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author of *My Shouting, Shattered, Whispering Voice:
A Guide to Writing Poetry & Speaking Your Truth*

SMITH: AN UNAUTHORIZED
FICTOGRAPHY

JORY POST

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

INTERVIEW WITH TALESMITH

“I READ THE BRIEF PARAGRAPH YOU SENT along with your request for this interview. I have it here with me. Do you mind ... if I read it out loud, while the recorder is going?”

The interviewer had no problem with that and nodded her assent. The subject had her eyes down on the piece of paper in front of her, made no eye contact with her.

“Okay. ‘You’ve been recommended by a friend, acquaintance, colleague, boss, or someone else in your life who thought you might be a good choice as a participant in my study. The study is funded by a private foundation that wishes to remain anonymous. I’m able to pay you an honorarium of one hundred dollars to be a participant. I can’t tell you much about the study, other than I will record what you say, and that I want you not to use your real name, but rather a fictitious name, and because Smith is the most prevalent name in the U.S., England, and Australia, I would like you to pick a name that has Smith in it.

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That's really all I can say, but I hope you'll find the opportunity enjoyable and tell me about you."

Silence. Fifteen seconds, thirty seconds, more. The interviewer watched the subject, whose eyes were still down, even though the paper had been removed from the table and put back in her purse.

"Okay. Am I to believe that you'd like me to come up with a make-believe name?"

The interviewer nodded.

"Then this whole thing could be made up for all you know. Every word out of my mouth could be a fairy tale."

The interviewer nodded.

"Okay. Let's call me FairySmith. For now. Maybe I'll change it later. Maybe I'll change it a few times. Then you want me to tell you about me. I can't really do that. I forget most about me, have lost me along the way, so what if I just make up a fairy tale, that may or may not be about me and people I have known?"

The interviewer nodded. The woman's eyes were still facing downward at a forty-five-degree angle directed at the middle of the round table where the digital record sat.

"Do I start with 'Once upon a time'? Isn't that how most fairy tales begin? Some generic sense of time so you don't know whether it happened yesterday or seven hundred years ago? Well, I'll try to make it clear in my tale when it began. John F. Kennedy was president, so that gives you a range of years to begin with. He died in Dallas on the day this tale began. About the time the bullets were sprayed from the window of the repository or the grassy knoll or any one of a hundred other possible locations, a woman in the woods was screaming for her life. With a husband out chopping wood in a forest behind a small cabin with a fire and a kettle of steaming hot water, the woman squirted out a little baby, red and crying and covered in goo. They named that baby ... hmm ... what shall her name be ... let's just call her Smith, plain old Smith, because she was just a plain old baby like all the other babies born to

families on that auspicious day, and pretty much every other day. Is this what you wanted from me? Does this work for you? Me telling a fairy tale instead of talking about me?”

The interviewer nodded, jotted down a few notes in her journal, kept her eyes looking at the woman, who still hadn't made eye contact with her.

“Good. Because I like fairy tales. The little girl who was born in the woods the day a president was assassinated also liked fairy tales, mostly told to her by her mother because the father was never around, always out cutting down the forest to make a pathway to town so at some point one or more of them could escape, because God knows there was need for escape. Just like Lee Harvey Oswald tried to escape. Just like Jackie tried to escape out of the backseat when she saw what was happening. Or so the little girl was told by her mother later, because she was too young to know then what was happening the day she was born. The mother taught her much about the world, the world away from their small little cabin hidden away in the woods, and she always told them with a little more light than the girl imagined existed in the real world, always told everything in fairy tale form, so there was a swaying lilt to her voice, an injection of happiness just to be telling the story even if the stories didn't have happy endings, even if the stories scared the little girl somewhat. But the mother would always end every fairy tale with a smile on her face even if it seemed inappropriate to do so ...

“I could tell you the parts about big bad wolves in the woods at Grandmother's house, of which there were many, even if there was no grandmother. And I could tell you about being locked away, in towers, or dungeons, when the girl's hair grew so long and tangled she tripped over it with every step. Or about the giant bean plants outside the window before the entrance to the forest, with what the girl liked to pretend were magic beans that could take her to golden lands. Or maybe about the unhappy girl who tried to plant a garden.

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“But I won’t bother you with those chapters of this girl’s fairy tale, because there are more chapters, like the one about the father who was supposedly chopping down trees to make a pathway for someone’s escape, which turned out to be another tall tale, as the mother told the girl after she went searching for the entry point, and discovered that the father was never blazing a trail through those woods, but instead was chopping down those trees, making planks out of them, crisscrossing the planks together in a very high fence that would keep the mother and girl locked inside the father’s little slice of the forest and little mess of a cabin probably forever, or at least for the rest of their lives.

