

Georgiann Baldino

The
NURSING HOME
FUGITIVE

SMINK WORKS BOOKS

THE NURSING HOME FUGITIVE
A SMINK WORKS BOOK

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To Bob Baldino

A talented and generous man,
who can turn tears into laughter

Introduction

When the publisher asked me to write an introduction for *Nursing Home Fugitive*, it seemed impossible to keep my thoughts under 30,000 words, because the novel has come to mean much more than when I wrote it. The first and subsequent drafts seemed to come from the experiences of family members. Now I realize that I was writing about hopes I harbor for myself. The laughter and the joy of new experiences are what I wish to hold onto forever, and Clive Bertram Parisi represents, to me, the best possible outcome of old age.

In the book Clive sets out on a geriatric road trip, and a series of eccentric patrons give him shelter. Clive has suffered a stroke that robbed him of short-term memory, and all the secondary characters have some kind of disability too. Some of their handicaps are physical; others are emotional and mental. The suddenness of his own illness makes Clive more tolerant and understanding than before — at the same time it becomes much harder for him to express his feelings or offer help. Still, Clive's limitations draw him toward those who struggle, which brings me back to what I wish for myself. At times words cannot describe the emotions I feel, and there may be times, hopefully many decades away, when speech itself becomes difficult or impossible, but through shared life experiences and knowledge of each other I hope that family and friends will continue to understand.

For readers, I hope you will walk down the road with Clive, sympathize with his confusion, laugh with him, and evaluate the choices he makes in light of your own life journeys.

Georgiann Baldino

December 2006

I

So spake the prophet

What is this place?

Have I been here before?

Doesn't look familiar.

Strawberry fields to the left, recently plowed ground to the right.

Out in the middle of nowhere.

Smells good though, this rich, black soil.

What is this place?

Have I been here before?

Nice looking, but not where I want to be.

How far have I gone?

What would Sam say? He'd tell me, 'Do some reconnoitering'

Clive Parisi consulted his journal, but the entries didn't tell him what he wanted to know.

What is this place? How far have I managed to go?

He closed the book.

Where does this road lead other than around that bend? God, I hate this, not being able to remember from one moment to the next. Up there is a road sign. That will tell me where I am.

This is no time to feel sorry for yourself. Go over and look.

He grabbed the Paper Mate pen out of his shirt pocket and shambled over to the sign. Then he opened

The Nursing Home Fugitive

the journal again to the page with the paper clip. The clip marked the entries for today, but he scanned the words as if seeing them for the first time.

Got up at 5:23a.m. Had breakfast at the Starlight Motel and Café. Westbound on County 14.

Writing it all down anchored him; otherwise he drifted off. He peeled back his cuff for a peek at his watch and copied down the time and place.

Millstone, New Jersey. Pop. 573. 2:30p.m.

The top line reminded him today was March 22nd.

He grabbed an energy bar from his backpack.

Can't even rely on my stomach anymore. Haven't had lunch yet. No record of it in my journal.

He wrote down the time of his snack. Without a written record it could be any time, anywhere. His book also kept him focused on the ultimate goal. He recorded all the details of daily life he could no longer hold in his head.

Clive also used it to catalog the people he met, writing down a person's name the moment he learned it, followed by one of his quick-code symbols. He had to get a person's identity down within seconds or lose it. The symbols later told him his first impression and whether someone represented friend or foe. A star meant the person was a good guy. A minus sign told Clive the person was up to no good. On rare occasions he drew a circle after a name. The circle meant indecision. He never worried about being fair. He knew his judgments were totally subjective and of no value to anyone but him. But as soon as he decided about a person, Clive filled in the circle, using one of the other symbols in his code. Many times a first impression had turned into a lifesaver. The stroke he had suffered hadn't robbed him of all his gifts. Clive still knew instinctively how much trust he should place. Circumstances had broken his memory but, by god, not instinct.

So far today I haven't met anyone. That's unusual.

Again he consulted his watch. Only two minutes had passed. It was now 2:32 in the afternoon. His feet ached like it had to be much later. Too bad the road was so deserted. He could have used a ride, but just as soon as the feelings of fatigue and loneliness claimed him, they were lost.

Clive's eyes ran up the hill in a way his legs couldn't. Not much of a hill really, but the old pegs weren't what they used to be. The sun warmed the back of his neck and for a while he just stood there, letting the radiance ease away a few kinks. While he soaked up the warmth, a strange figure ambled over the hilltop. Clive balanced his journal on his left forearm, getting ready to write.

Who's that ahead? Looks like a monk. Funny fellow, using an old bicycle pump as a staff. He's struggling hard to get up the incline. Is he a monk, or not? He wears a coarse robe. The hood completely shades his head. His shoulders stoop like years of devotion have bent his bones into a permanent posture of prayer. But what's that on his feet? Battered tennis shoes with florescent green swashes peak out from the hem. Is he a monk, or isn't he?

Clive decided to close the distance and smiled, eager to acquire a companion.

The guy's worse off than I am. Why is he traveling this godforsaken road? That robe of his belongs in the Middle Ages, but actually it's a great getup for traveling. The hood and long sleeves provide good protection from the sun.

He took off his cap to see what he was wearing.

This old Sabers cap ... Why am I looking at my hat?

Who is that up ahead?

The traveler's lurching gait drew Clive close.

He needs help.

The man stumbled and almost fell. Clive ran forward to catch him, but the man whirled, as though ready to attack.

The Nursing Home Fugitive

Behind the tangled thicket of his mustache and beard, a voice erupted. “Beware.”

“I mean you no harm.”

“Harm is inherent, my Son.”

