

The background of the cover is a close-up photograph of a forest floor. It is densely covered with dry, brown pine needles. In the center-right of the image, there is a large, dark, mottled leaf, possibly a maple leaf, with shades of deep red, purple, and black. The leaf's veins are clearly visible. The overall lighting is natural, suggesting an outdoor setting.

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“Parting thoughts...”

I’ve been noodling about a piece I’m writing on the end of the world. Perhaps this is because it’s been so *en vogue* to speculate about the demise of the species that it’s gone full *passe*, or that I want to create the perfect dystopia (because who doesn’t?), or that it is just to have fun shooting at lots of bad stuff, like a state fair water-balloon pop, while remaining politically correct - blaze away at zombies all you want, buddy!

I intended to get in my two cents about the world’s swan song before no one cares, but I’ve failed to find traction on or attraction with any bits that had the full complement of truth, whimsy and pathos. In other words, it is not easy being teasy, cheesy and queasy. Maybe no one cares anymore. They’re all exhausted with the current reality, which is pretty damned tiring. How often can you be on fire before there is no fuel to burn?

And it’s not because I don’t care that the world ends. Or that I’m not interested in the details of how our human era of the world wraps itself up. I do and am, inasmuch as such thoughts are integral to the theme of my WIP, and development of the story requires me to come up with an avenue for the possibility of survival, even temporarily. And I have time for such mawkish speculation. Are we doomed? Of course – eventually the atomic pile we call our Sun will come apart at the seams. That’s a billion years down the road, mind, and not a front-burner issue (no pun intended). More to the point, what can we do to prevent our doom? Regarding the Sun’s end, not very much. Seed the galaxy with our progeny? Common Sci-Fi stuff. Wrestle with God and philosophy and find peace with group-demise? Sure, sure, as my friend John sometimes dismisses the obvious. But one observation keeps popping up in my notes, and plays havoc with my plot arc: can we stop the battle between fools and the less foolish? I don’t think we can.

Do you walk around the house barefoot? Of course you do. Why? Because it’s your home, and you imagine that you’ve earned the right to not be encumbered by footwear. Do you ever stub your toe? Of course you do. Do you rage at the gods when it happens as the exquisite pain radiates up your leg to your brain, and toss tomorrow right down the toilet with regards to happy lack of ache in the extremities? You do, admit it. My point (and the larger point about humanity and its choices) is that you can sometimes prevent calamity, but you choose not to. Or, rather, you choose a different path – one that you walk with no protection for your delicate second toe, the

one with no apparent purpose other than finding blunt objects first, and colliding with them. Final question: has this happened more than once – your barefoot dashing of a toe on a chair leg or door left ajar? Really? I'm not judging, just observing.

It intrigues me how different times (and moods) create fresh popular perspectives on the world's end. Viruses – man-made, cosmic, accidentally or intentionally released – were fictional fodder in the nineteen-sixties and -seventies. Zombies, too, found their way into our consciousness around the same time. The ideas nestled into our memory-banks and found root. Each generation of creative types relaunched the sub-genre and we giggled and screamed and clutched our throats anew.

Then reality stepped in, and here we are, wondering *what will happen next?*

My youngest and I were sitting on the porch not so long ago, and she asked me 'what if there were a zombie apocalypse?' I tried to explain without going into much serious detail what I considered possible about such a turn of events.

Selfishly, but only occasionally, I imagine myself in my semi-quiet little corner of the world as it implodes, burns, floats, freezes, chews itself up, spits out the remainder and we happy few still around deal with the too hot, too cold, too dry, too wet, too dead, too undead pieces? Drinking coffee as everything unfolds. And for what it's worth, why are all of the pop apocalypse entries of the last few years so selfish-minded? Do people really want to believe that the world is collapsing under the burden of human misbehavior, and if so, they can actually prepare for or survive it? Or that they can spend their treasure putting together a fool-proof alternative to joining the rest of us in the never-never?

