

## [The Write Place At the Write Time](#)

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“Like hell you can.” Then Victoria did the unthinkable. She pulled her keys and credit cards from her purse and threw them at him and left.

“Victoria,” her mother Ellen called after her. She glanced over her shoulder at her husband with the greatest look of hatred he had ever seen, then ran after her daughter. “Honey,” she said, following her out the door.

David stuck her car keys and credit cards in his shirt pocket as he finally found a channel he liked, a documentary on the bombing of Hiroshima. When the pilot said, “Oh my God, what have we done?” he nodded. My God, what had he done?

He had only done what he had to, of course, given the interminable suffering he had felt as a boy. He and his brother Matthew had grown up in an orphanage – before the Department of Human Services began placing castaway children in foster homes. The orphanage was a large, three-story brick building in a small town in eastern South Dakota. Every morning, a bell would ring, summoning the children to breakfast. Then it was off to school, after which another bell would summon them to dinner. A final bell at night would tell them to quiet down and go to sleep.

Matthew was seven years older, tall, blond, blue-eyed, and popular with everyone. David, who had been sired by a different father, was short, brown-eyed, dark-haired, with a complexion indicating he could have been part Native American, Hispanic or Black. He didn’t know. His mother never told anyone who David’s father was and if she had, the orphanage wouldn’t have revealed the identity of either parent. Since he and Matthew had been placed in the orphanage when David was a baby, David didn’t remember his mother at all.

Matthew remembered her very well though.

“She’s really pretty,” Matthew said, skipping a flat rock across Rocky Run, a cold, clear stream that cut through the red quartzite on its way to the Big Sioux River.

David, then five, wondered why Matthew spoke of their mother as though she were still alive and in the present. To David, she was dead, a figment of his imagination, a mere dream. “Do you know where she lives?”

Looking off across Rocky Run as far as he could, Matthew bit his lip. “I think so.”

“So where is she?”

Matthew picked up another rock, hefting it in his hand, and faced David for a brief, intense moment. “I’m not supposed to tell.” He skipped the rock across the creek, one, two, three skips, landing it in the brush where two grouse twittered from the dried fall grass, one flying toward the setting sun while the other disappeared into the darkness reflected in Matthew’s eyes as he searched for another stone, then suddenly tired of his game and jumped up and ran toward the orphanage. “Last one back’s a rotten egg.”

“Hey, that’s not fair,” David protested. “You got a head start.”

Ellen didn’t return until late that night. She threw the keys to her Lincoln on the dining room table and glared at David. “You broke our daughter’s heart,” was all she could say.

“I doubt that.” David had tired of television and was reading Gibbon, one of those authors that he once heard everyone who aspired to become one of the educated elite should read. While he was considered elite, he did not consider himself educated so he constantly surrounded himself with a material veneer that would say he was – his Mercedes, Ellen’s Lincoln, Victoria’s Maserati that he found totally ridiculous for Iowa winters, their five-bedroom brick home overlooking West Lake – it all said money, affluence, position. The books in the living room were the final touch, a way of saying he belonged to the society to which a successful man like him was inevitably drawn. “She’s a pretty tough girl. She can take care of herself.”

Ellen looked at him, not believing what he had just said. “She’s nineteen, for God’s sake.”

“At nineteen I was well on my way toward owning my first newspaper.”

“I can’t believe you,” Ellen muttered. “So what’s wrong with Ahmed?”

“Can’t you tell?”

“Is it because he’s black?”

“Of course.”

“I think Victoria’s right. I think you’re a racist.”

David pitched his book across the room, shattering the vase Ellen had bought on their last trip to Greece. Both he and Ellen stared at the priceless shards until he finally chose to break the silence. “I just don’t want their kids to go through what I did.”

“And what’s that?”

“Hell.”

Back in the 1950s, of course, when most people had growing families of their own, few wanted to adopt two children, especially when one was black. The idea behind adoption after all was to find a child that closely resembled the parents. And in eastern South Dakota, everyone was Scandinavian and Lutheran and white.

Just like Matthew. Even at fourteen, the town girls fell in love with Matthew, even the older ones. Their eyes glued to his tall, athletic frame as he dribbled down the court, faked a jump pass, and hit a three-pointer. The crowd roared.

An old Norwegian farmer turned to another farmer in the bleachers beside him. “So he’s from the orphanage?”

The other farmer nodded and smiled. “Hard to believe, ain’t it?”

“Hmm, a freshman and six-three at that. Just wait till he grows into his paws.” Together, the farmers laughed.

David sat right in front of them, admiring what they said yet pinched with jealousy.

That Saturday, the farmer, Olaf Jenson, came with his wife, Sophie, to visit Matthew at the orphanage. David got to tag along since he was Matthew’s brother. The orphanage director had seated them at a table in the cozy living room with fireplace and bookshelves that belied the squalid, urine-tinged dormitory where the boys lived.

“So,” said Olaf, clapping Matthew’s shoulder as he and Sophie sat at the table. “That was quite a game you had the other night.”

Matthew shrugged a smile and a blush, not having yet developed the arrogance of the older boys. “I like basketball.”

“Hah, I can see that. So,” Olaf continued, leaning over his elbows on the table. “How would you like to come live with us.”

Matthew looked to David then Mr. Jenson. “You want both me and my brother to come live with you?”

Olaf gawked at David and reared back in his chair and pointed at the younger boy, not half Matthew’s size. “He’s your brother?”

“You bet,” Matthew said, putting his arm around a beaming David.

“I, uh...” Olaf looked to Sophie and shook his head slowly. “I don’t think we have the...uh...room for two boys. Do we, Sophie?”

“I don’t know about that.” Sophie smiled at David, her maternal instinct showing. “Would you like to come live with us too?”

“Yes, I...”

“No,” Olaf said sternly. “We have just the one extra bedroom.”

“But the girls could share a room.”

“No.” Olaf slammed his fist on the table. “I’ll not have my own family live like paupers because we take in someone else’s children.” He looked sternly at David. “You can understand, can’t you?”

“I, yes sir,” David said.

“There, that’s settled.” Olaf smiled and leaned toward Matthew. “So when do you want to come live with us.”

“As soon as I can,” Matthew said, eagerly leaning toward Mr. Olson.

The pit of David’s stomach fell. Matthew wasn’t just his brother. He was his only friend, his only friend in the world, a friend who had now abandoned him.

And so the Olsons made arrangements to adopt Matthew while David would remain in the orphanage. That's fine, the orphanage director said, there were plenty of families that would want to adopt David.

But everyone knew that would never happen.

A moon-vacant night two years after Victor had left, David pulled up to Matthew's apartment, a quad he shared with three other men. Each had his own bedroom and together they used a common kitchen and living room. It wasn't that bad of an arrangement for a fifty-year-old man in Matthew's condition.

David rang the bell and was greeted by Paul, a man half Matthew's age with a constant smile. "Daa-vid," Paul called, pumping his hand vigorously as though it had been years and not a week since he had seen him. "I am so happy to see you."

David winced as he shook Paul's hand, something that felt like a warm, squishy octopus just out of water. No telling where it had just been. "Is Matthew around?"

"Yes," Paul said, putting his knees together and slapping them like a girl. "He's sleeping. I will go wake him."

"No, there's no need..." But Paul was off like a rocket toward Matthew's room. "I'm sorry," David said to Melissa, the caseworker who looked over the men and who was now working on her perpetual stack of paperwork. "I didn't mean to disturb him."

Melissa smiled. "You're not disturbing him. He loves seeing you. He lives for it."

Guilt pinched David's core when anyone said that. He tried to visit his brother every week, but work often prohibited it.

Matthew, all six-seven of him, dressed in skivvies, came yawning into the living area. His yawn snapped into a smile upon seeing his brother. "David," he said, holding his arms out for his brother.

