

audience

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audience

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[\(\[www.compulsivereader.com\]\(http://www.compulsivereader.com\)\)](http://www.compulsivereader.com)

Reviews of books by some of the hottest writers working today, exclusive author interviews, literary news and criticism.

The Fortunate Milkman

By

Hareendran Kallinkeel

Selling milk at one hundred rupees a liter was far-fetched fiction for milkmen in Taliparamba. In this small town, where sprouts of urbanization lay choked amidst coconut palms and paddy fields, dairy farming was not considered a lucrative occupation.

Not until Krishnan commercialized it.

When Krishnan brought up the idea, his mother was dumbfounded. "Ayye! Do you have any idea what people will say?" she said, placing an index finger on her nose in the typical Keralite manner of showing disapproval. Educated boys from upper-middle class families didn't indulge in milk trading. The family's reputation would be at stake.

"Mamma, why worry about people? Let them say what they want. They'll tire themselves soon enough and leave me alone," he replied, patting her cheeks. She had never seen him so enthusiastic, not even when he received his master's degree in commerce. She realized he was determined and thought it wiser to let him be.

Thus Krishnan began the spadework. He built a spacious stable that provided adequate water, light and ventilation. He wanted his cattle to be comfortable and healthy. He hired a boy to tend his stock and bought two hybrid cows.

Krishnan had a Brahmin priest perform a puja — a prayer ritual that preceded all auspicious events in a traditional Hindu family — before the cows were inducted into business. While the ceremony was in progress, Uncle Kanaran arrived. Sparkling rays of his anger bounced off his shiny walking stick that looked more like an artifact with a lion's head at the top for the handle, tapering to form its paws at the bottom. His fury released fumes that overshadowed the fragrant smoke emanating from the ceremonial fire.

"This is the commerce you were taught in the university? I can't believe someone would spend over two hundred thousand rupees for a couple of cows and a cow-shed!" Kanaran shook his walking stick.

"Uncle, please relax. Let me explain." Krishnan took a cautious step forward.

"I won't listen to your stupid theories. You could've joined the family business if you thought things were that bad for you." Kanaran stood, feet apart, fists closed on the handle of the walking stick, body erect, as if he were waiting for the right opportunity to take a swing at his nephew.

Krishnan's voice was composed when he said, "Uncle, I will recoup the investment within six months. Be assured of that."

Kanaran didn't blink. His anger suddenly ebbed. His arched eyebrows dropped. The dark sacks below his eyes sagged. When he spoke, his tone was mild and the voice, sad, "My child, I didn't know you were so serious about it. Unfortunate!" He turned to leave, but paused in front of his sister who stood in the doorway.

She saw the red sting of wetness in his eyes. His voice choked when he said, "I am sorry, sister. I didn't realize things were this bad. He is insane." She watched her brother walk away and then wrapped her face in her palms. Tremors in her body released a bout of sobs that jolted her.

Krishnan watched bewildered as his uncle slumped out through the gates like a rag doll. The priest, unperturbed by any of these emotional outbursts, carried on with the ritual. Krishnan inhaled the exotic aroma that lingered in the air and hoped it would stay till his guests arrived.

« »

The idea of dairy farming was Mammu Hajji's brainchild.

Krishnan always listened to Mammu Hajji, whom he addressed as Mammuka, the equivalent of 'elder brother Mammu'. He considered

Mammu Hajji a vast treasure of knowledge and ideas. Others didn't think so. They saw in him a grocery merchant. Nothing more. How unfortunate for them.

Krishnan cherished the long walks and engaging conversations with Mammucka. It was during one such walk that Mammucka told him about the Siddha Ashram at the top of a hillock on the outskirts of the city.

"A lot of foreigners visit there for ayurvedic treatment. This traditional system of medicine that the Hindus practiced since the first century A.D. is becoming popular overseas, especially for its use of combinations of herbs, purgatives, rubbing oil, etc., rather than chemicals in treating diseases. At any given time you will find over a dozen tourists lodged there," Mammucka said as he spread the statistics in the air between them.

Krishnan was amused. "Of all the f..." Krishnan suddenly held the reins to his loose tongue. Mammucka didn't relish the 'f' word. Veiling his embarrassment with a broad grin, Krishnan resumed, "Well, Mammucka, it isn't a degree in Ayurvedic Medicines that I possess."

"Thockintulleckeri bedi beckandiri pahaya," Mammucka protested. It was his cliché to allude 'don't interrupt and rush things.'

"You know, ayurveda insists on the purity of things. Food grown and produced in natural environments," Mammucka continued.

"That's interesting. But how does that benefit me?"

Krishnan saw a flash of mock anger in Mammucka's eyes. "At it again, eh?" Mammucka asked.

"Sorry. Not again," Krishnan did not want to offend him.

"They do grow vegetables there, but for some reason they want to avoid dairy farming inside the Ashram. Maybe the foreigners don't like the stench of cow dung. Well...you Hindus consider it sacred."

"After all, Mammucka, you aren't suggesting that I start dairy farming?" Krishnan said laughing.

"Thanneda hamucke. I suggest exactly that!" Mammucka patted Krishnan's shoulders and continued, "A couple of hybrid cows and you'll get a minimum of twenty liters of milk a day. The inmates of the ashram are ready to pay one hundred rupees a liter — approximately two US dollars. That leaves you with two thousand rupees a day. Not bad, eh?" Mammucka paused to take a deep breath.

Krishnan sat speechless.

Mammucka ran his fingers through the scant graying hair of his head, then through his white beard. He was prepared to come up with the tough part

of the story. "The entire responsibility for the farm, the risks involved... will be that of the person who runs it. A minimum consumption of twenty liters a day is guaranteed."

"But how could you expect me to...?" Krishnan interrupted.

"Let me finish first. They insist that the cows will not be fed any artificial cattle feed. They have to be bathed twice a day. The stable and surroundings will be kept hygienic and sterile. The cows will be taken to the ashram for milking, accompanied by the man running the farm. That's about it," Mammu Hajji concluded.

"I don't think I can." Krishnan shrugged.

"Well, you can. Perhaps only you can. You have all the credentials. Background. Education. Your vast agricultural byproducts are free resources. Above all, you have the nonchalance that can withstand crude public reaction."

"But, Mammucka, I can't imagine guiding cows through the roads of my city to milk them in an ashram. What an absurd idea!" Krishnan shook his head as if contemplating some preposterous theory.

"Ever read western fiction? Watched the movies? Some of the cowboys are living legends. Taliparamba needs a denim-clad lad tending cows and

fulfilling the big-buck dream. You are on the threshold of creating history!" Mammu Hajji exhorted.

The 'cowboy in jeans' creating history appealed to him. Mammu Hajji had just hit the bull's eye.

Krishnan looked at Mammucka and smiled. Mammu Hajji saw the new dawn in his eyes. "You won't regret it," Hajji said as he placed his palms over Krishnan's head like a Hindu saint blessing his disciple.

« »

The guests came at the appointed time. The air was fragrantly pleasant. The Ashram authorities were satisfied. "Excellent. The set up is perfect and to our entire satisfaction. You may go ahead with it."

Krishnan was happy. He was determined to keep this reputation forever. He vowed to keep his customers satisfied. Quality of product and service was the key to good business relationships.

His mother found solace that ultimately it was not a case of insanity as her brother had feared. Kanaran listened as his sister narrated the details. "We must wait and watch," he said. Then, as an after thought, added, "No matter how much money he makes, the disgrace will remain a stigma." Initially, people mocked Krishnan, clad in denim and guiding cows. He

reminded them that this was India, where Gandhi preached the dignity of labor. As people learned more about his business and witnessed the money pouring in, they grew silent. Uncle Kanaran finally called off the 'wait and watch' policy when Krishnan presented him with the accounts, which showed a return well over the investment by the end of the fifth month.

« »

In the sixth month a conflict confronted Krishnan. One of his best cows began to behave in an erratic manner, stubbornly resisting efforts to milk it. Krishnan overcame the problem with a push or a tug at its tail. On occasion, he failed to deliver milk in time. The ashram authorities informed him of their understanding that animals could be unstable, but they expected Krishnan would handle the situation.

Krishnan read the message loud and clear. One more delay and his business was finished. Now that dairy farming had turned lucrative, there were other youngsters eager to take over. He must revamp his services to remain in business.

But the very next day, calamity struck. Half way to the ashram, the cow refused to move. Krishnan tried all his usual tactics. But the cow wouldn't budge.

Finally he sent the cow-tender ahead with the other cows so that he could

attempt to persuade the troublesome bovine to join the others at the ashram later. Krishnan spent half an hour persuading it. He rotated its tail and twisted. It urinated, but didn't yield. He gave a final kick to the cow's hind end. Nothing. Maybe Mammucka could offer a solution. His shop was just a block away. Krishnan ran to the shop. Mammu Hajji listened to his problem and said, "No big deal. The cow is tired of frequent baths and the odor of sandalwood. The way you keep those cattle, they miss their natural environment."

Krishnan was perplexed. "How could that be? You know I keep them in congenial conditions."

Mammucka laughed out loud. "Congenial! A relative term. What is congenial to you need not be so to me. We are talking about cows."

"But then, the other cows never had a problem." Krishnan argued.

"Resistance in animals differs. It may sustain the harassment for a few weeks more," Mammucka offered, smiling.

"You mean to say..."

"Never mind. I have the solution to your problem. Wait here for a minute."

When Mammucka returned, he handed Krishnan a small envelope. He

surveyed the customers crowding his shop and, not wanting them to be able to eavesdrop, he whispered his solution into Krishnan's ears.

As Mammu Hajji spoke, Krishnan's eyes grew wider and wider. When he was finished, he patted Krishnan on his cheeks.

"Trust me." Mammu Hajji did not mind that his patrons heard that.

« »

Krishnan found the cow in the same position as he had left it. He patted the envelope and said to the cow, "Come on, baby, you're gonna have a slice of real life."

He opened the envelope and fished out two chilies. One green. One red.

Mammucka's murmur rang in his ears, "The green chili should do the trick. Break it into two. Squeeze the tips with your fingers. Stuff the chili up its anus. It should move like it's on fire. The red chili is just an extra precaution, in case the green one doesn't work. But that won't be the case; the green one should spice things up fast enough."

The cow did not pay any attention to Krishnan's hand approaching its hindquarters. It looked him in the eye, scowling, as if it might bellow, "Turn my tail three-hundred sixty degrees around if you want, and still I

won't give up!"

In the next second, as the chili pieces were taken in, the cow gave out a loud moo and bolted. A cloud of dust rose from where the cow kicked its hooves in its frantic thrust forward, blocking his view for a moment. When his vision cleared, a trail of dust running up the road was all he saw.

Krishnan's heart sank. How could he ever catch up? If he failed to deliver for the second consecutive day, his business was finished.

Suddenly an idea sparkled in his brain. The red chili! Krishnan broke the red chili, gave its ends a squeeze with his thumb and forefinger. With the bravado of a true cowboy, he unzipped his jeans and pulled them down.

Krishnan shot forward even as his fingers approached his rear.

« »

Stories raced around town of a cow that bolted like an arrow and a man who caught up with it speeding like a bullet. Krishnan delivered in time and stayed in business. The cow never again demonstrated an unwillingness to move. Nevertheless, the milkman carried two chilies with him always, a green one and a red one. Just in case.

The Serpentine Jasmine of the Cursed

By

Hareendran Kallinkeel

"Kanyakakku sarpa dosham kanunnu," the astrologer passed his verdict.

The maiden had the curse of serpents.

Malini sat, allowed the impact of the seer's words to sink in.

Oh! The dusky skin on her thighs, the pale-brown hair on them. The slithery movement of the snakes tickled. Sometimes her hairs got tangled on their rough scales.

When she slept, they glided in sleek dancing motion between the threads of her dreams. Sometimes the cold touch of their forked tongues woke her to reality.

When she bathed, they snaked out from the shower, pounced on her in thin streaks, and dazzled her breasts with cold shivers. Sometimes they released a trickle of warmth between her legs.

They played along, all the while, just to slap her with curses?

No, the seer was wrong. Somewhere in the intricacies in calculating the position of planets, he had faltered.

She remembered the jasmine garlands. Small, white jasmines stacked in long coils. White serpents. Fragrant reptiles.

During the night, their heady smell wafting down from upstairs lulled her to sleep. In the mornings she saw them in the dustbins that the maids brought from upstairs. Their brightness dead. Their fragrance smothered. Brown stains encroached upon their white pallor.

It was those flowers that cursed her. Not the serpents. No. Not those lovely, lively creatures.

"Aren't you listening?"

An old fang pierced; her eardrums ruptured. It hurt. "Huh?"

The baldhead came into focus. Grey eyes behind the lenses magnified.

The tips of the white moustache quivered.

"Yes, daddy. I am..."

"There is a hitch in her marriage. Something unpleasant is to occur on her marriage night. She must do the Naga Puja in the Sarpakkavu, the temple of the snakes, for forty days to overcome this curse," the astrologer said.

The grey stubs became more visible on the chubby cheeks as betel leaves and areca nut grinded between the jaws. The gold rings on daddy's ears jumped as the bald head nodded in assent. "Carry on..." he said.

"This, her nineteenth year, is a crucial age. The stars say this stage determines the direction of her life. So the rituals are very important," the astrologer offered.

"But..." Malini stopped as she began. The cold wave of a look from her father froze her to silence.

The astrologer resumed, "The stars indicate marriage before twenty. But we will have to remove the Sarpa Dosham , the curse of the serpents, with prayers and offerings to the Naga Raja, the King of the Snakes."

"What else do the stars say?" The father asked.

"Everything will be fine. Just take care of the rituals. That will avert any mishap on her wedding night." The astrologer concluded.

He gathered his kavadi, small shells used in calculating the position of the

stars, put them in a cloth bag and tied a lace around it.

Raman counted out four five-hundred rupee notes and handed them over to the astrologer. Malini saw an eager smile light up his face as the astrologer accepted the notes. It should be ten times of what he received from an ordinary customer.

Her father tried to get her destiny weighed with willing accuracy.

The astrologer left. Raman spat out a lump of betel leaves and nuts onto the lawn. Narrow red lines appeared on the corners of his mouth. He wiped them with the back of his hand.

"You've started forgetting your manners. How often need I tell you not to interfere when men talk?"

Her father referred to her protest when the astrologer spread the shells of her destiny.

"I'm sorry, dad," Malini said.

'Oh! The wretchedness that seeps down my legs,' she thought.

"Tell me now. What did you want to say?" Her father asked.

"My studies...I won't be able to adhere to the requirements of those elaborate rituals. It'll disrupt my studies."

"To hell with your studies. Destiny matters. Now is your time for marriage; not after your hair turns grey."

"Dad, I'm only nineteen. Can't we wait till I graduate?"

"Bullshit. Remember, you have a dent in your destiny. You have to mend it. And what should you study for? You don't need a job to support yourself." Raman spat out the remainder of beetle and nuts.

Malini stood up. The wretchedness now flowed down her legs. She started for the bathroom.

"I have amassed enough wealth for generations." Raman called after her.

'And more sins than the generations could ever hope to seek penance for.' Malini thought as she slid behind the bathroom doors.

###

The stench of scotch arrived first. The male scent of her brother.

His tall figure loomed over her table; the shadow covered the monitor.

"You'll spend the rest of your life painting these stupid pictures on this screen. Why can't you do something worthwhile?" Ravi asked.

Perspiration struggled to break loose on her skin. Malini willed them back.

She did not want her brother to smell her female scent.

"I just don't understand why you are so indifferent," her brother said.

"I am sorry. I will try to mend." Malini replied.

"I doubt it. Well, tell the maids to keep ready all the four bedrooms upstairs. The houseboats and outhouses are full today. I have more tourists than I can handle."

Ravi left. The male scent remained.

Backwaters flooded with boats. Boats overloaded with foreign tourists. More tourists to flood the bedrooms upstairs. More jasmines than the maids could handle.

White jasmines illuminated the dark void around her. Her father stood there, his shadow spread a black cover over the brightness of the jasmines. Her brother approached, his shadow swallowed her father's shadow.

Her father raised his arm and patted his son on the shoulder, "Well done, my boy. You'll keep adding to my empire. You are a fine boatman who knows how to move his oars. You are a fisherman who knows where to lay the baits and when to lay them. You know how to haul the catch."

