SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF
NEIL HUMMASTI

WWW.NEILHUMMASTI.COM
SVENSEN PIONEER PRESS | ASTORIA, OREGON | PUBLISHED 2018

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The seven stories by Neil Hummasti presented in this collection offer readers an astonishing range of voice, characters, tone and theme. Neil's short fiction is often dark when reporting on the human condition, but he also wrote with hilarity and devastating wit.

Family conflicts arise in several of Neil's stories and his characters never manage to remedy them. Many of the stories feature characters engaged in intense stretches of interior monologue where they struggle to ascertain what's happening inside and around them. The Columbia River exudes a powerful, even tragic, presence in three of the stories. Neil depicts it as almost a character unto itself and his writing about rain explores the rigors of living in a place where it can rain 90 inches a year.

Two stories about the calamity of elderly dementia were most likely precursors to the material on the subject that appears in the novel *Forty Ways to Square a Circle* and apparently inspired by Neil's long-term care of his elderly aunt who suffered from the disease.

The collection also includes a meta-fictional satire on a publisher who rejects a phone book he thought was a literary submission, a comical coming-of-age story that unfolds at a sixth grade dance, and a Christmas tale with a suggestive hint of partial redemption at the end.

One story as typed by Neil on a typewriter has been retained in its original visual form to serve as a kind of primary source document for the reader to see Neil's unique mind at work when it comes to punctuation and other stylistic flourishes that modern keyboarding has eliminated.

Some of the stories were written under the pseudonym of Ben Champion (as was the novel *I See London, I see France*). Why Neil wrote using a pseudonym is unknown. It is impossible to determine when Neil wrote these short stories and no precise accounting of rejections and acceptances was left behind. Neil wrote nearly 30 short stories and essays in his lifetime and at least six of the stories were published in literary reviews and other publications.

SLIDING

A STORY BY NEIL HUMMASTI

No doubt about it, the floorboards in the dining room were buckling. Ben could feel the decline as he walked to the window and looked out at the downpour. The wind frothed up blotchy whitecaps on the river. It was already dark, and the big river (more than four miles across on a fogless day) was defined only by those foamy speckles. In the light from the street lamp, Ben watched the rain fall in gusty sheets, and listened to its drumming on his roof. With its crescendos and diminuendos, the rain sounded as if it might go on forever.

With an odd smirk, Ben stared down on the flow of mud (formerly his front yard) which had squashed up against the expensive new siding of Dr. Wolbers' house. Since no one had been injured (merely frightened and confused in the middle of the night), Ben experienced a rush of devious satisfaction from the mudslide which had surged like a chocolate river down the hillside and chased the doctor from his home. Ben laughed out loud as he recalled the swearing he had heard coming from Dr. Wolbers' house that night.

And there it rested—a heap of mud, still wet from the rain, pushing with all its might to shove Dr. Wolbers' house into the river. Like the whitecaps, the mud had its own night presence. Luminous. Shiny. Ben pressed his face close to the window to look straight down. It appeared that he had no yard left at all.

Ben walked up the gently arcing slope of his dining room and into his son's bedroom. He had had two children with his wife. Both were accounted miracles, but Ben knew that only one was a true miracle. Was it his wife who was confirmed barren by the doctor's charts? or was it he who had had the problem? He couldn't remember. He only remembered that, after years of planting dead seeds in a dead ground, his wife gave birth to a stone. A hard stone—despising love, and lacking ordinary human compassion—perhaps lacking humanity itself. Its name was also Ben, but at fourteen, it rolled away and never returned.

Then, when his barren wife (or was it he?) seemed surely past the hope of child bearing, the

real miracle happened. His name was John.

Ben looked at a photo in the light of his lantern.

"You have to get a doctor," his wife shouted. She was hysterical. Ben tried to soothe her with a touch, though he was near to hysteria himself. "You can't let this happen!" she screamed at him. "It can't happen! You have to let me know that this won't happen!"

"I'm trying! I'm trying!" Ben assured her. "I even went for Dr. Wolbers, but he's not at home."

"I don't want that man in my house."

"I know, I know, but I didn't know what else to do."

A cry from John. A stab.

"He's in pain."

"He's delirious," Ben explained. "We don't know if he's in pain, or what."

Ben held up the Coleman lantern and looked at the stuffed animals that circled the room like a protective spell. The bed was made, and everything was as it had been.

On the night John died, Wolbers had come too late. The fact is, he had not come in his capacity as a physician at all. He had come to inform Ben and Bonnie that he was suing them over a property line dispute.

Ben walked to the window (the floorboard's in John's room were not buckling quite so noticeably) and looked down at his mudslide. "Well, Wolbers," he said. "There's your land."

He held the lantern up to the window, and, like a ghost gazing down on the Doctor's disputed property line, he placed his face against the glass. Streaks of water trickled like tears down the pane.

"Ben!" he heard a cry from below. "Open the damn window!"

It was Fat Andy, the sheriff, standing below in glassy, yellow rain gear—shining a big police flashlight up at Ben. The beam barely penetrated the heavy rainfall.

Ben opened the window just a crack. "I can't open this window. Look at the rain. It'll blow straight in."

"Your house is on the verge of falling into the river, and you're worried about rain coming in through your window?"

Ben realized that he had been careless with the lantern. He shouldn't have brought it so close to the window.

"You gotta get outta there," Fat Andy said. "Your place has been condemned. I can't have you staying in that house any longer."

"I just came to gather a few things together, sheriff."

"There was a police padlock on the door. I ought to arrest you for breaking in."

"Breaking into my own house? I just came to get a few things," Ben pleaded. "I'll be out of here pretty soon."

"Well, OK then," Fat Andy said. He didn't like standing out in that rain, and he had done what he could. He got into his car, poured some hot coffee from a thermos, and drove off.

Ben blew out the lantern. From now on, he would have to remain in the dark. Even in the dark, he could see the accusing bright eyes of the stuffed animals.

"Please! Daddy!"

The floor shook a little as another foot or two of dirt slid from beneath the house. Ben stood on the precipice and stomped on the floor. "Go then! Slide like a beaver into the old river! And take Dr. Wolbers' fancy showplace down with you!"

The rising river battered against the pilings on the waterfront.

The river couldn't flood like it used to. The dams on the Columbia can control the flow to a certain extent; but with a rain like this . . .

Ben felt his way to the railing and climbed the stairs to his bedroom. The odd sensation of walking at a slant was magnified on the second story. The roof had split in a couple of places, and there was water on the floor; but the only puddles were up against the wall. The bending, straining floorboards provided an effective system of runoff.

It was quiet when Ben came home. It was not unusual for his wife to be gone. She had shopping to do, and endless errands to run. But it should not have been so palpably quiet. Ben turned on the TV set, but even the chatter from the TV did not upset the quiet.

Ben rarely went upstairs to the bedroom until it was time to go to bed, but there was something oppressive—even the river was as flat and quiet as a marble slab. He went upstairs to take a shower. It was the only thing he knew to do for his nerves.

An objective observer (a voyeur of the recent, unraveling months) would not have been sur-

prised by the letter Ben found on his wife's pillow. He would have said he saw it coming. But Ben took his wife's leaving hard. True, they had been constantly at one another's throats; but that was because of John's death. They each needed someone to lash out at for an unfairness that was almost unbearable. But they also needed each other if they were going to make it through.

The letter was lengthy, but Ben's soul was crushed by one line of it. (The details, the suggestions regarding a settlement, none of that meant anything to him). "When you've loved someone for a long time, and then it all falls apart, love gets turned upside-down. And the underside of love is hate."

Hate. Hate? It's a word that doesn't go away, no matter which way you turn it.

Just before midnight, Fat Andy returned for one more look. He shined his spotlight on the window where he had seen Ben standing, but he wasn't about to go into a house that would surely crumble in the mud before morning. All that rain.

"This is nothing to you, Fat Andy," Ben said as he watched the sheriff drive away. "Just an alibi. You can tell them how you tried."

Ben remembered that he had not eaten all day. He took a cheese sandwich out of his pocket and nibbled small bites without tasting.

A million fingers of water pulled at the helpless foundation of the hillside. Ben watched them sparkle in the streetlight as they strained to tear down the tired-of-struggling, old hill.

He laughed again to remember that the initial slide had pushed right through the bedroom window of neighbor Wolbers. "I wonder what it's like to wake up to something like that. I could hear his swearing way up here—clear as a bell."

Ben went down to the kitchen and took the bottles of medicine from the table. He opened the door and flung them out into the mud.

"When a man is so afraid of losing his mind that he checks himself into the hospital . . ." Ben heard someone telling a nurse in the hallway. "We didn't have much choice. Did you see the shape he was in when he got here? He doesn't know where he is half the time? And what he says makes precious little sense."

Everything there was so white. And the outside was kept locked outside. That was the amazing

part: wherever you went there, the outside was always outside.

Ben was sick for a long time. Not sick in a way that he could understand or talk about. Not sick with a bowl of soup or a hot water bottle. No cancer or pneumonia. No bug to blame. Just life.

For several months after coming home, Ben did not dream at all. He was very much aware of that jarring deficiency. He had never felt so out of control. When he tried to write a check, he could not even hold the pen in his hand. He was embarrassed by the slips of his pen. Roving marks everywhere. He was ashamed. His illness could be seen through his disguises.

He couldn't even keep his own thoughts in check. Wild, dangerous, frightening, black thoughts —and they came and went as they darn well pleased.

He took pills to sleep. He took pills to eat. And the pills that were supposed to make him want to get up in the morning only made him feel heavy and lethargic. He lost weight without the pills and gained weight with the pills. And it went on and on . . . like his old friend the rain.

Sometimes, he could not concentrate. There were lost moments of his life. It was like reading every other paragraph of a difficult novel. There were pieces, but the pieces did not connect. They were not pieces from the same puzzle.

It rained that winter . . . and rained . . . and yet the old house stubbornly stood its ground.

Ben went to the hall closet and tried to open the door. With the whole house leaning on its flank, bending toward the river, the closet door had wedged itself shut. With all his might, Ben pulled at the doorknob. The door broke free with a violence that sent the doorknob banging through the Sheetrock as the door swung wide.

Without bothering to examine the cavity in the wall, Ben took a scrapbook from the shelf and felt his way, with a stiff arm in front of his body, to his chair. He sat down with the black scrapbook in his lap. He couldn't see the scrapbook in the dark. He could only hold it.

