

CANDYLAND

HUGH O. SMITH

Writer Shaun Harmon should be the happiest man alive. His novels are best-sellers, Hollywood just made one of his books into a hit movie, and he and his daughter recently left the Bronx and moved into a huge home in the New Jersey suburb of Willows.

But, all Shaun's success comes at a price. His wife dies just as he achieves his dreams, the words that used to come so easily to him won't come anymore and the affluent new town he's moved to is not quite what it seems. Soon, Shaun finds that the town harbors dark secrets, secrets that it would do anything to hide.

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I truly hope you enjoy this excerpt of *CANDYLAND*, thank you for reading.

Chapter 1

Shaun sprinted through the back door, past the pool and onto the broad expanse of lawn. Adrenaline heightened his senses and gave him a strange clarity. Every blade of grass stood out in high definition and the fireflies' flickering lights stood in stark relief against the dark backdrop of Willows Lake. He felt his daughter's dead weight in his arms and her terrified breaths, hot against his neck.

The adrenaline also gave him the gift of calm. He should be panicked, but he wasn't. Strangely, all he could think about was how to use this experience in his next novel. After all, Shaun Harmon novels were known for moments like this, a hurt and bleeding hero running in the dark, using his wits to escape harm and defeat the bad guys. If he were writing this scene, the hero would be injured but unflappable, working out the ways to use the everyday items around him as weapons even as he weakened from blood loss.

He ran across the grass, his mind working to find a way to describe what was happening.

Early evening had given way to full on night. Fireflies were the only light, but terror heightened his senses and his eyes adjusted quickly to the gloom. The grass was damp from the evening's rain, soaking his bare feet and the cuffs of his jeans as he ran.

That was okay, he thought, but not dramatic enough.

He looked right, then left.

Nowhere to run except straight ahead into the dark waters of Willows Lake.

Too dramatic, he thought, and not strictly true. He had choices. He could...

Tanya's frightened breathing in his ear brought him back to reality. Usually he couldn't shut her up, but now her wide and terrified eyes did all the talking.

"It's gonna be okay baby, don't worry, everything's gonna be okay," he whispered to her as they ran.

He hoped.

Shaun ran around to the side of the house, sticking close to the building, cursing the floodlights that activated at his movement. He stopped to peer around the corner. His Range Rover was in the driveway and his hopes flared, only to be dashed a moment later when he realized that it sat on slashed tires.

"Fuck," he hissed under his breath.

Usually Tanya was quick to admonish her father when he let loose the occasional swear word, but terror had rendered her mute. He peered around the corner once again, looking and listening for their assailant. Seeing and hearing nothing, he scurried across the driveway, then took refuge behind his SUV. There was no sign of their attacker and he took a moment to smooth Tanya's hair out of her eyes.

"It's gonna be okay, Princess," he said again, trying hard to sound convincing. Tanya's eyes were wide open and staring down at his side.

Shaun didn't look.

He didn't have to; he could feel his t-shirt sticking to his skin, soaked with blood. There was no pain yet, adrenaline was probably delaying its onset, but Shaun had no doubt it would come

soon. In his second book, *Van Cortland*, his hero was injured by a serial killer operating in the Bronx. He'd had his hero chew periwinkle leaves and apply them to the wound to staunch the blood flow. Or was it dandelion? He couldn't remember. His friend Nelson's *Abuela* had told him about that when he was writing the novel. The old woman had insisted on taking him out and actually showing him how to chew the bitter leaves and apply to the wound. He put his hand to his side and they came away red and wet.

He put his hand to his side and it came away wet and red with blood. The knife had been sharp. So sharp, the cut was almost painless. He'd only realized he was hurt when...

Oh, now you want to write, he admonished himself silently. He should be running for his life, their lives, but his mind kept on trying to find the words. Writer's block had plagued him for months and now, in the most unlikely of moments, was when the words chose to come to him again.

He knew they had to keep moving but he hesitated a second longer, trying to stay calm long enough to weigh his options. His first thought was to return to the back of the house but there was nothing for them there except the dark waters of Willows Lake (maybe that line would work after all) and the dilapidated boathouse that he'd been meaning to demolish since he bought the home six months ago. He glanced out at the lights twinkling in the homes on the far shore of the lake. There were far more homes there than on this side; if he were alone he would chance the half-mile swim but making an attempt with Tanya was out of the question.

