

Neil Kelly

**It Happens All the Time  
(an excerpt)**

**2007 Lester M. Wolfson 1st Place Fiction**

"I ain't drunk. I'm just drinking!" I sang. I tried to be loud enough to cover the shouting next door. I stood, looking at the stereo, and smoked the thin cigarette. I wanted to blare, "It's Cheaper to Keep Her" by the Jerry-curl'd Johnny Taylor into my neighbor's wall, but I didn't feel like digging for it. Music in all playable forms were scattered across my apartment. My little cigarette was inhaled quickly and burned up. The tobacco seemed dryer than normal. That's probably why it was conveniently forgotten by someone eager to open up their new, airtight package and breathe in the tang. My cigarette was getting tiny and with every inhale, I could feel the desiccated harvest burn through the fingers, lips, tongue, throat, and lungs. The exhale glowed from my nostrils and my insides felt blistered. I tossed it into the ashtray.

I heard a loud growl from my neighbor's apartment followed by something bumping into his wall. Probably her head, I thought. I'd definitely wear a helmet if I ever went out drinking with him; however, there's really no chance of that happening. I slammed down my beer and opened the other.

I started to get a good buzz going after that brief interruption, but I could predict that the neighborly intrusions would bring nothing but spoils. Every so often there would be a bang against the wall or someone would shout "Fucker" or "Whore." Then there would be silence for a few minutes.

I walked back towards the kitchen and bumped into the door frame prior to entry. I put the beer down on the kitchen table by a really thick, green ashtray. I grabbed one of the chairs from the table and flung it around and sat on it with its back against my chest. I leaned my chin on my arms which were resting on the top of the chair's back. Willie Nelson's "Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground" started escaping the speakers. I thought about my neighbor and his lady friend. America's finest evidence of why some people shouldn't be able to breed. I reached down into the ashtray and pulled out a roach. It was just about an inch long. The tips of my index and middle fingers, along with my thumb, were black with moist ash from the bottom of the ashtray. Beads of moisture must have dripped off Old Style cans to form a sludgy substance covering its base. I was more like a spittoon. I threw it back.

Listening to Willie Nelson's voice through the speakers, which have been covered with stickers to give them a wood appearance, reminded me of seeing him live. He was in an old auditorium that had five brass chandeliers that were draped with crystals. The chandeliers also adorned garland and tinsel left over from Christmas. There were two makeshift bars in the lobby that served decent liquor brands and bottles of "Premium" beer. The lines were long, due to the fact that there were only two bars for two thousand people who needed drinks and the Red Headed Stranger. However, patrons weren't allowed to take their drinks into the recently remolded seating area of the auditorium. My friend and I were forced to slam down four beers and a couple of whiskey shots before Willie's set.

While I was thinking about the concert I was interrupted by high-pitched voices outside. I looked out the window and could see four boys and a girl between the ages of eight and eleven, I'd guessed. They were shooting frogs, with single pump BB guns, in the pond across from woods that borders the apartment complex's property. Just on the other side of the parking lot. My brothers and our friends all had those guns growing up and we would fire bottle rockets out of their barrels. They were our mis-

sile launchers.

I opened the door and yelled at the kids.

“Stop shooting those innocent frogs. Get on outta here, kids. Leave um alone and go back home.”

“Go back inside, ya old bastard,” one kid hollered back.

Bastard? Why that little cocksucker. I killed my beer and threw the empty can in the direction of the kids, but they were about a hundred and fifty to two hundred feet away. The can floated about nine feet before being blown another twenty feet to my left by a gust of wind. The kids laughed and told me to go inside. I did.

I went in and opened the other beer that was already sitting on the counter. I popped the aluminum ring on the top of the can and there appeared to be smoke billowing from its mouth. I took a hard pull from the beer and set it back down. I stumbled over to the hall closet and found my old wrist rocket. It was in a box with old letters from ex-girlfriends. I grabbed it, closed the box, and closed the door. I went into my bathroom and pulled out about ten or so water softener pellets from their yellow, plastic bag. I put them in my shirt pocket. I put my beer back in the refrigerator and I walked over to the front window and could see that they were still shooting frogs. I skipped over to my back door and undid all of its locks. I attached the super slingshot to my arm and hid it under my sleeve. I went down the back staircase and out the back door of the building.

