



# Creative Musings 2019

An Anthology of the Stittsville  
Creative Writing Group

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Creative Writing Group

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# Foreword

Tucked away in the west end of Ottawa, in a little village marked with a sign that's often the target of pranksters with a can of matching sign paint, sits a small branch of the Ottawa Public Library. The Stittsville Creative Writing group gathers weekly behind the closed doors of a nondescript meeting room just past the children's literature section. Courtesy of a popular and often wait listed program run by the library, twenty writers, poets, and storytellers come together Thursday evenings around four folding tables in a circle to share the workings of their craft.

Ranging from novice creators to published authors, the group is an outlet for the most prolific yarn spinners and writer's blocked listeners alike (and all those in between) to chat, listen, and narrate stories in a supportive environment free from criticism.

Since its inception in 2012, the SCWG has grown from one writer with an idea (John W Egan) into the thriving, productive gaggle of Creative Musers it is today. Out of humble beginnings countless Gallery Nights and Writers Discussion Groups have emerged to sharpen the skills and broaden horizons of those members looking to take their words beyond a hobby. A recent feather in the SCWG cap thanks to facilitator John W Partington forged a new partnership with the Algonquin College to place students in their writing program as resources for our members. To highlight the halfway point of 2019, yet another Creative Musings Anthology emerges from behind the countless empty coffee mugs and piles of first edits. It should be noted that in the event our current facilitator steps down, only those with a middle initial of W need apply.

What you now hold in your hands is the third assembling of pen-to-paper art, lovingly created by a collective group of friends and strangers who choose to give you a glimpse into their passion of storytelling. Whether the stories are tall tales or based on truths, each piece you read bares a little bit of the writer's soul. We write for everyone, and no one. We write to entertain the reader, or just ourselves. We write as a distraction, as therapy, and in the pursuit of a dream. We share secrets and create adventures. Please enjoy this latest collection of musings, creatively thought out and presented to the world by a little group of writers who hang out in the back room of the public library in Stittsville most Thursday nights.

//June Neske//

Project Manager for Creative Musings 2019

# Introduction

© Carmen Neske

Give me your worst. Strike me down. With love or hate, fear or sorrow. You are my siren song, the bard whose stories I must follow as you go about your worldly journey. How did we meet again? The parchment fresh, coffee and quiet...that was where I found you, where I fell in love with your words both cutting and blunt.

In the beginning I am lulled by colours and strung along by curious lights - what could they be? If I follow them I know I'm sure to learn. But that's when the siren song begins to work its magic. Trapped inside your tale I can't escape...I can only watch and follow as you demand of me. Sometimes you make me observe from a distance. Sometimes you force me into the minds of your puppets and I feel as they do.

The deeper I dive, the darker it becomes. Murky, uncertain, the glimmers of light thinner and thinner. Fewer and farther between. Oh what a sadist you must be, but here I am, even now. You caught me on that hook since the moment we first met. You fooled me with pretty beginnings but this is what you had planned from the beginning, isn't it? But I'm too tangled now to let go. The only way is forward. Perhaps there will be a light at the end of this shadowy abyss...but then again, maybe not.

In the darkness I reflect upon myself. Why do I keep coming back? You bring me pain and misery, stress for figments of my imagination. I recognize that the darkness colours me. I come back to watch that misery unfold. How exhilarating it is to watch how man can suffer under the circumstances you provide. Oh, what if his sister dies? What if he loses an arm, or a leg? Can he escape, or will this be the end for him? Cursed thoughts run rampant, flighty in my mind, excited. Perhaps the sadist is me.

At last, the freedom is reached. I emerge a new human, with a newer understanding of myself. That darkness in your story exists in me, for how I enjoyed the mayhem of your wrathful words.

I return to that place, the place where we met. I'm sure you're there, I'll find you again. Or perhaps another siren will call to me, and her words will be the ones to draw me in. My ship sets forth to uncharted territory, heeding the beck and call of mysterious words on the wind. I know I'll crash on the rocks, or sink to the bottom, or burst aflame somehow as I follow yet another tale to its conclusion, but that's why I'm here.

I wonder why that is.

# Mick the Cat

© Lori Holloway

On a sunny, warm Saturday in spring, my parents brought home our newest addition to the family. The advertisement my mother found was for “Apple-faced Siamese kittens. Blue and Seal point, \$25.00.” This was the first time my parents had actually paid money for a cat.

Apple-face refers to the cat’s face being round and not long and narrow. His eyes were blue, and not crossed. His tail was straight and not kinked. My mom said that crossed eyes and kinky tails were not a sign of good breeding. We thought he was perfect.

He was mostly white still. They are born white, like a Dalmatian pup, and gain their colour points as they grow. This little guy had dark bluish smudges of colour beginning on his feet, nose, tail and muzzle. His right, hind foot did not have much colour at all on the last two toes.

Names are important! We’d had different names for each cat; the last two being Mitzi and Mickey. They were a mom and son team of graceful smokey grey angoras. Both gone now.

“Mickey,” my dad declared. This was the first time we had repeated a name, but it stuck. OK, Mickey he was. Mickey the Second, actually. Of course, that did not last overly long. Dad called him “rat cat,” because he was skinny and fast; and also, “Mickey Cat,” because he was named after Mickey the first, and NOT Mickey Mouse of Disney fame.



People always asked if he was named for the mouse! His third and most used name was just plain Mick!

With six children in the family, Mick was kept very busy. He grew into a slender young cat, very handsome, with white toes on his back right foot. OK, not a show cat or perfect specimen but he was ours.

At six months he underwent surgery to wire his jaw shut after a glancing blow from a passing car. We lived on Neebing Avenue; the name it retained when the outer ring highway was built a few miles away to relocate what was then called HWY 11-17. Mick now had his upper left canine showing a little, even when his jaws were closed. It made him look tough. Poor cat though. He was no longer able to chow down on Kibble.... soft food only. Strangely enough he had no trouble eating what he wanted and could crunch his way through toys, mice and other treats. Just not the kibble. Oh well, he never really liked it anyway. I learned years later when I brought him in for his dreaded vaccinations at the clinic where I worked, that his jaw surgery years ago had in fact gone very well. Cats jaw bones are very fine and not easy to work with. I was glad to hear this. I had wondered.

My dad worked in construction on roads, bridges, and culverts; he was always busy. One summer Saturday, Bob, a business acquaintance and friend, drove into the yard with his 7 months old German Shepherd pup, Bruno, roaming in the back of the old red half ton pick-up truck. Bob opened the truck gate to let him run. My dad was not pleased. Mick was in the yard and Bob had not asked if his pup could roam. The big pup saw Mick and came bounding and barking with joy, eager to visit. I

watched from the house as Mickey stopped to stare at the dog. There was no point in going outside to interfere. Dad was there. Mickey advanced cautiously but not hiding. Slowly, step by methodical step, he advanced toward the mostly black shepherd. Bruno stopped mid-bound, ears perked bat-like on his handsome head. Mick advanced with a slow metronomic pace toward the foe. Pup backed up, until he was close to the truck. Bruno glanced behind and followed his eyes with a practiced leap into the truck's box.

Mick stopped, sat in place, and began to wash his face. Job done! The pup was vanquished. Mick sat there pretending to ignore the situation, with his eyes on the interloper. I expect my dad was trying not to grin. He and Bob finished talking shop as the truck's wooden gate was pushed back into place. Pup was secure and unharmed, and Mickey was in control of the situation. All was right with the yard.

My dad came in followed by his guard cat. He told us the story of his brave feline beastie protecting the yard from all comers. He was proud, we all were. Our cat had dominated in his own yard, and no one was hurt. Mickey later joined my sister in the sauna; sitting on the highest level and enjoying the steam heat. One of his favorite pastimes. He had earned it.

Biography: Joining the Stittsville Writer's group has given Lori an opportunity to write and listen to stories while in the company of like-minded writers.

# Lucifer

© Aïda Hudson

There was a fallen angel called Satan and he very much deserved it.

“Evil be thou my good,”<sup>1</sup> he cried. His voice resonated in the deepest darkest depths of Hell where a thick mass of snakes slithered and coiled on the lip of their cave. Below, a molten river ran, spurting fire into the sulphurous air. Above, a rock face loomed, trapping these tortured creatures.

“Evil, I shall never relinquish thee,” spat Satan. “I have such plans and they will see the light of day on Earth.”

“What’s the point, Satan? We are here forever,” hissed Belial, slithering close to him, a magnificent blue-black viper whose scales shone livid in the fires’ light. Belial never did much of anything, not even when Satan had voyaged through the Abyss and Chaos to leap to Earth to tempt Adam and Eve so long ago.

“The point?” replied Satan in anger. “We may be fallen angels, but we are rebels still. We shall never bow to God the Father.”

“Look again,” sniggered Belial. “None of us can bow. We are snakes. Your success in Paradise caused this.”

“I am Lucifer, Star of the Morning. Remember that!” cried Satan, as he bit Belial.

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<sup>1</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk 4, l. 110.

“Mercy!” gasped Belial in pain.

A rattlesnake sheathed in metal scales,  
Moloch himself, slid between them.

“I shall war for thee, Prince of Darkness,” he said, as he turned his diamonded head to Satan, stooping as if to bow. “I remain your faithful lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Moloch,” hissed Satan. “You, at least, are loyal.” Then he lifted himself to tower over all the snakes to continue. “Who will voyage with me to destroy the world? It is time. It is not enough that we made Adam and Eve dwindle into creatures who live, suffer, and die. We must destroy Earth and annihilate all their progeny!”

“For our sake and NOT for heaven’s, do keep your voice down,” said the cunning Beelzebub, who was second only to Satan in power among the devils. “The Mighty Father hears and sees all.” And then tongue in cheek (if that is possible for a snake) he added, “If we must plot, let’s move from here, the edge of this precipice, hemmed in on all sides by impenetrable rock.”

Satan raged inside, but he knew enough not to challenge Beelzebub, for it was he who had goaded him into going alone on that fateful journey to Earth. Satan may have accomplished his goal to rob Adam and Eve of their innocence, but God had diminished him and all his fallen army to vipers as punishment. He must wait until he could speak wisely and with measured calm.

“All of you come into our cave,” commanded Satan. And they followed him, still beautiful in motion, as he undulated from side to side into their own darkness. No need for light here. The vipers’ hearing was acute and they felt where each of them were assembled in a circle around their leader.

“What do you mean by ‘destroy’?” asked a lesser snake. “Surely it is enough, Satan, that you corrupted mankind with sin?”

“But they have free will,” said another snake. “They can still shape life for the good. They are not always corrupt. How can we change that?”

To drown out the words of this snake and to mollify his leader, Beelzebub interrupted. “You have been clever, Satan. By inducing Adam and Eve to sin themselves, you have taught them to ruin their Earth through greed, through the thoughtless expansion of their domains, stripping the very earth that sustains them of forests, creatures, ore and oil--and through conflict. We know their propensity for war about the least thing. They are doing your work for you.”

A thought possessed Satan. He would use what he knew to achieve what he wanted.

“There are great fires along the most bountiful ocean on Earth, the Pacific. Perhaps you know about the one in Paradise?”

“Paradise? How can that be?” asked Belial. “That is the one place that is still sacred. Adam and Eve were banished from there.”

“Ah, but their descendants multiplied over generations, travelled to new lands, from one ocean

to another and built cities and towns along the way, even on the Pacific. There was one town they named Paradise,” replied Satan, laughing his diabolical laugh. “The thought of one of the weakest humans of all, born of the sin that I whispered into Eve’s ear, manifested itself in one terrible act. The start of Camp Fire. How deliciously ironic. It roasted hundreds of humans in that Paradise. Young and old, but mostly the old, who still know about us and fear us. As their old die, knowledge of us is fast disappearing. Mankind’s ignorance will also be a weapon. They do not know who we are. We will destroy them completely.”

“But how?” asked the lesser snake.

“And how do you propose we get away from here?” said Beelzebub, surprised into real wonder. Beelzebub had asked the question Satan had hoped he would ask.

“But you, Beelzebub, the clever snake that YOU are, know the answer,” said Satan. “Together, we will leap into the molten river and it will take us beyond these rocks. We will make our way past the ruins of our fortress, Pandemonium, to the one structure that God the Father did not take away from us, the bridge to Earth. We will take the river’s fire in our bellies and destroy all their lands. Who shall accompany me and Beelzebub?”

“But how is that possible? We shall perish in pain in that molten river,” cried a lesser snake.

“Impossible!” boomed Satan. “God the Father has doomed us for all eternity. What is another pain to

us who live in agony forever? We will remain immortal even with fire within us.” A terrible hissing and rattling broke out among the vipers. Satan rose higher still, exultant and threatening. “Who is with me?” he thundered.

This time the snakes all hissed in acquiescence.

Then a beam of light shone on them from the mouth of the cave. They all turned and trembled. All that they could see was luminous unadulterated light. The snakes knew Who it was.

God the Father sat in Heaven, rocking back and forth in his rocking chair, smoking his favourite cigar. He tapped the ashes from its burning tip, looked down at them, and said:

“Excoriate.”

God’s command shot through that beam of light and touched the diabolical creatures--Satan, Beelzebub, Belial, Moloch, and all the lesser snakes. They writhed in agony as their skins burst and shed asunder. Along with their skins, shed their memory.

Biography: Aïda Hudson is the editor of two collections of essays. Her most recent publication is *Children’s Literature and Imaginative Geography*. A retired lecturer who taught English literature at the University of Ottawa, she is now working on a collection of short stories.

# Treasure Hunter

© David Hunter

A story about a young girl growing up with special powers.

When Paige Hunter was 8 her Mother passed away. At that time her Dad decided he needed to spend more time with her. He is an archeologist as well as University professor (Boston University). As it was May and Uni classes were over for Professor Hunter and Paige would be done school in a few weeks he was planning for them to go away (how long he was not yet sure). His Colleague Susan Porter had offered him the use of her family cottage in Cape Cod for the summer as she was off to Europe. He accepted though said it might be only for a few weeks depending on how Paige liked it. With the quiet he could work on a new curriculum for his students for the following year, so it would be great for him. The death of his wife the previous year was hard on him as his wife Sharon had done everything for them, as he had travelled a few months each year on archeological digs. Susan told him she had given their (his and Paige's) information to her aunt Mally who had the cottage next to hers in Cape Cod and who had her extra keys. She also let David know that Mally was a retired, widowed librarian who loved to cook and would probably try and be there all the time. If she bothered them please let her know politely.



David said that would be great and he could pay her to help them with cooking and cleaning (as he was sort of bad at both).

When Paige got home from school that Thursday afternoon David told her of the idea for a couple weeks at Cape Cod. Paige had a bunch of friends as she was a friendly girl who liked to read and play soccer and tried to help people (as her mom had always taught her). She said she did not have any plans for summer as yet as was just looking forward to school being over in a couple weeks. She was thinking of maybe going to a soccer camp for a month but as that was 6 weeks away they could decide later. Paige was used to her Dad being away so was glad to be able to spend some time with him (especially as her Mother passed away a year ago and she knew he needed her too). She liked to cook sometimes and he tried as well (but they both know Mom was the one that kept the house running as well as her real estate job).

She remembered that her Dad used to take her with him all the time searching for treasure (that's what she called it). He had this expensive machine that would make big noises whenever it found 'treasure'. Actually it was a metal detector and so just beeped whenever it was moved over the ground where there was metal underneath. At the age of 4 Paige thought it was so much fun to have her little bucket and shovel to help Dad dig for the treasure when his machine beeped. Mostly they found small

change, bottle caps and once a license plate and another time a ring. Paige never understood how it worked (Dad would tell her stories about all the treasures people had found of valuable jewellery and gold coins all over the world). She loved her Dad's stories and finding anything while digging made her feel special.

One time when she was about 6 she started to hear beeps in her mind when she walked sometimes. At first she thought it was just a noise from someone nearby but as she listened it sort of sounded like Dad's machine. So she went home and asked Dad if they could go and use the machine to look for Treasure. Dad was busy working on the car (and Mom was at work) and he said he had to mow the lawn after so would not have time today but if she stayed near home she could take her shovel and bucket and dig some holes and look for treasure herself. She thought this was a great idea but how could she know where to dig without the machine? She thought she would try and dig places anyways as this was also permission to get dirty (hehehe).

At first she had no luck at all digging and was getting upset at finding nothing. Then she kept hoping and thinking about finding treasure and all of a sudden she heard the beeping in her head again. She walked and it stopped so she walked back and started digging in the grass by a little rock and she found a quarter. She was so happy she kept digging but there was nothing and she also noticed she heard no more beeping either. She thought about it and walked some

more and heard beeping again so stopped and started digging again and now she found a toy car. She did it a few more times and started laughing as every time she heard beeping she found treasure like with Daddies machine. She was very happy but was out long and thought it was time to go home. At that age she got bored easily so forgot all about this experience until later.

School was now over and today they were driving to Dad's friends' cottage. Paige reminded her dad to pack the 'treasure finder' and battery charger (at 9 she knew what it was called but they both liked her name for it as gave them happy memories). She also packed the brochure on soccer camp and a few new books. Dad had said they could stay as long as she liked or if she didn't want to they could come home. He was not going away this summer. The drive was about 2.5 hours and so was not too boring and after missing one turn they found the cottage (it was a lot bigger than both her and her dad expected as it was a house not a cottage). She thought the house was a bit funny as the front faced the beach instead of the road, but dad said that was usual for the area as most people walked along the beach and that was the view they wanted for homes on beaches.

She was excited and wanted to go to the beach with Dad and try the metal detector again but Dad said he had to get the keys from Mally and then unpack and go get groceries. She should come with him to meet her also. She asked to stay on her own and as she was 9 and almost a 'teenager'. He said as

long as she stayed by the house (he would also ask Mally to look out for her if she could when he went to the store), and could she start unpacking things from the car onto the porch.

Mally was on the phone when dad knocked but waved and pointed to keys and note on the table by the door. She put her hand over the receiver and said “Hi, you must be David? I’m Mally and will just be a few minutes. Take the keys and the note and I will stop over shortly. The house had a very big white porch with an old fashioned wicker bench swing and a summer couch. “Mally was on the phone” he told Paige “so let’s see the place.”

“Hey Dad, it’s all sand here so no mowing for you either,” Paige said with a smile. Dad noticed too and smiled happily while agreeing with her (not a job he really liked nor gardening). Dad unlocked the door and carried in a bag and Paige had one of hers. The place was really big. They did a quick tour and the main floor had a ½ washroom near the beach (front?) door; a large kitchen; eating area (next to a back door?); a big living room with a fireplace, couple couches, recliner and big table; and a nice office with a futon and view of the beach too. Dad worked a lot so Paige thought he would be in the office a lot. Upstairs there was a big bathroom (only one so they would have to share it) and 2 big bedrooms. They unloaded the car, chose bedrooms and did some unpacking.

Dad called and told Paige they should make a grocery list and then go shopping. She said sure but

did she have to go shopping too? At that moment there was a knock on the beach door and Mally walked in.

“Sorry that I was on the phone when you arrived.” Mally said. “I’m Mally, short for Maleficence, and I know a crazy name huh? But Mally is fine and no one calls me by any other and I bet no one knows what my full name is any more anyways. So you must be David and you’re Paige? Another weird name huh?”

Paige said “Hi and it’s not a weird name at all.”

“Sorry,” Mally said “it’s just one I had never heard of and I do think my own name is very weird but I like it. Have you had a tour yet?”

David said “Hi and yes they had a tour and unpacked a bit and were just making a grocery list. Paige did not want to come shopping so would it be ok if she hung around here and you kept an eye out as I won’t be gone long?”

“Sure I am going to be around but before you make your list have you checked the fridge and cupboards yet?”

“No,” David said. “Susan said she had not stayed here in a year as last time she actually stayed with you. So I just expected all would be empty?”

“Well check first as Susan told me some of the things she thought you guys would like and when you would arrive so I did some pre-shopping for you. Everything I bought I like too so if something you don’t want I can take it home.” Paige went to the fridge and freezer and Dad to the cupboards.

