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presents

Shrieks
by
Dennis Latham

If the young man in a wrinkled black suit had waited another hour that summer morning, I would have probably missed his dive off the Park Office Tower outdoor patio. I've always avoided the noon business lunch crowd and the line at the deli just inside the double doors leading to the fifteenth floor patio. I didn't fit the suit and tie crowd. I wore jeans at work and kept to myself. After a nasty divorce last year, my social self-confidence had taken a beating.

But at eleven o'clock, I was smoking at a shaded umbrella table with the only other person on the patio, the gorgeous Jenna Sparks, an advertising firm secretary, who had a lover named Mary.

We had met during the winter while smoking outside the lobby front entrance. She was one of the few people I knew in the building, other than Harvey, the security guard at the front desk, and the people in my VA Benefit office. Harvey told me Jenna was a lesbian. She proudly confirmed the story, which made me want her more.

Jenna knew how I felt and tempted me constantly. At age thirty, I still refused to acknowledge that sex drive killed brain function. I believed I could change her.

A hot breeze wafted Jenna's curly brown hair as I sat in the chair across from her. Wearing a short, sleeveless lime green dress cinched tight around her narrow waist, she crossed her legs to display more thigh, brushed her left hand through her hair, and arched back to push out her breasts.

"Hi, Mark." She smiled. "I'm just cooling it off."

"Stop messing with me."

I tried glancing over the umbrella up the remaining twenty floors of the glass tower. A flag jerked in the slight breeze, furred against blue sky. When I looked down and lit a Winston, I got lost in her brown fawn eyes. Her smooth white complexion was accented by bright red lipstick. She pulled a long, reed thin cigarette from a blue case and moved it back and forth between her lips as if sucking it.

"Stop it."

Jenna lit the cigarette and grinned, her teeth too white for a nicotine habit.

"It's my birthday next week," she said.

"How old?"

"Twenty-five. What would you like to give me?"

I inhaled deep.

"I know what you're thinking." She blew smoke and a kiss at me.

That's when the double doors opened, and the young man in the black suit walked past without a glance our

way. He climbed the yard high, concrete safety wall, maintained perfect footing on the round iron railing, then spread his arms and did a swan dive across the narrow alley through the Chinese restaurant roof fourteen floors below.

Jenna's red lips formed a circle; her brown eyes bulged and smoke wafted from her nose as she held her breath. We heard a thud impact, a cracking crunch, and a clash like a thousand tin cans spilling on concrete.

Jenna's voice rose an octave. "What just happened?"

Crushing my cigarette, I stood and tried to remain calm. "He jumped."

"Oh, my God."

I walked to the wall and gripped the railing. I'm afraid of heights, and when I looked down, my stomach tingled like a quick roller-coaster dip. Traffic moved along the streets; people waited at crosswalks. A taller glass building across the street to my left reflected blue sky. I saw empty black tar and gravel roofs on the older smaller buildings beyond the Chinese restaurant. No one else had seen his jump, but people in the restaurant kitchen sure knew about it. The black tar roof had a circular hole about five feet wide.

Jenna now stood on my right. We heard faint frantic voices yelling what must have been Chinese. An oily black smoke wisp rose from the hole, spreading until it faded. A distant siren whooped.

Then, something weird happened.

Thick gray smoke rose from the opening, but didn't rise. Rolling sideways like fog, it formed a perfect circle around the hole. I felt Jenna's trembling fingers on my right hand.

"Do you think he's dead, Mark?"

I wanted to look at her because for once I had control, but I couldn't pull away from the gathering smoke, which seemed stuck to the roof. The sirens continued, louder, then stopped suddenly. Doors opened and slammed shut.

"No one could survive that fall. Did you know him?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you see that smoke?"

"That black smoke from before?"

I glanced at her. Perspiration dotted her forehead.

"No, the gray smoke."

"Where?"

"Around the hole in the roof, like fog."

"I just see the hole."

"Stop messing with me."

"I don't see any damn smoke." Small frown lines appeared at the bridge of her nose.

She was telling the truth, and I felt a chill. The gray smoke changed then, forming a ball with an elongated tail and floated upwards, like a balloon on a thick cord.

"Jesus, tell me you see it now."

"See what?"

It drifted across the narrow alley and hugged our building, still rising.

"Mark, see what?"

