



STORYLANDIA

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Storylandia

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Storylandia

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Table of Contents

Brexit Swan	1
Alice Frances Wickham	
Curse of the Lighthouse	23
Arthur Davis	
Of Cows and Corn	43
Jason Feingold	
Girl in the TV	66
James R. McCullen	
Two Wrongs and a Right	81
Chip Jett	

Alice Frances Wickham

Brexit Swan

Rosalind was expecting a rosy cherub for a sister but got me instead. My sister was eight years old when we first met. There I was, flapping about in my mother's arms, looking more like a caught mackerel than a Botticelli angel. Following that first fishy phase, I then became a pain in the butt, according to Rosalind.

Like, for one thing, I refused to walk until I was almost three years old, much to Rosalind's disgust. She accused me of being lazy and of tormenting poor mother. Easy for her to say! Rosalind sailed through those early years whereas I suffered one childhood illness after the next like a raft blown hither and thither on rough seas. Mother despaired before losing interest. Later, she turned against me altogether. Whenever Rosalind wanted something, Mother shelled out merrily, but with me, she wouldn't part with a brass farthing. If I complained, she began criticising my appearance.

Father took more of an interest. He made sure I had schoolbooks and encouraged me to learn. When in his cups, which was often, Father proclaimed that we were descendants of the mighty Fitzbastards or whoever, a warrior clan from Normandy—apparently. If anything, I was a weak representative of that supposed great bloodline. Yet, Father claimed I took after his side of the family whereas Rosalind took after Mother's

side. Father said Mother's side were a motley bunch of Irish gipsies, French pig-farmers, Jewish shopkeepers and English seafarers all mixed in. I envied Rosalind. She had all that colourfulness handed down.

Still, as a mighty Fitzbastard, I could give Rosalind a run for her money. Especially when she started throwing her weight about and giving me a hard time. Rosalind had inherited mother's good looks and charm, and she was popular, as mother had been popular. Father resented them both, and I was aware that insecurity fueled his preference for me, the ugly duckling daughter. Mother had a deep-seated aversion towards Father's relatives. Unfortunately, she died before I could probe her real reasons for hating them. Father died soon afterwards, so I guess they've gone on hating each other in hell.

During the teenage years, everything my sister said pissed me off, and vice versa, and for that simple reason, we kept out of each other's way. She had her 'best friends', and I had my drumkit down in the basement. It was a case of, 'never the twain shall meet'. On the cool stakes, we were about even. Rosalind dated married guys, and I strung together a heavy metal band. At seventeen, Rosalind moved to London, which I thought was cool—so I followed her overseas.

Here's what happened. Rosalind studied sculpture at Goldsmith's College and married Stanley, a stockbroker. I found a job in the N.H.S. and adopted Fatty. Rosalind and Stanley moved to a smart villa in Camberwell. Fatty and I moved to a flat above a shop in the sedate suburb of Toddington. We two drifted apart. Not that we were ever that close if you get what I mean.

Out of the blue, Rosalind sent me a text message. It was a 'cordial invitation' to an art exhibition in Soho.

Being with Rosalind's arty-farty friends sent shivers down my spine. Besides, I'd been to one of those posh do's, and it was excruciating. What the hell did I know about painting or art?

I consulted Fatty, "What do you reckon? Should I go?"

"Don't ask me, she's your sister, not mine," Fatty replied.

"But Fatty, anything I say or do annoys the hell out of that prima donna. I'm walking on egg-shells."

Fatty is a Burmese with a smoky-grey coat and a wonderful intuition. "Don't worry, she won't be in the mood for a fight."

"Why not? She's preggers," Fatty said, licking the illustrious paws.

I had to laugh. What a concept! Rosalind and motherhood were like fish and bicycles. Then again, who was I to talk?

When the day arrived, I buttoned up the trusty Levis, zipped up the old leather jacket, and with a deep sigh, made off for Soho. On route, I thought of things I should avoid saying to stay out of harm's way. Don't mention the parents. In fact, no talk of childhood. Be careful about Stanley and don't call him 'Stan'. Compliment Rosalind on her appearance. Not that my sister needed compliments. By fourteen, she was already breaking hearts with her buxom figure, green eyes, and long chestnut hair. In contrast, I was what people call 'pale and interesting'. To compensate for my scanty assets, I cultivated a medieval outlook on life, which saved me from the hassle of trying to fit with my surroundings. I've always suspected that I belong in the early middle ages rather than the fickle twenty-first century. Or perhaps I was around then too? Who knows?

