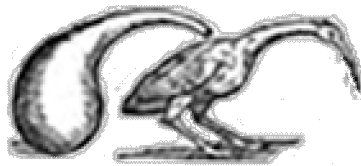


# Segue

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## NEIL GRIMMETT



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## Calling for Help

The old man coaxed the machine towards its required speed; a sound of contentment purred through the speaker. This control room was several hundred yards from the mound-enclosed building where the actual work was taking place; the little mesh-hidden voice was a reminder of the reality behind the lights and needles covering the panel in front of him.

Mostly, the only noise was that of the motor driving the stirrers around and around inside huge, metal vessel as the elements for destruction were combined. Sometimes, though, the younger of the two men heard a sudden, strange sound as if someone were walking across the steel floor of the building. As if an intruder had deliberately ignored the flashing beacons and barriers guarding the tunnel entrances and was either unaware of the huge risk or did not care. A saboteur or madman, he'd thought at first. Then, knowing that if he was to survive working in this place, he must keep his imagination in check, he'd tried to convince himself it was probably a faulty microphone, while still living in dread of a voice calling out. The old man seemed oblivious to it.

"Uncle Toby" was what the old man liked to be called. The younger man's name was Barry, he was married with three children and considered the title, like most of his fellow workers' games and opinions, beneath him. Toby gave the lever a final couple of tweaks and stepped back from the panel; the purr had eased to a whisper and a look of satisfaction smoothed the creases on his leather face.

"See how it's done, my son?" Toby asked his trainee.

Barry had attempted to operate the machinery on the final run yesterday and had failed badly. Somehow, as he'd tried to bring the motor up to the correct speed, all the chemicals in the mix had been forced above the paddles, which screamed in delight at their freedom. As the temperature dials swung into the red, Toby, who was the chargehand, moved calmly to the rescue. The old man always made it appear too natural to comprehend.

"You have to coax it to the point, lad," he said, "just like with a woman: sometimes gentle; sometimes firm."

Barry had stared at his new chargehand again, and though Toby was nearing retirement age, he noticed that his eyes were clear and sparkling and he was tanned and firm-muscled. Toby never took any days off work, kept the neatest building in the factory, and was admired by everyone. Barry had been advised - jokingly, he'd believed - never to let Toby into his house or near his wife as he was a terrible man for the ladies and had been married three times already. He'd laughed at the time but now felt a sensation of jealousy creep into his mind. Everything here was threatening and the fear had started to sneak out through the security fences and hide inside striking matches or car backfires. Now, even the old men in this place seemed capable of shattering his mindset as easily as the explosives could his body. He knew he had to leave here before it transformed or destroyed him. But how? It was the only job available and no one ever seemed to escape if they'd lasted the first few weeks of horror and shock.

"I'll adopt that approach next time," Barry replied, needing to stay in touch and learn the running of this building so he could move onto something less dangerous at least.

Outside, the vast layout of the explosives factory with its grass-covered pyramids, labyrinth of clean-ways for transporting explosives and network of connecting pipes carrying acids and poisons, appeared, as always, to be still and deserted. Groups of rabbits lived out their lives oblivious to the yellow ghosts of nitrous fume drifting overhead, and the drainage ditches running red that M.O.D. scientists could prove were natural. It made him think of all the bullshit everyone accepted with the need to earn a wage. “Keep your gob shut: keep your job,” was the golden rule in this place. He guessed it was probably the same for the soldiers that would get to launch and drop this stuff one day.



The inside of the cabin was hot, stiflingly so, but Toby liked it that way. Barry was supposed to be watching the indicator needle, checking that the speed stayed constant and making any minor adjustments if it fluctuated, especially upwards. Toby had his back to the panel and was filling in the log book on an old, stand-up desk, though he turned slyly every few minutes to make certain everything was safe. The heat and lack of responsibility offered an illusion of calm that Barry has been warned to guard against every day since his arrival. “Familiarity breeds contempt. And in this place, it will get you killed.” Luckily, before he gave a snore to demonstrate that the message had been wasted, the phone rang. “Hello,” he heard Toby yell. The old man shouted into phones as if he did not trust them to carry his voice. Barry watched as Toby began to look puzzled, then concerned. “Hello,” he repeated, slightly softer. “Is there anyone there?” After a couple of seconds he turned to Barry and, still bawling into the phone said, “I think it’s dead.”

Barry took the phone off him and spoke into it a couple of times without getting any response except for a sea-shell whisper of static. “Must be a fault,” he said and dropped the phone back into its metallic cradle. A noise from the speaker echoed it with perfect timing.

