

**R L Harrell**



Son of the  
Féinne

And Other Stories



# Son of the Féinne

## And Other Stories

R L Harrell



Robert L Harrell  
Integrity Excellence Growth

Published by Compelling Input Productions and Robert L Harrell

Copyright © 2020 Robert Harrell

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-938088-14-8

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without the prior written permission of the Publisher. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to Robert Harrell, [info@compellinginput.net](mailto:info@compellinginput.net).

Compelling Input books and other products are available online at <https://compellinginput.net>

Robert L Harrell books and other products are available online at <https://robertlharrell.com>

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or have been fictionalized. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, or events is entirely coincidental. The author makes no claims to but instead acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the world marks mentioned in this work of fiction.

For Mom, who always bragged about my writing  
06 January 1922 — 03 June 2020

If they won't write the kind of books we like  
to read we shall have to write them ourselves.

—Clive Staples Lewis

## Table of Contents

<i>Son of the Féinne</i> .....	1
<i>Aunt Min</i> .....	8
<i>The Perfect Revenge</i> .....	12
<i>The Paramedic</i> .....	19
<i>In Search of Family</i> .....	29
<i>The Bull</i> .....	35
<i>What's Your Point of View?</i> .....	42
<i>The Author</i> .....	48

# Foreword

Six stories in six genres plus an essay.

I hope you enjoy them. Each one arose from a particular circumstance, and most of them have the potential for becoming part of a larger story.

"Son of the Féinne" came about as the result of a writing assignment from The Write Practice combined with a longstanding desire to explore the world of the paranormal from a Christian perspective. Irish werewolves fit that well.

"Aunt Min" represents the first installment in keeping a promise to a friend. We played Dungeons and Dragons® together for many years, and he encouraged me to write a novel based on one of our campaigns. This story is for Nick.

"The Perfect Revenge" is my entry in a writing contest. The theme was 'Boundless,' and I worked with the idea of love and grace being boundless, specifically the concept that 'where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.'

"The Paramedic" correlates to a novel I wrote. *Chevalier* tells the story of Geoff Lightstone, who rescues a fellow student from a gang and travels in time to Occitania on the eve of the Albigensian Crusade. The short story relates the aftermath of his confrontation with the gang from the perspective of a paramedic who works on him.

"In Search of Family" relates a trip that my mother and I took together in 2013. She had long wanted to visit England, in particular the area from which her family came, so we made it happen.

"The Bull" comes from my second novel, *North Sea Pirate*. In this book, Geoff travels to the North Sea in the year 1400. The prologue "The Bull" shows us a significant episode in Geoff's life.

"What's Your Point of View?" arose in response to a question about narrative perspective. I critiqued a writing piece in The Write Practice, and the author asked me to explain more about Point of View because that was a struggle for her. She indicated that my explanation helped her, so I include it among the short stories.

Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoy the stories.



# Son of the Féinne



# *Son of the Féinne*

Bang!

I jump and spin. An old junker exits the intersection. Just a car backfiring. I breathe a sigh of relief. Jack Rabbit Trail gives me the willies, especially at night. I still use it; it's the shortest route home.

Low in the sky, the waning gibbous moon creates patches of lambent effulgence that alternate with grotesque blocks of murky obscurity in an expressionistic juxtaposition of light and dark, unrelieved by any streetlights. Surrounded by shades of grey, I'm on the set of *Nosferatu*.

A faded-blue two-story house with a porch running the length of the front stands empty. Everyone says it's haunted. According to local legend, Tony Mancuso spent a night in the house on a dare when he was a teenager. The next morning, they found him on the front porch, wrapped in a sheet, cowering and whimpering. He's never been right in the head since and wanders the streets admonishing everyone to repent before the devil steals their soul.

Tonight, shutters on creaking hinges bang against the sides of the house. The windows and door hide in shadow. Two glowing red eyes stare at me through the window at the end of the house. They dim, slide to the right, and disappear. I turn my head. The taillights of a sedan recede into the distance on Dry Lake Road. A reflection in the distorted glass.

On the other side of the street, a squeak and a thump betray Old Man Grimes on the porch in his rocking chair, protecting his apple trees from the young hooligans, as he calls them,

who want to steal and eat the fruit. No one wants his apples. He only thinks they do. So far, he hasn't killed anyone with his double-barreled shotgun. I'm amazed.

The evening breeze carries the bark of a dog from the next street over and skitters dead leaves down the street. I step on one simply to hear the dry crackle and crunch of the leaf crumbling to dust beneath my sneaker. Goosebumps rise on my arms from the cool breeze. At least, I tell myself it's the breeze.

The houses along the street are dark. No porch lights offer a welcome. Thin strips of light outline the drawn shades in the windows but fail to penetrate the gloom. The street creeps me out.

A loud, deep-pitched 'bu-bubu-booh' announces the presence of an owl. I shiver. Some Native American tribes considered owls harbingers of doom, incarnations of the god of death. Death was the owls' bridge. The owl glides past me on silent wings, its golden eyes shining. My gaze follows its flight to the end of the street.

At the end of the street live the Karhew twins, two of the nastiest guys in town. Everyone steers clear of the whole family. Their front yard provides a final resting place for car parts, the rusting hulks of an Edsel, a Dauphine, and a Gremlin, and enough tires to open a store.

My path leads into Mockingbird Lane before I reach the Karhew house. With any luck, I'll make the turn and be on my way before anyone notices I'm there.

No such luck.

Urs and Medve saunter toward me. The grins on their faces promise nothing but trouble. So do the lengths of steel pipe in their hands.

I know their routine. Everyone knows, but no one can prove anything.

If they catch me, they'll drag me to their house and 'have some fun' with me. They'll testify I came on their property, trespassed. In this town, they'll get away with it.

Before they come too close, I turn and run. My backpack slips to the ground as I race for the only house on the street that offers refuge, the MacCormac place.

The Karhew brothers' voices grow louder.

"Aw, don't you want to play?"

"Come on, you know you want what we have."

The menace in their words spurs me on.

I'm not going to make it.

Out of nowhere something huge lands between me and the twins. I pause in my flight to stare. Stupid, but I gawk anyway.

The beast is bigger than I am. Intense, glowing green eyes transfix me for an instant. Transfix and dismiss. I'm no threat. I reek with fear. Warm breath and a not unpleasant odor wash across my face as the gigantic wolf turns with a growl to face Urs and Medve.

This is my chance, and I'm not about to waste it. I turn and run. I don't glance back.

The twins shout in a language I don't understand.

A fearsome snarl shakes the fabric of my world. Its bass rumble vibrates through my body and brain. The click of teeth snapping together carries over the sound of my panting.

More shouts and rapid footsteps recede toward the Karhew house.

I keep running.

I'm almost to the MacCormacs' porch.

I'm on the porch.

I pound at the door.

“Help! Help! Please, somebody, open the door!”

The porch light goes on. The door opens, and Granny MacCormac squints at me through the screen door. “Hello? Who’s there? Jeremy! What’s the matter, boy?”

Without waiting for an invitation, I wrench the door open and spring inside, bumping into the old woman. I catch her before she falls, latch the screen door, slam the wooden door shut, and lock the deadbolt. Not that this will prevent the monster from coming in.

“Karhew twins ... monster ... giant wolf.”

My breath comes in gasps.

“Calm down, boy. You’re safe. Nothing’s going to hurt you.”

“But that, that beast outside. Call the police.” Why does my cell phone have to be inside the backpack now lying in the middle of the street?

There’s scratching at the door. Sniffing and snuffling. The creature followed me. Boards creak as the thing makes its way the length of the porch, sniffing at each window.

I’m trembling. What if the brute decides to crash through a window? Granny MacCormac seems unperturbed. “Don’t worry, boy. Everything’s all right.”

Moments later, a scratching sound comes at the kitchen door. Whines. A wolf’s bark.

Granny MacCormac strides toward the kitchen door. On her way, she picks up a stack of cloth from the table.