David hugged his brother first before whispering a mild reprimand. "You should wear pants when there's a lady around."

Matthew smiled at Melissa. "Oh, she's no lady. She's my friend. Aren't you, Melissa?" Then he went to his room to do as asked.

David chuckled and swallowed hard as he looked to Melissa. "He's getting worse, isn't he?"

Had David been anyone else, she would have denied it. But the bond between him and Matthew and her was too strong. "I'm afraid so."

Matthew returned with pants, still no shirt or shoes, and hugged his brother again as though again it had been years and not minutes since he had seen him. He pulled his face back, eyes not quite focusing. "I love you, David."

"I love you too, Matthew," David said. "I really, really love you."

Ellen's sobbing woke him. She had spent most of the day and half the night at Ahmed's apartment where Victoria had been living since she left. Ellen had tried not to wake David, knowing he had to be at the newspaper early Monday morning, but as soon as she turned into bed the tears began.

"You have to understand. I'm not a racist," David said through the dark. With no answer from the other bed, he felt compelled to go on just to break the impenetrable silence. "I just don't want their kids to go through what I went through – not to mention what happened to Matthew."

"Don't you know that times have changed since 1965?" Ellen choked through her tears.

"Not that much, they haven't." Her sobbing was too much for him, so he pulled back the sheets and went to her and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

"Get the hell out of here," Ellen screamed, slapping his face as hard as she could.

David touched his face that stung like hell. "Well, I guess you told me."

"Get the hell out of here," Ellen screamed again. "Don't you understand I hate your guts and wish you were dead?"

David grabbed his pillow and blankets and wended his way through the dark hall to Victoria's bedroom and flicked on the light. Her face smiled

back from every wall where Ellen had created a photo shrine to their estranged daughter, a gurgling, bare-buttred infant, a little girl in a white Easter dress, her first dance. The last photo was her high-school graduation, in cap and gown, embracing her parents.

David shut out the light and laid his pillow and blankets on the floor and crawled between the covers. Even after a couple years her girlish scent lingered, a vanilla-fruit aroma that reminded him of those rare but precious times when she gave him a hug. Then, like Ellen, he cried himself to sleep.

The dream came again, that same dream that was not a dream at all but the horrible reality replaying itself like a broken record from hell.

Matthew and he were walking home from school. Matthew was excited about a prom date he had with Joann, the prettiest girl at Rocky Run High. That was understandable, though, since he was by far the most handsome boy in the school. Somehow, Matthew had escaped the vicissitudes that plagued his classmates – alcohol, marijuana, premarital sex. In fact, it was his abstinence that attracted the girls, especially Joann. They saw him as a challenge – a beautiful, indomitable challenge.

Matthew's talk of Joann, like his talk of moving in with the Olsons, angered David, and just as they left the school grounds he burst into tears – and started to run.

“Hey, where you going?” Matthew called after him.

David ran as hard as he could, running because he didn't want his brother to see him crying, running because just then, for the first time in his life, he realized he hated his brother more than anyone else in the world.

“David!” Matthew called.

David ran down an alley to the railroad tracks and stumbled head first, dropping his book bag, scattering his books on the tracks.

“Hey, look at the dumb little ni\*\*er fall.” Desi, the smallest of the group of six boys, leered at him.

Matthew's huge shadow hovered over him. “His name is David. Hey, why don't you pick on somebody your own size – like me.”

Desi, just 5' 4" and maybe one-twenty, sneered at Matthew's 6' 2", one-ninety frame. "Screw you and your ni\*\*er brother."

Every bit of anger, every bit of frustration at hearing his brother called that name, focused in Matthew's left fist that cracked into Desi's nose with the sound of a sledge hammer hitting a pumpkin. Desi flew three ties down the track as Matthew threw a right into the side of the biggest boy's face so hard he fell against another kid, both dropping to the ground. Half the town boys dispatched in seconds, Matthew moved in to finish them off.

David saw one of the boys pick up a big rock, getting ready to throw it at Matthew. "Look out!"

"Huh?" Matthew turned to David just as the rock crashed against the side of his head. Blood coursed from his nose as he eyes bulged. "Run, run, run."

David ran. He ran until his lungs burned and his legs ached. He turned once, to see Matthew still fighting, getting the better of the boys. The one who had hit him in the head with the rock was down, with just two left standing, and Matthew sent them both running off.

David slowed his walk for Matthew to catch up, but his big brother's walk was very slow, even crooked, as though he were a drunk weaving between the rails. David stopped and waited for Matthew to catch up.

Matthew winced a smile, wiping blood from his nose. "Oh, wow. That took a lot out of me. Let me lean on you, little brother."

Matthew's body grew heavier and heavier and as they approached the orphanage, David half-carrying him. When they made it to the front door, the director looked at Matthew with horror as blood streamed from Matthew's ear and nose. "Oh my God, what happened?"

"Someone hit him in the head with a rock."

"Someone call an ambulance," the director ordered. "Someone call an ambulance now."

Matthew went into a coma for three days, in and out with death. The doctors said his injury was inoperable, and even as this brain swelled with blood to the point it was ready to explode, they said moving him again would likely kill him. Besides that, the director confided to the hospital

administrator, paying for brain surgery would bankrupt the orphanage that had minimal insurance on the children.

Matthew had to relearn how to talk and walk. Reading was difficult if not impossible. After a year the doctor said the best Matthew could hope for was the IQ of a seven-year-old. Years before anyone had dreamt of inclusion, they sent him to the state home for the mentally handicapped.

David knew what had happened to Matthew was his fault. Perhaps sensing his grief, the Olsons offered to adopt David but he turned them down. He knew if he went to live with them he would merely be filling Matthew's place and the Olsons would constantly, in their minds at least, compare him with what Matthew could have been, the sports Matthew would have played, the athletic scholarships Matthew would have been offered, the girls Matthew would have dated, even the girl Matthew could have eventually married.

But David wasn't Matthew. And Matthew wasn't Matthew anymore either – because of him.

David didn't see Matthew again until he graduated from high school. By then, he had largely forgotten his older brother. He had challenges of his own, dealing with the town boys. Those that had approached him and his brother that day on the tracks, though, kept their distance. Matthew had beaten every one of them quite badly, and they associated David with that beating, as though he were capable of stepping in where his brother had left off.

David graduated from high school, and taking an interest in newspaper, went to work for one the day after high-school graduation. He started with circulation then moved into advertising and in time was building ads and writing stories. The publisher was glad to have a workaholic on his hands, and gave him free rein to do everything. When the publisher and his wife began considering retirement, David was the first they thought of to take over. They struck a deal for David to buy the paper with sweat equity over ten years, then retired to Florida.

Ellen never really asked David to leave the house. He did that on his own, taking an apartment a few blocks from the newspaper. So now he had cut himself off from not only his daughter but also his wife. He refused to go to

Victoria's wedding, though he offered to pay for it. *If you aren't willing to come, Dad, I don't want your money either*, she told him.

It wasn't long after that when David got the call that Matthew's seizures had started in the middle of the night. When Melissa tried to wake him after he had failed to report for work at the recycling plant the next morning, he was nearly gone.

David and Ellen waited in the same hospital, on different floors, in different rooms, David for his brother to die and Ellen for her grandson to be born.

David held Matthew's hand, trying to bridge the waters of so many last years. "I'm so proud of you, Matthew," David said, hoping he could still hear. "I'm so proud of you when you stuck up for me and stood by me the whole time." He searched for words that escaped him, as fleeting as his early memories of his youth and his mother. "You know, I think Joann really loved you. I think she would have even married you."

A huge, ragged gasp filled Matthew's chest, and his eyes fluttered open. He turned his head to David, blinked and smiled, squeezed his hand, and released his last breath and the burdens of the world. The monitor rang as David still held his hand.

