



STORIES BETWEEN 1,000 AND 5,000 WORDS LONG IN WHICH ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS ARRIVE SOMEWHERE AND FIND SOMETHING THEY DON'T EXPECT... IN THE STORY'S FIRST SENTENCE.

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#### FIRST PLACE

Beth is a thirty-something internet analyst with two kids and two dogs who can't read, and a husband who won't. She was previously published in *Tick Tock: A Time Travel Anthology*.

## Six Long Years

by Beth Gaydon

When I arrive at my home and open the door, my lips still burning from my date's goodnight kiss, I see my husband inside and my mouth falls to the floor. My surprise is not because he's caught me in a torrid affair (if you could call two dinners that). No, I cannot pick up my jaw because my husband has been dead six long years, trapped in a watery grave at the bottom of the Atlantic along with seventy-five other men and women. I stand frozen, unable to process what I'm seeing, finding it impossible to move further than the entryway.

There are rumors the plane was downed in an act of secret terrorism, but we've received no official answers. Search and rescue took two years to find any wreckage, and the bulk of it remains missing. I have eight million questions, but when he strides toward me, my mind goes blank and I reach up to touch his face. There's stubble there; that's new. He spent our whole relationship clean shaven. I rub it, certain ghosts do not grow facial hair they never had, but he is so cold, colder than anyone I've ever touched. "How is this possible?" is what I mean to ask, but what comes out is, "Who are you?" My brain cannot fathom him being who I think he is, so he must be someone else.

The man barely bats at an eye. "Someone you used to know," he says.

Considering this accurate, I remove my hand from his face and finally shut the door behind me. This reunion cannot be a good idea, but it would be worse to let him leave without attempting to get answers.

We walk to the kitchen. It's the same home it was when he left; there's no need to direct him or show him around. He slides into the same chair he always preferred, the one closest to the sink. "You fixed the wobble," he remarks, holding onto the table with one hand, trying to rock the chair back and forth.

"Years ago." I sit in my seat in front of the refrigerator. "Coffee?"

I shouldn't have sat before offering him anything; I'm a bad hostess. It feels wrong, waiting on him, but this isn't his home anymore. He is a guest. I shuffle to the liquor cabinet, my feet now aching from hours in heels, and pull out a bottle. Whatever story he has to tell will be a doozy, so I bring the whole thing, along with two glasses.

My supposedly dead husband takes everything from me and pours. They are dainty pours, not like the ones I remember. We sip for a moment. "How was your date?"

My date kissed me not at the door, but outside the restaurant as we said our goodbyes. I stare at my husband. Was he spying? What is his angle?

When enough time without an answer passes, he waves his hand. "You left a note with his information," he reminds me. The tension flows from my shoulders as I remember, and we both take a sip. "Well? Where should I start?"

"Are you a ghost?" I ask. I expect him to laugh, but he responds with only a faint shake of his head.

<sup>&</sup>quot;It's too late for coffee."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Whiskey?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;That'll do."

"Sometimes I wish that," he replies. Perhaps he is not a ghost, but his eyes, at least, are haunted. I wonder how to follow up this question, but he gives me no hints.

"Are you here to stay?" I settle on.

"No," he says. "I wish that too. Always."

"Then why are you here at all?"

"I had to see her," he replies. He leans back in his chair and takes a sip, perhaps waiting for me to tell him no or kick him out. I should, of course. Instead, I sigh.

"She's sleeping." If she wasn't, she'd have run out by now, wanting the details from my date. Unless he's done something to her. My stomach clenches, reminding me the man who walked out that morning wasn't stable then and can't possibly be now. My hand slides to the cell phone in my pocket, ready to dial without my brain's permission. Most of me still thinks I'm in a dream, a bizarre, insulting dream, but my hand knows better and it's ready to act. I take a deep breath and glance down, searching for the call icon.

"That's for the best."

"You won't wake her?" The words leave my lips before I think them through. I am too focused on the phone to control my mouth.

"Not on purpose," he answers. He throws back the rest of the whiskey and pushes away from the table. The chair scraping across the linoleum makes me shudder. He knows where her room is, but he doesn't move, still waiting for my permission. I don't get up. I can't. Perhaps I have gone crazy, but even in the throes of insanity, my daughter is off limits. Our daughter. He sees this and does a bob and weave motion with his neck, impossible to interpret. "I just want to say goodbye. I didn't, you know. That day. I planned on it, but I overslept, and by the time I got up, she was already gone."

The situation is unfair. He has all the information about his last day of parenthood, and all I have is rumors. Finally I get up, hand still on my phone. "If

you touch her, I will kill you," I say, even though right now he seems immortal. "If you so much as whisper in her direction, I will call the police."

"I'm surprised you haven't already," he replies, and turns on his heels. He leads the way out of the kitchen, but I rush ahead before we reach the hall. I can't let him get to her before me. He was a ghost, an apparition, when I first opened the door, but now he's a danger. My heart pounds as I open Gabby's door. I stick my foot across the doorway, preventing him from moving in without stepping over me. It's unclear what this will accomplish. He's too tall for my foot to make much of a difference.

"What..." he whispers, his voice trailing off. I follow his eyes to Gabby's wall above her white writing desk. It's covered in paper, pages ripped from magazines, internet print-offs, and newspaper clippings. The desk is too, but it's not visible in the faint, slanted light shining in from the hallway. He moves in for closer examination before I can stop him. I follow, shushing him, and we come to a stop in front of the collage. It's too dark to read all of it, so he pulls a cell phone out of his pocket and switches on the flashlight. I turn to glance at our sleeping child—teenager, she's a teenager now—but she doesn't stir.

My husband and I read the headlines together. I've seen them, of course. Sometimes I've even been the one to give them to her. He's likely seen them too, but not like this, spread out in a detective-style map of clues. "Gallant Flight 287 Goes Down with 76 People on Board. No Survivors." "What Happened to Gallant Flight 287?" "Terrorist Attack or Mechanical Malfunction?" "Two Years Later, Black Box Still Missing." "Pieces of Plane Found in Caribbean." "Was Pilot Peter Rowe in on Flight 287 Crash?" "Pilot Intentionally Crashed Plane, Says Former Co-Pilot." "Who is Peter Rowe?"

The newer they are, the more bizarre they become. Conspiracy theorists run the internet these days, and Gabby spends far too much time in their forums. I think this as I stand next to one of the dead, though, so perhaps I've been too quick to call people crazy.

"Come on, Pete," I say after we've stood for five minutes. He's standing there like he'll read those headlines forever, and eventually Gabby will wake up. He turns his body, but his head focuses on the wall until I grab his hand and lead him away.

We go back to the kitchen, where he downs another whiskey. He puts the glass down too hard and stares at me, waiting for me to admonish him. I do nothing. The entire world knows Peter Rowe is a murderer, best of all me. I glance at the kitchen window, the one I've had to replace due to soaring bricks about a dozen times now. If Gabby wasn't sleeping, perhaps I'd go out it. Sitting there with him, though, it feels no different than before he left. He hurt other people, even then, but he never hurt me.

"Tell me what happened," I suggest. "Maybe I can understand."

"What happened to Neil?" I ask. It's always bothered me, the crash being blamed on Pete when Neil was co-captaining right next to him.

I don't think he's going to answer me. He sits there, studying a room that has not changed in six years. It's the only room I haven't redecorated, the only room he'd never injected himself into to begin with. He glances at the whiskey a few times before letting out a large sigh, reaching for the bottle, and pouring another glass. I haven't finished my first yet, but he tops it off.

"Consider him my Louise," he finally says.

It takes me a minute to understand—it's been a while since I've seen the movie—but then I do. Neil went along for the ride willingly. "Is he alive then? Are they all alive? Are you?" I realize I've already asked him this, but I have an uneasy image of purgatory rolling around in my head.

This time, he ignores my questions. "It wasn't about you, Annie," he says. "I need you to know that."

<sup>&</sup>quot;You can't," he answers.

I hadn't thought it was, or at least I hadn't thought I hadn't thought it was, but a huge a wave of relief washes over me, anyway. Not wanting to interrupt whatever else he is going to tell me, I only nod.

"I've heard the stories, all the dumb rumors. How I planned it all, chose that flight for revenge. I didn't know she was on that flight, Annie. What kind of pilot reads the passenger logs? Who cares? We don't meet them." He takes a shot, and so do I. We'd been married for eleven years when I found out about his affair. She came to me, told me everything. At first I was mad, but frankly, it wasn't all that surprising. Pete was a pilot. He was gone more than half the time, living separate lives in separate cities. I was a bit surprised there was only one. Besides, I'd had plenty of emotional affairs myself over the years. I'd forgiven him. What we had took work, too much work to be perfect. It'd never made sense to me he'd kill all those people just because she took his flight. But then, it doesn't make sense to me he's here now either.

A stirring from the direction of Gabby's bedroom makes me jump then, almost slamming Pete's head down under the table so he won't be seen. But if she's awake, she's choosing to stay in her room. I let out a long breath of relief as Pete stares down the hall, his eyes glossy and faraway. I wonder what Gabby will do if she sees her long dead father, but I truly do not want to find out. We both speak in whispers after this.

"The morning of, I kissed you. Do you remember?"

"Yes," I say. Of course I remember. He was gentle, gentler than he'd been in a long time. And he'd stared into my eyes afterwards, like he'd done when we first got together. At the time, I thought he was trying to rekindle our connection, to make sure his indiscretion never happened again. After the news came out that he'd likely crashed on purpose, my views changed. He wasn't trying to return. He was saying goodbye.

"I meant it, the way it felt. It was about love, not goodbyes."

I touch my lips again, haunted by a phantom kiss—not from James earlier that night, but from Pete long ago. It's like he's reading my mind. "When did you know

it'd be the last time?" I ask. It seems a safe question. It's not an accusation, but maybe I will get answers.

"After we took off. I didn't have a date, not until we were in the air. It was a good day for flying, blue skies, few clouds. We didn't even see birds. Great conditions."

"Pete... you sound crazy." And he does, talking about great conditions for crashing a plane. Yet I'm the one talking to a dead man.

Pete doesn't respond, and now I wonder who else was on the plane that day, who else slipped under the radar. Maybe Pete wasn't just homicidal. Maybe he was acting on orders. I'd seen things from him before, odd things, terrifying things. It was not good to be in Pete's way, and he enjoyed flouting his contacts with shadowy figures. But downing a plane... who was he attacking, if not himself?

"I can't tell you anymore than this. Like I said, I just had to tell you it wasn't about you. Never about you. I loved you, Annie, and I still love you. Tell Gabby to stop reading those articles. Tell her it will only bring her more pain, and she'll never understand. There are things outside her world, outside yours... What happened is a blip in humanity, even if it seems gigantic to you." He stares at me like he wants to say more, but then his eyes flit to the clock and he jumps up, almost knocking over a chair. He steadies it, then takes my hand, his icy palm sending a chill through me. "Goodbye, Annie. Take care of her." He heads for the door, ready to leave.

Gabby appears in the kitchen as Pete is opening the door. All of us freeze. Her face turns white. Pete's eyes droop. I get a grip first and throw my arms around Gabby, protecting her and claiming her at the same time.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Dad?" she asks, in a strange half-whisper, half cry.

<sup>&</sup>quot;I love you, Gabby," he says. Then he turns to me, nods, and goes out the door.

<sup>&</sup>quot;What just happened?" Gabby asks.

<sup>&</sup>quot;I don't know."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Is he a ghost? Can ghosts grow beards?"

"I don't know," I say again.

Gabby clutches me. Neither of us will ever be sure of what we've seen, that much is certain, especially when Gabby gasps and points down. "Mom, look."

