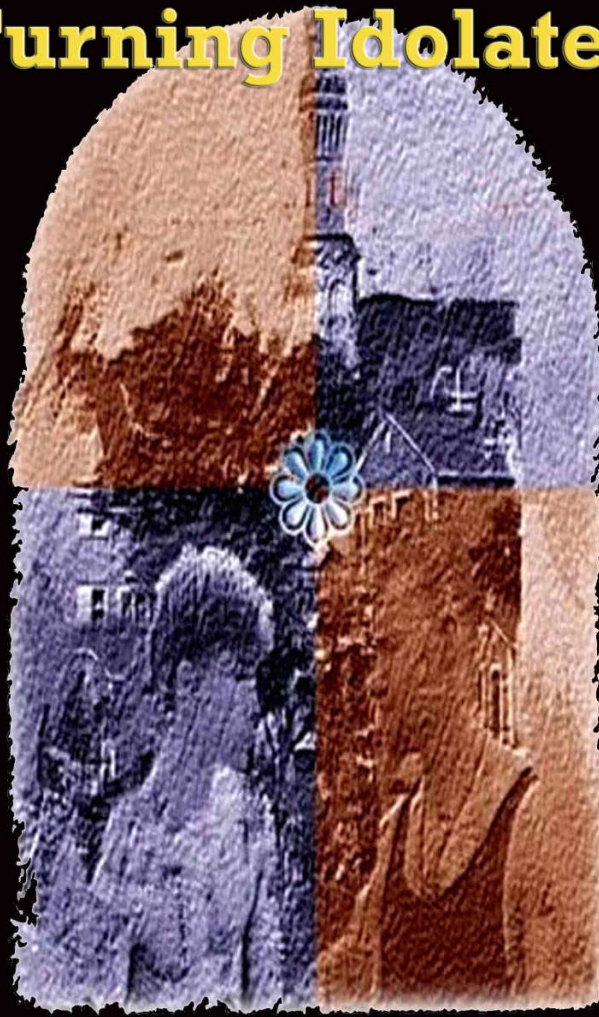


Turning Idolater



Edward C. Patterson

Sample Chapter

Turning Idolater
A Novel of the Internet Age

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Sample Chapter – Turning Idolater
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Chapter One

The Tools of the Trade

1

It was a small tub in a tiny bathroom, but it served Philip Flaxen well as he prepared. All craftsmen attend to the maintenance and condition of their tools. Chefs hone knives. Hacks change cab-oil on a schedule. Writers look to their quills; and painters care for their horsehairs and camels. Diggers sharpen pickaxes and none but a preacher can fill the fount with consecrated drink. Thus, it was with Philip Flaxen as he plunged his hands between his legs lathering the tool of his trade and, although changing the oil might be less scintillating, the honing of this particular tool gave Master Flaxen pleasure beyond measure.

The bubbles welled in massive peaks, like whip cream, almost eclipsing young Flaxen in a world of cleanser as he finished off. Nevertheless, his emerging better nature prevailed. Wineglass in one hand, he reached for a book with the other, his deep, black eyes intent on the words, not tools now, unless these were considered some additional craftsman's artifact. Here in the pages was a new world, as foamy as his tub; he was under the prow of the Pequod as it ported its master in pursuit of the Great White Whale. The words may have been from a shelf above Philip's normal mantel, as he had never finished high school, and in fact never pursued any white whale of education — not even a white elephant of a diploma, but this book was magic to his eyes. The words may not have had keen meaning, but they had rhythm — the beat of the waves; and aroma — the smell of the sea. The pages dripped with foam and he turned them like a capstan, weighing anchor. The margins puckered beneath his pruning fingers, but he didn't care nor did he wonder. He was tripping beyond the bubble bath, out on old Nantucket wharves. Therefore, when the alarm clock buzzed, reeling him to shore, he flinched. The wineglass tipped turning the suds burgundy and the book nearly swam back to sea. However, Philip caught it before the plunge, diverting it to dry-dock, in this case, a mat on the bathroom floor.