You're right. Please. Enough questions.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

bowling every Saturday night

“An Expat Goes Home”

by Victor Pogostin

Ed. Note: What you are about to read is an excerpt from Russian Roulette, a collection of stories by Dr. Pogostin and recently launched by our book-publishing arm Blotter Books. Enjoy!

At dawn one day in late November, I was awakened by a call. It was my niece, sobbing: “Uncle Vic... Papa died.”

My elder brother Vladimir had died in the subway on the way to work. A Moscow policeman found his cell phone on him and dialed the first number listed in the contacts. An hour later, an email from the Research Institute, where my brother worked his entire professional life, confirmed his death.

Visiting one’s home country after a long absence (I left in 1993) might seem like a thrill but be careful what you wish for. Changes can leave you with a sickening nostalgia for lost memories, while making places and events from one’s past, once so dear, seem like nothing but hallucinations.

I found that not only had the street names changed, but once sullen, Soviet display windows now challenge shoppers with the glitter of Channel, Armani, Gucci, and the like. And the places that I cherished: the curved side alleys, the inner yards where I grew up playing with friends who are no

longer there – those are the changes that hurt the most.

And while change may be a popular word in Moscow; alas, some things never change.

To go to Moscow, I had to get a visa. The email from my brother’s place of work produced no effect in the Russian Consulate. “Anyone could have sent this message,” said a consulate official who avoided looking me in the face, trying to hide the odor of alcohol on his morning-breath: “A formal telegram is required.”

From time immemorial, only the Central Telegraph Office in Moscow had dispatched formal telegrams of this sort. And for that, a sender had to produce an official death certificate.

The next day was Saturday, and the registry office was not issuing certificates.

My brother’s friends’ so called “donation” helped to change circumstances, and the telegram was sent; yet it reached Toronto only after my return from Russia.

Lo and behold, four days later I landed in Moscow. A friend offered to meet me at the Sheremetyevo airport. It had been twelve years since we had seen each other, and it was not the changes in his looks that struck me. He had been a devout communist in the Soviet days, now he crossed himself every time we

passed a church.

That November, Moscow was bitterly cold. With the wind blowing tiny icicles at my face, my first nostalgic night-stroll ended quickly in the Okhotny Ryad, a new, upscale underground trade center built beneath Manege Square, which separates Tverskaya Street from the Kremlin. I found a coffee house on the main floor, alongside a cozy fountain and a white grand piano. A shop sign invitingly promised, “What else if not a cup of fragrant espresso or delicate cappuccino to cheer you up!”

True, my espresso came, steaming and aromatic, in a fine china cup. And so, I thought, recalling how ten years before getting a cup of coffee in Moscow was not so easy, that some things had changed for the better. Later, already in bed, I watched one of the many propaganda TV talk shows filled with commercials. One in particular caught my attention. It was about “the superior service and caring staff of the Moscow funeral services.” Well... I thought falling asleep that at least my brother would be laid to rest with dignity.

The following morning was even colder and snowier than the night before. An old Camry borrowed from a friend, straining and grumbling through the drifts, finally broke through the traffic jam-

ups to reach the hospital gate. The barrier at the gate was closed. The guard did not even look at me. “No cars allowed... 100 rubles,” he muttered in one breath. Tariff announced, I handed two dollars through the window and the barrier opened.

The hospital morgue was squeezed into a small, one-story, grey brick building with no room, not even a washroom, for the waiting relatives and friends.

Four funeral buses were waiting, engines running. Our bus was third in line. In the bus, the heater worked only in the driver’s cabin, and my Camry was the only refuge from the cold for a dozen friends who had come to say farewell.

The wait stretched to over an hour, and we all needed a restroom. Next to the morgue was a dilapidated, green-planked wooden structure. I peeped through the frost-covered window, spotted a human silhouette inside and knocked. A tiny vent window opened, and a young woman looked back at me quizzically.

“Excuse me, is this part of the morgue?” I asked.

“Hell no. It’s a laboratory”

“Do you have a restroom?”

“Yes, but only for staff.”

I squeezed two dollars in the narrow opening.

