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McGimpsey

certifiable

fiction

certifiable

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Hamburger Valley, California

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(fictions)

David McGimpsey



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FOR THE ARTS | DU CANADA
SINCE 1937 | DEPUIS 1937



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for Kathy

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Foreword

You might be asking, why did I come out of my 18 year retirement to write this book? I'll tell you, it wasn't for the sweet punch my agent serves at his so-called "80s Night" parties. I enjoy the singing along to "Eye of the Tiger" and have been known to pocket a salmon quesadilla or two, but the punch he serves is like 100% gin. How else can I explain going into his dresser and trying on all his socks? No, I wrote this book simply to express life's human despairs and the exhilaration of life's universal joys—like the time my TiVo remembered to tape that rerun of *Felicity* where she finally does it with Ben. That was awesome. I also figured lots of people are still writing books, so why not Davey? Pete Rose wrote a book and maybe I could write one without using the word "baseball" so often—baseball this, baseball that, God, that's really annoying! Of course, lots of things have changed in the world in the last two decades. Personally, I'm surprised woodburning portraits never really came back in style, but who can account for taste? After several tragic misunderstandings of the proper handling of the woodburning "pencil," I confess I became quite prolific in the craft, and though I'm justly proud of my crowning achievement, "Tribute to Posh Spice," I realized it was time to get back to a less fickle, less third-degree burn causing, art. But, my, everything feels different today. Now, apparently, there's more than one kind of aerobics. Step aerobics, power aerobics, couch-bound aerobics, Kenny Loggins lovin' retro aerobics—it is a complicated time. I swear, how people can choose a potato chip, what with the ruffled and non-ruffled brands both being so tasty, I'll never know. But I have decided to meet the hurly-burly of the era with the will of a true believer—for if there is one thing I must do now it is prove all the nay-sayers wrong. Like my old writing teacher who said

Gayly Through the Gloomy Gloaming was “perhaps not the best manuscript title,” or my erstwhile co-worker who said I would never be “barista material”—I’ll show them, I will show them all. Now I am ready to reap the rewards that invariably await those who write of life, death and a philosophical little gopher named Grady. Make no mistake, I am expecting huge rewards! Like that guy in Oceanside who had his poem “Why Oceanside Rawks” on the bulletin board at the Oceanside *Stop ‘N Shop* for nearly a year. Can you imagine? That guy got to go on the *Hello Oceanside* radio show and they gave him, like, a thirty dollar gift certificate at El Pollo Loco. As Grady himself would say, that’s living. Maybe, if I’m lucky, I’ll be honored with an even more prestigious award from the literary community—like being named the Academy of Country Music’s “Entertainer of the Year,” an award once shared by Robert Penn Warren and Mel Tillis. You are looking at the next *Oprah* book. My stories of a plucky pioneer who yearns for a lost European lover all the while putting up with the indignities of a small town rhubarb cannery will somehow remind you it’s never too late for plastic surgery. After a life of suffering for my art, with the money I make here I might be able to purchase the two things everybody wants in life: Buford Pusser’s whoop-ass stick and Buford Pusser’s solid gold football. To the future! People are always saying, “Don’t tell me, you could write that down—but you should definitely not be telling me.” So I have responded to their editorial kindness and I give to you my first effort since ghosting the biography *Rock Me Falco* (Falcobooks, 1986). I hope you enjoy this book, and you too may experience the generous spirit of people who always look me straight in the eye and say, “You’re certifiable. Absolutely certifiable.”

Rawk!

—DM, Oceanside, CA

B.G.U.

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My third unpublished novel, *Big Guy University*, was certainly my worst. Who wants to read a whole book about a guy named Steve? Who wants to read about a guy who finally gets a job as an advice columnist even though he seems ill-equipped to do anything but offer misanthropic commentary like some scraggly Gen X movie hero? And, honestly, who would want to read anything about the girlfriend I had provided for Steve-o; did “Amanda” do anything but make “terrific fajitas” and insist Steve was really not such a bad guy?

Did I not use words like *jouissance* and *modality*? Did I not pretend, what with Steve’s uncanny ability to make people in tollbooths smile, that he was a totally different kind of man than I was?

