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I told them how lovely the culture was.

FASHION COPYWRITER BY ELLEN BLOOMENSTEIN

his was the hellishly hot week I was let go. I was a copywriter in fashion. I had been with the company only three months but they had unreasonable expectations, asking me to write 65 clothing descriptions in a day, plus their promotional emails.

The company, Martha & Laura, was a plus-size fashion brand that catered to African-American women. I am Caucasian Jew in my 40s, pretty much ancient in the world of fashion, but Martha & Laura catered to an older customer, so I thought I might have a real chance at this job.

My previous job was for a company called Metropolis where they made cheap clothes in the latest trends. I thought of it as "throw-away fashion". I specialized in emails and did some descriptions, but they didn't renew my freelance contract and hired someone younger for less money—at least that's what I heard from my former co-workers.

I visited one of Martha & Laura's shops in Harlem, gone to Sophie's, a soul food restaurant uptown for brunch, and attended a service at the Abyssinian Baptist Church. In other words, I immersed myself in the culture.

I was interviewed at Martha & Laura's by about a dozen people, each of them telling me how wonderful Martha & Laura was. (Some of them said that they didn't like my previous employer Metropolis, but although Metropolis hadn't renewed my contract I liked working there.)

I told the interviewers I liked the individual attention customers got in the Martha & Laura store and how lovely the culture was. Despite my age and their lack of respect for Metropolis, I was offered the job.

In the first three days I was ready to quit. First off, it was a heatwave. It was so hot and muggy outside which was dreadful, but they blasted the air conditioning so high in the office which was even worse. One employee, Julie, a large and pretty African-American woman who sat next to me turned on a portable heater she had for such occasions below her desk. I was freezing as hell. And, the

amount of work that was expected from me, the work that just kept piling on and the fast pace which included my boss asking just about every hour, "How much have you done?" and "How much more can you do?" I was writing furiously for their website. The clothing kept coming, the descriptions had to keep being written.

Let me explain here what writing a fashion product description entails. In most companies where I've worked there are one or two sentences of romance copy—that's the descriptive copy: A beautiful fall boot that takes your look from work to weekend... Pair with a great pair of jeans or trousers for elevated everyday wear...

At Martha & Laura they wanted the copy to appeal to African-American women from ages 35 to 50 and written like you were speaking to your best girlfriend. Hey Diva, finish your look in this chevron print skirt for a style that's sure to slay this holiday!

Then the SEO (stands for Search Engine Optimized) title copy. These are the key words that a customer searches to find the product online, such as skirt, side zip, chevron print, knee-length skirt, pleated skirt, fashion skirt,

We want to keep you, so for now do as much as you can.

rhen the details, side-zip, kneelength, pleated. Then the care instructions. For most companies, machine wash or dry clean is enough, but at this company they wanted you to write the entire care label: Turn inside out, machine wash cold with like colors. Do not bleach. Hang to dry. Iron on reverse side with cool iron. Then the origin: Made in USA.

So each description took about 15 to 20 minutes (sometimes more) to write. It was tedious and time consuming. I could write maybe 30 to 35 descriptions a day but there was no way I could meet the expectation of 65!

I also wrote emails, like I mentioned. These were composed of a subject line (the sentence that appears in your inbox). And the topper, the sentence that appears at the top of the page when you open the email. Also there was the body copy to write, catchy headlines and descriptions to go below the photos or graphics. And there were the headlines for landing pages and copy to write for videos, other projects, and more!

My co-workers were laughing, socializing and basically having a good time. "Why look so blue, Girlfriend?"

On my third day I spoke to the President of the company, a stout African-American woman who wore a different head scarf every day and bright Dashiki dresses. I started by saying that the job might not be the right fit. I explained to her that it was an unreasonable amount of work. She said they were going through people like they were going out of style. They wanted to keep me, what could they do?

I told her how out-of-date the computer system was, how hard it was to be speedy writing the copy in the Excel spreadsheet with all the different fields to fill in, how I could sure use some help.

She was very kind and said, "Just do as much as you can, honey. I spoke to the creative team yesterday and they really like you, they think you are even trying too hard. We want to keep you, so for now do as much as you can."

I felt some hope after the conversation and went about trying to write as much as I could.

My immediate boss Antonia was a short Latina woman in her late thirties with huge hips and a large behind. She had dyed blonde hair (I could see the dark roots at the top of her head). And I could tell she hated me.

"Send me a list of everything you have done by 5pm," she would say.

"Okay, but I have to write the emails now."

"It shouldn't take you more than half an hour."

"But I have 35 emails to write—"

"Write the emails and then 40 descriptions. It's only 4pm."

"That's only an hour and half—"

"You should have it done by then. It's very doable." She would then click her tongue and leave me with all that work.

The other co-workers sitting near me laughing and joking would make it hard to concentrate. I took a deep breath and started on the emails.

"Hey Ellen," Maureen would call from across the aisle from her desk. She was a small, pretty African-American woman with a cropped afro, "Swamped with work again? Don't worry Sunshine, you can't do the work of two people all in an hour and half in real life, Antonia has got to know that."

Some weeks I worked well over 40 hours but I only billed for 40.

"Thank you," I said and got back to work.

Half an hour later, Antonia swung by my desk, "How many descriptions have you written?"

"Zero. I'm still writing the emails. I have 20 more to write."

"That's because you keep taking breaks."

"I haven't been taking breaks. I went to the bathroom over an hour ago."

"Yes, I get it. You need to go to the bathroom, so do I. But you haven't written the 40 descriptions. This is unacceptable. And, another thing," she looked at me, "please stay off your phone while at work."

Everyone checked their messages, Facebook, and Instagram throughout the day. I didn't do it too often, but I did check every once in a while.

The company refused to pay me more than for a 40-hour week because they didn't pay overtime. Some weeks I worked well over 40 hours but I only billed for 40.

One week I was sick one day so I thought I could bill an extra hour or two. Boy, was I ever wrong. Antonia rejected my timecard and said that I was taking a lot of breaks and had billed the wrong amount. It was nasty and unnecessary. I did the timecard again and billed only 32 hours. Antonia didn't approve this timecard till the following day so I had to wait an extra week to get paid. Timecards had to be in by Monday at 5pm or they wouldn't be paid till the following week.

Other co-workers would say, "I feel sorry for you, your job is really a two-person job." Then whoever said it would lose interest in talking to me and return to the other co-workers and start laughing and joking all over again.

The office was a continuous fashion show. Most of the women who worked there were African-American and plus size—they wore the Martha & Laura clothes. They were mostly in their 20s and 30s. One woman, Amy, was a thin, short woman about 24, white, with makeup like a Kabuki doll. She wore a completely different outfit every day. Other employees always noticed what she wore. "Miss Thang! Hey Ames, you look fierce today!"

Amy only talked about clothes and how she looked in them. She was the Marketing Assistant, Antonia's right-hand woman. She tried to order me around, telling me that product descriptions were missing on the website and that they needed to be written ASAP. I learned to deal with her by telling her how adorable she looked. She seemed pleased that I noticed.

I, on the other hand, wear mostly Gap and Old Navy. I may not be in the very latest trends, but I think I'm a bit stylish.

The Vice President, Janie, sent me an email asking how I proposed to get all the work done.

I wrote back a very polite email explaining to her that I could sure use some help. I suggested that maybe someone in the office could help me out or maybe they could hire an intern? In any case I wrote that I knew the need of the company was to get the copy up on the website and to that end, I needed some help to get it accomplished.

I should explain that they had doubled my work by then. Instead of a rack of 250-300 items of clothing, now there were two racks to write about in a week. To make matters worse, other people in the office asked for copy for their projects, and I still had emails to write each week, and copy for the website.



That Tuesday afternoon at about 4pm Antonia sent me an email telling me that I had to meet her at 5pm. I went to her office at ten to five and she was on the phone. She looked at me, clicked her tongue, and said, "I am not available right now. We'll have to meet tomorrow."

So I went back to my desk and got back to work. I lived in New York City and the office was in Secaucus, New Jersey. I would take the O train in Manhattan and get off at 34th Street, walk over to Penn Station and get the train to Secaucus. There I waited for the company van to come pick me up to go to Martha & Laura. Altogether this would take about an hour and a half. I would do the reverse commute to get home. And the van only picked us up at 5.30pm. If I missed the van, I would have to take a cab to Secaucus which was easily a 10-dollar ride.

So, I was a little relieved that I didn't have to meet with Antonia that afternoon, I didn't want to miss the van.

But then at 5.15-pm, Antonia appeared at my desk. She said, "Come with me."

I went with her to the back of the office, a big open space with a few meeting rooms and racks of clothes. It was cold as hell. Colder than hell. She told me to wait in a conference room while she got Janie.

Janie was probably in her late 60s, a fair-skinned Caucasian woman with bright blonde hair and a worn-wrinkled face that gave her the appearance of a perpetual frown. She wasn't a nice or kind woman. When I was learning their computer system to upload the clothing copy to the website, she had little patience and was basically just plain nasty that I didn't understand the system immediately.

I sat at the large Formica table that took up most of the room and I thought: So, okay they are going to fire me. Okay. Okay. It won't be much, but I'll get unemployment. It's okay. I'll finally be released from this hellish job. It's okay.

I was as cold as hell, but the weird part was that I was sweating. It'll be okay whatever happens...cold as hell...

Antonia appeared with Janie and they sat down. I was sitting to the left of Antonia and Janie was directly across from me.

Janie started, "So, we understand that you think you need help."

"Yes," I said. I could feel myself sweating but I was also freezing. Okay, it'll be okay...

"Well, we're paying more than \$147,000 a year and you can't accomplish the work? It's cheaper for us to do it ourselves than to pay for your copy."

"I'm confused," I said, "I don't earn more than 30 dollars an hour."

"Yes, that's because your agency is pocketing all the money!" She looked furious, "And your clothing titles in the descriptions are too long!"

Antonia looked up at that point and said, "Yes, Ellen, I've told you that a million times."

I had never heard this before now, "Oh," I said, "I can make them shorter."

"Yes, it's about time you shortened the titles!"

'So," Janie continued, "We decided we'll get you some help, but if this person is a better writer than you, we'll keep them and get rid of you."

"Okay," I said.

Janie stood up, "That's all."

It was 5.40pm. I had missed the van. I called a cab in the lobby. I pushed open the double doors and was overcome with dense heat. Hot as hell.

Goodbye guys, I said to everyone near my desk. I didn't wait for a response.

That evening I told my boyfriend, Adam, who I live with, the whole story. He's an opera singer and had just come home from a rehearsal at the theater. He hugged me and said it would be okay. "I give you permission to leave this job," he said.

"Well, I don't want to quit."

"Okay, baby, you do what you think is best."

Adam sat down on the couch and pressed the clicker for the TV and I sat down next to him to watch Rachel Maddow on MSNBC.

A week later, I was actually beginning to catch up. Antonia wasn't in that day and I had completed all of the October clothing samples and I just had November to complete. Since it was October 6th, I thought I was in pretty good shape. I still had another rack for the week but it was Friday and I thought I wasn't doing too badly. I was freezing, but in a good mood. I was trying to warm up by moving. I was taking the finished rack of clothes to the back when Janie waved to me. "Can you stop by my office when you get a chance?"

It was 4pm. I dropped off the rack and then went to Janie's office.

She said, "Have a seat."

I sat. Her office was astonishingly hot. Hot as hell...

"Wow, it's warm in here," I said.
"Yes I turn off the AC."
"Oh?"

"We've replaced you," she said.

I felt a sting, "Well I don't think this was a good fit," I surprised myself by saying, and then I said, "Thank you very much," and extended my hand. We shook hands.

She seemed dumbfounded. I don't know if she thought I would get really upset or even cry? But actually I felt like doing neither.

"We are now in crisis mode due to the unfinished descriptions. Please return your passkey to me before you leave."

I went back to my desk and gathered all of my stuff. "Goodbye guys," I said to everyone near my desk. I didn't wait for a response. For the first month after I was let go, I got teary-eyed at anything remotely sad on TV or online. I applied and got unemployment. I was also submitting my resume to every job that seemed possible online and touching base with all the recruiters I possibly could, without many responses. I was sleeping late.

"I'm worried about you, baby," Adam was standing over me in bed.

"I'll be all right," I said and turned over to go back to sleep.

"Honestly," he said, "It's almost 12pm."

"Okay, okay - I'm getting up!"

I did get a new job. Also as a fashion copywriter. This time at a large corporation writing for women's and men's clothing and any size, shape, color, age, and ethnicity. The work was good, challenging, and fun and the amount of work was, in Antonia's words, doable.



ELLEN BLOOMENSTEIN

I was writing a lot about job experiences and thinking about a book to write about jobs in fashion. Then when my actual job ended and I had had an awful job and then it did end (thank god) I decided to write about it while embellishing the facts and drawing from other experiences as well. I wanted the characters to be me and my actual boyfriend, so I didn't change our names. I did, however change the names of all the other characters. I wanted this story to seem real and have the reader wonder whether it was fact or fiction or both which indeed it is. I wanted to blur the lines between fact and fiction.

I've had stories published with 34thParallel, Drunk Monkeys, Pig Iron Press. I've also had poems published on Referential, Zeek, Good Foot, Rosebud, Sonora Review, and more. I have an MFA from the New School and an undergraduate degree from Skidmore. I've also self-published a novel and novella. I do work as a copywriter in fashion in New York City and I'm lucky enough to live with my favorite person, my boyfriend Adam.









THIS ABOVE ALL ELSE BY CORIE ROSEN

This above all else:
Write nothing pastoral.
Do not celebrate the seasons.
Do not clasp hands with time.
Do not write about love.

(Whatever you do, please don't do that.)

This above all else:
No lines about fields and gardens.
There are people screaming in the streets and it's not the nineteenth century after all.

This above all else:
No more dreamy eyes turned cloudward.
No more of this lover's business.
No more stars winking in unselfconscious delight.

The slithering line of the freeway.
The smog lung of this city.
The men who cry "science is a hoax" while we (by which I mean you and I) busy ourselves trying urgently not to love.

This above all else:

This above all else:

The cries of "it was always happening"
The boys who watched hope slip from its sockets.
The girls who turned their eyes skyward
as we all did, once, faces tilted upward
trying to forget how to welcome the sweet, soft breath of night.

