



Willowing Skywardly
Stories and Essays

Peter McMillan

Books Published by the Author

Flash! Fiction (2012) by Peter McMillan

Flash! Fiction 2 (2013) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 3 (2014) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 4 (2015) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 5 (2017) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction (2020) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Missing Stories: An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction (2020) by Peter McMillan & Adam Mac, Maku Miran (ed.)

Collected Essays on Political Economy and Wartime Civil Liberties, 2002-2008 (2020) by Peter McMillan

Flash! Fiction: Around the Block (2022) by Peter McMillan

2022



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Peter McMillan, January 2022

Photographs: Peter McMillan, 2021

Dedication

For L & O and L2 & O2

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Introduction

Part One features short fiction written since *Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction* and *Missing Stories: An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction*.

Part Two Non-Fiction includes two sections: the first comprises book reviews and essays from 2020 and 2021 and the second includes two papers from the 1990s and several essays and op-ed articles overlooked or otherwise omitted during compilation of the *Collected Essays on Political Economy and Wartime Civil Liberties*.

The fictional and the real are combined in this collection intentionally, partly because the collection would be too small with just one or the other but also to suggest the permeability of boundaries between perspectives.

Peter McMillan
Toronto
January 2022

The lunchroom is overstuffed with blue shirts (baby blue button-up style with the company logo on the pocket) and T-shirts (mostly faded dark blue) on bodies of all ages, colours, and genders. The former are one step closer to the 'B' shift, the afternoon shift. The latter are probationary meaning that they have 90 nights before they have to find another job.

Groups sit on the beige plastic chairs set around small square tables, also plastic, designed for four but able to accommodate eight ... with the corners. Some tables are anxiously subdued, others comfortably boisterous. There's no music in here, just the hum of the Coke and sandwich vending machines and the whooshing sound of the HVAC system, which are mostly drowned out by human voices. That will change in about 15 minutes and for the next 8 hours, give or take.

In the middle of the room sits Ram, the old guy, Grandpa, who could have started living off old-age benefits years ago. He wears a clean white T-shirt to work every day, even though he should have earned a blue shirt by now, but his probationary period has been extended multiple times. He takes it as it's given, doesn't complain but doesn't kowtow. He limps as he walks. His round but muscular midsection doesn't help his mobility. His brown work-scarred forearms covered in white hair are as thick and powerful as any in the plant. Asked how he stays so healthy, he answers matter-of-factly, "Very, very good doctors. Son and daughter, and four grandchildren." No one takes him literally, but that's what he means.

On one side of Ram is the temp, the 20-something from the dying steel town 40 minutes away. He comes from a family of United Empire Loyalists. He's fond of saying that though no-

body knows, or cares, what he's talking about—1776 and 1812 being unfamiliar markers for most of his co-workers. And on the other side of Ram, is Mai, Vietnamese but from Japan. She often puts in her earbuds and listens to English pronunciation lessons during lunch break. Once that fact was discovered, it spread and has produced no end of jokes and laughter from the male voices in the lunchroom. Mac takes the fourth side of the table. He's a bookish, stand-offish sort, and during breaks he chain-smokes a foul-smelling unbranded cigarette that creates a comfortable space in the 'smokers' pen.'

On the corners of the table are three. The fourth is empty. Between Mac and Ram is Osman, a fastidious Blue Shirt with carefully pressed navy blue pants from Mark's Work Warehouse and the company blue shirt, always a long-sleeved style that stays buttoned at the wrists throughout the night. Oleg, another Blue Shirt on the 'C' shift, is on the opposite corner from Osman. He only talks about computers, though once he mentioned he'd been in the wars (which ones, nobody knows). He spends his breaks on his mobile researching refurbished servers for the database farm he maintains in his one-bedroom apartment. What he stores on these databases he never says. "Somebody's gonna lose their job," snaps Kathleen, the night supervisor, pointing to the empty chair as she works her way through the room brushing up against her preferred who respond admiringly. Edsel, on the third corner seat, wearing a T-shirt, like Ram (though not white) and Mac and David John (the UEL) mutter something after Kathleen passes. Mac nods. Though not as old as Ram, Edsel moves about like someone who is as old as Ram. His breath, bloodshot eyes, and splotchy-reddish-gray face give away what he had for breakfast, the meal daytimers call dinner. He's quiet but his eyes and manner betray an intense dislike of authority. He used to work construction year round in the north but quit after the accident.

