

# SUR-R-R-PRIS*E* !! !

(OH, WOW! I WASN'T EXPECTING THIS!)

By

*Hector Lambert-Bates*

## **WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...**

*There are a few things to like about Hector Lambert-Bates', "Surprise!," all of which should make you feel like reading this story.*

*I'll start with the self-reflexive, meta knowledge of this story – it is a story that knows it's a story. That shit tickles me to no content. Not only does the story know it's a story, but you can go even further into the tale and discover that a completely unrelated book by our protagonist has gone about and screwed all of his neighbor's minds up – as if knowledge had the ability to do that... – therein also lies the lovely philosophical connotation to Plato's Allegory of the Cave.*

*Next, as you read, I think that you'll find Dennis Grekland a protagonist that walks those fine lines between insane and genius. Now, is that always likeable? No. But is that type human someone who can certainly entertain your day? For sure. Rationalizing chaos is one of the traits that most humans tend to have, but to create your own and try to rationalize your way out? – now that is the mind of a human being that's read too much and I am here for it.*

*There is much more to enjoy about this story, but I think there is, at its core, the humanness of the writing process and the way in which we use language to express, incense, and create connections – even if, in Grekland's case, it gets him stuck in a goddamn cave for three years.*

*Lambert-Bates has done some good work with "Surprise!" and the best part about that statement is it isn't even the best surprise in the whole story.*

*Five stars.*

**QUALITY QUOTABLE** (*for the love of language...*)

I stepped out of my car. It was 37 degrees, or 2.7 the other way, although it felt like 28 degrees, or -2.2 degrees the other way, or 271 a third, with all that wind on my left cheek. The pavement had been poured 20 years earlier, which I suppose is 23 years ago now. It was a mixture of gray cobble and black crevices with white lines to separate the cars. The lot was crowded that day. Not as much as it had been the year before, but enough to make me feel uncomfortable. 7 steps in, I brushed past a man holding three things.

- a. Thing one: a grey pot with leaves around the edges.
- b. Thing two: a bag of groceries with a milk carton weighing the bottom down.
- c. Thing three: a satchel with tags still attached to the strap around his left shoulder.

Surprise!

*Dennis Grekland has been trapped in a cave for the past three years. He has documented the return of several mice and a herd of frogs. He presumes he is somewhere between Tripoli and Kalamata.*

*The following is an excerpt from a research paper he wrote in the cave:*

A Postface to The Translucent Thought of Grecian Frogs

Now that you all comprehend my dealings with those slime bastards, the necessities are done. It's time you remember, with me, my origin.

Three years ago, I was delicately hunted by a woman with fewer hairs than wits. I've been prisoned in this grotto ever since. A boulder fell at the entrance, so she can't get me, but I watch her shadow beneath it. She's been wandering back and forth since we arrived.

I've wondered: "Is she immortal? Is this God I'm squared off with? Baphomet perhaps?" No. It can't be God or the devil. I hear her footsteps and those lordies don't have those. It must have simply been that stout woman.

But right, I was saying, pondering, questioning: why was it that she pursued? What was the motive which provided her with an odd spear and a mess of coat hangers? I've narrowed it down to two possibilities, each less likely than the next.

1. I recall being disliked, but I assure you that in being disliked, I was in the right. I lived in a town blasphemously named Creakridge, for its reek and cringe, with my son Todd and his mother Miscrel. I recall a book, my first book, sitting on the ledge of our cottaged house, staring at us three, eager to invade us too. No, but see, I put a thing in the book. The book couldn't get us because I put a thing in it.

d. Imagine, please, a thing. Can you? No. It's already being used in the book. But try. This thing has no heft. Penniless, without *cents*, it serves no purpose, it has no meaning, it cannot be loved, it cannot be. This thing is a word. Which? I don't remember, but I'm sure it was the thing that kept it on the shelf and not scurrying around our minds.

So, my book was a contradiction. Something about the way it had to have been was utterly against the "have to be" of those people in that town. So I lived in my dislike. Right there in it. A fly in a hardly set flan, a shovel in the sewer, a counterfeit dollar buried in brass trinkets.

