

Literary Landscapes

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE GREATER LOS ANGELES WRITERS SOCIETY VOL. 3 No.1
WINTER-SPRING 2013

Original short stories, novel excerpts,
poetry, opinion, educational articles
and news of the Society authored by:
(in alphabetical order)

Karl Alexander

Joyce Actor

Rosaliene Bacchus

Sarah Beach

Art Holcomb

Kevin McKenna

Barbara Schnell

Morgan St. James

Tony N. Todaro

Alex Windel



**THE GREATER LOS ANGELES
WRITERS SOCIETY**

WRITERS MENTORING WRITERS OF ALL DISCIPLINES

Literary Landscapes

Vol. 3 No. 1 2013

Editor

Mike Robinson

Copy Editor

Barry Dale Gilfry

Associate Editor

Joyce Actor

Production & Design

Michael Rushlow

Contributors

Morgan St. James, Joyce Actor,
Sarah Beach, Karl Alexander,
Barbara Schnell, Barbara Schnell,
Art Holcomb, Rosaliene Bacchus

Visual Art

Tony N. Todaro
Michael Rushlow
Vanessa Sick Photography

GLAWS President

Tony N. Todaro

GLAWS Vice President

Leslie Ann Moore

Founders

Tony N. Todaro, Neil Citrin

www.glaws.org

Literary Landscapes is the official periodical of
The Greater Los Angeles Writers Society. All Rights Reserved 2013.
All work remains the property of the individual author.
The words of the writers do not necessarily reflect the opinions
or policies of the society's members or staff.
Original material may be submitted by GLAWS members
in good standing for editorial consideration.

We take poetry, fiction, articles and excerpts between
500 and 3,000 words (preferred).

Send submissions by email to: editor@glaws.org
There is no reading fee. As this publication is distributed free,
no royalties are paid. GLAWS is a 501(c) non-profit.

Contents

03 Editor's Forum

03 Message From The President

04 Proofreading Is Essential?

Morgan St. James

06 Fade To Black

Joyce Actor

09 The Twilight Zone Ending

Sarah Beach

11 Bury Their Hearts In Topanga Canyon

Karl Alexander

17 Tracks

Barbara Schnell

21 The Commodity Of Courage

(A Guest Post), Art Holcomb

24 The Ole Higue

Rosaliene Bacchus

29 Higher Calling

T.N. Todaro

37 Statue

(Poetry), Kevin McKenna

37 Now Available From GLAWS Authors



Worry Me This

By Tony N. Todaro

Writers worry too much.

They worry about what to write, how to write it, how to keeping their inner muse stimulated, dealing with the demon they know as writer's block, fearing that today will be gone before they write something great, fearing there's no tomorrow, and... well, everything!

Whatever happened to just writing?

A wise man once said, "If you don't know where you're going, you're going to end up somewhere else." No, it wasn't Mark Twain. It was Zig Ziglar. And it's so true. Hey, how about, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there." That one was George Harrison, and while that might work lyrically, it is a poor mantra for creative writing.

There are two fundamental "skill sets" a writer must possess—a yin and yang if you will. One is the Logic function, where you learn the procedural rules of writing, sentence structure, plotting and pacing, character development, editing, and rewriting—then rewriting again. And again.

Generally, anyone can learn these fundamental tenets of communication, but that and twenty-five cents will get you...well, not even a decent cup of coffee nowadays.

The other skill a writer must possess is purely artistic. I call it the Creative Gene. It is the gift of imagination, the ability to express passion, romance, mystery, intrigue, love, and hate—all the colors of emotion necessary to bring a story to life and truly engage the reader. It's the life-blood every tortured writer aspires to burn into his or her work and make it a vivid and compelling read.

Bluntly, this cannot be learned from a textbook. It must live in the writer's genes, a part of one's psyche. Just as a great artist can paint clouds to portray a feeling of happiness, ominous portents, or religious inspiration. Or, a great guitarist develops a new "riff" and contributes to the art of music—Pat Metheny comes to mind for me.

It is born in every creative's blood. And, if you are not sure whether you have it, don't give up yet. Your muse might be hiding under your armpit until the time is right.

The secret is not to worry about it. Effective writers draw on their lives, their perspectives, and study the world around them as a source of fuel. Every sentence reflects what they have seen, or read, or heard, tasted, or most importantly, felt. Some of it is sweet, some bitter. If you can find it in yourself, you can write creatively.

Ray Bradbury wisely once said, "Jump off a cliff, and

learn to grow wings on the way down." About a half-million words ago, I took that message to heart. I learned to just write, mindful of the rules, but not a slave to them. So, don't worry; don't stop.

And sooner or later, your writing may soar on the wings of an eagle.



Editor's Forum

By Mike Robinson

"Tilting at windmills". Sancho Panza. Quixotic quests.

We all know the terms.

Cervantes' beloved tome has survived the last four hundred years, and will no doubt survive the next four, standing shoulder to resolute shoulder with the work of his exact contemporary, William Shakespeare (evidence shows they may have died the same day). Even if actual readership of the book has diminished, many know the language and the personalities spun from its pages. Cervantes himself, less passionate about *Don Quixote* than his work as a dramatist, was nonetheless proud of the personality of Sancho Panza. As well he should be.



One wonders what Cervantes would have made of the verdict from a pool of noted living authors declaring *Don Quixote* the best book ever written. I think he would've been flabbergasted, as would have Virginia Woolf, who suspected its "wisdom" was not intended. I agree with her. No one, of course, can intend such a profound impact. While setting out to bludgeon the overwrought chivalrous romances of the age (the *Twilight* books of 16th century Spain, let's say), like a daring literary spelunker Cervantes happened upon the untouched chambers of the modern novel, a fluid form built of character, driven not by plot but psychology. Much more than ink marks to carry a heavy-handed message or turn a quick buck, his characters had a pulse, one which continues unabated.

But I also think the book's survival has persisted in large part because of succeeding writers, so unavoidably drawn to *Don Quixote's* organic interplay between Fantasy and Reality, imitated exhaustively throughout all media. We envy Quixote at the same time we shout for him to come back down to earth. It's that push-pull of fact and fancy, that line-straddling, that temptation and that tension that defines our work as authors. To some extent it defines all humankind, many of whom look to us writers to show them a windmill and say it's a giant, and make them believe it.

Proofreading Is Essential

By Morgan St. James

Proofreading is one of the most important things a writer can do. Submitting work with multiple errors is like going out of the house with your shirt buttoned wrong, wearing two different shoes, or simply looking like a slob. Did you really think no one would notice?

Publishers want compelling, well written work, and because the content represents the bones of your creation, it is extremely important. However, like it or not, this definitely affects the way others judge it and you as a writer. Let's face it. You've worked hard to develop and present your book or article. Why risk letting careless errors distract from what you have labored so hard to create? Shouldn't you dedicate a reasonable amount of time to paying attention to the details that help you to make a good impression?

Carolyn Hayes Uber, CEO Stephens Press – "AMEN. As I review submissions, a terribly sloppy manuscript gives rise to the thought that 1) it would be too much work to fix this MS and 2) what would it be like to work with such a negligent author?"

Is that the first impression you want?

In my opinion, now that the art of texting has spawned "creative spelling", it is even more important to make sure that pieces submitted for the net or print have been proofed. Imagine how easily that could have read "been proofed" if I hadn't checked. Would I have seemed like a competent writer?

Believe me. Those errors are all lurking there, just waiting to detract from your work: the misspelled words, extra or missing letters, actual missing or extra words, sentences that go nowhere, paragraphs created in the middle of a sentence. Yep. They hope you'll just slide by them, and if you do, the person you submit your masterpiece to might also slide by the whole thing.

Rushing to publish. Unfortunately, a lack of editing in some self-published books and articles is just as obvious as lack of proofing. What does it say about a book when there are spelling errors all over the back cover, or in the acknowledgement or the dedication? It practically screams, "This is a loving hands at home book." Those are the things that often make bookstores shy away from the self-published author, even though the book might be fantastic and perfect in every other way. It is a perception fostered by those who rush to print without going through very necessary steps. Don't be a sloppy author.

Now that the art of texting has spawned "creative spelling" it is even more important to make sure that pieces submitted for the net or print have been proofed."

Spelling errors are sometimes very elusive.

The eye sees what it thinks it sees. Have you ever done those tests where only the first and last letters of words are correct, but you can still read the entire paragraph or page? Your mind fills in the proper letters, despite the fact that what is on the page is wrong, wrong, wrong.

You can't trust your Spell Check tool to catch everything. It won't know if you are using the wrong form of a word. As long as words are real and in its dictionary, they will pass with flying colors. One of the best tools is to have a friend who is a great speller and also a nitpicker. Like homing missiles, he or she will find *every inverted i and e, every e that should be an a* and every missing or extra letter or word. Think how

many people interchange words like then and than and insure and ensure, to name a few.

If you aren't fortunate enough to have a friend like that, do ask someone else to read your work, or even enlist two friends. If all that fails, let it get cold and then read it again. It is amazing how nasty typos and misused words seem to jump off the paper, daring you to spot them, once the manuscript isn't fresh out of the printer.

Writers' Groups. Some authors simply don't understand why writers' groups, conferences, and writing teachers emphasize having a manuscript proofread and professionally edited if possible before submitting it. As it stands, with the volumes of manuscripts received every day by agents and publishers, poor formatting or obvious sloppy work habits are enough to earn an invitation to the waste basket on the way to the dumpster.

It is also important to try to keep editing and proofreading separate. When you are editing an early draft for content, that's when you really must focus on developing and connecting ideas and monitoring the flow of the piece. If you find spelling or punctuation errors during that phase, by all means fix them. But once you have what you presume is a final manuscript, plan on doing a read-through for proofreading without focusing on content. It is sometimes very hard to do both at one time, because one is **"creative" and the other is "nuts and bolts"**.

Why risk letting careless errors distract from what you have labored so hard to create?"

If you are self-publishing, order as many generations of printed proofs as needed. Read the proof carefully, correct all errors, and then order another proof until you are satisfied that you have caught as many errors as possible. Then, and only then, approve it for publication.



About the Author: Morgan St. James co-authors the popular Silver Sisters Mystery series with her real life sister Phyllice Bradner. She has published over 500 published articles related to writing. Her books are available at most online booksellers or order from your favorite local bookstore.memoir.

Mau'i

By Alex Windel

Loke lani, lovely blossom

When your island holds my hands

To show me all her faces

Onaona, nahenahe

One is gentle, one is sweet

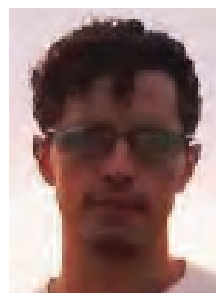
When the Mau'i mornings so serene

Mumble love through flowers so pristine

They touch all my senses!

So here my hands are always open

E hele mai and never leave!



About the Author: Alex Windel has been creating poems and lyrics in multiple languages since he was 11 years old. His pen name is "alika I". Besides writing, he also builds web sites for the Fortune 500.

Fade To Black

By Joyce Actor

On the night Shirley called, I was in the shower splashing water into my eyes, hoping I could wash away the sight of sick people.

I could not remember the last time I bathed. After sitting all day in the ICU with Allen, I was too exhausted to bathe at night, and in the morning I never had time. Had it been two days? I was not sure.

It had been three months since Allen had showered, and maybe he was too sedated to think about how good it would feel to be clean. I did not want him to feel the perspiration that was collecting on his sponge-bathed skin, or smell the sourness of his unwashed hair.

Leaning against the tiled wall, I swayed from one foot to the other. I turned the water hot, then hotter, until my stomach and thighs had spotted patches on them that looked like red starbursts.

With Allen in the hospital, I always kept the television on at home. Muffled voices from the set in the living room merged with the sound of water swirling down the drain of the tub. The comfort of a human voice helped slow down the nagging questions that would not let go of me. Did the hospital make mistakes? Will he ever walk again?

Reports of the casualties in the Iraq war drifted into the bathroom, accompanied by the loud disagreements on cable news as to whether we should be there or not.

When the war started, Allen fought with Dee Dee about it. He was against it. She was for it.

I did not care. I listened to the arguments on the news as a diversion, a way to interrupt my maudlin thoughts.

While the water pooled around my ankles, the phone rang in the living room, and at first, I continued standing in the shower, debating with myself if I should answer it.

After Allen's first surgery, friends called constantly. As the months wore on, I came home to silence as, one

by one, people stopped caring. Some called once or twice, but just to explain why they could not be in touch more often. My old friend Ruth, in Florida, volunteered at her church's arts and crafts festival and did not have time to call. My oldest brother told me he was going through a rough time and did not want to talk about Allen.

I am not saying it was an easy conversation to have. It must have been hard on them to hear about Allen's medical horror stories. I understand that. But did they understand that I missed them?

That night when the phone rang, I decided to answer it. I had been lazing in my shower hide-away much too long, with pruny fingers to prove it. I used the phone call as an excuse to get out of the tub. I wanted to talk to someone, anyone, hoping the loneliness would go away.

With a towel wrapped around me and shivering from drops of water left on my shoulders, I made wet footprints in the carpet all the way from the hallway to the living room.

I heard Shirley say, "Hello, Joyce?"

Shirley was Allen's first cousin. They had lived only blocks away from each other as children in San Antonio, Texas. Allen was older than she was, and when they were young, he babysat her. Shirley said she had so much fun when he told her ghost stories and jumped out of closets to scare her.

I told her what had happened in the last three months, the mistakes the hospital had made, the "simple surgery" that had turned into three, and how I was about to put Allen in a nursing home for rehabilitation. That concerned her.

"Are you going to hire a private nurse?" she asked.

"No, we can't afford that," I said. Shirley had the same thought I had. I worried about who would be there to watch out for Allen when I was not around.

“Those nursing homes don’t take care of rehab patients,” Shirley said. “Why don’t you look into getting a private nurse. I’ll pay for it.”

The tension drained from my body, and my back relaxed into the soft pillows of the couch. I clutched the receiver tighter, holding back my grateful tears. “Thank you,” I said. “Thank you. I will pay you back, I promise.”

Her aid liberated me from one of the worries that pummeled my thoughts every day: Who would be there to make sure Allen is okay? I hung up and slumped further into the softness of our couch, imagining how her gift would help.

A nurse could exercise Allen’s legs, assisting him in gaining strength, and give him pieces of ice, getting him used to swallowing. Once he could walk and eat, I could take him home. I tried to imagine that, but the image of my bedridden husband was all I could see. It had been so long.

I pulled the towel tighter around me, so those errant drops of water would not ruin the couch. My fingertips made circles on the cushions as I thought about how comforting our sofa had always been.

