

Spinetingler

Magazine

Spring 2005

Issue #1



Short Story Contest Winners

Interview with H. Mel Malton and a review of her latest book

Featured stories from authors of note

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Cover Photo: "Thetis Island Sunrise" by S. Marie Einarson

LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER

I have always considered the Internet to be the great equalizer of the publishing world. Not since the creation of the printing press have we seen a tool that allows a person to express their ideas to so many other people at once. Now anyone with a web page can tell a story, share a viewpoint or even just tell the world why they like a certain television show. These web sites can be found in a search engine along side web pages created by large companies and publishing houses. The power to publish has been wrestled from the control of a few and given to the many.

These changes have required the publishing industry to adapt to new ways of doing business. There is an expectation that the industry must operate in "real-time" and take better advantage what these new technologies have brought us.

We are starting to see this in the number of magazines that have electronic portions with enhanced content such as web links to provide further current information and updates related to the story. We also see this in new electronic magazines with the kind of specialty content that would not be represented in the majority of bookstores. These kinds of changes are creating a second renaissance, where we are seeing more of a free flow of ideas and less of publishing based on economics.

Sadly there is one area of this industry that remains in a backward state. I speak of the editorial elitism of the industry.

I recently came across two different new magazines, one in print and the other electronic. Both extolled their virtues and spoke of their desire to publish articles and stories that other magazines would not be interested in. I was impressed by what they had to say until I saw their condescending submission criteria. Each magazine made it clear that the editorial staff viewed their magazine as an exclusive club and that any writer who wished to be published by their magazine had to submit to a means test to find out if they were "worthy" of being published. One of these magazines even had a feature article by an anonymous literary agent who went on tirade about how agents, not the writers, were the lifeblood of the industry and how they deserved an even bigger slice of the profit split.

This is the heart of the matter, the fact that the industry has forgotten. Without writers, there is no need for publishers or agents. We as an industry need to remember this at all times. Empty pages don't sell.

As the stigma of self-publishing continues to diminish and companies like Amazon.com give world-wide distribution to the self-published, this industry needs to think carefully about the role it plays and what role it will play in the future. The world will not wait for the publishing industry to catch up, so we need to leave behind the smug elitism that is all too common and start viewing both the reader and the writer as our client.

This is the mission statement for SPINETINGLER Magazine. We seek to publish stories that people make an emotional or intellectual connection with. We also want to provide an example of how a magazine can be writer-focused, which as a byproduct will provide the kinds of stories that people will want to read.

It is a win-win scenario for everyone.

K. Robert Einarson

Publisher

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THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTORS

Ross Belot

Ross E. Belot has lived in Hamilton, Ontario most of his life; attending Parkside High School and then McMaster University. He and his wife have four children who have mostly grown up; one on each coast, one in the Rockies and one in their basement. He writes short stories and poetry. This story is not meant to resemble the large multinational that Ross works for in any way shape or fashion or any of its managers who send e-mails out at 2 am. Really, it is purely coincidental. Really.

Sandra Ruttan

Sandra Ruttan has studied journalism, communication theory and special education. She has spent several years working in early intervention work with young children with speech delays. Her story, *Write to Kill*, was written to play with the mind. Was it all a delusion? Was Adrian Morris telling the truth? Or were the authorities right? You decide.

Michael Spohr

Michael Spohr graduated cum laude with a Bachelor Of Fine Arts degree from the University Of Southern California Film School. He wrote and co-directed the independent feature film, *All The Best*, Billy Sears, which had it's world premiere at the 2001 Malibu International Film Festival and went on to become a favorite at festivals across the country. He currently lives in Los Angeles where he pursues fiction writing in all forms.

Joseph Swope

Joseph Swope is a Real Estate professional who has only recently experimented with writing. He has a BA in psychology and a MA in education from liberal arts colleges around the Washington, D.C. area. He lives in rural Maryland and has enough children to know that Barney videos can cause severe personality disorders in parents. He is a voracious reader who now realizes writing a story is much more cool than reading one. He will soon write a macabre tragedy involving literary agents, a pleasure yacht, a 3-hour tour, a storm, and being stranded on an island with nothing to read.

Shelly Wass

Shelly Wass is a graduate of the University of Montana's Creative Writing and Literature program. Currently she attends graduate school at Reed College in Portland, Oregon.

NIGHTMARE

By Ross Belot

Tap. Tap. Tap. Nick woke up from a deep sleep. He rolled over in his bed, the sheets wrapped around his body. Extricating himself he got up and padded over to the window. Rose was still in a deep sleep, he could hear her breathing. A stiff breeze was blowing through the open window. The bright moonlight that flashed across the floor was like a wild kaleidoscope, shining through the white lace curtains that swirled in the wind. The wind whispered through the nearby trees and the leaves rustled back as if alive. There it was again. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Nick rubbed his eyes and bent to stick his head out the window. Looking down, he stifled a scream. The top of a head floated below the window ledge, just below his second floor bedroom window, fifteen feet off the ground. The head was attached to a body and its hand was outstretched so that its fingers could play out a rhythm on the sill. Even from this angle it looked familiar, a bald pate with a Friar Tuck fringe.

“Hey, what the hell is this?”

The fingers stopped. The head glided up toward the open space of the window. Nick jumped back into his bedroom, hitting his own head on the bottom of the open window. The moon slid behind some clouds and all was in shadow. An outline of a face appeared in the opening. He could see the man was dressed in a dark suit, a blood red tie visible in the shadows at his throat.

“Good evening, Nick. I hope you don’t mind the interruption. I need to talk to you,” a gravely voice rumbled from outside.

The clouds moved past the moon and Nick got a clear view of the intruder. His boss, the rotund Ralph Smoker, was floating in front of his window at... he looked at his watch...three in the morning.

“What kind of trick is this Ralph? What are you doing here?”

“I was hoping you would invite me in and I’ll explain everything”

Nick looked out at the impossible apparition. The hair stood up on his neck. This was crazy. A small voice told him to be careful, very careful. Memories of vampire movies flashed across his mind...never invite them in without risking your immortal soul.

“No... I don’t think so.”

“Really, just invite me and I’ll fill you in”

“No... I don’t think so Ralph. This is either a really stupid dream or something very weird is going on. In either case you can stay out there. How are you doing that anyway?”

Ralph opened his mouth to reply but was interrupted by a voice from behind.

“Have you got it done yet Smoker? How long are you going to take?”

A second body slid up into view. John Oakes, the Senior VP, floated in front of the window, pushing aside Nick’s boss. Ralph moved off like an astronaut floating in space. A tall gaunt man, his face glowed white in the moonlight, his scarlet tie flapping up behind him in the strengthening wind, his grey hair waving like seaweed under water.

“What’s wrong with you Nick. Invite us in to your home. Now.”

“With all due respect Mr. Oakes, its not what’s wrong with me. What’s wrong with you? People don’t float in mid air and call on me in the middle of the night. I don’t get it. Like I told Ralph either this is a dream or I’ve gone nuts. Either way you can stay out there.”

“We have an emergency at work. The Bangor Beans presentation for tomorrow is in trouble. We need to come into your room right now.” Mr. Oakes glared at him.

Nick just shook his head.

“You don’t seem to be on the train Nick. It is very disappointing,” Ralph’s basso voice came muffled from behind Mr. Oakes.

“Yes indeed. We have such high hopes for you. Competition among our staff is very stiff. We need team players.” Mr. Oakes stared intently at him the whole time he said this, his eyes looked like dark holes.

With that the two men floated up and away. Nick stuck his head out the window again but the men were gone. He must be dreaming. Maybe if he went back to bed he would find himself waking up from this weirdness. He climbed back under the sheets and closed his eyes.

He heard the annoying beeping of his alarm set for 6 a.m. Rose rolled over and hit the snooze button. He got out of bed quickly, his car pool buddy Jim Emerson would be here in twenty minutes so he had no time to waste. Twenty-five minutes later he climbed into Jim’s black Honda Civic. They had been car-pooling together for over five years. They both worked at Alucard Advertising and got along very well, making each other laugh.

“Nick, how’s it going? Great morning. Radio says traffic is good; we should scoot before it gets real heavy. Hey, did you open that thing last night?” Jim was referring to the black bag with the laptop that Nick had just thrown into the back seat.

“Nope, same as always. I have the best intentions when I bring it home but then never can make myself open it. Last night I was about to and Rose wanted to go for a walk. You know that was a far better use of the time. Work can wait for work.”

“Yeah, well. I wish I could say the same thing. Ever since they gave me those junior account executives to supervise I never have enough time. Ralph suggested I get dialup access for e-mail and it’s an incredible time saver. Lets you spend more time with your family because you can be at home instead of putting the extra time in at work.”

A faint bell chimed in Nick’s head. What was it? He had a dream last night but couldn’t remember it, just wisps left, kind of a feeling.

“Somebody mentioned you had been sending e-mails out after 9 p.m. last weekend. I wondered how you were doing that.”

“Yeah well they gave me the laptop and with the dialup I can work while Susie puts the kids to bed and then kiss them goodnight. Then while Susie watches TV I can be in the same room doing my e-mail.”

“Sound great.” Nick didn’t really think so. He thought it sounded sick. He remembered when Jim used to tell him how much fun it was to read bedtime stories with the kids or how Jim and Susie used to enjoy their evenings together after the kids went to bed. Ever since they had started relying on Jim to manage the junior people at work and had given him that bigger office Jim seemed to have changed.

“Yeah, really is. I feel real lucky the company cares enough to give me the right tools so I can be home with my family. Lots of companies would expect you to just come in. Hey, that reminds me I have to work late the rest of the week. The big Bangor Beans account is in trouble and the team and me have to burn the midnight oil. So if you wait around if you have work to do or...”

“No that’s fine. I can drive myself. Hey, how about those Leafs...” He heard the same soft chime again. Something about Bangor Beans. No he just couldn’t get it. They settled into their usual drive-to-work banter.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Nick was awakened again that night. Tap. Tap. Tap. Nick got up and walked toward the open window. The dream from last night was now clear in his mind. He was not surprised to see Ralph floating in front of him.

“Ralph, what are you doing? We went through this last night. Take off will you, and let me sleep.”

“Nick, my boy. You really don’t understand what is going on. This is all for your career. Invite me in to talk to you about it.”

