

15 minutes



five short stories by
e. g. fabricant

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15 MINUTES



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JUMPERSⁱ



E. G. Fabricant

Norma cracked the front door, to be greeted by a bright Bay Ridge morning—the kind she used to anticipate, and enjoy. She scarcely noticed the bracing breeze off the Narrows as she labored to get the *Sunday Times*.

Inside, she retrieved her mug and scanned the unfolded front page. *What's today? May 26. She read further and recoiled. OhmyGod. Why can't they just leave it alone? It's been eight months. I can't let Peter see this—*

From above her: “Ma?”

She hid the paper behind her. Peter was midway down the stairs. Knit cap; peacoat; black jeans; boots—with a duffel in his hand.

“Peter? What—“

With the bag, he pointed at the sofa. “Sit. Please.” She obeyed, mouth open; he descended and settled next to her, cradling her shoulders. “Ma”—his eyes found hers—“I enlisted. Marines.” Norma imploded, racking with sobs. Peter squeezed the tremors away, fished into her housecoat pocket and produced the omnipresent hankie. She took it, for all the good it

would do her. She stifled a wail, but only for him. “How...?”

“Recruiter, Ma—at school. Put the paperwork through a month ago.”

She snuffled quietly into the leaden cloth. “Today?”

“Yes.” He produced a plane ticket. “LaGuardia to Chicago to San Diego, then a bus to Camp Pendleton.”

For a moment, her gaunt features froze; then, her eyes narrowed. “Just tell me one thing: is this because of your father?”

“Maybe—partly, I guess...”

His mother, struggling to a knee, flailed at him. “*Tell me!* Is this because he ‘jumped’”—she pointed skyward as she spat out the word—“from the North Tower, instead of being burned alive, or waiting around to be crushed under tons of concrete?” Now she cried out, and collapsed into another viselike embrace.

Peter stroked at her until she subsided. “Not Dad, Ma; everybody and everything else. The reporters, the stares, the abuse—at school, on the street, seeing the way they came after you. When’s it ever going to *end?*”

Norma touched his face, kindly. “I don’t know, honey. Because your father didn’t wear a uniform, he wasn’t a ‘hero.’ And, because he made a choice—they assume—he wasn’t a proper ‘victim,’ either. Well, what happened just one September morning doesn’t make somebody a hero, if you ask me—it’s being there, every hour of every day, good and bad, loving and protecting and providing like he did for you and me, for almost 20 years. No complaints—just taking the small rewards of husband and father as they came. *That’s* a hero, Mister!”

“Ma.” He searched her face, cupped in his hands. His eyes were weary but strong, both well beyond his barely 18 years.

“Guys who didn’t lose anybody are going. I loved my Dad and I’ll never stop thinking about him. I’ll always miss him, but that can’t be enough; that’s not the end of it. His life was taken—from him and from us. That’s it, and all of it—attention must be paid, you know? There’s a debt...”

Time passed; eventually, he helped her up and she clung to his wrist.

“What about me?”

“Uncle Tony and Aunt Edna know; I’ve talked to them. Dad paid the house off. You’ve got his pension and the disability, and I’ll send home as much as I can, when I know what’s what, to help out with—you know...”

Outside, a horn honked. “Well, that’s my cab.”

Norma winced, and bent. “Ask him to send another one.”

“Why?”

“My water just broke.”



Did you like JUMPERS?

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QUINCY ii



E. G. Fabricant

"Some people swore that the house was haunted. Thus began my most challenging case as a paranormal psychologist."

Frail Louisa Tumulty's fitful stirrings in her hospital bed roused her granddaughter, Catherine, from her memoir. "Gran." She seized her bony hand. "Gran! You're dreaming again."

"Oh...Cat?" Louisa managed a thin smile.

Catherine nodded. "Quincy?"

"Of course. Who else?"

"I've just begun to read. Tell me."

Louisa's gaze grew distant. "Hallowe'en 2010, and the usual report or two of the spectral cat. Then, the calls from the Capitol police about Tommy Boland, held down in their basement lockup." "He was the retired policeman?"

"Yes—long before. Hung around Statuary Hall for years; everyone thought he was crazy, but harmless. Interviewed him that same night."

"How long before the transformation took place?"
"Couple hours in. I had the sense he was sparring with me, seeking some level of trust."

Catherine squeezed that hand. "Describe him."

Louisa's eyes deepened. "The map of Ireland that was Tommy's face gave way to the high, balding patrician brow, angular features, and penetrating eyes. His was the image of that sketch done after his cerebral hemorrhage in 1848, but reinvigorated. The power of that voice and its eloquence quickly enraptured me."

