

# The Free Indie Reader #1

## An Anthology of Short Stories by Indie Authors

Featuring:  
[Lisa Thatcher](#)  
[Paul Samael](#)  
[Carla R. Herrera](#)  
[Giando Sigurani](#)  
[Willie Wit](#)  
[Michael Graeme](#)  
[Judy B.](#)  
[Tom Lichtenberg](#)

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Since the online self-publishing revolution began a few years ago, I've been on the lookout for great indie authors, and my efforts have been rewarded many times over. Most of these discoveries have come from writers who have put their work out there for free. Motivations may vary, but they all share a common underlying impulse to help their stories find an audience. There is an enormous ocean of books out there, and each new one reminds me of a paper boat set out somewhere on a quiet stream full of dreams. Through various mechanisms of publicity, writers and their readers try to help those boats along their way, and I've tried to do my part. I've reviewed and blogged and tweeted and posted within my limited reach to assist these stories in their journeys. Most recently it occurred to me that I could do a little more, by gathering some of my favorites together and publishing an anthology. This collection contains some of my favorite stories by some of my favorite indie authors, and also one by myself. I'm grateful to all of the authors, not only for letting me re-publish their stories here, but also for all the joy they've given me through their wonderful writing.

Tom Lichtenberg

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Lisa Thatcher

***The Previous Owner’s Shopping List***

The dandelion spore of a woman placed a precarious foot to the road, having parked her car and turned toward the bookshop. Inside the shop, a man of considerable girth made his way past War Stories to True Crime, promising today of all days he would answer literature’s call, get his substantial carriage to the smaller aisles and take home a book that nourished his mind. Tonight both people visited the shop impulsively.

There existed between these two readers strange parallels that, despite the overwhelming differences, would bring them together at a crucial moment in time. Something superior to their knowledge and beyond the physical bonded them. The woman walked as if the tilt of the earth could topple her. Clutching at her large prescription-filled handbag, conscious of the elements and their personal vendetta against her, she wondered at the reckless decision made under inspiration in a safer space. Her mapped-out day didn’t allow for this kind of spontaneity, preferring instead to act as a buffer against the regularities of life that could mean the end for a woman this frail. If her body provided no imperviousness against the elements, she had to use her mind to protect herself from them.

She'd assented to this early in life, and the recognition grew into a love affair with the fact. In her mid-twenties, not sure if she'd see thirty, she fancied her sickly remains separated her from the healthy herded masses of ordinary people preoccupied with instant gratification. With no real body to serve, no physical presence to mark her streak on the world, she felt forced to focus on the more delicate things of life. She fancied her immersion in frailty marked her as conscious; even superior. Tonight, uncharacteristically, she'd left her work as a political archivist ten minutes ahead of time, shocking her colleagues into checking the batteries on the hall clock. She'd go to the large bookshop on King Street on the way home, alone.

Now she stood beside her car, parked close to the shop's gaping, inviting front, a gentle thrill moving under her skin; a rare moment when her body spoke to her, from behind its glass; it's usually muffled message clear. She felt the immersed disquiet delight of being in a place usually attended in the day. The leftover from childhood subterranean excitement of doing something you don't have prearranged permission to do. She received an intuition of twisted vastness, connecting her via her mind's electric meandering through her body, with fields of hopeful emptiness. This emanated from the shop, she presumed. It was an aching residual trust that once and for all this place can change you and make you who you want to be.

The shop's awareness of its position in the street, the city, the world and time coupled with its invitation to be a part of its heaving expanse, its excited pant and its theatrical possibilities enticed any regular thinker into its seductive web. The shop not only sold books, but ideas. Ideas challenging enough to be burned, its writers murdered, for salacious content in days gone by. These were rich lives lived and jotted down in row after row of invitation to the alternative. Here it all rested, offered to you and you alone, the thinking writer's soul mate.

This shop, this testament to radicalism, this documenting of anti-establishment prancing through occasion, sold second-hand books. Ideas flowed—no, gushed—out of the busy pens of thinkers not bound by time into its goods. The building stood, magnificent in its dishevelled disdain, caring more for what lay between the covers of its wares than for its own physical presence. It held the books, not vice versa. You had to pay to take them away, out of its great dust-filled belly.

The structurally unsound woman standing in front of the store particularly enjoyed the idea that the shop collected the books for her. She liked to think they were friends, as if the bookshop had personal advice for her. They corresponded via an intuitive undercurrent passing between them; remarkably ensuring what called her next would be available on the shelf that day. The shop, also governed by life sustaining rules, knew her even when her body was elsewhere. It existed for her she believed, the other shoppers being a necessary evil; what it took to run business as business.

This afternoon she appeared, deliciously out of context, arriving at the pivot on which things essential and unseen tilted. Now was the moment of transition between the regular and familiar flow of the daily folk to the brash confidence of the wealthy workers freer to spend on that which they have no time to enjoy. She stood outside, aware she was an intruder because the shop knew her as a weekend visitor, always in daylight, always in sunshine. The store would have her anyway she knew. It would be glad to see a kindred spirit, shuffling its shelves to offer her its latest secrets. She allowed her gaze to settle on the other damp-coated, high-heeled, suited customers; those she knew to be competitors, wrestling for prize places in thin cluttered aisles.

This nervous fish out of water of a woman, felt more at ease with the thriving bodies in her world if they maintained a distance of several feet than pressed up against her; damp upon damp, breath sour effluvium, spoor, hair and cells mingling under microscopes with fragile skin. She ventured inside, tucking her woollens closer around her throat.

Inside, she moved with sureness, as if the building lured her with its confidence, her passive face set with a determined squint at the literature section at the back. Many long coats stood by the magazine rack, expanding into the territory they claimed. Their occupation meant sliding down a further passageway, the aisle where espionage and crime relaxed comfortably up against true war stories. It wasn't her usual aisle, but she remembered it to be broad. Quelling panic, she took a relatively deep breath, as much as she could handle, heard her feet walk toward the gangway, the river of unfamiliar books opening up to her like a grossly enthusiastic virgin.