“And breads are in the bread basket in the corner, in case you don’t know what it is.”

Paige noted first, “Hey Dad I need Almond Milk, but there is 1% for you here and even sherbet AND Ice Cream too. And there is cheddar cheese so maybe some swiss too as there is already ham slices for sandwiches.”

Dad responded, “wow that’s great, cupboards have everything and more than I can think of and just maybe some granola for me for breakfast and snacks for games or movies?”

Mally jumps in, “well check the cupboard on right side of the fridge”.

Paige goes there.....”Wow Dad, 3 flavours of chips, pretzels, Doritos, freetos, Nachos AND Salsa and then peanuts, gummy bears and licorice.....Red, black and purple.” And a whole box of microwave popcorn along with a shaker of white cheese flavoring.

“And Dad the freezer had burgers, chicken and fish too but I saw no veggies?”

“Yes Mally agrees I never know what veggies people like so only have stuff for salad in there along with Apples, Oranges and nectarines (they are in season).”

Well said Dad, “I know what veggies we like so maybe Mally can help me with the list and Paige as long as you stay near the house I will go get groceries and be back in a jiffy”

Paige headed outside and Dad and Mally talked.

“Mally this was way above and beyond, please let me know what I owe you for the groceries and maybe we can all go out for dinner tonight, on us, and you can tell us about the area?”

Outside Paige found a small bucket and shovel exactly like she had when she was 6 and used to play finding treasure. She thought this would be great when her Dad and she went treasure hunting again. She tried to remember her hunting game she used to do on her own. It took her a while to remember how to make the beeping in her ears start again but once she got it she found coins and toys and nails and bottle caps and even an old watch. She was tired so went back to the cottage to see if Dad was back.

When she got back to the cottage she put the bucket with her treasures and the shovel by the beach door stairs as it was dirty and she wanted to go inside. She knew she was not allowed to bring dirty things in their house or her dad would be upset, so here would be the same. Dad had just finished unpacking the groceries and asked Paige to wash up they would go out for dinner in the local town with Mally. Paige forgot about the bucket and went to get washed and changed.

The next day Dad and Paige were in the park and she was playing on the slide when she saw her Dad talking to a lady with a small boy. They were looking all over the ground and she went to ask what they were looking for. Her Dad told her the lady was playing with the boy and when he grabbed his Mom’s

hand her ring came off and she did not notice where it had fallen. They were both looking and so Paige said she would look too. Paige thought about the ring and then looked around and she could hear the beeping in her head when she looked at one area. It was not where her Dad was but she went over anyways and looked on the ground in that area. She looked around and next to the swing she heard the beeping again louder so started looking in the sand and there was the shiny ring. She brought it over to her Dad and the lady and showed it to them and the lady smiled and said "Yes that is it, where did you find it." Paige pointed by the swing and said I was looking over there and found it and it is very shiny. The lady thanked her and her Dad very much and said she would give her a reward but Dad said that was ok. The lady said she was so happy she could not accept no and at least take this \$5 bill to get some ice cream. Dad said ok and the lady and her son left. Dad asked Paige how she had found it as it was not where they were even looking for it. She told him it was with the beeping to find treasure.

Dad did not understand so left it at that and they went for ice cream then home. When they got home Dad asked Paige if she wanted to go to the beach and play with his treasure finding machine (see Dad enjoyed digging for treasure as much as she did as he always wished to find buried pirate treasure like he saw on TV as a kid). He told Paige to get her bathing shorts on and beach shoes. While she went to get changed Dad got the metal detector and saw



Paige's bucket and shovel and many little things in the bucket. When Paige came outside Dad asked her where she had gotten all the things in her bucket. Paige said that she was digging using the treasure beeping and found all the things. Dad looked upset and told her she was not allowed to take his machine as it was too big for her and when did she do that? Paige said "no Daddy, I did not use your machine I just dug where I heard the beeping." Dad did not understand and Paige tried to tell him how she was digging at the park next door and found the items there. Dad figured she was just digging on her own and had brought some of her treasures to dig up.

When they got to the beach they started looking but Dad's metal detector stopped beeping. Dad said he forgot to charge it up so the battery was low and would not work. Paige said that's ok we can still dig and she will listen for the beeping. Dad was not sure what she meant but he was happy to play whatever she liked. Paige started walking and dad moved his machine around the sand then she told him to stop and said 'there Daddy'. He asked what's there and she said the beeping so we need to dig the treasure. She started using her shovel and soon found a bottle cap, then she looked at the spot and there was no more beeping. "See Dad, treasure." Dad did not understand how she had found it but thought it was maybe just a low battery and he could not hear it. They walked some more and Paige said again to stop and dig. This time she dug and found a strange little object wrapped in a piece of cloth. Dad said to wait so

he could make sure it was safe and he opened it up to find a nicely painted china dog. Paige was so happy as she loved dogs. Dad was very surprised and asked her how she found it and where it came from? Paige again said with the treasure beeping. Dad said that the machine is not working and that the machine only finds metal treasure and it would never have found this?

Paige then told Dad that when she was out a few days ago in the park looking for treasure and could find nothing, because Dad and his machine were not there, that she kept thinking about the treasure and then started hearing the beeping in her head. She then tried again and every time she thought to find something she heard the beeping and dug and found treasure. He asked if that was how she found the ladies ring and she smiled and nodded "yes." Dad was very surprised but wanted her to try again to show him (and now he turned the machine completely off). Dad was about to walk away when Paige stopped him and said the spot where the dog was is still beeping. So Dad took her shovel and started digging in the same spot and there was another wrapped bundle and this time it had 2 wooden animal carvings. Paige was smiling and happy but Dad looked confused and told her again that these wooden treasures could not be found by his machine as they are not metal and that he had turned the machine off. Paige asked if she was doing something bad and Dad said no, she was never bad. But for now he told her not to show anyone else what

she can do. They looked around some more (dad kept his machine off) and Paige found 3 more spots where they dug and found coins, a can and even a fork and spoon.

When they got home they washed up and sat down to dinner that Mrs. Tiller (Mally) had made (spaghetti and meatballs). That evening Dad looked through all of the things Paige had found and then tried to search on the computer to find out if there were other people that were able to find things as well. He saw many internet sites on paranormal experiences and people with curious psychic abilities but nothing like Paige. He did see that all of them mentioned testing the abilities to make sure they were real and to help to use them better.

The next day Dad set up some tests in the back yard where he buried various objects to see if Paige could find them. They spent a few hours playing this 'game' and at the end Dad understood that Paige was special indeed and that if she thought of something specific (Dad used the china dog wrapped again) she could find it fairly fast. Paige also learned that things like cans and bottle caps were not really treasure and she was able to stop finding them anymore.

These special abilities really helped Paige in her future where she went to university to become an archeologist and treasure hunter like her Dad 😊

More stories on some of Paige Hunter's adventures to come...

Biography: David Scott Hunter is a child at heart who has travelled the world, yes "I dressed the rains down in Africa," and has enjoyed writing since winning a creative writing contest while at James Cooke University in Townsville, Australia. He now makes his home in Corkery Ontario. Corkery is a small Canadian Village founded in the early 19th century by about 100 Irish families from County Cork. David's inspiration comes from: always being a child at heart, and he writes what he dreams (I do dream in colour), as well as his love of his nieces and nephew. The Stittsville Creative Writing Group is a great outlet and helps everyone by being the muse we all need. David enjoys writing and will read his stories to all in order to make them smile.

# Finally, I Have Them

© Monika Jain

Finally, Finally I have eyes on the back of my head now, that's how I announced the birth of my first child.

You know, I always wondered how my mom knew everything, what we wanted, what is good for us, how to answer our questions, what kind of kids we made friends with. She could finish our sentences and catch us for the crimes she did not see us commit and most of all she was an expert mind reader. Every time we asked her how did you know, she pointed at the back of her head and said, "told ya, I have eyes on the back of my head."

How did you get those, how come we don't have them, my mom smiled and pointed at me and said, I got it when you were born, my first child. Throughout those years I grew up obsessing over the set of those magical eyes which made our lives a living hell.

At last, the day had arrived and I was eager to get my own set. Soon after the baby was born a nurse came to the room and glanced over my husband who was snoring away as if he just moved a mountain and handed me a beautiful brochure and said, "order them instantly sweetheart, you really need them".

Bold and bright words on the catalog flashed in front of eyes as I read them enthusiastically...

*Magical Eyes, New moms, order now, Only visible to the bearer, come in different colors,*

*styles, shapes, and sizes and even in polka dot.*  
*“Satisfaction guaranteed.”*

Of course, I ordered one in polka dots. I felt an instant transformation, I could multitask as I never did before. I gained mastery in figuring out what my child wanted, what every cry meant. I wore my magic eyes proudly every moment of my life. One day I was in the kitchen and my son was sleeping. My magic eye tickled and I went and checked on my son. I found my son surrounded by baby wipes as he happily pulled another one and let out a giggle. My first crime catch was a success. Then on it got better and better, I was always a step ahead of him. I was a walking talking lie detector, mind reader equipped with honorary doctor degree and possessed with strong intuitions. I was rocking the job. Santa, Tooth Fairy and the Easter bunny were so impressed with my work that they officially designated me to take care of Christmas presents, fallen tooth, and Easter egg hunt. I felt supercharged with all these high profile jobs and perks were priceless, a beautiful smile on my child's face.

The family was growing but I was unstoppable, Every morning I put on my magic eyes and I was ready to conquer the world.

As we all know that whatever goes up has to come down. My kids were grown and they no longer needed Santa, Easter bunny, and the Tooth fairy. I was still a great mind reader and crime detective but now I also became cloth picker, and sink wiper, and instructions repeater. It surprised me I had to repeat every instruction zillion time before my kids could get it right. I

thought that was a trait of my husband, of course, the product of poor parenting. Under my perfect parenting, it can not happen, I was so good at it.

I yelled, I cried, I pleaded, I threatened but nothing seemed to work. things would fall in place for a few days and then we were back to square one. I was getting frustrated, I decided to run away from home. I packed my bags. I closed my eyes as I took a last look at my world, my mom's smiling face flashed in front of my eyes, as if she is saying what goes around comes around, my magic eyes tickled again. Suddenly I saw something peeking out from under the shelf. Another Catalogue. I picked it up and read with wide eyes...

*Want to have a peaceful life, tired of your mom's nagging, order these filters, also known as selective Hearing, works on your wife too. These are unisex. Satisfaction guaranteed or your money back. Invisible to any other human being. Just so that you know, We are in business since Eve came to existence.*

That evening my husband and my kids came home and called out "honey, mom what's for dinner?" I just sat there with a cup of tea in my rocking chair catching up on my favorite show adorned with my two superpowers, my magic eyes, and my even more magical filters.

Biography: Monika Jain is a Stittsville Toastmaster club member and writes weekly

synopsis and local newspaper articles for the club. During the course of writing and preparing for her speeches and synopsis, she discovered that she enjoyed the experience. She is an amateur writer. Monika is slowly finding her style. She likes happy endings and draws inspiration from people and incidents around her. She feels fortunate to have found a writer's group at the library where she was welcomed with open hearts and has the supports she needs to continue with her writing.



# A Noseworthy Tale

© Susie Loranger

Sunday was a long day consisting of: gardening, lawn mowing, and building what my husband called a sound baffle for the pool equipment. For those of you wondering what a sound baffle is, it's a noise barrier. I'm sure he made the term up as he loves to invent new words. Needless to say, I was so exhausted that evening, that by 8:30 I was in bed. I put on my sleep mask, quickly activated my CPAP machine, and fell into a deep sleep. A few hours later I had to use the lavatory whereupon washing my hands, glanced up and noticed something wrong with my nose. Staring at my reflection I realized my nose stud was missing!

In a panic, I called out to my husband and said "Omg RJ, my nose piercing is missing!"

"What did you do with it?" he asked.

"I don't know! That's why I'm asking you!" I fired back.

Purposely striding into the room from his office, RJ fluffed the bedding, hoping to reveal the location of the missing nasal jewelry. Not one ping sound was heard. My husband stood looking at me, and as I looked at him could see the gears turning in his head.

"I think you swallowed it." Now for the outrageous part, my husband claims that he heard weird moans and groans coming from our bedroom, as he sat in his office, at 3am.

I didn't recall any dreams of a libidinous nature, but I failed to see how that noise could have been evidence of me swallowing a piece of jewelry. Shaking my head, I headed back to bed, threw the covers on and fell back asleep. A short time later, RJ

showered and prepared for work. He bent down to kiss me and said goodbye.

“Did you find it?” he asked gently. I mumbled something incomprehensible and again nodded off to sleep.

I startled awake, grabbed my cell phone and sent RJ a worried text:

*Susie: I think I feel my nose piercing in my esophagus, something feels weird.*

*RJ: Hospital?*

*Susie: I'm drinking a Pepsi, hopefully it will either bring it up or send it down. It doesn't hurt but honestly, how will I get it out of there?*

*RJ: If it feels worse, have Meeps take you to the hospital. You're eventually going to swallow and poop it out.*

*Susie: Is that even possible given the shape?*

*RJ: Kids swallow things all the time.*

*Susie: I'm just worried because it's a hook shape.*

*RJ: Hospital*

*Susie: What if I didn't swallow it? LOL*

*RJ: Then it will be a quick trip. Carleton Place*

*Susie: Maybe I flung it on the floor and a cat batted it around.*

*RJ: Only one way to be sure: Hospital*

*Susie: Ok I'm gonna try and sleep and see how it goes.*

*RJ: Or you could wake Meeps and go to hospital.*

*Susie: Yes, I know, but she's sick so I'd rather wait a couple of hours, I'm exhausted too. When did I make that god-awful noise?*

*RJ: Don't wait too long, the further it goes down your tract the more complicated the removal. Noises at 3am.*

*Susie: And you didn't wake me up???*

*RJ: They sounded like you were having a sex dream. I thought you were happy.*

*Susie: I don't remember having a sex dream. I just don't understand how it got in my mouth.*

*RJ: Maybe get an eyebrow piercing, less to go wrong. You probably snorted it.*

*Susie: Maybe it got loose when I took my cpap mask off and it fell in there.*

*RJ: Maybe?*

*Susie: But it's thicker at the end, I don't think it can go through my piercing.*

*RJ: Well, something happened.*

*Susie: I guess.*

Another text an hour later:

*Susie: Going to take a quick shower and then heading to CP hospital.*

*RJ: Let me know what happens.*

By 9am, Meeps and I were sitting in the waiting room at the Carleton Place hospital. The room was small and crowded with people with various injuries and illnesses. An hour later, the male nurse comes in wielding a wad of x ray requisitions. He handed one to me, and then as if in an Oprah moment, started handing them out saying "you get an X-ray, and you get an X-ray!" I went for my x-ray to find the mischievous nose stud.

"I don't see the piece of jewelry in these films. How big did you say it was?" the tech asked.

All of a sudden an alarm went off "Code red; cafeteria. Code red; cafeteria!" The technician helped me off the table, and escorted me to the front door wearing my too small, short blue hospital gown.

Without fanfare, we were escorted back into the hospital waiting room. Another two hours later and I was called to see the doctor.

"Hi, I'm doctor Ho, how are you today?" he asked.

"I'd be better if I we knew were this nose stud was" I stated.

"According to the radiology report, we can't see any foreign bodies inside you. If it's in there, you'll probably pass it without too much difficulty, but if you feel anything strange, please come back to see us. You could use a strainer and some gloves if you want the nose stud back," he added helpfully.

Back home: BINGO! I had to go. I prepared the spaghetti strainer and put on a pair of white latex gloves liberated from the hospital. I went, and got ready to inspect. As I stood up, I felt something sharp under my foot. I found my piercing.

Biography: Susie Loranger is an amateur writer who got into the activity by being dragged to meetings by her husband. There was no kicking or screaming, beyond the first couple of meetings, because the Stittsville Creative Writing Group is a supportive and nurturing organization which takes place in a library. Libraries don't like screaming; they're okay with kicking. Once Susie realized that she was the equal of any of the assembled writers she became comfortable and confident with the group. She does not write often, but writes well.

# Maybe Not

© Allan McCarville

The dog leapt to her feet and faced the door to the back porch, snarling viciously, fur bristling. I didn't know it at the time, but the dog had just signalled that my life was about to change forever.

We live on a farm, and at ten o'clock at night, we would have heard a car driving up the lane, or seen headlights reflected off the shed, easily visible through the kitchen windows. We neither saw nor heard a car.

I decided I had better check outside, just in case there was a coyote, or perhaps even a bobcat, in the yard that had attracted the dog's attention.

I stepped onto the back porch and scanned the yard but saw nothing. I listened, but all I could hear was the sound of waves crashing onto the shore a little over a kilometer away, the sound being carried on the light wind that also carried just a hint of salt air. Satisfied there was nothing, I went back into the house.

My name is AJ by the way. I'm 22 years old and I was looking after the farm while my parents were in Saskatoon to be with my older sister, who was expecting her first child, Mom and Dad's first grandchild. Included in "the take care of the farm" duties, was the task of looking after my kid brother; you know, like, make sure he gets off to school on

time, does his homework, eats something besides candy – well, you get the picture.

My little brother is ten, yeah, only ten. Life is full of little surprises and my parents named this one, Kyle. Although his arrival was a surprise, at least *he* ended up with a normal name. My name on the other hand, is Aloysius Jasper – so you now understand why I much prefer to go by “AJ”.

I had once asked my parents what I had done that was so terrible to be labelled with such a moniker. At that my mother scowled at my father and commanded, “*You* tell him, Henry!”

Wilting under my mother’s glare, my father ruefully explained that my name was a result of a celebratory visit to the local pub the day I was born. Sometime after round five or six – things were rather fuzzy by round four - Dad promised to name his new born offspring after his two new best drinking buddies, Aloysius and Jasper.

Dad always kept his promises. Incidentally, he had never met them before, and never laid eyes on them again after that momentous day.

“Anything there, AJ?” asked my little brother, who was sitting at the kitchen table, finally doing his homework an hour past his bedtime. My bad; we got sidetracked playing video games.

I grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and sat back down at the table. “No, nothing there, Sport,” I replied reassuringly. “Everything is fine.”

Kyle’s smile reflected his faith in his big brother and he returned to his homework. For my part, while

Kyle's hero worship stoked my ego, I found his faith in me a little unsettling, since I was still puzzled as to the dog's continuing strange behaviour. Granted, she was now sitting rather than standing, and her snarl had become a deep throated growl, but her eyes remained fixated on the door.

I was about to dismiss the dog's antics as a dog specific mental problem when we heard the knocks – three of them. They were not loud, but they sounded hollow, and echoed throughout the house.

The dog had an immediate psychotic meltdown, howling and barking while running in a circle in the kitchen, chasing something that only she could see. Kyle landed in my lap with his arms wrapped tightly around my neck so quickly I hadn't even seen him bolt from his chair.

There had to be a logical reason for the noise, I advised them both as calmly as I could, not willing to even consider the possibility of an illogical explanation. Kyle relaxed his grip sufficiently so that I could breathe, but the dog ignored me, and continued to demonstrate she was a prime candidate for the canine psych ward.

"Stay here," I ordered. "I'll have a look around."

As if *that* was going to happen. Both boy and dog followed, sticking to me like glue as I went through the house, looking for the cause of the mysterious knocking. I couldn't find anything, so concluded that it was just air in the pipes - or something.

Still, even as I stated that conclusion with all the confidence I could muster, there was something in the back of my mind that said I was wrong. This was something else, something that I had heard or read about, but I just couldn't quite put my finger on it.

We returned to the kitchen and anxiously waited, nervously expecting more noise, more sounds, but nothing transpired. Even the dog eventually settled down and went back to sleep. I dismissed the episode as one of those strange things that can't be explained – it didn't mean anything.

I was wrong.

Two weeks to the day after that night, tragedy struck our family. Mom and Dad were on their way home from the airport and had stopped, waiting to pull into a strip mall. They were rear ended by a drunk driver, and both were killed.

