

# DIZZYING DEPTHS

## ALSO BY LANCE MANION

Merciful Flush

Results May Vary

The Ball Washer

Homo sayswhaticus

The Trembling Fist

The Song Between Her Legs

What You Don't Understand

neXt

Tales of Adventure With Nap Lapkin

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People ask me why I only write short stories.  
It's a long story.

-Lance Manion

## Contents

Forward: Note from the Editor

Introduction

first story

the bizarre

O baby!

Olive Garden of Eden

Butterfield's birthday

yard work

the receipt

a little latitude

a halo is merely a hat that lets the rain in

the super gay story

the moth

milk carton kid

well-done

Dr. Fart

Thelma without a Louise (the big sleep)

fugit inreparabile tempus

socks to be you

the ubiquity of kissing

misfortune teller

ome is where the eart is

the trip

Mother Jemima

Dear Stacy

Dear Derrell

Dear Reader

Charlie Brown's high school reunion

finite jest

the penis crisis revisited

the clams finally came

I dreamt a little dream of me

Heaven

happy birthday, dear

rrrrrr rated

the butterfly

the road to Ithaca

the pot calling the kettle annoying

the thread

telescoping things out  
if you must work  
Letter to Nabisco  
Kinematics  
Labor Day  
2019/2020 (part 1)  
passing thoughts  
2019/2020 (part 2)  
dream homes  
suicide school  
reading into things  
Lance, the human Hot Pocket  
retaken  
tom bo li day say moi ya, yeah, jambo jumbo  
a Valentine's Day story  
how I almost died 4 U  
the weirdo connection  
flush  
aaaaarrmageddon  
the Emperor's new words  
a chance meeting with Adolf  
guy on a plane  
the butter quote  
a grave situation  
a showerly basis  
take me back to the ballgame  
Phil  
left and leaving  
his name is Earl  
one terrible image for you  
Love Street and Compromise Way  
the shower question  
Nature 1, Lance 0  
seeds  
the Zeitlin effect  
how Miss Granch stole the 4<sup>th</sup> of July  
his road to ruin  
13C  
systemic stupidity  
simple  
Detective Ferguson needs a hand  
blood

Trevor sees a sunrise  
in yodeling and in health  
that's when it hit me  
Easter in the time of COVID-19 (the lion tamer)  
unexpected heroes of the pandemic  
COVID-19 Update: The First Sunny Day  
The 2020 COVID-19 Commencement Address  
COVID-19 Update: Not Everyone is a Hero  
COVID-19 Update: Neighbors  
COVID-19 Update: Getting Hosed  
COVID-19 Update: the Realtor  
COVID-19 Update: Mold  
COVID-19 Update: Online Shopping  
Rudolph the Brown-Nosed Reindeer (as told by Nap Lapkin)  
Nap Lapkin turns down a mission  
About the Author

## **Forward: Note from the Editor**

This is my ninth go at editing a collection of Manion stories. How did I get here? That's easy to answer: he made me laugh.

I downloaded *Ball Washer* several years ago and found myself actually laughing out loud - which, despite the ubiquitous text acronym LOL, is pretty rare. Life is hard; laughter is a gift. On a whim, I sent the author a message of appreciation and somehow, here we are.

On the face of it, we're very different. He's an Atheist; I'm a Christian. He's a misogynist; I'm a Bohemian. He's a Mondrian portrait; I'm a Picasso still-life. But we're both writers. Our primary modes of exploration are through ideas and words. In truth, misogyny and bohemianism are mere cloaks we wear and are easily set aside.

Manion knows his writing is not for the masses. He's turned down opportunities to dial down offensive content to be published on a larger scale. That's partly why I'm a fan. I may not agree with or even like some of his stories, but I firmly believe in free speech and not in the politically correct hole we find our culture drowning in.

That's not to say his manuscripts aren't a mess- they are. I'm just hoping I polish them enough so you can read his wit and not notice his utter lack of understanding of punctuation rules.

Manion has stated he believes a goal of creating is to be a catalyst for others. That is true in my case; though my attempts at storytelling have been awful, I've been encouraged to find my voice, which I have as a poet. Which he supports but mocks incessantly.

