**Write Away, 250/500/750-word story collection no. 20**

Contents

[1: Pipes of Wood 2](#_Toc76923135)

[2: Tomorrow Never Knows 3](#_Toc76923136)

[3: A Twister of Fate 5](#_Toc76923137)

[4: The World Is Your Oyster 7](#_Toc76923138)

[5: What Now Is 9](#_Toc76923139)

[6: Talking ‘Bout Fireworks, Baby 10](#_Toc76923140)

[7: The Name Is Grey 11](#_Toc76923141)

* 250 words: Nights (to start), Dutch, month (to be included)
* 500 words: Cloak (to start), where, uneducated, islands, immortalised (to be included)
* 750 words: Use (to start), armour, mourning, crowns, Dakota, frequently, specially, dominion (to be included)

# 1: Pipes of Wood

Nights bring the mystery of the stars and moon

The tides of the cosmos flow like the sea

Dreams of love till the dawn breaks soon

The spirits of those who turn in the grave

And the faces of those whose love we crave

Come unbidden in waves, like the sea

Above the mountain rides the silver moon

And golden, reflects upon the indigo sea

And to its light plays the endless tune

Of those who blow on their pipes of wood

As man has played since the first man could

Flow notes like the bobbing of the sea

For eons man has watched and worshipped the moon

That she brings forth fruits from the earth and the sea

As she sails the stars like a mercury spoon

The month and the season turn and change

The crops grow golden and the woods rearrange

Till the bare boughs dream of the sea

The wolf he stares, then howls at the moon

Sensing the currents that flow from its sea

And with countless ancestors he will attune

His senses to the smell and the scrape of the earth

The scent of the night and the cycle of re-birth

Till his yellow eyes mist like the sea

Far from man’s cities, shines the silver of the moon

On the snow of the arctic and the desperate sea

Where the Dutch did sail through storm and typhoon

Bringing gold for the king and jewels for the queen

From towns they’d sacked wherever they had been

Now their wood lies rotting ‘neath the sea.

# 2: Tomorrow Never Knows

“Use the call button on the side panel of your bed if you need a nurse. My shift is almost over. Can I get you anything before I leave?”

It took me a few seconds to remember where I was as I stared at the friendly face of the nurse standing over me. “Pain meds would be lovely” I answered immediately. I had been in an accident earlier, falling three feet off a friend’s deck and shattering my hip. At first, I felt nothing; then incredible pain started coursing its way up from my toes to the crowns on my teeth. Moving a millimeter caused me to scream out in agony. Too bad I’d forgotten to wear my suit of armor today!

“Your next round is in two hours – a specially-prepared cocktail to get you through this. Until then, try to get some rest” the nurse suggested.

I’m a firm believer that copious amounts of pain medication should be dispensed frequently but apparently here in the hospital my opinion was worthless. I smiled wanly and asked the nurse for my iPhone; if I couldn’t have propofol at least I could have music.

Trying to rest in a hospital is next to impossible. Patients crying out, buzzers buzzing, machines whirring, carts rolling, elevators dinging, doctors discussing. Even the mourning doves who held dominion over the sparrows on my windowsill were cooing incessantly.

[I slip in my earbuds and cue up The Beatles “Helter Skelter” – the best and only hard rock, heavy metal song they ever recorded. No matter how shitty I may be feeling at any given moment, listening to that masterpiece makes life perfect for 4 minutes and 29 seconds.]

Someone wheels in my dinner cart. Lifting the lid, I see a bowl of soup, a sandwich, a beverage and a little Dixie Cup of ice cream. Not feeling hungry just yet, I go through my collection of albums trying to decide which one to play. Ah, “Revolver”. You can never go wrong with that beauty. I close my eyes and revel in the genius that is George Harrison singing “Taxman”.

I’m suddenly aware of a rush of air and find I am now outside floating uptown over the streets of Manhattan, my hospital gown flapping like laundry on the line. I hear the old-fashioned bell sound of “Ahooga” behind me and swivel round to see a flying ice cream truck being driven by none other than John Lennon. Somehow as bizarre as it all is, it seems perfectly normal.

“You getting in? We don’t want to be late” John says.

“Late for what?” I ask.

“For whatever comes next” John replies with a grin and I slide onto the seat next to him. “It’s very rude to be late, isn’t it?”

“AHOOGA”

“What’s on your bucket list, me darlin’?” John asks me and I answer without hesitation “to go to Liverpool!”

“Ah, me lovely Liverpool. I won’ be going back there again, I’m afraid. Next stop: The Dakota” John calls out and we swoosh away.