I released the railing and backed up a few feet.

"What is wrong with you?"

The gray smoke cloud stopped just above the patio, shifting patterns of dark and light gray thick enough to block the sky behind it. I thought I saw a vague human outline forming.

At the railing, Jenna glanced down at the restaurant roof, and then looked straight at the cloud.

"I don't see anything."

It shrieked. I don't know how else to describe the sound. Maybe like stadium speakers on extreme feedback. My heart stuck in my throat. I closed my eyes and covered my ears. A hot air blast, stinking of rotten meat, washed over me for a full ten seconds before the shriek stopped.

When I opened my eyes, Jenna leaned against the railing. Her lips curled to one side with the same disgusted look she gave street beggars. From the cloud behind her, two gray tendrils, like small twirling snakes, eased over her right shoulder as she took a puff off her cigarette.

I wanted to warn her, but I couldn't. She already thought I was crazy, or less of a man because of the way I seemed to react to the suicide.

The gray snakes entered each of her nostrils, even as she exhaled cigarette smoke. Like some bizarre vacuum

cleaner, she sucked up the cloud only I could see, until it was gone. My eyes must have been the size of cueballs. My pulse throbbed at my temples. I tasted the rotten meat odor on my tongue.

Jenna crushed her cigarette against the railing. Her eyebrows titled toward her nose. I stared, expecting some physical change in her, a puffing up or something, but she appeared normal.

"Are you okay, Jenna?"

"Why are you staring at me like that?"

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yes. Your acting crazy is getting on my nerves."

Without turning, she dropped her cigarette over the railing. "I guess I won't be ordering any more meat dishes at China Gate."

Jenna was in control again, beautiful, but hard as nails. The double doors opened and two uniformed police officers came out on the patio.

About 9:30 the next morning, the office secretary, Libby, told me I had a visitor. He dropped a magazine and stood when I entered the reception area. I recognized him from a newspaper picture. He had been wounded in a shootout with a bank robber while trying to cash his paycheck. He had close-cropped gray hair, blue eyes, and a square jaw with just a hint of sagging beneath his chin.

His nose was slightly crooked. I figured him to be about fifty and maybe ex-military.

"Mark Wright?" he said, reaching out.

"Yes." I shook his sandpaper rough hand.

"I'm Detective Victor Prentiss."

"Homicide, right?" I said, before he could show me his badge. "I saw you in the paper last year."

His cheeks went a pinkish red. "Yeah, right."

"I have a good recall for faces."

"Is there some place we can talk?"

"Step into my office."

My cubbyhole, with a bookshelf desk and a chair on wheels, offered some privacy since the VA home inspector in the next cubbyhole was in training out of town. The wall behind me was one solid window with a street view one floor below. I spent many afternoons watching people out that window. I learned most men above age twenty-five were going bald. It made me glad I had thick hair because I had enough problems.

Detective Prentiss sat in the client chair on the left side of my desk. I turned my chair to face him.

He smiled, but I'm sure it was more a courtesy than being friendly. "What is it you do here?"

"I help veterans with VA claims and some job referrals."

He pointed to the USMC on my right forearm. "You were in the Marine Corps?"

I nodded. "And you?"

"Vietnam."

"I thought so. I was in Beirut."

"When they bombed the barracks?"

"Yeah. I rode the building to the ground. I broke my foot in three places, but I walked out."

"You were lucky." Prentiss cleared his throat. "I spoke to a Jenna Sparks a few minutes ago. You were with her when Steven Babcock jumped."

"So that was his name. I didn't know him."

"He had just come back after a nervous breakdown."

"He looked awful young to go nuts."

"He was also about to be fired for stealing money."

"I guess some people have a lot of problems."

Prentiss cleared his throat again, sighed, and tugged at his right ear. Then, he looked into my eyes. "Miss Sparks said you acted strange after he jumped. Did you see something she didn't?"

I would sound like a nut if I told him.

"No. I guess I kind of went into shock."

"So, he walked out and jumped and didn't say anything?"

"Not a word."

Prentiss stared out the window then shrugged, rising. "I've taken enough of your time."

"That's it?"

"I believe so."

We shook hands and I walked him out in the hall where he pushed the elevator button.

"Did Jenna seem all right to you?" I said.

Prentiss smiled. "She looks as good as any woman I've met."

