

# **The** Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

**Satisfying Fiction from  
Clarendon House Publications**  
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**Issue  
# 10**



**Three gems from some of the best storytellers on the planet:  
Jim Bates, Alexander Marshall and Bill Swiggs**

# The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

## Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

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In this issue:

### **The Bridge** by Jim Bates

Experience the adventures of Norman, after he tries - and repeatedly fails - to come to terms with life in a care home after a tragic loss.

### **Porphyrean's Choice** by Alexander Marshall

Journey to a fantasy world like no other and gaze through the Mirror of Manjle to see if the goddess Burravish will complete her quest to acquire the Fruit of Knowledge in the Garden of the Nether Paradise before the Causator's Bell chimes.

### **Concrete** by Bill Swiggs

Since Arthur Connell lost his only son Trevor in the Vietnam War, his Australian Outback farm has been empty and his own heart bitter - but the arrival of a mysterious stranger might be about to change all that...

We hope you enjoy the magazine!

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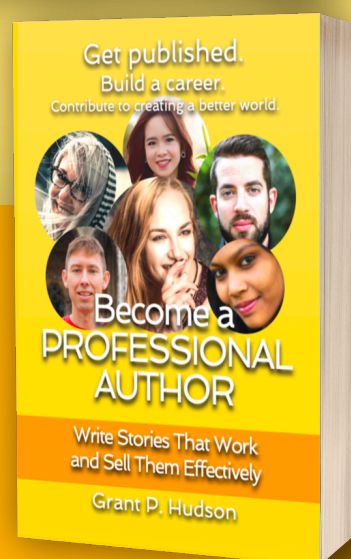
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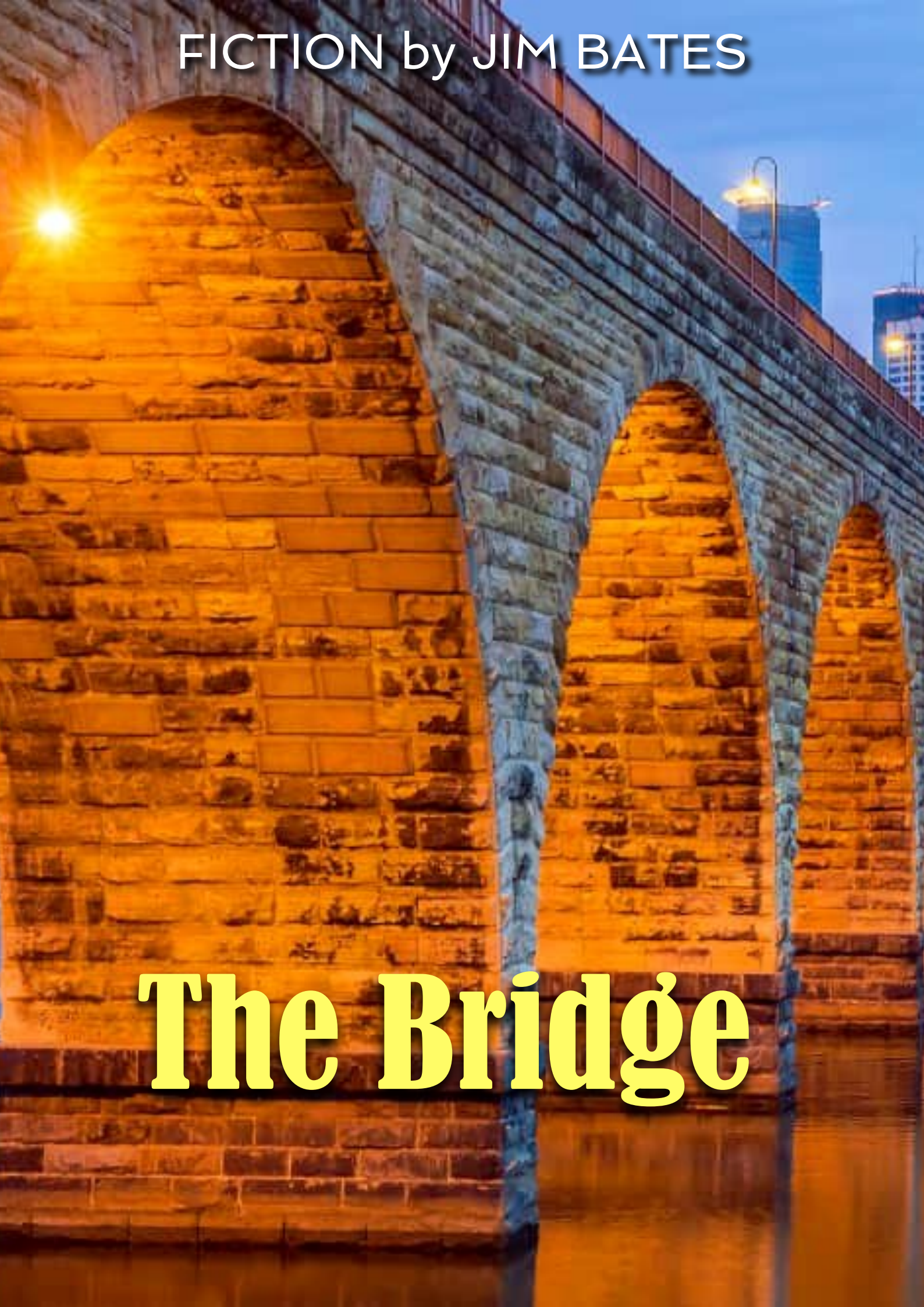
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FICTION by JIM BATES

# The Bridge





Norman smiled as he stood on the bridge. He loved the light breeze blowing through his thinning hair. He loved hearing the rapids of St. Anthony Falls thundering one hundred feet below him. He loved the first rays of the sunrise warming his face as it rose above the buildings of downtown Minneapolis. He loved it all, especially the feeling of being free of the group home he'd been living in for the last two years of his life.

Held prisoner was more like it in his mind. After he'd lost his wife and son and daughter to a head-on collision with a drunk driver on interstate 35W, he'd gone into a deep depression. He was diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder and sent to the West River Road Group Home just south of downtown Minneapolis where he was put under the care of a kind and understanding psychiatrist whose kindness and understanding had been unable to make much of a dent in healing the broken-hearted man. Nevertheless, Norman found a way to integrate into the daily life of the home. He had his own room, three healthy meals a day, group activities, medication for depression, and group and individual counseling sessions, all under the watchful eyes of three orderlies Norman referred to as Huey, Dewey, and Louie. Most importantly, he had the ashes of his family in a simple brass urn placed prominently on this dresser.

On paper, all should have been fine. He was being given a chance to heal and begin living a healthy, happy, and productive life. But life wasn't easily confined to a sheet of paper. The point of the matter was that Norman missed Ann and Ethan and Leslie so much that no amount of counseling and therapy and drugs was going to help alleviate the pain he endured in his heart every day.

He'd tried to escape once, but only got as far as sliding down a steep embankment near the group home to the Mississippi River where he was just about to make a swim for freedom when the speedy Huey, Dewey, and Louie had captured him.



Another time, a few months later, he'd hitched a ride on the back of a sanitation truck only to be discovered by the driver at the next stop half a block down the street and unceremoniously returned. In retrospect, it had not been his best nor most well-thought-out plan.