I hope you enjoy this book and maybe find yourself open to making something to share: a story, a painting, a sweater, a cake. And laugh a little.

Andira



## **Introduction**

When I was a kid, I remember my parents had a giant book of bedtime stories. There were 365 of them in this book and every night, they would read me one. This went on for a few years and I sincerely looked forward to hearing those stories before drifting off to sleep. Often, my dreams were influenced by the story I'd just heard. About five years ago, after publishing my fifth or sixth collection of short stories, it dawned on me that if someone wanted to, they could have created a book of 365 of my stories and done the same thing to their kid. The horror. Imagine a young impressionable child being subjected to these stories night after night for a year. What kind of a sociopath would be created? Does this mean that because you're older and jaded, you'll fare any better? I certainly hope not.

## **first story**

As an author, every story you write is like a part of you. Like one of your children. Disappointing, underachieving children. If you think I'm going to single out any of them out to be "first," you're crazy. I wouldn't do it to the rest of them. I just couldn't.

And if you're getting a smug look on your face and thinking that the second story is really the "first" story, you can wipe that look right off. Once you read the next story, you'll see what I mean. It screams "second story."

## **the bizarre**

Am I guilty of a little anthropomorphism when it comes to insects?

Sure.

Am I guilty of assuming everybody knows what anthropomorphism is?

You betcha.

For those of you who don't, anthropomorphism is attributing human characteristics to other things. In this case, insects. I would stop here to make fun of what a dimwit you are, but I know what the next sentence is going to be, so I can't really be throwing stones.

There is truly a part of me that believes that millions and millions of years ago, all bugs had a head, two arms, and two legs (what did I tell you?). This was before diversity was a thing. They were tiny but they looked very much like we do. My apologies to those who don't have two arms and/or two legs (if you don't have a head, I don't think an apology is going to cut it).

Then along came evolution.

I picture evolution as a big sprawling market, equal parts bazaar and trade show. Countless exhibits where insects marched up and down, looking at evolutionary options.

Front and center would be the Wings booth. Very glitzy. Lots of traffic. "What would it take to put you into these wings today?"

"How big you want them?"

"Retractable or fixed?"

Moths so excited by their purchase, they forget the instruction manual. Flies having yet to stop by... but Wings knowing it was juuuuuust a matter of time.

Exoskeletons are also swarmed.

Antenna. Segmented Eyes. Mandibles. All open for business. The place is hopping.

Hopping. Obviously Hopping is in attendance.

Ironically, not many insects find Camouflage. Location, location, location.

You can see the gullible slug getting roped into the Slime pitch. Even the salesperson there is shocked that they make the sale.

Fresh from having sand kicked in the collective face by another beetle species, the rhinoceros beetle makes a beeline for Strength. You can bet bees took note of how it got where it wanted to go.

All the bugs starting to give the Odors booth a wide berth as they begin spraying samples on innocent passersby, like they do at the perfume counter at the mall.

In a dark alley, well off the main thoroughfare, a dung beetle storms away from the Proboscis booth yelling, "Hell no! I have my pride!" before a mosquito standing behind it slides up, looks over both shoulders, leans in and in a hushed voice says, "I just got wings. Tell me a bit more about this spear of yours."

A spider sits in front of Appendages, explaining its issue. "It's taking forever building these webs with just four limbs."



When I felt that nobody on board could stand a single minute more of wailing, the mother simply put her hand on the top of her baby's head, her thumb pressed firmly against his nose, and gave his head a quick twist.

A soft cracking noise was heard throughout the plane. Like a dry twig being snapped.

Suddenly, all was quiet. Then, like the end of an 80's movie, passengers, one by one, started to clap until the noise swelled and one would have thought that the mom had just sunk a fifteen-foot putt to win the Mayakoba Golf Classic in Playa del Carmen (I'm trying to reconnect with Mexican readers after calling Mexico a shithole so many times).