As we came to terms with our grief, I recalled the knocking noise Kyle and I had heard two weeks earlier. That's when that elusive memory, that forgotten snippet, came back to me.

When I was very young, the old folks had told stories about what they called, "forerunners", signs of impending doom. I had dismissed them as stories intended to frighten young children.

Not anymore.

The drunk driver, by the way, walked away with hardly a scratch. Not only that, but he had been driving without a licence, having lost it due to a previous drunk driving conviction – his third in the last two years.



How's that for justice?

I naïvely believed this time they would lock him up and throw away the key. Well, guess what? He was released on his own recognisance until his trial, with the conditions that he not drive and that he abstained from alcohol, conditions to which he readily agreed to. He might have been a drunk, but he wasn't stupid.

It wasn't long before rumours started to surface that despite the conditions imposed on him, he was seen driving to and from some of the local taverns. He disappeared late one night while driving home after drinking at his favourite neighbourhood bar. They found his car parked at the side of the road, but no sign of him. Most assumed he skipped town to avoid his trial.

As for my family, as sometimes happens in tragic circumstances, it ultimately made us stronger. It was not easy, especially for little Kyle, but in the end, we drew closer together and have gotten on with our lives.

As for the drunk driver, there is a warrant out for his arrest because he never showed up for his trial. He is still missing.

Perhaps, someday, I'll tell them where I buried the body.

Then again, maybe not.

# **The Atonement Bureau**

© Allan McCarville

The last thing John Higgins remembered was dying.

He slowly opened his eyes and looked around, confused and frightened. He was in a room, and past the end of the bed on which he was lying he saw that the wall consisted of floor to ceiling glass, through which sunlight flowed, brightening the room with natural light. Outside he could see palm trees swaying lazily in a gentle breeze. Wherever the room was located, it was elevated because he could see deep blue water over the top of the trees.

This was definitely not the execution chamber at the prison.

The room was well furnished. In addition to the bed he occupied, there was a dresser, desk, sofa, two matching arm chairs and a coffee table. To his right there was an open door that he could see provided access to a bathroom and shower. To his left the wall, like the wall opposite the bed, also consisted of floor to ceiling glass, except this one had a sliding patio style door that provided access to a balcony.

He swung his feet over the edge of the bed and stood up, instinctively clutching the back of the hospital gown he was wearing when a draft of cool air signalled that was all he was wearing. He could feel the carpet under his feet, and could even detect a hint

of the fragrance of the flowers in the vase on the coffee table.

Not what he expected the afterlife would be like.

A door slid open and he instinctively reached for the gun that he always carried in a shoulder holster. Of course, there was no gun, no holster.

“Good morning, Mr. Higgins,” cheerily declared the tall man who entered. He was wearing a light brown suit, and was carrying what appeared to be a mobile phone. “I trust you are feeling well.”

“Considering I’m supposed to be dead, I would have to admit to feeling very well,” responded Higgins. “Didn’t I die?”

“Yes,” replied the other man. “You were executed by lethal injection at 10:00 am on Friday, September 5<sup>th</sup>, for the bombing of the Leghorn Café that killed ten people, only one of whom was your intended victim.”

Higgins pinched his arm. It hurt. “I don’t understand,” he said looking around. “How can this be hell, it looks more like a tropical resort.” Higgins was a professional killer who had assassinated more than twenty-five people, not counting the ten who died in the Leghorn bombing. He had always been a realist and fully expected to go to hell when he died.

“It doesn’t look like hell, Mr. Higgins, because it isn’t,” replied the man.

Now Higgins was more confused than ever. He cocked his head to one side and tentatively asked, “Is it Heaven, then, Mr. umm?”

“My name is ... just call me Joshua. No, it’s not Heaven either, Mr. Higgins.” Joshua paused as if searching for words. “Perhaps the term that comes closest to describe where you are currently, is Purgatory, but even that isn’t totally accurate.”

“I really don’t understand,” said Higgins. “Aren’t I dead?”

“No, Mr. Higgins, you are not dead – at least, not anymore,” replied Joshua. “May I call you John? Mr. Higgins is so formal for partners.”

“Partners?” questioned Higgins.

“Yes, John, partners,” confirmed Joshua. He looked at the device he held in his hand. “Let’s see, you were convicted of killing those ten people in the Café. Of course, the court was not aware of the other twenty-five people you killed, but we know about them.”

Higgins’s head snapped up in surprise. “How did you know about them?”

Joshua just grinned knowingly. “We know everything, John. When it comes to leadership, operations and planning, you are very talented. It’s unfortunate you directed those talents the way you did, instead of using them to benefit others.”

Higgins looked at Joshua with a mixture of awe and fear. No, not fear – terror. “Are you God?” Although he was a grown man, his voice squeaked like a child’s.

Joshua chuckled, “No, John. Of course not. I like to think we are doing His will, but I am certainly not the Creator.”

“Let’s sit,” said Joshua indicting the arm chairs. When they were seated, he continued, “Do you recall your thoughts, John, when you were dying?”

Higgins was silent for a moment before he nodded reluctantly. He remembered all too well the gut wrenching fear he felt when he knew he was facing the end, the physical pain as the lethal cocktail began to take effect. “I was really sorry for the people in the café who died. You’re right, I was a professional hit man but this time I made a mistake and innocent people died.”

“What about the one you were targeting? What about the other twenty-five? Were not they, too, innocent?” asked Joshua.

“Perhaps,” admitted Higgins. “I never asked questions. I was paid to eliminate someone, so I did. The bombing was the first time I killed someone I didn’t intend to kill. I can’t describe the feeling I had when I found out I had killed nine others besides my intended target.”

“So, you were feeling sorry for yourself?”

“No,” replied Higgins. “I was feeling sorry that I had taken away the lives of those people. When I was executed, I was regretting that I would not have the opportunity to make up for what I had done to them. I deserved my fate, but they should have lived.”

Joshua grinned his ubiquitous smile. “That is why you are here, John. You are being given the chance for atonement. There is evil in this world, as you well know since you served that evil. You have been selected to lead a team of special people who,

like you, were executed for their crimes but are being given a second chance. You will be joined by four others within the next several days.”

Higgins was now totally bewildered. “What is this team supposed to do? What day is this?” asked Higgins. “What year?”

“Time is meaningless in this place, John. For all intents and purposes, you died yesterday. Your current body is the same age as when you died, it will never age. You, and the others who will be joining us, will remain physically as when they died.”

“Are you saying I’m immortal?” asked Higgins incredulously.

“That’s one way of describing it, although not quite accurate. Each of the others will be like you, to them they will arrive here the day after they died, even though their deaths are years apart. As I said, time has no meaning here.”

“If that is supposed to help me understand,” complained Higgins, “it isn’t working.”

“I suggest, then,” said Joshua standing, “that you get dressed and join me for breakfast and I will explain. You are hungry, aren’t you?”

Higgins was surprised to discover that he was.

“Who are these other four?” asked Higgins.

Joshua merely smiled. “Each has a special purpose, a talent,” he responded. “They will need your leadership to help them utilize those talents thus enabling them to atone for their crimes.”

“So, why me? And do I have a choice? What if I don’t want to be the leader of this gang of yours?” asked Higgins.

Joshua smiled knowingly. “You always have a choice, John. Just like you did in your previous life. However, as always, there are consequences resulting from those choices.”

Higgins considered what Joshua had told him. He didn’t have to accept this second chance – or whatever it was that was being offered.

What would be the consequences for him if he passed on this opportunity?

What would be the consequences for him if he seized the opportunity?

He glanced out the windows at the idyllic tropical scene. Was that real?

Finally, he decided to go with his gut.

“Well, Joshua,” he breathed, “I’ll likely regret this, but it looks like you have a chief for your Atonement Bureau.

## TO BE CONTINUED

Biography: Allan McCarville is a Stittsville based freelance food safety consultant who also conducts training on food standards and international food trade in developing countries. He has recently started to write teen/young adult fantasy books and stories as a change from the scientific technical material he usually writes. It’s much more fun and he continues to work hard at making people think he’s normal.

# Home Security

© Melba McGee

“Phew! And so it begins, my very own home for the first time in my life. I answer only to me; no one else has demands on my time, or my talent, or my comings and goings. I shall have long periods of silence, solitude, simple pleasures. I left my job and my life partner at the same time this year, allowing me the first spring in my step and my mind in 43 years. Now to claim this new and final home as truly mine. I am happy to remain in the city of Ottawa, home of hot, humid summers; cold, blustery, snowy, freezing-rain winters; beautiful array of weathers and lights and activities. This locale offers sidewalks, established trees, and a park within reasonable walking distance. My new home, built in a 1950s neighbourhood, has large windows that allow a cross breeze rather than depending on air conditioning, a large lot and hedge fence that afford me some privacy. There will be upgrades needing doing: a garage rather than park in the driveway, new coat of paint throughout, and others that will make their need known.” Mandy was pleased with herself and her musings.

Moving day found Mandy re-exploring every nook and cranny without real estate agents quack-quacking in her ear, with no one directing her attention, or achievements, or actions. Her belongings



were sparse, due to losses of heirlooms and treasures to her bitter, mean-spirited partner. Yet it was a completely fresh start, all hers. The moving truck and crew left, and she began acclimatization to sights, sounds, and stirrings of her new home. Her new cat, Puss, was still in his carrier, content to stay there just to make sure all the fuss and extra people were gone. His open door allowed him to find his litter in the bathroom and his food and drink bowls in the kitchen. He would get used to the new place and then make it his own, as will Mandy, in due time.

Mandy held her floor plans and lists, reviewing placement of furniture by moving crew, double checking all her belongings had arrived, checking windows and doors and locks, finding out what is behind that extra wall, in back of the basement laundry area. She pulled out the laundry shelving, opened a concealed door, and determined to turn the room into a storage room.

She began her brisk decision-making, deciding on updated and new locks everywhere, heavy curtains and one-way blinds to block out hot sun, cold winter winds, and curious eyes. "Fresh painting throughout begins tomorrow, in my favourite colours of grey, navy, and maroon." Thankful for her usual planning ability (her ex would have called it 'anal'), she checked her moving contingency slush fund plan, then off she went to paint store to buy charcoal grey for accent wall in living room and dining room,

blackboard paint for accent wall in kitchen, medium grey for bedrooms and bathrooms, and icy pastel grey everywhere else. Kitchen and bathroom cupboards would be maroon. "Painting begins tomorrow, a room a day until finished!" she declared to herself.

Back home again, she carried paint and groceries by herself, revelling in her self sufficiency, free from rancour and worse from her partner. Mandy noticed the front door mat had been moved in her absence, and double checked (her habit born of ex-husband's propensity for gaslighting). Assuming that a spare key might have been the goal, she decided to get the locks changed to keyless entry today, along with intercoms situated at every door. In her past, it took her forever to make such decisions, which were usually met with complaints, derision, name calling, threats of undoing her work. Her call to lock and intercom pros brought up changing doors to solid heavy metal doors with windows too small to crawl through. Lock, tech, and door crews arrived with needed equipment and supplies and set to work ... completed in short order and to her specs. They asked her why the guy walking up and down the street was paying such close attention to their work. After they reviewed how the codes and intercoms worked, and after an inspection of window security requirements and costs, they departed. New windows will have to wait but new window locks will be installed throughout, main floor and basement, tomorrow. And one-way blinds the day following.

Supper was simple and simply wonderful, cooked in her very own kitchen, eaten in her tree-encircled haven on the patio outside the dining room, while planning where she would place her new bird feeders tomorrow after the day's painting was completed. Mandy took pride in her matter-of-fact ability to get-'er-done, born in her work world and not quite entirely crushed by the put downs at home.

While walking inside, she caught a glimpse of movement. Thinking it was a neighbour child come looking for a ball that broke through or over the dense-hedge-fencing around the lot, she called out ... no answer. She ducked inside, locking doors, setting alarm, double checking all locks, closing the flimsy curtains that had come with the place, turning off inside lights, chiding herself, "What is wrong with you?" It was a question often asked by her husband, followed by, "It's all in your head," his favourite confidence destroyer.

Kitchen cleaned and put to rights, Mandy headed to the bedroom for some quiet reading. No TV tonight because the sound prevented her from hearing any duplicitous activity outside. She reached for painting tape and all her extra sheets to cover the bedroom, bathroom, kitchen windows before her supply ran out. "Now for that new book for Book Chat Club next week." Favourite glider chair and foot stool, tea of her idyllic childhood visits with her Grammmum,

her crocheted throw (housewarming gift to herself - her first retirement project) across her lap, she felt chilled for some reason. Scratching on outside of her house sent her for her cell phone lanyard, her weapons (new handgun, hunting knife with a sure grip that circled her fingers, and a flashlight that came with warnings that shining it in someone's eyes would render them blinded instantly). The sounds stopped. She admonished herself, "The scratchings were simply shrubs and branches that I need to trim. Tomorrow, after painting, after bird feeders installed."

She woke from having fallen asleep in her glider, and slipped into her new bed, new sheets, new pillows, and was instantly asleep. What woke her at dawn she could not say. On high alert, she decided against falling back to asleep and headed to her new coffee press. The kitchen door had mud splashed on the outside. She found same on each of the other doors. When the police arrived, they found the patio furniture toppled over, suggesting perhaps that was the scratching. They waited until she called to ensure that the new and more secure window locks installers were indeed arriving in the next half hour, then left saying they would come back at end of patrol to check in.

With the confidence of the work crews in the house, she committed herself to her first day of painting, the kitchen. Two coats were finished at same time as window locks. These locks were more

secure, with a twist lock as well as a bar that kept each window from sliding open or closed. The appointment was confirmed for one-way blinds installation next day, same crew. They were protective of her and she was grateful not to have different strangers inside working in every nook and corner of her home each day. Their oh-by-the-way on the way out, "Same guy, this time walking a dog, back and forth, showing notable interest in the activity at your house."

The police officers returned, as promised, just as the crew left, and she mentioned the crew's suspicions about the person walking by her house. Then the grilling began. "What did you work at before you retired?"

"Teaching grade 7 and 8."

"Where have you lived before?"

"My parents' house in the city of Ottawa, in the Glebe, until I married at 18. Then I lived with my husband in eastern Ottawa, in Orleans. "

"Do your parents still live there?"

"No they were killed in a car crash twenty years ago."

"Do you have any siblings?"

“No, I am an only child.”

“Where is your husband now?”

“We are divorced. I am not sure where he is living. We had to sell the house to split the community property, so that along with my retirement gratuity let me buy this charming little fixer-upper in Kanata subdivision of Ottawa.”

“Was the divorce amicable?”

“No, he continued his antagonistic and aggressive ways right up to the last day I saw him at the lawyer’s office when we signed the papers that concluded our business and life together.”

“What kind of car does he drive?”

“2014 metallic grey Buick sedan.”

“His name?”

“Frank Watson.”

“Do you still use your married name?”

“No, I am now Mandy McFadden, back to my maiden name.”

“Any kids?”

“No, after our fifth miscarriage, neither had the will to even try.”

They reassured that they were looking into Frank’s whereabouts, that they would have a squad car drive by the house through the night, and that they would return next day when they started shift. They walked around the house again, moving the small barbecue away from the wall of the house, and departed, leaving Mandy alone in her new little home, with their business card clutched in her hand. There was just enough daylight left to put up her brightly coloured hummingbird feeders by the patio, and to right the furniture. She stood back, pleased, “The bright feeders and plastic lawn furniture certainly added more ‘me’ to the place.”

Supper that night was a quick affair, eaten over the kitchen sink, in the fading twilight, without lights, with weapons by her side now as constant companions. Reading required light so she added a living room light, just so no one could follow her whereabouts to the one lighted room. Reading focus proved impossible so she knitted on a purple sweater for her god-daughter. After extinguishing lights, she lay down in bed, wondering if she would ever fall asleep. Apparently the day’s activity caught up with Mandy who drifted into dreams of her past, lurking strangers, work crews coming into her home and

being more personable and protective than her ex-husband ever was.

Something heavy landed on her! She sat bolt upright! “Puss, silly cat, you surprised me! You took quite a chance while I slept with a loaded pistol and hunting knife under my pillow, my tactical flashlight and cell phone on my lanyard around my neck.” He curled up in what was becoming his favourite place to sleep at night, between her ankles. Somehow sleep settled over her more quickly, after she remembered her intention to get a dog for companionship during afternoon walks and suppers on the patio. “Cocker spaniels are known to be barkers when others arrive. An added doorbell.” With Cocker’s barks and Puss’ coming to her when others are around, security seemed closer, somehow.

The sound of breaking glass in the kitchen sent Mandy hurtling silently to the dark basement with Puss, her weapons, and her phone. The hidden cement-encased room was small, and somewhat dank, but for now it offered her Wi-Fi connection for her calls to 911, and her text to the already-loaded number for the officer. She held her breath, listening to someone creeping about overhead, turning on lights, growling and muttering. She sipped a bottled water and nibbled a nutrition bar from amongst supplies which she had put there the first day. The interloper walked downstairs, around the basement, back upstairs, searching into corners.



“Please-please-please let help arrive in time!” she prayed. Footsteps out the door then silence. “What does this mean?” she queried herself.

Suddenly glass broke over her head. Someone was breaking into her sanctuary through an unnoticed window. And this time he had the flashlight which he shone into her eyes. “So you thought I’d forgotten about this hidden safe-room, and the hidden window only I could find from outside! Well girlie-girl, the game’s up now!” The strange voice was not that of her husband. “My folks sold this house to you, a stranger, rather than letting me inherit it for free! Where’s the justice in that? I’ll just dispose of your body, then take up residence as the person who purchased the property from you after you ran screaming away from this insecure home! Oh good, you brought an excellent knife so I can cut you up. I’ll just go find some garbage bags so I can take out the trash when I’m done.”

When he left the room, sirens could be heard coming closer. Not waiting, Mandy snatched up her remaining weapons, and Puss, and despite glass shards and cuts, she exited the window where the intruder had recently entered. She ran round the house to the flashing lights. “He’s inside, main floor, finding garbage bags to dispose of my body! Help me!” The police officers secured her in the back of one of the cruisers. “Does he have a weapon?”

“No. He said he was going to use my knife to cut me up, but I didn’t see any weapon of his.”

They found him trapped in his childhood hidey-hole, in the tangled branches of the hedge, a place from which he had observed her since moving day, from which he had watched his parents search for him after some childhood transgression they were going on about.

“Do you want to go back inside or do you want to come with us to the station where you can nap until daylight?” The officers were still solicitous of her needs. “Did he mention your husband at all? The only connection we found in our records was when he and Frank met briefly as boyhood hockey competitors. We have ascertained that they have had no connection since they were young boys.”

“No, he made no mention of Frank, only his parents. Thanks for the offer of sanctuary, but if I leave now, I might never return. I’ve already invested my life savings and much effort planning my future here. The threat is past. I am going back into my home, rechecking my lists of things to do, and the crew will be here in the morning to put in my blinds. I’ll call them and ask them to bring a replacement for the window that opens into the safe-room. Thank you, Officers. I hope I never have cause to call you again, but you certainly saved my life and I am grateful.”

“You have our number, ma’am.”

“Why don’t you two come over for supper tonight after your shift ... maybe 5pm? Bring the cruiser, will you. Won’t hurt having a cruiser parked out front! Oh, and don’t mind the new dog ... he’ll be an additional security feature, chosen for his barky-ness!” Just in case ...

Mandy settled herself with the determination, “Stay living mindfully in the present rather than knee-jerking back into the unsettled past, a land of old regrets and unspoken acceptance of her part in creating the situation. Time to find your way into a peaceful and joyous 4thThird.”

Biography:

Melba McGee [MelbaMcGee.ca](http://MelbaMcGee.ca)

Since first holding pencil to paper, I’ve been awestruck by the majyk that spills out.

