



Klamath Writers' Guild is pleased to present three winning stories from our short story competition. The competition covered three different themes: The Teacher, Slavery, and Romance. The following stories will fall under at least one of these themes.

## The Saxophone

by Jessica Bryan



“I see and behold God in every object and understand  
God not in the least.” – Robert Hyman

The top half of his body was muscular, his long arms ending in hands with short, stubby fingers colored yellow from cigarettes. One of his eyes pierced me with its blueness, while the other gazed outward. This was probably a genetic anomaly—his mother Hilda had the same wayward eye. But to me, he always seemed to be partially focused on another reality, as if he perceived the universe in a different way than everyone else. Then again, perhaps I imbued him with supernatural qualities

because I was young and impressionable, and I loved him madly— although we were never lovers because he was born with spina bifida. Below the waist, his body was like that of a ten-year-old boy. He was divided in two. The lower half of him dangled there, supported by two wooden crutches that he managed with great agility.

His name was Robert Hyman, and the first time I saw him was in 1965 at the Italian deli at 13th and Spruce in downtown Philadelphia, just one street over from Dirty Frank's Bar. He was at the cash register assuming a casual pose, supported by two crutches under one arm, as he paid his bill and flirted with the waitress. He turned towards me, and I was immediately impaled by those two blue eyes: the one that looked at me directly and the one that didn't.

A week later, I saw him again at the free Thursday night sculpture class at Fleisher's Art College on Catherine Street. He was perched on a high stool, ogling the nude model as he pressed the thick, soft clay into the wire armature sitting on the table in front of him.

I took the chair next to him, and after a few minutes initiated a casual conversation as I worked my own lump of clay between my nervous fingers.

We became friends after that, revolving around each other for several years. During that time, Bob suffered torturous surgical procedures to save his feet. Poor circulation caused him to get infections in his heels. Amputation was threatened several times, but he refused to give up any more of his body than the circumstances of his birth had already taken.

In the sixties there was a song that went like this: "Where do all the hippies meet? South Street! South Street!" At the time, I considered myself a beatnik, and I knew South Street, a neighborhood just south of downtown known mostly for great barbeque. It was a borderland, a conglomerate of nationalities and social stratas, but mostly poor, mostly black.

Many of the buildings south of Ronald's Famous Hot Dog Palace and west towards the original Philadelphia waterfront, stood empty. Leftovers from another era, they were soon to be taken over by alternative theaters, natural food stores, art galleries, and other commercial ventures borne of the late 1960s counterculture.

For a few months in 1965, I rented a room on South Street above an abandoned shoe store, a ghost town populated by empty boxes, discarded sneakers, and broken mirrors. Moving past the small, almost indiscernible “For Rent” sign in the cracked plate glass window, and stepping over the wine and urine stained cement entrance, I would turn my key in a rusty lock and enter the musty interior of the deserted shoe store.

Then, picking my way cautiously through the boxes that had tumbled down off the shelves revealing a multiplicity of unsold shoes, I was often struck by loneliness and melancholy, struck by the sadness of the dusty women’s sandals and men’s oxfords lying on the floor in a tumbled heap, a silent chorus of shoes that cried for music so they might dance.

Towards the rear of the darkened first floor was a narrow, winding staircase leading to the second floor, and again to the third floor, which was the room I had rented. Houses built in this fashion, three single rooms on top of one another, were called “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” houses, perhaps because of the large number of Irish and Italian Catholics living in South Philadelphia.

It was a small attic-like room, its angular corners and sloping ceiling formed by the shape of the roof, and I could only stand up straight in the center of the room. The floor was made of wood, and I had painted it an ethereal, robin’s egg blue. The color of the floor made the room appear to be floating in the sky.

The southern and northern walls each contained a fairly large rectangular window. These windows faced each other, and for some reason they were only wood-framed holes in the walls. They had no glass. Looking out of the northern window at night, the top of Independence Hall could be seen, a long, conical sphere lit up like a beacon in the autumn night.

The room contained a single mattress that had been hauled in from the trash left out on the sidewalk, two chairs, a one-burner hot plate, a teapot, several cracked ceramic cups, and a candle. My neighbor on the second floor was an unemployed Armenian poet who spent his time in Rittenhouse Square selling drugs and attempting to seduce young girls from the Main Line. He provided me with electricity via a long extension cord that was draped up the stairs.

Bob and I spent many nights in this room, drinking tea as we stared into the flame of the candle and shared our stories about who we were and who we wanted to become. Then, descending carefully down the stairs and through the sleeping shoe store, we would burst forth after midnight, glorious in our newfound freedom. We were like leaves thrown before a storm, as we swept through the streets until dawn and whirled and whirled and whirled.

Like true friends, Bob's pleasure was always my pleasure. His pain was also my pain. Once when he was in the hospital, I smuggled in spaghetti and garlic bread. At the end of visiting hours, I hid under the bed until the nurses had retired to their other duties. We stayed up until after midnight eating spaghetti and entertaining the boy in the next bed, an artist who had flown head first into a brick wall on his first motorcycle ride. The poor young man had been reduced to painting by holding the paintbrush in his mouth.

Later that same night, Bob and I left his room—with him in a wheelchair—and found our way to a dimly lit hallway that went between two of the hospital buildings. The hallway had a fairly steep slope, and as I sat in his lap we rolled down the hallway over and over shouting with joy. These are the kinds of things children do, but it should not be in a wheelchair, never in a hospital. Bob taught me how to suffer immense pain, yet live fully in the measured moment.

