



SEVEN
FROM
HAVEN

Daniel Grotta

SEVEN FROM HAVEN

BY DANIEL GROTTA

Excerpt

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by Daniel Grotta

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WELCOME TO HAVEN,
PENNSYLVANIA

Ours is a village that takes care of its own. If you are visiting with good intentions and kindness in your heart, you'll have a wonderful time. But if your heart is cold and calculating, and your intentions less than honorable, we suggest you turn around and hightail it back to the Interstate—or else.

Have A Nice Day!

MIR. EASTMAN'S EMPATHY

“Coffee, black,” I automatically responded when the cook’s booming voice called out through the kitchen pickup window to ask me what I was drinking. It was a small, dingy, woody-looking luncheonette straight out of the 1950s, in a small, sleepy village in the middle of nowhere. Because it was well past the lunch hour, the waitresses and patrons were long gone. Only the cook and I were there.

Ordinarily, one quick glance at the interior of that nameless and unappetizing-looking greasy spoon, and I’d have immediately turned around and walked out—except I was exhausted from driving and desperately needed to take a leak. As soon as I ordered coffee, I made a beeline for the men’s room. When I returned a few minutes later, a large, steaming mug was sitting on the counter. Beside it was a slice of blueberry pie, with a generous dollop of what appeared to be hand-whipped cream on top.

“The pie’s on the house,” the still unseen cook announced from the kitchen. “The blueberry crop just came in yesterday, and Janice Fiedler baked a dozen of her yummy pies for us this morning. That’s the last piece left. You’ll love it.”

“Thanks,” I replied, surprised and pleased at the cook’s unsolicited generosity. “Don’t mind if I do.” I sat down on the round chrome and red vinyl stool, poured a Sweet ’n Low packet into the coffee, and tentatively took a sip. It was hot and rich and very, very tasty, infinitively superior to the designer brews and blends they serve at Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts. And my first bite of Janice Fiedler’s blueberry pie convinced me that I had

somehow stumbled into culinary heaven: sweet and tart at the same time, with a buttery, flaky crust that melted in my mouth.

“Great, ain’t it?” the cook asked as he came through the swinging door that separated the kitchen from the dining room. “She’s won the blue ribbon for her pies at the Haven Harvest Festival three years running. Last month, it was strawberries, next month, peaches, and once we hit Labor Day, then I mean ta’ tell ya, we get into some serious apple pies.”

I muttered something non-committal and inconsequential, much more intent on shoveling the fast dwindling pie into my mouth and washing it down with more of that superb coffee. I’m embarrassed to admit, I barely looked up until the last crumbs of that wonderful blueberry pie had disappeared.

“More java?” the cook asked. “It’s my own blend.”

Looming in front of me was a huge hulk of a man who, at first glance, was every mother’s nightmare, and for a brief instant, frightened me too. Probably in his early 30s, his heavy beard couldn’t disguise that fact that his face looked as though it had been pressed flat with a sledge hammer. An ex-boxer, perhaps, from the look of a mangled and mutilated ear, squashed nose and a variety of scars crisscrossing his cheeks, chin and forehead. His huge hairy right hand dwarfed the coffee carafe handle. On each knuckle was the faint outline of crude, self-inflicted tattooed letters that spelled out L-O-V-E. Though I couldn’t see it, I imagine that the four fingers of the left hand spelled out H-A-T-E. Apparently, one day he had come to his senses and tried to have them surgically removed. It had almost worked. He wore a long-sleeved stiff-starched white shirt with the cuffs turned up and what might have been earlier that morning a clean white apron. He also had on a New York Yankees baseball cap, covering either a very short crew cut or shaved head.

The cook filled my nearly empty cup to the brim without waiting for me to answer.

“I can’t stand them commercial coffee bags. I mix together Kenyan, Jamaican and Columbian beans, a tad of chicory, a couple of chocolate beans, a pinch of salt, and my secret ingredient. I’d tell you what it is,” he said impishly, “but then I’d have to kill you.”

