

A black and white photograph of a forest path. The path is covered in fallen leaves and twigs. On the right side, a tree trunk is visible, and a bright green puffer jacket is hanging from it. The jacket is the only color in the image, standing out against the monochrome background. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image in three white rectangular boxes.

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Fergus Anthony

reader

a

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A Fergus Anthony Reader

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Thanks to Jelena Demchenkova for noticing the jacket was there.

You can find Jelena [here](#).

And me:

contact: fergusanthonywrites@gmail.com

blog: [Fergus Anthony](#)

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From

THE COMPANY OF THIEVES

Peter Hopkins – I

One day, when he was twelve years of age, Peter Hopkins went to play in the attic of his grandparents' house. His imagination transformed that dead space into a living temple filled with ancient treasures. Boxes carrying the insignia of Brillo, Fyffe's, and Campbell's, held the keys to a past that, his grandfather assured him, was better than anything life could ever offer the young boy. Through the eyes of an antique gas mask, he saw himself safely through the trenches of World War 1. Slashing wildly with an old épée, stolen from the local drama group, he cut a dash through the stagnant air and pinned a dusty hardback to the floor. The book was a collection of poetry by Lord Byron, and standing in the settling dust, the boy felt his lips curl into a smile, as he read the legend: *Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know*.

Peter knelt to pick the book up; he noticed the smell of the paper. This was not a new sensation, but for the first time, the fragrance charged his mind with wild imaginings. He began to read. The rhythm of the words enlivened the shadows inside the attic. At the same time, Peter felt a space around him; he felt he was moving differently, experiencing life differently. For the first time, Peter had a sense that he was himself. He turned the page and trembled at the title: *Don Juan*.

Don Juan was a name Peter had known for years. Of all he possessed what possessed him most was a black and white photograph of himself as a baby. He is caught in mid bounce on his grandfather's knee, with the old man dressed as the mythical lover: Don Juan at sixty-five. To a boy on the brink of puberty, with all its attendant uncertainty, the discovery of the poem conjured up a life far removed from anything he had ever known; it promised a life of adventure, filled with heroic deeds. A sudden inspiration told Peter that poetry would be a good way to win women's hearts. Poetry would set him on the road to fame, but not as a poet. He imagined himself as the kind of man who walks into the jungle with nothing but his guts, to return years later, changed but untamed, possessor of secret knowledge, blood brother to unknown tribes who, having escaped the ravages of civilization, still lived in harmony with creation.

That night, with a flashlight, pen and exercise book, Peter took a new kind of nervousness to bed. Beneath the covers, he began to write, copying the style of Byron, but the results, he was certain, were trash. After a few days, he quit, but the work was in him now, and he soon found himself back beneath the bedclothes, pen in hand, struggling with the syntax, fighting words. He discovered and discarded Charles Bukowski in a week. He passed through Yeats like a dream. Dickinson confused him. He developed a system: every Sunday night he would copy a poem into his exercise book. Over the course of the week, he'd change a word here and there, but leave the structure intact. He'd repeat this process until he felt the work before him was his own. In this way, he amassed some fifty poems over the course of the year. However, anyone can do that, what he needed was publication. Who could then deny that he was something special?

In keeping with his romantic vision, he searched for a bookshop that reeked of history, uneven shelves heavy with unpronounceable names, the ceiling stained with cigarette smoke, and the dust of generations in the air. He found *Books Upstairs*, a shop that occupied two floors above a greengrocer. He loved the staircase that climbed from one floor to the next, the stacks of books to the side of each step. About half way up, a flattened cigarette butt bore the partial imprint of the sole of a work boot. As Peter entered the top floor of the shop, the smell of fresh biscuits, and the cigarette smoke dancing in the dusty sun made his head swim. A small crowd

sat spellbound, watching a man make spastic noises that no one could understand. After a few minutes, he stopped and said, "I've been thinking about the word 'Daybreak', and of all the implied violence in that word. 'The day,' has been, 'broken.' We need, to 'fix', 'the day'. This next piece is entitled 'Fixing the Day'." He cleared his throat and began again, making the same spastic noises that no one understood.

Peter went back downstairs. He poured over the shelves, looking for a magazine that cried poverty with the greatest authenticity. He searched for an hour and found a slim homemade book with a light blue craft paper cover. A photocopied ballpoint pen drawing of an open window invited readers to explore *The UniVerse*. He opened the book and found the work of twenty poets spread over fifty photocopied pages; this was the kind of magazine taken seriously in the ranks of rebellion.

He submitted his poems and followed their journey through the post, to the manicured hands of a woman with blood-red fingernails and a perfect hourglass figure. His work would penetrate all her hidden places and pierce her heart. She would wet herself and know that she had to have him. She would be *Parisienne*, of course. This did not necessarily mean she came from Paris. In his Geography of flesh, being *Parisienne* located her in some elevated 'other' place: a world of sexual and intellectual sophistication. He felt her call to him, and he knew that, through her, his life would begin.

In due course, his work returned with corrections. There was a note from the editor, congratulating the young poet on his choice of reading. He recommended other books that would help Peter to develop and to discover his own voice. The letter had been signed by a man. Sitting on his bed, staring at the signature, Peter began to doubt the existence of *Parisienne* women.

For a long time afterward he did not write a word, but the term 'find your voice' had stirred something up. His next attempt at poetry was for the thing itself. He wanted to see where the words would lead.

01/A Burglary in Winter

Sheets of lightning pulsed in the sky, brightening the bellies of fat clouds and lighting up the battlements of the Whitely Museum: an old English castle that had been transported to the New England countryside. Here and there, patches of frost sparkled like glitter on the walls, and recent rain caused the slate roofs to shine silver in the night. At a short distance, a freeway ran along what had once been part of the Whitely Estate, and just inside the perimeter wall, Jack Higgins, crouching in a cove of trees, waited and watched.

He was there to steal the Whitely Diamond and to leave irrefutable proof of the break-in. This was for the benefit of the outside world. No one must be allowed to deny the theft had taken place. Under ordinary circumstances, he would never do this. To Jack, burglary was an art form, and the victims of his art should discover the theft only after exhausting every other possibility.

