

# Alexander Santo

## Writer Portfolio

Custom news, corporate blogs, romance stories. If it can be written, I've probably been paid to do it. My versatility is one reason why I stay with my clients for the long term. No matter what twists and turns a project creates, I'm able to navigate them with professionalism and ease. Below are a few of my favorite commissioned pieces. Learn more at [AlexSanto.com](http://AlexSanto.com)

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## The Art of Retail Convenience

Convenience stores are so named because shoppers don't have to go very far out of their way to grab a few quick essentials on the way home. In many cases, convenience stores charge more for items that could be purchased elsewhere, but consumers don't balk at the upcharge because they would rather pay a little more if it means not driving the extra miles to a larger store. Even if your business doesn't make its money from selling quick snacks and lottery tickets, it should still strive to be as convenient as possible.

Here are a few ways you can make the shopping experience easier for customers.

### **Focus on the customer's needs above your own**

This point should be obvious, but according to a paper published in the MIT Sloan Management Review, many retailers put their own cost-saving measures ahead of customer convenience. For example, some retailers put out large displays that actually block the view of merchandise rather than promote it. Others put commonly purchased goods at the far end of the store to promote impulse shopping. This tactic might seem like a good idea, but more often than not, it is simply a barrier to convenience.

For instance, you might consider a large mirror to be a waste of valuable retail space. But if a customer has to walk across the entire store just to see what she would look like in a dress, she might just leave the item on the rack. All of Firefly's retail mirrors could help shoppers in your store make a purchase - and they fit nicely into most designs and themes.

The review further stated that most American consumers strongly desire to spend less time shopping and more time engaging in fulfilling activities at home. Your business can show customers that you respect and value their time by making the shopping experience as painless and quick as possible.

Millennials are one group of consumers that place a high value on free time. According to Bloomberg Business, millennials shop differently than previous generations. The generation has less money than its counterpart of twenty years ago, so millennials do a lot of research about a product before making a purchase. For retailers, this means it is important to provide as much information up front as possible, making it easier for consumers to find out what they want to know so they can make a purchasing decision more quickly. For instance, clothing merchants should consider having detailed photos and specifications about their products online, so shoppers can browse from home and then pick up the items in-store.

### **Convenience is ease of access**

Shoppers new to your store will experience a brief moment of acclimation as they get used to the new surroundings. If a customer comes inside looking for a specific product, she will probably scan the entire establishment looking for the appropriate section. Irisys, a retail

analytics company, said that this moment can often cause customers to look right past shopping carts and baskets. Then, you have a situation where a customer came into your store with a particular product in mind, went to seek that product, and then found herself without a basket. That's fine if the item they were looking for is small, but the lack of a basket prohibits any chance of further, spur-of-the-moment shopping.

This problem is easily combated by placing baskets throughout your store. Firefly's red shopping baskets are easily spotted, and as we've mentioned previously on the blog, warm colors promote action. If shoppers still aren't picking up the baskets themselves, try offering them to people holding three or more items. Frazzled customers will thank you for easing their cumbersome burden.

Shopping carts also play an interesting psychological role in the buying experience. The Consumerist reported that larger shopping carts actually encourage people to buy more products. Even if shoppers in your store don't typically buy pounds and pounds of merchandise the way they might in a grocery store, you can still benefit from having baskets or carts. The Consumerist said that the reason carts were invented at all was to increase the number of items a shopper would purchase.

### **Online carts aren't automatically convenient**

In theory, just having a cart on your website should make your online shopping experience more convenient. In some ways it does, but not all online carts are equal. Inc. magazine reported that 67 percent of online shoppers simply abandon their carts and 97 percent of shoppers on mobile devices never make it through the checkout. The magazine said that there are a few simple changes retailers can make to their sites to encourage purchasing. For example, online shoppers tend not to want to make an account to be able to check out - conversions go up by 45 percent when there's the option to check out as a guest.

When discussing the topic of abandoned online carts, Business Insider said that these digitally dusty carts are not necessarily a bad thing for retailers that exist offline. In many cases, shoppers researched products at home, put items in the online cart to remember them for later, and made the actual purchase in-store. Therefore, it's important that your site reflects the inventory you have available on-site.

