

## THE ORIGINAL MASTERS

*Hugh Burkhart*

I knew little of the publishing world before becoming a proof-reader. Without following the conventional wisdom of just being myself or being professional, I flew through the initial interview with the human resources person. Then I was given five unedited manuscript pages and an hour in which to edit them with nothing but a list of proof-reader's marks for guidance. My performance was flawless, and I was hired on the spot. I told them I needed time to find a decent place in the city. My new supervisor told me she knew of a rooming house that would serve as a stopgap until I found something more permanent.

The rooming house was on a drab little street of tightly-spaced, semi-detached homes. More than one of these homes had been transformed into a rooming house, and by the constant coming and going of vans and gangs of people strapping beds to car roofs, I pegged many of the other homes as rentals.

Most of the permanent residents were Portuguese. Their homes offered the few splashes of color to the neighborhood: tiled mosaics depicting the blessed Virgin or Christ's Passion hanging on porch walls, tiny gated front gardens bursting with tomatoes, yellow peppers and cucumbers, backyard vineyards heavy with grapes.

On some of those first summer nights, a collection of old men would gather in the backyard neighboring mine and sing, accompanied by accordions and guitars. I lived in the rear room of my house. I'd sit on my back stoop, sip beer, smoke cigarettes and listen to them get drunker and louder as the heat of the day lifted. They would wave at me and speak the few English phrases they knew, and I would smile and wave back politely. Other than that, I kept largely to myself. I saw my fellow boarders only in passing, going upstairs to the shower or in the kitchen outside my door. Not being a native to the city, I spent weekends sightseeing, shopping, museum hopping and generally wandering around gaping like a tourist.

I was content with this existence initially because my work exhausted me. There seemed only room for drinking on the stoop and watching the news on weeknights, and happy, indiscriminate rambling on weekends. Eight hours a day painstakingly poring over a manuscript left my head feeling like a cartoon

thought bubble containing only ellipses. The books were by decent writers I'd never heard of. I read fast, sometimes managing twenty pages in a single morning, and after a month of working without complaints, indeed without much in the way of communication at all, assumed my superiors were content with my performance. Then, after two months on the job, my supervisor told me Ms. Libman wanted to see me.

One of the company's three chief editors, Ms. Libman, had yet to make an appearance in my presence. She was known as the editor to some very renowned writers at Naughton, with a reputation of equal importance as the discoverer of new talent. She had an assistant who ran all her errands, and when this harried young man was whirring about with papers, coffees and take-out, you knew Ms. Libman was in the building. Whenever the assistant spoke to my supervisor, my supervisor's mouth got tight and flat like she was holding back a tremendous fart. Claire was naturally uptight, but the day the assistant sent her for me she looked positively hermetic. Usually I'd try to kid her into cracking a smile. Usually it worked. But her tone didn't lend itself to levity. Instead, it betrayed a mixture of forced deception and ruefulness.

"Sonny," she said, blinking. "Ms. Libman says she'd like very much to comprehensively discuss your work."

I wondered if Ms. Libman had split her infinitive like that.

“With me, Claire?” I asked coyly. Claire wordlessly showed me to Ms. Libman’s office. My work was obviously not as flawless as I’d assumed.

Ms. Libman was nothing like I’d expected. She was short, thin, wore a white fleece jogging suit and glowed with recent exercise, though no exercise machinery was evident. She set a bottle of water down on her desk and strode over to me.

“Sonny,” she said, reaching up to grip my shoulder, “your work is flawless.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and thanked her for the compliment.

“I don’t call people in here to just hand out compliments,” she replied. “I have an assignment for you. A special assignment. There is a certain author on our roster who has just completed a draft of his latest novel. It’s a first draft, but he’s famous for his impeccable first drafts. And it’s really long. When you see it, that is if you decide you want to take on this assignment, you’ll understand why he hasn’t gotten around to a second draft yet. Now, the author himself guards his unpublished work as much as he guards his privacy. I suppose I should tell you who it is, although, should you decide to take on this assignment, certain hallmarks, repeated themes, stylistic devices and so forth may

give away his identity. If you're familiar with him, that is. If you're not, then this assignment might not be for you. Then again, if you're not familiar with him, perhaps you're not Naughton material in the first place. At any rate, you must have assumed by now that if you utter a word about this author's latest novel, and the role you may or may not be playing in it, losing your job will be the least of your worries."

I hadn't gone so far as to contemplate repercussions beyond getting fired. I wondered who I might tell. The strangers I lived with? My Portuguese friends? She revealed the author's identity. I assured her I was familiar with his work.

"I'll take the assignment," I said. I made tightening motions over my mouth with my hand and threw the invisible key over my shoulder.