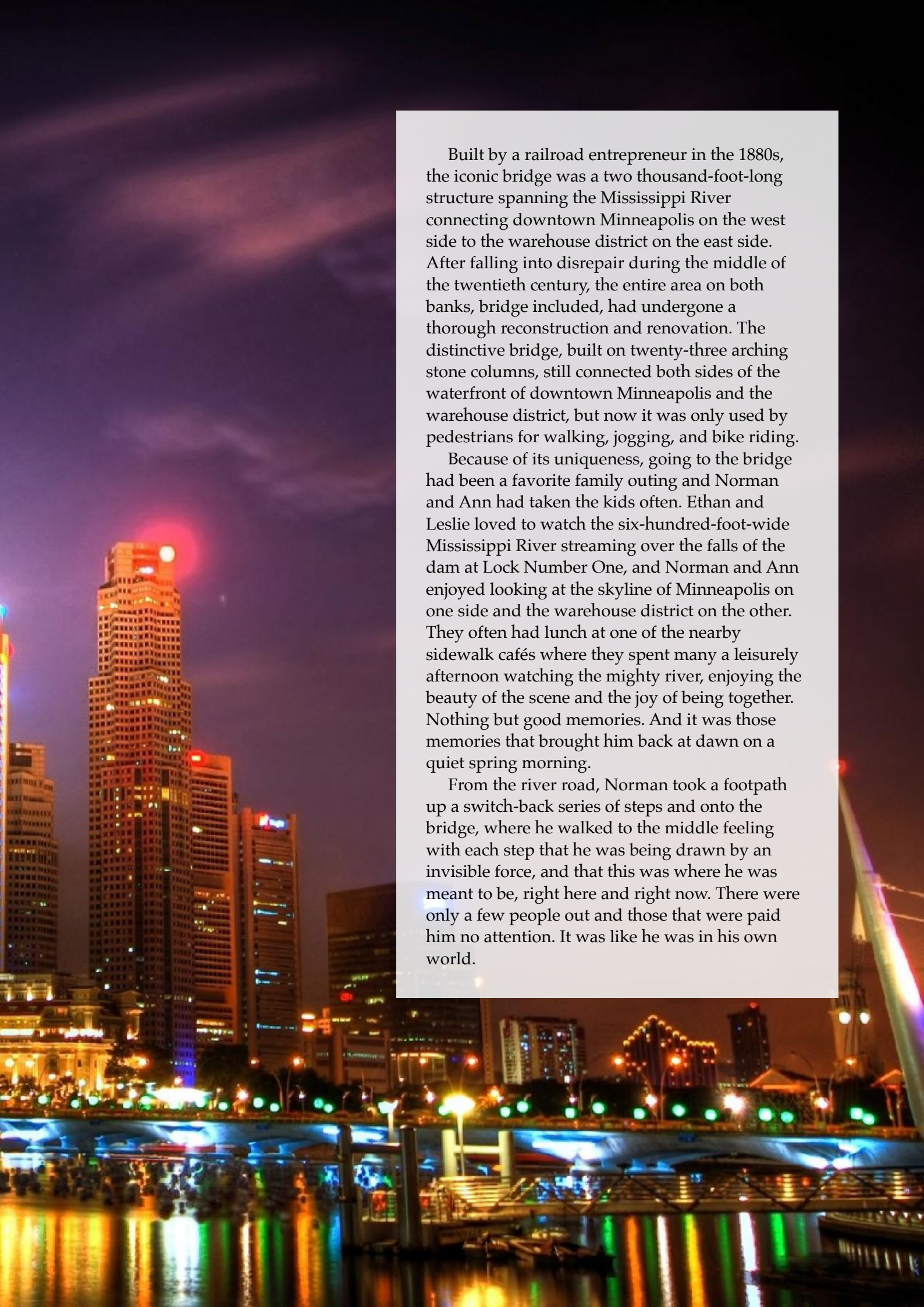
So, Norman decided to try a different approach and passed the winter laying low while waiting for another opportunity to escape. But it was hard. He so badly wanted to see his family again. Sure, he had photographs of vacations and holidays and times of just plain goofing around, and those photos brought back wonderful memories that he cherished. And, of course, he had his treasured brass urn filled with his family's ashes.

But he wanted more. He wanted to be free to be on his own outside in the natural world so he could connect with his loved ones and be with them the way it used to be. Like it should be. Like he knew they wanted him to be. To join them on some sort of spiritual level, if that's what it was called, away from the confines of the stifling group home atmosphere. He'd didn't know exactly how to articulate it; he only knew he needed to try something. He had to see them and be with them again.

By spring, Ann and the kids had been gone for over two years, and he couldn't wait any longer. He snuck out in the middle of the night, clutching his urn to his chest, and made his way north along the west river road high above the Mississippi River, hiding in the bushes whenever he spotted an approaching car or person. Two hours later, without incident, he'd made it to his destination, the Stone Arch Bridge.







Built by a railroad entrepreneur in the 1880s, the iconic bridge was a two thousand-foot-long structure spanning the Mississippi River connecting downtown Minneapolis on the west side to the warehouse district on the east side. After falling into disrepair during the middle of the twentieth century, the entire area on both banks, bridge included, had undergone a thorough reconstruction and renovation. The distinctive bridge, built on twenty-three arching stone columns, still connected both sides of the waterfront of downtown Minneapolis and the warehouse district, but now it was only used by pedestrians for walking, jogging, and bike riding.

Because of its uniqueness, going to the bridge had been a favorite family outing and Norman and Ann had taken the kids often. Ethan and Leslie loved to watch the six-hundred-foot-wide Mississippi River streaming over the falls of the dam at Lock Number One, and Norman and Ann enjoyed looking at the skyline of Minneapolis on one side and the warehouse district on the other. They often had lunch at one of the nearby sidewalk cafés where they spent many a leisurely afternoon watching the mighty river, enjoying the beauty of the scene and the joy of being together. Nothing but good memories. And it was those memories that brought him back at dawn on a quiet spring morning.

From the river road, Norman took a footpath up a switch-back series of steps and onto the bridge, where he walked to the middle feeling with each step that he was being drawn by an invisible force, and that this was where he was meant to be, right here and right now. There were only a few people out and those that were paid him no attention. It was like he was in his own world.



With the rays of the new day's sun warming his face, he leaned on the railing and listened. Above the roar of the rapids, along with his memories of being here with his family, he was sure he could hear Ann's voice. It was like she had been waiting for him to appear and was now standing right beside him. He looked around but couldn't see her. What was she saying? He couldn't quite make out her words above the sound of the thundering river, but he responded anyway.

"Oh, Ann, my dear, it's so good to hear you." He spoke quietly, reverently, "I love you so much. I miss you every moment of every day."

He listened but the river drowned out her voice as mist from the swirling rapids rose in the air and swept over him like a soft sun shower. He didn't notice.

"I'm having trouble hearing you, Ann. Are you doing okay?" he asked. "How are Ethan and Leslie?" A tear formed as he remembered his soccer-loving kids. Ann had been driving them home from practice when the drunk plowed into their car. At the time, Norman was in the kitchen making a special spaghetti dinner for them as a treat. But there would be no more treats after that fateful day. Life as he'd known it had changed forever, and he had been challenged to go on living alone without his adored loved ones. A challenge he had to admit he was not rising to very well at all.

"Ann," he whispered, wiping away the tears now beginning to flow freely, "Ann, I can't live without you anymore. I want to be with you. I want to hold you in my arms again and feel the warmth of your body next to mine and the touch of your fingertips on my skin."

Norman was now weeping openly, his heart breaking more and more as the pain of his loss became overwhelming. He almost collapsed as he staggered, nearly falling to his knees, but didn't. Instead, not noticing the small crowd that had begun to gather, he gripped the steel railing and stepped up onto a brace at the bottom of it. He teetered for a moment, clutching his urn, and was beginning to swing his leg over the top when he felt a hand on his shoulder. *Ann?* He turned, eager to see her smiling face. But, no, it wasn't Ann. It was a young man with dreadlocks, his face serious.

Calmly, but firmly, he said, "Hey, there, buddy, let's get you down from there, okay?" He pointed to the deadly rapids far below. "You don't want to do that."

Beside himself with grief and weeping uncontrollably over the loss of his family, Norman fell into the young man's arms.





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Later, back at the group home, the words filtered into Norman's brain, *You don't want to do that*. Well, the point of fact was he did want to, but maybe now just wasn't the right time. He looked at the urn keeping him company on the dresser. Maybe he'd just wait. After all, the young man, who'd introduced himself as Frankie, said he might come by and visit sometime. That could be nice, maybe, to have a friend other than the crazy patients at the group home.

Norman sighed, frustrated. Why was this so complicated? The third one's the charm the saying went, and he'd almost done it. He'd almost gotten free from the group home. At least, he'd made it to the Stone Arch Bridge where he'd relived some wonderful memories and even had a nice talk with Ann. It could have been a lot worse.

He lay back and closed his eyes, the meds along with the shot they'd given him were beginning to take full effect now. It had been a long day and he was exhausted. The memory of the morning on the bridge was quickly fading, but he knew one thing, he still had to get away. He still had to get free of the group home and get out into the world and be with Ann and his kids. He'd almost done it this time.

