

Spring 2022

## From the Missing Briefcase, Chapter 1

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### Recommended Citation

O'Keefe, Devin and Slavinski, Justin (2022) "From the Missing Briefcase, Chapter 1," *Community Literacy Journal*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 48.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy/vol16/iss2/48>

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## ***Devin O'Keefe and Justin Slavinski***

### ***Reflection***

The following excerpt from “The Missing Briefcase” comes from the first chapter of a much larger work by Devin O’Keefe and Justin Slavinski, incarcerated writers who met in an Introduction to Creative Writing class taught by an Exchange for Change (E4C) volunteer at Everglades C.I. in Miami. E4C is a volunteer-led organization founded by Kathie Klarreich which teaches writing classes in South Florida prisons. The cohort of writers who have taken any E4C classes at Everglades C.I. is at least 200 strong—about 10% of the population. Both Devin and Justin had written small pieces independently prior to and while in prison, but truly began writing in earnest within the past three years. After both gained employment in the Education department, they developed several short, co-written stories which were traded from computer to computer on 3 ½” floppy disks. Quickly, they discovered their offbeat sensibilities meshed and began the creation of two larger works: an urban fantasy set in the Atlanta area, and a quirky detective story set in Milwaukee.

Devin and Justin alternate who writes what every 300-600 words, rarely leaving notes for each other, and letting their stories develop organically. They fly by the seat of their pants and hope for the best. Only after a chapter or series of chapters is finished do they sit down and harmonize—though, having worked together as writing partners for three years, they are most often on the same page. They hope to see Woody Tukker, of Woody Investigations, recover Jean D’Eau’s briefcase—and for the world to read about it.

### ***From The Missing Briefcase, Chapter 1***

*Beep . . . beep . . . beep* blared the insistent alarm, waking Woody to another Monday. He stifled a moan and threw off the sweaty covers. Sitting up in bed, he grabbed his head as the hangover from another long night out on the city punished him. He had to return to his office early to check for new cases, but the hangover and his gut told him that today would be three more strikes. Again. He had been down on his luck and hadn’t seen a case in far too long. An unnecessary check of the fridge was a testament to his dire circumstances: half a bottle of Heinz mustard and a half loaf of moldy Wonder bread lay within.

A cold shower was a sensible decision for someone with a hangover, yet he took one this morning because he hadn’t paid his gas bill in over a month and couldn’t shower in hot water if he got down on both knees and prayed. Besides, most of his prayers last night were spent at the toilet. Woody cranked the handle in the shower and dunked his head under the cold, refreshing water. He hoped for refreshing, but in reality he hopped in and out of the water stream just soaping his crotch and armpits and then quickly toweling off before heading out into the warm, summer air.

If he didn't get a case this week he was not sure what he would do; a man can only go so long on nothing. That his receptionist even dared to stay on with no pay so long surprised him. Rachael was far too loyal, but she had a hipster boyfriend, and they went out every night during the week. She was the only fortune he had had in this long dry spell. Everything else had turned to shit. Checking the fridge for the same two sad items, he went off to his office to roll the dice again. Would today be his lucky day?

A quick check of his wallet revealed no walking around money for today. He had spent it all on last night's drinking, which in hindsight was not his best decision. Ascending the steps to his office, he crossed his fingers that today would be the day. The lights were already on; Rachael had arrived in the office before him. He opened the door like the past mornings, his hopes full. A smile shone on her face: Rachael seemed unusually chipper this morning. Her copper blonde hair flashed in the overly bright fluorescent lights, waving an envelope in the air.

"Good morning, Rach. I sure hope that's a job," Woody said.

"Another late bill, Woody. Another goddamn late bill. How the hell am I supposed to pay my bills, boss?" Rachael asked as her smile inverted to a frown. She'd set him up, but at least she had still come to the office.