The rain continued to fall—like an hourglass of gravel steadily releasing its contents onto the roof. The lights of a tanker illuminated the wild whitecaps on the river. Another sliver of the foundation crumbled, and, as the old house creaked, Ben stood up to stomp.

Had Ben retained his old sense of proportion, had he been able to hold onto that tether of acuity, he would have perceived his activities in a different light. Had he been able to stand apart and look at himself engaged in such foolery with older, healthier eyes, he would have laughed out loud

at the sight of it. But with the rain coming down, and the whitecaps whipping up, and Dr. Wolbers in a cozy seaside hotel . . . it all had quite another color to it.

ANDREW AT THE BEACH

A SHORT STORY BY NEIL HUMMASTI

"I love you, Andrew."

Lolly dusted the surface of the end table with the sleeve of her housecoat, propping at last the photo of Andrew against the candy dish. She took a dozen more photos from the tin box and fanned them into something like a card player's hand. *Who's this man? Can't remember his name.* Someone (she didn't know who) had told her recently that it was her husband. As she applied her whole concentration to the mystery, it *did* seem for the moment like it might be a husband's face. Something about the eyes. Something familiar in the eyes. She shuffled the photos and put them back into the box. She took up another stack bound with a rubber band. *Why did he want to kill me?* She remembered a time. . . . *I had to hide the gun from him.*

Her eyes closed under their own weight. "Andrew." When her eyes opened again, she saw a man in a uniform. She closed one eye for better focus. *Who is this man?* The man's eyes were in shadows. She dropped her hands along with the creased photo into her lap.

Andrew would have loved those animals that were here this morning. Romping as big as you please. Standing on their hind legs to get at the cherries. She knew she could remember what they were called. She had not forgotten everything. *Deer. Of course. Deer. What's the matter with me? What do you think, Andrew?* Lolly closed her eyes. The minutes that were lost to her consciousness were compensated by a cordial dream.

"Do you need any groceries, Mom?"

"Goodness!"

"I didn't mean to startle you. I knocked, but you didn't hear. I think you nodded off. I'm going to the store. If you have a list, I need it now."

"Where are you going to sleep?"

"Sleep? At home."

"Who's sleeping upstairs?"

“You don’t have an upstairs anymore, Mom.”

“Oh? Where are Lee and Eileen going to sleep?”

“Lee and Eileen live in California, Mom. They said they might come visit you next summer, if Lee feels up to it.”

Lolly struggled against the fog.

The daughter peered over her mother’s shoulder. “Dad’s army photo, huh?”

“Is this your father?”

“It is.”

“What was his name?”

“Alan.”

“That’s right.” The sudden recognition sparked a memory. “Did I ever tell you how I met him?”

“Many times. I need your list now, if you have one.”

“No. I did need something, but I can’t remember what it was right now.”

“Whenever you think of something, you have to write it down.”

“I know.” Lolly touched her forehead and smiled poignantly. “My brain doesn’t work anymore.”

“I brought you a writing pad. Remember? To write things down?”

“I’ve lost my hearing aid,” Lolly admitted guiltily.

“Oh dear. Again? I don’t have time to look for it right now, Mom. You look. Look in the usual places. If you don’t find it, I’ll help you look later. It might be in one of your pockets. Unless you’ve hidden it again.”

“I didn’t hide it,” Lolly protested. “It was right by the phone. Now it’s gone.”

The daughter sighed.

Lolly returned to the photo in her hand. “Why did he want to kill me?”

“Who?”

Lolly held out the picture of the man in uniform.

“Father?”

“My husband.”

“He didn’t want to kill you, Mom.”

“Yes, he did. I remember I had to hide the gun.”

“You hid the gun because he threatened to kill himself. When he was sick.”

Lolly took up the picture of Andrew and held it before her daughter. “He was just a baby then.”

“So was I.”

Lolly tried to work the puzzle out. “You were a handful, I think; but Andrew was as gentle as a lamb. Why don’t you ever bring Andrew with you when you come to see me?”

The daughter stared intently at the photo. It was an indictment she did not have time for.

“I have to go, Mom. I have a million things to do. I just stopped by to see if you needed anything. I’ll stop by this evening.” She kissed her mother˚ on the cheek. In spite of her haste, she looked for a moment longer at the picture of Andrew.

“Where was this taken?” Lolly asked.

“Mom, it was a long time ago. I gotta go.”

A long time ago. And yet so clear. If I can remember the old days on Taylor Street, why can’t I remember anything else? Maybe it’s because nothing happens anymore. Nothing worth remembering. Lolly grimaced. I don’t know. Nothing seems to stay in this head. She struggled to a seat by the window. She waved to her daughter who was pulling out of the driveway. Her daughter did not see.

“I love you Andrew.”

Lolly closed her eyes. *Why am I always tired?* She slept poorly at night, but napped often during the day. For two minutes, or twenty. Whatever was needed to restore a fragile consciousness. She did not lie down. She slept in chairs. Her eyes simply closed—even when she resisted with all her might—and sleep swooped down and carried her off in cobwebs. Lolly talked enthusiastically—sometimes even screamed shrilly—in her sleep, but she was rarely heard. Every nap was followed by a gray period of unknowing. Her surroundings were always unfamiliar at first. It had been many years since she had lived at the old farmhouse, but, even now, she often woke up at the old place where the smells were familiar. Her mind strained and protested against the journey across the years to someplace new. Lolly brushed away the cobwebs.

Andrew. Is it this place you don’t care for? I don’t like it much myself. I don’t even know how I got here.

Lolly gazed at the contents of the tin box she had carried with her, straining to attach names to faces. A ballerina. Where in her past could she have known a ballerina? One ought to be able to remember a ballerina. So frustrating when her mind would not obey, but even more frustrating not

to try. She knew that her brain was worm-eaten, but there were memories she would never allow the worms to have. She would give herself to worms before she would give them that.

The old Finn Hall. We used to have all sorts of activities there. Dances. Plays. "Did I ever tell you about the play I did where the flats came crashing down? We were never able to get back into character after that. I was laughing through the whole third act."

She laughed until sleep began to tempt her. To combat the urge, she set down the tin box and went to check on her store of frozen vegetables. She insisted on preparing her own dinners because it would be giving too much to allow someone else to step in; but she often lost track of ingredients. Lately she had been heating vegetables in a pan and avoiding recipes that called for multiple steps. *It's just food, for Pete's sake. It all tastes pretty much the same anyway.*

"Andrew."

I only eat because I catch heck if I don't. I never really get hungry anymore.

After a modest supper of peas and pearl onions, Lolly returned to her chair by the window. The occasional swoosh of a car through puddles was comforting. She took the tin box in her lap and began to sort through photos. *What was his name now?* Lolly applied pressure to make her mind behave. She recognized Alan's face in a picture taken shortly before he died, but an earlier-in-time photo of her husband seemed to be that of an interloper. A little fuzzy around the eyes. *Why on earth did he want to kill me?*

Lolly picked up a snapshot of Andrew. She turned it over and read what was written on the back: "Andrew at the beach. 5 yrs. old. Aug. 1937."

The picture had been taken just six days before Andrew had passed away. He had complained of a stomach ache. Lolly had underestimated the intrusive speed at which calamity can move and had sent Andrew to bed without a word of sympathy. He never woke up. Just like that. No farewell. No time to dig in. No time to bargain or to pray.

Lolly squinted at the photo of Andrew shivering in the surf. *It's the best picture I have of you, baby. What happened to the other pictures? You must be a big boy by now. Why didn't we take pictures?*

A group of middle-schoolers on their way home from school passed Lolly's window. They were accustomed to seeing the old woman grimacing in her sleep by the window. They were particularly fond of laughing at the ickiness of an old age that could never touch them.

“She’s awake!” one of the boys shouted with mock surprise. “I thought she’d been sitting there dead for a week. I was thinking maybe we ought to be able to smell her by now.” He pinched his nose with thumb and forefinger.

“Grooossss!” one of the girls in the company laughed.

“Now you won’t be able to run in there and snag her false teeth,” a second boy said. He looked at the girl’s, believing that he was entitled to the same approbation his friend had received.

Through the window, Lolly saw the children. Andrew was not among them. She would have recognized him in an instant. She half hummed, half sang an old Finnish folk song her mother had taught her, surprised and impressed that she could remember the words. “I haven’t sung that song in—I remember hearing J. Alfred Tanneri himself sing that song. Those were good times. Dances every Saturday night. We kids would slide around on our stomachs on the dance floor, so slippery from that white powder they used to sprinkle on it. Polkas and schottisches. Those were the best times.”

Seeing her lips move, the jackals outside hooted uproariously.

“I love you, Andrew.” Lolly massaged her arthritic fingers. The controlled pain kept her alert.

Gradually, the light outside thinned and Lolly became aware that it was evening. She dropped the photo of Andrew into her lap and covered it with a shawl. Straining against sleep, Lolly remained at the window, waiting.

AND WITH THE GIRLS BE HANDY

A STORY BY NEIL HUMMASTI

This whole thing never should have happened at all. When I asked Honey Dew Ferris to go to the dance with me, she should have said no. That would have been the correct response; and it should have been automatic! She shouldn't have had to think twice about it! Of course, I never should have asked her, I know that, but since I did, she should have said no. I expected her to say no. Looking back, I think I even *wanted* her to say no. I'm sure I did! I must have!

Prior to this one unexplainable act of self-destruction, I'm pretty sure the last words I spoke to Honey Dew Ferris were in 4th Grade, when I called her a "crispy, dried snot wad." That was two years ago, and I can assure you that I have never apologized to her; I have shown no remorse; so what right did she have to forgive me just like that? Why did she have to go and say yes when I asked her to the 6th Grade dance? If she had hesitated ever so slightly, I think I would have withdrawn the offer. Did she have revenge in her heart? Is that why she accepted? Has she been biding her time these past two years, waiting for just the right opportunity to skunk me?

Being that this was my first date ever, I was panicked into asking advice from those older and more experienced than I. I started with my dad, although his experience with girls was never very extensive. Mother was his childhood sweetheart, so Father's dating routine never had much flexibility to it. He was sort of socked in right from the start.

"What's the big deal? You go out. You dance her off her feet. You come home," Father oversimplified. "Where's the problem?"

"The problem is in the teasing that's sure to follow me for the rest of my days," I said, peeved that I should have to explain the obvious. "If I put my arm around a girl on a dance floor, I'll never hear the end of it. It'll be the sacred duty of every 6th grade boy to taunt me to death."