He rolled to his side and pulled a blanket up as he felt himself slipping into sleep. Drifting off, his last conscious thought was, *Next time*. Because for sure there would be a next time. His family was out there waiting for him and he was coming. Ann and the kids could count on it. He'd get to them. Somehow. There was no doubt in his mind about that. None at all.



CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

JIM BATES



Overlapping memories, overlapping lives, wide open spaces and soft but sometimes heart-breaking reminiscences, with the mighty Mississippi running through it all — let Jim Bates take you on rich, human, intertwining journeys into a landscape of souls where you can glimpse beauty and peace, longing and contentment, the burden of past decisions and their forgiveness, and perhaps find yourself . . .





# CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

## SHARON FRAME GAY



*Sharon Frame Gay has been internationally published in many anthologies and literary magazines, including Chicken Soup For The Soul, Typehouse, Lowestoft Chronicle, Literary Orphans, and others. She has won awards at The Writing District, Wow-Women On Writing, Owl Hollow Press, and Rope and Wire and is a Pushcart Prize nominee. Her first collection of short stories, **Song of the Highway**, was published in 2020 by Clarendon House Publications. Her master storytelling continues in **The Nomad Diner**.*

# The Nomad Diner

## A Short Story Collection

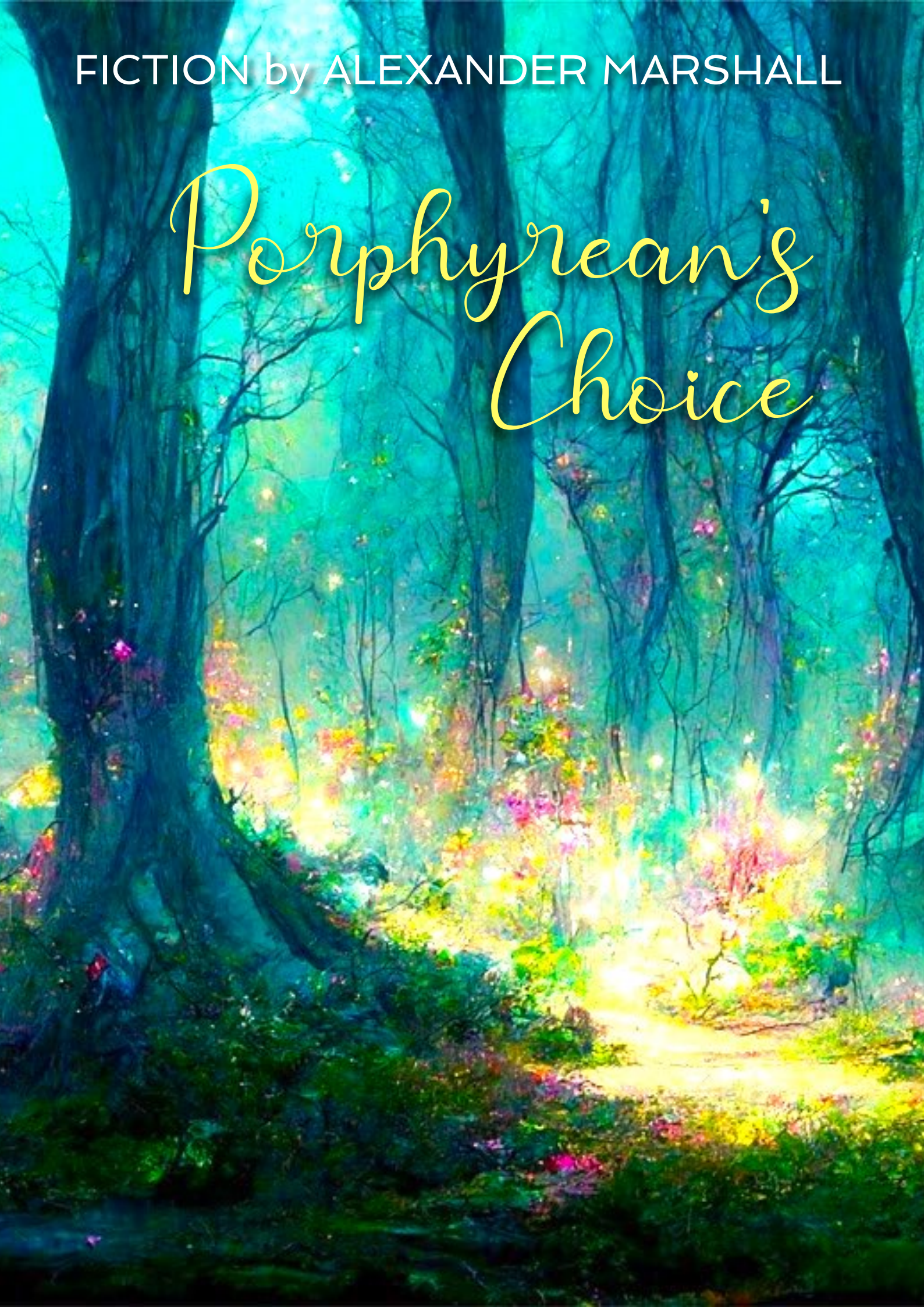


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FICTION by ALEXANDER MARSHALL

# Porphyrean's Choice







Porphyrean turned, his idle gaze pervading the purple twilight of the overhanging emerald vineleaves and procrastinating in the pearly light from the wintrous beads of the many thousand chandeliers that clustered about the globing dome of the voluptuan ceiling. In those violet shadows stirred thoughts unmentionable, eddies in the pool of Porphyrean's divine mind.

Queen Scaramuthe stroked her lover's long and shining hair from the high and stony shelf of his thoughtful brow, her tracing fingers dividing his cascading locks right down to his reclining waist where the winding braids ended in jewels and lumps of chiselled gold. Her eyes flickered fancifully in the half-light, embers of thought fading and flaring in the deep and ash-choked grate of her ancient mind as she watched her lover lick the bitten flesh of a blue and green grape before dropping it whole with a delicate and miniature ceremony of fingers and lips into the ebony abyss of his gullet.

'Wondreth thyself, my full-bodied god of the fire of love,' said Scaramuthe, leaning her frame against him and turning her fingertips round about and round about in the ends of his mane, 'wondreth thyself whether thy darling and honeysweet daughter has yet put her hand to the Fruit of Knowledge in the Garden of the Nether Paradise afore the chiming of the Causator's Bell? For is not this day the Day of the Thousand Tongues, and is not the Dividing of Fruits the Seventh Ceremony of that day, and should not she at this very tick of Great Lucy's tock be prostrating herself at thy feet and presenting thee with the Apple of Horatius Himself?'

She had spoken so quietly, in a whisper like the wind waiting for a door to open, that Porphyrean had neither moved nor breathed for fear of missing a syllable from her worshipped throat — for, as well she knew, she had but to utter a sound, not even a word but only a primeval groan or even a squeak without significance, to send his whole mighty form trembling with the desires that gave birth and meaning to the world. He instigated a motion of muscles, a slow and thunderous stretching of his face, his grape-stained lips straining back across the skeletal stalactites of his teeth in a smile that betokened unspeakable pleasure in that sweet murmur of his lover's voice.



'Ah, my essence of the nectar of peaches,' he said, marking each word on the air as a painter caresses a canvas with his brush, 'thou speakest too little, and my poor and pleasure-starved ears, drowned in the silent music of the spheres, occupied with the frenzied clutter of the seventy-seven thousand palaces, pine to nothing in the absence of thy voice. Put thy licktacious lips to my own and let us abandon Burravish to her quest! Let us set fire to the stars themselves with our rampaging and unmitigatable passion! Let the darkness of heaven be dark no longer, but full of my seed and the crimson cries of thy receiving loins!'

