

*SOMETHING LIKE HOPE*  
&  
*OTHER STORIES*

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Wising Up Press

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## SOMETHING LIKE HOPE

My best friend, Tim, and I knew we'd be the only gringos in that Los Banos migrant farmworker camp. We were driving over from the little house we rented together near the beach in Santa Cruz. It was a Friday evening, mid-July, and several hours earlier, we'd finished our student-teaching responsibilities at a year-round elementary school in Watsonville that was surrounded by lettuce fields. As we snaked down out of Pacheco Pass, the wide sky over the valley floor was in ink wash. It was 1977, and we'd both just graduated from UC Santa Cruz. Tim was driving the truck we used for the little part time landscaping business we'd started during our sophomore year to help with expenses; my feet were up on the dash.

I said, "You sure Colton has it all set up for us?"

"Says so." Tim shrugged. "Told me they need all the pickers they can get right now."

Colton had been a teammate of ours on the university's basketball team. He'd grown up in Los Banos and was a boyhood acquaintance with the son of the owner of the big cantaloupe farm where we were heading. The son, a guy named Stan, worked as a foreman on the farm, and Colton had called and arranged with him for us to join their workers who were in the midst of the harvest.

I looked over at Tim with his long frame draped over the steering wheel. I was six-two and he had at least three more inches on me; we both wore our dirty-blond hair in short ponytails. He'd majored in sociology and had been doing research for a professor studying the effects of the increase of automation on harvesting in the Central Valley. He'd decided to put off trying to teach for a while so that he could continue as a graduate assistant for the professor and help finish the study. They both thought it would be beneficial for someone in their group to have firsthand knowledge of the farmworker experience, which is what led to seeking the arrangement through Colton. I'd been an English major and had nothing special going on while I hoped and waited



## ROAD CREW

If I told you I wasn't dreading that Saturday morning, I'd be lying. I sat with three other people, all of whom had arrived after me, on hard plastic chairs in a small, brightly-lit anteroom between the main police station entrance and the jail itself. The officer that had checked us in sat at a metal desk behind a little window in the wall doing paperwork, maybe registering the personal belongings we'd left with him.

We all took turns not looking at one another: three males and a female. By his clothes and hair and manner, I figured the man next to me to be an executive of some sort. He was about ten years older than me, maybe forty, forty-five, and wore roundish, horn-rimmed glasses. The other guy, I took for a logger. He was as surly-looking as they come. He might have been about my age, though it was hard to tell with the cap, the whiskers, and those veiled eyes. The girl was perhaps twenty-two. If I'd seen her at a party or a bar, I would have looked twice.

The clock was the only thing on the wall; it read 8:35 when another officer in a blue uniform and brown jacket came in. He was wearing a gun in a holster, mirrored sunglasses, and chewed on a toothpick like some television cop. He leaned through the window and took a clipboard from the other side of the wall. The officer at the desk looked up at him once and then returned his attention to his papers.

The new officer moved the toothpick in his mouth and studied the clipboard for a while. Then he said to no one in particular, "A shoplifter, two DUI's, and a cannabis lover. Nice intimate group this morning."

The officer at the desk smiled but didn't glance up from his work. The second officer looked at each of us steadily for a few seconds. "All right," he finally said. "I'll be your guard. Let's go out to the van."

We followed him outside where a plain white van with government plates sat idling at the curb. He opened the back and we climbed in, two of us on bench seats on each side. He didn't lock the doors. Another officer



## THE DIE IS CAST

I didn't really get to know the Kruegers until a couple of weeks after arriving at the RV campground. They'd been working at the nearby super-warehouse since early fall, and I'd only been there since Thanksgiving when I'd heard about the big seasonal hiring push. Our RV spots were next to one another out in that southeastern Kansas scrubland along the Oklahoma border under power lines that hummed at night. Everyone in the campground was there for the seasonal work, and many of us were on a sort of "camper force" circuit of the country. We were all seniors, most having been reduced to that way of life by losses during the recession. Amazon was a big recruiter and had their "fulfillment" centers scattered all over, but there were more and more companies doing the same thing. The Kruegers had been chasing jobs in their RV for five years, and I'd been at it for almost that long. They both appeared to be in their mid-sixties, and I was approaching seventy.

