

Word Worth®

# WORD WORTH

WORLD MAGAZINE OF  
IDEAS AND THE ARTS

May 2010

Volume X Number 5

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## *Once Upon a Time With a Cat*

That's how an ideal fairy tale would start, really. "Once upon a time, with a cat ...." And it would likewise end, that perfect story, "so they all lived happily ever after, with their cat." If you have a cat you probably know what I mean. If you don't, let me try to explain.

Some people take coffee breaks; at the moment I work from home, and I take cat breaks. When I've finished part of a task or have hit some minor wall, I search out my cat—usually asleep on the couch—and rub his neck until he stretches ....

by Aurelia Carter *in* [Editorials](#)

## *Grandma*

...Bobbie didn't answer. She hated the smelly outhouse so much that she preferred to antagonize her grandma rather than to go out there, especially now that she was all dressed up for church. But Grandma was dressed up too and still had to clean up after the spoiled city child. Grandma was a good cleaner; to support herself and her invalid husband, she rushed down the mountain to the train station whenever the whistle warned. Her job was to sweep and clean the passenger cars when the train stopped at the town.

by Barbara DuBois *in* [Columns](#)

## *Biography of a Thief—Part II*

I thought about the money some more, and then I actually slept a little. I woke to Sam tapping politely on my bedroom door (so much for the mystery of who locked me in). He had coffee and a croissant and asked if he could get me anything. I snapped, "Yeah, the key to the front door!" but he just shrugged his shoulders and set down the coffee. "Mr. Zito will see you in one hour."

I gobbled the croissant and drank the coffee. ... I could work out my escape later.

by Philip K. Edwards *in* [Arts](#)

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## EDITORIALS

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## Once Upon a Time With a Cat

by Aurelia Carter

That's how an ideal fairy tale would start, really. "Once upon a time, with a cat ...." And it would likewise end, that perfect story, "so they all lived happily ever after, with their cat." If you have a cat you probably know what I mean. If you don't, let me try to explain.

Some people take coffee breaks; at the moment I work from home, and I take cat breaks. When I've finished part of a task or have hit some minor wall, I search out my cat—usually asleep on the couch—and rub his neck until he stretches his sleek muscles, purrs, and (honest, this is true) smiles happily with his eyes still closed. After a couple minutes of gentle, sunny fellowship, of such perfectly peaceful domesticity, I feel re-charged, and go on to the next thing I have to do.

If you're a pet lover you understand full well that your particular dog or cat or horse or duck isn't just an example of a species; he or she is a unique individual with a very distinctive personality. My cat is the same way. He's a round-faced blue point Siamese, and I got him 14 years ago. In a way, he chose me: he was ten weeks old when he stumbled over my feet while chasing a sibling. He looked up, shaking his head to clear it, and quite nearly said "Sorry" out loud. I had to have him.

We named him Cairo, in part because I was studying ancient Near Eastern archaeology and World War I diplomacy in the Near East, and in part because of the way Humphrey Bogart says "Joel Cairo" in "The Maltese Falcon"—that Bogart voice, deep and unhurried and monochromatic, like fog under a street lamp at night. Somehow, a gray Siamese kitten seemed to fit the word, fluid and exotic. ("Funny; the name 'Cairo' reminds *me* of dirty, over-populated places", my brother replied at the time.)

When Cairo was brand new I was waitressing the night shift at an all-night diner. I'd come home at 7 in the morning, have cereal, and go to bed, and this little kitten would sit like a sentry next to me, keeping watch but never disturbing one's rest. Leave it to a cat to understand the concept of sleep.

On days off, we'd have fun; he'd help me sort my tips by pouncing on the coins with—he's very smart—intellectual intensity and great wit. A good companion from the first, he'd shadow me around the house and whenever I'd bound upstairs he'd try his best to follow, tiny kitten feet padding along. Once I couldn't help but take cruel advantage of my few seconds' lead: Cairo knew I'd head left at the top of the stairs, toward my room, so this once I turned right, and hid behind the solid banister. Up he came, a 3-month-old fuzzleball, cheerfully trotting to the left without seeing me. "Hey!", I called out, and he wheeled around, fur all puffed up. "*HISS! HISS! HISS!*" Oh, I laughed so hard. When he saw that it was me, he started purring in apology for his language.