The shadow of her brother loomed larger and larger as the jasmines whimpered. The shadow moved closer to her, poised to sweep over.

The cold touch of a forked tongue woke her up from her reverie. It licked its way down her legs.

As it slid further down, she felt its warmth.

She moved. She must take care of things. She should hurry.

###

Malini heard steps on the staircase. Rapid. Heavy.

The smell of jasmines, coiled around her hair, braided in long curls, propelled her forth as Malini stepped out of the bathroom.

She walked through the bedroom and out of its door. Stunned whistles of appreciation followed her.

She stepped into the next bedroom. Shocked emission of choked breath erupted as a girl withdrew her head from Raman's lap, in answer to Malini's footsteps.

Heads turned, limbs ceased movement, as Malini treaded the third bedroom.

Amidst the suffocating male odors in the fourth bedroom, the male smell of Ravi was distinct. She stepped in, the impression of her feet silent on the floor.

Malini went straight to the dressing table. She stood for a moment in front of a portrait, eyes closed in prayer.

"Mom, why didn't you let them know your eyes were open, you could see?"

Her question cut through the sounds of passion.

Ravi stopped pumping.

Feet, soft as cotton pads, clamored the floor as the girls ran for their clothes. Girls with jasmine garlands coiled around their braids.

The scent of jasmines that churned out lust. Jasmines that brides wore on

their hair on their first nights.

Rough hands pulled up trousers heaped around their feet as the tourists heard her.

Malini didn't bother to count the numbers.

She walked straight to her brother. "My body is still young. Sell it like you sell the others."

Ravi closed his eyes against the fierce glow of his sister's naked skin. His hands shot up covering his ears.

Malini stepped closer. She wrenched his hands away from his ears.

Serpents hissed. Their shining bodies wriggled in the heat of excitement. Malini felt the perspiration break loose on her glistening skin.

"Those girls you sell to these tourists are also someone's sisters. Someone's daughters."

Malini saw her brother choke. Her shadow swallowed him.

As the girls ran out of the door, Malini realized that the room filled with a suffocating haze.

Oh! Her feminine odor.

The trickle between her legs had stopped.

§ § §

Tank

By

Graham Hayward

She was one of two sisters of mine. She was physically strong, graceful, and dedicated to gymnastics. Out of four children, I was sure she would be the most successful. She had such discipline and drive. Her name was Clara.

She built a high jump in the back yard. It was made from branches that had fallen from the old silver beech tree. She dove and tumbled over that high-jump until the dark came, and then, she'd dive some more.

Clara saved her Halloween candy until it became stale, she was sensible, she didn't eat it all at once like me.

We lived in a suburb outside of Philadelphia. We were upper middle class I'd say, my father earned a good living in the city. We lived in a nice house; we had two cars and plenty of food and furniture.

I never did well in school, I day-dreamed a lot about girls; I wasted the tips of my pencils drawing pictures of naked women in a note book. I

envied Clara and her passion for discipline. It came easy for her, like the mighty flow of a river, it was just nature taking its course, there was nothing forced about it. I wanted that for my self but I just didn't have it. Those written directions that come with your life, Clara was born with them, I had to stand on the edge and wait for that river to bring them to me, and all that just takes time.

Clara worked at her gymnastics tirelessly. She got better and more refined; she always defeated her competition. No one trained like her. She got good grades in school. After she finished tumbling in the soft Bermuda grass, she'd leave the back yard and hit the books with the same vengeance. Clara never let up.

She found a pipe and some pot of mine one day. She replaced the pot with oregano. Clara hated drugs. Later that day, I shared some of my stash with a couple of pot-head friends of mine. The smoke tasted like pizza, and I vowed to kick the ass of the dealer who'd ripped me off. Clara came to me later and told me about the oregano, she had tears in her eyes. She asked me: "Please stop smoking pot." I knew Clara was very serious, I told her I'd stop and I did. Her words were doled out sparingly, with meaning, precisely; there was no excess like the rants from parents.

Clara studied, and I flunked every course at school with the exception of gym and art class. Clara scored high grades with ease. She tumbled and carved her way through floor exercises with supple loveliness. She had

friends that earned their places by her side; she was the center of their kid universes. They hung on to what she had to say, she walked the walk and they all knew it. She presided over meetings about whose basement would host the next sleepover, or, who would be chosen to ring the Funkwaller's doorbell for the one-thousandth time. In the fall she'd rake the leaves from the browning grass, keeping her practice area clear. My father would watch her from the living room on the weekends, cocktail in hand, marveling at the work ethic his daughter possessed. He would say things like:

“I wished I had sales people with a tenth of her drive.”

Looking at me looking at him, he would just shake his head and say, “why'd he give it all to one kid.” I guessed the “he” he was talking about was “God.”

One of my friends called her a “tank.” It was on a fall day after school, and we were trudging through the wet leaves strewn across the playground. There were ten or twelve of us, all kids from the neighborhood, just shuffling along in relative silence.

“Clara is just like a tank, she never stops,” he said, and then he laughed and kicked at the leaves. He had a big mouth, his name was Marky.

Clara put her blue note book down in the leaves. We all stopped and

laughed. She had the look of concentration on her face, usually reserved for competition. She wore a short plaid skirt, patent leather shoes, and a yellow sweater, hand knit by my grandmother.

Clara stood still, and then raised both arms to the gray sky. She did a cart wheel and ended up standing in front of Marky. She punched him solid in the mouth, and his books exploded to the ground along with Marky. One of Marky's eye-teeth poked through his upper lip, and blood began to surround his other teeth. He had a strange smile on his face as he lay sprawled amid his paper work. More blood came to his mouth as Clara gathered her single blue note book from the damp ground. She carefully peeled a single red maple leaf from its cover.

"I don't think you'll ever call me a tank again," said Clara, and that's when I knew she'd be someone important.

That night, we went to the junior high school to listen to the Valley Forge military glee club. I looked over at Clara as she rubbed her right hand, the one she'd used to knock my friend Marky on his ass. My parents sat and smiled as the glee club sang: "God Bless America." I was in simple awe of my sister Clara, and her right-cross.

I went through school and finally graduated. I started a successful business of my own and Clara would often call to tell me how proud of me she was. It felt strange to hear that coming from her. Good wishes from her had to

be earned, like a trophy in competition, but at the same time, I felt that maybe she was asking for help.

She kept running and tumbling but Clara could not hold down a job. It was as though she got stuck in kid's world, her life bound to one phase. The tournaments came to a close; her friends went off to school or got married. The spot in the back yard was overtaken by wild ivy, and the Funkwallers died. My brother moved to a different state, as did my other sister, Ally. Clara went away to college, but you could tell by the way she talked; she was somehow losing her grip.

Clara had gotten a full athletic scholarship and been in training for the Boston marathon. I had heard she had been seeing quite a few guys at school, she liked them for casual sex but she really didn't care about them. She called me one Friday night. She told me she'd run until her feet bled, and she was running so she could "feel." I asked her what she had meant by that, and she told me she couldn't feel anymore. She felt like she was outside of herself. Clara had lost control of her mind, it made her lifeless.

God had played a cruel trick on my parents I thought.

That was the beginning of her end. She was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Clara could not fight this misfortune. My mother cried and searched for answers because that's what mothers do. Clara was her child. My father had the discipline to accept it as fate. Clara lives in a home now

with others like her, at night, she sits by a window and counts the stars. She's still a fighter, but she fights the wrong things. She won't take her medication and she hates the police. She bit a cop once as five of them wrestled her to a gurney; they lashed her down and slammed the ambulance door behind her. That was the last time she was home. She's taken on the world because she can't live in it.

I wondered about all her training, the gymnastics, the grace, her fearlessness, her willingness to attack. Then, one day I understood. She put it all out there ahead of time; she took all her chances early, Clara didn't wait, she bit deep and held on. Moreover, I understand that in real life, there is never a sure thing, just the stars, and time, and remembering my stolen sister.

Under the Gumbo Limbos

By

Graham Hayward

“Why not?” he said, and grinned.

“Because,” said Naya, and she felt gooseflesh beneath her muslin top.

“I pay twice as much for a nude shoot.”

And then he mumbled something under his breath as he pulled the back of his camera open. Naya felt like a fool for disappointing him. She was flattered and she knew someone else would ask eventually. After all, wasn't she a professional model?

“Don't worry about it. I should keep my mouth shut sometimes,” he said, and he laughed a nervous little laugh. Naya considered, holding her breath for just a second.

The studio was hot under the lights. He walked into the tiny kitchen.

This extra cash would pay her rent for the next two months.

“You wanna smoke a joint?” he yelled from the other room.

She didn't. She listened to him going through the refrigerator.

"I think I'll do it," Naya said, and she felt her heart race, she felt brave and excited all at once.

"Smoke?" he asked as he stepped back into the studio.

"Nude," said Naya. "Do you have a beer?"

"Hey it's not a big deal Naya, I mean, you don't have to."

"I know, but I might need a beer or two to loosen up."

She studied his eyes for a moment, and then smiled.

She could do this. She had been coming here for a week now, it's not like he was a complete stranger. But up until now, everything had been so business-like. This was the first time they ever worked in the studio, and at night

He smoked a joint and arranged the set. Naya ambled around the studio drinking her beer and getting comfortable.

They made small talk. His name was Olen Cleary, and he was forty-one, divorced, no kids. Naya actually thought she might have some fun with him, after all, she was twenty, and guys his age hit on her all the time.

She drank four beers.

He giggled often to himself, and she took full advantage of his tedious setup. She browsed composite cards of other models strewn across his desk. She thought they looked older and smarter than she.

Quitting high school and moving to Florida wasn't as easy as she had imagined. Naya had been a waitress at a "Waffle House" for the last three and a half-year. She imagined so much more for herself down here in the land of flowers.

"I'm just about ready," he mumbled.

"Me too," said Naya, slurring just a bit. She felt bold and in control, she knew it was difficult for him to keep his eyes off her, it made her giggle and he looked up at her.

"Uh, you can change behind the scrim in the corner." He motioned with his head as he fastened a camera to the tripod

"I don't need the scrim. I'm a professional."

She unbuttoned her top and dropped it to the floor. She wasn't wearing a bra and the sudden flush of air made her nipples twist and tighten. Her heart remained balanced and she commanded the moment. Olen looked hesitantly in her direction. She stood just a few feet from him.

"I wanna do a few test shots to gauge my lighting," he said, and he seemed oddly consumed, workman-like.

She peeled her shorts off and stood in her underwear.

“Stand by the wall on the mark,” he ordered.

Naya stepped from her panties and dropped them to the tiny pile on the floor. There was a cross made of gaffer’s tape on the floor beneath the lights. She was doing this, and she felt proud of herself, attractive in her nakedness, in the sway of her breasts as she moved.

She walked across the studio and he began taking pictures with the Polaroid.

One after the other, the camera motor whirred and churned out little square photos that fell to the floor.

She thought it odd he hadn’t waited for her to hit the mark.

“Ok.”

She still had not reached the mark.

“Okay Naya, let’s get this right.”

Naya felt uncomfortable, she remembered the Xacto knife on the desk and wondered why its picture had made its way into her head. He picked up the Nikon and stalked her.

"I don't think I'll do this," she said, and wondered why.

He dropped to his knees, aiming the camera and shooting up at her. The flashes from the big umbrellas were harsh and bright.

He stood.

“Lay down.”

She would finish this and leave. She knelt down on the hard brown linoleum.

“On your back,” he screamed, and she shuddered.

“I’m sorry, this isn’t right,” said Naya. She felt like running, but why?

She felt nauseas and cold, stupid for being so exposed. Her mind began to clear and suddenly, Naya knew this was as wrong as it could be.

“I’m paying; I say what’s right.”

His red eyes looked right through her.

And then he calmly put the camera down on the desk, he kissed his knuckles, and then punched her in the mouth.

Dark.

She drifted off to a place in her mind, eating ice cream in her grandmother’s kitchen. The sun shone brightly through the white lace curtains, and the spoon in her hand looked as big as a shovel. The vanilla

ice cream rose up and down like a great white ocean and her stomach felt hot and upset. Her grandmother was off in a corner crying into her flowered apron, and Naya could not make herself rise from the chair, the bowl and spoon were much too big and heavy. The table growled at her like a chained dog, it grew fur, dark and black, and it held her there.

Her eyes opened.

Olen Cleary's hips were pummeling her. He was inside of her, and his head was wedged beneath her throat.

She swirled into unconsciousness and drifted.

Naya bit the top of Olen's head, her teeth slid along his skull, hair and skin piled into her mouth. She tasted the iron in his blood.

He screamed and hit her again.

She felt insulated from the pain; she was on her feet too—running to the knife.

He jumped on her back as she reached the desk.

She grasped the handle of the scalpel-sharp instrument and rolled onto her back.

Blood, warm and rampant rained into her eyes and over her naked body. He fell away, wide eyed, hands at his neck. She saw the blood rush from between those kissed knuckles in a feral spray.

Naya could hear strange, hoarse breath, creaking through the gape in his neck. Freakishly, he dropped to his hands and knees as if looking for something, crawling and bleeding, his eyes looking like tiny black peach pits. Then he stopped. He was trying to stand.

She ran to the studio door, and then out to the dark. Naya ran through the night, naked and bloody. She couldn't find her voice.

The shiny darkness on her face and breasts grew cool and sticky as she had entered the canopy cover of trees. She was breathing in short, choppy breaths; her heart a ripping terror beat.

It was his blood, she knew, from his throat, and she dropped the razor knife in the crunching leaves as she stopped and listened. Her front teeth were loose, the ones her grandmother had told her to brush, the pretty ones.

The Gumbo Limbos rustled atop their muscular trunks and Naya stood still in the dark.

Listening.

She wished her breathing would quiet, and her heart could find the pace of

calm it had before he attacked. She smelled the iron of his blood, and felt the pound of his rape between her quivering legs.

The blood was darker than the dark, shiny and smelling, and Naya involuntarily urinated.

Olen Cleary's kills ended at seven, buried beneath the Gumbo Limbos, where Naya now stood, trembling.

And listening.

Another Metropolis

By

Edward Musto

"The thriller is dead."

Frederick hadn't intended his remark to be a springboard for discussion, but an announcement of a subject. He'd given it a good deal of thought and planned to speak at length about it.

"Now, dear," said his wife.

"Here he goes," said his best friend.

"Let's yawn now and get it over with," said his best friend's wife.

The get-together was a small one, just his wife Lucille and their best friends, Ira and Agatha. They were having cocktails before dinner. For some reason they all decided to dress for the occasion.

"No, that's not the way you do it, Agatha," his wife said. "You have to distract him. Hold up your empty glass and admonish him for neglecting

his duty as bartender."

Agatha held up her empty glass. "Frederick, my glass is empty," she teased. "You're neglecting your duty as bartender."

"Nice try," Frederick said, "but one *can* talk and tend bar at the same time." He moved to the bar and took out fresh glasses. "Succinctly put, the thriller is dead because of, oddly enough, our own evolution. From creatures relying on instinct, we've developed into rational, civilized beings that don't do *anything* without the *utmost* consideration. We weigh options, contemplate alternatives, surrender reflex to passionless, methodical scrutiny."

"Oh, come on, thrillers still get done," Lucille said.

Frederick was about to argue the point when he was distracted by Agatha holding up her empty glass.

"Stay right where you are now," she said. "I'd like another one of these, if you don't mind."

"Coming right up," Frederick said. "Dear, shall I freshen yours?"

Lucille looked up at him. She looked especially radiant this evening.

"Yes, please."

"What are these called again?" Agatha asked.

"It's called a metropolis." Frederick was pleased the new drink was going over well. They'd already had a few and he needed to brew up a new batch of what the bartender from whom he got the recipe described as "the magical, mystical drink of the new millennium." A made-to-order martini is what it actually was. New Year's Eve he and Lucille had gone into the town's most popular night spot. It was being served there. Frederick's memory was of many glamorous women wearing beautiful dresses, all of different colors—and all with matching martinis!

Ira expressed interest in the drink's recipe and Frederick was glad to share it with him. He took out the raspberry flavor vodka, the raspberry liqueur, poured then shook it all up with ice. To this he floated champagne. He garnished with a few berries. Just looking at the drink made Frederick feel refreshed.

There were other flavors: cranberry, pomegranate, orange, ginger. In fact, if he recalled correctly, there were sixty-one flavors in all.