If you don't sell products online, you can still take advantage of this concept by promoting specific products on your social media pages. Forbes reported that millennials not only like to engage with merchants on social media sites, they expect it. If you can provide information and feedback through your social media presence, consumers will not only feel more connected to your brand, they will be more likely to trust it. It's more comfortable for consumers to shop from a store that interacts with them than it is to buy from a silent, uncaring behemoth of a corporation.

Take a look at your store and think about the ways in which you can make it more convenient for shoppers. The easier the experience is, the more likely shoppers are to patronize your establishment.

## If the Schengen Area fails, what will it mean for EU workers?

The recent immigration crisis in Europe has caused heads of state to question the efficiency of the Schengen Area. French Prime Minister Manuel Valls and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban are skeptical of the Schengen Area's continued existence. Not only is Orban intent on reinstating border controls between Schengen countries, he has also proposed building a fence along the Greek and Macedonian/Bulgarian border, reported The Telegraph. Such measures are aimed at curbing illegal immigration into the EU. Already, an estimated 1 million people have entered the area illegally.

But what would the suspension of the free-travel zone mean for legal workers moving between states?

### **Understanding the difference between the EU and the Schengen Area**

The most important thing to understand about the Schengen rules for free movement is that they do not directly correspond to the EU's laws regarding cross-border travel between members. In fact, the Schengen Area also covers Switzerland, Norway and Iceland, which are not members of the EU. Passport holders of these countries are not required to get visas to travel across Schengen borders. The agreement was implemented in 1985. The current problems haven't been caused by complications with internal movement, but rather by issues with the external borders of the Schengen zone.

If the Schengen Area fails, EU citizens will still be able to travel between countries without a visa - however, they can expect their commute to get a little longer. The right to free movement is guaranteed by Article 45 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The article states that EU nationals and their family members may freely pass between states for the purpose of work or while in the pursuit of a job. While the Schengen rules are in place, these nationals do not need to present a passport while crossing the border. Therefore, if the rules were to be suspended, free travel would still be permissible, although traveling workers would be required to show their papers at the border. Commute time could become quite lengthy with such requirements.

Workers and their family members are also allowed to live in the country in which they are employed. If the Schengen rules are suspended, it should in no way affect the EU laws regarding living abroad. That said, many people are fearful that a suspension of the laws would create a domino effect that could potentially collapse other portions of the EU system. The French prime minister has been especially fond of prophesying such eventualities. The situation should be clearer after the next EU summit.

### **How are non-EU nationals affected?**

Non-EU nationals are required to have a 60-day Schengen Visa, which will in turn give them the right to apply for a residency permit. The process of obtaining the visa can be difficult and time-consuming, and so many serious applicants use a professional immigration services provider to expedite the process. In general, Schengen Visa applicants need to provide a number of documents, such as medical insurance policies, employment contracts and copies of their airline tickets, among others. Visa holders are typically checked at the external borders of the Schengen Area, then given the right to free movement once inside. If the rules are dissolved, international workers may face tighter security restrictions, though they will still be allowed to work in the EU, assuming they have the proper documentation.

### **A proposed deal with Turkey**

On Mar. 8, EU leaders came close to settling a major part of the immigration issue. Turkey, which is currently seeking entrance into the EU, has agreed to accept migrants from Greece in exchange for an equal number of Syrian immigrants. Additionally, the EU could potentially send €3 billion in funding to Turkey, reported RT. Nothing has been signed or officially documented yet, but both parties seem hopeful of a favorable outcome for all. The agreement could pull the Schengen Area away from the danger of dissolving.

## Safety concerns: Independent catering and craft service

Anyone who has worked in a restaurant knows what a difficult job it is to run a kitchen. There are so many moving pieces that it only takes one small failure to bring everything to a halt. Everyone from the manager to the chef down to the busboy has to do his or her job well for the whole operation to go smoothly.

Now consider grabbing that hectic experience, cramming it into a portable kitchen and taking it on the road. It sounds like an extreme test of patience, planning and organization - but it's what independent caterers do every day. Not only must they deal with typical kitchen duties, they must also plan timetables around traffic, transport fresh ingredients and do it all before lunchtime.