"Very good," Ms. Libman said. "You don't know how pleased this makes me. You have exactly two hundred days." With that her assistant arrived to show me out.

## §

"I'm so sorry," Claire said when I returned to my desk. Past meetings between her underlings and Ms. Libman had clearly not gone well.

"It's okay," I said. "I've just been given an assignment is all."

Claire put a hand to her mouth. "That's wonderful," she said. I didn't believe she meant it. "What is it?"

I recalled the invisible key I'd discarded in Ms. Libman's office. "I'm sworn to secrecy," I said.

"I see." Claire attempted an impish grin that was more like an imitation of a malicious garden gnome. "Well, just so you know, an assignment directly from Ms. Libman is a very big coup. I don't imagine we'll be dealing much with each other from now on."

"What are you talking about? You're my supervisor."

"Not for an assignment I know nothing about I'm not. Looks like you're working directly for her now. You're practically next in line to be her assistant."

"She already has an assistant."

"Oh, sure," she continued. "I'll oversee your general progress and liaise between you and her, but it'll go no further than that from now on."

"Besides," I said, still thinking of my hypothetical promotion. "I don't see the great honor in being *that* guy. I'd rather have your job." I stopped short of playfully jabbing her in the ribs. She didn't laugh.

“You don’t know how things work around here. Becoming *that guy* is a stepping stone to full-fledged editor. And Ms. Libman’s assistant has a name, you know. It’s Jerry.” Claire left me alone at my desk, where the manuscript I’d been editing earlier had vanished.

## §

Jerry came by after lunch to give me the instructions for my assignment. Every morning the manuscript would arrive at my desk. I would lock it away in the drawer during breaks and at lunch. At the end of each day the manuscript would be taken away and my work reviewed by Ms. Libman. She would arrange for us to meet periodically and let me know if there were any problems with my work or if any changes were to be made to the procedure. If I didn’t hear anything, even if the silence was protracted, I was to proceed with my work. That meant all was going swimmingly. He said ‘swimmingly’ playfully. Before that he’d been as sombre as Claire. After he gave me my instructions, I was dismissed for the day with the recommendation to ‘rest up.’

## §

I took advantage of the time off by going to a nearby megastore to look up the writer’s books. It was one of those places that reeks of grande lattes, freshly printed paper and money. The clerk told me he’d have to order whatever I

wanted; they didn't currently have the author's works in stock. This news wasn't surprising considering the author was not exactly what you'd call accessible. He'd spurned accessibility. I recalled reading an essay once in which the author railed against all fiction conventions and formulas. Writers, the author stated, must get beyond traditional notions of plot, character and setting if they wanted to get to what really mattered. I was never sure if that meant abandoning plots, characters and settings entirely, or if he was just being provocative. With this in mind, I went to the library to revisit the author's first novel.

*I Broke the Rope* takes its title from the old Johnny Cash song "Bad News":

*They tried to hang me in Oakland  
And they did in Francisco  
But I wouldn't choke, I broke the rope  
And they had to let me go.*

The novel was more conventional than I'd remembered. In it, the protagonist's attempt at suicide fails when the dressing gown belt he uses breaks. As the novel unfolds in a fashion by turns comic, violent and ribald, the character must determine whether or not he consciously or unconsciously chose to fail at suicide in order to attain a significant reason for serious introspection. When I finished the novel, it was nearly closing time. I went out for a late dinner. It

was the longest I'd been away from the rooming house since I'd started working for Naughton.

## §

## Book I

The untitled novel arrived at my desk the next morning, just as Jerry said it would. All 2,000 pages of it inside an immense file folder. The top and bottom pages were blank.

"Did you rest up?" Jerry asked. I recalled my deadline. It meant I'd only have to read ten pages a day.

"I feel fine," I said.

Jerry shrugged and turned to go, then stopped to face me again.

"I'm going for coffee and bagels for Ms. Libman. Can I get you anything?"

"Sure," I said, reaching for my wallet. "Thanks for asking."

Jerry held up his hand. "It's on the company," he said. Claire happened to walk past as he spoke. She ignored us both.

## §

Work went well that morning. Fortified by the extra nourishment and coffee, I paced myself and still made it through seven pages. Ms. Libman had

been right. He did write impeccable first drafts. I'd barely made any corrections, which gave me more time to digest the story. The twenty-two pages I read comprised the prologue. Written in even, unaffected prose, the plot dealt with a group of ageing amateur rock musicians playing a gig that concludes with a very messy bar brawl. The origin of the brawl is uncertain. By the time the bar has cleared, however, all but one of the band members has escaped injury, and all their gear except one destroyed amplifier has been saved. Nevertheless, the band's unofficial leader, a singing bass player—the one who got clobbered in the eye—reaches an unstated yet startling epiphany, something akin to what recovering addicts call 'a moment of clarity.' The novel proper began here. At five o'clock Jerry came to collect my work.

