

# EVACUATION PLAN

a novel from the hospice

by

Joe M. O'Connell

Foreword by Joe Holley



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## FOREWORD

“For we do not, after all, simply have experience; we are entrusted with it. We must do something—make something—with it. A story, we sense, is the only possible habitation for the burden of our witnessing.” — Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*

In the summer of 2004, after nearly three decades as a journalist for newspapers and magazines in Texas and California, I became a staff writer for *The Washington Post*. Hiring someone my age was unusual for the Post, but my primary task for the paper was also unusual. Along with four other veteran journalists of wide experience, I would be an obituary writer. My colleagues and I would take one of the lowlier beats on most newspaper staffs—where rookie reporters traditionally learn the mundane but necessary habits of accuracy and thoroughness—and transform it. We would write about the dead and in the process re-create lives in all the depth and fullness we could summon. We would be writing, not memorials, but biographies in miniature—about saints and scoundrels, about the well known and the unknown. We would seek to capture—on deadline, of course—the particularity of a person’s existence in all its richness and idiosyncrasy.

In my years of experience as a journalist, I had written a total of three obituaries—two for the *New York Times* about Texas political figures and one about my father for his hometown newspaper. For that reason alone, I was apprehensive during my first few days at the Post. What do you say to a stranger, I wondered, who has just experienced the loss of a spouse, a child, a dear friend? How do you capture a life in 20 inches or less of newsprint?

I soon realized that I had no reason to be concerned. I discovered that something intriguing almost always takes place during the process of collaborating with a family member on re-creating a person’s life. Since I have not known the person, the family member isn’t expecting me to feel the same sense of loss, which frees me to ask questions, to listen intently and to guide the spouse or the parent or the sibling through a process of remembering. They tell me stories, recall memories, share the particles of a person’s existence. We even laugh together over the

silly things that happened through the years. Instead of concentrating on a death, in other words, we attempt the biographer's task. We do our best to bring a person back to life.

*In Evacuation Plan: A Novel from the Hospice*, Joe O'Connell recounts in fictional form a similar opportunity. Matt, his narrator, a screenwriter scouting for material in a place where people have gone to die, is at first reluctant to intrude on the rapidly dwindling moments of time at the end of a person's life. He feels bumbling and exploitative, frets that he's becoming a "grief junkie." But gradually, as he drops by the hospice every day or so, as he sits at the bedside of patients and teases out their stories, he learns a lesson similar to what I have learned as an obituary writer. He discovers that in the shared process of making something of their experience, of shaping a story out of the raw materials of their existence, the people he comes to know at the hospice become truly and fully live.

The stories Matt hears aren't always pretty. Far from it. But for the people telling those stories, the act of sharing their experiences with a willing listener gives even the most troubled lives a richness and dignity they would not otherwise have had. "Death without a history is the cruelest joke of all," Matt observes at one point. He's determined not to let that happen, if at all possible.

One of his favorite patients is a garrulous old man named Charlie Wright who invariably has wonderful stories to share, as well as life lessons worth heeding. "And it is good you are here on this side for him," a nurse assures Matt. "He thinks your writing is his immortality."

It is, of course. For Charlie Wright, for all of us, memory—memory shaped and shared—is the true reality. It is our immortality.

Joe O'Connell's fictional screenwriter has one advantage over the real-life obituary writer, in that he's able to meet the people he writes about before death asserts its tyranny. What we have in common, however, is something quite profound: We're both dealing with death, but we're writing about life. *Evacuation Plan* itself may be set in a hospice, but it is, in fact, a rich and compelling book of life.

Joe Holley  
Chevy Chase, Md.

## THE SCREENWRITER

ANNIE MAY LEADS ME down the hospice hallway and into a partially open door. Mr. Wright's eyes are closed, but they flash open at our arrival.

"Am I dead yet?" he booms. "Is this a pair of angels sent to whisk me on my way to the heavens where I'll be bathed by dainty virgins and talk philosophy and smoke cigars with Mr. Freud?"

"No, not dead," Annie May says. "Ugly, maybe, but not dead."

"Annie May." His hair is white, thick, and looks to be recently combed. His voice drops into the disk jockey zone. "She's a goddess. Come to make an honest man of me. Is this your son, Annie?"

"Wrong color, Mr. Wright."

"He is a tad pale. The tadpole is a tad pale. Get your son some sun!" He sticks his hand out toward me and winks as I shake it. "But a fetching lad. So you beat me to her. Gigolo. Sly dog."

"This is our filmmaker," Annie May says.

"Ah, the creative genius has come to pick my brain. Better do it while I've still got something left. Sit, boy. Sit."

I pull a chair up by the bed, but the seat is already taken by an artificial leg. I feel goose bumps raise on my arm.

"Diabetes," Mr. Wright says. "At least I have one leg to stand on. Toss it in the corner, boy."

I pick it up gently and feel its heft. The shoe and sock on it creep me out as I drop it by the wall. Not much to the room: a bed, a couch, two overstuffed chairs; sink by the wall and a small refrigerator. But it's more homey than a hospital room.

Annie May laughs at me again and the old man who is 70, 75, though he acts younger, joins in. He's wearing pressed baby-blue pajamas and the pink of his cheeks sharply contrasts to the white hair.

"I've named it Henrietta after my first wife," he says and points at the leg. "I never liked Henrietta. But she gave me two strapping boys and one heavenly daughter."

"Is diabetes why you're here?" I settle in the chair.

"Diabetes and the Triple A," he says. "I'm a full-fledged member. Asthma, arteriosclerosis, and arrogance. Heavy on the latter."

"Don't let him fool you." Annie May stands over us with one hand on her hip. "He's a lover, not a fighter."

"Annie May!" he says. "I'll make an honest woman of you yet, you little flirt."

He turns toward me and offers a hand. It's warm to the touch. Not what I expected from a dying man. Little of this place is what I'd expected.

"Name's Charlie Wright. No relation to Frank Lloyd Wright, but we shared the same business, and the ladies here like to delude themselves that I'm an artiste. Sorry, Annie May. I just put up ugly boxy buildings for the government and a school or three. A company man. Not an artist like this young man."

"Some would argue whether movies are art," I say.

"Don't let the bastards get you down. What's your name?"

"Matt. I guess you could say I'm here in search of a good story. Can you tell me what it's like to be in this place?"

"Cream of the crop," he says. "Everything is aces at the hospice. Better than that damn hospital any day. But you don't need a story; you need a model. That's what we do in my field. Then we can see what a building will look like in three dimensions."

He cups his hands as if cradling a ball.

