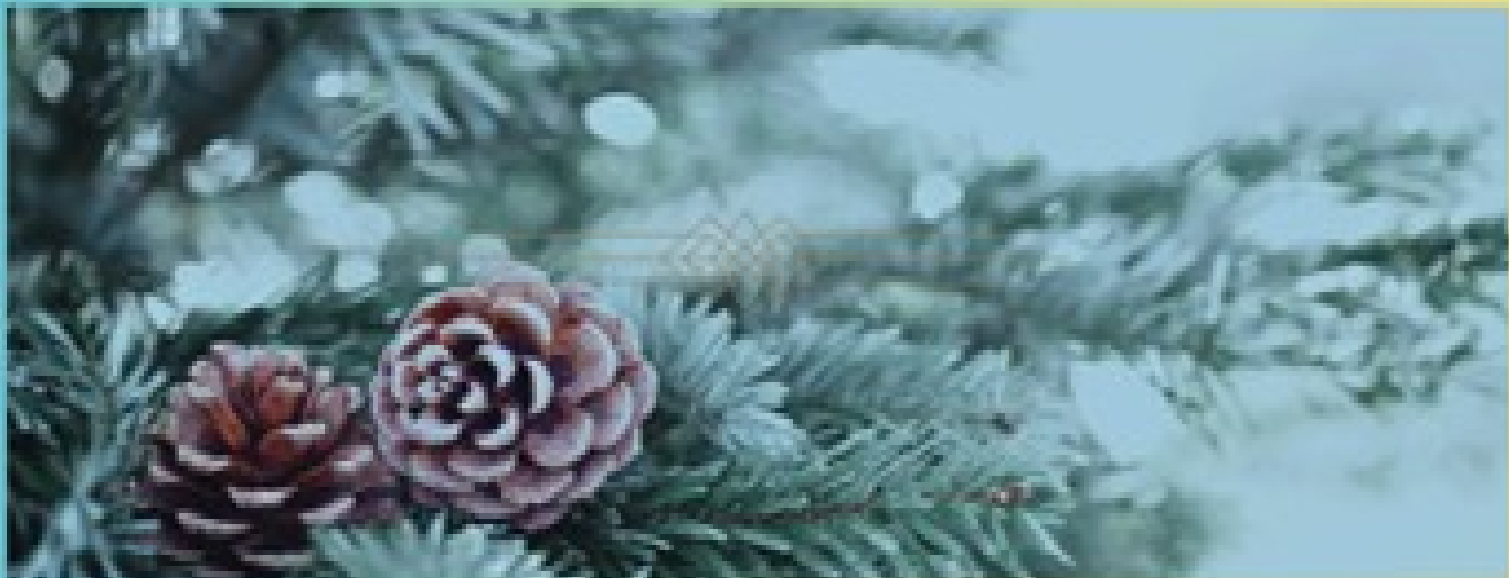




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The Indie Writers' Digest



**Edited by
Bryony Petersen**



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FOREWORD BY THE EDITOR



For the first Christmas edition of the Indie Writers' Digest, I thought I would take a look at some of the ways the world around us celebrate the birth of Christ.

For example, there is no Christmas national holiday in Japan. However, many people celebrate by enjoying a KFC, which tradition has its roots in the 1970s when KFC promoted its Party Barrel for Christmas. This led to long lines at KFC restaurants during the Christmas season.

The way Christmas is celebrated today has changed since I was a child. It set me thinking, what of well-established "traditions"? Where do they come from?

The practice of decorating with wreaths of Ivy (to symbolise the coming of Jesus to earth) and holly (thought to protect against the Pagans and witches, with the red berries symbolising the blood of Christ and the crown of thorns he wore on the cross) dates back to early Tudor times in the UK.

The Nativity Scene beloved by many dates back even further to Italy and Saint Francis of Assisi, who popularised them. They can comprise many forms and the complexity of the grouping, how elaborate the figurines depends on region and cultural differences.

The traditional colours of Christmas are red, green and gold. Red is for the blood of Christ, green signifies eternal life and gold is the first of the gifts brought to Jesus in the stable by the Magi, denoting Royalty.

Records of the use of a Christmas tree can be traced back to German Lutherans in the mid-1500s. It became a custom to put candles on the branches, and later still a star at the very top of the tree to symbolise the star of Bethlehem. It was not until probably the mid- or late eighteenth century when the alternative of an angel was used to denote the angels mentioned in the nativity of Jesus.

In the UK, Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria, popularised many of the customs we take for granted today: placing garlands, candy treats and decorations on the tree, and placing gifts under it. We also have the Victorians to thank for the practice of sending Christmas cards.

As the readers and contributors to this magazine may be aware, I am a British independent writer, and proud of my heritage and birthplace.

At the moment, or so it seems to me (and I appreciate recollections may vary) the world is experiencing a period of great change.

Perspectives, attitudes and values appear to be changing and shifting, and while changes are inevitable, one thing I believe that should remain constant is kindness, respect and compassion for others. I am not sure I can be any other way. If that makes me old fashioned or outdated, I'm content to remain kind, respectful and compassionate.

At this time of year, I like to remember the true story of a Christmas football match, played on No Man's Land in 1914/15 between the British Expeditionary Force army and the German army.

Apparently, it was an amicable match, concluding with handshakes all round. Even though they were at war, they found a shared moment of peace.

A little more than a hundred years on and possibly peace may resume between the Ukraine and Russia. I sincerely hope and want to believe it will be possible.

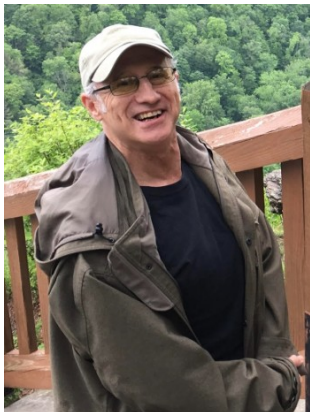
I hope you enjoy this issue's collection of stories. Some are from independent writers new to the Digest. Other stories have been contributed by independent writers who have featured in previous issues.

I hope you have enjoyed this short foray into the traditions of Christmas.

It only remains for me to wish everyone a very Merry Christmas and a Happy, healthy, prosperous New Year.

Bryony Petersen

INTRODUCING ROBERT FENHAGEN



As a child, I remember to this day (undoubtedly influenced by Mighty Mouse and other cartoon heroes, I used to dream that I'd jumped off the tiny platform at the very top of one of those impossibly high circus trapeze poles (the ones so high they're ready to touch the tent's ceiling) the giant striped circus tent), swooped down and at the last second pulled up in order to save - who knows? Maybe my Mom or sister?

Sometimes I wonder if it might be - perhaps a Freudian thing, of WRITING.

Jumping off and plunging into a new story??

In 3rd grade, I was tasked with reading 'Ferdinand, the Bull' to the 2nd Graders. I wasn't nervous at all, they were only 2nd Graders: a bunch of babies.

It was there in that 2nd Grade class that I realized what power words had. Not one of those children was day-dreaming; they were wide-eyed intent on hearing all about a flower loving bull.

I suppose what I'm saying is that from the odd dreams of a child to a 3rd grader who has a childhood epiphany, at around the age of 20, became, without realizing it, a wordsmith.

Be it writing up a final paper in college, or working (during the summer, where at the end of my shift, I hid in a utility closet to write, I wrote.

I may not be good, but I am me; as Kurt Vonnegut would say: "And so it goes."

ON WRITING By Robert Fenhagen

Ah, nativity.

It's been said that it takes a village to raise a child, so perhaps it takes a village to raise a writer.

Now, the phrase, 'raising a writer' may be a misnomer, as writers often know or suspect that's what they are early on.

For so long, I thought writing was a solitary business, but, surprise, surprise, the whole thing about a tortured, hard-drinking, solitary soul is bunk.

As a therapist I consulted to help me with concentration and enthusiasm about my chosen field said: "Well, you know, writers don't need to be depressed and withdrawn to be writers."

Perhaps a more recent fantasy might be-- the lone writer in a cabin, fuelled by coffee and genius, wrestling a masterpiece from the ether. Romantic, maybe, but freaking misleading! That's because (here's the thing) yes, writing requires solitude, but to finish a book, to hang in there through the crazy-making editing, I think that takes a community.

More than once, I've found myself staring at my manuscript, wondering why I was still persisting with it. After all, I don't have a deadline, I don't have a contract, and it's just me, the page and the doubt.

It's not the grammar or plot twists that get you. It's the quiet moments when no one's asking for your work, and you start to wonder if it matters. In those moments, connection is everything.

Stephen King put it well: "Writing is a lonely job. Having someone who believes in you makes a lot of difference. They don't have to make speeches. Just believing is usually enough."

I think isolation makes the job harder.

I have often thought I'm doing this--it's mine, so I don't need anyone's approval as long as I'm happy with it.

Of course, self-satisfaction is paramount, but, as has been said, 'We are social creatures and so maybe we need to be more sociable.

Early on, I joined writers groups, but it always left me feeling unfulfilled. I have no doubt that part of that was that I was still, 'Me, me, me-ing', and wondering why more attention wasn't on my stuff?

As a writer-friend I really respect says, "Isolation breeds self-doubt.", which is true.

My job in a writers group is to join in.

When you're alone with your work for too long, your perspective shifts, and ideas and passages that felt inspired and urgent, seem trivial. The inner critic gets louder. We need solitude to write, but when solitude turns into disconnection, it can definitely sabotage your progress on YOUR work.

Remember, writing is work, so if we can't whistle, we can reach out.

