

This collection of stories starts in one place, and ends up in another. In between are splices of what our lives are - humor, pathos, irony, sarcasm, insight, the brevity of life - all sides of the same coin. The things that bind us, just as often divide us.

THE RIVER: A Collection of Short Stories

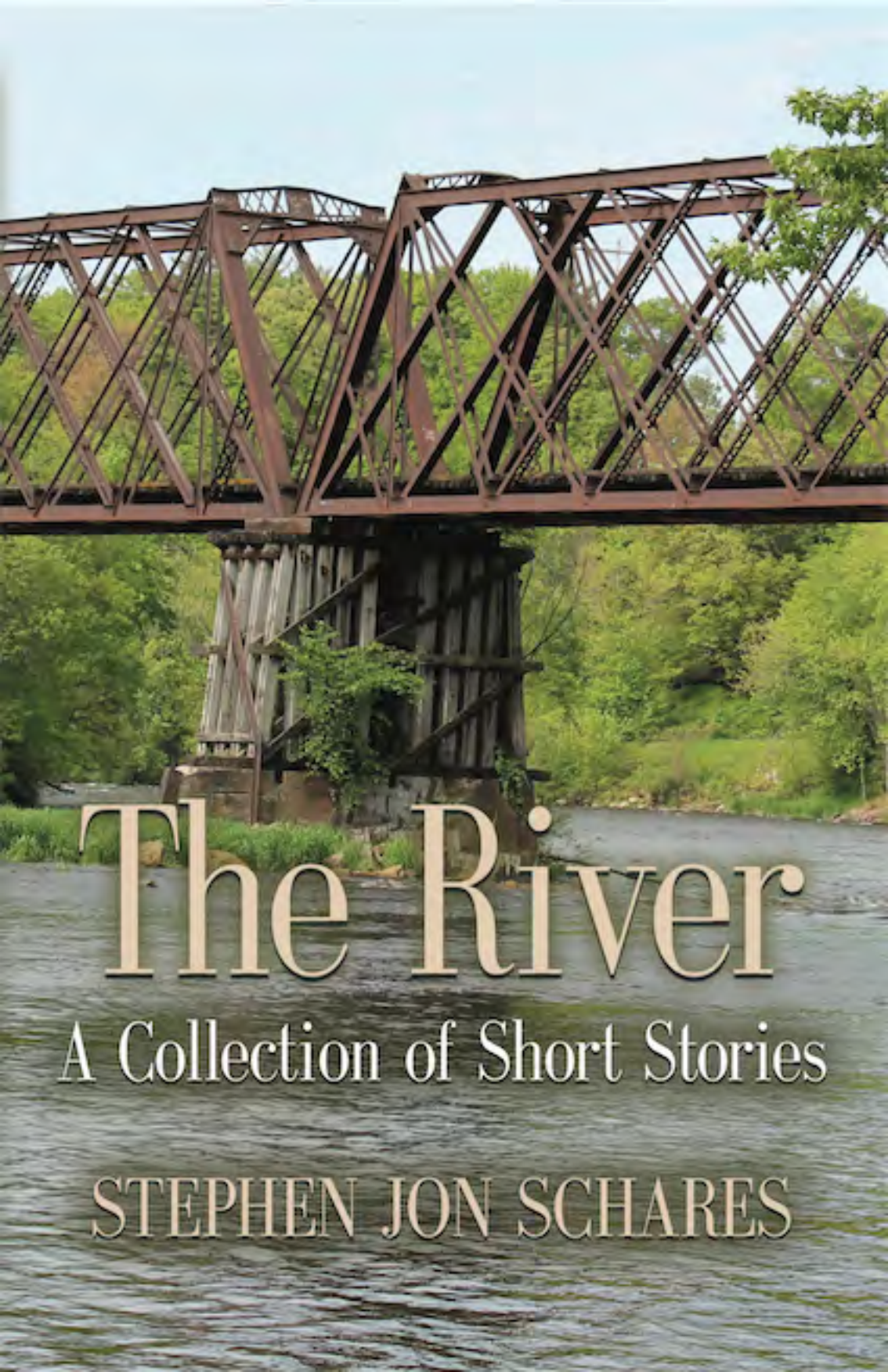
by Stephen Jon Schares

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The River

A Collection of Short Stories

STEPHEN JON SCHARES

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Seeing Red

Maybe it was the photo that caught my eye; even before the small headline. I knew that face. The name took me a second. I didn't put the two together. He always went by his nickname — Red. I had never seen his real name in print. Russell Alfred Swope. I stared unblinking.