Many of the items in our living room were hand-me-downs, except for the couch. When we moved in together, Allen left it up to me to find a sofa. He had one rule. It had to be comfortable for him to sleep on. When I saw the seven-foot couch with large, plump pillows, I called him. He rushed over to the store and stretched out on the three cushions. With his six foot frame engulfed in soft, teal-colored corduroy, he grabbed my arm and pulled me on top of him as customers turned to look at us. Then he held my head with both his hands and said, “We’re so good with each other, for each other, and on top of each other.”

I giggled and pulled my head from his hands to bury my red cheeks in the crook of his arm, trying to keep my embarrassed face away from the scowling saleslady.

For ten years, we had entertained friends on that couch, watched movies while holding hands, and on the night it was delivered, made love there. Shirley’s money would help Allen get back to his comfortable sofa sooner than I had thought. I hoped it would not be long before I would be tip-toeing into our living room, trying not to wake Allen, asleep on our sofa.

The social worker in the hospital had given me three days to visit two rehab centers, the only ones that could accommodate a patient with a trach. I had to make a choice as to which one I wanted for Allen. Her words kept bouncing around my mind and wearing on my nerves, but I made time to check them out, something I

considered unpleasant because it took me away from staying with Allen.

The day after Shirley called, I met Allen’s sister, Patty, at the hospital.

“Pretty soon we’ll get you out of here,” I said. “We’re going to find you a rehab center. I know you’re itching to use your ‘get out of jail’ card.”

Allen remained silent. I searched his face for the intellect that used to be there, the optimism I once saw in his eyes. Instead, those same eyes looked dejected and empty. I was not sure he understood me. His comprehension had remained stilted by the tear in his brain.

“I’m sorry I can’t stay longer,” I said. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Staring at the wall, Allen did not move. I suspected that tear had also caused him to fall deeper into a depression that broke his brittle thoughts into tiny, irretrievable pieces. I had to keep pushing him out of his despair.

I had heard about nursing homes like this one on an investigative television show.”

The first thing I noticed about The California Nursing Home was the lack of private parking. I watched with awe as Patty maneuvered her car into a tight spot by the curb. If I had to drive there every day, I would never find a space, or worse, have to parallel park. Already, that rehab center had one strike against it.

I stood in front of the nursing home taking in the unattractiveness of the small, one-level building with reddish bricks, reminiscent of a Motel 6.

Then I walked through the double doors and stopped, my feet unwilling to move forward. My legs tingled as though they wanted me to run away, and for a second, I considered it. It was not just the angst I felt about placing my husband in a nursing home, but as soon as I entered the building, I had to block my nose from the smell of urine. I had heard about nursing homes like this one on an investigative television show and, at the time, I had sat in my clean living room while a reporter described a dingy, overpopulated, putrid-smelling facility. His description never conveyed just how filthy that odor made me feel, as though I was homeless, sleeping on the dirty ground and eating out of garbage cans. I wondered if all nursing homes shared the same impression of griminess. I had not been in one since I was a little girl visiting my mother’s disabled sister. That institution also reeked of urine, along with a rotten-egg smell of death that I will never forget.

I had to fight against my instincts to get out of there. I managed a fake smile and said hello to the nursing home's representative. Then Patty and I walked with him down the hall while I tried to ignore my fear.

The young man announced that he had already picked out Allen's room. He escorted us down a corridor lined with elderly patients. One woman slept in a wheelchair with her head tilted, resting on the wall, her mouth wide open as she snored, and her arm slung over the side of the armrest. An old man, who looked like he was in his eighties, stared at me as he leaned on his crutches, using the railing to steady himself while he tried to take a few steps down the hallway.

Expressionless faces kept their blank eyes on us, as though they had a right to gawk.

Then the manager turned into the last door on the right. Like a salesman, he tried to convince me that my husband would be safe there, barking his words at us as though he were the master of ceremonies at a carnival.

"This is a private room that leads out to the garden," he said, waving his arms to encompass the claustrophobic bedroom. I noticed a dirty bandage dangling from the corner of the bedside table. It must have been overlooked when the room was cleaned.

Our guide opened the door from the bedroom to the tiny outdoor patio, as cramped as a jail cell, with a concrete path, some trees, a few fading pink geraniums and hardly any light.

"And your husband's close to the physical therapy room," he added with a proud smile.

That did not impress me, since Allen would not be able to walk for quite a while, not to the physical therapy room, and not in their make-shift garden, either.

Patty and I thanked him for his time and left.

"What did you think, Patty?"

"Well..."

She scrunched up her face as though she was working every one of her brain cells to make a decision.

I could not wait for her reply. "I thought it was awful. And the smell! I can't leave Allen there." I walked quickly to the car. I was not sure if she intended to fight me about it, but my mind was made up.

"I'm so glad you said that," she said. "I thought so, too." I should have known she was not going to argue with me. Patty did not like confrontation.

That one was out. Would my only other choice be as bad? Or worse? We drove in silence to Santa Monica.

The Pacific Convalescence Home had a small garage for staff and visitors under the building. I liked that. At

the reception desk, an employee signed us in and guided us to the elevator to start our tour on the second floor. The first thing I noticed was something that was not there: the smell.

"Allen will have a double room, but I promise you, he will never have a roommate," our tour guide told us.

The room had a big, sunlit window overlooking Santa Monica, where the streets criss-crossed, as though the city was a large tic-tac-toe game. Allen had lived in Santa Monica before we were married, and maybe, being back there might make him feel better.

We were introduced to the physical therapist, Eddie, and the respiratory therapist, Abe, who would be in charge of Allen's care. Abe's office was only steps away from the room.

"What is your husband's diagnosis?" Abe asked.

"He has a tear in his brain. I'm concerned about getting him walking, eating, and speaking again."

"Oh, talking is easy. I have a speaking valve he can use."

My eyes widened. Finally, someone who was able to help Allen. If Allen could talk, it would facilitate his recovery. Abe knew that.

He retrieved a small, rubber piece that could be inserted into Allen's trach for a few hours each day. I could mark that problem off the list I kept in the back of my brain, in that file of things he had to accomplish to come home. This facility was focused on rehabilitation, not warehousing patients until they died. I felt comfortable with Abe and the rest of the staff. And I especially liked that Allen would soon be talking again. I missed his deep, resonant voice when he called my name, laughed at my jokes, or whispered his love for me in the dark of our bedroom. I needed him.

In the shower that night, I scrubbed hard to remove any leftover stench of urine. I thought about how Shirley's money had been a much-needed surprise. I lathered up my hair and belted out my favorite Rolling Stones song:

You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need



About the Author: Joyce Actor has a BFA in theater from The University of North Carolina School of the Arts. She has studied at UCLA and has an MFA in creative writing from Queens University. She leads the GLAWS memoir critique group.

The Twilight Zone Ending

By Sarah Beach

The flickering black and white images danced across the wide screen before the celebrating audience. The frantic male rushed anxiously into the scene, crying out in protest: “It’s a *cookbook!*” The audience expressed its appreciation of this example of ancient human entertainment. Their digians fluttered and the rippling clattering bounced off the walls of the auditorium.

The house lights came up to daylight equivalent, and the principal speaker moved to the podium that rose from the floor of the stage. She made the ceremonial obeisance to the hive-queen, who sat in the center of the front row.

“The Institute used many of these examples of human entertainment in our study of our subjects’ psychology. Our supposition was that we could deduce dominant patterns of thought in the analysis of their stories. The popularity of the series under the title *The Twilight Zone* led to its selection as fertile material for study. Its proven durability with the humans was a deciding factor. Indeed, as we progressed in our study of human psychology, we discovered the humans themselves had studied the phenomenon of this series. There are a number of studies and commentaries in human archives concerning the so-called ‘Twilight Zone ending’.”

The orator paused to scan the audience. The hive-queen remained attentive, and for the orator that was the crucial thing. It was known — as was natural with

the hive-mind link — that the queen had not yet selected her principal heir. All those of the worker caste were vying for the Kiss of Elevation, wherein the recipient would receive the enzymes and hormones that would raise them to nascent queen. The orator desired the elevation, and sought to prove her worth by demonstrating her part in the successful territorial expansion.

She resumed her exposition, energized by the memory of her success. “The selection of stories gave us examples of the human desire for conformity. In a significant portion of these tales, the principal figure in the story is at odds with the society around it. At the

end of the tale, the principal character faces a dire consequence of being the outsider, or learns a secret that others know. In the example just displayed, the principal character becomes separated from loved ones because it persists in studying something that its colleagues felt had been addressed. The Institute team enjoyed examining this particular story due to the motif of off-world territorial expansion.”

She brought up the next set of notes. “The human discussions of the ‘Twilight Zone ending’ focus on over-use of surprise as a story resolution, particularly when disconnected from previous elements in the story. From this, the Institute team concluded that the humans take comfort in conformity and frown upon surprise in courses of action. With this in mind, we developed the alpha wave broadcaster, which reinforced the desire for conformity and stability in the humans. Once the broadcasters came on-line, our forces were easily able to



guide the humans into stable, productive activity in support of our territorial expansion. The efforts of my team in the Institute have caused the territorial subjugation to proceed with unprecedented speed. The humans, after initial resistance, were pacified and re-educated to our needs. Thus, it is with great pleasure that I am ready to declare Subject Stability so early, on this our first orbital anniversary of planet-fall.”

She made obeisance to the hive-queen again, as the audience flittered their digians. The ripple of clickings elated the speaker. She knew she had been bold in placing herself in position of primary credit, but none of her minioners would contest the claim. They were useful workers, but their imaginations barely rose above those of drones.

The speaker watched with suppressed excitement as the hive-queen rose to her pediants. She gestured for the speaker to approach.

A hush fell on the audience as they anticipated what was to come.

“Your initiative has proven of service to the hive. Receive now the Kiss of Elevation.”

The speaker moved forward, thrilling to the clittering of the audience.

Ka-BOOM!

The noise bounced off the hall’s walls. Fine dust billowed down on the audience. Everyone, including the hive-queen, looked upward.

CRASH!

A central section of the ceiling broke free and collapsed on the upturned insectoid faces.

Outside, the exterior walls crumbled, following additional minor explosions. A single human stood in the roadway watching the collapse, holding the detonator control. The rest of the human population of the city was quietly conforming to the alpha wave broadcasts, safe in their homes.

The orator crawled out of the rubble, thankful the ceiling collapse had missed her. But the hive-queen had been crushed by the falling ceiling, before passing on the enzymes and hormones.

The orator must have made a noticeable movement, for the human turned toward her. It approached her and watched her with cold interest.

“How... possible?” she managed to gasp out at the human.

It frowned. She struggled to speak louder.

He suddenly realized she was attempting to communicate. He reached up and pulled a pair of plugs out of his ears.

“What’s that?” he asked.

She felt her cardiac organ jolt. Earplugs! It would not be affected by the alpha wave broadcast! How had the team not anticipated that innovation?

He crouched down to meet her gaze as she clutched the rubble. “I found your lecture most interesting,” he said.

She could not help herself. The investigator aspect in her personality needed to know. “I was right?”

A few seconds passed while it processed her accent. When it did, it began making the noise the team had catalogued as laughter.

“Oh, no. You misunderstood the nature of *Twilight Zone* tales.”

A distressed skitter escaped her mandibles.

He leaned closer. “What’s that?” She couldn’t answer, but he realized what she wanted. “They were *horror* stories,” he said. “Do you understand what that means?”

The assimilation of this information washed over her. They had greatly miscalculated! A species that explored its fears and horrors as entertainment would be far more resilient than her people had ever encountered! The heart-hive must be informed!

She tried to pull herself upright, but her limbs could not function correctly.

The human stood up.

He smiled. It horrified her. “How do you like *my* *Twilight Zone* ending?” he asked.

Her life fluids were oozing out. Her strength was waning. She must warn the heart-hive.

He looked down at her. “Too late,” he said. He put the plugs back in his ears.

The Resistance had begun.



About the Author: Born in Michigan, transplanted to Texas, and emigrated to California, Sarah Beach finds everything around her fascinating. Consequentially, she loves telling stories of all sorts.

Bury Their Hearts In Topanga Canyon

By Karl Alexander

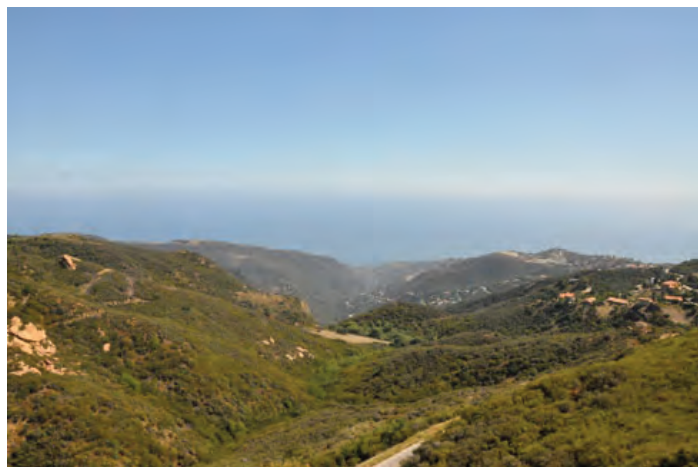
The folks don't leave instructions. Nope. There's no will, no family plot, nothing passed on except a few heirlooms, a box of old photographs, sixty grand in credit card debt and a house in Vista worth considerably less than its three mortgages. It's January, 1992, and they've left us hanging. We don't know what to do with them, but, Jesus, we can't just toss them out now, can we?

So they end up in my garage.

My father, Pop, comes in 1988 because Mom thinks I should have him. He's facing eternity in a beautiful hardwood box complete with old-fashioned lock and key, crafted by my brother, Bill, an accomplished artist. I don't ask Bill why Pop's ashes are locked up—I'm guessing it's retaliation for our concentration-camp childhood. When he gives me the key with great ceremony then busts up laughing, he confirms my suspicions, and I shrug thoughtfully and laugh with him. If nothing else, my brother survived them with a sense of humor. If nothing else, the folks gave us plenty to laugh about.

Sometimes, when I'm in the garage looking for a hammer or a trowel, I'll see the little box and dust off Pop's name. Sometimes, I'm tempted to unlock it and free his spirit—if it's not already gone—except I'm living in the small, spiritually-eclectic community of Malibu Lake, nestled in the Santa Monica Mountains of Southern California, and I doubt Pop would get along with the neighbors. They're almost as eccentric as he was.

