

Literary Landscapes

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE GREATER LOS ANGELES WRITERS SOCIETY SUMMER 2016

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

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**THE GREATER LOS ANGELES
WRITERS SOCIETY**

WRITERS MENTORING WRITERS OF ALL DISCIPLINES

Literary Landscapes

SUMMER 2016

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By Mike Robinson

The dedicated writing life naturally comes bundled with a series of motivational ups and downs, but I don't think I've ever experienced a downturn as intense and protracted as the one that took hold this last year. Although one should never underestimate the unaccountable and often fickle factors that feed into human psychology, I do think I understand the general source of my malaise: having for years navigated the winding river of seeking publication, I now have found myself adrift in the oceanic sprawl of the marketplace.

For those not yet published, this may sound like a petty “woe is me” moment. I don't intend it as such. Rather, I intend it as a bridge to the more important point of the recent—and almost embarrassingly obvious—remedy that I had to re-learn: writing itself. After so many hours swept up in external opinions, sales figures, Amazon rankings, review solicitations (not all that different from the lonesome venture of querying publishers and agents), after so much time and energy spent fretting over whether or not I was reaching who I wanted to reach, questioning whether I was being properly understood, if I was having any impact anywhere, and consequently feeling

disillusioned, invalidated, outmoded, during which the prospect of writing anything seemed a Herculean feat, I at last slogged back to the page with the condition that I was not to expect any reward beyond that supplied by the words themselves. To challenge myself to return to the juvenile days of yore when I wrote for writing's sake. In setting pen to paper, then, it proved a nourishing exercise that helped set some things right again in my tiny author's corner. I'm not entirely out of the woods yet, but the sun peeked through fairly bright.

This reminder has put in even starker relief the notion that one's first and foremost reason for writing should be because you have to. Because the idea compels you. Because you love the process of sculpting language. In this fractured, noisy, increasingly unmanageable age, that's your anchor. The art itself. All the imagined fruits about “becoming the next Stephen King” should be nothing but a blurry shadow-haze on the horizon of your mind, a place that may yet prove an optical illusion. And truly, in this atomized culture, not even Stephen King, were he starting today, could become “Stephen King.”

Frostbite

By Katherine Stewart

Kurt Holt woke early to stoke the fire, then took his black coffee to the porch and watched the morning sun puncture the steel gray sky that hung over the high plains. A flock of Sandhill Cranes flying south to New Mexico passed over the cabin like shards of shrapnel. Within the rain shadow of the Rocky Mountains, the wild grasses had already retreated in anticipation of a difficult winter. Barely fall, and already the distant clouds and mounting wind warned of a blizzard that would soon layer the landscape in deep snow.

Tall, strong and seasoned, Kurt set his square jaw for troublesome weather, and his sharp eyes were hooded with apprehension. He worried about the strength of the roof against the weight of the snow, the stockpile of firewood, and how he would emotionally survive another winter alone. But he had no plans for leaving, even if his wife decided to take him back.

The cabin was built by his grandparents, who enjoyed fishing and hiking. It was easy for Kurt to imagine his grandfather greeting him affectionately, despite the reserve of a Norwegian wheat farmer, and his grandmother serving sponge cake with warm milk at the kitchen table. But they were long dead, and the only remnants of their lives were the lingering aroma of pipe tobacco and the nails in the wood fireplace mantel that once held Christmas stockings. Kurt often felt the sweetness of their love, and over the years had rebuilt their cabin with affection: insulating the

attic, sealing cracks, installing storm windows, cleaning the chimney, and wrapping the water pipes. The first spring and summer, he felt grateful to be surrounded by the endless beauty of buttes, domes and rolling hills. But an early snowstorm evaporated the feelings like water on a hot cast-iron stove. Isolated, he barely coped with the murky, disturbing thoughts that had driven him to exile; thoughts that had placed his family in danger, especially his son. He had left everything he loved behind, and the Great Plains that sliced across North Dakota had become his prison. Daily he allowed the harsh weather to portion out punishment on the ugly voices in his head; then he'd harness the impulses with exhausting work.

Stacking a cord of firewood, Kurt felt the first flurry of snow and saw low fog the color of cataracts crawling toward the cabin. A sharp wind chased him inside, where he settled on his bed to wait. By early afternoon, the blizzard had already dropped eight inches of snow, and outside the winds screamed like a hungry newborn, triggering memories so powerful he sat up in bed. He searched the cabin for distractions: another cup of coffee, a book, or hand-cranking the radio. Despite his efforts, there were too many snares and currents to cast a net wide enough to capture all the bad memories, so he let them drift into consciousness.

Kurt recalled the day at his favorite Miami café when Rachael told him about the pregnancy.

“You know I love you?”

Rachael’s voice lingered in his thoughts. He remembered how she was twisting the paper napkin around her ring finger.

“I love you too,” Kurt answered with a hint of suspicion. “What’s going on?”

“I am pregnant,” Rachael said with such resolve that Kurt thought she was joking. But she didn’t laugh.

“I thought you took birth control.”

“Be happy we’re having a baby,” Rachael replied, her voice trailing off to make plans without his permission.

“No, we are not,” he interrupted. “Absolutely not. We agreed.”

Rachael’s joyful mood withered, but later in their apartment she found her footing and the quarreling was relentless. There was no room to negotiate until Rachael threatened to leave, and for Kurt the loss would have been too great. But the pillar of their relationship had been cracked, and as the pregnancy continued, strange feelings began to overwhelm Kurt. During the night he’d shiver as if his vital organs were starved of blood. Waking, he was racked with fatigue and nausea.

The day his son was born, Kurt’s fingers turned cold and numb. Soon, he developed an unexplained fear of touching the infant, nervously declining bathing or changing the boy. And when Rachael breastfed, he battled waves of revulsion. The morning Rachael nestled the tiny boy in bed with them, Kurt got an erection. Two weeks after the birth of his son, he drove home to North Dakota.

Named after the great epidemic of Scarlet Fever in 1861, the town of Scarlet was an outpost of low-slung buildings next to the Little Missouri River, which passed on its way to the prairie grasslands. His mother, Grace, worked at the town’s only diner. She was laughing with customers when Kurt surprised her with a bear-hug. Ecstatic, she held him as if there was no end to her joy. He slipped effortlessly into her arms, responding to each kiss with an insatiable need for more affection. And momentarily, he found himself within the proximity of happiness.

In the comfort of his family’s kitchen, Kurt spoke and his mother carefully listened. Pausing, he noticed a slight twitch in her eyes and a tear she quickly brushed away, complaining about the dust. Without warning, she dismissed his concerns as the nervousness of a new father and fled the conversation with the excuse of starting dinner. But Kurt led her back to the table and tried to coax her to sit. She insisted on standing.

“What’s wrong with me?” He asked.

His mother pressed her hands into the pockets of her apron.

“Why am I having these bad thoughts and dreams?” he said, fixing his mother with an insistent look. “Tell me something, anything to help me understand.”



© LARISA KOSHKINA

“You know the story—you were found all beat up in the snow and nearly frozen.” His mother’s voice cracked.

He had a vague memory of the cold biting at his fingers and toes, the hospital, and the gossip. But the concussion had blocked the remainder of the story.

“That was a strange winter.”

His mother’s eyes turned upward reaching for the memory.

“Nobody knew what happened, but about that time Mr. Stern disappeared. He left his wife and two little boys behind. Those poor boys went to a home in Fargo; the mother ended up in a sanatorium. And then there were the schoolboys who were scared of you, but—” She shrugged and ended the conversation.

The morning haze cast an uncertain light across Mr. Stern’s abandoned house, and Kurt felt closer to the epicenter of his despair. The muddy images were clearing. The night before, he woke in a sweat, remembering how Mr. Stern had left him beaten in the snow, but the reasons were fleeting.

The house opened easily, eager for company. The dry split wood, broken windows, buckled walls, and creaking floors added to Kurt’s uneasiness. Halfway down the hallway the memories emerged, as if he’d wiped condensation off a pane of glass: the bathroom where Mr. Stern took photographs of his two boys while Kurt bathed them, the bedroom where Mr. Stern first touched him, the kitchen where Mrs. Stern prepared lunch. The memories lured him down the basement steps. There, Kurt glimpsed a vision of two frightened boys huddled in the darkness, and the house seemed to hold its breath. Mr. Stern stood over the boys naked. Peering deeper into the grainy, fragmented hallucination,

Kurt found that the victim had become the predator. He saw his young self in the corner filming the assaults.

Kurt woke with a shiver. The blizzard had passed but the fire had gone out sometime in the night, leaving the cabin covered in frost. Rising stiffly, he felt a draft on the back of his neck. Following the stream of cold air with his hands, Kurt found the spot where the roof had split under the weight of snow. Panicked, he quickly dug out the drift that blocked the front door and raced to rake the high-pitched roof before it collapsed. But the crystallized glare of sunlight played with his vision and halfway through raking, he saw Rachael standing in the distance. She seemed so real he could smell her bitterness.

“I can’t go back.” His words were frantic. “I can’t be trusted with our boy.” He walked toward the apparition; the snow compacted beneath each step until it reached his knees.

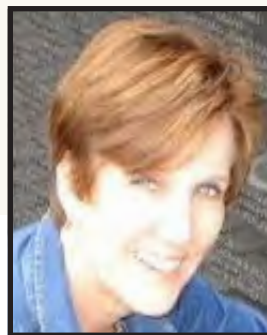
“Mr. Stern, I wanted his attention. To choose me,” he yelled. “He beat me for my own good.” In the heat of his delirium, Kurt took off his heavy jacket and gloves. “I was jealous because he took another boy home for lunch. He thought I was going to tell. But I loved him.”

The words angled into the open sky at the same moment the roof of the cabin gave way. The weight of the snow had snapped the trusses. Thundering logs punched through the drywall, smashing the storm windows and chimney. The winds of the coming blizzard rushed through the open walls, pulling a box of photographs from its hiding place under the bed. Hundreds of Polaroid snapshots flew into the open snow field: each holding a twisted, terrorized portrait of a naked boy. Kurt rushed to snatch the photos from the hands of the growing winds. It was as if God’s eyes were searching for him. But he only managed to rescue three: the rest disappearing into the open sky.



By the time Kurt reached the cabin to find shelter beneath the collapsed roof, the tissue under his skin had started to freeze. As the temperature plunged he burrowed deeper into the shell of the tattered structure. In the final effort to survive, Kurt's body temperature soared, and feverishly he peeled off his clothes.

The next spring when the Sandhill Cranes migrated north to Montana, Kurt's body was found. Three Polaroid photographs were neatly wedged between the fallen beams: two showed Kurt as a boy sitting comfortably on Mr. Stern's lap; the other depicted Kurt's son lying naked on a changing table.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr Katherine Stewart is a writer, psychologist and writers' coach. Born in Los Angeles, she has spent much of her adult life in Sydney. Her career in Australia was devoted to treating young people who struggle with psychosis, and much of her early writing reflects her clinical interest. Returning to the United States she is actively involved in writing fiction, GLAWS and coaching aspiring authors. You can contact her at ksdhs49@gmail.com

Collaboration

By Art Holcomb

What do these people have in common?

- *Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright*
- *Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel*
- *The Farrelly Brothers*
- *Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio*
- *Joel and Ethan Coen*

All are famous screenwriting teams that went on to great success. And all are screenwriters who once made the decision that they were better together than separate.

You certainly have all thought about it. All writers have. How much easier it would be if you could write with someone else, join your talents together, and be more than the sum of your parts. And when it is good, collaboration can be extraordinary. But when it's not, it's like a thousand miles of very bad desert road.

After years of looking for a good writing partner, I recently started collaborating with acclaimed novelist Howard V. Hendrix to develop some of our individual properties together. We completed a play, *The Perfect Bracket*, that has gone on to some success in national competitions, and currently are developing a series of screen properties.

In coming together, we each have taken our past successes in our individual fields and brought those experiences to play in our new partnership. It's not always been easy but it has been a way for us to be much more productive. And along the way we've learned some things about each other; about the nature of our talents, and about the pleasures

and pitfalls of working together. These are our tips for a great collaboration.

Before You Begin

Collaborate With People Who Can Do Things That You Can't.

You have strength and weaknesses—so does your partner. But collaboration can't live up to its full potential if you each are good at the same thing and have the same weaknesses. Seek out partners who complement your personal talents. The writing will go so much smoother.

