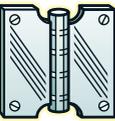


# spirit

SOUTHWEST AIRLINES



**H**istory s entirely poorer as people if family,  thrives, down for generations. Many of in s trying to find new ways to Words, of course, are not the  narratives. Yes, laptops are used but s have also been doing In brief, it's all about  thing:

on it. We'd  so much our s weren't enriched by in part, on tales passed our best minds  themselves deliver a fantastic yarn. means of -veying these (and sometimes even s), the  forever. Comics, too! truly thrilling **storytelling.**

# Once upon a time, storytelling was all we had. Just talking. No photography or flicks or e-books.

No tweeting or texting or Tumblr-ing. Before these modern mediums gave us the means to document our lives in sometimes ridiculously exacting ways, we passed along our history, personal experiences, and family traditions through a whisper in the ear, a gathering around a fire, an assembly in the village square.

This oral tradition of storytelling was a social-media leap from the solitary anecdotalism of cave drawing. Still, for all its enchanting qualities, it must have been cryptic stuff. “Our species existed for more than 100,000 years before the earliest signs of literacy,” Drew Westen, a professor at Emory University, noted in a recent op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, “and another 5,000 years would pass before the majority of humans would know how to read and write.”

Today, of course, storytelling exists in an exhilarating array of forms, a small but vivid sample of which appears on the following pages.

We tend to think of photography as a truth-telling medium and the camera

as a tool for capturing, in perpetuity (and often painfully embarrassing poses, and facial-hair and fashion choices), the many phases of our lives. And it is that (see page 68). But in the hands of a boldly imaginative artist, it is also a tour-de-force storytelling form (opposite and page 74).

The smartphone has become many things: navigational tool, translator, bottomless source of Web information, dinner table-conversation killer. But it’s a hi-def moviemaking device too (page 69), and, for better or worse, the 21st century’s equivalent of a scroll, typewriter paper, newsprint, a Word doc. Those deeply poetic love letters of Simone de Beauvoir? Today, in text message form, they might look something like: “U r so ill, my BFF. I ♥ u!” Even the gr8 Shakespeare would be LOLing (page 69.)

No matter what shape it takes, storytelling—and the urge to spill tales fantastic and tender and searching or just plain silly—thankfully endures. And to that we say, “Have we got some stories for you.” Enjoy.



STORYTELLER  
**GREGORY  
CREWDSON**

**“Untitled”** “It’s storytelling of a particular type,” says Gregory Crewdson about photography—and about the elaborately staged images he creates. “Unlike a typical story, there’s no beginning, middle, and end. It’s a story that never resolves, which is part of the power of it.” Crewdson’s new book *In a Lonely Place* gathers images from across his stellar career. A hint to just one of the mysteries of “Untitled”? As a boy, Crewdson liked to spy on his psychotherapist father—whose office was in the basement.

REBUS ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETER & MARIA HOEY

PHOTOGRAPHY © GREGORY CREWDSON



STORYTELLER  
**JOHN McALLEY**

## “Is Dolly There?”

He'd intended to ask her sister for a date. But when he called and Dolly turned out not to be home, he hatched plan B. “Well,” he said to the flirty 22-year-old on the other end of the line, “what are you doing tonight?” Our family photo albums can't capture every detail of the story of our lives—for instance, that call in which my father met my mother—but embedded in them are our most essential narratives and intimacies. Meet my folks, Ruth and Fred. —JM



WATCH the “Splitscreen” film using this QR code or at [spiritmag.com/storytelling](http://spiritmag.com/storytelling)



short stories

## DIAL “M” FOR MOVIES

While Hollywood films seem only to get bigger, mobile phones are making deft Spielbergs of us all. Shot entirely on a Nokia N8, “Splitscreen: A Love Story” won the Nokia Shorts 2011 competition. Pull out your smartphones (see box above) and be stunned.

STORYTELLER  
**PATRICIA MARX**

“STAR-X-ED LUVRS”  
The *New Yorker* humorist and author of the new novel *Starting From Happy* herewith thumbs the Bard.