A flash of lightning showed two guards, keeping perfect time, complete a circuit of the building. Their rain ponchos cast ghoully shadows against the castle wall. They stopped to talk to each other. A ribbon of flame leapt from a Zippo as one of the guards lighted a cigarette. For a moment, Jack was aware only of the glow from the cigarettes. He felt the ghost of a craving, the pull of smoke in his mouth. He smiled; their habit might prove useful if he had to make a run for it. Their cigarettes finished; the guards moved off in opposite directions. Jack set his stopwatch and sat with the countdown until the guards should meet at the far side of the castle. Then, like a fighter about to step into the ring, he pushed aside everything but his immediate task. There would be time enough later to reflect, relaxing on the terrace of his penthouse in the sun, sipping a glass of Tullamore Dew, and watching the ships in the Gulf of Mexico.

He petitioned the stained-glass saints in the windows to watch over him, and walked quickly to the castle wall. He turned to face the battlements and began to climb.

On the roof, Jack hunkered down to get his bearings. He uncoiled a length of high tensile wire from around his waist and fixed it to the wall, ready for his escape. He moved along to the section of roof through which he would enter the castle. He removed about twenty slates and put them to one side. Then he cut a hole in the roofing felt, snipped through a layer of chicken wire, and lowered himself into the attic. He crawled along the rafters to a ring of one-inch steel bars. These were directly above the diamond and set to slam down at any change in pressure on the pedestal below. The bars were six inches apart, making a circle four feet in diameter. One of those bars would have to be removed.

Jack stood up and took his gloves off. He felt along the top of the steel ring that held the bars in place. He found a slight depression on top of one of the bars and marked it with a piece of chalk. He took a small metal box from his jacket pocket and left it on the rafter above the bar. He put his gloves back on.

In the room below, soft white powder fell from the ceiling and lightly dusted one of the most celebrated jewels in American history: the Whitely Diamond, the famous blood diamond from which the family fortune flowed. Moments later, a few centimeters of a fiber-optic camera peeped unnoticed through a hole that was barely there.

Jack pushed a button on the monitor in his hand. The screen lit up with a night-vision image of the Whitely Diamond, almost invisible against the white velvet cushion on which it sat. Turning the camera, he caught sight of a marble bust, depicting honor, courage, compassion, and integrity. These qualities, chiseled into the face of the first American Whitely, told nothing of the man himself. As he watched the image, Jack heard the slow, steady rhythm of footsteps approaching. Moments later, the screen turned white as the lights in the Diamond Room came on when the guard entered. Jack pushed another button on the monitor and once again had a clear image. He watched the Guard circle the diamond and leave.

Jack withdrew the fiber optic. He widened the hole just enough to take a thin metal tube. Through this, he lowered a series of hooks that opened out and gripped the ceiling, holding the tube in place. He attached an arm to the tube. At the end of the arm was a blade, with which Jack now began to cut a hole in the ceiling of the Diamond Room. This was the most dangerous part of the job; tedious work threatening to lull him into autopilot while his nerves were eager for action. He worked for almost an hour, one slow, shallow circle at a time. The heat in the attic was made more oppressive by the close quarters. He had to stop several times to wipe his face, and once to wait for the guard to circle the diamond and leave. Before the final cut came the sound of the guard making another round.

After the guard had left, Jack wrapped a rope around the bar he had selected. He stood up and rolled his shoulders, then opened the metal box he had left on the rafter. He took a vial of acid from the box and squeezed a few drops into the depression at the top of the bar. The attic filled with smoke, too thick for a torch to penetrate. Jack crouched down and picked up the end of the rope. He gently tugged until the bar began to move. A few more tugs and the bar broke free. He stood motionless for several seconds and listened for any sounds from below. He felt the silence as a something tangible. He put the bar to one side, fixed his harness to the rafters and lifted the lid on the treasure trove below.

After squeezing into the confines of the outdated security system, Jack pushed a button on his chest. He dropped eight feet through the hole and found himself trapped in a glass case that surrounded the diamond from floor to ceiling. This had not been visible on the monitor. It had not been mentioned in the brief. He threw a thought away and refocused on the job. He reached out and picked the jewel from its white velvet cushion.

Steel doors slammed shut; an alarm sounded, echoing around the room, calling down the corridor, startling the guards into action. The steel bars slammed down around Jack and sent a shudder of prison through his body. A bar brushed his right shoulder and Jack dropped the diamond. For a brief, terrifying eternity, his breath stopped, his eyes froze, his world telescoped into the sight of the falling stone. Swinging around, Jack caught it in his boots. Cradling it there for a moment, he began to breathe again. The steel door struggled to open, years of neglect slowed the mechanism. Still, a guard was in under the door and firing by the time Jack had stuffed the diamond inside his jacket. Armed guards were another thing the brief had omitted. In an explosion of glass and noise, a bullet flew past Jack and ricocheted off one of the steel bars that surrounded him. He swung round, struggling to stay focused. He pulled a grenade from his jacket and tossed it to the guard, who, on reflex, caught it. In a fit of panic, he realized what it was and threw it away. He dived for cover as a small explosion filled the room with smoke. Within this cloud, Jack pushed the button on his chest and was reeled back into the attic, leaving behind the confused sound of security guards unused to dealing with an actual security breach.

There were pools of light floating in the sky. The entire estate was lit up. Jack climbed out into the night. The storm was growing. Ten feet away, electricity flowered from the lightning rod on the roof of the castle. Loud banging to his left turned Jack's attention to the roof access door, also suffering from lack of use. A sudden small explosion of dust and broken slate caused Jack to drop down onto his stomach. Just as he registered what was happening, the shot rang out – bullets travel faster than sound. The heavens opened, and rain hammered down. Still on his stomach, Jack crawled to where he had left the high tensile wire. He sat up, flat against the wall, and pulled a small black box from inside his jacket, raised a short aerial and pushed a button. A series of explosions around the castle brought darkness and cover. Jack listened as the guards scrambled confused towards that diversion. He scouted the ground for any guards still waiting. There were two. Their guns were holstered and they were vigilantly watching everywhere but the roof. There seemed little to choose between them. Jack launched himself off the roof, swinging out and down in a wide arc. His feet touched the wall, and he had kicked off again by the time the wire reached the ground. The two guards turned their heads towards the monster that was falling from the sky. One of the guards fumbled, trying to draw his gun. In almost the same

instant, Jack was on his man and together they tumbled painfully to the ground. The other guard raised his gun and pointed it roughly in Jack's direction; he squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. The guard looked at the weapon as if it were an alien device in his hands. Then he remembered the safety catch.