Even Snow White had the dwarfs....

By Robert Fenhagen

INTRODUCING PETER BRADBURY

I am a dark thriller writer although I have penned a couple of murder tales. I am



particularly drawn to characters that act out their dark thoughts, (which most of us don't do), and where it takes them.

My books are fast reads that hook you from the first page, but the content may make some people uncomfortable and feel disturbed.

I was born and raised near Manchester, England, and moved to the USA in 1994 after getting married to my American wife. I was a traditional butler at that time, and continued to be until the recession in 2009 led to me losing a job and my credit rating. The credit score matters

in the States, and I was unable to recover from it. I then worked in the catering trade until eventually retiring.

It was my career as a butler that caused me to start writing, as many people asked me what it was like to work for very wealthy people. So I took a part of my near 25 years experience and turned it into a murder mystery that takes place in an English mansion.

CATCH By Peter Bradbury



PROLOGUE

Alec and George Savvas both hail from Clayton, California, a town situated just north of San Francisco in the Bay Area. Alec is the elder sibling and possesses both striking good looks and exceptional intelligence, although both brothers earned their business degrees from Stanford University.

After both their parents died in a car wreck, George stayed at the family farm to raise sheep, as his father had done, while Alec moved into the city to emulate his mother's work as a business advisor and trader. He is very successful and his advice is sought worldwide, after word-of-mouth recommendations.

Both brothers are introverted and prefer spending time together instead of with others. However, George is currently engaged to be married while Alec is known for his promiscuous behaviour with women.

His exceptional good looks, intelligence, and wealth make him irresistible to the most stunning girls. This has always been a source of envy for his younger brother. George is by no means ugly, but during his college days, he resorted to rape when he was mocked by a pretty girl. He found that he enjoyed the control that it gave him, and so it became his dark and twisted secret.

Alec harboured a dark secret of his own that he had never shared with anyone. He often dreamed about murdering a woman, simply to prevent her from being with another man after him. However, he knew it had to be done under the perfect circumstances to avoid any suspicion or investigation.

Whenever he started dating someone, he would secretly follow her around, disguising himself as a homeless person to observe her true character. He looked on these women as prospects to kill. When he felt the time was right, he would take the women to the family farm, but he struggled to find the courage to kill.

Finally, one day he did. He had meticulously planned every detail, from the choice of drugs to the type of knife and even a plastic sheet to contain the body. But as he drove the knife into the beautiful woman's chest, he felt nothing but disgust. The blood staining his skin and clothes made him cringe. He didn't regret his actions, only the mess it left behind.

Alec was prepared to turn himself in to the authorities and accept the consequences of his actions after the disastrous event. Just as he was about to make the call, George returned home. George had acquired skills in butchering sheep and had bought an incinerator for disposing of carcasses, making it no shock to him when he saw the lifeless body. He reassured his brother that he would handle it and told him that if he ever needed to dispose of another woman, all he had to do was leave her unconscious and

sedated.

George's offer to help had an ulterior motive, driven by his own twisted desire to have complete control over a beautiful woman and inflict terror upon her. It was the perfect scenario for both brothers.

Despite the fact that the women Alec brought to his farm had few friends and no family nearby, they were eventually reported missing. Detective Lorena Garcia was assigned to the case and she suspected foul play. She identified Alec as a suspect but was frustrated by the lack of evidence to support her suspicions.

Facing mounting police pressure against them, Alec and George Savvas had no choice but to flee San Francisco to avoid being arrested for their numerous murders. Despite a lack of physical proof, they knew it was only a matter of time before the circumstantial evidence would catch up to them.

Using different identities to avoid being tracked, the brothers travelled far and wide. Eventually, they settled into their new homes in Argentina. George bought a winery, while his suave and affluent older brother Alec enjoys a life of luxury in Buenos Aires as a business advisor to clients all around the world.

Despite Alec's charm and wealth attracting the most beautiful women, George often goes unnoticed due to his less refined looks and behaviour. He does dress better than he used to, but he is still in the shadow of his older and more handsome brother.

In this sequel to *Prospects*, we check in with the Savvas brothers as they lead peaceful lives in Argentina, free from any further criminal activity since leaving the Bay Area. Since leaving the San Francisco area, George has discovered the world of BDSM, where his intensity and underlying darkness are seen as assets rather than liabilities. For the first time in his life, he feels truly accepted and understood. The controlled environment of the dungeons allows him to channel his violent urges into consensual play, giving him a sense of power and control he'd only experienced when he had defenceless women at his mercy.

Meanwhile, Alec's charm and wealth continue to open doors, both in business and in the bedroom. He has cultivated a network of influential clients and beautiful lovers, always careful to keep his true nature hidden beneath a veneer of sophistication. He misses the old days of stealthily watching the women he wants to make disappear, but he enjoys his life in Buenos Aires. He understands that he is sexually attractive to women, and he makes the most of it, not caring in the least if the women are in relationships. Married women are his favourite conquest these days - the forbidden fruit that reminds him of darker and dangerous times.

George had initially intended to marry before he left San Francisco, but ultimately remains single. In contrast, Alec has never seriously entertained the idea of marriage, though he enjoys the affection his partners show him. He simply cannot commit to one person and lacks any paternal urges. While he knows about George's involvement in BDSM, it holds no appeal for him personally, though he does not judge it. Despite living in different places miles away from each other, the brothers make a point to attend sports events together and have a close relationship without any other family members

present. Thanks to inheritance from their late parents, various properties, and Alec's successful business ventures, the brothers are extremely affluent. They manage all of their assets through an off shore management company and have multiple identities, allowing them to move around quickly and discreetly. Being constantly aware of the search for them, they take every precaution to avoid being caught. With the resources at their disposal, they can disappear at the slightest hint of a problem.

Detective Garcia hasn't forgotten the brothers, and with assistance from the brother of one of the victims, she keeps an eye open for any news. Now promoted to the rank of Inspector, she is determined to catch the evil brothers one day and bring justice to the grieving families.



CHAPTER 1

George's pulse hammered in his ears, a frantic rhythm that mirrored the chaos erupting within him. Sweat beaded on his brow as he fought to steady his breathing, to quell the nauseating swirl of panic that threatened to consume him whole. The walls of the room seemed to press closer, the air thick with the gravity of what had just transpired.

The encounter itself had been a heady blend of control and exhilaration, the kind of primal dance George craved and found satisfaction in. He remembered the way his heart had raced with dark anticipation as Maria Rosa walked through the door, her presence commanding yet laced with an intoxicating vulnerability.

She was a gorgeous woman! Her blonde locks cascading down her shoulders, and a body that could rival a lingerie model. She was the epitome of beauty and sensuality, which made it surprising that she enjoyed being hurt during sexual encounters.

With every knot he tied, every deliberate caress of leather against skin, George felt the power coursing through him, feeding the twisted desires that lurked beneath his unassuming exterior. The crack of the whip, the sharp gasps that punctuated the silence, the scent of sweat and fear mingling in the charged air – it was a symphony of sensation, a dark ritual that left him feeling both dominant and utterly consumed by his own savage needs.

The room had been transformed into a tableau of forbidden desires unleashed, the stark contrast of black restraints against pale flesh, the gleaming metal of the cuffs catching the dim light as they clinked together with every movement. And Maria Rosa, she had met each moment with a fervour that matched his own, her eyes alight with the fire of someone who walked willingly into the abyss and revelled in its depths.

But as the intensity crested, as George wielded his power with a precision borne of years indulging in the shadowy corners of his psyche, he hadn't seen it coming- the shift from thrilling to terrifyingly real. The signs were subtle at first, lost in the throes of their shared carnal ballet, until the pounding of his heart had drowned out everything else, leaving him alone in the aftermath of a scene gone terribly wrong.

Now, with the rush of adrenaline ebbing away, leaving behind only tremors of dread, George Savvas faced the reality of his actions - a reality that threatened to unravel everything.

Time slowed to a crawl for George as he knelt beside Maria Rosa, the scent of sweat, perfume, and body deodorant, still hanging in the air. His hands hovered over her chest, trembling as they searched for the rise and fall that would signal life. But there was nothing - just an eerie stillness that seemed to mock his frantic pulse.

"Maria Rosa?" he whispered, his voice barely carrying across the room. No response. He pressed his ear against her parted lips, praying for even the faintest hint of breath. Silence filled the space where her vitality should have been, and with it came the crushing weight of realization.

She was unresponsive. Not breathing.

Panic clawed at his insides, raking through his composure with merciless talons. His mind raced, images and thoughts colliding - Alec's cold instructions on 'handling situations, his own dark impulses, the smiling face of Maria Rosa before this twisted dance began. This wasn't part of the plan. This wasn't supposed to happen.

"Come on, breathe," he urged, his voice laced with desperation. When she didn't stir, the room spun around him, a vortex of fear and disbelief. With shaking hands, he reached for her neck, searching for a pulse - a sign, any sign that this nightmare hadn't just become reality. There was nothing.

"Dammit!" George's exclamation was a growl, fuelled by terror and guilt. He needed Alec. Now!

His gaze swept the dishevelled room, and he spotted his phone lying innocently atop a nearby dresser. He lurched toward it, his movements erratic, like a puppet jerked by unseen strings. The device felt alien in his sweaty grasp, slipping almost from his fingers as he fumbled to unlock it.

"George?" Alec's voice, cool and composed, was a stark contrast to the cacophony of dread in George's head. It was a voice that promised control, a voice accustomed to cleaning up messes far worse than spilled wine.