When Bob was born, the doctor told Hilda that when he saw the unclosed spine of the baby he was tempted to do nothing and simply let the child die. This was the custom in the forties. But then Bob let out such a fierce cry that the doctor broke the unspoken "rule" and did reconstructive surgery to save him. The doctor told Hilda her child would not live more than ten years, but Bob was already twenty-five when I met him.

He was drunk on life and also booze. He devoured it. He reeled from it. But most of all he made a cynical joke of it. Old women were especially fond of patronizing him. They would come up to him on the street or in the grocery store, touch him lightly on the shoulder, and say something like, "Oh, you poor dear. What happened to your legs?" Bob would make up a different story for each well-meaning person, depending on his mood. His favorite was how he got run over by a beer truck while venturing out to buy cigarettes. Alternatively, the truck might

suddenly lurch forward when the light turned green, causing several cases of beer to fly out of the rear door and crash into him as he stood innocently on the corner.

One Christmas Eve, we took a long bus ride through a blizzard from Center City to my parents' apartment on North Broad Street. It was a painfully slow distance of about ten miles, and we were the only passengers. I carried with me a brown paper bag full of presents and my Siamese cat, Piewacket, who was tucked inside my heavy coat. After miles of whiteness, we pulled the cord and came to a stop at Cheltenham Avenue. When I stepped out of the cold bus into the even colder, damp, winter night, the wet slush quickly permeated my shoes. Bob was awkward on his crutches, but soon we were both standing in the street watching the driver pull away from the curb and disappear into the swirling snow.

We turned and noticed a drunken man lying in the gutter, clutching a battered instrument case. He was crying and mumbling in a thick Irish accent about his lost sister. It seemed as though she was the only thing in his life that mattered.

I somehow managed to pull him to his feet and hold him upright as he staggered over to the closed and darkened pharmacy on the corner. The man sat down on the sidewalk in the snow, leaned against the plate-glass window, and opened the instrument case. Removing a perfectly preserved saxophone, he began to play a sad tune, the sound extending far up into the night sky.

Bob and I stood nearby and listened in amazement. The man, realizing he had our attention, began to spin his tale of love found and love lost in a manner common to all drunks, and again he wept for the sister he was desperate to find. All of this was offered as if to explain why he was lying on the sidewalk in the snow on Christmas Eve. We listened for a while and then left him there alone, still playing his saxophone.

Over forty years have passed and my memory is dimmed, but in my mind I see Robert Hyman still sitting on the sofa in his tiny one-room apartment on Spruce Street, cigarette in hand, one shriveled leg crossed delicately over the other.

He begins to relate a simple story about an everyday event. Perhaps he only went to the store, only crossed one street. But the story begins to spin out of control until it is filled with improbable, unexplainable occurrences, and I am rolling on the floor screaming with laughter. As his story escalates, he also begins to laugh harder and harder, until tears are streaming down his cheeks and he is bouncing straight up and down in his chair. He nearly levitates to the ceiling. He defies gravity. He is a masterful storyteller who did not commit his stories to paper. Damn it, I miss him. At times, it is almost unbearable. Bob died in his fifties, refusing to see anyone the last few years—only his mother Hilda. It was kidney failure from drinking, so you might say he got run over by a beer truck after all.

I returned to North Broad Street in Philadelphia in 2004, only to discover the apartment building I had lived in as a child was gone, bulldozed to make room for a parking lot. The pharmacy on the corner had become a Korean grocery store that was subsequently closed and boarded up, leaving behind strange foreign hieroglyphics, no doubt advertising Korean specialty food items.

I felt as though part of me had died and my past no longer existed, as though I no longer existed. All of the memories embodied in that building—where I had lived with my parents and which I had so often relived in my dreams—were shattered. I was filled with grief, but also relief, because attachment to the past has sometimes kept me from living fully in the present.

Life is a series of shifting realities and loss. Bob is dead now, and so are my parents. But they beg me to live while I am still alive, while I still have a body. They beg me to remember them and live with passion.

\* \* \*

From a letter dated November 12, 1967:

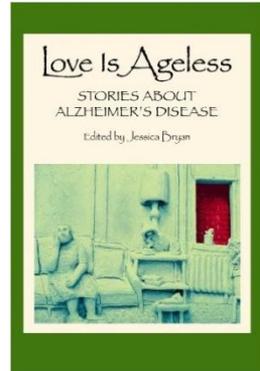
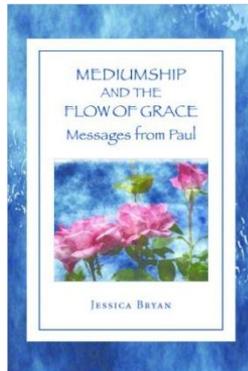
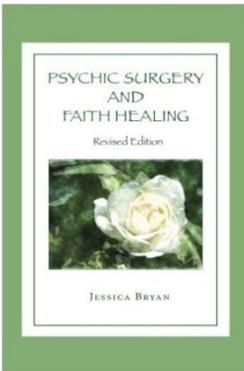
“. . . When I am a great sculptor and living in the South of France, when I am drinking 12-year-old Scotch whiskey and listening to the golden tonsils of Conway Twitty vibrating on my 500-dollar stereo,

when all this comes to pass, Miss Bryan, will you come and pose for me? Together, we will make a masterpiece. Love, Bob”