"Closed structure." His hand unfolds. "Open structure."

He looks at me as if waiting for some kind of sign I'm getting it. I put on that nodding smile I used with my own father when he started lecturing.

"Matt, Matt, Matt. A closed structure doesn't change. That's death. An open structure has three dimensions, like a model house, and is open to change."

"I see." But I still don't quite get his point.

"Don't sweat the story, boy! The moment you think you've got a lasso on it, it's going to change."

Okay, I get it. I need to let the story come to me.

"So that's how you see death?" I ask.

"We're always afraid of change," he says. "You better not remodel one of my buildings, bub. But lack of change is what should scare us."

"Are you ready for the end, Mr. Wright?"

"Name's Charlie," he says. "The end?"

“Death,” I say. “I wonder what it’s like to be facing death.”

His face gets serious, and his left hand reaches out to caress the bed’s metal railing.

“Dying . . .” It comes out of him more as a question than a statement. “By golly, I guess I am going to die. Imagine that.” His eyes turn first to Annie May then toward me. “No worries, folks. I’ve got it mostly figured out.”

“Mr. Wright looks tired,” Annie May says and motions for us to leave.

The old man nods.

“Come back and see me, boy. We’ll find that story yet.”

“It’s a date.”

In the hallway, Annie May kisses me on the cheek.

“What was that for?”

“You did Mr. Wright a favor. You reminded him that his journey is close, and he’s got to prepare.”

“What now?”

“You’ve graduated, Matt. Time to fly solo. I’ll be around somewhere if you need me.”



I knock at Room Five and wait a second before entering. The woman in the bed has reddish, yellow hair that is shaved away on one side of her head, which is large and flabby. Her eyes are vacant and don’t focus as I approach her bedside.

“Mrs. Fiola? How you doing?” I say the words slowly and loudly.

Nothing. No change, then I realize I’ve asked one of the questions Annie May said doesn’t matter at the hospice.

“I’m wondering if you can tell me about your life, Mrs. Fiola.”

Her eyes find me for a second, then spin away.

“Not a bad life.” Her voice is soft, younger than she looks.

“You have children?”

“No, never married. An ugly duckling.”

“What kind of career did you have?”

She pauses as if in deep thought.

“Worked at the post office sorting mail.” The words are a mumbled soup. “In a bookstore. Nothing much.”

“Was there a best moment to your life?”

She licks her lips, and after a few seconds her eyes clear and focus on mine.

“In the Army. Vietnam. Doing paperwork at hospitals. Front lines. One day a doctor comes in. Pregnant woman. Says needs help. I didn’t know what to do. Coming out so slow. Head pops out. He says catch the baby. I look down and here it comes. Falls right in my hands. A baby girl.”

“That’s beautiful.”

I take out my pad and scribble her words on it. Her eyes start to wander again. I have to speak up before I lose her.

“You believe in heaven, Mrs. Fiola? Hell?”

She props her hand and forearm straight up in front of her, and the arm wavers like a gas gauge in a car.

“Done some bad things, some good,” she says. “Hope my balance is over the proper way. Figure I’m right on the thin line.”

Her eyes start to cloud again. Her arms drops, and her head falls back to the pillow. Done.

I tiptoe into the hallway and try to shut the door behind me as silently as possible. A man with bloodshot eyes comes out of another room. Inside I see another elderly woman. She is awake and smiling toward someone else. All I can see are his hands.

“Hey,” the bloodshot guy says in greeting. His clothes are wrinkled and his breath reeks of stale beer. ☞

## THE GAMBLER

WHEN WE PULLED UP to the trailer house, Crazy Baby was naked, robotically swinging a suitcase and pacing the roof. I wondered what the odds were of her falling off before she froze to death. Probably low; schizophrenics have a great sense of balance.

My wife CeCe glared at me and shook her head slowly. Her eyes, with their cool logic, said it all, but her mouth made it official. “This is your last chance, Fred, you wienerhead.”

I reached for her hand and she squeezed mine back a little too tightly. Then Crazy Baby stood still and looked our way.

“George Washington can’t get away with it,” she screamed in a fast monotone, staring right through CeCe and me. “My stepfather kicks his dog and that dog don’t bark at all. Them nurses try to touch me again and I’ll sue them a new asshole. George Washington thinks he’s got me fooled with that curly hair . . .”

My mother used to say change is bad because it shakes things up too much. I suppose it’s like spinning dice. Only the cheat knows which way the numbers fall. For me and CeCe, the dice were tumbling to the shrill sound of Crazy Baby. In charge of the game was the father who had left me with a legacy of self-doubts, and the group of mentally ill ex-convicts he tended in exchange for their monthly government checks. Trailers full of these outcasts of society circled Dad’s house, like wagons holding off an Indian attack. I hadn’t seen him in five years when he walked out the door.

“Baby, get your fat ass down here and take your meds,” he said in a loud scratch, hands on his hips. Dad looked like how I imagined James Dean would if he’d made it to middle age: thick in the middle, wavy silver hair, dark glasses, an attitude.

“Got an itch to gamble, do you, boy?” he said without looking at me. Crazy Baby crawled down from the roof and Dad handed her a pill. Yeah, gambling reduced me to this. It started with a friendly poker game among high school classmates. It wasn’t long before I was begging farmers for bets at a chicken fight. Last week they repossessed CeCe’s Toyota from the front of the lab where she worked as a technician identifying viruses for fifteen bucks an hour. If they hadn’t outright

fired her after I showed up and she started punching and screaming, I'd wager she wouldn't be standing next to me now.

"Don't you mind Baby," Dad said and laid a hand on CeCe's shoulder. "She's just a dumb old crazy girl who likes to talk when she's off her pills. She's not used to a pretty woman like you."

CeCe smiled for the first time in days. CeCe was tiny, about four foot–eleven, but her piercing green eyes and erect posture made me forget I was a foot taller.

"I think she has maybe two synapses firing," CeCe said and pointed.

Crazy Baby searched her suitcase, pulled out a soiled dress.

"There's some kind of fire in Baby, that's sure," Dad said. "I'm Eugene Early, Fred's Papa. Looks like he won at something at least once. Come in and I'll show you around the mansion."

The two of them went giggling into the house and I was left standing there with Crazy Baby, who pulled a dozen stuffed animals out of the suitcase one at a time.

"These are my babies." She spit the words at me. "Don't touch them."

Dad once said she bit the ear off a fellow inmate who tried to take one of the dolls. Crazy Baby hadn't changed a lot since. There was a sprinkling of gray in her greasy hair and maybe a few more scars on her arms.



