

FREE

5

FLASH

FICTION

BY PAUL D. DAIL

Free Five
Flash Fiction Pieces

by Paul D. Dail

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A 250 word introduction:

My wife hates flash fiction.

Not necessarily *my* flash fiction, but flash fiction in general. Even though the pieces I write allow up to 1000 words (roughly 4 pages), it bothers her to not know the rest of the story, either before or after this particular “flash.”

For me, it’s a love/hate relationship. *Run, Rabbit. Run.* was my first attempt, and my first draft was over 1300 words, meaning I had to figure out a way to cut almost a quarter of the story.

As a writer, this is an amazing exercise, both in finding the most essential details necessary for a story (as opposed to the fluff and filler... like this parenthetical), as well as tightening up the very words chosen (in order to get your point across not only clearly but also in a manner reflective of the mood of the piece... see what I mean?)

But sometimes I love the fluff and filler. Sometimes it adds nice additional depth to the story. And sometimes I hate to cut it because I feel like something is lost. However, perhaps what is lost is best left to the imagination of the reader.

So I resisted taking another look at these pieces. All of them came in heavy for word count on their first drafts, so they already received serious editing to get under 1000 words.

And as for the stories which seem to have more to tell? I expect I’ll be doing that someday as well.

Thanks for reading.

The Professional Crier

[Necromancy: the art or practice of supposedly conjuring up the dead, especially in order to obtain from them knowledge of the future]

My name is Penny Circe.

If I had any friends, I'd want them to call me P.C. It would be funny, you know? 'Cause I'm not really that politically correct.

But I don't have any friends. Can't blame 'em. I probably wouldn't be friends with me, either.

My school counselor calls me P.C., but not to my face. I overheard her once, whispering to the secretary when I was waiting in her office. "The Professional Crier is back." I could detect the exasperation in her voice, like maybe she *wanted* me to hear her.

Of course I was back. After all, Randy Metz, the school quarterback, had died in an ATV accident. And anytime one of my classmates died, I had to cry.

Because my tears can bring back the dead. At least, temporarily.

Don't get me wrong. I cry out of genuine sadness, too. How could Mrs. Gants not get that? After all, I am the only daughter of our town's only mortician. (Correction. I *was* the only daughter of our town's only mortician.) And dying has always been good business in our town.

The mortuary has been in our family for generations. Literally. We run it out of the house my great-grandfather built after the Civil War. The same house we've lived in my whole life. Death has been my playmate ever since I can remember. Nothing to be afraid of. But I've also seen the grief in the loved ones when he came around to play.

And I've seen the bodies left behind. And I've cried over them, just like I did with Randy Metz. But it never does any good. They never stay.

Sitting on my bed in the dark, I can only hope it works tonight. It hadn't worked with Randy last Fall, and I haven't tried it since.

The trick is to get to the bodies before the mortician. My father had a curious ritual when someone brought him a body to prepare. After a few minutes alone with the deceased, he would leave the house without saying a word. I never knew where he went, but I have a few guesses. He was never gone more than an hour, but it provided the time I needed. You have to get to them before the eyelids are glued shut or the jaw sewn together.

I learned this early on.

After they had "delivered" Randy Metz and my dad had left, I went down to the parlor. Randy wasn't the cutest boy in school. But he wasn't bad looking. He had even looked at me a couple of times. Most people just ignore me.

He didn't look so good *that* day. Kind of grayish-blue. Scraped up pretty bad, and his neck was one big bruise where the four-wheeler landed on him.

The tears came then. I can't really control them, but at least I finally figured out what I can do with them.

As with every classmate who made their next-to-last stop here, after I had wiped my tears on his face, Randy opened his eyes in shock. And just like every other time, I thought I had done it... brought someone back from the dead.

Some, like Randy, would even sit up and look at me. Color would seep back into their flesh. After the initial shock, there would usually be a look of placid calm. Relief, maybe. But before they could say a word, they would get that terrified look again. Their eyes would return to a hazy, milky color as they seemed to look right through me, wide-eyed and staring at *something* I couldn't see.

My old playmate probably.

And then Death would take them. Again. And I would cry. Again. But this time because I had failed.