I kept low and made my way over to an unkempt bush. I took cover. The children were still there laughing, socializing and bonding through carnage. I could see a bunch of skin colors throughout the munchkin murder group. All five of them were circling the pond, firing and pumping, then firing again. They repeated this process about a hundred times. The BBs penetrated the water and pierced the frogs like torpedoes hitting unarmored vessels. I swore I could see smoke spilling from their barrels after every shot.

I fingered my shirt pocket for the salt pellets. I pulled about five or six out and started to crumple them up to make them smaller. Shrapnel for all.

I put the pieces into the leather ammo holder that was in the middle of two rubber straps. They were still tight after all the years in storage. I crouched up, about a foot or so, to get a better view of my target. I steadied myself and pulled the leather holder back as far as I could and pointed the slingshot up toward God. The straps were tight and my arms shook a little from the tension. I let go of the leather holder and the pellets jettisoned astronomically from the Earth. They tore through clouds and ruptured the atmosphere while traveling up and then back down. The pellets came raining down all over the children. Guns were dropped and little hands tried covering prepubescent heads. My ammo spread like buckshot and it ripped the youth's skin and the salt punished the wounds. I grabbed the rest of the pellets and fired directly on the juveniles again. The shots crashed upon their heads, necks, shoulders, and backs. Their screams were violently in tune.

“Mommy, help!” a boy cried.

“I can't see!” shrieked another. The girl continued to cover her head and picked up her BB gun and gave it a pump. She took off running, elfish, in the direction of her house, perhaps. She pointed the gun behind her and fired it. She pumped it again and fired another blind shot over her shoulder. She continued this until she found cover behind a dumpster. She popped up from behind it, fired off a shot where she thought the shooter was, and took off again.

“You haven't seen the last of me,” she said.

I went back inside my apartment. I opened up the closet and put the slingshot back in its box. I went over to the window and peered out towards the pond. I could see a couple of BB guns lying around and a tackle box left open on a rock. I looked

down the parking lot and could see people starting to come out of their dwellings, sleuthing around for clues.

I went over to the fridge, grabbed my open beer, and another, and went back to the window. The anonymous donor's compilation was now playing Floyd Dixon's Hey Bartender. I liked being my own bartender. I had no lines to wait in nor did I have to leave a tip. I controlled the mix ratios, cutoff limits, and closing time.

I walked back over to the window and took a drink from the white can. I could see the little girl and she was pointing in the general direction of my apartment. She was bandaged and smoking a filterless cigarette. She had either had a dimple or part of her cheek had been torn off by the salty bullets. She tossed her cigarette to the ground and picked up two Daisy single pumps and started shouting orders to adults and other kids. If it'd been darker, I figured them to be waving torches and pitchforks. Eager for blood and a soul.

I sat on the arm of my recliner and read the Cubs' facts printed on the can. I read some shit I'd already known and took a drink. One of these years they should print why the fuck they haven't won a World Series in almost one hundred years. Maybe more importantly, they should print why I've been wasting my time rooting for them my whole life. Hanging on to every promise, every can't-miss-potential-rookie-phenomenon, and to next year.

I gaped through the curtains and the outside was quiet. The mob must not have figured me for the sneak attacker. I could hear some ducks flying over head. They were heading north. I then heard voices, again, getting louder. I kept looking down at the parking lot and could see the people gathering in the handicapped spots. I've never seen anyone park in them. The group looked unwashed, tormented, penniless.

The ducks were growing louder. You could hear the spring and summer-time elation that honked from somewhere in their feathered chests. Everyone in the group was looking up. They were twisting their heads around to see through and around trees. They were trying to shade their eyes from the sun. Then I saw the little girl point to the sky with the two air rifles.

"Pull!" she said.

Following her order, the rest of the group pointed their guns to the sky and shot teeny metal balls weakly into the heavens. The group of airborne ducks began to break apart. Some of them were doing spiraling nosedives while others never looked back.