She silently cursed the suits as she moved past, head held high, unnoticed. They bent over their magazines about money, politics and investment, seemingly oblivious to the momentous expanse of their bodies, preventing innocent needy folk from reaching the literature they craved. The bookshop towered over their perfection, dropping its dust, its ceilings a reaching ogre, its fluorescent lights muted

by the time they landed their electric blue on white skin. The hollow click clack of her shoes echoed out and out from the vinyl floor, as did the sigh of her coat wafting against the immovable mound of magazines, and the slight wheeze in her panicked breath. The strange silences of so many people standing adjacent, sensitive to disturbance, discouraged a request to move aside. The bookshop smelled of mouldy dust, the scent of age that can't be known but is the first thing to hit you in a retirement village, and an end-of-day reapplied male deodorant.

True Crime loomed ahead, making it larger, womb-like, welcoming a fresh new face. She felt a gust of breeze from the open staff door she knew to be at the top of the True Crime aisle, located furthest from the entrance, to entice traffic through the store, she'd always assumed. She shuffled through a strangely clear passageway as circumstance forced her to move that way, feeling obedient, the store laughing at her, knowing what she had to shed to get to her final destination.

Turning the corner, she almost bumped into the large man his open book held close to his face, his concentration endearing, and his fervour obvious. She stood for a moment. His stationary hull-like frame sat bulbous, broad, taking up the bulk of the walkway as if he were being prepared to be tugged out to sea. She found herself staring at the long leather belt, hooked through the eyes on trousers so voluminous, so broad; she wondered momentarily what possible threat could remove them and thus warrant the belt.

Her stare sparked the inevitable glance from him in her direction. A fleeting moment passed between them as each prepared for the conversational imperative faced by those suddenly wanting to be in the same space at the same time in a bookshop with its elegantly fragile silence; the obligation of communication without the preamble of intimacy, or even familiarity. They had nothing to share but the space.

Turning her gaze to focus on the floor she worked through her options, words neither dismissive of her intrusion, nor neglectful of her right to be there. She noticed his shoes shuffle toward a long row of encyclopaedic war novels, accompanied by a murmur of apology.

Relieved of the burden of directing their connection, she glanced up, flushed, and smiled at him: a smile containing the warmth of gratitude, without any hint of seduction. He caught her eye. She blushed again, and looked away as she moved into the space. A casual "thanks" had been on her lips, but became lost as she blew past him, her eye set against picture after picture of dishevelled mug shots on the covers of the books of True Crime. She drifted by without incident, leaving him to his books and her without further challenge on her journey to literature.

The literature section opened up toward her slowly, her feet echoing out into the silent store. Having explored the first few alphabetised shelves, she'd abandoned her previous hunt at the start of D, and it was here she chose to move forward. Here, where writers at their most dangerous lay packed back to back on thin dusty shelves, books sat in anthills scattered through the aisle, boxes of them forming a semi-solid base, while shuffled-through and rejected others, babbled their ideas up precarious towers ready to tumble if a mint of a breath brushed against them. Feeling her way, speculatively, through each shelf, she wriggled a small shimmy side to side, thinly avoiding brushing past and potentially toppling any teetering pile making its way to god.

The frail woman in a bubble felt her way through the titles, choosing to remove only those with a Kandinsky corresponding vibration in her soul. This book, this next that she'd read, needed to find her through the vibrations of energy, have the recondite ability to reach her without using the senses she didn't trust. The bookshop rained its dust, and she inhaled it, filling her wheezing lungs with fine particles, the smell of old leather, the dirty taste of the air, the high blue descending hum of the lights and the funereal silence challenging her, combining forces to prevent her feeling that still small touch as it tapped against her spine.

As she passed her dowser's fingers over the books, she felt for the subsonic disquiet she expected. She received it from a Marguerite Duras book, *Blue Eyes, Black Hair*; having never doubted the bookshop's message before she saw no reason to start, so she tugged at the book wedged between

various copies of *The Lover* and *Summer Rain*, slipping it off the shelf. She looked at the gentle pink of the cover, the thinness of the book, turned it to read the blurb and at that point decided the shop was again to be congratulated on its latest gift to her. So seduced was she by the prospect of starting a journey through Marguerite Duras that she ignored her own convention and reached out for *Summer Rain* as well, the intention to buy two contributing to the evening's madness.

This move, this one diminutive action that should have been uneventful, carried the weight of the penalty of recklessness. This sickly woman, a woman out alone in her freedom, this woman caged by conformity is thought to be free and therefore in tune with the finer things of life. The bookshop, always masked as friend, turned on her and her flouting of her own structure; that which was proven to be so should never have been ignored in favour of a supercilious haste.

It was *Summer Rain* that held the list and it fell out of the book, its feathered floating taking it to the floor, a side to side dance blurring the ink that sat on the paper, face up showing it to be a list. It pirouetted twice as it fell, smooth, a small kite with no string, no structure and no owner. It seemed to fall, the surprised weak woman thought, almost out of time, taking twice as long as one would expect to reach the dusty vinyl floor.

The Previous Owner's Shopping List, its stark purple ink glaring tattooed in single words down the page, lay graceless now that it stared at her from the floor. The woman who was not supposed to be there stared at it for a weightless moment, unsure of its origins, suspended in the dangling instant it took to recognise it as part of the book she held. Driven by nonsensical politesse, she bent to replace the list, as if its position were not equally the floor as between the covers of a book no longer owned by the list's maker.

As she bent toward what she recognised must be an inventory, script came into focus, letters made their way into words and the list broke into her consciousness revealing not just what it appeared to be but what it actually was. This list contained several items, seven to be exact, that were identical to a shopping list she had written only the day before. Leaving the list in its freshly made imprint against the dust on the floor, she brought her large prescription-filled handbag over it, and rummaged through, knowing in that unfathomable place where useless etching of trivial histories are stored, that she still had the list from yesterday. Her spindle fingers found it, lifting it so as not to tear it from her bag, flashes of green ink confirming it to be the list she sought.

Dumping her bag next to a teetering tower of books, she picked up the Previous Owner's Shopping List, and compared the two.

Toothpaste  
Ventolin  
Beige stockings  
Comb  
Mouthwash  
Fendi  
Valerian

Alert, composed, acutely aware, thin, without pre-plan or structure, in the wrong place at the wrong time, the completely sick woman stood holding each list at arm's length, her weak knees slowly supporting her centimetre by centimetre rise, her neurons working overtime to search cellularly for logic or sagacity in her body, or this structure, this reckless bookshop where anything could happen, providing no safe haven when anything did.