"Looks aside. I mean does she seem normal to you?"

"Normal?"

"I mean, did she act weird or anything?"

The elevator doors slid open. Prentiss glanced at me sideways, arching his brow.

"She seemed fine."

"Thanks. I was just wondering."

The detective stared at me as the doors closed. I could imagine his mental wheels turning. I had created an air of suspicion. But I had an uneasy feeling Jenna had become the dead Steven Babcock.

I avoided Jenna and the patio for a week, smoking outside the front entrance. One Friday about 10:30 I bought a soda and went out on the deck. I miss Jenna teasing me, I thought. *But I was afraid of her now.*

The Chinese restaurant roof had been fixed, and I imagined it was business as usual. The glass mirror towers to my left reflected the white sun, and the sticky tar roofs beyond the restaurant shimmered in wavy lines. In the dead humid air, the patio deck was a skillet.

I took two drags of a cigarette and decided it was too hot to smoke. As I turned to find an ashtray, the patio door opened. Jenna, wearing white slacks and a green tube top, came out on the deck.

"Hello," I said.

She hesitated, staring, her eyes fixed beyond me before she turned right toward the railing on the opposite side.

"Jenna."

The door opened again and Harvey the security guard came out carrying a Coke can.

"Jenna," I yelled and started toward her.

She had kicked off her sandals and climbed the railing, balanced on the balls of her feet. I was almost there when she spread her arms like Steven Babcock and dove off.

Time stopped. I froze in place as a tingle rushed up my stomach and I couldn't breathe. I heard a hollow crunch impact of glass and steel, like a car wreck from a long distance. I turned toward Harvey. His fat round face, usually red, had gone pale white.

"Lord, did she jump?" he said.

I dropped the cigarette. "Yeah."

"We rode the elevator up. She asked me to buy her a Coke."

I moved to the railing and looked down into a parking lot, a hard knot twisting my stomach. Jenna, on her back and splayed out, was embedded in the crushed roof of a red Chevy Blazer. A parking lot attendant stood about

thirty feet away talking into a cell phone. A crowd formed behind him.

Standing next to me, Harvey smelled of Old Spice and perspiration. The sun reflected off his security badge. A wheezing noise came from his throat. The sirens began about the same time I saw the gray cloud forming around Jenna.

"Do you see it?"

"I saw her jump," Harvey said.

"Do you see something around Jenna?"

Harvey looked down and then sideways at me, his watery brown eyes open wide. He shook his head.

"No."

The cloud formed a ball with an elongated tail, rising.

I grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed. "Leave, Harvey. You're in danger."

Harvey almost fell, but caught himself, fat jiggling beneath his white shirt. His black tie moved up and down as he swallowed.

"It's okay," he said, backing up a few steps. "We're both in shock."

I started to answer, but didn't know what to say. I sensed a shadow blocking the sun behind my back and I got a chill so bad my teeth chattered. Turning, I saw the vague gray outline of a robed figure with long hair and Jenna's features; the brows turned down and in, the lips bent to one side. The sudden shriek and putrid meat

stench knocked me to my knees with my hands against my ears. I stared at the concrete deck. Two sweat droplets fell from my chin, and suddenly became pointed streaks as if blown by a strong air blast.

When the shriek stopped and I looked up, two tendrils snaked toward Harvey. I must have looked stone crazy, on my knees staring at him. The tendrils entered his nostrils like wriggling worms. He couldn't see them.

"I'll get help," Harvey said, backing away.

The last tendril slapped like a tail against his chin and disappeared inside.

"Oh, God," I said.

After he left, I glanced back to where my sweat had dripped on the deck. I saw two almost dry, pencil thin, long streaks. *It had happened. I wasn't nuts.*

I didn't wait for anyone to come out on the deck. I took the elevator to my office, past the secretary who looked at me like she saw a ghost. Outside the big window, two patrol cars with lights flashing parked in front of the building, and within an hour Detective Victor Prentiss came looking for me.

I told him what I had seen because I didn't know what else to say.

"Harvey is next," I said.

Prentiss rubbed his eyes and chin, then stared at the fingernails on his right hand before he looked into my eyes.

"I'm telling the truth."

"Are you Irish, Mark?"

"I'm mostly Italian. Why?"

