



# **FUGUE**

**By Michael J. McLaughlin**

## **Book Excerpts**

### **CHAPTER 1**

*The knots have to hold.*

The days in the hospital following my brain surgery were the haziest of all. Events and conversations, observations and imaginations, fears and suspicions all tumbled through a gale force wind like puzzle pieces. I have been in search of them ever since, finding one here, one there, seeing if the edges fit together. Sometimes they do. Most of the time they don't.

As linear as possible. That's how I've tried to write it all down. But that's not at all how it lives in my head. Wrapping it up with a bow on top wouldn't have felt right. But I did try to tie together the relevant parts in a way that makes the most sense, for me most importantly, but also for anyone reading this. I hope the knots hold.

That's all I kept thinking on that particular day in the hospital. *The knots have to hold. The knots have to hold. As I tied each one. The knots have to hold.* Repetition filled in the mental voids that threatened to pull me in, soothed the anguish that silence allowed to enter. *The knots have to hold.*

Multiple trips to the bathroom. The plan started that simply. Draped in a sheet on the way there but not on the way back. That was it. Nothing dramatic enough to raise suspicion. Just sheets piling up in the bathroom. Intravenous lines invading my arms made maneuvering

difficult. They were the final remnants of a long list of medical contraptions that had tethered me – inflatable devices around my legs, blood pressure cuffs, leads attached to monitors. My hospital gown tangled in the lines every time I got out of bed, exposing the palest parts of my nineteen-year-old body, justifying a sheet for additional cover.

That’s how old I was, nineteen, at least according to Nash and Nancy Nelson. My hospital ID bracelet was blank in the *Nombre* and *Nacimiento* sections. Only the date of admission and an ID number were filled in. Nash and Nancy called me Nila, which matched the lettered tattoos on my fingers.

The uniformed man with the caterpillar eyebrows. I watched him when he wasn’t watching me. That was most of the time. He sat in the hallway outside of my hospital room. Protecting me from the outside? No, protecting the outside from me, preventing me from escaping. The guards started showing up after Nancy’s first appearance, or maybe it was Nash’s. Can’t remember which, but one or both of them must have hired the security. Escaping hadn’t even crossed my mind until then.

The guards seemed incapable of smiling and only spoke Spanish, same as everyone else. Sometimes we nodded to each other through the window, across the language barrier. Was it bad that I kept imagining them drawing their guns, shooting me in the face, a vision so real that I closed my eyes and winced each time? Actually, “imagining” isn’t the best word. What do they call it when you see something that’s not there? Like, totally see it but it totally isn’t there. That’s what it was.

At some point Caterpillar Eyebrows guard would leave his post again, and I would be ready. I waited. I had written down a five-step plan on the back of a breakfast menu card so I could remember it. Without the card, there was no hope.

Nash and Nancy, the fancy-dressed white “couple” who had tried to assure me that they were my “parents,” would return at some point. They would appear one at a time, never together, same as each of their prior visits. The next day, one or both of them would bring me back to the United States.

“Mom” and “Dad” had alternated visits, each warning me about the other. “Don’t trust your mother.” “Don’t trust your father.” Well guess what. I, aka Nila Nelson, didn’t trust either of them. When you throw suspicious encounters into a brain fog of fear and confusion, that’s what happens.

Darkness fell across the checkerboard of apartment windows across the alley. Some of my neighbors watched television, and others dug through their refrigerators. Everyone looked more like the others in the hospital than me, and probably also spoke Spanish like them.

Anyone looking back saw a white girl wrapped in head bandages. A girl who must have come from half a planet away.

*Where were we? Why?* I had no idea.

Nobody had shared much information, as though my inability to remember anything prior to the surgery were preferable. Nash and Nancy had been following the same script. *The doctors want to go slowly*, they said. *Everything will be okay*, they said. Empathetic grimaces. Supportive smiles. Reassuring nods. Anything but eye contact. “Mom” and “Dad” would have failed lie detector tests.

Caterpillar Eyebrows finally left his post. Maybe to pee. Maybe to flirt with the nurses. Maybe to scavenge for food. Probably some combination of the three. He didn’t spend a lot of time fulfilling his guard duties. That worked in my favor. Might have been the only thing working in my favor. With his absence, my chances of success crept above zero percent.

I would probably only have a few minutes, at most.

Standing worsened the aftermath from the brain surgery. The chainsaw was loose again, rattling, grinding. The brain fog thickened from a light broth to a pea soup. The basics were difficult enough to process, let alone my plan. I forgot the list I had written, leaving it on the bedside tray. Then I completely forgot that I had written the list at all.

I was halfway to the door leading to the hallway, holding the straps that had restrained my limbs in prior days. Dry blood was on one of them. My blood.

The restraints, the sheets, step one, step two, the restraints, the sheets.