That broke the ice as he and I smiled at each other. He put the carafe down, wiped his hand on his stained apron and held it out to me.

“Pete, Peter Malineux. It’s French, originally. I own this here place. Well, me and the bank, that is.”

I took the proffered hand and shook it, expecting to have mine enveloped and crushed in a macho squeeze. Instead, his grip was surprisingly gentle.

“Mark Santori,” I replied. “Originally from Boston and now Brooklyn.”

“What brings you to Haven?”

“Passing through.” Whether it was the coffee or the pie or Pete’s infectious friendliness, I suddenly felt like talking. “I install and troubleshoot Unix servers.”

Silence. OK, I really didn’t expect a short order cook in an out-of-the-way village to know anything about high end computer nodes and networks and thin clients. So I simply explained, “Computers. I was at Corning Glass in Ithaca on a service call.” It wasn’t necessary to state the obvious, that I was on the interstate heading home and when I needed to stop, this town was only a couple miles south of the next exit, and his restaurant was the first one I saw.

“Haven’s a sweet, caring village,” Pete declared. That’s twice within 30 seconds that he had ascended his stereotype. I hadn’t expected such a rough-looking character to use adjectives like sweet and caring, or for that matter, to describe his pies as yummy.

“It looks after its own.”

“Yeah, I noticed.” I glanced across the street at the spiffy, shiny new ambulance parked in front of a large, almost completed garage. “I see it’s rich enough to afford a new rig. Nice looking. Must have cost a mint.” I knew something about ambulances, because last year I had worked almost a month in an EMS dispatch office in Bridgeport, Connecticut, upgrading its county-wide emergency response computer system.

“It was donated,” Pete replied. “That, and the ambulance building, and a ‘jaws of life’ outfit for the fire company. A gift from Mr. Ronald Eastman.”

“Eastman, as in Kodak?”

“Don’t know ’bout that, Mark,” he replied with an easy, friendly familiarity. “But I mean to tell ya, Mr. Eastman was the most unselfish, givingest man I have ever known. Practically the whole village turned out for his funeral.”

“How did he die?” I asked, not particularly interested in hearing the details of the passing of a rich old geezer, but wanting to keep the conversation going because I was enjoying Pete’s company and my second cup of coffee. Besides, there was nothing of any urgency waiting for me at home.

“Of empathy,” Pete said solemnly.

Empathy? I hadn’t a clue what he meant by that. I involuntarily arched my eyebrows, not so much in disbelief as puzzlement.

“Well, it’s a long story,” Pete said. He paused to think, and stuck his large index finger up in the air, as if to say ‘wait a minute.’ He then poured himself a cup of coffee, walked around to the front of the counter and sat on the stool next to me. Once settled, Pete began a rambling, freewheeling narrative about the death, and life, of the remarkable Mr. Ronald Eastman, late of the village of Haven, Pennsylvania.

I gather that Eastman had been a successful high-tech yuppie type from King of Prussia, Philadelphia’s Silicon Valley, who had made a large fortune when he took his company public,

cashed in just before the dotcom meltdown, and then retired to the Pocono Mountains. His predominate passion in life was golf, so he actually went and bought himself a golf course—that would be the Cold Valley Country Club, which Pete said is a mile or two south of Haven—and then built a magnificent mansion for himself that fronted onto the fairway. He and his good friend Glen—Pete didn't out-and-out say that they were gay, only that Glen was Mr. Eastman's live-in companion—played a round of golf almost every day from spring through autumn, weather permitting, of course.

“For the first three years Mr. Eastman and Glen lived here,” Pete recounted, “they'd nothing to do with nobody in town. They didn't even hire nobody, because they had their own help from Philadelphia—an old husband and wife—to do the cooking, cleaning, shopping and anything else the big house needed.”