Even her mind let her down, its best offerings being the easily dismissed probability of television shows like *Candid Camera* or *Twilight Zone*. Her calculating neural pathways began the arduous organisation of figures, computing the unlikely chances associated with each list existing, and the least likely scenario of them meeting in a place soon after she wrote her list which would be torn and discarded in the next few days.

Her mind, upon which all her faculties hitherto relied, raced down a road less travelled. It was

the presence of Ventolin, Fendi and Valerian, marked of no consequence on her own list, a simple errand to the chemist, which pulsed with what she wanted most to avoid. These told her another woman, a woman who smelled of Fendi—the only scent to which she was not allergic—who had respiratory problems so common she took Ventolin regularly, had trouble sleeping and so consumed Valerian, no doubt according to the packet’s strictest instructions. Worse than this, this doppelgänger had read Marguerite Duras before her, and seemed to be living her life, a few years ahead.

It was now that her body positively kicked in, and started to send messages clear as day. A thin sheen of sweat, never felt before, broke out over her all at once; a shake started at a fault line in her belly but shocked through her joints causing the papers she held to quiver; heart palpitations, sending her blood thudding through her veins; her mouth dry as a camel’s; a numbness spreading its way through her hands and feet as though all feeling, sensory opportunity, were closing itself off to her.

She stood, face to face with the overwhelming fact that her illness did not make her unique; it had no bearing on her at all; it made nothing about her special. The list in all its simplicity told her she was not out of the ordinary and the illnesses, many and varied though they had been in her life, were not indicative of something else and did not mean she had been singled out for anything.

Standing in shock, the Previous Owner’s Shopping List in her hand, she disappeared into eternity, seeing herself as a speck of meaningless dust, amid the millions of dust particles in the store, floating, inhalable, a place to make an imprint and nothing more.

She was so taken by the enormity of her moment that when the large man blocked the walkway in front of her, she barely noticed. When he moved toward her, brushing past three towers of books that tumbled in response to his girth, she didn’t move. When he begged his “excuse me” with the intention of moving past her, she didn’t respond. She stared, mesmerised by the identical shopping lists and the weight of all they contained.

She saw him in her peripheral vision make his way into her space, but she remained stoically unprepared with no structure to cope with what the world now offered her. She felt him, his firm jelly belly, pushing her back toward the bookcase, now her enemy, as she fell. Her bag splayed out, its contents spilling as the new body pushed her small thin frail one onto a large long waiting nail, sticking out of the old bookcase. She felt it enter her in the back, piercing her coat, her shirt and her skin instantly. He turned, a worried look on his face, not realising his bulk pressed harder against her with his turning, forcing her further back and deeper impaled on the nail.

She heard a faint ‘pop’, accepted it and dropped the two shopping lists together. She looked at him, no blush to warm her face, no recognition in her eyes as she felt the store take the last of what she had to give. She slumped but the bookshop held her in place, impaled on a moment in time, a sickly woman of no consequence after all.

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## **Paul Samael**

### ***The King of Infinite Space***

To his relief, the train was nowhere near full. Towards the middle of the carriage, there was a group of four empty seats either side of a table. He chose one of the seats nearest the window, putting his bag down on the seat next to it.

Other people did not always seem to like making long journeys on their own. It was as if they were afraid to be left alone with their thoughts for too long. But not him. What was that quotation from “Hamlet”? It was something about being confined in a nutshell, yet feeling that you had an infinite amount of space at your disposal. Or that was the gist of it, anyway. He could not recall it exactly. But he

had always felt that it summed up his own attitude to being alone with his thoughts.

The journey was supposed to last about an hour and three quarters; a generous expanse of time. He had bought a newspaper and had an interesting book to read. Or maybe he would do some more work on the novel he was writing. Yes, he would start with that.

The guard blew his whistle and a high-pitched bleeping signalled that the train doors were about to close. From further down the carriage, he heard someone panting heavily as they hauled their luggage onto the train. Evidently they had only just managed to board in time. He got out his notebook and pen.

The passenger was now advancing rather clumsily down the aisle in his direction, his suitcase bumping against the arms of the seats. At first, the man seemed to be heading for one of the four empty seats directly across from him. There was more panting and grunting as he lifted the suitcase onto the overhead luggage rack. He turned and was just about to sit down when a look of sudden recognition crossed his features:

“Excuse me,” he said, “but are you Peter Cranston?”

“Er, yes, I am,” he replied, feeling embarrassed, because he could not place this man who seemed to know his name.

“Long time, no see!” replied the man. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” he said. “Look, I’m really sorry – have we met before?”

The man grinned and ran his hand over his head. “Ah! I probably look a bit different now – got a lot less hair these days. And put on a bit of weight, as the wife keeps reminding me. I’m Tony Goodman – we were at school together, remember?”

Peter did remember him – but they had never had a great deal to do with one another. Tony had been good at sport, but not much else. The longest conversation he could remember having with him had been in the school library, where Tony was – uncharacteristically for him – trying to do his homework. He had exhaled deeply, shoved his books to one side and said:

“Cranston, how do you get such good marks all the time? I mean, tell me, how do you do it? What’s the secret?”

He remembered being at somewhat of a loss to know what to reply. He had mumbled something about there being no secret, it was mostly hard work.

“Bollocks,” said Tony. “It’s that you’re brainy and I’m not. I don’t know why I bother with all this,” he said, gesturing at his books. “I’m rubbish at it. I’m never going to amount to anything. It’s so unfair, you know, ‘cos there’s nothing I can do about it. It’s alright for you. You don’t know how lucky you are.”

“Mind if I sit down here?” asked Tony, drawing Peter back to the present.

“No, of course not – please do.” Although he was rather dreading the conversation which was bound to follow.

“Thought I wasn’t going to make this train – traffic on the way to the station was terrible. So,” said Tony, spreading his hands wide, “what are you up to these days?”

“Oh, I’m between jobs at the moment,” said Peter, doing his best to sound casual about it. “I’m having a sort of career break, while I think about what to do next.”

Tony nodded understandingly.

