**Write Away, 250/500/750-word story collection no. 11**

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750 words: Lighted (to start) and second/founder/Persian/Hebrew/victorious/wheel/Theophilus (to be included in any order)

Similarly,

500 words: Given (to start) and every/crest/nuts/state

250 words: Ray’s (to start) and wrote/air

# 1: Writing Wrongs

Ray’s ‘great idea’ was a writing group,

T’would be held at his house on the first.

Me and my friend thought it sounded great,

Ray didn’t want no one coerced.

So, we gathered there, the first of June,

We blew hot air ‘bout our plans.

Some said they’d like to write novels,

Others, tales of Afghanistan.

Ray suggested we take turns to set,

An assignment or two or three.

To hand in by the next meeting,

To read out whilst supping our tea.

Well, the month flew by before I knew it,

And for Sandra, my friend, it did too.

So, of the six who met up at Ray’s,

The assignments numbered just two.

An old lady who came, called Sheila,

She’d written a tale of Japan.

Based on her time in that far off land,

Losing all to a yellow conman.

And Ray, he wrote a good ’un,

As could be predicted he’d do.

A tale of a mermaid and a poofter,

Who met at London zoo.

Well, the months rolled by, and I’d written nowt,

I hadn’t time, you see.

And Sandra, well, she had dogs to walk,

And she *couldn’t* miss TV.

Said Ray, “Look, if you wanna write,

You’ll think up an idea or two.

Then sit at your desk, give your TV a rest,

And do what you have to do.”

So, I made a vow and I promised ‘Sand,’

“Look, Ray’s a good guy, a grafter.

I’ll definitely write something next month,

Or, if not, p’raps the one after.”

# 2: Our Little Trysts

“Given. Frank Given. Suite 412. Please check again” I implored the unfamiliar desk clerk at the Pierre Hotel.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, there’s no one registered here by that name.” The young man behind the desk looked at me with a mixture of embarrassment and pity.

“You must be mistaken” I replied quietly.

“There’s no mistake, ma’am. There isn’t even a reservation for a Frank Given. Perhaps you have the wrong hotel” the clerk suggested, trying to give me a way out.

Well, of course I didn’t have the wrong hotel! Frank and I had been meeting at the Pierre the second weekend of every month for three years. I noticed two female clerks huddled in the corner looking in my direction and chattering conspiratorially. My face turned red knowing they were talking about me.

I checked my phone for any texts or missed calls from Frank; there were none. Rather than stay in the lobby looking distraught and abandoned, I walked into the lounge and ordered a martini.

I sipped my drink and absentmindedly fingered the outline of the crest of the Pierre Hotel on the cocktail napkin. From where I sat I had a clear view of the front desk on the left and the entrance on East 61st Street on the right. I’d be able to see Frank the moment he arrived.

After thirty minutes and two martinis I began feeling paranoid. It was painfully obvious, at least to me, that everyone who saw me sitting by the bar thought I was either an elegant call girl just past her prime or a now lonesome and tedious woman who had been stood up.

Now in a state of semi-panic, I took out my phone again and texted Frank. I stared at the screen waiting for an answer which would offer a perfectly understandable and forgivable explanation.

Feigning nonchalance, I called Frank’s cell; it went straight to voicemail. Laughing flirtatiously, I left a message proving to no one in particular that all was right in my crumbling world.

My mind drifted back to that night when Frank and I first met. We shared a taxi and instead of continuing to my apartment, I accepted Frank’s invitation for a late dinner at the Pierre. One thing led to another as it often does and we spent the night together. A fling turned into a romance.

I became aware of someone approaching. Expecting to see Frank, I looked up, smiling; it was the concierge. Whispering discreetly, he handed me a note. It read: "Dearest Christine. I have treasured our little trysts but now we must go our separate ways. Farewell. Frank”

“Our little trysts!” I was shattered.

Just like that, as suddenly as it began it was over. Looking straight ahead, I gracefully walked out of the hotel. After buying a bag of roasted nuts from a vendor on the corner, I crossed over to Central Park. I sat on a bench feeding the pigeons, thinking of everything and nothing.

# 3: Connections

Given that there were fewer than eight hours before the *Sapphire of the Seas* sailed from *Le Havre*, Third Engineer Joseph – *Giuseppe* – Blackburn queued anxiously at Portsmouth ferry terminal. The ferry was due to leave in thirty-five minutes and the sailing time to *Le Havre* was almost six hours.

