

IWD Indie Writers' Digest



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FOREWORD

I want to open this first quarterly issue of the Indie Writers' Digest with a brief look at the evolution of writing through the ages, and touch on the future of our craft.

Recently, I watched a TV show about the origins of the written word. I found it extremely interesting and being the book-nerd I am, I second-guessed the narrator's research that the very first record of marks to indicate sounds or words came from the Chinese. Needless to say, I was wrong and we apparently have Persian Merchants to thank for the first recorded scratched marks on clay tablets as evidence of trade transactions.

It was still rare and unusual to find anything written in the time of Homer, and we know this because Homer is most frequently modelled performing to an audience. This would have been a fairly typical sight in those distant times. Ordinary people went about their business, leaving the performing arts to the less fortunate (most usually blind) of their settlements to shout or sing about daily news or events.

Later, the Egyptians invented hieroglyphics and the 'Rosetta' Stone provided the key to unlock their meaning.

It is only centuries later, in the early Middle Ages when books become a thing. If you have never seen such meticulous works of art, I urge you to find examples. The very best examples are still as resplendently coloured as if spontaneously created.

The novel itself, as a means of storytelling is a relatively recent creation.

While poetry and then plays have been in existence since the time of the famous Greek tragedians, such as Euripides, Sophocles, and the Romans Ovid and Virgil. The novel only began its literary journey to prominence with works like *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which remained alone until Daniel Defoe was inspired by the story of Alexander Selkirk to write *Robinson Crusoe*.

He was closely followed by Laurence Sterne (*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*), and Samuel Richardson (*Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady*). Henry Fielding, never one to miss an opportunity for satire, quickly produced *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and his Friend Abraham Adams* and the novel was a fully-rounded and respected form of literature.

By a strange quirk of fate, the first featured story by the independent writers in this edition of the Indie Writers' Digest is 'The Charred Blade' by Susan Mansbridge.

On a personal note, I would like to acknowledge my sincere gratitude to all the featured writers here. It has been my pleasure and privilege to work with every one of them. They are one and all, extremely talented and my sincerest wish is that the Indie Writers' Digest provides them with a worthy platform from which to publicise their work. Every story or piece of work here has its own special merit and I was truly amazed at the standard and quality, as I hope you (the reader) will be. It only remains for me to wish you happy reading – I hope you enjoy the stories here as much as I have.



SUSAN MANSBRIDGE

Originally from the north of England, Susan has made Southampton her home.

Her love of fantasy started very early after being given Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea trilogy one Christmas, and her dream has always been to write her own books.

Having worked in the NHS as a staff nurse, and in education as a Teaching assistant and administrator, Susan left employment in 2016 and soon after began her first novel, Master and Apprentice. She is currently working on a quadrilogy based on Norse mythology. Book one, The Charred Blade, will be published in 2025.

When she is not writing, Susan enjoys reading (of course), watching movies, and solving cryptic crossword puzzles. She also loves walking in the New Forest with her camera and fellow clicking buddies, and is an active member of Testwood Baptist Church.

You can follow Susan on LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/susan-mansbridge-indie-author/> or Facebook @susanmansbridgewriter

To find out more, visit Susan's website at <https://www.susanmansbridge.com/>

Sign up to her newsletter to get sneak peeks, background information on her books, and news of new releases. All new subscribers will receive a free short story set in the world of Zelannor. You can also contact her via email at smwritersworld@outlook.com

THE CHARRED BLADE (Chapter One)

Finlay Balder threaded his fingers through the wire mesh of the fence and peered into the gloom. He could see the shape of the familiar stone bridge beyond, its arches traversing the river flowing lazily beneath. It had been fenced off for as long as he could remember. Bright red and yellow warning signs, flashing in the headlights of passing cars, were prominently displayed along the road, notifying the curious of the weak structure and giving dire predictions of injury or death for anyone trespassing. Even the local youths had given up trying to scale the high barrier. Instead, they risked life and limb by leaping into the river from the other side of the dual carriageway.

The sound of wings made him look up briefly. A large black bird landed on the top of the fence, its dark feathers bleeding into the encroaching night sky. A passing car's headlights shone on it momentarily. The bird stared at Finn for a moment before burying its head under one wing, carefully preening its blue-black feathers.

Finn's phone buzzed, and he reluctantly tore his gaze away from the shadowed bridge. He pulled his mobile from his pocket and glanced down. A message from Dee demanding to know why he was late. He sighed as he shoved the phone back into his pocket and rubbed his forehead. Despite being in his late twenties, his friend still worried if he didn't arrive home at exactly the same time, and he didn't feel like being berated for spoiling dinner again. Besides, he could feel the tension building up behind his eyes and knew that a headache was imminent. Since they started a couple of months earlier, he had tried several painkillers to ease them, but it was Dee's herbal remedies which were the only things that eased the pain. Finn screwed up his face as pain pulsed in his head. He should get home. He would need to have one of her concoctions soon, otherwise it would incapacitate him for the rest of the evening.

He loosened his fingers, but movement beyond the fence caught his eye and he pressed his face against it once more, searching the darkness for the figure he had

glimpsed the week before. Seconds passed. Finally, he could make out a hulking shape shuffling across the bridge at the far side. It stretched for a moment, and the figure was briefly lit as a car raced by. Lank, unkempt hair, long hairy limbs and muscular torso. It froze momentarily in the headlight's glare, before squatting down against the parapet, its silhouette merging with the shadows until Finn could no longer make it out.

When he had told her about it, Dee had tried to persuade him the figure was a figment of his imagination, but he knew he had seen something. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. He had wondered whether she was right, and it was a relief to know he wasn't going completely crazy. Nevertheless, there were still things he couldn't explain. A strange compulsion kept drawing him back to this place, as if it held answers to questions he didn't even know he had. Someone, or something, lurked in the shadow of the bridge, but who were they and what were they doing?

Another stabbing pain across his brow finally roused him at the same time as another text buzzed from Dee. He glanced back at the bridge, but the early winter night made it almost impossible to see more. The bird croaked once and flew off, and Finn reluctantly turned for home. Solving this particular mystery would have to wait a little while longer.

"Where have you been?" Dee demanded as soon as he walked into the brightly lit kitchen. He winced, both at the lights and her scolding tone. She pushed a strand of white hair from her distinctive amber eyes and frowned as she glared at him. Then her face softened.

"Another headache," she stated, turning back to the kettle and flipping the switch. "Sit down. I'll make you a herbal tea."

Finn slumped into a Formica chair crammed into the corner of the room. Closing his eyes, he leant on the small scratched table and laid his head on his arms with a low groan. He could hear his friend measuring out the herbs into a pot and pouring the boiling water over them. "I saw it again," he mumbled.

She paused her stirring. “I don’t know why you keep going there.”

“Neither do I, to be truthful,” Finn said. “There’s just something about it. It calls to me.”

Dee huffed. “It’s a condemned old bridge that goes nowhere. Here. Drink this.” She pushed a mug of steaming liquid in front of him.

“Thank you. What would I do without you?” She patted his shoulder before turning back to her dinner preparations. He blew on the infusion and took a sip. He could smell the pungent ginger and peppermint, but also recognised a hint of lavender and thyme. The rest of it was a mystery that Dee refused to divulge. He didn’t really care about her secret ingredients as long as the tea cured his pain.

The headaches had been sporadic until more recently and he had put them down to the stress of meeting deadlines at work. Now they seemed to occur at least once or twice a week, and her herbal remedy was the only thing that drove them away. He vaguely wondered if he ought to make an appointment with his doctor, in case something more sinister was going on. What if he had a brain tumour? He’d heard stories of people falling down dead in the prime of their life because they refused to believe they had a serious health condition. He made a mental note to book an appointment the following day.

Written by Susan Mansbridge, indie fantasy author

A FRESH INTERPRETATION OF NORSE MYTHOLOGY

2025 will see the publication of my sixth book, *The Charred Blade*, the first book in a quadrilogy, based on Norse mythology. My protagonist, Finlay Balder, suddenly finds himself plunged into fantastical realms that he knows only through books and Marvel films.

Like all my stories, this one started with a picture in my head. A man peering through a wire mesh fence in the twilight, trying to make out a figure moving on an old stone bridge. I started asking myself questions. Who is the man? What is special about the bridge? Who is the figure on it, and what is it doing?

My immediate thought was a troll who is there to take payment for crossing the bridge – a bridge that doesn't seem to go anywhere. (The bridge actually exists across the road from where I live!) Over the space of an hour or so, I had fleshed out the bare bones of a story, including the end.

I decided to do some research. Several hours later, my excitement ramping up and up, I had the beginning of my saga. Unbelievably, with only a few little tweaks, my story was a perfect fit into the mythology of the Norsemen, and the rest began to take shape.

Interestingly, despite the plethora of stories and films, there is very little that survives of the Norse myths. Two longer pieces of work, The Poetic Edda, a collection of anonymous poems, and the Prose Edda by Snorri Sturluson, were both written around the thirteenth century after Iceland had converted to Christianity. The rest are

fragments, or information gleaned from comparative cultures. As you can imagine, scholars still debate the veracity of these sources.

For instance, we know there was a realm of the white elves, or Alfar, called Alfheim. And that is all we know. There are no descriptions of either the realm or its inhabitants. So, when my MC's visit that realm, I had carte blanche when creating it.

Probably the most famous piece of work derived from this mythology is JRR Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy. His interpretation has informed fantasy writers ever since, who use his descriptions of elves and dwarves without question. Even his names are rooted in the Old Norse language. Middle Earth is a direct translation of Midgard, the Norse name for our world. Gandalf is created from two Norse words: Gand, a magic stick, and Alf, or elf. There are possible nods to characters like Vafthrudnir, who loved to engage in contests with riddles. Was he the source behind Bilbo and Gollum's test of wits?

Rather than stick slavishly to Tolkien's interpretation, I wanted to make my own, although there is a wink to Tolkien within the fifth chapter. Despite that, I tried to stay as true to the mythology as I could, even while putting my own spin on it. Returning to the myths again and again has helped me craft all four books and get myself out of some tricky situations of my own making. When my MC became completely overwhelmed in the third book and I wasn't sure how to get myself out of the corner I had painted myself in, I discovered a minor god who was the perfect "Get out of Jail Free" card. She also makes an appearance at the end of the last book, too.

There are some characters who you won't see within the pages of my books except for perhaps a passing mention. Thor and Loki are both absent. They have had far too much attention to comfortably cross into my worlds without bringing a lot of baggage with them, and I really didn't want them to overshadow my MC. So they will remain firmly locked away within the Marvel universe.

Writing this series has been a joy in so many ways. I have learnt a great deal about the Norsemen of old on this journey and my prayer is that my readers will appreciate and love the reimagining of the ancient myths.

Susan Mansbridge,
Indie Fantasy Author



Another new contributor to the Indie Writers' Digest is the super-talented Martin Dixon, who has been writing novels and short stories for more than 40 years now.

Martin has extensive experience as an author.

Martin is originally from South London. He concentrates on creating entertaining characters involved in complicated plots that push stories along at a good pace, stories with intrigue and tension but with a strong element of humour to lift the narrative to another dimension.

Martin's books are mostly set within the crime and mystery genre the books and provide an easy reading and entertaining experience.

I give you the first installment of Martin's submissions: It's Cold Outside.

Please note, Martin Dixon has a blog: <https://www.shortstoriestoentertain.com/>

IT'S COLD OUTSIDE

George sat at his kitchen table sipping black coffee looking through the window towards the dusty play area in front of the road. Smiling was what he should be doing but he had a distressing suspicion preventing the smile from getting any purchase. The dark-skinned girl sitting on his fence, on her own, took no part. He could see she was just sitting silently suffering. He thought about it but actually knew it was futile to intervene so stood, put the cup in the sink, took one last look then wandered to his study to continue writing what would be his greatest work, unaware that without even the need to intercede, he was in fact, the catalyst to the girl's salvation.