CORIE ROSEN

This past fall. I attended a writer's residency in Western Massachusetts. The leaves were falling from the trees, the streets full of their red and golden bodies. It was cold and remote and romantic. Toward the end of the residency, I found myself sitting at the town's only bar, a narrow lakeside tavern. While I was finishing my glass of wine, I got into an argument with a wild-eyed math professor in his sixties. The professor—whose name I never got—insisted (after he'd drunk two or three martinis, his hair going wilder all the time), that math is a kind of Romanticism, a pure aesthetic. Mathematics, he claimed, is an expression of true nature, and true nature is always beautiful. I argued that aesthetics are shaped by culture and experience, but he disagreed. To him, the discipline itself was the aesthetic, not the content or even its forms.

Months later, as I was working on a cycle of love poems (a sort of short story in poetic narration), I started to think about whether romantic love, like math. might be its own aesthetic. I wrote this poem, I think, to explore that question. Our world, the world of social media, of false personas, of the commodification of sexual partners, of constant advertising of the self to others, seems to preclude the kind of elementally pure romantic love that writers from earlier periods have exalted. (I like to think of what might have happened if Keats and Shelly had been on airplanes and Instagram, instead of at manor houses and in row boats).

That pure, elemental, love still exists, I think. We're just not supposed to talk about it, maybe because it's difficult to understand, because it can't be easily explained, commoditized, or sold. I think this poem is asking whether there is still space for something like a pure aesthetic when it comes to experiences of love and of wonder. The answer that I think this poem offers is that it isn't possible to ignore love or the beauty of the natural world around us. For all of our apps, swipes, and stories, we are only ever our most naked human selves.

I have a degree in literature from UC Berkeley, a graduate degree from UCLA, and have taught writing at Arizona State University and at the University of Colorado Boulder. My writing has been published in Arts & Letter, Juked, and Crab Creek Review. My first book of poems, Words for Things Unsaid, is to be published by Aldrich Press in 2020.

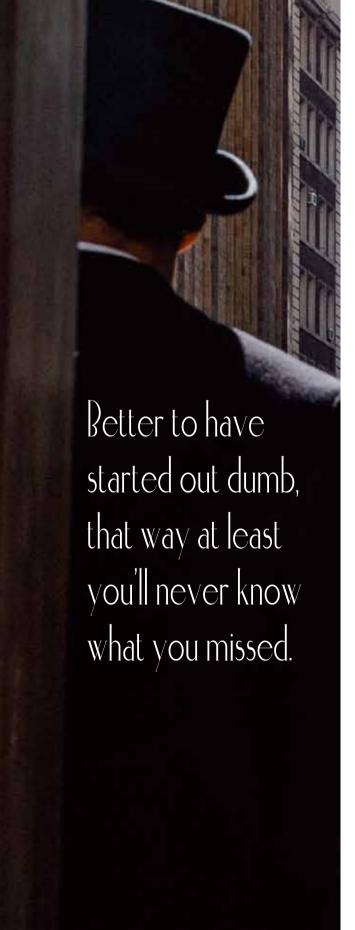
Images by Jeff Felder.





Having to waste our lives like this, letting our time on this earth slip away for nothing.





THE HALLMAN BY CORA CRUZ

he worst part about jobs like mine is the way they make you stupid. If you weren't stupid to begin with, stay with the job long enough and for sure you'll deteriorate. Better to have started out dumb, that way at least you'll never know what you missed.

I'm a hallman, as they call me, but I work the elevators too and sometimes the door. My other title is relief-man, which means I cover for breaks. I'm next in line for supervisor, management tells me, since I know everyone's job and have a sense for how they fit together. I'm not sure I want the trouble, though. For an extra 5000 dollars at the end of the year—which isn't even that because they take out a third in tax—you get the pain of being responsible for a bunch of lazy bums, everyone trying to pass off their work on someone else, porters never showing up, handymen conveniently forgetting, this one drunk or that one smoking weed in the basement, and it's all on you. What does a couple of extra thousand dollars get you in New York? A month's rent is all, for a year's worth of headache.

But as I was saving, it's not dealing with the others that's the worst, or even the tenants. Some of the tenants are decent, treat you with respect and ask about your family, and it's clear they do care. Some even go out on a limb for you, they'd write you a recommendation if you need it or put in a good word if you ask. I've had a tenant or two stick up for me in a dispute. But about half of them treat you like furniture. Still, this isn't what I mind most. It's the way they tell you that you can't read, even when there's nothing going on and you're standing there in your uniform in the entrance or at your point in the hall, or sitting at the desk in the lobby, or on the stool in the elevator, bored to death. It's the boredom that kills you. If you don't find ways to occupy your mind you won't make it, that's certain. It does something to you. They say stress kills, but I think they confuse stress with boredom. The guys, you see them after a while doing anything to avoid it. They talk shit, constantly. About their adventures with women mostly, though we all know most of the stories are made up, or commenting on women as they pass by, observing everything, speculating. JC's gay

so he comments on the men and it's all shit. Sometimes I ask them if they all just have shit for brains, if they've ever read a book or thought about anything ever in their lives, but it's pointless. I get it though—even if you're motivated, after a while you give up.

We sneak a look at our phones when we can. But you're fired if you're caught reading. Every few months the superintendent sends around a letter saying anyone seen on his phone will be sent home on the spot. For one or two months after that we put away our phones till the boss chills out, but then, little by little, we take them out again, till a few months later another letter gets circulated.

My wife says it's the same at her job. She's a secretary, or as they label it these days an administrative assistant. That's what they call the women they hire to organize an office, but she says she doesn't care, it's all the same thing. She comes home sad and frustrated every night. They promised her all kinds of stuff when they hired her, they said things about future opportunities and growth, she was excited and bought two suits, but once you get hired as a secretary, she found out, it's for life. If you've



worked at that even for a little while, it sticks to your resume like super glue and no one ever sees anything else, especially the large companies. My wife, she was born in Colombia, came here with her mom and baby sister after her father was assassinated, worked her way through high school and college while still taking care of her sister and then raising our first kid, taught herself Portuguese by watching TV till she was fluent, all that, and they treat her like an idiot. She wanted to be a doctor, maybe go back to Colombia one day to help the children there. Now she makes appointments or books travel all day and answers phone calls. She's supposed to be grateful. Everyone around her getting promotions, them no different than her except they went to a fancy school and got a degree in finance, and they didn't need a job so badly like she did then, that she had to take something convenient, something just for now, so she could go to classes at night or pick up our son from daycare, not knowing it would get her stuck forever.

Well we're on the same page about that. An army of doormen and hallmen could join an army of secretaries to protest the life sentence of stupidity we serve. But no one ever organizes a protest about this. No one ever brings it up. Not the people on TV that go on and on about racism and sexism and inequality. Not even our union, which is pretty good I'll admit in other ways. We get decent health coverage, dental too, for now, and the wages—well they're not great. nothing you can get a house on or support a family, but they could be worse. Still, no one talks about what it does to us, having to waste our lives like this, letting our time on this earth slip away for nothing, every day at work the same as the one before, watching ourselves never improving, never growing, not ever going anywhere.

We're supposed to only care about money. And it's true, when you have money, you do get treated like you're intelligent, even when you're not. Most of the tenants in my building—it's a luxury building in Manhattan, so you know they're all at least billionaires—don't have enough brains to fill my grandmother's thimble, as she used to say.

One tenant, some famous economist, wrote a book on poverty. It got us all talking, since some of us read it. Basically it said we're poor because we're lazy. I read that chapter. Of course, is what I told the guys. Why should we care about working, when to us, working means doing the same thing over and over and over again. getting paid the same too, which isn't nearly enough to make it even slightly worth it? For that, better to sit around, than be somebody's slave. And why should we care about reading. or studying, when that doesn't get us better jobs either? Unless like I said it's to relieve the boredom. Please. No one ever sat down, had a conversation with a doorman, noticed he had potential, and sent him to Yale on a scholarship. We're supposed to get excited about training programs in mechanics or refrigerator maintenance or waste disposal, which would pay about as much as what we make now, and would be about as interesting when you come down to it. Why bother. And if you're over 20, forget about it. People assume if you're an adult already, you've got nowhere to go mentally. Myself, I'd be a better student now that I'm 45 than I ever would have been when I was 20, when I couldn't have appreciated college even if I'd gone.



So naturally, given the situation, you get revenge where you can. Laziness is a great kind of revenge, and trust me, my co-workers excel in that. I'm not saying I approve, it's just a fact. You observe it. I don't always think it's fair. The tenants in my building pay thousands in maintenance fees, in other words for us servicemen, so I guess the least we owe them is a smile and a helpful attitude. I'm sure we'll all be replaced by robots soon and then there'll either be something else boring for us to do or we'll just starve to death. Why not be courteous then, and call the plumber when we say we will, instead of forgetting about it and lying later.

It hurts me though to see this behavior in other cases, where it matters more. I used to take my lunch breaks across the street in Central Park when the weather was good, and you see all the nannies of rich people there. They sit on the benches with their phones talking, playing games, or watching shows. They pay no attention to the babies or toddlers that are fastened into their carriages. They cry, those little things, you see they're struggling to get out, they want to crawl or

learn to walk or explore. You know the sitters tell the parents that they took the kids to the park for hours to play, but they fabricate. It's too much trouble to supervise a baby crawling around—it'll get dirty, then you'll have to clean it up, or it'll put God knows what in its mouth and you'll get blamed and too much work, too much hunching over, to hold a toddler's hand to help it learn to walk and climb, like it's meant to do if it's to develop properly, so the nannies just leave them strapped down for hours. When the babies get too fussy. I see how the nannies turn the strollers to face away from them and jerk it back and forth with one hand, still on the phone with the other, still sitting on the bench. At feeding time they prop the bottle up somehow in there—that baby just never comes out—and keep on talking on the phone, or sometimes to each other when they're in a group, each with a stroller facing away with the top down, bottles propped and pathetic crying coming from inside. They're hoping the kid just gives up, takes a long nap and leaves them alone, which eventually of course it does. What do they care, it's not their kid,

and you know that deep down, there's a real hate for that kid and for its parents. After a few hours. they get up off the bench and take the babies home, where you know they tell the parents that the child had a great time playing and exercising. The parents are tired then from work and are looking to put the kid to bed. where it's completely miserable and restless again and has to cry itself to sleep all night. The kid can't explain because it can't talk and the parents will never know why it comes down with all these problems later, like hyperactivity and attention deficit, emotional problems, being overweight and all that stuff they talk about these days that kids have. You see the whole scenario, you take the whole thing in at a glance as soon as you sit down on a bench with your coffee next to a nanny on her phone, the stroller that's facing away from her, that thin little crying coming from it, like the kid already knows it's no use but can't help it. What that kid goes through flashes in front of your eyes. It got to where I was so upset, sweating and shaking as soon as I crossed the street to the park and saw those ladies on those benches

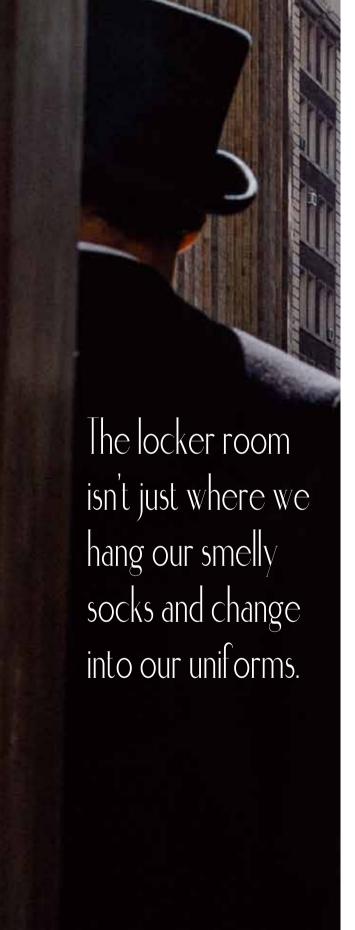


with those terrible strollers with those awful sounds coming out of them, that I gave up eating outside and take my lunch break these days in the basement.

Once or twice I've tried talking to them, but it's hopeless. They have such faces, these ladies—the cheeks puffed and then pulled down in a scowl, the lips shoved forward and turned down too at the edges, just as mean and stubborn as can be, their little eyes gleaming with meanness, or big eyes, drooping, their expressions dull and flat. I see these faces a lot in my neighborhood, the bulldog faces my wife and I call them. On my ride home, as the train moves further from the city toward our borough, as the stations we pass get dirtier, filled up with garbage and the walls covered with political statements, as the manners get forgotten and riders pick their noses, wipe their fingers on their pants, crack their knuckles one by one, real slow, or scratch themselves, floss their teeth, clip their nails and snort—that deep back of the throat sound that reminds you of farm animals—the car fills up with them. You see these faces on white or black people, Eastern European, Asian,

or Latin American, that's not the issue. They're not like the faces of the tenants where I work, which can be uptight for sure, or like the faces you see on the streets in Manhattan, which are stuck up and spoiled but sometimes also look like they're either always hunting or always being chased. The bulldogs are not like the faces that I was used to when I was growing up either, where everyone was so nice it made no sense, them being dirt poor with nothing going for them. No, the faces in my country when I was little were sweet, even when they belonged to the most backwater hillbillies. Rodriguez, at work, says that's because they were descended from the Taino tribes. who were gentle and kind but too trusting and usually got eaten by the Caribs or taken advantage of by the Spaniards. Well anyway. I never saw these bulldog faces till I came to New York. Maybe it's a new thing related to modern life. Maybe it's an old thing from certain parts of the world that still clusters and grows in pockets on the outskirts of cities. I don't know. But I've learned to look the other way when I see them coming.

The basement where I take my breaks has the workers' lounge, a small kitchen and the locker room. plus a lot of other things of course. mostly storage. We run a pretty good gig when tenants renovate or throw out belongings furniture, clothes, books, baby gear, toys. We bring these to the basement and negotiate on who takes what, depending on who discovered it—for example if the lady in 6B wants my help getting rid of her old desk, which is pretty magnificent you can bet even if she's exchanging it for a better one, then if I have no use for it myself and can't afford the shipping to my cousin in the Dominican Republic, I'll offer it to a co-worker who'll save me the trouble and sell it online, in exchange for certain things, maybe rides home if they have a car, or they'll buy me dinner or cover for me if I'm late or need to leave early. We have a pool also where we loan money to members—you never know, a quy gets himself into a bind—and we keep each other up to date on what's going on with the tenants, not just what pertains to our duties but more interesting matters too. Like I said, we're all more or less trapped in



these jobs, and some of us mind more than others, but there's a code about how we should be treated, beyond union negotiations which I mostly ignore, though I appreciate them in theory. The locker room isn't just where we hang our smelly socks and change into our uniforms, it's where the balance of power gets worked out—the balance between us and the tenants. We servicemen may disagree on a lot of things, for instance some of them actually like the job and think it's a good use of their time and abilities, while others, like me, find it a perpetual disgrace. But when it comes to us getting our due from the tenants, whether as consideration or as monetary compensation, we stick together. What happened to Mr Kaas is a good example of the consequences when tenants ignore these unwritten rules.