“Well, it was obvious to everyone at school that you were always going to be a high flyer. And these days, if you’re not careful, you can burn yourself out by your early thirties – I’ve seen it happen. So if you ask me, it’s sensible to take a bit of time out every once in a while. I’d do it myself if I didn’t think I’d lose all my clients.”

“What is that you do for a living?” asked Peter, anxious to shift the focus away from himself.

“Remember how at school, the only thing I was any good at was sport?” He reached into his pocket and handed Peter a business card which read: “Tony Goodman, Player’s Agent. Licensed by the Football Association of England.”

“Wow,” said Peter, genuinely impressed. “D’you act for any of the big names?”

“Not anyone in the Premier League – mostly I act for players in the Championship and League One. Although a couple of former clients of mine have gone on to play for Premier League sides.” He mentioned a couple of names, but Peter hadn’t heard of them.

Tony shrugged. “Anyway,” he continued, “there’s plenty of action below the Premier League – enough to keep me in business, that’s for sure.”

Peter felt that he ought to take up the slack in the conversation but couldn’t think of anything to say. He didn’t know much about football agents, except that some of them were rumoured to take bribes and backhanders - but that didn’t seem a particularly diplomatic thing to raise at this point.

“You know, it’s funny bumping into you like this,” said Tony. “I bumped into Giles Warren, the other day – remember him? I’d lost touch with him but guess what? He’s managing partner at a firm of lawyers in Guildford. I mean, Giles Warren - who’d have thought it? He was such a joker at school. But in the end, we’ve all done pretty well for ourselves, haven’t we? So tell me, what were you up to before you decided to have this career break?”

Peter explained in a slightly guarded fashion how he had been working at a well known firm of management consultants. This was true, although he omitted to mention that his job there had been a temporary one, largely consisting of editing spreadsheets along with other tasks of similarly mind-numbing tedium. He knew from experience that people tended to assume that he had been doing something rather more high-powered. He also omitted to mention how, prior to that, he had dropped out of medical school, tried but failed to become a TV scriptwriter and then re-trained as a teacher, before realising that it wasn’t for him. After that, he had worked in a succession of temporary office jobs while he attempted to finish a novel. He was now thirty four years old and no nearer being able to say that he had a “career” than when he left school.

“So what’s next?” asked Tony.

“I’m not sure, to be honest. There are a few possibilities I’m mulling over. I’d quite like a complete change of direction.”

“You know, I was always jealous of you at school,” said Tony. “It was because you were so bloody good at everything – well, maybe not sport, but pretty much anything on the academic side. But I can see that it makes things more complicated when it comes to working out what you want to do for a living. I mean, sport was the only thing I was any good at – so that made it a lot simpler for me on the job front. And ‘cos I never expected to amount to much, I’ve always felt a bit surprised at how well things turned out for me.”

Peter nodded. There were suddenly lots of things he wanted to say to Tony.

He wanted to tell him that he was on his way back to his parents’ house, because he could no longer afford the rent on his own flat. They would do their best to hide their disappointment, as they had for many years now, but he knew that they had expected better of him.

He wanted to tell him that school had not prepared him for the real world, where you needed to know what you wanted – and be prepared to focus on it. It was true that he had been good at lots of different subjects, but the world had no use for a jack-of-all-trades; you were much better off if you could find one thing you were really good at and specialise.

He wanted to tell him that he felt as if he had been born at the wrong time and in the wrong place. In the past, possession of a wide range of abilities might have been celebrated as a sign of accomplishment – but now it was more of a liability. It marked him out as a mere dilettante, flitting distractedly from one thing to the next.

And most of all, he wanted to tell him that despite his academic success, he had never been happy at school; that in fact, he had always been jealous of Tony and others like him, who were popular with the other pupils and never seemed to be at a loss for things to say.

But he didn’t say any of those things. There was another awkward silence.

“So, are you married? Got any kids?”

Peter shook his head.



Tony got out his smartphone and showed him pictures of his three children.

"You're very lucky," said Peter, his voice sounding slightly hoarse. He cleared his throat.

"Yeah, I know," said Tony, beaming as he flicked back through the photos.

At this point, Peter excused himself, saying that he needed to go to the toilet. By the time he came back, the train was pulling into the next station.

"You alright, mate?" asked Tony. "You look a bit off colour."

Peter assured him that he was fine.

"Well, here's where I get off," said Tony. "Got to go see a man about a footballer." He held out his hand. "Nice seeing you again though. And good luck with the new career. A man of your many talents is bound to find something sooner or later, eh?"

Peter watched him walk along the platform to the station exit, pulling his suitcase behind him. There was still over an hour of the journey left. He felt relieved that Tony had gone. It meant that he would not have to face any more questions. But he no longer relished the prospect of being left alone with his thoughts for the remainder of the journey.

He thought of the quotation from "Hamlet" again. He must have mis-remembered it somehow. He logged onto the train's wifi so that he could look it up on his smartphone.

It turned out to be largely as he had thought.

But not quite:

Oh God, I could be bounded in a nut shell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

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## **Carla R. Herrera**

### ***Bubble Gum Bicycle Man***

The kids at the park--the little ones--seven and eight year olds--they would run up to him. The old guy riding the adult tricycle with the basket on it.

He looked wrong in our neighborhood. A dirty bearded guy. By dirty, I mean unshaven and ruffled. He had shaggy salt and pepper brows, in addition to the beard, it made him look as if he had just come from a hidden mountain cave. His wrinkled clothing appeared to hang from him, as if too large for his frame. He was thin too, skinny enough to make us all wonder if he was this side of starvation.

The kids didn't care though. Someone would see him riding by the park and the shout would go out.

"Hey, it's the Bubble Gum Man!" Then the call would be put out through the whole area. Kids would run over each other to get to the curb before he passed, so they could get a good look and a piece of Bazooka Gum with the Bazooka Joe comics inside. He had done this for years. When I was ten, I was one of the kids running as fast as my legs would carry me across the park, just to get a piece of gum before he ran out. It wasn't just the gum I wanted.

Like all kids at that age, we have the desire to be scared and safe at the same time. The Bubble Gum Man provided that kind of entertainment. We had all heard stories about him. Some said he really did live in some cave on Mount Baldy and came down once a week, just to lure some lone child back to

that cave. There, like Odysseus's Polyphemus, he would eventually cook and eat the child. bones would be strewn across the cave floor.