When I see it, I gasp too. Leading from the table to the door is a trail of sludgy, wet footprints, and one soggy piece of seaweed.

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## SECOND PLACE

Tony Concannon grew up in Massachusetts and began writing in 1979. Much of his fiction is set in Japan, where he taught English for 18 years. Since returning to the United States, he has been working in human services. Stories of his have appeared in *On The Premises*, *Columbia Journal*, *Litro*, *The Taproot Literary Review*, and *Thema*.

### The Backboard

by Tony Concannon

It was late June when I dribbled my basketball into the park and saw the backboard was gone. The rainy season had started and I hadn't been down to the park for nearly a week.

On the other side of the park a group of Japanese boys were playing soccer and I walked into the middle of their game and pointed at the pole to which the backboard had been fixed. "What happened?" I asked in Japanese.

The boys stopped and looked at each other.

"When did it happen?" I asked when I got no response.

"Friday night," one of the boys said and the others nodded.

I thanked them.

On my way out of the park I slammed my basketball against the fence. I was disappointed, to say the least. The court had become my refuge, almost a home away from home, especially since Yuriko had moved out on me in December. Other than the ones in the schoolyards, which were always locked, it was the only

outdoor basketball court I'd ever seen in Japan. I'd discovered it two years earlier when Yuriko and I had rented an apartment in one of the suburbs west of Tokyo. I was no player but I'd always loved shooting baskets and I'd bought myself one of those red, white, and blue balls and started going down to the park in the afternoons and on the weekends. It was a dirt court but the ground was firm. The wooden backboard was attached flush to the thick metal pole and you had to plan your layups carefully to avoid injury. The wood was warped and the gray paint chipped and peeling. There were always groups of Japanese kids playing baseball or soccer in the park and I'd draw lines in the dirt so they, especially the baseball players, wouldn't get too close.

I wasn't ready to give up on shooting baskets. I wanted to find out what had happened to the backboard and get a new one put up. I'd seen city workers emptying the trash barrels in the park and I figured the city had jurisdiction over it.

Walking down the road to my apartment, I passed a Japanese man on a bicycle. The man's son was riding on the back and there were two baseball gloves on the handlebars. The man, who was thin but muscular, and I looked at each other but neither of us spoke. A few weeks earlier my friends and I had had a run-in with him at the park.

I dropped off the basketball at my apartment and headed off to City Hall, which was about a mile away. I'd been there a few times to pay my taxes or health insurance premiums. The woman at the information desk directed me to the far end of the building. A young man was sitting at the counter. At the desk in the rear an older man was smoking a cigarette and reading a newspaper. Both men listened intently as I explained in Japanese, which I spoke quite well, about the park and the backboard. When I'd finished, the older man addressed me.

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"It was stolen," he said.
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The man's face showed no emotion.

<sup>&</sup>quot;In Japan?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;We think it was a prank," he said.

"When are you going to replace it?" I asked.

The older man said something I couldn't catch to the younger man. The older man resumed reading his newspaper.

"There is no money in the budget," the young man said to me. "You can write out a suggestion and put in the box. Then they'll consider it for the next budget." He pointed out the box on top of the counter.

"When will that be?" I asked.

"Next April."

I might not even be in Japan then. I was pissed but I couldn't think of anything to say.

"Do you want to write one?" the young man asked.

"No."

\*

It was Thursday and our drinking group met that night. There were four of us: my best friend Keith, Rob, Marty, and myself. All of us were American. We were a somewhat mismatched group. Keith and I were tall and husky and Rob and Marty were shorter and thin. My mind had been on the backboard all afternoon and I was pretty worked up by the time I got to the bar. As soon as I told them what had happened, Rob put into words exactly what I'd been thinking.

"You scared the shit out of some little kid playing soccer, who went home and told his father. Or maybe it was that asshole guy playing catch with his son. Anyway, someone complained. They didn't know how to handle it. You can't forbid an American from playing basketball just because some little kid's afraid of him. So they solve it the Japanese way. They take down the backboard in the middle of the night and say someone stole it. I mean, who's going to steal a backboard in Japan? It's not as though people around here have garages to put it on."

"What am I supposed to do? I can't prove they took it down."

"The more I think about it," Rob said, "the more I'm convinced it was that asshole guy playing catch who complained. He probably has a cousin on the city council. Guys like that always do."

"I see him all the time. He lives right down the road from me. I saw him and his son today."

"We won't get caught," Rob said. "We'll steal it and tie it to the pole. That way, he'll know Bill did it."

Rob picked up his glass. "To the backboard," he said

\*

Later, walking home from the station and when I'd sobered up, I had second thoughts about tying the man's bicycle to the pole. We had no idea if he'd anything to do with the backboard disappearing. The run-in with him had happened when Keith, Rob, Marty, and Keith's girlfriend Sachiko had come out to play basketball in May. On the other side of the park a group of boys had had a soccer game going and I'd found a stick and drawn the lines of a basketball court in the dirt.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Have you seen him since that time?" Keith asked me.

<sup>&</sup>quot;It's definitely him," Rob said.

<sup>&</sup>quot;We've got to get back at him," Marty said. "We'll steal his bicycle."

<sup>&</sup>quot;This is Japan," Keith said. "If they catch you, you're screwed."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Why would I want him to know it was me?" I asked.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Because it would have no meaning if he didn't," Rob said.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Maybe it was the French guy," Marty said. Rob laughed and even Keith smiled.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Thanks, Marty," I said. Yuriko had left me for a guy from France.

In the middle of our game the man and his son rode up on a bicycle and started playing catch between us and the boys playing soccer.

"Don't take your eyes off this one," Rob muttered. "He might stick one in your ear."

"He does the same thing every time," I said. "I think he's trying to scare me away."

"We'll scare him away if he's not careful."

"Just ask him to move back," Keith said. "Sachiko, can you ask him to move back."

Sachiko, who'd been sitting against the fence, drinking a beer, stood and walked out to the man. He stared ahead as she spoke. When she'd finished, he said something and took one big step away from us. He motioned for the boy to move over. Sachiko walked back to where she'd been sitting.

"That was big of him," Rob said loudly. "Hey, move back before you kill someone."

"This park is for children," the man said in perfect English.

"You don't look like a child to me," Rob said.

"You don't look like a child to me," the man mimicked Rob.

"Forget about him," Keith said. "Let's just play."

"If I get beaned, someone who is not a child is going to be eating a baseball," Rob said. He glared at the man, who'd resumed playing catch with his son.

"Don't be starting a fight here," Keith said.

"The guy's an asshole."

"He said the soccer players needed the space," Sachiko said.

"Tell me about it."

I was still thinking about the backboard when I reached my apartment. Whenever I unlocked the door, I always had the irrational hope Yuriko would be there. Of course, she never was. The empty apartment, especially at night, depressed me. The truth was I was tired of living in Japan. I'd been there nearly six years. I'd come when I'd been 24, just a few months out of grad school, full of idealism about the world. I'd worked hard at learning Japanese and gone out of my way to make Japanese friends. I didn't care about doing any of that anymore. I had enough self-awareness to understand the breakup with Yuriko had played a big part in the change in my feelings toward Japan. My contract with the university, where I taught English, was up in March, and I was thinking of going back to the United States then.

\*

On Friday evening I waited at home for the tofuman. I wanted to ask him about the backboard. Every evening he rode around the neighborhood on his motorbike, selling tofu. He'd blow a horn and all the housewives would run out with a small bowl. He was also the local town crier, as he passed along the gossip he heard at each stop.

<sup>&</sup>quot;I want to ask you something," I said in Japanese after I'd paid for my tofu.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Go ahead," he said. He was a short man with a round face.

<sup>&</sup>quot;You know the little basketball court in the park at the end of the road?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yeah."

<sup>&</sup>quot;The backboard was stolen. Or at least, that's what they told me at City Hall."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Stolen in Japan?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I know. It doesn't make sense," I said. "You didn't hear anything?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;No."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Would you mind asking around?"

"I wouldn't mind. I'm curious now."

"Thank you."

\*

On Saturday morning I headed out to get some movies at the video rental shop next to the train station. It was a bit of a trek but I enjoyed the walk. There were still farm fields in the area and a canal that had been dug several centuries before. The road ran past the park and I saw the man and his son riding toward me. The man stopped.

"No basketball," he said in English.

"I know."

"I'm sorry," he said and then he and his son rode off. Wondering what he'd meant, I continued up the road.

The sky had been dark all morning and the first raindrops were coming down. I crossed the canal and climbed the big hill. As I descended the other side, I began to look for Yuriko. After she'd left me, she'd moved in with the Frenchman, who lived on the other side of the station. She'd studied in Paris and spoke French.

I didn't see her in front of the shops along the street and I went into the video rental shop on the right. She was there, with the guy from France, riffling through the movies. Their backs were to me. Yuriko, who was tall and slender, was so pretty. Her long hair framed her face. Her mouth and nose were perfect. Marcel, the Frenchman, was shorter than me but he had big, sloping shoulders. Yuriko had told me he'd been some kind of judo champion in France. She turned her head and noticed me.

"Any good movies?" I asked her in Japanese, the language we always spoke. I didn't look at Marcel.

"A few," she answered.

"Leave some for me." I moved past them to the next aisle.

Two minutes later she came up to me

"Will you be home tomorrow morning?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah."

"I'll drop by. I want to talk with you about something."

I watched them leave. It was raining harder and the two of them, huddled under the same umbrella, headed down the street.

\*

It was still raining when I met up with Rob and Marty in Roppongi that evening. Keith was at a wedding with Sachiko.

Rob started in on the backboard as soon as I sat down and ordered a beer. "When are we going to do it?" he asked me.

"Do what?"

"Steal the guy's bike."

"We don't know for sure if he had anything to do with it."

"Do you think it was stolen?"

"No."

"Have you had any trouble with anyone else at the park?"

"Not really."

"Then it has to be him."

The waitress brought me my beer. Rob picked up his glass. "To the backboard," he said.

"The guy told me he was sorry today," I said.

Rob picked up his glass again. "To the backboard."

\*

On Sunday morning I was hungover and feeling a little remorseful. I'd promised to help steal the bicycle. Rob had a way of bending people to his will, especially when they were drunk. He was one of those people who blamed their unhappiness on Japan, which begged the question of why he was there in the first place. I had never wanted to be that kind of person.

I didn't dwell on Rob and the backboard, though. I was too excited. Yuriko was coming. I'd never stopped believing we'd get back together and I was hoping that was what she wanted to talk about. I made pancakes, which she loved. There was a knock and I opened the door. She was wearing sweat pants and a t-shirt and no makeup. I'd always thought she was her most beautiful without any makeup.

<sup>&</sup>quot;For what?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I don't know if he meant he was sorry he'd gotten the backboard taken down or he was sorry I couldn't play basketball anymore."

<sup>&</sup>quot;He's not sorry you can't play basketball," Rob said. "That's for sure."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I think that's his way of telling you he did it," Marty said.

<sup>&</sup>quot;To the backboard," Marty echoed.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Good morning," she said.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Good morning. Come in."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Let's go to Kiraku."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I made pancakes for you."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Let's go to Kiraku," she said again.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Okay. It'll be like old times."

The sun was out as we walked to the coffee shop. When we'd been living together, we'd gone there nearly every Sunday morning to have breakfast and read the newspapers.

"Where's Marcel today?" I asked.

"At judo practice."

We didn't speak again until we were seated and the waitress had brought us our coffees.

"The backboard in the park disappeared," I said.

"What happened to it?"

"At City Hall they told me it was stolen."

"No one would steal a backboard in Japan."