The turning of Porphyrean's mighty form was like the upheaval of a craggy and gold-encrusted range of mountains by a tumult deep within the heart of the world; his bejewelled flesh sparkled in the mystic lamplight as his arms embraced slender Scaramuthe, her lithe and splendid shape overshadowed and all but eclipsed by the moon of his body coming between her and the splintered light from the overbrimming suns that hung delicately from the carven sky of the ceiling. But with one tiny, perfectly formed hand emerging from within her drapery of pale blue and silver, with one fragile, taut and curving arm protruding upwards, the diamonds of her gauze shawl twinkling like a galaxy in his shadow, she gave him pause, she ceased the downward bearing motion of his bulk, she halted the god mid-movement, and, smiling at him with the smile that shattered the Plinthmaster's heart and curdled the blood of a thousand sacrificial virgins, she forced him back, and untwined his mind from dreams, calling silently to the purpose of the day and dragging forth from the void of his idleness the intention not to fall upon her but to swing instead to his right, where, spilled with grapes and surrounded by ruby-crust pillows, the Mirror of Manjle lay strewn as though no more than a toy, a thing to be tossed aside, a bauble. With the ringed talons of her left hand, the Hand Sinister, she drew a wide, dark line across the steam upon the glass, and leaned over it, feeling its crystal iciness upon her half-gauzed breasts, and such was her will that the gaze of the god was drawn thither too, his own powerful fingers stroking his long, brown beard as he peered into the reflecting shadows.







Therein, but a moment had passed and they saw the light-play of a figure dancing across a darkness, paddling naked through a forest stream, sharp and golden sunlight cutting the dawn air until it bled pale mist. It was a girl, a princess — though, as her white flesh pressed into the dripping bark of the massive trees she seemed a wormish thing, small and of no consequence. The trees frowned at her, they loomed at her, they resolved not to be disturbed by her as she plashed about in the dim domain at their feet, like some beauteous dragonfly, a colourful and fascinating but irritating insect that sought escape from their shadows into some brighter and freer world beyond — but try as they might, the tall trees of the ancient Tharlsigirdle Wood could not forget that fateful shape that tickled their beslimed trunks with her nakedness; nor could they put aside their wooden but no less certain knowledge that this day was the Day of the Thousand Tongues. Six of the Nine Ceremonies of that Day had been performed. Of those the trees of Tharlsigirdle Wood knew naught — but of the Seventh Ceremony they had an intimacy of knowledge, for in the west of the wood was the Garden of the Nether Paradise, and in the cleaving of that garden between two low hills was the Clearing of the Broken Spiral, and in the centre of that space, tall, proud and spilling over with silver in the morning sun, stood the Tree of Horatius Himself, and this was the special season when it hung heavy with red and glowing fruits like rubies that seemed lit from within by an fruitish fire: the Apples of Knowledge. It was these Apples that Burravish, glorious princess upon whose skin the sun and moon made love, the very sight of whom had split open the hearts of at least seven hundred mortals, was intent with more than a single portion of her youthful mind. She knew, and was enervated by the knowing, that one of those apples she needed to pluck before the chiming of the Causator's Bell. She glanced up at the whirling sun, and knew that, by its too-swift motion of madness across her heavens, not much mortal time remained.



What would happen to her young self if she failed to grasp one of those rubied fruits prior to the tintinabulation of those heavy bells, she did not dare to contemplate, nor did anyone know, for in the Five Ages of Snorcus-Snarrilus, no one had returned from the Garden of the Nether Paradise if the Bell had caught them out. Would she be burned by an out-reaching flare from her father's sun? Or would the green and wet earth which made her toes shiver as she flitted from shadow to shadow open up beneath her and suck her into its cold muddiness forever? She shook with fear and morning dew as she ran on, slipping on squeaky fronds of dampness and brushing aside the silvery nets of dawn cobwebs.

Then suddenly it was before her — not the slender trunk of the Tree of Horatius Himself, but the bowed-over shape of a man turned to stone. The grey gargoyle form faced away from her, bent as though in perpetual pain, a tall and exceptionally thin man. Anxious with the anxiety of a goddess, she stepped lightly about the dripping rock and looked upon this captive of chronosis from the front. She had to bend to see his face — it

was a twisted visage, its young and frail features spoiled by lines of agony. He had his arms clasped about his naked abdomen, as though frozen in the fraction of an instant when he had received a blow there. He was not beautiful — his arms were taut and bony, his eyes bulging, his nose far too large for his face. A small spider had made a webby home in one of his nostrils. Forgetful of the time, or dismissive of its passage as revealed by the creeping of black shadows across the vernal floor of the wood, Burravish put a delicate hand to the statue's creased brow and at the cold contact between fingertip and stone inhaled an upsurging pity which had already begun to trickle upwards with her hot and youthful blood from the ventricles of her divine heart. Who was this agonised boy? she wondered — and answered herself in the next breath: he was one of those who had come before her to recover an Apple, and this was what befell those who could not beat the Causator's Bell! Her hand jerked away, involuntarily, but that motion with its implication of fear shamed her innocence and she put her sweet fingers back upon that stony head and stroked it.





Then she leaned forward and put her pink lips to the grey and twisted stone mouth, feeling its rough icy grit against the yielding cushion of her own lips. She closed her beautiful eyes, and heard in that silent wood where even the birds were silent for the day of a Thousand Tongues, a sudden and very distinct crack, like the sharp and decisive breaking of a giant's bone, or the clean splintering of a rough diamond under the expert blow of a jeweller's hammer. She opened her eyes again, and keeled over like a fallen tree at her feet, writhing in a cacophony of coughing and rubbing a small spider's home from his face, was a tall and exceedingly thin young fellow who after a moment's collection of himself, noticed her standing there naked and utterly glorious before him, and immediately used his flat and splaying hands to cover his own youthful embarrassment.

No words were spoken, for what words could be found in such a circumstance as a boy lately a statue finding himself in the company of his unexpected saviour, a divine princess who

glistened before him like the offspring of a sun and a moon? He shifted from foot to cramped foot; she looked at him and away from him, her girlish curiosity seeking neither to avoid nor to meet his nervous gaze but looking him up and down as though inspecting a specimen in the late Plinthmaster's cabinets. Nor did she speak when she approached him and drew aside his hands as someone rising from slumber might draw aside a curtain to look through a window. He stood awkwardly as she peered at his exposed boyhood, her mouth a little tunnel of curiosity. Nor did he utter a word when she stepped closer, her small hands stroking his spindly arms, her small breasts touching his newly-restored skin, her staring eyes like a deer's only inches from his twitching face. He could make only an incoherent noise as she pulled him closer to her, and could yell only a meaningless squeak as she put her gentle and warm lips upon his protruding collarbone in







the same purposeful way in which a child puts a coloured bead to its mouth. Nor did he do more than draw breath when her teeth lightly grazed his neck, her nails testing the thickness of his flesh down his back. He trembled, no more than a fitful shake like a dog drying itself, when her hand stroked him intimately; he ground his teeth together when she took it upon herself to make him fall backwards onto the wet and slimy earth; he made no protest of movement or sound as she cleaned the rest of the cobwebs and dust from his face with her wonderful fingers; he fell silent as she bestrode him, her face empty of all lust or feeling, a blank and white canvas upon which a grandmaster might paint a passion, her eyes a staring and forgetful void as she took him in those fabulous and fairy-like fingers, her golden hair sharing something of the sun's morning sheen as she fell upon him.

And then they heard it. Over the tops of the tallest trees it came, defying height and distance with its chilling thunder; worming between the trunks of the forest, it approached like an ambushing army, falling upon their

helpless ears like marauding outlaws might savage a wandering and witless victim — the deadly and perfunctory chiming of the Causator's Bell. And there, not a hundred paces away, gleaming in the mid-morning shafts of shimmering sunlight, in the Clearing of the Broken Spiral, were the precious fruits of the Tree of Horatius Himself, bowing low upon slender branches, untouched, unplucked, unheld. And Burravish woke from her girlish and animal trance and was struck down by terror and guilt and realisation of mortal time, that passage of ticks and tocks that ate away always at opportunity. And the boy looked in her face and his unbidden and uninvited ecstasy ceased as swiftly as his stony form had melted again into flesh, as she leapt from him and pounced toward the Clearing of the Broken Spiral — too late. Even as her fleet foot touched the grass it was golden — there she was, frozen in a golden moment of terrible cognisance, golden rather than stone because of her divinity, the boy surmised, his mind, even with all that it had endured, being of that sort.





Scaramuthe smiled the smile that had tormented and destroyed the armies of the Spotted Witch as she pulled back from the Mirror of Manjle and the phantasmic images that it had shown them. She pulled at the trunk of supernatural muscle that was the arm of Porphyrean, her cosmic lover, and taunted him with her eyes.