Dad did three things the year he decided to become Born Again: he adopted Crazy Baby, fresh from her parole; named his halfway house Tiresias Place; and invited me to visit. I didn't know what to make of his call. Mother had told me my father died in Vietnam. She'd remarried a good provider, a nice guy. My stepfather was always on the road, so I never knew him, and he sure wasn't the soldier Dad of my imagination. One spring break I'd even driven to the Vietnam Memorial and spent hours searching for Dad's name. My hero, my stability. Then I discovered he was an admitted murderer and con man who'd spent over twenty years behind bars. It was like I suddenly had a third arm, and it kept reaching up to slap me. I was fresh out of college then, one ball of contradictions.

“I don’t apologize to nobody but God,” Dad said during that first visit. He and Crazy Baby and I sat on his porch eating take–out chicken. Dad threw the bones to his pack of dogs, most of which seemed to be missing an eye, an ear, or a leg. “I ain’t embarrassed to admit I fucked up, son. If you ever need me, I’m here on the bad side of town with people your Mama wouldn’t let in the yard.”

I nodded my head, chicken grease dripping down my lips, but inside I was running as fast as I could from Tiresias Place, my Dad, and his retarded, misshapen, adopted daughter.



I had sworn I’d never be back, but here I was, penniless.

“Are you the doctor?” Crazy Baby asked in a child’s voice. To her everyone was an authority figure. She couldn’t keep them straight, but at least under medication she was coherent. “Cause you know I’m crazy. As can be.”

She laughed and coughed at the same time, and smothered her mouth in a plastic doll’s yellow hair. Crazy Baby peeked over the doll’s head, her eyes full of mischief.



“It all makes sense now, Fred,” CeCe said in the dark.

After he’d introduced us to the rest of the residents, Dad had moved us into a trailer that smelled of Oreos and piss. It was crowded with mismatched furniture donated by churches. I squirmed next to CeCe’s warmth, avoiding the random lumps on the mattress.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Why you are what you are.”

“CeCe, please.”

Once again I failed to read the signs. I saw sevens and eights, but life was giving me snake eyes.

“You fooled me, Fred. When we got married I thought you had some kind of plan. I knew you had a hard time keeping a job, but I thought you were just creative. Then I realized you had Cheese Whiz for brains.”

She reached over and ran her fingers through my hair. CeCe’s strange speech patterns were endearing at first, but they did begin to grate.

“Let’s not fight,” I said and roughly patted my hair back into place.

CeCe didn't argue like a normal person. She was as predictable as a computer.

"Fred, when I met your father today the axiom became clear. He's just like you."

"He's not the least fucking bit like me, CeCe. That man killed somebody over a parking space. The guy cut in front of him and Dad pistol-whipped him until his nose collapsed. Tell me I'm like that, go ahead."

CeCe scooted closer and massaged my stomach.

"It's not so bad. Eugene's a charming man and kind of cute, too."

"Damn it, CeCe," I said half-heartedly.

"What I figured out," she whispered in my ear, wrapping a tiny leg around my waist, "is that you're a poor cultivar. That's all there is to it."

"CeCe, speak in English please."

She was lulling me to a comfortable excitement. Making love with her was like a long, hot bath.

"You're a poor cultivar. Like a variety of orange that didn't quite work. One that has hardly any flavor, brittle seeds, a thin skin. You see, I can't be too mad since it's in your genes."

I didn't know whether to be insulted or relieved. My wife just told me I'm inbred, but since she had the bad fortune to place her chips on me she would have to let it ride. Her logic was sexy.



"I'm sorry about your mother," Dad said. He, CeCe, and I were sitting around a card table in his living room sipping coffee. Crazy Baby was on the floor shredding the day's newspaper. There was a dark mustiness to the house that made it clear this was home. The carpet was a thick maroon, and black velvet paintings of Jesus covered the walls.

"That she's dead or she's my mother?" I said.

CeCe flashed me a look. I meant the remark to come out jokingly. I buried mother two years ago, but she still was around passing judgment, telling me to quit making such a mess.

Dad just laughed and grinned. His eyes remained hidden behind dark glasses.

"Best stop sassing your Papa or I'll sic Baby on you. She's unpredictable." He swung around in his chair. "Tell him how crazy you are, honey."

Crazy Baby looked up from the mound of shredded paper.

“Who’s he?”

“This here’s an inspector from human services. Ugly, ain’t he?”

“Nah, he’s pretty,” Crazy Baby said and fluttered her eyelashes.

Dad made up roles for me when one of the Tiresias Place residents came around asking for medication, cigarettes, or a few dollars for junk food at the 7–Eleven down the block. Most of the time they stayed in their trailers or sat out front. But when they did come to Dad’s, I was a health inspector or a private investigator. Sometimes I was just another person over the brink.

“You ashamed to admit I’m your son?” I asked Dad just to goad him, to shuffle the deck.

“He’s kidding, Fred. Quit the harangue.”

CeCe stared at Crazy Baby with clinical fascination.

“That’s all right, darling.” Dad leaned into my face. He smelled of sweat and aftershave. “Boy, I admit you don’t have a lot to recommend you. You got no money, no job, and a wife that’s pissed. But we don’t judge people. Me and God just kick ass.”

Dad was puffed up, showing off for CeCe and making me feel like a kid. He called himself Born Again, but I was never sure if the religion was a scam. Being around Dad was like sticking your hand in a pit bull’s mouth.

I watched as Crazy Baby jammed wads of newspaper into her mouth as if they were cotton candy.

“CeCe, honey, you know about Tiresias, the one I named this place for?”

Dad put his hand on her knee. He was trying to see if he could make me jealous, the crazy old fart. It was working; a heat was rising, but damned if I’d let him know.

“I assume that’s a god. I’m not indoctrinated in mythology.”

CeCe stared at a jagged scar across his knuckles. I realized—CeCe probably did, too—that this was the same hand that had gripped the gun when he’d killed that driver.

“No, he wasn’t a god, but the gods blinded him. They felt bad about it, so they gave him the power of prophecy. That’s like our Baby here. She don’t have a lick of sense, but don’t let it fool you. She knows more

than she's letting on. Ain't that right, Baby? Tell this policewoman what you know."

Crazy Baby rocked back and forth and laughed. A drop of saliva, gray from the newsprint, hung from her bottom lip. "I didn't hurt nobody," she said. "They said they'd give me candy, but they didn't. I didn't hurt nobody."

Dad went to the kitchen and opened a drawer packed with oversized lollipops. He offered a green one to Crazy Baby. She moved to the corner and sucked.