*The restraints.* The wrist loops of the restraints barely fit around the door handle. I tied the free ends to a hook in a way that held the door closed. Several knots each. My arms were sore from tying all the sheets together.

*The sheets.* The five sheets I had tied together were still hidden in the bathroom shower, curled up like a lumpy white python. I dragged the sheets back to my bed and tied one end to a metal beam below it.

*The knots have to hold.*

## CHAPTER 2

I hadn’t been vertical much without assistance in recent days, hadn’t eaten anything in case my food was being poisoned. I swooned momentarily. A cup hit the floor, oozing melted ice cream blobs into crevices between the tiles.

My hand was resting on the breakfast menu card, where I saw the next few items on my list. *IV Pole. Tray. Pillows.*

I glanced at the bare mattress on the bed where I had been recovering, disoriented and confused, unable to remember anything from my past. My future was waiting outside, somewhere. Hopefully it would last longer than a few seconds.

I stared out the window like a caged bird ready to fly.

*How high up? Maybe five stories.*

This was it. Right or wrong, there was no way I was going home with nefarious Nash and Nancy Nelson. I was drowning in a sea of unknowns. I had to trust my instincts. That's all I had left.

*IV pole.* I yanked the IV lines from my arms, needles, tape, and all. Puddles spread on the floor. Blood striped my arms. I lifted the pole like a battering ram, charged toward the window, struck dead center, shattered the glass. The pole flew free, hurdling end-over-end into the night before arcing toward the alley below. The IV lines fluttered behind, streaming droplets that flickered in the streetlights' glow. Metal clanged on cement after a few seconds, longer than I had expected, further down than I had expected.

*Tray.* I used a serving tray to chip away the treacherous shards jutting up from the window frame.

*Pillows.* I draped pillows across the jagged edge, tossed the free end of the tied sheets out the window.

Alarms wailed from monitors near my bed and down the hall. A female voice blared through the overhead system. The tone was urgent, and I recognized the word *emergencia*.

Footfalls approached my room, faster and louder by the second, everyone shouting.

I crawled up onto the pillows on the windowsill, knees first, warm breeze meeting my face, clutched the window frame, scooted my feet up onto the pillows, crouched to fit through, traffic sounds to my right, grabbed the first sheet.

A nurse's face appeared in the hallway window, frozen, stunned by the sight of me escaping in dramatic fashion, looking almost as frightened as I felt.

I rappelled out the window. Legs swung into the emptiness below the outcropping of the ledge. Body dangled and twisted until feet found the bricks. Somehow, I was facing the hospital again.

Hands walked down the sheets. Feet tiptoed along the side of the building. Grippy soles of yellow hospital socks made for traction while walking to the bathroom were now maintaining proper rappelling position.

Nurses and staff reached the broken window. They looked concerned, gesturing for me to climb back up. But I wasn't fooled. Milky liquid dripped from the tip of a long needle protruding from a bulging syringe. *Sorry, no more dream juice for me.*

I kept descending.

*Don't look down. Don't look down.*

But I did. The descent looked ten times further while hanging from a sheet. A gray wave of unconsciousness swept in. I remained still, hoping the sensation would pass.

*Don't black out. Don't let go.*

A warmth rushed up through my face as my eyelids began to flutter. Just when I thought I would pass out and fall, the feeling subsided, my vision returning to normal.

I was halfway down the length of the sheets. My handiwork didn't reach all the way to the street, or anywhere near it. Hopefully, I could survive jumping from the lower end.

I took another step. Time for my right hand to move, but my forearm was cramping.

*How many stories up? Maybe three. Don't look down.*

The chainsaw in my head ripped wide swaths of pain.

My yellow socks reached another window, catching the attention of a hunched old woman in a hospital gown. Her face pressed against the window. She stared at me, blinked a few times as though reprimanding faulty vision, and then looked up along the string of sheets with complete bewilderment.

*What else did you expect to see out here?*

The sheet suddenly yanked upwards, almost shaking me loose. Two muscular men were leaning halfway out of the broken window, trying to reel me back in, sheets first.

Didn't want to jump from that height. No way, no how. I knew that without looking down.

My hands sprinted down the ever-shortening length of the sheets, netting some progress. But when I crossed onto the last sheet, the knot securing it unraveled.

The sheet fell from the others, taking me with it.

I was about to die.

### CHAPTER 3

Arms flailed, legs flailed, muscles strained to remain upright, but my body angled backwards.

I was in free fall.

*How many seconds would it take?*

*One...two...three...*

The impact was abrupt and all encompassing.

As I landed on my back, all the air in my chest grunted out, every square inch of me produced a splattering sensation, something gelatinous squirted across my face.

My entire body was a chorus of pain.