Still thinking about the "that's why you don't see many babies on submarines" comment, aren't you? Can't just move past it like a reader of one of the mindless feel-good books pimped by Oprah, can you? Please don't email a list of the real reasons you don't see many babies on submarines; I simply don't care. I just described a baby being murdered on an airplane flight and you're hung up on something trivial.

I was actually going to mention a baby's head imploding at a particular crush depth (like a cheruby tin can) but figured I might be pushing it if I described two infant deaths in one story. I bet you don't even appreciate my sensitivity.

Anyway, I was just wrapping up telling the person seated next to me how my sister would always carry a little bag filled with pepper on every flight so that after she got off the plane, she could induce a giant sneeze and clean out all of the bad recirculated air out of her lungs but then she got addicted and now can't even have pepper with her meals, when I saw the stewardess walking by, collecting trash before we landed.

I went to toss in my empty plastic cup when I saw two little cheruby feet sticking up out of the bag. I didn't even dare look at the mother for fear I'd see her on her phone trying to sell a stroller on eBay. I felt so weird dropping my cup on top of the formerly-bouncing-but-now-not-so-much baby corpse. Then I remembered the idiom "The tantrums of toddlerhood are all part of life's rich pageant," and stopped feeling anything.

I didn't want to be a baby.

## **Olive Garden of Eden**

It was midway through the apple pie, served by a waitress wearing a large button among many others on her vest, that read "Experience, Not Innocence" (the letters of these three words forming the shape of a serpent), that the words escaped her lips. Almost offhandedly.

"I just don't want to hurt you."

As soon as he heard that, he was counting the seconds until he could leave. He smiled and laughed and pretended to listen but all he wanted was out.

He could already feel the night air on his face and when he finally was able to push open the door to the Olive Garden and escape, the breeze did not disappoint.

He knew he'd never see her again.

She didn't suspect, so for a few minutes, for the first time in their rocky relationship, he knew something that she didn't.

She got into her car and he watched her drive away. The most poignant moment of any teen movie. Except, he couldn't help but fuck it up.

He saw himself in front of the car, holding up a boombox like John Cusack in *Say Anything*. "In Your Eyes" blaring out.

He tried to just watch her drive away but he couldn't even get that right.

She accelerated. The John Cusack-version of him stood motionless, boombox still overhead, and tried to stare through the glare of headlights and find her eyes, as if to say, "I want to heal you." His eyes found hers and her eyes said, "I want to kill you." The car got closer and still he didn't move, her eyes saying, "I'm sick of feeling like a shitty person," to which his eyes replied, "so stop being a shitty person." And then, the car hit him. He watched her driving away and he felt every bone breaking, the weight of the car rolling over him, ripping his skin, the hair on his head being unceremoniously torn off. He heard the crunching and squishing noises and smelled the odor of gasoline and tasted oil and blood in his mouth. He stood motionless. Overwhelmed. The weight of the moment rolling over him. The back of her head looked so tiny now. Then it was only the car in the distance. Brake lights like glowing red eyes. Then, she was gone. Somehow, the boombox had survived.

*Love... I get so lost, sometimes  
Days pass and this emptiness fills my heart*

He didn't want to know the details of "I just don't want to hurt you." There were no good scenarios. Eve was leaving the Garden with the knowledge of those unoriginal sins and he was leaving the Garden without it, but leaving just the same. Impossibly, the John Cusack-version of him was getting to his feet and brushing himself off.

*And all my instincts, they return  
And the grand facade, so soon will burn*

"Jesus, why can't I just have a normal heartbreaking moment?" he asked the night. "Does that damn boombox play any other song?" he asked the John Cusack-version of himself.

*Love, I don't like to see so much pain  
So much wasted and this moment keeps slipping away*

"I guess that's a no," he said to nobody, as John had departed as well.

### **Butterfield's birthday**

Like any conscientious dog owner, when his dog took a crap on their nightly walk around the neighborhood, Ned scooped up and deposited it in the little bag he'd brought for just such an occasion before the first fly even knew the transaction had taken place. Typically, he'd finish the walk clutching the bag, but because he was friendly with the neighbor whose lawn his dog had done his business on, he decided instead to just pop it into their garbage can which sat at the end of the driveway awaiting pick-up the following morning to save himself the unpleasantness associated with walking around clutching a bag of smelly dog excrement.