"There's this one guy who we think might have complained about us to City Hall. Rob wants to steal his bicycle and tie it to the pole."

"Don't do what Rob says."

I knew she couldn't stand him.

"So what's up with you?" I asked.

She studied the table before she raised her head and spoke. "I'm moving to France. Marcel wants me to meet his parents. We're getting married."

When I could finally speak, I asked, "Is that what you really want to do?"

"I think so. I'm going to be thirty in September."

"When are you leaving?"

"Soon. Maybe even this week if my visa comes through."

"What about your parents? Your job?"

"Marcel met my parents. They're okay about it. I think they just want me to get married. I quit my job."

I was silent.

"I wanted to tell you," she said.

"Thank you, I guess."

"I'm going home now."

"I'll walk with you."

"I want to be by myself. Stay here and finish your coffee."

She stood. "Goodbye, Bill."

\*

The sky had darkened by the time I left the coffee shop. It was going to rain again. I couldn't face being alone in my empty apartment and I headed up the road to the canal.

Yuriko and I had been so good together. We'd met at a disco in Roppongi. It was her birthday and her friend had joked I was Yuriko's birthday present. We'd danced until closing time. She lived in the same neighborhood as me and we'd taken a taxi home. After that, we were inseparable. Her apartment was on the road next to the station and I'd call for her every evening. It was early fall, a beautiful time of the year in Tokyo, and we'd go for long walks through the winding streets, talking the whole time before we ended up somewhere to have dinner. A year later we'd rented the apartment in the suburbs.

I turned up the bank of the canal toward the big park. The rain started. During our second summer living together, Yuriko had visited her family in her hometown. When she'd returned, all she'd spoken about was her cousin's engagement. The talk of marriage had taken me by surprise; it had been the farthest thing from my mind. After that summer Yuriko had been different. In October she'd met Marcel on the train and two months later she'd moved in with him.

It was pouring by the time I reached the park. Nobody was out on the boats on the pond. In good weather it was a popular spot for couples. I was soaked from the rain but I didn't care. I stood there, watching it hitting the surface of the water.

\*

Every day that week I somehow dragged myself to the university to do my classes. I didn't joke with the students or even smile, as I'd always done. If they noticed, they didn't seem to care; their minds were on the upcoming summer vacation. All I could think of was losing Yuriko forever. The worst part was that I knew it was my fault. I'd taken her for granted. She'd wanted to get married and I hadn't. It was as simple as that. Marcel was older. He looked like a man. I still thought of myself and my friends as kids.

On Thursday evening I ran into the Japanese man and his son. I was on my way to Shinjuku for the weekly drinking night.

"Excuse me. Do you know what happened to the backboard?" I asked the man in Japanese.

"No," he said. His face was impassive.

"At City Hall they said it was stolen."

"No one would steal a backboard in Japan."

"Thank you."

I was still on the fence about tying his bicycle to the pole.

\*

Rob, Keith, and Marty were already drinking when I arrived at the pub. I ordered a beer.

"We're going to steal the bike on Saturday," Marty said. "It's July 4."

"I haven't decided yet if I'm doing it," I said.

"You promised," Rob said.

"I was drunk."

"We'll get you drunk again."

The waitress brought me my beer.

"I've got bigger problems than a backboard," I said.

"What happened?" Keith asked.

"Yuriko's moving to France. She's getting married."

"Forget about her," Rob said. "She cheated on you. She walked out on you."

"When's she leaving?" Keith asked.

"Maybe this week."

I drank half my beer. I wasn't going to need a push get drunk.

"The week's almost over," Marty said.

\*

I caught the last train from Shibuya and it was after midnight when I arrived at the station. I was still drunk. I wanted to apologize to Yuriko before she left. Marty's remark about the week being almost over had made me realize she could be gone any day. I'd followed her once and I knew where she and Marcel lived.

The streets were empty. Their apartment, on the first floor of a three-story building, was dark. I knocked softly on the door. I didn't hear anything and I knocked again, this time harder. When I didn't hear anything, I banged on it.

The door on the right opened and a Japanese man stuck out his head. "You're waking everyone up. It's almost one o'clock."

I banged on the door again.

The man pointed at it. "They moved out. They went back to France."

I banged on the door.

"Leave or I'll call the police," he said. He shut his door.

I kicked his door as hard as I could and headed home. I almost wished he would call the police. Nothing mattered. Yuriko was gone.

I dreamed of her that night. We were shooting baskets in the park. The Japanese man rode up on his bike. Marcel was on the back. The Japanese man had a ladder and Marcel held it while the man climbed up and took down the backboard. When he was finished, Yuriko and Marcel left. It was just me and the Japanese man.

\*

I caught the tofuman again on Friday evening.

"Did you find out anything about the backboard?" I asked.

"It wasn't stolen. I heard the city took it down."

"That's what I thought. Did you find out why?"

"I didn't."

"Thank you."

I'd been right. Someone had complained. It probably had been that man. Later that night I called Rob.

\*

The following evening I stood on the street outside the apartment building in which the man and his son lived. The air was hot and humid. It was my job to steal the bicycle. Rob and Marty were waiting for me in the park. Keith had wanted nothing to do with the whole thing. The bicycle rack was on the side of the building. There were lights on in many of the windows. Fortunately, the glass was the type which let in light but which you couldn't see through. As I crossed the

parking lot, I heard voices and the sound of a television. Someone was smoking a cigarette. Most of the bikes in the rack were children's. The man's bike was big and black with a seat on the back. There were two big black bikes with seats. One was a little larger. The smaller of the two bikes was locked and I pulled out the larger one. I was pretty sure it was the man's. I got on and rode out to the street.

The bike was hard to pedal. I kept glancing behind me to check if anyone was running after me.

"Good job," Rob said when I coasted into the park.

"Let's do this and get out of here," I said.

"Relax."

Marty had already tied the ropes in place at the top of the pole. I stopped in front of it and dismounted. Marty shinnied up the pole. There was little light but I thought Rob seemed happy.

"Screw this," I said. "I'm not going to do it."

I got back on the bike.

"You can't stop now," Rob said.

"Wait here," I said as I sped out of the park.

"Asshole," Rob yelled after me.

I returned the bike to the rack and walked back to the park. I was glad I wasn't doing it. It was wrong. Yuriko would have said I was better than that.

"I'm disappointed in you," Rob said to me.

"Good. Let's go get drunk so I can drown my sorrows."

"I think it was a great plan," Marty said.

"Whatever," I said as we started up the road to the station.

It took us a while to reach Shinjuku. When we were finally seated at the bar and had our beers, I picked up my glass.

"To the backboard," I said.

\*

I was walking home about a week later when I saw the man and his son coming my way. They stopped.

"I wanted to tell you," he said in Japanese. "I dropped by City Hall and asked them to put up a new backboard for you. They said they would consider it for the next budget."

"Thank you. That was very kind of you."

I looked at the boy. "He's going to be a good baseball player."

The man smiled. "I hope."

We bowed our heads to each other and went our separate ways.

I seriously doubted the city would put up a new backboard, seeing it had taken down the other one. Nevertheless, it was a nice gesture by the man. I'd probably never find out what had really happened to it, not that it mattered. I still hadn't decided whether to renew my contract and stay in Japan but I was beginning to lean that way. I'd have to get over Yuriko but that should be easier now that she was gone for good.

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#### THIRD PLACE

Dawn Ronco says, "I am a seasoned corporate editor and longtime fiction writer. I published a short story collection in 2019 titled *Limited Time Offer*, which has consistently earned five-star reviews. Four of the stories in that anthology won first and second prizes in regional contests. My first novel, *Unintended*, comes out in April 2022 from Realization Press. I am well progressed in writing a second novel."

## Ham Pick Up, No Left Turn

by Dawn Ronco

You'd think we could make it two damn miles, but when I get into the left lane to turn onto Travers Street, I see an LED road sign flashing: HAM PICK-UP, NO LEFT TURN. "Jesus, really?" I bang on the steering wheel.

"People are getting their hams for Christmas," my father says, unbothered, from the passenger seat of the pickup. He nods at the long line of cars coming at us from the opposite direction, their blinkers flashing toward the ham store at our left on the corner of Travers and Main. I'm sure he's not in any hurry to get where we're going. I don't understand why we're going at all. Or why he sold our house. He's only 74—too young and able-bodied for an old folks' home.

He leans forward to turn up the heat against the gray December day. "God, it's sticky," he says, making a face when he touches the temperature control. "Have you cleaned this thing even once since I gave it to ya, Rusty?" He motions toward the napkins and receipts scattered on the floor of the Tacoma, the coffee-streaked stack of Dunkin' Donuts cups in the cup holder. What does he care? It's my truck now.

PRE-ORDERS ONLY warn the orange signs staked along the ham store's double-lane drive-through. Ham-filled cars stream from the other side of the building, exiting in a clog onto Travers Street—where I, the flashing sign tells me, am forbidden to turn.

I slow to a near stop behind a Civic that's also in the left turn lane, and I see its driver throw up his hands. Traffic whizzes by us on the right.

I don't need this. What I need is a couple of ibuprofen and a cold beer. After pulling a back muscle yesterday moving my own stuff to a sorry apartment, it was agony loading all my father's shit this morning.

Behind me in the bed of the truck, ropes lash down his bureau, his frayed mattress, and the blue recliner my mother bought him forty years ago. His clothes, hangers and all, are packed in black trash bags along with jackets, slippers, and bed sheets. Small boxes hold his alarm clock, nail clippers, and the 1-800-PLUMBER tumbler he uses to take his arthritis meds. Faded dish towels wrap the plaque honoring his 25 years as a fireman and the framed picture of him and his buddies from their Vietnam days.

The Civic driver in front of me spots an opening, veers into the right lane, and takes off. I stay put. If I can't turn left, I'll have to drive up another mile and wind back through a maze of neighborhood streets to get onto Travers. No way.

One car after another exits the ham store, crossing Travers to get back onto Main.

Damn the sign! At the soonest break, I palm the wheel hard to the left and gun it.

"GOOD GOD, Rusty!" my father yells, curling toward the passenger door. Horns blare.

With a sudden crash, my Tacoma t-bones a Kia crossing from the ham store. The front of my hood buckles. My radiator hisses out the wet, hot-plastic smell of trouble.

An angry guy bursts from the Kia, his legs bare below cargo shorts, his black flip-flops slapping the pavement. He wears heavy-rimmed glasses, a stupid baby-blue university shirt, and a ponytail. "No left turn, asshole! NO LEFT TURN!"

The guy's young wife screams at me from the passenger seat, cradling her golden foil-wrapped ham like a newborn baby.

I struggle from the pickup, my back killing me.

"What, you didn't see me?" the guy demands, jabbing a finger toward my chest. "And you didn't see the other dozen cars crossing in front of you, either?"

I look toward the ham store as if discovering the traffic for the first time, then throw back my shoulders. "Oh, so *I* can't turn left because so many people need their *hams*?" I argue, looking at our wrecked vehicles.

The guy throws up his arms, heaves outrage. "Is that the problem here?"

His skinny wife emerges, ham-laden, shaking beneath her long, dark hair. She glances toward the ground beside me, where I see one of our boxes has bounced, spilling the veterans photo in a tangle of dish towels and glass shards.

"You know what? I'm not having any ham for Christmas," I tell her husband. "And neither is my poor widowed father here." I point back at Dad, who sits in the truck with forehead in hand. "He's just given up his house, which was also my house. He's giving up his independence, too, which is why he's moving to an assisted living place down the street. *This* street. Where *I'm* not allowed to turn."