“Ralph, I’m closing this window and going back to bed. If you have something to talk to me about, talk to me at the office. I know this must be a dream but I’m getting really annoyed.”

“Nick, let us in. It’s important. You know you can trust me,” a different voice chimed in. Jim, his car pool partner, had appeared from behind Ralph.

“Jim, you too! This is getting dumber and dumber. Okay what’s this about?”

“It’s all on your laptop in the corner. Invite us in and we’ll show you, Nick.” Nick could see Ralph’s white teeth gleaming in the moonlight, his red tie blowing straight back.

“Okay, okay. I give. Come in. Let’s get this figured out.” He looked up as the two men floated in and saw a tear rolling down Jim’s face.

A few months later the rustling leaves lay dead on the ground and a frigid wind blew hard bending the barren trees. Nick was sitting on the couch in the family room. He looked up from his laptop and realized that Rose must have already gone up to bed. Letterman was just ending.

“Guess I better get up to bed but it’s hard to sleep with the work still running around in my head.”

Nick was frustrated he hadn’t got more done. He would have to do better tomorrow night. He went upstairs, got ready for bed and slid in beside Rose. He fell asleep in minutes.

An hour later. Tap. Tap. Tap. A head poked out of a window.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“Hello, Snyder. Let me in and I’ll explain. Its about your career.” Nick floated up in front of the new guy at the office...



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Spinetingler Magazine

Publishing exception fiction from emerging
and established writers

WRITE TO KILL

By Sandra Ruttan

He glanced at his watch and felt his chest tighten. He was going to be late. ‘No, no, no!’ That wasn’t acceptable. He couldn’t be late. It would upset the cosmic balance that he relied on to function through his shift. Everything had a sequence. He couldn’t skip over one element and pick up along the path. It would be wrong.

Coaxing his stubby legs to move faster, he squinted slightly as he looked through the dark rims of his glasses, darting to and fro to avert the rush hour crowd. The sweat was starting to pool on his fingers under the handle of his briefcase.

He darted left, left, left, stopping short as someone walked into his path carelessly and they almost bumped. The towering man glared down at him. Adrian pushed his glasses back up on his nose and kept moving, shifting the briefcase to his other hand.

Just as his fingers made contact with the handle another man, who looked like he should be a stand-in for Tony Soprano, sidestepped a puddle and knocked the suitcase from Adrian’s fingers, sending it tumbling down the sidewalk.

“Oh, uh...” Adrian stammered. ‘*Not the briefcase. Not today. Oh no, no, no.*’ He made the mistake of glancing at his watch again, his heart accelerating. The man hadn’t even muttered an apology.

As Adrian turned, the background noise of two teens arguing came to the fore as one pushed the other right into him. Adrian felt the shoulder blade of the youth intersect with his nose and he stepped back automatically, feeling his torso brush against a polished woman trotting by in a sleek, black suit. She glared at him, too preoccupied with the conversation on her cell phone to comment.

He turned again, this time managing to stay clear of the crowd. *'Faster, faster, faster. Don't be late, don't be late.'* He kept the mantra going until he reached the building, turning to walk up the stairs.

"Good morning Adrian," Paula said automatically as he shuffled into the staffroom.

"Good morning," he mumbled back. But it wasn't. Why did he have to lie? Oh, to see the looks on their faces if he just blurted out, "No, it isn't Paula. It's a terrible, rotten, lousy, stinking morning, like every other morning this week. And I'm late."

Late. Not to her, he wasn't. But two minutes of deep breathing and scanning the stock market reports was gone from his day. He needed those two minutes. He had a routine and it was important. He'd proven that. When he followed his routine the day was as smooth as a professional skating rink.

'Skating. Oh damn.' He'd forgotten to buy a new tape. *Stars on Ice* would be on tonight, but it conflicted with his schedule. He wanted to watch it on the weekend. Now he would have to try to get a tape in the afternoon shuffle.

He pushed the glasses back up on his nose and opened the newspaper, feeling the deep breaths filter into his chest as he lost himself in the numbers.

The day went by, as all days did. Sort and file, sort and file, just like a thousand days before as he filtered office mail into the appointed slots, circulating memos and briefs as they were dispatched. His position offered a certain orderliness that soothed his nerves. He never liked his workstation to be in disarray and he didn't like surprises.

He also didn't like interruptions. When Mr. Brenner held the door open for a wide-eyed blonde who looked like she should be in a cheerleading outfit, Adrian felt his lips curling down with displeasure.

“Morris,” Brenner’s voice boomed, his eyes monitoring his fingers as they straightened his Italian silk shirt. “Can I see you for a moment?”

“I...uh... I’m just...” Adrian stammered, trying to think of what to say. He could never get the words out when he was nervous or distracted. He was in the middle of a stack. Brenner’s presence was affecting his rhythm. He straightened the pile, set it down on the table and shuffled after Brenner, his finger instinctively reaching up for the routine nudge of the bridge of his glasses.

“You’ve been doing a fine job down here Morris,” Brenner’s voice boomed. Full of volume but nothing more than hollow, predictable words that echoed off the concrete walls of the stairwell Brenner had led him into.

“Th-thank you,” Morris muttered.

“It’s just that we have to do some streamlining. Be more economical. More savvy with the cash flow and all that, you know?”

Adrian didn’t know. Why was Brenner talking about business to him? He squinted up at the suave figure looming over him.

“If, uh, you need me to do... some, er, extra, I can...”

“No, no, Morris,” Brenner interrupted him. “I’m saying we have to let you go. You’ll get a good referral and a nice severance. Paula has all the details. You just need to swing by her desk.” Brenner looked at his Rolex. “You can go home early, with pay.”

Brenner turned on his heel, opening the door and letting it fall shut behind him as Adrian compiled Brenner’s words, struggling to process their meaning.

He tugged the door open and scurried after Brenner, who was more than halfway across the room. "But I'm not finished," he squeaked.

"That's alright. Chrissy will finish up for you. Go see Paula." The edge of his tone left no invitation of debate.

Adrian Morris turned and shuffled meekly towards the stairwell. He could hear Chrissy's fluffy giggles mocking him as he trudged up the staircase, the quiver in his knees increasing with each step he took.

Adrian found it disconcerting to be able to choose from the empty seats on the bus. He was accustomed to the throng of people he had to navigate morning and night. The relative solitude added to his uneasiness. He took deep breaths, concentrating on his nerves and nothing more, feeling his heart palpitating as he tried to push his stringy, sweaty hair off his brow.

The bus slowed and a woman stood, her two children in tow. Adrian felt his shoulders loosen at the prospect of respite from the noisy kids who'd been begging for a treat and protesting over the news that they were spending the night at Grandma's. He'd tried to block it out, but the hum in his ears intensified painfully and he'd given up trying to filter the noise.

The door opened and a new sound thudded into his sensitive orifices. The boom of the bass seemed to shake the windows as the youths strutted into the bus, oversized ghetto blaster draped over the shoulder of the first one. Adrian glanced up nervously at the wrong time. The teen glared down at him.

"Yo, what you lookin' at?"

Adrian's eyes widened and his lips trembled. Before he could muster a word of response the young man laughed cruelly and continued his trek to the back of the bus.

Now the whine of children had been replaced with the thud of the boom box. The so-called music was so loud that it pushed any possibility of thought beyond grasp.

Adrian could feel the sweat pooling on his fingers, trickling from his neck down his back, his heart outpacing the techno punk blaring in his head. He wanted to reach up and cover his ears, scream until the music stopped, but then he was there. His stop. The place he could exit to and return to processing his day, sorting and filing it and trying to make sense of where his life was going now.

'Order. I need to find order,' he told himself as he walked down the sidewalk. The cherry blossoms were blooming. With the spring rain came a number of things and his furtive glances at the manicured lawns he passed showed tulips emerging from the flowerbeds. Soon the dismal grey would give way to colour.

He'd forgotten he wasn't in a hurry anymore until he saw Claire. Her silky brown hair hung over her shoulders, her long legs augmented by the pleated skirt she was wearing as she walked towards him, a dark terrier in tow.

Claire's blue eyes sparkled as her whole face resonated with her smile. "Hi Adrian. How are you?"

"Oh, um. I'm alright." He managed to get the words out without much of a stammer, pushing his glasses back up on his nose instinctively as he looked down at the dog. "Is he, uh, your dog?"

He looked up at her in time to see her nod. He felt his neck kink slightly, but ignored it. Somehow, talking to Claire always overrode all the markers he relied on for comfort.

“I just got him. Isn’t he adorable?”

“Oh, uh, yes Claire. Wha-what’s his name?”

“Leigh.”

“Really? Tha... that... That’s m-my... middle name,” he said, barely managing to get the words out coherently as she smiled and nodded, waiting for him to finish. Claire wasn’t like other people, who took the gaps as a chance to cut in.

Once, when he’d been upset, he’d muttered that he wished he could just get the words out without tripping over them. He’d always known it was just nerves, but he couldn’t stop himself.

She told him she thought that everyone deserved to have at least one wish come true. He’d smiled and stuttered that he thought that was a nice idea, and she’d taken the time to talk to him when she saw him ever since.

She even lent him tapes of music she said she liked. Music he wasn’t sure he liked, but he was trying hard to like it.

Her smile widened now. “I didn’t even know that! Isn’t that funny? You’ve been renting our suite for years and I never knew that. You’re home early.”

“Yes, well, I, uh... do you think you...” he started, only to be interrupted from a voice across the street.

“Claire! I managed to get us tickets for the theatre,” the approaching figure declared as he jaunted across the road without so much as a hint of a sweat or a hair out of place. He glanced at Adrian, giving him a toothy smile. “Hi.”

“Oh, hi. I’ll, uh... Nice to meet your Leigh,” Adrian said lamely, unnerved by the site of Mr. Tall, Dark and Handsome, the man who was the embodiment of all the things he knew appealed to women, all the things he knew he wasn’t. He trudged off to his basement suite, descending the steps and wishing he could really sink into the earth and have it swallow him up. Wasn’t that what everyone wanted to see happen to him anyway? He was insignificant, a ‘nobody’. Nobody anybody wanted to know.

Claire watched him go, her eyes shadowed.

“You’re so soft. You worry about everyone,” Mark said to her with a shake of his head.