I am:

- a child of the universe
- a free spirit
- a member of a circle who tolerate my idiosyncrasies, grounding me whenever I spin off the earth
- a retired grade 7 & 8 teacher
- a 3rdThird dweller amidst nature

- a writer who writes from the soul, because “A Story Told is a Journey Enlightened

# Encounters

© John C Nash

I grew up in Alberta, even if I wasn't born there. The big skies still haunt my dreams and memories. But when it came time to earn a living, my recently minted advanced degree was treated like a Weimar mark in 1924, and I ended up taking a job with the feds in Ottawa.

My father seemed to think this meant I'd be rubbing shoulders with all sorts of folk who were written up in the Calgary Herald or the Albertan. "Do you run into any of the politicians there?" he'd ask. Answer: "Nope!"

Except once. 18 September 1977. A quiet Sunday morning, and my wife and I decided to get some exercise playing a game of squash at a fairly new athletic facility that was trying to attract the interest of the well-off and the wannabees.

We have our game. There's almost nobody there at 9 in the morning, though we see a couple of guys on one of the courts. Didn't pay much attention.

After, we go back to the locker rooms. The men's had four long aisles of tall lockers. You got a small permanent locker and moved your stuff to a bigger one that would hold coat and such as well as your street clothes. Picked up a towel and headed for the showers. Some men put the towel around their waist, others sashay along in the buff, swinging the towel. I'm kind of indecisive, and just walk with it over my arm.

I take my shower – there's several bays and I don't see anyone else. Stand under the drier for a bit, then head back to where I'd chosen a locker. The other two men – it seemed the only other patrons that morning – are just out of the shower too. And they've got lockers directly bracketing the one I chose.

I approach the two naked men and say "Guess what?" and they both laugh, knowing exactly what the situation is without any big explanation. So I open the locker and they spread out a bit, the incoming finance minister on my left who would later become prime minister, and the outgoing on my right. The latter subsequently led a Royal Commission that recommended a free trade agreement for North America and later became High Commissioner to the United Kingdom.

So, Dad, I did sometimes rub shoulders with people who were in the news. In fact, almost literally. Just that when I did, we were all undressed for the occasion.

J C Nash ©2018-3-18

# Evaporation

© John C Nash

There are awkward moments in life that we'd rather never happen. Mostly these are in social situations where we manage to get one foot in our mouth so far the knee is blocking further entry. Sometimes, however, we're on our own and the sense of discomfort and unease is just as acute.

The other week I was doing some cleanup. You know, that eternal job of sorting and moving and tossing things out. Then getting some of them back. Rearranging the piles and boxes and envelopes of all the treasures and trivia of our lives.

I'd been tidying a drawer of old mementos and was pushing the drawer closed when I sensed some resistance. My wife's method for dealing with this sort of situation is to pull the drawer out and ram it back hard. There's a couple of chests of drawers for which I've had to renew the backing sheet. Usually it's just masonite, or even glorified cardboard nowadays. My approach is to lift the drawer out and find what is causing the trouble.

In this case, I had a bed handy and found an old letter scrunched up behind the drawer. Pulled it out and put back the drawer, then straightened out the letter. Wow. It was from about 40 years ago, from a friend called Vivian who was a classmate in University. The letter was from the time we had just graduated. She'd gone back to her home town after graduating and was working in her father's retail business. And not just to be gainfully employed. Her interests were more than banausic. Eventually she took it over and made it really hum. Smart lady.

The letter was friendly, but mostly pretty banal. We'd been lab partners and sometimes would go out in a crowd, but had dated others. Still, we had a pretty good rapport. Then I turned the page, and read

*It's a bit awkward, but I feel I should tell you that Liz is a bit unhappy you've been stopping by rather frequently. You and I know that you're just being friendly. You even told me you don't find her very attractive as a woman, but like to chat with her because her background is so different from yours. However, I phoned her the other night -- she still has some of my stuff that wouldn't fit in my cases and we have to arrange to pick it up sometime. In fact, maybe you could do that for me since it's more likely either you or someone you know will be coming this way during the summer -- I'll let you know. Anyway, because of her rather fundamentalist upbringing, she considers your visits to be tantamount to courting, and you don't belong to the chosen few. So you may*



*want to avoid going round to see her. Sorry to be the wet rag on that. Most gals would welcome the companionship of someone who treats them as you do.*

Well, it wasn't the awkwardness Vivian mentioned that gave me a cold shiver. The problem was that I could not remember ANY Liz. None. An empty glass.

Yet here I had written evidence that I'd socialized with someone on several occasions, and done so enough to make them uncomfortable that I might have intentions that could not be fulfilled.

I scoured my memory. Went through an old address book. Tried to picture what I did and where I used to go that long-ago summer. Nothing!

Finally, as it was getting towards supper time, I poured myself and my wife a glass of scotch. We like a small one from time to time. When she came in from the garden, she saw the glasses and smiled.

"What's this in aid of?"

"Thought you'd like one with me."

"Sure. I'll not say no. What shall we toast?"

"Not letting the good stuff sit around long enough to evaporate." I said, wondering if I had.

J C Nash ©2018-09-19

# Logogriph

© John C Nash

The words this week are rather short,  
Just four letters -- NOT that sort!

The first divides mankind in two  
Used for part descriptions too.  
Truncate it and it's very bad  
Almost enough to make you sad  
Without the front you may get drunk  
Though one will rarely leave you sunk.

The second word is not so hot  
My morning coffee rather not  
Leave off one letter at the start  
You age, and ready to depart  
But if my tail you should crop  
Look up towards the mountain top.

Explanation:

male -- (with minor exceptions) one of two  
possible genders

mal -- a prefix for "bad"

ale -- a form of beer made with warm fermentation

cold -- having low temperature

old -- aged, not young

col -- ridge between mountain tops

J C Nash ©2018-11-08

# Marketing 101

© John C Nash

Cucumbers aren't generally looked on as a cat treat. In fact, I think you'd be pretty hard-pressed to get most cats to even take a bite. Somehow, of course, there's always an exceptional creature who defies expectations.

In our family, we always seemed to get those sorts of pets, or cars, or houses, or whatever. So I'll tell this tale of one such animal, and use it to suggest how to sometimes rescue things from disaster.

This was when I was just a kid, maybe three or four. We owned a grocery store, and to make a bit of extra profit, my parents would sell local produce when it was in season, putting it out on a barrow under the front awning. You remember awnings, don't you? Stores used to have them back then.

This one morning, Dad puts out the barrow and puts some vegetables on it with cardboard signs written using a big black wax crayon. And one of the items was cucumbers. This was in England. They were probably priced something like 8d.

About opening time, Mom checks the barrow, and a number of cucumbers have a bite out of the end. The indent and teeth marks matched one of the cats that we had to keep the mice down. And there was a cat sitting there licking its paws.

Well, you've now got a dozen cucumbers you can't sell. Mom is mad as hell. The cat moves off smartly after she gives it a good kick – this was in the days when a cat that did something like that would be lucky to not forfeit all nine lives at once and the RSPCA would almost send you a commendation. Not like today.

Mom is about to toss the cukes, when Dad comes out and stops her. He takes the bitten cucumbers and puts them beside the whole ones, then takes a new card and writes "Half-cukes, 4d". Then he cuts off the end of each bitten cucumber. They're almost full size, but half price.

This is a time not long after the War. Food is something you don't waste. Pretty soon the housewives have figured out they get a lot of cucumber for 4d. Mom and Dad don't quite make as much out of the cucumbers as they'd hoped, but they do OK.

I did OK too. Mom and Dad told me they'd pay me an ice cream – a not very common treat back then – if I "worked" for them and kept the cats away from the barrow. And I guess I also got a lesson in marketing along the way.

J C Nash ©2018-05-24

# Summer Solstice

© John C Nash

“Oh. It’s June 20. What’re we going to do for the Summer Solstice?” Jackie asked in an excited, demanding voice.

I didn’t really want to answer. My coffee was just at the perfect temperature to drink, and my toast had that perfect layer of really good marmalade. Also I was in the middle of reading an op-ed piece in the newspaper that tried to argue that Canadians were responsible for getting Mr Trump elected in the US of A. I was having a very difficult time trying to decide if the author were insane or viciously cunning in emulating his subject by being obnoxiously annoying. Or was it annoyingly obnoxious.

Risking a potentially violent divorce, I responded, “Hadn’t given it any thought.”

This was true, but husbands are not allowed to NOT give things thought. Even if you haven’t thought about something, you should never admit that.

Especially – and that should be underlined – since Jackie had started reading up on the Wicca. Was even thinking of trying to find a local coven. This didn’t bother me, at least as long as my coffee and marmalade weren’t affected. If religion got in the way of that, I might start a terrorist cell to eliminate the threat.

“How about a big bonfire and we’ll invite people to jump through it like they did in medieval times?”

Jackie proposed.

“City fire ordinance. And we live in a condo apartment – no fires on the balcony. No jumping there either.”

“Oh. You’re no help. And I was counting on your support.”

Jackie does that. Counts on my support, even when I’m really as supportive as the French Resistance were to the Wehrmacht. I grabbed a sip of coffee while I could, and almost made it to a mouthful of toast before Jackie said, “We’ve got to do something!”

I didn’t want an unhappy wife. That’s never good for any man’s health and wealth. Health because he’ll be nagged and get an ulcer or a heart condition. Wealth because unhappiness is often treated with retail therapy. Expensive retail therapy.

“You know, our balcony gives a really good view of the sunset. We can see the sun set into the lake.” I said.

“True. What were you thinking?”

“Well, the weather forecast is for a fine evening, not too hot or humid. We got that nice bottle of wine from Joe and Martha, and I happen to know there’s some smoked salmon in the freezer. We could have a sunset supper on the balcony to celebrate the solstice, even though it will actually take place in the morning I think.”

“That isn’t what I had in mind, but it would be rather nice. OK.” Jackie responded.

The apartment was suddenly a placid and comforting place. My wife was again the woman I love. Indeed, her next words were “Another toast and marmalade?”

J C Nash ©2018-6-21

# The Back Alley

© John C Nash

If you grew up in the West of Canada, you probably had a house with a big front window. The garage was in the back, on the alley, with a frame to hold the garbage cans beside it. Out there it's fairly recent that the greed of real estate developers managed to expand profits by using the land the laneways took up.

When I came East, it took me a while to get used to houses that didn't present windows to the street. Instead, one was offered a phalanx of garage doors. Well, actually a phalanx of vehicles parked in front of garage doors. The garages were too full of junk to take even the most compact of cars. Days of freezing rain ensured the formal liturgy of window scraping that would have been avoided by using the garage for its intended purpose.

Now if you were of an age where you were allowed out to play beyond the back yard, the back alley was where you met up. A handful of kids about a decade or a dozen years old. There'd always be some current fashion of things to do depending on time of year and whatever promotions the toy manufacturers could come up with. Perennial – but seasonal – items were yoyos, marbles, kites, or model planes. Of course, we had to go to the park or the school playground to fly kites. And girls weren't



generally included. By the rules of biology, that all changed a year or so later, of course. Before then, however, I'd moved east, so there was a year when I had no back alley and its gang of kids, and I couldn't find an equivalent in my new home.

This was the time not long before Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon. Science was a big deal. Well, the rockets were really neat. In fact anything that flew. I made a lot of paper airplanes of sometimes bizarre designs. I had a couple of balsa wood gliders over the year, too, but they seemed magnetically attracted to trees, high roofs, and the mouths of retrievers.

At school I sat behind a boy who'd not long been in Canada from somewhere in the Soviet Union – it wasn't Russia then. His father had been captain of a fishing boat, and he managed to smuggle his family on board and keep them hidden until he could arrange a fuel leak that required a repair in St. John's. Dmitry hadn't got much English. In that time, kids didn't get a lot of ESL, but he was soon managing well enough. He and I were always top in maths, and we got to be friends over paper airplanes.

Dmitry lived one street over from me, in a rather dilapidated triplex. Our place was in a strip of newish cookie-cutter houses with the garages sort of half in front, half beside, but they were just singles. My Dad put up a shed in the back of the yard. For some reason, it had a window on the side that faced the side fence. The corners of the fence for our house and the one Dmitry lived in met. We pretty soon

figured out how to get through the fence so the hole could be concealed, and we carefully fixed the window so Dmitry and I could use the shed as our hangout. There were some tools and a small bench, and we were pretty handy. Someone had left an old car battery behind Dmitry's apartment and Dad had a charger, so we set up a lamp.

In social studies, we had a week or so about Australia, which led us to make a boomerang. Sort of. Well, you may remember a novelty pop song – rather pejorative of native Australians I might add – but the title fitted our attempt quite well because the boomerang ended up on the roof of the school. Admittedly, we did get it to come back one time in eight or nine before a gust of wind sent it up and over our heads as its trajectory bent back towards us.

In Science that year we learned a bit about static electricity. Somewhere we read that the ancients would rub an amber rod on cat's fur and generate sparks. We didn't have real amber, but I found a nice plastic rod that was part of one of my sister's skirt hangers. I found a length of dowel and made a substitution. She can't wear that skirt often – I haven't heard any complaints yet.

The rod worked well. Mrs. James' cat used to come round the shed often. Probably mice somewhere. We rubbed the plastic rod on the cat. After all, there was nothing that said the fur had to be off the cat. And the cat liked being stroked. Well, up until she got curious and put her nose near the plastic rod. The spark was about 5 mm. If the air was dry, then 15000 volts. Sorry puss.

Then we somehow had a lesson that mentioned the Mongolfier's and their balloons. Dmitry was a whiz with drawing, and soon we found some large sheets of tissue paper and he drew the shape we needed for the panels, called gores, of a hot air balloon. Pretty good, really, as the drawings had no straight lines, but had to meet up to be glued to make the teardrop shape of the balloon.

We used copper wire to hold the bottom open and carry a small tea-light candle. And Halloween night to try our first flight, which we launched from behind the shed.

After we waited a long time for the air in the balloon to heat, it finally lifted off. The light through the tissue was kind of eery. As the candle wasn't very big, and our balloon was about 4 feet high, it didn't rise too fast. And of course, we hadn't thought much about trees and utility poles. So it got hung up in a tall tree for a while.

Then a small child out trick or treating saw it and thought it was a real ghost. Pretty soon there was some fuss on the street. Dmitry and I cautiously edged to the back of the forming crowd. Suddenly the wind changed and the balloon escaped the tree and rose slowly. But another gust somehow brought the flame in contact with the tissue. There was a fairly sudden eruption of flame and then darkness. The kids took off, some squealing. Dmitry and I sort of wanted to see if anything were left of the balloon, but it was dark. Besides, one kid had dropped their candy bag, so we retired to the shed to divide the loot.

John C. Nash ©2018-04-10

# The Critic

© John C Nash

Sometimes the world is far too accepting of the self-opinion of a person who should be ignored. This was especially true of – well, we'll avoid trouble with a large and well-known corporation by calling him Grouch. He had received what used to be called a good education, that is, he studied Latin, English, and history. He had no expertise in mathematics or science, and his manual skills were such that he could hardly open a wine bottle. Perhaps that explained why he insisted on dining in a restaurant every day.

Nevertheless, his sense of self-importance, and an ability to persuade others that this opinion was correct, let him get a position as restaurant and theatre reviewer with a large media company. This allowed him to avoid the necessity of having to cook or seek entertainment as long as he could report on his experience in a way that attracted readers, viewers or listeners.

It is unfortunate that humans are overly drawn to enjoy reviews that start from a spirit of meanness. Start with damnation, and excoriate the honest efforts of a chef or actor or director, and it will attract attention. At least for a while.

Unfortunately for Grouch, he prepared a scathing critique of a rather good piece of dinner theatre by a woman who was both an exceptional chef and a scintillating playwright. This was some years ago, and she is long since deceased. I only learned the story by deciphering a strange letter that was somehow in the possessions of my late Aunt Ruby when I was required to empty her house after she died.

The lady whose work was unjustly dismissed by Grouch had a lot of friends in the theatre and restaurant circles. With consummate care, she promoted a new show called "The Magician". It supposedly told its story about a magician, but used the theatre audience as part of the show. Indeed, one of the audience would be made to disappear, then reappear again.

This masterful piece of theatre – with dinner as well – had, of course, to be reviewed, and Grouch either was told, or decided himself, to attend. Though he never used his own name, he was by now so well known that his presence was noted. Indeed, the lady impresario had carefully made sure the theatre staff was primed for his appearance. Actually for his disappearance. For when the magician carefully selected Grouch to be his foil – and supporters in the prepared audience ensured he could not refuse – he duly disappeared.

Except only a stuffed porcupine reappeared. Grouch was never seen again.

The police were, naturally, brought in, but not until a couple of days later. Everyone assumed the disappearance was a publicity stunt by the show and by Grouch's employer. Indeed, the media company executives enjoyed the noise and fuss. Besides, Grouch had been becoming annoying by sending them unconscionably rude communications.

The police found that nobody knew anything. At least that's what they said. Of course, it wasn't widely known that the chef/playwright and the police chief were conducting a discreet affair, one that lasted over two decades until the chief died.

The media company hired a new critic, one who was more careful with both praise and scorn. Her name was Ruby.

J C Nash ©2018-11-29

Biography: John Nash is a retired university professor who has a mistaken impression that no longer being paid implies that one has to undertake a lot more activities, intellectual and other. Some of John's writings can be found on [archive.org](http://archive.org).

# Christmas?

© Carmen Neske

On the night before Christmas, there isn't a sound.  
No music, no holiday cheer to be found.  
The songs are offensive, the TV shows too,  
They've been outlawed by upstarts who haven't a clue.

Baby it's cold is a song too risqué,  
Domestic abuse means no Rudolph to play,  
Don't say merry christmas, now that's a sin-  
Happy Holidays is the new thing that's in.

Run over by reindeer depicts battery.  
And mom kissing santa is adultery.  
No more nuts roasting - it might mean something else.  
And Santa's poor eating is a problem as well.

The crazies have banded together as one  
None will be hurt by Xmas when they're done.  
Their mission is clear, all offence soon will fall,  
On they go, on they march, and with confidence call:

Gone Frosty, gone Rudolph, gone Christmas Carols,  
Gone Elf and gone Frozen, gone spiked eggnog in barrels.  
Begone with White Christmas, and its racist appal,  
Now ban away, ban away, ban away, all!

But now I with my christmas tunes, movies and more  
Find myself wondering what it was all for.  
There's nothing left now, this just can't be right.  
Oh well, no more Christmas, so to all, just...good night



# Drifting Hearts

© Carmen Neske

When we started, I'll admit, I didn't think it'd last. Call me a cynic. We had a connection, sure, but it wouldn't be the first time I saw bits of me in a woman. I dunno, if I see somebody who's down and out I kinda relate to 'em. It's a bad habit, makes me easy prey for a lotta women. There's a type that sees into you, squeezes her way into those comfy little places in your mind, then once she's done with you just leaves you out to dry. I met a few, still ain't learned my lesson. But it's hard for an old dog like me.

Dottie...well...she's a pretender, sure, but that hardship in her's real as mine. I dunno what her story is, and I doubt I ever will - she's not the loose lipped kind to give it away so freely and I'm a gentleman who obeys the rules; no gentleman asks a lady about her life story like that, sure as hell not the darker secrets of their soul. All I know is she and I have a connection.

It's a funny situation. I can't help but laugh when I think about it. All the years I been alive, I never thought I'd wind up with one of Goldridge's women, but fate's a funny broad. I used to roll my eyes at fellas who said they like bad girls, but shit, here I am, just another in the bunch.

Today's the anniversary of the night we met, when I first heard her singing at the Red Door. It's been a while now, since we started seeing each other. Always in secret, I'm never the same man; there'd be a lotta scandal if Detective Harmon was seen with a gal like Dottie, with a reputation as one of

Goldridge's harlots. Tonight I'm Martin Kingsley. Just some average, clean-cut businessman. Course Dottie's a real sight, wearing a sleek dark blue dress and a matching handbag that really brings out those burnt curls of hers.

Dottie links her arm with mine as she takes me to our booth. I'm not sure what the arrangement is, but dining with Dottie at this place, we've always gotten some sort of discount. The minx probably showed the owner a good night once upon a time, not that it's my business. She fixes me with a glossy cherry smirk, sliding onto the comfortable leather seat and crossing one leg over the other, real slow.