Jessica Bryan is the author of three books: *Psychic Surgery and Faith Healing, Revised Edition*; *Mediumship and the Flow of Grace: Messages from Paul*; and *Love is Ageless – Stories About Alzheimer’s Disease*. Jessica is also a professional editor, specializing in metaphysical, spiritual, and self-help books. She lives in Ashland, Oregon. For more information about Jessica and her books visit:

[http://www.amazon.com/Jessica-Bryan/e/B002BM21R0/ref=src\\_tc\\_2\\_0?qid=1457294845&sr=1-2-ent](http://www.amazon.com/Jessica-Bryan/e/B002BM21R0/ref=src_tc_2_0?qid=1457294845&sr=1-2-ent)



## Lesson Learned

by Pam Bainbridge-Cowan

The first time he saw her, Ben was sitting at a table at his favorite coffee place in Canon Beach, drinking his usual triple shot latte and reading the editorial page. She was probably in her mid-twenties, medium height,

fairly slender, with shoulder length blond hair. She wore tan shorts, a black tank top and white Nikes. A white and black spotted terrier on a black leash danced around her, sniffing at the table legs, the potted plants, his shoe.

“Sorry,” she said, flashing a brilliant, white smile, giving him a brief glimpse of the bluest eyes he’d ever seen, and tugging the small dog away.

After that he saw her at least two or three times a day, though she never stepped inside his bank. Usually she was walking alone with her dog, peering into stores, or sitting in front of one of the many shops eating something, or just watching the crowds of people drift by. None of the locals seemed to know who she was, just another tourist, just another lady with a dog.

If she’s here by herself she must want to be alone, thought Ben. Or maybe she’s lonely. Maybe she’d like someone to talk to.

He was thirty-six and had two great kids, girls, one eight and one ten. He had married while he was still in art school. His pretty, young wife had seemed very special then. Bonnie hadn’t changed much; she was still self-confident, smart and popular. She read a lot and held meetings for the local book club and writers club in their bohemian slash craftsman style home. She’d furnished it with a mix of old wood and soft cushiony furniture that was the envy of their friends.

Secretly he thought she was a bit of a phony. Not as smart as she thought. She mispronounced words all the time, kept them all on tight schedules, and didn’t nearly live up to the wild potential she’d shown when they were first married. Back then she’d been willing to jump in his old Volvo and drive until they got lost. Now it was all parent/teacher meetings and honey-do lists.

He’d started being unfaithful the second year they were married. It was hard not to be. They lived in a town where beautiful women walked around in as little clothes as they could get away with, looking for an adventure they could share when they returned to their boring lives. He didn’t think much of them considering they were sluts, not even smart enough to be whores, who at least got paid. He often imagined them in their identical, lint-gray cubicles, answering phones, staring at computer monitors, fantasizing about the day at the beach when that guy with the dark brown eyes and the crooked smile got them out of their pants.

As much as he disliked the women who slept with him, he hated the idea of going more than a few days without one. Men were boring. He had zero interest in sports, hunting, or most of the other things that men were supposed to be into. Even though he was never very nice to women, at least with them he could be himself. They liked that he had paint ground into his knuckles. That he slaved away in a bank all day and then locked himself in his garage workshop so he could paint in the evenings. They imagined him a talented, suffering artist. True or not it was enough to draw them to him, just as he was drawn to them.

Experience had taught him that he had to be careful though. Many women were confused by his attention. Oddly, this was especially true of the ones who claimed to want nothing more than a one night stand, no names exchanged, no strings attached. They became clingy and unbearable. This repetitious theme should have taught him to stop, but it didn't. He willingly suffered through the inevitable angry scene in order to have those first few moments when love was fresh and exciting. The strange was such a strong draw, even when you realized it would quickly grow stale.

One evening he had escaped his family, who were taking in a play at the local junior high, and he came across the woman with the dog walking along the boardwalk. She wore a simple sheath dress, the kind women wear over bathing suits, and a pair of cheap flip flops. Her very indifference to her appearance set his heart rocketing in his chest. The idea of touching her bare arm, of feeling that blond hair slide across his forearm as he drew his hand up her back. Those were the thoughts that almost tied his tongue as she looked up, saw him, and smiled.

The terrier tracked back and forth at the end of his leash, just out of reach. Ben knelt and leaned forward, scratching the eager animal behind its ears. The woman took a step toward him, putting slack in the leash that the dog immediately took advantage of by leaping onto Ben's knee and licking his face.

"I'm sorry," she said, pulling the dog away. "My gosh, I do apologize a lot. Haven't I apologized to you once already?"

This acknowledgment, that they had shared something, some small moment of the past, seemed a large and important thing. Ben stood and held out his hand.

"I'm Ben," he said, "And no more apologies needed."

"Liza," she responded. "Do you live here?"

“I do,” he said. “You’re from?”

“Portland. Just out here for the week.”

“Alone?”

She nodded, but said nothing further. He had already glimpsed the wedding band and diamond engagement ring. She was married. That fact had not bothered him before and it didn’t now.

“I hope you’re not bored,” he said.

“Never.”