He thought to creep along the trees that lined his driveway until he reached the main road, but with Tanya in his arms, his wound, and no shoes on his feet, he doubted he would get very far.

To his west was the Murphy estate but it was over three quarters of a mile away; they'd never make it. His neighbors to the east, the Kings, were much closer, but their house was empty. An elderly couple, the Kings spent much of the year in their Florida home. There was no one there and no help for him. Then he remembered the old Duracraft fishing boat that Gerry King kept. The King's had invited Shaun and Tanya over shortly after they'd moved in and Gerry had proudly showed off the lovingly maintained boat he'd rescued from a junkyard and restored. Shaun didn't know the first thing about boats, sailing hadn't been a part of his Bronx upbringing, but he figured that if they made it to the boat he could at least start it. They didn't have to go far, only to the other side of the lake - then they would be safe. Course of action decided, he glanced toward the house again then ducked into the trees.

Five minutes later Shaun and Tanya emerged onto the edges of the King's property. There was no sign of anyone about, but Shaun paused at the tree line and sat down in the dirt. Tanya was a very petite child, one of the smallest in her Kindergarten class but terror made her a dead weight in his arms that was becoming heavier by the minute.

"Let's rest here honey," he said, trying to put her down.

The scared little girl shook her head and held onto him for dear life.

"We're only gonna rest for a minute, Princess. I'm not going anywhere, I promise."

Gradually, Tanya loosened her grip and he placed her on the warm dirt. Her eyes were wide in the dark and he kissed her forehead gently.

"We're going to be all right honey, don't you worry," he said.

He knelt in the dirt next to his daughter, looking and listening. The King's property was dark except for a dim spotlight that illuminated the front of the massive home. Except for the cicadas there was no sound.

Shaun mapped out the route in his mind, then turned to his daughter.

“We’re going to run into the King’s backyard, go get Mr. King’s boat and ride across the lake. Sound good?”

Tanya’s response was to hold up her arms and Shaun lifted her up and held her close. She snuggled her face into the space between his neck and shoulder and wrapped her tiny arms tightly around his neck.

Shaun took one more look around, then keeping low, ran along the side of the King’s property hugging the tree line. A minute later they were at the back of the King’s property and he paused again, looking hard into the darkness for any sign of movement. Seeing none, he ran down the slope of King’s back lawn and down the steps to the dock and the boathouse.

Now that they were here, he began to question his idea. What if the boathouse was locked? What if the boat was in dry-dock already? What if he couldn’t get it started? He shook off the doubts and turned the boathouse doorknob. The door pushed open with a tiny squeak that sounded as loud as a gunshot in the darkness. Shaun put Tanya down and stood for a moment to get his eyes used to the murk.

The boathouse was large and immaculately kept. There were two spaces for boats, one occupied with the Duracraft, the other empty. On each wall were shelves and hooks that held the various canoes and kayaks that the King’s grandchildren were constantly paddling on the lake.

Shaun recalled Gerry King explaining that the boat was relatively small, only seventeen feet, but in the darkness it loomed huge in front of them. Shaun lifted Tanya onto the deck and opened the hatch he remembered led to a storage compartment below.

“Get down there honey,” he whispered. “We’ll be safe soon.”

Tanya quickly did as she was told and Shaun sat in the pilot's seat, trying to remember Gerry's lessons. The throttle was to his right and he put the engine in neutral and began to turn the key, but stopped when he realized that the boat was still tethered to the dock. He jumped off the boat and as he undid the line, he heard the squeak of the door opening.

"So predictable," a voice said.

Shaun turned to see the business end of an oar coming hard and fast at his face. He ducked, and the oar passed harmlessly over his head but as he moved backward, he tripped over the line that tethered the boat to its berth. He fell hard, the breath knocked from his body. He jumped up quickly and ducked another blow that again missed his head but struck his shoulder a glancing blow that caused him to stumble backwards. Flailing wildly for balance, his hand found the material of his attacker's shirt and they stumbled back together, splashing into the dark water, going under as the terrified Tanya screamed for her father.