Jack rolled with the guard he had landed on, positioning the guard on top of him. The gun in the other guard's hand went off, spraying bullets into the sky and raining panic down on the freeway. A knee to the groin caused the guard on top of Jack to jerk upright. Then with both feet, Jack pushed him to his companion, who had thrown his gun away when it roared so violently.

Jack got to his feet, grabbed the discarded gun and ran for the trees. The head of security released a Rottweiler. The dog bounded past the other guards. Jack fired a short burst of gunfire in their direction. It bought him a few seconds, enough to reach the wall, enough, almost, to escape. He had just grabbed the top of the wall when he felt a powerful force close on his boot. With every ounce of strength left to him, Jack fought against the dog that was trying to pull him to the ground. The guards were almost on top of him now. The head of security barked at the others, warning that there would be hell to pay if anyone shot Satan. Consequently, the guards took pains to fire into the ground well away from the dog.

The dog began to win, forcing Jack to give up part of his grip on the wall. He reached for the gun swinging at his side, found it and emptied the clip into the dog's head. It exploded in a mixture of blood, bone, and brain. Jack disappeared over the wall with Satan's jaws still locked around his boot.

The head of security stopped. He stood, lost, empty, a world away from the chaos around him. Someone had murdered his best friend. He raised his gun; his finger closed around the trigger, firing blindly as he walked to the remains of his dog. He stood for a moment in grief, turning obscenities over in his head, but he had been raised correctly, and they never passed his lips. He tried to follow Jack over the wall. But after years of nursing his ass into obesity, all the Guard had left were the pains in his heart, one for the effort, and one for his love.

The other guards, their prey out of sight, were already returning to the castle, already inventing a historic battle, each engrossed in his own mythology.

Within minutes, television crews were at the gates, filing reports and taking statements from the heroic guards.

A pencil-thin man in a gray suit and wearing television shaped glasses quietly slipped past the gates, as a couple of uniformed police officers tried to corral the cameras. He wondered who had tipped them off, probably the same person who tipped him off. He walked along the perimeter, inspecting the grounds, the wall. He watched the head of security cradling the remains of his dog and whispering the promise of scraps from some heavenly table. He crossed over to the castle, noting the discreet bombs: the homemade charges that had blown the lights. He entered the castle and walked its corridors. He looked about the Diamond Room and up through the hole in the ceiling. He climbed the rope to the roof and slipped out into the moonlight. He turned to where an artificial lake shimmered in the distance, but his vision fell short and he saw only a confusing haze at the limits of his world, limits that he now noticed had been edging ever closer for the past couple of years.

02/Death in Repose

Two months earlier, Jack returned from his morning run and collected his mail. He ran up the stairs to his apartment, in order to keep his workout going until he got home. He dropped the post onto the breakfast counter, stretched, and shook the lactic acid from his muscles. He turned the radio on and let the room fill up with power chords. He loved the relentlessness and the bombast of classic rock. A warm shower, a leisurely breakfast, and he felt ready to begin his day. He settled down with a mug of steaming coffee and spread the mail on the table before him. His phone beeped with a text message suggesting lunch.

Jack arrived at the restaurant shortly before one o'clock. Despite having a reservation, he had to wait for a table. From the bar, he had a clear view of the dining room. It was a dark vault filled with what the owners claimed to be a thousand years of Irish history; the timber joists that ran to the center of the ceiling had come from Irish trees. This was the province of a particular type of thief. To Jack, everybody was a thief, but he put himself in a different category to the thieves who ran the restaurant, and the thieves who ate there. He stole from the rich to avoid being poor. They robbed the poor in order to be rich, skimping on quality, or skimming pension funds to pay for their addictions: thousand dollar suits, hookers, and sloops. The exception was Tony, the person Jack was here to meet.

Working as a young thief in the fifties and sixties, Tony loved his life. He felt there was a certain glamour attached to his outlaw status. He was not just a thief, he was sticking it to *The Man*. Because of that image, he was also sticking it to the many daughters of *The Man*. The Future Mothers of America: wholesome looking girls who would prowl college campuses and downtown dive bars, in search of poetry and illicit sex: Indian, Black, Communist or Criminal. They were building memories before the onset of suburban respectability, children and tranquilizers: those magic little pills, which some were already taking from Mother's medicine chest in order to feel rebellious and alive, and which they would one day take in order to feel nothing. One of these women went on to campaign against backward messages on rock albums. Now an old man, Tony longed to retire, but he had seven ex-wives, twenty-five children, and thirty grandchildren. None of his ex-wives had remarried, five of his children and ten of his grandchildren were in rehab, and all but seven of this little village looked to Tony to support them.

Polite Jazz whispered from loudspeakers as a waiter led Jack to his table. The expression 'Music for Middlebrows' came to mind. He was sipping a glass of water with a couple of lemon and lime wedges floating in it when Tony arrived. He sat down and picked up the menu. As he looked at the prices, the corners of Tony's mouth turned down and with them his whole face seemed to slide a little, as if an avalanche threatened to take hold of his features. He shook his head.

"I remember when you could get a steak sandwich for a buck and a half. It was a good lump of steak too." He put the menu down and looked directly into Jack's eyes. "1.5"

Jack nodded. "1.5."

'1.5' meant one point five million dollars, Jack's fee for the job he still knew nothing about.

"Good. Let's eat." Their business concluded, the two men ordered lunch and spent half an hour discussing trivialities. There was no talk about the job. Arguably, there was no reason for them to meet, but Tony liked to look into the eyes of the person to whom he assigned a particular job. The occupation notwithstanding, this was the only way he could be sure he was dealing with an honest man.