“I’m lost, I’m not sure where my mummy and daddy are.”

Joseph looked down at two brilliant blue eyes in the little girl’s upturned face then at the clock. In a pocket, his fingers crushed a used train ticket. If he missed the ferry, he missed the cruise ship. He’d be busting his nuts in a crummy, low paid job at home. No contest.

“Please.”

Joseph looked at the clock again, feeling his heart pound. “Look, come with me, quickly.” He took her hand and they set off down a long corridor towards customer services.

Just as they reached the desk, there came a deafening bang and a sheet of flame. “Get down,” someone yelled. Two men, young and athletic, clad in black, raced past, one shouting to the other. Joseph looked up to see flames in the corridor.

A squad of policemen ran past, dressed in riot gear, complete with automatic weapons. One stopped. “This your daughter?”

“No, she lost her parents I think.”

“And you are?”

“Third Engineer Joseph Blackburn. Listen, I need to get the next ferry to *Le Havre*–.

“Look, sir, I’m sorry but we need to get this little girl to safety. In the meantime, lie on the floor, and stay there until you’re told to get up.”

Joseph kept his head down, aware of men running and shouting. Finally, he felt someone wrenching his shoulder. “Joseph Blackburn?”

“Yes.”

It was a young policeman. “Come with me, sir.”

They proceeded along a corridor, Joseph noticing groups of shell-shocked travellers being led by quiet men in uniform. Finally, they came to a helipad where a helicopter stood, its rotors flailing. On its side was a crest of a red lion sitting on a crown, a sword in one hand, a sceptre in the other. Through a helicopter window, Joseph could see a familiar young girl waving.

The policeman coughed. “Look, perhaps I shouldn’t be telling you this, sir, but they were enemies of the state, after members of the Royal Family. The little girl, well, she’s … connected. Anyway, she recognised the accents of the terrorists who ran past you, she has a kind of photographic memory apparently. They were from an, er, unusual country, so not hard to catch and … well, eradicate, let’s say. In the meantime, please join the chopper and they will take you to your rendezvous with the *Sapphire of the Seas,* your luggage will follow soon. *Grazie Signore*.”

Joseph laughed. He guessed the little girl, whoever she was, had detected the accent he thought he’d eliminated. Well, it wasn’t every day he got a lift in a royal helicopter! He ran across the tarmac, a weight lifting from his shoulders.

# 4: Twin Sons of Different Mothers

Ray's first instinct upon opening up the bi-monthly e-mail from the sender whom he referred to as ' Our Fearless Leader ' was to Go for the Gold. Which is to say, as Sir John Winston Ono Lennon once exclaimed ' The Toppermost of the Poppermost.' The Ultimate set of parameters: The 750 plateau.

But, as is often the case, he initially scaled down his ambition from said ' Toppermost of the Poppermost' to .. simply .. ' The Toppermost.'

' Given the state of every crest and subsequent break of the insanely large {and lethal} waves rolling in, his gut told him that he would be no less than categorically nuts to attempt to ride one.'

Thinking to himself .. ' Ok. Great. Now what? I've already used all the words ...  
I wrote a tiny little story, out of thin air and now I have zero idea what to say in order to flesh out the rest of what I've written. “

What's a boy to do?  
In other words, as he often thought to himself: ' Is it hot in here .. or am I crazy?'

Yet, the words which appeared in his mind were actually a mirror image of same .. One may have simply asked, instead: ' Is it crazy in here .. or am I hot?'

Yet .. calling up an old nursery rhyme to demonstrate the exclusivity of one's opinion on the matter is fraught with potential complications:

Eenie Meenie Miney Moe / Moe Miney Meenie Eenie Six of one / Half a dozen of the others

Twin Sons of Different Mothers

# 5: The Goat Whisperer

Ray’s day wasn’t going so well;

In fact, it had been a lousy year.

Things just seemed to be going to hell

And he felt like shedding a tear.

He and the missus hadn’t been married too long

They was practically newly-wed.

But she kept complaining day and night

‘Bout there being no action in their bed.

“I’m tired and weary, I am!” Ray exclaimed.

“And I’m dead on me feet at night!”

“Well, how ‘bout giving me love in the morning?”