"We are thankfully losing touch with that darker part of our nature," Frederick explained, "the one that acts on impulse and knows no moral code. Of course you pay a price for that."

"No more thrillers."

"That's right," Frederick said. "No more thrillers. Agatha, you look like you're ready for another drink."

"That's because I am," Agatha said, handing her glass to him. "He's very observant, your husband, isn't he?"

Ira downed his drink and poured another. "So being *desensitized* to murder means we're less likely to *commit* murder? Everyone knows it's the other way around."

"If we're desensitized to murder, aren't we *equally* desensitized to the passions that trigger it?"

Ira flashed him a self-assured smile. "Come on, Frederick, haven't you ever pictured yourself having snapped? Committing murder or some other act of savagery?"

"Absolutely not."

Frederick was not lying. He was a peaceful man, some thought timid, and could conceive of no situation that would shake his belief in the power of rational thought. Why, if people held no such belief, what would stop them from destroying themselves and those around them?

"Beware the man who denies his demons," Ira said smugly. He wondered if Frederick really was impervious to any type of provocation and, if not, what would set him off. "Tell me what you would do if I told you Lucille and I were having an affair. Would that provoke you?" It was a sensible question. Adultery brought out the worst feelings in men.

The question seemed uninspired, but Frederick took it with humor. "To uncontrollable laughter," he said.

Ira shot him a look of mock appreciation then continued to make his point. There was no telling what would trigger an otherwise respectable, law-abiding individual like Frederick to commit murder. It happened in the best of families and the sturdiest of friendships. One careless moment. "That's all it ever takes to destroy everything," Ira said. "Take an evening like tonight. Everyone is having a nice time. Perhaps you and Agatha are off in the other room, leaving Lucille and me alone. Perhaps Lucille loses her ear ring. Perhaps I bend down to help her look for it. Perhaps our eyes meet. Perhaps quite suddenly we're struck by impulse and find ourselves locked in an adulterous embrace."

Frederick stifled a laugh.

"My husband wouldn't be indifferent if I were having an affair with you, Frederick," Agatha said. "Would you, dear?"

"Darling, it if I ever caught you sneaking around, I'd *strangle* you."

"Thank you, dear."

Ira asked for another metropolis. Instead of dirtying another glass Frederick took the one in Ira's hand. "Would you really kill your wife for something like that?"

"Probably not."

"Because you're a rational man. There. I've exposed you."

"I'd kill *you*."

"Really."

"Well, you *or* her."

Ira's indecisiveness was a source of amusement to all of them. Would he murder Frederick or Agatha should the need come about? He didn't know. He just knew he'd spend days thinking about it. Weeks maybe. He imagined himself drawing up lists—one for Agatha, the other for Frederick—cataloguing what satisfaction he might derive from each death. Then naturally he'd have to come up with *how* he'd kill whichever one he chose.

"You'd kill no one, dear." This came from Agatha, a complacent grin on her face as she ground out her cigarette in the ashtray. "And why? Because you're a terrible procrastinator."

"I do not procrastinate," Ira said. "I just wait for the right moment to do things."

"Thereby enabling someone else to take a course of action and *you* to be the course acted upon."

"Oh, really? By whom?"

"Perhaps by me," Agatha said sweetly. "I can't *live* without you, Ira."

"She's *that* crazy about me."

Agatha's lightly ribbing tone gave way to one very matter-of-fact. "It's a matter of economics. You see, I'm not like Lucille. I'm not a modern woman with her own identity, her own career and her own money. I am a relic of a bygone womanhood. I'm well bred, but not well educated. I have work, but no career. Whatever money I have is what you dole out to me. I can't *live* without you, Ira."

"Unless, of course, she lives *without* you." Frederick couldn't help himself.

How true that statement was hadn't struck her till after she said it. Alimony was a pittance compared to life insurance, pension, veteran's benefits and Social Security.

"But why kill me?" Ira wanted to know. "As opposed to Lucille."

Agatha was ready for that one, however, and her answer was delivered with something little more than a sneer. "Let's face it, sweetheart. I can always fall in love again, but after a woman hits forty, it's just too hard to make new friends."

"So you'd really do it. Murder me in cold blood."

"You sound surprised."

The dry manner of Agatha's speech surprised even her. She explained that where his murder took place was more important than how, that it would have to be a place that carried with it some poetic justice. His favorite pastime was golf, so where better to bludgeon him than the fourth tee? Agatha explained her husband would know something was up, though he wouldn't be sure what.

"The smile you'd see me wearing would strike you as merely odd at first," she said. "But soon enough you would come to understand I had somehow found out that I'd been displaced in your affections—and that

retribution wasn't far away." It might be the cruel way with which she'd hold the 9-iron, Agatha explained, that would make Ira realize it was only a matter of minutes before his skull would pop the way coconuts do when they're cracked open and the liquid inside swishes about, spills out, matting everything down. Three strokes she figured would do the trick. Of course what did she know? She was just a housewife.

"Obviously you've given this some thought," Frederick said. Naturally they all laughed at this, but it did make Frederick wonder. Though it hardly seemed a worthwhile plan, since it didn't take into account anything beyond the momentary satisfaction a wife would receive from punishing her philandering husband, the situation itself seemed pondered, and it made him wonder if Agatha had reason to worry. He never assumed Ira was the type to step out on Agatha, whom he knew Ira loved unequivocally.

"That's awful, Agatha," Lucille said. "Taking a 9-iron to your husband like that. You'd be much better off using the pitching wedge."

Ira had a worried look on his face.

"Oh, not to worry, Ira," Lucille said reassuringly. "It would never come to that."

"Who's to say?"

Lucille arched her eyebrows. "Agatha, do you really think I'd let you murder the man I love?"

"I thought we were friends!"

"We are," Lucille said. "But be realistic. The situation, the hypothetical situation, is that your husband and I are having an affair and you've found us out. Ira wants to divorce you and marry me, but he can't bring himself to tell you. Now we all know how Ira is handling all this."

She did an amusing interpretation of Ira in the throes of indecision, taking off on him pacing the floors and smoking interminably, avoiding Agatha's gaze as he would the sun during an eclipse.

"Agatha, on the other hand," she continued, "is biding her time, plotting, murder so heavy in her eyes she has to dab at them with her hankie. I see I have to take matters into my own startlingly efficient hands."

"And what makes *your* hands so startlingly efficient?" Frederick hoped he sounded playful.

"I'm a businesswoman, Frederick," she said haughtily. "One doesn't get any more efficient than that. Whatever needs to be done I do on time, under budget, with a minimum amount of fuss."

"You're a caterer, Lucille, not a hit man for the Mafia."

She tossed Frederick a look as she raised her glass, and he wandered over to the bar to get another drink.

"Let's say I was to murder Agatha," Lucille said. "It would be a monument to simplicity and good taste. No guns. No knives. Nothing round her neck. No violence of any kind. In fact, no one would ever suspect she had even been murdered."

Lucille outlined what seemed a well-plotted scheme to get Agatha safely out of the way. Since food was her livelihood, it stood to reason food would play a role in Agatha's demise. Lucille imagined a mid-afternoon, just-the-girls lunch of wine spritzers and salads. "Except yours contains a handful of *fly agaric* mushrooms," she said sweetly. "They're illegal, you know, because of the deep sleep they invoke twenty minutes after ingestion."

Lucille took one of Agatha's cigarettes, which Agatha lit for her, then went on to reveal the details under which Agatha's dead body would be discovered—in the kitchen, on the floor, a dampened mop and a bucket of cleaning fluid, inordinately heavy with ammonia and bleach, next to her. It would be surmised that the fumes from this deadly combination of ingredients had inadvertently caused her to pass out and asphyxiate.

"Naturally there would be an autopsy," Lucille said. "But what would that show? You've digested the evidence! And even if you haven't, all they'd

see is what's left of a garden salad including some *non-poisonous* mushrooms!"

Ira thought this an excellent plan and said so. Even Agatha declared how much in awe she was over how well Lucille had thought it all out. Frederick, on the other hand, was not impressed. Though he wished he could take this in the light-hearted spirit in which it was conveyed, he was disturbed by his wife's jest over such things. He never understood the appeal of badinage, especially since it almost always involved the participants remaining nonplused over the most unsavory of subjects.

"There is, however, a flaw." This was from Ira, who stood at the bar pouring himself another metropolis. "What makes you think I'd want to get married?"

"How can you say such a thing?" Lucille cried out. Frederick couldn't tell if there was a mocking tone in her voice or not. He sincerely hoped it was there. He didn't want to think what it meant if it was absent.

"Even if you loved me?"

"Must we drag *love* into it?"

"You, sir, are a cade!" She was laughing while she poured herself another drink and freshened Ira's and Agatha's. Frederick too got caught up in the

merriment until he wondered if the laughter was a ruse to camouflage some sordid goings-on.

"If I were so dissatisfied with one wife, what makes you think I'd be in the market for another?" Ira asked. "Then again I might be quite happy with my present wife and all I'd wanted was something amusing on the side. Did that ever occur to you? Oh, I can see it didn't. I never would have pegged you for the gullible type, Lucille. But then it's always the sensible, serious women who fall for the wrong men, isn't it? Your killing Agatha to be with me is set on the premise I want Agatha out of the way and what if I don't?"

Now it was Ira who had the floor. He lit a cigarette and smugly turned to lecture his best friend's wife. "Whoever murdered my wife, even if it turned out to be my mistress, would become the object of my hatred—and my vengeance. And this time I would not procrastinate."

"Would you hire someone to bump me off, dear?" Agatha asked. "Or would you do it yourself? The first option lets you establish an alibi."

"But then he opens himself up to blackmail," Lucille said, helpfully. How could they joke about this? It was obvious they'd skirted far beyond the boundaries of cocktail talk. So this left them where? *Perhaps this was all true!* Perhaps everyone but Frederick was privy to this adulterous affair now playing itself out in front of him under the guise of kidding around. Frederick poured himself another metropolis, the last of the batch

he'd just made, and listened intently to Ira rambling on about how he'd kill Lucille.

"If there's blood on your hands, there should *be* blood on your hands, shouldn't there?" His tone was of mock-innocence. "I would strike at the first opportune moment, which most likely would be Frederick's annual convention. It would go down something like this. I arrange for our children to have a big pajama party at the house. I pop in a video for the kids. *The Parent Trap* or whatever. After a while I excuse myself for a bathroom break, but I slip next door for what Lucille assumes is an abridged version of our usual fun-and-games. In my pocket is one of Agatha's scarves with two knots tied in it. Lucille offers to fetch me a drink, but she never makes it to the bar. Just as she turns her back to me, I throw the scarf around her neck and tighten it with every ounce of strength he have. It's pretty pedestrian stuff as far as strangulations go—the usual gasping, eye-bulging, flailing, and so on. Quickly then I make the room look as if a burglary had been in progress and was interrupted. All this would take minutes to accomplish, so when I return to the house, to the children I love and who will unwittingly serve as my alibi, I feel pretty certain both justice and I have been served."

There was much laughter now, but none of it came from Frederick, who gripped his glass so tightly that it broke in his hand. It made a loud noise, startling everyone.

"Funny, isn't it?" Frederick's voice cracked. "You've proved my point and I've proved yours! Crimes of passion! Involuntary acts! Yet everything I've heard has been an act of pre-meditation! Every single one! Let me tell you something. The kind of passion we were talking about, the kind that triggers a crime like murder, isn't something you carry out. *It's something that carries you!* It has its own steam, its own power and you're just along for the ride! One careless moment is all it takes. You're quite right about that. It snowballs just like you said; it rolls down, heading for us, gathering up deceit after deceit, rancor after rancor, murder after murder, getting bigger and bigger, till it finally strikes, scattering wives, lives, children, friends, certainties, expectations and every dream you ever had!"

What a sad, somber moment it was for Frederick to discover it was he who harbored the darkness he thought had been eradicated, that he was, in fact, the one whose rational faculties had turned to mush.

"Every twist in the story you just spun—from the impulsive, furtive kiss to the scarf round my wife's neck—brought me closer to a reality I can't bear to think about! I can see in a flash the events that would unfold if such a thing ever happened, what we'd do to one another and the monstrous way it would end!"

Despite whatever precautions Ira took, Frederick would know if his wife were seeing another man. He knew this sort of thing happened to married couples every now and then and he could accept it, he thought, if he had

to...and would *do* so for the sake of his home. But if Ira were to *kill* his wife? That would be too much. Too much to bear. Too much to forgive. He'd snap. He knew he would.

"The day that happened I would wait until dark and then descend the stairs," Frederick explained, his eyes focusing on something off in the distance. "Night watch one last time."

He pictured himself sitting at the kitchen table and considering what to do. This is something he did every once in a while, usually when he couldn't sleep, and the sights and sounds of a sleeping house comforted him: the furnace off, the icebox on, night lights reflected on the countertops, the modest noises of the house settling; these symbols of order, now empty, meaningless, hurtful.

"Something inside me would snap," he said. "Just snap, like the—the mousetrap you set behind the fridge and had forgotten about. It's made you jump, but it's what comes *afterwards* that keeps gnawing away at you; the struggle of trying to get free, the *end* of the fight once it comes, and finally what death looks like, feels like, *smells* like and how to dispose of it properly. Decay has set in, here's the proof, it's in your hands, and suddenly you realize everyone is breathing in the stench. Death is no longer inevitable *but already here!*"

He felt light-headed and thought perhaps he'd had one drink too many. Yet

his voice was rational, calm, almost soothing.

“I go for the gun I keep in the study,” he said. “I load it. Six bullets: one for each of us. I remain in my pajamas, robe and slippers. I go out the front door and cross our lawns to your house. I unlock the front door and go in. Your house has the same feel mine does. They're houses without women, homes belonging to lost children and displaced men. At the top of the stairs I turn right and go down the corridor, past the maid's quarters, past Veronica's room, till I come to your bedroom. The door is ajar. I hear your even breathing. My footsteps make the wooden floors creak. You wake up. Your mouth is open, though no sound comes out. You taste the gun barrel. I squeeze the trigger, but I don't hear the explosion, just the gurgling noise of blood staining the linen. Then suddenly there is screaming coming from down the hall. In the next room little Veronica is sitting up in bed. Tears stream down her face. And again I pull the trigger. Someone's on the stairs. I go out onto the landing and spot the maid running for help, but I gun her down just as she gets to the front door. Now there's this loud siren coming from somewhere and it's getting louder and I know I must get home before they catch me! I shoot out the back door, tear through the garden and slip in through the patio doors. Next door I hear cars screeching to a stop. Upstairs both my boys are asleep. They do not stir and I only hope the dreams they're having are pleasant ones, and maybe they won't even hear, be aware of, the gun as it goes off—twice. Never in my life have I heard such screaming! I cover my ears, but it reverberates in my head! *I know it's me screaming, but I can't help it!* It is triumph and agony both, as if

whatever god rules this metropolis has joined me to exalt this madness and loss! Outside I am studied by the prying eyes of neighbors and police, and then I decide yes, there before the eyes of all, I shall end this. A great tranquility filters down through all the sobbing, shrieking and sirens, and summons me to use this instrument once more, which I do in an act that is wise, kind—and final.” He had an imaginary gun to his temple and, after a moment, squeezed the trigger.

"Darling, what's wrong?" said his wife.

"If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were taking all this to heart," said his best friend.

"He can't possibly believe we were serious!" said his best friend's wife.

Frederick recomposed himself then apologized for his outburst. He assured everyone he was fine and they all breathed a sigh of relief. His hand was bleeding from the broken glass and Agatha asked Lucille where she kept the peroxide. Frederick wanted to clean up the mess he'd made, but Lucille said she would take care of it. Ira helped her, carefully putting the shards of glass in an ashtray.

"Sorry, everyone," Frederick said. "I don't know what got into me."

"Come on, Frederick," Agatha said. "We'll bandage you up, get this mess

cleaned up, and then we'll all have a nice dinner. And afterwards we'll watch television. They're running an old movie tonight. I think it's a *thriller!*"

On their hands and knees, Lucille and Ira finished cleaning up. There was an awkward silence as they waited for their spouses to return. But their eyes met. Then suddenly, impulsively, they found themselves locked in an adulterous embrace.