“Okay but make it quick and your party only.”

I signaled to our small group, and one by one we surreptitiously sneaked in and out.

Soon it was our turn in the morgue. A large, red-faced man, wearing a shabby jacket over a

soiled green gown, appeared on the morgue porch holding a coffin lid.

“Who’ll carry the coffin?” he demanded.

“They are looking for ‘a little extra,’” my brother’s friend whispered in my ear.

I didn’t mind paying extra, but my brother’s friends and I thought we should carry it ourselves.

“We will,” I said.

He shrugged his shoulders, dropped the lid in the snowdrift alongside the porch and gestured us inside, where we found a small room with concrete walls painted green.

After a nearly 90-minute drive, chilled to the bone, we arrived at the crematorium attached to Nikolo-Arkhangelskoye Cemetery. Opened in 1974, it now did seventy cremations per day. We had missed our designated time and were put at the back of the line. Fast learner that I am, this time I quickly found the ritual administrator and, thanks to a hefty ‘extra,’ the waiting line shortened. However, the time for eulogies had to be cut from the designated fifteen minutes to ten.

Following a colleague from the research institute, where my brother worked, and one of my brother’s closest friends, it was my turn to say a few words. Suddenly, a sad-looking figure of an Orthodox priest clad in a worn-out robe squeezed his way through the thick crowd and placed an icon at my brother’s feet.

“Wait,” I said, trying to stop him. “My brother was not only a

committed atheist, but he was also Jewish.”

My comment ignored, the priest hurriedly muttered the psalm, “Blessed is our Lord God, always now and ever,” sprinkled holy water over the coffin, placed a shroud over my brother’s face, and then left, giving me no time to say a word.

Outside, the steel-gray clouds opened up, and a bright winter sun cast a long shadow: the crematorium chimney over the dazzling white snow.

“No worries,” said my brother’s friend, “we’ll have a memorial at the Institute, and you’ll speak there.”

The memorial stretched out to dusk, and I gladly availed myself of Institute Director’s offer to drive me to Donskoy Monastery Cemetery, where a week later the urn with my brother’s ashes would be placed in the columbarium niche alongside our parents.

The monastery was founded in 1591, during the rule of Boris Godunov, and closed in 1917 after the Bolshevik revolution. The New Donskoy Cemetery was added to the medieval burial grounds and a crematorium opened in 1927. It was closed for burials in 1980 and any new burial in the columbarium required special permission from the Moscow City Council. The deceased had to have a certain rating in the unwritten list of bureaucratic ranks to be granted such permission. My father had passed away in 1981. He had been the chief engineer of a large energy trust and a brief obituary in

The Blotter

Vechernyaya Moskva (Evening Moscow), the official newspaper of the Moscow government, signaled that he should get a family niche.

It was dark when I was dropped off at the cemetery. The narrow door in the pink-hued metal gates was locked. There was no bell, so I pounded on the door hoping to get some attention.

Soon I heard squeaky footsteps on snow and a bearded man, his face half-hidden by a fur hat, peered out through the narrow opening.

“What?” he demanded.

“Can you let me in?”

“Can’t you read?” He pointed to the hours of operation sign hanging outside the door.

I shoved a twenty-dollar bill through the opening and the heavy door opened. Inside it was dark. Only the bleak, steel-grey moon shed a feeble light on the dusting of snow sprinkled atop the monastery walls, spruce trees, tombstones, and the crematorium tower.

“Have a flashlight?” I asked.

He walked on, gesturing for me to follow him to a small wooden lodge.

Once inside, he took off his hat. In the bright light the bearded face looked strangely familiar.

“Hey,” I said. “Do I know you?”

Avoiding looking at me, he reached outside the vent window, grabbed a plastic bag with vodka, filled two not very clean glasses and handed me one.

“Maybe...”

“Jog my memory.”

“First Koptelsky Lane, my

father was the yard-keeper.”