Countless teenage expeditions hunted for the cave and never did find it, but that didn't stop the story. In fact, with each generation the tale grew longer and more complicated. At some point, the Bubble Gum Man's childhood was introduced and it was said he was so ugly when he was born that his parents abandoned him on that mountain and he survived only because a mama bear happened to run across him and thought he was a baby bear.

But at fifteen, I no longer believed those old stories. I thought he was some old pervert that rode by the park on his bicycle hoping to find a lone child. That's why he never failed to have bubble gum on him. Though he had never done anything to any of us, that's what most of the kids my age thought. We believed that version of the story enough to keep an eye on the younger ones, from a distance.

"There's that old perv again," said Raley, my best friend Kyle's girlfriend. Though she wasn't my girlfriend, I went out of my way to impress her. Like other boys my age, I hung on nearly every word.

"Yeah," I said, watching the crowd that gathered across the park. "That's why I watch when my little brother runs over. Scared that old perv might do something."

If I was completely honest, I couldn't think of one child who went missing from our area. Though there were plenty of missing kids on milk cartons, they were always from somewhere else. If anyone had taken time to look at statistics, we would have seen our area was safe; not beset with missing children, you would think came from having a child predator who lived in a mountain cave nearby.

Toward the end of the summer of my fifteenth year, life was good. Thoughts of the Bubble Gum Man didn't cross my mind. My friends and I ran like packs through the park, on dark nights, playing spotlight, where we carried flashlights to tag our rivals.

We swam, took our turns at tentative and fragile romances, dreamed of a bright future and shared our hopes about escaping to the city one day. Though the small hamlet of Clearlake Highlands had a crime rate nearing one percent and offered nearly everything a person could need for a good life, we thought of having much larger lives than our parents. We hoped for more and wanted everything.

One night after a game of Spot, Kyle, Raley, a few other kids and I lay on the warm sand, soaking up moonlight, listening to the music drifting over from the nearby bar. We spoke in low tones, about graduating, leaving the Highlands, what we wanted to do with the dwindling days of summer. A perfect night by all accounts until one of the other kids spotted the one person no one wanted to see.

"Hey, isn't that the Bubble Gum Man over there?"

All heads turned to look at the freckle-faced girl pointing to a lonely stretch of beach. We sat up, curious, looking intently, for that familiar and strange figure. Even in the dim light, I knew from the bearded profile, the rumpled clothing and hunched shoulders, it was him, absent the bicycle. It appeared as if he had found something interesting in one of the garbage cans. Though no one had ever seen him going through trash before, the behavior fit with the countless stories we had heard about him over the years.

"I think he's dumpster diving," said Kyle.

Raley elbowed him and smiled. "That's not a dumpster, Dummy.

It's a trash can."

Kyle shrugged, glanced back at the man. "Same thing. Ugh. The guy is so gross. I wish he'd just leave."

"How 'bout we tell him to leave," said one of the other boys. I didn't know him well. Kyle had introduced him as one of Raley's cousins, visiting from the city.

"He's not bothering anyone," said freckle-face, an expression of calm marking her features. Sitting there, in her turquoise patterned summer dress, she looked even more beautiful than Raley. I smiled at her.

"That's true," I said, agreeing, trying to impress again. "He's not bothering anyone. Just leave him alone."

"He's bothering me," said the cousin, standing now, with hands on his hips. "I see enough of this in the city, don't want to see it while I'm on vacation."

The boy was large. He looked big enough to be on the high school football team, which is something most of the crowd I hung around with didn't know anything about. We were the nerdy adventurous types. We did our work through the year, got good grades, worked on the year book, took journalism or photography classes and wished for adventure. We read National Geographic and Smithsonian.

He began striding down the beach toward the hunched figure, the rest of us rising from the sand like rabbits tentatively poking noses from burrows. A common element of fear and surprise ran through us. I felt it, glancing around at the faces of those around me.

"What's he gonna do?" asked Freckle-face. That same fear I felt, sounding in her voice.

Without realizing it, I had begun moving, following in the cousin's footsteps. All of us followed, perhaps out of perverse curiosity, to see how this would unfold, but also to stop the boy who would disturb our strange little world with his city ways.

Kyle finally replied. "He's not going to do anything. He just likes to talk big."

I nodded, hoping my friend was right, a tight knot forming in my chest. Wishing I could turn around and run home, tell an adult, or someone who would take responsibility. We stopped far enough away to mark ourselves divorced from the situation, but close enough that we could hear the conversation. The cousin stopped several feet from the Bubble Gum Man. "Hey, Old Guy," he called.

The older man, glanced up, his beard seeming much longer than it usually was. He stopped rummaging, looked at the cousin, waiting.

"You shouldn't be on this beach by yourself this late at night. Go on home."

The Bubble Gum Man appeared to consider this for a moment, then turned his attention back to the garbage and continued his hunt for whatever it was he had been looking for. I noticed a small bag held in one withered hand, probably for his nightly cache--whatever that might be.

"Billy!" Raley called out to her cousin, but he didn't seem to hear her. Perhaps he was just ignoring her, we weren't sure.

"Hey Man, I said beat it. You need to leave now, or I'm going to have to escort you off the beach myself." "Billy!" Raley called again, as she began moving closer to the figures. "Come on now. Leave the man alone. Let's go."

The Bubble Gum Man seemed to have found something, pulling it from the trash and dumping it into his sack. I heard the tinny sound of metal striking metal.

"He's collecting cans," I said, to no one in particular.

"That's probably how he pays for the gum," said Freckle-Face, quietly beside me. I glanced over and saw she was watching Billy with a worried expression.

"We can't let him hurt the old guy. My mom said he's retarded."

This was the first time I had heard that part of the story. So in addition to living in a mountain cave, Bubble Gum Man had become a disabled individual. Was he still a pervert? I didn't know. What I did know, was that despite the stories, this man had lived within, but just outside our community for our entire lives. In reality, he had never done anything malicious to any of us. In fact, he had always been a benevolent figure who simultaneously terrified and amazed. We smiled when we thought of him, but shivered in fear when listening to the tales about him, grateful we were the fortunate ones who had not been taken to his cave.