“Everything changed one October morning, when Glen collapsed on the 11th hole. A heart attack. Mr. Eastman frantically punched 911 on his cell phone, pleading for an ambulance and someone who could perform CPR. But nobody was around during the daytime to crew Haven's ambulance. That's just the way it is with a volunteer-staffed ambulance association. So, the emergency call had to be mutually aided—passed on—first to Black Bear, then Promised Land, then Newfoundland, and finally, to Gouldsboro. It took nearly 45 minutes for Gouldsboro's ambulance to arrive on scene.

“Glen died in Mr. Eastman's arms,” Pete said, sadly, even though he probably had never known the victim personally. I couldn't image this gentle giant with a train wreck of a face traveling in the same social circles. “The guys on the crew said that Mr. Eastman wept and wailed like a baby. In the end, they had to trank him and take him to the hospital for emotional trauma.

“Sad to say, my friend, almost no one from Haven showed up for Glen’s funeral. A few local golf buddies, the housekeeper and her husband, a handful of employees from the country club, the contractor who built Mr. Eastman’s house, and Karen Dobson, who goes to almost every funeral, whether she knows the folks or not—that’s all there was from hereabouts. When he got up to give the eulogy in the almost empty church, Mr. Eastman made a solemn vow before God that he would give his life to help others get emergency medical assistance in Haven.

“That’s when he got involved, big time, with the Haven Ambulance Association.” Pete paused to drain his coffee mug, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. “He simply showed up at the firehouse one Wednesday evening. Back then, the Association shared the building with the Haven Volunteer Fire Department. Wednesday’s when the members meet regular like, you know, to practice their skills, clean the rig, replenish the supplies, that sort of thing. He asked to join the Association on the spot, but they told him that he first had to take the Emergency Responder course. Unfortunately, ’cause nobody around here was much interested, there weren’t gonna be no class ’til January. Mr. Eastman, he said he couldn’t wait no three months, so he asked Kenny Penderton—he was the Association captain back then—how could they get an ER course goin’ right away. Kenny told him they needed at least ten people before the county Red Cross chapter would hold a class.

“Well, Mark, the long and short of it was it took only a couple of weeks to line everything up. Mr. Eastman paid out of his own pocket for eight employees from his country club to take the ER course. With him and Tom, his houseman, that made ten, so they went ahead and held the course at the firehouse, three nights a week for two months. By Christmas, the Haven Ambulance Association had ten brand new, state-certified

Emergency Responders. That's more volunteers than they got in 4-5 years, total.

"Mr. Eastman, he also wrote out a check for a new transmission when Donny Walker chewed up the gears trying to get Haven's old ambulance unstuck from a snowbank."

"What happened next?" I asked as Pete poured me a third cup of coffee.

"Well, Mr. Eastman, he came out every time the ambulance was toned—that's what it's called when the beeper goes off—whether it was his shift or not. He'd drop whatever he was doin', jump into his red Porsche, turn on its flashing blue emergency light, and race for the firehouse building. But, you know what an Emergency Responder is? A 'gopher'. You know, the guy who gets the stretcher and the bandages and the backboard and stuff. An Emergency Responder sometimes takes the patient's pulse, tapes up a wound, cleans up the vomit on the floor of the rig. Oh yeah, he also handles all the paperwork—name, address, medical history, that kind of stuff. Usually, Mr. Eastman was the first person at the building when there was a call, so he'd start up the old rig, drive it out of the building, move over to the passenger seat, and wait for an EMT and driver to show up. Without an EMT on board, state law says you gotta mutual aid to another company, even if it's a life-and-death call."

Since I refrained from interrupting with questions or comments, Pete continued his narrative.