Cairo is faster than I am, now, and likes to play 'chase'. Once while I was making lunch he attacked my feet: viciously, out of the blue, and I got truly angry. "Why, you little rodent! Boy are you going to pay!" *Oh, whoops*, Cairo's expression read, frozen suddenly in horror. *I should not have done that.*

"Damn straight you shouldn't have done that!" I lunged, but he was off and up the stairs, me hot after him. "Come back here, you little fur basket!" I couldn't even see him as he ran through the double-entrined upstairs bathroom and—this is a small house, but since it used to be a miniature duplex for servants, long ago, it happens to have two sets of stairs—back down via the north stairwell. "You can't hide from ME, Cat!" He raced past the music room, and, yes, up the south stairs again. This time when I followed him through the bath I closed its far door. We made the furious loop one more time, and when I got back upstairs I found Cairo, in full fear of the wrath of God, tucked into the bathroom sink. He'd tried to go through the door at high velocity and, finding the way blocked, had been carried by sheer force of motion into the basin. The sight was so funny that I figured that'd been enough punishment.

We hardly ever argue, Cairo and I. He's a very good cat, delightedly greeting me when I come home, curious about guests while being proper & polite, and never getting up on counters or tables. At 14 he's full of energy, likes to play, look out the windows, and go gracefully galumphing like a herd of wildebeest across the upstairs in the morning. He also likes to talk, "prrrt"ing what sound like questions, meowing back and forth with me. There's a little bit of a language barrier, but after so long we pretty much get the gist of what the other is saying. And he likes to sleep. He's a cat; he's a connoisseur of rest. Sometimes his attitude about it makes me think of him as an old man who sits around my house reading the newspaper all day. He does chew on vased flowers, if able to get near them, but they're not poisonous and the worst that usually happens is that my roses look like their petals have been trimmed with pinking shears. He's certainly the cleanest animal I've ever known, his rabbit-soft fur immaculate and beautifully groomed—mainly through his own efforts. He smells wonderful: sometimes like baby powder, and sometimes like nutmeg, or light cinnamon.

And, come to think of it, I think it's about time for a cat break. I'll find Cairo, perhaps on the couch, and put my face in his fur as I rub his ears. (Tip: do not kiss the cat immediately after applying lip gloss.) "Mm ... you smell nice", I'll say, as, eyes closed, he touches his nose to my cheek and starts to purr. "You smell nice too", he'll answer.

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# COLUMNS

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## Grandma

by Barbara DuBois

“How could you do it? How could you poop in the pot after I washed it already?”



Bobbie didn't answer. She hated the smelly outhouse so much that she preferred to antagonize her grandma rather than to go out there, especially now that she was all dressed up for church. But Grandma was dressed up too and still had to clean up after the spoiled city child. Grandma was a good cleaner; to support herself and her invalid husband, she rushed down the mountain to the train station whenever the whistle warned. Her job was to sweep and clean the passenger cars when the train stopped at the town.

Bobbie was 12 and could have been a help around the house, but she wasn't. Her summer was a child's, playing with dolls—mostly making doll clothes like strapless evening gowns—swimming, picnicking, eating ice cream with Grandpa on the porch, playing Monopoly with the boy next door, who was always trying to get her to walk up the mountain with him.

Grandma supported all these activities, gave her sewing materials and cloth scraps; somewhere Grandma found a green satin remnant for a doll's formal gown. A loose-knit sock made a fashionable doll's sheath. A worn curtain had enough fabric for two girls to make circle skirts for dolls.

With a B. A. and an M. A. in English from the University of Michigan, Barbara DuBois taught for UNM, the Los Alamos National Laboratory, and New Mexico Tech. A member of the New Mexico State Poetry Society, she has published many travel articles, book reviews, and six book poetry chapbooks.

One Sunday afternoon, Bobbie was sewing before going across the street to Patsy's house. "Heavens," said Grandma, "we don't stitch on God's day!" Bobbie said, "I've already been to Sunday school, isn't that enough?" "No, no, dear child, we spend all day Sunday honoring Him. You may read your New Testament. Memorize some verses for next week." Grandma was a staunch Presbyterian; one reason she put up with Bobbie may have been the girl's sterling performance at Daily Vacation Bible School. Bobbie easily memorized verses and wove baskets and won gold stars.

Grandma gave her the daily dime for the park pool and egg salad sandwiches for an occasional picnic. Grandma didn't mind being Bobbie's hairdresser. When Bobbie had arrived with long, curly hair, Grandma has asked, "Is your hair naturally curly, Girl?" Bobbie said, "No, Mom twists it in rag strips at bedtime. Or if there's a birthday party, she does it again just before the party. Otherwise it's straight." Grandma said, "Curling it will take more time than I have, but let's try braids for swimming and playing. Then I'll curl it for Sundays and parties." Bobbie loved the attention, whichever style. Grandma herself braided her gray hair in two pigtails that she crossed on top of her head during the day and let hang down at bedtime, looking like a girl.

