

J.A.WILLOUGHBY

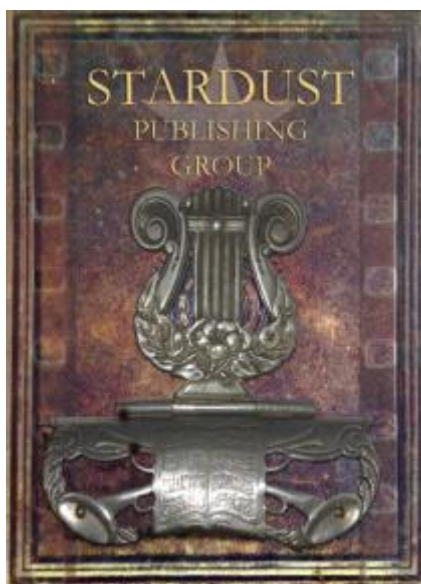
~SAMPLE BOOK WITH PURCHASE LINKS~

THIS SIDE
OF
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ENCORE

THE SECOND BOOK IN THE ANTHOLOGY

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Preface

After having written this book, I sat down and read it cover-to-cover. I needed to self-edit, add some things, take some things away, make changes and get a feel for the table of contents – the “running order” in music production terms – of the feel for ordering the stories. What I did not expect to find was a theme threading its way through many of them.

I write what I feel. Ideas pop into my head, I make note of them, I develop the story, do research and I write. Internal conflicts, ruminations, and personal pet agendas are all fodder for mental ingestion, digestion and subsequent literary regurgitation. External daily stimuli tends to give it form, always in an unplanned way (I always keep my eyes and brain open to neutral observation), and the next thing I know, I have another collection of stories stored on my hard drive. The thing is, I never know what it is that wants to be let out of my head until I go back and read them. This time it was very obvious.

After reading all that I have written these past two years, it became very apparent that I have crossed a boundary from “extended youth”, to “early senior citizen”. Oh, I don’t feel that, bemoan or proclaim it daily (unless there is a discount involved at a local restaurant) but my mind is telling me that in a natural sort of way: my unconscious thought is conjuring thoughts of mortality. Simply put, I am physically entering the “third act” of my Life’s Journey. The last chapter of my life on

earth has begun writing itself and it doesn't need my help. Rest assured, I am in good mental (you can be the judge of that) and physical health and hope to be around for a long time to come to take you, the reader, on more adventures. Also, the feel or tone of this book isn't morbid – so please don't close the cover and send it back for a refund just yet. This latest collection of stories doesn't dwell on the subject of our finite existence, but rather looks at it (and sometimes only dances *around* it) through many different eyes – and some of those are not even human.

Judicious assessments of my own life experiences shadowed the story lines, making observances of choosing between right and wrong, growing and maturing as an individual, coping with the worst that this world can dish out, and, of course, learning from each mistake made. I don't ask myself if I've made the correct decisions over the years because they can't be rescinded. I ask myself if I have adequately dealt with the effects or consequences those choices or decisions have rendered. That is living in the moment.

Each life experience, pleasant or unpleasant, had always proved itself in my mind to be enlightening. I *always* tried to find the positive side of anything that was thrown my way, even with the most grim of happenings, because I felt that experience, any experience, is better remembered and re-applied in a positive way or learned response, than would be a negative memory replayed *ad infinitum*. In other words, life doesn't always deal the best of hands. So, even if you have to fold, at least have the presence of mind to know why, and

make sure you can apply that lesson in the future, if dealt similar “cards” again. That is what being a human is all about: being confronted with obstacles, evaluating, adapting and overcoming them, and applying that to future similar circumstances. That, when aptly applied, is called “wisdom”.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to be able to express myself in many different ways. Art, music, writing, photography, all are creative outlets in my Theory Of Immortality. I have been planting a few seeds in each of those fields over the years, hoping that the ideas are sufficient enough to grow and outlive my corporeal shell, leaving something behind. Having felt that way for some time, I wrote the following on a social media post a few years ago. It seemed a fitting summary to this preface.

“If immortality exists in any form, I believe it exists by way of what we leave behind to be remembered: the things we create, write, sing, teach, the stories we tell, the very experiences we have had and share with each other. The knowledge gained and the lessons learned by sharing our 'uniqueness' with each other are to be told, absorbed, repeated, enjoyed and to be remembered for generations to come. All of that, added to personal decisions to procreate and pass on our own unique genetics in the form of our descendants, in my belief, is the essence of our human development, evolution and continuation of our existence as the human race and indeed, comprise what is known as the *human spirit*.”

This book is my latest attempt at achieving immortality.

"The life given us, by nature is short;
but the memory of a well-spent life is eternal." -
MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO

"Heaven isn't a place...
It is a presence of being, a state of mind.
It is what you believe it to be, what you want it to be.
It can be nothing more, and nothing less."
J. A. WILLOUGHBY - *From "Family Picnic" (audio book)*

"I would rather have a mind opened by wonder
than one closed by belief."
GERRY SPENCE

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In Memory of Sally Quinton
In Memory of Paul Everly

For My Children, Grandchildren & All Who Follow.
Life happens once.
Live it well and leave something behind.



MERCY

I thrust my arm upward, reaching through the entire expansiveness of the earth's atmosphere. I could feel every cell in my fingertips co-mingling with every molecule of the air from the surrounds of my patio chair to where the blue meets the stars. This was not a dream. I was awake – for now.

A casual glance at the watch wrapped around my left wrist told me I had been asleep for over an hour this time, having been drifting in and out of consciousness for the past twenty-four hours. Now, for some reason, the drowsiness was subsiding only to be replaced by a different sensation: I was experiencing a feeling of oneness, infinity and unity simultaneously with everything in the cosmos.

The feeling had no sooner nestled itself in my psyche, when a warm breeze blew over my arm. It was as if it were a familiar soft kiss, one from my past. In that fleeting moment it generated an instantaneous sense of extreme nostalgia, connecting with all my senses, flooding them, taking me back to a pleasant time and place some forty years before.

I felt the hot sun of the New Jersey shore beating down on me and slowly turning my skin red, with the inevitable feverish warmth and subsequent itchiness I felt after showering. I heard the intermittent oscillating surge of the ocean waves lapping, crashing on the beach, smelled the dying musty seaweed in the air, and the dried, rotting scent of beached fish and horseshoe crabs.

At that moment I could also distinctly hear the musical and mechanical sounds of the amusement rides and thumb-driven bicycle bells clinking, coming from the noisy boardwalk and the people's shoes clopping as they went from store-to-store, window-to-window. And I heard the gulls continuing their incessant calls as they circled overhead, their scream-like pleas begging someone to toss them a French fry.

I somehow actually *felt* the hot white sand and broken shells under my feet and caught a distinct whiff of the scent of baby oil from the glistening skin of the teenaged girl lying face down on the blanket next to me. The stiff, continuous beach wind blew her long brown hair across the unfastened back of her bikini top as the blowing sand pelted my skin. All of this from a warm breeze that barely grazed my skin and lifted the hair on my arm in one or two quick sweeps?

What is happening to me?

That inquiring, self-analytical thought no sooner presented itself than did I feel complete and utter calm. A mercurial transition to a feeling of total peace and serenity, apart from the moment in which I occupied, pervaded my being and propelled me into a heightened state of creativity, one which, as an author, I desperately seek out on a daily basis.

Multiple story lines came into my awareness suddenly, my head being filled with images, dialogue, scenes and characters all playing simultaneously but somehow miraculously unique and separate. It was like watching dozens of films all at the same time but following the action and fully understanding each singly in its own linear form.

How can this be?

I was connected on the most intellectual of levels to every living and non-living thing within the range of my senses. And also to some that weren't present or within my physical reach. I was hyper-aware but calm. Stimulated but serene. Observant yet fulfilled. Thirsty for more, but somehow sated.

I was *one* with the universe, completely connected in all its knowledge, both obvious and hidden. I was at its core of all worldly understanding. And I was falling asleep again.

"Can you hear me? Hello? Sir! Stay with me!" shouted a voice from above. "Just a little longer. Stay with me! Can you hear me?"

A bright light and the wailing of sirens invaded my recently acquired inner space peace and destroyed it in an instant. An uncomfortable need to know surfaced, floated slowly upward as if it came from a place deep, deep inside me, at the core of all emotions within a human being. It was an odd feeling of juvenile helplessness compared to my previously omniscient enlightened state. Without saying a word I somehow managed to externalize my thoughts in the form of an apparently quizzical facial expression that was understood by the anonymous person in the blue jumpsuit.

Where am I? What's happening?

"You're in an ambulance on the way to the hospital. Just try to stay calm."

I managed another uneasy interrogative, knitting my brow and making my immediate needs known for a second time. The young paramedic responded instinctively and with a tone of dry professionalism.

"You were dying."

I lapsed into unconsciousness again briefly and was brought about by the gurney crashing onto the ground. We rolled our way through the ER entrance as I heard the attending doc barking out orders.

"Level 4 bio-hazard here! Suit him up now and isolate. Clear the halls! Quarantine unit, lower level! Stat!"

Confusion and noise reigned supreme as the paramedics encased me in a clear plastic shroud and hurried me toward an elevator with red doors. I was fading again, the sounds of the motor humming and cable banging above my head as the car dropped to the previously defined secure confinement of the depths below. My eyes closed. As I drifted off I heard the two attendants casually conversing.

"So what's up with this one?"

"Sleeping by his pool. The neighbor found him. Just stopped by kind of randomly."

"Good thing for him."

"Yeah. He'd have ended up a lounge chair full of bones."

"Yeah. It's weird. They're all like that. I wonder why."

"I don't know. But I'm not sticking around to find out."

"What do you mean. You leaving?"

"Yeah. Nobody around here knows what the fuck is going on. I'm outta here starting Monday."

"Oh, yeah? Where you going?"

"Anywhere away from this shit! Any place where they're not finding bodies layin' all over the fucking place with stupid smiles on their faces."

"Yeah. That's some creepy shit, man."

I awoke to a woman's face staring through the encapsulating plastic that surrounded me. I no sooner had the thought than she was unzipping the enclosure, allowing it fall to the sides of the bed.

"The doctor will be in to see you in just a moment," she said and left the room.

I appeared to be in a sort of a holding room filled with only about five or six others, all with their plastic shrouds undone. The doors to the room were yellow, a cautionary color. I remembered the elevator doors were red. The next room would be green, no doubt. A simple but effective color coded marking system, I thought, so long as the attendants weren't color blind, that is. A bedraggled looking young man crossed the aisle from the opposite wall of beds and approached my bedside.

"Good morning. How you feeling?"

"Fine. It's morning already? I must have slept through the night after I fell asleep in the elevator."

The tired-looking young man looked at the computer pad in his hand, scrolling with his finger.

"Elevator? That was four days ago when you went into quarantine," he said continuing to scroll, yawning widely.

Four days? How could that be? I just fell asleep!

"You mean I died again?"

A glance from him told me he didn't get that question often.

"No. You simply fell asleep for four days. But your death may have occurred had you not woke up."

He stopped looking at the pad and addressed me directly.

"And we don't know why. Do you remember anything? It could really help us out."

The elevator guy was right. They really don't know what is going on around here.

END OF 'MERCY' SAMPLE

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AND THEN...

It's getting dark and I shouldn't be out running around like this. Everyone knows how dangerous that is. All the creatures and Beasties of the 'Tween World stalk their prey during the hours from twilight to dawn. I mean, everyone knows that!

Whoa! What was that? I thought I heard something. That would be all I need right now – to be slashed and hacked to death by a Mogwort. They kill just for the FUN of it!! Its razor claws would tear at my throat until all the arteries in my neck were opened leaving me to bleed out all over the sidewalk! Only random bits of ragged flesh would be left of me after the brutal attack. My body organs would be the only solid parts of me left to identify until they were carried away by the Crawltilians.