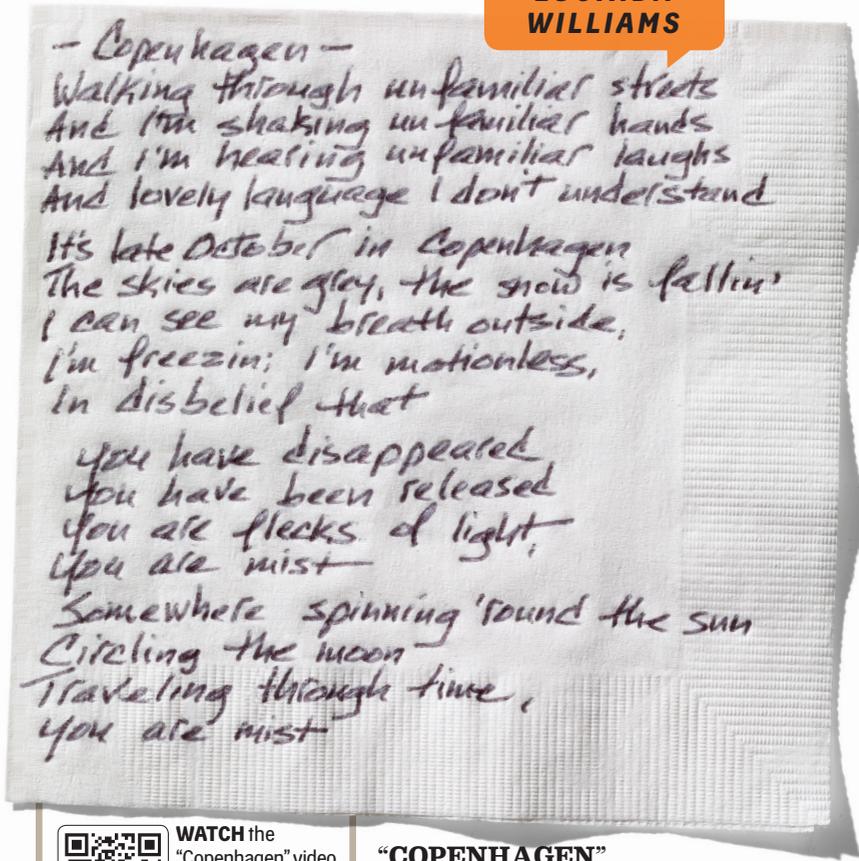


STORYTELLERS  
PETER & MARIA HOEY

# "First Day of Fall"

Siblings Peter and Maria Hoey are close in every way except age (13 years apart) and geography. He does the drawing for their sublime editorial illustrations in California; she colors them from her digs in Brooklyn. For their unusual *comics* work, which appears in *The Best American Comics 2011*, they often take a single scene and "grid it out," says Peter, to tell multiple stories simultaneously. Maria calls the style "nostalgic" (and big brother's influence "deviant.")

