

# Tales from the Interior

BY SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS ILLUSTRATIONS BY AVI A. KATZ

The three short stories you are about to read were written by Scott Russell Sanders, distinguished professor emeritus of English at Indiana University and the author of 20 books of fiction and nonfiction. The stories, published for the first time here, feature the family of one ordinary citizen named Gordon Milk.

“I have been writing stories about the bearish, boorish, unflappable Gordon Milk and his family now and again for some years, whenever I’ve needed to

play hooky from more solemn subjects,” explains Sanders. “Set in an unnamed city tucked away in the hills of southern Indiana, where the laws of nature yield to the force of imagination, the stories reflect my love of folk tales.”

These three tales, and others, have provided the narrative for a stage show entitled *Miracles, Myths, Lyrics & Lies*, featuring songs written and performed by Carrie Newcomer and Krista Detor. The show also includes

humorous and poignant tales told by Philip Gulley.

A previous collaboration, *Wilderness Plots*, based on Sanders’ book by the same name and starring Sanders, Newcomer, Detor, and singer/songwriters Tim Grimm, Michael White, and Tom Roznowski, toured broadly to critical acclaim.

Having seen the first performance of *Miracles, Myths, Lyrics & Lies*, I believe it will achieve similar success. I hope you enjoy these stories.

—the editor





# Southern lights

Art by Kate

**S**INCE, NOT LONG AGO, A JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES NAMED GORDON MILK lived with his wife, their four children, and three grandparents in a little-known city tucked away in the southern Indiana hills. Their old house, which fell apart as fast as Gordon could fix it, was packed from the foundation to the rafters. Gordon slept in the basement with his wife, Mabel. His mother slept in a room he had tacked on beside the kitchen, and Mabel's parents slept in a room tacked on to the garage. The two daughters, prone to squabbling, occupied separate bedrooms on the second floor, while the two sons, far enough apart in age to avoid fighting, shared bunk beds in the attic.

They weren't exactly poor, since they never went hungry, but they also never had any spare dimes to rub together. Each month Mabel's parents received a tiny Social Security check, which they used to order surefire cures for old age from magazine ads. Gordon's mother drew an even tinier pension from the owners of the

quarry in which his father had been crushed by a slab of limestone. She spent most of her money on lottery tickets, without any luck. The older children worked odd jobs after school, but the few dollars they brought in went for make-up, music, and shoes. Mabel had her hands full running the household. That left Gordon to earn enough for the mortgage, insurance, taxes, groceries, utilities, clothes, medicines, school fees, union dues, and who knew what other expenses. Gordon certainly didn't know, because Mabel paid the bills.

Still, they managed to scrape by on Gordon's wages from the city maintenance crew. Blessed with the constitution of an ox, he never missed a day of work. Because he could repair sidewalks, pave streets, cut up fallen trees, weld broken parts, overhaul motors, and run every sort of machine, he was assigned to fill in for workers who went on sick leave or vacation. One week he might be mounting new tires on a snowplow, and the next he might be digging up a broken

sewer main, and the next he might be replacing the roof on a bus shelter or scrubbing graffiti from the water tower.

Gordon had begun learning his many trades as an infant, when he played with wrenches, pliers, and hammers instead of stuffed animals. The tools weren't wooden toys, either, but real ones, left in the crib by Gordon's father, who also persuaded Mrs. Milk to treat the baby's diaper rash with white lithium grease. She had no idea what else to use, so she lathered on the grease, which worked like a charm, even if it made the baby smell like an engine. Gordon was her first child, and also, as it turned out, her last. She and her husband kept trying for another one, year after year, until he was crushed in the quarry, but they had no more luck than she would have later on with the lottery. It was as though Gordon, one of the burliest babies ever delivered in the city hospital, had claimed all the vigor Mrs. Milk had to offer.

When his father died, Gordon quit school,

lied about his age, joined the Navy, spent two years in Vietnam as a Seabee bulldozing airstrips in the jungle, spent another year building military bases in Saudi Arabia, all the while sending paychecks to his mother. Then he returned home, wounded only in the depths of his heart where he rarely probed. When he applied for a job with the city maintenance crew, the foreman sent him to look at a balky garbage truck that had baffled the mechanics. Gordon soon had it purring, and the foreman hired him on the spot.

