



A Short Fiction from Michael Ehret

P.S.

A Touch of Love Story



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A sigh escaped Bonita Humphreys' throat. It startled her and woke Farrell, lying close to her on the couch. She rose, and like her shadow, the dog rose, too.

He had barked once since Friday at some imagined threat out the front window, but until her sigh the small house had remained silent. Good.

Bonita cleared the coffee cups from the end table, hooking them with her fingers. There were five—one for each day since. None her favorites. One had an open book on it and had come from the library. A cartoon character from a strip she didn't read grinned from another. One had a big chocolate bar on it. The other two were common. Like her.

On the way to the sink, her slippers flip-flopping on the linoleum, she sidestepped the diningroom table. On Wednesday she'd tossed the card on the table and arranged the other papers so it looked as though she'd covered it accidentally. She would waste no more time with it.

Farrell gazed up at her, his "walk" look in his eyes. He had been outside since Friday, of course. After all, she'd found no messes. But five days was a long time for a dog to go without a walk. Still, no. No walk today. Maybe she would brush him, but probably not.





The cups joined the dishes piled on the counter. One of the common ones tipped and clattered, sounding like an avalanche in the quiet. The odor of the days-old coffee assaulted her nose as it trickled to the edge of the counter with enough oomph to dribble over the edge and create a small puddle on the floor. Farrell sniffed it and gave a tentative lick. He shook his head, “puppy-eyed” once more in her direction, and moved to lie in front of the slider that opened to the back yard. Bonita left the coffee as well. There was always tomorrow. Or the next day.

Since the days had become cold, Farrell liked to sit near the glass of the door and watch the world go by. However, there was no room on the floor for Bonita, and even if there was, getting down would be much easier than getting up. Besides she was already shivering in her nightie from the night before. Or was it the night before that?

She walked over to join Farrell at the slider, holding her cup of coffee. She caught her reflection in the window as she raised the cup to her mouth. In that cold mirror of sorts, she noted the sag of her breasts and the roundness of her hips. Charlie’s eyes had always looked at her with appreciation, but now Bonita saw only imperfection. The gray January sky drooped, smothering the rooftops of the homes in her neighborhood.

Farrell looked up at her, hopeful. But since the snow was beginning to swirl, Bonita sighed again and turned back toward the living room, stopping momentarily at the table to sift through the mail.

Except for the card. She wouldn’t chance the card. Not today. Maybe not ever again.

She picked up and set down a magazine and the phone bill. The church newsletter caught her eye, but just for a second. “Does God Grieve...” was all the headline she saw before relegating it again to the table. As she set it down, her fingers brushed against the card and the touch stole her breath away. She reached for it and



stopped, hovering like a claw in the Dollar-A-Shot game at Walmart.

No, I won't. Not today. Not again. And yet. With every bit of good sense she possessed, she ordered her hand to her side—then watched it betray her and lift the card off the table. The love inside that card ignited her hand and forced her to fall into the chair—or to the floor.

She chose to sit as the memory took her.



“Bonita?”

Charlie called from the garage.

“Bonita, come out here and see this, love.”

She laughed and ignored him. This was their game—she could hear it in his voice. Even though they'd only been married two years, Bonita could read Charlie's voice. Not that his intent right now was hard to catch.

“Bowneeeetah. Come to me.”

She giggled, then slapped a hand over her mouth.

“I have a present.”

She moved closer to the garage door, but kept her back to it, straightening things on the counter. Outside, the sun sparkled like Charlie's eyes—especially when he laughed. She must not laugh—must not!—or she would lose.

The garage door opened and she heard Charlie step into the kitchen.





“Wipe your feet! I just cleaned in here.” She clapped her hands. Pretending to be angry sometimes helped her keep from laughing—sometimes not.

“Suppose I just take my shoes off, then?”

She shrugged and soon—too soon—heard his shoes dropping on the floor.

“I have a present for you, Bonita.”

She held out her hand without turning around and felt a little quiver in her shoulder blades.

“Oh, it won’t fit in your hand.”

Bonita flushed as a familiar warmth flowed through her.

“Just set it on the table then.”

“No, I want to give it to you personally.”

She bit her lip and braced herself. “It’ll wait,” she said, dismissing him with a flip of her hand. “It’s card night, Charlie. I have to get things ready for Monie and Jake.”

“Bowneeetah.”

“Oh, all right.” She turned, hands on her waist, mouth pursed. I will not laugh. I will not laugh.

But she may as well have promised she wouldn’t breathe.

She laughed. How could she not? He was wearing nothing but her gardening hat



and apron—and that silly grin. Oh, yes, she laughed. And she lost. But losing never felt so good.



Bonita dropped the card as the memory faded. Her hand, at long last, returned to her side as ordered.

Her breathing had become ragged—she'd inhaled glass shards and exhaled gravel. How was this breath not her last? Why did she still live? Farrell edged closer, his wet nose nudging her hand. His action urged her to “touch me, touch me, touch me,” and all would be better.