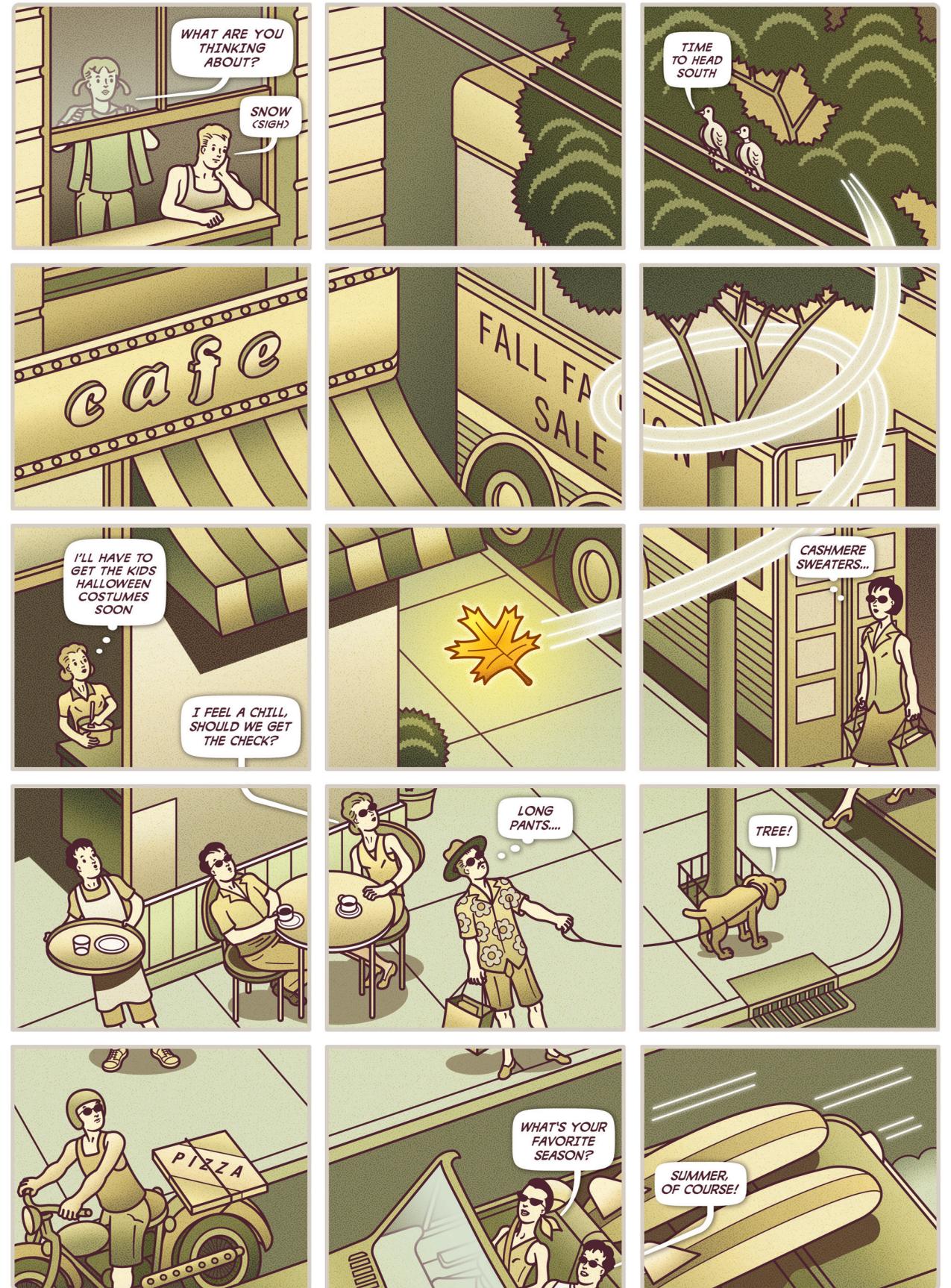
STORYTELLER  
LUCINDA WILLIAMS

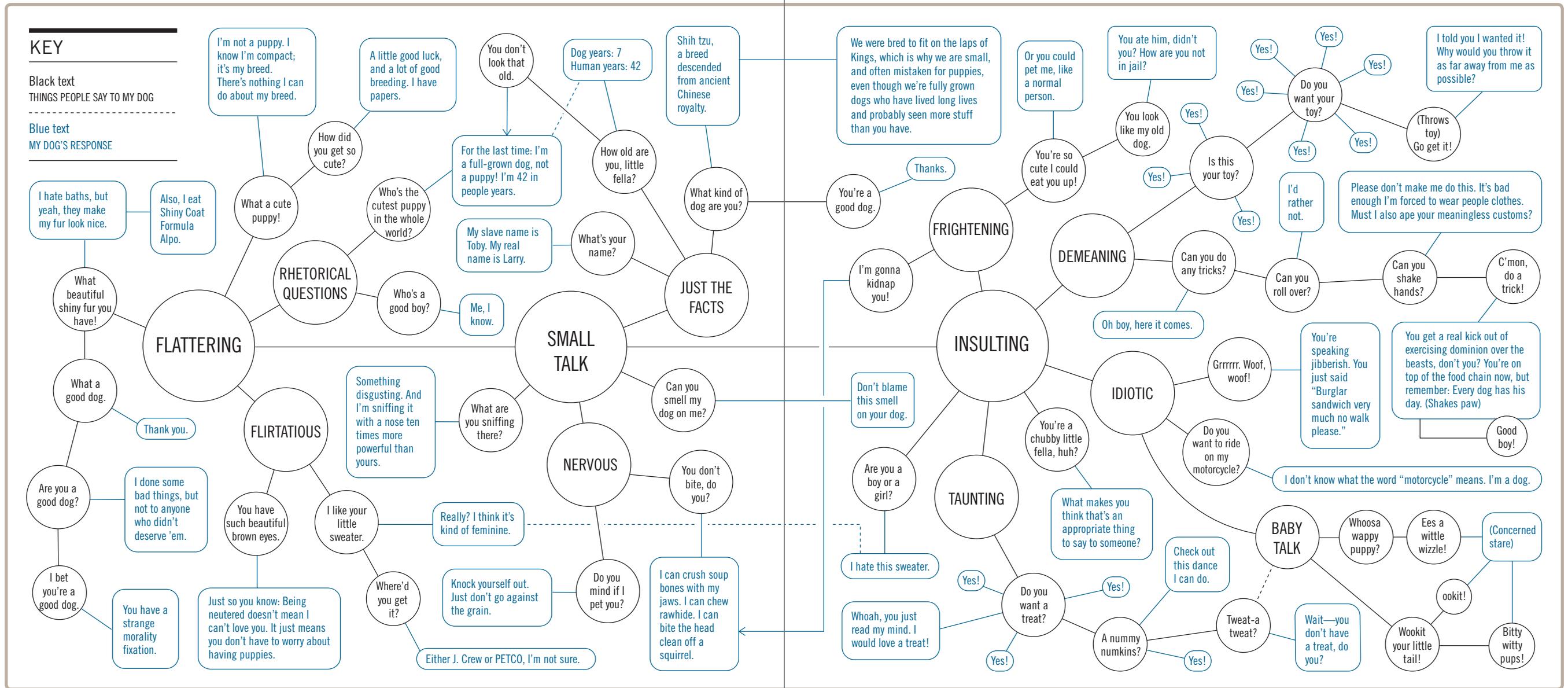


WATCH the "Copenhagen" video using this QR code or at [spiritmag.com/storytelling](http://spiritmag.com/storytelling)

**"COPENHAGEN"**  
Few songwriters move us as deeply as Lucinda Williams, whose lyric for "Copenhagen" she wrote out on a napkin for us. The song is an aching portrait of loss. The video weeps, too.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM VOORHES (MAPKIN)





STORYTELLER  
**DOOGIE HORNER**

## “Things People Say to My Dog”

He swears his flowcharts didn't start out to be funny. “I'm not really a funny person; I'm actually a pretty *serious* person,” says graphic designer Doogie Horner. “In fact, most of these charts come from subjects that I find confusing. For example, people spend a lot of time talking to my dog. Confusing. And they always ask him the *same questions*.” Other vexing topics that Horner wrestles into hilarity in his 2010 book, *Everything Explained Through Flowcharts*: salad dressing, tattoos, and the afterlife. Horner is so unfunny that he does stand-up comedy, and appeared last year on *America's Got Talent*, which he calls a synonym for *horrible*. That's funny!

short stories

## JACKETS REQUIRED

The best book covers capture the essence of tens of thousands of words in a single image. It is storytelling through design—and when it works it's riveting.