CeCe rolled her eyes at me and motioned toward the door with her nose. I wanted to get out of this room—and Tiresias Place—but until one of us got a job we were stuck. I shrugged and Dad came back.

"You want you a lollipop, too, boy?"

He grinned at me and dropped a red sucker in the center of the table. I ignored him and watched Crazy Baby attack the dissolving green. There was no pattern; for a moment she licked the lollipop, then she nibbled at the edges, then she scraped her teeth along the sides.

"She did hurt them, but I don't know if she remembers," Dad said softly, as if confiding a deep secret, and leaned back until his chair tilted. "Me and Baby know what it means to put a world of hurt on somebody. She's simple-minded and them high school boys played with her. They was young and horny. One of them's a vegetable now. That's why I keep plenty of candy around. I ain't stupid, son."

He winked at me and I felt the hair on my forearms rise.



"Maybe we should have a child," I said.

The thought popped into my head like a hunch on a horse. CeCe and I were watching *Leave it to Beaver* on a little black-and-white TV. I was spending a lot of time in our trailer, doing my best to avoid the old man. CeCe went out in the mornings to look for a job while I placed bets with myself on when she would return. When I peeked out the window, Crazy Baby was in the yard staring at me.

"Maybe you should get your rear end off the couch and go with me to look for a job," CeCe said. "I may find one and not come back."

"Take a chance on me, CeCe. Somehow I know if we have a kid, everything will work out."

I don't know where the idea came from, but at that moment I was sure. A kid would bond CeCe and me, force me to get responsible, force us to get away.

"Fred, you don't live on a plane of reality," CeCe said. "Remember I told you what my embryology professor said? If a tall person and a short person breed, their offspring can have disproportionate body parts. I will not bring some huge-headed child into this world to suffer. And you are not the best breeding stock."

Dad again. Everything returned to him. CeCe and I were like another pair of crazy people at Tiresias Place, dependent. He gave us money for gasoline and food, invited us to church, cooked dinner every Friday. I wondered when he would offer up lithium. Dad was steadily gaining control. I was sure that at some unexpected moment he would shake us like dice in his scarred hands and send our lives spinning. He was always touching CeCe.

"Do you think he and Crazy Baby do, you know, *it*?" I asked.

CeCe squeezed her mouth into an O shape. "You're sick, Fred. Get off Eugene's cloud. He did some horrible things, but with age there is mellowing. He does take care of misfits. That should count."

I sunk down into the couch. "It should, but you can't take everything at face value, CeCe."

CeCe smiled. "Now you're talking," she said.



The menu was meat loaf smothered in blood red barbecue sauce. CeCe cut hers into neat squares and placed them in her mouth one by one. Dad shoveled the crumbling meat in. Crazy Baby was on the floor leaning slightly against my leg. Sauce dripped from her mouth onto her T-shirt, but she kept her free arm tightly wrapped around a one-armed doll.

"What do you think, boy? Can the old man cook or what?"

His glasses slipped down and I saw his watery eyes for a moment before his forefinger replaced them with darkness.

"It's the first gamble I've taken in a while, Dad."

He laughed and CeCe pinched my thigh approvingly under the table. For a moment we could have passed for a happy family.

"You miss it, don't you, son? You got that itch in you and it won't go away." He was playing the understanding father. "I used to have that

wildness, too. It's so strong." Dad leaned back in his chair. "You can taste it in your mouth and it tingles down." He looked up at CeCe. "It's like really fine sex, if you'll pardon the comparison, darling. Hey, wait a minute. I got me an idea."

Dad got up and returned with an ancient board game in a box.

"Monopoly," he said. "You can lose money and it won't matter one bit."

CeCe snickered. "Let's live dangerously."

Dad set the board on the table. It was yellowed with age and the tokens were heavy cast iron. It must have been donated to him by some church patron who found it disintegrating in an attic. I chose a man on a bucking steer as my token. Dad was the top hat and Crazy Baby the thimble. CeCe pulled an earring shaped like a butterfly from the box and used it. I went first and the dice snapped in my hands like old friends. Double threes. Oriental Avenue in the low rent district. It was mine for \$100. Roll again. A one and a trey. Jail, just visiting. The man behind bars stared out.

"Come to visit Papa, have you, boy?" Dad said. He didn't smile. "You look right at home there. Hand over them dice."

Dad rolled a five and bought Reading Railroad; then CeCe rolled a six and owed me \$6 rent.

"Oh, take your money, jackass," she said and nudged me in the ribs.

CeCe helped Crazy Baby roll the dice and they came up snake eyes. Community Chest. Doctor's fee, pay \$50. The story of her life.

"Put the money in the middle and whoever lands on Free Parking gets it," CeCe said, and Crazy Baby complied.

The dice were mine. Hot hot hot. A five and a four. New York Avenue. \$200. Mine, all mine. Just a square away from Free Parking. I was on a roll. I could feel it building. Boardwalk would be my next buy. More than anything I wanted to win. Dad's face gave nothing away.

Two hours later CeCe went bankrupt and the pot in the middle of the board had grown to massive proportions. She helped Crazy Baby barely stay in the game. Dad and I were amassing armies of houses and hotels. Crazy Baby landed on my Boardwalk and it cost her \$2,000. I chuckled as CeCe mortgaged the rest of Crazy Baby's properties.

"That's not nice, Fred," CeCe scolded. "It's just a game."

“She’s right, boy,” Dad said and tapped his scarred hands on the table. “It’s a game, and you’re a loser. You done lost at everything up to now, haven’t you? No point in changing.”

He was trying to psych me out. I wouldn’t let it work. “You’re crazy, old man. Once I win that pot in the middle, you’ll be dead.”

Round and round the board our tarnished metal tokens went, but no one stopped on Free Parking. I kept landing on Baltic Avenue and paying \$450 a shot to stay in Dad’s fleabag hotel. It was too close to real life. I was almost broke.

Dad grinned at me and crossed his arms at his chest.

“Every since you been here you’ve been pushing, boy. Thinking you’re better than your ex-con Papa. Well, it’s time you learned a lesson.” His grin was fluorescent. “I tell you what. You hit that pot in the middle, I’ll give you real cash for the fake stuff and you can get your ass out of here. Maybe do some real gambling.”

CeCe put her hand up, palm toward me as if she were trying to stop an oncoming train.

“Sounds like a plan, Dad.”

CeCe’s mouth was open, but she didn’t say anything. She reached down and stroked Crazy Baby’s head.

“But what happens if I lose?” I asked.