Whether it's for an engagement party, business function or film set, caterers have a lot on their plates. And sometimes safety can get placed on the back burner. Here are some ways cooks on the move can get their work done and stay safe at the same time.

### **The business of catering**

Becoming a freelance chef is a daunting task on its own. Not only does he or she have to develop his or her skills and move up the ranks in a traditional kitchen environment, but he or she has to then save up the money to buy or rent a portable kitchen, hire staff, order ingredients and find contracts for work. To the end user, hiring a caterer seems straightforward. You call up the company you want, pay the fees and enjoy the food. But the chef sees things differently.

Take craft service - the snacks and drinks served on a movie set - as an example. For many people in the film industry, it's craft service that helps everything run smoothly. The food table keeps everyone full and energized as well as provides a gathering place for people to hang out and relax between takes. According to National Public Radio, craft service can be responsible for feeding between 250 and 5,000 people, depending on the size of the set and the number of extras in a scene. That means getting up early in the morning and preparing everything for a long day of shooting - sometimes as long as 16 hours. Such a schedule can take a toll on the toughest people in the business, and it could lead to mistakes and safety concerns.

### **Catering safety best practices**

Research done by Southern Health Board and Employment Health Advisors in Cork, Ireland, found that students at a catering school had high rates of injury compared with other courses. Cuts, lacerations and burns topped the list of safety concerns. Anyone who has seen a hectic kitchen would know why such incidents are common: A kitchen in motion is a whirl of food, fire and knives. One wrong move and a chef could slip and fall, spill boiling water or cut him or herself.

When working in a small, portable kitchen, the key thing to be concerned with is space management. Any projects that can be moved to another area, such as salad prep, should be moved away from the main kitchen. But that won't necessarily make the kitchen a calm place. There's still lots to do and there's never enough time to do it. Wearing slip-resistant shoes is one way that kitchen staff can stay safe. Slipping and falling in the kitchen could prove to be extremely dangerous, not to mention the fact that it could hold up the entire operation.

Catering for large numbers of people is an exercise in controlled chaos. It's never going to be a walk in the park, but with the right mindset, the proper safety equipment and good space-management skills, it can still be a great experience.

# Childhood Exposure to Secondhand Smoke Increases Risk of AFIB

Many seniors grew up in a world where the hazards of tobacco smoke were not yet well known. In their youth, it was common to be around smoking adults. If that was the case, what can older adults do now to mitigate the damage that was done so many years before? Thankfully, early exposure to cigarette smoke is by no means a sure prescription for heart problems, especially if care has been taken to engage in an active lifestyle.

## **New Research**

A team of researchers led by Dr. Gregory Marcus of the University of California's Department of Medicine surveyed 4976 people concerning their exposure to secondhand smoke in early childhood. Of that number, nearly 12 percent reported having AFIB. The team found that having a mother who smoked during pregnancy or living with a parent who smoked increased the likelihood of having AFIB later in life, especially in those people who had no other significant risk factors. More research is necessary to confirm these findings - though it's enough to suggest that it's a good idea to keep children away from secondhand smoke.

## **Atrial Fibrillation**

AFIB is a type of irregular heartbeat that feels like a quiver or flopping motion. It is found most often in older adults and can cause serious health problems. The Heart Rhythm Society reported that AFIB can lead to chronic fatigue and actually increase one's risk of stroke by five times. Check out this post for more information about the signs and symptoms of AFIB.

## **Secondhand Smoke Facts**

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, secondhand tobacco smoke contains over 7,000 chemicals, 70 of which are known to cause cancer. It doesn't only negatively impact children, but can affect adults as well. Older adults are especially susceptible to the dangers of secondhand smoke. Exposure to exhaled smoke may cause damage to the heart and blood vessels of nonsmokers.

