



Flash! Fiction

by Peter McMillan

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Dedication

For Bengue

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The Funeral

It did not come as a surprise. Instead of surprise, it was more like a sad resignation. After all, it was really the only conceivable ending for a troubled, lonely and unspectacular life.

In some places, among some people, the departure would have been marked with shame and disgust for a life wasted and worthless. Condemning failure and shunning the one who failed somehow seems to maintain the uninterrupted value and meaning of life. And so it is that death, or at least the thought of death, is put off—indefinitely.

But in this place, among these people, the departure is not so meanly marked. This is a place of conservative views and a people whose living roots stretch far back into the hazy and almost forgotten years of the Great Depression and World War II. Judging in this case would be expected to be harsh—very harsh.

In these days where families are dispersed across the country and even across the globe, the clan is something of an anachronism. All the more remarkable then is the solemn and respectful appearance of every one of the living blood relatives from the elder generation of both sides of the family, most of whom are in their 80s.

The image projected on the rolling cemetery lawn on that sunny and mild autumn day in this small south Alabama town and ancestral home was that of a latter day Scottish clan, American for many, many generations, but fiercely united in the family rituals of death and the show of solidarity in the face of the unknown.

Judging there would doubtless be. Guilt there would be. Forgetting there would also be. Nevertheless, for one extended moment there would be a oneness. The moment passes into memory preserving

the experience of the clan gathering to send one of their own to the other side and holding on to one another in an unspoken promise.

And so, the judging was hushed.

Only one breach had been heard, but it was of no consequence. It was just the perpetual mourner who marked the death of his loved one by seeking out every opportunity to attend the funerals announced in the local newspaper.

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It began the way they all begin. The tugging from somewhere out there, growing ever more persistent and difficult to ignore. The tether to home no longer there. All that keeps you around is the familiar, the predictable, the safe. What's out there is only vaguely understood. People talk about it, and most of them talk with the enthusiasm of explorers and conquerors. Few come back who have no story of great importance to tell.

When you're younger your instinct for comfortable certainties is so strong that it alone is sufficient to keep you home. But as your mind and body change and grow, independence and confidence develop and bring with them inner certainty.

Just as countless millions before you have journeyed out from home, so you, too, set out to conquer the unknown. In your haste to get under way, you set aside your quarrelsomeness and accept all the provisions that your family can put together. You know that you can discard what you don't need once you've got well beyond home. The weight and bulk of all this stuff—how can it possibly be necessary?—will not be easy to haul even for the 20 or so miles before you can dump it. But you promised not to insult your family on your way out—whether from guilt or fear of the curse, it's hard to say.

Dawn is coming. Ahead, the scattered clouds brushed along their rounded edges with lavender and pink highlights tell you that the sun is rising just over the horizon in the direction you're headed. The air is cool and crisp. Apart from the soft crunching sound of the fine gravel underfoot and the non-melodious clanging of your load, it's quiet. The sounds in the meadow to your left and the forest to your right are magnified in the morning stillness. There's no one

else on the road, so you're alone with the rush of thoughts of the young wayfarer just set out from home for the first time.

You don't even notice the extraordinary weight that you're carrying. You've seen pictures in National Geographic and mail order catalogues of what hikers and mountain climbers look like with their massive, fully-outfitted frame backpacks. You figure you would be satisfied to be travelling so light. However, your backpack is so chock full that if it had snaps instead of that sturdy double zipper, it would pop open and shoot all your belongings out on the road behind you.

You've got things dangling off the backpack, a set of pots and a large black cast iron pan, a tent, a fishing rod, a life preserver, a camera, a pair of snowshoes, an inflatable dinghy, a double-end paddle, a plastic mesh bag filled with pears, tomatoes, corn and pecans from the family garden, a four-foot long cardboard cylinder with a laminated map of the world, a parachute, and a sleeping bag rolled up and stuck on the top of the backpack just above your head.