### §

The next two weeks passed without incident. I tried cutting down the amount of reading I'd do each day, but only managed to read as few as eighteen pages. No amount of breaks short of being suspect could hamper my progress. The novel was very readable. Not at all what I'd expected.

The plot centered on the bass player of the amateur rock and roll band. It begins with the funeral of the protagonist's father, who has been killed by a

collapsed shelf in the warehouse of his profitable cabinet manufacturing business. The protagonist, Jesse Grimes, is seventeen years old. His uncle takes over the business with the understanding that Grimes will ultimately inherit it. Grimes, who has never wanted anything to do with cabinets, sells the business to his uncle when he turns eighteen. He invests one half of the money and with the other buys sufficient equipment to prepare his dream career, the one his father would never endorse: rock star. Problems confront Jesse not in lack of ability, but in lack of inspiration to do something genuinely new. The year is 1983, and to Jesse, the potential of his chosen genre appears to him to be exhausted.

In the creation of the dedicated musician and audiophile Jesse Grimes, the author impressed me with his own encyclopedic musical knowledge. And the catalog of instrument and electronics descriptions managed to enthrall even a non-musician like myself. At the end of the two weeks, Claire summoned me to Ms. Libman's office with a grave look. I followed her cheerfully, prepared to deliver my glowing review of the book and duly receive my praise. Ms. Libman met me with a look that shattered Claire's. She wore a dark skirt suit in keeping with the changing of the season to autumn. Claire stood with her hand

on the door handle for a moment before shrinking away under Ms. Libman's glare.

"Sonny," she said when the door shut, "I'd like very much to comprehensively discuss your progress on the project."

"Yes," I began, careful not to let the smile slip from my face.

"It stinks," she said.

"What, um," I said. "Is there a problem with my corrections?"

"That's the least of your worries. You need to be concerned about finishing on time. The author will want both my notes and your corrections at the end of the two hundred days."

"So you've read the novel?" I asked meekly. "Because I think it's really great."

"Of course I've read the novel. Did you think I'd given you the only copy? Don't answer that. Tell me this, what point in the book are you at today?"

"Jesse Grimes has just driven his band mates and himself in his Range Rover to see The Kinks play Detroit. Their new synth sound disappoints him."

"Jesus." Ms. Libman removed her glasses and rubbed her temples.

"I can be well past two hundred pages by the end of today if you want me to," I comforted her.

“You’re not even at the end of Book One yet,” she moaned.

I could think of no further words of comfort. I didn’t dare say I had no idea there *was* a Book Two.

“Listen,” Ms. Libman said once she had replaced her glasses on the tip of her nose. “I’ll give you another week and a half—That’s generous, by the way—to get your act together. I hope I’m not making a mistake. You tell Jerry if you’re ready to see me before then. Now go fetch Claire.”

### §

When I got back to the rooming house that evening, I was in the worst mood I’d been in since becoming a proof-reader. After being dressed down by Ms. Libman at work, I went without breaks and read well past the two hundredth page. The knowledge of a Book Two, which I could only assume was much less readable than Book One, weighed heavily on me. More than once I was tempted to skip ahead, but Jerry was making himself very busy around my section of the office, and I didn’t want to attract attention. On top of that, Claire hadn’t appeared since she’d been fetched. Whatever message Ms. Libman had to deliver to her, it certainly couldn’t bode well for my future at Naughton. The job was not without its benefits—I had previously enjoyed my work, and co-workers spoke of opportunities for advancement—though it

didn't pay particularly well. I could not afford to lose it and feared exactly that. I just wasn't sure about the how or why.

Compounding my new predicament was the fact that I was becoming acutely aware of my flagging social life. Fall chill had set in, and the Portuguese men no longer played music in the backyard. It was nearly too cold to be strolling about the city for hours. Over the course of that weekend I conceived a plan to jumpstart my down time.

### §

Claire was standing beside my desk when I arrived at work on Monday. I was unusually early, though Jerry never brought the manuscript before five after nine.

"So," she said, "you ready to put your nose to the grindstone this week, or what?"

"I'm sorry if I put you in a bad spot Friday," I said. I noticed she was wearing a suit identical to the one Ms. Libman wore when last I saw her. Claire was not unattractive, and the suit looked far better on her than its twin did on Ms. Libman.