The whistle of the teapot shook me out of my daze. I put down the newspaper, stood up from the kitchen table and turned off the stove. The sunlight out the window followed the shadow of a cloud across the empty street. I watched it — a line moving in slow motion.

Thumbing through the paper, I had flipped to the obituaries. Why, I don't know? It wasn't a section of the paper I read unless I knew ahead of time about someone I had known; or, a young person killed in a car crash or some farming accident.

'Senior High School student dies in two car accident on graduation night...Eagle Scout, planned to attend college in fall'. 'Ten year old suffocated in corn silo...member of 4-H... survived by parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, etc.'

That sort of thing. Tragic, yes, without a doubt. I felt sympathy but there wasn't much else I could do.

They say if you stand on the street corner of your hometown long enough you will eventually see everybody you have ever known. As a young boy, I knew Red. A friend of my dad. My dad's friend? Well, yes and no. You know everybody by name in a small town, but that doesn't mean you are close friends with everybody. You see them around town — at the

Post Office, the grocery store, the gas station. Red was older than my father. He looked it. How many years? I couldn't tell.

My dad took me to Red's place once. He lived on the edge of town. Repaired small appliances, lawn mowers, things like that. I don't remember the exact reason why we went. Maybe our toaster was on the blink. I must have been about nine. We drove down the gravel road along the river to his driveway. A rusted sign next to the mailbox said 'Red's Small Motor Repair'. The driveway was a dirt path bordered on each side by a lawn overgrown with weeds and spotted with bare patches of dirt. In rainy weather, the driveway turned to mud and the bare patches in the grass became puddles.

It was one of those wet days. I had to be careful where I stepped. The house was small, like a cottage, more clapboard than anything. Not at all like my uncle's cottage on the lake. It stood uninviting. Dirty water streaks ran down the chipped and peeling white boards in vertical lines. It resembled the stripes of a zebra. The roof was a random pattern of shingles and metal patches. It had no eaves. Even in that rundown part of town, it was an eyesore.

The screen door hung loosely on its hinges. A diagonal tear at one corner had been duct-taped. The mosquitoes can be murder along the river. At the base of the door, a cracked slab of cement provided a spot to scrape or stamp your shoes to rid yourself of any attached mud; or snow, in the winter months.

Dad knocked at the door, although Red knew we were there. His head had appeared at the window when we drove into the driveway. Red opened the door with a tug. The door stuck at the bottom. "Hey Bob, how's it going?" His voice was hoarse and rough sounding like he had a sore throat.

"Not bad, Red," my dad replied, shaking his hand. "How are you?"

"Can't complain, but sometimes I still do." He winked at me. "Who's this? The oldest boy? What's your name, young fella?"

"Bobby Jr." I stammered. Red's size and appearance intimidated me.

Red wore a sleeveless white T-shirt that bulged out at his stomach, and shapeless gray cotton pants that hung straight, with a slight crease down the middle. The sort of pants that all the older men in town wore. 'Working class pants,' my dad called them. 'Comfortable and cheap.' Grease stains outlined the pockets. Red's work shoes were scuffed and unpolished.

His arms and shoulders were matted with hair. More so than his head. His hair, fiery red, was slicked back and receding. A rough, equally red stubble covered his face. Red's smile revealed a gap between his two front teeth. A smoker's stain painted them a dull yellow.

"Well, come on in Bob and Bobby J. You'll have to excuse the mess. Maid's day off." Red laughed at his own joke.

Dad smiled and chuckled slightly. I stood speechless in disbelief.

I was stunned by what I saw. The image burned into my retinas. We had to bend over to enter the front room. A clothesline strung from behind the front door ran across the living room to the far wall then back to the near wall. We had to duck under hanging laundry, straighten up, then duck again to reach the kitchen.

The heavy smell of wet clothes and mildew filled my nostrils. My stomach felt a little queasy. An ironing board was set up in the kitchen. It was a wooden one with spindly legs and a threadbare cotton cover. The iron sat upright on the board, plugged by a short cord into the wall. A half-pressed shirt hung limply over the sides of the board; its shoulders and arms slumped in resignation. Here the heat from the ironed

clothes faced off against the dampness from the wet clothes on the lines. The radiator, like a referee, whistled away in the corner.

Some of the laundry was draped over the crowded lines like it had been tossed blindly over Red's shoulder. The rest were attached by clothespins, the old horseshoe shaped kind without the spring closure. They were pinned right side up — pants, shirts, underwear — posed like they were ready to flee.