"One of these days, you're gonna get in trouble."

I can't help but laugh. I don't bother picking up the menu; I always order the same dish and that ain't gonna change. I know what I like, no need to take a risk on something new.

"It's the same for you, ain't it? At least I could just say you seduced me. What's your excuse?"

Dottie looks up from a thorough inspection of her purple-red nails. She got that look in her eye, the mischief I came to love just a little too much.

"Just playing a detective fool for all he's got."

Hell, I won't deny it, I know I'm a fool. We both gotta be, playing a dangerous game like this.

"Better hope your boss'll buy that. Don't want him getting jealous of me, now."

She looks me over real good, sizing me up like a sizzling steak with a handsome barbecue drizzle. All's fair I guess, I was making eyes earlier.

“Confidence looks good on you. Should wear it more often.”

Our drinks are brought to us and this time I’m the one smirking.

“Can’t say no to my lady, now, can I?”

She uncrosses her legs and crosses them again, the other way. I’ve noticed she does that sometimes - she knows what catches my eye. Dottie raises her glass to her lips with that devilish little grin. “Not a bad suit either, but you’d look better out of it.”

In the past, I might’ve choked on my drink with that kinda talk. This ain’t a low-brow kinda place, ain’t all that empty, either, but here’s Dottie bold as ever with spice on her tongue. She’s really not like any woman I’d ever known; not ashamed at all, but then she got nothing to be ashamed of. To her, it’s just the facts. I swallow a mouthful of wine without missing a beat, just to show her that ain’t gonna get to me no more.

“We’ll save that for later. Dinner before dessert, and all.”

The old me wouldn’t be caught dead saying that. The new me doesn’t give a damn.

Dinner went without much incident; we chatted, got a few looks from nearby tables but the two of us couldn’t care less what some stuck-up faces thought. They probably ate like this on the daily, lived without any troubles. A few words wouldn’t kill ‘em. All that mattered was Dottie and I. Lasting a year...that’s new for me. I’ve had other women, but never this long. A month...maybe more if I’m lucky. They just don’t got the spark I need. But Dottie...

She's the first woman who's ever come close - ever been able to quiet those lonely gnawing memories. Dinner with Barbs at our kitchen table, just the two of us, her telling me the scoop on her latest story. The tender kisses before bed, breath on my neck, the warmth of her beside me...I used to love them, depend on them working day to day, knowing the light of my life was there to welcome me home. Now they're just reminders of what I'll never have.

Dottie's got a way of turning it all down. Some say you can only love once; can't say I know for sure. Dottie's no Barbara; she ain't got the same innocence about her the way my Barbara did. She's not an honest kinda dame, she's a trickster, got a knife behind her back at all times and I never know if I'll get caught on it. But there's that part of her - the part that's just like me, knows my pain. Maybe that's what makes her more than those other dames.

Harmon's a charmer...got that perfect sarcastic bite to him I love in a man, clever enough to keep up with me, with all the manners of a gentleman. I should count myself lucky - no girl like me hits it big after we walked the path I do. He's good to me. I should appreciate that.

But then, there's a habit of his.

I used to wonder where he goes, when he stares out the window into the long distant past. We got our scars, our demons. Maybe I can help him with his. But I found out one night, some months ago,

when we were together. Woke me up with his mumbling, and that's when I heard it the first time.

*Barbara. Barbara.*

Soon as I heard, I knew what this was. That lonely look he's got...I'm there to heal his wounds. To fill the void till the hurt goes away. I'm his band-aid solution - gauze on a wound too deep for such an easy fix. What he wants isn't me; it's her. Or anything that'll take his mind off the lonely pain.

Does he love me? I don't know. Not like he loved this Barbara, that's for sure. He's holding back. It's been a year, and there's still that part of him that can't give himself all the way. Too afraid to take a chance, risk his heart on someone new.

But it doesn't have to be that way. He saved my life. Maybe I can save his heart. Maybe I can turn things around, get his feet back under him so he can move on, move forward. I'm not Barbara, never even knew her. But the sooner he realizes he'll never have her again, the sooner he'll be able to heal.

Harmon's a good man. I'll give him my best shot. He's earned at least that.

# Into The Fog

© Carmen Neske

Your day begins as it should. An ordinary morning, the same as any other. Breakfast before the sun rises and then it's off to work. You follow the expected routine. That is, until you step outside. As you descend the steps, you see it; the heavy fall of a fog in the distance. You know the way - walk straight ahead, you know the way - yet by strange design you find yourself turning. You feel yourself in a trance. You turn and walk left.

The fog is thick, heavy. You hear nothing, you see nothing. There *is* nothing. Back takes you nowhere. Forward....where is forward? You stand in a sea of gray. There is nothing. Nothing. Then-

*Do you know the way?*

The sound comes from everywhere at once. It soothes. And you....

"No...no I don't."

You should not have answered.

A silhouette breaks the fog. He steps with no sound, until you see his face - a face you know, someone you once knew long ago. You were lovers, before you parted ways. He looks the mirror image of himself back then. How strange you remember his face, but not his name. He reaches out toward you.

*Let me show you.*

He takes you by the hand and together you walk. The fog begins to thin, and thin, until the morning clears. He disappears. A vision in the tired hours. The sun has risen. Whatever strangeness had befallen is gone, yet unease remains, crawling down your spine in slick beads. The day continues, normal, as it should.

But you notice....you begin to notice...

*He* appears, now and then. Glimpses of his face in the background. As you take lunch with your friends that afternoon, you see him two tables away. Or do you? With a blink he's gone. You see him two more times; at the end of the day, and on the way home. You take dinner from the fridge to heat, and turn on the TV. A tired tale from a tired man, the weather, a tragedy, and then breaking glass.

Those friends you took lunch with were found dead that very same evening. The bodies aren't shown, but as you close your eyes you see it; fleshless corpses, faceless gaping holes. The reek of blood wafts to you and you open your eyes. The clock by your bedside stares back, the morning light shines through your window.

The day begins as normal. The walk is normal. Work is normal. You take lunch with your friends as normal, yet unease shakes and quakes in your bones. Your partner calls you after work. She'll be coming home at last, negotiations over, the deal clinched. You'll make something special when she gets home. *Tomorrow afternoon*, she says. *Tomorrow afternoon*.

Something catches in the corner of your eye and you could swear you saw *him* again, but you must have been mistaken; you see it's only your friends walking by, and so you wave.

Your hand fumbles for the phone on your nightstand. Beeping, buzzing. A social media explosion. A deadly accident. All in critical condition. All but one, pronounced dead. The image fills your mind. Face gaping, blackened, nothing. Gone.

She won't be coming home.

She won't be coming home.

The same rank stench fills your nostrils.

You see her, as you see your friends, as you see *him*. And you know....the unease....the feeling of wrong....they all lie dead. You see it in the news. You hear it from their families. The visions that *you* see are imitations.

The unease you feel with them is the same as felt in that first fogged morning. Today, you meet an old acquaintance for coffee. You hope to tell him of your plight, your fears. That you find yourself haunted by a spectre. But you feel *him* there, watching. If you turn, you'll see him. Him, or any number of your ghosts. And you know...

You leave before your conversation can begin, but the news of the evening still betrays you. Again. Another. You must never go near another human being. Only once you accept this truth does it appear again; the fog, as thick as that morning. Somehow it comforts you now. You see him again, as you walk toward it, glistening silver grey.

He reaches for you.



*Do you know the way?*

You join hands and walk, disappearing into the fog of the morning, swallowed for the last time.

Life passes, time moves. Days come and go and the world watches. Fog enters and leaves, and rarely is it seen by the wanderers of the early hour. But, from time to time, before the dawn, that uneasy fog settles, and a spectre appears. She takes shape, and with her voice, she soothes. You know her from a time, but you cannot place her name.

*Do YOU know the way?*

# Misophonic Onomatopoeia

© Carmen Neske

Crunch. Crunch. Chew. What is it, chips?  
I can hear you from across the wall.  
Crinkle munch, chew slurp, *stop*.  
Bubbling boiling blood and sanity's slip.

Click clack, comfortable, white noise.  
Hum and whirl, mutter mumble, peace.  
Quiet and calm, until the noon hour strikes.  
Temporary tranquility that your lunch destroys.

Quiet am I, *loud* are you.  
Chitter chatter gulp, shut your mouth.  
Tell me if I'm being a bit too loud!  
Herein lies problem number two.

Muted, silent, shy, cannot speak.  
Oh, you *are* too loud, but I can't say.  
Internalize disdain, endure in pain,  
You, unknowing the havoc that you wreak

Crunch and crunch again, it never ends.  
Polite and timid, what am I to do?  
Outside calm, inside I stew and stew  
Day in, day out, my tender ears you rend.

But then....

Crunch, squelch, screech, muffle, splat.  
Coloured red, as good as dead, you lie  
Morning buzz, quiet because....mm, who knows?  
Good morning! Cheery welcome, at desk sat.

Tragic news, office blues, a shame  
Rest in peace, and peace / rest in, too.  
Take two.  
Giggle snort, snicker, squeal. Ignite flame.

Noise, oh noise, disruptive, fight or flight.  
Quiet, forgotten, drowning in your din  
End of day, a chance, wait! Before you go...  
Meet me after work later tonight?

Biography: Carmen is a 25 year old aspiring author whose interests in writing began early in childhood. Now a young adult, she writes for leisure within various genres, taking particular interest in crime noir, post-apocalypse and science fantasy genres

# Smells Like Karma

© June Neske

If you own or have ever owned a dog, you know all too well to expect the unexpected. As much as they can be creatures of habit, stuff just *happens*. There are some things you come to expect and accept, much like with children. Maybe even spouses. Patterns and traits, sounds and smells; the list is endless. As a two dog mom and a wife, some of those sounds and smells were not always distinguishable as to exactly whom the culprit was. Snoring from dogs, or even a husband, at ungodly hours was fairly common. Since often all three were on the bed it required lifting your head to figure out which one was sawing the logs and keeping me awake. SMELLS were easier. If it were human, there was often a giggle followed by an exclamation of blaming a dog.

Back in the days before kids, it was just me, the hubby, and two sizeable dogs. Bailey the beautiful golden retriever and Annie the adorable black lab mix were mine and predated the husband in the family dynamic. As a single gal my dogs always slept with me on the bed, despite the lack of room once a husband appeared on the scene. Between the trio's assorted snoring and the two large furbeasts that alternated between spots on the bed and floor, I often found myself awake briefly throughout the night. Most nights I could stick a toe into someone's ribs to stop the noise (two can play the blame a dog game), but on this night it wasn't the familiar bench grinder like sound that opened my eyes. There was a... smell. A

*great* smell. Tears welled up in my sleepy eyes. I poked the body beside me, covering my face with a pillow. Either he did it and deserved being woken, or at the very least he should have to endure this ungodly odour the way I did. He stirred, and then gasped.

“It wasn’t me!” The body shifted in the moonlight and pulled the covers over his head. He mumbled something else but I couldn’t make it out.

Suddenly a NOISE erupted in the room. The smell worsened. A head emerged from the covers. My alarm clock told me it was just before 2am, neither of us was exactly coherent at that point. Squinting and trying not to breathe we peered around the dimly lit room for the guilty party. One dog circled on the floor a few times and flopped down. Mystery solved, we nestled back into bed as the golden retriever stretched across the carpet and uttered a little sigh.

It didn’t take long before at least one of us clued in that maybe the smell was lingering just a bit too long for a typical cloud of noxious fumes. And once the thought pops into your head... BOOM. My eyes popped open and I bolted upright. Hubby was a split second behind me. He switched on the light. Behold, before our eyes, was not a cloud of gas, but a pile of... Not Gas. In fact, TWO not gas piles; though to be fair, one pile was really flatter and not at all pile like.

Let me mention now that against my wishes and decidedly better judgement, some fatty food scraps had been shared to the furballs just a few hours earlier. One dog was known to have a more sensitive tummy, and sharing to one dog over the

other simply wasn't fair, so I generally discouraged the practice in it's entirety. A practice only one of us adhered to.

So there we were. Middle of the night. Smack in the middle of Pooville. As I had been AGAINST the giving of the scraps, at this point I also chose to distance myself from the clean up. Suddenly it became obvious the suspect dog was sniffing and making moves like more moves were imminent, so the giver of scraps rushed to take doggo outside. Mostly naked. Maybe some boxers. No time to get dressed when poo is on the line. Thankfully we lived in the country with no neighbours of consequence (and not a rural subdivision like we did when that whole naked guy on the porch shooing the porcupine thing went down).

With the rumbly tummied pooch safely outside, Spongebob grabbed a garden trowel, returning to the scene of the crime to scoop that one pile of Not Gas off the carpeting. Back he went outside, swearing profusely on his way, and hurled it with all his might across the yard. Meanwhile, I dragged myself out of bed to clean the other bits because the smell was So Many Shades of NASTY. I cleaned, all the while plotting payback on the fellow who caused the situation. Every scenario I considered ended with me triumphantly exclaiming "this is because I told you so", not that it offered much solace as I scrubbed.

After some wisely spent time in the yard ensuring the one with the sensitive tummy was settled (as well as empty), hubby made his way back to bed. He vented in detail about the big pile of icky smell he carried; the treacherous journey through the house

being very careful not to drop it, and eventual angry disposal of the poo behind the garage. Not only was I given a play by play synopsis, but I was also treated to a naked demonstration of his epic wind up and launch of the hand shovel of poo across the yard, like he thought it would qualify him for the Olympics or something.

I finished getting the worst of the pootastrophe cleaned up; the smell of carpet cleaner replacing the not so pleasant odours from earlier. I washed my hands, tossed the laundry down the chute, and fell back into bed. It was now closer to 3 bells because as you may know, getting runny poo out of carpeting is decidedly less easy than getting runny poo out of dogs.

Oddly, once settled in bed, and despite freshly scrubbed spots and spritzs of air freshener, the poo scent seemed to return. The body next to me grumbled the same thought. I wrote it off to our imagination as we each rolled over to find much needed sleep. More grumbles. The giver of treats sniffed and protested my cleaning efforts, convinced he still smelled The Smell.

I shushed him to no avail. For the next several minutes he tossed. And turned. And complained.

“WE MUST HAVE MISSED A SPOT!” came the cry as he propped himself up and looked around the room in the dark, nose in the air.

‘We’, I thought. Nice try. I ran over my payback scenarios and did my best to ignore him, insisting I did not miss anything. He put his head back on the pillow, perhaps realizing that arguing with the one

who did the cleaning was not his best move. Within seconds, he sat straight up and turned on the light.

Unamused, I pushed myself up to a seat in bed to yell at him.

And that's when I saw the spot he'd accused me of missing. Spots. Maybe more like smears. On him. And the sheets. Pillowcase. So MANY places.

I suppose it was my look of absolute horror that caused him to leap up out of bed the way he did. He must have caught a glimpse of himself in the big mirrored closet doors at that point because it turns out hubby knew words I hadn't even heard of. He yelled them all as he did a little dance around the room. A dance like a war cry. Complete with war paint. Except we would substitute 'war' with 'poo' to be more accurate. If by chance you remember the part about him being naked, the dancing around the bedroom covered in brown racing stripes just got funnier.

A further unfortunate bit of luck for my husband is that poor Spongebob PooHead is married to me. I am The One Who Laughs in circumstances like the one we were in. And, as he declared, this was Not Something To Be Laughed About. While I disagreed vehemently with his assessment of the situation, I let go of my desire to protest as he appeared to be in somewhat of a rush to get in the shower.

It seems that when 'the one who gave the dogs the things I said do not give to the dogs' ever so carefully carried that runny scoop of poo to the back yard and hoisted it up behind his head to achieve Olympic-like poo hurling glory... That fleeting moment whereby you cease to hold the hand shovel parallel to the ground and it becomes a tad more vertical had



apparently caused runny poo to drip off the shovel, onto a waiting and unsuspecting shoulder and back. Combine poo hurling anger with the fact that the mishap had been fairly recent, and was likely close to body temperature warm... It's quite plausible that you may not, in fact, realize you have just hurled poo onto yourself.

In my defense, I'd been kneeling down to finish the clean up and trying as much as possible to avoid watching his naked re-enactment of the poo hurling glory so completely missed his poo streaked back and shoulders. The tossing and turning back in bed was the icing on the cake. From shoulders and back to luxurious 720 count white percale sheets, the redistributed the poo reached places you definitely wouldn't want poo distributed. Along the back of his head and across ears and cheeks, that stuff was *everywhere*.

I'd have probably felt worse for the guy if he hadn't been the one to feed the dogs. To this day I haven't topped the payback he gave himself.

# The Birthday Cake

© June Neske

You could practically taste the sweet aromas hanging inside the bakery. Pushing open the heavy old oak trimmed shop doors triggered a wave of delight for all the senses. Orderly lines of individual pastries stood in contrast alongside exquisitely curated displays of chocolate ribbon topped cakes and mile high meringue pies. Piles of brightly decorated cookies and trays of precisely cut layered squares filled a second display against the far wall. Strains of jazz warbled from the kitchen beyond the pink door. This place was heaven. Heaven, with calories.

When the bell rang as the door pushed open that morning, there was no need for Carole to peek around the corner to know exactly who would be standing at her counter. Jingling bells just after nine on a Friday almost guaranteed the arrival of a fellow she'd once dubbed The Cake Man in the bakery's early days. One of a handful of Miss Maisy's most loyal customers these past 15 years, the Cake Man was unquestionably the pie and cake emporium's most charming patron. Strolling into the shop that first day with big round eyes soaking in the array of sweets tucked inside the display cases, the rugged older gentleman towered above the oak counter. He grinned like a four year old. You don't forget your first customer. This one had been larger than life.

"I'll have THAT." A weathered hand waved to a glistening peach upside down cake.

Even in its humble beginnings, the bakery shelves held a small but carefully planned selection of standards plus a few specials. Butter, sugar and chocolate perfumed the air.

“And can you make me a birthday cake?” His looming figure leaned in as he whispered hoarsely. “With the fancy white buttercream, and coloured frosting flowers? Are you Maisy?” Despite the impeccable presentation of treats on display, there were no obvious birthday cakes.

She couldn’t peg his age, but his ear to ear grin and childlike enthusiasm over the possibility of a birthday cake would be forever etched in her mind. Carole explained there was no real Maisy; it was the name of her imaginary friend as a child, and that buying pastries from Miss Maisy’s sounded a heck of a lot better than buying a pie from Carole. Yes, birthday cakes were indeed possible, and could she get a flavour, and a name for the cake?

“No name. Don’t need a *name*.” The fellow appeared to laugh at the thought of her suggestion. “White cake, please and thank you. For Friday?” Handing over cash, the tall man strode to the door clutching his box of peach cake and paused before leaving.

“Why is it called white cake, but a chocolate cake isn’t called brown cake, anyway?”

With that, he was gone and the newly opened bake shop’s first sale was in the books. Three days later on a sunny Friday morning in Georgia, Miss Maisy’s door swung open to see her first returning customer. Carole presented the jovial man with his requested cake, watching the grin spread wider as he

declared it “the finest looking birthday cake in the South, Maisy!” Carole beamed at the praise. “See you next week!”

Sure enough, Tuesday the following week saw the grey haired gentleman back in the shop, picking up treats and ordering another birthday cake. Miss Maisy’s proprietor didn’t ask any questions. This was just business, not *her* business. She smiled and remarked on how lucky he was to have two celebrations close together. His response was a wink, and “see you Friday!” It was the third consecutive Tuesday cake order that officially garnered the friendly customer his Cake Man moniker.

“Don’t even ask. He’s probably just from a huge family.” Over dinner that evening, the story of the apparent run of family birthdays in her customer’s life did not seem to interest the bakery shop owner’s husband.

“Just be happy he’s buying your cakes. And tell me again how I’m married to the lady with the bakery and we never have any baked stuff?” Mark pouted and laughed. Then he pouted again. Carole sighed, rolling her eyes.