Chapter 2

Two months earlier

Shaun peeked through the curtains at the audience, trying hard to stifle his amusement at the standing room only crowd that had come to the Willows Reading Club to hear him speak. The audience was predominantly white, expensively dressed, and firmly ensconced in the one percent. Ironic, since the Willows Reading Club was formed almost two hundred years ago by former slaves with the express purpose of teaching their escaped brethren how to read and write. The original purpose of the club was largely forgotten, its legacy hijacked by the wives of investment bankers and Wall Streeters.

“Can I get you anything Mr. Harmon?” The chipper young girl, whose name Shaun couldn’t believe actually was Muffy, asked. She’d been hovering around for a few minutes, tasked with taking care of him while he prepared for his talk.

He closed the curtain. “No thank you, I’m good,” he said with a forced smile.

The truth was he wasn’t good, far from it. He hated these events. In the minutes before he spoke his stage fright kicked in and his stomach became one big knot. He usually found someplace to hide before he went on but the Willows Reading Club, although elegant and obviously exclusive, was small and didn’t offer much in the way of hiding places. People probably thought the great author was being quiet to collect his deep thoughts but in actuality it was all he could do not to vomit his lunch up on their ancient hardwood floors. The nervousness usually passed as soon as he stepped onto the stage but the minutes before were no kind of fun.

His mind began to race and he heard Claire in his mind. “Take a deep breath,” she said. “Just breathe honey.” She’d given him the same advice thousands of times when the words wouldn’t come to him, or when he received yet another rejection letter from another publisher.

He breathed deeply, wishing with everything in him that she were here with him. He closed his eyes and tried hard to channel memories of her. It was at times like this that he missed Claire the most. She would have gotten a huge thrill out of seeing him talk to an enraptured audience about his work. He saw her in his mind's eye, smiling and holding his hand, he could almost smell her perfume feel her hand in his...

"Mr. Harmon," Muffy said, breaking the spell. The young woman was hovering around him, obviously trying to work up the courage to say something.

"I hope you don't mind me saying so but Oh-Emm-Gee you are my favorite author in the whole world and I can't believe we live in the same town, I mean, it's such an honor to meet you, I love everything you write, you're amazing." She held Shaun's newest hardcover in her hands. "I was wondering if you would..."

"Muffy, why don't we give Mr. Harmon a chance to gather his thoughts before his speech," a voice said from behind the wide-eyed young woman. The voice was cultured, low and very sexy. Jessica Rabbit with a finishing school education.

Trudy Willows-Brown stepped out from behind Muffy and gave Shaun a dazzling smile.

"Oh. You're right. I'm sorry Mr. Harmon, I really didn't mean to..."

"It's okay...um, Muffy," Shaun said. He could barely say her name without wanting to laugh. "You weren't bothering me at all. Tell you what, catch me after the speech and I'll sign your book, okay?"

"Muffy could you go get Mr. Harmon a Cherry Pepsi please, I left some in the refrigerator especially for him.

“I’m so sorry Mr. Harmon,” Trudy said after Muffy eagerly ran off to get his soft drink. “I hope she didn't bother you too much, it’s just that she admires your work so much. We don’t get many celebrities in our small town, much less one that lives here.”

“I’m hardly a celebrity,” he said. “And please call me Shaun,” he said. “And anyway, how did you know I liked Cherry Pepsi?”

“And I’m Trudy,” she said with a smile. “I think I’ll have to disagree with you about the celebrity part. You’re one of the most famous writers in the world. The President of the United States said you’re his favorite author, your books have been on every best-sellers list and they just made a movie out of your first book. I’d say that grants you celebrity status, so I made it my business to find out everything I could about you. Including that you love Cherry Pepsi.”

She extended a hand and he took it, expecting a well-manicured, soft fingers but her nails were short and the hand was hard and calloused with a strong grip. His surprise must have shown because she laughed and pulled her hand back.

“Horses.”

“Excuse me?”

“Horses. I’ve worked with horses since I was old enough to walk. You have to have a strong grip, and manicures don’t really survive too long when you’re on horseback most of the time.”

“Have you been around horses much Mr. Harm...Shaun?”

“Not much. My mother took me for a horseback ride once for my birthday when I was about six, but that’s about the only experience I’ve had.”

“That’s a shame; all children should get a chance to be around horses.”

“Maybe, but there wasn’t much chance of that in the South Bronx.”

