

in it?"

He flicked his cigarette on the ground and glowered his way to class.

I replayed the entire conversation in my head on my way to Psychology. I wanted it burned into the curvature of my skull for the next time I sat down to write, but I wouldn't be able to write it all down until after class. Some of the information might be lost by then.

There's got to be a better way to remember story ideas, I thought.

Three days later, I finished a story called "Swindled," a series of unrelated events and images so disjointed and abstract that it conned the reader into looking for deeper meaning. Anybody searching was welcome to read the title. I almost stained myself laughing at that.

I mailed a copy to The Lynch Mob addressed to Michael Harper personally and went back to whatever passed for normal college life.

While I waited for Mike's reaction, I spent my time revising a story I had been working on for a while called "The Face." Once that was finished, I sent it to our English department head in consideration for a creative writing scholarship they had advertised all around campus.

"The Face" was published some years

later, in one form or another, and appears somewhere in this very book. It's one of the good ones, by the way.

Mike didn't say anything to me about "Swindled" for two weeks, which led me to assume he either thought it obtuse, or actually received the joke and was far too irritated with me to say anything. Regardless, it slipped my mind and my attention once again narrowed to Professor Mark's English class.

Professor Mark was a short, desperately friendly woman with a tendency to wring her hands everywhere she went in class. To her credit, she was always trying to get to know us better. Two weeks into her course, she had decided the best way to get to know us was to assign short story assignments. I happily turned in my latest revision of "The Face" and awaited her comments.

I had almost forgotten about that story as well when, one morning, she returned our graded stories. I didn't receive mine.

She stood up in front of the class with a packet of papers, stopped wringing her hands long enough to give a cheery clap, and announced that she had good news.

"One of your classmates has written an absolutely stunning piece of work," she said. "In fact, I consider this young author's work so well-done that I've made a special recom-

mendation on his behalf to the creative writing scholarship contest. I may be jumping the gun, but I think Daniel's got it in the bag."

She emerged next to me, grinning. Her hands strangled a copy of "Swindled."

"Mister Harper, editor of the campus literary magazine, liked Daniel's story so much he sent me a copy," she continued. "I fell instantly in love. It's very much a throwback to the modern realists of the early twentieth century. The use of metaphor is phenomenal, almost professional. Daniel's other story," she said, turning to the rest of the class, "The one he handed in for class, wasn't enough to really stir my waters, but this is wonderful. You just may have a fine career ahead of you, Daniel."

I nodded dumbly. Professor Mark handed me my story and offered a few closing congratulatory remarks. She advised the class to open our textbooks and prepare to discuss our assigned readings.

"Mister Pagoda," she said, "Perhaps you'd allow us a look inside your literary insights and tell us what you thought of the text you were supposed to have read."

To this day, I cannot remember what I responded with, but whatever it was, the entire class burst into laughter. It took all of them, including Professor Mark, considerable time to calm down.

I didn't laugh. I wanted no credit

for something I didn't consciously craft.

The scholarship came and went. "Swindled," with the aid of Professor Mark's recommendation, made an almost clean sweep of the judges. Even if she hadn't mentioned a word about it, I'm convinced it probably would have won. Fate is all knowing and all seeing. Fate would have found a way.

There was a tiny flare-up in the school press about my win. The English department tacked a few posters in the hallways announcing my story. It certainly made hiding out a difficult task, as any other criminal would agree.

But all flare-ups eventually quell, as did mine, and I was able to forget about "Swindled" for a while. There still was the matter of it being published in the annual, but that was an entire semester away. Plenty of time for me to make a name for myself with other writings.

Eventually, there were other stories. Most of them were finished and sent to prospective schools in great bundles with transfer applications, suggestive cover sheets, and a phone number.

Sometimes I'd think about a girl I dated for a laugh during this time. It ended after a couple weeks and we parted company. Sometimes that's how things happen.

that the giant grandfather clock in the sky could toll for me any day now, I might as well clue you in on why I originally decided to become a writer as a child - but not just yet. We'll save that for later.

As for the other question, I'll be glad to answer that now: magic notebooks.

I keep two notebooks with me everywhere I go these days. One is for ideas, concepts, names, and words that hit my creative G-Spot. The other used to be kept on the bedside as a dream journal. In my old age, I have to carry it everywhere.