So it happened that Gordon's first job for the city was driving that truck up and down the streets before dawn in the dead of winter, while two boys, recently expelled from high school, rode on the rear bumper and emptied trashcans into the hopper. When the truck was full, he dropped the boys at the service garage to warm

up while he drove out to the dump. The dump had begun as a valley, but over the years it had filled and filled until it rose higher than any of the surrounding hills. On his first run to the crest of that hill, Gordon noticed a blue glow on the southern horizon, the color of a pilot light on a gas furnace. It was the wrong direction for dawn. Besides, the rest of the sky was still as black as the inside of a cat. He stopped, tilted the hopper, and then pumped the clutch a few times, jostling the truck until it was empty. Meanwhile, the glow on the southern horizon turned green, violet, and rose, and began to ripple like a windblown curtain. He watched until the buttery dawn took over the sky.

The next morning he persuaded one of the loaders to ride with him on the first run to the dump, and, sure enough, there was the shimmering glow, this time the color of copper. But

the boy saw nothing, merely shrugged before dozing off. The following day the second boy rode along, but he also failed to see the shimmer, silver this time. On the third morning, the foreman agreed to go, grousing the whole way, and even though he squinted, he couldn't make out the rippling veils, which this time were gold. "Better have your eyes checked," he grumbled.

During the rest of that winter, Gordon often spied the southern glow from atop the mountain of trash, but never from anywhere else. The landfill crew only scoffed when he asked if they had noticed the blaze flickering at the edge of the world. So he said nothing more about his discovery until years later, when he took a midnight ride to the dump with his firstborn child, a tot named Jeanne, who clapped her hands in wonder at the dancing lights. ✨



## crows

**S**INCE, AS A BOY, GORDON MILK fired his BB gun at a crow, missing by a mile. Decades later, every crow in the neighborhood still scolded him. They would cock their heads and screech, hurl sticks and stones at him, or slime his truck. They would slouch along in imitation of his walk, which his children compared

to the rolling gait of a gorilla, or they would mimic his laugh, which his children compared to the grinding of river ice in the spring thaw.

It was bad enough being mocked by his kids without being mocked by birds. Chickadees or sparrows or goldfinches would have been easier to ignore, for they were small and shy, with

pipering voices. But crows were big and loud, as brash as schoolyard bullies. Although Gordon was by nature a peaceful man, back when he still spent recess time in schoolyards he dealt with bullies by thrashing them. But he couldn't thrash crows. In their beady eyes, he supposed, he was the bully, for having shot that ill-aimed

BB at one of their clan long ago.

"It's bad karma," explained Gordon's older son, Bruce, who, at sixteen, had become all-knowing. Bruce had likewise come to realize how little his father understood. So he patiently defined bad karma as the legacy of your past mischief, like the buildup of tartar on your teeth or cholesterol in your veins. Fortunately, he added, there were ways of undoing the damage.

"Give me a for instance," Gordon muttered as he pulled off his grimy overalls after a day at the city maintenance garage.

Bruce decided not to recommend that his father go meditate in a cave, for that would wreck the family finances, and he had too much affection for the old man to suggest an early death followed by reincarnation as a wiser being. So he advised: "You could do the crows a good turn, which might persuade them to forgive you."

It so happened that the city, little known to most of the world, had recently become well known among crows, which flocked there in the fall and settled in for the winter, roosting by the thousands on trees and rooftops. Branches snapped and power lines sagged under their weight. Gordon couldn't go anywhere without setting off a flurry of cackles and caws. Black eyes, gleaming with suspicion, followed his every move. He took to wearing a hard hat whenever he went outside, to protect himself from their droppings.

At least he was no longer the only one afflicted, as the siege of crows darkened the sky and whitened everything beneath their roosts. A slippery icing coated sidewalks, war memorials, fire hydrants, and street signs. People who ventured out, clad in slickers with the hoods pulled up, often got lost, as after a blizzard. School was delayed each morning until the streets could be scoured. The crows plucked letters from mailboxes and newspapers from front lawns, leaving behind a trail of confetti. They harassed squirrels and dogs, chased toddlers, waltzed into cafés to peck at plates, raided garbage cans, and took over the dumpsters from rats.