## **Foods That Can Help Prevent AFIB**

According to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, a diet that's low in trans fats can help prevent AFIB. Eating the food groups recommended by the Food and Drug Administration is another great way to reduce the risk of AFIB. A senior nutrition plan that aims to prevent AFIB should have at least six servings of whole grains each day. Having a side of brown rice or an appetizer of barley soup are two great ways to add more whole wheat to one's daily diet. Other dishes include whole wheat buns, cooked quinoa and cornmeal pancakes. The diet should also include four servings of fruits and vegetables every day. Replacing junk food with a piece of fruit is a great way incorporate healthy eating into your daily snacking.

**Exercises that can prevent AFIB**

Aerobic exercise is great for people who want to prevent AFIB. It's always important to talk with a medical professional before starting a new exercise regimen, but here are some great exercises to consider: vigorous walking, jogging, swimming, dancing and rowing. Even a little exercise every week can help seniors to stay active, but it's important not to exercise to the point of exhaustion.

Even if a person was exposed to secondhand smoke as a child, there are still ways they can prevent AFIB. By eating the right foods and getting the proper amount of exercise, older adults can stay fit.

## Tankless water heaters and water softeners: A good match?

When making the switch from a rusty old tank-style water heater to a new, compact tankless system, you might turn your attention to the quality of the water coming out of your faucets. You're saving energy and money by switching to a tankless model, but is there more you can do to ensure your bath water is sparklingly clear? If you live in an area with hard water, you may want to consider getting a water softener - it'll make your tap water taste better and it could extend the already long life of your new tankless heater.

### **What is hard water?**

According to Oregon State University, hard water is caused by minerals dissolved in the water, typically manganese, magnesium and calcium. The build up of these minerals could cause clothes to become yellow in the wash, skin infections from bacteria trapped in soap scum, and increased heating bills due to a reduced water heater efficiency. The university reported that 85 percent of American households have issues with hard water.

### **How does a water softener work?**

From the outside, a water softener may not look like much. But you may be wondering what's going on inside the tank. Start with the substance that does most of the work: resin. According to Pennsylvania State University, the resin is a sand-like material which is coated in positively charged sodium ions - atoms with more electrons than protons. Hard water flows through the resin, exchanging its sodium ions for the calcium and magnesium ions.

Eventually, the resin will have spent all its sodium ions. That's when the water softener switches into regeneration mode. Newer models do this automatically, though older ones may need to be switched manually. In this mode, a tank of brine washes over the resin, replacing the lost sodium ions and removing the mineral build-up. Salt typically only needs to be added to the system every six to eight weeks, though that time period will depend upon a number of factors, including the size of the unit and the amount of water used.

### **Softeners and heaters**

Electric tankless water heaters won't get as much mineral build-up as old-fashioned types simply because there isn't a tank in which minerals can get stuck. But that doesn't mean hard water won't have any effect. First of all, you have to decide whether or not you're fine with drinking hard water - it's not usually harmful to people, but it can taste odd and cause the problems mentioned above.

The Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, a unit under the Department of Energy, said that hard water will not negatively affect the daily operation of a tankless water heater. However, after many years of continual use, the minerals could build up and reduce the overall life of the machine. This is important to note because electric tankless water heaters have the longest

lifespan on the market. Softening your water could keep the device running smoothly for decades to come.

## How Supply And Demand Could Affect Your Morning Cup

Some of the largest exporters in the world - including Brazil, which exports approximately one-third of all the coffee in the world - are reporting that they cannot keep up with growing demand. It's estimated that production needs to rise by 50 million bags per year to keep up with the emerging markets. That would mean Brazil would have to double its already gigantic production in under a decade. While that would mean more jobs and perhaps even increased competition among growers and roasters, it's going to be a big trick to pull off.

The taste for coffee is spreading across the globe.

### **What's Causing the Issue?**

There are several factors impacting the supply and demand issue but chief among them is the fact that more and more people across the globe are drinking coffee. What was once a predominantly western drink has spread to every continent. Scandinavia, eastern Europe and the majority of English-speaking countries are still at the top of the list of coffee consumers, but drinking coffee is a growing trend in Asia, especially in the sprawling metropolitan areas. The faster the global economy moves, the more coffee people are drinking to keep up with it.