"Sometime in March or April, 'bout three years back, they got toned for Emily Hawkin's 15 month-old. Sorry, it's been so long and the story's made the rounds so many times that I can't recall the baby's name, and come to think of it, I don't even know for sure if it was a he or a she. The kid swallowed a toy and was choking. Mr. Eastman made a quick beeline for the ambulance, pulled the rig out, and waited. A driver showed up a couple minutes later, but there weren't no EMT around that day, so much as they hated ta do it, they mutual aided the call to

Tafton. And just like Mr. Eastman's companion Glen, Emily Hawkin's kid dies before an ambulance arrived on scene."

"Bummer," I commented. It wasn't the most sympathetic or diplomatic thing I could have said, but not knowing any of these people personally, I couldn't really feel much emotion for a nameless child who had died years earlier.

"Mr. Eastman, well I mean to tell ya, he was truly devastated, so he made another vow, that there would never be no emergency that the Haven Ambulance Association couldn't and wouldn't respond to. The very next day, he went to Kenny and asked how much money he made on his regular job at Hamlin Auto Center as a tire installer. Kenny told him, and Mr. Eastman promised to pay him double if he'd work for him at the country club. Told him that it didn't matter none what he did—handyman, groundskeeper, busboy, whatever—so long as Kenny was always around to take ambulance calls. Just to make sure they'd never be without an EMT, even when Kenny was sick or had the weekend off, Mr. Eastman also hired Carol Thomas, one of the other EMTs, as a waitress. Eventually, all but one of Haven's EMTs worked at the country club—at top wages, too," Pete added, with a degree of admiration in his voice.

"The next thing Mr. Eastman did was to become an EMT himself. He took the full 125-hour course—that's every Monday, Wednesday and Friday evening for five months—and passed with flying colors."

"Most commendable," I said, and I meant it. Here was a man who put himself out to help others. I began to feel a little ashamed that I never even bothered to donate blood at Red Cross drives.

"Yeah," Pete responded, slowly shaking his hand, "but sad to say, Mark, that's what kilt him in the end."

"How so?" I asked, figuring that he maybe he got hit by a car beside the highway or died of a coronary helping lift a fat

patient or accidently got infected with AIDS or some other fatal virus.

“The only way we can explain it is that he died of... *empathy*.”

“Empathy?” I still had no idea what Pete was trying to say.

“Yeah, empathy. That’s the word Bob Krauss used, and it kinda stuck.” Pete poured himself another cup of coffee, and would have refilled mine if I hadn’t put my hand over the rim. I had finally reached my limit.

“It all started on his first emergency call as a full-fledged EMT. A 13-year-old girl was riding when her horse stumbled and rolled over on her at Pocono Pines—that’s a big summer camp halfway between Haven and Lake in the Clouds. One of the counselors tried lifting her up—which is about the worst thing you can do to someone who might have a neck or back injury. Suddenly, she had no feeling below her neck, couldn’t move nothin’—you know, like the guy who played *Superman*, what was his name...”

“Christopher Reeve,” I interjected.

“Yeah, Christopher Reeve. Well, Mark, they called out the ambulance, and in ten minutes Mr. Eastman was on scene. Now, there’s not an awful lot you can do for a spinal or neck injury victim, ’cept collar ’em and strap ’em down on a stiff wooden backboard. But Mr. Eastman, he takes one look at this poor little girl, still wearing her black felt riding cap, tears rolling down her cheeks, and it breaks his heart. So he lays his hands on the back of her neck, on a big bump where the bone broke or popped out of place. Some swear that there was a bright, strobe-like light pulsing from his hands as he held her, but others said they didn’t see nothin’.

“Well, I mean to tell you, the Man Upstairs musta been there that morning, ’cause before you know it, the little girl begins wiggling her hands and toes like there was nothin’ wrong.

She tells everybody that she can feel her arms and her legs again. Of course, they took her to the hospital and X-rayed her neck, and do you know what they found?”

“No, what did it show?” I asked, convinced that I knew what the punch line was going to be: it would show no injury whatever. I’ve read about so-called miracle and spontaneous cures, and, like most doctors, scientists and rational non-believers, I was convinced such injuries or illnesses were either faked, of a minor nature, or psychosomatic to begin with. In my book, faith healing had about the same credibility factor as the existence of UFOs, vampires and werewolves.