The fence swayed gently in time with Lucy, rocking back and forth as she sat on the low post joining two sets of two runners, just watching. The huge guard dog behind her growled and snarled, spluttered and coughed at the same time. A long chain clipped to its choke-chain collar tightened as he tugged and strained, his paws gouging long furrows in the dirt of the yard. Oblivious, the heels of Lucy's shoes bumped a thumping rhythm on the post. Grey skirt, red shirt with one tail hanging loose, grey socks rolled untidily from bruised knees to pool around her ankles; her school uniform. Her brown leather school bag, dusty at her feet, held so tightly between grey speckled lace up black shoes with toes scuffed by scraping dirt and stones. Maybe she had a fear of bag snatchers: anything for a laugh, that was her school, one that seemed to despise newcomers, particularly ones with her appearance.

A picket fence, that's what it was. How did she know that? She'd been places, that's how. America with its fancy fences, then all over Europe. Six times in five years, in fact, was how many times she'd moved. The picket fence, white vertical slats and two runners, one top, one

Bottom and rickety. Absent-mindedly Lucy picked at the flaking paint and poked holes in the porous post as she concentrated on the game in front.

If you were to ask at this precise moment, the end of her first week, what she had thought of Monday's school day she would say, pretty ugly. The tears she had felt like shedding as her hair twisted around the fingers of a particularly obnoxious boy. Head tugged back and laughing eyes staring into her pain as he muttered nasty insulting racist words that spat into her face. But no tears for her. She was a tough one who well knew the perils of showing weakness. An army brat, her family a household constantly on the move.

She'd learned to take the bumps, the not so subtle shoves that landed her on her knees and worst of all, the whisperings of catty girls. The cutting comments because she was different. The clique. The tight group with the biased barriers so hard to break down. The power that ruled the playground which, for her, was a hostile environment but the clique, they were the key to escaping enforced exclusion. She had to endure. But there was no easy way in for a newcomer with a frown, a scowl, a strange accent and skin a shade or two and sometimes even three times darker than theirs and that was always the problem wherever she went. Why it is cold outside in a new place.

For the sixth time the same pattern as all the other schools she had been dumped in. Nothing new at all, the first week. She'd experienced the same, hated the same for what seemed at least a million times before, sometimes for days, sometimes for weeks but never forever because something always happened: someone might suddenly say something nice, some meaningful words that would break the mould. A test perhaps, or as happened this time just a few seemingly insignificant words, hardly any at all in fact, said by one girl after just a single nod then the come-on wave which was enough to know she had been accepted.

Her frown had become a scowl as she sat, shuffling, scuffing and twisting the satchel strap around her fingers, feeling the dreaded chill of loneliness. Now there were tears but she forced them back; I will not succumb to self-pity. A cracking thud of wood hitting rubber. A yell, catch it, but she didn't move, just watched the girl running her

way. Reaching, jumping, missing as the ball slipped through her fingers and flew over Lucy's head to land ten feet past the straining dog, suddenly barking, drawn from a doggy doze by the screaming and yelling of a collection of kids, all eleven-years-old or thereabouts, hanging on the fence, rocking it, ignoring Lucy and all staring at the ball, at the dog, at the ball again, at the girl who should've caught it. The inference in that universal look at her was so easy to decipher. But the culprit was scared, that much was plain to see and didn't move despite the intense goading.

Lucy stood, swung her legs over the fence and walked towards the dog. Scared? Of course. Did she let the dog see? No way. Instead, standing just beyond his reach she sternly yelled in as deep a voice as she could muster, "Sit, leave," and waved her right hand in a downward motion. The briefest of pauses, an exchange of views of understanding and a searching of eyes and that's exactly what the dog did, sit, and as she firmly strode towards the ball, she pleaded the leave would be understood as well. The ten feet past the dog felt like a mile, the time it took seemed at least an hour but she stooped with her back to the dog then retraced her steps past him, his head on one side panting, displaying sharp meat cleavers, emitting a muted growl just to underline a point of dominance. As Lucy exited the danger zone she smiled at him, said thank you and, heart racing, hopped back over the fence.

The incredulous pack looked at the dog, then Lucy holding the ball, then back to the dog and returned to the rounder's pitch and Lucy to her perch. All of them, including the girl with the slippery fingers who picked up the bat; it was her turn. But the bowler didn't bowl and along with the whole field gave a single communal nod towards the batter who wandered over to Lucy still swaying on the fence.

She said, "My name's Alice," and handed Lucy the bat complete with the magic words, "It's your turn." It was then Alice gave the come-on wave.

“Lucy,” is all Lucy replied and followed Alice, the frown and scowl lost, replaced with a welcome smile and took the bat. Expertly spun it once, then twice, thought three times a bit inappropriately show-off and properly smiled as she set her stance.

The others, they carried the air of acceptance. They had a new member, a brave asset for sure. Their clique had just grown. For Lucy, she felt herself warming to her new friends. She was well aware of how lonely being on your own was, just waiting for the warmth on the inside to thaw the outside freeze, so horridly based on outdated prejudices.

Her saviour, the dog’s owner, George, whose name she knew from the postman, appeared from the house. Maybe to see what the commotion was although it was now quiet, except, of course, for the sound of a mighty hit and the ball heading into the trees on the other side of the road, where a collective trawl through the undergrowth would eventually find it, Alice this time being a redeemed hero.

On her way to school every day Lucy passed George’s house. The dog outside, always alert, not always growling but always restrained by the clattering chain as the postman came and stopped at the gate where, suspicious of the chain’s security, he shouted, George, and the owner appeared, stood on the porch and yelled, “Sit, leave,” with a downward wave of his right hand to demand total obedience.

Written by Martin Dixon, indie Author

CHAPTER 1

(taken from Laundry Wars in Desenzano)

It was ten-fifty Monday morning; at least that's what Emily Ellis's watch told her as she curled back the cuff of her cream blouse. The six-forty-three express from Desenzano rattled and rocked through a multitude of point changes as it passed endless rows of houses and warehouses finally approaching Roma Termini platform twenty-one. The express was twenty-five minutes late, but of course that didn't matter, the important thing was that she had escaped, so far without any consequences, other than the fact that most of her possessions were still enjoying the view across Lake Garda. She snatched a glance at the sour-face sitting next to her. Emily was not normally a spiteful person but that bitch; she was sure her ankle would suffer for days.

The sun had woken her that morning. Too much Bardolino the night before and the gap in the sloppily drawn curtains had definitely saved her. The bedroom window faced east and it was close to six when the sun had cascaded onto her closed eyelids. It stalled her dream of being pulled from the arms of the smiling woman with the long black hair. Rubbing her eyes she threw back the light sheet, her nakedness prompting recollection. All the others had left together just after midnight, finally leaving the two of them alone until just an hour ago when Rosa had slipped away to prepare for work.

It was definitely the sudden brightness that had stirred her, not the sound of the car drifting through the open window as it pulled up outside her apartment. That had been a few minutes later as she shuffled back from the bathroom frowning at the dishevelled apartment. The bottles, the red stained glasses, plates with dregs of tomato sauce and pasta now a solid mess. All that debris marring the normally pristine coffee table.

As usual she passed the front window to satisfy a desire, an endless need to wonder at the sheer beauty of sun sparkling on water and misty mountains, framed between the tall trees neatly spaced along the lakefront. A view that had captivated her since arriving what seemed an age ago, although it was only six months since she had dragged a small suitcase out of Verona airport to hop into a taxi and give the driver the address of a small hotel in a quiet road behind the main street.

That was when she had panicked, as she had looked out of the window through foggy eyes. She had always known it was going to happen but even so her involuntary gasp shook her out of her lethargy, the shock was still weirdly unexpected. Instead of staring over the water, all she concentrated on was the car, then the creak of the door, then the grey suit, a foot planted onto the pavement to stand and take a moment to adjust his jacket. Suspecting what he would do next she slipped back from the window before his head turned to glare up through dark glasses as the passenger door opened and a similar grey suit moved to stand by the first. Not so much thought at that particular point though, she was way too absorbed with rapidly repeating just one short word under her breath. Then, as if to underline to herself exactly how she felt she slapped her thigh with a clenched fist making her flinch into reality and return to the bedroom, to stoop and reach under the bed.

Lurking there the small soft fabric sports bag suggested an underlying insecurity being secreted in anticipation of such an inevitable moment. Packed and ready to go. Essentials, things for a quick flight. Only a few clothes and the necessities: passport, important documents, temporary residency and the like. Anything else was easily bought and she was certainly not short of money, she'd made damn sure of that. A few treasures. Mostly jewellery and she did not want to forget Rosa's purple bougainvillea flowers pressed between the pages of the Lake Garda travel guide, sweetly given with a light brush of lips on hers and a slight stroke against her left breast where Rosa's right hand gently held her side.

Back to the front window she risked a quick look. The first grey suit leant on the driver's door as he slowly pushed it shut, staring over the passing cars on the lakeside road, across the still water looking through the dappled shade lining the shore. That would give her time. Back to the bedroom to throw on yesterday's clothes. Underwear frantically removed with kisses and caresses randomly lined the floor. Skirt and blouse taken off with more care but still untidily draped over the easy chair next to the ornate frame of an ormolu wall mirror. The mirror that showed confirmation of her overindulgence. She pulled her hand through her long untidy blonde hair. Such a futile gesture. She sighed at the drab look, simple cream and grey, grabbed the bag and her handbag from the floor next to the bed and snatched her purse off the dressing table, slipped feet into flat soles, took one last look around and rushed her dishevelled self through the door.

The wide hallway held the sound of the main door clicking shut. Footsteps on the stairs. The slow slap of leather soles on tiled treads. Echoing words. Thankful she had paid attention when she had rented the second-floor apartment, she sprinted to the end of the corridor. Through the door with the green exit sign and bar handle, down the narrow metal staircase to the rear yard across which she rushed, past terracotta pots, past the purple bougainvillea spreading over the tall rear wall, to disappear through the back gate silently letting it swing shut.

Briskly moving through the slowly waking backstreets Emily made her way towards the station. Quickly past the ruin of the ancient Roman Villa with the near intact mosaic floors, somewhere she would normally dally and catch a mesmerising peek through the gaps in the bush lined wire fence. Then a right and all the way up the long gentle slope past silent shops and bars just beginning to open for the early coffee drinkers, the aroma already percolating onto the street. As she walked her thoughts whirred. Who were they? There were several options: one bad enough to make her think she definitely should not be caught. Fishing her phone from her bag she turned it off. Her

Italian phone. She had left her London phone behind when she had fled to Italy six months before.

Fifteen minutes was a long time for a naturally impatient person to wait and for Emily the extra ten minutes were tense. Imagining pursuit, she kept glancing at the entrance as she waited, melding into the crowded platform. Keeping a close eye on the information screen still showing the late arrival time. She knew it would be difficult to get a seat, so with a minute or so to go she shuffled forward to form the front of a group beginning to congregate where they expected a door would appear when the train stopped.

First on board, she thought about upstairs but instead looked along the lines of downstairs seats and quickly moved halfway along the carriage before it became congested. The woman sitting on an aisle seat ignored her by staring out of the window, maybe pretending she was not there, her bags packed onto the window seat. Emily asked once quite nicely then, not receiving any reaction, nudged the lady's arm and pointed at the seat.

A scowling face stared as she huffed and took her time complaining while she shuffled over to sit with a soft bag on her lap and one by her feet. The hard leather one the woman kept vindictively ramming against Emily's ankle until Emily jammed her bag against it. But the woman kept pushing so Emily stared at her and leant close, "Basta," she quietly snapped with force and a look and a flash of white teeth. One thing she had learnt during her life in London married to Charlie was how to use the tone of her voice to make a point. Not only to Charlie but also to some of the crew who worked for him. Dressed in their smart suits and loosely knotted ties with their discreet groping hands, they seemed to be always there, lingering in her luxurious kitchen or slouched on plump feather filled cushions on the garden room sofas, drinking coffee, farting and swearing and laughing at lewd jokes while waiting for instructions. All the time watching, their eyes running over her every detail every time she entered.

