

CREATIVE WRITING CLUB

K. MARVIN BRUCE

“Multiple Breck Witnesses Report UFO!” the front page of the *Herald* screams. The self-congratulatory newspaper makes our university town seem so provincial. It’s an embarrassment. I mean this isn’t the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or even the *Boston Globe*, but still—UFOs front page material? I sweep it into the same mental bin with the story about the night the dead started driving their cars. Some things just can’t happen.

Too soon it’s time to fold the paper, gag down the last slug of lukewarm coffee, and get to work. Who’s got time for the impossible?

Breck High School is a museum piece to reactionary education. Built just after Sputnik went up, it’s equipped with things a normal high school doesn’t have. A planetarium, for example. Who puts a planetarium in a public school? In rural New Hampshire? Back in those days they wanted people to look up. “Keep watching the skies,” an insistent Ned Scott warned late-night television viewers. We watched and watched and nothing happened. Best keep your eyes firmly on the ground.

Mrs. Warfel wondered why I didn’t try to become a writer. English teachers don’t understand, I suppose. Some families can’t afford college. Still, I joined Creative Writing Club with the other wannabes. What small town kid ever really breaks through that bullet-proof acrylic ceiling called publication? Or gets out of town? There’ll always be a need for janitors. Those willing to clean up other people’s messes. And you don’t have to go into debt for the rest of your life. Stan Amendola over at Final Chapter Books doesn’t have an English degree. “You can read without one,” he says. Mom never finished school herself. She said, “You can write no matter what your job is. But you can’t pay your bills with stories.”

It’s Tuesday, the day the Eco-Waste trucks come. The dumpsters outside the loading dock are trenchantly pungent with a week’s worth of decay, wrapped in plastic. Human silage, for the benefit of rats and seagulls. I can smell it from my car. I pull into the staff lot and shoo away the Canada geese that seem to be taking over the country. Reluctantly they take to wing. I watch them fly. That’s when I see her in the sky. I tell myself it can’t be true.

“Hey, Zero, ready for another Tuesday?” Adam Auckley’s cool for a boss. Gruff and irreverent, he’s a guy who’s lost a lot but manages to keep his sense of humor. “Garbage in, garbage out.” He’s a philosopher too.

When the sleepy-eyed kids get here I’m overwhelmed by the river of hormones chaotically surging like corpuscles through the halls. Biology has already taught them what Mr. Hammersmith tries to instill through textbooks. Life’s all about the urge to procreate. They experiment with it and hide it from parents who pretend it doesn’t happen. I’m a janitor. I clean up messes.

“Everybody’s talking about it,” Andy Rouse tells me after lunch.

“People can’t fly, Andy.” He’s a nice kid. Clean cut. Never swears. Scared to death of girls. He works as a janitor at the school during the summer CETA program. The government doesn’t like giving handouts, but if kids are up to physical labor, they can justify keeping their families just above the poverty line. Or just below. Other kids turn up their noses as if the janitorial office itself stinks. We’re the cleaning crew. This is the cleanest room in school. Andy stops in after lunch to catch up.

“But lots of people saw it! I mean, I know it’s impossible and all, but everyone’s talking about it.”

“Did *you* see it, Andy?”

“Well, no.”

“You gotta be careful what you believe. Rumors most of all. People around here want some excitement. It’s like back when they said the world was gonna end. You remember that?”

“Yeah. Mrs. Warfel had us write an essay about it for Creative Writing Club.”

“And the world didn’t end. That’s the end of the story.” As he shuffles out in his oversized clothes, I almost call him back, but I stop myself. What good would it do him to tell him I saw it too?

Ralph and Stephen are out cleaning up the ceiling tiles that fell in room 207, back when the roof leak was discovered. Watch the skies, kids. Watch the

skies. I sit at the busted and repaired dining hall folding table that serves as our central office eating and meeting space. I sip my bitter coffee.

Suzie comes to me in my dreams. In my unconscious mind she's still like she was in high school. Pert, perky, four-foot-ten, ninety pounds of cheerleader. Bob-cut straight black hair. Eyes like a fawn. Under the bleachers at the football game on Friday night. She's telling me it's Kent, and not me. Her hand is so tiny in mine. She'll still be my friend, though.

She's never been happy with Kent. Everyone knows. He took a job selling hardware at Sears. They bought a little house on Oak and Third. But what girl wants to rope herself to a guy who makes a living cleaning up other people's puke? It's too late for me now. Suzie has moved on. She could've flown, though. She had the right stuff.

Those eyes, though. They were vaults, those eyes, full of secrets. Don't know what she saw in Kent. I couldn't have seen her flying this morning. UFOs aren't real.

"I sometimes imagine," I tell Ralph, "what would've happened if I'd become a writer."