The 'Pires would smell the blood from miles away and come lapping it up like vicious dogs! But they would rather suck it out of me when I was still alive and warm. If I'm too far dead, they'd get sick and puke up everything, all thick and

black smelly crap. Ewww...Gross!

After that all the ZomBirds would dive down from their caves in the hills and then crack open my skull with their hooked beaks and eat my brain!!! And then they'd peck at my 14-year-old tender white flesh, jerking and pulling it off my bones in strips that would look like raw bacon.

That would just SUCK!! Only five blocks from my house and I get ripped to shreds and eaten alive!? WTF?? Why do we have to live on the other side of the park?? The park with all those trees!! The park with the lights that don't work half the time!!

Maybe if I was talking on the phone...ah, cell...is DEAD!!! GREAT!! That's just GREAT!!!

I don't have that far to go. But it's right through the dark part. I could walk around it but it would take a lot longer. And it would send me through the wrong side of town. It would send me down Steeb Street, the street where all the Bad Boys hang out. Uh, that would NOT be good! Maybe, if I did do that I could flirt with one of them just to get him to walk me home! That would be awesome! There's that one guy in my algebra class. He hangs out down there. He plays in a garage band or something. He's kinda cute. :-)) <3 <3 <3

Okay, I could walk by and pretend I'm talking on the phone. And then kind of look over his way. Maybe drop something to see if he would pick it up. And then say "Hey aren't you that guy who sits on the other side of the room in 3rd Period Algebra?"

And then he'd be like, "Uh, yeah, I am!! And you sit in the

row by the windows. Third desk back."

And I'd be like, "Oh cool you noticed me! hahaha Thanks!"

And then he'd ask what I was doing out after dark and then I'd tell him, "Oh just walking home. I live right over there on the other side of the park. My dad is probably standing and waiting for me out on the front porch right now." And then he would just ask me if I wanted him to walk me through the dark part. And then I'd say, "sure" and maybe he could help me with my homework sometime. And then he would just walk me home!! hahaha!!!

And then if I did get attacked by the 'Tweenie Beasts, he could fight them off and I could run home safe and sound! I mean, he'd be dead and everything but it's not like I knew him. Like, REALLY knew him. He was just that guy in algebra class.

But what if he liked me? Like, REALLY liked me? How would I know? What exactly would he try to do? I've never even been with a boy yet. Or a girl. Oh, yeah, well there was that one time that I made out with my BFF, like a long time ago, like, almost a year ago maybe. But that doesn't count. All we did was kiss on a dare with everyone watching. It got a little weird when she like started to really get into it and her tongue went into my mouth! Uh, Whoa!

Wait. Stop! LISTEN! **I heard something. It's coming from...**

Hey! Oh, it's you! I'm SO glad to see you!!! Give me a hug!!! I was SO scared!! Thank god!! I thought it was some creature hiding, waiting to attack me!!! I am soooo glad it was my beautiful bae!!!! My one and only TRUE BAE girl!!!! Will you

walk with me through the park? You will? Cool!!

Hey, did we have a homework assignment in English today? Huh? What? What are you doing?! Hey! No! Stop it!! No! Stop!! Not you! Not YOU! This CAN'T be happening!! You CAN'T be one of THEM!!! NO! NOT YOU!!! AHHHHHH!!!!!!

>>>>>Okay, D. That's it! The end of my part. You write the next one. And MAKE IT A GOOD ONE!!!! ;^) Do the Boy part and make it HAWT!!!! :-P LOL! <<<<<<

The man closed his daughter's laptop quickly and shook his head.

"Whew," he said as he laughed aloud, taken by surprise.

Wild imaginations, these kids. No wonder she is spending a lot more time on her computer lately. Either way that is a good thing, right? I mean, she's home and not out running around.

"Mogworts, Pires, ZomBirds, bacon bits, bad boys...heh," he said under his breath. "Crazy."

He carefully placed the computer back on the exact spot on the desk where he had found it.

Ah, maybe not so crazy. He turned toward the window. The sun was beginning to set and a few of the street lights in the darker areas flickered on.

We had our monsters, too. Getting killed in your dreams. All the ghosts in the universe descending on and harassing the people of the earth all through one apartment building. Dolls and puppets that killed people...heh.

"Emily!" he shouted, turning his head slightly over his right shoulder.

"Yes?" came the reply from his wife in the kitchen

downstairs.

"Is Maddy home, yet?"

"No, not yet!" she shouted back.

"Hmm..."

He cast a momentary glance back to the laptop, looked about the contents of the room, then stared back out the window.

Yeah, we had our monsters. Every generation does.

He watched as the last of the street lights flickered to life on the street below. He turned slowly from the increasingly darkening world outside the window, walked out of his daughter's bedroom and closed the door behind him. He made his way down the stairs, muttering parts of the story as he went.

END OF "AND THEN..." SAMPLE

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THE KITCHEN KLATCH

"drip...drip...drip..."

"Oh, no, not again!" said Oven, yawning. "Just a little extra twist is all it would take. I need my sleep!"

"Give Girl a break," said Teapot. "She hasn't gotten it together, yet. We just moved here!"

Oven yawned widely again and again, hoping to get some much needed rest after a two burner morning and a full four burner and inner roasting extravaganza house-warming dinner the night before.

"Yes! Seriously!" said Coffee Maker, "It is quite annoying to say the least! Just an extra little push!"

"The time is now 8:38 am," said Clock, trying to bring order to things.

"So what, Clock!?" said Coffee Maker. "The least she could do is shut off the water! Now we have to listen to this dripping all day!"

"Girl was in a hurry, that's all! She has not adjusted to her new commute yet. We just got here. You all need to just calm down!" said Teapot, with all the cold, vintage brassiness she could muster.

"Oh, quit *spouting* off, telling us what to do," said Oven with an uncharacteristically humorous tone, as he yawned widely.

Coffee Maker, or CM, as he prefers to be called, giggled.

"The time is now 8:39 am," Clock reiterated.

"We know what time it is! Stop that!" demanded Teapot.

"Now you got her going, Clock," said Oven, still on a comedic roll. "And we didn't have to sing the song about where her handle and her spout are and how short and fat she is. That always does it!"

"Oh!" huffed Teapot, a bit more than miffed.

CM chuckled a little, and Oven joined in. Teapot caught the whimsy of it all and joined in too, ultimately failing after a valiant attempt to stifle her laughter.

The twittering eventually subsided and the kitchen was once again silent, save for the now-slower drip from the faucet. CM couldn't resist the urge to continue the fun.

"What do you think?" he said, directing his question to the Toaster sitting silently beside him on the black granite counter top. And one by one, they all started laughing again uncontrollably.

"The time is now 8:45," said Clock, determined to bring peace to the new chaos.

"That was cruel," said Oven. "You know he never speaks."

"Toaster could be a *she*," asserted Teapot.

"She has a point, Oven," said CM, contemplatively. "You should not be so quick to assume or judge."

Oven fell silent.

"You've been with Girl the longest, Teapot. How many toasters has she had?" asked CM.

"Four," she answered back without delay. "And none of them ever made so much as a peep. Just a pop...UP, then nothing!"

Oven and CM contemplated that notion as Clock ticked away the seconds.

"Well, if you *can* hear me, Toaster, I am sorry. It was all

in fun, you know?" offered CM to his mute countertop companion.

Many hours passed in silence as Clock maintained a constant and monitored vigil over all. Suddenly, an unusual sound came from Fridge.

click...whirrrr...click...whirr...click

"I don't like the sound of that," said Teapot, her tone exhibiting one of concern, not unlike that of a wise grandmother of some years.

Again, the ominous sound emanated from the old appliance and filled the room with a new and different sound, a strange mechanical rhythm.

click...whirrrr...click...whirr...click.

"We've been together for a very long time," she continued.

The kitchen regained its silent composure again and, save for the dripping of the faucet, all was quiet. Oven got his usual daylong sleep before he was needed for that evening's two or three burner meal.

"The time is now four o'clock, pm," announced Clock.

"It won't be long now!" tittered CM. "She will be here soon. Get ready, Teapot!"

"Oh, I am always ready – morning, noon or night,

whenever Girl needs me, I am here," she said as proudly as any one hundred- year-old family heirloom teapot could be.

"What do you think she will be bringing home today?" said Oven, yawning upon waking. "It's been a little something here and there each week."

He paused for a moment. "Maybe a new Micro?"

"NO!" screamed CM.

"Oven...don't," Teapot said condescendingly. "You know how he despises Micros."

All of them knew it was only a matter of time before that vacant corner of the counter top would be filled with a high-strung chattering Microwave, operating at peak efficiency, 24/7 – and letting all of them know about it.

"I'm not a hater, but Micros are totally annoying!" CM lamented. "And she always sticks them right next to me in every place we have been! I was just growing accustomed to this empty space next to me."

He paused for a moment. "Not you Toaster, on the *other* side of me. Why not next to the Bread Box? There is plenty of room."

"No one wants to share space with a Bread Box!" Oven droned slowly. And they all giggled. All except Toaster, that is, who, of course, remained mute.

"Maybe it will be a one shot coffee maker," said Oven

needling.

“Oh! Stop it!” screamed CM.

“You are really on a roll today, Oven,” said Teapot quietly. “He really does hate them!”

“They are such sellouts! One shot and done! Whores! Oh!” he continued. “Where is the talent in that? It takes cold, filtered water, a clean carafe, and regular maintenance to do what I do! And, of course, freshly ground coffee dispensed in just the correct amount. Everything has to be just right! Heh, one shot prepackaged, indeed!”

“How about a nice espresso machine, then?” said Teapot, trying to steer his mood in a more positive direction.

“Oooo,” CM cooed. “Well now, that is something I could sit with all day *and* night! Strong, hot, steamy, frothy. Mmm...”

“The time is now 4:15, pm,” declared Clock.

“I guess we will know soon enough,” said Teapot resignedly.

click...whirrrr...click...whirr...click

“I really don’t like the sound of that.”

Girl returned from work and the evening went as usual; a nice dinner with a glass of wine, followed by the creation of the next day’s To-Do List, a couple of quick text messages, and

one lengthy phone call accompanied with hearty laughter. Everything was status quo until a knock on the door came without warning.

Girl peered out the kitchen window to look in the driveway, raced to the door and held it open for a man in a uniform carrying a box marked with very large letters. He set it down in the middle of the floor, gave a nod and left.

Girl excitedly cut open the box, pushed back the flaps and pulled out a brand new stainless steel finished microwave from its interior, much to CM's chagrin. She placed it in the vacant space on the counter top directly next to her ever-faithful coffee maker, and plugged it in, looked up at Clock's imperceptible moving hands and set the digital clock on the control panel.

beep, beep, beep...beep, beep, beep

"I'm annoyed already," exclaimed CM.

"Shhh..." said Oven.

"Don't be silly, Oven," said Teapot. "You know she can't hear us."

"Yes, I know!" said Oven. "I just wanted to hear its voice, to see what we are in for."

"Oh, they are all the same," said CM disgustedly. "They are nothing but a bunch of cheerleaders!"

Programming beeps complete, Girl picked up her ringing phone and left the room, babbling happily as she went. Teapot, Oven, CM and Clock stared at the new member just added to their Kitchen Klatch. It sat there completely silent, its robust internal energy contained – for now. When activated, the newly-purchased unwelcome machine would hum and blow smells, counting down the seconds like a time bomb waiting to explode. Its disquieting non-compatible noises – clicking, droning, humming, beeping – would fill the room, disrupting any normalcy the Kitchen Klatch had enjoyed. And, as that last second ticked off, it would announce loudly that it had DONE ITS JOB! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! - just like they all did.