I race behind her and grab her arm. “What are you doing? That thing will tear you apart! Call the police!”

She turns and smiles. She pats my arm. “Everything will be all right. You’ll see. Trust me.”

Granny MacCormac pulls loose from my grip. Her strength surprises me.

At the door, she pauses. “Get away from the door! Back off now!”

To my shock, the whining becomes softer, as if the creature is backing away.

The old woman flicks the backyard light on and opens the kitchen door.

I can’t let her go outside to face the monster alone. I try to squeeze past her, but she elbows me in the stomach.

“Sorry, Jeremy. I’m safe enough with my own.”

I scratch my head. What does she mean?

Granny MacCormac throws the cloths in her hand — her grandson’s sweatshirt and sweatpants — at the beast. She puts her hands on her hips. “Thaddeus Tadgh MacCormac the Third! Pull yourself together this minute and put some clothes on! You have a guest.”

Glowing green eyes blink. The slavering creature sits and curls into itself. The elongated snout recedes and broadens. Long, pointed ears shorten and round, sliding to either side of the diamond-shaped face. The eyes cease glowing but retain their intense green color. Powerful shoulders and the thick chest broaden. The waist and hips slim. Hind legs straighten and lengthen. Front legs thicken.

The sound of cracking bones, rending sinews, and popping joints pierces the night air.

The front paws become hands that provide strategic cover for certain body parts. The rear paws elongate into size 14 human feet. Red-and-gold fur thins to become reddish-gold hair on the head, arms, legs, and groin of the school’s star water polo player.

“Trey!” The word slips out before I can stop myself.

My friend’s embarrassed smile reveals a set of even, white teeth where curved fangs and razor-edged incisors stood seconds ago. “Um, Jeremy, do you mind looking away for a moment? You, too, Gran.”

I turn and stumble against something. I glance down. My backpack. Where did my backpack come from? Did the wolf — Trey — fetch it? I choke back a snort at the image of a monstrous red-, gold-, and cream-colored wolf carrying my neon green backpack with manga figures in its teeth.

Trey's grandmother turns to me with an expression of concern. "Are you all right, boy? I'm sure you're experiencing a bit of a shock."

That's an understatement. "I—I'm fine. Or I will be as soon as my heart stops trying to escape from my chest."

Granny MacCormac emits a breathy cackle at my side. From behind me comes Trey's throaty bass, tinged with the wolf's rumble.

Trey drops his hand onto my shoulder and squeezes reassurance to me.

I flinch. I can't help myself.

He drapes his arm across my back as he takes his place to my left, opposite his grandmother. He gives me a brief one-armed hug.

I return the hug. "That was fast."

Trey grins. "I've had to become a bit of a quick-change artist. Otherwise, I might find myself in some rather embarrassing situations."

"Let me guess, transforming from a ravaging giant wolf into a naked teenager at Barry's Burger Barn during the Friday night rush presents some slight potential for discomposure. For everyone." I can't believe I'm so calm about my friend being a mythological beast.

Trey snickers. "I wasn't ravaging. I was angry at the Karhew twins."

Granny MacCormac chuckles again. "I'll make some hot cocoa. Then you and Trey can talk. You deserve an explanation."

# Aunt Min





## *Aunt Min*

Longfinger surveyed the passing crowd.

In Angelshand, the capital of Skye, everyone walked with purpose. Occupied with tasks to do, business to conduct, places to go, people to see, they hurried on their way. Well-dressed nobles on horseback barged through the crowded street, guards clearing the way for their very important employers. Tradesmen rushed to complete their errands and earn a living. Merchants and shopkeepers hawked their wares, enticing the busy throngs to purchase a trinket, a treasure, a tool. Beggars lined the bustling thoroughfare crying, “Alms for the poor!”

Whether rushing on their way or idling in wait, no one presented an opportunity for the employment of Longfinger’s particular talents. His nickname came not simply from the elongated span of his digits, but also from the use to which he put them. They worked their way into pockets and purses, bags and backpacks. Few places remained out of reach when Longfinger turned his mind to ‘salvaging’ an item.

That was the term he used for his practice, salvaging goods that would otherwise go to waste. The owners didn’t need them, or they would be more careful and aware of what transpired with their belongings. He could use them, or if not, he knew people who could. Plenty of people bought ‘salvaged goods’ from him and never inquired as to their provenance.

The current crowd appeared far too alert for successful salvage operations, though. It wouldn’t do to have someone draw attention to a stranger’s hand in their pocket or bag. Perhaps another section of town would be more promising.

Wait.

An elderly woman strolled at a leisurely pace on the boardwalk between the shops and the muck of the streets. Wisps of silvery gray hair sought to escape from the bun, held in place with two knitting needles, on top of her head. A smile and a greeting graced everyone she met. The greetings were returned with smiles and cries of “Good day, Aunt Min!” “Greetings, my lady!” and other pleasantries. Yarn trailed from the large, elegantly embroidered carpetbag she carried in the crook of her right elbow.

Longfinger pushed himself off the doorframe and stepped onto the crowded boardwalk several paces behind the diminutive figure. The woman's stooped posture made her not much taller than him, and he was a halfling. Rather tall for his race but a halfling nonetheless.

The woman strolled ahead, oblivious to anyone or anything not immediately in front of her or calling her name. The passersby before her garnered her full attention and a cheery greeting.

With slow, doddering steps, she made her way through the crowd. After several blocks, she turned into a less-crowded street. Commercial buildings gave way to governmental structures. She was headed for the palace, and her clothing indicated she would be welcome.

The gaping opening of her bag beckoned to Longfinger. What salvageable goods lay within its dark confines? More than skeins of yarn, no doubt.

The woman stopped, hung her cane over her forearm, and reached into the bag. A moment later, she pulled out a wrought gold chain with gems. Shaky hands fumbled with the chain as she worked to disentangle it from her yarn, causing it to flash in the sunlight.

Longfinger quickened his pace and approached. "May I help you, Aunt Min?" That was the name with which people on the street had addressed her.

Watery blue eyes peered down at him. The pungent, menthol tang of dragon's brain perfume assailed his nostrils. She must have taken her clothes out of the storage chest for this visit to the palace. With a voice as shaky as her hands, the old woman said, "Thank you, young man. You are most kind. Do I know you? Sometimes, names and faces have a way of becoming blurry." Squinting, she peered at him more closely.

With a smile, Longfinger worked on untangling the yarn from the chain. "No, Aunt Min, we have never met. I have admired you from afar." For the last five minutes at any rate.

"You flatter me. I should think a young man like you would have his eyes fastened on a damsel closer to his own age rather than a matron old enough to be his grandmother." She gave him a slight smirk. "Probably many times over."

"Come now, you can't be that old. Besides, beauty such as yours defies the years. Like a fine wine, it improves with age."

Aunt Min blushed and smiled. "Oh, you are such a charmer. Save the flatteries for fair maidens. They are more likely to believe them."

Longfinger held up the chain. "There you go. All untangled. Will you allow me to drape it around your neck?"

A dip of her head indicated Aunt Min's acquiescence.

The chain now around the woman's neck, Longfinger stepped to the side and bowed low. This put him directly over the carpetbag and within easy reach of its opening.

"Oh, look! Isn't that the Prince Regent himself leaving the palace?"

The woman turned to look. A quick reach inside the bag should bring Longfinger's hand to some salvageable good before he took his leave and beat a hasty retreat. He groped for something besides yarn and encountered a sharp prick to his thumb.

A feeling of languor stole through Longfinger as he drew his hand from the bag. He shook his hand and put his thumb to his mouth to suck the blood from the puncture.

Aunt Min stared into his eyes. She no longer shook, and her eyes no longer watered. Her voice was steady. "Oh, dear. It appears you found something other than what you sought."

Numbness coursed through Longfinger's limbs and body. His legs ignored his brain's command to run. He collapsed on the ground in a heap. The world went black.