Dad wagged his tongue against his upper lip, his imagination hurtling through space.

“Boy, you lose and me and CeCe go into my bedroom for a few hours and see what comes up.”

All expression was hidden behind his dark glasses. CeCe flinched. I looked in her eyes and swore I saw fear and a little anticipation.

She said, “That’s not funny, Eugene,” and started laughing. But she stopped when I said, “Okay.” It came out before I could stifle it—instinct. The pot on the table must have topped \$5,000. I had been hot all night. I needed a seven to take it all. I couldn’t lose.

CeCe stared at me wide-eyed, as if I were an experiment gone horribly awry.

I started rattling the dice in my cupped hand.

“Fred,” CeCe said flatly, her green eyes flaring. “I’ll hate you till hell freezes over and that ought to be about the time you get there.”

I couldn't hear her anymore. The bones were spinning like fire in my palm. Round and round they went. Faster and faster. Finally, they left my hand like slow-motion rockets and skidded across the board. At the far side one careened against Dad's top hat and skipped off the table toward the carpet. Crazy Baby rose like a whale from the depths and sucked the flying dice into her lips. She puckered up and sent it sailing back to the board. The saliva-covered dice had five dots showing, the one that didn't get away had two. A winner, but it didn't count.

"You can't even keep it on the table, boy," Dad said and leaned in toward me as he got up out of his chair. "Let me get a towel to clean up your mess. Excuse me, CeCe, darling."

CeCe nodded mechanically, but her eyes were fixed on me the entire time.

"It's no big deal," I told her. I could feel the sweat drip down my forehead and collect in my eyebrows. "I'm going to win. I'm due. Then we can escape from this place. It's a sure thing."

CeCe rubbed her fingers lightly across Crazy Baby's head.

"Your expiration date is showing, Fred," CeCe said flatly.

Dad walked back in holding a kitchen towel with brownish stains on its edges and the faded words "God Bless This Mess" across it.

"Here, boy," he said and tossed the towel at me.

Dad stood behind CeCe's chair and rested his meaty hands on her shoulders. He methodically massaged them, only the thin layer of blouse separating him from her. CeCe smiled toward me, though her lips remained tightly clenched together.

"God does love a sinner," Dad said. "Now roll them dice and let's see what he has in store."

I rubbed Crazy Baby's saliva off the dice and picked up its companion. The bones felt sticky in my palm. I used wrist action to spin them around—that's the secret for a good toss. I kept flicking my wrist up and down and the dice click click clicked. They became an extension of me, cubes of flesh. If I squeezed one at that moment, I was sure it would bleed and I would feel the pain.

"He does have style."

Dad ran his hand along CeCe's neck. She didn't flinch, just stared intently at my hand as if it were under a microscope.

My wrist was getting sore from the movements, but the dice weren't ready to stop. My hand jerked up and down, up and down. Everything else receded from view. My palm was hot from the friction of the spinning dice. My breath came out loud and labored. My fingers finally pried open, and the dice spilled across the board. I went limp and closed my eyes tightly. When I opened them, I saw a three and a four. I had won. The gamble had finally paid off. I instinctively reached out my sore hand and caressed the pile of fake cash that would soon be real.

"Jesus loves you, son," Dad said, and let his hands fall from CeCe's shoulders. "You count it all up and I'll write you a check. Y'all can cash it in the morning."

"Better split it into two checks, Eugene," CeCe said and took Dad's right hand in hers. Her face was wet with tears. "I believe this is a community property state."

"Sure, honey," Dad said. "Why you come up to my room and I'll write it for you now. We'll estimate."

CeCe stumbled as she got out of her chair, but reached out a hand and steadied herself on Crazy Baby's shoulder.

"CeCe," I said, staring in disbelief. "What are you doing? I won. Do you understand? I won. This doesn't make sense. With him?"

She reached across the table and slapped me.

"I've told you before, Fred—for every action there is a reaction. This one's mine. I'm taking the car in the morning. What I do until then is none of your concern. And who says I'm doing anything? Face facts, Fred. At least Eugene does that."

The two of them walked up the stairs, CeCe leading, as I sat there trying to think of something to say—anything.

"Fair is fair, Dad," I finally said in a pleading whine. "I won."

He looked back over his shoulder from the top of the stairs, tilted his glasses down so I could see his smiling eyes, and said, "That's right, son. You did. When you get that money counted, yell that figure up to me. Or come visit us if you dare to take another risk."

They reached the top of the stairs and disappeared from sight. I heard a door open and loudly shut. I sat there numbly with my winnings, then Crazy Baby nudged my leg. She held her doll tightly to her chest and reached down to kiss its forehead. Crazy Baby looked up at me and smiled angelically, her eyes daring me to reach out and wrench the plastic baby from her arms. ❧

## THE MALE NURSE

“GRANDMAMA CALLED LAST NIGHT from Heaven,” Marina said. “She asked how you were.”

Marina was my older sister by three years. She was only sixteen, but Mama said Marina is older than anybody, at least since Grandmama died. Every morning Marina crawled into my bed when my eyes were crusty with sleep and told me dreams.

“It was so real, Marco,” Marina said, her dark eyes wide. “Grandmama called from a pay phone. I could hear this other lady with a Yankee accent behind her telling Grandmama to hurry up, and dogs were barking.”

Marina’s lips turned down and her whole face tightened. “I said, ‘Grandmama, do you know where you are? Do you know you’ve been dead to our Texas home for five years?’ Grandmama didn’t say anything, then she said, ‘Oh, that explains a lot.’

“When I asked about Heaven she wouldn’t answer. ‘I really must hurry, Marina,’ Grandmama said. ‘There are people waiting.’ She whispered with the other woman for a second and they both laughed. And she said, ‘Tell Marco to take out the garbage and not get into fights at school.’”

I asked Marina, “Did she say anything about Mama?”

Marina smiled and leaned back on the bed. “I told Grandmama that Mama didn’t mean anything when she called her a fat, old cow. I said, ‘Mama was just being Mama and she was mad that she couldn’t go dancing because you wouldn’t stay home from bingo and baby-sit us.’

“Grandmama clicked her tongue. ‘I’m not mad. My daughter-in-law is a foolish little girl, so different from you. That clock radio was awful pretty, though.’”

Grandmama won a clock radio at bingo but it was broke up when the drunk cab driver sent Grandmama sailing through the sky and left the stuff from her purse, radio dials, and plastic slivers scattered like confetti. At least that was what Marina told me.

“What else did Grandmama say?” I asked. I was finally starting to wake up.

