

THE LONG GODOT

JON WESICK

I tipped the bottle of rye whiskey over my cup of joe. One drop slid to the spout leaving a trail like a slug on a plate-glass window. It was March. The sky was gray, the grass brown, and my bank account was empty as the bottle due to the Yen's devaluation after I tracked down a Japanese assassin called "The Chipmunk." My name is Pillbottle, Morris Pillbottle and I'm a private detective. I was about to shake the bottle to coax another drop into my coffee when two guys walked into my office. Except for the bowler hats, perched like unrolled condoms on their heads, both looked as unremarkable as briefcases full of cash in the halls of Congress.

"Is this the Pillbottle Detective Agency?" the shorter one asked.

I pointed to the sign painted on the frosted glass saying, "ycnegA evitceteD elttoblliP."

"My name is Vladimir," the taller said, "and this is my friend Estragon."

"We'd like you to find Mr. Godot," Estragon said.

"Missing person, huh?" I took a sip of java. It tasted too much like coffee and not enough like whiskey. "What can you tell me about him?"

"We're supposed to meet by the willow tree," Estragon said.

"Before dark, a boy arrives and tells us Mr. Godot has been delayed and will meet us, tomorrow," Vladimir added. "We're prepared to pay you a handsome sum to find him."

"Just how handsome are we talking about?" I asked.

Vladimir emptied his pockets and put a pile of change on my desk.

"That doesn't even comb my hair," I replied.

Estragon added a handful of quarters to the pile.

"I still need to shine my shoes."

Vladimir added a bottle cap. I took the job.

The willow tree didn't offer much concealment so I sat with my back against the trunk and fiddled with my cell phone. I scrolled through stories

about a homophobic cat, armadillo body painting, and plaid chewing gum. I was so caught up in reports of a border collie playing Wordle that I practically missed the boy telling Vladimir and Estragon that Mr. Godot wasn't coming.

The "boy" was a middle-aged man stuffed in a child's clothes like sheep's lungs in a haggis. His shirt sleeves reached the middle of his hairy forearms and his pants barely covered his knees. He was easy to follow because he never looked up from his cell phone. I let him get a block ahead and kept my own cell phone in my hands in case he turned around. After twenty minutes we entered the outskirts of a city. Like a lemming with a death wish, the boy stared at his phone even when crossing streets. He entered a bar with a green façade called The Paisley Chameleon. I doubted they'd card him.

I gave him a few minutes and followed. It wasn't the kind of joint attended by partiers swilling high-end vodka nor was it a sports bar. Instead, it was a quiet place for serious drinkers to forget their troubles. The furniture was dark wood and dozens of beer taps lined the bar. I sat a few seats away from the boy.

"What are you drinking?" I asked.

The boy looked up from his glass. "Gimlet."

"I'll have one of those," I told the bartender. "And another for my friend, too."

The mixture of London dry gin and lime was cool and refreshing enough that I wanted to order another. Instead, I nursed my drink and bought more for the boy.

"My name's Morris," I said.

"Terry." The boy shook my hand.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I work for a messenger service." Terry stared into his glass.

"You must meet interesting people," I said.

"Not really."

"Been doing it long?"

"Twenty-three years." He staggered to the restroom. After a few minutes he returned.

“If you don’t mind me saying, you don’t look fit to drive.” I took out my keys. “Why don’t you have another drink while I get my Hyundai?”

I called an Uber, got a lift to my car, and drove back to the bar. Terry was so wasted that he hadn’t noticed the delay. I got him into the front seat and buckled him in.

“Where do you want me to drop you?” I pulled away from the curb.

“You’ve got to help me escape this absurdist existence,” Terry said. “I’ll pay you a hundred dollars if you drive me to Canada.”

“Sure, but first you have to help me.” I turned to look at the lights of passing cars casting shadows, like the sets of a German Expressionist movie, on Terry’s face. “Who is Mr. Godot and where can I find him?”

“It’s not Godot. It’s that sadistic writer Wade Beckett. He gets inside my head and makes me do things.” Terry grabbed my forearm. “You’ve got to get me away from him.”