A pungent, minty yet medicinal odor tinged with hints of citrus assaulted Longfinger's nostrils. He wrinkled his nose. Dragon's brain perfume. Why was he smelling dragon's brain perfume? Only old ladies smelled of dragon's brain perfume. Oh. The old woman with the elegant carpetbag on the street.

Longfinger forced an eyelid open. Before him loomed an enormous yellow eye with a vertical black slit for a pupil, a long snout covered in silvery scales, and a mouth that curved upward slightly at the corner. Pearl-white fangs protruded between the lips.

That was a dragon. No training or experience, no borrowed or stolen magic, had prepared him to face a dragon alone and at the beast's mercy.

A female voice, vigorous and tinged with humor, inserted itself directly into Longfinger's mind. *You ought to exercise greater caution choosing your victims. Not everyone is what they seem, you know. A silver dragon might disguise herself as the arch-mage of a city who wanders about as a forgetful old woman.*

The dragon's smile broadened into a grin, a very toothy and fierce grin. Longfinger held his breath.

Once again, the voice echoed in his mind. *Now, what shall I have you do for me?*

# The Perfect Revenge



## *The Perfect Revenge*

Arms reaching to the sky, I stretched in the saddle. A ride always delighted my spirit but took its toll on my body. As I twisted to relieve the tightness in my back, a hare burst from the brush at my horse's feet. Startled, Milo bolted. No damsel in need of a rescue, I pulled his head to the side, forcing him to slow, then stop.

Milo's mad dash brought me and my retinue to the edge of a ravine. I dismounted and gazed over the rim. At the bottom, an irregular blotch of bright crimson in the white snow proclaimed a violent act. A dark shape lay at its center. An animal? Hard to tell through the trees. The form moved.

I called my huntsman. "Gerard!"

"Yes, my lady?"

"See what that is." I indicated the object in the ravine. "If it's suffering, put it out of its misery. Then drag the carcass up here. The meat will adorn our Christmas table."

Gerard worked his way down the steep hillside. At the bottom, he made a cautious approach and bent over the animal. "Your Grace!" A note of surprise tinged his voice as he stared up at me. "You may want to take this one alive."

"What possible use do I have with an injured beast that's likely to die before we arrive at the castle? Don't prolong its suffering. Be merciful."

"Begging Your Grace's pardon, I think you'll not mind watching this creature suffer."

What was Gerard thinking? He knew I abhorred wanton cruelty, though necessity forced me to rule with a firm hand. 'The Iron Duchess' they called me, rigid and just, like the law I upheld. Why would I take delight in the suffering of any innocent beast?

Despite the steepness of the incline, Gerard soon reached the top and approached carrying his burden in his arms. With a start, I realized he held no animal but a person. Why would he think me capable of enjoying another human's distress?

A boy of about fifteen lay in his embrace. The boy's head lolled backward, his face ashen against the glistening curls of his raven hair and the wet darkness of his cloak. His eyes closed, he breathed in shallow gasps through parted lips. Pain etched his visage.

"Thanks be to God! He has delivered the son of our enemy into my hands." I rubbed my hands against the cold. "The get shall suffer for the sire. Thus will I avenge my maternal sorrow."

Gerard laid the boy on the ground and tended his wounds. Tense moments passed while Gerard stanching the bleeding, straightened the twisted left leg, and popped the right shoulder into place. At last, he raised his head. "The animal will live, my lady, but we must transport it with care if it is to reach the castle alive."

"Can you improvise a litter? We will ride at an easy pace. Call a halt whenever necessary. You're responsible for seeing the beast arrives still breathing."

"Yes, Your Grace."

I dispatched a messenger with orders to prepare the tower room.

Amid the jingling of harnesses, I marveled at God's Providence in bringing the only son and heir of my sworn enemy into my hands. Duke Marc waged incessant war

against us, and we against him. The cause of the feud lay generations in the past, a dispute over a small strip of land between our two duchies combined with an insult at the king's court. His Majesty settled the legal question; the affront engendered hate beyond measure.

Two Christmases ago, Duke Marc ambushed my husband's hunting party, murdering him and our son. Now, God's Christmas gift to me, the duke's spawn lay before me to do with as I wished. I would keep him alive, but only so I might, as Gerard so astutely surmised, make him suffer. I would break his body, his spirit, and his mind. Afterward, I would return the broken animal to its sire and delight in another's torment.

Moans from the litter pulled me from my delicious plans for vengeance. Slowing Milo to a funeral pace behind the litter, I smiled. The beast lay in obvious distress, groaning and squirming. Fifteen, the same age as my James when he died. They tortured him for hours, the servants reported, before his body succumbed and God took him. Did this spawn of Hell laugh at my boy's screams? I would laugh at his. Except, they would last for weeks, months, years, and not mere hours.

At last, our triumphal procession arrived at the castle. Gerard oversaw the animal's removal to the tower. I didn't want the dank and filth of the dungeon to infect him and end his suffering prematurely. No, we would isolate him from all but silent guards, diligent torturers, my daughter, and me. We would exact our revenge.

After I changed from my riding habit and freshened up, a brief walk brought me to Danielle's favorite hideaway, a secluded corner of the castle garden. As usual, she was engrossed in a Book of Hours. Her piety and gentleness commended her to all. Destined, now that her brother was dead, to inherit the duchy, she needed to learn

severity as well as tenderness to rule well. My recent acquisition provided an opportunity to teach her.

At my approach, Danielle lifted her gaze from the book and grinned. “Mama! You’ve returned.”

“Yes, my dear, and I brought you a present.”

“A present? What did you find? A bright flower amid the cold of winter? A rabbit as a pet?”

“You are most perceptive, my dear.” The crimson splotch in the snow floated before my memory. “I discovered a bright flower but did not gather it for you. The animal I found will not serve as a pet, I’m afraid, but you must come and see for yourself.”

“Can it wait, mother? I would like to finish this passage from the Apostle’s letter to the Romans. It will take but a moment.”

I sat on the bench beside my daughter, folded my hands, and waited. After a moment, she whispered, “Vengeance is Yours,” closed the book, and turned to me. “All right, mother. Let’s take a look at my present.”

A short time later, we reached the topmost room in the abandoned tower. A guard stood on either side of the door. We halted before entering.

“In a moment, you are going to confront a monstrous beast, Hell’s own spawn. Do not be deceived by its enticing form or sweet enchantments, for even the Devil transforms himself into an angel of light.” I caressed Danielle’s cheek. “This animal would tear you limb from limb if it could. It would eradicate our family without a trace and without a second thought if that lay within its power.”

I paused.



“Its sire murdered your father and your twin.” I drew my daughter into a tight embrace. “You know your duty. Be resolute.”

With that admonition, I motioned for the guard to open the door. The torches in the room cast dim light sufficient to reveal the still form on the bed. Danielle approached with caution while I lingered at the door. After a moment, she sat on the chair beside the bed, her rigid posture and tight movements revealing the tension within her.

Tristan, Duke Marc’s son, his right arm bound to his torso, lifted his left hand with deliberate care. He reached across his body and caressed Danielle’s cheek as if befriending a skittish colt. His voice croaked as he spoke. “Are you real? An angel come to take me to judgment? I do not wish to die unshriven. Please, hear my confession.”

Danielle nodded.

The boy continued. “I have done terrible things. I have killed people for a cause in which I do not believe. My family commits atrocities, and I stand by, afraid to plead for mercy lest I be condemned as well. I witnessed a boy little older than myself being tortured and did nothing. His cries haunt me. Please, forgive me.” Sobs racked his body.

I smiled. The time had come for my heir to deliver the coup de grâce. A rejection of the creature’s plea for absolution would crush its spirit, rendering it more vulnerable to my manipulations.

To my horror, Danielle cradled Tristan’s hand in hers, kissed it, and gazed into his eyes. “I forgive you.” She bent forward and kissed his cheek.