But I can't fail tonight. Tonight is more important than any other time. Tonight it's my daddy.

I found him just after midnight. I had awoken from a particularly nasty nightmare and gone to his room. It had been a year since the last time this happened, but I knew he would still let me climb into bed next to him. But the bed was cold, even when I curled up alongside him.

I came back to my room and sat on my bed. But I haven't cried, even though I really want to. I have to save my tears. I have to try one more time.

Daddy lost a lot of weight over the past year, so I'm able to carry him downstairs. His cosmetic effects are all there. And the cold steel table, scalpel, and tools for removing the blood.

I lay him on the table. Finally I let myself cry. Harder than ever. Puddles of tears fill my palms, and I rub them across my daddy's face.

He opens his eyes.

But there is no shock. He smiles as color rushes back into his cheeks. He pushes himself into a sitting position. "My sweet daughter," he says. My breath catches in my chest.

He spoke.

He reaches out a hand and wipes my tears away with his thumb. "I have the answers you have been seeking."

Then it hits me. Hard. Like a book-filled backpack "accidentally" swung in your direction in a crowded hallway.

Suddenly I realize that I haven't been trying to beat death all these years. I wasn't reanimating my classmates because I loved them or anything (well, Randy Metz...) It wasn't about them. It was about *me*. I've been wanting answers... to know what they discovered. Was there an end to this pain? Or would it be better if I just ended it myself?

Now here was my answer.

But all I want is my daddy back.

But before he can say another word, he gets that terrified look. His handsome blue eyes turn milky and hazy, and he looks right through me, wide-eyed and staring at *something* behind me.

My old playmate probably.

When he drops back on the table, I reach for the scalpel. \

The End

ABOUT *THE PROFESSIONAL CRIER*

From the author:

I have to give credit where credit is due on this one. The original spark of this story actually came from our school's guidance counselor who said that at a previous school, they had a student who was a "professional crier," meaning that anytime a student died (it was in Las Vegas, so apparently not uncommon), this particular student was the first in the counseling offices whether she really knew the passed student or not.

Needless to say, after she made that comment, I didn't pay much attention at our training in-service for about the next hour little while as I started ferreting out the details of this particular girl in my head.

The response to this story when it first appeared was interesting, especially in regards to Penny. I hadn't originally intended her to be "creepy," but that was the impression many got from her. Working at a performing arts high school, I am surrounded by kids who would normally be shunned at a regular school (and I was a theatre student myself in high school, so I can understand). I originally envisioned Penny as one of these types of students, and actually I was concerned that this piece might be more depressing than anything else.

But given a little space, and allowing Penny to exist in other people's imaginations, I realized that there is definitely something off about her, maybe something a little darker, and when I took off my teacher's glasses, I saw her in a whole new light. I expect you'll be hearing more from Ms. Penny Circe someday.

Oh, by the way, the name is a play on words. "Penny" for the coins (often pennies) placed on a dead person's eyes. And Circe was a Greek goddess of magic. Obviously, the combined initials have a variety of possibilities as an acronym.

Thanks for reading, and if you have any questions or comments, please feel free to email me at pdail73@gmail.com.

And of course, special thanks to my parents, wife and family.

I Spy With My Little Eye

Anthony Monsano stood at the bar, staring at the round, wooden box on the counter. About the size of a hatbox, except Tony knew it was no hat inside this particular box. He would've smiled at this thought had a fire not taken the elasticity from his face just six months earlier.

But he was sure as hell smiling on the inside. Not even the fact that his oldest friend, Danny Blaylock, lay in a bloody crumpled mess on the floor next to Tony's boots could take away the satisfaction at finally having found the box.

Besides, Danny was in good company. All the men who were either dead or dying in the bar (and even some of the women) had fought bravely. And Tony had to respect their conviction in the cause. They had all been willing to die for this prize. And with the exception of Tony and Esmeralda, that's exactly what they had done.

Where was Esmi anyway? She was so damned quiet. Probably collecting mementos. She was a weird kid, but Tony knew he needed to keep her around.