Three years after Pop's internment on a shelf between spray cans of Black Flag, WD-40, and a half-gallon of Roundup, Mom joins him, only she's in a cardboard box like the kind you get at Nordstrom's, her box graced by a gray velvet sack. Before her passing, she tells Bill and me that we should get all our ex-wives and children together, go out in the boat and sprinkle Pop's



ashes on the lake. It never occurs to her that we'd need a flotilla of boats and that none of our ex-wives and children were particularly fond of Pop to begin with. Regardless, Mom is enthused by the idea—wouldn't it be great to see everybody again?—until I remind her that Pop hated water.

Aside from her lake idea, Mom has no idea what to do with Pop's ashes, just as she hasn't a clue what to do with herself. I'm astonished that, as self-absorbed as my parents were, they didn't seem particularly concerned about their remains. When we were kids and the subject of death came up, Pop would invariably blow it off by sing-songing the little "worms crawl in, worms crawl out" ditty. Then again, who knows? Maybe the folks thought they'd live forever.

That summer, my stepdaughter, Damien, comes home from college, bringing along her fiancé, Paul, and the first thing she does is take him out to the garage and introduce him to her step-grandparents, Jackie and Pop. If he's horrified, to his credit, he says nothing. I'm ready to tell him that if it were my choice, I'd have them in the living room with the spectacular view of the lake and Sugar Loaf Mountain, the same view that's the actual logo on all the Paramount films, though I don't think Pop ever wrote a movie for Paramount. But it's

not my choice. Kateri, my current wife, says she can't sleep with dead people in the house—she doesn't care who they are—and besides, my parents lived in so many different places, she's sure they're right at home in the garage. More important, what am I going to *do* with them?

Once a week or so I call my brother, but he doesn't know what to do with them, either. Actually, I'm getting used to having them in the garage. I can talk to them and not have to endure a political diatribe in response to something as non-political as, say, the weather.

No doubt, this is the first time they've ever visited anywhere without insulting someone's sensibilities or causing trouble. They're pretty quiet, too, although they do trigger more than a few painful memories. Yes, yes, I know I have to move them on. I am, after all, the executor of their non-estate, and lately I've heard Kateri muttering, "Me or them, Karl, me or them." It's just that nobody appreciates the irony: No matter where the folks eventually go or get disbursed, they'll haunt Billy and me forever.

"Hi, Mom, hi, Pop," I say, getting the lawnmower out of the garage so Paul and I can do the yard. "Nice day, today, huh?" Paul smiles graciously, and I think, *you have no idea, son, none whatsoever. You should thank your lucky stars you're marrying into Kateri's family and not mine.*

In the summer of 1939, the folks meet standing in line at the Hollywood post office. Pop is a reader at 20th Century Fox, writing short stories on the side, trying to follow in the footsteps of his younger brother, already a published novelist and working screenwriter. Mom is a junior at UC Berkeley, a starry-eyed English major. She writes poetry, has visions of someday becoming a lyricist for Broadway musicals, maybe even a famous playwright. Alas, love at first sight has a habit of derailing dreams, especially when it gets physical, for about the time Hitler's armies are marching into Poland, my brother, Billy, is on the way, making an invasion of his own. Mom never sees her senior year.

My parents run off to Yuma, Arizona, and get married. Horrified, Mom's family protests, but the lovebirds stand their ground, resisting heat for an annulment. They "settle down" in West L.A., renting the first of twenty-eight different places they'll call home, the car being one of them. But Pop is eager, inspired now. He writes war stories and suddenly is selling them to

Liberty, Collier's and *Saturday Evening Post*, yet happily for him, the closest he comes to WWII is a fatherhood exemption from the draft. With unbridled optimism and money in the bank, he buys a new car, quits his day job, and never looks back.

For the next forty-eight years, Pop struggles as a writer. If his career were graphed on a screen, you'd see it inch slowly along, spike a half-dozen times like an irregular heartbeat, then flat-line. Why does he keep doing it? It's certainly not for the money, though wealth and fame are undoubtedly part of the dream. As the years pass, writing for him becomes an addiction. Like the cigarettes he smokes, he has to write, and if he doesn't sell the screenplay d'jour, he sits down and writes two more, figuring he'll get his fix tomorrow or the day after. Yes, those spikes do indeed come, but twenty years into the picture, he's up to four packs a day and no longer enjoys the cigarettes with his morning coffee. Likewise, the typewriter has become a monkey on his back—he has to write just to maintain, to keep his dream up and running.

Actually, I'm getting used to having them in the garage. I can talk to them and not have to endure a political diatribe in response to something as non-political as, say, the weather."

Twenty years into that same picture—amidst those glorious spikes—Mom goes back to school, earns the B.A. she gave up for Pop, then an M.A. and a Ph.D. for good measure. When she gets a full-time teaching job at San Diego State, the folks move to San Diego, but Pop complains that he's too far away from Hollywood, so they move back to L.A. Mom commutes. Though Pop remains the "professional writer" in the family, Mom tries her hand at writing plays and volunteers for anything, anywhere that smacks of a theatrical production. She also picks up a political consciousness—the 60s are upon us—but like everything in her life, she takes it to the extreme, going from nonpartisan spiritual dilettante to liberal Democrat to fist-waving leftist radical in less than a decade. Then she, too, gets hooked on writing. Only for her, writing must have a political agenda or it's no better than the crappy shows on TV—those very same crappy shows that Pop writes for. Yes, they toss him bones from time to time, but it's never enough,

and as we march into the 70s, Mom has become the breadwinner, wearing jeans and a blue work shirt instead of pants or power suit.

By 1988, Mom is a white-haired, little old Marxist-Leninist who will do anything to get her latest play produced—a musical period piece about black people enslaved by the Sears & Roebuck Catalogue. She’s been an English professor at San Diego State for twenty-two years now, rising through the ranks despite her outspoken politics, but these days she doesn’t have much time for teaching. The Inner City Cultural Center has granted her a vanity production of “Catalogue”, but since the venue is a dilapidated second-floor walkup between Hollywood and South Central, she spends six hours a day on Interstate 5, her ’66 Alfa Romeo on its third engine, stuttering toward 500,000 miles and the *Guinness Book of Records*.

“The Coroner’s people arrive the same time as the oxygen man shows up with the oxygen that’s about four years too late.”

Pop is a Marxist-Leninist because Mom says he is. He’s in charge of coffee and soft drinks for the “Catalogue” rehearsals, a far cry from his salad days as an amateur boxer, jazz musician, and a budding writer at the studios who used to drink with Dalton Trumbo and William Faulkner. In the early 50s, he had a brief run with the Hollywood big dogs, earned an Academy Award nomination for “Garden of Evil”, then wrote “Old Yeller” before free-falling into the swamp of episodic television. For much of his life, he’d lived in the shadow of younger brother Karl Tunberg, now the credit-rich screenwriter of “Ben-Hur”. Compared to Uncle Karl, Pop’s moments in the sun were few and far between, and he resented it. How he lived for so long on anger and envy, I’ll never know. His last TV assignment was in 1968, the year of the Tet Offensive. Since then, he’s been writing novels in the back bedroom, composing on yellow paper, then typing draft after draft on his veteran Olympia portable, using more yellow paper. Yellow? I dunno why. Maybe they used yellow at the studios. He used to criticize me for using white paper and pen, as if that would keep me from following lockstep in his footsteps, as if that meant I was abandoning *him*. A computer? He never considers one.

What the hell would he do with his pencils and yellow paper? Or his electric pencil sharpener? What if Ping or Pong—his cats named after Mao Tse-tung’s Ping-Pong diplomacy—get into all those cords and shit? They could get electrocuted or something. Pop worries too much as it is. He worries more than he works, more than he does anything. And I remember him working. In bathrobe and slippers, resembling “Whistler’s Mother”, he sits in a faded green recliner staring at his dog-eared clipboard, inventing bad cops and good criminals, the former usually white, the latter, black, brown or Muslim. He painstakingly crafts sentences in longhand that die as he types them, that make funeral corteges to L.A. and New York in manuscript boxes, that come back in those same boxes and get buried without ceremony on dusty closet shelves with rejection letters from agents.

Six months after turning eighty-three, Pop himself dies ignominiously from cancer of the pancreas, then the prostate, then the liver, then everything, rogue cells metastasizing through his insides like Genghis Khan trashing Asia. I remember him in diapers—as he no doubt remembered me—only now he’s curled up on the threadbare living room sofa, crying for morphine instead of mother’s milk. His writing addiction used to ease his pain, hope being one of his strongest suits, but now he needs something stronger. His last book—like his life—is not enough and remains unfinished.

We move him to the bedroom for those final hours. I remember his stick-like, shrunken form lost in blue print pajamas, light as a leaf on the bed. I remember his ancient white-stubbled face, blue eyes seeing nothing, seeing everything too late. I remember his musician’s hands clawing preternaturally at the air as he struggles to breathe. I think of pterodactyls. Is he trying to fly? I take one hand—oh, to hold my father’s hand – but he pulls it loose and resumes his work, work always coming first with Pop, work at the expense of everything. I imagine his soul gaining altitude, maybe even seeing the forest through the trees over smogged-in Southern California.

The struggle stops. Finally. William A. Tunberg, born April 12, 1905. *C’est la mort*. Haunted by bitter-sweet memories and dreams of what might have been, he mercifully dies, October 4, 1988. I kiss his cold hand, hold it to my face. *Goodbye, Pop; I love you*. Pong, the big orange tom, jumps on the windowsill outside and meows plaintively. *Good-bye, Pop; we love you*.

The Coroner’s people arrive the same time as the oxygen man shows up with the oxygen that’s about four

years too late. They zip Pop in a body bag and take him away—just like they did with the boys in Nam. Yet he fought in that war, too, reluctance the better part of his valor. For better or worse, he was on the other side, drafted into the anti-war movement by Mom, then schooled in the rhetoric by Susan, his hip, radicalized daughter-in-law. She gave the folks solidarity and counterculture, dismissing Pop's elusive dream of renewed Hollywood success with stoned, bemused witticisms. *Either you're part of the problem or part of the solution, man.* Pop never has a chance to decide for himself. He doesn't get to claim the fatherhood exemption that worked once before. *Sorry, Charlie, the movement's taking everybody, no deferments allowed.* He never has a chance to secretly relish looking like a Hollywood writer, either. They criticize his '66 XKE convertible with wire wheels, his 50s sports jackets, his speeding tickets. According to Mom and Susan, success in tinseltown makes you a "capitalist pig"—complicit in carpet bombing and napalm runs, not to mention police brutality in the south. They don't see that Pop is losing control. They don't realize he's writing out of desperation. Ironically, he resembles the boxer he once was—only now he's deep into the late rounds. He's out on his feet, with no idea where he is or who he's fighting, yet he goes on swinging and punching. Except Pop doesn't do it for three or four rounds. He does it for twenty years.

Back in '68, Mom and Susan never do get him to demonstrate against the war. He flat out refuses and turns a deaf ear to their abuse, surprising them. It must be fear, I think. He's terrified—not just that somebody he knows might recognize him—but what about his image? Him, sixty-three and counting, out there on the street, marching with all those long-haired, drug-crazed freaks! It's unacceptable. It's not him. Besides, what if the Goddamn wind comes up? How's he supposed to hold his hair down over his bald spot if he's carrying a sign?

Still, the war goes on and on. It outrages Mom and therefore outrages Pop, yet his heart really isn't in the movement. He has a hard time rooting for Victor Charlie and the NVA because his second son, Karl, was an officer in the regular U.S. Marine Corps—one of "the enemy". So, in those days, Pop watches the six o'clock news furtively, as if the war's a football game and he's rooting for the wrong team. God forbid Mom should walk in, catch him with a beer, his hand in the peanuts, and ask why PBS isn't on. In the Tunberg household, acceptable behavior is Mom and Pop having a glass of

sherry before dinner while listening to KPFFK. Then, after Pop's done the dishes, they read the *National Guardian* over coffee—if he's allowed coffee that late—and then she might recite a Palestinian agitprop or Leroi Jones. In those dark days, Pop waits in agony for that one phone call—the next TV assignment—the one phone call that will give him his *cojones* back and restore his dignity, that one phone call that never comes.

By 1995, the folks have been in my garage longer than they'd lived anywhere else. I've gotten used to "exchanging" pleasantries with them and really don't mind their presence, though deep down I know we have to part company sometime. If I knew where they'd like to be—if, if they'd give me a sign. Frowning, I wonder why my brother and I can't just sprinkle their ashes somewhere and be done with it. How come we're having such trouble letting go? Is it a pathetic attempt to have a normal relationship with them? Or do we merely want to hang onto their craziness? We'll never know.

On January 10th, after weeks of El Niño, the mother of all rainstorms slams into Southern California. The lake rises fourteen feet in a matter of hours, flooding my house and garage. My living room guest-stars on the six o'clock news, and there's three feet of muddy water in the garage, but, no, Mom and Pop haven't been swept away. No such luck. They're snug on their shelf, a foot above the high-water mark, dry as dust, except Kateri tells me to forget bringing them to the new condo we've rented. She has no intention of setting up housekeeping with the ashes of her in-laws. Understandable, I guess. Maybe it's bad feng shui. So I cave in to domestic tranquility and call my brother, musing, if it

They don't see that Pop is losing control. They don't realize he's writing out of desperation. Ironically, he resembles the boxer he once was — only now he's deep into the late rounds."

takes an act of God to get rid of the parents, maybe I should start going to church again.

His service answers.

“Hey, Bill, this is your brother, Karl. We gotta do something about the folks.” I pause in case he’s there, but he doesn’t pick up. “Call me, okay?”

Of course, he doesn’t call. I call again the next day, but he doesn’t return that call, either, so I set my alarm for three in the morning and try him then, figuring he’ll answer for sure because he’ll think somebody died. Indeed, he does, and is extremely pissed off when he finds out what I want.

“Why can’t they stay in your garage?” he says when awake. “What’s wrong with that?”

“I’m moving!”

“Yeah, but nobody’s gonna buy your house. Your house flooded! You can leave ‘em there.”

“No!”

“Okay, okay,” he acquiesces, “so what do we do with them, then?”

“I think we should sprinkle their ashes where they were the happiest.”

“Okay.”

“So where were they the happiest?”

“I dunno, Karl, they lived in twenty-eight different places.”

“Think.”

“What about Topanga Canyon?” he says after a pause. “That’s where Pop wrote Old Yeller.”

Done.

Less than an hour from downtown L.A., Topanga Canyon sits lost in the Santa Monica mountains, a foreign principality of weirdness. I’m surprised they don’t make you show your passport when you cross Mulholland and descend into its vibrations. Rugged and inaccessible, it’s always been a haven for wayward souls. In the mid-19th Century, the area was named after Topanga, a Chumash Indian who settled there after being expelled from the Ventura tribe for questionable spiritual practices. When the Civil War broke out, Topanga started an Evangelical Chumash-Christian church that appealed to white male settlers because Topanga’s seven daughters wore no clothes. Eventually, the church became a nudist colony known for its libertine philosophy. Now the Fernwood Market occupies the site where Topanga’s daughters used to frolic with their bearded consorts. A few miles north, on a remote hillside off Entrada Drive, is a ramshackle Spanish-style faux adobe where Mom and Pop first tuned in KPFK in

1958.