“Didn’t you see what was in his hand? That’s a severance package. He must have lost his job.”

“It happens,” Mark said, shrugging unsympathetically.

She turned to him with a slight twist of her mouth, thrusting the dog leash into his hands. “I’m going to check on him.”

“Claire...”

“He’ll be on my mind all night if I don’t make sure he’s okay.” She could never explain to Mark that she sensed in Adrian a sensitive spirit, a kindness that so many people lacked. She never had to try to live up to an expectation with Adrian. Although they had really only begun to talk in the past few months, he heard every word she said, cared about what she thought. He tried hard too, she knew, to find nice things to say about her taste in music and books. *‘I’ll just make sure he’s okay.’*

'Now, where to put this,' Adrian thought, wearing a trench into the linoleum as he covered the narrow space over and over again. Everything had its place, its allotted spaced within his small suite. But this, this letter from work, was throwing off the balance. He held his head in his hands in an effort to keep his thoughts from spinning out of control, relying as always on the external to govern the internal, to help him sort the whirling voices into order.

He stopped swirling around, vaguely surprised that he wasn't dizzy. Dropping the letter onto the table he trotted into the bedroom, carefully pulling the tin box from under his bed. He pulled it out and sat down, setting the box on his knees.

Lifting the lid cautiously, he set it on the bed alongside his body. Adrian reached into the box, stroking the cold metal barrel of the gun. He felt the pinch in his neck unwind and he lifted the gun into his hand.

He smiled. He knew what to do. He would show them, show them all he wasn't insignificant. He wasn't a 'nobody'. He was the 'somebody' that everybody had overlooked.

Crossing the room, Adrian pulled the squeaky chair back from the desk, letting it absorb his girth as he squeezed between the arms. He leaned forward, feeding a sheet of paper into the old Olympic he'd stubbornly clung to.

The first two words were easy. He was going to tell them all, leaving no room for doubt. He didn't want someone else to take his credit and he didn't want some headshrinker propagating the wrong conclusion. He wanted them to know. He wanted to be known.

And this was the way.

He slid his fingers back over the gun slowly, the conviction solidifying. He reached for his tape deck, pressing play.

His music usually soothed his mind too, but he'd forgotten one of Claire's mixes was in the tape deck. The band The Box offered its mantra, "Walking, walking, on the tightrope of insanity... Walking, walking, on the verge of losing mind. Walking, walking, on the tightrope of insanity... Walking, walking on the verge of losing mind."

He turned the tape off, feeling his heart trot with the insinuation. He wasn't crazy. He wasn't losing his mind. He'd show them all.

Adrian lost himself in the soothing rhythms of a 70 word per minute keystroke echoing like machinegun fire in an alley as the words flowed from his mind through his willing fingers...

Claire walked around the side of the old house, intending to knock at his door around back, but as she passed the bedroom her attention was drawn by a movement from the other side of the window that she saw from the corner of her eye.

When she didn't return, Mark reluctantly walked around the house, glancing at his watch. He had plans for the evening, and they didn't include holding the hand of a dreary little man his fiancé felt sorry for.

"What..." he started to ask. Claire stepped back from the window and shook her head.

His brows merged to form a solid line and he choked back a sigh as he approached the window, seeing the satisfied smile as Adrian Morris stroked the gun.

"I swear! I was only writing a story," Adrian protested as the officers sought to restrain him. He was contorting his body, pulling back against their grasp, turning his head from side to side and trying to twist his head to see what the stream of uniformed people were doing inside his home...

He froze as his eyes focused in on Claire, the officers seizing the chance to tighten their grip as they forced him along the sidewalk to the waiting cruiser.

“I was writing a book! It was just a list of names for a book,” he squealed pleadingly as they pushed his hands together and cuffed him, needing only to nudge his head down slightly to get him inside the open back door.

“Come on, Claire. They can handle things now.”

“But they want to take him away.”

Mark shook his head. “I heard them say he has a history, he’s been committed before.”

Claire swallowed. “That doesn’t mean he’s lying. What if he was only...?”

Mark summoned a soothing tone. “Then they’ll let him go. But we did the right thing.”

“Now, this is the gun, isn’t it? What can you tell us about it, Mr. Morris?”

An enigmatic smile filled his face, the hush of the crowd of fans straining to hear him speak lingering in the air invitingly. They were holding their breath for him, waiting to hear what he would say. He glanced over the crowd, and then nodded.

“Yes, it is.”

“So this is your weapon of choice?”

“No, no. My weapon is the words. The gun is just another tool, no different than the characters in the story.”

“Your book, *Compelled to Kill*, is an international best-seller. Can you tell us about what inspired you to write this story?”

“I was out of work, so I finally had time to write. The idea had been shaping for some time. It was just a matter of sitting down at the typewriter and putting my thoughts down on paper.”

“You make it sound so simple. Why did you choose a typewriter instead of a computer?”

Adrian Morris smiled again, nodding his approval of the question. He carried on, indulging in the rapt attention of the audience...

“Is there any progress?” Claire asked.

The doctor shrugged slightly. “When he first came he insisted he was just writing a book. He insisted it was just a list of character names.”

“He wrote that in a letter to me,” Claire said. “He said that if he stayed here he would lose his mind.”

“We aren’t here to make people crazy.”

“What is he doing?” Claire asked.

The corners of the doctor’s mouth twisted down. “This is his alternate reality. He believes he’s written a best-selling book and that he’s being interviewed in front of hundreds of adoring fans.”

She shook her head, watching Adrian talk to the empty chair, all the inhibitions that had governed him outside these walls suppressed by the dominance of the delusion.

Claire turned to walk away, pausing to hear Adrian Morris continue his monologue, his voice smooth and crisp as the words came effortlessly, without hesitation.

'He isn't stuttering. I guess he got one wish after all.'

Attention Writers...

We are looking for compelling stories that capture the reader with intriguing characters and quality writing.

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Also include a brief bio of yourself in the event your submission is selected for publication. This will be published following your submission. Please keep your bio to less than 250 words.

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IN THE MOUTHS OF INSECTS

By Shelly Wass

EXCEPTIONAL SHORT STORY CONTEST WINNER - FIRST PLACE

So long, world.

I can see the sky from where I lie. The moss is making its lifelong and arduous climb up the trunks of the trees around me. I must be on my back. I can feel the earth moving under my right arm, stretched out at a right angle. My other arm is twisted under my head, cushioning. What are my legs doing? They, too, are out of shape. One bent with my foot almost touching my thigh. The other stretched straight, ankle wrong. I think it is broken. But I can't feel it. All I feel is the movement under my right arm. Must be the worms.

I fear the worms the most. They attack unmercifully. They will nibble and gnaw until I am no more. So long, world.

I remember the fall. Head over heels and arms circling like pinwheels as I somersaulted my way to this place. There was a gentle push and then this. But there was also laughter, sinister and final.

I remember other falls. Not me tumbling but the tumbling of leaves falling softly to come to rest on their own death bed. A bed of places like this, quiet, forgotten, alone. They are reborn through the process of decomposition and new forestry growth. I, too, will contribute to the growth of the trees that shelter me.

What beautiful trees. Everything is so green. There is a rectangular opening and then there is sky. Wisps of cloud float by. I don't think it will rain today. I don't try to move. When the sun is above me I don't think I will shade my eyes. I will remain, misshapen and bent until the worms come. I will go softly long before they come. So long.

My husband must be putting up the posters.

* * * *

“Don’t call me so much, Mom. Every time the phone rings I think it’s her.” He sets the phone gently into its cradle. The way they fit together makes him think of the way he fit snug with his wife in bed.

“Ok. Thanks for coming. I sectioned off the map. Everyone pick a section and go in groups of, how many people are here? Three, groups of three.” He hands the first of the posters to his brother. The picture is from their wedding day. She smiled broad in her clean white dress. It had been taken in three sizes. She looked like a model in a wedding magazine, helpless and small.

“Ready?” They file out the door. He doesn’t think to lock it. He feels that he no longer has anything inside to protect.

* * * *

He always told me to lock the door. He always told me this area has the highest number of serial killers because it is so easy to hide a body in the overgrown forest.

* * * *

The train stretched the length of the curve around the hill. She rested her arm on the rail, her head on her arm. There was nothing but green and it was everywhere. The trees at the bottom of the hill fell all over each other and the bushes at the bottom reached toward the tops of the trees. The wind from the momentum of the train blew her hair off her forehead.

“This is where I’m going to dump your body when I kill you,” he said.

“You couldn’t pick a better place, really.” She didn’t lift her head, closed her eyes. She could feel the freedom of the growth of trees and sky. It closed on her like a fist, tightening and releasing.

* * * *

We joked about these things. We laughed because those things were so foreign. We laughed because we knew one day I would be here with the sky stretched before me, after a long, treacherous fall and that the worms were standing at attention, ready to feast. We joked. And then the next moment he would tell me, "I live my life trying everyday to do something special to remind you how much I love you. If I can continue to do this, we will always be happy. You will always feel loved."

My husband wouldn't let me take the dog out at night. He wouldn't let me carry the groceries up the stairs because my hands are fragile. He protected me from every conceivable incident of horror. He made me aware that without him I was vulnerable. Walking out to my car alone became dangerous. Walking to the mailbox alone was inviting tragedy. On this day, he was not there to protect and love me. He slept while I left for class. He slept as I approached my car. He left me vulnerable and alone and he left me to face my fate. He slept.

My keys, I think, are all that's left of me. They sat lonely on the ground next to the spot I was taken. I regret leaving my memory in such an object. I would rather there be nothing.

* * * *

He sits, resting his head and holding the keys. They are always either in his pocket or his hand. He hates jasmine tea and there is a cup of it on the arm of the couch, next to him. It smells like her. She loved jasmine.

"Do you need anything before I go?" his brother asks.

"I need a lot of things." He closes his eyes and he closes his fist on the keys. They dig in and leave impressions on his palm.

“Call me in the morning, we can put up more posters or do something mindless. Let’s go to the zoo.”

“Maybe we could go for a walk, or a drive. Let’s go for a drive,” he says without opening his eyes.

* * * *

I remember the sound of a car, the opening of the door, the shoving, me kicking and now this. I dropped my keys. Not on purpose, but from the shear force of the shove that landed me in the car that brought me to my resting place here in the woods.