The ward nurse rushed in to check his pulse and vitals. Having done it perhaps hundreds of times, she removed the oxygen mask from Matthew's face and unplugged the heart monitor so the buzzer stopped. "Would you like to be with him for a little bit before we call the funeral home?" she asked, her words hollow in his ears despite her intended kindness.

"Yes, please." He held his brother's hand a moment more. "I'm sorry." A rustling sounded and he turned to Ellen in the doorway.

"Victoria had a boy." Ellen looked to the sheeted form on the bed beside her husband. "Is he..?"

"He passed away a few minutes ago."

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

David gently laid his brother's hand on the bed.

"We have a grandson."

“What’s his name?”

“I think Victoria should be the one to tell you.” Ellen preceded him down the hall to the elevator then down to the maternity ward. A pediatric nurse escorted them to Victoria’s bedside where she held a brown, eight-pound little bundle, a doting Ahmed leaning over both of them. Ahmed looked at him grudgingly, black, angry, and very large.

David searched for words, knowing he was the last person Victoria and Ahmed wanted to see. He stroked Victoria’s labor-drenched cheek and touched her chair. “How are you, honey?”

“I’m great, Daddy,” his daughter said, kissing her baby’s head. “Isn’t he beautiful?”

“He is. He really, really is.”

“He’s not entirely white, you know,” Ahmed said resentfully.

“I know. I’m not either.”

Ahmed, who was easily Matthew’s size and had waived a shot at the NBA to go to medical school, looked curiously at David. “I didn’t know that.”

David finally broke. “You have to believe me. I just didn’t want my grandson to go through what I did growing up. You wouldn’t believe the names they called me.”

“I think I would,” said Ahmed.

“So what did you do?”

“I did what I had to. I decided to be better than those who called me those names.”

“I’m sorry.” David extended his hand, and amazingly, Ahmed took it. “Congratulations.” When Ahmed stood, David saw that he looked to be about 6’ 9”. “I understand you’re going to be a doctor.”

“He’s a nuclear medicine specialist who just finished his residency here and is ready to start full-time after his boards. Right, Ahmed?” the maternity nurse said.

“That’s the plan anyway.”

“I’m so proud of the three of you,” David said.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, honey?”

Victoria lifted her baby toward her father. “Would you like to hold him?”

“Oh, yes, yes I would.” The years fell away since he had last held a baby, now the woman in the bed before him who had just borne his grandson. He cradled the baby’s neck with one hand as he picked up his little body. The blue eyes roved in his walnut face, focusing into a smile.

“Did Uncle Matthew die?”

David nodded.

“I thought so. That makes me so sad. I don’t ever want to forget him.” She looked wistfully at the baby in her father’s arms. “That’s why I named him after Uncle Matthew.”

“His name is Matthew?” David said proudly.

“David Matthew.”

“...David...Matthew?”

“I named him after you too, Daddy. Because I love you.”

Ellen touched his elbow. “Maybe you should give her back her baby,” she said. “They both need to rest.”

David kissed David Matthew’s head and gently laid him in Victoria’s loving arms.

“Let’s go home,” Ellen said, taking his arm.

“Huh?”

“Let’s go home,” she repeated, smiling at Victoria and Ahmed then going with David down the hallway.

The bottom of his life fell open like a trap door, all the anger, all the shame, all the bitterness vanishing and taking him back to that day when Matthew fought for him and told him to run. Now, Matthew ran down the tracks toward him, strong and straight. He was going to have his date with Joann tomorrow night and they would marry and have a family. And they would name their first son David Matthew.

Bio- Michael Tidemann is a journalist, freelance writer and adjunct English instructor living in Estherville, IA. His recent publications include a travel piece in the *Des Moines Register*, an article on writing your local history in *Writer's Journal*, a short story in *Struggle* magazine, and three short stories, "The Elk", "Seeking Sacajawea" and "The Funeral", in the last three issues of *The Write Place At the Write Time*. His novel, *Doomsday: A tale of cyber terror*, is currently out in Kindle and in print.

### Life After

by Diane McDonough

Jimi Cuomo smoked a Marlboro on the porch, ignoring the rain that was body-heat detecting and horizontal. He rested his ass on the railing, picked at the peeling paint and flicked it into the dirt. We all did it. We all had this compulsion to strip the wood of its pretenses, and leave it raw, like we were.

Rob and Willie, both tall, malnourished kids, a month out of detox, walked out of the sober house and let the screen smack against the door frame. "We're going to Hennessey's for cigarettes. Need anything?" Beneath identical brown sweatshirt hoods their eyes were childlike, leery. They'd seen the limo drop us off after the funeral.

Because Jimi's sparse wardrobe consisted of leather or denim, I let him borrow a suit, a gray one. He purchased a white shirt, button-down collar, and a blue tie at WalMart. This morning, I handed him the suit, on the hanger, sheathed in dry cleaner's plastic.

"You are coming with me, Mike, I can't do this alone," he said.

"I told you I'd go to Kelly's funeral, Jimi, I'll be right beside you." I rubbed his back and squeezed his shoulders as if some deep-ache healing could be transferred from me to him.

I'd already decided during the whole funeral I'd pray. That way I wouldn't cry; because if I cried, he might cry, and I didn't want to see him break. Knowing what I know about probability, Jimi Cuomo might break. When we heard the news that Staff Sergeant Kelly Cuomo, Jimi's 26 year-old daughter, had been killed on the streets of Kabul, giving first aid to a Taliban suicide bomber, we feared this might drive us all straight over the edge.

"We don't need anything, thanks," I said to Rob and Willie, who were still waiting in the rain, still watching Jimi. Both of them turned their heads and looked back twice until they were out of sight.

We were all distraught. Jimi, the manager of our sober house, was always the strong one, the one with the most time clean. This was his test, wasn't it? And maybe mine. I was afraid to leave him alone on the porch. Not yet. "Want some coffee?"

"Mmmm." He lifted his left foot to the deacon's bench, and brushed cigarette ash from his cowboy boot. Jimi was an aging rocker with bleached blonde picaninny pigtails, a useless right hand, and a dead daughter.

I went into the house and put on a pot of dark Colombian, then turned around and sat with him outside; took a Marlboro from his pack, lit it, and inhaled long and deep. I blew the smoke out slowly, watched it disappear. Jimi stood at the end of the porch, jingling Kelly's dog tags in his pocket.

When we'd returned from the cemetery, I wanted to yank him by the collar, shove a crucifix or a Star of David or a direct psychic connection to the Supreme Being in his hand so he would be off my relapse-watch. He'd been my student in twelfth grade Math class at the Halliday High School twenty years before. He'd loved listening to my Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry and John Coltraine albums after school while I corrected papers. He was like a son to me, and I wanted to correct this miscalculation of the gods, protect him from the anguish of losing his child, but I couldn't. Instead, I calculated the pivotal point on the railing, balanced my cigarette, and ran inside to pour us coffee.

Jimi Cuomo was a music man, but hadn't touched his guitar since he'd heard that Kelly had died. He'd always invited me to his gigs when he was in high school. In his freshmen year at the Berklee School of Music, a talent scout flew in to hear his group, Landslide, play at Club 77 in the South End.

I was there, at the table, when they were offered a recording contract. Jimi was walking on air, and I was proud of him, knew he was destined for fame. But it was a school night, and I had papers to correct. I left Jimi early, before their last set, knowing the band would celebrate until after the bar closed. In those days, he didn't do anything but drink a Budweiser or two.

If I'd stayed, maybe I could've prevented the brawl. Maybe the crazy Plausnitis kid wouldn't have slashed his way through the crowd with his machete, maybe Jimi's hand wouldn't have been nearly severed; his right hand, his miraculous-fu#\$ing-guitar-plucking right hand that attached wings to your body and propelled you straight to nirvana, with chords reminiscent of Hendrix, the Doors and Credence Clearwater.