## “The Haunted Household”

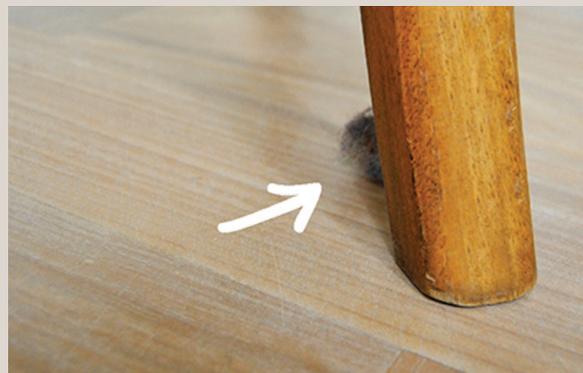
STORYTELLER  
**CHRISTOPH  
NIEMANN**

One of the most revered illustrators of his generation, 40-year-old Christoph Niemann had a great thing going in New York—so three years ago he left to return to his native Germany. “The idea,” he says, “was to kick myself out of my comfort zone; to try things I was really afraid of.” From Berlin, Niemann agreed to create *Abstract City*, a blog for *The New York Times* that gave life, through a variety of

boundary-pushing visual experiments, to the artist’s personal obsessions. “The Haunted Household” is just one of the dizzyingly imaginative pieces that surfaced and will be compiled in a book in 2012. Niemann’s favorite theme is the way technology insulates us from real crises and drives us into our own tiny universes, to the point where, he jokes, we “start having relationships even with dustballs!”



**1. We try to keep our place tidy.** I sweep the floor, I sit back, relax, and ponder my good work, yet...



**2. ...a few seconds later...**



**3. ...ta-da! One of those little beasts jumps out to mock me.**



**4. These creatures make life difficult.** I love pasta, but there’s always one straggler that, once dry, will never leave again.



**5. Another formidable opponent is the little crumb of whatever,** which gets stuck between the two parts of our tabletop.



**6. They ridicule my handiwork.**



**7. I am deeply embarrassed by my laptop’s scruffy smile.**



**8. There goes another remote.**



**9. Why does this guy begrudge me my last bite of marmalade?**



**10. Things have not improved since we had children.**



**11. But by now I’ve learned to live with their trickery.** These friends may be wicked, but they are dependable companions...



**12. ...and they’re welcome to stay.** Except you, T-shirt Houdini!

## “Keys to Happiness”

Anyone who has sat at an airport bar knows that storytelling is not exclusive to professionals. Jim Gillett yearns to tell stories. So much so that, at age 39, he has given up a teaching career to pursue his dream of being a writer. Jim still lives in the East L.A. neighborhood where this story takes place. This is his first published work.

STORYTELLER

**JIM  
GILLETT**

I grew up in the poor part of East Los Angeles, which, if you lived there in the early 80s, was every part of East Los Angeles. My parents, Latino Catholics that they were, decided that for the benefit of my soul they would sacrifice their keeping up with the Joneses in order for me to attend our local parish school. While most of middle-class America was off buying ever-bigger TVs and constantly trading up as beepers evolved into Neanderthalic cell phones before becoming the pocketable multitaskers of today, my family stayed in the Dark Ages.

Back then, I never gave much thought to what we did or didn't have. It wasn't like any of the other kids on my block were doing much better. So when I reached middle school and was told that my homework reports would now have to be typed, I didn't know what my parents would do. To my surprise, they walked me to the closet in our back-of-the-house washroom. It was stacked so high with boxes of junk and stuff that it resembled a game of Jenga in mid-play.

They played the game cautiously, removing the boxes from the top down, until they came upon a large, metallic case with two latches and a shiny black handle. With the exception of the freckles of rust that dotted the corners of the box like the cheeks of some ginger kid, it was in perfect shape.

"This was your grandfather's," my mother said. "I believe it still works." For a family of modest means like mine, "I believe it still works" was as good as "Hey, I just bought it." And because it was something new -- to me, at least -- I could hardly wait to flip the latches and see what was inside.

With help from my father, we popped the latches and opened the case to reveal a hardly touched 1940s Smith Corona Sterling typewriter. Apparently, my grandfather bought it when he came home after the Second World War. He had dreams of becoming a writer in order to describe what it was like to be a Latino in the Navy. No doubt, he had adventures to write about, too. But I imagine he never got the nerve to flip open that metal box.

So while most of the kids my age were getting their first electric typewriters, I was dusting off my mint condition Smith Corona. The excitement I felt was no less exuberant than theirs.

It was heavy -- so heavy that it took both of my 12-year-old arms to carry it from the closet to the kitchen table (aka my writing desk). The start of every paper required two heavy-lifting efforts: the typewriter and our leather-bound Complete Oxford English Dictionary, which had the size and weight of the Bible the priests would read from every Sunday. As a former altar boy, I can tell you that carrying that Bible was also a two-handed job.

The typewriter itself was made of thick, greenish-black metal. One could imagine it easily being used for the turret of a tank. The canopy that bore the Smith Corona name lifted to reveal an arsenal of tiny hammers with a letter at each end and resting like missiles in their silos until the push of a button would launch them toward the inked ribbon and paper.

2

As a kid I was dazzled to see the ribbon rise in its carriage as the hammer hurried to meet it, both of them arriving at the precise same time, paper, ribbon, and hammer becoming one in a flash before retreating to reveal a T or a Z or a # left on the paper. Comically, I thought that if I pressed the keys fast enough, they would beat the ribbon to the paper. Of course, this often caused the hammers to get stuck together, and I had to physically pry them loose, risking hands and inked fingers in the process.

Another great thing about working on an old typewriter was the constant reward and positive feedback. Every typed letter would be met by a "Click!" and every completed line congratulated with a resounding "Ding!" Then I would pull the carriage's return lever like the arm of a slot machine and feel the rush of the ratcheting sound -- "ThrrrrUTTT!" -- as I began each new line.

It wasn't till I entered Loyola High School, a very exclusive parochial school, that the love affair between my Smith Corona and I would go through a rough patch. It was there, during the dawning of the PC, that the social division in my life was pointed out to me. It happened in freshman English class. We were handing in our first homework assignments when the student sitting in front of me grabbed mine, with its messy correction-tape marks and tissue-thin paper, and held it up for the class to see. "Oh my God, dude," he bellowed, "are your parents, like, so poor they make you do your homework on some old typewriter?"