Mr Kaas, or K as I'll call him, wasn't a real tenant though, so maybe that explains his ignorance. Still, he was a smooth operator, and slick as he was, it was kind of a shame that his whole scheme, the one he worked so many years to pull off, came to nothing for such a careless error. He'd met

our former tenant, Mr Hessel (H), in a bar of course, by coincidence seemingly, though nothing in this case was coincidence. H was by then already pretty far gone—his eyes had already turned yellow and his skin had begun to darken. We'd known H for years, he was a drunk but always cool with us. Took care of us every Christmas. For a while he got on the wagon and we were glad to see it. His skin started looking better and he seemed happier. It was that new wife of his who kept him straight, a very good-looking Scandinavian woman. H had taken some pictures of her, artistic, nude in a pool or garden, that we found in the trash when they divorced and she'd gone back to Europe. We all appreciated them and agreed that was a fine looking woman. She'd gone away happy, everyone said, with a few hundred million, but we all knew that amount was nothing to him. H hit the bottle real hard after that.

It was around this time he met K. who said he was some kind of entrepreneur, and they quickly became friends. K was over all the time, they went out to shows and parties, and started a business venture doing photography in the Amazon. We saw a couple of their photographs in National Geographic. H had a love for art, not just photography but a collection of paintings he spent a lot of time on. You felt like you were in a museum when you went to his apartment. H was a skinny guy, always dressed elegant, and they made a pair: K so huge, blond hair sticking up, dressed like some kind of hippie, in shorts even when it snowed. They were both womanizers. H was known to have girls over he always used the best services and we treated the ladies respectfully when they came, taking them up to the apartment and then back again a couple hours later, calling them cars and making sure they were safe. Very classy they were too, young and well dressed, they'd talk to us and usually slip us a little something for our trouble although we'd have done it anyway. As for K, H bought him an apartment nearby so K could keep his girlfriend there. She



started hanging out with them a lot too then, took H to some doctor's appointments, and told everyone how worried she was when the doctor said that H was absolutely not allowed to drink any more, not even a drop. K and his girlfriend got very strict, not letting H drink, and we were all supportive of this.

Well, time went on and they went to parties and on trips, they kept busy, the three of them, and somehow before you knew it H was drinking again. K was very concerned. Toward the end, he even fired H's housekeeper Lucy, the one that had done everything for him for 35 years, saying he wanted to take care of H himself, that's how good a friend he was. Lucy went back to the Philippines with only two hundred thousand, which we thought was a shame given all the years she'd worked for him, but maybe that stretches far over there. H turned darker and darker. K became very friendly with us, saying how much he was obliged and how he'd be sure to show it, and after the funeral, which he organized all by himself since H wasn't close to his family, he moved into H's place. We kept this low-key. Paintings started

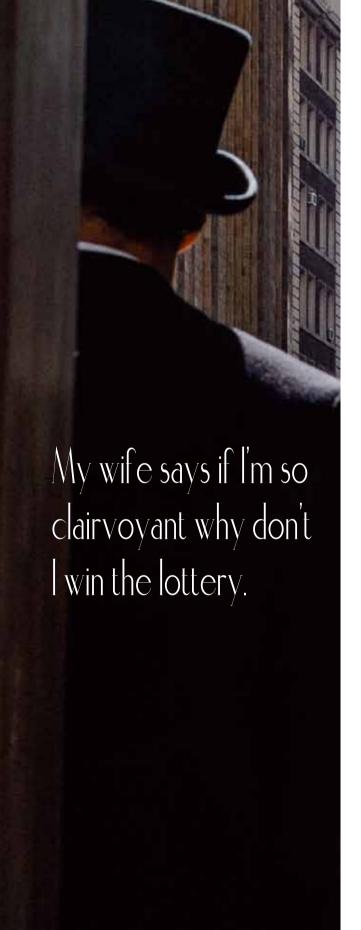
going from the apartment, K would bring them down and we'd help him carefully load them onto trucks. Sculptures too, all kinds of stuff. We looked out for him and never said anything to management when mail came for H, or notices, we just handed everything over to K like he asked. We looked forward to our bonuses that Christmas.

Wouldn't you know it, the holidays came and went, K kept on the same as ever, living in that apartment and moving stuff out of it, and we got nothing. Not one of us, not even a 20-dollar bill. We'd start looking at him, like waiting, but he didn't seem to notice. His girlfriend had moved in by then too and they were occupied hosting a lot of parties and going on a lot of trips. Sometimes mail would come for H but we stopped giving it to K, keeping it in a pile. We started getting curious about it and found out, after searching a little online, about H's next of kin. They'd be interested in that apartment, we figured, and in whatever was left in it. Maybe insurance companies had documentation about its original contents and owner, we wondered. By the time the next holiday

season came around, K ignoring us again, Rodriguez and Santos paid a visit to building management, with the pile of mail we'd kept and the addresses of all the family of H that we could dig up. The following week K and his girlfriend were escorted out by police. No one ever saw them again, and the apartment was put up for sale by H's relatives.

The guys and I, we talk sometimes about what we would do if we had money like our tenants. We get a fair view of the choices. You can do what H did: collect amazing things, design your home beyond most people's wildest dreams, have parties, travel, and live to indulge yourself. You can do what many of the other tenants do-keep working to keep earning money while your spouse works just as hard spending it. You can go into politics or entertainment. You can teach, write books, or run charities.

Me, I think I'd get tired of decorating my house. I'd use my time to do something I've always wanted, which is find out what my mind is for. Since I was a little kid, I've been curious if other people are like me, and if not, what it can mean. I get messages. I'll get



a vision, a picture or movie in my head, or words written, clear and strong, in front of my mind's eye as if it were physically there, and I'll hear a voice too, along with the vision usually, telling me something. The voice speaks like it has something extremely important to tell me and I'd better listen. The visions, also, come at me like they're insisting, like I can't or shouldn't ignore them. Often I won't know what they mean. Sometimes, though, it's easy: a voice came to me the night my grandmother died, saying clearly, "Mamachila acaba de morir." The next day, my sister called me to report that in fact, our grandmother had died the previous night, exactly when I'd gotten those words. Another time, a voice spoke in my head, saying I should go and look outside the house where I was staying at the time—it was my sister's, I was visiting her in the Dominican Republic. I obeyed, went and checked out back where it told me. and found, hidden in a hollow part of the property wall, a collection of items that some of the locals use for black arts: the head of a chicken, some bones and coins in patterns, a tuft of someone's hair

tied with a string. I scattered them, disrupting their arrangement as much as I could, saying whatever counter-spells I could remember from hanging out in Santiago growing up. Had I not found this, it could have been bad for someone. In 2013, the voice told me that in the next presidential election, a business tycoon known for his hotels would win, and that was long before anyone guessed he would even run.

My wife says, if I'm so clairvoyant, why don't I win the lottery. Trust me, I've tried. It doesn't work for that. It tells me the things it wants, not what I demand, and they're never for me to benefit personally. To tell the truth, they cause me so much annoyance, trying to interpret them, that I often wish I didn't get them. My wife also tells me that she read a book about psychology which says that my brain is a throwback to older times, when humans did not think the way they do now, with the ideas and complicated language we have. Instead, when they did their thinking, it came like hallucinations, voices and visions telling them what to do or what's going on or what's going to happen, same as I get. But the

book says these were just their own brains playing tricks on them, because they couldn't think properly, like normal, educated, non-crazy people can now. I'd like to sit down and have a conversation with the author of that book. I'd ask him, first of all, how he could possibly know what some quy's thinking was like who lived thousands of years ago. I'd tell him, second, that just because we got the technology of reading and writing since then, and all kinds of habits to go with that, where we use them to deal with each other, and then imagine ourselves in certain ways because of how we do that, doesn't mean our brains changed. Any more than our appetites have changed because of what we got used to eating. Or maybe this is what he means. But I'd remind the author that he still didn't answer the question of what our thinking is for, just because he explains how it has worked so far, and how it can be different for people. Well, I'm getting ahead of myself. What do I know. But I'll say this: if I do have a gift, as they say where I come from—if I have some kind of special insight, if something somehow has chosen me for this purpose, then it's got better things to do than tell me how to make money.



CORA CRUZ

My approach to fiction is a committed realism, as much as I can manage. I know that is not everyone's approach. And I know that begs the question of—you know—what is real, what is truth, what is truth-telling, what is the role of a "truth-teller" in our society, or in societies historically; which is why I tend also to be reflexive (philosophical) even in the "fiction". There's always a distancing, you portray a situation, a first personal experience and perspective, but there are always the reflexive examinations in the background (is what I am saying true? How can I know? Why does it matter? How could/should it be evaluated?)

My Hallman story attempts to articulate what I see, from rather extensive personal research, as a working-class point of view that continues to be underrepresented, political hype notwithstanding. Despite the protagonist's ostensibly laid-back personality, he is observant and has something to say. For the theoretically inclined, I'll drop one spoiler: yes, the reference at the end is to Julian Jaynes' 1976 book The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind. For any familiar and interested, I would suggest that perhaps the so-called "bicameral mind" is less a lack of "consciousness" or introspection, than a rational tradition in the MacIntyrean sense, viz: "an historically extended, socially embodied argument that is reflexively concerned with how to conceive the goods that the tradition exists to pursue, or that 'define' it." (citing

MacIntyre's "After Virtue"). Otherwise stated, the narrator's vestigial bicameralism, rather than merely a neurological leftover (though it surely has its neural correlates), may primarily be a tradition of thinking with corresponding values, notions of goods and the good life, that are deeply embedded in his cultural practices. This tradition is not necessarily to be equated with "underclass" consciousness, for it is far more than that, though there are historical-economic reasons now for such identification. It does put our narrator at odds with more discursive, Post-Axial variations of rationality and iustice: and it is at odds with modern liberalism in both its conservative and progressive modes. But it is a tradition which has not been entirely lost, and which continues to emerge sporadically—an ancient stratum deeply interwoven in our biological and cultural fabric.

I live in New York, an independent scholar and writer. I also more or less hold down a day job in financial services and manage on occasion not to completely neglect my three kids. My recent novel is The Meditations of Manuel de la Vega. I've also written for the Tulane Review, New Millenium Writings, the Comparative and Continental Philosophy journal, and a couple times already for the 34thParallel Magazine. I studied philosophy at Hamilton College and then at the New School for Social Research.

He would gaze across the wind-rippled prairie that traveled on and on to the end of the world. Was that where the people had gone?



WHERE DID ALL THE DENTISTS GO? BY ROBERT EMMERS

Can you not see what's happening? Escape is necessary!

ne morning after we'd been together eight years, Miss D announced that we must flee the city. This notion, she said, had assailed her dreams over a period of some weeks,

and indeed she had recently seemed pensive and distracted. I enjoyed living in the city, especially given the easy access to material, blackmarket and otherwise, for my project, but Miss D, whose dreams could be forceful indeed, was adamant. Can you not see what's happening? she said. Escape is necessary! She rarely employed exclamation marks, but when she did I knew better than to contradict her.

But escape to where? Miss D began to take long, rambling trips on her motorcycle, camping out, often gone weeks at a time, and it was during one of these excursions that she came upon M..., which, she told me later, did not appear on any of the maps she carried nor was it recorded by her several GPS devices. She spent an afternoon walking the streets and alleys of M..., after which she determined it was the place to escape to.

Why? I asked.

It may appear my coming upon M... was accidental, she replied, but I do not believe so. The couple who adopted me from the orphanage were physicists of a sort and taught me that the universe is full of mysteries, one being that what might appear to be a chance encounter generally isn't. Which I believe applies in this case, M... being just the sort of place of escape I have been seeking. Two other points recommend it, she added. Number One, as I was walking about, I saw many people, but none of them inquired into my business. Bravo! Privacy is to be cherished any day, but these days especially.

Number Two? I prompted.

Number Two, she said, no children. None at all.

I started to ask about this, but she abruptly walked away to find the tool she needed to help the super fix the elevator in our ancient, crumbling apartment building.

So, the village of M... it was. We left behind the clamorous city of my birth—whose noise, scurry, and frequent riots had never bothered me, just the opposite, in fact—and set off across the prairie for the village that was to be our blessed home going forward. It was an afternoon of blazing sun and hard blue sky that hurt the eyes. Through the chest-high grass the billowing wind cut dark stampede trails

Buffalo, I said to Miss D.

She was looking all around with that penetrating gaze of hers flaming through the thick lenses of her goggles. I don't know if I ever told you this, she said, but sometimes I dream I'm a Sioux warrior chasing bison on a rugged pony with my flint-tipped arrows and painted face.

No, you never told me, I replied, but I wish you had.

Miss D nodded. We might be better off these days, she mused, if there were more Sioux warriors on the scene, given the number of people who should be scalped, but all the Sioux, their hope for the future dead, took that last, long ride west many, many years ago. They understood how things work.

M... was in the middle of endless grasslands many, many miles west of our former city. On our arrival the general impression I acquired was one of bedragglement and ennui. Sagging buildings, flyspecked windows, empty store fronts, dusty streets. The wind carried the aroma of dust and the ghosts of cowboys and Indians.



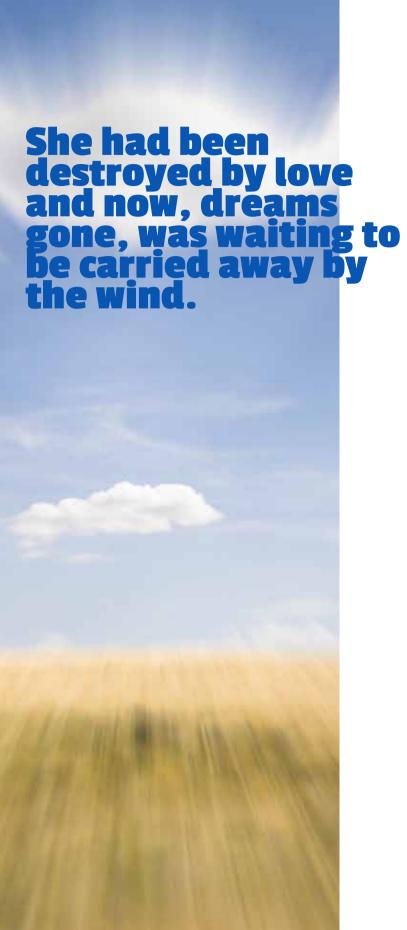
Present-day men and woman were sitting on benches along the sidewalk, in general bearing the bland, unfixed gazes of people who've been in a waiting room too long. A number of these people were holding up newspapers which they might or might not actually be reading. The only headlines I could make out concerned going-out-of-business sales. There were no boys riding bicycles with baseball mitts hooked to their belts nor any little girls squealing about frogs: as Miss D had noted, this village had no children. A few people were walking around but didn't appear to be headed anywhere in particular, just passing time. A train sat supinely at the station, the track ending some little distance ahead of it. A young woman leaned from an upstairs window while a gingham curtain billowed sadly around her, and from this it was clear she pined for someone who had left her.