He believed her. Unlike his wife she seemed self contained and content. He had watched her sit for hours at the cafe where he’d first seen her, sipping coffee, watching the tourists flitter from store to store like a flock of uncoordinated birds. She was a bit apart, an observer more than a participant, but she never wore that look of impatience he saw so often, that look that conveys a busy person’s need to remain busy, or send waves of guilt into their surroundings.

“People come here from the city to get away from the fast pace and all they do is complain they’re bored.”

“People are strange,” she said.

“That they are. Look, I know we’ve established that you’re not bored but, would you like to have dinner together anyway?”

“Can you do that?” she asked quickly. “I mean, don’t you have people expecting you.”

She didn’t say a wife, or a family and Ben drew from this that she did not want to broach the subject. Since he was also happy to play the avoidance game he gave her his patented nice guy smile and said, “Sure.”

They left the dog in her room at the hotel and went to an out of the way place near the dock, a real hole-in-the-wall where the local commercial fishermen tended to hang out. They were a close-mouthed group. Despite his trust in their discretion he and Liza ate in silence, like a couple that has been married too long. After dinner however, as he walked her back to her hotel, the mood shifted. The night was warm, with soft breezes and the sound of the tide and it was dark, the street lights softened by the heavy mist that had crept into town.

They walked slowly, talked softly, two people with no need to be anywhere but where they were. “I don’t want to go to my room yet,” she told him. “Could we go for a walk instead?”

They walked to the beach and through the soft sand and when they got to where the sand was damp, and the foaming surf threatened to reach them with each wave, they took off their shoes and laughed at nothing at all. The rim of the world held just the thinnest hint of sunlight, a slim line of orange on the distant horizon. They watched it disappear and spoke of how nice the day had been.

He told her he worked at a bank but that his true love was painting. She confided she worked at a small coffee shop and went to school part time and that yes, she was married. Her husband was an engineer with an excellent job, a real workaholic. That was all she would say about him. He did not speak of his wife, his marriage.

A wave washed over their ankles and sent them scurrying away from the ocean toward a sharp embankment of sand and dune grass that blocked them from view of the homes along the beach. The tripped over smooth stones and driftwood and he took her hand, but instead of helping her find the trail he spun her toward him, and kissed her.

She kissed him back with a sweet ferocity that didn't surprise him but still pleased him. His hand went round her curved waist, rested on her back. He pulled her into his body and then down to the sand. His hand slid under her thin dress and he realized her panties and his zipper was all that was keeping them apart. In moments those barricades were gone.

The surge of the ocean was far too slow a beat for their needs. It served only as background music, a deep basso profundo playing beneath their frantic, hungry pace.

Later, in bed lying beside his sleeping wife, he thought of her, alone in her room at the hotel. She was probably, he believed, thinking of him as well. They would meet tomorrow. It was inevitable, ordained. He recalled the wildflower smell of her skin, the soft contour of her breasts, the way she had thrown her head back and made that mewling sound, deep in her throat as she lifted her hips. God, what a nasty little slut he thought, right before he let sleep claim him.

Her week at the coast became his holiday as well, though he went to the bank each day, missing not a moment of work. Due to some contrary part of his nature, which he did not understand, he threw himself into his work with unusual dedication, and when his thoughts drifted to Liza he shook them off and refocused. It was a subtle self discipline, a painful

austerity that was rewarded as relief is greatest when it follows pain—or so he decided when he finally allowed himself a moment's reflection.

It was an unusually warm week for so late in the summer. Even the wind off the ocean was warm. They bought blueberry-flavored shaved ice and laughed at their blue stained tongues. In town they were circumspect, keeping a formal distance between them, talking about art and dogs. The practiced ease of their acting felt like competence. They could be sitting on a sun-warmed bench outside the town's second-hand bookstore, while he told her in low tones exactly what he planned to do to her body as soon as they reached her room at the hotel. A moment later, a customer's appearance, and they would be debating the primary cause for the economic downturn.

On day three she met him when he left work. His family had gone to Portland to shop for school clothes and he felt unusually free. He didn't bother going home to change; he simply loosened his tie, unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and tossed his jacket over his shoulder. He felt like the lead actor in some old black and white film. She wore a short white skirt that day, and a sleeveless black silk shirt with rows of frilly ruffles. They made a handsome pair as they strolled along. Pausing to admire the flower boxes at one of the tidy vacation rentals that lined a side street, Liza looked so amazing Ben couldn't help himself; he gathered her into his arms and kissed her long and deep. Right there, in the middle of the street, in the middle of his town, in the bright light of day. He let her go and anxiously looked around to check if they'd been seen.

"Let's go to the hotel," he said softly.

She nodded and they walked on, two friends.

The room was forgettable. The view was of the parking lot. The walls were light blue, the bedspread dark blue and the black framed pictures on the wall were all of blue ocean scenes. All that blue made the room feel cold, but it smelled of her perfume and held hot memories.

He thought about the women he'd known before her. There was the classic guilty girl who would insist over and over that she had never done such a thing before, implying that he had some special power. Maybe they thought he bought one of those books on how to hypnotize women he conjectured. Well, whatever made them feel better about themselves.

Then there were the girls who wanted to be as free with sex as the guys and bragged about how many men they'd been with. They were

competitive and viewed sex as another game to be won. Their attempts to be the best in bed were always fun at first but quickly became exhausting.

There were also the romantics, who convinced themselves he was the love of their life and cried when he refused to respond to their declaration of love with one of his own. Usually he cut them loose very quickly. Desperation and tears were no kind of aphrodisiac.

