
**DON'T
FENCE ME IN**

— *A Novel* —

DOUGLAS H. YOUNG

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**DON'T
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Books by Douglas H. Young

The Tidy Bowl Man Lives

Jiffy John

HT-HT

Don't Fence Me In

Nonfiction

How Peace Came to the World
(Co-contributor)

For
my daughter,
Jean Danielle

*The race is not won by the swift or the strong,
It's won by he who endures until the end.*

Irving Fryar - Wide Receiver,
Miami Dolphins

...To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Ulysses - Lord Tennyson

SUNDAY

Chapter 1

THE LUMINOUS HANDS on his wristwatch glowed evenly at two-thirty. What had awoken him? Tremors? The evening news had reported shifting on the fault line, slight tremblings like yesterday. Then again his sleep could have been broken by the disturbing dream that had recently graced his slumbering hours: From out of blackness, suddenly would come the green-white beams of brilliant light; and at their intersecting site, the serpent coiled, its jaws agape, the drooling fangs about to strike. There was a sort of evil poetry in the image which would slowly fade and leave him wide awake till morning.

But tonight there had been no snake. He was alert, listening, seeing shadows play about the room in oddball shapes and changing forms.

Was he imagining muffled voices downstairs? Could he have left the TV on? Had his VCR reactivated a preset schedule? Better check.

He eased from the bed quietly and put on his slippers.

Walked gingerly to the top of the stairs.

Paused.

Shuffling, then a thump.

Maybe *Mouse*, the cat, prowling. It was everywhere and nowhere. *Mouse* hated him; fizzed, spat, and whined when he was near. Maude loved her, and had named the creature according to some humor that escaped him.

The mynah bird, Plato, was his favorite. Could even say *truth*, other things. A speaking gem.

Muttering, light footsteps coming from the study.

Perspiration tickled his ribs.

He crept to the landing where the stairs turned left at the night light. Orangish glow, shadows. Needed his glasses.

What could he do anyway? Skinny. Short. Wispy hair crawling toward baldness; he wasn't exactly a man of action, the swashbuckling hero.

He recalled Plummer's comment on his fiftieth birthday: "Been an antiseptic half century, old boy, hasn't it. A Listerine cocktail, that's what you are: a gargle of a man. What say?" Then there'd been the usual braying laugh.

Satyrical ass. Plummy's mind held the attraction of swamp gas to those who ventured close enough to get a whiff.

He peered downstairs questioning his prowess, the pluses and minuses of confronting the intruders. Would they flee or fight? Bash him about? Yes indeed, there could be violence, injury.

He'd pulled muscle, sprained and wounded appendages in a diversity of minor activities: lifting a teacup, bending for slippers, reaching for a towel. His body concealed a wealth of nasty practical jokes that could be inflicted given the slightest encouragement.

Moonlight caught them. Two: one rangy; hair, a whitish sheen; the other black, squat—a hydrant. His new equipment—TV, stereo, VCR—was piled high in their arms.

The high-tech splurge had been expensive, at least to a philosophy professor on average salary.

"Truth," screeched Plato. "Damn truth."

The larger man moved toward the cage.

He wouldn't harm...

"Can it," squawked the bird.

Goddamn little was all he heard from the burglar before losing his balance.

With a shout, he slid and rolled downstairs, lay sprawled on the rug at the bottom.

The men dropped everything.

The black one stared at him for a moment, eyes gleaming, teeth a glistening white in the moonlight.

He grinned. "Be seein' yuh, *Sweetness*," he whispered, "we all be back. Ciao."

Maude's voice came from the bedroom, concerned, loud, as he picked himself up off the floor. Miraculously, he seemed in one piece, unhurt.

"Oliver, you alright, dear? Is everything...?"

"Maude! Me. Fine. I'm here. It's Pavarotti. Recorded earlier. Too loud. Up soon. I'll be there."

"Late Oliver, it's late. Lights, dear, don't forget."

"Yes, Maude. Coming."

Wouldn't do to tell her about intruders, thieves. Never'd happened before, ever. She was so—timid? No, not mousy, but shy-timid. Maybe *sensitive* was a better word. Aware of nuance, shadings, attuned to the unspoken. Had he ever told her that? But then she knew. Of course she did.

Violation of the house might appear to Maude to cast a sinister shadow upon their home, destroy the aura of peace and happiness it hopefully represented to her.

"Truth," muttered Plato softly, as Oliver took his equipment back to the den and carefully shoehorned himself into the old leather recliner.

Chapter 2

OLIVER LEANED BACK into the soft leathers of his favorite chair and tried to relax. Fine quiverings seemed to ripple from the tips of his toes to the ends of whatever hair still remained on his head. The sherry bottle was on the table beside him. A drink might help. He poured. Very good, although the wine had the taste—no, the smell—of shellac about it. The alcohol seemed to be unclutching his mind, easing its tremblings, and he wondered if the stuff dropped by the intruders still worked. That would allow him to watch the opera his amazing new machine had recorded while he and Dumfrey had philosophized time and space away into beery mists at Ye Olde Pubby Inne earlier in the evening.

Yes, he definitely liked Saturday nights; even better, he enjoyed the wee hours of Sunday morning, alone, the alcohol still warming, his mind alive: ideas, rationales, emotions, all tangled, balancing on some high wire that bridged the known and unknown poles of his life. A fine time to go solo with his thoughts, ponder the astrology of his personal universe.

No shooting star, he, not yet, probably never. Good old Bentlock, a planet moving slow, his axis firm and orbit set in the philosophy department of Custer University.

For a while he watched moonbeams touch and dance about his chair.

Then he flicked on a light. Best not to venture into the cosmos between his ears just yet. Later, perhaps with music and the great Pavarotti, he'd jump into his spacecraft and blast off.