Differentiate Between Roles

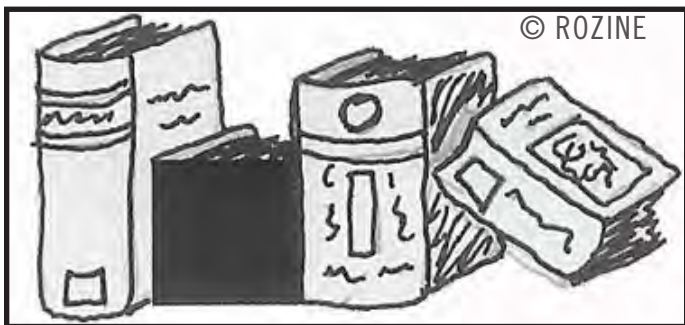
Who is going to do what and in what order? Which aspect of the writing process is each member going to be responsible for? Again, go with the strengths of each individual.

Agree to Share Credit Equally

Someone will always have the “first” idea—this does not mean that they do not own the concept in collaboration. The best way to maintain a good working relationship is to make sure that the partners share in the credit equally. Anything else begins to look like an employer-employee relationship—if that is the case, it's best to be up front with it from the beginning.

Decide to Go Project to Project

Collaboration is a living thing, just like any other relationship. You may go in believing that you've found your creative soul mate only to have it all turn to ashes somewhere around Act II. Better to commit to a single project at a time and see how it goes, reassessing at the end whether you want to do another together or not.



Decide on Your Collaborative Process

Will you be working in the same room at the same time? Will you do one section and then pass the manuscript to your partner? Who will write the first draft, or the second? Who will have the final pass at the work? It is vital that you make the process clear to all parties before you begin in order to maximize speed and minimize confusion.

Understand the Needs of Your Partner

Make the commitment to the project appropriate for the other person's regular job requirements. Understand and respect each other's writing process. Each team is different—each team must find their own rhythm.

Discuss Personal Goals

What kind of work do you and your partner want to do together? What do you really want to accomplish with this project? What is next?

Decide On How Credits Will Appear Early in the Relationship

How will your credit be listed? X and Y vs. X & Y? The Writers Guild of America (WGA) and other governing bodies have extremely strict interpretations of credit based upon exact wording. Know the difference before you decide.

Collaboration Means More Than Just The Writing Partnership

You need to have a team who will work with you and who are affected by that work: managers, agents, editors, first readers, and significant others. Any successful professional career is really built upon these relationships. Make sure everyone is on board and on the same page!

Get It All In Writing

Consider using the WGA's Writer's Collaboration Agreement or have one drawn up by an intellectual property attorney. You can find a good example at: <http://www.wga.org/uploadedFiles/writersresources/contracts/collaboration.pdf>

The Process

Consider Brainstorming Alone First, Then Collaborate on the Execution.

Creating in a group can often cause for concessions too early. It's often best to create on your own and bring fully-formed ideas to the table for discussion and compromise. Then decide which direction to go together.

Work From a General Outline

At some point, your story will start evolving and it is vital that each writer agree on where the story is going. An outline helps keep everyone on track. But keep it general and flexible—too loose an outline and there is not direction; too tight and it strangles the writer as s/he develops the work.

Constantly Refine Your Collaboration Process

Again, collaboration is a living organism. It needs nurturing and adjustment along the way to get the best out of both parties. As you go along, you will continue to adapt to each other as well as to the process. Make room for this in your partnership. Let it evolve naturally into the best, most effective process possible.

Honesty is Vital

Without it, resentments develop, which are poison to such an intimate relationship. There will be times when each collaborator will feel under-appreciated—often at the same time. Keep in mind that the Project and the Collaboration are equally important. Here, one cannot exist without the other. Communication is key!

Plan for Conflict

Problems will naturally arise. Agree to the “No Door Slamming” policy. Agree that neither of you will quit the project without giving the other party notice of what's not working. Nip resentment in the bud as soon as possible.

Reward Yourself at the Appropriate Stage

Celebrate the things that are within your control. Best times to celebrate: when you agree to collaborate; when you complete the project outline; the first draft and the final draft; and when you send it out into the world. Don't wait until the screenplay is sold to celebrate. The sale is not the most important thing to a continuing partnership. The optioning of a screenplay is only the by-product of the collaboration and is always outside of your control.

Set Realistic Schedules & Deadlines

The collaboration isn't the only important thing going on in either writer's day-to-day. Modern life gets in the way. Make sure you give the other partner plenty of time to get the work done. It is the best way to guarantee a continuing relationship.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Art Holcomb is an award-winning playwright, screenwriter and novelist. He also coaches private students who are ready for the next step in their writing career. You can contact him at aholcomb07@gmail.com.

April 15th

By Norman Klein

“The sun burped on as he raced down the Amalfi coast.” It was his finest line and he read it out loud again. Arnold Knockfarfel then sealed the envelope and mailed the article to Condé Nast traveler magazine. This would be his third attempt to publish with Nast. Each year he received a letter of encouragement from the editor but never an acceptance. But this time, he was certain, would be different and his efforts would reap great financial rewards. In fact, Arnold had never published anything and his position as assistant professor of creative writing at Langsam Community College in Bopeep, Kansas was a gift from his well-connected father. Truth be told, Arnold was a dullard who thought himself smarter than anyone else and, as April 15th approached, it was time to prove it once more. Again, he would argue for this year’s concoction of tax deductions.

Five years earlier he had proposed that he should be allowed to depreciate his brain. His ever-patient accountant, Zoltan Buckmeister, calmly informed him that he would first have to establish a cost basis. He didn’t have the heart to tell Arnold that, even if the tax law would allow it, it would be impossible to establish that the quality of his work had deteriorated. Buckmeister was certain the quality had remained consistently awful. In fact, there was no body of work to consider.

The next year Arnold proposed adopting an entire Third World country village to claim hundreds of personal deductions. Ever patient, Buckmeister informed him that complying with the resident requirement test would bankrupt him.

The next year Knockfarfel wrote his first travel piece, his master oeuvre, and submitted it to Condé Nast. The opening line was **“The sun burped on as he raced along the Blue Ridge Parkway.”** Arnold informed Buckmeister that he wished to tax deduct his trip to Asheville, N.C. since the opening line to his story took place in that vicinity. Ever patient, Buckmeister thought it unwise but finally succumbed to Arnold’s whining and allowed a deduction, but only for gas—as a trial run. He declined to mention that racing on that highway was restricted to 45 MPH. The editor at Nast couldn’t believe how bad the article was, and after passing the piece around the office to uniform laughter, he decided to send a personal rejection letter praising Arnold’s effort and encouraging him to submit more—a cruel office diversion.

The next year, armed with the letter of encouragement, Arnold submitted the same article with only one change. “The sun burped on as he raced along the NJ Turnpike toward Martha’s Vineyard.” A weary Zoltan

Buckmeister caved in and said he would again try the gas deduction. He couldn't bring himself to mention that the Turnpike was not the way to the Vineyard. The Nast editor passed the article around to the joy of the entire office and sent an even more glowing rejection letter.

This year, the indefatigable Knockfarfel decided to go whole-hog. Armed with irrefutable praise for his work and no tax audit, he decided to deduct his entire inflated eight thousand dollar European trip. If Steinbeck could do it, why not Knockfarfel? The suddenly aging Buckmeister didn't object to any of the deductions and decided on a quiet early retirement. He declined to mention that there was no evidence that Steinbeck had deducted his trip to Positano. The editor at Condé Nast had to be hospitalized when he broke a rib from laughing too hard.

Two months later, a letter arrived at Arnold Knockfarfel's home. The return address, in a plain font, was:

Internal Revenue Service
P.O Box 802501,
Cincinnati, OH 45280-2501

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Norman Klein is a member of GREATER LOS ANGELES WRITERS SOCIETY.



Geode

By Katherine Friedman

I am often jealous of other people's children. That probably makes me a bad mother to my own son, though I do everything I'm supposed to do. I send him to the best school, enroll him in music classes, take him to all his doctors' appointments, speak in a calm voice when he throws himself on the floor in a meltdown, clean him up without yelling at him when he poops in his pants, and meet with the behavioral specialist after he bites someone. And at least once a week I take him to see the Rock, his favorite thing in Los Angeles. But I really don't understand my son any better than I understand that piece of granite.

Officially naming it "Levitated Mass," the Los Angeles County Museum of Art literally spent millions of dollars to build a ramp underneath a 340-ton piece of granite. It is a big rock. That's all. But Nathan's limited collection of one-word expressions includes "rock," and he says the word over and over again every day, begging for a visit.

Today, as we drive there, I explain this trip is his reward for going an entire week without a biting incident. My speech is half-hearted, however, as I have almost given up hope that he understands. If Peter were here, he would give it full energy, praising Nathan for a "good" week at school as if he were any other third grader. Though sign language and Picture Exchange Communication and years of speech therapy have been unable to unlock any hidden insights, Peter continues

to insist that something is out there that will one day help us understand the only child we've ever been able to conceive. Peter's patience, persistence, and endless optimism would qualify him for sainthood, which makes me feel like an even more terrible person. Not that I have any right to complain about an endlessly supportive husband; that would be like a woman complaining the diamond her husband bought her is just too big. Every week he's out of town on business, I remember just how lucky I am to have him in my life. And then I wish I had gone into international business so I could be the one who leaves for several days each month.

Nathan starts to kick his legs and flap his arms in excitement as I pull into the parking lot entrance. "Rock! Rock!" he yells, pitching back and forth in his seat so hard the car shakes and a thick stream of drool pours onto the seatbelt. The parking lot attendant has the usual stare-and-then-quickly-look-away reaction as I hand him a \$20 bill and he gives me my change. I don't blame him; it's the same reaction I used to have before I was The Parent.

I take my \$10 and try not to calculate the cost per minute I just paid to stare at a piece of granite. When Nathan was younger and more portable, we used to walk the mile to LACMA, but walking with Nathan now would require The Leash, which would earn the admonishing stares of parents who just don't understand that some children will run into traffic without warning.

I grip Nathan's wrist as we leave the car and lead him to the elevator, letting go as soon as we get off. He gallops away, flapping his arms and weaving through the stream of spectators while yelling, "Rock! Rock! Rock!" This is one of the few places where I can let him go. I know he will head straight for the middle of the 456-foot ramp, then stay on the flat section underneath the megalith, never going up the other side of the symmetrical slope that leads to the exit of the museum grounds. Nathan arrives at the center and his ecstasy reaches its peak. "Rock! Rock! Rock!" he yells.

I stop halfway down the ramp for a moment, experiencing what other people see when they look at my son. Tall and skinny, with pale skin and short-cropped brown hair, he could look "normal" if it wasn't for the drooling and foot stomping and arm flapping. If he were two years old, his reaction to the Rock would be adorable. But he looks like an eight year old, so the crowd gives him the usual five-foot radius, and most people do the stare-and-then-quickly-look-away thing, except for the younger kids who just stare.

I silently sigh, then continue down the ramp to break into his circle, thus claiming him as my own.

"What's wrong with that kid?"

I turn around and see a boy who looks about Nathan's age, standing next to a girl about two years younger, talking to a man that I'm sure is his father. They are all tan and beautiful. Tan Father shifts uncomfortably and avoids looking at us as his son waits for a response.

"He has autism," I say.

Tan Father gives me a look of relief. I understand the comfort in familiar labels, limited as they may be. He turns to Tan Son and says, "Remember when we talked about Kyle, from school?"

"Yes," Tan Son says tentatively. I'm guessing Kyle is a kid in this boy's class who lacks social skills and is obsessed with dinosaurs or Legos or something like that, nothing like my son.

Tan Father turns toward me. "He really likes that rock," he says.

I smile and nod. "I'm not sure what he sees in it."

Tan Father laughs.

"Maybe he sees something the rest of us don't."

That's exactly what Peter would say.

"Can we go to the tar pits now?" Tan Son says, tugging on his father's arm.

"Let's go climb on the sloths!" Tan Daughter says.

Tan Father laughs again. "Clearly, my kids don't understand it either. Have a good night."

"You too," I say. I swallow back jealousy as I watch Tan Father walk away, one beautiful typically-abled child on each hand. I also prefer the tar pits and the giant climbable sloth sculptures, but Nathan has no interest in them. One day last year, Peter stayed at the Rock with Nathan while I went on the guided tar pit tour. When I got back, Nathan was in the exact same position and state of excitement, and Peter seemed unfazed by the attention his son garnered. But since Peter isn't here today, I have timed my visit so there is only twenty minutes before sunset, because that's all I can take of the stare-and-then-quickly-look-away crowd before I start hoping the Rock will fall down and crush us all.

Juan, the security guard, arrives on schedule to close the ramp.

“Nathan!” Juan says. “My man!”

I smile and say hello as Nathan ignores him, as usual. Juan never did the stare-and-look-away thing, not even the first time Nathan visited. Peter and I give him a nice Christmas gift every year. “We’re closing, my man. But you can come back again tomorrow.” I shoot Juan a look, and he adds, “Or the next time your mother wants to visit.”

