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## June Meeting

### Pizza Party

### Book Exchange

Tuesday, June 11

6:30 p.m.

McNabb Recreation Centre,  
Meeting Room C

Bring \$5 and a flash fiction story (up to 500 words) using the starter sentence "She recognized the unmistakable gait of the man walking toward her on the beach."

## September Meeting

### Annual General Meeting

### First Page Challenge

Tuesday, September 17

7:15 p.m.

McNabb Recreation Centre,  
Meeting Room C

## THE WRITER'S QUESTION

### "WHY AM I DOING THIS?"

By Arlene Smith  
President, CAA-NCR

When you read the short pieces about the CanWrite conference in the next couple of pages, you will see a common theme: the event energized the people who attended, fired up their creativity and fed their work-in-progress. It had that effect on me . . . eventually.

When I first returned from the event though, I had to navigate at least a week of low energy and self-doubt.

Spending four days with people who had so much in common gave me the opportunity to **exchange ideas with** them, and to **compare myself to** them.

How lucky I am to learn from them.

became

I will never be able to write like them.

I should just give up right now.

Talking to people who have published many books **inspired** me, and **discouraged** me.

If they can do it so can I.

became

Look at how many books they've published.

I can't even finish one.

The writer's life is a physical, mental, emotional, and I would say spiritual, roller coaster. We read a short story that makes people laugh or cry and we feel **fantastic**. We submit, submit, submit only to be rejected, rejected, rejected, and we feel **defeated**. The doubts that the Editor (with a capital E) feeds us begin to creep in.

- We aren't being paid for this.
- It takes SO MUCH TIME.
- Our house hasn't been cleaned in a month and we really need to get to it before we can sculpt the dust.

*Continued on page 2*

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## WE START TO ASK: WHY AM I DOING THIS?

And then . . . when we are on the brink of pressing delete, or tearing up the pages, or throwing out the USB drive with all our files, something happens . . .

. . . a person meets us on the street and tells us that they loved our latest blog post.

. . .that person we sold a book to months ago sends an email to say how much they enjoyed it and to ask what's coming next.

. . . wonder of wonders, our story, poem or book gets accepted.

—————

I've been writing long enough to recognize the symptoms and to understand the process.

I felt the drag of discouragement and let it be.

The low spirit crept in and I said, "Oh, I recognize you. Here you are again," but I didn't let it stop me.

I waited it out. The start of lift eventually came when I re-read something I had written and thought, "I like that. I want other people to read that some day."

I didn't press delete, or tear up the pages, or toss away a USB drive with all the files on it. I got up in the morning and I wrote, because writing is meant to be shared, and I have things to say that I want people to read someday.

And I want to read your words too, so if you ever find yourself asking the writer's question, one answer could be: Because next week, or next month, or next year I'll feel better, and there will be people who want to read what I have to say.



Canadian Authors Association  
National Capital Region  
Website

<http://canadianauthors.org/nationalcapitalregion>

Email

[NCRadmin@canadianauthors.org](mailto:NCRadmin@canadianauthors.org)

# NATIONAL CAPITAL WRITING CONTEST 2019

## THIRD PLACE - POETRY

### *Judge's Comment*

*Gut wrenching, literally and figuratively. The poet pulls the reader ... into the universal human experience of dying. The familiar tone is almost conspiratorial: "there is no way to practice this," the poet observes. "There are some things it is impossible to prepare for."—JC Sulzenko*

## WE, LIKE THE FISH

Thomas Gordon Reynolds

This is the way fish die,  
they die out of water,  
they die like this:  
rudderless on the grit and gravel  
thoroughly inept  
it don't take long,  
they know where they belong  
these fish,  
and it sure ain't here.  
All their strengths  
are weaknesses  
and  
there is no way to practice this,  
no way to know  
ahead of time.  
There are some things  
it is impossible to prepare for,  
there are some things  
you have to get right the first time  
(like being lifted by the pit of your throat  
and dangled spinning above the ground).  
There are some things  
so unexpected  
you have to trust to God for  
(like arching your back on the cold stones  
and screaming for something familiar).

