



Literary Sampler

**a potpourri of
stories and first chapters**

**Mayra Calvani
Aaron Paul Lazar
Anne K. Edwards**

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This is a work of fiction. All concepts, characters and events portrayed in this book are used fictitiously and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

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Cover art photo credit ~ Aaron Paul Lazar

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Containing works by



Mayra Calvani

Award-winning multi-genre author Mayra Calvani writes fiction and nonfiction for children and adults. She reviews for SimlySharly.com, the NY Journal of Books and Blogcritics Magazine. She's had over 300 articles, reviews, interviews and stories published online. Visit her website at <http://www.MayraCalvani.com>. For her children's books, visit <http://www.mayrassecretbookcase.com>.



Aaron Paul Lazar

Aaron Paul Lazar writes to soothe his soul. The author of LeGarde Mysteries and Moore Mysteries enjoys the Genesee Valley countryside in upstate New York, where his characters embrace life, play with their dogs and grandkids, grow sumptuous gardens, and chase bad guys. Visit his websites at www.legardemysteries.com and www.mooremysteries.com.



Anne K. Edwards

Anne K. Edwards writes in a variety of genres as she prefers to follow the idea of the moment to its often surprising end. She has written mystery novels, suspense, dark futuristic, children's books, and is coauthor with Mayra Calvani on the award-winning book *The Slippery Art of Book Reviewing*. She is a reviewer for her website <http://www.Mysteryfiction.net> which promotes her own works and those of several other talented authors. *Voice in the Dark*, the ezine she co-edits with Mayra Calvani, is also posted on this site.

Part I

Mayra Calvani



Embraced by the Shadows

Excerpt

(Paranormal/Vampire)

The power of her new vision stunned her. It was as if all along she had been looking at the world through a veil of mist, and all of a sudden the veil had been removed and everything sprang into crystalline focus.

They drove back to the city and walked the streets around the docks. Alana could sort out a hundred separate scents upon the air and hear conversations that were taking place in bars far away from her and see flashes of a person's past as she glimpsed his or her face in the street. It was too much to take, too confusing and overwhelming, but Sadash told her she would soon learn to handle it. Her mind would gradually learn to take in what it wanted and discard what it didn't. Right now all these images, all these flashes of information were gushing into her brain without restraint, without any meaning whatsoever.

And the hunger...

Nothing like she could have ever imagined. Thirst and hunger as if she had been walking in the desert for a month, sensual hunger as if she had been lusting after someone for ages...Blinding thirst and food hunger and sensual hunger, all in one. Only more, much more... The bloodlust.

The musky, metallic reek of blood was everywhere.

In a dark and desolated street Sadash chose Alana's first meal, a sinister-looking individual with drug-dealing and murder in his past. As the man was hastening down the

street, Sadash grabbed him by the collar and flung him against the wall, commanding him to surrender with the intense glimmer of his yellow eyes. The man's eyes became glazed, his body limp as Sadash turned his head to the side to expose the pulsing artery.

"Take him," he told Alana, who had watched the whole thing with horror in her eyes.

Nervously moistening her lips, she fixed her eyes on the man's neck, on that little swelling spot.

"I don't...Do I have to kill him?" she mumbled, the tips of her fangs scraping the softness of her lower lip.

"He deserves it, but you can take him half, if you want. That is, if you have the will to stop yourself before his heart does."

Sadash had been right. This was an act of love. Hardly aware of her sudden feral arousal, of the sudden lengthening of her canines, she wrapped her arms around the man's neck and, breathing in all of his human stinking sweat, took him by the artery, her teeth crushing through flesh and muscle. A gush of blood spurted into her mouth and for a second it seemed too much blood to take, too forceful the flow to keep up with it, to be even able to breathe. But oh, the taste of it!...To kill in love. Yes, yes, yes, to kill in love! Nothing compare to this, nothing could ever compare to this love.. consume him, yes, yes, drink until the heart stops, till it's drained... A haunting melody, a holy song, a mouthful for each continuous beat of his heart, like steady Indian drums in the center of a dark forest, thudding heavily in her ears. But don't go, please no, don't go, I love you....I love you so much!

The man was dead.

Horrified by what she had done, she tossed the dead body onto the ground and stepped back from it as if she had been burned.

When she looked at Sadash, he was laughing.

"You're...you're a monster!" she breathed, her mind blazing like the sun from the feast.

"Maybe. But I'm a realistic monster. I don't pretend to be what I'm not, and if you want to survive as long as I have, you'll do the same," he said, taking her by the arm and hastening down the dark street.

"I killed him....Dear God, I killed him..." she whispered to herself, unconsciously licking any trace of blood from her lips. "I didn't have to kill him, but I killed him, I killed him!"

A few minutes later, in the Porsche, Sadash waited to start the car until Alana became calmer.

She was still shaking and muttering things to herself. The only thing in her mind was that dead body, its smell and its inertia and its heaviness, the brutal way in which she had feasted on it and then tossed it onto the ground like a disposable piece of garbage. She began sobbing.



Embraced by the Shadows is available in [eBook](#) format from:

<http://www.twilighttimesbooks.com>

<http://www.fictionwise.com>

Alana is surprised when she is chosen to manage a new restaurant. She has neither the training nor the experience to justify her success. But La Cueva del Vampiro has the kind of ambience she adores, for Alana has always had a penchant for the dark side of life.

What They're Saying:

“On the surface, [Embraced by the Shadows] appears like many recent vampire romance novels. However, Alana lifts the novel high above the current level of similar books because readers feel the protagonist's inner torment between a love that borders on obsession and a past that she obsesses over. Sadash is somewhat more typical of the sub-genre though his human like conscience brought about by his love for Alana will surprise readers yet feels true to his character. Even with the threat to their existence as a couple taking a back seat to the love story, sub-genre fans will fully hunger for more dark supernatural romances from Mayra Calvani.” – Harriet Klausner for Blether Book Review.

Deja Vu

by Mayra Calvani

Amanda stood on the sidewalk overlooking the sea. The splash of the waves against the rocks below resonated in the air. She could taste the salty tang sharply on her tongue, feel the cool breeze tousling her hair. She hugged her arms to stop the goose bumps.

Tonight, Old San Juan vibrated with a magical quality. Twinkling multi-colored lights and shimmering garlands adorned shop windows and balconies. Christmas trees glowed from inside the flats that lined the street.

Amanda admired the sea a little longer. It was late and she had to go home. She and her husband were giving a party. They always did on Christmas Eve. She was stalling and she knew it, though she didn't know exactly why.

Abruptly someone bumped into her. She turned to see a little boy running down the street. She froze for a second before realizing what had happened—he had stolen her handbag.

“Hey!” she called, running after him. “Come back here!”

A sense of unreality grabbed her. She saw the little boy running in slow motion, his dark curls floating behind him as if there were no gravity. An intense feeling of déjà vu shook her to the core. She had to catch up with him. She had to stop him!

“Stop!” she shouted, breathless.

Everything happened in a matter of seconds. The boy glanced behind his shoulder just as he tried to cross the street. A fast approaching car was coming in his direction. Amanda reached for the boy's shirt and pulled him hastily to the sidewalk and away from the street. The boy struggled against her, but she held on, a wave of relief flooding through her.

“Stop that. The policeman will see us,” Amanda said, her eyes on the strolling officer across the street. Oddly, he looked bored, as if he had not noticed anything unusual.

The boy relaxed under her grip and, for the first time, she had a chance to look into his face. He had shoulder-length curly hair and large brown eyes surrounded by thick lashes.

Under the streetlight his chestnut curls glowed. He couldn't have been older than eight. In spite of his arrogant attitude, he reminded her of a cherub.

“What do you think you were doing? Trying to get yourself killed? That car almost ran into you!” she said.

“Are you going to have me arrested?” he asked, lifting his chin.

Amanda glanced at the officer, who was now far away. She sighed. “Are you going to give me back my bag?”

Looking strangely calm, he gave her the bag.

“Thank you,” Amanda said drily.

“Can you let me go now?”

Amanda realized she was still holding onto him. Confusion and fear filled her being. She didn't want to let go.

“I'm not going away,” the boy said enigmatically.

Their eyes locked momentarily.

“Oh... all right...” She let go. “What's your name?”

“Felipito.”

“Why did you try to steal my bag?”

His small, thin shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Why do poor kids steal rich people's bags?”

She decided to ignore his wisecrack. “You should go home. It's late. Your parents must be worried.”

“Nah, they never worry.”

They began to walk side by side.

“Let me bring you home.”

“I don’t want to go home. There’s always too much fighting in there.”

“It’s Christmas Eve. I bet your mom is preparing a nice meal.”

“I don’t want to go home,” he said coldly, stopping her in her tracks.

Amanda looked at him. She was not ready to say goodbye. “Well, do you want to come to my house? We can have something to eat together.”

“Do you live in a mansion?”

“You could say that.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I have a dog,” Amanda said.

His expression brightened. “What’s his name?”

“Noah. Well?”

Felipito seemed thoughtful as he stuffed his hands inside his pockets and resumed walking. “I’d like to meet Noah.”

At Amanda’s home the party was in full swing. Guests in sophisticated attire were gathered around the pool with drinks and cigarettes in their hands. Some couples danced. Others ate by a long buffet table. Holiday music poured out of hidden speakers.

Amanda led Felipito to the back of the garden and towards the back door of the kitchen.

“Do you know all these people?” he asked.

“Yes and no.” She halted momentarily to look at the guests. “My husband is an important man. These are mostly his co-workers.” Her voice had turned sad, bitter. “I’ve always been sort of a hermit.”

“What’s that?”

“I like being alone.”

“Oh.”

“My husband is a very important man.”

“So you said.”

They looked toward the kitchen as a large blond dog stormed out the door and dashed into their direction.

“Noah!” Amanda said, smiling for the first time that night. “Come here, boy! Let me introduce you to someone.”

She bent over to stroke him and scratch him behind the ears. Felipito laughed as he joined in the petting. Noah whimpered as if he couldn’t have enough of Amanda’s affection.

“Let’s go inside,” Amanda said.

She led Felipito to a table at the far end of the kitchen, while the servants continued their duties on the other side of the room. After bringing an assortment of food and pastries to the table, Amanda sat across from Felipito. Noah lay at her feet, his tail still wagging from contentment.

“Go ahead, eat,” she said.

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

“I’ll just have a drink,” she said, lifting a glass of wine as if to make a toast.

Felipito studied the servants in the kitchen, then turned to Amanda. A dark cloud crossed his features; he appeared infinitely older than his years.

“Do you have any kids?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I’ve always wanted kids, but I can’t have them.”

“Oh...”

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After Felipito finished eating, Amanda said, "I probably should bring you back now. It's late. Your mom must be worried."

Amanda leaned over to stroke Noah, who had started whimpering again as if sensing her parting.

Amanda and Felipito stood by the door of the small house which was his home. Felipito looked somber.

Amanda was about to knock when he stopped her and said, "Don't. Let's just go in."

Inside the small living room there was no Christmas tree; no lights or garlands or poinsettias.

A woman sat alone in the dark, her back to them. She had something in her hands.

Felipito took Amanda's hand and together they approached the woman until they stood behind her.

Felipito sighed. "Don't cry, Mami," he whispered.

"What is that in her hands?" Amanda asked.

Then she saw it. It was a photo of Felipito.

Amanda turned to him, the floor shifting under her, the room swirling around her. She opened her mouth, but no words came out.

"I died one year ago," he said calmly.

Amanda took a step back. "No..."

She moved away from the crying woman and away from Felipito. His big eyes shimmered with emotion as he extended a hand towards Amanda.

"Come. I'll show you," he said.

"You can't be dead. You're here, with me, talking to me. You just played with my dog,

ate at my kitchen. You can't be..."

"Come."

In the late hour the Old San Juan cemetery was cold and windy and Amanda could hear the waves crashing against the rocks below.

"Where are you taking me?" she said.

Now it was his turn to hold on to her. "You have to know, Amanda. You have to let go."

She shook her head, tears flowing down her cheeks. "You're going to show me your grave, is that it?"

His small hand pressed tighter around hers, his nails digging into her.

"There," he said, pushing her in front of a tombstone.

She read the name engraved on the stone and covered her face with her hands, while all her life, all the memories rushed through her mind until that last very moment. "No! No! No!"

"Why is it that no one can see or hear us—no one except Noah? How do you think we moved from here to your house without a car?"

"No!"

"You have to let go," he said.

"No!" She fell to the ground, wallowing in the knowledge, guilt and pain.

"You'll be here forever without freedom or peace until you forgive yourself. Look at me, Amanda."

Her sobs weakened as she looked up at him.

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“It was not your fault that I tried to steal your handbag. You had to run after me. It was not your fault that I got run over by that car. You’ve punished yourself enough, drowning in alcohol and pills. Why did you take so many pills that night?”

“It was an accident...”

“I know.”

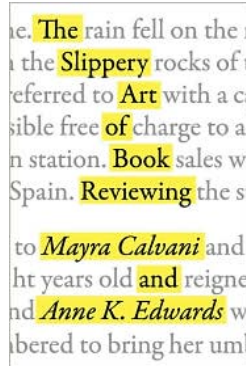
“I never meant to kill myself!”

“I know.” Then he said, “I forgive you, Amanda. This is why I’ve come here. Tonight.”

They were quiet for a long time. Amanda stood up and looked around her. Would she smell the sea again? Play with Noah? She felt scared and lost. “What now? Where do I go?”

Felipito took her by the hand. “Let me show you the way.”

The End



The Slippery Art of Book Reviewing

**by Mayra Calvani
and Anne K. Edwards**

Excerpt

Are you passionate about books? Do you have the desire to share your thoughts about a book with readers, yet are unsure about what makes a good review? Are you curious about the influence reviews have on readers, booksellers, and librarians?

If you're an experienced reviewer, *The Slippery Art of Book Reviewing* will serve as an excellent reference tool and amalgam of resources. If you're a beginner, this book will show you how to write a well written, honest, objective and professional book review. It will also teach you:

How to read critically.

How to differentiate the various types of reviews.

How to rate books.

How to prevent amateurish mistakes.

How to deal with the ethics and legalities of reviewing.

How to tell the difference between a review, a book report, and a critique.

How to start your own review site.

How to publish your reviews on dozens of sites and even make money while you're at it, and much more.

If you're an author, publisher, publicist, bookseller, librarian, or reader, this book will also bring to light the importance and influence of book reviews within a wider spectrum.

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The Slippery Art of Book Reviewing is available at any online bookstore and bookstores like B&N or the publisher <http://www.twilighttimesbooks.com>

ISBN: 1-933353-22-8. 184 pages. Available now!

“As a writer this book gave me insight in my own writing, and as a reviewer I learned a lot about the business of reading. Calvani and Edwards have provided the world of publishing with something that was sorely missed, a well written, easy to understand and follow, book of instruction and information on and about the fine art of reviewing.” –
Wanda Keesey



Sunstruck

by **Mayra Calvani**

(parody/satire)

Excerpt

Tony isn't exactly ignorant. He studied at the Fine Arts School for four years, majored in painting, earned a bachelor's degree. He isn't exactly a Cro-Magnon, right? It's just that sometimes the whole world gets on his nerves. You know, like when other artists, artists who are famous, try to tell him that there's something wrong with his paintings. Who the hell are they to tell him what's right and wrong? The way Tony sees it, there isn't an absolute right and wrong. It's all in the mind.

Like when he was at school. His teachers, most of them known artists themselves, were always trying to tell him what to do and how to do it, which styles to follow, which artists to imitate. Every time Tony showed signs of originality they would give him that look that says, "If you want nice grades at the end of the course, you better do what I like, you little bastard."

By the time Tony got his diploma, he felt like erasing the whole damn school from existence. The school itself was a cold, little battlefield created by the professors and their conflicting ideas and beliefs about art—Realism, Impressionism, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, and the rest.

There's one thing Tony sadistically enjoys—these professors may be known and their works may be acclaimed in the newspapers, but they're still starving artists just like him. Tony doesn't care about labels. He stands in front of the canvas and dabs colors on the palette and lets his right hand do the rest. Tonight they'll call his paintings surrealist paintings, but for Tony they're just the product of his unconscious mind, his hidden fears and desires, his naked true self. Human beings like to vulgarize whatever they think or

feel, that's why they're always putting labels on everything.

Tony isn't really worried about the art show. He knows what to expect. He knows that the gallery will be jammed with enemies who want him to overdose and with artist friends who are secretly dying to see him fail. Well, he can understand their spite. How can you not be envious of someone who's clearly a born genius?

As Tony thinks all this, he's shaving and humming in the bathroom. After he finishes shaving, he splashes cologne onto his face and studies his features in the mirror. How good it feels, to be him. Not only a born genius, but also a born Adonis. What can he say? Can he help it if he was touched magically at birth by God's own finger? Can he help it if he's one of God's favorite wolf cubs here on earth?

Tony steps out of the bathroom and starts getting dressed. Even though he can hear the honking of cars and the muffled voices of people out on the street, the room feels unusually quiet without Daniella—not that Daniella talks much when she's in the apartment. Daniella's mother is afraid of driving in Old San Juan at night, so Daniella went to pick her up and they'll meet him later at the gallery.

Tony puts on seedy jeans, slips his naked feet into battered leather loafers. Suddenly he stops moving. He sniffs. There's a funny smell hovering in the air. He sniffs and looks around the room. Commando is sitting in a corner like the Sphinx of Giza, watching a cockroach defy gravity as it crawls up the wall. The cologne is evaporating from Tony's face and the funny smell is quickly turning into a familiar stench. What the hell?

Tony kneels on the floor and looks under the bed. The litter box is there, as it usually is, but the stench isn't coming from the litter box. He gets up and as he gets up he casts his eyes on one of the chairs by the bed. His T-shirt, the T-shirt he had planned on wearing tonight, is crookedly folded on top of the chair.

Tony feels his heart racing. That's a brand-new METALLICA T-shirt. If it is what he suspects it is....

He bends over and realizes that the shirt is wet and sniffs and makes a face and holds his breath and starts planning Commando's execution. Cat piss! Cat piss on his brand-new METALLICA T-shirt!

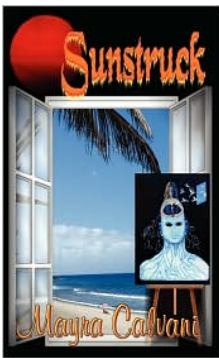
Tony spins around like a Tyrannosaurus rex ravenous for blood, but Commando is nowhere to be found. No doubt the demonic cat anticipated Tony's fury and scurried out the window.

Tony goes berserk, shouting, cursing, banging his fists against the wall, his blood boiling, his temples pulsating. Commando has always done his bodily necessities in the litter box.

But tonight, the night of Tony's first show, he has pissed on Tony's shirt. Tony decides there has to be a mystic connection here. Somehow the two events must be related, but he doesn't know exactly how.

Finally he takes a deep breath and injects himself with a little heroine.

When Tony leaves the apartment, without a shirt on, and walks through the narrow cobbled streets toward Fifi's Gallery, and inhales the warm night air coming from the nearby sea, he's overwhelmed with an intense feeling of bliss. Loudly he begins to hum Beethoven's 9th Symphony. He looks at the people around him, mediocre people with mediocre jobs, and he feels himself bigger than life itself.



Twenty-four-year-old Daniella is an architecture student living with her narcissistic artist boyfriend in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Abandoned by her father at an early age, Daniella always falls for the wrong type of man. Her most enduring male relationship so far is with her 30-pound Turkish angora cat. Thankfully, Daniella's mother is always there to offer a shoulder.

Several strange mysteries are threaded through Daniella's everyday life: her ex-husband, Ismael, has just opened an outlandish hotel for animal lovers that has her distraught; Ismael's wife, a rich woman Daniella fondly refers to as "Lady Dracula," has some gruesome ways to keep her skin looking young; Daniella's mother is founding a revolutionary, feminist society called The Praying Mantises; the island's national forest is being depleted of hallucinogenic mushrooms; meanwhile, young girls are disappearing and there's a nut loose dressed as Zorro slashing the rear ends of women who wear miniskirts.

Oppressed by all these crazed, eccentric characters, Daniella feels herself falling into an abyss. Then something horrendous happens, making Daniella wake from her stupor and take charge of her life.

"Calvani skillfully combines twists and turns along with satire to create a book that will stand out in its genre." – Reader's Favorite

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Sunstruck is available from Zumaya Publications, Amazon, [B&N](#), Fictionwise, Mayra Calvani's websites:

<http://www.mayracalvani.com>

<http://www.mayrassecretbookcase.com>

<http://www.examiner.com/x-6309-Latino-Books-Examiner>

The Painting

by Mayra Calvani

I was sitting in front of the fire with *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* on my lap. It had been a rough semester, without let up, and my only escape from the constant pressure was my crime and mystery collection. All day I'd looked forward to reading "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" again. I had purchased at the famous 221b Baker Street—now the official Sherlock Holmes Museum.

This particular book was a limited, leather-bound edition which I purchased at the Museum on a short visit to London a couple of weeks ago. The illustrations were the original ones from *The Strand Magazine*, and were so engaging I could look at them for hours. I had also bought a little bust of Holmes that now stood proudly on top of the mantelpiece.

It rained heavily outside and the wind blew like the endless howling of a wolf. I still had not gotten used to the Belgian weather. I sneezed three times in a row and cursed whoever was up there in that idealized cave they call heaven. This cold was not getting any better. I could picture the savage battle going on inside my body. I was obviously far behind on the battlefield; my little cells running away like cowards. I had to eat better and stop drinking so much. At least I didn't smoke or drink coffee.

I focused my watery eyes on the page and another sneeze came out like an explosion. Then the sweetest sensation made me float in the air and settle down again. I thought I had reached salvation.

I put the book down and stared at a small cockroach crawling up the wall. I wished I could defy gravity like that. The intruder disappeared behind a bad painting of a clown. I hated clowns, but the painting came with the apartment. The first day I moved in I tried to take it off, but the damn thing was completely glued to the wall. It was a clown like any other clown. That's why I despised it so much. It had a broad smile on its face and sad looking eyes. But if you looked closely you could see that it wasn't really smiling and that its tightly shut lips were the embodiment of solemnity. I glared at it. If the clown thought it was going to have some power over me, it had another thought coming.

From the apartment above mine came the irritating sound of high heels clicking on tile floor. Oh no. Not now. This cold was unbearable enough as it was. I certainly didn't need the help of my noisy upstairs neighbour to turn my headache from bad to splitting. Everything the woman did was noisy. She constantly fought and argued with her husband, her hobby seemed to be moving furniture from room to room, which by themselves were pretty normal activities, but she had a strong preference to do these after midnight. Flushing the toilet at three o'clock in the morning seemed to be another of her

favourite pastimes. Maybe in another building this would not have been a problem, but here the walls were made of paper. I could hear everything-even her piss in the middle of the night. What a way to wake up, with a sensation of drowning.

The clicking continued for about ten minutes. I finally put the book down. What on earth was she doing? Walking up and down her corridor for the sole purpose of driving me mad? Maybe she was trying to hypnotize me with the monotonous clicking. In an absurd way it seemed to be working. I could hardly keep my eyes open.

Silence.

I sighed. I was so tired and drowsy from the medication I fell asleep with the book on my lap.

The sound of loud voices woke me.

I glanced at my watch, trying to fight disorientation. It was almost midnight. I had slept for sixteen minutes. My body felt as though it had been clobbered while I slept.

A major fight was going on upstairs. I recognized the baritone voice of the husband. Some time during the past sixteen minutes he had come back home. He kept shouting and she lashing back in a whining voice. To make matters worse, they were Italian and were using their native tongue to “communicate.” She began sobbing, which seemed to send the husband into an even greater fury.

To appease my murderous thoughts, I rose and staggered into the kitchen to pour myself a glass of orange juice. After finishing a glass, I calmly fetched the mop from the small kitchen closet. Then, like a madman-hair messy and oily, the shadow of a one-week old beard covering my face, wrinkled bathrobe stained with juice-I began to hit the ceiling in a frenzy.

Finally I stopped.

I looked up to the ceiling, which was marred with dents.

Silence.

Feeling much better, I set the mop against the wall and went back to sit by the fire, the only place at the moment which seemed warm enough for my feet. I turned the armchair a little to be closer to the burning logs, which kept crackling and sputtering.

I, a sensible, practical person, tried to consider the situation logically. Ever since I had

moved in, three months ago, I'd had to endure the continuous noise from my upstairs neighbours. I had complained to the building manager twice, to no avail. I had even walked upstairs and talked to the lady—a suntanned woman with coppery hair, buttery teeth and insane-looking green eyes. Her eyes reminded me of a one of those marsupial night creatures which live in constant terror of being eaten. Maybe her look had to do with her husband. In any case, we had been unable to communicate. She spoke no English. She did ask, using sign language, if I spoke French or Dutch. I shook my head and came back downstairs. Since that day all I'd been able to do was hit the ceiling when it got too unbearable. I didn't want to move out, either. The rent was okay for a sophomore philosophy student from abroad and I had fallen in love with the fireplace, which was the perfect place to read mysteries.

I got the terrible sensation of wanting to sneeze, but nothing came out. I dozed off for a little while longer, but not before scowling at the painting of the clown, which appeared to be mocking me. I turned back to the fire. From the corner of my eye I caught movement. I glanced back at the painting, but everything look normal.

At about two in the morning I managed to pull myself from the armchair and stagger to my bedroom.

Not bothering to pull the covers over me, I collapsed face-down on the hard European (must have been imported from Russia) mattress and shut my eyes.

Not much later something made me stir... the faint yet distinct sound of moaning. Their bedroom was above mine. I endured the whole thing, complete with the crescendos and grand symphonic finale. Moments later the not-to-distant sound of piss came from the toilet upstairs. Flushing.

The piping system had been built in a way as to give the impression of a tsunami each time the toilet was flushed.

Too weak to open my eyes, I cursed inaudibly, my head still plastered to the sweaty pillow.

The next day I was no better. I realized I had the flu. I had missed the last two days of school and it looked as though I'd have to miss the rest of the week. After a skimpy breakfast of toast and juice, and two tablespoons of cold medicine, I went to the living room to prepare a new fire.