The end of the run was reached and Toby eased the stirrers into stillness. The silence felt coiled to Barry, like a spring that dared any movement. As they moved towards to the building, the phone in the cabin started to ring and Barry was sent back to answer it. Once again, no one responded, but he lingered with the handset held to his ear until he saw the red light on the control panel blink off, telling him that the security barrier had been lifted and Toby was entering the explosives building. Nothing was more frightening to Barry than that moment when the door was opened and what waited inside must be faced for the first time. He was well aware of the fact that high explosives would never be completely stable or predictable; but it was the introduction that terrified him the most. “Do you want anything?” he asked again before hanging up and leaving.

Toby was already busy working inside the building. “I think I’ve just had a dirty phone call,” Barry said, and was relieved to see the old man share the joke and not question his late arrival.

They off-loaded the innocuous-looking mix and were putting together the chemicals for the next, when the phone attached to the outside of the building rang. This time Barry hung up the instant there was no response. Toby took a furtive glance at him and did not even bother to ask. It started again as they were leaving through the mound. “They’ll try the cabin if it’s important,” said Toby, closing the first of the barriers. Barry listened to the sound of the phone, its ring distorted

and softened by the cold dampness of the tunnel that zigzagged its passage to safety, dissipating the noise as it was supposed to any shock waves. He imagined the building exploding and firing them to oblivion through this rifle barrel of dirty, lichen-lined stone. He wanted to run; but running was against the rules as it might start another chain reaction.



Inside the cabin the slow drone of the motor began its song again. Barry waited for the old man to offer him the controls but his attention had drifted somewhere else. Then there was a louder, revving noise as a large, red forklift pulled up outside. The driver, Ronald, leapt out of its cab and barged in. He was young, immensely fat and came to the factory straight from the deep, primitive countryside that still existed around the top secret establishment. His job was to do the fetching and carrying for every building on the plant. It was considered to be the lowest position available and reserved for individuals too dumb to be trusted with anything more responsible. And yet, though Ronald had only been their driver for a few months, Barry could sense that he was fitting in well and was already better liked than himself.

Toby seemed particularly fond of him and always cheered up when he was around. Something else happened. Something that both fascinated and disgusted Barry. They wrestled. Or, at least they bent towards each other and grabbed hold of the loose folds in the baggy, zipless, button-free, safety clothing everyone was required to wear. Then they began to struggle until they managed to force a hold around each other's crutch area. Once they achieved this, the action stopped, and they stood for a time like a statue from some classical age before parting and carrying on with their jobs.

“Hello, my son,” said Toby.

“Hello, Uncle Toby,” said Ronald.

“How's Ronald?” asked Toby.

“Alright, my cock,” he replied.

And the wrestling began.

Once, Barry had attempted a bout with Ronald. Ronald had been far too strong for him and had grabbed hold of his balls and crushed them in seconds. Barry had leapt away with tears welling up behind his eyes; a feeling of shame and disappointment that had refused to fade for weeks. Now, as with so many of the recent events in his life, he sat back and observed, pretending to himself that he understood clearly what was going on, and that these people were just base and crude with nothing more complex worth considering.

All the men were invited for a night out the following week to celebrate the forty years some unseen character from the offices had spent dotting and crossing the messages of love stenciled on each rocket. Barry wondered how Toby and Ronald would act. Toby's wife was said to be quite posh; Ronald still lived at home with his parents on a farm. He tried to picture the faces of the lady and old farmers as their men performed this ritual. He knew really that no such thing would happen, that their language and posture changed, unrecognizably, outside the locked and guarded perimeter of this world. And that in some way this was almost another dimension, the

danger that surrounded everything demanding its own patterns of esoteric behaviour. “Just for a short spell,” he kept telling himself and everyone else. “That’s what I said,” Toby had replied when Barry informed him. “Thirty-eight years ago and I still don’t know where the days have gone.” Barry could not comprehend how anyone could stay in a place like this for so long, their lives ticking away inside a time bomb.

The phone started to ring. Toby released his hold on Ronald and answered it. Ronald moved off reluctantly and slumped in a chair next to Barry. He stared as the old man repeated the number of the building several times and then shouted into the phone for whoever it was to speak. “Someone’s bugging us about,” he stated.

The phone calls were explained to Ronald who made an instant judgment. “It’s Chopper the Whopper: Ol’ Donkey Dick himself.”