Rocking to a halt, the doors thumped and the platform rapidly filled. Emily did not rush. Make the bitch wait, she thought. After a few moments she stood, stooping to pick up her bag and went to move towards the door behind her then stopped. The lady was in the aisle heading the other way. A long cotton dress swished as she struggled with her cases in the cramped space. Emily followed her onto the platform. Following her, dragged along by the heaving mass, towards the exit. Followed her until she could barge her way right up close behind. The exit slowed the crush with some bunching and shoving. Emily looked down, measured her stride perfectly and ran her heel down the back of the lady's ankle causing her shoe to slip off with a hiss of pain. The lady spun and Emily grinned. She would not describe her action as spiteful; it was simply that an ankle for an ankle was perfectly justified; after all, the principle was cast in stone. Book of Exodus 21:23-27, one of the things that had made enough of an impression, from her religious education lessons, to stick in her head

Through a turbulent concourse onto the street, she paused suddenly realising she was thirsty and hungry. Rome had a habit of being filled with multitudes so there was no problem with cafes and restaurants. She had once heard that waiters sang with operatic voices as they worked, much like gondoliers, but that was long ago before she grew up, and had been quickly dispelled on her first visit on her engagement fifteen years ago, after she had been swept away by promises that failed to materialise. That was the first time she had stayed five stars, with personalised guided tours and fine dining and long, slow dancing into the small hours. At the time she had never questioned Charlie, she had just assumed he worked hard for his obvious wealth. How naive, but then she had only been twenty-two.

All the servers in the main street cafes hovered expectantly, no slouching, lots of smiling, plenty of suggestions. This one, a hopeful gigolo type, with charm and so much creative knowledge of how beautiful and desirable particular ladies could be, spoke unwanted words as he directed her to a table close to the street but she declined and

pointed to one at the rear. One in the corner with the fresh white tablecloth and sparkling glasses, where the charmer waited patiently while she decided what to order. She checked her watch, eleven-thirty-one; thirty-one minutes past the perceived cappuccino deadline so she ordered a double macchiato and a ciabatta, her favourite mozzarella and Parma ham with fresh rocket, then sat back to watch the activity on the wide pavement and take stock. How likely was it that she would have been followed? She thought very low at the moment so felt she could take a few days to decide whether it would be safe to return to Desenzano or if she would have to move on. Thinking she had a bit of time to make up her mind, the first priority would be to find a place to stay, although as she left the cafe the first thing she actually did was turn on her phone, send a one letter text M and wait for the call. She also had funds to transfer.

The area between the station and the Tiber was familiar to her. She had made two trips to Rome during the past six months. Only for a few days and mostly for financial reasons but there had been time to see some sights. The first time she came to open a non-resident bank account and transfer money. One and a half million, the second of her three intended payments. Then a second visit, to arrange for investment for the laundry. Why Rome and not Desenzano was a reasonable question and like most reasonable questions the answer was simple. Leaving was always likely to be necessary so best to flee to her most important consideration, the money. It would always be accessible in Rome. The transfer to arrange funding for an investment residency, the so-called Golden Visa. The smart four-star hotel she stayed on those occasions was the obvious choice now but if they didn't have a room there were plenty more nearby that hopefully would. As it happened the hotel she had stayed in remembered her. The first thing she did when she had settled in her room was to risk a simple text. She had to let Rosa know she was safe.

It was that time of day, ten-thirty and the tourists were on the move, wandering around the foyer queuing for reception with their concerned faces to ask endless stupid questions. Sitting, filling all the chairs waiting for tour guides chatting exuberantly in the

many languages of their eclectic mix. It was now, eight days later, that Emily thought about returning to the lake but decided the risk was too great. She felt she should stay hidden a while longer, at least until everything became clearer. She would move down south instead. Puglia had a great look about it. Quieter, maybe an easier place to disappear. Driving was the best option so she intended the car rental to be her first stop of the day. As she left the hotel, she did not notice the man wearing a dark blue polo and light-coloured chinos, carrying a brown folio case, change his mind and not enter the hotel but followed her instead.

Fifteen minutes later, mixed up with Japanese tourists near the museum, as she overtook the lady with the red umbrella held high, familiarity suddenly struck. The same feeling, the one from eighteen months back when she had been followed by that detective inspector. He had questions about Charlie's activities which, of course, she denied knowing anything about. But here it was again. Call it sixth sense or her insecurity fuelling her imagination or whatever you wanted, it didn't matter, Emily was positive she was being followed.

Taking a quick furtive glance behind, she suddenly swept from the street through double doors into the museum hoping to hide amongst the crowds but immediately became distracted by the near naked lady standing solidly towards the back of the gallery. Emily's stride slowed as she gazed at the face. Was there something familiar? The lady's right hand rested on her left shoulder loosely clutching some light fabric, silk most likely, with the impression of some subtle movement, a breeze maybe, as the cloth appeared to swirl to drape, subtly concealing one part of her modesty. It was the lady's pose and her coy expression that was reminiscent of a recent memory. Pushing through the crowd she abruptly halted. The suggestion of virtue was extraordinary and immediately reminded Emily of Rosa, giving her such a sudden feeling of guilt. It was probably now safe to call her. If she did head south, she would ask Rosa to come with her although she knew the laundry would make that unlikely.

Staring for just a moment longer, unable to refrain from gently stroking her hand down the smooth white marble thigh, she turned to be engulfed by an intense moment of panic. The dark blue uniform of one of the many attendants was pushing through the admirers and quickly heading her way. Absent-mindedly she rubbed her hand down the pale blue fabric of her skirt trying to expunge her guilt and snatched a glance at the stern face approaching. Emily's expression betrayed her fragile disposition and in a natural reaction, her eyes swept around the gallery desperately searching for the nearest exit. The uniform was just ten feet away when a hand from behind rested on her shoulder causing her to gasp. In her high state of anxiety, even such a gentle touch held the expectation of stern reprimand but a soft voice simply said, "Mrs Beech?"

Written by Martin Dixon

JAMES GORDON YEO



My name is James G. Yeo and I was born in April 1979, in Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada. I am the youngest of three; I have an older sister and older brother. We moved to Saskatchewan, Canada in 1986 and we spent ten years there before moving to another town in Saskatchewan in 1996.

After finishing high school I moved to Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, to attend N.A.I.T. for my Culinary Arts course. Once I finished my college I spent another two years in Edmonton to achieve my Red Seal in cooking.

I moved back to my parents in 2001 to work in the oil field to pay off my school debt. Then I moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada which was a dream of mine. I would spend three years there and I would continue with school by taking some business courses.

In January of 2005, I would be diagnosed with schizophrenia and I would move back to Saskatchewan the following spring. Since my diagnosis, I have changed my career to become an author with the goal to change the stigma on mental illness.

I have more book projects that I am working on that I will be publishing in the future. For more information about my work and me check out my website at www.jamesgyeo.ca, as well follow my weekly blogs with updates of where I am with my present projects that I am working on.

This essay is part of my philosophy book, *Echoes of Yesterday*, that I will be releasing in late spring early summer of 2025 with Amazon.

THE STORM

As the afternoon begins to cool down from the heat of summer, you are lying on your grass when there is a light breeze that begins. It cools you sending a chill up your back. In the sky clouds slowly begin to move in and there is in the distance a thunderstorm heading towards your home. The wind slowly picks up as the cold front moves in to drop its rain that is needed. Not thinking much, you continue to relax as the smells of wet earth starts to fill the air.

Within minutes, you can feel the mist that is starting to swarm around you. The mist begins to turn into light rain. As each drop plummets down and breaks on your body, the feeling of peace fills you. It makes you remember when you and your lover would make love in the rain when you were first dating. Now that is not the case, however the rain feels good on your body.

Slowly the rain becomes heavier and then you hear the thunder from the approaching storm. The wind begins to pick up more and the rain turns into a downpour. Not moving from your spot, you close your eyes, and you imagine that you are in a dream where you are walking back to your home to be with your lover. Moments later there is another crack of thunder and then the rain lets off a little and the climax of the storm is reached as it passes you by.

Minutes later the storm is over, and the sun has come out to dry up the land. The rain has washed your soul clean, and you feel a sense of calmness that you open your eyes to see that your first born has come out to stand over you.

In life there are many types of storms. Noting that there is always a calm before and a calm after the storm we never see this. Many people only see the storm and think

that it is going to last for the rest of their lives. They do not look at what is happening to them, and it brings them down. Without looking at the positive in what the storm is bringing, they only see the negative. This is what happens to most people where it is easier to see the negative. Looking at what could come out of the situation is far from their mind.

I have had many storms that have come through my life. Some last years and others were shorter, however when I was diagnosed with Schizophrenia, I had to look into my heart and soul to understand that I need to follow a positive road. I am not saying that my storms are more than what you have and are going through today. The thing is that I have learned that every storm that I have managed and gone through has made me stronger. At times I have wanted to give up and take the easy way which is the negative way. Yet, there has always been something inside of me that made me say no.

With all that we suffer from in this life, we need to follow the light at the end of the tunnel, and I know that sometimes that light is hard to see. In 2010 I was in a dark place and was ready to end my life because I was tired of fighting with my illness. I spent one month in the hospital because of it, and it was then when I put down the bottle and took a hard look at my life. As I looked back, I saw the battles that I have had with depression, the ten years of abuse that I went through as a child from being bullied in the town that me and my family moved to in 1986.

I looked at all the bad things and then it dawned on me that I had a lot of positives that had come from those storms. I found my love for cooking when I was 11 years old which turned into my career for over 20 years. I looked at what happened to me in Edmonton, and I looked to see that I made a lifelong friend who gave me the push that made me stay and get my papers in cooking.

As I sat in my room one night when I was in the hospital, I saw that I had made my two biggest dreams in my life come true. One was to be one of the best in the culinary world and the other was to move back to the region where I am originally

from. That was when I saw all the pain and hardships that came from all the storms that I had to go through to make them come true. Then came the book, *An Individual's Innocence: The Silent Screams*. It was hard to write it, and it took me until 2016 to publish it. The time that led me there was a storm that started in 2005 when I was diagnosed. I did not know it then that I would walk a path of defiance against the way that society sees those who have mental illness. That was the storm that almost took me to the grave.

In 2015, I was not happy with what was happening in my life again and I remembered that night in 2010 when I was in the hospital, and I pushed through. That night in 2015 in question I was ready to delete the book and give up again and it was a new friend that had just read the book, and he said that I should do another edit. He told me that I should go through to publish it. Since then, I have had challenges with job losses which effectively made me question again but it was just another storm that I had to face.

With all that and seeing the fact that when I was at the point of breaking someone has always come into my life to ask me if I am giving up or not. I have fallen many times, and I have always stood back up because it is something that I have always done. My dad once told me, "James, if you get beaten down, get back up and if you can only get to your knees continue forward. If you can't walk, crawl and if you can't crawl, use your arms and pull yourself to where you can grab a chair to help you to your feet."

This one thing that he told me time and again when I was going through the abuse for 10 years where I did not really have a friend, however finding out years later that I did have one or two. In Edmonton it was a good friend who said to me when I was ready to quit cooking. He said, "James, you have something that everyone wants. If you are going to quit, quit everything." After he said that, he gave me a look and continued, "Make your choice. I will be a good friend and be here to remind you of the fact that you

can do anything you put your mind to, it would be a shame that you gave up on your dreams.”

These are the things that run through my mind when I think of giving up. When I see a storm, I sit and smile because it means that I am at the beginning of a new lesson and I look forward to the struggle that I am going to have.

I would like to say to you that even when it gets harder for you the storm will pass. Stand up to the storm that is approaching you or the one that you are in. You will get through it and look for the positive aspects of the situation and the lessons that you are learning. There will always be storms, and it is not how long they last but who you become.

Stay safe.

Written by James Gordon Yeo, indie Writer

About James McLean



[OBJ]

I am a Canadian writer who loves a good story. I was raised as an only-child thus allowing my imagination the opportunity to run free to keep myself occupied on my days home alone.

I would also write horror stories during my spare time in an attempt to freak out my friends. I am proud to say it worked. Daniel, I'm sorry (not really).