"Something's wrong. She's not—" George couldn't finish. His throat constricted around the words, as if saying them out loud would cement the horror into existence.

"George, breathe. What happened?" Alec's words were a silken thread in the murky waters of George's mind.

George clutched the phone to his ear, his heart hammering against his ribs. He knew what came next - the meticulous planning, the need for precision and calmness. But as he knelt there, the chilling stillness of Maria Rosa, a haunting presence beside him, all he could feel was the terrifying spiral of his world as it threatened to come crashing down around him.

Yet this was unlike George. He'd taken lives before in the Bay Area of San Francisco, and it hadn't bothered him in the slightest.

"She...I can't-she stopped breathing," George gasped into the phone, his voice a shattered whisper of fear.

"Who is she? Is she breathing now, George? Did you check her pulse? Where are you?" Alec's tone was steady, betraying none of the urgency that pulsed through George's veins. "No. No pulse. It was just supposed to be a game, Alec! A damn game! I met her online and she came over to the winery." George's breath hitched, his words tumbling out in a frenzied rush.

"Remember San Francisco, George? We've been through worse. You need to focus. We have contingencies for this." The calm assurance in Alec's voice was almost hypnotic, a balm to the storm raging inside George.

"Contingencies." The word echoed in George's head, a lifeline back to a time when another chaos had erupted and they'd emerged unscathed - the escape from San Francisco, their orchestrated disappearance into the night.

"Exactly! Just like before. Clean and precise. Stay with me, brother." Alec's command was soft but insistent, an anchor in the swirling panic.

George whispered, desperate for Alec's guidance in this moment of chaos. "Okay, I hear you."

"First things first. Can we make it look like an accident if the police get involved?" Alec inquired.

"It might be hard because I've strangled her," George gasped. "She was supposed to let me know when it became too much, but she didn't."

"Does she come from a powerful family?" Alec wasn't well-versed in the sexual activities his brother engaged in, but he knew that wealthy families tended to attract more attention from the authorities.

George's mind raced, trying to recall any details about Maria Rosa's background. "I...I think so. She mentioned something about her father being in politics. Shit, Alec, this is bad."

"Calm down," Alec's voice was steady, a stark contrast to George's panic. "We need to move quickly. Is there any evidence linking her to you?"

George glanced around the room, his eyes falling on Maria Rosa's purse and phone. "Her things are here. And there's... there's evidence of what we were doing."

"Listen carefully," Alec's tone sharpened. "You need to remove all traces of her visit. Pack up anything she brought, any toys or equipment you used. We'll dispose of it later. Wipe down surfaces for fingerprints. Use bleach on any bodily fluids."

"Got it" George replied, calming down.

"Leave the place as anonymous as possible. No traces. No memories," Alec continued:

"The GPS on her phone and in her car will show that she went to your winery, but that can't be avoided. So we need to create another destination. Keep her phone and her purse with you, but take her car, with her in the trunk."

"What do you want me to do with them?" George asked, rehearsing each step as though it were a twisted script he'd been forced to learn. His mind spun with fear and guilt, the weight of his actions crushing him from within. His despair came from the belief that he'd really let his brother down. Alec loved his new life in Argentina, as George did, but now he'd ruined it.

"Head to a rough part of Palermo, and wear gloves and a large hat. When you find a quiet spot, text whoever she spoke to last on her phone, saying you are meeting someone, but won't be long. Take the cash out of her purse, but then dump everything else in a trash can. You need to make it look like she was robbed and killed."

"I understand, but don't you think I should just call the police and explain it was an

accident?" The words were barely a whisper.

"They could believe you, George, but you might still be looking at a manslaughter charge. We can't risk you going to prison here. It's better we both leave, and if we hear that you are free from suspicion, then we can always return. It's all okay, George. So do you know what to do now?"

"Yes I do."

"Good. Keep your head down and then dispose of the hat and gloves some distance away from her car and get a cab. I'll meet you at the airport. And George?" Alec's voice took on a firmer edge. "Act normal. Any hint of panic, and we're done. We blend in; we disappear, just like we did when we left San Francisco. I'll handle the rest from here. Just follow my instructions to the letter."

With his brother's reassurance, he began to prepare for their departure from Argentina, but George struggled to redress Maria Rosa's lifeless form, his hands shaking as he worked. The leather corset and thigh-high boots she had changed into for their encounter now seemed like a cruel mockery of the passion they had shared. With each tug and adjustment, memories of their frenzied encounter flashed through his mind, intensifying his guilt and fear.

Finally, he managed to get her back into her original jeans and T-shirt, erasing any obvious signs of their illicit rendezvous. He gathered her belongings, methodically wiping down surfaces as Alec had instructed. The room that had been a playground of dark desires now felt suffocating, heavy with the weight of what he'd done.

With a deep breath, George hoisted Maria Rosa's body over his shoulder, staggering slightly under the dead weight. He made his way to her car, constantly scanning for any witnesses.

Beforehand, he had checked outside and ensured that there were no unwanted visitors. With the trunk of her car open, he gently placed her inside before closing it firmly, taking care not to leave any fingerprints behind.

Before they had left San Francisco, Alec had emphasized the importance of having an escape plan which was basically a bag they could grab at a moment's notice, that held anything important to them. They had done the same thing in Argentina, so George didn't have to run around finding things. Being rich, they didn't have to worry about material items they could replace, but George did have some toiletries and a change of clothing already in his bag.

As he zipped it closed, he couldn't help but feel a sense of apprehension mingled with excitement for this next adventure.

After taking a good look around the bathroom that Maria Rosa had used, the basement, and his living space, George locked up and took a good look around at his winery. There were no tears, but there was a little sadness.

He had managed to find some gloves and a large floppy hat that belonged to one of his

employees in their staff room, so after making sure he had all of Maria Rosa's belongings, some in the trunk and some beside his own bag on the front passenger seat, he drove her car away from the winery.

George drove calmly and at the speed limit to a run-down part of Palermo, where the Mercedes certainly seemed out of place. Finding a very quiet street, he grabbed his bag and Maria Rosa's purse and left the unlocked car where it was, along with the car keys on the seat. He had already taken all the cash from her wallet, which was inside her purse, so after a few blocks he saw a dumpster down a side street and threw it in. After a few more blocks, he also disposed of his hat and gloves in a trash can, and then hailed a cab to the airport.

Unbeknownst to the Savvas brothers, a pair of dogged detectives was about to get on their trail, their every move being tracked by a woman with a personal vendetta against them. And she would stop at nothing to bring them to justice for the lives they'd so callously taken.

VOICES OF REASON by James Gordon Yeo

In the absence of light darkness will rule.

Picture yourself in a large crowd with hundreds of people talking at all different levels in a conference room of a large hotel. All around you, you see people and inside you are beginning to panic. This is something that I deal with when I am having a bad day with my schizophrenia. On a normal day, I see and hear three people that are not there. It is hard for me to know what is real and what is not. I do have ways to figure it out sometimes, but it does not always work. This is one of the symptoms of my illness. Every day I take pills that make it easier for me to function, but they make me feel intoxicated all day long. At times, I have had situations where my illness has progressed to the point that it took me out of the career that I loved which is the Culinary Arts Field. I would not wish this on anyone, including my enemies, as my mind is my enemy.

With all mental health problems, there is a stigma that we are to be feared because that is what the media and movies want society to believe. Over the past many years since I was diagnosed in January of 2005, I was told that I would never work again, and I would most likely end up being in and out of hospital for the rest of my life.

In the years after I was released into the care of my parents in the spring of 2005, I returned to work, and I have held full time employment until September of 2020 when I had to retire. I have only been back to the hospital twice and the last time was in 2010. The one thing that I have done is come to the plate for people who suffer from mental health problems saying that we can do anything that we put our mind to. I took to writing as my platform because of the difficulty level and it will always be available for everyone to read. With some books published and a few interviews that I have had, I have shown that the mentally ill can be a positive part of society.

The road has not been easy for me as I go through times when I want to end it all and just let the negative outlook that society has for the mentally ill rule the common belief for

everyone. I have been met with all kinds of challenges to the point where I want to work, however I cannot get help when I am unable to work which does happen. Out of the first fifteen years, I have probably missed over two years of work because of sick days. Most employers do not like to hear that you have one of the most feared mental health problems, which is schizophrenia, during an interview where I must tell them.

Most people feel that if they are getting their rights and freedoms taken away from them, they are being punished. Unfortunately, with people who suffer from mental health problems they have to follow a different set of rules, which is the Mental Health Act. It varies from country to country what happens to those who suffer. I am lucky that I live in Canada where even though I have to follow our Mental Health Act, I can still have a voice and live a good life. The only downfall is that I must see my doctors on a regular basis and take my pills.

If I stop taking my pills I will end up in the hospital again, if I miss an appointment with my doctor, I better have a good reason. To be honest, most people who are diagnosed with a mental health problem, they give up on their life because they become just a number in the system. At times, I have thought of giving up on life and it is something that I have tried. The reason why I have continued to live a full life is because it is just a diagnosis and it does not have to be the end of the world.

The one thing is that mental health problems come in all forms and sizes. It does not see colour, race or sex. It is the mind that is affected, which is what makes it so hard to treat properly. The doctors are only making an educated guess with the pills, and they react differently with each person. As every day comes, there is a movement that is slowly taking to the media about those who have mental health problems.