"Why did he choose you?"

"He said it was time; he could no longer hold his peace. I was merely his vessel. The party he steered from National Republican after his presidency through Whig to confront slavery and save the Union, he said, had fallen into the grip of 'soulless, indentured mercantilists, trothed only to the power of the dollar.' His rage was colossal."

"So, it was the corporate orientation of the Republican Party in that election that triggered the wholesale possessions?"

"It may have been the last straw—but he was much more adamant about his heirs' utter lack of passion and respect for the institutions they sought to control."

Catherine looked puzzled. "Meaning....?"

"They'd spent 30 years running against government—turning it into a pejorative to further their own, undisclosed ends. For Adams; Clay; Calhoun; and their cohorts, governing was a means. Whatever their divisions on slavery, they were strong federalists, with a common vision of its potential to promote and manage progress. They believed, and lived it. In 1842 J. Q. fought a bogus, 'antislavery agitation' censure resolution against him on the House floor for two weeks—to get around a six-year-old rule prohibiting discussion of the issue. Point was...he had a point." Louisa smiled impishly.

“What?”

“Remember: John Quincy Adams was a natural bridge between the founders and Lincoln, and he freed the Amistad slaves in court. What shocked and frustrated him and his cohorts most on the other side was the cynical use of empty, ignorant rhetoric about our history and origins to block change. As an immigrant’s son and scholar, lawyer, and patriot himself, he professed a stronger affinity for Obama than anyone else. He couldn’t wait to engage. After the midterm elections the following week, he set to work, rounding up John, Henry, Dan Webster, and some of the other, post-Jacksonian firebrands. Even got Abe to agree to come aboard if the Democrats held the White House in 2012. They went incorporeal almost immediately. Public discourse changed virtually overnight. In their new incarnations, their first target was anti-immigrationism. They battled; they compromised; they came together to heal. As they did after Old Hickory left office, they created the opportunity again for multiparty coalitions to displace the paralysis of ‘bipartisanship.’”

“Nothing was ever the same again after that.”



Did you like QUINCY?

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RAPID CITY ⁱⁱⁱ



E. G. Fabricant

Willie stood in the doorway to Joe's bedroom, looking past his shoulder into the mirror. He tipped his felt fedora to a jauntier angle and smoothed the Brilliantined, white tufts beneath the brim over his ears.

"Ready to go, partner?"

"Pert' near—soon's I get the noose knotted." Joe struggled to cinch his tie into his starched white shirt collar. "Durn arthritis."

Outside, a decaying but neat Voyager honked.

Joe split the blinds. "Let's go, Romeo. Amahl's here."

They crawled into the second seat, using the stool Amahl furnished. He bounced into the driver's seat and wheeled away. He found them in the rear view, eyes round and merry.

"Fourth Friday of the month—the usual, gents?"

Willie sighed. "Do you have to ask?"

They glided to the curb in front of a nondescript, two-story frame house. Gathering dusk compelled some of its lights and those in surrounding houses to come on. Smiling, Amahl turned and crooked his elbow across the top of the seat. "Want me to wait this time?"

Willie sighed again. "Course—and put that flag down

or we'll have to walk home. And, no tip."

Amahl laughed, threw it in "Park" and got comfortable.

Joe took the door handle. "Ready to plant the flag?"

Willie grinned. "I ain't as good as I once was, but I'm as good once as I ever was. How d'you 'spose Uncle would feel if he knew how we was using his benefits?"

Joe grinned back. "We're veterans. We're entitled."

Upstairs, LaVerne released the sheers and turned.

"Okay; they're here. Sure you're up to this, honey? I'm sorry—I'm not usually short-handed on Friday night."

Aurora finished picking out her natural and smoothed her lingerie. "Anything for my old mentor; besides, I need the money. Mama's ill; no telling how soon I'll work again."

"I'm grateful. Bear in mind, though," LaVerne whispered, "these gentlemen aren't ordinary tricks. They're...institutions."

In the parlor, Joe selected Taffy, his regular, leaving Willie the choice of Aurora or the sofa and magazines. She took his hand and led him to the small room at the end of the hall. Pivoting, she posed. He shuffled his feet.

"Is something the matter?"

Willie couldn't look up. "Ain't never—you know—a colored..."

Aurora stanchd the reflexive bile with a smile. "The darker the berry, the sweeter the juice."

Willie cleared his throat. "Reckon?"

"Do you want me to remove your clothes?"

