

Searching for a Place to be

An old, abused dog runs to save herself. A thirteen-year-old-boy witnesses a murder and runs for his life. A combat veteran hides from the world and himself. This is the story of how these three come together in a forest in the northwest, and what they do to help each other take their first steps back out into the world.

By Michael de Guzman

Melonhead

Beekman's Big Deal

The Bamboozlers

Finding Stinko

Henrietta Hornbuckle's Circus of Life

Growing Up Rita

Cosmos DeSoto

and the Case of the Giant Steel TEETH

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Praise for other books

Growing Up Rita

“A life lesson for adults and kids alike, a great read with a quiet message of understanding, friendship and tolerance.” -- Peter Pan (London, UK)

Henrietta Hornbuckle's Circus of Life

“The clean, engaging third-person narration and rapid-fire dialogue distinguish this artfully concise novel about the inevitability of change...” -- *Kirkus (Starred)*

Beekman's Big Deal

“Kids will care about Beekman and Leo, whose relationship is wonderfully close, funny and real. You could say this story is a big deal.” -- *Kirkus*

The Bamboozlers

“de Guzman's humorous, snappily paced caper introduces another spunky, credible young hero.” -- *Publishers Weekly (Starred)*

Melonhead

“A poignant story of a disconnected boy searching for a place where he feels loved and wanted.” -- School Library Journal

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This is a work of fiction.
Any similarity between these characters and
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coincidental.

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1. Friendship – fiction. 2. Life in the woods-
fiction. 3. Survival – fiction. 4. Overcoming
fear – fiction. 5. Dealing with PTSD – fiction.
6. Dogs and people – fiction. 7. Street kid -
fiction

This book is dedicated to my wife Marilyn,
who gave me a place to be.

Searching for a Place to be

ONE

A dog sat on the back seat of an automobile that was making its way along a narrow two lane blacktop in forest country. Her face was sticking out the open window. Her nose gathered air. There was a human sitting next to her. She kept her distance. As much as she could. There were two more in front. She didn't like them any better. She was wary of all humans. She had her reasons. More than she needed. But for the moment, however long it lasted, she was at peace. She liked the movement of the car. She liked the wind in her face. Most of all she

loved what her nose was bringing to her brain. It came to her the way a full blast of exploding color comes to the human eye.

What were these strange new aromas flooding her senses? What was out there? She didn't know where she was. Usually, as long as they were moving she didn't care. This place was different. She wanted to stop. To get out and explore. She was no longer free to make this choice. Or any other. Not since these humans had grabbed her off the street.

Before that, for all her life, she'd been on her own. Living out of garbage cans. Eating what made her ill. Being hit. Being shot at. Nearly dying more than once. Most of her right ear had been chewed off. She bore the scars of a warrior. When the humans in the car trapped her, they tied her to a tree. She gnawed away the rope. They replaced it with a chain. Her life extended only as far as the six feet of steel permitted.

She was getting old. She could feel it. Her legs were becoming stiff. Harder to move. Her parts were wearing out. It took her longer to get cranked up after sleeping. She was mangy black and brown. She was underfed. She had teeth missing. She'd never been to a veterinarian.

The car pulled off to the side of the road. The humans got out. The back window was left open. The dog was quickly aware of this mistake. It had never been left open before. She watched the humans separate, each finding a place to pee. When they were done, they'd return for her. They'd fasten the chain around her neck and tighten it. Too tight. They'd take her out to do her business, then put her right back in the car.

The dog took their measure. They were close. Close enough to stop her from what she was about to do. But she had a chance. And if not now, when? She summoned a burst of strength and started climbing out

the window. She was halfway through when one of the humans saw what she was doing. He started yelling and running toward the car. All of them did. Her hind legs got caught. She struggled to free herself. The humans were almost upon her when she made a final effort and pushed herself out. They reached for her in vain. They chased her. They shouted. They cursed. They threw rocks. She was quickly out of range.

From her distance, the dog watched the car speed away. She was happy to see it go. Whatever she found here couldn't be worse than what she'd left behind. If it was, then maybe it was time to die.

She looked about to get her bearings. Everything was new. There were no people. No buildings. She rolled on her back. She stood and shook herself. She sniffed the air until she found the direction of the fragrance that had pleased her so much. She followed her nose and began running through the tall grass toward her destiny.