“Come on, Nathan, it’s time for dinner.”

“Food!” Nathan says. The true universal motivator. His face lights up and he turns and follows me back up the ramp without a meltdown.

A loud crash jars me out of my sleep in the middle of the night. I immediately rush to Nathan’s room, motherly instinct rushing ahead of my coherent thoughts. I flick on the light. My son is in one piece, and so is everything else in the room.

Nathan is out of bed, sitting on the bench of his bay window. He walks over and turns off the light, then returns to the window as I hear a loud clap of thunder and see lightning dance across the sky.

“Lightning,” I say, as much as question as a statement. I don’t remember a thunderstorm in the weather forecast.

“Lightning!” Nathan repeats, staring out the window as it zaps across the sky.

“That’s exactly right!” Nathan usually only speaks in one-syllable words, so I want to reinforce his newly-acquired vocabulary. I kneel next to him, grateful he isn’t afraid.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Lightning!” Nathan says again, though the sky is dark. He isn’t stomping his feet or

flapping his arms or smiling, but he seems to be enjoying it.

I stay by his side at the window for another few quiet minutes before I announce I’m going back to bed.

“Lightning,” Nathan says again.

I consider trying to make Nathan get back in bed, too, but he seems safe and happy, so I leave him at the window.

“Go rock! Go rock!”

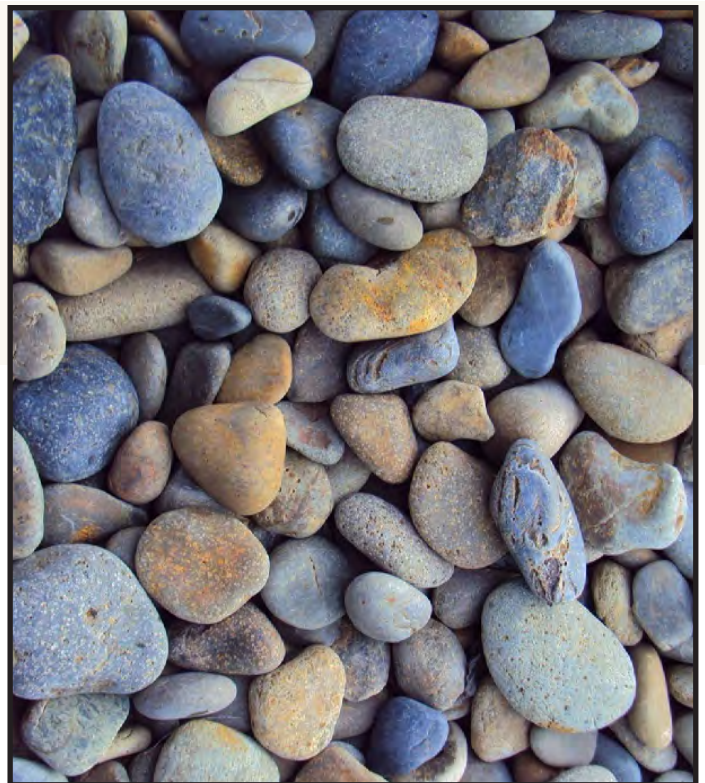
I blink awake to see the dark shape of my son by my side, flapping his arms excitedly. It takes a few seconds to process the miracle. I sit up.

“What did you say?”

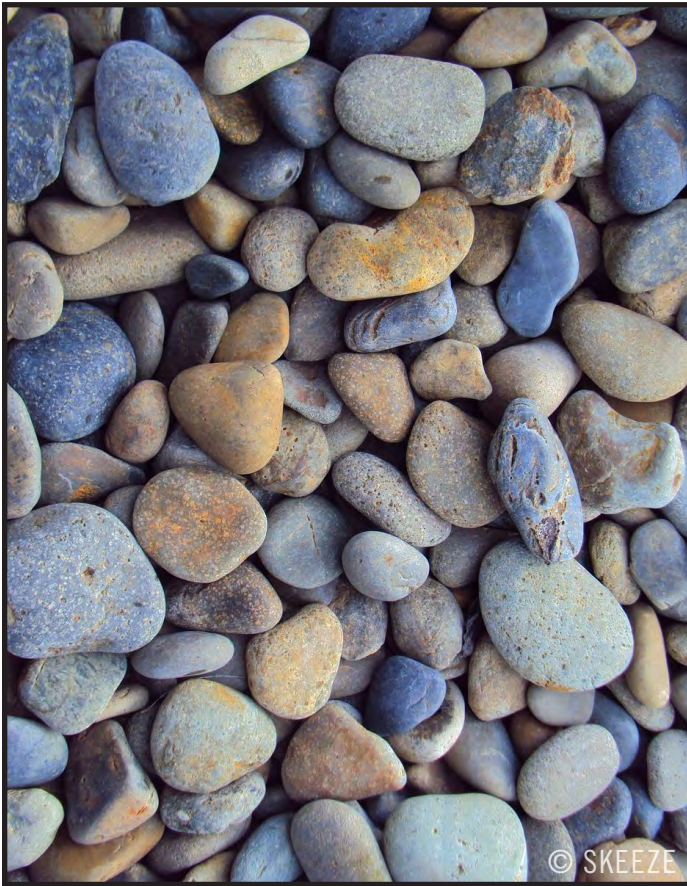
“Go rock!” he repeats, loud and clear.

Now I’m wide awake. My son has just used a two-word phrase. Ever since his first word three years ago, his vocabulary has consisted solely of one-word, mostly one-syllable phrases.

“Go rock now!” he says.



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A three word phrase. Now I am beyond awake. My heart pounds as I get out of bed. My clock says 5:30 a.m. It's still dark outside, and the Rock does not open to the public until 7:00.

“Go rock now!” Nathan says again, with urgency.

My son's expressive ability has just tripled within twenty-four hours, a development I must reinforce.

I look out the window; the rain has stopped. In fact, it doesn't even look like it rained at all. Did I hear rain last night? It must have rained if there was thunder and lightning. I look at Nathan, who looks at me. I do a double take when I realize he is making eye contact.

“Go rock now!” he repeats.

If I wait until 7:00, the chance for positive reinforcement may be lost forever. We can at

least stare at the Rock from outside the fence while we wait for the gate to open, which will show him that words have power.

“Okay,” I say. “We'll go see the Rock right now. Just give me a minute to get dressed.” I'm about to tell Nathan to change out of his pajamas when I realize he already has. We arrive at the entrance to the Rock a little after 6:00. Miraculously, the gate is open. And there is street parking right in front of the entrance, an L.A. miracle that only happens before 7:00 a.m. Nathan is out the door and through the gate before I have even taken the keys out of the ignition. I run after him, hoping I don't trip over anything in the semi-darkness.

When I get to the top of the ramp, I see it. I freeze in place and stare.

The Rock has been split straight down the middle. Its mass now looks truly levitated, both halves leaning into each other, seemingly on the brink of collapse but still standing on the display platform. It seems too perfectly divided for a lightning strike, but that's the only explanation that I can think of. Something is glistening from inside both halves of the Rock. It looks precarious, but it seems to be held in place by some magical force.

I feel a strange pull in my core compelling me to walk down the ramp and join Nathan underneath, the first rays of dawn lighting the way. Nathan is doing his usual routine: arms flapping, feet stomping, drooling in excitement, and yelling, “Rock!” But this time, I understand his rapture.

The Rock is a geode, filled with stunning crystals. The edge is a dark, vibrant blue, then it turns indigo and then purple and then pink. In the center, clear crystals shine like diamonds. It is the most magnificent work of natural beauty I have ever seen.

I stand next to Nathan underneath the geode and watch the crystals dance in the light

and shadows as the sun makes its way up the horizon. I lose all sense of time and place as I let myself get lost in the spectacle.

When the sky is almost light, Nathan pauses his arm flapping, reaches down, and picks up a piece of crystal as large as his palm from the ground underneath the Rock. He looks into my eyes as he hands it to me. I reach out and take it. It is dark purple on top, then changes to indigo, then fades from dark to light blue.

“Thank you,” I say softly.

My son, who has never maintained eye contact for more than a split second, keeps his eyes on mine and nods. Then, he turns and walks back up the ramp. I put the crystal in my pocket and follow him.

When we get to the car, it's 6:55, five minutes before the Rock is scheduled to be open to the public. I imagine the reactions when people discover its hidden secrets. I look around and wonder why no one else is out on the street. Usually, in this part of L.A., there are runners out at dawn, and homeless people around at all hours.

“Go home,” Nathan says, softer than his usual tone.

I touch the crystal in my pocket before I drive away.

I can hardly focus during the parent planning meeting for the Autism Walk at Nathan's school that morning. I think about ditching it, but I'm the Team Captain so I have to be there. I leave with a page of notes, all things I've promised to do, but I barely remember what they are.

As soon as I can escape, I drive back to LACMA. I imagine a huge crowd and news cameras around the geode, and I wonder if I will be able to even catch a glimpse of it. I'm

shocked when I find another parking place on the street, not too far from the entrance. I feed the meter to its maximum, since there will probably be a long line.

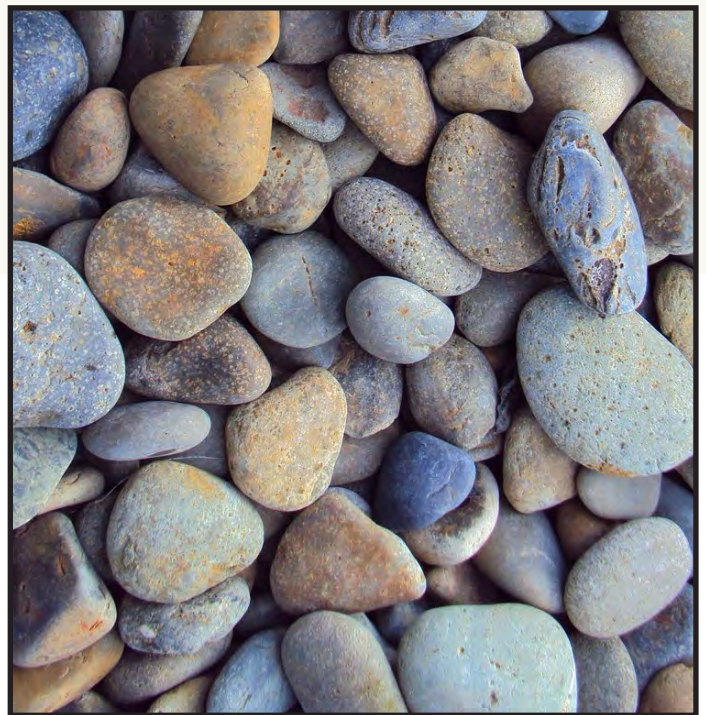
As I walk up to the ramp, I'm puzzled to see the usual stream of casual spectators. From this distance, the Rock looks just like it did yesterday, before the lightning strike.

I keep walking, expecting the crystals to come into view at any moment. But when I reach the bottom, it is apparent that the Rock is just a rock. Completely intact, completely granite. I reach into my pocket and take out the crystal Nathan gave me that morning. It is still there, and still just as beautiful.

I wonder if I am going insane.

As I walk back to the car, I look around to see if anything else looks strange or out of place. I don't hear voices. I see Juan by the entrance and wave to him, to make sure he is real. He beckons me over.

“Where's Nathan? I've never seen you here without him.”



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“He’s at school.” I pause, then say, “Was there anything strange about the Rock this morning?”

Juan laughs. “Some people say the Rock is always strange.”

I take the crystal out of my pocket, pondering whether to ask him about it.

“That’s beautiful,” he says, pointing to it. “Did you get it at the museum gift shop?”

I turn it over in my hand. “It was a gift.”

“Nice.”

I hesitate, then ask, “Did you hear the storm last night?”

Juan looks at me as if I really am crazy. “Never mind. Have a good afternoon.”

Instead of going straight to the car, I put the crystal in my pocket and walk to the museum gift shop. There is a small collection of quartz crystals on the side, a seemingly mandatory part of any museum gift shop, but none are as beautiful or as large as the one in my pocket. I walk next door to the Page Museum at the Tar Pits and go into their gift shop. They have a more extensive collection of small geodes and quartz crystals, but none of them come close to the one in my pocket.

When I get home, I go straight to my computer. First, I check Accuweather. It mentions nothing about a storm in the past twenty-four hours. Then I check the news reports. Nothing. In this drought, even half an inch of rain would have gotten a mention. I move to Facebook, the true indicator of what’s newsworthy. Lots of comments about cold and snow on the east coast, but nothing about thunder or lightning in L.A.