It took four hours to drive him to Sherbrook, Quebec. He talked about starting life over as a lumberjack or an oilfield worker in the Alberta tar sands. I dropped him at a Tim Hortons and after some Timbits and coffee, I left to find Wade Beckett.

Beckett lived in a two-story house on the beach in Kennebunkport, Maine. I climbed the steps to the deck and knocked on the aluminum siding next to a picture window. A woman with bronzed skin and brassy hair answered. Her eyes were the color of zinc oxide, and her nipples poked through her sweatshirt like a pair of quarter-inch, socket-cap screws. She was such a knockout that doctors recommended avoiding strenuous exercise to anyone who saw her.

“Help you?”

“Names Pillbottle, Morris Pillbottle.” I handed her a business card. “I’d like to speak with Wade Beckett.”

“He’s at the Meatloaf Writer’s Conference in Riptorn, Vermont.” She looked at my card. “Private detective, huh? Maybe you can help. I’m his wife, Irene, and I suspect Wade is being held against his will. I could pay you a handsome sum to break him out of there.”

“How handsome are we talking about?” I asked.

“A hundred dollars.”

“That might comb my hair but I’d still need to dry-clean my trench coat.”

“Two hundred.”

“What about trimming my nose hairs?”

“Three hundred. You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Pillbottle.”

Like everyone else, she got that wrong. I drove a Hyundai.

I got on the I-89 heading north and marveled at my good fortune. All I had to do was escort a writer away from a group of pacifist academics to earn my fee. This wasn’t just a piece of cake. It was a whole French bakery complete with enough madeleines to inspire a million-word novel. I was two hours from Riptorn, Vermont.

When I saw Meatloaf Mountain overlooking the conference center, like a 1950s housewife whose husband was hours late for dinner, I realized I’d gotten it wrong. The facility was a windowless, concrete bunker surrounded by a chain link fence topped with razor wire. Guard towers at the fence’s corners had an unobstructed field of fire into the courtyard. If I wanted to spring Beckett, I’d need an excuse to get inside. I drove to a shopping mall and returned an hour later.

“My name is Herb Drexler, here for my three-o-clock appointment,” I said into the intercom.

“I don’t have a record of any appointment.”

“This is the Meatloaf Writer’s Conference, isn’t it?” I replied. “You filled out a card saying you wanted me to clean a room to demonstrate the Lurgy vacuum cleaner.”

“Hold on. I’ll ask Dr. Lowbrow.”

The gate opened, I drove inside, and parked in front of the building. A short man with white hair and a worried brow met me at the entrance.

“Herb Drexler. Nice to meet you.” I unloaded a vacuum cleaner from the trunk and handed the attachment bag to the man. “Hold that would you? If you don’t mind me asking, what kind of vacuum cleaner to you currently have?”

“It’s some kind of upright, I think.”

“What is this place, anyway?” I looked at the guard towers as we walked toward the entrance.

“As you know, writers procrastinate,” Dr. Lowbrow said. “I designed an environment where that’s impossible. Our alumni include two National Book Award winners, three Pulitzer recipients, and one was even nominated for the Nobel Prize. It’s amazing what you can accomplish with forced isolation and electric shocks.”

“Armed guards! Really?” I pointed to the towers.

“They’re mannequins,” he whispered. “Just don’t tell the inmates, I mean guests.”

The metal detector buzzed as we carried the hardware through to entrance but Dr. Lowbrow nodded to the guard and he let us through. A low-pile, stain-resistant, polypropylene carpet in a pattern called Notorious Gaucho covered the lobby.

“Tell you what I’m going to do.” I plugged the vacuum cleaner into the outlet. “You’re my last client of the day so I’ll vacuum your entire facility. If you don’t agree that the Scramjet Turbo 3000 with our patented Nitro-Fueled Compressor and Supercharged, Magnum Filter makes your facility cleaner than a chihuahua that’s been through a carwash, the job is free. But if you like it, I can give you this little baby for just ten low, low payments of \$199.99.”

The vacuum cleaner did well on the writers’ hair, torn out in frustration, but it clogged on some papers under the couch. It took fifteen minutes to remove book two of Gogol’s *Dead Souls* that had wound around the beater-bar brush. Dr. Lowbrow got bored and left. After completing the first floor, I hauled the vacuum cleaner up the stairs. The second floor was carpeted in a pattern called Truculent Viking. I started with the hallway and knocked on a door.