Les and Marge Krueger had a big Winnebago that had seen better days. Mine was an ancient Airstream tag-along that I unhooked from my pick-up truck so I could use that to get to work. Most folks in self-contained units like theirs took the warehouse bus for the commute; it stopped on the road right in front the campground host's mobile home. I offered them a ride one morning as they were walking to the bus stop in the rain, and they had me over for dinner that same night in return. That's when we started to become more than just passing neighbors.

That first night, Marge arranged the flowers I'd brought in a tall glass, then opened cans of corn beef hash and green beans that she started heating on the stove. While we waited, we sat around their little Formica table under the galley ceiling light and drank beer. They'd told me a bit about their circumstances on the ride to the warehouse that morning, but Les was ready to share more as soon as we were seated.

"Yeah, we lost just about everything in '08. The nest egg we'd been investing for years went belly-up in six months, and a couple years later, we



## THINGS HAPPEN AND THEY DON'T

Steve had been back from his second seven-month deployment to Afghanistan and out of the Army for five more when he finally found a job as a laborer for a construction outfit in New Britain that did contracting work for Connecticut Natural Gas. During that intervening time, he slept on his mother's pullout couch in her basement in Portland, drank a lot, and got a dog: a stray he found at the animal shelter, a rescue dog. Steve came upon her in a cage at the end of the first row, splotchy-colored and mangy as could be. She tilted her head and looked up at Steve with sad brown eyes that matched the way he felt. Steve took her on the spot and named her Lucy.

At first, Lucy was shy and skittish, but gradually worked her way up onto the couch next to Steve where she'd lie with her eyes closed and her tail thumping while he scratched her behind the ears. Soon, she was licking Steve's face and jumping up on him whenever he'd let her. He took her everywhere with him: to the corner bar he frequented, the shooting range, down to the pond at Martha Hart Park where he tossed a tennis ball in the pond for her as the summer became hot.

It took about six weeks of work for Steve to save enough money and find an apartment for them where the owner made an exception and took a dog. The owner was an old vet himself; he traded war stories with Steve when he showed him the place and took a liking. At the time, Steve was involved with a girl from high school he'd become reacquainted with at the bar. Her name was Cindy, and she stayed over most nights, but he didn't put her name on the lease.

The apartment was part of a long row of old two-family houses the owner had converted into four units each in a rundown neighborhood not far from the construction yard. Steve's apartment was on the first floor of one next to the manager and her husband, Sid, and the upstairs places were empty. It opened in back onto a patch of shared scruffy grass surrounded by a short hedge and divided in half by a small hooped-wire fence, the type of



## DEPUTY

The sheriff's department in that little town was housed in what used to be a gas station. The two mechanics' bays had been turned into jail cells, and the adjoining room served as an office; partitions separated a trio of desks and the folded cot squeezed into a corner was rarely needed. Hugh's nephew, Jake, who was the sheriff, often joked that his job was like being on *The Andy Griffith Show*; the keys to the cells even hung on a ring from the wall just as they did on the show's set. There were less than eight hundred people living in town, but the rest of the rural jurisdiction encompassed a couple hundred square miles.

With the early-spring afternoon's light starting its descent, two of the desks in the office were empty and Hugh sat behind his nephew's. To say that Hugh hadn't expected to find himself there would have been an understatement. He'd stopped by like he always did during his mid-afternoon walk to say hello to Jake. At the time, Hugh's plans for the rest of the day lay ahead of him pretty much as they had regularly since retiring as a middle school math teacher several years before: head back to his garage to spend more time woodworking until dinner, read for a while, then go to bed. But that had changed abruptly when he entered the office as Jake hung up the phone, pursed his lips, and fixed Hugh with a hard stare.

"I need you to do me a favor, Uncle Hugh," Jake said. "And I have to have you to do it now. I need to deputize you for a couple hours."

Jake went on to explain that his regular deputy was on vacation several states away. The main reserve deputy and his wife were both home sick in bed with the stomach flu and 102-degree temperatures; the wife served as the station's dispatcher. Tom's other reserve deputy, a retired teacher like Hugh who Jake only used in a pinch, was on a camping trip off in the mountains and unreachable by cell phone. Jake had to respond right away to a call that had just come in from a rancher out towards the county line who'd found one of his heifers laying in his far pasture with a hind quarter full of





## MIDLAND, MINNESOTA

1

A breeze lifted the shade on Martin's bedroom window, and wan, gray light crept underneath. A blue jay called. The old man opened his eyes, blinked several times, then sat up in his pajamas on the edge of the bed and slid his feet into slippers. He took his spectacles from the nightstand, stretched them over his ears, and used his cane to shuffle into the bathroom. Martin relieved himself, brushed his teeth, shaved, and regarded his image in the mirror. His eyes looked back at him sadly, moist at the edges. He smoothed the strands of hair on the sides of his head and tried to coax his lips into a smile. The stroke had taken place five years earlier, and still his lips wouldn't cooperate; the best he could manage was the same grim smudge of mouth with the tiny curl turning up on the good side.

