**Write Away, 250/500/750-word story collection no. 25**

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| 1. Write about something that was a big part of your childhood that today’s kids will never know about. |
| 2. Begin your story with an invitation - to join a club, attend a dinner party, do something shocking. |
| 3. A funeral is held for someone in the family or the community. |
| 4. A detective is hired for a high price to find a thief who stole something that doesn’t appear to have any real value. |
| 5. Write a piece featuring a pinball machine. |
| 6. Write something featuring a bag of French fries on the edge of a bathtub. |

# 1: Rebel with a Cause

“Come in here please, Connor!” I called out to my son.

Connor came bounding into the kitchen. “What’s up, Mom?”

“Have you seen the bag of frozen French fries and the burgers we just bought?”

“Not since we left the store. Aren’t they in that bag on the floor by the fridge with all the other frozen stuff?”

“No” I replied. “I just looked through the bag. Funny, I could have sworn they were right on top. You know, this happened the other day. Dad couldn’t find the box of donuts or the hot dogs.”

“Did you check the receipts, Mom?”

“Yes. Everything was listed, even the missing food. Dad said he was going to call Costco but I’m not sure he did. They obviously forgot to pack those items.”

“Yeah, that store was super busy. I can see how they might have overlooked something. Well, good luck, Mom. If I can help let me know.”

“Actually Connor, there is something you can do for me when you have a minute. There’s a box of old photos you can bring down from the third-floor storage room.”

“Sure, Mom, but I was heading over to Joey’s to play video games for a while. OK if I bring the box down when I get home?”

I gave him a “thumbs up”.

I texted my husband to see if he had called Costco. He replied with an eye-roll emoji and wrote that he totally forgot about calling. “OK, no worries. I’ll handle it” I texted back. Now to call the store about my dilemma.

After speaking to a couple of people and being put on hold several times, I was assured nothing was left behind at the store. The manager said I could bring in my receipts and they’d issue a refund. That was fine with me but it still didn’t explain what happened to our lost items.

When Connor came home, he went straight into the den to watch TV. “Excuse me, bud. Aren’t you forgetting something? My photos?”

Smacking his forehead and groaning, he headed upstairs. “And don’t forget to walk the dog!” I called after him.

Not even a minute went by before I heard Connor yelling for me.

“Mom! Come up here – quick!”

I raced up the stairs.

“What’s wrong? Are you OK?” I asked nervously.

“I’m fine, Mom. I heard noises in here; check this out.”

We entered a guest bathroom which we never used.

“Look what I found” he said. Balanced on the edge of the bathtub was our missing bag of French fries – half-eaten.

“What’s going on here?”

“Take a look.” Connor drew back the shower curtain. Sprawled in the tub was our golden retriever, Rebel, softly moaning. Surrounding him were the empty packages of all our missing food.

“Oh, Rebel! What have you done?” I didn’t know if I should laugh or cry. “You little thief! Poor baby. Looks like you have nasty bellyache. C’mon boy, let’s get you to the vet.”

# 2: The Coffin Club

Ronald Knaggs’s day had begun somewhat curiously. On his way to the downstairs toilet he’d spotted a card pushed under the front door. He bent down to pick it up, feeling the familiar stab of pain in his back, arms and knees. *‘The Coffin Club invites Ronald Knaggs Esq. to The Haunted Windmill for an evening of intrigue,*’ it read. The Coffin Club? He’d never heard of it, and as for the Haunted Windmill, well, there was only one windmill nearby and that was rammed with a family of layabouts and barking dogs.

On closer examination, he saw the meeting was the following evening and that the windmill was on a saltmarsh out at the coast, about half an hour’s drive away. Intrigued, he determined to go.

The road out to the coast was dark and lonely. Knaggs would have welcomed the glare of another’s vehicle’s headlights, but the road was empty.

A dim light burned at the end of the drive to the windmill and Knaggs took the bumpy track, trying to dismiss the trepidation he felt burning in his guts. As he grew closer he could see lights in a couple of windows and other vehicles parked outside.

He parked in an area of rough, pitted tarmac, and got out, shocked to see the other vehicles were wrecks with windows cracked and bodywork spotted with rust and dirt. The front door was ajar and inside a dim bulb burnt at the foot of the staircase. “Hello,” Knaggs called. “Hello, is anyone home?”

There was no answer, just a sullen silence, thick like fog. He began to climb the creaking wooden stairs, spiralling upwards past locked doors. “Hello,” he forced himself to sound cheery, “hello, it’s Ronald Knaggs!”