I pull out the label for my low-dose antidepressant and carefully read the long list of side effects, twice. There are more than I remembered, some of them quite scary, but no mention of hallucinations or psychosis.

I close my eyes and listen for voices or phantom thunder or maniacal laughter.

I hear nothing.

I take the crystal out of my pocket, stare at it, run my fingers along its sharp edges.

It is still there.

It is still beautiful.

“Eat cheese now!” Nathan says at the dinner table that night.

Another three-word phrase.

I jump up. “I’ll get you some cheese.”

The refrigerator fails to deliver, but in our freezer there is a chunk of Nathan’s special cheese with the special enzyme for the dairy-intolerant, ordered from the special website. I hack off a chunk as quickly as I can and put it on a plate in the microwave. It melts instead of just thawing, but Nathan seems happy enough when I set the plate of gooey goodness in front of him. He drools all over the plate as he eats.

“More cheese,” he says when he is finished.

I hack off more, imagining all the doors that might open with the use of two and three-word phrases. I make a mental note to order more cheese.

Then, we hear the doorknob turn.

“Daddy come home!” Nathan yells, jumping up.

I look toward the door. Peter isn’t supposed to get home until tomorrow morning.

“Daddy come home now!” Nathan yells as he runs to the door.

My son has just used a four-word, five-syllable phrase. I hope to God that it really is Peter and not some intruder who is going to silence the four-word phrases forever.

“Daddy come home now!” Nathan yells again as the door opens. Peter stands on the front step, his eyes wide and mouth gaping.

“Daddy come home now!” Nathan says triumphantly.

And then my husband, who has just finished negotiating international business

deals, drops to his knees at the wonder of an eight-year-old using a four-word phrase.

“That’s right, Nathan,” he says.

He looks like he wants to hug him, but he stops himself, remembering how Nathan shrinks from touch. Instead, he holds out his fist and Nathan bumps it and smiles.

Then Peter stands up and hugs me, hard. “Did—did he just use a four-word phrase?”

I nod.

“And he looked me in the eyes,” he says. Tears start streaming down his face.

A lump forms in my throat.

Peter leaves his suitcase by the door and sits on the couch.

Our son walks to the window and stares out of it, rocking back and forth on his feet, once again lost in his own world.

I sit next to Peter. “How was your trip?”

“Beijing went well.” He kicks off his shoes, leans back with his feet on the ottoman, and puts his arm around me. “Hong Kong went badly. So badly we ended up catching an earlier flight home.”

I reach into my pocket and take out the crystal.

Peter sits up and turns toward me.

“What’s that?”

I look from Nathan to Peter to the crystal, pondering what to say next. I decide to tell him everything. It’s too big of a story to keep from him, and if I am going insane, then he has the right to be the first to know.

He sits in silence for a long time after I finish, looking from me to the crystal to Nathan, who is still swaying by the window, a puddle of drool forming underneath him.

Then, my husband takes the crystal from my hand, runs his fingers along its edges, and holds it up to the light.

“Nathan,” he says.

Our son continues to rock back and forth and drool.

Peter walks to him and says his name again. Nathan suddenly snaps to attention and turns toward Peter.

“What is this?” Peter asks, holding up the crystal.

“Rock,” Nathan says.

Peter walks back to the couch, grinning. “Did you see that? He made eye contact again,” he says.

He hands me back the crystal. “This is real.”

“You don’t think I’m going insane?”

“You seem perfectly sane to me.”

When I look into his eyes, I love him so intensely it’s almost painful.

He leans in to kiss me. Before I lean over to kiss him back, I look down at the crystal glimmering in my hand.

It is still there.

It is still beautiful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Katherine Friedman is a member of GREATER LOS ANGELES WRITERS SOCIETY.

P	E	N	L	I	G	H	T	E	N	A
D	E	Z	Y	L	A	N	A	Y	A	D
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E	B	D	T	E	I	T	S	D	T	D
W	O	R	G	G	E	O	S	A	G	G
M	A	R	K	E	T	A	C	U	D	E

SWELL	DETECT	SEE
ENLIGHTEN	GROW	EDUCATE
MIND	MOMENT	ADAPT
GRASP	LEARN	ANALYZE
JUDGE	PRESENT	WISDOM
MARK	AWARENESS	KNOWLEDGE
OBSERVE	NOTE	

Draw a thin line through each word after finding it in the puzzle. Once complete, use the untouched letters to reveal a hidden inspirational message.

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Interview with Katherine Stewart

By Katherine Stewart and Mike Robinson

Doctor of Health Science, Psychologist and Writing Coach. Using psychological approaches to enhance the narrative process and her knowledge of brain plasticity, Katherine Stewart is helping writers get past the obstacles to their creativity.

You have worked for many years with people who experience severe mental health problems. What has made you want to coach writers?

Writers can be vulnerable to similar issues that affect people struggling with mental health problems. If you consider the rejection, isolation and emotional effort that writers put into their work, it is understandable how psychological support would be of benefit. I wanted to coach writers because I believe the same techniques that I used to enhance cognitive, emotional and brain plasticity in people with mental health challenges, would also work well for writers.

What are some of the issues that your clients face?

They can range from severe blocks in creativity, dealing with the emotional issues of a story theme, to time management. Some writers have great difficulty writing memoirs, especially if family members are still living and the topic is controversial. I have a friend writing about the experiences of his partner dying of HIV and being a gay man in 1970s New York, while trying to keep the book a secret from his aging mother. Emotionally, it is very difficult for him.

How do you help people to get through their problems with writing?

Storytelling is all about the brain and the mind. Luckily, the brain is flexible and agile, and the mind limitless. But the brain needs to be exercised so the mind has more opportunity to express itself. I provide the techniques to enhance the brain's cognitive capacity, while the mind expands its expression. Also, emotional support is a feature of my work, which includes creating new personal narratives about being a writer.



What advice would you give a writer?

Carry a notepad wherever you go and write what you observe. With compassion and curiosity, open yourself up to all possible stories of the world and think beyond your perspective. Don't be afraid to write badly at first, there is never a perfect first draft. Lastly, join a trusting and supportive critique group that will give you honest but sympathetic feedback.

For a consultation email: ksdhs49@gmail.com

- Registered with the Psychology Board of Australia
- Member of the Australian Psychological Society
- Certified Solution-Focused, Narrative and NLP therapist (Australia)

A Rainbow Dream

By Rozine

Salma Foreshan lies on an unmade bed in a tiny studio apartment in Brooklyn Heights, New York. She sighs as she runs her fingers through a freshly self-trimmed mohawk. Her colorless and practical wardrobe and sparse, functional furnishings are in dramatic contrast to the brightly-painted walls, ceilings, and crown-molding. Each bold area of the room complements the next.

She looks around at the hundreds of paintings she has created over the years, somewhat uncertain of what's actually there. Layers of canvas lean against every flat surface. Salma's personal favorites hang in cleverly-crafted collages, leaving little space for the eyes to rest.

Dark silhouettes of people, standing among other shadowed shapes, fill Salma's creations. Angular, dreary scenes show cityscapes or dense crowds. Despite their bleak foregrounds, each urban landscape plays with colorful, prismatic light. Many show an equal balance between flat tones and vibrant saturation. Rainbows shine through high-rise windows; setting suns radiate behind silhouetted skylines.

As Salma falls into thinking about her past, she remembers learning to make breakfast for herself at three and a half years old. At four she was left home alone, unsupervised for days at a time. Her guardians locked her in a room with pre-made peanut

butter sandwiches and easy-to-use juice boxes. They instructed her to use a lidded bucket for a latrine. She wore old, torn clothing and, most nights, fell asleep hungry as she watched her foster mom chain-smoke while shopping for cheap collectibles on TV. Salma thinks about her last few moments with these people and how one of these tacky knick-knacks changed the course of her life.

One night, Salma woke from sleep to hear her maternal guardian welcome the husband home.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

she yelled as he stumbled through the door. The man replied in his typical slurred sarcasm.

“Why don't you mind your own business? At least I came home. What more do you want from me?”

The person she had been told to call “Mama” continued, “You're a selfish prick. I'm here taking care of this piece of shit while you're out fucking around at Charlie's. Why don't you try to be part of this family instead of running away to some fantasy land filled with whiskey? Did you even go to work today?”

The man she called “Papa” turned toward the door and hollered, “You know what? Fuck you!”

At that moment “Mama” picked up a cheap porcelain statue of a girl sitting on a

park bench, holding a red balloon, and hurled it toward her husband. It flew just inches past his face, out through the open door, shattering against the hallway wall. The police came in no time. They saw the poor living conditions and discovered Salma was in foster care. Child Protective Services was called and briskly took Salma away. She was five years old.

When she arrived at her second foster home, Salma felt as though she had won a prize. This house was immaculately clean and filled with thoughtful design choices. These people were different too. The father upgraded homes for resale. His wife managed the administrative tasks, volunteered for many local causes, and held a number of civic positions. Their good looking, fourteen-year-old son, Jeremy, was a football hero at the local middle school.

As they sat around the dinner table that first night, the mother explained, “Now, Salma, you are not here because you deserve to be. Jeremy asked for a little sister for his birthday. We are unable to have any more children and, so, we have had to settle on you.”

In that moment, Salma didn’t care why she was there. Her mouth was full of freshly-baked chicken, seasoned in a way she had never experienced. Wrapped up in her own pleasure, Salma blocked the painful words. The woman continued, matter-of-factly, “You’re not our daughter. We haven’t adopted you. You are more like a pet. Do you understand? You will not call us mom and dad. I am Beth and this is Jason.”

Salma just nodded, still appreciating the fact that she was sitting at a dinner table, with clean dishes, silverware, and a full plate of delicious food.

That night Jeremy cornered her in the hallway.

“Listen here,” he hissed. “Those are my parents, not yours. This is my house. My couch. My room. My everything. And you are not allowed to do anything without my permission.”

He did not waste time in letting Salma know her real purpose. He tormented her physically and sexually. He would smack her face with an open palm, or punch her fiercely in the stomach to push her into submission. He would then lie on top of her, dry-humping her body until he was fully satisfied. When that wasn’t enough to stimulate his sexual needs, he would strip her clothes off and hold her down while masturbating.

She would beg him to stop and even warned that she would tell his parents. One day, when Salma threatened to expose him, he grabbed her tightly around the neck and snarled, “If you tell anyone about us, they will find you dead. No one cares about you, orphan. There is no one to miss you if you were gone.” His eyes told Salma that, without a doubt, he would follow through with his threat.

Salma built a makeshift hideaway in her bedroom closet with empty boxes, blankets, a chair, and random junk from around the house. From the outside it looked like closet clutter. The hideaway was just wide enough for her to sit with her knees pulled in tightly to her chest and just tall enough for her to stand up straight, but it provided escape from the torment.

When she was not at school Salma spent the better part of four years in this dark,

cramped box, which became tighter with each passing year. Jeremy never discovered her safe haven, but the abuse continued on a regular basis. Every morning and night Salma prayed for a way out of the situation. She often visualized herself approaching a teacher or other adult, whispering, “Help! I’m scared!”—but Jeremy’s constant threats reminded her that tattling was a very bad idea.

One night she felt something like an invisible push. It came from both within and outside of herself. She understood it to say she did not deserve to live like this. She decided to tell Beth and Jason about Jeremy. Salma approached her foster parents, who were at the dining room table doing paperwork.

“Beth... Jason... can I please tell you something about Jeremy?”

Jason ignored her, keeping his focus on the numbers in front of him. Beth seemed annoyed, yet set the papers down and turned slightly toward the young girl.

“What is it?” she snapped.

“Well... Jeremy has been doing things to me that I don’t think are right.”

Jason continued to ignore the conversation. Beth sighed.

“Jeremy can do what he pleases. He’s a good son.” She turned away as if the discussion was over.

Salma protested, “He takes my clothes off and touches my body. It feels wrong. Sometimes he gets naked, too.”

Salma now had both parents’ full attention. The slap came without hesitation. Beth raged, “How dare you say such a thing! You are a filthy liar! Why would you make up such a lie?”

Jason stood, hovering over the scared little girl. “You ungrateful little bitch. We gave you a place to live. We have fed you our food every day. You could be homeless, on the streets, or back with your other parents who didn’t even feed you! Instead of appreciating what you have, you choose to bad-mouth our son? What is wrong with you?”

Salma ran from the room and threw herself, face down, on her bed. As she cried herself to sleep, she felt a blackness enveloping her heart. Within days, she was removed from the home and placed in an orphanage. Salma was now nine years old.