"Teasing?" Father scoffed. "A grown man afraid of teasing?"

I don't know if, in most circles, an eleven-year old would be regarded as a grown man; but Father has been using that argument on me since I was five years old. I've stopped trying to debate

the issue with him.

“I’ll tell you what you do,” Father advised. “If someone teases you about being head over heels in love with this girl, you look him right in the eye and tell him, ‘You bet I am. What of it?’ That’ll put a quick end to the teasing. You see, they only tease you because they know it irritates you. Agree with them, and there will be nothing left for them to say.”

It must be nice to be so naive.

“Obviously, you’ve never been teased,” I said with the surliness of the misunderstood.

“Never been teased!” Father wailed. “With a nose like mine! Are you kidding me?”

“Even my homeroom teacher, Mrs. Grout, took time out from her busy schedule to tease me a little when she heard I had a date for the dance,” I whimpered.

“Well, we can’t have that!” Father conceded. “When even our professional educators indulge in that sort of childish banter, direct action is called for! Just say the word, and I’ll have the flesh ripped from her bones!”

Mr. Sarcasm. Why did I ever think I could go to him with a problem like this?

Mother was next on my checklist. Mother was a girl once, and I thought she might be able to recall enough about those ancient days to give me some helpful pointers. What does a girl expect? What does she want, for crying out loud? At the very least, I hoped that Mother might be willing to call up Mrs. Ferris and apologize for my not being able to take her Honey Dew to the dance after all, on account of the scarlet fever which had invaded our home.

“All you have to do is be yourself,” Mother insisted. “She’s sure to love you. How could any girl not?” Mother patted my cheek adoringly.

I should have known that Mother would give me a whitewash. Her girlhood was clearly behind her, and her maternal feelings now interfered with her ability to be objective. In the final analysis, the only advice she could give was to suggest that I take a laxative before going to bed.

Was there no one who could understand the depth of the hole I had dug for myself?

“You’re making too much of this,” my older sister submitted. “At a 6th grade dance, the girls hang out with the girls, and the guys go off and push and shove each other around to relieve their sexual tension. There’s practically no mixing involved. Maybe you’ll be expected to dance one dance with your date. I don’t think you can mess that up too bad.”

On the following day, I stayed in my room all afternoon, fretting. I didn't read comics. I didn't play video games. I did not feel that any of these activities could either prepare me for, or distract me from, the terror which lay unavoidably in my path.

When I could no longer put off my ordeal, I sneaked out of the house through the back door (to escape any last minute advice which might further cloud my judgment) and began the slow, torturous walk to the Ferris home.

Upon my arrival at the Ferris front door, I stood for a long time relishing the notion that it was not too late for me to back out of this. But, after fifteen minutes, Mr. Ferris opened the still-unknocked-upon door and forced me to move beyond my fail-safe zone.

Honey Dew was not ready—even though I had squandered a quarter of an hour on her front porch. I was obliged to sit in unspeakable discomfort, wedged in between her parents on the sofa. I gave out monosyllabic responses to their questions, in the hope that they would give up their vain attempt to trick me into revealing personal information and go about their business.

When Honey Dew appeared, with no apparent result from all the extra preparation time, I stiffly gave her the wrist corsage my mother made me bring and hoped that she would make no comment on the offering.

"Thank you, Carl," she said. "It's pretty."

I hung my head in defeat and humiliation.

A bizarre farewell scene followed in which Mrs. Ferris gave the impression that her daughter was going off for a two year stint in the army. She seemed to have no inkling that her daughter was merely going to a dance and would be home again in two hours.

In all of the ugliness, Mr. Ferris even insisted on shaking my sweaty hand. I can only imagine what conclusion he must have derived from the moistness of my palm. His smile waned, and I was sure he was on the verge of saying something to me about puberty and its baffling twists and turns, so I grabbed Honey Dew's arm and made a break for it.

As I had already used up my quota of monosyllables on her parents, Honey Dew had to be content with my bitter silence as we walked toward the school.

The gym seemed an unfamiliar and forbidding place as Honey Dew and I entered its confines. The basketball hoops had been pushed back against the wall. Balloons and crepe paper stream-

ers created an artificial ceiling. All of the streamers within a 6th grader's reach had already been pulled down. Balloons were being batted around in makeshift volleyball fashion and stomped on whenever one hit the floor.

As soon as we were spotted, my friends let loose with a barrage of loud catcalls.

In the meantime, Honey Dew's friends gathered around her to ask the kind of female questions no member of my sex should ever have to hear.

And that might have been virtually the end of it, right there. It appeared that Honey Dew would spend the rest of the evening in the pleasant company of her own kind, while I would be mercilessly ridiculed for having been seen in her presence for one brief shameful moment.

I can only guess what Honey Dew told her friends about the whole situation.

My only comment in regard to the allegations which were flying fast and furious was, "Are you kidding? I hate her guts!"

"Oh yeah? Why'd you take her then?" Spencer asked dangerously.

I'm usually pretty handy with the quick, convincing, spur-of-the-moment lie, but, in this instance, I couldn't come up with a darn thing.

"That's what I thought, Loverboy," Spencer taunted.

Those were fighting words, and even if I could not defend myself with the truth, I could certainly issue a challenge. I informed Spencer that, unless he took his cowardly remarks back, I would meet him on the playground the following day at high noon. My honor and my reputation were at stake. (At that point in the evening, I still *had* a reputation worth preserving.)

After the first few stressful minutes, things settled down pretty well—for awhile. In fact, I might have escaped with barely a scratch to my honor had not Mr. Cooper been unnecessarily disturbed that no male and female had been seen together on the dance floor all evening, and had he not wished to liven things up by announcing over the microphone that Honey Dew and I would begin the last dance, and that others could join in at their own risk.

I was mortified.

My friends began to push me to the center of the dance floor. I swung wildly at them. A spotlight from the stage blinded me, so that I was barely aware when Honey Dew came to take me by the hand. Somehow, I had the notion that it was Mr. Cooper who was leading me out onto the dance floor, and I was trying to explain to him that he was making a career mistake.

“It won’t kill you to dance with me,” Honey Dew insisted.

As it turned out, she was very nearly mistaken.

The spotlight bore down mercilessly upon us as Honey Dew put her arms around my neck. I was like a deer caught in the headlights. I couldn’t budge. Honey Dew’s feet moved gracefully with the music while I stood, stump-like, rooted to the dance floor.

“Come on. Make an effort,” Honey Dew complained. “Put your head on my shoulder.”

The most convincing proof I can offer to support my claim of total numbness of mind is that I obeyed Honey Dew and rested my head on her shoulder.

I did not even hear the catcalls. I’m not even sure I was in my body anymore at this point.

Then it began. The horrifying sickness. I felt it rising from my stomach, working its way into my throat. I took a labored breath and tried to swallow, but the flood was rising. The heat of the spotlight made me dizzy, and I knew I was fighting a losing battle.

“Stand up straight!” Honey Dew grumbled. She was, by this time, holding me up.

I tried to plead with her to take me off the dance floor, and would have accepted any terms she proposed, but my throat was full of muck. My last hope was that I might have the good fortune to lose consciousness.

No such luck. In a flash, it was all over. All over Honey Dew, that is. The puke flowed, then spurted irresistibly from my mouth and down Honey Dew’s back.

“Gross!” she screamed, in a state wavering between terror and revulsion. She became rigid, in the hope that her stiffness might somehow aid run-off, allowing her to retain less fluid. I fell in a shapeless heap to the floor. My friends reacted swiftly and appropriately to the gravity of my situation. They laughed uproariously and buried me in mocking jibes.

Somewhere deep within I found the strength to rise to my feet and to run to the bathroom. I hurriedly entered a stall and put my head in the bowl before another accident could occur. Only it wasn’t a bowl. It was the lap of our principal, Mrs. Drudge.

“What is the meaning of this?” Mrs. Drudge shouted.

I raised my head weakly. “Wrong bathroom,” I wanted to say, but I was still dribbling from the mouth and could not get the words out. I also had the feeling that nothing I could say at this point would be convincing. I didn’t believe it myself, even though I knew it was true.

“I’d like to see you in my office in five minutes,” Mrs. Drudge demanded, pulling up her panty

hose.

I nodded, in effect waiving my right to a jury trial and agreeing to accept whatever sentence she might impose.

“Female problems, Carnahan?” someone yelled out as I emerged from the ladies room.

I wiped the film from my mouth and tried to be invisible, but this was difficult because the spotlight was trained on me again.

I sought out Honey Dew and, with a calmness which can be attained only when one has nothing left to lose, I asked her if she was ready for me to take her home yet. I had only five minutes before my appointed meeting with Mrs. Drudge, so every second counted.

Honey Dew had, by this time, changed her shirt. (I don’t know where girls get them, but they always seem to have spare clothes stashed here and there whenever they need them.) She looked at me with a combination of astonishment and disgust. “I wouldn’t go home with you—”

“I promised your parents—” I explained matter-of-factly.

“I don’t think you have to worry about the impression you’ll make on my parents,” she said. “After they find out what happened, there isn’t much chance you’ll be seeing them again. In fact, we might be moving out of the community.”

All of Honey Dew’s friends gave her support by looking at me with crinkled noses.

It all seemed so strange. How things had been turned upside-down. At the beginning of the evening, I had the vague hope that Honey Dew would spend the brunt of the evening raving to her friends about me: “He’s such a doll. You don’t know how lucky I am.” Then she would go home and tell her parents, “Whatever I end up doing in life, wherever I go, no other boy in the whole wide world will ever touch my heart the way Carl did tonight.”

It now appears that I will have to modify my dreams.

I nodded my approval of Honey-Dew’s decision to see herself home and stumbled toward the door. Mrs. Drudge was there to greet me. I had already forgotten that she had volunteered to be my escort for the remainder of the evening.

I waved good bye to my former friends who could not have been more delighted to see me leave under armed guard. They were leaping and shouting and, in general, having a fine time.

“Way to go, Carnahan,” I heard one of them shout. “You made this a dance none of us will ever forget.”

I knew how true that was likely to be. When I'm in high school, I'm sure I'll still be remembered for this one incident. It will become my defining moment. I can see it now. My senior graduation. The principal finishes his introductory remarks and then points out a number of TV monitors scattered throughout the gymnasium. "And now some amateur video footage of one of our graduates shot at a dance way back in the 6th grade."