The Man and his Wife

By

M. Stefan Strozier

The man looked at his wife. She sat at their dining room table, writing a letter. Her head was bent down close to the paper and she was lost deep in what she was doing. He always wondered about her. The man was reading a book on the sofa. It was fairly peaceful in the house tonight; they had eaten dinner and so far, no fight. The lamps in the living room were on and the traffic on the street was going by in its usual monotony. The book he was trying to read was not that interesting, so he followed along in the pages with his eyes and let his thoughts drift a little about his wife.

Then the man's wife turned into a giant, black spider. She was the kind of spider with a big body and fuzzy edges. The creature had eight limbs instead of four and the spider suddenly turned and stared straight at him with evil, beady eyes. Bug eyes. He jumped back from the book he had been skimming. Now, the huge spider flew out of the chair, straight up the wall on its eight legs, to the corner. It turned around and paused there, staring back, piercingly, into his soul.

The man threw his book into the air, ran from the couch to the kitchen, and grabbed a large cutting knife from a drawer to defend himself with against the spider on the ceiling, staring back at him with several sets of eyes.

He held the knife with both hands, trembling from fear that shook his whole body. Then he clutched the knife blade with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, reached back over his shoulder with it, and hurled the knife at the spider, all the way across the dining room. The knife spun over as it sailed, carried by its momentum. It was a fine throw. But the spider was just too quick, and it darted out of the way. As the giant black spider scurried to another corner of the ceiling, it kept its head pointed at him the whole time, with those tiny, circular bug eyes, crawling into his mind.

He felt his blood curl and his skin crawl. Suddenly, out from nowhere, the spider started jumping around the room in a circle, ensnaring him with a web that was now coming from its web sack at its rear end. He tried to make it to the door, but he could not, for the thick line of web quickly wrapped around his chest and the thighs of his legs. Soon the webbing covered his whole body and held him tight. To his horror, he could not move at all! A couple of more times around for protection, and now he was tightly trapped inside of her web.

The giant black spider slowly crawled up to him, over her huge net that filled the room, as he gagged for breath. Then the spider reached up and cut open a hole in her web for his mouth with a precision slice from one of her long, atrocious, insectivorous black legs, still staring at him with those maddening sets of eyes. He gasped with terror for air through the tiny hole in her web, nearly insane from his fear.

Then the evil, black spider spoke to him in a low, slow hiss! “You need to take out the garbage before you go to bed.”

“Aaahhh!”

“Did you hear me? Take out the garbage before you go to bed.”

The man looked up at her from his book, lying open in his lap, for what seemed an eternity. His wife was still sitting at the table, her pen and paper down now, and she was looking over at him.

“All right. Sure. But then I am going to bed.”

She looked back down at the letter resting on the table, and picked it up again with one hand, stealthily. He got up and went to the kitchen to get the garbage. As he walked back by her with the garbage, she looked up at him. He looked back, nervously, and her eyes seemed a little more narrow than usual.

Taming an Old Friend

By

Hareendran Kallinkeel & M. Stefan Strozier

My friend calls as usual, when daylight begins to fade, his voice mellow, yet the command firm. *“Let’s begin.”*

His voice is so alluring. He knows my weaknesses, all of them. He knows them backwards and forwards; he even knows my methods of resistance; and, he has ways to fight those, too.

I call home to warn my wife of another late return. She listens to me, meek as always. After a moment’s silence, I hear her soft voice. “Why don’t you make it a standing instruction?” Her sigh erupts through the receiver like a wind’s swoosh. “You’ll save on official phone bills.” A pause, a click, and she cuts me off the line.

The sinking sun brightens the edges of rain-clouds with a pale orange hue, as I watch from behind curtains that rustle in a breeze. Her voice has sounded like the note of an overwrought guitar string.

I wonder why she doesn’t flare up. Maybe, she is emulating the proverbial patience of women that is compared to mother earth’s power to endure. Or

is her ability to sustain the loneliness slowly turning into resignation? Has she been stressed out waiting alone for my return, through long days and longer nights, all these years? “Maybe, I must ignore his invitation today,” I mumble to myself, taking in the cold spring air, and prepare to leave.

The cool air pieces my lungs. I force it into my lungs, feeling the pin pricks of my damaged body. It is this steady healing of my body I rely on to keep me going. It is all I have to resist; but it never seems to be enough. Time: that is my other weapon. Right now, however, I have plenty of time. There’s no need to rush. I can relax and kick back, with no repercussions.

A gust blasts through the window, sweeping the satin curtains back. The chill it carries spikes through my skin.

He calls again, impatient, his voice now harsh like the gurgling of rainwater in a storm-drain. He is so unlike her, never allowing me an opportunity to contemplate. Keen to be with me, eager to take control, and always diluting my determination.

I light a cigarette and take deep drags. The cold breeze still leaves me shivering. I place my hands on the desk and watch my fingers twitch. It is not the frozen air, I know. My body is acknowledging its submissiveness to his absolute control.

“We’re late, friend.” His whisper resonates in my ears.

“Yes... I know,” I mutter. “Late for home, late for you... Late for us.”

Rain sprinkles inside my cubicle through the open window; the wind picks up speed and whistles along the streets, sweeping sodden leaves and soaked papers. I suffocate in the smell of sodden earth.

“Can you ignore me just like that, friend?”

I wish I could say that I am not his friend; but it is not true. He is my greatest friend. He is the only friend I can count on: he is always there, by my side. In my darkest days, he is there to comfort me. I owe him for that kind of friendship. I am indebted to him. I wish I could be released from this debt.

“Stop it,” I retort. The effort leaves lungs yearning for a heave of air. My mouth feels dry, and the aridness spreads throughout my body, clutching at my muscles. A buzzing sensation hammers the insides of my head.

“You can’t desert me, friend.”

He knows there is no where I can run. He knows I am trapped; and, even in my most “free” state, I am still a slave. If I try and run, he will send the dogs to find me. There is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. His reach is beyond measure; it permeates all things that I am: my existence. I want peace. I want to be left alone. That is all that I want. Why can’t I have that? Why can’t I be left alone? Why must I be forced to answer him?

I straighten my fingers, bend and stretch them. The veins in my forearms swell taut beneath my pale skin.

“Stop torturing me,” I yell.

He quits pushing. My cubicle falls silent except for the faint hum of a ceiling fan. The rain stops. The breeze ceases. A crescent appears, clad in white bridal attire, illuminating the rain-drenched roads with a feeble light. A “pink cloud”? No. That is a stupid concept, for sober drunks. I am a real drunk.

I close the windows, lock the door and walk into the moonlit yard. Pain clutches at my stomach, gnaws through my intestines as I enter my car.

#

Rain seems to have driven people home early. The streets are deserted, except for stray pedestrians and occasional traffic that sways to steer clear of puddles of water. In the distance, the neon sign of a bar glistens.

A pang of terror clenches my heart like an iron-fisted glove. A million excuses run through my head. I can go in for just one drink. What’s so wrong or bad? The sign seems so alone, isolated, beckoning me to enter; to relieve my worries and torture. I don’t have to live like this, you know.

She may be waiting, not knowing how late I will be, [her] eyes cast on the driveway, hands clutched against her bosom. Tonight she will be happy; she deserves that.

“You know you can’t avoid me, can you friend?” He starts up again, in a rejuvenated bid to allure me. I slow down, and slide a peppermint mouth-freshener between my lips as I [drive in the direction of] the bar. The knot in my stomach tightens.

The cool of the mint gives me just an ounce of strength. An ounce is all I need, maybe. That might be just enough. I suck the mint between my teeth. I wish I had a cookie or something with sugar.

How will she deal with my pain, something that she never knew; and, something that I can’t explain her? Won’t it hurt her as much it does me? Yet, she’ll be happy, I suppose, to hold me and ruffle my hair. Just to have me with her early, and to smell only mint in my breath.

As my foot presses the accelerator, another car swerves past, and a guy in the rear seat leans out and hurls a bottle. I slam on the brake. The bottle hits the front side roof, and bursts, splashing the windshield with the frothing liquid.

“Son of a bitch!” I yell.

The car shoots forward; its taillights blur and then disappear into the darkness ahead.

“See, it’s a sign. You gotta come inside. Rethink your decision.” My friend’s voice booms in the night air, coaxing me.

The smell of beer invades my nostrils. The smell overwhelms me, it is so strong. I lick my lips, trying to get at the taste, hanging there, lingering. I can feel my mind even leech toward the smell, wanting to envelop it. But it is more than thoughts my mind careens toward; it is blood and marrow and soul, trying to absorb the alcohol into my thoughts, seep them into my brain. I heave in a sigh and shake my head. “No way!” I shift gears and move forward.

I slow down, lighting a cigarette as I approach a junction, and the lights turn red.

“You know you can’t avoid me, don’t you friend?” It’s obvious that I cannot. Why does he keep telling me this, then? If he knows, why not leave me alone about it? It is the taunting, the flaunting of power.

As the lights turn green, my foot presses the accelerator. At the next turn, I see red through a haze of gray. I look left, and then right. My grip on the wheel steadies. “Son of a bitch!” I shout into the damp night, and surge ahead.

“You skipped lights. You gotta come back to me!” I pass the bar. I can outrun him. I can keep going and not look back, that’s what I can do. I sneak a look in my rear-view mirror and watch the bar fade into the distance. It seems like a small victory; but I know it was one of the

hardest battles I've ever fought in my life. And, what are my rewards?
There seem to be no rewards; only more torture, just on the horizon.

I slam on the accelerator, jump another red light, and feel the heat.

"Wrong direction, pal..." The voice fades as I switch on the air conditioner and speed away.

#

Even in the unlit bedroom I see her lying prone on the bed, her lustrous hair, sprawled on the pillow, washed in the moonlight from an open window. I lean to kiss her. Lines of tears stain her cheek.

"Wake up, honey." I whisper into her ears, and kiss her.

She sits up startled, and then leans against my chest.

"It's adieu forever to my friend." As I caress her face, the sting of salt dazzles my lips. I mean it too, this time. I feel stronger than before, than yesterday. I think I can last now, almost on my own. I recognize that I still need help, however. Still, I have a foundation and it's sturdy. I know I can't get cocky, though.

"Aren't you...a bit late?" She makes an effort to hold her head straight.

"He visited me."

Her head wobbles on my shoulder, and I smell whisky on her breath.

He Knows Spring

By

Hareendran Kallinkeel

He knows spring
By the fragrance of flowers;
The chirping of birds.

She knows it
By colors exploding in gardens;
Blue sky cluttered with birds in flight.

He feels winter
Through his shrunken skin;
Pinpricks of chill that freeze
The flesh beneath.

She collects falling snow
In her palms,
Pieces of white cotton
Spill out of her hands.

Chaotic rustle of banyan leaves,
Swooshing of wind in foliages,
Warn him of approaching storms.

She takes cue from dancing shadows,
of fluttering leaves,
And films of dust
Veiling the distant horizon.

He realizes rain's ferocity
By its batter
Against windowpanes;
The gurgle of choking drains.

She experiences
The darkening sky,
Drops falling in slanted patterns;
The chocolate color of mud pools.

To him, a thunderbolt is
Rumbling that echoes
In his ears.

To her it is lightning
That splits through the sky and
Vibrates the earth beneath her feet.

He feels love by the
Warmth of her touch,
The smell of her sweat
And the sound of her breath.

She feels love by the
Smile on his face,

The quiver of his lips and,
The wetness of his tongue.

He never sees her smile,
But knows she does.
She never hears him call her name,
But knows it is his mantra.

They measure their love,
By the length of their togetherness,
The shortness of distance
That separates them.

He is blind, she is deaf
But that doesn't matter.
In togetherness
Each compensates the other's lacking.

Scream

By

M. Stefan Strozier

I hope we weather this storm
Weather the storm weather the storm
Whipping through the hollows
Screaming for recognition
In my heart
In my weary heart in my weary heart
And your tired eyes and your tired eyes
I can see in the storm
Searching like the wind
For harbor in my arms
I hope we weather this storm
You and
I

She Dreams in White

By

Graham Hayward

I drop my socks
and leave
a toilet seat up.
Let the door go
before she passes
and she dreams in white.

The first year
has passed
Our anniversary
with not a notice.
And she dreams in white.

We fight
She cries
I win at chess
forget her birthday
and she dreams in white.

She waits
and I am late.
Some of her favorite
I eat the rest.
And she dreams in white.

It rains
I sleep
sun shines
she wakes.
Another day
and she dreams in white.

She leaves

I am sorry
She begs
for me to go
my loss, and she is gone.

Someone honest
has won her heart.
Today she marries
she walks in white.

My sorrow
is for myself.
The damage is my own.

L'exilé

by

Parviz Lak

(A Lille, le 10 octobre 1989.)

La lune pleurait
Le soleil pleurait
Les amoureux de l'univers pleuraient
Quand de la galaxie des oiseaux amoureux
Je fus projeté dans ce pays
Ce pays où la couleur de la terre et des plantes
M'est étrangère

La lune est de pierre
Le soleil est de pierre
Le ciel est de pierre
Comme il est dur de vivre
Dans cette ville de pierre

Ici la main qui peut le plus
Est celle qui possède le plus

Les oiseaux immigrés
Leurs ailes déployées
Ne peuvent plus voler
Ils meurent
Au soleil levant
Et sont portés en terre
Au soleil couchant

Et moi,
Mes mains ont, à regret,
Enterré le plus fort d'entre eux
Dans ce pays
Au jardin de mes souvenirs

Un oiseau aux ailes blanches
Un oiseau au coeur jaune
Un oiseau aux yeux bleus

Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats

By

M. Stefan Strozier

(www.mstefanstrozier.org)

(First published in Skive Magazine (<http://www.skivemagazine.com/>))

Characters:

Sergeant John Brown

Specialist Michael Plansky

Specialist Jose Rodriguez

Private Thomas Johnson

Kara Brown, wife of John Brown

Dr. Ellsinore Zinn, John Brown's psychiatrist

Kerry, a homeless Vietnam veteran

Iraqi Soldier

The world premiere of *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats* was July 4th, 2005, at Where Eagles Dare Theater (347 West 36th Street, NYC), and Alan Kanevsky directed it. The artistic director was Jean-Claude Villaréal. The light and sound technician was Leck Dzie.

The cast:

Sergeant John Brown	Chris Sorensen
Kara Brown	Anita Anthonj
Dr. Ellsinore Zinn	Yza Shady
Specialist Michael Plansky	Joe Wissler
Specialist Jose Rodriguez	JohnpauL
Private Thomas Johnson	Diego Aguirre
Kerry	Joe Wissler
Iraqi Soldier	M. Stefan Strozier

Foreword

As director for *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*, I was given the unique opportunity of tackling some of the hot topics of our time, such as abortion, divorce, homelessness, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. A play, such as *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*, should allow the audience to decide which side is right or wrong, without undue influence, on the part of the director.

In choosing actors for this play, I set about finding strong actors with strong personalities. The finest actors will take a role and incorporate aspects of their own lives into the creation of the role. Although actors do pretend to be someone else, we never want to see pretentious actors on stage. Actors, who can lock onto the drives and wants of their characters, are the most successful. What part of John Brown is being fulfilled by each member of his team and his wife, and what part of him is being torn apart? The dynamics of these relationships are at the core of this play.

As a director, I try to have the play work around each actor. Actors bring to the table a specific set of skills and unique dynamics. To attempt to pigeonhole an actor into fulfilling some predisposed ideal, for a specific part, is difficult and can create a block for an actor. Having tackled two different casts for *Guns*, I came to believe in allowing the cast to find its own voice. A well-written script will be able to paint its own picture. The cast must be made to feel that they too are a part of the creation of the art of the play.

The cast's level of confidence in their art needs to be reinforced and developed over the natural course of rehearsals. Only with strong convictions from the actors, can any allow the subtext to shine through. More often than not, it is the unspoken subtext, which makes a play alive, interesting and real. Plays that overlook this vital aspect of directing will often feel artificial and one-dimensional. It is up to both the players and director to find these facets and to incorporate them into the action. For example: In a room filled with people, whom is a given line directed at? Even when a specific character is named in that line, is it for his or her benefit, or is there another character meant to hear it? The understanding of this focus will give a powerful new meaning to lines, and reveal aspects of the characters in ways that a straight read never could. The dramatic irony for the audience will become more powerful and telling.

Understanding is at the heart of theater. Many times I've heard an actor say a line without conviction or meaning. Typically, I let this continue in the hopes that the actor will discover the meaning. Then, there comes the time when you need to ask the actor what they feel a line means. An actor may not have given a line much thought, or be familiar with the word, phrase or the hidden meaning. By talking it out, often, you find out where the actor got off track and a director can enhance the actor's understanding.

