



THE MAGICAL
COLLECTED SHORT STORIES
PUBLISHING PEN



SAMPLER



M. STEFAN STROZIER

THE MAGICAL PUBLISHING PEN

Collected Short Stories

FREE SAMPLER

M. STEFAN STROZIER

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THE FARM

A huge black rat comes running out of the burning barn. It's burning in flames. The rat tears around in confusion. It's disappearing into a bean field. There it goes. It's gone. Daryl—he's our neighbor—yells at his bird dog to chase after the rat, but that dog's already gone into the bean field, too, hard on the rat's heels. For one split-second, I saw the flaming rat; and, the dog trying to catch it, before both those beasts went into the waist-high field of beans. I mean; just now, that dog was moving so fast, he was trying to catch the space in between, too. I'd seen him do that before, sure. The bean field moves above the dog and the rat like a wave. I follow their trail, which goes around in circles. The old barn's burning down to ashes. My father's standing with Daryl; both of them silent like preachers, watching it burn in flames, like the rat. We don't use the barn anymore.

The bird dog just caught the burning rat in its teeth. Look at that! The dog's shaking the rat, back and forth. I've just run behind the barn, to watch everything. The bird dog's head, which is white with patches of gray, is above the waist-high beans, as if the dog's swimming with the rat in its mouth. The rat's screeching in pain; and, it's still on fire; but now it's stuck in the bird dog's jaws. The dog's shaking the rat with its powerful jaw and neck muscles, tearing the rat to pieces of flaming blood and guts. The dog's growling low. Killing the rat like that makes the dog feel good. I knew that dog would catch

the rat. It's a good dog.

The farm is the name of the place where I live. It stands on top of a large hill. All around is flat prairie landscape, far as the eye can see. The house, the barn—plus all of the other buildings—are a strange, dark color, like pewter—or something. The farmhouse is low and wide, has many big rooms; and, it faces the blacktop road below. There's a large yard in both the front and back; and, the front porch stretches all the way around the front and one side of the farmhouse. The back door opens to a roundabout driveway. My parents are hippies; and, they decided to return to the land.

I can still see, to this day, my father tying up my mother in a long rope, in our roundabout driveway, which is behind the farmhouse. He tied her all the way around her body, with her arms inside of that rope, all the way down to her ankles.

*Nighttime has arrived in its usual monotony. I managed to get a few hours of rest during the day, but I am to be put back into the room and shackled. My wrists and ankles are caked with blood from fighting against the leather restraints during the long nights. Someone comes in the room every few hours or so to check on me; but they never do anything. Usually, they do not even come inside. They just stare at me for a few minutes, through the small, thick, double plastic window; and, then they walk slowly away. I watch them watching; and I wonder what they are thinking. Nothing, I guess. Then I struggle and strain away the night, constrained by the shackles. It is hard and painful ... **Continued...***

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THE TIGRESS

I returned to my high school, age 18, from a mental hospital, diagnosed a paranoid schizophrenic. I had missed my last year, so I was allowed to finish up in vocational school, in an agriculture mechanics program.

Our small class studied a textbook for two months, before moving into the machine shop. An old tractor engine, hoisted by wire chains, hung in the back of the shop. It had once been painted yellow but was now badly rusted. The engine seemed to be intact, however.

In the shop, we first learned how to operate each type of welder. A MIG welder feeds a thin line of metal at a steady rate, but I could not control that rate, so I did not like it much. Brazing produces a bond of unruly brass. An Oxy-acetylene blowtorch breaks things apart. Arc welding was the best. I only had to ease the white rod along in small, concentric circles. After cooling, I chopped off the cover; and, a metal bead appeared, shaped like pancakes piled halfway on top of each other. There is no middle ground with arc welding. A bead is right or ruined. And one poor bead jeopardizes an entire structure. I related to this sense of imperative.