“That’s when the mother lost the lilt in her stories, forgot to put in the happy parts, and it seemed to the girl, who was five or seven by this point in the story, that the mother was no longer telling the stories to the little girl, but instead was telling them to herself, or some other person who wasn’t in the room, who didn’t seem to be listening, because the mother never looked at her anymore, was almost afraid to look in the little girl’s eyes, it seemed to the little girl, and that’s when the little girl began avoiding her mother’s eyes as well, for fear of what she might see there, or what might not be there. It was about this time the little girl knew her mother was not going to find the pathway out of the forest that would lead them to safety in town.

“And that she was now on her own. It would be her task to save them both, to relocate in a big city like Dallas, no, not that one, never that one, bad things happen there, even worse things than happen in her father’s part of the forest behind tall fences. So she went out to pick the beans to help make the father’s dinner, because the mother just sat staring most days and nights out the windows, and when the father grumbled, ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ the girl smiled, even though she was frowning inside, and told him the fairy tale about the giant and the beans and the gold and how she was going to find them fame and fortune in those beans. And the father snarled and said, ‘Just cook

the damn beans, in a big pot, with a glob of bacon grease and goose meat.’ And she did, and she delivered it to him in a big bowl at the table and took a smaller bowl over to the seat by the window and tried to spoon feed the mother who spit the beans on the floor and mumbled about light and bullets and pathways to heaven.

“It was on the forays to the ever-growing bean plants that she was able to explore, to search for possibilities, now that the father approved of her ventures, because he truly loved her bean stew with bacon grease and goose. She would walk all along the tall fence that enclosed the whole area, circular, with no gate, because the father was big enough and strong enough to climb the fence and leap over when he needed out. And it was along these walks that she discovered the berries she knew not to eat because of the fairy tales with the poison berries her mother used to tell her when she was still able to recite and make eye contact. I feel like I’m just rambling on here, but I’m getting to the good part now, so is it okay if I just keep on talking?”

The interviewer nodded her head emphatically at the top of the woman’s downward-looking head.

“So the little girl put a second towel down in her bean-collecting basket, beneath the towel that caught the beans, where she would pluck the poison berries, careful not to lick her hands and to wash carefully when she returned to the cabin. By spring, she had gathered almost a gallon of the berries that she hid underneath her bed wrapped up in the towel. Finally one day, she discovered a family of gophers behind some bean plants and berry bushes that had figured out how to move from outside the fence to inside the fence. They had dug a small hole under the fence, and her eyes got big. She looked around for the father and heard him in the distance chopping down more trees, so she got down on her knees, skin to dirt, and thrust her nails into the loose dirt and widened the hole. But it was getting dark and she had to get back to fix his supper.

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“When he sat down at the table, she noticed that he noticed something different in the stew. So she said, ‘Because it’s your birthday today I thought I’d make you a special stew with the raspberries from the plants down by the spring.’ And he nodded, not quite smiled, but looked like he appreciated the new flavor, and took big bites, and finally lifted the bowl and drank the whole thing until the last drop slid onto his tongue. Within minutes he was holding his stomach, vomiting on the floor, falling to the ground in pain, until he stopped breathing.”

She stopped, raised her eyes to meet the interviewer. “Is this what you had in mind?”

The interviewer nodded.

“Okay. Let’s call me TaleSmith. I can tell these stories all night long.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jory Post was an educator, writer, and artist who lived in Santa Cruz, California. He and his wife, Karen Wallace, created handmade books and art together as JoKa Press. Jory was the co-founder and publisher of *phren-z*, an online literary quarterly, and founder of the *Zoom Forward* reading series.

His first book of prose poetry, *The Extra Year*, was published in 2019, and was followed by a second, *Of Two Minds*, in 2020. His novel, *Pious Rebel*, also appeared in 2020.

His work has been published in *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Rumble Fish Quarterly*, *The Sun*, and elsewhere. His short stories “Sweet Jesus” and “Hunt and Gather” were nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

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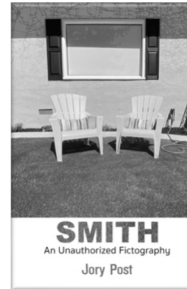
PIOUS REBEL

After her partner dies suddenly, Lisa Hardrock realizes how little she knows about the life she's been living — and starts exploring her questions in a blog that unexpectedly goes viral.



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In the kaleidoscopic, episodic joy ride, Jory Post treats us to thirty interviews that may or may not be real, with an array of “ordinary” people who turn out to be anything but.



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