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President's Letter

by Janice Konstantinidis

Dear Fellow NightWriters,

As predicted, the virus is surging with the onset of colder weather. The prospect of months more of isolation, masks and social distancing is a bit depressing.

I hope you will attend our November general meeting on Zoom. While we do have the critique table and a scheduled speaker, you are welcome to chat after the presentation on any subject. If you want to talk in a more organized way, write me an email and I will make a list of topics to open a discussion.

In December we will hold a virtual Holiday Party. Please read the announcement and in this issue for details. Please plan on attending; I am certain it will cheer you up!

Because so much isolation is not good for us, I am working on a plan to use our Zoom account to allow members to socialize on a regular basis. Right now I am soliciting suggestions and ideas, so please write me at jkon50@gmail.com if you have comments,



want to participate, or even want to volunteer to moderate our conversations. Please let me know what you think of the idea.

Meanwhile, stay safe and keep writing.

Janice Konstantinidis

A Silvereye eyeing some sage,
was destined to stir up some rage.
When nearing some washing,
he spurt forth his noshing;
his aim was good for his age.

Janice Konstantinidis



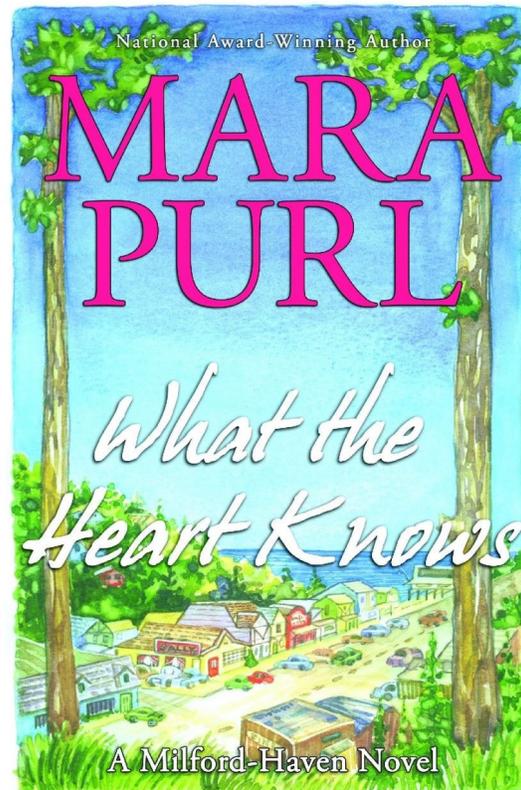
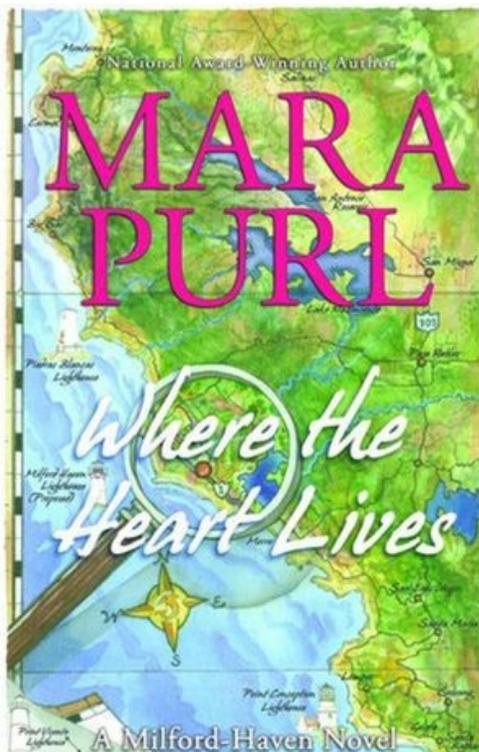
Photo by Lorraine Flakemore

November 10 General Meeting Preview

5:15 pm: Join the Critique Table

6:30 pm: General Meeting Presentation: *Using Multiple Media Formats to Tell a Story: A Journey in Milford-Haven, USA* by Mara Purl

Mara Purl pioneered small-town fiction for women with her popular and critically acclaimed saga, *Milford-Haven*. Her best-selling Milford-Haven novels, novellas and novelettes, are set on the Central Coast and brought international attention to the region when her original radio drama became a hit on BBC radio with 4.5 million U.K. listeners. Her books include: *What the Heart Knows*, *When the Heart Lives*, *When Hummers Dream*, *When Wales Watch*, and *When Otters Play*. One hundred of the Milford-Haven episodes were also performed for radio drama. Having been part of the all-star cast of Milford-Haven USA, she is now a noted audio book performer.