"I just mention it for your sake," Claire said. "I no longer have anything to do with you or your project. But things started off so well for you here. It

would be a shame to throw it all away because of a moment of, what should we call it, carelessness.”

I balked at “carelessness.” I actually thought I’d been rather conscientious all in all. But I said, “Believe me, it’s not going to happen again. I enjoy it too much here to throw it all away.” Then I told her I was going down for a latte and muffin and asked if she wanted anything. “On me,” I added.

“Thanks,” she said coolly. “I’ll be at my desk. Just keep an eye on the time.”

“Will do,” I said.

## §

### Book II

I got to Book Two on Wednesday. It was more difficult than the first. The plot took off where Book One ended: Jesse Grimes had resolved to turn towards radical musical experimentation, swearing to forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated sonic landscape of his generation. The Joyce allusion might have tipped me off to the syntactical difficulties of the second book, but I first thought it was a bit of a joke. Perhaps Jesse Grimes parroting Stephen Dedalus’ overheated pronouncement was the author’s way of saying he was well aware of his own reputation for abstruseness.

Book Two confirmed that those who held such opinions about the author hadn't seen anything yet. Works in the author's own canon did nothing to prepare me for what I confronted. The story had all but disappeared in a lexical swirl that was apparently a mimic of Grimes' own creative process—the newly created sonic landscapes themselves—with brief breaks for the unwelcome intrusions of Grimes's friends on his artistic time and space. The breaks may have been unwelcome to Grimes, but not to me, as they provided the only dialogue and linear time frame. It wasn't completely indecipherable, however. As a proof-reader, all I needed to do was establish the syntactical rules, methods of indicating dialogue and the uses of fonts and italics, and make my marks and notes accordingly. The story became secondary. When Claire and Jerry arrived at my desk at the end of the day I was past the point of panic. In fact, I was quite pleased with my efforts.

"Ms. Libman will be quite pleased," Jerry said upon eyeing my progress himself for the first time. Claire turned to me once Jerry had replaced the manuscript in its folder.

"It doesn't take much for you to get the message, does it?" she said.

"Like I told you," I said. "I enjoy it too much here to throw it all away."

She smiled and turned to go.

“So do you feel like celebrating with me, or what?” I asked. Claire looked over her shoulder.

“What are you celebrating? Responsibility? Kind of contradicts you turning over a new leaf, doesn’t it?”

“Hump Day,” I answered. She faced me and seemed prepared to act offended. “Wednesday,” I clarified.

“Oh,” she said, allowing herself a chuckle. “I guess I can’t refuse then.”

We split a pitcher of beer and a large plate of vegetarian nachos. The conversation was pleasant, we shared a few jokes, and Claire bummed two cigarettes off me. We didn’t learn anything personal about each other, but it was better than sitting alone in my room watching the news.

## §

At the end of the week Jesse Grimes made it through the first trial in his musical odyssey, and the plot returned to Earth. Grimes had not been satisfied with his efforts and, saying a silent prayer to whichever deity Brian Wilson worshipped, burned all but two tracks of strummed piano strings filtered through an Echoplex. I resolved to be more successful in my own endeavor. I sought out Claire after Ms. Libman magnanimously let all those under her charge leave work a half hour early.

“There comes a time when the fruits of responsibility should be *duly* celebrated,” I kidded her as we entered the elevator. “After all, hard work can’t always be its own reward.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Jerry, who stood next to Claire. I thought he’d been acting aloof. Next thing I knew he was asking if we’d like to split some beer and veggie nachos.

Jerry and Claire spent the following two hours talking almost exclusively to each other. They shared a passion for shoes. After receiving approving nods over my stylish new dress loafers and half-heartedly offering my two cents on the virtues of cross trainers over runners, I had little else to contribute. Unexpectedly, Jerry said he had to run after the last morsels of cheese were picked from the wax paper at the bottom of the basket. His wife would be getting off her shift at the hospital, and he had promised to take her out for a late dinner. When he’d gone, I made my move.

“You and Jerry seemed to hit it off,” I said. “Glad to see you’re warming up to each other.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Claire asked.

“Nothing really. I just thought there’d been some tension between you two.”

“We’re fine.”

“So,” I began. “Do you have to run home right away, or can you stay out for a few more?”

“I’m not sure I want to drink at a pub all night, if that’s what you’re asking,” she said.

“No, if you need to go home and change, or if you have plans, I—”

“Look, just so you know, I’ve been in office romances before, and they don’t work for me.”

“I—”

“Furthermore, I’m above sleeping my way to the top, if that’s what you’re insinuating.”

Seeing I had no reply, she told me to nab the waitress to get our bill.