Other factors are harder to pin down, though droughts are to blame for some withered coffee crops. The most common species of coffee beans can only grow at high altitudes in subtropical latitudes, which means that if those areas become affected by drought, it is nearly impossible to relocate crops. Therefore, growers may have to turn to better forms of irrigation. The worst case scenario for many farmers is having to switch to a more stable crop. Because coffee beans are very picky about where they will grow, it's often easier for growers to simply switch to a hardier crop.

### **What Can You Do?**

The best thing you can do is to keep drinking coffee. Is that what you expected to hear? Well, the truth is that if coffee lovers continue to support sustainable, fair-trade coffee, growers will be more likely to continue to plant more coffee crops. The next time you load your [Client Name]® Blade Grinder with freshly roasted beans, take an extra moment to enjoy the great smell of coffee grounds and the anticipation you feel as you brew that first cup of the day.

Coffee lovers around the world can come together to solve it before it becomes a problem. If there's any group of people who can get things done, it the millions of people around the globe who enjoy drinking coffee every day.

## 4 Exercises To Help You Look Great In Leggings

Leggings are a surprisingly versatile part of your wardrobe - though most people can agree it's not very fashionable to wear them as pants. Nevertheless, leggings work well with long sweaters, flowing blouses or even a baggy army jacket. However, leggings don't leave much to the imagination, so sometimes it requires a bit of work to feel completely comfortable in them. This winter, you'll probably add some patterned knit leggings to your outfits when it gets cold. If you want to feel your best, try out some of these awesome lower-body exercises. And don't forget to clip on your nuyu™ Activity Tracker to keep count of how many calories you're burning.

### 1. Toe Walking

This is a simple exercise you can do outdoors or from the comfort of your home. Grab a pair of one pound or half-pound dumbbells and stand straight up with your feet shoulder-width apart. Hold the weights down by your sides - without locking your elbows- and stand on your toes. Walk on your toes for a minute, then relax for 30 seconds. Repeat five times.

### 2. Goblet Squat

This odd-sounding exercise requires a 5-to-8 pound dumbbell with wide ends. Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and hold the dumbbell vertically by one end, using the base of your palms. Your hands should be positioned so that they resemble the position of cupping a goblet. Squat as low as you can, hold for a moment, then return to the standing position. Do this eight times, rest for 30 seconds, and repeat.

### 3. Side Lunge

Stand with your feet placed shoulder-width apart to ensure you don't accidentally injure yourself. Lunge to the right, bending your right knee while extending your left leg. Keep your toes pointed forward. Extend your left arm until it touches the floor in front of you. Your right hand should be touching your right hip. Hold the position for a moment, then return to a standing position. Repeat on alternating sides, five times each.

### 4. Sun Salutation

Here's a yoga pose that really works your upper legs and backside without putting too much strain on your body. This is a great exercise for beginners, especially those who don't have any exercise equipment. Start by standing straight and raising your hands up toward the ceiling. Then bend forward and place your hands on the floor on either side of your feet. Bend your knees slightly and move your legs backward until you are in the downward-facing dog position. Lower your legs and push your chest upward, then slowly return to a standing position.

# How to Travel Like a Frequent Flyer Pro

Traveling the world comes with some built-in complications. Nowadays booking the trip is so simple - all it takes is a few clicks - that you can easily forget about the difficulties that can emerge on other parts of your journey. From getting to the airport and going through security to getting lost in a foreign country, there are many pitfalls you could accidentally stumble into. However, if you follow a few simple tips, you'll be able to travel the world like pro.

Learn to stop stressing out about travel complications with these tips:

## **1. Get to the airport ahead of time**

If you're traveling domestically, getting to the airport an hour ahead of your boarding time should give you all the breathing space you need. Unless you're flying near a national holiday, the hour should give you time enough to check in, hand over your checked bags and pass through security. If you're flying internationally, give yourself two hours - you'll have to go through customs, which can be unpredictable at times.

## **2. Check in with your phone**

Most airlines allow you the option to check in from your computer or phone up to 24 hours prior to departure. This means you can either print your boarding pass at home or simply bring it up on your smartphone. Checking in ahead of time is ideal for travelers without checked luggage. You can walk straight through to security without even looking at the ticket counter.