“Housekeeping!” I entered to find Galway Kinnell eating oatmeal with the ghost of John Keats. “Don’t mind me.” I vacuumed rolled oats off the carpet in a pattern called Sardonic Samurai and moved to the next room, which contained a nose dressed as a Russian general and a carpet in a design called Ironic Anarchist.

It took several tries before I found Wade Beckett’s room. With a face like chiseled granite, hair the color of quartzite, and eyebrows dark as hematite, he resembled a famous director whose name was something like a

city in Texas. Archibald Abilene? Ferdinand Fort Worth? Beckett turned his chrysocolla-colored eyes toward me and asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Irene hired me to bust you out. Pretend you're my assistant and carry this vacuum cleaner past the guards."

"That just won't do," he said. "Where is the conflict? What are the stakes? If you can't answer these questions, how can our escape result in a rewarding climax that is surprising and yet natural?"

"I suppose I could use this," I removed the snub-nosed .45 I'd smuggled past the metal detector with the accessories.

"Kid, you've got grit," Beckett said. "I'm going to write you into my novel."

"I'll create a distraction. When you hear gunshots, run to the entrance. I'll have the car running and we'll beat it out of here." I propped his door open as I left.

No one bothered me when I hauled the vacuum cleaner to the break room. I unloaded my pistol, put the bullets in the microwave, selected the popcorn setting, and ran for the exit. The bullets went off when I hit the lobby. I cranked up my Hyundai and waited with the engine running until Beckett dashed into the front seat. I would have burned rubber but my car was a Hyundai after all. We cruised past the puzzled staff and onto the interstate.

The cops roused me out of my bed at 5:00 AM. A detective, named Barker, with a beet-red face, nose like a kohlrabi, and body like a butternut squash did the talking.

"Get dressed. I'm taking you downtown."

"For dinner and a show?" I asked.

"Down to the station, wise guy."

"What's this about?" I slipped into my fedora.

"Double murder. Witnesses say you were the last one to see Vladimir and Estragon alive."

They hustled me into a squad car, jostled me downtown, and manhandled me into an interview room.

“P.I., huh?” Barker lit a cigar and blew acrid smoke in my face. “One word from me and city hall will pull your license faster than Snoop Dogg on his way to a bong sale. Who’s your client?”

“I’ve got nothing to say.”

“I ought to give you a knuckle sandwich.” Barker’s knuckles popped louder than the Tunguska explosion.

No amount of cheese, bacon, spicy mustard, and mayo would make that sandwich appetizing but a P.I. won’t stay in business long if he goes spilling information to the flatfoots. It looked like I was in for a dental appointment, the bad kind, when a familiar detective walked through the door.

“Lieutenant Filefolder.” Barker backed away from the table. “I was just asking the witness to help with our investigation.”

“Go find a fire hydrant and piss off, Barker.” Filefolder sat across from me. “You’re in over your head this time, Pillbottle. Ordinarily, the death of two people experiencing homelessness wouldn’t raise a stink but Vladimir and Estragon are part of the longest-running gag in literature and the D.A. is out for blood. Your only chance is to tell me everything.”

“I’ve got nothing to say.”

“Take him away, boys.”

“What’s the charge.” I stood while the uniforms wrapped bracelets around my wrists, not the charmed kind but the steel bracelets that bit like a meth-addled pit bull having a bad day.

“No charge,” Filefolder said. “I’m placing you in protective custody.”

The cell was bare except for a sink, seatless toilet, and a mattress thin as the shaved truffles at Chez Pierre.

“Hey!” I yelled. “I want a lawyer.”

A bull, named Lucky, took me to a payphone. He had a wooden leg and a glass eye. If Frankenstein’s monster and ALF had a lovechild, it wouldn’t be half as ungainly as the guard. There was no phone book so I dialed a number scribbled on the wall.

“Godot, Potso, and Christmas. How may I help you?”

“I’m in city lockup. I need a lawyer.” I gave the secretary my details.