He returned his attention to the round box on the bar, but still he didn't touch it. Until today, he had only seen rough sketches of the box, the same sketches currently folded in his coat pocket. And while there had been inconsistencies, this was no doubt the item he had sought for years.

Most seekers agreed that the box dated back over two millennia. Some even speculated that it was carved out of the wood from the cross used to crucify Jesus, with any of the steel parts of the box forged from the spears used by the Roman soldiers. But Tony didn't buy that. It just didn't make sense. Especially considering what the box was supposed to contain.

The gargantuan man Tony killed just minutes earlier to get the box had a Norwegian accent, but the script carved into the wood looked closer to Arabic, the symbols closer to Egyptian. The old steel lock on the box was shaped like a skull, a skull that looked like it had taken a severe beating from various implements trying to break into the box over the centuries.

"My God," he whispered, "the thousands of miles this box has traveled." He held his fingers just above the box, tracing the air in the shape of the symbols. He longed to touch it. "If you're done, you can come in now!" he shouted.

A young girl, maybe nine or ten years old, with dark skin and long black hair came through a door marked "Employees Only." Her white dress was spotless, but her right arm was smeared red and she clutched something that Tony didn't want to try and identify. She barely glanced at the bodies on the floor. "Did he have it?" Esmeralda asked.

"Of course," Tony said. "So you can read this writing?"

She nodded, and Tony had to turn away when she slipped the bloody morsel into her mouth. Hopefully he wouldn't need her around for much longer.

He pulled out the sketches of the box. The more fragile ones, drawn by ancient hands on tissue-thin parchment, had been left in a safe place, but he had copies. He spread them out over the bar. The greatest mystery for Tony had been the fact that each sketch had been missing some little detail, but looking at the box in front of him was like

seeing the puzzle completely assembled. So why the inconsistencies? He would've furrowed his brow if it weren't for the scar tissue.

Esmi stepped beside him. "It's because something new is added to the box with each user," she said, as if she had read his mind. Tony had long since stopped wondering how she did it.

"So what do we need to do?" he asked.

"You need to think about whether or not you want to do this."

Not this again, Tony thought. "And after that?" he asked.

"Today, you need to think about it again."

From the corner of the room, a man groaned. The groan turned to a raspy cough. Then there was silence again.

"Listen, kid," Tony said. "I didn't get you out of that South American death camp to get your opinion. You're here to do a job."

"If that's what you want," Esmi said. She climbed up onto a bar stool. In different circumstances, someone might've said it would've made a cute picture. She reached out and touched the box. A shiver went through her body, then she began to trace the symbols, leaving little streaks of blood which the wood of the box seemed to absorb. At the same time, she started to sing in a soft, wispy voice. But even with all of his studies, Tony didn't recognize the words she sang. And yet in a way, he recognized all of them somehow, like it was a mix of every language he had studied.

But the song didn't last long. Tony only saw her trace twelve of the marks, and then she was done. She stopped singing, took her hand from the box, and turned on the stool to face Tony.

"That's it?" he asked. He had expected something a little more grandiose. But no sooner had he spoken the words than he heard a heavy *click* and the bottom of the skull lock swung open. "I can touch it now?"

The girl nodded.

Tony pulled the box over, unhinged the lock and lifted off the lid. He had to stand on the tips of his boots to see inside, but when he did, his face tightened around his lips. Whether it was a smile or a grimace was unclear, and the look in his eyes could've been elation or terror. Then he dropped to the floor next to his best friend. Less bloody, but just as dead.

Esmeralda hopped off the barstool, hefted the round box off the bar, and walked out.

The End

ABOUT *I SPY WITH MY LITTLE EYE*.

From the author:

This is one of those stories where I intentionally left quite a bit of details to the reader's imagination. Primarily this was because the topic for this particular flash was: "What's in the round box?" I decided not to answer that question, in essence to make the question into the story. This was my MacGuffin. Sort of a "Pulp Fiction" briefcase sort of thing. Mixed in with a little hint of "Hellraiser." Maybe a touch of "Raiders of the Lost Ark."

And although I don't really know where I got the idea for Esmeralda, I love the idea of the two of them traveling around together (and that he refers to her as "Esmi," almost like a daughter). The name "Esmeralda" appears in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, but besides maybe a few surface comparisons which could be fun to play with, I didn't intend anything too deep by it.