"No, Ma'am. Man my age don't have much but his dignity. I'd be obliged if you did yours, though."

Naked, she prepared him gently. They engaged, and finished. She slid on her bra and panties and stood, hands on hips.

“Well?”

Willie buttoned the fly on his overalls and scratched his neck, his eyes dancing.

“Reckon right.”



Joe and Willie were taking the morning sun on the porch, over coffee and the *Journal*, when Amahl rolled up. Aurora popped out in a full-body leather jumpsuit and heels. Willie took it in. *Tighter than a cow’s own hide and more hard buckles than a pilgrim—assuming the pilgrim was set to beat you half to death with a cat o’ nine tails.*

She strode right up to Willie and fished into her handbag.

“I’m off to Chicago. You forgot your wallet.”

Just as easily, she was gone.

Up and down the block, Joe noticed that curtains had parted in windows now filled with blue hair and noses. He leaned into Willie.

“This month was really, *really* worth it.”



Did you like RAPID CITY?

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SHAMBLES^{iv}



E. G. Fabricant

"And, back in three...two...one..."

The tinny, overwrought theme blared, again. The "YELL REAL LOUD!" sign flashed. The floor director wind-milled the audience into a cheering frenzy, paused, and stabbed a finger toward center stage.

"Heeeey, Booooyz'n'Guuurlz," Hank the announcer intoned. "Whoooo's...yerrrr...beeeest FRIEND?"

Dozens of tiny throats exploded in unison. "SHAAAAM-BULLS THE CLOWN! YAYYYYY!"

Spinning and flashing like a spastic kaleidoscope, the star slid to his marks and, with a flourish, assumed his signature stance, feet splayed and arms akimbo. He took a beat and cocked his head.

"A-yuk! Heeeey, kids! What tiiiiime is it?" He cupped an ear.

"IT'S HOKEY-JOKEY TIME! YAAAAAY!"

"Thaaaat's right!" He hunched into a conspiratorial crouch. "D'ya know why you should never, EVER keep an elephant in the refrigerator?"

"WHYYYYY?"

Shambles leaped at them and flung his arms wide.

“Cause heeee’ll leave footprints in the JELL-OH!”

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

The closing theme erupted and the floor director began his digital countdown. Grinning and waving maniacally, Shambles exited stage left. Hank took the mike.

“Heeee’s SHAMBLES, Boooyz’n’Gurlz! Tune in again tomorrow, and don’t forget: MAC ATTACK mac’n’cheez, the brain food that feels good all over! Bye-bye for now!”

Shambles rounded the last flat’s edge and dropped his hands to his knees, gasping. “Jeezus! Bum me a Marlboro, willya, Marty? That oughtta hold the little bas—“

“Sid!” Marty glared, chopped at his own throat, and nodded sideways toward a back corner.

Slight and round-eyed, she edged into the light. She was well-groomed, but her coat and pinafore reflected wear. “Hullo, Mister Shambles. I’m Missy,” she said, extending a tentative hand. “I watch you every day.”

Sid disappeared into his cheery alter ego and absorbed her hand into his. “Weeeell! A-yuk! Helloooo, Missy—pleezedtameatcha!” He glanced around. “Is your Mommy here?”

“No—I came on the bus, to see your show and...talk to you.” Her eyes darkened.

“Well—Shambles is always happy to talk to a fan. What can I do for you today?”

“I want you to be my Daddy.”

Sid caught an expletive in his throat and forced Shambles to look concerned. “Um—you don’t have a Daddy, now?”

“He went away before I could remember. Mommy has two jobs and says she doesn’t have time. I stay by myself after

school.” Missy’s lip trembled. “Me and her—we need a Daddy.”

Beneath the greasepaint, Sid flushed. “Weeeell, Missy; Shambles can do many good things for his boys and girls, but—“

“But, you’re magic. You said so. You make things appear all the time; today you made real flowers.”

“Weeeell, little Missy, there’s just so much—“

Her little fists white by her sides, Missy’s eyes spilled tears. “You said. You SAID!”

Sid knelt, his pocked and parti-colored face close to hers. “Look, kid. Life’s tough all over. I had a Mommy and a little girl like you once, and that didn’t work out so well, either. Had a couple more Mommies after that, too. They always wanted more than I could give, so guess what? I made ‘em disappear—all of ‘em. Now look at me. I’m just a dumb-ass TV clown, paying alimony and killing brain cells. Okay? Happy now?”

Missy wailed, and her tears came in rivers.