Over the years, The Cake Man kept to a schedule you could set your watch by. Tuesdays for some sort of treat, and the standing “I need a birthday cake for Friday, please and thank you!” At some point curiosity got the best of her.

“Oh there’s no birthdays, Maisy. Just birthday CAKES. What did you say your name was Maisy? I’m Truett. Walker.”

Thrusting his hand toward her, the Cake Man officially had a name. One firm handshake combined

with his unforgettable grin and signature wink later, Truett Walker dropped his payment onto the counter, scooped up his cake and left. Seconds later her big door swung open, Cake Man's head poking back in.

"Carole, next Friday. Can I have a brown cake instead?"

Looking back, the only Fridays Truett ever missed over the years was on account of his grand adventures. Upon the Cake Man's return he would sit with a tea and scone to regale Carole with tales of trekking through mountains or jungles, jumping off water falls or zip lining in the rainforest while monkeys howled their displeasure before leaving with his birthday cake.

Miss Maisy's expanded quickly and grew into a flourishing café and bakery. She'd learned the 60ish year old strapping man had actually been 70 the first time he'd walked into the store; that Mr Walker had a very small family with just one married daughter and one grandchild. She sent cake after cake to his home for weeks back when Truett was battling cancer. It wasn't until then, five years ago and after ten years of almost weekly trips to the bakery that Miss Maisy learned the story behind Truett's obsession with birthday cake.

Ellie Walker was the spitting image of her father. Tall, a huge smile and eyes that lit up when she walked into the bakery. Her father's daughter, indeed.

"I'm here for my dad's cake..."

Chemo takes its toll on a body, but nothing was keeping Truett Walker from his weekly cake. Besides,

doctor's orders were to eat anything he could keep down.

"Ahhhh, your dad and his cakes! Everyone here loves him. You must be Ellie" Laughter from both ladies filled the shop at the thought Truett and his cakes.

"Don't charge her for that, it's a gift from us" Carole placed her hand on the cash drawer, preventing the girl behind the counter from ringing up the sale.

For the next 90 minutes that day, stories of Truett Walker spilled out over coffees as two strangers caught up like old friends who hadn't seen each other in years. Tales of how Ellie's dad would show up at her house most every week, a Miss Maisy's cake box in hand. It was customary to expect him around 11, walking in the door singing Happy Birthday to Me. How the good china dishes were laid out on the table in advance, southern hospitality style, with tall glasses of ice waiting beside a pitcher of sweet tea. How she'd tried to serve regular iced tea to her dad once. ONCE. Truett wouldn't have anything to do with that nonsense. He was a sugar man.

Carole learned that Ellie's parents had a rough go in life. Truett raised his daughter alone for the most part. Her mom, Truett's wife, battled many demons over the years. In and out of hospitals, it was mostly just the father and daughter to count on each other. Not that Truett Walker was afraid of responsibility. He'd been on his own since leaving home as a young teenager. Born in the 30s, and raised on a farm in what he called Nowhere, Georgia without electricity or plumbing; his own dad passed when he'd fallen off

the barn roof. Clarence was a hardworking man but left his bride with little more than a roof over her head and a toddler. Truett's stepfather also worked hard but had an affinity for the Tennessee Mountain moonshine his family made in the hills back home. He was neither a kind nor gentle man with no paternal instincts. Raising the children was largely up to Truett's mother, what little interest he did show toward them made it obvious he favoured the four offspring he'd sired himself. Postwar farmer with a limp, a temper, little money and a shelf of mountain madness in the shed meant daily life was a struggle celebrations were lean at best. The stepfather expected chores to be done swiftly by the eldest boy, declaring school to be a privilege to walk to if you had everything finished in time. Spare time was usually spent watching the young ones.

For Truett, spare time was best spent playing ball. The greatest days were those when kids from the next farm would come by for some baseball in the pasture. On the days Truett made it to school, the boys would play during lunch and recess, and whenever they could, the kids stayed long after the bell, risking being late home to do chores just for a little extra ball time. No one knows where it came from exactly, but Truett Walker had an arm that was legendary. When asked, the boy simply shrugged and offered "maybe it's from chucking rocks at critters in the barn". He wasn't often allowed to pitch in those pick up games because no bat could make contact with a ball unless Truett wanted you to make contact. Word got around about this boy and his pitch, and one September day after school he walked into the

old farm house to his mama standing over the woodstove making tea for two gentlemen seated at his kitchen table. His mother introduced the man in the fine blue suit as the brother of the farm owner next door. The man said he'd heard about Truett and his throw, and he'd like to see it for himself. He pulled out a brand new leather glove and tossed it to the kid as they all made their way outside. For the next half hour the man who played catcher, Truett's mother and step siblings watched as a lanky farm boy from Georgia repeatedly struck out the ball player the man in the suit brought along.

Back in the sparsely furnished house, Mr Jackson told the young ball player he lived in Florida and asked the 15 year old Walker boy if he would like to go to school there and play baseball in something called the Little League. In 1948 the little league was up and coming, newly expanded from Pennsylvania to the southern states. It wasn't Georgia with an angry stepdad full of moonshine, and it was baseball. With his mama's blessing, Truett Walker left with the two men and never looked back.

As Ellie continued, the story of the cake began to unravel and make sense. Her dad had his first real birthday celebration when he was 16, explained Ellie. He played ball and billeted with a nice family of means who provided the young man with a proper cake and gifts for the occasion. He had a future after the Little League; but like so many young men at that time, his country called. Truett answered and went off to fight in Korea.



“Volunteered at 18. As a kid really. Got hurt...” Ellie’s voice faltered as she spoke. “His first wife died.” There was a long pause.

“Aaaaand... Then he met mom.” Her voice lowered.

“Most of the time it was just the two of us. I mean she’s better for longer now, but still...”

“Dad called me the day he first walked into your bakery! He was so excited. Giggling. Ordered a birthday cake. Wasn’t even his birthday. Just because he COULD. Covington’s never had a bakery until you came along. Dad said he never had birthday cakes growing up so dammit he was gonna have them every week now. What’s it been now...? Ten years of weekly cakes?” She laughed. “Maybe I need to do that, too!”

“Cake is your dad’s fountain of youth, I’m sure of it.” Carole replied, nodding in agreement.

“Tell your dad I’ll make him a brown one next week.” Miss Maisy’s alter ego Carole tried to sound upbeat for her patrons’ daughter. “Sometimes he likes to shake things up with a brown cake. And give that man a wink for me.”

Weekly birthday cakes all made sense after that. Five years after learning the story behind the cakes, the conversation between Truett’s daughter and the bakery shop owner remained a secret. Carole was relatively certain that Ellie’s dad wouldn’t want anyone feeling anything close to pity toward him.

Sure enough, the bell that called Carole into the shop from behind the pink door that Friday morning was indeed the larger than life Truett Walker and his tiny wife Connie. She already had the

signature Miss Maisy's cake box with the prized birthday cake inside.

"Good morning Walkers! Are you two off to Ellie's?"

The Cake Man's wife was a slight woman; well appointed, and sharply dressed, sporting heels that Carole thought were rather impressive for a woman you might refer to as 'of a certain age'. Carole herself was more of the sturdy nurse shoes type with all the time she spent in the shop. And she had a few decades on the woman!

"Another cake, another happy day of memories to cherish" the Cake Man replied, opening the door for his wife.

"Have a safe trip" she called after them.  
"ELLIE!? We're here!"

Truett's voice boomed from the vestibule. Inside the dining room, four place settings circled fresh flowers on the table. Ellie's 22 year old daughter appeared in the doorway.

"Grandpa!" Lifting herself onto tip toes she threw her arms around his neck kissing his cheek.

"Hey, grandma. How are you?" Wrapping one arm around her shoulder for an awkward sideways hug, giving a slighter cooler reception for the lady who was more of a stranger than family.

"I'll go find mom!" She gestured for them to sit.  
"I'll be back with your sweet tea Grandpa."

Visits were harder this past year. More precious. Every day should be a celebration because you never know what the next one will be. That had become Truett's mantra since his first brush with

cancer. He was a survivor, and everyone knew it. From the days on the farm, to the injury in Korea, and losing his first wife and infant son in childbirth, the Cake Man endured. Widowed and finding love for a second time, things were no easier when Connie's addictions meant becoming a single parent off and on, even when she was at home; although that wasn't often by the time Ellie was a teenager.

Accepting Connie back to enjoy what good times they could as a family was a leap of faith for everyone, but she'd been holding steady and sober for a couple of years now. It wasn't fair to leave her out of the memory making in the time that might be left. The Alzheimer's diagnosis' was a hard pill for to swallow, and Truett vowed to make the best of it until the time came for hard decisions. It was an unexpected plot twist in his life and earth shattering. At some point, all recognition would be lost. For now though, the Walkers still found happy moments between the lost memories. At another point the family would need to discuss alternate living arrangements. Once they moved past the quirks of answering endless repeated questions or the games like finding the tea towel in the fridge instead of on the oven door the family needed to make sure safety came first. But today, it was just about cake. Glorious, beautiful cake.

A figure appeared in the doorway. The Cake Man rose to hug his daughter. Despite seeing her at least once a week, the hug was long and cherished. Making memories, one seemingly insignificant moment at a time.

“Ellie! It’s cake time!” Lifting the lid to the cake box filled the dining room with sweet smells from the family’s favourite cake shop. Yellow roses swirled across the top of the smooth white frosting. Connie passed Truett the knife and began passing him plates.

The Walker clan slid into their seats as plates of birthday cake made their way around the table. Ellie picked up a fork, twirling it through fingers until Truett passed a plate of cake piled with buttercream roses in front of her.

“Happy birthday” she exclaimed as the big man ran his fingers across her cheek.

“Have you seen my dad?” Ellie asked of the man in front of her. “My dad hates to miss out on cake. Is my dad coming today?” she demanded of Truett.

Cake Man sat beside her at the table, taking up his beautiful daughter’s hand.

“I know Ellie. I sure do know your dad loves his cake! Let’s celebrate, maybe he’ll be by.”

With that, Truett Walker began to sing.

“Happy birthday to meeeee...”

Biography: June Neske is a real life dog mom, wife, and mother to two remarkable human beings. Ex-military and former kitchen designer, she is currently a yoga teacher who waits for life to hand her ridiculous situations as inspiration for stories. Life rarely disappoints.

# Diary of a Prophet

© John W Partington

Day 1: The animals are loaded; I have concerns about the lions. It doesn't seem like a good idea to have such fierce creatures on board with the other animals. I asked God how long the rain would last: "until the world is drown of all sin," he answered. I asked if he could be more specific as I would have to lay in provisions for the voyage. "God will provide," was the answer. A light rain started this evening.

Day 2: The unicorns are as much a problem as the lions. They are angry at being captive and take out their anger on their stable mates. I try to let them wander the deck as much as possible. The rain is about a foot deep on the ground. People are starting to notice and seem concerned. They are starting to believe me, but it is far too late for repentance.

Day 3: The water is three feet deep. My neighbours are starting to build boats. Being a desert people we don't know much about boats. If God hadn't provided me blue prints I doubt I could have accomplished the feat.

Day 6: The ark has left its mooring. The ramshackle houses of my neighbours are drown in thirty feet of water. The water is everywhere. It is dirty as the soil is picked up and moved about. We have run out of food for my family and the animals in the morning. There are plenty of people on makeshift

boats. Occasionally a boat will sink or capsize, dark bodies of huge fish converge on the people and they do not resurface. We will not be going into the water.

Day 7: We woke up to a thick layer of manna on the deck. We quickly swept the flour up to make bread for ourselves and the grain eating animals. Several large fish leapt onto the deck; the lions and other carnivores fell upon the fish; in minutes there was nothing left.

Day 8: The lions ate one of my lambs. Fortunately I have the whole flock so it was no great loss. There is more manna on the deck in the morning.

Day 9: I can see land. It turns out to be the tips of the mountains, which means the land is down beneath one thousand cubits of water. The water is also clearer, so we see great fish swimming about beneath us. They are fearsome to behold.

Day 10: With no way to steer the ark we drift aimlessly on the newborn sea. It is still raining.

Day 11: Adrift at sea; still raining.

Day 12: Adrift at sea; still raining.

Day 13: The lions broke out and ate the unicorns. God is going to be pissed. With great difficulty we managed to get the lions back into a pen, and reinforced the cage, but the damage is done.

Day 18: Adrift at sea; still raining.

Day 23: We come across another ark. They say they are from the land of the Huron near Gitchegoomy. Cougars have eaten their jackelopes and they want to know if we have any spares. We

have no jackelopes; they have no unicorns. God is going to be extra angry.

Day 30: I'm sick of eating manna. It falls onto the deck every morning, but with the animals on deck there are now stray bits of sediment in the food. The rain has finally stopped; we have enough fresh water for a little over a week. I mentioned this to God, he said not to worry.

Day 31: Adrift at sea; the rain started again.

Day 35: I asked God how much longer the flood would last. He said to release a dove. When it came back with an olive branch we would know the water was receding. I released a dove; a thundercloud came up and the dove was struck by lightning. The water is not receding.

Day 36: I released a dove after gathering the manna. As it crested over the water a shark leapt and swallowed it whole. The water is not receding.

Day 37: I released a dove. It flew high in a spiral above the reach of wind or water; then presumably had a heart attack and crashed into the ocean.

Day 38: I released my last dove. It flew off toward the horizon. I don't know what became of it.

Day 39: The rain stops. The ark snags onto something beneath the surface of the water, but the water is swirled with mud so I cannot see what has struck us. We no longer are adrift.

Day 40: I woke up to find the dove on the railing of the ark. There was an olive branch in its mouth. The water has receded while I slept and I find

my ark on top of Mount Sinai. I'm trying to figure out how to get down when there is a lurch, and the entire ark slides down the side of the mountain to rest at its base. "Welcome home" God says, "Go forth and populate the world, but first tell me: where are my unicorns?" Crap. "I forgot them." I answer. "Don't tell me you forgot my unicorns!" God bellows. I reply, "As sure as I was born, my Lord, I forgot your unicorns." Maybe one day that will be a parable.



# Untitled

© John W Partington

It was a country lane  
In summer bliss  
Where Sarah and I  
Stopped for a kiss.

Elms and poplars  
Made a canopy above  
As we lay down  
For our first love.

The drums of war beat the world  
My country gave the call.  
I asked Sarah to wait for me  
As we stood against that wall.

Many years we fought,  
Our dead we buried.  
When I came home  
I found Sarah married.

She explained to me that cold night  
That she was content.  
She didn't want to be a soldier's wife,  
And hoped my heart would mend.

I never forgot that fateful day  
When my world came undone,  
Or the regret and dismay  
Of another father for my son.

# Party

© John W Partington

Jim entered through the kitchen, not that he wanted to but because he was lost. The GPS on his rental car had kept telling him to turn right, and he had blindly followed not understanding that the Service Entrance of the banquet hall was not the same as the Main Entrance. As far as he was concerned he was there for a service, so it made sense to use the Service Entrance.

A wave of heat hit him as he walked through the double doors. He worried about the effect the steam would have on his tux and tails, which the sales clerk had assured him was completely in fashion. In fact, the clerk had rented out an even three dozen just that day.

"You're late!" an angry voice shouted as a beefy jawed man approached him. The man was wearing white linen with a blood stained apron. The uniform was straining at the seams to contain the two hundred pounds of man.

"I apologize," Jim started, "My rental car..."

"I don't give a rat's ass why you're late," the man shoved a platter of appetizers into Jim's hand, "Get your ass out there and start shagging crab cakes."

"You don't understand," Jim tried to explain, "I've got a PhD..."

“College boy, if you don’t get your skinny white butt out there right now I’m going to throw it in the meat grinder and make sausages. Move your ass!” He gave Jim a not too gentle shove toward the door into the banquet hall.

There was a moment of chaos where Jim almost slipped, and then righted himself. He found himself in a large hall with tables around a central dance floor. There was a raised stage upon which a head table sat, while dozens of servers, all in tux and tails, circulated about and served from platters just like the one Jim held.

“Don’t stand there you moron,” a man in a red dinner jacket snarled, “Counter clockwise, start where you left off.”

“But I just started...”

“Then go to the first table, idiot.” The maître d was not willing to suffer fools this night. Jim trotted to the first table and cleared his throat, “Would anybody like a crab cake?” He proffered the dish to the table. The table of eight looked at him with such an incredulous glare he backed away wondering if his fly was open.

“How rude!” Jim heard a woman at the table say as he backed away.

“The help they get,” her companion added, “Interrupting our conversation like that. I shall complain to the manager.” At the next table Jim simply stood a discrete distance away and displayed the tray while looking poignantly at the crab cakes. An older woman in a red dress, one trying to look like she

was fifteen years younger, took a crab cake and then watched Jim walk away. Her gaze drilled into his back for three tables. Jim ran out of crab cakes. He went back to the kitchen.

“Here,” the chef passed a fresh tray into his hands.

“But,” Jim started...

“Go,” the chef slammed a butch knife into a thick hunk of meat and divided it into two easy pieces. Jim swallowed and went back into the banquet hall.

“Where you left off,” the maître d whispered as Jim passed. Jim walked near the tables he had served so that he could remember where he left off. As he was passing the woman in the red dress her ankle shot out and tripped Jim. He fell to the ground and was covered in crab cakes.

“You clumsy oaf,” the maître d ran over.

“It’s entirely my fault,” the woman in the red dress, who was showing entirely too much cleavage, explained as she stood and helped Jim to his feet.

“Miss Van Horne,” the maître d smiled, “Please do not make excuses for this, this...”

“I was stretching out a cramp and I tripped him, please let me help him clean up.” Grabbing Jim’s elbow she steered him toward the guest bathrooms. In the hall she opened a closet full of brooms and cleaning supplies.

“I don’t think that’s a bathroom,” Jim started when she shoved him in and then pounced on him. She was all lips and arms as she ran her hands all over Jim’s body while tugging at his waist band. Jim

surmised it was like being attacked by an oversexed octopus.

“Are you going to help me or not?” she demanded as she finally got Jim’s belt undone.

“Help you what?” Jim asked.

“Honey, we’re alone in a broom closet and I’ve got my hands down your pants. What do you think I want?”

“But you’re a stranger!”

“Are you kidding me?”

“You’re old enough to be my mother...” Even by the dim light of the single light bulb Jim knew he had made a tactical error. He never saw the flash of red as the sleeved hand slapped up the side of his head, or the silted skirt that resounded with a knee to his groin. He crumpled over with a whimper as Miss Van Horne went back to her table very unsatisfied with the exchange. After a few minutes the door opened; the man in the red jacket looked down.

“If you have finished ‘cleaning up,’” he made air quotes with his fingers, “there are crab cakes to be served. The fart that everybody is here to listen to has yet to show up. People are getting antsy, so get your carcass back to the kitchen!”

Snippets of conversation rolled over Jim as he walked among the tables:

“Doctor Merrick is a genius.”

“He tends to ramble.”

“He’s running late.”

“He fudged his test results to get the answer he wanted.”

“Fifty dollars to hear him speak and he doesn’t even show up.”

“Why does that waiter have a crab cake on his shoulder?”

“Delilah Van Horne looks angry. What crawled up her ass?”

“What hasn’t?”

“Excuse me” one of the men at the head table spoke into a microphone twenty minutes later, “It appears Doctor James Merrick is running late. I don’t suppose any of you know where he is?”

“As a matter of fact!” Jim shouted, “I know exactly where I am!” All eyes turned to Jim, and all conversation stopped as recognition spread out like ripples in a pond. He put his tray of crab cakes down on the nearest table and then walked to the podium.

“You all came to hear my speech on social interaction among the cannibal tribes of Papua-New Guinea, but maybe instead I can give you a few insights on a remarkably socially awkward tribe I meet just recently. Let’s call them the new bourgeoisie...”

# **The Ladies' Man**

© John W Partington

Connor was a Scotsman; Connor went to sea  
Leaving behind his wife, she fair Chastity.  
Nine years he roamed the world; a girl in every port  
That he treated as his wife, and nightly he did court.  
When he finally returned home what did he find?  
Chastity with a brood of children ages one through nine.

