

A REAL GUY

By J. C. Smolen

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author ZACHARY HAY writes: “A Real Guy” reads like it came from a few generations ago when plots were tight, words meant everything, girls were worth dying for and heroes—even the ugliest and unlikeliest—saved lives. J.C. Smolen’s story about a one-armed, legless beggar finding redemption is a rare breed these days: exceptionally masculine while heartbreakingly vulnerable. Its prose cuts deep enough to take your arm off, its pacing could conduct symphonies and the characters take on more flesh and blood in 3,000 words than some authors can muster in a career. Quote: The hand at the end of El Brazo could push just one of the little silver buttons and Peen would drop and splat the hard ground like a little, mal-formed hatchling; a reject. That was Peen – a purposeless scrap, a reject. In his hopelessness and helplessness, Peen felt himself choke and start to sob and shake. Peen just hung there up-side-down like a quivering bat, and suddenly he knew Fidelio’s pain, while his miserable tears drained down through his eye brows and into his hair.*

Why do I like this story? Because Smolen’s grit and humor may save the American short story, or at least keep its blood flowing another day. Five stars.

A Real Guy

No cell phone, no dog, no girlfriend, no smokes, no energy drink, no sign, no legs, no left arm, Peen picks the spots where nobody else works it. He works the twenty-lane, impossible intersections where the traffic roars and semis slam and the dust devils, where there’s no protection, not even any shade, but for Peen – humming her song, humming “Norma Jean. That’s my love” - an hour tied to his skate board a day and he’s done. Some days he stuffs over a hundred bucks into his money belt.

Here's a flame-yellow pick-up truck sparkling alone in the morning sun at Peen's light. By himself in the cab, big diesel looks over at Peen, deciding. No place to pull over, the truck powers its curb-sides right up on the sidewalk. A smiling movie-hero driver in filthy work clothes jumps down with something in his hand, bounds toward Peen. Peen rolls his way. Peen reaches for the tenner the huge, clean hand offers him. With the bill, Peen starts to spin away back to his spot, but the towering dude is grinning white teeth, blabbing something that doesn't make sense - something that Peen barely hears as he spins away back toward his money spot. The blindingly yellow truck bounces back down onto the road, roars off.

Back when he was even littler, Peen used to wonder what it feels like to step on the gas and drive in a car chase - to be a hero. But a Dad now, no return address, Peen mails regular money orders away home to her - if he doesn't get robbed on his way to the store or back to this week's RV park. What's left of Peen weighs just a hundred and two pounds. Yes. Sometimes he does. He gets robbed - unless El Brazo gets them first.

Today, like out of an ATM, Peen gets ninety-eight bucks in forty-eight minutes. He might just bag it for the day. Besides, Peen's not used to people looking at him - I mean, not right in his eyes anyhow. Usually, the drivers watching their traffic light, they're reaching public tender blind across to Peen through their passenger side window. They don't want to nakedly look at him, so they don't. But that's where the diesel-powered hero looked - standing right next to him - right in his eyes. Shook Peen up.

Ninety-eight bucks in forty-eight minutes. Peen works the corners bare-headed. In his best pan-handle trim, sun burn lightens his blonde hair and peels his cheeks. He's

pretty sure he looks more pitifully cute that way. Today, he decides to just bag it. Besides, kitty-corner across the intersection, coupla hoodie locals are vultching on him.

When he was four and a half, in a hay field down near Bakersfield, a combine pruned him – pruned little Peen. Back before that, a little brown Madre begged her husband Rancilio to give puny Peen tortillas – and after her tears – to take Peen in, then buy him his last little pair of shoes. Peen was nothing but a homeless toe-head runt orphan, but he and Fidelio grew up together.

Peen was little. Cut way back to stumps now, he would always be little – and a target.

So Peen watches the two leggy hoodies walk behind a law office parking lot hedge, then disappear as they duck out of sight. He can feel them watching him through the hedge.

Town-to-town, Peen lives in his brother Fidelio's RV – in exchange for Peen's disability check. Fidelio still eats out his six-years-ago broken heart. Fidelio had a big heart, but since Lupita broke it, he chews it in front of the TV – everyday. Fidelio has a sixty-six inch waist now and fingers like sausages. Peen doesn't tell Fidelio about the cash he hustles.