Jack left the restaurant with a cell phone and a memory stick containing all the information he would need for the job. At home, he plugged the memory stick into his computer and learned he

had been hired to steal the Whitely Diamond. He smiled. He had once planned to crown his career by stealing this jewel. But he recognized the vanity of that ambition, the stone would be impossible to sell, and there is no profit in vanity.

In the weeks that followed, Jack made his plans, observing the advice of General Patton: *A good plan, violently executed today, is far better than a perfect plan executed tomorrow.* Jack finished his preparations by taking the night off.

Jack's eyes opened. A little drool fell from the corner of his mouth. He lay twisted across the bed, troubled and still. Dreams of a woman clawed at him and made him afraid. He took a moment to recall where he was. He felt his arm stretch across the empty space beside him. He felt the deeper emptiness of knowing that she was gone. For a few seconds, he thought she was the woman he had dreamed of, and then he remembered: she was a whore, and she was still on the clock. He did not recall her name; he did not recall her leaving, and he was too old for her anyway, even if she was a whore. There was something else, a presence that filled the room.

He found a pair of eyes burning in shadows within shadows as a figure took shape at the foot of the bed. Jack sensed, more than saw, concern cross the face of this phantom. A shift in the atmosphere wiped it all away and left a man, sitting, staring at him, and waiting for him to wake up. He felt the dread of something beyond his control. He felt tightness in his chest, and then a sickness, as if he had just thrown up. He thought he saw a bony finger caress the trigger guard of an automatic pistol – Death in Repose.

Jack's hand began to crawl down the side of the bed.

Death spoke softly, "Don't disturb yourself."

"What's going on?"

"This is just to let you know."

"Know what?"

The figure rose silently in a single movement. Moonlight sparkling on the silver gun in his hand looked like a tiny constellation. Jack followed the movement of these stars until each was extinguished as the intruder reached the bedroom door. Death stopped to look at Jack, and there again came the sense of concern.

"I'm sorry," he said, and slipped quietly out of the room.

As soon as the bedroom door closed, Jack was on his feet. He crossed the room and opened the door. The hallway was empty. He opened the apartment door and walked quickly to the end of the corridor. The elevator was lit up and going down. Jack raced to the stairs, the door was stuck, and he had to put his shoulder to it to get it open. The stairwell was empty. He half ran, half jumped down the concrete steps to the next floor. He came out into the corridor and checked the elevator again. It was two floors below him and still going down. He went back to the stairs and continued running jumping racing the elevator to the ground hardly feeling the cold concrete on his bare feet hoping at least to put a face to the shadow.

He reached the ground floor and stood by the lobby door, his hand on the handle. He took a moment to catch his breath and then softly cracked open the door. The lobby appeared empty. From where he stood, Jack could not see the elevator, but he heard it arrive, he heard the doors open. He knew that anyone leaving the elevator would have to pass him. He waited. No one came. There was silence until he heard the elevator doors close.

"Hello?" the Security Guard's voice echoed in the empty lobby. The clip-clop of his shoes on the marble floor reminded Jack of his own feet turning numb from the cold. He suddenly realized he was naked and blushed at the prospect of running into the old woman who lived in the apartment below him. He closed the door and as quietly as he could, ran up two flights of stairs and out of view. He felt weak. He was aware only of his heart beating and the cold sweat that made him shiver. He continued back up to the seventh floor, keeping an eye out for anyone coming down the stairs.

Jack pushed open his apartment door. The entrance hall was empty. He stepped inside, closed and locked the door. He felt more embarrassed than angry that someone had broken into his home. As a burglar, Jack knew all the vulnerable places in his apartment, and when he first moved in, he made sure to secure them. Until now, his precautions had kept him safe. He pulled on a robe and went out onto the balcony, looking down to the street for anyone coming out of the building. After fifteen minutes with no sightings, Jack went back inside and locked the door. Did his burglar live in the building? Jack had not felt this vulnerable since he was a child growing up in a New York tenement. Even then, the thought that the burglar was probably someone from the neighborhood made it easier to deal with; someone would find them; someone would pay.

Jack turned on all the lights and began to search the apartment, looking for the signs only a professional would recognize. An hour later, he stopped. Half a lifetime's experience had just proved worthless. Jack allowed himself to consider the scarier part of the encounter. Whoever it was had been sitting for however long in the dark, watching him sleep. What was meant by the statement "This is just to let you know." Let him know what? He stopped, arrested by an idea. The whore was in on it. She had let him in. Had she? Was she just some random whore? Was he an assignment? Thoughts of the girl sent him back to the bedroom, but all he found was a burst condom.

All hope of sleep abandoned now, Jack went to the kitchen and put the coffee on, then went through to the living room. He stood for a few moments before one of the bookshelves that lined the apartment, searching for something light. He settled on Ian Fleming's, *Live and Let Die*. He opened the book but found he was unable to concentrate. He decided to try a more challenging book. He did not expect a better result, but the exercise might be useful. He put Fleming away and opened Marcus du Sautoy's *The Music of the Primes*. The book was an adventure in mathematics. It was one of the regrets of Jack's life that he lacked the imagination to appreciate the finer points of mathematics. He could certainly calculate, and he understood that everything aspires to the condition of mathematics. There are those who argue that everything aspires to the condition of music, but what is music without mathematics? A piano keyboard is divided into a repeating pattern of natural, sharp, and flat notes. The scale of C major is C, D, E, F, G, A, B, the final C is actually the beginning of the next round and is played to make the sound complete. In any given scale, the division between each note is always the same, so you can pick any first note, and following this pattern, you will quickly learn the keyboard. The Blues is not a feeling; it is a mathematical construct, man! Unfortunately, though Jack understood the principal, the actual making of music, indeed, the making of any art, escaped him.

Jack had just started to read when all of these thoughts attacked. He put the book aside, turned the television on, and flicked through the news channels. He found a story about a Marine Corps Colonel tracing stolen artifacts. The history of Iraq, worth hundreds of millions of dollars, was being trafficked to London, New York, Paris, and Tokyo. Almost all of it went through Geneva, and frequently it was Iraqis leading the way in selling off their heritage, bringing them more or less into line with the rest of the world. The plunder found its way into the secret vaults of people who told themselves they were preserving the history of this cradle of civilization. Occasionally, customs officers discovered these artifacts in the luggage of ...