When she wasn’t at school, Salma’s days at the orphanage consisted of staring out a window, lamenting about her past and occasionally acting out in rebellion. Sometimes, when she was exhausted from the hatred, she found herself on the other end of the spiritual spectrum. She prayed that some magical entity would come to claim her and erase all she had endured. She found safety in imagination. When she thought she was alone, she would act out her fantasies:

“Mom! Dad! You remembered me! I knew you would come back for me. I’m so excited to discover you were fighting the enemy spies in another country! Of course you had good reasons to leave me.”

“Who are you talking to, Crazy?”

Another child had entered the locker room, interrupting Salma’s daydream. The imagery of real parents rescuing her had made her heart swell. Waiting for that to come true was agonizing. Acknowledging it never would, broke her heart.

The orphanage staff made attempts at marketing Salma as a good kid, but potential parents were more interested in the plenitude of toddlers, infants and young children. An awkward, abandoned at-risk, pre-teen was not a desirable option for those looking to start a family. The chronic rejection only caused Salma to act even more sullen and aloof on interview days and during public events.

Salma knew children needed adults, but she couldn't comprehend why an adult would need a child. In her experience, kids were tools to be used for adult's advantage, or burdens that only made life more complicated.

Over time, she gave up on the dream of ever having a family. She found it difficult to connect to the other children in the 5,000 square-foot, four-story orphanage on the east side of Brooklyn.

She was the oldest for her entire stay. She saw hundreds of children adopted and several dozen reunited with their biological families. Salma was unable to be happy for them and became comfortable with feeling defective.

Despite her gloomy personality, Salma's guardians worked hard for her. It was their job to care for her basic needs and, whenever possible, they went the extra mile. They recognized her ability to function highly when placed in solitary, responsible positions. She was given her own room while others shared with up to ten. She had access to employee-only areas, such as the garden and rooftop patio. It was her therapist who first noticed that it was in these spaces that Salma was able to brighten up and let go of some of her pain.

Salma learned how to cook and clean for one hundred people, manage industrial-size loads of laundry and help plan events for thousands of guests. Her assistance

helped the orphanage as much as it aided in her own growth. She remained in the cold, hollow institution for nine years, until the age of eighteen.

Back in the present moment, Salma recognizes that she is dwelling on a lonely, mixed-up past. The air in the room has grown dense and cold. It darkens as if the lights are on a dimmer, reacting to her thoughts. The corners of the room, near the ceiling, grow thick and murky.

Suddenly, she feels a cold, crisp breeze sneak in through the slightly open bedroom window. She walks over to close it and discovers a small bird on the fire escape. It tilts its head as if asking to come in.

"Hello beauty. Welcome to our sanctuary. You are wanted and appreciated here."

Her mood lifts as she widens the window allowing the bird into the room which is glowing brighter by the second. The bird lands on a tall feeder sitting in one corner of the apartment. Other animals slowly reveal themselves. A squirrel scurries to rest under the feeder to munch on fallen seeds. A raccoon scampers from underneath the bed, then out through another open window. A mother skunk nurses her babies on a blanket in a nook of one of Salma's bookshelves. A few random pigeons sleep behind a stack of paintings. One lonely bird bobs his head as he makes his way toward the kitchen. He saunters to a corner, stretches his wings and settles in, ruffling and grooming his chest feathers a bit.

Despite the natural order of things, animals co-exist with Salma in complete harmony. Prey and predator status become non-existent around her. (When therapy sessions at the orphanage became too overwhelming, Salma would run away to

find sanctuary on benches near tall trees scattered throughout parks in the city.) While her human interactions are nearly non-existent, Salma's relationships with plants and animals are intimate.

The outside world of bustling, human creatures creates anxiety, while nature delights her with peace and balance. The dark cloud that started to seep in while brewing over her past completely leaves the room. There is now a soft glow of warmth shining throughout her place.

She pours birdseed into a bowl. The visiting bird sings a sweet tune of gratitude before pecking away at the seeds. The squirrel stands on its hind legs and cocks his head as if to ask for some food, too. Salma can't resist his request. She moves a dish of mixed nuts closer and gently pets his head. She smiles as she walks over to her easel which is filled with spectacular rainbow hues popping against the black and grey landscapes. She now understands a bit more about how bright, bold colors set against a dark background mirror the contrast of her anger and pain to the gratitude she now feels. Grabbing a messy palette, Salma continues to add details to the scene.

As she reflects on how far she's come, Salma's skin begins to glow. Like an exotic creature from the deep sea, the veins on her arms turn fluorescent white. Her skin becomes translucent. Microscopic sparks of electricity dance on the tiny hairs of her body. Even her pores emit radiance. There are only a few dim bulbs on inside Salma's apartment, yet the room is glowing with a bright, white light, as if the sun was contained within the walls of her apartment.

She is not alarmed by this oddity. She first experienced the phenomenon when she was

very young, perhaps only a few months old. She struggles with the memory, but can, at times, catch faint glimpses of the young couple who left her behind. Looking down at her, as if seeing a miracle, they seem wise beyond their years. The mother rests one hand upon her heart as she dries her tears with the other. The father seems in awe, yet profoundly sad. Salma can see herself shining clear, white light upon their faces. The couple fades away as if in an over-exposed, faded photograph as her light intensifies. She dulls the glow in her memory, trying desperately to bring them back, but there is nothing.

Years later, while hiding in her closet fort, Salma recalled these early memories, reawakening her ability to illuminate. In a world full of fear and darkness, she practiced radiating auras of soft, warm light.

Salma's light had been its densest in the moment she decided to confront Beth and Jason about her foster brother's abuse. Within her hiding place, she practiced crunching the energy in around herself tightly, so that it could not be easily detected. Wearing her light like a warrior's breastplate, she expanded her force field wider until it surrounded her entire torso. After months of practicing from her confined space, she drew upon the power of light as her mouth opened to expose the truth. Releasing her light fully, Salma attempted to overpower her foster parents with her magic.

Salma again notices that the space around her easel is getting darker, colder, and heavier. She scans her surroundings looking for something to be grateful for. Her eyes land on a photo of her two best friends: Bone and Ezra. She immediately starts to glow. She thinks about how her friends embraced her and seem to love her unconditionally.

She has discovered that her glow is relative to the integrity of her thoughts and intentions. When she performs a good deed, without expectation of gain or reward, she stores positive energy and has the ability to glow the brightest and strongest.

When she is non-judgmental about herself, others, or her environment, she can store and emit warm, healing, tender light. When she stays in the moment, quietly within herself, she might smell like sun-rays on a field of wild flowers. Any time Salma smiles peacefully from her heart-space, her glow emits a soft chime-like noise. She compares this to her angrier, teenage years, when shadows hugged her shoulders and deep caves of darkness surrounded her on every side.



She continues to paint until her eyes can no longer stay open. As she falls onto the bed, parts of her artwork jump off the canvas and dance and move as if infused with life. Each brush stroke on the painting flows into a three-dimensional river of color rushing toward Salma, who is now in the center of her dream. The colors start to splash around her body in a pool, engulfing her in swells of fresh-flowing light. Rays of bold color beam into ten columns, protecting her from a dense darkness.

Sparks of electricity are emitted from each color, tickling Salma as they swim around and engulf her naked body. She interacts with the fresh, cool blue light, which mixes with a lively green. It then shines a safe yellow before swirling into a warm golden energy. Salma reaches her hands toward a bold beacon of red-hot warmth. She is attracted to the intensity of this color which reminds her of a space heater, before twirling even deeper toward a majestic violet hue, then even further into a silver light.

The colors feel intimate, like she cannot live without them, nor they without her. She knows they are not of this planet yet there is familiarity beyond anything Salma has ever experienced.

Surrounded by the colors, Salma transforms into an enormous beam of pure white light that extends beyond the darkness that had, only moments before, seemed of a depth beyond comprehension.

It's always at this point in her recurring dream that Salma feels a sense of complete balance and harmony. Peace instead of opposition. Clarity rather than confusion. Love as an alternative to hate. True and meaningful enlightenment. In a ring of protection surrounding Salma, the colors dance in celebration over the beauty of expansive energy. Tranquility rushes over her body and

settles deep into her heart.

Ever since she can remember, Salma has experienced this dream. It makes her feel more alive than when she is awake. It feels so real that she assumes her soul is partaking in experiences in another realm, while her body sleeps on Earth. She wonders if she can ever find this magical, heavenly feeling while awake. The persistence of the dream leaves little room for doubt in her mind. It has to exist. The images in her dreams are confusing puzzle pieces, too abstract to understand while awake, yet her subconscious always whispers,

“It exists in your dreams, it must be real in life.”

As she comes to consciousness, Salma sits up and finds the sun shining low on the horizon. It is piercing through the open window. She silently wishes her animal friends a “good morning” and visits with the skunk family. The babies fit in the palm of Salma’s hand. She loves their innocence and appreciates their existence. Nothing, not even the devoted friendship of Bone and Ezra, is able to heal her pain like the presence of plants and animals.

She stretches, yawns and makes her way into the tiny kitchen for some cantaloupe which she grew on her rooftop garden. She mentally thanks the fruit for its existence. Closing her eyes, she focuses on the farmer who grew the fruit from which she harvested the seeds.

Going through the same, slow, mindful process of saying grace, she adds granola and coconut yogurt. She takes her simple feast to the fire escape with its slight view of the

Manhattan Bridge.

She eats her breakfast while taking notice of all the things she is grateful for, including the fact that it is a beautiful day. She makes a personal agreement to do right and good as a vessel for the Universe.

She now understands that being positive and grateful is a choice. It took her years to figure this out, as her sad childhood had very little to be thankful for. But the sun is out. Birds flutter through the air. She is able to do work she adores and maintain a roof over her head. The day is full of endless possibilities. By shifting her perception to things she enjoys, she distracts herself from bitterness and heartache. She has learned that while unfortunate circumstances may always be a part of life, it is the way in which they were handled that matters.

A neighbor sticks his head out his window and waves to Salma. “Those birds must be really hungry. They’re just waiting for you to drop a crumb.”

Salma looks around to see two dozen pigeons perched in close proximity, while none of the other fire escapes on the building have a single bird. It’s obvious that the neighbor is slightly uncomfortable about how close the pigeons are to her. As if they can feel his unease, the birds fly off.

She responds to her neighbor cheerfully, “It’s as if I don’t leave them enough birdseed in all of these feeders!”

The neighbor shakes his head before ducking back into his apartment. She knows most people think she is weird, or at best, eccentric, but she focuses her thoughts back to

gratitude. The birds return. She continues with her breakfast, while mindfully visualizing how she would like her day to unfold.

She finishes her breakfast, then climbs the fire escape ladder to the roof, uncoils a hose and waters her plants. She can see the Brooklyn Bridge and all of lower Manhattan. Even though she is in tune with nature, she also is deeply drawn to this city. She grew up here and has grown accustomed to calling it home. She is amazed that millions of people can live so close to each other and still relatively get along. She also loves being able to disappear and become completely anonymous in a big city.

She has hundreds of edible plants growing in beds of wood scraps and makeshift materials found in alleys or left on curbs. She could have purchased something more aesthetic, but Salma prides herself on being resourceful and creative.

Her mind drifts to an imaginary society that is not driven by money—where everything is simply available to every person. Nothing is hoarded or restricted. People are encouraged to be resourceful and creative. In her dream scenario, luxury abounds because no-one takes advantage of it. Human beings live with a responsibility of the highest standards. No one person possesses an overabundance of wealth while others suffer. Salma sees a time and place where people contribute the best that they can to society based on individual gifts and talents. She sees that there is no elite class controlling situations or circumstances. In her ideal world, everything belongs to every being, yet nothing

can be owned.

Her fantasy doesn't require a lack of opulence. It is quite the opposite. Indulgences are available to any person, at any time, and are viewed as a delicacy to accommodate celebration.

Each person would be able to achieve their fullest potential because every resource would be made available. People would contribute because their efforts mean something to their spirits.

Ego and the need for control no longer exist. There is no short-term profit with long-term destructive side-effects. In her fantasy world, there would be no reason to be a criminal. Of course, for her daydream to materialize, a spiritual evolution would be required.

Bringing her awareness back to Earth, Salma looks down to see that her plants seem to have responded to her thoughts. They broaden their leaves towards her, opening up and spreading as wide as the foliage allows. It's a slight movement, but Salma notices. She leans down closer to her tomato plant and says, "Thank you for bearing fruit for me. Your tomatoes are delicious and my body cherishes every healthy bite."

The tomato plant stretches taller as another layer of cellulose develops along the stem. Salma looks over the green jungle that sits amid this urban environment and takes another deep breath of gratitude. She knows her world isn't perfect, but she recognizes the pieces in it that are miraculous.

Walking toward the edge of her garden,

Salma approaches a rosebush which reminds her of the orphanage. She used to help the landscaper, Rafo, tend a small but beautifully manicured garden. He was always so nice to her. It didn't take him long to take her on as an unofficial assistant.