I'm still "young and budding" with my writing, but with more than forty novels planned, I hope to continue to provide the worlds of my imagination for many years to come. And I hope you will come to be as immersed while reading my stories as I was while creating them.

(I also want to say thank you to the lovely Laura of Riverview Photography for the wonderful picture you see above)

THE SUICIDE EXPRESS

Sef stood at the on-ramp, next to his red Lithro Corvette, while the city's neon lights flashed against the clouds behind him. He raised a cigarette to his lips and took a drag. He let the smoke linger in his lungs, then lowered it as he exhaled slowly through his nose.

The on-ramp was smaller than he thought it would be. But he didn't let it bother him. The section of highway he was going to drive had been abandoned for years and the project had been cut so quickly that lights had never been installed. The city of Reconciliation started the project but after a change in mayors, it was quickly abandoned. What was supposed to have been named the Reconciliation Super-Highway had been dubbed the Suicide Expressway by the city's populace.

Sef chuckled. The name was fitting. Though all the construction equipment from the project had been moved to other sites, there were plenty of hazards someone could get caught in. Potholes were strewn along the 100-kilometre section of roadway and abandoned cars, trash cans, garbage, and other forms of refuse littered the asphalt. Some kids had gone down shortly after the highway was abandoned and built makeshift ramps for them to launch their cars off of.

Those kids were the reason the highway was given its namesake.

The Suicide Expressway ...

More than a few of the adrenaline-seeking kids killed themselves on their damned contraptions. And more wound up crippled for life.

Sef chuckled again while he shook his head. The ramps still stood – or so he was told – randomly spaced along the expressway where other folks had launched themselves to their death. Would a ramp be his way out? No. He didn't think so. He wanted to see the end.

Rumour told that the Suicide Expressway came to a very abrupt stop over the Atlantic Ocean, and no one was certain whether or not anyone had made it to the end. There were never any witnesses. And why would there be? It was a place people went to off themselves, to get their asses out of the dystopian nightmare that had become Reconciliation and the world at large.

Potholes claimed some lives and the makeshift ramps claimed more. But small barricades and barriers claimed the most. Erected seemingly at random by folks looking to speed up the abandoned project's found purpose.

In a way, the expressway was a blessing. It wasn't monitored like the other hotspots. Drowner's Bridge was kept under surveillance and there was even a net under the water to catch those that made it over the edge. Last Leap was patrolled heavily by law enforcement, and so too was Hangman's Hotel. Everywhere people sought freedom in Reconciliation was met with more oppression. Except for one place: The Suicide Expressway.

Sef looked at the outskirts that sat around the on-ramp he stood atop. He squinted in the dark and tried to see if someone was watching him. Waiting for him to make a move. It all seemed too good to be true. Why leave the expressway as the only unguarded hotspot in the city? It had never made sense to him. But, he reminded himself, the thought of having children to pay off taxes – through free labour – was another thing he never understood. When did the world get so messed up? And when did it stop mattering?

Sef shrugged. It wouldn't matter for long. Within the hour, he would be dead and gone; off the edge of the highway and into the Atlantic Ocean. He took another drag of his cigarette when a thought occurred to him. What if part of the road, at the very end, was being surveilled?

He exhaled and dropped the butt of his cigarette. He pressed it firmly into the asphalt with his sneaker and another look at the darkened outskirts in front of him before turning to face the neon of Downtown Reconciliation.

The flashes of green, pink, red, purple, blue, and every other colour imaginable lit up the world with grim reminders of why he was about to floor it down the expressway. All the corporations were scooped up by government officials as a way of increasing taxes for everything.

Sef shook his head. There was no such thing as an "after-tax dollar". Everything was taxed, from his income down to what he spent it on. He worked in the Linkton Offices as a "Data Analyst". It sounded cushy in conversation but in reality, he didn't earn any more than other folks did. He was just taxed less. He paid 50% taxes on all his income instead of the more standardized 60%. Sure, he brought home more at the end of the annual pay period than he used to. But it didn't mean much because the Linkton Workers-Housing increased his rent by the same amount. He was taxed less but was consequentially forced to pay more just to keep a roof over his head.

Bastards.

Sef raised his hands and curled them into fists, towards the city.

"SCREW YOU" he roared into the empty night air around him. His voice cracked. "Screw you and all you stand for ..."

He wanted to cry, but he wouldn't. He didn't have a wife; he didn't have a child or even a dog. He worked, watched state-run television, and then went to bed. That was life, day after day, month after month, pay cycle after pay cycle. Life had gotten pretty questionable when the country started to use pay cycles instead of years on the calendar.

That thought pissed Sef off. With the newfound rush of anger, he opened the door to his Lithro Corvette, sat down inside, and slammed it closed beside him. The key fit nicely in the ignition and when he cranked it for the engine to start the car did so. The engine roared to life at the stroke of midnight.

June 4th, 10th Pay Cycle. His dashboard read.

And what would he listen to during his final drive? Sef wasn't sure. He thumbed through the music he downloaded onto his car's hard drive – not all of it done legally – and settled on something that was considered to be classical music:

Panama by Van Halen

The sound of Van Halen's guitar erupted from the Corvette's speakers as Sef shifted into drive – with an old automatic gear shift, not one of the more modern button ones – and pressed his foot onto the gas pedal eagerly. The car's engine screamed as it worked its mechanical magic and accelerated the vehicle down the on-ramp.

Within no more than three seconds Sef was up to 80 kilometres per hour and dodging potholes as best he could. The first of the ramshackle ramps sped past as he pushed the car's speed to 90. Just beyond it – and quickly speeding past – was the wreck of an old pickup truck. The body of the driver was left on the asphalt partly eaten by wildlife and completely ignored by Reconciliation. He was free.

Van Halen's guitar shredded through the car's cabin and Sef found himself with the biggest, stupidest grin he had ever worn. Speeding, illegally, with some classic Van Halen playing was something of a fantasy come true. He swerved to the left, and again to the right as a tire-sized pothole threatened to cut his final drive short.

The car hit 100 and continued to glide along the abandoned roadway. In front of him, and getting closer, Sef recognized the silhouettes of more ramps in his Lithro's headlights. He corrected his course to avoid them. He would see the end of the Suicide Expressway. It would be the last thing he would ever be proud of.

Ahead of the handful of ramps was a pile-up of cars. Sef didn't bother to count them, it would be too distracting. But it looked like the spot where most folks who visit the Suicide Expressway reached their destination.

Too bad, Sef thought, they didn't even make it halfway.

The car's engine roared louder as the speed crept past 120. He was 40 kilometres into the drive and was shocked to see that he hadn't pushed his car harder. He could have easily been going 200+ but something was holding him back. Unsure of what it was, Sef chalked it up to the fact he wanted to enjoy the final drive with his car. And why wouldn't he want that? May as well go off on a high note.

Van Halen's Panama had long finished and it had been replaced by the ever-welcoming tones of another classical band: Gun's N Roses.

You're in the jungle baby, you're gonna diiiiiieeee

Sef grinned foolishly. It was corny, but he couldn't help but smile. His speedy dash to the finish line of his life was the happiest he had felt in a long, long time.

Another pothole, he swerved around it; another ramp he fought the urge to drive up; a wall made of scrap metal, wood, and old car parts whizzed past with the occasional body slumped on top.

The expressway was where so many people came to end their stories before it was time. Where would their stories have ended up? Sef wasn't sure. He wondered if there were happier days on the horizon, but he pushed the thought aside and continued. With his life, he would need to have three children and enrol them all into the TaxSavers Labour Program to rid himself of his debt.

Yeah, right.

Sef's engine kept strong as the speed approached 150. He was 60 kilometres into the trip and he was nearing the end. The drive was difficult with no light but that from his car's high beams. The driver's senses were heightened and he drove like he never had before. The thought of getting into racing occurred to him. But he pushed it away. He didn't think there were races where he was going.

He passed the 80-kilometre mark and everything was going just fine. "A-okay", as his dad used to say before he was hauled off to a Debt Relief Program.

Just a fancy title for a concentration camp, really. He never came back, but Mom got one hell of a tax break before she died.

But after she did, the rest of their debt was saddled onto Sef.

"Can't leave debts unpaid," his father used to say. "You do that, and those you love will get truly screwed."

"What happens if someone doesn't have any family?" a much younger Sef had asked.

"Then they take your debt and give it to the next random schmuck that wins the lottery. They take it out of his winnings. Ever wonder why people who win millions of dollars in the lottery only walk away with 200? There's ya answer chap."

That was the day Sef realized the world was quickly becoming sewage.

Also like Dad used to say.

The end of the Suicide Expressway made itself known fast. And Sef was shocked to find that not all of the construction equipment had been moved. There were bags of concrete left behind, metal and clay pipes, hard hats, toolboxes, and assorted pieces of hardware.

The Lithro Corvette ploughed into a partly full skid of concrete mix. The impact almost stopped the car as much as it stopped the classical music playing from the speakers. Sef felt his lip smash against his steering wheel and there was the warm taste of blood. He looked back up, dazed, and found his windshield coated in the grey powder that was concrete mix. He pushed his wipers on but they only left streaks.

He felt his Corvette pull hard to one side. He tried to even it out but entered into a flat spin. In no time at all, he was off the edge of the highway, his car spinning, and he couldn't even see how far down the water was.

Instinct kicked in and Sef braced himself. He gripped the steering wheel tightly to try and stay seated during the inevitable impact. He braced his legs the best he could and waited.

Sef didn't have to wait long. The water rose to meet him – or rather, he plummeted to meet it – and almost all of his momentum stopped at once. There was the fantastic sound of something flat striking the water with a roaring slap. Sef was pleased that he wasn't rocked too harshly. The experience wasn't comfortable and he doubted he'd be recommending it to anyone, but he was coherent and able to assess his surroundings.

Water started to pool into the car, through every crack and crevice it could find. Sef began to panic and again instinct kicked in. Overriding the very reason he took the drive down the Suicide Expressway in the first place.

He had seen things in movies and read things in books – before they were outlawed – that would help him. He unbuckled his seatbelt.

Why was I wearing this anyway?

With the metallic end of the seatbelt, Sef started to smash it against the glass of the driver's door window as hard as he could. He struggled to find a good angle. At one point, the flat edge slipped and he smashed his fingers against the smooth surface instead. The pain was fierce but he didn't slow. The overwhelming need for survival superseded everything he felt in those crucial moments. He hardly noticed the water approaching his waistline.

He kept smashing, hoping beyond hope that the glass would break. He already knew that once it did he'd have to hold his breath. The water would surge into the new opening and threaten to keep him in the car with it.

Finally, a crack. Sef struck twice more and watched it grow, before the third blow hit he held his breath. The window went to explode outward but the shards were quickly pushed towards the ocean's victim as the water began its dash to take over the inside of the Corvette.

Sef grabbed the window frame of his car and instantly wondered why he was even bothering. He had come to the Suicide Expressway to kill himself. Throw himself into

the Atlantic Ocean. He wanted to leave Reconciliation behind. Yet, for reasons that were not known to him, in what should have been his final moments, he felt the overwhelming urge to survive, to continue with his damnable plight and to try and break the surface of the water.

There were a few moments during Sef's clamber out of the car where he considered giving up and letting it drag him down. But for some unknown reason, some unfathomable voice told him to keep up the fight. He struggled and tugged himself free of the car and began to make way for the surface.

Sef's legs kicked harder than ever before and his arms moved water better than he thought possible. His lungs burned and his mouth threatened to burst open. But he fought on. The familiar feeling of a claustrophobic hug surrounded him. He had dreamt of drowning several times and much to his surprise it felt exactly like the real thing. He squinted his eyes and continued to kick. His legs began to burn, and the oxygen his muscles sorely needed was being exhausted in rapid supply. And in those moments, he had no way to get them more.

He began to groan and scream in his closed mouth. Then, cold air wafted over his face and Sef's mouth opened in a desperate gasp. His lungs filled with air and he felt himself gasping. His muscles continued to burn and ache but with oxygen flowing into his blood, it was more manageable. It was easier to ignore.