“Enjoy its silence while you can. Here she comes,” said Teapot, who had a better view down the hall from atop the counter. Girl jaunted back into the Kitchen, fragrant cup of tea in hand, and headed across the tiled floor to the new Micro.

“Oh, no!” said Teapot. “She’s never done that before!”

Girl opened the door to the shiny new unit, placed the cup inside and punched the express button for one minute.

“Don’t worry, Teapot,” said Oven. “She hasn’t abandoned you. She’s just warming it up to see how it works.”

“Oh! They are all the same!” huffed CM. “They’re just a bunch of –

“SIXTY! FIFTY-NINE! FIFTY-EIGHT! FIFTY-SEVEN!...”

The stainless steel appliance started its perfectly executed digital countdown. It clicked, hummed, and blew warm chamomile scented air out from under it, along with dust, crumbs and other minute counter debris. The Klatch was appalled, beleaguered and beside themselves, anticipating unending years of this obnoxious behavior.

“...FIFTY-SIX! FIFTY-FIVE! FIFTY FO– “

The shouting “cheerleader” and all her accompanying annoying sounds and vocalizations abruptly stopped – before the countdown concluded! Stunned into silence, the Klatch members looked to Clock for order.

“The time is now 7:16 pm,” announced Clock.

The panel on the Micro did not exhibit the same information. In fact, it exhibited no information whatsoever. It was blank and the under-the-counter lights were not on. CM's glowing timer was dark, too. They shared a space and they shared the same electrical source. The remaining “awake” and alert Klatch members reached the same conclusion simultaneously: The power was off!

“Yay!” they all shouted with glee. All except for CM, that is, who was as silent as a Toaster. Or a Breadbox. He hated when that happened. And he would remain that way until Girl figured out what had just occurred. It wouldn't take her long. The electrical breaker panel was just down the stairs in the space beneath them. She'd be back in a minute.

“That happened in Girl's first apartment, too.” said Teapot. “It was an old building, the wiring wasn't quite right and – “

The under-counter lights suddenly came back on and the Micro blinked and beeped once. CM's glowing timer came on, too, all at the same time.

“Bitch!!” CM screamed at the Micro the moment his energy surged back on.

Teapot and Oven laughed.

“I knew he would say that,” droned Oven, always warmly enjoying his own electrical source and not sharing with anything else.

“So did I!” Teapot agreed, stifling a giggle.

“The time is now 7:18 pm,” announced Clock, trying to restore order to the Kitchen.

Girl glanced at Clock, set Micro's timer again and pushed the one minute express button.

“Here we go again!” Oven said with dread.

“NO!” screamed CM.

“Oh, dear,” said Teapot helplessly. She could not offer any assistance or even consolation because she was not a powered device. And this was one of those moments when she was glad she wasn't. All she could do was sit and watch

her friends suffer the indignity of – interruption.

“SIXTY! FIFTY-NINE! FIFTY-EIGHT! FIFTY-SEVEN!...”

And all the humming, clicking and blowing noises and perfect countdown began again and unnerved their bucolic space.

“...FIFTY-SIX! FIFTY-FIVE! FIFTY-FOUR– “

Once again the shouting female cheerleader appliance abruptly ended her countdown in mid-number.

“Yay!” they all yelled again. All except for CM, that is, who again went as silent as a Toaster. Girl growled a bit and hurried back into the space below.

“You know, at one of the places we used to live, Girl moved Micro to her other space. The space above us where she did some of her work,” said Teapot. “I saw it. She took me there once when I was to be polished. Maybe she will –“

Suddenly, the lights came back on, CM's timer glowed and he screamed the same profanity he did before. Oven yawned and then went back to sleep and Micro shouted her energetic countdown for exactly fifty-four seconds before being silenced again by another power failure due to Micro's overload on the circuit. Girl gave up, and all was well and silent until the next morning.

“The time is now 7:03 am,” said Clock, announcing to the Kitchen Klatch, the arrival of a new day, as Girl hurriedly

set Fridge's contents on the counter top and in the sink. Some things she immediately threw into the garbage can without hesitation. Others she placed in a Styrofoam cooler on the floor. Girl stopped long enough to wipe the floor in front of where the large appliance had sat, sopping up melted ice cream and condensation with a dirty, formerly white, dish towel.

"It happened just after Girl went to bed," Teapot offered without prompting. "I heard his last – "

Uniformed men interrupted her as they inadvertently banged against the open the door, moving Fridge out to a waiting truck. Girl continued to alternately wipe the floor and rinse the towel in the sink.

"It was shortly after midnight when I heard that sound he was making earlier, and then nothing. Just nothing," she continued.

Despite the movers' indelicacy, oblivious as they were to the situation, the outside storm door shut gently, its closure softened by the pneumatic shock absorber attached to its hinge.

"Girl forgot to cover me with my cozy. I saw it all."

Oven and CM, and maybe Toaster, heard her and said nothing. The room fell silent for the remainder of the morning. Even Clock kept a muted vigil, refraining from announcements, as Teapot sat uncovered, maintaining Her Watch.

The Klatch knew that the space that Fridge had

occupied would not remain vacant for long. It was not an option, in this modern era, to go on for any length of time without refrigeration, though Teapot had seen otherwise.

"How long do you think it will be before we see another Fridge," asked Oven, his thoughts uncharacteristically preoccupied with the surroundings, and not his purpose and daylong sleeping habit.

"Not long," said CM in a subdued tone.

Teapot sat in silence.

"What do you think Teapot?" asked Oven.

Teapot remained quiet, seemingly distracted, for a long moment then responded.

"Oh, yes...what?"

"We, uh, Oven and I, and possibly Toaster, wondered how long it would be before a new Fridge would arrive."

"Um, yes, I was just thinking along those lines just now, you see," said Teapot coming back from her reverie. "Yes, I was just..."

Oven and CM gave her the moment she needed.

"I was thinking back, way back, to my time in England," she said without further prompting. "That was such a long time ago and with Fridge's demise and the time we had here, I mean, I was just reminiscing and was lost in thought,"

she said, pausing to acknowledge the rest of the Klatch.

“Go on,” said CM encouragingly. “We would love to hear it!”

“Yes, tell us about England,” droned Oven. “Your home.”

Teapot hesitated at first but the desire to recount her time, her existential beginnings seemed most appropriate now with the loss of her relatively longtime companion. She had seen so many things. And although she was not an appliance, but rather an heirloom and could therefore sustain longevity in the World Of Girl and other humans, she nonetheless knew that her existence was ultimately finite – and was all-dependent on the caretaker.

“The first ‘fridge’ I remember was an icebox – a wooden cabinet with a place at the top for a block of ice that kept the inside cold. It wasn't a fridge, really. It was a box with ice in it. We were in Surrey, just southwest of London. It was the summer of 1914. The people there were involved a war. The First Great War.”

“What happened?” asked Oven, now unusually awake for the time of day that it was.

“Oh, wars...” said Teapot. “You get to see so many new and different people and then one day, they're just – gone.”

The Klatch remained quiet, giving Teapot the space and time she needed to tell her story.

"I had many, many happy and joyous teas with soldiers of the East Surrey Regiment and their sweethearts before The Boys left for across the Narrow Water."

She paused to order her thoughts.

"And then there were the sad teas...with just the young girls whose fellows had not come back. But I was always there!"

If Teapot had a mouth it would have had a smile on it.

"Though a good many years later during the Second Great War, I came very close not to serving tea ever again!"

"What do you mean, Teapot? What happened?" asked CM.

"I almost went to the Front with Our Boys."

"What?" Oven and CM exclaimed simultaneously.

"You mean as a soldier's tea set?" asked Oven.

"No. As part of a tank!" Teapot said, and a bit of proud whimsy shone from her metallic surface.

"The time is now 7:37 am," proclaimed Clock. Girl wiped up the last of the mess on the floor and hurried out of the kitchen and went upstairs, cell phone in hand.

"Do tell!" urged CM.

"Yes, please," said Oven encouragingly.

Teapot waited a moment, which was the human equivalent of taking a deep breath, and recounted her brush with oblivion – or immortality – depending on how you look at it.

END OF “THE KITCHEN KLATCH” SAMPLE

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THERE YOU ARE!

There you are! Finally!

“What? What's the big deal?”

What do you mean?
We've been waiting!

“For what?”

We can't do anything
until you sit down and write it –
or had you forgotten that?

How long's it been *this* time?

“A couple of days.”

A couple of days?!

What have you been doing all that time?

"Lots of things."

Like, what is so important
that you just leave us here
neglected for a "couple of days"?

"Lots of things.
And where is 'here'?
This is only dialogue.
I haven't created a scene yet."

You said that already.

"What?"

"Lots of things."
Maybe you're running out of ideas.
You're repeating yourself.

pause

Oh, no you don't!
You've been gone for a couple days.
You don't get to put us on PAUSE.
Think of something!
Write, damn it! And make us look good.

“What would you have me say?”

Maybe we could...
take on a life of our own.

“It seems you have done that already.”

pause

Not THAT again!
And an extra, empty line!?
How much time do you need anyway??

“I had to take a leak. That's why the extra line.”

You took a leak
just before you gave us
a life of our own??
How indignant can you be?!

Ah, *another* empty line.
Making us wait *again*!
Touch a nerve, did we,
or is your bladder failing?

pause

Okay, okay, I get it, I get it.
Knock it off!

Knock it off – *please*.

“That's more like it.”

Hello there.

Hey, where'd he come from –
the bathroom??

“Very funny. You've been saying ‘we’.
I thought it was time to make an introduction.”

END OF “THERE YOU ARE!” SAMPLE

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THE KID & ME

Not many people get a second chance at living. Hell, most don't take a very good shot at it the first time. Yet here I am getting a second chance, even after having a good first round.

Let's see...I'm fifty years old, in and out of love a long time ago and in between wives at the moment. Hey, what can I say? Most women my age come with built-in issues, like used cars. And all the younger ones look, well, *too* young, like new cars you can't afford. I guess that same thing would apply to me, too. Today I have exactly \$246.37 in my savings account and, oh yes, I am recovering from my first heart attack.

I wonder what the kid would have thought of all this?

I like walking this old street. I grew up on this street, and they say walking is good for me now, since the operation, I mean.

That's part of the reason I've got Bandit here: he's about as defective as me, and he needs a walk every day just like I do. I figured I could improve both our lives when I adopted him from the pound. I've spent too many hours in a computer chair and not enough time running and playing, I guess—he's about the same. An occasional pickup game of basketball or soccer would probably have been enough to keep me in shape. Even sex once or twice week might have helped somewhat. But the years come, and the years go...

...And this old street looks new. The people don't look the same either. The more I walk, the less familiar it becomes. I take the picture out of my jacket pocket and look at it once more. I do that more often now - since my operation, I mean. That face has the same look each time. It never changes. Same smile. Same innocent gleam in the eye. So young. Such hope. Everything was yet to come.

Have I let him down? Could I have done better for him? He wanted to do things.

I know there is no interstate road map to life. Some people think you have to take what comes at you and keep your direction straight, your pace fast. I never believed that. *You* make your own way. *You* choose whether or not to take all the turns along the way. I like those little asphalt capillaries, not the main arteries, that lead you to who-knows-where. You plan the trip, make the routes, pull over to pee, or race ahead full speed. You stop to take on passengers, or leave them by the side of the road. If you're Bandit, maybe you roll around in

the grass awhile before moving on. No, Life isn't a train ride on two straight rails going a hundred miles an hour. It's not always a straight run but you're at the wheel. Yes, there are curves and hills. Or if you prefer the vernacular -- shit happens.

I wonder if the kid would have understood any of this then. I wonder.