A steel beam had slipped and fallen six stories onto the supervisor's trailer during lunch break.

All around the lunchroom, there is a sudden silence as if some sound had commanded, interrupting conversations, breaking off interior monologues and stopping the anxious drumming of fingers. There had been no sound, but what follows is the scooching and clattering of chairs being pushed up to the tables. All stand watching the second hand of the large round clock posted above the lunchroom entrance make its last sweep. At 12, the bell rings, and out goes the night shift and in comes the afternoon shift. The Blue Shirts pass through the lunchroom to the showers. The few day-by-day temps rush out the door to catch the last bus. Soon afterwards, the Blue Shirts trickle out and amble to their cars or pickups. The fragrance of freshly-lit joints wafts through the parking lot of long shadows. Rival rock 'n' roll legends struggle to be heard over the revving engines. Once the stereos and high-torque motors are out of earshot, the great machines in the neighbouring factories lull the industrial park to sleep with their rhythmic white noise, only twice, at 2:30 and 4:45, pierced by the engineer's whistle and then the protracted clickety-clack of a locomotive and its train of empty, rattling boxcars.

November 1985. Lackland AFB, San Antonio, Texas.

Seven never-to-be officers of the USAF are waiting to be processed out and back to civilian life. Four hadn't checked out. People who knew them had said something innocently or otherwise, and these guys no longer measured up. Another had medical issues, and one just wanted out. One wasn't talking.

The first step in the process was to remove them from the general population. Fear of contamination—against regulations to mix as the propagation of values and beliefs must conform to military codes of thought and conduct. The lepers were sequestered in a separate administrative building restricted from access to base facilities except the mess hall. Three times daily, they were escorted by a staff sergeant, unarmed and not exactly custodial but then not one to shoot the breeze with either. The decommissioned recruits were allowed in the mess only after everyone else had been served and had left. The mess hall—large enough to accommodate several hundred men—was empty but the colony cluster sat together around the same table, as if accepting the reality that they were bound together by a mark that designated them untouchable. Their voices echoed in the vast hall.

Except for meal times, the seven stayed in their barracks, a small square room with freshly painted pale blue walls ... about the size of a motel room fitted with four bunk beds and a one-person washroom with a shower. No personal electronic gadgets were permitted, but then the times antedated the electronic communication revolution that made these devices as common as the wallet. The only phone was a public phone in the hallway, and there was no TV or radio. Stationery (blank paper for

the Xerox machine) and BIC pens were allotted to the group to divide as they chose.

Massachusetts was a tall, blond-headed guy with patrician manners. He'd got caught lying about his marijuana use, but he was very cavalier about it all. Idaho was a Stanford-educated electrical engineer who wanted to fly Phantom jets before he worked with one of the big military contractors, but that wasn't going to happen with that DUI in British Columbia nobody was supposed to have known about. Alabama was the only guy—yes, they were all guys and yes, again, they were all white guys—who had initiated the separation on his own, not that he was proud of the fact given that he had nothing to go back to except a Walmart job. Nevertheless, with some self-satisfaction he maintained he was better off than if he were continuing his employment with a government that commits war crimes, referring to Nicaragua, Vietnam, and Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki before that. His was no great loss; his AFQT score of 74—acceptable but far below the scores reported by anyone else in the colony. Massachusetts and Idaho were in the 99th percentile. Missouri, the one with the heart murmur, was the only one who was profoundly disappointed. He had dreamed of a 20-year stint in the Air Force, then early retirement houseboating on the Mississippi River and writing about river people for the rest of his life. He'd already been published in a couple of Midwestern literary journals, though his biggest achievement thus far was a personal note that accompanied the rejection of one of his submissions to *The New Yorker*. Utah, one of those who hadn't checked out (he was vague on the particulars), was reading *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, periodically offering his unsolicited commentary on Phaedrus' odyssey. North Carolina was reading the Bible and mumbling to himself from the top bunk farthest from the door. The last guy just lay there, not moving, not sleeping, just there. All that was

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