# CanWrite!

The Canadian Authors Association  
National Conference  
May 16 to 19, 2019  
Vancouver campus, UBC

Six Canadian Authors Association members from National Capital Region travelled to Vancouver for the CanWrite conference.

These are their stories . . .

## CONNECTIONS

By Kit Flynn

There are other Ottawa regional writers groups, but my decision to join CAA was reinforced by attending my first CanWrite! conference. It was well worth my time, money, and energy. Here's why:

- 1. The national aspect of the CAA.** At CanWrite! 2019 I met writers from all over Canada. I now feel connected to a community of Canadian writers and, thanks to social media, we can easily keep the relationships going.
- 2. The content and quality of lectures and workshops.** The sessions were led by knowledgeable people who delivered professional lectures and workshops jam-packed with helpful tips and techniques.
- 3. Eyeball to eyeball connections.** These matter to me. It's easier to relate to people over the internet if you have met them in person. I met Catherine Saykaly-Stevens, our social media in-house expert, Douglas Richmond from House of Anansi Press, Katherine Koller, who provided me with a blue pencil edit, and Margaret Hume, our CAA National Chair, who was the one who inspired me to write my book when we met at Canadian Writers Summit in Toronto last year.

Those are the top three reasons I am glad I went to CanWrite! The connections with a Canadian community, useful information and helpful feedback infused my writing with new life, new ideas and new momentum.

## SUPPORTIVE TOUGH LOVE

By Sheila Burpee Duncan



OW. My head hurts. But perhaps not as much as the plot and protagonist of my novel-in-progress are hurting—they both got beaten up pretty badly in my pitch and blue pencil sessions over the CanWrite! 2019 weekend.

Sometimes I felt just like the men on the nearby nude beach: exposed, and caught doing something naughty. If you don't get caught what's the point? My naughtiness included a f acid elevator pitch and failure to erect a compelling story arc.

My first workshop was led by Betsy Warland on *The Use of Enquiry in Memoir Writing*. She was also my choice for a blue pencil session that afternoon. I have pages of notes, but I wrote one line in capital letters: "DON'T MAKE DECISIONS IN YOUR HEAD."

During the publisher panel it was comforting to hear Douglas Richmond from House of Anansi (to whom I would later pitch) say: "Publishers don't know what makes a book successful."

The biggest takeaway, the bit of advice I might consider tattooing onto the inside of my eyelids so that I am reminded with each blink, came from Eileen Cook, in her workshop, *Building Better Characters*: "It's not the events themselves but how the character relates to those events that matter to the reader."

## INFORMATION AND INSPIRATION

By Amy Hogue

I was excited about attending my first CanWrite! conference, and almost equally excited about exploring Vancouver for the first time. Given that we were staying in a dorm, I wondered what accommodations would be like at UBC, but we were blown away by how fantastic our room was, and by the campus itself. An early evening stroll through the beautiful campus was the perfect start for the conference, and even led us to a nude beach (!).

The workshops offered during the conference led by experienced writers gave me many good ideas and thoughts for my Work in Progress. Donald Maass was inspirational, and he definitely got my creative flow going. So many great ideas came out of Eileen's Cook's workshop, and I had a blue pencil session with her as well. It was just like we were part of a writing group and she was sitting down to tell me her thoughts on my piece. Informal, friendly, and she even gave me her email address to contact her if I had any more questions.

The conference was professional and well organized, with thought-provoking sessions. I left feeling inspired and looking forward to getting back at my novel. It was the right mix of information and inspiration.

# More on CanWrite!

## THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE FOR CREATIVITY By Tracey Pankow

I attend conferences regularly, and think it is important to attend at least one writing conference a year. It makes writers feel less isolated to know there are other writers feeling the same feelings of inadequacy, struggling with finding an agent or working through the confusion about the best way to get their work seen in the ever-changing world of publishing.

This year I attended CanWrite! for the first time. In the past, I have attended the Canadian Writers Summit in Toronto among other conferences. I have to admit that part of the appeal was Vancouver, a mecca for writers in novel and screenplay form. And sometimes we need a change of scenery!

I was impressed with the atmosphere. The feeling was much more intimate than other conferences and the atmosphere lent itself to collaboration and the sharing of ideas. Having meals together allowed us to meet fellow writers from all genres. I think I spoke at least three words to everyone in attendance and had more in depth conversations with many.

