



[Home](#)

[Summer 2014](#)

[Winter-Spring 2014](#)

[Fall-Winter 2013-14](#)

[Summer-Fall 2013](#)

[Spring-Summer 2013](#)

[Winter-Spring 2013](#)

[Fall-Winter 2012-2013](#)

[Summer-Fall 2012](#)

[Spring-Summer 2012](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

Prognosis

by Paul Colby

When he opened his eyes, Warren found himself in a hospital room. A needle had been inserted in his left forearm, held there by a blood-clotted gauze bandage. Urine-colored fluid coursed through a plastic tube that twisted its way from a plastic bag hanging on a turquoise apparatus, down to the needle in his arm.

Pale sunlight filtered through the slats of the drawn blinds. Everything in the room was tinged with gray, like a thin coat of dust. In one corner there was a round table which held a styrofoam pitcher, a folded newspaper, and a potted plant with yellowing leaves. In another corner was an armchair with a cracked seat cushion.

Warren thought he was alone until he heard a deep, wet cough coming from the other side of the curtain to the right of his bed. He noticed that there were two television sets bolted to the ceiling, one directly in front of his bed, the other facing the bed on the other side of the curtain. Neither set was on. Another cough came from the other side of the curtain, this time weaker and drier.

He heard the unseen door open and a small, thin nurse padded quickly, quietly into the room. She took his blood pressure and then jabbed a thermometer under his tongue. She hummed softly as she waited to read his temperature, but showed no expression and said nothing. She went to the end of his bed, picked up the clipboard, and made a few notations, still saying nothing; then she left the room as quickly and quietly as she had come in.

Warren desperately tried to remember what had happened to him, but his mind was almost a complete blank; he could barely recall his own name.

He heard coughing from the other side of the curtain again. This time it was a sustained, deep, congested fit that went on and on, getting worse and worse with each cough. Warren wondered if he should page someone for help. He searched the panel on the side of his bed for the right button but couldn't be sure which one to push. He was just about to call out when, to his great relief, the fit stopped. Deep silence ensued. Oddly enough, the presence of the unseen other man somehow made him feel all the more alone.

Suddenly the door burst open and Maureen bustled into the room, trailed by W.J., who was looking as lank, gawky, sullen, and acne-spotted as ever.

"My word, this room is gloomy," Maureen declared. She went straight to the blinds and yanked them open, letting in a shower of dull yellow

Spring/Summer 2008

Winter/Spring 2008

Editor's Note

Guidelines

Contact

light. "There. That's better."

W.J. picked up the newspaper, unfolded it, and slumped into the armchair.

Maureen turned toward Warren and smiled. She was on the point of saying something, when she suddenly began looking around her. She scurried to the door and shouted, "Harley! Put that balloon back! It doesn't belong to you! And get in here!"

She came back to Warren's side of the room and Harley followed her shortly, dragging the toes of his sneakers across the vinyl floor.

"Well," Maureen said, "you're not looking too bad, when you consider." She gazed into his face intently for a moment. "I'd like to see a little more color in your face, but you don't seem to be in pain. Are you?"

He was about to speak, but she didn't wait for his answer. "Really, you look O.K. I wish they'd given you a private room, but at least this one is at the end of the hall. There's so much commotion near the nurses' station. So much noise. It should be more peaceful down here."

Harley had been leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets. He now came up to Maureen and, whispering in her ear, glanced wistfully at the television across from Warren's bed.

"No," Maureen said firmly. "We're here to be with your father, not watch cartoons." He slunk over to the table and began picking leaves off the potted plant.

Warren wanted to know what Maureen had meant by "when you consider," and he started to speak again. This time she placed her finger on his lips and said, "Never mind anything, now. You just need to rest some more. Really, your color is not so good. Just rest. Close your eyes."

He did, and he instantly fell asleep.

Upon waking, he was in his own bedroom. He turned to his right and squinted at the clock with the glowing dial: 2: 15. He glanced at both of his arms, double-checking to make sure that he wasn't still tethered to the IV. He felt great relief once he fully realized that he had only been dreaming, but his relief was mixed with an unaccountable sense of disappointment. It seemed that the dream was somehow incomplete.

Warren flipped on the lamp on the bedside table; then he turned to the woman sleeping next to him and roused her.