That man was cruel. Cruel like a blizzard in March. Yes, cruel like unpredictable weather. There was something innately unnatural and callous. Like a storm he scooped me up, threw me around and pushed me over the edge when he was done with me.

“We were meant to be here together,” he said. He stank of cigarettes and desperation.

We sat huddled in the back of his car, parked at the top of a lonely hill. I protected my body by holding my legs to my chest with my duct-taped hands. He stroked my arm and the hair rose in defiance. The tape on my mouth restricted the breath coming in through my nose. If I could speak I would tell him about my dog. My dog and my family. I have people who love me and will miss me. I know this is my final connection with any human being. I know this. But I would plead if I could.

“I’ve been watching you,” he slobbered in my ear and he lifted my arms from around my legs. “I know what you like. You sit on your balcony and drink coffee. Do you remember the last time you did this? Do you know it was the last time you will do that?”

I sat, wide-eyed and silent. The only sound was the sound of my labored breath. If he had been watching me he would know I was loved. In my mind I thought of the scenes that unfolded in my home that anyone with a good eye and patience could witness. My windows were always open as though inviting people to observe my life from a distance.

I thought of every move I made in my house. I thought of the times I had taken the dog for a walk at night. I thought of the little things. Making macaroni and cheese beside the kitchen window. I thought of my husband. We were not alone when he held me on the couch in front of the television. He walked by me as I sat, reading, on the bean bag chair. He would kiss me on the forehead as he walked by. Nothing we did was ours. Nothing we did was just for us. We were always watched, I thought.

* * * *

“What would you do if something happened to me,” she asked over the counter separating the kitchen and living room. She was washing the dishes from dinner.

“I would probably marry my girlfriend,” he said. She could just see his head, peaking over the counter.

“I’m serious. I think we should make a plan.”

“You want to plan our deaths? It’s not exactly like talking about retirement,” he laughed in his throat. He knew she was serious. He didn’t like to think about it. He had spent thirty years looking for her and now that he had her he didn’t want to plan on losing her. He had spent enough of his life thinking he would die alone.

“I would kill myself, is that what you want to hear?” He was standing now, serious.

“God, no. I just think that we should prepare ourselves for tragedy. I don’t want to be caught off guard,” she shook the soap bubbles off her hands.

“Prepare yourself for tragedy, if you want. I don’t want to think about it.”

She shook her head and smiled. She had a streak of bubbles on her cheek. They formed a line, straight as a razor.

“Ok, forget it. Let’s just plan on killing ourselves together before we get too old,” she said.

“Deal,” he said. He came around the side of the counter and wiped the bubbles off her face. He kissed her on the forehead as they stood in front of the black-dark kitchen window.

* * * *

I thought of my wedding night as the man slid my jeans down my awkward legs. The car was cramped. I thought of my wedding night and the rose petals and candles that my husband’s sister had decorated the room with before we arrived. We ate pizza on the floor and slept maybe an hour that night. I thought of gentle caresses compared to the rough assault of this awful man. I closed my eyes and thought of my husband as my head rhythmically hit the window of the car. I knew it would bruise and I knew it didn’t matter. The bruising would have no time to heal before nature carries me away piece by piece in the jaws of beetles and ants.

* * * *

Window open, he rests his head on the car door. The car winds around the curves, holding the road and the road holding it. He looks down ravines, always looking. He thinks he can spot the place where she lies. He knows she lays waiting for him. He thinks he will lie down with her when he finds her and hold her, transforming the spot into one of joy.

“I know a great place to hike up here if you’re interested,” his brother says.

“Sure.” He doesn’t lift his head, runs his hand over the keys in his pocket.

They stop at a pullout. There is a brown and yellow board advertising proper trailhead etiquette. There is a sign on the board about leaving trash on the trail. They ask that you don’t do it. Pack it in, pack it out.

At the top of the trail he stops.

“I can’t do it. I should go home in case someone calls,” he says.

“Whatever you want.”

They get back into the car and make a u-turn on the road. As they drive he sees a tree full of bluebirds. There must be at least fifty. They flutter together and sing in harmony. He can hear their rustling as they pass. His hand goes to the keys in his pocket. They are cold and hard against his sweating palm.

* * * *

A small bird plunges from the tree on the left to the tree on the right with such precision. Nature is methodical. Nature is our nemesis. We return to it just as we are born to it. No one is exempt from its fury and rage. No one will die any more gracefully than I.

I think he gave me a choice at the top of the hill. My hands were untied before my fateful plunge. Maybe he knew it would hurt more to have more limbs ready to break. Maybe he thought I could climb out. Either way, I can't move. I have grown into the ground already.

All I have to do is close my eyes. I won't have to see the beauty of the world that is about to consume me. I can close my eyes and think of my family, of the joy I experienced in the minutiae of life. If my arms and legs could move I would try to climb. But they can't and I won't. So, so long, world. I give myself back to you.

A PUPPET'S SOUL

By Joseph Swope

EXCEPTIONAL SHORT STORY CONTEST WINNER - SECOND PLACE

Through her designer glasses, Dr. Elizabeth Lightfeld watched the monitors with clinical calm. No observers, especially her few superiors and many subordinates, would see any sign of the rush of excitement she felt. Years of planning and working had led her to this moment.

She allowed herself no show of triumph. With a flick of her black pumps, she sent herself spinning in the standard issue office chair. Once around was enough; lest someone see her. It would not do to have anyone think of her in any way but the image she had carefully crafted. Even something as slight as having someone watch her in a harmlessly embarrassing moment could be used against her.

She had worked for years to prevent any such thing. Avoiding giving away leverage while gaining leverage against others went hand in hand with the project that was just now beginning to wake. It was amazing to her that no one else had the imagination to foresee what this project would mean.

As she got up from the barely padded chair, she quickly checked her reflection in the glare of the computer monitor. The rhythmic sound of her heels on the polished tile masked her need to rush through the sterile government facility.

The project, in fact everything, was really about power. She had been a student of power since she was a young girl. The lessons of power or the lack of it were painfully and repeatedly taught to her by her older brother. Countless times, he had used the advantage of his age and strength to torment her. It might have been a simple game to him. She had, since then, read countless stories of sibling rivalry. But, she believed

that her brother enjoyed tormenting her. It wasn't that he wanted to cause her harm necessarily; it was that he simply enjoyed using his power over her.

It didn't take her precocious mind long to find ways to stop him from exerting his will over him. The flip side of that discovery was that she could then exert her will over her brother.

From her brother to her classmates, her knowledge of leverage over others grew quickly and more importantly unnoticed. It would not do to have her teachers and parents know how she read Machiavelli while other girls read books about ponies.

As she had grown, she had learned other levers to get what she wanted. Along with her intelligence that she hid, came a stunning body and an innocent face that were very versatile tools. Even now, her lab coat was a bit too tight around the bust. It was a standard lab coat, given to her when she began to work at this place of secrets. No one would guess that she had the buttons moved a bit by her drycleaner. It was a subtle change, but the all-male staff with whom she worked definitely noticed it.

To counter any extreme notions of her femininity, she made sure they knew she had paid her dues. It was only after her time in the Marine Corps that she had attended Princeton. Physically, the paunchy, over-educated doctors knew she was more than a match for any of them was. Her extreme training in martial arts gave her advantages that few could match. Still, there were too many who could scoff at her physical abilities. Men. Always her instructors and sparring partners could beat her with ease. If she had more skill or more endurance, they would simply use their strength to hit her harder or throw her around.

She had money, looks, and education that would make most three times envious. Still, she felt like she was a mugging victim waiting to happen. The more she learned about power, the more ways she discovered she was vulnerable.

That was why what awaited her in the hospital cell made her jittery with anticipation. It was more than a lottery jackpot. Money could bring some power, but power could bring money and more. In the end, there was nothing else. Power. It was with that thought that she exited her dimly lit office and headed to claim her prize.

#

The fog of sleep was gradually replaced with a disturbing haze of confusion. His emotions cried out for reassurance as his mind desperately sought to soothe his increasing fear. Without lifting his head, he looked around.

The room was practically bare. The walls and floor were dull steel that diffused the stark florescent light from above. He turned his head from side to side, to gather more information. The back of his head rubbed against the canvas cot that held him.

As, he did so, disturbing information flooded his mind and filled his soul with icy dread. Not from the views provided by turning his head but rather from the strange feeling he received from the back of his head. There was too much feeling. He had no hair. Worse than that was the awkward stump of something metal jutting from his head.

He lifted his hand to confirm his fear. It wasn't a quick motion, though it was driven by fear. It was a slow motion, hampered by exhaustion. With trepidation he felt in his gut, he gently felt the once inch ridge of metal and plastic that was protruding from the top of his head. The skin around it felt raw. Whatever it was, had to have been inserted recently. As he explored, his fingers found with horror, that it spanned his head from ear to ear in a perpendicular mohawk.

He let his hand drop back to his side in despair. It landed listlessly on the green fabric of the cot. Thoughts and fragments of thoughts swarmed in his mind. Despite his exhaustion and the probable residue of sedatives, his disciplined mind made order from chaos.

A small shudder of fear rippled through him as he focused on what he truly needed to know. How helpless was he and how could he free himself of this room. A part of his mind wondered if whether he was simply assuming being in the room was bad. He did not know and not knowing was always a cause of fear. His ordered mind warned against acting from fear, but fear had kept him alive before.

With an effort that almost sent him back to unconsciousness, he lifted himself to one elbow. Waves of dizziness threatened to knock him back to the cot. He gripped the edge of the aluminum frame and forced himself to a sitting position. Flashes of pain exploded in his head. With a white knuckled grip and iron determination, he remained sitting. Nausea assailed him at the same moment his gaze drifted across the steel toilet across the room.

With deep breaths and well-practiced thoughts of relaxation, he quieted the pain. Nausea receded into the depths of his gut. His body was secondary.

His mind was primary. It was his tool, his weapon. With a stable platform and a calm background, he focused his thoughts. He found the part of his mind that existed just before he moved or thought voluntarily. It was the part that allowed him to do, to move, to be more than a vegetable. Without it he wouldn't have existed. It was his will.

Most took it for granted that the mind and the body were permanently intertwined. He had learned differently. His thoughts could be directed down a path that was different than that which led to his body or other areas of his mind. It led outside of his mind and even his body. He could focus his will, his thoughts on anything he wanted. The term for his ability was telekinesis.