In the past, there were doctors were doing all kinds of experiments on the mentally ill and I do not want to go into it because it pains me to no end. The one thing is that most people who have mental health problems are extremely intelligent on all ends of the spectrum. Some, like me, are into the arts, others run their own companies or are CEOs

of major companies and these are the ones that are not noticed, because they seem normal to everyone around them. It is time that society sees us for who we are; we are just people that have our own battles.

I know that for the first five years after I was diagnosed, I had given up on life. I was drunk all the time because I did not want to face the fact that I had an illness. It took the doctor that I was seeing to show me my future that I would end up being hospitalized for the rest of my life if I did not stop drinking. After I stopped, I took it on myself to do some soul searching and I started to write a journal which is when I decided to write a book series loosely based on my life of dealing with my illness. It is the An Individual's Innocence Series.

With all my writing, I want people to know that we, the mentally ill, have a voice to and we deserve the same treatment as someone who is considered normal. We have feelings and some of us have extreme thoughts, however, we should be able to have the same quality of life as everyone else.

With this being said, you can make your own views on the matter because we do not want you to change your mind, but maybe open your perspective on what we deal with in our lives.

Stay safe.

This essay is from my book called Echoes of Yesterday. Available only on Amazon.

INTRODUCING SUZY SUSAN

Wings Unseen is a love letter to my Mum. It tells the story of her WW2 service as the second in command of an airbase with over 2,000 personnel. I am so proud of her, and wish I had told her before she passed.



Two amazing things happened when I was writing Wings Unseen. Australian Pilot Officer Wamsay had been maligned by history, and I wanted to rectify that. Wamsay was a perfect fit to be Mum's best friend, and has become one of the most beloved characters in the book. I found out after publishing, that Diana Ramsay was posted to Mum's airbase for two years, so they almost certainly knew each other. I am making an assumption here, but are you shocked that you assumed she was a man?

The second amazing thing is that the training dome in Northern Ireland where Mum was a torpedo attack trainer is still standing! I discovered that a local trust had spent 12 years trying to restore the anti-aircraft gunnery training dome. I contacted them and told them what they really had, and sent through Mum's memoirs where she had gone into great detail about how it worked. The top-secret dome was extremely high tech, one of a kind in the world, and was run by women. I had contacted them five days before their last-ditch attempt at gaining funding, and they were granted £900,000 on the spot. Even more incredibly, it was Mum's birthday that day. I am quite sure she was up in heaven orchestrating the entire thing.

These stories are what Wings Unseen is truly about. The 250,000 everyday women who made up one quarter of the RAF in almost every role. They were on the frontline, being bombed and strafed on the airbases. They even flew aircraft over Britain, shooting down German planes. In just one generation, we have completely forgotten what they did. Our movies have written them out of history; have you ever seen a war movie where 1 in 4 of the soldiers are women?

It is my hope that you will read Wings Unseen, and that it will inspire you to research and celebrate the contributions of the women in your family.

It has been 80 years since the end of WW2. Surely, it is time to tell HER story.

Suzy

Wings Unseen is available on Amazon in eBook, paperback, and free to read on Kindle Unlimited. <https://amzn.eu/d/7hl9kh8>



WINGS UNSEEN By Suzy Susan

CHAPTER ONE

AUGUST 18, 1940 THE HARDEST DAY

Diana

A feeling of impending doom has spread over Britain. They are now at war with Germany. England's south coast looks over Nazi-occupied France, and it doesn't take much effort to imagine the might of the German army looking back; a terrifying horde waiting for their moment to pounce. Royal Air Force bases are the first line of defence and are on high alert. They wait. And they wait. Weeks pass, but there is no invasion. Everyone has started calling it *The Phony War*.

At RAF Kenley fighter base in south London, a group of Airwomen are enduring yet another gas attack drill, their energy and enthusiasm at an all-time low. Section Officer Diana Buckingham tries to keep enthusiasm up, but even she has begun to question the point of it all. 'Well done everyone. Now let's get to the mess for lunch,' Diana says, trying to sound positive. As the words leave her mouth, she feels the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. There is something wrong. She hears a quivering voice. 'Ma'am?'

Diana turns to the source of the voice, an RAF Meteorologist that Diana had only welcomed to base yesterday. Her eyes are wide as saucers. 'W-w-what's that?' she manages to stammer.

All eyes sweep across the aerodrome to where she is pointing. A dozen German bombers are hurtling toward them.

The Tannoy base speaker system squawks to life 'Controller here: Imminent attack. Come to readiness! Take cover! This is not a drill!'

Diana looks at the women under her command, and then looks to the nearest trench. It is near the hangars over 250 yards away. *Damn! Why did I choose the far dispersal area for the drills today?* No time for regrets now.

'Pick up your equipment and get to the trench. Now!' she yells.

‘Ma’am, permission to go to the control tower,’ requests Flight Sergeant Booth, an air traffic control radar operator.

‘Denied!’

The women take off sprinting, suddenly thankful for the Physical Training PT sessions that they have endured every morning since enlisting. The sky grows darker as the aircraft bear down on them, closer and closer, while the trench seems to move further away with every step.

At last, they arrive at the trench. Diana holds open the blast door as the women dive through. She looks up to see a bomber release its bomb load, twenty 1000-pound bombs. The bombs plummet screaming in a direct line toward them. ‘Move it! Go! Go! Go!’

The last Airwoman dives past Diana and she follows, pulling the blast door shut behind her. In that instant, the first bomb hits with an ear-splitting explosion. The blast door comes off its hinges and the corrugated iron of the shelter cracks. A hot blast of air throws Diana across the shelter. She finds herself face down on the floorboards, her tin hat knocked off and lolling on the floor. She hears a second bomb, but then it is just a deafening and terrifying roar. The acrid smell of explosives burns her nostrils. The women around her are covered in dirt and curled in foetal position, their hands over their ears to block out the deafening noise. Just when she thinks that the onslaught will never end, the bombing stops with an uneasy silence.

‘Is anyone injured?’ yells Diana, the ringing in her ears disguising the excessive volume of her voice.

No response. Thank God for small mercies.

‘Ma’am, the shelter’s on fire!’ yells one of the new recruits. Sergeant Walker grabs the fire extinguisher and attacks the fire.

‘Can you get it under control?’ Diana demands.

‘No ma’am, the fire extinguisher is making it worse!’

Diana is alarmed to see the fire spreading like molten liquid across the floor of the trench. Recognising the makeup of the incendiary bomb, Diana yells to Sergeant Walker. 'Turn off the fire extinguisher! It's an incendiary bomb!'

Sergeant Walker looks up; fire is beginning to lick at the sticky petroleum gel that the bomb has sprayed on the wooden beams. It won't be long until the trench is an inferno and the roof collapses in on them. 'We have to get out of here!' she yells.

Diana throws herself at blast door. The explosion has damaged the door, jamming it awkwardly into the frame. The Airwomen rush to help.

'All together, 1-2-3-Push!' Diana yells. Nothing. The acrid smoke stings their eyes and makes it hard to breathe.

'2-3 Push!' The door opens an inch, letting in a small gush of air that transforms the flames into an inferno.

'Push!' Diana manages to wheeze. The door screeches and fights against them then swings open, releasing the women into the raging battle outside.

They take off sprinting for the next trench. A squadron of RAF Spitfires has joined the battle overhead. Diana sees a bomber pulling up and away, its full silhouette splayed in front of one of the Spitfires. A stream of bullets pours from the Spitfire's machine guns, shredding the fuselage of the Dornier. Inky clouds billow from the wings, and then the aircraft tips awkwardly, and plunges to the ground. The crew have no time to escape at such a low altitude.

Diana hears the blast of a Parachute and Cable crew taking aim at a low flying bomber. A massive cable shoots into the sky in front of the aircraft, reaches its apex, then a parachute pops open, suspending the cable in mid-air for a few gravity-defying seconds. The pilot sees the cable and rolls the plane, angling the wings vertically to avoid the cable. Too late, the cable wraps around the left wing. The plane lurches forward, then hits the ground seconds later, bursting into a ball of flame. The women are knocked off their feet by the impact. They get up and stagger to safety. Sergeant Walker arrives first. She wrenches open the door and stops in her tracks. 'Shit! It's full!' she yells.

Diana helps Sergeant Walker reseal the protective door on the Airwomen and men crammed inside the shelter, and then looks around to assess their options. A second wave of enemy aircraft is almost upon them. A dozen Stuka dive bombers and double that number of Messerschmitt fighters. They won't make it to the safety of the next trench in time.

'Take cover behind the trench! Get a sandbag in front of you! Gas masks on!' 'An' strap your tin 'ats down tight!' adds Sergeant Walker.

The women dive for cover. A Stuka dive bomber flies over them, flips and swoops into a steep descent straight at them. The bomber screams, louder and louder as the distance between them narrows. The bomber flares with a roar and a shock wave that hits Diana like a fist to the stomach. The pilot releases four bombs. They are so close they can see the fins guiding the bomb toward them. The bombs explode around them, sending the women airborne. Every impact reverberates through their bodies, shaking bone from sinew. Diana feels as though she is breaking into pieces. Another bomb explodes nearby. Caustic smoke and dust fill the air, but Diana's greater worry is the invisible killer of chemical warfare. The sound of her rasping breath in her gas mask echoes reassuringly in her ears.

Three Messerschmitts line up the trenches and sweep past them, strafing the ground with hundreds of bullets. Diana feels a *thuck* against the sandbag in front of her chest. The sandbag explodes, spraying sand and sackcloth in an abrasive cloud. The sandbag has stopped the bullet, but the force of it reverberates through her body. She feels one of her ribs crack, no longer able to absorb the pressure. Diana is terrified for her troops; they won't be able to survive much longer out in the open. 'Four more bombers! We can do this!' she yells, trying to convince herself. She doesn't know it yet, but a third wave of 150 enemy aircraft is about to hit.