“Well, then there X-rays showed that the little girl had broken her neck clean through, severing the spinal cord. But a miracle happened—it instantly knitted back together on its own. Now that’s fact, Mark, and if you don’t believe me, well, you can look it up in the *Wayne County Eagle*. They wrote it up on the front page, even had a photo of the girl with her parents.”

I was very skeptical, but said nothing.

“Mr. Eastman, well, they say he was never the same afterward. When they wheeled the little girl into the emergency room, Mr. Eastman no sooner said goodbye and good luck (he always wished all the patients good luck), then he collapsed onto the hospital floor. They sent him up to X-ray, and do you know what they found? Two herniated discs and calcium deposits on his back.”

“A bad back is fairly common in elderly people and...”

“No no no, Mark,” Pete interrupted, his modulating voice betraying a rising excitement. “It weren’t that, ’cause Mr. Eastman had a thorough physical just a couple weeks earlier and he sure didn’t have no arthritis or slipped discs. Don’t go thinkin’ he was some old, out-of-shape fuddy-duddy. Back then Mr. Eastman probably coulda lifted me over his head without even workin’ up a sweat. He was tall, athletic. Worked out every day (though after Glen died, he never again played no golf). He

looked more like a movie star than... I don't know, a retired gazillionaire.

"Besides, he was a young guy, only 44 years old."

I didn't know what to say, and I didn't know where Pete's story would go next, so I simply shrugged. After all, I hit 44 myself last April.

"Mr. Eastman, he sorta hobbled 'round from that day on," Pete continued, "bent over a bit, limping a little. Everybody knew he was in lots of pain, though he didn't never complain about it to nobody. But it didn't slow him down none... well, maybe a little... but he continued to go out on just about every emergency call.

"Then, a couple weeks later, Jimmy Wimmer was having a backyard barbeque when he had trouble lighting the fire. Dumb ass that he was, he went and got the gas can he uses to fuel up his weed whacker and splashes it right onto the charcoal. You can guess what happened next. Jimmy stands right over the grill and tosses in a lit match. *Kaboom!* It explodes in his face, and he goes up like a torch. By the time his son Bob rolls him in the grass to put out the fire on his body and his clothes, Jimmy's got third degree burns over half his body.

"Mr. Eastman and a driver arrive a few minutes later, and start wrapping him from head to toe in gauze. Jimmy's face is black, still smoldering actually. There's not a strand of hair left on his entire head, and his skin's so crispy crittered that it's cracked and peeling. Jimmy then goes into shock. When that happens, one by one, your organs just plain shut down 'til you're dead.

"So, just like the little girl, Mr. Eastman wraps his arms 'round Jimmy as they put 'em on the stretcher. A minute or two passes, and Mr. Eastman falls to the ground like a stone. The driver's in a panic, 'cause Mr. Eastman's the only EMT on scene, there's no Emergency Responders around, and the paramedics was busy at the other end of the county. So the driver

packs 'em both into the ambulance—Jimmy on the stretcher and Mr. Eastman belted onto the padded bench—and drives like a bat out of hell to CMC—Community Medical Center—in Scranton, about 25 miles away.

“When they got there twenty minutes later and opened up the back of the ambulance, Jimmy’s sitting up on the stretcher, cursing, unwrapping himself, and scratching his body bloody—he said that it itched like hell. His skin was still red all over, but it wasn’t no worse than a slight sunburn. The doctors refused to believe that Jimmy had ever caught on fire, and sent him home without so much as putting any cream on his skin.”

“What happened to Mr. Eastman?” I asked.

“Mr. Eastman, he’s lyin’ there unconscious, so they put him on a stretcher and wheel him into the operating room. Then they cut off his clothing. Do you know what they found?”