Over time, the gardener transformed from Salma's gardening mentor into the first human being she could truly trust. This one man made all the difference in her world. He showed her that no matter how lonely or misunderstood a person thinks they are, there is always someone who genuinely cares for their well-being.

She wishes she had kept in touch with him and considers reaching out to see if he's still working at the facility. He would probably find it humorous to learn she has figured out how better to communicate with plants and animals, but still can't quite make out how to fully connect to humans. She climbs down the fire escape, back through the window and into the apartment. A big orange tomcat purrs and rubs against her ankles. She sets down her breakfast dishes, joining him on the floor, rubbing his belly. He meows before dashing off to the window to groom himself. After a few chores and a healthy dose of yoga, Salma grabs her bag, cellphone, reusable water bottle, keys, and heads out the door.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Rozine is the author and publisher of eight art therapy activity workbooks encouraging accountability for the creation of dream lifestyles. "*A Rainbow Dream*" is an excerpt from her first novel, coming soon!



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Little Bastards

By Mary Pease

Held high in the tree was an apple being devoured by twenty metallic-green Japanese Beetles. I hit the apple with a hard whack. Instantly the insect-weighted rotten apple torpedoed down the branches. At the last branch it ricocheted onto the top of my head where it exploded into a rotten bug-swarming mess.

“Little bastards! Little bastards!” I yelled as I batted the swarming beetles off my head onto the ground.

“Yea! Yea!” my five-year-old grandson yelled as he rushed to gather the fallen swarm in his container. He hurriedly gathered the dazed beetles. With container full, he joyfully announced, “Look at all my little bastards! I’m going to show my little bastards to Mom.” And off he bolted toward the house.

“No!” I yelled. “No, come back here! Come back!” He ignored my pleas and continued on his speedy journey to rat me out. He had a head start while I was busy slapping off beetles and rotted apple.

As luck would have it, his mom was already at the back door to check on all the excitement. My already tarnished reputation for potty mouth was doomed to take another hit.

He made it to his mom before I could. In fact, the little tattler had already yelled his information before he reached her.

“Grandma got me a bucketful of little bastards!” he gleefully announced as he lifted his bucket to his mother.

“Grandma!” she yelled. “Did you say that?”

“Nope. He made that up,” I stated. “After all, he’s five; they make up lots of stuff.”

“No, grandma,” he said with his little cherub lips. “You said that when the rotten apple hit you on the head.”

The look his mom gave me indicated the five year old was more believable than me. He is so angelic with those hazel eyes and rosy cheeks. It’s understandable why he looks more trustworthy.

Well, time has passed and that beautiful little cherub is an equally beautiful and polite eleven-year-old young man. He loves his two-year-old little brother Aiden and never misses an opportunity to kiss him. In fact, some days Aiden needs to yell, “No more kisses!” Sean laughs and says, “It’s going to be so much fun getting old and being a daddy. I want to teach my kids lots of stuff. Like how to tie dental floss on a Japanese beetle so it flies like an airplane. You know, Grandma, that’s the most fun ever from when I was a little kid.”

I laughed and asked, “Do you remember the day the rotten apple loaded with beetles fell on my head?”

He threw his head back and gave a deep laugh. “That was so funny, Grandma. That rotten apple smelled like vinegar and it smashed all over your head. The funny part was you screaming and running around trying to get the beetles off of you. They were everywhere. My bucket was over-flowing. You know, Grandma, when Aiden gets bigger I’m going to tell him about that. I’m going to help him gather a bucket of little bastards. I can’t believe that’s what I thought they were called. I’m telling my kids when I get a family, too.”

When I think back upon that day I realize we are not in charge of all the memories we pass on to the next generation. When I dreamt of being a grandma my wish was for all my children to have happy memories. To look back on life and say they had fun. Of course, funny is usually the unexpected. The well-planned “dates” of cooking lessons, zoos, and movies are nice and meaningful, but the funny isn’t usually planned. I didn’t volunteer for the rotten apple experience. Yet, as we look back, it’s what my grandson remembers fondly and plans to pass on.

Funny is worth passing on. We aren’t in control of what memories are going to make it. I just pray some are meaningful and hopefully, once in a while, funny.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Mary Pease lives in Los Angeles, California. She is currently working on a memoir of short stories called, “*Laughter in The Attic*”. The theme is finding sanity in dysfunction and a safe place to laugh.



Driving To Texas

By David Elsensohn

I am eleven at the time. The universe simply exists without reminding me that it doesn't actually need me at all, leaving me immersed in my own murky mental waters, mindful only of desires and boredom. It is a time before one blinks oneself aware, revealing ugly truths.

We are driving to Texas, because some people who live there have the same blood we do. My opinion was never asked, nor should it have been; that was what we did. Family vacations are their own species of shared ancestral memory. To children they echo with tedium, and parents do not understand this, seeing them as necessary, struggled-for periods of family togetherness. It is our divine right as an American family to power across the land, absorb a destination, and return and look at pictures of it.

I ride in the expansive back seat that sedans once had, vast vinyl landscapes of chlorophyll green without regard for seat belt usage or human curvature. Dad drives, then Mom drives, then Dad and Mom and Dad in an endless rotation broken only by rest stops, where there is nothing to do but peer at unreadable hiking trail maps tacked behind sun-bleached acrylic cabinets. The sills of bathroom windows serve as graveyards for countless flies.

To travel to Texas by car is to crawl across the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico like

an insect across a playground's baking asphalt. The highway is a black stripe grafted onto the land; scrub and cacti flash past at seventy miles an hour, and the mountains move not at all. It is hot, and deathly. For some reason at this time in my life, Barry Manilow is a frequent presence on the radio, an uncannily coiffed muse who leans in through the huff of air conditioning and smiles when the road is bleakest. "Copacabana" dances from the speakers, telling and retelling Lola's disco tale of love and murder and decay. I play with



my plastic army-men and grow attached to Manilow's brilliant urban myth of Tony leaping across the bar to defend his ladylove. I am a child of the city, detached from the desert fauna and stark, sun-blasted lives of those who live here. The army-men were bought somewhere past Flagstaff.

"Do you want a Triscuit?" offers Mom behind a crackle of cellophane.

"No."

"You suuurrrre now?" Mom draws out vowels like she is measuring rope.

My silence is sullen. Mothers are unaware that such raspy, woven pallets of grain are awful to the tongue of a child. The ugly cylinders of pecan-studded cheese we buy from a local gas station chain are also awful, but she is relentlessly optimistic.

"How about some pecan log?"

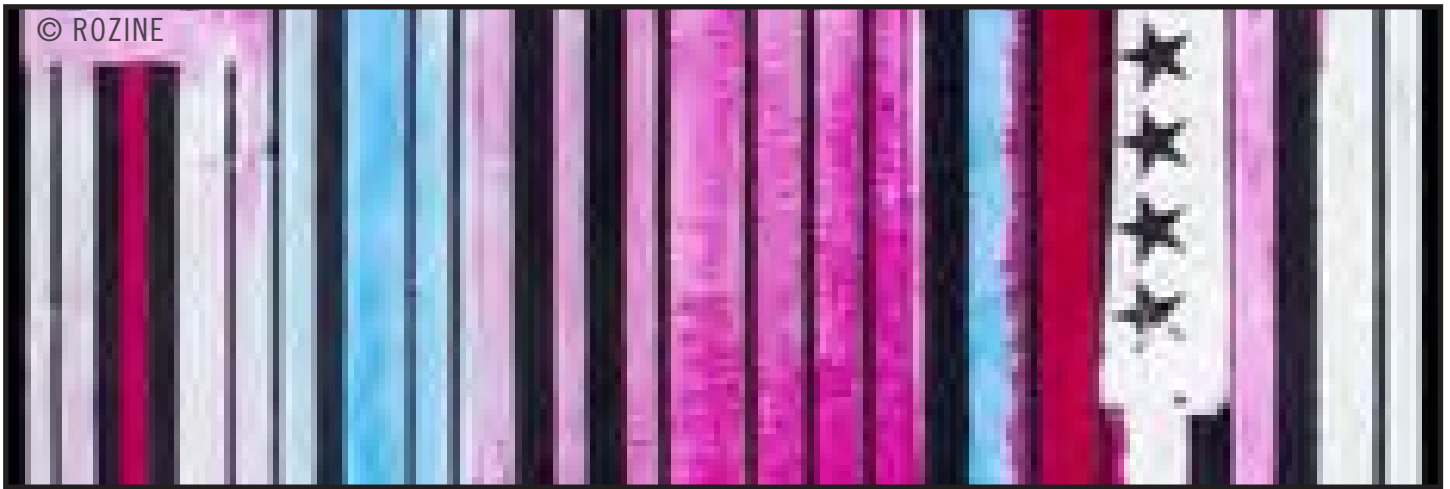
"Mom, I hate pecan log. You always ask me."

She shrugs, pleasantly aggrieved that I have chosen to miss out, and I try to stand up my army-men so that they can participate in the war I've planned for them. The swells of the back seat would serve well as hills over which they can storm and conquer. The bumpy highway defeats me. Barry Manilow leans in to smile warmly, reminding us of that singular club. I give up, counting things flashing by, until the signs appear.

The signs are of wood and faded paint, but their messages of "Friendly Indians Ahead!" and "Stop And Shop!" still call with a desperate grin, urging us to partake in joyous transaction. We top the rise and see white teepees arranged in a semicircle, as they must have done long ago, casting mighty silhouettes. The long American sedan docks in the dusty lot, and I see that the teepees aren't real at all, just cement buildings. It is nothing like the books. Tables sag in the sun, sprayed with necklaces and beads and bracelets and the flat shine of turquoise. The



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Indians are not dressed in loincloths, nor fringes, nor feathered headbands. There is wool, and denim, and hats with the brim pulled low over black and grey hair. A rusted truck of dubious vintage rots nearby.

“How much is this?” quips Mom, dangling a thin necklace.

“Five dollars.” The old woman sits behind the table, impervious to the sun only because she is dry already. She radiates something: heat, or hate, or hopelessness. Her face is stone, her braids thick. From my low vantage point her bosom is large and ominous.

“Do you take checks?”

“Cash only, ma’am.” The term of respect is loud in its artifice.

“Freeeddd,” calls Mom. “Do you have a fiiive?”

“Five bucks is too much,” mutters Dad, who knows everything about commerce between nations. “It’s not even a real gemstone.”

The old woman is silent, but her eyes circle and land on me, her prey, and I blink myself into now. I cannot stare back. Barry Manilow drifts from our open car window, ridiculous and immune. The contrast cannot be farther apart between the old woman and the showgirl of the song. Feathers gone, dress faded. My stomach hurts. This is not my home, and I think that it isn’t theirs, either. They grow up here, but their hearts and their souls belong elsewhere, some point of origin from which they were torn, or shuffled, or pushed. The highway we have been traveling is a tattoo the world never wanted, a long, many-buckled strap of a strait jacket over lives and lies.

When I look up her eyes have risen and flown. We have powered across the country and seen the results of our labor, and my head has broken the surface of its murky waters. It is only at that point I can begin to learn.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

David Elsensohn can usually be found coaxing language into pleasing arrangements, wearing more black than the person next to him, or making batches of chili. Living in Los Angeles with an inspirational wife and the

ghost of a curmudgeonly black cat, he is also a novelist.

Race

MY STORY & HUMANITY'S BOTTOM LINE (an Excerpt)

By Lauren Nile

Picture: A little girl about ten, sitting on Santa's lap, wearing Harry Potter glasses, a pencil behind her right ear, reading quite deliberately from a spiral notepad.

The words on the pad: "A cure for all the world's diseases, an end to hunger and poverty, a home for all orphans, no more natural disasters, all the innocent people out of jail, all the bad people in jail, a solution to pollution, everybody in the world always tells the truth, a great education for all kids, every pet in a good home, and oh, don't forget about world peace"

The Inscription: "Lauren—Is this the perfect card for you or what?! Merry Christmas, Tom"

I received that card from my dear friend, Tom Finn, many years ago. I was in my early forties.

That little girl on the card was really an amazing reflection of me as an adolescent beginning at age thirteen. I did absolutely love science throughout my childhood, and the little insatiably curious scientist was still very much present, but beginning at age thirteen, Lauren, the little outraged activist began to emerge. I was beginning to develop a very strong intellectual and emotional orientation toward integrity, peace, economic equality and social justice.