In a play such as *Guns, Shackles and Winter Coats*, where much of the action takes place in the confined space of a Hummer, it is easy to lose the energy level and interest. The challenge for any play, where actors are seated, is to find movement. This movement may be as simple as a hand

gesture, actively looking for something or drinking water from a canteen. The actors need these activities or their performance will suffer. As humans, we are acutely aware of movement. As directors, we need to use that pre-wired skill to have our audience look for those things we need them to see. We can use the contrast between motion and stillness to help tell the story.

Lastly, I would like to speak to future generations that may read and or perform *Guns*. The overriding truths of this play are apparent. The one constant is humanity. The human condition will continue on, the same way as it has for all time. The emotions and instincts that make up the human psyche will remain unchanged; understanding that set of variables will allow anyone to make sense of *Guns* in the future. Walk a mile in John Brown's shoes. Then you will understand the universality of his condition.

Alan Kanevsky
New York, NY
April 5th, 2006

Act One

Scene One

Setting: A homeless veteran moves among the crowd, collecting change. Brown enters. He is dressed in slacks, a tie and jacket, carrying a briefcase.

BROWN: Soldier! Front and center!

VIETNAM VETERAN: Sergeant Brown! You got any change on you?

BROWN: I thought you were working at Hoffbrau. Kara helped you get that job.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Yeah; but something happened. I lost my cool with one of the customers. I couldn't deal with them. I appreciate you getting me the job. But they got attitudes – especially, the little punks. One of the guys still gets me free meals; so, you can't beat that.

BROWN: No, I guess you can't. But, can't you just do something? Look: I'd put you up, if I could; but there's no way my wife would allow it. What about a shelter?

VIETNAM VETERAN: There is no way in hell I am living in a shelter. I can't believe you said that. I still have some pride, man. I'll be all right; I'll survive out here. I can get help from guys like you. Who needs anything else? I'm just tired of dealing with the BS, man.

BROWN: I hear you.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Thanks for thinking about me, though. I'll remember that.

BROWN: Anything for a First Cav Scout.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Old Cav Scouts never die; they just go to hell and regroup.

BROWN: They've already scouted a way out of hell. When you and I get there, we'll just follow their signs.

VIETNAM VETERAN: That's right, buddy.

BROWN: Listen, buddy: I am really sorry; but I'm skating on thin ice with my wife.

We're not speaking the same language.

VIETNAM VETERAN: That's how it is with women. They don't hear a word you say.

BROWN: Were you ever married?

VIETNAM VETERAN: I got a "Dear John" letter to prove it.

BROWN: I have to get home, before I miss dinner. I'll see you later, all right?

VIETNAM VETERAN: You can count on it, buddy.

[Exit Vietnam Veteran. Brown watches him leave; then he steps into his kitchen, as Kara simultaneously enters, through the curtain.]

BROWN: Kara, you're here.

KARA: How was your day?

BROWN: I'll tell you about it, later. Guess who I saw at the subway stop?

KARA: Your homeless friend? You gave him some of our money, didn't you?

BROWN: No, I did not give him any money. You should have more respect for him,

Kara. He is a Vietnam Veteran.

KARA: Yes, you have told me before.

BROWN: Did you make dinner? I'm hungry.

KARA: No. I am ordering Chinese tonight. I am tired of cooking dinner you never eat.

BROWN: I eat dinner! All right, let's order Chinese. Let's make it a candlelit dinner, baby. How does that sound?

KARA: Sounds nice.

BROWN: Good. Do we have any more candles? Aha! Come sit down with me. This afternoon, I fell asleep at my desk after lunch. I dreamt I was crawling underneath concertina wire. The wire kept cutting me, making me bleed. I couldn't breathe; but I knew I had to make it through the wire. I crawled faster. My arm got stuck in the wire. I pulled my arm, hard. The razor wire dug deeper I in my skin. I couldn't move. I was stuck. I woke up, screaming.

KARA: John Brown: this is a horrible nightmare. Every day, it is something with you. It wears on me to have to listen to you tell me war stories, in our home. I talked with my friends about it. I think you may need to get some help. I am saying this to you as a friend.

BROWN: Not as my wife?

KARA: Can't you take that for granted?

BROWN: I get scared you'll leave. I've lost people before.

KARA: I want you to get some help, John. Things are not going well for

you and it is making me very uncomfortable. The only problem is you have no health care at your temporary job.

BROWN: The veterans' hospital gives me free health care; but I am not going to a VA hospital.

KARA: Why not?

BROWN: VA hospitals are filthy, under-funded labs, where veterans are treated like animals. Army doctors are bad enough; VA doctors are even worse than they are. What are you trying to say, anyway?

KARA: Nothing. I am just talking to you.

BROWN: Why are you dressed? Where are you going?

KARA: It's Friday night.

BROWN: Do you have money?

KARA: I am going out with my girlfriends, tonight. They are treating me. Besides, I have found a job. I will be working at Macy's, during the holidays.

BROWN: I don't want you working. I told you that. You never listen to what I want.

KARA: I am not sitting in this house, listening to you speak about your nightmares.

BROWN: You shouldn't be working. It stresses the fetus.

KARA: I will work! We never have any money to do anything. There is nothing here – no furniture. We never take trips. We used to travel all around Europe, remember? All of my friends have nice apartments with nice furniture. I want nice things, too.

BROWN: Who are all of these friends of yours? You've been in America

less than a year. All right, fine. What kind of furniture do you want? I'll buy a couch, okay? How about a leather couch? I know how much you're into leather.

KARA: Don't be funny. I am being serious. You can't just count on me like that anymore.

BROWN: Oh, really?

KARA: Yes, really. Have you paid the rent for this month?

BROWN: Why are you so hard on me? Let's get ourselves situated, first. I don't want to worry about jobs right now. I want a family. I got fired today.

KARA: What? Well, I see I can't rely on you. I am going to work, that's it. If you can't take care of your family, I will take care of myself. And, besides, I feel I am not yet ready to be a mother. I want to wait.

BROWN: Stop talking like that! We are going to have a family, damn it! Do you hear me?

KARA: John, stop yelling. It's just that things are not in order. You are not well.

This is no time to start a family.

BROWN: There is nothing wrong with me! What are you saying: that I'm crazy? That's what you think, isn't it? You think I am insane – a freak! Sit down at the table with me.

KARA: John, when we met, in Germany, you were so happy. You were confident and funny; and, I was very much in love with you. But, there is something on your mind, ever since you returned from war. You never tell me what you went through; so, I have no idea what you are experiencing

now. I have tried to get you to talk to me. You never tell me what you are feeling; only, your scary nightmares. It has gotten very bad, John. You are right: a job is not as important as a family; but if we are not happy, then there is nothing. What I want is the man I used to know. You are not ready for a family, John. I wish you would come to church.

BROWN: I wish you would stop talking about religion and abortion in the same sentence! I don't understand you! I want a family. That's why we are married. I do not want you to have an abortion. It is not a natural thing. I am tired of death, Kara – tired of war and death. I am begging you.

KARA: And, now that you are fired, how can you support another person?

BROWN: Yes, with my family, I can do anything. Don't worry about money, baby. The economy is strong; and, I am a veteran of an American war. I can get work anywhere I want in this country.

KARA: You have not had a decent job since you left the army. What is wrong with you, John? What can I do if you tell me nothing?

BROWN: I am trying to get my head right! Why do you have to keep up this pressure on me! Why can't you give me some space? I feel like you're squeezing the life out of me. I am not all right. I have to take it easy, until things come to me. It won't be long; but if you don't back off of me, you're going to be sorry.

KARA: Don't ever speak to me that way again!

BROWN: I am sorry. Please understand me. Stay here tonight, baby. You'll enjoy yourself more with a man than with your girlfriends. Go get the food.

KARA: Ha ha. Okay, I will stay tonight. You always seem to convince

me. You have a way with words.

BROWN: It's my silver tongue.

KARA: That is the only thing you have.

BROWN: It's all I need. Follow me.

KARA: Where?

BROWN: Can you help me with something?

KARA: Oh no. I have to go get the food.

BROWN: Order delivery.

KARA: No! I'm going.

[Kara exits.]

BROWN: Good, leave me alone. The silence is all I have left.

« »

Scene Two

Setting: Light fade to black; only the candle is lit. Combat sounds play.

Brown's team takes up their seats, alongside Brown. Combat lights (red, orange, yellow) flash. Plansky is driving; behind him is Rodriguez. Brown is in the front passenger seat; behind him is Johnson.

JOHNSON: I can't take this anymore! Do you guys hear me?

RODRIGUEZ: Where the hell are those 16 SCUDS landing? Sergeant Brown! We're lost in a tank battle! Pull your head out of your fourth point of contact!

BROWN: This place is hell on Earth. Look at the sky. There is no

beginning and no end: sky and sand and red, forever.

JOHNSON: Sergeant Walker's team is dead, for Christ's sake – gone, in a ball of flames!

PLANSKY: Sergeant, we are lost in a tank battle, at the front lines of the Persian Gulf War.

JOHNSON: This is real war. I'm scared, man.

RODRIGUEZ: No shit, Sherlock.

JOHNSON: Why can't we follow the tank explosions? We are cavalry scouts! Aren't the tanks supposed to be following us? Tell the tanks we're behind them; but to keep going that way.

PLANSKY: Jesus H. Christ, Private Johnson, what a genius idea; drive in front of the tanks! Here:

[Plansky picks up the microphone.]

'Excuse me, Mr. Tanker, my name is Private Johnson; aren't you supposed to be following me? We would appreciate it if you could keep killing the bad tanks'. Privates are not paid to think!!

BROWN: Shut up! Plansky: Was that Sergeant Smith's team who was shooting at us? If you had let me radio Smith's team; and, not driven away like a coward, we wouldn't be lost.

PLANSKY: Well, golly, sergeant, I'm not sure who was trying to kill us. Does anyone know who was trying to destroy us?

JOHNSON: Listen to me! I am scared! I can't think. I – I can't breathe.

RODRIGUEZ: Don't be a pussy, private. Sergeant Brown's not scared; right, sergeant?

PLANSKY: *The sergeant's not scared; right, sergeant?* We all know you

want to be a noncommissioned officer, Rod. Why don't you focus on the team?

BROWN: At ease. I am scared. I feel as if I am living a few hours in the past. I am watching everything happen; but not experiencing it. I don't even feel like I am a human being.

RODRIGUEZ: I know what you mean. Everything is fading into one thing, like being inside a big dream; right, sergeant?

PLANSKY: I just had a brilliant idea! Why don't you two put your crack pipe down; pay attention! Because I'd like to remind you we're lost in the middle of a tank battle!

RODRIGUEZ: What are we going to do, sergeant?

BROWN: Follow the tank explosions, like the private said. See that Bradley Fighting Vehicle, Specialist Plansky? – The one going slow, stopping and shooting with its twenty Mike-Mike cannon?

PLANSKY: I see it, over there, away from the pack.

BROWN: Maintain precisely 25 meters directly behind it, all night long. Our tires are to be kept exactly in its tracks. When it moves, we move. When it stops, we stop.

PLANSKY: Yes, sergeant. Follow the Bradley like stink on shit.

BROWN: Who the hell did that, Rod?

RODRIGUEZ: It's the MRE's, sergeant. I can't help it.

JOHNSON: Gas, gas, gas!

BROWN: Jesus, I'm dying. Put down your windows; air out this vehicle!

PLANSKY: Sergeant, are you crazy? There might be chemical weapons out there. The M-9 paper hasn't changed colors yet; but we can't be sure.

There might be Mustard Gas, Blister Agent, Nerve Agent – biological agents – or who knows what?

JOHNSON: My eyes are watering. I hope we get shot, so we don't have to breathe anymore.

BROWN: Hope is not a plan, private. Where's the hot sauce?

JOHNSON: I used the last of it; we're out, sergeant.

BROWN: Are you fucking kidding me?

RODRIGUEZ: Whose job is it *always* to make sure we have a full bottle of hot sauce?!

BROWN: Combat is bad; being out of hot sauce is pure torture, private!

RODRIGUEZ: I say we drive back to Saudi Arabia for hot sauce, right now!

PLANSKY: There is no way we can eat these MREs without hot sauce!

JOHNSON: Did anyone get the white cheese?

BROWN: Yeah, private, I got the white cheese right here.

JOHNSON: Sergeant, I'll trade you my M&Ms – plus, a granola bar for your white cheese. I'll throw in a package of dried fruit; and, the ham and cheese loaf.

BROWN: Negative, private. Your weak attempt to trade your way out is failing miserably. As everyone knows, the brass bar is worthless; dried fruit means nothing; your package of M&Ms is puny; and, it is impossible to give away a ham and cheese loaf, even in combat. Anyway, I'm almost done eating my white cheese. You're SOL, private.

JOHNSON: You're always done eating it! It was the same thing back in Germany: REFORGER, Grafenver, Hohenfels – all of it! I am sorry about

the hot sauce! I'm tired of flies constantly swarming our chow. I'm tired of sand jamming my weapon and crawling up the crack of my ass. It's everywhere: in my eyes, my ears, my fingernails, my teeth, my hair, my nose, my dick. I can't take it anymore! Do you hear me?

[Johnson starts to exit the vehicle.]

RODRIGUEZ: Private! You'll step on a land mine and kill us all!

JOHNSON: Leave me alone!

BROWN: Hold him, Specialist! Fuck, Private! What's your problem? By your cowardly act of trying to commit suicide, you almost brought down your whole team. We're all terrified out of our minds. I wanted to shoot myself in the foot before the ground war started. But, it's like - who's that journalist that shot himself?

PLANSKY: Hemingway.

BROWN: Now, there was a man who could not handle his madness. A real man knows how to handle fear, confusion, terror. Show bravery in the face of uncertainty, private. If not for yourself, then for your team, your country; and, your family back home. Private: The last thing you want to do is shame your country.

RODRIGUEZ: So this means we're not going back for hot sauce? Way to go, private.

BROWN: Lay off him, Rod.

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, sergeant.

BROWN: Listen: isn't Sergeant Smith's team from Texas?

RODRIGUEZ: California.

BROWN: California, Texas, Canada: all the same shit.

PLANSKY: I wish we were in Brooklyn, *New York City*.

RODRIGUEZ: But, after this shit is over – assuming we make it out alive – we go back to Germany, to a country that hates Americans and spits on us. I didn't even get to take leave before we deployed. There's so much I miss about New York City: pizza, lots of fine honeys, and good bagels.

BROWN: New York City. I know this bagel shop in Hell's kitchen, on 48th and 8th: Joseph's Bagel Shop and Deli. There's something magical about that place. Now, they have the best bagels in New York City.

RODRIGUEZ: Sergeant, you're wrong on this one. I know the best bagel shop in New York City. It's called Joey's bagels on 86th Street, in Brooklyn. The bagels at Joey's are twice as big as any in the city; and, half the price – hell yeah.

PLANSKY: You're both wrong. Let me tell you something: If you're looking for great taste; plus, every kinds of cream cheese, then it's Joe's Bagel Shop in Brooklyn, near Brooklyn College. Those are the best tasting bagels in all of New York City, and that's all I got to say - forgetta' 'bout it.

BROWN: Man, I'll be glad to get back home, with my woman.

RODRIGUEZ: Sergeant, take your gal up to the Windows of the World restaurant, at the top of the World Trade Center. At night, it's like seeing into forever.

PLANSKY: No, listen: If you want to make a girl feel real special, then take her to an offoff

Broadway play: Twenty bucks, tops. She'll think you're all sophisticated. The plays all suck-ass; but since the theaters are dives, you can score a

hummer in the corner. Generally, they turn out the lights, during the plays.

RODRIGUEZ: What about off-Broadway?

PLANSKY: That's the same thing as Broadway.

RODRIGUEZ: I've never been to any Broadway plays.

PLANSKY: They don't have plays on Broadway anymore, just musicals and shit from Disneyland.

RADIO (Voice 1): Break, sir, I'm hovering above the target, at this time. There are POWs surrendering. They are waving white flags, exiting their bunkers. They're surrendering, sir. They're waving their arms high in the air.

RADIO (Voice 2): Pilot, this is Colonel Nash! You will shoot those individuals – those enemy soldiers – dead, right now! That is a direct order. Do you copy me? Shoot the Iraqi bastards!

