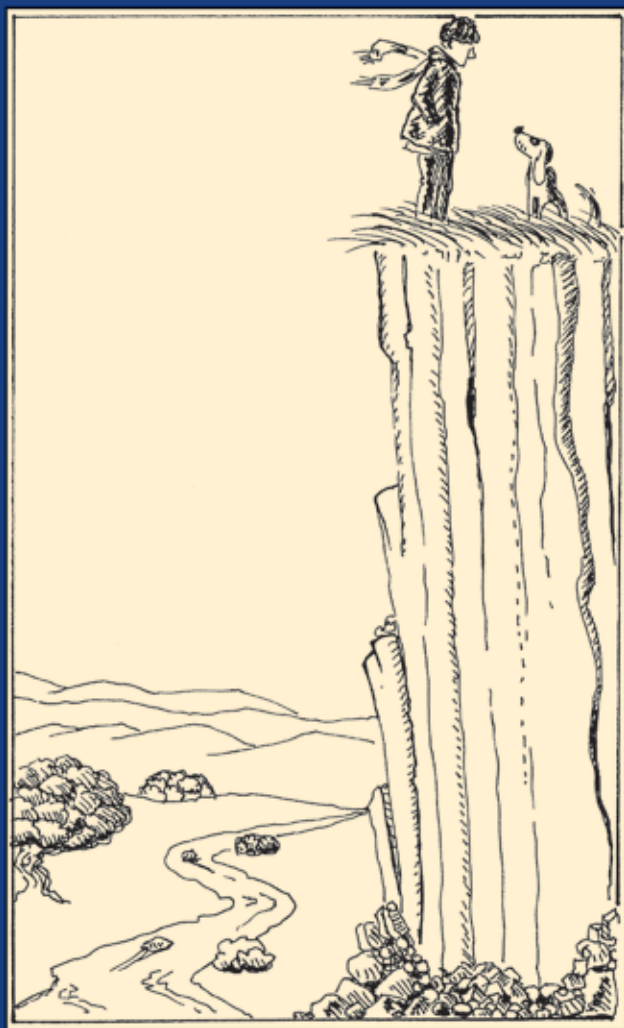


FLASHES OF LIGHTNING

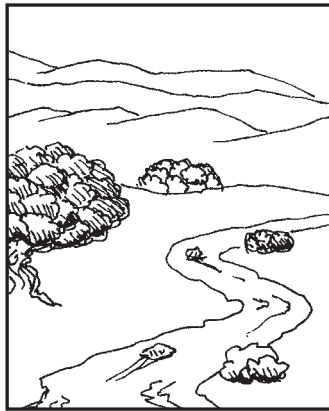
52 SHORT, SHORT STORIES



NEIL TARPEY

FLASHES OF LIGHTNING

52 Short, Short Stories



by

NEIL TARPEY

With illustrations by
Laura Zerzah Jones

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“There are a lot of scoundrels in your stories,” my wife Judi remarked about *Flashes of Lightning*, and I agree. Nevertheless, this book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is coincidental.

...

The following periodicals first published the following stories:

A Quiet Courage: “Hitchhiker” (2015)

CR Poets & Writers: “Not in the Stars” (2015)

Crack the Spine: “Family Reunion” (2015)

North Coast Journal: “Handgun Wedding” (2009); “All Bets Are Off” (2012);

“The French Confession” (2012); “Something About This Stinks” (2012);

“Mistaken Identity” (2013); “A Small Yellow Cap” (2013);

“The Last Lunch” (2013); “The Frog Clan” (2014)

101 Words: “Bad Reception” (2015)

Postcard Shorts: “Wanda Tries Speed Dating” (2015); “Cupid’s Coffee” (2016)

Red Fez Magazine: “Huckleberry Pie” (2015); “Miss Todd” (2015);

“The Freezer” (2015); “Flounder” (2015); “Volunteer Labor” (2016)

Short, Fast, and Deadly: “The Lost Wallet” (2012)

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*This book is dedicated in memory of
Sarab Anne and Mary Catherine,
my two Irish grandmothers.*

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PREFACE

I HAD never attempted writing a 99-word story before the *North Coast Journal's* flash fiction contest in 2009. My first draft was 309 words. I kept rewriting, revising, changing, chopping, re-editing, and polishing. I embraced brevity. Kept concrete images and action verbs. Cut non-essential adjectives and adverbs. Created a concise plot that took off running and ended swiftly.