He went down the mental path to find his power. It wasn't easy. Perhaps it was the drugs that might still be in his system. Perhaps it was the metal intruder that jutted

obscenely from his skull, but something was blocking him. He could not push his will into the outside world.

Desperately, he tested his failure. He concentrated and formed his thoughts into a golf-ball-sized sphere in front of his chest. Tentatively, he waved his hand through the area. Nothing. No invisible ball could be found. Nothing, not even the slightest resistance that would tell him he was affecting something. Without his mind, he was helpless.

An electronic whir stirred him from his morose thoughts. The featureless door slid into the wall with mechanical precision. A woman in a white lab coat stepped through the door.

"Mr. Patrick Calhoun?" She had a smile that did nothing to comfort his fear. Despite the hint of sexuality her legs and shoes gave, he knew she was all business.

He did nothing to respond.

"I am Dr. Lightfeld. I am here to answer questions as well as to ask some." Again, she impatiently gave a smile that barely held a wave of aggression. Her arms were folded across her chest and held a dull metallic laptop. With practiced ease she opened it and pressed a button. Another electronic whir accompanied a chair that slowly swung down from the wall.

As she sat, he could get a better view of her. Definitely attractive. Beautiful even, but in the way a frigid vista of a glacier was beautiful. Her long legs extended out in a way that let him know she was completely comfortable. Her thin glasses hung on her nose as she ignored him and focused on the computer. After what were enough moments to shake even his confidence, she looked up.

"Now we can begin." There was no trace of a smile. "Mr. Calhoun, you possess certain abilities that are of interest to all who know of them. I know of them. Therefore, I am interested in them. Extremely interested in them." She paused.

He knew enough to know she paused for effect, drawing out his discomfort at not knowing. Though he knew what she was trying to do, he could not ignore its effectiveness. He wanted to know. Knowledge was power and he had neither.

"Mr. Calhoun, this computer is a rather complex transmitter. It can send an almost infinite number of signals. You might learn to appreciate how complex it truly is. The receiver is attached to your skull. It has an almost uncountable number of connections to parts of your brain."

With mental discipline he had learned through years of intimate working with hidden parts of his mind, he successfully hid the flash of panic her words evoked.

"You see, from the top of the head and moving down towards each ear are the sensory strip and the motor strip. Every time you feel something or move something a group of nerves in those areas fire. It leads to a truly an interesting question."

Again, she paused. She was savoring the delicious position of power.

"You see, do people have thoughts because their nerves fire or do nerves fire because people have thoughts? You are going to help me answer that question." Her smugness was another manifestation of her power. She wielded it like a whip.

His groggy mind had come to a course of action whose failure would leave him no worse. Its success might provide an avenue of escape. Slowly, with feigned clumsiness, he moved his legs into position.

With a lunge that was barely possible given his weakened state, he assailed her. Though his body made it across the cramped room, his attack was clumsy. His hands did not make it to her throat. They were shunted aside and managed only handfuls of lab coat.

After an initial start, Dr. Elizabeth Lightfeld appraised the situation with her customary clinical coolness. With her left hand she grabbed the man's right and twisted. At the same time, she dug her thumb in between the ribs on his left side. It was a simple move. Patrick Calhoun's body had no choice but to roll off her and land painfully on the floor.

"Mr. Calhoun, we have work to do. This is not helping. I hope you will take me at my word when I say you are powerless in this situation. Please return to your bed and I will demonstrate."

Patrick Calhoun lay on the cold metal floor for a few moments. The shock he had felt at being thrown was quickly replaced by burning humiliation. He knew he should be beyond it, but the woman was attractive. It wasn't simply the ease with which she handled him, it was her confidence. Rage burned inside of him, but he realized that until he had more information, she was right. He was powerless.

He returned to his bunk and stared at her. He sealed his anger inside one of the many rooms of his mind and waited for her to speak. It didn't take long for her to being anew.

"You see, the question of where the mind stops and the brain begins has long plagued mankind. You, I think, are my key to answering the question. Your mind has found a way to turn your thoughts into matter. Oh, I know that you would like nothing better than to insert your thoughts into my chest or maybe form your thoughts into a fist and hit me. I, too, would like that to happen, but, of course, not to me."

Patrick Calhoun allowed himself to blink naturally, but he submerged all emotion into insulated parts of himself. Gloating or not, she was giving him information. It might not be of use, but it was all he had.

"Think Mr. Calhoun, how many desperate people, prisoners, cripples, victims of violence have struggled or even prayed for what you have discovered. It really shouldn't be possible. I understand that thoughts are energy and energy is matter. A simply ounce of radioactive matter can generate tremendous energy, as I'm sure you know. But, your brain should not be capable of generating the amount of energy needed to create matter from the millivolts of your neurons."

He had examined it countless times. He did not know why he could do any more than he knew why his arm would move when he willed it to do so.

"It doesn't look like you plan on being cooperative with me, so let me show how this machine and the devices in your head work." After only a few keystrokes she looked up.

Despite his iron control over his thoughts, he could not help but react to the hand that suddenly gripped his left ankle. It seemed to be coated with a glove of sharp pins. He slapped his own hand on his ankle and quickly looked under the bunk. There was nothing.

"Ah, it works." It was the first semblance of true emotion he had seen from her. It did not reassure him. Instantly, he began to understand the peril that faced him.

Several large waves of thoughts and emotions crashed upon him. He knew they warred across his face. He knew she enjoyed watching him absorb what it all meant. Even for pride's sake he could not hide his fear.

“Unfortunately for you, there is much testing to be done. It will no doubt be unpleasant. I would by lying, though, if I said I wasn’t looking forward to it. Even in your position, you can see the medical and technological possibilities.” Though it might have been phrased as a question, she did not care to hear anything he might say. She continued to ignore him as she typed rhythmically on the instrument that was to cause him untold amounts of despair.

“It was your left ankle that was stimulated, yes? How far up?”

He did not answer. Whether it was from defiance or fear, he did not know.

“No matter, I will soon have this finely calibrated. The less you help, the longer and worse it will be for you.”

With that, it began in earnest. His left pinkie toe began to itch. Quickly it turned to a mild burning and then to pain. He tried to resist it. He could see nothing was wrong with it. He knew pain was truly only a thought and all thoughts could be ignored. But, this was too much too fast. He had had no time to prepare.

With a reaction that almost shamed him, he reached down to grab the afflicted toe. Mercifully, the pain evaporated. He sat on the edge of the cot, in a type of pajamas, holding his left foot awkwardly. As quickly as he had snatched it from the floor, he dropped it.

It moved. He had wiggled his toes before. But, this was unnatural. His five left toes each flexed in a different direction. He watched in horror as they continued their gruesome dance on the tiled floor.

The woman’s cold voice came again. “My apologies. Too much too soon. You see, I am trying to isolate each muscle of each toe. With a few more clicks of the keyboard it

was only his pinkie toe that moved like a worm in the immediate moments after its body had been severed.

Slowly, methodically, she worked her way across first the left foot and then the right. After a few hours, the alternating itch, pain and contractions crept to his knees. He simply asked. "Why?"

"You have something I want." Was her simple reply.

With that, he realized there was no possibility of mercy, compromise, or bargaining.

"Control of your body is an ancillary benefit. I have not much use for a living breathing puppet. Though interesting, you will require food, waste removal, and general upkeep. That, I do not want."

He again waited for her to continue. Truly explaining to him was of little importance. He interrupted her as the sensations tickled his right thigh.

"So why are you doing this to my body?" He said through clenched teeth as his quadriceps flexed themselves into a rock hard coal of agony.

"Your body is expendable. A free trial, if you will. With this program, I am mapping some of your neural pathways. Soon, I will be able to combine several individual sensations into a larger complex one. I expect, in a few days, that I will have you walking about. All from the little pain you are about to feel in your hamstring. Then we will move onto your mind itself. I think with time, we can find the root of your telekinetic ability."

"Please make it stop." He was surprised and embarrassed at his plea.

"No." She said with all of the empathy of the computer she balanced on her skirt. "But, we will break for a few minutes."

With a few clicks, he heard another whir. From the wall an unpolished stainless steel toilet swung into position.

“Quickly” she commanded quietly and ruthlessly. “Use the facilities. We will soon be getting into more delicate areas and I do not want to work in filth.”

Each time he thought he understood the depths of his position, he fell to new lows. In an effort to gain some of his self back, he refused.

Without a word, she clicked a few keystrokes, and his legs erupted in fire. White hot lightning streaked up and down. Though his eyes were screwed shut in agony, he knew nothing was wrong with them, but he could not block out the pain. Then, it was over.

“Now relieve yourself quickly.” There was no emotion in her voice. Only a calm certainty.

Despite the weakness in his tortured legs, he hastened to get to the toilet. The fear of future pain outweighed his humiliation at having to perform in front of her. With deep shame he untied the draw string and sat down on the cold seat.

Relaxation of the necessary muscles would not come. He did not want to look at her and admit that he could not go.

After a few moments of humiliation, he again heard the tell-tale clicking that preceded something unpleasant.

“Let us see if this works.” She said to herself and her laptop.

Immediately he felt himself release his wastes. That was even more humiliating than not being able to go. It hammered home the point that she controlled his body. With his increasing understanding, he realized his mind would not be far behind.

She looked up pleased. "Good. Now return to your cot unless you would like to continue on the toilet."

He pulled up his pants though he realized that it was a ridiculous gesture. Still he felt better with the thin layer of fabric covering himself.

"I think we now have an understanding of our work ahead of us. I know you hate this. You believe it is in your interest to thwart this. At this point it is not. First, a team of very special doctors who were schooled and paid in secret installed the actuator in your skull. Unfortunately, some have had accidents. Some will have accidents next week. There will be no one left on this earth with enough skill to remove it from you. Secondly, you do not know if I have programmed it with a failsafe. If I do not enter a password at a certain interval, something more than unpleasant might happen to your body and might continue to happen for hours, days or even weeks."

He struggled to find his center. He had endured pain before. He had ignored everything but his thoughts before, but this was different. Each time he felt as though he got his head above water, she threw another brick at him. He needed time. Surely she could not continue this without going home, or eating or something. A spark of hope began to glow.

