



Cole's Notes

a short story

Melanie Robertson-King

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DEDICATION

For my husband, Don, whose support means more to me than he'll ever know.

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Cole's Notes

Cole pulled the heavy, oak door closed behind him. Gunmetal grey clouds gathered in the sky. A storm approached. An icy blast picked up the fallen, dried leaves and swirled them into the air. Not yet the middle of October, but the weather had been unseasonably cold this autumn. The hot, dry summer now a distant memory.

After he put up the hood of the fleece he wore beneath his worn, bomber jacket, Cole cupped his hands and blew to warm them. After, he zipped up his coat, shoved his fists into his front jeans pockets, and jogged down the steps.

At the intersection of Union Street and Bon Accord Terrace, the damp wind from the North Sea hit him like he walked into a granite wall. The tall buildings concentrated the gale and he pressed through the headwind. Would the storm hold off until he reached Starbucks? To beat the fast moving inclement weather, he quickened his pace.

A few steps short of his destination, the skies opened and the deluge began. Beneath the sheltered entrance, Cole yanked his wet hood down and shook his jacket, sending out a spray of droplets.

The queue formed in front of the counter and snaked through the shelving units. The narrow corridor between displays stocked with bags of coffee, ground and beans, mugs and travel cups, made him claustrophobic and he fidgeted while he waited his turn. Sweat gathered around his collar. At least the stools near the entrance remained vacant. The one at the end on the right he considered 'his'. A cold trickle ran down his back as he counted the people ahead of him. No one could sit in his place.

"First, please," the female clerk announced.

Not realizing she meant him, he twisted from one side to the other, and shuffled to the service desk.

"Your usual, Cole?"

Embarrassed, he cast his eyes towards his scruffy shoes and nodded. Jeannie was attractive and friendly. Sometimes if she had a moment when she wiped off the bar at the large, plate glass where he always sat, she spoke to him. His shyness prevented him from saying much in response, other than please, thank you and keep the change.

"Go get your place by the window and I'll bring your drink over."

Only one seat remained along the high counter-his favorite one. "Th-thank you." He turned, mumbled and walked away.

A few minutes later, Jeannie placed his steaming hot, latte in front of him. "Enjoy, Cole."

Her big, blue eyes sparkled like the sun on the North Sea. Her teeth were perfectly straight and white. Save for a single dark mole high on her cheekbone about an inch below her right eye, she had a flawless complexion. The beauty mark gave her an air of mystery and glamour. Still, she complained to co-workers and female customers about having surgery to remove the blemish. The discolouration made her unique.

If only he could work up the nerve to ask her out on a date so he could see the full length of her tresses. Unable to imagine her appearance with her hair falling around her face and possibly past her shoulders, he thanked her for the service.

After Jeannie left, Cole removed his grotty, black leather bound notebook from his inside breast pocket. The moleskin fell open to the page marked by a shabby, blue silk ribbon. People walked by the coffee shop, some carried umbrellas, others sheltered themselves from the rain under their briefcases or newspapers.

Next, Cole pulled out his Bic pens-red, black, and blue-and lined them up in precise military fashion on the worktop. After some deliberation, he chose the blue one, removed the cap, stuck it on the plug end, and chewed before putting pen to paper. Soon the ink flowed, and he worked furiously pausing briefly to sip his latte.

While she cleared away plates, mugs, and napkins from the vacancies left from the other customers along the counter, Jeannie asked, "What are you writing?"

Cole slammed his journal closed. The book belonged to him. For his eyes and no one else's. Only he could read the words on those pages. "N-nothing."

"You can tell me," she said as she slid on the stool next to him. "I won't tell anyone."

"No." He jammed the top back on his pen, and stuffed his belongings inside his jacket before he pushed his way past her and out the door.

A week passed since Cole's last drop in and his absence made Jeannie worry. Never had he been gone this long between his regular visits. A family visit elsewhere? Worst case scenario home sick with a cold or the flu.

Each time the door opened, she hoped to see him in the entrance. Every time someone else came in disappointment washed over her.

After closing one night when they cleaned up, her co-worker, Rick, discovered something. "Jeannie, come here."

"What did you find?"

"Doesn't this belong to your 'boyfriend', Cole?" He held a leather-bound book up in his hands. Some of the pages were beginning to fall out.

"Give me that!"

He lifted the folio higher. "What a weirdo. More than the rest of us, you should know that," he taunted, waving the object in front of her beyond her reach.

Yelling in protest, she lunged towards him, and dislodged the jotter. The book landed on the tiles and Jeannie scrambled for it. "Now back off. What's written in here is none of anyone's business. I'll drop by Cole's place on my way home," she said as she shoved the loose pages back inside.

"How do you know where he lives?"

"I'll find out." She stuffed the notebook into her apron pocket.