HOLIDAY PARTY



December 8 General Meeting Preview

5:15 pm: Join the Critique Table

6:30 pm: It's A Zoom Party!

It's time for our annual SLO NightWriters **HOLIDAY PARTY**. Please join us for a chance to share some Holiday Cheer with your fellow NightWriters.

This year's party will feature:

- **Storytelling**

Members are invited to share a story, a family tradition, a memory, or work you are proud of with other members. If you are interested, contact our Program Director, Steve Mintz (smintz@calpoly.edu), and let him know what you would like to do. Plan on speaking for five to ten minutes.

- **Raffle**

Be a winner! Several prizes will be raffled during the meeting, but you *must be present to win*. The SLO NightWriters board contributes the prizes, but if you have something to donate as a holiday gift, please let Janice Konstantinidis (jkon50@gmail.com) know.

- **Costumes**

We encourage you to dress up for the party. Best costume wins a prize. Members will vote on best costume during the meeting.

Bring your own food and drink, and let us toast a year that we will never forget.



WORD PLAY

by Morgann Tayllor

HOLD THE 'PHONE!

Barbie Good and Margie Wood were best friends but personality opposites. With nothing to go on and everything to come off, Margie Would climb into the back seat with any mail scent to her box.

Hello, **homophones**. This is not about trendy electronic devices, but of sound--a word pronounced like another word, but with a different meaning, whether the spelling is the same or not.

Mama calls: "Jonnie, come **HEAR!**" Silence. "Jonnie, did you **HERE** me? I want you to put these dirty **CLOSE** in the hamper. And when you're **THREW**, **CLOTHES** the door behind you."

'**Phones** can be traced back to eternity, but we'll drop in on the first officially recognized Thanksgiving event 400 years ago in Massachusetts between Native Americans and early European colonists. Though hard facts vary, one can **piece** together this **peaceful**, if cautious, harvest celebration between two cultures, with probabilities tacked onto some authentic journals written at the time.

* * * * *

In 1620 some 100 colonists from England landed on the Massachusetts shore aboard the Mayflower, full of hope and dreams for a better life. They struggled to become self-sufficient, to plant crops and to thrive. The land was a **maze** of vegetation, but through contact with Native Americans, they learned about corn (**maize**) and other indigenous plant and animal life.

But life was grim; it was difficult to gain a foothold in this strange land. Staples such as wheat **flour**, yeast, sugar and butter were in short supply or non-existent. Daily diet

consisted mostly of unleavened bread, stew, unpurified drinking water or home brew from fermented grain. Crops at first were sparse. Along with harsh living conditions and a disease epidemic that first winter, almost half of the original colony died, including 78 percent of the women.

* * * * *

But colonists persevered. They and their Native American neighbors celebrated a combined Thanksgiving harvest in the fall of 1621 with three days of food and games. It was a dreary New England day as they gathered, but spirits were high. A few flakes of snow drifted lazily from the overcast sky onto the hats and heads of some 90 Native Americans and just over 50 surviving settlers, which included four married women, 22 men and 25 children and teens.

Our forefathers and mothers had no supermarkets from which to choose Thanksgiving dinner ingredients, no plump dressed turkeys to pluck from the food freezers, no cornucopia of fresh fruits and vegetables year round, no bakeries to buy pumpkin pies or fresh dinner breads, no commercially sweetened cranberry sauce, no mashed potatoes because potatoes were mostly unknown in North America at that time.

* * * * *

Food was **dear** for these people and they were thankful for what the land and the sea provided. For their **meet**, a **fowling** party was organized. Wild turkey, geese, ducks and pigeons were abundant; the Native Americans brought in five freshly killed **deer** to be eaten before the **meat** turned **foul**. Wild game had a wild taste and the meat could be tough or

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chewy depending on the age of the animal when killed. Methods and preparation included boiling and/or roasting; strips of venison and whole wildfowl were often roasted on a spit. There were no ovens. Cooking was done over the hearth indoors or in a fire pit outside.