"Ever heard of a banshee?"

"Yeah, sure. Like the bogeyman or something."

"Well, not quite. In Irish folklore a banshee was a female spirit that would wail when a prominent Irish family member was about to die."

"This thing didn't wail. It shrieked and turned into some damn thing that looked like a snake."

"So you don't think it was a banshee?"

I turned and looked out the window. The world no longer seemed real. I had a passing thought that I was dreaming a detailed nightmare. When I looked back at Prentiss, he instantly made eye contact.

"You don't believe me?"

"There's one way to find out. I'll hang out with you up on the patio and we'll see what happens."

I studied his blue eyes, trying to imagine I could read his mind. I guess homicide detectives learn to hide emotion. He was a blank wall.

"You might be sorry."

Prentiss stood up. "Let me worry about it. I'll see you on Monday."

I had nightmares all weekend. Once, when I jerked awake on Sunday night, the rippling curtains looked like the cloud and I screamed so loud the burly construction worker in the next apartment, Joe Radnick, knocked on my door. I told him I had stubbed my toe on the couch. He looked at me weird but bought the excuse.

Harvey missed work Monday, and Detective Prentiss didn't show up. My boss was on vacation, so I was on my own. Libby, the office secretary, kept asking if was okay. Libby had just turned forty. She had brown eyes, straight brown hair, and thick, crooked glasses. She was married to a skinny guy who also wore thick crooked glasses. They looked like nerd twins. But they were nice, and I knew her concern was genuine. I worried that Harvey might already be dead, but I wasn't about to tell her.

On my way down for a cigarette outside the front entrance, people on the elevator shifted to one side away from me. Rumors had spread fast. After that, I used the stairs and smoked in the alley behind the building. Something else nagged at me, like trying to remember an old song name, but it never quite comes back and drives you nuts.

I went to Jenna's layout that evening. She had a closed casket with her picture on top. Her dyke lover sobbed and tried to climb the casket while the suffering family looked

embarrassed. I stayed five minutes and left without signing the guest book.

I kept the bedroom window closed so the curtains wouldn't blow. A bad *falling* nightmare made me wake up screaming. Joe Radnick next door knocked on my door again, drunk. He had a pink bald head, a flat nose, bloodshot brown eyes, and arms bigger than my thighs. Beer had dribbled down to mix with gravy stains on his white muscle shirt. I heard a television blaring from his open apartment door.

"You're disturbing me, asshole," he said.

I had intended to apologize, but his attitude changed my mind.

"Yeah, I forgot it was WCW Nitro night." I slammed the door in his face.

He beat on the door and called me a faggot a few times before he went back to his apartment. I would have to be careful now because he would ambush me some night or damage my car.

On Tuesday, Harvey sat at his lobby desk facing the entrance. The desk was to the right against a wall, around the corner from the elevators. His usual pink cheeks were chalky pale, accented by dark circles under the eyes. He didn't smile when I said hello and asked how he was doing.

He avoided eye contact. "I didn't feel so good yesterday."

I felt awkward talking to a doomed man. "Hope you feel better," I said, then stepped around the corner and pushed the elevator button. It was a rare, odd moment where no one entered and the lobby was tomb quiet. I heard the wheels on Harvey's chair squeak. The elevator bell dinged and the doors hissed open. Then Harvey poked his head around the corner and I saw an evil grin.

"I'll see you soon," he said.

A chill raced up my back and across my shoulders. I literally jumped into the elevator and stabbed the buttons. Harvey now stood in front of the open doors. His smile seemed to stretch from ear to ear as he raised a finger.

"Very soon."

The doors closed. My legs shook and I gasped for breath.

It had talked to me.

Libby was the only person in the office. My face must have looked pale as hell.

"Are you okay, Mark?"

"Yeah. Jenna's funeral was last night. I'm just upset is all."

I sat in my cubicle and stared out the window. *I must be going crazy*, I thought. A veteran came in wanting information on how to file a VA claim. I helped him in a panic, sweat pouring off me, afraid I might break down at

any moment, and worried Harvey might come through the damn door.

Detective Victor Prentiss showed up about ten minutes after the veteran left. I felt a weight lift from my shoulders.

"Sorry about yesterday," he said. "I had to tie up loose ends on an old investigation."

"I need a smoke," I said. "Let's go out back in the alley."