Later in the afternoon while on break, Jeannie pulled the worn possession out and turned it over in her hands. Beyond repair. What remained of the leather cover was brittle and cracked, so she handled the fragile item with care.

The last time she saw Cole, he fled from the coffee shop panicked because of her question. Certain he returned the moleskin to his pocket, and surprised Rick found it near his stool disturbed her. The contents were personal, but she wanted to open the diary and see why the man had been so secretive.

Did he drop the cherished object on the floor? She would have chased after him if she noticed. Should she peek inside the front cover? The information she needed to take back the property might be written there. If she found his address, she would stop her search and return his diary after her shift ended. Otherwise, she would keep the prized possession in her gigantic handbag until Cole returned.

After some serious thought, she opened the book. Nothing to identify him written in either location, but there in pen and ink, a sketch he drew of her, hair down, stared back from the pages. Descriptive text about her surrounded the image. Jeannie - kind, beautiful, friendly were a few recorded. Now intrigued, she turned the page.

Some of the sketches she recognized as people who frequented the coffee shop and snickered at the words chosen to for them.

Cole immortalized Rick between the worn covers, too. Unable to suppress her laughter at what he thought of her co-worker, she giggled. Pompous and arsewipe were her favourite adjectives.

Another sheet turned and Jeannie regretted her action. The person portrayed was a stranger to her, but labelled 'Mother'. The word choice shocked her... 'bitch, dark places, locked up, men, hooker, slut, hate you.'

All she wanted was to locate the information needed to return it, but didn't find a name, address or telephone number. Curiosity piqued by the drawings and descriptions before her, Jeannie continued.

"Thought you weren't going to look inside?" Rick sneered.

Startled by his voice, she slammed the notebook shut and shoved it back into her apron pocket. "Only looking for his address. Hoped he would have written something down near the front."

At the end of her shift, she placed it in her huge handbag and went home to her flat. Murphy, her ginger and white cat greeted her with a hiss and a swat to her leg.

When she tossed her purse on the small dinette table, a resounding thud echoed through the compact space. Once in the kitchen, she opened her fridge, and peered in. An open bottle of Riesling stood in the lower shelf in the door. Pulling the wine out by the neck, she pushed the door shut with her hip and turned to get a goblet from the rack affixed to her upper cabinets.

Seated at the table, she poured herself a glass, took a sip, and worried about Cole. A watch could be set by him and his predictability. Every day, the same time, the same latte, the same stool by the window. Yes, he was a bit odd but there had been customers come into Starbucks far stranger than he.

Jeannie pulled the notebook out and put it in front of her. With the palm of her hand, she rubbed the surface. In places the jacket was worn so thin, the paper backing on the inside showed through.

Opening it to the location marked by the ribbon, revealed another sketch of her but without her beauty mark. Out of habit, she reached up and touched her face. ‘must keep mole, glamorous, beautiful, not Jeannie without it’ surrounded the picture.

Until now, she didn’t realize he had such a strong opinion about her having the blemish removed and it scared her.

Was Cole some kind of control freak? Would he hurt her if she went ahead with the surgical procedure?

The words on the page made her feel dirty and cheap so Jeannie slapped the cover shut and pushed the book away. Bottle and her glass in hand, she checked the deadbolt and hooked the chain, headed for the bathroom, and secured the door behind her, too. Soon the tub was filling with hot, steamy water. A few drops of Green Apple bath and shower gel formed a sea of bubbles and floated on the rising water; the room fragrant with the fresh scent. Jeannie flipped the switch on her heated towel bar.

Whilst she waited for the water to reach the desired level, she moved her caddy towards the taps, topped up her wine glass, and placed the goblet in the specially designed holder.

Once stripped down, she climbed in, turned off the faucet, and dipped below the bubbles.

Immersed in the hot, soapy water Jeannie let her mind wander. Perhaps she worried too much about the mole on her face. It was tiny, smooth, dark and been there for as long as she remembered. No appointment was made for the procedure. Maybe she wouldn’t bother.

Her thoughts returned to the place in Cole’s diary where he had described his mother in such an unflattering way. She took a sip of wine and sank back under the surface wishing she turned up the heat in the room before getting into the bath.

Loud banging on her apartment door startled her. Jeannie leapt out of the water, almost knocking the caddy and glass flying. There was no time to grab one of her warmed towels so she yanked on her long, pink, fleece dressing gown.

When she reached the door, she still struggled with the tie belt.

Her cordless phone was in the base so she grabbed the handset. On the other side of the peephole, Rick stood in the corridor. What was he doing at her home at this time of night? “What’s going on?” she asked when she pulled the door open a crack with the chain still on the latch.

“Can we come in? It’s important.”

“We?”

“Yes. Let’s not stand here all night debating this.”

Jeannie removed the shackle and opened the door the rest of the way to receive Rick and whoever was with him.

