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Remembering
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Elite Force

NCIS: Shane Brennan

Unwritten

As the world burns...

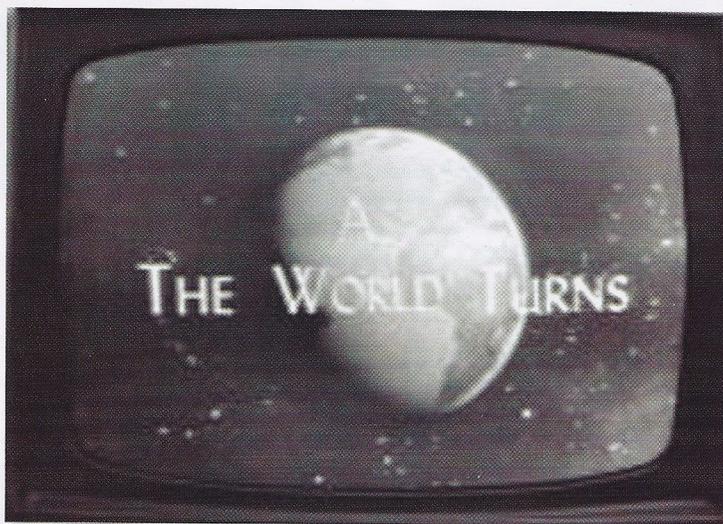
I have murdered, married, kidnapped, switched babies, split personalities, resurrected the dead, pointed stubborn ghosts toward the light, sent cars careening off cliffs, blown up hospitals, trapped divas in caves, crushed a promising young neurosurgeon under a speeding train, and successfully transplanted donor hearts on two different networks. (And a liver.)

For the past 11 years, I wrote soap opera.

At dawn on December 8, 2009, I was at my desk, crowded with the artifacts of another all-nighter: empty coffee cups; inside-out Luna Bar wrappers; and the dog-eared, scribbled-on outline for *As the World Turns* Episode #13,719. It had been a dramatic evening.

Molly and Lily, rivals for handsome former stable boy Holden, mothers of one and three his children, respectively, visited him in jail, where Holden was falsely accused of murdering Lily's ex, Damian—whom she remarried when Holden was mistakenly declared dead. Damian is also not dead. He's with Holden and Lily's wild child, Faith, at boarding school, passing himself off as her father to bail her out of trouble (pot-smoking) in exchange for her participation in his dastardly plan to spirit Lily off to Monaco. Meanwhile, high school senior Liberty has leukemia and might need a bone marrow transplant, so her mother, Janet, wants to get pregnant with soon-to-be-ex-husband Jack's baby. (Liberty's late father was Jack's brother in order that the DNA dice be loaded.) But Jack is in love with recovering alcoholic Carly—again, or maybe always. They were secretly back together until Janet played the cancer card, but now all bets are off.

Just another day in Oakdale, Illinois. One minute before deadline, I emailed the 93-page script to the studio in Midwood, Brooklyn, peeled myself off the chair and went in search of coffee and fresh air. Halfway to the corner bodega, I realized I was still wearing my slippers. My body was on a Hell's Kitchen street, but my mind had not



yet caught up with reality.

When I returned, fully caffeinated, the phone was ringing. Caller ID read: ATWT WRITERS' OFFICE. The soap opera machine churns out more than 240 episodes a year. There's no time for chitchat, especially on Tuesday morning, when last week's assigned scripts come in and next week's scripts are laid out. I answered, worried my writer's nightmare had finally come to pass, that I'd spent six days mistakenly working on the wrong episode.

"We're asking the writers to call into the conference line at noon." The normally ebullient script editor's tone was unnervingly flat, his choice of words oddly impersonal.

"What's wrong?" I squeaked in alarm.

"We didn't get the pick-up."

Translation: After 54 years on the air, *As the World Turns* had been canceled.

If the moment were a scene from a soap opera, it would read: "She sits, gutpunched." It was the end of a world. Fictional Oakdale had been turning in my imagination for three years. While I went to yoga, walked the dog, watched *24* with the boyfriend, and wrote at least one 90-page script each week, the people of Oakdale were living a parallel life in my head. On September 17, 2010, it was to fade out like *Brigadoon*.

Alas, Poor Yorick

But weeks before, we writers—alone in our home offices from L.A. to New York to Atlanta, connected only through phone lines, email, fax, and messenger—would press SEND one final anticlimactic time and be done. We were links in a storytelling chain that would soon be broken.

