



Twenty-four stories plus self-contained excerpts from nine novels, ranging from romance to mind-twisting fantasy to realism, to history. Some include elements of all of those.

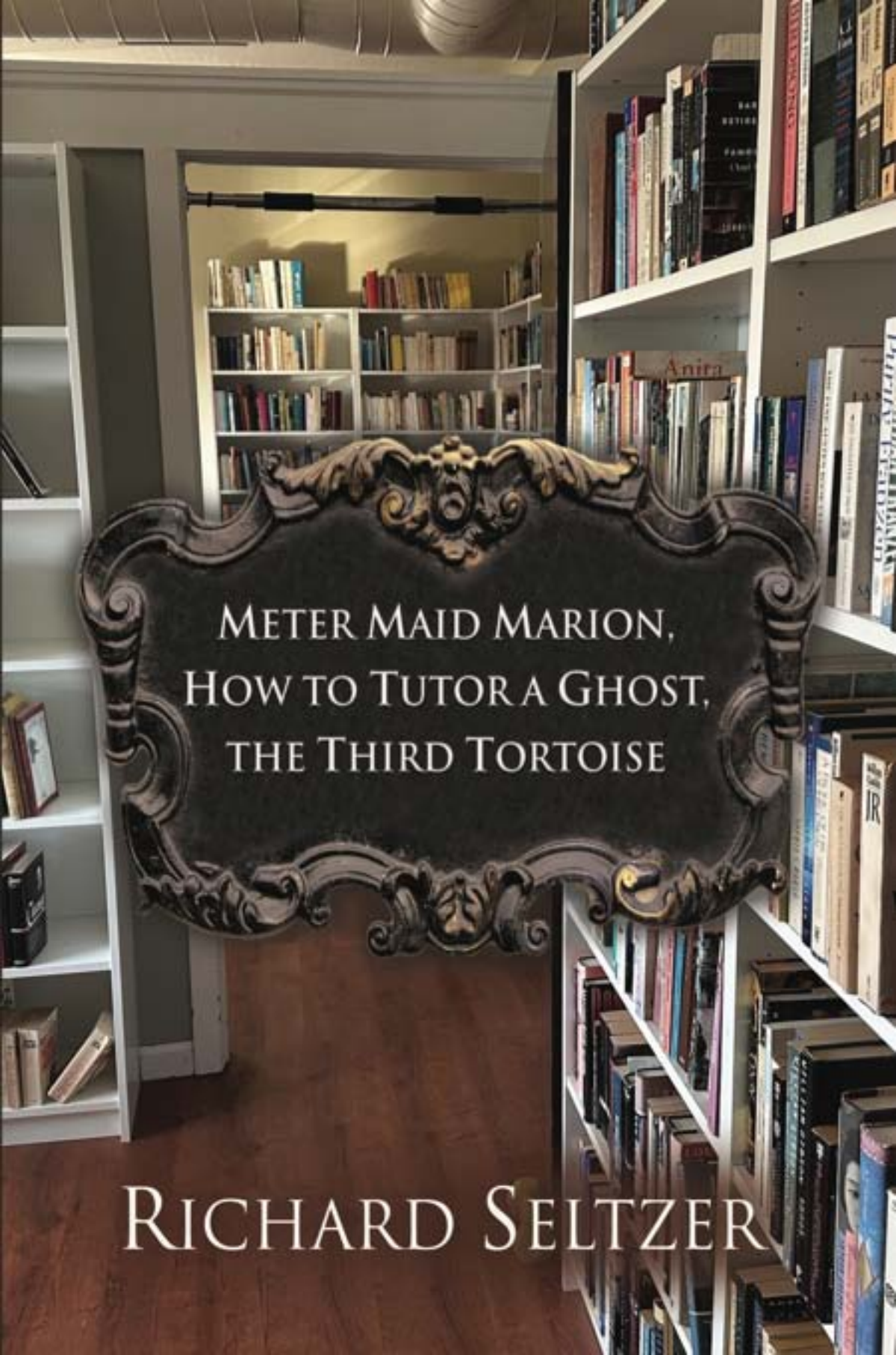
Meter Maid Marion, How to Tutor a Ghost, The Third Tortoise

by Richard Seltzer

Order the complete book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13325.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**