She reached for the card again, and why not? It only moved her once a day. One trip that ripped her heart out. She could touch the card now and be safe.

“I should throw it out.”

She should have tossed it immediately after she'd gathered enough courage to open it on Monday after the funeral. She'd figured then that she was so numb nothing could possibly make things worse.

She'd been wrong.

Outside the slider the neighborhood children walked home from school. The smaller ones were bundled in their heavy coats, hats, boots, and mittens. Some even wore snow pants, as well.

She almost smiled. The little ones in the snow pants waddled a bit—like penguins. Her fingers caressed the card again.





There was nothing special about it. On the cover a single penguin stood on an ice floe, staring with head slightly cocked. In a balloon, the penguin said, “Hey, I heard it’s your birthday.” Then when the card opened, several more penguins stood inside, each with a smile on his face. “Enjoy a few cold ones—on us,” the lead penguin said with a wink.

“The card’s perfectly ridiculous. I don’t even drink.” So why did it hold such power over her?

But she knew why. It wasn’t the card, which truly was ludicrous, even for Charlie. It was the message inside.

My love, your birthday is the second happiest day of my life—after our wedding—because without that day, I would not have all of these days.

Always, love Charlie.

P.S.

The card fell from her fingers, returning to the pile on the table.

The P.S. was, as always, empty. It had been over the years. P.S., then nothing. Charlie’s shorthand way of letting her know he was always thinking of her, that he had more to say to her. It meant he loved her, even more than the “love, Charlie.”





Sometimes it meant The Game was on his mind. He had written P.S. on her grocery list once and she'd hardly been able to concentrate on her shopping. Another time it had appeared on one of the monthly bank statements and she'd never been quite sure that month had balanced.

But most times it just meant she was on his mind, like an "X" or an "O" meant kisses and hugs.

"Why don't you ever fill in the 'P.S.?' she'd asked him early on.

He'd just smiled, taken her hand, and kissed the back of it—as if he were an English gentleman and she a lady of high breeding. That was the memory that had first come back when she touched the card.

Over the years she'd come to anticipate the vacant P.S., even looking for it first. Charlie'd never said "Goodbye" either. It was always, "See you later, 'Nita," or "Be back soon," or "Wait up for me, won't you, love?" It was his way of keeping the connection between them alive—and she loved him for it. At least she had until Friday. Now it tormented her.

What is that one more thing? What last phrase would he have written if he'd known he was going to have a heart attack and die on her birthday?

Bonita's hand dropped from the table to hang, useless, at her side. Farrell, as always, was right there, nuzzling her. She stroked his nose gently, her hand moving to pass over his head and around behind his ears—his favorite spot. She rubbed his right ear first, then the left. When she was done with his ears, an exhaustion overtook her and she laid her head on the table, her arms coming up to encircle her head.





“Bonita? Honey?”

Not now, Charlie. I’m so tired.

“Nita, are you okay?”

I’m fine, just let me sleep, honey.

“Bonita! Now, you’re frightening me. It’s Ramona. ‘Nita, wake up!”



Bonita climbed out of sleep, groping for consciousness. Her neck stiff from the awkward position, her eyes reluctant to see the tiny dining room once again, she groaned as she lifted her head and saw Ramona’s worried face.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” Bonita said.

Ramona’s arms encircled her with the first hug she’d had since the funeral. That simple human touch opened the floodgates of her grief. She wept.

Soon her friend was lifting her to her feet. As Bonita fell into her embrace, she could feel tears on Ramona’s cheeks that matched her own.

For many moments, Ramona’s frail arms held her up. Not having to support her own weight, let alone the weight of Charlie’s passing, was a blessing Bonita hadn’t realized she needed. She didn’t focus on the card, the funeral, Farrell, or even Charlie. She mourned and it consumed her, the howl of her grief sounding like the keening of a pack of wolves.

“ ‘Nita? Why didn’t you call?” Ramona stroked her hair.

Reluctantly, Bonita left Ramona’s embrace to rummage on the dining room table for the box of tissues.

“Oh, Monie, dear, you know—I meant to. But the days ... passed.”





“Well, I knew I should have come over,” Ramona organized the mounds of dirty dishes on the counter and began loading the dishwasher. “But I assumed you’d gone to your family when I didn’t see your car.”

Bonita watched her friend scurry around her messy kitchen, making things right again, but avoiding her gaze. Ramona “tsked” over the coffee cups. Swiped up the spilled coffee. Clucked over the lack of food in the fridge. Fussed over “poor Farrell.” The care in these actions nearly brought a smile to Bonita’s face—until she looked down at the table and saw the card.

That silly penguin is smirking at me.

But with Ramona there, she was able to avoid the card. Instead she picked up the church newsletter.

Again she saw “Does God Grieve When We Grieve?” on the front.

She and Charlie had visited the church three or four times last year. After the first visit, someone had stopped by with a coffee mug full of candy and brochures. The pastor—was his name Juan?—had telephoned a day or two later. Subsequent visits to the church had produced no further contact except the monthly newsletters, which Bonita read religiously. Still, she had liked the church and the pastor’s sermons, even though Charlie had been unimpressed.