Jack changed channels. A new director at the Louvre had removed the Mona Lisa. The exhibit would remain closed for six months to facilitate cleaning and a new study. Angry tourists, in France for this painting alone, complained to their tour operator; they complained again when the tour operator refused to give them a refund. In some quarters, the painting's removal revived speculation that it was a fake. Jack turned the television off. Given the particular news channel, there was no guarantee that the story was accurate, but it would almost certainly become a movie.

Jack showered, dressed and took a shot of espresso. He felt a little better, but there was something he could not escape. He went into the bedroom and found the cell phone Tony had

given him. The contact list contained a single number. Jack pressed the call button and as arranged, let the phone ring until it went to voice mail. He left a message, “Hey Tony, it’s Jack. How’s tricks?” He wanted to know what Tony knew. More importantly, he wanted to know if Tony had sold him out. With fifteen other jobs working, and with everything else Tony had going on, who knew what offers might start to look attractive. Although risks were an accepted part of the job,

Jack did not intend to walk into a killing zone.

Half an hour at the meeting point with no sign of Tony. In a situation like this, Tony was always prompt. His absence, coupled with the break-in, told Jack that everything was wrong. At best, something had happened to Tony, but killing him made no sense, he always worked through the client’s agent. The thief never met anyone except Tony; the client was always protected.

Jack crossed the city and changed cars, then crossed the city again to what he hoped was still his safe house. He took the elevator to the top floor.

The sun made mirrors of the city, and the apartment was stifling. Jack opened all the windows to let in as much air as possible before the rush hour arrived, spewing out noise and smoke and forcing him to shut it out and turn the air conditioning on. He paced the floor, trying to decide what to do next.

Would you like to know how it all turns out?

The ebook is available now.

[The Company of Thieves](#)

Online Cupid

DAY 1

Once upon a time...

A man stepped through a doorway and stopped. He felt foolish in his mirror shades. He almost took them off; instead he stood blinking in the darkness as he looked about the room, barely making out the metal shelves, the sink, the laptop computer on the old metal desk. Beside the desk, a printer sat on an old chair with trails of rust running up the legs. In the centre of the room, a woman sat awkwardly on a wooden chair. She seemed to be sinking into it, even as she leaned forward. A red velvet bag covered her head, and her legs were shackled to the legs of the chair. Her arms disappeared behind her back. Above her, a 40-watt bulb with a pink plastic shade cast a faint yellow light, like an island on the floor.

‘Shsh,’ the man said, ‘it’s OK. You’re safe.’

The woman’s head jerked up as he spoke and she seemed to follow the sound of his approaching footsteps. He stopped in front of her and reached out. He held his hand an inch or so from her head.

‘I’m going to take the bag off, OK?’

She didn’t answer and he assumed she was just afraid. He pinched the corners of the bag and gently tugged, to avoid causing her distress; revealing more and more of her face, until she looked up at him, and the relief disappeared from her eyes.

He must have been six feet tall and had once been well-built, but now he ran to fat. He wore a cheap black polyester suit, with a black shirt and black tie. On his head, he wore a black fright wig, a few strands of which hung down over the sunglasses. She saw herself; tears gathered in her round, blood-shot eyes; her cheeks made hollow by the red ball gag in her mouth; the black straps that held the ball gag in place. Absurdly, she was struck by the fact that the ball gag perfectly matched the red velvet bag in his hand.

She shivered and the man moved away, not sure how to continue. He became conscious of the bag in his hand and looked for somewhere to put it down; finding nothing he turned back to the woman.

‘Listen, em... really sorry about this, but, em... I have to cut away your trousers and knickers. OK?’

On the word ‘cut’ the woman tried to run, that is, her body prepared to run, twisted on the chair, even as her mind told her the truth of her situation.

‘No no,’ the man said. He dropped the bag and reached out to reassure her, but didn’t touch her because he felt that would be a violation. ‘It’s OK it’s OK,’ he said, ‘it’s nothing... icky! Look at me. Hey. Look at me.’

When she didn’t, he reached out to touch her, to guide her face to his. The woman jerked her head away and looked down her nose at him.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I should have thought of it sooner.’

He looked away, conscious of the need to do or say something to reassure her.

He crouched down and gently placed his hands on her lap.

He looked her in the eye and did his best to put a smile into his voice. ‘It’s OK. I’m not going to kill you. I’m not going to rape you. I’m not going to violate you in any way. There’s a bucket under that chair. I have to cut your clothes off so you can go to the toilet. OK? If you need to go, just let me know and I’ll give you some privacy. Nod if you understand.’

After a few seconds the woman nodded.

The man smiled at her. She would learn that the man had only a handful of responses, and this was his favourite.

He took a pair of scissors from his pocket.

He took hold of one of the woman's trouser legs.

The woman stiffened, she tried to pull her leg away.

The man let go of the trouser leg and raised his hands in surrender.

'OK?' he said.

He slowly lowered his hands and took hold of her trousers again, rubbing the cloth between his fingers and thumb.

Again, the smile in his voice, 'These must have set you back a fair whack. Seems a shame to cut them, but, well, I suppose if I unlocked you, you'd, well...'

He shrugged his shoulders and offered a sheepish grin.

He began to cut through the cloth.

The woman's leg jerked forwards and the metal cuff at her ankle bit into her skin.

The man let her trousers go again; he began to lose patience with her.

'I'm doing this for your benefit, you know,' he snapped. He took a breath and counted to ten. 'I don't want to cut your leg open.' He took another breath and took hold of her trousers again. He began to cut.

The woman stiffened. For a few seconds, as she listened to the scissors cut through the cloth, all she could think of was how much they cost: seventy-five Euros in Marks and Spencer. Cold metal touched her leg and she jumped; but he continued, cutting up past her knee where her trousers pulled tight against her skin. He cut more slowly now, gently pushing the scissors forward, making tiny cuts. As each new cut revealed more leg, he trembled inside, excited by the erotic possibilities of their situation. It was something he had never considered, and part of him wished he had thought of it sooner.