That story, “Handgun Wedding,” won the *NCJ* contest, and contains one of my favorite characters, Uncle Rocco. But the *process* of writing that story, more than its subsequent success, sparked my passion for writing fiction limited to 101 words or fewer.

Characters drive my stories. Their motives range from healthy to diabolical. They face conflicts and make choices. They talk to themselves, other people, and animals. One character—a homicide inspector—appears in five stories (and a hit man mentions him in another). He sprang to life from my enjoyment of crime novels, hard-boiled fiction, Netflix crime series, and film noir. Or did genetics inspire him? My Irish-American family has included at least eight police officers, inspectors, or detectives.

Many characters die or get killed. But there's love. Some are looking for love. Others are escaping from,

or deciding what to do about, matters of the heart. The humor in *Flashes of Lightning* is ironic, often black. These stories focus on love, death, coincidence, myth, and addiction. O. Henry, my dreams, and multiple Irish writers—Yeats, Synge, Beckett, Bruen—have influenced these tales.

Readers familiar with my sports writing may be surprised that there are no sports stories in this book. Well, except for one where a softball bat accidentally kills a musician.

I'm optimistic a handful of characters will remain in your mind long after you've read *Flashes of Lightning*. Hopefully stories may touch your funny bone, heart, or prompt you to reflect.

There are folks whom I need to thank. I appreciate friends who have offered different perspectives about certain stories. And people like Jen McFadden and Nancy Short, co-owners of The Booklegger, and Ryan Burns, the ubiquitous journalist, for their comments supportive of my flash fiction.

Kudos to the talented artist Laura Zerzan Jones. Thank you, Laura, for reading my stories and then helping fourteen of them become real through your whimsical, spot-on illustrations.

I am grateful to the poet and novelist Margot Genger. She has spent time every three weeks over the past thirty months, reading my stories, critiquing, suggesting,

reviewing revisions, and giving the green light. Margot also lobbied for having Inspector Valken appearing more than once.

I thank John Daniel for introducing me to the fifty-five-word story. His belief in micro fiction as an effective storytelling genre became contagious. John suggested I submit my stories to different markets, and as a result, I found eight homes for twenty of my stories.

Finally, I turn the spotlight on my wife Judi, an artist and voracious reader whose love, tolerance, and acceptance enriches my life.

FLASHES OF LIGHTNING

HANDGUN WEDDING

I NOTICED a handgun holstered inside his gray tuxedo.

“Beautiful wedding,” he said.

“Handsome couple,” I said.

Dark eyes scrutinized me. “You the Irish kid who helped them move to Long Island?”

I nodded.

“I’m Uncle Rocco.”

Handshake like a bear, smile like a fox.

The bride’s felonious, but generous, Uncle Rocco.

“We always need strong guys. For deliveries.”

He puffed on his cigar.

He stuffed a business card in my breast pocket.

“You’re now a friend of the family. Think about it.”

I thought about it.

I moved to California.

THE FROG CLAN

MY BURNING headache worsened, so I bought water at a desert market.

“Will you trade your bracelet?” asked an Indian woman sitting in the shaded doorway. “It shows the frog clan—my mother’s people.”