Although I was a bit worried about finding the necessary parts for my project, the state of the village didn't bother Miss D. Rather, as she carefully examined what in my view were our dilapidated surroundings, she would express her satisfaction with a variety of sotto voce comments. Oh ves. No need for pretense. Just as I hoped. Indeed. our arrival seemed to have restored her normally sanguine mood. Now she examined everything with wide-eved glee and pointed at this and that with childish wonder. The pining woman especially intrigued her. This was. I assumed at the time. because she had studied most of history's strange disappearances such as those of William Cantelo, Wallace Fard Muhammad, Joan Risch, Ambrose Bierce, and Cotah Ramaswami. And, as she pointed out, those are just the ones we hear about because they are famous. There are many, many more. It is possible, she added, that this phenomenon has something to do with parallel universes, which, as you know, I have been studying. But I believe something more fundamental to be the cause. That pining woman, for example. What does the expression on her face tell vou?

I was about to comment, but Miss D held up her hand for quiet and pointed to a house.

It was an old house of two storevs with a tower, set off by itself on the south edge of the village. In front of it was a large, drooping tree, a weeping willow, which seemed fitting. This was because the house looked to me as if it was quivering in despair and might fall down at any moment. Its windows were sightless, its doors should have been hung with exit signs. I was about to convey this impression to Miss D, but I saw she was already enthralled. I should have known. Collapse and ruin had always enticed her

We soon learned that the owner had departed two years ago, leaving no heirs or instructions regarding the property. Just as I suspected, Miss D said. Thus, we shall take possession. As I said before, when Miss D set her mind on something there was no turning back, so take possession we did



We began to furnish it with items found at the area's abundant garage sales. This was because Miss D preferred old things; also there was nothing new for sale in M... Meanwhile, we lived in a conical tent beside the weeping willow, Miss D's idea. We live on a prairie, she explained; we should embrace it. Literally, she added sternly, and showed me the posture she deemed appropriate. Some day, she told me as we flattened ourselves on the grass. fingers digging into the soil, it may be useful, for you especially, to have something to hold onto.

What our neighbors thought of this behavior, I do not know, because generally we were only aware of them as eyes peering through briefly parted curtains. But one afternoon as I came down from my tower workshop, I found Miss D in discussion with a woman. I gathered, presently, that this woman was on her slow way home after walking downtown for a teeth-cleaning appointment with her dentist only to discover him gone like her last dentist and the one before that, the office deserted and boarded up. Heading home, she had seen our tent and stopped by on the off-chance it had

something to do with departed dentists. Miss D had informed her, however, that the tent had nothing to do with dentists but rather was meant to invoke Indians and buffalo, symbols of which she had painstakingly painted on the canvas. Of course, Miss D added as an afterthought, it is true that the Sioux and buffalo did disappear, so in that sense, at least, they are like your various dentists.

Oh, I see, the woman was saying to Miss D as I approached. This woman was a dried-out woman with features scoured into sharp edges by what I assumed was the cutting prairie wind. It was obvious she had been destroyed by love and now, dreams gone, was just waiting for the moment when she could let herself be carried away by that wind. In fact, she was just now explaining to Miss D that she once had a boyfriend, a finelooking fellow who was pursuing his dream of selling Bibles door to door but was finding it difficult since everyone in M... already had a Bible and boxes of abandoned Bibles filled the basement of the deserted church. Then one day, the boyfriend was no longer there. Gone, totally (although for a long time she imagined she could still

see his shadow). And now the various dentists gone too, now and over the years. I'm thinking maybe I should... she started to say but saw me coming and scurried off with a horrified look as if she had just been confronted by an axmurderer.

Yes, her boyfriend's shadow, Miss D said to me later. Lost love is like that. The look in her eyes told me not to inquire further.

The day came when we could move into the house. Miss D was a whirlwind, planting flowers and decorating the shrubs with ancient artifacts she'd acquired during her years in Southeast Asia. (She thought about placing her 1946 Indian Chief with skirted fenders in the middle of the yard as additional adornment but decided against this, she told me, because the motorcycle had an unfortunate tendency to roam by itself. Afraid it might decide to follow the Sioux, she confined it to the shed.) When she was done in the yard, she summoned me from my tower where I was working on the emergency kill switch for my project. (It turned out my worries about finding the necessary parts in M... were unfounded; the village, unsurprisingly, was replete with



junk yards.) As we stood admiring our old house, I congratulated Miss D. A capital job, I told her. Everything is now complete! Of course, I wonder if we could talk about...

No, she replied, children would be a distraction. They have dreams, you see, and they're always chattering about them and the wonderful life ahead. Ha! I am reconciled to the way things are, which includes you.

I do want to note here that I rated our marriage as more or less satisfactory, given the current state of things and despite the issue of children and a couple of other things. Generally, I felt a measure of fondness for Miss D and I believe she felt likewise toward me. Of course, there were also those times when I would want to... But that is a whole different story involving why I started my project. Suffice it to say, working with my hands on my project and thinking about the day it would be completed always saw me through those trying times when I would want to...

Anyway, Miss D now decided to make certain alterations to the house: a deck, a gallery, a gazebo. bigger kitchen. We might as well be comfortable while we are here, she pointed out. I voiced my encouragement. After all, I had my project; why shouldn't she have hers? Without another word, she set off toward the center of the village where we had seen all the people sitting around or walking aimlessly or leaning out of windows. Such a small village, but so many layabouts! Miss D and I had discussed this after we had made our initial inspection of M...

Why are they all here? I had asked.

I had assumed Miss D was thinking the answer might have something to do with multiple universes, a favorite topic of hers, as I pointed out earlier. I knew she had been studying the villagers and I wondered what conclusions she was reaching. I could imagine her brain working away. I could almost see the equations tumbling through it as if propelled by a leaf blower. (She was, by the way, in the process of repairing ours.)

But all she had said was, Why are we here?

At any rate, Miss D, having gone in search of labor for her projects, returned with a skinny young man. (My first thought when I saw him was that he needed pancakes but Miss D prepared pancakes only on certain holidays.) Shortly thereafter, a sputtering truck arrived and deposited piles of lumber scavenged from deserted homes. That afternoon, the skinny young man began to build a backyard deck to Miss D's specifications.

Meanwhile I continued work on my project, the wiring for which was nearly complete. Downstairs Miss D puttered away on the collection of discarded small motors she was rebuilding. At least once a day we would come together in the backyard to check the progress of the deck and to examine the weather trampling across the endless prairie upon which the village of M... cringed. The deck progressed but the weather remained the same: the vast bowl of the sky a deadly blue while beneath it moaned a tireless, unforgiving wind that exhausted the ears. I had been noticing Miss D's mood changing again; perhaps it was this surly weather.

The skinny young man, maybe hoping for platters of pancakes, had managed to sink pilings and lattice them with cross members. Now planking had begun to appear. Miss D pointed out a corner which she said would be perfect for her telescope, the lenses for which she had begun furiously grinding as if she had set a deadline for herself. After a time, the deck was half completed. Miss D and I spent an evening on this finished section engaging in a poetry duel. She won, of course.

There in the starless dark, the poise, the hover, There with vast wings across the cancelled skies,

There in the sudden blackness, the black pall

Of nothing, nothing, nothing—nothing at all.

I should have known the answer, of course, but could not summon it. Before she could hide it, I saw the stony look on Miss D's face. What was going on with her? But I couldn't worry about that; I had to focus on my project.

The next morning, the skinny young man failed to arrive. The absence of hammering enveloped us, a forlorn emptiness.

We waited.

Nothing.

The skinny young man had quite disappeared.

I expected as much, Miss D said, and proceeded to walk downtown where, she told me later, she peered at passersby and through the foggy windows of bars, stores, and offices even though many of them were closed and abandoned, in search of another workman. Their ranks, she found, were sadly diminished.

She did arrive back home, however, accompanied by an older man with his hair in a ponytail. As they crossed the lawn, they were arguing about the Rosenbergs. I quickly fled upstairs to work on my project, the subject of the Rosenbergs being one of those I always avoided around Miss D: she could become exceedingly overwrought! (Their poor children! she would exclaim. Too soon deprived of their youthful hopes!) But she and the ponytailed man seemed to be getting along fine.

At any rate, I soon heard a hammer once more banging away. From my tower, I watched the ponytailed man busily working away at completing the deck. But I noticed that every so often, he would pause in his work and gaze off to the west, across that wind-rippled prairie that traveled on and on to the end of the world. Was that where the disappearing people had gone?

I thought this would be an interesting topic to discuss with Miss D, but she had gone to the hardware store, which was having a going-out-of-business sale, in search of a piece to repair either her telescope or the toilet. (I hadn't quite heard her clearly.) So, I locked the door of my work room and went down to the ponytailed man. He took one more whack at a nail and laid the hammer aside. There, he said wearily, this here deck be finished.

Well, I said, a good job indeed. So, what do you make of all these disappearing people?

He stood in somber thought. His face was lined, eyes sun-bleached. His big, wide teeth were so densely packed it was a wonder he was able to force words out from behind them. What do I make of it? he said after a moment, speaking slowly and with obvious effort—oh, those stout teeth! It's like I told your missus: people come here for a reason. Then they gotta make up their mind. Maybe it takes 10 minutes, maybe it takes 10 years, y'know?

Make up their mind? About what?

The ponytailed man looked at me as if I were a dolt. Why, he said finally, in an exasperated manner, it's because they got choices! There's the Midnight Movers, but that's pretty expensive. Or the Society for Vanishing, maybe The Way to Elsewhere Cooperative. And, of course, some are do-it-yourselfers, like your workmen...

I thought a moment. But where do they... I started to ask.

You don't know nothing, do you? he replied and gave me another exasperated look. Then he picked up his tools and trudged off to begin work on the front porch that Miss D had determined would be the next project to enhance our old house.

Two days later, the front porch unfinished, the ponytailed man was gone.

And that's the way it went.

Miss D would walk down to the center of M... She would return with a likely candidate from the diminishing numbers available. There would be hammering, sawing, drilling, etc etc etc. Then the activity would abruptly cease. The front porch, for instance, was finished by a fat man with a limp who then went to work on the gazebo Miss D thought would add

a grace note to the backyard. He was there hammering away when I looked down from my tower at noon and gone when next I looked down at one o'clock. Then there was a young man with a club foot who was set to work finishing the gazebo; he was nearly finished when he too was simply gone.

Yes, that's the way it went. It was baffling.

One evening as we were sitting on the deck waiting for Venus to rise—this being one of those times when the planet glowed especially brightly, Miss D's spirits were better than they had been for some days—I raised the issue. These men who came here and worked and then just didn't come again, I said. Do you ever see them on your visits downtown?

No, Miss D said, concentrating on the complicated equations she was trying to solve on her iPad, they've chosen to go, of course.

But why? I continued. Where are they going?

Miss D looked up with annoyance. You really don't know? she said

I told her I did not.

She studied the computer screen, pondered, made a notation, started to say something then thought better of it. A habit of hers I found particularly annoying.

The days passed. Miss D continued her treks downtown, returning with more vanishers, a category that now included women. Generally, they made a pretense of working on various parts of the old house, but pretty much nothing of value was accomplished before they went off to... wherever it is they went off to. Meanwhile, I was proceeding with my project. What joy I felt, as I began to fit the pieces together, screwing screws, soldering electronic parts. At last my life would be complete! My woes banished!

At any rate, I was so busy I had little time to spend with Miss D. But finally the day came when I soldered the last little diode into place. Done at last! Eager to hear Miss D's reaction, I leaned out the window of my tower and saw her below in close, animated conversation with a stout woman leaning on a cane. I hurried down and found Miss D alone. I looked all around but all I could see was a trail heading off through the tall grass, empty and endless, dissolving into the far horizon.

I walked a little way along the trail, thinking I might discover some clue, but there was nothing.

I returned, ready to ask Miss D about it, but she was walking away toward the house.

When I entered the parlor, she was sitting on the sofa, pouring tea from her silver Iranian samovar into delicate bone china cups decorated with mythical beasts. Her favorite Beethoven sonata, the 23rd in F minor, played by Gieseking, was on the gramophone she had built. She set out the cups, then leaned back and closed her eyes.

I sipped the tea, then set down my cup. Miss D, I said, I would like to discuss something.

Her eyes remained closed. Your project? she said. Your new diet? The role Of Tiresias in The Wasteland?

No, I replied. What is bothering me is the people who disappear. So I want to ask you again: why do they come to M...? Why do they then go away? Where do they go? What is the answer?

Several moments passed. She still did not open her eyes, but a tiny smile tickled her lips. I wondered if she had perhaps

fallen asleep and was dreaming of things to break so she could repair them.

Buffalo? I ventured. The end of the world? Things breaking? Sioux warriors?

She murmured something I could not make out. I leaned close. Her lips moved again. Very softly, she explained it all to me.

I sat back. Yes, of course.

As she watched me, the tiny smile reappeared, a tiny mocking smile.

Mulling all this over, I went to the gramophone to turn over Mr Gieseking. I heard the closing of the door. When I turned back, Miss D was gone.

I called out but received no answer. I waited to see if I would hear the sound of her motorcycle, but there was only an immense, annihilating silence all around.

Yes, she was indeed gone.

But all's well that ends well, I suppose.

From my work room upstairs in the tower came a long rattle then a drawn-out yowl and finally a soft, conciliatory entreaty. The sound was perfect. In my opinion, there is no emptiness that cannot be filled—with something.

ROBERT EMMERS

I was always both entranced and mystified by stories. I can remember, when I was five or six, visiting great-grandfather in the nursing home to which greatgrandmother, who'd had it up to here, had exiled him. He was half-reclining in a window seat wrapped to the neck in at least three plaid blankets because this was winter on the south coast of Maine and the nursing home wasn't lavish with the forced air. He was telling me a story that featured a crowd of retainers watching the beheading of Mary Queen of Scots. He got in all the gory details—the falling ax, the spurting blood, the severed head rolling down the steps. I have no idea why, for heaven's sake, he thought the story appropriate for a six-year-old. But I do remember thinking there was something magical going on here.