It took Martin a long time to change into his clothes, tie his shoes, pull on his jacket, and make his way out to the garage. He'd already packed the bed of his pick-up truck with the needed items. It had taken him more than an hour the night before. He backed the truck into the street and drove slowly on patched blacktop through the silent town. A few house windows were lit, but most were not. The gray had begun to lighten towards fuller dawn.

When he got to the diner and pushed open its door, it made its regular creak. Denise looked up from behind the counter, shifted her girth, and smiled at him. She had his coffee poured and his place set in front of him before he managed to get himself onto the stool.

"Good morning, Martin."

The old man nodded. He turned his head to look around the empty diner, then stirred his coffee, putting nothing into it.

Denise scribbled something onto a pad, tore off the page, and put it on the ledge of the little window in the wall behind her that opened into the kitchen. The older of her two nephews there, Dale, took it and stuffed it in his pocket. Glen, the younger one, rubbed his short, dark hair and said quietly,



## TIGHTROPE

Twice in the previous week, Doris had made it as far as the front door of the rectory before turning around. That morning, she managed to raise one hand to the knocker before hesitating and lowering her eyes to the small paper bag she held with the other. It was still, just past dawn. A small light blinked on in the back of the rectory and she held her breath. She could hear the sound of slippers shuffling inside on linoleum. She set the bag on the doormat and left.



Father Michael found the bag when he opened the door a short while later to scatter crusts from his toast for the birds. His eyebrows knit as he picked it up and unwrapped the tape around it. Inside was a jar of homemade jam with a label on it that said: Plum. The cinder parking lot between the rectory and the school was empty in the dim light, as was the street corner where the church stood. Over the trees, he could just make out plumes of smoke from one of the remaining factories in town. It was cold on the step. He looked around for another long moment, then went back inside, closing the door behind him.



Before Mass that next Sunday morning, Doris walked down to the corner coffee shop, went inside, and took her usual stool at the counter. She kept her long green coat and scarf on, but removed her cap and put it in her lap. Sarah brought Doris her tea with the bag already in the steaming water.

"Thank you," Doris said.

Sarah smiled and thought, as she often did, that Doris looked much the same as she had when she'd been her fifth-grade teacher at the Catholic elementary school twenty years before. She had gained weight, of course, but



## LONG TRAIN

Just to fill the afternoon, Walter had made one of his solitary trips into the city to see a new museum exhibit. He lingered longer than he'd planned, missed the express train back, so was stuck with a commuter packed with people heading home from the city after work. The cars seemed endless as he wandered through one after the other until he finally found an empty seat at the far end. He sat facing the rear, watched the city's buildings flash by in the falling late-spring light, then selected a podcast on his cell phone, secured his earbuds, and settled in for the long haul. Walter adjusted his hip to get as comfortable as possible; it was still bothering him from when he'd had it replaced a couple months earlier before retiring at sixty-five.

The seat across from him remained empty until a young woman plopped herself down into it after about twenty minutes and dropped a daypack to the floor. She turned immediately to the window, blew out a long breath, made a fist, and chewed a knuckle. She was college-aged, slender, and attractive except for the cloud that covered her face. Several moments later, she began to weep. Walter watched her from the corner of his eye while the train made its first stop. Her shoulders were still shaking well after it had regained speed. When she swiped at a bit of snot under her nose with the back of her hand, he powered down his cell phone and popped out the earbuds, exchanged both with some tissues in his pocket, and reached those across to her.

As softly as he could, he said, "Here."

She looked from the tissues to Walter, nodded once, and took them from him. She wiped her face, blew her nose, and balled the tissues. Then she looked at him again, made a little choking sound, and began to cry harder.

Walter resisted the urge to pat her knee. Instead he said, "Would it help to talk about it?"

She blew out another breath and dried her eyes. "My boyfriend," she said. "I think he just broke up with me."