It rang a bell. Our family had lived there for over twenty years, and my brother and I were born there. The yard-keeper was a huge Tatar with a bushy, smoky moustache, and a yellowish, worn-out leather apron.

“Holly Smoke!” I burst out, “Alex?”

We had never been close friends, but he and his Dad had been sort of permanent fixtures in the lives of the inhabitants of the four-building complex where we lived. German architects had designed the building in the 1930s. Architects and engineers from Germany had been invited by Stalin’s regime to help with the industrialization of the country. Residents of our gated community presented a fascinating mixture of high-ranking technocrats, government officials, educators, as well as military and security officers.

I still remember the clanking of the chains at dawn’s first light when Alex’s dad opened the iron gates to let in the Black Raven (a secret police car used to arrest “enemies of the people” during Stalin’s Purges). I was in second grade when the “ravens” stopped coming. Then, on the frosty, sunny, early spring morning of March 5, 1953, I looked out the window to see if my buddies were waiting for me to walk to school and saw two strange looking flags, their rich, red cloth framed by black ribbons.

“Look Mom...,” I called out.

She did and said only one word in reply: “Stalin.”

There were no tears in our family. Yet at our all-boys school classes were cancelled, and all students, from grades one to ten, were lined up in the main hall in front of the huge, full-length portrait of the moustached generalissimo in his high glossy boots. The teachers were crying, some genuinely, others from joy or fear of the unknown times looming.

As for us, first and second graders, we found it hard to stand at attention. We pushed and pinched and giggled. The teachers desperately tried to restrain us. I remember that my elder brother, who was in grade 10 at the time, frowned down at me.

The last time I had seen Alex was many years before. I had run into him on the street. He was only a few weeks out of jail, where he had spent three years for hard currency profiteering.

“Just think! “He gulped his vodka down. “Why are you here?”

“My parents are here, and my brother’s urn will join them next week. You?”

“Business. We are taking it over.”

“We?”

“Trustworthy guys.”

“I see...”

“Like hell you do... Come on, I’ll walk you to your niche.”

Walking through a cemetery at night is no fun, but in this columbarium, there was a sector that always sent the chills up my spine.

In 1930, the city dug up a large pit that was then used as a common grave for some victims of Stalin’s purges. Two more pits

were added later. Over 5000 Muscovites were shot and cremated in Donskoy, their ashes dumped in the pits. In 1989, the Gorbachev Government put up a sign “To the Eternal Memory of the Innocent Victims of Political Repressions.”

While I brushed the snow from the ceramic photos on our family’s niche, Alex waited at a distance, leaving me alone to my memories.

Back in the shed, he handed me another shot.

“Hungry?”

“No. Just cold.”

“Well... I am. Want a steak?”

I looked around – no barbecue. He caught my puzzled look.

“I heard you’d left. Where to?”

“Canada.”

“Man, you lucked out there. Come on.”

He kicked a small electric grill. “Chinese shit... useless. Check out mine!”

He led me to a large mesh grate made from an old metal bed. The corners of the mesh were attached to electrical wires. He winked at me and plugged it in. In a few minutes, the mesh turned gray and then bright purple. The room warmed up. He took a huge steak from a plastic bag hanging outside the window, threw it on a pan, and started cooking on his DIY grill. The room was filled with the aroma of sizzling meat.

“May your brother rest in peace.” He passed me another glass of vodka.

“You still live in our building?”

“Hell no. The city took it over for ‘major repairs’ and kicked all

the residents out to suburbs. They are tougher than us.”

“I’d like to go there”

“Why? No one’s left.”

“David?”

“In Israel.”

“Eugene?”

“In Germany.”

“Yuri?”

“Killed in Chechnya”

“Misha?”

“In the States.”

“Sava?”

“Be damned. He was the one who locked me up. Colonel now.”

We had a few more drinks for the road and he offered to drive me.

“Sure?” I asked pointing to the emptied bottle. “What if the police pull you over?”

“You serious?” He chuckled.

“Don’t fret. We have them covered.”