He looked around and in the darkness was able to make out the silhouette of the shoreline. It wasn't far.

Oh, thank God.

He began to swim, slowly. He wanted to keep his body from wearing itself too thin. He didn't let himself think, didn't let his mind wander. During his swim, Sef kept his mind blank and allowed his body total control over itself. Nothing would interfere.

His hand found purchase, finally, on a piece of crumbling dirt. Chunks fell into the water, splashing Sef's face with mud. But he didn't care. He hauled himself onto land, rolled over and began to laugh.

He lay in the dirt and laughed for a full half hour before sitting up to look at the ocean he was so certain would be his grave.

"The Atlantic Ocean, eh?"

He looked out at the blackened waves and saw the reflection of the few visible stars that were in the night sky.

He grinned as an idea came to him.

It's pretty damn ironic actually.

The Suicide Expressway was an old abandoned construction project with zero surveillance from the local government. He grinned. He quit his job before he came out, left a suicide note in his apartment and then left.

By the time he made it to the abandoned stretch of highway, the paperwork for his termination would have been filed and HR would have begun stripping his apartment of his things. The note would have been found. They would know he had killed himself.

On top of that, any surveillance on the streets would have seen him driving towards the Suicide Expressway. Providing even more proof he had killed himself. With luck, a camera would have seen him begin his acceleration before disappearing entirely.

He had done it. He supposed. He had killed himself in every way but one: the literal way. He still breathed, but Reconciliation was none the wiser.

So, what does that mean for me?

Sef reached into the soaked lining of his pocket and absentmindedly pulled out his pack of cigarettes. They were soaked through and soggy.

That tracks.

He chuckled to himself and threw the box into the water in front of him.

"You're probably wondering what it is you'll do now, aren't you?"

Sef started and turned. A man was standing behind him. Well dressed, or so he assumed in the dim light. He was of average height with green eyes trying to poke out of the darkness.

Sef chuckled. "You could say that."

"You already quit your job? Left a note?"

"Yes."

"Good. I have something to show you."

There was a part of Sef that wanted to be apprehensive, that wanted to question who the man was. But what did it matter? He was no longer relevant, in terms of society, he was dead. His debt would be forced onto some lottery-winning schmuck and his apartment would be filled with the next poor soul the Linkton Offices hired. What did he have to lose?

"What is it?" Sef said.

"Something I think you'll quite enjoy. Now come, we don't have all night."

Sef rose to his feet and followed the man.

They walked for what felt like hours and it was made worse when the cool night air would blow through his soaked clothes.

The first time Sef shivered, the gentlemen looked back at him. "Don't worry, you'll be warmer, soon enough."

But for the rest of the walk, there was almost no conversation. Eventually, through chattering teeth, Sef managed to start a conversation. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Sorry, I can't tell you my real name. Too much at stake for that, but you can call me Nigel."

"Alright," – it would have to do – "and where are we going, Nigel?"

"To your new home."

Sef's stomach was filled with the feeling of butterflies. "What?"

"You survived the Suicide Expressway. Made it to the end. Which is more than can be said for most. You've earned yourself another go at life."

"What are you talking about?"

They arrived beside the abandoned highway, about halfway to the ocean from the on-ramp. It looked different. Sef wasn't sure why.

"The Suicide Expressway, as you have come to know it, was never intended to achieve its goal of becoming the Reconciliation Super-Highway. It was a front ... if you will. While the project was deemed a failure, it was actually completed."

The side of the highway opened and revealed a well-lit room on the other side.

"Come," Nigel said with a beckoning hand. "I haven't got all night."

Sef stepped in and could see his saviour properly for the first time. The man was wearing a mask, but his eyes were certainly green. He was middle-aged but his posture was good and his English was incredibly well-spoken. Sef knew he was wealthy.

There was an elevator on the far side of the room. The two men stepped in and the door closed behind them. Nigel pressed a button on the wall before continuing his story.

"You see, I'm quite a prominent investor in Reconciliation's infrastructure. A lot of the businesses in the city wouldn't exist without me, and as a result, the majority of Reconciliation's tax income is due to my hard work."

Sef felt his anger blossom. The heat in his face threatened to boil the water that stuck to his pores.

Nigel held up a hand. "Please, I understand the anger you may be feeling towards me right now. But it's all for your benefit. Because I am such a fervent supporter," he commented mockingly, "the city allowed me free reign over this construction project and the property it resides on.

"There are no surveillance cameras, for one. If the city wanted to keep one of its biggest supporters happy, they would make sure he wasn't spied on. The Reconciliation

Super-Highway was to be donated to the city on my behalf. Though no one would ever know my name. I've always worked through proxies, keeping my tracks covered where I can, but all are part of a 'corporation'. The city was grateful they could have the highway they always dreamed of, for free. But I played them like a fiddle."

The elevator continued its slow descent.

"You see, the construction of the highway was a front for something else. A place where people could live away from Reconciliation without much worry."

"What?"

"We're not a utopia," Nigel continued, "we don't have anything fancier than you did in your previous life. You will need employment, you will need to pay rent, and you will need to pay some taxes. But I feel 5% income tax is far better than what you were paying when you were 'alive', am I right?"

Sef's eyes opened wide.

"Good. The people who live here are all former drivers of the Suicide Expressway. Anyone who ever made it to the end is given another chance. The ones who didn't were doomed from the start.

"I'll be frank, I'm not trying to create a new country, civilization, or nation. It's a district in a city if you will. Power is supplied by private facilities and banking is provided by private facilities. You pay an income tax to support the upkeep of these facilities. That is all. I doubt we'll ever become self-sufficient, to do that would pose too big a risk to your new home's existence. No. Instead, small construction projects around the city will 'fail' from time to time and the resources that are carted away will be brought here."

Sef nodded in awe. The elevator stopped and the doors opened to reveal a concrete hallway of depressing greyness. It was longer than Sef would have liked, but it was heated. The two men stepped out of the lift and into the confines of the earth.

"Where will I live?" Sef found himself asking.

"There are several vacant units available. I already have one picked out for you. It's not big, but it's not small either. It's better than what you can find in Reconciliation, but don't get me wrong. It's nothing like having a house."

"How big is it?"

"One-bed, one-bath, with a living room and kitchenette. Laundry is in the basement of the building."

Sef's knees grew weak. He wasn't sure if it was due to his frantic swim or if it was from the miracle of having a one-bed, one-bath apartment with a living room.

"What about utilities?"

"Half is included in your rent."

"And the other half?"

"Already paid. We charge a paltry 7% sales tax here on anything you buy. A large portion of that goes to paying for electricity, water, clean air, and so on. Income tax for upkeep, sales tax for distribution, if you will."

"No such thing as an after-tax dollar, eh?"

Nigel chuckled. "Hasn't been since World War II, my friend."

"How will I pay my first month of rent?"

"Already taken care of. You have two months to find a job. After that, if you can't make rent, we ship you back to the surface."

"Have you had to do that before?"

"Not yet, though it has gotten close for a few people."

"And what is this place called?"

"Your new home?"

"Yes."

They turned a corner and made their way to another door. Nigel pressed a few buttons on a keypad and it opened. Sef was greeted with fresh air and an artificial sky. They were standing atop a hill and below was a town. Like something out of the late

1990s. There was grass and parks with benches; there was a small downtown area, some suburbs and a couple of apartment buildings. There weren't any cars that he could see, but why would there be? Everything was close enough together that one could walk from the suburbs to downtown and not be bothered.

Nigel chuckled. "You know, I'm still working out a good name for our little world away from the world. I thought of ironically naming it 'Hell' seeing how the local politicians fancy Reconciliation as 'Heaven on Earth'. And you and I both know that's a crock of crap."

Both men started their slow walk down a stone pathway towards a small cluster of three-storey apartment buildings.

"Do you have any runner-ups?"

Nigel tilted his head. "Hm? Oh, names. I'm particularly fond of 'Second Chance', for obvious reasons. But it feels a little too on the nose. You know?"

Sef nodded. It wasn't a bad name, but he felt there would be a better one.

Nigel waved a hand dismissively. "A name is of little import right now. Once our population here starts to grow, it will become a little more needed. People like having a sense of identity and all that. But if you have any ideas feel free to drop them off at the post office. There's a suggestion box I'll dip into once a week and skim through."

"I can do that."

The stone path the two men followed rose and fell gently over artificial hills. The false sky above them was pleasant and showed more stars than Sef had ever seen. He wondered, fleetingly, if the real night sky looked the same. He hoped it did and if it didn't he hoped it was better.

Little white blips of light glinted and shimmered.

Stars.

There was a cloudy mass hanging lazily behind every little light and cluster.

The Milky Way.

“It’s quite nice, isn’t it?” Nigel said, without facing his town’s newest inhabitant.

“It is. Does the real sky look like that?”

“It does. Though people like you or I will never see it. You’d have to go to a place with no cities around for miles to be able to get a glimpse at the real deal. Oh, how I envy our ancestors. They got to see it every night for their entire lives.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

Eventually, a red brick wall stopped them. A small glass door sat neatly centred on the front of the building. Sets of double windows, spaced evenly apart, rose the length of the structure. The nearby streetlamp hummed peacefully with white light.

“Welcome home,” Nigel’s eyes told Sef he was smiling under the mask. “For now, your apartment building is named an unoriginal ‘First Street Apartments’. If you have any better ideas, drop them in that suggestion box.”

“I will.” Sef looked up at the building, awestruck. He felt numb in his excitement.

“You will be in unit 3b, on the third floor. Here’s the key.”

Nigel’s hand reached into his pocket and pulled out a small metal key.

An actual key!

Sef reached out with a shaking hand, shocked that it wasn’t a keycard like he had used in his past life.

“What can I ever do to thank you?” he said as his hand closed around the cool metal.

“Live your life, make a change, pay your taxes, we need them to keep this place running.” Nigel chuckled and rubbed the back of his head. “Oh, and I may call on some of you for a favour, in the days ahead ... if that’s alright with you.”

“It is.”

“Good. And welcome home.”

James McLean

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

Suicide is no joking matter. It affects far too many people, and with the way the world is constantly changing, it can be hard to keep up. I've felt the drag myself from time to time, but – for whatever reason – I stubbornly truck through to the other side and make some necessary changes. But it isn't as easy for everybody, hopelessness is a very real problem and it hits some people harder than others. Not everyone can take the same punch, if you will.

If you are considering ending your life. Stop and take a good look around. Yes, there is plenty of bad in the world, but there is also plenty of good. No matter how small it could be. Maybe you enjoy a particular pen or a corny movie. There is always something that we like and it's those things we need to pay more attention to. So please, if you feel the desire to end your life, no matter how small that thought may be, find help. There are resources available for you, no matter how alone you may feel.

If you are in Canada, like me, call Talk Suicide Canada at 1-888-456-4566.

If you're in the United States call 988 Suicide & Crisis Hotline at 988

If you're in the UK call Suicide Prevention UK at 44 800 689 5652

There are options available for everyone, no matter what country you are in. I can't possibly list them all and thankfully the information is incredibly easy to find. Always remember, there could be help for you just around the corner, (Just like Nigel for Sef) but you need to get around that corner first.

James McLean



Gene J. Miller

As a new author, professionally I was a 44 year educator. After 19 years of secondary teaching English/History and coaching teens, I became a high school assistant principal for two years, 1997-1999. In September 1999, I was promoted to middle school principal grades 6-8 for the next 14 years. I know middle school! I retired after 35 years in public school education in southern New Jersey and was hired part-time by Stockton University's School of Education to teach and supervise practice teachers for nine years. I retired May 5, 2023 due to medical conditions. I became an author of 15 short stories based on my life's challenges as a middle schooler for my two eldest grandsons headed into their middle school years. Many people forget how hard it is for an elementary child to transition into their teen years. It's HARD! It has been rewarding reliving those transition years of middle school. WARNING: Short Stories for Middle School Boys Only, Because Girls Have Cooties! Is my heartfelt soliloquy reminder about those children transitioning from their elementary years into teenagers.