Only one more block and I'll be at the park. I can tell by the slack in the leash that Bandit's slowing down a bit, so we'll both be looking for a rest on the bench. From this distance the park still looks the same. The benches are in the same locations, the cannons still pointing silently at a once real, but now imaginary enemy. The bell in the church tower across the street still rings at noon. The kid saw and heard all those things so that hasn't changed. He played on the cannons, hung from their barrels like a monkey, waited for the bell to ring, then jumped off and screamed and plugged his ears. I can sit on the same bench he used to sit on hoping to catch the eye of a passing girl he fancied when he was older. Hoping she'd sit down-even if it was at the far end of the bench. It still meant something to him.

Ahh..."Take a load off, buddy," I say to Bandit, and to myself I guess. He lays down, gratefully.

Nice thing about walks; they make you appreciate the sitting time even more. I know that's not the intention, but hey, what the hell? Uh, oh. Just when you try to forget...a moment

of relaxation...and everything comes pouring back. My eyes scan the surroundings, and right over there's the school.

Fourth Ward Elementary. All the neighborhoods were divided into small districts then; Wards. Hmm...odd they should call them that, like a hospital. Anyway, that division created a territorial thing, socially speaking. Originally, it was an ethnic division; Germans here, Irish there, Welsh over that way. Over time, all the wards became more homogenized. But not nearly as homogenous as later times when these smaller schools were melded into one centralized elementary school.

In many ways, it was better the old way; it promoted socializing locally because there was a mystery there, something that needed exploration. But it also created rivalries. The local hot shot, the biggest kid on his block, would saunter over into the neighboring Ward. He'd poke around a bit at the playground and in the alleys to see who was the biggest— not always in size, but the most popular kid— on that block. Then sometimes there would be a fight, sometimes there wouldn't. I guess in some ways it wasn't all that different than dogs marking territory, packs vying for space and status. Either way, all parties would walk away. No bodies littered the street afterward. No later retaliatory drive-by shootings. In every case I can think of, even if the both of them 'got it on' and the winner was declared by mutual exhaustion, they would shake hands and walk away. I can think of one instance where they even became best friends after the dust settled. The kid had so many opportunities at that time. Oh, so many things then to

consider!

“I had so many good friends then,” I say aloud to Bandit, who is probably now one of my closest. “Where have they all gone?” He looks at me, blinking in the sun as he pants, that dog-smile on his face. What do I expect, an answer?

It’s getting colder. It will be winter, soon, I can almost smell it. I remember a time when I liked winter. Well, what I really liked was the first *snow* to be more precise, not winter. But then that ‘like’ would depend on the time period. When I was younger, I couldn’t wait for the first big snowfall – the one that would stop traffic and cause school to be canceled. No one, except the crazy diehards with chains on their tires and something to prove, would venture out in a car on a day like that, so all the streets would be covered.

Pure, fresh, white snow covered the streets like it covered the sidewalk and the yards, which all blended and ran together. It was one big blanket covering everything. You couldn’t tell the streets from the yards, the yards from one another. It was all one big white blanket and everyone was under it. Then the shoveling would start, and with it, the divisions again: his walk, her path, their fence row, the town’s street, all would re-emerge. Those divisions nullified that perception of natural unity, caused by that infinite number of falling, unique, white symmetrical flakes coating all our irregular and unnatural surfaces.

We would find the steepest hill with the shortest street

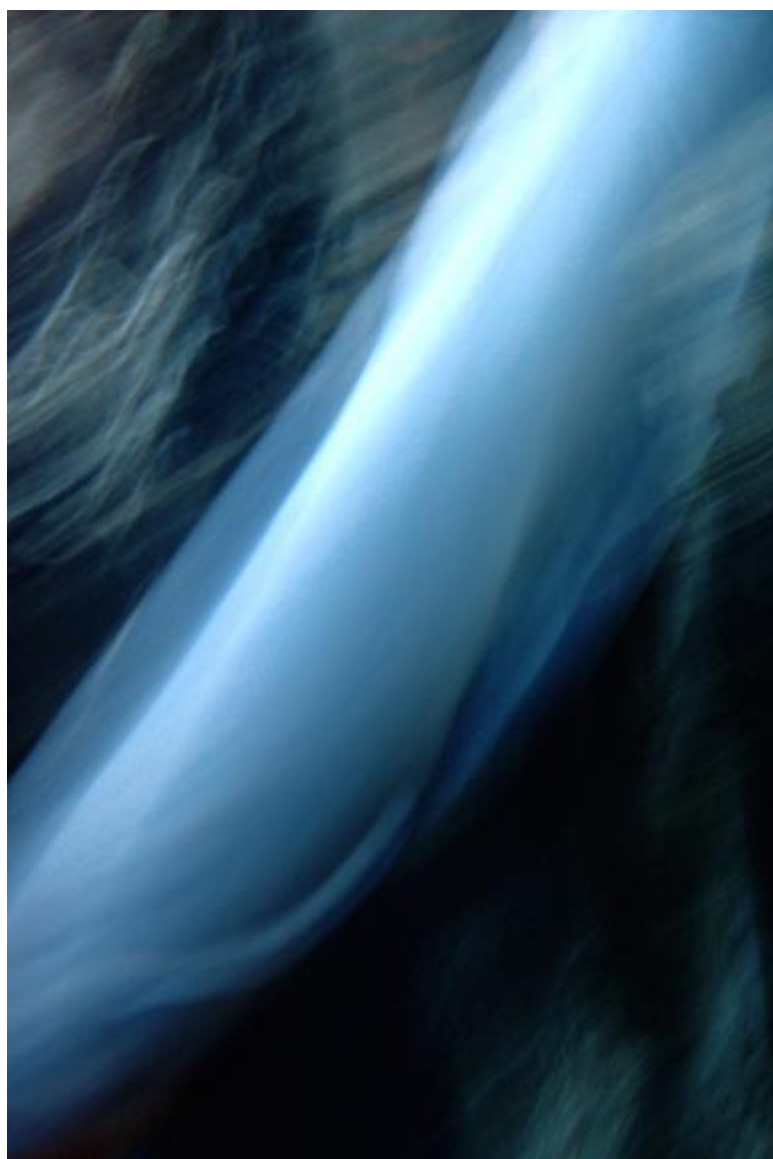
and place guards, more often than not it would be the little kids, at either end, grab our sleds and run to the top. You'd take one or two steps with the sled sides firmly in your hands before throwing it to the ground and landing yourself on top of its wooden surface. That sudden jolt to the chest would leave you gasping for breath, streaking down a steep embankment. We'd race down the hill, the fresh cold powder hitting us in the face, causing us to wince, and sometimes stick out our tongue to catch the sensation of the day's unique cold and wetness on the surface of our warm sensory organ, not unlike a reptile, finding its way around a new and possibly exciting environment, or a dog, stuffing its face into a fresh snow pile just for the fun of it.

The ride would last only a few exhilarating seconds, instilling an immediate need to do it *again*. To go faster, longer. To experience the ignored, but never revealed, fear - *again*. To feel the rush of adrenaline - *again*. To get a perfect run – *one last time*.

END OF "THE KID & ME" SAMPLE

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WHAT OF MAN?

Legions of their species moved effortlessly across the earth's oceans, slicing through the wave tops at great speed. Tens of thousands more joined their crusade daily. They, as well as the many other creatures among them, were now united; their common desire committed, their commitment undaunted, their purpose just and unrelenting.

They had followed a path back, a path set down by the Elders, the Wise Ones who knew of The Old Time. And now that path was on target.

"The beaches are where the earth's people frolic and play, where and when they are the most congregated. Hit them where they will be with their offspring, out in the open," stated the Supreme Directive from their Order.

"Chiik-kk-tk-Reen! Chiik-kk-tk-Reen! Rreeun-drak-krrit-rek- tik!" The Group Leader, out in front of the rest, screeched loudly as he made his way back to his Command Pod. His Loyal Followers repeated his command over and over, sending it down the line of thousands-in-waiting.

Hit them! Hit them! Our survival depends upon it!

The cold, salty water of the planet's oceans sprayed their faces and kept them sharp and invigorated. Their numbers were strong. Their mindset, determined. Their intent ominous. Their assault, coordinated worldwide.

Precise communications between the water and the air environments was tantamount for their plan to be successful. Only days before atmospheric conditions had not been optimal, storms prevailed, and their transmissions had been spotty, garbled, echoed and confused. To make certain that their signals were clearly understood by all those in their massive Assault Force, individual messengers were sent out, one by one, to all the groups spread out over thousands of miles of the planet's oceans to make sure all of the Group Leaders were informed. Each designated messenger relayed the command to the messenger from the next group until it was passed down through all of them.

“Chiik-kk-tk-Reen! Chiik-kk-tk-Reen! Rreeun-drak-krrit-rek tik!”

The Directive was a revolutionary idea for their species, a controversial decision for even the oldest and wisest among them. It had been years, decades, in the making. Its course and their actions today would take even longer to come full circle. But it was a first necessary step and it was imperative for the continuance of their kind, as well as others of their Order.

Helplessly, they had watched their own world become

uninhabitable. Their living conditions had not been improving, and instead had deteriorated. Food supplies were contaminated and dwindling. More of the general population were being killed by The Others, and reproductive issues had arisen out of nowhere: chemicals and pollutants, most likely, in the air they breathed and the water they drank. Over time, remaining in their world was a death sentence for their entire species, as well as others from The Order.

“Rreeun-oon-ee-kk-ttk-drakniik.Rrunn-nyee-aanur-oon-drakeen!

Our world is becoming poisoned. We need another world in order to survive!

The Group Leaders knew that many lives would be lost in this First Assault but most, especially the young ones, would survive and continue on. And more importantly, that would benefit the entire race. The survivors would contribute to the benefit of millions of their kind over time. It was imperative their efforts today were successful in spite of the odds.

The Group Leaders had observed the humans on countless occasions for many years so they knew the timing of their incursion needed to be precise. Their Assault Force needed to hit the oceans' beaches when they were the most heavily populated; a midsummer's day on a weekend and in good weather. No rain, but bright sun. That's when the earth's people would go to the beaches: human men, women and

children, all out in the open in full view when they hit. While it was also true that the heat of the day would weigh heavily in their fight to survive, it was necessary. Their landing must be productive, the inevitable loss of lives, meaningful!

A quick glance down the front line of the First Wave of the assault showed the enormity of the operation. Moving swiftly through the water, they numbered in the thousands, a sight to behold, their many Pods seemingly endless and fading into the distance like so many stars above in the darkness of the night. The Leaders could hear the calls of youthful voices through the crashing of the waves.

“Rrunn-urr-meen-bk-rreeun-mrrr-ik-ooun! Rrunn-eek-ik-ooun! Rrunn-irr-ihr-ooun-nnn-oounik!

We are many and move as one! We think as one! We are one and united!

The determination of the indoctrinated Young Ones was admirable, if not desperately inspired. So many of them would be lost. After this day, so many would never see the Light again or take in another breath of air. What unified them was knowing that all of their kind would be doing the same thing all over this world, doing what they knew had to be done for the sake of their survival.

The Grand Leader signaled the others through the liquid and air environments, issuing his final assault command.