And yes, I imagine I might do something more with this one someday as well. Maybe a series of stories where the round box appears (and most likely Esmeralda along with it).

Thanks for reading, and if you have any questions or comments, please feel free to email me at pdail73@gmail.com.

And of course, special thanks to my parents, wife and family.

Run, Rabbit. Run

There was something about jackrabbits that always creeped out Pete Cantrell. Something about the way they moved. More gangly than their cuter cousins, they loped along when they walked, as if evolution got stuck somewhere between a cottontail and coyote.

Not long after Pete and his wife Wendy moved into their house in the middle of twenty undeveloped acres, Pete had a nightmare in which the world was a scarred apocalyptic landscape. The only humans that had survived were distorted into twisted creatures scouring the wasteland on all fours. In the nightmare, these aberrations loped, and they had the same glassy, lifeless marbled eyes of the jackrabbit.

Ever since, it seemed like whenever Pete went outside, there was one standing there. Staring at him. Watching him with those glassy, lifeless marbled eyes.

But not this morning. On weekends Pete liked to get up before Wendy and go for a walk out on his property. He would follow the deer trails through the brush and juniper trees, crossing a wash where the land dropped down, ending at a small copse of junipers, a quiet spot where he liked to be by himself.

There was a chill in the air this morning. Autumn was getting ready to give way to Winter. It was late enough for the sun to have risen over the mountains, but it was hidden behind gray clouds. Even the birds were silent as Pete made his way away into the maze of sagebrush.

As he walked, he kept his eyes down, scanning for arrowheads or fragments of chipped stone from tools that had been worked. Several hundred years before any white faces found this part of the world, this land had been Fremont Indian hunting grounds. To date, Pete had only found chipped off pieces, but where there were chips, there were usually tips to be found also.

He was almost to the clump of trees--his "thinking spot"--when he spotted something metal off to his right. He stepped over some brush, bent down and picked up a metal lunchbox with pictures from the old Lone Ranger TV show. It even showed Tonto.

Something shifted inside when he picked it up, and Pete opened it. "I'll be damned," he said, pulling out a plastic baggie. The lunchbox also contained some cigarette rolling papers and matches.

Pete hadn't smoked grass in years, but the familiar scent wafting out of the lunchbox brought back old cravings. He looked around to see if he could spot anyone. The closest road was back by his house, probably a half mile, and the next house was at least a mile. Kids must be going to some pretty great lengths to get high these days.

"Their loss," he said. Figuring some teenager must've ditched the lunchbox, he continued to the trees where he sat down in the dirt and rolled a joint. The weed was potent, and it only took a couple puffs to feel the effects. He was about to lie down on his back when he saw a flash of gray movement not ten feet away behind a clump of sagebrush. He jumped up, his first thought being, *Coyote!* He was ready to make a dash, but before he could, he saw a jackrabbit instead. Probably the biggest one he had seen, the size of a small mutt. And almost as mangy.

Pete's heart slowed, and he laughed at his previous panic. The jack just stared at him. Pete reached down, picked up a rock and threw it at the rabbit, but the rabbit disappeared. "What the...?"

Tentatively (it wasn't a coyote, but it was still a wild animal), he stepped toward where it had been. There was a dark hole in the ground, probably a foot in diameter, like a little cave slanting underground. Even with all the rabbits in the area, this was the first time Pete had found the entrance to one of their warrens. It surprised him how big the hole was, and he hesitated before getting much closer. He didn't see the jack, but he knew it was down there, probably just out of range of the light. He raised himself up on his tiptoes to try and see a little further into the hole.

That's when he spotted the arrowhead lying in the dirt a few inches past the lip of the hole. Possibly obsidian. Black in the center, but like smoky glass at the edges. Beautiful. Just a few inches into the hole. Just before the line of shadow.

Pete broke a dead branch off one of the junipers. Holding it in one hand like a club, he reached slowly down towards the hole...

* * *

Wendy Cantrell woke with a start.

Had she heard a scream?

