

Short Stories

by TEXAS AUTHORS

VOLUME 4

Short Stories by Texas Authors

Vol 4

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Final Curtain

Patricia Taylor Wells

Margaret Thistle waited for the sixth chime of the grandfather clock before throwing off her covers and sitting on the edge of her bed. She pressed her toes into the plush-lined slippers she had positioned beside her bed the night before. The wood floor creaked as she walked across the room to her closet. Margaret dressed quickly, choosing something from her small wardrobe appropriate for that day's activities. She then pulled back the gossamer curtain of the large window that faced an oak shaded street. Light flooded her bedroom, which over time had darkened with age. Margaret stared through the glass as though seeing another time filled with people she had loved and lost, places she had been, and a medley of things that had happened along the way. She thought about her late husband, and the son they had lost in Vietnam. She thought about her wayward daughter who barely spoke to her anymore. Margaret went through the same routine every morning. And every morning, she felt lonely and tired of living.

Sometimes she would wander over to the antique secretary stationed in the little alcove next to the closet. She would always hesitate before opening its drop front desk, not really certain if she wanted to unearth its secrets. She would take the ornate brass key she kept hidden in a leather pouch in one of the desk's cubby holes and unlock the center door. Inside were a stack of faded envelopes tied together with a blue satin ribbon. Margaret would carefully hold them to her breast before placing them against her lips--their faint mustiness a reminder of how long they had been hidden away. She would then close her eyes and remember one special moment in her life. Something she kept buried deep in her heart, something she still had difficulty believing had ever happened. Something that still felt as splendid as it had over thirty years before.

Even though she was well over fifty back then, she looked younger. Still, she was past the age when men would look her way and find her beautiful or captivating. Yet, even now just as then, there was a hint of the beauty time had faded in her piercing eyes, her delicate lips and the highlights in her hair that hid any signs of graying. To her advantage, age had sharpened her senses, had made her more interesting and in an unexpected way, very attractive. The sadness she suffered from losing her son had long since melded into a tenderness that was often mistaken as affec-

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tion.

After their son died, Margaret and her husband Harold grew apart. Harold, an attorney, threw himself into his work, spending long hours at his office and then shutting himself in his study each night to pore over client files. Margaret busied herself with the Women's Symphony League and the Blue Bonnet Garden Club.

It was on a summer evening that her life changed unexpectedly. The symphony league had booked a chamber orchestra, a quartet that included a flute, violin, cello and viola, for the garden club's annual party. Margaret, with her vast knowledge of classical music, had helped plan the event and was influential when it came to selecting the orchestra. Having a quartet on tour from Cologne, Germany was exactly what was needed to attract new members for both the garden club and the symphony league. Everyone was talking about it.

The evening of the event, Margaret was eager to speak what limited French she knew with two of the orchestra members from Paris who were frequently asked to tour with the Cologne Chamber Orchestra.

"*Bonsoir*," she greeted them. "*C'est un plaisir de vous rencontrer.*"

"*Merci, Madame.*" The young violinist kept his eyes on Margaret. "We are happy to be here. Thank you for inviting us."

"You speak English extremely well," Margaret observed.

Following the concert Margaret and several other symphony league members engaged in lively conversation with the musicians. Margaret was glad that Harold had opted not to attend the concert, as he would have insisted they leave right away. Most of Margaret's conversation was with the violinist, who must have been half her age. But he was charming and they had much in common. Margaret offered to send copies of the photos she had taken that evening if any of the musicians were interested. Jules, the violinist, gave Margaret his address. The delightful evening ended with alternating kisses on the cheek. Margaret couldn't help but notice that Jules had pulled her a little closer to him when they were saying goodbye.

As soon as Margaret's film was developed, she selected several photos and mailed them to Jules along with a little note about how much she had enjoyed meeting him and hearing the quartet's beautiful music. The haunting sounds of the violin, of course, were what she remembered almost as much as she remembered his tender embrace.

To her surprise, Jules wrote back, making several inquiries about her life that would require a polite response. Margaret tucked the letter away in the secretary desk, not certain if she should mention it to her husband. It seemed innocent enough, but Harold might not think it was a good idea for her to answer Jules's letter. But she wanted to answer and she would think of a way to ensure a response back from him. Jules and Margaret

began corresponding on a regular basis, each letter becoming a little more intimate. At Margaret's request, Jules used the name Juliette in his return address so Harold would think the letters were from a former pen pal who now lived in Paris. But since Harold paid little attention to what Margaret did, the letters went unnoticed.

Margaret always used her finest linen stationary when writing to Jules. And her best ink pen to showcase her skillful handwriting. Sometimes she would dot the edge of the page with lavender, hoping its delicate scent would survive the journey to Paris. The letters became the highlight of her life and she would drop whatever she was doing to read each one when it arrived. She was very surprised when the words from one of his letters jumped out at her: "Come to Paris, my darling." Surely not, thought Margaret. But the thought of it lingered in her mind for several months. She contacted her former friend who lived in Paris, informing her that she was planning a trip in the near future. This would be her cover – she was going to France to see her friend. Harold would certainly be okay with that. And so Margaret began making plans.

In early summer, Margaret flew to Paris. She and Jules spent the entire two weeks together, strolling along the Champs-Élysées, sipping espresso at sidewalk cafés, dining by candlelight and making love. Margaret had never been more fulfilled. But she could make no sense of what she felt. Here she was, a woman in her fifties acting like a school girl with a man half her age. What did he see in her? "Age does not matter when you love someone," Jules repeatedly told her. "Why do you concern yourself with such nonsense?" Regardless, Margaret had her doubts. She would never leave Harold. She had a comfortable life and a husband who loved her. What could Jules possibly promise her other than romantic, sensuous love that would eventually fade away, especially after she grew even older? "No," she told herself. "This must end."

She returned home and wrote one last letter to Jules. He responded, pleading with her to not let their love end this way. Margaret did not answer him and she never heard from him again. But she did not forget him either. Not long after, Harold died suddenly of a heart attack. And even though she was now an unmarried woman, free to do as she pleased; she did nothing--other than to instruct her attorney to keep track of Jules's address each year. And then she updated her will.

When Margaret passed away at age 87, her attorney immediately located Jules who still lived in Paris. Margaret's instructions were very clear. She was leaving her entire estate to Jules, other than a small portion for her estranged daughter, under one condition: Jules was to play his violin at her funeral.

And so Jules arrived in the United States a few days later with his violin and a heavy heart. He had never forgotten the time he had spent with Margaret many years before. Now he was a little more than the age Mar-

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garet had been when they met. Margaret had specified the piece she wanted him to play; a Chopin Variation, Prelude in B Minor, a piece that was played at Chopin's own funeral. Although written for piano, Margaret preferred an arrangement that was accompanied by a violin. And that was what she wanted Jules to play.

There was only a small gathering for Margaret's service. Her attorney handed Jules a note when he arrived. Jules recognized the beautiful handwriting on the envelope. He carefully opened it and pulled out the familiar stationery that Margaret always used when writing him. His heart was filled with longing as he read her words.

My darling violinist,
One day many years from now,
Perhaps you will look up into the sky
And you will see a bright, shining star,
And you will know that it's me
Looking down and watching over you.
All my love, M.

He placed the note in his vest pocket, close to his heart. And when it was time for the Chopin piece to begin, Jules looked out at the small audience as his eyes began to tear. The pianist began Chopin's haunting melody as Jules lifted his violin and placed his cheek against its rest. Jules closed his eyes as his bow touched the strings, evoking the most beautiful music he had ever played. In his heart, he knew Margaret was smiling down at him.

Why I wrote this story:

The inspiration for "Final Curtain" was a portrait painted by my cousin, Cynthia Ross Vermie. The portrait was an elderly lady who was looking out a window as she clutched the gossamer curtains she had pulled aside. Her eyes were filled with sadness, as though she was peering into her past. At the same time, I was listening to one of my favorite pieces on the Music Channel, the Chopin Variation featuring a violin included in the story. And finally, I had just returned from a trip to Paris, retracing my own journey there as a young school girl. The story evolved from all of these elements.

The Enigma Chronicles –The Jewel

Breakfield & Burkey

Haddy recalled it had been a harsh two weeks, both physically and mentally. Even at her young age and good state of health, the birth of her daughter had been difficult. They had both survived, which was a good reason to give thanks. Sadly, reality sunk in as her beloved husband gingerly pushed the wheelchair with her and the newborn to the waiting sedan. Her melancholy wouldn't let her forget the devastating statement from the doctor: no more children.

Haddy looked down at their new bundle of joy and smiled, but it tore at her heart to know there would be no repeat performance based on the medical procedures she'd endured. Otto tried to remain upbeat with her, but he recognized the distant, forlorn look in her eyes. The loss pained him in a different way. Otto knew exactly how lucky he was to have them both out of danger and coming home. It would take time, he realized, before she would embrace the upside or to coax her back from her confused despair.

Nadine, the newly hired au pair, met them at the sedan with a gentle smile and offered to help Haddy into the spacious back seat that had been outfitted with extra cushions and a soft cashmere blanket. Otto carefully gathered up the sweet little bundle as she momentarily opened her huge blue eyes. Nadine gently assisted Haddy into the seat, then arranged everything for utmost comfort. Once sitting, Haddy took a breath, reached her hands up and asked in a broken yet soft voice, "Let me hold her again, please."

Dutifully Otto gently passed the swaddled baby into the outstretched arms of Haddy, seeing a single tear as it slid down her cheek. Otto studied the scene and understood that a lot of healing was needed. He wanted to remind Haddy not to mourn what was lost but to embrace what they had gained. His love for Haddy held him in check because he felt certain if he forced it she would lose her tentative hold and sink into an emotional puddle of despair.

Unfortunately, very little emotional ground was gained over the next couple of years even though Haddy tried to mask her sadness. She of course loved her dear Petra and took joy in how sweet the child grew. Each milestone Petra completed was cheered and applauded by Haddy and Otto. They had so wanted their children to enjoy siblings to shower with love and overcome the aggravation. Petra was a joyful, happy baby,

The Jewel

who learned well under the guidance of Nadine, and loved both her parents. Hugs and smiles were shared as her verbal and walking skills kicked into overdrive. Yet, the growth of Petra seemed to highlight Haddy's melancholy and threatened not only her mental state but also her relationship to Otto. Otto had learned to school his thoughts and comments so as to not jar her emotionally bruised state, even though he felt himself slowly being shut out of their once tight bond.

On Haddy's birthday, in an attempt to recapture their closeness, Otto planned to wine and dine her as they had done before Petra had been born. Nadine was trusted for the child's care, the dinner booked, and the theater tickets acquired. Overcoming her resistance to the outing with all the charm he could muster, they both donned their finery and headed out in the Bentley. With all the polish of the European gentleman he was, he escorted her to the door, opened it with a flourish, and held her hand as she sat. The little giggle from her, as he indiscreetly patted her fanny, seemed to lighten the mood. It promised to be a great evening.

The dinner went off splendidly in their private corner of the candlelit room. A vintage merlot and fork-cut tender prime rib combined to propel them back to smiling and flirting with each other as they had when they were newlyweds. Otto saw Haddy smile more than she had in the months of distancing herself. As he laughed at a story she was trying to relate, it seemed they had turned the corner in this painful chapter of their lives.

With all the fun they were having at dinner, they left a bit late for the theater. To his dismay at the crowds and his delight that he had selected such a popular show, Otto discovered there simply wasn't enough parking, even with the valet service. He took it upon himself to park behind the adjacent building in the service alley. It was darker than he preferred, but with the play in full swing he didn't want to waste any more time than necessary. They were recapturing their special bond as a couple, and Otto didn't want to lose any of the evening's momentum. As a precaution, before opening the door, he grabbed his walking cane to provide some defensive protection should action be required. It was a wise choice.

The silver Bentley, with its rich interior, did not escape the notice of some unsavory types. This notice was magnified when Otto and Haddy stepped out of the car. Fine clothing and jewelry acted like beacons in the dimly lit service alley, silently shouting, *'these rich people are easy targets'*. Funny, how signs can sometimes be misinterpreted.

Rough and uneven pavement of broken brick required they step carefully to avoid a spill. Otto kept hold of Haddy's arm as he used the walking stick as intended. A thug appeared from each side near the end of the service alley, and one was carrying an iron pipe in his hand. They joined then stood motionless in front of Otto and Haddy, while the one with the pipe kept slapping it into his hand to reinforce their menace. Though the

thugs weren't terribly large at six meters away, their attitudes and stench reeked of malice.

Otto released Haddy's arm and then slowly stepped in front of Haddy, who fearfully stepped back toward the car. Otto casually reached around behind his back for the other end of the cane and withdrew the half meter sword concealed inside. Holding the wooden sheath in his left hand and the sword in his right, he made sure the two thugs saw the dim light dancing off the blade. The one with the pipe seemed unimpressed and began to walk forward. The other thug seemed to hold back, possibly thinking better of a forced action.

Otto calmly asserted, "Gentlemen, I mean you no harm, but we are not going to be the easy targets you think. This is your only warning. Turn around and leave."

The one with the pipe smirked and demanded, "There's two of us. We want your money and jewels! Now we can do this the easy way, or we can do it the hard way. Which way do you want to go?"

Otto chuckled and exclaimed, "That's exactly what I was going to say!"

Otto wasted no time as he placed a lunging frontal kick that caught the pipe-wielding thug squarely in the chest, sending him staggering backwards into a dumpster. The other thug stood dumbfounded until he received a well-placed spin kick to the side of head that sent him to the ground. The pipe-wielding thug tried to stagger to his feet, but Otto threw a hammering side kick to the man's head, which sent the thug back into the dumpster and then to the ground. Now Otto stood to face the other man, his sword positioned to strike. The ruffian scrambled to his feet and took flight.

Haddy watched the drama with wide eyes. Now that the odds were even, Otto walked cautiously up to the stunned thug who was sprawled on the ground. Thinking he had played possum well, the thug lunged forward only to have Otto drive his foot into the man's solar plexus, which had the desired effect of neutralizing the thug for good.

Haddy cautiously walked up behind Otto, who motioned her to stop. Haddy's attention wasn't on the incapacitated thug but revectoring on a faint mewing sound coming from inside the dumpster. Otto was still breathing hard as he gave Haddy a puzzled look, trying to understand why she was ignoring his caution. Then he too heard the sound. First Otto checked that the thug was still unconscious, and he sheathed the sword. Together he and Haddy looked for a way into the dumpster to locate the source of the sound. The metal dumpster was sealed all the way around with no discernable easy access.

Haddy's eyes grew large as she began to panic and anxiously cried, "That's a baby crying! Otto, we have to get into this dumpster and save the baby!"

The Jewel

Otto, a little unsure of the potential outcome of this scenario, tried to find a way in. He calmly offered, "You know, my darling, it could just be a kitten mewing because it is stuck inside. It probably isn't..."

Haddy's eyes grew fierce with anger as she stormed, "That's a child's cry. We are not ignoring it or moving from here until we get this baby out! Do you hear me, Octavius?"

Otto continued to try to gain access as he quietly muttered, "The show is already half over so, hey, why not do some dumpster diving instead?"

Finally, he shoved one of the metal panels on the front to the right with all his might. The rusty track moved and slid open for full access. They were astounded at what they found. Against the far wall of the dumpster, they discovered a carelessly placed cardboard box, half full with soiled swaddling clothes and a crying near newborn baby. Otto stood dumbfounded, but Haddy was already on track to reach through the opening to retrieve the box or dive inside, when Otto intercepted her. Without saying a word, he handed the cane to Haddy and deftly swung in through the opening. After stumbling somewhat amongst the trash, he was finally able to gain his footing and retrieve the baby. He gently handed the baby to Haddy through the opening and then swung himself out.

Haddy was frightened by what she saw and the condition of the baby. Her eyes were wild with terror as she demanded, "Otto, hospital, NOW!"

Once at the hospital emergency room, the staff went to work as if the baby was one of theirs. Otto explained the circumstances to the police and was obliged to return with the officers to the dumpster so it could be inspected more thoroughly. But Haddy simply wouldn't leave the baby's side. She calmly cooed and stroked a free hand, keeping out of the way of the staff.

The police investigation took longer than Otto would have liked. However, with a minor, and in this case an abandoned newborn, the hunt was on for a local convent to take care of the baby. The police were familiar with a Mother Superior who helped with abandoned babies and might know the mother. Haddy dug in her heels to stay with the infant despite the Mother Superior suggesting the convent could take care of the infant after she was released from the hospital.

Otto had returned by the following morning to the hospital only to find that Haddy hadn't slept a wink during his absence. In fact, the ER staff pulled him aside and asked that he try and get her to go home. Her constant badgering for informational updates was becoming a big problem, even though she remained a calming factor for the now clean, sleeping baby.

Otto explained the Mother Superior would arrive soon to take the baby, but Haddy ignored him. When he tried to convince her to go home, she angrily refused. "I'm not leaving her! That little...Jewel... has al-

ready been left by her mother. I'm not going to let that happen again. I'll stay and explain this to the Mother Superior. You can leave. I can find my way home!"

Otto, fearful that Haddy was going over the emotional edge he'd been so worried about, reminded her, "There is nothing more that can be done at this moment! We also have our child at home, and we need to worry about her, too! And I am worried about you. You need rest.

"Let the ER staff do their work so they can monitor the baby and make certain she is out of danger. You are coming home, but don't worry, this business is not finished. You, however, will be if you don't get some rest!"

Haddy began to crumble as she sobbed, "We found her! Don't you understand? We were meant to have this second child! She must have been sent to us."

Otto held her as his tears joined with hers. He softly lamented, "This is not going to be our baby just because we found her. Now come on home. Things will look different tomorrow, and the baby will be here recovering."

Every day for a week, Haddy spent every waking moment at the hospital trying to help with the baby. She had met with the Mother Superior and pleaded her case the first morning. One of the nurses took pity on Haddy and let her hold the baby, as it seemed to calm them both. No one seemed worried that it might be a mistake to give Haddy false hope.

At the beginning of the second week, Haddy was holding the baby when Otto and the Mother Superior arrived at the nursery in the hospital. As soon as Haddy saw Otto with the Mother Superior, she went ashen. Haddy railed, "You're here to take the baby away, aren't you? You brought Otto to help reason with me, didn't you? Well, you can't! We saved her, don't you understand? She was destined to be with us! I cannot surrender her! Otto, please don't let her take this Jewel!"

The Mother Superior looked at Haddy with kindness and then hesitatingly offered, "Madam, I have so many heartbreaking stories of people desperate to be parents, especially with the terrors of the war now behind us. We keep lists of those who are willing to adopt or help foster the babies of young girls who have run scared, usually leaving the baby on our church steps. There may be another couple that has requested help from the church and you were not on our list. I understand you want her, I truly do. But I need to review our parishioners."

Haddy began sobbing uncontrollably and haltingly implored, "Please no, not my little Jewel...not my little Jewel...she belongs...with me..."

Again, the Mother Superior looked sympathetic as she faced Otto and kindly asked, "Mr. Rancowski, can you explain it to her? I don't seem to be getting through."

Otto nodded and slowly stepped close to Haddy. In a lowered tone he

The Jewel

said, "Sweetheart, after that close call with our first child, and based on what the doctor said, I have had our attorney working diligently to enter us onto adoption lists. We have been applying everywhere and anywhere, but I've never told you because of what the Mother Superior just said."

Otto thought back to the months of work he had done to try to find alternatives to their adopting a child. The foundation of the church and community at large was comprised of "Kinder, Küche und Kirche" or Child, Kitchen and Church which Haddy was well aware of.

"We have been contributing members to this community while it has been rebuilt with a stronger foundation in the three Ks. The Bishop has been aware as well and lending guidance to help minimize your emotional and mental agitation with false hope. It is a curious twist of fate that you found a baby when we are on top of the lists in our own church. Because of our faith and commitment to family, this little Jewel will get to come home with us. Our wish has been granted, my love."