I was crushed when nobody wanted to read my first novel (*Guy on the Highway*) and pretty much lost my will to live when even my friends wouldn’t read through the second (*Ditch-Blessings*), but by the time I started *B.G.U.* I guess I was writing in the same way somebody works on their gardening or on one of those jumbo jigsaw puzzles of Big Ben. It was something to do in the early evenings to help keep an illusion alive.

Unlike the pathetic Steve, I worked in advertising. I was a member of a four person team within a mid-sized east coast company where we were responsible, among other things, for creating a pitch for a new line of thick, deodorant soap called “Engage.” A rather unimaginative clichéd product to dedicate my days to, but it was better than checking up on the stock of DVDs at the local Buy Now. Holcomb and Rahlolld was quite successful with local campaigns: a morning radio show famously tagged as “Better than calling in sick!”; a local restaurant chain where it was assured, “The fun is the food at Binty’s!”; and a local law firm who told all in the Tri-State area—“Don’t pay for *their* mistakes.”

My ex-wife wasn't around to see me write *B.G.U.* but she was, she said, "disappointed" I didn't turn out to be a better novelist. She had a tweedy image of me which was flattering but depressingly easy to dismantle. Two years after the divorce, not long after I had made one of the creative teams at H-R she phoned to tell me, with the severity of a judge, how I "lacked character."

I said: "Does this mean I can't expect a drunken call in February wishing me a Happy New Year?"

"You're a fish-faced jerk," she said on more secure, colloquial ground.

Maybe I still cared what she thought, but was happier without her. Aside from the whole getting to watch ESPN in the morning, I made good dough and I had a semi-serious girlfriend who also made good dough as a "fitness consultant." This would make my girlfriend a 24-year-old aerobics instructor named "Terri," which sounds more clichéd than the thick deodorant soap, but there you go. My ex-wife was the kind of person who'd make fun of Terri with an "i" but, let's face it, who wouldn't? It sounded like the kind of girl *B.G.U.*'s Steve would moon over while Amanda perfected her Tex-Mex entrées. But I liked Terri; she didn't take things too seriously and even if she dotted her i's with smiley faces she wasn't an ambitiousless caricature. I don't deny her great cheer—her Courician perkiness—her unflinching willingness to musically assure a group of fatties they should "shake their buns"—but she was possessed of an inner strength that one rarely encounters. Anyway, was I supposed to regret the youthful apple-polish she gave my graying life? Was I supposed to find someone who just liked to sit and talk about shitty movies?

The transition from *aspiring writer* to *full-time hack* is always an uncertain demotion. The pain about artistic failure is nobody comes with a pink slip and says, "I'm sorry, the aspiring writers of America have decided to let you go. We wish you the best of luck with your future endeavors be they involved with hammer, mop, spatula or broom." By the time you realize any of this, the pink slip has already been handed-in and all you have are drawers full of unread manuscripts. Even the dippy Steve of *B.G.U.* knew that. The office of H-R was similarly filled with former *artistes* who now had an intractable cynicism towards all who retained noble aspirations. Rationalizing *everybody is selling something*

was our form of heightened consciousness. Those who thought otherwise were still suckling the very pap we were offering in both original and lemon-lime formats. And though I fit right into that world, my story begins before I had finished my contribution to H-R's soap campaign, because, believe it or not, the story for *B.G.U.* was optioned as a screenplay for an agency and a movie studio which, for legal reasons, I am not at luxury to name.

How did my stinky manuscript find its way to Hollywood? I wasn't sure, but I knew it had something to do with my friend John who worked with an entertainment agency (brazenly called *Star Power*) in Toronto, Canada. I'd been friends with Toronto John since I met him at a writer's conference at a southern Vermont university. I'm ashamed to admit I attended such an obvious cash-bilk and when I talk about John to my friends I'm careful not to mention we met at the pricey workshop. These conferences are usually the reserves of talented, neurasthenic women who are just one bad prescription away from a stay at another kind of retreat. When I applied to the workshop I had this delusion I'd meet some literary bow-wow who'd be astonished by my stuff and would rush me posthaste to meet his or her publisher. Instead, I became friends with Toronto John who wasn't so ashamed, but was also coming to terms with his last run at becoming a writer.