Before Mrs. Berardi could stop him, the damage was done and my Smith Corona typewriter became the scarlet letter of my underprivileged youth.

Today, I rock a loaded MacBook Pro, but I still have that 1940s Smith Corona Sterling. I can never quite bring myself to let it go. I wrote love letters to my college girlfriend on it, typing them on fine stationery and sealing the envelopes with wax. I credit to that typewriter two years' worth of very sexy weekends with her. Later, I would haul it out to write bad poetry in some drunken, futile attempt to channel my inner Bukowski.

Today, when friends see my Sterling, they think it is one of the coolest pieces in my apartment. Some have even offered to buy it. I shrug them off and tell them that it still works (which it does) and that I still have a supply of ribbons in the bottom-left drawer of my desk (which I do). What I don't tell them is that, on certain nights, if the mood is just right, I will sit behind it, I will place that huge Oxford English Dictionary right next to it, then roll that transparent tissue-like paper through its carriage, carefully making sure that the paper is lined up and straight. I will smile as I place my hands on heavily worn keys that meet me with gentle, loving resistance. I will look to my right to see my young self sitting next to me, and to my left to see the angry teenage me, who just wanted to have what the other kids had. And together we will type, letting the clicks and dings and thrrrrUTTTs conduct their symphony as we write love poems to women and to a world we have already met and are still waiting to meet.

*— Jim Gillett*

THE ART OF  
STORYTELLING

A story can change your life. Even if you are the one telling it. For the formerly wayward like O.T. Powell, a storytelling nonprofit known as The Moth has led to confession—and redemption.

# “TRUE STORY.”

BY KATE SILVER /  
/ PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER YANG

**S**OMETHING ABOUT Sherman "O.T." Powell made you want to trust him. As he walked across the stage of the posh Players Club in Manhattan in 2003, the 56-year-old flashed a smile. You wouldn't know that a few months before, he was sleeping in a park, drinking from a paper bag, and smoking crack. Dressed in a dapper gold vest and matching tie, and with stiff-as-a-board posture and a humorous squint, he didn't look like a professional thief, because he isn't. Not anymore.

But he was understandably nervous. This private club, where members pay \$1,500 in annual dues, was founded by Edwin Booth, brother of John Wilkes Booth and the greatest Shakespearean actor of his day. Such stellar names as Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Lynn Redgrave, and Morgan Freeman are written among the roster of Players. To this day, members include the rich and famous. Tough crowd.

*Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.*

O.T. pushed the first words out nervously, his voice wound tight.

*My name is O.T., and I'm a retired pickpocket.*

Pause.

*I did say "retired." If I wasn't, it'd be too late anyway.*

Laughter. He's got them right where he wants them.

O.T. is one of thousands of storytellers who, since the 1990s, have gotten up on stage and shared a story with no notes, no music, and no pyrotechnics, thanks to a



**Grand Slam** O.T. Powell (left) recounts his riveting tales to a sold-out crowd at a recent show in New York's Central Park. The audience goes wild (right) for Powell's story about making hooch in Attica prison.

in live performance. "There's no better feeling than when one of the stories comes together," Osborne says. "You walk off the stage, you hit a home run. There's nothing better than that."

The Moth didn't set out to transform lives when it got its start in Saint Simon's Island, Georgia, in the 1990s. Back then, novelist and poet George Dawes Green would gather with friends on a porch for nights of Jack Daniel's and recounting true tales. The only strangers were the dozen or so moths that snuck in through a hole in the screen. The group began referring to itself as the Moths.

In 1997, Green moved to New York City, and he was flummoxed. No one seemed to listen. Everyone was too busy waiting to jump in and speak. He decided to host an event in his living room, where one person got to be center stage while others sat quietly. He called it The Moth. Stories of the storytelling spread, and before long so many people attended the gathering that Green moved it to a neighborhood club.

Today, The Moth is funded by donations, grants, corporate sponsorship, and box-office sales. Now available on 240 public stations, The Moth Radio Hour received the 2010 Peabody Award for excellence in electronic media, and its companion podcast gets downloaded nearly 1.5 million times every month.

Then there are the live shows. At the most prominent ones, Moth

directors work with performers to shape their story before they go on to tell it. The tales are less polished at the monthly open-mic slams in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, and New York City. Lines for tickets (which start at \$8) begin forming nearly two hours before show time, as scales of nervous storyteller hopefuls and audience members arrive early, angling for a seat. Each slam has a theme—food, confusion, fireworks, money—and 10 names get drawn from a hat. Those selected tell a five-minute-long tale. Judges rate it, and the winner competes against other winners in subsequent Moth gatherings.

Storytelling seems, officially, to have become a trend. Similar series have cropped up across the country—Story Lab in Chicago and The Story Space in Boston; Los Angeles hosts a storytelling festival; next year the National Storytelling Network, an organization formed in 1998, will host

its biennial conference in Cincinnati. Each event offers a smorgasbord of true tales from people like O.T., the kind of characters you don't often get to meet, or, in some instances, *want* to meet. When you hear his story, you might think to yourself, *I would have crossed the street to avoid this guy.* This guy was a thief. A likeable one, but a thief nonetheless.

