

A vintage white sedan is parked on a dark street in front of a stone building with a large window. Wisps of white smoke or steam rise from the top of the frame, partially obscuring the sky. The title 'STEALING SMOKES' is written in large, white, serif capital letters across the upper middle of the image.

# STEALING SMOKES

Some surprising short stories by  
**JOHN HANLON**

## STEALING SMOKES



# STEALING SMOKES

SOME SURPRISING  
SHORT STORIES

JOHN HANLON

Sample Chapter

*Stealing Smokes* is available from [Amazon](#), [Book  
Depository](#) and [other leading booksellers](#).

© Copyright 2020 John Hanlon

John Hanlon asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be produced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the copyright holder.

Publisher: Woven Words

Author website: [www.johnhanlon.co.nz](http://www.johnhanlon.co.nz)

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

# Contents

<a href="#"><u>Postmortem</u></a>	I
<a href="#"><u>About Stealing Smokes: Some Surprising Short Stories</u></a>	II



## POSTMORTEM

---

It would be fair to say that more than a few people, my wife included, were offended when I burst out laughing during the funeral for a dear departed friend. In my defence, I'd like to offer the following.

Terry sighed and rubbed his unshaven chin. 'I was never the perfect husband,' he said, and I wasn't about to disagree.

Given the circumstances it seemed inappropriate to point out that, far from being perfect, he'd been an unfaithful bastard whose marriage had survived despite his behavior, not because of it. Although, while it in no way excuses his waywardness, it would be fair to say that life as an international airline pilot had exposed him to more temptations than many a stronger man would have been able to resist. Irresistible opportunity

notwithstanding, the immutable fact was that twenty-odd years of a 'what happens on tour stays on tour' lifestyle had morphed him into an ageing Lothario whose infidelity knew no borders.

Then Margaret fell terminally ill and it all changed. Her irreversible cancer brought him to heel with a suddenness and totality that surprised us all.

Within days he eschewed his high-flying vocation and wandering ways and dedicated himself to providing her with as much care and comfort as was possible while the agonising disease tortured her with unrelenting cruelty.

For sixteen terrible months they held the inevitable at bay aided by painkilling drugs and a battery of medical experts. But for the most part it was just the two of them fighting a losing battle against the devil.

Only the regular visits of a nurse and the mercy of Morpheus provided occasional respite and during these quiet times Terry was prone to sip whisky and rue the misdemeanours of his past with the kind of evangelistic fervour you most often hear from those who've given up smoking.

To relieve him of his self-flagellating introspection I'd find myself reminding him that there had been a great many happy times in his marriage. In fact, putting his infidelity aside, theirs had been a strong and supportive partnership. In most respects they were a well-matched and happy couple and admired by many for it. Were it not so, Margaret would never have stayed the course.

## POSTMORTEM

Underpinning their union was their shared love of many of life's finer things, not least their love of music. Ginny and I had often been entertained by them playing piano and violin late into the night at our small farm in the hills: Evenings of good food and laughter that forged the bonds of a friendship that held us together now in this darkest of times.

Three days ago, at 4 pm on a golden autumn afternoon, Terry finally agreed to let the doctors switch off Margaret's life support. She had not been with us in any real sense for over three weeks and known only agony in the weeks prior to that. Keeping her alive had been for him, not her.

They had no children and her parents were long gone so the decision was his alone — albeit with our support and the empathetic ministering of a South African doctor who had the physical presence of a front row forward but the compassionate countenance of an angel of mercy.

Personally, I found myself wishing that respite could have been provided weeks before when her suffering was at its worst and the outcome already known. There is no credible rationale for needless suffering. To subject anyone to agonising indignity at the end of his or her life is immoral in my view. No God would be so merciless, only misguided humans using God to justify their own point of view. I should have been distraught at Margaret's passing but found I was just angry.

However, as we sat at the kitchen table watching the ferry boats jockeying for position on the quay below, my

anger was fading as the cold reality of our loss descended upon me. Terry needed my support, not my outrage. Now was not the time to discuss the rights and wrongs of euthanasia.

Ginny came in and placed a small pile of envelopes on the table. Terry had been staying with us since Margaret died and that morning Ginny had been to their apartment to check on things and clear the mail.

Terry looked at the mail without enthusiasm and murmured something that could have been a thank you. The size and shape of the envelopes seemed to indicate that the bulk of the mail would be cards of condolence. This proved to be the case. Terry scanned each one unseeingly before laying it on the table.

Ginny and I looked on in silence. I noticed she'd been crying.

Eventually all the cards were opened and Ginny began to gather up the empty envelopes.

'Wait!' Terry said with something approaching excitement in his voice.

He took one of the envelopes from her and a smile lit up his face. 'This stamp hasn't been postmarked. We can reuse it.'

Ginny looked at me as if to say, can you believe this guy? He's just lost his wife but he's excited over the thought of recycling a freaking stamp worth sixty cents. This might seem a great deal to convey in a single glance but if you knew Ginny you'd know it's possible.

## POSTMORTEM

‘Really, mate? I can lend you a couple of bucks if you’re that hard up,’ I said.

Terry ignored my jibe. ‘It’s a sign,’ he smiled as he began to pick at the stamp with a fingernail.

‘I’ll put the jug on,’ Ginny said.