Many things have changed in Moscow, with its freshly painted and backlit bridges. In May 2016, a huge brawl took place at the Khovansky Cemetery in Moscow, followed by a shootout. It involved between 200 and 400 “trustworthy guys” from rival groups. Several died. This ended the turf war for the Moscow underground funeral services market, which, according to media sources has an annual turnover of between 12 and 14 billion rubles (\$180-210 million).

In addition, starting in the second quarter of 2019, the “GBU Ritual” (government funeral services) intends to demolish all open columbaria walls at Donskoy Cemetery. New walls will be built, where the “Ritual” is going to transfer over 63,000 of the old bur-

ial niches. At the end of this venture, a “free reserve” of 3,714 columbaria niches should be made available for sale. It is unclear what will happen to the niches of those who do not have relatives living in Moscow: who will ensure the transfer of the urns? Would I have to go back, hoping to run into Alex again?

That is, of course, if he wasn’t one of the unlucky guys shot in the brawl. ❖

Two Short Works

by Linda S. Gunther

“Forgetting”

Loss of memory plagues my life more and more as I age. The embarrassment of failing to remember my best friend’s birthday or my own wedding anniversary unnerves me. The zig-zag of my wandering mind, no longer nimble enough to recall all the images, facts or figures I’ve heard and internalized over the years. And sometimes, not even able to recall the headlines from my boss’s staff meeting this past Monday.

I am cooked, lambasted, sauteed, over-stuffed, blanched, deep-fried from too much information steam-rolling into my brain day after day. I just can’t keep up. Reading emails from three different devices full of things to remember every morning, every afternoon and on most evenings; desperately attempting to stay focused on work, family and social connections. Am I supposed to absorb everything? It’s a crime scene, a mess by the end of the day. My head is jammed.

Of course, I don’t like to admit my propensity to forget important things because it might mean that my strongest all-time fear has craftily tiptoed into my life. I ask myself the frightening question as I stand at the precipice of my recently re-decorated home office. *Okay, why was it that I came*

down here? I have no idea. So, I traipse back up the twelve steps to the living room, my dog Lucy trailing behind, wagging her cropped spaniel tail, happy to be along for the hike.

Once I hit the top step, I head to the fridge for a glass of filtered water and decide to sit down at my laptop to read the local news. And then I whisper unto myself. “Now where the hell did I leave my eyeglasses?” Lucy stares at me, her speckled brown and white furry head bent to its side. She picks up her fuzzy octopus and squeaks it non-stop, hoping I will play fetch with her. But, instead, I stomp back down the twelve steps, searching frantically in both the second bedroom and the office. *No specs! “Crap.” Such a dimwit.* I sprint upstairs and into the master bedroom. *They must be on the bed.* Yes. I was reading that birthday card from my brother. Not there! I bolt from the bedroom and check the two upstairs bathrooms. Nada!

I take advantage of the opportunity and set up to do a little writing. Chapter II of my fifth romantic thriller is exploding in my head. I need to get it out. I type and attempt to read it back but I can’t. I glance down at my watch and can barely read the hands but I think I see the little hand on the

four and the big hand on the twelve. *Hooray! It’s four o’clock. Time for a glass of vino.* Forget the freaking eyeglasses, I convince myself. Editing work on first pass is over-rated anyway. *I’ll come back to it!* If I get desperate, I can retrieve my trusty magnifying glass, an antique I picked up at a local flea market. I know where *that* is: top drawer, middle cabinet, kitchen. *Hot damn!* I’m a long way from Alzheimer’s.

As I take a well-deserved sip of my full glass of merlot, I stare at the framed photograph of my son and his wife. I ponder how forgetting things is undoubtedly a bitch, but not half as bad as being forgotten by your family. I want them to remember me long after I’m gone, at least until they start dealing with losing their *own* memories. I don’t want them to remember me *not* remembering them.

