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Flash! Fiction 3

by Peter McMillan
with Adam Mac



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Dedication

For Otto

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The Ad

The ad said “whether you make \$1 a day or \$1 million a day, don't waste time job hunting with anyone else.”

That's an eye-catching claim, but it makes you wonder what edge they have on Bertrand Halperin and Associates, the long-time anchor of the back-end of the classified section.

This will be a good test for my new portfolio.

The Office

The office is smartly furnished. The building is old, but it's well-maintained, so it can pass for faux ancien chic.

Bobby, the receptionist, is attractive, professional and polite, but after the introductions and the call to Robert, her attention turns to a tanning and fitness salon brochure.

Robert—pronounced with a French accent and thus no “t” sound at the end—runs the show. He is not French at all, but he does seem fond of hearing his name called. Robert is very smartly dressed, almost as if he and the office were designed together.

Bob is the third in the trio. He's the guy that can make you look young and sober. Bob is also the guy that makes things happen. He's the coach, the critic, the advisor, etc.

The Pitch

Robert makes the pitch. It's a \$3,000 6-month program using a patented methodology for résumé development, interview feedback and leveraging the hidden job market.

The hidden job market—that's Robert's theme, and it has been apparent from the moment I walked into the office suite. Bobby hadn't said much, but a conspicuous part of her introduction was a recitation of the fact that 80 percent of all jobs are hidden. And during my brief tour of the office with Robert, I met Bob, who claimed, with rehearsed precision, that 85 percent of the job market is in the hidden job market. I noted the discrepancy, but let it pass.

Now, Robert expands upon the hidden job market theme. It is the only way to go, he says, which is why it is the focus and the specialty of the firm. The approach has been so successful that patented material is guarded like a trade secret. Only clients who have signed non-disclosure agreements have access.

Robert clinches it when he concludes an already captivating presentation by insisting that *fully 95 percent of all available jobs never show up* in newspapers, trade magazines, corporate websites, online job banks, coin laundry bulletin boards, you name it. That figure, he says, is based on proprietary market research that is shared with clients. It includes a secondary hidden job market that has long remained untapped within the more familiar primary hidden job market. Again Robert emphasizes that once prospects become clients, they also become shareholders to whom the mysteries of the proprietary and confidential business model are unveiled.

What an extraordinary pitch—and pitchman! I'm intrigued by this marketing of the secondary hidden job market and wonder whether Robert is aware that I already have access to it.

Robert is certainly impressed with my credentials and my references and even goes so far as to express his regrets for not having an opening in the firm—a senior position reporting to directly to him. Never know when a vacancy will pop up though, he says. Quite right, I add.

The Plan

As Robert changes over to talk about administrative matters, I recognize that this is going to be perfect. A more timely and plausible pyramid scheme just can't be found. One or two things need to fall in place first, so I'll buy some time. I assure Robert that I'm interested—more than he can imagine—but that I need a day to move some—er—funds around.

We agree to a late morning meeting on the following day.

Walking through the revolving door and out into the busy sidewalk, I spot the coffee shop where I'll hang out until Bob leaves the office. I choose a seat at the counter facing the window, directly opposite the old building with the revolving door. From here, I can observe the comings and goings without attracting attention.

I am convinced that Robert was telling me that the job was mine as long as I made the necessary arrangements. What about Bob? Well, no job's permanent, and like Robert said, you never know when a vacancy might pop up. In the hidden job market, you have to be prepared for anything, at anytime.

As I drink my coffee and skim through the classifieds, my eyes are drawn to an ad that reads “Identity portfolio enhancements—passports, name changes, credit histories, work credentials, references—arrange for a free and confidential consultation.” The phone number looks familiar. I reach for my cell phone, punch in the numbers and wait. It’s Bobby! My god! How could they have known? And how could they be so upfront as to give their real phone number? The identity shop that I went to was a back-alley, basement operation, but these guys are operating right out in the open in the middle of the financial district.

There's Bob, but it doesn't matter now. There are no hidden jobs in this pyramid.

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The Writer Who Had to Write Big

Some writers write about the small, the everyday, the ordinary, and, turning it over and over and looking at it from all sides, the good ones turn up something never before seen in precisely that light.

Christopher couldn't tolerate the banal, however artistically finessed. He had to have the big theme, larger than life, steeped in history and suggestive of the future.

He should have been a novelist, but he was afflicted with a genius that grew bored very, very quickly. So, he wrote flash fiction – fleeting bursts of the imagination compressed into a short story that can be fully digested in 3-5 minutes.

His friends were polite but curious when they asked how he could write about epic themes in only slightly more detail than haiku. Of course, they never asked him directly. They always asked one another, rhetorically.

From an early age, Christopher was fascinated by the transcending. That's the one thing that he enjoyed so much about his religious lessons as a young boy. Religion introduced him to the infinite, and this liberated him from the common and the boring repetition of things and people and places.

Gaining entry was difficult and inexplicable. However, it was impossible for Christopher to navigate through the infinite. He simply yielded to the infinite. Although it was blasphemous, some even maintained that no one had ever mastered the infinite. But that was a large part of the attraction for Christopher—an infinite that got larger the farther you got into it.

Christopher was not a scholar. He didn't have the attentiveness for that kind of work. In a library he would sit quietly at a table for 20-30 minutes, then get up, walk around, look through the stacks and return to his table with another 10 or so books completely unrelated to what he'd been reading. This could go on for an entire afternoon or evening, and afterwards his table would be covered with towering, unsteady piles of books having no discernible theme uniting them.

