

A person wearing a dark jacket and a hat is running away from the viewer through a dense, misty forest. The trees are tall and thin, and the ground is covered in fallen leaves and moss. The overall atmosphere is dark and mysterious.

ON THE RUN

A Flash Fiction Anthology

Fourteen Stories of Suspense

GREG MERITT

ON THE RUN

**By
Greg Meritt**

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Meritt, Greg M.
On The Run

To Curtis, Coara, and Cannon. You are my
inspiration, my joy, and my everlasting frustration.
But I love you guys more than words can convey.
Thank you for being a part of my life.

Introduction

On The Run is an anthology of fourteen “flash” fiction stories, which can be read in five minutes or less.

Great for when you're in the doctor's waiting room, and you know he (or she) runs at least fifteen minutes behind schedule. Or when you finally make it to the gym, and you're on that boring treadmill, and there is absolutely nothing worth watching on that monitor in front of you. Unless you like daytime talk shows, Judge Judy or soap operas. Or perhaps you're waiting for the wash cycle to complete but the clothes still have a few more minutes before they're ready to be tossed into the dryer.

This is a good way to read without investing much of that most precious commodity: TIME.

And it might help you, the reader, decide to either A) read more of the author's work or B) never, *ever* pick up anything this guy's written again. Either way, short stories are a great barometer to see if you want to invest time (and money) in longer works.

In 2015, that most infamous of companies, Amazon, started a website to help aspiring writers learn their craft and share works-in-progress with others to improve their stories. They named it, appropriately enough, *Write On by Kindle*.

And then, on March 22nd, 2017, Amazon abruptly closed the doors, advising community members to download their posted and drafted stories to retain the content and story comments.

They didn't give a specific reason for the closure, but they did mention that they were unable to grow the platform in the way they had wanted.

It probably came down to a lack of revenue generation.

One of the reps posted this reason in the forum: *One of our goals is to constantly be innovating on behalf of readers and authors, so*

we're always trying out new things. Write On is one such experiment, and, unfortunately, we were not able to grow it in the way that we had wished. It was a tough decision, but it's for that reason we have decided to stop offering the service.

While it was operating, *Write On by Kindle* developed a "Weekend Write-In," whereas the moderators of the site would come up with a prompt and challenge authors to write a very, very short story (flash fiction) in 500 words or less. Writers only had a day or so to come up with this short piece of fiction and post it to the site for all to read and comment on. It was a lot of fun.

The following pages contain fourteen of these stories. I have included the original "prompt" before each narrative.

Some of these have twists, some not so much, others are just plain *weird*. But they all have one thing in common: they are very, very short!

I hope you enjoy reading these as much as I enjoyed writing them.

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On The Run

In 500 words, imagine what happens when a character's spirit is put to the test. Written for the Weekend Write-In prompt themed "Mettle":

I was growing tired, fatigued. I had been in these dense woods for what seemed like days, but in reality, it had only been a few hours. The gear on my back was cumbersome, and I feared the camouflage fatigues I wore wouldn't do their job and I would be shot. But I couldn't stop. I had to keep going. I *had* to, no matter what.

I quieted my breathing. I was sure I heard something off in the distance, and it wasn't Mother Nature rustling the leaves of the forest floor, nor was it some errant animal out for an afternoon stroll. It was my enemies tracking me down, hunting me for the kill. I looked to my left, then to my right. Nothing. Slowly I rose from the gully where I had slithered in fear a few moments before.

I climbed out of my inadvertent shallow grave and started moving again. The distant sounds I heard earlier were not so distant anymore. They sounded as if they were only a hundred yards or so away, down the other side of the embankment, coming after me with a vengeance.

My rifle was slung over my shoulder, my bulky backpack weighing me down as if I were carrying a small child. I ran through trees and brush, praying I didn't trip and fall, giving my adversaries the opportunity to gain ground.

My heavy combat boots were good for wooded areas and the hard compact earth, but they were not made for making a fast retreat. My legs, like other parts of my body, were aching and just wanted to rest.

I hastened forward, fear and adrenaline my constant companions. In my mind, I saw the face of my wife smiling, encouraging me forward. *"You can make it Michael. You can do this."* Those words, although only in my head, kept me going.

I suddenly realized the sound of my pursuers had not only abated but were gone entirely. I stopped where I was and listened. All I could hear was the sound of my own blood rushing through my ears and my heavy breathing.

I only had to make it a little further, and I would find help. The town was not too far away now. I was sure of it. In anticipation, I stepped out from behind a thicket of bushes.

And then I was shot.

I fell to the hard-packed earth, knowing I had lost and let my team down. It was over.

The shadow of a large man loomed over me. He wore a huge grin. "Hey Mikey, red looks good on you. The color of blood."