“No, John. You mustn’t!” I beg him and I start to cry.

“Oh, but I must! Now dry those eyes. It is what is and we can’t change that.”

When Paul and I met for the first time, do you think we had any idea what tomorrow would bring? Of course not! We didn’t have a clue where we were going in our lives. Then we met George and we three became brothers, but we didn’t know that the best was yet to come. George brought Ringo and look what happened. A phenomenon! You can never stop tomorrow unless you stop today just like I can’t stop what’s going to happen to me; I’m scared but this is my destiny. Tomorrow will always happen and yet tomorrow never knows.

Nancy, listen to what I’m going to say. Aim for the stars. Time is fleeting so always eat dessert first. Got it?”

And I nod as I hear the faint words “Try to realize it’s all within yourself. No one else can make you change and to see you’re really only very small and life flows within you and without you.”

And in a flash John was gone.

I open my eyes and prop myself up in my hospital bed. Dinner is still there, right where I left it, and I find I’m suddenly starving. I pop open the ice cream cup and dig in.

# 3: A Twister of Fate

“Use some common sense,” I said, “the dead don’t send text messages!”

Bunty looked up at me. Her voice was tremulous. “I know, but it says Harriet Harding. ‘Hi Bunty, greetings from heaven! Look, I need you to do something for me. More later. Xxx’ That’s how she always signed off, three kisses, x’s, the first one in capitals.”

I took Bunty’s iPhone from her and tapped on ‘info.’ It looked to be kosher. But a text from her dead sister, I didn’t think so! “Well, who’s got her phone now?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t see any of the family playing tricks.”

Harriet’s husband was Donald, a farmer, always busy with planting and harvesting cycles, looking after cattle and a hundred other things. Then there were the kids, both at university. Faye studying biochemistry and Alan, musical theatre.

Bunty sat, staring at the message. “I wonder what she wants. ‘More later,’ she says.”

I needed to get to work. “Guess you’ll just have to wait and find out.”

A few days later, I came home to find Bunty playing the piano. Something she did frequently when we first married, but hardly ever now.

“That’s nice,” I said.

She smiled. “Chopin. Harriet loved this one.”

Bunty finished playing. “I got another text from her.”

I experienced a sinking feeling.

She held her phone out. I read the message. ‘Play some Chopin for me. Love, H. Xxx.’

“I phoned Donald,” Bunty said, “I asked him what happened to Harriet’s phone after she … passed. Anyway, he said her phone was buried with her.”

“What! Is he sure?”

“Positive. It was something she asked for specially, once she knew she was dying. He put it in the coffin himself and never told anyone. He was in mourning, I suppose.”

“Well, has she said what she wanted to say yet? You, know, in the first message.”

Bunty came over and kissed me on the lips. “Yes, Frank, you’re not to play in the golf competition at the end of the month.”

I almost blew my top. “What, the Swallow Falls Open? Look, hang on a minute, Bernie and me have been working up to it all season.”

Bunty put her arms around me. “She doesn’t say why, but it’s important you don’t play. Please, Frank.”

Bernie was my business partner, golfing partner and best friend, a no-nonsense kind of guy whose cynical armour sometimes got people’s backs up.

“Look, Frank, it’s bullshit. Anyone can spoof someone else’s number, it just takes a bit of software. Look, we’ve got a pretty good chance in the Swallow Falls. Sure, there’s Dan McCormick and Phil Tann, they’re playing pretty well right now. Dan came third in the South Dakota Match Play out at the Three Crowns, did you hear?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I heard. Look Frank, if I was to pull out, couldn’t you pair up with Matt?”

Bernie looked shell-shocked. “Matt Farthing, the semi-pro? Well, if he’s free, maybe. But come on, Frank, you’re not pulling out. Look, it’s one of the other guys who has to be sending you these messages.”

“Hmm.” Not impossible, but I doubted anyone knew the intricacies of Harriet’s life well enough.

“Hiya Phil, how’re you doing?”

Phil Tann smiled up at me from his hospital bed. At least, I think it was a smile. His face was a mass of black and red swellings.

“I’m alive, Frank, that’s the main thing.”

“That’s good. That tornado injured a lot of people. Everyone’s asking why they couldn’t have forecast it.”

“Nature’s dominion over man, I suppose. Look, Frank, there’s something you should know.”

I looked at Phil lying there, all bandages and tubes, and wondered. Thank God I’d followed Bunty’s, well, Harriet’s advice and pulled out of the competition.