The surgeons couldn't do anything. Stitched him up. Told him to exercise by squeezing a tennis ball and then pray for a miracle. "Or better yet, play with your left hand," one doctor told him, as if it was that easy. They replaced his in-hospital dose-to-pain ratio of morphine with a take-out, refillable prescription for oxycontin. And then he was an addict.

I never had the pleasure of teaching Math to Kelly. By the time she got to high school, I was drinking a cup of 80-proof vodka instead of coffee in the morning, and had been quietly fired from my teaching job. It wasn't just my divorce that destroyed my equilibrium; my two kids took her new husband's last name.

Marcie, Jimi's ex, didn't want Kelly seeing him when he was using. She was a good mother; he was a bad influence. I get that. Even now, after my five years of sobriety, my kids aren't interested in renewing our relationship. But Kelly was interested in her father, and showed up at the sober house early one morning when she was twenty-one.

Because she begged him, Jimi taught his daughter to play the guitar. But first he taught himself to play with his left hand. Determined to strengthen the muscles in his right hand so he could at the very least, play a few chords, he was never without a tennis ball. He kneaded it like a worry stone; even brought it to AA meetings. He taught Kelly to play a song she'd loved, "Higher" by Creed. When she played, even in her stilted, beginner plucking, and he sang, there were angels in the place. That's when I really remembered what Jimi was, what I was, before.

The coffee was ready and I grabbed two mugs and eased my way through the screen door to the porch. The butt of his Marlboro smoldered in the ashtray, but Jimi was gone.

Christ, I was so afraid of relapse. His. Mine. I left the mugs on the bench and took off down Main Street for the bridge. I knew he went there sometimes, when he wanted to be alone, to watch the river. Locals sometimes stood on top of the bridge, fished for trout, and when the tide was low, drug pushers sat underneath, on broken milk crates. I ran past the four-way stop at the intersection, past the fire station, past the boarded-up furniture store. "Let him be there," I prayed to whoever was listening, "please, let him be clean there."

I saw Rob and Willie walking back from Hennessey's, told them Jimi had left the house without saying a word. It just wasn't the way we did things. We each lit a cigarette, and rushed past people who had no idea that each of my steps was a prayer that I wouldn't lose him. When we got to the gas station before the bridge, I heard his guitar, his hoarse voice singing Creed.

I needed to see him, needed to see with my own eyes that he hadn't stuck a needle in his vein to escape from a world that had taken his 26 year-old daughter to war and then blown her away. I pushed in front of Rob and Willie, slid down the embankment to the mud. There were no fishermen, no drug dealers, just Jimi, sitting on a rock, singing to a sky that pelted his face with rain.

Bio- Diane McDonough is a poet and fiction writer. She has published poetry in *Avocet*, the *Aurorean*, *The South Boston Literary Gazette* and *CapeWomenOnline*. Her fiction appeared in the Fall 2012 issue of *The Write Place At the Write Time*. She is a member of the Cape Cod Writers Group and the National League of American Pen Women. She lives in Marstons Mills, MA.

## Room for Two

by Yawatta Hosby

Nadia glanced out the window while her husband Dean took the keys from the front desk clerk at the hotel. She blinked slowly, her chin resting on the palm of her hand. She felt sorry for herself and just wanted to go back to sleep.

For the past three hours, she rested, probably snoring loudly while Dean drove. She should have kept him company, but she just wasn't capable. This weekend would probably be an emotional rollercoaster for the both of them, which she wasn't ready to face.

Some days Nadia's antidepressant worked, some days it didn't. She probably needed a stronger prescription. It didn't help that she was stressed. She tried to hide the pain from Dean because she didn't want him to worry about her. It wasn't his place anymore.

The desk clerk smiled. "Hope you enjoy the honeymoon suite."

Nadia looked straight ahead at the wooden panel filled with different gold keys hanging on hooks. She avoided Dean's stare; she could feel his eyes burning into her, probably searching for any type of reaction. She should have paid more attention to the conversation instead of being lost in thought. If she had been listening, she would've talked him out of that decision.

She said goodbye to the clerk, then proceeded to walk out the door while gripping herself. Dean followed. It was a chilly night. There was a dark sky with no stars, only a half moon was on display. The streetlamps brightened the parking lot; many cars were parked outside.

Nadia stopped in front of Dean's Honda. She faced the car, still avoiding eye contact. He leaned into the trunk, so he could be in her line of vision. She lowered her eyes to the ground.

He sighed. "You heard the guy. This was the only room available. Do you want to leave and try someplace else?"

She shook her head.

"Dia..." Dean's voice trailed off, and he glanced over to the left. He frowned. "I didn't plan this. Please don't be mad at me."

His reaction crushed her. He hadn't called her Dia since they separated. That was his pet name for her when they were in love. Why would he use it now? She didn't want to keep hurting him but didn't know how to change.

These past few years took everything out of her, and she didn't think she could ever recover.

"I'm not mad; I'm just tired." She resembled a zombie going through the motions most days. Her antidepressant made her that way, but she was afraid she couldn't function without it. She didn't trust herself.

Nadia wished she had been strong like Dean, but it just wasn't in the cards for her.

He seemed satisfied with the answer because he pulled their luggage out of the trunk. Nadia grabbed her bag while he carried both suitcases. They walked side by side. "He said the room was up ahead," Dean said.

The room. The honeymoon suite. Like that wouldn't play mind games with the distant couple. She didn't know how Dean felt about her. Seeing his face reminded Nadia of all the pain and loss they encountered. Even though it wasn't Dean's fault, she didn't know how to stop punishing him.

They entered the room. A flat screen TV hung on the rose colored wall. The king size bed spread was velvet red. The white sink had two bathrobes folded on top of it; the carpet was white. There was a wide closet by the front door and a walk-in closet by the bathroom. For what they paid, it was definitely a bargain. It was a beautiful honeymoon suite.

Nadia ambled towards the sink and placed her bag on top of the fluffy bathrobe. Her back faced Dean, but she could see him through the mirror.

He sat the suitcases down, admiring the room, then focused his sights on her. "Are you hungry?"

"No."

He placed his hands in his pockets after ruffling his hair. "Aren't you supposed to eat a meal with those pills?"

She rolled her eyes. "I have a protein bar." It got on her nerves that he treated her like she was a child—like she didn't know how to take care of herself properly. She remembered the time their marriage counselor encouraged him to admit her to a psych ward, that she was a threat to

herself.

It hurt that Dean had considered it. Thankfully, she talked him out of it.

"Nadia—"

"I'm taking a shower."

While letting the water fall on her, she pondered what Dean was doing. Hopefully, he'd fall asleep before she got out of the bathroom. She couldn't take his questions. She wouldn't even be in this situation right now if she wasn't doing him a favor.

Why did she let him talk her into it?

She took her time drying off and massaging lotion into her skin. She could hear commotion outside the door. She wiped the fog off the mirror with her hand and studied herself. Her hair was wet and stringy, her make-up off. Dean had always said he loved her best at her natural beauty. She put a strand of hair behind her ear. Why would she care what he thought now?

She sighed, exiting the bathroom. He looked up from rummaging through his belongings. His lips parted and his eyebrow rose. "I put a bottle of water on the sink for you."

She smiled. "Thanks."

He stood. "I guess it's my turn for the shower." Dean looked her up and down, smirking. "You did leave me hot water, right?"

Nadia shrugged. "No promises."

They shared a teasing glance before he went into the bathroom. She walked over to the sink and opened her pill bottle. She placed two pills into her hand, then accidentally dropped them when a picture caught her eye.