"I just had the most incredible dream," he began as she turned to look at him with empty, half-closed eyes. "I was in the hospital, and my ex-wife was there." As he described the details of the dream, though, he

realized that it wasn't exactly "incredible," and he found it difficult to explain why he found the memory of it so engrossing.

She yawned so wide that he could see the back of her throat. "Is that all?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"All right." She turned over and went back to sleep.

Warren switched off the lamp and lay down, but he couldn't relax right away. He had become very conscious of his heartbeat and could feel his pulse throbbing in his neck veins. He lay as still as possible, noting every separate sensation in his arms and his legs, as if taking inventory of his whole body. Once he was convinced that everything was completely normal, he was able to drift off to sleep.

A few nights later, after taking a tablet of Ambien and climbing into bed alone, he found himself back in the same hospital room. This time the light was on and the blinds were open to a cloudless, sunny day. There was no needle in his arm, and he could see the IV apparatus standing uselessly behind the armchair. The potted plant and styrofoam pitcher were still on the table, but the newspaper was gone. To the side of his bed was a rolling tray bearing the remains of a meal.

His television was still turned off, but the television on the other side of the room was full of blinking images which were impossible for him to make out. The sound was on loud enough for him to hear but not loud enough for him to understand anything he heard. Now and then he heard the sound of labored breathing coming from the other side of the curtain.

The door of the room opened briskly and in came Maureen. In her arms she was carrying Harley, who was clutching a bright yellow giraffe. A pudgy W.J., wearing a baseball uniform, came clomping in behind her. She sat down in the armchair and rested Harley on her knee. W.J. pulled a baseball out of his pocket and began slamming it into his glove.

"Well," Maureen said, "you really are looking better. I'd still like to see a little more color in your cheeks, but really you look fine. I hope you're feeling better."

He didn't know exactly what to say to this and was pleased that she didn't seem to expect an answer.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner. I had to wait for a repairman this morning. The refrigerator's been making that noise again. You know. The one that sounds like a nauseated cat in heat. I had to wait three whole hours for him to come and then I had to listen to him go on and on about how JFK Jr. is still alive on an island off the coast of Morocco.

Faked his death to keep from going to jail for tax evasion. Seems there was some elaborate cover-up. I think Hillary Clinton and Mia Farrow were supposed to be involved somehow.” She rolled her eyes. “I don’t know. I lost track of it all.”

W.J. had begun bouncing the ball against the window and the floor. “For crying out loud, you’re going to break something!” Maureen snapped. “Put that ball away!”

She turned back to Warren and gave him a broad, beaming smile. “Anyway, we’re here now. You really do seem to be looking better. Really.”

She set Harley down in front of the chair and said, “We brought you something. Go ahead sweetheart, bring Daddy his little present.”

Harley pressed himself against her legs and shook his head.

“Come on, sweetie. Give Daddy his giraffe.”

Harley shook his head firmly. Maureen tried to gently take the toy out of his hands, but he wrapped it tightly in his arms and wriggled away from her. He began running around the room, holding the giraffe over his head and making airplane sounds.

“Well, never mind,” she said in a soft voice to Warren. “You know how Harley is these days. Self-esteem issues.”

The patient on the other side of the curtain coughed loudly several times. Maureen looked in that direction warily, and then, lowering her voice a little more: “I really wish you could get a private room. It’s nice that you’re here at the end of the hall, but a private room would be so much better. Apparently, they’re still waiting for one to come open. There’s a man with lymphoma a few doors down. They’re expecting him to . . . any day now, but he’s held on for months longer than they thought.” Another cough, this time weaker, came from the curtain. “Anyway, his room should be yours, once . . .” Her face took on a disturbingly sober look as her sentence trailed off.

Just then a doctor in green scrubs came into the room. He acted as if he were about to say something to Maureen, but instead simply took the chart from the foot of the bed and studied it. He took a pen out of his shirt pocket, clicked it open, and made a few tentative notations. For a moment he looked intently at Warren. Then he clicked the pen shut, put it back in his pocket, replaced the chart, and went quietly out of the room.

“I don’t like that doctor,” Maureen said after she heard the door shut. “I don’t have any confidence in him. I like the other one better. What’s his name?”

Warren tried hard to remember, but his mind remained a blank.

“It’s either Watson-Wilson or Wilson-Watson. I forget. He’s much more optimistic. I think doctors should always try to be optimistic.”