And that's just what is clipped onto the frame backpack. Trailing you at a dutiful distance of two-and-a-half-feet is a two-wheeled cart with a rugged mountain bike, bulky sacks and tins of dry goods to last for several weeks, and an overfull packing crate with exactly 100 books, including the Bible, a hodgepodge of titles from 19th century German philosophy, the history of economic thought, Russian literature before the Revolution, the nearly forgotten samizdat of post-war Eastern Europe, and Mr. Esslin's theatre of the absurd as well as a handful of recently acquired titles on travel, bird watching, and wilderness survival and a prized first edition of the collected works of O. Henry.

Weeks later we catch up with the young wayfarer. He seems to have lost his bearings in the desert. In all directions, there is nothing but sand—flat desert and sand all the way to the horizon. And there's no shadow. Well, there is a shadow, but it's the shadow of the noonday sun.

We've happened on our traveller just as he is frantically going through all of his pockets and all of his belongings in search of— Must be a compass he's looking for. He's standing dead centre of a circle of footprints that look to have been made by someone methodically scanning the horizon from every point in the circle's 360 degrees.

Ah! There it is! He's located his compass.

With compass in hand, he faces north, in line with the compass needle and then turns sharply to the right, looks off into the endless sand and shoulders his pack and resumes his journey eastward.

He's back on track, reinvigorated by the thought that he hasn't lost his way and that through perseverance he has triumphed. Having lightened his load again, he marches forward, confident that he has all that is needed to come out of this OK on his own.

The cart is gone, left behind on the craggy rocks of some distant mountain pass a lifetime ago. All that remains of its contents are the small volume on surviving in remote and desolate conditions and the second volume of the first edition O. Henry. Also left behind—miles back on the desert plain—are the dinghy, the boat paddle, the life preserver, the fishing rod and the snowshoes.

After briefly checking in on our young traveller, we again take our leave. As we zoom out, we halt momentarily to take in the bird's eye view of the desert. Off to the east, the desert ends abruptly.

Beyond there is nothing but blackness. Our young friend is headed due east and seems to be 100 miles or so from the edge. A few miles back—near the spot where the circle had been deliberately etched out in the sand—lies the parachute, marooned in the blinding desert whiteness of a perpetual midday sun.

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Cathedral bell door chimes send my heart into a sympathetic panic. My wife and I have been invited for dinner at her partner's mansion. I've never met him or his wife before and don't usually care for nouveau-riche business-types, so I don't expect much. Not much, that is, except for validation. And that just met me at the door.

Our hosts greet us at the door, invite us in, and then escort us through the great hall to the study where we have drinks and the customary 'get-to-know-you' small talk for the benefit of the strangers—the hostess and me.

After 15 or 20 minutes of this, I sense restlessness, and I assure everyone that I'll be fine—that I'll just have a look around the library.

The partners move towards the terrace with their drinks to go over their pitch for their presentation in Vancouver on Monday. The hostess excuses herself to the kitchen to finish preparing the meal.

The library had caught my eye as we were led through the hall. Two arched, stained-glass doors open to the right off the foyer, and since one was ajar, I glimpsed an intriguing floor-to-ceiling bookshelf. Now I could lose myself among books, lose track of time, until dinner and then time to go home. Perfect

What's on the bookshelf? Are they bestsellers, mysteries, history, religious, scholarly, cloth-bound, paperback, or just decorative spines? Is the bookshelf used often, or have layers of dust collected on the books and underneath the books? Are there secret hiding places in the bookshelf for money, jewellery, love letters, wills, a handgun?

Maybe there are patterns to be discovered, which will tell me something about our hosts. I wonder whether he reads literature, and whether it's ancient or modern, poetry or prose, European or American. Perhaps she reads English history or East German literature or parapsychology.

Maybe hidden in the books is a history of their travels. Books stamped with book dealers' addresses in Buenos Aires, Hong Kong, London, Sydney, New York, and New Delhi.

Maybe the bookshelf wraps around the room. I've never seen one of those in person. How many volumes would it hold? Maybe there's a second floor or even a third floor, with sliding ladders on each floor and a spiral staircase connecting all of the levels, each with a hidden door for secret entry and exit.