"She said, 'Take care of everybody. They think they can't make it without you. And I'll see you real soon, Marina.' Then she hung up."

Marina put her hands behind her head and closed her eyes. Telling me dreams seemed to suck the life out of her. Her face lost color and her hands began to shake. I let her sleep and went and tried to make breakfast for Mama. Mama was born in Greece. Marina said Mama's parents brought her to South Texas to tame her and keep the wild boys away, but it didn't help. Papa came from Mexico. He left home for adventure. Papa said Greeks and Mexicans go together everywhere except in the kitchen. Mama's tortillas were fat and fell apart. Marina did the cooking and cleaned the house.

Mama built fancy doll houses and sold them to rich people. She worked on a bunch at one time because that way she didn't get bored. Once a month Marina and I had to finish them so Mama could pay the rent. Papa played accordion in a Tejano band, but he only lived here sometimes and his pay shrank on the way home. Most of the time he was on the road squeezing out notes. While he was gone, Mama went to dances most every night. She said her feet couldn't stay still. When Papa returned, he and Mama didn't leave their room. Sometimes they yelled at each other, but mostly they pinched each other for fun.

"Your Papa thinks I'm his instrument and he can squeeze me any time he wants," Mama would say and then wink. "He doesn't know who is really conducting this orchestra."

Papa was crazy about Marina. Last year he had worked extra hard so he could save enough money to throw Marina a party for her quinceañera. This was a party for when a girl becomes a woman. Mama said it was a stupid idea. Mama said she was too young to have a grown daughter. Papa laughed and kissed her behind the ear.

"Everybody will know that my Marina has become a woman. There will be a mass with candles and a party without end. I will invite the whole town to get fat off the finest meats and crazy drunk from the coldest beer," Papa said.

We didn't see Papa for a month, and, when he did show up, all he did was sleep. Marina said he played his squeezebox in bars as far away as Louisiana to save up for her party. Mama bought bright white and pink cloth to make a fancy dress. Then she sewed fringe and bells on.

It shined and jangled like something you might see on TV, only one of the sleeves was longer than the other. Marina had to straighten it out.

Marina was always in the kitchen. Grandmama taught Marina to cook, but she never could interest Mama in anything Mexican except Papa and dances.

“It’s because Mama got married so young,” Marina said. “She and Papa didn’t get to be teenagers, so now that they’re getting old they’re trying to make up for it.”

Marina understood everything, and it was hard to get her mad. During the plans for the party, she was all little–kid laughter one minute and tired sighs the next.

The morning of the quinceañera, Papa was one big grin, and Mama was holding his hand. The priest was waiting, the dress was made, the house smelled of chiles and chocolate, and the dance hall was full of colored streamers.

Everyone was invited. Papa patted his cheeks and said, “My little girl is a woman. Soon I will be an old man.”

Mama cleared her throat and kicked him.

“Marina is the only one allowed to get old in this house,” she said. “I’m not going to stay married to any old man who is full of worries.”

Then Marina walked slowly, carefully down the stairs in the dress Mama had made. She looked like an angel. Only during the night her hair had turned as white as a cloud that holds no rain.



“I flew up to the treetops and held on there,” Marina said. Marina flew a lot in her dreams.

“The leaves were soft in my hand. I could see our house below—you need to patch the roof, Marco. Then I let go and stretched my arms above my head like Supergirl. Papa was playing his squeezebox somewhere and I could see the notes. I flew sideways and plucked them from the air, one by one and ate them.”

I asked, “What did they taste like?”

“I got one bad one that tasted like okra. I was flying faster and faster, passing cars on the highway heading for San Antonio. Then I saw something shining by the side of the road and swooped down to get a closer look.

"It was a suitcase made of the finest leather. I opened it and found a stuffed bear, a bicycle, a puppy, three baseballs, a spinning top, earrings made of gold, and fifty toy soldiers fighting over a flag. I scratched under the puppy's chin and closed the bag tight. With the handle sagging in my hands I could only fly about two feet off the road, so I dropped down and decided to walk home. I walked for hours and the bag got heavier and heavier. One of the soldiers shot a hole in the bag and the bullet bounced off my shin. See the scar? I had had enough and knew it was about time to wake up and tell you my story, so I put the bag down and flew home."

I rubbed my eyes. "You left it all behind?"

"Almost," Marina said. "Before I flew away, I stuck my hand in the bag and grabbed this for you."

She opened her hand, and it was the spinning top, only it had stopped moving.

"This is life," Marina said and twisted the top in her fingers. It danced across the floor. "In motion it is a thing of beauty. If you let it slow down, the chips in the wood begin to show and the fancy paint begins to fade."

I carried the top in my pocket to remind me of Marina's dream.



Marina met Ernesto when the carnival came to town. Usually fairs set up on the edge of our city with their Ferris wheels and dizzying rides. This time the trucks paraded through downtown to a big empty parking lot for a Buick dealership that closed before I was born. One tired old elephant slowly led the way while the children grabbed at his tail. Ernesto was the lion tamer, but the lion was really a bobcat with its claws pried off. Still, Ernesto walked with his head in the air, and his white shirt had not a speck of dirt on it. Of course, his blue jeans were filthy, and his big toes stuck out of his ragged shoes, but his green eyes and greasy pile of black hair kept you looking so it was hard to notice anything else.

But Marina didn't see him at all. The other girls from the high school crowded around the bobcat cage asking Ernesto questions about the sad beast. Marina, with the white hair that scared most boys her age away, was looking in the other direction. All she saw was the acrobat woman in a bathing suit covered with sequins and a hat made of

ostrich feathers. “She is the most beautiful creature,” Marina said. I saw a tear sneak down Marina’s cheek. To me, the woman looked no different than Mama fancied up to go out dancing, and big purple bruises were scattered on the woman’s legs. But Marina stared in awe.

Marina talked Mama into going to the show that night—Papa was off somewhere playing his instrument. The three of us sat in the front row of the plastic bleachers and laughed as the clown’s junky car sputtered backwards and shook ahead, burping blue smoke.

Then came the lady in the shiny swimsuit. Marina clutched Mama’s shoulder and pointed as the woman climbed a tall ladder. Mama kissed Marina’s cheek. “You are my girl after all,” Mama said and laughed. When the woman reached the top of the ladder, she put a rope in her mouth, dropped her hands to her sides and spun in circles like my top. I could see Marina’s eyes spinning around her head in time with the sparkling lady.