Said the missus trying to avoid a fight.

But Ray had an answer for that one, too.

“I got lots of work in the morning

Feeding them cows and pigs and goats.

Now please don’t be giving me no warning.”

So Ray went off to tend to his chores;

A farmer’s work is back-breaking stuff.

Just then he found a note his wife wrote

Stashed in the pocket near his old tin of snuff.

"I’m making your favorite ploughman's lunch,

A sandwich prepared with loving care.

I’ll bring it to ya ‘round half gone noon.

And you can plough me in the sweet fresh air.”

Well, Ray got busy and sorta forgot

‘Bout his wife coming round near noon.

So he went to the back of the barn for a nap

But the missus arrived a moment too soon.

She let out a scream and covered her eyes

For the sight she beheld was too crude.

Right there in the hay like two lovey birds

Lay a goat and Ray in the nude!

# 6: The Sting

Lighted from above by three bright spotlights, the dartboard was mounted in a cabinet on the yellowing paint of a wall in The Golden Calf.

It was Thomas Scaman’s second visit to The Golden Calf, having moved to the village of Little Muchly just two weeks earlier. Then it had been lunchtime and full of jovial families.

Tonight, he’d fancied a pint and expecting to be met with a jovial greeting, instead opened the door onto a sparsely furnished, and equally sparsely populated, bar.

A couple of old men were playing dominos. The only other occupant was a youngish lad picking his nose and grinning like he’d just won the lottery.

“Good evening,” said Thomas. There came a click of dominos and a high-pitched giggle from the young man, who Thomas now noted had bulging crossed-eyes.

“Can I help you?” A man stood behind the bar, long grey sideburns growing on his sagging jowls. Above the bar was a faded photograph. A man with a grim wheel-like face and long silver wig glared through the dirty glass. Underneath was the legend, ‘Theophilus Leake, 1762-1849, Founder of Shadford’s Brewery.’

Thomas hesitated. “A pint of … er, Persian Silk please.”

The barman yanked on a handle, pumping a mass of foam into a glass. “It’ll settle in a moment, it’s a bit lively.”

Just then a couple of young men came in. One of them, a large anchor tattooed on his wrist, slapped a set of darts down on the bar. “Pint of Hebrew Hoodoo please, Bill, when you’ve finished serving this … gentleman.” They laughed.

“Do you play darts then?” Thomas ventured.

“No, that’s why I carry a set of darts around with me.” He made a noise like a fart.

“Oh, sorry, er, would you like a game?”

“What, maybe later mate, hey, Bill, you got any pork scratchings?”

Thomas carried his beer to the dartboard and took a few self-conscious throws, hearing the men chuckling.

“Fancy a game then, mate?” It was anchor-tattoo man.

“Oh, yes, that’d be good,” said Thomas.

“Fred’ll chalk,” said the man, “501 straight start, you throw first.”

Thomas took aim at the treble twenty, the highest score on the board. His first dart just grazed it, his other two landed in the adjacent sectors, five and one, for a score of 26, known to dart players as ‘bed and breakfast.’ He felt his face flush as anchor-tattoo man hurled his first dart straight into the middle of the treble twenty followed by two nearby, for a score of a hundred.

“Tony’s brilliant,” said Fred, revealing tattoo-anchor man’s name, after the former had emerged victorious five games in a row. “He can put three darts in the middle of a polo mint.”

There came a high-pitched giggle from the young lad.

Thomas felt the Persian Silk going to his head. “Never!”

“Yeah, he can.” It was the barman.

“I’ll bet you, then,” said Tony, “Do you drive?”

“What, yes.”

“Well, I’ll have one go at putting three darts in the centre of a polo mint. I do it, I take your car. I don’t do it, well, Bill’ll give you and your mates free drinks for as long as you’re alive. Ain’t that right, Bill?”

The barman assented with a grunt.

The young man, whose name turned out to be Percy, stood grinning like a Cheshire Cat, holding a small round mint with a hole in front of the dartboard. Tony took aim. Thomas stood, wondering how he could lose, surely this guy wasn’t *that* accurate? To his incredulity, Tony walked to the board and poked his three darts into the centre of the mint. He turned, “Car keys please.”

Tony stood, stunned, “What are you on about, you never threw them!”

The bar was deadly silent. Tony held his hand out. “Don’t you understand the meaning of ‘put’?”