METER MAID MARION,
HOW TO TUTOR A GHOST,
THE THIRD TORTOISE

RICHARD SELTZER

Copyright © 2024 Richard Seltzer

Print ISBN: 978-1-958892-50-3

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-715-3

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2024

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Seltzer, Richard

Meter Maid Marion, How to Tutor a Ghost, The Third Tortoise by Richard Seltzer

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024906312

includes excerpts from:

The Name of Hero (Bulatovich Saga) © 1981, 2024 Richard Seltzer

We All Are Shakespeare © 2023 Richard Seltzer

We First Met in Ithaca, or Was It Eden? © 2023 Richard Seltzer

To Gether Tales © 2022 Richard Seltzer

Shakespeare's Twin Sister © 2021 Richard Seltzer

Nevermind © 2020 Richard Seltzer

Beyond the 4th Door © 2020 Richard Seltzer

Parallel Lives © 2020 Richard Seltzer

Saint Smith and Other Stories © 2011 Richard Seltzer

Table of Contents

Stories	1
Meter Maid Marion.....	1
The Third Tortoise	7
How to Tutor a Ghost	8
The Princess Tango.....	13
The Mirror	17
The Fifth Floor.....	19
Will Come, Stranger	22
The Seventh Note	25
Reader Four	32
Becoming Whys.....	35
Reinventing the Airplane	37
The Gentle Inquisitor.....	39
Revolution.....	47
Retreat! Retweet! Retreat!	52
Good Judgment.....	55
Mazeppa! Layers of Legend	59
Dream Job.....	65
Bargain.....	67
State of the Union	69
Cancer to the Question.....	72
Creation Story	77
Yanni.....	82
Hands	95
The Choice.....	98
Excerpts from Novels	103
Aunt Rachel and the Wizard of Oz	103
Saint Smith.....	118
The Place Where Time Stopped.....	128
The Drawing Room	135

Give Me Now My Nevermind	143
Losing Mommy.....	147
Special Delivery.....	152
Brave New World.....	158
Something, Somewhere, Somehow	162
The Abandoned House on Rogers Avenue.....	172
Princess Sonya	196
An Unexpected Hurdle	207
Ethiopia Through Sonya's Eyes	212
Great Expectations	222
The Saga of Madame B.....	228
Even Elephants Pray	239
Chess Lessons	249
Talent Isn't Destiny	253
Thoughts about Writing	257

Stories

Meter Maid Marion

from To Gether Tales

Bill has writer's block. Day after day, he sits at his computer, opens Word, and stares at a blank page on his screen, until his itchy mouse finger takes him to Twitter, where he reacts to one question or quip after another and the day disappears. He needs to clear his head and get ideas to flow as they always did before.

He turns his computer off and goes for a walk, from one end of the High Line to the other, then cross-town to Fifth Avenue and up to Central Park. The whole way, he doesn't have a single idea. He looks without seeing. He counts his steps. Two thousand steps per mile. He loses count at six thousand, but continues walking, zombie-like.

Three blocks south of the Met, he encounters a meter maid, in what looks like a brand-new uniform. Wide-eyed, she turns her head this way and that, scanning up and down the street, as if, for her, this is a new adventure, the start of a new life. He guesses this is her first day on the job. This is now her domain, her beat, and she's proud of it.

Twenty feet away, he stops and stares. Physically, she's very attractive, but that isn't what caught his attention. On this long walk of his, he passed dozens of women who were more beautiful than she. But she has an aura of freshness and enthusiasm that's contagious. The cleft in her chin. Her green eyes. Her freckles. How would he describe her to someone else or in a story? He's good at dialogue and weak at description. He needs a life-writing class, like life-drawing, with a woman like this posing naked for him to sketch in words.

She's a meter maid and he wants to meet her. He has to write that down.

He reaches in his pocket. He has a Sharpie, but no paper. Whenever he goes out, he carries a pocket-sized pad of paper in case he gets ideas. But he didn't bring it today.