I learned to always keep a notebook with me one autumn morning during my freshman year of college. The school I attended was a rinky-dink campus, one of the many littered throughout the greater New York area. These were a sort of half-way houses between high school and sprawling universities. But regardless of its size, the school had a throbbing pulse. It took open eyes and concentration to finger the beat, but the vigilant student would sooner or later find it. That's why that morning I was paying attention to Mike Harper instead of Professor Mark and her English class.

Mike was the sort of guy who could have gone on to bigger and better heights of life if our school had offered majors in Media Know-

It-Allism and Classroom Interruption. Mike edited *The Lynch Mob*, a school-produced literary anthology published at the end of each year, which gave Mike all the credentials he needed to be a snob of all kinds of media. But pretentious as he could be, Mike's head was a tiny blond culture machine with detailed schematics of the books, movies, and music every self-respecting college student should experience. The people who wanted their fingers wrapped tightly around the wrists of the scene would have to pay attention to that kind of man. People like me.

And Mike was in true form that morning as I entered class, sermonizing a book review to a crowd of followers who encircled the desk he sat upon.

"Phenomenal," he remarked to no one in particular. "Pure genius in every sense of the word. I love stuff like this."

His flock listened intently. "Really?" someone asked.

Mike nodded. He held up the book so everyone could write down the title. They did.

"Trust me," he said with a cool tone. "This book is fucking brilliant."

After class let out, I dumped my books in my dorm room and strolled two blocks east toward downtown until I caught sight of the nearest bookstore. I then broke into a run.

sent you the one you already have?"

There was a shuffling of papers. "A Professor Margaret Mark sent it to us. Do you know her?"

"Certainly," I said and hung up.

I visited Professor Mark's office later that day with a bag of tricks. She let me in, and before she had a chance to wring her hands and ask me how things were in the literary world, I removed two items from the bag. The first was a beaten-down spiral notebook, worn from years of being shipped around in book bags and boxes. Crease lines trickled across the faded green cover, like varicose veins poking through an old man's skin. The other item was a stack of crisp pages. It was my only copy of "Swindled."

I explained to her what had happened over the course of the semester, including the book and the conversation with Mike and the story and the joke and the scholarship and "The Face" and the call from the university and how everything under the sun was going all to Hell.

I gasped and slowed down, calming myself. After some momentary breathing, I told her I was going to refuse the school's scholarship and tell the other university I no longer claimed any credit for "Swindled."

For some reason, she hadn't been able to follow my garroted babbling. She looked bewildered, like a child

who couldn't understand why she was being scolded.

I pushed the notebook across her desk. Despite the scrapes of time, the word *Novelist*, written by a young man of twelve in black, non-fading felt-tip marker, was clearly visible on the cover.

I told her a story about green slime aliens and magic wands and a young man who once won a writing contest. While feeling invincible, he decided the next logical step was to begin a novel. She opened the notebook and paged through the volume's handwritten storytelling, which tracked along until page 42, where came to an abrupt halt.

We lifted the notebook and skipped to the end, where a series of drawings and diagrams dwelled. The diagrams, I clarified, were author's blueprints for a screenplay, one that he hoped one day to adapt from his novel at the request of some imploring movie studio. The accompanying sketches were conceptual designs of his characters, labeled with key costume attributes. The first drawings were slipshod, but as we flipped along, each sketch surpassed the previous in quality. These were accomplished drawings, as if more time and detail had been implanted with every page.

"The day he finished the forty-second page," I told her, "The author lost track of the story and forgot what came next, so he reread the

published story. They printed it in the annual university literary magazine. It won an award. Just the same, send it back.”

He was confused. I repeated the order. “Send it back. Have them bury it back in whatever grave they dug it out of. Tell them to plant it deep, in case a bear or something should smell it.”

He moaned a little more, now definitely knee-deep in it with me. He was silent for a brief moment, probably rethinking his strategy.

“Look,” he finally sighed into the receiver, “I just thought that people might want to see how your style progressed over the years. There are people out there who find that sort of thing interesting. They’re called fans.”

“Virgil, nobody wants to read this piece, and they can see my progression through all the other stories in the book if they like. They can see how I went from writing hack pulp stories for nothing to writing hack pulp novels for slightly more than nothing.”

Two hours and a host of other arguments later, we hung up with an agreement between us. As it turned out, the argument we eventually jumped into had gestated with a pair of misunderstandings. Virgil misread my effrontery as a ploy; he assumed indolence and a promise of riches (in that order) would wear away my thin pocket of resistance. My mistake was

in thinking I could win against his contentions. I didn’t. I’ve never been good at standing my ground.