“Well, now you're here in Willows where there are plenty of chances. This is your open invitation to bring your family by our farm anytime.”

“It’s just me and my daughter,” Shaun said.

“How old is she?”

“She’s four. She just started preschool over at Candyland.”

At the mention of the prestigious local school, Trudy’s face darkened but she regained her composure quickly.

“Four? What a great age! I have the perfect horse for her, his name is Puddles, he’s perfectly gentle and...”

Trudy caught herself and laughed.

“Look at me Shaun, I chased poor Muffy away from you and now I’m here doing the same thing.”

Shaun smiled.

“I don’t mind at all,” he said, and meant it.

There was something about Trudy, despite her obviously expensive clothes and patrician air that calmed him. He hadn’t been living long among the wealthy, a class that he was now a part of thanks to the massive success of his books and the resulting hit movie, and he felt constantly off balance among them.

“That’s very gracious of you,” Trudy said. “But I think I’ll leave you to gather your thoughts. She turned to go but turned back to look at him.

“They told me you had a way of making a lady feel...at ease. They were right. Good luck with your talk.”

She smiled and walked away before Shaun could ask her what she meant. “They” said? Who were “they”? Before he could speculate any further she was gone.

A moment later footsteps approached and his agent, Sara Diamond, appeared with a Cherry Pepsi.

“I intercepted some teeny bopper back there with this,” she said, handing him the soft drink.

He greeted Sara with a kiss on the cheek, before accepting the soft drink from her.

“I see you met the local gentry,” she said, as Shaun sipped the soda.

“Who? Trudy?”

“Trudy? My God. She even has a snooty name,” Sara said, rolling her eyes.

Shaun said nothing. He loved Sara; if it weren't for her none of the success he'd had over the past two years would have occurred. She was the only agent out of the fifty or so he'd sent his manuscript to who had bothered to even respond to his query. Since his success plenty of other larger and more established agencies had contacted him, trying to woo him away from Sara, but she'd believed in him when no one else did and that earned her a loyalty that would never waver. She got him. More importantly, she got his work. She believed in it and fought for his manuscripts like a mother tiger defending her cubs.

Shaun took another sip of his soda and glanced at his agent. As usual, her butt was prominent in her tight skirt accentuated by the insanely expensive heels she was addicted to. Her top was equally as tight and her enhanced cleavage tried its best to bust out of it. She fit in perfectly in New York City where she was another hard-driving, fifty-something with store bought breasts and dyed roots. Here in Willows, among the tasteful pearls and Prada, she stood out like a roach on a wedding cake. She didn't care. Sara had nothing but contempt for the wealthy women of Willows and did absolutely nothing to hide it.

She parted the curtain and looked out onto the growing audience.

“My God, it’s like shark week out there.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just look at them. Predators in tasteful pearls. All here to get a look at the big, handsome, Bronx import.”

“Sara, please...”

“I don’t see why you couldn’t just stay in the city. If you wanted the suburbs you could have moved to Westchester. What’s wrong with Scarsdale? Chappaqua even. There are plenty of rich people there and I wouldn’t have to drive for three damn hours and pay a hundred dollars in tolls to see you.”

“It’s only an hour from New York and not anywhere close to a hundred bucks in tolls. Stop exaggerating.”

“Whatever. It’s far.”

She took the Pepsi from him and sipped.

“I do appreciate the pool though,” she said.

“Are you saying that you’re staying the night and taking advantage of my pool?”

“Fuck no. I’m saying I’m staying the entire weekend and taking advantage of your pool AND your hot tub. Plus, we have some business to go over, so get used to this face buddy, you’re putting me up for a few days.”

Sara smiled at him, and he smiled back. He enjoyed having her around and his daughter Tanya loved her too. He was about to reply to Sara when he heard the microphone come alive and the hostess begin the introduction. He squeezed Sara’s hand, plastered a smile on his face, and walked onto the stage.

Chapter 3

“Daddy can I ask you a question?”

Shaun knew this was coming. All through her bath time the normally talkative Tanya had remained silent. He didn't press the issue, he knew her well enough to know something was on her mind and she would come out with it in her own good time.

“Sure hon, you can ask me anything.”

“Why doesn't Sara stay with us all the time?”

“Because this isn't her home, honey. She lives in New York. C'mon, arms up.”