"Screw you, Chuck. I don't think I'm going to play next weekend. Rachael's tired of cleaning these clothes. And those paintballs really *hurt*. I'm getting too old for this."

"Come on," he said, clapping me on the back. "Show a little mettle, a little moxie man."

"Right," I said, walking towards my truck. "See you tomorrow Chuck."

Popcorn and a Movie

Written for the Weekend Write-In prompt themed "Melt." In 500 words, imagine what happens when something melts.

Stephanie was looking forward to a weekend alone. Although she loved Brad dearly, she also enjoyed time to herself without the distraction of another human being.

Brad was on a two-week assignment with the paper, covering a lame story about some city trying to break the record for making the world's largest cheeseburger. "Just think of how big a piece of cheese they have to melt," Brad said. He knew how stupid this was, but he also was aware that you had to start somewhere and work your way up. "Someday you'll be married to the best crime reporter in the country," he declared once.

"You'll have to ask for my hand in marriage first, you putz," she'd replied.

Stephanie came home to the empty house just after six on Friday night without any plans for the next two days. Unless you wanted to call laying around watching movies, eating fattening foods and napping a plan.

She showered and put on her favorite nightgown. She plopped her tiny frame onto the couch, flipped on the TV and searched Netflix for a good thriller. She loved thrillers – not grotesque horror movies, but psychological thrillers that could scare you to death.

"But I need some popcorn first," she said out loud.

She went down to the kitchen, got the air popper from the pantry and a pan from the cupboard. She grabbed a cube of butter from the fridge and dropped it in the pan to melt. When she dropped the

popcorn kernels in the machine, she thought heard something that sounded strangely like a door closing.

“Brad, is that you? Something happen?”

Nothing.

She walked cautiously around the kitchen pass bar and into the living room, but there wasn't anything there.

Must be my imagination.

When she turned back toward the kitchen, the man bolted out of the closet. She turned back just in time to see the knife come up and slice through the air. Without thought, she twisted her body around, the blade catching her left arm as she turned, slicing through the nightgown and cutting the fleshy part of her bicep. She cried out and ran to the kitchen, the man close behind.

She did not look back. Her brain was in survival mode now as she grabbed the pan of melted butter with her good arm, turned and swung it as hard as she could. The sound of metal breaking the man's jaw was sickening, but not as bad as the screams when the scalding butter began to melt the flesh on the man's face.

When he dropped to his knees, she hit her ex-boyfriend again, this time knocking him unconscious and silencing the screams that unnerved her more than the attack itself.

How did he get out and how did he find me?

Shaking, she dialed 911, then went outside and waited on the porch. After a few minutes, she heard the sirens in the distance, getting closer.

Flight 167

In 500 words, tell a story in which a character gets an ominous chill.

I heard the final boarding call for flight 167 to Kansas City. I don't remember much else about that morning. I can't recall the cab ride to the airport, checking my luggage or even packing for my trip. After the phone call from Brian, I just went sort of numb, like I was checking out. Another failed relationship.

A friendly co-passenger gently nudged me when they announced our flight and said "That's us" as he stood and nodded toward Delta's boarding ramp with the twenty-something blonde, who was smiling and nodding at each passenger as if she had the greatest job in the world. *As soon as she gets off work, she'll be getting drunk, screwing her boyfriend and complaining about how lousy life is.*

I mumbled a thank you to the man and stood up, brushed off the lap of my dress, boarding pass clenched in a fist that I wasn't aware I had made. When I reached the young lady with the painted on smile, I unclenched my fist and handed her the wrinkled up boarding pass. She looked at me kindly, left eyebrow slightly raised as if to say *at least my life is better than yours*. "Thank you for flying Delta. Enjoy your flight," she said with feigned kindness. I thanked her and stepped onto the jet bridge, carry on limply hanging from my right arm.

Continuing down the ramp, I wondered how my life had turned out to be so...well, so boring and lonely. I had it all planned out, after all, so what happened? "Miss, please keep moving," a voice said from far away, shaking me out of my thoughts. I looked up at the flight attendant. She was staring at me with genuine concern, and I felt my face flood with heat, my eyes meeting hers for a second before

looking away. "Are you okay, miss?"

"Uh, yes, yes I am, thanks. Just lost in thought, sorry." I made my way past her, smelling the tangy mixture of soap and perfume as I went by. I found my seat, double-checked my boarding pass, stowed away my carry on, crawled across an old man and sat down in my assigned window seat.

About fifteen minutes into the flight, the plane suddenly dropped. Not just normal turbulence, but an *enormous drop in altitude*. And then I realized we weren't recovering as the plane began to slowly bank and roll; luggage and debris began flying around as the plane continued to fall.

There was no sound from the other passengers, nothing from the flight crew. *Silence*.

I screamed.

And then a man's voice: "That's us." He nudged me and nodded toward the boarding gate. "You fell asleep."