"I'm *fine* and so is my *wife*, thanks for asking," the guy says. "And no, there were no kids in the truck, in case you were wondering. Thank God we left our pit bull at home. Or else I would've sicced him on you, you twisted idiot."

"Move off to the side!" one of the ham-store customers calls out his car window.

"Here," the wife says, approaching my steaming truck with her golden ham raised. Her husband holds out a hand as if to stop her, eyeing me as if I have a gun and might shoot. But she presses forward and lays the gleaming ham on the unbuckled part of my truck hood like an offering upon an altar.

#### What?

"Now you give us something," Ponytail says. "Your name, address and insurance information."

He directs me to give it to his wife while he moves his bashed Kia to the side of the road. We'll push the Tacoma aside, too, but in the meantime, there's no left turn for *anyone*.

Sirens sound in the distance, thanks to some Good Ham Samaritan who called the police.

\*

An hour or so later under a flurry of snow, Dad and I pull up to the body shop in the U-Haul truck we've just rented. I turn off the engine and sit for a second, the citation in my jacket pocket. My Tacoma sits broken in the crashed car lot in front of us, my father's mattress still towering behind its cab.

"I'm not losing my independence," my father says into the silence.

"Okay, whatever you want to believe." He doesn't know it, but when he gave me the address of his new place on Travers Street, I went for a visit.

\*

"They don't call 'em 'rest homes' anymore, but that's what I'd call it," the woman told me last week when she toured me through the place, an extended ranch built in the 1960s. Her name was Hilda, I think. A printed scarf wrapped around her neck and trailed down over a long, knit vest, both nearly reaching her suede boots. Tufts of gray hair spurted from beneath a floppy straw hat. She had a round, ruddy face. I'd had no idea the house was a *facility* and couldn't figure why my father would sign himself into such a place. So with Hilda, I posed as a nephew whose uncle could do for himself but shouldn't be alone.

"No dementia, right?" she asked.

"No, he's sharp as a tack," I said, thinking of my dad.

"As long as they can walk, go to the toilet on their own, and pay the rent, I'll take 'em. I cook for 'em, do their laundry, and keep the place clean. But I don't expect to have a vacancy anytime soon."

My father must have taken the last room. I knew the aged wooden floors would have appealed to him, the birdfeeders outside the kitchen window, and the spotted mutt who lay flopping its tail at the foot of a bony woman working a crossword in the living room. If the arthritis was going to get the best of him, he could do worse than that place.

But it *hasn't* gotten the best of him. He's gotten up and down the stairs just fine. And since Charlotte left me and Mom died, I was there to help him. So I don't understand why he needed to sell the house.

\*

I open the driver's door of the U-Haul.

"No, wait," Dad says, his fireman's plaque and the loose, scratched photo of his veteran friends lying in his lap. "I'm *not* losing independence. I'm gaining independence. From you."

"But you don't even need my help! You were doing fine. If your arthritis got too bad, I could've helped you."

"Then you would've been in my house permanently."

OOMPH. The familiar sock in the stomach sets my heart pounding. *Get a roommate* so you can split rent until you get a more permanent job, my mother suggested when I turned 30. We could afford a decent place if more than one of us was working, Charlotte said, five years into our marriage. Then, *I'm leaving for your own good,* Rusty.

The heady smell of spray paint emanates from the body shop. A mangled car door drops with a crash onto a pile of metal.

"So this is your way of throwing me out, Dad? Putting yourself in a nursing home?"

"What?"

"You are demented. I should've told her that."

"Who?"

"The hippie lady who runs the nursing home. She says she doesn't take people who have dementia."

My father takes his hat off, slaps his hand to his forehead and bursts out laughing. "You've got it all wrong! But you're just pissed off as usual, aren't you Rusty? Somebody done you wrong and you're gonna lash out. I'm claiming my independence from *that*."

I slam the door as I get out of the truck and head for my pickup, my lower back screaming in pain.

The Tacoma doesn't look totaled, but without collision coverage, the fix will cost plenty. My latest gig fixing sidewalks can't cover it, but the house money can.

My father doesn't even try to help as I begin moving his stuff into the back of the U-Haul. I can see his dumb face watching me in the side-view mirror when I try to get the mattress off the back of the truck. *His mattress*.

The forklift operator sees me struggling and comes over to help transfer the heavy stuff from one truck to the other. "Merry Christmas," he says as a send-off. *As if.* 

\*

With the U-Haul truck full, we drive straight past the fucking NO LEFT TURN sign. We've barely gone a half-mile when my father says, "You can turn here." I turn onto a street that curves through an older neighborhood. "Now right and then a quick left," he says.

"You know all the back roads, huh?"

"I've been to this place quite a few times."

Outside the sprawling ranch, Hilda stands awaiting our arrival wrapped in a fringed blanket. A necklace of colorful lights flashes from around her neck. As I park in the driveway, the cold breeze lifts the brim of her hat, revealing not just a welcoming smile but a look of absolute delight. My father practically springs from the truck and bolts toward her. She opens her arms, the blanket spreading like wings, and my father rushes into her embrace. Between kisses she tells him how very happy she is that he's finally arrived.

WHAT? My mind and body stumble from the truck as Hilda and The Traitor make their way toward me.

"This is my son, Russell junior," he tells Hilda. "I think you may have met."

"I didn't know he was your son," she says, sliding me a weighty glance.

"So, I guess fraternization is allowed?" I quip, with disgust. I have no idea what's going on.

Hilda laughs. Her hand rests on my father's belly, an alarming gesture previously allowed only to my mother. "Russell isn't one of my boarders." She winks. "He's my main squeeze. And my new unofficial handyman."

"But I don't do ladders," my father ribs, eyes sparkling, stupid in love.

"Wait, so..."

"C'mon, Russ," Hilda says to him, nodding toward the truck. "Let's get this thing unloaded."

I unlatch the back and have barely pulled out the metal ramp when Hilda climbs up and grabs herself a box. She hands it down to my father, who jaunts toward the house.

The bony lady I'd seen working a crossword holds the door open for him. Then a large, open-mouthed man appears in the doorway behind her.

"Frank, come help us get the big stuff off this truck," my father orders the man. Frank lumbers out, and before I can offer any help, he and Hilda pull the mattress out of the truck and head toward the house.

My father has returned. "You help Frank get that recliner down, Rusty. It's too heavy for Hilda." He slides another box off the truck.

Of course it's too heavy for Hilda, for God's sake.

Despite whatever is the matter with Frank's left leg and eye, he's strong as an elephant. By the time he hefts the recliner from his end, there's barely any weight for me to bear. We carry it into the house, which smells of apple pie. Frank directs us to the first bedroom on the left.

My dad comes in with the bedrails, and we start assembling the bed.

"Since I have my own room, we're not technically sleeping together, are we Hilly?" he calls to Hilda, who's in his ensuite bathroom loading combs and dental floss into a drawer. His laugh comes out like a teenage giggle.

"Who gives a damn? We're grownups," Hilda proclaims, then leaves the room in a swirl of paisley skirt.

We flip the mattress up onto the frame and ease on the bottom sheet. Dad snaps open the top sheet and settles it onto the bed with Army precision, adds the blanket, tucks his square corners.

"Dad, what the HELL is going on here? I thought you—"

"Well, you got it wrong. I met her on Match-dot-com. She just happens to run an old folks' home."

"But-"

"But how dare I not comply with your plan to live in my house and then inherit it when I croak?"

My heart slams. "So this is your way of cutting me out of your will? How fatherly of you."

He gives me the hopeless stare I've seen so many times before, the one that focuses dully on something just over my shoulder. I saw it when my report card told him I'd be in sixth grade for a second time. And when I refused his suggestion to enlist in the Army to learn discipline. And when I told him Charlotte had left me. I hate that stare.

"I'm not doing anything *to you*, Rusty. I'm doing something *for myself*. Taking charge of my life. Living to the fullest while I still can. You just go on with your hissy fits and your accusations. I don't need your permission or your approval." His eyes focus on mine now, challenging me.

"Okay, fine. I'm taking the truck back now. Maybe 'Hilly' can take you back to what used to be our house so you can get your car."

"I'd be happy to," says Hilda, who has reappeared in the doorway. I want to slap her for taking him away. I want to slap Charlotte for abandoning me. I want to slap my mother for dying on me.

"Oh!" my father says with frisky snap of his fingers. "I almost forgot. I need to get something from the truck before you go." He disappears out the door, leaving Hilda and me silently staring at each other in his new bedroom.

I'd dump out the trash bags and start putting clothes in his closet, but I don't want to give him the satisfaction. To shame me, Hilda opens one of them and lifts out shirts on their hangers, gives them a shake, and hooks each hanger over the closet rail, one annoying *chink* after another.

I stand the 25-year plaque on the dresser against the wall. I flatten an empty box. My father lives here now.

When Hilda exits to the kitchen, I follow her. The misfit household has gathered around the big island when my father comes back, carrying the goddamn golden ham. "Christmas dinner for the gang," he says, offering it cheerfully to Hilda.

"Russell, my God! This is... Fifty-eight bucks' worth of ham! Thank you! I'll save the turkey for another occasion."

"You need to thank Rusty," my father says coolly, without looking at me.

"Thank you, Rusty," says Bony Lady as she takes a pie out of the oven and places it on the island. Frank leans down for a whiff and swoons.

"It'll go great with the Waldorf salad," Hilda says, not thanking me.

I hang around for another couple of minutes, waiting for them to invite me for Christmas dinner. But they start talking about taking a ride to see Christmas lights tonight.

"Don't you have to get that truck back to the rental place?" my Dad asks, and they all look at me.

OOMPH.

\*

Under the darkening sky, a dusting of snow has collected on the windshield of the U-Haul. I feel the tiny flakes fall and melt on the back of my neck. At least they could have invited me to dinner. If not for me, they wouldn't have the ham.

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# HONORABLE MENTION

Carter Lappin is a Californian author. Her works of fiction have appeared in several literary publications, including *Apparition Lit*, *Air and Nothingness Press*, and *Parsec Ink*. You can find her on Twitter at @CarterLappin.

# Unintended Magic

by Carter Lappin

With a flash of purple light and a clap of normal-colored thunder, two surprised-looking boys appeared in front of a unicorn. The unicorn, for its part, looked less than impressed with the display, continuing to chew at a pink-colored plant without any apparent concern.

The boys looked at each other, then at the unicorn. One of the boys was holding a very old book. Both of them were smoking slightly from their sudden transportation, green and pinkish-blue clouds of ash wafting from their clothes. Again, they looked at each other, the unicorn, each other. Back and forth. They were utterly silent for a long moment.

Then one of the boys reached over and punched the book-holding one, hard, on the arm. "What the hell, Brian?" He was, slowly, gaining an expression of panic. He bounced on the balls of his feet and said again, "What the *hell*?"

Brian looked at the book as though it were a live snake. "I don't know!" The unicorn's ear twitched in annoyance at the pitch of the boy's wail.

"Why did you read it?"

"I don't *know!* It was just there in front of me—and, anyways, this whole thing was your idea in the first place." Brian shook the book in the other boy's direction, then, seeming to realize what he was doing, dropped it hastily on the ground. It fell into the blue grass with a puff of sparkles. He wiped his hands off on the front of his shirt like he was afraid he'd been contaminated just by touching it.

"We both agreed to go into the wizard tower, don't try to pin that one on me!"

"Nuh-uh, remember, when we were on that creepy staircase, I was like, *hey, Brandon, I think this might be an* evil *wizard tower, maybe we shouldn't go in here after all.* And you were like, *no, dude, it's fine, nobody lives here anymore, what's the worst that could happen?* Well, guess what, Brandon? The worst happened!"