How did great-grandfather know where to start? How did he know what happened next? How did he know when he had come to the end? How did he know who the people were in the story? It was all so mystifying. (I was six years old.)



Some years after those sessions with great-grandfather, while I was dropping in and out of college, attempting to play the banjo and hoping to get a junked bug-eye Sprite running again, I was trying to write short stories. Many involved a character named Annie who lived with the first-person narrator. "That vear they lived in a house by the river. The river flowed down from the mountain. The mountain was blue in the haze. The stones in the river were white, the water was cold, my sandwiches were good, etc, etc." Yes, in those days Papa was still The Man, but my stories were so bad they weren't even bad Heminaway. They were bad bad Hemingway. Anyway, eventually, I went into newspaper work—imitating Papa again, but also as a way to write and get paid for it. That led to a career covering organized crime, blithering politicians, government corruption, and so forth. (Covering mobsters was especially fun: yes, they really do talk like that. And politicians? Way back, I was covering our local congressman and the large contributions he was getting from banks, Congressman, I asked him. what about this contribution from blah blah? He scowled back at me and said, Why, that's peanuts. They couldn't buy me for that! Can't make this stuff up, as they say.)

For my next career I sequed seamlessly into the role of private detective and fraud investigator. (Being an investigator is basically the same as being a reporter—you find out things and then write them up, in this case for your client.) Investigating was a ton of fun too. I mean, what's not to enjoy about getting the goods on some scammer who's knocking down \$10,000 a month tax-free by faking injury or disability. And then getting to write up his prosecution referral! And. of course, there are side benefits like getting to carry a gun and having a license to flip at people while a cigarette dangles from your lip (in those days we were allowed to smoke) and occasionally being scared to death, which gets the adrenalin pumping marvelously.

And then for my third career, I decided I'd better start making some real money so I took a position with a PR firm that specialized in handling crisis situations. What this meant was that if you got arrested or sued or otherwise found yourself in a dicey situation, we'd handle the media in complement to your lawyer's handling of the legal stuff. In practical terms, this meant almost all of our clients

were corporations or wealthy individuals because they were the only ones who could afford our outlandish rates. Mostly what we did was write strateav plans and statements to be delivered by the accused and pitches to try to get reporters interested in favorable stories about our clients. A lot of the work was pretty boring, although it did have its moments: getting a good zinger into a story or coming up with a really devilish strategy. On the other hand, I also thought many of the firm's clients actually deserved the trouble they were facing, which made my eventual exit inevitable.

And so, finally, I come to my fourth and, I fervently hope, last career: writing fiction again, like I wanted to do all those many years ago. Taking that long detour really pissed me off for a while. One day, feeling down, I told my wife how anary I was, in retrospect, at taking that swerve into newspaper work and the subsequent careers. It was my own fault, I told her, but just think where I'd be today if I'd just kept at the fiction writing back then! Forty more years of learning my craft! What a dummy I was!

It was only later, thinking about what I'd complained of in my fit of pique, that I came to an interesting realization. Although it was, in many ways, inadvertent, even in some ways accidental, maybe I wasn't such a dummy after all! Because (and maybe you tumbled to this long before I did) each milepost on that long detour did manage to teach me something about storytelling: How to write logically, with the inessential pruned away; how to discern and then use the details that make a report (or a story) come alive: how to marshal an argument, which is the backbone of any narrative.

But beyond these lessons, and in my opinion more important, are the experiences I compiled during my detour from fiction writing. I now know how it feels to have an otherwise mildmanner husband confess to me that he butchered his wife and if he hadn't been caught would have gone after everybody else who'd ever said a bad word about him. I know what it's like to watch rescue workers pick up body parts leftover from a plane crash. I've listened to all the self-justifying blather of venal politicians and corrupt officials. I've dodged and weaved

through the nonsense spewed by entitled rich people who think they should be excused their sins because... well, because they're rich. I've met dope dealers, gun runners and people smugglers, and the cops and government agents chasing them. I've interviewed mothers who just lost their children. I've lived on the street with a couple of homeless guys. I've...

I could go on, but I won't. (There were also, by the way, a lot of relatively normal people on the list.)

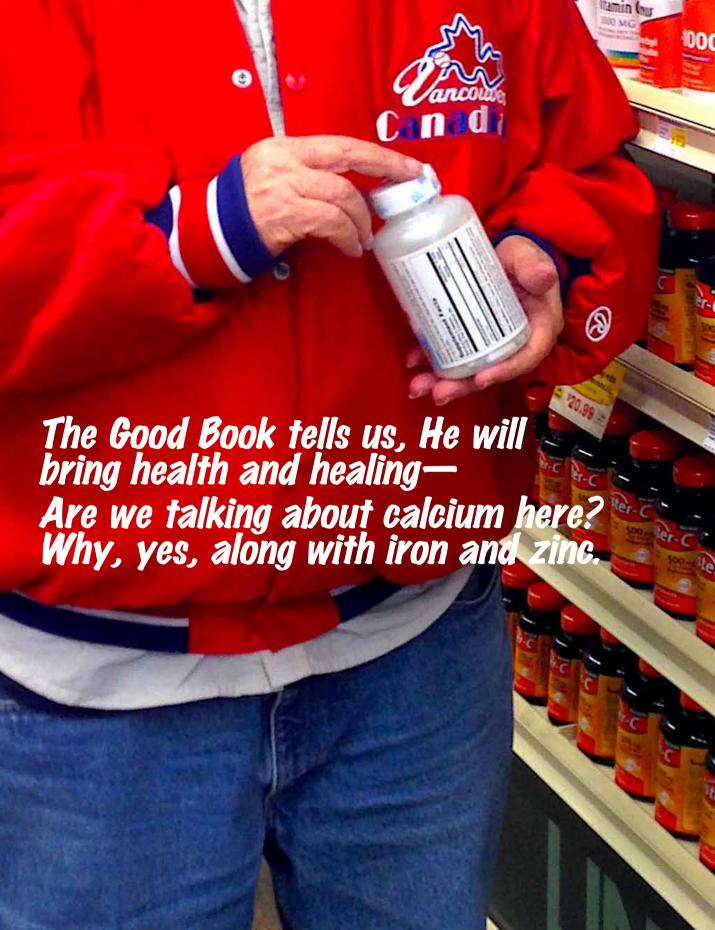
So, in my 60s now, I'm living in the mountains of northern Pennsylvania with my wife Rosetta and our canine pal Casey. And at last I'm writing full time and have managed to publish short stories in a number of literary magazines, and I've got a novel in the can which I think is pretty good but which the agents (screw 'em!) don't, and another novel underway. I'm also working on a novella featuring miniature android dogs and a family on the run from Los Hombres Derecho that I hope will kick off a short story collection.

But the process of storytelling still remains mysterious to me, just as it did to my six-year-old self listening to great-grandfather in the nursing home. How did he know where to start? How did he know what happened next? How did he know when he had come to the end? How did he know who the people were in the story?

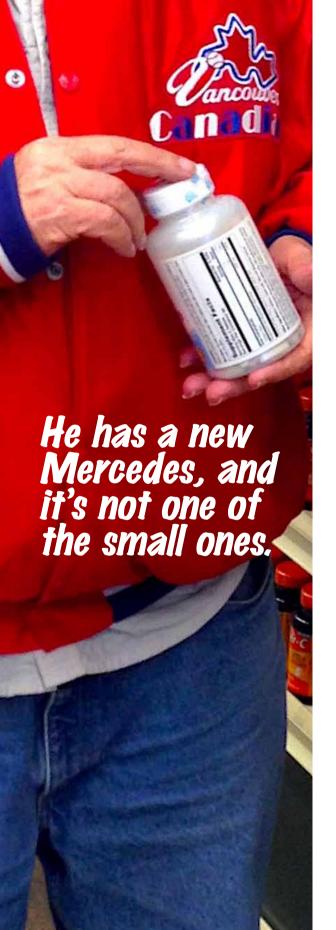
An image will come to me, generally a person in a particular place. I'll have no idea who this person is or where this place is located. But a sentence will form and I'll write that sentence down and then sometimes, if the magic is working, other sentences will arrive: the person, now a character, will begin to take on flesh and will do something, and the place will start to become a setting, and another action will follow the first and details will begin to infiltrate the setting and it will all proceed from there until eventually a story is told.

Or, if the story gods have decided not to favor me at the moment, it will just lie there, that first sentence, just lie there and die there and turn into just so much detritus.

I have no idea why. I might as well be that six-year-old again.







DOUG'S INTERNAL HEALTH BY JAY BERMAN

oug Ballard had
worked for the Tulsa
Park and Recreation
Department for 12
years, most recently
at the Oxley Nature
Center. He could lead

a nature walk as well as anyone, replace a sprinkler head that had gone berserk, or spruce up a hiking trail that had been damaged by rain.

He liked his job, even though temperatures generally hit 90 in mid-June and stayed there through to the end of August.

Doug was 33. He had joined the department after two years in the Army. Whenever he had to clear brush on a 90-degree day, he reminded himself that it was cooler than Afghanistan, and that nobody was trying to kill him.

His wife of 11 years, Cindy, was a nurse at Hillcrest Medical Center. She usually worked day shifts, avoiding the long overnight slogs that kept her and Doug apart.

Together, they earned about \$64,000 a year, enough to get by but not so much that the cost of replacing a broken water heater wouldn't leave them dining on macaroni and cheese for a week.

Doug drove a five-year-old Ford pickup, and Cindy had a three-year-old Toyota Corolla.

Their closest friends were next-door neighbors Mickey and Judy Williams. They alternated back yard barbecues between their houses and occasionally went out together to El Rio Verde, one of Tulsa's best Mexican restaurants.

Mickey had a tech job with a local computer sales and repair shop, while Doug felt lucky if he could successfully send an email to his department's office downtown. Mickey's wife worked with Cindy at Hillcrest. They would carpool to work when they had the same shift.

One July night—the evening temperature cools to the mid-70s at that time of year—the four were sitting in the Ballards' backyard.

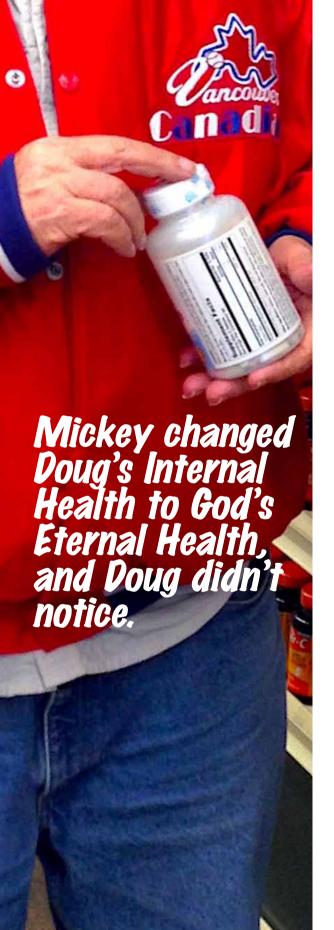
Doug was complaining to Mickey and Judy, over barbecued ribs and hamburgers, that he and Cindy probably wouldn't be going to Hawaii in the late fall as they usually did, because of financial strains.

Opening a can of Bud Light, Mickey told Doug about his brother-in-law in Michigan who had lost his job in the automotive industry a few years ago but later called it "the best thing that ever happened to me". Mickey didn't know the details, but it seemed the brother-in-law had opened a business in his home, selling vitamins and minerals online, using the slogan "Everything from Acacia to Zinc". He bought his products from manufacturers and distributors and sold them on his own website.

"I don't know how much he's taking in with his vitamins," Mickey said, "but I do know he has a new Mercedes, and it's not one of the small ones."

After Mickey and Judy went home and Cindy had fallen asleep, Doug also went to bed, but he was wide awake. He was thinking. He didn't want to give up his job at the nature center, but he had heard of other people supplementing their income online.

He read everything he could find on vitamins, minerals, supplements, and elixirs, although he decided to avoid the elixirs when he read they were often associated with patentmedicine hucksters of the 1890s.



Within a month, and without saying anything to his bosses or co-workers, Doug decided to give the online health business a try. Because his computer skills were limited, he asked Mickey if he would create a website for him.

Within a week, Doug's Internal Health was born. Doug came up with the name and liked the sound of it. It put his name up front and it told the potential customer what he was offering. He spent \$5000 that had been set aside for the Miami trip on basic supplies like Vitamin C, melatonin, potassium, weight-loss shakes, and salmon oil, which he placed in alphabetical order on wooden shelves he built in his garage.

He rented a post office box and used his home landline number for the company—he didn't want people ordering valerian root from him while he was at work. He netted just a bit more than \$600 in his first month of business. Cindy kept track of the books.

Doug's Internal Health doubled its profits, largely through repeat business and word of mouth, in six months, and Doug decided he needed a larger, more comprehensive website.

He offered Mickey and Judy a prime-rib dinner in exchange for a larger website, one he could update frequently and on which he could display his new line of energy powders and shakes, plant compounds he didn't yet understand, and the kind of protein powder that would probably get you suspended if you were a baseball player. Goodhearted Mickey would have done it without the dinner offer.

Doug overlooked just one thing: Mickey had mild dyslexia. You'd never know it, but it slowed his reading speed and forced him to concentrate on reading and writing more than most people. When the revised website went online Mickey inadvertently changed Doug's Internal Health to God's Eternal Health, and Doug didn't notice. Within two weeks, his mail-order business doubled. In two more weeks, it doubled again.

He also began receiving telephone calls—many of the voices sounded like those of elderly women—asking him what time Sunday services began. He told them, always politely because Doug was a well-meaning man, that they had the wrong number.

When the calls increased to such a degree that he could no longer watch "Big Bang Theory"—oh, that wacky Sheldon—without interruption, he examined the website more closely and discovered Mickey's error. God's Eternal Health?

What to do? He pointed out the mistake to Mickey, who apologized but then paused and told Doug, "Well, since you're now bringing in more than \$3000 a month in addition to your regular job, maybe you ought to leave it as it is. Maybe you could become a preacher."

Doug remembered reading of mail-order churches that would allow you to perform weddings, funerals, and even let you operate your own church and call yourself an ordained minister. That would let him hold a weekly service and, at the same time, promote the vitamins. He also remembered a line from Rolling Stones' guitarist Keith Richards' autobiography in which Richards said of 50s rocker Little Richard, who had become a mail-order minister, "Preaching is tax free. Very little to do with God, a lot to do with money."