Billy moved in, just as the old guy reached into the trash can again. Time slowed, the rest of the world fell away from our little group and every bit of my attention focused on that hand reaching for the old guy. I knew then, the Bubble Gum Man was harmless, and trying to fit in the best way he knew how. What Billy intended was worse than bullying. By the look on his face, the grim set of his lips, he

wanted to hurt the man.

"Stop it!"

Kyle and I screamed the command in unison. Raley had come up behind her cousin and slapped his hand away. "Stop it right now Billy, or I'm going to tell your mom."

The sound of another can dropped into the sack caused me to glance at the older man. He looked up and met my eye. Nodded. "You a good boy Joe. Tank yoo." He turned and began hobbling up the beach with a slight limp. His voice held that familiar speech pattern of those who were mentally challenged. Freckle-Face's mom was right. I glanced at her and saw she was watching curiously. Glad for the cover of night, I colored and glanced away, but let her know I was paying attention.

"Your mom was right," I said. She nodded, but remained quiet.

Kyle yelled again, breaking into my thoughts. "Stop him!"

Billy had broken away from our group and sprint down the beach after the Bubble Gum Man. Kyle on his heel, me tagging behind. The girls brought up the rear, screaming for Billy to stop. By the light of the moon, we saw Billy reach the figure limping across the sand. He did not stop running though. Instead, he crashed into the man with an elbow jutting into the back of the old man's neck. Both figures crashed to the ground, aluminum cans clattered in the sack flying across the beach. Kyle was there first, pulling on Billy, who seemed bent on pummeling the old man, who now had his hands up to cover his face, shrinking against the beach floor, as if he could somehow become invisible. The sight fueled my own anger and like Kyle, I grabbed at Billy. Anything I could grab was fine with me, as long as I could pull him from the Bubble Gum Man.

The boy's hair locked in my fists, I pulled hard, jerking his head back as Kyle pulled an arm. Raley and Freckle-Face moved past us, a glance in their direction and the girls both told us they were taking care of the old man.

As we pulled him toward the water, Kyle shouted, "Stop fighting," to no avail.

"Screw you guys. I'm gonna kill that guy." There was no doubt in my mind the boy meant what he said. Face contorted by rage, eyes glazed over, he still searched for his prey.

When we reached the water, we glanced at each other and were of the same mind. We pulled him out, Kyle holding one arm, a grip on the back of the boy's neck, me holding the other; every bit of strength I had going into pushing my weight on to his back to hold him down. Billy was large and strong, but working together we managed to keep him under until he stopped struggling. Then we let him go.

Soaked, we moved back on to the beach where the girls comforted the old man. He sat with his sack in his lap, rocking back and forth, emitting a cry that reminded me of a wounded animal, knowing it was about to die.

"It's okay John. It's gonna be okay. We got rid of that guy. He'll never bother you again," soothed Freckle-Face.

After several minutes the old man finally looked up at us standing around him. When younger I had been fascinated with taking in all the details of his dirty beard, the weathered face, the rumpled clothing, but had never looked into the man's eyes before. Like the sound of his cry, this man's eyes were pure soul. The eyes of a child wounded and alone. Years of sorrow dwelt there. I knelt next to him. "No one will ever hurt you again," I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. "I promise." I meant it too.

Raley glanced out at the figure floating back up toward the beach. "I guess he tripped on a rock or something, huh?"

Kyle and I looked at each other and nodded, unsmiling. Today, the kids know the Bubble Gum Man's name is John. He collects aluminum cans to buy bubble gum for anyone who asks for it. That's why most of us save our cans and set them out on the curb for him, when we know he's coming by. No one really knows when the tradition started, or why, but there are still stories about him. Some say he began giving out bubble gum when he just happened to have an extra piece, and handed it to a child.

When he saw the smile lighting up that kid's face, the tradition was born.

## ***Freedom***

The screen blinked twice and Ally's lips moved, but no sound issued forth. The children on the screen, stood with hands placed over their hearts. "I pledge allegiance..."

Afterward, she hurried into the bedroom and lifted the side of the mattress. Hurry, hurry, she thought.

They would be coming. She had made a mistake during last assembly and read aloud.

Hurry, hurry.

She pulled the long white roll from the space between the mattress and box spring and began unfurling it. Then began wrapping it around her body. Voices in the hallway. Hurry. Wrapping, round and round.

She laughed when she heard the knock. She had anticipated this. Growing more anxious she stepped to the bedroom window and looked down, then placed the edge of the wrap against the inner sill, clamping the metal rod into place.

Another series of rapping, "Ally Benton! Come to the door. We know you're in there."

This time she laughed loud, "Fuck you!" she screamed and stepped out.

As she fell, she looked at the building opposite and could see her small body, falling, falling on the screen. Someone down there was videotaping. Round and round she went, unfurling and smiling.

"Haha!" She screamed when she saw the letters revealed. That would teach them.

Then she hit the pavement.

Jacob Hinter still videotaping and walking around the scene, got it from each angle. This was the second jumper in a week. Crazy days we live in, he thought.

He panned upward at the banner. There were several symbols. F-R-E-E-D-O-M. He had no idea what they meant.

## ***Stairs***

Eyes wide from fear, Veronica pulled the car to the side of a red brick wall and curbed it. She let it idle, keeping her foot on the brake as she looked at the time on the cell phone screen. Four p.m. The girl was supposed to be picked up at three.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the rear view mirror and winced. She looked frightened, pale and thin. She took a breath and looked away from her reflection to the road.

Worse than late, she had no idea where the school was located. One school was across town, but she didn't think it was the right one. She could not remember seeing children playing in the area. She pulled away from the curb speeding toward the only school she knew and wishing she had taken more information down.

Emily, the social worker had said it was a Lindsey School. Not that that meant anything to her. She would not know a Lindsey School from any other school.

She pulled into the parking lot. A few people milled about, coming and going, but they were adults. She hoped it was because the kids had been let out. Maybe the girl was inside waiting for her.

Inside, turquoise walls bordered in white were adorned with large, elegant splashes of color on canvas. Though it had been several years since she had been inside an elementary school, this did not look like any she had ever seen.