He lifted the lid and was greeted by a balloon.

Not just any balloon, but a festively-colored balloon with the words Happy Birthday emblazoned on it. It floated up right into Ned's face as if to say "Finally! Free at last!"

Ned grabbed it and felt his blood begin to boil. "What barbarian puts a balloon in the trash still inflated?" he thundered to himself. He immediately vowed never to be civil to that neighbor again.

"There are rules, damnit. You don't just sing the birthday song, insist people blow out candles, cut a few

pieces of cake, and then just walk away!" he said aloud and glared into his neighbor's dark window. "There are protocols to follow. Would you just wipe the cake off your mouth with Old Glory and then chuck it?"

He looked at the balloon and for the third time that day, wished he had his bugle handy. He wasn't sure "Taps" -also known as "Butterfield's Lullaby" or by the first line of the lyric, "Day Is Done"- was appropriate, but it certainly seemed so.

In July 1862, U.S. General Daniel Butterfield and his brigade were camped at Harrison's Landing, Virginia, recuperating after the Seven Days Battles near Richmond. Dissatisfied with the standard bugle call employed by the Army to indicate to troops it was time to go to sleep, Butterfield asked his brigade bugler, Private Oliver Wilcox Norton, to rework the existing bugle call used to signal the end of the day. He did and it caught on. As for the name, prior to Butterfield's bugle call, the lights-out call was followed by three drum beats, dubbed the "Drum Taps," then simply "Taps." When Butterfield's call replaced the drum beats, soldiers referred to it as "Taps" anyway.

Butterfield's bugle call was officially known as "Extinguish Lights" in American military manuals until 1891.

Ned couldn't bring himself to just push the plucky balloon back into the garbage can and walk away. He knew that it would be bobbing up and down in the darkness, banging against the top, rustling and frustrated, and that thought would keep him awake all night.

"Damn it... I'm going to give this balloon the respect it deserves," and with that, he tied the balloon to the lid and walked home, still holding the dog poop, returning a few minutes later with his bugle and a pin.

He untied it and couldn't help but stare into his neighbor's house again and hope that the inhabitants therein would see what was going on. That they would see him with bugle in hand and feel remorse and emerge from their abode and do the right thing.

But they didn't.

So Ned played "Taps" right then and there, for all the neighborhood to hear and wonder about. When he was done, he took the pin in one hand and the balloon in the other. The balloon that had done its part and helped someone celebrate a special occasion. To the very best of its ability. The balloon that still tugged skyward, plenty of life and cheer still within it. It seemed to yearn for one more chorus of "Happy Birthday."

Tears began to stream down Ned's face. "Day is done. Gone the sun. From the lakes. From the sky. All is well. Safely rest," and then he popped the balloon.

It fell limply over his hand. He lifted the trash lid and gently placed it inside.

He closed the lid.

His neighbor never did figure out why Ned was mad at him.

## **yard work**

Standing at the entrance to the Manion estate recently, I couldn't help but admit that the grounds looked a little shabby. Not up to the expectations someone would have if they pulled into the driveway of a celebrated author such as myself.

So I did what Manions have done for generations when it comes to yardwork; I rolled up my sleeves and called a few landscaping companies to get a quote.

They were far too expensive and it looked for a brief time like I would have to figure out how my garage door opens, find the tools left by the previous owner, and actually exert myself. Luckily, I happened to be speaking to a neighbor that same week on the topic and he put me in touch with a guy he knew that

did that type of labor for much less than his competitors. A couple of phone conversations later, I had sorted everything out.

A couple of days later, as I sat and watched from my office above my garage, I saw his crew roll up. One old man and one old lady.

His parents.

I swear.

Each looked well into their seventies and as they started to unload wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of mulch and bring it up to the flowerbeds at the front of my house, I felt horrible. Absolutely terrible. How could I possibly sit there and let these two old people do all of my yard work?