"Now, I do have other responsibilities aside from you and this project. You have been through a lot and I want you to sleep. I understand that you might not be able to. I also understand that you might not want to. So I would like you to swallow this."

She pulled a rather large pill from the left pocket of her lab coat. "This will ensure that you sleep until I am ready for you."

His mind raced. He needed time to think. Outright refusal was pointless. The memory of the toilet was still flashing in his mind.

“I would like to try something that I think you will not hate so much. Nerves can transmit all types of sensations. Pain as well as pleasure.”

With her clicks came a warmth that spread throughout his body. The warmth deepened. It did not become hot, but rather became fuller, more comfortable. He felt the muscles in his neck and back release. His face became slack. Despite the circumstances, he could not help but smile like a junkie who feels the first tingles of the hit in his blood. All traces of earlier pain were erased.

“I see you like this.”

He did not respond. He did not care. He wanted to flop down onto his cot but he didn't want to disturb the feeling. His stomach felt pleasantly full, his muscles, even his skin felt warm and alive. As good as he felt, he began to notice a whole new level of pleasure evolving. Inside the thin pajama bottoms a wave of ecstasy was building.

He tried to fight it. It was not right. But, he could no more fight it than a starving man could resist a gourmet feast. The wave of rapture rose. It was much more than a sexual response. It was an inferno to the candle most knew sex as. He stopped thinking as he had during the waves of agony. He gave himself over to his body.

All at once it stopped. “Now Mr. Calhoun, would you like that to continue? Please swallow this pill.”

He did not know how long it had lasted. Speaking, even thinking seemed to be too much effort. All that mattered was returning to the sublime feeling of pleasure. He

reached out a shaky hand and grabbed the pill. Greedily, he shoved it in his mouth and swallowed.

Expectant eyes of a desperate man looked up at her. They held nothing of value to her. “Until next time then.” Efficiently and crisply, stood up and exited the room. She left with the laptop. In it, he realized, was his body and soul.



In the next Issue of

Spinetingler Magazine

Our Summer 2005 issue will feature:

- The winners of the Very Short Story Contest,
- An interview with an exciting author and a review of their latest novel.
- Outstanding stories from both staff and contributing authors

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Available May 15, 2005

JESSIE'S TOOTHBRUSH

By Michael Spohr

EXCEPTIONAL SHORT STORY CONTEST WINNER - THIRD PLACE

For the last three weeks I've been using my ex-girlfriend Jessie's toothbrush. I don't know why really, and if someone asked for a rational explanation I'd be hard pressed to come up with an answer. Even if I could, the explanation would surely be undercut by the fact a brand new toothbrush rests unopened on my bathroom counter. Irrational as it may be, I wake each morning and pick up a toothbrush that has a handle shaped like Winnie The Pooh's head.

It all began the morning after I returned from a business trip to Wisconsin and realized I'd left my toothbrush either atop the commode of a Motel 6 in Madison or on the counter of a relatively posh Holiday Inn somewhere on the outskirts of Green Bay. I groaned dramatically as if there was a chance it might make my lost toothbrush scurry into the bathroom and say with a plummy British accent, "Very sorry, sir," before jumping into the rack beside Jessie's "sleep over" toothbrush. Amused by the idea, I imagined my lost toothbrush doing just that, then calmed the minute my eyes fell upon Jessie's "sleep over" toothbrush. I loved that we had "sleep over" toothbrushes. It's the perfect step for a young relationship - not as all consuming as moving in together - but a statement about the relationship nonetheless.

"Whose toothbrush is that?"

That was the first thing my brother Carl asked after exiting my bathroom in the days following the arrival of Jessie's "sleep over" toothbrush. Actually, the first thing he said was "Have you gone fruity?" on account of Winnie, but once I explained it was Jessie's brush he smiled and said, "Getting serious, aye?" I nodded, proud. And even though after a year of dating we hadn't furthered our commitment beyond adding "sleep over" deodorant and hairbrushes, I still felt great about what the Winnie toothbrush said about

me and my girl. It was my prized possession. So much so that I wouldn't even touch it. It was too precious.

Jessie and I met at a party thrown by Arnold Felton, a guy I went to college with. I couldn't stand Arnold. No matter what you said to him he always responded with way too much enthusiasm. Even something as uneventful as getting a passing grade on an exam would cause Arnold to whoop and give you endless high fives. He was same way with bad news. If you mentioned you had a headache he'd act like you'd told him you'd been diagnosed with cancer. The other thing I couldn't stand about Arnold was that he talked like a frat boy. That was okay when he was a frat boy and invited me to parties with plenty of pretty girls and free beer, but it had considerably lost its charm now that he was a balding, thirty-year-old insurance salesman. I could do no wrong in his eyes, however, and he invited me to parties three or four times a year religiously. For some reason I could never say no to the guy.

"OUT FUCKING STANDING!" Arnold screamed as I arrived, then embraced me like I'd just returned from being held hostage in the Middle East for the last decade. I forced a smile and raised the six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon I'd brought. He threw his arms into the air and cried, "OUT FUCKING STANDING!" I forced another smile, already regretting coming, when luckily someone else arrived. Arnold looked past me to the door and screamed, "OUT FUCKING STANDING!" I took the opportunity to slip into the kitchen.

And there she was. Standing at the end of the counter making a dainty plate of snacks. Though overdressed in a black cocktail dress, she had an understated beauty and something about her that made her look like a flapper. I was immediately smitten. As she finished making her plate, my head raced trying to come up with an introductory line. Offer her a Pabst? Oh yeah. That would be smooth. Ask her if she'd like to dance the jitterbug? No. She'd have no idea what I was talking about. Make a joke that the food was poisoned? That would just be creepy.

“Are you all right?”

She was suddenly right in front of me. I then realized then that I had been staring at her with my face screwed up with a bizarre intensity. I nodded. An awkward beat passed. “Want a Pabst?”

Turned out she’s friends with Arnold’s younger sister, loves Pabst Blue Ribbon, and can’t stand Arnold. We talked the rest of the night and it just worked. Clicked, you know? And though I was thirty and she was only twenty-one, and despite the fact she hated the Beatles, who I love, and loved the Stones, who I hate but told her I loved, I felt for the first time in a long while like I’d met a girl I could get serious with.

Two months into our relationship Jessie mentioned after having slept over that her teeth felt “icky” as we perused the local market’s beer section.

“Why don’t you get a toothbrush?” I said as I reached for a six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon without even considering what it meant.

“You mean like a ‘sleep over’ toothbrush?”

I laughed and nodded. Jessie pulled a loose strand of hair from her face and aimlessly kicked at the back wheel of our cart.

“You should too,” she said. “For my place.”

I nodded, and Jessie let out a big, beautiful, open mouth smile. She looked so adorable I had the urge to suggest we buy a “sleep over” version of every item the market had in stock. I suppressed that urge, however, and instead followed Jessie to the Oral hygiene aisle and looked over the potential toothbrushes. My choice was a blue brush with a hard/soft bristle combination, while Jessie picked Winnie from the children’s section. We

then hurried to the express line clutching our freshly anointed “sleep over” toothbrushes and stared at each other with big, dumb smiles on our faces.

For months after that night I beamed every time I saw Winnie sitting in my toothbrush rack. I was happy. Ecstatic. Walking on clouds. Nevertheless, the morning after returning from Wisconsin I pulled Winnie from the rack, applied a dollop of toothpaste, and stuck it in my mouth. Upon finishing, I thoroughly rinsed the toothbrush off, wiped some paste from Winnie’s face, and replaced it in the holder.

As I drove to work that morning I was overcome by anxiety. Why had I used Jessie’s brush? Until that day I’d never so much as touched the thing, and now I’d actually used it. I felt like I had defiled the whole notion of “sleep over” toothbrushes, even betrayed Jessie and our relationship in some way. After a few minutes, however, I calmed, realizing I was blowing the whole thing way out of proportion. It was no big deal, and Jessie wouldn’t have wanted me to go to work with mossy teeth and bad breath. I decided I wouldn’t tell Jessie about it and simply never do it again.

But then the next morning came and there I was staring once more at the empty slot in the toothbrush rack beside Winnie. How could I have possibly forgotten to buy a new toothbrush? It wasn’t like I had an incredibly busy night the night before unless you consider eating a microwave dinner and watching a biography on Tatum O’Neill busy. For a second I considered not brushing, but then I found myself reaching out and grabbing Winnie’s head. Once again I brushed, thoroughly cleaned the toothbrush, and replaced it on the rack.

Sweat beaded on my forehead as I drove to work. What was I doing? One day was excusable, but two days was betrayal! Okay, calm down. We can still fix this. No one ever needs to know. I simply need to buy a toothbrush today and move on.

But then a funny thing happened. As I filled out forms at work I felt a strange sense of liberation. I was having an affair with Winnie the Pooh and Jessie wasn’t any the wiser!

That sounds strange. I know. But I couldn't help it. And I couldn't stop thinking about it. That night I drove home past three 7-11s and two Supermarkets, but found a reason not to stop at any of them.

The next morning I awoke before the alarm sounded and skipped into the bathroom. What was I feeling? Excitement? Was I actually excited about using a toothbrush? Adrenaline rushed through me as I reached for the toothbrush.

And that is how the rest of the work week went. I woke each morning and used Jessie's toothbrush with more and more excitement. It was my secret. No one knew. It actually became the highlight of my day.

When the work day expired on Friday, however, and I was due to meet Jessie for dinner, I became incredibly nervous. Oh God. What have I done? She's going to sleep over tonight. Would I be found out? No. How could she know? I'd been very good. I'd cleaned the brush thoroughly, acted normal on our phone calls during the week. I was in the clear. But fear gripped me nonetheless.

I rushed to the restaurant making sure I got there before her so I could have a drink to calm my nerves. I ordered a double and forced it down in large gulps. Soon I was feeling better. I even laughed. What was I so scared for? I shook my head at the inanity of it all.

But then she walked in and all my nerves returned. I inhaled deeply. My God. Is this what it feels like for people having affairs? How do they do it? All I could think was that I had to act normal. Unfortunately, I smiled too big, kissed her hello too long, and even had trouble looking her in the eye. Christ. I was screwed! Be calm. Be cool. You can do this.