The house had three rooms from what I could see. There was the living room, which we had just crossed, and the kitchen where we stood. There was also a narrow door off the living room. I couldn't tell if it led to a bedroom or a bathroom. It was closed. Either way it could not have been very big.

Single light bulbs hung down from both the ceiling in the kitchen and in the living room. Neither one had a shade or a cover. There was a short chain attached to the hanging socket in the kitchen to turn it on or off. I don't think the place would have passed a fire inspection.

A low sofa leaned against the wall of the living room. It sank in the middle. The sofa back and cushions were covered by a faded bed-sheet. The exposed arms were frayed with fiber strands that clumped like hair in need of a combing. At the far end, a lamp, with a tilted shade, stood on a narrow crate. A wooden coffee table, one leg heavily taped, stood in front of it. The top was invisible, covered with a pile of newspapers and an assortment of dirty dishes — plates, cups and glasses of varying patterns. The plates held remnants of food; the glasses and cups ring-lined with milk and coffee stains.

A thin brown carpet, stained dark in places, stretched to reach the walls. It looked like an indoor-outdoor carpet rather than what I was used to seeing in houses. The carpeting stopped at the kitchen.

There the linoleum floor took over. A patchwork of black and white squares along the edges of the kitchen blended to matching gray squares in the middle of the floor. A metal table, slightly bigger than a card table, stood in the center of the kitchen. It was piled with more dirty dishes, and a small, black and white TV that faced the ironing board. The TV was on but no sound came out of it. Two matching rusted chairs with vinyl-covered seats sat by the table. One held a basket with clothes for ironing.

Under the window was a large single sink. It had a U-shaped faucet, with separate up and down handles for hot and cold. Clean dishes were stacked in the rack on the drain board. There was no counter space. Dried and hardened food stains spotted the stove. They didn't look recent.

I took it all in. I felt like I was on a Hollywood set. This can't be real. No one could live like this. My eyes must have popped out of my head.

Red looked at me and grinned a toothy smile. "This is how bachelor's live. I haven't got a wife or a mother to take care of me, to do all my washing and mending and cooking. Now your dad here is lucky." Red nodded at my father. "He's got a good wife and you've got a good mother. You better stay in school or you'll end up like me."

I must have gulped. No words came out. I could see my dad looking at me out of the corner of my eye.

I didn't need much convincing on the school part. I liked school. I was already planning on going to college. One look around told me I didn't want to be a bachelor either. That fear never escaped me — growing up and living alone in bachelor squalor. I couldn't really picture myself being married but I feared the other extreme.

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My dad teased me about Red's place on the way home. "How would you like to live like that?"

"I wouldn't," I replied, shaking my head. "Does his place always look that way?"

As much as Red, and his place repulsed me, I was intrigued. About a year later, I started a newspaper route, delivering in the afternoons every day after school. Red was usually there in his yard at a portable workbench that he could wheel in and out of his work shed, depending on the weather, or else inside the shed, yanking some engine apart or banging some metal piece into place. The shed, an old converted animal or horse stall, was about half the size of his house.

He would look up and yell, "Hey Bobby J., how's it going? Any good news to report?" He would point with a jerk of his head to the paper in my hand.

"No, not much," I'd answer.

"Hell, there never is." Red would then spit tobacco juice my way, grin, and say, "Didn't get any on you, did I?"

"No. You missed me again."

"That's what I thought." The next moment he would be back at his work tinkering away.

I got pretty good at dodging his tobacco juice. Although I think if he had really tried, he could have nailed me or at least made me dance.

Our conversations usually only lasted a few minutes. I would ask him things like "What are you working on?" or "What does that part do?" Real intelligent questions. Red would often stop what he was doing and explain everything in great detail.

Other times, Red would ask me questions like "What are you studying in school?" Then listen to my answer. He wanted

to know specifics. Whether it was history, math, literature, or science, it didn't matter to Red. He would add some comment or observation, but not in the preachy way that parents do.

One time I asked him how he knew so much.

"Well," Red replied, "living alone, you have a lot of time to think." He paused for a moment, put his wrench down, and looked at me with a sideways glance. "You might not believe this, Bobby J., but I like to sit down on occasion and read a good book." Red must have noticed the surprised look on my face. He grinned.

"Me too," I replied.

"That's good". He paused. "Anything but ironing." Red's face took on a look of horror.

I laughed.

Sometimes I would help hold a tool while he loosened or tightened a bolt or nut. One day, I was holding pliers for him. I asked Red, "How come you never got married?"