One of the mail-order churches—called the Holy Chapel of East 79th Street—had a motto on its website: "We are all citizens of the same planet." You couldn't argue with that logic, so Doug sent a check for \$40 and was soon, according to a parchment certificate, the Reverend Douglas Ballard, even though the last time he had set foot in a church was for Mickey's and Judy's wedding eight years ago.

Doug placed five rows of folding chairs in his garage—he borrowed them from the nature center—and combined his church services with a pro-vitamin message. After all, he knew Vitamin C a lot better than he knew the Corinthians and Vitamin E a bit better than Exodus.

He revealed on his site that services would begin at 10am every Sunday. Cindy set out a tray of punch and cookies, and Doug borrowed a podium from the Elks Club which had shut down about the time that streaming became popular on home TV screens.

Cindy said that he needed music. He didn't have an organ, or even a piano, but he did have an old cassette player, complete with speakers and several tapes his brother had left with him and never retrieved.

Doug asked Cindy to look through the tapes and see if she could find something that sounded religious. He didn't listen to music much, and his tastes ran to country, anyway. He didn't think his new parishioners would be fans of Travis Tritt, who had a rebel image, had been married three times and once told a TV reality show host his cabin was haunted by 19th century ghosts.

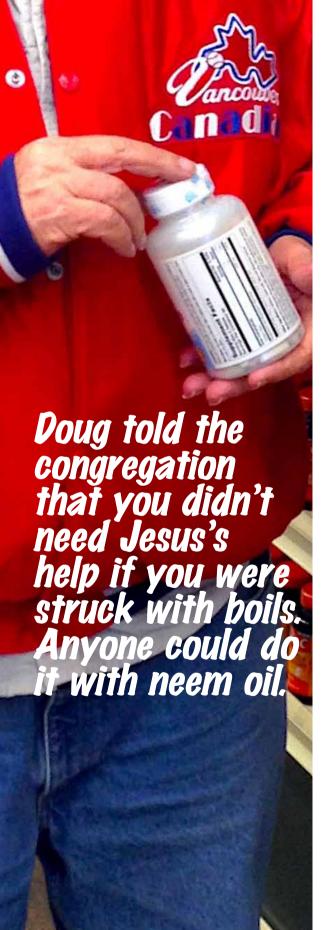
Precisely at 10am on the first Sunday—it was a clear winter's day—Cindy chose "Let It Be" as the church's opening song, with Paul McCartney singing "Mother Mary comes to me..." She had no idea McCartney was singing about his late mother, Mary McCartney.

Doug had studied his mother's old Bible carefully, and his first sermon was extremely cautious. God and Jesus constituted all the good in the universe, Satan and his followers were evil, and parishioners would do well to follow the teachings of Jesus if they wanted to go to heaven, which seemed much nicer than the other place. His attendees—nine women and three husbands—nodded in agreement.

Doug strayed from his notes. He told the congregation that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead because, well, he was Jesus, and that sort of thing was easy for Him. He admitted that none of his products provided that kind of power, but that many had a positive effect on life-threatening ailments. After all, scientist Linus Pauling had advocated large doses of Vitamin C for years, and he lived to be 93.

Doug not-so-coincidentally had a little extra Vitamin C with him that week, and sold several bottles when the service ended. He and Cindy were happy.

A week later, with the congregation climbing to 15, Cindy turned on the recorder and the beautiful voice of Karen Carpenter singing "We've Only Just Begun" filled the garage-turned-church. The song was actually about a couple starting out in marriage, but Cindy thought it sounded soothing and maybe a little religious.



That week, after discussing Paul's conversion on the road from Damascus to Jerusalem, during which he encountered Jesus on the way, Doug said—almost as an aside—that the devil had stricken a man named Job with painful boils. The King James Bible explained it like this: "So went Satan forth from the presence of the Lord, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown."

Somehow (Doug wasn't sure), Jesus found out and asked Satan: "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." Jesus tracked Job down and healed him instantly.

Doug told the congregation that you didn't need Jesus's help if you were struck with boils. Anyone could do it with neem oil, which he imported from India, and teatree oil, which he bought from a distributor in Australia. Apparently, nobody feared sharing Job's fate, because Doug didn't sell a single bottle of tea-tree oil or neem oil that day.

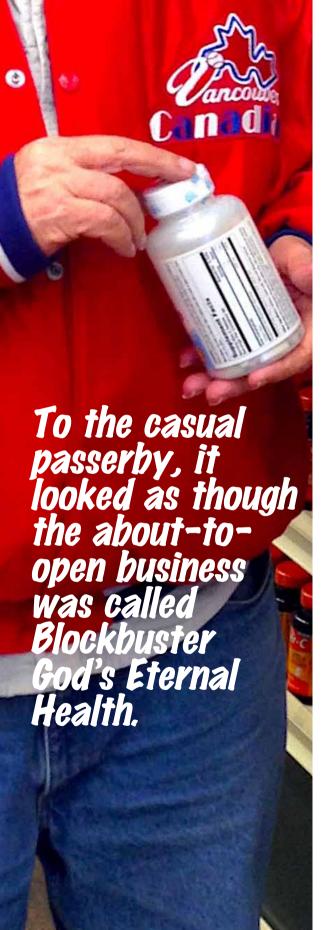
The following week, Cindy committed a slight tactical error in her choice of music. Seeing the word "heaven" in the title, she began to play "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," a Bob Dylan song that warns of approaching death. Doug, noting that the congregation's age averaged about 80, gave Cindy a panicked look and she turned it off.

That night, he told the crowd (all 20 chairs were now taken) that Methuselah lived to be 969—and he wasn't guaranteeing that, he said with a rehearsed chuckle—but that Vitamin C, Vitamin D, Omega 3 fatty acid, and several other vitamins and minerals had been found to help users live longer and happier lives.

Things got better and better, or so it seemed. Then came March, when Doug and Cindy usually went to visit Peter Brown, their tax accountant. They had a major tax write-off in their home, plus a few lesser items. The upshot was that they generally got a tax refund of \$2000, give or take a couple of hundred dollars.

Wrong, Brown, with a solemn expression that would have been appropriate for a death in the family, told them that everything they had earned from Doug's first sale of magnesium pills to his latest shipment of calcium, was fully taxable. Shocked, Doug and Cindy left Tulsa Tax, Notary and Auto Insurance several thousand dollars poorer than when they had walked in an hour earlier. Apparently, Doug's certificate from the Chapel on East 79th Street wasn't good enough for the Internal Revenue Service

Over waffles and coffee at the Waffle House on nearby Mingo Road, Doug and Cindy examined their options. Get out of the vitamin business? Quit his job with park and rec? It was Cindy who came up with a plan. Since churches are generally tax exempt, and since Doug's services had outgrown their garage, maybe it was time to meet the problem head-on and expand. Having a diploma from the Chapel on East 79th Street hadn't worked, but what about a real church facility?



A short drive took Doug and Cindy to the Utica Square Mall. Like most malls, Utica Square had been losing business to online sales. On the north end of the square, adjacent to a thriving Walgreen's, was a vacant Blockbuster video outlet, its windows covered with dirt and old campaign posters.

Since the store had been vacant, except for a Halloween costume shop the last couple of Octobers, the mall's management company was happy to sign a lease with God's Eternal Health. With Doug and Cindy doing most of the work themselves on weekends, the former Blockbuster was ready to open in a month. The only problem was that they couldn't figure out how to remove the Blockbuster sign at the top of the wall without damaging the stucco, and it was too large to cover with the canvas sign they had purchased.

Thus, to the casual passerby, it looked as though the about-to-open business was called Blockbuster God's Eternal Health. The combination church and vitamin establishment continued to prosper. Most of the parishioners made the move from the garage to the mall, happy to be sitting on upholstered chairs instead of the folding variety. The vitamins, minerals, bodybuilding and weight loss products had been joined by herbs, bath and beauty items, protein bars, insomnia aids, and probiotics.

Doug couldn't link his sermons to all of his products, of course. Jesus never spoke of granola bars or weight-loss shakes. But Doug had become knowledgeable on all things biblical, and had even joined a local council of church leaders. This gave him access to other members' knowledge and, he hoped, might help aid his credibility in the community. Some of his colleagues welcomed him warmly and seemed eager to accept 20 per cent discounts on his products. Others appeared to regard him as a heretic. One was skeptical when Doug confused "proverbs" for "adverbs".

Then came the day Doug would later come to call the apocalypse. It was a Saturday afternoon in May. Cindy was checking inventory in the home office, and Doug was trying to come up with a link between the Dead Sea scrolls and the importance of keeping a written record of your gym workouts.

Two men in dark suits, shiny black shoes and sunglasses entered the office, unannounced. If they weren't wearing fedoras, they should have been. For a moment, Doug thought they were either the Blues Brothers or the actors from "Men in Black".

They introduced themselves as officers from the Tulsa office of the US Food and Drug Administration. Neither made an effort to shake his hand but Doug thought one had said their names were Scully and Mulder. Doug assumed correctly that offering each of them a \$10 discount on any product would be a bad move.

"We're serving you with a subpoena to appear before a Food and Drug Administration hearing on charges of making false and misleading statements," one of them said. Doug's head was spinning.

"Under US Code," one of the Blues Brothers or Men in Black said. "no information statement shall contain any statement which, at the time and in the light of the circumstances under which it is made, is false or misleading with respect to any material fact, or which omits to state any material fact necessary in order to make the statements therein not false or misleading or necessary to correct any statement in any earlier communication with respect to the same meeting or subject matter which has become false or misleading."



Doug was astonished that the agent had said all that without referring to notes. "Umm, I don't think I did any of that stuff," he said. "I'm just a humble minister who is trying to care for the health of his parishioners." He couldn't believe he had called himself a "humble minister". It felt like a Jimmy Stewart line from "Mr Smith Goes to Washington".

"You are hereby ordered to appear before an administrative law judge," one of the dark suits said. "It would be in your best interests to be accompanied by legal counsel." Then the men turned, precisely at the same time, and walked out.

Two days later, the Reverend Doug received a registered letter advising him that he was being charged by the Office of Prescription Drug Promotion of the Food and Drug Administration, alleging that he had made false or misleading claims on his website or in his services, claiming that his products could cure ailments and disease when, in fact, they could not. It also said he was being charged with four violations.

The letter was accompanied by a summons ordering him to appear before an administrative law judge at the Tulsa Federal Courthouse on June 20, just 30 days away. Doug could see himself sharing a cell with Charlie Manson or OJ Simpson, except he was nearly certain that Manson had died and Simpson had been released. Maybe he'd get his own cell.

Doug knew few attorneys, and none who practiced federal law. Hillcrest Medical Center, where Cindy worked, kept a lawyer named Max Edison on retainer to help with bill collection. Doug called Edison, explained his plight, and Edison advised him to plead no contest to the charges. Such a plea, while technically not an admission of guilt, would leave Doug liable for financial penalties of up to \$25,000 per count but would keep him out of prison.

Then came The Call. Doug and Cindy were watching "The Walking Dead" one Sunday night, and Doug was beginning to identify with the zombies. When he saw the name "Charles Hawtrey" on his phone screen, his first instinct was to let the call go to voicemail. But something about the name seemed familiar, so he paused the zombies and answered.

"Mr Ballard," the caller began. "I'm Chuck Hawtrey. My wife, Eleanor, is one of your parishioners. She tells me you may be in trouble, and I wanted to offer my help." Doug had mentioned in a recent service that he might have to take a hiatus from his ministry, but had not gone into great detail.

"I'm 79 and a retired attorney," Hawtrey told him, "but I've kept my license current, and my wife very much enjoys your sermons. Her arthritis has also improved a great deal. She thinks it's from your aloe vera. She says the government is accusing you of making false statements. I'd like to represent you, at no charge, of course, just because of what you've done for Eleanor. They've probably told you to plead no contest and take the fine. If you'll take my advice, you won't do that."

Something about Hawtrey's confidence impressed Doug. They met for lunch a few days later, and Doug filled him in on his situation, starting with the conversation with Mickey in his yard.



When their June 20 court date arrived, Doug and Cindy met Hawtrey on the steps of the federal building. Hawtrey explained that he had known Amanda Talbot, the judge who would be conducting the hearing, for more than 40 years. He said he had checked the court calendar and learned that she'd be hearing Doug's case. He described her as fair but serious and said he had argued many cases before her.

They were in and out in less than an hour. Hawtrey explained to Martin Henderson, the federal prosecutor, that Doug would be pleading not guilty, rejecting the suggestion of a no-contest plea, and would ask for a trial date as soon as possible. Henderson seemed annoyed, but said nothing. Judge Talbot called Henderson and Hawtrey to the bench, spoke with them briefly, and assigned Doug a July 19 trial date.

Doug suspended his religious services for the next four weeks but continued working at the nature center and selling vitamins and minerals from his home. He and Cindy tried to live as normally as they could, going out to dinner and to movies, but the upcoming hearing weighed heavily on their minds.

Finally, it was July 19. Doug and Cindy showed up at the federal building at 8.30, a half-hour before they were scheduled to meet Hawtrey to go over the case. The building was heavy on concrete, about 50 years old, and looked like it was designed to withstand attacks from outer space. Hawtrey told them that administrative law cases were almost always decided by a judge, rather than a jury, which he thought would work in their favor.

The bailiff opened the trial exactly at 9.30am, introducing Judge Talbot, who was tall, slim, and had short gray hair that contrasted with her black robes. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," Judge Talbot began. "Calling the case of the people versus Douglas Ballard. Are both sides ready?"

"Ready for the people, your honor," Henderson said. "Ready for the defense," Hawtrey responded.

Henderson, in his opening statement, told Judge Talbot that he would show that God's Eternal Health was not a religion or church, but was rather "a clumsy way to sell vitamins, health supplies and similar commodities with the use of religion as a

sham cover. Mr Ballard has been marketing these goods with an implicit promise of reward in some religious afterlife when in fact they are nothing more or less than any customer could buy at any health food store or pharmacy."

After about 10 minutes, Henderson thanked the judge, sat at his chair at the attorneys' table, straightened some papers and poured himself a glass of water.

It was time to see what Hawtrey could do. He began his opening statement by telling Judge Talbot that the Reverend Ballard-he emphasized the "reverend"—wasn't "promising anything to anyone. Rather, he is operating a successful enterprise offering quality health goods at competitive prices. The fact he is an ordained minister is no different than any other person who works at more than one job. He is quilty of nothing more than trying to earn a living, providing the community with healthy materials and serving God."