"Are you okay?" Jessie asked. I realized then I hadn't said a word to her in over a minute.

“Yes, yes. I’m fine, Sweetie-bear.”

Jessie looked around, mortified. “I thought we decided you weren’t going to call me that in public anymore?”

“Yes, we did, sweetie-bear. Jessie! I mean Jessie! Sorry.” Jessie frowned.

“Are you sure there’s nothing wrong? You’re acting really strange.”

Christ! She’s only been here a couple minutes and she’s on to me. Think! Say something! Quick!

“My aunt died.”

“Not Aunt Sally?”

“No. My aunt, uh...”

Jessie stared at me in anticipation as I searched for an answer.

“Jemima.”

“Like the syrup?”

I nodded. Suspicion crossed Jessie’s face and didn’t look like it planned to leave any time soon.

“You have an Aunt Jemima?”

“Yes. Well, I did.” What the hell am I saying? “She’s more of a great aunt. Not even an aunt really. More of a family friend. But she’d dead all right.”

Jessie winced at me, confused, as I tried to evoke the ghost of Laurence Olivier and seem distraught. Thankfully, it worked. My eyes even wet! Jessie, upon seeing this, welled up herself.

“Oh, Joe. I’m so sorry.”

Inside, I cackled like a mad man. No one will ever defeat me! Jessie is my pawn! My confidence remained sky high until the waiter came and Jessie ordered garlic chicken. Oh my God! She’s going to need to brush when she gets home and thoroughly. I had to step up and say something.

“You don’t want that, Jessie.”

“Actually I do.”

“Sweetie-bear, you know it gives you gas.”

Gas? What am I saying? The waiter made a face at me, and Jessie sunk down in her seat. I winked at Jessie with an expression that meant to make light of the whole situation but somehow came off as pompous.

“I’ll order for you, Sweetie-Pie.”

“Why? So I don’t get me gas?”

I shrugged and emitted a strained, awkward laugh. No one joined me, and Jessie stormed out. The waiter glared at me like I was an imbecile and I couldn’t disagree. I threw down some money and ran outside.

Jessie sat on the curb, crying.

“Get away from me!”

Jessie quickly rose and hurried down the street. I followed her.

“Sweetie-bear, I’m sorry.”

“Stop fucking calling me Sweetie-bear!”

Jessie grunted and swung open the door to a local bar. Why had I done this? I loved Jessie. Damn it. Why couldn’t this be a Woody Allen movie? Everyone screws around behind their partners backs in those movies and no one’s the wiser. It’s because they have poker faces, and an illiterate blind man could read mine. All felt lost until it dawned on me how I was going to fix all of this. I was going to get Jessie drunk.

After entering the bar and apologizing profusely, I ordered round after round. Before you knew it Jessie was babbling drunkenly and slurring her words.

“I don’t ca-hare if you call me scchweetie-bear. I like it. I do.”

Jessie then set her head down on the bar and passed out. Again, inside, I laughed like a mad man.

Upon reaching my apartment I put Jessie under my bed’s covers and marveled at my genius. When she wakes in the morning she’ll be too hung over to realize her “sleep over” brush’s thistles are a little less perky than before, and all will be back to normal. I went to the bathroom to prepare for bed, elated.

At that point something terrible happened. My eyes fell on Jessie's Winnie the Pooh brush. Adrenaline flowed through my body. No. I couldn't. She's just in the next room! It's too risky! Forget it! I splashed some water onto my face. Unfortunately, I kept looking to the brush. No, no, no! This is a mistake. I stood back from the sink, breathing heavily. I then heard Jessie's snoring. After a second's hesitation, I ripped the Winnie the Pooh brush from the holder and turned the water on full blast. I lustfully slathered a huge amount of paste onto the brush and submerged it in my mouth. As I brushed hungrily, I couldn't help but smile. Dude, she's just in the next room! And I'm using her brush! I am the man!

"What the hell are you doing?"

Jessie stood in the doorway staring at me. I quickly threw down the brush and moved away from the counter.

"Oh God, Jessie! This isn't what it looks like!"

Jessie moved into the bathroom as I stammered, "I'm sorry. I just needed to brush and I can't find mine so I used yours."

Jessie pulled up her skirt and sat on the commode.

"I don't care if you use my brush. I just don't know why you were moaning so much."

"You don't care if I use your brush?"

"Nope."

"But it's your sleep over brush."

"So?" she said. I felt my blood boil.

“So it means something to us. It’s a symbol of the strength of our relationship and I ruined it!”

“It meant something a year ago,” Jessie said as she stood. “Now it doesn’t mean so much.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We’ve been together over a year and all we have to show for it are stupid sleep over toothbrushes, Joe.”

“We also have sleep over deodorants and hair-brushes.”

“Don’t you want more? My God, you’re thirty-one years old.”

Jessie stared at me, intent. I searched for some way to appease her, confused.

“Do you want your own shelf in the ‘fridge? Is that it?”

“Christ, Joe, I meant moving in together. Or marriage.”

Things suddenly got way too heavy. “You want to get married, Jessie?”

“I don’t know. I’m only twenty-two. But what I do know is that I don’t want to be in a relationship with a guy your age who hasn’t even considered anything deeper than stupid sleep over brushes.”

Jessie stomped out of the bathroom. I looked at my reflection in the mirror, trying to calm down. “Relax,” I told myself. “In the morning Jessie will want to go to breakfast like

she always does on Saturdays and all will be fine.” Calmed, I walked into the bedroom where Jessie was gathering her things.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to go.”

I couldn’t believe it. “You can’t,” I plead. “You’ve been drinking.”

“I’ll get a cab.”

Jessie then dropped her hands to her side like they were suddenly too heavy to hold. “This isn’t working, Joe. I’m sorry. We’re just not going anywhere.”

With that, Jessie walked out of my bedroom, my apartment, and finally, my life. Woody Allen said in *Annie Hall* that a relationship, like a shark, has to keep moving or it will die. He then added, in relation to his love affair with Annie, “that it looks like we have a dead shark on our hands.” I guess that’s exactly what Jessie and I have as well. A dead shark. It’s strange. I keep turning the events over in my head trying to make sense of it all, but all I can come up with is that I have to keep moving myself. Growing. Thing is I don’t know if I’m ready to do that yet. In the meantime, I’ve continued using Jessie’s toothbrush. I realize sooner or later it’s going to get too old to keep using, and I’ll have to throw it away and start anew, but for now I wake every morning, enter the bathroom, and, with a heavy heart, pick up a brush in the shape of Winnie the Pooh.

20 QUESTIONS... WITH H. MEL MALTON

By Sandra Ruttan

Canadian author H. Mel Malton answers questions about writing, her life and her Polly Deacon mystery series, published by RendezVous Press.

What was the first book you read that had a profound influence on you as a person and how did it affect you?

I don't think I can name one book in particular having influenced me, but a certain *kind* of book probably did. I was a voracious reader as a child, and was allowed unrestricted access to any book in the house, and there were hundreds. That doesn't mean I was reading adult stuff from age five. I was addicted to Enid Blyton, actually. I loved the *Famous Five* books, and those stories about girls in boarding schools, which made me yearn to be just like the characters in them – clever, brave and frightfully good at sports and friendship. I was none of these things, but I discovered that a good story could whisk me away to a place where that didn't matter. At some point, then, I started writing the kind of stories that afforded me an escape from the everyday. If they had a puzzle or mystery attached, all the better.

What is your favorite book/story/article you've written? Why?

Most writers seem to give the same answer to this one – which is that the book I'm currently working on is my favourite. I think that's because a large part of the writer's mind and energy is taken up with the present cast of characters and what they're up to. However, I confess to a soft spot for my third book – *Dead Cow in Aisle Three* (*pub. 2001*), mostly because the political and economic issues it deals with are still current, which makes me feel as if the book might be a teeny bit prophetic.

Do you ever dream about any of your characters or the scenes you've written?

Not exactly, although sometimes an idea for a scene or plot twist will come to me first in a dream. If I'm having trouble with a tricky bit, I'll actively encourage this kind of resolution by thinking about it just before bed.

What compelled you to writing crime fiction?

After my Enid Blyton phase, I went on to Trixie Belden, then the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew. After that, Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh and Dorothy Sayers, and so on, from the Brits to the Canadians. I read mysteries for recreation. Although I wanted to be a writer of 'literary fiction', the truth is that I read more mystery fiction than anything else, so at some point it occurred to me that it might be wise to write the kind of thing I liked to read.

Do real people ever influence your character development and how?

Yes, certainly, though not directly. That is, I don't create a character "based on my friend Bill", but if Bill has some quality that interests me, I may borrow it for one of my characters. I'm rather careful not to base characters on real people, actually, because it can get you into trouble. Anyway, if I put you or my next door neighbour into a book, I'd be limiting myself in terms of what the you-character would say and do. I'd constantly be saying to myself, "Oh, she would never do *that*..." and the lines between fact and fiction would become hopelessly blurred.

What is the one talent you wish you had that you envy in others?

The ability to manage money and keep a clean house.

How do you select names for your characters?

I spend a great deal of time trying different names out, and I don't usually write much about a character until I've got a name that feels right. I keep name-files; those newspaper lists of heart-and-stroke lottery winners are useful – hundreds of names printed very small on one sheet of newsprint. Also useful are the programs from theatre productions – they have cast names, crew-names, founders and patrons and the like. I

have baby-name books and I also keep a list of the sender-names that spammers put on their unsolicited e-mails.

I'm interested in date-appropriate names, and what's fashionable in a certain period. For example, a person born in the depression is more likely to be called Daisy or Enid than a child born yesterday (who is more likely to be christened Madison, or Dakota, poor thing.) Socio-economic trends, and geographical/cultural backgrounds are also factored in. A Hakeem is not a Henry. A Trudi-Lynn is going to be very different from a Hester. For me, if a name doesn't suit a character, their personality remains elusive.

What generated the idea for *Down in the Dumps*?

Dumps began as a story for young readers. I was living near a dump at the time, as I did as a child, as well. I like dump-scavenging. I remember finding a suitcase full of costume jewellery at the dump once, an amazing treasure! So, I started with the premise that some kids find something interesting at the dump, but the narrative got very dark and adult quite soon, and I realized that I would have to let the story go wherever it wanted. I stopped trying to write a "certain kind of story", and simply carried on until it was finished. And it turned out to be the kind of book I like to read, so all was well.

