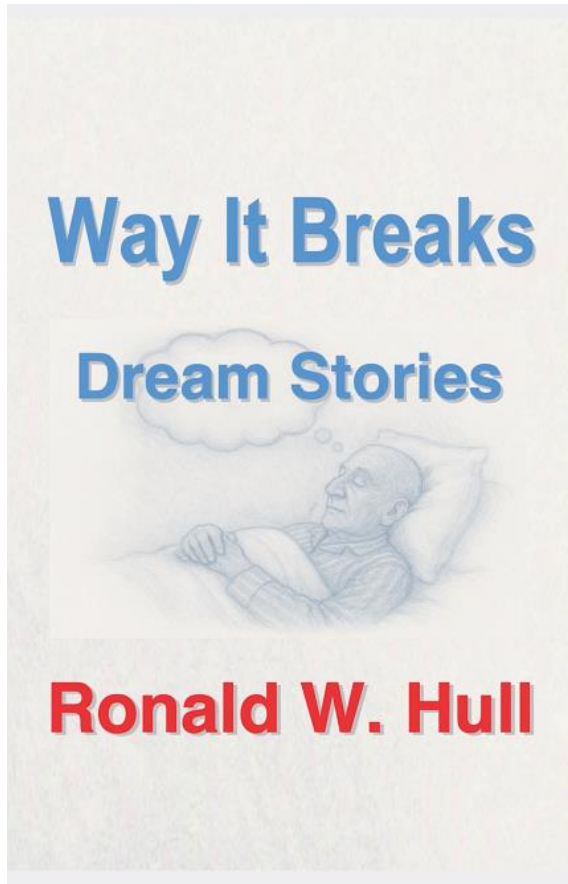




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Way It Breaks

Dream Stories



Ronald W. Hull

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Ronald W. Hull

Houston, Texas USA

Ron's Place: <http://ronhullauthor.com>

Table of Contents

Preface	ix
Good Karma	1
1 - Small World	3
2 - Recovering from Brutality	17
3 - Foundling Pearl	29
4 - From Nothing to Something.....	41
5 - Hand-Me-Down Home.....	53
6 - A Beggar's Good Fortune	55
7 - Two Muskie Tale	65
Bad Karma.....	77
8 - Bad Karma	79
9 - Fateful	85
10 - What the Hell?.....	109
11 - Winner, Loser.....	113
12 - Falling from Grace	121
Music	127
13 - Sweet Melody of Life.....	129
14 - Death Do Us Part	145
Nature	151
15 - Gigantic Joe.....	153
16 - The Matriarch.....	161
17 - What Are You Bloody Doing?.....	167
Crime	171
18 - Bernie Made Off	173
19 - Sybil's Identity Theft	191
20 - Lost Boys Scheme.....	209
21 - Deep Closet	223
Mystery	243
22 - Mind's Eye	245
23 - Father's Secret.....	249

Way It Breaks

Fantasy	263
24 - The Macaw Prince and Sleeping Princess	265
25 - Wolf In the Woods (Not Children Safe).....	279
26 - Tom Turkey	283
27 - Talking Dead	291
Superstition	293
28 - Damn Black Cat.....	295
29 - Cracks	309
Science Fiction.....	327
30 - Five Flash Fiction Stories	329
31 - Shady Timbers Bigfoot.....	335
32 - Aberration.....	355
32 - Unidentical Twins.....	361
33 - God Playing	375
34 - Project Infinity	377
Erotica	389
35 - Sisters of the Revolution.....	391
36 - Nia's Fame (Warning – Erotic)	405
37 - Erotic Companion.....	415
About the Author	437

Good Karma

Stories of good fortune that changed lives drastically for the better.
For those interested in warm, sometimes true, human stories of those
blessed by the roll of life's dice.

1

Small World

“What a wonderful story, one that was easy to follow and kept my interest from beginning to end. Therefore, for the time it took me to read this delightful story, I was there. Thank you for making it happen—this time from the safety of the sidelines.”

— David Thompson

Based on a True Story

But one day, as he followed the others leaving the camp, Quan saw a young woman above the trail smile and wave at him in a motion that told him, “Come here.” Since he was free to roam, he scrambled up the bank to where the woman was. The others did not see him.

Like so many, Quan Van Nguyen’s parents fled with their two sons and daughter from Hai Phong in 1954. He was 4, the youngest, and enjoyed the adventure like children do. But the trip wasn’t pleasing for his parents, having left everything they had built behind. Running for their lives.

Taking the long train ride with few possessions to Saigon as Ho Chi Minh began punishing or driving out all the Vietnamese people who sided with the French rather than his communist agenda. A young couple with nothing but their youth and their willingness to work, to fish, to make their way in life, prosper.

By working hard doing menial work for rich Saigon patrons, they saved enough to buy their own fishing boat again they lived on and made a living on while their last child, a girl, was born. Working as a

family, they soon were able to buy a small house by the fish market so that Quan, 7, could go to school.

Quan's older brother and sister stayed on the boat, not wanting to go back to school while making money. Fishing was good in the warm south waters, and they prospered.

Quan excelled in school. He not only loved mathematics, outshining his fellow students, he was interested in language, learning both English and French as well as how to read and write Vietnamese well. When the Americans came, he took every opportunity to talk to soldiers who would put up with his questions. Learning about them and their way of speaking English. He admired their bravado and wanted to be like them, a soldier, too.

From what Quan had learned from his parents, his peers and the news, the Vietcong and the Communists in the north under Ho Chi Minh, needed to be forced back north or they would overtake the whole country. And that would be very bad, very bad, indeed.

At 17, Quan graduated from high school with honors in 1968. At war since 1963, all able men were required to join the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the ARVN. He took a test that the military provided to see whether he was qualified to go to college. The test proved that he was and that he scored the highest in mathematics. Eager to become an officer, Quan was allowed to take the officer training test that earned him a military education at the famed Dalat Officers School, the equivalent of West Point in the United States.

After the Tet Offensive, the war was really ramping up, and the Americans were deep in the fight. From the 22nd class of Dalat in 1965 on, the ARVN were so in need of trained officers, they had two classes, an A class of two years and a B class of four years. The thought among the students and their instructors was, *the more training, the less bloodshed*. Quan was eager to go to battle with the Americans, so he chose class 25A. making First Lieutenant when he was only 19. He chose to go with the Infantry.

Quan's older brother had served his time in the ARVN, reaching the rank of corporal and, along with his older sister, returned to the boat and became partners with his parents. His younger sister went to nursing school. Nurses were in high demand with so many war

casualties. Fish were needed to feed the Army. Quan's family on the boat profited, both with fishing and side businesses like ferrying goods and people.

Quan was immediately placed in charge of a platoon of 20 men engaged in the day-to-day skirmishes in villages north of Saigon where they were routinely helicoptered in and out. Finding very few Vietcong in those villages when they arrived. Quan was particularly adept at learning from the tight-mouthed villagers who were often too afraid to help very much. It was hard work, and sometimes, very dangerous.

There were booby-traps and Vietcong disguised as villagers. Worse, children and women indoctrinated to carry a grenade or a larger bomb into a group of soldiers. Quan escaped that kind of surprise more than once by spotting it before it happened.

Quan's platoon suffered casualties but survived, and he was promoted to more responsibility, at least up until March 1975, when the People's Army of Vietnam, the PAVN, launched an all-out offensive that couldn't be stopped. By that time, rapid promotions had made Quan Captain in charge of a company.

Quan's company retreated to Saigon to regroup. But they didn't. Command was in disarray. Troops in his charge deserted. They all went to find their families. He found his family ferrying people out to US ships waiting offshore for big money. Saigon was rapidly falling apart during April and finally fell to the Vietcong and PAVN on the 29th. Quan had just left his family's boat to get back to his company, hoping to bring it back together to make one last stand.

He removed all his captain identification on his uniform that he could and put it in his pockets. Unfortunately, he was still wearing his uniform and was easily spotted by three barefoot Vietcong in the street who weren't wearing any uniforms.

Quan was carrying his US issued .32 caliber pistol, but they were carrying the preferred AK-47. Amazed at what Saigon was compared to what they had been told.

Saigon was a primitive village of animal-like people in the mud.

Instead, they found a beautiful city with paved boulevards lined with majestic buildings and residences. Markets with more food than they had ever seen in their lives. Seeing their prize hurrying through

the street, they grabbed Quan from behind before he could pull his pistol and took him to the PAVN headquarters set up in a confiscated mansion where he was detained with others.

Quan was soon interrogated. And when he couldn't provide them with any information, they thought useful, they tried some beating and a bit of torture. But they gave up when they found out that he was just a leader of soldiers and not a general. Quan apparently didn't know anything of any value.

The Commandant in charge of prisoners like him declared that they needed to send them to the North to get "reeducated." The prisoners were told that it would not take very long and if they were well behaved and learned quickly how to become good communists devoted to Ho Chi Minh, they would be back home, here in the South, within a "week or two." Quan didn't believe it.

But, when Quan learned that it would be easy for him to become "part of the victors," he volunteered to go. It seemed better than other options. While secretly knowing that he would never bow down to Ho Chi Minh or the dogma of the communists. It would just be an easier way for him to avoid being a prisoner for a long time, *at least he thought*.

Quan was wrong. He was packed with many others on a train headed for Hanoi at a snails' pace, the track was so damaged from the war and neglect. He and the other prisoners were not given any water or food for a trip that took nearly a week as the cars swayed and bounced along.

Some prisoners died from thirst, starvation, beatings or the heat. Unlike their captors, some of these officers at office jobs had not been hardened by the war to accept being deprived and survive such conditions.

Quan was hardened by his daily work in the field, but even he thought he wasn't going to make it to that wondrous reeducation camp that the Commandant had told him about.

He feared he would never be able to return to Saigon and his family again. His mouth was parched and dry. His lips cracked and bleeding. The heat was stifling. But the psychological strain was worse than the physical pain. Quan endured.

When the train finally arrived in Hanoi, the Hanoi Hilton was already full of US aviators and so were the other nearby ramshackle prisons and education camps where the Americans held were separated from the Vietnamese.

Quan was given some food and water, mostly just rice with worms in it, and ordered to walk while tied to others by rope far from Hanoi into the mountains where the Vietcong had holed up, fighting the Hmong earlier.