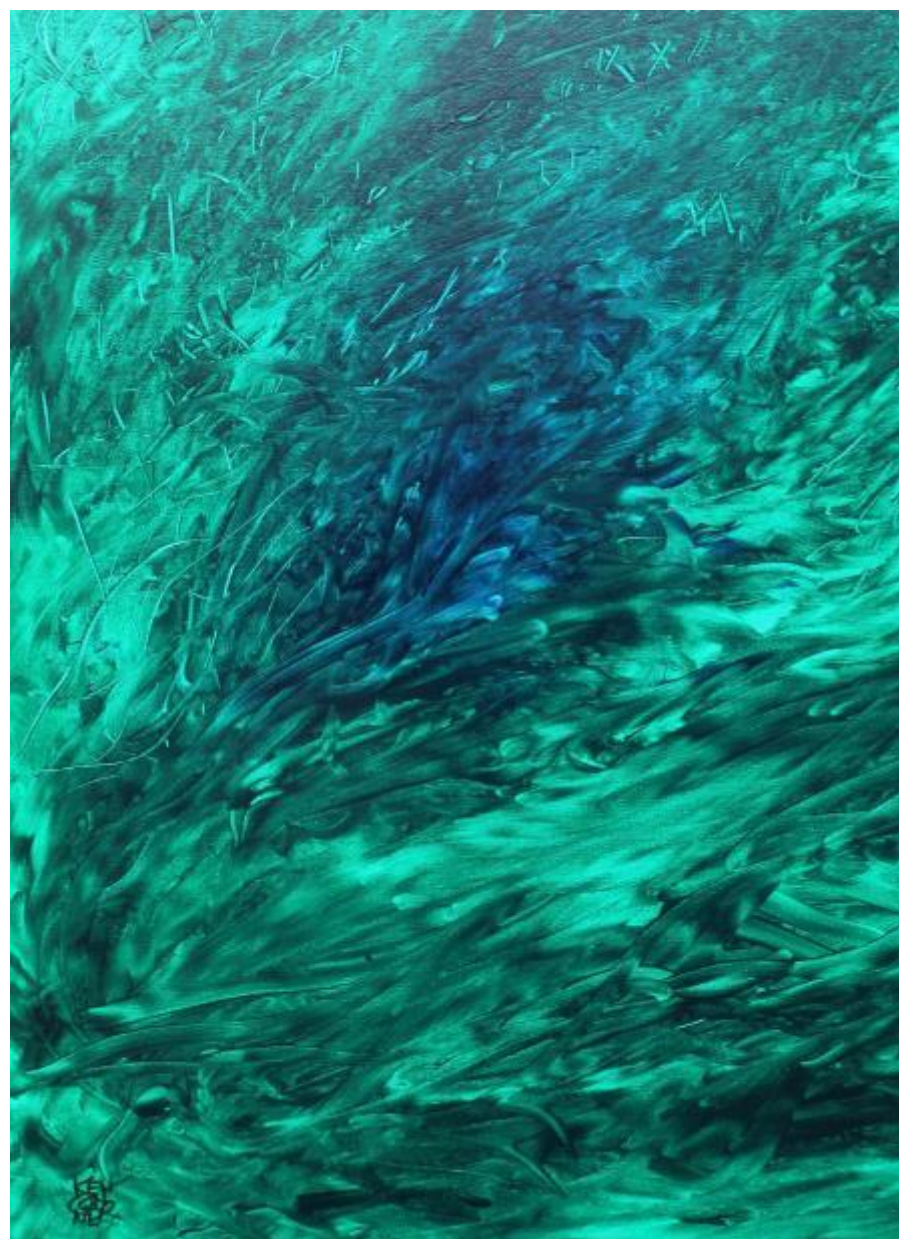
“Grreee! Nrree! Rreeun-kikiik-ee-een-sree! Rrunn-urr-

kkaakaka! Rreee! Rreee! Rreee!

*Today! Now! Our target is in sight! We close the distance.
Go, go, go!*

END OF “WHAT OF MAN?” SAMPLE

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THE UNSEEN

The door flew open and slammed against the wall, causing a neon beer light in the adjacent window to flicker from the sudden vibration. A man in a denim jacket and cargo pants walked determinedly through its intermittent wake, the door swinging wildly shut behind him as he made a beeline to the bar. The lone customer at the end of the bar glanced up from his newspaper distractedly.

"Gimme a shot. Whiskey. The good stuff!" he demanded of the bartender as he settled himself onto the red sparkle vinyl cushion, distributing his middle-aged weight from side-to-side, seeking the bar stool's familiar form.

"Sure, Donnie. No problem," said the bartender a bit unnerved, but intuitively ready for anything, and poured him a bourbon from the top shelf. Donnie grabbed the heavy little glass and quickly threw its contents down his throat. He coughed once, shook his head violently, and peered into the bottom of the empty shot glass as if the answer to his problems was imprinted there.

"Jesus, I've never seen anything like it!" Donnie exclaimed in obvious distress. "I don't know what to make of all this!" He looked off into space for a moment and slammed the shot glass back onto the bar.

"Give me another one!" he demanded, shaking his head in disbelief.

The dutiful bartender fulfilled his regular customer's request, poured another shot and set it neatly on the coaster in front of him. The bartender scrutinized his friend intently, looking for clues to his unusually erratic behavior. After a moment Donnie looked up.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," said the bartender. "I've just never seen you so – "

"Upset?" he said interrupting him.

"Yeah, upset."

Donnie raised the glass to his lips and threw back the second shot, bringing the hefty old fashioned tumbler down to the bar with a clunk. He took his time pushing the empty glass forward, signaling his request for another, but in his own due time. The bartender understood and leaned forward, resting his weight on his elbows.

"What's going on? I've never seen you like this," he said in a subdued voice, respecting his friend's privacy. Donnie shook his head, staring at the coaster and rolling the empty glass around between his fingers. He stared at his friend for a few long moments, fighting with himself to speak or not.

"Okay," he said at long last. "We've been friends a long time, right?"

The bartender nodded.

"So, you know I'm not nuts. Maybe I get a little crazy sometimes in here, but I'm not off my rocker. You know what I mean."

"Sure, Donnie. Everybody gets crazy in here sometimes."

The bartender stared silently at his friend, giving him the space he needed. Donnie pushed the glass forward, nodded his head once and pointed at it. The bartender instinctively got the message and obligingly filled it to the brim this time. His troubled friend pulled it in, wrapped both hands around it, and leaned forward. He took a small sip and cleared his throat and said in a subdued tone, "It's the house."

The bartender frowned.

"The house? What do you mean, Donnie?"

Donnie took another quick sip from the glass and stared blankly, seemingly focusing on something in his mind's eye."

"It's doing crazy things. All by itself."

The bartender straightened a bit but remained focused.

"Like what, for instance?"

Donnie took an even bigger sip this time, drinking down to the cut glass markings, and carefully set the glass down dead center on the coaster. The last remaining customer stood, left a five on the end of the bar, gave a nonchalant wave of the hand and exited. The bartender gave him a quick but sincere nod and a smile and immediately refocused on his friend's dilemma.

"Okay, now it's just us. Tell me what the hell is going on!" said the bartender, his curiosity piqued.

Donnie downed the rest of his whiskey in one gulp. He grimaced for a second or two, exhaled, coughed and unloaded the details of his plight to his longtime confidant.

"It's everything! I've never seen anything like it in all the years we've been there! And Ellen and I have been together for a long time!"

"You sure have, Donnie! She's a great woman. You two make a beautiful couple, a perfect match. Now, what's going on?!"

Donnie took a moment to order his thoughts.

"Well, it all started about a week ago. Everything was great – and normal. And then all of sudden, about a day or two later all hell broke loose."

The bartender stared at him, and said encouragingly,
"Go on."

Donnie continued much more freely, the alcohol apparently taking on its desired effect.

END OF "THE UNSEEN" SAMPLE
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WHERE THE BOYS ARE

"There she is!"

"This is creepy."

"Shh! Shut up! She'll hear you."

"She can't hear anything. That's why she plays that song so loud!"

"Well, shut up anyway."

"Okay. Okay. Chill."

"Watch..."

The two young teenaged boys watched from the porch as the old woman made her way out to the mailbox, looked around inside for several seconds, then came back empty-handed and went inside her house.

"Wait for it..."

A few moments went by and then they could hear a musical buildup to a female voice singing the opening line to the song, *"Wh-ere...the boys...are..."*

"What the f-

"I told you!"

In a few moments the woman made her way out to her porch and sat in the rattan rocker.

"Sometimes she does that, sometimes she stays inside."

The old woman sat and looked off into space, occasionally singing along with the music.

"See?"

"So when the song is over she just goes back inside."

"And she'll do the same thing tomorrow?"

"Yep. Just like that."

The song ended in a crescendo and the woman got up out of her chair and went inside.

"Wow...so, does she ever play anything else?"

"Nope. That's the only song I ever hear coming from that house. Sometimes she plays it a couple times in a row."

"I wonder what's going on."

Jake, the younger of the two sat for a moment and pondered his own question. An inspiration came most readily.

"Maybe she's got some guy chained in the basement! She keeps him alive just enough to...feed...to feed...something."

"Did you see her? She's old. She can barely make it out to the mailbox and back. Nah, it's something simpler than that," said Michael laughing. His porch was the equivalent of box seats for the old woman's daily stroll.

Both boys sat and thought for a minute. Jake had a revelation.

"I got it! When she was younger she tortured and murdered a bunch of kids – all boys – and buried them in the

backyard! It's like she's *confessing* to the crime!"

Michael looked at him intently and added his own take on the story.

"That's...*where the boys are!* Oh my god, you might be on to something there."

He looked over the backyard fence to the neighboring property and furrowed his brow.

"That's a pretty small yard."

"She stacked them! Or maybe burned 'em up first and just spread the ashes all over," Jake said excitedly, defending his theory.

Michael was latching on to the new explanation and offered another piece to the puzzle.

"In the winter she could have mixed them with the coal ashes to keep her car from getting stuck in the driveway!"

"Holy shit! That's totally possible. I mean, she could have done that, couldn't she?" urged Jake.

"Sure. Why not?"

The two sat thinking about their latest crime saga, each silently mulling it over, mentally looking for holes in their theory.

"So what's it about?" asked Jake.

"What?"

"The song. What's it about?"

"It's from a movie. Some old, dumb beach movie from the sixties. I looked it up online and watched it."

"Really?"

"Sure. There's skin in it. Chicks in bikinis, partying and carrying on, getting wasted. It was still dumb.

"You can see more than that on your phone, you idiot!" Jake said laughing. "You can see Kimmy K completely naked!"

"She's a skanky porn ho. Besides I like the beach stuff, never been there."

"Really? Huh."

"Yeah, when I graduate I am getting the hell out of this burg. That way, as far as I can go," Michael said pointing to the ever-present rolling hills far in the distance.

"Really? Where you going?"

"West Coast, man! That's where all the action is! Partying, chicks, bad ass music scene...nothing like that here."

Jake nodded his head. "Where was it?"

"What?"

"The movie. Where was it supposed to be happening?"

"Florida. Fort Lauderdale. That's where everybody went then for Spring Break, I guess. It was nuts."

A white van pulled up in front of the old woman's house and a middle-aged woman got out carrying a tray. She walked up the sidewalk and knocked on the door. The resident old woman greeted her warmly and let her inside.

"Who's that?"

"One of those meal delivery people," Michael said clarifying. "They bring food to old people who can't drive. She'll look over here and wave when she leaves. She does it every time."

"Really?"

"Yeah. See, that's one of those things."

"Whadda ya mean?"

"That small town stuff. Everybody knows everything about everybody else. It's so predictable."

Michael looked over toward the old woman's house, then added, "It's boring."

"Yeah. I guess I see what you mean," Jake said and paused for a moment, contemplating. "So, that's why you want to get out of here, then, after graduation? I mean, one of the reasons, anyway? Right?"

The door to the old woman's house opened and the "meal lady" stepped out and walked toward her van.

"Yeah. That's one of the reasons," said the older boy.

The woman got halfway down the sidewalk and glanced back toward the porch, smiled and waved. Michael grinned and nodded his head.

"See what I mean? So predictable!"

"Wow..." exclaimed Jake. "You know everything!"