He feels this is the onset of a story. He needs to jot down what he's thinking before he loses the thread. His imagination is working again. He needs to record this scene right away and find out how far it can take him. But he has no paper.

He can't return to his apartment or look for a store where he could buy paper. That would take too long and distractions along the way would kill the idea. This is urgent. *Meter Maid Marion*, he repeats over and over to himself.

Then it occurs to him that he has cash in his wallet. Money is paper. He can write on money. It's worth it to sacrifice money to keep the inspiration alive. He runs to a bench on the sidewalk across the street. He takes a one-dollar bill out of his wallet and starts writing on it with his Sharpie. When he has filled that with text on both sides, he takes out another bill, then another, then another.

That's when he realizes that he isn't alone. The meter maid who triggered this wave of inspiration has followed him. She's standing in front of him, staring at him with a look of disbelief and concern.

He looks up. Their eyes meet. That gives him still more ideas. He opens his wallet again. Fortunately, he has a stack of ones. There's no telling how long this story might be, and he has to write it down

immediately.

Arms akimbo, with a look of authority, she addresses him. "What do you think you're doing, sir?"

"I'm writing a story," he says, waving her off, not wanting to be interrupted.

"You're writing on US currency, sir. You are defacing US currency. That's a crime. Do you realize that that's a crime?"

He chuckles and keeps writing.

She pulls out her cellphone, does a quick search, and announces with authority, "Violation of Title 18 Section 333 of the United States Code. Punishable with a fine and/or imprisonment for up to six months or both."

"Interesting detail. Thank you. I'll work that in."

"On the contrary, sir. You have to stop. Immediately. I cannot allow you to deface currency in the presence of, with the full awareness of an officer of the law."

"Great. Thanks again. *Deface. Officer of the law.* I appreciate your help."

Marion is new on the job, her first after graduating from college. To her, this is the start of a career in law enforcement. Starting at the bottom, she will work her way up. But here is someone challenging

her authority. If a supervisor were to chance upon her here with someone blatantly breaking the law in her presence, she would be humiliated. What can she do? She can't handcuff him and arrest him. She doesn't have handcuffs, and she has no more authority to arrest than an ordinary civilian.

She sits down on the bench beside him and buries her head in her hands. She takes a deep breath and tries to put this into perspective. Is she making too much of it? Is she making a fool of herself?

She picks up the stack of defaced bills on the bench between them. If she's going to do anything, this will be evidence.

She starts reading and does a doubletake. He's writing about her. He described her as a *vision in blue* in her brand-new uniform on the sidewalk across from Central Park on Fifth Avenue. In the story, seeing her triggers an uncontrollable urge to write about this moment and to use the only paper at hand, US currency. The story moves quickly from a physical description of her to a one-sided conversation as he tries to get her attention, walking in lock-step with her as she goes about her rounds, until she finally agrees to a first date, the next day, Saturday. They meet at the Met. Then they get together half a dozen times for walks in the park when she's off duty. They go to a couple of movies. They spend a night together at her place, then a night at his place. She moves in with him. They marry and have three boys and a cocker spaniel.

This guy is nuts. Stalker at first sight. Probably dangerous. She should run for it.

Then, as she's putting the stack of bills back down on the bench,

slowly, carefully, so as not to draw his attention, he stops abruptly. His wallet is empty. His look of despair moves her. Rather than leave, she pulls out her own wallet.

"How many do you need?" she asks.

"One more, just one more. For the title. Before I forget. Thank you. Thank you."

On it, in big capital letters, he writes, *Meter Maid Marion*.

She cringes. That is spooky.

"How did you know my name is Marion? My badge says *M. Rodriguez*."

"It seemed natural. Meter Maid. Maid Marion. That must have been in the back of your head when you took the job."

"And your name?"

"Bill."

She laughed. "That must have been in the back of your head when you started writing on dollar bills."

"I guess we have that in common."

"What?"

"We trust our instincts."

She grins.

They kiss.

The wedding is six months later.

They tape those bills to the walls of their apartment.

They have three boys and a cocker spaniel.