"No, let's go upstairs."

On the patio deck, clouds masked the sun. I sat at the covered table where this all started. I lit a cigarette. Prentiss ambled to the rail to stare at the Chinese restaurant. He grunted, removed his brown suit coat and came back to the table, then moved a chair around to face the patio door. His gun, a small blue .38, protruded from a waist holster on his left side.

"That's a long drop," he said. He stared at the door, looking almost bored.

I told him what happened in the lobby.

Prentiss looked straight into my eyes. "Did anyone else witness what he did?"

"No."

He hesitated then scratched his left ear. "Have you ever seen anybody at the VA?"

"About what?"

"Beirut. You went through a major trauma and people died. This cloud or banshee image might be your way of dealing with survivor guilt."

I blew smoke out the side of mouth and shook my head.

"What about Steven Babcock, or Jenna, or Harvey?"

"Maybe coincidence. Nothing has happened to Harvey."

"It will, probably today."

"We'll see."

I was wrong.

Prentiss left around 3:30, with Harvey alive at his station. I left at 4:00, out the back entrance. While walking the alley, I kept turning to make sure Harvey wasn't following.

On the way home, I stopped at St. Boniface, where I had attended Catholic grade school. I hadn't been there in years, but I needed answers. I drove around to the ornate brick house behind the church. A young priest wearing a black robe and jeans answered the door. He seemed nervous, but shook my hand when I introduced myself.

"I'm Father Sebastian," he said.

The priest could have just graduated from high school, but I didn't care. "Do you have a few minutes, Father?"

He nodded and I followed him inside.

We sat at an oak table. The study smelled like musty clothes in a laundry bag. Father Sebastian had thick black

hair, green eyes, and thin pink lips. His hands were long and delicate. His brow arched a few times when I told my story and he tapped an index finger against his chin. I could almost see his mind working. This was way out of his league.

"Do such things exist, Father?"

"Evil is real. Look at events in the past few years, with normal people engaging in violence as if possessed. I believe demons exist and pick certain people to inhabit or attack."

"But I see it and it talked to me. Why doesn't it attack me?"

"I don't know. Maybe your mind is too strong."

"What can I do?"

"Come back to the church and pray for God's help."

I stood up then. He didn't have an answer. "I've been praying, Father."

I spent the night in a recliner chair. The television mumbled low like some insane relative. I kept my .38 special by my right hand; the first time in months I had removed the gun from the closet. I kept playing the suicides over in my mind looking for some clue I couldn't find.

I fell asleep several times and jerked awake suddenly. Once, a door slammed and I grabbed the pistol. But it was Joe Radnick, cussing and fumbling keys. If I screamed

during the night, he was too drunk to notice, and I didn't remember.

On Wednesday, I waited outside the building until several people entered at once, figuring I would have safety in numbers, but Harvey wasn't at his desk. Detective Prentiss arrived a little before eleven and asked if I had seen him.

Libby was in the cubicle handing me a fax from the main office.

"I saw him this morning," she said. "He looked funny."

"In what way?" Prentiss said.

Libby straightened her glasses. "I don't know. Like he felt bad or something. His uniform was wrinkled. That's unusual for Harvey."

The detective looked at his watch and nodded. I told Libby I was going for a smoke, and we took the elevator to the patio deck.

Two men in white shirts and ties were on the bright deck by the railing where Jenna had jumped. Maybe they were out of town visitors. They didn't whisper or point at me. I sat at a table under an umbrella, facing the door. A warm breeze blew across my back. Prentiss sat next to me. He fingered his collar and looked bored. The two men finished smoking and waved to us when they left.

"This is my last day," Prentiss said. "I have other cases."

"That would be best. You're in danger here."

"If you say so." He stiffened. "Jesus."

Harvey opened the door and came out, his eyes fixed and unblinking. His wrinkled uniform shirt, minus the badge and tie, hung out of his pants. He walked fast toward the railing over the China Gate.

"Harvey," I yelled. Then Prentiss tackled him.

With my help, he cuffed Harvey's hands behind him and sat him in a chair. Harvey seemed in a trance, his brown eyes dead-fish milky.

Prentiss shook his head. "Christ, I don't believe it."

Harvey suddenly turned toward me. "You're it," he said. I heard a chain snap when the handcuffs broke.