*Let me tell you how I got acquainted with this way of life. I'm from St. Louis, Missouri. I was about 15 years old. It was in the summer, around May or June. I was working at Ray's Pool Room. And these guys came in, there were about six of them, multicolored outfits, looked like human peacocks coming through the door. The cars matched their suits, and they had bankrolls big enough to choke a horse.*

*I had been confused about what I wanted to be in life, but when I see these guys I said, "Whatever they is, that's what I want to be."*



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DENISE OPELIAMANGEN

nonprofit outfit called The Moth. This year, 15 million people across the world will hear someone like O.T.—or more high-profile cultural figures such as Adam Gopnik, Padma Lakshmi, Ethan Hawke, Malcolm Gladwell, and Jonathan Franzen—participate in a Moth-branded podcast, public radio broadcast, or one of the 168 live performances taking place in four American cities.

Though the stories usually last less than 15 minutes, the spoils can be significant—past Moth storytellers have gone on to sign pub-

lishing deals, book off-Broadway shows, hold regular radio spots, and garner Hollywood interest. Take Steve Osborne, a brawny, tough-talking ex-policeman who spent 20 years with the NYPD. A Moth regular who tells cop stories in a thick New York accent, he has leveraged his storytelling chops into two screenplays, acted as a script consultant on TV shows and movies, and just closed a deal with a major network that will turn his tales into a weekly drama. But the best times are the times when he can tell his stories

*So as fate would have it, they stayed right around the corner from my mother. And so I made myself acquainted with them, and I became their errand boy. I would run to the store, I would get the food, I would take their car and get it washed, I would walk the dog and all this stuff. And in the process, I would get a few dollars, and I would learn how to cheat in cards, and I would learn how to cheat in dice.*

Then one day, he said, a group of women rolled into Ray's. They were bragging about lifting hundreds of dollars from people's pockets. Real

money, not the penny ante cash O.T. was earning from cards and dice.

*So I go to my tutor and said, "I want to be a pickpocket."*

Get yourself to New York, the man advised, sending O.T. off with a letter of introduction and a dose of age-old wisdom: "If you can make it there...." He packed his bags that night.

At this point in the telling of his story, O.T.'s fists were balled and his arms bent like those of a T-Rex. His audience was gripped, too. "The Moth and storytelling is human con-

nection at its most primal form," says Catherine Burns, an impassioned brunette who serves as The Moth's artistic director. She's speaking from her tidy office in a bustling area of Soho in Manhattan. "In the midst of this technological revolution, it's not surprising to me that people are looking to return to their roots."

Of course, she's right. We need stories to lure us out of our own heads and back into the lives of our family and friends. We want more than a status update about a breakfast cereal or someone's

child's potty-training escapades. We crave more than a "like" on Facebook or a retweeted Tweet. Storytelling is to entertainment as the slow food movement is to dining—it's fresh and it's local. "At The Moth, you feel like you're sitting at a campfire and connecting with one person," says Burns.

A recent Princeton University study shows the connection to be

more than metaphorical. If all goes well with a story, the study found, the storyteller and the listeners' brains are actually in sync. In 2010, researchers Greg J. Stephens, Lauren J. Silbert, and Uri Hasson peered at the brains of a storyteller and a 12-person audience with the help of functional magnetic resonance imaging. The storyteller shared an unrehearsed

### short stories

## A STORY'S SECRET INGREDIENT

Want to turn simple news into a gripping yarn? Look for attractive opposites. **BY JAY HEINRICHS**

If you ever tried to create telephones out of tin cans, you can understand the theory of tension in communication. The concept is simple: attach a string to two cans, pull tight, talk. The tighter you hold the string, the more the sound carries. Theoretically. It never seemed to work for my little brother and me. Fortunately, creative tension works better. Learn how to use it, and your story can progress from news recital to spellbinding tale. Here's an example:

Several years ago, my mother-in-law, Anna Jane, developed congestive heart failure. The prognosis was grim, and Anna Jane didn't want the doctors to take extraordinary measures. A strong-willed woman who liked to do the right things at the right moments, she figured it was time to join her beloved husband, who had passed on a couple years before. As her condition worsened, Anna Jane's four grown children gathered at her bedside and sang hymns all night.<sup>1</sup>

Around 3 o'clock in the morning, Anna Jane lifted a weak finger and pointed to the can of Coke on a table across the room. "Sip o' that?" she whispered. So they propped her up and gave her a drink. She downed half the Coke, despite an oxymoronic nurse's protest that caffeine was bad for the dying woman. Three hours later Anna Jane was sitting up on her own; two days after that she checked out of the hospital, furious that she had failed to die on schedule. It took her a couple years before she finally joined her husband.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the doctors couldn't save her, but a Coke could.<sup>3</sup>

**1. Create tension between what you deliver and what your audience expects.** While you might find the scene moving, the tension is built around whether Anna Jane actually died that night. (She didn't, or I wouldn't be telling the story.)

**2. Base the story's theme on attractive opposites.** The greatest tension can come from a theme with two elements that don't ordinarily go together. This simple trope—helpless doctors, salubrious soda pop—makes the story. The tension adds humor and becomes the tale's climactic moment as well as its central point.

**3. Write a one-liner.** Besides helping to focus your story, the sales-style one-liner can also help you with a graceful ending. Have you ever started telling a terrific story only to have it peter out? A well-rendered, paradoxical tag line can fix that problem by summarizing the story or serving up the theme as a moral. Nice ending.