Philip rolled his eyes. He had an evening ahead. It wasn't difficult work. It didn't require a Master's degree to sit at a computer and wait for requests from an invisible audience. He wished that Sprakie was better heeled. They could have rigged up one of them home cams so he wouldn't have to haul his ass across town to manluv.org. Hell, some of those set-ups could have made the tub his workplace. However, he couldn't be so particular. Manhattan rents were exorbitant and he was living in Sprakie's place not by royal decree, but by near-charity. He did pay his share, or near it, but as long as he followed his roommate's rules, he could luxuriate in the bubbles, sleep on silk and keep his employment across town.

Philip sighed. He would have preferred to keep sailing in Nantucket. The words were tough, and he needed to read each passage twice, but he savored them like a fine corned beef on rye. He wished he could delve beneath the waves, because he knew there were deeper meanings swimming there, but there was hope. The man who had put him onto this book was a generous trick, an old gent who wanted nothing more than to stroke off before a live stripping twink. There were such freaky fetishes about, but Philip was over eighteen. Hell, he was twenty, almost old enough to drink. His roommate nagged him about such tricks — the old geezers who just wanted to recall their long lost days. Sprakie also warned Philip that a few went beyond harmless voyeurism. *Some might explode like a firecracker and cause you infinite harm, sweetie.* However, Philip didn't think that Sprakie, that is Robert Sprague, would follow his own admonition. Sprakie was the wildest *hoohoo* in Philip's acquaintance, and had proved to be a valuable guide into outrageous waters.

Philip hoisted himself from the tub careful not to drip bath water on the book. He didn't have

many books, at least ones with words only. He smiled at the binding as if it were a candy box with plenty of samples left. Standing before the steamed mirror, he dried off, keeping his own peerless figure in sight. *What that old geezer must have thought*, he mused. That was a pacific trick. The man was grateful both with money and a shower of grizzled kisses, which Philip could have done without, but as long as things didn't get too kinky, he supposed it was a kindness — like a charity visit to the old folks home. Then the man gave him — the book. *What's this?* Philip asked. *What's it look like?* chuckled the geezer. Philip opened it. It had an aroma about it like nothing he had touched before — electric and deep. His eyes scanned the illustration engraved on the page. A huge bump spouted water from its head and aimed at an old-fashioned ship. It was about something called Moby Dick and some guy named Herman Melville penned it. Both were beyond Philip's ken, but somehow, as the pages turned under his tidal hand, he was hooked — or harpooned, if you will. *Call me Ishmael?* Then the call to the planks and rigging.

Philip dried off and glanced at the clock. He had better get his ass in gear if he was going to be on time. He wrapped the towel around his toolbox and sought his flip-flops. It was a short trip through the common room (he could never come to call it a living room) to his own small cubby. The apartment was cluttered from necessity. The kitchen was a mere counter with a half refrigerator, two cabinets, a two-burner stove and a toaster. It barged into the common room, the only room with a full window and small enough to accommodate a couch and a chair. There was a Murphy bed in the closet for guests, and Philip had slept on it when he first moved in, but it was a pain in the ass to open, so he slept in a converted closet.

Sprakie's room once had a window, but the man of the house insisted on making the room wall-to-wall bed, of which the canopy and Arabian valance blocked any sunlight that could have managed an appearance through the barred window that lurked behind some plywood. Philip had to rattle through this bedroom to get to his small cubby. Small, but it was his. By real estate value, his six by six (if it were that) would fetch \$500 a month on a good day, but Sprakie let it go for \$250 and a third of the utilities. A bargain. The only drawback was when Sprakie entertained — that is, went on the clock. Philip would need to fade to the streets then.

What to wear? Not a huge variety in his clothes stack, which mushroomed in the corner laundry basket. Philip wondered if he had anything clean. The launderette on Avenue A was a pain in the ass to use — all those quarters and little boxes of soap, not to mention the stink. At one time he could flirt with the local hustlers there (it was a good pick up point), but lately the place was filled with haggard old Puerto Rican housewives and skuzzy, green haired Goth girls from the West Village. He reached for his favorite shirt — a turquoise silk affair that favored his curly shock of hair. He sniffed the armpit and choked.

"I have to get to the laundry this week," he muttered. "Shit."