Publisher: Palmetto Publishing Charleston, South Carolina

Publishing Date: June 2024

Title: WARNING: Short Stories for Middle School Boys Only, Because Girls Have Cooties!

Description: A time capsule nonfiction 15 short story collection about a young man's "Coming of Age" in reaching adolescence in the time period of 1965-1970. The stories reflect a life lesson a chapter reflecting the challenges of friendships, challenges, adventures and a personal evolution through a variety of circumstances trying to "grow up". Through humour, major life decisions with consequences reflect the struggle of adolescence in a time before the internet, computers, cell phones, Xboxes and streaming television.

Colour illustrations adorn each end of chapter and an educational Chapter Lessons section is packed in the back of the book to allow the book to be used educationally within a classroom, as a summer enrichment read or as a home school educational supplement.

Please feel free to visit my author website at www.genemiller56.com

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A DAY IN THE LIFE

Do you have one event in your lifetime that has changed your life? I do. “It was twenty years ago today,” times two, plus ten. I believe MACCA would enjoy this line if he ever read it! I recently was reminded of that day by a local news reporter. On that day, which was a Saturday morning, my goal was to be pumping gas on weekends as an 18-year-old college freshman, I needed to supplement my personal costs at college. Since October, I had been commuting home from college every Thursday afternoon after the last class to work on Thursday night shifts 4-11p.m., Fridays 7-4p.m., Saturdays 7-4p.m. and then again on Sundays the same shift. I would return to the college each Sunday evening after having dinner with my parents.

Many of us have all had those needs and those kinds of jobs throughout the years. We do what needs to be done as hardworking people. Recently a reporter, whose name was Celeste Whittaker from the Gannett Press, inquired about the 50th anniversary date of the rescue of a two-year-old child, Victor Scott IV, in a runaway car that had taken off from the gas station. She emailed me for my phone number and picture. She requested to meet me at the location of the gas station where the rescue event took place. I was surprised and had not thought much about it for many years. As human beings, we tend to forget the past as we proceed busily forward with our lives, our families, our jobs, our personal interests and our issues.

Celeste met me at the gas station on time. She was parked at the rear of the property in a 2019 gray BMW facing the direction of where things all took place. Celeste was taking in the entire scene of the event from inside her car. I was actually early. I was excited that someone had remembered and was interested in dredging up a modern-day story on something that took place such a long time ago. I was so excited I arrived twenty minutes early. I decided to waste some time by riding past the location for old-time’s sake. Some of the landscape had changed, surprisingly some not so much.

I pulled into the station that was on the corner of a highway and a busy four lane bypass.

As I pulled alongside of Celeste's vehicle and rolled down my window, gusts of January frigid air whipped into the cab of my pickup truck. Celeste rolled down the BMW's window and smiled.

"Hello, Gene. It's nice to meet you after we talked on the phone the other day. Thank you for giving me your number to call you."

My face wrinkled as the cold arctic blast of air captured my breath.

"It's nice to meet you, Celeste. I appreciate you remembering that crazy morning back in December of 1974. I just thought that it all had been forgotten. You know that day changed my life."

"Apparently that day changed a lot of lives." She immediately replied.

"I am just sitting here in this warm car viewing and thinking about the story that you told me on the phone. I can see it like a movie taking place. Why don't we get out of our vehicles, and I'll take a couple pictures of you standing in the gas station lot, then I want you to pose where the side gas pump island was with the four lane bypass and the Concord Hotel across the street behind you."

I excitedly replied, "Sure!" and jumped out of my truck.

I stood in the spots she assigned. I shivered a few times as the wind blasted both of us as the pictures were taken.

Celeste then said, "Now I'm going to video tape you with my phone. Begin with the father pulling in front of the office to pick up his developed film."

I then repeated the story. In 1974, our gas station had a drop-off service for developing film into pictures within 48 hours. It was a great draw for business. This father came in on that December day to pick up his developed film while leaving his car running because it was cold out. He had a two-year-old son unrestrained in the front

passenger seat. As I handed him his pictures, the son shifted the shifter on the column into gear and the car surged forward. Mr. Scott flew out the office door to grab onto the passenger handle to get into the car. The car drug him past the office and past the two parked cars along the side of the office, He was smashed between the vehicles and fell to the ground injured and down for the count.

Standing dumbfounded in the office, the car was headed for a side island of two gas pumps facing the four-lane bypass. I dove out the front door in pursuit of the car. The car appeared to have a mind of its own. Luckily, it jumped the side of the island missing both pumps rolling towards the bypass. I turned on my adrenalin induced speed to catch the car on the driver's side. We both crossed the north bound lanes of traffic as I focused in on the driver's door handle as I closed in.

Just as I gripped the driver's door handle the front tires struck and jumped the grass dividing median flipping me forward while being rolled to the ground. I got to my feet and continued in pursuit of the vehicle which now had crossed the opposite lanes of traffic. The car was now headed into the side brick wall of the Concord Hotel with some customers still in their rooms.

In a stroke of good luck, two police cars were parked across the street monitoring traffic flow. They witnessed this from across the highway and drove out onto the highway and into the parking lot of the Concord Hotel. They wheeled behind the hotel and turned the corner of the back of the building to ram the vehicle to stop it from crashing into it.

Just as they wheeled around the corner with lights flashing, I grabbed hold of the driver's door handle one more time and yanked the door open. I swung into the vehicle in a parallel position from the ground and landed on the brake pedal with both feet. The car locked up. The child had bounced to the backseat when it struck the divided highway median. When I jumped on the brakes, he was abruptly sent flying over the front seat and smashed into the windshield.

All I heard were sirens, a child screaming, and two voices of the police yelling as one opened the passenger door to retrieve the child and the other leaning over my reclined body with both feet still on the brakes as he shifted the car into park.

It was over. The child was saved. He and his father were transported by a pair of ambulances to the hospital. Standing in amazement was my boss on the bypass curb.

He began screaming “MO! That was GREAT! It was like watching an action movie with an action hero running down that car!” I was stunned. My mind was blank as I slowly walked breathless across the bypass to return to the station.

“You can go home, Mo. You did a great job.”

“No, Joe. I want to finish the shift. I need the money.”

“Well as far as I’m concerned, you can do whatever you want to do. Take a long lunch.”

I remained. The police came over and congratulated me. They believed everyone would be alright and they left.

Then things got a little crazier, if you can believe it.

A couple hours later, the father returned in the very same car. He stepped out and pulled me aside.

“I just can’t thank you enough. If you hadn’t done what you did, he may have been killed.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad that I could help,” I replied.

The father reached into his back pocket and pulled out a fifty-dollar bill.

“Here, please take this. You earned it. I wish it was more.”

The father’s right arm was bandaged three quarters of the way up his arm.

I replied, "Is your son alright?" The fifty-dollar bill was still extended towards me in his hand.

"He has a concussion and a few bumps and bruises. But that's nothing compared to what it could have been."

I raised my hand to stop him from giving me the money. "Sir, I cannot accept this. But thank you for the offer. You were in a bad situation and needed help. All I did was help out. Someday I hope I have kids, and someone will do something helpful for them in a jam."

He lowered his arm looking down while thinking. "Well, how about I take you duck hunting on the Rancocas Creek? That could be fun."

I smiled and shook my head no. "I don't own a gun, and I do not hunt, but thank you anyway. We are good."

He smiled and thanked me a few more times. Then he handed me a piece of paper with his name and number on it. "If you ever need anything, call me." Then he got back in his car and left. I never saw him again and that piece of paper disappeared.

Over a year had passed. Then in April of 1976 while at college, now working on campus, a knock came at my door around 10a.m. An investigator from The Carnegie Hero Award Foundation came to interview me about the rescue. I was asked to accompany him back to the scene of the rescue. As I was doing with Celeste, the reporter, He wanted me to walk and narrate the entire rescue. My old boss, Joe, was there too. He spoke to Joe privately in the office, then walked the scene with a rolling tape measure with me narrating by his side.

Finally, he was done with his drawing of the scene. He turned to me and said, "This is almost impossible to believe. I've calculated everything and you would have had to be running at over 18 miles an hour to catch that car. I have written testimony from two police officers, the father, and today your boss and you. This was an incredible

rescue for sure. And how you didn't get struck by a vehicle crossing that busy four-lane bypass is another unbelievable thing. I am signing off on your medal and \$500 award check. They will both come in the mail in a few weeks. You are a true hero. Be on the lookout for the check and the medal." Then he blurted out one last thing, "By the way, if you had accepted any money or any gift for saving that kid's life, you would have been ineligible for this Carnegie Hero Award."

The medal arrived with a letter and a check. In the letter, it indicated if I ever had a hardship to pay for college tuition the Carnegie Hero Foundation wanted to help. With my father ill and out of work, I wrote them over the summer of 1976. As it turned out, instead of dropping out of college to go to work, I graduated as a teacher on a Carnegie Hero Scholarship and began to touch student lives for 44 years. While teaching at school I met my wife-a teacher, had three children of my own and now have eight grandchildren.

An unforgettable day in the life, so long ago...

By Gene J. Miller

JORDAN CIMENSKI – emerging new writer



Jordan Cimenski grew up as a military brat, travelling all over the world since both parents were in the Air Force.

After Jordan settled in Utah, she started writing poetry, short stories, and, eventually, novels.

At Utah Valley University, Jordan published several poems and academic essays while working towards her Bachelor's degree in Education.

Now Jordan is an accomplished and award-winning educator, having most recently won the Utah Jazz Most Valuable Educator of the Year Award. After 6 years of working on her book, Jordan has most recently published her debut novel: *The Last Door*, a dark fantasy for young adults.

THE LAST DOOR (review)

This is easily one of the best dark fantasy stories I've worked on. The plot and character arcs especially are excellent.

Throughout the book, one of the things that truly stood out to me was your portrayal of depression. There were certain phrases that were almost chilling in their accuracy. The same stands for self-harm.

I'm certain that this is going to be a point of interest for prospective readers, but this book treats delicate subjects—expertly, to be sure, but they are delicate subjects, nonetheless.

The same goes for emotions. Every emotion portrayed was realistic, grounded, and the character expressing it had every reason to do so. This is not easy to write. You display significant talent in this amazing portrayal of characters, their emotions, and their struggles.

Every single character was interesting and useful in the story. They say that every scene should either reveal our characters' aspects or further the plot and/or character arcs, and this is true for your book. There are absolutely no superfluous scenes. Every scene is important, and every scene is full of meaning. Every character is placed exactly where they are supposed to be, serving their purpose perfectly.

I really liked how Shari and Pat contrasted and compared to Jaci. I also liked how well established they were as characters, with their unique and realistic backgrounds and motivations. They felt like real people. You avoided overfilling the story with characters, using new ones sparingly.

I had never expected so many twists, nor so many character deaths. It was hinted only one would survive, but I hadn't expected it to happen that way!

Endings are hard. A reader remembers a story's beginning and ending the most, and when you spend so much time working on a story, it's hard to figure out a way to finish it that gives the story justice. The same goes for beginnings; the first line of a story

is the most important, in my opinion. You've delivered the first line perfectly; it grabs the reader's attention and doesn't undersell the story.

It has been an incredible journey. I've enjoyed every minute working on your book. Thank you so much for the opportunity!

A PERSONAL NOTE

You don't need to read further, but I felt that I had to add this. As a person battling with major depression myself, I found Jaci's journey inspiring. The book has helped me with my own struggle, and I believe that any reader that battles with similar disorders will feel the same. No book can change a person's life radically, the person needs to make this change themselves, but books can and do change how we see things and how we feel about them. Stories have power. Your book has helped me take another step in this uphill battle. Thank you.

THE LAST DOOR

Chapter One

How would you pack a bag for a journey, knowing it would be your last?

A few granola bars and a bottle of water would be good enough to get me through the train ride. No cash or credit cards, I had already bought the one-way ticket online. I didn't need medicine either. All the pills I tried never made a difference, anyway. There was no need for a phone or charger, technology never worked in the mountain.