After Bobbie had been there a week or so, the neighbor boy, Timmy, came to the door one morning and said, "Let's pack up a lunch and hike up the mountain." The children had discussed a hike during yesterday's Monopoly game on his front porch, but now that the time was here, Bobbie said, "Not today, my ankle still hurts from that crooked dive off the side of the pool yesterday.

When Bobbie always found an excuse not to go up the mountain, Grandma never pressed her to go. Bobbie was so ignorant that she didn't know what she was worried about, but she felt uneasy about being alone all morning or all afternoon or all day with that boy, though he was perfectly companionable at Monopoly on the front porch.

Grandma never thought of depriving anyone of food, so she let fat Bobbie eat ice cream or anything else she wanted. The child never appreciated poverty because her whole family always had enough to eat. She had inherited a hearty appetite and a metabolism that stored fat, though she was never obese, just chubby. On long summer evenings, Grandpa would establish himself on the front porch. The ice cream truck would bring Bobbie running. "How about some napoleon ice cream, Grandpa?" "You mean Neapolitan, Hon, sure, here's a quarter." The two would eat up the ice cream without offering to share with the rest of the family members indoors. Mornings brought a fruit and vegetable vender, but it never occurred to anyone that Bobbie would be healthier and slimmer if she bought his wares instead of ice cream.

Grandma baked delicious apple pies and always cooked lots of potatoes so that no one would go hungry. When there was a town celebration at Weona Park, 4<sup>th</sup> of July, for example, Grandma would be one of the volunteer cooks. Her specialty was a meat pasty, probably a Pennsylvania treat of the day, hamburger in a pastry triangle, like a meat pie, but sealed for portability. Bobbie sincerely admired and enjoyed all the goodies.

Bobbie was easy to get along with, obedient for the most part, quiet, but not exactly lovable. Why

did Grandma tolerate her? She wasn't even her real grandmother, but the grandmother of Bobbie's half-brother, not related at all, the mother of Bobbie's mother's first husband, who had died in the 1918 flu epidemic. Grandma had loved her son so much that she loved his widow and the widow's second husband and their daughters. Also, her son had had a son, who lived with his mother. Grandma was so devoted to him that she had to embrace his mother in order not to lose him. .the grandson, Alfred, named after his father, liked Bobbie, despite or maybe because of the ten years between them. At the end of the summer, he would come to pick her up and return her to the city. The brother and sister always enjoyed using long words on each other. Alfred, like his stepfather, Bobbie's own father, saw great intellectual promise in the child and was always working on her, teaching, training, urging, nagging. During the summer, he wrote:

I am the recipient of your advisory epistle of the 20<sup>th</sup> instant

(for the purpose of differentiating between the aforesaid and its receding ultimo) (ibid. Cit. 30) in regard to my "not doing anything you wouldn't do." I hasten to assure you, my dear Miss Rattray, in an appreciatory vein, that I have the deepest regard for your counsel, at all times, and I sincerely hope, in the future, as in the past, that your contingent higher unit dynamically expressing itself as a characteristic mode of reaction to surroundings, resulting, of course, from an integration of numerous specific qualities, will precede me, and guide my inoriented footsteps.

In a postscript, he wrote, "Give this five bucks to yer granny and shut yer trap!"

Along with the smelly outhouse, primitive conditions meant no bathroom for baths, either. Each bedroom had a pitcher and basin. Bobbie never gave a thought to how the water got into the pitcher and out of the basin. Luckily, one daughter of the family had married and progressed to a modern home with indoor plumbing. Her husband graciously tolerated a family Saturday parade to the tub. Even Bobbie was included, though daily swimming probably made her the least offensive of the family.

Saturday was, however, a good time for her cleanup because Saturday night was movie night. The mother of one of her neighbor playmates was the ticket-taker, whose daughter would beg, "Mom, can we go next door to the soda fountain during the newsreel?" "Sure, Hon, have a sundae and come see the feature again if you want." Bobbie always had a pineapple sundae with walnuts even if she didn't re-enter the theater.

After her weekly bath, Bobbie changed to a clean gym suit, two of which someone had found in an attic. Maybe her older cousin, Bernice, had used them in junior high school. The suits were one-piece, heavy, gray broadcloth with red piping around the v-neck and sleeveless armholes, about as plain as they could be, yet sturdy and sufficient. Bobbie loved fancy doll clothes but harbored no illusions about fancy clothes for herself. She usually was provided a new dress for Easter Sunday, but had few playclothes. Grandma was more embarrassed by Bobbie's wardrobe than the child herself was, and took her to Allentown to shop when it was almost time to return to school. Grandma bought her two identical cotton dresses, but one was blue and the other brown.