“Look, Donald Harding, Harriet’s husband, was ‘playing away’ with another farmer’s wife, Annie Sykes.”

“Annie Sykes!”

“Yeah, look, and while he was messing around with her, well, me and Harriet ….”

I looked at Phil, trying to register what he was saying.

“And well, I sent Bunty those messages. I thought you and Bernie were too good. I just wanted … to stop you. Looks like karma took a hand. I’m sorry, Frank, it was stupid.”

I put a hand on Phil’s shoulder. One way or another, fate had stepped in and I was grateful it wasn’t me lying there, bandaged up to the eyeballs. “No worries, Phil, just get better.” Though exactly what I would tell Bunty, I wasn’t sure.

# 4: The World Is Your Oyster

“Cloak and Dagger and a dozen oysters on ice” was the order placed by a vaguely familiar voice in the corner.

Her interest piqued, Judy Lowe leaned in a bit to get a better look. Where had she heard that voice before? Finding it a little too dim to see, she decided to go over and check out the situation. Taking her Bloody Mary with her, Judy casually strolled to the end of the bar and wriggled her curvaceous bottom onto the stool.

*“Pardonne-moi*” Judy cooed. “The name of your drink is *tres* intriguing.” The man was older than Judy expected but extremely handsome with silver hair and a rich tan. “Has anyone ever mentioned you look like Cary Grant?” she asked, smiling flirtatiously.

“Never” he replied in a clipped Bristol accent as he gazed appreciatively at Judy’s *decolletage*. “Ah, yes. The Cloak and Dagger: the perfect blend of Blackwoods Gin from the Shetland Islands, fresh lime juice, simple syrup, green chartreuse and Extra Brut sparkling wine. It’s the quintessential pairing with oysters.

“I’m Judy Lowe, a model from Los Angeles. And you are?”

“*Enchanté*, Judy. My friends call me Archie” and he gently kissed the palm of her hand.

Judy gasped; no man had ever kissed the delicate flesh of her palm. It was so European and sexy.

“Archie, would you mind terribly if I had a little sip of your Cloak and Dagger?” Judy asked. ‘A friend once told me the perfect drink with oysters is a Bloody Mary and I’d like to see who’s right.”

“Oh Judy, Judy, Judy! Whoever told you that was obviously terribly mistaken or an uneducated boor” Archie teased. “No, you may not have a sip of my drink; you shall have your very own. Barkeep! Please prepare a perfect Cloak and Dagger for the lovely Judy Lowe from Los Angeles.”

When the bartender set the drink before Judy, she clapped her hands in glee like a little girl and reached for the glass but Archie stopped her.

“Oh, no, my dear. This must be done right! It’s a process. First slide the oyster into your mouth and savor the taste. Delight in the pleasure; it should never be rushed. Now, follow with a sip of the Cloak and Dagger and let the juices mingle. That’s a good girl. Now swallow.”

Judy was in ecstasy. Never had she experienced anything so sensual. “Oh my God, Archie! That was heavenly.”

“Let’s raise our glasses, lovely Judy, to the noble oyster and the Cloak and Dagger. May they be forever immortalized as the true nectar of the gods!”

Archie stood and kissed Judy’s palm. “And now, my dear, I must bid you *adieu*.” He flipped his hat onto his head, tapped the brim and left.

When Judy came back down to earth she discovered a folded piece of paper in her hand. Gently she peeled back the corners to find it was a cocktail napkin on which was scribbled: “Dearest Judy: The world is your oyster. Always, Cary.”

July slowly exhaled. “Well, I’ll be damned!”

# 5: What Now Is

Nights were never dark enough. There was never any secluded enough place to hide.

Dutch would find you. Simple as that. Dude was just ridiculously tuned in. In a nearly shortwave kind of behind-the-scenes way. Had to be something like that.

If he had been growing six inches every time he'd crack a case, he'd be pushing twenty plus feet by now. But he's still just barely pushing a dead on six feet. Pure testament to nothing, other than the sheer will he was able to exert when he truly, truly wished to manipulate reality into a form, shape, dimension even, of his choosing.

A beyond-epic ability to have to tap into when a push came to shove. Especially in his chosen line of work: Bounty Hunter.

People sometimes just flat out disappear. All their earthly possessions, oftentimes right along with them. As if their entire existence had been nothing more than a figment of the collective imaginations of everyone who … quote unquote … ‘knew them.’

It was Dutch's job to find them. Yet not with the intention of ‘bringing them back to life’ *per se*. More to simply add some closure for their family and friends. Ideally to be able to relate to their loved ones a simple ‘I'm here. And I'm ok.’ Without belabouring the fact.