Haddy almost collapsed from the emotional release that cascaded over her like a tsunami. Still holding the baby, she steadied herself against Otto. They both shed tears of joy as the Mother Superior said a prayer and blessed them all before she turned to leave.

Otto, when he was finally able to command himself enough, asked, "My love, what shall we call her? We now have the right to name her."

Not bothering to wipe away her tears, Haddy proudly proclaimed, "We found our Jewel, so it means her name should be Julie. Julie, my little Jewel."

Haddy was pulled back to the present, with the loud steps running across the hardwood floors. The twins, Juan Jr, and Gracie, squealed with delight and said in their outside voices, "Grandma, Mama's here! Mama's here!"

Julie saw the lone tear trailing down Haddy's cheek as she smiled and said, "Daydreaming again, I see. Was it a good one?"

Haddy, not bothering to wipe the tear, patted Julie's hand and smiled as she confessed, "It was a jewel."

Why We Wrote this Story

Introduction to The Enigma Chronicles. The Enigma Chronicles notations are used in some of the chapter headings throughout our award-winning stories of The Enigma Series to identify key incidents which are part of the three pillars of the R-Group. We believe that family, ethics, and moral code have the best chance of properly navigating the criminal cyber world of today. The Enigma Chronicles are designed as avenues to tell the back-story history of the family. This story focuses on how Haddy and Otto's life was altered forever by a simple date night at the theater. We welcome your feedback and comments at our website www.enigmaseries.com Thank you, Breakfield and Burkey

Osceola 373

Breakfield & Burkey

Daylight seemed to explode from the tips of the lightning at the crash of thunder. Accompanied by the whistling winds of the February storm, Liz woke with a start. For just a second it seemed like dawn rather than just past midnight. Though she would never truly enjoy the noisy storms, the house was solid and safe. In addition, she knew the crops and animals would appreciate the rain and what it brought to the land. Frowning at the lost sleep, she wrapped herself in the warmth of her covers, blocking all but the most pervasive flashes of light. She reflected that only a short time remained in her deed requirement of the 373 days to stay on the family farm, which was named *Winners not Losers*. A sad smile came to her lips as she recalled how she arrived at this place.

Recalling the old story from years gone by, it had been another storm which had brought her to this place nearly 25 years before. Mag and Dave, her parents, had been headed toward the edge of Osceola to visit Mag's sister Bet and her husband Ed. Rain in Hill County, Texas could be wild and unpredictable, with winds to match, making it a risky dance at best. Liz was fully fastened to her infant seat and sound asleep as her parents laughed and sang their way down the road.

Dave was always careful and that stormy night was no exception. Few vehicles were on the highway as they came over the rise of the winding road, only to find an 18-wheeler jackknifed across the road, covering all lanes. Taking the only option he thought viable, Dave turned the steering wheel to the right to ride the shoulder as he slowed his vehicle on the slick road. All seemed possible, said the truck driver later, until the car hit a pothole and flipped, rolling twice before it settled down the slight embankment. The violent rolling of the car had thrown Mag and Dave out, only to land in harm's way as the car came to rest on top of them. Emergency vehicles had already been alerted by the truck driver, and the deputy and the EMS driver agreed that they hadn't suffered. But when rescuers finally muscled their way into the car, they were astonished to find that the baby was quietly napping as if nothing had occurred.

It hadn't taken long to learn that Bet and Ed were Liz's only living relatives. Fortunately, Mag and Dave had paperwork already inked in order to make a smooth transition in the event of a tragedy. Dave had often commented to Ed, *one never knew what tomorrow would bring*. They formally adopted Liz but never let her forget her parents. Many years later

Liz learned that Bet and Ed's own baby girl, Mary Jean, had been a victim of AIDS. After Liz had been adopted and having suffered two miscarriages, Bet had a hysterectomy. When Liz had learned this part of the story as a young teen, she'd asked Bet why she wasn't mad all the time.

The response had been, "Sweetie, never be mad more than a day. It takes too much energy, and if you can't fix it, move on and make way for the good things you do get. Look what a wonderful daughter I gained. If I'd stayed mad, I wouldn't be a very good influence on you. Keep this in mind when you're an old married lady like me. Don't go to bed mad. You are my precious gift and I am so lucky to have you."

Growing up, Liz led the life of a small-town country girl. The simple life was filled with wildflowers blazing everywhere in spring, miles of healthy crops of corn, hay, and more in summer and fall, herds of prized cattle and thoroughbred horses, and outdoor adventures limited only by imagination. Liz grew up safe in a cocoon of love and hopes, supported by a tight-knit community. Bet was right, how could you be mad when life was such an enjoyment?

Ed managed their parcel of land with a portion relegated to raising cattle, some annually sold for income. A few acres were leased and provided a nice steady revenue for the family. When these leases were negotiated, they were for multiple years and had proven their value time and again. They also had a few purebred quarter horses which were used for breeding, further supplementing the family earnings. Life was comfortable yet not extravagant, but Liz always felt rich.

Bet and Ed had met at Texas A&M and fallen in love in their senior year. Bet focused on Animal Sciences with the original goal of using horses to help PTSD victims, especially children. Throughout Liz's childhood, Bet had conducted two riding support classes on Saturdays. As Liz became older and more accomplished, she helped with these classes. The closest school for her was one in Itasca. Studies were her job, according to her parents, and she excelled. Her Christmas gift for her junior year in high school was a personal computer. It opened up the world to her and her mind.

Like a common country song theme, she loved her mom and dad, horses, and hours looking at the wildflowers growing. The county roads around Osceola gave her flowers every year, like they would this year if she stayed long enough. Some years were more vibrant than others, depending upon the overall rainfall and benign temperatures during the growing season.

As a country girl, she learned how to be self-sufficient. Bet taught her to sew, and even today Liz still could make special items for her one-of-a-kind look. After learning food with fresh ingredients was better than the random visits to the restaurant in town, the garden and cooking became all consuming. Through high school and then whenever she was home,

Liz was the official chef, unless Ed barbequed.

Money had always been put away in trust for her college, so she knew the amount when she'd applied to schools. When they'd sat around the kitchen table staring at the delivered envelope from the school, no one seemed anxious to open it. An outsider looking in might have believed they were waiting for it to open itself. Bet barely contained her excitement and patiently watched Liz's trembling fingers and moisture-filled eyes as she'd opened up the news which would change the course of her life. Speechless, Liz stared at the page and finally handed it to Ed to read aloud. Not only had she gained admittance, but she had also earned a scholarship to the University of Texas at Austin. They all took her to Freshman Orientation in the fall.

When Liz came home for Christmas break that first year in college, she sobbed to Ed, saying she wouldn't go back. The campus was larger than her home town. There were so many people. No one cared. How could she be good enough?

Ed patted her back and stroked her long hair and reminded her of commitments. He related the time when she had pestered them that she wanted to be a ballerina. Bet found a small studio in Itasca which would teach her daughter if she was committed. Bet would enroll her and make the weekly drive, if Liz promised to work hard for a whole year before giving up. Liz agreed. Two months into the program, her toes hurt and she felt uncoordinated and begged to quit.

Ed told her then, "Honey, you don't get to quit on a promise. You agreed to take this ballet on for a year. It's the only way you can truly learn something and find out if it is for you. You don't get good at something because it's easy. You get good because you work at it. You'll do your best. Mom and I will cheer you on at your recital at the end of the year. Don't ever quit. It will eat at you forever. Always give every major commitment at least a year before you give it up."

Liz was the star of that little ballet performance. She even did a second year with the group before becoming enamored with horses, gardening, sewing, and cooking. But she hadn't given up.

After finishing that first year of college, which helped propel Liz to complete the next three years without any trouble, she'd returned home infrequently. Marketing was her major, which she excelled in. This opened windows and doors to a future of her choosing. The internships she earned at several marketing firms across Texas took her further from Bet and Ed as each year of college was completed.

The routine weekly phone calls occurred even after she landed the Marketing Director position in Dallas. Talking to her parents was never eliminated. It wasn't until she was back home after her parents passed that she realized how easy it would be to work remotely. The socialization of the water cooler or after work bar scene had never been her thing.

Doing a good job, meeting her clients' expectations, and saving a lot of her earnings, potentially for future travel, had been her three-legged stool of success.

Such an odd number of days, 373, but the attorney, Ross, had been insistent that it was specifically outlined that she remain on the property for that number of days. After settling in last March, Liz had unconsciously worked the garden and relished the rich feel of the fertile soil as the garden gave her the vegetables she'd enjoyed in her youth. Until she'd picked the fruits of her labor from the garden and relished their freshness in her home cooked meals, Liz hadn't realized she'd missed it.

Ed had a full-time manager, Kyle, who stayed in a cabin in the middle of the parcel. He'd been there since Liz had entered seventh grade. Kyle was a few years older than she and had remained single after his wife had left him. Bet had once commented that Kyle and Myrna met in Austin and married before Myrna had spent any time in the country. Some women crave what they perceive as the glamorous city life, and she couldn't adapt to the slow country pace Kyle liked. He'd never dated much or had much of a social calendar to worry about.

Bet had taken a bad fall during one of her horse training sessions and in October was buried in the family plot near her baby Mary Jean, who had died too young. At Ed's funeral just after last Christmas, Kyle mentioned that Ed had been inconsolable after Bet passed. It hadn't surprised Kyle when Ed took to his bed with the flu and gave up. Ed had given up the moment Bet was gone. Surprisingly, each time Liz went up the hill to visit the family cemetery, it was well tended, often with fresh flowers.

Kyle knew the terms of the deed of trust Liz faced and volunteered to stay on while she met her obligations. Liz was grateful not to have to worry about that portion of the business. Since that time, Liz had invited him for supper most Sundays. When her cooking got out of hand, it was not uncommon for a container to be on his porch when he returned in the evening. Their interactions were amicable as they shared the common thread of the farm, *Winner not Losers*.

As if the loud silence around her became her alarm clock, she peeked out from under the covers to see the sun was well above the dawn line and signs of the squall were gone. Shaking off the covers and stretching, Liz went to turn on the coffee and check the time. If time permitted she would take a fast shower before heading off to Sunday services. The day was going to be amazing, and she almost couldn't wait to smell the freshly washed air. Checking her smart phone and the weather report, she found that the rain would not be returning. She danced from room to room and opened the windows to let new air flow through the house.

Services at the country church were well attended, and the Pastor was always targeting a subject the community would relate to. Small towns afforded everyone to know one another, allowing mutual greetings as

soon as she was spotted. Kyle, she noticed, had arrived early and sat near the front. Mom and Dad had brought her up to have faith, which had kept her strong many times in her short life.

Spring had not yet arrived, though it was gaining ground. Stepping outside after the sermon, she found scores of birds trying to figure out which ways to return home or where to set up spring housekeeping. They had everyone pausing and contemplating what to plant the next season. Sunshine had indeed prevailed and with the air warming, the laughter after the service seemed to linger. Small groups caught up on events of the past week or those planned for the upcoming week. The last of the congregation was loading into their cars and waving goodbye, promising to see everyone the next week.

It reminded Liz of the times her small family lingered around the kitchen table trying to make a decision, usually about a purchase of some major piece of farm machinery. Someone would say, "Let's list the options and think about it for a week. It's only a week, so the possibilities will still be there. We don't have to be in a hurry to spend money. We can wait a week."

So many times in college and when she started working, the 'it's only a week' would pop into play in her mind. It had saved her from making some rash decisions on more than one occasion and lessened unnecessary buyer's regret. Another lesson which once learned was not easily forgotten.

When Kyle arrived for Sunday dinner, he surprised Liz by asking if she might consider his buying her out of the farm after the deed of trust time was completed. Liz was stunned.

"Kyle, I hadn't considered you'd want to take on the whole farm. I thought you mentioned you had more than enough keeping you busy with the leases and didn't want to take on the bookkeeping side or the horses or gardening. Granted, I didn't start up the riding support again, but that could always happen again. I honestly haven't made any final decision."

Kyle grinned and replied, "I just don't want some strangers getting this property and realizing they don't need me."

They ate with some easy conversation on the state of the leases and guesses about when the trees would bloom. Kyle said he had seen a late red flowering quince on the way home, whereas Liz said she'd spotted daffodils. This easy banter allowed some laughter and even a few bets on who was right, as they agreed it was still too early for bluebonnets.

Time marched on, though Liz had stopped marking the days. Somehow she naturally found a balance between the country life and her marketing job. The house had been cleaned from top to bottom, and she'd finally gone through all the drawers, saving some things and making donations through the church for others. Hardly noticing the changes, she'd find the photo album close at hand in the evening for a stroll down

memory lane, or the letters exchanged between any of them tucked in a safe box in the den. Music played in the background during off hours, and she'd find herself singing a catchy tune.

It was mid-morning on a Wednesday, just as she was shutting down for lunch, when there was a knock at the door. She was surprised to find her attorney Ross smiling, with his briefcase in hand. Liz smiled in return as he invited him in.

"What brings you over? I don't recall that we had an appointment, Ross."

Ross cocked his head with his smile, then checked his watch for date and time. He replied, "Sure we did, Liz. Today is day 374, or one day past the deed of trust. I came with the final paperwork for you to sign over the property so you can sell it. Judge Cantor and I met yesterday evening, and he approved the transfers into your name."

Liz was surprised she'd forgotten the date and the meeting. She fixed them both some coffee and offered Ross fresh cookies she'd baked the night before. Glancing out the window, she saw the first hints of bluebonnets in the yard, just like when she was a kid, and smiled.

Liz signed the paper, accepted the transfer and asked, "Ross, I don't have to leave today, do I? I had a few things I wanted to do. I could wait a week or so, right?"

Ross shook his head and smiled as he said, "No, Liz. It's all yours. You can do anything you wish. There is one additional item you will receive in addition to the property and all the bank accounts, and that is this letter."

He pushed the envelope toward her, and she saw her name in Ed's handwriting. "Ed called me to come get this about four days before he passed and said if you stayed you needed to get this on this day.

"Take your time. I'll see myself out and file these documents today. I'm on retainer for you for the next two years, regardless of your decision on the property."

Liz barely nodded as Ross left. She stared at the envelope for the longest time and then finally opened it.

Liz Honey,

If you are reading this then not only am I gone, but you have been here on the property for 373 days. I knew you would stick it out; it's how we're put together. Your mom and I loved you the moment you arrived. We were always proud of you. I had hoped to walk you down the aisle, all dressed up in Bet's wedding dress, but I'm too tired and I miss my Bet. I hope you saved her dress.

Maybe you're in love and waited a day to say I will. I hope together you and your man will think about each investment or purchase for at least a week and, when possible, a week more. I hope your engagement lasts at least a year so friends can help you celebrate your joy, and you

can create the family you deserve, while you become secure in your commitment to each other. Mom and I lucked out in that regard by taking our leap so fast.

We will always be right there with you.

Love Dad

Liz's tears gently fell onto the ivory paper. "Yes, Dad, I decided to stay at least another year, after waiting an extra week, like you always said, and not waste today being mad that you're gone. 373, Dad, Mom. I love you too.

Why We Wrote This Story

Breakfield and Burkey have traveled across Texas seeking out the beauty of the countryside and meeting some marvelous salt-of-the-earth people. We hope this story helps you appreciate the people of Texas with their tenacity and determination, living and working in areas that can be unforgiving. Most Texans appreciate what they have and work very hard, particularly for family. The people in this story are taken from those we have met and have spent time learning about their lives. The Enigma Series is our award winning TechnoThriller series, so this is a new avenue into Young Adult fiction. We hope you enjoy this story. We welcome your feedback and comments through our website at www.enigmaseries.com Thank you, Breakfield and Burkey

Edges of Gray
Michael Scott Clifton

The old man shuffled past rows of middle school and high school students. The normally boisterous students viewed the elderly gentleman with a mixture of curiosity and uncertainty. Silent expectation reigned, the only sound the creaks of chairs.

Reaching the front of the room, the old man grasped a padded chair and turned it to face the students. He then collapsed heavily into it. Behind him, pictures of men, women, and families scrolled by in an endless parade across a series of screens mounted on the wall. Some were of advanced age, others middle-aged, yet others were pink-faced youths. Each shared one thing in common.

All were Holocaust survivors.

The octogenarian smoothed the white, wispy hairs on his head with age-spotted hands. Pale blue eyes peered out at his audience, while a young woman with an official hostess badge on her lapel attempted to hand him a wireless microphone. He waved her off and cleared his throat.

“Welcome to the Holocaust Museum. My name is Joseph Rabinowitz. Like those you see in the pictures behind me, I am a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust.”

The old man’s voice, steady and clear, paused to let his words sink in. The students sat in rapt attention. Joseph nodded in approval.

“In 1940 I was a fifteen-year-old boy living in Warsaw, Poland, when the SS came to my school and separated the Jewish students from all the other students. Marched to a nearby barn, we were kept there for several days. During this time, no food was offered, and we subsisted on a single cup water each day. One of my classmates, Peter Goldstein, asked for an additional cup of water on the second day. Peter was a thin boy my own age, and after he made this request, the SS soldiers removed him from the barn and took him into the nearby woods. A short time later, we heard a shot.

Peter never returned and no one asked for more water.

Finally, we were moved from the barn and marched to the train station in Warsaw. Although only ten kilometers from our school in the countryside, some of my classmates, weakened from lack of food and water, couldn’t keep up the pace. We were forced to watch while they were made to kneel beside the road, and then each was shot in the back of the head. Rather than the dignity of a burial, my friends were shoved into

the ditch while we continued our march.

When we arrived at the train station, thousands of people milled about, mostly fellow Jews, but some were gypsies and other 'undesirables'. Herded into boxcars like cattle, the rumors abounded as to the destination of the trains, but no one seemed to know for sure. Our only certainty was we were being taken somewhere. Once a boxcar was full, another took its place with more Jews prodded forward into the rail car.

Because of the huge numbers of people and the chaos which resulted in their transfer and movement, the guards became lax and I enjoyed more freedom of movement. I had heard nothing of my family and desperately searched for my parents and two sisters. I went from person to person, group to group asking about my family, and was struck by how many other individuals were doing the same. So many families had been separated and ripped apart by the Nazi authorities. After witnessing the brutal murders of my classmates, I retained no illusions the Nazis would give deference to keeping families intact.

By pure luck, I happened to see a familiar red scarf bobbing about in a group of people being loaded into a nearby rail car. My mother owned an identical scarf which had long been her favorite, and I pushed through the throngs to see if it was her. I spotted my mother and two sisters and sobbed in relief.

Soldiers guarded the ramp into the boxcar, and I could get no closer than shouting distance. Others with family members being loaded, packed the area by the ramp. They sobbed and shouted, desperately trying to be heard over the tumult. The soldiers pushed the crowd back, and in some cases, clubbed frantic family members with their gun stocks. I saw one gray-haired grandmother bayoneted through the stomach and left to bleed to death on the ground.

The scene was one of unimaginable cruelty and desperation.

My mother and sisters ended up in the far corner of the freight car facing me. So many people packed the boxcar, their bodies were pushed flat against the sides. I could see my sisters had trouble breathing because of the press of bodies against them. I shouted at my mother and she looked in my direction...or at least the best she could with her face pressed hard against the wooden slats. For a moment, I saw fleeting joy on her face that we had found each other. Moments later, dread recognition replaced her elation that I too, was caught up in the Nazi roundup of Jews.

Where is Papa? I cried.

Lips thrust through the rough slats, she replied, 'The SS came last night and took us from our beds. All we had time to do is put on some clothes. They separated the men from the women, and I have not seen your father since.'

Her final statement left no doubts between us...we held out no hope

Edges of Gray

for my father.