I clenched my eyes shut, expecting to pass out from blood loss or shock or whatever happened to your body after falling so many stories. My insides must have traded places with my outsides. I lay there silently, waiting for death to claim me.

But I remained conscious.

A smell invaded my nose and lungs, half sweet and half putrid, making me gag.

Liquid trickling along my lips. I couldn't resist sticking my tongue out. I braced myself for the metallic taste of my own blood, or something even worse. *What could be worse?* I didn't want to think about what could be worse.

Instead, my tongue found something pleasantly sweet.

Opening my eyes, I saw the hospital towering above at a distorted angle. Faces the size of snow peas leaned out from the open window where my descent had started. They must have been certain that I was dead. They would soon share my disbelief that I was still alive.

I wiggled my fingers, my toes. Most of the new pain from the impact had subsided, with the exception of my left arm, which was throbbing just above the wrist. The pain and brain fog I had experienced before climbing out the window were amplified.

Death would have to wait.

The liquid coating me wasn't me. It was shrapnel from a mountain of overripe and rotting fruit and vegetables discarded by street vendors after a long day of pushing their gigantic carts. Obliterated tomatoes and other mush, some recognizable and some unrecognizable, a palette of colors on my hospital gown.

I touched my tongue to my lip again, lightly stroking a sweet fragment along my skin. Watermelon.

I wedged my right arm against the pile, trying to lift myself, only to sink deeper into the fruity quicksand. My arm instinctively stretched out until finding something firm. Remnants of what might have been a bookcase provided adequate support to stand.

A lightning bolt of pain struck the lower right side of my chest and ran through my ribs.

Had I fallen a couple of feet to the side and landed on that wood, I would have died. Had I landed almost anywhere other than where I did, I would have died.

A chorus of gasps descended from my hospital room window, followed by excited chatter, acknowledgement of my resurrection. They began yelling toward the hospital entrance at the end of the block, then pointing down at me. Whoever was by the entrance would soon be after me.

The urge to flee overrode my relief to be alive.

Struggling to maintain my balance, angled toward my chest pain, I staggered away from the direction of the hospital entrance.

Faces in the lower windows stared toward the sky, looking for anyone else falling from another planet. The alley was empty, but a crowd clogged the main avenue up ahead.

Alarms blared from open hospital windows. An escaped patient was on the loose. A fugitive.

A glance back over my shoulder revealed a short, wide security guard coming out of the hospital. He was waving a baton with one hand and tugging his belt up with the other, waddling in pursuit at full speed.

We were in a slow-motion chase, the guard dragging his entirety and me trying to shift my brain into gear, trying to will the fog into lifting. I hastened my pace, I think, trying to narrow my zigzags into a pattern more closely approximating a straight line.

Others poured out of the hospital entrance, far behind the waddling guard but likely more agile, Caterpillar Eyebrows possibly among them.

As I reached the main avenue, pedestrians scattered, yielding ample distance to the monster with the pulp-coated hospital gown and yellow socks. There was nowhere to hide. My throat was dry, my lungs starving for air, my heart threatening to jump out of my chest. I bent over, both hands on my knees, drawing deep, burning breaths.

Gridlocked traffic stretched in all directions, a tsunami of engines, horns, music, and car alarms. Cars wedged together, some nearly touching, others touching. They stuttered forward periodically in a lane-less swarm. Jumping in a cab or bus was no option for escape.

Someone rammed me from behind. I pivoted to see a toddler dangling from her mother's arm. The girl's free hand was coated in smashed fruit from my back. The mother glared at my filthy gown and dragged her daughter aside.

My pursuers would be there soon. I had to keep moving.

Pedestrians leapfrogged along pockets of air between them. I joined them, shuffling sideways between some cars and stepping over the bumpers of others. Horns blared. At me, at other pedestrians, at anything.

Finding a sizable gap, I accelerated ahead, only to encounter a pickup truck barreling down on me. I stopped short, but the driver didn't. Tires sped within inches of my feet. A fist waved from an open window with a flurry of undecipherable expletives.

After crossing the street, I tried to get oriented while catching my breath again. Waddling Guard was about to reach the intersection. A public square stretched out in front of me. A crowd encircled a street performer, protesters waved signs and competed for airspace with megaphones, police with machine guns patrolled the chaos. Colorful shops and stands lined an outdoor market just beyond the crowd.

*Where should I go next?* I was a stranger to this city, a stranger to myself, lost and frightened.

Someone grabbed my injured arm from behind, so suddenly and forcefully that I nearly fell. The damaged parts of my body screamed with pain. Hot breath filled with onions hit my face as I turned around.

## CHAPTER 4

I spun, fist first, at what ended up being Caterpillar Eyebrows. A bicep intercepted the blow, deflecting my arm skyward and causing my injured ribs to scream with pain.

