Small Portions Café

A TEMPTING ASSORTMENT OF STORIES

DOUGLAS FERGUS

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To every person who has ever lived and those not yet born. Oh, and anyone else I forgot to mention.

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INTRODUCTION

SPIRAL BOUND

While stationed at Eielson Air Force Base near Fairbanks, Alaska, I decided to write a book. My day job was fixing leaky steam pipes, but my passion was teaching myself to play guitar, bass guitar and writing songs. I wanted to be an author, too. At twenty years old, and with the youthful arrogance to match, I felt I had as much to say to the world as Hemingway, Steinbeck, Vonnegut, and Bombeck all rolled into one.

I would get an idea, write a few pages, hate what I had written, then tear up the pages in anger and disgust. Then I got the brilliant idea to write a book about a man who was trying to write a book but could never get past a few pages before deciding that what he had written was crap, then tear up the pages in anger and disgust. The real story was about his life in between the stories he was attempting to write.

I wrote about 120 pages by hand in a spiral notebook—and, of course, made no copies. I managed to get some of the stories published in a humor periodical

called the *San Juan Horseshoe*—or, rather, my mom did.

I would send her my latest story just for her amusement, and she, in turn, would send it to the *San Juan Horseshoe* without my knowledge. The folks at SJH liked my writing and printed several stories. I got a free subscription in exchange for my astoundingly magnificent literary compositions.

About six months after I was released from active duty, I met a cute young woman named Jeannie at a Radio Shack store in Pasadena, California. I knew her name because the tag on her shirt read "Jeannie."

I suppose she was suitably charmed by my appearance and wit because she wrote her name and phone number on a slip of official Radio Shack memo paper for me.

Two days elapsed before I called, which was standard, appropriate dating protocol for people in their early twenties in the 1980s. When I was about to call, I couldn't remember hearing her say her name. I thought it could be pronounced *Jeen*. Or even *Gee Annie*. Maybe from the way I interpreted her handwriting, or because I was slightly confused with the two n's, I didn't even consider saying *Jean-ee*. I decided Jean was best. She didn't correct me.

We went out on a couple of dates together, but there weren't any sparks to speak of.

We simply stopped calling each other.

A year later, I walked into the same Radio Shack store to obtain a particular fuse for my bass guitar

amplifier, and there was Jeannie/Jean/Gee Annie. She was curiously delighted to see me. There was something different about her—how do you say—*enthusiasm* for me.

I liked the attention, and we began dating again. In the year since I had seen her, she had been in a terrible car accident. It had changed her outlook on life, and now I was much more appealing to her. But I was the same person I had been just the year before. This time she wanted to know *all about* me, so I told her *everything*, including the book I had written in the air force, and I *stupidly* gave it to her to read. (No copies, remember?)

I was confused by it all, so I did the only thing any normal young 1980s American man would have done in that situation: I rejected her affection and stopped calling her. She never called me either, so I was glad for the clean break.

Fast forward about eight months after we broke up. I went to retrieve my precious, possibly Nobel Prize-winning manuscript from the cardboard box I kept it in. I wanted to re-familiarize myself with it. Touch it and caress it. Admire the wit and wisdom and sheer brilliance contained therein. I might have been interested in trying to start writing again.

I wouldn't know until I looked at the handwritten pages, noticing the cute way I dot my i's, making the letter look like a T with its head floating above its body. *Too bad*, I thought, *that they can't just photocopy my handwritten pages and bind them into a book and sell*

them that way. Part of my appeal would be not only what I write and the words I choose to assemble but also the actual handwriting. It would be a literary/publishing first!

All my cleverness and wittiness (are they the same thing?) and, well, cuteness would be there for all to go gaga over.

I imagined myself on the talk-show circuit. I would be so popular, even retired hosts and those no longer living would want to meet me (using a medium, of course), including but not limited to: Oprah, Carson, Letterman, Ellen, Colbert, Leno, Kimmel, Fallon, and Barbara Walters. Then my manager would send me to Great Britain to meet with Kaye Adams, Ruth Langsford, and all the other absolutely fabulous British talk show hosts.

Next, tally-ho we would go to Australia. I would shoot the breeze (do they say "shoot the breeze" in Australia?) with Rove McManus, Carrie Bickmore, and the lot of lovely hosts. I would get to practice the funny pronunciations of words like saying *nigh* for no or *icey/dicey* for AC/DC.

All my favorite actors, musicians, motorcycle racers, swimsuit models and heating/air conditioning service techs would see me, read my book, and want to meet me to rub shoulders and minds together.

With the smugness and comfortable confidence of a pirate reaching without looking into his chest of gold coins, I reached into the corrugated container where I knew I kept my manuscript, and . . .

Panic!

Hysterical sobbing!

Then calm, cool retracing of steps.

I remembered I had given Jeannie/Jean/Gee Annie my precious, possibly future Nobel Prize-winning manuscript.

I had not kept her phone number. Right then and there I got into my 1979 Ford Courier pickup and drove well above the posted speed limit to her apartment.

Miracle! I remembered where she lived, and she, a twenty-something single person, was still in the same apartment more than six months later! She came to the door, confused by my sudden appearance. I breathlessly asked her about my precious, possibly Nobel Prize-winning manuscript that I had loaned her. She calmly said she had given it back to me.

I said, "No, you did not give it back, because it is not in its cardboard box." She steadfastly stuck to her memory of returning it to me. (I have always wanted to write a sentence with *steadfastly*, and now I have done it.)

We stood staring blankly at each other, long enough for us both to grow ZZ Top beards. Her eyes said, *You are an emotional infant, and I'd like to suggest that you read some self-help books*.

My eyes said to her, *I know you have my manuscript, or maybe you threw it away because you're jealous that I wrote a book, and gosh who painted your apartment? It's gorgeous!*

Then her eyes said to me, *Don't try to change the subject. I didn't throw away your manuscript.*

Our beards continued to grow in the uncomfortable silence.

Then my eyes said to her, *I'm going to leave now because this is very awkward and I don't know how to handle this situation. You already know that, as you have accurately pegged me as an emotional infant.* I turned, quickly walked to my car, and left the scene.

As I drove back to my house in my 1979 2.3 liter silver Ford Courier with red Naugahyde interior (what exactly *is* Naugahyde? Isn't that the stuff that's inside some candy bars?), I scrambled around inside the brambled shambles of my head looking for a way to get my book back.

"*Aha!*" I said out loud. I bet I could, under hypnosis, recite my entire book, have someone there to record it, and have it transferred to print.

Hypnosis was expensive.

So now you are holding my collection of height-challenged stories, which have been completely restored from memory. Actually, not entirely from memory. Decades of kale, ginger, lemon, paprika, and maple syrup smoothies helped to keep my old grey matter in shape, but I did have to fabricate new sections and stories that I couldn't recall. It's a blessing that none of these stories have emotional problems associated with being short. I suppose I raised them correctly, giving them lots of love and attention when they were in their

formative years. I told them on a weekly basis that they could have successful and completely normal lives even though they are not as tall as other stories. Thank goodness they didn't turn out to be tall tales!