"You mean you wonder what it's like to starve?" A comedian. "I hear it ain't all it's cracked up to be." Bits of ceiling tile cling to his blue Dickies. Cleaning up 207 is turning into a full-time job. He heads back to it. He was the most promising poet in Creative Writing Club. Now he carries a broom instead of a pen. The privileged kids from west of the river are busy drinking their brains away and joking about how if you're dumb, you'll end up like Ralph. "Ralph" has its own definition in our local slang dictionary.

I have to do it. I go see Suzie.

Breck isn't like the big city. You can still look up addresses in the phone book here. You can walk right up to a door and knock. Someone will answer. Suzie Giuseppe. She never took Kent's last name. She never moved away. If she's learned to fly, I want to know about it. No matter what the neighbors say.

In my imagination the woman who answers the door will be the girl I knew in high school. Petite, cute, just naive enough to be irresistible.

“Zero Desa? Is that you?” The thirty-year-old staring at me is an imperfect projection across the years, but my chest still thrills the way it did under the bleachers. The way it always does when a beautiful woman looks at me.

“Hi Suzie.”

She glances both ways, as if fearing paparazzi. “Well, maybe we’d better sit on the porch.” The neighbors. A married woman talking to a strange man. She steps out, pulling the door shut behind her and gesturing to some white, plastic lawn chairs stained dingy gray from overuse and the elements. “What brings you here?”

I’ve always been amazed at how girls seem able to walk away from youthful attachments. They can act as if that death-grip never existed. As if just five minutes in their presence wasn’t enough to die a happy man. If teenagers could be men.

“Well, we haven’t talked since graduation.” What’s the problem being friends with a former lover?

“I think that’s kind of normal, Zero,” she gently scolds with the same frank manner that made my knees melt as a sophomore. The slight downward cast of her head. The soft chiding of her large brown eyes. “There’s nothing to talk about. People move on, and it’s weird for a guy to visit another man’s wife.”

“I saw you out and about the other day.” She stiffens as I say that. “I just wanted to talk.”

“Where did you see me?” She tries hard to sound casual, but I hear the tension in her voice.

“I know it’ll sound crazy,” I hesitate. I always hesitated with Suzie. Her tawny eyes say more than her words. They’re telling me to tread lightly now. Maybe I should just go. I can’t leave her. It comes out in a whisper. “I saw you flying.”

“Thousands of people fly, every day,” she says without flinching.

“No, not like this.”

“Zero, this is crazy. I can’t start seeing you again. People will talk if you come here.”

“But, Suzie, I’m sure it was you!”

“I think you’d better go, Zero.” Is that sorrow or fear on her face? I’m a quivering teen as I stand to leave. Under the bleachers.

At home I dig out the box. Everyone has a box that holds their past. Curled and browned papers carelessly shoved inside along with mementos that mean something only to me. This box is my treasure chest. Creative Writing Club. I still have some of Ralph’s poems although he told me to burn them. I know it’s in here somewhere. I leaf through, paper by paper, lingering over piquant memories. There it is.

Creative Writing Club is where I met Suzie.

I didn’t talk to girls in class—too risky. Creative Writing Club, however, was all about sharing our innermost selves. You can’t write without undressing your soul. Suzie wrote a story advanced for someone in ninth grade. It impressed Mrs. Warfel enough to have it typed up and distributed to the club. I adored that story. I asked her if I could have the handwritten original. She was so pleased to see her work in print that she gladly gave it away. Our fingers glanced as she handed me the sheets torn from a school tablet.

The Wings of Time

by Suzie Giuseppe

“Look at the bird, See how she flutters about so. Just imagine if man could master that art.”

“Now Pathophelia, my daughter, could a man sprout wings and soar among the very clouds? Could he fly over the trees and rocks and oceans?”

“Father, I know he could, if he tried. Look over this great land, see the temples, the armies—our ships. Man can sail over the waters, could he not soar over the air?”

“But daughter, man has tried. Many a brave and many an intelligent man has plunged to his death off these cliffs, overlooking the mighty seas. I exhort you,

daughter, don't throw your life off of these rocks—Greece needs skillful young women like you."

"The sky is so open, so clean. The blueness of air, like the seas it beckons people toward it. Man wants the sky; the sky wants man."

"The land is beautiful also, see the fields and mountains, trees, animals, all of the Earth."

"But man confuses the Earth. The sky is serene, tranquil. Man can not confuse or destroy the heavens. Man can not reach that far."

"The banquet will soon begin. Do not be afraid to express yourself, but please, my daughter, don't do anything foolish."

"Yes, father, I understand."

"Well Pathophelia, are you enjoying the banquet? It is quite a festival, you know."

"Yes, Sophophanes, I enjoy the feast, but I do have a problem."

"Well, a young woman like you has such a big problem. Why don't you tell me about it? I may be able to help you."