Walter felt himself frown. "Here, you mean?"

She pointed. "In the front of the train. We were sitting there."



## THE SHAPE OF THINGS

Many years ago, not long after I'd turned seventeen, I began boarding with the family of a man who worked for my father. His name was Don Donaldson and he lived on a quiet cul-de-sac in Portland with his wife, Pauleen, five-year-old daughter, Lauren, and a small dog. That June, I'd gotten kicked out of the all-boys Catholic high school in San Francisco where my own family still lived. My parents were waiting for a new house they were having built to be finished before moving themselves and my four younger siblings up to Portland where my father's regional vice president's office was being relocated. The house was scheduled to be done in January, and my parents thought it would be best if I started my senior year in the place where I would complete it, so that was the main reason for renting the room. That, and the relative peace of mind it would give my mother without me living at home for a few months.

My room at the Donaldson's had been a den, so it was small, just space enough for a twin bed, a standup lamp that lit it and a tiny desk, and a little chest of drawers they moved in there for my clothes. They insisted I call them by their first names, which took some getting used to because they were both almost twice my age. Pauleen was French-Canadian, spoke with a delicate accent, and was quietly beautiful. Don travelled a lot with work, so was gone most of the week. He usually got back on Friday afternoons, changed out of his suit, and took up a position on the living room recliner in front of the television that he rarely left except to sleep, a short glass of Early Times over ice never far from his reach. My father paid him a nominal amount for my rent, and I was expected to do chores to augment that – mow the lawn, wash their cars, do odd jobs around the house, and walk their dachshund, Tag, in the morning and at night.

It was on one of those evening walks early on with Tag that I met Angelo. He was the night custodian at the elementary school that Lauren attended a few streets away. When we came by, he was almost always sitting



## YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE

Meg walked down the sidewalk on an empty street vaguely aware of the sound of her footsteps on the pavement. It was cold, not quite dawn. Bare tree branches nodded on the small breeze. Few windows were lit. She pulled her coat more closely around her and wondered if her boyfriend, Brendan, was still in bed asleep where she'd left him. She wondered what he would think when he awoke and found her gone. She pictured him sitting up in bed, looking around, his brow furrowing in bewilderment. She shook her head. If she'd slept at all that night, she couldn't remember it.

After another twenty minutes, Meg came upon a cafe and went inside. Its warmth fogged the edges of the room's big window. She found an empty table against the glass and ordered coffee. When it came, she held the mug under her nose with both hands and let its steam fill her nostrils. She closed her eyes, then opened them again. Outside to the east, a wash of wan light had emerged above the buildings. She took out her cell phone: nothing from Brendan. Meg left a voice mail for the secretary at the elementary school where she taught saying that she was sick and would need a sub. Before powering the phone down, she glanced at the screen saver photo in which Brendan was folding her into a hug and felt a shiver pass over her. She pinched the bridge of her nose until it hurt.

Meg glanced up when the café doors sighed open. A man came through them and looked directly at her as the doors closed behind him. He walked over beside her and set her wallet on the table in front of her.

"Saw this drop out of your coat pocket on the sidewalk back there." He gestured with his head. "But I was riding the city bus and had to wait until the next stop to get off and retrieve it. To try to return it to you."

She looked from the wallet to him. He was about the same age as Brendan, mid-twenties, but taller, with a crooked nose and short, disheveled brown hair. There was an earnestness to his eyes that was endearing.

"I didn't know if I'd catch up to you, but I found your identification



## ANOTHER BEATING HEART

Roger and his longtime partner, Jimena, moved into the tiny house next door shortly before I retired. I'd heard it was the smallest detached home in that gentrified San Diego neighborhood, and it stood out there like a beat-up golf cart on a lot of upscale cars. Jimena told me they'd had to leave the cabin they'd rented for years on a mountain in Sequoia because of Roger's worsening breathing problems at that altitude. They were both in their mid-seventies, and she said they'd lived for years mostly off his Medi-Cal disability benefits and what was left of the inheritance from his mother's death. Almost all of the later was gone except that house, and the modest monthly rental check they got from it went away, too, once they moved in. When he was younger, Roger had worked off and on as a mechanic, but got paid cash under the table and never contributed into Social Security, so they only had hers to augment things.