As the train pulled away, we exchanged one last look and I began to weep. I never saw any of my family again. To this day, I do not know their fate or what befell them, other than the certain knowledge they died as a result of some Nazi atrocity.

My turn to be loaded into a freight car came a short time later. Fortunately, like my mother and sisters, I ended up pressed against the slatted walls of the boxcar where I could at least get a breath of fresh air. Others were not so lucky, we discovered, when we finally reached our destination at Treblinka, one of a string of concentration camps scattered throughout Poland, Austria, and Germany. The journey on the train with its long line of boxcars full of human misery can only be described as a hellish experience of incomprehensible proportion. The smell of fear, sweat, and human excrement in the closely packed conditions is simply indescribable. When we unloaded and staggered off, we discovered a score or more of our number dead, most of them children, unlucky enough to be packed in the middle of the rail car and literally crushed to death.”

The old man paused and closed his eyes, the vivid images even now painful to recall. When he opened them again, they were bright with tears.

“Over the next five years, I shuffled from concentration camps, to slave work camps, and back to a concentration camp. Death was my constant companion along with thirst, hunger, and disease. I saw my fellow camp mates killed in every conceivable fashion possible. We were gassed, shot, stabbed, and poisoned. Still others were starved or worked to death, and we died by the thousands from disease and malnutrition.

In most concentration camps, our pitiful allotment of food represented 900 to 1,000 calories a day...much of it worm-eaten and spoiled. The average calorie needs of a normal human is at least 2,000 calories. By the end of my first year at Treblinka, we could not tell man from woman. We were all skeletons.

The elderly, children, and infirm were the first to die. In fact, sometimes the Camp Commandant wouldn't even wait for death to take its natural course. At roll call, the commandant would go through our ranks of shivering, emaciated numbers and pick out those considered too weak, small, or sickly to work. Those picked formed a 'work detail' which marched out from the camp...and never returned. Forced to dig a huge trench, these unfortunates then knelt at the edge of the ditch. The Nazis preferred this method of execution, because when shot or machine-gunned from behind, the bodies would fall forward into the trench. Another work detail would then cover the trench, although sometimes, their number might be added to the ditch, particularly if it had been dug large enough for the Commandant to believe there was room for additional

bodies.

The Nazis were very efficient when it came to death.

One day in camp, a barrack mate stood at roll call trying to dislodge a piece of gristle from the gruel served the evening before. A sharp-eyed sentry spotted his tongue moving about and immediately pointed this out to the captain in charge. You see, everything of value we owned—jewelry, money, shoes, clothes—was taken by the Nazis. In addition, they always suspected we had hidden valuables, and believed we swallowed jewelry and precious stones, or hid gems in false, hollow teeth.

This poor man was pulled out of line and a soldier brought the captain a pair of pliers. The captain then pulled and meticulously examined every tooth. When he found nothing, the monsters decided he had swallowed the gem, strung him up spread-eagle on the fence, and gutted him like a fish. The awful screams produced no emotion from the soldiers other than laughter at this agony inflicted on another human being.”

The old man rubbed his face with trembling hands.

“In May of 1945, my camp was liberated by the Allies. By this time, the officers, the soldiers, the SS, had all fled. I numbered among the few camp inmates left alive, too weak from malnutrition and disease to even get out of my bunk and greet our liberators. As a strapping lad five years earlier, I then weighed 160 pounds. When the allies found me, I weighed 80 pounds and suffered from dysentery, intestinal parasites, and anemia. I spent months in a field hospital before I recovered enough strength to even sit up in bed.

When I finally made a full recovery, I helped the Allied authorities identify and convict many of the officers and soldiers who carried out the extermination of over six million Jews. I sat at Nuremberg where many of these inhuman vermin were convicted and hanged. My heart, so full of hate, was content to see my former tormentors convicted and executed.”

The old man sighed and shook his head.

“But you see, I found out no amount of blood could satisfy me. My family, my friends, my neighbors...they were still just as dead. It occurred to me then that revenge is a disease every bit the equal of the perverse hatred the Nazis harbored toward the Jews. It is a bottomless pit which can never be filled, an addiction that can never be fully satisfied. In short, if the execution of Nazis caused me to rejoice, then what was I? But a pale shadow of those who rejoiced while they gassed, shot, and executed Jews and other undesirables?”

A hand shot up from and a young girl in the first row. “You mean you don’t hate them? They killed everyone you loved!”

The old man thought carefully before answering.

“Yes, I hated the Nazis. Yes, I hated the inhuman acts of death and cruelty. How could any normal person not hate under those circumstances? But what I hated most was the *thought*, the *motivation* which led to

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the slaughter of millions of Jews. You see, *that* is why I'm here today. *That* is why I share my story with you! Today, there are those who say the Holocaust is a farce, a fairy tale which never happened. They say it has all been made up, a lie of history. This is why we few who remain feel compelled to shout our story as loud and as often as possible. *We are witnesses to a history that must never happen again!*"

Breathing hard, the old man pulled a white handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead. He folded it carefully and placed it back in his pocket.

"In the midst of the barbaric cruelty of the camps, I witnessed acts of kindness and generosity which even today, continue to touch my soul. There was the old woman who became sick and knew she would shortly be marched out of camp on a 'work detail'. I was scared and starving, and she gave me her rations of moldy bread and gruel. There was the German camp guard, different from the others, who risked assignment to the Russian Front and 'accidentally' dropped an old, patched coat in the trash barrel next to me during one harsh winter. These stories and more I remember vividly."

The old man struggled to stand as straight as his arthritic spine would allow.

"You see, life is never so cut and dried as we might imagine. Cruel acts are matched by acts of compassion, selfish ambition by selfless concern for others, and finally, hatred and prejudice versus love for our fellow man. These edges of gray I have witnessed time and again.

One day, you too may face circumstances which provide a stark contrast involving choices. These have faced humanity since the dawn of time. Sometimes it will take courage to make the right choice. Sometimes there will be no easy choices, just hard and harder. But as my story has shown, one thing you can be assured of. If you become a bystander and allow what you know to be wrong to continue, you will wake up one day and make a most unpleasant discovery...

Your choices have been made for you."

Why I Wrote this Story

Several years ago, I was privileged to take a group of junior high students to the Holocaust Museum in Dallas. We were fortunate in that a genuine Holocaust survivor spoke to our students. He told his story which was as riveting as it was horrific. The struggles he went through, the barbaric acts of brutality and death he personally witnessed, were among the most disturbing and graphic descriptions I have ever heard. It is a narrative which needs telling. In the words of George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it". *Edges of Gray* is an attempt to re-cast this Holocaust tale, and bring to life one of the darkest chapters in the history of the human race.

Taking Another Ride with Clyde

Jan Sikes

Taylor Malone rested his tall lean frame against the kitchen counter and shuffled through the most recent stack of bills. Maybe by day's end things would be better for them. With a new computer, he could complete the on-line real estate classes and get started making some real money.

JoAnne Malone hit the brew button on the coffee pot and shot him a worried look. "I wish I knew magic and could make those bills disappear. But, I'm worried about Clyde too."

"I know, sugar." He pulled her into an embrace and rested his chin on top of her head. "He's been up drinking all night. But, as soon as we get the new computer bought and set up, he'll head back to Texas."

JoAnne nodded. "Maybe you should offer him some breakfast and coffee."

"Sure, babe."

Taylor walked to the back door of the mobile home and called out. "Morning, Clyde. JoAnne's making breakfast and coffee's on."

Clyde Baker turned bleary eyes his direction. "Thanks. I'll take a cup of coffee."

He stumbled when he reached the top step and Taylor resisted the urge to steady him.

"Damned uneven steps. You oughta' get 'em fixed," Clyde grumbled.

"I'll add that to my list," Taylor said.

"Mornin', Clyde," JoAnne chimed when they walked into the kitchen.

"Jo." He planted a kiss on her cheek. "I'm gonna get that damned computer today or die tryin', sweetheart," he slurred.

"I'm sure you will. Taylor and I thank you for helping us. Can I talk you into some eggs and bacon?"

"Nah." With coffee in an unsteady hand, Clyde headed out the door. "Need a smoke."

Once the back door slammed, Taylor faced JoAnne. "Sweetheart, please try not to worry. I'll insist on doing the driving. He's taking his time and money to help us out, and Lord knows we need it."

"I know, and I appreciate it. I just wish he could control his drinking. It's a narrow road into Tulsa."

"Like I said, I'll drive." He kissed JoAnne and patted her bottom. "We'll be here when you get off work with a shiny new computer."

JoAnne laughed. "I just want you back here in one piece. That's the

most important thing to me.”

Taylor agreed but at the same time, having a solid way to increase their income meant the world. He felt bad that his business venture hadn't proven more profitable. The art of sign painting had all but died in the digital age.

When his older sister, Marge, suggested that he get his real estate license and offered to help with a computer, he had to say yes.

After all, Marge and Clyde had done well for themselves in the business. With upscale houses in multiple locations, luxury cars, boats and expensive vacations, they had it all.

Except that Clyde had a monkey on his back he couldn't shake.

Taylor had been ten when his sister had married Clyde. It seemed to him that the more money they made, the bigger Clyde's drinking problem grew.

Taylor wanted to provide a good life for JoAnne, the kind she deserved. Even though they'd only been married a year, he looked forward to the day he could move them out of the trailer house and into a real home. The day they could start a family. The day money worries didn't keep him awake at night.

JoAnne hurried into the living room, grabbed her apron and purse. “I'll see you this evening, honey. Please be careful.”

Taylor reached her in three strides and pulled her into his arms. “I promise. Now, don't worry.” He smoothed the frown on her forehead with his thumb and tucked a golden strand of hair behind her ear.

“Everything will be okay, and soon, we'll be buying our own house.”

JoAnne sighed. “I hope so.”

Taylor kissed her, then gently shoved her toward the door. “Don't work too hard.”

“Ha,” she tossed over her shoulder as she left for the Main Street Diner. “Call me.”

He glanced up when the back door opened.

“You ready to go?” Clyde asked.

“Yep. I was just coming to holler at you.”

“Well, come on. We should get there about the time the place opens.”

Taylor pulled the front door shut and locked it. “Clyde, I'm driving.”

“The hell you are.” Clyde stumbled toward the Lexus. “It's my damn car, and I'll do the driving.”

“But, you're drunk, man.”

Clyde waved his hand. “Oh hell! I've driven more miles drunk than you have sober. Now come on. Let's get this over with so I can get it all set up and get back to Texas.”

Taylor reluctantly slid into the passenger seat and buckled up.

Clyde squeezed his bulky frame behind the wheel and grunted.

“Aren't you going to put your seatbelt on, man?” Taylor asked.

“Damn thing’s a nuisance. It’s totally bullshit propaganda that seat-belts save lives anyway.”

Taylor clamped his mouth shut and drew in a slow breath. He just wanted to get this day over. Even though Clyde was sixteen years his senior, he felt responsible. He’d never outlive the guilt if anything happened. But, what could he do short of physically fighting the man?

At the end of the dirt road, Clyde turned the car onto blacktop and gunned it, spinning gravel behind him.

Taylor kept a close eye on the speedometer. “Clyde, this is a narrow winding road. You might ought to slow down a little.”

“I know what I’m doing. So, back the hell off,” Clyde growled.

They rounded a curve to find a large combine covering most of the road going ten miles per hour.

Clyde slammed on the brakes and tires squealed as he cursed a blue streak.

Taylor was sure the floorboard wouldn’t survive his foot pressing against it so hard. He tried to relax, but foreboding gnawed at his gut.

“I’ve gotta get around this son of a bitch,” Clyde growled.

“Nothing you can do but chill. We have a solid yellow line for a few more miles.” Taylor switched on the radio hoping to distract his brother-in-law.

A Merle Haggard tune drifted through the speakers. No question about it, this car had a great sound system. For the way it delivered, Merle could be sitting in the backseat singing to them.

“Hey, Clyde, remember that time we went to the casino to see Merle? What a great night. If I remember right, Marge hit a jackpot after the show.”

Clyde grinned. “You remember right. It was a good thing too, because it helped cover my losses at the blackjack table. That was a great show.”

Taylor relaxed a little. Happy they were forced to slow down, he tried not to notice the way Clyde crowded the combine.

Clyde whipped the steering wheel to the left, only to swerve back into his lane barely missing an oncoming car.

With his teeth clenched, Taylor sent up a silent prayer.

“It’s not safe to pass, Clyde.”

“Don’t tell me how to drive. I was driving when you were still riding a bicycle.”

“Yeah, I know,” Taylor muttered.

They followed behind for two more miles, then Clyde made another attempt to pass the lumbering combine.

Halfway around, a semi topped the hill. What happened after that was a blur.

Grinding metal, an explosion, shattered glass and screams ripped

Taking Another Ride with Clyde

through Taylor's brain. It was only later he realized the screams came from him.

The car rolled four times before coming to a stop on its roof in the middle of a wheat field.

Taylor tried to unbuckle his seatbelt. The nauseating odor of gasoline assaulted his nostrils. He had to get out! He turned his head toward the driver's seat to find it empty. The shattered windshield told him where Clyde had exited the car.

He struggled with the seatbelt release. Finally, it gave way, and his forehead bounced against the dashboard. But, he couldn't move his leg. When he maneuvered where he could see, he found squashed metal holding his right leg at an odd angle. Excruciating pain shot through him.

It couldn't have been more than five minutes before pounding footfalls could be heard, but it felt like a lifetime to Taylor. All he could think about was JoAnne and how much he loved her.

"You alright, mister?" a deep voice called.

"No. Something's got my leg pinned. I can't get out." Just the effort of saying the words left him spent.

"Hang in there, buddy. Help's on the way."

"Hey, Jerry!" Another voice yelled. "Better get over here."

"I'll be back. Hang in there and stay awake."

Taylor counted his breaths. That was the only way he could be sure he was still conscious.

Finally, he could hear sirens in the distance. He closed his eyes.

Hours later, he awoke to JoAnne's worried gaze and tear-streaked face. She gripped his left hand. His right arm and hand must weigh at least a hundred pounds. One glance revealed a bulky cast from fingertips to shoulder. He tried to move his legs, but it was useless. They were made of lead.

"Where am I?" he croaked.

JoAnne sobbed. "Oh, sweetheart, thank God you're finally awake. I've been so scared. You're at Saint Francis Hospital in Tulsa."

Taylor licked his dry lips and struggled to form words. "Clyde?"

"They're working on him. Marge is on her way. It doesn't look good."

Taylor closed his eyes and squeezed her hand. "I just wanted us to have better."

JoAnne leaned over him and kissed his cheek. "I know, honey. But, nothing is worth risking your life for. I was so worried all morning. My gut told me something horrible was going to happen."

"He wouldn't let me drive," Taylor muttered. "My legs?"

"Your right leg is shattered and so is your arm. They have temporarily cast them, but they tell me you'll need lots of surgeries." Her salty tears dripped onto his cheek. "Your side of the car took the brunt of the

impact.”

“I’m so sorry.” Taylor closed his eyes and allowed the medication to take him into nothingness.

ONE YEAR LATER

Taylor Malone shifted his weight on the chaise lounge and squinted against the afternoon sun.

“Need something, babe?” JoAnne moved to his side.

“Yeah. I need you.”

He reached for her hand and pulled her down on top of him.

“Taylor Malone!” She pushed back. “Someone will see.”

A grin spread across his face. “So?”

“So. We’re still guests. Maybe it’s time for us to go home.”

Taylor relished the feel of her curves under his fingers. “Maybe you’re right. I’m doing good. With all the metal plates and screws, I can finally walk without a cane. It’s time to get back in the saddle.”

“Hey, you two lovebirds.” Clyde wheeled his chair through the double doors.

“Hi, Clyde.” JoAnne stood. “How are you feeling today?”

“Better every day, sweetheart. I’m a lucky man.”

Marge joined them. “Yes, you are, Clyde Baker. We damn near lost you.”

“Totally due to my arrogance and stupidity, darlin’,” he answered.

“You’ll get no argument from me.” She leaned down and kissed his cheek.

Taylor pushed himself up. “JoAnne and I were talking, and we think it’s time for us to go home. We’ve imposed enough on your hospitality.”

Marge waved a hand of dismissal. “You aren’t guests. This is your home for however long you want or need. I’ve never told you this, but I promised our mom when she was dying, that I would look out for you. You were so young, and she was worried for you. I take my promises seriously.”

Taylor reached his sister and draped an arm around her shoulders. “Sis, you have done an excellent job, but it’s time for me and JoAnne to get back to our own lives. We have dreams and plans, and part of those include a family.”

He didn’t miss the mist in Marge’s eyes. “I’d love to have some nieces and nephews, but you need to be sure you’re ready.”

“I’m ready. I have my real estate license. I can start earning us a good living. You’ve taught me well. Mom would be proud.”

JoAnne joined her husband. “Marge and Clyde, it has been beyond amazing to be here. But, Taylor’s right. It’s time for us to make our own

Taking Another Ride with Clyde

way. We appreciate everything you've done and for letting us stay here in paradise with you while Taylor mended. I never imagined how peaceful it would be in Hawaii."

"It's nothing, sweetie. Just a beautiful place to recuperate. You know you and Taylor are welcome here anytime."

"I hate to break up this little lovefest," Clyde growled. "But, I need a drink."

Marge laughed. "Of course, dear."

She disappeared through the double glass doors.

Taylor's gut clenched. "Clyde, man, you aren't going back to drinking again, are you?"

Before he could answer, Marge reappeared. "One cold glass of sweet iced tea, babe."

Clyde looked up from his wheelchair. "Not a chance. Not a chance."

Taylor clapped him on the shoulder and pulled JoAnne close. "Come on, honey. We've got some decisions to make. But, my immediate plan is to get started on that family we keep talking about."

He ignored the jab to his ribs and flush on JoAnne's face. He'd come close to losing everything. And all because of one man's refusal to relinquish the keys.

Most of all, he was thankful no one else had been hurt or killed in the wreck. The truck driver, although shaken, wasn't injured, and the damage to the truck minimal.

As they made their way down the hallway, he whispered a silent vow. Never again would he willingly get in a vehicle with someone behind the wheel who had been drinking. It was a promise he intended to honor for as long as he lived.

Couple the warm rays of Hawaiian sunshine with a beautiful woman who loved him at his side, and a bright future full of hopes and dreams lay ahead.

Taylor danced them through their bedroom door, closed it and locked it.

He pulled JoAnne close. "Sweetheart, I'm going to give you everything you've ever dreamed of and that's a promise."

Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. She whispered, "You already did. You lived."

It all could have slipped away so easily in that split second of time and bad decision. Life is fragile. That much Taylor and JoAnne Malone understood. For whatever reason, Taylor Malone had been given a second chance and he damned well intended to make the best of it.

THE END

Why I Wrote this Story

This is purely a work of fiction but is based loosely on an incident that did occur with my brother-in-law who stayed up all night drinking then drove fifty miles early the next morning to purchase a computer. My late husband accompanied him and his last words to me before they left that morning was, "I'm taking another ride with Clyde, sugar." Thankfully that story ended on an uneventful note, but the purpose of telling this story is to raise awareness about the seriousness and danger of drinking and driving. Don't do it! As Taylor and JoAnne found out, life is fragile.

She
Karen S Coan

Drip. Drip. Drip. Dark. Dank. Dread.

Repeat 10 times a minute. Sixty times an hour. Twenty-four times a day.

Three days, 17 minutes.

That's how long she'd been in this hellhole. That's how long she'd been reminding herself she was Jenna Nicole Hutchins, a 23-year-old history major traveling back to Austin for fall semester. That's how long she'd been assuring herself becoming just another rancid, dead body was not her kismet.