A chill rippled through my body then as I looked at the blond girl checking passengers. Flight 167 sat beyond the window, waiting, beckoning. It had never left the ground.

"Um, thank you, but I forgot something," I mumbled as I stood. "I'll have to reschedule."

Museum of Flight

In 500 words, imagine what happens when a character discovers their own portrait at a museum.

I silently watched as people milled about, out for a day of family fun and history with their children. Staying a few feet behind, I followed a couple as they explained each exhibit to their three kids, who looked so bored I thought they were going to fall asleep standing up. I listened as dad read the placard in front of the replica of the Boeing "F4B-1" Navy fighter plane, built in 1929. When Dad was about halfway through the story, the young girl, who couldn't have been more than eight, interrupted: "Dad, I'm hungry, can't we get something to eat?"

"Yeah Dad," the two older boys chimed in. "Let's get sumpin' to eat!"

The man turned to his wife. "Let's go downstairs to the cafeteria and grab a bite, then we can come back and continue through the museum."

"Sure," she replied, looking as bored as her kids.

They turned around so fast that I almost didn't have time to get out of the way. Without a word, the kids rushed past me as if they hadn't eaten in a week.

"Slow down!" the woman scolded, trying not to draw attention to herself.

I scurried in the opposite direction, heading over to the replica of the Boeing 727, one of my favorites. You were allowed to tour the inside of the aircraft. Even after all this time, I still marveled at the technology and advancement in the industry since the early days of aviation and the Wright Brothers first flight at the turn of the century.

I spotted another family who actually looked as if they were

enjoying their visit to the Museum of Flight, rather than making it a chore. To these people, it wasn't some homework assignment, but an interesting piece of a fascinating past. They were studying the old biplanes from WWI when I walked up beside them. They took no notice of me.

I watched this family as they inspected the black-and-white portrait that hung on the wall beside the display. It was a picture of the pilot, a young man of perhaps twenty, wearing a leather helmet, a brown suede flight coat, and a scarf that was thrown over his shoulder like a lock of long hair. The inscription beneath reading: "Ace pilot, Scott Vallery, killed in combat, 1918."

"What a good-looking guy," I said aloud, fingering the scarf around my own neck. They didn't even look my way but continued staring at the picture. Especially the young teenaged girl, who seemed to be swooning a little. I smiled and put my hand on her shoulder. "Yeah, I looked pretty good when I sat for that," I said, knowing she couldn't hear me. Or feel me.

"Do you smell that?" the girl asked. "It smells like leather. And it almost *seems* like the guy is right here, doesn't it? Creepy."

I smiled and went to check out the space shuttle exhibit for about the billionth time.

Dream House

In 500 words, imagine what happens when someone tries to buy a house. Written for the weekend write-in challenge "real estate."

Marissa Roberts drove slowly around Belmont Woods, the upscale neighborhood of homes that were now within their grasp since Ben received his promotion. Dreams were coalescing, life was growing inside her, and a slight crispness permeated the fall air. She smiled as she turned down the road which led to the house that had beckoned her with its charming wrap-around porch and finely crafted woodwork.

Every day after lunch she would drive around, searching for the perfect place to raise a family. She and Ben could hardly wait to vacate the drab, cramped apartment with the noisy upstairs neighbors, who made all kinds of unreasonable and strange sounds at odd hours. Complaints did little to alleviate their frustrations. But that was all about to change.

Now, just as she was grabbing the real-estate flyer, Marissa noticed movement. She turned and saw a woman standing on the front lawn next door, watching her. The woman, who couldn't have been more than twenty, was holding a young boy's hand. Just as Marissa was about to say something, they turned and went inside.

Marissa shrugged and stuck the flyer in her back pocket. She could hardly wait to tell Ben about this place. But now, she had to go back to work.

The next day, Marissa couldn't fight the urge to go for another drive through the neighborhood. Since the home was vacant, she parked in the driveway. *Might as well start acting like it's mine*, she thought happily.

She got out of the car and decided to walk around. That's when

she saw them again: The woman and kid from yesterday. They were in the exact same place, watching her. She waved and said, "Hi. My husband and I are looking to buy this home. Just thought I'd say hello." When she started toward them, the woman turned away, pulling the boy with her.

"Wow, how rude," Marissa whispered under her breath, feeling hurt and somewhat uneasy.

And then she heard laughter; she noticed two girls playing at the end of the block. Marissa walked over and introduced herself. When she inquired about the strange woman and the boy, the oldest girl took a step back and said, "What are you talking about?"

"The young woman and the boy who lives there," Marissa said, pointing to the home.

"Lady, no one lives there. That house has been empty for the last year, ever since the owner and her kid were murdered. Uh, sorry, but we gotta go," the girl said nervously, shooting Marissa a strange look. "Isn't that right Amy?"