He thought they were all, under their various pretenses, nothing more than biologically driven creatures conditioned by their culture to deny their desire for sex and bury it under whatever explanation suited them at the moment.

Liza was different. There was some undefinable something about her. She was neither filled with guilt, trying to prove something, or pretending to be in love. She was just a simple woman with no pretense. She was like...he struggled for an analogy, and decided she was like vanilla ice cream. That smooth, sweet taste you crave after too much walnut fudge ripple or triple-coconut rum swirl.

Maybe it was because she was different that Ben kept forgetting his wife and children. When he was with her there was no one else, no consequences. Was this love? He wasn't sure. He did want to know all there was to know about her. What was her favorite flower? Where did she get her blue eyes and blond hair? Was she ticklish? Why had she married her husband?

She answered all his questions, except the ones about him, the man he was beginning to think of as an enemy, or at least a competitor. That was different as well.

The week ran out, as they do, until they found themselves at the moment of her departure. They had planned a last, feverish hour musing her sheets, but the hour turned into two as he learned how little discipline he actually had. He couldn't stand the idea that he would no longer touch her with his hands, his tongue, slide himself inside her welcoming body. She also seemed to catch fire in these last moments. She licked and sucked, kissed and teased but the laughter that had been such a part of their love making was gone. Instead, every motion seemed carefully staged and just a little bit desperate.

"It's a good thing I'm leaving," she said, as they stood under the shower together. "This was getting far too real."

She got into her car, the hyperactive white terrier sitting on the passenger seat beside her. There was nothing he could do but step back, give a sort of half wave and nod. She was, after all, no more than a friend. She smiled through the glass, a sad sort of grimace. Her pain made his easier to bear and yet more real.

She drove away fast, her tires barking against the asphalt. In moments she was out of sight, though he imagined he could hear her car for a moment longer. Well, another one gone, he thought, another conquest and another ending. He couldn't even convince himself that it didn't matter. Shoving his hands into his pockets he walked home.

The days slid by and the weather changed. The storms of autumn came charging in, casting dark shadows across the ocean and driving cold rain and icy mist. The weather matched his mood exactly: turbulent, angry, dark.

Bonnie took a job that got her up early so he started getting up with the kids, getting them ready for school, checking they had their lunch bags, their backpacks, their homework. Afterward he would go to the bank, put in his eight hours, nine if you counted the lunch he rarely took. Then back home, chores around the house, stories to read, broken toys to fix. His wife, waited for him in bed while he dawdled in the garage, working on painting his feelings for Liza, while carefully concealing her image under slashes of paint, passionate reds, calming pinks, burning lines of orange.

He convinced himself that by spring the memory of Liza would fade. He would no longer imagine he smelled her perfume. He'd forget how sunlight on the sea reminded him of the color of her eyes. At some point she'd be just a girl in a dream, a memory of soft flesh and heated whispers. Nothing more than an old, dirty movie he'd replay in his head while he climbed between his wife's legs or masturbated.

Spring arrived and reminders of Liza were everywhere. The sight of flower buds brought the memory of their reckless kiss on the street. The oceans ever present rhythm reminded him of their times together at the beach, in her room. He would stop when these images came, and he would be still a moment, a smile playing on his lips. Then he would

shake free and go on with what he'd been doing, a sudden emptiness like a sharp pain in his chest.

He decided what he needed was a new woman. Someone to take away the memory of the old one, the way pickled ginger cleans the pallet and makes it ready to fully taste the next bite. He took long walks on his lunch break, went to his favorite cafe earlier and earlier. He saw so many women, not as many as summer would bring, but still, women of all kinds. Not one of them kept his attention.

It was April when he told his wife he was going to visit an old friend in Seattle. He left for Portland on April fourth. He didn't know Liza's address and hadn't been able to find her in the online directory. That was alright. He didn't think showing up at her house was such a great idea. The best thing was to find her at work. He hoped she hadn't changed jobs.

She was at the back of the shop, pouring coffee beans into a container. The sound they made was nice, a sort of clattering hiss, and the smell was wonderful. He couldn't take his eyes off of her. Luckily there was no one watching. A young woman and two customers were chatting at the front counter, the sound of the steamer masking what they said. It didn't matter, the moment he saw her he had become deaf.

The sight of her filled up every one of his senses. There was nothing else in the world at that moment but her. He hadn't fully understood until then just how much she meant to him. She was his woman, the love of his life, the one, the only. The sense of wonder that filled him was like all the Christmases that had ever been, all the presents big and small bestowed by the universe.

He took a deep breath and moved further into the store. She sensed his presence and looked up, a friendly smile meant for a stranger on her face.

"Hi," he said.

She recognized him and the smile was gone, her brows lifted and her forehead wrinkled.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her tone so expressionless he didn't know how to read it.

"I came to see you," he confessed, his vulnerability there for her to see. He thought it was a good start, an honest moment to begin their new relationship.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I had to. I want to start seeing you, whatever it takes. I know you're married. You can leave him, get a divorce."

"I'm not married," she said, holding up her left hand to show the only ring she wore—a silver thumb ring.

"You separated?" he asked.

"I've never been married," she told him bluntly. "Come on, let's go outside," she said, looking pointedly at the people in the front who had stopped talking and were staring at them with undisguised interest.

They stepped outside and Liza led him to a graffiti-scarred picnic table at the back of the building.