Brandon scowled. "You're taking that out of context." He looked at the unicorn again, which sparkled rainbow colors in the sunlight. "Besides, it's not the *worst*. We're just in fairyland or something. Fairyland is supposed to be nice."

"Why would an evil wizard, in his creepy tower filled with even creepier human skulls, keep a weird book that magically teleports people who read it into somewhere nice like fairyland?"

"I don't know," Brandon said, a little nastily. "Why would *anybody* pick up a random creepy book in a random creepy evil wizard tower and then read it out loud for *no reason at all*?"

Defensive, Brian said, "I thought it might be something cool! You picked up that weird amulet thing and nothing bad happened, I thought it was fine."

Brandon crossed his arms. "Dude, that thing was definitely cursed. It started bleeding. Didn't you see me throw it out the window?"

Brian looked away. "No. I was reading the book."

"It exploded on impact with the ground. I'm pretty sure a ghost came out of it," Brandon said. "Literally everything in that tower was super, super evil."

Brian looked around. The closest tree seemed to be growing cotton candy instead of leaves. "What does that mean for you and your idea that this is fairyland, then?"

They both turned to look at the unicorn again. It was still standing where they'd first seen it, chewing contemplatively on something that was bright blue. Its horn might have been glowing, just a little bit. The unicorn itself also smelled overwhelmingly of candy—though that could have been the scent of the surrounding fauna instead.

"Uh," said Brandon. He scratched his head as he thought. "Maybe the evil wizard stole the book from a good one?"

Brian pointed triumphantly, shoving his finger in the other boy's face. "Which would mean that it *wasn't* a terrible idea to read the book then. So I'm fine and everything is your fault after all. Okay, you've convinced me—this is fairyland."

"Now hang on a second—"

Brian bent down and swooped the book up from where he'd dropped it on the ground. Enough glitter to fill a bucket came up with it, and Brian grimaced as he shook it out, trying to clean it as best he could. It didn't work very well, with glitter mostly ending up stuck to the book's cover, between its pages, and in the folds of Brian's clothes. He tried to brush it off and succeeded only in covering his hand in a thin layer that stuck to his skin no matter how hard he tried to wipe it off.

"Look, it's fine," he said.

"It still teleported us," Brandon pointed out, eyeing the book warily as Brian flipped through its pages. "I don't think I would be holding that if I were you."

"No, you'd just be convincing your perfectly innocent friend that it would be a good idea to walk right into an obviously evil wizard tower and start poking things," Brian said, huffy.

"Again, you're the one who read the book and made us teleport. I really don't see how I'm the bad guy in this situation. Besides, when you find a wizard tower, you go into the wizard tower. That's the rules."

"Whose rules?"

"I dunno. Everyone?"

"Everyone says that if you find a wizard tower you need to go into it? Everyone says that?"

"Uh, yeah, probably."

"Brandon, I've never heard anyone except you say that in my entire life."

Brandon shifted awkwardly on his feet. "I've definitely heard someone say it before. Anyways, can you un-teleport us or what? Fairyland seems nice and all so far, but I don't want to stay here forever. Plus, I'm pretty sure that unicorn is looking at me weird."

They looked at the unicorn. It looked back.

"Okay, yeah, good point." Brian flipped quickly through the pages of the books, sending up clouds of sparkles as he did. "Um, I'm not sure exactly which page it was. It's all in this weird language."

"A weird magic language, apparently," Brandon said. "Are you telling me we're stuck here forever? What if things start singing? *I can't sing*, *Brian*!"

"Why would they sing?"

"I don't know, it's fairyland! The grass is sparkly and the trees are made out of candy and the sun has a smiley face on it! Why wouldn't there be singing?"

Brian paled slightly. "Good point." He started flipping faster. He stopped on a page, brushing glitter from it. "Okay, this is the one. I'm pretty sure."

"Pretty sure is gonna have to be good enough. Start reading, book boy, and quick. All this magic stuff is starting to give me hives."

"Oh, *now* you want me to read," Brian said. Brandon punched him again. "Ow! Okay, fine!"

He read. The boys squeezed their eyes shut.

Nothing happened.

They opened one eye each. "Maybe—"

Another flash of light and they were gone, leaving no trace of their presence besides a couple of footprints in the sparkling grass.

The unicorn looked up. "That was really weird," it said. Then it went back to its meal. A rainbow blossomed beneath its feet, and the wind blew in the scent of warm fudge.

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# HONORABLE MENTION

Mark Lucius is a writer and speechwriter in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His work has appeared in *Best American Sports Writing*, *Cafe Lit*, *Cowboy Jamboree*, *Fewer Than 500*, *Great River Review* and elsewhere. He has received five Cicero Awards from *Vital Speeches of the Day*.

#### Not the Raven

by Mark Lucius

I said good night to my wife and returned to my study, only to find a bird fidgeting on the white wooden window sill. The summer breeze blowing through the window had turned chilly. I rubbed my eyes. When I opened them, the bird's sleek black head had quieted.

The visitor looked up at me with black button eyes. I measured this bird as about the size of a football.

This was a circumstance I'd never imagined. A bird calling me out for my ignorance of birds.

"I mean for a guy who was an Eagle Scout," said the bird in a sharp, clipped voice.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Huh. A raven at my window at midnight?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Never," said the bird. One black wing fluttered.

<sup>&</sup>quot;You talk? Mynah bird?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Never," said the bird. "You don't know much about birds, do you?"

I sat down in my desk chair. "How do you know that?"

"I've been hangin' around this block for about as long as you have. Word travels."

Words travel, and birds travel, and what else did this bird know about me? It looked like a regular old bird with a beak like a wire cutter and feathers layered like armor. I figured if this bird wanted to hurt me, it would have done that already. I decided not to rouse my wife in the bedroom next door.

"You thought I was a raven because of that poem, right? 'Midnight dreary?' Poem dreary if you ask me," said the bird, flicking its head left, center, right, like a quarterback searching for a receiver.

"The Raven? I guess. But that poem isn't really about a raven."

"I know that, and you know that, but most people don't. I bet if you asked everyone forced to study that poem, most would tell you it's some grand rave-up about some grand raven."

"If you're not a raven, what are you?"

"I'm a crow," said the crow. "Rhymes with Poe."

The crow edged stiffly along my window sill. "Do you mind if I help myself to those cookie crumbs?"

"Oh by all means, be my guest."

The crow hopped and flew to the plate at the far edge of my desk. It pecked at the leavings of my midnight snack.

"May I ask what brings you here?" I asked, "I mean, besides the food."

"You're a PR guy, right?" the bird asked between bites.

"Was."

"Four decades, right?"

"How do you know that? Oh, right, you've been hangin' around the block."

"It's a nice block," said the bird. "We like it here. The trees and all. But you're the only PR guy I know. Your neighbors are just a bunch of college professors and attorneys."

"Who can be very useful," I replied. "Look, you're acting cagey. Could you try getting to the point?" I was using up my inventory of bad bird puns.

"There's a reason why I've been granted this *rare privilege*"—the crow sounded like a mockingbird—"of speaking your language. I'm looking for someone to help us crows improve our image with your *fellow humans*." More mockingbird.

"I'm retired. Not looking for new clients."

"There might be a few bucks in it for you. We pick up lots of coins along the way."

"I'll bet," I said. "But I don't understand. What's wrong with your image?"

The crow lifted its head from the plate. "People... like ravens," the crow said slowly. "They don't like crows. Even though ravens are just bigger, shaggier and dumber."

"Well, I hardly think..."

"I know, your kind hardly think about it." The crow was snappish. "People only think of us as scavengers, nuisances, harbingers of doom and death."

"You might be exaggerating..."

"Tell me, what's the first thing you think about when you think about ravens?"

"Football team," I said. "Baltimore Ravens."

"Right. Why aren't they called the Baltimore Crows?"

"I dunno. Maybe people just don't like crows." I rubbed my eyes again. All this pondering was making me weary.

The crow flew back to the window sill. Its neck twitched like Rodney Dangerfield wearing a shirt too tight.

"What else do you think about when you think about ravens?"

"A phrase, I guess. 'Raven-haired beauty.'"

"Ha! And do you know how many results you get in that computer next to you when you search 'raven-haired beauty?"

"No, but I bet you do." My laptop was beside me on the desk. I kept my eyes on the crow.

"220,000 hits. The first is about that singer, Rhianna, and the last time I checked she had dyed her hair *blue*."

I'd reached the age when even a crow knew more about pop culture than I did.

"And how many hits do you think for 'crow-haired beauty?" asked the crow.

"I'd guess that would be none. But what would you have me tell my fellow humans about all this?"

The crow fluttered to the top shelf of my bookcase. Like a politician scrabbling for votes, the bird began to declaim. "Tell 'em what your scientists say about crows. It's there in that computer. They say we're the most intelligent of all birds. Of twelve-hundred species! They say we're more sophisticated than chimpanzees."

The crow cocked its head, preening. "Sophisticated," it said. "I like the sound of that."

"I'm sorry," I said, "If you're looking for a top hat, you've come to the wrong place."

"Well, you can tell your fellow humans we're more monogamous than people..."

"I'm not sure I'd hang my beak on that one."

The crow ignored me. "I'm a family man myself," he said.

"Yeah. Why do you think we're always looking for food? Scavengers, my ass. Do you have any more cookies?"

I unwrapped a bag of pretzels from my desk drawer and sprinkled a few on the plate. The crow jumped down to the desk for another bite.

"Everyday survival," I said, "Crows just trying to get by. I think people can relate to that."

I might as well have shouted: "What more do you have to crow about?"

The crow straightened and began strutting back and forth on my desk. Its head moved with knifelike swiftness as it unleashed a torrent of crow facts. Crows use tools! Crows teach their children well! Crow families span generations! Crows eat insects that destroy crops! When a crow dies, the extended crow family gathers for a memorial, a "crow funeral."

This crow sounded like every client I had ever worked with. To him, his story was more urgent than any in all the world. But in the midst of his lecture, as the crow's head bobbed and his feathers shuddered, I realized something. Here was a crow who wanted to be more than a crow. He was like all the humans I knew who longed to be more than human. A kid reading a Superman comic. Me in church on Sunday. He was us.

"Stop," I said finally. "When a talking crow appears at my window, I guess I should take it as a sign. Maybe I *can* help a little. But one condition."

The crow's feathers glistened with sweat. "Condition?"

"You're not going anywhere with an anti-raven campaign."

<sup>&</sup>quot;You have children?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Of course. My wife and I have had many. But understand, only half of all crows survive the first year of life."

<sup>&</sup>quot;So, for a crow, every day is a quest for survival?"

"Wait," said the crow, "you haven't even heard my idea for a theme. 'The first thing we do, let's kill all the ravens.'"

"Clever," I said, "But if you make people hate ravens, they'll just hate you, too. You'll all get tarred with the same feathery brush. Humans have the same problem. Two groups of people notice the slightest difference between them. Next thing you know, they're at each other's throats."

"You just watch," said the crow. "Ravens will catch wind of our campaign. They're sneaky."

I ignored him. "Think about what I said. Let's get back together in a few days. But next time, please caw first."

"You really think you're funny, don't you?" said the crow.

He flew away at dawn. I collapsed into bed and awoke my wife. I told her I'd spent the night talking to a crow.

"I imagine you did, dear," she said.

I was tired all day and went to bed early that night. I woke up with my wife tapping me on the shoulder.

"Hey," she said. "Someone here to see you."

"Who? What time is it?"

"It's late. There's a talking bird at the window."

"No! I told him to give me time to work."

"Uh, this bird says you've never met."

"You sure it's a bird?"