It couldn't have been more than 50 pages. But 50 pages in a mind is far more than 50 and a thing sitting on a shelf.

I couldn't leave our house by that point. I was too far gone with everyone's distaste.

That was my first sighting of the woman. She had a few more coat hangers back then. Some had fallen out by our chase sequence. We all cranked our necks, third, fourth and eighth vertebrae hanging out of order, to see her out the left window. She was staring at my pride; not the son one, the better one, the one with new meaning in its place on a shelf. She shook her head and spoke something at her hanger-less hand.

"She seems to be having a rough go," I laughed at my others. "Seems as though she can't imagine a thing."

"Dennis, you've ruined their lives." said Todd's mother Miscrel, less bearded than usual. "Everyone's undone. Tim next door refuses to change his sheets because of that book."

"I did nothing to change their minds other than introduce a newness." I croaked and gestured to my book on a shelf. "No bedsheets received a recommended change in that one's regard."

Todd replied, "I don't understand what it was you introduced, but it's got their systems tangled."

No! My book, far more than 50 pages and a thing in my brain, has no newness and yet all these people herold me about their disfunction, complaining "I've lost my sense of circadia," and "why can't I turn anymore," and "this book has truly helped me clamber from my senses," and "maybe if you could possibly destroy it, please?"

So, I never answered my Todd. I let him stew across the table as our eyes turned back to my book. The woman looked too and I could hear the tinkles of her hair falling

outside. But I needed a breath, an established pause. Shooing the woman away was more than excuse.

“Excuse me,” I muttered while Todd and Miscrel ignored all the parts of me that weren't on a shelf. I swallowed prongs of empty air as our front door swung open.

“Weather for hooligans and mountaineers!” I would have said if the mood had been less taut. I waited for a chuckle from Todd anyways. He gave, but not to me, and I stepped out.

We had pillars. Not the kind that held a thing, begging for another crumble, but the sort that stretched up to something; to bridge the gap between floors, interrupting a stroll with a guise of wealth.

I knocked on a pillar, an introduction to possible conversation with the woman. Hollow. “Hollow,” I smiled and turned. She had been gone long before. Or, most of her had. On the ground, where she had stood, was a coin. Why didn't I pick it up? No one liked that.

That could have been what angered those people in that town: my negligence to the pursuing consequences of my book. I've attempted to rectify that through the book you're reading now and, in effect, the *translucentism* of the frogs here. I do not know if it'll ever truly make up for my- No!

I must again reiterate my rightness. I am not responsible for others' analysis. I present the text, and as their bed sheets aren't changed, the people in my town interpret in their own way. Can you pin Frothman's unearthed ruggedness, or Frilton's breath ache, or Freg's legless breachings on words I spat out on a page? No!

Why did that woman chase me? Well, I say it was because of timing, not an error of mine. A beginning I started, I confess, but a moral one. It was timing which placed me in “Barber’s Liquids: Shopper’s Drug and Food Store” on that Sunday, no... Thursday afternoon. The hour which set me with bag-fulls of water as she spied from her spot. And it was the minute which noticed my poverty and set the idea in her noggin.

She began to chase, not me. I performed no instigation. A tree waved her on.

I find it unlikely, however, that they all had such unpleasant dealings with my book. It’s nearly preposterous and now that I’ve done a share of remembering, I verdict it wrong. The previous theory is right out. I’ll need the other before I do anything rash.

In the meanwhile, I’ve prepared several tools. I can still see her shadow wandering back and forth beneath the boulder, and I’m going to face her. I’m going to pull my lever. I’m going to lift the boulder, I’m going to fight her, and I’m going to publish this, my next bestseller, in an area devoid of caves. That’ll make up for three years lost. But I can see her shadow wandering back and forth beneath the boulder. Her whistle refuses melody.

I’ve got another theory.

2. One morning, I dragged myself to the sink for a tepid glass of water and filled my cup with vacancy. Our well had gone dry. Must have been the wind. But that was ok, it just meant I needed a trip to the store. I loved the store and its many things. Don’t worry, I’ll describe them soon.