“No idea,” I said, and I meant it.

“His entire body, from head to toe, was covered with big boils and blisters. Had to spend two weeks in the hospital, so’s the doctors can keep the boils on his face, chest and arms from goin’ septic. Took him another month to recover enough so’s he could go on ambulance calls again. Sorry to say, my friend, but those blisters scarred up his body, especially his hands and face, somethin’ terrible. Some said he looked like a movie monster.

“Things went along OK for a while, until they got a call from the Fast Brook Managed Care Home. That’s the big yellow Victorian with the green shutters, just five doors down from here. 88 year-old Ida Prell, Miss Ida, we all call her, she started throwing up around noon, couldn’t keep nothin’ down. Then her temperature shot up to 104 by dinnertime, so’s they call for the ambulance. Oh yes, she also had Alzheimer’s real bad, and was bedridden all the time. Diapers, arm restraints, the whole nine yards. She didn’t have a clue for years what was going on. Well, Mr. Eastman, he sees her lyin’ there in her bed, thin as a skeleton and pale as a ghost. You know what he does?”

“Puts his arms around her?” I ventured.

“Yeah, that’s it exactly,” Pete said as he held out his hands in a mock bear hug to demonstrate how Mr. Eastman did it. “Suddenly, she’s sittin’ up and lookin’ ’round at everybody, eyes clear and alert like she was still a teenager. Dammed if she didn’t recognize the nurse and her aide, and started talkin’ to them, normal like, saying she felt fine and didn’t need to go to no hospital. This floored ’em, ’cause Miss Ida hadn’t spoke a single intelligible word for who knows how long. Now she was goin’ on, all normal like, askin’ to see her son and grandchildren. And she weren’t sick no more, neither. It was a miracle, my friend, and if you don’t believe me, why, just walk down the street and ask for Miss Ida. She’s 91 now, healthy as a horse and sharp as a tack. Practically runs the nursing home.”

“And Mr. Eastman?” I asked again, wondering what dread Pete would ascribe to this Good Samaritan for this unbelievable—*literally!*—act of kindness. Or empathy. It was a great story, a new twist on the Dorian Grey legend.

“Mr. Eastman, well, he was in the hospital a month this time, for Parkinson’s Disease. It hit him all of a sudden, like a ton of bricks, the moment he took his hands off Miss Ida. He was shakin’ something awful. Could barely stay on his feet. When he comes out of the hospital, he starts runnin’ with the ambulance again as if nothin’ happened. The Association, well, most of them wanted to keep him off the rig, ’cause he couldn’t do much workin’ on patients with his hands shakin’ and all that. But no one had the heart to say no to him, so he went along on calls, just to be part of the crew.

“Then, just as summer ended, some rich guest at a wedding reception at the Fordham Inn—that’s about four miles from here, up the mountain—has a heart attack. By the time the ambulance arrived, the guy’s been down almost fifteen minutes.”

“Did anyone start CPR on him?” I asked.

“Yeah, almost immediately, but they couldn’t get no pulse. Well, when the ambulance gets on scene, Mr. Eastman pumps air into him, while Kenny and Carol take turns massaging his heart. Nothin’. A few minutes later, the county paramedics show up with a defibrillator and put them paddles on the guy’s chest and zaps ’em. And again. And again. Nothin’.”

“So Mr. Eastman puts his hands on the victim?” I anticipated.

“Sure as shootin’,” Pete continued. “This guy, he opens his eyes and sits up, askin’ what everybody was doin’. The paramedics can’t believe it, ’cause they’re gettin’ a real normal pulse and blood pressure. They put the portable EKG on him, and that reads normal, too. At the hospital, they do a CAT scan on the guy, and do you know what it showed?”

“Scar tissue?” I guessed.

“Yup. He had had a real bad biggie, a massive coronary, but his heart instantly healed itself. He shoulda been dead, but there’s not a thing wrong with the guy.”