RADIO (Voice 1): Mission accomplished, sir. They're all dead, sir.

PLANSKY: Did you hear that? They're murdering people.

JOHNSON: They should die grateful the MPs didn't get them. What the hell are we doing here? Everyone knows President Bush and Cheney are oilmen, with lots of Saudi Arabian friends. Texas oil: that's why we're fighting this war, which, the U.S Congress barely supported. We hear it every day, on Rod's short wave radio, on the BBC. How are we supposed to fight and die in a war our country doesn't want us to fight?

RODRIGUEZ: Hey, look, private: some white cheese. You still want to trade for it?

JOHNSON: Give me that. Sergeant, I am tired of fighting, for nothing! What has our country become, sergeant, huh?

BROWN: I hear you, private. You're giving me a damn migraine headache with your politics.

PLANSKY: I know what you mean, sergeant; he never stops. Jesus, my head is splitting open. How long can a human being go without sleep, anyway?

RODRIGUEZ: Come on, sergeant, we got these fuckers on the run! 24th Mech and 82nd

Airborne surround Baghdad; Apache helicopters are wasting Iraqis right and left. We're going to win this war and all go home!

ALL: Hooah!

PLANSKY: Hey, what's that, over there? It looks like a chow truck. That's our unit!

RADIO: Break, Romeo Six Niner, this is Juliet Eight Eight. Come in, over.

BROWN: Juliet, this is Romeo, over.

RADIO: Romeo, where in the hell are you, over?

BROWN: We got lost, sir. Sorry, over.

RADIO: I see your vehicle. We've found the chow truck and we're drinking warm soup. Through some bizarre army logic, you have been promoted to the rank of staff sergeant, E-6. Congratulations; make sure you're not out of uniform! Holding the Metal of Honor pushed you above your peers in promotions points. And one more thing! Cease-fire! Stand down; take off your chemical weapons gear. The war is over!

[Music plays: James Brown's *I Feel Good*.]

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Scene Three

Setting: Rodriguez lights a cigarette on a dark stage, with the candle. Lights rise slowly, revealing the team standing, outside of their vehicle, shaving, etc. It is two days after the ground war.

JOHNSON: Congratulations on your promotion, sergeant. I always wanted to ask you what you did to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

BROWN: So ask, you bonehead.

PLANSKY: Our sergeant jumped on a grenade, to save his team; blew his balls off – technically, he is a woman.

RODRIGUEZ: Shut up, Plansky. Sergeant John Brown charged into a hornet's nest of enemy in Panama City to save two stranded, wounded, dumb ass privates. Then, he shot his way back out, carrying the wounded soldiers to safety.

JOHNSON: Hooah. Is it true generals and the President has to salute you, sergeant?

RODRIGUEZ: They salute the ribbon, not the man. Hey, Sergeant Brown has a German girl!

BROWN: That's right, we're engaged. Her grandfather was a GI in World War Two. He was black.

RODRIGUEZ: Good to go, sergeant; squared away. Does she cook?

JOHNSON: Did you meet her in Frankfurt, while you were partying in Saxenhausen?

BROWN: Does she cook? Hell yeah, man: Weiner schnitzels, bratwurst – forgetta’ ‘bout

it. Let’s go, everyone in the vehicle.

PLANSKY: She likes the schnitzels, huh?

JOHNSON: Hey, sergeant, can we go to the bunkers? We’ve got to get more stuff.

BROWN: We’re going back to the bunkers.

JOHNSON: Sergeant, are you really marrying a German woman?

BROWN: I am getting married and getting out of the army. I’ve seen enough war and death for one lifetime. I can’t take anymore of it.

RODRIGUEZ: What are you talking about, sergeant? You know NCO stands for ‘No Chance on the Outside?’

JOHNSON: Yeah, if you leave, they’ll farm us out to other platoons or headquarters.

BROWN: I don’t care about you guys.

JOHNSON: Man, these burnt bodies’ stink. They smell worse than Plansky.

BROWN: At ease. It’s peacetime. A New World Order; Let Freedom Reign! Man, those oil well fires are smoking up today. The wind never changes direction. This warm breeze is putting me to sleep. So what’s everyone reading?

PLANSKY: *The Stand*, by Steven King.

JOHNSON: A librarian from Kansas sent me a goodie-bag.

RODRIGUEZ: Did she send a picture?

PLANSKY: They don’t have any *cameras* in *Kansas*, man.

RODRIGUEZ: Librarians in Kansas are sweet, man. They have nice curves, big old titties; and, round, tight asses. They have long, jet-black hair. They always tie it up tight, in a bun, when they're sitting at their desk. But when they're in the back, stacking books, they let their hair down; and, shake it around a little, to let it loosen, like this. Then, then say, 'It's time to read to the librarian; are you ready, papi?'

ALL: Stop!

PLANSKY: So this is what the journalists are calling the Turkey Shoot: beat-up trucks and cars, caught in a bottleneck. The girl force wasted them with farting A-10 Warthog tank killers. These conscripts were mostly Shiites, judging by their clothes and lack of uniforms. Hey, the Shiites are revolting, fighting their way to Baghdad. But perhaps these were the elite soldiers, since they were raping and pillaging Kuwaiti City. America sure is hegemony.

ALL: What?

JOHNSON: Does anyone have change for a seventy-five cent word?

RODRIGUEZ: Professor Plansky has single-handedly broken the bank.

PLANSKY: Hegemony happens to be a word I heard a journalist say, by the name of *Dan Rather*.

BROWN: And then he said, "America has routed the fearsome Iraqi Republican

Guard from Kuwaiti City," which isn't what we are seeing here.

JOHNSON: This sure as hell wasn't 'The Mother of all Battles.' Ever notice how battles are named weird? The Battle of the Bulge, for instance, is named for a battle I fought every day in high school.

RODRIGUEZ: Private, it's not size that matters; it's the motion in the ocean.

JOHNSON: And why call them movements? It sounds like you're taking a shit.

RODRIGUEZ: Oh! This morning I took the most amazing shit! It felt like a giant anaconda, winding through the deep jungle, out my asshole. I had to stand up, off the ground. I screamed for several minutes. It was amazing! My eyes became chris-crossed for over an hour.

ALL: Wow!

PLANSKY: MREs will kill you, dead. Man, we have destroyed this country: All I see are burnt bodies, smashed buildings, starving children, rabid dogs. You've got to feel for these people – not the soldiers, of course – they were trying to kill us. But the people, man, Saddam is cruel to them.

JOHNSON: Man, fuck these people. They should build a big dome over the whole Arab peninsula; let everyone fight it out, until they're all dead. Then, we move in and set up McDonalds and Walmarts.

PLANSKY: I'm talking as a person, not as a religious zealot.

JOHNSON: There he goes with big words, sergeant. I thought you were a Jew,

PLANSKY: What do you care about Muslims?

PLANSKY: I am two-thirds Jewish.

JOHNSON: How can you be two-thirds a Jew? What'd you have: two Jewish parents plus one Irish milkman? It's impossible.

RODRIGUEZ: Don't be stupid, private. What religion were you raised?

JOHNSON: Religion doesn't matter – except, over here, where everyone is an insane fanatic. What do you believe in, Sergeant Brown?

BROWN: To be honest, I'm thinking about becoming Muslim, after everything I've seen over here. I can see why religion started in this land. [Brown pulls out his bottle of booze. Brown takes a big sip, passes the bottle to Johnson, behind him.]

PLANSKY: I guess you're becoming a Muslim tomorrow! Are open containers legal in Iraq? Jesus, it's only 1 in the afternoon.

BROWN: Give me that bottle. Watch out for US Air Force craters on the highway; it's getting dark. We don't want to drive in a crater and die like Sergeant Jackson's team, the day after the war ends. Let's see: Atropine, pra-li-o-dox-ide. That doesn't sound too good for you. Ah ha: Valium!

RODRIGUEZ: What are you doing, sergeant?

BROWN: Whoa! There we go: Valium and Jack.

PLANSKY: Sergeant Brown, you have major issues.

JOHNSON: Didn't the LT specifically say to not do this?

BROWN: You're all a bunch of chicken-shits.

RODRIGUEZ: The sergeant happens to be an ingenious mastermind. Let me try some of your medicine, doctor. You're last private, because you're from New Jersey.

JOHNSON: Hey, man, don't house the fucking shit. Share.

BROWN: Whew! Holy shit, man, does anyone feel that?

JOHNSON: I'm gonna fall out of this vehicle in a second.

BROWN: Men, I thought you all performed brilliantly in combat. The fact that we were lost was not our fault; everyone was lost in this war – taking

pictures of the incredible orange-red artillery flashes, filling the sky like fireworks; MLRS rockets, firing their little white rocket-doves of Lord Jesus Christ into the colorful night sky. Soft glows of exploding howitzer copperhead rounds – effervescent illumination. Beautiful, awesome, slowly setting sun: yellow, orange, deep, blood red. Eye of God, watching it all transpire, while his evil children are playing, killing, destroying: Booms pounding softly in your chest. Boom. Boom. Boom. Combat is so beautiful. Hey, what's that: smoke? Drive over there, specialist!

PLANSKY: No way, sergeant, we are not going to the oil well fires.

BROWN: God is in the fire. I can ask Him why He created the red sky.

PLANSKY: I'm driving back to camp, right now.

BROWN: Everybody calm down. That's an order. Everything I say is an order. We are going to the oil well fires. Now, let's go, damn it.

PLANSKY: Sergeant, we're almost out of gas. What about Lieutenant Hall? This situation is becoming hazardous. Therefore, I do hereby relieve you of your command, effective immediately! Sergeant, are you asleep? Did you hear me?

RODRIGUEZ: Plansky, you are not relieving our sergeant of command!

JOHNSON: What are you guys talking about?

PLANSKY: He wants to go the oil well fires. I'm going back to camp.

RODRIGUEZ: I say we go do it! We've done lots of crazy stuff before. We're

Americans, damn it, not pussies!

JOHNSON: I think we should radio the LT.

RODRIGUEZ: At ease, private!

PLANSKY: Don't be a fool, private. But, I have a bad feeling about this. The war is officially over. We're not operating under combat ROE anymore. I do not have to follow his orders to my death.

JOHNSON: What's ROE?

RODRIGUEZ: Jesus, private, you are a dumb fuck. You've just been through a war and you don't know what ROE is. Anyway, I guess it couldn't hurt to advise the platoon sergeant of our present situation; that we'll rally up at camp, tonight, after we finish our bottle of Jack and Valium.

JOHNSON: Specialist Plansky, can you please tell me what ROE is?

PLANSKY: Rules of Engagement.

BROWN: What the hell you guys talking about?

PLANSKY: Nothing, sergeant.

BROWN: We are going back to the bunkers, to get more stuff.

PLANSKY: A minute ago, you wanted to go to the oil well fires. You're not thinking clear-headed.

BROWN: I can do AN-Y-THING I want! Let's go, damn it. We'll fire off all of our remaining ammunition, clear customs into Saudi Arabia, and go home. We'll shoot up the Russian tanks. I'm done trading the Shiites, for their booze. They've got everything now: rations, gas, water, stinger missiles, PVS-7 night vision glasses. I like the Shiites. Rod, did you mail all of our war booty?

RODRIGUEZ: I mailed it to my grandmother's house in Brooklyn.

BROWN: You didn't send any body parts, did you, like those boneheads in 24th Mech?

RODRIGUEZ: No, sergeant.

JOHNSON: Sergeant Brown, don't we have enough Iraqi stuff? I'm getting hungry. I want to eat a warm meal at the mess truck, tonight.

BROWN: Shut up, private. Eat an MRE.

JOHNSON: Yes, sergeant.

BROWN: Rod, did you mail that Russian pistol I found to my address, in New York City? That baby is mine.

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, sergeant.

BROWN: Glad to see someone's following orders.

RODRIGUEZ: Sergeant Brown, are you all right? Listen: The combat we saw, that'll stay with me my whole life. I'll look at Vietnam veterans in a whole new light. Why don't we go to the bunkers tomorrow? In our present condition we'd better not shoot off our remaining ammo. Let's get back to camp, so the private can eat his warm dinner.

BROWN: We are going to the bunkers.

PLANSKY: I want to get back to camp.

BROWN: What the fuck's going on here, a mutiny? I want to load up with more war booty before we go home. I want more money. Don't you guys want free money?

RODRIGUEZ: All right. Let's go make another bunker run.

PLANSKY: All right, sergeant, let's go to the bunkers.

BROWN: I knew it. Let the money do the talking. Hell, they're right over there. Come on, let's roll. I want to get underground, where it's cool. It must be a hundred and twenty degrees in this sun. I can't hear myself think.

PLANSKY: How about this area? We haven't been here yet.

BROWN: Stop the vehicle. Everyone get out. You men go check out that bunker.

JOHNSON: Sergeant, can we leave our weapons?

BROWN: Leave your weapons in the vehicle. No one is going to take them out here.

JOHNSON: All right, sergeant.

[All four move sluggishly, still drunk and high. An Iraqi suddenly runs onstage and slits Plansky's throat. In the confusion, the Iraqi is able to stab Rodriquez, from the back; and, Rodriquez goes down, not dead; but dying fast. Johnson attacks the Iraqi head-on; but the Iraqi overpowers him. Meanwhile, Sergeant Brown picks up his .45; but he can't shoot; or, he will shoot Plansky. Brown maneuvers around, as he tries to take aim. Brown trips once. Finally, as Johnson dies, Brown has a clear shot; and, kills the Iraqi.]

BROWN: You killed my team! Rodriquez? Plansky? Johnson? I have to call for help.

[Kara enters, carrying a plastic bag, full of Chinese food containers.]

KARA: Here's the Chinese food. I brought extra hot sauce. I know how much you like hot sauce.

BROWN: You're going to die.

KARA: John, stop it! Put down the pistol! It's me, Kara. The soldier is gone.

BROWN: You stay here, until I return.

[Brown quickly exits.]

KARA: Hello? Is this the police? Hello? Yes, my husband attacked me with a gun.

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Act Two

Scene One

Setting: Brown is on a bed, shackled by his wrists and ankles. He is in a VA hospital mental ward. Dialogue begins, while the house is still dark.

BROWN: Nurse, remove these shackles! My wrists and ankles are covered in blood. He's here, in the room! Team: Get in here! Hear him laughing at me? He chased me through the park. I hid my pistol in the park. My pistol is safe, in the park. I am sorry I let you men down.

PLANSKY: Do not fear, sergeant.

RODRIGUEZ: In the darkness, there is the enemy.

JOHNSON: Focus on the night's approach.

PLANSKY: Enemy will not come near.

BROWN: Where is the enemy?

PLANSKY: The red sky is evil.

JOHNSON: How is the chow in this place?

RODRIGUEZ: Are the nurses sexy?

JOHNSON: The red sky suffocates.

PLANSKY: You must win, sergeant.

RODRIGUEZ: You cannot breathe air.

BROWN: I am alone.

PLANSKY: You are not alone.

JOHNSON: The explosions are deafening.

RODRIGUEZ: Fight the battle.

JOHNSON: Fight and win.

BROWN: I am alone.

[Exit Johnson, Plansky, Rodriguez. Dr. Zinn enters.]

DR. ZINN: Good morning, Mr. Brown. I see the nurses have removed your restraints. If you'd simply comply with taking your medications, there'd be no need to wear the shackles.

BROWN: I don't care if I have to wear the shackles, because I am not swallowing any pills! I had to swallow pills in the war. That's why I have Gulf War Syndrome.

DR. ZINN: John, I have good news: Your wife is going to sign you out, today.

BROWN: My home phone is disconnected.

DR. ZINN: Is it?

BROWN: Why is she coming, now? How long have I been here? Doctor, I am not ready to leave.

DR. ZINN: Almost 24 hours.

BROWN: Doctor, I don't want to leave the hospital. I can't go outside. How can I work?

DR. ZINN: John, what about the rest of your family? I believe you said

your mother was unreachable; your father, what happened with him?

BROWN: I don't want to talk about my family or my father.

DR. ZINN: You must have some feelings for your father. I thought you might give me some details.

BROWN: I have no feelings for my father! Doctor, please, let me stay here a little longer. I am begging you. I have tried to face my problems; it doesn't change anything.