81 steps. It always takes 81 steps from my parking spot, 6 places from the entrance, to “Barber’s Liquids: Shoppers Drug and Food Store.” That is if I’m walking as usual. Sometimes I prefer to spice things down. It takes 177 steps, toe to heel, and 31 steps while striding. That morning was without flavor, though. It was exactly as follows.

I stepped out of my car. It was 37 degrees, or 2.7 the other way, although it felt like 28 degrees, or -2.2 degrees the other way, or 271 a third, with all that wind on my left cheek. The pavement had been poured 20 years earlier, which I suppose is 23 years ago now. It was a mixture of gray cobble and black crevices with white lines to separate the cars. The lot was crowded that day. Not as much as it had been the year before, but enough to make me feel uncomfortable. 7 steps in, I brushed past a man holding three things.

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What did I need? Yes, water.

The doors were those slidy ones that don't work until you get close enough to think they're not going to work. Wind on the inside was different. It smelled like roses and saffron and a touch of agony.

A wall of bagged water was in the back. Rows of canned goods blocked it. I walked seven steps to stand at its foot.

“Grim for us water-ponderers, eh?” The barnacled hand of Fronders Muck missed my shoulder. “How do ya plan to get yer neccessecties with all those things crowding the top? I'll follow yer lead.”

Mr. Fronders was a controlled old man; a sea-goer, I think, ripe with remedied scabies and rickets. He hobbled around every day in a routine fit with boredom and

barrels of drink. I had caught him on a rare occasion that day. Only once a month did he go searching for beverages with less than 20% alcohol.

Years before, I'd met him on a similar errand. Then, he had those badges and memoirs he'd try to pawn. I always showed polite interest, so he favored me and I reaped the rewards: ...

"Water today?" I asked.

"Oh yes, ya know I'm try-yin to get myself to my healthier state, before all this mess happened," he ran a shuddering hand over the wool sweater that covered his stomach. The motion turned into an itch at the bottom.

"I think you're looking just fine, Mr. Fronders, although your hair could use a little trimming." Fronders fondled gritted strands of air where hair used to be. "I could ask Todd to give you a haircut. He's been learning and he's getting damn good. Did you see how he did with her?" I gestured to the cashier across the store.

"Mmm, good deal then. Ya knowin I haven't seen that boy since he was up to my elbow? Been mighty too long."

"You know what, Mr. Fronders, I've got your water today. Don't worry about it. I can bring it around later. Maybe we can grab a real drink afterwards." I smiled, aware I'd dug a chasm of drawl for my later *descent*.

Fronders licked his lips with a fractured tongue. "That sounds lovely-like, my boy. And please do call me Muck. It's been too long with that Mr. Fronders. Muck is where I'm called to."

"Muck." The man waddled away, dropping bits of licorice as he went. I glanced back at that gummed stack in front of the water, sat the tip of my finger on a misplaced

can, and the tower collapsed. That's what a degree in biology will get you. I followed Muck's path through the bushel, into the line, coughing as I cut in a reasonable three regulars away from the desk of my son's head model. Shouts erupted behind me, but I've got the antidote.

h. Try this, will you? You can't unless you're reading this in a line you don't belong in, but here, I'll do it anyways. Convince yourself you are part of the mob. Yell with them. At yourself, sure it is, but who knows that behind the first? Only you, who is now yelling. No one scathes at a moral colleague.

The woman two in front bought a bouquet of prawns and dropped her dollar in the tip jar, courtesy. The next carried his parrot rum to the counter and fished for exact change. He dropped his dollar in the jar and thanked our cashier.

A copy of "I Found God Satan and the Rest in Belgium in 1926" sat on a shelf behind her. Oh! That's where I read about the lordies' lack of stomping. I remember now.

But beside it was the damp spot where a book had been. Had it been a book? Or was it just a thing and fifty pages in my head where a book should have been? No, there it was. Behind her. I saw it. Just a book on a shelf, staring at me.

"Can I help you?" our cashier chirped for the 239th time that morning.

"Hello, how are you doing today?" I asked.

"Polite. I can't remember how the weather is outside. Nice?" she replied.

"No, it's hailing. It's all those minerals from the north. They're frothing up the clouds," I stood confused, balancing my bags as they bulged between my elbows. "It's been going for a few days, haven't you been home?"