He reached for my free arm. I pivoted away, swung again, missed again. His grasp tightened around my injured arm. When I tried to pull back, he reeled me back even closer.

I drove my knee up into his crotch. As he doubled over, I swung an elbow up into his face and heard a crack. Muscle memory was an interesting animal. Most of my memory was a garbage heap, but I repeatedly found myself calling upon skills I hadn't even known. The knee-elbow combination had probably come in handy before.

It surprised me, but I liked it. I liked it a lot.

Caterpillar Eyebrows staggered backwards, releasing my arm. Blood streamed from his nose as he stumbled over the curb, grasping at the air in an attempt to regain his balance. Two or three steps back into the street proved to be two or three steps too many. Somewhere in the screeching of tires, he bounced off the grill of one car and against the bumper of another.

It wasn't enough to kill him, but it would surely slow him down. He started to stand but fell back down on the street.

Not wanting to wait and see what happened next, I ricocheted through the crowd.

Ducking below a policeman's line of sight, I pressed uphill toward a towering stand displaying pan flutes, small guitars, and colorful, knitted cases.

A short man working the music stand smiled into round, ruddy cheeks while strumming a guitar. As I approached, he held out the instrument and gestured for me to play. I pushed past him, panting as though ascending a mountain instead of a city incline.

Wall-to-wall stands and shops of an outdoor market lined the hilly, cobblestone streets. The narrow passages and stacks of merchandise promised more hiding places than remaining out in the open and hopefully some time to map out a plan.

My chest was heaving, my lungs burning, my rib cage stabbing. I begged my legs to keep running but plodded forward.

I dragged myself through the tunnel of colors. Every stand displayed hundreds of items, clay statues of deities, bundles of roots and herbs, packets of spices, blankets, shawls, and purses, all rushing past my peripheral vision in kaleidoscopic patterns. Women in tall, black hats leaned forward on their stools, merchandise in hand, then recoiled from my frantic strides.

A woman in a brown shawl stood her ground in the middle of the street. Woven artwork draped across each arm. She indicated prices with her fingers while calling out in a language I couldn't recognize. As I pivoted to avoid her, the number of extended fingers changed, indicating the price was already dropping. I shook my head and waved her off as I passed by.



A girl came out of nowhere and thrust a colorful blanket in my hands, squeezing my fingers around it. I yanked myself free from her, released the blanket, caught my heel on a cobblestone, stumbled across the narrow street.

I careened against another woman in a black hat and a white-bearded man sitting by a pot of smoldering herbs. Bodies flew in all directions. The man flopped on his back in a large basket, and the woman and I tackled a storefront display. Pouches of powder flew from her hands. Their purple puffs mingled with the herbal smoke, making me cough as I hit the ground.

The basket where the man was lying was filled with desiccated frogs and reptiles. His shocked expression matched hundreds of bulging eyes around him. The woman was furious, waving her arms and yelling while assessing large, gray animal carcasses scattered around the stand.

My ribcage hurt even worse than earlier, making it difficult to stand. The girl with the blanket helped me to my feet, interlocked her arm with mine, and led me away from the mess I had caused. Wrapped in head bandages and increasingly aware of the countless mummified carcasses on the stands lining my passage, I felt like the guest of honor at a human sacrifice ritual.

She stopped at what must have been her family's stand. She took a blue shawl with bird designs from a stand and began wrapping it around me.

"No, thank you," I said with emphatic hand waves. "I can't buy this. I don't have any money." I held out both sides of the hospital gown, demonstrating a lack of pockets and, therefore, a lack of money.

She didn't seem to understand, because I was soon swathed in the shawl despite my objections.

Suddenly, I spotted a frightening sight about a block back. Entering the market was a familiar face.

Caterpillar Eyebrows.

I retracted like a turtle into the shawl until it concealed my tell-tale head bandages and all but a circle around my eyes. Hints of smoke escaped the woven fabric as I watched back along the street. The guard limped along the stands, talking to the merchants.

One of them pointed in my direction.

The girl immediately spotted the man holding my gaze. Reading the fear in my eyes, she pulled me toward a narrow door between two stands.

As she fumbled for her keys, I tucked my head closer to a stand to avoid being visible to the guard.

I was breathing harder than ever, becoming lightheaded. Staring back at me from the stand were rows of painted clay statues. Men and women entwined. Squatting women pushing out babies.

The girl opened the door and gestured for me to follow.

Clutching the blanket tightly around my soiled hospital gown, I alternated glances between the guard and the girl, the known and the unknown.

I couldn't catch my breath. My vision was fading.

The girl walked through the door and fused with the darkness inside.

There was no way I was going to be captured by the guard and returned to the hospital. That just wasn't an option.

I stepped inside the building.

Then I blacked out.

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