Al came to take Bobbie back to Albany in time for high school, tenth grade, the big time. But this fall, his news was more exciting than hers: on the way back, he said, "I'm not going back to Norwich to teach this fall; I'm going

to fly!” He was not returning to his job teaching high school science, as he had done since graduating from Albany State two years earlier. He had fallen in love with the idea of flying and insisted on joining the Army Air Corps though the United States had not yet entered the war. Pearl Harbor was still a few months away.

Not long after Bobbie and her mother had kissed him goodbye, they got the miserable news that his parachute had failed in a training accident; the tree had not broken his fall enough to save his life. Adamant Grandma, declaring possession of her heartbreaker boy, insisted on burial next to his father, so Bobbie and her mother and older sister all trudged to the mountains, though summer had ended.

Bobbie’s mother could not forgive Grandma for taking charge; she felt as if she had doubly lost her son. Of course, Grandma would have felt the same way if she had lost the fight for the body. But now the tie was torn; there was no longer any welcome for Alfred’s family at Grandma’s.

Bobbie found other summer activities, babysitting one summer, and then, several summers during college, waiting tables in an Adirondacks summer hotel. As a college freshman, she foolishly participated in sorority rushing, forgetting the extra expenses of sorority membership. She suggested to a sorority president, “Maybe I could work for room and board?” The president was tactful enough to say, “We have enough help already. We don’t need as much help in the kitchen as your dorm does, you see.”

In time to prevent embarrassment (her favorite sorority had given her a bid), Bobbie withdrew, always slow to remember her poverty. She was too late, however, to avoid offending two sorority women from Grandma’s town, members of a sorority that Bobbie had shown no interest in. Bobbie didn’t know which relatives the women knew, but the women assured her that offense had been taken. No more was ever heard from or about Grandma.

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## The Biography of a Thief, or Take my Life, PLEASE

by Philip K. Edwards

### Part II

*[Part I is available in the Archives.]*

I thought about the money some more, and then I actually slept a little. I woke to Sam tapping politely on my bedroom door (so much for the mystery of who locked me in). He had coffee and a croissant and asked if he could get me anything. I snapped, 'Yeah, the key to the front door!' but he just shrugged his shoulders and set down the coffee. "Mr. Zito will see you in one hour."

I gobbled the croissant and drank the coffee. A long, hot shower improved my outlook. I had twenty minutes to review the state of the *MS* and put together a work plan that would sound realistic to Frank. I could work out my escape later.

"I hope you slept well," he purred, "I know that some of what you read may have been disturbing to you." I lied that I'd slept fine, though I probably didn't look it.

He inclined his head "Do you have any fundamental questions, Mr. Ingram?"

I thought about ducking it, but instead I blurted out, "What happened to the other guy!?"

Frank gave a little chuckle. "Of course you must think it's something sinister, but I assure you that Charles and I were the closest of friends, almost brothers. His diabetes was closing in on him, and I think I overworked him these last few months. There were complications following the amputation. I was holding his hand as he uttered his last words: 'Frankie. Who will finish the manuscript?' I told him not to worry. That night he died peacefully in his sleep."

... [\*Continue\*](#)

He looked away for a moment at the thought of this tender exchange. Then he went on. “I chose you to finish Charles’ work. Can you do it?”

I asked him about some particulars, said I’d make a list of questions and once I had all the information I’d be able to finish up the main text in a week or less. “Then you’ll want an epilog, I think—all the best biographies have them.”

“It won’t be necessary. And the five copies?—we don’t need those either, just the finished manuscript. A paper copy—the only one, please—and one of those electronic backup things. Sam will take charge of them when you’re done. Of course, we’ll pay what we promised. Anything more, Mr. Ingram?”

I used some writer’s software I’d downloaded from a pirate to set up the work up for finalization. I put tic marks everywhere I needed clarification, and the software generated a questionnaire for Frank to fill in. That stage took a day and a half. Frank said he’d look it over. That afternoon I sat out in one of the deck chairs. It was a warm day and soon I was asleep. I dreamed about swimming with bare-assed golden-haired lassies. After the swim they laid me out on a deck chair and fed me refreshing drinks through a straw while rubbing oil all over my body. I woke to Sam pushing on my shoulder. “He wants to see you.”

He had scribbled in answers to most of my questions. I read them to be sure I understood (with this guy you didn’t want to get anything wrong). For some of the gaps I had to ask some delicate questions, but Frank didn’t mind, and in one case he corrected me harshly: “We didn’t drown the bastard, he was dead before he hit the water!” All I could muster was, “Yes, I see.”

It took all that day to input the new data, then I submitted it to the software’s comprehensive spelling, grammar, and syntax review (why should I re-read every [\*...Continue\*](#)

word myself?). That must have been powerful software, because it took most of the night to crank through it.