Topanga Canyon is only a half-hour drive from my condo, but when I pull off the narrow mountainous road and gaze at the old house, I feel as if I’ve gone back in time. It still needs painting, its red-tile roof is still missing tiles, the grounds still need weeding, and the long asphalt drive curving up to the house remains potholed. Nothing has changed, except someone has added a dog-run alongside the house, and the field sloping down to a grove of scrub oaks is emerald green from the rains. When the folks lived here, it was always parched brown. A Dodge Ram crew-cab is parked in front of the house, too. Pop would never drive a pickup or a truck. When the folks lived here, he drove a ’54 Ford, but was usually smiling because he was working at Disney. He

“I’m surprised they don’t make you show your passport when you cross Mulholland and descend into its vibrations.”

had Ferrari dreams.

My brother shows up late and in a hurry to get this over with. Having just come from World Gym in Venice, he wears ragged sweat pants and an old muscle shirt with holes in it. He resembles a pro wrestler turned fugitive—perfect for Topanga Canyon. Nervous, he scans the trees behind us, looks at the road, then peers across the field at the house. A German Shepherd has materialized in the dog run and stares back at us, its ears perked. Bill nods at the dog, allows himself a quick grin. “Remember Tango?”

Named a decade before the folks felt morally compelled to name their pets after left-wing heroes or events, Tango was a German Shepherd without papers who spent his salad days at this very adobe. He disliked small children and farted in his sleep. He was Pop’s perfect dog.

My brother nods at the shepherd again. “That dog looks like Tango.” He chuckles nervously. “He could be the reincarnation of Tango.”

“Maybe.” I get the folks out of the car, set them on the hood, unlock Pop’s box, take Mom from her velvet sack.

“Remember when Tango used to chase rabbits in this field?”

“Yep.” I hand him Pop.

He holds the box gingerly, away from his body. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“You take Pop, and I’ll take Mom. We’ll get as close to the house as we can and then we’ll sprinkle their ashes, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Let’s go.”

Not knowing exactly where, I start across the field. Reluctantly, my brother follows. Late afternoon sun comes in shafts through the scrub oaks, giving them an aura of serenity, and we veer toward them. My throat goes dry. I’m just as nervous as my brother. Releasing the ashes of your parents is not something one does lightly, for there’s an unseen, sacred quality to their remains. We are, if you will, releasing energy and spirit. So, yes, I feel that I’m about to do something spiritual and noble, yet I also know that I’m trespassing. Confirming it, the shepherd in the dog run starts barking—a deep, big-dog bark that reverberates down the hill. I walk faster, legs swishing through the grass.

“You know there’s a \$500.00 fine for littering,” my brother says ominously, “even in Topanga Canyon.”

Irritated, I glance at the house. A man has come outside, a little man. He wears a greasy baseball cap, green T-shirt and cargo pants. Hands on his skinny hips, he glares down at us, and I almost laugh. Though famous for spaced-out, liberal people, Topanga Canyon does have its share of rednecks, and one of them is living in Mom and Pop’s old adobe.

In the oaks now, we set the folks on a patch of grass. Heart pounding, I drop to my knees in front of them, turn expectantly to my brother, but he’s still watching the redneck.

“He went back in the house,” says Bill, kneeling across from me. “You don’t think he’s getting a gun, do you?”

I shake my head no, and start opening Mom’s box, my eyes suddenly brimming with tears. Bill follows my lead, and pulls Pop from his hardwood box, but we both discover the ashes are sealed in plastic. Prepared, I slice the plastic with a pocketknife, look at my brother.

“I feel weird,” he says.

“We should say something.”

“The folks loved it here.”

“Yeah.” I nod, tears streaming down my face.

Then I take a handful of Mom, her ashes surpris-

ingly gritty, and throw them high in the air. I take a handful of Pop and toss him skyward as well. My brother grabs handfuls, hurls their ashes everywhere. I begin speaking, my words counterpoint to the sound of the ashes raining down through the trees, the ashes *falling gently on the grass. We commit your spirits to the sky, the earth, the grass, the trees. We commit your spirits to the universe. You were happy here once—may you be forever happy here again. God bless you, Mom and Pop. We’ll always love you. Welcome home.*

We bow our heads in silent prayer and listen to the silence. Finally, we’ve put them to rest. We pick up the boxes, the plastic, and start back, but coming out of the oaks, I hear furious barking and glance at the adobe. Jolted, I see not one, but two large German Shepherds scrambling down the hill and bounding toward us. The redneck has let his dogs loose on us!

“Jesus Christ!”

I take off running for the cars, my brother right behind, but the dirt is soft and the grass heavy, and I know we’ll never make it. I hear the dogs baying now, almost on us, and in the middle of the field, we turn to defend ourselves, but then the strangest thing happens.

The dogs aren’t barking and growling. Ears back and tails wagging, they’re crying joyfully, jumping up on us, licking our faces, holding onto us with their front paws. Astounded, I stare at my brother, and he gapes back at me. We pet the dogs and talk softly to them and tell them to go home, but they don’t. Bounding playfully in the grass, they follow us to our cars, and I look at my brother again, but shake my head and can’t think of anything to say. Has some sort of strange transmutation taken place, or were these dogs friendly all along?

I’ll never know, but driving away, wiping tears from my face, I think, we didn’t put the folks to rest, we released them. And in the best of multiple universes, Mom will be busy leading a revolution somewhere, and Pop will be right behind, writing a screenplay about it.



About the Author: Karl Alexander is a novelist and screenwriter. He has published six novels and two have been made into films, including the classic, “Time After Time”. His most recent book is “Time-Crossed Lovers”. He lives near his hometown, Los Angeles.

Tracks

By Barbara Schnell



An anemic sun fought wispy clouds to shine on the 1880s Dakota Territory. A blizzard had blown through, leaving bone-chilling temperatures. In Medary Township, loose snow drifted against the raw wooden railroad station set close to the tracks.

Inside, the station manager checked the time on his pocket watch. He glanced out the window, frowning sympathetically at the thin, ragged young man shoveling snow from the station platform. He bundled up and struggled with the door against the wind. He waved the young man over and said, “Train’s late. I expect the tracks are blocked up the line.” He winked at Tom. “Bet you can’t wait to get a look at those brides. Surprised a young fella like you hasn’t got a girl.”

Tom wiped tears from his wind-reddened blue eyes and smiled shyly. “I like to git vent vith too, but da girls ain’t so fer me.” He stopped, embarrassed. That wasn’t right, was it?

The station manager grinned. “My wife wasn’t

much for me either, but I married her anyway,” he said. A gust of wind drove the men against the building and the manager turned away to protect his face before continuing, “You should come back fulltime with the railroad. I don’t know why you kill yourself farming.”

Tom wanted to explain that he’d come to America from Denmark with the dream of land ownership, that the money he’d earned laying track for the railroad spur went for his homestead... but he didn’t have the words. He shrugged.

Tom’s worst problem was loneliness. No American girl wanted an immigrant with no money and little English.”

The manager pulled his coat collar up around his ears before peering down the tracks. “No point waiting. Might as well get some dinner. Don’t kill yourself shoveling; the snow will just blow back.” The manager started down the steps of the platform then turned back. “Say, why don’t you come with me? The wife always makes plenty of food,” he offered. “Those brides never have any baggage, and anybody picking up a load will wait. We’ll just lock up for an hour.”

Tom struggled to express thanks for kindness and rejection of implied charity. He finally said, “No...I wait.”

“Suit yourself,” the manager said, and trudged off.

Tom resumed shoveling and pushed powdery snow off the side of the platform. He looked disconsolately at the train tracks that bisected the plain and fingered a hole in his glove. The hope and energy that had sustained him when he first came to this country was almost gone.

He lived underground in a sod ‘house’ on the prairie, like a gopher. He’d struggled to farm his acreage with little success. He needed oxen to break the tough sod, but he only had enough money for seed and survival. Fortunately, the railroad offered him odd jobs to get him through the savage winter. It was a long walk into town, but he was glad for the work—and the company.

Tom’s worst problem was loneliness. No American girl wanted an immigrant with no money and little English. The only women available to him were the whores in the red-lanterned house on the other side of the tracks, but he had never seriously considered going there. The women’s bold eyes scared him; they knew he was a greenhorn, and his pride couldn’t stand ridicule. Besides, he feared disease and refused to spend money needed for supplies on what he considered a public facility.

He resisted the buffeting wind and stared down the tracks heading into the west. Maybe he should go to California. The easy panning of the Gold Rush was played out, but he could work the mines. He’d still be in a hole, but at least he’d be warm. He sighed.

Tom’s attention turned to a gathering crowd of work-worn men. These bachelors had organized a fund to bring brides from the East. He leaned on his shovel and watched as they clutched pictures, scratched newly shaved cheeks, and made embarrassed jokes. The sound of a train whistle turned his attention back to the tracks, and he stepped back as the train finally pulled in with a whoosh. Skinny, poorly-dressed women carrying baskets and photographs disembarked. They compared scruffy men to their pictures for a match and paired off. Then the men silently escorted them toward the town through the snow, making tracks that the wind obliterated. Tom frowned at the thought that in ten years he’d be greeting some poor, desperate, picture-clutching stranger. He stamped his feet and pulled his cap more firmly over his blond head. He needed to keep moving to stay warm. Might as well shovel some more.

As he worked, he noticed three large, dirty men approaching the station. *Probably on their way to the brothel*, he thought. As the men passed the couples, the biggest one shoved a bride rudely and shook his fist at her escort. Tom recognized them as itinerant cowhands who hung out at the saloon. He tensed when they looked toward the platform; he’d been their victim before. “Well, look here,” said one of the cowhands. “We’ve either got a jilted bride or a new whore.”

A startled gasp behind Tom confirmed that he wasn’t their target. Tom turned to see a young woman huddled against the building grasping a carpetbag. She was short and sturdy in countrified, Old World clothes. Her blue eyes met his briefly before she ducked her head and took a firmer grip on her carpetbag.

Tom turned back to the approaching threat. He looked toward the town, hoping to see the station manager returning, but the trio climbing the platform blocked his sight. He took a deep breath and stepped in front of the young woman.

“Is she yours, Dutchy?” the biggest cowhand asked. “You don’t mind sharing, do you?”

He tried to push Tom out of the way, but Tom pushed back. “Dane, no Deutsch. You... leave,” he stammered, wishing he spoke English better.

The leader sneered. “Why, you insect. She’s probably a new girl for Tessie’s house. We’re just going to try her out. We won’t hurt her... much.” He exchanged a leering look with his fellows and turned back to Tom, snarling. “Out of the way, little man. You got no business here.” He pushed Tom again.

Tom briefly thought of stepping aside. The man was right; he had no official responsibility here, he was part-time help. He was outnumbered. He didn’t even know the girl; it wasn’t his fight. Then the thug pushed him once more and Tom thought, *Enough*. This was America, not the old country. Nobody got to push him. And he represented the railroad for the time being; he had to do something. He closed his eyes, raised his shovel, and swung. The thug he hit yelped, and the other two jumped Tom and wrestled the shovel away. He punched and kicked desperately as they threw him down. He was in for a beating and he knew it. He hoped the girl would have sense enough to run for help.

He resisted the buffeting wind and stared down the tracks heading into the West. Maybe he should go to California.”

Abruptly, Tom felt something large swing over his head and connect with an attacker. It was the carpetbag. The young woman had joined the fight.

“Call me a whore, will ye?!” she yelled in an Irish brogue, as she knocked a thug off the station platform. She swung the carpetbag at the remaining cowhand,

who backed off in confusion.

The fallen leader was slowly climbing to his feet, swearing as he wiped blood from his ear. Tom raised himself on an elbow, shook his head to clear it, and looked up at the girl. She offered him her free hand. "We've evened the odds a bit, eh?" she said as she pulled him up. Tom grinned and retrieved his shovel. The shovel and her carpetbag were effective weapons until the noise attracted the attention of the train engineer and conductor, who came to the rescue. The ratchet of a shell being chambered in a shotgun stopped the fight.

"Don't make me use this," warned the engineer. The cowboys slowly raised their hands.

"You two alright?" the engineer asked Tom and the girl without taking his eyes off the cowboys.

"Foin," the girl said quickly.

"Ya, fine," Tom echoed, wincing.

"You," said the engineer to the cowboys, "move." He jerked his chin toward the town. The cowboys were prodded at gunpoint to the sheriff's office.

Tom was checking bruised ribs and the young woman was straightening her scarf when an older man pulled up in an empty buckboard. "Margaret, is that you?" he called out.

"Bruce Adams?" the young woman asked. When he nodded, she smoothed the front of her coat and said, "Yes, I'm Margaret. Ye're expectin' me, I think?"

The man glanced at the departing, gun-toting railroad men, who were ungently prodding the cowboys, and Tom's bloody lip. "What happened?" he asked.

"This young man helped me fight off those eijets," she said with a contemptuous glare toward the captive cowboys.

"The two of you?" Adams asked in surprise.

Tom nodded cautiously. Adams was a well-to-do merchant and town leader; he didn't want to seem too forward. "You knew she was my niece then," Adams said. Tom shook his head. Adams raised his eyebrows. "No? Then I guess introductions are in order. Tom Sorenson, this is Margaret Dickie. She's come from Ireland to keep house for her aunt and me while she goes to Normal school. The town needs a teacher. Margaret, young Tom here is a homesteader."

Margaret thrust her hand out to be shaken. "Mr. Sorenson," she said, "I'm thankin' ye fer helpin' me against those..." suddenly her blue eyes flashed and she

spat "vermin." Then she smiled at him. "I'm in your debt."

Tom smiled bemusedly back, as he took in the russet curls peeping out of the scarf. Such a pretty girl! And how brave she must be to have come all this way by herself.

Mr. Adams coughed to break the silence. "I came to pick up the hardware and lamp glass for my new store. Would you check to see if my order came, Tom?"

Tom returned to business. He jumped off the platform and limped to the nearest boxcar. As Mr. Adams brought the wagon around, Tom slid back the door and jumped into the car. The ten wooden boxes were small enough to be handled by one person, so he ignored the handcart. When he turned back with the first box, he was startled to see raised mittens at the door. He looked questioningly at Mr. Adams, not sure if it was appropriate for the niece of a rich man to engage in lifting. Mr. Adams just shrugged and nodded, so he silently handed the box to Margaret, who smoothly slid it into the buckboard. Mr. Adams smiled, crossed his arms against the cold, and let them work. When the wagon was loaded, Tom jumped out of the car to stand next to Margaret.