Arthur Davis

Curse of the Lighthouse

“There are instructions for cleaning the mirrors and maintaining the motors. Remember, you have to report to the naval station in Bangor every six hours. Not that there’s much else to do around here. And you’ll want to read the government handbook Lighthouse Management series 333-5A from 1951. They told me to tell you that. Personally, I wouldn’t give a rat’s ass about crap like that if I were you.”

“What about everything else?”

He glanced about, as if he were surveying the space for the first time. “There is no everything else. It’s all common sense, and caution.”

The control panel operating the lights, motor, and electrical system was simple to the point of primitive. “Caution?”

“You’re out here alone. The launch gets out weekly for your reports and to bring you food and supplies. Don’t expect strangers to come calling in the night, but still...” he began, then trailed off.

“Never been on a lighthouse,” I said, still enthused with the assignment.

“Nothing special about a shack with a light on top of a tired old smokestack.”

“Did you know that The Pharos of Alexandria

was the first lighthouse that we have a detailed record of? Thing was built in 280 B.C. It was 350 feet high and topped off by a wood fire. That was more than seven times the size of this one.”

“I didn’t study history, kid. If I had, I wouldn’t be out here.” He buttoned up his coat and started towards the waiting launch.

I stood on the rocky landing that led down to the pier. A man named Dave—I couldn’t get much out of him on the way over—stowed Louie’s duffel and loosened the stern line. Louie gave me a salutary wave without looking back as Dave throttled out of the inlet of Highpoint Island.

Nautical adventure, they said. Seafaring excitement, they said. I was hooked.

A gust of salty wind swept across my face. I stumbled back, making sure not to lose my footing on the large rocks that surrounded the sixty-two-acre outcropping. I had an hour of light left before I officially started my three-week watch. I’ve had worse assignments as a biologist for the Department of the Interior.

Louie had been guarding Manan Channel for five years. I probably couldn’t have managed alone for five months. Maybe his being at least twice my age had something to do with it.

The island was used as a sanctuary, a place of worship and human sacrifice for the tribe that occupied the surrounding inlet. The tribe disappeared over a hundred and forty years ago when, according to legend, the sea rose up in one monstrous wave and swept the land of those who had offended their god. The few survivors fled north into what became Canada. The research didn’t explain what the tribe had done to deserve such terrible punishment.

I went into the other room of the cabin, a glorified shack, and unpacked the cartons of food that had been delivered by the launch. There were enough canned goods for a month, including a dozen steaks. There was some fresh fruit that would be gone in less than a week and enough cookies and cake to put on the dozen pounds I had taken the last year to work off. There was an adequate supply of coffee, tea, and butter. I stowed my clothing and went through every cabinet and closet.

I tore two pages from the calendar on Louie's desk until it read May 1973.

Highpoint Island off the coast of northern Maine was the furthest jot of land bordering the mouth to the Grand Manan Channel that led north to New Brunswick, Canada. Commercial and private ships plying the Atlantic Coast traversed the treacherous eight-mile strip of turbulence, knowing the Highpoint lighthouse would guide them safely through the worst part of the channel.

Highpoint was three miles due east into the channel from the coast town of Cutler, Maine, which was where Louie was spending his first night of his three-week furlough off the island.

Highpoint wasn't quite as old as the great Pharos of Alexandria that was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World. I would have liked to see that 14th century edifice before it was destroyed by an earthquake. I once read that the Romans built lighthouses along the European coastline, and several still stand inside the walls of Dover Castle in England and at La Coruña, Spain.

I organized the kitchen and my bedding and logged in to the green lighthouse journal. I signed in for the first

Jason Feingold

Of Cows and Corn

It is said that God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh. The trip we made from Pittsburgh to Stanford was a long one. It could have been done in six days and provided a lovely Biblical parallel, but Bill had budgeted an extra three to allow for travel fatigue. How many days should it take to unmake the world? My world?

There was another reason for lingering on the road. When we ran out of highway, our friendship would expire. At the checkered flag, an airplane ticket waited for me to fly back to Pittsburgh. Once I returned, I would spend the next two days packing up my own shit for the move to my first apartment, close to Penn State. It wasn't as exotic a relocation as Bill's, but I was looking forward to it. All I did at Penn State was drink and read books and try to get laid. I went to class only every now and then, which is probably why I didn't go to grad school at Stanford or anywhere else.

Pittsburgh, PA

"Where's the cassette case, Jason?" Bill asked as I opened the passenger door and sat in his '85 Ford

Escort, stuffing my duffel bag on top of Bill's boxes in the back seat.

"I decided not to bring it," I replied.

"Why the hell not?"