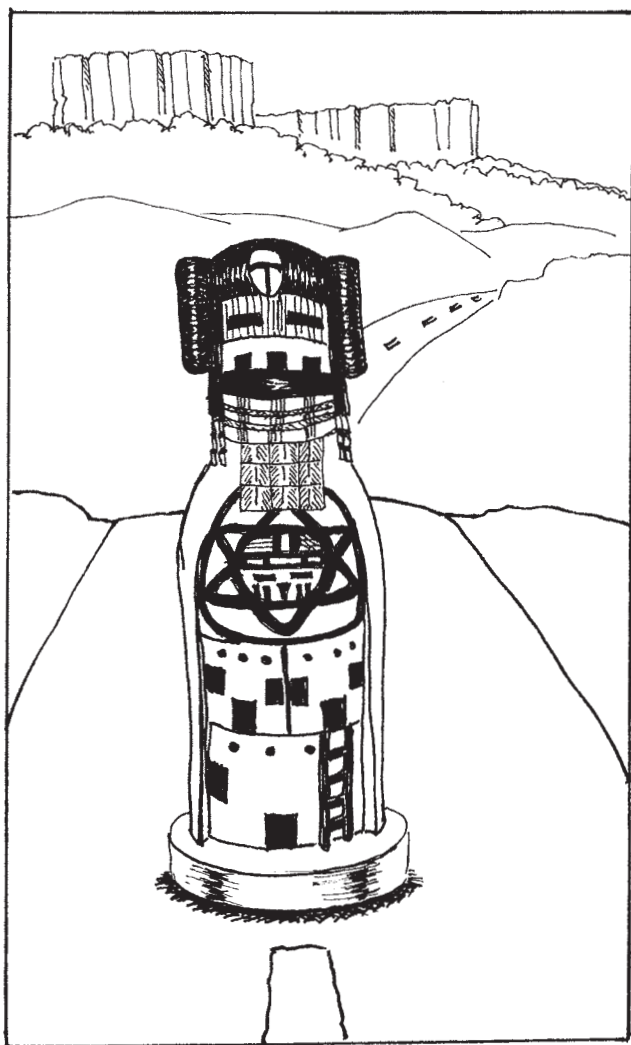
The bracelet had circled my wrist for nine years, so I hesitated.

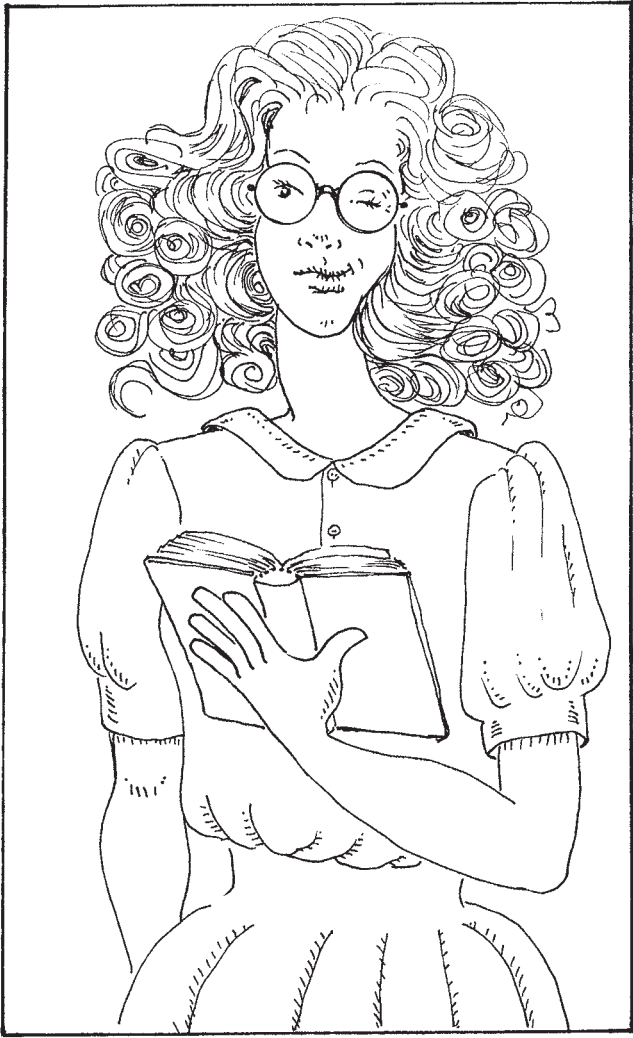
“What do you offer?”

She handed over her corn maiden kachina doll. I fingered the cottonwood’s lightness, considered the painted symbols, the masked face.

I gave her my bracelet. She slid it on, her brown eyes sparkling.

That night, while I dreamed of a frog jumping through a moonlit cornfield, my fever broke.





TOOTSIE AND MARIE

I KNOCKED twice. Mr. Hathaway opened the door.

Her father.

“You must be Nick. Come in.”

I sat down on the couch, holding the flowers.

“Nick, it’s embarrassing, but Tootsie’s not here. She’s at the casino with her friend Sherona.”

So much for our blind date.

“Marie, come in here please,” said Hathaway.

An attractive young woman entered the room. She wore glasses and held a book.

“Please put these flowers in a vase.”

I handed them to her.

I’ve still got two tickets for tonight’s play.

“Marie, ever hear of *Waiting for Godot*?”

“Samuel Beckett?” she answered, winking.