"Tanks fer yer help," he said carefully, not wanting to appear foolish in front of her. "You dunt hev to."

"Work doesn't scare me. I wouldn't be here if it did," she returned.

"Well..." Tom started and stopped. He tried to think of something gallant to say to impress her, but gave up. He looked helplessly into her smiling eyes and dropped his own in confusion. "My English... no good," he said apologetically.

"I could teach ye English if ye'd like," she offered.

Tom looked up, brightening, until he remembered he had little money for non-essentials. "I haf... no money... fer lessons," he admitted shamefacedly. She'd find out soon enough that he was no catch for the niece of a rich man.

"Teachin' is payment fer yer help," she replied. "Besides, it'd be good practice fer me."

Tom looked at Mr. Adams, uncertain if he was overstepping, but Adams just said wryly, "I don't know what accent you'll end up with, but she can teach you at my house if that suits."

Tom nodded, surprised. The rules here were much different from those in Denmark.

“Good,” said Mr. Adams. “We better get going, Margaret. I want to get the horses out of this cold, and your aunt will be worried.”

Margaret started to climb up to the buckboard seat, and Tom put a diffident hand under her arm to help. Margaret smiled at him again and settled herself. He was lost in reverie until Mr. Adams cleared his throat and said, “Tom, Margaret left her bag on the platform. Maybe you could get it for her.”

Tom jumped up on the platform, his bruises forgotten, and threw the carpetbag into the buckboard. Mr. Adams picked up the reins, hesitated, and put them down again. “Say Tom,” he said, “do you know carpentry? I need help building the store. I could pay you in seed.”

“Some,” Tom said confidently.

Mr. Adams nodded. “When you’re done here, come to the house. We can work out the details.” He clucked at the horses.

Tom gazed after them, sucking two loose teeth and calculating the offer. Instead of buying seed, he could use his savings to rent oxen. He could break more sod for planting. He’d have a decent crop to sell next year.

All practical thoughts fled when Margaret peeked around at him. He noticed a dusting of freckles on her pert nose, and his heart lifted when she smiled and waved. This morning he’d been ready to give up. Now he had money for oxen and a chance at a pretty girl. A few bruises and loose teeth were a small price to pay. What a country!

He smiled as he knocked snow off the shovel, then went inside the station to wait for the manager. The wind would cover the buckboard tracks, but no matter. He knew where they led.



About the Author: Barbara Schnell is a member of SAG/AFTRA and shares a rehabbed 1921 bungalow in Echo Park with her husband and two cats. She set a cash-winning record on \$25,000 Pyramid and came in last on Jeopardy. She has written one novel, *First Year*.



The Commodity Of Courage

A Guest Post by Art Holcomb

By Art Holcomb

“The chief commodity a writer has to sell is his courage. And if he has none, he is more than a coward. He is a sellout and a fink and a heretic, because writing is a holy chore.”

~ Harlan Ellison

I believe a writer must have the **courage** to:

START IN EARNEST: Not in fits and starts, but as if your life and world depended upon you taking this path. This could be the hardest thing you have ever done, because the need comes from some unspoken place, ancient, and deep.

Harder still, because you must cast aside every day any voice in your life that says that this is not your destiny. The hard truth is that no one will ever really understand you – that is, except the audience who await your arrival.

It’s just one step into the darkness.

So... take a breath, center yourself... and begin.

DO INCREDIBLE EXPLORATION: Talent is important and wonderful and amazing and – in the end – is not enough to make you a success. But exploration matters, because writing is more about being **REAL** than being right. Being authentic in what you say gives power to your words and makes it easier to finish each piece.

80% of all writing happens before you type **CHAPTER ONE** or **FADE IN**.

At least half of **THAT** writing is **done out of the chair**.

Inspiration and discovery combine when you commit to doing this deeply and well.

SAY WHAT OTHERS WILL NOT: I know you have seen the secret things in the corners of Creation.

You have felt and done things that have changed your life. And you stand now – in this place and at this time to **testify** – to tell **YOUR TRUTHS** to others through the greatest vehicle there ever was for truth – Story.

These things are often dark and byzantine and intense and uncomfortable, and some of them frighten you. But it is because of this that you **MUST** say them aloud, because they are the very things that make vital, personal, and spiritual the connection between you and your readers.

“After trying everything I could to create again, I started doing research and setting deadlines and disciplining myself to produce good work on a regular schedule.”

You have to go deep every time. That means taking the risk of making your readers uncomfortable, because you’re making them think and feel. So write the passages that will cling to your readers, the ones that will return to them, sudden and unbidden, in years to come.

It’s what writers like Ellison have done for me. It’s what you can do for the next generation.

MAKE MISTAKES: Mistakes are the only way to know that you’re pushing yourself beyond whatever your limits are **right now**. Later, you won’t make these same mistakes anymore – you will make new ones...

And that’s how you grow.

But if you are not regularly making mistakes, if the writing is coming out “perfectly” in first draft all the

time, it's not because you've finally become the consummate professional...

It's because you're not trying hard enough, and you've set the bar too low.

Reach farther. Write harder, faster, deeper.

And when in doubt – always take the risk.

KEEP YOUR TALENT IN CONTEXT: I had my first public success in writing when I was 13. As a result I became prideful – and even a bit stuck up – because I thought I could do something that others could not, and do it well.

Years later, a day came when I called upon that talent to get me through and it failed me. I came up empty – literally – and thought I was done for sure.

I felt like that, lost in an ever-increasing dry spell, for 11 years.

After trying everything I could to create again, I started doing research and setting deadlines and disciplining myself to produce good work on a regular schedule. Eventually, my productivity and quality came back, once I realized that talent works best in harness and under the thumb of a good work ethic.

I never took it for granted again.

BE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR IMPACT: This does not mean for you to be careful about what you say for fear of offending someone. Your words are yours alone, and people will react to them as their own lives, desires and circumstances dictate. “Offensive” is a label, not a critique.

But regardless of what you say, you must consider carefully the deeper meaning of your particular truths, and then have the courage to stand by what you say.

“You are either master of your unspoken words or slave to those best left unspoken.” – A. Lincoln.

SACRIFICE: Writing is more about choices than most people realize. It's not just the choice of what to say and when, but the thousands of choices you will have to make to give your writing a fighting chance.

The classic image of the writer at ease, working one or two hours a day creating marketable prose and then living the life of ease, has always been a myth.

There are things every serious writer, musician, and athlete must give up **every day** to afford them the time

to learn and work their Art. Writing, especially, is a lonely journey, even in the midst of a crowded coffee house, and to do this day in and day out is the active choice we make – moment by moment – as we each fight for our own relevance.

Recognize and celebrate that sacrifice in yourself. Respect and celebrate it in others.

Writing is more about choices than most people realize. It's not just the choice of what to say and when, but the thousands of choices you will have to make to give your writing a fighting chance.”

SET AND HIT DEADLINES: This is the great secret to a successful career as a writer. But it is at the same time both the most dreaded aspect of a writer's life and the **absolutely best tool** you have in becoming a successful writer. Because any open-ended writing project – with no concrete due date – is a project **that will never be finished.**

I learned that while writing my first monthly comic book series in 1993.

Back then, the prospect was very attractive: a completed comic book with words and story by me and art inspired by my ideas, in my hands published EVERY MONTH!

Of course, if that were to actually happen, if artists were to have pages to draw, inkers and colorist to have pages to fill, a printer to have pages to print and my publisher to have a profit with which to continue paying me, I had to complete a new 22 page script with new story and new ideas **each month!**

On time.

Every time.

Every month.

Since I very much enjoyed writing **and** eating, I learned to do it.

And since other people were depending on me, I had to make sure those stories were done and done well.

There was always another deadline and always another challenge, and soon I realized that this was the only way to create a body of work.

I now apply this to all my projects, setting a deadline for each phase. It's how I must work to be successful. It's how Larry must work to be able to manage all of his many projects and achieve his many successes. Best learn to embrace it now.

I like the way Chuck Wendig (the incredibly prolific novelist-screenwriter-game designer) says it:

Write as much as you can

Write as fast as you can

Finish your work

Hit your deadlines

Try not to suck

You have to go deep every time. That means taking the risk of making your readers uncomfortable, because you're making them think and feel."

FINISH: And Chuck is right about this too. So simple a concept, but it lies at the heart of most writing failures.

The secret shame of every unpublished writer is their embarrassment of unfinished work. There should be a law that says that you are not allowed to call yourself a WRITER until you actually finish something. Until then, you are an apprentice.

This is not to penalize those learning their craft, but there should be a benchmark by which to measure yourself.

Because:

You will never get an audience until you publish, and

You cannot publish until you finish.

SUBMIT: In a world of e-publishing and blogging, the concept of submitting your work to another for acceptance can seem a bit alien. This is because both these institutions have devolved into forms of vanity publishing.

Such format denies the most basic tenet of a writer's

development: the crucible of critique.

It is vital to the artist's life that he knows directly and sincerely how another well-informed person perceives his work.

It is both feedback and benchmark.

It is a way to tell how well you are reaching your audience.

It is vital to growth as a writer.

Without it, you can inadvertently slip into that unfortunate subclass of the writer: the dilettante. The person who acts and talks like a writer but produces nothing tangible, living their life as much as a work-in-progress as the pieces they cannot finish. People can delude themselves so easily, and such writers can toil away at a piece for years without ever accomplishing anything.

At best, this is the literary version of Sisyphus and the rock.

At worst, it is a Siren's song, trapping you in your own desire.

Are you that person? Are you still writing something that you know is done but cannot seem to move past? Just decide to send it off and start something new. Take a chance.

Remember: courage isn't really a virtue.

Courage is a decision.



About the Author: Art Holcomb is a screenwriter whose work has appeared on the SHOWTIME Channel and a comic book author of such comics as Marvel's X-MEN and Acclaim's Eternal Warriors. He teaches screenwriting and graphic novel writing at the University of California Riverside Extension Writer's Program, and is a regular contributor to Storyfix.com.

He will be teaching at the Screenwriter's World Conference in Los Angeles in October 2012. He lives in Southern California.

The Ole Higue

By Rosaliene Bacchus

MANGO SEASON IN GEORGETOWN, GUYANA.

On a bright Saturday morning, I shouldn't be chasing a cricket ball in the neighbor's yard. This happens when you have a little brother like Sammy. He's worse than a male mosquito.

"You do this on purpose." I want to clobber him. "Granny says Missis Withers is an *Ole Higue*. She suck her husband 'til he dead. She going suck you too."

"Daddy say is not true," Sammy says. "*Ole Higue* is only old-people story to frighten lil children."

"Is that so? Keep pestering Missis Withers. You going find out if is for true or not."

I march over to the Ole Higue's house at the street corner. Sammy lags behind. "I got better things to do than go after your stupid cricket ball."

"Like kissing that smiley-face tall boy?"

I turn around and glare at him. "You spying on me now?"

We pass the Ole Higue's dense five-foot high red hibiscus hedge. No one uses the padlocked gate to the sun-beaten, water-worn front staircase. We turn the corner to the side of the house where a thick metal chain secures the corroding wrought iron driveway gate. The Ole Higue's hearse waits under the house. The graying-white, colonial-style wood house, standing on eight robust ten-foot stilts, looms above us like a giant black widow spider. Dark curtains trap the sunbeams piercing the glass windows.

I move towards the small service gate on the right. Sammy clutches my skirt; he hunches by my side. I shake the rusty bell. A young man, the Ole Higue's grandson, sticks his head out a window overhead. Sunlight gleams on his oily black hair.

"Is what you all want?"

"My brother's cricket ball fall in your backyard. We can go in the yard and get it?"

The Ole Higue's head pops out another window. Her long plaited black hair brushes the windowsill. Sammy twitches by my side. "Me not stupid. You lil wiry brother only after me mangoes." The dark eyes in the emaciated face hurl balls of fire at Sammy. He grabs my hand and glues to my side.

"Missis Withers, your grandson can look for the ball then?"

"Me tell you already, young lady. What in me yard is me own. Tell you big-eye brother to stop throwing things in me yard." The Ole Higue and her grandson disappear inside the belly of the black widow spider.

"Don't look at me with a long face. I promised to try. I didn't promise to get your ball back."

On our way back home, I can tell that Sammy is up to more tricks. I shove him in his back. "Sammy! No more tricks. You hear me? Or the Ole Higue going come and suck you." After I open our gate, he bolts into our yard as if the landlord's two black Dobermans are after him. Cocoa—a big, sleek, cocoa-brown, mixed-breed dog—barks from his



kennel under the front staircase. He belongs to the family in the bottom flat. Since the day Cocoa attacked the postman, they keep him locked up during the daytime.

I take a deep breath and exhale. I hate talking to Mrs. Withers. A cockroach-crawly-feeling runs down my spine. She cursed us from the first day we moved in next door. Our modern, two-flat, pink and white concrete residence must be blight to her. Everything that lands in her yard is gone forever. Dad can't enjoy his Saturday-night barbecues with his friends: She calls the police to complain about the noise.

Without Sammy, the Ole Higue wouldn't even know I exist. He's always losing things in her yard. Her mango tree lures him. From our dining room window on the top flat, he counts the orange-red fruits hanging on the tree. It's not easy for a sixteen-year-old girl like me to deal with a seven-year-old brother. He brings out the worst in me. Granny said I got the face of an angel but the heart of the devil.

"He's a handful," Mom told the landlady the other day. Somehow, Sammy had managed to break the landlady's crystal vase that she kept on a side table in her living room. He goes over often to their house to play video games with her young son. "Zina never give me so much trouble when she was small," Mom said. "I ain't got energy to keep up with him."

Mom figures I got the energy to handle Sammy. Besides finding and catching him, I make sure he bathes, eats his food, does his homework, and brushes his teeth. I'm now Optimus Prime. One o'clock can't come fast enough for me, when Mom and Dad return home from work. Saturday afternoon is my time off; my time to spend with my friends. No Megatron. No Ole Higue to suck my energies.

Saturday night, after 8:00 p.m., I'm in our study-room, chatting with my girlfriends online. Sammy is in the living room on his Playstation2, fighting the Decepticons on Planet Cybertron. Don't ask me what he sees in that silly Transformers video game. But the game keeps him in one place for half-an-hour. The *Transformers* movie is another thing: That is non-stop action. And Shia LaBeouf is real cute.