“This is Dr. Baird. She’s weirdo’s shrink.”

“Psychiatrist,” the well-groomed woman corrected.

“Wh-why are you here?”

“Can we sit down?” the doctor asked.

“Yes.” She escorted them to the table, picked up Cole’s notebook, and shoved it into her handbag. As she showed her guests a chair, she tossed the leather satchel on the peninsula counter.

“I came in to coffee shop looking for you.” The physician nodded towards her. “Cole missed his last two appointments which isn’t like him. One I could see due to illness but not both.”

“Wh-what does it have to do with me?”

“During our sessions, he always spoke of you. It was apparent, he thought you were an exceptional young woman.”

Jeannie blushed.

“You’re no doubt wondering why I insisted your friend bring me here.”

“The thought has crossed my mind.” She didn’t try to hide the sarcasm in her tone.

“There’s no easy way to tell you this. Cole is dead. His body was discovered in his flat earlier today. He’s been deceased for about a week. The police contacted me when they couldn’t find any next-of-kin information. My number was by his phone.”

Jeannie’s heart pounded so hard it hurt. The time span worked out right after she asked what he wrote in his book. Initial shock passed, she wailed, “This is all my fault. If I hadn’t sat down beside him and asked what he was doing...,”

“Cole was a disturbed young man. No one could have predicted he would do this, let alone when.”

The words were of little comfort. Now the sketch started to make sense.

“It’s only in the past year he has been living in his own lodgings. After he murdered his mother when he was twelve, he was sent to a borstal. From there, he moved to a rehabilitation unit. When I deemed he was no longer a danger to anyone, we procured an apartment for him.”

Overcome by nausea, Jeannie bolted for the bathroom, hand over her mouth. Dropping to her knees in front of the toilet and threw up again and again, retching until there was nothing left. Tears ran down her cheeks. Cole was a murderer.

Not close, but she considered him a friend. Was he? Had he been sizing her up to become his next victim?

When she picked herself up off the floor, she reached for the Listerine. The reflection in the mirror had dark mascara streaks down its face. Removing the cap from the bottle, she took in a mouthful and rinsed hoping to eliminate the bitter taste.

Devoid of emotion, she rejoined her guests and dropped on one of the hard dinette chairs.

Dr. Baird took an envelope out of her handbag and slid it across the table to Jeannie. “He wanted you to have this if anything ever happened to him.” The psychiatrist turned to him. “You’ll stay here with her. She’s too upset to be here alone. I’m sorry but I must go. I’ll be in touch with the funeral arrangements. Don’t bother getting up. I’ll let myself out.”

Jeannie followed the doctor's exit with her eyes. Her hand touched the envelope and she recoiled.

After the doctor left, she drew her knees up to her chest and planted her heels on the

chair, wrapped her arms around her legs and cried.

Rick tried to comfort her but he couldn't. "Let's get you into bed," he said and helped her up from her seat. A brotherly arm enveloped her shoulders. He walked her to her bedroom, and reached for the switch.

"Don't leave me, please, I don't want to be alone."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'll get a blanket and make myself comfortable on your sofa for the night."

Jeannie pointed to the closet and waited while he opened the bi-fold doors and pulled down a comforter from the upper shelf. She turned down her duvet and was about to untie her dressing gown when she realized she was naked under it. Instead, she climbed in with it on.

Rick stopped by her bed. "I'll switch the light out on my way to the lounge."

"No. Leave it on."

"Why don't I turn on a couple of these small lamps? They're not as harsh and you won't be in total darkness." He walked around the room switching on the other lights.

"Don't close the door, please."

He nodded, switched the overhead light off and went into the other room.

For hours, Jeannie lay and stared at the ceiling. The information passed on by the psychiatrist about Cole unfathomable.

Dr. Baird didn't say he killed himself but it sounded like he had.

What had she done that day in Starbucks to drive him to it? Wanting to see inside his notebook wasn't extreme, was it?

Eventually, she fell into a restless sleep.

The next morning, Jeannie was up before the sun rose. Rick stayed on the sofa, snoring in ignorant bliss of her torment. While she waited for the kettle to boil, she got a mug and the instant coffee from the cupboards and the milk from the fridge.

When he groaned from the lounge, she called out to him, "Coffee's up if you're interested."

When he threw the comforter off, he was clad only in his boxers and socks. His pants and shirt draped over the arm chair went unnoticed. To allow him a moment of privacy to get dressed, she turned away.

Jeannie sat down at the table. The letter remained where she left it the the previous night. The handwriting matched the style in Cole's journal and she picked it up and examined it.

The words 'To Jeannie at Starbucks... to be opened after my death' spooked her and she dropped it like it scalded her.

What was so important he couldn't tell her when he was alive?

“You not got into that yet?”