Quan had heard of the minority group, Hmong, but had never seen them. As they passed villages, he saw them with their strange decorative clothing. They looked different, too, more like Chinese. When he was in command, he had learned from the Americans that these people were fierce fighters. Guerrilla fighters in the mountains and deep forests. Helping the Americans put pressure on the Vietcong there.

He was also finding out how different the terrain was, getting higher all the time. With narrow trails and no place to grow food, just vast vistas of other mountains sometimes in clouds. He began to wonder if he would have anything to eat there at all. He ached from hunger and the long walk, but fortunately, there were many streams where they could get cold crystal-clear water.

Sleeping was hard because the jungle around them was filled with wild animal sounds and very frightening in the night. But he knew it was mostly birds from his experience in the jungle in the lowlands. But not as many bugs as there, something he appreciated. But it could get cold some nights. It was hard to stay warm.

When they got to the camp, not far from a monastery, they were put in bamboo cages. The regimen was simple. In the morning, they were roused out at dawn, forced to sit in the dirt, or mud when it rained, and lectured on the principles of communism and following Ho Chi Minh who they would have to declare allegiance to before ever being declared, "Reeducated."

The hope of one or two weeks that the Commandant had promised turned into months and years. Those in charge of the camp were starving and had to rely on the monastery and the nearby people for food.

Sometimes, there was plenty with fresh fruit, rice and vegetables, even spices. But mostly, there was just rotting vegetables and rice to be had from the poor people that lived nearby. Mostly, Vietnamese that were forced out of Hanoi in 1954, eking out a meager living. Only able to live in the area because the monastery helped them learn how to farm, forage, and hunt so they could sustain themselves. Secretly dreaming of leaving the country, but there was no feasible way out for them.

The Vietcong Captain in charge of the camp was just as eager to get back to Hanoi as his jailers and prisoners. As time moved on, after about two years with no help from Hanoi, he let the prisoners, after morning indoctrination, go out into the surrounding forest and forage for firewood, fruit, flowers, roots, mushrooms, tubers and other forest food that the local villagers also sought. Quan found he had to go deeper into the forest every day to find anything that others had not already foraged.

But one day, as he followed the others leaving the camp, Quan saw a young woman above the trail smile and wave at him in a motion that told him, "Come here." Since he was free to roam, he scrambled up the bank to where the woman was. The others did not see him.

###

Xuan Le's parents, like most of the others, had been forced out of Hanoi like Quan's parents in 1954. But instead of going south, they had to retreat to the mountains where they found the monastery. The monks saved them from starvation, and they gathered in villages around the monastery for mutual support.

But they could not hold back the fierce Vietcong. Some even collaborated and they had to tolerate Vietcong activity like the reeducation camp in their midst. Her parents were teenagers when they came. They married and had four children, two boys and two girls. Xuan was the youngest.

Mountain living was very hard. Xuan's parents died at a young age leaving her siblings and her to fend for themselves when she was only 15. The people of the village were a close group. Marrying any of them would cause problems. The few their age were just inadequate.

She didn't want to marry any of the Vietcong or the Hmong either. Who they thought were inferior because of their sometimes violent, wild ways.

Xuan and her sister still dreamed of marrying and having children to help support them one day. Even though some of the monks wanted to have sex, they resisted them. They were not monk chasing prostitutes like some of the girls.

Finally, Xuan hatched a plan that she didn't even tell her sister about. She had observed the prisoners going by every morning. One was tall and very educated looking. She fell in love with him just by seeing him walk by every day. Finally, she got up enough courage to wave and summon him. To her surprise, he came, climbing up through the brush, to greet her. She felt her heart beating in her chest in anticipation. She blushed.

Quan saw the love in her eyes and rose on her cheeks as Xuan, without saying a word, held out her hand to take his. She led him along the trail to where she had made a bed of grasses for them.

She was wearing a rough woven cloth shirt and pants, but nothing underneath. Quan could not believe how beautiful she was with a little mole on the right side of her cheek – a beauty mark. Her eyes were blazing as she let him remove her top and began touching her all over.

Quan couldn't even believe what he was doing. He never dreamed of a woman like this. Thoughts of the camp disappeared from his mind. She shuddered under his touch, and he was gentle as he could be, while at the same time, eager. He had a bit of experience with prostitutes in Saigon but had never been in love. This was so different, so pure, he succumbed to his urges.

Xuan cried out and bled when he entered her. And it didn't take long for him to release his tension. Afterward, he held and kissed her gently while she cried, she was so happy. But he knew he had to come back to the camp with something every day or he would be punished.

So, Quan left her that day while thinking of her all day long, all the way back to camp and all through the night as he tossed and turned until daybreak, and he knew he would see her again.

For about a month, every day, Quan would make sure that he was the last one in the line of those going out into the forest. Each prisoner

wanting to be first in line on the trail to find something by being first to find it. Then, he would fall back when he came close to where Xuan was. He would climb up to the higher trail and go to her lair that had become theirs.

And then one morning, the captain of the camp announced that everyone was returning to Hanoi. All the prisoners were declared, “reeducated,” and they would be going back with them. They packed up and left. Quan did not even have time to tell Xuan what happened.

Xuan waited that morning and Quan did not come. She was heartbroken. Hoping against hope, she came again the next morning and found that he didn’t come that day either. But when she returned to the village, she found out that the camp had been evacuated, and all the prisoners had left. She cried for many days after that and told her sister, the only one that knew of her tryst.

Fortunately, part of the reason the camp was evacuated was a Chinese initiative against Ho Chi Minh and he needed all his troops to fight them off from Hanoi. When the Chinese came to the village, they gave the villagers food and allowed them, even helped them, escape north to China with food and passage.

Xuan, her sister and her brothers, along with others, walked many days for two months, helped by many Chinese families along the way. Finally, they reached the coast where they were able to get boat passage to Hong Kong. They arrived at a refugee camp set up by the British there.

Along the way, morning sickness and the older women told Xuan that she was pregnant. She was very happy that she was having Quan’s boy. She knew it was a boy in her heart. Before long, the family learned where they would be able to immigrate to Germany. It wasn’t long after that they were sent to Germany on a plane.

When they got to their assigned city, Berlin, Xuan and her family worked menial jobs until they got tired of the German food. There were few Vietnamese there and no Vietnamese restaurants. Three years after they arrived, they pooled their savings and opened a Pho restaurant.

In the meantime, little Van Quoc Le was born and spoiled by the others who had no children. Xuan’s family had all the Vietnamese in

Berlin coming to the restaurant and were surprised how many Germans loved the traditional noodle soup, too.

They prospered and the others got married: Xuan's sister, to a German businessman and her brothers to Vietnamese women who also joined them working at the restaurant.

They soon were able to buy a larger building. The family lived upstairs in a very large two-story apartment. Little Van Quoc went to school at an early age and learned German, English and Vietnamese. Easily conversing with customers in their languages by the time he was four. Customers enjoyed his friendly antics. Providing them with eating entertainment. He picked up all the latest hit songs and danced while he sang.

Xuan marveled at her son's intelligence, and she knew one day he would grow to be like his father. She longed to see Quan again but knew it would never be.

It was a difficult birth. The doctor told her that she wouldn't be able to have any more children. By having a child and running a restaurant, there was little hope that she would ever marry. But she was content with her son and her business. That was enough.

###

After reaching Hanoi, Quan, once again, had to take that train to get home. They were starving and at war in the North and wanted all the prisoners to go south. This time, the trip was a bit easier. The tracks had been repaired, and the train ran faster. There was more food and water.

Quan arrived at a Saigon much different from the one he knew. It looked poorer and ragged around the edges. The once crowded streets of commerce were more barren than before. People stayed indoors and minded their business rather than get caught by the police who are everywhere making sure that people were behaving in the right communist way. After all, they were given free medical care and rice when they needed it,

When Quan got to his parents' home, squatters occupied it. But when he arrived at the fish market, people who he knew there told him that his parents had been fishing for the communists, while secretly

taking people, a few at a time, out of the country as far as the Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand.

All he had to do, was help in the fish market for food and wait until his parents' boat arrived. It was a month before they arrived, and he found out that his father had died. Pulled overboard by a huge shark that took his hook. Quan learned that they couldn't save him because the line got wrapped around his wrist and the shark pulled him under and away from the boat where they never saw him again.

Quan cried for the first time in his life. But his brother told him that they had waited for him to come back, having pretended to be friends with the communists, providing them fish, while plotting to leave the country as soon as Quan returned.

They left the next morning. Throughout the boat that was very seaworthy, the gold that they had received from those they took to safety was hidden carefully in many places inside. Enough gold to make them wealthy.

Quan's father had already paved the way, by befriending, and bribing, Thai officials, so that they would have proper credentials to go to the United States. When they arrived in Thailand they didn't go to the refugee camp there. Instead, they went where their father had made the deal and received proper passage, along with Thai passports.

Selling the boat, they gathered up all the gold with each one carrying some so that they wouldn't be noticed, went to the Chase Manhattan Bank in Bangkok where they were able to sell the gold and set up an account for all the money in US currency, a substantial sum of \$1,286,000. They planned for the funds to be transferred to the US once they arrived there. The bank was most happy to accommodate them for a substantial fee. United States citizenship would be waiting for them when they arrived.

With first class tickets, Quan's family flew to Los Angeles. They thought that bustling Bangkok was a marvel, but upon arriving at Los Angeles they were stunned. The freeways made them dizzy as they took their first cab to a hotel in downtown LA.

From there, they toured the Vietnamese community and determined they didn't want to live there. All that Quan's older brother and sister wanted to do was continue a fishing business. So, they

continued to a place where there was fishing – Kemah, outside of the city of Houston. Arriving there, they found what they were looking for. And were easily able to buy a home in Friendswood, very near the remarkable NASA Manned Spacecraft Center.

Quan enrolled in the University of Houston and with the transfer of this record from Dalat Officers School, was able to finish a mechanical engineering degree in two years. He was hired by Shell and began his career in the oil business. His younger sister, by the same token, continued her schooling in nursing, and became an RN after two years. She began working in MD Anderson Cancer Center. She married an American, Ralph Wilson, one of Quan's coworkers at Shell.

During the oil industry downturn in 1983, Quan, with his brother-in-law, were laid off with little promise of being rehired. Ralph was a licensed professional engineer, so they established their own mechanical engineering firm and were soon, successful in bidding jobs around Houston.