Red looked hard up at me out of the corner of his eye, spit off to the side, and said, "That's kind of personal."

My face flushed. "I'm sorry, Red. I didn't mean to get personal."

He flashed a half-smile, winked, and said, "That's all right. I'll tell you anyway. If you're going to marry someone, Bobby J., it has to be for the right reasons. Hand me that wrench. You can't marry someone to make yourself happy. You have to be happy with yourself first."

I thought about my parents. They didn't always seem very happy. They argued a lot, and sometimes took it out on us kids.

"And you don't marry just because everyone thinks you should. If it's not there, you can't force it. For me, I like being

single, not being tied down. Here hold this again." Red handed the wrench back to me.

I nodded my head. I don't know that I really understood everything he said, but he talked to me like a person, not adult to child. "Did you ever ask anyone to marry you?"

Red shook his head slightly. "No." He leaned closer. Then looked around like he was going to confide in me. "But once a woman asked me if I wanted to get married."

My ears perked up. I tried to imagine what the woman looked like. A female version of Red? "What did you say?" I bent close to hear his answer.

Red put down the tool he was holding. He raised his eyebrows. "I thought she said buried, and I said not until I'm dead." He stared at me, his eyes unblinking.

It took me a second. Then we both broke into fits of laughter. He roared so loud and long, he started to cough and choke. I had to slap him on the back.

In those few minutes we talked, during my paper route, we covered more ground than any conversation I ever had with my own dad. He was always too busy, too tired, too whatever. There was a gap, a chasm, between my father and I that I couldn't seem to bridge. It grew as I grew older. We couldn't communicate on any important level beyond the weather and similar small talk. Yet I could talk to this rough, brass, uneducated guy who lived on the fringe of a small farming town.

I never told my dad about those conversations with Red. Why? I guess I didn't want to hurt his feelings. Make him think that Red had somehow taken his place. Even though, in some ways, he had.

My dad was quick to point out mistakes, failings. Maybe he thought he was helping me; criticizing me so I didn't make

those same mistakes again. It had the opposite effect. I resented him for it. Red never criticized. He just pointed out things or asked questions. He would tell you what he thought, but he would leave it up to you to decide how you reacted or what you decided to do.

My father died three years ago. Lung cancer. He smoked too much. I wasn't there when he died. I had planned to spend some time with him during those last months. I had hoped to narrow that gap that still existed between us. The doctors missed on their prognosis. He went quickly. He died before my connecting flight had left O'Hare. I still carry that pain, that missed opportunity.

Red showed up at the funeral. I hadn't seen him since I was a teenager. After I went away to college, I only spent brief periods of time at home. He went through the line at the funeral home with the others, offering his condolences. I only spoke to him for a few seconds. He wore a suit and a tie. I had never seen him in one before. Red took my hand in both his hands. I didn't want to let go.

"You know, your father loved you in his own way. He showed me a picture of you once — leaning against some fancy sports car you had just bought. There was a young woman in the picture too — very pretty. He was proud of you. That much I could see."

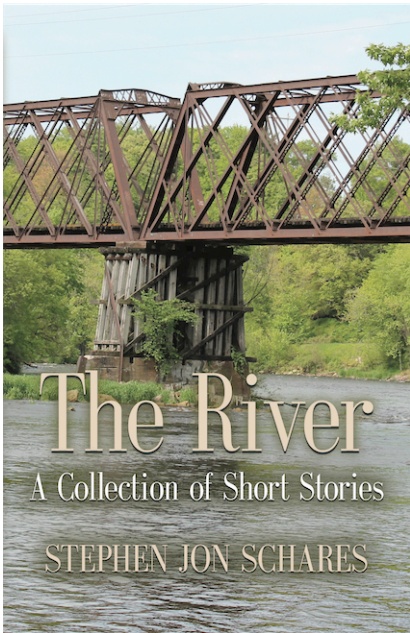
I swallowed hard to fight back the tears. "Thank you, Red," was all I could get out.

I'm divorced now. My two-year marriage was short but not very sweet. I guess I went into it for all the wrong reasons. Maybe that old fear of living alone. The funny thing is, I live alone now; in the town who's paper I used to deliver as a boy. My hometown only twenty miles away. That's how I happened

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to see Red's photo and name in the paper. His world never stretched any farther than that. So far, mine hasn't stretched much farther.

I stirred the tea in my cup. The crystals of white sugar melted into the liquid. I looked around the kitchen, then down at my reflection in the swirling tea.



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