“Stan?” Toby queried, knowing exactly who Ronald was talking about.

“He’s been had up for it,” said Ronald, “that and nicking women’s clothes off washing lines. And worse.”

Barry had only met Stan a few times. He arrived earlier than the rest of the crew and was always changed and on his way to the plant before anyone else, then was the last one back. The only time Barry had spent more than a few seconds in his company was when he came into the cabin to hurry Ronald along. And though it usually meant Stan was angry at having been kept waiting and was running behind time, he too ended up wrestling with the driver before they both left.

“Years ago it was,” Toby confirmed. “The police found wardrobes full of underwear and dresses. He even had some belonging to my second wife. He told them that it got blown into his garden and he’d been tidying up after the storm! But that’s not the half of it. According to what his wife told mine before she left him, anyway. But then you are too young to hear such things...”

Ronald was grinning his head off, “Ding dong King Kong,” he burred.

Barry listened to this latest slice of gossip without believing a word of it. During his short time here he had gone from taking all the stories and rumors as the truth, to believing they were just another symptom of being forced into having to stay mates and relying on each other in the event of things going wrong. Everyone, it seemed, had some terrible secret that was always connected to sex in this men-without-women environment. When Barry had started working here, he’d had to sign the ‘Official Secrets Act’, and swear not even to tell his wife what went on inside the establishment’s perimeter. He put the gossip and innuendoes down to a need to invent something that they could tell.

“Listen,” Barry said, determined to prove, if only to himself, that this was more of their nonsense, “the next time it rings don’t answer it straight away. I’ll run up over the mound and see if Stan is on his phone at the same time.”

Stan’s building was only a short way from the cabin and the phone would be visible from the top of the mound, so the plan sounded good. They sat waiting and poised. The motor turned, its speed too high, but unnoticed.

The phone sounded and Barry took off. He started to climb the steep side of the mound, trying to shut out the fear that began slowing him as he neared the top. Suddenly Ronald passed him, laughing and panting, “Dirty ring a ding,” he panted. At the top they crouched and stared over the edge. Stan’s building was considered reasonably safe and could be operated within the mound

from behind thick steel doors. They saw him walk past the outside door carrying a pile of boxes. He was a large man with very pale skin and easy to recognize.

Toby was at the control panel when they returned and Barry noticed his forehead was covered in sweat and that the normally-smooth line on the chart was jagged and close to the red zone.

“We'll have to be more careful,” Toby warned.

Ronald drove off: the last phone call had been genuine and was for him to go and collect chemicals for one of the other buildings. The phone rang twice before their break; both times the caller refused to speak. During lunch Ronald kept on about it. He was sitting close to Stan who appeared as puzzled as the rest. Nearly all the men played cards on this rota, and for money, though it was against the rules. Sometimes, a loud, angry voice shouted out at the stupid way a card had been laid and what it had cost. Mostly though, it was silent, and time dragged more than usual. Ken, the foreman, came to see Toby with some instructions about the rest of the day's work. Afterwards, he stood for a time watching the game of cards with an envious look on his face as if he regretted the promotion that had segregated him from the men. Barry waited to see if Toby would mention the phone calls. He did not, and the foreman moved slowly away trying, and failing, to spark conversations as he left.



After the break, Stan walked the long way back to the plant with Toby and Barry. He said he was having a few problems getting some of the tests in his building to come out correct and Toby agreed to go over and take a look. Toby was the most experienced chargehand on the section and some people said the factory would shut down when he retired, or that there would definitely be another major explosion and more deaths. “The seagulls will be busy when Toby leaves,” Barry was told during his first few weeks, and found out later that when one of the buildings had blown up the only way they could locate the remains of the crew was by watching where the gulls fed. He heard the same things said about another old-timer who retired just after he'd started work.

This man had known everything about one section of the factory. He had cried on his last day - which was apparently the normal thing. Tears streaming down his stained face as he had opened the cigarette lighter they had bought him. “All that knowledge,” the men had said as he dragged himself out of the gate for the last time. The next day it was as if he'd never existed, and had been so ever since.

The next mix was underway when Toby set off to see Stan. It was the first time Barry had been left on his own when the building was running, and almost immediately he could sense the change. He stood in front of the panel trying to keep his legs and hands steady. He felt that the connection between him and the building was like a rope holding some untamable beast that sensed his weakness and was preparing to turn and spring on its captor. Any second, he feared, a growl would roar through the speaker and announce its intention. The sound though, continued as no more than a gentle purr and the needle stayed ruler straight on the chart until Toby arrived back,

well in time to take control at the end of the run. "I had another phone call," Barry lied, needing to add something to the flat-line reality, "just as I was adjusting the speed."