INTRODUCING EMILY B. SCIALOM



Emily B. Scialom was born on July 27th 1984 in Hackney, London. She is now a multi-genre author of seven books based in Cambridge, England. Having grown up in the alternative communities of Glastonbury, Somerset, her writing is steeped in the sense of spiritual exploration she was exposed to as a child. Having been published nationally as a poet aged at just eight years old, Scialom became internationally published aged sixteen and began writing novels in

2008.

Her acclaimed debut novel, *The Religion of Self-Enlightenment (The ROSE)*, took eight years to produce and has been declared "a modern cult classic" by various media outlets. Scialom featured in a Times Square billboard campaign in 2024, has appeared on BBC radio five times and in recent months has graced the cover of multiple literary magazines.

Emily B. Scialom has recently completed a memoir entitled *Wild to the Max*, which is currently being submitted to literary agents.

For further information on her releases and accomplishments, please see emilyscialom.com.

THE RELIGION OF SELF-ENLIGHTENMENT By Emily B. Scialom

CHAPTER ONE

He was the kind of person who had forgotten why he was here. He was boring, and proudly so. Every ounce of ingredients the world had thrown at Carrick Ares had been thrown onwards into his life's oven. The result was horrific, of course – just not to Other People. Yet because this was a segment of Carrick's reality whose opinions he courted fiercely, he almost managed to sustain the impression that he was that death-of-all-deaths: okay. "How are you?" they would say. "I'm okay", he would reply. But there was no reason for this, because in truth Carrick could never be anything other than extraordinary. And there was never a single, dreary, rain-soaked moment of his life in which he could possibly reduce himself to the depths of being merely 'okay'.

If Carrick had his way with how you saw him, if he could really orchestrate your mind, he would make you believe the idea of understanding him to be something of excruciating pain. This was a measure aiming to prevent people from becoming close to him. For when the sun rose, he would make a conscious decision to reveal nothing that it could not shine upon. He sometimes lost himself in sadness, but aside from these lapses of raw, choking sorrow, he was fine – drained of emotion and devoid of desire – but fine. He understood that this is how you should live. He had seen it in the newspaper and in the eyes and words of the people he met: images of war and rape, the violent condemnation for violent acts, the hatred of who we are.

As a result, he had grown afraid and learnt to disdain and strongly doubt anything besides that which he had been told by others. Acquiescence was his shield against the violence he felt surrounded by. If ever a situation arose, complex and nuanced, which required more of him than to be an incarnate reiteration he simply learned more things to repeat. And did so with an added passion: he had no idea of what it was to be original, to exist.

Yet like most of Carrick's highest dreams about himself, the desire to be impenetrable to others was a hopeless self-deceit: for Carrick Ares was a total phenomenon. In truth, he could be anything he chose to be.

Yet he pretended not to know this.

It became clear, after a while, that courting ignorance was not clever. He reached the point in early adulthood by which the buried accumulation of thoughts he'd been unwilling to think about had gathered and joined into vast tectonic plates beneath the surface of his world. They grew steadily and rubbed against one another daily. And without heed of his desire or any warning provided, they would erupt. He would be out in the most peaceful of settings and it would happen: that which he was seeing, hearing, touching or tasting would suddenly dissolve into the background, while to the foreground burst screaming, violent visions of what he wanted to be, what was unfulfilled in himself, and how far he was from such things.

He would cry and tell himself, "It's natural to feel this way". Yet it was a lie he could barely contain along with all the others – it was just something he had heard and repeated without hesitation. He cried again at what he had been given to quieten himself with, because yes, it was clear to all who knew him that the soul within him had much emotion. He just did not know how to express it, had not been told how.

In contrast to what might be expected in such circumstances, Carrick was no man of faith (thank God). Yet neither was he a man of no faith (poor souls). No, he was a man of the curiously strange times in which he was living; he had simply never really thought about being either.

He would say that his total lack of convictions was a terrible consequence of the way he was never allowed time to discern his beliefs in the mad rush for money and power... to some people. To others, he would expatiate heartily about how anyone who believes that they can use recycled, disingenuous beliefs that have no doubt been held by millions of others throughout history is severely delusional. You see, that was his way. He was neither liberal nor conservative, a paper-chaser or a charity-giver, a good man or a bad man: he was all of them, and would decide which part of his wondrous personality to show according to whom he was with and what they would approve of most.

You may find this appalling, yet Carrick knew it was inevitable: the value the world places on truth is the most hypocritical of all human ideals. People make it very clear, even to each other, that they do not value truth: they just claim to. In Carrick's playful, blindfolded way, he was therefore practicing a very high degree of awareness. For taken at their root source, these attitudes postulated a much higher ideal: to be everything was the ultimate aim – and that means lies, and lots of them. The truth was that Carrick spent his whole life trying to avoid looking his opinions in the face – just in case he recognized one that someone might disapprove of. Again, one is taught to condemn such attitudes. But Carrick was wise and aware. He had a strong sense that in life, merely by

breathing, it is often the case that one incites enough hatred to break a heart in two. And so it was somehow unwise to provoke any more antagonism through the incubation of the still-born opinions of strangers who, if they should ever have met, would have hated him in their turn.

Yet do not take all this at face value. It is the portrait of a man of deception, and who knows what you will see in Carrick by the end. The question to be asked at the beginning, however, is not what he had become by the time of his death but what he was in spite of death. And the point to be seen clearest of all is that whatever anyone else saw in the young man he was at that time, Carrick could never see his true self.

As for the company he kept, in terms of unconditional love, Carrick's girlfriend Beth – who claimed the affections of many others – was the proud, sole flower in a bed of weeds. They had been together for almost two years, a long time for Carrick, who had treated his previous partners badly. At twenty-nine years old, he was past the confusion of youth but still felt its lingering consequences. In his younger days, he had gotten himself into quite a muddle over the basics of his genitals and where to put them, as most do; “It looks wrong, it is uncontrollable; it wants men, it wants women, it wants nothing; what is going on?” and walked around with a cyclone in his head for years. Family, friends and lovers were bruised and contorted inside it.

Beth, however, had a mental biography which read not at all like his. She was a lot more stable and single-minded, and the power she had over her thoughts was a gift which Carrick knelt before, as at a secret inner altar, longing as he was for such a blessing in his own life. They had met in a park on one of those sunny days that never draws breath, and her smile had been silly as she kept kicking a football against a hedge when she had been aiming for a lamppost. Three weeks later, Beth and Carrick were lovers, and two days after that Carrick found himself having his inane post-sex banter rudely disturbed by Beth's serious questions. She actually wanted to know Carrick. Really know him. This scared Carrick immediately, for he knew he had no answer to the question of who he was.

One night, she lay beside him and asked in his ear if he would tell her an interesting thought he'd had recently. It took Carrick a long, long time to realize just why he became so flustered in trying to reply - why her question had moved him. He went through every conceivable explanation after she left: it was because most of his friends were very business-orientated and merely talked money and girls and maybe some sport, as you do. It was because his girlfriends before her - without exception - had been absurdly un-engaging.

It was because there were boundaries, for crying out loud, and just because he slept with you that did not mean you could ask whatever you wanted - the physical and the mental worlds were separate until stated otherwise!

But no, he finally struck it: it was because she had passed the towering watch-guards of his privacy and stolen from his prison the idea that there was anything interesting about him at all.

Emily B. Scialom

INTRODUCING JAMIE L. BUTTERWORTH



J.L. Butterworth is a full-time creative, part-time author, part-time game designer, and determined word gremlin who believes stories should reflect all the messy brilliance of being human - the good, the bad, and the excruciating (well, at least the bits most of us have). His debut novel, *Superpowered*, is a fun superhero romp that set the world on mild with a blistering 3.5 stars on Amazon. His second book, *My Conversation with Claude*, dives into a philosophical chat with an AI to explore what it means to be human - and to collaborate with machines. *The Unknown Before Us* is his latest work: a found-family sci-fi adventure packed with neurodivergent characters, alien wildlife, mood-enhancing mushroom trips, grief, trauma, and one very insistent ship cat. He lives with his wife, three kids, and a concerning love of cats.

THE UNENDING CLIMB By J.L. Butterworth

His fingers scramble for purchase on the steep, rocky hill. Nothing but darkness surrounds him, but he *feels* as though he's adrift in an infinite void, only the dirt underneath his fingernails and the earth digging into his knees felt solid — real.

"I can't...I can't...there's no way..." Admitting defeat, yet clinging on with his fingertips, his body flat against the precarious ground, gasping between every word.

"I believe in you." A voice calls out, from everywhere and yet nowhere.

"Who is that??" His head swivels around to locate where it's coming from, but only blackness fills his vision.

"Michael — you'll make it up this hill one day." A small pulsing orb flickers into existence.

The orb's soft blue light illuminates the ground beneath Michael, revealing only packed dirt and gravel. He recoils and squints at the light, using one hand to cover his eyes against the invading light source in the pitch black.

How long have I been climbing? The only thought his mind will allow him echoes through his skull, drowning out anything else.

"You've been climbing longer than you'll admit." The orb's voice is ethereal, threatening to vanish at any moment.

Michael's eyes start to adjust to the new light source filling his vision. Though he can see the patch of ground he's been ascending, anything beyond that is blackness — an empty and uncaring void. "You can hear my thoughts?" He calls out, still breathing hard.

