

Just Staff

Theodore K Phelps, June 2024

Hitchhiking had been slow for a Saturday in July. Connecticut used to be good for hitching, a decade ago, back in the day. So, by the time Guy LaPierre arrived at the Northfield Writer's Conference Center, his first time at NWCC as a guest, he was late. Stupidly late. A couple days late. By that time, he should have been walking quietly down the flagstone pathway, novel in hand, to the dining hall. Looking at least a little like the 2024 winner of the Northfield First Novel Award. Not hair matted and back wet from his trek in from Route 8. Yes, an author of *Colorado Mine* could look rugged, could cover up his Yalie ivory past, but this grunge was just embarrassing. He tried to blame his hiking buddies, or those 'girls' from last night.

Guy dropped his backpack on the stone slab at the wooden door of The Speaker's Cottage, a cute English style thing, built in the 30s, gray, round stone, roses and ivy on the walls, white window trim. The door was half open and inside, the sound of metal on metal. He pushed his head in. To the left, a plumber was bent over the clothes washer spitting 'fck fck fck!' Then, seeing Guy, "Mr. LaPierre! Thank God."

"Call me Guy," Guy said, "Pronounced ghee."

"I am sorry, the plumbing is fuhh—is stuck. We just learned," pulling up oversized overalls and strapping them over the green and yellow Northfield logo with an odd 'Just Staff' embroidered in black over the breast pocket. *A tiny sort for a plumber.*

"I, uh," he looked down at his torn jeans, fanned the front of his hiking shirt to sense his aromas. "I just need a quick, you know. Shower and a change. And," looking at his Apple Watch, "Shit!"

Guy brought his backpack inside. Pulled out a rain poncho and a red nylon zip bag which he up-ended on the couch. The fruit of five days in the Green Mountains and some heavy nights: hi-tech shirts, pants and underwear. "Something here will have to do. Hold your nose." He winked. She waved him off.

"Yuh, put that stuff back in the bag and follow me," she, the plumber, said.

“Just to point out, I am the so-called guest of honor at dinner. So—”

“—And the *featured reader*. We know! We have fifteen minutes to make you look and smell—for God sake—like a winner of *something*. Out we go. We have to run. Keep up! You look fit.”

As we can tell, this ‘Just Staff’ shirt label is some kind of joke. This whirlwind is Jessica Staffz. And as everyone here knows, the moniker winks back to ‘Justin Staph,’ the bent detective in her first published stories. The series led her to George, the publisher, and indeed the founder of NWCC. They had the wedding at the Center in ‘08. He called her ‘just staff’ at the reception.

That was then. Now, after his brain cancer, Jess runs the Center with a small team of ‘girls’ who still love the Just Staff bit. They all wear all the hats to make the place work. And right now, that is all Jessica is trying to do: Get this year’s First Novel winner showered and into a clean shirt, one she pictures hanging at the back of her closet in her own cottage. But that is a quarter mile through a rough path in the woods.

Plumber’s overalls are no good for the run they must make. *Dammit*. If she were alone, she could just drop the overalls and be fine. But there’s this First Novel Winner to think of. Running behind her. Usually, these past years, the winners have been women, and the barely shorts she has on would be tolerable. For this guy, this Guy guy. Nope. She knows. A woman her age and all, knows. “F-boy,” she muttered and more to the point, mosquitos would kill her if she ran half-naked without her tube of prescription repellent, left by the bathroom sink.

“How are you doing, Ghee?” she called back to him as they hopped over rocks and pine tree roots. She could hear his feet. No heavy breathing. *He is in shape. For a writer!* “This patch has poison ivy.” She dodged to the left. Swatting bugs from her neck. Her ears. Eyes. Cursing.

At her cottage, Jessica got him into the shower while she pawed through his dirty clothes for a shirt and shorts. All tech-dry fabric. She handwashed a set and put them on a 10-minute hot dryer cycle. He opened the steam-filled bathroom door a few minutes later, spikey hair, tanned body dripping wet, stepped onto her living room floor, and stood there like he had nothing to hide. “Got a towel, ma’am?”

"Use mine. On the rack there. I washed your undies." She tossed them to him and sat at the kitchen table watching him use the towel. "I need the shower," she said. "but while I am in there...come over here a second, Mr. LaPierre. Guy." She brought him, bare footed, bare chested, bare everything minus those shorts, into her bedroom. She reached deep into the left side of a cupboard of clothing. "See if you prefer any of these shirts and maybe even the pants. George's. He was a bit like you. Your build." She brushed past him, taking her summer dress and an under thing and went into the bathroom to shower..

When she came out of the bathroom, in a dress of flowers, he was in a pale-blue, linen, button-short-sleeve and tan linen trousers. "Do you have some shoes to go with this?"

"Sandals, I think," she said poking under the bed. "It is hard to get rid of his..." she began heaving quietly and sniffing as she pulled stuff out. "I haven't had a man...I mean, no one has been up here...I do all the cleaning here, my cottage and yours...I mean the Speaker's..."

Guy stood there from behind watching this labor. For a long time. *Not like her*, he thought. Dinner must have started. She had gone silent, sitting on the floor, holding a pair of sandals. Turning them over and over. Her cheeks wet. He saw mosquito welts on her neck, and believed he saw them increasing, one the size and color of a penny under her ear.

She scratched her forehead drawing some blood. Stood to look in the mirror. "Fuck! Oh crap!" Her face and neck looked like the measles. "Take these sandals. Go now! It is right down the path. Don't break a sweat! Stay sweet. You are the hero tonight. Your career starts tonight. Don't run. Don't mention me! Don't say you were here! Don't! Do you get it? Why the fuck were you so late today?"

"I am so sorry for that. Thank you for all this. I can't believe you, you—and sorry, who *are* you, exactly?"

"Just staff. Maybe I will hear your reading. I loved the novel, well most of it. Go now!" Him gone, she limped to the cabin phone and called the front desk. "Get me an ambulance, Sherry. I am in my cabin. Have Wang do the introductions for LaPierre. I think I am blacking out." {Click}

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Guy LaPierre walked to the podium in the Center's meeting room. He was the final speaker at Jessica Staffz' memorial. The circular room's full-height screened windows filled the room with scents of lavender fields, the sounds of birds and crickets in the late afternoon sun. It was September, two months since Guy had stood there and read from his novel.

"I knew Ms. Staffz, your dear Jessica, hardly at all. I mean, really just for forty-five minutes. Forty-five hectic, stressful, fateful minutes." Guy put his hand on his mouth. "And I love her. I am sorry, that sounds so...I do." The room sighed with him. "I am so grateful you have allowed me to come here today. Only Sherry knows what it means that I am...Just to say, if I weren't such a...If I were a better person, Jessica would still be with us. I know it was the, um, allergy. But she died helping me. Helping me just look OK. Just. Look. OK. That night. And all because I was so late getting here. Oh, God." Guy choked. Weeping. Cramping his chest.

He stepped back and gestured to the woman facilitating the service who said, "Yesterday, Guy told me he is writing a short story—a *true* story—about Jess, how he met her and what she did for him. Those forty-five minutes. Working title, 'Just Staff.'"