* * * * *

The forest also provided chestnuts, walnuts, beechnuts and small game such as squirrels and rabbits. Seafood was plentiful: lobster, clams, mussels, eels, oysters, white cod. Some of the meat was stuffed with onions and herbs. Seasonal garden vegetables were added to the menu, such as cabbage, carrots and cucumbers. Cooked beans and corn were a part of a vegetable medley from a Native

American dish called *succotash*.

There were no pumpkin pies, but pumpkin or Indian corn could be mashed or ground into a pudding sweetened with molasses. Dried and seasonal fruits were available, but cranberries without sugar were eaten as a tart garnish.

Finally sated by food and drink, the party began to **wind** down as people dwindled back to their daily lives. But a tradition had been **born, borne** on the brisk **wind** that swept away the overcast to herald a new season.

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Monthly Zoom Meetings

During the pandemic isolation, we are offering online meetings and presentations via Zoom (see page 3 for details of our November 10 General Meeting). We encourage interested visitors to join us. The meetings will be held on the second Tuesday of the month. The Critique Table will begin at 5:15 pm and the General Meeting will begin at 6:30 pm.

If you have any ideas or comments about our online presentations, please contact our Program Director, Steven Mintz, at smintz@calpoly.edu

Visitors are always welcome. For details, visit our website: www.sloneightwriters.org

How to Join the Monthly Zoom Critique Table

1. If you desire to have your work critiqued, send your chosen two pages to Susan Tuttle (aim2write@yahoo.com) and Terry Sanville (tsanville@sbcglobal.net) by the Saturday before the meeting.
2. Login to the monthly Zoom meeting a few minutes before 5:15 pm on the day of the meeting using the link provided in the email that is sent to members when the Zoom meeting is scheduled. You are welcome to join us even if you just want to listen and hear the critiques.
3. If you have any specific issues or questions you'd like covered at the Critique Table, just let Susan (aim2write@yahoo.com) or Terry (tsanville@sbcglobal.net) know before the meeting.

TIPS AND TIDBITS

by Judythe Guarnera

BEFORE YOU THROW UP YOUR HANDS IN SURRENDER, READ THIS INFO ABOUT PUNCTUATION



When I'm editing, I've noticed that there's often a ton of inconsistencies in the way writers use the following: ellipses, hyphens, em dashes, en dashes, colons and semi-colons. For example, I saw many writers using a hyphen when what they want is an em dash. Hyphens have their own special uses. But that's a discussion for a later date.

I thought it might be helpful to put together some of my research, which may help you become more comfortable with at least some of the punctuation listed.

Trust me—there isn't one set of writing styles, as attested to by the number of style guides available to writers. Think *Strunk and White: The Elements of Style*; *Chicago Manual of Style*; *MLA Handbook*; and *The Associated Press Stylebook*.

If you're writing a novel or a nonfiction piece which you intend to submit to a publisher and you become confused what to use when, you can always resort to an important caveat of the writing industry—**When in doubt, be consistent.**

Fact: publishers use different style guides. If you are submitting to a particular publisher and you have their style guide—no excuse—use it—follow it. If you don't have one, which is the usual case, use this collected information or other info that you've studied, but be consistent. The publisher will see you as a professional and someone worth taking the time to work with. And if they accept your work, they'll share their style guide.

An em dash (—) is longer than an en dash (–) and three times as long as a hyphen (-).

LET'S START WITH EM DASHES. Don't be afraid of them. They are useful and versatile, and too few writers make use of them.

Use em dashes in place of commas or parentheses to create a break in a sentence. Example: Please call my lawyer—Richard Smith—on Tuesday.

This sentence could also be written with commas or parentheses.

WHAT ABOUT SPACING?

The em dash is typically used without spaces on either side. Most newspapers, however, set the em dash off with a single space on each side. Not being a newspaper, I do this: "It's not my fault—he made me do it."

WHY SHOULD I USE EM DASHES IN PLACE OF COMMAS?

A pair of em dashes can be used in place of commas to enhance readability. Note, however, that dashes are *always* more emphatic than commas. (I believe a writer drags the words out more with em dashes than they do with commas, which increases the emphasis.