Was there a specific reason you chose to have an amateur sleuth and a female sleuth? Did this just evolve because of your story idea or did the sleuth come first and the crime later?

I wanted to write in the first person, which was at the time the most comfortable form for me. There are bazillions of crime books with male protagonists already, written by people who have first-hand experience living and working in male bodies, so I figured I'd write what I know – which meant writing from a woman's perspective. Polly Deacon evolved as a character who shares some of my characteristics, which made the getting-started part of the writing process easier. And I made her an amateur because I'm not

really all that interested in police work, and I'd be sure to get the details wrong through sheer inattentiveness.

*Did you develop *Down in the Dumps* with the idea of expanding it into a series?*

Not initially, but as I got near the end of the first draft, it seemed a pity to abandon all my friendly characters without giving them another plot or two to work with, so I began thinking in terms of a series. And offering a series to a publisher is more likely to be successful than offering what they call a "stand alone" – at least, that appears to be the case.

Are you a planner or someone who flies by the seat of their pants when a story is evolving?

I'm a dyed-in-the-wool seat-of-the-pantser. I tried planning a book once, but got bored halfway through because I knew how it was supposed to end (no surprise/no fun) and I found I kept on squashing ideas because they didn't fit in with my Plan.

How do you feel Polly Deacon has developed over the series?

I think she's discovered that she's not nearly as open-minded and tolerant of difference as she thought she was. And she's matured a fair bit – she's acquired a bit more self-awareness than she began with. Actually, this applies to the writer, too.

There is an underlying theme concerning commitment issues and religion for Polly in the books. Do you see the books guiding Polly towards some resolutions in these areas?

Yes, I think so. At the end of the last book, Polly was the verge of making rather an unexpected commitment, and we'll see how that plays out. I'm not sure where the religion-thing is going. I doubt that Polly is the kind of person to experience a sudden conversion to orthodoxy (and that would really piss off some of my readers), but I

expect she'll continue to question the religious status-quo and seek some sort of comfort level she can live with in terms of her own religious belief.

You use humor wonderfully in your stories. How important do you think humor is in mysteries? Were you deliberately attempting to utilize humor, or was this just how your voice emerged as you wrote?

Thanks. ☺ Not every reader wants humour in their mysteries. Some might argue that any humour at all has no place in a plot that deals with death and retribution – or at least justice of some kind. I didn't really set out to write funny books – but Polly seemed to have a sharp and satirical tongue right from the start, and that felt right, but was not deliberate. I don't much like crime books that are all gloom and blood and forensics and deadly-serious commentary on our weary world. Life is humourless enough without adding to it by writing overly-earnest books.

Does your writing hint at your own wonderful sense of humor, or is the comedic element something that just comes through because of Polly's character?

Secretly, I've always wanted to do stand-up comedy. This is probably a safer option.

You also write poetry. Is that how you clear your mind when you're finished a Polly Deacon story?

The great thing about poems is that they don't take ages to write, and they are usually concerned with abstract concepts. I rarely set out to write a poem, though. They sort of show up, in the form of an idea or image, and it's in the first few minutes of writing down the thought (I keep an ideas book) that a poem will start developing. When I'm hard at work on a book, poems don't come that often. I suppose it's because my brain can't work in two modes at once.

What's next for you? Another Polly Deacon mystery?

Napoleon Press is publishing the first in my new series of mysteries for kids in 2006. It's called *the Drowned Violin*. I released a poetry book this past fall, called *Halfway to Elsewhere*, and can be ordered via e-mail, by sending me a note through my website, which is www.hmelmlaton.com.

I have a second poetry manuscript in the works, and I'm at work on a new novel – not a Polly-book – something a bit more serious. There is another Polly to come, but probably not until next year.

What has been your most awkward 'celebrity' moment or strange thing from a fan?

Some time after *Dumps* came out, I received an e-mail from a fan who told me that I'd killed off a friend of hers – John Travers. Very awkward, as he lives nearby. Luckily, she said he didn't really mind. It made me realize that no matter how hard you try to make up names that nobody actually has, the task is hopeless.

What is your most prized personal possession?

I'd say my dogs – Karma and Ego, except that they're not really possessions. I have some books that I would mourn if they were lost – my great big two-volume Oxford dictionary, for example, and my 1921 set of "Wonder Books for Young Minds." I guess if you'd call a library a personal possession, that would be it.

You're stranded on the proverbial deserted island and find a lamp with a genie. This genie has the peculiar power of only being able to bring one character that you created for a story to life to be your companion. Which character would you choose and why?

Probably Rico Amato, the antique dealer. He's a loyal friend, very practical, good with his hands, a good cook, and gay. Being on a desert island with Becker would be a nightmare.

LIFE ON THE LINE:

Is Polly Deacon the target of a murderer in *One Large Coffin To Go*?

By Sandra Ruttan

One Large Coffin To Go, the latest in the Polly Deacon mystery series from H. Mel Malton, is one big step forward for Polly Deacon as well as the author.

The Polly Deacon series is primarily set in Ontario's cottage country, told through the experiences of a back-to-nature puppet-maker named Polly Deacon. Polly has a knack for crossing paths with dead bodies and, much to the annoyance of local detective Mark Becker, an ability to get people to talk to her instead of cooperating with the authorities.

Polly has commitment issues, stemming from the childhood trauma she experienced when both of her parents were killed in a car crash. The young Polly went to live with her Aunt Susan and has subsequently resisted all pressure to conform to the expectations of society. Polly's cabin in the woods has no electricity or running water. She doesn't own a vehicle. She takes contract work making puppets and helps her landlord on his farm in exchange for rent. She has a delightful, quirky sense of humor and is prepared to say and do things that the average person only wishes they could say and do. She is unencumbered by social conventions, seeming to feel no pressure to experience the typical milestones (such as marriage) that often mark the journey into adulthood, which makes her both refreshing and amusing to read about.

In *One Large Coffin To Go*, the on-again off-again relationship between Polly and Mark Becker is on-again and Polly is facing an unexpected pregnancy. She is not particularly fond of children and doesn't have much experience in the child-rearing department. The book begins with Polly's examination of her own feelings about having a child, which anyone who has ever had a moment of frustration dealing with their own children or someone else's child will appreciate. Again, Polly is thinking all those things that many of us have thought in our most politically incorrect moments.

Polly must also decide whether or not to accept a proposal of marriage from Mark Becker. This is not an attempt on Mark's behalf to do the right thing because of Polly's pregnancy. The proposal lingers from pre-conception and is now complicated by the unborn child, who Polly refers to as her 'sprog'.

In the midst of decision-making about major life issues such as marriage and a family Polly learns that she has received a sponsorship to attend an international puppet-maker's convention in England. Despite protests from Mark about traveling in the post 9/11 aftermath and in her condition, Polly plans to travel to England and refuses to let family or friends change her mind.

It is at this point that both Polly and the author make some big steps. Polly is on her own in a different country, faced with a different environment, different people and different perspectives on life. H. Mel Malton has moved Polly across the ocean and is exploring new terrain, both geographically and psychologically as the shift in environment exposes Polly to different perspectives and a different system of law enforcement. By removing Polly from the familiar Kuskawa, H. Mel Malton demonstrates her ability to take the reader into the scene in Canterbury and uses the setting as a catharsis, a safe haven away from Becker's pressure and the opinions of family and friends, where Polly can make important decisions about her future.

Along the way, Polly thwarts a would-be robber who repeatedly attempts to steal her puppets, but when a pregnant woman who bears a strong similarity to Polly is found dead Polly falls under suspicion from the local authorities. Why has someone been trying to steal her puppet case? Was the woman who was murdered the victim of mistaken identity? Was Polly the real target?

The answers lead Polly to a startling discovery about her would-be fiancé, and help her to make a final decision about marriage, family and her future.

The mystery genre is filled with talented authors who write hard-boiled, moody, brooding novels that take their readers into the back alleys of society and the darkest parts of their character's soul. The Polly Deacon series is a refreshing change of pace. Polly

has a pragmatic view on life, perhaps tempered by her own experiences with grief, and she's developed her own coping mechanisms along the way, some of which aren't strictly legal, which complicates her regular involvement with the local authorities. Her quirky sense of humor underscores the storyline of each book. No matter how devastating the crime, Polly seems to find a way to cope with the situation and her unique perspective on life makes her one of the most original sleuths in popular crime fiction today.



Watch for our special Canadian issue of

Spinetingler Magazine

This issue will feature:

- The winners of the Canadian Short Story Contest,
- Outstanding stories from both staff and contributing authors

We are accepting submissions for this issue.

Check our website for further details in late May.

Available Summer 2005

FEATURED WRITER'S GROUP WEBSITE

Written by Stan Almedro

South African poet, Stan Almedro, has launched the Whisper from the Heart Poetry Club website, opening opportunities for aspiring poets to have access not only to publishing their works but a host of related services.

He recently teamed up with IT specialist, Wynand Labuschagne and Giselle Visser to develop a web site catering for a wide spectrum of the arts. The club offers competitions for scholars and adults, pen pal club, African art by Cameron Jubu, etched leather art from Danie Potgieter, a range of pottery by Adrian Kirston as well as art, for the ardent art lover through an affiliation with Art Price.

“We have also formed an association with Amazon where we offer books, CD’s and DVD’s that are of specific interest to poetry and art lovers,” says Stan. “Our aim is to grow African poetry and art. The talent in our country is immense and we feel that by joining our club and sending in contributions will make the literary and art world stand up and see what we have to offer. Our hopes for the web site are to show our country’s valuable source of talent. We welcome poetry and art contributions.”

The club has also formed an alliance with an African tour facility that is being offered via the web site. This opens up prospects for visitors to visit South Africa and see what is on offer by way of tours and art of the African wild game.

“Our current competition is open to scholars, who need to enter via their respective schools,” comments Stan, “Non-scholars may also enter under an adult category. Super prizes can be won and this also opens up the opportunity to have poems published in a number of anthologies,” concludes Stan.

Interested poets (adults and schools) can visit the site at www.whisperpoetry.com or contact the office on +27(0)13 93 23182. Correspondence can be addressed to Whisper from the Heart Poetry Club, PO Box 1466, Alberton, 1450, South Africa.