"Uh huh," the younger girl said.

As the girls hurried off, Marissa walked back to her car in a daze. The dead woman's house that had looked so sharp, so *kept*, was now worn and dilapidated, as if years had passed in the last few moments.

As Marissa drove off, she crumpled up the flyer and flung it out the window.

Her noisy, drab apartment sounded really, really good right now.

The Basement

In 500 words, tell the story behind the large trophy on display in a character's home. Written for the Weekend Write-In Challenge "Trophy".

Mark Reynolds opened his eyes slowly, the bright overhead fluorescent sending daggers of pain through his head. Licking his dry, cracked lips, he sat up and looked around the room. He was lying on a makeshift bed fashioned from plywood and two-by-fours. The steel beds in the local county lockup were more comfortable than this.

Across the room behind him was a set of stairs. To his left, along the wall, was a tool bench and work counter. Lying on a white towel on the counter was a hypodermic needle. Next to the needle was a small vial of liquid. On the far wall was a beat up washer and dryer. "I'm in someone's basement," he whispered. "How did I get here?"

In front of him, out of place, was a marvelously hand-crafted, glass-enclosed display case. Inside were four rifles of different caliber, two on the left and two on the right. Sitting between these firearms, directly in the center, was a large gold trophy. Something was inscribed on the front, but he was too far away to make out the words.

When he tried to swing his legs off the wooden bed, he realized with sudden horror that he was chained to the frame.

Why was he shackled?

The last thing Mark remembered was being down on Fifth Avenue in the alleyway going through the dumpster behind the Steakhouse restaurant. The staff would sometimes toss out good food after closing, and if he were lucky, he would get to it before the dogs or rodents.

He vaguely remembered being grabbed from behind, followed by a

stabbing pain just behind his ear. He looked over at the hypodermic needle again, and it began to make sense. He had been injected with something to knock him out and then brought here. But why?

As Mark was fumbling with the chains around his ankles, he heard a door open, and then footsteps coming down the wooden stairs. A moment later a man appeared in front of him. The man sported a salt-and-pepper beard; he had a thin, sallow build.

"I see you're awake," the man said. His voice was quiet, almost soothing.

"What...what am I doing here?"

Ignoring the question, the man said, "Have you seen my trophy?"

"Yeah, I saw it. What does it say?" Mark asked, trying to placate him.

"It says: *The Exterminator. In recognition of your generous and continued efforts to help clean up the homeless population.*"

The man smiled. "Engraved it myself."

Mark screamed.

"No one can hear you," the man said, unshackling his prisoner. "Not a soul around for more than five miles. That's why I come here to hunt."

"Hunt? Hunt what?"

"You. You and your friends," the man replied, raising the rifle he had taken from the case. "You get a ten-minute head start, same as the others."

Mark looked at the man and the rifle in his hands and then bolted for the stairs.

Three minutes later, the hunt began.

The Car

Written for the weekend write-in: "Peculiar Parking": In 500 words, tell a story in which a character parks their vehicle in a peculiar place.

It was almost three in the afternoon when Bill Haskell pulled the squad car off the main highway and onto the dusty dirt road. Six-foot high stocks of corn flanked both sides of the pothole-filled road that led to the Turner place, obscuring the rest of the horizon.

The call had come in yesterday, but an abandoned car wasn't a high priority in a small town like Junction City, especially when the police force consisted of one sheriff and one lazy deputy.

Bill parked in front of the farmhouse. He was greeted by two dirty pigs, one old dog and a bunch of chickens. Shaking his head, he looked up to see Carrie Turner standing on the whitewashed porch, a half-smile on her face.

"Well thanks for finally comin' out Sheriff," she said, wiping her hands on her apron. "Good thing there wasn't a murderer on the loose."

"Sorry Carrie," Bill replied, removing his hat, "it's just that we have been kind of busy back in town and –"

"Locking up the drunks really keeping you that busy Sheriff?"

"An abandoned vehicle isn't exactly causing a lot of harm now is it?"

"It isn't just an abandoned vehicle, Bill. I told that to your no-good deputy. Didn't he tell you?"

"Must have slipped his mind. Where's Tom?"

"He's with the boys' on a hunting trip. Be back in the mornin'."

Bill nodded. "Shall we go have a look?"

"Yes. Just a minute." Carrie went back inside, returning with a twelve-gauge shotgun slung over her shoulder.

"Really, Carrie, it's just a car."

"Whatever you say Sheriff, but the gun stays with me."

After walking about half a mile down the dirt road, Carrie stopped. "Right here."

"What? There aren't any tracks, no entrance into the corn field."

"I know. That's what I'm trying to tell you. There isn't any entrance point. No crushed stalks of corn, no tire tracks, nothing."