• • • • • • • •

When I arrived at home, arm in arm with the unforgiving Mrs. Drudge, Father was just putting the finishing touches on an ice cream sundae. He saw that I was deflated and, somewhat hesitantly (having noticed the presence of a strange woman in our midst) flicked a cherry at me.

"I'd like to speak with you outside for a minute, if you don't mind, Mr. Carnahan," Mrs. Drudge demanded coolly.

Father glanced at me, then glanced at Mother, then meekly followed Mrs. Drudge outside looking as if he expected to be disciplined himself.

Mrs. Drudge slapped the back of her hand in her palm menacingly.

Mother took one look at the stain on Mrs. Drudge's skirt and immediately guessed everything.

When Father returned after several ominous minutes, he was silent for the longest time. Finally, he said simply, "I won't ask how it all happened. You probably couldn't explain it if you wanted to."

I hung my heavy head.

"You're probably hoping the earth will gape and swallow you up, but I don't think it will. At least not until you get to school tomorrow."

Mother looked at Mrs. Drudge through the window, then smiled at me unconditionally. "Take a laxative before you go to bed, dear. You're bound to feel better in the morning." (Mother has prescribed laxatives even for our dog, whenever he looks a little droopy, and being that our dog is a basset hound, that happens fairly often.)

"I'm brokenhearted, not irregular," I snapped.

"A broken heart on your first date?" Father asked. "In my day, it used to take three, maybe four dates. These kids today."

"*She* didn't break my heart," I insisted. "I broke it myself. Didn't you hear what Mrs. Drudge told

you?" I banged my head against the wall.

Father held up his hands to suggest that enough had been said for now.

Mother went to the medicine cabinet and returned with a laxative tablet and a large glass of water.

"That bad, huh?" my sister asked, curious to learn the details.

I nodded pathetically, but I gave her nothing she could gossip about.

"Well, you have to learn to put these things into perspective," she said at last.

She could see that I wasn't buying.

"Let me just ask you this: did your date at any point in the evening go into the bathroom and give birth?"

I shook my head.

"So, you see? It could have been worse."

The strength practically gone from my legs, I slouched off to my bedroom. As I lay my weary body down, I felt a lump under my pillow. A note attached to a bottle of pills explained the intrusion: "This is supposed to be just the ticket when you're feeling blue."

"St. John's Wort?" I muttered sourly. I examined the bottle.

Apparently Mother had sneaked into my room while I was talking to my sister—although I could not be sure that Mother was the culprit since the pills were not from the laxative family. It's possible that the Tooth Fairy is branching out. To wit: Traditional cash settlements for nice, well-adjusted children, and nature's own anti-depressants for bad little boys and girls.

I crawled down under the covers. *Way* down under the covers—where no sense of social obligation need disturb me ever again. It makes no difference what stratagems anybody wants to try on me. In spite of truant officers, guidance counselors, health care professionals, coming out parties, and even a mother's love, I'm staying right here under these covers (with only my journal and flashlight to console me) until my adolescence has passed me completely by. And may all my misery lay like a brick on Honey Dew Ferris's conscience!

INHERITANCE

A STORY BY NEIL HUMMASTI

Like an old crone with her black magic and theatrical spells, I have been conjuring heroes from ancient legends, seeking a category of man into which I may fit my father. Here, is a man of courage, and there, a man of honor. But my father would be mislaid among a troupe of heroes. He is an ill-cut piece of the puzzle -- a square peg for the round hole. Realistically reconstructed, he sits with the serious-minded buffoons on the mount of lost ideals. How shall I respond to that? Heroes we can flatter, and cowards we can laugh at, but what of the man who is neither hero nor coward -- who, nevertheless, is possessed by a hero's beckoning dreams and a coward's irrepressible fears? The myths and histories are silent on portraits of such colorless composition.

For years, father fluttered from one unlikely job to another -- like a moth obsessed with a false light. Perhaps it was father's tragic flaw that he was incapable of seeing the truth about his enigmatic vision. Whatever it was he wanted existed for him only in the romance he was fond of calling "life as it ought to be." Jobs were occasional -- meeting some practical need, but interfering with the primal quest.

Mother may have had some understanding, regarding father's world of wonder. She accepted it, at least. It was easy for her to accept every paradox because she was a believer: she believed in the Torah, she believed that the lion would someday lie down with the lamb, and she believed -- indisputably -- in father. The rest of us -- the extras in father's great fantasy production -- learned not to expect very much stability.

Our farm was a testimony to father's divided attention. Except for a few neglected cows and chickens -- without which, the place would have had no legitimate claim to the name farm -- the whole scene was arranged in bits and pieces of projects, once designed to re-create "life as it ought to be." The pallid house would have fallen into peril with the rest, if not for mother's continuing insistence that we boys see to its upkeep. Father saw the house, if at all, only as a body -- a shell -- that confined a soul too big to hold. It was a matter of pride for him to neglect all but the ultimate vision. The kind of neighborhood shows, designed to make a grand impression, he avoided with ascetic determination. Unequivocally, he had left the world of "business as usual" and any thought of compromise would have been immoral. It kept him on the move -- this flight from compromise. I guess that's why he changed lives so often: to escape into a new drama, to play a new part, to take on the character of someone a little stronger, a little braver, and a little less guilty.

We floated with father -- secure in our insecurity. We had no reason to expect more from one whim than from another. But perhaps there is a "tide in the affairs of men" which heaves a man to heights he cannot mount; for it became apparent, in the fall of that first year, that father's plunge into commercial fishing was something more than whim. There was a fresh, new wind and we were moving again. When father announced that he had purchased

a 26-foot gillnet boat, we reacted as Jack's mother must have when Jack announced that he had traded the family cow for a bag of magic beans. But father was good. Almost from the first, he was good -- good enough to irritate the older fishermen, who may have smelled a usurper. With fingers imitating hook noses, the veteran seamen did their best -- with their salt water wits -- to entangle father in the nets of their laughter. Their ignorant, anti-semitic jests were conspicuously reserved for conversations within father's earshot. "I'll bet he'll get his money's worth at the cannery," one man said, consecutively, to three or four different groups of net menders. Stereotype are immortal, I suppose. To these fishermen, who resented any new competition, the bars which kept father on the outside were there for a reason. A Jew ought to be a pawnbroker, or a tailor. If this reprobate Hebrew didn't realize that, it would be up to the committee for the preservation of racism on the high seas to instruct him. Outwardly, the silliness did not seem to disturb father much. It was I who nurtured resentment. These men were my enemies, and I wanted them to know it. I wore a Star of David on my jacket, and painted another Star on a particularly obnoxious fisherman's tuna boat.

The taunts were, I suppose, part of our Jewish education. But, slowly, some of the suspicion and chill began to evaporate. Even the most noticable forms of prejudice were stored away somewhere in the cerebral attics of these mystified men. They had never been able to deny father's gift. Some refused to acknowledge it, but even the wariest were silently impressed. Respect was dear bought. Father paid a higher price than I could have, but, after seven years on the hard river, he was at home. To many young seamen, he was one of the nine worthies of Fishingdom. And the veteran kings of the river, one by one, were forced to abdicate their former claims and swear fealty to

the new king -- though, many had no wish to kiss the shoes on father's feet.

The curiosity of children trying to discover the magician's technique overwhelmed the unquiet souls of his rivals. All watched him. Some asked to fish with him. There was magic in his method. But father worked alone. It was a matter of pride. I believe it was the first time I had seen raw pride; it provoked me to an uncertain insight, and made me afraid. It was doing something extraordinary to my father -- something I knew he could not see -- and it frightened me.

It was pride that motivated father -- drove him, you might say, to a point past fatigue. Every season he pushed, with unthinking irreverance, closer to the sea, and left the relative safety of up-stream fishing to the "ama-choors". Everyone knew that was crazy. Past buoy 10, the currents play with boats as Gargantua plays with toys in a tub, and the water paws and slaps at would-be giant killers. But, strangely, even though everyone knew father was acting the part of the fool, they respected him for it; and the more daring and foolish he became, the more they respected him. It's a hard judgment to bear, but in a crazy world, you have to be crazy to be admired.

If mother worried, she never said anything. She never talked about the masks father wore -- almost never mentioned fishing. In our house, father did the talking, and mother was the monk, who perceived but said nothing. Sometimes it was crazy talk -- wild nonsense about the sea. "She can be handled, if the hand is firm enough," he would say, with borrowed conviction. He had read The Old Man and the Sea and had devised some kind of curious equation from its naturalistic theme.

"Gillnetters used to go out there, too," he was fond of pointing out. ("Out there" referred to the sea.) "Yeah, they used to go up as far as North Head Lighthouse." He was thoroughly acquainted with the history and

the legends of the sea, but the authority he seemed to possess when he spoke was strictly vicarious. I often wondered if father would not, some dark night, surreptitiously cross the bar. He was already an outlaw -- having many times entered the "badlands" beyond the legal boundary of buoy 10.

Something about that ocean just wouldn't leave father alone. He made the sea his woman -- as many do -- sought to love her, and to understand her mysteries. But the metaphor is false. Say what you like about the sea; it's no woman. Women change. The sea doesn't change. If you survive its mocking once, it will meet your second challenge with the same srategy. There's not a woman on earth who'd do that. They have an unquenchable thirst for winning, and if they don't win one way, they'll try another way -- or they'll try another man. Match wits with the sea in the same way you'd match wits with a woman, and you're bound to get more than just a slap in the face. The sea doesn't have wits. It has energy. If we use personification at all, we would be wiser to call the game plan, Patience. The sea can wait. Like a boxer, it beats relentlessly at the arms until the arms are no longer of any use, and then, like a champion who's saved the money punch for a climactic moment, it sends another conceited, punk challenger to the famous Locker, which old men of the sea ignorantly protest will be their final home.

Maybe it's not like that at all. Maybe the sea doesn't fight anyone. Maybe it just lays there, like a brick wall, and allows the men who challenge it, in hope of some spectacular conquest, to batter their own brains out. Good fishermen do not go near the ocean -- not with a gillnet, and a 26-foot boat. But it was not enough for father to be a good fisherman, or even the best fisherman. He wanted to be the conquering hero, and, so, he shook his fist at fury and foul weather and went off to bang heads with king Neptune.

Death was not half so terrifying as defeat -- for defeat would mean that he would have to admit what he always must have suspected: that he was nobody special.