Donald Maass led one of the hands-on workshops: "Writing the Breakout Novel." I learned ways to take my plot and characters to the next level. The atmosphere was right for creativity. It was hard to choose which workshops to attend out of all of those of here, as they were all worthwhile. CanWrite! is a conference that I will attend again.



Tracey, Sheila, Kit, Arlene, Marcy and Amy



Arlene at Open Mic night



Kit with Katherine Koller

## COLLEAGUES, FRIENDS AND FUN By Arlene Smith

When I walked into my room on the University of British Columbia campus, the first thing I did was take a picture of the view and send it to my family. "Look at the view!" I wrote. When Kit Flynn walked into her room, she did the same thing. Take a conference and set it on the UBC campus and it's off to a great start. The attendees had the opportunity to walk around the beautiful grounds and gardens every day.

The second thing I did after arrival was attend the welcoming reception. That was my first opportunity to meet up with people I have met many times before, but only see once a year at CanWrite! They are professional colleagues, inspirational friends, and a lot of fun. I might have had a glass or two of wine.

Over the years, whether in Peterborough, Edmonton, Victoria, Ottawa, Toronto or Orillia, at every CanWrite! I have met at least one person who changed my writing career for the better. I have met at least one person who has become a friend even though we live a country apart. I have learned at least one thing that I have applied to my stories to make them richer and more engaging. CanWrite! Conferences are smaller than some other conferences, so there are more opportunities to meet people and really get to know them. You can pitch your work to an agent or publisher in the morning and end up sitting next to them at lunch an hour later. It is a time to build relationships and writing skills.



# NATIONAL CAPITAL WRITING CONTEST

## Awards Night

On Tuesday, May 14, CAA-NCR held the awards night for our 32nd annual writing contest.

The evening, emceed by our President, Arlene Smith, featured a mixture of poetry and story readings, announcements, and remarks by the judges, JC Sulzenko (poetry) and Jean E. Pendziwol (short story).

In a departure from previous years, excerpts from stories were read in alphabetical order by author, alternating with whole poems, also alphabetically by author. Announcements were made and prizes awarded in reverse order.

### POETRY

Judge JC Sulzenko felt that two of the poems were equally deserving of the top prize, so two first place prizes were awarded this year.

First place: Sylvia Adams, Ottawa, "The Girl Who Grew Up on Faerie Tales"

First place: Susan J. Atkinson, Ottawa, "Jealousy"

Third place: Thomas Gordon Reynolds, Amherstburg ON, "We, Like the Fish"

Honorable mention: Royden McCoag, Palmerston, ON, "Whale Watching"

Honorable mention: Marianne Jones, Thunder Bay, ON, "Grief Sonata in Three Parts"

Honorable mention: Sylvia Adams, Ottawa, "What Might Have Been a Love Poem"

### SHORT STORY

First place: Robynne Eagan, Carp, ON, "Blue Moon Rising"

Second place: Lynn Jatania, Ottawa, "Miss Julie's Home for Wayward Girls"

Third place: Alison Whiddon, Nepean, ON, "Neighbourhood Watch"

Honorable mention: Bruce Hodgkinson, Ottawa, "A Little Compassion"

Honorable mention: Joan McKay, Kingston, ON, "The Long Dash"

Honorable mention: Sara Mang, Cornwall, ON, "Away With Birds"

The number and quality of entries was high. The National Capital Region Branch welcomes contributors from all around our region, and some from a greater distance. Winners who could not attend the event had their work presented by friends or family.

Attendees at the awards evening commented favourably on the new format of presentations. It was enjoyable to hear "teasers" of the short stories, along with full versions of the poems. *Byline* readers can read full versions of these in this and upcoming editions. Entries will not be printed in order, but at the editors' discretion. In this issue, two poems and one story lead off, and the rest will follow in due course.

Many thanks to this year's judges, JC Sulzenko and Jean E. Pendziwol, for their selections and thoughtful remarks on the finalists' entries, and to Sherrill Wark for her many hours of work in running yet another successful contest.

To all members: Sharpen your pencils and your wits for the 33rd annual National Capital Writing Contest, coming up in 2020.