Toby gave him and the record instrument a quick, doubtful look. "I will have to speak to Ken about it," he said.

As they worked in the building the phone rang four more times; each occasion they answered it, there was silence. Once, when Barry was certain he could not be overheard, he felt a desperate need to say something that had been playing on his mind.

"I'm not like these people," he offered. "I would understand. You could trust me. There is no need to hide inside this hellhole, behind razor wire, or in sealed buildings even." The silence had seemed to move.

The phone went another three times as they sat in the cabin. The speaker seemed full of metallic-sounding footsteps. Even Toby appeared to find it strange and tapped the top of the panel as if something was loose. The phone rang again as they were leaving the cabin. This time they ignored it; then did the same when it disturbed them working in the building. On and on it trilled until the sound was not a sound anymore.

As they were walking back to the cabin, Ken came cycling over at full speed. "What the hell's going on?" he demanded. "I've been trying to reach you for ages. I thought something must have happened."

"We've been getting a lot of aggravation," said Toby.

"You always answer the phone in this place," Ken stated, "you know that. It might be somebody calling for help. Someone in serious trouble, panicking, only able to remember your number. You should be more aware of that rule than anyone, Toby."

A look passed between the two and Barry could see the fear. He'd been told that Ken was once badly burnt in an accident and that his legs were bald and he grew whiskers on the palms of his hands and would do anything rather than enter a building. Toby explained to him what had been happening and how many times they'd tried to answer the phone. Barry backed him up, pleased to be able to speak to his foreman at last. Ken assembled everybody in his office at the end of the day and gave them a rule reading. Toby and Barry had to stand next to him to show they were innocent and Ronald kept making faces at Stan. Back in the shift room, then on the way to the gate, the old hands kept voicing their opinion that it was someone from another part of the factory having a joke.

Barry had a different idea. He'd suspected it after the canteen break, now he was certain. It was Ken. Lonely and brooding through the long working hours in his office with the responsibility of so much resting on his shoulders; the scapegoat waiting to be sacrificed the moment the nightmare scenario became fact; living his life covered in his new skin of fear. Barry was just waiting for the right moment to make the rest of them face the fact, when the M.O.D. police grabbed him. It was not unusual, random searches at the gate happened every day, just his bad luck.

By the time they got through, most of the men had left. Toby stood waiting for the work's bus along with another of their crew. Barry joined them and said what he thought. At first, Toby dismissed it as rubbish, then he remembered something.

"Mind you," he said, "there were those pervy magazines."

The other man, Clive, agreed.

"What magazines?" Barry asked, wanting to refute their nonsense.

“They caught him in a big newsagents,” Toby explained, “with a couple of dirty books stuffed up his jumper. A store detective threw him onto the floor and sat on him while some young assistant searched him. There was a right stink about it that nearly cost Ken his job.”

Clive warmed to the memory. “Because of what he gets up to with his wife, I suppose.” Barry wanted to make them understand the real reasons. “I think he’s under a lot of pressure with so much responsibility. Especially considering what once happened to him.”

“They reckon,” Toby said and winked at Barry, “he goes in for that ‘wife swapping’. Maybe, he was ringing up to invite you and that pretty young bride of yours along!”

“Or maybe it was you, Toby!” Clive added. The two men were laughing uncontrollably as the bus arrived.



That night Barry told his wife, Pauline, about the phone calls. She responded by telling him that she’d once received an obscene call as a young girl doing some babysitting. Pauline carried on, enumerating in detail, everything the man had said to her, then repeating everyone else’s opinion on the incident and what ought to happen to all the perverts in the world.

Barry tried to tell her that this was different and had a lot to do with repression and men being forced together in such circumstances.

Pauline got it totally wrong and recalled reading about some men who were working with chemicals growing breasts. Finally, she started to panic that the foreman of a high explosives factory had gone mad and wanted to know exactly how far a blast could travel and if it was true that you must blow out your breath to stop your lungs rupturing. “Who can we ring?” she asked. “Who? Why is it so secret?”



The steady drone of the motor seemed to invade his head as he tried to sleep. The sound got louder and louder, racing out of control. The needle on the chart climbed ruler straight and began to paint its line in fire. Then another sound woke him properly. Barry shivered, though his hair was soaked in sweat. “Babe, I can't sleep,” he finally said, feeling afraid and alone. “I think I may have heard something.”