Squeezing her dilated eyes and pushing fierce her lungs, she tried to force the disgust of air from her waning courage. Tried to have pity on the poor souls who preceded her predicament. Tried to think pleasant thoughts of colorful flowers and floating clouds and children's laughter.

But, death was not a passive neighbor. Far from it. It was rotting corpses leaking a river of bodily fluids. Fluids coming at her nonstop in her captivity. Captivity exasperated by the roughhewn metal handcuffs elongating her arms into numb. Numb as the other bodies wasted into puddles of mush and crawl of bugs and protrusion of bones.

Even the cocky cockroaches and rotund rats grew tired of this smorgasbord of excess. Festering her impatience at her stomach, growling constantly from no relief. Her lips, drying into callouses. Her skin, hanging like an old tattered coat three sizes too big.

Straining her eyes at the darkness for the source of faint footsteps sloshing closer and closer and closer, until silence overwhelmed the pain pumping blood down her face, blinding her eyes, draining her presence.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Dark. Dank. Dread.

* * *

Unsure what transpired or how or why, Jenna found herself longing for the dungeon of doom she must've escaped. Consistency of disgust was somehow more reassuring than claustrophobic dark of unknown origin and, even worse, unknown destination.

Forcing her panic into cooperation, she listened harder than she ever had. Forcing her brain into concentration, she imagined deeper than she ever had. Forcing her sensibilities into camaraderie, she armored stronger

than she ever had.

When brightness overwhelmed, Jenna thrust her weakened legs into a tornado of twists and turns and turmoil. Emerging as a tumble of bodies into sticky sludge. For one petrifying moment, lightning flashed the monster's face before rain drenched her escape.

Running. Running. Running. Stumbling into faintness. Rolling down a muddy ravine. Ripping raw flesh on briar thorns. Panic crested in the futility of her stupid quandary as thunder drowned the monster's curses growing nearer, nearer, nearer and then fading away.

Sinking into exhaustion, Jenna awoke to stiffness throbbing every facet of her body. With hands still tied behind her back, she was unable to focus on anything but tormented anguish about the monster's return. Squinting a survey of the world now unfolding full color, she saw a field of wildflowers with no houses, no roads, no animals in sight. Scouring blades of grass, she imagined every breeze would reveal the detested monster and launch the torturous game again.

Waiting through an eternity of turbo-charged heartbeats, her first move was freeing her hands. Contorting wretched agony, she paused with knees scrunched hard against her chest to channel years of gymnastics training. Rolling back to lock her legs behind her neck, she endured a slow, muscle-spasmed stretch of her arms over her clinched butt, along the back of her trembling thighs. Pulling, bending, tugging in ways never intended, she managed sight of her bound and bloody hands with the mere dislocation of one shoulder.

Succumbing to pain, her next sensation was the face chill of mud as she fell into unconsciousness.

* * *

Jenna's groggy awakening from recent despicable nightmares muddled into sickening unease of her current surroundings. Guttural regret from taking just those three classes of Muay Thai boxing. Certain, this time, the monster was ready for her moves.

Instead, her ears deceived her with kindness, a mottling of words coming from a woman. Her anger deceived her with softness, a shuffling of hands pushing her back against the pillow. Her body deceived her with submissiveness, a pricking of skin warming to the narcotic pulsing her veins.

"No," Jenna wanted to say, but knew the faint protest only echoed through her mind. Her lips wouldn't move. Her voice wouldn't project. Her angst wouldn't work. Using her only means of contact with the world, her eyes followed the image of this new captor around the room. Fluffing pillows. Adjusting curtains. Pouring water.

Jenna blinked her appreciation of the wetness at her panting lips as a

She

hand cupped the gentle lift of her head. Hoping the liquid wasn't laced with her death sentence, she wanted more than afforded, but was grateful for the drop of hydration or annihilation.

"Rest," the kind woman said. "We'll talk when you're stronger."

Stronger was the last thing Jenna's body desired. Sleep was all she could muster. Tossing in moans of jerked slivers from the bizarre days now consuming her life. The foul dungeon clinging to the putrid hairs in her nostrils. The horrific degradation staining the musty tissue of her lungs. The wicked monster souring the gastric glands in her stomach. Curdling her blood and erupting her throat into a raspy dry heave.

The coolness of the cloth across her overheated forehead and burning cheeks only made her angrier at the helplessness she was forced to endure. Grabbing the arm of the woman, Jenna screamed at her shocked face, "Why did you do this to me?"

The severity of the slap across Jenna's face jolted her release of the former kind woman, now scrambling across the room and slamming the door. An obnoxious of locks secured Jenna inside a new prison.

This one brighter, cleaner.

No decaying bodies apparent.

Yet, a prison, just the same.

Limping from the bed, Jenna slid the curtains open to discover wrought-iron bars protecting a flickering fluorescent light two leg length's away. Everything bolted to the floor – the bed, the side table with an opening where the drawer should've been, the wood chair with no cushion.

The empty water pitcher and glass left behind were plastic, but this was not a hospital room. No bedpan. No medicine pole with plastic tubes. No syringes. A psych ward, at best.

Jenna knocked along the walls in search of vulnerability but found none among the painted concrete blocks. She stared at the hinges of the heavy metal door for a hint of escape. Scanned the water-stained acoustic tiles at least 15 feet above her head and beyond her reach, even if she stood on any immobile thing. That's where she spotted it. A tiny flicker. A camera.

They were watching her.

They were removing her element of surprise.

They were enjoying her futility.

Using both middle fingers, she gave the evil monster and his deceitful accomplice a sample of her non-affection for them. Turning the message full circle in case there were multiple spy cams. When she heard the door unlocking, she immediately regretted her display. Bracing the reinforcement of a corner to staunch her legs for the sexual attack she blamed herself for bringing into the equation with her vulgar attempt to assert some power over them.

Power she knew was insignificant.

Power she tasted in the bile bubbling her stomach.

Power she sweated profusely as the unblinking monster stood staring at her.

An enormous freak of nature. More animal than man. Covered in an excess of bodily hair, from the unkept mess streaming from his balding scalp to the hairy arms crossed in front of the untrimmed chest heaving hot, stale, garlicky puffs of repugnance her direction.

Amazement was the word cramming Jenna's frantic mind. Amazement she had overpowered this monster from what must've been the trunk of a car. Amazement this monster had removed her from the dungeon when others were left to their own demise. Amazement this monster was just standing there, not mauling her.

When this monster spoke, she couldn't believe the pathetic wimpy of the muttered words, "Hullo. Me. Joe."

Someone was punking Jenna. Had to be. No one was as lacking in intellect as this monster not even knocking her out nor dragging her by the hair to the next round of this torture game. No one with a dust mite of sanity would come up with something as extreme and downright weird as this kidnapping on their own. Ashton Kutcher had to be on the other side of that camera. Someone was punking Jenna.

Searching for the flickering, with one eye still on the monster, but discovering it had gone as dead as she assumed she would be any moment if this wasn't a joke.

Not knowing anything else to do, she looked way up into the dull eyes and dumbled way down her reply, "Hullo, Joe. Me Jenna."

Joe uncrossed his hairy arms. Lowering his gaze, as if apologizing the gesture. Extending a filthy hand, as if expecting her to reject him. Jenna considered rejection. She considered a lot of things. Trying to flip him. Attempting to punch him. Running past him. Climbing the walls. Fainting. Puking. Instead, she settled on shaking his hand, even though the thought of touching any part of him grossed her beyond gross.

In a flick of the wrist, all the malodorous, stinking, noisome, rank, fusty, mean, bad-smelling disgust of Jenna's recent days faded into a swelling of emotion streaming down her face. Grabbing her arms around the flustered man as he puffed larger with his held breath until she let go and stepped back, as surprised as he was at what had happened.

The cartoon version of "Beauty and the Beast" danced across Jenna's messed-up brain. Sinking her hysteria to the floor as a black glossy flash of the 1970s Patty Hearst applauded from a seat in the audience surrounded by her bravo-flaunting Symbionese Liberation Army captors.

Was this a thwarted love story?

Was this what Stockholm syndrome felt like?

Was she losing her last grasp on reality?

She

No time to explore her options. A swarm of stern, uniformed officers burst into the room. Followed by a bevy of spit-penciled detectives with spiral notepads. Commanded by egotistical brass shouting orders. And, every media outlet encircled and helicoptered the facility, which turned out to be an abandoned armory in Arkansas. Two states away from where Jenna Nicole Hutchins traveled four days ago.

Four days ago, when she was just another student headed to a fall load of classes in hopes of getting a degree worth the cost of a financed higher education.

Four days ago, when she was naïve of real bad things and real bad people and real bad places.

Four days ago, when she was someone she would never be again.

Not knowing why she had been kidnapped or even how she was kidnapped. Not knowing where she had been originally held or even why she was spared. Not knowing who the woman was or even her association with Joe Tucker, a 42-year-old man with the mental capacity of a seven-year-old boy. He was as clueless as Jenna about what had happened. He was as innocent as Jenna. He was more victim than Jenna.

It changed Jenna. Trust dissolved like sugar in hot water. Fear stockpiled like lava in a dormant volcano. Overreaction prickled like spines on a desert full of cacti.

It changed Jenna. She switched her major from history to a double major of pre-med and physical sciences with a minor in behavioral psychology.

It changed Jenna. She argued, successfully, in court for Joe's lifetime commitment in a criminal mental institution near her university, so she could visit him every day.

It changed Jenna. She never stopped looking over her shoulder or under cracks and inside crevices for the woman Joe only knew as She.

Jenna refused the label of victim. She was a survivor. She was a formidable force. A champion of the discarded. A foe of the abusive. A right to the wrong.

Jenna never stopped searching for She. She never stopped believing there had to be redemption for the wounded of this world. No matter the travesty. No matter the circumstance. No matter the consequence.

No matter whether they were named Joe or Judith or Jedediah.

Or, Jenna.

Why I Wrote this Story

Karen S. Coan is a published writer under a nom de plume, a wicked-good editor and now a short-story contest winner, specializing in marginally inspiring, hugely fictitious and oftentimes provoking content. She believes a life without chocolate and Mexican food is not worth it. To

balance taking herself too seriously, she reads book shots all at once, is an eclectic DVD collector, and an occasional social adult-beverage partaker, especially frozen margaritas with no salt. A summer 2018 writers' workshop in Tyler inspired her to write this story and to enter this contest. She thanks John Foxjohn, for opening her world through his true crime eyes, and B. Alan Bourgeois, for encouraging Texas writers. Most of all, she thanks the readers for indulging a trickle of the constant motion of words blazing through her imagination onto the keyboard. Click, if you dare, into her realm on Facebook, the one she calls The Write of Us (<https://www.facebook.com/TheWriteOfUs/>).

Fenced In Mark Cain

With the sun at his back, the cowboy urges his horse forward. He is sore from the ride.

But the cowboy smiles, and pats the flank of Buddy, the palomino he rides. He likes his work, even if the days are long and hard.

They have been together three years now, he and Buddy, and the cowboy thinks of the horse as his, though of course that's not so. The ranch owns him. Owns the saddle too.

But that won't be forever. The cowboy saves his money to buy Buddy from the ranch. Then he and Molly will get married, settle down, have children.

The cowboy pushes back the brim of his Stetson. Perspiration has crept upward from behind the hatband, staining the felt. He wipes his brow on his sleeve.

Though young still, he is one of the last of his breed. Country is giving way to city; the horse defers to the automobile. The open range is a thing of the past, gone before he was born, vivisected by leagues of cruel wire. Yet day after day he rides, paralleling the fence, looking for damage, maintaining the barbs on which the Old West will meet its death.

* * *

The old man pushed the black mower through the opening in the chain link fence then closed the gate behind him. He knelt beside the machine, though his stiff joints protested, unlatched the handle and with both hands began to crank it clockwise. When he could do no more, he folded up the handle. His thumb, wide, flat, as if the years like a hammer had pounded on it, rested against the starter. He looked at the nail. Weathered white, cracked like dry wood. With a sigh, he released the catch. The Tecumseh two-stroke sputtered feebly, coughed then rumbled to an idle. Putt ... Putt ...

The old man pursed his lips. putt ... putt ... he mimicked. putt, putt, putt ...

Putt! Putt!

Kill yer engine, partner, said the gas jockey, as he removed the cap

from the automobile fuel line. And put out that cigar! Wanna cause an explosion?

The driver smirked. Sure thing, grease monkey, he said, throwing the cigar out the window of his glossy black Model T. The stogie rolled a foot before coming to rest against the attendant's cowboy boot. Cursing under his breath, he stomped out the cigar.

Hate this job. And these damn automobiles. For my money, a horse is the only way to get around.

For my money. Poor Buddy.

Buddy was dead. Pulled up lame before the cowboy could buy him.

After he and Molly got married, she made him quit the ranch. He took the only job in town that let him work outside, but the stench of hydrocarbons was a poor substitute for country air.

Here's your change.

The driver started the engine and drove off, leaving the cowboy choking on a black cloud of exhaust. Putt ... putt ...

Phtht! The mower sounded the raspberry and died.

The old man rubbed the back of his neck. Woozy. Looked behind him. Half the grass of the back yard was neatly cut. Did I do that?

Too hot to mow today, anyway. He pulled the brim of his ancient Stetson lower over the thick lenses of his glasses. Pushing the mower was almost beyond his strength, but the smell of the fresh-cut grass was pleasant, reminding him he was outdoors, alive. He preferred being outside. Always had.

At least I'm makin' myself useful.

Been hard since Ruby died, livin' here in her daughter's house — her daughter, not mine. But can't make it on my own. Ruby's money's gone. Only got my pension check. Least that's mine, thank God. And Roosevelt.

As tiny as the check was, he had a hard time spending it all. James and Marybeth wouldn't let him pay rent or even help with the groceries. He hated that. Made him feel like a freeloader. Just like in the Depression.

So what if you ain't got a job? they said. A man only needs three hots and a flop to get by. Take 'em and be grateful. Dignity don't fill the stomach.

The old man frowned. Same damn thing all over again.

So he bought things for the two boys. Mowed the lawn when they let him. Repaired the chain-link fence.

The sound of the mower was drowned out by the roar of jet engines. The old man craned his neck upwards.

The Blue Angels. Heard they were comin'.

He watched them blast heavenward, marking the sky with white ex-

Fenced In

haust, ripping the fabric of sound with supersonic speeds. They broke formation, and he tried to follow the path of one that soared for the sun, but the glare blinded him.

From the trenches, he watched the fly-boys draw invisible circles in the sky. The hot-shots gunned for each other in awkward contraptions, invented barely fifteen years earlier. He was sure he'd never ride in one.

He had said the same thing about cars.

War came. Though nearly thirty, he enlisted, against Molly's wishes. It was his duty. He was called doughboy, soldier, Yank. But in his heart, he remained a cowboy.

He did not see much action, and a day came when the sound of exploding bombs was replaced by bells pealing peace. Armistice Day.

War will never come like this again.

GRANDPA!

Red, yellow, black spots hung in the air. He blinked. Took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes.

GRANDPA! YOU ALL RIGHT?

Slowly, as if he waded in molasses, the old man turned in the direction of the voice. Jimmy, Marybeth's oldest, stood on the porch. YOU WANT A BEER?

The old man swallowed thickly. Yea ... yeah. Good. Sounds good.

He killed the engine and walked over to the porch, settling heavily on the steps. Jimmy had a queer look on his face as he handed his grandfather a beer.

YOU'RE ALL PALE LOOKING!

I'm fine, boy. Thanks for the beer. You go on inside.

Cold. Feels good going down. Really hits the spot.

He swished the beer around in his mouth. Standing up from the bar stool, he staggered to the door.

When he came home from the war, Molly was gone, run off with another cowboy. He got drunk for a month then looked for a job. The ranch wasn't hiring — its owners had found oil beneath the range and had gone into a more lucrative and modern line of work — so the cowboy went back to the gas station. Time passed, and Model A's began to replace the T's.

YOU WANT SOME COMPANY?

The old man looked up from his beer, a far-away look in his eyes.

GRANDPA! IT'S ME.

Reluctantly the eyes came back into focus. Oh. Bobby. You. Need? Need somethin'?

The eight-year-old plopped down on the step above him. In his hands was a peanut butter sandwich. THOUGHT I'D COME SIT WITH YOU. He held the sandwich up to the old man. WANT A BITE?
Crappy smell, peanut butter. Hate the stuff.

After World War II, he took Ruby back to the town of his youth, where he got a job in a factory that processed peanuts. The drone of goober machinery finished the job on his ears that World War I bombs and the rat-a-tat-tat of construction drills had started. Though he washed and salted peanuts faithfully for ten years, a day came when management said he was too old and deaf to keep around.

But at least he had Ruby.

Ruby. Best thing I ever did was marry her. She was always so strong. Stronger than me. My lucky day when I met her in the shipyard.

The Second World War. The Great Betrayal. They said we wouldn't have to go through it again. They were wrong.

And we won't come back 'til it's over, over there.

He tried to enlist again — it was his duty — but they wouldn't take him. Too old. So he spent the war years working in a shipyard with women and with other men too old or sick to fight. They made him a riveter because of his construction experience in the Depression.

He attempted everything in those lean years, migrant farming, riding the rails, standing in long bread lines. He went to California. Came back. Tried the cities. Gave them up.

Who am I? What am I to do?

To thine own self be true.

Who said that?

Hold on. Hold on to who you think you are. All you got. All you ever had.

So always he wore his Stetson.

Roosevelt. The cowboy was for him. So what if he's rich, and a cripple? I believe him. He'll help the common man.

And he did. The cowboy spent the rest of the Depression building great stone bridges across rivers. The work was hard, but honest, and he felt like he was earning his keep again. No more handouts for me. Never again. Have my pride back. Can hold my head up again.

Ruby was a riveter too.

Ya sure look cute in yer hard hat.

Fenced In

You're not so bad looking yourself.

'Bout my age, maybe a little younger. A widow. Got grown children, six of 'em.

Some were fighting in Italy, some in Guadalcanal. Some were home raising babies, hoping to see their husbands again.

Don't know why she wants to marry me. Maybe she's lookin' for someone to take care of her. Or why I wanna marry her, after what Molly did to me.

WHAT'RE YOU THINKING ABOUT, GRANDPA?

But they both took a chance, and it worked out.

While working in the shipyard, the cowboy began to lose his hearing.

They spent their declining years in a little rent house, not far from the peanut mill. Ruby had a small annuity from her first husband, and her children occasionally sent checks. All the cowboy had was his Social Security pension. Not much, all told, but enough to get by.

A day came when they were unable to manage for themselves. That's when Marybeth, Ruby's youngest, took them into her house. He didn't want to go, but Ruby insisted. He had already broken his hip once, and she didn't think she could take care of him if it happened again. For love of Ruby, he went.

It was not a happy arrangement. The house was big, but not big enough for Marybeth's family and them too, and James never made them feel welcome. He musta been talked into it, too.

Without a house to fuss with, Ruby concentrated her energies on her man. How she fretted over him, constantly worrying that he would break his hip again, have a stroke. And then what would she do?

GRANDPA! WHY ARE YOU CRYING?

She's dead now. Why should we have to keep him around? He's not our kin.

Hush, James, he'll hear you.

That old fart? He's so deaf, he couldn't hear me if I was shouting at him.

He might be wearing his hearing aid.

Ha! He forgets to put it in most days. And it doesn't work worth a damn anyway.

James, don't swear.

And don't you change the subject, Marybeth! He's not our kin. He's nobody's kin. We don't owe him a thing.

Mother loved him, and he was good to her. And the boys like him.

Let's at least see if somebody else will take him in. Maybe Janet.
Lord knows we've had our turn.

You know nobody else will take him. We're stuck.

The cowboy got up from the rocker and walked passed them. James was embarrassed, but if the old man had heard, he didn't show it. He left the den, entered his bedroom. Closed the door. Took the hearing aid from his ear and set it on the dresser.