Now is not too early to begin crafting your entries.

# NATIONAL CAPITAL WRITING CONTEST

## Awards Night



The finalists



Robynn Eagan  
1<sup>st</sup> Place Short Story



Susan J. Atkinson and Sylvia Adams  
1<sup>st</sup> Place Poetry



Lynn Jatania  
2<sup>nd</sup> Place Short Story

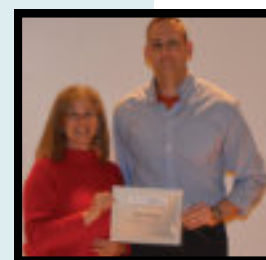


Bruce Hodgkinson  
Honourable Mention Short Story

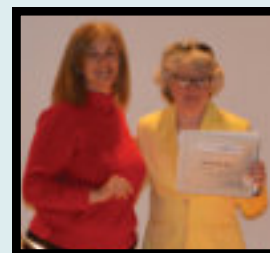


Alison Whiddon  
3<sup>rd</sup> Place Short Story

Nathan Mang for  
Sarah Mang  
Honourable Mention  
Short Story



Joan McKay  
Honourable Mention  
Short Story



NATIONAL CAPITAL  
WRITING CONTEST  
2019  
HONOURABLE MENTION -  
POETRY

Whale Watching

By Royden McCoag

I've always bin told to face the win'  
And not waste my time on where I've bin  
So when I stepped onto the bobbin' scow  
I says to the mate, "Which end's the bow?"  
He squints at me, a mainlander for sure,  
And replies, through his beard, in sort of a slur,  
"I sees, me bye, ye has no seafarin' bend  
But the bow, by tunder, 's the pointy end.  
And to call the back 'the stern' up air's a farce  
For in Newfoundland the rear's 'the arse'.  
We were leavin' Bay Bulls on a cloudy day  
Alookin' fer whales in Witless Bay.  
"The camplin's 'ere by the tousands, by gar,  
So the humpbacks and belugas can't be far  
And dey're 'ungry as 'ell, so far as I knows--  
Hey, look over starboard for der one blows!"  
We see the spray and the arch of the back  
And a monster comes up, all wet and black.  
"A cow," the mate says, "And see der's her calf.  
The old girl's lookin' us over and havin' a laugh."  
The pair see us, I'm sure, as we crowd the rail  
And then dive together, showin' some tail.  
But, after a minute, they surface again  
And you'll never believe what happened then  
For the bigger one breaches the water complete  
And the little one matches the mother's feat.  
For a moment, together, they stand on their tails  
And a cheer breaks out from those by the rails  
And don't tell me those two beauties didn't know  
For in the next half hour they put on a show,  
Blowin' and breachin' and smackin' the water  
And comin' much closer than I think they oughter.  
You'd think they were performin' by cue or remote  
For the appreciative aways on Jim Gatherall's boat.

Judge's Comment

*Using dialect and narration, the exuberant piece turns the excitement and joy of one whale-watcher into an experience readers can share and remember.*

—JC Sulzenko

## PUBLIC LENDING RIGHTS (PLR)

### WHAT, WHEN, HOW, WHY

By Phyllis Bohonis



Public Lending Right is the right of authors to receive payment for free public use of their works in libraries. More than 30 countries around the world have PLR programs. In some countries, payments to eligible authors are based on library lending. In other countries, payments are based on the total number of copies of each book held in libraries. In Canada, payments are based on the presence of a title in public library catalogues that are consulted during the annual PLR survey. Canada's PLR program was established in 1986.

In Canada, the calculation of PLR payments is determined by the PLR Commission, an advisory body of the Canada Council for the Arts. The process takes a full year and involves four main steps: registering titles, verifying title eligibility, sampling of public library collections, and preparing and issuing payments.

According to the Canadian Authors Association (CAA) records, the CAA began a campaign to bring a Public Lending Right program to Canadian authors in 1946. However, an excerpt from the PLR research reports by Roy MacSkimming in 2011 show the actual year as 1949.