## **3. Dress for flying**

Going through security means you'll have to take off your jacket, shoes and belt. Keep this in mind as you dress on the day of your flight. You'll want to wear comfortable clothing - but don't wear your pajamas. Business Insider recommended wearing closed-toed shoes in case of an emergency - but they're also a good for avoiding getting your toes stepped on. If you want to wear a jacket and belt, consider putting them in your carry-on luggage to speed up your transit through security.

## **4. Keep your eye on cheap tickets**

It's a common misconception that travel has to be expensive. If you know where you want to go for vacation, look for tickets early so you can get an idea of the prices. For international travelers, calling the ticket seller's customer service department can sometimes get you a great deal. Traveling on a budget doesn't mean you have to limit your destination options.

## **5. Remember the rules**

The TSA has many guidelines regarding the objects they allow onboard planes. The rule that many fliers come up against most often is the regulation of liquid products. If you're traveling for an extended period of time, place all of your liquids - shampoo, contact lens solution, etc. - in

your checked baggage. Otherwise measure everything carefully so that it meets the TSA's guidelines.

## New Amsterdam Theatre [landing page]

The premier place to see Disney Broadway productions, the New Amsterdam Theatre was first opened in 1903, making it one of the oldest Broadway theatres. The building is rather narrow and offers seating for about 1,700 audience members. During the Great Depression, the theater was forced to close. A few years later it reopened as a movie house and remained so until the late 1980's when, in a court battle, the State and City of New York took over ownership of the building. In 1995, Disney signed a 49-year contract to lease the building and put on theatrical productions.

The building finally reopened in 1997 with the premiere of the animated movie "Hercules." Shortly thereafter, "The Lion King" moved from Minneapolis, Minnesota, to the New Amsterdam Theatre where it was met with great success. It is currently the third-longest running show ever and the highest grossing production of all time, having made over \$1 billion.

The New Amsterdam Theatre is located at 214 West 42nd Street, near Times Square, in Manhattan.

The venue is currently running "Aladdin," based on the 1992 animated film. The Broadway production earned about \$1.6 million in one week in August 2014.

## Cheap Flights [landing page]

### **Looking for cheap flights? Look no further**

[Client Name] should be your No. 1 place to go for cheap flights because we have some of the most competitive ticket prices on the Internet. Our wholesale contracts with many of the major airlines allow us to sell tickets for as much as 60% off the original price. Whether you're traveling for business or leisure, domestically or internationally, we have the deals you need. And if you still need help finding a cheap flight, our travel experts can assist you seven days a week. We'll do everything we can to make sure you have the trip of your dreams.

### **Hundreds of amazing destinations**

No matter where you need to go, we have the cheap tickets you need. If you have a meeting in London, Hong Kong, Paris or Rome, we'll make sure you get there in style - and without hurting your travel budget. On the other hand, if it's relaxation you're looking for, we have tons of cheap flights to Florida, Las Vegas, Hawaii and Mexico. You're just a few clicks away from scoring cheap airline tickets to your favorite destination.

Within the United States, [Client Name] has flights to popular destinations for under \$200. And you don't have to break the bank to see the rest of the world, either. Our insanely cheap flights to the capitals of Europe will give you the chance to splurge on more fun once you get there! Beach lovers now have nearly instant and affordable access to the white sands of Fort Lauderdale, Montego Bay, Thailand and many others across the globe.

### **Talk to an expert**

Need help finding a flight? Our team of travel experts is ready and willing to help. They can get you amazing deals on airline tickets, hotels and vacation packages. And these aren't just salespeople - our knowledgeable staff can help you plan every aspect of your trip. For business travel buyers, our staff can assist you in getting great deals on tickets to the top destinations, from Dubai to San Francisco. Call today to book a cheap flight and get helpful travel tips.

### **Connections that count**

Our wholesale contracts with the major airlines give us an advantage over individual buyers and other competitors. We pass these savings directly onto you, meaning your tickets will be at the best prices available. The cost of a flight to New York or Los Angeles, for example, might fluctuate as demand changes, but we'll make sure you get the best deal possible. Don't bother refreshing ticket prices a hundred times a day - you have better things to do! [Client Name] will find the cheap flights for you.