I cut some pieces of iron with a hacksaw and the blowtorch and welded them back together into a frame. I installed wheels to the frame. I drilled holes in the frame and bolted the structure securely. I wheeled my frame over the engine, hanging by its chains; and, lowered the engine into its frame. I recalled how I have

been shackled to a bed by my wrists and ankles for a week when I had first arrived at the hospital. Having the engine secured in its frame felt right to me, and safe. I had made a home for the engine.

I started to work on my tractor engine.

I wheeled it outside and sand blasted the engine's exterior to remove old paint and rust. After sand blasting, the engine had a smooth iron sheen, like an animal's fur coat, newly brushed. I spray-painted the engine and its frame blue. After the paint had dried, I wheeled the engine back into the shop. I loosened the head's bolts. The head gasket had rotted, sealing like glue to the block. I had to pry the head off by ramming several long screwdrivers into the gap, using a large rubber mallet. The head slowly lifted, millimeters at a time; until, with one last ram of a screwdriver, the head popped from its block, nearly falling on the concrete floor. I carefully carried the head over to the glass-beader; putting it inside the machine. I glass-beaded the head. The head's inner surface became shiny steel. I set the head on my work bench, as I wouldn't need it until I was done resurrecting my engine. I took the valves out of the engine. The valves were caked with rust and grime. I ground the valves down on a stationary grinder and then polished them with the electric wire brush. I had entered something of a trance state. I frequently had to be told to wear my safety glasses on the grinder by the instructor.

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SEASHORE OF LAKE MICHIGAN

“Tom, do you ever wonder what’s going on in the world?”
“What do you mean?”

“I mean everything else is happening and has happened before too.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Why do you spray that stuff all over your armpits?”

“So I don’t smell.”

“I never smell. You’re filling up the whole room. I can’t even see.”

Tom just kept spraying his can of Right Guard deodorant, filling up the room with a thick, gray mist.

“Tom, what’s your one cousin’s name?”

“Susan,” Tom answered.

“Oh. I like her.”

“Yeah, you told me. She’s alright, I guess.”

“Tom, who is this?” Mike asked about the music they were listening to.

“Led Zeppelin. ‘Immigrant Song’.”

“This song is cool.”

“Why?”

“Because the way the singer is calling out to something.”

Tom put his can of deodorant down on the table and

said, "Let's go to the beach and see if the girls are there."

Tom was a medium built boy, almost slight, but not quite. His hair was black and his face one girl called cute. Mike was a little bigger but not by much, with clear eyes and thick, brown hair.

"All right."

The two boys left the room of the big house and walked down the long wooden staircase to the beach. It was dark outside and the stars were out in the sky and insects were buzzing all around them. The nighttime air was clean and fresh but the boys did not notice any of it.

"Your brother is cool."

"Yeah."

"Tom, today, I could see your mom's bra through her shirt; is she supposed to wear it like that?"

"I don't know."

"Oh."

The boys stepped off the staircase onto the sand and walked over to the fire that was blazing in the middle of the beach. It was a big fire and the smoke was rising straight into the dark, night sky. There were people all around the fire in a big circle. As the two boys walked up to the fire, Tom's older brother, John, who was sitting in a lawn chair, looked up at them and said, "Hey, you bums, come on and join us. Get them a beer, Rachel."

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SCARECROW SOLDIER

Sergeant John Brown pressed forward against his exhausted will. He moved his legs slowly and chose his footing carefully as he walked down the rocky hillside. He balanced a paper plate, still slightly warm, in his right hand. The food on the thick plate was protected from a lightly falling snow by another paper plate on top. Everywhere dead trees were empty of their leaves that covered the frozen, muddy ground in a solidified carpet of red, yellow and brown. Winter had come early to this German training ground of Hohenfels, West Germany. It was Fall, 1990.

A man stood ahead of John, further down the hillside, as still as the trees. As John approached, the man extended a thickly mittened hand and Sgt. Brown placed the food in his hand.

“These god-damn motha’ fuck-ERS do not fucking feed us enough, Sergeant Brown!”

“Jesus god-damned Christ, what the fuck do you want me to do about it, Private Johnson?” John said.