Example: And yet, when the car was finally delivered—nearly three months after it was ordered—she decided she no longer wanted it, leaving the dealer with an oddly equipped car that would be difficult to sell.

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HOW ABOUT USING THE EM DASH IN PLACE OF PARENTHESES?

A pair of em dashes can replace a pair of parentheses. Dashes are considered less formal than parentheses; they are also more intrusive. If you want to draw attention to the parenthetical content, use dashes. If you want to include the parenthetical content more subtly, use parentheses. Just like exclamation points, writers tend to overuse parentheses.

Note that when dashes are used in place of parentheses, surrounding punctuation should be omitted.

Examples:

- Upon discovering the errors (all 124 of them), the publisher immediately recalled the books.
- Upon discovering the errors—all 124 of them—the publisher immediately recalled the books.

How to use the **em dash** keyboard shortcut on a **Mac** or **PC**:

Mac operating systems all have the same shortcut for the **em dash**, which makes the process quick and simple. Press Option + Shift + Minus (that's -, the key right next to 0 at the top of your keyboard). The **em dash** will appear immediately.

On a **PC**, type: dash dash and the first letter of the following word and then hit Enter.

Em dashes are often used to set off parenthetical information. In this form they are similar to commas and parentheses, but with subtle differences. Using em dashes instead of parentheses puts the focus on the information between the em dashes.

For this usage, make sure you use two em dashes. Use one before the parenthetical information and one after it. Putting spaces before and after an em dash is a matter of preference; just be consistent.

Examples

- While I was shopping—wandering aimlessly up and down the aisles, actually—I ran into an old neighbor.
- There has recently been an increase—though opposed fiercely by many people—in alternative education practices.
- He was going to call off the project—or was he?—when the client increased the payment.
- Traveling—that is, traveling by public transit—can be a relaxing activity if you bring music and reading material along with you.

Perhaps a useful way to think of the em dash is as a pause or parenthesis with somewhat more emphasis than a comma and somewhat less than parentheses.

SHOULD I USE A COLON OR A SEMI-COLON?

This is not official, but I'll tell you how I decide to use one or the other. When I use a colon, it usually precedes a list of things; or I hear myself say, "So, this is what I was talking about."

When I use a semi-colon, I'm connecting two independent clauses that have a close relationship. They are different enough that I don't want to join them with a conjunction like 'and.' I see each one as independent, but related and important enough to have their own space, but similar enough to hold hands.

Example: We had too many fumbles; we lost the game.

Now, I could also have joined the two clauses with the word 'and,' or I could have used em dashes. All would be correct, but it's up to

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the writer to use the style that fits their intention and gives the emphasis that fits that intention.

While parenthetical em dashes often operate in pairs (see the examples under the first point above), hard-comma em dashes often function alone at ends of sentences. For example:

You are the friend, the only friend, who offered to help me.

You are the friend—the only friend—who offered to help me.

I pay the bills; she has all the fun.

I pay the bills—she has all the fun.

I wish you would ... oh, never mind.

I wish you would—oh, never mind.

Tune in later for more.

*In the Rhythm of Writing,
Judythe Guarnera*

Submit Stories, Photos and Ads to the Newsletter

We will publish advertisements for NightWriters' books and book writing related events. This advertising is Free For Members. Please provide the graphic (book cover or other graphic) for the announcement.

We will also accept original photographs, and unpublished Flash Fiction between 400-800 words from current members. Excerpts from published works, if they stand alone as their own mini-story, are also acceptable. We are also interested in articles, kudos and event notices. And if you have any other ideas for content, please let us know.

Monthly (Online) Meetings

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Visitors are always welcome. For details, visit our website: www.slouthernwriters.org

The 2020 Lillian Dean Inspiration Award

By Judythe Guarnera

"Janice is well-known for her wicked and quick ability to sculpt a limerick out of thin air to the delight of everyone."

This quote is from Teri Bayus, Central Coast Writers Conference Director, as she awarded the Lillian Dean Inspiration Award to SLO NightWriter president, Janice Konstantinidis, at the September conference.

Having been friends with Janice for eight of the fifteen years she has been here after emigrating from Tasmania, Australia in 2005, I am personally aware how true that description is. Though she might deny it, I strongly suspect she cherishes being identified with *wicked* limericks. She often follows up one of her specialties with the word 'naughty,' accompanied by a serious twinkle in her eye.