"Of course I'm sure. Says it's looking for some PR help."

I threw on a robe and yawned my way into my study. Another bird, bigger than my friend from the night before, sat on the same window sill. This bird was rougher around the edges. I sat down at my desk.

"Huh," I said, "a raven at my window at midnight?"

"Why yes," said the raven, one black wing fluttering. "How did you know?"

"Just a wild guess," I replied.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Liam Hogan is an award winning short story writer, with stories in *Best of British Science Fiction* and in *Best of British Fantasy* (NewCon Press). He's been published by *Analog*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Flame Tree Press*, among others. He helps host Liars' League London, volunteers at the creative writing charity Ministry of Stories, and lives and avoids work in London. More details at <a href="http://happyendingnotquaranteed.blogspot.co.uk">http://happyendingnotquaranteed.blogspot.co.uk</a>.

### A Baker Street Dozen

by Liam Hogan

I was annoyed to find Sherlock Holmes, Inspector Morse, and Poirot already at the crime scene. More fictional sleuths arrived over the half-hour, until there were ten or so hanging around. All avatars, all pixels and light. They might not be fouling the evidence, but it was an unwanted distraction. And there wasn't a blessed thing I could do about it.

It's rare to see that many Great Detectives in one place. Your average household has one, maybe two, holo-projectors, but the victim, Alfred Ghent, had gone the onliner, no-privacy route, allowing every moment of his life to be shared. And that, regardless of my or the department's views on the matter, included his death, natural or otherwise.

At least the case would be wrapped up quickly. Every projector also doubled as a high-definition, always-on camera; rather more useful than the clunky kit with the obscenely long zoom that Jessica Jones was one-handedly touting between virtual swigs from a virtual bottle. I was surprised I'd been sent for.

The Super probably thought it'd be good experience for young Sergeant Anders, hovering by my side, gawking at the World's Greatest Consulting Detective instead of watching where she put her size-whatever feet. Sherlock Holmes sneered at her.

"Alright, what do we have?" I asked the forensics team as they were packing up. Columbo sidled over, looking as rumpled as I felt. I considered engaging a privacy scrambler, but whatever our guys had found, the virtual detectives had already seen it. I was the one playing catch-up, which just irritated me all the more.

"Bit of a head-scratcher, Inspector Clonbrock," Jonie said and then did exactly that. Being on camera (and we're always on camera) makes people self-conscious, and overly formal. Especially when flustered. "Despite 24/7 coverage, and despite the messy end—blunt trauma, multiple blows, no murder weapon—nothing useful was captured."

I grunted. In a world with constant coverage—between security cams, augmented reality advertising systems, and those extroverts (such as the late Alfred) who wore glasses that streamed everything they saw to their subscribers—most crimes were solved within twenty-four hours, and it only took that long because of the ocean of footage you had to wade through.

"Network glitch?"

"Not with the cameras, no. No missing or deleted footage, but the house lights went out at 8:43. It stayed dark for just under nine minutes. When they came back on..."

"No more Mr. Ghent."

"First responders—a squad car and an ambulance—arrived at 8:59, and used emergency protocols to gain entry."

"Well, who called that in?"

Jonie shrugged. "We got two dozen reports from live-stream watchers, a couple of minutes after the lights returned. Long enough to see it wasn't some elaborate prank. No one else was in the house at the time."

"Except the murderer." I shook my head at the wicked ways of the world. Alfred had done alright for himself, until he hadn't. Of the rooms I'd passed through to get to where the sheet protected what was left of his modesty, this was the smallest, and also the one I'd spend my time in. The walls were covered with an eclectic range of books, spines speckled with blue tape to indicate blood splatter. There was an e-paper projector that made me suspect most of the actual reading had been done that way. The books were decorative then; overly thick, noise deadening wallpaper. I glanced back the way I'd come. "If you told me the library doors were also locked, I wouldn't be any less surprised."

Jonie blinked owlishly at me, sporting red marks from the goggles she'd just removed. "There are no locks on any internal doors," she replied, after careful deliberation. "But no external doors were forced, not according to the security logs, until emergency services arrived. So I guess it's a locked house mystery?"

A youthful voice interrupted my next question. "What the hell? Get those kids..."

One of them peered back at me, mock quizzical, and I saw straight through him and his wing-tipped shirt and primary coloured pullover combo. *Christ*. Even the Hardy Boys had shown up. If the Famous Five arrived, with or without their dog, I was handing in my badge.

Was it the sniff of an actual mystery that attracted them? Word of mouth—online chatter as the first voyeurs passed on the news—and then before you knew it, every cyber-sleuth not engaged on some other case would be dialling in to investigate.

The only saving grace was that no more than thirteen Great Detectives could play any one game. A Baker Street Dozen, the app called it, in one of its more egregious puns. Everyone else was along for the ride, invisible, ghoulish spectators, eager to scratch their morbid curiosity. But a dozen projections, plus or minus one, was plenty annoying enough. What was even more annoying was that, with so many amateurs involved, they'd undoubtedly beat us to the punch.

Not because they were *smarter*, but because there was no real penalty for reaching a hasty decision and logging their "discovery", to be compared when the case

finally broke. Like an early, lucky guess in Cluedo—*Alfred Ghent, in the Library, with a lead pipe*—one of them was bound to guess right and claim undeserved credit, making us plods look slow and stupid to boot. Unlike the fiendish fictional mysteries that so entertained their original counterparts, most actual murders were banal. The prime suspect was frequently the only suspect, and just as frequently, the perpetrator. Hardly a stern test for any sleuth worth their salt.

But Alfred Ghent was the victim, not the murderer. As yet, we didn't have any suspects. Or motive. Or...

Ah hell. I wasn't learning anything, and even the holograms were blinking out, seeking excitement elsewhere. As I was leaving, Jim Rockford burst energetically onto the scene, houndstooth jacket flapping behind him as he plaintively asked: "Am I late?"

\*

Two hours of report filing followed. And that, as much as anything else, is why I hate The Great Detectives. The players don't have to do paperwork. It didn't help that on the street outside my apartment, leaching off a traffic camera, a plume of CGI smoke curled from beneath a brimmed hat—a Borsalino, no less.

"I was wondering when you'd show," I growled. Only twelve player-detectives had turned up at Ghent's residence. I'd naively assumed one must have already seen all they'd wanted to before I arrived.

Philip Marlowe glanced at me, crooked a lazy smile. "I was busy. A dame."

Marlowe had always been my favourite fictional detective—he's who I'd play, if I wasn't doing this as an actual job, and had the time and money to waste. I nodded. If you were going to pretend to be a Great Detective, at least play the role, and not just dress the part. Laconic is hard to fake.

Then again, the software offered a choice of potential replies if the user wasn't fully engaged, and even allowed the sophisticated AI to take over if they took too long to pick one. I might have just nodded at an algorithm. I sighed.

#### "What are you after?"

A cigarette stub blazed through the air, vanishing before it hit the pavement. "Ever wonder why some crimes have so many Great Detectives there, almost before the murder is reported?"

I jerked my head, peered into and through the projection. "Who's playing you?" In theory, the IP address should lead to a user account, to credit card details, to an IRL person. But I'd need a warrant to go digging, and it was all too easily anonymized anyway. Which was why I asked. Some people are eager to claim future credit for solving a crime.

"A friend," Marlowe drawled, amused. "Just a friend." He faded into the night, into smog that wasn't any more real than he was. As if I didn't have enough to worry about.

\*

As soon as I got through my door, I brought up The Great Detectives' public forum. Lots of theories already, most of them as stupid as you'd expect. The Ghent case was front and center on the main page, having already garnered the most followers.

After a moment's thought—a moment in which I poured a large glass of wine, wondering which cliché I was becoming—I started looking at other highly rated homicides over the last twelve months.

A surprising number of them involved onliners like Alfred. Maybe that just meant it helped to have an active following before you got waxed. But the top five were all onliners, and all unsolved. Again, that would explain their continued popularity, but it still shocked me. You got a few off-grid murders a year, tops. Bodies found long after they'd gone missing, the trail cold, hard to solve because they were crimes committed at random, the victims desperately unlucky.

These weren't that kind. I thought about what Marlowe had said and switched to Alfred's viewing figures. Popular guy. His numbers, even for a Wednesday evening at home, were solid. They dropped a little during the nine minute blackout. I

topped up my glass. I'd expect to see a rise, if Marlowe's cryptic hint was anything to go by.

I flicked the screen off, annoyed again—this time, with myself. I'd been distracted by some amateur whose only credentials was a shared love of detective noir. That was, assuming Marlowe was his—or her—first choice, and Miss Marple hadn't already been taken.

I sat in the gloom until the glass was empty. Reached for my phone instead of the bottle. It was time to bring my daughter into the investigation.

Ever since she'd left home, she'd started to get over the embarrassment of having a policeman as a father. Presumably, her dating life had come on in leaps and bounds. I shuddered. But wasn't that what University was for?

"Hi Dad," she said, ghosting onto my screen. "What's up?"

"Can't a father—"

"Not at 2am, no."

I blinked at the time in the corner of the screen. "Sorry, kiddo. Need your geeky expertise."

"Thanks. I think."

"You wouldn't happen to have a Great Detectives account, would you?"

Her lips thinned. "Actually, yes, I do."

"Which detective do you follow?"

"Sorry Dad, but you're not an option."

"I'm serious."

"So was I. Kind of." She stared at me via the camera and the screens and the infinite miles separating us. "If you must know, Adam Dalgliesh."

I couldn't think of anyone *less* like me. Ah well. "Can I ask you to follow Marlowe instead? And can you share access?"

"What? Why? Can't you afford your own account?"

"Hun, I need it now, not in forty-eight hours or however long it takes. And I'd prefer it not to be traceable to me."

She shook her head. "He won't solve your case for you, y'know?"

I didn't say anything. After a minute-long stare-off, she relented. "Anything so I can go back to sleep. I'll change my password in the morning. And, Dad?"

"Yes, kiddo?"

"You do anything, *anything at all*, to embarrass me, and I'll be coming after you. No court in the land—"

"Got it. 'Night."

The screen went dark. A moment later there was a bleep as her credentials landed in my wallet.

\*

There was no record of my meeting with Marlowe. Normally, every avatar was fully streamed, so others can see and hear everything they did, read every note they made. Thirteen Great Detectives, a full compliment, were registered in the Ghent case, but no one was following Marlowe. His account appeared frozen. Had he been suspended? Or had someone decided to play him, but failed to give further instruction?

But if Marlowe was in play, and whoever was driving him left no tracks...

Something weird was going on, but until I knew what, there wasn't much I could do except play the cards in front of me, and keep my eyes and ears open.

\*

After I'd read the case notes of the unsolved murders, deliberated and decided against talking to the other inspectors, and mused over whether I'd only got this homicide because everyone else was already busy, I called the pathologist.

"Morning, Inspector." Jack's face loomed before me, half a pastry disappearing beneath his unruly beard. "What can I do you for?"

"The Ghent case?"

"You've read my report? All crystal clear from my side. Cause of death, time in agreement with other evidence, tox clean, no DNA or other material to go on... what are you fishing for?"

"You say the first blow did the job?"

"I said any of the blows would have, but, yes. Whoever did it had a decent swing."

"Could you give me anything on the victim? Was Alfred Ghent in good health?"

Jack sucked in his breath, I heard it whistle between the gap in his front teeth. "As it happens, and this isn't official unless you can prove relevance, *no*."

"How long?"

He cocked an eye. "Sharp, Clonbrock. I'll buy you a pint if you tell me how you knew that?"

"I'll buy you one back, if you can tell me why everyone doesn't know it already?"