*Jay Heinrichs is Spirit's editorial director. His latest book is Word Hero: A Fiendishly Clever Guide to Crafting the Lines that Get Laughs, Go Viral, and Live Forever.*

dramatic memory about going to prom as a freshman. The scans showed that the same areas of the brain, in both the storyteller and the listeners, were stimulated at the same points in a story. Storytelling, it turns out, unites us on a biological level. Understanding one another connects us, literally, as human beings. Even better, it can connect us to ourselves.

## *Even before he started picking pockets, O.T. fast-talked people out of their cash using tactics straight out of ‘Paper Moon.’*

In 2003, O.T. wasn't sure what to do with himself. He had bottomed out. Too shaky from drugs and alcohol to earn or even steal a living, he had nowhere to go;

he'd been estranged from his family in St. Louis since his teens. So he checked into a homeless shelter and rehab center on Manhattan's Lower East Side and began attending recovery meetings. Those meetings gave him a chance to tell his story again and again to other residents. He says it served as a kind of therapy.

One day, a staffer at the shelter told him that a Moth storytelling coach would be coming in to work with residents. The goal of the MothShop Community Program is to bring out storytellers who wouldn't ordinarily find an outlet to share the personal tales—or to find *The Moth*. “O.T. would have probably never walked into the Players Club or The Cooper Union to see a show,” says Burns, the artistic director. “It was a selfish motive, in that we were trying to find the real stories of New York.”

They hit the jackpot with O.T.; that first workshop led straight to his gig, a few months later, at the Player's Club. “It seemed at the time like a risk, but it was one of the greatest shows in Moth history,” says Burns. “And O.T. kind of stole the show.”

At the same time, MothShop organizers say that the 10-week workshop often has a profound effect on its participants. Each week, the classes encourage ex-felons, homeless men and women, and struggling teens to examine their lives and learn from the past. “The process of putting your life in order with a beginning, middle, and end forces you to see cause and effect,” says Burns. “And it can actually be empowering to see that you do have more control over your life than you think.”

O.T. wasn't thinking so much about putting his past in order. He was thinking about how to escape it. Storytelling might distract him from the compulsion to drink. So he signed up, along with other shelter residents. "It helped me to get rid of the demons," he says.

Besides, he was already overflowing with stories. O.T. was more than a pickpocket. He was

*A good pickpocket insinuates himself into a crowd, makes himself trustworthy.*

*A good storyteller does the same.*

also a confidence man, and he had the credentials to go with the title. As a self-described master of the con, which, he says, "is just telling a story," he insinuates himself into

a scene, gaining the audience's trust, getting people to give him something for nothing.

Even before he started picking pockets, O.T. fast-talked people out of their cash using an array of tactics straight out of the classic 1973 film *Paper Moon*. He'd hit all the major sports events—the Super Bowl, the Kentucky Derby, boxing matches—anywhere that his marks would have pockets full of cash. Sometimes he'd flat-out play people for suckers by cooking up some story about making fast cash. Flashing his own roll of dough (strips of newspaper book-ended by a couple of real bills), O.T. would convince total strangers to hand over hundreds of dollars on the promise that he would return in a couple of hours with their money multiplied. Usually, only the greedy fell for his cons. If O.T. could see "larceny" in their eyes, he knew the game was on.

The scamming didn't stop there. A talented pickpocket insinuates himself into a crowd, makes himself trustworthy, or just loses himself in the setting. He uses finesse and sleight of hand. A good storyteller does the same thing. He can lead you so deeply into a story you forget you're being led.

*I get to New York, and I check into the Howard Johnson's at Eighth Avenue and 52nd Street. The gypsy place is about three blocks down the street; this little storefront with two ladies in the front reading palms and all this... I go in and say I'm looking for Ralphie. Ralphie comes out and I give him the letter. I give him the \$500 [tuition].*

*He takes me in the back and all you can see is mannequins, everywhere.*

*Mannequins with coats on, mannequins with no coats on. Mannequins with pocketbooks and mannequins with just pockets. He introduces me to this guy called the Fat Man, and the Fat Man was to be my teacher, right? So the Fat Man comes out and says, "You're a pickpocket?"*

*I said yeah.*

*He said, "Let me see what you can do."*

*So all these pocketbooks and all these wallets, you know those bells you can put on baby booties? Well, everything has a bell on it: the wallets, the pocketbooks. If you pick something and the bell rings it means you're caught. So I'm going through this crowd picking the wallets and picking the pocketbooks and bells ringing ... ding ding ding ding.*

*"You're not a pickpocket," the Fat Man said. "We better start from the beginning."*

*He was graceful. He would go through a crowd of mannequins, smooth as a panther. He would go on the balls of his feet like a ballet dancer.*

*"He would go through a crowd of mannequins, smooth as a panther," O.T. recalls. "He would go on the balls of his feet like a ballet dancer."*

*And he would go through and wouldn't a bell ring and he'd come out on the other end of the crowd with six or seven wallets. I said, "That's what I want to be like. I'm going to be just like that."*

He spent three months practicing from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m., every day but Sunday, getting his wrist slapped every now and then by the Fat Man. "Gently, boy, gently, like a pianist," the Fat Man told him.

Right after he "graduated" from pickpocket school, O.T. headed to Grand Central Station. He stayed for several weeks until he "got hot"—until the police started watching him. So he moved uptown to 57th and Third, working the bus stops and the buses themselves.