She dismissed it as a remnant from a nightmare. She swung her legs off the bed and hopped across the cold hardwood floor to her slippers. She wrapped herself in her robe before walking into the kitchen, pouring a cup of coffee and heading out onto her deck. Pete was usually back from his morning walks by now, but sometimes he lost track of time.

Just as she was sitting down, a jackrabbit scrambled out of the sagebrush. Wendy didn't hate the jackrabbits like Pete did. In fact, she sort of liked them. They were survivors in a world full of predators, including gun-happy rednecks. But one thing she could agree on was that there was something a little unsettling about their eyes. Staring, unflinching, cold.

But this one was different. It appeared more frantic. Panicked. It stepped one direction, looked quickly side to side, then started in another direction. Then it spotted Wendy on the porch and stopped.

For a brief instant, Wendy had a crazy thought.

Peter?

But before she could make sense of the thought, a coyote bolted out of the brush in a snarl and tore the jackrabbit off the ground in its maw and disappeared back into the wild.

The End

ABOUT RUN, RABBIT. RUN.

From the author:

This was the first flash piece I ever wrote, and I was hooked on the exercise after that.

Let me just say that Pete Cantrell is not me, but he lives pretty close by. And I would've probably had him over for drinks a time or two. Something neighborly like that. That is, if you could call where I live a "neighborhood." My nearest neighbor is about a couple hundreds yards away, and we're much more likely to see wildlife than people.

And jackrabbits are pretty weird. I did actually have the apocalyptic, loping half-human nightmare that Pete mentions. And I have actually found an arrowhead, although not obsidian (which worked so much better for the story). Otherwise, the connections end there.

As to the story, I like the idea that Pete falls into the trap of so many horror story victims: sex, drugs and/or rock and roll. In the old slasher pics, you always knew who was going to get the ax (often quite literally) based on who was... well... having the most fun. But still, A CAUTIONARY TALE, KIDDIES.

Speaking of falling, I also like that Pete falls prey to some sort of spirit for no real reason besides where he happens to live. I don't think he has ever intentionally run over a rabbit. Maybe he has trespassed on some sort of Indian ground, but certainly not intentionally. But like all prey in the wild, mostly he's just a victim through no fault of his own.

Oh, and Pete Cantrell is actually a play on Peter Cottontail, just for fun. Have you noticed that I rarely choose names randomly?

Thanks for reading, and if you have any questions or comments, please feel free to email me at pdail73@gmail.com.

And of course, special thanks to my parents, wife and family.

The Death He Expected

There's power in superstition. I've never been too superstitious, but I can tell these three kids out hiking in the middle of the night got a strong streak of it running through 'em. Why else would they be going out to the mesa on a full moon?

Well, for one, they're hiking out there to try and scare the new kid. But I can tell that in each of 'em there's some small sense of belief. And a little bit of fear. They're a little high off it. Even the redheaded one who likes to whisper for effect. He says not to be too loud if they don't want the dead to hear them. I like this kid.

Hiking through the sagebrush, the new kid catches his foot on something and stumbles forward into the tall kid.

"Get off me, man," the tall kid says. "You tryin' to feel me up or something?"

"You wish," the new kid says.

"Personally, I think you *both* wish," the red-headed kid says. "Now shut up. We're gettin' close."

"Sorry, Jake," the tall kid whispers.

"This is stupid," the new kid says, but I can tell he doesn't think it's stupid at all.

"How do you even know it's a person up there? You dig it up or something?"

"It's under a pile of rocks, idiot," Jake says. "You think I'm gonna start pulling out rocks and stick my hand in a pile of rotten flesh? I just know, okay?"

"Well, who is it?" the new kid asks.

"I heard it was some Indian," the tall kid says. "The Big Chief or somethin'."

"There it is," Jake whispers and points to the small mesa rising out of the earth about a hundred yards in front of them.

Funny thing about the full moon. Everything's real bright, but nothin's real clear. It's easy to pick out the five-foot pile of stones on top of the mesa, but the black granite side they'll have to climb up is shrouded in shadows.

Seeing this shuts up the new kid. I can tell he's scared. Got a little Indian blood himself, but he hasn't told anyone.