"I've got these," I said, ignoring his question. I held up a small case that contained perhaps ten cassettes. The big case was cumbersome. It was the size of an attaché case, and I didn't want to drag it across the country and back.

"It's a sixty-hour drive," he said.

"These are the good tapes."

He just looked at me.

I went back into the house and got the big case.

"Happy?" I asked, tossing both cases into the back seat on top of my bag.

He popped the car into drive and floored it. I didn't know if that meant he was happy or not. He must have realized that his take-off was probably a bad idea, given how overloaded his car was. He lightened up on the gas.

The morning was cool, but it was a false promise. The day would be hot, as would the next eight. It was August. I rolled the window all the way down, enjoying the chilled air while I could. The '85 Escort had no air conditioning. It was probably just as well. Bill had so much crap piled in and on the car that running an air conditioner on top of it would probably have given the poor Ford apoplexy.

It was twenty-something years ago—1991. This was our last adventure together. We both knew it, but neither one of us said anything about it. We'd been best friends through high school, but we went our separate ways after graduation. He went to school in Indiana, and I went to Long Island to sell luggage and work on my novel. I didn't write the novel, and he didn't

finish school in Indiana. We re-bonded in Pittsburgh for a while, but then I was off to Penn State while he finished his undergraduate work at the University of Pittsburgh. I suppose we would have remained closer if I had gone to Pitt too, but I refused. I didn't want to live at home and commute to Oakland on the bus every day.

Bill had found someone to marry, and she would be joining him in California shortly after the trip was over. I remained immune to long-term relationships. In fact, I had just had my heart broken by a sophomore who had had a nervous breakdown, dropped out of school, and dropped me like a hot rock, all at the same time. I had high hopes that the drive would take my mind off of it. The sophomore, Stacy, was working at an overnight religious camp as kitchen help in Uniontown, PA. I wanted to talk to her, but it was nearly impossible to get her on the telephone because those were the days before cell phones became ubiquitous. She shared a landline with ten other people in a dormitory.

And she didn't want to talk to me.

"How does it feel, leaving it behind?" I asked.

"I'll be back someday," Bill said. "This is only temporary."

"I don't know where I'll end up," I said. "It certainly won't be here."

"There are worse places," Bill said. Prophetic.

Ten minutes later we reached the on-ramp to the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Bill pulled up to the booth and took a ticket. We were off.

I took a pack out of the carton of Camels I'd brought with me, opened it, and lit the first cigarette of the journey. Bill had cleverly brought a coffee can filled with sand to serve as an ashtray and had

James R. McCullen

Girl in the TV

The Christmas holiday had come and gone, and the gym was packed with the ones newly committed to getting thin. It was 5:30 p.m. Darkness filled a large steamed-up window stretching across the main room, ice-cold rain pouring down onto the parking lot outside. Jack's attention jumped between the TV screen on the treadmill and the flashing of red and white lights. Never had fifteen minutes seemed so much like an eternity. He tried to imagine himself standing out in the cold, rain or no rain, staring at the people inside.

During peak hours new members strictly enforced the thirty-minute rule. They gathered around the cardio machines. They watched the clocks and checked the time against their new sports watches. They stretched their limbs into painful contortions, eyeing one another with strained irritation. Some had their ears stuffed with little rubber plugs, tiny wires hanging down to their phones. Others wore pastel-colored headsets that looked like oversized macaroons. No one spoke. It might seem each member was an island unto himself. But an aura of discomfort prevailed, for each wore the latest in tight form-fitting shorts, glowing fluorescent apparel. It could be said

that, in their collective suffering, they exuded peace on earth and goodwill to men.

Jack trotted heavily on the machine, his feet clomping like the hooves of a broken nag. He poked at the screen incessantly, panting away the seconds. He strained to ignore the impalpable trickling of time passing like a series of tiny explosions under the leaky faucet of his mind. Channels flashed by like the graffitied cars of a speeding train. Poke! Poke! Poke! His heart beat faster as his brain shrunk with hypoxia. Sit-coms, blasts of QVC, Rex Humbard's tender devotions from a long-gone America! Time was a thick cement wall that must be surmounted at any cost!

He popped into an old TV drama.

Here were a man and woman sitting at a dining counter drinking coffee. They were arguing. Jack, of course, heard only some of their words, but he surmised from the man's toothy snarl and the woman's brutish manner of slamming down her cup that they were both New York City cops. But this was not the only reason. The woman's face was familiar: blackest of eyes, a school girl innocence in her smile. Jack recognized her as one of the show's regular characters. She was young, thirtyish. She had short black hair, a bob-style cut, a swath of which swept over her cheek and shaded one of her eyes. She had the kind of lips that must be kissed.