He threw the towel aside, grabbed a reasonably clean jock strap and holstered his assets. His underwear was clean, because he was too exposed to the public to have otherwise, but his shirt was a problem. So he ventured into Sprakie's boudoir, to the dresser that slept under a tumble of oriental silks and aromatherapy candles. He poked about the top drawer — no shirts. The second drawer was more promising. He shook out a golden golf shirt. Nice. Sweet. Philip couldn't remember when Sprakie wore this. Still he slipped it over his head. It fit like a glove. Most of Sprakie's duds fit him, but Sprakie would have a fit when Philip borrowed his clothing. This was an emergency, after all. Wasn't it? No duds — no work. No work — no rent.

Philip strutted to the mirror, clearing away a pink feather boa.

"That's the ticket."

He shut the second drawer, but decided that perhaps the bottom drawer held an even better choice. His fingers poked around until it stroked a delightful, satin number. He pulled it out with a

snap, and as he did, something came flying from the back and across the floor, slipping under the bed.

“What the fuck,” he murmured. He reached under the bed, his fingers spidering over the traveling knick-knack. He winced. *What the fuck?* He snapped his hand back. In it was a gun. Not a two-fisted rootin’, tootin’ firearm, but a pearl-handled ladies’ pistol. At first, he thought it was a starter’s gun, but Sprakie wasn’t a runner. Philip sniffed it as if he could detect a firing.

“I better ask him about this.” Then he thought better. He shouldn’t be poking around in Sprakie’s dresser, even to purloin a shirt. The neighborhood was shitty, so he supposed Sprakie kept it for protection, and, in true Robert Sprague fashion, he would want a pearl-handled, purse size affair, something that was fashionable at a mugging — a pretty cap gun. Therefore, Philip shrugged, shoved the gun back into the bottom draw and covered it with the satin garment that no longer held his interest.

“Oh shit,” he said. “I’m going to be really late.”

He dove for his jeans, his wallet, and his easy-off loafers and prepared to emerge from this fifteen-hundred dollar per month rabbit warren. He stuffed the book in his backpack, hit his pocket for change, checked for his Metro Card and scooted through the door into the ratty old hallway. Locking the door and securing the bolts, he scurried past the solemn portal of the old lady next door. He felt her eyes through the peephole as she always monitored the hall’s comings and goings. Philip flipped her the finger as he descended the stairs, down three flights, and then over the broken tiles into the foul, urine soaked vestibule. That stink always matched the first breath wafting in from Avenue A. Philip just closed his eyes and imagined the Nantucket wharves, which transformed the slum into a harbor — the tenements into tall-ships. *No wonder Sprakie had a gun in this shit-hole. Shouldn’t everyone? Wouldn’t Ahab?*

2

His watch stopped. Battery needed changing. Philip had to rely on the street signage and the charity of others for the time. The digital displays increased as he trotted through Greenwich Village, and a good thing, because the charity of others was scant. In any event, by the time he reached the Subway, he was already a half hour late. He debated the issue at hand — subway or bus. They both would get him to Times Square, and a bus was waiting, but he feared the evening rush hour traffic. Therefore, he whipped out his Metro Card and plunged into the abyss taking the stairs two at a time, not that it would matter if there were no trains in the station.

The West 4th Street station was always a busy stop, and at evening rush hour, it was a monster — hot, humid and redolent of foot odor. Most travelers were heading home — tired and weary from a day of rasping bosses, heavy pushcarts, lousy customers and a host of information age combustion. Philip plowed his way through the crowd, swiped the turnstile and prayed for a short wait. The uptown platform was as thickly lined with commuters as the downtown one was, but somehow Philip knew that there would be three downtown trains to every uptown one, but it was better than getting stuck in traffic.

He leaned over the track hoping to feel the hot blast of an approaching train. The air was still — noisy, but still. The downtown train had screeched into the station, its doorbells tinkling and its computerized voice singing West 4th – *Watch your step.*

C’mon, he thought, moving back to the station wall. He considered the line of crap that Sprakie would hand him for being late. That would be amplified when Sprakie beheld the golden golf shirt. Philip chuckled. He wasn’t afraid of Robert Sprague, but a Sprakie hissy fit could mean missing a meal or even being locked out for the night. However, the streets held no fear for Philip . . . anymore. As he bounced his backpack off the wall, he noticed a young thing sprawled on the bench — a

student, perhaps — N.Y.U., or at least from the way he consumed his book, Philip thought it must be. In his slouch, the student brushed the sweat from his curly brown hair. His black rimmed glasses made him appear scholarly. Philip imagined that this guy wasn't really reading his book, but was using it as a ploy to gaze at the surrounding travelers. Every so often, he'd peep askance and then dart his eyes back to the page. Philip wasn't impressed. In fact, he considered whipping out his own book as a springboard. My book's bigger than your book. However, the subway was a crappy place to read a precious work with golden binding and clean white pages. After the near miss in the tub, Philip didn't want to chance a drop into station crud.