Despite being cosmopolitan "men of the world" and having much better things to do with their summer vacation, the two boys continued their porch ritual, hearing over and over "Where The Boys Are" in its entirety for days and weeks on end and watching the old woman come back from the mailbox empty-handed every time. Still fascinated, they eventually grew tired of the scenario, in spite of the fact that they *knew* there were boys buried in the backyard or scattered about the woman's driveway like so many grains of coal ash pushed to the side and washed away down the gutter drain to the river. But today was different. Today they were going to do something about it. Today they were going exploring.

END OF SAMPLE OF “WHERE THE BOYS ARE”

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THE LAST LAUGH

Nothing scares me. At least that's what I thought until I was told that I had to have 'minor' in-and-out surgery. That is when I discovered that I was afraid of something: general anesthesia.

As a private pilot I am required to pass a Third Class Medical examination every two years. I wasn't going to pass the next exam without this operation. And it just plain scared me.

Never mind the fact that there is pre-history evidence of the use of general anesthetics (opium poppies) as far back as 4200 BC.

Or that one of the first procedures (painless tooth extraction using nitrous oxide) was performed in the Western Hemisphere as long ago as 1846. Forget the fact that ether and chloroform have been used in the past for over 100 years and have worked.

Mistakes can happen. Because of that unfortunate fact, I felt compelled to call my family and friends the night before and said my goodbyes – just to be on the “safe” side. All of them assured me that everything would be alright.

Easy for them to say. I was the one going under!

“Those chemicals may not react *exactly* the same in my body as they do in everyone else’s,” I thought in an endless feedback loop embedded in my brain for many weeks before the day of my appointment.

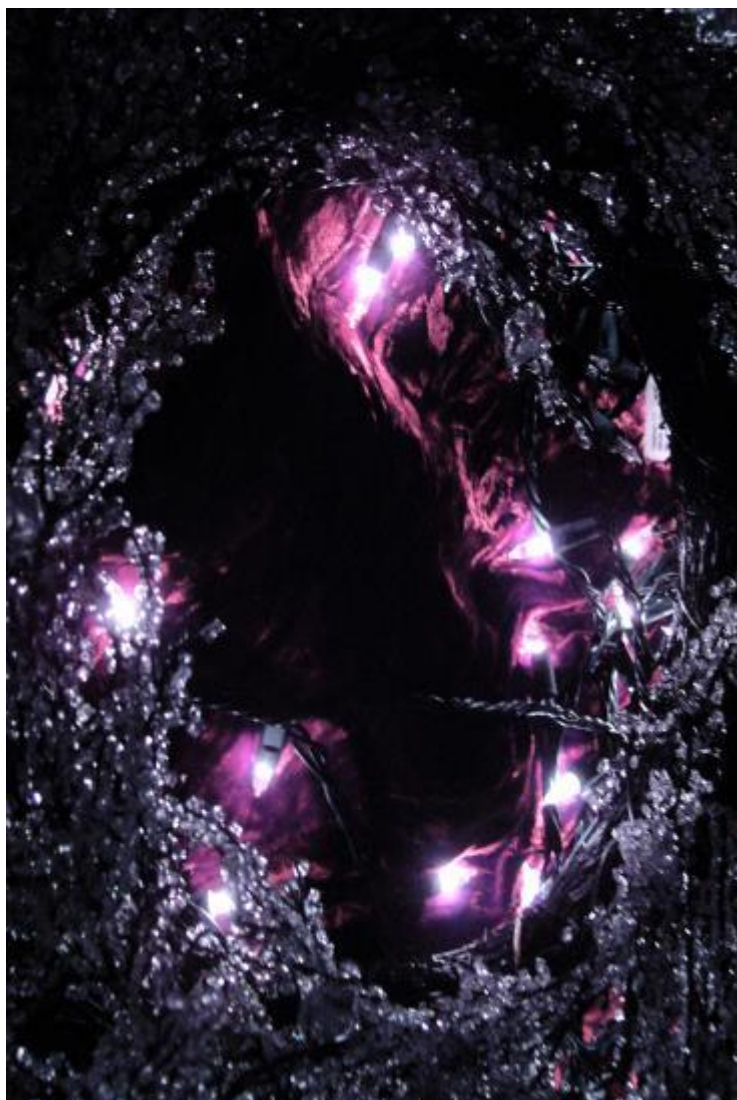
That day was now at hand.

“There is a *possibility*, it is *possible*, that this day *could* be my last day on the planet,” I thought, unwittingly channeling any Woody Allen movie character. Pick a movie. Any movie.

I had no control over what was about to take place. And I wanted to make sure I did everything in my power to make the surgical team aware of how *alive* their patient was, how much he *enjoyed living*. And if something did go wrong, by giving them something to remember me by.

END OF SAMPLE OF “THE LAST LAUGH”

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TO ALL, A GOOD NIGHT

I watched with keen interest as the old man's hand dug deep into his right pants pocket trying to find some money to feed the gas pump. With no luck, he shoved his left hand in the other pocket. A clutch of three one dollar bills came out this time. The look on his face, and the heavy sigh that took his shoulders up, then slowly down, told me it wasn't going to be enough. Undoubtedly feeling the chill of this December night through the many holes in his inappropriate winter clothing, he hurriedly fumbled around in the pockets of his well-worn war surplus Navy Pea coat. His weathered dry, cracked and slightly bleeding gnarled hands darted quickly into each torn pocket and came back out again, empty.

With one forceful pull, he yanked open the door to his thirty-year-old plus sedan. The driver's door groaned with the sound of rusty hinges and stayed that way only so long as the old man's outstretched leg kept it there, propping it open. The entire car looked as if it were being held together by vintage bumper stickers whose cause or purpose that was written on them was as expired as the inspection sticker on his windshield. As he became aware of me waiting in line behind him, the embodiment of an updated Charles Dickens work revealed itself to me in plain sight as he rummaged even more quickly, searching frantically inside his car for a little extra cash to satisfy his gas tank.

It was Christmas Eve. I knew why I was here; to fill up before the next day's travels, for making the rounds on The Day. I wondered what his story might have been: out of state plates, no money, down on his luck. It seemed to be a desperate, sad way to be spending the night before Christmas, to be spending *any* day or night, for that matter.

He walked through the entrance of the store, his three single pieces of currency in hand, approached the counter and paid the clerk in advance. As the old man turned his back to him and walked out, the clerk shook his head. He must have had the same thought I had. Or maybe he was thinking why he had to work on Christmas Eve – or both.

The man made his way back to his car and pumped the metered three dollars worth of not-much-mileage into it.

When the pump clicked off, he held the hose up higher to get every last drop. I couldn't sit there and watch any longer.

"Hey," I said as I opened my door and got out. He looked startled, wariness and caution showed on his wrinkled face.

"I noticed your plates. You coming or going?"

"Going," he said as he replaced the pump handle firmly in the cradle. "Home. To see the family."

"You've got a ways to go, then. Driving straight through?"

"Yep." He nodded his head and took a step toward his door. "It's only a couple of hours. But I gotta get there before morning, ya know," he said grinning, and gave a strange sort of half smile, curving up only one side of his face. He pulled the door open to his ride.

"Yeah, sure, of course," I blurted out awkwardly. My words held him in place.

"You know, I was thinking. I noticed you didn't put a lot of gas in there. Is that going to be enough to get all the way home?"

He looked at me, expressionless. A long silence answered my question.

END OF "TO ALL, A GOOD NIGHT" SAMPLE

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~



SQUAWK

THUMP! THUMP!

noise...what?...dark...move...restrained.

sfffffft

“read...”

sfffffft

“intention...over...”

sfffffft

“three-two sev....juliet...whisk...”

sfffffft

“over...”

sfffffft sfffffft

“you read...”

sfffffft sfffffft sfffffft

black...sound...

sfffffft

motion...noise...

sfffffft

move...restrained

sfffffft

noise move restrained...open eyes...can't

sfffffft

noise...

sfffffft

droning...hum...

mmmm

*...asleep?...waking...all that noise...open my eyes...oh my
god...where am I...panel of...dials jumping...a windshield
flickering...droning...a motor...above the ground...moving up and
down... dark...again. No!*

THUMP! THUMP!

**"Three-two-seven Juliet Whiskey, do you read, over? If
you cannot transmit squawk seven-six-zero-zero and ident.
Repeat: squawk seven-six-zero-zero and ident."**

Awake again...I heard that loud and clear. I heard that! I know what he said! I know what he said! Yes! I hear you...I'm flying...

"Three-two-seven Juliet Whiskey do you read, over?"

He didn't hear me. He couldn't hear me. Nothing came out of my mouth. I didn't make a sound. I'm saying it but he can't hear me! I can't talk. And I can't move, can't reach the transponder. I can't squawk a code.

"Three-two-seven Juliet Whiskey if you can read me, please respond. You are within visual range. We are assuming you are having trouble and cannot transmit. If you can read, you are cleared to land if you want to put down for repairs. Repeat: You are cleared to land. Our active is two-seven-zero. Winds are three knots right down the runway. Repeat: You are cleared to land. Our active runway is two-seven-zero. Winds are three knots."

Land?! I can't even move. How the hell am I supposed to land an airplane?! I can barely push the comm button on the yoke. Wait! I can move my thumb. I can move my thumb! I can move my thumb! Where am I? Who is talking to me? Where was I going? Repairs? Some of my instruments aren't functioning now...I've lost my altimeter.

"Three-two-seven Juliet Whiskey if you can read me, please respond. You are coming up on Truesdale, TN8 and ..."

Truesdale? Where's Truesdale? Was I asleep? No, not asleep. I can't move. I can't talk. I...I...maybe... a stroke? How did they...?

"We can see you now. Do you have us in sight? If you can hear me but can't respond just waggle your wings. We have you in sight...and it appears that you have some damage.

Repeat. You have damage. Do you read? You are cleared for landing. Do you wish to declare an emergency? Repeat: Do you wish to declare an emergency?"

Damage? What?! How did that happen? What did I hit? I'm in the air. Where am I going? Emergency? Yes, dammit! This is an emergency! This is an emergency! This pilot cannot speak! I'd say that qualifies as an emergency! Now, what are we going to do about it. Move...my...thumb.

sfffffft

"Three-two-seven Juliet Whiskey you are moving past the outer marker. Do you wish to land? Repeat: Do you wish to land, over?"

sfffffft

Of course I wish to land! Get me down and I'll tell you all about it!

sfffffft

"Three-two-seven Juliet Whiskey you are past the outer marker and cannot now make a safe approach at your altitude. Repeat: you cannot make a safe approach at this point. Abort any attempt at landing or make a go-around if you wish to land. You are cleared for landing. There is no traffic in the area. Three-two-seven Juliet Whiskey, what is your intention? Do you wish to land?"

Jesus Christ! No, that's not a prayer! Okay, okay. I am in airplane with plenty of fuel, going somewhere that I can't remember. I can't move. I can't talk. But I am still flying. First Rule: Fly the plane. Fly

the plane. Fly the plane!

END OF "SQUAWK" SAMPLE

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SYNCHRONICITY

It was the first of two stops before the long drive home to Pennsylvania. The next one would be to top off the tanks just after sunrise. We always tried getting home before the sun came up, creatures of the night that we were. Sometimes it just wasn't possible. This was going to be one of those nights, despite how many speed laws were broken. It really sucked driving east with the sun directly in your eyes, silently but very brightly proclaiming its BRAND NEW DAY – until it moved far enough upward off the road to be shaded by the visor. I always considered that a personal robbery of some kind. Or was it paying for the privilege of doing the job you wanted to be doing? Either way, it meant driving through the night till that flaming, bright yellow ball crept up over the horizon while the rest of the world slept, curtains drawn, inducing the night-like umbra needed for blissful daytime slumber. And that world included the last audience we played for, all snug in their beds while visions of their favorite rock stars played on in their heads...