“N-no. I’m not sure I want to see what’s in it.”

“It’s got to be something vital I would think. Why else would he have left you a letter?”

“Don’t know.” She laid it down.

“Don’t be such a wuss. Open the damn thing.”

Jeannie picked up the envelope, walked the kitchen and tossed it into the wastebasket. “Can’t do it. Don’t want to do it.”

“You’re making a mistake. If that missive goes out in the rubbish, you’ll be kicking yourself in the bum from here to Sunday and back again.”

Unable to stop herself, she started to giggle. The words pompous and arse wipe from Cole’s notebook came to mind. She couldn’t look at Rick and not laugh.

It was a relief when he left for Starbucks. Alone in the flat, she could go through her normal morning routine. Cold coffee poured down the sink, she opened the cupboard door. The bin was still there but the letter was missing. Panic set in. Where did it go? Wheeling around, she found it on the peninsula work top.

This message would haunt her until she read it. Jeannie turned it over, stuck her thumb under a loose corner of the flap tore it open. She pulled the paper out of the wrapping and let the latter flutter to the floor. Carefully, she unfolded the sheet and began to read.

*My dearest friend,
Jeannie,*

If you’re reading this, then Dr. Baird has passed my letter on to you and you’ll know I’m dead. There are many things about me you will never comprehend. I don’t understand some of them either.

Did the doctor tell you I murdered my mother? That is true, I don’t deny it, but you deserve to know why. From the time I was a little lad, she was a prostitute. Quite often, she left me alone overnight while she went out and shagged blokes for money. Not to support me but her drug habit. Social services were always around. Every time they threatened to put me into care, she pleaded with them saying she would mend her ways and promise to be a good mum.

Her idea of that was bring her tricks back to our dingy flat. She locked me in the closet or the chest at the foot of her bed. I knew what she was doing. The men coming into the bedroom, grabbing at her and her clothes. I heard them shagging. Sometimes, those blokes would beat the crap out of her and steal what earnings and drugs she had.

What I did was wrong. In the beginning, I don’t think I meant to kill her. After I stuck the knife in her the first time, I couldn’t stop. They say I stabbed her over thirty times. Even after she died, I kept sticking the blade into her.

I think I killed her out of some misguided loyalty. If she was dead, she was off the drugs. The blokes couldn’t beat her almost to death. She got aids either from the dirty needles or from letting the johns do her bareback. Do you know what that means?

You were always kind to me, Jeannie. You never mocked me. Never tried to use my weaknesses against me. I couldn’t show you the notebook because I had drawn so many

pictures of you. I didn't want you to think I was some sort of freak or stalker. I know some of the people you worked with did. I would have been proud to step out with you on my arm. You're a beautiful, young woman. You must have many decent blokes queuing up to take you out. I would never have stood a chance.

Don't grieve for me. I've been dead inside, except when in your presence, for a long time. My topping myself was the final act. Remember, though, I appreciated the kindness and friendliness you always showed me. No matter if I'm in heaven or hell (and I don't particularly believe in either), I love you and always will. I wished I could have told you to your face.

Cole xo

After reading the letter he left for her, she leafed through his notebook from the first to the last page used. The sketches were amazing. His talent for capturing the essence of people, as well as their features, shone through each drawing.

The funeral came too soon for her liking. Jeannie didn't want to go but knew she had to. She persuaded Rick to go with her. Since the night she found out about Cole's death, he had been there for her.

Jeannie's hair fell loose on her shoulders. The way Cole sketched her many times.

Glad to have a friend with her, she stood bravely by the graveside with the psychiatrist and the few mourners who attended.

When it was over and the casket lowered, she leaned over the chamber and released his grotty, leather notebook into the grave.

A resounding smack on the wooden surface of the coffin echoed through the air. "Goodbye, Cole. Your notes will always be private now," she murmured, more emotional than she expected.

Her tribute to his life and what might have been was a long-stemmed red rose. She dropped it beside the journal. It landed silently beside the man's prized possession. She whispered, "I love you, too. I wish we could have told each other our feelings."

She turned away and sobbing, buried her face in Rick's chest.

Also by Melanie Robertson-King

A Shadow in the Past (currently under revision)
(4RV Publishing)

The Consequences Collection
Tim's Magic Christmas
The Secret of Hillcrest House
Shadows From Her Past
YESTERDAY TODAY ALWAYS
(King Park Press)

Forthcoming (also from King Park Press)
A Shadow in the Past (second edition)

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Melanie Robertson-King has always been a fan of the written word. Growing up as an only child, her face was almost always buried in a book from the time she could read. Her father was one of the thousands of Home Children sent to Canada through the auspices of The Orphan Homes of Scotland, and she has been fortunate to be able to visit her father's homeland many times and even met the Princess Royal (Princess Anne) at the orphanage where he was raised.