As I crouched and began to arrange the logs, I heard a whisper.

I stopped moving, startled.

The sound had come from my apartment, not from upstairs. In fact, the whisper had come from the same room. I glanced about the room, my eyes finally settling on the clown.

I loathed the painting. In some bizarre way it seemed to reach deep into my soul, somehow absorbing the essence of who I was and reflecting it back at me. I averted my eyes.

When the fire was ready I sat in the armchair and extended my cold feet close to the flames. I reached for the leather-bound book on the little table beside me and opened the page at the bookmark.

After reading a few lines I put the book down. It was very quiet and I wondered what my upstairs neighbour was up to. Her silence somehow made me restless. Maybe she had gone out. I tried to concentrate on "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," but found the effort exhausting.

Since the cold medicine wasn't having any effect on my symptoms, at noon I took a double dose. Holmes used to take cocaine and even heroine; that was much worse. Then I took a glass of water with me into the living room and stood in front of the painting. I took a sip and held the glass in front of my eyes and saw the image of the clown through it. The image was nothing but a mass of hazy colors forming something indefinite. Then I heard it, the exquisite clicking of stiletto heels on tiles. I sighed. I wanted this to happen. My whole being longed for it. My attitude could be compared to victims of kidnappers who in some deranged way grow attached to their tormentors.

Almost involuntarily, my eyes returned to the clown. I thought it had called my name. It was smiling as usual and looking at me. No matter where I was in the room, it would always be looking at me. A sharp pain in my temples blinded me for a moment. I felt dizzy and had to hold the back of the armchair for support. Yes. I was right. It had called my name and now it was talking to me. Its mouth was moving and it had no teeth. Inside its red mouth there was only a black empty space. I wondered how it could talk and still smile like that.

Slowly I went out of the apartment and crossed the empty, windowless hall towards the stairs which led to other floors. Once in the upstairs hall I was happy to see that it also was empty. My heart thudding, I knocked on my neighbour's door and waited.

A moment later the door opened and I gazed with fixed fascination at the color of her hair-only a consummate professional could achieve such an unnatural hue.

She appeared to recognize me, displayed her buttery teeth, and began talking in another language-probably Italian, though it might as well have been ancient Sumerian. She moved her hands in all directions as she talked, and gestured me to come inside. Not uttering a word, I obeyed. She continued her enigmatic speech. The vibrations of her voice entered my ear as if they were coming from another dimension. My body felt as hot as a kitten's belly, and my head as if it had been implanted with electric wires. I just wanted her dead.

I fixed my eyes on her neck and silently closed the door behind me as she bent over to pick up a cleaning rag from the floor.

In spite of my drowsiness, my hands felt incredibly strong.

Later that evening I sat by the fire and wrote what I had done, a fictional confession of sorts. I filled seven pages of longhand, doctor-like scribbles only I could decipher.

I glanced at the painting. Earlier I had covered it with a sheet. The clown could stare at me no more.

The door bell rang and, papers clutched to my chest, I got up and went to answer it. Though I had been expecting them, my heart skipped when I saw the two young policemen standing outside my door.

After I made it clear I spoke only English, they quickly introduced themselves and stated the reason for their visit. My upstairs neighbour had been murdered and they wanted to know if I had seen or heard anything.

I adopted a surprised expression and shook my head.

“Did you know her?”

“I saw her just once. I’ve been living here for only three months,” I said. “Though I could often hear her. She was always fighting with her husband-I assume it’s her husband. That’s the reason I once met her. I went upstairs to ask them to keep their voices down. It was late and he was shouting and she was screaming. It sounded bad. In fact, I almost called the police that night.”

Literary Sampler

One of the policemen wrote something on a note pad.

The other policeman glanced at the papers I held against my chest.

“I’m studying for an exam,” I said.

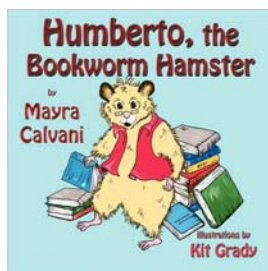
The policeman nodded. He looked like a toy policeman. Both of them did.

After several more questions and answers, they apologized for the inconvenience and said goodbye.

Holding my confession close to my heart, I closed the door and went back to sit by the fire.

“Elementary, my dear Watson,” I murmured. One by one, I fed the pages to the flames. Even Holmes would have been proud.

The End



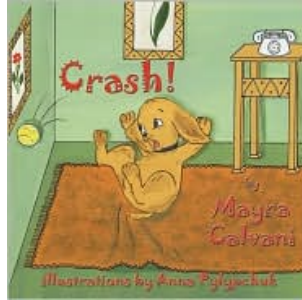
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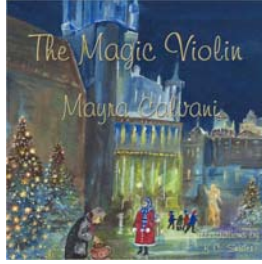
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Part II



Aaron Paul Lazar

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MAZURKA (2009)

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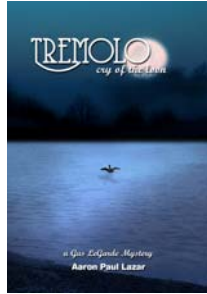
www.murderby4.blogspot.com (Writers Digest Best 101 Websites 2009 and 2010)

www.aaronlazar.blogspot.com

www.aplazar.gather.com

Lazar's Seedlings column appears in *Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine* and *Voice in the Dark* newsletter at www.mysteryfiction.net. *Expert author for Ezinearticles.com. * Saturday Writing Essentials host for Gather.com 2006-2008.

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Tremolo: cry of the loon
by Aaron Paul Lazar

Chapter One

Summer 1964
North Belgrade, Maine

We're not gonna make it.

I looked nervously across the lake as the sunlight dimmed, then pulled hard on the oars in the direction of home. Cool feathers of fog slipped over the glassy water, whispering insidious moist threats.

Siegfried peeled off his sweatshirt and handed it to his sister, who shivered in the stern of the old wooden skiff. She tossed him an uneasy smile and put it on. Wispy vapor draped the boat, stroking my bare arms with cold fingers.

I took a deep breath and nodded to the ten-year-old twins with more confidence than I felt.

"Don't worry. We'll make it. We're almost to Moose Point."

Elsbeth drew the sweatshirt tightly around her. The sleeves were six inches too long. She slid them up to free her hands and peered at me through a mass of dark curls, moving closer to her brother for warmth.

"What's happening, Gus? Why is it so dark?"

I cast my eyes around the lake and then up to the sky. It was sunny when we set out for Horsehead Island. Now the thick fog bank obliterated the sun. I answered carefully, feeling responsible for the two since I was a full year older.

"It's just the fog. Don't worry. I'll row to shore and we'll wait it out, okay?"

Elsbeth nodded and yanked the hem of the sweatshirt over her bare legs. Her eyes darted with apprehension. I wrenched harder on the oars and broke into a cold sweat. They

creaked in the damp silence. Siegfried turned and looked toward the disappearing shoreline, wrinkling his brow.

"You'll row to shore? *What shore?*"

He was right. The land had vanished. Returning his somber gaze, I swiveled the oars into the boat. Water dripped from the wooden paddles and pooled below. The fog enveloped us, filling the air with a ghostly gray mist. I shifted on the seat cushion that doubled as a life preserver. The cracks in the vinyl chafed my legs. A loon warbled in the distance, his cry distorted to a hysterical giggle. Blind, we sat in the rocking boat and waited.

"Well," I sighed, "we can sit here 'til it clears. We'll be safe. If we hear someone coming, we'll just make a bunch of noise."

Siegfried nodded, running his fingers through his long blond hair. It had grown over the tops of his ears since his last haircut. He looked more and more like the lead singer in Herman's Hermits. I was envious and begged my parents to let me skip my weekly trim at the barbershop. So far, they hadn't surrendered.

"Good idea. *Gut*," he said. Although the twins had been in the States for six years, they still harbored traces of a German accent. Siegfried, in particular, often combined phrases from both languages in the same sentence.

Elsbeth suddenly sat up and stared anxiously past my shoulder across the bow of the boat. She held up one hand. "Listen."

The faint drone of a motorboat purred in the distance. Motionless, we strained to hear. It growled louder, heading in our direction. Siegfried's blue eyes widened in alarm. "Move!" he shouted as he motioned toward the oars.

I picked them up and spun the boat around, hoping to row away from the oncoming craft. Pulling with all my strength, I struggled to move the boat across the dark water. The thrum of the motorboat escalated as it bore down on us. We shouted, trying to warn them.

"Watch out!" Our voices combined in a triad of shrieks as we screamed warnings into the air.

Shrill laughter reverberated behind the veil of fog as the boaters gunned the engine and splashed toward us. My heart sank to my bare feet as I realized they must be either drunk or insane. I dragged harder on the oars until my arms burned, propelling the skiff forward into the mist.

A dark shape emerged from the fog and almost scraped against our stern. The erratic driver barely avoided us as he accelerated back into the mist. His passengers shrieked with laughter. The wake from their boat rocked us violently, causing our craft to skitter

forward.

Without warning, a great ripping crash knocked us from our seats.

Siegfried pointed at the bow.

"*Gluck mal!* (Look!)"

Water gushed through a ragged tear in the bottom of the boat. I swiveled around to inspect the damage. It was bad. Very bad. Peering over the bow, I looked down. A glistening turquoise reflection loomed large and sullen beneath the surface.

"Oh, crap," I yelled. "We hit Big Blue!"

Elsbeth and Siegfried both scuttled to the front of the boat and looked overboard at the monstrous boulder that glimmered beneath the surface. Water swirled around our ankles.

"*Mein Gott!*" screeched Elsbeth as her hands fluttered to her mouth. She stared at the water creeping toward her calves. Siegfried grabbed his sister's floating red cushion and forced her hands through the loops.

"Hold this, Elsbeth. Hold it tight."

The water bubbled higher and the boat listed to the bow, throwing us off balance. Siegfried snatched his green cushion and motioned for me to grab mine. It floated beside my legs. Temporarily frozen, I shook myself out of the stupor and followed his lead.

"Come on," I said with new purpose. "Let's get out and stand on Big Blue."

I set one foot on the slimy boulder. It was slick beneath my toes, but I found my balance, threw my other leg over the bow, and reached back to help Elsbeth out of the boat. Siegfried followed. Within seconds, the boat disappeared.

"My father's gonna kill me," I whispered. I'd cared for the boat for the past three summers with the understanding that I'd return it to my grandfather in good shape at the end of the season.

Elsbeth said, "It wasn't your fault the fog came in. He'll understand, won't he?"

I hoped she was right.

We shivered knee deep in the water of the Belgrade Lakes, clutching the cushions to our chests.

"Listen!" Siegfried said.

He stepped back quickly and looked down at his feet. Elsbeth yelped as something brushed against her legs. A two-foot lake turtle swam between them. She screeched and jumped into the water, arms churning as she splashed away from the snapper. Siegfried shouted to her, then dove for her red cushion bobbing in the opposite direction. Fearing we'd be separated in the fog, I yelled and plunged after them.

"Wait up! We've gotta stick together!"

Elsbeth and Siegfried joined hands as I swam toward them. We linked our arms together above the triangle of floating seat cushions and treaded water as the light dimmed and the fog. The voices of our parents echoed across the lake. Their words traveled in muted, garbled waves through the fog.

"Gus! Elsbeth! Siegfried! Where are you?"

We shouted back in vain, yelling until we were hoarse. Our cries were gobbled by the fog. Realizing that it was futile, we stopped. Even if we knew which way to go, it was too far to swim. Had we been in the boat, I might have tried to row toward the sound of their voices, but as it was, we were stuck.

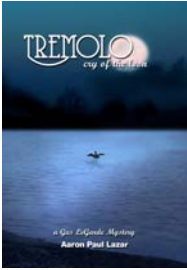
"Shoot," I said, trying to hide the cold fear that rumbled in my stomach.

"*Scheisse*," muttered Siegfried, surprising us with the German profanity.

He stepped back quickly and looked down at his feet. Elsbeth yelped as something brushed against her legs. A two-foot lake turtle swam between them. She screeched and jumped into the water, arms churning as she splashed away from the snapper. Siegfried shouted to her, then dove for her red cushion bobbing in the opposite direction. Fearing we'd be separated in the fog, I yelled and plunged after them.

"Wait up! We've gotta stick together!"

Elsbeth and Siegfried joined hands as I swam toward them. We linked our arms together above the triangle of floating seat cushions and treaded water as the light dimmed and the fog thickened. I gripped their hands and waited for the air to clear.



Tremolo: cry of the loon (click to order)

Author: Aaron Paul Lazar

Publisher: Twilight Times Books, the Paladin Timeless Imprint

ISBN: 1-933353-96-1

Ebook available now at: http://twilighttimesbooks.com/Tremolo_ch1.html

Print Book available [here](#).

Watch the *Tremolo* Trailer [Here](#).

“Beautifully written, with the perfect touch of nostalgia and suspense, the pages of this book tremble with a strong emotional appeal... As the plot steadily progresses, the climax explodes like a summer thunderstorm, clearing the air with the rush of truth.” — Joyce Handzo, www.IntheLibraryReview.com



Healey's Cave: a Sam Moore Mystery

by **Aaron Paul Lazar**

Chapter One

Sam Moore was free. Free from the tether of the alarm clock, pushy pharmaceutical reps, runny noses, and waiting rooms packed with patients.. On the first day of retirement, at the age of sixty-two, he was ready for a change.

He stood behind the barn and looked toward the garden. It lured him with a peculiar intensity he'd never been able to explain to Rachel. The pull was visceral, infused with a strong lust for the land. Cirrus clouds skated across the sky, racing eastward and the cool May breeze ruffled his hair, caressing him.

He *should* be happy. But a familiar sense of melancholy washed through him. It was always there, ever present. It retreated occasionally, when he was busy caring for patients. But as soon as he stopped-to take a breath, to look out the window, or to eat his lunch-that undercurrent of sadness, born of loss, returned.

It has been this way for fifty years. Fifty years of longing for the truth, of missing his little brother.

Where are you, buddy?

A flurry of starlings swooped past him. Their trickling waterfall calls resonated, frightening the goldfinches feasting at the thistle feeder. He watched the birds settle on the branches of the black walnut tree. Their blue-black plumage glistened in the sunlight.

The breeze rose, stirring the leaves in the cottonwoods.

Is it a sign?

Sam shot a glance toward the house, embarrassed to have such thoughts. He was glad Rachel couldn't hear the foolish ideas that ran through his mind.

Was Billy dead or alive? Snuffed out on his eleventh birthday, or whisked away by a kidnapper? Was he living somewhere? In Alaska? Canada? Forced to change his name as a child, brainwashed to forget his life as a Moore? Did he have grandchildren, like Sam? Or...

Sam's heart blackened. He hated this part.

If Billy were kidnapped, he would've tried to come home once he gained access to a car. He had been old enough when he disappeared to remember what town he grew up in. So...if he hadn't returned, he must be gone. Gone for good.

Sam sighed and ran a hand through his thick gray hair. Two starlines lit on the birdfeeder and pecked at the seeds. The wooden feeder had suet holders on each end, and his hands were still greasy from the peanut-flavored cakes he'd refilled earlier. A woodpecker hung upside down on one end, tapping at the treat.

He realized it would be harder now to ignore the persistent questions about Billy's fate. He'd have time on his hands. Lots of time. Besides tending to Rachel and babysitting his grandsons, he'd have hours to imagine the best and the worst.

He slid a hand into his pocket and jingled his keys.

I'll just have to keep busy.

Squaring his shoulders, he walked into the barn and yanked on the starter cord of the rototiller. It coughed, belched black smoke, and stalled. He nudged the choke back and tried again. The engine roared to life. Sliding the choke all the way down, he shifted the tiller into reverse and backed out of the barn.

Sam guided the tiller over the wet grass toward the garden. Its knobby tines dug into the ground, drawing him past the bearded iris bed. His mind drifted to patients and the young doctor who'd taken over his practice.

I wonder how Garcia's doing?

He'd dreamed about retirement for the past forty years. And here he was, on his first day of freedom, about to embark on a full day of gardening until he dropped into the lovely sleep born of physical exhaustion-and his first thought was about Garcia.

Doctor Andrea Garcia had worked by his side since she graduated from the University of Rochester Medical School. She was good. Very good. And she'd take excellent care of his patients.

But would she remember to retest Jenny Boyd for strep?

An annoying voice hissed inside his head.

Forget about it. It's not your job. Not anymore.

It was hard to sever himself from a practice that flourished for forty years. Forty years of growing this “limb” that became such a part of him, and everyone expected him to simply chop it off. Just like that! It wasn't going to be easy.

He stopped and looked at the cloudless sky. The strong sun shone through pure azure, although it was just eight in the morning. Leaves rustled in the whispery willows and sugar maples that dotted the grounds. He smiled, drank in the scent of honeysuckle, and propelled the tiller forward.

The jungle grew to his left. He'd hacked away at the bamboo-like shoots for weeks after tending to patients all day in his family practice in Conaroga, New York. The official name of the weed was Japanese knotweed, a rapid-spreading invader that killed everything in its wake. Last year's stalks were dry and crisp. They towered twelve feet high, crackling in the breeze. He imagined them taunting him, calling to him.

You can't stop us. We're taking over.

Sam had worked hard to clear half the knotweed spreading behind the barn near the woods, but a lot remained standing. His bonfires had been impressive. Fueled with dried knotweed, dead apple tree limbs, and bundles of crispy weeds, they roared into infernos, inciting stares from passersby. The coals were usually warm the next morning, when Sam added more branches to the pile each day.

He reached the vegetable garden near the above ground pool and set the tiller in motion between the wide rows of sugar snap peas and asparagus. Rachel and he had feasted on purple-tipped asparagus for the past few weeks.

His stomach growled. He'd skipped breakfast and bolted outdoors before the sun had crested over the hill. The idea of a brunch of asparagus on buttered toast nearly drove him inside, but he resisted and kept working.

Sam muscled the machine around the row of peas and started on the other side. The soil churned like butter. Baby beets grew thick within the row. He smiled again, pleased with the result. He'd defied upstate New York conventions and had boldly planted the beets at the same time as the peas. He'd marked it in his garden journal: March 27th, a rare, eighty-degree day, perfect for the first till.

Lila trotted toward him from the woods, hopping over felled logs and skirting piles of knotweed stalks. Her sleek, white body moved with feline fluidity. She meowed twice, raising her tail in greeting.

Sam switched off the tiller and leaned down to pat her. She pushed her head against his hand and turned in small circles beside him.

“What’s the matter, Lila? You hungry? You missed your supper last night. What have you been up to?”

She purred and placed her delicate paws on his knees as he crouched beside her. He stroked the smooth fur on her neck and scrubbed his fingers behind her ears.

"That's a good girl. Good kitty."

When Lila was satisfied, she abruptly trotted toward the house, probably to claim her missed meals. Sam restarted the tiller, finished working the soil between the corn and potatoes, and headed to the knotweed patch.

He was ready to dig today. Although the job of clearing wasn't yet complete, he ached to set tine to soil and stir it up. It would allow him to smooth out the area, rake it, and eventually mow the knotweed to death.

He maneuvered the tiller over the lawn to the knotweed jungle and slowly worked the soil. The weed colony was founded when he and Rachel owned horses, years ago. When her multiple sclerosis worsened and she needed the wheelchair, the animals were sold, and the knotweed multiplied, infesting the edge of the woods. By the time Sam retired, it had grown expansively, creating “the jungle.” Sam was obsessed with ridding the landscape of the infectious weeds. Listed first on his retirement list, he planned to turn the area into a lush lawn, opening it to a line of heirloom apple trees that edged the woods.

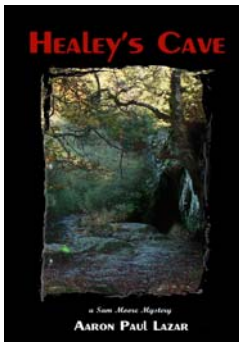
Something sparkled from the earth. Sam poked at the soil and uncovered a clear glass bottle. He brushed off the dirt. “Bayer Aspirin” ran down the side of the tiny vessel in raised letters. He pocketed it. Rachel would want to clean it and add it to her collection. Such treasures frequently popped out of the earth around the house and barn. Long ago, it was common practice to bury trash, before the emergence of the town dump. Since the house was built in 1815, Sam anticipated an abundance of finds.

He continued tilling until he connected with the woody root of a knotweed plant. The tiller bounced up and down, trying to unearth the root. Eventually, after coming at it from several directions, it popped out of the ground. The offender was ten inches long, knobby, and misshapen. It resembled a piece of wood. Pink shoots of baby knotweed sprouted from the chunk. He threw it into the wheelbarrow. After letting it dry in the sun for a few days, he'd burn it.

Another object flashed from the dirt. Sam backed up the tiller and dug until his fingers closed around a small marble. He picked it up, rubbed it on his jeans, and held it to the light.

The sphere was small and partially opaque. A cat's eye. He turned it in his fingers. Light sparkled through glass the color of lichen; muted, pale green overlaid swirls of deeper

green within. He smiled, put it in his pocket, and continued until hunger drove him in for lunch with Rachel.



Healey's Cave (click to order)

Author: Aaron Paul Lazar

Publisher: Twilight Times Books, the Paladin Timeless Imprint

ISBN: 978-1-60619-162-0

Ebook available now [here](#).

(http://twilighttimesbooks.com/HealeysCave_ch1.html)

Print Book available [here](#).

(<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbninquiry.asp?isbn=1606191624>)

Sam Moore's little brother vanished fifty years ago. No body. No answers. What Sam has is a boatload of guilt, since he failed to accompany Billy on his final, fateful bike ride.

While digging in his garden, Sam discovers a green marble with a startling secret—it whisks him back to his childhood, connecting him to Billy. Thrust back and forth through time, Sam struggles to unlock the secret of his brother's fate.

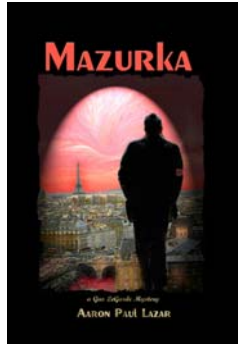
When the FBI investigates remains found nearby, Sam learns of a serial killer with a grisly fifty-year record. Sam's certain it's Billy's killer. But what's worse, his grandson fits the profile of the murdered boys. Will the killer return to Sam's town to claim his final kill? Can Sam untangle the truth in time to save him?

Watch the *Healey's Cave* Trailer [Here](#).

“Opening the pages of *Healey's Cave* releases a delightfully diabolical mystery with a chilling paranormal plot. Exceptionally written, this book will capture readers with a unique chase for a murderer that transcends time and space.”

—Joyce Handzo

www.IntheLibraryReview.com



Mazurka

by **Aaron Paul Lazar**

Chapter One

We're going to die on our wedding day.

The right wing dipped and the storm raged, battering the massive Boeing 747. Overhead bins snapped open, disgorging travel bags and paraphernalia into the aisle. Cries of alarm filled the air and cold sweat wet my brow.

Camille grabbed my arm.

“Talk to me, Gus. Take my mind off it.”

Her complexion waxed green and she brushed damp curls from her forehead, leaning back with eyes squeezed shut. A bolt of lightning burst against the window as the aircraft wobbled its way toward Paris.

I forced a smile. “I think we’re over land now. Almost there.”

Her eyes blinked open, searching mine. Hope glinted momentarily until the plane shuddered again, reinforcing her deep-seated flying phobia. I wondered how I’d ever get her back on the plane for the return trip to East Goodland, New York.

I twisted the overhead air vent, letting the tepid air ruffle my hair. With a deep breath, I collected myself and tried to sound natural.

“You’ll love Paris, honey. It’s so full of color and motion and ... people. An amazing assortment of people.”

Her eyes darted to the window. “Uh-huh. Tell me more.”

Another bolt of lightning flickered, blinding me. I braced myself as the plane rocked. The wing quivered in counterpoint to my heartbeat; its metallic stutter growling in protest.

“Notre Dame is spectacular, dark and mysterious. The view from the bell tower is incredible. It’ll take your breath away.”

She shifted in her seat and shot me a glance.

“You were there with Elsbeth, right?”

I looked into her eyes. No jealousy lurked there.

“Yes. Ten years ago. Our anniversary.”

My throat clogged. Elsbeth, my soul mate, my fiery partner, had been murdered five years earlier—shoved from the cliffs of the Letchworth Gorge.

Camille kissed her fingertips and gently pressed them to my mouth. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

I flashed a half smile.

“It’s okay.”

She sat up with interest, ignoring the rocking aircraft.

“Let’s talk about Paris.”

I turned to her, taking her hands in mine. “What’s the first thing you want to do when we arrive?”

“Besides kiss the ground?” she asked.

I laughed. “Yeah. Besides that.”

Rain splattered against the window, dancing in parallel conga lines as the high wind smeared it against the glass.

“I want to walk along the Seine and find a café. I was craving fresh croissants and strawberries before my stomach started to flip flop.”

A sudden gust caught the plane, sheering it sideways. I nearly lost my lunch. Mopping my forehead with my sleeve, I tightened my seatbelt. Camille froze, plastered against her seat. When the plane stabilized, the captain’s voice boomed over the loudspeaker.

“Folks, this is Captain Wilcox. Sorry for the bumpy ride. I’m going to try to fly above the storm. Meanwhile, please remain calm. Observe the seatbelt sign and stay in your seats. As soon as it’s safe to move about the cabin, I’ll let you know.”

Camille took a deep breath.

“Where’s our hotel?”

“On the right bank. Just around the corner from Notre Dame. Walking distance to the Musée D’Orsay, the Louvre, the Jardin de Tuileries. A perfect location.”

The left wing dropped and the plane pitched. She grabbed my hand.

“If we make it at all,” she said.

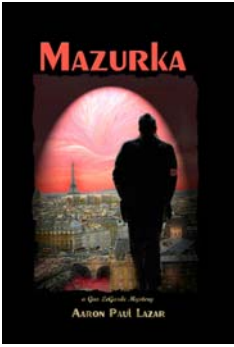
Without warning, the jet plunged, diving through the clouds. A volley of flames erupted from the engine outside our window. Camille’s eyes widened and a sob burst from her lips. My head snapped against the headrest and the force of the descent pinned me to the seat.