"How in the hell did you do that?" Prentiss said, lunging.

Harvey stood and punched Prentiss hard in the face, catching him by surprise. When he fell, his skull hit the concrete. His legs twitched. I froze. Prentiss looked dead. Harvey walked to the safety wall, climbed the railing, wobbled for a second, and jumped.

From the meaty, hollow crunch and the mad cymbal clash of clanging metal, I knew Harvey reached the restaurant. I sat next to Prentiss, waiting without looking up.

When the shadow blocked the sun, I closed my eyes. A thick, rotten smell came first, followed by the feedback shriek. I held my ears until my heart seemed to burst inside my head. And when that horrible sound stopped,

leaving my ears ringing, I peeked out. The last of two whipping tendrils disappeared inside the detective's nostrils.

I made it through the day with all the questions and frenzy. Prentiss had a mild concussion and would spend a night in the hospital. The China Gate was a mess. Two cooks had been injured when Harvey came through the roof. The street was closed for hours.

Libby told me the China Gate owners were going to sue big time. They also wanted a freeway overpass fence around the patio to keep the nuts from jumping into their kitchen. Local television stations picked up the story, and soon it was on the wire.

I answered police questions and refused press interviews. Prentiss was able to verify my story or the police would have probably held me for questioning. I left a message for my boss, on vacation in Florida, and told Libby I would be gone for at least a week.

The story made national news. CNN called it the *Suicide Tower* and mentioned my name. I kept trying to figure out what Harvey meant when he said *you're it*. Something was missing, but I did know one thing. Victor Prentiss would soon kill himself, and I would be there when it happened.

I woke up screaming three times and realized, after the third time, I was imitating the shriek. I heard Joe Radnick cussing through the walls, but he didn't beat on my door.

The next afternoon, when I went out for cigarettes, I found deep scratches along the side and hood of my car. It had to have been Joe Radnick, using a key or bottle opener.

Prentiss called on Saturday, from home. His voice was a distant robot monotone.

"How do you feel?" I said.

"Fine," he said.

He lied.

At 9:00 Sunday night, the doorbell rang. It was too early for Joe Radnick; he wouldn't use the doorbell. It was Victor Prentiss. Through the peephole, I saw dark circles under his bloodshot blue eyes. He didn't blink, and drool leaked down his chin.

"I want to talk to you," he said.

"Not now. I can't see anyone." I stepped to the side, realizing he might shoot through the door.

"I'll come back," he said.

I waited about two minutes before checking the peephole. He was gone. Then, I heard the floor creak behind me.

The bedroom window. I had left it open.

Prentiss stared, way beyond me, to some black void I couldn't understand. He reached to his waist and pulled his pistol. I should have rushed him, but it wouldn't have

mattered. He quickly raised the gun to his right temple and pulled the trigger.

I collapsed to my knees by the time the shriek began.

Three days have passed, and the stabbing internal pressure has become unbearable. This thing is eating my insides. Victor Prentiss has been in my bathtub since Sunday. It wouldn't have done any good to call anyone, since I now understand what I had been missing all along. Another person had always been with me. When Prentiss killed himself I was alone. That's why Harvey said *you're it*. My turn was coming.

Unlike the others, I fought the wispy snake entering my nostrils, but it was like grabbing smoke. The pain is so bad I can't hold a pen anymore. Joe Radnick will be home soon, drunk and nasty for sure. He will probably key my car again before he comes inside.

I'll visit him with my gun tonight. Once inside, I'll hold the gun to my head and, before pulling the trigger, play a game he'll understand.

Like *tag*.

"You're it," I'll say. "Pass it on."

The End

About the Author

Dennis Latham has published stories in *The Palmer Writer*, *Live Writers*, *VietNow*, *Byline*, and *Deep Outside SFFH*. His novels, *The Bad Season* and *Michael In Hell*, are currently published by Page Free Press as CD ROM books. A Marine Vietnam veteran, he writes a bi-monthly newsletter for combat veterans, *The S-2 Report*, dealing with VA benefits and the psychological affect of war. He is working on a third novel, *Something Evil*. He has been among other things an ironworker, a bar bouncer, and a lead singer in a professional road band. Entering the University of Cincinnati at age forty, he graduated as an English Major in 1992. He currently lives in Guilford, Indiana.