“Hey, back up offa’ my motha’ fuck-in’ ass, sarge, I ain’t giving you no shit, man,” Johnson said incoherently, with a mouthful of eggs. His voice wavered at the edge of exhaustion, but to cry was unthinkable and he stifled his pain in a guttural moan of satisfaction as he continued to shovel yellow, scrambled egg into his overwidened mouth from the paper plate like some kind of serpent with detached jaws.

“I got some bad news,” John said.

“Yeah?” Johnson said, looking away.

John heaved his shoulders a couple of times like his father used to do to circulate his blood. Where was his father now? The snow fell harder. The cold wind started to pick up as it whipped through the dead trees on the rocky hillside. The sound the wind made had a faint, familiar whistle. All John could see was an endless sea of white.

U.S. Army tank divisions had destroyed this ground. Tanks ran over trees and made deep fields of mud, miles wide. Hitler’s divisions had used the very same training area. A few months in this wasteland was the perfect field training experience.

“What a fucking hell,” John muttered. Mist escaped his mouth. And then louder to his private, Brown said, “3rd Armor Division is going to Iraq.”

Johnson was still.

“My old drill sergeant just told us,” John said.

Sergeant Brown’s old drill sergeant had broken the news at morning chow. Sergeant First Class Anderson was a trainer, assigned to Hohenfels. The soldiers were all sitting in the warm tent, quietly eating breakfast. Sgt. Anderson strode inside. He was still wearing the same type of non-issue boots he had worn when John had been a private. His hands were gloved in the same slick, black gloves normally worn with the service dress uniform. He smacked them together forcefully, finger well against finger well in some kind of nervous habit.

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THE MAN AND HIS WIFE

The man looked at his wife. She sat at their dining room table, writing a letter. Her head was bent down close to the paper and she was lost deep in what she was doing. He always wondered about her. The man was reading a book on the sofa. It was fairly peaceful in the house tonight; they had eaten dinner and, so far, no fight. The lamps in the living room were on and the traffic on the street was going by in its usual monotony. The book he was trying to read was not that interesting, so he followed along in the pages with his eyes and let his thoughts drift a little about his wife.

Then the man's wife turned into a giant, black spider. She was the kind of spider with a big body and fuzzy edges. The creature had eight limbs instead of four and the spider suddenly turned and stared straight at him with evil, beady eyes. Bug eyes. He jumped back from the book he had been skimming. Now, the huge spider flew out of the chair, straight up the wall on its eight legs, to the corner. It turned around and paused there, staring back, piercingly, into his soul.

The man threw his book into the air, ran from the couch to the kitchen, and grabbed a large cutting knife from a drawer to defend himself with against the spider on the ceiling, staring back at him with several sets of eyes. ... *Continued...*

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THE STINGER

Joey Kelly was an Irish-American, a recent émigré to Boston. He had long, curly blonde hair and stood at medium height. His eyes were a curious light gray, resembling the color of dirty sea salt, with a thick line around the pupil. He was an unquestionably handsome man. As he gazed across the ocean spray a few feet in front of him from the huge waves that were hitting the bow of the ship, he thought of his home and his family back in Ireland. He hadn't seen any of them for several years and he particularly missed his mother. He yearned for her cooking and her warmth more than anything he could think of. He so loved her.

Their ship had gone too far out and everyone on board knew it. Still, their haul was massive and it had almost been worth it. Only Joey had complained to the captain that it was not worth the risk of taking on the huge storm coming their way. He had risen to first officer and now it was his job to naysay. He knew he had been right and he wished that he had trusted in his instincts. Now they were in real trouble and it was partly his fault. Still, if they could follow the storm along their port side, it might just guide them back to safety.

“Ma’an O’erboooard!!! Maaaaannnn...” the cry faded away into the dark, stormy night, as another wave crashed into the side of the ship.

The captain pulled the two throttle sticks upright and turned to stare into Joey’s eyes. The captain was a tall,

lanky man. His eyebrows made one long line across his forehead and he talked in a deep, gruff voice. He embodied the image of seafaring mariner. The captain did not, instinctively, turn the ship around, presuming the man to already be lost.