I was sleeping better now that Frank and I had an understanding. I woke in the morning feeling rich as Gatsby, so I asked Sam for an elaborate breakfast with—could he manage it?—a *cappuccino*. He did.

I reviewed the annotated manuscript. The program had put color-coded markers everywhere it had made a change. It took the morning to scan through the entire thing, but the software was darn good—I made only a few changes to its suggested revisions.

Then I checked the word and page count—it topped out at three hundred fifteen pages, my best effort so far, though I had to admit it was with Charles' help. At noon I summoned Sam. “You can tell the man I'm finished!”

Frank sent word back with Sam that I should give him my computer and any copies, electronic or otherwise, and then I should ‘relax and enjoy yourself for a few hours’ while they reviewed the manuscript. I ordered a club sandwich for lunch and downed it with some of Frank's single malt while I fiddled with the entertainment system.

I had dozed off when Sam returned again with a folded note and a fat envelope. I was to read the note first, then acknowledge it with a signature:

“Mr. Ingram. Thank you for taking the trouble to humor an old man who just wants to get the record straight. We won't be meeting again, but please initial your acceptance of payment in full, as we discussed it.” Below that was a line and the words ‘accepted as payment in full.’ Sam handed me the envelope and *...Continue*

indicated I should count it. It was the full six G's, even after he'd already paypaled me the down payment. Frank was a man as good as his word.

Sam helped me pack my things. I didn't like him touching my stuff, but I guess they wanted to be sure I hadn't swiped any of the furniture. He was especially interested in my computer bag, so I showed him everything that was in it (nothing having to do with the ms). I asked about my computer. He indicated I should write down an address where I wanted it sent. I asked when. "In two, three days, max."

My car was waiting, motor running, almost exactly where I'd last seen it. It hadn't been an altogether negative experience, but let us say I was happy to get out of there.

When I got 'home' I cased the joint lest the Ingrams had made a sudden return. On finding nothing changed, I went inside. I was just settling in when I noticed there was a message on my (the Ingram's, really) answering machine.

When I heard Paul Keiffer's voice on the tape my stomach instantly knotted up. I quickly went to my desktop and checked my Paypal account to see if a protest had been logged. No problem there, but I was still nervous. The message said he needed me to come back to Wichita. I called him back, wary.

He wouldn't tell me the whole story, but he needed a 'special favor' and I was the only person he could trust. He would send me the money for a first-class ticket and cover all my expenses if I could come by the end of the week. I said, "Oh, you don't have to do that," then reminded him of my paypal account details. When the money arrived the next morning I was again tempted to take it and run, but

...[\*Continue\*](#)

why not at least see what he was up to? Maybe there was another old fuddy he was going to refer me to. And it would get me out of the Ingram's house.

I got to Paul's on Thursday morning. He looked grave, and when I was seated he got right to the point.

"I left something out of my life's story. I never told Dorinda, either, but I've got a weak heart. I've been taking care of myself, but now they tell me I have to have an operation. I'm scheduled to go in tomorrow for tests, then the operation is on Saturday morning. I don't want to go alone, and there's no one to take care of my—Dorinda's—cat for a few days while I recover. I know you're a busy man, but you're the only friend I've got. I thought maybe you could stay here, use my place for whatever you're writing now, and just look in on the cat once a day. She's an old girl, lives in the cellar and has her own door to the outside. All I do is give her food and water once a day, like I promised Dorinda, for as long as she lasts."

He looked at me with pleading eyes. "Will you do it for me? For Dorinda?"

What could I say? I was already there, I had nothing else to do. I didn't want to get stuck taking care of a sick old man, though, so I told him I was on a deadline and could only stay until Monday, Tuesday at the latest. He took my hand and thanked me profusely. Then he shook a finger at me and said, "Don't worry, if I'm not walking by Monday I can afford a nurse to stay with me."

I drove him to the hospital and waited while he was admitted. A doctor came by and explained the procedure, preparing me as much as he was preparing Paul. It didn't really sound so good, an *aneurism*, whatever that was, that had to be fixed or it would burst, but the doc was chipper about it and said Paul would be up and

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around ‘in a few days.’ That didn’t sound exactly like playing tennis by Monday, but what could I do about it now?

I told the doc I’d call in on Saturday afternoon to make sure everything went well, but he gave me a dirty look and said, “Someone should be here. Come at eight and you can see him before he goes in.”

It wasn’t my idea of how to spend a Saturday morning after I’d been working my ass off, but then, what the heck. It’s Wichita. I said I’d be there.