DR. ZINN: John, you do not suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. There are veterans here who truly suffer from PTSD – Vietnam veterans. True, you witnessed some horrific events; but instead of dealing with your problems, you choose to self-medicate with alcohol, which triggers your delusions.

BROWN: Listen to me! I am a changed person. I never had any problems before the war. I saw combat before, in Panama. Something has clicked up here. No one seems to understand me; no one seems to care. I am an American war veteran; doesn't that account for anything? I served my time; why can't I enjoy my life?

DR. ZINN: John, you can lead a normal life. Not all war veterans experience difficulties; in fact, many transition smoothly into civilian life.

BROWN: All war veterans have to deal with the trauma of combat, every day. I feel

America has used me and then abandoned me.

DR. ZINN: You arrived here, escorted by the police. John, you are only a few steps away from destitute. I wish you could stay here, long-term; but the fact is we can't afford that kind of luxury to every veteran that comes

through our doors. Shouldn't we conserve our resources, so that we can help those veterans, who are most needy?

BROWN: This is crazy! I am being kicked out of a mental hospital.

DR. ZINN: How would it feel to consider it as transitioning in to the real world?

BROWN: How am I supposed to go outside, when the sun goes down and the sky turns red? I have tried to explain. You think you know everything because you read the New York Times; and, some lying journalist, miles from the action, tells you the whole story, with pictures. I see why war vets never talk about their experiences, because of idiots like you! I want to talk to my wife!

DR. ZINN: She will be here, shortly.

BROWN: Doc, please, I am begging you to let me stay here. Don't do this to me.

DR. ZINN: John, I understand it has been hard for you to adjust to civilian life; and, that you harbor guilt over the loss of your team. But, don't you think it's important to understand that there is no way to control fate? Your team died during an enemy attack. Shouldn't you face this fact; and, move on with your life?

BROWN: You make it sound so simple. The truth is I ordered my team to leave their weapons in our vehicle. They died, defenseless, while we were searching a bunker for money. It was my fault. It wasn't an enemy attack. The war was over.

DR. ZINN: Soldiers die in all types of unfortunate accidents. War is a horrible thing; but it is necessary, so that society can continue to function;

so that you and I can have a job and a life. Honestly, John, as a professional, I don't have a choice. Aren't you happy that your wife is coming to take you home?

BROWN: I am alone. No one can help me.

DR. ZINN: Goodbye, Mr. Brown.

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Scene Two

Setting: Lights rise. Kara and Dr. Zinn enter.

DR. ZINN: Kara, before we go see your husband, I'd like to speak with you a moment. Your husband was brought to us by the police, extremely intoxicated and violent. He believes he suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

KARA: He has gotten steadily worse since he left the army and we moved to America.

DR. ZINN: Are you American?

KARA: I am from Germany. We were married when he was stationed in Germany.

DR. ZINN: I see. Has your husband had problems with alcohol abuse, in the past?

KARA: Yes. But doctor, I have to tell you something: I am scared. I cannot be his wife anymore. I have made changes, in my life.

DR. ZINN: Well, you are still married; and, you must sign for him.

KARA: But, doctor, he threatened to kill me with a pistol. He is dangerous.

DR. ZINN: Ms. Brown, your husband is stable and must leave this facility; but it does not have to be with you. I can arrange for hospital security to escort you from the ward to the hospital exits. He will be shown to a separate exit.

KARA: Yes, I would feel more comfortable that way.

DR. ZINN: It is no problem at all.

KARA: Doctor, I have tried very hard to help him; but I am just his wife. He must help himself. I told him the Veterans' Hospital could help him. Why doesn't America take care of its veterans?

DR. ZINN: Kara, I understand how you feel. In fact, I work closely with a non-profit agency, which helps homeless veterans. It is important for your husband, who does not need to be in this hospital, get help elsewhere. Grant money is very limited these days. We can't do anything to jeopardize non-profit agencies from receiving federal funds. Wars cause casualties on the home front, too. But we have to resolve this situation. Let's go see him.

KARA: Yes, doctor.

DR. ZINN: How are you today, Mr. Brown?

BROWN: Nothing changes. Kara, you're here. You look like a ghost.

KARA: Hello, John.

DR. ZINN: Your wife has come to sign the paperwork to release you from the hospital.

KARA: John, I have to explain. Doctor, I would like a few minutes alone

with my husband.

DR. ZINN: Yes, of course. Goodbye, Mr. Brown. Mrs. Brown, please meet me by the nurses' station.

BROWN: What a minute! You can't just kick me out of here.

DR. ZINN: Mr. Brown, we are here to receive you; but you can't malingering at this facility any longer. We are all taxpayers. We all must work.

BROWN: This is not how America is supposed to work!

DR. ZINN: If you don't calm yourself down, I will call security and you will be restrained.

KARA: John, I want to tell you what has happened.

BROWN: Why didn't you call me? I kept thinking about you. People in here are really crazy. I'm not crazy.

KARA: I know you're not crazy, John. I'm glad you got help here, at the hospital. And, I want to still be your friend. I hope we can stay in touch.

BROWN: What are you saying?

KARA: I have moved all of my things out of your apartment. And, I have a lawyer. I am filing for a divorce. I am sorry, John. I have no choice. I have to move on with my life.

BROWN: Please, Kara, don't do this to me. Your life is good because of me. I gave you the chance to leave Kirchgoens.

KARA: I know you have helped me. I thank you for that.

BROWN: We are man and wife. We can get help, some counseling.

KARA: John, you are stuck inside your own mind. You never let me inside. I have to face reality. You had my love; but you don't love me, anymore. The heat is no longer working in your apartment. There are still

some microwave dinners in the freezer.

BROWN: I love you, Kara. Don't you remember when we were married? It was a beautiful day and there were so many flowers. The soldiers in my unit were dressed in army blues, carrying shining steel sabers. What about our baby? What about our future? We were going to be a family.

KARA: With what money? It's too late for us, John. I don't want my child to be raised by someone like you.

BROWN: What is that supposed to mean?

KARA: I had an abortion.

BROWN: Why did you do that, Kara? I told you not to do that! You can't kill something alive inside of you! That life was going to replace all of the death in the war. You have taken that life from me! You say you're religious. You're a murdering bitch!

KARA: Meine Mutter hatte Recht mit dir, du bist nicht gut. Du tust gar nichts, um dir selbst zu helfen. My mother was right about you! You don't frighten me anymore. You are pitiful.

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Scene Three

Setting: It is winter and Brown is homeless. He has been living on the street for several days.

BROWN: Get down, for Christ sake! Get down, before you're blown to fucking hell! Incoming!

Man the sixty; get another box of ammo A-S-A-P!

VIETNAM VETERAN: Whoa. It's me: Your buddy, from First Cav.

BROWN: Oh. How's it going?

VIETNAM VETERAN: Same as always.

BROWN: I was trying to sleep. It's too cold to sleep.

VIETNAM VETERAN: You know; you ain't hearing a word I'm saying.

BROWN: What are you talking about?

VIETNAM VETERAN: I told you a thousand times to put something underneath your box. You don't listen good. You think this is all joke, don't you?

BROWN: No.

VIETNAM VETERAN: I got to deal with assholes all day long; and, then I run into punks like you. Let me tell you something: Today, I seen this lady picking up her dog's shit in the park with a plastic bag. She dropped her New York Times. She saw me in the bushes. She tells her dog, 'Look, fluffy, that man is so disgusting.' I'm disgusting? She's scooping up her dog's shit with her fingers! She's the same one who spit on me and called me 'Baby Killer' when I came back from Nam. You got any smokes on you?

BROWN: No.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Civilians don't understand what war does to a person, how it changes them. It ain't easy going to civilian life, from killing people. There're a lot of vets on the street, man. You know that.

BROWN: The hardest thing is not saying “fuck” every other word.

VIETNAM VETERAN: You got that fucking right. What’s wrong with you?

BROWN: Nothing. My wife, she’s gone. It was my fault. She’s always mad, slamming cabinets – scares me to death. I was going to take care of her; and, the baby. I was going to be a father.

VIETNAM VETERAN: A father, huh? I had a son once. But, I’ve lost track of him. I don’t know where he is anymore. I try not to think about it – too painful.

BROWN: I wanted to raise my child right, not like my father raised me.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Look, buddy: Women is idiots. You got your freedom. You don’t need a thing. There’s no bills, no responsibility, nothing to worry about. I wish we could get something to drink tonight. Help take the edge off; you have any money?

BROWN: No.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Me neither. Fuck! Hey, weren’t you a staff sergeant in the army, soldier?

BROWN: Yes, sir.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Don’t call me sir, I’m a sergeant; I work for a living.

BROWN: I’m sorry, sergeant.

VIETNAM VETERAN: I was assistant squad leader; until, one night, when I was working point man. I was listening; I heard an explosion behind me. The enemy always let the point man go past; because they know the whole squad is not far behind him. It wasn’t an explosion; it was

a whole platoon of enemy Viet Cong opening up, all at once, on my squad. My platoon was gone in ten seconds, torn to shreds; little pieces of flesh and blood were all that was left of those Americans. I ran away, back to camp. I see them at night buddy. I try to hide; but they still find me. They start by whispering. Then they speak my name. Fear is what's eating your brain on the street. You fear them watching you, because you can feel them watching you. The only thing left is your feelings, just like you're working point man. You're body starts rotting away on the street, like gangrene. It starts with your feet, next is your teeth, then your skin. Your mind is gone. You stop catching yourself because your mind is gone. Are you listening to me?

BROWN: I'm sick of fear. I saw my team killed. I killed the enemy soldier who killed my team.

VIETNAM VETERAN: Yeah? Well, I probably killed fifty people – or more. I still think about all of them dead bastards. I can't think about it. I can't do it.

BROWN: I don't want to listen to this.

VIETNAM VETERAN: You're a coward, just like me.

BROWN: Why don't you leave me alone?

VIETNAM VETERAN: You're living with the curse of your dead buddies, aren't you?

Admit the truth. You hear them screaming in your ears, don't you? You see them in your nightmares, don't you? You think you're the only one?

BROWN: Leave me alone!

VIETNAM VETERAN: That's right; you're a coward, just like me. Your

country doesn't want you anymore, because you failed her. You are not even an American citizen anymore. You have no home. You have no country.

BROWN: I have failed. I am a coward.

VIETNAM VETERAN: I need to rest a while, before the cold hits. You can't sleep – well,

I can. I don't want you around here, anymore. Get lost!

BROWN: But, I got all my old stuff in there. I built this space; it's mine.

VIETNAM VETERAN: I'm giving you 10 seconds to permanently vacate this area of operations, soldier!

BROWN: But, I got my stuff in there, man!

VIETNAM VETERAN: I am taking all of your stuff; consider it mine.

Now, don't get me angry. One. Two. Three. Four...

BROWN: I am not leaving my stuff behind! Why are you doing this to me? We're Cav scouts. Those things are all I have left of my life. I have to have them with me.

VIETNAM VETERAN: I'll do whatever the hell I want! Now, you heard me, soldier: move out; un-ass this A/O! Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine.

Ten!

[Lights go black. Lights rise. Brown enters.]

BROWN: My things are all gone! No! Seek protective cover and camouflage, soldier. Get into a bunker, where it's cool, underground. Get to your team. Help your buddies. Fight for your country. Leave me alone, you bastard! Where is my team? What is your name? No! You won't chase me in my dreams. No more nightmares! It's all a lie. The truth is I

felt pleasure, watching life leave you, in a death rattle. I can't believe in myself. I don't believe in anything. It's all lies – all of it! My soul has left me.

'And I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free

And I won't forget the men who died, and gave the right to me

And I'd gladly stand up, next to you, and defend her still today

Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land, God bless the USA!'

[Brown puts the pistol to his temple. There is a gunshot, over the sound system. Lights go black.]

The end.

Notes on Writing Plays

By M. Stefan Strozier

Play writing is one of the most agonizing forms of writing. This is why I am sure Shakespeare must have revised and had feedback. I have a good idea about the level of pain, which writing plays causes, because I have done many other forms of writing. I have written 4 novel-length books, 2 full-length collections of short stories, 1 book of poems, 1 collection of essays, and 3 plays, as well as some other odds and ends. In my mind, short stories are the easiest to write (and I have success with getting them published); poetry seems easy, though it is really very difficult. But writing plays is a grueling business.

It's the slow burn of a play's revisions that bring such misery. And, no play is done without 10 or more revisions. For instance, I rewrote *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats* at least 10 times. Then, I "tweaked" another 10 or more times. Finally, I reformatted it many times, and each time I chipped away yet again. And, this play is based on a book I wrote, *Scarecrow Soldier*; so, the story was already written.

What is the playwright doing in all of these rewrites? He is trying to create the "perfect sentence", as Hemingway called it. This thing is the right balance of rhythm, emotion, intensity, humor, contrast, and it falls precisely within the rest of the play. It is truly amazing how much chipping a simple sentence of (mostly unremarkable) words can take, and

keep improving. Revisions always make a work better. Each time the sentences, and the ones before and after it, are reexamined a new way is discovered to improve some aspect of it.

We can also consider each sentence's larger context, within the play, which can be enhanced and improved. This is true in every case, and the options are seemingly endless. The bottom line is every time the playwright takes a chip of stone away from the marble, the picture becomes clearer. And, all of this work is not easy.

All writers hope their work survives them. However, while we are living, the playwright's rewards are among the best of any kind of writer. The poet has his readings and his crowd. The novelist and story writer have their liquor (actually, they no longer even have this luxury). And, essay writing is something done at leisure time. The playwright gets to *hear* his words and *see* his characters on the stage. This experience is like none other; and, it is very exciting and worthwhile. After witnessing it enough times, something strange happens in the playwright's mind, and his plays start to improve. First, the changes are obvious: He sees what works and what does not. He does not create scenes on the Planet Venus or on the ocean floor. He understands people enjoy laughing. He learns to move his characters in and out of scenes like chess pieces (in a complex game, which is not unlike a complex plot). But, then the playwright learns the nuances and subtleties of plays. He sees the value of contrast in all things. He learns the importance of action, plot, character development, lyricism, poetry, and humor. Finally, the playwright learns to listen to his audience. The playwright must listen to two voices: those of his actors

and his audience. No, the playwright does not have to listen to the director, and the playwright should occasionally overrule (or fire) his director. The lifeline of a play is between the playwright and the actors; and, if this lifeline is severed, the play will die. The director has very little to do with the art of a play. If writing is both a craft and an art, a director is to a play as a writer is to his craft: precise, experienced, expert. The director does not create art. The director modifies the art created by the playwright. The art lies in the words and the acting. The director is concerned with the set, blocking actors' movements, focusing the actors' performances, the overall management of all aspects of the play, and a few other things. The director does not in any way modify the playwright's words or even misconstrue them. The best directors are able to see subtext in a writer's words. But, that subtext comes from the individual writer's mind and nowhere else. The spaces, pauses, word choice, rhythm of the words was all chosen or omitted for very specific reasons, which took much revision to get right. The director would be well-suited to not ruin plays, as all he or she is doing is ruining theatre. Maniacal directors remind me of "hot-shot" Air Force pilots, who wind up murdering their crew from excess and negligence. However, directors are very important to a play, though the best ones are frequently playwrights themselves.

A play is a collaborative art form. Each artist brings his or her art to the play and the whole is stronger than its parts. However, there are three central artists creating a play: actor, director, and playwright. Arguably, there are only two: actor and playwright – and, director falls in with lighting, set design, producing, etceteras. The director is a “glorified

grunt”, as we called Military Police in the army. “A specialist is still a private,” an officer once explained to me. The director is not a sergeant. He or she does not have any authority of the art of the play.

I am not trying to be mean to directors; certainly, I have no problem putting directors in their place, or firing them. Actually, I have worked with some very talented and smart directors. But, the reality is in 2006 writers are still considered freshmen (maybe we’re sophomores by now). For much of mankind’s evolution, playwrights were king – not any more.

I advocate the playwright’s profession, because I have traveled his road. The secret, and where the powerful magic of your words can arise from, is yourself. This sounds trite and cliché; but it is true: The playwright must develop a unique style, and no one else can help achieve this. If the playwright cuts corners, the play will not be very good at all, and a bad play is obvious to all parties. But a good – even, unfinished - play is immediately recognizable as such. So, if you are reading this and you are a playwright, there is only one option: revision.

An Interview with Calvery "Lee" Stringer (fall, 2004)

(Conducted by Mike Strozier.)