A task force appointed by the mayor to repel the invasion naturally began by recommending that scarecrows be erected throughout the city. No sooner were the scarecrows in place, dressed in castoff clothes, than the birds perched atop the straw hats or wooden arms, preening one another. Undaunted, the task force tried more strenuous remedies. Broadcasting crow distress calls merely elicited yawns from the real crows. Playing rock and roll at top volume beneath their roosts only inspired them to dance. Feisty cats sent to spook them soon retreated, much

the worse for wear, often missing an ear or a tail. When heaps of old tires were set on fire to smoke them out, the crows moved to the roofs of houses, where they chattered all night, keeping the inhabitants awake. An assault by fireworks provoked the birds to drop gravel onto parked cars, especially on sport utility vehicles, which presented the largest targets.

"You see why it's called a murder of crows," Bruce remarked to his father, who of course didn't have a clue. With a sigh, Bruce explained that just as a bunch of cows is a herd and a bunch of fish is a school, so a gang of crows is a murder.

"Whoever thought that one up?" Gordon asked.

This further evidence of his father's ignorance prompted another sigh from Bruce, who declared that God had thought up the expression, which appeared in the Bible. Not actually having read the Bible, and uncertain of his facts, Bruce hastened to lay out a scheme that would simultaneously free the city from the plague of crows and free his father from their curse.

Gordon agreed to give it a try. So on his next day off work, he and Bruce drove the pickup to Limestone Brewery, where they loaded the bed with a steaming pile of spent barley, hops, and yeast. Next they drove to the courthouse square, where the oaks and maples were clotted with crows. Bruce got out, climbed in back, and dumped a shovelful of brewery waste onto the ground. Half a dozen crows immediately flew down to investigate, pecking here and there, blinking in apparent bliss, and then they chuckled enthusiastically, whereupon fifty or a hundred other crows swooped down from the trees to join them.

As instructed, Gordon rolled the truck slowly out of town along the road leading to the dump, while Bruce kept shoveling fermented grain over the tailgate. Crows followed them in an ever-swelling flock, strutting and then waddling and finally staggering from one pile of brewery waste to the next. By the time the procession reached the dump, those crows still capable of flying were doing loop-the-loops. Some crows dangled upside down from telephone wires, clinging by their feet; others rolled down the hillocks of trash, plodded back uphill, and rolled down again; and still others sprawled on the rubbish, out cold.

Bruce scattered the last of the stinking mash, and then knocked on the rear window, the signal for Gordon to show himself. Bracing for an onslaught of jeers, Gordon climbed from the truck, and was surprised to hear thousands of crows chortling contentedly. Two birds even

fluttered up and perched on his shoulders, one on each side, gurgling with gratitude and rubbing their feathery jowls against his chin. Then they leapt down, wobbled a few steps, and flopped onto their bellies for a snooze. Contented murmurs arose from near and far. The few crows still awake were inspecting the garbage, muttering their approval over half-eaten pizzas, soggy French fries, rancid hotdogs, and other tasty morsels.

To complete the scheme, and assure that the birds would stay at the landfill, Gordon and Bruce cruised the highways near the city, scraping up roadkill, until the truck was heaped high with mangled deer and flattened raccoons and unlucky possums. They unloaded their haul back at the dump, where feathered lumps were beginning to stir. As the crows awoke to discover this offering of carcasses, which stank to high heaven, they clacked their bills in a way that sounded very much like applause. ✨

## rabbit



WHEN DANNY MILK WAS FOUR, he asked the elderly couple who lived next door, Ella and Ray, if they had sailed on the ark with Noah and the dinosaurs.

Ray drew his wrinkled face into a frown and answered, No, they had missed the boat, and had survived the flood by hitching a ride on a hippo. This account satisfied Danny, who shared the information with the rest of the Milk household.

Living next door to the Milks would have tried the patience of saints while Danny and the three older children were growing up. Without children of their own, Ray and Ella seemed to enjoy the ruckus. At least they never complained about the firecrackers, midnight serenades, hot rod revving, caterwauling, and other disruptions from the boisterous kids.