Virgil did finally persuade me to go ahead with the book, the notorious story intact. His end of the bargain conceded me the introduction to the collection, which is what you, dear reader, are swimming in.

Instead of throwing this time away as some authors might, opting to fill space with a scanty retrospective, I decided a remembrance for these twenty-seven slices of me was in order. Anything powered by twenty-seven vials of my own blood deserved some kind of memorial, perhaps even an exhibition. Take one down, pass it around, let anyone who wants a whiff have one, or perhaps even venture a taste. Let them see what dripped out of me and soaked into the yarns of this collection.

Strangely enough, when it came time to pay tribute to them all, I found myself lingering on three single stories. Two were the best I ever wrote, and they’re not included here. The other one is.

The first story I ever wrote and lost was about a green slime alien and his birthday party. It lasted no more than half a page double-spaced. I wrote it on Fail-Safe, my dad’s ancient typewriter, sometime between the ages of

of submissions at a well-known New York-based literary magazine. I’m led to understand he got the job with the claim of being the first to publish my work. He hadn’t technically discovered me, which might have won him one of the better jobs on staff, but in that position, he got as much credit as most people gave the Vikings for landing on the Canadian seaboard.

Earlier that week, the magazine asked me to sum up my life, my work, and my views in about six or so paragraphs. When I called the submissions editor, his receptionist diverted my call to a lowly subordinate. It was Mike who answered my call. To the best of my understanding, Mike’s bosses had grown irritable with his frequent selections of avant-garde submissions for the magazine. I suppose these things happen.

There are other stories in this volume that I could have done without seeing again. It seems like those stories will keep coming back to me, no matter how deep in the earth I bury them or how big a boulder I shove on top of their graves. They always seem to find me, like tortured souls of people accidentally murdered in the ignorance of my youth, returning to exact their revenge for the injustices of sloppy narrative and poor grammar.

It also appears that I’ll never find those long lost stories of my youth,

or the map to the Island either. But I will not cry into the night because I have lost childhood treasures, or because I have literary skeletons nesting in my wardrobe. Part of living in this world is learning that sometimes your hands are too slippery to hold onto things you loved forever, and sometimes you just can’t get rid of the things that break your heart. Sometimes it is your own stupidity, or inexperience, shining through, and sometimes it is Fate stepping in. Regardless, those things are bound to happen.

The golden rule of writing is to use the time of the readers so that they won’t walk away embittered because their time has been wasted. I’ve tried my damndest to finish this tale of my youth with some kind of satisfactory meaning behind it, but now the sun is falling outside, and I’m having a tough time pinpointing what I wanted to say about “Swindled.” There’s something about that concept that strikes me funny.

I wasn’t intending this to be an argument against reading the story. I’m sure my tired old words won’t be enough to keep you from stopping mid-sentence and flipping to page 174 to see what all the fuss is about. It won’t bother me if you quit right now to go read it. If I felt truly embarrassed by the story, there were other recourses I could have taken. I could

the Introduction from ‘The Complete Short Works of Daniel Pagoda’

BY SCOTT CARLSON

EDITOR’S NOTE: The following pages were written by cult writer Daniel Pagoda (1952-1998) shortly before his untimely death. They were to be included as the introduction to The Complete Short Works of Daniel Pagoda. Sadly, it turned out to be the last thing he wrote. Out of respect for our dear friend and his wishes, plans for the book were abandoned.

-Virgil Vishnoo

The book you now hold in your hands is the product of my friend and editor Virgil Vishnoo’s tireless efforts to preserve my indicted past. Most of these stories were written in my ignorant youth, solely to pay the bills. They were submitted to no-name pulp magazines who gladly paid for the grisly stories that flowed with a disturbing ease from my head. Consequently, most are of average quality. Some are good. One is horrendous.

Virgil is a gracious, congenial man, as much as he is authoritative. Somewhere between those two sides of personality he finds an equilibrium, which, considering his line of

work, works well for him. He has the very annoying habit of telling it like it is, and the even more annoying habit of almost always being right, which causes problems for someone like myself.

I was eating breakfast the morning he called to talk to me about this book. My meal that morning was a capitulation of the previous evening’s marathon writing session, which had ended merely twelve minutes beforehand. I had promised myself nourishment solely on the condition of finishing the manuscript. It seemed fitting my remission would be interrupted.

After pleasantries, I told Virgil