Right beside the water bottle was a photo of their son, Dez. She remembered that moment like it was yesterday. He had wanted to look his best for his kindergarten school picture. Two front teeth were missing from his charming grin. As if in a trance, she picked it up and stepped backwards

toward the bed. She landed awkwardly on her behind. Nadia caressed the photo gently; it was hard to breathe. Her body trembled as she cried uncontrollably. A silent cry as if only for her and her lost beloved ones to hear.

Dez was six when he died. The bus driver had been drunk and ran off a bridge. There were no survivors—whoever didn't die from the impact of hitting the river drowned. Nadia had been five months pregnant; she miscarried that same day. The baby would've been a girl. It was hard, but she and her husband tried to go on. Two years later, she got pregnant again. Another chance to be loving parents. On the day of delivery, she gave birth to a stillborn baby boy. The doctor said it was no one's fault, it was a terrible accident. The baby had wrapped the umbilical cord around his neck, unable to breathe. Even though the doctor said it wasn't Nadia's fault, she couldn't help but think it was.

She shut down after that, begging Dean for a divorce.

\* \* \* \*

Dean leaned into the sink, folding his arms across his chest. He was an idiot in love, but had Nadia given up on him? She asked for a year separation but hadn't filed divorce papers yet. Maybe he could convince her to change her mind. It had to be a good thing that she agreed to visit his family for Christmas. Plus, it was his parent's fortieth anniversary.

Dean hadn't had the heart to break the sad news to his family. Therefore, he asked--thankfully didn't have to beg-- his wife to join him at his family's home and pretend they were still together. She didn't even ask for any favors in return.

He took a quick shower then got dressed. Still silence from outside the door. He fidgeted with his hands. Was Nadia all right? Maybe he shouldn't have left her alone, knowing the photo of Dez would hurt her. He thought that if maybe they dealt with their issues now, then they'd be fine this weekend. But it wasn't right to spring that on his wife, not without a heads up or discussion first. He at least owed her that.

Dean glanced over at the closed door and thought of the fun moments they had before and after having Dez in their life. He missed his son--no words

could express how much—and he knew in his heart that he and Nadia could share even more memorable moments together. When he had said “I do,” he meant it. Dean wanted to be like his parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents who'd had many joyous anniversaries under their belts and more to celebrate. He swallowed a knot in his throat.

If only his wife would give him a second chance.

Once he opened the door, Dean found Nadia sitting on the edge of the bed; her knees leaned into her body with her head buried into her lap. Dez's photo lay beside her. Slowly, Dean crossed the room, sat down, and enveloped his arms around Nadia. He held her tightly. She raised her head, broadcasting her swollen red eyes and runny nose. He wiped a tear from her eye, and she placed her head on his chest. They stayed in that position for a long while. Nothing else mattered in the world. Not even his cell phone ringing on the nightstand.

Nadia ended the silence. “I miss them,” she whispered.

Dean sniffed. He wanted to say something comforting but no words escaped his lips. He never thought he'd lose his children as well as his wife. He lost his family, and it had gutted him. How come he and Nadia who were good people, who loved kids, couldn't keep their own? How come people not fit to be parents, people cold-blooded, birthed kids all the time, managing to ruin their lives in the process?

“Dean, I'm tired.”

He choked. “I know.”

“I'm sorry for everything.”

“Me too.” He stroked her hair. “It's not too late for us. I've never stopped loving you.”

Nadia squeezed his hand. Dean smiled weakly.

Bio- Yawatta Hosby is a working writer who resides in the eastern panhandle of West Virginia. She teaches creative writing through the Adult Community Education Program, and she enjoys connecting with other writers through blogging. 'A Writer's Blog' at <http://yawattahosby.wordpress.com> shares book reviews, writing tips, and tidbits of her

publishing journey. She's always had a fascination with psychology, so she likes to focus on the inner-struggles of her characters.

## Waiting

*Adapted from his one-act play of the same name*

by John Bolen

The old man sat, waiting. The young man, the desk clerk, kept eyeing him, wondering and waiting himself. When it had been busy in the hotel that afternoon, the young man had noticed the old man. And he had assumed the old man was part of one of the many parties of people involved in the bustle in the hotel lobby. But he was wrong. All the families, lovers, business people and pets had left the lobby. And the old man was still there. An hour had passed since all the others had departed and four hours had passed since the young man first saw the old man.

The clerk was not in charge of things in the hotel. He was just a clerk at the front desk. He was not experienced in how to deal with someone like the old man. So he had called his superior. His superior did what superiors do in just such a situation. He told the clerk to deal with it.

The clerk was uncomfortable, and not sure why. The old man was clean. He did not appear to be one of the homeless panderers one saw too often on the streets of the city. His clothes were out of style, but if a younger man wore them he would be considered stylishly retro. The old man appeared gentlemanly when he had interacted with others earlier. Nothing about him should have intimidated the clerk. But he did. Perhaps the younger man feared hearing the old man's story. Sometimes, in the last hour, when the clerk had looked at the old man, the old man had looked back. The glances had been fleeting. But they had been sad.

Finally the clerk found some courage and approached the old gentleman saying, "Sir. Excuse me, sir. Is there something I can help you with?"

"What did you have in mind?" the old man replied.

"No, I didn't have anything in mind; it's just that you have been here a very long time. What are you doing?"

“Waiting,” came the old man’s simple response, stating the obvious.

“Oh, someone is coming for you?”

“Who would that be?”

“I don’t...I mean...” the clerk stammered. “Are you waiting for someone?”

“No.” The old man’s answer was so simple.

It seemed to the clerk there was a look in the older man’s eyes implying that the clerk’s questions were stupid. The young man had felt this way every time he had asked a question of a professor in college. Because of this he had quit college. But the clerk did not quit this time. “Then what are you doing?” he pressed.

“As I said before,” the old man replied, “I’m waiting.”

“Are you a guest of this hotel?” the clerk tried a different tack.

“Yes, I guess you could say that.”

“Well, what is your room number?” the clerk demanded.

“Room?”

“Yes, what is your room number?” the clerk repeated, the frustration rising in his throat.

That the old man laughed here did not help to ease the clerk’s frustration. “I don’t have a room.”

Deciding to take on an authoritarian air here, the clerk spread his arms in an inviting gesture showing the old man the way to the front desk. “So you want to check in?”

“Oh, no,” the old man replied, rejected him.

The clerk was getting fed up with this game. “Listen,” he snapped, “I’ve had a really lousy day so far and...”

“I’m sorry,” the old man interrupted with what seemed genuine concern. “What went wrong?”

Genuine concern disarmed the young man. Flustered, he stuttered, “First my wife, then my car...”

“How long have you been married?” the old man jumped in.

“Almost three years, but that’s not the...”

“Expect less sex!” the old man cut him off.

“What?” the clerk blurted out, surprised by this direction the conversation had taken.

“I’ve been married a long time, and take it from me, it is a lot easier to stay married if you come to the realization that you have to expect less sex.”

“Thanks for the advice,” the clerk replied in shock.

“You’re welcome,” the old man responded, ignoring the nuance.

“So, your wife is coming for you?” the clerk beamed, thinking he had solved the case.

“That would be surprising,” the old man chuckled, “very surprising indeed.”

“Why?”

“My wife is long gone.”

This was part of a sad story the young man feared. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he apologized, “I didn’t realize.”

“Oh, don’t be,” the old man grinned. “She’s not sorry. She always wanted to live in Albuquerque, although I have never understood it. We only drove through there once thirty years ago, and I wasn’t very impressed with the place. I think she just liked the name.”

“Fine,” the young man said, trying to shake off the strangeness that had now taken over the conversation. “Just tell me what you are doing here?” he insisted. It was time to get down to brass tacks.