I love being around grandpa. Don't you?

Yeah. He cracks me up, especially when he gets things, you know, mixed up. HEY GRANDPA! Jimmy shouted at the old man, who sat on the edge of the bed. TELL US ABOUT ROOSEVELT!

They think I'm a clown. He sighed. Not bad boys. Not really. They just don't understand. Not yet anyway.

Just can't seem to keep things straight anymore.

He started telling them about the Depression, how Roosevelt saved this country.

Saved me. Got me a job. Sent me to war. He shook his head. Boys, I shoulda been in the cavalry.

Jimmy and Bobby rolled their eyes and turned away, their shoulders moving up and down rapidly. They were laughing at him, he knew, though their giggles sounded faint and hollow, as if he were hearing them through the end of a drainpipe. He looked with longing at the hearing aid, still lying on his dresser, which his pride would prevent him from ever wearing again.

Mom! Come quick! There's something wrong with grandpa!

The chain-link fence wiggled, as if the old man were staring at it through liquid. On the other side he could see the neighbors' pool. Cool. Inviting.

I'm ready, boys. You sure they said we could use it while they're out-ta town?

YEAH, BUT GRANDPA, YOU CAN'T WEAR THAT.

JIMMY'S RIGHT, GRANDPA! IT'S UNDERWEAR! THREE TO A PACK. FRUIT OF THE LOOM.

What?

IT'S UNDERWEAR!

No it ain't. Them's briefs, not underwear. Says so on the package. Underwear's long and baggy, but see how tight this fits. Just like a swim-suit.

The old man dropped his beer can, struggled to his feet. Wanna go

Fenced In

swimmin', Bobby? Got my swim trunks on.

He took a step, felt his hip crack and the ground beneath him give way. In slow motion he fell, flailing his arms as he tried to swim through liquid air.

He opened his eyes. Floating above him were the blurred faces of Marybeth and the boys.

I'm drowned. Come fish out my body.

The old man stared at the yellow flower mural on the wall opposite Bed B. The flower had been his only companion these past few weeks since Mr. Smith, former occupant of bed A, had died. Yellow. Cheery, except when he took off his glasses. Then the mural became a jaundiced enemy, petal-arms lifted threateningly above its head.

Can't blame James for givin' up, puttin' me here in the home when my hip finally gave out. But I wish he'd just shot me, like I did Buddy.

With the help of drugs, liberally supplied by nursing home attendants, the old man floated away from reality. He closed his eyes for a moment. When he reopened them, it was five years later. He sat at a checkerboard across from another inmate, and a decade passed between his first and second moves.

During a rare period of lucidity, Jimmy and Bobby showed up pushing a wheelchair. They didn't come often.

They're almost adults now. When'd that happen?

WE'RE GOING TO TAKE YOU TO A RODEO, GRANDPA.

What?

A RODEO.

When what they said sank in, the cowboy smiled. Where's my Stetson?

Bobby looked in the closet and found the hat on a shelf. The curl had almost left the brim, but the old man caressed the ancient felt lovingly and reshaped it with trembling hands. Then he put the Stetson on, refusing to remove it even in the car.

Half the coliseum parking lot was sectioned off for a livestock exhibition, and the old cowboy made the young men wheel him through the displays. He spent a long time before the pen that held the horses, his fingers clutching the chicken wire, while Jimmy and Bobby tried to contain their impatience. They did not see his tears.

That's when the clock broke, and the old cowboy left the present entirely to wander along the paths of memory. It all seemed so real.

Feel funny. Head aches. Limbs numb.

His eyes flew open. Where am I? He felt the starched linen beneath his fingers. Sheets. Bed. Where're my glasses?

He looked for the source of a persistent pressure on his arm. A nee-

dle, stuck in a vein near his wrist, attached to a tube that was held in place by gauze and white tape. He followed the tube upward to where it joined with a plastic sack that hung like an executed man from a metal pole. Wonder what's in the sack.

With difficulty, he raised his head off the pillow and looked around the room. At the foot of the bed was a yellow ghost, arms held above its head. It floated in the air, back against the wall.

Don't worry about falling, the ghost said. I'll catch you.

Not yet, mumbled the old man. Hard to breathe. Where're my glasses?

TRY TO RELAX, GRANDPA.

Before the yellow ghost stood Jimmy and Bobby, grownups now, and a man in a white coat.

LIE BACK DOWN, SIR. YOU HAVE FLUID ON YOUR LUNGS.

Bobby nodded. THAT'S RIGHT. THEY DRAINED OFF A QUART A FEW DAYS AGO.

Days? Weeks? Months? The old man coughed up yellow phlegm.

Now? asked the ghost.

Not yet. Jimmy! the old man gasped. Come here! Jimmy came to the side of the bed.

WHAT IS IT, GRANDPA?

The old man opened his mouth, but had difficulty getting the words to sound. Who won? he rasped.

WHAT?

Who won? Roosevelt?

Jimmy turned and said something to his brother. Bobby nodded, then the elder leaned back down. Yes, grandpa. He won.

With a sigh, the old man closed his eyes.

Now.

* * *

Sunset, and the cowboy smiles. A good day's work, and he pats the flank of Buddy, long dead, who is back beneath him. Mine now. My inheritance.

It is good again to smell the moist leather of the saddle, the sweat of the horse, his own sweat, country air. He stands in the stirrups. In all directions, there's open range. The cowboy lets his wire cutters fall to the earth, coils his rope and drops it over the saddle horn, then rides to the west.

Fenced In

Why I Wrote this Story

Some years ago, not long after both my parents had died, I began — as a form of therapy I suppose — a series of short stories examining death from a variety of aspects. My notion was to produce a small volume, entitled *Little Deaths*. After completing only five of these tales, though, I felt myself healed after a fashion and moved on to other projects.

“Fenced In” was one of those five. The story has always been a favorite of mine, and I’m happy to see it published in this volume.

Problem Solving in an Imperfect World

Darlene Prescott

I

I was on my way to San Francisco to meet up with Eric for a long weekend. He was home visiting his family after a six-month assignment in Singapore. Eric's marriage fizzled out some time ago, and he hadn't opted for a divorce because of the big financial hit he would have to take. Eric was very interested in money. I suppose his wife also had her reasons for staying in the marriage.

Marriage never interested me. I always was a little different growing up in Standard, Texas, where my girlfriends concentrated on getting married over everything else. But that was okay, too, under today's divorce laws.

I never felt uncomfortable when asked, "Silvia, don't you want to get married"? "No, not really." I was quite satisfied with my self-contained lifestyle. Non-committal "involvements" suited me, and Eric certainly had fit the bill – until now.

On the plane, I took the opportunity to catch up on my recreational reading. I knew my solo law practice would be there when I got back on Monday. I would check my messages for any problems.

Many of my clients were women arrested on prostitution charges. They knew the ropes and easily could bail out. Talk about great clients – no handholding for them. They also knew that I would provide them with solid legal representation. And those women deserved as good legal representation as any bad-behaving CEO, or murderer!

The plane landed, I fetched my small piece of checked luggage, and walked outside to be picked up by Eric. There he was. Eric was a tall Chinese-American, now with graying hair. I had a fondness for Asian men, and Eric was quite good-looking.

I got into the car, and, after exchanging greetings, Eric remarked, "Hey, we've never had sex in San Francisco." "Yes, that's right," I responded. "We'll have to add this one to our list." I had a normal (female) sex drive, but what had added to the excitement for me was meeting up with Eric in different cities – different countries.

I had known Eric for fifteen years. We were casual friends before we began our "touch and go" affair. Eric had developed into a sought-after airport dealmaker, traveling the globe and putting the right people together in order to construct a new airport or expand an existing one. I often had felt a twinge of jealousy. His career certainly did appear to be more

glamorous than mine.

Eric had made a hotel reservation near the wharf area. Dinner was good and we enjoyed catching up with each other. I did sense something different about Eric this time, but could not quite put my finger on it. He was acting so uncharacteristically cavalier, not his usual business-like demeanor. He kept giggling and asking me, “Silvia, wouldn’t you like to try something different”? “Well, Eric, I think we have just about run the gamut”!

Eric stopped giggling. “Look, Silvia, I wouldn’t be here if the sex wasn’t any good. I just think there are other things we can try.” Eric’s rudeness also was uncharacteristic. I didn’t respond. I wasn’t after exclusivity, but I did expect civility.

As Eric paid the check at the restaurant, I couldn’t help think that if good sex was the only reason for our relationship, how ironic it was that he had trouble getting it up earlier in the hotel room.

We were soon back in the room. As I turned on the TV late news, Eric started pouring the wine.

The next morning, I woke up confused. I couldn’t remember what had happened after the second or third glass of wine the night before. I waited until Eric woke up, which also was another anomaly. Usually, he woke me up!

“Eric, did we have sex last night”? – a question that, under normal circumstances, would have been odd. I heard Eric mouth “yes.” I let it go.

As planned, we drove around the Napa vineyards, stopping at several to sample the wine. Throughout the day, I kept thinking that there was no way I could have blacked out – not remembered the “great sex.” I had not had that much alcohol.

On the drive back to the hotel, I finally turned to Eric and asked him flat out, “Did you put something in my drink”? Eric denied my accusation – in a sort of half-hearted manner. However, I was very aware that one minute I was drinking a glass of wine in the hotel room, and, in the next instance of consciousness, I was waking up in the morning.

I also had a fleeting memory of flaying my arms around in bed that night, as if I was trying to fight off someone. I could see my body as I floated above. I was still wearing my underwear at that point. My goodness, I must have realized that something was wrong even in my drugged state.

The next question, of course, was why Eric would do this. I was a willing sexual partner.

After my accusatory question, Eric went quiet. I had more time to think. Was the reason to video me in bed? I remember Eric asking me for nude photos of myself in the past. What advantage to me would there be for such images to be floating around. Damn, his computer was stolen

in Hong Kong last year.

He had once snail-mailed me a naked – from the chest down – photo of himself. But *my* identity could get out there – in cyberspace. I had to assume that my face would be exposed, as well as my private parts! I had rather quickly tossed Eric's photo in the trash.

Trying to come to terms with my situation was difficult. I had believed that Eric appreciated my accomplishments over the years, as much as I appreciated his. He must have had some regard, some respect, for me. Did he think I would not notice I had been drugged – not really care?

Why couldn't that jerk be satisfied with commercial porn? Was this act a result of his declining ability to perform sexually? It didn't matter. It was time to end this relationship. Good gawd, this idiot could have killed or seriously harmed me. I had heard about young women going into comas after being given a date-rape cocktail.

My anger, and embarrassment, became more intense as I made my way to the airport – on my own. I deliberately had opted for temporary relationships instead of becoming saddled with a husband and children. I had chosen a life I could more easily control. And, now, this arrogant pig was attempting to show me who was boss. Maybe, he was the one suffering from jealousy.

By the time I was on the plane, I knew I had to do something. I thought of suing Eric for everything he was worth, as well as filing a police report. But I quickly decided against the legal route. If any of this got out into the public sphere, it would reflect badly on me. Could you imagine the comments – “How could Silvia get mixed up with such a man – she must have been desperate for male companionship.”

Never mind that I was not the man-worshipping type. But had I missed signs of Eric's sexual proclivities? I felt stupid. No, I decided, I would not go down that well-trodden road of blaming the victim, i.e., me! I would not blame myself for his sickness – whether or not there were “signs.” I was not a psychiatrist.

On Monday morning, I walked into my office and wrote Eric's wife an anonymous letter, informing her of his exotic activities. I knew that the letter would force the divorce he didn't want. The wife, unfortunately, probably would tell their daughter.

That done, I wrote another anonymous letter to the IRS, suggesting that the agency investigate Eric's shady financial dealings. I really did not know if he was involved in any such undertakings, but it was a good idea for the IRS to audit someone like Eric. If he was drugging women – and there were probably others – he could be mixed up in something else illegal. In any case, I would put a damper on his dangerous pleasure-seeking.

I did not think that Eric would retaliate against me, by doing some-

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thing like putting his “unauthorized” video on the Internet. If he did, I *would* take legal action. Eric, in spite of the erotic haze he apparently had fallen into, should realize this. The smart thing to do was to destroy the “evidence” and hire a clever divorce attorney.

II

Just after I fixed Eric, Lynn Whyte called. Lynn had been arrested several times in the past on charges of prostitution, and, on Saturday night, she was booked on another prostitution charge, as well as on assault.

Lynn explained, “Silvia, the cheap bastard would not pay me, so I hit him over the head with a motel lamp. And he had the gall to complain to the police”!

Lynn Whyte really had not chosen her profession. Like many of the women I represented, she was born into a dysfunctional family, to put it mildly. Her drug and alcohol-addicted father introduced a variety of drugs to Lynn, beginning at age thirteen. The drugs made it easier for him to sexual molest her. Rape her.

Around the age of sixteen, Lynn ran off with an unemployed drug addict to get away from her father. It was only a matter of time before she began selling sex to support both their drug habits. After her boyfriend died of an overdose, Lynn was on her own. The best thing that could have happened to her – Lynn stopped using.

But she did not make a career change. It probably never occurred to Lynn that she could go back to school and prepare herself for some type of thinking job. Lynn, who was now in her early 30’s, but looked older, once told me that she had always been a loser.

Representing prostitutes made me really think about the so-called oldest profession. How could I not. For centuries, women were married off, and, if they found themselves without a husband or “male protector,” one of the few paying jobs then in existence for females was prostitution.

Weren’t those traditional marriages also a financial arrangement for sex – and children, who were literally the property of the husband in those days. The husband supported his wife, in return for her “domestic” services.

It only has become a crime recently, in some countries, for a husband to rape his wife. I chuckled to myself, “Yeah, the positive change in the laws made sense now that wives were working outside the home and earning a salary”! I could analyze the human condition the way I wanted.

Yes, I had a lot of sympathy for women working as prostitutes. At one time, I thought prostitution should be legalized, as it had been done in other countries and in Nevada, but, now, I was not so sure. Women should have the right to sell sexual favors if they so choose. It was her

labor, not inherently illegal. But few prostitutes had real control over their lives. It was the pimps and madams who held the purse strings, made the rules, usually without regard for any sense of dignity for the working women.

My lawyer-friend, Paul, would argue: “What about those women who think they should get paid for sex rather than give it away.” Some of those women make a great deal of money – in a world where women’s wages are still not on par with men.” Paul made sense, but I had to fall back on my experience. The “happy hooker” was the exception, and, Lynn, like all prostitutes, faced the scorn of society. While prostitutes were in demand, they were at the same time despised. Paul had to agree.

“Silvia, yes, I agree,” Paul said. “And society also eagerly castigates women who ‘sleep around’ – they are called whores”! Gee, I thought, that epithet could be hurled at me by atavistic types. But I wasn’t going to let that worry me.

If there had to be prostitution, damn it, prostitutes should be in control of their working conditions and earnings. And if prostitution was to remain illegal, why couldn’t law enforcement adopt the Swedish model, where only the clients were punished? In my mind, this strategy would do more to lessen the prostitution plight.

I could see that going over easy in Standard, a city of oil refineries and a well-entrenched good-old-boys’ culture. I could hear Chief Denton of the police department now, “Silvia-Honey, men have urges, and those *ladies* take advantage of them, and you want me to *only* arrest the men – men who have to support their families.” Of course, it was different when a store took my money when I had the very real urge to buy some new shoes!

I reached the point where I was fed up with the revolving-door mentality of the Standard Police Department, happily arresting the city’s alleged prostitutes over and over. There was no room for a creative solution with those guys. I was going to tackle the problem.

I remembered that Paul had used a “discriminatory enforcement” defense in a gambling case recently, and I thought that this defense might work for me. Why not raise a similar argument in defending Lynn in her upcoming court case?

There clearly was nothing in the Texas Penal Code prohibiting the arrest of the customers of prostitutes. Why discriminate in favor of the male clients who also were in violation of the law?

I mean, if society is squeamish about arresting and prosecuting those clients like “regular” criminals, “johns’ courts” could be set up to deal with the men. Specialty courts currently were the fashion. It should not be that difficult to herd those ‘procurers of sex’ into a court that could offer them community service, or something else, instead of jail time.

Lynn’s john typically was not arrested. The two had met up in one of

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the working-class bars Lynn frequented, and then they shifted over to a nearby motel to execute their sex-for-money agreement. Here, the facts were undisputed, including the assault. Lynn should not have hit the guy, but no case was perfect.

I was aware that this defense never had been used to defend a prostitute in a Standard courtroom. And I could anticipate the skepticism that would come from the town's legal hierarchy.

That was okay. I would do my homework and prove that the Standard Police Department's method of prostitution control, directed solely at prostitutes was not a reasonable law enforcement approach. Not only had the police not arrested any johns in the past, but also they made very little effort to pick up the pimps and madams. This was not fair on its face! It wasn't efficient either.

III

I never heard from Eric again. I didn't expect any kind of communication from him. Didn't want to see that asshole again. What would be the sense of it. More importantly, Eric's "bad behavior" had not changed my life style.

I knew that I had not taken the lawyerly route in handling my personal Eric-problem, even though I thought my solution would be effective on other levels. In the back of my mind, though, I did feel a little like I had betrayed my profession – I should have immediately reported the crimes against me. Lynn's john certainly had reported the assault on him.

I did believe that I was earning every dollar defending Lynn and my other clients. And I was optimistic that my efforts had a good chance of changing the practice of how Standard, Texas, dealt with the important problem of prostitution for the better. Perhaps others would take note and also change their medieval ways.

Just as I was patting myself on the back, Paul phoned: "Are you free for drinks later on"? I immediately said, "Yes." It was not likely that Paul also would go weird on me – even in an imperfect world!

Seriously, it would be nice to relax a bit and discuss my defense strategy with a buddy. Hearing out Paul on the Whyte case, no doubt, would reveal anything I had missed – that, hopefully, could be remedied before trial.

I would keep my San Francisco "adventure" to myself.

The first question out of Paul's mouth was "How was San Francisco"? I said something.

"Paul, I've decided to use a discriminatory enforcement defense strategy in a prostitution case." "I think that is a great idea," Paul responded.

"I recently got an interesting case," Paul added. "Oh, please elaborate," I said – even though I wanted to talk about my case!

“It’s a defamation case. This guy’s girlfriend, well, ex-girlfriend, brought charges against the ex-boyfriend for placing their private sex videos online after she broke off with him. He claimed it was an innocent mistake.”

“What a mess,” I volunteered.

“The ex-girlfriend claimed that she was unaware of any video being made of their love-making,” Paul continued. “Who knows if she really knew. In any event, the ex-boyfriend was exonerated, and he turned around and sued her for libel and slander. I personally think he should have been found guilty of something. But, now, I’m representing ‘the pornographer’,” Paul proclaimed.

It was my turn. “So, Paul, why did you agree to represent this creepy client?” “Silvia, are you nuts – it’s a weak case, but he’s got money. And since when do we not represent ‘the unpleasant’.”

Paul was right, of course, but I couldn’t stop myself: “Paul, you’re like a prostitute”! “Well, that may be so, but...,” Paul mumbled.

I had another sip of my unadulterated wine – and, silently, continued to hope that Eric would not broadcast “our” sex video. At least I had gotten a drug test upon my return home, so that fool could not claim I was a willing partner.

Why I Wrote this Story

I wrote the story because of my annoyance over the jokes made about prostitutes. I do not agree that prostitution is all that funny. I assume that it is merely another way to castigate women.