Carrie stepped off the road and into the field of corn with Bill close behind. Ten minutes later they reached a clearing. In the middle of the open area sat a rusted-out old Ford.

"What the hell?" Bill exclaimed. "What a peculiar place to park."

Then Bill heard a rustling noise. Still quick on his feet, the sheriff disappeared into the crop. He returned with the cause of the noise: a short, balding man, that the sheriff now held by the back of his pants.

"It's the guy that bought Tim Meadow's old place," Carrie said. "He tried to buy us off too, but we said no. Now I suspect he's trying to scare us off!"

"This your car?" the Sheriff asked the man.

"I ain't sayin' nothing."

"What'd you do, drop it from the air. Helicopter or something?"

The man just stared at his feet.

Bill cuffed him. "You're under arrest."

"For what?"

"Illegal parking!"

A month later, as they harvested their crop, Tom and Carrie Turner stumbled upon another clearing. But no Ford.

This time it was a Chevy.

Dinner Date

Written for the weekend write-in: "Meal." In 500 words, imagine what happens when a meal is interrupted.

Rusty stood in front of Gloria's, nervously waiting for his date. An unlit cigarette jutted from the corner of his mouth.

He had finally given in to his sister Jen and agreed to dinner with a friend of a friend. A blind date.

"It'll be fun, where's your sense of adventure?" she'd asked.

"In my other pants," he'd replied sarcastically.

So here he was, standing in the May sunshine, leaning against the brick building, eyes closed to the brightness of the day, cigarette hanging limply from his mouth when a voice said: "You going to light that?"

Rusty opened his eyes. Sheepishly, he plucked the cigarette from his lips. "Oh, you mean this?"

The woman didn't reply.

"I don't smoke, quit a few years back."

She just looked at him.

"Just habit. It's comforting in times of stress," Rusty said, tossing the cigarette in the nearest trash.

"Are you stressed?"

"Maybe."

"Why?"

"I'm not good at meeting new people," Rusty said, "especially women."

She was silent.

"Vanessa, right?" he asked.

The woman hesitated and then nodded. "And you must be..."

"Rusty."

"Of course," she said snapping her fingers as if she just remembered the punch line to a joke. "Rusty."

"Let's go inside, we can talk over dinner."

"Okay."

They were seated in a dimly lit booth. A single candle sat like a fencepost in the middle of the table, barely illuminating the food-stained tablecloth and cheap napkins. Like their waitress, the laminated menus were old and tattered.

"Would you like something from the lounge?" the waitress asked.

"Bourbon," Vanessa said.

"With Coke?"

"Did I ask for a Coke?" Vanessa snapped.

Rusty fidgeted and smiled uncomfortably. "I'll have a beer please – whatever's on tap." The waitress nodded, shot Vanessa a weary look and left to get the drinks.

"So you looking for sex?" Vanessa asked.

"Excuse me?" Rusty replied, noticing the glazed, insane look in her eyes.

"Ever kill anyone?"

"What? Of course not!"

"Could be fun."

Just humor her and get through dinner.

Vanessa suddenly slid closer and put her hands on him. Repulsed, Rusty stood up abruptly, creating a scene as he knocked his beer onto the floor.

Embarrassed, he hurried across the restaurant. He dropped a fifty in the waitress's hand mumbling, "Sorry, I'm so sorry."

Once outside, he took a deep breath of the fresh air, looking over his shoulder, expecting to see the crazed woman on his heels.

He made it to his vehicle without incident and drove numbly home, where he called his sister.

"What the hell are you doing fixing me up with some nutcase—"

"Slow down...didn't you get my text?"

"What text?"

"Vanessa called earlier today and canceled dinner, she's sick in bed with the flu."

Silence.

"Rusty!"

He had dropped the phone.

In front of him, on his computer screen, was the woman from the restaurant. Earlier that day, she had walked out of Western State Hospital's mental ward.

They were still looking for her.

The Prosecution Rests

Written for the weekend write in: In 500 words, tell a story that begins with the giving of a flower bouquet.

When Becky got to work Thursday morning, she found an exquisite autumn flower bouquet, which brightened up her drab desk. She'd been with the county prosecutor's office for the past sixteen years, and, over time, had worked her way up to prosecuting the toughest criminals. She also forged a reputation for being a cold, hardened human being that derived some sort of sick satisfaction watching people's lives being destroyed.

Roy often wondered if it made the poor woman feel better about herself. When he wasn't mad as hell with her, he kind of felt sorry for her. And as soon as Roy had even a smidgeon of compassion, Rebecca York would do or say something that reconfirmed her hatred of people and life in general.

So who would send her flowers? Roy looked at the woman across the desk - his boss - as she perused the open file in front of her.

"That's a beautiful bouquet. What's the special occasion?" Roy asked.