"I'm closer than you think." Its presence gives him reassurance. "I believe in you. You can make it. You've overcome bigger obstacles."

He pauses in thought. *Have I? This feels like all I've ever done. All I ever **will** do.* His own thoughts echo in his head.

How long have I been climbing? The only thought his mind will allow him echoes through his skull, drowning out anything else.

“You’ve been climbing longer than you’ll admit.” The orb’s voice is ethereal, threatening to vanish at any moment.

Michael’s eyes start to adjust to the new light source filling his vision. Though he can see the patch of ground he’s been ascending, anything beyond that is blackness — an empty and uncaring void. “You can hear my thoughts?” He calls out, still breathing hard.

“I’m closer than you think.” Its presence gives him reassurance. “I believe in you. You can make it. You’ve overcome bigger obstacles.”

He pauses in thought. *Have I? This feels like all I’ve ever done. All I ever **will** do.* His own thoughts echo in his head.

“All things must end.” The orb’s voice softens. “But with every ending comes a new beginning. The ascent is difficult, but you **will** make it to the top. And then — it’s all down here from there.”

Such a clichéd saying. Michael rolls his eyes. “Really? That’s your pep talk? The same stuff my grandparents used to say? Lines from a thousand movies? That’s what you’ve got to offer?”

“I’ve come to offer help.” It quickly replies.

“Oh yeah?” He pulls himself up and starts to climb again, grunting with effort. “I don’t need any help. I’m going to tell you what I’ve been told my whole life — I’m too stubborn to accept help from anybody.”

“Is that why you’ve been climbing this hill for so long?”

Is that why? I can’t remember how long I’ve been climbing this hill, but it feels like this is all I know.

The orb flits to the other side of him. “You’re so much more than this. It feels like you’ve been doing this for so long because focusing on it was the only way you could keep moving. No growth. No going backward. Only climbing an endless hill to nowhere.”

“Can’t I even have my own thoughts to myself?” He growls as he climbs.

“Haven’t you noticed that you’re not going anywhere?”

Michael stops and looks around him, as if he’d recognize anything in his surroundings. “I haven’t?”

“Do you think your backpack is holding you back?” The orb inquires, pulsing with each word.

“Backpack?” He looks back, and to his surprise, he’s been carrying an oversized pack this entire time. “Where’d that come from?”

“You’ve always had it. You sure you can make it up the hill while carrying that?”

“What’s even in this thing?” He’s able to find some purchase with his feet, sling the pack off of one shoulder, then turn and lay flat against the incline. He tries to lift it up so he can unzip it, but it’s too heavy to lift. “How was I even carrying this?” He hauls it upward with all his strength, scraping it across the incline. Rocks tumble into the abyss, clicking and clattering until they vanish into silence. He lays there panting a moment, backpack at his side.

“Go on. Unzip it. See what’s in there.” The light implores.

Breathing heavily, he doesn’t think — only acts. He leans forward some, not enough for him to lose his balance, and unzips the pack he’s been carrying. “....rocks? Why am I carrying rocks?”

“That’s a *very* good question,” it says, tone firm now. “Why *are* you carrying all of those rocks? You should dump out the backpack.”

Michael looks at the pack full of rocks and hesitates. “I....I can’t...I need them...” *Why do I need these rocks?*

The orb flits to the open pack, illuminating the rocks inside with greater detail. “Are you *sure* you need them? Maybe you could part with a few of them?”

Uncertainty welling up inside him, he looks at the rocks longingly. He’s not sure how much time passes, but the rocks seem to hold meaning. He wants to address the orb, but

it simply waits patiently for his response. *I mean, they're just rocks. Surely, I could get rid of a few of them.*

"I believe in you, Michael." The light's voice is soft and reassuring.

He stares for another moment. "Al...alright. I can let go of some of these." He reaches in and grabs a few larger rocks, inspecting each one before placing several on the incline beside him. "Okay, there."

"You know what you need to do next." Its tone is demanding.

Hesitation creeps in again. Michael stares at the rocks. *Can I really let go of these? They seem so important...*

"Yes. You can. I'm here for you. I always have been even if you couldn't see me. It's okay to let go."

Another moment passes by. His hands creep closer to the waiting rocks. Before he can pull himself back, he slaps each one in turn and watches them roll down the hill, clattering and bumbling until they're out of sight, only the sound of their tumbling remains until it fades to nothingness. He sighs deeply.

"It's okay. I know that was hard. It's never easy to let go of things that are important to you. Are you ready to climb again?"

He takes a breath. His muscles ache and his hands are bleeding, but he's ready. He slings the pack over his shoulder — lighter now — and starts to climb again. "Okay, let's do this."

One hand after the other, each foot finding purchase, he climbs with renewed vigour. Slowly, he feels like he's making progress. The way is easier now, his burden lighter. Maybe he can actually do this.

A blaring alarm slices through the silence — faint at first, then unbearable. He stops his climb and covers his ears.

“Michael, it’s time to go. I will see you again.” The orb flickers out of existence, taking its scant light with it.

His eyes open and his vision is filled with the morning light flooding into his bedroom. The blaring from his alarm clock is quickly silenced with a slap. Hauling himself up on his elbows, he looks around with bleary eyes. No hill. No orb. No heavy backpack. Only his small TV, dresser, and the large king size bed he sleeps near the edge of.

Bare feet meet the floor as Michael hefts himself out of bed and wills himself to the bathroom to start his usual morning routine. A few minutes of browsing the internet on the toilet, brush his teeth, wash his face, comb his hair, put on fresh deodorant, and he’s ready enough. The routine rarely changes — he appreciates some semblance of stability in his life.

The same handful of polo shirts and khaki pants await him in his laundry basket — clean but not yet put away — they’ll make it into his clothes pile by the closet door by day’s end. He slips into his usual work clothes, buttons up his shirt, tightens his belt, and checks in the mirror that his appearance is acceptable.

I need to shave, but that will have to wait.

He checks his clock. Fifteen minutes until his train comes. That’s plenty of time to make it up to the station on foot.

The apartment echoes with the sound of his bare feet on tile as he crosses to the living room, passing through his kitchen and the stack of dirty dishes that have awaited him for a week. He grabs the messenger bag he carries with him every day and slings it over his shoulder. His socks and shoes wait nearby — the socks themselves haven’t been washed in weeks, but they’re only worn when he’s not at home — and he’s usually at home.

Mindlessly he slips them onto his feet and stands up, doing one last final check. He reaches for the door when his phone buzzes in his pocket. He reaches for it and glances at the screen — a reminder notification.

“Third anniversary of losing her.” It says plainly.

Michael stares at his phone for a moment, then tucks it back into his pocket and opens the door.

The sun is bright on this cool summer morning, birdsong filling the air as cars pass by on the road. He steps outside, then shuts and locks the door before turning to head up the sidewalk to the station. He takes a deep breath before blowing it out through pursed lips.

“Okay. You’ve got this,” he tells himself, stepping forward.

PSYCHEDELIC DANCING by Martin Dixon

“Come on, let’s go,” Suzie said standing up, unconcerned her low-cut top was undone to her navel, blue silky bra and white flesh tantalisingly visible. Her warm, soft hand small in his great big mitt, the slight squeeze encouraging, the sudden determined tug betraying an overpowering need. Kissing, proper kissing. They had been kissing and fondling in the dark corner behind the door. Chaos all around. Hectic. The noise. The thumping base-up beat. A toxic smell of enjoyment and abundant naughtiness.

Rick is knocked back surprised how sharp the edge of a door could be as it slammed against his head. That was Jimbo coming in, with exuberance, the usual flamboyant entrance, the big, *I’ve arrived*, and late as usual. Wearing his trademark wrap around shades. Looking cool, well, at least he thought so but, most importantly, so did the girls.

Suzie, impatient, pulled again, “*Come on Rick... nowww Rick.*”

Into the hall passing Jimbo, Rick says, “Hi Jimbo, thanks for the lump.”

Jimbo replies with a slur, “Nice to see you Rick... Suzie.” Watched them stagger into the dining room and the food table.

Huge and white but covered in debris. Three types of cheese ground into the pale blue carpet looking impressionistic. Probably wool. Definitely ruined. With crackers and French bread and something strangely brown, a sauce perhaps, and other stuff. The sheet almost touching the ground, tent like. The makeshift tablecloth soiled beyond redemption.

“Here, under here.” Tugging, now urgent, “*Come on will you.*”

Fumbling hands, frantic, belt, zipper.

Mickey Mouse and blue leather. Only Charlie wears Mickey Mouse shoes. Standing next to the giggling red high heels.

“Hey, Rick.” This is Charlie lifting the sheet. Grinning, “Suzie, you look... well dishevelled.”

“Piss off Charlie,” Suzie pants, nothing else so he leaves them to it but couldn't resist a last smile at Suzie's face, now oblivious, concentrating, mouth gasping and... he does have some decency and drops the sheet.

May is standing in her red heels pulling at Charlie's arm, “I want a drink, Charlie.”

But Charlie sits down next to Bobby and in a blink they are immersed in conversation; drinking Vodka and Coke from glass Coke bottles, so she drifts off following the red drip, drip trail with Jimbo on the end clutching Merlot from Argentina in a box. He is swaying in the sitting room left hand on the shoulder of a girl he does not know. Slowly moving to fast music. Michelle, *tres magnifique*, her mother is French and she's loving the association with Jimbo's reputation.