Gumdrops J.P. Barnett

The badge he holds too closely to my face says his name is James Bergman. I can call him Jim. Jimmy if I prefer. The intensity of his eyes suggest that I should prefer to call him sir. The badge is gone before I can discern the agency he hails from, tucked into his jacket pocket by his right hand, while his left hangs limply and awkwardly by his side. I invite him in without delay, offer him a seat, and then a beverage. He takes the seat but declines the beverage. I sit across from him, trying to hide the nerves behind a wall of confidence, but the wall has gaping holes and my concern oozes through them, threatening to break the dam for good.

“Where is the specimen?” he asks coolly, using his eyes only to intimidate me rather than for searching the room for his prize.

The “specimen” is safe. Away from him. I don’t trust that he won’t hurt it, but I also know that I’m out of my depth and can’t possibly care for it in the way that it needs. I distract myself by studying him, trying to gain power in the conversation by delaying my answer. He wears a perfectly ironed black suit, crisp and neat, and perfectly molded to his solid, muscled physique. His lapel boasts an American Flag, pinned with precision such that it leans neither to the left nor the right, but steadfastly horizontal, parallel to the square of his shoulders. By all accounts, he is a picturesque, almost surreal human form. His eyes, though. Something isn’t right about his eyes.

“It’s safe. What are you going to do with it?” I stammer out, failing to sound threatening in any way.

His dead eyes stay trained on me even still. He doesn’t blink or change the slow rhythm of his breathing, and his mouth doesn’t alter its shape or belie any emotion. He takes a beat before answering, but his beat is more natural and more intimidating than mine, “Reunite it with its kind.”

My eyes narrow as I answer, “You aren’t going to experiment on it?”

He only shakes his head in the negative, and I notice that his hair barely moves at all. It doesn’t look like it has much product in it, but the salt-and-pepper gray strands grip his scalp like stone, great in number for a man of his years. When I called about the specimen, I expected someone like this man to show up at my door, but I never expected the person they sent to be so unsettling.

As he sits with unsettling serenity, I carry more of the conversation, “What exactly is its kind? Where is it from?”

This causes Agent Bergman to shift uncomfortably in his seat, lean-

ing slightly to the left, and then to the right, before settling back to the perfect posture he held before, his eyes never detaching from mine throughout the process of his repositioning. He untangles his right hand from his left, lifts it and runs it along the right side of his hair, as if he felt a strand out of place that isn't visible to the human eye. Then his hand goes back to his lap, almost robotically, back to where it started, identical in form, as if he practices folding his hands in his lap every single day.

"Do you really want to know? There are consequences to knowing," he says plainly, with no discernible indication of malice or threat.

I mull the question over. What sort of consequences? I would be willing to sign an NDA if that's what he means. I consider that he may be referring to something more sinister than paperwork. I've seen the "history" shows on television. Sometimes, citizens disappear and never come back after they report seeing something as fantastical as this specimen. Does Agent James Bergman mean to lock me up, throw away the key, and disavow all knowledge of my existence? I certainly would stand no chance against him in an altercation.

I don't reach a conclusion about whether I'm willing to accept the consequences of my question, but I answer anyway, "Yes. I need to know."

He regards me for a few seconds, as if deciding whether he believes me. He says nothing, but lifts his right arm again, this time pointing towards the ceiling of my living room. I can feel my eyes widen. I suspected, of course, that it might be an alien life form, but to have it confirmed to me by a government agent bores it into my soul in a way that I could not have anticipated.

I gulp, "Space?"

He nods and lowers his right hand back down to his lap, interlacing its fingers with those of his left hand. This time I notice that the left hand does not participate in this ritual; it only serves as an object for the right hand to meld with. It occurs to me that I haven't seen him use his left hand for anything.

I don't know if he's willing to answer more questions about the specimen, but I am sufficiently convinced that he means it no harm by some intangible quality of his countenance. I quietly rise from the couch and go into the kitchen where I have hidden it away. Agent Bergman does not follow, nor ask where I'm going, but that doesn't stop me from glancing over my shoulder constantly as I move out of the room.

I crack open the pantry door and look down to the floor, unable to hold back the smile that spreads across my face when I see its form huddled in the corner. When the light hits it, it pulses with a purple glow, the hue emanating from somewhere deep within the opaque outer skin. It has no eyes or mouth. I don't know if it eats or drinks. This color is purple, but I have also seen blue and red, each of which surely has some distinct

Gumdrops

purpose and meaning that I am unable to discern. I have barely slept since I found this thing glowing in my backyard, managing to blend in with the rocks when viewed from the right angle.

I squat down and cup my hands on the floor. The shade goes from purple to blue as it rolls towards me, not as a rock or ball would do, but something more otherworldly, soft and squishy, yet firm enough to keep its shape. While rolling, it becomes a perfect sphere, but once it rolls up my fingers and into the palms of my hands, it reverts back to the gumdrop form that it most commonly exhibits. I run my finger over the unnaturally cool surface and the color fades from royal to sky blue.

When I stand to return to the living room it jiggles like a bowl of jelly, as if it is laughing at some cosmic joke that I don't understand. By the time I return to my seat, it has reverted back to purple. Agent Bergman's blank eyes regard the specimen, but he shows no signs of excitement. His mouth turns up strangely, as if he means to smile but can't complete the action, leaving his face in a creepy bemused state.

The specimen jiggles in my hand again, turns back into a sphere, and rolls to the tips of my fingers, as close as it can to my visitor without falling from its perch on my digits. When I look up from the specimen, Agent Bergman is transfixed on the firm, yet gelatinous object in my hands. The purple glow reflects off his gray eyes with an unexpected passion, growing brighter with every passing second. It takes me a few seconds to realize that although the specimen is indeed glowing purple, Agent Bergman's eyes are giving off their own violet color, growing in intensity as they multiply with the reflection.

"May I?" he asks as he holds out his one good hand.

The specimen does not allow me to answer. It instead squishes its form down into my flesh, and then springs forward from the tips of my fingers to the palm of the Bergman's right hand. I gasp. The specimen has never hopped before.

"It likes you," I say, smiling in awe at the scene before me.

Bergman nods, and before I can react, he pulls the specimen away from me and slams it with all his might into his left hand, squishing it, and creating a sickening popping noise that echoes through the living room. For the first time since he has arrived at my house, Bergman closes his eyes.

I jump from my seat, horrified, "What have you done? You said you wouldn't hurt it!"

He doesn't answer. He rubs his hands together, and I can hear the remains squishing around between his flesh. Tears start to form in the corners of my eyes, as I realize that I can't possibly reverse what he's done. I doomed this amazing, beautiful creature to death because I trusted it with a strange government agent. My stomach rumbles with disgust, and I realize that I have to pry his hands apart. I have to see what he's wrought

on this poor, innocent space-faring being.

When I try to pull on Bergman's hands, there is no give. He is stronger than me, and he won't part his hands if he doesn't want to. Still, he allows me to pull on them with all of my might without trying to stop me or even acknowledge that I'm trying. Eventually, I give up. It's no use. I try yelling at him some more. Obscenities. Insults. Anything to get him to take responsibility for the atrocity that I've just witnessed.

Suddenly, and seemingly unrelated to any action of mine, Bergman's eyes shoot open and his hands unfold. There is nothing on them. Nothing between them. His eyes, which were gray when he arrived, have turned to sky blue, and now telegraph a new serenity that diverges greatly from the deadness that lived there before. He stands and smiles – a real smile this time, fully formed, pleasant and inviting.

The tears are falling freely down my face now, and I jump back when he starts to wipe them from my face with his large, steely hands. Both of his hands. Though his fingers are on my cheeks and below my eye line, a blue glow emanates from them, clouding my vision with brightness. Once my tears are wiped away, he puts a hand on each shoulder, causing me to raise my sullen face to stare into his eyes. His smile still shines, unchanging from before.

When I look into his eyes, I see things. Not hallucinations, or memories, or written information. I see things that I can't explain or even put into words. I see hundreds of little gumdrops, all bouncing up and down, shaded blue, some of them morphing into spheres and rolling around with what I take to be excitement. I find myself wondering about the nature of them. Where do they come from? What are they? The answers fill my mind, but I can't make sense of the overwhelming deluge of truth. They come from... "out there" is all I can hold on to.

As quickly as the knowledge attaches, it leaves. I try to remember it as if desperately trying to preserve a happy dream, but I can't. It fades away. Where they came from. Why they're here. And then, I see only a single gumdrop as it pulses from blue to purple and back to blue before also disappearing. I know that something miraculous has happened, and that I've experienced something life-altering, but I can't remember what it is. Why is this man in my living room, with his fine-pressed suit and his perfectly coifed hair?

He pats me on the shoulder with his left hand, "Thank you so much for your help today. You've done a great service for your country."

I open my mouth to ask to what he's referring, but he's already turned his back to me and opened the door, forcing me to holler after him, "Will I see you again?"

I shock myself with the question, unsure of whether I'd want to see this man again. I shake my head, trying to get my brain to catch up with the situation. I am so very tired, and it's starting to play tricks with my

Gumdrops

short-term memory. It's an inevitable consequence of so little sleep, but I couldn't sleep because... because why? I can't remember right now, but I know something has been keeping me awake at night.

As the door is about to close, he turns back to me and says, "Sure. When you're ready."

Why I Wrote this Story:

Gumdrops hatched from the opening lines; the image of James Bergman at the door, absurdly suggesting that anything other than formality would be permissible in such a situation. From there, it became a matter of figuring out why Agent Bergman stood at the threshold. The rest came as I wrote it but grounded itself in the side of science fiction that is born of awe and wonder, instead of warning and destruction. Otherworldly beings are so often portrayed as terrifying or startlingly human, that I wanted to reach for something different. *Gumdrops* is my first published work, but look for my debut novel, *The Beast of Rose Valley*, in March 2019 from Evolved Publishing.

I Shot a Man in Reno

Allan C. Kimball

I became obsessed with that Johnny Cash song when I was 12 years old. It consumed every daydream and most of my nightmares from that moment on, so I had to get a gun and go to Reno.

I first heard it in my grandfather's work shed way out in Medina. He was retired but still did a lot of handyman work around the area. I lived in Paris with my parents. Yes, Texas has a Paris and we even have an Eiffel Tower. It's not as tall as that one in France but it wears a red cowboy hat and that makes it better. Most of the family lived in Paris, three uncles and two aunts, so I had a lot of cousins to play with while I was growing up but none of them liked Johnny Cash like I did.

I had another aunt and an uncle down in Austin.

But it was hard for me to look up to my father or any of his brothers and sisters. My aunts were women, of course, and just not men. My father was a car salesman. Of the three uncles who lived in Paris, one worked with his hands and looked down on my father who worked with his mouth so he was never around much. The other two uncles were clerks or something like that working for the county. I never really understood what they did. I saw my uncle who lived in Austin just once that I can remember in my whole life. I don't think the family liked him much. I remember one Thanksgiving my grandfather saying that those people who lived in Austin were so crazy that when you blow your nose they have an ordinance that makes you blow only out of the left nostril with one hand and the other hand waving limply in the air to warn anyone standing near that germs might be in the air.

I always spent two weeks every summer with my grandparents there out in the far western Hill Country and it was always fun because I got to wander around in the maples and learn about tools and making and fixing things with my grandfather. He was the only man I looked up to. His shed had every tool you could imagine, and a couple I didn't even know existed, and it had a ceiling fan and an old record player. I'd help out in the shed and he would play all his scratchy records. I didn't care for most of them. Hank Williams sounded like a whiner and Ricky Nelson sounded liked a weasel, but that Johnny Cash sang like a man.

I'm stuck in Folsom prison

And the time keeps draggin' on.

Maybe I took to that song because it sang about Reno and Reno wasn't that far from where our house was. I remember we drove by a prison once when I was real young and my mother warned me to always behave myself or I'd end up right there, a real place, with tall concrete walls with barbed wire on top and guards with real machine guns watching all the time.

When I was just a baby,
My Mama told me, "Son,
Always be a good boy,
Don't ever play with guns."

The song just seemed to connect up with me. But I was confused by it, too. One day, maybe I was 14, and my grandfather played the album with that song on it and I asked him how come if Johnny Cash committed a crime in Nevada he was in a California prison.

He explained to me that, first off, it was just a song, that Johnny Cash didn't commit any crimes, and, second, that the man in the song was in prison for some other crime and not the one in Nevada.

I wondered about that for a bit and asked my grandfather if that meant the man in the song got away with murder and he told me that was probably the case. I didn't know that was possible. It certainly wasn't what I had learned from television. On the TV, the police or lawyers always catch the criminal and put him in jail or kill him.

"Criminals don't always get caught but even when they don't, they still pay for their crimes," he told me.

"How's that?" I asked.

"Your conscience will eat away at your insides all your life."

"What's a conscience?"

The old man tapped his temple and tilted his head down in that way of looking at me that said I'd better by-God pay attention to what he was saying. "It's that little man that lives inside all of us that tells us what's right and what's wrong, whether we listen to him or not."

I was even more confused. The only little man I ever had in my head was Johnny Cash and he never stopped singing.

I hear the train a comin'
It's rollin' 'round the bend,
And I ain't seen the sunshine,
Since, I don't know when.

I visited the Railroad Museum down in Palestine on a school field

trip, even rode on the excursion they give and I loved it because it was the kind that Johnny Cash sings about. Their horns were like the lonely whistle I imagined when I heard his song. The train in the song had to be an old train, a steam train with all that black smoke puffing out of it, chugging-chugging-chugging along the rails blowing that whistle in the dead of night.

Far from Folsom Prison,
That's where I want to stay,
And I'd let that lonesome whistle,
Blow my Blues away.

My problem was that I didn't know what the blues were. I told my mother one time, just to see how she'd react, that I was feeling blue and she said, "Whenever you start to feeling blue just remember to start breathing again." Maybe you had to get older to know the blues, maybe you had to do some bad stuff, like Johnny Cash, to feel the blues and want to get them blown away.

I think my problem has always been that I can't seem to concentrate on things because that song never leaves my head. I didn't even try to go to college like my father wanted me to because I knew I could never pass the tests. I'm not stupid. I read a lot of books. I watch the History Channel and the Science Channel. It's just that when it comes down to applying what I know, my focus kind of wanders until I forget what I'm doing. Except for that damn song. When I turned 17 I told my grandfather I wanted to join up and be a Marine like he was, but he told me not to do that. He said I'd never make it as a Marine because Marines needed to be focused and he knew I couldn't do that because I had this tendency to drop his tools too much of the time. He'd say I stumbled over my own feet.

When I got out of high school, my Uncle Bill gave me a job in his auto body repair shop near downtown and I was grateful for the job but he fired me in a few months because I'd forget where I put stuff. The final straw was when I was fixing the right rear quarter-panel on an old 'Vette and used Bondo. I knew the Corvette's body was fiberglass and not metal, but that focus just wandered off on its own and I used Bondo anyway. It didn't stick, of course, and when I went to sand it down it went one way and my sander went the other and I damaged the quarter-panel even more. Even Uncle Bill wouldn't put up with that.

I went through about six jobs in the next year and finally I realized the only way I could get that song out of my head was to go to Reno and get a gun.

Reno wasn't that far away. Well, Reno, Texas, anyway. I sure couldn't afford to go to the real Reno, the one out near California that was half

I Shot a Man in Reno

a world away. But our Reno was just a bit east—almost within walking distance on Highway 82. So I went and got a job at a Reno ice cream shop. I did that for another year or so until I went to a gun show and bought the pistol.

I don't know a lot about guns but I liked the name of this one: a Beretta Border Marshal. It was a semi-automatic pistol in .40 caliber and the man who sold it to me said it would put a fist-size hole in any man. I didn't believe that for a moment—he was a salesman, remember—but I figured it probably did have the power I wanted.

The next step was to pick out a man.

I hear the train a comin'
It's rollin' 'round the bend,
And I ain't seen the sunshine,
Since, I don't know when.

I'd get off work, after cleaning up, about 10 p.m. and I was tired. I figured I just needed to wander through some of the neighborhoods on my days off. So I'd drive and drive all around. I got gas one time at this convenience store that looked like it was on the verge of collapsing in on itself. The clerk was one of those foreigners, hard to tell from where, with a dark skin and an accent so bad English just tied up his tongue. At first I thought he'd be the man, but then I realized that was too easy. I went back to the store after dark and saw it was a hang-out for all sorts of disreputable people, at least half of them drug addicts. None of those types appealed to me at all. I wanted someone worthy.

I went back again and found my man. A deputy constable.

I kept going back, waiting until the constable car showed up again. When it did, I made sure the pistol was tucked safely under my belt in the small of my back and walked into the store. The cop was buying one of those 64-ounce cups of coffee to go and was handing the clerk money so both his hands were full. I heard the music and smiled.

I shot a man in Reno
Just to watch him die.

I was no more than ten feet from the constable when I raised my pistol and stepped into the store, the song screaming in my head. But I tripped on a loose piece of weather-stripping in the doorway and I pitched forward. As I fell, I remember hoping the pistol's safety was still on. It wasn't.

I did hear the bang, a little muffled by my body falling on top of the pistol when it went off. I sure felt the bullet burn into my chest. I couldn't take a breath without it burning like my lungs were on fire. The store

spun around me as the cop rushed over and jabbered something into his radio. He rolled me over and kicked my pistol away. He asked me something but I don't remember what. It was all I could do to keep my eyes open.

An ambulance arrived but I didn't hear it. I assume the siren was going because they always are, but I didn't hear it right then. They tore open my shirt and stuck me with a few things, I don't know what they were, and one of the EMTs stuffed something in the hole in my chest and they loaded me into the ambulance.

An EMT tried three times before he got an IV into my arm. The ambulance was rocking and rolling, careening through the streets. I couldn't see any of the neon out there. I only saw the EMT hovering over me looking bored as he checked my vital signs. I tried to speak, but his blue gloves just patted my shoulder and he told me to rest. I heard the siren wailing in a distant fog. I had mislaid my focus. My chest still burned. Burned. I heard the EMT holler something to the driver but it was drowned out by the music. The Man in Black was singing that song I'd heard thousands of times.

I shot a man in Reno
Just to watch him die.

That's what I dreamed of doing for the past ten years. I never dreamed the man I'd shoot and watch die would be me.

The Last Outpost

Thomas Nichols

Every Saturday at this time one of them came in. They'd never be late – not even by a minute. It was easy for me to keep track of two old retired priests on these desolate, wind-swept plains. Their penitents came at one time or another: wife beaters and income tax cheaters; whores and thieves; it didn't make much difference, they all came eventually.

Long ago I knew what the compassionate old priests would do before they knew themselves. Good habits, like bad ones, are hard to break.

I was dozing when the door gave a long steady creak and opened. A quick blast of cold air whisked into the church. I shuddered at the chill, but didn't bother to look up to see who it was. The clean air smelled good, so I took a deep breath and enjoyed its sweet taste.

I watched in silence as the old priest shuffled down the side aisle of the church. It was a long walk. Every day it got a little longer. Folks wondered which was older, Father Judson or this decrepit old church. If you think God might have forgotten someplace, this was it – Murdoch, Texas!

Downtown? Well, it had more or less folded. There was Midge's Cafe, Downey's Full Service Exxon Station, and the Post Office. Not even a school anymore. The smattering of kids who lived anywhere near-by rode the decrepit old bus thirty miles to Muleshoe.

Saturday afternoon in Murdoch didn't have much excitement, not that there was any on the other days either. I could always count on ol' Father Judson or Father Carsino. One of them would always be in the confessional at four o'clock. Not that there were many takers anymore. It wasn't like in the old days when there were a lot of roughnecks and whores. Nope, not anymore. Maybe two or three folks coming in to seek forgiveness. But like the old priests would say to each other, "Not much action today."

* * *

The two old men had seen better days. Age, the weather, and the grind of Chicago finally caught up with them, so the bishop helped them find an out-of-the-way place where they could still shepherd a few of God's sheep. Surely, Murdoch, Texas was about as out-of-the-way as they could get.