He looked put out, as if I was accusing him of being loose-lipped. "Like I said, medical records are—oh, I *see*, the guy was online. But it's a doctor-patient confidentiality thing. Like priests. No public coverage inside surgeries or confessionals."

"They're not recorded?"

"Well, GPs are, I'm not sure about priests... But those recordings are block-chained and only opened in cases of malpractice or under warrant. So, while an onliner is

supposedly online all the time, in certain interactions with others, *their* professional privacy takes precedence, hence, blind spots."

"You should; it applies to police inquiries as well, to prevent lynch mobs. Not that you'll be interviewing Ghent, poor sod. In answer to your question, he had between three and six months. It wouldn't have been a fun ride." Jack's eyebrows met in the middle. "You're not...? No suicide could self-inflict those blows, or hide the murder weapon after. Though it might explain one curious thing."

"I didn't mention it in my report, and haven't yet sent it down to evidence, but it's what got me thinking about priests. Ghent went to see one recently."

"I guess you could confirm, by reviewing his feed and looking for recent outages? Ditto where, I suppose. As to the *how...*"

He held up a clear evidence bag, inside was a small slip of paper. It moved around too much to stay in focus, so he read it for me. "Penance: Three Hail Marys."

"A relatively minor transgression, then. Thanks, Jack. I owe you one."

\*

Sometimes it's handy having a subordinate. "Anders? Check Ghent's onliner log for *off*line periods, within the last two weeks. Work backwards; time, duration, and location. It should lead you to a church, to a priest's confessional. Ping me as you find them."

Anders nodded, puppy-dog eager, having just returned from a fruitless door-to-door. Ghent's neighbors weren't particularly observant. Maybe that's what happens when you can afford detached houses and tranquillisers. "On it, guv. And then we pull the priest for questioning?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Interesting. I did not know that."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Do tell?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;When? And where? And how the hell do you know?"

"You should know better than *that*, Sergeant. Confessional confidentiality. I just need the when and where. And—" I was thinking on the fly, "See if you can find out if this was a regular thing, or a one-off. Yes?"

"Yes, guv. Where are you headed?"

"The doctors."

"Everything alright?" A flash of concern crinkled her eyes.

"I don't know yet," I admitted. "I'll tell you when I get back."

\*

Ghent's GP surgery was one of those practices with a half-dozen doctors. In the waiting room a poster kept catching my eye, and every time it did, it rattled off personalized lifestyle tips. Stats for men my age, my weight, and who live alone, were shocking. Who knew getting divorced would knock ten years off my life expectancy, and add three to hers? (Who knew it was so dangerous being so much of a stereotype?)

After being shown in by the robo-receptionist, I flashed my ID and explained why I was there to Doctor Pollock, a tall, dapper guy with expensive glasses. He lifted his fingers from the keypad on the desk and leaned back in his chair.

"I'm confused, Inspector. I was under the impression Mr. Ghent had been murdered—"

"Yes."

"—Brutally?"

"Again, yes."

"Then, if I may, what does his state of mind, or indeed, health, have to do with anything?"

I gave him my sweetest smile. It wasn't easy. There's something about a professional unwilling to help another that rankles. A lack of common courtesy. It didn't help when I mentioned I knew Ghent was terminal.

He winced. "You didn't hear that from me—"

"Of course not."

"And I can't give you specifics, but yes. Though I had rather held out hopes for an experimental drug trial..." A cloud sped across the good Doctor's brow.

"Would that explain your visit to Mr. Ghent's house, a week before his demise?"

The scowl returned. "I'm not at liberty—"

"Are you in the habit of making house calls, Doctor?"

"When the circumstances dictate, Inspector."

"And what circumstances were those?"

The scowl intensified. "I find that discussing end of life care takes more than a quarter hour, Inspector, and is best done in the comfort of the patient's own home. Will that be all?"

I agreed it would be—for now, despite the temptation to slip in a Columbo-esque "one more thing…" Problem was, I didn't have one ready to ask.

\*

Marlowe was waiting for me again, under the same lamppost. "What do you know?" I demanded.

He took his time. "What do you know?"

"I know you're suggesting there's a half-dozen connected cases—" I ignored his raised eyebrow "—but that's *ridiculous*. There hasn't been a serial killer in... *forever*."

Ever since the transparency laws came in, to make sure there weren't any rocks for a killer to hide under. Laws that allowed apps like The Great Detective. Laws that meant no one escaped justice for long enough to kill again, at the cost of virtually all claims to privacy.

And yet here we had a half-dozen unsolved murders, each by a different method: one a poisoning, in a public bar. No one knew how the poison was administered. In others, like Ghent's, the murder weapon was conspicuously absent. There was even a break-the-doors-down, *genuine* locked room mystery. All in our fair city, all far more public and documented than the usual unsolved cases. All onliners, and a number of them with recent, terminal diagnoses. But those illnesses, along with the doctors involved, were different. It was at best a *glimpse* of a possible connection; little wonder the department was treating them as separate cases.

"What's your part in this?" I asked.

"You could picture some public spirited Joe hiding behind my avatar, dropping hints? If that helps."

"Or?"

Marlowe shrugged, immune to my scorn. "You're the detective; you join the dots."

I sure as hell didn't like the feel of my strings being yanked. And if I didn't trust Marlowe's motives, could I trust his information? What choice did I have? If this crime was anything like the others, solving it head on wasn't likely to happen.

"Fine, whatever. So drop me a hint, already?"

He laughed. "One thing you haven't considered: all the victims were keen fans of The Great Detective."

That figured, I supposed. But it didn't narrow things down, not unless it was connected to their onliner status, to their shortened lifespans... my brain ached.

"That's it?"

"For now." Marlowe repeated his vanishing trick, which was damned easy, if you were never there in the first place.

\*

I sat in the gloom once again, trying to think. The Great Detective was a money spinner. Maybe it was a reaction to having so much of modern life under the spotlight; the seedy side, as long as it wasn't too pitiful, had a vicarious attraction to some. Correction, to a *lot*. But how would a murderer make money from an unsolvable case?

I called my daughter. At least it wasn't past midnight, this time. I sketched out—in the vaguest terms—what I knew.

She was unexpectedly excited. "I should have been following these cases," she moaned, "rather than tragic *crime passionnels*, the scorned lover standing over the body, bloody knife in hand."

I paused. "That happens a lot?"

She shrugged. "Cameras discourage *premeditated* murders, mostly. But this... this is a puzzle, more than that, it's *shaped* like a puzzle."

"It's almost an irrelevance who, or why they did it, you just want to know, intellectually, *how* they did it."

Things clicked into place. "The murderer is playing a dangerous game," I mused. "The how-dunnit, and the who-dunnit, are always going to be entwined. If you solve one..."

"You solve the other? He's not expecting you to solve either?"

"So it would seem."

Which stung my professional pride. Someone thought they were cleverer than we were. Someone was playing god.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Come again?"

\*

Another night, another encounter with Marlowe. This time I was ready for him. "How far are you willing to go, to help?"

The same drawl, the same tilt of the head. "Meaning?"

"All you've given me are sphinx-like hints. Not exactly helping to crack the case."

Marlowe sniffed, stuck his hands in his pockets. "No? Well, whatd'ya want, tough guy?"

"More to the point, what do you want?"

He gazed at me, a moth flickering around then through his face. "An end, to this."

"So give me something. That will end it?"

\*

Two nights later I found myself stood in a park, the lights of the back of a house peeking over a tall, but not unscaleable fence.

"Are you sure about this, Inspector?" Marlowe asked. "Once you're in there, you're on your own. No calling for backup. No recording to protect you if it goes wrong."

"I'm sure," I said, though my hand was trembling and I couldn't stop thinking of my daughter. "There's one thing you might do for me, though."

"Oh?"

"Raise hell at the front door, while I go over the back?"

He chuckled. "I can do that. Good luck, Clonbrock."

\*

Doctor Pollock was dead, tangled in a web of ropes and pulleys, a Heath-Robinson murder contraption that took two to operate, one of whom was the intended victim. For all that, as I sat on the curb outside surrounded by flashing blue lights,

it was the bullet from my gun that had ended it. And it'll be the almost-victim's tearful testimony (the shock of an assisted suicide gone wrong) that will crack the other cases, explain how they were recruited, (a network of Doctors, referring terminal patients to one another?), and which Great Detective forum they hatched their convoluted plans in.

I'd catch hell, later, maybe even a suspension, for going it alone, even if there would have been another murder if I hadn't. For now I was the hero, the Super praising my instincts. I didn't tell her they're born of a lifetime of thinking the worst of people.

And I couldn't help but stare into every shadow behind every light, expecting to see a tall man with a brimmed hat, tipping me a wink.

Anders took the empty coffee cup and watched as I clambered stiffly into the car. "Back to the station, guv, to file your report?"

"Not quite yet, Anders," I said, waving away the inevitable protest. "If the Super asks, I gave you the slip. There's a loose-end I need to pull. It's probably nothing—I'll see you in an hour."

I didn't bother waiting for her response.

\*

The moment I closed the door my signal dropped to zero. It might look as ancient as the rest of St. Marys, but the confessional was retrofitted with a fancy faraday cage and a privacy scrambler. Which explained why the penance printer was mounted on the *outside* of the box.

A panel was pulled back with a clatter. "Yes, son?"

"Father McIntyre," I said. "Or would you prefer Marlowe?"

I glimpsed the light from his eyes, watching me warily through the ornate grill. "Inspector Clonbrock, an unexpected surprise. I assume you're not here to confess your sins?"

"No. Are you?"

"I see the Great Detectives site has been taken down?"

"Temporarily. I suspect it will be back up, probably no later than tomorrow."

"So it was Doctor Pollock?"

"So it seems."

"Odd that he thought he'd get away with it—"

"He might have," I interrupted. "If he'd merely claimed assisted suicide, and not obfuscated the matter."

There was a sigh. "Suicide?"

"Assisted. The poisoning, the locked room, the convenient timings of Ghent's blackout... all made much easier if the victims helped out, if they bought into the idea of fabricating a mystery."

"But why?" There was a plea in his voice.

"People do all sorts of crazy things for fame. Pollock thought he could control the narrative, could direct the play from beginning to end. He was a Great Detectives fan, of course. How galling it must be, when reality so rarely matches fiction."

I heard a sigh, a rustle of vestments. "Did you have to shoot him, Inspector?"

"He was *armed*, Father. It was dark. And there was another's life at risk. A Doctor who strays into killing his own, or others' patients—even those who beg him to—is a dangerous animal. It might not have taken much more than a slump in ratings before he decided to give someone a false, terminal diagnosis."

The priest's shudder rattled the woodwork.

"Others might agree with you, but it grieves me that it should end this way."

"Isn't that what you wanted? Why you led me on?"

The silence stretched. "Inspector, my part in this is smaller than you assume. In truth, what Alfred Ghent told me was rather vague. And what I picked up on, the hints of a deception, the murmurs of suicide, wasn't even near the top of his list of sins. He wasn't a regular confessor, there was somewhat of a backlog. All rather tedious, and I wouldn't have thought any more of it, if—"

"If you hadn't been a Great Detectives user yourself?"

"Yes. Even then I only jotted down a few initial thoughts, triggered by the things he'd hinted at—what if it was more about the method, the *theatre*, than the murder itself? And then, when I logged in to see which players were investigating, I was surprised to find one slot available.

"You can check my account, if you haven't done so already. I've never been a *player* before. I wouldn't have this time, except it was as if the game was waiting for me to join." His laugh caught, turned into a delicate cough. "We men of faith must sometimes exercise it."