And he would always do so on the precise month, day and time they initially disappeared. In an attempt to erase what was.

And start over with what now *is*.

# 6: Talking ‘Bout Fireworks, Baby

Nights in Manhattan. The bright lights of Broadway. The fusion of fragrances emanating from the legion of restaurants. The cacophony of languages of millions of immigrants. The Big Apple – excitement and diversity down to its core.

So how the hell did I end up in Pennsylvania Dutch Country, hopelessly in love with my Amish husband Eli, married for four years with three kids and twins in the oven?

Good old revenge. I wouldn’t “play ball” with my boss so instead of being assigned to photograph Macy’s July 4th Fireworks I was banished for a month to cover the “Plain People’s” Summer County Fair.

What I thought was going to be a nightmare was quite the opposite. When the handsome, lusty Eli Fisher and I locked eyes, it was “*Grossfeelich*” – a “good feeling” from head to toe and all parts in between.

Being accepted into the Amish community, let alone marrying, is difficult but Eli and I had a few things going for us. I was a city girl but I wasn’t afraid to get my hands dirty. We weren’t kids. Most Amish were married before age 20; Eli and I were both 26.

But the clincher was the serendipity of my name: Menno Jakob.

Menno Simons and Jakob Ammann were the most revered men in the Amish religion. The elders were convinced I was descended from them, when I was actually an Italian Jew from Canarsie. That was perfectly “*oll recht*” with Eli.

Talking ‘bout fireworks, baby!

# 7: The Name Is Grey

“Cloak and dagger man?” asked Clunch.

“My name is Grey, Parma Grey,” I replied, “like a mouse’s back, and I have a cloak, incarnadine in hue, but, alas, no dagger.”

He gave that queer, lopsided grin of his. “Ah, Mr. Grey, immortalised throughout our fair islands. Do come in.”

I followed Clunch into a blue pavilion. The Ministry of Covert Warfare’s idea of keeping a low profile. “Hardly immortalised, I’m supposed to be a secret agent!”

Clunch pressed a lift button. “Ah, but immortalised amongst we secret people, the cognoscenti of the garotte and poisoned umbrella!”

Soon, I found myself facing an obese bald man sat in a huge chair behind a huge desk. His name, appropriately, was Hugo. Hugo Mann.

“Mr. Clunch, please show Mr. Grey the latest assortment of, er, gadgets.”

Things had moved on since the days of Aston Martin ejector seats and boats that could take off and fly. Now it was all microelectronics, miniature cameras and bio-weapons. But there was still time for what I called ‘fun things.’ Umbrellas that could blow a hole in someone and phones that could burn someone’s hands off.

So, I was shown a range of new gadgets. An innocuous-looking laser pen, but with enough power to fry an enemy’s eyeballs. “Be sure to keep the safety catch in the ‘on’ position,” exhorted Clunch. Then there was what appeared to be an ammonite, an ancient fossil in two halves, but which had been impregnated with a special kind of plutonium. “Quite harmless,” said Clunch, “but put the two halves together for sixty seconds and … well, you’ll need a fast car to get out of range!”

“You mean …?”

“Yes.”

Finally, clutching a briefcase with enough firepower to start a small war, I found myself facing the enormous Mr. Mann again. Surely there was some diet he could go on, I thought.

“No there isn’t,” he said, as if having read my mind. “It’s a genetic thing.”

Genetic thing my arse. I’d bet he liked his doughnuts soaked in double cream.

He laughed. “And brandy. Well, Parma,” he said, jabbing a finger in my direction, “your mission is to wipe out the Taliban.”

“With pleasure,” I exclaimed. “The uneducated swine!”

“You’ll be parachuting into Kabul tomorrow morning.”

“Couldn’t I just go by passenger plane, y’know, incognito?”

Mr. Hugo Mann’s expansive pink face took on a shiny, sweaty hue. “Hmm. That’d mean getting you a ticket.”

“Blimey. Surely the Ministry could manage that!”

“Well, er, I suppose so, if you really don’t want to parachute.”

“Um, I’d rather not,” I said. “You know, there are a lot of insects floating around up above the desert. I don’t fancy a mouthful of flying earwig.”

He stood up, with difficulty, and reached out a huge sweaty paw. “Good luck, Parma, the country, and indeed the world, is depending on you!”

I shook his hand and surreptitiously wiped the grease off on a handkerchief. “Lead on, Mr. Clunch,” I cried, “Afghanistan here I come!”