I didn't know either of them well, but they came out to sit on the top of their front steps and smoke a dozen or so times a day, and we occasionally visited then. When we did, Jimena did almost all of the talking. Roger had suffered several small strokes before the move; one side of his face drooped and it was difficult for him to speak, but I never got the impression he had much to say anyway. He had long, gray hair he kept in a thin braid, a beard of similar length, a bandana tied around his head, and large, rimless glasses. He was almost always dressed in sweat pants, a Harley T-shirt, and black socks. She dressed the same and was as short and squat as he was tall and thin. They were generally sprinkled with cat hair from their tabby that seemed permanently perched behind their screen door. Whenever I walked by and they weren't smoking outside, I could see Roger lying on the couch in the living room, no lights on, the television tuned to a station that exclusively played reruns of old shows from the 60's and 70's non-stop morning and night. I rarely saw Jimena inside, so I'm not sure how she occupied herself in there. The lower portion of their old PT Cruiser was rusted out from winters



## HOMESTEAD

1

Some memories of my parents are harder to shake than others. One happened on a Thursday or Friday morning; I can't remember which for sure, it was so long ago. But it was definitely a late weekday morning during the winter, and I was nine. I'm seven times that now.

I was home from school because I was sick with the flu. The later stages, but I was milking it with my mother. I was supposed to be in bed, but had slipped into my parents' room and was trying to find their latest National Geographic magazine to see if there were any photos in it of bare-breasted women. I could hear my mother downstairs washing dishes at the kitchen sink. The phone rang on their bedside table; I picked up the receiver at the same instant my mother lifted the one on the kitchen wall.

After she said hello, my father's voice replied, "I'll be home in fifteen minutes. Be waiting."

Then he hung up. But my mother didn't. I put my hand over the mouthpiece so she wouldn't hear me breathing. I could hear her own breaths quicken, it seemed to me, unsteadily. After a long moment, she hung up, too.

My father was a field supervisor for an insurance company and travelled most of every week. We lived in Des Moines at the time, and his work took him all over the Midwest. He left on Monday morning, and usually didn't return until Friday evening. It was unusual for him to come off the road earlier than that during the week, which is why I know it was one of those mornings. I heard the water turn off in the kitchen and my mother's footsteps approach in the hallway downstairs. I scurried back into my bed, shutting the door softly behind me. She climbed the stairs slowly. I feigned sleep when she cracked my door, and I heard it close again firmly with a click. I listened to her movements in their bedroom, the sounds of her changing out of her housedress. Faint reedy music lilted when she opened her jewelry box. Afterwards, the scent of the perfume and hairspray she used crept under



## COW IN THE ROAD

It was well into evening when I came upon a cow in the middle of Route 57, a lonely two-lane out in the boondocks. She stood perfectly still, swishing her tail back and forth and watching me as I slowed to a stop a dozen or so feet away. It was cold enough that her breath came in short cloud blasts. Snowless fields flanked both sides of the road; I couldn't see a break in the barbed wire fencing on either side, but there must have been one somewhere not too far away. The cow stared at me blankly, then took two steps towards the shoulder of my lane. She was mostly brown with white splotches, and her udder seemed impossibly heavy. I tapped my horn several times, but the cow just continued to stare at me with apparent indifference.

There were no other vehicles in either direction, so after a few more moments, I used the other lane to edge around the cow and continue up the road. I went about twenty yards before pulling off onto the graveled shoulder. I glanced in the rearview mirror; the cow hadn't moved, but had turned to look my way. I shook my head. My cell phone had died soon after I left from visiting my mother in her nursing home, and I hadn't brought my car charger. There was nothing but blacktop, fields, and fencing as far as I could see until the front end of an eighteen-wheeler appeared over the rise in the mirror heading towards us. It didn't slow a bit as it approached the cow, but gave a long blast of its air horn as it swerved to miss it. The truck's right fender hit the rear end of the cow, sending her sprawling onto her side along the road's edge.

I shouted, "No!"

The truck sped past me so fast I could only make out the grim expression of the driver behind a dark beard. As if in explanation, his air horn blasted again several more times before the truck continued into the distance. I felt myself blinking watching it go, then jumped out of my car and trotted back to the cow. She lay perpendicular to the road with most of her body on the gravel shoulder but her rear flank still on the blacktop; her right back leg





## GERTRUDE AND CHARLIE

### *Coming Home*

Gertrude and Charlie started getting ready in earnest for the visit of their sons' families several days before their arrival. In truth, they'd each been looking forward to it for months. Although they took annual trips to Ohio and California to see both of them, it would be the first time in a half-dozen years that they'd all come home. There were three grandchildren altogether, each under the age of eleven and one a four-month old they'd yet to meet, so there was plenty to do in preparation.