The Princess Tango

from To Gether Tales

Alex and Laurel got engaged before their first date. His best friend and her best friend got married. They were both in the wedding party. He gave her a ride home. She invited him in. He proposed immediately, and she accepted without hesitation. They went on a Caribbean cruise for their honeymoon, on the Princess ship that was the set for *The Love Boat* TV series.

They were deliriously happy together. Neither of them had danced much before the cruise, but they wound up going to free dance lessons in the afternoon and then dancing from dinner to midnight, every night.

The dance instructor and his wife were Chinese. He claimed that he had taught finance at Harvard Business School and that this was his retirement — cruising around the world with his wife, who was his dance partner, and passing on to others these steps that for them had led to marital harmony and bliss. ‘Happy wife, happy life,’ he said proudly.

He was rigid in his teaching style: ‘One, two, three, four. One, two, three four. This is how it is done in the cha-cha. This is how it is done in the merengue. This is how it is done in the tango. This is the way. This is the sequence of moves and steps and no other. If you and your partner each learn that and do that, you will be in sync with one another and will experience the joy of dance and the joy of marital harmony.’

At first, Alex and Laurel rigidly followed his instructions. But they

soon found that their bodies moved together naturally, even when they forgot the instructions, even when they unintentionally used a cha-cha move in a foxtrot, even when they mimicked other experienced dancers and added unorthodox side steps and hand-over-hand twirls. By day four, they stopped going to the lessons but still danced until midnight, and their repertoire expanded. They felt the music in their bodies, and they anticipated one another's moves with no effort. Soon their dancing evolved to a set of moves that they could, with minor modifications, use to any music from waltz to tango.

There was one routine they chanced upon that they hadn't seen anyone else do — one, two to the left; overhead twirl with handholding; twirl back again; side left, side right; then walk straight ahead with arms joined behind their backs. They were proud of that move and did it smoothly. Other couples would stop and watch when they did it, and then would try to imitate it.

That cruise, that magical moment, ended all too soon.

They flew back to Philadelphia, picked up their car at the airport, and drove toward their home in Huntingdon Valley. It was a clear moonlit night in June. They were holding hands and listening to a radio station playing *The Tennessee Waltz*, which they had danced to as the ship sailed away from St. Martin, when a tractor-trailer coming toward them on the other side of the road lost control and jackknifed into them.

When Alex woke up in the hospital, he was told that Laurel had died in the crash. At first, in his confusion, he didn't know who Laurel was. His parents and his sister helped fill in the gaps in his memory,

but he couldn't help but feel that he was dreaming now — that this was a nightmare that he would wake up from, or that he had dreamt meeting Laurel and falling in love with her and had dreamt their cruise-ship honeymoon. Nothing felt real — not the past, not the present.

Eventually, he went on with his life. He married again. They had two kids. They divorced. He married again and had another kid and divorced. His memories of Laurel and their time together faded.

When he retired, forty years after the accident, he treated himself to a Caribbean cruise, alone.

Retirement was a downer. Living alone was a downer. His kids were grown and married with kids of their own and were scattered, living hundreds of miles from Philadelphia. He saw them once, sometimes twice a year. And, aside from his kids, he had little to look back on with pride, and nothing to look forward to. The routine of going to work and doing what was expected of him was over. He was no longer part of the work-related web of expectation, recognition, and camaraderie. When he jogged or used a treadmill at the gym, as his doctor recommended, he couldn't help but feel that all the activity of his life had been like this — going in circles or going nowhere, accomplishing nothing that would last. When he died, aside from his kids, he would have left nothing behind, no sign of his existence. He might just as well have never lived.

Going down to dinner on day two of the cruise, as they were sailing away from Princess Cay in the Bahamas, a band in the Piazza was playing *The Tennessee Waltz* and a dozen couples were dancing. He overheard two couples talking about an unusual dance move that one

couple had done on day one and that nearly all the experienced dancers had picked up. It resembled a tango move, but they used it in the cha-cha, the merengue, and even the waltz, like now. They called it the *Princess Tango Step*.

There was a legend that had been passed down through the years about a young couple on their honeymoon who had first done it and done it so well that others copied it and others copied them. People called it a *meme*, a piece of human culture that perpetuates itself, an echo of that time long ago and of the love of that couple who first danced it. As if the love of two people in harmony with one another found natural expression in these very moves, and as long as there was love in the world, there would be the *Princess Tango*.