First, they went back to Vietnam to check on old friends. Some, they sponsored to come to the United States. Some, they gave money to so they could start businesses. The communist regime had learned, though full of bribery and corruption, that letting free enterprise run was a good thing for the Vietnamese economy. Even tourism from those who had left and American soldiers coming back helped Saigon start to prosper again.

The family was also growing. Quan's brothers and sisters had children, but Quan had none. He was just too busy, first going to school, and then, running his engineering business to marry. When they went to Vietnam, he saw many young women. But none of them seemed to measure up to what he remembered of Xuan. He watched for her everywhere he went but never saw anyone as beautiful as he remembered her to be.

In April of 1990, the family planned a trip to Europe, taking a month to do it. First, they flew to London and after touring London, went to some of the historic places in the British Isles. And then, they flew to Paris, touring all the historic places there. They were surprised

to find so many Vietnamese there and even found Vietnamese food if they wanted while sampling some of the French food as well.

The Berlin Wall had fallen a few months before, and Quan was intrigued with what was happening to the Soviet Union and Vietnam with communism failing to live up to its promises and the people eager to get back to business.

When they arrived, the family was glad that most Germans spoke English, unlike the French in Paris. Making it slow getting around the city and finding sites. The friendly Germans made it easy to get around in Mercedes taxicabs.

While touring one day near the Brandenburg Gate, they were surprised, while walking down a busy street, to see a familiar sign in Vietnamese for Pho, in big letters above the large, three-story restaurant.

Curious, they decided to go there for lunch. As they approached the door the familiar aroma of the noodle soup reached their noses. They knew they were in the right place. Opening the door, they found it full of noisy Germans enjoying what they knew was a real treat and a substantial food source as well. They couldn't wait to try it out.

A Vietnamese girl led them to a large table and took their orders, some preferring beef, others chicken. Quan looked around the room and saw a beautiful woman at the cash register that seemed to oversee the place and was strangely familiar for some reason.

While the family was in the midst of eating and slurping, the woman made a round of the tables to greet the customers both in German and in English. There were American tourists there as well. Her voice sounded familiar, too. It was a bit confusing until she came to their table to greet them knowing that they were Vietnamese tourists from America by their clothing and the children talking in English.

For some reason, she looked down to where Quan was sitting first, with her usual welcome, this time in Vietnamese. She was about to ask them if they were enjoying themselves when Quan saw that familiar face and the mole on her lower left cheek. *He couldn't believe what he was seeing!*

"Excuse me, could you be Xuan?" He stood up as he asked it, looking intently into the woman's eyes.

Xuan returned his gaze, and a look of great surprise came over her face. "Quan! is that you! I can't believe it!"

She started crying and fell into his arms. Both shaking as they both began sobbing together. Not of sorrow, but of great joy. Everyone at the restaurant turned to see the commotion and some of the Germans started cheering. Even though they didn't know what the couple was saying, from their own experience greeting their relatives from the East the year before, they knew that great joy and joined in the couple's happy experience.

At first, Quan's family around the table was rather shocked at what was happening. But then, his brother and sister with them remembered him telling about the girl and looking for her when they were visiting Vietnam. They joined in the celebration and crowded around the couple asking questions.

Xuan told Quan, "Excuse me, but I must show you someone. Can you wait for a minute while I go and get him?"

"Of course. I'd love to meet him. Is he your husband?"

"No." And she scurried off leaving everyone there, including the Germans, wondering why she left the party that was forming as some of the staff were bringing cake for everyone to share, free of charge.

In the back of the restaurant was the stairs leading upstairs to the residence they had above. It wasn't long before she came from the back of the restaurant to the crowd gathered around leading a boy by the hand.

When Xuan arrived back at the table, she announced, "Quan." She pushed her boy closer to him. "This is our son, Van Quoc. Van, this is your father, Quan."

Quan bent down with his hand out as if to shake his surprised son by the hand, while Van looked up at him shyly, not really knowing what to do until he just reached up and hugged his father, the one his mother had been telling him about. All the other boys he knew had fathers around or had lost them during the wars. Now, he had a real father to tell them about. He couldn't stop hugging him.

Soon, Xuan put her arms around both and everyone cheered again.

The family stayed in Germany longer than they had planned and plans were made for Xuan and Van to be sponsored to come to the

United States, while her brother and sister would stay behind in Berlin with their families because they had established themselves there and didn't want to come to the United States, although they could, and did, to visit.

Within a year, Xuan and Van arrived in Houston at the Bush airport where they were met with a huge crowd of Vietnamese who had heard the story. The local media was there, and stories were broadcast on television that evening.

Mother and son soon received their citizenship. There was a big wedding that the family from Berlin was able to attend. Van went on to follow in his father's footsteps, taking ROTC at Texas A&M and becoming a Marine pilot after.

To say that they lived happily ever after would be an understatement. Coincidences like this, half a world away, don't happen very often. But the story ends here. No one knows how the family fared after that. Many immigrant Vietnamese, although they and their children did very well, longed for home, and eventually returned.

1/19/23

2

Recovering from Brutality

“Really well done. You created vivid, believable characters and kept my interest and attention the entire way. I appreciated that your reporter character is human but struggles to remain as objective as possible under the circumstances.”

– John DeDakis

My name is Robert Brook. I’m a Cable World News (CWN.net) reporter assigned to reporting the war in Ukraine. I’ve been here, off and on, since the beginning of the war on February 24, 2022. I’m here because of my facility with language – still learning. I have a loft in the Bronx but am rarely there. Working out of Berlin for these assignments. Have been assigned overseas for the past 20 years doing stories, mostly in war zones, with too many close calls to believe. But this is not my story. But of a refugee. One I’m very close to.

###

After following the Ukrainian war in country since last March, the news desk sent me resources by wire to go to Kherson and be the first to get eyewitness stories from those liberated there. I had just arrived when shelling from offshore Russian ships forced me underground.

It was just me with my high-tech equipment in a pack on my back so that I could easily talk to people without huge cameras and camera people around drawing crowds and distraction. I pioneered the process enabling me to get candid stories more easily.

So here I was, following the crowds into a World War II era shelter. It wasn’t crowded because there were other, less nasty, places

where the residents could go. As we heard the shells strike nearby in the city, I looked around to see who was there with me.

Not far away amid a group of women, was a woman who stood out. She had that Nordic look of the Vikings who had invaded and left their mark permanently on the people of this region a thousand years ago. She was taller and more regal, naturally blonde with hair that seemed to fall into place beautifully. High cheekbones and a turned-up nose that wasn't aloof even though her clothing suggested it.

She was wearing a full-length coat with a hood that was off to one side. The coat appeared to be beige cashmere and much richer than the other women's warm padded and colorful jackets around her. I needed to talk to her. But before I moved in that direction, I saw a young man approach her and talk to her briefly. I saw her open her coat a bit and I saw the man suddenly turn and run away. That was strange. All the more reason to talk to her and get her story. My first in a city of stories.

I approached slowly past the others waiting for the shelling to be over and arrived in front of her with her eyeing me as I did. She seemed to want to smile but had a forlorn look on her face that belied her beauty, evermore obvious the closer I got. Still, she seemed to encourage me to say something.

"Hello," I spoke to her in Ukrainian with my bad accent. "My name is Robert Brooks. I'm a reporter from Cable World News covering the war. Would you mind talking to me? You can call me Bob, for short."

She answered in broken English. "Okay Bob, but it's a long story and like so many others here." She waved her hand around above the crowd. "You may find mine too shocking to report." Her beautiful eyes betraying her pain.

Who was this beautiful, intriguing woman, anyway? I knew then I had to know.

"Try me. Why did that young man who just talked to you, turn away and run?"

Her piercing blue eyes narrowed, and she opened her coat a bit for me. She was naked under the coat but terribly disfigured with obvious cuts from a knife including the loss of her right nipple and scarring all

the way down to her blonde hair down there where the bright redness of the scarring was still vividly evident.

I was shocked but had seen worse. She closed her coat quickly, and then, looked at me, almost with pleading eyes, obviously needing help. I didn't run like the young man. I had to know more.

"That was terrible!" I whispered close to her ear. "I understand why that man ran now. Who would do this to you and why? I've got to get your story. Can you tell me? I'll listen. That's what I do. I listen to people's stories. Stories of people hurt like you."

She nodded her head, *yes*, and I followed her deeper into the tunnel where it got so dark no one wanted to be there except us. I guess better because what she had to tell me she didn't want others to hear.

I pulled out my camera recorder with a full charge and signaled for her to begin speaking. The camera and sound recording, I told her, would be confidential if she wanted. She shook her head, *no*.

"No, people have to know how bad it is. I've been waiting at the train station nearby to take the train to Poland or Germany. I was hoping that some man going that way would take me with him, even marry me, but as you can see, I'm so badly damaged no man will want me now."

Her tears began flowing freely and I produced some of the tissues I carried in a pocket for fending off the cold dampness of the climate on my growing red, bulbous nose prone to leaking a bit.

As she wiped her eyes dry again, I asked, "What is your name and where did you learn English? I understand you well."

"My name is Veronika Kovalenko. I worked for a travel agency here in the city. We had many tourists come through our agency both from Ukraine and all over the world. I had to understand English in order to speak to most of the customers."

Her eyes lit up a bit as though she liked talking to me. Was even interested in me. I sensed it. Resisted it to stay neutral, but there is something about women this beautiful that scares the average man in me. Never really feeling good enough to get too close. Not liking rejection. I had to remain professional and objective. But it was difficult with this woman, so close

I could feel her warmth.

“Are you...Ahh... were you married?”

“I was... We came from a small town 50 km north of here. Marko and I fell in love in high school. He joined the Army because there were Russian insurgents in the area that were threatening us way back then, ten years ago. He rose in rank to Lieutenant, leading commandos on raids into secessionist group strongholds. It was scary but he loved it. ‘For our freedom,’ he always said. But he worried me every time he left that he wouldn’t come back.

“When our town was overrun by tanks last March, I was seven months pregnant and he decided to protect me by asking me to drive to Kiev or to Poland with our automobile. I’ll never forget what he told me when I left.

“‘I’m going underground right here to help save our people. I’ll see you when this is all over.’

“He looked me in the eyes, we kissed and hugged one last time, and I drove off not knowing if I would make it or not to safety or danger ahead. I was just one of so many wives and children that had to leave ahead of the Russians’ arrival.”

She began to cry again profusely and came to me. So, I held her close feeling the warmth of her body and let her cry on my shoulder until she stopped and looked up at me with those beautiful pleading eyes once more.