Unwilling to put our hearts into the work, we concentrated on summer-camp fun. That Vermont workshop was a post-adolescent bonding-fest, replete with put-on questions to famous writers (Toronto John asked Rick Moody "what are your lucky Powerball numbers?"), silly-hearted affairs with girls up from the city, drunken threats to piss on Robert Frost's grave. We laughed at how terrible our pieces were and mocked the careful critiques these abominations were offered by the earnest hopefuls. "Can you believe this girl said my story lacked convincing narration? Christ, it lacked convincing *spelling!*" It was a defense mechanism: it was also the truth. Perhaps this unflinching part of Toronto John's nature got him his job at the *Star Power* agency.

As soon as he answered the phone I asked: "Did you give somebody my manuscript?"

"Dude!" he laughed; "What one is that?"

“The one about the advice columnist.”

“I didn’t *read* it, dude, get serious, but, yeah I think I gave it to this guy at *Excellency* in L.A.” (Excellency was another idiotically named agency). “He said he was looking to *develop stuff*. Scripts. Can’t remember his name ... something WASPy, but out of the ordinary ... like, *Blueberry*, or *Blankenship*. Remember, pal, don’t get feedback, get paid ... Why?”

So, I read him the trouble-starting e-mail I got from Hollywood:

LIKED *BIG-U* V. MUCH—WOULD LIKE TO TALK ABOUT IT—POSSIBLE MOVIE—QUIK \$\$\$

“Wowie,” Toronto John said. And then I started blabbing—the real nervous blabbing one would associate with the alternate on a cheerleading squad. I started losing concentration, boring Toronto John with details about the thick deodorant soap campaign, about Terri and, predictably, about the ex-wife. I reflected on how nice it was that we had both gone on in life, with no hard feelings, and how I’d like to think she’d be happy for my recent fortunes and how great it was going to be to rub her sour prune face in it all!

Toronto John listened in on a third line as I talked to the Hollywood guy who sent me the e-mail. He was all-business and straight to it, as if he was handing out money all day: “I liked the manuscript because the guy has quite a few good lines. The story with the wife doesn’t interest us too much, but the zingers do. Have you ever thought of writing comedy?”

“You mean like Pauly Shore becomes a rapper?”

“What? What? Please—what about screenplays? Do you have any experience?”

From these few words, these few reasonable suggestions, I managed to convince myself I was finally a writer. Making no distinction between *New Yorker* essayist and someone on call to doctor scripts for *L.A. Law: The Next Generation*, I was on my way. I was sure I was even better than most: a *Hollywood* screenwriter and I was going out there—settling quickly on the \$10,000 the agency promised for first-rights, etc.

Terri liked the idea of L.A. so much she wanted to get married. It was a comfort to know we'd be in it together, even if it meant packing boxes and boxes of aerobics gear that might never be opened again—at least not until fashion's next great hot pink explosion. H-R was steamed I wanted to go out west and one of the nits there made some motion they'd sue me for breach of contract. They didn't have much of a case, my lawyer said, but my lawyer would say the people of Valdez, Alaska didn't have much of a case if Exxon was on the line. I left some sketched ideas, some copy and a promise to keep in touch with H-R and to return to the team someday but they all wanted me to just say goodbye. Ray Wedall, the senior member of my team, gave me his best shot: "You know, the moment you step out of here Elinor Chase is taking your desk." Elinor was a legendary advertising sad sack, whose Sherlock Holmes campaign for a lemonade mix ("It's Lemonetary, Dear Watson") was H-R's biggest creative disaster and she was dying to get on a higher profile team. I laughed and told Wedall I didn't care. Like a teenager, I was thinking of escape: of screenplays where the phrase "huge explosion" is repeated and underlined; where cleavage make up was an art on the same scale as the lithograph.

Terri and I moved into a small apartment building in El Segundo. Under the illusion that the film industry was one large branch plant, like the GE Factory in Schenectady, I thought it was too far from "work." I never much noticed the orange trees and rhododendra which had Terri in rhapsody, but it was all "amazing" for her. It seemed like before she unpacked her little baby blue dumbbells she had a job teaching Pilates at the "Hollymain Dance Studio." She never heard the LAX-bound planes flying overhead and every night, like we were at a summer cottage, she would turn to me and say "can we go get some frozen yogurt?"