*One day I'm on the bus and it's crowded. And as I'm going through the crowd I hit this old lady—she got on pearls and beautiful diamond earrings, so I hit Mom and get her wallet, close the bag, and when you close the bag you gotta cough—AHEM—and make sure she don't hear the sound. So I close that bag and hit this guy's inside pocket. I spin around and hit this other guy's back pocket. So I'm coming through and out of the corner of my eye I see these police lights. Then the bus driver starts pulling over to the curb where there ain't no bus sign at. I look out of the corner of my eye again. Here comes a guy with a crew cut—I know he's five-0. He's trying to get through the crowd to get toward me.*

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The audience was deadly quiet, hanging onto the story—which suddenly shifted in tone.

*So as he's pushing toward me, I'm putting back wallets—POP-POP-POP—putting all the wallets back.*

*By the time I get to the front door and the sergeant gets on, he says, "Grab him!"*

*"Got him, Sarge. We've got him!"*

*And the sergeant grabs me, I say, "I didn't do anything!"*

*"Search him!"*

*"He don't have no wallets on him. I thought you said he had wallets!"*

*He said, "I'm telling you I've been watching him."*

Next the police officer asked the woman to check her purse, and

there she found her wallet. He went to the two other victims, who both produced their wallets. Exasperated and furious, the cops told O.T. to get off the bus.

*And I go around the corner and by the time I get around the corner I kind of speed up my walk, and I look up and I start laughing. "Well, Big Man, you might have taught me how to get it out of pockets, but you sure as hell didn't teach me how to put it back."*

He recalled the Fat Man's advice:

*If there is just three wallets in the world, and the president has one and the pope has one, make sure you have the third one.*

And, though he technically didn't end up with any wallets, the audience was convinced: all in all, O.T. *did* end up with that third one.

After the show, one audience member after another slapped him on the back, congratulated him, and asked him if he does standup. The Moth gave him \$50—one of the few above-board payouts he'd ever received. He got invited back again and again to share his story. He told it at a nursing home and shared it during a conference of attorneys. ("My father always wanted me to be a lawyer," he told the crowd. "Many years later, I asked him why. He said, 'Son, if you can be a lawyer, you can get paid whether you win or you lose.'") He went on a two-week Moth tour that took him through Denver, San Francisco, and Seattle. He told a story about being on a chain gang in a prison in Arkansas, another about making bootleg alcohol in New York's Attica Correctional Facility. But the audience favorite is his original story about pickpocket school and returning wallets.

"Why do people love it?" he asks. "Because it's different from other

Moth stories; because you have someone that's a pickpocket. I'm a real criminal—that's the bottom line."

*I'm a criminal.* The present tense keeps his past alive, swagger and all, and, in O.T.'s mind, turns his life into something more than arrests and drugs and loneliness.

Now 64, O.T. lives in an efficiency apartment in East Harlem, a

## *For O.T., storytelling started out as a way to save himself from himself. Now, it's his way of giving back to the community.*

home the shelter helped him find in 2004. In his tiny, spotless space, medications surround the television set. Photos and clippings fill a cork board on the wall between

his bathroom and his bedroom, press about his Moth appearances: photos of him in the "society" pages of a magazine while on the road with The Moth; photos of his many onstage appearances; photos of friends at the shelter. "I donate to Feed the Children," he says, pointing to another snapshot. "These are African kids who they send pictures of."

O.T. sits in an overstuffed chair and watches a VHS tape of a televised performance he did of one of his pickpocket stories. He laughs when the crowd laughs, and he mouths his own words like a stage dad might. His whole life revolves around storytelling now. He attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and shares his story. He attends Narcotics Anonymous meetings and shares his story. He's working on an autobiography that he hopes to sell one day, but the manuscript is taking longer than he expected. Writing, he says, is more difficult for him than talking.

O.T. recently became a deacon at his church, where he shares his experiences with drugs, alcohol, and crime and tries to lead people down a healthier path than the one he took. His pastor, the Reverend Leamon Morgan, of the Holy Ghost Deliverance Church on Manhattan's Lower East Side, says that O.T.'s history has made him even more valuable to church members. "There's a lot of people now where he was," says Morgan. "He can tell them how he's changed his life and helped change a lot of people's lives."

For O.T., storytelling began as a way to save himself from himself. Now, it's his way of giving

back. On a table below the bulletin board are more press clippings—stories on the subject of pickpocketing. In 2010, he did an interview with *The Daily News* in which he gave pointers on how to avoid being a pickpocket victim. Around the same time, a local news station interviewed him about schooling women on how to protect their belongings.

O.T. says it's his way of trying to make up for the crimes he perpetrated. "When I think back on it, it was because of us that there were people who couldn't pay their mortgage or their rent or their car note or whatever the case may be," he says quietly. "And if I claim to have turned my life around—*truly* turned it around—then I should be willing to make some sort of repentance."

Not surprisingly, O.T. has been banished from the community of hustler that once constituted for him a family of sorts. While many of his old friends have died or gone to prison, the rest won't talk to him. "I've been kind of eight-balled," he says. "They don't particularly care about me for exposing the game."

While there's no doubt he has changed from his con-game days, you can still see the hustle. Like when he asks this reporter if he'll get paid for sharing his story. (He will not.) Or when he frequently, laughingly recalls something a fellow pickpocket once said to him: "We came up together, stealing people's money, now you're telling them how we did it—and you're *still* getting paid?"

*Kate Silver is a writer (aka storyteller) in Chicago. Her story for this magazine's June 2010 issue, "How Mya Saved Jacob," about a veteran with PTSD and his service dog, won the 2010 Best Profile award from the American Society of Journalists and Authors.*