“No, I haven’t had the chance.” As I reminisce, she was clearly delusional, not in the right of her mind, rocking outside of ration. “I’ve been here oh…” she continued, “since Todd gave me this magnificent style.” She twirled behind the counter and shook her locks.

I would like to rephrase. Lock is far too elegant. Either everyone in this town, including my son, were toxically positive, or they lacked sense enough to define “style”. What topped the cashier’s head were clumps; parasites that drained from single spots on her scalp, all connected to blonde strands that ran down her chest. They looked continually wet, yet snappable at the slightest bend.

“It looks spectacular.” I heaved my bags on the table. “Well, I’d love to stay and talk, but there are far too many people behind me and I wouldn’t want to keep them.” The squat one behind me plunged eyes into my lower spine. “I’ll just be having these today,” I said.

“Alright, that’ll be four dollars.” I handed her my bills and dropped my change into the jar. “Thank you,” she finished. Did she? Maybe she was silent. Maybe she stared at me from beneath leeches of hair.

The room creased. She focused between my eyebrows as one of hers twitched.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” she said.

“Excuse me?” I turned to find cousins, grand-things, relatives and distants with eyes focused on the bridge of my nose and the few follicles there I couldn’t feel until then.

“Please leave,” she said again.

“I demand to know why,” I snapped back. The crowd gasped. “What?” I turned. “Did I do something to offend you? Was my purchase not satisfactory? I haven’t stolen, I haven’t lied. I haven’t even written this time. What would please you all?” We all heard the seconds arrive.

The woman unlatched from my forehead to glance left. A lump of hangers, whose clothes had been worn out, beckoned for her. She grabbed them and the room erupted in haggles.

That woman chased me out of the store and whistled as I ran. When I turned around the corner, something slipped through my fist-ends. *A cent. How much did I put into her tip jar*, as she cracked round the corner?

Did any of that happen? I don’t remember its realness, other than itself, or its past. It could have been. Still, no reason for all its post nastiness. So, I find myself in a cave, halfway between Tripoli and Kalamata with a family of slime bags.

I’ve been scheming for years and I assume she has too, although I don’t know how. She’s been occupied walking back and forth with that whistle barricading her lips.

I’ve prepared. There are a couple of stick-hangers. I didn’t make those. They brushed in from the open end at the other end of the cave. In my three years, I never tested the darkness behind.

There are a few mucks, named after my old man, if he ever was. Those might help me if necessary. I’ve also been able to fashion a belt of wooden pegs, which, if used right, would secure my demise. I don’t want that. I’ll leave those here. No, before I go out, I’ve got one more theory.

3. I may have *cent* her husband to the grave.

i. That one's a far fetch, though.

It's time. I hope you enjoyed "The Translucent Thought of Grecian Frogs". I certainly  
int-

*Dennis Grekland prepares to release himself from this trap with its cave and frogs. He picks up his mucks, stick hangers, but not those wooden pegs, they'd never help. He stealths towards a lever beneath the entrance boulder. Her whistle cocophons. Her shadow lengthens beneath. Her trampse quickens.*

*Dennis Grekland pulls the lever and the boulder rolls away.*

*Dennis Grekland steps into a frosted morning and drops his weapons. There is no woman there. Just a figured tree that sways in front of him. Its wind-ridden fingers are shadowed beneath his feet.*

*Surprise!*

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This story loosely originates from a 3-AM-conjured idea of my gender identity. What compelled me to write it, though, was the ending, which helped me through a night of existential crises - the solution that gender, for me, is a tree. Any theory as to why the tree is there doesn't matter. It exists as a singular thing, and so do I. This story was written for me to string together my views of conformity and the individual.*

*My biggest influences are Borges and Danielewski. Borges for raw concept and Danielewski for a nonsensical surrealist prose style I refuse to read - and that really is the best kind of literature, isn't it? I love writing surrealism and I hope you enjoy watching Dennis run.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** Hec is a writer from Guelph, Ontario. He is interested in surrealism and literary fiction. He has been published in CafeLit and Alternate Route. He is working on his first novel.