Them Indians got lots of superstitions. You want to see superstition in action, go see an Indian. They'll show you its power. That belief can make things happen. And you don't need no full moon, either.

When they start walking again, the new kid doesn't say anything, because he's got that belief that puttin' words to something gives it power, like speaking it aloud will bring it to life.

As they climb the rocky slope, I'm tempted to take at least one of them. It'd be so simple. A misstep on loose rock, a shoelace caught on some scrub brush. All this sharp granite.

But I wait. 'Cause I got a feeling my time's gonna come.

The top of the mesa is narrow, only maybe twenty feet at its widest. At one end is the mound of stones.

"What are those for?" The new kid points at two circles of rock on the ground, about eleven feet across, nearly overgrown with time.

"I dunno," Jake says, and I sense the slightest chink in his confidence.

"I don't think you wanna step in them circles," the tall kid says.

“This is stupid,” the new kid says again, but his voice cracks this time, like he’s back in puberty.

“Then you shouldn’t be scared,” Jake says. “All you gotta do is get three stones off the top of the pile.”

The new kid stares at him a moment, like he’s weighing his options... and his courage. Finally he starts over to the pile, careful to edge around the rock circles, until he’s at the mound.

He tries to reach the top stones, but the pile is sloped enough that he can’t lean far enough forward to grasp one. He’ll have to climb on it.

He puts one foot on the pile, and the stones immediately shift. He hesitates, one foot still on solid ground, then shifts his weight and pushes forward, getting another foot up. He gingerly puts one hand down on the rocks and reaches with the other.

Just as he gets hold of a stone, something jumps up from behind the pile shrieking. The new kid only gets a glimpse of tangled black hair and a grotesquely deformed face before sliding backward in panic. He pushes away and falls on his ass, but the thing is moving around that pile quick. He notices that he has fallen into one of the rock circles and lets out a little whimper before scrambling to his feet.

He starts to run, but stops when he sees Jake and the tall kid in hysterics. Then he hears laughter behind him as well and turns to see the monster pull of the mask, revealing a blond kid.

“You assholes,” the new kid says.

They’re all laughing now, but I’ve been given my opening. For a moment, the new kid truly believed that the dead had come for him. It was enough to let me in.

Insects are easiest to control, and I send out a swarm of winged ants that have nested in the rocks, a reddish-black cloud that descends on the other boys. All except the new kid.

The ants don’t bite, but having them crawling all over is enough to send the boys into a panic, swinging their arms around, running in circles. Jake trips over a stone and there’s a loud *crack* as his head comes down on another rock.

The new kid can only stare in horror, but I’ve saved the best for last.

There’s nothing special about the Indian buried on that mesa, but I reanimate the corpse, and it starts to drag itself out of the rocks.

There’s power in superstition. It can bring things to life... even if that thing is Death. And now I’m here for the new kid. And I give him the death he expected.

The End

ABOUT THE DEATH HE EXPECTED.

From the author:

Hmm. Where to start. Well, again, I must give credit where credit was due. Around my birthday last year, my parents gave me *The Book Thief* and told that Death was the narrator (I’m thoroughly enjoying it, by the way). Before I could start reading it, though, I knew that I wanted to tell some sort of story from the point of view of Death (you did figure out it was Death, right?). But I didn’t want it to be obvious until the end, so I tried to make it seem like they might’ve been being stalked by a serial killer or something

(although I tried to put in some details that either would make the stalker very astute in the area of human nature or very sneaky to be so close to them without being seen).

For the story itself, I've actually been to this mesa with my archaeologist father-in-law. There are petroglyphs on some of the rock faces on the slope, which was the actual reason we were there. He didn't know about the circles on top or the pile of stones. And while he didn't actually climb to the top with me, the thing with the ants really did happen when I accidentally stepped into one of the circles (something that immediately gave me a bad feeling) and neared the pile of stones. Not to the extent in the story where I was covered by them, but I had enough on me that I hotfooted it off the plateau swinging my arms.

Should I be concerned? Or am I just giving in to a little superstition. My father-in-law told me he didn't know anything special about the mesa besides the petroglyphs, and much as I've wanted to, I haven't pushed him to look much deeper. They're probably already worried enough about whom their daughter married.