*"The frst recorded instance of advocating a domestic program for the Public Lending Right is attributed to the Canadian Authors Association in 1949. The CAA made a presentation to the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Social Sciences (Massey Lévesque Commission) which was holding hearings at that time."*

Other Canadian writing groups joined the campaign and the PLR program was finally created in 1986. It was not smooth sailing during those approximately 40 years.

Mr. MacSkimming's research reports that during the 1960's and 1970's the Canadian Library Association helped keep the discussion of PLR alive. Basil Stuart-Stubbs, head librarian at the University of British Columbia, travelled to Scandinavia and had been impressed by PLR in action there. He and George Woodcock, an author and colleague at UBC, collaborated on an article arguing the right of authors to be paid for the reading of their work by hundreds who borrow copies of books in libraries against the few who might read a book purchased by an individual. It was published in Saturday Night in March 1974. They went on to propose a scheme for Canada that was similar to PLR schemes practised in other countries.

Some librarians were opposed to PLR since it implied that libraries had been ignoring the right of authors to be compensated for library use. Another of their concerns was that their institutions and/or patrons would be stuck with the bill for PLR. Recognition of an author's right might bring about lending fees for patrons, or reduced acquisition budgets for libraries.

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## PUBLIC LENDING RIGHTS

*continued from page 7*

In 1976 the CLA convened a PLR forum and after hearing all sides, the conference passed a compromise resolution urging the federal government to develop and fund a system of increased financial rewards to writers including the administrative costs of such a system. For the next decade arguments supporting authors' rights to compensation and the libraries' use of holding data in the development of an appropriate system. In 1977 a six-person study group, which was later called "Consultative Committee on Payment for Public Use" was formed by the Canada Council's Writing and Publishing section. The Consultative Committee consisted of Francophones and Anglophones who were a mixture of authors, librarians and publishers. In view of Council of officials, a Council-funded study of a PLR/Compensation for Authors / Payment for Public Use program for Canada could not be turned over to an individual association. Any association would inevitably be in a conflict of interest and would lack the capacity to carry out research to the extent necessary. Nor would any single association be nationally or linguistically representative. The task was daunting including the questions regarding Canada's Copyright Act; fund disbursement; eligibility criteria, etc. Complete data on published Canadian authors varied, estimates of the numbers of published Canadian authors varied wildly.

In September, 1981, the Memorandum submitted to the Canada Council board's quarterly meeting outlined the four-year process of the Consultative Committee and the characteristics of the system it had designed for a Payment for Public Use program. The scheme included a draft payment scale to authors, which produced a budget projection for the first three years. The program should be up and running in the 1982-3 fiscal year, the submission stated, "so as not to lose the momentum gained over the past two years of intensive input." The government would not act on the matter for another five years, and then under a different governing party. But those same principles and needs would survive more or less intact throughout the long delay, underpinning the program that was introduced in 1986.

In April 1986, the Council convened a consultative meeting with representatives of the national associations of writers, translators, librarians and publishers to advise on the Commission's role, membership, voting procedures and staffing arrangements. In June 1986, the Canada Council board approved establishment of the Payment for Public Use Commission along the lines recommended by that consultative meeting. The Council also authorized the necessary disbursement of the program funds to be administered by the Commission.



<https://www.facebook.com/groups/CanadianAuthorsNCR>

The PLRC's constitution provides for a board of fifteen voting members, of whom ten are writers. Each of the following seven writers' organizations has a right to appoint one voting member to the board:

Canadian Authors' Association  
Écrivains francophones d'Amérique  
League of Canadian Poets  
Playwrights Guild of Canada  
Regroupement des écrivains acadiens  
Union des écrivaines et écrivains Québécois  
Writers' Union of Canada

The PLR searches for eligible books in selected library systems across Canada to calculate payments to creators. This process is known as library sampling. Their approach is to include public library systems with large collections from all provinces, territories, and regions of Canada. They search for all eligible books in the online catalogues of selected library systems or within digital copies of their paper catalogues.

### **New for 2019: Audiobooks are now eligible for PLR Registration**

In recognition of the growing popularity and demand for literary audiobooks in Canadian public libraries, the Public Lending Right Program will open registration this year to credited authors, translators, and narrators who have participated in the creation of an audiobook.