“What happened to Mr. Eastman?” I expected Pete to say that he had died of a heart attack.

“He became the one with the real bad ticker, though the docs said that he used to have the heart of a 30-year-old. I’m told that Mr. Eastman’s heart stopped beating on scene, and if the paramedics hadn’t had the defib unit right on the spot, he’d of died right then and there. They rushed him to surgery—embolism, torn aorta, quadruple bypass, you name it—and it was weeks and weeks ’fore he was on his feet again.”

Pete paused a moment in his increasingly solemn and surreal story. He then folded his hands over his massive chest, leaned slightly forward and, only inches from my face, looked directly into my eyes.

“Now this is the God’s honest truth, Mark, so strike me dead. Everybody in Haven knows by now that somethin’ strange and wonderful’s going on, but nobody wants Mr. Eastman to lay

his hands on nobody else, 'cause it would kill him for sure. And he's so popular that he could've gotten elected mayor by a landslide. By this time he's too sick to run with the ambulance regular, but he still has his pager and listens to all the calls.

"Then on Christmas Eve, there's this real dumb fuck...."

I winched at the unexpected scatological vehemence.

"Real trailer trash, he was. Drunk as a skunk, roaring down 507, 80-90 miles an hour on a Harley, not giving a damn for no one or nothin'. This idiot takes the Sawmill Road curve wide, and runs head on, full speed, into a minivan parked on the side of the road.

"Him and his bike Evil Knieveled over the top of the minivan and skid and slid together down the road a hunert, two hunert feet. By the time he finally stops, the friction ripped off his shoes, socks, helmet, bluejeans, and tore up most of his shirt and leather jacket. His face is all stove in and there's this big ugly hole in his head where blood and what's left of his brains are oozing out. As a matter of fact, almost every bone in his body is broken.

"The call comes in just before midnight, so by the time the ambulance, fire company, and paramedics arrive on scene, it's officially Christmas. This guy is so busted up, it's so obvious that he's dead as a dodo, the paramedics don't even bother startin' CPR. One of them tells Bob Krauss, the EMT on duty that night, to bag-n-tag 'em and call Frey's, the undertaker in La Anna.

"Just then, Mr. Eastman's Porsche pulls up, with Tom drivin'. Bob knows what he's goin' to try, so he walks over and holds the door shut tight, so's Mr. Eastman, he can't get outta the car. When Mr. Eastman rolls down the window, Bob tells him not to waste himself on this worthless piece of shit who never done no one no good as long as he lived. Mr. Eastman, well, he argues there's good in everybody, if you'd only give 'em a chance. Bob, he holds firm, keepin' Mr. Eastman from getting

outta' the car. That is, until Mr. Eastman lays both of his hands on Bob's arm. Bob says that it felt like fire and ice, electricity and tingle. Suddenly, the diabetic neuropathy—that's numbness and pain—he had in his feet for neigh on ten years, instantly disappears. Bob just couldn't hold on after that. He took his hands off the car door, ashamed that he probably caused Mr. Eastman more suffering by making him cure him, but thrilled to be rid of the numbness. Later on, all Bob's blood sugars test dead normal, so's the diabetes he's had half his life was gone forever.

“Mr. Eastman, well, he slowly climbed out of that car. Even though the light was poor, Bob saw that Mr. Eastman's eyes were completely clouded over (with multiple cataracts, as it turned out). They say he was blind as a bat. Not only that, Mr. Eastman didn't answer when folks ask'd if he needed help, so's they think that he went totally deaf, too. He started hobblin' towards the victim, and as much as everybody wanted to help, no one dared touch Mr. Eastman. Everybody—ambulance crew, firemen, cops, paramedics—they moved out of the way, sorta like Moses partin' the Red Sea, to make a path as Mr. Eastman drags himself towards the dead guy. He went right to the body, knelt down, put his hands on the guy, and a few seconds later, collapsed on top of him. Then they packed both of 'em into the ambulance and took off like a bat outta hell for Pocono Medical.