Me? I’ll sit back and enjoy forgetting all the bad things in my life; the never-ending bills, the scheduling challenges, the disappointments, the information overload, the demanding deadlines. I’ll make up stuff to forget. New stuff. Good stuff. Bad stuff. *I’m a writer.*

“Psychic in the Parking Lot”

I was between Zoom meetings with clients but anxious to get out of the house and exercise. We had three straight days of rain here in Santa Cruz. As I put on my sweatshirt, my dog Toffee watched, her eyes following my every move likely wondering if I'd cave that day and take her out on my daily beach walk. She would slow me down, I thought. But I attached the leash to her collar, grabbed two poop bags and we headed out the door. It was just a short three-minute walk to the parking lot where I could either take the narrow beach path or walk the wide parking lot parallel to the ocean for about a half mile to a stone wall, which everyone touched for luck before turning back. I preferred the parking lot route during the pandemic where I could be spaced from other walkers. It was a solid mile and if fast-paced, an excellent 45-minute workout.

Toffee took two dumps before we even got to the beach and a long pee when we came to the start of the parking lot. *Perfect*, I thought.

The sun was shining and I was thankful that I had the sense to wear my most comfortable shoes which also matched my bright turquoise sweatshirt. At least I had fashion to hold onto during the pandemic. The only downside was having to wear my face mask which often felt suffocating. But I was a stickler for preventing the spread of the virus. Wearing a mask for another few months wouldn't kill me.

The disheveled woman appeared about halfway into my walk. Her light tan capri pants were spotted with dirt, her white blouse wrinkled, the sleeves rolled up unevenly. She stood on the grassy slope of the hill, about a foot from the parking lot blacktop, bent over, her arm out, something small in the palm of her hand. I instantly recognized her, much frumpier than I remembered, her frizzy brown graying hair half up half down, and she wore no face mask.

“Gorgeous day. I'm feeding the cats,” she called out and started towards me holding a white plastic bag filled with something. The expression on her face told me she didn't remember me.” She was just being friendly thinking I was an approachable stranger.

I wanted to keep going but I didn't want to be rude.

“Yes, a beautiful day,” I said, and raised my hand up to the sky. “About time after all that rain.”

She came closer. I noticed the deep creases on her face, the loose puffy flesh under her green eyes, her face recognizable but quite different from the last time I had seen her. Toffee wagged her tail and sat down near a tree, sniffing the eucalyptus leaves around her.

“You know,” the woman said, “I found good homes for 228 feral cats during this pandemic. I'm a hero.” Her shrill voice was sharp on my ears. She came so close that I could feel her breath on my forehead. I backed away. She didn't seem to give a crap about being

safe.

“Wow,” I said. “That's a great accomplishment. 228 cats? They're so lucky they have you.”

“I'm a psychic,” she said, “and they come to me. I just hold my hand out.” She stuck her fingers in the white plastic bag and lifted up some kibble for me to see. “Yeah, those bastard park rangers want all my cats dead. They don't give a shit about saving them. Every ranger out here will go to hell. I'm not kidding, every one of them is part of Satan's army!”

Damn, I wanted to escape this downer of a woman.

“All of them,” she continued, “they're going straight to hell! Their hateful deeds will catch up with them. You know what I mean?”

I nodded.

“Those RV park hosts, they're just as evil,” she continued, her voice getting louder. “They want the cats dead too. Fucking dead. It makes me mad. There's God and then there's evil.”

Maybe I could change the subject, I thought.

“You're Sandy Castle, aren't you?” I said.

“Yes, that's me,” she brightened.

“I had a tarot reading with you over 25 years ago.”

“You did?” She paused, looked into my eyes, the mask covering the rest of my face. She seemed slightly embarrassed that she didn't know me, her lips scrunched up,

The Blotter

her hand went to her chin, trying to place my existence in her life. “Yes, I’m a famous psychic,” she said. “I was on KNZO Radio last week. I told both producers that I knew *all* about the private projects they were working on. They were amazed by my accuracy. People called in on the phone. I read them and I was right on target every time.”

How did she know she was on target? Thank God, she hasn’t asked my name.