Tanya held her arms up and Shaun slipped her Hello Kitty nightshirt over her head and onto her tiny frame.

“I know that Daddy.” She used the tone that all daughters used when they thought their Daddies were being silly. “But she can move here, right? Just like we did.”

“I don't think so, Princess, her home is in New York. She would miss her friends.”

“But I miss my friends in the Bronx and we moved here anyway. I miss Nylah and Anna and Jordyn and Madison and Ava and Juliette and...”

“I know you do hon, but let's talk about it tomorrow okay. It's time to go to sleep.”

Tanya yawned as Shaun put her in her bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. Normally, the let's talk about it tomorrow ploy would never have worked but she was exhausted. Tanya loved when Sara came over and the two of them had run all over the house playing until they wore themselves out. Shaun had let her stay up a little bit past her bedtime but now she was dead tired and more than ready for sleep but she kept on trying to fight it.

He kissed her on her forehead as stroked her hair.

“Have a good night; I'll see you in the morning. I love you.”

“I love you too Daddy,” Tanya said, yawning.

Her eyes were already closing as Shaun gently pulled the door halfway closed, making sure, as he always did, that light from the hallway entered her room. He lingered for a moment, feeling a pang of guilt at his daughter’s question about their former home. It’d been only a few months since they’d left the Bronx but Tanya still asked about it from time to time. Hell, her new bedroom was almost as big as their old apartment, he thought. The school she now attended was only about one thousand times better than her old one, but none of that mattered to a young child who missed her friends.

After his third novel had hit the bestseller list and was quickly snapped up by Hollywood, his first and his second, which no one had paid any mind to before, quickly followed suit. Much success and even more money had quickly followed and Shaun saw no reason to stay in the Bronx. The idyllic neighborhood he’d grown up in had changed for the worse. Landlords refused to make any repairs to the buildings, the gangs were more and more of a presence every day, and Shaun shuddered every time he passed the ramshackle building that housed the school that Tanya would soon attend. As soon as he was able, he looked for a better place to raise his daughter and quickly found the small but affluent town of Willows about ninety minutes away in New Jersey.

Shaun walked down the gigantic staircase and into the kitchen where Sara sat at the table drinking from his bottle of twenty-five-year-old single malt.

“Found the good stuff, I see?”

“No sweetheart, it found me,” she said.

She picked up her glass and took another sip, then poured him a shot and pushed the glass over to him.

“Now it found you too.”

Shaun rarely drank but he picked up the glass and drained the contents, then pushed the glass back over to her for another.

Sara raised an eyebrow in surprise, but poured him another and pushed the glass back.

“You all right?”

He drained the glass again, wincing as the harsh liquid hit his stomach.

“I’m fine.”

“Yea, I can see that.”

Shaun sat down opposite her and poured himself another drink.

“She asked me about the Bronx again. About her friends...”

“Shaun, we’ve gone through this, you know that...”

“I know Sara, but try and explain that to a four year-old kid who misses the only home she ever knew.”

Sara took a drink, then set her glass down.

“Did I ever tell you why I accepted you as a client?”

He shook his head.

“I did it because I knew you were just like me. You would do whatever the fuck you had to do to make your dreams come true. You came into my office that day with your manuscript in your hand, remember? You could have easily e-mailed it but you wouldn’t leave until you put it in my hands personally. You had that fire in your belly. You had ambition! I knew you were going to do big things. You couldn’t do those things if you stayed where you were.”

“I know, but maybe I should have stayed closer to ho...to the Bronx, so she could visit her mother once in a while.”

“Claire lives in her heart, Shaun, and in yours. It’s only her body that’s in Woodlawn Cemetery. I break your chops about this Stepford town, but moving was the right thing to do. Of course, you don’t exactly fit the Brooks Brothers, suburban mold,” she said, smiling.

Shaun laughed. “You’re one to talk; you don’t fit in here either.”

“Maybe. But the difference is I don’t give a fuck. I don’t have to live here and play nice with the Stepford wives.” Sara rose and put her arm around Shaun. “Speaking of Stepford wives,” she whispered in his ear. “How many of them have you...um, you know?”

“Uh...well there is someone I’ve been...”

Sara smiled. “I was kidding, Shaun. I don’t care.”

Shaun held Sara close, and said nothing.