"This afternoon my father and I were watching the birds flying over the sea. I told him I wanted to fly, but father said that man flying is helpless, a dream."

"That is quite a problem for someone your size. How would you go about this mysterious art of flying?"

"I would build a pair of wings perhaps, or a giant set of feathers, and I would go and leap off the cliffs or run on a plain, flat place and I would use my wings and fly."

"Hmmm, you are full of ideas—you are a born flyer. Perhaps we, and your father, can find a way for you to fly."

"Oh, would you? I just adore the skies."

“We’ll talk again in the morning.”

“Pathophelia, wake up. We will see about your flying now.”

“Oh, father, it is so early.”

“Sophophanes is here, we are ready and waiting for you. We have something special waiting.”

“Well, Isopia, she is your daughter. If you wish to stop her, now is your chance. She is a creative and intelligent girl.”

“I don’t think there is any harm in letting her try, I wouldn’t let her do it if it were too dangerous, it will be good for her. She will learn from it.”

“I’m ready father.”

“Pathophelia, Sophophanes, let’s go to the fields.”

“Oh, father, it isn’t!”

“Yes it is.”

“Father, Sophophanes, look! I’m flying!”

I linger over the loopy teenage handwriting. I remember that assignment, a story composed of dialogue only. Not bad for a fourteen-year-old. Stilted language and made-up names, and a view of ancient Greece that was wildly inaccurate. How could anyone from Breck know anything about ancient Greece? Still, there was real longing here. The raw yearning that she felt. Her naked soul. A desire to escape the mundane. To fly.

Reading the story again, in her own curly scrawl, I feel that same love and fear as the first time. Suzie wanted to fly. Her fiction was truth.

“I can’t tell you what to do with your time off work,” Adam shakes his head Wednesday morning, “but I wouldn’t go visiting another guy’s wife.”

“Kent wasn’t home.”

“That makes it worse.” Kent has a violent temper.

“Suzie and I are just friends.”

“My brother lives over on Oak, and people talk.”

“It’s not like we’re dogs, sniffing each other up.”

“Kent will hear, Zero. Take my advice. Forget her. For her sake, keep your head outta the clouds.”

Some advice I just can’t take.

Janitors are like ghosts. We’re seldom seen. We limit our time in the halls to when the kids are in class. We enter the lunchroom after they leave, cleaning up like ants. Other than occasional objects of scorn, we’re simply invisible. I may be a ghost, but I can’t ignore this spiritual ache. My soul tells me she’s something I shouldn’t shut out. Something I need.

“Zero, you can’t keep stopping over like this.” She’s wearing sunglasses and a scarf, although it’s cloudy. And she’s inside.

“I remember you in Creative Writing Club, talking about how you wanted to get out of Breck. Leave this place for good. Spread your wings and soar.” We’re both still here. I hold out the story. “Remember this?”

I need to see her eyes to read her. The sunglasses remain ominously in place. “I can’t believe you kept this.” I wait until she finishes.

“Can I come in?”

“Zero, it’s sweet of you to hold onto this,” she hands back the story. “But things have changed. We’re not in high school any more. You need to move on.” She turns her back. She steps inside. “Don’t stop over again.”

I sit in my apartment and think about Creative Writing Club. How we listened to stories better than our own. Stories that took us to places we’d never go. Places far from Breck. How Suzie sat next to me, close enough to touch. To smell. How the hidden became obvious. How just before graduation her

secret life became so clearly public. How Kent had got her pregnant. I have to get out.

I drive to Target, east of town. It has a Starbucks, well lit. I see other people here, out by the freeway. Everyone on the verge of escaping, but ultimately turning back.

Open land begins just across the highway. As if big blocks are the end of civilization itself. Daylight lingers, so I drive further east a bit. To the clearing in the woods just a few miles along. I pull over. Watch the skies. I contemplate the horizon and all that it implies.

Why did we go to Creative Writing Club? I was destined to be a janitor, she to marry a bully. The air is still and eerie and fills me with a longing sharper and harder than shattered glass. I've read that being a janitor is the lowest job a working man can take. A cleaning man can't offer Suzie a way out.

Her story's on the seat beside me. I marvel at how one person can hold my entire imagination hostage. The wind billows long, dusky grass rollers across a beige land-sea. I'm a janitor. I clean up other people's messes. I've made a mess of this.

The darkening clouds part. A distant movement in the air catches my eye. I know what it is. It's Suzie, and she's flying. She's flying away from me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K. Marvin Bruce has studied in western Pennsylvania, eastern Massachusetts, and southern Scotland. He has taught mythology and folklore in Wisconsin and New Jersey. He has published twenty-eight fiction stories in a variety of venues. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, the Write Well Award (Silver Pen Writers Association), and the Best of the Web Award, and has won prizes from Calliope, Danse Macabre, and Typehouse Literary Magazine.