Small, dim lamps lit his way until he reached an open door near the top of the mill. Inside a light burned and music played softly. An old song, before his time, but one that his grandmother used to sing.

*“We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when …”*

He pushed the door open to see a coffin on a trestle table. Candles burnt on an ancient sideboard and a disc turned on an old-fashioned gramophone. Knaggs wondered if it were all some kind of silly joke, maybe even a ruse by his agent, Rupert! “OK, OK, very funny,” Knaggs spoke loudly, forcing joviality. “You can come out now!”

But no one stirred from the shadows, no footstep creaked on the staircase. The candles flickered, the song played quietly, and the coffin lay on its stand.

He noticed the coffin lid was loose. Well, there was nothing for it, he lifted the lid and his lungs refused to breath as he looked down on a face made of grey plasticine. A familiar face he’d confined to history.

Nundy, Alfred Nundy, well, well, well. He’d barely thought of Alf for, what, five years? It wasn’t his fault after all, well, a rally driver couldn’t anticipate all eventualities and the co-driver, the navigator, had to take his chances, just like the driver.

“*But I know we’ll meet again*—” The needle scratched across the record and the music stopped.

“Hello Ronnie.”

Knaggs’s heart missed a beat as he whirled around to see a young man, slim, athletic-looking, with tattoos on his arms and neck. “Graham! What the hell’s going on?”

The man gave a wry smile. “What’s going on? Well, my old dad here, he can’t let go, seeing as how he blames you for his death. Careless driving, to put it mildly. So, he’s stuck in limbo, fated to wander the earth.”

Knaggs remembered Alfred’s son as a teenager. A teenager who was often in trouble with the law. “Look, Graham, what’s this got to do with me. There’s nothing I can do. Sounds like you need to see a priest.”

“I did see someone, not a priest exactly, but someone who could contact my dad in spirit. Seems my old man doesn’t feel he can leave this earth whilst you’re still alive. He wants retribution, you see.”

Knaggs started towards the door. “Well, Graham, I’m sorry for what happened, but we all need to move on. That includes your dad.”

Graham Nundy quickly barred Knaggs’s way. The windmill’s sails began to creak and the room vibrated. Heavy rain began to fall against the window, lashing it like hail, as the sails began to turn. Nundy took out a flick-knife. “Time for dad to go to the light.”

# 3: *In Memoriam*

“We all know how much we depend on our postmen and postwomen,” intoned Arthur, the vicar, concluding the eulogy, “and Barney was one of the best. Everyone loved Barney.”

I looked around the packed church. There was Mavis McLung with her lined face surrounded by a mop of ginger curls, courtesy of L’Oréal, then there was Shirley Hardaker, glaring around at the other villagers lining the pews, her bitchiness silenced through necessity for the time being. In the front row sat Maureen, Barney’s widow, dressed in a neat black two-piece with a black hat and veil. Her two teenage sons sat to her right, their eyes red and swollen.

Sue took my arm as finally we traipsed out into the graveyard and the warm sun of an early spring morning. “What a bunch of hypocrites,” she whispered.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, no one was that bothered about him when he was alive, were they? Sure, they’d say ‘Good morning, Barney,’ and ‘Goodbye, Barney,’ but be bitching about the post being late behind his back.”

“Well, I liked the chap,” I said. “Well, I didn’t really know him, I suppose, but, well, all those years his little red van would come down our road, rain or snow.”

“Or sun,” said Sue. “Well, I spoke to Maureen at Bingo sometimes. She’d talk about all the big houses and farms he’d drive out to, places almost no one knew existed. I always felt she was holding something back though.”

“How d’you mean?”

Sue beckoned me away from the rows of mourners screening us from the grave where the vicar was doing his ‘dust to dust’ routine, surrounded by Barney’s tearful relatives. “Well, I mean, as a postman he’d be privy to a lot of secrets, wouldn’t he?”

“Well, like what?”

“Come on, dear, like who was getting summonses, speeding fines, warnings for debt, all that kind of thing. Easy enough to tell from the envelopes, especially if it’s your job.”

“Hmm. I suppose so.”

“Then, there’s stuff you can feel through the packages, isn’t there?”

“Huh?”

“Well, like …,” she lowered her voice even further …. “well, like sex toys, y’know, vibrators, dildos that kinda thing.”

I felt indignant. “Surely the postmen, er, and women, would be discreet. It’d be more than their jobs would be worth to have a good feel of customer’s mail, I’d have thought.”

“Dream on.” Sue snorted. “And then he’d likely come across people in inappropriate places.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Well, like where?”