It wasn't easy, let me tell you. At times, I couldn't even bring myself to look out the window and watch them.

The guy was your typical haggard old man but his wife... she was something special. Short and squat, built for such activities, she wore braces on both her ankles and knees and seemed no stranger to manual labor. She looked like a miniature Russian power lifter from back in the days when they were all doped up.

There was a lot of grunting involved.

Finally, after enough guilt had welled up inside me, I ventured downstairs to get a closer look. Proving the old adage that no good deed goes unpunished, my kindhearted gesture of bringing out a pitcher of ice-cold lemonade completely backfired. Not that they didn't enjoy it, but because I got a closer look at the old woman.

She was covered in dirt and debris and bugs. It was the bugs that got me.

They were still alive.

For reasons known only by science and whatever gods she prayed to, her skin was like flypaper. As if on cue, a gnat flew into the center of her forehead and stuck there. She didn't bat an eyelash nor did she make any attempt to remove it. It just sat there, little legs waving in the air, completely unable to extricate itself from her sweaty brow.

She continued to talk about plants or the weather or some other completely banal topic, but I couldn't hear a word she was saying. All I could do was to stare at the bug trapped on her face.

I wondered if she walked around at night amongst fireflies, would she eventually look like the universe? There were bugs on her arms and bugs on her legs and all of them were doing the same little dance. My bottom lip began to quiver. Why didn't she feel them squirming and put them out of their misery? I wanted to get a wiffleball bat and whack her with it until they had all passed on.

Apparently, she wasn't talking about plants or the weather anymore because when I finally rejoined the conversation, I'd already agreed to pay her another \$60 to clean my gutters. Just dandy! Now I had to worry about Helga or Olga or whatever the fuck her name was thundering around on my roof and possibly putting one of her cement feet through my upstairs ceiling. I swear, we'd need one of those cranes they use on high-rises to pull her out.

Luckily, that didn't happen because after only a few minutes, she fell off my roof. I say luckily because she wasn't injured. I'm not that callous.

Luckily, she landed on her husband.

He was injured. But getting injured is a man's job, after all. Not a delicate flower like Helga or Olga or whatever the fuck her name was. That flower drove the old man deep into the grass. After his son had collected him and driven him to the ER, there was still an "old man who got squashed by a Helga or Olga or whatever the fuck her name was" imprint on my lawn.

That night, I called the man and told him that I no longer needed his services. I would do what I should have done from the start- gone down to Home Depot and hired a few of the illegals that hang around there looking for work.

"Pone el mantillo en los parterres."

Maybe Helga or Olga or whatever the fuck her name was has a pet lizard that she feeds every night with all the insects stuck to her.

“Ese sería un buen final.”

### **the receipt**

“Do you want your receipt?” asked the young man behind the counter.

“No thanks,” replied the older businessman.

“Are you sure?” the young man asked again.

“Yes. You can chuck it.”

There was a long pause but instead of depositing the receipt into the trash as requested, the young man hesitated, looked at the receipt and then looked at the businessman. Finally he asked, “How are you going to remember what you bought?”

“I have this to remind me,” the businessman said and lifted up his right hand, which held a bacon, cheese, and egg bagel. His face had a “game, set, match” look on it.

“What about when it’s gone?”

A look of irritation crossed the face of the businessman but before he could offer his rebuttal, which would have include a rather graphic and unpleasant third option as to where the receipt could end up residing, the young man behind the counter continued.

“Do you remember your prom?”

Not one to back away from a squabble, the businessman took a moment to remember his prom. He only went to one: his senior year. For a moment, he forgot all about the piping hot bacon, cheese, and egg bagel clutched in his right hand and fumbled for pertinent particulars of that magical night.

“Do you remember the name of the girl you went with?” the young man inquired.

Ignoring the fact that he had no idea what the connection between his prom night and a bacon, cheese, and egg bagel could possibly be, the businessman played along.

“No,” he said, “But I do remember distinctly that her dad sneezed when I was waiting for her to come downstairs. He sounded just like the blonde girl in a horror movie when she opens a closet to find her best friend hanging there with her throat slashed. I’ll never forget it.”