Becky grunted. "No special occasion; just another day putting scum behind bars."

"Then why the flowers? You have a secret admirer?"

"Who the hell cares? And what concern is it of yours?" Contempt rolled off her as if she had bathed in it just this morning.

"Just wondering, that's all – thought maybe you had a boyfriend. He'd be a lucky fellow is all I'm saying."

"Oh, bullshit, you don't believe that. Now, what do you want? I have work to do! Or are you blind to that like you are to everything else?"

Without a word, Roy left Becky's office and went in search of Cynthia. When he was this angry, Cynthia could always calm him down.

He found her in the break room sucking on a Popsicle. "Popsicles at 8:30 in the morning?"

"Great way to start the day – you should try it. What's wrong?"

"I'm just not sure how long I can –"

The scream cut Roy off in mid-sentence. He looked at Cynthia and then joined the other staff members, who were headed in the direction of the scream. It had come from Becky's office.

They found her on the floor, convulsing and turning blue as her throat swelled, cutting off her supply of air.

Someone yelled, "Call 911!"

Roy bent down and leaned in close to Becky's purple, puffy lips. She reached up and pulled him closer. "The...the...flow...flowers...." Suddenly her grip loosened as her strength slipped away.

And then Roy noticed the note clutched in the dead woman's hand. He pried it loose and opened it.

"The prettiest things, like these flowers, can be deadly. Just touching this beautiful plant causes death in mere minutes. You killed my son by putting him in that prison. Now it's your turn."

Roy jumped to his feet. "Don't touch the flowers! They're poison!"

The crowd murmured and backed away.

"Karma," Roy whispered to Cynthia. "Now how about a Popsicle? Someone told me it is an excellent way to start the day."

The Test

In 500 words, tell a story that begins with the sentence, "Sarah read the letter and gasped." Written for the Weekend Write-In prompt themed "Gasp."

Sarah read the letter and gasped. Usually, she didn't read mail on the short walk back to the house, but the postmark on the envelope changed her normal routine, and the letter begged to be opened immediately. When your life was about to be changed, why wait?

Sarah's brown eyes darted back and forth, savoring every written word, relishing the future promise she held in her small hands.

"Watch out!" Mr. Ecklund cried when Sarah stepped off the curb and into the street. She was so absorbed in the letter before her she didn't even see the blue Impala coming up the road. With a small yelp like a frightened animal, Sarah jumped back on the sidewalk, narrowly aborting what could have been a terrible accident.

"Should be more careful," Mr. Ecklund said as he approached his new neighbor. He had been raking the leaves in his front yard when he'd noticed Sarah's absentmindedness. "High school kids come tearing through here all the time without any regard for other people or their safety. I swear, one day somebody is going to get hurt. Or killed."

Sarah pulled her eyes from the page and smiled at the old man. Pulling the hand-woven scarf tighter around her neck, she said, "Thanks for watching out for me Mr. Ecklund. I was lost in thought.

She looked back down at the paper in her hands.

"Sorry, I don't mean to pry, but that letter almost got you killed. It must be important. Everything okay?"

Sarah nodded and broke out into a huge grin. "Oh yeah, couldn't

be better! See ya later.” And with that, Sarah Green looked both ways, crossed the street and ran the rest of the way home.

Waving the letter high over her head, Sarah burst through the front door yelling, “It came, it came!”

“What came?” her mother asked. Her mom was sitting at the kitchen table, scanning the help wanted ads, hoping to find a job. Money was getting tight. *Real tight.*

Without another word, seventeen-year-old Sarah skipped over to her mom and dropped the letter in front of her. Sarah watched expectantly as she read it. She finally looked up at her daughter.

“Unbelievable,” her mother said, her voice cracking.

Sarah nodded excitedly. The Paternity test results were back and what they had for so long suspected, had now been confirmed. Sarah Green was indeed the daughter of software billionaire Mark Sizemore.

Smiling at her mom, Sarah said, “Tonight, I’m taking you out to dinner! And tomorrow, we can start looking for our new home.”

Snooze

In 500 words, imagine what happens when somebody takes a nap at the worst possible time.

I made my way back to my seat, stumbling between the narrow aisles and trying my best not to bump into other people that had paid good money to be here, just like I had. It had been a long day, and I was drained, and I just wanted to sleep, but of course, I couldn't. No, we were getting close now, and I had to keep my wits about me.

Finding my seat again, I squeezed my large frame into the tiny space, trying my best not to annoy the elderly woman next to me. I wasn't very successful, however, for she gave me a look of contempt that I wouldn't wish on anybody, even Frank, my next door neighbor who refuses to trim back that ugly tree that is encroaching on my property.