Excerpts from Novels

Aunt Rachel and the Wizard of Oz

from Saint Smith and Other Stories, and Beyond the 4th Door

In July of 1946, Russ, recently discharged from the Army in Georgia, arrived home with his new bride, seventeen-year-old Rachel.

He had the cab stop at the corner, and left their luggage under a bush. Then he paused to admire Rachel.

When she was disoriented, as she was now, she looked naive and vulnerable. But alone in bed at night, she could turn bold and provocative. He enjoyed comforting her, then shocking her, to watch her switch from one extreme to the other. He was fascinated by her fluctuating, lustful innocence.

He took hold of Rachel's hand and pulled her along, as he slid quickly and quietly toward the house. They hid behind hedges, then behind an oak tree, then dashed to the front door.

"Remember," he told her, "they don't know you exist. Stay right here by the door. I'll go around to the side. It ought to take me five to ten minutes to set them up. Then I'll get Mom to open the front door, and you'll say... "

"Hello, Mom, I'm your new daughter."

"Right. You've got it. It'll be unforgettable. Just stay put and wait for your cue."

Russ crept back the way he had come and picked up the suitcases. Then he strolled up the driveway to the side door. He tried to maintain a poker face, but, inside, he was laughing at this surprise he had prepared for his parents.

He knew they would love Rachel. They would be as delighted as he was that he had met her and won her. It was as if he had won a million dollars, and he wanted to spring the news on them with dramatic flare.

He also had a surprise in store for Rachel. He had never told her he had a baby brother. The way she loved kids, she would go wild over little Charlie.

"Mom! Dad! I'm home!" he hollered as he opened the door.

No answer.

"Mom! Dad!" He put the suitcases down and ran to the living room. It was empty.

He hollered even louder, "Mom! Dad!" and rushed into the hall and up the stairs. Still no answer.

He ran back down again, and, out of breath and disappointed, opened the front door for Rachel.

"Hello, Mom... " she blurted out, then broke into laughter.

"Hush," Russ put a hand over her mouth. "They aren't here. They must be visiting at a neighbor's. We'll still surprise them, just a different way. Come on in. I'll show you around. Then I'll hunt them

down and set them up. Believe me, this will work great. I can't wait to see the look on their faces."

"God!" she exclaimed as she walked in the door.

"Watch your language. How many times do I have to tell you — my parents are very touchy about things like that. Never, and I mean never, use the name of God in vain in this house."

"All right, already. But this place is wild. It's just the way you described it." She went straight to the fireplace, walked into the alcove, and curled up on the bench. "Come over here," she hiked up her skirt above her garter belt and started unbuttoning her blouse. "You know how I've been looking forward to this."

"Not now. They could walk in the door any minute."

"But we're married," she coaxed. "Remember, anything goes when you're married."

"But not in my parents' house. Besides, there'll be time enough for that later."

"Russ, you are unbelievable. But I love you anyway." She nuzzled her head against his shoulder. When she stood up straight, her forehead was even with his chin.

He slowly ran his hand through her long, straight black hair, and caressed her ears, adorned with gold-plated loop earrings he had given her. He held her close. "Okay, you Delilah. We both know you can get your way with me. But please don't tempt me now. Come on, I want

to show you the house."

He led her upstairs, then had her wait in the hall while he scampered up a pull-down staircase to the attic, and came back with a horse's skull.

"You mean that really happened?" Rachel asked. "That whole wild episode?"

"Of course. And come in here. This was Sue's room. There's the drawing Uncle Harry did of this same skull. See, it's a good likeness." He put the skull on the floor in front of the picture. "And over there," he pointed to the other wall, "is that blow-up photo of Sue that spooked Fred when he saw it in the living room."

"God," she started to say, then corrected herself. "Gosh. This room looks like a young girl still lives here."

"Mom's left everything the same, like she expects Sue to come back. From what Dad said in his letters, Mom's gotten superstitious. Every year, on Sue's birthday, she bakes a cake, and sets it up with the right number of candles, as if Sue were still alive and getting a year older each year. According to Dad, Mom claims she's seen the shadow of a young girl, in this very room, by that very window."