"Wife how could you forsake me?" he asked with mounting  
ire.

"These aren't mine, from your loin were these bairn sired."  
Connor stood there with his eyes upon floor,  
"Connor my sweet Connor; you'll go to sea no more."

Now Connor is a bricklayer with many son and daughter.  
He spends his days dreaming of life upon the water.  
Occasionally he goes to port to watch the ships come in,  
Then he trudges home to his wife, brood, and kin.

Biography: John Partington is a Canadian writer living  
in Ottawa. He was a soldier for 15 years with the  
Canadian Forces. Since then, he has had a few jobs  
and started a career with the Public Service. Writing,  
however, will always be his first love (his wife is his  
true love).

# On-Line Course

© Joan Savoie

“Are you kidding me?” she sighed – “the computer is down again!” How was she to get any work done when the computer was always crashing?

On-line courses – what a wonderful idea, work at home, work at your leisure, stay in on a stormy winter’s night – the wonders of technology and on-line learning were advertised in her profession’s monthly magazine – take graduate courses, or additional teacher qualifications, on-line through a number of universities across Canada – oh they made it sound so enticing, but what they failed to report in their glossy advertisement, was the fact that your whole life depended on a computer and that, the computer needed to be functional at all times – someone also forgot to tell the computer that it was never to go down, the internet was never to go down or the electricity was never to go down. Oh yes the wonders of technology – bring the university to your home, to your office or to your study – yes the glory of it all.

So her journey into the dependency on computers began with her registering for on-line graduate studies through Queen’s University, she was told by all her Ontario educated colleagues that Queens was the top university in the country. She would question this as she graduated from the University of New Brunswick and she was sure she had graduated from the top university in the country –



everyone seemed to have an option on what university was the best. Anyway she decided to see what all the hype was about and enrolled in her graduate studies through the continuing education department of Queen University and since she lived in Ottawa, the most convenient way to do this was to take on-line courses.

Registering for the program was easy – all she had to do was fill out the application form – which was on-line and then give her credit card number and everything was all set.

A few weeks later she received an email with her login and password information as well as a list of the books required for the course she had enrolled in and information on her student card that she would need if she wanted to take books from the University library – now she was not sure why she would need this student card as she did not plan to visit the library or the university since she lived two hours away– thus the reason for taking an on-line course. The email also stated that the required books could be purchased through the internet from the Queen's book store at a cost that seemed quite inflated, since she found the same books on Amazon for considerably cheaper – of course all this would depend on her computer not going down when she was trying to make all these arrangements and transactions to get herself set up and ready to start the course.

Next came the navigating through the on-line program called Web CT – which in itself was not hard – what made it hard was the fact that her computer liked to go down just when she thought she had things figured out – it was frustrating, but she would not give up. The fact that she could work at 10:00 PM when all the children were in bed was actually a plus with this on-line education format.

So she started her course and things went along fairly smoothly until it was time to submit her first paper. Submitting through the drop box was awkward– she thought sending an email directly to her professor would have made her life easier but it was necessary to send every paper and assignment on the Web CT program through this drop box, so her fellow classmates could post comments on each other's assignments – this was not something she was really excited about but everyone was there to learn and so she read the comments posted about her paper and made comments on her classmate's papers.

Two years passed and she was finally nearing the end of many long hours of working late into the night on papers and assignments that sometimes found themselves in that great black hole of computer space. Having learned from her first experience with the computer that it was not a reliable tool for storing and sending information, she always had a paper copy of every assignment she submitted. Her final paper was the big one – she has been working on this

paper for weeks and made sure she saved it often, as there was no way she wanted to lose any of her research. Working late into the evening after teaching all day can be a very tiring thing and although she was almost at the end – she really was starting to feel fatigued as she was not only working on her paper and teaching full time, she was also writing hockey articles about her boys' teams for the local newspaper. She enjoyed doing the articles which detailed the events of each game, but the articles took time. Finishing her paper, she read it over, made a few corrections, sent a copy to her printer and then clicked the save bottom sending her paper to the hard drive where it would be safe until she was ready to post to the drop box in the morning. With her paper complete, she thought she would take a few minutes before she went to bed, to write up the sports article about her son's game that took place earlier that evening. She enjoyed recalling the events of the game, who scored, who assisted, who made some great moves, there was always something to add to the description of the game and she always tried to include every player in each article, after all the kids loved to see their names in print. Once the article was done she saved it and felt good about what she had accomplished and went to bed.

The next morning she thought it would be best to get her paper sent off before going to work, that way she would not have to think about it anymore – she was finally done her studies. Turning on her computer, she went straight to her hard drive –

located the file that stored her paper and opened up her Web CT and with a Click of the send button her paper was on its way to her professor. The task was done.

A few days later she received an email from her professor – asking for clarification on the article that she received that described a hockey game. What – a hockey game! Oh, no – what had she done – checking her hard drive, she found the file where she had saved her final paper, she opened up the file and it was no longer her final paper, without thinking she overwrote her paper when she saved the hockey article. Having experienced so many computer ups and downs over the two years of on-line study she was very happy to let her professor know that she had a paper copy and would be faxing it to her the next day. Computers are great but paper will never let you down.

# Run for Your life

© Joan Savoie

She rubbed her eyes and stretched her arms. It seemed like she just went to bed and now it was time to “rise and shine”. Oh how she cringed when her mother sang those three little words. How could her mother be so chipper so early in the morning? She rolled over hoping the sound of her mother making breakfast would go away, but no matter how hard she tried, the clanging of pots and pans prevented her from going back to sleep. She knew her mother’s pattern, get up early, start breakfast and make lots of noise, no need for an alarm clock, when her mother was in the kitchen.

She knew there was no sense trying to get a few more minutes of sleep. The only way she could stop the noise that was coming from the kitchen was to get up, go downstairs and eat the breakfast that was waiting for her.

“Good morning, Joanie, you’re looking bright eyed and bushy tailed, this morning” her mother smiled as she welcomed her eldest daughter to the breakfast table.

‘Oh, mother,’ she thought, ‘always the cheery one in the morning. Makes one want to gag.’ “Good morning, mom, what’s for breakfast?” she said, not wanting to carry on a conversation.

“Vegetable soup and crackers,” her mother smiled.

‘Oh my god,’ she thought, ‘not again.’ Why couldn’t her mother make pancakes or portage like other mothers. It seemed she was always having a lunch for breakfast. Oh, well at least she did not have to make it herself.

Finishing up her soup and crackers did not take long, because she was anxious to get to her chores.

She pulled on her boots and grabbed her coat from the hook in the closet and ran out to the barn. The sheep were waiting for her. She climbed the ladder to the hay mow and broke open a couple of bales and quickly tossed the loose hay through the trap door that looked into the sheep barn. Looking through the trap door, she saw the sheep pushing and shoving each other as they all gunned for their morning feed. Gee, sheep are stupid she thought, but oh how she loved them and took pleasure feeding them, but she always had to laugh watching them. There were always a few sheep who were greedier than the others and those sheep were quick to push each other as well as their babies, a side so they could be the first to get to the food. Sheep were funny - just like people she thought.

She threw down one more bale and then climbed down the ladder and headed to the hen house.

Her love for the sheep and feeding them each morning always brightened her mood until it was time

to feed the hens, how could one's mood change so drastically - well it could when it came to hens. Just thinking about going to the hen house made her heart race. She felt panic as she walked to the opposite end of the barn.

Feeding the hens and collecting the eggs frightened her. If she could get out of that chore she would, but her sister had to practice her music lessons every morning and her brother was too young for doing chores in the barn. Her parents told her the only way to fight fears was to tackle your fears head on - well she tried but her fear of the hens was more than a fear it was a downright terror. Making her way to the hen house she kept repeating over and over "be not afraid, you are bigger than they are, and you are smarter than they are" but as she came closer to her destination, her heart raced and she felt a tightening in her chest. She knew if she returned to the house without the eggs her mother would have no sympathy.

On she trudged. Slowly she opened the door to the hen house. She was glad her father had some sympathy for her and had built a wire cage enclosure in the hen house so that the hens did not roam freely around the hen house. Grateful, yes, but she still had to somehow manage to place water and food in the hens' dishes and place the dishes inside the wire enclosure.

Looking into the hen house she was pleased to see the hens sitting or maybe sleeping (she hoped) on their nests. When her father checked the hens in

the evening he would leave the empty water and food dishes out of the enclosure and placed on the ground for her to fill in the morning - that was the easy part, but getting the dishes back inside the enclosed area was not so easy - she had to be fast and very careful not to spill the water or the food when she placed the dishes down. Any quick movement and she would be attacked by flapping wings and pecking beaks - just thinking about the scene sent her heart into a flutter.

Taking a deep breath she knew she had to get the job done and collect the eggs. She filled each dish and as quickly and calmly as she could, she opened the little door that lead her into the deeps of hell (as she called it). Keeping her hands steady she bent down to place the dishes on the ground, when suddenly her hand slipped causing the two dishes to collide. The noise startled the hens who flung into action and became a mass of flapping wings and clucking noises. Her body went into panic mode as she tried to get away from the cluckers who were now flapping and charging at her. She was being attacked. She had to get out but her mind was running away on her, she could not think. With panic driving her thoughts she turned to reach for the little door to escape her attackers, - stumbling, she missed the latch and crashed through the wire enclosure, the hens were everywhere. She had let the prisoners escape and now she was surrounded. She started to scream - she felt she was going to die. Could anyone hear her? She knew in reality no one would hear her and she felt trapped.



With feathers and wings flapping around her - she knew the hens were just as frightened as she was but she had no sympathy for them - they were attacking her and she had to escape.

Not knowing what she was doing but working with fear and “run for your life” instinct she found her escape hatch by reaching the main door. Getting the door open was not easy with crazy hens pecking at her ankles, but open, it did and with fear running through her veins, she ran as fast as she could to the safety of the house with the hens in hot pursuit.

Reaching the kitchen with feathers in her hair and panic in her eyes, she slumped onto the floor - she had escaped her attackers, never again would she feed the hens, she did not care if they starved to death and she did not care if she ever saw an egg again - she was done with hens!

# What day is it?

© Joan Savoie

She sits at the window with a steaming cup of hot tea in her hands and wonders where the years went. Her days once filled with cooking, shopping and visiting now consist of notes and lapses in memory. The yellow sticky notes on the window, door and wall tell her to turn off the TV, watch the stove, watch for cars coming down the lane – Martha has a gray car, Dola has a black van, use the bathroom down stairs, put the milk back in the fridge – the sticky notes make her angry – who put them there? She would remove them, but her fingers are twisted and stiff from arthritis, making it hard for her to grasp the tape and peel the notes off their mounts. The notes are everywhere, they make her head spin and they are embarrassing – notes that say Martha comes on Monday and Wednesday, Dola comes on Tuesday and Thursday, what day it is today, she asks herself?

The days melt into each other. Visitors don't come as often but she does not care because they only confuse her and cause her embarrassment. She enjoys Martha when she comes. Martha cooks her meals, takes her shopping and helps her walk around the property when the days are bright and sunny. She loves to look at her flowers – flowers were her hobby and her calm after a busy day at work. She loved to garden and dig into the rich, dark soil that surrounds

her home. The beauty of her gardens – dailies, lilies, pennies, daises, marigolds, so many pretty flowers – the garden was her pride and joy, but now she can no longer bend to do the planting and the weeding. Martha does that for her and keeps everything looking clean and bright.

She puts her cup down and walks to the stove. She picks up the tea pot and pours herself another cup of hot steaming tea and waits. She thinks someone is coming – but what day is it? – why can't she remember what day it is – maybe today no one comes. No, she is sure someone comes today. Then she sees it – a gray car is coming down lane –yes, it is a gray car, the note says Martha has a gray car.

“Good morning Maude, how are you today.” Martha says as she comes through the door with her arms filled with grocery bags.

“Hi” she answers, looking puzzled - she draws a blank. She pauses as she remembers the face, but she just can't recall the name – is it Dola or Martha, no maybe it is Mabel or Mary – why can't she remember?

She puts her hand to her head as if she wants to give her head a shake, but instead taps the side of her temple.

Martha, knows this sign and without giving Maude more time to think, she quickly says, “Maude, I am a bit late today as my husband Martín, said “Martha I need you to stop at MacIntyre's to pick up that spare tire, I brought in a few days ago.”

Maude looked at this smiling lady standing before her and smiled – yes, she remembered, Martha is here and today is Wednesday.

Martha put down the bags she was carrying and said, “Maude, I stopped at the grocery store and picked up a few things. I thought I would make you some rolls and a beef stew, then I will take you up to see Marian. She has been asking for you to visit for some time and today is a beautiful day for a drive.”

“Yes, I would like that – what day is it today?”

Martha knew the routine and said, “It is Wednesday.”

While Martha was preparing the ingredients to make rolls, Maude sat and watched. She used to love to bake, why was she not able to do the things she used to love to do?

Sifting flour onto the bake board, Martha said, “Maude, I wanted to let you know that Dola will be coming three days a week starting next week – your son feels having help five days a week will be best, for you, I will still come on Mondays and Wednesdays, but I am not free to come on Fridays because I work for Jackie MacCormick.”

“I don’t need help. I am fine here – why are people always trying to run my life?” She was getting agitated, so she stood up and started towards the pantry - then she stopped and with a puzzled look on her face, turned to Martha and asked, “What day is it today?”

“It is Wednesday.” Martha said softly, “Maude, would you like another cup of tea?”

“Yes, thank you.”

She returned to the kitchen table, took a seat and looked at the cup of hot steaming tea and watched Martha make the rolls. Martha made the best rolls, she liked Martha – she really did not like that other lady who came – why can’t she remember her name? She will have to ask Martha later.

Martha put the rolls in the oven and soon a mouth-watering aroma filled the old kitchen - when the buzzer went off, Martha took the rolls from the oven and placed a dozen golden topped rolls on a cooling rack on the kitchen table. Maude watched the steam rise from the rolls.

“Maude, the rolls are ready – would you like one now?” Martha asked.

“Yes, with butter. What day is it?”

“It is Wednesday”, Martha said as she prepared a warm roll and a bowl of hot steaming beef stew for a woman who was never demanding.

“Mmmm – this stew is very tasty – what kind it is?” she asked

Martha was pleased - “Beef stew, I thought you might like something different today and something home made.” Martha responded with care in her voice.

“Yes, you are a good cook. You know I used to love to cook, but I don’t cook much anymore.”

Martha smiled at Maude – she loved working for this gentle lady who was kind and thoughtful, but Martha worried about her – so many hours alone without someone around, it made her nervous.

“You were some hungry Maude.” Martha said, loving the joy the home cooked meal gave to her elderly client. Martha was sure that the only time Maude ate now was when she or Dola was there, this also worried her. Wiping down the table, Martha turned to Maude and said, “when we are done with the dishes, I am going to take you for a lovely drive to visit Marian – it will be good to get out of the house.”

Smiling at Martha, Maude said, “Yes, I will like that. – What day is it today?”

Biography: Joan Savoie lives in Stittsville. Growing up in Northern New Brunswick she heard stories from grandparents and parents and felt the stories she heard had to be written down for her own children to enjoy. Joan enjoys writing stories that bring regular events and characters to life. Her first and only published book to date is “The Backyard Rink; A Daughter’s Memory”, but she promises that more stories will be published as she continues to get encouragement from her fellow writers at the SCWG

# The Fellowship

© Thom Whalen

You'd think men of the cloth — priests, ministers, pastors, and the like — would abandon the church when they suffered a crisis of faith and questioned their belief in God. You'd be wrong. They can survive that quite nicely.

No, what drives them out of the church isn't their lack of faith in God, it's their lack of faith in their fellow man. One day, a priest or minister realizes he's wasting his breath trying to convince his flock to behave better and abandons the church to seek a more fruitful way to spend his life.

Let me tell you how this happened to me.

I was ordained as a Methodist minister when I was twenty-two years old and sent to serve as an assistant pastor at a medium-sized church in Oregon. Two years later, I was given my own, much smaller church in Northern California. The town will remain nameless in my tale for the obvious reason that there was only one Methodist church there, and I don't want to be sued by the guilty for libel, even though every word I say to you is the absolute truth.

I arrived in town with the best of intentions. The church was well-established, being over a century old, and was faithfully attended by a prosperous and generous congregation. In fact, it was one of the better-funded small churches in the state, for reasons I didn't understand until later.

When I arrived, I found a letter from the previous minister, who had departed unexpectedly for reasons that were never explained to me. His letter wished me

the best and included a single bit of advice: “Let Matthew 22:21 be your guide to peace in your ministry.”

I didn’t have to look up the reference — that was the well-known verse in which Jesus advises us to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and render unto God that which is God’s — but it would be three years before I understood the wisdom of that advice.

My first year was uneventful. I preached earnestly every Sunday, visited the elderly, counseled the troubled, and generally did as much good as I could for my parishioners. I didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary.

I was particularly pleased by the Bible Fellowship group. Their meetings every Saturday evening were well attended by the most faithful members of the congregation. Like the previous minister, I trusted the leadership with keys to the church so they could meet in the assembly hall. They seemed to merit my trust by never causing a problem. Invariably, they left the hall neater and tidier than when they found it.

I offered to attend their meetings any time they wished, so I could guide them in their Bible studies, but they gently refused my generosity, saying they understood that I had far more important obligations. They assured me my sermons on Sundays gave them all the guidance they needed.

I thought I understood, and didn’t press them further.

In my first year, the only oddity brought to my attention was that they didn’t admit membership in the fellowship group to anyone under the age of twenty-one. Twice, older teenagers asked me why they weren’t welcome to join the fellowship. When I asked Bill Johnson, the fellowship moderator, he replied that sometimes the group wanted to discuss personal



issues. Teenagers would stifle discussion because people would have to censor themselves.

I naively accepted his explanation. Bill had a way of being quite persuasive. It wasn't difficult for him. He was forty years old, and a police detective. He'd seen it all. I was twenty-five and had deliberately sought a sheltered life, never going to parties and cultivating only pious friends. Who was I to question what his fellowship was doing during their meetings in my church?

But exactly that question was raised during my second year. One of the members of his fellowship was getting a divorce. After service one Sunday, Mary Winston came to my office and apologized for crying during my sermon. I assured her that I hadn't noticed, which was a little white lie. It's hard not to notice the tears streaming down a woman's face when she's sitting alone in the second pew. She told me her husband, Oren, had served her with divorce papers the previous day and moved to a motel. I asked if there was any possibility of reconciliation; I'd be happy to talk to her husband if she thought I could help. She said it would do no good. Then she asked if I knew what went on in the Bible fellowship meetings.

I told her I assumed that they discussed Jesus' teachings.

She didn't correct my assumption, just said that sounded like a logical conclusion, and began talking about her children. They were in first and third grade and were going to be the real victims of the divorce. I counseled her to maintain a cordial relationship with her husband so the children wouldn't be torn between their parents.

My thoughts didn't return to the Bible Fellowship meetings until the next day. I wondered why Mary had mentioned it in the context of her divorce. It had to be

more significant than just an odd off-topic digression. The implication was that she and Oren had fallen out over something that happened there.

I didn't pursue the question right away — I had better things to do on my Saturday nights — but Mary's question kept popping into my mind at odd moments during the next couple of weeks.

It happened to pop back up on Saturday evening, and I had a spare time to spare — my sermon for Sunday was already written — so I decided to drop in on the fellowship meeting. I wouldn't stay long, just stick my head in the door and wish everyone well. Give them a few words of encouragement for being so interested in scripture that they would devote their Saturday evenings to study and discussion rather than carousing in the local bars and clubs.

The door to the worship hall was locked. I could turn my key easily enough and heard the bolt slide home and withdraw, but the door wouldn't open.

There was a second lock that my key didn't fit. I'd never paid attention to it before. I just assumed it was an old lock that no one ever used, but had never been removed because it would leave a hole in the door.