“What happened? Did something happen to him?”

“About a week ago, some of our townspeople were in the hospital. I asked them about Marco. They told me that when the Russians came, they quickly realized who he was. They took him into the town square and made everyone watch while they called him a Nazi, slapped him and spit in his face. All the while, spewing other nasty unspeakable names. They cut off his penis first, and then, his balls until he begged to die. And then, they cut off his head dramatically with a sword in front of everyone.

So shocked by the horror before them, the townspeople quickly gave up the names of innocent people to save themselves. It was a brutal warning to everyone watching what would happen if they tried to resist. The Russians then sought out our families and massacred them, too! I have no one left! I’m alone in this terrible world!”

Veronika's tears flowed again as she uttered a number of epithets against the Russians who she obviously detested so much. Once again, I held her until she calmed down.

"What a terrible thing to learn about your husband and families. I can see why you want to get away. Far away from the Russians as you can. But you have a terrible story, too, don't you? I've heard so much from you already. I can wait if you can't tell me now."

"I must tell you. What happened to me should never happen to anyone. I want you to report how terrible the Russians are. They should not be let go from the horrors that they inflicted on me, my family and my country, but should be punished to the fullest that civilized law allows!"

"We've got lots of time here before the all clear. My batteries are full. I can get both video and audio. Where do you want to start?"

###

"After I left that day, I drove on until it was night and I had forgotten to get petrol in my frightful departure from home. When I ran out, I left the car and started walking down the road towards a darkened farmhouse that I saw in the headlights ahead. Suddenly, five Russians surrounded me. Apparently, an undercover advance reconnaissance team like my husband's.

"They came upon me so quickly, I couldn't run, but I knew who they were immediately because I heard them speaking Russian. They grabbed me and dragged me into the farmhouse. There was no one there. As they ransacked the place for liquor, food and money, they kept eyeing me with more and more lust. One of them came over to me and pulled my coat off, threw it aside, and began tearing away my clothes, ripping them off. I dared not resist.

"The others watched while he tore my clothes off and raped me. I knew it would be better not to struggle and hurt my baby, so I didn't. And then, each one took a turn. They knew I was pregnant from my bulging belly but didn't seem to care.

"They got more and more violent, demanding that I tell them where I was from and where I was going and other things as they

accused me of everything kind of low behavior like I was some kind of prostitute.

“And then, they began to suspect that I was a spy or courier and began cutting on me. Asking questions, I couldn’t answer because I didn’t know. With each cut I screamed in pain and blood ran. I kept imagining what it was doing to my baby to hear it. Finally, I saw the leader and the one who first raped stand between my legs and violently kick me. Unconsciousness took over and I don’t remember anything else after that.”

“That was terrible!” I whispered as she leaned into me for comfort, sobbing and I had to stop recording. “How? How could you still be alive and here? Are you some kind of ghost? Am I dreaming?”

“They left quickly and left me bleeding unconscious on the floor. Right after they left, the farming couple and their son came out of the woods nearby and back into the house. When they found me and found me still alive, the son happened to be a medic.

“They washed my wounds and wrapped my body tightly in sheets to stop the bleeding. They found my car, added petrol and drove me to the nearby hospital where the young man worked. The father and son had my blood type and donated blood for me on the spot.

“The Russians soon commandeered the hospital. Some of the Russian soldiers even gave me blood. I woke up there about two days after I arrived in great pain from all the cuts that were healing and a tremendous need to urinate but couldn’t.

“Miraculously, I could feel my son still kicking inside me. The unbearable kidney pain of being unable to urinate caused me to go unconscious again.

“My pelvis bone was broken. My urethra was so damaged and covered with scar tissue they had to surgically run a plastic tube to my urethra below my bladder to drain my urine with the tube exiting above my groin muscle on my right side. The baby and I were sustained only by intravenous and liquid soups for the first week as I gained strength.”

I listened and recorded in rapt attention while she continued.

“And then, one night, I started having labor pains. The wounds and my broken pelvis would not allow a normal birth even though I was dilating under great pain. They moved me into the operating room

again and did a cesarean section. My boy came out kicking and yelling like a warrior but died within a few minutes because he was too early and malnourished. I cried a long time after that until my eyes dried from all that crying.

“As I lay there, I healed, and gradually, I started to get up, sit in a chair or walk the halls gaining strength, I began thinking of my future. My husband had wanted me to leave the country until it was safe. And I decided that’s what I would do. I didn’t let the hospital staff or our captors know what I was thinking. It was obvious that I wouldn’t get care for my scars in that hospital. Or my broken pelvis corrected, now healing in place.

“Yesterday, there was a lot of fighting we could hear in the streets. Most of the hospital staff left to be with their families. Knowing that I could walk okay with a limp, but couldn’t run, I wanted to leave, too.

“They dropped me off a short walk to where the train station was, so I limped over here this morning. When I got here, I approached several men to help me get on the train and out of the city, but they were all shocked when I showed them how I am. None of them would help me. And then, I heard the sirens that warned of the shelling and I came here.

“That’s my story until tonight talking to you. I need to move on, go west, find a new man and heal like my husband would want me to. That’s why I’m here, to find a man who will help me and continue my story.”

“You are so beautiful and your story is so engaging, I’m sure you will.”

###

Suddenly, she looked me straight in the eye, not five inches away so that I could feel her breath on my face, and asked, “What about you? Are you married?”

I was dumbfounded, so attracted to her, trying to remain professional.

I stammered, “No...never...have been. I got the urge to travel and be a reporter in college. I know I’m not handsome. I never was an athlete and don’t have a very good physique. When I began traveling

the world to report, I was always moving and never met anyone who wanted me enough for me to settle down. I hate to admit it, but I've never had sex with a woman."

"But you're kind. I can see it in your eyes and hear it in your voice. You have a good profession. You could provide for me. That's all you have to do. Accept a damaged woman like me. It's really not so bad. You would be kind and loving, not like those awful Russian bastards. We can go to a hotel or to the train. It doesn't matter to me. I want to reward you for listening to and recording my story. Not being horrified by my scars."

"The hotel is out of the question. I'm on assignment. But I can arrange a train ticket for you to get to Berlin at the address of a friend of mine where I stay when my assignments are in Europe.

"His name is Klaus Bumgardner. I will write down his address and telephone number and tell him to pick you up when you arrive. He will look after you until my eight-day mission here is over and I arrive back in Berlin next week.

"Once I get there, I can line up some top plastic and reconstructive bone surgeons to see if you can be helped and have your urethra restored. I expect the cost will be great, but I have gathered a large retirement fund that I can borrow from to help pay for having it done.

"You know that I am 48 and you are half my age, don't you, Veronika?"

"I know you are. But I don't really trust young or even handsome men, anymore. Even though I haven't been with any men other than my husband, I've known others. You are kind and generous. That's all I need. Already, I want to have your child."

She shocked me with that. But, before I could object, she suddenly interrupted our long conversation. "I have to pee and I have to right now! Let's get out of here, too many people around."

Even though the all clear had not been announced, the shelling had stopped and we headed for the nearby train station. She led me around the side of the station to an alley, out of sight of the deserted street and told me, "I will pee here."

Veronika pulled back her coat from her right hip and leaning that way against the wall with me holding her up. She removed a plastic cap from the five inches of tubing protruding from her side.

She peed a stream of urine onto the wall. She seemed to have held it a long time because it took a while to empty her bladder and she nearly collapsed after from the exertion doing it. I held her tight to keep her from falling over.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Veronika straightened up and kissed me. Leaning in close, she took my right hand and brought it up over both of her breasts under her coat, asking me, "How do they feel?"

Embarrassed, I told her, "It's amazing. I can feel the scars, but underneath you are both hard and soft. Lovely to touch." I found myself saying. *I couldn't believe it!*

As she moved my hand down her belly to between her legs, I told her, stuttering, "Your... scars... can be removed.... I... find... your vulva both strong and soft at the same time. I... have... never felt anything like it before!" I was near speechless with emotion.

Veronika nearly swooned in my arms with those words. She slipped her hand under my belt and under the band of my shorts to briefly feel my growing erection before retreating and kissing me again, more deeply than before. I was already in love with this amazing woman and she knew it. We straightened up and I escorted her inside the station. The all clear was on and people were gathering on the streets again.

I bought her some coffee and a meal for the trip. She was very hungry and ate heartily. Also, assured me that she could pee in the toilet on the train on her way to Berlin without anyone else's help.

When Veronika's train arrived, before she got on, I kissed her like I was already her husband and wished her luck on the journey. I was worried about seeing her go alone but knowing she would be safe if the Russians mounted another offensive and retook the region.

###

I needed to get her out of Kherson and to the West because I knew that things were very volatile and the Russian plan was unclear except, they continued to send rockets, bomb with planes and drones, and shell

cities even while retreating from previously held territories. Veronika had to find someplace safe and I was willing to help her get there.

The next day, I filed her story with CWN with careful cutting of the video I sent to comply with broadcast standards regarding nudity and words. My superiors were pleased with what I sent them.

Fortunately, nothing more happened except continued Ukrainian success recovering territory that the Russians had overrun. During the seven days that followed, I continued recording peoples' stories like Veronika's from many who had gone through terrible torture and mistreatment during the brief, terrible Russian occupation.

Most people I interviewed were elated that the Ukraine Army was able to come back and rescue them. They all told me that they had allegiance to Ukraine all along but had to pretend to be loyal to the Russians just to save their lives.

Everywhere I went, the streets were filled with joy, and I videoed with my smart pad some of the residents lavishly kissing and hugging Ukrainian liberators whenever they came into view. It was hard for those soldiers to go about their business with so much adulation.

Seven days later, when I returned to Berlin after my assignment, I arrived at Klaus's suite and my room to find Veronika greeting me in a light robe and a glass of wine. Apparently, he had helped her acquire it along with some other clothes for going out in public.

She was already filling out from his food. Veronika was so happy to see me she almost smothered me with hugs and kisses. I set about lining her up with reconstructive and plastic surgery appointments with the finest surgeons in town.

###

It's three years later. We were married in Berlin and Veronika loves our loft in the Bronx. Almost immediately, she got a job in a Manhattan travel agency where she is already valued for her languages and her lovely approach to customers.

They allow our one-year-old, Eric Brooks, to come and stay at the agency with his mama all day. We thought for a moment to name him Robert, but having one Bobby Brooks in the family was enough teasing.