“And that, my dears, is how your mother met your father. He confessed. I condemned. She forgave. He repented. I raged. She rejoiced.” Embracing the children, who had listened to my tale with rapt attention, I smiled. “In the end, your mother won.

Where my hate abounded, her love abounded all the more. Hers was the perfect revenge.”

# The Paramedic



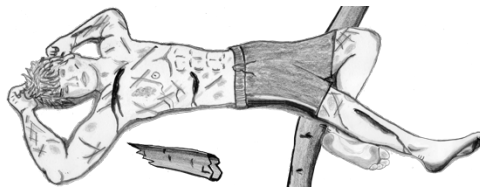
# *The Paramedic*

## The Paramedic

Have you ever listened to the William Tell Overture?

It starts slow and relaxed, drifting peacefully. At about four minutes, there are running scales representing a brief storm on the lake. In old cartoons, people run up and down stairs. Then the music goes back to slow and calm. This part is where everyone is sitting in the meadow with the sun shining, not a care in the world. *La-la-la-la-la-la*. Shortly after the eight-minute mark, the trumpet fanfare comes in. *Ta-ta-ta, Ta-ta-ta, Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta*, and orchestra furioso to the end.

That was my day. Here's what happened.



The day's slow for a Friday; we're floating along. In the afternoon, we receive a couple of calls. Even go up and down stairs. Then the rush is over. Finally, Mike and I are back at the station and sitting down to a very late dinner. I'm looking forward to finishing my shift in peace. Sunshine and flowers. Without warning — of course, it's without warning, duh! — we get the call.

Code 3.

Lights and Siren.

That means this is no hysterical teenager who's hyperventilating.



needed. Cervical vertebrae normal. Multiple cuts and bruises on the torso, shoulders, arms, and legs. Some cuts are jagged, some are straight and clean.

The jagged cuts – tears, really – no doubt came from tree branches. Part of a branch is on the ground beneath the kid, its point bloody and jagged. A couple of the tears appear deep.

The clean cuts appear to be knife wounds. Relatively shallow. Intended to cause pain and incapacitate. Sadistic. Torture? Execution? Death by a Thousand Cuts? Glad the cops caught them. What kind of person does this to another human being?

I roll the guy to examine his back, making sure I hold his neck. More of the same. No puncture wounds on the torso.

The kid grunts and opens his eyes when I turn him, so I say, “Hi, I’m Jim. I’m a paramedic, and I’m taking care of you tonight. You’re going to be all right.” We always tell people that, no matter what we think. “What’s your name? ... Can you tell me your name?” The kid mumbles something I don’t understand. Sounds like a question. Rapid, shallow breathing. Rapid heartbeat. I speak louder and slower. “Can you hear me? I’m Jim. What. Is. Your. Name?”

He stares at me, frowns, and says something unintelligible.

By this time, Mike’s there with the gurney and other gear. He attaches the leads for the ECG and runs a strip, then shows it to me. A quick check doesn’t tell me much I haven’t already figured out. The kid’s heart is racing, probably from too little oxygen. No wonder, with the blood loss and rapid, shallow breathing. I report my observations to Mike so he can relay them to the hospital and give me their response.

I register snippets of Mike’s report. “Adolescent male ... disoriented ... multiple lacerations ... tachypnea ... possible concussion with lowered consciousness ... GCS Eleven ...”

As soon as he finishes, Mike joins me. Ready the defibrillator in case of cardiac arrest. Supply oxygen to the brain and heart. Put fluids into the kid before he depletes entirely. Stop the bleeding. Keep him still. At least he isn't fighting us.

While I'm putting the bag valve mask on the guy and hooking it to the oxygen tank, I glance at the smaller boy. Guys from the hook-and-ladder unit are tending to him. I ask, "What's his name?"

"G-Geoff."

I turn back to the guy I'm working on. "Well, Geoff, today's your lucky day. I'm a professional. Don't worry about anything. Relax. I'm a paramedic. We have everything under control." He frowns. His lips move. He looks like he's trying to figure out what I said. His eyes close.

The kid's got blond hair and blue eyes, so I don't expect much success, but I try nonetheless. "¿Cómo te llamas? ¿Hablas español?" No response. Not a Spanish speaker. Neither am I. I just said everything I know in Spanish. Mike tells me I'm hopeless. "Can you make a fist for me? Not understanding that either, I see. Okay, I'll keep talking so you stay awake." He has bruising across the thighs and torso but primarily over the ribs. I touch them. He flinches and moves his arm. His eyes open. Eyes open in response to pain. Good. Flexion withdrawal. Better. But is it simple withdrawal or a localized response?

I squeeze the trapezius muscle at the base of his neck. He reaches to push my hand away. Purposeful movement in response to localized pain. Wonderful. I bet he wonders why I keep hurting him.

Mike nudges me. He's having trouble finding a vein for the IV. I say, "*Oh la vache!*" Why you say 'cow' to express astonishment in French, I'll never know, but I love saying it. Ever

since Madame Borutzki's French class. *Oh la vache!* 'Holy cow!' That's certainly milder than what I'd like to say watching Mike search for a vein. He tries again.

"Zut!"

What was that? Did the kid react in French? Bless you, Mike, for being clumsy today.

I can do this. Thank you, Madame Borutzki, for making us speak French in French class. And they said that Spanish would be more useful. Shows you what they know. Everybody speaks Spanish. *Whatcha gonna do when French comes for you? Bad boys, bad boys. Whatcha gonna do?* Why didn't anybody tell me the kid's a French speaker? Why didn't the little guy say something? Overwhelmed, no doubt. Why do I provide emergencies with a soundtrack of songs from old TV shows and movies? Stress response. Why does no one tell me I sing well? Because I don't. Sing well, I mean. Or out loud.

Well, here goes. "*Je m'appelle Jim. Comment est-ce que tu t'appelles?*"

"*Bon-sss? Les ... routiers ... sont ...*"

Soft. Slow. Doesn't fit the question, but the response is there. Words, not incomprehensible, incoherent sounds. I simply didn't understand him before.

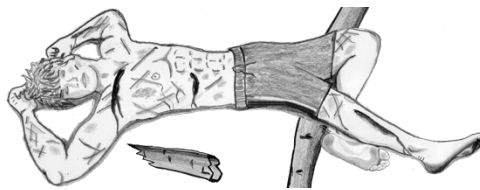
By now, Mike's got the IV attached. We can put fluids into the kid. Mike helps me stop the worst of the bleeding. Fortunately, no major arteries were severed.

Next, we backboard the kid. No telling what damage his fall may have done. From the branches lying around, it appears the tree saved his life. I hope we didn't do any damage getting him stabilized. Better alive and paralyzed than dead. I hope he sees things that way. I have the cop who's already bloody slide the backboard into place so Mike and I both can control the kid's body. Then we put a blanket on him, strap him in, and lay him on the gurney. The whole time, I'm talking to the kid in whatever French I can remember. If he understands this, he must think



I'm an idiot. He doubtless thinks I'm an idiot even if he doesn't understand me. Especially if he doesn't understand me.

We need to transport 'our' kid to the hospital. A raised eyebrow at the little guy provokes the response, he's okay. The other crew tells him to go to the hospital. They called for an ambulance. I hear the approaching siren. Several more black-and-white units have responded since we arrived. This is their crime scene. We need to be on our way. We'll take Geoff to Miller Children's, one of the better hospitals around. Part of Long Beach Memorial.



On the way, I check responses again. "*Comment vas-tu?*" He opens his eyes and peers at me. "*Bon-sss? C'est toi?*" Confused or inappropriate rather than incomprehensible verbal response, once you realize he's speaking French. How do I decide if it's inappropriate or merely confused? He said "good," but not the right word. He made it a question and added an S sound. Or was that just exhaling? Then he asked, "Is that you?" We'll go with confused. I know I am. Confused, that is.

Wait a sec! He asked, "Is that you?" Is 'Bons' a name? Could he be asking if I'm someone named 'Bons'? Let's see ... B-b ... P-p ... Bons ... Pons. He wants to know if I'm Pons! Must be a friend of his. Too bad I'm not Pons.