By the time Danny asked his question about Noah's ark, Ray and Ella must have been well north of eighty, Gordon Milk figured, a decade older than his own mother, and he could see they were beginning to fail. So Gordon kept an eye on Ray, making sure the old man didn't climb a ladder or run a chainsaw or do anything else endangering life and limb. Once or twice a week, Gordon's wife, Mabel, dropped by to chat with Ella, usually taking a casserole, bouquet, or

some other gift. The Milk children ran errands for them, returning library books or picking up groceries. Even Danny found chores to do, such as rearranging their patio furniture or digging holes in their lawn where they might want to plant flowers.

One Saturday in June, Gordon noticed a crate the size of a phone booth resting on Ray and Ella's front walk. The old man was out there prying at the wood with a crowbar, grunting and groaning, without making any headway. Gordon hurried over to lend a hand. Ray surrendered the crowbar, and then limped away into the garage. Moments later he returned, dragging a blue tarp. "Here," he said, "throw this over the top so Ella won't see. It's for her birthday tomorrow."

Gordon finished dismantling the crate under cover of the tarp, eventually revealing a concrete rabbit tall enough to look him in the eye. The rabbit's eyes were green and the fur was pink. It stood upright on its hind legs, balancing a tray on one lifted forepaw like a waiter delivering a drink, an impression reinforced by the fact that it was wearing a red jacket and black patent leather shoes. The pointy ears stood straight up, as if electrified.

Ray crawled under the tarp to admire the statue alongside Gordon. "Found it in Danville," the old man said. "You need first rate art, you go to Danville."

"Was Ella wanting a concrete rabbit?" Gordon asked.

"She wanted a live one, but I'm allergic to fur. So I figured this was the next best thing." Ray set a folded note on the rabbit's tray and weighted it down with a stone. "Come over tomorrow morning to see Ella's face when I unveil this beauty."

Next morning, the nine members of the Milk household were eating pancakes when they noticed Ray and Ella shuffling out toward the blue bundle, so they all trooped over, the children still in pajamas, to watch the unveiling. When the giant rabbit emerged, Ella gave a gasp of surprise, hugged Ray, and started bawling.

Danny sidled over to grasp her hand, saying, "Don't cry, Auntie Ella."

"I'm just flabbergasted," the old woman sobbed.

By standing on tiptoes, Danny could peek over the lip of the rabbit's tray. He lifted the stone and handed the folded paper to Ella, who smiled through her tears when she read it.

The Milks never learned what that note said, but they learned about many later ones. Every night Ray left a folded paper on the rabbit's tray, and every morning Ella tottered out to retrieve it. Before Ella stirred, however, Danny, now age five and learning to read, would steal over there with a flashlight, decipher the message, and return home to recite it for the family. "You're the bee's knees," the note might say, or "I'm the fella for Ella," or "Sugar pie, I'm your guy." Every note was signed, "Forever, Ray."

Danny recalled that signature with puzzlement when Ray was hauled away in a hearse a few months after the concrete rabbit appeared. Mabel explained that Ray didn't mean he'd live forever, only that he'd never quit loving Ella. Danny wasn't sure what to think of love, which could make you laugh and cry at the same time, nor did he know how long death would last. As he waited for Ray to return, he noticed that now Ella was placing a note on the rabbit's tray each morning. Because she didn't lay a stone on top, the paper would flutter away on the wind. Every day, after returning from kindergarten, Danny scoured the neighborhood, finding notes in bushes, on the hoods of cars, in goldfish ponds. He found them woven into birds' nests, caught in bicycle spokes, flattened against fences, snared in porch railings, skittering along sidewalks. He memorized each message, sounding out the letters, and then he let the wind carry it on.

At supper he repeated Ella's words, which puzzled him as much as Ray's disappearance. "Dancing in the kitchen," a note might say, or "No kids but lots of kicks," or "Rag and bone shop of the heart," or "Meet you in harp city." As Danny recited the messages, he studied the faces of his brother and sisters, where he saw a bit of understanding, and he saw a bit more in the faces of his parents, and yet more in his grandparents. Evidently there were secrets hidden in those notes, secrets he might learn to read if he lived as long as Noah, or even as long as Ella and Ray. ✨