The meeting was in session, no question about that; I could hear voices inside. I could have knocked, but I didn't. Faced with a door locked from the inside, I felt like an intruder in my own church. I quietly retreated, wondering why the fellowship would lock the door during their meetings.

I didn't ask Bill Johnson because I knew what he'd say. He'd tell me they were just being certain no teenagers could intrude on their private, adult discussions; and he'd make it sound so reasonable that I'd have no grounds to question him.

During the next few weeks, the locked door preyed on my mind constantly. It wasn't locked by accident,

that was for certain, but I couldn't think of a legitimate reason for it. Nor could I think of any way to find out what was going on behind it. I thought my curiosity would fade over time, but it never did.

Mary and Oren's divorce was finalized about six months after she was served. She moved out of town with her children. Before she left, she stopped by my office to say goodbye. I took the opportunity to ask why she'd mentioned the fellowship to me and to ask what happened during those meetings. She would say only that the first rule of fellowship was never to talk about fellowship. Especially to the minister. That rule was enforced strictly and severely. No one in the fellowship would talk about what happened during their meetings.

She didn't say explicitly that she'd suffer harm if she broke her silence, but the fear in her eyes made me understand she was never going to say more than she already had.

I was going to have to find out for myself.

I tried visiting a couple more times, but the door was always locked during the meetings. That appeared to be the second inviolate rule of fellowship. Never forget to lock the door.

Midway through my third year, I could stand it no longer. My curiosity overrode my good sense. I talked to a locksmith about getting a key made.

He suggested drilling out the old lock and replacing it.

I told him I didn't want to replace the lock, just get a key for the existing one.

He said that would be more difficult. He'd have to pick the lock to remove the cylinder and measure the pins. It would be quicker and cheaper to replace the lock.

I insisted, so he brought his tools to the church and spent half an hour doing the job.

The next Saturday evening, I used my brand new key to unlock the door.

I'd feared I'd find a scene from Sodom and Gomorrah, but there was no orgy in progress. What I saw was more mundane. Members of the fellowship were standing around small tables chatting quietly.

When I stepped into the room, silence fell and every face turned to watch me. Their expressions universally combined hostility and guilt. Eyes widened; faces reddened; jaws set.

Bill Johnson was the first to react. He stepped forward and asked if there was something I needed.

I told him I'd just dropped by to see if I could offer any guidance.

He stood in front of me, blocking me from coming any further and said they were doing fine. No guidance was needed. He was sure I had more important things to worry about on a Saturday evening. Like writing my sermon for Sunday morning.

This was not the affable, persuasive man I'd known for the past three years. His eyes had turned as cold and dead as a snake's, and his mouth was set in a tight, grim line.

I peered over his shoulder. Plastic bags filled with dried leaves were piled on the tables, and some of my parishioners were holding money in their hands. Large wads of high-denomination bills.

The penny dropped. In a flash, I understood why this church was flush with donations. Why my offering plates overflowed every Sunday while other churches struggled to stay afloat.

The most profitable industry in Northern California is the cultivation of marijuana, and my assembly hall was a safe, neutral space where producers and

distributers met to conduct their business under the supervision of a senior detective in the local police force. A police officer who had both the means and will to employ deadly force to protect their interests.

I was no Christ to rail against merchants doing business in the temple, to overturn tables, and to drive them from God's house with a whip.

I kept my cool and told Bill that he was right. I had to work on my sermon.

I quietly retreated, rendering unto Caesar that which was of concern to Caesar.

I could have railed against illegal drugs from my pulpit. I could have blustered and threatened to call the feds. I could have done any number of things that would have made me a martyr. But I didn't have the courage to nominate myself for crucifixion.

I didn't even pray to God for guidance and assistance. If He had wanted to do anything about the drug dealers in His house, He would have done it already.

Instead, I wrote a letter of resignation. I didn't ask the district board for reassignment, I resigned my ordination and left the ministry completely.

I went back to university and got my teaching certification. I have no regrets. My life is better spent teaching high school students about great literature than trying to convince drug dealers to find a less lucrative profession.

God is no match for human nature.

# Visiting Mom

© Thom Whalen

My mother believes she's going to heaven. The rest of us aren't so sure about that. To put it as diplomatically as I can, her rather unique view of the world doesn't include a whole lot of compassion for her fellow man. Especially not for those of us who were raised by her hand.

Mom isn't in heaven yet. She hasn't shuffled off this mortal coil, as the Bard would say. She will be remaining with us for some time yet, whether we like it or not.

You'd think we'd avoid her as much as possible. You're right. We do. But, come on, she's our mother. We can't shun her. One or another of us pretty much has to visit her every week. That's only right. And she loves our visits so much. Every visit gives her another opportunity to delight in recounting all the ways her children have failed her.

Which brings me to last Sunday. Or more accurately, to last Tuesday when I phoned my oldest brother, Will. "Hey, Will, you going to go over to Mom's on Sunday?"

"Has Hell frozen over yet?"

"Come on. Don't be like that. You haven't seen Mom for three months."

"More like one month."

"She says three."

“She would.”

A month and a half was more accurate by my count. “Even if it’s only been one month, it’s your turn this week.” Four children meant that each of us owed Mom one visit a month. In addition to the holidays, which were their own special nightmare.

The pause was long, before Will said, “Are you going?”

“It’s your turn.”

“I’m not going alone anymore. I’ll go if you’re going, too. Otherwise, no way.”

“You want to give Mom a two-for-one special? Double her fun?”

“There’s safety in numbers.”

“Not around Mom.”

Another pause. “I’ll go if you do. That’s the deal.”

I sighed. “Okay. I’ll be there at two.” That was the only time to visit Mom. If we showed up in the morning, Mom would be at church. If we showed up at noon, Mom would insist on making lunch for us. If we showed up after four, Mom would demand we stay for dinner. Mom’s cooking is to be avoided at all costs.

“See you at two on Sunday.”

And that brings me to Sunday afternoon. Will didn’t phone; he showed up at my door at four-fifteen, and he wasn’t going to stop pounding until I answered.

When I opened the door, his face was red with fury. “Where were you?”

I hadn't come up with a decent excuse yet. I hadn't expected to be speaking to him so soon. "I was busy. Something came up."

"Bullshit. You chickened out."

"Did not. I couldn't make it. I had to prepare an emergency motion for tomorrow." I was lying about the motion and he knew it.

He didn't wait for an invitation. He pushed me aside and stomped into my living room. Mom's children will do that. "You promised you'd be there, and then you left me to face her by myself."

"Come on, Will. You're forty years old. You don't need me to hold your hand."

"It was Mom. You know what she's like. And she was way worse than usual this afternoon. It was terrifying."

"Will, you're a psychiatrist. You've been trained to handle behavioral problems. You do it all day long. You can handle Mom."

"I handle people like her with drugs. If I prescribe an anti-psychotic for her, are you going to get her to take it? Because if you can, I'll give you a script for Seroquel right now." He reached for his pocket.

I think he was bluffing. He wouldn't have taken a prescription pad to Mom's house.

Or maybe he would. I don't know. I didn't wait to see. "She doesn't need drugs. Even I know you don't treat borderline personality disorder with drugs. You should give her psychotherapy." I knew about borderline personality disorder because I'd argued a medical malpractice case about it last year.



He dropped his hand to his side. "God, no. You think I'm going to spend several hours a week with her? God, no."

"Can't you spend an hour a week talking to her? Don't just talk to her when you go over there. Treat her." If I could get Will to go over every week, my other brother and sister would owe me so much. I'd be collecting on that favor for the rest of my life.

Will wasn't biting. "God, no. I'd be a basket case. A psychiatrist can't give psychotherapy to his own mother. You need someone who can maintain a clinical distance. Be objective." His eyes narrowed. "How about spiritual guidance. Mom isn't just a church-goer, she's a true believer. Why can't Courtney tell her she has to shape up if she wants to go to heaven?"

"That's not a carrot Courtney can dangle in front of Mom. Mom's already certain she's going to heaven."

"Then, Courtney can tell her she's wrong. Tell her she's going to hell if she doesn't start acting more Christian."

"Courtney isn't going to tell Mom that. It would be cruel."

Will shrugged. "So what? Someone's going to suffer no matter what we do. Why not let Mom suffer instead of the four of us."

"You don't mean that."

Will nodded. "Yes, I do. I really do. If Courtney went over there every week, she'd have more influence on Mom than just going over there once a month. She could really help Mom. You're closer to

Courtney than I am. You can convince her to give Mom regular spiritual counseling.”

“That can’t happen. You know weekends are Courtney’s busiest times. She’s got to spend Saturdays visiting members of her own congregation and she’s got three services every Sunday. She doesn’t have time give Mom any more attention than the rest of us. It’s a miracle she manages to see Mom even once a month.”

“It’s going to get worse, you know. I was talking to Gunner. He’s requested a posting to Japan. If he gets it, he’s going to be on the other side of the world for three years, minimum. Six, if he can get the posting renewed, which he thinks is likely. He’s pretty certain he’s got it in the bag.”

My heart fell. If Gunther left the country, I was going to have to see Mom every three weeks instead of every four. “I should have joined the diplomatic corps, too.”

“Don’t even think that.” Will shook his head. “I can’t take much more of this. It’s a serious matter. My own mental health is at risk. I know. I’m a mental health professional.”

“Don’t be melodramatic. You can handle seeing Mom every few weeks. I’m here to help.”

“You weren’t there this afternoon.”

I could feel myself blushing. “Like I said, something came up. An emergency motion.”

His eyes narrowed to sly slits. “You owe me.”

“Sure. What do you want from me?”

“How about a restraining order? You’re the lawyer. Get a judge to issue a restraining order.”

“I’m not going to get a restraining order against Mom.”

“No, not against Mom. Against me. Get a judge to say I’m not allowed within a hundred yards of Mom because I’m abusive or something. Then you can tell Mom there’s a reason I can’t see her any more. Tell her it’s all my fault. She’ll love hearing that.”

“I can’t do that.” I took Will by the arm and escorted him to the door. “Get a good dinner and have a good night’s sleep and you’ll feel better in the morning.”

He looked at me with sad eyes. “You won’t get a restraining order for me?”

“No, Will. I can’t do that.”

I felt a wave of sadness when I closed the door on Will. He’d seen Mom this week, and Courtney and Gunner had already seen her this month. I was going to have to visit her next week. There was no way to avoid it.

She was only sixty and healthy as the proverbial horse. Heaven was going to have to wait a long time for her.

I saw dozens of visits in my future. Dozens and dozens.

Maybe Will was on to something. Maybe I should get a restraining order issued against myself.

That was worth thinking about.

Biography: Thom Whalen was born in British Columbia and grew up on Vancouver Island and in San Diego, California. He studied experimental psychology in San Diego, Vancouver, and Halifax. After completing his doctorate, he came to Ottawa and spent thirty years as a scientist with the federal government conducting research on how people use computer networks. He retired in 2009 to write fiction full time.

# Her Mother's Eyes

© Lamar Williams

My daughter wanted to take a trip to the States. I suppose I was to be relieved that three of her friends were to accompany her, but all I imagined was four equally unprepared women on a road trip, in a lemon, to the U.S. of all places, with that lunatic in the White House.

She introduced the idea at dinner; that during March break the quartet would drive to North Carolina to stay at a beach house belonging to relatives of one of the girls. After she finished talking there was a long pause where I was supposed to offer an opinion, as long as that opinion was in favour of her going. But my thoughts were elsewhere and I missed my cue. The feel of her gaze forced me to raise my eyes from the plate. I swallowed and tried to cough up something enthusiastic.

“Oh?” I said.

In grade eight I caught Dahlia and her friend smoking. I opened the door to her room, their little heads were out of the window, hands waving frantically as a whiff of a Newport drifted past.

My daughter would have to forgive me if I still saw her as the little girl clever enough to have somehow obtained a cigarette but not savvy enough to have smoked it elsewhere. She was not ready for a road trip, definitely not one to States.

Then she said, “I need my birth certificate.”

Dahlia had been a baby when she last crossed the border, when the world was still sane enough not to have asked that an infant identify itself. Before

Kevin passed away, we took her to meet friends in northern New York; after he was gone, I did not have the money for travel. She wanted to apply for her first passport.

“Oh?” I said. The word stumbled from my lips.

I thought she suspected something was wrong when I excused myself to the wash room, where I locked the door and sat on the edge of the bath tub. My arms quivered as they had when the lawyer laid her fragile body in them for the first time. She had been screaming and had drooled on his sport coat. The skittish man had been more than eager to hand her over. When it was my turn to sign the papers, I passed her to Kevin with the prudence of something that needed diffusing.

A great deal of what I fed her slid from the corners of her mouth, and rocking her seemed to piss her off even further. It had been our first fight. I do not remember how we resolved our differences; the following morning Kevin found us passed out on the couch.

“I don’t have your birth certificate. I adopted you when you were a year old.”

That was what I should have said, respectfully and finally. What I said was, “I’ll look for it.”

The next morning, I sat with coffee that I could not bring myself to drink. Steam wafted to my face, I peered into the cup as if it was an oracle’s window into the future. However, my distorted image in the liquid’s shimmering black surface offered no advice.

I dried the tears that attempted to descend my pathetic expression. She was entitled to more than some blubbing admission of guilt. My right hand

pinned an envelope with the Ministry's faded forms enclosed to the table. I held it there to remind myself to say the words and not just hand her the papers. "I adopted you," I practiced. I did not want to slap her across the face with the force emitted by "You're adopted."

Dahlia sat down at the table and slid across a photo. The picture was of me; my then mane of brown hair draped around my shoulders, my brown eyes enhanced by innovations embedded in the camera. The back of the photo was dated 2002 April 7 — two months before she was to have been born, my belly as smooth as the table's butcher block finish. The feel of her blue eyes forced me to look up from the picture. "Who do those eyes belong to?" I thought. Had that been the look her father returned to her mother after she revealed she was with child? Perhaps it had been the mother's last long glance at Dahlia before surrendering her.

Bewildered and afraid, a single word escaped my lips. "Oh."

Biography: Lamar Williams is from Rochester, NY. He lives in Ottawa, ON with his wife and two sons. Lamar submits his short stories to contests and in 2016 joined the *Stittsville Creative Writing Group* to develop his writing.

## Other books by these writers

Many of the above writers can be found in the previous Stittsville Creative Writing Group anthologies:

Creative Musings 2017

Creative Musings 2018

The below listed contributors also offer you a selection from their catalogues:

Allan McCarville

*The Sacred Knife* (Book 1 of the Pegasi Chronicles)

*The Portal* (Book 2 of the Pegasi Chronicles)

*The Five Kingdoms* (Book 3 of the Pegasi Chronicles)

*The Council* - A Nates Grimes Mystery

*Encounters of the Unusual Kind* - A Trilogy of Supernatural Encounters

*Legends, Folklore and Other Tales: Stories of a Haunted Stittsville*

*Fateful Encounters* (Available in Kindle only)

*The Soul Thief* (Available in Kindle only)

*Garden of the Dead* (Available in Kindle only)



Melba McGee

*4/3 – A Baby Boomer Memoir*

Other Anthologies where Melba contributed:

Carp Creative Writers' Group 2018

*"Mutiny - Our Family Karma," "All Your Eggs in One Basket," and "Passing Through the Veils of Drama to Eternal Awareness"*

Carp Creative Writers' Group 2019

*"Square Peg, Round Hole – Redux – Unskewed," "Mother Superio," and "Mother's Kitchen."*

Ottawa Independent Writers 2019

*"The Welcome Sound of a Crackling Fire"*

John C Nash

*Thursday Afternoon* (2013)

*Dodging the Potholes* (2017, but part 2 of the series)

*Return to Flanders* (2015)

*Love and Iron* (2017)

All the above from John C Nash are freely available for individual reading at

<http://web.ncf.ca/nashjc/novels/> and at

<https://www.obooko.com/>. His out-of-print scientific books

are available on [archive.org](http://archive.org)

John W Partington

*A Call Girl in a Small Town*

*An Elven Tale: Death of the Demon God*

*Awaken the Cyborg*

*Destiny*

*Jake & Chearice: Cell Phone Conspiracy*

Joan Savoie

*The Backyard Rink; A Daughter's Memory*

Thom Whalen

*Now They Call Me Gunner* (2012)

*Sundog Gets Schooled* (2013)

*Death from a Clear Blue Sky* (2014)

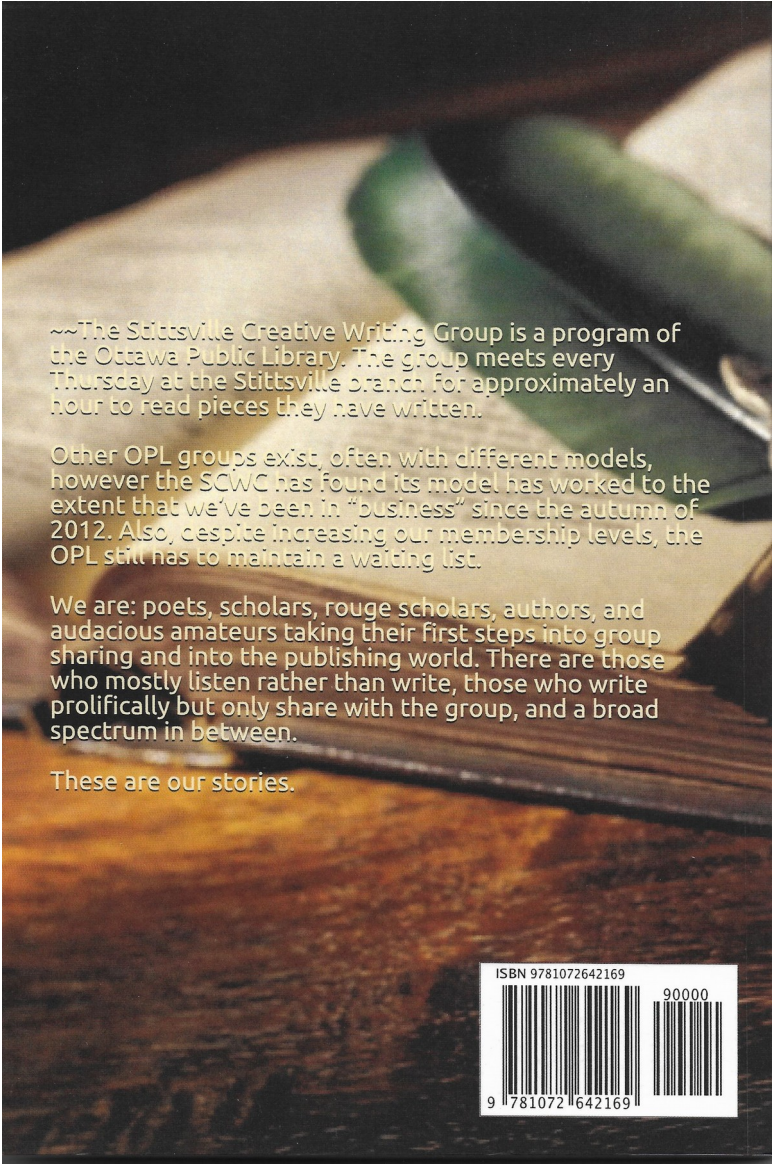
*A Poor Boy's Confession* (2015)

*Bloody Profits* (2017)

*The Voices in My Head* (2019)

*Saigon, Sixty-Nine* (2019)

*The Forty-Niner* (2019)



~The Stittsville Creative Writing Group is a program of the Ottawa Public Library. The group meets every Thursday at the Stittsville branch for approximately an hour to read pieces they have written.

Other OPL groups exist, often with different models, however the SCWC has found its model has worked to the extent that we've been in "business" since the autumn of 2012. Also, despite increasing our membership levels, the OPL still has to maintain a waiting list.

We are: poets, scholars, rouge scholars, authors, and audacious amateurs taking their first steps into group sharing and into the publishing world. There are those who mostly listen rather than write, those who write prolifically but only share with the group, and a broad spectrum in between.

These are our stories.