W.J. was picking through the food on the tray, taking small bites of jello and green beans. Maureen turned and said, “Stop that, W.J. That’s nasty. You have no idea what kind of germs” She glanced back at Warren, blushing. “Well, I don’t mean *your* germs, of course. But those beans, for instance, must have been sitting for at least an hour. I don’t know what happened to your orderly. Probably holed up in a closet with girlie magazines.”

She gestured for Harley to come sit on her lap. He flew the giraffe back to the chair but remained on his feet, leaning against her thigh. He was blowing saliva bubbles, and Maureen drew her arm over his lips. Spittle dripped down her wrist, but she hardly seemed to notice as she went on speaking to Warren:

“I guess you’re wondering how long you’re going to be here.”

She paused as if waiting for him to speak, and he sat up straighter, but decided to let her go on.

“Well, the blood tests are back, and they’re inconclusive.” She paused again, watching his reaction. “Now don’t get the wrong idea. Nothing is definitely wrong. Just a couple of things they’re concerned about. That’s the word the doctor used. Watson-Wilson or Wilson-Watson, or whatever. ‘Concerned.’ Now you know that could mean just about anything.”

He mouthed the word “concerned” as if it had tremendous significance, but did not hear himself say it aloud.

“The X-Ray didn’t show anything,” Maureen went on. “The doctors agreed about that. But they can’t agree about the MRI. One of the doctors—not the good one and not the one who came in here just now but another one—wants to send it to a doctor in Philadelphia. Apparently, he’s some kind of young genius. He’s just twenty-two years old, but he’s a brilliant diagnostician. He never gets it wrong. Never. He’ll have an answer for you, but it might take a while, he’s so busy.”

Maureen turned her head suddenly and found W.J. juggling his glove, his ball, and his cap. “Stop that! It’s nerve-wracking!”

When she turned back to face Warren, W.J. sneaked back to the tray to pick over the food some more. Something occurred to Warren as he watched W.J. He was the wrong age. He should have been a teenager. But no. That was wrong, too. W.J. had dropped out of college, bummed around the Pacific Northwest for a few years, and then joined a group of gold miners in Brazil. Warren hadn’t heard from

him since 2003. Harley, sleeping now against Maureen's thigh, was an intense, brooding college freshman.

The next moment Warren was in his own bed again, listening in the dark as the neighbor's son arrived home with his car stereo thumping and throbbing.

The following afternoon, he was sitting at his desk, preparing for a deposition. He had been shuffling through documents full of information about thermal ratios, hydraulic pressure, pipe fittings, and O-rings, looking for one particular diagram with barely legible handwritten notations, when he began dwelling on the details of the two hospital dreams. He found himself thumbing through at least a dozen pieces of paper without giving a single thought to what he was trying to find. He went back through the stack of paper, trying to force himself to concentrate, and then finally decided that he needed a different file.

He leaned into the intercom and spoke to his secretary:

"Kathleen, could you bring me the Heffernan correspondence?"

Five minutes later, she brought the thick accordion file into his office, dumped it loudly on his desk and left without speaking to him. She had been that way for the past two months, ever since the end of their brief fling. He had been thinking about firing her, but was morbidly afraid of a sexual harassment suit, so he had decided to just let her get over it. In the meantime, the silence in the office was just fine with him.

He opened up the file and started flipping through it, but once again he lost track of what he was doing. He had a nagging urge to call Maureen. He was not sure why. Maybe he wanted to reassure himself that there was no reality to the dreams. It would be sort of like pinching himself.

True, the dreams had brought him a certain kind of pleasure, the kind he used to get from reading John Grisham novels. He was curious about what had happened *before* the first of the dreams and how the whole thing would come out. What diagnosis would the doctors make? How long would it take for him to get out of the hospital? These were intriguing questions, but he could enjoy the intrigue only if he could regard the ongoing drama as a separate reality, something safely removed from his life, not the residue of actual memories.

Speaking to the real Maureen might help to put the dreams at a further remove and help him to look forward to the next one. But their conversations these days never seemed to go the way he intended. There was such a long history of betrayal and duplicity between them that every word they used seemed twisted by suspicion into an accusation, an insinuation, or some sick parody of itself. It was hardly worth the trouble.