### **Last-minute flights are no problem**

Your travel plans can't always be scheduled months in advance. If you need a last-minute flight to Toronto - or any other destination - we've got you covered. Cheap flights can be found at any time, not just weeks prior to departure. Our website and team of experts will help to ensure that

your last-minute flight goes smoothly, so you can relax and focus on what's important. After all, nothing takes the stress away like a last-minute pair of cheap tickets to your favorite beach.

## Excerpt From YA Thriller

[...] Three years earlier Luke didn't know Heather or her husband Brian, but they had known him as the annoying neighbor kid with the loud car. He had worked a year to save up enough money to buy a beaten up '92 Mustang. The vehicle belched exhaust like a volcano's caldera before an eruption and it burned oil faster than the Deep Horizon incident. It was rusted in patches, its windshield was cracked, and its muffler only held on with duct tape—hence the loudness—but it was Luke's baby. When he wasn't in high school, he was either tinkering with his car in the garage or browsing for parts online.

His family lived in a rural area outside of Pine Bluff, Arkansas where the houses were separated by huge lawns or even fields. Brian and Heather Morris lived three quarters of a mile down the road on a fifty acre plot of land. Brian ran an auto shop out of his pole barn, only doing enough work to pay the taxes and buy the groceries. He had met Luke only once and told him to get his muffler fixed before he left it in a parking lot or it flew off at another car. Luke had grinned and told Brian he was on his way to buy some duct tape just for that purpose.

On the day Luke was to formally meet Brian and Heather, and come to know them very well, he was off school for the summer and racing down the road after dropping off his little brother at soccer practice. His plans for the day were ordinary for a teenager. He wanted to get burgers in Pine Bluff with his friend Max and see a movie at night. But first he had to go home and shower. It had been a while since his last one.

On the way to the soccer field, Luke's brother had tuned the radio to a terrible top 40 station. It was the sort of station where celebrity gossip was considered breaking news, so Luke was surprised to hear them bantering about the war. The male DJ did a bad Russian accent while the female DJ just repeated, "Oh my god, ha ha! Oh my god!" over and over again. Luke switched them off.

He slowed for a turn and just as he placed his foot back on the accelerator something clunked and snapped. Suddenly he could only turn the wheel with a great effort, as if something was caught under the wheels. He hit the brakes, took the key out of the ignition, and angrily shoved open his door.

He first checked under the body and saw nothing blocking the tires. Pushing himself to his feet, he felt certain he knew what the problem was, and it wasn't one he could fix out here. Opening the hood confirmed his suspicions. The drive belt had snapped like a rubber band and it lay across the engine, limp and useless.

The road was dead. It never saw much traffic at all, and it could be a while before anyone drove past. Luke figured he was only a mile from his house. It was a straight shot there, but he didn't

think he could push the car without help. Then he remembered Morris Motors. The faded sign hung from a wooden pole at the end of Brian and Heather's driveway. Luke snapped his fingers, locked his car, and took off at a jog. He arrived at the sign in a few minutes and trotted down the long driveway to the small, blue house. As he was looking for the doorbell, a voice accosted him from behind.

"Well, if it ain't Mr. Muffler," Brian Morris said. "Where's that wreck you drive around at a hundred miles an hour?"

Luke turned and found Brian wiping his greasy hands on a greasier cloth. He was tan, wore overalls, and looked like he was struggling to keep off the extra pounds. Luke cocked a thumb toward the road. "Busted the drive belt coming off of Shacklee Trail."

Brian nodded and heaved a sigh. He shoved the dirty rag into his pocket and said, "All right then. Let's go get it."

In a few minutes they had taken Brian's small tow truck up the road, hitched up Luke's busted car and returned to Morris Motors. Heather's car was in the driveway, and she was standing on the front porch, watching them come in.

Brain pulled the tow truck up to his pole barn and leaped out. He hailed his wife with an odd whoop. "I caught one, honey! We're gonna eat well tonight!" As Luke got out of the truck and came around, Brian pointed at him. "I know he looks like skin and bones, but I tell ya, he'll be good eating!"

Luke looked anxious. Heather laughed. "Brian, stop scaring the kid. Also, I know you think you're funny, but really, you've got to give up the comedy act."