Based on my earnings and savings, I plan to retire when I'm 55 and then go back with Veronika and Eric to all the countries where I've made friends over the years and see how everyone is doing... Much better, I think.

And, after a lot more travel, I will write more of my memoirs of all the interesting people I've met and worked with through all those years in all those countries. Trying to bring what was happening to life and the world's attention as best I can.

12/2/22

3

Foundling Pearl

“That was an AMAZING story! Who would think that geeky Adam and Amanda would end up being a couple of such valuable finding. Their lucky stars must have been illuminating extra brightness.”

– Sandie May Joyce (Sandie Angel)

One of the workmen, Andre Ward, approached Amanda coming down the stairs. It had been a very hot day and oppressive up in the attic. His dark skin shown as he wiped sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. He was carrying a sturdy wooden box and huffing a bit from exertion.

“Miss Zee, Ma’am, I found dis ugly box up in de attic. Don’ know why anyone would put a padlock on it? I didn’t find the key neither, but it rattles, so there’s somethin’ in it. Do you want me to break it open for ya?”

“That would be nice, Andre. It sure looks old and weak. I think a hacksaw would cut that lock off easily.”

###

Amanda Zee and Adam Furness were new staff coders at a highly successful Silicon Valley startup called, Spaceway. Truly, outer space was the limit as far as what their products could do. Fresh out of Stanford and MIT, the two of them were trainees in two different branches, so they didn’t meet while training.

Mostly, their work involved either working alone or collaboratively on large touch screens. With all the amenities at the Los Altos location, they could be seen taking advantage of the cafeteria, the gym, the game room, or the outdoor track and pool. All

designed to give employees a break during highly stressful coding sessions that sometimes lasted many hours nonstop until an objective had been met.

Adam, while at the swimming pool, diving off the high board, perfecting dives involving twists and somersaults, noticed a ravishingly beautiful Asian woman watching him. Sometimes from the pool as she was swimming, and sometimes when she would stop walking wet, ringing out her long hair and flipping it over her shoulder out of the way.

When he retreated to one of the benches to get some sun, dry off and rest, the woman climbed the high board and did an exquisite twisting single flip, entering the water with nary a splash as if to challenge him. Adam waved a V sign to her, and she lifted her hand in response, but exited the pool by the other side and went back in the building. Even if he had the chance to talk to her, Adam was too shy to do it.

There was nothing wrong with Adam. For a geek, he was very fit. But in high school, with all his interests and top grades, he was ostracized by the jocks and all the average kids who went to state colleges and joined fraternities.

Adam had a good sense of himself and didn't care whether he was "popular" or not. The only girls he dated, rather unsuccessfully, were geeky girls who were mostly greatly out of shape or had some other bad habits like bingeing on video games or certain types of junk food that made him gag.

Never gave him any opportunity to learn how to talk to a girlfriend or a woman except his mother who was single and hard-working to pay for maintaining their expensive Boston home and its mortgage after his father died in the Iraqi war from an IED.

After three or four years, sympathizers no longer came, and his mother had to carry the financial load herself. Adam did his part by volunteering and getting scholarships. Did some tutoring on the side for money so he didn't have to ask his mom for any.

Adam saw her again in the cafeteria. She was with some of the women. And he was with some of the guys. This happened several times. But he didn't have the nerve to go over and talk to her, although

he saw her glance his way a time or two, he tried not to return, but found that he did anyway, trying not to stare.

Finally, one day when he was in the gym doing a routine that he normally did, Adam saw her out of the corner of his eye coming his way and getting on the machine next to him. He could hardly contain himself.

Adam wanted to say something to her but wasn't sure what to say. *I really like your bod? You sure are hot? Want to go on a date?* None of them made any sense, so he didn't say a word and tried not to glance at her flexing muscles. She had set the machine at a high rate of difficulty and was showing it – sweating.

After exchanging glances for some time, Amanda calmly said over her exertion, "I saw you diving the other day. You have great form and confidence off the high board. I like it too, among other physical tests. I find these machines rather boring, don't you?"

His tongue untied; Adam had to answer. "I much prefer going outdoors and doing more natural things like walking on mountain trails. But the weather was pretty bad today and that's why I came in here to do my usual reps in order to keep my muscles in tone. Working so long every day at the smart panel isn't healthy."

"I feel the same way," she responded, clearly straining under her exertion.

Not knowing what to say next, Adam just blurted the first thing on his mind. "Tomorrow, if it's nice, would you like to join me on the trail?"

"That would be great. I've been running alone there for a long time. Some of the women runners aren't as fit as I am and can't keep up with me. Hell, most of the men either..." She giggled at the thought.

"I know what you mean, I have the same problem." And then, Adam thought out loud, "Oh, no... Not women, just men." His face grew red, and it wasn't from the exercise.

Their routines over, Adam stood close by as they both wiped the glistening sweat from their bodies with their towels. Each sizing the other up and not trying to make it obvious, even though it was. And then, they both went off to their separate showers and back to work.

The next day, in the cafeteria, Adam spotted Amanda sitting alone at a table and took his tray over to sit next to her. Immediately, after saying, “Hi,” and sitting down, he could feel her warmth and vibe as though there were Wi-Fi between them. Whatever she was wearing smelled heavenly, like jasmine.

Conversation suddenly became easy, and they began telling each other about each other. Amanda told Adam about her strict Chinese father and mother in San Francisco’s Chinatown where they both were accountants. She wasn’t allowed to date.

So, her only escape from home was to enter sports in high school so that she could be with others and not have to stay at home after school and listen to her mother or father scold her about not doing well in her homework. But when she got a full ride at Stanford, they changed their tune and began to brag about her to family and friends.

“So, while I participated in swimming, diving and track at Stanford and made some female friends, I didn’t have a social life because during all breaks I had to return to Chinatown where my parents would ask me to continue my studies online so that I would be better than everyone in my class. And I was.” She hunched her shoulders and frowned, showing a humility in her that he liked.

It was Adam’s turn. “I tested and my grades and interests were so high in high school, that I didn’t have any real friends. There were those that came to me asking for favors like doing their homework for them that I had to decline. But my social life was cut short by having to work and help my mother support us. I got into doing things on my own, researching ideas, that no one else understood except me.”

“Sounds pretty lonely to me. But a good-looking guy like you... And smart, too. You really caught my eye. I’ll have to admit. Not many like you around.”

“I’ll have to say, ‘Ditto,’ to that.” Adam blushed at the thought and Amanda caught it with a twinkle in her dark eyes that told Adam more than if she had said something.

They made plans to meet for an evening run at 6 pm and both left the cafeteria glowing with having made a new kind of friend in the business of hard-core out-of-the-box technical innovation. Sometimes,

cutthroat competition. Both back to work with a newfound sense of purpose.

Spaceway hired both full-time. Flush with money, they both bought high-rise studios in buildings within walking distance of each other. Dating, they took in much of what the Bay Area had to offer... Diving, surfing and fishing on the coast. Climbing, skiing and camping in the Sierras. And driving to the various scenic places up and down the state, hiking the trails and occasionally viewing the wild side south of the border.

But the state of California was coming apart from prolonged drought, wildfires, inequity in pay between the fieldworkers and service people being driven from their jobs by robots and cut out of the good life that California offered most. Unable to pay for even housing with what they were paid.

The crowding, air quality and concern for water were a bit overwhelming even though both worked online after a while and didn't have to concern themselves with what was happening on the streets until they went outside and started to experience it. They took to leaving on jet planes to other parts of United States and some tours to foreign countries. Finding that in some foreign countries conditions were getting worse.

They didn't marry because Amanda's strict Buddhist parents forbid it. Although they seemed to like Adam, they were too set in their ways to accept him. Although Adam was able to send money to his mother, she had married a man that he didn't get along with, and he stayed away from them unless he had to.

That guy, Mark, had eyes all over Amanda every time they visited. He wanted to give the guy a black eye over it, but that would've only angered his mother and made the situation worse. Besides, Amanda laughed it off, saying, "Oh, Adam, don't worry, I get that all the time. I know enough karate to give him a bit of pain if he tries to touch me in the wrong place."

One of the places they visited on brief vacations was New Orleans. They loved the people and style of life there, like San Francisco, where waiting for the "big one," made it more urgent to live fast and let what happened, may. The only difference was that

everything was a lot less expensive in New Orleans. Anywhere in the Bay Area cost at least twice as much. Their studio apartments were already overflowing with things they had acquired and the thought of having children or pets seemed out of reach.

Amanda wanted a house. Growing up where she did in crowded Chinatown and then ending up in that studio apartment after she was earning good money, she convinced Adam that it would be a great idea to investigate New Orleans real estate.

They contacted a realtor on one of their trips there and looked to see what they could buy for \$600,000. Each of their studios was worth about \$450,000, so if they both threw in together half, or \$300,000, on a house in New Orleans upon selling their studios, both would still have \$150,000 each to invest in whatever they wanted. The move to New Orleans would be easy because they were now doing 90% of their work online anyway and could go to 100% without any trouble.

Stan Boudreaux, the realtor, showed them some palatial homes and some of the nicer communities that had survived Katrina quite well. But then, he told them about something they hadn't thought of. Stan, after hearing their comments about having to renovate almost all antebellum type structures, complaining that they were too far from the French Quarter and too expensive to renovate, said.

"Why don't you buy one of the abandoned houses and completely rebuild it?"

Adam was intrigued. "What do you mean?"

"In the area that was badly flooded they have rebuilt the levees. But many of the elegant homes located right next door, within walking distance of the French Quarter, have been abandoned and never restored after Katrina. If you don't mind, there are a lot of vacant lots you can buy for a song."

"What's a song?"

"Depending upon the house, \$50,000-\$100,000." Rebuilding with all of the contractors in town constantly doing reconstruction after hurricanes, usually runs \$200,000-\$300,000."

Amanda was intrigued. "Show us some."

On a lonely street with only two or three houses, all grown up with weeds and some debris left from that terrible flooding after Katrina,

they found what they were after. A strong Victorian three-story with good bones that had been ravaged, first, by the flood, and later, by illegal inhabitants long driven away by the authorities because the area was rebuilding and there were new houses being built, showing a resurgence of the tax base.

The house was up for sale by a bank for \$75,000. Stan told them, "Go for it!" They made a bid of \$70,000. The bank had the house for over two years on its inventory and was most willing to get rid of it.