When Ernesto came out with the bobcat, every girl in the place had her mouth hanging open, including Mama. But not Marina. She stared at the place where the spinning lady had been. Ernesto noticed her stares and looked up, too. Seeing nothing, he shrugged and decided he must get the attention of this white-haired girl. I think Ernesto liked the challenge. He danced with his bobcat. Still Marina stared up. He dressed the beast in a baseball uniform and beat it with a plastic bat. He stuck his head sideways into the bobcat’s mouth. No use. Marina stared upward as something began to spin inside of her. Mama sat up straight and smiled. I think she thought Ernesto was showing off for her, certainly not for the daughter who was so very old. Mama blinked her eyes at Ernesto and her cheeks turned a deep red.



“The circus elephant’s eyes were so beautiful and sad,” Marina said. “I could tell by looking in them how very hurt he was at always having to perform for his peanuts. He seemed to be begging me, so I looked down at my chest and found a zipper. I pulled it down slowly and walked out of my skin. The elephant smiled and nodded his head. He stretched his trunk down and found his own zipper. He left an empty sack of gray in the sand. We put on each other’s skins like Halloween costumes.”

Marina was so alive this morning. Her hands fluttered through the air as she described the dream.

“It’s not easy to be a circus elephant,” she told me. “You have to watch where you step and the children tease you. But it is fun to have a trunk. I learned to fling rocks at the bearded lady. But I could not fly when I was an elephant, so I had to put my Marina skin back on and come tell you my story.”

Marina and I collected empty soda bottles and turned them in at the 7-Eleven so we could buy tickets and go back to see the spinning woman each of the next three days. Mama stayed home and started moving like a madwoman, building twelve doll houses at once. It wasn’t like the bill collectors were calling, but Mama would not sit still for a moment. Every day Ernesto’s act got more dangerous. He would stick the bobcat with pins and then wrestle with the creature as its teeth tried to enter Ernesto’s neck. He would wear the animal like a hat and spin him around until they both were dizzy. Finally, on the fourth day Marina’s eyes turned to the lion tamer and she laughed at his stupid bravery. Ernesto dropped the bobcat in the dirt and walked over to kiss Marina’s hand. I saw her hand begin to shake. At that moment Marina looked just like Mama to me.

Marina started crawling down the gutter drain at night when Mama was asleep or out dancing. One night I followed Marina across town and through the tall grass. I saw her meet Ernesto at the edge of the creek where Papa sometimes hunts crawdads. Marina dropped her nightgown in the rocks, and her body glowed almost as white as her hair. Ernesto stripped down to his skin, and pushed Marina into the water. I watched them splash in the water and imagined Marina trading her skin with Ernesto, just like she did with the elephant. I thought they must be in love. The carnival packed up. It was headed to San Benito next, but Ernesto stayed in our town. I think he slept in the trees and waited for Marina to come to him at night.

Marina never mentioned the spinning woman again, but I know she thought about her. Ernesto got a job in the novelty store in the mall selling fake dog vomit and black light posters of Elvis. The high school girls would crowd around the lava lamps to talk and Ernesto made sure they bought something. He was on commission. I sat on the bench outside eating a corny dog and watched it all. One day I looked

through the glass and saw a woman holding Ernesto's face in both hands. He shook free, and she slapped him and ran out of the store. It was Mama.

"Marco, go home," she said. "It's not safe for you here."

Papa came home later that week to find the house littered with sections of dollhouse. Half-empty paint cans were drying into colored slush. Tiny roof shingles littered the floor. Worse yet was Mama. She walked around in her housecoat and her hair looked like a ball of yarn unwinding.

"Where the hell have you been while your family falls apart?" She screamed at Papa and ran into the bedroom.

Papa's squeezebox groaned as he dropped it to the floor. Papa rushed into the bedroom and I pressed my ear up to the closed door to hear.

"Querida, what have I done? Did someone talk about the women in the dance halls? They are my fans, I can't ignore them. I have to earn a living for my family, yes? Come kiss me and we will make up like before."

"Before your daughter wasn't the source of gossip for the town."

I imagined Mama with her hands on her hips, her eyes on fire.

"What do you say, you crazy woman?"

"I say your daughter is sneaking off with a circus boy and the neighbors are talking about the trash that lives in our house. If Marina's Grandmama were alive, she would be dying of shame. I tell you, that wicked girl will make us old before our times."

"Why are you so worried about getting old, Querida?" Papa said. "Worry only puts lines around your eyes. Be like me, let the music of life keep your feet tapping."

Mama screamed. "Old? I'll tell you old. That circus boy Ernesto tried to touch me in places you don't want to know about. That's how old I am! Our daughter is dating the devil."

Just then Marina walked in. Her cheeks were pink and she skipped into the house. "What is it, Marco?" she asked.

"It is a nightmare," I said and ran up the stairs.



"I felt something icy slide along my foot and around my ankle," Marina said, and pulled the covers over us. "I decided that if I didn't move it couldn't hurt me. So I shut my eyes tight. It wove its way up my body

in rings. I could feel the pointed tongue flutter on my belly. It tingled there. I held my breath knowing it would soon squeeze my chest. It whipped around my body, tighter and tighter, but I did not look. I could feel its scales pushing into my skull, stealing my thoughts.

“The pain was a dull sound that got shrill like an approaching train. I opened my eyes wide and Grandmama was over me, smiling down. She bent closer and opened her mouth over mine. Her eyes were dead and I knew then that she would drink the life from me if I let her. I reached my hand wildly in the grass growing around my bed and clutched something. It was a pink stuffed elephant from the carnival. I slapped Grandmama in the face with it and she melted like rain. Hold me, Marco.”

Marina did not argue when Papa commanded her to stay away from Ernesto. I think she figured Papa would be right back on the road with his accordion and then she could do as she pleased. But Papa didn't go. His squeezebox sighed with loneliness in the corner. During the day Papa helped Mama finish the dollhouses and at night he sat on the front porch. The red glow of his cigarette guarded the door and the gun in Papa's coat was ready to deal with unwelcome visitors. I imagined Ernesto waiting in his tree for Marina, leaning his weight from one branch to another. Sometimes he dozed off, but he jerked awake before he fell. I wondered what Ernesto's dreams were like and if Marina floated into them.

Marina stopped telling me her dreams. The third day that Marina didn't come to my room, I tiptoed to hers and peeked in. Her skin and hair had become paler. “Go away, Marco,” she said in a whisper dry like gravel. “I can no longer fly.”

After that Marina only left her room to use the toilet. I noticed her face and body had got rounder and that she walked bent over like she was scanning the floor for the eggs of dust bunnies. She would not talk to Mama and Papa.