I have written 92 episodes of *As the World Turns*, the equivalent of three-and-a-half seasons of *Law & Order*. Prior to that, I wrote more than 350 episodes of *One Life to Live* and six unaired episodes of *All My Children*.

Before I was drafted into daytime, I was an actress. Bored with merely interpreting others' words, I wrote a one-woman show, *Guarding Erica*, about my misadventures playing Erica Kane's prison guard on *All My Children*. ABC threatened to sue me for copyright infringement, but after they saw the performance, they hired me. Within a few months, I went from guarding Susan Lucci to putting words in her mouth. It was an extreme reinvention.

The unrelenting grind of soap-writing taught me that I could do anything I set out to do. There is no handbook or soap-writing class, and the powers that be have neither the time nor the inclination to mentor new writers, who would

provide competition. I taught myself the job by reading hundreds of scripts, trolling Internet fansites for show history, and watching what worked on the air. I spent dozens of hours at the Paley Center for Media, studying the best TV writing—a virtual apprenticeship at the feet of such groundbreaking TV writers as David Milch, Tom Fontana, Bruce Paltrow, and Steven Bochco. With every script, every week for 11 years, I tried to write better.

My acting training gave me an edge. I was tasked with lifting the outline of an episode off the page, bringing it to life with dialogue, action, and verisimilitude—the tiny touches that give the show a “real feel.” In the privacy of my office, I improvised, setting the scene, then letting the characters talk as I transcribed their conversations.

Last fall, for example, Henry Coleman, a broken-hearted striver with such a tendency to hyperventilate that he carried a brown bag in his pocket, was possessed by the ghost of the recently deceased Brad Snyder, the goofy but lovable new father and Henry’s best friend. My boyfriend, Jeff, walked in unnoticed and was treated to a 10-minute monologue as I played Henry fighting ghost Brad, who needed to borrow a body so he could hold his newborn for the first and only time. Jeff likened my performance to a remake of *Sybil* as performed by the Blue Man Group, while being electrocuted. Good times.

I usually forgot what I’d written as soon as I sent it, but occasionally I added something more of myself to a script, like the day *One Life’s* Marcie went shopping for a wedding gown.

Kathy Brier, who played Marcie, has a real body, a welcome soap opera anomaly. Show executives wanted to treat Marcie like a “normal” person, ignoring her size, but for a 21st-century American woman not to worry about her weight—especially around her wedding—is more than abnormal, it’s impossible. For any woman with body issues, a visit to a bridal boutique—where most sample gowns come in size 6—is heartbreak waiting to happen. I sent Marcie into that bridal shop expecting to feel like a princess, until she met the snooty salesgirl. It didn’t matter

In 1973, Erica Kane had the first legal abortion on TV. She “selfishly” got rid of the baby in favor of her modeling career. The story was groundbreaking. In 2005, *All My Children* debuted Josh Madden, Erica’s aborted baby. It was like a choice do-over.

that she had an amazing voice, a doctor fiancé and her own radio show. In the mirror of the willowy bridal consultant’s eyes, she saw only a wide, squat failure. I knew what the viewers knew. That, for so many of us, hell is a dressing room mirror.

I’ve always had a love-hate relationship with soaps. Daytime used to be the most nervy of genres. In 1973, the year of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, *All My Children*’s Erica Kane had the first legal abortion on television. Not only that, she “selfishly” got rid of the baby in favor of her modeling career. The story was groundbreaking. Then, in 2005, *All My Children* debuted the character of Josh Madden, who turned out to be . . . Erica’s aborted baby. It was like a choice do-over.

In 2006, I wrote the script for a *One Life* episode that ended with Todd Manning’s on-air execution for a crime he didn’t commit. I funneled all my moral objection to the death penalty into the day, knowing viewers loved Todd like a family member and that watching him put to death would drive the injustice of capital punishment home. It did but only temporarily. The following Monday saw the lethal injection reversed by a “special operation.” I loathed this turn of events. I want to tell stories where executions are fatal, and the unborn don’t grow up to be dashing cardiac surgeons.

Everything changed when *As the World Turns* was canceled. The stories became more focused, now that there was an endgame. I was surprised to realize how much I cared what happened to the characters.