Mom appears in the open doorway, dressed up in her new glittery, tight-fitting red dress with fine straps. She looks real chic and curvaceous. She promised to let me wear her dress to my best friend's birthday. Mom and Dad are going to the Pegasus Poolside for a wed-

ding-anniversary celebration with some friends. Open air, candle lights, barbecue, and live band music. I'm stuck at home. Babysitting Sammy.

"Zina, I don't want you and Sammy fighting again," Mom says. "You hear me, Sammy? No fighting."

"She the one who start it, Mommy."

"Sammy!" Dad says from the living room. "You gotta listen to your big sister."

"Okaaay, Daddy. I going behave."

Following Mom and Dad to the front door, I lock it after they leave. Time to lock up. No *thief-man* is going to get in. I close and bolt the sitting room windows. Before closing the dining room window, I glance at the Ole Higue's house. A light is visible in one of the bedrooms. The mango tree stands guard in the gloom of the streetlight. I check the latches on the back door. The high windows in the kitchen, toilet, and bathroom are secure. I turn off all overhead florescent lights, leaving on the table lamp in the living room.

The graying-white, colonial-style wood house, standing on eight robust ten-foot stilts, looms above us like a giant black widow spider."

Sammy is still waging war with Megatron. Duhduh-duhduh-duhduh. The sound of Megatron's arm-mounted fusion cannon echoes in every room. He and I share the front bedroom, near to the L-shaped living room. Our study-room occupies the middle bedroom and opens into the dining room. Mom and Dad sleep in the back bedroom, close to the bathroom and kitchen.

I settle down again at the computer. The Guyana Forum awaits me. Yesterday, HeartBreakKid complained he could not find a girl with a good personality. BrownSugar responded: "Maybe you're looking in the wrong places." Registered as AngelFace, I add my comment: "I got a similar problem. The boys in my class are too childish and boring."

Over half-hour elapses before I notice the recurring sound of the 'Game Over.' The living room is now in darkness. Sammy is up to mischief again. Tiptoeing to the open door, I slip out. Sammy is out-of-sight. I peep over the four-foot high divider between the dining and

living rooms. Spotting him at the living-room window behind the divider-wall, I sneak up behind him.

“What you doing, Sammy?” He jumps back, almost hitting me over.

He whips round to face me, hiding something in his left hand. “I not doing nothing. I just looking out the window.”

“Let me see what you got in your hand.” He opens his hand to reveal several small white balls, about the size of genips. I snatch them from his hand. “They wet! What’s this?”

“Is just toilet-paper.”

“You soak toilet paper and make it into balls?... Sammy?... What you been up to?”

“Nothing... I ain’t do nothing.”

On Sunday morning, I awake around eight o’clock and head for the toilet. Sammy is still asleep. Later, after making my bed, I notice a bloodstain on Sammy’s white pillowcase.”

I lean out the window at the concrete yard below, lit by light from the bottom flat. No toilet-paper balls. I turn to face him. “Don’t tell me you throw them balls in the Ole Higue’s yard?”

“She take my cricket ball.”

“So you think it right for you to dirty her yard with toilet paper?”

“No.” He stares at the floor.

“The Ole Higue should suck you dry.”

“I not frighten of the Ole Higue. She can’t catch me.”

“Yeah? Is who hide behind my skirt this morning?”

He looks at me sideways. “Don’t tell Mommy and Daddy.”

“If you go to bed now, I not going tell them.”

With his teeth brushed and dressed in his pajamas, he settles in his bed on the bottom bunk. “You promise not to tell?”

“Yeah, I promise. Now go to sleep.”

He hugs his green stuffed frog, puts his right thumb in his mouth, and is soon out like a light bulb. I wish I could fall asleep so fast. Before my brain shuts down, it has to process everything that happened during the day.

On Sunday morning, I awake around eight o’clock and head for the toilet. Sammy is still asleep. Later, after making my bed, I notice a bloodstain on Sammy’s white pillowcase.

I shake him. “What happen, Sammy? Blood on your pillow. You cut yourself?”

“Blood?” Sammy sits up in bed, rubbing his eyes. “Where?” He looks at me. “What you staring at?”

“You got blood on your pajamas, too.”

He gazes at the bloodstain on his pillow. Sitting down on his bed, I examine his face, mouth and neck. I find a tiny red mark, resembling a mosquito bite, on the right side of his neck. No cuts or marks on his chest and back. Rushing to Mom’s bedroom, I knock on the door.

“Mom... Dad... Something happen to Sammy. He got blood on his pajamas and pillowcase.”

Mom appears, buttoning her housecoat. I follow her to our bedroom where Sammy is still sitting in bed with his finger in his mouth. She examines him, the pillow, and bed sheets; she touches the bloody spot on his neck. “Zina, you sure you and Sammy didn’t get into a fight last night?”

“No, Mom! You think I would lie about something like this? He stay up ‘til 9 o’clock playing video games, then I put him to bed.”

Mom returns to her bedroom to wake Dad.

“Must be a vampire bat,” Dad says. He fingers the spot on Sammy’s neck. “Mosquito don’t leave blood-stains like these.”

“But the bedroom door and windows were closed,” Mom says.

“Then it got to be hiding somewhere in this room.”

“Sammy, go lie down on the sofa while we search your room,” Mom says.

Sammy leaves the bedroom, clutching his green frog. Not at all like Sammy to do as he’s told without an argument.

“Zina, you stay and help.”

“Ugh, Mom.” I make a face. “I hate bats.”

“Help me remove the bed sheets,” she says.

We remove the bed sheets and pillowcases. We shake everything. Dad checks under the mattresses. I drag our shoes from under the bed and bang them on the floor. Thank goodness! No vampire bat hanging under the bed.

Dad opens our wardrobe. As usual, Sammy had left the door ajar. Mom removes the hangers with our clothes, one by one. I stack them on my bed. After peering inside the empty wardrobe, Dad jerks it from against the wall and inspects the back. No vampire bat.

“Zina, bring the stepping stool,” he says.

He sees no bat from his perch on top of the stool.

The bottom drawer of our chest-of-drawers hangs open. It’s Sammy’s drawer—where he hides all his junk. As Dad removes the four drawers, I edge to the open doorway—ready for a fast getaway. No bat is going to collide with my face. I find Sammy standing near the door. Mom goes through the clothes in each drawer. Dad inspects the empty chest. No ugly bat. He pulls the chest from against the wall. Nothing clings to the back.

Our bedroom is now a mess. Mom sits on Sammy’s bed; Dad stands in the middle of the room; Sammy and I remain in the doorway.

“I don’t understand what happen,” Mom tells Dad. “If is not a vampire bat, what cause the bleeding?”

Grabbing Sammy’s hand, I pull him to the kitchen. “Sammy, if you didn’t cut yourself, if a vampire bat didn’t bite you, then it must be—“

“The Ole Higue,” Sammy whispers. “Don’t tell Mommy and Daddy ‘bout the toilet-paper balls. You promise. I going get ban again from playing video games.”

“So what we going do now?”

“Lewwe call Granny and ask she what to do.”

“No, she going want to know what happen. Lewwe search on the Internet.”

“What the two of you whispering about?” Sammy jumps at the sound of Mom’s voice.

“I just telling Sammy he gotta help me tidy up our bedroom.”

“That’s a good idea,” Mom tells me. “When you change your night clothes, come help me make breakfast.”

“Come Sammy,” Dad says. “Lewwe make sure you ain’t get bite anywhere else.”

After breakfast, Mom washes up the dishes; Sammy helps me to tidy our room. Later, in the study-room, Sammy sits near me in front of the computer monitor. I google the words ‘*Ole Higue*.’

He fidgets in his chair. “Anything yet?”

“The *Dictionary of Jamaica English* say the *Ole Higue* is a witch who could take off her skin and fly at night to suck people’s blood, especially babies.”

“What they say we gotta do to stop the Ole Higue from sucking my blood?”

“They only mention a blue cross to use on the ninth day after a baby born. This not going work for you.”

“What else they say?”

“Here’s more.” I click on the link for the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*.

“What it say?” He leans forward, squinting at the screen “The writing too fine to read.”

“In the countryside, various fetishes are still used to keep *Old Higue* away.”

“What is fetishes?”

At bedtime, after Dad turns off all the lights, Sammy and I get to work. With light from Sammy’s flashlight, we place small piles of rice at each bed-foot.”

“Must be things that protect you from the *Ole Higue*...” I continue reading out loud: “Guards might be fitted round the children’s neck, a cube of blue hung over a doorway or chalk marks made on the stairs.”

“I can get chalk from Charlie downstairs.”

“Hey, they mention Guyana. ‘There is a folk legend in Guyana about an evil spirit that sheds her skin and takes the form of a ball of fire or some such, and then sucks the blood of the living.’”

“How she does turn into a ball-of-fire?”

“How I must know? Stay quiet. Let me read... ‘On April 28, 2007 a group of villagers in Bare Root, East

Coast Demerara, beat a woman to death. They thought she was an *Old Higue*. They throw rice around her.”

“Mommy got plenty rice. She won’t miss it. It say where we got to put the rice?”

“Yeah, we gotta put a heap of raw rice near the foot of our bed. The *Old Higue* gotta count the grains of rice. While she’s counting the rice, we can sneak out of bed and call Dad.”

Sammy jumps up. “Then Daddy can beat she with the pointer-broom.”

On Sunday evening, while Mom and Dad are watching TV, Sammy and I are on a mission to out-smart the *Ole Higue*. We draw chalk lines along the bottom of the back and front doors. For extra protection, we mark each door with a large cross.

At bedtime, after Dad turns off all the lights, Sammy and I get to work. With light from Sammy’s flashlight, we place small piles of rice at each bed-foot.

“You can sleep in my bed tonight?”

I’m glad he asks. I don’t want to sleep alone tonight. Taking my pillow from the top bunk, I join him on the bottom bunk. After we cover with his sheet, I hide the flashlight under my pillow. He snuggles up under my left arm like he did when he was a baby. I hug him to my chest. Tonight, no *Ole Higue* will suck my brother’s blood.

“What we going do if the chalk and rice don’t work?”

“I going stay awake and start screaming when I see her.”

My brother struggles to stay awake with me. But within half-hour, he falls asleep. I keep watch in the shadowy room, stiffening at the slightest noise. Men walk by on the street. Cocoa barks from the front gate. They curse him. The landlord’s Dobermans bark and growl. A cat hisses. Cocoa runs up our front stairs. During the night, he lies on the landing. Mom complains all the time about the stink dog smell on her doorstep. She’s asked Dad umpteen times to build a gate at the top of the landing to keep the dog out. I suppose it gives Cocoa a good view of our yard. According to Sammy: “He does pick up scent better from high up.” I don’t care about these things. But tonight, it’s good to know that Cocoa is on guard. He’ll bark when the *Ole Higue* appears. He’ll take a chunk of her flesh like he

did with the postman.

Cocoa barks. My brain comes alive. It’s after midnight. I must have dozed off. A mango falls from the *Ole Higue*’s tree. I hug Sammy. Cocoa growls. My muscles tense. Easing the flashlight from under my pillow, I flick the switch and beam the light around the bedroom. Cocoa moans. Silence. I wait. My body is so rigid, I can’t move. No ball of fire appears. No skinless, raw flesh apparition. I wait. I survey the room again. All is still. Cocoa must be asleep. I should get some sleep too. I listen to Sammy’s slow rhythmic breathing; I feel the gentle heaving against my chest. It’s the last thing I remember as sleep carries me off to the belly of the black widow spider.

Monday morning. Back to school after our weekend break. The *Ole Higue* is not in our bedroom counting rice grains. There’s no blood on Sammy’s neck, pajamas or pillowcase. We hug each other. The *Ole Higue* could not come near us. We are safe.

“The chalk marks work,” Sammy says. “Is true what they say: *Ole Higue* can’t cross the chalk line.”

We get ready for school and have breakfast. I help him pack his school bag. Mom’s in her bedroom putting on make-up.

“If you-all want a lift to school, you better get moving,” Dad says. “I’m going downstairs to warm up the old Ford.” Dad opens the front door. “Zina! Sammy! Come here quick!”

I freeze. Sammy and I stare at each other.

We squeeze besides Dad in the open doorway. “Is who would do a thing like this?”

Someone had moved our doormat to the center of the landing where Cocoa lay in a pool of blood. Toilet-paper balls adorn his lifeless form like a corpse prepared for the pyre.

I reach out and squeeze Sammy’s hand.



About the Author: Rosaliene Bacchus is an emerging Caribbean novelist from Guyana. She has finally completed her first novel, *Under the Tamarind Tree*, now in the hands of her copy-editor.

Higher Calling

By T.N. Todaro

Repton IV was a dreary world. A dreary place for dreary souls—at least it was in the eyes of Ssathafis Sak’han. The rain had fallen steadily since his arrival on this squalid ball of mud, a condition the locals probably delighted in, but he found insufferable. No, he decided, with its incessant rain and bone-chilling climate, it was worse than intolerable: It was downright sacrilegious.

Not that the foul weather could have harmed him. Ssathafis was G’Offkan, hatched on Repton Major, where the harsh climate and severe tribal existence produced a hardy stock and devoted souls. His bones had been genetically enhanced with carbon-fiber, and his thick hide of scales shielded against low-powered lasers. Intense training had sculpted his muscles into steel springs and his mind into a dedicated warrior. He cast a shadow greater than most of his peers and fear into the hearts of his enemies. Those who had dared challenge him in tribal rituals were either dead or maimed, a feat that had earned him the rank of *Ch’ak-thss*—Most Lethal—at an early age. A title he wore as a badge of honor along with a blood swatch from every kill.

He was perfect for interplanetary jihad.

Ssathafis had concealed his starship in a grove of weeping danda trees on the edge of a rainforest deep in shadows and thermal fog. It was far enough from the T’Ritan city to avoid sensor detection, yet close enough to make a hasty escape should his mission fail—*though he shuddered at the thought of it!*

To avoid alarming the locals, he wore long olive-drab attire that made no fashion statement, but was typical of a traveler in foul weather. His proud mane of tendrils, which normally draped over his shoulders, was bound under a leather hood to further conceal his kind.

He forged through the rainforest with a stealth that barely disturbed the natural order of things, despite his formidable bulk. He did appreciate the way the rain glistened on his blue-green scales. In his mind, it glossed



over his rough physique.

He soon reached a thoroughfare cut through the forest. It was little more than a broad, crudely paved road, without signage or sanity, that serviced an endless stream of one- and two-seater vehicles rolling past in both directions. The angry buzz of their engines reminded him of nesting *wormbrats*.