It occurred to him that he could call Harley, but he could never think of

what to say. The last time he had talked to his younger son, there were long, painful pauses as he tried to remember what he had and hadn't asked him yet:

"So, are you seeing anyone these days?"

"Yes," Harley had replied, in a weary voice. "I believe I've only told you about her a hundred times."

"And I suppose you've told me her name?"

"Only a hundred times."

A very long pause followed. Warren finally said:

"So, what are you taking this semester?"

Harley sighed. "We covered that last time. Do you really want me to go over my whole schedule again? Do you need times and room numbers?"

He supposed that Harley might be interested in the dreams, but then again Harley was a child in those dreams and in recent years he had apparently chosen to pretend that his childhood had never happened.

Warren stopped shuffling the papers in his hand. He tapped them against the desk like a deck of cards and shoved them back into the folder. Leaning back in his chair, he suddenly realized that he was overlooking the obvious. Maybe the dreams meant something.

That's what Maureen always believed. If she had a dream about a meteor landing in front of her car, she would go have the brakes checked. If she dreamed that she was lost in an airport, she would refuse to fly for the next six months. If she dreamed that her office was flooded, she would buy a new raincoat. Warren was always skeptical. He assumed that it had to do with something he had seen on TV or something he had overheard on the elevator but had forgotten. Maybe Maureen was on to something, though.

He immediately picked up the phone and called his doctor's office. Two weeks later he underwent a complete examination. While he was putting his clothes back on, the doctor came back into the examination room, flipped quickly through Warren's file, and then pushed his reading glasses up onto his forehead.

"I'm sorry to have to inform you," he began, with that smug half-grin, "that there is nothing wrong with you at all."

"What about the blood tests?"

“Well, we’ll see about that, but I don’t have any reason to think that there’s anything wrong.”

Warren took this in for a moment, as if trying to decide whether or not to be pleased. “What about an MRI?”

“What about it?”

“Do you think it would be advisable?”

“Why? Do you think you have a tumor?”

“How would I know if I did?”

“Headaches, blurred vision, fainting spells, that sort of thing.”

“Could I have a tumor and not have any symptoms?”

“Sure.”

“Then wouldn’t it be a good idea to be on the safe side?”

The doctor looked at Warren quizzically, with creased eyebrows and an arched frown. “This reminds me of a joke,” he finally said. “Man comes to see his doctor and says, ‘Doc, you’ve got to help me. I’ve got arthritis, a urinary tract infection, severe cramps in my legs, a tapeworm, hypoglycemia, cirrhosis of the liver, foot fungus, and a spot on my lung.’ The doctor says, ‘Hmmm. Sounds like a case of hypochondria to me.’ Then the man says, ‘What? That, *too?*’”

Warren grunted as he finished tying his tie. “All right,” he said. “You made your point. Sorry I bothered you.”

“I just thought you could use a laugh. Have you heard the one about doctor and the lawyer at the—”

“Yeah, I did,” Warren said, putting on his jacket. “Bye.”

That night he woke once again in a hospital room. The room looked familiar to him yet not entirely familiar. The view outside the window was something he knew he had seen before. But the wallpaper, a pattern with loops and swirls in powder blue and yellow, was completely new to him. On the table there was a bouquet of pink carnations. The room was filled with a scent of cinnamon and cloves.

He could almost remember now why he was in the hospital. If he concentrated for just a moment he knew that it would come back to him, but he didn’t feel like straining his mind.

In a corner of the room he noticed an IV apparatus, along with an

oxygen machine, and another medical gadget that looked something like a battery-powered television, mounted on a long steel rod with a rolling pedestal.

Maureen was sitting in a familiar-looking chair, reading a thick novel. Warren gazed at her for some time before she finally looked up from her book. She smiled warmly.

“Well, Rip, it’s about time you woke up. Did you have a good nap?”

He started to speak but discovered that his mouth was unbearably dry. He gestured toward his throat.

“Just a moment,” Maureen said. She went over to the table and poured out a glass of water from the styrofoam pitcher.

She handed him the glass, and he emptied it in one gulp. He had never tasted water so cold or so sweet.

“There,” she said. “I’ll bet that’s better.”

He smiled and looked at her closely. She was wearing a sleeveless, flower-print dress. Her hair was shoulder-length, with lush curls. Her eyes glistened under long, dark lashes. She had never seemed so beautiful to him.