Hawtrey liked to keep his opening arguments brief, especially when there was no jury. That way he couldn't be accused of grandstanding.



The judge turned to Henderson and asked him if he was ready to call a witness. "Yes, your honor," he replied. "The people call Mr William Shears." Doug Ballard looked at Shears and recognized him instantly as one of the Blues Brothers who had cited him. All he lacked was the dark glasses. Shears spelled his name for the record and, as requested by Henderson, said he was a consumer safety officer from the Tulsa office of the US Food and Drug Administration.

"And were you working in that capacity on Saturday, May 18?" Henderson asked. "Yes, I was," Shears said. "My partner, Mr Gerald Garcia, and I were at 303 N Rockford Ave, which is the home office of Mr and Mrs Ballard."

"And what was your reason for being there?"

"We had reason to believe that Mr Ballard was using his vitamin business and church affiliation to coerce citizens into buying products under the promise that they would live longer, healthier lives."

Hawtrey objected, claiming that Ballard never promised longer lives to anyone, merely pointing out that certain vitamins, minerals and other supplements had been proven to improve health. After the judge sustained the objection, Henderson said he had attended four of Ballard's services, sitting near the back of the room and taking notes.

Hawtrey again objected, asking Henderson why he had chosen to "spy on Mr Ballard and his congregation". Judge Talbot reprimanded Hawtrey, pointing out that the services were open to the public, and thus Henderson was not spying.

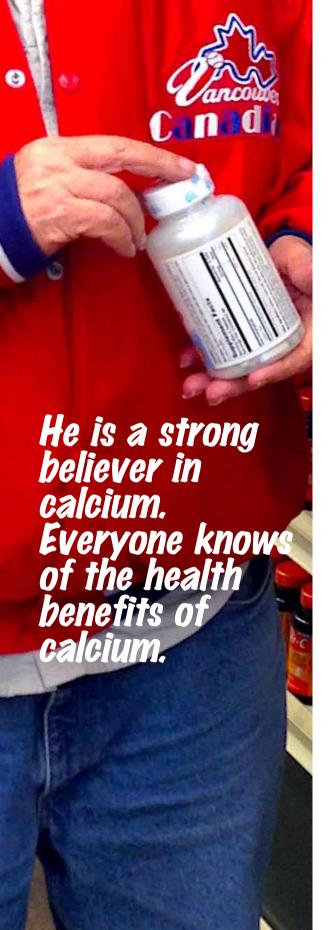
After a few more comments in which Henderson tried to link Ballard's sermons and product sales, and thus, he said, proving he was using his clergy status to sell products, thus constituting the "false and misleading status", Henderson concluded his testimony.

It was now 11.30am, and Judge Talbot adjourned for lunch, telling everyone to be back by 1pm. Doug was worried. As he, Cindy, and Hawtrey walked to a nearby coffee shop, Doug asked Hawtrey how he was going to counter Henderson's claims.

"Don't worry, a seemingly confident Hawtrey said. "I have witnesses." In many trials, both the prosecutor and defense are required to supply the names of their witnesses, but, as this was officially a hearing, there was no such requirement.

When the hearing resumed, Hawtrey rose from the defendants' table and said, "Your honor. I'll be introducing you to two witnesses very shortly, but first I want to read to you just two paragraphs from a magazine. The judge gave Hawtrey a curious look, as though she wondered where he was going, but still told him, "Go on."

"Thank you, your honor," Hawtrey said. "The following is from the November 26, 2018, Olive Oil Times, a trade magazine: The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that it will allow all olive oil bottles to carry a new 'qualified health claim' on their labels. Olive oil manufacturers may now choose to advertise their product as a heart-healthy alternative to animal-based fats for cooking and food preparation.



"Supportive but not conclusive scientific evidence suggests that daily consumption of about 1.5 tablespoons of oils containing high levels of oleic acid, may reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, Scott Gottlieb, the head of the agency, wrote in a blog post."

"That's all well and good, Mr Hawtrey," the judge said, "but why are you telling me this?"

"Your honor, to answer that question, I'd like to call on Ida Murchison, one of the Reverend Ballard's parishioners and an ardent believer in the Bible, as my first witness."

Mrs Murchison, who appeared to be about 80 but moved quickly to the microphone reserved for witnesses, was sworn in by the bailiff. "What is it you have to share with us, Mrs Murchison?" Hawtrey asked.

"Mr Hawtrey, your honor, everyone. I've been attending the Reverend Ballard's services for about six months, but I've been reading the Bible for 75 years, since I was a little girl."

Mrs Murchison pulled a small, black-covered Bible from her purse and said, "I won't take much of the court's time. This is from James 5:14-16. 'Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church, who will pray for them and rub olive oil on them in the name of the Lord. This prayer made in faith will heal the sick; the Lord will restore them to health, and the sins they have committed will be forgiven.' That's all I have to say." She nodded, Hawtrey thanked her and she returned to her seat.

Henderson looked puzzled. He stood, faced the bench and told Judge Talbot, "I'm not exactly a biblical scholar, but I don't see what the witness's comments have to do with this case. I'm going to object."

"Objection denied," the judge said. "Mr Hawtrey was speaking of the benefits of olive oil, and Mrs Murchison knew of a biblical reference to it. I don't see the harm in that."

Hawtrey told the judge he'd like to introduce one more witness, Mrs Violet Sims, another parishioner. Mrs Sims, who also appeared to be about 80, was sworn in but then just stood quietly in front of the bench, apparently waiting for instructions.

"Mrs Sims," Hawtrey said, "I'd like you to tell the judge what you told me about your health." "Certainly, Mr Hawtrey," Mrs Sims said. "When I heard Mr Ballard was in trouble, I asked him who his attorney was. I wanted you to know about my health. For years, I've had cramps in my legs and back, numbness in my fingers, and fatique."

This time, it was the judge's turn to object. "I'm sorry for your health problems, Mrs Sims," she said, "but I don't see how they pertain to this hearing."

Hawtrey stepped in, pulling a small Bible from his briefcase. "The Reverend Ballard is a strong believer in calcium. Everyone knows of the health benefits of calcium, even back to when this book—he waved the Bible in front of him—was written. "A quick comment from Isaiah 58:11: 'And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong—'"



"Very well, Mr Hawtrey, the judge said, cutting him off. "I don't see the calcium link, but is there something else?" "Yes, your honor. Proverbs 17:22 tells us that 'a joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.' And that sounds like calcium deficiency to me." He paused. "Is that all?" the judge asked. "Just one more thing, your honor," Hawtrey said. "Proverbs 3:8 says 'it will be healing to your flesh and refresh your bones.' We can't be sure what the author was referencing, but—"

"I know," the judge interrupted. "Calcium."

Mrs Sims returned to her seat, and Judge Talbot adjourned for the day.

Doug and Cindy were disappointed, as they had expected the case to be resolved in one day, but Hawtrey said hearings often took two or three days. He urged them to get a good night's sleep and return by 8.30 the following morning.

The next day's hearing provided few surprises. Henderson, the prosecutor, called on Gerald Garcia, Shears's partner, as his witness. Garcia's testimony was virtually identical to that of Shears. Garcia said that Ballard "is preaching a combination of the Bible and beta carotene, of Jesus and joint repair, of the New Testament and niacin." It sounded as though he had practiced that line in front of a mirror.

Judge Talbot, apparently annoyed by Garcia's clumsy alliteration, interrupted and asked if he had anything else to offer, adding that she was hoping to wrap up the hearing by noon. Garcia, his head down, returned to his seat.

Hawtrey stood for his closing argument, pulled the Bible from his briefcase, and said he also had only one more witness. Louise Clemons. Mrs Clemons looked eager to approach the microphone, leaning on a walker but with no other sign of frailty.

Smiling at Mrs Clemons, who wore a dress that was probably very much in style a few decades ago, Hawtrey asked, "What do you have to tell us about the Reverend Ballard?"

"Let me instead quote the Good Book," she said. "You know, Jeremiah 33:6 tells us, 'Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing—"

The judge, who had been squirming in her leather chair, interrupted Mrs Clemons, asking "are we talking about calcium here?"

Mrs Clemons, wondering how the judge had anticipated her testimony, responded: "Why, yes, your honor, along with iron and zinc."

Judge Talbot shifted her focus from the happy Mrs Clemons, turned to the attorneys and said, "Gentlemen, please approach the bench."

Henderson and Hawtrey seemed shaken by the judge's sudden move, but both managed a weak smile as they stood before her.

"Gentlemen, this is not the OJ Simpson trial," she said firmly. "It is not Watergate. At issue is the question of whether the defendant used his position as a clergyman to sell fish oil capsules." Hawtrey, in a move he immediately regretted, said, "And calcium, your honor."

She ignored his interruption and continued: "As we all know, if a defendant is arrested and charges are pending against him or her the prosecutor must show an objective basis for believing that the defendant committed a crime.

"The law makes it clear that there must be probable cause to believe the defendant is quilty of whatever infraction he or she is charged with. If a judge does not find probable cause. the charges must be dismissed. There is simply, in my mind, not enough evidence to move forward. I don't believe Mr Ballard-or the Reverend Ballard—was deliberately breaking the law. I don't doubt that he was attempting to link his sermons to the importance of the use of vitamins and minerals that he sells in his primary line of work. This is salesmanship, not a crime, not a matter of false and misleading statements.

"Therefore, I am dismissing all charges against Mr Ballard. I appreciate your fine work, but we are done here."

The attorneys returned to their seats to gather their documents, the judge asked Ballard to stand, and she explained why she was halting the proceedings.

Ballard, realizing he was free to go and recalling that Hawtrey had told him he would be representing him without charge, thought of hugging him, but instead just shook his hand, thanking him warmly. He considered offering him a free 32-ounce tin of protein powder but then thought better of it, turned to Cindy, and walked from the courtroom.

If Henderson showed any emotion, it was relief, as though he were happy to be done with it and able to move onto his next case. The judge had already disappeared through a mahogany door to her chambers.

Back home, Doug and Cindy considered their next move. Doug was thinking it might be smart to back off a bit from health claims in his sermons. That meant he'd have to scrap "Proverbs and Proteins" and "Saints and Supplements".

But he had enjoyed his Sunday gatherings. He would separate church and state, just the way Thomas Jefferson had called for it. He'd hold services on Sunday and had even found a tape of George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord", as an opening track, and he'd continue working for the park and rec people during the week, while mailing out his supplements, powders, pills, and tablets.

Everything appeared to be moving smoothly. No more men in dark suits, no more courtroom visits. Then, quicker than you can say micronutrients, Doug's phone rang one night. A caller identified herself as Marilyn Ogden Stewart, program manager for the Nutritional Broadcasting Company (not affiliated with NBC, the National Broadcasting Company). She explained to Doug that she had read about his trial in a health-food industry magazine.

"As you may know," she said (he didn't), "the Nutritional Broadcasting Company airs on Channel 1056 on many cable networks. We serve vegans, nonvegans, vegetarians, people who follow a gluten-free diet, and those who try to incorporate vitamins and minerals into their daily diet." When she said "vitamins and minerals", Doug began to listen.

"As you may also know," she said (he didn't), "Wendy Hoskins, host of our popular show, "Cooking with Rutabaga", is about to retire, and we're looking for a new show to fill the 5pm Thursday spot. We think your emphasis on vitamins, supplements and religion is a fascinating mix, and the inclusion of religion may help us the next time our license is due for renewal with the Federal Communications Commission.

"We'd like to offer you \$40,000 a year to host that show. We have working agreements with independent stations in the Tulsa area, and we'd pay for all the production costs, of course. We'd be happy to fly you to our offices in Toledo, Ohio, to discuss the particulars."

"Hang on a minute," he said. He held the phone against the couch and outlined the offer to Cindy. Her enthusiastic nod meant he'd probably never need to set foot in Toledo.

"I'd love to do it," he said. Ms Stewart said she would express mail all the paperwork to him within 24 hours. She also assured him he could record the show any day he wanted, so as not to interfere with his parks job or his ministry.

"I'll call you when you've had a chance to look it all over," she said, assuring him she felt his show would be at least as popular as Ms Hoskins's rutabaga hour.

Doug hung up and stared at Cindy. They could make that Hawaii trip in the fall after all.

"You can still work for the city, have your Sunday church service and do the TV show?" Cindy asked. "What does this mean?"

"It means God works in mysterious ways," Doug said.



JAY BERMAN

I'm a retired newspaper reporter and editor and university journalism professor. Just two years out of journalism school at the University of Southern California, while working for the Daily Breeze in Redondo Beach, California, I wrote the local reaction story to the assassination of President Kennedy. A year later, I covered the Beatles' first West Coast news conference and the 9.2 Good Friday earthquake in Alaska.

I became city editor of the Daily Breeze and, a few years later, of the Santa Monica Evening Outlook. Along the way, I picked up a master's degree in journalism, also from USC, just because it seemed like a good idea. I spent a few years in governmental press relations, working on the 1977 campaign of Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley as news secretary.

In 1981, thanks to that MA, I took a teaching job at California State University, Fullerton, serving as adviser to the student newspaper, the Daily Titan, for nearly 12 years. Graduates from our program during my time there have worked for the New York Times, New York Post, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Dallas Morning News, Seattle Times, Rocky Mountain News, Louisville Courier-Journal, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Detroit Free Press, Newsday, Hartford Courant, Portland Oregonian,

Asahi Shimbun in Tokyo, and other publications. I've been retired for a decade. I've done a bit of freelance writing, largely baseball- or travel-related. My story on the John Lennon Museum near Tokyo was published by the New York Times. Another, on the continued popularity of Buddy Holly in the UK, was used by the Times of London. My interview with the operator of the southernmost brewery in the world, in Ushuaia, Argentina, was in the Orange County, California, Register.

But few newspapers use freelance work these days, and a couple of friends encouraged me to try short fiction. I liked the idea. This is my second try at it. I like that after a half-century of scrupulously being sure that all my quotes from contacts are accurate I can now make up my own quotes. I still enjoy writing as much as I did nearly 60 years ago.

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Image by Irene Machuca Berman



He's alone. Maybe he's some kind of lone wolf hunter, or an outcast.

THE HUNTER BY MARILEE DAHLMAN

aitlyn, the mining company rep, stood across from Jack. She wore a fleece vest, collar up, and had a lime-green climbing rope looped around her shoulder. "I'll show you the pix."

She adjusted her cap brim with both hands, working the curve of it, and kept talking. "His clothing, a spear, the body itself—it's well-preserved. You're wasting your time with Site 3. Check out Site 29. He's alone. Maybe he's some kind of lone wolf hunter, or an outcast." Caitlyn's tone shifted. "Anyway, you need to clear that area so I can get engineers in."