The entire night I puzzled over just what Claire meant by her remark. Had she thought I’d been insinuating she was coming on to Jerry in order to curry favor with Ms. Libman? Or had I unwittingly made it high enough in the company hierarchy that sleeping with me might be considered an advantage? Number one I ruled out by figuring Jerry to be a gay man temporarily married to a woman. The fact that Claire probably made ten grand more a year than me ruled out number two. A third option was that Claire was playing hard to

get. I wasn't about to try to find out. I spent another Friday night alone watching the news. When I couldn't sleep, I clicked the television back on and caught most of a late movie starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Bogart played a fugitive who gets plastic surgery to hide his identity.

The next morning, I was treated to a spectacle that kept me entertained well past noon. A new tenant was moving into the neighboring rooming house. A mid-size moving truck with blinking hazards was parked outside the house the entire morning. The van had to be moved frequently to let other vehicles pass on the narrow street. From the amount of stuff moved from van to house it looked like the new tenant had rented the whole shebang.

"I always thought that was just another rooming house," I said to one of my housemates, who had come out to join me on the porch for a coffee and a gander at the proceedings.

"It is," he said.

"Jesus. He's got a whole house worth of shit. I hope he's renting a couple rooms."

"I've been inside," my housemate said. "A buddy of mine lives there. There's only one vacant room as far as I know. You stick around long enough and nothing surprises you."

We stood watching silently until the van drove off. I understood what he meant. I was becoming inured to surprises.

The new tenant's possessions had been mostly musical equipment: Guitar cases, amplifiers, miscellaneous electronic items trailing wires. Either this guy was just storing his equipment temporarily, or a mini music studio was going in next door. If the latter was the case, things might be getting raucous again. Any change the new neighbor might make to my routine would be welcome.

### §

For a long time nothing happened. I neither saw nor heard anything of the new neighbor. I went to work, read the manuscript and came home to my little room. Claire came up with something resembling an apology two weeks after our unfortunate exchange.

"I hope you didn't take what I said the other night the wrong way," she said in the middle of an uncomfortable elevator ride. "Sometimes things around here leave me a little on edge."

I cleared my throat and said, "I know what you mean." There was another prolonged silence as we crept slowly to the ground floor. When the bell dinged, I asked her if she would ever care to go for a drink again. Strictly as friends. Sometimes it was nice to have someone at work to share things with.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Thanks all the same.”

Back at home, watching old movies became my new hobby. The Bogart/Bacall late night brought back a long dormant fascination with old movies, so I bought an old DVD player at a pawnshop and picked up some films at the library. I started with *To Have and Have Not* and *The Big Sleep*. I worked my way through a couple of films a night. When I ran out of movies featuring the romantic duo, I went through just Bogart’s, then Bacall’s. I had made it to *Harper* with Bacall and Paul Newman when it began to snow.

Thick fluffy flakes, tiny perfect crystals, then slushy sleet and finally a deep freeze. There was a layer of snow and ice over everything. Telephone and high-tension wires appeared a frosty grey, and icicles hung from the poles and from the eaves of every house, making me long for colorful front gardens. A plow didn’t come down the street for an entire day, and when it did, all the cars parked along the gutter, some already dug out by their owners, had a three-foot drift pushed against them.

I had moved to the city with a car but used it only on rare occasions. I used public transportation and my feet to get nearly everywhere. The car was for emergencies only. Before the snow I was even considering getting rid of it because I had never obtained a parking permit, and over four months had

amassed a good dozen tickets. Now I found myself cursing its very existence as I dug it clear.

As I was digging, I caught sight of the man who had moved in earlier that month. He wore a cap over his brow and was bundled in a heavy leather coat with a scarf tied under his chin. I stood to nod and say hello as he passed, but he made no acknowledgement. He disappeared into his home. I had finished freeing the car when something glinted at me down the walk. I picked a tiny key out of the snow and, thinking my neighbor must have dropped it, knocked on his door. After pounding away for a while, I tried the knob, but the door was deadbolted. For the rest of the weekend I kept regular watch for the mystery man to no avail.

Going to catch the bus to work the next day I spotted him. More correctly, he spotted me. He came down his steps in a bathrobe and winter boots as I trundled down the street in my parka. Coffee steamed from the mug clutched in his hand.

“Good morning,” I greeted him. “I think I have something of yours.” I pulled the key from my inside pocket.

“Fucking right you do,” he snarled. He snatched the key from my hand and stomped back up the steps.

## §

## Book III

I managed to get through the rest of that day without alienating anyone. By this point I was very much enmeshed in my job. The novel remained stylistically difficult well past its midpoint and into Book Three. Our hero felt he'd become more successful in his musical endeavors but became very paranoid due to a series of coincidences that saw his life mirroring his art. I couldn't help but try to fit my own life of the past four months into a sinister series of coincidences, but came up with nothing better than a conspiracy of banal misunderstandings.