Lillian Dean Award

The Lillian Dean Inspiration Award is given by the Central Coast Writers Conference to a Central Coast author or mentor who has demonstrated achievement, dedication, and facilitated early writers to grow and flourish. The recipient is a mentor and peer to all who tap the keys and strive to create with the written word. The award is named for Lillian Dean, the Cuesta College instructor who created the Central Coast Writers Conference 35 years ago and encouraged writers to improve their skills and to ultimately publish.

At the conference Bayus explained why Janice was awarded this coveted award.

Janice has shown a true dedication and commitment to local writers through her roles as: the President of SLO NightWriters; as a member of the CCWC Advisory Committee (five years and

counting!); and her hours of instruction teaching poetry classes.

Janice is a poet with a fascination for limericks. She is currently writing her memoir and enjoys writing short stories.

Some of Janice's poems have been published in literary magazines over the past several years. She won first place for creative nonfiction and first and second place for poetry in the Lillian Dean writing contest in 2014. Her new book of limericks in collaboration with a nature photographer with a specific focus on birds is titled *Words Of Beak*. Janice draws inspiration from her past and nature. She has a deep regard and a sense of the transience of life.

When she was told of the award, Janice admits to being astonished, then humbled, and above all delighted.

NightWriter Contributions

Janice joined NW in 2008, served on the board as Webmaster, and became President four years ago. As anyone who serves on a non-profit board knows, those involved often wear a number of hats. For brevity's sake, I won't list them all here.

Her dedicated efforts have created a fertile environment for both new and seasoned writers.

Something that brings Janice joy is seeing a writer's talents emerge and grow and sometimes experience the joy of being published. She points out that if she can't help a writer, she usually knows someone who can.

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When the Muse Visits

Janice loves to write in magical realism, creative nonfiction, and “above all—poetry.” She says she writes anywhere an idea comes to her and then later she expands her idea at her desk in the kitchen with her dogs lying at her feet.

Looking Forward

Janice recognizes that not every writer wants to write in fixed form. For those who don’t, she’d love to show them how to craft their words with precision. She might also teach other facets of writing later. Janice wants to finish her memoir, a work in progress. She wants to keep improving, something her mentors have encouraged her to do. Writing another book like the one she’s published—a book of limericks/verses in collaboration with a talented photographer—feeds her love of nature and poetry. She’d also like to publish another book of poems.

“I think in rhyme and am grateful that I can channel it to poetry. I accept the way I think, and I turn this into my art.” In five years, she’d like to have finished another book of poetry and to be teaching somewhere. So far, her classes at the conference have been about the mechanics of poetry—essential elements of rhyme, meter and rhythm, but it seems she has much more to offer.

Janice’s Journey

“As a young person, I fought to achieve despite challenging circumstances. Had it not been for various mentors throughout my life, I would not be the person I am now, for better or worse.

“I was relatively illiterate at sixteen, living alone in a small room. Because I had a fire in me to learn, I tried my best to find people I admired to guide me. Several good and unselfish people throughout my quest for a good education, and continuing to this day, have given me support. To cut a long and harrowing story short, I succeeded in my pursuit of knowledge. I am happy within myself.

“I am never happier than when I can mentor someone who has a need to get ahead. I feel great joy when I know I’ve been instrumental in helping someone feel good about themselves. Many of the people who supported and taught me are no longer here. I know they would want me to keep doing what I do.”

How do we sum up this person, who is President of SLO NightWriters and the recipient of the Lillian Dean Inspiration Award? From a rocky beginning, with love, help, and support, Janice is who she is today—someone ready to “Pay it forward.”

Sunshine Corner

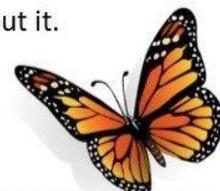
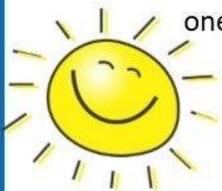
Need a Little Sunshine?

Into every life a little rain might fall, times when we long for sunshine, but no one notices.

NightWriters would like to send a card to any of its members who are ill, have lost a loved one, had surgery or an accident, but we don’t always hear about it.