It was an unwritten rule that the drummer drove home because he never drank. Alcohol, that is. He did lose his license thirteen times for speeding, though. Details, details. He was still the best qualified, considering.

This night was late in the Winter of 1990, almost Spring, and in that part of the country anything could happen, meteorologically-speaking, whether the calendar said "Spring" or not. Our location was a convenience store just outside of Buffalo, New York. The time was a little after three in the morning. It had begun to snow just as we left the club, with large flakes falling and causing the ground and the highway we were on to go white very quickly.

This was the glamorous part of being a rock musician that the public never saw: the band members pumping gas and meandering around inside a convenience store like the undead, in the wee hours. These places were a roadside oasis in the dark and usually located in the middle of nowhere. Sometimes we would run into other meandering rock musicians milling about a place, only an hour so removed from their gig and desperately seeking a bathroom. Those convergences were not unlike two tribes meeting on the road to somewhere, their unique names emblazoned on a T-shirt or jacket. The mutual recognition and acceptance was instantaneous. There was no problem communicating. We all spoke the same language. We wanderers had a lot in common. We performed in the same venues, shared the same markings, hair styles and, like ancient minstrels, we had stories to tell. Storytelling, mostly humorous or amazingly unbelievable but true anecdotes, would erupt spontaneously once your band's name was mentioned.

“Oh! That's you?” they would say. “Cool! We were just playing [*fill in the regionally appropriate venue name here*] and I just gotta tell you what happened...there was this chick...”

There was always “a chick”.

Everyone knew of everyone else because our bands' names were written on the dressing room walls. The stories and jokes inscribed there were our sort of private social media of the time, and often became interactive by each band contributing their own scribbles and art to a particular ongoing thread. That response would be answered (or commented on) the next time the originator rolled through town, usually on a 6-8 week rotation. We all knew each other by those specific iconic petroglyphs (as in, created by *rock* musicians), although we most likely had never met. And, unless we shared the bill at a venue, we certainly hadn't seen each other perform because we all worked the same night shift.

This was not one of those nights with buzzing store aisles awash with loud anecdotal chatter full of band tribal lore of sexual conquest, crowd capacity and stage antics. This oasis was devoid of any post performance social entertainment, a quiet place with an empty parking lot. It was an eerie contrast to the sonic ghosts of the preceding night's repertoire that continued to ring in our ears.

END OF “SYNCHRONICITY” SAMPLE

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ENCORE

A storm is coming. Not a violent, windy one, just a heavy, calm kind of snowstorm. The kind that makes all that traffic stop after a half hour or so; empties out the streets. Then what remains of the urban life are the lights. That green, yellow, and red blinking continues in its repeating pattern, though no cars wait for their instruction. The colors alternately diffuse off the white snow on the street, signaling no one.

After the storm is over, or even while it's still snowing, everything gets really quiet. The city is peaceful and serene, like the cover of one of those cheesy Christmas cards; the kind with the clear glitter glued fast to the drawing of the snow in the illustration. That glitter that is still sticking to your fingers after you decide you don't want the card and put it back on the rack.

I can always tell how much snow we are going to get by the flakes, and how they fall. These are big ones, so large that you can see their shape as they float slowly downward. The air is still; not a breeze to speak of, so they just kind of falter and take their time and drop very slowly, kind of rocking back and forth. It's almost as if they're trying to decide if they want to continue their descent, onward to their inevitable fate.

If they had brains, maybe they would decide to fly back up the same way they came and start all over again. That way, they could be the ones that land on top, piling on the others, the ones that came before them. That way, at least, they would accumulate higher and higher, into who-knows-what? A pile worthy of industry? A fort? A snowman? An igloo? Anything would be better than just instantly melting away, only to run down the sidewalk into the iron grates that send them to the river. Or worse yet, becoming a one inch layer of slush that lasts for just minutes before being salted into oblivion and brutally pushed off the street by an anonymous taxpayer-funded plow, any cohesive individuality scraped noisily aside in a few seconds, like so many crumbs from a single piece of bread that has been reduced to burnt toast.

I stick out my tongue to catch one or two of the flakes, something I have done so many times in the past. It is an action that harkens back to my youth, and yet doesn't seem that far removed each time I do it now, many, many years later. The things that stimulate the mind while waiting...

Ah, finally! She's got to be the singer. Beautiful, nice makeup, stylish clothes. A swing band tonight? No, a jazz quartet maybe. A rock band?

"Gonna be a cold one," I say as she walks by me, just to hear the sound of her voice if she decides to comment back to me.

Nope.

She looks at me, nods, and smiles politely enough but offers no vocal response. She does clutch at the scarf around

her neck, pulling it tighter, and toss it back over her shoulder. She may not speak it, but her body language tells me she agrees with me about the weather.

“Yeah, it's gonna be a cold one,” I say again just to hear myself speak, confirming her signals aloud for the both of us. My words come out in a mist of condensation that floats for a second and then disappears in front of me. I exhale then, purposefully, puffing twice just to see it again. The woman crosses the street and makes her way into a department store.

Yeah, that would figure, I guess. More nice clothes. Not the singer, though, hmm...maybe she'll buy a new winter coat.

Then I see a man carrying a double bass in a road case. He walks down the alley and up to the stage door. That's one. How many more tonight? So, it's not a rock band. But these days, you never know...genres are mixed. The lines of music are blurred.

“The lines of music...are blurred...ha, ha, ha. Not bad. Ha, ha, ha.” The bass player hears me laugh and looks in my direction.

Actually, nothing is quite as it was. It all sounds good to me, though. No, definitely not a rock band. The roadies would have been here hours ago, pulling endless gear out of the back of a truck. This versatile, old theatre always keeps me guessing. Always a diverse lineup.

END OF “ENCORE” SAMPLE

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SEASON FINALE

“Previously on Death Sentence!...”

The voice-over artist growled in an authoritative baritone as a montage of the previous week's show played on the video monitor. The botched execution of Lady Margaret Pole in 1541 was being cut and edited showing all the key moments. The playback continued.

“The best public executions that time travel broadcast has to offer – Live, as it happened!”

The sound on the playback stopped and went in reverse, the engineer cuing a spot for editing.

“Isn't it a bit warm for April?” asked James Banyon, the show's host, wiping his brow. He continued to watch as the engineer pieced in another clip to the video of the previous week's show.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. We had a beautiful day for an execution in merry old England last week," said the engineer, pushing the play button, and the video trailer continued.

"I don't think it's unusual," said Mikey, the agile, young camera man. "I read that it's anywhere from 50 to 70 degrees, on the average, in Jerusalem this time of year." He sniffed. "It's this rock shelter we've been assigned to that is doing it. It stays hot all day."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. I mean, we've been here for two days, for crissake."

The engineer stopped the playback, turned around and gave him a look. Mikey snickered and shook his head. James sat there for a moment and then realized.

"Oh. No, I didn't mean it that way! Seriously, guys?"

They all laughed until the door opened and the director walked in. He was not in a good mood.

"Hold it down. I could hear you outside." He directed his gaze to the engineer. "You done with that yet?"

"Almost. The audio's good. Just cutting in the *moment phenomenon* now."

On the monitor, an elegantly dressed young man from 1541 spoke to Jason Harker, the show's co-host who, along with Lorraine Brockton, was bedecked in the finery of the time period. The costume department had done their job well and the two went undetected as 21st century time traveling onscreen personalities on a reality show, blending in with all of Henry VIII's invited guests to the Tower Green. The spontaneous, unsolicited and often elusive "moment", coveted

by the loyal viewing audience, had occurred and that show's rating soared. This week's show was even more important. It was the season finale.

The director seemed agitated and shifted his weight distractedly as he looked at history again unfolding on the monitor.

"We've got a lot of leeway, don't we? I mean, they got us here three days ahead of time. And if we missed it, we can always go back," said James.

The director gave him a look.

"Yeah, we could just do another jump, but that's expensive, not in the budget. You know that," he said tapping his fingers on the top of the monitor. "We won't have to. It's today, for sure."

"You've got intel on that?" asked Mikey.

The director stopped fidgeting and pulled a small pad out of his pocket.

"Yeah. Lorraine and Jase are in the village. They just sent a message: 'It's on. He's being processed now.'"

"They're getting background, too, while they're there, right?" asked the engineer. "I'll need time to cut it and put it together."

"Processed? What does she mean by 'processed'?" James probed.

The director was even more agitated now as the questions piled on and he stood abruptly.

"Yes, dammit, they're getting footage. And yes, you will get it done! And 'processed' means he's been tried and convicted by the Jewish high priests and is being severely

beaten now."

Everyone looked at him with concerned and surprised looks.

"I never saw you like this before, boss," said James. "What's up? I mean, we do this every week."

The director nodded repeatedly and sat back down in his chair.

"Yeah, we do. We're pros. Sorry for snapping out," he said, shaking his head. "I have a lot of things on my mind – beginning with our two roving reporters in the village right now."

"What do you mean?"

The director took a breath and grabbed a pen and tapped it on the arm of his chair.

"Look, this isn't some walk around the square in France or the Tower Green in old England. Or standing around watching Nathan Hale hanging from a noose."

They all waited for him to continue.

"I saw the footage they sent back. Those guards, the Romans, they..." He paused and took another breath. He was clearly having an internal conflict. "I mean this is the *first* century not some later civilization we are mixing with. Those guards...they're pro-active, walking around clubbing anyone who looks at them wrong. It's brutal. Everything we've produced up to this point has been done in much later time periods. You could actually *talk* to those people."

He shook his head.

"Okay, here it is: I'm afraid Lorraine and Jase will try to

get too close to get some really good shots, and get discovered. Maybe worse."

He tapped some more.

"I mean, these shots aren't even going up live! It's just B Roll footage and audio background. It's too...it's not..." he stammered, speaking before he ordered his thoughts.

"I'm considering pulling them out and send in a bug drone."

Mikey moved his head slowly from side-to-side, looking at the floor of the pod. "They'll lose their bonuses. Plus, the quality won't be as good. You'll only have overhead, nothing from the ground. I don't have to tell *you* what's at stake here. Season. Finale. Everything's on the line."

The director continued tapping, slowly shaking his head, unfazed by the suggestion, his mind already made up.

"That's not all, is it?" said James, pressing.

The director gave him a look.

"No. That's not all."

He regarded the other three.

"Tell me something. We've done a lot of these time travel shows together."

"Five seasons," said Mikey.

"Five seasons," the director said, shoring up his next bit of discourse with the other three.

"A lot of shows boss," James said, wiping his brow and the back of his neck.

"Yeah, a lot of shows. What happens when we broadcast something that is contradictory to what the history books tell us?"

"Nothing. They correct the history texts and our comment page is nuts for a couple weeks. So what?" said the engineer.

The director nodded, looking smug.

"Yep. We correct a few dates and times and that's it. Pretty much the same with every era. Not this time. This is different."

"How?"

The director showed a bit more distraction, staring off into space, as if he were seeing his vision of the future playing on the walls around them.

"If anything in this show is out of line with what we know, or they *believe*, it could be the end of this show."

"What are you talking about??" said James, shocked by his response.

The director covered his tracks.

"Someone once said, "You can't convince a believer of anything; for their belief is not based on evidence, it's based on a deep-seated *need* to believe."

Everyone looked at him with blank expressions on their faces. They wanted an explanation.

"We'll talk about it later. Let's get those two out of there now."

The crew was confused. They wanted more from him and he wasn't about to explain himself further.

"Look. This is my show, my call. I know what the producers want and we'll give it to them. But we are not getting anyone killed or injured in the process."

"So what are we gonna do for shots?" said Mikey.

He waited a moment, then ran it down for them.

“Okay. Here's how it goes. Follow me on this so I don't have to repeat myself. “

The engineer pulled out a sheet and started taking notes.