“Well, earlier I spoke to some very interesting people. You know, there was a nice woman from Bangkok, Thailand, and I asked her as she was from Bangkok, Thailand and it is known as this very wicked sex place, if she was

a naughty person, and she said yes, she was from Bangkok, Thailand, but she wasn't a really naughty person."

The clerk was aghast. "Sir, we can't have you..."

But the old man cut him off. "And then I met this very interesting salesman from Pittsburgh, and even though he traveled all over the country, he had never been to Chicago. It's such a nice place to visit."

"I wouldn't know," the clerk responded.

"You've never been in Chicago?" the old gent asked.

"No."

"Do you travel a lot?"

"Not much."

"Well, that explains it."

The clerk was baffled as to how the interaction had taken this turn, but was determined to get back on the track. "Listen, we need to..."

But once again the older man cut him off. "And then I met the extremely charming man from England, but I could barely understand a word he said, so I kept nodding my head and he kept on talking. It was so nice to listen to, because he sounded so poetical when he talked. The words took on this rhythm, this cadence. Do you like poetry?"

"I've never really read much of it," the clerk confessed.

"I never saw a moor;  
I never saw the sea,  
yet know I how the heather looks  
and what a wave must be.

I never spoke with God  
Nor visited in Heaven.  
Yet certain am I of the spot  
as if the chart were given."\*

"That's nice," the clerk responded, drawn to the words.

“Emily Dickinson. And then there was this mother with a baby who sat right there on the sofa, with a shawl over her shoulder to hide that she was nursing her child. It reminded me so much of when my wife used to do the same thing with our son.”

“Is your son coming for you?” the clerk asked, remembering his job.

“No, he is long gone.”

“Albuquerque?” the clerk queried, thinking this time he was ahead of the old man.

“No, he died.”

These words were said so plainly, as if just conveying simple news. But the old gent’s eyes betrayed him, a map to the sadness in his life. “I’m sorry,” the clerk offered his sincere condolences.

“He wasn’t very considerate, was he? Children should have more consideration than to die before their parents. After he died, it wasn’t long before my wife left for Albuquerque.”

“I don’t know what to say,” the clerk said with sincerity.

“I never lost as much but twice,  
and that was in the sod.”\*

“How did he die?” the young man asked.

“He was smoking a cigarette, and he was out on his balcony because his girlfriend didn’t like him smoking inside. He was sitting on the rail, and a pigeon flew right into his head and he fell.”

“God!”

“That’s who I blamed,” the old guy confessed. “I mean, how could that bird have somehow gotten confused and smacked into his head? It doesn’t make sense, no sense at all. I don’t know. At one point I thought I had lost my soul.” He took a moment gathering himself back together. “Do you have any children?”

“No, that’s what we were fighting about,” the clerk replied.

“I didn’t realize we were fighting about anything.”

“Not you,” the clerk responded flustered again. “My wife and I. She wants a kid.”

“And you don’t want any children?” the old man asked.

“I want children, I definitely want children,” the young man said emphatically, “but the timing is just so bad.”

“Why?” the old man asked.

“Look at what I do,” the clerk replied. “I’m a desk clerk. You think I make a lot of money?”

“I never thought about it,” the old man admitted.

“Well believe you me, we clerks don’t. How can I afford to bring a child into this world? If she could just wait until I’ve been here longer and maybe get into management. It’s like she is not thinking. Just wait until we’ve got a lot more money in the bank.”

“It will never seem like there is enough,” the old man offered, “Especially after you have a kid. They are damn expensive.”

“So you see my point,” the clerk exclaimed, thankful to have an understanding ear.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong,” the old man cautioned. “They are as expensive as all get out. The good Lord taketh away, but He provideth, too. You will find that you will get by,” he explained, and then added another emphatic, “You will get by. Do you love your wife?”

“She must be the most aggravating person on the planet.”

“All women seem that way,” the old man commiserated, but asked again, “Do you love her?”

“First we are arguing about making a baby and suddenly we are rehashing stupid things I said a half-year ago, and that I squeeze the toothpaste tube wrong, and how I supposedly put the toilet paper roll on backwards.”

“Over the front or over the back?” the old gent asked.

“What?” the clerk asked, not following.

“Over the front or the back?” the old man pressed. “The toilet paper roll. Over the front or...”

“Over the back of course,” the clerk replied with confidence.

“Over the front!” the old gent dismissed him.

“You’re crazy,” the young man argued. “Over the back!”

“Look at the patterns,” the old man instructed.

“What are you talking about?”

“Look at the little embossed patterns on the paper and it will be obvious,” the old man insisted.

“We never buy the rolls with the little embossed patterns.”

“Well, splurge once and it will be obvious,” the old man said, accepting no further argument.

“She knows everything, every screw-up I ever did, and every screw-up I was blamed for. It is not fair. She’s so... so...” the clerk stammered. “I don’t know what she is. Sometimes I am so frustrated. I feel like a bull rhinoceros and I need to butt my head into a wall or a tile floor. Why in the hell am I doing this? Why?”

“Feels like she can see right through you?” the old man asked.

“Yes.”

“You find yourself making the stupidest of arguments?”

“Yes.”

“Swearing?” the old man pressed.

“Yes.”

“Stuttering?”

“Yes.”

“Then you do love her!” the old man exclaimed.

“Yes, I do!” the young man shouted.

“Then what are you waiting for? You’re a young man. There is plenty of time for waiting later,” the old man said with enthusiasm. “Go for it. And you get to have all the fun while she does the work.”

“You’re right!” the clerk exclaimed. “Wow! A baby.”

“Do you have the time?” the old man asked.

“It doesn’t take that long,” the young man clucked.

“No, do you have the time?”

“No more waiting!”

“Do you know what time it is?” the old man insisted.

“Oh,” the clerk said, now understanding. “It’s about a quarter-to-six.”

“Then I have to go,” the old gent explained. “The Bulls’ game starts in fifteen minutes and there is a little sports bar around the corner. Maybe I’ll meet a man from Chicago and we can talk about that city. It is such a nice place to visit, so much better than Albuquerque.”

“So that’s what you’ve been waiting for?” the clerk chuckled.

“Oh, no. No!” the old man denied.

“Then what have you been waiting for?” the puzzled clerk queried.

“For the next thing to happen, of course,” the old man explained. “The next thing to happen.”

“Well, stop waiting,” the young man laughed. “Go for it!”

“You know, you are right,” the old gent conceded. “You are absolutely right. Maybe there will be a woman from Chicago. That would be so much nicer.”

The old man gathered up his overcoat and hat and headed for the front door. "Well, goodbye."

"Goodbye, sir," the clerk said, then added, "Come back anytime."

"Well, thank you," the old man replied, with a sparkle in his eye. And then dancing out with a sprightly jig, he sang out, "A woman from Chicago. A woman from Chicago!"

After the old man left, the clerk called his wife and begged forgiveness for everything that he could think of, and everything he could not think of. He asked his bride out for dinner that night as way of apology, but conceded that making up might be more fun in their small apartment. "I love you," he said. "Wait for me."

Bio- John Bolen is a novelist/playwright/actor living in Southern California. He has been published by Applause Theatre & Cinema Books (Hal Leonard Publishing), Independent Play(w)rights, *Indigo Rising*, Scars Publications, *The Write Place At the Write Time*, OC18onews, *Eunoia Review* and YouthPLAYS. John is the Producing Artistic Director of the New Voices Playwrights Theatre & Workshop.

John's plays have been produced throughout the U.S. His play for a young audience, *Aurelia's Magic*, (under its original title *Dancing on a Grave*), was produced in Southern California by the Vanguard Theatre and Garden Grove Playhouse. Readers Theater Television produced *Dancing on a Grave*, and a radioplay adaptation was produced by Shoestring Radio Theatre and was broadcast on 111 other stations across the United States through the National Public Radio system. John's novel adaptation of *Aurelia's Magic* and his short story collection *Nothing for Christmas & Other Holiday Tales* have just been released in paperback and Kindle editions.