So, Fellow Writers, we need you!

Please email me, Judythe Guarnera: judy.guarnera@gmail.com and let me know when someone you know needs a little sunshine.



Kudos, Kudos, Kudos...

Terry Sanville

Terry Sanville's short story, *Squeezing Lemons*, will appear in the upcoming edition of [The Garfield Lake Review](#), an annual print journal published by Olivet College, Michigan.

Meagan Friberg

Meagan Friberg's article on Gary Eberle and Eberle Winery is featured as the cover story for the Fall/Winter 2020 edition of the [San Luis Obispo Visitors Guide](#). Find the full article at <https://www.slovisitorsguide.com/enjoy-unrivaled-hospitality-at-eberle-winery/>

Have Kudos to Crow About?

Do you have a recent article or story published in a local, national or even international print or online magazine? Or a book published?

How about a review, or an award, honor or recognition of your writing?

If so, we'd like to know about it. To have your literary kudos included in *WordSmiths*, send an email to slonnewsletter@gmail.com by the 20th of the month.

President: Janice Konstantinidis
Vice-President: Vacant
Secretary: Leonard Carpenter
Treasurer: Steve Derks
Program Director: Steven Mintz
Membership Coordinator: Jim Aarons
Critique Group Coordinator: Tina Clark
Social Media/Publicity Coordinator:
 Meagan Friberg
Contest Director: Vacant
Welcome Committee: Vacant
Sunshine Chair: Judythe Guarnera
Website Master: Janice Konstantinidis
Web Assistant: Steve Derks
Newsletter Editor: Steve Derks
Photographer: Vacant

We Need Your Help

The success of non-profit organizations like SLO NightWriters depends on its members. We all have talents other than writing that any organization could make use of. NightWriters has many special opportunities for members to get involved, working "behind the scenes." If you'd like to assist in any capacity, email: jkon50@gmail.com.

A Peruvian Tale

by Carolyn Chilton Casas

My friend Napoleon was born in Moyobamba, Peru, in 1942. Due to illnesses and accidents in that time, it was common for half of a family's children to die young. His mother birthed sixteen, but only seven children survived over the age of six. Napoleon himself came close to dying from a disease when he was three. His family lived in a small home with two bedrooms, one with a bed for the girls and the other with a bed for the boys. The understanding in their family was when another child was born, if no space existed for that child in the corresponding bed, it was time for the oldest child of that gender to leave home and make his or her way in the world. Napoleon's mother was trained as a rural teacher, but never had the opportunity to work in that field. His father was a soldier, sent to the jungle to pacify gangs of thieves that attacked and stole from the town once or twice a year.

In the 1940's, Moyobamba was a town of close to two thousand inhabitants, overlooking the River Mayo, in the humid, tropical region know as the Ceja de Selva. No running water or electricity existed. No roads led in or out of Moyobamba and the nearest town was a walking distance on trails through the jungle of six hours, or a three hours' run. Moyobamba was established in 1537, two years after Pizarro and his soldiers captured the Inca king Atahualpa. The town has Inca, explorer, and Anglican missionary roots. In the 1800's Moyobamba was the oldest town in the Amazon. It was a gateway to the jungle and a place to leave from to search for the gold and silver supposedly hidden after Atahualpa was killed, although the stash was never found. Napoleon is part Inca, and from stories told by his family he knows that one of his great grandfathers was French, one grandfather was a Portuguese

explorer, and one grandmother was an indigenous woman born in Brazil.

Napoleon and each of his brothers and sisters, starting at a young age, were assigned the rotating chores of working on their family's ten-acre property planted in coffee beans and fruit, taking care of the cow they had for milk and the horse they used for transportation, carrying the family's daily water in two huge drums from the public well, and helping their mother in the kitchen. Napoleon attended grammar school, grades one through six, without owning a pair of shoes. To begin seventh grade, when shoes were a requirement, a shoemaker friend sold him an inexpensive pair of used boots.