The guy on the phone met me for lunch at an Indian restaurant in Century City, had me sign a deal with the agency, gave me a signing check, and left early—perhaps sensing I would need to ask the waiter to pack up all the uneaten food for home. The guy also told me he knew of nobody outside of cartoons with a name like "Blueberry." He said he might have something for me with a script involving Julianna Margulies that was "in big trouble." *I wonder why?* So, like every other boner in Hollywood I waited and waited for my imaginary friend to give me a call about his zinger-less script. I still get jumpy when I hear

Ms. Margulies's name mentioned. Bored, I phoned my ex-wife to let her know where I was and to see if she would, for my amusement, eat her heart out.

"I met Cameron Diaz," I said. "She was all liquored-up."

"Are you getting any writing done?"

"I'm almost there," I said, like a delinquent student. Actually, I had managed to clear space on my desk and figured out how long a *venti latte* lasts when walking the beach.

"What *kind* of writers are out there?" she asked skeptically.

"All the best. John Irving is here working on, uh, *Scooby Doo 3* or something."

"Yeah right," she said.

Irving was her favorite writer. Once, when we seemed in love, she dragged me to see him at some reading venue way downtown. She even brought along several of his books and showed them to me like the bookmobile lady, carefully explaining what each book meant to her. A kind of poetic justice ruled that evening when Irving's handler told the audience that due to the author's preternatural celebrity he would not be signing books. The crowd twittered and exhaled the way golf fans do at that just-missed putt. I wasn't unhappy at all; I could see how she wished I was more like big John and I was glad to have something concrete to slag Garp-boy with.

"I don't want to have this conversation," she said.

"Oh, I gotta go," I said "Terri's taking me running."

"Feel the burn, Chachi," she said.

Chachi?

It wasn't too long before I was on the phone to H-R offering them more "input" vis-à-vis the thick deodorant soap. I wanted a "regular consulting fee" and opened myself up to Ray Wedall's comment "that's great—our regular consulting fee this year happens to be a case of Pepsi." By then, Toronto John had come down to stay with us for a bit while he took care of some L.A.-biz. It was good for Terri because he'd go with her to those stupid dance-clubs up on the Strip that I refused to go to. Meanwhile, I rested at home and started to concoct my fourth unpublished (and still unfinished) novel.

After being relieved of four serviceable jokey scenes, the agency dropped its rights to *B.G.U.* (except those jokey scenes) and, soon after, dropped me.

I did not start the last novel with any sense of its future—that I would learn from the last failures and fix that noise. No, it might as well have been called *B.G.U. Part II: Return of the Bong-Master*.

Every other night, when Terri was teaching or out, I'd walk up to this little Mexican-Chinese restaurant to write things long hand and to eat food that Terri had banished from our lives. The waiter who brought me my plum chicken tacos, Philip Wong, was the only person I have ever talked to about my fourth novel.

"So what's your book about again?" Philip would ask.

"I'm not sure. This guy named Steve and he has this girlfriend . . . Anyway, it's, as they say, a testament to the preference of madness to the durability of perception."

"Who said that, Hamlet?"

"Nah, I think it's something Screech said to Principal Belding."

"And what's next for you?"

"I'll probably go back east sometime and return to the buy-my-pirate-themed-toilet world of advertising. Shiver me timbers, she draws down like a giant squid."

In the novel, "Steve" was in the Valley, always up late at night, full of gin, and it's just him and his late-night TV friends. Soon enough, in a perverse twist on the whole notion of TV and talking horses, Steve starts having conversations about art and aesthetics with Mr. Ed. Anyway, one night, Steve's flipping around and he sees an old episode of *Fame* he hadn't seen before: Bruno's depressed because there's a flashier synth/piano whiz in town and Shorofsky starts beating him with a stick saying "you lost faith in your art!" or at least that's what Steve saw. This plunges him further into aesthetic crisis. Steve flips stations and watches a movie where Michael J. Fox is like a bellhop or something. The Mike Fox character seems to know a Chinese food delivery guy by name.

I never actually read any of this stuff to Philip Wong or anyone. It wasn't about following a dream but betraying it with senseless determination, following the self-pity inherent in being oblivious to failure.

True, if they had Hallmark cards that read "sorry about the desper-