She was looking around the room with evident approval.

“This is a great improvement,” she commented. “A private room is much, much better. It’s so much quieter, and you just never know what kind of germs someone else might be carrying.”

Maureen sat down in the chair again.

“I’ve been talking to Dr. Watson-Wilson-Watson, or whatever. He said you might be able to go home in a few days. The doctor in Philadelphia didn’t see anything suspicious on the MRI, but he does want to have one more look. That *other* doctor said something about another round of blood tests, but I don’t think he’s going to insist on it. Besides, the insurance probably wouldn’t pay.”

Warren watched as Maureen crossed her legs, exposing the knee of one leg and the thigh of the other. He expected her to tug on her dress as she usually did after crossing her legs, but she didn’t, and he suddenly realized that he was dreaming again. He was afraid that the dream would end right then, but it didn’t, and he felt his heart beating fast as he began thinking of what it was he so desperately needed to say to her but could only say in the suspended reality of a dream. Certainly, he wanted to know why he was in the hospital, but there seemed to be so much more. He tried to pull his half-formed thoughts together, and felt blocked, mentally paralyzed. Many times in dreams

he had tried to run but found that his feet were locked in place, and now it was happening again, except that it was his mind that was refusing to work.

Maureen sensed that he was in some sort of turmoil.

“Is something wrong?”

Warren shook his head.

“You’re not still worried about the MRI, are you? Because like I said, the Philadelphia doctor doesn’t really think there’s anything there. He just wants to make double sure. It’s practically a formality. You’re *not* worried, are you?”

Warren shook his head again.

She smiled indulgently and tenderly at him. “I think I know exactly what you need right now,” she said.

She stood up, unzipped her dress, and pulled it off. She hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to do with the dress, and then tossed it over the chair. She came over to the bed, turned back the sheets, and squeezed in next to Warren.

Wrapping her arms around him, Maureen kissed him on his neck, his forehead, and each of his eyes. He plunged his hands into her hair and pressed his cheek firmly against hers.

Just then the door banged open. Maureen darted quickly under the sheets and held herself tightly against him. A doctor in a lab coat walked into the room and grabbed the clipboard from the end of the bed. He paced the room pensively, staring at the clipboard, while Warren reached under the covers and slid his hand along Maureen’s thigh and around her hip, discovering, to his delight, that she was wearing nothing under her slip. He began exploring the small of her back and could feel her warm breath against his chest as she giggled quietly. The doctor looked up from the clipboard and gave Warren a severe, inquisitive glance. Warren tried to look as innocent as possible, and the doctor glared back down at the clipboard. Taking a ballpoint pen from the pocket of his lab coat, he scratched out a quick notation, slapped the clipboard back on the end of the bed, and left the room without giving Warren another look.

Warren was just about to laugh harder than he had ever laughed in his life, but then he remembered that he was dreaming and somehow he lost the urge. The next moment he found himself in his dark bedroom instead of the bright, cinnamon-scented hospital room, squeezing his pillow instead of fondling Maureen. He sighed deeply and pounded the mattress.

He lay flat and still on his stomach, clenching his fists, for some time. Then he set his pillow back in place and lay on his back, trying to capture each detail of the dream he had just had. He felt that if he concentrated enough on the images and odors that had seemed so real just moments ago, he could think his way back into the dream. He meditated on each individual detail again and again, but eventually singled out the moment when Maureen tossed her dress on the armchair. And then he began to concentrate on the dress itself, slung limp and soft over the back of the chair. He could clearly and distinctly recall the designs and colors, and the way the fabric crumpled into overlapping folds. He tried to imagine himself holding it in his hands, kneading it with his fingers, covering his face with it, breathing in the mingled fragrances of sweet-scented detergent, soaps, lotions, and the salts of her body, and gradually he hypnotized himself back to sleep.

Opening his eyes, he knew he was in a very familiar hospital room, though he could not think of the name of the hospital, or even what city he was in. Even though the room was almost completely dark, he recognized its contours, and he sensed that he had been there for a while, although he did not know whether it had been hours, or days, or weeks, or years. It was nighttime, he knew that. But he wondered whether it was near midnight or near dawn.