My hair was too short to keep my ears warm, so a hat would be a good idea. When Mary-Ann went a few years back, she said it was colder than she thought it would be. The only hat I had was the one she had brought back for me as a souvenir: bright blue, knitted, "Mt. Lavrynth" written along the bottom in cute, flowery letters. It matched her personality perfectly.

I glanced at the photo of us on my nightstand; the sky had been so blue that day, like her hat. We were sitting on the grass, staring up at the clouds, laughing. Actually laughing. I slipped the photo into my bag and put on her hat.

I threw my backpack over my shoulder. I hurried down the creaky stairs, but stopped abruptly. My father. "Jaci," he said in a slow, slurred voice so it sounded like "jaayyceee." He stood in the hallway, wearing stained pajamas and carrying a can of beer. "Where ya goin?"

"Mt. Lavrynth."

He stared at me blankly for a moment. "It'll be a pain to get rid of your stuff."

"There's not much left. I donated a lot already—"

"Should've sold it. Have money?"

“No. My wallet is upstairs. And the house key.” I waited for him to complain again, but instead he trudged into the living room. Pop. He slurped his beer can, and his old chair groaned as he reclined into it.

I left the front door unlocked behind me and then walked to the train station. I had everything I needed. I had canceled all my college classes and made sure the last of my bills were paid. There was no one left to say goodbye to.

“Tickets, please.” The train attendant smiled a big, fake smile at me. “Where are you from?” she asked, trying to make small talk as I awkwardly dug my ticket out of my bag.

“Not that far from here,” I replied.

“Oh, I meant where are your parents from?”

I was used to the question, but it didn’t make it any less annoying. “Korea.” I sighed as I finally found my ticket.

“Ah, I thought so, but I didn’t want to assume—” I handed her the ticket, and her eyes lit up. “Going to Mt. Lavrynth? So exciting! I wish I could have gotten work off to go see the gates opening.” She handed back the ticket and I crumpled it up in my bag. “Is this your first time going?”

It took me a second to reply. Mary-Ann used to drone on about the mountain for hours on end in such detail that it didn’t feel like a place I was visiting for the first time. “Yeah.”

“You’ll love it. I went quite a few years ago, before Markus had come out of the mountain but still... it was magical even back then.” I turned away from her to go back to staring mindlessly out the window. “I heard Markus is going back this year to try and defeat the mountain’s challenges again. He really is so brave. You should try to get his autograph before he goes in—”

“I’m going in.”

The train attendant stuttered, “S-sorry?”

“I said I’m going in. Into Mt. Lavrynth.”

“O-oh. You’re actually going inside.” I could see the confusion in her eyes and the question she was too afraid to ask: Why?

I wasn’t a hero like Markus. I wasn’t charismatic or tall or attractive or successful. People expected greatness from him. He had gone in with confidence and had come out a champion. I wasn’t that. I never was and never would be. The train attendant could see that much. The pity and curiosity were written all over her face. So why, she wanted to say, why would you enter the mountain?

But that’s not a question you ask. It would be like asking a couple why they haven’t had kids yet. The answer could be innocent, or it could be darker; an answer you weren’t ready to hear.

She stepped away awkwardly towards the next passenger. I set my forehead against the window and let the coolness of the glass seep into my skin and lull me to sleep.

“Mommy, I wan a bawoon!” I flinched at the high-pitched scream of the child. Kids sprinted past my feet and out of the train. Crowds of people were exiting buses and cars at the entrance, all moving in a large mass like ants towards sugar, beneath the large sign: Mt. Lavrynth National Park.

The mountain loomed ahead and was surrounded by dense forests, but a wide trail winded through the trees leading toward the mountain doors. On both sides of the path sat vendors and shops. It smelled of fresh pine mixed with fried food and car exhaust. Families shoved their way to the front to get a souvenir, all yelling over each other to be heard.

“Ten-dollar balloons here.”

“Daddy, you promised you’d get me a hat.”

“T-Shirts! Get your limited-edition T-shirts over here.”

“We have to make sure we visit the visitor’s center.”

“Hotdogs, burgers, fries at the Mt. Lavrynth Cafe.”

“Okay, honey, smile and say ‘cheese.’”

“Get your ‘I Survived a Trip to Mt. Lavrynth’ mug over here.”

“Come on already, we need to get a good spot if we wanna see the doors opening.”

“Markus bobble heads on sale for thirty dollars!”

My shoulders tensed as I snuck through the crowds. I held my breath and focused on weaving through the people while avoiding tripping over the children. Behind me, the voices grew louder, and the crowd stopped and turned.

“It’s them. It’s the Conquerors—look,” someone nearby called out. People with large cameras and microphones barged past me and ran to where another group formed around four people in particular. Cameras flashed wildly.

“And here come the Conquerors!” a newswoman announced, loud enough to be heard over the ruckus as people quieted down to listen. “This team has come all the way from Mexico and has trained all their lives in preparation to take on the mountain. We are so excited to see your group here today. Many people have been following your training for a long time.” She shoved her microphone at them, impatiently awaiting their response as more interviewers attempted to push forward around her.

One of the men, Alejandro, stepped forward. Standing noticeably taller than his teammates, biceps and thighs bulging from his shirt and shorts, he was an impressive sight. I vaguely remembered him from when Mary-Ann showed me magazine articles about the team.

“We’re super pumped to be here,” Alejandro said, a half-cocked smile on his face.

“Do you believe you’ll be the first full team to beat the challenges within the mountain? After all, only one person has succeeded and has had their wish granted.” The

newswoman moved her microphone over to Alejandro again, but the woman by his side interjected. I recognized her as Valeria, the other co-leader of the team. Her curly, brown hair was braided back into a ponytail and her muscles were almost as impressive as Alejandro's. Several small blades were strapped to her cargo pants and large hiking backpack.

"Of course," Valeria said. "If we didn't think we could do it, then we wouldn't be here. If Markus can do it, then we definitely can." The crowds of people squashed together as closely as possible to try and get photos of the Conquerors. With the people glued to the interview, I hastened forward and turned the corner towards the mountain.

A seven-foot-tall marble wall stood along the path now. They called it the "Wall of Souls." From top to bottom there were names etched into the stone—the names of those who entered the mountain and never returned. I walked next to the wall, and the list of names went on and on as the voices in the distance grew quieter. After forty yards, the names still continued. Now, I could finally hear the wind rustling in the trees and the deep grumble of a storm overhead. The smell of rain wafted in the breeze. Another forty or so yards later and the wall still stretched on, but the list ended. I stared at the final few people listed and the blank stone beneath them, knowing my name would soon be filled in.

The government had tried to keep people out: security, cameras, fences... nothing had made a difference. As a last-ditch effort to keep people away, the government built the Wall of Souls: a warning of how fatal this decision could be. And yet the Wall stretched on, almost a football field in length, because people would always find a way and a reason to enter the mountain. It was like the mountain drew people to it—a siren call.

I stepped back from the wall. Tapping my boot on the dirt, over and over, I leaned my head back as far as it could go. Squinting my eyes, I fruitlessly searched for an opening in the turbulent, rumbling clouds that shrouded the top of Mt. Lavrynth.

Lightning flashed out like a lighthouse beckoning people to come closer, tricking them into thinking it was safe. Some had tried scaling the mountain, braving the storm. Others had tried less invasive measures, like helicopters, planes, drones... but nothing ever survived the onslaught of rain, wind, and lightning. Not even demolition crews attempting to blow a hole in the mountain's side had been able to make a dent. As far as anyone knew, there was only one entrance in and out of the mountain, one that seemingly couldn't be opened by human hands. Rounding the final turn of the path I shivered and gazed at the door.

The massive entryway led directly underground and into the mountain. As I entered the clearing before the door, I saw that it was engraved with ornate designs. Muscular silhouettes fought each other with fists and swords. Serpents, with large eyes and long fangs, loomed over the battle. Snarling beasts with gnarly claws lurked in the corners. Prickly vines entangled themselves throughout the door's rich gray stone. When the light hit them just right, the carved figures seemed to move, shimmering like diamonds.

Written above the magnificent scene was a solitary phrase in a language no one recognized, and yet, somehow, everyone understood it to mean the same thing:

Conquer the Mountain and Your Wish Shall Be Granted.

Written by Jordan Cimenski

YOUNG GUARDIANS & THE DAWN OF DARKNESS



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For Taylah, always remember to dream.



My Personal Journey into Storytelling

I never set out to be an author. Truth be told, I'm just someone who has always loved stories - the kind that whisper magic into your ear and make the world a little more wonderful.

Life has a funny way of redirecting our paths. After school, I had dreams of writing, but responsibilities and life's practical demands gently nudged me away. Bills needed paying, and dreams often take a back seat when reality comes knocking. For thirty years, my writing remained a quiet companion, never quite forgotten but not always at the forefront.

Now, as I've found a bit more breathing room in life, I've rediscovered my love for storytelling. This book - well, it's something special. It wasn't born from a grand plan, but from something much simpler: a father's desire to surprise his daughter.

You see, my daughter was always brilliantly observant. Every children's book we read together, she'd solve the mystery pages ahead. It became a playful challenge - could I write a story that would keep her guessing? Twelve years of quiet writing, of stealing moments between life's responsibilities, led to these three interconnected tales.

I write primarily in science fiction, but this story is different. It's personal. It's a love letter of sorts - to imagination, to my daughter, to the power of storytelling that can surprise even the cleverest readers.

I don't claim to be anything extraordinary. I'm just someone who loves stories and finally found the courage to share one that means the world to me. If it brings a moment of wonder or joy to even one reader, I'll consider that a success beyond measure.

Thank you for taking the time to hear my story. I hope you might find something magical within the pages I've carefully crafted.

With warmth and hope,

Adam Parsec

And so, my Saga begins with...

Adam Parsec's Young Guardians & The Dawn of Darkness

When their grandmother comes crashing back into their lives, twins Tilly and Tom know their twelfth birthday will be anything but ordinary.

The twins are left with a mysterious gift and a warning; it must not be opened before midnight. But in a house where shadows have eyes and dinner guests harbour dark secrets, following their Grandmother's rules might prove harder than expected.

They are about to discover that their Grandmother's magical stories might not be so fantastical after all. As ancient family secrets begin to surface, the twins discover that some gifts come with a price—and some doors, once opened, can never be closed again.

Embark on a spellbinding adventure into other realms where anything is possible, as Tilly and Tom uncover their family's secret legacy, forbidden magic, and find the courage to face the unknown when darkness comes calling.



THE UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL

The summer sun hung low over Terrence Manor as the shadows stretched their way across the manicured garden. It was the afternoon of the twins' twelfth birthday when Grandma Tessa arrived at the door in the most unusual way.

A loud crashing sound came from downstairs as a motorcycle with a sidecar came smashing through the front door and came to rest on an expensive white rug. Gripping the handlebars was an older woman, her hair was grey, and the lines on her face were full of dust and dirt. As she brushed debris from her jacket, the last of the door frame fell to the floor with a thud.

Tilly and Tom raced downstairs as fast as their legs could carry them. Both were surprised to see Grandma Tessa removing a pair of riding goggles and laughing as hard as she could. Straddled on her bike, she stretched her arms out wide and yelled at the pair of them, "Don't just stand there with your mouths open, come and give me a kiss!"

"Grandma!" They both screamed as they jumped into her arms.

"Now children, what have I told you about calling me Grandma?"

"Not to call you Grandma and to call you Tessa. Because Grandma makes you sound old," they chanted in unison.

"That's right, and don't you forget it," Tessa mumbled as she adjusted her false teeth.

As far as brothers and sisters go, the twins were the best of friends. Double trouble would be the most accurate way of describing them. Born only seconds apart,

they shared luscious brown hair and big brown eyes that could charm their way out of any situation. Yet somehow, trouble always had a way of finding them.

At that moment, the twins' father, Tim, rushed in to see what all the commotion was about.

Tessa gently released her grip from the twins' embrace, and slowly got off her bike.

"Mum!" Tim yelled disapprovingly. "Why can't you park outside like everyone else?"