‘But my delicacy,’ he protested, ‘my quintessence of the flowing juices of night’s bedlam, what of our daughter Burravish, she of the sparkling eye, the golden mane, the slender and beauteous outspringing of thine own loins? Turned to a frozen image of her former self, doomed for a thousand years to stand cold and unmoving in the heart of that dim dark wood? Thou canst not cast aside thine own with so little regard!’

‘Oh but I canst, and so canst thou, my nub of divine butter,’ replied the honied voice of the queen as she reclined before his overwhelming shape. ‘Come spread thy creamy substance across the dark bread of my unearthly beauty,

and let the adventurous reap the consequences of their adventuring!’ Porphyrean paused and contemplated: it was true that the princess had put herself forward for the Seventh Ceremony unbidden, and despite the perils of the race against the Causator’s Bell. And it was also true that, to a goddess, a thousand years of golden timelessness in a sunlit clearing was a trifle in the Scheme of Things. So he succumbed and heaved his ferocity upon his queen. ‘Let us commence the Eighth Ceremony,’ whispered Scaramuthe as he voyaged within her, ‘and then let us revel in the Thousand Tongues that await us!’

And she laughed an unholy laugh to herself as she pondered how very wise she had been when she had placed that stone-cursed boy in the path of her daughter on the way to the silvery Tree of Horatius Himself.



CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

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# **CONCRETE**

**by Bill Swiggs**



The tractor's headlights bathed the shed wall with a pale glow as it manoeuvred into the yard behind the old stone homestead. The engine note changed and there was a momentary grating of gears, then the big vehicle reversed through the doorway into the machinery shed. The headlights went off and the engine died. Moments later the rusty hinges of the cab door creaked open and Arthur Connell climbed wearily down to the ground.

High above Arthur a bank of fluorescent lights burned, illuminating the contents of the shed. Two motorbikes were propped on wooden blocks near the far wall. One motorbike engine had been removed and was sitting on a nearby workbench which was littered with tools. On the far side of the tractor were five forty-four gallon drums containing fuel and oil for the farm machinery. Hanging in the rafters above Arthur were some old ploughshares, several old bridles and a yoke with the stuffing poking through numerous holes - symbols of the farm's involvement in a bygone era.

Turning off the lights, Arthur crossed the yard towards the back door of the homestead where Colleen had the porch light on. It was after 9 pm and his stomach growled with hunger. He had been out working since first light without break, not even stopping for lunch as he attempted to complete a day's work that would have been too much for two men, let alone one.

Arthur stopped at an old corrugated-iron water tank which sat on a stand behind the house. Below the tap in the side of the tank was an enamel basin that he filled with water then took up a big bar of yellow soap to scrub the day's grime from his face and arms. When he was done he dried himself with a piece of tattered towel hanging on a nearby nail.

As he replaced the towel, Arthur glanced down at the concrete slab on which he was standing. It wasn't really a single slab. Over the past seventy years or so the concrete had been added to in bits and pieces, the colours all varying to give it the appearance of a patchwork quilt, but that was not what Arthur was looking at. It was the numerous footprints embedded in the concrete that held Arthur's gaze. No matter how bone-achingly weary he was at the end of each day, he never failed to cast his eyes over those footprints before going inside.







There were four generations of Connell feet recorded in the slab. As usual, his eyes were drawn to the far left where the concrete was oldest. His grandfather's footprints were there, along with his great uncle's. Those two patriarchs had started the farm just before the turn of the twentieth century, recording their footprints in the concrete the same day they laid the foundations for the homestead. Then Uncle Albert had been killed in the hills of Gallipoli, and Terrence Connell had become the sole owner of the farm; a farm that had been part of Australia's breadbasket for another war and three generations of the family name. His grandmother's dainty footprints were there beside her husband's. Beside those, the child-sized prints of Arthur's father and his siblings. It was all recorded there in cold, hard concrete, family after family. Most had names and dates scratched nearby, like his mother's, 'Aggie - 1921' her prints recorded in the concrete within days of marrying Arthur's father. And, so on it went, down through the years; Arthur's prints as a child in 1928 and then as an adult in the '40's, Colleen's prints beside his when she came to the farm as his wife. Finally, at the far end of the slab, were the footprints of their children, Maria, Amelia and Trevor.

Arthur squatted in the dim glow of the back porch light and traced his fingers around the outlines of his children's prints. Both his daughters were now married. Maria, a nurse, lived in town with her husband, while Amelia had become a farmer's wife. She lived on a property on the far side of town. The girls were happy and Arthur was pleased with his new sons-in-law. He already had a bag of cement set aside in the shed to record their feet at the next opportunity.

Arthur's calloused fingertips drifted across to his son's prints. They had been cast there when Trevor was eight years old. The date was there as well, '1954', just below the boy's name. As he ran his finger over the indents made by his son's toes the anger came rushing back.

'Where did I go wrong?' he asked the darkness as he stood up.

Trevor had disappeared over two months ago. At least 'disappear' was what Arthur called it. He could not bring himself to use the words 'run away'. The words of their last argument still echoed in Arthur's mind.

'I need you here, boy. This is your future, right here on this farm.'



They had been sitting down to dinner when Trevor announced his desire to enlist in the army. He turned to face his father. 'It's your future, Dad, not mine. We both know that farming's not for me.' The words had stung Arthur like the strike of a stockwhip, even though he knew them to be true. Trevor had never shown any desire to carry on with the family property. His mind had always been off in the distance, somewhere over the dusty horizon.

'If I don't enlist, then one day my number will come up,' Trevor continued. 'I don't want to go into the army as a bloody nasho.'

'But farming's an essential occupation. You can get an exemption from national service.'

'That's what happened for you in World War Two. Things are different now, Dad. With this Vietnam thing they take everybody whose number comes up - no exceptions. Lyle Jones couldn't get out of it, could he? He's a farmer.'

'I don't know that he even tried.'

'It wouldn't have made any difference. Once you're called up for national service there's no getting out of it. You go into the army as a nasho. I don't want that. I want to enlist and have proper training. Make a career of it.'

It was the word *career* that pushed Arthur over the edge. He slammed his fist onto the table, making the crockery leap and clatter. 'I forbid it, Trevor. It's as simple as that.' If his son had to do a year of national service then so be it. But the silly little bugger was talking about careers now. Careers were for a long time.

'You can't forbid it. I'm eighteen years old, Dad. I can do what I like.'

'You do and you can forget about ever coming back into this house again. You go and you're gone for good.'

Colleen Connell had remained quiet up to this point. When the boys argued she knew it was best to stay out of it until things settled down. But, when her husband threatened to disown their only son, she could hold her tongue no longer. 'No! Arthur, please...' But he had quieted her with a wave of his hand.

'Shush, woman. There are three generations of blood, sweat and tears in this place. If he wants no part of it, then he wants no part of this family.' With that said, Arthur stormed off to bed.

The next morning Trevor was gone.







Arthur forced the memories from his mind. Turning from the slab and its footprints he went up to the house where Colleen had his dinner waiting on the table. 'Long day,' she said as he slumped into the chair and picked up the knife and fork.

'Too bloody long,' he muttered around his first mouthful of food. Colleen hovered at his elbow. She had eaten her own meal over two hours ago. Arthur sensed she had something to tell him, but he made no enquiry and kept his eyes fixed firmly on his plate. It was not until he was well into dessert that Colleen suddenly produced an envelope and placed it beside his bowl.

'The mail came today,' she started, searching carefully for her words. 'This was with it. It's from Trevor.'

Arthur made no move to pick up the already opened envelope. Instead he raised one inquisitive eyebrow at his wife.

'He's in the army. Just finishing off his basic training. Then he says he's off to Queensland for jungle-warfare training.'

Arthur finished his dessert and pushed the bowl away before he spoke. 'So, he's gone and done it then?'

'Arthur, we always knew there was nothing to keep him here. He's a farmer's son, not a farmer. I think I always knew from the moment he was born that this place would never be able to hold him long.' He could see a hint of moisture in the corners of her eyes, but she used all her strength to hold back the tears of anguish and concern lingering just below the surface. 'Can't you be happy for him, Arthur? Can't you be pleased he's out there doing what he wants to do?' She lost her battle and tears flooded down her cheeks. 'Can't you be happy for our son?'

Arthur stood suddenly, pushing the chair away with the back of his legs. 'I no longer have a son!' He turned and stormed out of the house.