The vehicles sprayed mud and motor oil on a hapless stream of pedestrians trudging next to the roadway. The sight of so many T’Ritans caused his tendrils to squirm uneasily beneath his hood. G’Offkans loathed their distant cousins as much as they loathed dreary places. Though both shared a common ancestry, each had evolved independently, with G’Offkans developing into land reptiles and migrating to the warm climes of Repton Prime, while the T’Ritans remained amphibious, a spiritual breed that preferred the cold oceans and rainforests of Repton IV.

It was natural for the locals to consider this a fine day to be outdoors, to stroll alongside the roadside and savor the rain and cold. They spoke in polite hissing sounds—nothing like the guttural tongue of G’Offkanese.

Ssathafis pulled his cloak tightly over his shoulders, which helped conceal a small arsenal, including a sword strapped to each thigh and a handheld disruptor. For re-

assurance, he ran a clawed hand over the grip of the weapon, then matched step with the flow of pedestrians and headed towards the city.

The rain stopped by second moonrise as he rounded the last bend in the road and the T'Ritan city rose into view. It was more expansive than the orbital photos had suggested, and fortified with a formidable wall of stone. Still, it was not insurmountable.

The main gate was guarded by armed reptiles, who challenged anyone seeking entrance. The guards wore slick uniforms embroidered with symbols of clan and political affiliation, and wielded crude battle-axes that were deadly at close range. Ssathafis observed that the muzzles glowed feebly and the shafts were caked with mud, which suggested the weapons were only partially charged and poorly maintained—both weaknesses he could exploit, if needed.

He took pleasure knowing all the ways he could kill the guard in a single, swift move. However, in view of his mission, he suppressed his inner rage, nodded deferentially, shuffled off without another word.”

The guards hissed and rattled their tails at the newcomers' arrival, demanding identification. They were challenging every vehicle and pedestrian that dared seek entrance to the city. Hanging from a dead tree next to the road were the tortured bodies of those who had plainly failed to pass inspection.

Ssathafis did not flinch at this grim display. In fact, it impressed his darkness. Besides, he could have easily snapped the guards in half before they knew what killed them. And his body armor would deflect the discharge of a battle-axe. He *did* fear their saliva, a toxic substance that could burn through scales and infect a G'Offkan's nervous system. The only remedy would debilitate him for hours while it neutralized the poison.

He shuddered at the thought of any delay as he hunched over further to avoid towering over the guards. He presented a forged ID chip, eyes locked on the ground, knowing that the hatred on his face might betray the true nature of the beast within.

The officer accepted the chip with a hiss. “What is

your purpose here?”

Ssathafis had learned enough T'Ritanese to pass for a local with a foreign accent. “I seek-ha your best s-s-shaman. To heal my afflictions-s-s,” he said meekly.

The guard leered. “No s-s-shaman has that much power,” it hissed, and then turned to the other guards to share its witticism. Ssathafis understood most of the words, which translated into “*The bigger they are, the more feeble-minded...*”—an obvious reference to his size. However, if that jibe was the most they could make of him, his disguise was working, and he could live with that.

When their amusement seemed satisfied, the guard tossed the credentials back and spoke to him harshly. “On your way, pond scum. Complete your purpose here and leave before sunrise.”

Ssathafis said nothing. He took pleasure knowing all the ways he could kill the guard in a single, swift move. However, in view of his mission, he suppressed his inner rage, nodded deferentially, and shuffled off without another word.

Inside, the walled T'Ritan city revealed a different complexion. Buildings were cleanly finished and painted in muted colors. None was taller than a few stories, though some appeared the breadth of an entire city block. A few were relatively modern, constructed of synthetics, with illuminated shop signs that sizzled noisily in the rain. Pedestrian traffic was light, as most business had closed for the day. Locals seemed more preoccupied with avoiding the vehicles that raced along the narrow streets than with a newcomer in their midst.

Ssathafis scowled at this lack of order, another sign that this species was close to total anarchy.

He extracted a PCA from a belt pouch and consulted it for directions, shielding it from the rain as he walked. In the moment, he failed to notice a pedestrian speeding around a corner from the opposite direction. They collided hard. The impact blindsided Ssathafis and knocked him off-balance. He landed in the mud with a solid splash, floundering to maintain some semblance of dignity. He struggled to keep his disruptor hidden under his cloak. His eyes narrowed to burning red slits as he considered the big dumb-looking T'Ritan standing over him.

“Watch where you're going, pond scum,” the reptile hissed, shaking its tail angrily. Then it made the mistake of reaching down to grab Ssathafis by the collar of his cloak and spitting, “Someone needs to teach you how to walk.”

“Are you blind as well as stupid? You hit me,” Ssathafis blurted in G’Offkanese. His rage turned to hatred as he realized he had just spoken in the tongue of the T’Ritan’s mortal enemy.

The pedestrian’s expression turned to shock. As it glanced up and down the street anxiously for help, Ssathafis realized that this low-life was about to betray his cover. He snorted angrily, aimed the disruptor beneath his cloak, and fired at point blank range. Hot plasma spat through the fabric and sizzled in the rain. It struck the T’Ritan squarely in the chest, causing its torso to burst in a gory mass of entrails and burnt scales. The remains splashed to the street, diluted in the rain and washed away in a matter of moments.

Ssathafis glanced about furtively as he harvested a blood swatch for his collection. It was not a high-order killing, but it was the first on this miserable mud hole and would certainly lead to more noble kills.

Miraculously, no one seemed to have witnessed the impromptu slaying. Traffic was almost nonexistent—a small blessing—and the nearest streetlights weren’t working. He abandoned the hobble and assumed a more urgent pace, consulting the PCA again for directions. This time he kept a wary eye out for pedestrians.

His mission was straightforward: A reliable informant had reported that the T’Ritans had a new secret weapon “...powerful enough to bring the universe to its knees.” It was called the Katchighouli—an odd code-name, he thought—which translated as *Eater of Worlds*. The device was supposedly in the care of a sect of religious fanatics, who planned to unleash it on Repton Prime and their mortal enemies, the G’Offkans.

This had a sobering effect on the G’Offkan High Command, who had no desire to be the weapon’s first victims. Instead they dispatched Ssathafis, their best agent of chaos, with orders to locate the weapon and steal or destroy it. The plan was to find the clerics, who would lead him to the weapon.

He walked more urgently now, abandoning the hobble. He consulted his PCA again, still keeping an eye out for obstacles. The temple was just around the corner, located halfway down a street too narrow for vehicular traffic. It was an archaic single-story dwelling, sandwiched between two larger, more modern structures. It had been originally built on holy ground, and over the yahren, the priests had managed to intimidate the landowners around it. There was a single entrance, with a wooden archway, framed by narrow windows on either side. A plaque hung over the archway, carved with

symbols that read, “Only the holy may enter the temple of Katchighouli.”

Right, Ssathafis scowled to himself. *Another sacrilege.*

He put his shoulder into the door and entered. It swung wide and shut behind him with a long rusty moan, muting the patter of rain outside. The silence was somewhat disconcerting to the spy.

The interior was small, with seating for maybe fifty. Currently, only a claw-full of worshippers was seated throughout the pews. The room was lit with amber wall lights that sputtered as if they might die at any time. The smell of potions filled the air with a sickly-sweet taint. The walls were painted with glyphs that had faded with time and neglect—*probably due to this demon weather*, Ssathafis reflected.

It was difficult to believe that the target of his mission was housed in such a primitive place. He had expected to find it in a well-guarded fortress protected by a legion of guards. For the first time, he wondered if G’Offkan intel was wrong.

Then he saw it. Sitting on a polished stone altar. A small metal chest wrapped in strips of dark blue leather. Four T’Ritan clerics stood before it, chanting fervently. Each wore dark crimson robes embroidered with designs that seemed to dance in the flickering lights. They wore long black scarves around their necks with a dagger wrapped at each end. The blades hung heavily, a sign they were more than ceremonial.

Ssathafis saw all of this, though his eyes never left the chest. Only an object of considerable importance would merit this many guards, he concluded. As he advanced, the clerics suddenly stopped chanting and moved between him and the prize. They hissed as they unwrapped the daggers from their scarves and gestured menacingly. The scales on their faces turned blood red—a clear sign of anger.

“What do you want, infidel?” the nearest priest hissed.

His brashness had cost him the element of surprise, but Ssathafis was too arrogant to care. The daggers were no more than a minor annoyance. He could not fire a disruptor at this distance for fear of damaging the chest, so he kept it holstered. Instead, he un-strapped the swords from his thighs. He twirled them menacingly in the air, letting the blades glisten in the pale light of the temple.

He advanced towards the chest.

“Is this the Katchighouli?” he demanded.

The priests responded by doing something odd: They raised the daggers to their slimy, forked tongues and licked both sides of the blade. This puzzled Ssathafis, until he realized that they were coating the edges with poisonous saliva.

“What do you want here, infidel,” hissed one of the clerics.

Rather than answer, Ssathafis stopped and turned sideways to make himself a lesser target. Considering his bulk, it had little effect.

Without warning, the nearest cleric leapt through the air, a dagger in each hand. Ssathafis reflexively rose up and cut broadly to the left and right with his swords. He separated the head and limbs from the lizard’s body while it was still mid-air. An outcry arose from the congregation, as guts and body parts splattered on the pews.

The remaining clerics charged, menacing their daggers.

Ssathafis smartly thrust his sword into the nearest priest and lifted it completely off the ground. Then he spun around and hurled the body down the isle. In his haste, he lost control of the weapon and left it lodged in the torso. It was a loss, but not a tragic one. He pivoted back to face the remaining clerics, juggling the sword between his hands as a taunt. Then he did an unexpected thing. He dropped the weapon. It clattered noisily on the stone floor.

The act stunned the clerics. They stopped cold and looked at each other in disbelief—which proved to be a mistake. In that heartbeat, Ssathafis lunged forward and grasped their daggers by the hilts. The impact and sheer momentum drove them backwards to the ground. He eyed each victoriously before thrusting their own weapons into their chests. Both went lifeless where they lay.

A new gasp arose from the congregation.

Ssathafis snarled a warning over his shoulder. In any language its inflection was clear: *Stay away or face the same fate.* He scrambled to his feet and raced to the altar. The chest was an unadorned box forged of crude metal, and wrapped in dark blue leather strips. It was surprisingly light, certainly not indicative of a planet eater. He was anxious to open it, but there was no time. He had to flee before the militia arrived, presuming they would not be as easily defeated as the clerics.

He took a ritual moment to obtain blood swatches from the fallen. Then he tucked the chest under an arm, retrieved both swords and bolted up the aisle past the

shocked congregation.

As he reached the entrance, the door swung open, as if inviting him to leave. Oddly, no one was near it. *Had a timely gust of wind blown it open—or was their god anxious to be rid of him?*

Outside, a solitary streetlamp illuminated the street. Behind him, the worshippers gathered at the doorway, continuing their cry. For the first time, Ssathafis felt a tinge of panic. He could not tolerate this attention. He cocked a mighty arm and hurled one of the swords at the crowd. They retreated inside like frightened children, as the blade flashed through the opening.

He never heard it land.

This had a sobering effect on Ssathafis. After all, he was *Ch’ak-thss*. Fear was foreign to his kind. By the time he reached the main boulevard, he was congratulating himself on a fine victory. He slowed his pace to blend in with pedestrians headed towards the city gates. Fortunately, the guards were only detaining those seeking entrance—not those departing.

Only an object of considerable importance would merit this many guards, he concluded. As he advanced, the clerics suddenly stopped chanting and moved between him and the prize.”

He resumed his stoop and hobble, with the treasure tucked in his cloak as he passed through the gates into the countryside. Once around the bend in the road, he abandoned the act and sought the cover of the rainforest. He dared not pause until he reached a thick grove surrounded by tall brush. He climbed up a particularly sturdy trunk into the boughs of a well-concealed thicket. Once settled in the fork, he wedged a small telescope through the leaves to watch the city glisten in the moonlight.

He was astonished to find that normal activity at the gate had not changed. Life seemed to have moved on as if nothing had happened. The temple clerics were dead, their precious treasure stolen. It was unimaginable that a citywide alarm had not sounded and the guards given chase. If this had happened on Repton Prime, the clan of the deceased would have taken up arms and

tracked the killer until they claimed justice, or died trying.

If T'Ritans and G'Offkans were truly related, he could not imagine how.

He returned his focus to the chest, his tendrils writhing in anticipation. The lid was engraved with the icon of an obelisk and rows of markings. He worried the lock until the catch gave way, then examined the seams for booby-traps.

Finding none, he lifted the lid and peered warily inside. At first glance, he was disappointed. Instead of a weapon, he found a stack of writings on metallic sheets and pressed into organized folders. Each book was covered in the same dark-blue leather as the chest, its cover embossed with symbols in metallic foil. He shielded the documents from the drizzle with his cloak as he studied them. He easily found mention of the Katchighouli, but no details of substance.

Perhaps the device was not yet constructed and these documents were its plans, he reasoned. If so, he could still claim success back home.

The rain had lessened by the time he finished the last manuscript. There were illustrations among the writings, but none was a blueprint for the weapon. However, he did find reference to another temple in the mountains.

Of course!

The weapon was too important to be entrusted to lowly clerics in an unguarded temple. It would have to be kept somewhere very secure and hidden. He found other references to the Katchighouli, one calling it unforgiving and infinitely vengeful. It made him jealous of its power.

However, there was no indication of the temple's location. His frustration rose. He had come all this distance with nothing to show for his efforts. All that remained was a small puddle of water sloshing in the bottom of the case. In a fit of anger, he picked up the chest and cocked an arm to fling it from sight—when he saw the map.

It was there all the time. Engraved inside the lid. Convenient for anyone who sought it without anger or haste.

The map led him into the mountains of Hakathithban, far beyond the city and away from his starship. The cobblestone road soon deteriorated into a gravel path,

then a crude trail that forged through an unending forest. The trees grew impossibly tall, thrusting up like leafy spears into the clouds. A thick canopy of foliage, some fifty paces above ground, prevented any chance of direct sunlight—if it existed in this dreary world—to warm his bones.

For the first few kilometers, the rain had only drummed on the foliage, high overhead. A distant drone that was tolerable to the soldier/spy. As the canopy thinned and the rain given lease to pummel the ground, Ssathafis felt it was pounding on his sanity, as well. The higher he climbed, the more intense it became. His hatred for this retarded little world grew with every kilometer that passed. He longed to return to Repton Prime and bask in the caress of a hot sun atop his rock dwelling. *Oh, to be home and dry again!*

He regretted not returning to his starship and *flying* to the temple—even though it might have been detected by the T'Ritan defense grid. At least he would have reached his destination, and perhaps success by now.

Hindsight was a demon all its own.

