



DEATH
ON THE
DUN

PAUL KNOWLES

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170 Shade Street
New Hamburg, Ontario, Canada
N3A 4J2
(519) 662-6757
e-mail paul@paulknowles.ca
www.paulknowles.ca**

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This is a work of fiction. While the community of Dunford may bear some resemblance to a town that I know and love, the characters and circumstances of the story are entirely products of my own imagination.

This book is dedicated with great affection to Nancy, Vicki and Erin – my cottage reading buddies.

PROLOGUE

Ed Brighton focused his lens on the fire fighters who were chest-deep in the Dun River, braced against the surging waters, watching intently for the woman caught in the flood, ready to rescue her... or capture her lifeless body.

Once again, Ed could not help thinking that the job of a small-town journalist was often odd – and perhaps not always entirely honourable.

His full attention was re-captured by a shout: “Here she comes!” He started shooting image after image that might be recording horror, or heroism, or perhaps both.

Yet, only half an hour ago, the highlight of his day had been another letter to the editor from Alicia Templeton...

CHAPTER ONE

To the editor:

I want to bring it to the attention of this entire community that some fiend among us is torturing our beloved cats. My own dear Pussikins has returned home several times with scratches and once with his ear torn. As well, I have heard Pussikins and other cats crying nearby, making such a clamour that it is obvious some evil person is hurting them. I have tried to investigate, but when I finally located Pussikins, the torturer had fled and my kitty was comforting another cat.

This is a matter of grave concern to the community. I have contacted the police, the fire department and the mayor, but they seem to be helpless. I am writing this letter to the editor in hope that the caring people of our town will stand up for their beloved kitties.

Sincerely,

Alicia Templeton

“Fuck me,” sighed Ed. It occurred to him that he was using that phrase more and more often these days, although never in the passion-filled, admonitory context he would have preferred.

Like too many letters to the editor Ed Brighton received, the latest Templeton tome left him with little choice, in the end. If he ran the letter, he would be a laughingstock among the vast majority of people who would understand exactly what Pussikins had been up to. If he refused to run it, Alicia Templeton would haunt his office, demanding that he do so, and accusing him of complicity in some anti-feline plot.

He realized that he could still stand a moderate amount of public abuse, but that he had absolutely no stomach for a tete-a-tete with Miss Templeton. Ed opened a document on his MacIntosh, and started to type. “To the editor...”

He remembered clearly the last time he had moaned “Fuck me” to Linda. Their lovemaking had been wonderful, as it usually was. She knew how much he liked to be asked, and his two-word comment had actually been a response to exactly the same command, issued with passion and authority by his wife as he thrust into her.

Well, his ex-wife, to be precise. Gone these two years, divorced for several months. She had left that same night.

He remembered lying beside her in the bed in a post-coital semi-coma. Why in hell he had chosen that moment to ask her advice about a good name for his new newspaper, he had no idea.

“Linda? About the name of the paper. I’m torn between calling it the Dunford Saga, the Dunford Advance, and the Dunford Independent.”

“Well, Ed,” she had responded, and it had taken a moment for him to catch the jagged edge to her voice. “Saga sounds Norwegian; Advance is obscure. I would suggest Independent, which has a lovely irony.”

Ed thought he understood the irony. There were many community papers called “The Independent” and virtually none of them were, in fact, “independent”. They had all been bought by huge newspaper chains, none of which had access to sufficient clarity of thought to identify the complete nonsense involved in maintaining the name.

He was savouring the idea of being the only truly independent “Independent” in the district when he realized that Linda had continued to speak, making it clear that her take on the irony of independence was something entirely other.

“And if this question means you actually intend to carry out your insane scheme and start a newspaper in this godforsaken damned community, then this is my personal declaration of independence. I am leaving. I warned you!”

And with those words, his wife rolled out of his arms, stood up, and without putting on a stitch of clothing, packed a bag and stormed from the bedroom. To this day, Ed had no idea if she dressed in the hallway, on the stairs, or in the cab. But he did know she was gone. And that she had returned, exactly once, apparently clothed, with two strange guys and a cube van.

He had not been at home at the time, but his neighbour, Antonia, had told him about the truck and the two muscular guys, and his own eyes were all he needed to know she had taken everything that she could marginally have laid claim to.

“Fuck me,” whispered Ed. He had never really been able to explain to anyone, including himself, why he had chosen to stay in Dunford and launch a newspaper it wasn’t clear anyone wanted, except maybe Alicia

Templeton. He was not at all sure why the Independent was more important to him than keeping his now-independent ex-wife.

He only knew he had not gone after her. He had not tried to find her. He had cooperated with the divorce. He had let her keep all the stuff that disappeared into the truck with the two hefty guys ... including his golf clubs. He assumed she took the clubs because she had given them to him as a wedding anniversary gift, so since the reason for the occasion was now null and void, the clubs reverted to her.

Or maybe she just knew it would piss him off. Not that he played worth a damn, anyway.

Ed finished inputting Miss Templeton's letter, anticipating the laughter that would greet him the day after publication, when he went into Mae's Coffee Shop for his early-morning black coffee. He spiked her letter – in this day and age of cyber-communication, Ed loved the opportunity to add another piece of real correspondence to the stack impaled on the antique paper spike on his desk. Keeping in touch with tradition this way was so important he put up with his almost-weekly mishap, when he missed his aim and drove the damned spike into his palm. He figured that some day the scar tissue would be tough enough to ward off the sharp point, in the manner of guitarists who virtually obliterated their left-hand fingerprints with callouses.