When Napoleon was a child, his father, as well as many other townspeople, was allotted acreage in the jungle to farm. A living structure needed to be built on the property and crops planted soon after. Many trees were cut down and burned before crops could be planted. It was a day and a half canoe trip up the Rio Mayo from their home in Moyobamba to the homesteaded land. After the crops had been planted and harvested each year, there was a month when some of the villagers working on neighboring homesteads would hunt together. They hunted in a group for protection, mainly against wild hogs, that while trying to protect their litters would attack in groups of as many as 30 to 100 animals. It was important to be an exceptionally good tree climber. After each hunt, in the evenings the meat was dried over fires, salted, and put in big baskets to take home by canoe. Each time two baskets were full, two of the men would leave with the dried meat, first walking from the

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hunting camp to the river and then canoeing back home downstream.

Since his father was the leader of the group, he usually was the last to leave the camp. When Napoleon was eight, he was allowed to go on the hunt with the men. On his first hunting trip, when he and his father were the last two remaining in the camp, Napoleon was told to start a fire for cooking while his father went to get water. Napoleon cut one branch in the form of a "Y" to hold a long stick from which to hang a cooking pot. Nearby he found a big log, which he decided to use as the other side of the brace. He sat down on that same mossy tree trunk to build a fire with dry sticks. As the fire started to get warm, the log he was sitting on began to quiver. Frightened, he yelled out to his father, "Earthquake, earthquake!"

His father rushed back into the clearing, grabbed Napoleon, the guns, and their sack of

clothing, and kept on running. They left behind the meat from a wild pig and a large rodent indigenous to the jungle that they had planned on drying that night. Little did Napoleon realize that the log he had chosen to sit on was a hibernating boa, at least fourteen inches in diameter, covered in moss. As the fire had grown warmer, the boa had started waking up from his normal six-to-eight month sleep. Boas move fast when they are hungry; many villagers in the past, especially children, had been eaten by them. His grandmother once told a story about a boa that in years past had been killed and cut open; inside the crushed bones of a child were found. It was an important lesson in understanding life in the jungle. For Napoleon, this experience was the beginning of a lifetime of adventures, traveling to and working in many countries, before finally settling on the Central Coast of California.

Have You Checked Out Our Website Lately?

Control Your Own Information

Post your bio, picture, book covers and ordering links. Contribute a writing blog post-free publicity!

MEMBER SITE LINKS

List your website(s) and blog(s) with live links — makes it easier for the public to find you and helps build your platform.

BOOK REVIEWS

Get your book reviewed. Write a review—it's a valid publishing credit.

WRITERS SERVICES

Do you have a writing or professional skill? Get listed on our new Services Page.

FACEBOOK

Become a "Fan" of NightWriters! Visit NW's Facebook page and sign up today! Also, link your Facebook page and your websites and blogs to NW sites.

LINKEDIN

Connect with NW on LinkedIn. Help build your author platform with writing professional connections.

The Long and Short of It

by James Gaberel

Mowing lawns for old people ain't the most glamorous career. But if old people are good for one thing, it's paying the bills. Hard part is there's no group of people on this giant, grass infested planet with more time to complain than old people. They obsess over right angles and lawn-length. Aeration is a nightmare, too. I had one guy stick matches in the ground to count the holes.

I keep mowing and they keep paying. I get down about it, but Jessie doesn't understand. To me, only two kind of people drive circles for a living, and I ain't Dale Erhardt. So, last year I got myself a goal. I was gonna sell my services to the entire Laguna Hills Retirement Community. Sixty-five houses all buttoned up like a fancy suit on a cow bleeding cash. I did it too, almost. I got a hold-out. Old Mr. Ulmstead of 1268 Currant Drive dodges me like a ferret on meth. I swear he has a motion detector on his garage door, because it drops every time I show up.

He's been mowing his lawn every Tuesday morning forever. Used to be real vigorous about it, too. Heck, he was a faster mower than some of the hourlies I got working for me. But he's been slowing down lately, takin time to pivot the corners and center the wheels. He's got a slope to his yard and used to alternate his pattern from up-down to side-to-side. Up-down doesn't look like an option anymore—that hill's taken his legs.

"You ready for this, Pete?" Jerry's my lousy brother-in-law.

"I'm ready. I'll get him about halfway into it. Just stroll on by and offer to finish for him—on the house."

"Think he'll even talk to you? Neighbors say he's been quiet since his wife died."

In places like this, people die. Often. That's why we bill the HOA for upkeep until new tenants arrive. One time, I mowed lawns for six empty houses in one go. They were just lined up, like open coffins waiting for bodies.