It didn't take long for Amanda and Adam to agree on what would be going into the house. While it would retain its regal Southern looks and charm, the interior would be updated and opened to the light with solar panels and a steel structure that would withstand the strongest hurricane known. The final budget came to \$350,000, far less than the other houses they were looking at and right next to the French Quarter.

After moving their work operations to a nearby hotel, Amanda and Adam sold their studios quickly because there were so many young techies just starting out in the Bay Area gobbling up anything they could buy.

Demolition had already begun. A workman, Andre Ward, up in the attic, was working on a replacement metal roof that was guaranteed not to peel back under hurricane winds, when he came upon a small black box that was padlocked and hidden up under the eaves. When he came downstairs for lunch, Amanda was there overseeing other demolition.

He approached her.

While eating his lunch on the run, Andre got a hacksaw and started sawing. Amanda was right, in no time at all, his mouth full, Andre's sawing broke through and the hasp was released. She looked on with anticipation as he opened the lid so she could look in.

The box contained five pieces of jewelry: a necklace and bracelet of silver with red rubies set with small diamonds and a ring and tie clip in gold with emeralds. The cuts of the stones and the design of the jewelry was very old, antique. And there was one, very large, pearl that seemed out of place.

Andre remarked, "Some nice jewelry here, Ma'am. If I was a thievin' man, I would'na showed it to you, an' snuck off with it so's I

could wear that ring. Maybe sell that other stuff or give it to Myrtle (Andre's girlfriend). She would'a really lik'd it even though it's not her style." His expression showed more than what he said about her taste.

"I see what you mean, Andre." Amanda unzipped and reached in her belly purse to see what she had by way of cash. "As a reward for finding it, here's \$160, that's all I've got on me. Will that do?"

"Sure will. Mighty kinda you, Ma'am." Andre returned to eating his lunch with gusto having made a little money on the side. More than he thought he would.

When Adam saw what was in the box, he was intrigued. "That pearl seems overly large. I wonder what it's worth?"

"I'll take it to a jeweler tomorrow and see."

The next day found Amanda at a jewelry shop in the French Quarter. She asked the old man at the counter if he could appraise some jewelry she had.

"Depends. My eye, it not so good as use to be, for sure. But I'll take a look see for you."

Amanda opened the box and spilled the contents out on the counter. Catching the pearl to keep it from rolling away. The old man turned on a light mounted on a swivel mount and pulled an eyepiece from his drawer to look. He picked up each piece, looked at it very carefully, turning it around looking for marks and other identification going... "Ahh...Mummm... Okey..."

Finally, he looked up from those investigations. "Dis is really old stuff. Nineteenth century. Don't see it much anymore, even from old estates. Mostly melted down with the stones recut and remounted. I can give you \$500 for the jewelry. Dat pearl, now she is something different. Never saw one so big. I could give you \$1000 for it but I wouldn't be able to sell it here. I suggest that you try Rothbys. And have dem auction dese off for you. Wouldn't trust the local auction house with dat pearl. Cheat you, Ma'am."

Amanda thanked the man and was already searching the Internet before she arrived back at their hotel room. Under good light, she photographed each piece front and back until she had good

photographs to send to New York. It wasn't long before she got an excited email back.

“Amanda Zee,

Thank you for the pictures of the jewelry and the pearl and thank you for the ruler alongside of the pearl giving us some sense of its size. We did some background checking on the items and found that they were stolen about 75 years ago from the LeBlanc estate in New Orleans. Emile LeBlanc was a New Orleans entrepreneur and explorer. One of his ventures was hiring native divers in the West Indies retrieving large, very old oysters that yield the best pearls. They are all gone now.

In 1905, one of his divers discovered the pearl in the picture, nearly spherical and .73 inches, the largest found in the Caribbean, ever. After he lost his family to a shipwreck during a hurricane in 1923, LeBlanc became a recluse in his home in the Montclair Quarter for the rest of his life. Except for his meager staff he was little seen venturing out until he died in 1930 after taking a big hit in the Wall Street crash of 1929.

The estate lay vacant until 1937, and boarded up, but that did not prevent the theft of those pieces. Easily recognizable from their features and marks. They are well-known by antique jewelry connoisseurs. I was quite shocked when I saw your pictures that they had been found. My rough estimate is that the four pieces of jewelry will bring \$100,000 and the pearl about \$50 million. But you never know.

I suggest that we have the auction right there in New Orleans, rather than here in Manhattan because that's where the interest in these pieces will be. Please screen face me to set up arrangements for the auction.

Best regards,

Malcolm Perlmutter
Chief Appraiser and CEO,
Rothbys.com”

Amanda printed the email almost crying from laughing, and texted Adam as she rushed to find him. They met in the foyer of the house where she started to read the letter with a silly grin on her face. She was reading too slow, so Adam grabbed it out of her hands and then, scanning it quickly, gasped when he discovered the estimated amount for the find.

The first thing he said was, “You’re gonna have to give Andre and that whole crew a much bigger reward for this!” With that, he leaped into Amanda’s arms, picked her slender body up, off the ground, and spun her around like a top until they both were dizzy, falling to the ground, rolling around on the hardwood flooring and laughing their heads off.

It was late in the day, but not closing time yet in Manhattan, so Amanda pulled out her smart pad, found Perlmutter’s phone number listed in the site map of Sotheby’s, and called.

An overly dressed middle-aged man with the right white accents to his curly dark hair and cherub like looks over rimless glasses smiled when he saw the two of them, sweating in their work clothes on a typical New Orleans summer day with no air conditioning.

“Hello Mr. Perlmutter.” Amanda introduced the grinning man by her side. “This is Adam Furness, my partner in life and this project where we found the jewels and the pearl.”

“The find of a lifetime. We love it when that happens. Call me Mal.” He chuckled. “Have you thought of a location for the auction?”

“No, we haven’t. We couldn’t have it here; this place won’t be finished for another three months.”

“How about the LeBlanc Manor? The Internet says that the New Orleans Heritage Society took over the place in 1955 and has managed it ever since as a museum of fine Antebellum housing right there in New Orleans. It was damaged during Katrina but probably is restored by now. You could give them a donation for the use of the place for the auction. A percentage?”

“That sounds great. We are just here working for as long as it takes to get this place in order so that we can move in. If you could do the arrangements that would be wonderful.”

“If you will accept our standard fees... You can view them on the website under legal documents... We will take it from here and do all the arrangements, promotion and the auction. I am looking forward to coming down and overseeing the auction myself.”

Within a month the auction was held. Because of the fervor created worldwide upon finding museum worthy pieces of nineteenth century jewelry and the largest known spherical pearl from the Western hemisphere ever found, the bidding was fierce for all the pieces both on the Internet and in person with billionaires present.

The four jewelry pieces sold for \$1.3 million. And the pearl, \$79.3 million. Adam and Amanda were shocked standing there with their champagne. They clicked their glasses together, kissed, and toasted their good fortune.

After paying Rothbys, their crew a bonus, taxes, the Heritage Society and helped both families in San Francisco and Boston, they still had enough money to buy three more houses in the neighborhood and renovate them in the style they deserved.

And their plan for their house was revised so that the house was raised, along with the others, and given higher grade upgrades for all the interior furnishings. When they were through, six months later, the whole neighborhood had increased greatly in value, improved New Orleans's tax base and brought in old residents who had regrettably left during Katrina and never came back. Enticed now to return to their old lifestyle with more safety and security.

Amanda and Adam started their own online ventures and made millions more over time. They still had time to mentor New Orleans youth and venture-capital projects they thought had a chance from young entrepreneurs.

They knew that their adopted city was doomed as storms grew greater and more frequent every year with storm surges that would eventually breach the levees and walls, but they kept the myth going, and near the end of the century, they abandoned the city along with everyone else for higher, weather safer, places.

Nothing is forever, not even the pearls of the ocean.

9/23/20

From Nothing to Something

“This is a feel-good story, well written and skillfully told. Reading it this morning brightened my day.”

– Steven Falco

John Royal Armstrong was the end of a long line of blacksmiths going back to his great-great-great-grandfather Andrew Armstrong, a blacksmith from England who followed the whaling trade to the New World to provide iron tools and implements for ships and even harpoons for their bloodied hunting of whales.

Long gone was whaling and so was his family, except for his uncle Andrew Armstrong IV, who resided in a mansion on the hill overlooking town. Andrew told the young JR early on that he was giving all his money to various philanthropic enterprises. Also told him to earn his money the hard way, something that Andrew hadn't, simply inheriting Armstrong Industries from his father Andrew Armstrong III. Whose painting was prominent among the rest of the family in the mansion that was going to the Anglican Church for a retreat center upon his death.

That was okay with JR, as he was known in Bay Bend, at a bend in the river one mile from the Atlantic where the whaling ships used to safely anchor. He was an only son who began working with his father at 7. Had inherited the shop from his father when he died at 51 from a heart attack with advanced arthritis and lungs damaged from breathing smoke.

When his mother died at 55, JR inherited the Victorian mansion he had grown up in. He found the place too big and empty, full of memories, and in disrepair. So, he sold it to a young couple, eager to

restore it to its over 100-year -old former grandeur. He used the money to pay off debts that his parents had acquired and that fell on him.

JR spent what was left on new shop equipment and to build a two-bedroom, one bath, addition to the shop where he could keep a better eye on it because the whole of Main Street, including the industrial end where his shop was, had declined from its vigorous heyday. The whole town was subject to burglary and vandalism more often. It was better for him to live on the premises. With a loaded shotgun at hand just in case.

As a result, and being an average student, JR was stuck with his occupation. High school counselors had advised him not to go to college where he might fail, but to continue to be a blacksmith like his family always had been. Mrs. Jones telling him, “Young man, you are on the right track according to your tests to remain in your father’s occupation. You are not college material.”

But he was changing with the times. The new digital equipment he put in enabled him to do more metalworking and he even thought about acquiring a 3D printer like he had heard about but hadn’t done yet, wondering about what he would do with it. Always practical with what he purchased. Only buying what he would use. Waste not, want not.

The business had always changed with the times from being a hardware provider for shipping, the horse and buggy trade, construction and farming. But when a Walmart opened and provided foreign-made tools and hardware items that his father had produced back fifty years ago, the business had declined to the point his father had borrowed on the business and done foolish things like buy a new car that they never really drove anywhere while it rusted out so close to the sea.