When I got there he was already prepped and ready to be rolled out. He had shrunk a foot overnight. He was so pale and scared looking I squeezed his hand as they led him away. At ten they came out and told me it was trickier than they thought and it would be while longer. At eleven a younger doctor came out and said ‘the team is still working on the plumbing, it’ll be awhile yet.’ He hit my shoulder with a mock fist and said, “Hang in there, buddy.” It gave me the creeps. At one-fifteen I was contemplating going somewhere for lunch when both docs came out. The older one put a hand on my other shoulder—I’m thinking, these guys are really touchy-feely—and then hit me with the facts. “We did everything we could.”

“What?!?” I almost shouted. They could see I was having a reaction so they guided me to a room off to the side and closed the door. “Your father put up a real fight, but...” I interrupted, “He’s not...” but they cut me off. “I’m sorry, but he’s dead. The aneurism was quite advanced. We were working around it, trying to seal it off, but then it just...went. There was nothing we could do then. He was gone in a few seconds. ...

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“Oh, no!” I wailed, thinking how did I get stuck in this situation, what am I going to do with a dead body. I wanted out. I held up my hands. “Give me a minute, okay? I’ve got to think this out.” They told me just tell the nurse when I was ready to see the body. There would be arrangements to be made, etc. “If you need a little something to calm you down just tell the head nurse.” They both patted me on the back as they make their escape.

I sat down. I had to think. The first thing that came to my mind was that I hadn’t got the return fare from old Paul, now it was too late. ‘That’ll cut into my stash, damn.’ I’d go back to Paul’s, get my stuff, and get a plane. Too late for today, probably, but I can get a motel. Who wants to stay in a dead man’s house?

I went to the nurse’s station and the head nurse took me aside. ‘Are we ready to say our goodbyes?’, she wanted to know. She didn’t know how much I was ready to say goodbye to them all, but I nodded an OK and she took me through several sets of doors to where Paul lay, almost as white as the sheets that covered everything but his face and hands. “I’ll leave you to say goodbye in your own way.”

I silently fumed at him for dying on me, then did a little rant about how he’d got me out here on false pretenses, hinting that there was another biography and there was nothing but an aneurism! After a few minutes I touched his hand—he was a human being, after all, or at least had been—but it didn’t seem to do anything for him or me. I went back to the nurse’s station.

“I have to get back to the house. There’s the cat...and other things.” She said she understood, but I should please call for ‘arrangements’ as soon as possible. I promised I would. She handed me a grocery bag with Paul’s ‘personal items’ (I ...[\*Continue\*](#)

didn't want to think about what might be in the bag—the remains of an aneurism?) and touched me on the shoulder then. What is it with these people, I thought.

I had Paul's car, so I went back and packed up my stuff. It was too late to get a flight, so I thought about the motel. Then I remembered the cat and went down to put out food and water. The cat stared at me. I ended up staying in the little room that Paul had set me up in, though it was extra creepy because he told me that Dorinda's last days were spent there. In the morning I got thinking: Paul wouldn't be coming home any time soon, and he had offered to let me stay as long as I wanted. Maybe I should set up shop here, at least temporarily.

That put me into action. I called an undertaker from the phone book and gave them the dope on Paul's body. I said I was Paul, Junior, and if they'd take care of the essentials I'd come in next week and discuss the details. I put a quaver in my voice—'when I can deal with it.'

I booked a round-trip to Jersey from Wichita in Paul's name. His license didn't look like me, but it didn't look like a dead man, either, and I figured all they'd look for was the name. Back in Jersey, I cleaned out my accounts and sold my car back to the dealer (what a bunch of crooks—they only gave me wholesale) and got a rental. I went to the Ingram's and erased their answering machine, then on second thought took it to the pawnshop with a couple of their other remaining electronic items. It was raining when I got back to the house to remove any remaining traces of myself. When I was sure there was nothing incriminating (although the missing items could possibly be interpreted as incriminating) I went to the outside alcove, locked the front door and put the key under the mat. ...

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That's when I saw Frank's limo creeping up the Ingram's street with Sam at the wheel and the hulk in the shotgun seat, both craning their necks this way and that. I grabbed the key and ducked back into the Ingram's without them seeing me. My rental was right out front, but it had Delaware tags and I didn't think they'd connect me with it.

When they stopped along side my rental I almost fainted. When the hulk swung the wide door open I made for shelter, choosing the basement. I was picturing a coal bin or somewhere the hulk wouldn't fit into, but it was just a finished rec room on one side and a utility room on the other. I thought about hopping into the chest freezer, but the imagery was too strong so I huddled behind the water heater, hoping they wouldn't put a slug in it where I'd be scalded to death.