He heard a low-pitched humming sound coming from the left side of the bed. Turning his head, he saw a rectangle of green light, a monitor screen that seemed to hang by itself in the air. Three vertical, segmented bars of white light rose and fell at different intervals, apparently unrelated to each other. The only thing that he could figure out was that each time the bar on the left side reached its peak, the nearly invisible machine emitted a shrill beep.

He tried to raise himself but found that he could not move his arms or legs. Was that it? Was he here because he had broken his spine? Was he paralyzed from the neck down? Or was he strapped to the bed for some reason? He felt his chest tightening with fear. He wanted to know what was happening to him, yet he was terrified of finding out more than he really wanted to know.

He listened hopefully for other sounds, for the footsteps of nurses or orderlies in the hall, for the tinny murmur of the intercom, for cries or muted conversations from other rooms. But he heard nothing except the machine's low hum and regular beeps. He turned his head in the other direction to see if he could detect a sliver of light under the door, but there was only darkness all around except for the green glow from the monitor.

The beeps began to come faster, and when he turned to face the monitor again, he found that the middle and right-hand bars of light had disappeared, leaving the left-hand bar to fluctuate at a dizzying pace. Warren felt his heartbeat quickening; breathing was becoming increasingly difficult. He tried to calm himself by counting backward from one hundred, mouthing each number slowly, but his heart just kept

beating faster; instead of slowing his heart rate by counting slowly, he counted faster and faster against his will.

Feeling panicked, he wanted to call a nurse. He ran his fingers along the panel on the side of the bed but could feel only smooth, hard, cold plastic. His breathing was becoming more and more labored, and now he heard his heart thumping hard. He felt the pulsing of his heart through his entire body and the machine's relentless beeps continued to become louder and louder.

He screamed.

Immediately his arms and legs felt free, and he sat up. He was in his bedroom and from outside his window he could hear the neighbor's son playing his car stereo at full volume. Somewhere deep within the pounding drums and screaming guitars Warren could hear the voices of the boy and his girlfriend. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but he could tell that they were scolding each other, ridiculing each other, cuffing each other, and frequently dissolving into laughter. Then the voices ceased while the music continued to pound and whine. In another instant, car doors slammed shut, muffling the music, and the car roared away.

Warren lay back down, closed his eyes, and tried to relax, but the loud music continued throbbing in his head. Sitting up again, he turned on the nightstand lamp; then he reached for the telephone and dialed.

The male voice on the other end was hoarse, groggy, and angry: "Who is it?"

"Warren."

"I don't know any Warren," the other man spat out. "You woke me up for nothing, you—"

"I'm Warren *Grimes*. Maureen's ex."

"Oh."

"I need to talk to Maureen. It's very important."

A note of concern crept into the other man's voice. "Is it about one of the boys?"

"No."

"Well, that's good. Maureen is very worried about W.J. She had a dream about him a few nights ago."

“No. It’s not about Harley or W.J. Not really.”

Warren could hear a rustling sound on the other end of the line and guessed that Maureen was turning over in her sleep.

The other man lowered his voice. “You need to wait until tomorrow morning, Warren. I don’t know what time it is where you live—”

“You know I live across town.”

“Well then you know that it’s 3: 30 in the morning. It’s no time for chatting. Surely whatever it is can wait. Maureen has to give a presentation tomorrow, and she needs all the sleep she can get. You can understand that, can’t you?”

Warren had to admit to himself that he had nothing truly urgent to say to Maureen. But somehow the need to speak to her *felt* urgent.

“Warren, are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“Well, whatever it is can wait, can’t it?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Warren hung up the phone. He propped his pillow against the headboard, leaned back, and sat anxiously in the darkness, waiting for something to break the silence.

A native of Texas, **Paul Colby** came of age in the suburbs east of Denver, Colorado. He spent many hours combing the fiction shelves in the Cherry Creek High School library, trying to discover what great literature looks and sounds like. This quest led to a Ph. D in American literature from Duke University in 1995. Shortly afterward, he began his career as an instructor of writing and literature in the N.C. State English Department. Although he wrote his first novel when he was eight years old and had written two more by the time he graduated from high school, he set aside his fiction writing ambitions as he pursued his graduate degree and academic career. Twenty years ago, however, he began writing abortive novels in his leisure time. Short story writing gave him new confidence in his ability to see a whole narrative through to completion, and a few years ago he completed his first collection. Since then, he has written a complete novel and is at work on another.

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