I let him stew. "What you did, Father, with the Marlowe avatar, should not have been possible. I've done my digging. You're no hacker, no secret geek."

"If it was secret—"

"No." I cut through his flippant response. "If you don't mind, I need two things from you. The first is a promise you won't be logging into your Great Detectives account, ever again."

There was a lengthy exhale from the other side, a disappointed: "I suppose not."

"And the other—just *how* did you do it? How did you control the app, the projectors, so that nothing you told me was recorded?"

His pause was a lengthy one. "Those half-baked theories I mentioned jotting down, Inspector? I never shared them. *No one* should have been able to read them.

"If I told you that God isn't the only one who moves in mysterious ways, I doubt you'd thank me. All that you give me credit for, someone else, or something else,

did. I was frozen out of the account almost as soon as it was activated. I never told *you* anything."

It was my turn for a lengthy pause. "That's what I feared. Ah *hell*—sorry Father. I'm just an old fashioned copper, one messed up case from being forced into early retirement. But it doesn't matter half as much as people think, how a murder is done. Technology, methods, the science used to pick them apart, all these things change. But the reason people kill—I don't think that changes, ever, whether they claim it was for money, or fame, or love. It's mankind's ability to stop seeing the humanity in others. I've had a lifetime of being exposed to it, and I wonder where I am on that spectrum.

"Though I don't suppose I need to tell you about human nature?"

The laugh returned, with a little more warmth. "I'm only *thirty*, Inspector. I hope I have a long way to go before I'm unsurprised by the things people do."

"Well, if there's some altruistic, secretive cabal out there, or even an AI that knows right from wrong... It's above my pay grade to do much about it. I just hope it knows what it is doing."

"So do I, Inspector." The priest's voice sounded as weary as I felt. "So do I."

There was a freshly printed slip waiting for me as I exited. It read: "Thou shalt not kill. Penance: Thirty Hail Marys."

I figured I got off lightly.

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### GUEST WRITER

Sharron Bassano is a retired teacher educator with nine published educational books to her credit. This is her first work of fiction. She feels more creative now, at age 78, than ever before in her life. It happens. She lives in Santa Cruz, California.

# Eizer Griggs and Eli

by Sharron Bassano

El Dorado County, California, 1949

Old Eizer Griggs arrived home about noon and was startled to find a small boy sitting alone on his porch, a cardboard suitcase at his feet. Eizer said, "Here now! What are you doing on my porch? You don't belong here." The little boy looked up, and did not reply.

"What are you doing here on my property, young man?" The little boy put his head down on his knees, and Eizer thought he saw one small tear fall onto the child's shoe. "Can you not speak?" said Eizer, a little more softly.

"My mama told me to wait here," the boy answered. "She said Mr. Griggs would be home soon. She said I... I had to stay here for a while and be good and she would come back for me." He rubbed his cheek with a knuckle.

"Is that a fact now? Well... and who *is* your mother then, and why has she left you here at *my* place?"

"My mama is Merlene Flounder. She said I had to stay right here on this porch and she would come back."

"I am Eli. Eli Flounder." He offered a grimy hand to Eizer. The man, no stranger to grime, shook the boy's hand, saying, "Eizer Griggs."

The child was small and thin, and looked as if he hadn't been fed much. Eizer thought he was maybe five or six. His long hair wasn't combed and one of his shoe strings was broken. He wore a blue flannel shirt a few sizes too big, the sleeves rolled up. His trousers were torn at the knee. He looked pretty clean, but was still a sorry sight to Eizer. "Well, I guess you better come on in then," he said. "You'll be hungry."

Eli Flounder picked up his battered suitcase and wrestled it clumsily up the steps, half-dragging it through the front door. He looked around at the place Eizer called home. The floors were not clean. The dust on the tabletops was so thick it rose up into the air when you walked by. Large cobwebs hung from the light fixtures, an accumulation of years, no doubt. The curtains looked as if they had not been washed since 1925, and one roller shade was ripped half off. There were stacks of books on every horizontal surface—on tabletops, on chairs, on the floor, like a library gone to hell. The couch had become a repository for so much flotsam, there was no longer a place to sit. The air in the room was redolent of fried onions, cabbage, liniment, dirty socks, and... poultry.

The boy followed the man into the kitchen. Two chickens were pecking around on the drainboard. Eizer yelled and flapped the dishcloth at them. They squawked and flew out the open window over the sink. He lit the burner on the greasy stove and put a lime-crusted tea kettle on to boil. Pushing a pile of unwashed dishes, pots, and potato peelings aside, he made a place on the counter to work. "You like peanut butter? I'll make us a sandwich. And we got plenty of milk." He found a half-empty jar of Skippy's in the cupboard and said, "You make us a place at the table there, son, and we'll eat."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Merlene? Merlene! Come back when? Where's she gone off to?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I don't know. She didn't tell me."

<sup>&</sup>quot;What is your name, son?"

Eli gathered up a stack of rubble from the table and arranged it carefully on the chair in the corner. He brushed off the oilcloth in front of him with his hand, scattering crumbs and other unrecognizable substances onto the floor. Climbing up on a chair, he sat down, waiting, feet dangling. Eizer brought him a plate with a sandwich oozing thin peach jam that was made by a neighbor. He added a slightly wrinkled apple and a tall glass of milk. The smear of dried egg yolk on the rim of the plate was just decoration, left over from yesterday's breakfast. "You eat," he said. He made a cup of instant Sanka and a sandwich for himself and joined the boy at the table. "That good?" he asked.

"Yeth, thir," Eli answered through a mouthful of goo. "Thank you," he added, remembering his manners. Jam ran out of the sandwich between his little fingers, and down toward his wrist. He tried to lick it off. Eizer handed him a rag. A minute or so later, Eli looked around him and said thoughtfully, "This house is a mess." It was not a criticism, really, just an observation.

"Well... yes it is," Eizer agreed gruffly. "There's no excuse for it."

After they are and Eli had washed his sticky hands and face, he remembered an envelope he was supposed to have given to Eizer. He took it out of his pants pocket. "I forgot," he said. "My mama wanted me to give you this. It's a note."

Eizer opened the wrinkled envelope and read:

I am sorry, Eizer. I had to leave fast. I am in bad trouble and I cannot keep this boy any more. You have to take him. He is a good boy and I love him, but he is not safe with me now. I will come back for him when if I can. Merlene.

Eizer read the note two more times, thinking he must have misunderstood something, but he hadn't. He stared out the window, blinked at the boy. What was he supposed to do now? He sat, waiting for inspiration. A minute passed silently, Eli began to fidget.

"Mr. Griggs? Sir? What is it? What does the note say?"

Eizer snapped to and quickly stuffed the note in his pocket. "Ah... your mama says she will come back for you just as soon as she can and that I am to take good care

of you," he said, telling the truth. "You are to stay here and you are not to worry. Now... let's us go out back and get that cow milked and bring in the eggs." Eli jumped down from the chair and followed Eizer Griggs out into the yard.

The area between the house and the barn looked like the scene of a train wreck, or an explosion of some sort. Debris everywhere. To the left, old tires, rusty springs, scrap lumber, a defunct water heater, the back end of a pickup truck. To the right, a broken trellis, battered discolored sheets of corrugated tin, various mysterious farming implements, a roll of chicken wire.

The cow was out in the sun in a large enclosure. Eizer tied her lead to the fence. Eli watched Eizer get the three-legged stool and a bucket and sit down beside the cow. The boy had never thought about where milk came from, exactly, other than a glass bottle. He squatted down to watch. "What are you doing under there, Mr. Griggs?" he asked.

"Why, I am milking this cow." He patted Rosie affectionately on her flank. "This is where the milk for your breakfast comes from. Did you not know that?"

"No sir, I didn't." He watched, fascinated, for a minute as the bucket filled with foamy white milk. "Mr. Griggs, does it have orange juice in there too?"

"No, it doesn't have orange juice," said Eizer. "Be nice if it did, though. Be right handy. Now you go over there to those five boxes, take that white basket with you. See if you can find us some eggs. Be careful now, they break easy."

"But... there's chickens sitting in there, sir."

"Pay them no mind. You just reach under, see what you can find."

The boy approached the chickens warily. He was getting a sideways, beady stare from a large white hen that looked as if she'd as soon peck his eyes out as not. He said, "Excuse me," to her and slid his little hand under the warm sturdy Leghorn. To his delight, he found a fine large specimen and placed it gently in the basket.

"See there?" said Eizer. "Easy! That will be your job every day now. You will be the egg man here."

Eli thought about that. *I'm the egg man here*.

Later, Eizer cleared off a bed for Eli in the room he himself had slept in as a boy, a room as haphazard as the other six rooms in the house. He put all the books on the floor, made up the bed with worn but relatively clean sheets. The blankets were somewhat the worse for wear, but he took them outside and gave them a good shake to get rid of most of the dust and a spider or two.

"Good," he said, looking down at Eli. "That'll do. Now let's see what you have brought here in your suitcase so we know what we have to work with."

Eli opened his Sears & Roebuck cardboard suitcase and pulled out a pair of wornout jeans, two cotton shirts, a sad looking denim jacket, various mis-matched socks, and pajamas. Merlene apparently overlooked the underwear, but she had stuck in a book, *The Tin Man of Oz* and four metal Matchbox cars and a stack of baseball cards with a rubber band around them. In a rolled up paper sack he found a tooth brush and a comb. There was a large torn manila envelope in the bottom of the suitcase, in which Eizer found the boy's birth certificate, some records of immunizations and his school history, which confirmed his suspicion that Eli's mother would not be returning any time soon, if ever.

Eizer prepared a dinner of Spam and fried collard greens. Eli helped him whip up a cornbread from a boxed mix. *It's a pretty good dinner*, thought the boy. The corn bread was very dry and he had to drink two glasses of milk to get it down. After dinner, Eizer added the dirty dishes, bowls, and skillet to the wreckage on the drainboard and said, "We better get to cleaning up this kitchen tomorrow, don't you think?"

"Yes, sir, I do," Eli agreed.

Eizer Griggs, trying to figure out what to do next for this boy, began to hear an echo of his own father's voice from so long ago, telling him, "You get in there and take a bath and brush your teeth now, son. And remember to scrub behind your ears and wash your hair." He turned to Eli, and, using what he thought was a tone of benign authority, said, "You get in there and take a bath and brush your teeth now, son. And remember to scrub behind your ears and wash your hair." He was

pleased to see the young man emerge from the bathroom half an hour later in his faded pajamas, damp, shining like a silver coat button.

"You look mighty fine," he said to the boy. "Good work."

The boy replied, "Maybe we should get to cleaning that bathroom, too, sir."

"Right you are," Eizer agreed.

Food, bath, teeth brushed, now what? How would he entertain this child? He rummaged around in the bedroom closet, and brought out a dusty box of old children's books. "You look through these, son. Find one that looks interesting and I'll read it to you if you want."

"I can read," said Eli. "I am six and a half."

"Well that is good, then. So *you* shall read to *me*, and we'll try to learn us something useful."

\*

Later that evening, before retiring to his own disorderly bedroom, Eizer peeked in at young Mr. Flounder to make sure he was all right. The light from the bare bulb in the hall shone dimly into his bedroom. He stood there in the doorway listening, watching the boy sleep, and was taken by a feeling of responsibility that was utterly new to him. He had someone to tend to, a human being who needed him for the first time in his life.

Eizer had been nearly the same age as this boy when his mother had disappeared. He remembered the confusion, the sadness, the sense of loss and of somehow feeling to blame for it, as if he had done something wrong that drove her away. At that very moment, Eizer found his first clear direction as to how to care for this boy. No matter what, he would never let him feel unwanted.

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