Woody shook his head and slammed the door shut behind him. He shrugged off his stained, rumpled raincoat and hung it on the coat rack just inside the door. In three short shuffling steps, he arrived at the only chair in the waiting area just in front of Rachael's desk and slumped into it. He wore his guilt like a dog caught shitting on the couch. Shame and self-loathing battled within him for supremacy, and despair launched itself off the ropes for a match-ending body slam.

"Rachael, you know I've tried. I've really tried. I...I'm at a real loss for what to do here. It's been what, six..."

"Eight."

"Fine, eight weeks since we've had a job. And what, five..."

"Six." Rachel knew this routine all too well from the past two months.

"Yeah, six since I paid you. Rachael, I know a big case is just around the corner. I can feel it. You know that feeling you get when you're at the plate, and the pitcher is winding up, and you dig into the clay with your cleats and you feel the grain of the bat through your batting gloves, and you just *know* you're going to hit a double over the head of the second baseman? It's like that. I know there's a big case. I promise you Rachael; all our troubles are about to be all fixed up. I promise."

"I don't play soccer. But I think I follow your metaphor."

"I can't tell if you're fucking with me right now, Rachael," Woody said.

Rachael crumpled the letter into a loose ball and threw it at him. He made no effort to stop it from smacking his bulbous nose. He simply looked down at the threadbare, mauve carpet under the chair's rollers. A defeated sigh escaped his lips before he could control himself.

"Hey, what's that?" Rachael asked.

"What's what?"

"That, in your raincoat pocket? Looks like a letter." Rachael gestured at his raincoat on the coat rack. "You getting mail at home again? I thought last time you did that someone mailed you, like, a rotting mango or something. That's the whole reason we got a P.O. box."

"I don't get mail at home. And it was a papaya. And it stained my carpet."

Suspicious letters in his pocket when he knew he didn't get mail? And no one had bumped past him on the street? Suspicious. He may have been getting up there in the years, but he still had a few years' more skill than most of the lowlifes in this town. This could be the break he felt. This could be the chance to make things right. This could be that frozen rope over the second baseman.

Rising from the chair, he took three steps back to the coat rack. Plucking the letter out of the pocket, Woody withdrew a seven-inch folding blade out of his front pocket and sliced it open. "You are hereby served by the Milwaukee County Court that you are to appear in court for a divorce hearing..." Woody said, his grin suddenly turned to a frown like a nice summer day erupting into a potent thunderstorm without warning. He had *felt* it deep in his bones that this was the big break.

Like any good batter, he thought he could easily take another fastball to the body and walk to first, but he was not so certain anymore. He slumped back into the chair, and his head starting the regular pounding which had tortured him over the past few weeks. Rachael picked up the letter, crumpled it, and tossed it into the waste bucket with the growing mound of late bills. Compassion must have overcome her, for she reached out a hand for his shoulder. "Wood, I . . ."

Woody stood with a grunt, brushing her hand away. "I'm heading out for the day; it was a long night and I can't handle this shit right now."

Woody abruptly headed for the door when Rachael called out, "I'll call your cell if we get a client."

He scoffed at her enthusiasm. "Rach, my service went two months overdue three days ago. No service. My phone is a paper weight." The door slammed behind him.

He descended the stairs two at a time with his hands in his pockets, mind elsewhere, when he slammed into a solid form. He lost his balance and fell on top of the person who was ascending the stairs. Limbs entangled trying to stop their fall, they both landed on their sides. Woody saw a gruff man with puffy red eyes pushing himself off the floor, offering his hand to Woody.

"I didn't zee you, messieur, hope your suit is alright," the man said.

Woody took his hand. "Don't worry about the suit, it's seen worse days."

"Would you happen to know where ze office of the Woody Tukker is located? I am in desperate need of his services and his number keeps saying it is out of service." Woody could hardly believe his luck, he had run face first into the pitch!

"Uh, right this way. Sorry, I had a, uh...big case on my mind," Woody half-mumbled. He gestured back up the stairs they had just fallen down.

Disappointment flashed across the man's face. "I don't want to burden you with more than you can handle. I've heard you're the best, and we—er, I can't afford to have a distracted detective on this. I guess I'll have to..."

