

HONOR

a Black Bear, Pennsylvania story



Daniel Grotta

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by **Daniel Grotta**

Excerpt

This free excerpt is the beginning of the novella *Honor*, which is available in print or eBook from all bookstores, including Amazon, Apple iBookstore, Barnes & Noble and an independent bookstore near you.

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“I read ‘Honor’ last night and loved it. It was incredibly poignant. I teared up a bit, I have to admit. The characters and the personality of the town are richly drawn.... It is a great tale. I can’t wait to read your next installment.” – Shawn Newcomer, James V. Brown Library

“A delightful read. I spent last evening with Daniel Grotta’s delightful novella. Mr. Grotta’s ... characters tell a story of the many faces of pride, shame and reformed honor. The main character, Jeff Smith, is a quiet man who loves his family, his friends and his community; but who hasn’t quite learned how to love himself. His daughter and father-in-law show him the way. I don’t know if Mr. Grotta did this on purpose, but his Mr. Smith has much in common with another fictional Smith -- Jefferson Smith of ‘Mr. Smith Goes to Washington’ fame.” – John Benigno

“Deeply satisfying.... moving and charming. I quite enjoyed it.” – Michael E. (“Mac”) McCarthy

“A superb short story....I couldn’t put it down. Later on I was forced to plug in my iphone. I was forced to read this tethered to the wall. The characters were so well developed and delightful.... Mr. Grotta has a way with words, and has formulated something marvelous. I look forward to many more stories. Good Stuff.” – J.S. Rae

“More please! There’s nothing better than being stuck in bed and reading a great story. Within a couple of sentences I wanted to punch the bad guy and make sure the good guy would win ... These are rich characters that jump off the page. I was no longer sick in bed but in another world. Looking forward to more Black Bear stories!” – C.O. Moed

1

“Come on, come on, put a lot more spit and polish into it, knucklehead!” Gene Engelhardt urged his brother-in-law, Jeff Smith. As usual, there was more than a little annoyance in his voice. “These puppies gotta shine so fuckin’ bright I can see right up a nun’s habit, eh? But you wouldn’t know about that shit, would you?”

Gene was in the back room of Engelhardt’s Auto Supply on Main Street, Black Bear, Pennsylvania, changing from his normal workaday white shirt/black tie/dark grey slacks into the green dress uniform of a Pennsylvania National Guard lieutenant-colonel. To Jeff, kneeling on the faded brown linoleum floor beside his brother-in-law, had fallen the obviously menial, deliberately demeaning job of polishing Gene’s black high-topped dress boots.

But then, Gene always made sure that Jeff was given all the menial, demeaning tasks he could think up.

“You’d never survive a week in boot camp, my friend,” Gene chided as he leaned over and inspected the boots. He had tried halfheartedly to say it lightly, with a hint of levity, but instead there was a decided hard edge of sarcasm, a tone of disapproval that went well beyond the spit and shine job. “A week? No, not even a fuckin’ day, the way you willy-nilly about. You gotta use more elbow grease, lots and lots of elbow grease, hear? *Harder! Faster!*”

Jeff didn’t appear to mind Gene’s sneering condescension, or at least, he didn’t outwardly react to it in the slightest. He was used to being taunted and ordered

about by Gene, a natural bully who, besides frequently reminding everyone that he was a decorated Vietnam vet and commander of the local VFW post, also happened to be Jeff's boss. Not only was Gene manager of the shop, he was a full partner with his father, AH Engelhardt, in the sub-S corporation that owned the auto supply store, the adjacent six-bay repair garage, and the used car lot across the street. And when AH's diabetes, high blood pressure, failing kidneys, scarred liver, smoke-blackened lungs, or bad ticker finally accomplished what the entire German army couldn't do in more or less continual combat from Utah Beach to the Oder River, Gene undoubtedly would inherit the entire auto empire (minus generous financial legacies for Jeff's 15 year-old son Bobbie and 21-year-old daughter Melanie).

To Jeff, it just didn't seem worth the effort standing up to Gene's daily bullying. After all, until Bonnie finally passed away from breast cancer three years earlier, one day short of the turn of the new century, he had been blessed with twenty-six happy years of marriage to a wonderful, caring woman, as well as two smart, beautiful, and usually well-behaved children. On the other hand, Gene was saddled with an avaricious ex-wife who held custody of their two dull and unruly teenage sons like a revolving ransom note. What's more, village gossip took it as an article of faith that Gene's much younger trophy second wife slept in a separate bedroom and unaccountably disappeared for days or sometimes weeks at a time.