“Is the Princess asleep?” Sara asked.

“Yea, she’s knocked out. Playing with you always wears her out.”

“What a coincidence,” Sara said. “I have the same effect on her father.”

She picked up the bottle of Scotch and poured herself another drink. She drained half of it, then handed him the glass and he drank the other half as she removed her panties and put them on the table next to the bottle.

Shaun felt a twinge of guilt as Sara sat on his lap, but quickly put that aside as she kissed him. Sara was thinner than Claire had been, she was curvy, but tall and long-limbed. But, like Claire, she was passionate and strong. He closed his eyes and in his mind, willed Sara to become his dead wife. The fantasy became so real that he almost felt Sara grow heavier on his lap; her hips grew wider as he caressed them and her breasts became fuller and pushed against his chest. He pressed his face into her skin and smelled Joy, the perfume Claire had worn every day since her father had bought her a bottle for her sixteenth birthday. Soon, it was Claire on top of him,

Claire's breasts that his face was buried in; Claire's scent, Claire's voice in his ear, urging him on. His writer's imagination filled in the blanks and he was transported back to their tiny Bronx apartment, their lovemaking causing their cheap furniture to squeak and protest, laughing at their inability to stifle their sounds of pleasure so their neighbors wouldn't hear. He smelled the roast she'd cooked for dinner earlier and the fresh laundry they'd picked up from the laundromat together. He heard the familiar, comforting clanking of the aged refrigerator that the super refused to replace and the drip-drip of the kitchen faucet. He held Claire's face in his hands and kissed her hard, then buried his face in her breasts, kissing and licking as her body bucked with the force of her climax. He smiled to himself as he always did, happy that he could satisfy this woman that he loved with all his soul. As Claire's orgasm subsided, his own was upon him and he buried his face deeper into her breasts and let himself go, losing himself even deeper in the make-believe.

Afterward, he opened his eyes and his fantasy abandoned him. They were in Willows, in his huge house. Sara was on top of him, not Claire.

Claire was dead.

He put his head on Sara's chest once again, hoping that she would mistake his tears for the perspiration that dripped from them both.

* * *

END OF EXCERPT

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I truly hope you enjoyed this excerpt of Candyland; I'm excited for you to read the entire book! But, until that's out, I hope you enjoy ***SOC CER MOM***.

Thanks again,

Hugh

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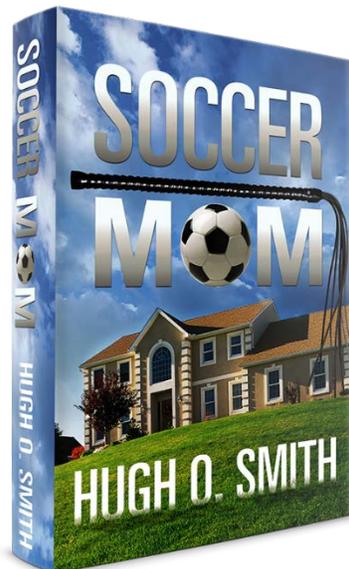
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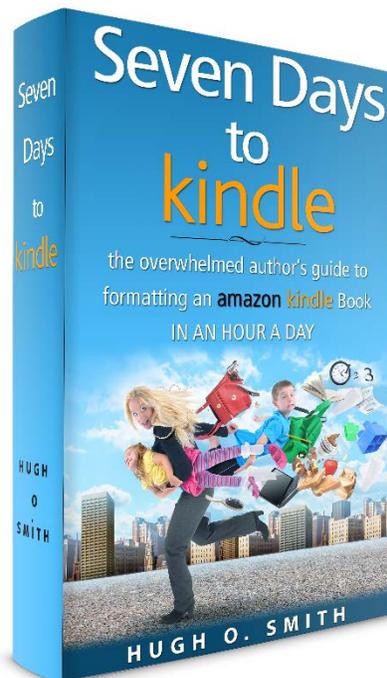
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hugh O. Smith is the author of *WILLOWS*, *GREEN EYES AND GOOD HAIR* and the novella *SOCCER MOM*. Hugh is a contributor to the writing site TheWriteLife.com. Originally from Jamaica, Hugh credits his Jamaican upbringing and its rich storytelling tradition for his writing inspiration. His website is www.hughosmith.com

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