Oh, and since I've talked about names for the other pieces, I'll tell you that names were tricky for this one (especially when I was trying to be conscientious of word count... saying "the red-headed kid" every time instead of just a name adds up). I decided for some reason that I didn't think Death would necessarily know their names, so considering the fact that Jake's is the only name spoken aloud (and he's kind of the ring leader), that's the only name we find out.

Thanks for reading, and if you have any questions or comments, please feel free to email me at pdail73@gmail.com.

And of course, special thanks to my parents, wife and family.

Another Oldie but Goodie

Margaret Daniels awoke in the night to music that only she could hear. She sighed and wondered if she could go through with her plan, even though she knew she didn't have a choice. The singing was only getting louder.

At being close enough to ninety that she didn't bother counting anymore, Margaret was supposed to be finally allowed some peace, but she hadn't had a good night's sleep since first hearing the music almost a month ago.

The Brookfield Retirement Home wasn't much to write home about, even if one of the residents still had kids who cared to hear from them. The walls were paper thin, and Margaret could swear she knew more about her neighbors' kids than she knew about her own. Consequently, the first night she woke to the muffled sounds, she blamed Barbara Young. Barbara's husband had recently passed. Margaret assumed the music was part of her mourning, but after three nights, she complained to The Management. Barbara claimed innocence, and Margaret had been further infuriated when The Management told her (rather smugly) there hadn't been any other complaints.

It wasn't until she started hearing the music elsewhere-- still very distant and muffled but somehow familiar-- that she got nervous. She even considered talking to the Resident Quack, but when the song grew loud enough to finally discern the tune, and when Margaret finally looked at a calendar, she discovered what no doctor would be able to decipher. Except for maybe one of them voodoo doctors.

As a teenager, Margaret had loved the song "You Are My Sunshine." What girl hadn't? But the song took on new meaning when Herbert (God rest his soul) sang it to her on the night he proposed. Ray Charles had released his version that year, and when Herbert took the stage in a packed jazz club, it was in Ray's style that he sang before asking for her hand.

Margaret had already been through one bad marriage and wasn't necessarily ready for another, but she agreed. Herbert sang "You Are My Sunshine" again on their wedding day. He bought her the record for Christmas. And on their first anniversary, Margaret awoke to find her bed covered in daisies and Herbert serenading her, dancing around in his boxer shorts, as smooth as if he had been back in that jazz club.

There hadn't been a second anniversary.

But now, almost 48 years since his death, Herbert was singing Margaret's song once again. The first night she awoke marked exactly 49 years since Herbert had proposed. And tonight would've been their 49th anniversary.

Margaret climbed out of bed and got dressed. After making sure she had everything, she slung on her oversized shoulder bag, grabbed her cane and crept out of her room. She found Bobby The Intern asleep on one of the chairs in the lounge.

She prodded his leg with her cane. "Do you have everything in your truck?" she asked.

Bobby cracked one eye. "That depends," he said. "You got my cash?" Bobby The Intern was a lazy slob, but like most lazy slobs, it only took the right amount of money for them to do something most others wouldn't.

Margaret pulled out a wad of bills and waited impatiently while Bobby counted. Satisfied, he smiled. "Let's go."

As they drove, the song grew louder in Margaret's head. "I'm coming, dear," she murmured, ignoring Bobby's sideways glances.

When they arrived at the cemetery, Margaret told Bobby to wait in the truck. She shouldered her bag and climbed out, shuffling slowly through the headstones until she came to Herbert's. As if on cue, a hand broke through the soil. As if keeping time, the fingers snapped while Herbert used his other hand to claw out of his grave.

Margaret had come to expect this, but she hadn't planned on Herbert looking as handsome as the day he died. She dropped her cane and walked up to Herbert. He engulfed her in his arms and they kissed. The singing finally stopped in her head.

Then the stench hit Margaret. Worse than the time her daddy's dog hid all those dead rats under the house. When she pulled back, she found Herbert looking more as she had imagined he would, the way someone *should* look after being embalmed for nearly 50 years. And exposure to the air wasn't helping. He was decomposing more by the second... until she barely recognized him. Only the eyes bulging from their sockets were familiar.