The fear that father would not come home one morning hovered over my imagination like the pestering seagulls that would hang above our boat. There were too many tales of experienced men who had had their last looks at the desperate sky from the place where the river and the sea form their alliance. But father always came home; and he always came with fish. With a traditional display of generosity, he would dole out samples of the catch to any, in the audience at the dock, willing to pay the price of admiration. This is the kind of kingly gesture that one expects from the regal -- or the guilty; a ceremonious act of benevolence -- or of penance.

During that last summer, I went out with father almost every evening. Father relished that because he wanted to mold me in his image, and the opportunities which presented themselves in the fishing expeditions must have seemed to him providential. I guess the "when you grow up, you can take over for me" education isn't so unusual. Most fathers revel in it (consciously or unconsciously), and most sons grovel in the muck of it (consciously or unconsciously). But my father's program, like all the schemes that flooded his absorbent brain, was extreme. A son to carry on tradition or familial peculiarities was not enough. He wanted to leave the world a carbon copy -- another Jonas Stein. I was a willing student in the early days of my training, and lent an eager ear to his telling, but later, when I saw something of the nature of father's descent into public esteem, I looked back on that schooling with repulsion, if not horror.

July was extremely hot ~~that year~~. I suppose that's partly why I went out with father so often. When the heat lies over this part of the country

in the summer, you can almost wring the humidity out of the air. On those sticky, hot days, the best escape is on the water -- if it's heat you want to escape from.

On that last Saturday, I had some vague intention of going with mother to synagogue, but when, at breakfast, I could feel my shirt sticking to my skin, I declined and went instead to the docks with father. We didn't go out until evening. The preparation was an all day job. Father mended the nets and tried to straighten out the sea's mischief. I washed the nets in the bluestone tanks. Something in the blueness and the nets drowned in the blueness held my untiring fascination. When the sun got into that blueness, there was a transparent sapphire effect -- stimulation for a flight of the imagination. The heavy nets sinking in the jeweled waters made me rich and forgetful.

There were jellyfish below the docks, and hooks about, to snag them with. They just floated and shimmered in the shallow water. Sometimes, I imagined smiles on the faces which they did not have. They can be a real mess if they get into the nets, and I felt a little guilty -- having accepted the comradeship (if you can call it that) of an occupational enemy. To father, "they are useless -- they do no sort of good... they just float and shimmer, and make messes for us to clean." But that's not such an odd phenomenon, when you think about it. There are jelly-people too -- who float and shimmer and accomplish nothing.

The evening was as smooth and well-disposed as the day had been. A few yellow clouds hung like poison gas on the horizon. The seagulls scooped pieces of bread from the air as I tossed. The boat made its tear in the silk water. The disturbance of the water always stirred some vague discomfort in me. Perhaps the guilt I felt in regard to jellyfish was akin to the

guilt I felt as the boat sawed through the calmness of the river. There is a penalty for those who disturb calm.

I tried to occupy my mind, on the journey, by cleaning the .22 that father kept in the cabin. It was my appointed task to keep an eye out for seals and sharks. I had younger eyes, father said, and so it was up to me to see the net robbers before they saw our fish; but, really, I think he just wanted to give me something to do -- an illusion of utility -- while he attended to the fishing.

The sun set early, it seemed to me, and I could see only the silhouette of Cape Disappointment against the last light of a green and grey sky. There was a piece of moon floating above us, and below us, but the water was still dark and murky.

"Why do you fish so near the ocean?" I asked. It was not my intention to challenge his judgment, but the question drifted like a jellyfish into my mind, and I could not recall ever having heard his answer.

"Well -- there's no competition. The river's full to the brim upstream, nowadays. And what's the point? Bad water three days out of four."

"Bad water" meant that the river was contaminated with alkali or uric acid. The fish stay out of "bad water" and so do fishermen -- those who can distinguish "bad water" from "good". The old fishermen knew how to recognize "bad water". Years of experience had taught them how much shine the water should have and the kind of oily shine which meant no fish. Father had an instinct about the river. He knew as much about it as the fish. When he said "bad water", there was "bad water".

The moon disappeared into a wave, as I watched it bounce past the cork floats that held our net.

"I might fish upstream next year. We'll buy a new boat. We'll always get all the fish we need."

I would have liked to have pursued this revelation, but I recognized the schooling session -- introductory phase -- so I kept quiet. Father, as a teacher, spoke in a manner which did not permit dialogue.

"You're just starting. Tonight is your first night. Make them respect you. Beat them, if you have to, but make them respect you. That's the only security you can ever have."

It was clear that father hated "them" (whoever they were -- very real bigots or imaginary phantoms), in a subdued sort of way. When he spoke of "them", he squinted, the way a man squints at a mortal enemy. It reminded me of the hatred I had often seen in my grandfather's eyes when he spoke of the Nazis -- only, grandfather's hatred was so apparent, it used to spill from his mouth like spit. With father, it was something just below the surface, like flames burning through a screen of smoke, that spoke more than it wanted to. There is something transparent in the strongest face.

"Anticipate what they're up to, and don't feel guilty if you have to crush them. There's plenty to feel guilty about without that."

He looked at the sky most of the time he was talking, as if he meant to find some confirmation there. For the first time, that last night, I felt sorry for him. Though he was an unchallenged monarch, his crown was more of a burden than a release. He could fight his empty fight and make a good show, but the irony was that he could not convince himself. It was sad to watch him on his fish-hatch throne, and to hear him speak, like a spoiled king who had no heart for royalty, but no courage to relinquish his crown. It gave me the same kind of disagreeable feeling I had when we went to see my grandfather's body at the funeral home, and I saw, for the last time, that powerful and troubled face.

Father allowed me to pull net that night. He must have felt that it was time for my initiation. The first fish we pulled up had been taken.

Only the head of what must have been a good-sized silver was left in the net. The meat had been ripped away.

"Shark?" I asked my father.

"Not likely. We're still a ways from the bar. Only a few maverick sharks get up here. Seal."

But it was a shark -- and it was in the net. Sharks, in these waters, are not the great white man-killers, but when they're caught, they're like men who are caught -- scared and crazy. Almost before I saw the lungeing black shadow in the dark water, I saw the blood straining from father's arm. His whole hand was gone.

With a sobbing scream, he fell backward into the bow of the boat, whining, like a man humiliated. My arms froze, and my fingers felt like steel spikes. In an instant, I committed to God more than I was possessed of. Meekly and dreamily, I began to fasten a tourniquet, as soon as my hands were functional. Reality became as melting snow. Father had a look of death about him. The picture of my grandfather in the open casket returned to my imagination, as father stared widely at the dark sky and said nothing in reply to my desperate questions.

I threw the net overboard and started the engine. No response from father, except for the high-pitched sobs. The boat had become a ghost ship. It was not I who controlled its progress in the waves.

> Under the keel nine fathom deep,
> From the land of mist and snow,
> The spirit slid: and it was he
> That made the ship to go.

The Coast Guard was quick to respond to my call, and I was relieved that father had temporarily survived my incompetence. Father was bleeding badly when they transfered him to their boat. I tried to tell myself, as their boat melted into darkness, that they could do a sufficient make-shift

job on the mutilated arm -- but I didn't believe it. I had seen the arm, and the red blood on his white face.

I took father's boat back and drove immediately to the hospital. I stood outside, afraid to go in, like a guilty criminal reluctant to hear the inevitable verdict. What would I say to mother? How could I speak to her undying faith? And the doctors -- what would I say to them? How would I respond to their interrogation? But father was careless and overbold; everyone knew that. Their questions would be more routine, I told myself.

My disjointed thoughts were interupted by a Coast Guard medic, who saw me and came out to tell me that father was alive. That was more than a shock. It was a sudden waking from a dream. Father -- alive? I had already begun to rationalize his inglorious death, and, suddenly, there he was again -- molding and haunting my future. I felt ashamed when the medic patted my shoulder. Our realities were divergent. There were two realities, and the one which was suddenly thrust upon me seemed distinctly less real than the one I had just lived.

The next week's reality was that father came home. Yes, he lived -- or rather, he sat -- dead -- on a cot fixed for him on the porch, staring at nothing in particular. Three days and three nights, he sat -- wilting. Then, he made his death official with a bullet in the brain. Surprisingly, none of us expected that.

Was it guilt, I wonder? I think, for father, there was always guilt; in the end, there was <u>only</u> guilt. The suffering, I guess, is worth the while, as long as we can hope. We have, at least, a direction. But when hope runs capriciously from us, we just float, and shimmer, and accomplish nothing.

There is an ancient Jewish legend of the laméd-vav: thirty-five men who, it is said, bear the wrath of God's judgment for the whole world. They spend their entire lives suffering. They make atonement through suffering. They suffer for a cause, though they, themselves, may never know the cause. I would like to believe that father was one of the laméd vav. That would help me to make sense of his life -- and mine. He was training me to take his place. I wonder if he knew what for.

CRAZY LANNY REJECTS THE PHONE BOOK

A STORY BY BEN CHAMPION

Dear Author Anonymous:

I am returning the manuscript which you left in a plastic bag on my doorknob. I apologize for the delay in responding to your submission. Although it is clear that you have put a lot of work into this project, your book is not right for us. I would like to be more positive, but frankly, I was only able to make it about half way through the book. Your list is exhausting.

I see several problems with your book which, in my judgment, render it unmarketable:

First, the pages and pages of Consumer Tips and Government listings with which you begin your book cannot be expected to grab the reader and hold his attention. You ought to begin with a car chase or a bungled murder—something a little more *in medias res*. If you feel you must mention the phone company and government agencies, why not include them in the "*Acknowledgments*"?

Second, by arranging all of your characters in alphabetical order, you virtually eliminate any chance for suspense. I *knew* that when I turned to the last page, I would find Mickey Zupp (or his alphabetical equivalent). It was an inevitability, given the foreshadowing clues you had previously supplied.

Third, and of even greater concern, there is a total lack of character development in your book. Fungina Botzer, 648B Elm Street, 555-4873. So? She can be reached there by phone. So? Do you see what I mean? You have to give her some human characteristics we can all identify with. We have to be able to empathize. Does she have gout? Does she raise chickens? Make her real!

Fourth, your book has far too many characters. Don't try to be Tolstoy on your first try. Do you really need thirty-two John Smiths, for example? Concentrate on just a few characters and flesh

them out.