Jeff could also take a small amount of pride that, despite his rapidly approaching fiftieth birthday, he was reasonably fit, still able to easily slip into 30-year-old Levis

faded into virtual colorlessness from hundreds of wash and rinse cycles. Unfortunately, Gene couldn't say the same. He might have once been a bull of a man who could bench press 400 pounds and rip a phone book in two. But in middle age, he had developed such a muscle-to-fat beer belly that, if Eileen Wilson at Black Bear Dry Cleaners hadn't sewn an expander into his waist pants last April, he wouldn't have been able to squeeze into his uniform for the soon-to-begin Flag Day parade.

2

Jeff always dreaded the approach of that quartet of holidays that most Americans normally and nominally celebrated: Armistice Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, and especially, the Fourth of July. Squeezing into his army uniform would invariably transform Gene from his usual annoying and overbearing civilian self into a gung-ho super-patriot who seemingly viewed civilians, especially those whom he assumed had never served in the armed forces, as slackers and shirkers, and – though he never came out and said it aloud – cowards and parasites. Once he put on those Jekyll-and-Hyde silver oak clusters, Gene would loudly complain to anyone (of course, always making certain that his brother-in-law was within earshot) that men who hadn't worn a uniform, hadn't stood up for America against its enemies, didn't deserve, hadn't earned, the right to live in the greatest, grandest democracy in the history of the world. In Gene's mind, there were two, and only two options: love it or leave it.

Jeff was painfully aware why Gene was so belligerently super-patriotic towards him. It was because of that old saw, that you can make a first impression only once. And Jeff's first impression on the God-fearing, staunchly Barry Goldwater Republican Engelhardt family had been about as bad as it could possibly get. As Gene was fond of retelling, Jeff was what the cat had dragged in, which was, in an odd sort of way, almost literally true. Back in April 1973, at the very last major Washington peace rally against the Vietnam War, Jeff had met his future wife, 17-year-old Bonnie Engelhardt. It was love at first sight, and although Jeff was beautiful, perfect in Bonnie's blue eyes, his long ponytailed hair, scruffy black beard, and shabby anti-establishment appearance (which included that pair of soiled and shredded bluejeans he still loved to wear to family picnics) had indelibly marked him as a pinko, a peacenik, and that ultimate appellation – although the word had even then become passé – a *hippie*.

– END OF EXCERPT –

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Black Bear One, a Black Bear Pennsylvania novel, coming in late 2014

***HONOR* STUDY GUIDE**

Pixel Hall Press’s Study Guides feature a series of questions, to stimulate dialogs about the books and their underlying concepts. Book Clubs, teachers and other discussion group leaders are welcome to download a free [Study Guide for *Honor*](#).

ABOUT BLACK BEAR, PENNSYLVANIA

[*Honor*](#) is the first in a series of stories and books from Pixel Hall Press, set in Black Bear, Pennsylvania.

Black Bear, Pennsylvania is a fictional village in the Poconos Mountains created as a literary *folie à deux* by Daniel Grotta and Sally Wiener Grotta. Both Daniel and Sally are dipping into the same pool of invented locale and characters to write a series of separate stories and novels that will, eventually, paint a full picture of the diversity of life and relationships in a small mountain village.

[*Jo Joe*](#), a Black Bear novel by Sally Wiener Grotta, was published in summer 2012. *Jo Joe* is the story of a young mixed race Jewish woman who returns reluctantly to Black Bear (where she was raised). During the one week visit, she confronts her first love, is menaced by a violent old enemy, and uncovers a secret about the bigotry that

scarred her childhood. Both AH Englehardt and Jeff Smith (from Honor) play key roles in *Jo Joe*.

The next Black Bear story by Daniel Grotta will be [Adam V](#), a YA novel about a spoiled brat of a boy who has to grow up very quickly, if he wants to survive. Adam V will be published in 2014.

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.

ABOUT PIXEL HALL PRESS

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might have otherwise been overlooked. Our mission is “To publish books that energize the imagination and intrigue the mind, and to be a conduit between readers and provocative, stimulating, talented authors.”

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