“But you did forget the name of the girl you took?” asked the young man again, careful not to sound in any way that he was gloating.

“The problem with the girl,” the businessman plowed forward, eager to explain, “was that her feet were too big. She was the only girl in high school who didn’t want bigger breasts but instead looked into a foot reduction.”

After he was done offering this explanation, the businessman realized that it was still no reason not to remember the girl’s name. “I remember her dad’s name. His name was Chuck.”

The two men looked at each other.

The young man slowly extended the hand holding the receipt.

The businessman took it.

### **a little latitude**

“Finally. A challenge.”

Not said out loud- not in any fashion we could hear anyway, but thought with great exuberance by a being beyond our understanding and typically portrayed in TV and film as anything from a cartoon to a giant blue Will Smith. Obviously, if this entity is beyond our understanding, it makes it hard to describe,



but let's just say it's a Pan-Dimensional being that moves through time far differently than we do and has technology at its fingertips we can't even dream about.

Although we try.

At least I do.

To amuse itself, it grants us wishes. The vast majority of which require nothing more than zipping back in time a few thousand years, manipulating some DNA here and there, or perhaps the banking system before creating yet another reality in a multiverse that is already choked with possible outcomes.

Child's play really, if you're this Pan-Dimensional being.

But every now and then, a wish comes down the pike that the aforementioned finds interesting.

Because said entity does not experience time as we do, it appears to anyone getting a wish granted that it only takes a second, a snap of the fingers or blink of an eye, for the wish to happen. What they don't realize is that once they've stated their wish, time as they know it stops and this "genie" then has to get to work on figuring how to grant the wish. This could take hundreds of "years," as we experience them, as the "afreet" has to engineer an outcome that will meet the lofty expectations of the wisher.

Making people rich or famous is so easy and mundane that this Pan-Dimensional being has often thought about taking those options completely off the table. Same with physical beauty or athletic prowess. They just don't get its toes to tapping... if it had any. I realize I muddied those particular waters earlier by referencing fingertips that it actually doesn't possess, but I trust you'll forgive me when this is all said and done.

Anyway, every now and then, a wish comes along that has the "jinni" working a bit overtime. A wish that will have your mind putting in a little extra effort if you dare try and picture it (Dare! Dare!).

Here it is... Celeste, from Akron, Ohio asked for the following: a world where things were different at the equator. On one side of the line, it was twelve hours different from the other. If it was noon south of the equator, it would be midnight on the northern side.

The Pan-Dimensional being got a chubby at this idea and Celeste wasn't even done with the wish.

On top of that, if it were summer south of the line, it would be winter on the northern side.

The Pan-Dimensional being got dizzy at the very thought of the physics involved in this wish. Even with all the resources at its disposal, it would be millennia before it could figure out how to grant this one.

Obviously, E can forget all about equaling  $mc^2$ . It allowed itself to imagine the finished product. Standing at the equator, a full-blown night sky to the left while the sun sat high in the sky on his right. Feeling the heat to its right and the chill to the left. Watching a cloud drift through the mid-day sky, then slide over to darkness. Eclipses... holy shit. Its head would have swam, if it had one.

Throwing out all the science surrounding hemispheres and timelines and starting again. Latitudes and longitudes tossed to the wayside. Gravity be damned!

The most difficult wish ever asked for and maybe the most spectacular. Completely selfless on the face of it, the PD entity broke one of the cardinal wish-granting rules and felt compelled to ask Celeste why she'd wished for this.

"Because," she replied, "I once asked someone I cared about to try and imagine it and he wouldn't."

The powerful-beyond-measure being wanted so badly to ask another question, just a quick "Why?!" but it had already broken one cardinal rule and it didn't want to push its luck. It went to work.

A second later, Celeste was standing on the equator she'd always wanted to stand on.

Now it's up to you to picture it. A sky split in half between light and dark. Details matter, especially at sunrise/sunset and during storms.

And then come up with a "Why?!" that works for you. I'm asking a lot, I know, but keep in mind, I'll give you a little latitude.

**a halo is merely a hat that lets the rain in**

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