That evening there was a pounding at the door as I was preparing supper. My neighbor stood outside clad in jeans and a T-shirt. His only concession to the snow was a pair of boots. It must have been fifteen below with the wind, but he made no attempt to shield his bare, skinny arms. He warmed both hands around a mug of coffee.

"Sorry about this morning," he said. "I get a little on edge about my work."

"Your work," I said ambivalently.

"The key," he elaborated. He sniffed the warm air wafting from my doorway. "Come over after you've finished your dinner and I'll show you."

## §

“I took the liberty of pouring you a cup of coffee,” he spoke as he welcomed me into his room. It was much larger than mine but still too small for its contents. There were two cushy armchairs and a wooden stool guarded by two amplifiers, with an instrument rack on which hung electric and acoustic guitars and a bass. Complimenting these were a synthesizer and a rack of electronic effects. A laptop sat on a desk littered with music charts and papers. Next to that was a reel-to-reel recorder and mixing table, beside which was a state-of-the-art stereo system. A thin mattress stood rolled in one corner atop a duvet, pushed against the wall by a bar fridge with a hot plate and a jar full of kitchen utensils on top.

“Creamer and sugar are in the fridge,” he continued.

“So this is your work,” I said. We sat facing each other in the chairs. He was older than me, with fair, wispy hair greying at the temples and a ruddy complexion as from too much booze.

“Tools of the trade, brother,” he said. “Might as well show you what I mean though, right?”

He rose, moved to the closet, and hauled out two steel boxes painted a dull sea green, each standing a foot high. He removed a silver chain dangling from his neck. On it were two keys like the one I had found in the snow.

“I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced,” he said as he inserted a key into a box.

After getting my name he said, “Sonny, I want to take this opportunity to properly thank you for finding that key. I realize your intentions were honorable. I can’t imagine what might have happened had the key found itself in other hands.” He lifted the lid of the box on its hinges and beckoned me forward. “My work,” he said as I crouched with him over the opened box. Within were two stacks of compact discs enclosed in clear plastic cases.

“Your recordings?” I asked.

“I burned them myself from the original tapes. Five years worth,” he answered. “I’ve been working and reworking them. Redoing tracks, experimenting with different effects, searching for samples. Of course, sometimes I get distracted. I mean, I might spend a month listening to old Red Krayola records. Get totally into what they were doing and completely discouraged with my own thing. But that’s part of the process. Nobody works in a vacuum. Even if working alone is your thing. All art’s gotta come from somewhere. Kraftwerk

were, like, listening to the Beach Boys. And the early Beach Boys were lifting off Chuck Berry and the Four Freshmen. So where does original stuff come from? The thing is not to become consumed by your influences.”

I nodded with each point. I wanted to reserve judgement until I'd actually heard those CDs.

“I don't think so,” he said when I asked. “I would like to buy you a beer though.”

I glanced at my watch. “I don't know. Monday night.”

“One beer,” he said. “I feel I owe you.”

“I don't like one beer. I like ten.”

“Well put,” he said. “Another time.”

I raised my hands noncommittally.

“Saturday then,” he said. He locked the box and led me out of the house.

## §

Now it was my turn to be paranoid about suspicious coincidences. There wasn't much doubt in my mind that my neighbor was some kind of obsessive maniac. An obsessive maniac with some cash to spend on music equipment no less. And delusions of grandeur about a clandestine recording project. The line between work and home was sufficiently blurred as to make me consider an

elaborate joke. I ran a mental list of who I'd contacted since I'd moved. More importantly, who I might have inadvertently told about the project. But I wasn't lying when I said I considered myself conscientious on the work front. In the few phone conversations I'd had with family or friends, I couldn't recall telling anyone about the project. So I was left with the possibilities that the novel I was editing was based on my neighbor, I was editing my neighbor's latest novel, or I needed a vacation from the publishing world.

"Do you happen to know anything about the origin of the plot," I ventured to Ms. Libman in our third conference together.

"Why?" she asked.

"I don't know. I guess I'm always interested in biographical or background information. I haven't read anything else besides the novel in so long."

"I should hope not," she said. "The less distractions the better. Anyway, despite the fact that many great works of fiction are essentially *romans à clef*, the biography of the author himself is superfluous. And he guards his privacy closely."

"I'm aware of that," I persisted. "But as his long-time editor, surely you must—"

“Sonny,” Ms. Libman said, as if confiding a great secret, “things have been going so well for you here lately. Don’t worry yourself with things not directly related to the project. That is, stick to the project. If all goes well, and I hope they do, you’ll be on to even bigger and better things in a few weeks.”