Sid stood and lurched backward, his eyes searching. “Marty—come get this kid outta here! Somebody call Social Services or something—anybody? Helloooo?”

Nobody saw the knife.



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TAPPED^v



E. G. Fabricant

She closed the book, pLaced it on the table, and finally, decided to walk through the door. *There is no strategy around it*, she mused. *Only the way through.*

Jack and I—that was different, she told herself. Like his old man, he was a teenaged conscript hooked into jungle warfare by bunraku politics beyond our comprehension. We were an item, graduating to reckless and fertile plans, when we hit that wall in 1968. For those three years, our lives—our parents and mine—orbited the cold reality he might not make it. I was lucky. Couple bullet holes and random tropical infections later, I got back a sober and determined adult. The defoliant, which ultimately took him two years ago, was our compensation. Between tuition assistance and eventual partial disability we finished school and nourished an exurban life—him in retail, me in teaching.

Brandon came to us right before they took our embassy in Tehran, and had just married his college sweetheart when al Qaeda turned four civilian transports into air-to-surface missiles. Jack saw his unguided resolve and sat him down. *Take control*, he told him. *Study it and shape it by making as many decisions for yourself as you can—give it every chance to mean something*

to you later. So, they mapped it out together. Air Force officer school and the full path to the 23rd Special Operations Force out of Hurlburt Field. Integrated JSOC air intelligence—a calculated risk, but with deliberate, incentive-based training and decent career potential.

In the hallway, the assault on her senses of old, cherry-stained oak, assembled flora, and that vague odor of chemical morbidity nearly staggered Mary. She cleansed and centered herself with a deliberate breath.

She came abreast of the pew where they sat. Where was usually found Antoinette—our Nettie, bright, fresh, with endless possibility when she became family more than a decade ago—was a painted, blasted husk. Coming from a family where risk-reward calculations never entertained even a suggestion of mortality, she was a diffident partner, distracting herself with child-rearing, interior design, and the self-conscious congratulations from strangers that her husband’s status earned her. That veneer of self-conscious patriotism and magnetic ribbons, designed by our self-gratifying culture to disguise the profanity of human sacrifice, exploded when Brandon’s U28-A did. ‘Continuing investigation;’ whether it was an RPG or mechanical failure will figure only in what his wife and three kids are paid posthumously.

The older boys ceased fidgeting in and scratching at their alien finery when they saw her.

“Nana!” Alistair cried, slipping his mother’s negligent half-embrace to tumble into Mary’s legs. Graham, a scant two years younger, leapt after him. Jonathan, the toddler, slept fitfully at his mother’s other side. Mary bent toward their upturned faces.

“Give me your hands, boys. We’re going to say good-bye to your Daddy.”

They came alongside the satin, teak, and brass box that quartered Brandon’s body. Alistair tugged at her.

“I want to see.”

She lifted him. He took it in and rubbed his eyes, terrified and confused equally. She set him down and focused on him, her hand over his heart.

“That’s not your Daddy. Your Daddy is in here, always. Remember.”

Nettie was up, roused by a waking and fussy Jonathan. Mary marshaled his elders to their mother’s side and raised her arm to enfold her.

“Come, Nettie. We’re going to go down this path. Together. One foot in front of the other.”

‘*Grief is a process,*’ the book read. *The convenient truths of shallow, “self-help” books be damned,* Mary thought. *It’s war.*



Did you like TAPPED?

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ENDNOTES

With one exception, all of the stories in this edition were entered into various rounds of National Public Radio's periodic short fiction contest, "Three Minute Fiction." In all cases, submissions had to be no more than 600 words; each had a particular rule that authors were required to follow, as noted below:

ⁱ *Jumpers* was entered in Round Seven, concluded November 12, 2011. In each story, one character had to come to town, and one character had to leave town.

ⁱⁱ *Quincy* was entered in Round Five, concluded Nov. 14, 2010. Each story was required to begin with "Some people swore that the house was haunted;" and end with the line, "Nothing was ever the same again after that."

ⁱⁱⁱ *Rapid City*, written in 2010, was not entered into "Three Minute Fiction," because it is sexually explicit and would likely have been determined to be "inappropriate." This round's story was required to contain each of these words: "plant," "button," "trick," and "fly."

^{iv} *Shambles* was entered into Round Six, concluded April 3, 2011. In each of this round's stories, one character had to tell a joke and one character had to cry.

^v *Tapped* was submitted for consideration in Round Eight, concluded May 20, 2012. Each story had to incorporate this sentence: "She closed the book, placed it on the table, and finally, decided to walk through the door."