The archeologists stood in a circle, parkas unzipped now that it was warmer. Voices clashed. There were 29 sites and everyone had a different view on priorities.

Jack watched a bull moose emerge from the forest on the opposite side of the river and step into the water. He didn't point it out. People had stopped commenting on such wildlife sightings weeks ago.

"Caitlyn, we'll focus on Site 3," Jack said.

"He had sprigs of something." Caitlyn pulled out her phone. "If they're extinct flowers, and intact, you could bring back the species."

"We've got 60 bodies at Site 3 and they're near the surface," Jack said. "The permafrost is warming at such a rapid rate that if we don't act fast we'll lose so much."

"At Site 3 those people don't even have baskets or tools. At Site 29 there's plant specimens and a spear."

"You said he's deep," Jack said.

"Yeah, and the site's pretty far off, but you can do it."

"I'll think about it."

"A little boldness, Jack."

Jack refused to look at her and focused on his team instead. "For now we'll work the mass grave at Site 3." He paused, hands at his waist, and waited for everyone's attention. "If I see anyone not wearing protective gear, you're done. The melting is revealing what's been buried for thousands of years, including microorganisms. There are no weapons in Site 3, no bone fractures from violence. Let's assume it was plague until proven otherwise."

He did not know this cave and he had never gone so far without the others. Crawling into the darkness, spear slippery in his hand, his thoughts weaved and trembled like those times when the ground shook with a force that made even the strongest in the Gathering afraid.

When the Gathering was small, and when he was small, he would wade into the river during the warmest season and the water would be a warm, living thing swirling about his ankles as his toes dug into mud. He learned to hunt with the others.

Every season more came to the Gathering and always stayed. Sometimes a family, or a group of hunters, and once a woman with a carved stone at her neck and eyes clouded with age.

They dug dwellings in everlarger circles and the Gathering edged closer to the river, even as the river itself seemed to grow narrower. The Gathering grew in size, and in noise, and in stench. It was the stench that drove him away. He had known from the first moment that it was the smell of death. In the dwelling he had always known, where two elder women sewed his hides, and where he brought meat, the place where his woman called him mine, there was silence when he should have heard voices. His eyes watered, he heard a cry and realized the voice was his own and he ran.

In the cave, he stretched out an arm and touched the rock with his fingertips and realized that the cave was quite shallow, or perhaps it was not a cave at all. He felt warmer but this was a false feeling. In fact, he was growing colder. His body grew colder and every dead and living thing around his body grew colder.

could only go so far.

Jack cut the engine and started up the hillside on foot. It was late night now, but the summer's sun lit his way well enough. He was alone, which was stupid, two grad students had spotted a griz just yesterday, but he'd been waiting for the chance to leave the camp behind, if only for a few hours, for the wild beauty and for the solitude.

he four-wheeler

For once the mining rep Caitlyn had been useful and given him an excuse.

He scrambled across slippery rocks and tramped upwards through soft snow, every step sinking until his boot hit the permafrost itself, that long-frozen crust of ice and dirt. His toes went a bit numb. The discomfort only got his adrenaline going and made him shake his head. These prehistoric humans in their hides and furs, how had they survived?

The wind cooled his ears and the tip of his nose and he smiled. Perhaps it was only right. A small battle against the elements in order to reach the prize.

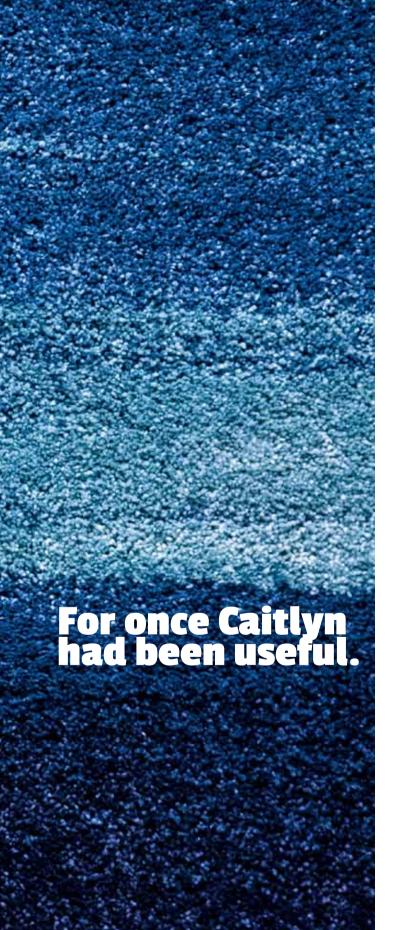
A worry crossed his mind—should he have brought something to recover those plant specimens? But he had decided to do only a recon of this outcast hunter. See how difficult it was to reach and if there were signs of other remains nearby.

Jack studied the steep terrain ahead of him, felt the weight of his climbing and emergency gear, and decided that he'd made the right call to travel as light as possible.

A sound like several rifle shots cracked in the air.

Maybe he heard a scraping and a splash after that. It was hard to tell.

Jack knew what it was, though. He'd heard it many times over the past few weeks: somewhere, chunks of frozen sediment were melting and breaking away.



He reached the top of the bluff and approached the crack in the permafrost. It was just as Caitlyn had told him: a ragged cut in the frozen earth running parallel to the river bluff, about 20 feet from the edge.

He checked out the cliff. Went right to the brink and sat down to rest. Tried to ignore how cold the ground felt. He watched the river slide past, a hundred feet below, and wondered if anyone else had ever sat here alone in a midnight light, other than the ghost of that outcast hunter.

Some more cracks broke the silence. He saw blocks of frozen dirt falling into the river upstream. For an hour he listened and watched, searching for any sound, any sign, that the area around him was unstable.

Unstable? Of course it was. How else had the crevice itself formed? He eyed the sun. Another day, another week, how long would it take for the warmth to ravage this area? It had little work left to do.



e was ready.

He'd looped
a climbing
rope around
an outcrop of
rock, attached
it to himself.

his pack and parka now sitting neatly on the ground. He tied the bandana around his neck, tugged on gloves and switched on his helmet light. He looked around—though for what, he didn't know. He saw no humans or wildlife. Not even any trees, except in the distance, in the direction of camp.

He dropped down the west side of the crevice and found a foothold. He drove two bolts into the frozen rock and looped the rope through to anchor himself. He'd expected it to be cold, but the meat-locker quality of the air still shocked his system, made his heart trip a few times. He worked his way down, sometimes pausing to unclip the flashlight from his belt and inspect the rock more closely for any sign of fossils, artifacts, or remains.

He descended 20 feet. Twenty-five. Thirty.

Crack.

He stopped, trying to determine where the sound had come from.

Not nearby. It had filtered down to him from the surface. He looked up to the anchor bolts. They looked the same. They had to be secure.

He knew he must be close. Caitlyn had said about 35 feet. He could see the ledge she'd described, the jutting-out of rock, a nice, flat place, and the outcast hunter was there, inside that cavity hollowed out by some ancient river.

Another look up, another look down. Below him, deeper than the ledge, all he could see was his helmet's light disappearing into the darkness. Impossible to tell how deep this fracture went. The air tasted as cold as breathing ice itself. He found another handhold, and another, and dropped the last few feet to the rocky ledge. He crouched there, holding still, his eyes narrowing to search in the dim.

He felt the jolt of curiosity and respect he always did when seeing the remains of a once-living human. This one was indeed better preserved than most. The pix hadn't done him justice.



"Hey, man," Jack said softly.

He felt an instant wave of affection that made him almost giddy. Surely they must have known each other in some past life, or were destined to meet in some future life. He unclipped the flashlight from his belt and pointed the beam.

The hunter had that same surprising smallness that all prehistoric people had. He lay on his side, face tilted down, much closer to the edge than Caitlyn had said. Jack raised his bandana to cover his nose and mouth. He glanced up and could easily see the sky. This area must be exposed to some sun and warmth, because pieces of frozen dirt had fallen away, leaving the remains almost entirely visible. Only the outstretched hand was still lodged in sediment, leaving the impression that the hunter had been trapped there like an animal, although Jack knew the permafrost must have formed after he died.

Jack smiled. A good story to tell people back home. Leaving out the part about the mining rep Caitlyn finding him first, of course. He professionally surmised the remains. A brown fur cap and bulky tunic, hide leggings, and boots-maybe sealskin-with neat stitching. A leather belt wound around the hunter's waist and pouches hung from it. The spear lay crossways under the body. Close enough to touch. Maybe even possible to grab, slide out from under him, except that it was probably frozen solid to his body, or to the rock beneath it.

Jack wondered what the man's face looked like.

His gaze slid to the pouches. One lay disintegrated, but among the scraps of light-brown leather he saw bits of plant. Some extinct flower? Were there seeds? Could the scientists back home find a way to make them sprout and resurrect the species, create a miracle pharmaceutical? Jack licked his lips. He should have brought something to remove those plant specimens, after all.

Crack.

Jack's heart rocked to a stop and his blood went as frigid as the air.

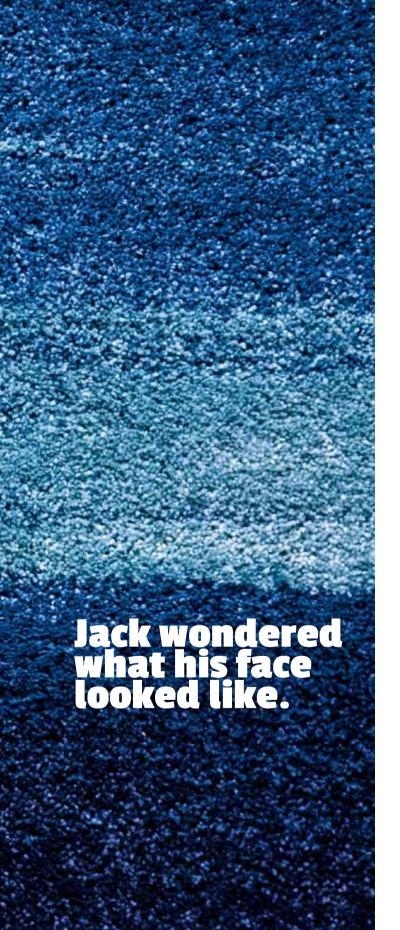
Dirt and rocks tumbled somewhere behind and below him.

With a jerk, he twisted to see, felt his foot slide, and knew the rock underneath it wasn't really rock, it was frozen ice and sediment and it was collapsing. He stood up to grab a handhold and missed and for a second he fell, and a split second later the climbing rope caught him. The sudden, unexpected dangling sensation made his guts feel like liquid.

He heard more cracks and sliding rubble, and he clamped his teeth together and sucked in a breath, tried to fixate on the pain of icy air sliding over his molars instead of the incontrovertible sounds of collapse around him. An irrational thought slipped into his brain that he felt proud he hadn't dropped his flashlight.

He threw it onto the ledge, thinking a second too late that the object might disturb the hunter, and climbed fully onto the ledge himself, only inches from the body now. The spear, the pouches, the plants—what to do? Leave it all alone, trust that it would all remain intact until he could return?

He had to get out. Now.



His gaze rested on the plants.

A solid chunk of something cracked against his helmet. He swore, felt frozen dirt break on his shoulders.

He leaned forward. Stuck out a gloved hand. Touched a bit of green-brown.

It instantly disintegrated. Jack balled up a fist to strike the rock beneath him in frustration. Thought better of it.

A few more sprigs remained. Jack shook his head. Not worth trying again.

He leaned back and started to stand up, find that handhold. It would take him just a few minutes to reach the surface, he figured.

A series of cracks erupted so close together they were indistinguishable from one another, and a torrent of rubble crashed onto his head and shoulders, and he heard a terrible sound of metal striking rock—one of the anchor bolts had come free.

A moment later, his hands were slapping down on the rocky ledge and sliding uselessly toward the edge. Panic rose and almost immediately leveled out as his brain comprehended that he had gotten an elbow onto the ledge,

and he could pull himself up, and he still had that safety line, and if he could just pull himself up and into that alcove, that same one that the outcast hunter had sought thousands of years ago.

Jack hauled himself up and crawled to the only place he could go.

"Sorry, man, sorry," he kept saying as he squeezed under the rocky overhang and the collapse continued all around.

The cave-in continued for several minutes. Jack forced himself to take shallow, even breaths from within the handkerchief and avoid a coughing fit.

The crumbling stopped. Silence and stillness followed. Jack blinked.

Immediately below him, centimeters away, the hunter's profile. Cracked, paper-thin skin, a few strands of white hair, a scar along the temple. Jack slowly eased away, gritting his teeth as he felt pieces of the fur tunic disintegrate with the quiet, quick inevitability of a burnt log collapsing into ash.

Once he was no longer touching the remains, he paused, uncomfortably balanced on the

balls of his feet, but calmed by the fact that he could look up and still see sky. He pulled the bandana down and breathed the cool air.

Shouts from above.

Jack felt a tug on the rope. He slowly gave a responsive tug back, knowing that his sojourn in this icy grave would soon end.

He looked at the hunter.

The rope tugged sharply against Jack's body, moving him slightly.

Another small collapse, a curtain of icy dirt reminded Jack of the fragility of this natural freezer.



ack rolled over on his back and stared straight up at sky.
Back above ground, the air smelled warmer, that living scent of part mud, part snow that invigorates you as much as it does any animal.

Staying still, Jack felt a sudden wave of dizziness. From the ordeal, no doubt, and he decided to close his eyes until the spell passed. When he looked up again, he saw delicate clouds hanging in the sky like some god had exhaled frozen vapor. Jack turned his head toward the sun. It was the Arctic midnight sun, but it did its job. He already felt warmth heating his body and brain, and sweat trickled down his neck and dripped onto the melting snow.

MARILEE DAHLMAN

I love hiking (especially any place where you might see a bear). I visited Glacier National Park not long ago and learned that in 1850 there were 150 glaciers and now there are 26, and some say it's inevitable we will lose all of them over the next few decades. I believe in science and the power of fiction to bring attention to what science tells us about ourselves, our planet, and our future. I'm not saying a story should be preachy, but I think it's OK if the writer weaves in some meaning. There's an environmental doomsday element in The Hunter but hopefully people just enjoy the story, too. I grew up in rural Iowa and spent summers on my grandparents' farm in Minnesota, so maybe that's why I like a good Western novel or anything with a little adventure. I've lived in Dallas and New York City and now I live in Washington, DC, where I work as an attorney. I'm a new writer and I have a short story that will be published in Down in the Dirt magazine later this year.

Image by Leslie Jean Goins.