Looking down at him, the woman was terrified by his smile: he smiled because he believed they were falling in love.

He put the scissors down, realising she sat awkwardly because she had fallen into the hole in the chair. He stood up and walked around behind her.

'I'm going to lift you out of the hole now,' he said. He reached under her arms and joined his hands across her breasts. He felt his penis swell to a semi-erection and thrilled to the thought of it brushing against her back, although the chair was between them. 'OK,' he said, 'on three: one!' In a sudden movement, he pulled her body up and then eased her back onto the seat. As he removed his hands from around her body, he stroked her breasts through her clothes, thinking that she wouldn't notice. He walked around in front of her and thanked her for her help. He crouched down, picked up the scissors and continued with his work. After cutting each trouser leg to the waist, the man put the scissors down and looked up at the woman.

'Lift your bum, please. I need to pull your trousers away.'

The woman did not move. She held his eyes until he was compelled to look away.

'I, I know this is embarrassing for you,' he said, 'it's embarrassing for me too, but if you don't lift your bum, you'll have to sit in your own mess when you go to the toilet.' She did not move and the man began to feel she was looking down on him. But he was not an animal. 'OK,' he said. 'I'm not going to leave you to sit in your own mess.' He looked at her again, hopeful that she would recognise his gentleness. 'Please?' Still she did not move. 'Suit yourself.'

Would you like to know how it all turns out?

The ebook is available

[Online Cupid](#)

[The Man who Thought he was Charles Bukowski](#)

He could stand in the centre of his room, stretch out his arms and touch the wall on either side. The small window gave a view of a brick wall, and the drain emptied out directly below. In summer, the rising smell forced him to keep the window closed. As a result, the room stank of cigarettes, stale sweat, dirty blankets, dirty laundry, and the plastic shopping bag filled with rubbish that hung on a nail by the sink. From time to time his underwear, drying on the radiator, though not thoroughly rinsed, masked all other smells. Every time he came home all of these smells hit him, but he never wondered if they were the cause of his perpetual headache.

Three or four times a week he got the urge to have a drink. Then he would buy a ten-pack of beer from his local discount supermarket: ten small bottles of German beer. His intention was always to drink only one bottle, this always became two, and two became three. Usually by the fifth bottle he had climbed into bed with a book and the TV turned on with the sound off, for the company. When he finished bottle number ten, he turned the TV off, curled up and went to sleep, not because he was tired, but because he was already in bed and had nothing else to do. This had been his routine for years.

There were times when passing a pub he felt the temptation to push open the door and go in. But the smoky rooms he remembered were gone, replaced by what he called Fashion Statement Drinking Emporiums, designed to appeal to a transient population. The young men he saw going into these places looked like homosexuals. The women looked pointy and callous, especially the mousey ones. Then there were the Biker Bars; dark pits of despair filled with noise and smelly people.

Now was one of the times he felt he needed a drink. Sick of drinking at home, and afraid to go to the pub, he bought four cans of Lager and went to the park. The deep front pockets of his heavy black coat held two cans each. He didn't know exactly where in the park people went to drink, but he wanted to avoid the places where tramps met. The thought of becoming a tramp frightened him; he had seen them fighting; the ugliness of their lives disgusted him. He imagined a world where fun-loving movie drunks congregate in lilac groves and sleep on the dappled ground.

His favourite writers had all been down and out and drunk, and he wanted to be one of those. Although he read, not for instruction or adventure, but merely to pass the time, he told himself he was searching for Life's Eternal Verities. He didn't know what Verities actually meant, but it felt right. If you told him it was the plural of verity, a noun meaning a true principle or belief, especially one of fundamental importance (Concise Oxford English Dictionary: Twelfth Edition), he would have agreed with you, although he wouldn't really have been any clearer.

He sat on a bench and took a moment to catch his breath before reaching into his pocket for the first can of Lager. Just then, a child ran past, her arms flapping, and her hair bouncing; she was laughing, chasing a ball. The sight cheered him. He watched her catch up to the ball, crouch down and pick it up with both hands. He watched her run back the way she had come; watched her throw the ball and watched the ball bounce once before landing a few feet from her. A man in his thirties clapped hands and cheered. He picked up the ball and then looked at the old man on the bench. Their eyes locked and the old man felt threatened.

Would you like to know how it all turns out?

The ebook is available here

[The Man who Thought he was Charles Bukowski](#)

Trial of the Living Dead

Woodstock and I were sat on his couch getting stoned.

‘Come on, man,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘Theatre workshop.’

‘What?’

I was twenty-one years of age and had no interest in the theatre. Except for some nonsense in school about the dangers of drugs, I had never even seen a play. As a child I wondered about the lives of others, I imagined living other lives; but it never occurred to me that this had anything to do with acting.

A young hippy named Del ran the workshop. She began by telling us of an upcoming cabaret we could participate in; she asked if there were any writers in the group. Woodstock jerked his head towards me, ‘He’s a writer.’

I wasn’t, but a few weeks earlier I had written an essay, titled *My Girlfriend Turned into a Tractor*. I wrote it in response to a challenge. A friend and I were talking and I said that it would be easy to write a novel. All you have to do is live for five years and then write about it; surely even a dull life would have enough moments of interest to fill a book in that time? Anyway, I wrote the story, it got a good response and I forgot about it. Now I had been outed as a writer by a guy who was stoned most of the time and supplemented his dole by dealing drugs. That’s not to knock people on the dole, I was also signing on.

Del turned to me; she didn’t ask if I was a writer; she didn’t ask what I write; she just said ‘Bring something in next week?’ So there I was, embarrassed, afraid, and unable to speak. I mumbled something and she got annoyed. I agreed to write a script for the following week. That was that, the workshop went on and at the end Del reminded me that I owed her a play.

‘It’s OK. I don’t expect Shakespeare.’

My impulse was to say, ‘You don’t even look pregnant.’ Instead, I said, ‘Good, because he’s dead.’