I was creeped out inside, feeling like something wasn’t right with her. I had seen her around a few times from afar but had intentionally avoided her. To me, she seemed kooky. I noticed her sometimes maybe talking to herself.

“So how was my reading for you?” she asked. “Did it help you?”

“Well, it was a long time ago, but I do remember that I left feeling hopeful.”

The truth was that I couldn’t recall a damn thing about my reading with her. What I did recall was that a week later my friend Norma left her tarot card reading with Sandy, humiliated. Sandy had barely started reading Norma when she abruptly stopped and kicked her out, saying she wasn’t open enough to hear the truth. Norma had tried to explain her hesitation, her insecurities but Sandy insisted she get out immediately, leaving Norma traumatized for several weeks.

“That’s good you left hopeful,” Sandy said. “Too bad you can’t

recall more details about your reading. Anyway, what is it that you do for a living?” she asked.

“Me? Now, I’m an author. Suspense, romance, a few children’s books. I also do Human Resources consulting with local companies.”

She didn’t seem to hear me. She looked out to the beach. “I hate park rangers,” she said. “Every one of them. They poison the cats, sometimes shoot them. Evil! They’ll all go to hell. She gazed out at the beach again, and looked back at me. “You agree?”

“Well,” I said, “I have to admit that I’m not a big believer in hell. I mean, I don’t focus on evil or hell.”

“You don’t? Well, you *should* because if you don’t believe in evil then it will bite you in the ass. Every time!”

Chills ran up my spine.

Why did I say that? Is she going to put a hex on me?

I shook Toffee’s leash, hoping my dog would get up from the grass, and pull me away. But she didn’t.

“Hey, you’re a writer,” Sandy said. “Listen, I need you to make a YouTube video about me. I know you can.”

“Oh,” I piped in quickly. “No, I’m so sorry. I don’t know anything about YouTube.” I shook my head. “I’m a writer.”

Her green eyes narrowed. One eye seemed to twitch at the lower lid.

I instantly felt guilty and for some reason, pulled my mask off to show her my fully apologetic face.

She stared into my eyes. “I get it. I see you.” She tilted her head back and forth and pointed her finger at me. “You have no intention of helping me do anything. I’m leaving now.”

She turned and walked away, trudging back up the grassy slope.

I was the evil one. Shit. Who would she tell? ❖

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them.
We won't publish your whole name.

I was recently dragged out of my sleep by a cramp in my lower leg – my calf to be specific. No big deal, just a bit of stretching worked out the cramp before it became excruciating. But it was an interesting moment for me, because I was in the middle of a dream before the cramp happened.

Big dinner – holiday type of gathering. So many chairs that we are all pushed together, eating with our elbows tucked in but still jostling one another. Lots of crowd noise, conversation, slurping, laughing and shouting over each other. I am near one end, but there is suddenly food I want that is only available at the other end of the table. I ask for someone to please pass. . . I'm not sure – maybe it's croissants, maybe it's cole-slaw. I know, they're not even in the same ballpark, but I have a craving for whatever it is down at the other end. No one responds.

I ask again, a little louder, but still not loudly enough to be heard over the ambient noise in the room. It's like there's a game on television somewhere, and the volume keeps rising as everyone tries to be heard. I would stand up, and possibly even walk to the other end of the table with my plate in hand to fetch it myself, but to slide my chair back will upset the persons to my left and right, and logically they will upset those next to them. So it's like we're all jammed in a subway car and the person in the back wants to get off at this station, and everyone has to be courteous and make room where there is none. So much easier to pass the food, but that isn't what happens.

Instead, and wildly unlikely, I am somehow lifted from my seat by a collection of strong hands and passed down the table myself, like one of the dinner courses, or a stage-diving rock star. I am horrified, and a little bit frightened because I am aware that I am being manhandled over burning candles and hot dishes of food.

And of course, I don't have my plate with me. That is the moment I want to go back the way I came. To get my plate. I cannot reach it with my hands, nor turn over to face the tabletop – not that I would want to do that because I have a sudden fear that it is far below me. Like the perspective has been shot to hell and I'm suspended high in the sky and the only way to make it work is to go along with it. To keep being shunted down the table without my plate.