Oxygen masks dropped and dangled elusively in the air. I pried one hand from the armrest and fumbled for my mask. Reaching for it, I snagged it and stretched the elastic strap around my head. Camille caught her mask, placed it over her mouth, and looked at me. Terror flared in her eyes.

I clutched her hand as a kaleidoscope of images flitted through my brain: Camille in her wedding dress, my grandson’s impish smile, our dogs, Max and Boris, asleep by the fire.

We plummeted through a time continuum that blended slow motion with eternity. I struggled to remember the crash position and my heart drummed beneath my ribs. The captain’s voice thundered over the loudspeaker, words muffled beneath the roar of the descent. Craning my head against the heavy force, I faced Camille. It was surreal. A dream. A nightmare.

Abruptly, the aircraft stabilized. A stainless steel coffeepot rolled down the aisle and lodged against my foot. The fire in the engine extinguished and the plane ascended as innocuously as it had hours earlier from Dulles Airport.



Mazurka (click to order)

Author: Aaron Paul Lazar

Publisher: Twilight Times Books, the Paladin Timeless Imprint

ISBN: 978-1606191606

Ebook available now at: http://www.twilighttimesbooks.com/Mazurka_ch1.html

Print Book available [here](#).

When Siegfried receives a puzzling invitation to visit an ailing relative in Germany on the eve of Gus and Camille’s wedding, their honeymoon plans change. Siegfried – Gus’s socially challenged brother-in-law – can’t travel alone, so they gather the gentle giant under their wings and fly to Paris. After luscious hours in the city of lights, a twist of fate propels them into a deadly web of neo-Nazis. A bloody brawl on the Champs Élysées thrusts Siegfried and Gus into the news, where a flawed report casts Siegfried as the Nazi leader’s murderer, sealing his death warrant. While Siegfried recovers in a Parisian hospital, Nazi terrorists stalk Gus and Camille. Hunted and left for dead in the underground Parisian Catacombs among millions of Frenchmen’s bones, they barely escape. Siegfried is moved to safety at his aunt’s in Denkendorf, where he learns a shocking family secret about Chopin’s steamy past. The calm is soon shattered, when the threesome is plunged into a cat-and-mouse game where the stakes are lethal and the future of Europe hangs in the balance.

What They’re Saying

“Sorrow-filled scenes, delicate details and exciting escapes will satisfy all readers. Well-turned phrases and excellent writing causes the plot to come alive with a sense of reality and purpose... Mazurka marches forward with a solid story that beats with passion!”

—Joyce Handzo

www.IntheLibraryReview.com



Double Forté

by Aaron Paul Lazar

Chapter One

We'd been skiing over the frozen alfalfa field for twenty minutes when I heard the howl. I stopped dead in my tracks, pulled back my hood, and listened. Siegfried swished up behind me and plunked his long poles into the crusty surface. I stood motionless, straining to hear the sound again.

"Professor?" he said.

I frowned, listened again, and looked up at my behemoth brother-in-law. "Did you hear that?"

Siegfried looked at me quizzically and then drew back his hood, listening intently. Wisps of hair had escaped from his long blond ponytail and fluttered around his face in the cold wind. A hawk passed overhead, screeching against the silence of the frozen landscape. He shook his head to indicate that he heard nothing.

I listened again for a long minute and was about to dismiss the idea, when we both heard the second cry. Siegfried stiffened and turned his head toward the woods as he whispered, "*Was ist das?* (What is that)" in his strong German accent.

The second cry was more of a yelp than a howl. A trickle of alarm raced along my spine.

"I don't know," I answered slowly, exchanging a glance with him.

"Could it be a coyote?"

The wail repeated, echoing plaintively across the rolling hills of the Genesee Valley. Siegfried's expression transformed from fear to concern. "It could be. *Ich weiß es nicht.* (I don't know)" He paused momentarily as the howl repeated, then looked at me with concern. "It sounds hurt."

Without hesitation, he pulled his poles from the snow and started toward the woods, moving rapidly down the hill. I struggled to keep up with my long-legged friend as our skis whispered against the frozen trail.

We stopped at the bottom of the first hill and looked toward the woods, catching our breath as frosty plumes puffed from our lungs. The sun had begun to rise, flooding the eastern horizon with a rosy magenta as it scattered the early morning fog. The low-slung clouds offered a cotton candy background for the black locust trees that were silhouetted against the horizon.

“Which way, Sig?”

He listened closely, and then turned his vivid blue eyes toward the thicket of woods that ran north along the field. Lifting one pole in the air, he pointed.

“There. It’s over there.”

We pushed off again, skiing rapidly down the last hill. When we reached the final hedgerow, my right ski skated against a submerged boulder. Instantly catapulted through the air, I landed face first in the snow. After a few stunned seconds, I pushed myself back up and brushed the snow from my face with my glove. Siegfried waited as I caught up with him, and proceeded into the woods as we tracked the howls. We wound slowly around the maple and beech trees, clumsily breaking new trails. Snowshoes would have been a far more effective mode of travel.

The piteous cries grew louder as we neared the animal. After ten minutes of searching, we finally found her.

“*Mein Gott* (My God),” Siegfried whispered, “It’s a dog.”

The golden retriever lay helplessly in the snow with her hind leg tethered to the ground by an iron-jawed trap. Spots of red soaked the snow beneath her leg. She raised her nose in the air when she saw us and thumped her tail rapidly against the frozen ground, whining in our direction.

We clicked out of our skis and ran toward her.

“Okay, girl— it’s gonna be okay, girl,” I said as I approached the dog, holding out my hand. She sniffed my glove and began to lick the fabric. I pulled off the sweaty glove and reached for her ears, stroking them. Running my hand down her side, I realized that she was pregnant. Her sad brown eyes searched mine as she lapped my hand with her tongue.

Siegfried knelt down in the snow by the trap, his brow furrowed. “Shush, now, shush,” he said as he examined the dog and the heinous mechanism. The wind blew hard again as it knifed icy crystals against our faces. Siegfried pulled up his hood and looked at me anxiously.

“She’s in trouble, Professor. She’s very cold. We need to get her home, *sofort*. (immediately)”

I nodded in his direction, deferring to his knowledge of animal husbandry. He’d learned a great deal about the treatment of injured animals as an assistant in my daughter’s veterinary clinic.

“Can you release the trap, Sig?”

I wondered how long the poor dog had been caught in this position and realized she must be nearly frozen. The intense cold had penetrated deep in my own limbs during the few moments we’d spent kneeling by her side and the exposed fingers of my right hand were starting to burn.

“*Ja, ja*. (Yes, yes.) Hold her collar, Professor. On *drei* (three), okay?”

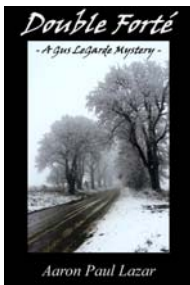
I leaned over and slid my right hand beneath the worn leather collar.

“Okay. *Eins, zwei, drei!* (One, two, three)”

Siegfried applied his muscle to the rusty contraption, pushing with all of his might. After several nerve-racking seconds of concern, the rusty jaws finally sprung open with a snap.

The dog yelped once and jumped up, hanging her rear right foot as fresh blood trickled from the wound. Siegfried pulled the scarf from his neck, carefully wrapped it around the shaking dog’s leg, and then leaned over and effortlessly lifted her into his arms.

An absorbing tale of love, intrigue, and murder...



Double Forté, A Gus LeGarde Mystery
by Aaron Paul Lazar ISBN#1-4137-2838-3

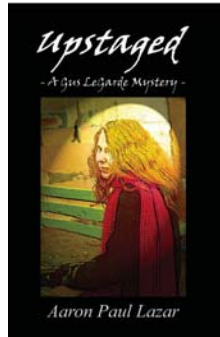
Double Forté is a chilling mystery set in the verdant landscape of Upstate New York's Genesee Valley. Packed with memorable characters, hair-raising chase scenes, and touching family moments, it's a solid page-turner.

What They're Saying

“*Double Forté* unfolds with dollops of well-observed local color, culinary magic, appropriate music, romance, and palpable danger,” Bob Koch, WXXI FM, “Bob on Books”

“Lazar’s erudite grasp of human nature shines through the rolling dialog and interplay of the characters.... Artfully crafts imagery vividly grows in the reader’s imagination... *Double Forté* is a compelling thriller and a splendid addition to the mystery genre.” Ray Edinger, Fury Beach

Double Forté is the first book in the LeGarde Mystery Series and is available to purchase [here](#). Read more excerpts at www.legardemysteries.com, or order your copy at Barnes and Noble Bookstore and other fine bookstores.



Upstaged

by **Aaron Paul Lazar**

Chapter One

The scream came from backstage.

Molly Frost stopped singing. Her slender arms, which had been extended toward the audience in a graceful arc, dropped to her sides. A bewildered expression settled in her eyes, and she whirled around to stare at the dark hallway that led to the prop room.

The scream repeated, louder this time.

Camille froze in her seat at the back of the auditorium with one hand poised above the clipboard on her lap. She'd been taking notes as she evaluated students for roles in the upcoming production of *Spirit Me Away*.

She spun toward me as an alarmed expression flitted across her brow.

I bolted from my seat at the piano, leapt onto the stage, and raced across the scuffed floorboards. Fumbling for the break in the heavy velvet curtain, I finally found it, and flew through the backstage corridor, past the chorus room, and into the prop room.

Mrs. Agnes Bigelow stood plastered against the wall. Beads of sweat rolled down her forehead. Her face worked in noiseless horror as she stared across the room. A yellow tie-dyed skirt lay crumpled at her feet.

Racks of costumes lined the far wall. Cartons of props were jumbled on the floor. Artificial swords protruded from a bucket. A procession of wigs lined two shelves. I scanned the room carefully, but saw nothing amiss. Cautiously, I turned back to Agnes. "Mrs. Bigelow?"

She didn't respond.

I placed my hand on her shoulder and repeated her name. "Mrs. Bigelow?"

She gulped, sputtered, and looked at me with glazed eyes. Trembling, she pointed toward the bucket of swords and cried, "Over there!"

Puzzled, I walked toward the bucket. A snake reared its red and white head from the box, hissing angrily. My heart skipped a beat and my skin crawled as I stared at the creature. Its scales glistened as it corkscrewed around a crude wooden sword. I stepped back.

Camille appeared at the door with her entourage of drama students in tow. "Gus?" What is it?"

I looked at my betrothed with false bravado. "It's all right, Honey. Just a snake,"

Camille's hand flew to her mouth. "A snake?" she repeated.

I nodded. "Yeah."

Her eyes widened momentarily, but she recovered quickly and herded the clamoring teens back into the hall. They craned their heads and peered over her outstretched arms.

I surveyed the room. No outside doors or windows. A catwalk suspended, overhead. It seemed improbable that the serpent had slithered in from the outside. I wondered if it had escaped from one of the terrariums in the elementary wing, then turned back toward the students who thronged outside the doorway.

"Could one of you please get Mr. Marggrander? Last time I saw him, he was unloading lumber at the dock."

Tenth grader Candy Price shot her hand in the air, waving it with enthusiasm as she danced from one foot to the other. Her short, red curls bobbed around her head. "I'll go!"

Camille nodded approval and the girl scampered off.

The snake rose to the top of the bucket and hissed. Its head swayed back and forth as it stretched toward me. A shiver rippled along my spine. I stared at it, almost mesmerized, and vaguely wondered if it was a copperhead.

Face to face with the only creature on earth that caused my insides to twist in fear, I froze. The effect was visceral. My stomach rolled as cold sweat dripped down my neck.

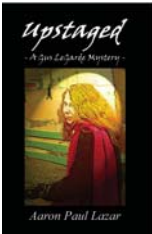
What they're Saying

"*Upstaged* is outstanding! There is a gentleness and charm within these pages. The author has a true talent for creating characters that touch the reader's heart. The descriptions of everything from flowers to a family dinner are filled with a genuine appreciation of life. This makes a remarkable contrast to the murderous desires of the saboteur, but also makes for an ending that leaves readers perfectly satisfied."

Upstaged left this reviewer applauding!"

—Joyce Handzo

www.IntheLibraryReview.com



Upstaged, A Gus LeGarde Mystery

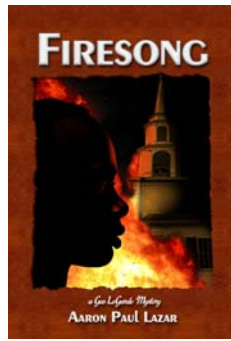
by Aaron Paul Lazar ISBN# 9781413772586

A twisted saboteur lurks backstage and plagues the drama club during rehearsals of the high school musical, *Spirit Me Away*. The company falls prey to bizarre pranks while Camille, Gus's fiancée, directs the show.

Gus suspects handsome Brazilian student, Armand, whose behavior is laced with sexual improprieties that may be directed at Camille. His suspicion shifts as a jealous stage-mother creates havoc when her daughter isn't cast in the lead role. As the attacks escalate, the school superintendent becomes a suspect when Gus learns that his shadowy past is sealed in an official state file.

The action turns lethal as opening night draws near. A sniper fires shots. Camille's home is ransacked and her beloved dog is missing. The star performer takes a bone-shattering fall when a stage railing inexplicably breaks. Who is terrorizing the community? And why? Will Gus prevent the villain from upstaging *Spirit Me Away* with deadly, psychotic games?

Upstaged is the second book in the LeGarde Mystery Series and is available to purchase [here](http://www.legardemysteries.com). Read more excerpts at www.legardemysteries.com, or order your copy at Barnes and Noble Bookstore and other fine bookstores.



Firesong

by **Aaron Paul Lazar**

Chapter One

Pine branches tapped a tango on the stained glass windows of our church, as rhythmic as a frenzied woman beating a rug. I glanced up from my hymnal, wondering if the old glass would hold under the assault. Outside, dirt devils skittered across the parking lot. The lights flickered, and in a sudden gush, hail clattered on the roof.

Behind the pulpit, Reverend Nahum Hardina paused for breath and frowned at the ceiling. He shrugged and smiled, smoothing his wispy gray hair. After only three minutes of preaching it was already tousled, a sure sign of the compelling sermon to come.

My three-year-old grandson squirmed beside me. I shot him a warning glance. He blew his forelock in boredom, then pushed his nose into a pig snout, snorting so loud that everyone turned to stare.

“Johnny!” I said. “Shush.”

He squealed and snorted again. I cringed and whispered apologies to our neighbors. Before I could catch him, he flung his arms over the pew and gawked at Dorothy Mason. A gentle sigh escaped her lips. This was the third time Johnny had turned to stare at her cornflower blue hair.

Before I could blink, he pitched one leg over the backrest and nearly toppled onto Dorothy. Sweating now, I stood and locked my arms around my struggling grandson to lift him back to his seat

His brown eyes glinted with hints of mischievous deeds to come. I lowered my head to his level.

“Johnny. Sit!” My words hissed over the congregation, bounced off the big crucifix in front, and returned with a sacrilegious sizzle

He slumped against me.

Reverend Hardina shot me a glance of empathy, raising his voice over the wail of the wind.

“And now, let us turn to the quiet temple deep in our hearts. Prepare to worship the Lord from this region of inner peace. May the radiance of the Lord flow into your hearts and minds as our acolyte comes forward to light the candles.”

Johnny recovered in a flash, jumping to his knees. He turned his palm up and wiggled his fingers for candy. I unwrapped another peppermint Lifesaver and pushed it into his sticky hand, wondering if the roll would last until the Sunday school exodus. He popped it in his mouth and sat down.

Camille sat to my right, pressed close to me in her yellow sundress. I sensed her skin’s warmth and drank in the scent of vanilla shampoo. Memories of passion from the previous night skated across my mind’s eye. Soft skin. Sweet perspiration. A mew-like cry that meant I’d done something right.

I felt heat rise to my cheeks.

What’s wrong with me? Thinking about this stuff in church?

I tried to refocus, and watched my wife’s dark curls tumble forward when she bowed her head to pray.

Copying her, I bowed my head. With eyes closed, I reached for her hand and rubbed my thumb across her wedding band. We’d been wed in this very church, although with all that had happened since our wedding in May, it seemed like a lifetime had passed.

I glanced up when Shelby, Camille’s daughter, passed us on her way to the pulpit. She waved a long brass candle lighter over the wicks until they sputtered and caught. Johnny sucked on his Lifesaver, drumming his feet against the pew. I patted his knee in gentle warning.

“Sshh. Be a good boy, now.”

He scrunched his face in protest, then rummaged in his backpack for a toy. Brandishing a black police car, he raced it up my arm and onto my shoulder.

“Vroom, vroom!”

There it idled as heads turned. I ignored Elliot Newman’s glare and clamped down on the urge to burst into hysterical laughter, then slid my arm around Johnny’s shoulders and pointed to Shelby.

“Look. There’s Shelby. Wave to her.”

He waved like a flagman at the speedway and shouted her name. She started to laugh, but caught herself and wiggled her fingers at him instead. I sneaked the car back into the backpack while he was distracted. Shelby extinguished the lighter, hung it on the side of the pulpit, and rejoined us, sliding into the pew beside her mother.

“Shall we rise and sing the opening hymn? Our first selection is on page one forty-five.”

A rustle filled the church when the parishioners reached for their hymnals. Reverend Hardina nodded to Miss Lillian Phillips, who did her best to play the introduction for “Morning Has Broken” on the out-of-tune piano. She winced with every cracked note, but soldiered on with determination. The organ stood silent, a victim of the church’s sad state of affairs. Badly in need of an overhaul, it squeaked out its last note years ago and lingered on top of the repair list.

I leaned forward to peel my wet shirt from the pew. Because of the varnish that never completely cured, it made a loud, ripping noise, so unholy, I nearly lost it. Camille’s mouth twitched. I looked away, suppressing the laugh threatening to burst from my lips. The congregation clunked and shuffled. As one, the human wave rippled, stood, and began to sing. The storm worsened and the wind whipped tree branches harder in the yard outside.

We managed our way through the first verse in spite of the gale’s fury. But when the second verse began, the wail rose to a screech, drowning our voices. A crack exploded in the churchyard. The congregation swiveled in their pews and exchanged worried glances. I suspected a tree limb had fallen in the parking area. Hopefully, not on my new Toyota Sequoia.

For a moment, there was a lull in the wind. Lillian started playing again, and when we sang the last verse, sweet rain splashed against the windows. The heavy drops slid down the panes and pooled on the windowsills. A buzz of satisfaction filled the air; everyone chattered and sighed in relief. The shriveled corn stalks would be quenched—at least for today—and hopefully the rain would prevent a rash of failed crops in Livingston County.

We finished the hymn and took our seats. Reverend Hardina stepped from the pulpit and reached for a bucket of props for his children’s message. Johnny took his carton of crayons from his backpack, choosing a red one. I gave him my church bulletin to scribble on, but before he could attempt to draw the wheels on a tractor—his favorite image—the crayon slipped from his fingers and rolled under the pew in front of us. I tried to nudge it back with my shoe, but Johnny slithered to the floor and got it first. Covered in fine dust, he clambered back onto the seat and grinned.

“I got it, Opa.”

I whispered to him with one finger over my lips. “That’s good. But try to be quiet, now,

honey. Just a few more minutes and you can go to Sunday School.”

He drew a waxy red circle on the paper, supporting it with my hymnal.

The reverend arranged a jump rope, star-shaped candle, and a tomato on the front table. I wondered what kind of message he had planned for the children with his odd assortment of items.

Nahum’s eyes sparkled. “And now, would the youngsters please join me up here for-”

Siegfried burst through the vestibule doors, blue eyes flared in panic. He breathed hard, and stared straight at me.

The reverend’s eyes widened.

“Siegfried, what is it?”

My brother-in-law answered in his strong German accent. “Oscar Stone called. He says there is a twister coming up the hill. A big one!” His massive hands shot out in opposite directions, flapping in the air. The winds picked up again.

The Reverend shot a puzzled glance at Siegfried, who shouted to be heard above the storm.

“We should go where it is safe, *Ja?*”

Acid slid from my stomach to my throat. A tornado? Although my brain couldn’t process the facts, I jumped up and corralled my family, heading for the door where Siegfried stood. The pastor hurried down from the pulpit and waved his arms in an attempt to gather his flock.

“Okay, everyone, follow Siegfried. Down to the basement. To the common room. The walls are strong there. Hurry!” he said.

Scrambling through the door, they spilled down the stairs into the basement. Most were elderly, and with flushed cheeks and terror in their eyes, they held to the railings and moved as fast as they could manage. Lillian Phillips stumbled down the last step. I helped her up.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She ignored me and turned. Her eyes popped in panic.

“My pocketbook! I left it by the piano. My medication’s in there!”

I watched Siegfried and Camille move the children to safety, then turned and ran back up

the steps. “I’ll get it. Go down with the others.”

I pushed through the double doors into the sanctuary. As if a veil had been dropped, the light dimmed. I glanced outside and saw... black. At ten thirty in the morning. A hungry roar eddied debris outside, escalating to a frightening pitch.

I found Lillian’s oversized leather purse beside the piano and snagged it, racing down the aisle and stairs to the cellar with it banging against my leg. When I reached her side, she accepted the bag with grateful tears.

A sea of confused and cowering people looked at Reverend Hardina for guidance. He summoned his fire and brimstone voice.

“My dear people! We must try to be calm and trust the Almighty will protect us.”

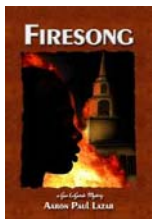
A boom of thunder rattled the walls, and the Reverend dove to the floor. “Everyone get down! Take cover!”

The winds screeched, increasing to a deafening clatter. Siegfried grabbed Johnny and Shelby and slid beneath a stout table, holding them close. Johnny whimpered once and plastered himself against Siegfried’s chest. Camille locked eyes with Shelby, trying to reassure her. On the other end of the table, Dorothy Mason’s blue hair poked out, reminiscent of a figurehead on the bow of a ship.

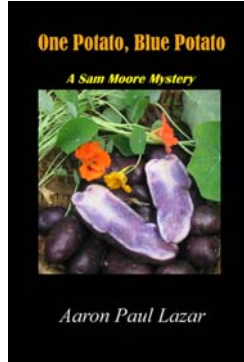
A doomsday ship? Headed for some bizarre netherworld where the Wizard-of-Oz tornadoes sailed through a tiny farming town in upstate New York?

I took Camille in my arms and backed up to the cement wall, trying to still my thumping heart.

Then—in the safest place I knew on earth—all hell broke loose.



Firesong is coming in 2010 via Twilight Times Books. To follow the release progress, sign up for the LeGarde Newsletter by writing to Aaron Lazar at aaron.lazar@yahoo.com, or watch the book’s progress at www.legardemysteries.com.



One Potato, Blue Potato: A Sam Moore Mystery

by Aaron Paul Lazar

Chapter One

Sam stood over his brother's grave. A curious combination of sorrow and liberation flitted through him. Like a tapestry of death, its weave created patterns of loss and love that gutted his soul, twisting him inside.

The agony of grieving again for his little brother had hit him hard. Although he'd mourned in stages since Billy disappeared fifty years ago, he'd never had closure. Until now. A week ago, his three best childhood friends admitted to burying Billy's body in the pool near Healey's cave. When the boy had slipped from the crossing log and slammed his head in a lethal fall, they'd panicked, afraid of being charged with murder. Their childish fears escalated, and they'd pinned Billy beneath heavy stones, his eyes wide open and dulled, hair waving in the water, skin wrinkled like prunes.

Sam shook himself

Stop it. Stop torturing yourself.

He glanced at his SUV in the distance; its four doors gaped open to promote relief from the heat. With her motorized scooter parked alongside, Rachel, his wife of forty years, perched sideways on the passenger seat, a cell phone clamped to her ear. His grandson Evan rhythmically tossed and caught a softball nearby. They'd accompanied him to the gravesite and had left after his request for a few minutes alone.

To think. To stare at the earth. To remember that the physical markers of Billy's young life were just that. Placeholders. Reminders. Cold ground and stone

A funeral on the hill ended, and its mourners scattered like dandelion feathers in the wind. Sam watched them drift toward the parking lot for a moment, and turned back to

the grave.

He fingered the green marble in his pocket and looked up to the cirrus clouds that stalled overhead. Chalk white against a steel gray sky, they paused in their frenetic journey as if trying to get his attention

I know you're not really in the ground, Billy. I know you're up there.

The cottonwood leaves rustled, stirring in a breeze that came from out of nowhere.

Billy.

The marble warmed his fingers in response - his talisman, his connection with Billy's soul. He closed his hand around it so the people walking by wouldn't see the glow of green blushing through his khakis.

The marble pulsed. Sam's heart skipped a beat.

Billy's spirit hovered in the clouds, the leaves, and in Sam's heart. His very essence connected through the marble Sam clenched in his hand.

A cardinal hopped down from a nearby branch, perching on the headstone as he cocked his head at Sam and twittered.

"Weeka. Weeka."

Sam refocused and straightened. A wry smile stole across his face.

"You're right. I should be going. They're waiting for me."

Sam headed for the parking lot. The sugar maple that arched overhead cooled the grass below.

He left its comfort and moved into the bright August sunshine, his steps lighter now.

A pair of young men hovered over a new grave, arguing. One man gesticulated wildly, flapping a bouquet of flowers back and forth. The stems bent and petals showered the mound of dirt below. As Sam passed, they turned their backs and lowered their voices.

Arabic? Sam thought. Strange. But not completely. The local college in Conaroga, NY, attracted students from all over the world.

The taller man hissed as he spoke. Sam couldn't help but notice that no sense of grief arose from his tight posture and hot words. There was no quietude born of loss. No sloping shoulders from the cold misery that accompanies death.

Sam shrugged mentally and moved on, disturbed by the intensity of the argument.

When he reached the Highlander, Rachel looked up at him. Gray bangs kissed her forehead and fluttered in the light breeze. She snapped her phone shut and slid it into her purse.

“Beth?” Sam asked.