Vodka shots at Jack's and Jimbo is well on the way when he arrives at the Farmhouse at eleven-thirty. Jack's place, a third floor flat he shares with two others, both out, both in love. He took the Vodka. Cheap Vodka. What else? Jack opens the door standing in faded jeans and bright yellow tank-top with a giant red star. Brown espadrilles. Of course no socks. Empty milk bottles lined up like parade soldiers, standing to attention, two by two along the balcony walkway and all the way to the stairs. Tomorrow they will march on down. An ongoing dispute resulting in the milkman delivering but not collecting.

“Hey Jimbo... come in, the girls are out.” Lots of happy exuberance from Jack.

“The Old Farmhouse tonight. Are you coming? It should be good.” Jimbo asks, taking off the glasses, handing over the Vodka and all hunkered up against the cold. The draft leaking through the smashed hall window.

“Will do but later. Things to do, people to see first.”

“Do the people in question have blonde hair by chance?” said Jimbo with a smirking smile.

A bit later, well at least an hour, Lisa in a frilly yellow dressing gown, soft and smooth and still bath pink, long blonde hair damp and going wavy, opens the door, Jack leaning against the porch post smiling, wrapped up in a thick coat and long loose knit scarf,

breath in white puffs and with that Vodka glow. No espadrilles. Black biker boots all scuffed up.

“Hey, Lisa, you coming out tonight? There’s a party on.”

“Not tonight, I’m staying in. You want to stay?”

“For a bit, then I’m off to the do.”

Rick and Suzie have emerged and are in the kitchen, a large space and awash. Rick with a beer bottle needing the nowhere to be found opener. He tries clipping the top off with a sharp bash on the edge of the back doorstep. Then the fridge door latch which snaps, so wanders off in the direction of the rapidly deteriorating scene in the sitting room where a Tamala session is in progress. The room dark, psychedelic patterns on the wall from the oil wheel in the 60’s projector. A relic from a parent’s past. Silhouettes smooching. The sofas cuddling. A smoky haze with a sweet, sweet smell. Jimbo is still sway-dancing with Michelle now mostly propping him up.

Rick is side-tracked to the stairs. Attracted by some squealing noises. Up the top and the bedrooms are sealed off, signs outside the master and the two kids' rooms. *Keep Out*. Nice bold red letters. The master door slightly open, the bed occupied. The covers giggling and thrashing, four legs wiggling and flashing poked out the bottom.

Rick yells, “Hey, can’t you read. Up and out. *Now*. This is a no-go area. Out please. You know the rules.”

The two girls, blonde and brunette, skimpy frilly underwear, nudging each other playfully, scuttle past stepping into clothes as they go. “Sorry Rick,” giggling and laughing down the stairs. Trying not to trip as shoes go on. Hopping on one leg. Tugging at a trainer’s heel. A designer trainer and the leg of a posh girl.

Rick checks the other rooms then back towards the dancing. He sees Bobby who has wandered from the sofa and hands him the bottle. Bobby snaps the cap between his teeth. Rick nods a thanks and back to Suzie who is giving Charlie an expletive loaded beating concerning inappropriate sheet lifting.

Charlie met May in the pub, The Fox, a tranquil, ancient, thatched place about a thirty-minute brisk walk from The Old Farmhouse. He was with Bobby stopping en route to fill their tanks so to speak and standing near the bar. Pint of something cold in a straight glass and a second double Vodka shot chaser. Neat and ice cold. Pretty with long dark hair and the pile of plates May was carrying, or dropping, smashed on the flag stone floor, shards erupting in a fountain like spray. May mouthing, "Fuck," and wiping gravy and mashed potato and other soft bits from her, might have been, white apron. Charlie and Bobby both grinning as they stoop to help. Old Fred the landlord, probably as old as the pub, appears with the long-handled brush and pan, pot belly wobbling and permanent roll-up stuck to his bottom lip and coughing. Bright red flabby face. "Lucky it's the end of your shift. Were those the last?" he wheezes.

"Yes, and sorry. Just the tables to wipe." May on her knees cleaning the floor.

"Well, that's the washing up done," says old Fred philosophically. But no smile. Just a frowning coughing fit.

"Hi, I'm Charlie," said Charlie with a smile. "This big boy's Bobby. We're off to a party. Want to come?"

"Sure, just give me five minutes and I'll be with you... nice shoes," replied May with mischief in her eyes.

Ten minutes, a bit of slap and she appears in red high heels and short red skirt. Charlie picked up a carry out. The bottles clinking in the jute carrier. "You look... red," he said, "but nice, proper nice." And stuck his arm around her shoulders as they walked out the door.

They arrive and see Rick and Suzie disappear under the table. Bobby sits on the sofa in the dining room and pours Vodka into a Coke bottle while Charlie inspects the table for anything edible and of course other things. May is amused but drifts off leaving Charlie and Bobby and grabs the Merlot box from Jimbo just before he crashes to be helped up by Michelle. May changes the music to Tamala, her favourite dance music, and moves rhythmically to the beat. Her red skirt looking surreal in the multi-coloured glow. A sexy picture and no mistake.

A bit later Jack leaves a radiant Lisa and is walking down the lane towards the farmhouse. The police car with lights flashing comes up behind and whizzes past.

Speed dials. “Hey, Rick, its Jack, there’s a Police car en route. Might be coming to you.”

“Thanks Jack. How long?” Rick is unconcerned. There’s always a contingency plan.

“Maybe ten minutes but it could be less.”

“Okay, we’ll clear out, it’s getting on anyway.”

Rick grabs Suzie, Bobby and Charlie and Charlie grabs May who is firmly gripping Merlot. Rick picks up his projector and music. The word is passed, and the house empties and within five minutes, about sixty people are heading in all directions. In all sorts of condition. No vehicles and no running, just casually strolling, some staggering, too many and too spread out for one police car to do anything. Jimbo walking straight-backed and upright, swaying onto Michelle, not too bothered. He was incognito after all, hiding behind his dark eyes.

Rick and Suzie are the organisers. Paula works in the Travel Agents and had fed her brother the information when the holiday had been booked three weeks before. “Mr and Mrs Taylor and kids, The Old Farmhouse away for five nights in Paris,” the note had said which was ripped up and chucked in the black metal bin by the off-licence with *rubbish* stencilled on the front. Two weeks later the word went out. An informal *bush* type telegraph but secret.

Two days later a distraught Mrs Taylor with designer suitcases piled in the hallway is talking to a police officer, gesticulating frantically. Italian style. Animatedly speaking. Uncharacteristically swearing. Understandably furious. In one hand, she is holding a smart, red plastic coated and professional looking flyer that had been circulated to all the surrounding houses the week before. It read, in large blue letters, *Suzie’s Specialist Cleaning Service. All Types of Cleaning Undertaken. Fast, Efficient and Reliable Service.* In the other hand, she held her phone ready to dial knowing the cost would be huge.

Martin Dixon has a blog - you can find it at <https://www.shortstories.to/entertain.com/>

INTRODUCING HEIDI RICHARDSON



Born and raised in Edmonton, Alberta, Heidi Richardson later married a farmer and left the city life. Now tucked away on a farm northwest of Calgary, Heidi loves to tell stories, but she often says, “If there is a bright centre to the publishing universe, I’m on the planet it’s furthest from!” (Apologies to George Lucas and Star Wars fans!)

Through the decades, technology changed from laborious pen and paper to today’s swift computers. Now she writes fictional fantasies for young readers, where her creative dreams weave with biblical truths to create allegorical visions.

Heidi’s invitation to all her readers is, “Come dream with me.”

A CHILD'S CHRISTMAS CANTATA RECALLED By

Heidi Richardson

I was born in the Royal Alexandra Hospital in 1961, in Edmonton, Alberta. Yes, Canada! It seemed I was born to sing. My mother was a singer, and she was quite determined that all three of her children would be singers as well! Piano players, too. Though she had never had the opportunity to learn an instrument, we were expected to, so we did. She was a strong German personality in our home, a first generation Canadian, born in Saskatchewan, the fourth of fourteen living children to pioneering parents. Though all this happened not that long ago, by my calendar, it always seems like something out of Dickens when I remember it.

My childhood Christmases could surely have come out of Dickens, except that we weren't English, so we didn't know anything about Figgie pudding. But we did have Ukrainian Christmas Eve to honour my Ukrainian father and his family. Christmas Day, we had turkey and all the trimmings. We got mandarin oranges in our stockings, which only came to Alberta at Christmas time in those days. Ribbon hard candy and salt-water taffy were in there, too, and candy canes were always only red and white peppermint. We put up a Christmas tree that we bought at a city lot for five dollars, decorated with the delicate tin Christmas balls and fuzzy plastic bells in many colours. Tinsel, too, which took forever to put on, then take off at the end of the season.

We would usually make a trip to downtown Edmonton to see the Christmas displays in the windows of the big Hudson's Bay store. There were a lot of windows, and each one was decorated with moving puppets and scenes! We also visited Candy Cane Lane most years, where every house in a certain neighbourhood was decorated and lit to the hilt. There was always a trip to Mayfair Park to skate, followed by hot chocolate which we bought there. (I *still* call it Mayfair Park). This was before 'Christmas' inflatables or moving light displays

were put there, which seem to me now to glorify animated movies instead of Christmas. In my childhood, the trees in Mayfair Park had Christmas lights on, and that was good enough for me.