“Mr. Eastman, he's at death's door with a brain hemorrhage. But this asshole comes back from the dead. And that's the God's honest truth, Mark. As the ambulance tears down the interstate, Mr. Eastman, he looks up with his sightless eyes at this no-account bastard, smiles, and then dies without saying a single word.

“Like I told you earlier, Mark, just about everybody in Haven came out for Mr. Eastman's funeral on New Year's Eve. Nobody's surprised when a month later a Philadelphia lawyer shows up and says Mr. Eastman left a pile of money to the

Haven Ambulance Association and the Volunteer Fire Department. He was that kind of guy.”

Pete spun quite a tale. What’s more, he seemed completely convinced that it was gospel truth. Undoubtedly, Ronald Eastman was a generous humanitarian and philanthropist, but a miracle worker? I didn’t think so.

But the story wasn’t quite at an end. I asked Pete whatever happened to the guy on the motorcycle.

Pete lightly touched his right temple, smiled and said, “Now that is the…”

*BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!
BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! Medic 501, Haven
Ambulance, Respond to the George Stevenson residence on Six
Point Buck Road. 67-year-old male complaining of chest pains
and nausea. Going to CMC. First tones, 15:21 hours.”*

Pete glanced down at the pager on his belt. He instantly tore off his apron, exchanging it for a fluorescent orange ambulance jacket from under the counter. He then flipped off his Yankees baseball cap and put on a matching orange cap with an EMT patch on front.

“Sorry Mark, duty calls, gotta go,” Pete said apologetically as he lumbered towards the door. ‘If you would be so kind, just leave a buck on the counter for the coffee and close the door when you leave. Have a safe drive home!’” He then ran across the street towards the brand new ambulance.

Later, as I headed home on the interstate, I mulled over and over in my mind the one indelible image seared into my memory that instantly turned my comfortable conception of a logical, orderly universe upside down. I glimpsed it for only a second or two, in the all-too-brief time it took for Pete to switch caps. On the right side of his bald head, just above the cauliflower ear, was an angry-looking, wildly misshapen indent covered by a huge jagged mass of overgrown scar tissue. It was just the kind of impossibly deep wound one might receive from a

skull shattered by a motorcycle handle in an accident that, save for Mr. Eastman's empathy, would otherwise have been instantly and irrevocably fatal.

END of *Mr. Eastman's Empathy*

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ADDENDA

MORE FICTION BY DANIEL GROTTA FROM PIXEL HALL PRESS:

[Honor](#), a Black Bear, Pennsylvania novella, which explores the human cost when patriotism, personal ethics and the deep bond of friendship collide.

[Adam](#), a Young Adult novel, is a first-person diary of a spoiled brat of a boy forced to grow up fast, if he is to survive. Coming in early 2014.

Black Bear One, a Black Bear Pennsylvania novel, about the volunteers of the town's ambulance corps. Coming in late 2014

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~ *Daniel Grotta*

ABOUT DANIEL GROTTA

A former war correspondent, investigative reporter, editor and critic, Daniel Grotta has written literally thousands of articles, reviews and columns for major magazines, newspapers and online journals. He has also written several books, including *J.R.R. Tolkien: Architect of Middle Earth*, the renowned first biography of the creator of *The Lord of the Rings*. Among his many accolades and awards is one that stands apart from the rest: His writings were, at one point, the most requested to be recorded as audio files by Reading for the Blind in Philadelphia, because of the clarity and beauty of his prose. A member of the National Book Critics Circle, American Society of Journalists & Authors, the Science Fiction Writers of America, the Overseas Press Club and The Authors Guild, Daniel Grotta is a frequent speaker on writing and publishing at conferences and other events. He also welcomes invitations to participate in discussions with book clubs (occasionally in person, but usually via Skype, Google Hangout or phone), and to do occasional readings.

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