“Mr. Godot will surely be there by the end of the day,” she said.

Lucky, took me back to my cell. Three hours later he returned and said, “You have a visitor.”

A row of chairs behind reinforced glass lined the inmates’ side of the visitors’ room. I took a seat across from Terry and picked up the phone.

“I thought you were in Quebec,” I said.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” Terry scratched his beard. “I came to tell you that Mr. Godot can’t make it, today, but he’ll surely be here, tomorrow.”

There was nothing to do in my cell but count the hairs on my forearm. When I got to ninety-seven thousand thirty-nine, I heard a voice coming from near the sink.

“Hey buddy, over here.”

“Who’s there?” I didn’t see anyone.

“Down here.”

I looked under the sink and saw a cockroach in a red vest and knee-length boots on each of his six legs.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“This is the only place where people have time for intelligent conversation.” He twisted his antennae into a mobius strip. “The only guy on the outside who wanted to chat was Kafka. After he wrote that scandalous story about me, I wanted to sue but no lawyer would take the case. How about you?”

“I’m waiting for Godot,” I said.

“Say, you wouldn’t have any of that wine brewed in a toilet bowl. Would you?” the cockroach said. “I could sure use a drink.”

“Sorry.”

“So, what do the cops have on you?”

“You wouldn’t be a jailhouse snitch, would you?” I took off my shoe and the cockroach scurried through a crack in the wall.

“Let me out of here!” I screamed and rattled the bars.

Lucky appeared with a gleam in his eye like a young Torquemada's on seeing his first pair of nipple clips.

"You can't leave yet."

"Why not?" I asked.

"You have to wait for Godot."

"Oh, yeah."

The cops kicked me loose after three days. Although their appetite for bullying was unbounded their patience with absurdist literature had its limits. When I got back to my office, the phone rang. It was Irene.

"Mr. Pillbottle, I'd like you to look after my husband. You got along well and I could pay you a handsome fee for your time."

"Cut the mortadella, sister. I've got a face like a waffle iron and a gut like the Goodyear blimp. No amount of money could make this tired gumshoe handsome."

"How does a thousand dollars a day sound?"

"I'm on my way."

She greeted me at the door, wearing a tight dress the color of anthracite.

"Wade's resting after a hard night with the thesaurus. Why don't you get settled?" She gestured to the servant. "Nonpareil will show you to your room."

Nonpareil took my bag. He had a complexion the shade of baked Brie, hair the color of bouillabaisse, and eyes like tiny escargots. When we got to the top of the stairs, he pulled an eight-inch fondue fork made of molybdenum/vanadium steel and held it to my neck.

"If you hurt him, I will keel you!"

"Keel as in the bottom of a boat?"

"No, keel as in murder."

"Do you mean mule deer?"

“What’s going on out there?” Wade Beckett stuck his head out of his study.

“Oh, I was just showing Mr. Pillbottle to his room.” Nonpareil hid the fork behind his back.

“Well, keep it quiet,” Beckett said. “I’m trying to get some work done.”

I joined Beckett in his study a few hours later.

“Care for a gimlet?” Beckett poured equal part Tanqueray gin and Rose’s lime juice into two glasses and passed me one. “I’m stuck on my novel *Schrodinger’s Litterbox* and need your help. You’re a man of action so I figured we could bounce around some ideas.”

“I can tell from the title that your novel touches on the collapse of the wave function, that puzzling feature of quantum mechanics that’s confounded physicists for a century.” I sipped my drink. Too much lime. “Of course, the cheap shot would be to write about parallel universes but the many-worlds interpretation has been overused. The Copenhagen view is referred to as, ‘Shut up and calculate.’ Where/s the fun in that?” I stroked my chin. “Maybe a hidden-variable theory like Bohmian mechanics would be the way to go.”

Beckett stared.

“But you’d have to get around the fact that Alain Aspect’s measurement of Bell’s Inequalities disproved hidden-variable theories, at least local ones. Hmm, a novel featuring nonlocality would be fascinating.”

“Let’s go to dinner. Shall we?” Beckett picked up the gin bottle.