“Hold on a minute, you’ve got to be joking.” Tony felt as if his body had just been placed in a deep freeze.

“No joke,” said Tony, “hand over them keys, or ….” He and Fred slipped on large silver knuckle-dusters.

To his horror, Thomas noticed that Bill had disappeared, as had the domino players. Only Percy remained, his mouth wide open and his giggling stalled for once.

Then the door opened and in came a police constable. He looked around the bar in astonishment. “Come on, Tony, you at it again, haven’t you won enough cars already!”

# 7: Tea for the Tillerman

Lighted gardenia-scented candles flickered throughout the Brevard Jewish Community Temple. I grew up in Brevard, North Carolina, but moved to San Francisco at the age of 17 to “find myself”. After 20–plus years and still not certain who I truly was, I felt the time had come to revisit my hometown.

It all began after reading an article in the Transylvania County Times about BJCT which my dear friend Marcia sent me; a few of the lines truly resonated with me:

“It is good to enter into the spirit of the Sabbath, a time in which our personal concerns drop away for a few hours and we get a sense of the larger meaning of life and fellowship, one unconcerned with wealth or occupation or standing. That is what Shabbat can do – take us to a place of repose, equality, community and perhaps even peace of mind.”

After my catastrophic marriage, peace of mind sounded like an impossible quest. Once my decision to return to Brevard was made, I called Marcia; she met me at the airport and our first stop was the temple. Services were already in progress so we sat in the back listening to the tranquil beauty of the ancient Hebrew chants.

Listening to a man’s resonant voice I realized it was familiar to me. I opened my eyes to see who was singing but my view was obstructed by a woman’s enormous hat. “I *know* that voice.” Glancing down at my program I saw a name that made my heart pound: ‘Arthur Rosen’.  So much time had gone by but his name still warmed my blood. '’The one that got away’’, as the saying goes, when in actuality he was the one I pushed away.

As the people were leaving the temple, Marcia and I stopped to chat with Arthur; I wondered if he sensed my heart and mind were racing. He was as handsome as I remembered – a little grayer and sporting a closely cropped beard which added to his rugged charm. His blue eyes were still captivating, his smile warm and inviting. I couldn’t help noticing he wasn’t wearing a wedding ring.

“Lois Efron! You have no idea how wonderful it is to see you after all these years! If I may say, you look radiant!” Arthur exclaimed. Truly happy to see me, he clasped my hands in his.

No embraces, no awkward kiss on the cheek – just genuine pleasure in seeing me again.

“It’s wonderful to see you too, Arthur. An especially nice surprise.”

He asked me what I’d been doing all this time and laughed when I told him “I was on the road to find out.”

“Aren’t we all, Lois?” he asked. “Tell me; were you victorious?”

Now it was my time to laugh, saying “Oh, no! Not at all!”

“Well, then, you must persevere!” Arthur replied with an engaging smile.

We said our goodbyes and I realized we were still holding hands. I suddenly remembered those many nights we held hands listening to “Tea for the Tillerman”.

Marcia slid behind the wheel of her car and I casually asked “So, when were you going to tell me Arthur was still living here?”

“Would you have come if I did?” and I found I honestly didn’t know the answer. “Lois, before we go to lunch I’d like to show you something."

As we rode through the downtown area I was shocked by how much it had changed since I left. It was now dynamic and vibrant with eclectic stores, charming restaurants and inviting pubs. Marcia parked the car, walked to a store and unlocked the door.

“Wait a second. Is this *your* store?” I asked.

“Founder and owner … don’t sound so surprised! Welcome to Theophilus – a little bit of everything for the discriminating client.”

We were no longer in Brevard; this was a taste of the exotic Middle East. Gorgeous Persian rugs adorned the floors, hookahs, statues, belly dancing skirts bedecked with crystals, finger cymbals, lanterns, perfumes, jewelry boxes, coffee, almonds, candied dates and so much more filled the store.

“Do you like it?” Marcia asked excitedly.

“It’s magical, Marcia. I love it!” I responded, looking around in amazement.

“And look” Marcia said, gently guiding me toward the front window. “See that blue house across the street? Arthur lives there … very much alone. I’m sure he’d warmly welcome your company.”

I smiled knowingly at my friend; she understood me quite well. Yes, I think I’d found my way home.