In order to travel faster, he memorized the temple map and abandoned the chest in a rain-filled gully. He had ample weaponry, a PCA for navigation, and a fire in his gut to finish this mission. Food was no issue: The forest was rich with animals, insects and grubs that were fatter and juicier than those back home. They were quite palatable despite the odd tastes. *What more did he need?*

Upcountry, near the peak of Hakathithban, the terrain changed markedly. The trees turned gnarled and discolored; the vegetation was sickly black with crimson veins. The cursed rain was replaced by a blanket of low-hanging clouds that chilled him to the bone. The landscape was so unlike the lowlands of Repton IV that Ssathafis felt he had journeyed to yet another world.

The trail led through a field of cone-shaped formations that surged up from the ground. At first, he thought they were a natural occurrence, until a closer look revealed they were chiseled stone with glyphs similar to those in the city temple. In a maddening twist, their meaning was lost on him.

The trail ended at an ornate metal slab that protruded from the sharp incline of the mountainside. The slab was reinforced with wide bands of cross-bracing and bordered by great stone pillars. Other than a few stone steps up to the slab, there was nothing else. No symbols or signage. The door appeared covered with a

slick crud until he licked the surface and realized its true nature. A demonic smile crossed his face: The slab had been coated with blood, perhaps of deserving prisoners, or an appropriate sacrifice. It was a warning to intruders more profound than any sign, symbolism he found admirable and poetic.

Only then did he realize the forest had gone quiet. He had been tortured by the sound of rain for so long, he assumed he'd mentally blocked it out, or gone deaf along the way. Now, only the whisper of a breeze through the treetops and the rustling of the foliage disturbed the silence. Otherwise, he was alone in an unnerving emptiness.

For a fleeting moment, he worried that perhaps the temple priests had learned of his trek and set a trap. Ssathafis reflexively un-holstered and activated his disruptor. The weapon hummed angrily as it cycled up.

To stay alive is to be prepared for death, he chanted, then turned his attention back to the slab. It offered no handle, key lock or hinge. He tried to leverage it open with his hands until his fingers bled and throbbed with pain. His tendrils squirmed beneath his hood. His blood pressure rose. He had traveled so far, defeated every foe, only to be stymied within reach of his prize. He ripped off his clothes to stand naked in his boots. He cried out in challenge, his chest heaving as he spoke.

"I am Ssathafis Sak'han. I will not be denied entrance to the temple of Katchhouli!" he bellowed.

But the call went unanswered, other than a cold silence.

The G'Offkan pounded on the slab as he repeated his cry. "SSATHAFIS SAK'HAN WILL NOT BE DENIED ENTRANCE. IF I CANNOT OPEN THIS DOOR, I WILL BLAST IT OPEN."

Suddenly, there was a sharp crack of rock, as if the slab heard his words. The G'Offkan held his ground, wary of an ambush, as the massive wedge began to sink into the ground. It rumbled beneath his boots. Dust and debris leaked from the seams, as a dark ominous maw appeared beyond the doorway. It seemed to swallow all the light around it.

He aimed the disruptor into the chasm and weighed his options. He dared not wait for the slab to finish its descent, knowing that T'Ritans were poor fighters, but still dangerous when confronted or threatened, and might take advantage of his hesitation. So he leapt into the unknown. He somersaulted forward and landed in a crouch with his weapon firmly in hand. His eyes followed the barrel as it swept the gloom.

And found nothing.

Ssathafis swelled with pride. He remained unchallenged!

Triumph is near, he reassured himself. He could feel it in his tendrils.

He leapt to his feet and bolted into the tunnel. He allowed precious seconds to pass until his vision adjusted to the gloom, reluctant to use a utility light that might betray his presence to the enemy. Fortunately, the walls emitted a faint crimson glow, as if they possessed a life of their own, just on the upper edge of his vision. He advanced further into the mountain, comforted as the air turned warm and sultry. It was the first time he'd felt relatively acclimatized since landing.

The shaft remained featureless and desolate until he reached a series of alcoves. Each held the stone likeness of a kneeling figure, each of a different species, praying to an unseen deity. He ran a webbed finger over one of the statues. It was surprisingly cool to the touch. He moved on, passing almost twenty similar alcoves before a flickering light appeared in the distance. It was accompanied by the faint sound of chanting, a chorus of wind instruments, then the beat of drums with an unholy fervor.

He hugged the wall for protection, taking comfort from the faint hum of his disruptor. He stopped short of the entrance to an immense cavern. The walls were carved and painted like a gothic cathedral, with tall arches that vanished into a ceiling of gloom. Six large statues stood about the perimeter, each in a corner, each carved with a different deity, each alien to the other.

Ssathafis snorted. The poor fools could not even decide what likeness to give their god.

A massive stone obelisk filled the center of the chamber. It was surrounded by T'Ritan clerics dressed in brightly painted robes with ceremonial masks that mimicked the giant statues. Small skull-like totems dangled from the masks. They carried long staffs that bore a miniature obelisk on the tip like a spear. They also wore daggers draped in scarves around their necks.

A congregation of about fifty locals chanted and hissed, while others played reedy-sounding instruments. Some danced about with wild abandon, as if drugged or intoxicated. It appeared to be a religious ceremony, but its purpose was incomprehensible to the G'Offkan.

These T'Ritans are a pitiful species, Ssathafis reflected, *if not genetically insane*. He had expected to find the temple and its unholy weapon securely guarded by an

elite group. Instead, its keepers were conducting a pagan ritual around a rock. Either this was another false lead, or the entire mission was a fraud. Or, perhaps something else—more devious—was at play.

He decided to seek cover in a shadowy alcove, where he could observe the proceedings undetected. He bit his lip to stay alert. He was exhausted after the arduous trek up the mountain, but dared not rest, or sleep. He feared it might be his last. He could only hope the congregation would finish soon and leave.

The massive obelisk made a truly compelling centerpiece. It reminded Ssathafis of the carved symbol on the chest lid. He bit his lip harder. *Was this object the Katchighouli?* It was certainly big enough. If it was a long-range cannon, or interplanetary missile, he saw no propulsion system, no control center. And there were no apparent openings in the ceiling that might provide launch access to the heavens. The gloom obscured everything else. Still, it was too large to be moved by conventional means. *How does one use a weapon that cannot be wielded?*

In view of this, Ssathafis decided that the obelisk was an incomprehensible symbol of religious fanatics. He would have to destroy this blasphemy. Whether it was before or after he located the Katchighouli was the only issue.

While he was considering the alternatives, beyond his line of sight, the clerics had gathered to begin a new ritual. The din of drums and squealing instruments swelled, as they led a procession of the faithful around the obelisk. This time they didn't stop in front of it. Instead, they continued about the chamber and into the passageways.

Including the one where Ssathafis was hiding.

It happened so fast. There was no warning; no time to move to a new vantage, let alone escape. Instead, the entire congregation walked right up to him. Seeing the huge reptile, they stopped and cried out in alarm, some out of fear. Their wail reverberated throughout the chamber. It caused a pack of T'Ritan guards to appear, who pushed through the crowd and brandished their battle-axes.

Ssathafis had trained for situations like this: exposed behind enemy lines, surrounded by unknown forces. *Don't think. Don't feel. Kill the enemy, or be killed.*

He sprang into action, gripping his sword firmly in one hand and the disruptor with his other. Unhesitatingly, he sprayed a lethal volley of laser fire at the guards, while protecting his flank with the sword. The

guards ran blindly into the swath of death and were reduced to bloody guts and entrails.

Seeing this, the clerics tried to hide amongst the faithful, which caused the crowd to burst into chaos. Ssathafis took advantage of this to wade into their midst with an unrelenting bloodlust. He fired to the right and slashed to the left, and then reversed the mayhem as he advanced into the core of the temple. A few braver T'Ritans tried to spit poisonous saliva at him, while others took the weapons of those who had fallen and tried valiantly to defend their ground. But none could stand against the G'Offkan's assault. Slash to the left, fire to the right. Then spin and reverse.

He pressed on, regardless of the odds. He could not have stopped if he had wanted to. Sweat poured from glands he didn't know existed. The smell of death in the air was an aphrodisiac. He fought on. Shattered spears and limbs flew in all directions. He lost count of the dead as he climbed over their lifeless forms. The blood of his victims coated his scales. He'd have no need to collect trophies here.

He was exhausted after the arduous trek up the mountain, but dared not rest, or sleep. He feared it might be his last.”

Before he knew it, Ssathafis stood in a thick pool of blood at the base of the obelisk. Wicked fingers of energy snapped angrily at his legs. His heart throbbed like a raging engine. He turned and waved his weapons menacingly, ready for his next challenger.

But no one stepped forward. In fact, no one else was left standing. Only then did Ssathafis realize that he was the last one alive. He lowered his weapons and basked in his victory. Pride swelled in his chest.

He had killed all of them.

Intoxicated by this and numb to the mayhem he had wrought, Ssathafis turned to savor his prize: The obelisk was not a single piece, rather an intricate structure of faceted crystals stacked together like a puzzle. It would have taken hundreds of slaves to lift each segment and secure it in place. The surface was chiseled with thousands of glyphs that glowed with a smoldering blush. He wondered what kind of technology could power this phenomenon. He laid a webbed hand on the obelisk and ran his claws along the surface. It was hot to the touch and throbbed beneath his fingertips.

Suddenly, the obelisk trembled. A foul vapor oozed from the seams and rolled down to the ground in waves. Ssathafis took a step back and snarled as an alien stench filled his nostrils, a vile yet compelling fragrance.

The vapor rolled across the floor like a foreboding tide over the sea of bodies. The ground rumbled and cracked. Fissures opened with a jolt and swallowed many of the fallen. Ssathafis fought to keep his balance in the midst of the quake, wondering what had triggered this phenomenon.

Certainly not his mere touch!

Around him, he witnessed the six stone figures seem to come to life. Their eyes glimmered in the flickering lights of the temple, as if they were watching a long-awaited event.

Did he see a hint of anticipation on their faces?

The obelisk continued its metamorphosis, cracking open as if it contained something anxious to be free. The outer shell fractured into a myriad of fragments, allowing a dark-red mass to ooze out of the core. It congealed into the most horrific creature Ssathafis had ever seen; a grotesque parody of both T'Ritan and G'Offkan. Its sheer size was staggering. Its quartet of eyes burned like crimson suns.

"Ssathafis," said the beast in a rumbling voice.

"H-how do you know me?" the G'Offkan cried, unable to take his eyes off the apparition. He felt victim to a terrible new emotion—one of stark, naked fear.

"You are in the presence of your God, who knows all," it said with a startling sincerity. "We assumed a shape not unlike your own. Only grander. Are you not pleased?"

Before Ssathafis could reply, the beast unleashed long tendrils that slithered through the blood and vapors like serpents in tall grass. When the appendages curled seductively around the G'Offkan's legs, he felt oddly blessed. He tried to remain in control of his faculties, even as he felt reality begin to slip away.

"I don't know you, beast of the T'Ritans. I seek the Katchighouli. I am not here for you—unless you are its guardian."

The creature swayed, as it seemed to consider his words. Its head almost brushed the rafters of the temple.

"You have found what you sought, Ssathafis. Such a fine killer you are. Far stronger than we could have imagined. Worthy of a higher calling. Together, we will unite T'Ritan and G'Offkan into an interplanetary le-

gion of warriors. You will become their High Priest. They will worship you as they worship Us. You will hold dominion over them as we hold dominion over you, in service to the Absolute Darkness."

Ssathafis was stunned by the beast's words. He would never have attained such power in a lifetime of his own. Still, he cried in anguish as the demon took possession of his body and invaded his blood like an infectious poison. He tried to fight the rapture, but its power was overwhelming. He barely felt his weapons slip from his grasp and vanish into the mist. He didn't need them anymore. He stood in the presence of a much more powerful weapon. He felt his individuality slip away as the demon took his free will and then his soul. His dread was replaced by an odd sense of well-being, one filled with devotion to the new beast within him.

He recalled that the Katchighouli was referred to as vengeful and unforgiving. Only now did he realize that the G'Offkan high command had mistranslated their words. The T'Ritans never had a secret weapon—certainly not one to be used by mere mortals. The Katchighouli was a god-like *demon*. One that the clerics had said personified their greatest fears. A planet eater "powerful enough to bring the universe to its knees."

Ssathafis savored his new purpose. He had come in search of the ultimate weapon and found something better. A higher calling. In a horrific sense, the new High Priest felt honored to be the instrument of a great god.

And the perfect catalyst for interstellar jihad.



About the Author: Tony N. Todaro is President and Co-Founder of the Greater Los Angeles Writers Society, and the Executive Director of West Coast Writers Conferences. He has been a writer ever since scribing his first high school newspaper column, which got him sent to the principal's office. Since then, he's worked as a Brand Strategist, written for everyone from startup investments to Fortune 500 companies. He is also a professional consultant at Los Angeles Valley College. He's been writing fiction for decades, but will only admit to being the author of "True Light" and "Nexus of Swords" in the Lightriders Saga, and the futuristic thrillers, "What Comes Around", and "Eyes of God" in the Xander Hunt series.

Statue

By Kevin McKenna

What the passing of time, does to us all...

Spring always comes, but, so does the fall...

The tattered suit, a frayed filthy shirt,

Worn by an old man, now counting cans...

Hands folded in a muffled boyhood pledge,

To passive pipedreams and broken promises...

Lost potential and misplaced possibilities...

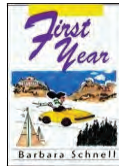
Like a voiceless statue, his future a monument,

To a life, that silently passed away...



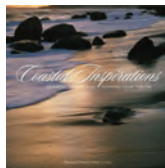
About the Author: Kevin McKenna has been involved with the arts and sciences since early childhood. He's worked as a filmmaker, magazine editor and newspaper columnist. Today he's very busy finishing a novel.

Now Available From GLAWS Authors!



Northern Exposure meets *Green Acres* in **First Year** by Barbara Schnell, a romantic comedy about a young woman's headlong plunge into marriage and a new way of life. Complete reviews and order information are available at www.bagmlit.com.

The Prince of Earth by Mike Robinson. Something happened in Quincy Redding's past, something that is now returning to claim her family, her life, her mind. Answers may lie in the solitary European trip she took 20 years ago, when she climbed Scotland's infamously haunted peak, Ben MacDui, and came face-to-face with a legend.



Coastal Inspirations: Drawing Beauty and Meaning From the Sea by Marissa & Peter O'Neil is a book by a father and daughter who invite you to look at the world through a new lens. This creative collaboration deepened their relationship and enabled them to truly see, appreciate, and embrace each other's talents. Now available via our website: www.marissaoneil.com, local bookstores, Amazon and Barnes & Noble.