Arthur strode across the yard to the shed and stabbed his finger onto the light switch. Too impatient to wait for the lights, he was halfway to the workbench before they finally flickered on, allowing him to find what he was looking for. He picked up a hammer and chisel and turned for the yard.



Standing at the edge of the concrete slab, Arthur let his gaze sweep across the neat rows of footprints and thought about the history, hardship, struggle and triumph each one of those impressions represented. Each generation had worked hard to leave something for the next; a legacy that would carry them through the years and, in turn, be worthy of passing on to the next generation. His eyes settled on his son's prints and the anger in his soul was overwhelming. He bent to the slab and placed the nose of the chisel between the footprints of Trevor and Amelia then brought the hammer down with all his strength.

Chips of concrete exploded out of the slab and peppered Arthur's face, but he ignored their sting and brought the hammer down again and again.

'Arthur? What are you doing?' Colleen rushed down the back steps knowing all the while what he was up to. She reached him and laid a restraining hand on his shoulder, but too late. With a grunt Arthur gave one last swing of the hammer and there was a resounding crack as a piece of concrete came away. He stood up with the piece in his hands.

'What have you done?' Colleen cried.

Arthur looked down at the piece of concrete in his hands. By the feeble light from the porch he

could see the child's footprints and the inscription, 'Trevor - 1954'. 'If he's not part of this family then he doesn't deserve to have his footprints out here,' he said, and stormed off into the darkness behind the shed with the piece of concrete.

Arthur fully intended to destroy his son's footprints, but when the moment came he stood poised with the hammer raised and could not bring himself to perform that final irreversible act. Cursing his own emotional weakness he walked out into the paddock. Some distance behind the shed was a pile of rubble, the accumulated detritus of various building projects from over the years. Arthur threw the piece of concrete onto the pile and turned his back, hoping never to think of it again.

Over the next months several letters came from Trevor. Arthur refused to read any of them, but he couldn't help overhearing little snippets of information as Colleen told their daughters or her friends what Trevor was up to.

'He's finished his jungle-warfare training. They're sending him to Vietnam.'





Then, some weeks later, 'He's at a place called Nui Dat. Trevor says it is terribly hot and dusty. Some mortars fell on his camp last week, but nobody was hurt. I do hope he stays safe.'

Nine months after Trevor left Arthur was working in a paddock not far from the homestead when he noticed a dust trail heading up the long driveway from the main road as a vehicle made its way towards the house. He had ordered thirty rolls of fencing wire from the local Stock and Farm and thought Ernie Wise, their neighbour, was dropping it off for him. Arthur called the dogs and they came running and leaping into the back of the utility, then he sped off in the direction of the homestead. When he got there he was surprised to find an army vehicle parked beside the shed. He slammed the utility door and thumped up the back steps into the house.

He found Colleen in the front room. Two men stood on either side of her. They were dressed in military uniform and one wore the high dog-collar of a priest.

'Mister Connell?' The younger of the two men held out his right hand and Arthur shook it. 'I'm Lieutenant Gerry McCann.' He gestured towards his colleague. 'This is Captain Little, Army Chaplain.'

'Something's happened to Trevor.' Colleen's voice was on the edge of hysteria. There was no other reason for an army chaplain to visit their home and she knew it. Two other families in the district had already received similar visits. 'They wouldn't tell me until you were here.' She collapsed into one of the over-stuffed armchairs and Arthur went to her. He placed a hand on her shoulder but did not take his eyes off the two men.

'Mr and Mrs Connell,' McCann began, 'the news is not good I'm afraid. It is my sad duty to inform you both that Private Trevor Alan Connell was killed in action four days ago.'

The silence lingered for several heartbeats, then Colleen screamed. 'Not my Trevor,' she wailed, clutching at Arthur's arm. 'Not my baby boy.'

'Is there someone I can call for you?' the chaplain asked. 'A friend or relative? Your local priest?'

'No - No, thank you,' Arthur said, his voice surprisingly quiet and even. 'You gentlemen have done your duty. We can look after ourselves. If you don't mind I'll leave you to see your own way out.'

'Sir, I have details on how your son died if you wish to know,' McCann said.





'Don't matter,' Arthur replied. 'Dead is dead. Don't matter how it happened.'

McCann looked perplexed. 'But, sir. I'm told he has been cited for the Victoria Cross. Trevor died a hero, Mr Connell.'

'Still don't matter. A medal doesn't make him any less dead does it?'

Trevor's funeral was held a fortnight later in the little cemetery on the edge of town. Most of the town folk turned out for the solemn occasion. Trevor had been a favourite son of the community, well-liked and respected, with family roots that went back for generations.

Arthur stood beside his wife at the graveside and let the priest's words wash over him without paying too much attention. His eyes kept drifting back down the rows of headstones. More than a few Connells had been laid to rest in this part of the cemetery and it now irked him that Trevor was being buried among them, having spurned the family the way he did. Arthur had suggested that their son be buried on the far side of the graveyard, but Colleen had stood her ground, rallying her daughters to the cause. In the end Arthur had begrudgingly given in.

As his son's coffin was lowered into the grave, Arthur looked about at the gathered mourners, surprised to see Lieutenant McCann standing a respectful distance back from the others. Arthur dismissed the lieutenant's presence as some sort of army protocol. It wasn't until he and Colleen were leaving that McCann approached them.

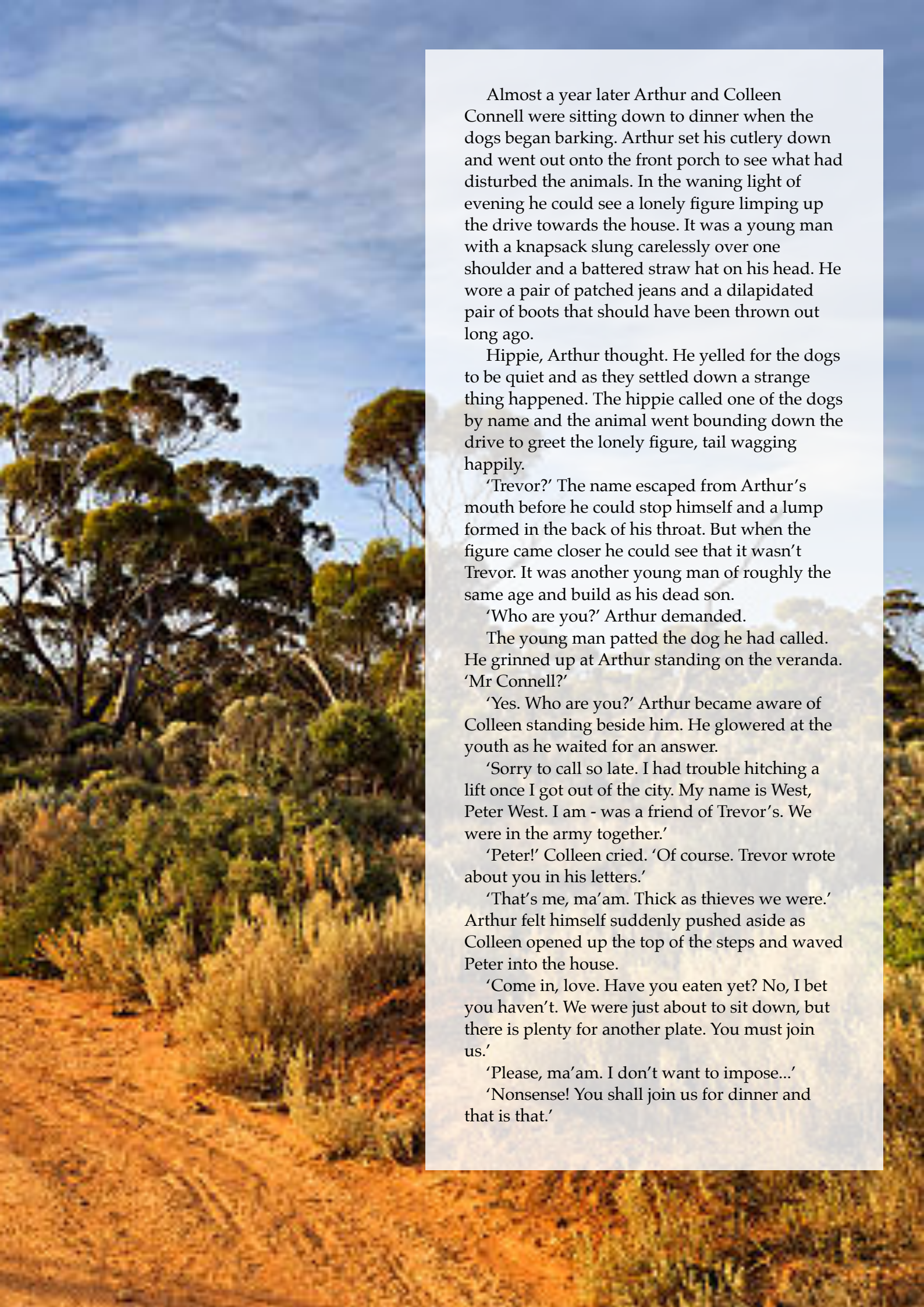
'Mr and Mrs Connell, my sincerest condolences on your loss.' He held out a small, highly-polished wooden box. 'The Army would like you to have this.' He snapped the lid open to reveal a medal and ribbon resting on a red velvet base. 'This is the Victoria Cross awarded to Trevor.' Arthur turned his eyes away from the medal, but as he did so, he could not help but read the two simple words embossed onto the medal's surface.