And that is when in real life, outside my dream, my leg cramps, and the dinner table scene begins to fall apart and I feel like I'm going to fall and cannot save myself. Waking up just in time to sit up in bed and massage my calf, talking to it like it's an animate object – which it kind of is – to calm down, it was only a dream.

Ruth - cyberspace

Two by John Grey

“Mismatched”

Her own clothes were not tossed
into the to-be-washed basket
but folded neatly
by her dainty fingers,
placed gently atop
her other things.
Even the cottons
were treated like silk.

But he threw his dirty overalls,
like taking a basketball free throw,
right atop her finery,
drowning their perfumes
in car-engine grease,
garden soil
and beer stains.

It was like the times
he lay on top of her,
his heavy body
hammering her soft frame,
his rough hands
roaming her soft pink skin.

Sex was always
something to be endured.
Laundry was always
something to remind her of sex.

“The Construction Business”

Driving with a friend –
he’s a carpenter –
he points to a house
we pass by
and blurts out,
“I helped build that.”
His dour expression gives way
to a beam of pride.

I’m a poet.
I could drive the length
and breadth of this city
and never find anything,
not even a decrepit, abandoned shed,
that my words helped put together.

The good, the damage,
my poetry has done,
can be a mansion,
or a hovel,
a homey cottage
or a burnt-out shell
But they’re all here
in the pit of me.
And cars don’t
go down that road.

"Ruby"

by John Grey

She stakes out the front row
of the blues club,
so close, her sweat dampens the stage.

She loves that throbbing bass,
screeching sax,
and drumming like a tortured heartbeat.

But most of all, she's down with the vocalist
and a lyric about scratching out
the eyes of a cheating man.

Oh how that woman on stage
can drag pain up from the gut,
shriek a hunger for revenge
that rips at her throat until it bleeds.

That's the perfect evening.
Singer's lips, Ruby's nails,
both dripping crimson.

Contributors

Victor Pogostin was born in Moscow. He graduated from The School of Translators of the Moscow State Institute for Foreign Languages, worked as translator for the Soviet Trade Mission in India, taught Russian Language and Culture course at the Aligarh Muslim University, served in the Long Range Naval Reconnaissance Aviation of the Northern Fleet. After his return from military service he defended his PhD dissertation on Ernest Hemingway's Nonfiction. For many years he worked in the Institute of Sociology of the USSR Academy of Sciences, while working as a freelance author/translator for national newspapers and literary magazines throughout the former Soviet Union. In addition to translating fiction and nonfiction into Russian, he has compiled, edited, and written introductions and commentaries for over a dozen books by North American authors, including the works of Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. In 1993 he relocated to Canada with his wife and son. In Canada, he worked in senior executive positions for companies doing business in Russia and for the past seventeen years in the conference production industry. In English his non-fiction has appeared in *The National Post* (Canada), *Canadian Literature* magazine, *Russian Life* magazine (Vermont), *The Epoch Times* (US & Canada editions), "As You Were: The Military Review. Vol.14, 2021" (US), *The Blotter Magazine* (US) and *The Other Side of Hope* magazine (UK)

Linda S. Gunther is the author of six published suspense novels: *Ten Steps From The Hotel Inlaterra*, *Endangered Witness*, *Lost In The Wake*, *Finding Sandy Stonemeyer*, *Dream Beach* and most recently in 2021, *Death Is A Great Disguiser*. She has also authored three illustrated children's books. Her short stories and personal essays have been featured in numerous literary publications.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Sheepshead Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review* and *Hollins Critic*. Latest books, "Leaves On Pages" and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Lana Turner* and *International Poetry Review*.

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AND HIS 13 RULES FOR HOW TO SURVIVE A GLOBAL PANDEMIC
IN A NATION THAT'S GONE COMPLETELY BATSHIT CRAZY



Joe Buonfiglio

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a global pandemic seem
WEIRD?

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WEIRDER!

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