Peen feels vulnerable today. He figures, from some place hidden, the hoodies've been watching him all week, ever since he and Fidelio rolled into town, like the hoodies know now how much Peen's got on him, like they're guessing how it's money-order day. It's as if, clear kitty-corner across that twenty-lane intersection, Peen can actually hear the sniffing of those hoodies, hear it right through the traffic roar and exhaust - sniffing out blood. Ever since, five years ago, he had to look at great big knives and give up his

cash or his blood, Peen has been feeling his ability to hear the blood-sniffing grow in him. He can tell it's growing by how his fear and his anger are growing – anger that somebody might try to stop him from sending her money – fear of what might become of his son if the money stops. She told Peen she was sorry and he knew she meant it, but right after Peen got her pregnant, Norma Jean started twining her legs with Cecil's.

But that was a long, long time ago. Today, Peen's gotta dodge the hoodies. When you use the same arm and hand for everything, you don't take the long way there and you don't dink around. So he decides he has to make his move. When he gets the light and skates across the highway, in his peripheral vision, he can see the hoodies've moved out from behind their hedge, but there're still five lanes of forty-five-mile-an-hour traffic between Peen and the hoodies' law office parking lot. He sees one of the hoodies banging the crosswalk button impatiently. It's maybe six blocks to the Prairie Mart. Peen takes off.

Sticking to the right-hand side of the new sidewalk, Peen grabs the clean, concrete edge, and his arm – El Brazo – rapid-fires in fast, powerful yanks that he knows can take him up to maybe fifteen miles an hour – fast as a lotta people can run. But that's what they're doing – the hoodies are running. He can hear them now behind him – their feet thudding the pavement, gaining on him. He was right – about the sniffing. He feels afraid and in his mind, he whips El Brazo just like you would a sled dog, and El Brazo's super-power makes Peen's skate board lunge along the sidewalk in big leaps, then into a slight down-grade.

Peen hasn't been to this Prairie Mart before. He only hopes they sell money orders. He just thinks he knows where the store is - what the basic lay of the land is –

from back when he and broken-hearted Fidelio first drove up the winding, steep grade into town. At first, from the freeway, they spotted the big Prairie Mart sign up on top of its hundred-foot, white pole. Peen knows the town is built way up on a mesa, the freeway running far below on the plain, along the western base of the plateau. That's all he knows. But when he sees up ahead the sidewalk come to an end and the road curve left and out of sight and that there are no houses or businesses in the curve, with a stab, he realizes he screwed up. He realizes the hoodies are going to try to get Norma Jean's money soon.

Under his sweat shirt, when he's skating, Peen always wears a heavy belt around his waist with two nylon lanyards coming off it – one clipped at his right hip and leading towards the front of his board, another the reverse. His leg stumps grip the board's rails and his nuts and lizard in their heavy leather pouch dangle through a custom slot.

The hoodies are very close now; Peen hears them laugh. El Brazo ignites. Peen rockets off the end of the sidewalk. Accelerating, his board's trucks slam onto the street. When he hits, he feels his board flex and the pavement flying under him graze his nuts. Peen is isolated in the curve. He hears one of the hoodies yell, "Get him!" and there's the loud slap, slap, slap of sprinting feet and just for an instant, fingers snatch at his shoulder and he feels hot breath, right down his neck.

But on Peen's left, a hidden street opening zooms into view. Jamming the board's left rail down hard, El Brazo yanks up on the right. The perfection of El Brazo's carve into the turn takes Peen's breath away. El Brazo rides again! The tension of the turn feels beautiful, organic as behind him, somebody thuds the pavement and tumbles and swears in pain.

The narrow road dives. The speed is incredible. Peen hears the rush of the air past his ears, his eyes watering as the accelerating wind hits his face. The hoodies' running feet are gone, but so is Peen. Just at the sublime instant when all the tension in the smoking trucks of Peen's board releases, just when Peen feels his board go out of control, and he becomes bug-eye terrified by his velocity, the narrow road ski-ramps Peen sickeningly into space. Without Peen, the road curves suddenly sharp right.

Peen airborne, he can't breathe. His awed feeling of flying very high over the planet darts intensely. A glistening, floating mylar balloon in the shape of a blood-red, lost valentine shoots by. Peen's terror becomes unimportant. Instead, his mind is filled with Norma Jean – her face, her curls, the profound depth of her dark eyes and their rapture and her words and that fact that she didn't laugh when he told her Fidelio said once that, below the belly button, naked Peen looked the way a machinist wouldpeen the sheared end of a steel rod. He hasn't talked to Norma Jean in eight years and even the way he learned he has a son was a grapevine kina thing, but Peen loves her and doubts she loves Cecil. It wasn't just kinky – what Peen and Norma Jean had.