Fifth, where's the conflict? Now if Fungina Botzer were to attempt to blackmail Dr. Gunnar V. Dundrum of 8138 Salmon Place into performing her physician-assisted suicide, then we'd have a story! What does she have on Dr. Dundrum? Why does she want to die? What moral conundrum keeps Dr. Dundrum from killing a financially dependable patient? You see? (There's your title, by the way: *Doctor Dundrum's Conundrum*.) What you have at present is essentially a list. I would refer you to Thomas Keneally's book *Schindler's List* to see how a list can be brought to life.

Sixth, you have written *some* names larger than others and in bold print. You seem to want to give them a position of greater importance in your story. But you can't simply tell me that **BERTHA'S BAGEL BOAT** deserves a prominent place in the story. You have to *show* me! How does Bertha's Bagel Boat tie in with Fungina Botzer's blackmail scheme and Dr. Dundrum's dirty little secret? I can see possibilities, but you don't explore them.

Seventh, while I am not opposed to experimental fiction, I would like to be able to detect the barest scent of a plot, and some kind of theme. If there is a theme in your work, I can't find it—unless it's that "All God's chillun got phones."

Of course this is just one opinion. Another editor might love your book. I sincerely hope so. Best wishes in finding just the right publisher for your work.

Warm regards,

LANNY

President, Tree Top Publishing

P.S. If you wish to submit material to us in the future, please enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

A GIFT

A STORY BY NEIL HUMMASTI

Henry Sutter breathed the heat of cursing into a hollow of his fingers. With one hinge gone from his wood stove and the door wired shut, he was apprehensive about testing the jury-rigging by burning more than one chunk of wood at a time. He had heat enough within himself to combat all normal inclemencies. Possessed with an extraordinary confidence in the acuity of his best senses, Henry could hear the teeth of cockroaches chattering in the crevices. They deserved the discomfort; he did not. “What sort of world is it where a weak mind can triumph over a great heart?” Henry often played such a game of question and answer. His questioner was the greater hothead. The one with the answers demonstrated greater sophistication. A division of labor that served him well. “In a world that makes virtue of weakness, strength will always be despised,” the answer came.

Henry felt the top of his head for context. He had mislaid his woolen stocking cap and was well aware of the fact that he must have looked ridiculous with only a handkerchief covering his scanty streaks of hair. “So what? Who cares? Even if someone were to see me, who cares?” His alter ego had no answer for that one; but he knew well enough that his appearance was not the cause of his troubles; it was a result. Henry glared at the opulent, out-of-place brass bed that dominated his living space. It was a convenient symbol of both gains and losses, being that it comprised his entire share of the inheritance. The brass was naturally brilliant, but it taxed all its potential powers trying to shine in such murk? It seemed to stand for disability. Cellini gold in a mud hut. If a room can die of starvation, Henry’s room was in its death-camp stage. All bones and rot. “At least I have the satisfaction of knowing that Sally the rich has been deprived of one voluptuous bed. Not much of a victory, but—” “No victory at all!” the answer came. “Nothing more than a father’s last joke on a neglected son.” And perhaps on the daughter as well, one of them thought. A jab at her famous frigidity. “A cold woman has no use for a lustrous bed.”

Sally had offered money—the share Henry’s father had deprived him of—if he would only come a beggar to her door—if he would submit to the judgmental slings and arrows that accompany

charity. She could not forgive him for his independence, and he could not forgive her for trying to take it from him. “So there you are. I have my bed; she has her money. I have my dignity; she has her pride. Let it go at that.”

Henry had not received a guest in a long time, and he gave some thought to ignoring the knock at his door. “What’s she doing here?” he asked. “I think you know,” the answer came. The interlocutors were not in suspense as to who the guest might be. Who else could it be? His sister at his door, giving a little in exchange for everything he had. Christmas time was all the excuse she needed to try his patience. Family responsibility, she would say. “Something thicker than water—or mud or slime.” Whatever it was, it always brought her to his door during the needy seasons. “How joyfully she must come with open charity and silent condemnation.” Better to ignore the knock. He sneered with delight at the mischief of the thought. A naked light bulb suspending from a frayed cord, however, gave him away. “Well, so what? Why not let her in?” he said loudly. “A real foe is needed from time to time. Arrows do not stick in the air.”

Sally looked (and felt, he sincerely hoped) out of place. She had never liked creaking. Wealthy people cannot acclimate themselves to creaking. Sally was a slight woman of twenty-seven. A woman with unearned respectability, Henry added to himself. She had long wavy brown hair and dim eyes to match. Eyes that surely could not see much. She wore a new red cloth coat for winter. Her appearance was looked after. Social vanity, her brother surmised.

“Merry Christmas, Henry.” Sally greeted him with a stiff hug and a kiss that did not quite reach his cheek.

He bore the indignity without returning fire. He would wait for a better opening.

“Why are you wearing that ridiculous napkin on your head?”

He knew she would find it ridiculous. “It’s not ridiculous in this environment,” he avouched. “It’s entirely suitable.”

She never quite knew how to answer him when he appealed to his environment. She wasn’t even sure what he meant. “I thought you might come home for Christmas dinner.”

“Home?”

“You could make a little effort. Since all your enemies are imaginary, it shouldn’t take much.”

Ah|! There it was: the snideness he had been waiting for. “Let’s see now, I would be doing this for whose sake? For your sake? For my sake? For Father’s sake?”

“It always comes back to that, doesn’t it? Father. You act as if you were the only one Father ever hurt. We both know that he was not a man to show affection, but he did what little he could to keep us together. He shoved away instead of reaching out, but that was his way with both of us. Family only became important to him in the end, and he didn’t know how to show it then. One can’t start that late.” She sighed a sigh that she knew he would misinterpret. “OK, so you didn’t get your fair share. Nobody denies that, but I’ve offered to give you the money you felt cheated of. But no, that would hurt your pride—the pride that proves you are your father’s son. He’s not the only one who built that imposing wall. You want to hurt him, but he’s dead. Mother’s alive, and she’s innocent. Think of what all this bitterness does to her.”

“How is she?” He knew he ought at least to inquire.

“How would you expect? You never come to see her.”

“She’s welcome to come here anytime.”

“She doesn‘t feel welcome.”

“So I should come crawling back to your grand house?”

“Not to my house. To Mother. You certainly should come crawling to her—on your hands and knees—to beg forgiveness for the intolerable way you’ve treated her. All right, you want to blame me for your troubles. I’m tired of trying to convince you that your resentment is misplaced. But Mother is another matter. You ought to be ashamed. You see Father’s flaws, but you don’t see your own. Perhaps it’s because they’re the same flaws.”

“Right. I’m to blame for Father’s callousness.”

“Take the blame for your own callousness. That would be quite enough.”

“Well, I don’t expect anything from you.”

“No. Or from anyone else. And the sad thing is you’ve realized your expectations. You have fully achieved the nothing you expect to get.”

“Well, Mother has moved in with you now. She made her choice.”

“Where was she going to move? Here? She needs help.”

“She sold the house.”

“She sold the house. It was her house. Too big for her with no one there to help.”

“Too big,” Henry said absently.

“And by the way (not that you’ll ever register anything I say that contradicts your vision of the

world), I may have received most of the money Father set aside for his children, but it wasn't as great a sum as you make it out to be. Remember, my husband has a successful law practice. His money bought our house. Father's money has gone for other things. A lot of the money has gone to good causes. I know you don't acknowledge that anything I do could be good, but— I would have done right by you, too—if you'd let me." Sally left a large-ribboned package on the table and bid him as much cheer as she had left to give.

As soon as she had closed the door, and while she might yet hear, he dashed a poker against the corner post of his rich bed. The brass cracked and split at the seam. Two coins thumped to the floor and spun like sun-brightened dervishes. Henry watched the coins for a good long time after they had stopped spinning before stooping to pick them up. Two twenty-dollar gold" pieces. Astonishing. Almost unbelievable. His father must have hid them there. It was his habit to hide money around the house. When he had died, more than fifteen thousand dollars had been recovered from cupboards, drawers, vases and knickknacks—and everyone believed there was likely still more to be found.

Henry surmised that a twenty-dollar gold piece, in good condition, might bring over eight hundred dollars in the current market. He had seen his father's book. "What I could do with that," his questioner declared hungrily. Observing that roles had been shifted, the one with the answers responded with a question: "What would you do with that?" "Oh, I don't know. But the fact that this money was purloined from our sister's inheritance would make the treasure all the sweeter. At last, a joke on frigid Sally." There was justice in this coincidence—enough to support a momentary tingle.

"Hang on a minute," he thought. "This is my inheritance. Father willed the bed to me. Is the joke on Father, then? The old man's intended slight may have gone awry." But could his father have forgotten the coins? He was ill in the end, but his mind had remained relatively sharp.

The bed had always been an oddity. In particular, everyone had always remarked on how heavy the bed was. The movers had complained endlessly, and he had never been able to move it an inch from the spot where the movers had deposited it. He had once compared it to the tree-rooted bed of Odysseus—and had only wished that there had been someone there to appreciate his simile. Henry struck again with the poker. The bedpost ought to have split open after a few blows, but his father had welded the pieces together. A poker was impractical. Henry sought a hacksaw

among his tools. He did not pause to think that he would be destroying the only thing he owned that had any value. “He’s left something ¸of himself inside. Am I seeking a connection or a revenge?” he asked; but his answerer was too busy sawing to respond. “Father is here. I’ll set him free or cut him in half.” Whatever his father’s fate, the old man had brought it on himself. Henry’s cut produced a shower of coins. Dozens of twenty-dollar gold pieces. “So I am to be an heir after all.”

When all of the posts had been amputated, he stacked a total of three hundred coins. His own conservative estimate put their value (and no one takes more thought for value than the one who possesses nothing) at $200,000.00. His mattress lay on the floor, but he would not need it this night. He needed only his coins. It was midmorning before he could tear himself away from the music of the coins. The temptation to pile and jangle them half the day was overwhelming. Even his bath break was filled with jangling sounds and glittering reflections.

With his towel around him, he quickly returned to check his treasure as a mother would check on the welfare of a new baby. “Why did he make me toil for this? Why play such a childish jest?” The answerer shrugged. “He must have known there were risks involved. He made his own son hate him. And did he not realize that his precious coins might have wound up on a junk pile?” There had to be a reason. His father could not have forgotten the concealment of so many coins. One coin, two coins, maybe, but—“What? Did he intend to humiliate me? Pay me back for my lack of respect? Or was it some kind of test? Did he mean to teach me a lesson I’d never forget?” The one with the answers perked up. “Ah yes,” he nodded. “Father was not one to play games, but he was one to teach lessons.”