"Oh, I'm scared of ghosts," Rachel murmured, nuzzling up to him again. "I need a big strong man to protect me." She turned her head to the side so their lips could touch.

He laughed and pushed her back. "Not now."

"But we've never kissed in a haunted house before."

"And you know I couldn't stop with just kissing. Wait here. I'll find my parents and bring them back. Then I'll come up and tell you my new plan."

"Why not tell me now."

"Believe me, if I knew it, I'd tell you. I'll figure it out as I go along."

He threw her a kiss from the door.

When Russ first came barging into the house, little Charlie, age four, was playing with tin soldiers in his parents' room. Frightened by the shouting and the loud steps, he crawled under the bed and hid. Then he heard soft voices coming from Sue's room. Then loud footsteps rushed downstairs again.

Slowly, cautiously, Charlie crept out and inched his way toward Sue's room.

Now, standing in the doorway, he saw Sue herself, sitting in her old room, with light streaming through the window behind her. Her face was in shadow, but even from the doorway he could feel the warmth of her love, a warmth he had never felt before.

She was playing with her miniature horses on the windowsill. He'd never seen a grownup play make-believe before. Her hands slid from one figure to the next as her attention moved. Then she tossed her head back and shook her hair as if she, too, were a horse.

He walked up to her, slowly, without saying a word. He knew without a doubt who she was and presumed that she knew him — after all, he was her brother. Even a ghost would have to know that. He wondered why it had taken her so long to appear to him.

Charlie tripped over the horse's skull on the floor. The girl turned toward Charlie. Sue had disappeared, and in her place stood another girl, about the same age — a pretty girl, with long black hair. Charlie screamed an unworldly scream, and the girl ran up to him, picked him up, and hugged him tight to comfort him.

"Where did she go?" asked Charlie in confusion. "What did you do with her? Where did you hide her?"

"Who?" asked Rachel.

"Sue. My sister Sue. She was just here. You made her go away. Tell her you won't hurt her. Please call her back."

Meanwhile, Sarah, walking back to the house from the end of the driveway, saw the shadow of a young girl at Sue's window. She stopped, shut her eyes, turned away, then looked again, and the shadow was still there. She took her glasses out of her pocketbook, wiped them clean on her blouse, and looked again. The shadow was still there.

With trembling voice, she began to repeat the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father..."

Then the shadow moved and an unworldly scream broke loose —

Charlie's scream.

Sarah ran up the driveway, stubbed her toe on the doorstep, banged her knee on the door, tripped up the stairs, and found this strange girl with a wild frightened look, holding Charlie.

The girl hesitated in confusion, then blurted out, "Hello, Mom, I'm your new daughter."

Sarah grabbed a broom from the corner and waved it at the intruder, shouting wildly, "Out, you madwoman, you imposter, you demon."

The girl clutched Charlie and ran through the upstairs hall, down the stairs, and out the side door to the driveway.

Sarah came racing after her, waving her broom, and shouting, "Unhand my son, you, you..."

The girl cowered, helpless, with her back to the wall. "Your son?" she asked. "But your sons are in the Army, or were in the Army. You're... "

"Old enough to be his grandmother? Yes, indeed, but he's mine." She reached out her arms to him. He hesitated a moment, then pulled away from the stranger and ran to his mother. She picked him up and hugged him warmly. Then she shifted her attention back to the intruder. "And who are you to be playing Goldilocks, wandering into other people's houses?"

"As I tried to explain... "

"Don't explain anything. Just tell me who you are!"

She hesitated, then answered, "My name is Mrs. Uhland."

"What?"

"Mrs. Rachel Uhland. Mrs. Russell P. Uhland. Your son's wife."

"Impossible. You're just a girl, no older than... "

"Than your daughter Sue would have been? Russ told me about her many times."

Stunned, Sarah stared and held Charlie even tighter.