*"Je suis désolé. Je ne suis pas Pons."*

The kid frowns and tears up. Let's focus on something else. Keep him awake, alert. So, how do you say 'make a fist'? Oh yeah, "*Ferme le poing.*" The kid makes a fist. Obeys commands, if you give them in French. Excellent. The situation is improving by the minute. I

move on to basic information, starting with his name. Jaufre. Where is he? Carcassonne. All right, we'll call that confused. What year is it? The start of some crusade. At least he knows his name — I think. Heart rate remains fast but no longer thready; blood pressure stabilizes. Fluids and oxygen flow.

I should have asked this earlier. *“Est-ce que tu as des allergies? Any allergies?”*

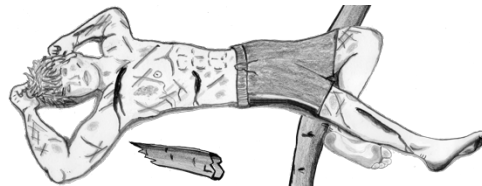
*“Non.”*

*“Not even to gravity? Cause it sure messed you up.”*

Was that a chuckle?

When we pull in ten minutes later, the staff is waiting to take the kid out of the truck and inside. I warn them he speaks French and doesn't understand English. Must be pretty new to the U.S. They tell me they need me to go in and translate. Sigh. No good deed goes unpunished. ... *If there's something French in your neighborhood, who ya gonna call? Jim Custer.*

In the ER, the attending physician examines the kid, stares him in the eye, smiles, and talks to him in what sounds like a mix of French, Spanish, and something else. I don't understand a thing. The kid does, though. Muscles relax, breathing slows and deepens. His eyes follow the doctor. I'm confused. What's that about? They give Geoff pain meds and start sewing him up. My work here is done. *Ta-daaa!*



Exhausted, I leave the ER, hoping Mike's at least started the paperwork although that's my responsibility. The admitting nurse stops me. She motions a couple over. The kid's parents. He resembles his mother. Since they can't go into the emergency room to see their son, they want to talk to me. I brace for another round of mangling my way through French.

The mother, eyes shining with tears, grabs my arm. “How’s Geoff? Will he be all right?”

“Whoa! You speak English!” That’s a surprise after dealing with their son.

“Of course,” the father says. “What else would we speak? I’m David Lightstone, by the way. This is my wife Martha.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that your son speaks and understands French, not English, so I thought the family must be new to the US. I used all the French I could remember from high school just to talk to Geoff — or Jaufre as he called himself.” I spread my hands. “He didn’t understand English or Spanish — I tried both — but he reacted in French to our physical and cognitive examination. That was a surprise and a relief. His LOC — Level of Consciousness — was higher on the GCS than I first thought.”

“The GCS?” David and Martha ask in unison.

“The Glasgow Coma Scale, a rubric we use to describe a person’s level of consciousness. Even taking into account that he understood only French, your son was on the verge of serious trouble. Some of that came from the head trauma, but most of it resulted from shock and depleted blood volume.” I glance down at my uniform. “As you can see, things were a little messy. Once we started the IV and oxygen, though – and stopped the bleeding – Geoff started improving a lot. What I don’t understand is why he speaks French and not English.”

“That doesn’t make sense to us, either.” Mom checks with her husband, who raises his eyebrows. “Geoff’s learning French in school, but his native language is English. He was born in this very hospital and grew up right here in Long Beach.”

“Okaaay ... Wait! I think I get it. Post-concussion syndrome.” I pause a moment, searching for words to explain in layman’s terms. “The brain often does weird things when injured. It appears your son — Geoff — accesses French rather than English right now.” I want to

give them hope but not unrealistic expectations. “His memory must have been affected by the head injury,. If the damage isn’t too severe, he should improve over time, but that’s something you can’t predict.” At least, I can provide them with some reassurance. “To answer your initial question, Geoff is doing better than I expected. He should recover physically.”

“Thank God!” Martha whispers.

David adds, “But what about his mental state? Will he recover?”

“You never know about brain injuries. The attending physician can provide you with a much better prognosis than I.” I glance at my uniform, then out the door to the parked fire department ambulance. “I’m sorry, but I need to go. My partner’s waiting for me, I need to clean up, and I have a report to write.”

“Right,” says David. “Thank you for your time, Jim. And for saving our son’s life.”

“I’m glad we were there to help. Mr. Lightstone — David. Martha.” I nod to each of them. “I wish you all the best and your son a full recovery. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

We shake hands, and I walk out the Emergency Room doors. Mike’s leaning against the door of the truck with his arms folded. I smile. No, I grin.

We saved a life tonight. Standing ovation.

# In Search of Family



## *In Search of Family*

I stood outside the doors of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs in the Arrivals Hall of Terminal 4 at London's Heathrow Airport. The throngs awaiting friends, relatives, business associates, and guests eddied like currents in a lazy river. Arrivals added their own flow to the stream.

After a rush came a lull. The doors opened, and my mother exited. She smiled and waved from the airport's wheelchair, her sole concession to the exigencies of air travel at the age of ninety-one.

The porter wheeled my mother through the crowd, and I joined them. Once he locked the wheels, Mom stood to hug and kiss me. She turned, thanked the porter, and handed him a gratuity. A checked bag, a carry-on, and her purse were her only luggage. I gathered them up, and we headed for the Piccadilly Line into the city.

For years, Mom talked about visiting England, including the area from which her family came. It wasn't that she hadn't traveled, she had: at least a dozen trips to Africa to visit my missionary brother; numerous trips to Spain and Germany with her friend, Hilda; jaunts around the U.S. to visit relatives. But she had never made it to England.

This year, 2013, was the year we made it happen. I chaperoned students on the German-American Partnership Program for three weeks in Stuttgart, Germany. I spent another three weeks in the North Sea region doing research for my book, *Nordseepirat*. The day before Mom's arrival, I checked into our hotel in London.

After alighting at Gloucester Road Station in Kensington, we strolled to the hotel, ate, and got my mother settled in her room. Tired from the long flight, she read, worked her crossword puzzle, and turned in early.

The next morning, we began our day with a stop at a local café for a full English breakfast for less than half what the hotel's breakfast would have cost. That established our eating pattern: local shops for breakfast and lunch; groceries from Waitrose for dinner.

How do you see London in a week? The short answer is, you can't, not with the city's history and everchanging kaleidoscope of people and culture. The extremes are to explore one or

two places in depth or take the broad overview and glance at everything. We chose a hybrid approach. Thanks to a hop-on-hop-off bus with a stop around the corner from the hotel, we enjoyed the broad overview on the first two days. “To your left is Buckingham Palace . . .” The recorded itinerary told us what we were seeing and brief essential information about each place.

Hopping on and off the bus allowed us to take a boat ride down the Thames to Greenwich where we boarded and learned about the history of the Cutty Sark, the fastest clipper ship of its day. I love sailing but get seasick, so exploring a ship in drydock was an excellent choice. The trip back upriver revealed London’s history through its architecture and monuments.

The Ceremony of the Keys at the Tower of London on Friday night proved a highlight. In the evening, after the day crowd left the grounds, those of us with a confirmed invitation gathered outside the gate. A select group, we observed the ceremony that has taken place every evening for centuries as soldiers secured the Tower for the night. The experience is impressive and gives you a sense of participating in history.

One disadvantage of being 91 is that you tire more quickly and recover more slowly than you used to. The second day, we stayed on the bus and enjoyed observing London as we passed. That night, we planned the following days to visit what we wanted. Mom hated crowds, so we waited until after the morning rush to ride the Tube and avoided the most popular tourist attractions unless they offered a timed entry. Strolls through the parks allowed Mom to indulge her penchant for people watching.