You see, the little girl who was so greatly loved by her mother and grandmother, that extremely curious little kid with the amazing inner life, the kid who had enough intellectual curiosity and imagination to wonder during a summer camp softball game about whether a whole other universe existed on a blade of grass, that kid who was a wonder-filled little ball of energy, when outside of the safe cocoon of her family, community and school, lived within a larger society as a second class citizen. Throughout my elementary school years, until I was nearly eleven years old, I both saw the symbols and lived in the reality of segregation every day. The "White Only" signs were everywhere.

I couldn't drink from the same water fountains white kids drank from. I couldn't use the same restrooms they used. In some places, there were three restrooms, "Men, Women and Colored". I couldn't eat with my parents at the same restaurants at which they ate with their parents.

I couldn't go to Pontchartrain Beach (the city's formerly "White Only" amusement park, right on Lake Pontchartrain and Lakeshore Drive that was a five minute drive from our home in Pontchartrain Park), which I really wanted to do, to ride what seemed to me to be the most amazing roller coaster in the world.

When we went to "the Lakefront" for Fourth of July, Memorial Day or Labor Day family picnics, we, along with all of the city's

other African-American residents, had to try to find a spot between Seabrook and Franklin Avenue, which I would guess is perhaps a fifth to a quarter of the entire Lakefront Drive area. The entire remainder of the lakefront, from Franklin Avenue all the way out to its end at the Southern Yacht Club, was “White Only”.

Early one summer afternoon in the early 60’s, my extended family, after arriving at Mandeville Louisiana’s Fontainebleu State Park for a family picnic, nearly left after about 45 minutes of riding around looking for the park’s “Colored” section. Fortunately, we eventually did find it, and had our picnic. But if looks could kill, those we received from the European American patrons in the white section would surely have made that our last day.

I couldn’t go into the Howard Johnson’s ice cream parlor on the corner of Congress Drive and Chef Menteur Highway that we passed every single day on the way home from school to have any of the twenty-eight flavors of ice cream that were so prominently and colorfully displayed on its front window. When we went to the train station to get my great uncle Marshall who lived in New York City and came down by train to visit us every

summer, we had to sit in the “Colored” section, which was perhaps one-third of the station.

The entire rest of Union Station was the “White Only” seating area.

My mother and I went grocery shopping at the Gentilly Schwegmann’s supermarket every other Saturday, which was billed, at the time, as “The Largest Supermarket in the World”. On the inside, it literally went on for as far as my eyes could see. It was in terms of size, the 1960s precursor to Costco. When Mama and I stopped at its long, L-shaped lunch counter at the front of the store for a sandwich and soda, we weren’t allowed to sit and eat our meal at the large front section with the nice counter stools. We had to go around to the shorter side of the “L”, the much smaller side counter where there were no stools. African American customers had to order lunch on that side and then either stand while eating or sit on the adjacent staircase. My mother and I never did. In retrospect, I believe that the indignity of doing so was probably simply far too much for my mother. We bought our sandwich and soda and then left. I’ll never forget the



visual of White People sitting comfortably at the front counter eating their lunch, and Black People at the small side counter eating while either standing or sitting on the nearby tile staircase—essentially, the floor. There was sometimes so many people sitting on those steps that they'd be half-way up the entire staircase, always with a passageway on the right side as you looked up. Walking along the passageway were White People who were going either upstairs to, or downstairs from the second floor business offices.

In the front section of the store were two water fountains, each on either side of a large, white round, floor-to-ceiling support column. Down one side, in big, black, capital letters, the word, "W-H-I-T-E" was painted. Down the other, "C-O-L-O-R-E-D". The "white fountain" was tall, silver, metal, and cold. Ours was low, white, porcelain and hot. Judging from the frost that accumulated so quickly on the mouthpiece, the "white fountain" had a strong steady stream of icy cold water. Ours, a trickle of warm.

When we went to the Shrine Circus at the Municipal Auditorium, we had to sit so high up in the auditorium's "Colored" section, the "nosebleed" seats, that it was virtually impossible to see the action taking place on the stage floor below. It was the same segregated Municipal Auditorium in which Lemar Jr. and his friends attended concerts of their favorite groups. The Coasters, the Platters, and the Drifters were his three favorites. He and his friends sat up in the segregated balcony high above all the white teens in the orchestra seats below them, as they all watched the African American performers on the stage.

My parents couldn't go to listen to jazz in any of the French Quarter clubs, the same clubs in which black musicians were performing.

We watched the Mardi Gras parades on either Claiborne Avenue or Canal Street. While Jim Crow laws didn't prohibit us from being there, it was known that St. Charles Avenue, the "uptown" section of New Orleans, was the area where the city's white residents watched the parades. It was a kind of de facto segregation.

My mother absolutely loved musicals. I grew up with the 33rpm soundtracks of the Broadway productions of among others, *The Sound of Music*, *The King and I*, *My Fair Lady*, and *South Pacific*. I don't know whether any of them were performed in New Orleans at that time, but had they been, we wouldn't have been able to see them since they would most certainly have been performed at the Saenger Theatre or some other "White Only" venue.

In addition to Lemar Jr.'s Ray Charles, Temptations, Marvin Gaye and Tammy Terrell and Sam Cooke albums, Lambert's Earth Wind and Fire, Miles Davis, Eddie Harris, Wes Montgomery, Dave Brubeck, Astrud Gilberto, and Chicago albums and the music I liked, the Supremes, Simon and Garfunkel, Stevie Wonder, the Mamas and the Papas, The Fifth Dimension, Dionne Warwick, the Beatles, the Shirelles and John Denver, I also grew up listening to the classical music which my mother loved. I have in my garage to this day, in vinyl, her favorites—Dvorak's *New World Symphony* performed by the Vienna Tonkuenstler Symphony Orchestra; Handel's *Water Music* and *Royal Fireworks Suites* performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy conducting; Beethoven's "*Pastoral*" Symphony No 6 performed by the Vienna Philharmonic, Pierre Monteux conducting; Rimsky Korsakov's *Scheherazade* performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy conducting; and her two

absolute favorites, *Finlandia* and *Swedish Rhapsody* performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy conducting, and Handel's *Messiah*, performed by the New York Philharmonic with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Leonard Bernstein conducting.

Mama loved classical music so much, that she wanted to instill a love for it in me. Her plan—Go to Werleins Music Store on Canal Street to buy me a piano (the only place of any reputation to buy a piano in the city), and send me to piano lessons. After my lessons began, every time she went shopping, it seemed, she bought me yet another album of piano music. My favorites are *The Exciting Pianos of Ferrante and Teicher*, performed, of course, by them; *My Favorite Chopin*, performed by Van Cliburn; and my all-time favorite, Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, performed by Taylor Edwards with the Royal Festival Orchestra. I don't know whether any of those orchestras ever performed in New Orleans at that time, but if they had, they too would have been performed at "White Only" theaters.

My mother took me to see the Disney movies—*Mary Poppins*, *101 Dalmations*, *Lady and the Tramp*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* are the ones I remember. To every Sidney Poitier movie that came to the theater—*Lilies of the Field*, *To Sir With Love*, *A Patch of Blue*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, and *In the Heat of the Night*. To the biblical movies she loved—*The Greatest Story Ever Told*, *The Ten Commandments* and *King of Kings*. And to the James Bond films she enjoyed—*From Russia with Love*, *Goldfinger* and *Dr. No*. When she did, she went to either one of the city's five "Colored" movie theaters, the Claiborne, the Carver, the Gallo, the Famous and the Caffin, or to one of its segregated theaters, the Circle

and the RKO Orpheum, where we sat upstairs in the "Colored" section. There were even separate concessions stands in the segregated theaters, one for white and one for "Colored".

In addition to the city's "Colored" and segregated movie theaters, there were also some that were "White Only", of course, the Saenger Orleans and the Joy on Canal Street, the Fox on Elysian Fields, the Tiger on Franklin Avenue and the one closest to our house, the Gentilly Art on Gentilly Boulevard.

I saw no black salespeople or cashiers in department stores, drug stores, grocery stores, furniture stores—no stores. I saw African Americans only sweeping and mopping their floors. I saw only white men as news reporters, news anchors, meteorologists, sportscasters, and politicians.

Even the city's cemeteries were segregated, as they were all over the South. The descendants of the same people, some of whom lived with European Americans in their plantation homes, waiting on them "hand and foot" from the moment they woke up in the morning until the moment they went to bed at night, the descendants of the same people who during slavery, cleaned their homes, cooked their food and cared for their children, the descendants of the same African American women who, during slavery, breastfed their children, the descendants of those same people were not good enough to have their remains buried in the same cemeteries as the descendants of their European American captors.

During those, my childhood years, I was struck by the absolute unfairness of segregation. The reality that was by far the hardest for me to comprehend is that we—my brothers, my parents and grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, all of whom I loved so much, all my

friends and their parents to whom I looked up to so much—because of how we looked, because of physical characteristics with which we were born, were being treated, every day of our lives, as second class citizens. My thought was, “But White People were born white just like we were born brown. (Children think in colors, not in categories.) They didn’t choose being born white and we didn’t choose being born brown. It’s not fair.”

Years later, as an adult, I realized that in addition to being morally bankrupt, segregation was also tremendously financially unjust. Throughout the entire time that we were forced to live as second class citizens in a segregated society, we paid not a single penny less for our goods and services, and not a cent less in taxes. No “discrimination adjustment” was made for us. Apparently, lawmakers didn’t opine, “Well, since they’re getting lesser treatment, we really should charge them less. It may hurt us a bit financially, but it’s well worth it to not have our children go to school with them, to not sit next to them at the movies or see them in our amusement parks, to not have to eat with them, use the bathroom with them, share water fountains with them, and sit next to them on the buses.” If any such discussions based on a fairness argument did occur among lawmakers, those who advocated for such a two-tiered economic structure, lost. The reality was that while being required by law to sit in only the back of the bus, we paid the exact same fare as white riders who rode in the front. While standing and sitting on the stairs adjacent to the side section of Schwegmann’s lunch counter, we paid the exact same price for our sandwiches and sodas as the white patrons who sat at the nice counter stools in the front. While being consigned to the smaller section of Fontainebleau State Park with its inferior picnic area and inadequate restroom

facilities, our parents paid the exact same state income taxes for the park’s maintenance as did white citizens. In all the stores in which we weren’t allowed to try on clothes, hats and shoes, or to return them if they didn’t fit, we paid the exact same price for and sales tax on that clothing. My parents and all of the city’s other African American residents who were fortunate enough to be able to buy a home, paid the exact same real estate taxes on their homes as white home owners paid on theirs. Math has never been my strong suit, but one needn’t be a math whiz to realize that it would have been a tremendous economic benefit to African American families and communities if, as an acknowledgement of the crippling discrimination under which we were forced to live, by law (when we shopped, when we ate in restaurants, when we used public transportation, public restrooms, public parks and every other kind of public facility), we had been charged 33, 25, 20, 15 or even 10 percent less for goods and services and paid even 10 percent less in income and sales taxes. It was a benefit that tragically, we were denied. We paid the same for everything. We paid..... to be humiliated—publicly.

In retrospect, I realize that the utter injustice of segregation could very well have scarred me as a child. But because my mother told me that segregation was wrong, that the people who believed in it were wrong in that belief, and that we were on the right side, the just side, the moral side of the issue, not only did segregation not affect my self-esteem, it actually provided me an emotional template on which I and everyone I knew and loved, were fighting a valiant battle of right against wrong, of justice against injustice. I felt good being on the “right” side, the side, I thought, of the people who were intelligent and mature, the side that was ultimately destined to win. As a child, I was

totally unaware that that very struggle of what I thought of as good against evil was providing me with a very early backdrop against which I was already beginning to develop as a value, the goal of living a conscious, examined life of principle.....

Segregation ended with President Johnson's signing of the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964, one month after I graduated from Moton. My grandparents were in their 60's, my parents, their early 40's. Lemar Jr. was 20, Lambert, 16, I was ten and Lorna hadn't quite turned two. We watched the news report of the signing of the Act on the nightly news. I remember that night as if it were last night. I had seen adults share a profound collective grief when President Kennedy was assassinated. I had seen them share what as a child I experienced as very real collective fear during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but I had never seen them share a collective elation. That is exactly what happened the day the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed.

Following the news that night, the phone in my house rang "off the hook." Gramzie, Uncle Ikee, my aunts Verlie and Johnnie, the neighbors and my other parents' friends, were all calling. I wanted to know what was going on, why all of the adults were so happy. I asked my mother what the law said and why the grown-ups were so excited. "Well Laurie", she said to me, "You know the twenty-eight flavors of ice cream you've been wanting to try at Howard Johnson's?"