A leafy tree top rushes at Peen, slaps him across his face. El Brazo's elbow throws up over his eyes. Like, for the second time in his life, getting harvested and scrambled by a huge machine, Peen feels himself bounce and tumble branch to branch as he falls a long time.

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Watching a little brown and orange bird peck along a pipe-stem branch a couple of feet away, Peen realizes he's awake and his eyes are open and he's hanging from his skate board which has this five-foot-long, splintered-off vertical tree trunk about thick as

a baseball bat handle threaded between his board and his bare belly. There should be, but there isn't much pain. In the distance, Peen can hear the rush of the freeway far below on the plain. It occurs to Peen he's a human button being sewn onto the great memorial quilt in the sky – that he'll die right where he is, and with him, his son's chances. Panicking, Peen clutches for his money belt, for her money. But it's gone! - just like his legs and his left arm.

Very close, Peen hears a raven's hollow, echoing caw. He twists and looks toward the sound. Big as seagulls, a pair of birds are watching him, their armor-like black feathers shining in the sun. They're so close, he can see their glittering eyes blink with interest. It's Spring. They'll have merciless fledglings to feed. Where he's dangling, nobody will see what happens to Peen. Flat nobody.

But what's new? Nobody ever did see him – except, squirmingly, the yellow truck hero. Peen didn't much appreciate it - getting nailed that way – as if that great, vital, bounding giant with two arms and two long legs and two watching grey eyes could total Peen's hidden pennies at a glance.

But shit! He did. He looked directly in Peen's eyes and he smiled and said, "You look like a real guy!" A real guy. What the hell? Peen was incomplete and he knew it. How could anybody call him a guy? Now that he thought about it, the hero kina bowed and sorta saluted to Peen, too. But Peen was nothing but a scrap. He knew that. Norma Jean knew that. A scrap. Love at first sight or not, she wanted more and Peen couldn't blame her.

Their hugely-beaked heads bobbing in excited agreement, the branches they are standing on bending, both black birds in a strange, rattling chatter, estimate Peen. It's creepy how, no question, they're predicting Peen's death.

Peen could tell he was still high in the trees - twenty, thirty lethal feet up over the steep ground. At the board ends of the lanyards on his waist belt – the only things that held him to his board – dangled him from the sky – were two push-button quick-release shackles. The hand at the end of El Brazo could push just one of the little silver buttons and Peen would drop and splat the hard ground like a little, mal-formed hatchling; a reject. That was Peen – a purposeless scrap, a reject. In his hopelessness and helplessness, Peen felt himself choke and start to sob and shake. Peen just hung there up-side-down like a quivering bat, and suddenly he knew Fidelio's pain, while his miserable tears drained down through his eye brows and into his hair.

That's when, below him, he heard a man's voice - ugly. He heard it clear. No question what the man's voice said from straight push-button down under Peen. The voice threatened, "Go ahead. Just open your mouth. I'll cut your tits off." Peen heard, too, the other part - the terrified whimpering - and her begging, "Oh, please - no."

The bind Peen was in got worse. The main reason Peen knew the man's voice was plumb-bob straight below him was he could see them straight down through an opening in the big leaves – the back of the man's shoulders and his head – and under him, past the back of his neck – a girl's face. With a shock, Peen realized she was looking up at him – at only Peen – appealing right into the private despair of Peen's eyes – invading just like the hero did, right into Peen's eyes, right through into Peen's heart where she had no damn business. Peen closed his eyes. He shut her out.

Her face reminded him of Norma Jean's – that first early summer glimpse of each other at the skate park. Norma Jean saw only the hard cordage of bare El Brazo clinging to the top of that half-pipe and above El Brazo, Peen's chiseled face and Peen never forgot that moment. He didn't know how he knew. He just knew Norma Jean was disarmed in that glance – that she was right there in that instant in love with Peen. When El Brazo swung Peen's skateboard over the top and Peen shredded down in a perfect carve and stopped in front of Norma Jean, she saw what little there was of Peen to see, but she stayed in the same mood. Peen had something Norma Jean wanted. Peen never really knew what it was, but he gave it.