"Russ wanted to surprise you. I thought we should invite the whole family to the wedding, or wait and have the wedding here, or at least tell you what we were doing. But Russ insisted. He's a big kid the way he loves surprises, and I love him for that. He had this whole script worked up — what he was going to say to you and Mr. Uhland, and how he'd get you to open the front door and there I'd be standing. But nobody was home when we got here. Nobody except the little one."

"Charlie."

"Yes, Charlie. That must have been another of Russ's surprises — not telling me he had a little brother. That rascal. If I didn't love him so much, I'd hate him." Rachel laughed.

Sarah stepped forward to take a closer look at this girl. Confused and innocent, wearing a plaid skirt and white blouse and saddle shoes with green socks, Rachel looked like a ninth grader just home from school.

Russ emerged from the backyard, walking with his father, Carl. "Oh," he stopped short. "I guess you've met already."

"This little girl says she's your wife."

"She most certainly is." He ran up and lifted Rachel, with one arm under her knees and another under her back.

"Is this some kind of joke?" asked Sarah. "She's not old enough to be married."

"She's 17, Mom. In Georgia, that's nearly an old maid. Besides, you were 16 when you married Dad."

Rachel craned her neck up toward Russ, perhaps to kiss him or perhaps to bite him, in anger at the humiliation he was putting her through.

"Seventeen?" repeated Sarah. "Why, Judy Garland... "

"What, Mom?" asked Russ.

"Judy Garland was seventeen when she played Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Who could ever imagine Dorothy as a married woman?"

"Oh, that's a wonderful movie!" Rachel nuzzled Russ's neck, all sweetness now. She kissed him behind the ear. "I saw in the paper that it's playing again. When it first came out, I saw it three times and loved it more each time."

Sarah stared at her, unaccustomed to seeing signs of affection in

public. She held Charlie tighter. She was still trying to absorb the shock that Russ was married. "Sue was ten when I took her to it. I haven't been to another movie since then. Come to think of it," she added distractedly, "Charlie has never been to a movie at all."

"Oh, but he must go. He simply must," insisted Rachel. "That's the most magical movie of all time, and movies are the most magical experience on earth. Please let me take him, Mrs. Uhland, please."

Sarah turned to Russ, then to Carl. She had no idea what to do or say, and she could tell that Russ and Carl were equally confused. Her son had married a puzzling and perhaps wicked little girl. That was an incredible mistake that could throw all of their lives into disorder. But the question at hand was whether to take Charlie to the movies. Sarah felt dizzy. On impulse, she responded, "We'll both take him."

"Great idea," Russ confirmed, with a sigh of relief. "I'll check the times in the paper. That'll give you two a chance to get acquainted while Dad and I catch up and take care of the yard."

"The lawn could certainly use mowing," added Carl, with a smile.

Sarah smiled too, put Charlie down, and gave him a pat on the behind. "Run upstairs, wash up, and put on your best Sunday clothes. And don't forget to wash behind your ears and under your nails. Let's make an occasion of this — it's not every day you see your first movie."

Charlie was confused, but he did what he was told. It was bad enough having to get dressed up and go to *God's house* every Sunday. Now he had to get dressed up on a Saturday, to go to some new kind of place.

Rachel said that there would be lots of people. Mom said he'd have to behave and stay still and keep quiet. He hoped this wasn't something he'd have to do again and again, like going to church. He'd rather stay home with Dad and Russ and play and work in the yard. But he knew there was no arguing with Mom.

The building was as big as a church, but instead of wooden benches, there were grownup seats with arm rests. Mom wanted to sit in the back and Rachel up front; so they sat in the back. Then Charlie stood on his seat to see over people, and Mom picked him up, and they moved to the front row.

He was just getting comfortable in his big soft seat when the lights went out. It was darker than nighttime. With one hand he grabbed his mother's arm, and with the other he found Rachel's hand. He took a deep breath and squeezed tight.

Then the curtain opened, and he was almost knocked over by the light, the color, the music. Creatures appeared that were many times bigger than anything he had ever seen. He wanted to ask, "Which one is God?" But he figured he was supposed to know without asking, and Mom might get upset that he hadn't paid attention in Sunday School.

Rachel gave him a hug, and whispered to him, "They look alive, but it's just a trick. Look up. See that beam of light? That's where the pictures come from. They're just light on a screen. Nothing to be afraid of."