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“NO! I mean, no, it’s alright. Nothing that can’t be assigned to my, uh, associate. I’m Woody of Woody Investigations, and you are?” Pressing a hand to the potential client’s elbow, he began easing him up the stairs.

“D’Eau, Jean D’Eau. I’m afraid I must insist on the privacy of your office to discuss more . . .

“Of course, of course,” Woody smiled and urged D’Eau back up the stairs.

On the third landing, he jingled the keys in the lock to let Rachael know he was back. “Hey, Rach, I think we’ve got a—Jesus!” Rachael was sprawled across her desk, twitching. A strobe effect from the computer monitor illuminated her stricken face.

“Goddammit! D’Eau, call an ambulance! I don’t think she’s conscious!” Woody shouted as he ran a hand through his thinning hair. The scene just didn’t make sense. D’Eau stuttered through the situation to the 911 operator. His French accent complicated the matter, and he had to double back.

A quick look at Rachel’s monitor revealed a flashing, swirling image of random colors and patterns. Suddenly, everything clicked into place like an epic game of Connect Four. Rachael’s epilepsy had struck her again. It was the very ailment that had sunk her chances of becoming a cop: the flashing lights on the cruisers set her off. There was no way she’d have done this purposely. Woody examined the computer and noted she had been in the office’s email inbox. Someone must’ve sent the email targeting her. An old case? An angsty exboyfriend? Woody closed the window and the flashing ceased. Pulling out his notepad, he wrote a reminder to have an IT guy check the email’s origin. He’d have to investigate this later.

Woody stopped his examination and hurried over to his potential client. He hoped he wouldn’t lose the case due to the unusual circumstances. D’Eau took the phone from his ear and said, “Paramedics cinq minutes. Should I do anything?”

“No, no,” Woody said absently while righting the lone visitor’s chair mechanically, and gestured for D’Eau to sit.

“No, sir, I couldn’t possibly while this mademoiselle is in distress.” Regardless, he pulled out a silver cigarette case from his back pocket, deftly removed a hand-rolled cigarette, and lit it. He puffed away, holding the cigarette backwards. Woody resisted rolling his eyes and leaned down beside Rachael. For the briefest moment, it looked as if her eyes were about to flutter open to tell him what had happened.

Sirens dopplered up the avenue and screeched to a halt before his building. Without a knock, two paramedics burst into the office and immediately set to work on Rachael after gently moving Woody out of their way. He stood off to the side with D’Eau as the paramedics worked. They manhandled his loyal secretary, quickly divining the cause and extent of her injury. Soon, the burly paramedic held down her arm and injected something that reduced her shaking. After strapping her to a backboard, they lifted her onto the stretcher. He turned back, “Look, we’ll be taking her to Memorial. You know the number?”

“Yeah, yeah. I got it,” Woody mumbled.

The paramedics banged the edge of the stretcher against his doorframe—there goes the security deposit, Woody winced—and, more delicately this time, descended the narrow staircase.

Bewildered, Woody looked around the room and at the supremely calm, smoking D'Eau. Clapping his hands once, he righted the chair behind Rachael's desk and sat down. Drawing a deep breath, he opened, "Alright, well...uh...that's...Have a seat Mr. D'Eau. Let's talk about your case."

### *Author Bios*

Devin O'Keefe is an incarcerated writer who has helped develop curricula for multiple writing courses inside the wire. He is previously unpublished. He is known as much for his wacky ideas as his calm under pressure. Mr. O'Keefe loves playing video games and creating fantasy worlds.

Justin Slavinski is a former textbook editor who unwillingly lives in Miami, Florida. His previous publications include Don't Shake the Spoon, volume 2; Hear Us: Writing from the Inside During the Time of Covid; Iconoclast, issue 121; Resentencing; Coda; and the Iowa Prison Writing Project. Mr. Slavinski enjoys teaching classes with Exchange for Change, running Dungeons and Dragons games, and eating Nutella.