"Look," she said, turning to face him, her arms crossed. "I went to the coast for a little fun and that's what I had, nothing more. I find that if I wear a wedding ring, well it draws a certain kind of man, a man who doesn't want attachments. The kind of man I want to spend a night, or a few nights with. But that's all I want."

"But I want more. I want to see you, see if we can make this more permanent," Ben explained.

"What this?" she insisted. "As far as I'm concerned there was never any this. We were just fuck buddies. Don't make it more than it was."

"But Liza, that's not how it was for me. You mean a lot to me. I think I love you."

"Really?" she asked, I find that hard to believe. Look, I know your type. You're the town playboy. You wear your shirt unbuttoned too far, too much cologne. You aren't bad looking and you're decent in bed but you know and I know that you're just a player. Besides, you actually are married. "

"That's true," he said, but I don't have to be. I can leave her."

"But why would you?" she asked, genuine wonder in her voice. "I mean, you obviously found someone who cares enough about you to marry you. She must love you if she's willing to put up with your bullshit fooling around. So why are you here and not there, making up with her until you find the next short-term girlfriend?"

"I don't. I mean, I won't. I have no intention of having another short-term girlfriend. I want you. Only you."

"Am I supposed to be so flattered that I fall at your feet. Sorry dear. I think you're a nice guy, in your way, but I have zero interest in having a relationship with you. It was fun but you know what, you really need to grow up. Now please, I have to get back to work. This has been real and this has been fun but like they say, it ain't been real fun," That said she walked back to the shop and went inside.

Ben stood there for a moment trying to gather his thoughts but then sheer embarrassment drove him to get into his car and drive.

Bonnie was home when he got there. She and the kids were hanging decorated eggs, as if they were Christmas ornaments, on a driftwood "tree" they'd found on the beach. When he walked into the house she looked up and after a moment's searching gaze gave him the barest whisper of a smile. "You going to help us?" she asked.

Ben nodded. She was wearing old jeans and one of his paint-spattered shirts. Her hair was up showing off her slender neck. She was really very beautiful. Funny that he'd forgotten that. She was smart too. She knew all about his womanizing. Liza was right about that. He had seen it in Bonnie's eyes when he came in.

"You know, I'm not very good with this stuff," he said, walking across the room to the wide kitchen table. "Your mom's the one with the creativity in this family," he told the kids, as he joined them in the dining room. He put his arm around Bonnie's waist and pulled her toward him. For the barest moment he felt her resist, but then she slid into his arms, and it was like finally coming home.



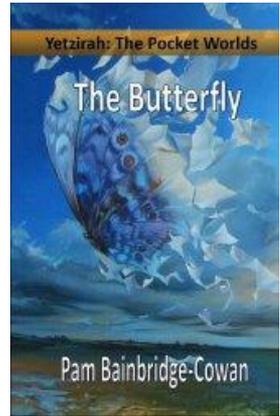
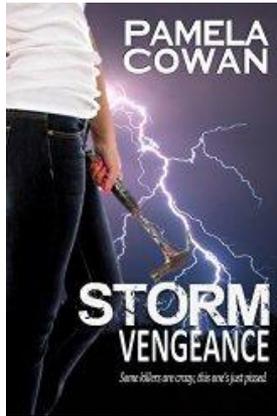
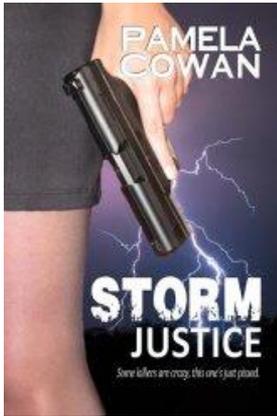
Award Winning Author Pamela Cowan is a member of the Klamath Writer's Guild known for her psychological suspense novels including *Storm Justice* and *Storm Vengeance* as well as the mystery novel, *Something in the Dark*. She is the winner of the Northwest Independent Writers Association NSQ award and a #1 seller on Amazon.

Her short stories have appeared in *Alien Skin*, *Argus*, *Space and Time*, *Visions*, and have been read on OPB supported *Golden Hours Radio*. She has worked as an audio producer, a magazine editor, and in criminal

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She also writes science fiction, fantasy and epic fantasy under Pam Bainbridge-Cowan. You can find out more information about Pam and all of her stories through the Guild's website:

[http://klamathwritersguild.org/Pam\\_Bainbridge\\_Cowan.html](http://klamathwritersguild.org/Pam_Bainbridge_Cowan.html) , Amazon [http://www.amazon.com/Pamela-Cowan/e/B0058DJ3HA/ref=sr\\_tc\\_2\\_0?qid=1457296375&sr=1-2-ent](http://www.amazon.com/Pamela-Cowan/e/B0058DJ3HA/ref=sr_tc_2_0?qid=1457296375&sr=1-2-ent) and her personal website, <http://www.pambainbridgecowan.com/index.html>



## NEED A LIFT?

by Jean Lamb

Mrs. Pevensy always felt strange when she was lifting her own body, and not that of someone else. The funny telepresence net covered her hair, though there wasn't much of that left, but the *real* her was here inside Olaf, the lifting robot that helped the aides in Merry Manor with moving patients. It was no effort to move or bend or anything when she controlled the robot, though of course Darla, the aide, told her what to do. While in the robot, Mrs. Pevensy's hearing and sight were much

better, too. In fact, that had turned out handy a couple of times when she had noticed a patient in distress before the aide did.

