



# Flash! Fiction 2

by Peter McMillan  
with Adam Mac

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# Dedication

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For L&O

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## The Boots on the Shoulder

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"Daddy, why are there boots on the edge of the road?"

"I don't know, son. Listen don't talk to me right now, OK? This is some pretty hairy driving. Rain, rush hour, slick tires."

"I think the man got knocked clean out of his boots."

"What man?"

"The man whose car was broken down."

"What car?"

"Umh, I dunno."

"Well, don't bother me, son. I'm really trying hard to concentrate here. Can't afford to have another accident."

"They looked like roofer boots. Me and Billy watched 'em put the new roof on his house, and they had boots just like that."

"Like wh— I thought I asked you to stop talking."

"Maybe they fell of the truck, you know, like after work, they change. I wonder if he had to buy a new pair. Are they expensive?"

"Are what expensive?"

"Roofer boots."

"What's a roofer boot?"

"I just said."

"Well, cut it out, OK. Wait til we get out of this traffic."

"Maybe it was a robbery. The boots guy stopped to help a sports car. Then he stole the car and the man's shoes, leaving the boots behind."

"Robbery? That's just silly. Now, hush."

"I think he took the girlfriend, too."

"What? Whose girlfriend? Now, would you please— "

"I think he got tired of roofing and wanted to drive down to Florida."

"What's in Florida?"

"You know, Disney, old people, Canadians, bikinis and stuff."

"What Canadians?"

"Old fat white ones. Snowmen! Get it?"

"Yeah, I got it. You've really gotta stop talking. Just for the next couple of miles, OK?"

"Daddy?"

"What, son?"

"Do you think Mommy will be OK?"

"Yeah. She's in a good place. They have the best doctors and nurses in the city. They'll— Yeah, son. She'll be fine."



"I hope so. I don't know what I would do without her."

"Me either, son. Me either."

"Daddy, I think I'm finished talking for now."

"OK, son."

On the inside shoulder of the freeway was a second pair of boots, but these were ignored.

First published in *The Story Shack*, February 9, 2013.

## The Boss

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She was dead, finally. All of us went to make sure. We still couldn't believe it. We skipped the memorial service and went straight to the cemetery ... and waited. With steely eyes, jaws and fists clenched, we watched every last piece of dirt drop to fill in the hole, as if every speck of dirt was needed to hold the coffin in place.

Dirk, Paula, Aurelio, Stephen, Valerie, Alex, Ryan and the rest of us stood there until the gravediggers, or groundskeepers as they preferred to be called, had left. The grave was now a mound in the midst of rows and rows of headstones, crosses and other markers. We stood there until dusk — almost expectantly, so not quite satisfied.

The groundskeepers finally came to usher us out. The gates closed at dark. Vandalism and debauchery had long plagued this cemetery, and overnight the groundskeepers became security guards.

We all went out for a drink, just like we said we would, but somehow it was missing the jubilation and relief we had all expected. So we just drank. Three or four or five rounds, I can't remember now. Numbness was pretty much the common feeling, both emotionally and physically, for we literally stumbled down the stairs to the subway platform where we helped one another get on the right trains ... more or less.

All night long, I must have half-slept, because I kept hearing her voice, though I knew it couldn't be. "It's quite straightforward, really." How many times she'd said that to me when I was new on the job. And after me it was someone else. "It's quite straightforward, really." And there was the "Please and thank you" benediction she

spoke every single time she gave you that little extra assignment that made you late leaving the office.

"Please and thank you."

"Really, it's quite straightforward."

"Please and thank you."

"Robert, it's quite straightforward, really."

"Please and thank you, Robert."

When the alarm went off at 6:00, I was up like a shot. The voice was gone.

Thanks to a wretched night, I was up, dressed and ready for work a full hour early. I phoned Ryan and Paula and we met for breakfast at the restaurant around the corner from our office building. Ryan and Paula looked even less perky than I felt. We kept our conversations on the food and the front page. Paula started to smoke but we stopped her before anybody saw. Ryan was fixated on his phone. Neither seemed to notice, thankfully, but I was self-conscious and distracted by my excessive sweating. I felt like I'd been splashed with a bucket of my own sweat — my forehead, my scalp, my armpits, my hands ... were dripping.

In the elevator, we punched different buttons. I would be the first to meet her replacement, and they wanted me to phone first chance I got.

Still worried about my perspiration wetness, I toweled off in the men's room before cautiously making my way to her office. Her—

The door was closed, so I knocked, and a voice invited me in. It was a huge relief to find a man sitting behind the desk.

Subconsciously, I had feared that I would open the door and find her still there. I paused for a moment to take it all in, and he said, "Would you close the door ... Robert, isn't it? ... please and thank you."

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## The Boy Who Knew Too Much

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Alfred was a genius. When he was very young his friends stopped beating him up and making him do embarrassing things. One day, Ernie, the leader and spokesman of the gang, got the clever idea that Alfred could make them money.

It was summertime. School was out. They took the bus downtown to show off Alfred's tricks.

But a bunch of boys, aged 8 to 11, with skateboards and smacking gum and wearing eye-opening T-shirts can be intimidating. So, Ernie told the gang to hang back and keep off their boards. Meanwhile, he and Alfred buttoned their shirts, tucked them in, spit out their gum, and crossed the street, heading towards an enclave of benches in the city plaza, near the fish pond. It was about half-past noon.