For example, when the father Liberty barely knew but loved deeply was murdered, his spirit came to her on Christmas Eve. I had written them the goodbye scene I wish I could have had with my own late father. As the show wound down, I wrote Liberty’s hard-earned graduation day speech, glad that she decided to take the scholarship to FIT, but come September, she won’t be going. She won’t *be*.

And what about Luke? Will he get over the tragic loss of Reid and find love again? Will it be with Noah? Will Luke’s parents, Holden and Lily, get back together? Everyone but them knows they’re soulmates. Then there’s Carly and Jack—Carjack, as fans call them. Will Jack default to his Dudley DoRight behavior and drive Carly back to drinking the cooking sherry? Will Paul and Emily stay happy or will they shoot each other again? And next Thanksgiving at the Snyder Farm, who will carve the Hubbard Squash? Nobody. The farmhouse is gone. The studio empty. The company moved on.

Fade Out?

At two o’clock p.m. on September 17, many of the *World Turns* crew gathered in a private room at a bar on New York’s Eighth Avenue to watch the final episode. Martinis and tears flowed, but, because the episode had been taped months before, the event felt more like a memorial service than a funeral. The reunion chatter was deafening during the commercials, but during the show itself, not even the bartenders moved. When Oakdale’s beloved Dr. Bob gave his office a final once-over, then turned out the light, the group applauded, the writer friend I came with dissolved in messy, heartfelt tears, and I finally felt released. Never one for goodbyes, I slipped out the door unnoticed and went home to clean out my office.

The next morning, my desk was a blank slate. Now what do I do with myself? When I was a kid, I could tumble headfirst into a good book. The story would find its way into my dreams, both waking and sleeping. I knew what it would be like to ride Black Beauty, Misty of Chincoteague, Flicka, and Velvet. Nancy Drew and Trixie

continued on page 60

The Job, continued from page 12

Belden had nothing on me. I can still get lost in a book. So I'm writing one.

I wrote my first story in second grade: a mystery-thriller titled "A Scary Adventure." I wasn't satisfied with the ending, but in the meantime I've seen much worse. On Parents' Day, I was to read my story aloud. Dad was working, but I was excited for Mom to be there. I knew the work had moments, lazy ending notwithstanding. When the day came, I read, beaming in my A-line shift and white tights with the crotch that sagged halfway to my knees. That night at supper, my dad asked how it went.

"I was terribly embarrassed," Mom replied. My stomach clenched. She continued: "The other parents wanted the chance to hear their kids, but it's not like I could go up and stop her."

I didn't write another story for 25 years, when a broken heart sent me back to the blank page. I wrote, but—still bad with endings—never finished anything. I would stop just shy of the

end and start something else. Ninety pages of script a week, every week, is a good excuse for not writing that novel. I didn't have to explain the vestigial fear of embarrassing myself and others, left over from the second grade.

Back then, I was also scared of the twilight, when the pattern on my bedroom curtains seemed to blink open hidden eyes, waiting for me to close mine. My fear of "making a spectacle of myself" is the same kind of bad-magical-thinking. What's the worst that can happen? I've failed before. Fall down seven times, get up eight. Or 12. It's not like I have a choice. There is no going back. I'm out of excuses.

Before turning in my final script for *As the World Turns*, I was privileged to write the unlikely but perfect wedding of Barbara and Henry, two free spirits who overcame a faked pregnancy, a shotgun wedding, a significant age difference, and imprisonment in a warehouse with an unlimited supply of Pixie Stix, wax lips, and a life-size clown doll. I loved writing a happy ending for my favorite fictional

couple. After taping, Colleen Zenk, who played Barbara, took the time to seek me out and thank me for my work. I had written more than 400 soap episodes, but she was only the second actor to ever do that. It was good to end my soap-writing career feeling appreciated.

Of course, a few moments after talking with Colleen at the reunion finale, I introduced myself to Trent Dawson, who played her soulmate, Henry. Flush with Colleen's praise, I told him how much I'd enjoyed writing for him, especially the final few episodes.

"You wrote those?" I nodded, beaming like a second grader. But Trent wasn't finished. "Could you stop writing me so many monologues?"

I froze, gobsmacked, as the clueless actor walked away. I briefly wished I could go back and rewrite Henry as a mime. Then I realized: Henry and Barbara are gone. Oakdale is a memory. The ending's been written. But my story is just beginning. And it's all mine.

Fade in. **WB**

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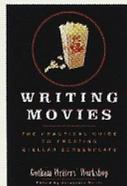
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