She enjoyed being able to work off some of her nursing home fees, too. There weren't many jobs, not even virtual ones, if you were ninety-two and mostly paralyzed. Plus, they had fixed the robot so the head screen showed her face when she was working inside it. She could even socialize with the patients who could still talk, and a couple of other patients who had their own brain net—when they were awake. It was probably wrong of her to tune into the police scanner frequency when she was bored, but it was kind of interesting. Besides, she only did that when nobody had anything for her to do, but she still needed to be plugged in just in case.

Her hours were mostly daylight, and only a few days each week. Some of the regular visitors waved at her if they saw Olaf the Lifting Robot go by with her face in it. And she probably shouldn't have let Margery's grandchildren color on her that one time, but most of the crayon had come off.

She knew some of the patients who had shifts, too. Frank Loftus, who had been a corpsman in the Navy, said he did it for five dollars a day and all he could see, though nobody took him seriously. But he worked mostly at night, so he could rattle on all he wanted to without bothering the public.

There. Her bed was all fresh now, and her body was settled in for another few hours, and a fresh chux put in for those little accidents. She'd heard all the stories about bedsores and bad backs among the aides. They hadn't liked some of the orderlies they'd been stuck with just because the men could lift better. Neither had she, for that matter.

Now it was time to do the same for Mrs. Bigelow in the next room, all three hundred pounds of her. A nice woman, mind you, but Mrs. Pevensy was glad to be a robot to lift *her*! Up Mrs. Bigelow went, as Darla pulled out the soiled, wrinkled sheet beneath. Olaf had no sense of smell, and Mrs. Pevensy was certainly grateful for it. The aide did some quick cleaning after putting down fresh linen and changing the gown, too.

Funny...the lights looked strange...she hoped the wireless connection wasn't misbehaving again...Oh. That *hurt*...

Darla looked at the robot, still holding Mrs. Bigelow. Mrs. Pevensy had a weird expression on her face, and then the image flickered and went out. *Shit. Where's the remote? Nope, not in the pocket at the side like it's supposed to be*—“Mrs. Bigelow, I hate to do this, but I’m going to have to leave you here for a moment,” she said, as she put a blanket around the patient. No way was she going to try to put the woman back in bed by herself. She was the only aide in this section at this time, and knew that she and Mrs. Bigelow might end up in a world of hurt if she tried to ease the large woman off the robot’s soft arms herself. “Here’s the bell, but I promise to be right back.” She tried to remember the last time she had *seen* the remote, but couldn’t remember—having a live telepresence operator for Olaf was always so much better that nobody really wanted to do rounds any other way.

The first thing, though, was to check Mrs. Pevensy. If the power supply for the brain net was loose again, Darla knew that plugging it in more firmly would restore the connection, as adjusting the net itself sometimes would. *We should probably get the newest model, but if this place could afford that, they could afford to pay me more anyway!*

Fortunately the room was nearby. Mrs. Pevensy looked half-asleep with her mouth open—but it was open in a way that Darla had seen before. She turned off the brain net and took it off first, in case it was contributing to the problem, and rang the front desk to call 911—even at over ninety, her patient wasn’t a no-code—and then removed the brain net and power supply, a fairly small unit. It was faster to wake up old Mr. Loftus and have him take over, than look all day for the remote control, or try to figure out the manual controls on the back of the robot.

That done, she could hear Mrs. Bigelow shriek—she didn’t like Frank—but that was too bad just now. Darla checked Mrs. Pevensy’s vitals and called them into the charge nurse in the office, so Mr. Shumate could relay them to the EMTs—then Darla wrote them down and left them on the side-table just in case somebody lost track along the way. The BP was through the roof, but she couldn’t administer any meds and Nurse Shumate was the only RN in the whole building, because it was a Sunday and a lot of people hated working weekends anyway.

Darla thought Mrs. Pevensy was breathing ok, so went to check on Mrs. Bigelow. The other woman was still arguing with Mr. Loftus, though the old fart just grinned down at her from his face screen. *Thanks a lot for aggravating the situation*, the aide fumed to herself. Once Frank

lowered the woman down, Darla threw a spare gown over the robot's head while she tucked Mrs. Bigelow back under covers. *I will have a talk with you later. Mr. Loftus. No wonder some of the older aides call you Foul Frank!*

By that time, Shumate and an EMT were coming down the hallway with a gurney, so she directed them to Mrs. Pevensy's room and had the robot follow her down to the bot's plug-in area. She owed Mr. Loftus an apology for waking him from his nap like that, but he didn't have to enjoy himself so much.

"How many lawsuits are ongoing with Merry Manor?" Delia Givens, a reporter for the local newsblog asked.

The tired clerk, a middle-aged man, said, "Go look it up yourself, it's all public record." They sat in a bar where the court people hung out before going home to dinner, or had dinner there if things ran really late.

"What fun would that be?" Delia said.

"Yeah, it must be such hard work to talk to your phone for five minutes..." George shook his head.

"I'd rather talk to you. C'mon, like you said, it's all public record."