Brian looked comically rejected. "Ah, what do you know," he said. "Hey, I'm gonna fix this kid's car so he can drive around real loud again. Why don't you give him something to eat while he waits?"

"Yes, dear," Heather lisped. Luke followed her awkwardly while Brain unhitched his car.

"Thank you," Luke called back.

"Oh, thanks aren't necessary, but we do accept cash," Brian said, grinning as he went about his work. [...]

## Excerpt From a Romance Novella

April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1870 was Elizabeth Smith's eighteenth birthday and therefore her last day at the New York Protectory, a catholic orphanage where she had lived her entire life. Ordinarily, Elizabeth would have left the orphanage when she turned sixteen, but Elizabeth was not ordinary. For starters, she had only one hand, her right. Her left arm ended at the wrist in a small nub. She usually covered this with a white cloth, neatly tied by one of the nuns or one of the other girls. She was also out of the ordinary because she was a great help to the orphanage.

Because girls at the New York Protectory were taught how to sew, and because this task was more than Elizabeth could manage, she was trained in other skills. She took care of the infants, cleaned up the bunks and canteen, and, her favorite thing, read to the younger children. All of the young boys and girls loved to hear Elizabeth read. She'd hold the book in her right hand if it were small enough, or prop it up in her lap, and the children would gather around her on the floor to listen.

Elizabeth enjoyed looking out at their eager faces. All day, the girls sewed and the boys made shoes. These were supposed to be valuable skills that would help them later in life. They received some schooling, but much less than they otherwise would. Elizabeth took advantage of their need for entertainment as a chance to teach them to read. Often she would hold the book out so that the children could see how the words were displayed across the yellow pages of her books.

She grew attached to the children, even though the nuns had warned her not to. Whenever one of the little ones was adopted by some young couple, Elizabeth would smile and hide her tears. She'd give them a hug goodbye and tell the parents they were taking a little angel home with them. But she cried later, because she missed them. And she cried because she was reminded of the fact that no one had come for her. And to keep this topic from constantly recurring in her mind, she kept as busy as possible. The other girls her age—there were only a few, and usually they were too violent to be adopted—would tell her she wasn't capable of anything.

"What will you do when you leave?" they asked. "No one will want you, that's obvious. You're going to starve out there."

Elizabeth did her best to push these voices away. Sometimes they got in, and she would weep late into the night, until her eyes ran dry and she finally drifted into fitful, bad sleep. But for every time she felt discouraged, there was a reminder that she was doing good, and that there were people who loved her. Sometimes she would tuck the little children into bed at night, and they would put their tiny arms around her neck and kiss her good night. "Love you 'Liz," they'd say, yawning.

When her sixteenth birthday came around, she'd been frightened of being thrown out into the streets, but the nuns had made an exception. There weren't enough adults to take care of the children. Many of the women had gone away during the war, and they had gone on to other things. The few men who worked in the orphanage had all gone to war, and only one returned. He wasn't the same man when he came back, and sometime later he'd disappeared without a trace. So Elizabeth stayed on and helped. But she was eighteen now, and it was time to go.

"Can't I get a job here?" she had asked. "I don't need much! I can stay in my old bunk!"

"I'm sorry, dear. You have to be a member of the cloth to work here. We can't keep you on any longer." The reply had come from Sister Mary, a plump woman with sad eyes. She'd kissed Elizabeth on the forehead and smiled wearily.

Elizabeth got her things together. There was barely enough to fit in one bag. The dress she wore was thin from so many washings, and besides it she had only one other that was nearly identical. In addition to this she possessed a cracked pocket mirror, a comb, a bible, and a small cloth doll. These went into her bag, except for the doll, which she left on a little girl's bed. For the moment, she had the bunk hall to herself.

She gave the room one final look. The rows of black metal beds sagged in rows, their mattresses brown and their sheets thin. The wooden floor was polished, and wood stoves at either end of the room had grown cold for the season. She looked at her reflection in the one mirror, brushed a rogue strand of brown hair from her eyes, and gave herself a determined look. Her right hand adjusted the linen covering where her left hand had once been, and she moved to say goodbye to Sister Mary.