This morning, though, he did it right, and Miss Templeton's letter joined about two and a half inches of papers on the spike.

He opened the next envelope, and extracted a torn, dirty, finger-printed letter. "Oh, fuck me," moaned Ed. It occurred to him that, as a professional communicator, he really should have a more varied vocabulary. But there was no other phrase to suit the immediate situation: another letter from Josiah Shavers.

To the editor:

The town of Dunford is becoming a breeding ground for sodomites and homosexuals of every persuasion. It is time town council took action to stop this attack on the moral fibre of our community. I say, drive the faggots out!

Josiah Shavers

Well, at least Josiah had crossed the line, once again, which solved the problem of whether to publish, and saved Ed from having to type this week's offering of tripe.

Ed did pause to wonder at the ludicrous image of a breeding ground for sodomites – surely there was some kind of inherent contradiction here – as well as “homosexuals of every persuasion.” He knew he should not find this kind of hate literature funny, but he could not help laughing. Shavers usually had this affect on him – as long as the letter was not sufficiently publishable that Ed had to make the decision whether or not to include it in the paper. He figured about one in four made it into print – and about a third of those, he regretted immediately after publication. Usually the regret kicked in after someone in Mae's declared his personal agreement with the latest Shavers' monstrosity. Inevitably, that made Ed wonder if he was complicit in the dissemination of evil. He never reached a sure conclusion, which meant every marginal Shavers' letter threw him right back to this morass of indecisiveness.

Ed also wondered for a moment who these invading homosexuals were, and then realized that Shavers was probably including Ed, himself. Ed was a guy who, in his moments of low self-esteem – moments which, in truth, lasted for months at a time – thought of himself as being “middle-aged” (which, at 43, was probably, with luck, mathematically correct), “weedy”, “unimpressive”, or “nondescript.” Occasionally, his self-esteem climbed to a level where he could describe himself as “lanky”, and even “Jimmy Stewart-esque,” but he didn't really believe it, even then.

Ed had also been without female companionship for two years – which everyone in the community knew full well – and spent a fair amount of time drinking coffee at Mae's with Chester Pringle, the local potter who simply had to be gay. After all, Chester was an artist, sort of, wasn't he? And, he often wore those green, suede shoes!

Josiah Shavers' opinion was probably shared by half the town.

Ed admitted to himself that he actually had no idea about Chester's sexual preferences. Like most guys who meet in coffee shops, sex was constantly on their minds, but never included in their conversations. Ed often remembered those old Mad Magazine cartoons that showed the characters' thoughts as well as their words. If life were really like that,

he decided, none of us would have lived past our 14th birthday.

“What happened to the kid, Harold?” “Well, George, near as we can make out, he saw Amanda climbing out of the car, and her father read his thought bubble, and the Dad beat him to death with his three-wood.”

“Me, I would have used the driver.”

“Apparently, the Dad had been carrying the three-wood in the car since he saw the kid’s last thought bubble breaking up, and was pretty sure what ‘real.. ..ke to ..uck ... er’ meant.”)

One thing for sure – if life were like that, Ed would never be able to encounter Kate McIntyre on Dunford’s main street again. While his voice would be saying, “Good afternoon”, the bubble overhead would certainly read, “Have sex with me, please, right now, I need you so badly, let’s go to my place, oh, touch me there, and there, and” He had to admit that his overwhelming desire for this lovely, divorced, 40-something woman even pre-dated Linda’s departure. Not that Ed had ever discussed his lust for Kate with anyone – not Chester (see “guys” above), and certainly not Kate.

But from the moment he had laid eyes on her, “laid” had never been far from his mental vocabulary. For all the good it did him. They had met, of course, at a number of community events, and they had even talked together from time to time. They had discussed the high price of green grapes at the local grocery store, on the occasions when they found themselves shopping in the same aisle. They had agreed on the overwhelming enthusiasm of the town band, as they winced together in the back row of a community concert. They always said “Hello” when they met on the street. Actually, Ed’s hidden passions sometimes turned his response into “H-h-h-h-h-ello,” even though he had never been a stutterer, n-never in his life.

He wasn’t even sure what it was about Kate that did this to him. She was pretty, of course, and she had a great smile, long dark hair, high cheekbones, lovely grey eyes, and a nice body ... perhaps he did know what it was that did this to him, after all. What he didn’t know is, why he was utterly unable to ask her to dinner. It wasn’t that he was intolerably shy. Hell, once upon a time, Ed had actually managed to propose to Linda, in such a way that she had accepted! Seemed unfortunate now, in hindsight, but back then he had been ecstatic. And he was pretty fearless

when asking local politicians tough questions like, “Why did council award the contract to repaint the fire hydrants without a full tendering process?” But when it came to saying one simple sentence, the one he most wanted to be able to say, the one that went something like, “Kate, would you like to have dinner with me?” he was completely mute.

Ed realized his thoughts had strayed a long way from the editorial copy he was supposed to be producing. “Fuck me,” he said, once more, and then realized that using that phrase this close to his reverie about Kate created an internal ache that was almost more than he could bear.

So he shut down his computer, turned to tell Amy that he would be out for a while, and then remembered that his office administrator (a big term for a job that meant anything Ed or Mel, the sales guy, didn’t do) had once again called in sick. So he flipped over the “Closed” sign on the door, locked it behind him, and headed across the street to Mae’s.

He knew anyone looking for him and finding the office locked, would automatically check Mae’s, anyway.