Then just as quickly as he had gotten angry, his booming voice softened, and he laid a hand on Clive’s shoulder. “When will you learn?”

“Guess I’m way past learning.”

“I hear not the rebuke of others.”

What does that mean? Best keep still.

The stranger thrust the hand holding a bicycle pump forward.

Clive jumped away, because it seemed the guy would hit him with it.

“My name’s Elijah.” He passed the pump to the opposite hand and held out the empty one.

*Oh, he wants to shake. Can’t take the time. Hurry.
Scribble Elijah’s name, then a circle.*

Elijah threw back his hood and peered over the edge of the book. While neither of them was speaking Elijah hummed, his voice idling like a diesel truck badly in need of repair. “Rr-rr-hhht-rrr.” It seemed the man kept his throat running, so he could slip it into gear at a second’s notice. Chunky sound but better to keep it running, diesels and old men’s voices don’t overheat no matter how long they idle.

Elijah peered into Clive’s journal, jiggling the book like a child demanding attention. When Clive met his eyes, Elijah smiled broadly. His two front teeth were chipped, creating a V-shaped opening. His hair was greasy yet somehow managed to stick out wildly in a dozen directions. Its gray tangles held burrs and small twigs, as if Elijah had slept headfirst in a hedgerow.

*An uncommon face. Handsome in his own grizzled way.
Too bad about his eyes though — glaring and wildly animated.*

Elijah's smile cooled, and he began to study something hovering above Clive's head.

"What do you see?"

"Too bad." Elijah folded his hands in prayer.

Clive added three stars behind Elijah's name and a note that the man focused on concerns not of this world.

"Your aura. The whole is no longer whole, no longer of a piece. The spiritual being begins its split from the corporeal." Elijah lay a hand on Clive's shoulder, shook his head sadly and then wandered off, resuming his trek, voice box churning a tempo for his legs to follow.

Clive marched alongside but apparently too close.

Elijah came to a halt. "Stand clear."

"Sorry."

"I do not fix my gaze on others."

"I just wanted to walk with you a way. Is that okay?"

Elijah's volume rose. "Heathen, think not that I don't see."

"See what? I'm looking for some company is all."

Elijah took offense at this, and the longer he pondered the thought of company, the stiffer his body became. "I walk a lonely path. My miracles are the genuine ones. All others are empty appearance."

"Sorry to be a bother."

"Bother? Brother, what bother? Not a bother. People crank their car windows closed rather than listen to my Word. Others beat a path in the opposite direction. A few cast stones." His eyes drifted heavenward. "Father, I can handle deflation, humiliation and even the Dark Night of the Soul."

Clive got more confused than ever, but thought that he, not Elijah, had lost the thread of conversation.

The Nursing Home Fugitive

If I just keep still a while longer, Elijah will tell me. Most people carry the conversation when I let them. This guy seems to know what he's talking about.

Clive didn't have to wait long.

The answer exploded not only from Elijah's mouth but also from the center of his being. "I cannot take up your burden too."

"My burden?" That's the last thing Clive wanted to talk about. "You don't have to. How about I take up part of yours?"

Instantaneous transformation cooled Elijah's face. "Do as you must."

"Good. I'll walk with you awhile."

More than Elijah's face had changed. Having a companion must be all right now, because this time when Elijah started out, he pulled Clive along.

"Why do you write in your book? And what is that you draw beside the names? Are they holy signs?"

"Things I can't remember."

Elijah withdrew his hand. "Like what?"

"I can't remember."

"What's wrong with you that you can't remember?"

"I can't remember."

"Can't remember what's wrong?"

"Can't remember anything."

"But what's wrong with you?"

Clive paused, trying to devise an answer, but lost his place in his thoughts. So he said nothing. During these last blurry days and weeks, silence had always proven best. Self-proclaimed prophets were really no different from everybody else. Everyone he met took silence as submission. Clive saved countless hassles by just keeping his mouth shut.

Elijah let go of the conversation and replaced it with nothing except the steady hum of his internal combustion engine. The two of them resumed their journey. When they came to a fork in the road, Elijah headed west.

“Good choice,” Clive said. “Just the direction I would have picked.”

After a while, they walked to the cadence set by the countryside, a rhythm Clive could appreciate, slow and steady, glad for human companionship and the fellowship of nature. Then suddenly a car bore down on them. Clive turned to meet it. “Shall I try to hitch us a ride?”

“Never touch the stuff.”

“Where’re you headed?”

“The rose garden of philosophers.” Elijah thrust his bicycle pump out in front of him and took a long stride, acting more like a knight preparing for the joust than a derelict stumbling through life. He menaced the car with his pump. Rust had fused the handle fully extended, and Elijah wielded it like a lance. “And I must enter by the left-hand path, only the left-hand.”

The car closed the distance.

Clive blinked. “Shouldn’t you step back?”

Instead Elijah charged the street. “The secrets are not published.”

The radio blared. Clive could hear heavy metal through the closed windows. The closer and louder the music got, the more agitated Elijah became. Clive ran forward hoping to pull Elijah back, but he dug in his heels. Clive made the sign of the cross and prepared for the worst.

At the last moment, the car swerved and sped past them, so close it tore the bicycle pump out of Elijah’s hand. Nobody in the car turned to look to see if he was all right. Instead the driver floored the accelerator, forcing the whining car into overdrive.

The Nursing Home Fugitive

Clive watched it disappear around a curve. When he turned back, some strange monk knelt on the blacktop. Clive nudged his backpack, shifting the weight of his worldly goods to a new, less weary spot.

Who is this man? Why is he praying in the middle of the street?

Continued...