"All right. A lawsuit from one of the patients against the home for being held up in the air for a week, to hear her tell it—and one against another patient who made fun of her while he was operating the robot. One from a patient's family against the home, another against the robot place, a third one against the people who make the brain nets, and one against the state of New York, just because. The home is suing the robot place and the brain net manufacturer, and probably Santa Claus—if any of the other suits go through, their parent corporation will be most unhappy with them, and aren't real thrilled right now anyway. I think a couple of people are suing the aide, though why I don't know, she doesn't have a penny, but I expect she'll lawyer up in a day or two. I'm sure someone will get around to suing *me* before it's over."

"How is the old lady doing, anyway?"

"Better than she was. They'll have to take her testimony remotely, of course, like they will for some of the other patients who wouldn't travel well." George sighed, and drank some more of his beer.

"Quite a scandal, making the patients work for their keep..."

"Well...from what I heard, some of the families were delighted to have the rates reduced, but don't quote me on that, and if I find this

conversation on the internet at any time, it'll be the last drink you have with *me.*”

Delia coughed gently, and surreptitiously turned her phone off. She knew George meant it.

Mrs. Pevensy continued to progress, though the new paralysis on her right side continued to resist therapy, and if she came back to the home, probably wouldn't have a brain net for any time at all. Darla left Merry Manor when she discovered that the home wasn't going to cover her legal costs, and took up a better-paying career in law enforcement. After working at the nursing home, the physical demands of the Police Academy weren't that bad, and she got puked on less often. Mrs. Bigelow stopped asking her family to smuggle in fast food and snacks, and lost 100 pounds during the next year, as all the lawsuits dragged on. After being able to move around enough to slap Frank Loftus a good one, the two of them began eating their (healthy) dinners together.

The patients weren't terribly happy to be lifted in robots that were operated solely with the remote control, and weren't shy about saying so. The aides were often impatient to have their turn with the robot, and ended up straining their backs when forced to lift patients the old-fashioned way. The front office complained about the cost of qualified telepresence operators, and wondered if they could hire more aides simply for that at a lower cost. Relatives saw higher bills for their loved ones and silently wondered what had been wrong with the original situation. Patients who could not otherwise afford use of a brain net rang their bells out of boredom, if they were physically able to. Those who couldn't ring bells for themselves silently prayed that someone would change the TV channel for them someday.

The robot and the brain net companies successfully fought off their lawsuits, after pointing out that a woman who was 92 with high blood pressure was not a good candidate for telepresence work. The nursing home pointed out in their lawsuits that the families of the operators were only too happy to enjoy a reduction in patient costs. Mr. Loftus brought the house down during one hearing when he told everyone that he would actually *pay*, if necessary, to be able to walk around again and check out

all the lovely ladies. Mrs. Pevensey's testimony was more decorous, but she certainly sounded wistful that she'd never be Olaf again. Mrs. Bigelow dropped her suit after being offered six months' stay free of charge. Once Darla testified, glowing in her new police uniform, why she had done what she'd done, the lawsuits against her were dropped. The nursing home promised to hire only certified, trained operators for Olaf, and to keep the remote control on a lanyard around the robot's neck so even people who forgot to put it back into the pocket wouldn't inconvenience others.

Except for legal fees, the net of all judgments against all parties turned out to be \$2.39 once everyone was paid.

"Where you headed today, Shakana?"

"Let's see, out to the window plant this morning, the housekeeping outfit after lunch, and I finish up at Merry Manor." The trainer loved teaching people how to play with the robots; sure, some of them were so well programmed they almost didn't need a human operator, but there were places only a robot could go, and where you needed people to judge things. She'd been trained on drones while in the Army, but it was fun to see how many different ways the bots could be used.

"Isn't that the place..."

"Yeah. We're running groups piecemeal out there, because of their shift requirements. Late afternoon is the only time days, swing, and graveyard people are awake at the same time."

When she walked into the nursing home, she was surprised to see a number of patients in the group. "Did they volunteer to act as demos?" she asked. Usually she had trainees practice with sandbags right at first. It was much safer that way.

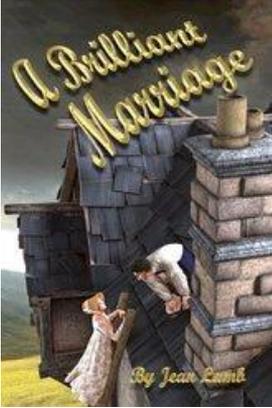
"No, Ms. Morris," said the administrator. "They're here to be trained."



Jean Lamb is a full-time writer (recently retired from her day job). Her novels include a Regency Romance, *A Brilliant Marriage*, plus two fantasy books, *Dead Man's Hand* and *Hatchling*. She's been a resident of the Klamath Basin for over 30

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[http://klamathwritersguild.org/Jean\\_Lamb.html](http://klamathwritersguild.org/Jean_Lamb.html) or her Amazon page: [http://www.amazon.com/Jean-Lamb/e/B00IR0YO20/ref=sr\\_tc\\_2\\_0?qid=1457295962&sr=1-2-ent](http://www.amazon.com/Jean-Lamb/e/B00IR0YO20/ref=sr_tc_2_0?qid=1457295962&sr=1-2-ent)



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The Guild has open meetings twice each month where individuals interested in writing can see if the Guild meets their writing needs. The next four open meetings are March 7<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>, and April 4<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>. For more information, go to [The Guild](http://www.klamathwritersguild.org) on our website at [www.klamathwritersguild.org](http://www.klamathwritersguild.org). Or you can email us at: [klamathwritersguild@hotmail.com](mailto:klamathwritersguild@hotmail.com).