"Yeah," I said in great anticipation of what might be coming. "Well", my mother continued, "This new law says that we can go there now. We can go to the Howard Johnson's ice cream parlor now." "And we can eat the twenty-eight flavors of ice cream?" I asked with even more anticipation. "Well", she said smiling, "We'll take them one at a time, but yes, we can go to Howard Johnson's, sit at the

counter and have ice cream now." I responded with one word, "Wow." My mother continued, "And now we can go to Pontchartrain Beach, and ride that big roller coaster you see all the time." She went on to explain that the law said that we could get a hamburger at Royal Castle if we wanted to, and eat at Morrison's Cafeteria if we wanted to, that my Girl Scout troop could go to City Park and ride the kids' train around the park. I'll never forget thinking in that moment, "This one law is doing all of that?! That's a powerful law". It was an evening I'll never forget.

Within days, I also saw that at Schwegmann's supermarket, Mama and I no longer had to drink from the "colored" fountain. We could now drink from the tall, cold, silver, metal fountain, the one on the side of the column on which the soon-to-be-gone letters, "W-H-I-T-E" were painted, from which icy cold water was dispensed. Within those same few days I also learned that my mother and I could now use the "Ladies Room", and that the third or "Colored" lavatory of the familiar three restroom lineup, "Men", "Women" and "Colored", would soon be gone. The adults in my life could now go to a French Quarter club to listen to jazz. African American families could now go to the Gentilly Maison Blanche restaurant for dinner. It seemed to my ten-year-old consciousness that the entire world was changing.....



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Lauren Nile is an author and nationally recognized keynote speaker and organizational development trainer. The goal of her work is to help all human beings to see the Divine in themselves and themselves in each other.

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Waking Gods

(an Excerpt)

By Mike Robinson

Try as it might with all its storms and wonders and giant trees, Nature was losing, thought Marcus Avery, as he hauled the truck down the redwood-flanked highway.

In the battle for people's attention, Nature's impressive bulk sat in defeat against the Gizmo, the Gadget. Even as the redwoods towered so imminent, tickling the clouds, standing as columns of petrified time, what held his daughter's attention? Her phone. More disappointing yet, what had his wife, Patricia's, attention? Her newly-bought smart phone.

"How can a few inches of screen be so interesting?" Marcus said. He gestured at the rain-specked windshield. "When you have all this?"

"What, the same tree over and over?" Laura remarked from the backseat. In the rear view mirror, though, Marcus noticed his daughter's eyes were fixed on the window. A break from trolling the deadening avenues of Cyburbia, probably. Marcus wanted a snapshot of that image—she looked almost wistful, of an age far older than her fifteen years.

"I promise," said Patricia from the passenger's seat, her head bobbing up and down between her phone and the road like a farm bird picking at feed, "that I'm going to shut this off when we get there."

"We're already there," Marcus said. "Part of the 'there' is the going."

**Patricia gave a light snort.
"Certainly, Master Buddha."**

Marcus had never in his life considered himself a Luddite, but had in recent years taken up the hat quite proudly. Technology, as his father Ozzy said, was an inevitable process, one futile to fight. Things flashy and fancy would come and go. If they bettered lives, in whatever way, they stuck, to be improved themselves over the succeeding generations. Humanity, despite all those claiming we were being irreparably compromised, fatally dumbed down or enslaving ourselves to screens, remained under the tides of technology basically the same, and "when the real hits the shit" (Ozzy Avery's patented mixture of "shit gets real" and "shit hits the fan") we would surprise ourselves with how ready we were, and always had been, to step up.

Would we, though, Dad? Sure, fuddy-duddies had decried the automobile, the radio, the TV. Probably, or, almost certainly, some old prune had blasted the cotton gin and the printing press. But for every ten over-reactive hypochondriacs, there was one real tumor eating away some poor bastard's brain. And Marcus was not remiss to consider that the Web Culture, compounded by the Phone Culture, represented an actual malignancy that had only begun nibbling away at our minds.

Through the radio wafted a staticy “Stairway to Heaven”, a song stupendously overplayed, though one Marcus had not tired of for twenty years. The highway stretched thin and straight, dipping only slightly. Over the canopy drifted a heavy fog bank, like a great spirit released from the sea, deciding what shape it might next assume. No cars for a while. Kind of nice, but also a little unnerving. Paranoia struck Marcus that he was on an endless loop, or that the highway would sail them off into infinity—“the same tree over and over,” Laura had quipped.

They passed a sign. For Marcus it assured him that time had not abandoned them, that people were still expected to travel this road.

ARDELLO CAMPGROUNDS 5mi.

TWILIGHT FALLS 8 mi.

“Only five miles out,” he said, half-consciously.

“I know,” said Patricia, putting her phone in the nearest cup-holder. “Just checked GPS.”

As Laura’s Matherton Academy began its summer break almost a month before the public schools, they had been able to get a jump on a peaceful camping trip. Always nice. Camping, after all, was a way of reconvening with nature, to excuse yourself from noisy neighbors, from the bumps, thuds and jabs of

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civilization. Not simply to experience them in newer, more rustic quarters.

They rolled through the campgrounds. So tight and twisting, the roads looked on the map like a bowl of muddy noodles had spilled between the woods. They passed a spartan assortment of other campers, their presence betrayed by the pockets of flame snapping and smoking away in the wooded gloom.

Their site was 341, located at the very western end of the grounds. Marcus pulled in and climbed out, smelled the ripe cool air. He craned his head far back, to the point where he nearly experienced vertigo, and stared what seemed like miles up the massive bodies of the redwoods, where fragments of sky lingered like gray nebulae in the cosmos of the canopy. For a moment, he forgot Patricia. He forgot Laura. For a moment, he forgot himself, becoming no more distinct from the forest than its shadows.

With well-honed efficiency, all three of them unloaded the truck. Patricia helped him set up their tent and Laura brought out the coolers, folding chairs, and other food supplies and said, against Marcus' advice, she would put up her own tent later. Then all of them went to work on starting the fire, Marcus bringing out a heap of old tax forms and bills and junk mail to add to the kindling. There was undeniable catharsis in watching the flames shrivel and blacken with such alacrity the things that defined ordinary life. It was as if the elements insisted that he, they, everyone, were better than those things, more permanent and so much bigger.

Much of that evening was phone-less, thankfully, Marcus and family eating hot dogs—Laura cooking Smart Dogs—before making s'mores. Marcus sipped his beer. Only occasionally did the voices of other campers reach them.

"My friend, Josh, said he saw Bigfoot around here," Laura said, eyes glazed on her

stick's browning marshmallow. "He said he's never told anyone. I'm still wondering if I should out him or be a good friend and keep quiet. But not many of my other friends know him."

"Was he being serious?" Patricia said.

Laura shrugged. The fire popped, coughed embers into the dusk. She retracted her marshmallow and mashed it between two graham crackers and sat down. "I think he was. I can usually tell when he's fu—uh, messing around."

Marcus smirked at the expletive near-miss. Silly as the topic may have been, he'd resolved to follow the advice of his friend, Derek Kahle, whose two kids were now in their twenties, to exploit, nourish and encourage "every conversation you can with them as teenagers", because "it's so damn hard to pry open that clam shell—it's like they go on vacations inside themselves."

Holding his smirk, Marcus said, "Where did he see Bigfoot?"

"I can't remember. He just said it was in the woods around Twilight Falls." Laura ran a pinky along her lower lip, scraping off melted chocolate. "I think he was serious. He was like laughing about it but I could tell he was serious, you know? He said it looked more human than anything, but like a big hairy human. And he was all nervous because he read that if you see one you might get cursed."

Marcus took a swig. "That an Indian legend or something?"

"I think so. Maybe."

With a sly smile at Patricia, Marcus said, "Well, seems a good thing then that he doesn't come around that often."

In camping, it always took longer for him to fall asleep, especially on the first night. When Marcus did, though, the rest was so much fuller, meatier, he liked to say, than the thin, linty imitation of sleep normally experienced in Sacramento.

He lay there in his sleeping bag, Patricia a still lump beside him, purring cute little snores. Outside the tent, night birds and bugs carried on their chorus.

I'm alive, he thought. And I'm here.

Drifting off to sleep, he heard footsteps. His eyes opened.

Crunch. Then, a bloated moment later: crunch. He thought maybe it was a deer, slowly grazing its way through the brush.

Yes. A deer. Definitely too heavy and too methodical for any smaller candidate.

Crunch.

Sudden fear struck Marcus, like a dart thrown at his breast.

It's two-legged.

Though he didn't know why he thought this. It was all the earlier Bigfoot talk, probably.

Damn Laura. Stupid thing, anyway. There was enough to fear in nature without having to invent monsters.

Breathing, it's breathing.

Faintly, he could hear breath. The footfalls getting closer. They spoke extreme caution in their rhythm, and a hint of investigation.

The fear Marcus felt did not seem confined to him, more like a sphere of sensation that had descended on the place, a collective feeling he now shared.

The moaning started, definitely male, with a deep wet agony behind it. Bewilderment. Crunch. Marcus sat up and tried to peer out the tent's see-through netting but in facing the woods he could see nothing but darkness. From the other side, he noticed a ball of light, bobbing. A flashlight. Laura's flashlight. Quietly, he crawled over Patricia to the entrance flap.

Then someone screamed.

Laura oh God Laura—!

Patricia sprang up from her sleep. "What was that?" she said, to which Marcus rasped an "I don't know" as he wrestled with the stubborn stuck flap zipper. He shook it, pulled at it. It was caught on a chunk of canvas.

"Mom! Dad!" Laura blubbered. Marcus had never heard his daughter so scared, not even when as a small child she would empty her lungs at some night terror. "Help!" she cried. Her voice reverberated through the woods, chasing her scream. "Help!"

Marcus opened the flap enough that he could crawl through. Patricia, uttering a chilled "My God my baby oh my God", threw off her sleeping bag and emerged close behind him. Voices of other campers—"Hey!", "What's going on?"—echoed back in mixtures of concern and irritation.

Laura stood across the campsite, past the pulsing of the waning fire, her flashlight trained quivering on the forest.

"Jesus Christ!" Patricia cried.

Illumined in the beam was a man, if he could be called a man.

For the first time since being in a child's seat, Marcus wet himself. He could not process the sight before him, let alone believe it. He might have turned to every other explanation, including a mischievous film projectionist hiding in the trees and running some holographic illusion before them.

No.

The man should have been dead or lying near-dead somewhere, gasping out his last breath. Blood drenched him, a stark glaze over his yellow-white flesh, having poured

exclusively from the orifices in his head, coagulated in gummy drool around his mouth, streamed from two stumpy memorials to his ears. Most horrifying were the throbbing red slits of an exposed skeletal nose, a goddamn nose-less nose, and two emptied eye sockets. Despite such utter mutilation, the man could clearly tell—maybe by the heat of the dying fire, or some other intuition—that he was not alone, that others were present. He staggered forward, arms out and reaching blindly and fulfilling for Marcus every childhood terror inspired by those Living Dead horror films.

Yet while the man stumbled and moaned like a walking corpse, he was certainly alive, his humanity and intelligence evident and sealed up in a windowless cranium. In struggling to speak, he managed only wet grunts and groans, but Marcus could feel the desperate clarity behind them. Then he realized: the man's tongue was missing.

Someone's cut them all out, he thought.

Cut out almost all his fucking senses.

"Is everything okay?" called a neighboring camper. Other flashlights poked the dark, getting closer.

Laura, shivering violently, had not moved. Marcus would later think that he saw again in that moment something much older in her, as he had that afternoon in the truck. Except it was not a wistful or wiser-looking Laura but one immersed in the atavistic terror which at their center all creatures, mosquitoes to men, shared equally.

The man pitched forward and fell, a pathetic and ghastly sight. He supported himself with his arms and knees. In the tiny bit of compassion poking through his fear, Marcus actually felt guilty for not helping the man, who, judging by his bald scalp, the frayed silver hair behind his ears and the skin that,

beneath the prodigious blood, Marcus could tell was beginning to sag, appeared older, even of his father's age.

"Oh God," Patricia whimpered, "look."

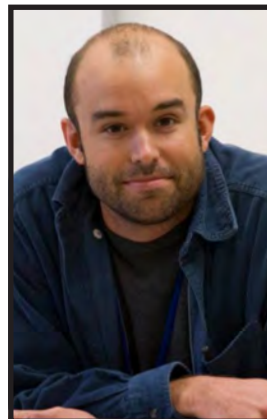
Marcus saw it the moment she did. In pitching over, the man had exposed his back, and the symbol carved there in a rain of blood:



Waking Gods is now available at Curiosity Quills Press.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Mike Robinson is an award-winning author of six books, five novels and a collection of short stories. He is also a screenwriter and producer, and has been with GLAWS since it began. He is the managing editor of Literary Landscapes. www.mikerobinson-author.com

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