"I'm here to take you with me, my sunshine," he gurgled.

"I know you are, dear." He tried to pull her back toward him, but Margaret reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out a chef's knife. In what was probably the fastest she'd moved in months, she slashed through Herbert's neck. His head lolled back, splintering his brittle spine, then the corpse dropped to the ground, and the head rolled back into the hole.

"Maybe you'll stay dead this time," Margaret said and spat.

Bobby walked up carrying a shovel in one hand and holding a vinyl 45 record, still in its paper sleeve, in the other. "Sweet Jesus," he said when he saw Herbert.

"I told you to wait in the truck." Margaret shook her head and sighed. "Well, quit lookin' stupid," she said. "You knew this was part of the deal."

Bobby stared at her, and she could tell he was considering giving her back the money and returning to the retirement home, maybe without her. Then he must've remembered what he could do with that money, and he shrugged. "Whatcha want this old record for?" he asked. "You want me to bury him with it?"

"That was the plan." Margaret took the record and pulled it out of the sleeve. It was Ray Charles' *You are My Sunshine*. She flipped it up in the air, and it spun a couple times before landing on Herbert's chest. The B-side was facing up. Hank Williams.

Your Cheatin' Heart.

The End

ABOUT ANOTHER OLDIE BUT GOODIE.

From the author:

Stephen King has said that he often thinks of himself more of an archaeologist than a writer... that the stories are like artifacts. They are already out there; he is just unearthing them. I've always liked that. And this story felt like one of those artifacts, the creation of it coming together in one of those amazing moments of synchronicity.

It started with my grandmother who told my father back in September that she had been hearing “Ave Maria” at various times throughout the day. Don’t be mistaken. She may not move very fast, but she’s still sharp as a tack, so this was pretty weird. It didn’t stick around for more than maybe a week, and she just celebrated her 99th birthday, so obviously it wasn’t anything to worry about medically/mentally. But as a horror writer, it definitely caught my attention.

Thus the story was born. However, as opposed to “Ave Maria,” I knew that I wanted Margaret to be hearing Herbert singing to her, and I knew that Herbert cheated on her and she killed him as a result. Now it just became a matter of finding the right song that would work for the time period.

“You are My Sunshine” was the first one to come to mind. A little research proved that it would’ve been out when Margaret was a young girl. Then came the question of which version she would’ve been listening to when she met Herbert. My original intention was for it to be a country version. I found one by Johnny Cash, but the timeframe wasn’t working.

Then I found the version by Ray Charles, and when I saw what was on the B-side of the single, I had that moment of synchronicity. Every bit of it worked. Using this version also dramatically changed the tone of the piece (and the relationship between Margaret and Herbert). It added more soul and life. Basically, it made it work where the country version wouldn’t have.

The next morning after posting *Another Oldie but Goodie* to my website, I sat down and opened up Pandora on my computer. Using the random feature to mix the probably 15 different stations I had--Ray Charles being one--you’ll never guess what the first song was to start playing. Almost as if in confirmation that I had unearthed an artifact with this one, a story that was meant to be told. I was only acting as the conduit.

Thanks for reading, and if you have any questions or comments, please feel free to email me at pdail73@gmail.com.

And of course, special thanks to my parents, wife and family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Paul D. Dail is the author of *The Imaginings*, a supernatural/horror novel, as well as numerous other short stories. His collection of flash fiction, *Free Five*, has spent over a year in the top 50 Kindle Horror Shorts Stories since its publication in 2012. He also has a piece appearing in the upcoming anthology *No Place Like Home* from Angelic Knight Press, where he will appear in the company of veteran Bram Stoker Award winners.

Currently Paul lives with his wife and children in southern Utah, amid the red rock, sagebrush, and pinion junipers. He teaches Language Arts and Creative Writing at Tuacahn High School for the Performing Arts. You can follow all of Paul's rants, rambles and reviews at his blog: www.pauldail.com- a horror writer's not necessarily horrific blog.

Other published works by Paul D. Dail can be found at the following author pages:

- [Paul Dail Books](#)
- [Amazon](#)
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