I smiled at the old lady. With a snort reserved for old folk, she turned her attention back to the screen in front of us. I surreptitiously turned myself in the narrow seat, like some contortionist, listening to my body protest with small popping sounds and twinges of pain. I finally got myself twisted far enough to see the crowd behind me. There were businessmen, mothers, athletes and the like all gathered here in one place. These are people who normally would not mix, but we all had one goal, one thing in common.

And then something began to gnaw at me: some of the faces staring back at me were unfamiliar as if these people had traded seats to mess with me or, worse, perhaps they were never there in the first place, and I was hallucinating again. It had been six months or a little

longer since I'd had an episode, and I began to fear for my own sanity. I fumbled for the pills in my inside jacket pocket. The old lady looked over at me and grinned. She was enjoying every minute of this.

Things began to get hazy then as I shook out two little blue pills into the palm of my hand. I just stared at them for a moment, waiting to see if they'd disappear. But they didn't. I swallowed my little friends and chased them with a whole bottle of water.

Pulling the earplugs from her liver-spotted ears, the old woman said, "The way you drank that water, you'll be back in that bathroom again. Better not stay in there forever like you did last time. What'd you do, fall asleep in there?"

I looked at my watch, and my heart skipped a beat. "We should have landed forty minutes ago!"

"We did," the old lady said, "while you were in the bathroom. We're on our way to Chicago now."

"Chicago! I'm not supposed to go to Chicago! Why didn't they get me?"

"Must've forgotten to check the restrooms."

In a panic, I called for the flight attendant.

With a grin, the old lady put in her ear buds and went back to the in-flight movie.

Imagine

In 500 words, tell a story that begins with a clash of metal.

The metal bars clang shut. I'm sitting at a small table in this tiny room – my room - on cell block thirteen. Behind me is a metal bunk bed, the top level empty. The whisper-thin mattress does little to prevent the hard slab of steel beneath from wreaking havoc on my back (or side or stomach, depending on my position). At the foot of this wondrous contraption sits a stainless steel commode that gets so cold in the wintertime I can't bear to sit down on it. To the right is a small sink. Above that, bolted into the concrete wall, is a mirror made of scratched up steel in which my reflection is hazy and blurred.

I'm caged like an animal in the zoo, but, like those animals, I have made this my home. Over time, I have been afforded the luxury of writing materials, books, pictures, and even a radio. The radio came with the stipulation that it can only be on between seven and nine in the evening and at such low volume that even I can barely hear it.

I have been in this prison for the past twenty-seven years. Not long ago, I let go of the last vestiges of hope of ever getting out, of having a chance at a 'normal' life. I finally realized that I am too old; too much time has passed for me to ever think that I will walk the streets a free man, make love to a woman, go to the ballpark, wrap my mouth around a juicy steak or do any of the things most people take for granted.

You may wonder how I've stayed sane all these years. That's assuming I *am* sane, of course, and what does it matter anyway? I'm locked up after all, so I'm not a threat to the rest of the world, now am I? But I am sane, at least in my own mind. And I've kept that crazy voice at arm's length through my writings and my imagination. I can go

anywhere I want in my head, and that is something they can never take from me. My physical freedom yes, but my mental and psychological play areas are mine and mine alone.

I get down on my knees on the hard concrete floor and look under the bed. I find more than thirty notebooks completely filled with stories I've penned over the years. They have become my good friends.

Three days ago I found out I had been pardoned by the governor of this wonderful state. Why I'm still not sure. Something to do with DNA evidence. I will be leaving this place tomorrow.

I lay back on my thin mattress, hands clasped behind my head, wondering if I can make it out in the real world.

And then I remember I always have my friends. The friends under my bed, the ones in the playground in my head. And I will always have them.

Always.

Sunday Blues

In 500 words, imagine what happens when a character encounters a superb owl.

Notice the subject "superb owl." If you look closely, you can see this is just a play on words. This prompt was given just before the 2016 "Super Bowl." Hmm....Funny!

As directed, Richard quietly followed Beverly through grassy fields and over stumps as nightfall slowly overtook the day. Earlier, Beverly had informed him that for this trip to be a success, they needed to be prepared, have the right equipment and, most importantly, the correct frame of mind.

"And what is the correct frame of mind?" he'd asked.

She'd stared at him with a look of bewilderment as if he should know exactly what she meant. Then she said, "Be one with them, think like they think."

If we were loon watching, I'd be done. I've got one right here, Richard thought. But when he found himself trudging through the dense woods, vaulting over dead trunks in the half-dark, following some bird-watching-woman with special binoculars hanging around her neck, he thought perhaps *he* was a little crazy.

The only reason he was in these backwoods on a Sunday afternoon two hours before the Super Bowl was one simple fact: Beverly Larson was *gorgeous*. And young. And now a little crazy. After an hour of sneaking around like a thief, Richard started to get cranky. Cold. Tired. Hungry.

Beverly began to lose her good looks.