Sunday highlights included morning worship at St. Martin in the Field, an organ recital in Westminster Abbey, and Evensong at Saint Paul’s Cathedral. At all three churches, the liturgy connected us to a rich heritage of faith. Not just tourist attractions, these are functioning places of worship, and our spirits soared beyond the vaulted roofs into the heavens as we participated with others from around the world in an affirmation of faith and community.

On Tuesday, we wandered through the Churchill War Rooms and Museum, one of the less-crowded attractions. Mom reminisced about watching newsreels and keeping up with the course of the war as a young woman. At nearby Horse Guards, we inspected the changing of the Guard. A pushy American late-comer tried to crowd in front, but we thwarted her efforts so Mom and some children had an unobstructed view. From Horse Guards, a leisurely stroll through Saint James’s Park brought us to Buckingham Palace at a time when the crowds were thinner.

We continued on to Hyde Park, where we sat and people-watched. A stop at Harrod's for tea proved less satisfying than we imagined, so we promised ourselves another try elsewhere.

At the end of our week in London, we picked up our rental car, navigated the London traffic, and headed for the Midlands. For the next week, we stayed in a hotel in Stratford-upon-Avon, continuing to alternate days of activity with days of rest.

On the to-do list for Stratford was a play at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. Thursday morning, we headed for the ticket office and shop. The best the cashier could offer us was two seats in the back of the balcony on the side with poor sight lines. We purchased them and then browsed the shop. About fifteen minutes later, the cashier approached us with a grin. A cancelation had come through, and she could seat us in the third row on the ground floor for the same price as the balcony tickets. *Hamlet* was wonderful.

On Saturday, we drove to Buxton, the ancestral town Mom wanted to visit. On the way, she told me about the Lomas family, the Gee family, and some cousins who lived in the area but for whom we had no contact information. When we arrived, Mom was thrilled to see her maiden name, Lomas, everywhere. Of course, we had to take a picture under the sign for Lomas Foods. Grandpa John had been a farmer, after all.

A visit to the local library garnered archival information about the family's history. We agreed that we would have to come back on Tuesday for more research. Thanks to a walk through the park and town centre, we became acquainted with the place from which our ancestors came. My one regret was not arranging for us to stay in Buxton for a couple of days. Instead, we drove from Stratford about two hours away.

Because Mom wanted to rest on Sunday after our outing, she stayed in while I attended church and explored the surrounding area, visiting Kenilworth Castle and going to Evensong at Coventry Cathedral.

At Warwick Castle on Monday, Mom took it easy and people-watched while I indulged my interest in the Middle Ages, explored the castle and grounds, and watched demonstrations of jousting, falconry, trebuchet firing, and more.

Tuesday's return visit to Buxton provided even more satisfaction than Saturday's.

The family had been Methodist, so we visited the Methodist Church in town. When we arrived, a Bible study was ending, and we talked to the church secretary and custodian, explaining why we came. The custodian called a friend of his, who brought a book with the



history of Methodism in the region. While we waited for him to arrive, the custodian gave us a tour of the church and let me play the pipe organ.

When the friend arrived, he showed us his book and gave us photocopies of a couple of pages. To my mother's delight, the Lomas family had been — and continues to be — quite involved in the Methodist movement. He drew our attention to the Methodist Chapel in nearby Hollinsclough, which was built in 1801 by John Lomas, a possible direct ancestor, since my grandfather was also John Lomas and the name runs in the family. (My mother wanted to name me John but left the name for her brothers' children, and I received the family name Lomas for my middle name.)

Of course, we had to stop by the chapel. After visiting a bit more with our gracious hosts, we plugged Hollinsclough into the GPS unit and headed off to make another family connection. When we pulled into the small lot next to the chapel, no one was around. The chapel was locked, and we thought we would have to content ourselves with looking in from the outside. At that moment, an elderly gentleman called to us and asked if we wanted to go inside. The caretaker, he had been mowing his lawn when he noticed us. We explained our connection to the Lomas family; he opened up the chapel and told us its history.

John Lomas was a successful local packman, a kind of traveling salesman. He joined the Methodist movement and decided the town needed a chapel in which the Methodists could meet. In 1801, he built the chapel himself and founded the local congregation. Upon their deaths, he and his wife were buried at the foot of the pulpit. Mom beamed with pleasure to hear how members of her family contributed to their community.

The caretaker also told us how to reach a nearby village where members of the Lomas family were buried. So, off to Altstonefield we went. We wandered through the churchyard of Saint Peter's Church and deciphered headstones dating back to the 1700s. My mother's pleasure at finding her family roots suffused her.

On the drive back to Stratford, we talked about coming back, staying in Buxton, and doing more research into the family. Mom expressed her excitement about returning and sorrow that we didn't have more time on this visit. I agreed.

Our return drive to Stratford gave us the opportunity to stop in Solihull for the second-best fish and chips I have ever tasted. Several years ago, I spent a couple of summers with friends in Solihull, and they introduced me to the Dovehouse Fish Bar.

Back in London, we spent our last night in England at a hotel in Chelsea Harbour. Our final treat for ourselves was their 'high tea.' This time, it was all we could ask. The view looked out over the marina and beyond to the River Thames, which reminded us of the flow of history and how we link to those who preceded us and those who will follow. Aircraft on their approach to Heathrow reminded us of our own journey the next day. Afternoon tea connected us to our family's English heritage.

Mom and I spent the rest of the afternoon and evening reminiscing and discussing when we would be able to return. Alas, we never did return to Buxton. We made other trips, though, like a vacation to Maui in 2019, and we had the memories of our time in England and the connection to our heritage. Mom passed away on 03 June 2020 at the age of ninety-eight. While I wish we had returned, I am thankful we made the trip we did. It reminds me to seize the opportunity and live without regrets.

# The Bull



# *The Bull*

## **The Russell Farm, Missouri**

The lithe, athletic ten-year-old boy with scruffy blond hair leaned over the gate and looked into the pasture. He stood with his feet on the fourth bar from the bottom and his hands gripping the top of the gate. His sister imitated his stance next to him.

This was the same route they'd used on the way to their cousins' house.

Geoff leaned over the gate as far as he could and scanned the pasture again. He turned his ear to the pasture but didn't hear any whuffing or mooing. Nope, no cows. And no bull.

"Do you see or hear anything, Ginny?"

The smaller, dark-haired girl shook her head. The way was clear.

Geoff jumped over the gate to the ground. He turned back and helped eight-year-old Ginny climb down. Then he took her hand, and the two of them headed across the field. Grandad and Nana's white and green farmhouse beckoned on the far side of the pasture.

It was a great day. The sun shone in an azure sky, warming their backs. The breeze caressed their faces like their mother's cool and comforting hands. The full-octave call of 'bob-WHITE, bob-bob-WHITE' marked their passing while the tk-tk-tk of the cicadas called to them from the trees. The scent of freshly mown hay tickled their noses. The memory of Aunt Mary's blackberry tarts made Geoff's mouth water.

"Did you have fun at Aunt Mary's today?"

"Uh huh. Sonny's funny. Funny Sonny." Ginny giggled. "Why's his name 'Sonny'?"

"It isn't."

"Then why does everyone call him that?"

"That's his nickname. His real name is Paul, just like Uncle Paul. But if they called him Paul, everyone would get confused. Since he's Uncle Paul and Aunt Mary's son, they call him 'son.' But because he's still little, they call him 'Sonny.' "

"But no one calls you Geoffy."

"And I'm really glad. Besides, you already gave me a special name."

“Yeah, ‘Bo.’ ‘Cause you’re my big bo.”

Geoff laughed. “That’s right. I’m your big bro, and you’re my princess. My job is to keep you safe.”

*Rrrrrumpph ... rrrrrumpph!*

Ginny giggled. Geoff froze and turned his head in the direction of the sound. It was coming from behind him and to his right.

Grandad’s bull was glaring at them. It shook its head and pawed the ground.

Where had the bull come from? It hadn’t been there when they came over the gate. Or had it? Had Geoff just missed seeing it? Missed hearing it?