She shook her head.

“No. I still can’t reach her. I’m worried, Sam.”

Sam patted her hand, leaning on the roof.

“I’m sure there’s an explanation. She might’ve gone away for a few days, maybe with her roommate, Zafina. She’s done it before.”

“I know. But she usually sends me an email. She doesn’t like us to worry.”

He straightened and nodded. “Wasn’t Zafina’s brother supposed to visit soon? First time in the country and all... maybe they took him on a tour of the area. Let’s try her again tonight. Did you try her work number and her cell?”

“Mmm hmm. Got her voice mail every time.”

Sam walked around and started the car, pushing the air conditioner to max. He closed the two doors on his side and walked around to Evan.

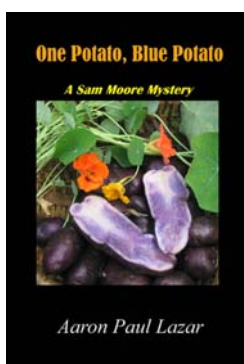
“You okay, sport?” he asked, sliding an arm around his shoulders.

Evan leaned into Sam’s chest, wrapping an arm around his middle. He squeezed, then stepped back and looked up into Sam’s face.

“I’m okay. How ‘bout you?”

Sam didn’t hesitate. He answered as he lowered the ramp for the scooter, then guided it inside.

“I won’t lie to you, son. It’s been hard. Very hard. But I’m okay. Now, let’s go get your little brother.”



One Potato, Blue Potato is under contract with Twilight Times Books and is planned for release in 2011. It is the second book in the Moore Mystery series. See www.mooremysteries.com for more information.

Anthropomorphism (and writing from my dreams)

An article and short story by Aaron Paul Lazar

In the past, I've almost always written from the point of view of a human. I've toyed with the idea of writing a book from a dog's POV a year ago, and even wrote a few fun chapters. It's on the "some day" list, like my Gus LeGarde cookbook, and Genesee Valley coffee table book.

About a month ago, a good friend (Pat Fowler, from NH) invited me to enter the Lorian Hemingway short story writing contest. We'd both write short stories, and then critique each other's work before subbing them. In my short, I ended up doing one scene from Claude Monet's dog's point of view. (see *Resurrection*)

Last week, I read a very original sci fi story by Pat Whitaker from New Zealand, entitled *Returning*. In the beginning, a being from outer space inhabits the body of a wolf. It's not exactly anthropomorphism, because the creature is using the wolf as a host, so it's not attributing human characteristics to the canine. But it must have gotten my creative juices going, because the other night I wrote this story while sleeping.

Honest! It's weird, but during the night I find myself writing in my head. I set up the scene, and the words come out as if I'm typing them. It's never exactly what comes out in the final typed version, but it's pretty close.

Here's what Wikipedia says about anthropomorphism:

Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics to non-human creatures and beings, phenomena, material states and objects or abstract concepts. Examples include animals and plants and forces of nature such as winds, rain or the sun depicted as creatures with human motivation able to reason and converse. The term derives from the combination of the Greek ἀνθρώπος (*ánthrōpos*), "human" and μορφή (*morphē*), "shape" or "form".

And here's the story:

The Bull

A short story by Aaron Paul Lazar

He rose with ease from his desk chair and reached for a crystal tumbler on the counter. Filling it with ice, he poured amber liquid halfway up and took a swig. His sleek black fur shone beneath the vested suit, and a vein throbbed in his neck above his lavender shirt collar.

Lowering his horns for effect, he swung his heavy head back toward the man tied to the chair on the other side of his desk.

The matador's face flamed brick red. Tears simmered in his eyes. He struggled against his bonds, and almost tipped over his chair. "I don't get it!"

With a rumbling sigh, the bull lowered himself back into the chair. "I know. This part is often difficult." He wiggled the thumb-like appendage that protruded from his hoof and winked. "In your experience, bulls don't have thumbs. But let me tell you, it's much easier to mix a drink this way."

Tears sprang from the matador's eyes. "That's not what I meant! Why are you doing this?"

An expression of sympathy curled the bull's lips downward. "Oh, dear. I'm sorry. As I said before, you are an experimental subject. The power of your species to torture and maim, the joy you take in killing, the need to show yourself more powerful than other creatures... it's long fascinated us."

"Where's my family? My boys?" Almost whimpering now, the matador's eyes churned side to side. "And where the hell am I?"

"I've told you. There are no boys. There is no wife. Your life was orchestrated to seem real, in your own head. But sir—you exist simply for the purpose of academic study."

"But the world is run by humans!"

"No. It's run by bulls."

"But on television—"

"All manufactured for the experiment. Shall I turn on the real television?"

With a click, the teak walls parted, revealing a flat screen. The bull flipped through channels, each filled with horned heads, wide flat noses—sans rings—and various colors

and sizes of huge, hoofed, mammoth bulls. Bulls dressed in clothing, bulls golfing, bulls driving trucks. Bulls everywhere.

A hilarious giggle rose from the matador. "I get it! This is a practical joke! You're wearing a costume. You staged the whole thing." He craned his neck around the room. "Okay, José. Come on out! I fell for it!"

The bull grimaced. "In spite of your capacity for inflicting pain on others, you are most decidedly a fascinating species."

The matador slumped, then sat up with interest. "Wait! Are there more like me?"

Lighting a fat cigar, the bull tipped back in his chair. "A few."

"Where?"

Another click on the remote parted wide curtains, revealing a large stadium. "Down there. In the cages."

"That's cruel!"

"Perhaps. But it's safer for bullkind. You don't think we can let savages like you just wander around, do you?"

Defeated, the matador let the tears stream from his formerly stoic face. The sequins on his costume glistened wet. His hat tipped sideways. "You mean my career? The accolades I've earned? My entire life?" Sobbing now, his head dropped to his chest. He raised it once again. "It's all fake?"

"Indeed. The glory you found in your...er...career was fabricated. You thought you defeated and killed bulls. You reveled in it. But it was all staged. No real bulls were hurt in this experiment." The bull spun his chair to stare down into the arena, tenting his forehooves. "But don't worry. We'll treat you with kindness. You'll have food and water, exercise, and sunshine. And we'll get you vaccinated. After all, we aren't barbarians. We're not human."

The End

Resurrection

a short story by Aaron Paul Lazar

Red Cloud

He woke on a secluded grassy riverbank to the sound of water lapping the shore. Like colorful smelling salts, the sharp scent of oil paints woke him. He stood, brushing bits of grass and leaves from unfamiliar clothing. On his legs, rough woven fabric. On his feet, clumsy black shoes. His shirt billowed in the cold breeze, covered with smears of cobalt, green, and yellow ochre. With a start, he realized it was a white man's artist smock.

Across the river, a setting sun winked on windows and gilded thatched roofs at the water's edge. Noise from the shore drifted toward him in lazy snatches of conversation and bubbles of children's laughter. The language was unfamiliar. Perhaps French? He'd heard some of these words in the hallways of the White House during his many visits to the Capitol.

Chimneys puffed thick blue spirals into the air, coloring the horizon with smudges of indigo, champagne pink, and soft orange. Before him stood an easel with a partially finished painting. Brushes lay strewn in the grass. Soft wet paint lay in globs on the palette he must have dropped when he passed out.

When I passed out? What happened?

He scrubbed at his face, closed and opened his eyes. Startled, he studied his hands. Ivory skin stretched over long sinewy fingers; blue veins popped out of the back of his hand. He turned them in the waning light.

What happened to my hand? My skin? Whose fingers are moving at my command?

A chubby sparrow hopped toward him, aiming for contents spilled from a tin bucket nearby. The grass beside it was matted, as if someone had lain there, resting in the winter sun for hours, maybe days. He crouched and peeled back corners of a linen napkin enclosing thick chunks of stale bread and a wedge of cheese. Black grapes nestled in a tin dipping cup.

Sudden thirst constricted his throat. He searched for a nearby well or a pump handle. Around him, colonies of trees and shrubs dotted the grassy field. In the far distance, a pink stucco house with green shutters shimmered in the late afternoon light. Somewhere in his brain, it looked familiar, yet strange.

Too shaky to make the trek to the house, he glanced down at the water. It ran clean and clear.

He grabbed the cup and stumbled to the riverbank, kneeling on soft black dirt. With a ragged swish, he filled it with chilled water and drank greedily as if he'd been wandering lost in the Sahara. Sweet and pure, it cleansed his parched tissues.

He jumped. *What was that?*

The sudden murmur of a crowd in an enclosed space. The pressing of shoulders against his. The rose petal scent of a white woman's perfume.

He dashed another cup of water against his face, then poured yet another over the back of his neck. His hair—cut short—dripped water on the black fuzz that grew from his face. He stroked the long beard, fascinated by its wiry texture. Droplets ran from it and splashed into the river with impossible rhythm, mesmerizing him in the flashes of light that swirled below.

He tore his glance away from the river and looked toward the island downstream, riveted by the wavy lines of shadows leafless trees cast in the water. Consumed now, he hurried back to the easel, grabbing the palette and brushes. A splash of transparent amber paint kissed the water next to squiggles of shadows. A touch of mint green filled the sky behind the trees. With sure fingers, he dashed colors onto the canvas as if this were his every day task, racing to beat the sun that threatened to sink before he finished.

Movement caught his attention. There! In the distance, two boats floated past the isle. He grabbed another brush and dabbed black onto the purple-gray water. A few quick strokes mimicked their wavy shadows.

He jumped. Someone, some ghostly hand, touched his fingers. Was it a spirit from beyond? Had the spirits transported him to another realm? With a shudder, he stepped back and scanned the area. No one. Not a soul for miles.

What's happening to me?

The sun, vibrant orange now, approached the tops of straw roofs, tinting the sky with rosy hues. He refocused on the canvas and slashed brilliant tangerine strokes across the image of water to mimic the sun's reflection.

Shivering, he watched the sun fuse with the horizon. He swore he heard ice cubes clinking in a glass, and once again jerked around, looking for the source of the noise. Nothing. No one. A group of wild turkeys squawked to his left, hurrying into the underbrush with wagging tail feathers. The Tom sported a feather that would have graced his headdress, had he the energy to give it chase.

His stomach rumbled. He sank to the grass, set his paints aside, and lay on the flattened grass. There would be time to untangle the mystery after he rested.

Claude

My head thudded hard on a marble floor. Crystal chandelier prisms swam before my eyes and people in ballroom dress thronged around him in the high-ceilinged room. Paintings lined the far hallway, hanging from gold chains secured high on red satin walls. Several guests ran to my side, faces crumpled with worry.

A silver-haired lady in a long black gown patted my hand. “Red Cloud? My dear! Are you all right?”

Although I spoke little English, my brain translated the words as if I’d been born in London. I stared into eyes the color of blue cornflowers. Thin circles of icy white rimmed the iris. Although she acted concerned, the woman’s eyes registered no warmth.

With a shiver, I sat up. “I’m fine. I think.” For a moment, the scene around me blurred. My riverbank shone through in rippled windows, as if vying for space in my mind. Yet the sound of birds singing, of water lapping the shore, and of the breeze rustling in the leaves soon disappeared, to be replaced by gold filigreed mirrors, marble statues, and waiters bearing silver trays with fluted glasses of bubbling champagne.

A man in a tuxedo touched my arm. “Mr. Red Cloud? May I interest you in a glass of champagne?”

Thirstier than I ever remembered, with a tongue that stuck to the roof of my mouth like sticky cotton batting, I reached for the glass, then pulled back when I saw the hand that stretched from me. Dark copper skin covered strong fingers. Beadwork trimmed a deerskin sleeve. A string of bear claws encircled my neck, hanging low on a tunic. I grabbed for the drink again and drained it quickly, nodding to the white-haired gentleman who held my elbow and looked with concern into my eyes.

“Better?”

“Yes, thank you.” My voice growled deep and rough. Familiar, yet unfamiliar.

What in God’s name is happening?

I shuffled toward a gold leaf mirror, afraid, yet hungry to learn more. A sharp angled face returned my gaze. High cheekbones. Long glossy black hair, falling well beyond my shoulders. Prominent nose. Straight, strong mouth. Eyes that bore into mine with iron grit.

With an excited intake of breath, I stared at my reflection. *God in Heaven. I’m a savage!*

I turned this way and that. Pinched my arm. Real pain. I exhaled, fogging the mirror.

Pride and strength flowed from my eyes.

I'd expected confusion.

"Everything okay, Red Cloud?"

With deliberately slow motions, as if I needed to concentrate on the words, I answered.
"Of course, Senator." *Senator?*

"Come. I wanted you to see the Monet we have on exhibit. It's quite valuable."

I jumped when he said my name aloud.

He led me past hordes of men in tuxedos and women draped in jewels and furs. With great ceremony, the Senator ushered me downstairs through a long narrow corridor into a room flanked by two guards who stood at attention with rifles on their shoulders.

"Here we are. It's entitled 'Sunset on the Seine, Winter Effect, circa 1880'."

Circa 1880? It is precisely 1880. But I haven't finished this yet! I couldn't drag my eyes away from the canvas. Before me were the strokes I'd forced while I languished on the riverbank, praying for solace. Camille had given birth to my son, Michel, and shortly thereafter succumbed to cancer. Since her death a year ago, I'd been unable to paint. Unable to socialize. Unable to eat and barely able to breathe.

A horse-faced woman decorated in emeralds appeared around the corner. The Senator's brow wrinkled.

"Yes?"

"Senator? Can you spare a moment?"

The patrician turned back to me, rolled his eyes, and touched my shoulder. "I'll leave you with the Monet. Stay as long as you like, Chief."

My eyes raked across the painting, taking in the bold orange of the sun's reflections rippling on the water. The touch of green behind the trees. The pastels fogging the horizon. Pride swept through me.

Red Cloud

After resting, he rose and blew into his cold hands. The river had turned dark and unfriendly. Deep purple whirlpools threatened and bubbled with what had to be evil spirits. Lights flickered on the opposite shore. Cooking aromas drifted over the water, sending pangs of hunger through him. With a sudden shiver, he collected the paints, brushes, and easel, and headed for the pink stucco house in the distance.

Antoine

When the Master came in and set his painting by the door, I sensed something amiss. I trotted from my place at the fireplace and shoved my muzzle into his dangling hand. With a start, I backed up and growled. Something was wrong.

He crouched and held a hand out to me. “Come, boy. It’s okay.”

Slowly, I crept toward his outstretched fingers. The scent of my master mixed with an unknown smell, that of wild prairie winds and open cooking fires. I wagged my tail, slowly at first. When my master’s hand touched my ear, I capitulated. He knew just how to scrub behind my ear where it itched. Wiggling all over now, I jumped up on him and licked his face.

“Whoa! Good boy, good dog. Get down, now.”

He picked up his painting and headed for the kitchen, from whence tantalizing smells tempted me all afternoon. The roast had been simmering in the black pot, smothered in vegetables, and fresh bread baked in the Dutch oven. But something was still off—my master walked with a different gait than his usual Steady and calm, it reminded me of a wild cat padding on soft grass.

The Mistress—the new one—smiled over her shoulder at him. “Monsieur. I’ve fed the children and sent them to bed early. I know you need your quiet time after a long day of painting.”

The Master looked disappointed.

This woman, whom the Master called ‘Alice,’ was the mother of six young hooligans who played with me in the nearby fields and gardens, especially in the summertime. When the old Mistress died a year ago, Alice moved in to help with the Master’s two boys. Eight children lived in our new home, and I loved each one.

The Mistress turned to my master with a frown. “Is something wrong?”

He set his still wet painting on the sideboard and dropped into a chair, rubbing his eyes.

“No. Thank you. Just tired.”

She sat beside him and took his hand. Lately, her ministrations seemed more loving, and less sisterly. “My dear Claude.” She stroked the back of his hand and looked into his eyes. “How did it go?”

He stared at his painting, and refocused on her face. “Strange. I felt as if I’ve never been in this body before, as if I don’t know where or who I am, yet I was consumed by the scene. The reflections on the water, glistening green behind the stark trees, the wavy silhouettes of the dark tree shadows...”

She looked at the painting as if a lustrous silver angel perched on the shelf, blessing her by waving his soft-feathered wings. “Oh, my.” She moved closer. “You’re back.”

He looked at his hands. “I’m not sure. Something’s wrong with me. Very wrong.”

“It will take time, Monsieur. The loss of our dear Camille will pain you for a long time. Perhaps your entire life.” Her voice cracked, as if emotion swilled beneath the surface.

He looked at her as if he didn’t understand, then sighed and pulled his chair up to the table. “Thank you. But now. Let’s eat. That much I remember.”

Red Cloud

He woke in his own bed, a straw mat on the floor of his wooden hut, covered in colorful woven blankets and serenaded by birdsongs. His last memory had been at the Senator’s home in DC, where he represented his tribe with dignity and honor. The thoughts that crossed his mind were instantaneous. *I have returned!*

Had it been a dream guided by the spirits?

He stood and stretched, his long silky black hair tickling his bare back. Running a hand across his smooth chin, his lips spread in a wide grin. *Yes. Only a dream.*

His hut was perched a short distance away from the village, on a bare stream bank, very unlike the river in his vision. This wide clear creek sparkled turquoise in the prairie sun, shallow in its deepest section and pure as spring rain. Orange, yellow, and crimson slate rippled beneath the water, reflecting the new day’s energy.

He stood over the water, drinking in the morning, and finally stripped and knelt on one knee to wash and quench an almost unbearable thirst. With eyes closed and hands cupped, he scooped cool fresh water into his mouth and over his face, hands, and body, scrubbing away the strangeness of the recent illusion. Letting the strong sun dry the droplets, he stood and examined his copper brown skin.

With a start, he turned his hands over to stare. There, a patch of mint green. On his thumb, a smudge of vermilion. And on his wrist, streaks of pure white. He threw back his arms and raised them to the sky, asking the Great Spirit to help him understand. A warm breeze stirred over the streambed, calming him and lifting his long hair from his shoulders. When he received no further counsel, he redressed and headed back to his campfire to cook quail eggs for breakfast, with a sudden strong urge rattling in his head.

Maybe I'll get a dog.

Claude

I came awake at the breakfast table, surrounded by eight noisy children and Alice. While the exchange of one day in my life with Chief Red Cloud was a puzzle, I knew it couldn't have been a dream. How could I have dressed and been in the middle of a scrumptious bite of strawberry peach marmalade on a warm croissant if I'd just awakened? I sipped at my dark hot chocolate and beamed at my new extended family, who squabbled and stuffed their faces with equal enthusiasm.

The doubts I'd had over the last year about my ability to produce anything worthwhile on canvas had vanished. I'd seen my work displayed in a gold frame, hung in a fine home with guards to protect it. It had been revered, coveted. A strange situation, to be sure. On the sideboard, the river scene beckoned. I studied it, realizing the green behind the trees was too faint; the black fishing boats needed to be emphasized. There was work to be done to make this version match the finished product I'd seen hanging on the red satin walls of the Senator's palatial home.

Alice smiled at me from the stove. A tingle ran through my previously numb body. *Could she? Would she? Am I as attractive to her as the bastard who had deserted her?* She rarely said an unkind word about the rogue, although my blood ran cold at the thought of him. Leaving six children and his wife behind to escape the hot flush of embarrassment from bankruptcy...there could be no greater evil.

Alice approached me, slid a fresh hot croissant onto my plate, and her clear eyes connected with mine. We held the glance for a few luscious seconds, and in minutes I was filled with the urge to paint. To paint, to never stop, to splash gorgeous colors on the canvas that mimicked and flattered reality. To paint for the memory of my Camille, of loves lost, and loves yet to flourish.

Ah, yes. I was back.

I thought of the Chief, and wondered what year he'd been transported from the gilded halls of Washington, DC. Had it been next year? Twenty years in my future? How long would it take my work to be known and beloved?

With a mental bow, I gestured to his fine spirit, wishing him clear vision and a long life. How it happened, I would never know. But I'd always be grateful to the tall proud man who had helped me relight my artistic spark.

I pecked a surprised Alice on the cheek, squeezed and hugged my eight children, scrubbed behind Antoine's ears and received an enthusiastic tongue bath in return, and

Literary Sampler

grabbed my easel. The early morning light was fading, and I needed to catch it before it disappeared forever.

The End

Bon Soir, Mes Amis

A short story by Aaron Paul Lazar

I headed for my parents' house on a rainy June evening, anxious for the tastes and aromas of home. Savory beef stew, bubbling on the stove. Spicy lavender, growing by the porch door. I even anticipated the musky smell of wet dog, having missed owning pets while on assignment in Germany.

I'd settled my wife and daughters back in our house in the country after a grueling flight from Stuttgart to Logan. After getting the place back in shape—the larder stocked, the lawn mowed, and the cobwebs whisked clean—my roots called to me. I needed to see my parents and grandmother. It had been far too long.

I parked in the driveway and soaked in the sight of the old cedar-shingled colonial, nestled between towering blue spruces and flanked by an overgrown Bartlett pear. Flashes of my childhood raced across my mind's eye: my chestnut gelding grazing on the back field; family feasts on the redwood picnic table under the plum tree; devouring my mother's cooking, and toiling in my father's sumptuous gardens. I was finally home, where family had patiently waited as the one-year post overseas had stretched to four.

After long embraces and reunion tears, we gathered around the supper table, just as I'd envisioned so many times in the throes of homesickness. Ginny, my father's beagle, sat at my feet, begging for morsels. I surreptitiously dropped a piece of cornbread under the table, and heard her satisfied snuffling as she sought and devoured the tidbit.

"When do we see Gram?" I asked between spoonfuls of Chicken Paprikash.

My parents exchanged uncomfortable glances. Mom shifted in her ladderback chair.

"We have something to tell you about Grandma," she began. Her fingers tapped a tango on the table beside her linen napkin, and she tossed my father a nervous half-smile.

My heartbeat quickened and I imagined the worst.

She's dead. My grandmother's dead.

"What is it?" I asked. I set down my spoon and pushed back my seat. Ginny scooted to the side, then laid her head on my lap, her big brown eyes rolling up to mine. I stroked her soft ears and waited.

My mother nodded to my father, who took over.

“Gram’s in a home now,” he said. “She got sick, son. Alzheimer’s.”

I stared across the table. My jaw dropped. Indignation welled in my chest.

“You put her in a home?” My voice cracked on the last word. “I thought you said you’d never do that? We were going to take care of her. Amy and I would’ve taken her in, if you couldn’t. What happened to the plan?”

I conveniently ignored the fact that I hadn’t been around for the past four years.

My mother began to explain. They’d tried to care for her at home. The dining room had been transformed into a bedroom for Gram, so she could avoid climbing stairs. They’d brought in her pictures, her Lincoln rocker, her quilts, and the display case with her miniature Hummel figurines and collector’s plates. Her two bedroom cape cod had sold for a mere sixty-five thousand dollars.

“She thought I was a stranger, John. She kept calling 911.” My mother’s eyes brimmed with tears; she dabbed at them with her napkin. “We found her outdoors, in the middle of winter, wandering around in her nightgown. She nearly froze to death, looking for the ‘hen house’ She thought she was a young woman again, and kept trying to do her chores. She wouldn’t take her pills, kept thinking I was trying to poison her.”

My mother stopped to collect herself, pressing the napkin to her eyes. Her chest hitched a few times.

“She turned into a different person,” my father added. “She wasn’t herself, yelling at your mother all the time, really getting hysterical. Of course we didn’t blame her. She was frightened and didn’t recognize anyone.”

He paused for a moment. Ginny’s tail thumped the braided rug. I leaned down to hug her, and she quivered with excitement, lapping my cheek.

“With the new medicine, she’s a little calmer. It was a hard decision, son, but the right one.”

My mother tried to smile, but her face crumpled. She breathed deeply and stood.

“Dad’s going to take you to see her tomorrow, so you can check out the place for yourself. It’s a homey place, has a nice feeling to it. Not too fancy, mind you, just comfortable. And... she’s safe now.”

Numb, I nodded and leaned down to pat Ginny’s smooth flanks. I didn’t want to lose it in front of them.

“Just one more thing. She probably won’t know you. You should be prepared,” my mother said in a voice that trailed off to a whisper.

Not know me?

My grandmother and I had shared an exceptional bond. I'd written dozens of letters from Germany over the past four years, assuming she'd read them, and not expecting an answer. With her arthritis, she had a hard time holding a pen steady, and we'd agreed on the one sided letter writing campaign before I'd left the country.

Impossible. She'll know me.

The next day, we entered a modest gray clapboard house and climbed a wooden stairway to the second floor. Several elderly patients peeked from their doorways. Dad greeted most of them by name, stopping to chat with a few along the way.

When we reached Gram's room, a stranger sat on the edge of the bed. Dressed in a loose, faded housedress, she looked fifty pounds lighter than the grandmother I remembered. Her short blond hair, so carefully coifed throughout her life, had transformed into wispy gray locks that lay flat and lifeless, framing her thin face. She wore no jewelry, no lipstick, and no shoes.

I approached slowly and sat beside her on the narrow bed.

"How are you, Gram?" I took her small hand in mine.

Her eyes widened with indecision and she carefully inched away from me. She smiled as if she were entertaining a guest and gently drew her hand from my grasp.

"I'm fine," she said. Her wary eyes darted to my father.

She looked down at her hands.

"Would you like to see pictures of my girls?" I asked.

"All right." She spoke with forced politeness.

I pulled out a packet of photos and began to reel off the names and ages of my daughters.

"Here's Meredith in our house in Germany. She just turned ten. You should see her play the piano. She sure loves music. She's just started on the Chopin Preludes now."

She seemed to relax a little, and accepted the photo, running her fingers lightly across the glossy surface. A small sigh escaped her lips.

"So sweet," she said. "She'll be a heartbreaker."

Encouraged, I continued through the pack.

“Here we are at the Christmas Market in Stuttgart. There’s my wife, Miriam. And that’s Alice, and there’s little Micki. Alice is seven and Micki just turned five.”

She carefully took the photo, gazing at it.

“They look a lot alike. Such pretty curls. What’s that building in the background?”

I warmed to her question.