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Will Do

by Lance Schaubert

I will get up out of this stall, wash my face, dry it. I'll hide the blemishes with hair, make sure no one heard me rehearsing. I will march out of this

bathroom, head high. They won't see me staring at the white and blue linoleum chess pattern I tend to hopscotch.

I'll wave to Chase and Travis, Athos and Porthos to my Aramis, and smirk my crazy idea smirk, and they'll wave back, wide-eyed. I'll slip past the prince of cats Steen Marlin and his crew so as not to get thrown down the middle hall railing. They will be bored, so I will be swift. Feet like a fox, wings like a barn swallow. Cats cannot contend with nimble fox-swallows.

Having avoided them, I'll take the middle entrance stairs three at a time until I hit the landing. There I will walk over the THS sign, and gaze out onto the circular blacktop back lot drive. Three groups will walk past me. Then I'll check to make sure I've not been followed. I won't be anxious. Nor reckless. Apollo's son took the middle way. So shall I.

I'll make my way up the next flight, come out the fire doors. I will look both ways, first to the end of the cavernous hall on the left where the glass-block wall stands, then to the end of the corridor on the right where my path leads around the corner. I won't turn back. I'll go straight into the library, lift up the biggest book I see, and station it on the table in front of me, giving me camouflage to blend in, yet enough vantage point to watch the copier.

There the beast walks, that violent creature farted out from the large intestine of Gehenna, that scaly winged relic from the ancient world. I'll watch Ms. Drake stride noisy joints over to the copier, and set my booty (the object of my quest) on top of the glass. She shall slam it down, paper on window, and turn on the Tartarean machine. The machine will use weapons of fire and light, transfiguring paper into flame and sunbeam, and out of ashes will hatch hundreds of baby papers. Then, having made my way over to the history section (the Drake's weakness), I will push over the furthest shelve, creating a chain reaction, a flood of books to put out the fires of the elder serpent.

She will say, "Ooh! Oh no!" and run to fix it.

Meanwhile, I will snatch up the stack of announcements, first to know the true date for prom. I will run out the side door, not to be seen again, and trash the rest of the papers. No one else will get there before me.

Reading the date and time, counting the cost, I will dart round the corner toward locker number twenty-two twelve. There guardian geese roost, protecting their golden egg, but my timing will be perfect. The bell will ring, and as usual, Faith will still be the only one of her flock waiting to get her books under wing. She will open her locker, and I will sneak up behind the door, out of eyeshot. Tomes in hand, she will close the door and squawk at the sight of me.

“You might have scared me to certain death, sir,” she will say.

“I know,” I will say, “but you shall be better for it in a moment.”

“Will I?”

“You will.”

“How will I be better for this intrusion?”

“In a second, I am going to ask you to prom with me on May fifth at seven o’ clock. Will you go?”

“I will indeed, fair champion.”

“That will be grand. I will pick you up at six.” Then I will trot off toward my class, and she will watch me turn the corner, silhouetted by Sun that will have stretched through the glass-bricks at the far end of the hallway to swoon after me, grasp for my prophetic voice. Faith might even cry at the sight. She might weep when she sees the Sun’s darts droop around my gilded profile. That is the plan. I will not deviate.

I look up at my hands, finish my business, pull up my pants and zip. And here we go, up and out of the stall, and over to the-

“Petty? Nebbish Petty, is that you?”

“Yes,” I say, emerging to wash my hands.

“What are you doing Petty? Who you talking to?”

“No one.”

“Oh, well, want to come play a round of three on three?”

“No,” I say, “I, uh, have something I need to do, Kurt.”

“Oh, well alright. See ya around.”

He walks away, and I go to the sink to wash my face. I scrub a bit too hard, and end up raw from the scrubbing. Potentially bleeding even.

I walk out, shooting the towel at the trashcan.

Miss.

I hang my head a bit lower and walk over the checkered steps, pawn edging toward the end of the board, toward imminent doom.

I wave to Chase and Travis, looking up soon enough to see their wave, their beckon. I walk over to them, hoping to mask my crazy idea.

“Hey Nebs,” says Chase.

“Hey Chase. Trav.”

“Nebbilicious. What up, cracka?” asks Travis.

“Nothin,”

“Not true,” says Chase. “What are you thinking?”

Travis speaks. “Uh-oh.”

“Uh-oh what?” asks Chase.

“He’s got it. He’s got the bug.”

“Got what?” I ask.

“Oh no,” says Trav.

“No what?” I ask again.

They both look at me. “You’re gonna try and ask Faith Warren to prom, aren’t you?”

I march off stomping.

They follow after me.

“Wait dude!”

And--

“Wait up!”

Not the best strategy since I was supposed to slip past.

“Looky looky.” Steen Marlin and Dick McCarlin pick me up and shovel me into an empty locker. In the darkness, ideas come to me. Bits of me ooze out the locker through the narrow slits at the bottom while other pristine pieces seep in through the narrow slits at the top, a radiator of ideas whispered from forgotten souls who have occupied this locker and other lockers before me, cooling, radiating. I’m not alone. I’m one in a multitude. I am antitype. I am immortal hero whose return was foretold: born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel. I am The Brave.

My neck cramps from contorted posture.

Chase opens the door. “Hey bro. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I say, “Just need some time.” I dig my way out, adolescent born of metal womb. Or tomb? My walk grows brisk, and I ignore my planned glance out the window since three groups pass. I walk in to find the demonic Ms. Drake crackling her skeletal mutation of a body over toward the copier. I hide behind the pillar that holds up the roof, thinking to wedge myself between it and the other and bring the whole temple of Dagon down. She must hear me because she looks right at the pillar, but goes back to copying. I run over, grab the sheets, hear her bellow:

“PETTY! BRING THOSE BACK HERE!”

I throw half into the trash, and memorize the last one: May second, seven o’clock. I from the glass blocks at the end of the hall, thinking I am the first. I am the type to all the antitypes who will miss their chance with her. I am raw initiation.

I turn the corner as Faith shuts her locker. There isn’t a gaggle. Has the bell rung? Have I missed it? How could I?

She's walking toward me. What do I do?

"Hey Nebbish," she says as she brushes past, silk curtains over an open window. If she would just do that about a thousand more times in a row for a thousand more years, I might be happy. Her hair's golden fleece, her eyes Aphrodite's, her voice Ariel's, her swagger stolen from Norse queens. She's treasure, the very end of myth.

She's leaving.

"Fu...Fu...Faith!?" I yell. Why did I yell? Did Aragorn yell at Arwen? Tristan at Isolde? Aladdin at Jasmine?

She turns, Icarus as he ignores his father and spins to the earth. "Yes?"

I'll have to suffer through nine levels of hell and twelve trials to have her. "I was...well, see I thought earlier about...and how I was..."

"Yeah?" She blinks twice. Fairy wings?

"Ifoundoutpromwasmaysecondwannagowithme?"

"What?"

I can't do this. I'm Paris. Achilles must be scoffing somewhere around the corner. I'm certain I see him. I ask again, "Uh...Prom?"

She waits.

Why is she waiting?

How can she say anything?

What if it's 'no'?

Where can I hide?

When will she stop waiting, eying me sphinx-like, riddle twixt her paws?