"Oh, I'm not afraid," he answered, then quickly looked over at Mom to see if she was mad at him and Rachel for talking. But Mom was just staring at the screen and smiling.

Cartoons switched to newsreels, to previews, to a Tarzan serial, to the feature. To Charlie, it was all one long sequence of pictures — one surprise after another — everyday-looking people and things mixed together with storybook characters, like in a dream.

Rachel leaned over and whispered. "I used to live in Kansas. But I never saw a tornado," she added.

"What's a tornado?"

"That is," she said, pointing to the screen, where wind was blowing things every which way.

When the movie switched from black-and-white to full color, Charlie jumped like he had when light first hit the screen.

Afterwards Charlie remembered Rachel's words more clearly than the words of the movie. And the pictures he remembered best were the ones that she named and described as he watched. Years later, he would say that her voice had controlled a camera shutter in his mind. "Ruby shoes... Munchkins... Scarecrow... Tin Woodman... Lion... " — one snapshot after the other, held forever in memory.

When the Great Oz first spoke, Charlie leaned toward Rachel and whispered, "Is he God?" But she didn't answer.

The cackling laugh of the Wicked Witch of the West cut into him. The Witch scared him so much it hurt. He shut his eyes and tried to think of other things.

He slept through the rest of the movie, his scary dreams mixing with

sounds and images from the movie.

He was glad when it was over and they were safely out on the sidewalk again.

Then Rachel started singing the rainbow song, and Mom joined in. Rachel took one hand of his and Mom the other, and they started dancing and skipping up the street, chanting, "Lions, and tigers, and bears! Oh, my!" It was like they were kids with him or he was a grownup with them. He laughed like he'd never laughed before, and hugged them both with abandon. And they hugged back like he was the most important person in the world and they both wanted him all to themselves.

That day, and every day for a week, Charlie kept talking about the movie and asking questions. Rachel read the book to him. Then they went to see the movie again the next Saturday, and the Saturday after. Gradually, he began to see the story, instead of just pieces. He was fascinated with it, and he loved the grownup attention he got when he talked about it.

"Is our house like that, Mom?" Charlie asked at bedtime. "Can it take us to another world?"

"Charlie, don't be silly. That's just a story, like a dream."

"You mean dreams aren't real?"

"I suppose they're real in their own way. But things aren't what they seem in dreams. One thing stands for another."

He didn't know what that meant so he asked, "Do you dream, Mom?"

"Of course," she answered. "We all do. That's part of being human — like remembering and building things and talking and reading."

"What do you dream, Mom?"

"Lots of times I dream of houses," she admitted.

"Ones that fly and fall on wicked witches?" he asked.

"No, I dream of the house I grew up in. Sometimes the house has extra rooms — attics on top of attics, and passageways leading to new passageways. Some are empty, and some are storage areas, like at our summer house, with trunks and boxes stacked high. I go wandering through those rooms, from one to another, opening boxes, looking for a lost recipe as if the world depended on my finding it. Or I walk into a room that's furnished like a living room, well kept and dusted, with a warm cup of tea sitting on the table, waiting for the owner, whoever she may be, to come back. Or I wake up in a strange bed in one of those rooms, and can't find the passage that will get me out again. Sometimes I think I catch a glimpse of your sister Sue, playing hide-and-seek in those rooms."

"Have you ever seen me there?" he asked.

"No, I haven't seen you or Rachel in my dreams, not yet. But I will some day. I'm sure of it. That's the way dreams are."

After that, Charlie made a habit of asking his mother about her dreams when he went to bed at night. Even when she was busy and in

a hurry, she would linger a few minutes to answer his questions. And his own dreams, instead of jumping from here to there to everywhere, like they had before, began to resemble the dreams she told him — often dealing with huge old houses with unexplored rooms. He was no longer afraid of falling asleep.



Twenty-four stories plus self-contained excerpts from nine novels, ranging from romance to mind-twisting fantasy to realism, to history. Some include elements of all of those.

Meter Maid Marion, How to Tutor a Ghost, The Third Tortoise

by Richard Seltzer

Order the complete book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13325.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**