“It’s the Stifkirche spire, right in the middle of the city. There are old castles intermingled with new buildings. This one street, called the Koenigstrasse, bans cars; it’s filled with shops and pedestrians. You’d love the Christmas Market. Glass blown ornaments, outdoor vendors in the old cobblestone square, hot mulled wine served from copper kettles... The present I sent you last year was bought right there—”

“Ben?” she asked, looking at my father. Her eyes danced between us and she played with the buttons on her housedress with one frail hand.

“Do I know this handsome young man?”

Dad hesitated, looking at my crestfallen face, then patiently answered.

“Yes, Mother. It’s your grandson, John. He’s my son. Your grandson,” he prodded gently. “He’s been gone for a few years on assignment in Germany.”

She looked up at him and nodded vacantly. I sat up straighter, looking into her confused eyes, pleading.

“Gram? It’s Johnny. Remember? Don’t you remember me?”

My voice caught and I choked out the last few words. She smiled and put a trembling hand on my shoulder.

“I’m sure I would’ve been very proud of you,” she said.

I sat still, grateful for her empathy, but crushed. A leaden sensation played around my heart. My father changed the subject.

“Are you hungry, Mother?” he asked. “John and I are taking you to lunch today.”

She brightened. “Yes, I am. I’m tired of the old-people-food they force on me here. They tell me I eat like a bird, but it’s because there’s nothing good to eat. And they won’t give me any beer. Can you imagine that? The Prohibition is over! What kind of a hotel is this, anyway?”

I smiled involuntarily as I recognized traits of my familiar, feisty grandmother. She was still in there, somewhere.

Dad pushed her shoes to the side of the bed and helped her put them on. Her forehead crinkled and she stood unsteadily, looking around the room for something.

“Gram? Can I help?” I asked.

“My pocketbook. I can’t go out without my pocketbook.”

Dad laid his hand on her arm and flashed me a melancholy look.

“It’s okay, Mother. I’m buying today. No need for your purse.”

He helped her into a worn blue cardigan and we shuffled down the hall. When we passed the bedroom of an elderly man, she leaned over and whispered in my father’s ear.

“You have to do something about that Mr. Timothy, son. He keeps hitting on me. My stars, he must be at least eighty.”

“Okay, Mother. Will do. I’ll have a talk with the old coot.”

Dad smiled. Gram would be ninety next April.

We drove to the restaurant that specialized in her favorites: golden fried scallops and Narragansett beer. We slid into an empty booth across cracked red vinyl seats, and picked up the sticky menus. Dad and I shared one side, facing Grandma. She held the menu, but didn’t read it. Instead, she looked back and forth between us.

“You know,” she said, “you look like him!”

She nodded toward my father. I smiled.

“I should, Gram. I’m his son.”

“Oh...” she said. She still didn’t get it.

I tried another tact.

“Do you remember camp? On Great Pond?”

I touched on a few of my favorite childhood memories. Her eyes lit up.

“Of course I remember camp. What do you think I am, addlepated?”

She began to reminisce about people I hadn’t known, who had been her guests at the

fishing resort before I was born. Although she didn't remember me, we discovered a common ground. The tall pines. The cool, sparkling lake. The lonely tremolo of the loons.

I took a long pull on my beer. A bead of sweat rolled down the green glass surface and pooled on the Formica. We sat in contented silence, sifting through sweet memories.

“Gram?”

She looked at me expectantly, a pink blush spreading over her soft cheeks.

“Yes?”

“I remember when you and Po-pa used to bring me a slice of pizza from the café, always late at night. You'd wake me up for it. It was cold, and wrapped in a paper napkin. Best darned pizza I ever had.”

“I'm sorry,” she murmured with downcast eyes. “I don't remember anything these days.”

“It's okay. It doesn't matter.” I patted the back of her cold hand and warmed to the childhood memory.

“You also sang to me. Every night, before I fell to sleep.”

I began to sing—softly—so as not to arouse stares from the other patrons.

*Bon Soir Mes Amis, Bon Soir.
Bon Soir Mes Amis, Bon Soir.
We had such a good time together,
But now we must say
Bon Soir.*

Before I reached the second stanza, my grandmother's eyes lit up and she joined me, singing in a wavering soprano. My heart swelled. Her eyes sparkled and her face crinkled with joy. She popped the last scallop in her mouth, and laughed with a tinkling wind-chime sound, reaching across the table to lay her hand on mine.

“Oh, my. I love that song. I used to sing it to you when you were a boy.” Warmth filled her eyes.

“Isn't it nice to be with family?”

** *Bon Soir, Mes Amis* is dedicated to my grandmother and based on a true story.

See more about Aaron Lazar's books and life at www.legardemysteries.com

Part III



Anne K. Edwards

Death and the Detective

My name's Joe Davis. I run a small detective agency that handles the usual type of case found in a small town like Meadville. Runaway mates and divorce cases our specialty. Occasionally, we get a case with more hair on it, but never anything like the one that just wandered in off the street one day.

It was a typical July afternoon when even the sidewalks were sweating. I sat in front of an open window with a small fan blowing on my face as I leaned my back against the desk with my feet on the sill. The copy of Playboy I'd been lusting at slid off my lap when the door to my inner office opened.

I jumped up and got into my desk chair and tried to look busy. The hair on my neck and arms rose as if an electrostatic charge had passed over me as I sat. I glanced up. I never should've done that.

A character dressed in a black robe was blocking the doorway. His face was lost in the folds of an overlapping hood.

"Come in," I said. Never should've done that either.

The guy--well, he wasn't a guy... Couldn't tell what it was. He just stood there.

"You are Joseph Daniel Davis?" His voice was deep with gravel in it.

"Yeh. What do you want?" I didn't like the get up. "It ain't Halloween," I said. Made me hotter just looking at him and besides, he give me the creeps.

"You find people?"

I didn't like twenty questions with the door open. "Close the door and we'll discuss it," I said.

You can imagine my shock when he turned to close the door. A huge, long-handled scythe with the blade pointing back rested on his shoulder.

Death!

I blinked and shook my head. Couldn't be. Some stupid prank.

I pulled my pistol from the side desk drawer where I keep it and pointed it at him just in case.

He set the scythe against the wall with a large crack in the plaster and approached my desk. Then he pushed his hood back so I could see his face. I wished he hadn't done that. He didn't have a face.

I froze in my chair. My pistol fell onto the desk. I had trouble breathing. Death heads do that to me.

He loomed over my old wooden desk so I had to look up at him. A skull doesn't have any expression but I swear those empty eye sockets could see me.

I couldn't even shudder.

"What do you want?" I did manage to croak.

He pointed across the desk at me with a fingerbone that poked out of his sleeve. "You can stop being afraid," he said.

His jaw moved, but I didn't see how he could form any words. His voice sounded like rocks rolling around in a tin can.

How was it I could understand him?

I tried to breathe again. I stammered, repeating, "What--what do you want?" I still couldn't move.

"I'm not here for you," he rattled. "I want to hire you."

"Is this some kind of joke?" I forced the question out. "Did my ex-wife send you?" I didn't really believe this was happening. He wasn't real. Somehow I was being had. And I thought my vicious ex was the most likely to set me up.

"I'm not a joke," he rattled again. "I want you to find someone."

"How do I know you're real?" I asked. "I don't think death has a physical form."

"You require proof. Very well." He touched the pot of the only other live thing in the office, an African violet my last secretary gave me. Its meaty leaves shriveled as the lavender blossoms turned brown.

Then he turned back to me. "Do you believe now?"

I was forced to, wasn't I? "Yes."

"Fine. Shall we continue?" he asked.

I closed my eyes. Ah...I could move my eyelids.

As if he knew what I was thinking, my visitor said, "You can move if you want. Fear paralyzed you. Not me."

I tried to move. I could. A little. My brain began to function, too. Well, sort of. I realized if he was Death and had come for me, I'd be gone. So maybe he was telling the truth about not coming for me. And maybe I was going to buy the Brooklyn Bridge. A guy in his line of work probably said anything he had to, to get the job done. I mean, he was one of those Four Horsemen.

"Okay, who is it you want found? And I gotta know why. For the records." I tried not to let him see I thought I found a way to get rid of him. "And I don't do nothing illegal." Meanwhile, I'd try to think of how to send him on his way--without me.

He straightened and moved back from the desk a few inches. "I want you to find Calvin Desmond James. It's his time."

That threw me for a loop. *His* time? "You want me to find some guy so you can take him?"

The skull nodded.

I started to shake my head when the weirdness of the situation hit me. I laughed.

He never moved.

I started to feel uneasy. "I can't do that. I can't be no party to no killing."

"You wouldn't kill him." Death said. "I will. He's going to be thrown from his motorcycle and I have to be there."

"Why do you need me?" I tried to figure this out.

"We don't know where he is."

Well, there went any theory I might have had. Death couldn't find somebody? I didn't believe that.

He read my thoughts again. "We need him."

"Who is he that he's so important? Why don't you just go on to your next vic--er the next person on your list?" My body suddenly went limp. I was free. I could move so I did. I slid my chair back against the wall as far from him as I could get.

"Several years ago they hired him to program our computers--we didn't know how--and when he was done, he said his work was guaranteed and if we had any problems to come get him. We found a problem and now we need him."

"What's the problem? I know several geeks who could probably fix it."

Death shook his head. "Mr. James left his name off our list."

"Just one guy. Why not forget him and go on to the next one?"

"He's not allowed to live forever. He's eighty-three now and it's his time."

This was really getting strange. "So because he's old now, you gotta take him? How did you know about him at all if he's not on your list?"

"We share data. The birth records have to match the death records. If we let him go, it becomes a bookkeeping nightmare. Always short one in the accounts closed column." He leaned over the desk again. "That would never do."

Death works for a bunch of bookkeepers?

"How do you know when he's supposed to go, if he's not in your records?" I asked. I couldn't figure out how they could know the time a guy was supposed to go and not know where he was. Didn't make any sense.

"The time of passing is included at birth. Each person has an allotted time. No more. Each one is different."

"Don't you keep track of him while he's here?"

Death shook his head. "That's the Life Department and they have trouble keeping their data up to date since the invention of the automobile."

I kept quiet for a minute. Let him think I was considering taking the job. Okay. One thing sure to drive him away.

"You'll have to sign a contract," I told him. "It's a standard form. I don't take any job without a contract. I have to protect my license and, in case you don't pay," I figured I had him here. Death wouldn't be carrying cash or have a credit card, "I have proof you hired me if we gotta go to court."

No response. Nothing. Several seconds passed and then he nodded. The hood fell over his skull again.

"I'll sign the contract," Death said in that rolling-rock voice of his.

How could he? For a few moments I didn't know what to do. He'd called my bluff. So I took it one step farther. "I require five hundred bucks up front for two days and expenses. I refund anything not spent and you get a copy of the expense sheet. A bill, if it takes longer than two days."

He nodded again. The skeleton of a complete hand came out of the sleeve this time with five one-hundreds in it. He lay them on the desk.

I opened the center desk drawer and took out a contract and pen. While I had it open, I put the pistol back, then pushed the form over to him. He appeared to stare at the form for

a bit and then one word appeared on the line where the client signs.

Death.

I sagged in my chair. I had Death as a client. I was stuck. I figured if I tried to weasel out now, he'd take me for spite. Besides, I needed the money.

So, okay. I had a new client. He wanted a man found. I took a deep breath and found my backbone. Yeh, I know. Bad pun.

"Do you want to know what Mr. James looks like?" Death asked.

I shook my head. "Nope. Just tell me how you got in touch with him the first time."

He appeared to ruminate over the facts. "We ran an advertisement in the help-wanted section of the local newspaper."

Huh?

"And he answered it?" I asked.

Death nodded, his hood fluttering in a breeze the came in my window.

I looked at the sky. A storm was coming in. There'd be lots of noise in those clouds. They were black as sin, black as Death's robe. I'd have to close the window and then I'd roast. The landlord hadn't installed the new air conditioner yet.

"How long will it take you to find him?" Death asked, interrupting my train of self-pity.

I looked at him. Well, best get it over with. "Not long," I told him.

I pulled the cover off the computer and turned it on. I seldom used it, not being a techno-geek. It sat on a little stand in a shadowy corner out of the way. It always took a while to warm up. After a prolonged period of coffee-grinder sounds and grunts like a contented pig, the screen lit up. I clicked on the logo for my server and waited for the connection. No, I didn't have the speedy service. Cost too much. I only used the machine to play games and visit a few adult sites. Yeh, I know. I had too much free time. My ex-wife says the same thing. I need to get a better job...

Finally, the server answered and I was on. I brought up the search engine I favored and clicked on the name find logo. When the screen came up, I typed in Calvin Desmond

James, clicked and waited.

Death seemed taller now. His hood faced the monitor. I swear his bones rattled with excitement.

A screen came up, notifying me of sixty-six Calvin Desmond James in the country.

"I'll need Mr. James' last known address," I told Death as I started looking for an eighty-three year old man. The name find service I subscribed to included age, occupation, address, criminal record, date of birth, phone number, and other information.

"He never gave it to us."

I raised my head to look at him. "How did you pay him? Didn't he send you a bill?"

The hood moved in a negative fashion. "He was paid just as you have been."

Great. So now I had to check all the names.

I scrolled down slowly, discounting the first fifteen. On the sixteenth, I sensed that static electrical charge again.

Death pointed at the screen. "That's him. He's eighty-three."

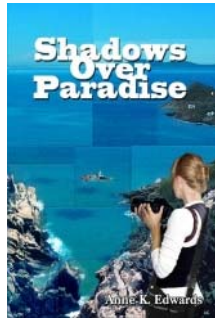
"There might be more than one. Let me finish checking before you go rushing off and maybe get the wrong guy," I objected. Much as I wanted him gone, I had to be sure. He seemed to be fidgeting with his robe, but he waited. I noticed though that he moved closer to the door and his scythe.

I rolled through the rest of the list and found no more of a matching age. I scrolled back up to the sixteenth name. "That's him," I said. And felt sad for the guy who thought he'd fixed it so he'd live forever. But bookkeepers are a persistent bunch. They'll spend hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars to find a missing penny so I guess Death is one of them.

Death opened the door and turned to me. "If we ever need to find anyone else, I'll be back." He vanished.

Wonderful. Just wonderful.

Fini



Shadows Over Paradise

by Anne K. Edwards

Chapter One

It never failed. Plan something and someone else would try throwing a monkey wrench in the works. Like now.

Julia stared at Captain Martinez. “What do you mean, telling me that I shouldn’t have come?” The audacity.

“I said, Miss Graye,” the old sailor answered, “this is no time for visitors. There’s trouble on Tiboo.” He waved a hand in what was, she supposed, the general direction of her destination. “You might find the trip isn’t worth it.”

Unbelievable. He was simply supposed to meet her at the airport and deliver her to Tiboo, but, instead, was trying to talk her into going home without seeing Suzanne. He certainly took a lot onto himself.

“What kind of trouble?” She spoke loudly to be heard over the babble of passengers and echoing announcements from hidden speakers.

“Political, Miss.” His wide jaw tightened.

“How can the political situation in the Mantuan Islands have anything to do with Suzanne’s wedding?” she demanded, impatiently shoving hair out of her eyes.

He put on his cap. “If you insist on staying, remember, I warned you. Another time, I’d be the first to make you welcome.”

“I won’t be turned away without seeing her.” His attitude was most irritating.

The captain ran a sun-darkened hand over his stubbled chin and shrugged.

He hailed a tall, scrawny porter who looked like he might break in two as he bent to pick up her bags. The man stacked them in his handcart with a flourish. Julia tagged along behind as he led them through heavy glass doors into the warm, muggy evening air. Taxis waited beneath a brightly lighted mural of native Mantuans in the act of worshipping the island gods.

The porter set her luggage in the trunk of the nearest cab, an aged vehicle painted bright green. Motor idling loudly, it belched small clouds of blue smoke into the air. Peeling gold lettering on the doors spelled out "*Moltani's Taxi*". The interior smelled of mildew and dampness. Julia slid carefully onto the rear seat, hoping the grimy upholstery wouldn't soil her new blue suit. She sank into the rump-sprung seat with the sensation of being swallowed alive.

Captain Martinez tipped the porter, receiving a wolfish grin of thanks in return. Pulling the empty cart after him, the man disappeared into the crowd. The captain climbed in beside her and closed the door with an emphatic thud.

With a roar and blue plume trailing, the taxi edged into a long line of bicycles and slow moving autos. In the background, the honking of horns beat out the rhythm of island traffic.

They rode in silence for several minutes until Julia could bear his obvious annoyance no longer. "Captain?"

"Yes?" He kept his gaze fixed on the passing lights, hands resting lightly on his knees.

"Could you tell me what's wrong?"

He shifted his weight and adjusted his cap, before looking at her. "Some of the locals don't want strangers on Tiboo." His deepset, brown eyes contained an expression she couldn't read.

"Why?"

The captain shook his head. "I've said enough, Miss. I didn't intend to alarm you. I thought it would be easier on the family if they didn't have to worry about a visitor right now."

Something in his demeanor made her wonder what lay behind his words. The suggestion that a wedding could involve local politics was a poor invention. Why?

Julia had read about the growing movement in this Pacific Island paradise to attain statehood or their independence. Could that somehow be the problem? "I don't intend to get involved in anything other than Suzanne's wedding."

He shrugged, returning his gaze to the night.

She sank into brooding. Why had Suzanne invited her to the wedding? Because there was no email service on the islands, their infrequent letters had been the only method of communication. Suzanne had written little on the progression of her latest romance, then, suddenly, came the news of her impending marriage.

Julia accepted the invitation with enthusiasm. She eagerly looked forward to seeing her old friend and visiting the exotic Mantuan Islands she'd heard so much about.

She was certain many changes had occurred in Suzanne's life during the six years that had passed since their college days. Would they still be friends?

What she knew of Suzanne's family had been gleaned from casual conversations in those days and more recent letters that contained little news. Her mother, Margaret LaBoudrie, devoted her life to her family. The older sister, whose name Julia couldn't recall, had died unexpectedly about three years ago. How full of sorrow that letter had been. There was a stepbrother, Beau, who'd given up his life at sea to run the family plantation when his father succumbed to cancer just before Suzanne graduated. Julia recalled meeting Lou, her friend's brother, on his visit to their school. In spite of his shyness, he'd worked up the courage to ask Julia out. She'd refused because she had a steady.

Briefly, her thoughts touched on her old boyfriend. Steady? Charles? She tried to remember just why she'd been so attracted to him. His good looks had covered a flawed character--always taking the easy way out. He desired the good life and found it with Bitsy Warden, a pliant wife who gave it to him with her father's money. Poor girl didn't get a very good bargain.

Annoyed at herself for wasting time on him, Julia closed her mind to those recollections. She had come to relax, not rehash a past she could do nothing about. Not that there weren't regrets.

Like Charles, her youthful hopes were just memories. The challenge of everyday life left little time to chase dreams. Her routine was dull, safe, while she struggled to finish the one novel a publisher would accept.

She gave herself a mental shake and thrust such thoughts back into the corner of her mind where they belonged. This was a vacation and she was determined to enjoy herself.

Her writer's eye turned to the passing traffic. Through her own reflection on the window, she watched as pedestrians and cyclists moved unhurriedly in the golden haze of sunset. How different Orinda was from her imaginings. As the capital of the Mantuan Islands, she'd thought it would bustle and hum like New York or San Francisco. Instead, the city had the introspective atmosphere of a small town that closed in on itself at night. If the capital was this quiet, how lonely the scattered plantations on the different islands must be. Apparently, the trouble on Tiboo hadn't spread to Marcora, the largest island of the

Mantuas.

* * *

The cab discharged Julia and Captain Martinez on the waterfront where odors of oily brine, fish, and salt-seasoned wood perfumed the damp air. She wrinkled her nose in distaste at the stench of gasoline and diesel fuel coming from the dockside pumps. Stories and movies didn't portray the waterfront as it really was

She peered closely at the boats tied to the dock as they danced slowly on their lines. One of them, a squat-bodied vessel, resembled a cross between the ocean-going tugs and converted fishing boats she'd seen on a trip to New York City harbor. Large old tires gently repelled the little ship from the pilings as the watery slap-slap of the tide crept in. Scarred woodwork and peeling paint scarcely showed in the growing dark. Below deck, sturdy engines chugged softly, gurgling exhaust. In the gloom created by the dock light, Julia could see faded letters on the prow "*The Flighty Maid*".

The Maid shared the dock with a charter boat that catered to tourists and several fishing boats. An inter-island ferry was tying up for the night. Out in the deep water of the harbor, a brightly lit cruise ship was anchored. On shore, a few late tourists sought out straggling locals for authentic island flavor.

Near a pile of unmarked crates a greasy-haired, unshaven man in a torn shirt emerged from the shadows. He walked with a seaman's swagger, swinging his muscular torso and arms from side to side. This rolling gait gave him the appearance of being larger than he actually was.

Captain Martinez stiffened at Julia's side as the man approached. His small, close-set eyes raked her in bold appraisal as he gave her a broken-toothed grin of approval. She looked away with a grimace.

Removing a red-banded cigarette from his lips, he said, "I gotta have a word, Martinez." Thrusting hanging hair from his round face with dirty fingers, he peered down at the shorter man. "The boss wants you." He exhaled a cloud into the air, then took another draw.

The acrid smoke drifted into Julia's face. She sneezed.

"I don't want to see the boss, Long," the captain said quietly, his hand slipping into the sagging pocket of his worn black leather jacket. "You understand?"

Long tapped the rough leather knife sheath on his belt. "I get whatcha mean, but the boss ain't gonna like it none." His light blue eyes narrowed. "And that gun yer carryin' won't give you much pertection." He crushed the smoke under his worn boot.

"Make sure you tell your boss what I said," Captain Martinez growled, straightening his

shoulders. "I carry the gun to use on vermin."

Long's coarse face hardened as he gave the old sailor a look of hatred. "One of these days we'll have a long chat about that." The words sounded like a threat.

Julia sidled behind the captain when the man cast another leer in her direction and strutted away. Captain Martinez waited until he vanished around the crates before starting for the ship with her close on his heels.

"Who was that awful man?" she asked in a low voice.

"Just someone who had something to say," he said.

His curt manner stung, reminding her that she was an unwanted visitor.

The shadowy figure of another man lurked at the edge of the light beyond a pile of barrels. Tipping his dark cap to her, he departed behind Long.

At The Maid's berth, dockhands shifted cargo aboard. Julia trod carefully, her leather soles slippery on the aged wharf's wet surface. She envied Captain Martinez's surefootedness as he leaped aboard. He turned and stretched a hand toward her. "Easy now. Grab my hand."

Taking the gap between ship and pier in a jump, Julia landed clumsily at his side as the deck rose beneath her feet. She gripped his arm for support. The nearest dockside worker handed her luggage over the rail.

A tall sailor appeared from the hold as the laden cargo net swung out to hover above the open hatch. He quickly unloaded it, lowering heavy boxes one at a time to unseen hands below. The captain watched for a moment, before speaking, "Beau'll stow your bags in the passenger lounge. We'll be getting underway soon." Then, he moved off to supervise the tying down of a large crate on deck.

Julia watched with interest as Beau emptied the net, slammed the hatch, and shoved the bolt home. Was he the stepbrother Suzanne had adored from afar during their college years?

He came forward wordlessly to pick up her baggage, disappearing with it through a narrow door on the port side marked "*Lounge*".

Rebuffed by the chilly reserve of her first contacts in Marcora, Julia looked longingly at the dock as a second taxi stopped under the light. A black-haired woman in white got out and approached The Maid with obvious distaste. The cabbie followed to hand bags and boxes aboard.

"Andre?" Her throaty voice quavered slightly. She avoided Julia's curious gaze.

“Yes, Miss Isabelle.” Captain Martinez extended a hand to her.

She came off the dock with a graceful movement, her white skirt flipping up to reveal long, shapely legs. Scanning the deck as if searching for someone, she spoke rapidly, before the captain could make introductions, “I’d like to go to the lounge. I’ve got a terrible headache.” As she passed, Isabelle gave Julia a sly, malevolent glare.

Julia reacted instinctively to the hostility in those brown eyes. She turned away, head high, to show her contempt for such behavior. Why waste time trying to get acquainted?

Captain Martinez escorted Isabelle to the lounge with the courtesy due a queen. He reappeared in moments, muttering to himself, “That woman will drive us all crazy. Why I ever let myself get drawn into her schemes, I don’t know.”

He shook his head, growling orders to the dock hands to cast off the lines. Aggravation showed in the tautness of his prominent jaw as he spoke to Julia. “You should go inside, Miss. The sea’s rough and the spray’ll ruin your nice clothes.”

“I’d prefer to remain on deck,” she told him. Being alone was better than sharing the lounge with that snotty woman.

He nodded, touched his cap with a callused hand, and went up to the pilothouse.

The Maid was soon underway, engines murmuring farewell to Orinda. Once beyond the Marcora Harbor breakwater, the ship encountered rough seas. Windborne spray coated the deck with a skin of greasy-looking water. Clutching the dripping stern rail, Julia shivered as the wet penetrated her thin jacket. Her sightseeing guide had mentioned the rough currents around some of the islands, but she had never imagined this.

The lights of the city sank on the horizon. The Maid seemed pitifully small when measured against the waves. Julia desired nothing more than the feel of solid earth under her feet instead of pitching, wooden planking. Her stomach jerked in time to the movement of The Maid. The dark was all the more alarming because she could see nothing beyond the faint glow cast by the ship’s running lights.

Julia’s resolve to remain on deck weakened and died. Bested by nerves and weariness, chilled by the wind, she made her way hand over hand along the rail to climb the metal steps to the pilothouse where the captain stood behind the wheel.

“Captain, may I stay with you?” She tried to keep the tremor from her voice as she stepped uninvited through the doorway. His bluntness would be preferable to staying on deck or spending the trip confined with the woman he’d called Miss Isabelle.

His grunt was noncommittal as his eyes remained on the invisible horizon.

The motion of the ship caused the door to swing shut. “I’m sorry to be a bother,” Julia

apologized lamely, grabbing the rail in front of her as a surge staggered The Maid, “but I’ve never been on a boat at night.”