“Look, Bo! Grandad’s bull is counting! I didn’t know bulls could count.”

“Yeah. And when he gets to ten, he’s going to be really mad we’re in his field.”

“But it isn’t his field. It’s Grandad’s.”

“I don’t think the bull cares.”

The bull turned sideways but kept his eyes on Geoff and Ginny.

The beast was huge.

Geoff grasped the hair at the back of his head. At least he was between his sister and the bull.

What had set the bull off? Oh, no! Geoff and Ginny were wearing identical red T-shirts. That must have been it. The bull hated red. All bulls hate red. Now he and Ginny were in its pasture wearing red T-shirts.

“Listen, Ginny. When I say ‘Go!’ we’re going to run for the house. We’re almost all the way across the field, and the bull won’t cross the fence.”

The bull tossed its head.

“But you said the fence was ‘lectrified.’”

*Rrrrrumpph!*

“It is, so this is what we’re going to do. When we get close to the fence, I’ll get on my knees. You step on my knee and then my shoulder and jump over the fence, just like you’re in Gymnastics class at school. I’ll help you jump. You’ll fly over the fence like the fairy princess you are. Just be sure not to touch the fence, okay?”

“Okay. Are we going to race?”

The bull pawed the ground.

“Yes. You and I are one team. The bull and cows are the other team. We’re going to beat them to the finish line — the fence. Ready?”

Ginny nodded.

The bull snorted.

Geoff said, “Ready ... Set ... Go!”

Holding Ginny’s hand, Geoff turned and ran for the fence as fast as he could. The bull was faster. Any second, one of the horns would pierce Geoff’s back. The bull would toss him in the air and then trample him. But at least Ginny would be safe. He’d make sure, somehow.

Three feet from the fence, Geoff let go of Ginny’s hand, jumped forward, twisted, and slid toward the fence. He stopped with his back mere inches from the fence. He propped one knee up and yelled, “Jump, Princess!”

Ginny kept running and stepped on Geoff’s knee. She was grinning. Then she stepped on her brother’s shoulder. Geoff had his hand on his shoulder with the palm up. When Ginny straightened her knees for the jump, he pushed her feet as hard as he could. Ginny sailed over the fence, landed on the other side, and rolled in the grass, laughing.

Geoff turned back to face his doom.

The bull had stopped several feet from the fence. It still glared at Geoff. It pawed the ground. It shook its head. It ‘bellered,’ as Grandad always said.

It was afraid of the fence. That had to be it. It had touched the fence before and been shocked. Now it kept its distance.

Geoff looked right and left. If he stayed close to the fence but didn’t touch it, he should be okay. About 100 feet to his left was the other gate to the pasture. Could he reach the gate without getting gored?

Geoff stood up as slowly as a sloth digesting a leaf. He looked into the bull’s face. The bull glared back and shook its head.

*Rrrrrummp!*

Geoff took one slow step to the left.

The bull snorted.

The smell of the grass that the bull had been eating almost made Geoff sneeze.

He took another slow, sliding step to the left.

The bull pawed the ground but didn’t move.

Geoff grasped the hair at the back of his head and took another slow step to the left.

The bull tossed its head.

Geoff took one more slow step to the left.

The bull turned sideways and continued to glare at Geoff.

Geoff turned and raced for the gate, keeping as close to the fence as he dared.

*Rrrrrummph!*

That was so close! The bull had to be right behind him. The thud of the animal's hooves echoed in Geoff's ears like a drum. Not daring to look behind him, Geoff ran as he had never run before. Sweat trickled down his neck and back. Its acrid, metallic smell spurred him on.

The stone pillar that marked the gate rose before Geoff. The ground next to the fence sloped into a ditch about three feet deep and six feet wide. Geoff ran partway into the ditch, then scrambled up the side. He darted across the cattle guard over the ditch and lunged for the gate. He was halfway up the gate before he looked back.

The bull stood on the other side of the cattle guard. It snorted and bellowed. It pawed the ground. It shook its head. It glared. But it didn't cross the cattle guard.

Geoff was breathing hard. He put one hand to his side where he felt a 'stitch.' His heart was pounding, and not merely from running. How could the bull not have gored him? Was it because he stayed so close to the fence?

Geoff looked around. Mom was holding Ginny and staring open mouthed at Geoff. Nana was standing on the porch with her hands on her mouth. Grandad was jogging behind Dad. Dad! Dad was coming. Everything would be all right.

Except it wasn't.

When Geoff's father reached the gate, he put his hands on Geoff's shoulders. The briefest flicker of relief washed across his face. Then his grip on Geoff's shoulders tightened, and anger suffused his countenance. "You, young man, are in big trouble!"

He picked Geoff up, pulled him across the gate, and set him down hard. Dad moved his hand to the back of Geoff's neck and gripped it like a vice. He pushed his son forward. "March!"

Grandad stepped back out of the way. Mom held onto Ginny. Nana moved away from the door.

Father and son made their way through the house to Geoff's small bedroom at the back. Dad picked up Geoff's freshly washed clothes from the straight wooden chair beside the bed and laid them on the bed.

"Sit!" Geoff's father pushed his son down onto the chair. He closed the door to the bedroom. He bent down in front of the chair and grabbed Geoff's shoulders. "Look at me!"

Geoff knew what was coming. Taking as long as he dared, he raised his head and looked into his father's eyes. The anger and disappointment there were like the thunderstorms that sometimes raged across Grandad's farm at night: black clouds with flashes of lightning. His father's voice was like the thunder that started as a distant rumble and grew to a deafening pitch before rolling away into silence.

"I'm disappointed in you, son. I thought you were growing up and taking responsibility. We let you and Ginny visit your cousins with the promise that you'd keep her safe. Not only did you fail to do that, you put her in danger. You had no business trying to cross that field with the bull in it."

"But Dad, I ..."

"Just sit still and listen to me. You're the older brother. Your job is to look out for your sister, make sure she's safe. Instead, you almost let a bull attack her."

"Dad, I didn't think ..."

"That's right. You didn't think. You don't think. You don't look out for your sister. You know that your grandfather lets the cattle out at night. Don't take shortcuts when they're dangerous. You should have walked around the pasture, even if it is longer. I don't know what I have to do ..." Geoff's father continued his harangue.

Geoff didn't dare interrupt. He didn't dare try to explain. He didn't dare look away. He scarcely dared blink even though the pressure of unshed tears built behind his eyes. He continued to stare into his father's stormy eyes and listen to the thundering litany of his failure.

Finally, Dad said, "I want you to sit in this chair for the next two hours and think about what you did. Don't get up. Just sit here and think about how you could have gotten your sister killed because you weren't responsible. Think about what you did wrong and what you should have done. Think about how you're going to repair the trust that your mother and I have lost. Think about what it means to disappoint your family. I'll be back in two hours, and we'll finish this talk then. Do I make myself clear?"



“Yes, sir.”

Geoff’s father stood up, turned around, and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Geoff’s cheeks were bright red and burned as if someone had put one of Grandad’s branding irons against them. The hard, wooden chair pressed against his seat bones, but he didn’t dare wiggle. Dad had said to sit still. The room was closed up, hot, and stuffy, but Geoff didn’t dare get out of the chair to open a window. Dad had told him to sit and not get up. The pungent smell of mothballs in the closet mixed with the sweet, citrus smell of Nana’s lavender sachets. If he could open a window, it wouldn’t be so cloying, but Dad said to sit and think.

So, he did.

All he wanted — all he had ever wanted — was for his father to be proud of him. But all he ever managed to do was disappoint his dad. He was supposed to watch out for Ginny, and he couldn’t even do that right. He’d put his sister in danger. That had scared him, even if Ginny thought it was fun. Dad was right. He couldn’t be trusted. Geoff would go through life a failure and a disappointment.

At last, Geoff lowered his head. He stared unseeing at his hands folded in his lap. The tears began to flow.