A short, but rotund woman behind the counter and glass window, greeted her smiling. "Hi there.

What can I get you for?" The woman rose from her seat with some effort and moved to the window, sliding it open.

She returned the smile, but already her hand-wringing had started. What could she say? Her stomach threatened to heave its contents and she saw the woman glance at her hands. Another smile.

"I'm looking for my daughter," she started.

The woman moved to a door separating them and stepped out, one hand on her left hip. She looked Veronica up and down, grinned sideways as if she found something amusing about her appearance. "Follow me," she said, moving down a narrow hallway.

The floor was shiny red, walls covered with what appeared to be weaved fabric. Again, she thought this did not look like any elementary school she had ever seen.

At the end of the hall, they moved through a door into an open area, an exact duplicate of the office they had just left. A middle-aged woman with dirty blonde hair stood directing a couple of teen boys to move things around. She glanced toward the two women as they entered and nodded at her co-worker, grinned at Veronica.

Veronica glanced at the woman beside her, but she was already moving back through the door. "She'll help you," she said indicating her co-worker and disappeared behind the door.

Suddenly a package was thrust into her hands. She held a large bag of hamburger buns. The blonde woman holding another bag motioned her to follow. "We're having a picnic tomorrow at the park, so we're getting everything loaded tonight. Really appreciate your help."

Another parking lot sat out front and they moved off the sidewalk, across the asphalt, toward a moving truck with two men standing at the rear. "I just need to find my daughter," she said following the woman. "I'm late. Was supposed to pick her up at three."

The woman stopped and turned to her smirking, "Give that to one of the guys, then you can follow me."

She sighed thankfully and handed the buns over to one of the men and followed the woman back to the office, falling in step beside her. "Do you know where she is?"

The woman glanced at her and pulled the door open. She pointed to an area where several old air coolers sat rusting on the ground. "Can you lift? We need some help moving those..."

Veronica felt her face grow warm. She grabbed the door handle, pulled it open, tearing it from the woman's hand. "Can you help me find my daughter or not?" Frustration sounded and she willed herself not to start crying.

The woman stood back, placed one hand on her hip and rolled her eyes. "I don't think so. Not with that attitude!"

Veronica wanted to strike the smug face. She imagined grabbing the woman by the hair, slamming it into the concrete floor. She turned and walked quickly away. Swearing under her breath as she looked at the time on the phone again, she hurried. She had wasted thirty minutes here and cursed herself for not calling Emily to begin with. She had not wanted to appear in need of help. If she called, maybe the social worker would think she was too stupid to raise a child.

The responsibility felt like too much. The girl was like a weight around her neck, dragging her under. She looked across the parking lot trying to spot the car, realizing she was on the wrong side of the building.

Moving down the sidewalk, she came to a set of concrete stairs. Ascending them, she was suddenly overcome with fatigue and sat down, broke into long sobs of frustration. The thought of the girl waiting for her moved her once again, but she felt herself sinking, drowning. The stairs seemed too tall, had grown too steep.

Still seated, she turned and attempted to crawl up the next step still sobbing. A young man approached and stopped not far from her. He fumbled with his car keys, looking uncomfortable. He was small and thin, a shock of dark hair tumbled from his head. A binder stuck from under one arm as he wrung his hands, played with the keys.

Then he moved again into the parking lot to a small turquoise car. He opened the driver's side door, hesitated still eyeing her. "You'll make it," he said, "just keep moving." Then the door slammed and he was pulling from the space.

She continued to stare at the empty space and a strange thought worked through her.

What if? What if she was someone else for awhile, she wondered. What if she had grown up in the perfect family and had none of the problems that plagued her life? What if she could do everything other people who grew up like that did?

She stood, looking around attempting to get some idea of where she was. Why was she wasting time like this? She was not weak or stupid. She looked at the phone again, opened it and hit the code for Emily's phone.

"Hello?" from the other end. A small woman's voice. A kind voice.

"Emily, I'm in trouble. I've made a huge mistake and need your help."

## ***Tesla's Secret: Part One***

1985 article.

Siloam Springs, AR-- Interesting discovery in historic building attributed to Nikola Tesla

After the purchase of a historic monument and hotel, local developer, Moroni Cally began exploring the basement and found, to his surprise, a strange looking mechanical contraption that appeared dated.

"The previous owners said they rarely went into the basement and when they did it was only during tornado warnings," he said. "They never mentioned this machine--or whatever it is."

After some research, a local reporter found that the dating of the machine corresponds to a lengthy stay at the hotel by Nikola Tesla, a Serbian-American inventor.

"Sometime in 1893, Tesla had come into the area and found the place to his liking and decided to stay for awhile. Unfortunately, it was to the detriment of the hotel owners as he was a very demanding guest according to the notes found in the (previous) owner's journals and reports in a small local newspaper called the Sun."

A collector of Tesla objects and artifacts, Chin Trine, examined the machine and reported that though it probably could be attributed to Tesla, the machine was unlike any of the inventor's other contraptions, which generally had to do with energy production.

He also offered to purchase the machine from the new owner. Currently, the machine remains in the basement of the hotel. The owner has no intention of selling, but has said that anyone who would like to examine it, may do so by appointment.

Since the 1985 discovery, the mystery machine fell into obscurity with the hotel changing hands three more times. The machine has remained where it was initially found, probably because the thing looked so forbidding. I happened to find out about it, because one of the hotel owners, a regular at the corner coffee shop, overheard me mention a story about Nikola Tesla.

A conversation ensued and from that, an invitation to view the machine.

Gloria and I arrived at the hotel around noon, on a sunny Wednesday afternoon. The owner of the hotel (preferring to remain nameless) escorted us to the basement, but asked us not to take photos. Thankfully Gloria brought her Iphone and managed to sneak a couple of shots.

"I have no idea how the contraption works," said the woman. "There is no electricity down

here.”

I moved closer to a console which looked to me, like something out of a 1950s science fiction movie. Glancing across it, I noticed several buttons, but no visible cords or wires. Given the absence of power, I did not see how the thing could work. A large red button, sitting at the end of the panel seemed to call to me. Not sure why I did it, but I pressed the darn thing.