I had no idea they were so interested in books. Maybe I misjudged them. Maybe we should get to know them better. Maybe we could have them over for dinner sometime, invite them to the cottage, to the theatre, or even sailing.

Suddenly, my thoughts are interrupted by my wife who is standing over me in the study, two steps from where I started on my journey to the library.

"Honey! Honey, what's wrong? How long have you been lying there? You forgot your medicine again, didn't you? We'll have to cancel dinner and get you to the hospital right away."

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Married, two kids, a dog, and two jobs—Ben was an ordinary guy. In a crowd you could scan past him five or six times and not notice that he was standing right there in front of you. Around the neighbourhood he was usually recognized by who he was with—Spots, Ben Junior, or one of the girls.

A nondescript man, an everyman, but a nobody. Got it. Next?

The writing still wasn't paying, but it would, he said. The other job, selling shoes, was 'research,' he said. It stretched the household income, but more important was that it got him out of the house. His wife and teenage daughter, who'd read all of his recent work, finally suggested it.

OK. The nondescript man is a writer who can't write.

Only a few weeks into the new job and Ben had filled several pocket-sized notebooks from the dollar store with bits of writer's material. Shoe sizes, foot odours, missing/extra toes, corns, bunions were of interest in the early pages. By page 11, Ben had moved on to capturing the subtle shades of customer behaviour between the polite and the ill-mannered, the modest and the showy, the parsimonious and the spendthrift, and the carefree and the morose. Moods and attitudes and demeanour Ben cross-referenced with the shoes customers bought.

This nondescript man and failed writer sets out into the world to find something to write about. Next.

But that wasn't the extent of Ben's research. You see, Ben liked to wear new shoes. And he had nearly half of an entire store to choose from. Every day, every lunch hour, he would slip into a pair

of new unworn shoes he'd had his eyes on that morning. For twenty minutes—his best estimate of a mile—he would walk, climb steps, maybe run after a bus, and jump over spilled garbage on the sidewalk, always taking a different route.

This nondescript man and failed writer—now a student of shoe store personalities and their footwear preferences—is quirky. What's next?

On returning to the shop, Ben cleaned and sanitized each pair of shoes, because his 'footprint' was supposed to be figurative and abstract and uncontaminated but equally because he was fussy about cleanliness.

OK, very quirky, but not quirky and disgusting is what we're supposed to think?

Studying customers as they tried on shoes that he'd worn, he liked to imagine what it would be like to walk in their shoes. On his daily walks he wondered how the new owners of his shoes would carry themselves. Would they walk with a precise, measured and decisive step? Would they walk tentatively, weaving left and right, stopping occasionally to look around? Would they swagger with arrogance and bad taste, projecting an exaggerated image of themselves?

Now we get why this nondescript man is a failed writer. And his failure as a writer spills over into this off-stage compulsion to control real people in the real world. Clever. Next.

Though tempted, Ben never interfered by suggesting the possibilities that lay ahead. After all, he said (to himself), people have to make their own choices. Nevertheless, Ben took pleasure in considering his influence.

“People are characters, and characters are people, so give them their freedom.”

Every customer was important to Ben, and they were flattered that he remembered them. He had a gift for recalling faces and names and stories, and his customers marvelled at his incredible memory. Of course, Ben didn't share from his notes or his lunch hour walks.

The nondescript writer creates descriptive characters and conceals from them their reason for being in his head. We got that already. Next.

After the manager retired, Ben rose quickly through the ranks. Although it was never his ambition—which remained to become a successful writer—he accepted the offer to manage the shoe store.

So, the nondescript writer morphs into a nondescript shopkeeper, trading characters for customers, plots for business, art for reality? Tragedy. Anything more?

One day Ben noticed that one of his employees was wearing store shoes when she went out for lunch.

The creative urge forsaken but resurgent? That it?

It was more entertaining when Ben was a cross-dresser, wasn't it?

Yeah, but it lacked authenticity. This one at least sounds like you...us.

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