The first project was repainting the peeling front shutters. It was mid-July, the height of a hot and humid Connecticut summer, so they started in right after a breakfast. That portion of their white clapboard house on the hill above Farmington Avenue was still in shadows. Gertrude prepped while Charlie sanded. They both wore wire-rimmed glasses and coveralls spotted with various colors from their regular oil painting outings. Charlie was tall, almost gaunt; he'd retired from his job as a draftsman at an aircraft factory a half-dozen years earlier. Gertrude was short and regularly-built; she'd retired about the same time from the community center where she worked. They were each turning seventy-one later that week, the celebration of which was the loose reason for the upcoming visit.

There were two sets of shutters: one at the big picture window of their living room and the other at their bedroom on the other side of the small front porch that held their tulip-backed metal chairs. The shutters at the back of the house for the kitchen, the other bedroom, and the bathroom got less direct sun, so weren't in need of repainting. They used the same existing green color and worked quietly side by side, slowly and carefully, as they did on their outings, each taking a shutter in the window's pair.

At one point, Charlie said, "This house is almost as old as us."

Gertrude smiled. "I remember being terrified at the expense when



## HOME

Now, as I near the end of my days, I wonder how we come to call a place: home. Born there, perhaps. A job. Climate. Family roots, getting away from something, love. None of those have dictated my decisions in this regard. I was a tradesman, a laborer really, all my life, and could do a number of simple things passably well. Worked in several factories and on a number of construction projects. Spent a fair amount of time in the merchant marines. Helped on a few ranches, drove truck, welded. A lifetime of doing this and that in this or that place.



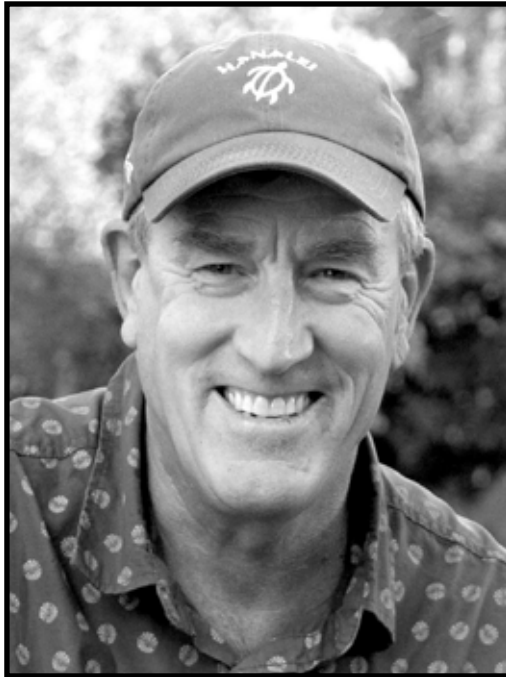
One time, about twenty-five years ago, I was heading from one place to the next, driving from Seattle across the Great Plains to Omaha to work with a cousin who had recently started a painting business there. It was late fall. All the corn had been turned under; the fields were either barren or had been rotated with dry grass that was brown and patchy. Endless stretches of brown or brown-yellow, an occasional wet ditch, and dipping telephone lines along the roadside. The sky was a sheet of gray, and it felt like it might snow.

I stopped the second night near dusk where two roads intersected at a low, flat, pink motel made of cinder blocks. Six rooms in a row with a white farmhouse at one end, some outbuildings next to it, a gravel parking lot, and an empty swimming pool with juniper bushes between the house and the rooms. There was a big tree on one side of the house whose empty branches hung over a corner of the pool.

The foyer of the farmhouse served as the motel office. I rang the bell on the little desk next to the staircase. A middle-aged man came out of the kitchen wiping his hands on a dishtowel. Through the doorway, I could see the back of a woman standing at the kitchen sink, water running. They both had short, salt-and-pepper hair.



## AUTHOR



William Cass has had over 200 short stories published in a variety of literary magazines and anthologies. He was a finalist in short fiction and novella competitions at *Glimmer Train* and Black Hill Press, has received three Pushcart Prize nominations, and won writing contests at *Terrain.org* and *The Examined Life Journal*. A recently retired educator, he lives in San Diego, California.