“Like people shagging other people’s wives … or husbands.”

“All in all, sounds like some may have been pleased to see the back of him,” I remarked. “Anyway, you go on to the village hall and get us a table. I just want a quick word with Bill Dikkers. About the compost club.”

“Blimey, you look like you’ve just seen a ghost,” Sue exclaimed, as I sat down at a table with her, clutching a cup of tea and a cream scone.

“Oh, er, I just had one of my turns.”

“What are you on about, you don’t have ‘turns.’”

“I was speaking figuratively.” I sipped hot weak tea. In fact, I *had* seen a ghost. The ghost of Barney, leaning nonchalantly against the church masonry and puffing on a cigarette. One of the advantages of being a spirit, I surmised. You could hardly die of lung cancer, after all.

He’d been kind of transparent and it seemed I was the only one around who could see him. He’d wagged a finger at me and held up a little black pocketbook. Then he winked and rubbed the first and second fingers of his right hand against his thumb. Pay up or Maureen would spill the beans seemed to be the message. Plus, I’d be haunted into the bargain, I supposed.

Looking around the room, I noticed a few other faces that might be considered pale and worried. Even Rosie Bale, the corpulent doctor’s wife looked a little off colour. Now, that was a turn up for the books. Either way, it seemed Barney’s ghost had been busy.

In a corner, Maureen sat with her sons, chomping on a large ham and cheese sandwich. She caught my eye and gave me what looked like a wink. She was on track to profit from Barney’s little ‘sideline’ for some years to come, I imagined. I decided it might be prudent to continue the payments. After all, fake or not, I never could resist ginger curls.

# 4: Memories

I remember all those years ago when we were children, once a month, on a Saturday, my brother and I would catch the steam train from Manchester Victoria to go and see our grandmother who lived in Leeds. I was nine years old at the time and my brother, John, was eleven. Our mother would pay a penny to get onto the platform and wave us off. At the other end of the line Auntie May would meet us. Auntie May was a spinster and lived with our grandmother.

Trams were still running then. Not the trams that we know today, these were the original trams that had wooden seats and a conductor who would walk up and down shouting “tickets please!” He would have a ticket machine over his shoulder and a leather satchel which held his money. Our father used to be a conductor on the trams until we moved to Manchester.

Our Grandmother lived in one of a very long row of red-bricked terraced houses. It consisted of a living room, with a large black range for cooking and heating, (it was my brother’s job to polish up the range), and a pantry that had a sink, known then as a ‘slop stone.’ Upstairs there were just two bedrooms. The toilet was outside in the back yard. Behind the row of houses was the “red wreck”, remnants of houses that had been bombed during the Second World War. John and I would spend many an hour scrambling over the bricks or turning them over looking for treasure or creepy crawlies. But we were never allowed to play out on Sunday. We had to be respectful of the Sabbath.

One of my favourite chores was to go to the shop with a list of groceries. We always got three pence to spend on sweets.

“Now then you two, what do you want today?” the man behind the counter would ask. He always seemed so big, as he stood there looking down at us with his hands thrust into the pockets of his brown coat. It was years later that we learned he actually stood on a platform behind the counter so he could see all that was going on. I would open the note I had and read out the list:-

“One pound of butter please, Mr Crabbs.”

I would watch as he turned around and proceeded to cut a portion of butter from the large mound. Taking the wooden paddles he would pat away until he had a nice square pat of butter which he would then wrap in greaseproof paper and place on the scales. He would note down the price.

“There you go, young lady, anything else?”

I would place it into the string bag I had with me and consult my list. “Yes please, two pounds of sugar.”

Again he would turn around, move along to a large bin where he proceeded to scoop sugar into a blue paper bag. Once more he noted down the price after using the scales. He would look at me expectantly.

“A pound of assorted biscuits, please. Can we have lots of custard creams?” I used to ask cheekily, they were my Grandmother’s favourites.

“Two dolly blues and a packet of starch.” It was laundry day on Monday and the dolly blues would make the sheets brilliant white. “That’s all, thank you, and our sweets.”

John would stand further along the counter, waiting for Mr Crabbs to ask him what it was he wanted, while I filled my string bag.

“A penny gob stopper, a sherbet lemon and a liquorish, and two halfpenny chews, please.”

“I’ll have the same please, that’s just six-pence, isn’t it?” I would enquire.

“Yes, young lady.” Mr Crabbs always called me ‘young lady’ even though he knew my name was Sylvia.