STROZIER:

Thank you, Mr. Stringer, for participating in this Web site and our literary ezine. One purpose of this endeavor is to prove that there has already been a sea change in writing and the watershed of this change was the Internet and technology, which began in the nineties. It is our view that writers on the Internet, and the present generation, which grew up knowing, exclusively, that form of writing, are fundamentally different from writers and readers of the print era. Due to your unique past, you have not been corrupted by the print world. You learned to write largely on your own. Furthermore, your subject matter and experiences are so unique, that no one could tell you how to write about them; you were the only one who could possibly figure that out; and, I believe that is why your writing style has developed into such a unique entity (more on this later). Therefore, if you accept that we are in the midst of a revolution, what do you perceive is the role of writing in the Information age and your role in the revolution?

STRINGER:

At the risk of sounding argumentative, I can't say I'm entirely convinced there is a revolution going on. The potential for one may arguably be there. Each up-tick in technology opens a new door. In my case, the computer itself is a revolutionary tool. My handwriting sucks the point where pharmacists' can't even read it. And I couldn't put out a clean page on a typewriter if you stuck a gun to my head. However, my sense of the Internet is that it has been all too quickly and completely overtaken by commerce -- a souped up advertising medium, if you will -- to foster any honest revolution, though this doesn't mean that interesting and groundbreaking things won't pop up on it from time to time. Nor do I see where the Internet would significantly change my role as a writer. After all, at its best writing is an art. And art, as defined by one writer I greatly respect, James Baldwin, is the laying bare of truths hidden by the facts. So, a technological advance aside, the role of a serious writer essentially remains the same as it has been: to seek what is true, and write it with resonance enough that readers can't deny it.

STROZIER:

There is, undeniably, a prevailing attitude among academia and intelligentsia in America that the print culture is firmly in control of all writing, and that the Internet is an undeveloped medium, and that writers on the Internet are not "actual writers," and are incapable of producing

literature of any worth. A good example of this would be Dr. Louis Menand of The New Yorker, who has written in that periodical that the Internet is nothing more than a marketing tool. Dr. Menand also attempted to show that because Microsoft Word (he did not specify which version of MS Word) is incompatible with the Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Edition (2003), that therefore technology cannot advance forward. I have written a response to this matter, which I will post on our Web site. What are your feelings on this subject i.e. do you believe such a bias exists; and, if it does, does its existence matter?

STRINGER:

Don't be ridiculous. Everyone knows what the Internet's for. It's for getting your hands on porn without anyone seeing you! Seriously, it is true that we are knee deep in bad writing. "The libraries have been put to sleep with the stuff," to quote Bukowski. And in my opinion, neither the "print culture" nor the existence or nonexistence of the Internet has all that much to do with it, either way. It's not clear to me how the medium in which something is written would improve or worsen the writing itself. Nor can we assume that bad print writers won't sally forth into cyberspace. The Internet is simply a tool and, as such, is only as productive as the person wielding it. Likewise, while the Chicago Manual of Style can greatly enhance one's clarity, this does not, in and of itself, lead to great literature. But, if we can agree that writing is or can be art then, like with any other art, you have to accept that there will be the bad in

with the good; that both are consequences of the continuous pursuit of what is fresh and new and vital. Is there potential for a preponderance of bad stuff on the Web? Perhaps so, given that anyone with a word processor can get “published.” Yet, if the rise of the Internet has sparked more people to write, this is a good thing. The more people you have taking a whack at it -- successfully or unsuccessfully -- the better the odds of something worthwhile, bubbling to the surface.

STROZIER:

I have read two of your books, *Grand Central Winter* and *Like Shaking Hands With God*; and, I am almost through with your third and present book, *Sleepaway School*. I have enjoyed all three works. Your writing style is very unique. I believe that it is a style that is very close to poetry. How did you develop this style?

STRINGER:

You know I once toiled at a far less grand form of writing, when I was in graphic design and marketing and had to cook advertising copy to go with the layout. I remember getting an angry letter from some yokel out in the sticks taking me to task for declaring in print that our product was the world’s “most unique” so and so. The word ‘unique’ is not subject to degree! -- He took pains to point out. There is no ‘very’ or ‘most’ or ‘somewhat’ about it. It’s either unique or it ain’t. I wrote him back

explaining that it was advertising copy, and that advertising copy only bears a passing relationship to the English language. But I haven't used the word with a modifier since. Anyway, I did a lot of logos while I was in that business and one day it occurred to me that what was most potent about a well designed logo is that it reduces an image to its most elemental components while still retaining its essential meaning. The post office's eagle logo is one good example of this. So, I guess I carried this less-is-more sensibility over to writing. Too many writers give you far more than you need. I get bored very easily reading books that are over written in this way. Secondly, I've always felt that words have music and that one of the things I can do in writing is to riff on the size and sound and shape and color of words. I suppose poets do this sort of thing as well. There are, of course, times when the need is to be straightforward, to go for the definitive, for words that are like boxes, keeping out all but the precise thing you are trying to say. More often, I prefer transcendence over precision. I'll go for words that work like diving boards instead of boxes, words which explode a thing rather than define it, words that splash vividly against one another, the whole becoming much more than the sum of its parts.

STROZIER:

You switch tenses often in your writing. You also frequently move back and forth, from the present to the past. Your POV does not change very often, if at all, however. Your sentences are often fragments. Sometimes a

paragraph is relegated to a single line; or, only a few words; maybe, a single word. I experimented with similar writing techniques; and, publishers I sent my works also wrote in terse, one line sentences: *REJECTION*. How were you able to breach the publishing market in general, especially given your predisposition for experimentation? Do you have any advice for writers on how to enter publication markets?

STRINGER:

You've hit me with two very different questions in one, asking about style on the one hand and about getting published on the other. First of all, quite often, a rejection slip doesn't necessarily mean your writing is bad or anything other than that you simply haven't submitted the kind of book a particular publisher is interested in doing. Good manuscripts by good authors get rejected all the time. When people ask me about getting themselves published, I suggest they go to the library and find as many similar published works as they can and submit their manuscripts to the publishers of those books. This won't guarantee you will get published, but at the very least you stand a chance of getting relevant feedback. Publishers are like restaurants, in a way. Each has their preferences of cuisine. In my case it was the publisher who picked me -- after reading my work in *Street News*. The other thing I tell people looking for a publishing deal is to get your work out there as often as you can, even if you hardly make a dime at first. For one thing, good stuff has a tendency of rising to the surface, and for another it helps to have a body of work

already under your belt, if and when a publisher becomes interested in you. As for the style thing, writing has its rules just as in any other practice. For the most part, these were founded in the interest that a writer clearly communicate to the reader what he or she is trying to convey. On the other hand, rules were meant to be broken. Renoir proved, for instance, that lines are not entirely necessary in painting, that light shadow and color were enough for the eye to understand what it was seeing, and therefore enough for him to convey what he wanted. He was pretty much laughed at when he first displayed his work. But, a decade later everyone in Paris was trying to paint like him. I never imagine, when I sit down to write, that I will ever get by simply doing well and following the rules. Fewer and fewer people bother reading these days. I figure that if I want their attention I need to declare war on the very idea that the printed word can't be sharp and cutting and as dangerous as a straight razor. It does help, however, to know what the rules are before breaking them -- that you break them for good reason. In *Grand Central Winter*, the important thing was the authenticity of the voice telling the tale, that it be intimate and inside, like personal testimony, as a counterpoint to the overall objective stance of the book. Given those parameters, lapsing between present and past tense lent a spoken word rhythm to the prose that worked quite well. In the end, though, it's risky to presume that you can succeed merely through the application of style. The best writing is seldom simply a matter of technique alone. There should be something there. Something that you intimately know and care deeply about.

STROZIER:

You have written two memoirs. Why do you like this format, and do you plan on writing in a different form in the future?

STRINGER:

I'm playing with the idea of doing a novel next, but who knows? The more I do of it, the more I find that writing is a process that has a lot less to do with what my plans are than one would imagine. In my generation, the "serious novelist" was much in evidence. And more widely read. These days, mega-bookstores and mass market, million-sellers have all but relegated serious novels to the remainder bin. Memoirs, nonetheless, tend to get read in this environment. And, I have discovered that in them you can do just about anything you could in serious novel, with the added dynamic that the events you are writing about are true. And, being a memoir rather than, say, straight biography, there is leeway enough to allow for theme, subtext, insight, ideas, drama, and all that. These are the things I go for, whatever form I choose to write in.

STROZIER:

Could you please tell me what this line means, from *Grand Central Winter*: "The door to hell is locked from the inside"?

STRINGER:

The narrative in GCW is, by turns, meant to be assertive, definitive, and evocative; and, at times, provocative as well. The quote to which you refer is definitely a thing meant to stay with you. The hope is that the reader will carry it around with him or herself, and from time to time try it on for size against what they see and hear and do. There are things we accept as a given, and then there are things we only truly accept if we earn them. It's the long dry trek through the dessert that makes the drink from the well truly refreshing. So, there is of course no way I will defeat this scheme by explaining myself here.

STROZIER:

What do you think about the state of literature in America, or worldwide?

STRINGER:

I guess this is where I'll have to admit to being no expert on literature with a capital L. Certainly, not world-wide. I'm actually kind of *Zen* about my reading habits. I tend to read stuff which in one way or another happens across my path and catches my interest. From this random sampling, if you will, it seems to me that a lot less of the newer stuff is what I might consider great literature. It just might be that literature with a capital L is out there as much as ever, but not as easily come by.

STROZIER:

Do you think that writing has lost some of its luster in the second half of the twentieth century; and, if so, why do you think this phenomenon happened?

STRINGER:

I certainly think there is indeed a chronology to the arc our literature has taken. In the first half of the 20th century, America was where the action was. We were and remain an undefined thing, a country “constantly on the verge of becoming,” as one English visitor observed. And when you think about why this is, you have to take into account that we are not only a young country but, more important, the only country on the globe, not a consequence of common culture or ethnicity or shared history, but founded upon ideas. In essence, we’re basically a heterogeneous collection of people occupying the same terra firma, whom all bear the brand of this thing called America. And, the struggle for each new generation has been to define what this brand means. Out of all this, arguably, evolved the American novel. But defining who and what Americans are is an elusive business, to say the least. And, the writers that have traditionally shined the brightest in pursuit of it were those who succeeded, at least, in defining their generations. Meanwhile, America essentially remained a nation defined by ideas. And, as we grew in prominence in the world, these ideas began to crystallize into myths that would gradually replace ideas as the

defining factor. By the second half of the century, however, our awareness of the world around us had grown. And we found ourselves questioning these myths. We did some of this in our literature, but more and more of it was in song. Particularly in the late sixties. It became the rock artist, more so than the novelist, who was identified with the voice of a generation and thereby grabbed the luster. Of course, it proved to be a risky business, defining what we are not, in America. To paraphrase Theodore White, in his book, *Breach of Faith*, “If you take away the myths of, say, France or Germany, you still have Frenchmen and Germans.” No so here. We will likely need perhaps another thousand years or so of history before there is an actual definable thing beneath our myths that is an American. And, indeed, in the sixties we became, for a while, unglued. In the end, we mostly scrambled back from the scary business of scratching at the surface of things. So, it’s the luster of the sixties more so than its voice that we remember. And today its Hollywood and TV, the most devastatingly potent myth-making combo of all, which have now supplanted even the rock artist in receiving the lion’s share of luster. All of which leads me to question whether luster is essential to writing and whether, absent of the white hot glare of the spotlights, literature can remain vital, necessary as ever. I’ve got to hope it can.

STROZIER:

What writers influenced you?

STRINGER:

Ellison. Baldwin. Wright. Salinger. Hemingway. Algren. This was, of course, all before the actual fact of my making writing the thing that I do. Their impact was in imparting to me that serious writing matters.

STROZIER:

We share the denominator of Project Renewal, which is a large nonprofit organization, helping homeless New Yorkers. (Dredge the streets and one's sure to salvage a few artists.) The numbers are hard to pin down; but it is estimated that, at least, tens of thousands of New Yorkers are living on the streets of New York City on any given night. Add to that the shelter population, those living in sub-standard environments, unhealthy ones, etc.; and, it would seem there is an epidemic. My own thoughts are that this problem is much more wide reaching than is believed. What are your thoughts on the homeless situation in New York City and America; and, in the world, for that matter?

STRINGER:

In that there are numbers of political reasons to under- or over-quantify the amount of people living on the street (for what numbers are worth), I tend to settle midway between the low and high figure. I find epidemic an apt description for the homeless phenomenon, since it is, after all, on the

streets that the first symptoms of an epidemic would appear. And, I certainly feel that homelessness is indeed symptomatic of some larger thing. The term homeless, however, adds a “them” and “us” distance between the domiciled and the non-domiciled, which throws a bit of subterfuge into the process of trying to determine bigger things. Basically, people become “homeless” when, for one reason or another, the lives they are living become no longer viable; when in one way or another they become lost. And, it’s in this respect that I would agree at the problem is more widespread than believed. For, in many ways, we are all more lost than ever. More and more, we are all urged to accept that the highest standard of living is to each amass our own personal empire; that a relentless march toward wealth, largess, and celebrity is the predominate purpose of life. Our tolerance grows thinner by the day for anything that even smacks of the notion that we might be here to make a personal journey. Or, that it’s okay, much less essential, that we each spend our days occupied by that which holds personal meaning for us. We are offered, instead, endless opportunity to fill our days with busyness, and fill our houses with things; to feed our various appetites and chase our every whim. This was certainly characteristic of the eighties. And, it was in the eighties that we first became aware of all the lost people who had fallen to the street. So: epidemic, yeah. But, I’d say it’s more about our empty hearts than it is about empty homes.

Contributors

Harendran Kallinkeel resides in Taliparamba (Kerala) with his family and owns a farm of rubber, coconut, pepper and areca nuts. He helps US college students online, and owns a company:

<http://www.kallinkeelconsultancy.com/>. He is published in literary print journals, and in numerous online ezines. 'audience' is the brainchild of Harendran Kallinkeel and M. Stefan Strozier.

Lee Stringer lived on the streets from the early eighties until the mid—nineties. He the author of *Sleepaway School*, *Like Shaking Hands with God*, and *Grand Central Winter*. He is a former editor and columnist of *Street News*. His essays and articles have appeared in a variety of other publications, including *The Nation*, *The New York Times*, and *Newsday*. He lives in Mamaroneck, New York.

Graham Hayward is published in numerous online ezines, and his book, *The Rushes*, is for sale on www.worldaudience.org.

Parviz Lak is a published poet, who was born in the south of Iran, in Boroudjerd. He arrived in France in 1982. He is French now but remains a political refugee. He will never return to Iran as long as this Islamic Republic will exist. We can feel deep suffering in his poems, because he is far from his country. But this suffering is enlightened by hope, "hope of the return for each man towards freedom, love and beauty."

M. Stefan Strozier lives in New York City. He is the founder of [La Muse Venale Acting Troupe](http://www.lamusevenale.org/) (<http://www.lamusevenale.org/>). His plays *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats, The Whales,* and *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln* were performed in lengthy runs, off-off Broadway, and in the Midtown International Theatre Festival. He has also directed four plays, professionally, and produced nine, all off-off Broadway. His stories, poems, non-fiction have been published in many online ezines. He has been published in print at *Gallery, War Heroes, Taj Mahal Review,* op-ed pages of the *Chicago Sun Times,* several poetry collections, self-published short story collection, *Sickness of the Young,* and, he was a journalist for his college newspaper. His former pen name is Mila Strictzer. He is also the co-founder of the ezine [audience](http://www.worldaudience.org) (www.worldaudience.org). His plays, books, and his collection of short stories and essays are available, print-on-demand, at his Web site: www.mstefanstrozier.org.

Edward Musto is the author of the plays *Genevieve, Blood Dues, Porter Peace, Boston Proper, The Game of Love,* and *The Ninth Circle,* the latter of which was published in the anthology *Plays & Playwrights 2003*. His short stories have appeared in *Pacific Review, Shots* and *Futures*. Most recently, his play *An Evening of Murder and the Like,* a trilogy of short thrillers, received an Edgar Award nomination from the Mystery Writers of America as Best Play. Recipient of an Edward Albee fellowship, Edward is a member of the Charles Maryan Playwrights/Directors Workshop and The Dramatists Guild.

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