#

Alfred is introduced as a local prodigy (his word) and the youngest challenger of the world record for facts known by a single person. Only in the third grade—well, just finished the third grade—Alfred knows more facts than just about anyone else in the history of the world. Ask him anything and he'll give you the right answer and even faster than a computer.

Of course, even the office lunch crowd is not that gullible but plays along anyway, taking it as a leisurely way to spend their lunch hour on a pleasantly warm, early summer day.

Alfred takes questions.

“Who was the Orioles' rookie DH in '77?” asks the fat, bald guy with hot dog relish dripping down his shirt front.

“Frank Robin-, er, Eddie Murray,” answered Alfred, a little more nervous than usual.

“That’s right, kid!” exclaims Relish still chewing as he tosses a gold and silver coin into Ernie’s cap.

“What’s a lepton?” fires the lanky, acne-pocked Bluetooth host in between sentences to someone in his head.

“A family of subatomic particles that—“

“What do you mean, where’d I get that question from?” snaps Bluetooth looking over at Relish who was busily cleaning his tie. “It was all over the news last week when—“

“How much are this year’s hybrid cars?” interrupts the chipper blonde who lives to deny herself food.

“The Honda Civic is around \$24,000, the Toyota Camry \$25,000, the Lexus GS \$55,000, and the Chevrolet Malibu is under—“

“That’s good, thank you” transitions the impeccably professional twenty-something with the slit-eyed glasses. “Now, how about this one?” she asks furtively, leaning forward. “What’s going on between the boss and Ted?”

“Why shouldn’t he know?” asks Glasses facing a menacing stare from Chipper who is good friends with both Ted and the boss. “It’s a fact, right? “

“OK. Here's another one,” pushes in the momentarily re-connected Bluetooth. “How many light-years away is the nearest intelligent life form?”

Alfred is stumped. He doesn't know whether to give the correct answer. They're probably not ready for it, he thinks.

Suddenly, the clock tower strikes one o'clock, five minutes ahead of time, and the rest of the gang bring out their boards and begin racing and jumping, making a raucous commotion. In a purely coincidental reaction, a few more coins are pitched into the collection hat, and the office workers get sucked back into the buildings.

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## The Bus Station

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Andy would wish he had never seen the young teenage boy walking towards the men's room.

It was well past midnight in the bus station. One of the officers had said "Don't go into the restrooms alone," and his partner added "and whatever you do, don't fall asleep."

That unsettled Andy. His bus to Salt Lake City was another 6 hours away, and he was tired and had drunk a lot of water walking up and down the hills, killing time. He'd missed the famous cable cars; they wouldn't be back until the following year, he heard.

He'd already seen more than he wanted to see in the Mission District and that was in daylight. In the dark, the city had an altogether different atmosphere—foreign and threatening. It was better in the bus station as long as other passengers were around. But at this time of night, there were only two—Andy and a young black soldier—Army, it seemed.

The mood inside changed for the worse when an old white-haired giant wearing a baggy and soiled mustard-coloured suit lumbered in shouting loudly at an invisible companion. The old guy circled and studied the young soldier, who sat quietly staring unblinkingly at his Reader's Digest. On his second pass, the old guy stopped, wobbled a bit, and screamed in the soldier's face. The soldier must have been fresh in the service because his whole body screamed back in silent fear. The old guy kept screaming and then stopped as suddenly as a summer downpour and walked away.

Andy was angered but mostly stunned. What kind of person—What kind of place was this where a person could be assaulted for



no reason whatsoever? And where were the cops—security, anybody?

An hour or so later, a pleasant, round little man, deeply-tanned from his bald pate to his sandaled feet and sporting a brilliant pink polo shirt, walked in, passed the soldier, and approached Andy. He engaged Andy in friendly conversation about the weather, the city, and finally religion. After judging that the man wasn't recruiting for a cult, Andy put his religious upbringing to good use. After 45 minutes of theological discussion, the pleasant, round little man politely excused himself and said he had to go make some money.

Over the next two hours, more came in from the streets—some almost normal. One of the “normals,” in a business suit but without the tie, was looking for someone in particular, but it seemed odd that he didn't stop to ask the soldier or Andy for help. A second went straight to the lockers and took out something, which he tucked away inside his 49ers windbreaker. A scary-looking couple, maybe a man and a woman, went into the men's room. Meanwhile, an ancient woman, her back crooked so badly the floor was just two feet from her face, settled into an out-of-the-way corner for herself, her cat, and her overfull grocery cart.

Just after 4:30, Andy saw the freckle-faced teen walking in the direction of the restrooms. Andy couldn't recall seeing him in the bus station earlier, but he wasn't sure. The teenager was carrying a suitcase. His short-sleeve plaid shirt was buttoned to the top, and his blue jeans didn't quite reach the top of his white crew socks. The cops hadn't returned and probably wouldn't. Andy looked across at the soldier. His eyes were glazed over—the magazine lay limp in his lap.

Andy couldn't help himself. He had to warn the boy. It was the right thing to do. That's how he'd been raised.

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