Joey turned and ran straight out the cabin door and, grabbing the railing, made his way to the stern of the ship where the yell had come from. He saw two men at the stern, just figures dressed in bright orange in the mist, pointing out to the large, dark ocean waves. Straining his eyes, Joey thought he could just make out the man's orange suit bobbing up and down in the freezing waters, at least fifty meters out. But he could not be sure.

One of the crew threw a life preserver out but it only went out a short distance and the ship idled in the rough waters for a few minutes. No one moved. The white life preserver bobbed up and down in the huge waves. The two men held the rope and Joey held the rail as they all waited.

Then suddenly, a tall wave defiantly rose up and, like a credendum, hit the port side of the ship. With all its force and might, it caught them off guard. It was all they could do to just hold on and not get washed overboard.

Joey felt a slight vibration at his feet and immediately realized the captain had powered up the two massive diesel engines beneath. The man was gone. Joey yelled for the other two men to pull in the float and go below. When they had, and closed the hull door behind them, Joey made his way back to the cabin. ... *Continued...*

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HAPPINESS IN NEW YORK CITY

My name is John. I have lived in Manhattan all my life. Everything had been good for a long while. Then suddenly, it all went sour. And man, it sure came up fast on me. It started when I caught chicken pox from one of my kids. I had never had it before, and it can really hit you strong when you are older. I was out a good three weeks, and I lost my job.

My estranged wife came by the apartment to check on me only once. I never did understand her. She always wanted to fight about something, it seemed. Half the time, she would go stay with her mom. She had taken our kids to live there, even though they had all already had chicken pox. I have no answers why. I don't care about her anymore.

Huge sores covered me from head to toe. I mean, I was blanketed from my eyelids to underneath every single one of my toenails: everything. It just seemed like the most incredible bad luck thing to happen. Toward the end, I could barely move. All I did was get up to use the bathroom or get some food from the refrigerator. Then one day, I suddenly discovered that I was about to breathe my last breath. So I drew every ounce of energy I had left, put on a NY Mets hat, a pair of sunglasses, my coat and a scarf, and went to the corner store. It was hard to just walk. ... *Continued...*

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THE MAGICAL PUBLISHING PEN

One day—inasmuch as what we would consider one day—the devil went on vacation to Las Vegas. The devil wanders the earth from time to time; it says so in the Book of Job. The body that the devil chose for this particular jaunt was tall: six foot two, with black hair, and an overall handsome appearance. His eyes were solid orbs of blackness. This was, perhaps, most disturbing. When a human encountered his eyes, they instantly became entranced, but upon turning away, they forgot all. His voice was almost as sinister as he was. It was a low voice that had a metallic edge to it like a DJ's, but it was a very charismatic and melodic voice and sounded like a southern drawl without the accent.

The devil enjoyed Vegas. His favorite things to do were: shoot craps at Casino Royale, ride the go-carts out by US 95, enjoy a lap dance at Crazy Horse Too strip club, and eat the seafood buffet at the Rio. The devil did eat red meat, but he was on vacation, so why not lighten it up a little? After the buffet, the devil normally went up to the Voodoo Lounge.

Peter Salinski worked in the entertainment industry in town. He was six foot one and had long, wavy brown hair and blue, seafarer's eyes—clear and calm, but tainted, wise to the storm. His girlfriend's nickname for him was 'the second cumming'. He was in danger of losing his job for unprofessional and unethical business

practices but continued to gamble his paycheck every 10th of the month, after paying his creditors slightly less than the minimum of what he owed them. If he won at the tables, which did happen, he would go to the Crazy Horse and blow his cash. His mortgage was perpetually eighty-nine days late and he owed 10k on a title loan for his BMW. He always had several bad checks out and the district attorney had sent him a letter Friday saying he was prosecuting Pete for bouncing a check he had written to buy Girl Scout cookies (the ones with chocolate swirls). Pete's web of lies was so complex that even he often got lost inside of it, and at those times he would start stuttering. Then, after payday, or if he had won at the tables, he would stop stuttering for a few days.