Father Jud, as they called him, sat quietly in the confessional. He knew if he waited long enough somebody would show up and be full of contrition, and he'd be God's little tool on the desolate plains of this not

quite God forsaken place. He would grant them absolution for their sins and pray with them to go forward and sin no more. That's how it was supposed to be, and that's how it was.

Sure enough, he heard the sound of footsteps coming down the aisle. The years, and a little help from me, had taught him to tell if it was a man or woman, or maybe a youngster. Sure enough, the sound of soft-soled shoes told him it was a lady, or maybe I should say it was a woman, so he wasn't surprised to hear the soft feminine voice speak to him from the other side of the screen. She was filled with anguish for her sins. An adulteress! Sorry, oh so sorry!

"I'll never sin again, Father," she whispered. "I promise. If my husband knew about this, he'd kill me . . . you too, just for knowing about me. He's a mighty proud and mean fellow."

They prayed together and he heard her cry ever so softly. She mumbled her Act of Contrition, and with a little "Thank you," she left.

The old man sat there again in the quiet, shuffling his feet to help his circulation, waiting. Finally, he heard the rusty old hinges as someone opened the door. This time he could tell it was somebody wearing cowboy boots. Sounded like somebody pretty big, and Father Jud knew right away who it was the way he clomped, and knew his sin, too. Billy Don Williams wasn't a Catholic, but he still liked to come to talk. There wasn't enough town left to call him the town drunk, but he was. Whenever he was sober enough on a Saturday, he would come to confession. Sure enough, he knew the devil had his soul stuffed in the wine bottle, but he still had enough decency to want to get straightened out someday.

"Maybe tomorrow. Yeah for sure, tomorrow. Do it first thing in the morning," he promised.

* * *

The church was quiet as a tomb except for the howling wind. It never stopped blowing, and I could hear the rafters creak. Someday all this will come crashing down and kill whoever is inside and that would be the end of God's last outpost at the edge of the world.

The priest looked at his watch in the dim light. Just about another ten minutes, that's all, and then they were going to eat lasagna and garlic toast. Father Carsino was a master in the kitchen. Lots of spices and fat and starch in everything. It may not be good for you, but it was as good as it got around here. He was a little slow, but never lost his touch with the food, and it showed in his belly. It was big as a basketball, maybe bigger.

Another set of footsteps. Well, Jud must have been dozing 'cause he hadn't heard the door. Yep, this was a man, and sounded like he was in a hurry. A young man, maybe in his twenties? But oh, his sins were great.

The Last Outpost

He and a friend had been working for the cartel, but things had gotten out-of-hand and somebody had been killed. Didn't do the killing himself, but he was part of it and he felt terrible about the whole mess. It happened down in Mexico, and he came through here a lot so he knew there was some kind of church. He didn't think anybody knew he stopped here. It's so damned desolate he had to be safe coming in. Things were getting too bad for him, and he wanted out.

"Just forgive me, Father," he said. "Please forgive me. God Almighty, Father, I never meant for this kind of sin to happen. If they knew I was in here talking about it, they would shoot me on the spot. They're a tough bunch, Father. They don't cut no slack for anybody. All I want is to get out."

Father Jud and the penitent prayed and talked. The fellow said he had to be getting along, and he got out real quick.

The old priest sat there listening to his pounding heart. It had been years since he heard anything like this, and it was almost too much to take. Lots of action today. Yes sir, lots.

Time to go, but hang on a minute. Somebody else was coming. *What a day*, ol' Jud thought. "Sounds like another pair of boots, big boots, so it's gotta be a man, but he's sure walking slow. Too slow. Maybe it's been a long time since he came to ask forgiveness for his sins and he's kind of scared."

"Well, come on, come on," Jud murmured to himself. He's just outside the confessional working up his nerve, but here he comes. He's coming inside now. I can hear him breathing on the other side of the screen. Can even hear him sweating. *He's really scared*, the old priest thought to himself, then uttered a quick and silent prayer for the stranger.

"Forgive me, Father, for the sin I am about to commit."

* * *

Father Carsino looked at his watch . . . nearly a quarter after five. Wouldn't be the first time Jud went to sleep in the confessional, but if he didn't get here in a couple of minutes, a fellow might have to go wake him up. Need to eat while it's hot and fresh, 'cause cold lasagna isn't any good.

He didn't walk as fast as Jud, so it took him a few minutes to scoot his feet across the yard, into the back door of St. Elizabeth's, cut through the sacristy, down the two steps from the altar, and the last three or four steps to the confessional. The church was dark except for a light over the tabernacle and another one in the vestibule by the front door.

"Hey, Jud, wake up," he said in a loud whisper, trying not to scare his old friend awake. He tapped lightly on the door. "C'mon, Jud, dinner's ready," he said in a slightly louder voice. "Let's go eat."

The big bellied priest stood at the confessional for a minute or two that seemed like a year. He knew something was wrong. They had talked about it before -- what it would be like when one of them died. He knew before he opened the confessional door that Father Judson was dead. He opened it a couple of inches and peered inside. His friend was slouched over in the chair, his head tilted back into the corner of the tiny room. Carsino reached up and flipped the overhead light switch.

"Oh my God! Oh my God!" he screamed. "God help us. Oh my God, what happened?"

The right side of Father Judson's head leaned into the corner. Blood ran down the wall. The old man was covered with blood. His sacred garments, the rosary in his hand, everything was covered with blood. Carsino leaned closer and looked intently at the horror.

Father Judson had been shot. There was a hole no bigger than a pencil in his left temple, but the right side of his head had been blasted onto the wall and floor. The priest looked quickly at the confessional screen with a small hole in it. He choked back tears and gasped for breath as he stepped away from the confessional. The sinner did it. He threw open the other door -- the place where sinners knelt to ask God's forgiveness. It was empty! Nobody was there.

* * *

"Who did it?" you ask. "Why would anybody kill an old priest?" Now the way I figure it, most of you think you know who did it. It was one of those fellows that went and got all wrapped up in that dope. That's what you think, isn't it? Or, was it that woman's husband? Well, maybe so, and maybe not. Y'all sure do jump to conclusions, don't you? I might tell you, and I might not. You'll just have to wait and see.

"But, hang on a second," you say. "Who are *you* telling us all of this? How do you know so much? Where were you when all this happened?"

Okay, I'll tell you, but you may not like what I have to say. Have you ever been sitting around with some friends in some kind of different place? Maybe a church or an old house. Or, maybe you were in some forlorn and creepy castle in England or someplace like that. Possibly, one of you said something like, "Wow, wouldn't it be something if these walls could talk? Just think of the stories they could tell."

Well, I'm here to tell you, they can talk. Listen hard enough and you can hear 'em. I know!

"And how do you know?" you ask.

Simple enough. I've been doing it about two thousand years. Even for me, it's hard to believe time can go so fast. Just a blink. Nothing more. Now I'll tell you how it is.

A long time ago, or not so long, depending on how you look at it,

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they had a really big dedication ceremony right here at St. Elizabeth's. It was a big deal. Bishop and all. Lots of songs, and in those days the organ was brand new. It was wonderful. It sounded like heaven itself. Dozens of people came, spent the day praying and singing and being filled with the Holy Spirit. They had never felt any better. It was a sight to behold.

When they'd finished, the ladies laid out all sorts of food -- fried chicken and rolls, some pies and cakes, and all sorts of things. Why shoot, a couple folks even got tipsy, but that was okay. Anyway, they dedicated this church, and I've been here ever since. That's what I do. That's who I am. I'm the spirit of this church. I've been in other churches and some temples, and even a mosque. You see, once a place is dedicated to God, He never leaves it. Never! And just to be sure, He always has one of us stay to look after things. And that's the way it is.

So you see, these walls can talk. You just have to listen. That's all. Just listen. Let me tell you, I've made a game of it. I like to listen, but keep my eyes shut so I learn to figure things out. I've been doing it a long time and have gotten to be pretty good at it, too. I like to listen to feet best of all. Some of them scoot along, others tromp like an army. There are some real dainty ones, kind of like a ballet dancer gliding across the floor. It's fun to listen and then take a peek to see how close I came. First time I ever tried it was a long, long time ago, and a long way from here. All the way across the sea on a little hillside outside of Jerusalem. I couldn't stand to watch anyway, so I closed my eyes and listened to that big Roman soldier shuffle his way over to the cross and drive those nails into His hands and feet. Yes sir, it was horrible, but I never forgot that sound. And, I've been listening ever since.

I know I'm about done out here at this little outpost. One or two more big winds, and this place will be coming down and they won't need me anymore. Not here, anyway. I already know where I'm going next. He told me they're building a big cathedral, and I get to go there. Going to be a lot different than this place. Guess I'll have to clean up my act a little and start talking right and get rid of my Texas twang. Well, that's okay by me.

Oh yes, before I go, I haven't forgotten you. I know who did it. It was the same shuffling footsteps I heard long ago on that hill they called Golgotha. Exactly the same. But I won't interfere with your laws or your business. You can do that well enough without me. But don't worry. He knows, and you know who He is, and that will take care of it. You see, there really is justice.

Why I wrote this story:

The Last Outpost memorializes life in the small communities on the South Plains of Texas. Every sunset brings them closer to extinction. The oil and gas industries were the pipeline to success. As innovation in drilling, communication, and transportation progressed, the need for those little hubs of commerce lost their significance to people's livelihood.

Saturday afternoon visitors used to find small but plentiful cafes, department stores, pharmacies, a movie theater, and the row of Baptist, Methodist, and Catholic churches. "In town," as they called it was where people of all ages could satisfy their wants and needs. It was a joyful place after a hard week's work.

Today, the wind blows unhindered down the empty streets. Shutters flutter in the wind and slap the walls of vacant buildings. The last outpost is a legacy to yesteryear.

A Brave Adventure
Charlotte Boatman Canion

Looking Back Mom was BRAVE and Angels were riding with us.

My mother was my best friend, the person I could always turn to for everything. As far back as I can remember, mom was there for me. She drove me to dance class, to school and to church.

When I was almost 15, we lived in Palmer, Alaska for a short while. When it was time to go home, my parents decided they would take an adventure and drive the ALCAN highway. The trip would be from Palmer, Alaska to Dallas, Texas, through Spokane, Washington, where my aunt lived. The trip would take three weeks with a visit in Washington state.



My parents bought a new car for the trip. It was a brand new 1961 Chevrolet Station Wagon. My dad and mom were to share the driving, but just days before the trip, my dad was sent to a very far region of Greenland and he had to be there in a week. Not enough time to drive home, so the task fell to mom.

Once you drive off the parking lot of a dealership with a new car, you have lost thousands of dollars on the resale. My mom was always the most frugal person I would ever know, so returning the car was out of the question.

Mom was going to drive the new car home, what could happen? The car was new, tires were new, everything was new. Mom would drive home alone, well, not quite alone. She had me (barely fifteen years old) unable to drive and my little brother “Billy”, age six. It would be the trip of a lifetime. I remember it like it was yesterday. Before we got on the highway, I took black electrical tape and spelled out the words “TEXAS BOUND” on the back of the station wagon.

I look back and think how brave my mother was to drive the 3000 miles to Texas with one thousand four hundred miles on gravel roads, down the ALCAN highway with nothing more than her true grit, an innocent fifteen-year-old and her six year old son in the back seat, kicking the back of his sister’s seat most of the way.

There was nothing but wilderness, scenery and a few strategically placed bed-n-breakfasts with a gas station along the fourteen hundred miles of gravel roads.



Mom and her two sidekicks got a book called the “*Milepost*”, which was a sort of map of the ALCAN highway with descriptions of the views to check out along the highway. (“*Milepost*” has been in existence since 1949 and referred to as the *Bible of North Country Travel*.) Some of the sites were a mountain side with hundreds of mountain goats, that looked like specks of white snow moving along the cliffs. Another site was

A Brave Adventure

pools of hot water called hot springs. This was where the Indians and the core of engineers used to bath and keep warm during their years of carving the ALCAN highway in and around the mountain range, that charted our path.

There were side trips to see Indian artifacts and totem poles, lots of totem poles. Along the fourteen hundred miles, there were small signs that told us how many miles we were from Dawson Creek, British Columbia in Canada. This was the beginning of civilization it seemed in the summer of 1961, because there were paved roads started in Dawson Creek.

Mom was able to maintain thirty to thirty-five miles an hour on the gravel roads and there were days when we never saw another human being. Mom had packed bologna and bread for us to eat and we even slept in the car many nights. That is until the day when we saw a mama bear and her two cubs walking down the middle of the road in front of us. Mom, yelled at me to get the Brownie camera out of the glove box (a Brownie camera was a four inch black square box with film that rolled on two winding wheel gears and once you took the twelve pictures, you took the roll of film to a developer to get your printed pictures). I got the camera and was trying to take the picture. Mom was so excited that she grabbed it out of my hand and we dropped it on the floor. Guess what the only pictures we got of the mama bear and her cubs – were the ones that remain in my memories.

I think mom recalculated our daily driving schedule and we managed to stay in a bed-n-breakfast every night after that. The best part of sleeping in a bed-n-breakfast was breakfast (real food). I had pancakes and milk, that tasted like real food. Oh, guess what? It was the only warm meal I had eaten in three days, other than bologna and bread. As an adult reflecting back - I am sure mom was wanting to get as far as she could, in as short a time as possible. I never noticed any hint of her being afraid, but I know as a mother myself now, she must have worried, what if something happens out here in the wilderness, how do I protect my children?

When we reached Dawson Creek, British Columbia, we felt we were home free. The highways were paved from there to the states. Dawson Creek was the first city we had seen and almost five days. Mom had developed a severe rash on her arm that had rested out the window, as she drove the ALCAN highway. The time of the year was summer and during the day the windows were rolled down, to get fresh air. The station wagon did not have air-conditioning, as a matter of fact air-conditioning was a brand-new invention. Billy, my brother had a bad case of asthma

and I had gotten trench-mouth from one of the bed-n-breakfast we had stayed at. We visited a Dawson Creek doctor. He was very nice, but he was most concerned that the rest of my family not get trench-mouth, as it is highly contagious. For the next few days, I had my own disgusting medicine and my own Dixie cups to use and discard. The doctor also gave Billy medicine for his asthma and mom had lotion to put on her arm.

We rested the rest of that day and then the paved roads allowed mom to drive fifty miles an hour. I remember thinking we were on a race track to paradise (Home).

Mom drove into Spokane, Washington late one afternoon and we spent almost a week with mom's sister and family. You remember I told you that air-conditioners were not installed in cars back then. Mom found a mechanic to put an air conditioning unit in our station wagon, which made the trip home to Texas more pleasant for everyone.

As we started the last leg of the trip. We stopped at the store and bought, yes, more bologna and bread, which we ate almost all the rest of the way home. I am sure mom was on a mission to get home, she drove day and night, only sleeping a few hours on the side of the road. She was ready to get back to TEXAS.

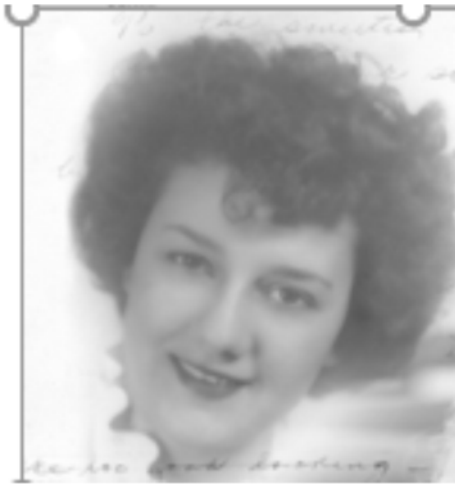
Late one evening, my brother and I were asleep in the car as mom was driving through Arizona. It was Friday night on an Indian Reservation. The loud music woke me up. Mom noticed the heat gauge was running hot. It was about midnight and I am sure mom was wondering, "what am I going to do now". She found an All-Night Diner and ask if anyone knew of someone who could fix our car. She explained the situation. You know there are angels everywhere and the waitress knew the town mechanic and called his home. The mechanic lived next door to his auto repair shop. He went to work helping a mother and her two children traveling across America get on the road again. That made the second angel we met that evening in Arizona.

My mom, brother and I were invited to wait in their home and slept a little, I was on the couch, while my brother fell asleep on the floor. All the while that wonderful man worked replacing the heat pump. A few hours later, we were on the road bound for Texas. This taught me that all over our great country there are people willing to help one another in a time of crisis.

Mother drove almost non-stop from there to Dallas, Texas and our home. She only stopped for gas and more bologna. The black electrical tape was removed when we got home, but the fading of the car paint left TEXAS BOUND visible for the life of the car.

I remember this story as I cherish the beautiful memories of my blessed mother, Louella Marcella Boatman.

A Brave Adventure



My Mother died at the age of ninety-three after battling Alzheimer's for almost 14 years.

Why I Wrote this Story

As an adult with children and grand-children of my own, I love to share the stories of how my brave mother drove through some of the roughest wilderness in 1961, with two children ages 15 and 6. The journey began in a small town in southern Alaska called Palmer and three thousand miles later it ended in Dallas, Texas. This was a journey down the ALCAN highway, when gravel roads, wild animals and beautiful scenery was what you looked forward too. She inspired me to write *You Have To LAUGH To Keep From CRYING / How To Parent Your Parents* a book I wrote dedicated to my mother.

Blues Angels
George W. Ramphrey

I was born in Greenville, but my family moved when I was ten years old. However, my older sister Sandra and husband, Jimmy remained. Occasionally, I visited them and we drove by our old neighborhood on Tucker and Bradford Streets and places of interest like the downtown area, the Mississippi Bridge, the Winterville Indian Mounds, the levee, and the waterfront. These excursions revived pleasant memories. One day as we ventured down Washington Avenue, we noticed posters that advertised the upcoming Delta Hot Tamale Festival. I knew that I would mark my calendar and make a special effort at attending this festival.

As planned, a few months later, I attended the annual Hot Tamale Festival in Greenville, Mississippi, as a book vendor. The day was a beautiful sunny Delta fall day. For many years, family and friends suggested that I participate in the gathering. I was excited and anticipated meeting new people and enjoying everything Southern. I arrived at six-thirty in the morning and was elated that fellow local authors were already in attendance. As a group, we enjoyed a wonderful breakfast at Jim's Café on Washington Avenue as we reminisced about old times. The fried eggs were prepared sunny side up with toast and grape jelly, thickly sliced bacon, buttery grits, and a glass of orange juice. This hearty breakfast was what the doctor ordered and we readied to face an exciting day. The owner, Gus greeted us like we were his long-lost friends. He personified the true essence of Southern hospitality.

After breakfast, I located the registration booth and received my packet of essential information. I shared a spot with a fellow author and we hawked our novels under an awning on Walnut Street to a huge crowd who nonchalantly trudged down the streets soaking up the sights and sounds. Unfortunately, many festival-goers were more interested in beer, turkey legs, and entertainment, than Southern literature. However, from time to time we still received inquisitive visitors who searched for books and conversation. The crowd enjoyed the sounds of local blues musicians, witnessed omnivorous contestants consuming platters of tamales, and applauded floats as they meandered up Washington Avenue. Vendors were jammed as thick as thieves at a Tijuana pickpocket convention in festive trailers and booths as they lined Poplar Street, Washington Avenue, and Walnut Street. Every smell imaginable emanated and saturated the air as odors poured seductively from the wall to wall booths out to the

adjoining streets. There were assortments of games and rides for the children to enjoy. I watched as older children entered giant, transparent plastic balls which spun around sporadically in a pool of water. Their faces lit up as they mastered and negotiated the movement of the ball. Smaller children rode in carnival rides of boats, cars, and airplanes. The competing hot tamale establishments proudly offered their tasty morsels of goodness wrapped in steamy corn shucks. No doubt about it, that many concocted recipes were passed from generation to generation and created their ideal Delta hot tamale. I encountered local folks from every social stratum, race, religion, and political beliefs during the festival. However, like a Southern quilt, they were connected by the common thread of a love of everything Southern.