After taking his stomach medication, Henry walked into town with five of the coins. A professional appraisal might be the place to start a proper investigation. And he could afford such luxuries now. Appraisals, and who know what other little indulgences?

The dealer seemed surprised. The tightness of the jeweler’s loop against his eye almost suggested disbelief. He must be surprised to see the coins in the hands of a ragged man, Henry thought with delight. Well, learn from that, my friend, he instructed the dealer. Things are not always as they seem. The puzzle was becoming more delicious all the time.

“Assuming that the condition and minting of the other coins is consistent,” the dealer said with a studied caution, “a value of $275,000.00 would not be out of line.” Henry tried to hide his pleasure by gulping it quickly.

Outside, the sun felt warm. Henry removed his worn tweed coat. The coins jangled in his pockets as he walked. He modified his gait to make the most of it. The jangle seemed to help straighten his posture. He stopped suddenly to wonder: “Will the coins make any difference?” Another shrug. “What do you mean? Are you becoming a philosopher? You can recover some of the trappings at least. No harm in that.” “Recover? How can one recover what one has never had?” “You are a philosopher. Don’t you know that people respect wealth without inquiring too deeply about a man’s past—or even about what sort of stuff the man might be made of. Even our emotionless sister is going to have to be impressed by this.” A frown passed across his face. “Mother is another matter. She’s a wealthy woman who treats wealth like a lowly servant. Money won’t buy her respect.”

The sidewalk was long and hard and hurt his feet. Henry slowed his pace. It was the first time in a long time he had done anything slowly. It made him feel anxious. To distract himself from his discomforts, he tried to look into the souls of passersby. The power to do so seemed to have come to him along with the coins. One gift will often beget another. The people who passed by displayed all sorts of expressions. They all had secrets of one kind or another. And he had secrets, too. He privately challenged them to discover his secrets before he could discover theirs. The evening fell with a thud while he was making his discernments. “And what have I learned?” he asked. “They’re people. They have secrets. They’re puzzles—puzzles of their own making. No law against that.”

A gentle rain washed the air, and he savored the new aromas. From a department store alcove, a Salvation Army lass jangled a sweet, even bell. Henry paused to observe. She, too, was a puzzle. She has secrets, like the rest. You have secrets. I have secrets. Just try to figure me out, he invited. Try. He reached his hand into his pocket and pulled out the five gold coins. They were not transparent. She could not see through them. He listened to the music the coins made in her pot and gazed at her uncomplicated smile with triumph.

Around the next corner, Henry paused to consider. “Am I my father’s son?” he inquired. His look was quite insistent, as if it would be painful not to know the truth, whatever the truth might be. The answerer almost spoke something rash in reply, but he stopped himself in time. “That’s going to require a little thought,” the answer finally came. “I thought you were going to ask if you were your brother’s keeper.”

THE SILENCE OF THESE INFINITE SPACES

A STORY BY NEIL HUMMASTI

Old Walt Svenson, three days past his ninetieth birthday, sat in his armchair with a decorated box on his lap. His legs quivered as he held his knees together. On the hinged lid of the wooden box, a Venetian canal-scape was represented. Faded and flaking now, the box had once been radiantly lacquered and universally admired. He had bought it for his wife on their second honeymoon—a month in Europe, paid for by the kids, and the kids' kids.

He opened the box and took out a dull, black handgun. It was heavy and cold. Walt had never used guns, but he liked the feel of a gun in his hand. He removed the clip from the handle and laid it in his lap while he fumbled with a box of ammunition.

Above Walt's head, a grimy Black Forest cuckoo clock falsely proclaimed the hour. The clock lost more than an hour each day, but Walt's daughter, Nan, always reset the souvenir clock, hoping that the familiar sound would help to keep her father grounded. Nan had also resurrected old photographs and scattered them in every room—an enveloping collage of familiar faces—to call Walt back whenever he began to wander away.

Walt loaded the clip unsteadily and, when it was full, he jammed it into place with surprising force. He lay his head back on the headrest of his armchair and closed his eyes. It was not the effort of his task, but his turbulent thoughts which made him feel worn and weak.

Tonight, I guess. Bound to be. Walt held the gun against his face. It smelled of oil. *What else can I do anymore?*

Walt flicked the spring which released the clip. *Yeah, it's got bullets. OK. OK.*

The raccoons, which were Walt's pets, tiptoed on the deck. Walt made his way, with a slow ar-

thritic shuffle, to the sliding glass door.

"Yes sir? Starving are we?"

One raccoon stood on his hind legs and looked intently at Walt. Walt interpreted the look as one of mistrust.

"You afraid of this?" Walt asked, waving his gun. He laid the gun down on the kitchen table to reassure his animals. "No need to worry. This ain't for you. You're my friends. My only friends, I reckon."

Walt dipped a coffee can into a forty-pound sack of dog food which he kept just inside the door and measured portions into three plastic dishes on the deck. He put the coffee can back into the sack, closed the sliding doors and watched the coons for a minute through the glass.

He could still see them as he sat down on three thin pillows fastened to a kitchen chair. He pulled a letter from a wicker basket on the floor next to the table and squinted to read. *I don't suppose I've answered this one.* He took out a magnifying glass and examined the letter more closely.

Walt's daughter knocked on the door, but Walt did not hear.

"Hello Dad," his daughter Nan shouted. She put her umbrella in the corner by the front door and took off her coat.

Walt looked up from the letter, shading his eyes.

"Just checking to see if you need anything," Nan said. "It's starting to rain a little." She threw her coat down on a chair. She went directly to the kitchen and checked her father's pill box to make sure that he had taken all of his pills; then she walked to the cuckoo clock and pulled the two thin chains, lifting the brass pine cones from which the clock derived its steady but unreliable movement. When those chores were completed, she came and stood behind her father, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"I can't remember if I answered this letter." He handed the letter to Nan. "Name's familiar, but I don't know."

"Look at the date, Dad. 1973." Nan frowned. "You're always doing this. You save everything, and then you haul these ancient pieces of mail out from time to time and read the same letter, or bill, or advertisement over and over again. It doesn't seem to bother you, but it drives me nuts!"

Walt tapped his forehead. "That's my brain. Can't trust it anymore. It's good for nothing."

"If you'd do what I tell you to do and file away anything you want to save and throw away any-

thing you don't want to save, right away as soon as you get it, you wouldn't waste so much time reading and rereading, and worrying about bills from two decades ago."

"I got lots of time."

"Well, why don't you do something with all that time? Why not take that cruise to Alaska?"

"Take the coons to Alaska?"

Nan laughed. "You don't have your hearing aid on, do you?"

"Don't need it when I'm all alone."

"You're not all alone. I'm here."

"I *been* alone."

Walt took the hearing aids from his pocket, put them in his ears and fiddled with them until they whistled.

"You're whistling," Nan complained.

Walt fiddled some more until the hearing aid whistled an annoying *diminuendo*.

Nan picked up the gun from the table. "What's this?"

Walt folded his arms.

"Can I take this out of here?" Nan asked.

"You surely cannot!"

"What do you need with this? You're just going to have an accident. Shoot yourself, or me, or the mailman, or someone."

"Julio's been around here again," Walt explained. He then pursed his lips, fortifying himself against his daughter's response.

Nan tossed the loaded gun down on the kitchen counter and shouted in frustration, "Oh, this has got to stop!"

Walt scraped his upper lip with his new lowers.

"It's taken on a life of its own! I'm sixty-three years old, Dad, and I have health problems myself! I can't take this!"

"No one believes me, but I know what I know."

"You don't know anything! What proof do you have that Julio has ever taken anything from you?"

"Things are missing."

"Almost everything you told me he took, I've found," Nan argued. "You just forget where you put

things. You know that your memory is bad, but you still blame everybody else whenever you leave the garage light on or misplace something. Why would Julio go after *you* of all people?"

"I let him go."

"Because there wasn't enough for him to do. I'm sure he's been let go before. Lots of times probably. It goes with the kind of work he does."

"He didn't like it when I let him go."

"He told you that?"

"Of course not."

"Of course not," Nan repeated. "Why would Julio say anything to you when he has an opportunity to register his displeasure by turning to a life of crime? This is so ridiculous. You haven't even seen him. Everything that supposedly is missing turns up eventually. Why can't you be reasonable?"

"I've heard the door rattling again the last several nights. I know he's been around, and I know he's up to no good."

"You heard the door rattling the last time you were over at *my* place too," Nan reminded him, "when I went to the store. Remember? Someone was trying to break in. You were sure of it. Only I'd left the door unlocked, so if your intruder really wanted to break in, all he had to do was turn the handle."

"You shouldn't leave your door unlocked," Walt scolded.

"That's beside the point! The point is that, without a shred of evidence, you've talked yourself into believing that Julio is out to get you. You imagine that every noise is Julio. And whenever you can't find something, it's Julio. Julio took it. Apparently, Julio has put aside all other ambitions and has decided to dedicate his life to tormenting you full time. If Julio were going to steal something and risk going to jail, do you really think he'd steal your undershirts or your heating pad, as you've claimed? He'd take your TV set or your paintings—something with value."

"It isn't about stealing. He just wants to upset me. Or to frighten me."

"You can't imagine how aggravating this is for me," Nan complained. She sat down heavily in a captain's chair. "You have no evidence that Julio even dislikes you, and yet you're telling everybody these stories. That's not right. Julio's bound to hear about your accusations sooner or later. And how's he gonna take it? You're ruining his reputation. If a gardener gets a reputation for stealing

things—" She decided to try another tack. "Can you remember, about a year ago, when you told me that Connie had taken your work pants?"

"No. I never accused Connie."

"You did! And I had to plead with you not to say anything to her."

"What would she want with my work pants?"

"You figured she was going to give them to her husband. But several months later, I found your work pants in a towel drawer. You had simply folded them in a stack with your towels and put towels and pants together in the drawer without noticing. And since Connie was the only one who had been here that day, you came to the conclusion that she had to have taken them."

Walt's teeth protruded unnaturally as he adjusted them in his mouth.

"Connie's your friend, right? She helps you with your puzzles," Nan continued. "You know she wouldn't take anything from you. And yet, you were absolutely sure that she had taken your old pants."

"What would she want with my pants?"

"Exactly! And what would Julio want with your undershirts?"

"It isn't my undershirts he wants especially. It's my piece of mind."