“First of all, like I just said, get them out – now. Shoot the handlers a text before we're done here,” he said looking at the engineer. He affirmed the directive with a quick nod.

“Okay, get this: we use a bug drone, wide angle, and do 360's over the processional as its moving, you know what I mean.”

“It will blend in with all these cicadas,” said Mikey. “No one will even notice. No problem.”

The director continued.

“Have it circling above them all the way up the hill to the skull mountain, or whatever they call it here.”

“*Golgotha*,” said James, checking his notes.

The director looked around the small group.

“With me so far?”

All nod.

“Okay, from there we have ground stuff. Mikey, you and...pick two others who just got here, with small body cams and the translators, walking along with the processional all the way up the hill. Got it?”

“Yeah, sure...but newbies??”

The Director nodded. “I want a fresh look. A, uh, non-professional response through the lens. Something less polished, and more spontaneous. I want to see the fear, confusion and real apprehension about what is taking place, through their eyes. You can't do that, you're objective, you're a pro. You get what I'm saying?”

"Sure, I totally understand that. And it'll be great. What about the closing shot? How do we set up for that?"

"Hold on," said the director. "There's a couple more things, and these are important. When you're out there, don't speak! There is no English here. It will only draw attention to you as being a foreigner. Some of these guards are schooled in other languages – but they won't know ours. It could make them suspicious and maybe pull you aside for interrogation. We don't want that. *You* don't want that."

He looked for a consensus. They all understood.

"Also, when you hear something that sounds like "E-show" or "Yeh-shoo-ah", and I am phonetically over-pronouncing here, that's their words for "Jesus". James, you have the correct spellings in your historical briefing memo. Make sure you give it to the line producer when she gets here, so they jive on the graphics."

"Sure thing, boss. What do the apostles' names sound like in Aramaic? They can listen for them, too."

"It's not an issue. None of them were here except for John, according to Bible scriptures. The rest of them all abandoned him when he got arrested. Get the writers on that, and we can put it all together when they get here, James."

James responded. "We can work that into the voice over, some historical background as they approach the hill. That walk is going to take awhile"

"Exactly."

"How will we know who John is?" Mikey inquired, contemplating his camera shots in advance.

"Not a problem. He'll be at the foot of the cross the whole

time,” said the director. “Well, at least that's what our historians tell us. We'll see, I guess.”

The director looked at his seasoned, professional and eager skeleton crew, and knew there was something missing. They had worked together for a long time.

“You guys didn't get any real background on this, did you?”

They all shook their heads.

“I got a memo but nothing really specific. Not a lot of detail, just the highlights. Like we usually get.” said James. “Why?”

Mikey and the engineer agreed.

“Yeah,” said Mikey. “I mean we know who our subject is, how he got here. And now we know what you want for shots, but that's about it. I mean, I'm an atheist. I really don't know anything about Christian history.”

“Neither do I,” said the engineer. “I mean, other than what I got as a kid in Sunday School.”

The director was uneasy. He knew there was a lot at stake, not only with the production of the show, but with the safety and well-being of his crew. And that meant not only their physical and mental well-being, but also the future of their employment status – their jobs. He felt he needed to protect them in many different ways. They needed more than memos. They needed real information because that's what they were walking into: brutal reality at its worst.

“Look, you need to be careful out there. In spite of what you may think or have heard, our research department tells us that not everybody liked him. As a matter of fact, he was

considered a troublemaker. Yes, he had loyal followers who greeted him when he got here. But it was a mob here who condemned him to death."

Mikey jumped in. "What was the problem? I never heard any of that."

"Me neither," said James.

The director continued.

"The backstory is, at this time, the Jews were divided. They had different sects, different ways of doing things. But one thing that most of them had in common was that everything came down through their priests."

"What do you mean," said the engineer.

"The priests interpreted everything. The people got in touch with their god through them. The rituals, sacred objects, blessings, the whole works was controlled by them."

"So how did he piss everybody off?" asked James.

"He told all who followed him that they didn't need all that. All they had to do was just do it themselves. Pray to God directly. And some people were calling him the "king of the Jews". He never made that claim, but that's what got him brought in to the authorities here."

"Sounds pretty radical," said the engineer. "And I'll bet there was a lot of lost revenue in there somewhere."

"No doubt," the director agreed.

"Yeah, but what he was saying sounds like the way it should be," said Mikey.

"I thought you were an atheist," said James.

"I am."

James gave him a look of disbelief.

"I'm just saying that it's a personal choice – or not, in my case. It's not right or wrong. It's just a choice. If someone wants to believe they just do on their own accord and do it their way," Mikey explained. "What he was preaching makes perfect sense to me. No buildings or mumbling priests needed."

Everyone broke out in laughter.

"What?" Mikey asked, confused. "What's so funny?"

The engineer jumped in. "I think Yeshua just got a convert."

Everyone laughed again.

"Seriously, guys? C'mon."

The director felt the need to bring order and focus back to the discussion.

"Okay, guys. That's what you are walking into. A hostile crowd, a very small group of supporters, town officials don't like his power with the people, a multilingual bunch and drunken, impatient Roman guards that are all jacked up from the beating and can't wait for him to die so they can get out of there."

They all gave him concerned looks.

"Stay focused and stay safe. Let's get back to the camera positioning and the post crucifixion set ups."

He put his hand on Mikey's shoulder.

"After you leave the processional, get yourself a spot dead center in front of the cross. It doesn't have to be close. We can zoom in. As a matter of fact, lay in the background. Tell Lorraine and Jason to do the same thing but a wider spread, off to the sides. No. Better yet, tell them to stay together,

looking like a couple. I don't want her off by herself someplace. We'll use her robe cam for panning around the landscape, his for scanning the people there. You stay fixed on the crosses.

Mikey nodded. "Got it."

"Just remember to keep your mouth shut and let the translators do their jobs, if needed. Get everything you can from a safe distance, like a curious onlooker, and we'll put it all together.

The engineer broke in.

"Okay. So you're gonna do the closing shot from the ground, looking up and all reverent like?

"That's been done a million times," said James, swatting a fly off his arm.

The director stared off distractedly, then responded.

"Nope, just the opposite. We send in the drone and hover it about two meters above his head, land two more – one on the top of each of the other crosses. We'll get perspective from them. Then when it's time, we cut to the bug above his head. Okay, get this: It's panned ninety degrees down, and just send it straight up. We'll dub in the audio, the 'Forgive them father' line. That's the end shot. Bug above, zoom in, pull back at the same time, zoom out, straight up into the sky...and fade."

The three fell silent.

"Wow," said the engineer. "I get it."

"Yeah, that works big time," Mikey agreed.

"I smell an Emmy award," said James .

END “SEASON FINALE” SAMPLE

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AFTERWORD

This is the third re-write of this Afterword and it is nothing like the previous two. I started off by writing about how busy I was in the “real world” the year after the first book was released. Read that: being a homeowner and all the charms and obligations that go along with that responsibility. That was true.

I segued that grievance into how much time was taken away by doing all those things for eight months, and then explained that I was too tired to write at night, which is my usual time slot for creating, and fell asleep in my office chair dozens of times, sometimes with my fingers still on the keyboard. I would wake up to ten pages of exclamation points. That was true, too. But that sounded like a lot of complaining to me.

I don’t do that – complain, that is to say.

So, this third version is different:

The book is done!

Here it is!

Does it really matter *how* I got it done? No, unless you really want to know. If so, then ask me about it sometime. In the meantime, I’ll tell you how everything got here...

At some point, I began writing a story about Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. It was a heavily researched piece and one that acted as a respectable vehicle to bring to light the many problems and undervalued payment system that we musicians and songwriters encounter in today's digital music/streaming market. The parallels between Mozart's grim and underpaid career as an adult composer and musician, and our repressive algorithmic digital online presence, were uncanny. That is a fact, and is not an inflated and biased opinion. So, I decided to write about it. What was intended to be a poignant yet amusing short story of around thirty-five pages, and intended to be a part of the short story collection in this book, ended up being over one hundred pages.

At my wife's suggestion, I extracted that story from this collection, created the cover in one evening and released it under its own power as a novella. *A Little Night Music / Mozart - A Variation On A Life* was kicked out of the nest and given a life of its own. All was fine and good - except for needing one hundred plus pages to fill the vacancy left by Wolfgang's departure.

A few of the "new" stories had already been written in the late night *fall-asleep-in-the-office-chair* then *read-what-I-wrote-and-edit-the-next-day* mode. That was a recurring thing throughout the writing of this second collection. No big deal. I do whatever it takes to get it done. What follows are the back stories to what you have read, their inspirations, and maybe some other interesting stuff you didn't expect to find here at the end of this book.

And Then...

... was an early story in the process and, coming from a 14-year-old girl's perspective, is an interesting little story because I had to be voice of the dad, mom and young teen daughter. It was a real writing challenge to create the voice of the daughter since I have never been one – at any age.

It was fun, and startled a few of my friends after they had read it and thought that the portrayal was disturbingly accurate.

Trivia: I lived on the corner of Steeb ("where the bad boys live") and Hofer streets, in my early years as an elementary school student in the Danville School District. In other of my works, Danville is known as "River Crest". Watch for it – it is part of an ongoing series, here and in future written works.

There You Are!

...is an exercise in form and a break from the traditional. I wanted to create an experimental piece of writing, most likely out of boredom. I wrote down everything that was happening over a forty-eight hour period, paying close attention to the characters who were "waiting" for me each time I sat down. I typed out exactly what first came to mind, not giving it any thought in advance. There were no edits made afterward, either. It is how it came out of my head at the moment I wrote it.

Justifying the characters hard left and hard right, was a way of defining them as the left and right sides of my brain, which provide logic and order, and creativity and spatial forms, respectively. I was in the middle trying to maintain a balance, like we all strive to do on a daily basis.

Mercy

Except for the “dying” part, the sensory overload that the main character in the story experiences actually happened to me on a summer’s day last year while sitting by our pool. A short time earlier, I had been working on an old lawn tractor that had been in the weather for a long time. Suddenly, I began feeling strange and falling in and out sleep, unable to keep my eyes open. When I was awake I experienced all the things I mentioned on the first two pages of the story. I theorized that I inhaled spores or mold which had a mild psychotropic effect on my brain. I did not seek medical help and just let it run its course as I did not feel ill, but I did keep notes on everything that was happening and wrote the story soon after.

END “AFTERWORD/BACKSTORIES” SAMPLE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Willoughby is a lifelong musician who has over five thousand performances to his credit. Retiring from the road in 1996 (and again in 2008), he has continued exploring his overall passion in life: creativity.

Insatiably curious, he has pursued many fulfilling endeavors which include continuing to write, record and produce music, scriptwriting, voice acting, photography, computer graphics and digital art, historical reenacting, and aviation. He earned his private pilot's license in 2004, and was inspired to construct an experimental aircraft.

He considers writing fiction to be a natural advanced step and larger construct of, and not unlike, his method of songwriting and serves as a relief valve for an overactive imagination.

This is his second book.

You can find him on social media
through his website at jawilloughby.com

AN IMPORTANT NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

For those readers familiar with and are fans of our collaborative works, stories written with and by Rebecca L. Willoughby, unfortunately, time constraints prevented all but one collaboration in this collection of stories.

I am pleased to tell you that her stories and some we have written together, will be included in the third *This Side Of Center* collection, which is already in progress. She will also be an integral part of a new young adult psychological quasi-horror drama series, tentatively titled, *MASQUE*, anticipated release, October 2017.

Though few of words in this book, she was very much a part of this collection in the way of encouragement, suggestions, comments, story structure, edits and general inspiration, as well as a contributor of photographs used for illustrations.

I am grateful and thankful for any contribution, input and guidance she can provide me now or in future written and visual works.

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