When it was over I drove off, though the fear was still with me. At least it was dark. I could still make my plane if I hurried, but these guys had resources, maybe they'd be waiting for me at the airport. Then it hit me—they were after Wally Ingram, not Paul Keiffer. They were probably on the way to Florida already. Poor Wally—I hoped they'd get a good look at him before they pulled the trigger. Or maybe not—if they thought they'd killed me they'd quit looking.

Back in Wichita I checked in with the cat. It gave me a hard time about being gone but it shut up when it got its food. I composed myself and called the funeral home. I told them the family decided to go with cremation. I'd have to sign some papers, they said, but they offered to meet me at the house. I was nervous about being Paul, Junior in a neighborhood they might be familiar with, so I took Paul's car over to their place.      ... *Continue*

They wanted me to have one last look at him, to be sure he was the right dude, I guess. My eyes got all teary when I saw him—maybe it was the chemicals, but that got me right back out of there. I had to fork over three hundred bucks for a ‘temporary’ casket (what a racket!), then signed and said I’d arrange for the ashes to be picked up later.

Back again at Paul’s I started poking around for what I could steal. Right away I could tell the man lived a dull life—no plasma TV, no surround sound, no computer, not even a bar in the basement. The furniture was old and the knickknacks were cheap. There wasn’t any obvious cash to be found, either, and I looked through every one of his wife’s shoeboxes. It was when I went through his desk and found the drawer he paid his bills from that I hit pay dirt.

Under his checkbook (a quick check of the register balance indicated there was only a little more than three hundred in it) was a box of checks, then under that was a folded set of papers bound with a rubber band. The first paper was a statement showing the stock and cash balances in his investment portfolio, under that was a manual explaining how to move money in his account via the internet, and under that was a letter advising Paul of his temporary username and access code. Wrapped up in the letter was a debit card with a little sticker Paul had added. The sticker had a four-digit number on it—his PIN, for sure.

I went back to the statement and almost fainted. Paul had more than a million in mutual funds and almost four hundred thousand in cash reserves. Not only that, but the year-to-date showed that eighty-eight grand was being deposited in the first week of every quarter from who-knows-where-and-who-cares? At that moment I knew I was going to become Paul. I ticked off the plusses. One, he’s

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*Biography of a Thief—22*

dead, but there've been no death notices sent because I, the next of kin, haven't sent any. Two, his wife is dead and they had no children. Three, there was no one to drive him to the hospital and none of the neighbors seem to care that I've been going in and out of Paul's house, driving his car, and feeding his cat. And the biographies—they're still sitting on the coffee table where I left them weeks ago—he had no one to give them to. I forced myself to think about the negatives. There weren't any! By the time they caught up with him for not filing his tax return or renewing his library card, his assets, and I, would be long gone.

Mexico was the logical choice. In the resort towns there are internet cafes and ATM's everywhere, not to mention babes and margaritas. It's easy to cross the border on a tourist visa, plus I could sell his car to some wetback who could drive it to *el norte* instead of having to cross the desert on foot. I would melt into the crowd, maybe buy a villa and marry a señorita, have a passel of niños, and grow old, happier and richer with every passing day.

And that's how it was working out, mostly, though there were some residency issues that forced me to hire a Mexican lawyer—though he assured me that unless I tried to assassinate the Pope money would solve any problems of that nature. And the villa—I had to rent instead of buy because unlike in the good old USA, there are rules about who can own land, especially where people want to live. And the car, that was a bust because once you bring a car into Mexico they hound you to death if you don't take it out. We should have had those Mexican car-trackers in Afghanistan when we were looking for bin Laden. But the lawyer took care of that, too—we bought a car just like Paul's and sent it back as a replacement (it

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only took a few dollars to convince the border guys that the vehicle identification number was the same).

So, after a few months of settling in, I was definitely feeling more relaxed. My routine was coffee in the morning at Conchita's, a walk on the beach, lunch and a tequila at Señor's, then off to my hammock for a well-deserved rest before dinner and schmoozing at Ricky's Beach Bar. Which is why on that sleepy afternoon, when I answered my cell phone from deep in the comfort of my hammock and a familiar voice inquired, "Mr. Ingram?" I momentarily forgot I was Paul Keiffer, two f's, and mumbled, "Yes?"

The voice suddenly went from soothing to aggressive, and chills shot down my spine. "Would that be Paul Ingram or Wally Keiffer? Which is it, Mr. 'Chick' Lancer?!?" I was dumbstruck. Whose voice was that, where was he calling from? Panicking, I stumbled out of the hammock, and regaining my feet, came face to face with my caller. He lowered his phone and spoke directly to me: "Hello, Mr. Ingram. Wally. I hope this is not inconvenient for you?" It was Francis 'Frank' Ziti.