For Valour.

'Thankyou,' Arthur said. He took the box from McCann, closed the lid and slipped it into his coat pocket. When they returned home he placed the box on the mantle above the fireplace, lost among numerous mementos and photographs. Never to be spoken of again.







Almost a year later Arthur and Colleen Connell were sitting down to dinner when the dogs began barking. Arthur set his cutlery down and went out onto the front porch to see what had disturbed the animals. In the waning light of evening he could see a lonely figure limping up the drive towards the house. It was a young man with a knapsack slung carelessly over one shoulder and a battered straw hat on his head. He wore a pair of patched jeans and a dilapidated pair of boots that should have been thrown out long ago.

Hippie, Arthur thought. He yelled for the dogs to be quiet and as they settled down a strange thing happened. The hippie called one of the dogs by name and the animal went bounding down the drive to greet the lonely figure, tail wagging happily.

‘Trevor?’ The name escaped from Arthur’s mouth before he could stop himself and a lump formed in the back of his throat. But when the figure came closer he could see that it wasn’t Trevor. It was another young man of roughly the same age and build as his dead son.

‘Who are you?’ Arthur demanded.

The young man patted the dog he had called. He grinned up at Arthur standing on the veranda. ‘Mr Connell?’

‘Yes. Who are you?’ Arthur became aware of Colleen standing beside him. He glowered at the youth as he waited for an answer.

‘Sorry to call so late. I had trouble hitching a lift once I got out of the city. My name is West, Peter West. I am - was a friend of Trevor’s. We were in the army together.’

‘Peter!’ Colleen cried. ‘Of course. Trevor wrote about you in his letters.’

‘That’s me, ma’am. Thick as thieves we were.’ Arthur felt himself suddenly pushed aside as Colleen opened up the top of the steps and waved Peter into the house.

‘Come in, love. Have you eaten yet? No, I bet you haven’t. We were just about to sit down, but there is plenty for another plate. You must join us.’

‘Please, ma’am. I don’t want to impose...’

‘Nonsense! You shall join us for dinner and that is that.’



Within minutes of the stranger's arrival Arthur suddenly found himself in the uncomfortable position of sharing his dinner with the young man. He kept quiet, his way of showing his protest to this awkward imposition, but it didn't matter, Colleen and Peter kept up an incessant babble of conversation. When they finished dinner, Peter helped with the dishes and they retired to the front room with cups of coffee in hand.

Arthur and Colleen took up their usual seats in the armchairs but Peter refused to sit when offered. He limped about the room nursing his cup and examined the photographs hanging on the walls and lining the mantle. Arthur and Colleen watched him in silence. A sudden change had come over their guest. They could sense Peter had something to tell them and they waited patiently while he gathered his words.

'Trevor was right,' Peter said finally, turning to face the Connells. 'This is a family home. Never had one myself. I was raised in a church orphanage. No brothers or sisters, least not that I know of. Now I can see what Trev was so keen to get home to.'

'What do you mean?' Arthur sat up straight in his chair. 'Trevor turned his back on this family. Wanted no part of it. Said he wanted to make the army his career.'

Peter gave a little smile and took a sip of coffee. 'Trev mentioned you and he didn't part on the best of terms.'

'There were no terms what so ever,' Arthur said. 'He up and ran away.'

'I can assure you, Mr Connell, Trev had a change of heart not long after we landed in Vung Tau. He was looking forward to finishing his term of enlistment and then coming home to the family business. He spoke of nothing but what life was like here. And I was hungry for everything he could tell me, never having had a family of my own. I milked him for every bit of information I could - even the names of the dogs.' He limped along past the fireplace but something on the mantle caught his eye and he stopped. 'This is it, isn't it? This is Trev's VC? Do you mind if I have a look?' And before Arthur could object he had the box open and the medal resting in the palm of his hand.

'Did they tell you? Did the army say how Trev got this?'

Arthur shook his head. 'I didn't ask.'







'It was me,' Peter said. 'I'm the reason Trev was awarded this medal. I'm the reason he's dead.' His fist closed around the medal and he looked down at the couple as if expecting them to attack him after his confession. When no attack came he went on.

'We were patrolling in this place called Long Tan, a few miles out of Nui Dat. We ran into a large force of Viet Cong. They were returning from making trouble near one of the big towns, trying to draw us out into a fight - and they succeeded. We were hopelessly outnumbered. Even the reinforcements they sent us weren't a patch on what the enemy was throwing at us, so we had to pull back and try to form a new perimeter. We were in this rubber plantation and it was raining so hard you couldn't see more than a few bloody paces. I got hit in the leg, another bloke got one too and we both went down. Trev should have kept going. We were nearly there, but he stopped and pulled me back into the line. Then he went back for the other bloke. That's when he got hit.' He looked down at the medal in his hand. 'If I hadn't been hit we could've both dragged that other bloke in. By the time Trev got me in and went back out the enemy was too close, you see. It was my fault.'

'Sounds to me as if it wasn't your fault, Peter,' Arthur said, his voice barely above a whisper.

'Maybe, maybe not. I can't help but blame myself. He's dead and I'm still alive. It just doesn't seem right.' His bottom lip began to quiver and Colleen stood from her chair, taking the young man into her arms and hugging him the way she had hugged Trevor after a childhood nightmare.

'It's not your fault, pet,' she said soothingly. 'Trevor did what he thought he had to do. We came to terms with that a long time ago.'

'What brings you here?' Arthur asked. 'It wasn't just to get that off your chest was it?'

'No, sir. Trev always said I should come home with him when we finished our enlistment. He reckoned I needed to see all the things he talked about to understand them fully. It was all I could think about when I was in the hospital. The things Trev told me about this place got me through the bad patches. They discharged me from the army as medically unfit, so I have all the time in the world to come and see it for myself.'

'What will you do now, Peter?' Colleen asked, holding him at arm's length to study his face.

'I don't rightly know, ma'am. There's not much call for an ex-grunt with a gammy leg. Something will turn up.'



'Can you drive a tractor?' Arthur asked. 'Sir?'

'You heard me. If I put you on here I need you to be able to drive a tractor and do a few other things, taking your leg into consideration, of course.'

A smile broke out on the young man's face. 'You don't have to do that, Mr Connell. I didn't come here looking for work. I came looking for something else - closure I guess you'd call it.'

'Maybe you've found that, and a little more,' Arthur said. 'It will be minimum wage, bed and board, until the crop comes in. Then I can afford to pay you a bonus. Deal?' He stood and held out his hand. Peter only hesitated for a moment before taking the hand and shaking it vigorously.

'Deal, sir.'


Colleen was amazed that, with Peter's help, Arthur managed to pull the farm out of the economic slump it had slipped into. The Connells discovered that the lad was an enthusiastic worker and his leg hardly slowed him down at all. He had a stamina that matched Arthur's and they worked hard to bring the farm back to its former glory, each of them revelling in their accomplishments. The list of essential jobs on Arthur's list slowly dwindled down and they were even able to enjoy a day off here and there.