“Plus, three shillings and nine-pence halfpenny, so that’s four shillings and three-pence halfpenny altogether.”

I would unwrap a ten-shilling note that had been carefully concealed in a paper bag, and hand it to the grocer. I tried to work out what change I should get but I never could at that age, even my brother struggled.

“That’s five shillings and eight-pence halfpenny, change.”

Mr Crabbs would carefully place the change into my hand and I would wrap it in the paper bag, and off we would dash.

Sunday was rest day but Monday I would help with the washing. My job was to turn the mangle!

# 5: Cracker Jack Days

When I was a kid growing up in The Bronx my favorite snack was Cracker Jacks. It didn’t matter that the molasses-flavored, caramel-covered popcorn got stuck in your teeth and remained there for hours; it was just too tasty to resist. Dad always said we were paying our dentist’s kids college tuition!

I’d run to the store with my allowance and grab the red, white and blue box with a picture of Sailor Jack and his dog Bingo. Back in 1960 a box of Cracker Jacks cost 10 cents. In big letters was the message that made our little hearts flutter: NEW PRIZE INSIDE!

We’d excitedly rip into the box wondering what we’d find. Would it be a decoder ring, plastic figurines, booklets, stickers, baseball cards or temporary tattoos? Once the surprise was revealed, we’d get to business gleefully stuffing our faces until our bellies hurt.

Cracker Jacks were so popular they were even sold at Yankee Stadium. Remember the old song? I bet you’re humming it now.

Nowadays kids won’t find toys in snack or cereal boxes; I guess it’s a “choking hazard”. Funny how back then we never heard about anyone choking on a Cracker Jacks toy or getting sick from drinking water out of the garden hose.

Nope, today there are just two surprises: how expensive Cracker Jacks are and how little you get for your money. And the only message on the package is “Contents may settle in transit”.

I miss those Cracker Jack days.

# 6: Memory Lane

I received a telephone call late one evening from an old lady, Miss Jean Sycamore, who was most insistent that I undertake some detective work for her. I told her that I was a TV comedy scriptwriter and not a detective but she said she was prepared to pay me a handsome price to find a lost object.

So, the following morning I called round to her rambling country estate, Enderby Manor, and was shown in by a crusty old butler*.* “Madam, a Mr. Frederick Rossiter to see you,” he announced to a rake of a woman with a wild frizz of white hair.

She got up from a sofa and peered at me. “Mr. Rossiter? No, I don’t think I know such a fellow.”

“Look, Miss Sycamore, you phoned me last night. You told me you wanted me to find something for you. Something valuable perhaps?”

The old woman looked perplexed. “Did I? Did I really?” She stood staring into space for what seemed an age then suddenly she smiled. “Mr. Rossiter, thank you so much for coming. That’ll be all Porterhouse. I do apologize, Mr. er, … I’m afraid my memory isn’t what it once was. Now, please take a seat.”

I sat down. “Look, how may I help you?”

“Well, you see, I’m looking for a mirror, a special mirror I’ve had since I was a girl. And that was a long time ago I may tell you!”

Well, seems this mirror was stolen in a burglary some months earlier. Some jewelry and furs too, but it was the mirror she particularly wanted back. She told me it was shaped like a butterfly, with a handle and a distinctive defect. She offered me a thousand pounds, a reward I could sorely use.

I asked a gypsy acquaintance by the name of Pecker to keep his ear to the ground, whilst his one good eye seemed to be on the constant lookout for anything that had ‘fallen off the back of a lorry.’ His other eye had been lost to a gamekeeper’s shotgun pellets. Time passed and Pecker had nothing to report, when one weekend I noticed a sale of bric-a-brac at the local village hall and for no real reason decided to take a look.

I recognized old Oswald Farthing and his enormous wife, Bessie, who insisted on describing her method of making lemon curd at great length. On a table right behind her was a box of odds and ends and, blow me, right at the back, I spotted a mirror in the shape of a butterfly. Picking it up, I noticed the characteristic bullet hole Jean Sycamore had described. I paid the very reasonable price, excused myself from Bessie’s curd instructions, and made a bee line for Enderby Manor.

Porterhouse ushered me into the lounge where Miss Sycamore sat on a sofa, staring into space. She jumped up when she saw what I’d brought with me. “Oh, Mr. er … how wonderful of you to find my lovely mirror. I had this as a child, you know. I am so grateful to you. Look, I will show you photographs of when I was a little girl, holding this very mirror!”

Seeing her excitement, I felt loath to mention the reward but, well, needs must. “Er, Miss Sycamore, would it be possible to have the reward in cash, please?”