Her face sharpened with anger, and, though Jack heard only a few of her abrasive lines of dialogue, it seemed to him she was taking a more than professional cop interest in the subject of their disagreement. At one point she slammed down her cup so fiercely she nearly shattered the saucer. Coffee

splattered over the counter which caused this man who was much older than she to jerk back in his stool and raise his hands like “Whoa now!” Jack heard the clink of porcelain against porcelain but wondered whether this perception wasn’t just the product of imaginative expectation. Cars passed blurrily in and out of frame on the other side of the large street-side window behind them.

The old-man cop wore a wrinkled trench and a pair of grisly sideburns. He was an ugly man with a twisted knot of a nose. His gun was visible in its holster behind the open lapel of his coat. He spoke tight-jawed. His brow twisted with the rising pitch of his macho anger.

Their words were bullets of indecipherable sound shot across the short distance between them.

A man walked in off the street. He passed through two sets of glass doors and sat down at the other end of the counter. Here was an extra whose brief, indefinite, existence might authenticate this TV diner. Jack nonetheless studied the man who sat hunched over the counter in the upper corner of the screen. He wore a blue t-shirt, electric blue. In this way his figure stuck out like a colored balloon in a black and white photograph.

Jack gripped the rails of his torture machine, twisting his biotic lenses to squeeze the man’s face into focus. He wiped the burning sweat trickling into his eyes as he watched the man lean forward onto his elbows, a familiar positioning of the body at rest, his head hinting at a turtle-like retraction.

The old-man cop stands and pulls a couple bills out of his wallet. The woman cop pulls a flip phone out of her pocket. She listens, her eyes widening, her mouth agape as she turns to her male counterpart.

Chip Jett

Two Wrongs and a Right

What Christopher Allen knew of prejudice and fear he learned from the woman he loved. That condemnation, that judgmental eye that says you are going straight to Hell, is sometimes too much to bear. It makes life's choices difficult, especially when the world says any direction you choose is wrong. But the hate wasn't directed at him, and the choices weren't his to make. Those burdens belonged to Alaina.

Alaina Fortune was the girl next door. Next door in those days was about two miles, as the crow flies. There was nothing between them then, just open fields and long, summer days. They spent time from about second grade to seventh just hanging out and being kids. Christopher would ride his bike to Alaina's place or she'd ride to his, and they would play all day until their moms called them in for supper. Christopher and Alaina were all kinds of innocent, and she was his one true friend. That friendship lasted until high school. They drifted apart then, as friends. She had her interests and he had his. As they became young adults, their paths rarely crossed. It was sad to see that closeness come to an end like that, but it wasn't tragic.

Christopher lived as ordinary a life as a kid in

rural America could expect. His parents took him to church every Sunday, to baseball practice at the rec department in the Spring, and they made sure every basic need was met. He grew up happy and knew little of sadness or conflict.

Alaina's life, on the surface, seemed much the same: loving parents, church on Sunday, and birthday parties every September. But Alaina spent most of her free moments worried that someone would discover her secret.

Alaina almost told Christopher one hot July day at his father's barn. She almost told him she was pretty sure she liked girls, not boys. They were only ten years old at the time. In truth, she didn't possess the vocabulary necessary to explain to him what she felt.

There was a rope swing, attached to a tree and hanging out over a creek. It was deep in the woods, so far away they couldn't take their bikes. She almost told him again one day there, at the swing. She had been twelve then, and again, she couldn't find the words. That was the last time, for a while, that Alaina Fortune tried to tell anyone who she really was.

The end of high school saw most of their friends leave town. There isn't much in the way of career opportunities in Carrollton, then or now, unless you want to teach or work at Southwire. The University is there, small as it is, and that's where Christopher and Alaina reconnected.

Christopher shouldn't have been surprised that first day of classes to find Alaina in the same English 1101, but he was. He figured she, like the rest of their friends, would have left town before the graduation caps hit the ground, but she hadn't, and neither had he.

It might only have been the past friendship they shared or maybe the thrill of seeing a familiar face, but Alaina and Christopher rekindled their inseparable nature. It's safe to say they had never, neither of them, thought of the other in a romantic way. But things had changed; they were older, more mature. The kids who had played in the fields and creek were long gone. He fell in love with her that first Fall at the university. She was everything to him. Christopher spent most of his days trying to make up for time lost to foolish youth.