I've opened her box, looked in, and found gout, rheumatism, colic, envy, spite, and revenge. I doubt she left me hope in the bottom. I am a fool to have asked, a fool to plan. She will never say yes, never in ten million summer months will she spend so much time with me as to answer in the

affirmative. No matter where I run, where I hide, there her voice will surround me, taunting me toward the rocks. She may become the hound, but I'm not the fox I once thought, the fox I'd hoped, the fox-swallow. No. Rather she's the hound, I'm the coon double-crossing rivers, hoping to erase my tracks and wait for her boredom to prompt forgetfulness of me, boredom that may never come. Only I'm remembered, for she's an elephant never suffering amnesia. I'm stuck in a tree, trapped Psyche in Cupid's bed. I can't get out until hunter cuts me out of tree and grabs me out of golden boughs to kill. I shall make a nice hat for Crocket long before I have her. My will will never suffice. She'll get her way, have her way with me as Potiphar's wife might have hers. This is Cohen's cold and broken praise, the splinter of my last will and testament fading from howl to hiss. For once, they have casted a boy as Echo. This is mixed metaphor, blending me into nothing. I have risked, and she has –

“Yes. What time?”

I miss my cue.

“Neb?”

“Oh. Um, it starts at seven, so...five?”

“That's great, we'll have time for dinner. I get hungry early.”

“Faith?”

“Yeah?”

Tell her she's beautiful. “Um...”

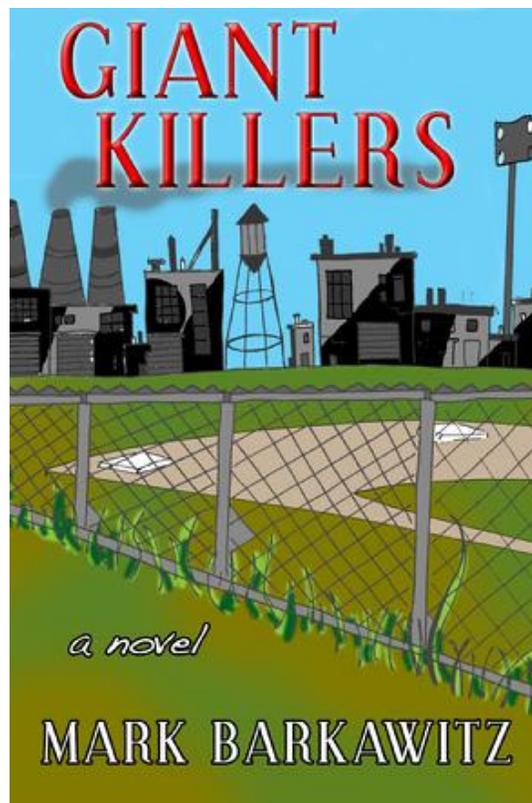
“Yeah, Neb?”

“You'll really go? Like...with me?”

“Will do.”

Bio- Lance has published articles in *Poker Pro*, *Hollywood and Vine*, *The Standard*, *Encounter*, *Stake* and *McSweeney's*; poetry in *Doxa*, *SP Quill*, *Thoughtwell*, *Salve*, and in an upcoming mixed-media book from Noble Beast; as well as a short story in *Scars* and *CC&D*. He coaches writers on their stories and edits full time.

## Featured Novel Excerpt



Cover Image of Giant Killers by Mark Barkawitz

We are featuring a pdf excerpt from the forthcoming novel *Giant Killers* (anticipated release date June 15th) by Mark Barkawitz who has been a contributing writer to *The Write Place At the Write Time* for five years. Below is a basic profile of the author consisting of a bio and comments on his works in other mediums; a synopsis of the novel is included as well.

### Author bio:

Mark Barkawitz has earned local and national awards for his fiction, poetry, essay, and screenwriting. His work has appeared in newspapers (*L.A. Herald-Examiner*, *Pasadena Star News & Weekly*, *Conscience*), magazines (*Arroyo Seco Journal*, *University Mag.*, *Simply 4 Pets*, *Senior Class*, *Our USA Mag.*), literary journals and anthologies (*Abraxas*, *Sojourns*, *Zyzyva*, *Blank Gun Silencer*, *Fingerprints*, *Paws & Tales*, *Sport*



[Featured excerpt from Giant Killers by Mark Barkawitz](#)

*Literate, Mediphors, Me Three, Illness & Grace- Terror & Transformation, Unhoused Voices: Granting Change for the Homeless, And We Write: Surviving Cancer; Let the Healing Begin*) as well as underground 'zines (*Inky Blue, Monkeywire*).

His work has also been featured on dozens of websites.

He has IMDb feature film credits as writer, actor, & associate producer for *Turn of the Blade* (NorthStar Ent.) and as supporting actor in *The Killing Time* (New World Pictures).

He lives with his wife, has two kids, and occasionally breeds a litter of golden retriever puppies (Woof Goldens) in their Pasadena, CA backyard.

[www.markbark.org](http://www.markbark.org)

Comments on other works of the author:

Perspective on poetry in the autumn 2011 issue- "The conversational tone of Mark Barkawitz's "A Pretty Good Deal" belies its somber subject. And that's good. Because if I say: here's a good poem about a guy battling cancer, you might think, dude, please. But if I say: here's a funny, whimsical, ironic poem about a brave guy having a laugh at misfortune, you might say, read it to me. And I'd begin: "helena shaved my head today," and I'd have you. I'd have you because you'd be reminded of the opening scene of *Tropic of Cancer*, among other things, but your intuition would be mistaken, as details in the following verses—breather masks, rubber gloves, and traumatized glances from the ladies—point to a more literal representation of the disease. And I'd have you – or, rather, Mark Barkawitz would have you – long after the hair hits the pillow case, long after the poem's concluding lines. The poem is free in meter, regular in verse, indelible in memory. And that's a good deal more than a pretty good deal" - Tim Tomlinson, co-founder of the New York Writers Workshop and co-author of *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing*  
<http://newyorkwritersworkshop.com/>

Perspective from the guest fiction judge of our First Annual Contest- "Bicycles" is a clear winner for me (not that the other pieces didn't have much merit as well!). It's a marvelous story with a strong shape--one of the most important but least discussed elements of short stories, which, at their best, show change in their short lives. I was absorbed in the conflict and felt all the potentials there--without knowing an obvious end. There's some delightful language, perfect for reading aloud. I hope to see more from this writer" - Gwendolen Gross, author of *When She Was Gone* (2013), *The Orphan Sister*, *The Other Mother*, *Getting Out*, and *Field Guide*  
<http://www.gwendolengross.com/>

*Giant Killers* synopsis:

Hidden behind dark sunglasses, long hair and a beard, a mysterious young man in shorts and sleeveless T-shirt runs the streets of a small town in Middle America. Store fronts are closed. The unemployed, like Darwin Charles, sleep on bus benches no longer on bus routes. The factory around which the town has grown, now struggles to stay open. So why has the runner returned when so many others are escaping?

At the park, he meets Willy Wood, a fatherless little leaguer who, like his teammates, can't catch the baseball. When pressed for information, the runner remains elusive, like the answers to the town's economic woes. Already anxious about her job at the factory, Mary Wood worries about this stranger, who now coaches her son and the winless Dodgers, even when his methods inspire a mid-season winning streak.

Paige Parker Jr., who inherited the factory, runs it with the aid of his most-competent but under-appreciated secretary, Connie Walls. He also manages the rival Giants with "Grub" Weisel, a disgraced coach formerly-linked to PEDs. Paige's son is their star pitcher. Parker will go to any means to keep the factory open—breaking the union, committing environmental felonies, and if necessary, even sacrificing a few lives along the way. Smitten with his employee Mary, he promotes her as his protégé.

Can one damaged man really make a difference in so many lives? Can the factory survive a world-wide recession? Can two aspiring women break the glass ceiling? Can the stumbling, bumbling Dodgers beat the big, bad Giants? When plans go amiss—and goals unachieved—can we still realize the dreams of our youth? In *Giant Killers*, perhaps we can.

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