She thought I was speaking metaphorically and went on a rant about how ‘*all of human life is contained, explored and explained within the works of William Shakespeare.*’ I had never read Shakespeare so didn’t know what she was talking about.

I had no idea how to write a play, but as I saw it, the choice was to give it a go or drop out of the class; as the class was my only real contact with other people, the idea of dropping out scared me more than being ridiculed for the shitty play I was bound to write. I cursed Woodstock for volunteering me. I would have dropped him altogether but he was my drug connection. On the way home I bought a four-pack of lager. I sat on the bed looking at the room. There wasn’t much to look at, it was a box-room at the top of an old house, the sort of place we’re told is romantic, but was actually just a step up from a slum. I opened the first can and took a long drink. It was warm and watery and I emptied the can in two swallows. I began to think of playwriting as a path to glory. This could be the first step towards a great Broadway career, money, fame and rosy-cheeked women. I got into bed, fully dressed, and pulled the blankets up, weaving a fantasy future as I continued to drink and smoke, lighting one cigarette off another.

By the time I finished the lager I had begun to wonder what I was going to write about. How would I get the actors on and off stage? How many pages did I have to write? What about the acceptance speech for my Tony award? Maybe I should just stay in the room; it would certainly be easier than writing a play and I wouldn’t have to deal with people anymore. That was no good either; I still had to go out to sign-on. How the hell do you write a play anyway?

My eyelids grew heavy but it was still light outside. I got out of bed and went for a walk, looking for inspiration. I made it to the supermarket just in time to buy four more cans of lager, so at least I didn’t have to worry about how I would make it through the night. The journey home took me past a court house. I pictured the lawyers, the Judge and Jury, the prisoner in the dock, the public gallery filled with relations and gawkers. It was theatre, I decided. I would write a trial.

Back at the room I got into bed and opened the first can of lager. I had a pad and biro beside me on the bed. I stared at the empty page wondering how to begin. I doodled and wrote down titles. I was searching for something impressive, highbrow and posh. At the time I thought theatre was the preserve of the rich; people whose homes were papered in green and hung with engravings of old men in red livery

stood amongst horses and hunting dogs. Soon the page was a mess of blue ink with titles highlighted in boxes, and written over again and again until they stood out; *Witness for the Prosecution*, *Kramer versus Kramer*, *The Maxwell Verdict*, and others I can no longer recall. *The Maxwell Verdict* had to do with *Maxwell's Silver Hammer*, not the media tycoon. I'd used the titles of actual plays to help stimulate my thinking, but they all seemed a little stiff and beyond my capabilities. I couldn't say what inspired the title *Trial of the Living Dead* but it made me laugh. I could see the zombie in the dock; I could see Death defending him. It was also in keeping with *My Girlfriend's Turned into a Tractor*, maybe that was what I liked about it. Immediately I wanted to know why this corpse was on trial. The more I thought about it the more stupid it seemed. I put it aside and turned on the radio. It would be great at this stage to say I tuned into a particular station and a comment heard by chance gave me everything I needed, but there was nothing like that. I finished my last can of lager and went to sleep to the sound of early 90's soft rock.

I awoke the next morning feeling equally uninspired. It was dole day, about 5 a.m. and I was dying for a smoke, so while I waited for the postman to bring my cheque, I got up and dressed, then went for a walk, scouring the streets picking up dog-ends. When I'd found a few good ones, I sat on a bench and rolled my first cigarette of the day. I lit it and took a long drag; it tasted disgusting and I felt like my head was going to explode. I needed something to get that taste out of my mouth. I knew restaurants and pubs had bread delivered around now, so I walked along the street looking out for easy pickings. Some of the doorways had high gates, but others had nothing between me and rolls of freshly baked bread. I took a few and continued on until I came to a doorway with fresh orange juice. I stole a bottle and walked quickly away. A couple of streets farther on, I devoured the plunder. It wasn't even close to being the best meal I'd ever had but it filled a hole and that was enough. It must have been about 6:30 by then and I was amazed to see so many people about at such an unGodly hour. Some must have been on their way home – lucky them that they had somewhere to come home from; some must have been on their way to work – lucky them that they had somewhere to go. I wondered about their lives. They all seemed so self-contained. I recognised some of the people on their way home and called out to them. I waved as they looked around. Their eyes swept past me and they kept going. They were midnight rock-club rebels and now it was morning in the street. One of them worked for the government. He worked for HM Customs and always had weed, but he only got stoned on the weekend. Thinking of that, my mind wandered down other alleys. The newspapers at the time were full of the Poll-Tax. Riots had broken out in a number of cities. I thought it might be a good reason for the trial in the play I had yet to start writing. The fact is I couldn't come up with anything else, so it would be a play about a zombie prosecuted for not paying his poll-tax.

I decided to go home and write until my cheque arrived.

The table in my flat was a few pieces of timber at the foot of the bed, fixed to the wall with hinges. I unfolded these and sat there with a refill pad. I rolled a cigarette while I searched for the perfect way to begin. A couple of cigarettes later I got annoyed with myself.

'Fuck it man, just put something down.'

So I did. I had never been to court and so with no idea how to begin I wrote: *The Presenter comes on*. Suddenly I was writing a game-show; it was still a trial, but it was a trial being offered up as entertainment. Without meaning to I had invented Reality Television, for which I would like to apologise! I made the decision then to just write down the first thing that came into my head, even if it was rubbish. It could always be fixed later on. So there I was, writing whatever came into my head, smoking dog-ends and eating and drinking stolen food. Each word brought a growing excitement as my imagination began to orbit a new world. That's not to say it was easy, but as I continued, not writing became harder than writing. I filled a couple of pages without making any judgement. I put my biro down and leaned back against the wall. I don't know how long I sat like that looking at the pages. I felt very quiet, very still. I wondered what the play would be like on stage.

I began to feel that I had forgotten something. Then I remembered it was giro day. I gathered up the pages and put them under my pillow, (there was nowhere else to put them). I folded the table back against the wall so I could open the door. It was possible to open the door with the table down, but not to open the door and leave the room. I went downstairs and there was the cheque on the floor. Yes! The play could take care of itself. I was going to the Post Office. I cashed the giro and bought a hot Cornish Pastie, a can of Coke, tobacco and papers.