I followed him downstairs to the dining room. Irene was already at the table. Her lipstick was red as molten aluminum at 1220 degrees Fahrenheit and her perfume had the heady aroma of a Bessemer converter. Beckett sat opposite her and I sat somewhere in the middle.

“Nonpareil has prepared a special treat for us.” Irene tapped her teaspoon against a champagne flute to summon the servant.

Beckett poured a healthy slug of gin into his glass. The terror of a Siberian husky on the way to the dog groomers replaced the look of boredom on his face when Nonpareil placed a bed of rice and vertical broccoli florets on the table.

“Madam et messieurs, let me present the Enchanted Broccoli Forrest.” He topped the dish with brandy and lit it on fire. “*En flambé!*”

Beckett recoiled from the table, flung the sliding door open, and ran down the beach.

“Save him!” Irene yelled. The ancients believed a wandering uterus caused hysteria. If that was true, Irene’s was sending postcards from Uzbekistan.

I followed the footprints in the sand but they ended at the waterline. Nonpareil was right behind me.

“You go south.” I pointed. “And I’ll go north.”

I ran up the beach, dodging frigate birds and Portuguese man o’ war. Two hippies were up ahead.

“You see a man run by? Looks a little like the director of *The Maltese Falcon*.” When they looked puzzled, I added. “Has a name like a city in Texas.”

“Stone Cold Steve Austin?” asked the guy with blond dreadlocks and a patchy beard.

“No, Austin is the wrestler.”

“Bernie El Paso?” the woman with stringy hair suggested.

“Alfredo San Antonio?” the guy offered.

“Debbie Does Dallas?” the woman asked

“Sam Brownville? Larry Laredo? Penelope Plano?” We played the guessing game until the guy said, “We haven’t seen anyone come this way.”

“Down here!” Nonpareil yelled.

I ran south and found Nonpareil holding a soggy Beckett in his arms. We carried him to the house and put him to bed.

A vulture took to the air as I approached the burnt, willow tree. All that remained was ash, the smell of propane, and two charred bowler hats. I’d come looking for Terry in hopes he could provide some background on Beckett’s meltdown but he wasn’t here. I decided to try the law firm that employed him as a messenger.

I sat at a table by the window with a good view of the high-rise that housed Godot, Potso, and Christmas. A laptop computer and supercharged-turbo latte helped me blend in with the coffee shop's clientele. Even after three refills and twenty-two trips to the bathroom, Terry never showed. I crossed the street and entered the lobby. The placard by the revolving door said the law firm was located in suite 508. The button for the fifth floor in the elevator didn't work so I selected six. I got off, passed smash rooms, chicken rentals, and plant hotels, before taking the stairs down a flight and finding myself on the fourth floor. I climbed the stairs up a flight and was back on six. I man carrying a theodolite got in the elevator with me. We took it down to three, climbed two flights of stairs, and ended up back on six. No matter how many combinations of stairwells and elevators we tried, we couldn't make it to the fifth floor. When I returned to the coffee shop, it was closed.

A librarian greeted me at the circulation desk. She resembled that actress married to a playwright, a woman with the surname of a bird. Rita Dove? No, that was a poet. Laurie Partridge? Rebecca Albatross? Whatever her name, she wore the ponytail, poodle skirt, and horn-rimmed glasses that could make a guy in a fedora fall hard.

"What's your name, sweetheart?"

"It's Paige, Paige Turner."

"Have anything by Wade Beckett?" I asked.

"Aisle fourteen." She leaned forward and my eyes plunged into her cleavage like the bathyscape Trieste diving into the Marianas Trench.

My gaze surfaced slowly to keep the nitrogen bubbles from expanding in my bloodstream thus avoiding the bends. I passed the microfiche and computers on my way to the fiction section. I turned right into aisle fourteen and found man in a chalk-striped suit blocking my way. He looked like that actor who played a heavy in gangster films and had a name like a boat. George Dinghy? Walter Dugout? Derrick Cabin Cruiser? Before I could decide, someone pinned my arms behind my back.

"You're messing with things that are better left alone." He sunk a fist into my gut. I doubled over and fell to the carpet covered in a pattern called Intoxicated Spartan. "The Parents' Council for Decency says this section is off limits. Let's get out of here, Rocco." The thug left a kick to the teeth as a parting gift.