Peen opened his eyes. This time, Peen knew exactly what it was, so he just gave it. His life wasn't all that much. It was going to be easy to die for a girl. With the tip of the thumb of the hand at the end of El Brazo, Peen pushed a shackle release button. The shackled didn't jam. It released perfectly. Hard, he twisted his shoulders. In the fall, Peen and his board and El Brazo rotated in a perfect crooked-grind, and then, just like they were descending into a half-pipe carve, El Brazo gripped the board's right rail and Peen's front board truck hit the man exactly in the back of his neck right at the base of his skull.

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Peen realized he was still alive. It was a startling disappointment. But maybe twenty feet away, Peen saw her sitting figure. She was in part of her underwear in the dirt with her arms hugged up to her bare chest. She was muddy and shivering. But she was waiting – watching Peen – until his eyes opened and he blinked and looked back at her and El Brazo grabbed a bush and pulled him up sitting. Several minutes, she looked fearlessly into Peen's eyes, then she stood up and started alone down the slope through

the brush. She didn't go far, though, before she stopped and turned and looked back at Peen and while she stood there a long time, Peen held his breath. Finally, she turned again and left.

Peen found his skate board and the man with his motionless head twisted at an odd angle. He took the man's knife. Amazingly, like at the end of a rainbow, Peen found his money belt, too. Wishing he could tell his broken-hearted brother Fidelio all about it, he let El Brazo start to drag them both back up the hill. But because Peen was never going back, Fidelio would never know.

Dragging himself, Peen's mind was filled with only her ashen face and blue eyes. It was almost the same feeling as that early summer day a long time ago with Norma Jean at the skate park. It was like lightening. He knew. He knew he would never forget it. He didn't know how he knew. He just did – that the naked girl in all her terror was disarmed by what Peen did, and also something she saw in his face and that she was in love with him, more than Norma Jean ever was, and that she would never forget him - either.

It was pretty good. Through his tears, Peen smiled and turned around and started back down toward the freeway. He decided he would keep the money in his money belt. Just this once. He decided he would find a new store in a new town and buy some new clothes and wash his face. He knew he was pitifully cute and even though they didn't have shoes or feet in them, he and El Brazo would go anywhere they wanted.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I actually met Peen on the street. I actually powered my curb-sides up on the sidewalk, got out and handed him ten bucks - just for his obviously remarkable huevos! But next I knew, my heart wanted him to be a hero, so I wrote A Real Guy.*

My approach to a story is never issue or theme; it's always bad planning and disorganization. Why would I want to chew clear to the bone of a story when I've already thought through what I think about the person who inspired it, or how it ends?

I want to say I have out-grown all my influences, but I often still feel F. Dostoyevsky's frenetic nervousness happen. Just for the high of it, I listen to Grace Slick's White Rabbit at Woodstock. I can't forget Jim Hawkins cowering from Billy Bones and his rum at the old Admiral Benbow Inn.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Months before he graduated from Seattle's O'Dea High School in 1964, J.C. Smolen found himself Seaman Recruit, U.S. Navy. Joe says, "Yeah. I don't get it yet, but there's an important reason I didn't go over there and get shot. I came back from Japan, and I went to school on the G.I. Bill."*

Joe received the B.A. English from the University of Washington, 1973. After Commencement, he was fairly consistently employable – as Ocean Shipping Owner/Charterer's Boarding Agent, Lumber Company Rail Traffic Manager, Municipal Bus Operator and Bus Training Supervisor.

He has written his own personal U.S. Navy Report(s) of Fitness of an Officer, and Enlisted Evaluations, hundreds of Bus Operator Evaluations, and twenty-five brief, internally-published articles involving practical Bus Operations Policy application. He also wrote Bus Operator training materials.

Since 2015, Joe has been having an over-the-top blast writing half a dozen short fictions and two novels. His work, including his tendency toward the type of blatant exaggeration found in this Bio, is overseen by the Waldport, Oregon writing group "Tuesday".

In 1982, Joe was finally struck by lightning. He says, "What else was I going to do then, but ask her, "Do you think we should get married?" Today, he and Sherrie live on the Oregon Coast in a house they designed and built themselves, with the well known black Standard Poodle Rico Suave.

EDITOR'S BIO: : *Zachary Hay was born in Detroit, MI in 1994. His work has appeared in The Arlington Literary Journal Online, Crab Fat Magazine and The No Extra Words Podcast. His story **The Boy Who Killed No One** was published in Issue 5.*