That morning at the centre Del asked how the play was coming along.

‘Really good,’ I said. ‘But I don’t want to say anything about it just yet.’

‘Oh that’s OK. I understand. You have your process. Don’t forget to bring it in on Tuesday.’

Tuesday. Jesus. I had a coffee and went home, stopping off on the way for a few cans of lager. Good lager this time, not the watery stuff at one pound for four.

Once again I was sat on the bed drinking. After the first can I set up the table and took the pages from under the pillow. I quickly read what I had written and realised I would never make it as a playwright. But however bad it was going to be, I had to finish, not so much for the sake of the class as for me. I really don’t know what was driving me.

I opened the second can and began to write, expecting a flow of words. But it didn’t happen. I looked over every sentence, questioning it; was that the correct thing to write? Did the play make sense? I had a reanimated corpse on trial for his life for not paying his poll-tax because he was dead. Death defending and a game show host prosecuting. The whole thing watched over by a Dominatrix. If anyone had told me I was writing political satire, I wouldn’t have known what they were talking about. I filled a couple more pages and put the biro down feeling satisfied with having done a good day’s work. I began to fall asleep and so, a few minutes later I started writing again. I filled another five pages before my imagination began to go blank. I stared at the paper but nothing seemed to be happening. ‘Fuck it,’ I thought, ‘I’m going to bed.’ Leaving everything as it was I lay back on the bed and rolled myself up in the blanket. Thoughts of seeing my play on the stage warmed me and I fell asleep wondering what my life would be like afterwards.

I awoke in darkness. The sheets were wet and it took a minute to realise I hadn’t pissed myself. When my eyes adjusted I discovered I had left the window open. I pulled the covers tighter around me and watched windblown rain fall on the bed. I looked at the table to make sure the work was OK, but it was empty. I panicked and sat up straight, looking around the room, half afraid that someone had come in while I was asleep and stolen my play. The only light was the muted overspill from next door. I got out of bed and turned the light on. There the play lay on the floor, blown from the table by the wind. I picked up the pages and put them back under the pillow. Then I picked up the open beer and had a drink. I rolled a cigarette and sat on the bed smoking and drinking. I closed the window and then propped the electric heater up on the table and aimed it at the wet section of the bed. I plugged the heater in and turned it on. Then I panicked, afraid the heater would tumble onto the wet bed and blow me up; that the blankets would overheat and catch fire, I would die from smoke inhalation before I could unfold the table and open the door to escape. I unplugged the heater and put it away.

I realised I was hungry which meant a visit to the chip shop. If I wasn’t careful I would soon be a fat bastard, and then all the women waiting for me to finish the play would discover they liked me better as a friend, which was pretty bad considering we hadn’t even met. But my stomach needed something more than cigarettes and alcohol. Chicken curry on the bone with rice and chips was always good. You bought it on the bone because it was the only way to be sure you were getting chicken and not something else. There was always the chance of rat.

I sat eating and looking at the pages, almost afraid to continue. I ate about half the food and I started writing. I discovered that if I played it like a movie in my mind I could just let the story take its own course and write down what I saw, so that’s what I did. It was getting light by the time I finished. I had forty or so pages; I knew that most of them would be rubbish, but that was OK if the good pages really were good. Of course I had nothing to compare them with; no way of knowing what constituted good theatre. I tucked into the cold chicken curry, and washed it down with warm lager. I thought that before I start cutting bits from the play I should leave it alone for a day or two. Maybe I should go to the theatre.

Would you like to know how it all turns out?

The ebook is available here

[Trial of the Living Dead](#)

Very Short Stories

Hen

The city morning magic-hour:
Lost to light-pollution.

On the street a symphony:
A drunken-disco serenade.

Beauty on a balcony:
A bride-to-be in L-plates,

Drips cider from her chin,
Congratulates a beggar

On his good fortune.

* * *

Words, words, words

Forever is not mine to give.
If it were, I still would not
Lay it bare at your feet.
There's slavery in that story.

A week ago I might have done,
And you, I know, would have
Turned it down and told me:
"Stop being silly." There is more romance
In your cold mind and warm heart reaching
For what is true, than in every fiction
Of 'Forever'. You were right.

Not about everything, but
Enough. I love you now,
Feel it for a moment, then
Let it go.

* * *

Venus in Chains

She folded herself up and cut
A poem into her flesh. Words
Heal like braille upon her skin.

Braile upon her skin to save
Silence from the spoken word;
The spoken word; the spoken word;

The spoken word; the spoken word;
Speaking to her still. She agreed
To be forced by me who lack.

Now she has celebrity, money;
A torn vagina, broken as she was
Before she was.

* * *

The One

Endless talk about the soul
Leaves me cold. I am not
The one to supply the missing
Part of anyone. If we are
Incomplete before each other
How can we be free
To love in anything other than
The romance of the stage?
But come together naked and maybe
We can share something beyond
A selfish adolescent dream.
Let the soul be
What it will. I'm not even sure
That I have
One.

The ebook is available here:

[*Very Short Stories*](#)

About the Author



Fergus Anthony was born in Ireland in 1969. Amongst other jobs, he has worked as a kitchen porter, a janitor, a tour guide, as a general labourer in construction.

He has published one novel: *The Company of Thieves*, and the novella *Online Cupid*, exploring of the dark side of online dating.

His theatre credits include
Robbie Ross in *Our Country's Good*,
The Painter in *The Visit*, and
Martin Kavanagh in *Brothers of the Brush*.

His plays, *Examine Your Zip* and *Godot* performed to enthusiastic audiences and are currently being prepared for publication.

Audience feedback for *Examine Your Zip*:
“Bawdy, witty, observant. Great performances.”
“Great show. Hearty laughs and heartfelt moments.”
“So clever. Excellent. Almost cried at some parts, roared with laughter at others.”



The logo is called Heart&Mind,
it's based on a woodcarving I made in the 1990's.
It's available on a T-shirt from

[An Elegant Adventure](#)

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