JR was more frugal, like his mother, and began to do new things for customers in the new millennium, like create ornamental gates and fence post toppings. Even venturing into wrought-iron, aluminum, brass, and other ornamental art pieces that came into his creative thought processes that never seemed to end. He put in long hours, seven days a week, so he never was able to socialize even with his customers because they weren’t, generally, single ladies. Besides, who

would want a bearded, 40-year-old, over muscular, blonde haired with gray streaks average looking guy. With no real prospects?

Nobody, so far. Working in his father's shop he didn't participate in school and church activities where he would have possibly met a young woman earlier. Although he had a few awkward dates during and after high school, JR just couldn't seem to fit in and stopped dating altogether as another useless and unproductive effort; only resulting in heartbreak when these young ladies seemed to reject him.

JR's only reprieve from the monotonous life was to do those artistic pieces that people liked to buy and put in their houses. To set on the table, by the fireplace or on the mantle and even hang on the walls as reminders of old New England and the simple utilitarian implements that were hand wrought by blacksmiths.

His uncle grew interested in JR's artistic ability and asked him, five years before, when he was 89 and becoming quite frail, to bring some of his creations along and help him on one last month-long trip to Europe. Though reluctant, JR agreed to close the shop for a month when a neighbor agreed to watch it for him and collect his meager mail every day.

This was a totally new adventure for JR, having never left the area except for some springtime and fall drives that his father had taken his mother and him into the New England countryside on Sundays with his new car before he grew disinterested in taking them driving anymore.

For some reason, JR, unlike other kids, wasn't eager to drive, drink and go crazy, crashing their parent's cars in such a wasteful way. Why he sold the rusted hulk of the old Oldsmobile to a junkyard for scrap. Where he often picked up interesting metal pieces for his artwork.

The trip involved many firsts. JR's first passport. His first time taking a limousine with complementary cordials to the international airport. His first flight, first class, to England. His first time staying in a restored Middle-Age, five-star castle hotel with exotic food he had never tasted and a luxurious suite where he learned how to take care of his uncle's unmentionable needs at old age. Something he didn't relish but knew was his duty.

JR's first time taking extensive tourist bus tours throughout the United Kingdom with his uncle explaining the relationship of their family to various historic places and shipyards. His first trip on a train through the English Channel to France, and from there, many more other train and bus tours throughout Europe until they finally arrived at Paris during the last week of what turned into a month at an art show of medieval artwork that was both shown and sold.

When they arrived at the show, Andrew took JR to the show officials who were on a first name basis with him because he had often come there in the past and bought items at auction. Introducing JR to one of the officials, Pierre, Andrew said,

"JR, would you please take out those pieces from your luggage that I had you bring here and show them to Pierre?"

JR was a bit reluctant having seen what was on display already and very unsure that his pieces would be of any interest. But he opened the suitcase and started taking each piece out. The first was a brass door knocker with a lion's head. The second was a set of iron instruments for tending a fireplace. The third was a whimsical hanging sculpture of the style of Calder. The fourth was a crest to be placed on the front of the gate for entering a property. And the last was an aluminum wall piece with highly reflective characteristics, polished to perfection.

Pierre looked at the objects, one by one, very carefully, and said, "From what I see here, I would be most happy to put these up for auction. But first, we will put them on display for a couple of days with an estimated opening bid so that potential buyers will get to know them. Is that satisfactory with you?" He looked directly at JR.

JR was shocked. All he could mutter was... "... Okay... Sounds okay with me."

Andrew patted him on the back and said, "Don't worry, lad, they'll bring a good price at auction. I saw that in them at your shop."

The next two days, they came to the show and looked at all the, some ancient, pieces that were being sold from castles and estates. JR saw many people looking at his items under glass and wondered why his work could ever be as valuable as these old-world pieces.

The auction day arrived and it was late in the day, about 4:30 PM when the initial crowd of bidders in the morning had thinned, that JR's pieces came up for auction.

To JR's surprise, there was vigorous bidding by architects and designers and others interested in using them in new construction or remodeling but reflecting an older style. At the end of the day, after auction fees were paid, the five items sold for \$135,630! JR was flabbergasted, but his uncle just smiled.

As they left the cashier, the show and the building with the American Express cheque in the full amount clutched in JR's hand, he blurted, "Uncle Andrew, you must take some of this money to help pay for this fabulous trip. I don't know what to do with all of this money."

"You keep it, JR. I have no need for any more money. If it is too much, you might consider giving some of it to some of the charities I have lined up in my will. I don't think I have to give you anything if you can make money like that simply by traveling here with your work."

JR was happy on the flight home but also worried about having so much money in his possession on a single piece of paper. As soon as he got back to Bay Bend, he went to the local bank and surprised the cashier with the check. The man immediately called the bank manager, and he asked JR to join him in his office.

"JR, we've known each other a long time and you have some very nice savings and CDs here. But this is extraordinary. I shouldn't ask, but did you win the money or get an inheritance?"

"No, I sold some of my art pieces in Paris with Uncle Andrew."

"Well, I wouldn't just put it in savings. Maybe you should invest it. We are affiliated with a National Bank in Boston. I can arrange for the money to be invested for you. Your gain would be, on the average around 10% per year, much higher than the going CD rate that you have now. What do you say? We'll manage it for you for a small fee."

JR had no knowledge of investing. Andrew had not told him what to do with the money. So, he agreed with the manager and got a contract that he signed but didn't pay any attention to except that the fee was something like 1% of the fund amount per year.

One hundred miles upriver along the winding highway that followed the river to the foothills leading to Mount Washington, was the little town of Mill City, named after the colonial mill, that now was a quaint gift shop for the touristy little town.

Mildred Stewart was borderline autistic and didn't fit in well in a town where everyone knew everyone else. Through school she didn't do well and was bullied a bit. She ended up following her mother to work in a small alteration shop that barely made enough money, since her dad died, to keep them alive. Still a spinster with no dates in sight at 27, she expected never to marry and wasn't sure how she would support herself when her mother died.

But Christmas time was always something that Mildred looked forward to because she had a knack for origami. From the age of 6 she had made Christmas ornaments of paper, sprinkles of silver and gold the decorated her mother's tree. There was no celebration for a father she never knew, and her mother never told her. Probably a lot of shame because she was raped and disgraced in town because of it. An autistic child her curse.

When Mildred found a computer and a printer that could print paper in the shapes and colors that she could dream up she started creating lifelike ornaments that not only shined, but some of them were also so lifelike and iridescent that they seemed to move.

When she placed them in the window of the alteration shop, people inquired whether they could buy them. She offered them for 5 or \$10, but generous townspeople, feeling magnificent in the holiday season, often paid her \$50 for one. Of course, to her delight.

But it was in June when the traveling salesman that came by with sewing products her mother needed that changed everything.

"Hi Mildred! Where's your mother, I've got a roll of thread I'd like to show her?" Harvey Ward was in his usual jovial mood. It was good for business.

"I'm sorry, but she died in April, I am having to struggle along here alone since then."

"Well then, young lady, I'll just have to deal with you."

While they were discussing some of his fabrics and threads, Harvey's eye caught a hummingbird ornament hanging in the window of the shop shimmering in the sunlight as though it were flying.

"Is that hummingbird for sale?" He asked.

"I didn't sell it last Christmas, so you can have it cheap."

"Cheap, how cheap?"

Trying to think like her mother would, Mildred replied, "Oh, half price. They were originally \$50 but I'll give you that one for \$25."

"Well, young lady... you've got a deal. All I've got is three 10s so I guess I'll have to give you a \$5 tip." With the big smile and a wink.

Mildred was overjoyed and thanked him profusely. Harvey was on his way stopping in town downriver. When he arrived in Bay Bend, he spotted some of JR's ornamentals and stopped to take a closer look.

JR saw him coming and recognized him from before. "Hi Harvey, have you come by to buy one of my pieces? I'm sorry but the prices have increased since I went to Europe last year.

"Europe? That's fancy, pantsy. I thought you never left your shop."

"I don't. But Uncle Andrew took me along on his last trip there and some of these pieces sold for a princely sum. But I'll sell them to you a mite cheaper since you're a repeat customer."

"Your prices are now a mite too high for the likes of me, so I'll just keep the two pieces I already have with the thought of making a profit if I ever want to part with them. But I came to show you something else."

Harvey was carrying a small cardboard box that he opened where the origami was resting in cotton and held it up for JR to see.

JR was impressed. "Where did you get it? It's beautiful! Such craftsmanship I haven't seen around here ever. It would sell in Europe."

"I bought it off a spinster lady In Mill City, upriver. Paid \$50 for it and it's worth every penny. I'll sell it to you for \$100." Harvey lied with a smile.

“No thank you, but thanks for the offer. If you give me some particulars, I might look up the lady myself. Labor Day is coming up, and I should close the shop.”

Labor Day came and Harvey took the bus up the river admiring the beginning fall color, the entire two hours it took to get to Mill City and the Fall Festival held there every year at that time.

Arriving in town, JR quickly found the alteration shop, but it was closed. Everyone seemed to be going to the festival, so he hid his overnight case behind a bush on the side of the building and wandered off into the festival grounds.

There were all kinds of crafts and produce on display for sale that was interesting, but he was looking for something else. Up ahead, he saw something that resembled a butterfly in-flight catching the sunlight and he knew he was at the right place.

Shyly, JR approached the young lady sitting in a booth at a table with some of her creations displayed on it and hung above it.

“Mildred... Are you Mildred Stewart? Harvey Ward came by and showed me an exquisite hummingbird that you made, and I just had to come here from Bay Bend, downriver.”

“Yes, I am. That was nice of you to come all that way just to see what I have made for sale here. Not many sales today. People don’t have Christmas on their mind yet.”

“I don’t see these pieces for Christmas. I see a lot more. And some of these that you have are really stunning.”

“Stunning? Now that’s a nice word. Everyone says they like them, but what did you say your name was, mister?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m John Royal Armstrong, but call me JR. I’m a blacksmith that has recently turned into an artist when I found out that the things I make for fun can make big money. I think your stuff can make big money, too.”

“Really? I wouldn’t know anything about that. It’s getting late in the day, and you look like the last person I’m going to talk to. Would you mind coming over to my house and I’ll feed you some of my cooking while we’re talking it over?” Mildred sensed she shouldn’t let this interesting guy get away.

“I’ll be needing to find a place to stay. Any suggestions?”

“Everything is full because of the festival. But you’re in luck. My mother’s room is vacant with her gone.”

“How much do you charge?”