"You haven't one shred of evidence!"

"I know what I know."

Nan took a deep breath. "You *knew* that Julio took your loafers. But I found them in the laundry room. You *knew* that Julio took your garage door opener. I found that in the pocket of your bathrobe. You *knew* that Julio took your spare keys. I found them in your dishwasher, where you'd hidden them to keep them from being stolen. *There's* the problem. You hide things, and then you forget that you've hidden them. When you can't find them, you blame imaginary robbers."

"The keys are gone again," Walt was reminded to report. "Julio can get in the house any time he wants."

"They'll turn up, just like they did last time! Julio has *not been in the house*!"

"He was here last night."

"You saw him?"

"No, of course not, but I know he was here?"

"*How* do you know he was here?"

“Things had been rearranged.”

Nan rubbed her forehead. She got up from her chair and looked around the kitchen and into the living room. “What things? Everything looks exactly as it did yesterday.”

“Oh, just little things.”

“Like what?”

“My *TV Guide* was on the coffee table this morning.”

“As it frequently is.” Nan sighed and closed her eyes. “I don’t know what to do. I can offer you proof that such and such never happened, and still you only believe what you want to believe. If I had the energy, I could search your house right now and find your spare keys. But it wouldn’t do any good. You’d still believe that Julio is trying to drive you crazy with his invisible comings and goings. You know, the CIA could use a man like Julio.”

“I shouldn’t have even mentioned it,” Walt snapped. “Just forget it!”

“I would be glad to do that, if you could forget it.”

“Just drop it!”

Nan felt worn out. Every day, when she came to visit her father, she reminded herself to be patient. *Don’t let him upset you*. And every day, he found a new way to get to her. Now he had beaten her again. “It’s not fair, you know,” she said. “It affects us all.” Nan looked for the little blue pad where Walt scratched out the groceries he wanted in a handwriting only a careful daughter could decipher. Bananas. Milk. Oatmeal. “I’ll bring these things for you tomorrow,” Nan told him. She smiled at him, hoping to part on a note of reconciliation.

Walt said nothing to her as she left. He got up from his chair to go sit in the living room. But first he had to make sure that she had locked the door. While he was at it, he checked all of the doors in the house. He went into the laundry room and fastened the chain which locked the door to the garage.

Reentering the living room, he bumped into one of those pictures of his wife that his daughter wanted him to be confronted with at every turn.

I remember her face, but I don’t remember what she was like. I guess we must have been together for quite a while, but it’s all gone now. I seem to remember that I didn’t like her parents. I wonder why.

He turned on the TV and watched the sitcoms for a couple of hours. He didn’t like them. He

didn't find them amusing, but the social interplay on the screen was a comfortable distraction. After a certain amount of time, the voices had become familiar.

As the sun began to flatten near the horizon, Walt made his nightly rounds, lowering all of the blinds in the house and closing all of the curtains. He never forgot. He never saw the sunset anymore, as it glowed through the mist in his redwood grove. He would have liked to have watched a sunset again, but darkness was tough for him, and he wanted to blot out the sun while there was still light to blot out. He liked the idea of shutting out the sun before the sun could slip away on its own. In any case, it was just safer when all the blinds were down. He checked all the doors, to make sure they were locked.

The fragile door of the cuckoo clock clicked open. Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo. Click.

The blinds were down, and the darkness was, for all practical purposes, shut out; but in spite of all precautions, somehow, the darkness got in. As the air chilled, the old house seemed to breathe, and with each breath, it sucked in darkness. Darkness floated down the chimney and seeped through the cracks in the walls. Walt had come to dread the night, with its come-as-you-please darkness.

Walt's heart began to beat faster as he sat in his armchair with his heating pad wedged unevenly behind his back. He held his hand against his chest to try to coerce a softer rhythm.

The den. That might work. Walt struggled to his feet and moved stiffly to his den. He closed the door behind him and turned around, in a dragging circle, studying the possibilities. *He wouldn't think I'd be in here. And he couldn't break in here so easy. There's no door to the outside.* Walt maneuvered a chair in front of the door and propped it under the doorknob as a test. *There's no lock, but that might hold him—at least long enough to alert me. I reckon I'd better sleep in here tonight.*

The couch folded into a bed, but Walt did not have the strength to make a proper bed of it. He just put a blanket and a pillow down and tested the couch for softness. *Lumpy, but I don't suppose I'll be getting much sleep anyhow.*

Satisfied that his fortress offered passable security, Walt returned to the well-lit living room, with its six lamps burning up the darkness. He didn't want to go to bed until he could no longer stay awake. The fear was like a fog in the room. It was wall to wall. If he went to bed now, he would wake up in a couple of hours, and it would still be dark. And the fog would be right there to greet him. *A*

damned shame. A grown man afraid of the dark. But it was not just the dark. There was more to it. More than he cared to think about at this time of night.

Tick, tick.

Walt picked up one of the scrapbooks his daughter had laid open on the coffee table. Four photos to a page on a stark black background. *I don't even know who these people are. He turned a page. Some of 'em look familiar, but I just can't place 'em.* He turned a page. *Here's a girl with her arm around me, and I don't have a clue. What's the point of living like this? I'm just good for nothing.*

Tick, tick. Tick, tick.

Walt made an effort to listen for a moment. Then he turned the page.

I think I remember some of these girls. My sister's old friends. They used to have a club that met in our basement. No boys allowed. Walt laughed at the thought. *What was this one's name? Finnish girl. Used to be at our house all the time. I guess I even liked her a little.*

Damn it, Julio! Damn it! Walt was sure he heard the rattling of the door now. He sat up stiffly. He listened more desperately, trying to hear above the soft humming which was always in his ears.

One moment the house seemed completely still—except for its breathing. The next moment the rattling commenced again—louder and clearer.

What'd'ya want then? Damn it! What's it gonna take?

Tick, tick. Tick, tick. Tick, tick.

Breathlessly, Walt reached for the box with the Venetian canal-scape cracking on its lid. He felt a slight pain in his chest and paused for a moment to regain dominion over himself. Then he flung open the box and reached in. He felt a sudden rush of terror in the darkness.

"Oh dear God, no!" he shouted. "He's got my gun! He's got my gun! He's got my gun!"

BIOGRAPHY OF NEIL HUMMASTI

A Renaissance man is one who embraces all knowledge and develops his own capacities as fully as possible. My brother, Neil (Nip) Waldemar Hummasti, was a Renaissance man. He was a scholar, a teacher, an athlete, a devotee of the arts, a theologian and a writer. In a previous life, he may well have been fixture at the Algonquin Round Table. Alas, he lost his battle with pancreatic cancer before his aspirations as a writer were fully realized. He left behind three novels, numerous short stories and essays, and some full-length, nonfiction pieces. Several of his short stories were published in magazines and literary reviews and he came very close to having one of the novels published by a major publishing house. Some of his later works were never sent out for consideration due to his illness and then death.

My hope is to complete, in some measure, what he was unable to: to share his literary gifts with a wider audience. I believe his talent is worthy of broader exposure and hope you will take a chance and leaf through his writing. If you do, and like it as much as I do, please spread the word.

Neil was born in Astoria, Oregon in 1949 and grew up on a family farm in Svensen, near Astoria. He went to a small, country school, where he was a good student and a star, left-handed pitcher on the high school baseball team. At his high school graduation, he was awarded the prestigious “Gentleman, Scholar, Athlete” trophy; he was all three. He enjoyed many outdoor activities but baseball was his great love. He rarely missed an opportunity to get up a game at the field near his home. As a tyke he started in Midget League and continued on to Little League, Babe Ruth League (chosen for the All Star Team, which won the regional championship), American Legion baseball, right through college (where he was a starting pitcher) and on into semi-pro ball.

He won a baseball scholarship to Linfield College but decided instead to major in history at Portland State University. It was there that he developed an interest in literature and writing. A professor nominated him for a university-wide competition to find the most talented writer at Portland State. The professor of his Advanced Fiction Writing class was Tom Burnam, author of *The Dictionary of Misinformation*. Mr. Burnam felt strongly enough about Neil’s writing that he offered

him a referral to his own New York agent whenever Neil completed a full-length work of fiction. He signed Neil's copy of *The Dictionary of Misinformation*, "To Neil, with the best wishes (to one of his favorite students) of the old professor, and author, Tom Burnam." Neil graduated with honors from PSU with degrees in both history and English. He also participated in overseas programs at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at Oxford University in Oxford, England.

Although his college advisor tried to persuade him to go into college teaching, he became a high school language arts teacher working primarily with 11th and 12th grade students in college prep classes. He taught English, literature, creative writing, Shakespeare, film, and drama (and, of course, coached baseball). He was highly respected by students and colleagues. Upon his death I found letters from a number of his former students thanking him for his dedication to them and expressing how significantly and positively he had impacted their lives. He taught for 25 years in Oregon public schools and received a number of honors and awards, including a "Teacher of the Year" award and an entry in *Who's Who Among America's Teachers.*

Neil was well read in the classics. He particularly loved Shakespeare, Dante, the 19th century Russian authors (Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, etc.), Flannery O'Connor, William Butler Yeats, Emily Dickinson and T. S. Eliot. He also was a student of theology and wrote several scholarly works on the subject, as well a novel involving Christians in the time of Nero. And he enjoyed vintage films, from Casablanca to the Marx Brothers.

His grandparents, on both sides of the family, immigrated from Finland. Neil valued his Finnish heritage and he was a life-long member of the Finnish Brotherhood Lodge in Astoria. He visited Finland (and what was then the Soviet Union) in the 80's with his aunt (upon whom he based a leading character in his novel, *Forty Ways To Square a Circle*). He loved traveling. He traveled throughout Europe and made visits to Turkey, the Middle East, and Egypt. He especially loved revisiting Italy and Britain. His comic novel, *I See London, I See France*, is a testament to that passion.

Health issues forced him to early retirement from teaching. It also fell upon him at that time to be the primary caretaker of his elderly aunt who was enduring the brutal metamorphosis of Alzheimer's. Although he had done some writing prior to retiring, it was then that he discovered his true calling, a calling he first faintly heard back in his college days with Professor Burnam.

Cancer silenced his literary voice before it had reached full volume in October of 2011. He's

buried in Svensen Pioneer Cemetery, a small, quaint country graveyard near his childhood home. Engraved on his tombstone is a quotation he chose from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

> "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will."

Arnie Hummasti
Publisher, Svenson Pioneer Press