Tessa handed him her helmet and goggles, then replied. "It wasn't my fault son. You had squiggle-whirls running rampant in your garden. I had to swerve a number of times just to make it to your front door."

Tessa put her hand on his shoulder and continued, "No need to worry, I think I got every last one of the little critters for you. I even think there might be one stuck under my back tyre."

Tilly and Tom stood there smiling. They loved Grandma Tessa's stories. Unfortunately, their dad did not.

"Mum, you know very well that there is no such thing as squiggle-whirls, and I won't have you poisoning my children's minds with your crazy made-up stories!"

"Very well, son." Tessa said in a defeated voice as she took off her jacket. "Can you put my things away and have someone park my bike for me?"

Tim's face turned red as his body started to tense up. He had to stop and take a deep breath before replying. "Is there anything else I can do for you, Mum?" He said through gritted teeth.

"Why yes, you could get your front door fixed, it's letting in a draft."

She turned to the twins and whispered, "Meet me in the library in five minutes. There's something I want to give you."

Unable to hide their excitement, the twins promptly left the foyer and disappeared down the hallway.

Tessa turned and started to walk towards the kitchen. "I hope you have plenty of food, I'm starving."

"Mum!" Tim said, pointing at the door. "Look what you've done!"

Tessa didn't look back. She continued to walk towards the kitchen and out of sight.

Tim stood there in shock and clenched his early greying hair in both fists. Looking out through the hole that once was their front door; he saw his beautiful garden was in ruins. Tyre tracks weaved through his prize-winning roses; remnants of his favourite gnomes lay scattered around the yard. Not to mention the skid marks on the driveway that lead into his beautifully shaped hedges.

Tim walked slowly to the door, ready to let out a scream of frustration. He paused for a moment when he heard a quiet groaning, coming from inside one of the hedges. He walked forward to get a closer look. Suddenly an arm stretched up out of a mangled shrub, followed by a body as it climbed from inside the bush and fell in a lump on the ground.

It was his fiancée Sara, the children's stepmother-to-be. She slowly stood up, trying to regain her balance. Her short blonde hair was a mess of twigs and leaves, her dress was torn, and the heel of her right shoe had snapped clean off. She did not look happy at all.

"Tim! Your mother is an absolute lunatic! She could have killed me!" She yelled furiously. "Don't you think there is something you forgot to tell me?" As Sara stood there with her hands on her hips, Tim realised he had not seen her this angry before.

He thought for a second and said cautiously, "Did I forget to tell you, honey?" He forced a smile and continued, "Mum called yesterday, she said... that she's coming to visit for the twins' birthday."

Sara stormed past him through the broken doorway and hobbled up the stairs, stopping only for a moment at the top, so she could have the final say. "Well, don't just stand there! Fix the door! It's letting in a draft!"

Meanwhile, the twins were in the library eagerly waiting for their grandmother. It was one of the few rooms in the manor that they loved to play in. Every story they read was a journey in itself, inviting them to experience exhilarating quests, heart-pounding battles, and spellbinding magic. The room radiated a sense of history and grandeur. Large wooden shelves filled with leather-bound books and ancient scrolls lined the walls. A magnificent fireplace dominated one side of the room, its stone mantel featuring intricate carvings, and above it, two empty spaces—one for a sword, the other for a shield—a hint at the family's fabled past.

Tessa walked in, in a bit of a hurry, noticing the twins staring at the empty mantle. "It used to be home to our family's guardians. I have long felt their echoes, and they have guided me through visions and dreams. But their voices have gone quiet. Two very special friends I miss more than I care to admit." She sighed.

The twins turned to the sound of her voice. "Tessa!" They screamed as they ran to her again. Their arms wrapped around her, not wanting to let go.

"Why has it been so long since you last came to see us?" Tom asked, enjoying the embrace of his Grandmother.

"Oh Tom, I've had a lot of family business to attend to, but this is a very special birthday, and I wouldn't miss it for the world. I promise that you will be seeing more of me from now on." Tessa assured them both.

"We've missed you." The twins said in unison.

"I've missed you both too, but for now we need to get down to business." Tessa's voice dropped to barely above a whisper. "What I'm about to give you carries strict conditions. You must not - cannot - open it before midnight, and only when you're completely alone. Wait until the house falls silent, until every last soul is asleep. Opening it even a minute too soon..." She paused, letting the weight of her words sink in. "The consequences could be catastrophic."

Tilly and Tom exchanged uneasy glances but nodded their agreement.

"There's more." Tessa leaned closer, her eyes darting to the shadows as if something or someone may be lurking just out of sight. "You must hide it where the Rogains will never think to look. If it falls into their hands..." Her voice cracked. "It would mean the end. Not just for our world, but for all worlds."

"Who are the Rogains?" Tilly whispered.

Tessa drew a sharp breath. "Now that you're both of age, there are things you need to know." She took a moment to gather her thoughts. "I can't shield you from this anymore - they'll be coming for you soon enough. The Rogains..." Her voice trembled slightly, "they're shape-shifting reptilian beasts, able to wear any form they touch like we wear clothes. Trust becomes a luxury when they're near. Anyone - a teacher, a neighbour, even your best friend - could be one of them."

From beneath her shawl, she withdrew a small wooden box. In the dim light, the carved scene on its lid seemed to ripple with mystery. A monstrous creature with ancient crocodilian features raged behind a wooden door. On the other side stood a small boy, his young frame braced against the barrier. His hands told two stories - one gripping a glowing sword, the other clutching a key. At his feet lay a shield, its surface etched with an impression of a tree.

The twins exchanged glances, their eyes wide with questions. They stared at the tiny box, wondering what secrets could be worth such desperate measures.

Tessa pulled them close into her protective embrace. Her whisper was barely a breath against their ears.

"This must stay between us. Your father - especially your father - can't know." She pressed the box into Tom's trembling hands. "Now quick, into your pocket. Go straight to your room and find somewhere safe - somewhere they'd never think to search." Her voice hardened with urgency. "Remember, midnight, and not a moment before. Everything will become clear to you then." She gave them a gentle push toward the stairs. "Now go. And for heaven's sake, make sure that no one follows you."

The children left the library in a hurry, feeling a little anxious and scared at what their grandmother had just told them. As they walked through the foyer to the stairs, they dodged around the groundskeeper and staff as repairs to the front door commenced. They saw two workers wheeling the motorcycle carefully out the front door and down the stone steps. Trying not to look suspicious, the twins made their way upstairs to their bedroom. Tilly turned the key in the lock, securing the door behind them.

Tom removed the small box from his pocket and whispered to his sister, "Tilly, where do you think we should hide it?"

They walked around the room slowly, thinking very carefully about the safest place to hide such an item.

"I have it!" Tilly said with excitement, "We should hide it in the wall!" Tilly, being the thinker of the two, remembered a loose board on the wall. She scrambled onto her knees and pushed and pulled every board until one moved.

"Found it," Tilly boasted. "This is perfect."

Tilly pulled the bottom of the panel away from the wall while Tom slid the box into place. It was done. The small, mysterious wooden box was now out of sight, and no one would ever find it there.

Thump, thump!

The twins almost jumped out of their skin at the unexpected knock at the door, "Tilly, Tom? I want you both downstairs in half an hour for dinner," yelled their dad. "Oh, and Sara said to wear something nice. She has friends coming over to celebrate your birthday with us. And one last thing, please try to behave yourselves tonight. Sara has put a lot of work into this party for you. Don't let me down."

The two children both looked at the door and replied together, "OK Dad, we will be down soon."

Within the wonderful world of writing, I'm quite proud of what I have accomplished. Within the three short years I've been pursuing my craft, almost full-time, I've successfully published three fantasy novels and two novellas.

My fantasy world, *The Fall of Valenfaar*, is a labour of love and passion. Though I published the first novel, *Crimson Plains*, almost three years ago, the series has been in the works and has been brainstormed for the past eight years. I'm proud to say that the first novel has won the Gold Literary Titan award and I hope the rest of the published series will be lucky enough to receive the same.

By the time *Valenfaar* is completed it will be a combination of two series. *The Fall of Valenfaar* (the first four books) and *The Rise of Valenfaar* (the last three). With the culmination of these stories, I plan on wowing readers whilst answering every question that may come to mind. The books are epic in scale and I know that any lover of Epic Fantasy will find themselves glued to the pages.

Then there are my sci-fi novellas. They are a collection of stories that can be read in any order that tell the stories of the lesser-seen faces of an intergalactic war. We're not looking at war heroes; we're looking at other cogs in the machine as try to do their part to help humanity survive the war. The first two novellas, "Carrion Crew" and "Out of Breath" tell the stories of a scavenger and mechanic, respectively. Future plans call for stories to be told from the perspective of a medic, a survivor, a low-rank fighter pilot, amongst others. Nice and easy, low-risk, beach reads for people on the move.

At this moment, I am prepping to release *The Crimson Plains, Second Edition*, for the world to see. The book never felt truly finished to me (despite winning an award) and I always planned on going back and tidying it up for my peace of mind. As soon as that's out and into the world I will be continuing to the last book in the *Fall of Valenfaar* series: *Chorus of the Sands* so I can get that into everyone's hands this year.

There are other series and books planned. As of checking my spreadsheet, there are over 40 stories that I should see published one day. They vary in genre from fantasy to historical fiction, supernatural western, to horror. They also vary in length from small series to large and even standalone stories. If someone keeps their eye on me, eventually something is bound to pop up that will catch their interest. If there isn't anything, well ... I just haven't gotten to it yet.

Adam Parsec

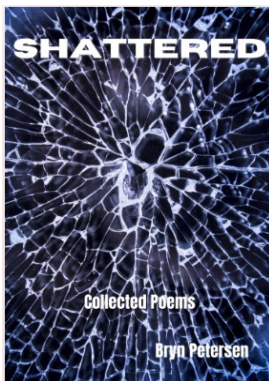
ABOUT THE PRODUCER AND EDITOR, BRYONY PETERSEN

Bryony Petersen is an independent writer of several books, including:

‘Another Arbor’ (a police detective crime thriller)



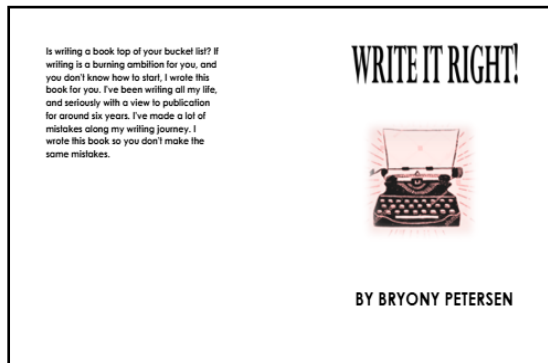
the sequel to ‘Another Arbor’, ‘Take a Perfect Picture’



‘Shattered’, a poetry collection



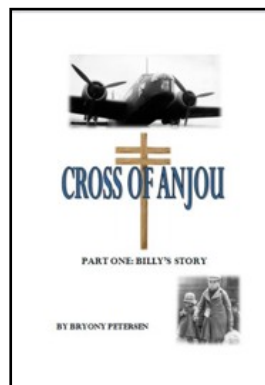
‘Kill Plan’ a short story anthology



‘Write It Right!’ is Bryony Petersen’s personal journey and overview of writing and becoming an independent writer:

Bryony is a native of Yorkshire, where she still lives.

She is currently working on a wartime adventure series of novellas set during World War 2 and seen through the eyes of an evacuee and the friend he encounters along the way. The first book in the ‘Cross of Anjou’ series is due out in the late autumn of 2025. All her books are available through links on her author website, bryonpetersen.co.uk, where you can also find links to all her social network platforms, blogs, and more.



Lastly, a very sincere and heartfelt thank you to Jordan Cimenski, who very kindly designed the front cover of this magazine and transformed my meagre efforts into something fabulous, wonderful and entirely fitting the extremely high standard of the magazine’s contents. Thank you Jordan from the bottom of my heart – you beautifully illustrated my vision for the magazine and I am sincerely grateful.