Mildred thought for a moment... “I’m not a bed-and-breakfast. I guess it’s okay for you just to stay. No need to charge you anything. You seem like a nice guy.”

“Well then, let me help you close up your booth.”

JR and Mildred walked back to her house and their conversation flowed quite freely. Something that JR had never experienced with a woman before. Likewise, for Mildred, it was the same. Both were lonely. Perhaps it was the loneliness that brought them together.

The simple cooking that Mildred did reminded JR of the way he cooked. They watched the movie on TV in the evening, and JR went politely to bed in Mildred’s mother’s room.

In the morning, he smelled bacon and when he came into the kitchen, Mildred had made blueberry pancakes and was ready to fry any number of eggs that JR wanted. To show her how he liked them, JR fried his own. Domestically, they were getting along famously. JR really liked this girl and wished he had met her in high school.

JR stayed two more days and helped Mildred with talking to customers at her festival booth. With him doing the talking, she sold more, for more, than she was originally asking.

That last night, JR knew he had to return home and catch the bus in the morning. But he wanted to stay as he was enjoying Mildred so much. He kept trying to think of a way to be with her more.

“Mildred,” he said as they walked to her house, “The show in Paris is in early October. I’d like you to go with me and bring some of your creations.”

Mildred could not conceive of ever going to Paris.

“I wouldn’t know what to do. I don’t even know a word of French even though we vacationed one time in Québec. But that was a long time ago.”

“Don’t worry, people come there from all over the world, and most speak English. Besides, I learned from my uncle how to book transportation and hotels.”

JR was surprised at how worldly he seemed to have become. Making Mildred less fearful of engaging in such an enterprise with someone she was just getting to know. But she wasn't getting any younger, and time to do something⁷ like this on her own was impossible.

They cooked together that last night and enjoyed a bottle of wine after. Things got a little out of hand and JR found himself in Mildred's bed in the morning.

At the bus station they hugged each other and cried.

"Don't worry," JR assured Mildred, "We'll be together again in a month."

They had exchanged emails and telephone numbers, so the next month was a flurry of communication between the two lovers. Mildred closed her shop a week before the trip and took the bus to Bay Bend with some of her finest creations she hadn't put up for sale.

Mildred spent the next week making JR's home a little less bachelor and a little bit more, domestic couple, while she picked out the clothes they would wear on the trip and packed. JR spent the same time making travel arrangements and finishing the work he was going to take. They worked together well and both liked that.

The day came and Mildred was aflutter with all the firsts that JR had encountered the year before. It seemed like no time, and they were in Paris and he was showing her around town... Taking her to the Louvre and to the Eiffel Tower.

When they signed into the show and auction, the auctioneers and appraisers had never seen anything like her sparkling creations. They reminded them of the quality of craftsmanship of the Faberge eggs. But of course, without the historic provenance of the eggs, her creations were estimated to bring only \$30-\$40,000 each. A figure that stunned Mildred when she heard the appraiser tell her.

Their pieces were placed on exhibit for a couple of days and then went to auction. This time, at 11 AM for Mildred's work and 2 PM for JR's.

When Mildred's ornaments were blown up on a large screen, the bidding was very brisk and she couldn't believe it. After fees, Mildred had earned \$625,000 and JR, \$463,000. They felt rich.

The money was wire transferred to the bank in Boston and the happy couple returned home.

In the months that followed, Mildred decided to give her shop and home to a needy family, a mother and daughter who had helped her mother with her alterations during busy times like before holidays and when school started. The town needed an alteration shop, and she didn't know of anyone who would want to take it over and pay for the business.

They took a 21-day Christmas cruise to the Caribbean and were married by the captain on the ship. When they returned, both spent their time making their creations and selling them to the locals for much less than they got in Europe.

Each year when they returned to the show in Paris, the value of their pieces grew. Before long, they were being sold at Christie's and other auctions in the United States.

With so much wealth and no children, they started an endowment for a trade school in Bay Bend they called Armstrong-Stewart Academy and watched it flourish until they grew old and died with their statues placed at the school to honor them.

1/13/24

Hand-Me-Down Home

“You got me, Ron. I had to go back and make sure this was just make-believe because, well, frankly, in this world, it could be true. Dreams flourish, lives cut short, surprises bloom, and we make the best of what we’ve got.”

– A. Frailey

In the little town of Rural, Mississippi, there was a sprawling 3000 square-foot classic ranch-style home with a pool. Built in 1950, the place was ripe for a *redeux*.

As fortune would come together, an 88-year-old man, tired of overseas travel in his work, picked Rural as a place to settle down in. All he needed was a property to settle into. Fortunately, some husband-and-wife house flippers were there to help him out – for a price.

But since he had accumulated wealth, the old guy said to them. “The sky’s the limit... I’ll spend whatever it takes.”

With that blank check, the husband-and-wife house flippers went all out. And turned that classic midcentury place into millennial haven in 42 days, 3 less than planned. The cost to purchase and renovate came to \$350,000. But the appraisal afterward was very pleasing indeed... \$500,000. The old man settled into his new abode and well picked community and started to party.

At his open house, all the neighborhood retired people arrived, both to see what had been done in the old Walker place and to meet the man that had put it all together.

They weren’t disappointed. In fact, one 88-year-old woman who came to party fell in love with both. She was wearing a denim jacket and short shorts outfit that belied her age. With no time to waste at

their age, they got married and the parties continued because both were in their prime of retired life.

Unfortunately, after two months of bliss, the old man had a heart attack and died. Probably from too much of a good time. Fortunately, he left the house to his new wife.

Unfortunately, although she had survived two other husbands, within a month, she died of a broken heart and other complications and left the house to her 68-year-old son.

Unfortunately, the son had lung cancer and died shortly after getting the house. With only one grandson studying at Old Miss, he gave the house to the 20-year-old to his surprise and good fortune. Nice to have a rich uncle.

Unfortunately, one drunken night on a rural highway, the grandson ran off the road and into one of those ancient oaks that don't give an inch, and he died. Fortunately, the fraternity that he belonged to inherited the house as a fraternity house.

Unfortunately, the house became an animal house, and as a result, the fraternity was shut down by the school. The house came up for sale again, but by this time it was totally trashed.

Fortunately, the house was now priced at \$100,000 and a young couple expecting triplets had scrimped and saved to buy a house were surprised when the husband-and-wife house flippers showed them this wonderful spacious place that they could live in with their meager \$180,000 budget.

After 50 days, the young couple were able to leave their university apartment and move into heaven for the rest of their lives. And they all lived happily ever after.

7/21/20



About the Author

Ronald W. Hull is an engineer, educator, and author. Fascinated with history and technological development, he likes to incorporate both in his novels and short stories. Paralyzed at twenty in a surgical accident, Ron walked away from the hospital, and, with a special hand splint, began writing again and typing with one finger. After his master's degree, Ron started his career in the telecommunication industry. For thirty-nine years, after earning his doctorate, Dr. Hull worked in higher education as a professor of technology and management, three years as a research coordinator, and as a university administrator.

Ron Hull has written poetry all his life. He posts a poem a week on his website, <http://ronhullauthor.com/>. Ron has traveled widely and experienced many cultures. Starting with his autobiography, Dr. Hull incorporates his many experiences into his books. His topics are wide-ranging and global. Ron's first book, *The Kaleidoscope Effect* was a

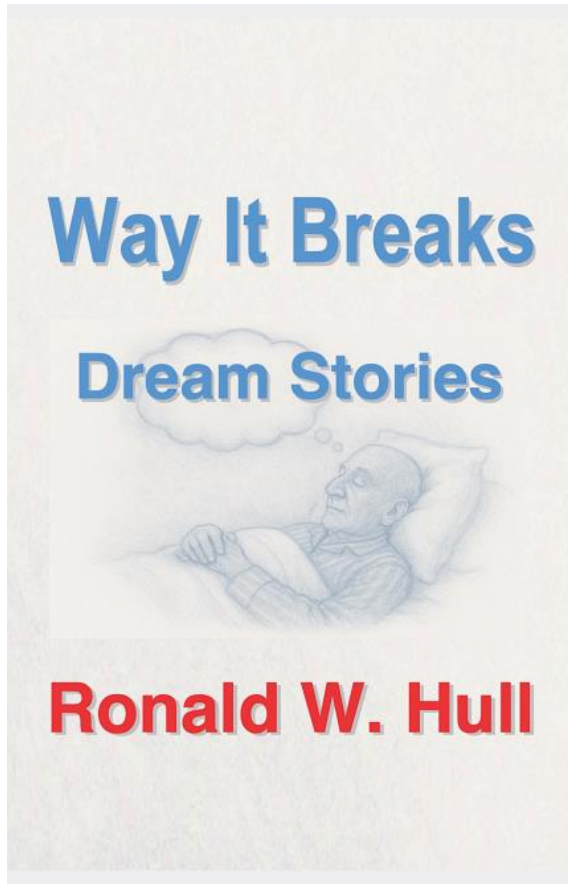
science fiction first contact novel that spanned thousands of years. *Alone?* the mirror of *Kaleidoscope*, is in its second edition. Continuing the story of the Ice Man of the Alps, he wrote *Tor: Last of the Thals*. About the grandson of the Ice Man searching for his mother.

War's End was Dr. Hull's first venture into the action thriller novel genre. Based on the catastrophic premise of *War's End*, the *American Mole* series is Ron's first attempt at a continuing story bridging several books: *The Vespers*, *ES 17* and *Aryan Nation*. *The Last Wanderer: Last Man on Earth* had an apocalyptic theme and is his most successful novel. His most recent novel, *LA 2032: Starting Over*, also has an apocalyptic theme.

So, others could understand, Ron published his autobiography, *Hanging by a Thread* in 2014. In 2023, he followed it with another memoir, *Mid-Century Tales: Unfettered Youth* about what it was like when he was young.

Ron has written over 500 short stories. And published four anthologies of them. This one and *It's in the Water and Other Stories*, *Verge of Apocalypse Tales*, *Impolite Stories: Sex Politics & Religion*.

Relying on an electric wheelchair and specially equipped van because of the effects of aging on his severe spinal injury, Ron uses computer technology to write and research his books. He resides in Houston Texas with his longtime partner, companion, and assistant, Beh.



Thirty-seven bedtime short stories in genres ranging from fable to erotic, rags to riches to science fiction. Most are Dr. Hull's vivid dreams but could be real. You may be enchanted by what you read or upset. But you will be entertained.

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