A good salesman gets all the information he can. That's how Jerry knows about Ulmstead's wife. Sad, really. They did it right. "Happily married 55 years," the neighbors told me. "Still cooks him three meals a day and irons his shirts twice a week." I can't even get Jessie to pack me a frozen lunch.

I talked to Mrs. Ulmstead once. She was a pretty thing, with curly silver hair and a pair of glasses like motorcycle windshields. I caught her checking the mail.

"Morning, Mrs. Ulmstead. Nice day we're having," I said.

"Sure is."

I just went for it. "I noticed that Mr. Ulmstead is still mowing his own lawn. You know, we can do a mow-and-blow for less money than he pays to keep that old mower running."

She glanced over her shoulder and lowered her voice. "Well, I told Henry that he wasn't allowed to buy another mower. When that one dies, he gets a service. So, if you want our business now, you'll just have to put a rock in the lawn. Otherwise, just stick around. You'll get him eventually."

I've been waiting since then. It's almost like a game between us. There's no way his neighbors haven't told him how I spy from around the corner every Tuesday. He was winning until today, but I've got him. I earned it, anyway. As JFK said: "Some men are born patient and some have patience shoved down their throat."

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"He's comin' out, Petie." Jerry says.

I gotta admit, I admire Ulmstead's perseverance. He just don't give up. He musta come that way straight from the womb. Started his own brick-laying business at twenty. Married at twenty-two. Building houses with his own ten-man crew at twenty-five. Then it was a trip to Germany to do his civic duty by cleaning up after the war. Back in the states, he traded in his trowel for a suit and worked his way to President of a hotel chain. The man never stopped moving up.

Getting old has to be tough on a guy like that. Realizing there's no more up, only a brief sideways slide before the plunge.

"Hey, Pete. What's he doin'?"

Ulmstead's got a box on a dolly and he's rolling it across his driveway. From this far away, I think he's coming out to mow, but I can't see his mower anywhere.

"Now he's got a shovel. What's in the box, Petie?"

"Hell if I know, Jerry. Shut up, will ya?"

Old man Ulmstead uses the blade of his shovel to saw through the turf that he should be mowing. Soon, he has a patch of sod about three feet square.

"Looks like he's planting somethin'," I say.

His shovel moves slowly, and the pile grows, but too slow. I tell Jerry to wait and make my way to Ulmstead's house.

"Hey, Mr. Ulmstead. Need any help there?"

No answer.

"You don't want to get heat stroke."

Nothing. I look in the box. Inside is a pile of metal parts I barely recognize. If not for the color, I wouldn't have guessed what was happening.

He still doesn't acknowledge me, and I understand why. I'm his devil and St. Peter in a copper brown shirt with matching hat—only here to escort him to the grave.

"Hey, Mr. Ulmstead. I'm pretty good with tools. I can probably fix that for you—no charge."

He stops with the blade deep in the soft soil and shakes his head.

"Molly said I gotta give it up."

So, I drag the box across the lawn to the open grave and help him lay the lawnmower parts inside.

"Would you like me to say anything, Mr. Ulmstead?"

"Tell me you can start Tuesday."

"Yes, sir. I can start Tuesday."

I leave him there, soil on his pants and sweat stains on his wrinkled shirt, crying over a broken lawnmower.

Earth's Yearly Makeover

by Karen Wright

Red maple and golden oak shine vibrant and alive in the throes of death.

A hint of winter chill turns green leaves yellow, orange, and red.

Pumpkin and squash born as winter winds shrivel their vines.

Tangerine and saffron, crimson and sienna, carpet the ground, awaiting their blanket of snow.

The days grow short under a waning sun.

Wind and rain mist the land.

Green and gold, orange and red drink in winter's tears.

Slick and brown, cocooned in winter's arms, fall transforms life's cycle continues.

Fall's blanket warms the seeds, rebirth begins, spring returns.

New buds poke their heads through warming branches.

Leaves stretch toward the warmth.

Flower petals open drinking in the sun.

Color and life once again cover the land.

Fruits and roots receive nourishment from the compost of fall leaves.

A bountiful harvest nourished once again.

Summer's warmth fades, the yearly makeover begins anew.

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