“Ah, the reward ….” She rummaged around in a box and brought out a photograph of a young woman dressed as a cowboy. “I don’t remember saying anything about a reward, dear. Look, this is me when I was eighteen. I performed in a rodeo show in South Dakota, can you believe it!” She began to hum an old show tune as she looked in the mirror, holding the photograph against the glass and gazing at it lovingly.

Well, the lady who sold me the mirror told me she’d bought it from a ‘woman who looked like a gypsy.’ She’d noticed a husband lurking in the background. A man with one eye. Which would explain why Pecker had come up with nothing regarding the robbery. Well, the insurance company were offering a hefty reward for information leading to the recovery of Miss Sycamore’s stolen jewelry and furs. I decided I didn’t owe Pecker any favours, so it looked like celebrations were on the horizon after all. And as for Miss Sycamore, well, she would serve nicely as the model for ‘Calamity Jean,’ a character in my latest sitcom.

# 7: Inspector Montalbano

The king is dead. Long live the king!

He really wasn’t a king; he was the mayor. Well, in truth, he wasn’t even the mayor. His name was Joe Montalbano and he was a royal pain in the ass.

Joe and his wife Pauline were one of the first couples to purchase a house on my street when they were built in 1960. They had a large piece of corner property – plenty of space for their precious son Joe, Jr. to run around.

Joe was one of those guys who knew everyone and their business and they in turn knew him. A retired firefighter, there wasn’t a store owner, restauranteur or town official who didn’t know Joe. He belonged to the Knights of Columbus, the Kiwanis Club, the local beach club, the town pool, the Italian/American Society and the bocce team. He was a scout leader, coached Little League and marched in every parade. He also attended monthly town meetings and made his opinions known loud and clear. Joe had a lot of opinions.

Joe was the self-appointed “inspector” of our street. He would drive around in his maroon Bonneville doing 5 miles per hour checking every house for scofflaws. If someone was doing a little home improvement, perhaps adding a patio or cutting down a tree, that person better have a permit taped to the window and all the necessary papers in order. Joe would go out of his way to schmooze it up with the homeowner and if everything wasn’t kosher, he’d report them to the town supervisor. Nice, right?

So, let’s say the poor schmo didn’t have a permit. He’d have to tear down any new construction, apply for a permit and pay a hefty fine. Then if the construction was approved, he’d have to hire someone to do the job and end up paying out the nose for work he could have done himself. Thanks, Joe!

Once – and only once – I parked my car in front of my house facing the wrong direction. I couldn’t have been inside more than ten minutes when I saw a police car out front. The cop had written up a ticket for “car facing wrong way while parked”. Who even knew that was a law? Apparently, it was and I broke it to the tune of $50! Thanks, Joe!

Let’s talk about garbage. Collection days on my street are Monday and Thursday; we’re supposed to put our trash out in the morning. God forbid someone puts their garbage out the night before, Joe would call the sanitation department. You can bet your sweet ass that trash would have to be brought back into the house. Thanks, Joe!

Everyone likes a little party occasionally, am I right? The Fourth of July, Super Bowl, graduation; these are times to celebrate. Get the grill fired up, have some friends over, play a little music – that’s what people do. Now, there’s a cut-off time for noise in the neighborhood. Everything needs to end by 11:00 PM. You’re on your front porch saying goodbye to the last of your guests and it’s 11:15. Guess who pulls up in front of your house – Officer Krupke with his little ticket book, that’s who. “Is there a problem, officer?” you ask innocently. “Disturbing the peace. Have a good night” the cop replies as he hands you a summons. You don’t have to ask who ratted you out.

Inspector Montalbano!

That’s what Joe did; he went out of his way to make his neighbor’s lives miserable, all in the name of due diligence. Nice guy, that Joe.

So, years later when Joe finally kicked the bucket, everyone except the people who lived on our street went into mourning. The funeral was worthy of Vito Corleone! The fire department, the police department, the Knights of Columbus, the Kiwanis Club and the bocce team pulled out all the stops and paid for the biggest funeral with the most flowers and best catering the town could provide.

But our little street was blissful as usual – not that we were necessarily happy that Joe was dead – no! It was more a sense of relief knowing “Inspector Montalbano” wasn’t breathing down our necks … or anywhere else, for that matter.

Well, sweet relief lasted about a week. That’s when we saw the familiar maroon Bonneville crawling down the street at 5 miles per hour. And who was behind the wheel? Why, it was Joe, Jr.

The king is dead. Long live the king!