# What's Your Point of View?



# *What's Your Point of View?*

You go to a party even though you don't want to. The boss says you have to go, so your goal is to get in and get out as quickly as possible. When you walk in, the room is dark, music blares, and the smell of sweaty bodies assaults your nostrils. I just want to greet my boss, find a quiet corner, and survive until I can gracefully make my exit. Scanning the room, I see that Alex, my boss, is deep in conversation with Taylor, my rival for the next promotion. Groan. You make your way to the two, grabbing a drink as you go. The bartender considers you the classiest person they've seen tonight. "Hey," I say as I approach. Taylor thinks I'm here to make some moves on Alex. Totally off the mark. Meanwhile, in the bathroom, Alex's assistant Jayden is cleaning up Braden's mess.

\* \* \*

A number of things, but for now, let's focus on Point of View or POV. In a single paragraph, the POV slides from second person to first person to third person and provides the reader with information the main character (MC) can't possibly know. It appears we have managed to include every POV in one paragraph, and this will, in the long run, confuse the reader.

We all wrestle with POV in our writing. (Maybe the masters don't, but we mere mortals do.) POV is important because it is a tool to make the text more comprehensible. Maintaining a consistent POV helps the reader make sense of the narrative. The strictures of various POV choices can make that consistency of perspective more or less daunting.

## **Points of View**

Let's start by considering the choices. We can write from the following Points of View:

**First person:** Everything is from the perspective of the character-narrator in that scene, chapter, or book. It uses 'I' to express the POV. Memoirs often use first-person POV.

**Second person:** Everything is from the perspective of the person to whom you are talking. This POV is most common in 'choose-your-own-adventure' books and role-playing games but can be used in other writing.

**Third-person limited:** The narrator stands outside the story and tells or shows the reader what one character does, says, sees, thinks, and feels.

**Third-person omniscient:** Everything is from the viewpoint of an all-knowing outsider who not only can go anywhere but can also see into the minds and hearts of everyone. The reader learns what various characters do, say, see, think, and feel. The narrator reveals the thoughts and feelings of different characters as well.

## Advantages and Disadvantages

Now, let's consider how that works out in practice. Certain advantages and disadvantages come with each POV.

**First-person, second-person, and third-person limited** are all limited points of view. (Duh, right?) Once we have decided on the character whose point of view we are using, we as the author/narrator can tell or show *only* what that character says, sees, thinks, knows, and feels. We can tell what other characters reveal by their actions and words, but only if the POV character sees, hears, or feels those actions and words. For example, our POV character might be talking to someone on the phone. They cannot see what the other person is doing but might infer it from what they hear.

- Jack said, "You caught me in the middle of doing dishes. Hold on for a sec." A crash and the sound of shattering glass came through the phone. "Drat!" said Jack. "I hate when that happens." He must have dropped a glass. "Can I call you back in five?" Jack's voice made his frustration clear. "I need to clean up this mess I made."

Our POV character does not know for certain what happened but can draw conclusions from the noises, statements, and tone of voice.

What we can't do is this:

- I hung up and checked my email while Jack got a bandage for the cut on his finger.

Why not? Because nothing in the exchange indicates that Jack has a cut. Our POV character has not heard about a cut and has no way of knowing, seeing, or feeling this additional information.

Another example. Our POV character is Sally.

- Bill's words hurt, and Sally exploded. "Get out! I don't want to see you. Leave my house!" She folded her arms and glared at him. He was so infuriating at times with his callous regard for her feelings. Bill shrugged, turned and walked out the door. Sally could be so unreasonable at times, thought Bill, as he closed the door behind him.

OOPS! We jumped from Sally's head (POV) into Bill's in that last sentence. That's a big breach of POV strictures.

What's the advantage of using the limited POV, whether it is first, second, or third? Familiarity, consistency and depth.'

Your reader becomes familiar with that perspective and knows what to expect. The author tailors the language to fit the POV character, and the reader gets to know that character. Because the POV is consistent, the story is in many ways easier to follow. This can be important if there are other factors that cause the story to 'jump around.

Nathan Van Coops has written a time-travel series. In it, the characters jump around in time and deal with multiple timelines. Van Coops sticks with the perspective of Benjamin Travers, the main character in a first-person narrative. That consistency and learning about time travel along with Ben makes the story much more understandable and therefore enjoyable than a more chaotic approach would. If you would like to learn more about Ben and his adventures, you can visit Van Coops's website **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**

**Third-person omniscient** is a bit different in that it does allow the author to move from character to character. However, you have to be careful with it. If you jump around too much, you will confuse your reader, and a confused reader is generally a nonreader (as in, they put the book down never to return).

While few writers use the third-person omniscient POV today, authors in the nineteenth century used it extensively. Advantages of third-person omniscient include developing an authorial voice, breaking the fourth wall to speak directly to the reader, exploring people, places,

and things not readily accessible to the characters (e.g., historical context), and revealing the perspectives of various characters.

We must distinguish between the omniscient POV and head-hopping, which is simply jumping around from person to person in a scene without plan or consideration. The result is usually confusing and inelegant.

Here's a link to an article about [Third Person Omniscient](#).

## Negotiating Point of View

**I write primarily from third-person limited and first person.** That means I must constantly ask myself what the character knows, sees, hears, feels, etc. in person. As I have grown in my awareness of this, I have edited out many descriptions, asides, and other instances of providing information unavailable to my POV character. The challenge is to provide both the POV character and the reader with the information in a different way. Since my stories tend to stick with a single POV character throughout, the reader must experience everything through that character's filters. That is a choice I've made with an understanding of the advantages and disadvantages involved.

**"But I want the reader to know what Bill's thinking!"** I hear you cry. There are at least two ways of doing this.

1. Bill expresses his frustration verbally, and Sally overhears him.

- Bill turned and walked out the door muttering, "Sometimes, you are so unreasonable."

2. Start a new scene from Bill's POV.

- Bill walked out the door.
- [New Scene/Chapter] Once he was outside the house, Bill stopped to savor the crisp autumn day. Sally's outburst liberated him. He no longer had to kowtow to her mood swings and unreasonable demands — and she could be unreasonable at times. Shoving his hands in his pockets, Bill stepped from the porch with a smile and a whistle.

Continue the scene from Bill's POV.

He will have no way of knowing that Sally just called his best friend Sam and told him, "Whew. He's gone. Now you can come over." — unless someone or something reveals that to him. For example,

- He stops at a nearby coffee shop and sees Sam's car go by;
- He calls his friend and hears Sally's laugh;
- An acquaintance mentions seeing Sally and Sam together;
- Sam and Sally themselves tell Bill that they are now a couple.

The thing is, in order to know what Sally did after he left, Bill must somehow experience it.

The narrator can't simply jump back and forth into people's heads. That's called head-hopping and confuses the reader.

I hope this helps you gain perspective on POV.

## **POV and Picasso**

Why do I have a picture of a mosaic of Picasso's Guernica for this essay? Because Picasso presents us with multiple Points of View simultaneously. It's like a third-person omniscient POV run rampant. Since it's art rather than literature, we can stand and contemplate it, sort it out, and interpret it. A story that looks like this will have a very small readership. (But, then, Cubism has a relatively small viewership.)

Let me know if this essay was helpful.

# The Author



Language acquisition, travel, theology, history, legends: these disparate interests inform R L Harrell's writing. His work has grown from a chapter book for students of German to include historical time travel, paranormal, fantasy, and more. He offers them in the belief that stories can change lives.

Robert has two websites: <https://robertlharrell.com> for general writing and <https://compellinginput.net> for second language acquisition materials.

## Also by R L Harrell

[Ritter von heute](#)

[Nordseepirat](#)

[Pirate de la Mer du Nord](#)

[Pirata del Norte](#)

[Der Fall des sauren Kunststudenten](#)

[Michael reist nach Wien](#)

[Kick It! Soccer in German Class: A How-To Guide](#)

[Kick It! Soccer in Spanish Class: A How-To Guide](#)