“No matter,” he said gruffly, drawing on his pipe as The Maid’s engines resumed their even beat. “The current gets a bit rough at times.”

“Please tell me about the islands.” Anything to get her mind off those waves that could swallow the little boat in one gulp.

The lines on his brow deepened thoughtfully. “When I sailed a small trader, we had a spiel for the tourists. That do?” He exhaled slowly and watched the smoke be pulled through the open window.

“Yes.” She closed her eyes against another roll of her stomach.

“The Islands were discovered in the seventeen eighties by a trader out of India who got blowed off course. Didn’t stay too long. Took on water and sailed away. Later, traders out of the Orient made contact with the natives, followed by whalers, explorers, and missionaries. Weren’t many natives left after their diseases got spread around.”

She wondered at the hint of anger as he spoke. Was he a native?

He continued, “They had a King Kaluma killed by a French pirate named Avenduc. He claimed the islands as his own and set up a government with himself as king.”

“What happened to Avenduc?”

“Spanish came. Killed him. They was pirates too. Gave the islands their name.”

A wave passed under them. The Maid shuddered, seemed to hesitate, before plunging gamely on. Julia shut her eyes, waiting for her landlubber stomach to subside. She prayed the captain would soon tell her they’d reached their destination.

Captain Martinez fell silent, his attention on The Maid broken only to relight his pipe. For several minutes he seemed oblivious to Julia’s presence, his thoughts gone like the wind-grabbed smoke.

At last, unable to bear the water-filled stillness any longer, she broke into his reverie. Returning to the subject of the islands, she hoped her interest sounded genuine. “When did the islands become a U.S. possession?”

“After World War Two. They’re a tourist attraction these days. Lot of new hotels going up.” His words were tinged with regret. “Time used to stand still in Mantua. Now we’re being caught up in the rush to modernize. What was a paradise is going to disappear one day.”

“How do the islanders make a living? Do they grow coconuts or pineapples?”

She blushed as her ignorance brought a wry smile to his lips. “We have pineapple and some sugar plantations. Many of us are fishermen or traders.” He sucked on his pipe, then held it aloft, as if addressing it. “And there are the tourists. They’re welcome, but too many stay. They put pressure on the natives who sell out without realizing they’re betraying their children’s heritage.”

“When did the LaBoudries come to the islands?” She tried to think of other questions to keep him talking.

“Beau’s grandfather came from France to take employment as a manager of the Duchense plantation and married the owner’s daughter.” His eyes took on a faraway look as though remembering a time gone by.

Julia could see the captain didn’t like the changes occurring in the islands. She understood, but that was the way of the world. Change. Sometimes it brought good and sometimes, it didn’t.

“Is Tiboo very big?” Suzanne’s description of her island home came back in bits and pieces. Green mountains, few valleys, sparse population.

“Big enough.” He gave the wheel a twist and suddenly she realized they had passed into much calmer water.

Julia breathed easier. She asked, “Is Ramon de Cordova from Mantua?” Suzanne’s letter containing the invitation to share in the festivities had given no information about the groom.

Curiosity glinted in his eyes. “He comes from an old island family.”

She sensed his skepticism. How, as a friend, could she not know about the man Suzanne intended to marry?

Captain Martinez withdrew into himself.

The ensuing silence told her much. Judging by the rigid set of his jaw, he did not view the impending nuptials with favor any more than he approved of her visit.

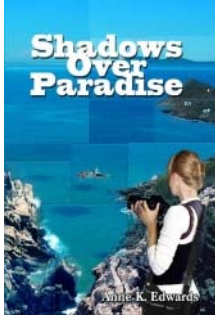
“You don’t think Suzanne should be getting married, do you?” His manner showed that he was uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had taken.

He raised a shoulder and let it fall, his darkened profile giving no clue to his private thoughts. His eyes were fixed on something she couldn’t see outside the range of the boat’s dim lights. She tried to follow his gaze and saw only the reflected glow of gauges, one of which blinked steadily like the beat of a heart.

Abruptly, the throb of the motors slowed as the distant light of a single beam reached

Literary Sampler

toward the ship. The moon sank out of sight behind the dark form of a tall, cone-shaped mountain as The Maid entered a harbor where glittering ripples performed a watery ballet of welcome.



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“This book impelled me to read late into the night. I simply couldn't put it down. Anne K. Edwards has created a twister of deception and mystery that kept me guessing at the culprits. The climax gripped me and left me breathless all the way to the fully satisfying ending.” – Marya Calvani

“*Shadows Over Paradise* is a delightful romp in a beautifully described lush tropical locale, with vibrant characters who jump from the pages. The twists and turns keep you guessing until the very satisfying end.” Aaron Paul Lazar

Mugging Death

by **Anne K. Edwards**

There are some days it don't pay to get out of bed. Wednesday was one of them. I should have gone to the ball game with my buddy, Hal Reaster, but no, not me. I have a work ethic. And I like to eat regularly.

So there I was, at my desk, finishing up a report on Tacky Mundt's wife and her newest lover when the door opened. The hair on the back of my neck rose and gooseflesh crawled up my arms. My stomach turned over and my heart began to thunder like a runaway horse.

Not again.

I didn't want to look up. I recognized that awful feeling. I knew who it was. Maybe, I thought, I could pretend he wasn't there and he'd go away. I kept my eyes glued on the form on my desk and hoped.

After a couple of minutes, I realized it wasn't working. He was still there, floating a few inches above the floor, just like the last time. For some reason, that bothered me. Why couldn't he wear a pair of brogans? I took a deep breath and gave up.

I looked at him. And wished I'd stayed in bed.

Death still gave me the creeps.

His black hood covered his skull. At least I didn't have to see his bony head.

"Come in and close the door." I croaked. I didn't want no one to see him. I mean, how would it look? Me--doing business with the likes of him?

He floated toward my beat-up old desk as the door closed.

"Just passing through, I hope," I said.

"No," he said. He still sounded like a bunch of rocks rolling around in a rusty tin can. It bothered me how I heard him in my head. I wondered if other people did too.

He came straight to the point. "I need your help once more," he said.

“Why don’t you give your business to someone else?” I asked without any real hope he would.

“You do satisfactory work. I see no reason to change,” he pointed at a stain on his sleeve with his bony finger. “This is why I need your services. Give me the contract to sign.”

I wished his voice wasn’t so hard on the brain. Mine felt like it had rocks of its own. “I think you ought to see Sammy Clarren, down the street. Clarren’s Cleaners. They take out stains.” I didn’t think Sammy would thank me for sending him to their establishment. “I don’t take stains out of robes.”

Death made some sort of low noise that sounded like a groan of frustration. “The stain isn’t important,” he told me. “I need you to find the mortal responsible. Give me the contract.”

“I told you the last time, I won’t be responsible for you taking someone’s life.” He didn’t get it. On a previous occasion when I’d helped him, he took some old geezer who’d thought he’d figured out a way to live forever.

“I don’t want to take him. He took something from me.” Death aimed his head at the computer that slept in its shadowy corner. “I want you to find him on that.” He pointed at the machine.

I blinked.

“What? You want me to find a crook? You think I can just type in ‘crooks’ and his name will pop up on a list?”

Death raised his head so that he faced me. Guy had absolutely no sense of humor. But what did he expect coming in here with such a stupid request?

“My implement must be returned to me,” he sounded more gravelly than ever.

My turn to not understand. “What implement?”

He gave a loud moan. Just like you’d expect to hear on Halloween at midnight in a haunted house.

I stared at him. My brain had turned to mush. I had no idea what he meant. The only implement Death carried was a scythe...

I roared. I couldn't help it. I got it. He must've been mugged.

I swiped at the tears that flowed down my cheeks. "You were robbed?" I wondered how he'd explain that to his bookkeeping bosses. The thought was enough to nearly send me into another laughing fit, but I managed to control myself.

"I was sent to take someone who sleeps in that alley."

I hopped in. "You got mugged in an alley? On the job?" I roared again. This was rich. Some idiot dared jump Death. Hadda be drunk or high. Or just plain stupid. "Don't you know better than to go in alleys after dark?" I asked without thinking.

He made that rattling moan again.

I'd swear he was embarrassed if he could've displayed any emotion. Tsk-tsking him, I asked, "Why do you need the scythe anyhow? It's just a symbol, isn't it?"

He shook his head, his whole robe swinging back and forth. "My implement helps me separate the soul from the body. It must be returned!" The rock-and-rusty-can sound was louder than ever.

I shook my head to clear it of what felt like an echo and changed the subject. "That's why they call you The Grim Reaper?" I didn't add that 'grim' came from being so humorless.

"Yes." He turned toward me so I could see under his hood.

I still didn't like the view.

"This is how I appear to some of those I visit. You see me as your media has presented me over the years--like this. This image is fixed in your mind. I may appear as an angel to others or as a relative. I am a guide, a messenger or a conductor."

He took his job seriously. I half expected him to launch into a speech about the film and books written about him, but he didn't. Lucky me.

He pointed at the computer again. "If that won't help, how will you find the thief?"

I pushed a contract form across the desk to him and rolled my chair back from the desk.

"Yes, I see. You must have a contract and your fee." He grew still as he stared at the form.

His name appeared on the contract. *Death*. My fee appeared beside it.

I shuddered.

Pretending to relax, I crossed my legs, then picked up a pen and the steno pad I used to take notes. "Okay. Tell me what happened--from the beginning."

He gave a sort of shudder like I do at the sight of him and said, "I was sent to take one Daniel Klavier Setter. He's spent his life in that alley. Drinking has destroyed his liver and now he is in terrible pain. I was entering the alley to take him when a mortal jumped on my back. I was caught by surprise and thrown against a building."

Gad! His voice could scrape the paint off a wall.

I let the pen fall in my lap and scratched my chin. It was a good pose. "Couldn't you have simply thrown him aside?" Death could overcome all obstacles I'd been told.

Death lowered his head and moved to the window. "No. I dare not touch those who are not ready."

Umff. I got it. "Mess up the bookkeeping, would it?" I said.

His hood moved in what I thought was a 'yes'. If the writers and moviemakers only knew about that. It would kill the interest in all those books and films.

"The mortal said he wanted my money. I told him I didn't have any. So he grabbed my implement from where I'd dropped it and ran away."

"Didn't you try to catch him?" I picked up the pen again and started a tic-tac-toe game on the pad and wound up drawing a hanged stick man holding a scythe.

He gave out another of those horrible groans. His robe moved like he was crying. Nah, couldn't be.

"I didn't dare." He raised his head so that his empty sockets looked down at me. I could see he had a problem. "So that's why you need me?"

His hood bobbed again.

I quit messing and got ready to take some real notes. "Where were you?"

“I told you.”

“I mean the street address.”

He was quiet for several seconds as if rummaging around in his memory. “Daniel Klavier Setter is in the alley between Fifth and Sixth Streets.”

“He lives behind Pootle’s Bar and Grill?” I knew the place well. My sometime gal friend, Kitty, worked there. Not much to look at on the outside, but real homey inside.

“What did the guy look like that jumped you?” I’d have to start leggin’ it door-to-door to find this one.

“He is shorter than you with a thick body. His hair is red and long.”

“How come he didn’t die when he jumped you if you can’t touch him?” I had to ask that one. My curiosity about these things gets to itchin’.

“I didn’t touch him with my hands or implement,” he sounded like an exasperated truck with a bad muffler. “Touching my robe won’t take him.”

The fool had a brush with Death and might never know. “Could he kill with it?”

Death nodded. “If he used it like a weapon, but just touching them with it--no.”

I wasn’t sure I understood.

He seemed to know. “I need my implement to complete the picture of myself. It makes the person to be taken understand who I am and why I have come. I touch them with the scythe to release their soul. This is what they expect. I do not cause pain.”

“You mean, the picture has to be complete before we’ll go with you? No matter how we think you should look?”

He nodded. “You mortals seem to require it.”

I wasn’t sure of what he’d just told me. Did he just tell me he was a figment of our imagination? I shook my head. Nah, couldn’t be. I did *not* spend my time thinking about him.

I got back to the problem. “Did you at least follow him?”

He nodded.

“Where did he go?”

“A mortal in a blue suit caught him as he was running down the street. He put him in a white car with a light on top. My implement was sticking out the window when they left.”

I couldn’t help it. I began to chuckle and it became a belly laugh. That was a picture I could see.

“Must of been Murphy that grabbed your boy,” I said after I quit gasping.

I reached for the phone. It was the old-fashioned kind with a cord. I dialed the station house over on Maple Street.

Nate Thomas answered. My lucky day.

“Yeh? Whatcha want?” He was pleasant as always. I could hear a radio in the background playing hard rock.

“Hey, Nate. Murph around?”

“He’s finishing up paperwork on some idiot he picked up,” he laughed. “High as a kite and carrying a big sickle.”

Then I heard him holler at Murphy. “Hey, Murph. Yer big-deal detective friend is on the line.”

No, we don’t have nine-one-one yet. Town’s too small and the old system works just fine.

Murph came on the line. “Hey, Joe. What’s up?”

“Hi, Murph.” I paused while I fought down a case of idiot giggles. Detectives don’t giggle. We guffaw or we laugh. We never giggle.

“Gotta make it fast, Joe. I gotta get back on patrol.”

“That’s sorta why I’m calling. You picked up a guy carrying a scythe.”

Murph laughed. “Damnedest thing I ever saw. High as a kite an’ draggin’ this huge scythe down the street behind him.”

“That scythe belongs to a friend of mine and he’ll be needing it soon. You know how it is with some guys and their tools.”

“Ah! Okay. It takes up too much room in the evidence locker anyhow. Don’t need it for my case. I arrested Tall Paul Smith because he was so doped up and causin’ a ruckus. He said the scythe wasn’t his.”

“Did he tell you how he got it?”

Murph laughed again. “Yeh. He says he took it from some dude wearin’ a black dress with a black hat. Jumped him in an alley. Think he’d be interested in pressin’ charges?”

“Nah. He just wants his scythe back.”

“Tell him, he can pick it up...” Murph started to say.

I cut him off. It wasn’t likely he’d want my *friend* to pick it up. “I’ll stop by to get it in a few minutes. He lives out of town.”

Murph agreed and hung up.

I turned to Death. “Where is my scythe?” he demanded rolling those rocks in that tin can.

“At the station house. The thief was picked up for causin’ trouble. It’s located on the corner of Elm at Main Streets. I’ll go get it.” I got to my feet and looked up.

Death had vanished.

It took a minute to sink in.

The phone rang. I grabbed it.

Murph spluttered, “Hey, Joe. You know that scythe you wanted to pick up?”

“Yeh.” I had a hunch of what was comin’.

Literary Sampler

“It’s gone! Can’t find it nowhere. I was gonna get it ready for you to pick up, but it ain’t in the locker.”

I closed my eyes against a sudden headache. No way was I tellin’ the truth.

“Well, I guess I’ll have to tell my friend his scythe is gone. He’ll have to get a new one.”

Murph grunted. I could feel his relief over the phone. The police would never live down having evidence taken from under their noses. Not something that big.

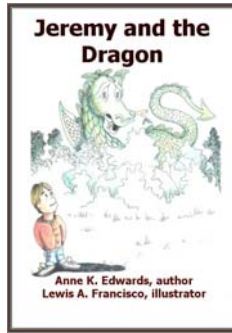
He hung up.

I tried to figure it out. Death must have retrieved the scythe the same way he left my office.

I pocketed the five-hundred-dollar fee. I wasn’t reporting that as income. My ex-wife didn’t need to know about it. Then I tore up the contract Death had signed. I wasn’t going to try explaining that to anyone either.

Who’d believe me?

Fini



Jeremy and the Dragon

By Anne K. Edwards
Artwork by Lewie Francisco

Once upon a time a little boy named Jeremy Kunkle had two older brothers named Jason and Regard who liked to tease him because he was smaller than they were. One day, Jason and Regard were going to play in the woods and Jeremy asked if he could go with them

“You can’t come with us,” Jason told Jeremy. “We’re going to play lost in space and our space ship landed in the woods.”

Regard said, “Dad told us, we’d get in trouble for taking you in the woods.”

Jason looked at Jeremy. “The woods are awful scary. There’s lots of paths that go around in circles and you could get lost. You’d never come out and nobody would ever find you,” he said.

“I want to see the wild animals,” Jeremy said. He was disappointed. Just because they were older, they didn’t want to play with him. They always said he was too little.

Jason shook his head. “There aren’t any wild animals. The dragons ate them.”

“Dragons?” Jeremy’s mouth fell open.

Regard covered a big smile with his hands. “The dragons live in the woods. We saw them once,” he told Jeremy.

“Are they big? Who owns them? What do they look like?” Jeremy asked.

Regard gave him a scornful look. “The wizard owns them. He lives in a castle way back in the woods. They guard it for him.”

“Yes, and they’re big. Almost as big as our house,” Jason added.

Jeremy’s eyes got round.

“There’s two of them. A red one and a green one. The red one is bigger than the green one. And he has a horn on his nose,” said Regard.

“A horn?” asked Jeremy.

Regard nodded. “Yes. That’s how you tell a boy dragon from a girl dragon. Boy dragons have horns on their noses,” he said. “Didn’t you know that?”

Jeremy pretended he did. “Yes.”

“If the dragons see you in the woods, they’ll chase you,” Jason said. “And if they catch you, they might eat you.”

Jeremy was very impressed. His brothers had seen dragons. Dragons! He wished he were big enough to see the dragons.

“We have to go,” Jason said. “We have to find our space ship.”

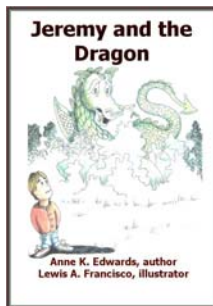
Jeremy watched as they ran shouting into the trees, waving their laser guns. They better be careful the dragons didn’t see them.

Jeremy went to sit in his swing that hung from the lowest limb of the old maple tree in his back yard. It was his thinking spot. And now he wanted to think about dragons.

Dragons!

Just once he’d like to explore the Dark Forest. He called the woods behind his house the Dark Forest because when you looked under the trees, you couldn’t see anything.

And it was where dragons lived. He got all shivery to think of them.



Jeremy and the Dragon is available in eBook format at Fictionwise.com and Kindle at Amazon and publisher <http://www.twilighttimesbooks.com>. Click [here](#) to purchase.

Altering Death

by Anne K. Edwards

It was sometime on Monday and I couldn't see straight. A weekend drunk to celebrate the end of my alimony payments. My ex-wife was safely married again to some poor sap and I was free.

Free! What a wonderful word.

Free! I could almost taste the flavor of it--like the richest Cuban cigar made and the finest scotch. That was how I'd celebrated last night. Now I paid for my celebration. But it was worth it. A temporary discomfort.

No more alimony. That was permanent. No more nagging about late payments or my other many sins. The nagging had made me realize I'd never be happy as a married man.

I was lying the floor. I rolled over onto my back and banged my head on the only good leg of the coffee table. I grunted and sat up, rubbing my noggin where a small bump quickly formed. Not a promising start to the day.

After several tries, I managed to clamber to my feet, using the old blue sofa to lever myself upright. My head pounded from the effort. The pain of a hangover and that klonk on the head added to the mix.

I was sure I was standing straight, but the room leaned. First one way, then the other. It took some doing. I found if I was careful, I could make it from one piece of furniture to the next. I headed for the bathroom.

I stank. No other way to put it. I smelled of smoke, booze, some flowery bug repellent called Lover's Twain and sweat. The stinky perfume must have belonged to the gal I met in Skeeter's Bar after my fourth glass. I couldn't remember her name or what she looked like now, but last night I'd thought she was beautiful.

A long hot shower and four aspirin helped reduce the pain in my head. When I stepped out of the bathroom, I found my sight was clear. And I wished it hadn't been.

He was floating just off the floor in the middle of my living room with his finger bones clutching his scythe. At least, this time he hadn't lost it.

"I need your help," Death said. Just like before, his voice sounded like a bunch of stones being rolled in an empty tin bucket. What was strange was I thought I could smell flowers--roses and lilacs maybe. Had he been to a funeral?

"Again?" I tried sarcasm. It hadn't worked before, yet one could always hope. *He* might take the hint.

He nodded. The hood of his shroud fell forward over his skull so I couldn't see his--what would you call it--his face? Whatever... I didn't want to see it or any part of him now or in the future.

"Go away," I said as nastily as I could. I didn't want to be bothered by his weird problems. Even if he did pay well. That would be bad for business--okay, it would be if anyone found out I had dealings with him. Who'd hire a P.I. who worked for Death? If they believed me, if I was stupid enough to tell them, and if I didn't wind up wearing one of those funny jackets in a padded cell.

"I need your help," he repeated. It was plain he had no intention of leaving until I heard him out.

I stalled, pouring myself a cup of coffee. It looked like, smelled like and tasted like tar. The maker had been on all night. The jolt of triple-strength caffeine hit my empty stomach and nerves with a sizzle.

"I gotta get some clothes on," I told him. The air conditioner was working for once and someone had set it at 65 degrees. My goose pimples had goose pimples. I didn't want him to see me naked either. I couldn't explain it, but the idea seemed indecent. Even to my fuzzled mind.

His hood moved in a nod. He'd wait.

I looked at the clock. Almost noon and my brain was just beginning to function. I was cold. No wonder. I was wearing only a wet towel.

I dressed slowly, not wanting to find out what strange thing my client needed me to do. Even though he paid well, he weirded me out.

I wondered if this ever happened to anybody else. Had he ever bothered Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple? What would they have done if he had?

Finally, I couldn't think of another thing to do to myself so I went out to face him. He was in the same place, and now two sets of foot bones protruded from the bottom of his shroud and made contact with my carpet. I wouldn't have been surprised to see one of them tapping impatiently at the way I'd kept him waiting. I don't really think Death has a sense of time, however.

I refilled my coffee mug and dropped onto the nearest chair. Gathering my courage, I asked, "What is it this time?"

"I have to get married," he sort of growled.

I stared at him. I couldn't have heard right. "What?"

"I have to get married," he repeated.

I howled. I couldn't stop. "Married? You? You...have...to?" It was the weirdest problem yet. I had trouble catching my breath.

After a few more window-rattling guffaws, I wound down to a stupid giggle. "Did you get some gal knocked up?" I couldn't resist the question. It cracked me up again.

"No," he rattled.

If I hadn't known better, I'd have said he was annoyed. This was the nuttiest thing I ever heard. A guy only I could see unless he was about to collect a soul was going to get married. What woman in her right mind... How...

"Do you know how ridiculous this sounds?" I asked, choking back more laughter.

"Yes," he rattled again. Then he pointed that scythe at me.

I shuddered and went numb all over. If that thing touched me, I was a goner. I stood and moved away from the chair. My coffee mug nearly broke as I dropped it on the nearest end table.

I had a strange premonition I was going to be attending the wedding. No way that was going to happen. I wouldn't.

"You have to help me." He didn't sound like he was asking for help.

I shook my head. "No way," I told him. "I'm not going to any wedding of yours." I took up a position near my door. I might just be able to get out before he could swing that scythe in my direction.

"You are the only one who can help me," his feet disappeared and he floated toward me with the scythe over his shoulder. It was like he knew what I was thinking.

"I can't help you," I told him. "If nobody else can see you but me, you can't marry anybody."

But I had to admit my curiosity was piqued. "By the way, who were you going to marry?"

"Eldona Secrist," he rasped.

"Eldona?" I couldn't believe it. I'd known her most of my life. She was an old lady who lived down the street from my family when I was a kid. When she started talking to people who weren't there, her sister Orrine took her to live with her in Mifflin and when Orrine died, Eldona was put in a nursing home back here in Meadville.

"Eldona must be about a hundred years old. She's nutty as they come too. She can't get married," I told him. Then I headed for that coffee pot. The first caffeine blast was losing its power. I filled a clean mug and turned to face him.

He raised his head. I wished he hadn't. His hood fell back and I found myself staring into those eyeless sockets.

I couldn't help it. I shuddered. And nearly spilt my coffee. So I sat again.

"Can't you keep your head covered?" I asked. "I gotta tell you, you give me the creeps." I was gonna have nightmares for weeks to come. This was worse than some horror movie.

He gave a quick nod as he spoke, "Eldona Secrist is a recycled soul. In a previous life she was killed in an accident. She missed her chance to be married."

"How did she get to be a recycled soul? She was always a single woman. I don't think she made the cycle a first time." I wasn't sure I believed his story.

"She was given a second life to replace the one taken before it could be fulfilled. She was promised in this life the marriage she missed the first time."

"Don't you think she waited a bit too long to get married?" I couldn't make any sense of it. This old lady was gonna marry Death? No wonder they said she was batty. Was she like the old man who'd wanted to live forever? He'd been the reason Death had come to enlist my services the first time. Why did he need a detective for this problem? This whole situation was crazy. I didn't see how it could be real.

I sipped steadily at the coffee. If you can call it that. It was thick and had a burnt taste that made me shudder too.

"Eldona was promised marriage before she died this time," Death told me. I thought I detected a trace of impatience in his tone. Maybe, just maybe, if I played stupid a bit longer he'd go away. I could but hope. It did sound like that first case. Only this time a crazy old woman had figured out how to keep living by not getting married. "I can't take her until she gets married," he added.

I leaned back in the chair. "Her wedding day is the day she dies? That's really crappy," I told him. "Couldn't you at least take her on a honeymoon first?"

He swayed back and forth a bit like my questions were agitating him. I had this sudden mental image of him and the little elderly lady together in bed. What a horrid picture that made. My eyes burned. I blinked several times and shook my head to clear my head of the picture.

"No honeymoon was promised." He floated to his former position in the center of the room. I'd noticed he seemed to favor being in the middle of things.

"Why didn't you marry her before this if you're the one she wants to marry?"

He seemed to stiffen as if he was communicating with someone else. After what seemed several moments, movement returned again.

"We didn't know until her time grew near. Then we learned she was saying she wanted to marry Death. Only Death. And that was impossible." He aimed those empty sockets at me.

I felt a creeping doom. I suddenly knew what he was aiming at. They were taking a crazy old lady's ramblings seriously.

I jumped to my feet. "No! I won't do it! Not me!" I headed for the door.

He got there before me.