We were raised going to church every Sunday, come Hades or high water. Well, I never really saw high water or even Hades, but I do remember threading through a few full-fledged blizzards to get there. It was a good thing the cars back then were made of metal entirely - and huge. Today's mostly plastic cars wouldn't have the traction of the big, heavy boats we drove! Especially going down into the deep valley of the North Saskatchewan and back up again. I don't know what the gradient of that road was, but I was always nervous when I got stopped on it in later life, while driving our stick shift Toyota. Yes, we had one of those, too. I called it the Flintstone car because there was a hole in the floorboards under the driver's feet, only covered by a swatch of carpet.

Where was I going with all this? Oh yes, Christmas! Always has been my favourite holiday, always will be.

In the church I was raised in, a person had to be thirteen years of age to sing in the church choir. The Christmas of 1974 was when I reached the right age. I had sung in children's groups, of course, but this was the *adult* choir! I had finally graduated into it. We always sang cantatas for Christmas, which perhaps very few people nowadays know about. A cantata is a grouping of songs which celebrates the Christmas story, of Christ coming to earth as a baby, born of the virgin Mary, laid in a manger, introduced to the shepherds by an angel choir, and visited by three kings who travelled from the Orient, who gave Him fantastically expensive gifts when they found Him.

I had been allowed to join the choir the June before, six months before this holiday event. We'd practiced every Wednesday night since early October. 1974 was the year of my debut in the choir. No, I didn't sing a solo! Not that time. That came a few years later.

On the big night, I was wearing the dress my mom had sewed for me. She always sewed new Christmas dresses for my sister and me, year after year. I believe the particular one that year was green velvet, calf length. It was still in the days of choir robes; the ones for our church were gold with burgundy sashes. But we didn't wear them for the cantata. For that, we all wore green and red; very festive!

The tradition was, the choir went downstairs in the basement to go through a couple of difficult sections, making sure they would be sung right. There's a great deal of cooperation and humility involved in singing with about thirty-odd other people. It builds something into the singers; not a time for showboating for individuals, but a team effort, which inevitably becomes a community. It's a great place for a young singer to gain both confidence and friends, no matter what age they may be. Sing together, worship together. For whatever a cantata may be technically, it's really a form of worship in which we all took part communally.

You would think that hearing and singing about the same Christmas story every year since birth would take away some of its magic for me, but it never did. Every year just made it better, as my child's imagination grew to encompass the infinite meanings of it. That's happening still, for every year brings greater mystery, and a new unpeeling of another layer of the story, revealed to the maturing believer's brain. A child starts with the miracle Baby, and the shepherds and angels. Then grows to contemplate this baby who grows into the historical Jesus, as a man. Then to the Divine Jesus, a God Who somehow squeezed Himself into a human body. How, you ask? I don't know; you may as well ask; how do you get the

ocean into a teacup? Well, that's part of the mystery, a mystery that may take an eternity of contemplation without exhausting our questions about it!

But back to the minutes before the cantata. We had gone through our difficult bits, and now we were almost ready to file upstairs to the stage and perform. First, we needed to pray – another one of the traditions. We all bowed our heads, and our conductor prayed that our music would go beyond mere music and become a way to glorify God. The audience upstairs had already begun the service. As the prayer ended, we heard them all break into song, probably about three hundred folks. They were singing 'Silent Night'. Standing in the basement, listening through the floorboards, it was almost as though the angels of the first Christmas were back, singing just for us. I got goose-bumps. It must have been the same experience for each of us, for no one moved until the carol ended. Then we all filed silently upstairs, me to meet my first cantata audience.

I've had many a wonderful Christmas since, with our children, and now our grandchildren. But the memory of Christmas 1974 will always be the best one, I think. It's like a candle burning in the halls of my brain that will never go out. Or more accurately, a fleeting moment which flashed by like a comet streaking the dark sky of the soul, to become utterly unforgettable, so that it lasts forever in memory. It prompts me to dare add a new beatitude to the historical ones; "Blessed are those with good memories, for they shall never forget that there is hope."

By Heidi Richardson

FAMILY NIGHT by Jhana Matthews

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This story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, or products is intended or should be inferred.

DISCLAIMER: THIS STORY WAS FIRST WRITTEN IN MY TIME AT FULL SAIL UNIVERSITY.

The evening rain of July 10th pounded against the windows all around the house. My husband, daughter named Jessica, and I had a family tradition every weekend. If Jessie did well in school and behaved around the house, we could take her wherever she wanted to go. Every weekend was different.

Jessica sat comfortably on her bed, clutching her stuffed bunny.

“Do you need to go potty before we get dressed?” I asked, keeping my tone soft. A flicker of hesitation appeared in Jessie’s eyes.

“No, Mommy, I don’t,” Jessie told me as I began to dress her. The back door had burst open, as a heavy rainstorm hit. Shoes squeaked on the kitchen floor. The wind followed John inside. He shook his head, sending droplets flying onto the tile floor. A tired smile appeared on his face as he saw his family.

“Where’s my little girl?” John asked. Jessie emerged from her room, still clutching her bunny.

“Boo” she said, giggling.

“Ahhhhh!” John pretended to be scared, while Jessie giggled a bit more. “How’s my little girl?”

“I am fine, Daddy. Are we going to the movies now?” Jessie asked, jumping up and down.

“Yes. Let Daddy get out of his work clothes, and we will go,” John promised. He kissed Jessie on the forehead, then encouraged her to play with her toys until we were ready to go.

He turned to me, put his arm around my waist, and then gave me a kiss. Mud clung to his work boots as he walked onto the kitchen tiles. When he hugged me, a smell of rain and earth touched my nose, but I did not care. His arms around me were a warm, solid comfort. I was so glad he made it home safely despite the terrible weather. The rain was still pattering against the windows, causing the whole house to shake. We did not want to disappoint Jessie, so we still decided to go. John turned and walked to the bedroom to change out of his smelly work clothes.

Finally, we were all in the car, excited to go.

“What movie do you want to watch?” John asked us.

“Jessica, tell Daddy what you want to watch.” She smiled from ear to ear as she jumped up and down in her car seat.

“I want to watch “The Little Mermaid,” Daddy,” Jessie said. John looked at me, smiled, and nodded. Jessica loved that movie, and she made sure that we knew it.

It was raining harder than earlier, and John struggled to see the road on the way to the theatre. Luckily, we arrived safely and found seats in the back where it was quiet. Once the movie ended, we were back in the car.

“May we get ice cream?” Jessica asked.

“Of course we can,” John told Jessie. When he turned the engine on, the car roared to life, and John turned on the heater so we could get warm.

Lightning streaked across the sky, plunging our surroundings into darkness. John turned the corner, and the storm intensified as the lightning struck the ground near our car.

“LOOK OUT!!!!” I shouted to John as our car and another vehicle swerved in different directions, crashing into the tree.

“OH MY GOD!!!! Are they okay?” someone asked in a faint whisper, but I couldn’t see who it was.

Between the car seats, Jessica’s small body was awkwardly wedged, limiting any movement she attempted. Her struggle was muffled by the smell of blood, and she groaned as the metal held her in place between the seats. The smell of car exhaust overwhelmed the scent of blood, making every breath a struggle.

“Mommy, it hurts,” Jessica whimpered. “The seats are squeezing me.”

“Hold on, baby,” I told Jessica, trying to keep my tone even and hopeful so she wouldn’t get more scared.

“Daddy?” Jessica cried out, but he did not respond.

“John, can you hear me?” I asked, but there was still no answer.

In the distance, sirens blared, making it clear that someone had called an ambulance.

“It hurts,” Jessica cried again.

“I know, sweetie. Please hold on, okay?” I said calmly in an attempt not to scare her even more.

“Okay, Mommy.”

As the ambulance and first responders arrived, the streetlights came back on. Immediately, they began extracting us with the Jaws of Life.

“We were heading to the ice cream parlour when the car hit us,” I told them as they loaded me into the ambulance. “I can’t wake up my husband. Is he going to be okay?”

“Look, I know this is scary, but let’s focus on you right now,” the paramedic responded. When I looked down, a chill ran up my spine. A slight panic flashed in my eyes.

At the hospital, everything worsened. John was declared dead. Jessica ended up in a coma and experienced sporadic seizures. I was paralyzed from the waist down.

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A month passed. After my release from the hospital, the pain of loss triggered my mental health issues, and I couldn’t break free from them. I saw a grief counsellor, as I wouldn’t know how to handle what happened on what should have been a routine family night without professional help. Despite therapy, I still felt disconnected from myself. Jessica never recovered. A few months after the accident, she died.

THE FINAL WORD By Bryony Petersen

It's been an exciting first twelve months' of producing the Indie Writers' Digest. When I first considered rebooting my free online magazine, I had a vision of how I wanted it to be, obviously I did: I wanted a quality, compelling publication, with great stories, both in terms of the factual or fictional pieces provided by the contributors, but also in terms of the contributors themselves. I never imagined it would become such a wonderful, vibrant, exciting publication, and that is all down to the contributors.

So, for this Final Word, I want to say a huge thank you to everyone who made producing the Indie Writers' Digest possible. You are all wonderful, writers, creatively talented and a total joy to work with. I would like to extend formally and publicly an open invitation to each and every one of you. Use the Indie Writers' Digest for its proper original purpose – to promote your writing and build your author brand. Thank you everyone,

Bryony Petersen

Thank you (in order of appearance) to:

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Robert Fenhagen, Peter Bradbury, Suzy Susan, Emily Scialom, Jamie L Butterworth, Heidi Richardson, who all featured for the first time in the Christmas 2025 issue of the Indie Writers' Digest

I should point out some contributors have submitted to the Digest and appear in later issues.

Please visit my author website, where you can find my books, blogs, back issues of the magazines and more at www.brynpetersen.co.uk.