A whirring sound, from somewhere in the guts of the beast sounded loudly. Gloria backed away toward the basement door.

"Mom! What did you do?" she yelled over the cacophony of sound that ensued. The owner of the hotel bolted out the door, shoving Gloria aside, nearly knocking her over.

I stood looking at the thing and wondering what just happened. The whirring, was now eclipsed by a loud hum and vibration directly under our feet. "What is that?" I asked.

Gloria and I exchanged a look. "Mom, lets get outta here." She motioned for me to come with her, but I could not move. I had to know what the inventor had done.

My father had begun telling me about Nikola Tesla when I was but a pup. If this truly was his work, it could mean something crazy wonderful for the world. A new technology never before tapped.

Though he was not in the soundest of minds, especially during his later years, I wondered about many of the projects he had worked on. Most specifically the material and equipment the government confiscated after his death. *Could this be something he had tried to hide?*

I glanced back at Gloria and shook my head. "I've gotta know Honey. You go." I waved her away. "I have to know..."

She must have thought I had gone insane. The conflict showed on her face. Something between shock and curiosity was quickly replaced by anger. "Are you nuts? This thing is doing something--"

She was cut off by a sudden wind that blew through the room, hitting me full in the face. I went to my knees, smelling and tasting metal.

"Mom!" Gloria, her voice shrill and down on the ground, pointed to the wall behind the console. I peeked around the console and saw that part of the structure fading in and out. It was there, then it wasn't. Replacing it was a large, dark hole.

My immediate thought was that Tesla, in all his wisdom had created a black hole. *Could he have?* I felt sick with the thought, but knew I had to get out of there quick.

The wind stopped. The room grew silent but for our heavy breathing and the whirring of the console in front of me. I looked back at my daughter standing again near the entrance, clutching the door frame, as if afraid she would blow away.

I held up a hand to indicate I needed her to wait a moment. Obviously the thing had stopped working for some reason. But then a motion in the hole caught my attention and I panicked. I meant to hit the red button again to shut off the machine, but instead hit a white button next to it. Suddenly, the hole lit up and I saw it was not a hole at all, but a tunnel.

Behind me, I heard Gloria's exclamation. "My God! What is it?"

Moving to the other side of the room, afraid to get too close, I needed to get a better look. There was no 'light' at the end of the structure. In fact, it appeared to be a replica of one of those carnival fun house tunnels, with light panels imbed into the side. It also appeared to rotate.

"Hello!" a weak voice called from the tunnel.

"What the--" Gloria appeared even more startled than before. Her eyes grew wide as we both saw a tall figure emerge.

As we stood there, rooted to our respective spots, the late, great Nikola Tesla stepped from the tunnel. I recognized him only from his height and stark features. The man was hardly the fastidiously dressed individual I had read so much about. Neither was he the aged Tesla I would expect to see. But a younger, less vibrant specimen of what Tesla had been.

His tattered suit, an old standby of mid-nineteenth century business men, was not only worn,



but ragged. Pieces had been ripped from the gray fabric and large tears showed in the legs. Threads had come apart at the seams. He appeared to be nearly bald, but I noticed clumps of hair had been taken from his head. As if, like the fabric, something had ripped it away.

Despite his slouching posture, he stood over six feet. His thin neck craned forward, bird-like, looking at us from eyes gray with age. Though younger, there were 'aged' traits to his appearance. He limped and I thought for some reason, this to be a result of the process that had brought him here.

Standing just outside the tunnel, he did not move forward. "Who are you?" he snapped.

Gloria had let go of the door frame. "Is that T-T-Tesla?"

I glanced back at her and nodded. "I don't think it's really him though. It's some kind of hologram or advanced imaging." I shook my head, disbelieving. "How could he have done this back then?"

"Of course it's me!" The Tesla image responded looking directly at me. "And you have used my Resurrector to bring me back. What is it you want?"

"Resurrector?" Gloria wondered, stepping closer behind me.

The man swiped the air in front of him, as if swatting a fly. "Yes. I have created a device that can tap the ether and bring back the consciousness of those who have passed over. Unfortunately, is-- ggg-- not a-gugugu-- per--gugu--fect process. gugu-- problems." A gurgling began to sound in his voice.

A resurrector that could bring back the consciousness of the dead. What did that mean? "What kind of problems?" I asked.

He glanced down at himself and spread his hands, which appeared to be withering in front of us. Flakes of skin rose like dust and floated away. "We gugu--an still feel our bodies, despite the fa--gugu that we have been dis--gugu--orporated. And the body that I'm in is ban--gugu--rupt. I am fading."

He paused as if exhausted, then looked back up at us and smiled sadly, shaking his head. "I am a failure eh?"

"No sir!" I said. "You are a legend Mister Tesla. Everyone knows who you are, as they did when you were alive. But today people see that some of the things you spoke of like the wireless technology... well, it has come true."

His smile grew wider at that, then his glance fell on the console in front of me. "I gugu--annot move gugu--loser, or the effects of the tunnel will dissipate. I will be blown to bits." He gestured to the console. "You see the bla-- gugu-- nobs with numbers? There are green and red lights over them..."

I nodded. He swatted at the air again and I wondered what it was he saw that I couldn't. The thought caused me to pause and I hoped I would never find out.

"Turn those nobs to increase the amount of energy needed to amplify the effe--gugu--ts of the tunnel. Turn the bottom nob to six."

I reached over and noticed this was the highest setting. "What will this do?" I asked, hesitant.

"Woman!" He snapped at me, swatting the air once more. "It will gugu--eep me from falling to pieces. Please..."

I turned the nob and noticed an immediate rise in sound of the whirring from the console. The man in front of us changed. He stood straighter, tattered clothing repaired and he took a breath.

"That's better. Now," he gestured to the console once again. "to call back someone specifically you must have a photo of that individual and use the thought connector." He waved toward an area of the basement that was unlit. "You will place it on your head and use the photograph for visualization."

Gloria stepped next to me now. "You mean we can call anyone we want?"

He nodded. "Yes. You must have a clear image of an individual in your mind, or you will get me again."

"Kind of like a default consciousness," said Gloria, beside me now.

Tesla nodded, his head full of jet black hair now. "The consciousness you call last is stored in the machine. If you have no other individual, you will get that consciousness."

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