I raised my hands, half to ward off the bullets and half in a show of surrender. He spoke quietly again. "You'll want to turn off your phone—wouldn't want to waste minutes." I didn't like the sound of the word 'waste,' but I noticed he wasn't holding a gun. I lowered my hands in a non-threatening way and turned off my phone. "Good," he said. "May we sit down?"

I was trembling as I guided him into the house and indicated the couch. He gestured for me to sit down, then he took the chair. If I was going to die at least I didn't want to look like a fool. I tried to gain some ground. "You're right. I'm not ... *Continue*

Wally Ingram, but I did my job, didn't I? You said it was good work." It came out a little whiney.

"It's not your writing that brings me here. Just a little carelessness with the manuscript. A copy fell into the hands of the FBI, who are, if anything, hyper-vigilant these days. I was put in a very bad position, with little room and less time for maneuvering."

"But I... ." He cut me off.

"Sam was convinced that you were a rat, but I was not so sure. On the way to a safe place we keep for such emergencies, we stopped at your, that is, Ingram's, house but you had gone. Then we employed experts to figure out what happened."

"But I didn't give anyone the manuscript," I moaned.

"You were, however, less than diligent in obtaining a license for a certain piece of professional writer's software. It seems that the company is aggressive about checking the legitimacy of its users. You uploaded the manuscript to them for error-checking and one of their—what do you call them, bots?—detected the illegal copy. Their enforcement people read the content and called Washington. Washington decided that crimes had been committed and set out to find the culprit, namely, I."

I was about to protest that I didn't upload anything anywhere, but then I remembered the spelling- and grammar-checker. It must work by copying the manuscript and running it through their powerful mainframe. No wonder it took so long.     ... *Continue*

“The FBI found the name ‘Wally Ingram’ and quickly located him in Florida—they know far more about where we all are than they used to. Poor Wally was whisked off for questioning while they pored over his computers. They also searched his house in New Jersey. They found that his house had been burglarized, and not only were many items missing, but a certain Mr. Lancer as well, whom they feared may have met with foul play. They held Wally for three days in very uncomfortable circumstances, but aside from some downloaded pictures of questionable legality—and taste—there was nothing on his computer linking him to any crimes.

“While in search of Mr. Lancer, they interviewed a young woman who had once threatened Mr. Lancer’s life, and who had been recently released from a locked ward. She is under protective custody while they probe for connections to Mr. Ingram and to Mr. Lancer’s disappearance. My friends in the department keep me advised of the progress of these investigations, and for my part I assured them that you were neither terrorist nor victim.

“I sent Sam to have a talk with a certain ex-wife of yours, one Linda van Muir. It was she who told us how to find you.”

“Linda!?! How?”

“There was a certain sum of money you, shall we say, *extracted* from her father of which she thinks you owe her part. Apparently at one time you threatened to move to Mexico if she kept after you about it. That made quite an impression.”

I got a little defensive then. “Well, sure, but Mexico is a big place. How did she know I was here, in this town?”

... *Continue*

“She didn’t, though from there it was really quite simple to find you—your computer, the one you left with me, gave you away. There was another manuscript on it, a rather less well-written account of the life of one Paul Keiffer—that’s with two F’s—of Wichita, Kansas. It was easy to find his house but, alas, he was not at home. An ally on the police force found a hospital record showing that the said Mr. Keiffer was in fact deceased. An interview with staff turned up the interesting fact that upon his death his son took charge of the body. Mr. Keiffer’s biography, however, states that he was childless.”

I put my head in my hands. I was finished. When I had composed myself again I looked at Frank and asked, “What are you going to do with me?”

“Sam was wrong, you’re not really a bad fellow. Actually quite clever, in your way, but your little software misadventure has put me in bad circumstances. For the time being I am forced to live outside my native country. Unlike you, I do not prefer it this way. Until some adjustments are made, however, it will be necessary to stay here.”

I brightened a little. “Possibly I could make it easier for you in some way?”

He smiled, and seemed to be considering my offer. “You are a generous man, Mr. Lancer, and yes, there are two things you can do for me.” Then he told me what they were.

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Now that all of the above is in the past tense, I, Charles ‘Chick’ Lancer, make my daily living by scamming tourists for handouts on a ‘lost my passport’ story. In the evenings, I cruise the bars for lonely gringas eager to buy me a drink or dinner, and at night I usually go home alone to my fisherman’s shack, where I sleep in the hammock that Mr. Ziti graciously allowed me to keep.

And this is why you are reading my autobiography, written at the behest of Mr. Ziti and retained by him to ensure that the authorities won’t trouble the new Paul Keiffer who, incidentally, looks a great deal more like his passport picture than I ever did.