“Are you all right, sir?”

I opened my eyes and saw the angel from the circulation desk leaning over me. Her breath smelled of laundry dried in Colorado sunshine.

“Thugs from the Parents’ Council sucker punched me.” I touched my handkerchief to my lip and it came away stained with blood.

“Want me to call the police?”

“No, they won’t do anything.”

“Here.” Paige Turner sorted through the brass knuckles, tampons, .357 magnum, and eye liner in her purse before removing a canister of pepper spray and handing it to me. “Give them a blast in the eyes next time.”

“Thanks, angel.” I struggled to my feet.

On my way past the literary criticism section, I saw a book cover that made the whole sinister plot fall into place. I dashed to my Hyundai, got on I-89, and tried to call Irene but the thug from the Parents’ Council had busted my cell phone. I drove like a mad man, took the Kennebunkport Highway exit, turned right on Kennebunkport Drive, took a left on Kennebunkport Boulevard, followed it until it turned into Kennebunkport Street narrowly avoiding a wrong turn onto Kennebunkport Court, and pulled into the Beckett’s driveway.

Irene dropped her glass of Bad Dog Ranch Chardonnay when I burst into the room. A leg of lamb lay on a tray in the middle of the table along with tiny potatoes and asparagus in Hollandaise sauce.

“Wade!” I yelled. “Where is he?”

“Upstairs in his study.”

My feet hammered the stairs harder than Christian Grey pounded Anastasia Steele in chapter ten of *Fifty Shades*. I found Beckett passed out in his study, an empty bottle of pills beside his laptop.

“Call an ambulance!” I yelled.

The EMTs rolled the stretcher out the door and loaded Wade into the back of the ambulance. Flashing, blue lights swept across Irene’s face. Her

brow wrinkled in worry and she held her pearl necklace to her mouth. I followed her back inside.

“Thank God, he’s all right,” Nonpareil said. “If you’ll excuse me, madam, I’ll get the car so we can follow him to the hospital.”

“Not so fast, Nonpareil,” I said, “or should I say Roland Clouseau?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Nonpareil’s eyes darted to the dining-room table.

“I saw your picture in the literary criticism section of the library,” I continued. “You’re one of those French Deconstructionists who advocate the death of the author. Only in your case, you mean in literally. Like all critics, you failed as a writer so you decided to take Wade down to sooth your ego. Each night, you substituted your writing for Wade’s, leading him to believe he’d lost his voice. When you learned two of his characters hired a detective, you figured the gig was up so you burned them alive, a fitting irony from someone who’s been gaslighting Wade for all these years.”

“You’ll never take me alive!” Nonpareil threw the leg of lamb.

I ducked and it struck the wall creating an abstract expressionist pattern of mint jelly and gravy. Nonpareil ran up the stairs.

“Stop him before he writes his escape!” Irene yelled.

I took the stairs, two at a time, and burst into Wade’s study as Nonpareil typed on the laptop. I reached for my snub-nosed .45 but he had already written it out of the story.

“Here’s some writing advice” I blasted him in the eyes with pepper spray. “You need to spice up your action scenes.”

“Got to hand it to you, Pillbottle. I never would have solved this case without your help.” Lieutenant Filefolder turned to the others. “Book him, Steve-O.”

A uniformed officer with a penchant for insane stunts led Nonpareil away.

“What will happen to Wade Beckett?” I asked.

“He’ll be all right. He may be a great writer but he’s a lousy pharmacologist. He mistook Viagra for tranquilizers so his wife will remain at

his bedside until the swelling goes down.” Filefolder put on his fedora. “Want to join me for a lobster donut?”

“Some other time,” I said. “I’m heading to the library. There’s a Paige Turner I want to check out.”

END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Wesick earned a Ph.D. in experimental nuclear physics from the University of Maryland in 1983. He is a regional editor of the *San Diego Poetry Annual*. He's published hundreds of poems and stories in journals such as the *Atlanta Review*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *I-70 Review*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *New Verse News*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Pearl*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Slipstream*, *Space and Time*, and *Underside Stories*. His most recent books are *The Shaman in the Library* and *The Prague Deception*.

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