For Christopher, that was the real tragedy: not knowing the woman he loved enough to know she didn't love him back. Not in the same way, anyway; she loved him as the friend with whom she had spent her childhood. For Alaina, there was nothing more.

Christopher asked Alaina to marry him one Spring day, between classes, as they walked past the library to the quad. They were holding hands like always. It wasn't a romantic proposal, because he knew she wouldn't want that. She laughed when he asked and told him not to bring it up again. She didn't hold his hand after that when they walked around campus, or anywhere else, or ever again.

Time and perspective had given Alaina the words she had been unable to find in her youth. She began trying to tell Christopher who she was. She said she had always known but could never admit it, even to herself. Their small town—their home—was less accepting of what Alaina called 'people like me.' Despite being in a college town, there were close-minded people living in the dark corners of their little Southern community. Not everyone shared in the hate, but it only took one to poison the well. Those had been Alaina's words.

“It’s not a choice,” she explained. “It’s who I am, who I’ve always been.”

Christopher’s heart was shattered. Feelings of hopeless loss versus elation that she trusted him enough to share that part of her life left him conflicted. They had always been friends and always would be; she promised him that. Yet he still loved her and struggled to bury his feelings. All he could do was carry on and be the friend he knew she would someday need, when the time was right. That time came sooner than either of them expected.

Christopher had never bothered to wonder why Alaina spent so much time at the library. Students study. But part of her confession, soon after rejecting his proposal, was of a love she had never said aloud.

The girl at the library had caught Alaina’s eye sometime during their second year. Alaina developed a severe inability to locate information and needed library girl’s help often. Christopher never suspected anything. The girls would study there, together, at the library, never bothering to walk outside. He didn’t know any of this, of course, only that library girl was exceedingly helpful. Besides, the girls were both in the teaching program together, and Christopher was in pre-law; there was nothing he could do to help Alaina with her studies.

Christopher was there as Alaina pursued library girl, full force, and eventually won her heart. He was genuinely proud for Alaina, in spite of the still strong feelings he had for her; she rose from the ashes of her past to a happiness she feared she would never find.

Library girl ended up having a name: Rachel. Christopher wanted to hate her, he really did, but he couldn’t. There were many times when Alaina

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After ending a career in teaching, **Jason Feingold** began writing, with works published in multiple literary journals and collections. When I'm not writing, I'm reading, keeping house, being a husband, raising a son, chasing dogs, and volunteering as a Guardian ad Litem in the North Carolina county where I live.

Chip Jett is a mystery and horror writer from the South. His stories have appeared in The First Line, Curating Alexandria, Inwood Indiana, Meat for Tea, The Raw Art Review, and Jitter, and in online publications as well, including Cadaverous

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James R. McCullen works as an attorney in Detroit, MI. Having traveled extensively over the years, he has enjoyed writing from many exotic places that include Room B-61 in the basement of City-County Building and American Coney Island on West Lafayette Blvd.

Alice Frances Wickham is a writer, editor and publisher living in London. She is the founder of New London Writers and Purcell Press. Her work ranges from dark, to humorous, to faintly bizarre. Alice's short stories have been published in Mechanics Institute Review - MIR (2018); Planet Drum (2015, 2019); Litro Magazine (2015); Tales to Terrify - Audio (2017); Indiana Review (2017); Paradise Press Anthology (2017); Death Throes Publishing (2014); Nazar Magazine (2014) Edge Magazine (1998). www.purcellpress.com

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'Brexit Swan' Bittersweet tale about two sisters coming to terms with their opposing personalities. A darkly comic story set in London, UK during the pre-Brexit years. The title symbolises the conflict within the narrator as she establishes her identity outside the restrictive bonds of blood sisterhood.

'Curse of the Lighthouse' 'It's all common sense, and caution,' he was told. Finally, an assignment at a lighthouse on an island sanctuary where peace and quiet would allow him to piece his life back together. If only he had taken the signs seriously. If only he hadn't gone deaf to the obvious. If only...

'Of Cows and Corn' Best friends Jason and Bill drive from Pittsburgh to Stanford to deliver Bill to graduate school. It's the end of their friendship, and Jason counts down the days until they part, and he goes home. Driving west, Jason ponders the coming loss to understand it and reconcile himself to it.

'Girl in the TV' In this story about a man's perception of time and the memories that comprise his life, he learns that a girl he once knew has been strangely erased from existence. He discovers that the same fate might soon befall him.

'Two Wrongs and a Right' Forbidden love. An abusive past. Promises and murder among friends. Christopher made a vow to the woman he can't forget and to the woman who stole her heart. Their past returns to test the strength of friendship in a world that forces choices that should never have to be made.



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