‘I’d rather have a scotch,’ I said.

‘The steam will help lift the stamp,’ Ginny explained, as if to a child.

‘Yes, right, of course,’ I mumbled.

Terry got to his feet with the envelope and followed her into the kitchen.

People came and went on the quay below. The sun sank slowly at the end of the working day and Terry returned holding the liberated stamp like a trophy.

‘Good as new,’ he beamed.

My incredulity was patent. This only amused Terry.

‘Marg would have killed me if I’d missed it,’ he offered by way of explanation.

‘Missed what ... an unmarked stamp?’

‘Yes. She has a drawer full of them she’s collected over the years. You’d be amazed how often it happens. Although less so since people started using email.’

‘Wouldn’t they be outdated stamps?’

‘Maybe. I don’t know. I just know she wouldn’t let an opportunity like that slip by,’ he said admiring the pristine condition of the stamp. ‘She was a Scot by birth and by nature.’

‘That’s a bit clichéd, mate. And wrong. Marg was one of the most generous people I ever met.’

‘True, but she would never spend a penny when she could save one. She prided herself on that.’ He paused as if remembering something, then brightened with the thought of it. ‘Which reminds me, she wanted a no-frills funeral. She was adamant about this. No fancy coffin. Just a cardboard box for her cremation.’

‘You can’t do that,’ Ginny protested as she walked back into the room.

‘It’s what she wanted,’ Terry insisted quietly. ‘And I promised.’

Theodore Silverman was born to be a funeral director. Literally. For three generations his family had buried the people of Hillsdale. Terry’s parents had been among the many who’d been dispatched to the afterlife by Silverman and Sons. Empathy was their profession.

Though naturally quiet of voice, which one assumes is paramount in the profession, Theodore did not have the foreboding, bony-shouldered, Dracula-like presence one imagines with funeral directors. He was large and broad in stature and avuncular in nature. In another life, he could have been an amiable doorman.

He towered over Terry. ‘A cardboard coffin?’

‘Yes. Is that possible?’

‘There’s not much call for them.’

## POSTMORTEM

'But you can do it?'

'Of course, but ...'

'But what?'

'Sir, the coffin will be visible to everyone during the ceremony. And ... cardboard looks so ... you know.'

'She's being cremated. It's all just fire fodder in the end.'

'Well ... yes.'

'It's what she wanted. She insisted. It's not my choice, it's hers.'

Faced by such intransigence, Silverman had no choice but to relent.

'Would you like to see what a cardboard coffin looks like?'

'I think we should,' I said, hoping that confronting the reality of sending his beloved into eternity in a shipping carton would shock Terry back to his senses.

Needless to say, there were no cardboard coffins in the showroom; the best Silverman could do was to show us a selection online. There was a surprising array of them. From those that made some attempt to look like a real coffin to those that looked more like large mail order packages.

Terry chose one of the latter. A design so basic I felt I should object.

'Mate, that's too tacky. It's just a packing case.'

'It's what she wanted,' Terry insisted. 'Let's say it's by unpopular request,' he added trying to make light of it.

'Jesus.' I walked away to disassociate myself from this

madness. As I made my way out of the office I heard him say to Silverman: 'However, I do have one requirement of my own ...'

I'm never comfortable in a church on any occasion and far less so at funerals. Margaret's ceremony took place in a small chapel that was part of the crematorium and the usual superstitious mumbo jumbo that ensued only served to aggravate me as always and this only added to Ginny's misery, which was due in part to the passing of a beloved friend but equally by the presence of the cardboard coffin. And, as if the choice of a no-frills send-off was not enough of an insult in itself, Terry's personal touch had been the final straw.

What he'd asked Silverman to do was now plain for all to see. The entire coffin was plastered with stamps. The very stamps Margaret had collected over a lifetime would now accompany her in death. Her coffin now looked more like a large mail order delivery than even I'd imagined possible.

Everyone was mortified except Terry. He seemed mightily amused.

'Margaret would have loved it,' he assured us. 'She'd see the funny side.'

I was less convinced.

The ceremony was the usual balance of sermonising

## POSTMORTEM

and eulogies. Some people spoke by request and others because they couldn't help themselves.

Terry's words were inspired, heartfelt and heartbreaking. He had us all in tears until he asked us to come up and sign our names on the coffin. Most found this distasteful and refused to comply.

Undaunted, he picked up a large permanent marker and wrote on the box himself. When he'd finished he looked at me for support. Despite my discomfort I relented. I got to my feet and took the pen from him.

As I bent to add my name to the gaudily stamp-covered coffin, I saw what Terry had written on it: RETURN TO SENDER.



## About Stealing Smokes: Some Surprising Short Stories

A delightful collection of short stories designed to engage  
and entertain.

Extraordinary tales about ordinary people told with empathy, whimsy, magic and imagination. You will be led up blind alleys and along familiar paths and more often than not the destination will be completely unexpected.

Told with cheeky irreverence and an antipodean tone of voice, these stories, while pure fiction, will often be so close to your own truths they are bound to resonate.

And in the tradition of writers like O. Henry and Dahl, Hanlon takes great delight in putting a twist in every tale.

Prepare to enjoy yourself.

*Stealing Smokes* is available from [Amazon](#), [Book Depository](#) and [other leading booksellers](#).