“I can hold out as long as you can, Marina,” Mama said when she brought a tray of something that was supposed to pass for food and dropped it outside the door. Mama had traded the housecoat for a flowery dress and her hair was in pigtails. “Why must you be such a baby, Marina? We have you in our hearts.”

The dollhouses were everywhere. Papa put on his Sunday suit during the week and went out to sell them to shopkeepers in all of the towns of South Texas. But even he could not keep up with Mama. She built houses like a woman possessed and she would not let anyone help her. Little girls everywhere dreamed of Mama's fancy houses and their parents struggled to pay the price. Money poured into our home like green honey, but Mama did not stop. Marina stayed in her bed and dreamed secret dreams.

Mama and Papa stopped talking to each other in sentences of more than five words.

"The houses sold well today," Papa would say.

"Buy more wood and paint," Mama would reply.

Papa did not sleep. His face turned gray and drooped from the nights spent guarding the porch. No one had seen Ernesto. He no longer showed up for work at the novelty store and sales were said to be off. I imagined him out in the woods watching the red dot of the cigarette as it traveled up to Papa's mouth and down again like a cherry on fire.

Then one night Papa's eyelids became too heavy and he fell into a deep, dreamy sleep. I awoke upstairs to the sound of an owl outside my window. His bird questions were loud and demanding, but I had no answers. Then there was a crash downstairs and a gunshot.

I ran to the staircase and saw Papa swinging the pistol in the air. "Get back in bed, Marco," he yelled up at me. "I will protect my house."

I raced to my room and stuck my nose against the cold window. I saw Ernesto running from Papa and the gun. Ernesto was carrying something. He swung it around and knocked Papa to the ground. The last I saw of Ernesto he was disappearing into the night cradling Papa's squeezebox.

In the morning I heard Papa load the rest of the completed doll houses into his truck—except one Mama left in front of Marina's door to cheer her up—so they could be sold in town. I looked out the window and did not recognize him. The suit was baggy and he walked as if under gray water. He honked once for Mama and they drove away. I knew they would not return for hours.

I thought I heard the owl again, but knew it could not be so in daylight. The sound was faint, like a mouse crying in the wall. I opened my bedroom door and realized the sound was coming from Marina's

room. I opened the door and saw Marina's bed had become huge. She seemed but a tiny dot in a huge sea of sheets.

"Marco, I have a dream," she said.

"Not now, Marina. You are sick. Let me get a doctor."

Her tiny chest forced its way up and down and her cloudy white hair was damp. "Listen first, Marco. Please."

"Okay," I said and sat on the edge of the bed.

"In the dream I am asleep in my bed, but our house has no roof. The sun shines down on me, warming my soul." Marina's eyes smiled at me. "I got up and stretched my arms twenty feet over my head. It felt so good to move about. I walked downstairs and out the front door. Mama was painting the house a bright pink. 'Whatever you do, you mustn't drink from the river,' she told me.

"I looked out across the river and saw Grandmama on the other side in a rocking chair doing her knitting. She smiled and said, 'I told you I'd see you soon, Marina. When I'm done with those baby booties we will have us a long talk.' I could hear her words, but she must have been five miles away. She looked back down at her knitting, then she seemed to remember something. She looked up and said, 'You're too old to be drinking from that river, Marina.'"

Marina's voice was becoming softer and softer. She pulled me close to whisper the rest of her dream.

"The sun was beating down on me and I was dripping sweat from the heat. But it felt so very good. I stripped off my clothes and sat in the grass watching Mama paint and Grandmama rock. The more I watched them the drier my throat became. My teeth were turning to sand and my tongue swelled like the elephant's trunk. I was so very thirsty.

"I waited until Mama was concentrating on painting the shutters and dashed across the field. 'Stop that this instant, Marina! Act like an adult,' Mama yelled behind me. I reached the river's edge and kneeled at the bank. Grandmama shook her head and said, 'Save some for me, dear.' I dunked my head in the water and breathed it. I could feel it flow out my fingers and toes. I began to float. I rose up over the river. Mama and Grandmama waved from below. They became tiny specks as I went higher and higher into the sky."

Marina's eyes began to flutter. "Marina, I'm scared," I said.

Her eyes cleared and she smiled at me. “Marco, I just returned to say goodbye. Grandmama says to be a good boy,” she said, and closed her eyes.

I did not know what to do. I almost tripped over the dollhouse in the doorway as I ran downstairs to look for something, anything. Medicine, heavy weights to put on her feet and pull her back. All I found were dollhouse parts. I grabbed an open can of black paint and brought it to Marina. I poured it on her hair and worked it in. My hands began to turn to night. Somewhere behind my eyes I could see Marina getting smaller and younger by the second. She was flying again. Then Grandmama’s wrinkled, gray hands came down from nowhere and plucked the dollhouse up into the sky like it was a cloud. I saw tiny baby Marina float into the little pink doorway. She was laughing when Grandmama shut the door tight. ☪

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by Caroline Ulbrich

Joe O'Connell has met a mass murderer, prowled a crack house, and spat seeds at a watermelon thump. He's a Texas native whose early career focused on small-town journalism. He earned an MFA in creative writing from Southwest Texas State University where he worked long distance with the late short story master Andre Dubus. O'Connell's stories have appeared in *The G.W. Review*, *Other Voice*, *Confrontation*, *Lullwater Review*, and many other journals. His stories have taken first prize at both the Deep South Writers Conference and the Louzelle Rose Barclay Awards. Of late, he teaches writing to graduate students at St. Edward's University and to undergraduates at Austin Community College. He turned a budding career as a movie extra—otherwise known as “scenery”—into a gig as a film industry columnist for the *Dallas Morning News* and *The Austin Chronicle* and previously for the *Austin American-Statesman*. He also has contributed to *Variety* and *Texas Monthly*. Joe lives outside Austin with his wife and newborn son. [www.joemoconnell.com](http://www.joemoconnell.com)



O'Connell hopes to work with hospice organizations in outreach efforts in one of two ways:

1. FOR REIMBURSEMENT OF travel expenses only, he will come and read from the book at your group's event. Or, he will help hospice groups recruit local actors to read from the book as part of a performance reading.
2. DALTON PUBLISHING HAS agreed to offer the book (cover price: \$13.95) to hospice groups for \$9.00 a copy (plus shipping) for sale at events at full price—with the difference going directly to the hospice organization. The publisher and author will aid efforts to get local media attention for hospice events related to the book.



O'Connell also will speak—either by telephone or in person if possible—to any book clubs choosing to read the book. He can be contacted at: [therealjoeo@gmail.com](mailto:therealjoeo@gmail.com).