And Richard Smith had to pee.

“Hey, Beverly,” he said. “I have—”

“Shhhh! Quiet, you’ll scare them. Remember, be like them, think like them,” she whispered.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Richard whispered, shifting from leg to leg. “I’ll be—”

“Look. What a beautiful creature.”

Richard followed Beverly’s gaze to the glowing yellow eyes and the sharp talons that dug deep into the dead trunk it was perched upon. He could barely make out the bird as dusk had settled neatly like a folded up blanket.

But he still had to pee.

The woman from the Audubon Society marveled at her find. “What a superb owl. Just *superb*. Do you realize this creature has a 48-inch wingspan? And stands 20 inches tall? And the great horned owl can turn its head 270 degrees either way when facing forward?

And I have to pee! Richard’s mind screamed.

“Be right back,” he mumbled quietly, making his way back the way they’d come, trying to find an adequate place to relieve himself, out of earshot of the GREAT SUPERB OWL.

He darted behind the massive trunk of a giant evergreen, sighing like a man who just found out he wasn’t going to die, and did his business. Just as he was zipping up, he heard what sounded like a firecracker and then a scream.

Richard found Beverly sobbing, the GREAT SUPERB OWL dead at her feet. Behind her stood Josh, his best friend, rifle slung over his shoulder, a huge grin swallowing his face.

“Finally got that thing!” Josh said. “Sorry lady, but that bastard ate my cat last week.”

“Oh, Beverly, I’m so, so sorry. I guess this wasn’t a success after all,” Richard said, trying not to smile. “Come on Josh, Super Bowl in 30 minutes!”

A New World

In 500 words, imagine what happens when a new door appears.

I sit in the overstuffed armchair listening to the crowd around me banter about new advances in medicine, the state of our beloved country and work issues. I smell the pungent odor of Uncle Jay's aftershave from across the room; Aunt Jane's perfume to my left. Behind me, I hear my father's laughter as he converses with my neighbors. I wish Mom were here, but she passed a few years back.

I am forty-seven. I have never witnessed a sunset. Or driven a car. Or seen my own shadow. Or anyone's shadow, for that matter.

You see, I was born blind.

My hands involuntarily reach up to the bandages covering my eyes. Two weeks have passed since the operation, and today the bandages come off. This is usually done in a doctor's office or hospital, but family and friends convinced my optometrist the first thing I experience in this world should be the familiar surroundings of my home. The home I maneuvered in darkness for sixteen years. The home I knew by touch and smell and taste. And intuition.

I feel the crowd's anticipation like waves of heat rising off a burning building.

The crowd grows quiet. I hear footsteps padding lightly across the carpeted floor. "It's time Gabe." I suck in a deep breath.

"Okay, let's do it."

As Dr. Leavitt slowly unwraps the bandage holding the eye patches in place, I hear someone whisper, "Is she ready?" And then, from far away: "Yes, she's waiting."

The ace bandage is now gone, and I'm left with two white pieces of gauze between me and the outside world. It is so quiet now, the house

seems empty. But I can hear the shallow breathing and the occasional soft sound of someone swallowing.

The doctor's hand is on my shoulder. "Okay, I'm going to take the dressings off now." My eyes are closed when he removes the patches; all I have to do is open them. Fear grips me. *What if the operation didn't work? What if I don't like what I see?*

Pushing those thoughts out of my mind, I cautiously open my eyes. At first, everything is a blur, but slowly things begin to take shape. I don't know the names of what I see, not yet, but what is before me is indescribable. The stimuli are almost too much, and I'm at a loss for words.

"Gabe?"

I turn my head. "Dad?" The man nods.

"I can see," I tell him and the whole room erupts in joy. My father turns me to face a door. "Gabe, Janet is in there."

I have seen my wife only through touch and in my mind's eye. The door opens. A woman slowly walks towards me using careful, calculated steps. She is beautiful. When she reaches me, she puts her fingers on my face and feels each wrinkle and crevice and formation. She touches my lips. Her fingers linger and then she says, "Hi Gabe."

You see, she is blind.

Author's Note

Thank you for taking the time out of your busy day (or night) to read these stories. I hope you found them entertaining. And if you didn't care for them, at least they didn't cost you anything! (except for a little time).

I am currently working on the sequel to my debut novel, *The Adoption – A Psychological Thriller*, which is available on Amazon. For those of you who have read it, I am forever grateful. For those of you who haven't, but want to, you can find it [here](#).

Because of family health issues, publication of the sequel to *The Adoption* has been pushed out to early 2018.

I will be posting more free stories and other relevant information at the following sites:

Website: <http://www.gregmeritt.com>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/gregmerittauthor/>

Twitter: https://twitter.com/greg_meritt

And feel free to contact me anytime. I love to hear from my readers.