“It's so hot,” she said, after he spoke again.

“Want a drink?” he offered.

Pauline switched on her light and tried to focus on the clock. He got up and went to the bathroom before she could start moaning about the time. The bedroom light was already off as he came back out. He stood on the landing and peered across the fields to the distant glow of the factory working its continual process, as dangerous to shut down as start. He heard the small garden gate click open and looked below. The person moved along the path towards his house. A

huge, grotesque shape in an ill-fitting wig and a pale voluminous dress. Barry watched, terrified, as the figure tottered on high-heels. He could see clearly as the man's large, pale hands opened and closed as if searching for someone to grab and hold. Barry sensed the longing and hopelessness in each empty grasp.

“Please,” Barry prayed, “don't look up.” Knowing he had led this out and wishing the steps were back dancing on the steel floor with the speaker's static drowning out the voice, now clearly calling to him, before the explosion could silence it forever.

## About the Work

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The short story, “Calling for Help,” is one of a series set in the confines of a top secret, military establishment where high explosives and missiles are made. It is the first of six I have so far set there and was, paradoxically, the hardest to write.

I wanted to introduce a newcomer into this enclosed, men-only-world and explore the issues through his eyes. In most of the work I had read about men in conflict, it was the danger and heroic aspect that held sway. My interest was in other issues: how men shut away without women would behave; what would be the effect of spending a large proportion of one’s waking hours hidden from the outside world and working with materials that could kill in a microsecond and were always unstable; and what would happen if someone came in and acted as a catalyst to invite some of the behaviour through the perimeter fence.

I tried to show how men who were genuinely brave and had to, through the nature of their work, remain close friends might learn to cope with the pressure of their work. Their sexual games and innuendoes, the gossip and rumours that took place and how these might seem to a stranger.

The character who is heard moving across the steel floor of the working building I used to stretch the point to breaking.

The inspiration came from having worked in the place described for four years and watching how men did behave under such pressures. And, apart from one blabber-mouthed writer, how nothing was allowed to travel past the heavily guarded gates.

The easiest part, if there is such a thing, was using such an exclusive setting to play out the drama.

The hardest was finding a way of showing the newcomer was missing the point and what it might mean if the hidden emotions were set free in the outside world. It was my way of using a metaphor to show the more terrible results of the super high explosives being produced and what happened when they were sent out into the world. Also, to explore something of the buried emotions of picking up a paycheck and living in denial of what was being made and its true purpose.

I ended up writing about 15 endings before I was happy and felt the story worked on the level I’d intended.

For me, the craft of the short story is very much akin to poetry. I like to catch the glimpse then expand it into a solid picture that, while it does not tie up all the loose ends, shows as much as possible.

I’m just starting my sixth novel and putting together some of my sixty plus short stories into a first collection. I’ve been struck, as I rewrite and edit stories—after just finishing 450 page novel—by the huge difference between the two forms. A question I’ve often been asked and seen asked many times is: What’s the easiest to write, short stories or novels? I have an answer now. Neither. They are both recalcitrant creatures that present their own unique problems and delights; never really tamed and always released from the writer’s control too early.

## About the Author

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Neil Grimmatt has published stories internationally in *London Magazine*, *Panurge*, *Iron*, *Stand*, *Sepia*, *Pretext*, *Ambit*, *Paris Transcontinental*, *Grain*, *Quadrant*, *New Contrast*, *Literary Quarterly Review*, *The Taj Mahal Review*, *Fiction*, *The Yale Review*, *DoubleTake*, *Blackbird*, *Tatlin's Tower*, *Web Del Sol*, *In Posse Review*, *m.a.g.*, *Word Riot*, *The Blue Moon Review*, *3AM*, *Gangway*, and *The Southern Review*. He also has stories published in the anthologies *England Calling*, *Book of Voices*, and forthcoming in Italy's *ISBN Press*. More work is forthcoming in *The Ellery Queen Literary Magazine* and *Southern Humanities Review*. He has won a Notable Short Story of the Year Award for the last two years on the Internet, the Write On poetry award, the Oppenheim John Downes Award three times, and two major British Arts Council bursaries. His first novel, *The Bestowing Sun*, was published in 2006. Grimmatt is a member of the US branch of PEN.

### Neil Grimmatt on the Web:

[www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v4n1/fiction/grimmatt\\_n/countdown.htm](http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v4n1/fiction/grimmatt_n/countdown.htm)

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