Christopher wrote better than average. He wasn't a great writer, just like he was not a profound thinker or serious scholar. But he was still captivated by the larger than life. As he grew older and as the limits of life became more and more real to him, he began to reach out again for the world of the infinite that had mesmerized him as a youngster.

He began to write—big. He knew he couldn't capture it on the epic canvas of a great novel. He could only see glimpses of it, and sometimes he couldn't even describe it in words. Often what he wrote would seem to represent his insight, but then on hearing another's opinion, he would realize how miserably he failed.

Over the final years of his life, he wrote hundreds of pieces of flash fiction—finite sketches of the infinite. He never published them, and they were never published posthumously.

First published in Writers Haven Magazine, Issue 13, The Writer.

My 4th grade class decided that it wanted to go on a school field trip to see the Efficiency Ombudsman. Of course the range of options they were given was limited, and the Efficiency Ombudsman was the lesser evil. In other words, it was the last option given the thumbs down.

#

Our guide informs us that the Efficiency Ombudsman is the ultimate arbiter, or judge, in questions of efficiency, whether in the public or private sector. He is the efficiency expert par excellence and his technical credentials are unrivalled. He holds an MBA from Wharton, a law degree from Harvard, a medical degree from John Hopkins and an engineering degree from Cal Poly.

As part of our tour, we are allowed to read a sample of the emails that come across the ombudsman's desk. Unfortunately, we are bound to silence on the specifics, having been required to recite the ombudsman's non-disclosure agreement "so help us God."

However, I am permitted to say that the emails come from everywhere—people in manufacturing, distribution, transportation, public utilities, banks, credit unions, agriculture, government, schools, universities, hospitals, charities, churches, synagogues, mosques. It seems that everybody's talking about efficiency, and they all seem to be converging on this one office. Most say they want more efficiency—greater output in goods/services with lower costs—and are petitioning the ombudsman to support them. However, there are a few who claim that efficiency, when pursued without regard to unintended consequences, can be harmful, and they petition the ombudsman to support them. Overall, the volume is extraordinary—somewhere in the tens of thousands, we are told.

Our guide apologizes as he explains that we will not be able to see how these emails are answered, since the process is quite complex and sensitive in terms of privacy issues. We do learn, however, that each incoming email must pass through a rigorous quality control check that may involve as many as six committees before a response can be researched, prepared, edited, translated, interpreted, logged, filed, and sent, requiring an additional eight committees.

I ask where all these people are accommodated, since I noticed in the lobby that the Efficiency Ombudsman only takes up one floor of the building. Our guide answers that virtually all committee work is done on-line. Then I ask how they manage a virtual office for such a complicated organization. He points ahead to the double doors on the left-hand side of the corridor.

He says "That's 'The Room.'"

I shrug my shoulders, and the kids look interested all of a sudden.

"That's where everything happens," he continues.

Again, I shrug, and the kids come closer, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

He speaks softly, "That's where the computer processes the request, simulates all possible responses and returns the most efficient response, based on a secret and complex probability calculation."

"So," I ask, "where do the committees come into play?"

"They're in the computer," he says.

"I don't understand, you mean they communicate on-line as if in conference?" I ask.

"Not quite," he says. "The committees are designed to operate inside the computer."

"Are there people inside the computer?" blurts out one of my students. "Cool," says another.

"Not in the way you're thinking," answers the guide. "Here, maybe this will help. Picture the computer as an efficiency calculator. It's a super-sophisticated calculator that adds, subtracts, multiplies and divides all kinds of things—not just numbers. But on the screen, it looks a lot like one of your video games. Everything that the computer needs to process and respond emails has been built into the program. There's a research committee, a writing committee, an editing committee, a translation committee, a community liaison committee, a public relations committee, and so forth."

"Wow," say several of the kids, almost in rhythm.

"Can we see it?" ask a couple of the starry-eyed math whizzes.

"No, I'm afraid not," says the guide as he motions us past the entrance and down the empty corridor. "You see, it's highly classified, and I've probably already said more than I should have. But remember, you promised not to tell?"

"We promised not to tell what we read in those emails," pipes up one of the youngsters.

"Actually," says the guide as he fishes into his jacket pocket for a piece of paper "what you recited at the beginning of the tour—here it is—covers the emails and anything else that is described as confidential."

“Hmmp!” interjects the youngster, as if to say “So, that’s what you think, huh?”

As a parting gesture, the guide offers one last thing. “The computer” he says with a wink “is an incredibly versatile administrator. For example, it planned and coordinated in detail the Ombudsman’s fishing trip this week off the coast of Baja California with the top executives of the ‘big five’ banks. And only moments before you arrived, it outfitted me with this tailored suit and silk necktie.

Another “Wow” from the audience, as I strain to keep my eyebrows level.

As we leave, we’re each handed a complimentary magnet which reads “Efficiency Ombudsman.”

One of the children suddenly yells out “Hey, mine says ‘Privacy Ombudsman,’” and our guide turns red in the face and helps me corral the students and guide them through the door and into the elevator lobby.

Out on the street, I tick off the children’s names as we load the bus. A flash of curiosity makes me reach inside the breast pocket of my jacket and pull out the magnet. I notice that “Efficiency” scratches off easily and underneath lay “Privacy.”

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"Go!"

"Get ready!"

"On your mark!"

"Runners to their places."

"Next is the 100 metres."

Alvin jogs off the infield track.

Six gurneys line up for the helicopter.

A flurry of white coats surrounds the sprinters.

The world's fastest runners lie fetus-like on the green.

Alvin needs one more win to break the last record.

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