She still carried a mother's grief over the loss of her son and knew she would for the rest of her life. Peter had managed to fill some of the void left by Trevor's passing, and it was a twofold benefit; she had an outlet for her motherly whims and Peter suddenly found himself receiving something he had never known before - a mother's love. Trevor had given his own life to save Peter's. Colleen felt she had a duty to her son to ensure that life was nurtured and allowed to flourish. And it wasn't just her. Nothing gave her more joy than to hear Arthur and Peter laughing and joking with each other as they came up to the homestead for a meal.

One Sunday morning Colleen was woken in the early hours by a deep grating rumble. She dressed hurriedly and rushed through the pre-dawn light to the back porch. The cement mixer sat in the middle of the yard, turning slowly. Peter was shovelling sand into the barrel as Arthur tore open a bag of cement. He noticed her standing on the porch and called out, 'Go and put the kettle on, love. I'll get you when this lot is ready.' Then he smiled up at her. Colleen had once thought she would never see Arthur smile again. She turned away to prepare breakfast, a happy spring in her step.







She went back into the house, lit the stove and filled the kettle. Within a few minutes she had plates of bacon and eggs at each place setting. Arthur appeared at the back door. 'Come and take a look at this, love,' he said.

He took her hand and led her down the back steps and over to the tank stand. A fresh patch of cement lay poured on the ground. In the middle of the wet cement was embedded an older piece of concrete that contained the footprints of an eight year old boy. Colleen read aloud the inscription, 'Trevor - 1954. You found it!'

'It took some looking, but I finally found it,' Arthur agreed.

Beside Trevor's footprints was a small impression in the wet cement. It took Colleen a moment or two before she realised Arthur had imprinted their son's Victoria Cross medal beside his footprints.

'The story is all there,' Arthur said, waving his arm across the slab and its footprints. 'The next family to take over this place will have quite a history to live up to.' He placed his arm around Colleen's waist and smiled as she kissed his cheek.

'Who knows?' she said. 'Maybe Amelia or Maria will take it on?'

'Maybe?' Arthur said. He looked down at the wet concrete and frowned. 'Shame to let the rest of that fresh patch go to waste, though.' He lifted his gaze to Peter. 'Get your boots off, lad.'

'But, Arthur, this is for family!' Peter looked shocked.

'Who says you ain't?' Arthur snapped. 'Get your bloody boots off. Trevor made you family when he convinced you this place was worth coming home to. You're family right enough. And it will say so right there in the concrete.'



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## BILL SWIGGS



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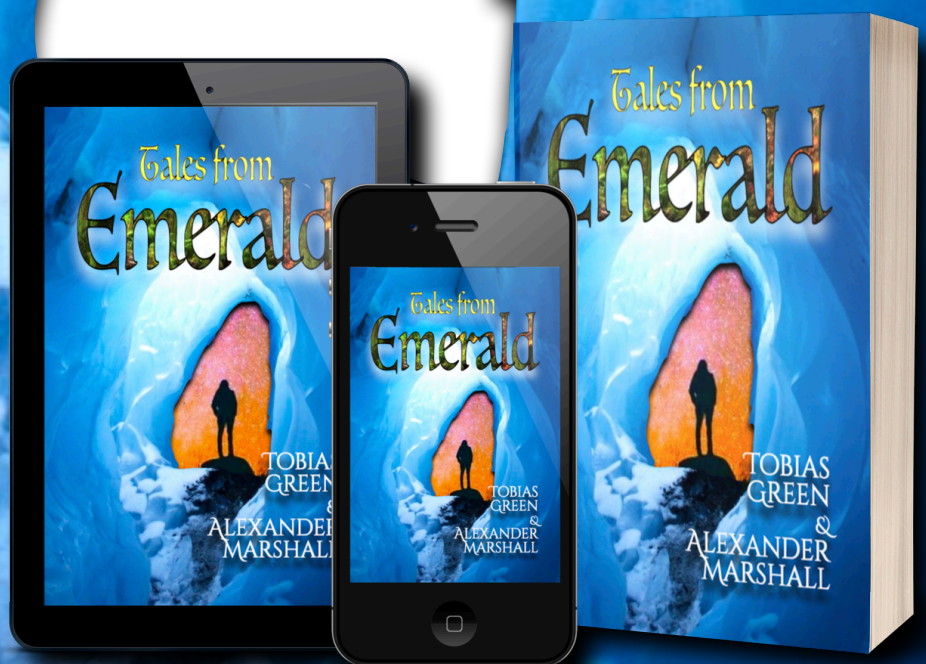


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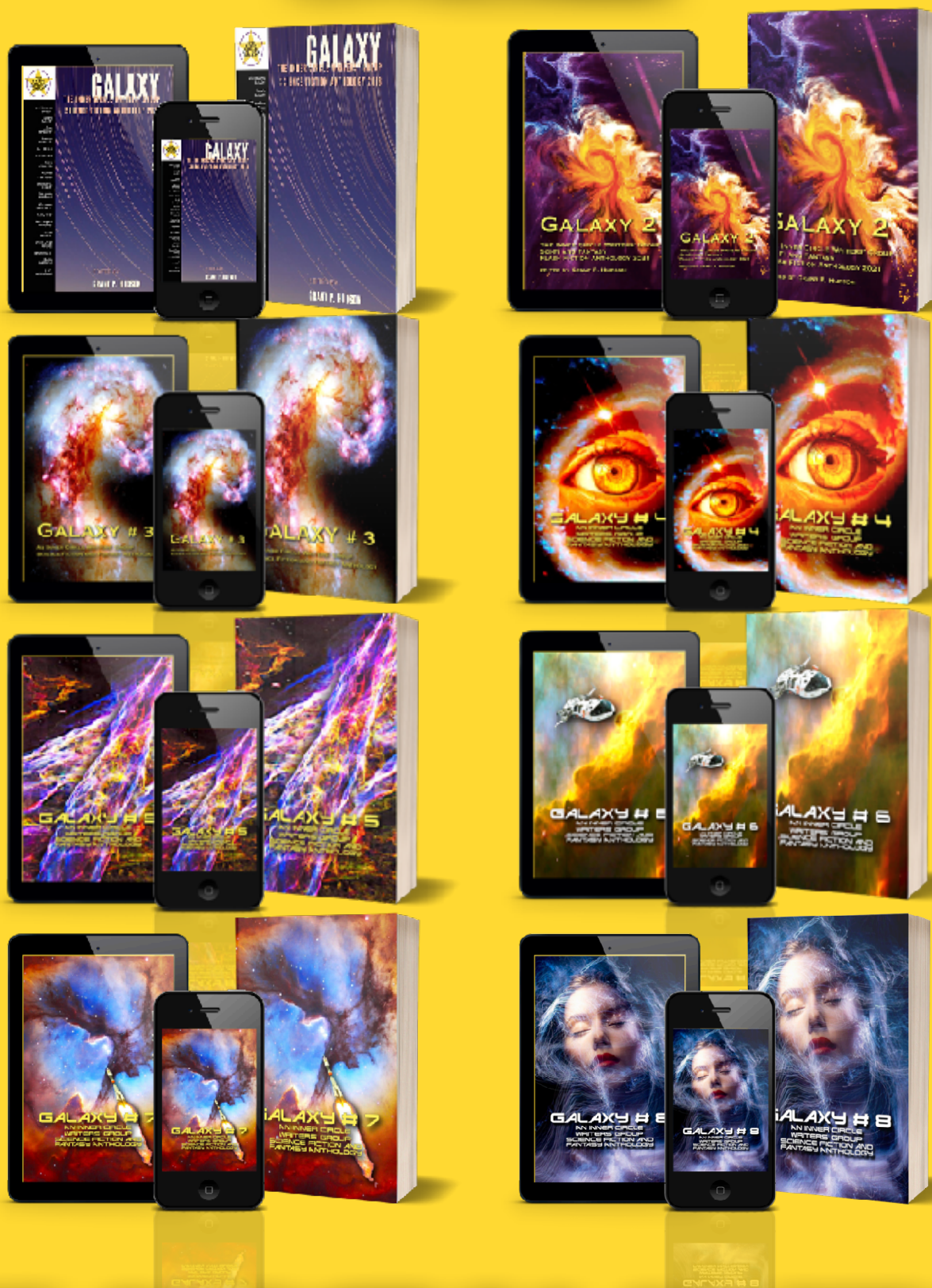


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