My thanks to Bernice Lever, British Columbia resident, long-time member of the Canadian Authors' Association and voting member of the PLR for several terms who answered my questions about the PLR and CAA's involvement. I first met Bernice at a lunch in Ottawa a few years ago when she was attending a PLR annual meeting and I was president of CAA-NCR. It was during this meeting that I learned of Bernice's passionate advocacy for the PLR, how beneficial it is to published Canadian authors and that it was the Canadian Authors Association who began the campaign to form this program. She instilled in me such a pride of membership in an organization like CAA that fights continuously for the rights of authors, poets and publishers.

Most of the information contained in this article is from <https://publiclendingright.ca/> and from "PLR Research Reports 2011" by Roy MacSkimming. I have extracted pieces of a report by Mr. MacSkimming and formed them into a short explanation of the formation of the PLR and how CAA was and is involved. For his complete and informative report please visit the website.



[https://twitter.com/caa\\_ncr](https://twitter.com/caa_ncr)



# NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

by Alison Whiddon

Iris nudged the slats on the venetian blinds further apart with the end of her binoculars. Four thefts within the last week were starting to make her nervous, so much so that she'd moved Ken's old pair of spyglasses, as he used to call them, to the window ledge of the second-floor bathroom. Nothing wrong with that, she'd reasoned merely keeping an eye on things.

The quivering branches of Ken's prized, so-called dwarf lilac bush, planted to disguise the hole in the back hedge, caught her attention immediately. The pale flower cones blossomed gloriously this past spring, then dissipated in a torrential downpour at the end of May. Undaunted it had leafed out thickly in the last few weeks. Ken would have loved it.

Force fed with manure, its ten-foot height by twelve-foot circumference shook fiercely. Iris held her breath half-expecting the gang of pirating five to eight-year-olds from the next street to burst out from behind it. Tomatoes or strawberries were their usual quarry; why they would swipe three maple saplings and one rose bush she really couldn't imagine. The lilac branches suddenly heaved forward and went still. Iris tightened her grip on the binoculars and waited.

And then, nothing. Not a twitch, not a ripple, not a breeze; it was motionless.

The scarlet flash of a cardinal startled Iris and she lifted the glasses. Her corner lot was large enough to overlook both back yards directly behind the cedar hedge. It had come from one of them.

Iris swung the binoculars to the left.

Ernie was there on his deck, slouched in a chair.

## NATIONAL CAPITAL WRITING CONTEST 2019 THIRD PLACE - SHORT STORY

### *Judge's Comment*

*Well structured and paced with interesting characters, and a consistent point-of-view—that being the one seen through binoculars into the neighbour's yard. Lighthearted and at times funny, the language is fluid, and the story culminates with a thought-provoking twist at the end. —Jean E. Pendziwol*

Years ago Ken had referred to him as a "rare-bird" type neighbour, as it could be months between sightings. Iris hadn't seen him lately, but then again, why would she? Spying was not a regular activity for her.

There was nothing in Ernie's yard but a deck and grass which he paid someone else to care for. His back was visible through the trees. In all the years he'd lived there, Iris had never seen him smoke, but that was definitely a scrunched-up cigarette dangling from his fingers.

Odd behaviour for a man who many in the neighbourhood considered forgettable. Tidy, distant, Ernie Smidgin was considered as insignificant as his name implied.

Iris pondered the few details she knew. He left the house at 8:30 a.m. every morning and returned at 6:00 p.m. in the evening. Jake's Greenery mowed his lawn every couple of weeks, and Snowbound Brothers shovelled his driveway through the winter. That was it. As far as she could tell, he never changed his routine. There were rumours of a wife who had left him, but that was before Iris and Ken had bought this place. Right now he was as immobile as that lilac bush.

Perhaps he was asleep.

The sharp sound of barking caused Ernie to drop his cigarette and stagger to his feet.

Was he drunk?

Iris followed the sound and shifted her binoculars to the right, to the yard belonging to another neighbour, Tobias, and his canine sidekick Warrick.

I wonder what the two old dogs are up to?