The salesman had shown him how to operate the VCR and TV. *Easy*, he'd said. *Like sucking a lollipop*. Could he remember?: *Activate on Red*, the man had snapped, pointing to a button on the remote control. *Depress Red, release, then...*

A huge, almost naked man filled the screen. Purple jock, glistening body, boots laced to the knee. He bellowed and fisted air.

Oliver quickly depressed the "down" arrow under Volume.

The titan on screen leapt at another gigantic creature in black leather, hoisted him over his head with a grunt, then hurled him onto a mat circumscribed by a ring.

Wrestling? Had he set the technology on a wrong course, fingered incorrect settings? Whatever, this wasn't Luciano.

The man, spread-eagled on the mat, writhed and arched his back.

The other giant, bald pate glistening, straddled the unfortunate chap, pounded his head on the floor, then rose and planted his boot on the man's throat.

Good lord, where was the opera? Try controls on the set itself, forget the remote gizmo. The silver knob turned the picture red. A gold dial wasn't channel selection either. The volume zoomed. Damnation.

"That you again, Oliver? I..."

"Yes, dear. Me. Just adjusting things."

"Fine, Oliver, noise, I heard more... Loud, wondered...?"

"Pavarotti. He's still singing, Maude. Wonderful. Up soon, after the aria."

The leathered victim, arms at right angles to his body, whacked the mat, opened his mouth wide.

Good, the blue orb lowered sound. Now, he'd switch the station.

From the audience, a woman, mouth agape, ran towards the ring. Others fisted air. New barbarians were apparently attacking the winner.

He worked various dials on the set: twisting, pushing, yanking. Perhaps the machine would operate more effectively if he moved it from the table to his desk. Damn, the cord wouldn't reach. He tripped over it and went down on one knee; then placed the TV on the floor and crawled in front.

Men and women flooded the aisles.

Was that a split second of Luciano, great head raised, arms wide?

The screen faded into pointillist patterns, then snow.

He snapped off the desk lamp and tilted back in the recliner. Maybe time to doze, or perhaps think a few long thoughts: what he'd do when he became chairman of the department on Monday, the day Plummer retired, moved up to Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, holder of the Blotter Chair.

And there were other things to ponder as well.

Why had he recently become interested in detective fiction, stories of crime and murderers?—violence involving matters far removed from his ivied existence as a grey man in a pastel job where he had excelled in performing with outstanding mediocrity.

And as for his future? Certainly there wasn't a madman in the shadows seeking his death. But were there other forces, villainous energies, invisible creatures of the night, stalking him these days? What killers might have him, Oliver Bentlock, on their hit list? If this was only imagination, why then did he recently sense walls inching, creeping inexorably to crush and hold him fast? hear doors closing? glimpse dark rivers in his dreams where currents ran slick and oily black? In the past, he had kept such specters within boundaries, rarely allowed them to interfere with the main course of his life. To let these shrouded imaginings flood in upon him now could mean trouble, even drowning.

Most definitely the ideas were phantoms, ridiculous; all harmless imagination, male menopause, the jitters of a silly man. And yet somehow, he felt he had failed himself; had never really contended with what he could be; and as a consequence was about to pay a severe penalty exacted from unexpected quarters.

No doubt the paranoia of encroaching senility with its final trappings of canes, wheelchairs, coffins and interment made one wonder more and more about life: Why was it seemingly both hero and villain?: a serial killer who brought death to everyone in order to possibly grant them everlasting life, at least according to many scriptures. He'd catch a few winks and hopefully awake to a world shattering answer.

What was that?: a crickle-crackle of shrubbery near the window? Imagination? Probably *Mouse* hunting. She loved to roam the backyard at night, pounce on and devour unsuspecting creatures. Time for a cup of tea, then up to...

Tapping at the window? The cat couldn't do that. Perhaps a bush touching...? Again, louder—a rap. Dumfrey maybe. Had he stayed on at Pubby, got really drunk? Come over to play games, talk the night away? But then they had their special code: three knocks at the back door—two more after a pause. Could be Dum had forgotten the signal.

He got up and pulled the curtain. With a shout, he reeled backwards, tripped over the cord to the TV and sprawled on his back. Two faces leered at him; one black, the other white. Their tongues protruded, fingers at the corners of their mouths stretching them wide. Toques were pulled low over their foreheads.

He glanced at the window again. Nothing. Rubbed his eyes. Still no faces. But he'd seen them. Not imagination, an hallucination. Damn, no. They'd been there, alright.

Suddenly the white snow blitzing the TV burst into vivid picture.

A man, blood pouring from his nose, whirled a machete about his head; another advanced grasping a thick snake by the neck; it writhed and struggled savagely, fangs bared, tongue a flickering blur.

Oliver clicked off the set with trembling hands. Shaking, he trundled back upstairs. His body, sore and aching, was already beginning its revolt against his acrobatics on the stairs.

As he gingerly pulled himself in beside Maude, he felt a tightness of chest that he'd noticed recently, the slight ache, a mitt beginning its slow squeeze. Added now was a quivering that seemed to grow on his physical Richter scale until even the bed and room were part of his body. The tremors, another mini quake? Or was it a delayed reaction?: fear of what his visitors might have done to him with knives and crowbars and bullets—weapons that could have left him on his back upon the living room rug as his Being dissolved into a burgundy stain covering the odd patterns and mystic

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symbols of the oriental carpet that lay beneath him.

And would such a fate, this wretched end, have been as the wrestling on TV?: preordained, a master hand behind it all?

Head spinning, arms folded tight across his chest, he pondered this hypothetical—reality?—until sleep closed with waves of black that pinned him down and held him fast.