On Saturday my neighbor showed up at my door. He was ready to buy me that beer. I was reluctant to go and reminded him gravely that I wasn’t interested in just *one* beer. I added that money was tight.

“Ten beers it is,” he said. “I got you covered.”

It had snowed again. Driving was out of the question; buses and trains were running slowly. We wrapped ourselves against the weather and walked to a bar above a Mexican restaurant. My neighbor introduced himself as Jack. He had heard of the band playing that night. The band members looked keenly bohemian, as did their audience, some of whom acknowledged Jack. It was my first night out in a long time, and I was soon enjoying myself immensely. Jack wouldn’t let me buy rounds until I told him about my initial plan of feigning destitute to avoid hanging out with him. He admired my candor and let me cough up my share the rest of the night. We eyed young women as they bumped up the stairs and shucked off winter gear. We talked about music, movies and books. We got drunk and discussed past loves, true friends and

people who had wronged us. We bought each other shots and shared cigarettes outside in the cold. I jinxed myself by complaining about my car and found a ticket sticking out from the snow on the windshield when we stumbled past at the end of the night.

“Why don’t you just sell the fucker?” Jack asked.

“Easier said than done,” I slurred. “I need it sometimes. And I never seem to have the time to advertise or show it. Not that anyone would want it.”

“I know someone who would buy it right now, brother,” he said seriously. I thanked him for the offer but told him I wasn’t ready to sell.

## §

I woke with a glorious hangover and spent the entire day recovering. It even took me a couple of coffees to wake up for work on Monday. By Tuesday I was back in the swing and resolved to remember my hangover the next time I thought about going out for a few drinks. Jack knocked on my door the next day.

“Hump Day,” he announced. “What’s going on tonight?”

“Not much,” I said. I was still wearing a loosened tie. “Just lying around watching the news.”

“No news is good news. There’s a band playing tonight I’m dying to check out. Wanna come with?”

I hesitated, mentioned the day and a half hangover, but he assured me it would be an early night. We stayed until last call.

Surprisingly, the following workday didn’t begin so badly. Jesse Grimes had all but disappeared from the story as the plot switched gears to a day in the lives of his respective band mates. Time had passed, and, frustrated by Jesse’s obsessive behavior and perfectionism, the boys were considering breaking up the band. In the afternoon, the plot returned to Jesse, this time from a first-person perspective. The interior monologue resembled the pastiche of illogically ordered image sequences popular in music videos. To say it was hard to follow would be an understatement. No amount of coffee could help me delineate a syntactical rule of thumb for the section, as no rules really applied, the language rocking and pitching at the whim of Jesse’s stream of consciousness. I had never been so glad for a day to be over. Of course, I paid for my performance.

“You’re to do this over,” Jerry said to me Thursday morning, handing back the entire interior monologue, free of proofreader’s marks. “Let me know

when you're finished." When I finished, Jerry ushered me into Ms. Libman's office.

"I know these last four months have been a strain on you, Sonny," she began, not unkindly. "A lesser proofreader might have buckled long ago. I admire your stick-to-it-ness. That said, this kind of thing can't happen again. Not at this stage of the game. It would be a shame to lose an opportunity when you're so close to it."

As if I needed proof that things can always get worse, I received a letter from the city ordering me to settle my account with Parking Enforcement to the tune of three hundred and ninety dollars. If I was able to keep my job I might be able to afford it. When Jack dropped by that evening I had a legitimate excuse.

"Bummer," he said. "But, like I said, I know a guy who would buy that car off you. No questions asked."

Just to get him off my back I told him I'd consider it.

"Wait a minute," he said as I was preparing to forcibly evict him. "This won't take long."

Before I knew it, I had agreed to participate in a recording session.

I spent two hours in Jack's room as his percussionist. I played bongos and congas on his drum machine. A base track of whatever I felt like doing. He hit record immediately, not allowing me any time to warm up my uncoordinated fingers. He wanted the sound to be as spontaneous as possible. Whenever I fell into a decent rhythm, he stopped me and said I was second-guessing too much. I was to go with my gut. I played as wildly as possible just to get out of there.

§

I wondered if the author had approached the last hundred and fifty pages of his novel that way. Like he just wanted to get out of there. What happened to the middle-aged Jesse Grimes of the prologue? How was the novel to reconcile itself with him when he had now completely disappeared into the tapes of tonal gibberish his mutinous band mates were reviewing after they found he had vanished? The critics could ask those questions, I told myself. Mine was but to find typos. I would be finished with the project within a week.