The yard appeared empty but two more contrasting views of landscaping you couldn't find anywhere else in the neighbourhood. Whereas Ernie's yard was spartan, Tobias took a more fertile, abundant approach to gardening; similar, Iris suspected, to his view of life. He had replaced the lawn with a fragrant carpet of thyme and turned the area nearest the house into a haven of colour. Banks of salmon pink, sunflower yellow and black-red vampire day lilies, divided a tiered rock garden that meandered its way around a couple of stone mermaids. Each one casting longing glances at their decorative pond, forever on the edge of what they desire.

Warrick, the elderly basset hound appeared barking frantically, unusual for such a placid, lazy soul. Iris could see him run a few steps towards her hedge, skid to a stop, backup, and start growling, barking and then repeat the process. Tobias appeared at the back door shouting at him unsuccessfully to be quiet.

Tobias had shepherded Ken home one Christmas Eve after finding him on his doorstep in flip-flops. Eventually Tobias called regularly for walks, saying he enjoyed the company as Warrick had no conversational skills.

Neither had Ken.

About a year and a half after Ken died, Tobias asked Iris out for coffee. "No worries," he said with a grin when she turned him down, "I'll still mow the lawn."

*continued on page 10*

## NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

*continued from page 9*

In his company she often caught a whiff of skunky tobacco or wet dog or both. Iris wondered if Tobias and Warrick slept together.

Switching backyards, she zoomed in on the table where she had last seen Ernie sitting. He wasn't there, but a toolbox and a couple of long metal tubes now lay across the table. When he appeared again he was pacing the deck shaking his arms in rage about something. Although Iris could not see the whole yard from her standpoint, she got the impression no one was listening.

Checking back with Tobias, she gaped as she watched him sprint across his garden. He was burdened with a reluctant, squirming basset in his arms, throwing themselves through the back door and slamming it.

What the hell was he doing?! The usual advice for confronting a skunk was slow and steady retreat. Of course maybe it was something bigger.

Ernie was back at the table and had gone quiet so Iris scanned her own yard, along the back cedars to the lilac.

Startled, Iris pulled back from the glasses and blinked. Was she seeing things? Was there some neighbourhood disaster preparedness practice she hadn't heard about? Some film crew making a movie?

Could that possibly be the plant thief?!

She checked again. No, the stranger was still right there, crouched at the bottom of the bush nearest the hedge, a figure in camouflage fatigues hefting an assault weapon.

A SWAT team in this neighbourhood?!

As she watched, the figure crept behind the lilac towards the hole in the hedge.

Breath caught in her throat, she raised the glasses. Ernie was facing

the back hedge pointing those two metal tubes...oh God, it was a shotgun.

Swamped with a sudden sense of guilt, but frozen in disbelief, Iris peered through the blind.

Except for a housefly bashing itself angrily against the glass window, nothing moved.

Then Ernie, still pointing the gun at the hedge, took a step toward the edge of his deck.

The silence cracked just once.

\* \* \*

Iris never confessed. Not to witnessing the convulsive jolt his body made, nor to her gut clutching shock at the spread-eagle sacrificial position in which Ernie lay gathering more attention than he had in years.

Later that week Tobias came over and asked her to go for a walk. Iris had not left the house for several days, so she went. They paced themselves to Warrick's speed and sauntered up towards the local park.

Neither one spoke, as though not wanting to disturb the quiet street.

As they crossed the grass Tobias finally turned to Iris and said.

"I...I saw a beaver this morning by

the hedge with one of my saplings in his mouth."

"Ahh...well, that explains the missing plants," she replied. "The ditches were flooded this spring."

"We'll have to catch him, move him on, somehow," muttered Tobias.

He pulled a newspaper clipping out of his pocket and thrust it at Iris. She knew what it said but reached out nonetheless.

Turned out Ernie had a fair for drama and had threatened to blow up his ex-employer whom he accused of having him watched 24/7. The report said 63-year-old Ernie Smidgin had recently been fired, but no explosives had been found.

"The police wanted to know what I knew about him," sighed Tobias as they settled on a bench, "but there was nothing I could say."

Iris nodded, "I know. I just told them he was quiet."

"They wanted to know if he was a bird watcher," Tobias shook his head.

Iris frowned. "Why?"

Tobias bent towards Warrick to scratch his ears,

"Seems more paranoia than hobby, but they apparently found a pair of binoculars at nearly every window in the house."

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