If I thought it would do any good, I'd shoot him. But my gat (I love that word--got it from those old B&W movies my ex-wife hated) was in my desk at the office.

I was sunk. Trapped. Snagged.

Then I thought of an out. "Do you have a marriage license application?" I blew out a breath of relief. He'd have to appear in person to get one.

"It's not needed," he said. "Now please get dressed. We must go."

I sagged and shook my head. "I can't do this. It isn't right."

"You must," He spoke like I had no choice.

And I knew I didn't.

There was no sense in my trying to run from him so I dressed and we went down to the alley where my car was parked.

"I don't like this," I said as I got it. "It's inhumane to make me help you kill this old woman."

He appeared in the passenger's seat. "Do you think I should let her live forever?" he rolled those stones in that bucket at me. "She'd soon be unable to talk at all. Or see. Or hear. Her heart is very bad, but it would keep beating."

I couldn't help how I felt, but I knew what he was telling me. The lady's body was tired. It was ready to rest. However a promise had been made and must be kept before that could happen. Why couldn't she have said she wanted to marry Elvis? Or Frankie?

We reached Happy Acres Nursing Home in fifteen minutes. It was the longest drive I'd ever taken. I tried to go slow but the car had a mind of its own and kept to the top of the speed limit.

Death was silent as we entered the lobby. I asked to see Miss Eldona Secrist. The lady behind the desk, a Mrs. Gibbons, nodded and got to her feet. "Come this way, please. She's expecting you."

"Is she all right?" I asked. Maybe they wouldn't let me see her.

She gave me a strange look. "Yes. She's fine. We don't know what's happened, but the last three days she's been unusually lucid. You're the first visitor she's had in a long time except for her lawyer yesterday."

I gathered I was supposed to know that. "That's wonderful. Maybe we can talk for a few minutes." Maybe I could explain the impossibility of this situation to her. I felt like a noose was being tightened around my neck. What if something went wrong...

Mrs. Gibbons opened the door at the end of the long, flower-papered hall. "Miss Secrist, Mr. Death is here to see you."

She ushered me into the room.

I turned to protest the name.

She didn't wait, closing the door behind me and leaving me in the room of a little old lady who didn't in the least resemble the neighbor I'd known.

"Are you Miss Eldona Secrest?"

She bobbed her head and smiled. She had a sweet untroubled look. This was no schemer.

An elderly man sat in a chair by the old woman's bed. He wore an unctuous air I didn't like one bit. In his shaky hand he held a small black book.

He stood and gestured to me with a knowing smile. "I'm Reverend Dale. Please take your place beside Miss Secrist's bed. We've got to do this fast."

I tried to explain I wasn't the groom. But *he* spoke in my head. I looked over my shoulder at *him*. "You know what you must do."

I'd been set up. "How did you know I'd be here today?" I asked Eldona.

She gave me a fluttery smile. "I had a dream that Mr. Death would come and marry me. Ever since I saw that movie...it was so romantic."

The reverend repeated his instructions. "Stand on Miss Secrist's right side, please." He added in an undertone. "We really must hurry. Mrs. Gibbons will be back in a few minutes. She doesn't allow so many visitors at once." He turned his head. "Okay, Addie. Come out, Miss Simms. Take your places."

On that, two other elderly ladies made an appearance on the other side of Eldona's bed. They were both like tiny, twittery birds made of very soft feathers. They simpered at me.

"Oh, Eldona. He's so young. How did you..." the one called Addie began.

"Hush, Addie. We're not going to stick our nose into their business." Miss Simms stopped her. "We're just witnesses to Eldona's marriage."

I found my voice. "I'm not who you think I am," I tried to protest.

Literary Sampler

Eldona smiled vaguely. "I know that, dear. You're just standing in for *him*." She pointed at the wall behind me where Death stood, his scythe at the ready.

"He's not anything like I pictured. He looks a lot like Daddy."

I remembered Death had explained how his appearance could be different to different people. To think I got to see the skull and bones version.

The ceremony was quick. She signed her name to the license and as I went to sign it, the name *Death* appeared on the line. I left.

I found my fee on the passenger's seat of my car. I would like to have refused it this time, but he was gone. And so Death was married.

I visited Eldona's resting place once to see if the headstone I'd ordered with that money had been set up. It read "Mrs. Eldona Death, nee Secrist, beloved wife" with the dates of birth and death below.

It was the least I could do.

Fini



The Last to Fall

by **Anne K. Edwards**

Chapter One

Jeanne Foster brushed a weary hand over her stinging eyes. It was impossible to see anything through the hanging mist that mixed with the smoke of burning buildings. What streetlights there were cast small bluish blobs of light. Buildings appeared as shapeless blackened ruins in the yellowed haze.

Worried, she studied Lester as he sagged against a grungy brick wall for support. It seemed hours since they'd started for the hospital, and their goal was no closer. He sank to the sidewalk coughing, a nerve-shattering sound in the predawn silence.

His thin body shuddered as he tried to draw the polluted air into his damaged lungs. "Jeanne, get help," he gasped.

She felt a rising hopelessness. "But nothin's open."

"Get someone," he begged as a new spasm seized him. His bloodshot hazel eyes pleaded with her. "Please."

"I'll try." Unhappily, she moved away. The swirling yellow murk immediately engulfed his skinny body as he sprawled on the walk.

Turning her head in an effort to keep him in sight, she collided painfully with a public phone stand that loomed out of the mist. Rubbing her bruised shoulder, she shoved the lowered plastic privacy shield up into its groove and fumbled in the change slot, seeking a stray coin. Nothing! The box was greasy and smelled of souring humanity. The line was dead. Just like all the others.

"Damn--" She set her jaw and fought against the pressing tears of frustration.

The choking stink of fire thickened. Her eyes watered as she blinked rapidly, squinting to see what lay ahead. She'd never traveled alone through northwest Washington, D.C. and had no idea where she was. Through an unexpected break in the fog, she spotted the blurry shape of a blue and white police vehicle moving slowly along the street. Running toward it, she shouted for help.

* * *

Officer Delon Stimm heard a girl yelling and swung his vehicle to the curb. He and his massive partner, John Kersey, got out. They kept their hands on their weapons, prepared for trouble.

"What's wrong?" Delon asked the slim, brown-haired girl who came out of the fog like a ghost.

"I need help. My friend's sick," she spoke in a voice shrill with urgency.

"Jojo?" He bent to look into her frightened brown eyes. It was the latest illegal drug to take over the younger generation.

"No! He can't breath." She covered her face with her hands and began to cry.

"Where is he?" he asked with a sigh. The morning was to be a continuance of the night before--nothing was going right.

"About a block from here. That way." Impatiently, she pointed, wiping away tears with the back of her hand. "Please hurry."

The fog closed in again.

"Get in." He held the door for her. *These kids...* He shook his head. *They get garbaged up and then cry for help.*

Was that what the crumbling society he served did to its children? So many walked the streets looking for something solid to believe in and found nothing. So they turned to jojo and each other. It did not bode well for the future of the country. What future there was, he thought.

He exchanged knowing glances with John. Kids had to learn the hard way. In the rear view mirror, he saw the girl huddle into herself, shivering as she searched the street for her friend.

They found him where she'd left him, a convulsed heap of long blond hair and old blue denims. One of his sandals had fallen off.

"Lester, they'll take you to the hospital," she told the boy, bending to touch his shoulder.

Delon could tell by the way Lester tried to push himself up, the police were the last people he wanted.

In spite of his protests, John and Delon carried him to the car. *Skinny kid. Not any bigger than the girl. Wonder when he ate last.* They placed him on the back seat, his head on the girl's lap. "Looks like bad stuff to me," Delon muttered.

"I told you, he's not on anything," she said fiercely through renewed tears. "It's his lungs. He's got emphysema or asthma."

"Could be." John Kersey started the car. "Could be. The air's rotten. All that smoke... Don't know why anyone would start fires now. My nose burns all the time from this polluted rot we call air." He grunted as he turned the car around.

Delon nodded in agreement. As soon as the sun rose above the haze enveloping the city, the smoke would mix with heated humidity, making the air almost too thick to breathe. His sweat-soaked, light blue uniform shirt was already clinging to his spine against the plastic seat covers. Everything smelled of smoke. He shuddered involuntarily.

This wasn't the first trip they'd made before daybreak to The Old University Hospital, nor would it be the last.

"The hospital isn't going to like this," he mumbled over the boy's wheezing gasps. He hoped they didn't run into any of the roving military groups searching for looters or streeters. He'd have to turn these children over to them.

John caught his meaning. "We're becoming an ambulance service," he said as he steered the car into the emergency entrance, passing the remains of the sign that bore the once-proud name of Georgetown University. Peering through the rounded swaths the wipers made on the windshield, he said, "Going to be an ugly day. Sun isn't to break through this muck."

* * *

White-coated attendants wheeled out a squealing gurney to meet the cruiser. Jeanne waited impatiently as the dark-skinned officer opened the rear door so she could stretch her legs to get rid of the cramps caused by holding Lester's head in the confined space.

Sniffing at the stale odor of heavy pine-scented cleanser used to cover hospital odors, she reluctantly followed them into a dim, green-walled corridor.

Officer Stimm drew her to a battered counter set to the left of the scratched glass doors.

Twisting a lock of her long brown hair, she watched sadly as the gurney carrying Lester's twitching body disappeared through double steel doors on the right.

A round-faced clerk with green-tinted hair and discontented mouth handed Jeanne a sheaf of forms and a pen. "Are you a member of his family?" she queried, eying Jeanne suspiciously.

Jeanne shook her head.

"Where have you been living?" the officer asked, his teeth flashing white against his dark skin.

"Two thousand two Connecticut Avenue in Northwest," she mumbled, twisting the hair over her left eye. The old hotel once an uptown address, had long ago been condemned. It was home to dozens of young streeter couples like herself and Lester. She'd miss it, but without Lester, she didn't belong.

"I see," he said flatly. "One of those old places beyond DuPont Circle. Not a safe neighborhood for a girl."

She didn't answer.

"Do you know his family or where he's from?" he prodded.

She shook her head, avoiding his kind brown eyes. His unspoken sympathy would only increase her need to cry. She had no idea who his people were so she focused on the forms, placing them on the counter. "I can't fill these out."

"They have to be filled in," the clerk tapped her chewed pencil on the counter.

"I can't. I don't know if he's allergic to things. I don't know if he's been sick before." Jeanne's temper edged into her tone.

"Does he have hospitalization?" The girl flashed Jeanne a quick look.

"He never tole me," Jeanne snapped. Most people didn't have it.

"Does he have a bank account?" The clerk reddened, scrawling angry notations on a pink form.

"No. He's unemployed." Jeanne turned away.

The girl chewed her fleshy lower lip in silence. "I see," she said after a pause and picked up the telephone. She toyed with a pulled threat in her blue knit top. Something red stained the shoulder.

"Will they take care of him?" Jeanne asked, pulling on her own clothes to straighten them. It has been so long since she'd fussed over her looks, she rarely thought about it.

All she had was what she wore, jeans and a faded blue blouse.

"es. Now, can you answer a few questions about yourself?" the policeman asked in a kind voice. "Do you have a family?"

She shook her head again. No sense in getting her room involved. She'd only say she didn't know where she failed, her excuse for everything that happened in her life. Jeanne didn't want any more of those horrible crying scenes with the well-remembered recriminations. The recollection of the hurt they caused each other nudged her conscience.

"Do you have anyone at all?" he persisted. He guided her to some chairs with patched red-cloth seats along the wall.

"No, nobody." She took the one nearest the exit sign. The fabric was unraveling and it wobbled when she shifted her weight.

"How old are you?" He sat next to her, putting hat on his lap.

"Twenty. I left home last spring after papa died." Tears pressed in her throat. In some ways, Lester has reminded her of her dad. Now he was gone again.

She straightened her shoulders and looked at the policeman. Knowing he would want proof of her age, she handed him a driver's license she'd found on the street. The plastic coating had cracked and water had distorted the features in the picture, but it looked a little like her.

"This is expired." He handed it back, his expression reflecting his belief the photo wasn't her.

Jeanne shrugged. "Don't have a car anyhow." She shoved her hair back from her face with shaking fingers. She clamped her lips shut. The license said she was twenty, but she felt more like a hundred.

He studied her intently. "We're just trying to help. You kids come here looking for God only knows what. I see it every day. You get hooked on jojo or sick like your friend."

She remained silent. The police always knew all the answers.

The officer stood. "If you have a family, go home and make up. This way doesn't work." He peered down at her, adding, "Wait here. I have other questions for you, but I want to check on your friend." He put on his black hat, pushing it back, and walked away.

Jeanne eavesdropped as he spoke to the nurse who chewed the end of a pencil. She wanted Lester to be all right, but doubted he would be. He'd been spitting up blood this time. Fear formed a knot in her chest.

"How is he? Good news might help me get the truth out of her." He nodded upward at Jeanne who read concern in his gaze.

The nurse took her pencil out of her mouth. "You know University takes no public cases now that our federal funding has been cut off. The new owners are very specific about accepting only paying patients. The boy has been sent directly to Cartersea in Northeast with a few others. He was on oxygen when they left."

"Thanks." Officer Stimm turned to John Kersey, who stood near the unplugged coffee machine. "I guess that's better than nothing. We'd better get the signatures on these new service cards to show how we spent the last hour. I miss the old days when all we did was patrol through our shift. This new paperwork is a pain." He sounded tired.

The waiting gave Jeanne the jitters. *If I stick around, I'll get sent to the juvenile center. And they'll get word to Mom. She felt the tears pressing again. I don't wanna go home. It's always the same thing.*

She'd lost count of the times she'd been returned only to run away again. The burden of guilt her mother shifted onto her for her troubles was too much to face any more. The thought of it impelled Jeanne to her feet as the two officers were distracted by the nurse inquiring about the identity of another patient they'd brought in earlier. Catlike, she moved to the door to make her escape. Lester didn't need her now.

He'd probably never leave the hospital or, if he did live, they'd send him to one of those detainment camps where people without permanent addresses were held. She shuddered. Much as she didn't want to go home, she didn't want to wind up in one of the horrible camps she'd heard about. Even if the rumors of torture and death weren't true, the people were still prisoners.

Sadly, Jeanne accepted that she'd never see Lester again. The best thing to do was get away from D.C.

She headed into the thickening mist where she felt secure from curious eyes, but as dawn broke, the smoky tendrils began to lift and thin. Another ugly day in an ugly city.



The Last to Fall is available in eBook format at <http://www.twilighttimesbooks.com> or Fictionwise.com.

“Anne K. Edwards is a master writer with the gift to bring her words to life. I couldn’t help but cover my mouth at times, feel emotionally drained as Jeanne tried to figure out what to do, and even held my breath at times before I realized I was doing it. Edwards is so close to telling the future, that it is scary. What will we leave behind for the other generations to follow if we continue the path we’re on? I’ll tell you, read *The Last To Fall* and you’ll find out.” – Book Reviews by Crystal

The Cursed Vampire

by Anne K. Edwards

"Prince LeRoix is dying," the old manservant said. He raised his tragic eyes to the gathering of vampires around the large canopied bed. The heavy hangings of the room muffled their groans of empathic pity for one of their own.

"He wasn't out in the sun or anything?" asked a white-skinned female vampire.

The servant shook his head. "No. He has kept to the same routine for the eight hundred years that he's been a vampire. He reached over to tug on a bell rope.

The vampire in the bed moaned and opened his eyes. His blood-red eyes moved from one face to the next. "Ah, you've come," he said. "Good. Good."

"What is the matter, your highness?" asked a tall vampire who stood at the foot of the bed.

"I don't know, Ladislaw. I don't know." He shivered and the manservant tucked the covers tighter around him.

"When was your last meal?" asked the female vampire.

"Ah. Three nights ago. A young female. Quite lovely. A pity I took her life in the process. I don't like the killing, but she tried to scream. I couldn't hypnotize her as I usually do."

A vampire with wisdom in his eyes looked at the ailing vampire and then swept the group with a slow gaze. "They found her in an alley," he said. "Her name was Myrna LeRoy." He paused as the door to the darkened room opened and a slim figure stepped inside.

"You rang for me, father?"

The manservant looked up. "Yes, daughter. I wish you to fetch some of the containers from the cold room." He glanced around. "We'll need eight."

When the girl was gone, the prince spoke, "You are quite right, Fredrich. My friends

must not go out tonight. It may be something we are all susceptible to."

The vampires huddled closer together, spooked for a moment by some unknown threat to their immortality. The wise-looking vampire shook his head.

"You have no need to fear, fellow night travelers. I know what is wrong with Prince LeRoix." He held up a large black, leather bound book. I looked up his symptoms. There have been two other cases recorded in our past.

The prince raised a feeble hand that resembled that of a skeleton, so white and thin the fingers were. "What have you learned, good doctor?" His hand fell onto his chest. "What is wrong with me?"

"The news isn't good, my prince." The other vampire told him. "You have broken the pledge we vampires take to never drink our own blood. We must take that oath because to do so is fatal."

"I have not bitten myself," the prince protested with an involuntary shudder as pain swept over him.

"You drank the blood of Myrna LeRoy three nights ago."

Comprehension and astonishment passed over the dying vampire's face. "No!" he protested. "It can't be! It can't be."

"I'm sorry, my friend. It is the truth. Before you became a vampire, you were married to Princess Margareta Prosperet. She left you once you became one of us as you had no interest in things mortal any longer. She felt herself to be in danger in spite of all the crosses she kept around herself. Did you know she was with child?"

Prince LeRoix was failing fast as the hour of dawn fast approached. He shook his head. "I did not know. I never tried to find her."

The doctor gazed down at him sadly. "The baby lived and since that day, your bloodline has continued. Until," he said in a low voice, "you killed the girl. She was the last of the line."

He straightened and looked around. "If there's any possibility that any of you have children or descendants, I suggest you find them. We must be sure this does not happen to us what had happened to the prince. In drinking the blood of a descendant, we drink our own blood."

Literary Sampler

As the first light probed with gentle fingers into the empty gloom around the heavy drapes, the vampire in the bed shuddered and cried out. Then he was still.

The vampires fled in a panic.

"They didn't wait for my daughter to bring their blood draughts," the manservant muttered and shook his head. He sighed. It was going to be hard getting used to a new master. He decided he'd find a genealogist to track that faithless wife of his, just in case...

Fini



Death On Delivery

by **Anne K. Edwards**

Chapter One

Jania Yewbanks shut the sweeper off with a nudge of her pink-slippered foot. The knock came again, an urgent summons over the sound of the early autumn rain.

"Whoever that is better have a good reason for bothering me," she muttered on her way to answer it. "Ellie's quitting like she did--girl never did half of what I told her. Left me with a real mess."

Patting her blonde hair into place, she peered out the window before answering the door. These days one had to be so careful.

On the stoop, with rain running in broken streamlets over his unprotected head, stood an unfamiliar delivery man. Jania sighed in annoyance. They were always inconvenient in their timing.

Opening the door just a crack, she looked out at him over the safety chain. His colorless hair was plastered over his high forehead. He leered at her through the narrow gap. "Who're you?" She glared at him.

"Got a package fer Mr. Yewbanks, lady," he told her, his voice sounding as if someone had him by the throat. "Hunnert an' eighty dollars due." Water dripped off the end of his prominent nose, the only notable feature on his otherwise unremarkable face.

"Yes, yes. He left the money for it," she said impatiently and disappeared behind the solid oak door.

With the cash in hand, Jania cautiously removed the latch. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the quick movement of lace curtains next door. Old Nosy was watching the

house again.

Disgusted, Jania hastily counted out the bills and handed them to the man.

He shoved his clipboard inside, his sleeve dripping onto her freshly waxed floor.

Exasperated, she scratched her name illegibly on the extended sheet beside the package number.

Giving a toothy grin, he bade her farewell.

Behind the closed door, she turned the package over in her hands. The brown, water-spotted wrapping paper bore no return address or postmark. She toyed with it, wondering at the contents. Ted's idea of a bonus for his secretary was probably something entirely unsuitable. If he had bothered to consult her, she could have advised him. So much money. He had no business buying gifts for the woman. He paid her well for her time.

Thick tape held the heavy paper securely. After some grumbling over a broken nail, Jania cut through the tape with her sewing scissors and stripped away the packing. Inside was a small blue box of imitation leather. The gold clasp opened easily to reveal a pair of pearl earrings nestled in gray crushed velour. "Mable doesn't have pierced ears," Jania muttered to herself, shaking her head at her husband's foolishness.

Jania fondled the pearls admiringly. The slender gold stems were tinted with a greenish glaze. Rubbing didn't remove it.

Must be a protective coating.

At the large hall mirror she fitted the earrings into her dainty lobes. They were lovely. What would a woman with an aged mother to support do with such an extravagant gift?

I'll get Ted to let me keep them, she decided. Mable could do with some new gloves. Jania was certain her husband would agree. He always did.

She admired her reflection proudly. She still had the beauty of her youth that had first attracted Ted. All these years and not a wrinkle or line. A woman had to work at keeping a husband's eye from roving.

At the thought of her husband, her blue eyes filled with disdain. She made a face as she considered his unfulfilled promises. Empty talk to get her to marry him.

Suddenly, her reflection swam, a strange weariness assailing her. At first she tried to dismiss it. Probably all the bending in this heat. I'd better sit down.

Movement was difficult. Her legs were unusually heavy. She staggered, frightened, into the living room where she stumbled over the vacuum cleaner and fell. Sobbing, she pushed the mahogany coffee table aside and pulled herself up onto the soft blue sofa to lie gasping. After a few seconds she summoned the strength to reach for the telephone. It slipped from her nerveless fingers.

* * *

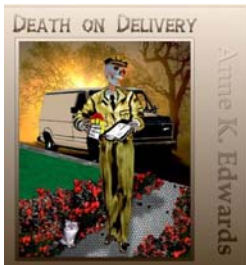
Ted Yewbanks entered the house, slapping the rain from his coat. He came into the room where Jania lay, approaching the sofa slowly. He stared down at her. Dripping water soaked into the gray carpet.

She reached out with a limp hand. An unintelligible croak escaped her lips as she tried to form his name.

"I see the earrings came," he said smiling as he leaned over her. "Yes, they are beautiful. You just couldn't resist trying them on, my greedy darling. An excellent choice." His voice hardened.

Jania shuddered, exhaling like the last air escaping from a deflating balloon.

He waited to see if she drew another breath and when she didn't, felt for a pulse. Finding none, he then closed her eyelids. "I'd better call the doctor," he remarked. "It's not every day a man finds his wife dying."



Death on Delivery is available in [eBook](#) format at the publisher <http://www.twilighttimesbooks.com> or fictionwise.com. The [print version](#) is available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble or any other online or B&M bookstore.

“Like Agatha Christie once did, Edwards takes a lot of chances with *Death on Delivery*, such as letting readers in on whodunit on the second page. The next 300 pages are crowded with outcasts—eccentrics, lovelorn old maids, criminals, scoundrels –you’ll

Literary Sampler

recognize your entire family before it's done. The best part is that Edwards' wit and wisdom helps us laugh at those who drive us nuts on a daily basis. A convenient catharsis for those days when (tell the truth, now) we all are wondering how we could order up our own: *Death on Delivery*." — Cheryl Swanson

The Devil You Say

by Anne K. Edwards

"Think about it," the soot-blackened imp urged his Dark Master. "Go into the upper world and see the changes that have taken place. Your messengers have been busy and the place is ready for the taking."

"Didn't you tell me that in the past?" Satan eyed his servant narrowly. "What they call their world wars were fought to defeat me and they did." He pointed at the imp. "You didn't do your job."

"You've never given up, Master. I think this time they are ready for the picking. There are wars and genocides raging over the world. The young ruin themselves with their stupidity." The imp gave a wide grin. "Just think of all those souls to torment."

"I'll think about it." Satan turned away from the imp to check the industry of those souls already in his keeping. Their endless labors of feeding the fires of hell and shrieks as the flames jumped at them to singe hair and skin pleased him. Good thing they weren't flammable, and could only feel the fire. If they burned, he'd soon be out of victims.

He considered the imp's suggestion. About every fifty years some part of mankind would come under his sway and let unreasoning hatred boil over. He wished he knew for sure the formula to make it more successful. Leftovers from the previous fifty-year span kept hate alive and made sure to infect the next generation but alone hate wasn't strong enough. However, he thought, hate was still his best tool.

Might there be a way to help it along? Greed, perhaps? Or Envy? Always good too. He wondered, tapping his talon-shaped fingers on his four pronger. Perhaps, now was time to venture beyond the stone bound gate to Hades and see how things were in the human world. Use a personal touch as it were. If the young were as brainless as the imp said, Satan was sure he could at last declare his victory over his creator.

"Malevo," Satan thundered.

"Yes, Master?" a cringing creature sidled up to him, fear in its dull eyes. To think this being had once ruled a large part of the world.

"I'm going up to the world of men for a while," he smiled nastily at his personal slave. "I'm leaving you in charge."

The light that flared in the creature's eyes made him add. "I don't want you to overdo the torments. The last time all that black smoke made the humans think a new volcano was forming and before you could say 'I'll be damned', there were hundreds of them creeping around trying to find the source. What do you think would have happened if they'd found the gate to Hades?"

Malevo shuddered. "Master, it won't happen again."

Satan glared at him, red eyes glowing. "It better not or you'll be demoted again."

Malevo twitched, his anxiety showing. "Please, Master. I don't want to spend another five hundred years married to a nagging wife."

"You wouldn't." Satan leered at him. "Next time, you'll be the nagging wife married to the useless drunk."

The imp was stunned. "No, please," he stepped back from Satan. "I'd get laryngitis."

"Then you'd know how your wife suffered. You never listened to her."

"She was the reason I drank. You know that." Malevo cried. "Five hundred years of that horrible croaking about get a job, buy her a bigger house, a new car, trips..." Huge tears ran down his face. "All that time I had to keep trying to satisfy her. Horrible." He wept. "It was horrible."

Satan laughed, a hoarse, grating sound that shook the walls of Hell and made the flames jump. The stench of sulphur rose from black wisps of smoke.