TWO

A boy tucked himself into the shadows by a column beneath the viaduct. The din of traffic above sounded like the whine of a single endless tire. A ship's horn moaned. A ferry in the night fog. He pried the lid from his container of coffee and took a sip. It was still hot. The milk and sugar he'd laced it with felt good going down. He dunked the glazed doughnut, took a small bite and chewed it slowly. Morris knew how to make food last. No matter how hungry he was. If you were a rabbit living in a world of wolves, you learned to do many things. He took

another sip of coffee. He dunked the doughnut and took another small bite. He tensed. He wasn't alone. He gathered himself, ready to flee. He heard a voice.

"You're kidding me," a man said.

"You know I got no sense of humor," a second man said.

"I thought we were friends," the first man said.

"We are," the second man said. "That's why I'm doing it myself."

"We can work something out," the first man said.

"It's my job," the second man said. "You know what I got to do."

Morris heard the "Pfffffft" of a muffled gunshot. Then a grunt. He rose slowly to his feet. He peeked around the column. The two men were maybe twenty feet away. One was holding a gun with a silencer attached to it. The other was clutching his stomach.

"I don't believe it," he said, beginning to fall.

“Take care of yourself, pal,” the shooter said.

Morris heard another “Pfffffft.”

The victim hit the ground.

The shooter looked down at him. “Sorry,” he said. He turned and saw Morris, who’d inched out into the open without realizing it.

Morris’s body froze. His mind went blank. He couldn’t get himself to function. He wasn’t sure he was breathing.

The shooter was momentarily startled. Then perplexed. Then he smiled.

Morris had never seen anyone shot. He’d never seen a gun this close. It looked enormous. Time slowed to nothing. They stared at each other for what, to Morris, seemed an eternity.

“Too bad you had to be here,” the shooter said. He started to raise his gun.

Morris found his wits. Or they found him. Either way, he threw the container of coffee at the shooter and ran.

The shooter ducked, but not quickly enough to avoid the warm sticky liquid that splattered his face and his suit. He cursed, wiped his glasses, took aim and fired.

Morris heard the bullet hit concrete behind him as he fled into the darkness.

The shooter holstered his gun and gave chase.

Morris raced out from beneath the viaduct and cut up into Pioneer Square.

The shooter began to close the distance.

But Morris knew where he was going. And he could run nearly forever. He had a map of Seattle impressed upon his brain. The parts of it that mattered. He knew what led to where. He knew all the short cuts. He raced past the train station into the International District. He darted across the street in front of a street car that almost hit him.

The shooter had to wait to run behind it, slowing his pursuit.

Morris ran under the freeway and up a long hill.

The shooter gave up. "You're dead, kid," he yelled. He removed his glasses and wiped his eyes with a handkerchief.

Morris kept running. The shooter's words echoed inside his head. "You're dead, kid."

The shooter checked his watch, wrote something in a notebook, then headed back to his car.

Morris climbed the long flight of concrete steps to the street two levels above. The city was filled with such stairways. He knew most of them. He made his way to an old shed that was half-fallen down on itself, and well hidden at the back of an overgrown empty lot. There was enough of it left to provide shelter. It offered as much security as a boy in his situation was likely to find. He kept what little he owned here; his set of extra clothes, his blanket, the odd bits, like pieces of soap and books of matches, that

he picked up here and there. He'd found a ring once, with a large red stone. He'd kept it for good luck, then lost it.

He started a fire in the small pit he'd lined with stones. He wrapped himself in the blanket and sat by it to warm himself. He tried to make sense of what he'd seen. He'd been frightened. There wasn't much light. He tried to piece together the shooter's face. He remembered the black eyeglass frames. And what he thought was his large, bulbous nose. He remembered thinking the man looked almost goofy. If that was as clear a picture of the shooter as he could put together, then maybe the shooter didn't have any better idea of what he looked like. Maybe he wasn't in danger. What was he supposed to do about it anyway? Go to the cops? If he couldn't describe the shooter, what was the point? They wouldn't believe him whatever he said. They'd give him back to his father. He'd do anything to avoid that.

He decided that it would be enough to keep an eye out. He'd be extra aware of his surroundings. He'd be careful where he went. The shooter would give up after a while. He began to tremble. He couldn't control himself. He saw the murder all over again. He heard the shooter's voice.

“You're dead, kid.”