Pete drove his newly washed, burgundy BMW into Crazy Horse Too's parking lot. It is not a wide parking lot and it's best to go down half a block and park in any adjacent lot; that is, so long as you're planning on picking up your car before morning on the next work day. Or, you can just pull behind the building by driving in the driveway at the opposite end of the building from the main entrance. Sure, you could just valet it, but these are just a few options for you.

Pete walked into the strip club and strolled right up behind two women with thongs on. It was early Sunday morning, before the sun had come up, so there was no cover charge. He went into the main room and took a seat in one of the large sofa chairs. A waitress soon came over. She wore a short, tight, leopard skin outfit showing plenty of cleavage. ... *Continued...*

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HOLLYWOOD'S LAST HURRAH!

I was born in Central Illinois, on a farm. My childhood was great and lots of fun. I can still recall some advice my father once gave me, when I was young. He said, "In China, there are a lot of people who don't have televisions, so they can't watch movies from Hollywood. Always remember that you've had Hollywood all of your life."

It was strange advice; but for some reason I can never forget it. I'm a youthful 43, so I've been told, with brown hair and blue eyes that are independently complimented as "nice". I started an independent press in New York a few years back and it's been having a lot of luck, thanks to the Internet. Some days it seems like this publishing house guides my life and provides explanations, such as to the advice my father gave me. And so it was that by the bizarre trajectory of a new book called *Green Paper*, I was launched into a strange new universe, the one my father had spoken about, Hollywood. The author, a fashion model and former wrestler, was named Mongolya, the way many celebrities name themselves, from Madonna to P. Diddy.

During the many months of creating Mongolya's book, *Green Paper*, we corresponded and became close. A relationship formed between us. I've uploaded our emails to my website: mstefanstrozier.org/id19.html and you can read them for yourself. We shared much in

common.

Mongolya. Just saying the word brings to mind such a unique soul. There is an unmistakable presence about her. Some of us have a unique side, and she is one of those people. She says that Hollywood celebrities are special for a reason; is this why? I can only ponder the seemingly unanswerable question. She had gone through life like a man shooting clay pigeons, screaming “pull!!” at every new challenge, and watching the targets burst in air before her. Such precision and aim was something to behold. And it all started with an email to me.

She invited me to come see her in L.A. It seemed like a good idea. I would walk down Sunset Boulevard, and see the stars’ handprints in the cement. But I would be doing this with a real-life celebrity! TMZ.com would take my picture and rumors would spread, even if I was only her publisher!

Mongolya didn’t meet me at the airport terminal. My heart sunk as I grabbed my bag and looked around for several minutes. She was outside in her white, drop-top BMW; but I didn’t know it because my phone had died on the plane ride. I found an outlet after some searching and charged it. Back in my 20s I had gone to L.A. to meet a woman just like this and she didn’t meet me at the airport, her father did, to tell me that his daughter had canceled our engagement because on our last phone call I had posited the thought that she might be a succubus. “What is that?” she said. “It’s an evil demon that takes the shape of a beautiful woman who devours the souls of men.” I spent a long weekend on the beach trying to learn how to surf and then went home.

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About the Author

M. STEFAN STROZIER lives in New York City. He is the founder and artistic director of La Muse Venale Acting Troupe. His plays, *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*, *The Whales*, *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln*, and *The Green Game*, were performed in lengthy runs, off-off and Off-Broadway, and in the Midtown International Theatre Festival. Additionally, he has written *Belzac December Night* (a one-act play; the first of 8 plays about America), and *Villa y Zapata La Revolucion* (the first of 4 5-act plays about Mexican history; he is working on the first play in the series now, called *The Moctezuma!*). He has directed seven plays and a two staged reading of a musical, and produced twenty-one plays. His novels, short stories, poems, essays, plays, etc... are on his website: <http://www.mstefanstrozier.org>. He has been published in literary journals (online and in print), magazines, and newspapers. He is the founder, CEO, and publisher of World Audience Publishers, and the editor-in-chief of *audience Magazine*.



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