She’d known God well, once—before Charlie. But Charlie had become everything to her over the years. Attending church had never been a priority for him, though, so she’d let it drop, too.

“It’s not that I don’t believe,” Charlie had always said. “I don’t have to go to a church building to worship God. I could worship God on the golf course.”

But he hadn’t.



Now and then he'd watch the preachers on TV with her, and she could almost always get him to go on Christmas and Easter. But he liked to make sport of what he called their "fiery" approach to life.

Her eyes scanned Pastor Juan's article. It was fairly standard stuff, she supposed. She glanced at it again and a phrase leapt off the page. Still staring at the newsletter, she called out to Ramona.

"Monie, listen to this, 'For every desert of grief, God has an oasis of grace.'"

Ramona stopped puttering at the sink. "What was that again, dear?"

"'For every desert of grief, God has an oasis of grace.' That's what the pastor says in here. Do you think that's true?"

Bonita handed the column to her friend as Ramona sat at the kitchen table. Her finger pointed to the phrase in question. She watched as Ramona read. Then Ramona's eyes went to the top of the article and started again. Tears soon splashed onto the newsletter.

Bonita reached a comforting hand across the table and laid it atop Ramona's quivering one.

"Yes, 'Nita, I believe that's true," Ramona laid the newsletter down, swallowed heavily and looked at her friend.

"The truth is, I didn't think you were with family," Monie looked away. "I stayed away because Charlie's death made me think about Jake, again. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Bonita stared at her lap. So, she wasn't the only one still hiding. Farrell nudged from under the table again, and she stroked the dog's long snout, receiving his kiss with gratitude.



Bonita reached to stroke Monie's cheek and her friend turned back, eyes moist.

"It hasn't been that long for you, has it?" Bonita asked. "Less than a year."

The two women sat at the still-messy table, lost in their memories and their friendship. Bonita picked up the card and looked at the signature again. "Love, Charlie. P.S." Keep the connection alive, vital.

"I'm going back to church Ramona. Soon."

Ramona nodded. "An oasis of grace."

Bonita looked out the slider window. A shaft of light broke through the dense clouds, briefly. Farrell saw it too. He stood, his tail wagging.

"Alright boy, we'll walk. Let me get dressed."





Bio



Michael Ehret loves to play with words. He is the author of the novel “Beyond December” and the novella “Big Love.” He’s currently working on his third book and enjoying his writing playground.

Previous playgrounds include being the Managing Editor of the magazine “ACFW Journal” and the ezine “Afictionado” for seven years. He also plays with words as a freelance editor and has edited several nonfiction books, proofedited for Abingdon Press, edited for Scrivenings Press, worked in corporate communications, and reported for “The Indianapolis Star.”

He is married to Deb (for 43 years) and they have three children and one dog, a Mini Goldendoodle named Toby.

Find Michael here:

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Also Available from Michael Ehret

Beyond December



Marriage is for life, but love lives on.

Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm; for love is as
strong as death, its jealousy
unyielding as the grave.

Song of Songs 8:6

Newspaper editor **Zak Cooper** knows his wife, Kay, is dead. She died mere weeks before Christmas and his newspaper covered the story extensively.

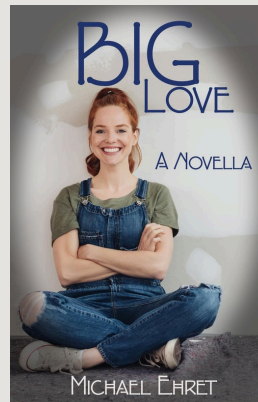
So why is he seeing Kay around town and why is she talking to him? Are they "bereavement hallucinations," as his doctor suggests? Or is it something more?

And what about **Jenny Miller**, new in town with her young daughter? A daughter similar in age to what Zak's daughter would be if she'd lived?

Can Zak move beyond this life, this love? Can he move beyond December?

A Touch of Love Story

Big Love



Can they find big love in a tiny house?

I want the fairy tale, the Big Love.
That's what I was sold and that's what I bought.

Berly Charles remembers growing up a razor's edge from homelessness in Indianapolis, IN. The experience planted a tiny desire for home in her heart that she now fills for others by building their tiny home ideals. Now she has the opportunity to take her tiny house company big time—will he stop her?

Nathan "Rafe" Rafferty is a writer for the nationally reputed architecture journal who is used to calling his own shots and covering the biggest and the best architectural accomplishments of the modern world. But when his hipster, much younger, editor assigns him to cover a new trend—tiny houses—the assignment stirs unpleasant memories and thoughts of revenge.

Michael Ehret





Welcome!

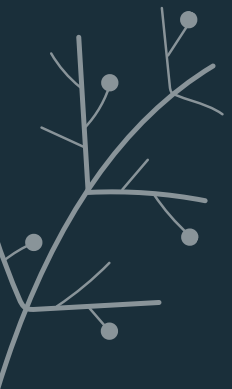
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