In the meantime, Jack approached me again about selling my car. His friend would give me fifteen hundred cash on Sunday if he could have the car by Saturday. I couldn't argue with the money. It was a fair price. But the idea of handing over my car to a stranger on the mere promise of money was a risk.

“Look,” Jack said. “If it makes you feel any better, I’ll give you the money myself if he isn’t here bright and early Sunday morning. You can have my amplifiers as collateral. That’s two thousand easy.”

His friend came for the car on Saturday. Jack moved the amplifiers into my room while I took the buyer for a test drive. Later, Jack bought me dinner, and then we went out and got completely shitfaced. I woke up in my clothes in the early morning.

Something pounded my eyeballs from behind as I stared hard at the sunlight cast on the wall before me. My tongue felt glued to roof of my mouth, hard and dried like cured meat. I sat bolt upright at the sight of the amplifiers crammed beside my bed. I ran over to Jack’s place and pounded on the front door. A tattooed boy answered after a long while.

“Jack?” the kid responded to my inquiry. “Buddy, there could’ve been eight people by that name living here in the past two years, and I wouldn’t know it. But you’re free to check things out.”

No one answered at Jack’s door. It was locked. His housemate followed me back down the stairs.

“Maybe he’s at work,” he offered.

“It’s Sunday,” I said. The housemate shook his head.

“Monday, dude,” he said. He showed me the day indicator on his watch. It was eight o’clock Monday morning.

I groomed myself for work as best I could. I wet my hair, gargled with mouth wash, coated my armpits with deodorant and sprayed cologne on Friday’s outfit, which had been lying in a heap in the corner. In my haste, I overturned one of Jack’s amplifiers. The head and cabinet fell face down on the floor. They had been completely gutted. No tubes, circuitry, or speakers. I walked an extra three blocks past my regular stop so I wouldn’t break down sobbing on the bus.

## §

“Jesus,” Claire said as I rushed to beat Jerry to my desk. “I’d heard it had gotten bad.”

“Fuck off,” I said. “You don’t know the half of it.”

I made no effort to hide my unhappiness. All I could think about was my car and the fifteen hundred bucks I wasn’t going to get. I couldn’t have cared less about the exploits of Jesse Fucking Grimes. He could vanish right into his sonic landscape as far as I was concerned. Still, I pressed on half-heartedly right through lunch. I’d have rather been carelessly proofreading and hating the author of this project than thinking about how I’d been made the victim of a con.

By the end of the day I had four hours of reading left. I was sure the story would just keep going until the narrative tape ran off the spool. I couldn't fathom any other ending.

§

Jack was standing at my doorstep when I got home. He was grinning, looked fresh and alert, and was clad the same way as when he first knocked on my door. Obviously awaiting my arrival.

"I owe you congratulations on two fronts," he said. He appeared quite pleased with himself.

"What the fuck?" I shouted over him. It was the first time I really felt like punching someone.

"Number one, your performance on Saturday night. What stamina! For a while I thought you would drink me under the table." He reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a thick wad of folded bills. "And I believe this belongs to you."

I was stunned. I reached for the wad and began counting.

"Number two," he continued, "your percussion work made it to one of the original masters. I thought you might like to know." He stepped down to the sidewalk.

“Where the hell were you the past two days?” I stopped him.

“Where wasn’t I?” he said. “You missed a helluva party, Sonny. There’s always a next time though. I’ll call you tomorrow, and you can listen to the final edit.” He jogged off, calling behind him that there was still some mixing to do.

“What about the amps?” I asked. He turned to face me.

“Did you really think I would trust you with two thousand bucks worth of equipment?”

## §

The next day Jerry failed to show up with the manuscript. An hour later, Claire arrived with a small business envelope and handed it to me wordlessly. Inside was a note on pink paper:

Sometimes even a Chief Editor can make a mistake. I hope I’ve caught this one in time. You have until noon to clear out your things.

Best,

L.

The weather had warmed slightly that afternoon, so I revisited some of my old haunts from my aimless summer and fall strolls. When I was sufficiently chilled, I went home with the plan of heading to Jack’s place after I’d

changed from my proofreader's uniform. At least I had fifteen hundred and a night off to drink. I could consider my future later.

Someone had already let him into my house. He was standing in the kitchen peering into the communal refrigerator.

"So this is how the other half lives," he said, inspecting a piece of cold chicken.

"I've been fired," I said.

"That's okay, brother," he said through a mouthful of chicken. "Now you can work exclusively for me."

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**Hugh Burkhart**'s short stories have appeared in *2 Bridges Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *Glimmer Train*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and elsewhere. He lives with his wife and son in San Diego, where he is working on a novel.