"Yes, it was. Ezilia told me all about it. She said you were thoroughly cowed." He smiled, fangs showing. "Just as you are now." He leered at Malevo. "Perhaps, you'd prefer five hundred years of solitude on some mountain."

Malevo failed to repress the shiver that coursed over his body. "Please, Master. I hate the cold."

"Then remember that. They say the Matterhorn in winter is cool and breezy with lovely snow and avalanches."

With that, Satan wrapped himself in a long black cloak, gave a twitch of his rather long tail and shifted himself onto the surface of Earth.

The air was nearly unbreathable. He coughed. Soot and ashes rained from his mouth as he cleared his throat. *I can't stay long.* Already, he missed the heat and smells of Hades, the shrieks of pain.

The unlit alley in which Satan found himself smelled of humanity at its worst. Its silence was like that of a cemetery on a cold wet day after a funeral. It bore down on him like a weight.

He knew what the weight was. His own fear. He could feel goodness vibes emanating from the old stone church nearby. His old creator still had a strong presence in such places. Even when they looked abandoned as this one did.

His scaly skin began to itch beneath his cloak. Scratching, he hurried toward the other end of the alley where the stench of humanity and its offal strengthened. The itching ceased and Satan found himself more comfortable in this environment. He watched calmly as two teenage males beat an old drunk, then robbed him. He knew them. They were his. Or would be soon.

Satan passed quietly into the rear of The Hoppin' Spot. The pounding noise they called heavy metal made his ears hurt. He pulled the hood of his cape up around them. Just as well, he thought, since they were so big. No reason to attract attention yet, though it wasn't likely he would in this dark.

Almost like home. He smiled, pleased.

A girl was flung into him. She bounced off and grabbed the nearest person, a heavy shouldered youth whose unshaven face had a mean expression. Perfect, Satan thought. He hates the world. Women in particular. Doesn't hide it well.

"You groping my woman?" the boy sneered, assuming possession of the girl.

Satan pushed his hood back. "No, young man. I don't want her." He cocked a long red finger at him. "I want you."

The boy stared. "Me?" he asked. "Don't be stupid."

"I offer you a position with power," Satan told him. Power was something most men responded to.

"Naw. I don't want no stupid job." The boy shook his head and moved away, towing the giggling girl after him.

"That's the trouble with these kids," Satan muttered. "They don't want to work. No ambition."

"Why should they, man?" a tall thin man in black asked. "They got everything they want. Parents support most of 'em." He swept the room with a hand.

Satan grunted. "Lazy, eh?" They'd come to him too, but they were troublesome in Hell. Always going on strike and sending him lists of demands. And nothing he could do made them amend their ways. They had no feelings in life, loved nothing but themselves. And if he threatened to deprive themselves of themselves... He shook his head. They always confused him.

"I'm looking for a new assistant," he told the newcomer as they took seats at the bar. "Someone to represent my interests here."

"What type of business is it?" the man asked without appearing interested. He took a long gulp from his glass of beer.

Satan tasted his gingerly. The last time he'd tried to drink some human concoction, he got boils all over his behind.

"You're not much of a drinker," the fellow observed.

"I don't usually drink, but I don't mind if others do." Alcohol wasn't his invention, but it brought him lots of souls.

"You know," his companion said, "I have the feeling I should know you."

"Maybe you do," the dark master said with a smirk. Then he shook his head and sneezed loudly. Some bimbo among the dancers was wearing feathers. Damn things. Reminded him of the wings he'd lost when he chose to make his own place.

He sneezed again. His nose began to itch a little.

"What about this job?" his drinking companion asked.

"I need someone with the gift of gab." Satan told him.

"My name's Adamis and I have a fine gift of gab," the man said.

"Are you willing to lie to achieve your ends? To cheat and connive?"

"I happen to be searching for a job that pays well. I require certain perks however." Adamis said.

Satan noted he hadn't answered the question. Evasion--a good indication this man could be the one he could use. "I can guarantee you any perks you desire--money, women, power, paid vacation as long as you like."

"I'm not interested in those things. I have something more intangible in mind." Adamis told him.

"Isn't that everything?" Satan was surprised that he might have forgotten something humans, especially males desired. He sneezed again. The itching was getting stronger. "No. I want to build a following. Like my employer has. People hang on his every word. They believe everything he says."

Satan considered this. A following, eh? This could be his chance to collect souls more quickly. Humans would believe anything if the right person said it. Like Hitler or Lenin or Napoleon. All they had to do was say the words and people followed blindly. Look how these personality cults were started. Why how many of those leaders and their minions had he residing in Hell? And their followers--only a few had repented before he got to them. If Hell weren't expandable, it would be overcrowded.

He smiled broadly. As if that could even happen. The nether plane went on for infinity and it was his kingdom, the whole of its boiling, flaming, sulphurous eternity.

He studied his companion at the bar. He was the type of man who'd be able to disappear into the crowd and never be noticed. He didn't possess any traits to draw people to him. He needed a trained speaker with an actor's flamboyance.

"I don't think you could do the job," he said. "I need someone with a strong personality who can follow orders."

Adamis frowned. "I'm very good at following orders. I'm here tonight because my employer told me to find him some recruits, some who could become true believers."

Satan frowned in turn. He tapped the bar with a claw-like fingernail. "Your employer is building a cult?" he asked.

"Not quite," Adamis said, "But it would be a following."

"Ah," Satan said. "This might be just the situation I'm looking for."

He did some quick thinking. "I'll give you time to recruit people for your employer. When you have a large enough group, I'll give you the power to take over."

His companion smiled. "I thought I knew you. Just wanted to be sure. You're the Devil, aren't you? Those pointed ears and that thing in your hand..."

Satan nodded. "If you know me, then we've done business before."

"Yes, we have," Adamis said. "A long time ago."

It wasn't important where or when they'd met, only that they had. Satan knew humans. They all had a weakness that would lead to their downfall. The more often he met them, the more likely they were to join him in Hell.

He sneezed several times in growing violence. The stench of sulphur filled the air around them. He peered through the darkness to the crowded dance floor. Feathers! What idiot female would wear them. Ever since he'd lost his wings, he'd had a violent allergy to feathers and all things that flew. He couldn't even eat chicken for pity's sake.

Satan shook his head to clear it and produced a contract. He touched it and his name appeared at the bottom in blood-red letters. The paper scorched around them. "All you have to do is sign this and we're in business. I'll grant you anything you wish."

"Not so fast," Adamis produced a set of folded papers from his pocket. "I have a contract you must sign first."

Satan was momentarily flummoxed. He'd never been asked to sign a contract in return.

"Very well," he said. "I'll sign it."

What could it contain but a lot of human legal speak? Probably, some guarantee that he wouldn't take Adamis' soul or that he'd live forever. Things like that always had ways around them. No matter how tightly the contract bound one, there was always wiggle room when dealing with humans. They were such fools. Made him wonder sometimes why he wanted their souls.

He affixed his signature with a single sweep of fire. "There. It's signed."

"You didn't read it," Adamis said. "Don't you think you should have?"

"No. I don't have the time and humans never write contracts I can't break."

"Well, you may find this one different," Adamis said, handing Satan a copy. "Just to keep things honest," he added.

As he held the document in his hand, Satan felt a terrible itching start. He began to cough. That meant only one thing. His old master had an emissary here, someone with enough power to start his allergies again.

His sinuses ran, his eyes watered. Sneezing and wheezing, he peered around the room. Where was he? Was it this ordinary looking human?

"I'm here," the old familiar voice said in his ear. His creator!

"You tricked me," Satan gasped.

"No. You tricked yourself. In your arrogance to believe yourself all powerful, that all men could be brought low, you signed a contract you should have read first," the voice said.

Satan unfolded the papers and, barely able to see through his tearing eyes, began to read. Party of the first part...bah... Party of the second part...

He turned to the last page where the full impact of what he'd signed hit him. The itching was intolerable. He sneezed and coughed.

"You can never return to Hell," the voice continued calmly. "You have given your spirit back to me."

End

In the Rough

by Anne K. Edwards

Merrilee Denning's hand shook as she set the white porcelain cup on the saucer and tea sloshed down the side.

"Now look what you've done, sloppy," the old woman who sat in bed across the rollaway table said. "You must be more careful."

Giving her knit top an impatient yank down over the waistband of her green skirt, Merrilee said, "Gran, they're digging up that old golf course." She wanted to shake her grandmother. "Don't you know what it means? They'll find..."

She wondered for the millionth time if she was crazy for half-believing the old woman's story. Whether it was true or not, she was worried.

"Let them find the men. I don't care any more. It was a long time ago, you know." The old woman clutched her mug with both hands. Their palsied movement sent the contents roiling near the rim.

Merrilee reached to steady the cup for her and helped it to her lips. "Gran, I don't understand. I thought there were only two, the golf course owner and that one golfer who ran over your dog."

The old woman swallowed the strong tea and smiled a smile that was a grimace. The stroke had paralyzed the left side of her mouth and left a permanent turn down on the corner of her mouth.

"No. There's lots of 'em. I don't remember how many."

"Gran, the police investigated only two disappearances. How could you have killed more than that and nobody know?"

The old woman grinned. "That was the easy part. I didn't have to bury all of 'em myself. Your Pa, Lord bless him, helped me with most of 'em."

Merrilee stared. "Pa?"

"Sure. He is a good son to me." The old woman lowered the cup to the table.

She looked out the window of the nursing home, her faded blue eyes sad. "You remember when I come here? It was spring and the grass was just coming out. Such a pretty time of year." She shook her head. "Now they're digging all that grass up. All the prettiness-- gone."

"Gran, what do you want me to do?" Merrilee asked. "Do you want me to ask Pa to come back from Hawaii?"

The old woman shook her head. "No, darlin'. Don't bother your Pa about this. There ain't much the law can do to me about them dead men. All I did was get rid of a bunch of jerks the world never missed. Never even looked for 'em."

"What should I do?" The girl looked out the window too, in her mind seeing the heavy machinery sinking its yellow teeth into the rich red earth. It gave her the shudders to think what they might find. On the other hand, it might be one of Gran's fanciful stories like the one she told about being descended from an illegitimate son of Henry the Eighth of England.

"Why, child, don't worry about it. It'll be all right." The old woman leaned back on her pillows. "I'm going to sleep now."

She seemed so relaxed that Merrilee shrugged off her fears.

"I'll go, Gran, but I'll be back as soon as I can. Tomorrow I'll be at the courthouse all day. My boss is representing that awful Mr. Julkes in a lawsuit again. I don't know why that old fool can't get along with his neighbors."

Her grandmother nodded, closed her eyes, and Merrilee left.

Sorrow filled her heart. It wouldn't be long before she lost Gran. She hoped the men digging up the golf course never found the place the old woman had buried those men. If they were there, they were somewhere on that low spot that was always wet from an underground spring. Gran said the digging was easiest there in the soft soil.

The drive back to the large old house where she'd spent her summers as a child wasn't long enough to reach a decision about calling her father. If she called him, he'd be on the first plane back. Had he really helped bury those men? Him? She couldn't accept that such a gentle man would do that. But what would he say if she told him she knew?

Should she just wait and see if they were found?

As she was about to put the key in the front door of the old house, a man approached from the golf course. He hailed her.

She turned to look at him. He was short, squat, with a fringe of white hair peeking from the bill of the cap that shaded his round, merry face. His blue eyes gleamed in the late afternoon sun.

"Sorry to bother you, Miss, but I wanted to find out about the lady that lived here," he said. "Her last name was Larkin."

Merrilee nodded. "I'm her granddaughter. She's living at St. Anselmo's now."

"The nursing home?" His eyebrows went up.

"Yes. She had a stroke and couldn't stay alone any more."

"I'm sorry to hear it. I wanted to talk to her about buying the house." He made a sweeping gesture with his left hand. "I talked to Ed Price at Kent Real Estate and he told me it was for sale."

Merrilee nodded.

"Who's handling the sale for her?" he asked. "I'd like to buy it."

"James Carlson is Gran's lawyer," she said. "Would you tear the house down for more condos?" she asked, supposing he was the man putting the condos up on the old golf course.

"No. I'd live in it. I always liked the old place. I knew Carl Larken pretty well. We golfed together over there." He turned toward the golf course.

"Oh. Gramps passed on about seven years ago." She didn't want to think about him. He'd been a very unpleasant old man at the end. Always cursing and throwing things. That was why he spent his last years in St. Anselmo's ward for difficult patients. It was the wing where they housed the violent and insane.

"I know." the old man told her. "I was in Arizona when my son wrote me that he was gone."

She nodded. No sense pretending any deep sorrow at this late date.

"My name's John Franklin. Be sure to give your grandmother my best. I'll see Carlson about the agent for the sale." He headed back the way he came.

The name Franklin was familiar, but she couldn't place where or when she'd heard it. No recollection of her grandfather's friends came to her. She and he had not been friends.

With a shrug she went inside and shut the world out. The day had been long and she was tired. A quick supper, some T.V., then she'd turn in early. It was a long drive back to her job in Clearton Falls.

Much later, though it seemed but minutes, the shrilling of the telephone roused her from sleep. She fumbled for the light and then the receiver. A glance at the clock showed the time to be three fifteen.

A frantic voice chased away the last of the sleep fog in her mind. "Miss Denning? This is Grace Hall at St. Anselmo's." The woman sounded frightened. "Have they gotten there yet?"

Merrilee couldn't get a grasp on what the woman was saying. "Slow down, please. I don't understand."

"Your grandmother... I called the police the moment we found out."

Chills swept over Merrilee. "Are you calling because my grandmother is dead?" She tried to cut through the confusion.

"No. No. She's gone! I thought the police would have come to see you right away."

Merrilee was fully alert. "My grandmother is gone?" She couldn't believe her ears. "What do you mean she's gone?" The phone shook in her hand.

She's not in her bed. Her chair is there." Grace spoke rapidly as if afraid someone would stop her. "Nessa stopped in to make a nightly check on her and she wasn't there. She checked the bathroom, closet, the halls and then alerted security. They found the fire door was open. Mr. Elmont in the room across the hall is always going out that way. He said your grandmother asked him how he did it. He jams the lock with paper." She took a breath and concluded. "It looks like she left that way."

"But Gran can't walk." Merrilee protested in tears. That damned place...Mrs. Hall had promised they'd be installing alarms on the doors in case of break-ins.

"She took her walker." Grace said. "We know she couldn't get far, and we're looking for her. Do you know any place she might go?"

"Not off hand, but she might be headed here." Merrilee tried to hold onto the hope.

Grace sighed audibly. She'd done her duty, Merrilee thought and was letting others take the responsibility.

How could Gran get away from St. Anselmo's? She could barely stand up without help. Shaking her head, she hung up and turned on the porch light to look outside. Why haven't the police come yet if they were on their way?

Deciding it would be better to be dressed if they did come, she went upstairs. She grabbed up a pair of green slacks and tan pullover. If she had to go out, she wanted to be dressed for the cool night air.

A knock came as she returned downstairs.

She opened the door to find a uniformed officer in dark blue standing beside a man in a dark suit. "I've been expecting you," she said. Holding the door, she stood aside to let them in.

They showed her their identification. The taller man was Private Duncan and the shorter one with dark eyes was Detective Roman. "Do you have any idea when she left the home or if she had help? Is there any place she liked to visit?" Roman asked.

Merrilee shook her head, but even as she did so, a nagging thought took hold. She tried to repress the idea. Surely, Gran wouldn't go there. She'd never make it. But it had been on her mind a lot lately.

"Something's bothering you, Miss Denning. What is it?" Private Duncan asked.

There was no help for it. Gran was in trouble and maybe they'd think she was just senile. She told them the story of the bodies buried on the golf course.

The two men were stunned. "Bodies?" Roman regained his composure. "How could a little old lady do something like that and no one know?"

"Gran told me how she killed the golf course owner and a golfer who ran over her dog. And she said she killed a lot of other golfers too. Always the same type. The ones who tromped through her flowerbeds after their golf balls or would dent her car with their

balls. She said she'd had three broken windows too from that place and no one ever offered to pay to fix them."

"Did she give you any names?" the officer asked.

"No. She didn't know their names."

"How did she kill them?"

"I don't know. She'd never tell me. Just said that was the easy part." She looked at him. "I'm not sure I believe any of it, but she seemed so sure."

Detective Roman grunted and ran his hand over his eyes. "Is it possible she went there?"

"It's six blocks from St. Anselmo's to the golf course. I don't see how she could possibly make it unless someone drove her. She'd have to have a flashlight too to find her way around the course. It's all torn up now. You can see it from here." She gestured to the land across the road.

"Where would she be likely to go?" Private Duncan asked, looking into the dark toward the golf course.

"Probably where the pond used to be. It's all silted in now, but the underground spring keeps the ground soft. She said that's where she buried them."

"I'll get a flashlight." Duncan said and headed outside to the car.

Merrilee was certain this was all a waste of time. But what if Gran did go there? Why would she? Was she that senile?

"I wonder..." she muttered to herself and started around the side of the house. "Surely, I would have heard..."

The two policemen followed.

She stopped at the little garden shed that sat by the entrance to the rear garden. The door was open.

"Why did you come back here?" Detective Roman asked.

"I just wondered if she might have come here. She kept a spade in the shed."

He flashed his light over the contents of the shed. "No spade here now."

Merrilee felt a sudden cold flow over her. "She couldn't be planning to dig them up." She looked at the policemen. "She said there are so many of them. The strain would kill her. She isn't very strong."

They stared at her. "Can you show us where?" Roman asked.

"I never went over there. The people were always yelling and Gran said most of them were drunks like Grandfather. She hated golfers."

They crossed the street and made their way around parked trucks and equipment that littered the land. They followed a dirt road cut into the old sod.

Merrilee pointed. "I think it's over that way. Toward the club house."

They left the road and picked their way across the brushy ground. On reaching a rise, they saw the remains of the clubhouse. Its burned timbers lay like the bones of some monstrous being in the light cast by their flashlights. Below it was the low spot that had once been a pond.

A beam of dim light shown dimly at the bottom of the hollow. The men plunged down the slope toward it.

Merrilee followed as quickly as she could over the rough ground. Her eyes locked on a pale figure that lay at the edge of the faint light. "Gran!" she cried.

The men reached the figure first. Officer Duncan took her wrist and, after a moment, shook his head. "She's gone, Miss," he said. "I'm sorry."

Merrilee knelt at her grandmother's side and wept.

The detective flashed his light around as he radioed in that they'd found the missing woman. Her walker lay partially jammed into a freshly dug hole where the shovel stood at attention. Clutched in the dead woman's hand was a long white bone.

The End

Hoofbeats

by Anne K. Edwards

Hoofbeats! This time of night? In such a blizzard?

Ole Mike rose from his warm bed and picked up his lantern. He lit it from the embers in the fireplace. Tossing a bit of wood on them, he watched with satisfaction as they grabbed onto it with hungry red fingers. He hung the coffeepot on the hook and swung it over the growing flames, then pulled on his boots. As always, the stone floor was cold.

He heard the hoofbeats again. Nearer. Was that a whinny?

He shook his head at some folks' stupidity. Wasn't his horse. He didn't have any nowadays. Ole Bub had up an' died a year back and he didn't see the sense on buying another. Town had grown so, it was nearly at his door. Wouldn't be long before they wanted his land to build on, a thing he feared.

That wasn't a matter for thinking on in the middle of the night. He pushed himself up from the creaky wood chair by the fireplace and took up his worn coat.

Better go see who was riding around in the storm.

Taking up his lantern, he pulled his coat tight and opened the door. Regretting the necessity that drew him away from the snug security of his cabin, he stepped into the blowing snow.

"Halloo," he called several times.

No answer.

He cried, "Halloo" above the storm.

His lantern guttered as the wind picked up.

Hoofbeats again! Closer now.

Ole Mike peered blindly about in the snow that stung like hot ashes on his face. He called once more and waited, listening.

The snow made it near impossible to see.

Literary Sampler

It came to him that he shouldn't be hearing hoofbeats at all. The snow always muffled sound. So why did he hear them now?

A shadow loomed over him. It whinnied. Nearly a scream. Like Dapple used to do when he wanted his grain.

Ah, Dapple. So many years ago. They had been young fools together.

Tears filled Ole Mike's eyes. He peered up at the shadow.

It rose before him, then came down.

Dapple! He'd recognize that gray and white head anywhere. He'd never forgotten.

His hand trembled as he raised it to the well-loved head of the horse that belonged to his youth.

"Dapple?" He touched the velvety nose that pushed at his hand. "How?"

The horse took Ole Mike's sleeve in his teeth and tugged. Their old game when Dapple wanted a run with Mike on his back.

Ole Mike shook his head sadly. "I can't, Dapple. I'm old now and stiff. You remember how that is. Like you were that last year."

Tears froze on his cheek. "I wish I could, Dapple. I wish I could." He sighed.

Dapple shook his head, pulling insistently on the sleeve he still held in his teeth, his breath turning white in the frigid air.

Ole Mike set the lantern aside and wrapped his free arm about the warm neck of his first love. "Ah, Dapple. Ah. I'm too old. And this is only a wonderful dream."

In his mind, he knew it was a dream. He wasn't cold any more. And Dapple had been gone over forty years. This sort of thing just wasn't possible.

The snow stopped. Just like that.

Ole Mike stared out over the frozen landscape. The mountains were merged with the valley under the thick white blanket. It would take the town a long time to dig out.

He could see smoke rising from some of the chimneys as people stirred. Time to wake up and begin a new day.

Dapple continued to exert pressure on his sleeve, tugging Ole Mike away from his cabin with short, sharp yanks.

"You want me to come with you?" the old man let the horse lead him away from warmth and security. "Why?"

The horse let go of his sleeve and whinnied. The sound echoed over the valley, rebounding from the mountainsides. He stamped impatiently.

Ole Mike shook his head. "I don't know if I can, but I'll try. You'll have to let me find a stump so I can pull myself up. Ain't young like we was once."

He used Dapple's withers as a walking aid as they headed for the chopping block around the side of the cabin. In the shadows created by the moon that broke through departing clouds, Ole Mike struggled onto Dapple's back.

The horse jiggled, wanting to be off.

Ole Mike grabbed a handful of mane and settled as best he could.

Dapple took off at a full gallop.

"What do you suppose happened?" Cort James asked Sheriff Davies. "I come over this morning to bring him some stuff Mayra wanted him to have, biscuits and such. I found him like this."

Sheriff Davies shook his head. "Ain't no way to tell. Reckon he come out for firewood and his heart gave out."

"Suppose that's it." Cort swept the area with his hand. "Wonder where these hoof prints come from though. They're fresh."

"Yeh. Horse was moving fast, too." The sheriff shoved his hat back, scratched his head and reset his hat. "Don't understand why they don't go no further than the edge of the trees though."

The End

The Romance of Mystique Jones

by Anne K. Edwards

Yesterday, my brother, Tom, sent me an obit notice from our hometown newspaper, The Newbury Voice. And I felt like crying as I read it. But grown men don't cry. A sweet memory of a long ago summer of my youth was gone.

Mystique Jones. I never did know where her Mom got that name. Mystique hated it and, of course, we all called her by it instead of the Missy she preferred. If you can't tease a girl you have a crush on, what is life all about?

We were all twelve and thirteen that year. Mystique, or Missy, was taller than most of us boys. She was skinny as a post and had the most brilliant red hair I ever saw. It glowed like an orange fire on top of her head whenever she took off her baseball cap. Her eyes were green and they could look right through you if you got smartalecky with her. Her freckles--she had agazillion.

I fell in love with her the summer of nineteen-fifty-four, the year we met. She could hit a ball like nobody else. Even Jake Dawson couldn't smack 'em that hard and he was big. Cal Thompson said he got tired of chasing her balls when they went over the fence. But he did. We only had one ball.

I never told Missy how I felt and my pals never knew either. They'd have been merciless in their teasing, something I never could have stood. I was painfully shy then, a short kid with braces and no particular talent in the field. They let me play because I was a catcher.

But Missy could play any position. She could out run most of us and made some of the most beautiful long slides home I ever saw. Her arms always had new scratches and her mom would yell about them and the dirt on her clothes. She always wondered why Missy couldn't be a lady like her older sister.

Missy told us once, in a rare sharing of a confidence, that her sister Peggine was a prissy pill and boy crazy. She liked some singer named Elvis. I didn't know who she meant until Buddy and Jake told us how he wiggled his hips when he sang and their folks wouldn't let them see him on TV or go to the movies.

Not that they cared much then. Elvis kissed girls in the movies. Icky, they said. Buddy grabbed his stomach and rolled on the ground like he was sick. I have to laugh when I think about that. The next year he was in love with a new girl every week. Even I had to admit girls looked better a year later.

But not when I was thirteen. I thought their giggling and simpering in front of boys was goofy. Mystique Jones didn't simper. Or giggle. She ran the bases with long, sure strides and slid home. And she'd always laughed, no squealing or sound like my ma's sewing machine when it got stuck.

We played ball every day that summer that it didn't rain. The summer seemed like it would go on forever.

Until that late August afternoon I turned up at the field and nobody was there. I waited for a while and then wandered over to Jake's house which was across the street. He was sitting on his porch swing, looking real serious.

I asked where everybody was and he shook his head like I'd just dropped off the moon onto his porch. I told him, my folks had taken us to visit relatives for two days. He bit his lips, then told me.

Mystique Jones had been hit by a car and was in the hospital. They didn't know if she'd live or not.

I sat down hard on Jake's steps. My stomach felt like somebody had kicked me. It was a long time before either of us said anything else.

I didn't play any more ball that year. I didn't go to see Missy either. I couldn't. I wanted to remember her like she always was, a tall girl whose voice could crack glass when she yelled, a girl who could run like the wind, a girl who seemed to reflect light when she moved, a girl who made my heart beat a little faster when I saw her hit a ball.

She never left her wheelchair. She never went back to school. Her folks sent her to a state facility where she'd be cared for like the baby she'd become. She spent the rest of her life there.

I don't know if she remembered that golden summer, but I did. I still do, especially when I pass a grassy plot with a baseball field worn into the grass. I hear her laugh, see her hit those long ones, then take off like a horse out of the gate. They'll never tag her out.

Fini