Every once in a blue moon, my faith in humanity is restored. The word altruism came to mind when I thought of a gentleman whom I had the good fortune to meet at the festival. He approached from the entertainment area. A fellow author introduced us. He was tall, friendly, and was blessed with black, curly hair. He was hospitable with an open personality that glowed like fireflies on a dark, Delta country field. He grabbed an empty lawn chair and parked himself amongst us.

"Hi, I'm T. Dewayne Moore, a Doctoral candidate at Ole Miss," he said. I discovered that the introduction was accurate, but also he possessed many other notable attributes. It didn't take long to find out that he was well-versed with an impressive knowledge of Mississippi Bluesmen and their discographies. We had a colorful lengthy conversation specifically about Delta Bluesmen. For the occasion, I listened to quite a few Delta artists' records since I was visiting Mississippi. I moved to Texas thirty years ago and was looking forward to this festival to re-baptize my soul in the spiritual catharsis of everything Southern. I listened to recordings by Delta artists and prepared myself for the full effect and impact of the Mississippi Delta. One Delta artist whom I particularly liked was piano player, Willie Love. He played with his band, *The Three Aces* and backed legendary Blues musician Sonny Boy Williamson. I told T. Dewayne about the song, *Nelson Street Blues*. Nelson Street was near our booth location and was a historically significant area for the Blues. Of course, he knew who I was referring to so expanded my story to include additional interesting tidbits of information. And, he told me all about Greenville's own James "T-Model" Ford and his recordings of *Chicken Head Man* and *Sallie Mae*. He was very knowledgeable, and we spent the next few hours immersed in conversation about the blues.

T. Dewayne took a mid-afternoon break and checked out a blues band performing in the courtyard. I continued to sell books and take in the spirit of the Delta Festival. I heard the bending of notes and soulful pleas, grunts, and groans spilling out into the thick Delta air from the courtyard stage. Yes, there was no denying, I was definitely in the home of the birth

of the blues. Even though it was the first week of October, the temperature was a blistering 90 degrees. Upon his return, T. Dewayne handed me a handful of valuable Blues information. He gave me a card and a handout of local blue's musician Eddie Cusic who was from Leland which was situated eight miles east of Greenville. It was a picture with the title "In Memory of a True Washington County Original." Also, he gave me a card with a picture of Bo Carter (Armenter Chatmon) and *The Mississippi Sheiks*. Both cards were under the sponsorship of the Mount Zion Memorial Fund or the MZMF. He explained that the fund provided financial support to Mississippi church groups and provided grave markers for blues musicians. I thought what a noble cause, to give back to blues artists who have left us with unique music that is respected and revered worldwide. I discovered that T. Dewayne Moore was the Executive Director of the Mount Zion Memorial Fund (MZMF). Also, he was a historian, legal representative, detective, and problem solver for the organization. Mount Zion Baptist Church, from which the group derives its name, was in Morgan City, Mississippi. He told me that Skip Henderson of New Orleans was the Board Chairman since 1989. Their Board of Associates consisted of six members. The amazing thing was that it was a nonprofit organization which met and fulfilled such a worthy cause. I asked "Who were some of the legendary Blues musicians who'd received grave markers and headstones?" He rattled out an impressive list that included: Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, Elmore James, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Big Joe Williams, Mississippi Joe Calicott, James "Son" Thomas, Memphis Minnie, Sam Chatmon, Eugene Powell, Lonnie, Pitchford, Tommy Johnson, "Big" John Wrencher, James "T-Model" Ford, Henry "Son" Simms, Jackie Brenston, Frank Stokes, Ernest "L'il Son Joe" Lawlars, Mamie "Galore" Davis and Eddie Cusic.

I was impressed with T. Dewayne and with his description of the staff of MZMF and their beneficial efforts in ensuring that these "Legends of the Blues" received respectable burial grave markers. I applaud their mission and believe that my chance encounter with him truly restored my faith in humanity. I labeled this organization as being a group of Blues Angels who paid back to these, in many cases, impoverished artists who had contributed so much to so many.

At the end of the day, I packed my books and belongings and left the festival. I was delighted when I noticed a marker of Sam Chatmon behind my tent. He was a gifted blues artist from Hollandale and brother of Bo Carter and the *Mississippi Sheiks*. I had a distinct feeling that Sam was privy the entire day to our conversation about Blues greats. Driving west on Highway 82, I crossed the Mississippi River Bridge and looked down into the muddy waters which flowed lazily like a dream and reflected on my day. It was a wonderful experience and I learned a great deal about blues artists from Mississippi. Also, I felt a great sense of contentment

Blues Angels

because I too planned to contribute in a small way to the outstanding work of the Mount Zion Memorial Fund. I started singing a verse of Texas Bluesman, Blind Lemon Jefferson's *See That My Grave Is Kept Clean*, as I waved goodbye to Greenville, Mississippi from my rearview mirror. "Thanks for all you do, MZMF and the check for financial support is in the mail!" I shouted in my most Southern accent. Then, I consumed a couple of delicious tamales and washed them down with a bottle of Pepsi Cola that was filled with Tom's salty peanuts. As the sun dipped down in the west, I heard my tires slapping on the pavement and thought I heard distant voices saying, "Y'all come back, you hear?" God, I love the South!

Why I Wrote This Story

This story was inspired by the unique people that I met at the 2016 Delta Hot Tamale Festival in Greenville, Mississippi and my love for the Blues.

Pepe
Rich Allan

I don't know how much time I have left. Doctors say they can't stop it and my skin is already stretched to the bursting point. I resemble a hydroponic tomato overfilled with enough water to reach giant pumpkin status. Last time they weighed me, the truck scale read 1200 pounds.

The bomb squad used a crane when they placed me in the middle of our town's little league baseball field and taped off an area large enough to keep people at a safe distance. If I squint my eyes, I can make out my crying mother surrounded by the curious and several fellow students from Monahans Senior High School. The number of people who have shown up is impressive; a bigger turnout than the Jaycee's July 4th fireworks celebration. Maybe I should hold a flare in each hand to make my impending demise more entertaining?

I know I am to blame for my current situation, but I just couldn't stand it any longer. The kids at my school picked on me constantly. Teasing me online, as well as to my face, with comments like, "Hey runt, stand up when you speak to me," or "When did they start letting second graders attend high school." With my tiny frame, bullies had no problem stuffing me into wall lockers or tossing me through the basketball hoop in the gym. I grew tired of always being the last one picked for sports and having girls laugh in my face when I asked for a date.

Jimmy, the bomb squad leader, who helped bring me to my final resting spot, assuming there won't be enough of me left to scrape up and bury, shouted out, "Tom, how much longer? I'm due at my bowling league in twenty minutes."

My stomach gurgled and my circumference increased four more inches. A button popped off my tent-sized shirt, flew toward the crowd, and almost put out a spectator's eye.

I assured him. "Any minute now, Jimmy."

But, before I leave this life...let me tell you how I got into this predicament. Just outside of my Texas town is the Monahans Sandhills State Park, featuring nearly 4,000 acres of sand dunes. When I am feeling particularly depressed, I go there with my one and only best friend, Harry, to

"surf" the dunes. Some students use a real board, but being poor, Harry and I share a cut-up cardboard box we swiped from behind the grocery store.

The dunes average seventy feet high so it takes a while to wade through the deep sand to the top, but coming down only takes a few minutes and is a lot of fun...unless you go on a windy day because the fine sand really stings when it blows against your face and body.

Anyway, we had made several runs and were getting tired, when I slipped off my cardboard sled, and plowed into the sand, banging my knee into something hard. I figured finding the only rock in all this sand was exactly the kind of luck I should expect for someone residing at the bottom of the food chain. As I sat there lamenting my injury, something metal in the sand reflected the sun and caught my eye. I dug out an ancient-looking brass teapot, similar to the kind they sell to tourists at the roadside stands located near the Tex-Mex border.

Harry joined me to see why I was still sitting in the middle of the dune. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Look what I found." I held up the teapot.

"What a piece of junk. The lid is rusted shut and the whole thing is tarnished. Throw it away and let's do another run."

"We might be able to get a few bucks for it. Let's see if I can shine it up a bit."

I used a corner of my t-shirt and began polishing the sides of the teapot. It started shaking as if it was alive, while smoke poured out of the spout, billowing upward like a miniature tornado. Next came a flash of lightning, accompanied by the rotten egg smell of sulfur, and then *poof*, out of nowhere, right in front of Harry and me, appeared a swarthy-looking man of Mexican descent, sporting a chipped tooth, three-day growth, and wearing baggy pants topped off with a traditional red serape.

"Gracias, Tom," he says, "for setting me free."

Harry and I stared at the apparition in front of us as he pulled off his boots and poured out the sand.

"I hate sand. Two hundred years crammed into that teapot; it gets in your hair, your ears, up your el trasero, and worst of all between your toes...very difficult to scratch."

I managed to stammer. "Who the hell are you and where did you come from?"

"From the teapot, mi amigo...and you can call me Pepe."

I turned to Harry to confirm what I was seeing and hearing, but he

had passed out on his back and had a dung beetle crawling across his face.

Pepe says, "Let's get down to business. What are your three wishes?"

"Excuse me?"

"Didn't your mother ever read the classics to you? Here's how it works...you rub the magic lamp, the genie appears, and you get three wishes."

"This is a teapot and you don't look like a genie."

"You want the wishes or not? I can always give them to Harry when he wakes up, although technically he wasn't the one who rubbed the lamp."

"Hang on."

My imagination kicked into overdrive. Three wishes! I pictured all the usual dreams...big house, fancy car, hot girlfriend, millions of dollars, rock god...but then I thought about my miserable school life.

"For my first wish, I want to be big."

"You mean famous like a movie star, captain of industry, or president?"

"No, physically big. I'm tired of being the smallest kid in high school."

Pepe lit up like a migrant worker on a Saturday night and produced a multi-page contract and a pen from thin air. "Just sign your name at the bottom of page five."

"What's this?"

"Standard genie agreement that defines rights, warrants, representations, indemnifications, fornications, and so forth. Don't worry about it, just sign."

I didn't hesitate. Harry, who had regained consciousness, watched me write my name with a flourish. As soon as I did, Pepe, the contract, and the teapot disappeared in another puff of lightning and smoke. We looked at where Pepe had stood, and then back to each other.

Harry said, "What about your other two wishes?"

I shook my head. "I don't think he's coming back."

Harry looked around. "If he was ever here at all."

As we walked back into town, we decided not to discuss what had happened, since we had no proof and knew our story would only result in more teasing. We wrote off our strange encounter as a result of too much sun and bad cafeteria food.

I went to bed early that night...right after supper. I tossed and turned,

Pepe

dreaming of a crazy Latino in baggy pants, with a chipped tooth, offering me three wishes, and a large plate of rice and beans.

When I woke the next morning, I felt the same. Did I get my wish or not? I jumped out of bed and raced over to my height measurement chart that I had drawn on the wall ever since I was old enough to hold a pencil. Standing as tall as possible, I drew another line, looked at the new mark, and hung my head in disappointment...sixteen years old and I remained a crummy four-foot-ten inches tall.

I went into the bathroom to brush my teeth. Nothing prepared me for the person who stared back at me in the mirror...a teenager in jockey shorts looking like an elf-sized Santa Claus without a beard. I had grown all right...only out instead of up.

As I watched in amazement, my outline split, flesh blurred, shimmered like a spirit and shook like Jello in an earthquake. The two vibrating versions of me went in and out of focus, until they came rushing back together, like two randy cells under a microscope, merging to create an entity twice as big.

This pattern repeated itself several times during the next two weeks and despite hardly eating any food, boot camp style exercises, visits to the doctor, and trying all the fad diets...grapefruit, low-carbs, jelly-beans...I kept gaining weight. Sometimes the shifts were violent, like David Banner turning into the Hulk, splitting out my clothes, and leaving me naked...one time much to the amusement of my coed gym class.

Freak got added to the name calling, along with *balloon boy*, *hippo*, *tons-of-fun*, and so forth. When I outgrew my Dad's clothes, my parents began buying stuff from the big and tall shop. After I outgrew those, Mother would make my outfits from scratch, buying material in large rolls, because I could change up to two sizes in a single day. Mom practically lived at the sewing machine trying to keep up.

I quit going to school because I couldn't fit through the front double doors. It got to the point I couldn't walk, sleep in a bed, or live in our garage. The fire department kindly decided to let me stay in one of their large bays, reclining on a flatbed tractor-trailer covered with several mattresses. I don't even want to talk about the problems that occurred when I had to go the bathroom, but a fire hose and a dump truck was involved.

Finally, fearing the end was near, they towed me to the baseball field and lowered me gently down...filling the entire infield, covering all the bases *and* home plate. Right after arriving, my stomach flip-flopped, my body shimmered, and I expanded another two inches. I could hear the

ooh's and ahh's from the crowd that had gathered to witness my latest transition. I held my breath and closed my eyes because I did not want to see myself pop like a balloon, scattering pieces of me in all directions.

A minute went by, then two. Nothing happened. I cautiously opened one eye and looked around. The onlookers had covered their ears and were slowly backing further away. The TV crews and paparazzi had their cameras raised in anticipation of capturing the precise moment I exploded...damn piranhas. I just wanted it to be over.

"Hola, Tom," a familiar voice whispered in my ear. A man stood beside me...cleaned shaven, a perfect sparkling smile, dressed in Armani and looking like a movie star.

My stomach gurgled. "What happened to Pele?"

He laughed. "Pele is only one of my characters. You probably know me better as Diablo."

"I'm in trouble here. Where have you been?"

"Rooting for the bulls in Mexico City."

"Help me."

"You don't want to be big anymore?"

"What do you think?"

"Is that your second wish?"

"For goodness sakes, yes."

He crossed his arms across his chest, blinked and nodded. "I always wanted to do that...every since I saw an episode of "I Dream of Jeannie."

The crowd gasped as I instantaneous shrank from blimp-size to ant-size and disappeared. Diablo knelt down on the infield grass. "You okay there, Tom?"

I push aside a dandelion stem and addressed the giant face above me. "You tricked me."

"One more wish to go. Make it a good one."

"Just put me back to the way I was when we first met."

Diablo smiled, snapped his fingers, and I returned to normal, spitting out some grass that I had almost swallowed during the transition. The crowd once again shouted and clapped their approval.

"No more wishes, Tom."

I sighed. "So, I'm right back where I started."

"Not exactly. You signed a contract."

"What does that mean?" I shouted at him as he disappeared in a flash of lightning, a puff of smoke, and the smell of sulfur, leaving behind only a trail of wicked laughter.

* * *

The unusually short old man came out of the confessional at the same time as the priest.

"That's quite a story, Tom."

"I swear it's true."

"I worry about you. Are you eating properly? You look so skinny."

Tom glanced around the church. "No matter what I eat, I can't gain weight and everything taste like rice & beans."

"You're not hitting the sauce again?"

Both Tom's hands were shaking. He grasped the end of a pew to steady himself. "No more than I need. I keep catching glimpses of him... on the street, at the store...and hearing his creepy laugh."

"Say three Hail Mary's and two Our Fathers and you will be fine."

"Will that give me absolution?"

"You didn't sign a deal with the devil. You just had a bad dream."

"For forty years?"

"Go home, Tom, get some rest. And for goodness sakes, eat something."

Tom, unable to stop the cancer-induced series of hacking coughs, broke out in a sweat as he shuffled out of the church. He hurried down the street, his coat collar turned up against the wind and the cold. Pulling a key from his pocket, he entered the small apartment, ceiling and walls papered in pictures of Jesus and complemented with large crucifixes everywhere. He locked the door behind him, turned the three deadbolts into place and fastened the double chains.

He sat down in his easy chair, turned on a small lamp, and began reading the Bible, as he did every night. Was it a dream? Harry died years ago in a car accident and his Mother had insisted she didn't see anyone standing near him on the baseball field. The doctors explained his weight "condition" had been caused by a rare gland problem that somehow miraculously cured itself.

Tom put down the Bible and took a swig from the nearby flask. Another round of coughs racked his body, as he used a handkerchief to wipe the blood from his mouth. It wouldn't be long now, ten days at most, and then he would know for sure...

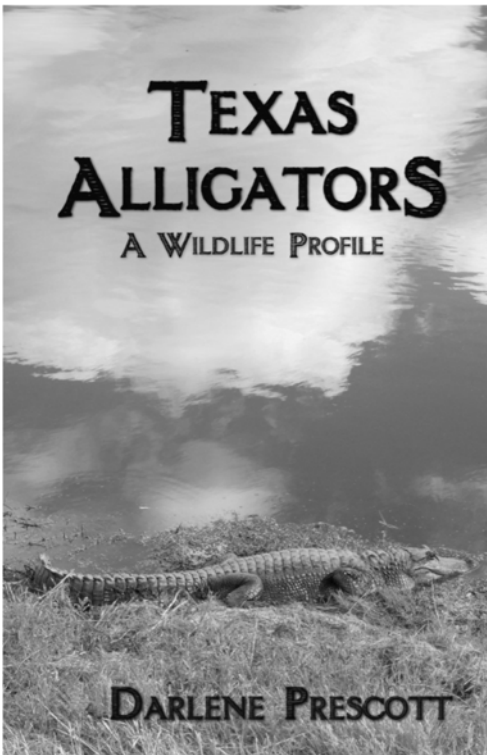
Why I Wrote this Story:

I wrote "Pepe" (a reimagined classic children's tale mixed with a little humor and Rod Serling) because I like to tell stories that are full of adventure and put a smile on your face. Monahans Sandhills State Park in Texas, where "Pepe" is based, is a real place to visit and yes, I did surf them, but alas, never found a magic teapot.

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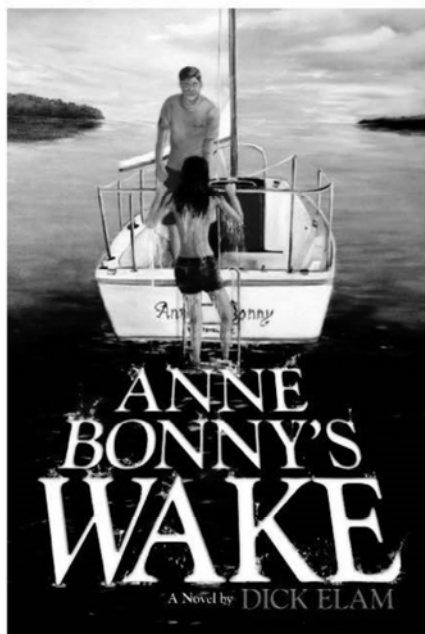


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Anne Bonny's Wake
By Dick Elam

**Ahoy, Young Writers ...
and Readers, great....
"Come aboard "and
sail with me.**

This Old Salt published my first novel at age 88. I was a retired Professor painting pictures until my son read the manuscript I abandoned in the 1980's. "Hey, Old Man, you paint a better picture with words than you do with paint. Toss the brushes. Publish this book."

I stowed the brushes. Typed words to refloat our sailboat --- named after the female pirate, Anne Bonny, --- and launched my *"Dangerous Encounters on the Carolina Waterways"*.

In Anne Bonny's wake, we are floating her audiobook, for Audible sale. In the book's wake, I have edited the sequel manuscript, "Guadalajara High". Also, editing manuscripts for books three and four in the series.

More fun than when I wrote sports for a Texas daily newspaper. Or wrote editorials for the TV station I managed. Lots more fun than writing a university theses or dissertation. And when a reader says they enjoyed stowing away for voyages, that's the most fun of all.

Please find the books on **Amazon** or www.dickelambooks.com

Dick



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