Yes, Philip thought. *This guy's cruisin' me.* It wasn't his imagination. He knew the call of the wild, and since he had the tools of the trade in evidence, there might be a chance that he could be fed later. Supper was always the short meal. There were usually not enough fixings in the half fridge to constitute a meal. Breakfast was cereal and perhaps an egg. Lunch was some toast, or if the spirit moved, peanut butter and jelly, but supper was always up for grabs. If he was lucky and there was a cash spike at work, he could get a hamburger, but supper was sometimes an every-other-day affair. Sprakie sometimes treated, and of course, if this young college student was interested, he might buy Philip a full course meal as prelude to an evening of passion. So, Philip winked.

The hurricane of the uptown train blew over the platform. Philip would need to finalize the deal in transit. The passengers jockeyed for seats and poles and overhead bars. There was an almighty crunch, but Philip was a master. He managed to pin himself and the edge of his ass against the college student, who smiled an apology and tried to juggle while reading his book.

Watch the closing doors, came the mechanical voice, followed by three chimes. The train chugged uptown.

Philip used every contour of motion to press himself against the student, who grinned a knowing grin. He knew what was apace. Hadn't he started it? Philip shrugged, but returned the smile — one that irradiated the car. Even the Pakistani lady, who stepped on his foot, returned that smile as if she was the target of his attention.

Timing was an issue. When they reached 23rd Street, Philip twisted his head over the student's book.

"Anything good?"

"Quantum physics."

Quantum physics? Give me a break. You're reading quantum physics in a speeding uptown train pressed between the sweaty masses? "Interesting," Philip smiled again. "N.Y.U.?"

"Yes. Engineering."

"Good," Philip said. "You can drive the train then."

The student chuckled. "I don't think anyone's driving this train."

34th Street. The Pakistani lady moved away rushing for a seat. A wave of passengers surged out, while a third as many shoved in. Philip almost fell. Not really. It was a surefire maneuver. The student caught him.

"Thanks. My stop's next."

"Oh," said the student. He frowned. He fumbled around his jacket pocket. He managed to grab an index card, and then grappled for a marker. Philip was ready on the spot. He always kept a marker near at hand in the outer slip of his backpack. He whipped it out with rapier speed.

"Thanks," said the student, who closed the book using it as a slipshod desk. He scrawled a shaky note, and then returned the pen. He slipped the card into Philip's pocket and smiled. While down there, he groped and Philip was already trying to decide whether he would have the prime beef or the swordfish.

Times Square. Watch your step.

“Bye now,” Philip said, mission accomplished.

“Later . . . but if not tonight . . .”

Philip tapped the side of his nose and went with the flow onto the platform. The doorbell bonged three times.

Watch the closing doors.

Philip turned and saw the soft eyes of the student. He wasn’t reading now, or at least not Quantum Physics. He was now studying a different course of engineering and Philip Flaxen was masterful at steering this craft ashore — as masterful as Ahab on his poop.

3

Philip waited until the train was sucked further uptown before he peeked at the index card. It was a courtesy to ignore the machinations of the deal until the interested parties were quite out of range again.

Dennis H.
212.432.2272
nice

Philip hummed, and then trotted along the platform to the stairs. He had forgotten just how late he was going to be. Funny thing about being late. After the first half-hour, it might as well be two hours. The consequences would be the same. However, his colleagues — his fellow craftsmen, were all on the clock, neatly scheduled and posted on the Internet at anticipated hours. The regular customers would be thoroughly pissed if they saw that the Flaxen One was due for display at 6:00 PM and wasn’t unveiled until 7:00 PM. It also meant a pile-up, and a drop in tips. Someone else would sponge in Philip’s tip bowl, and that meant another hungry night, or shortfall in carfare and a long walk. Philip hastened the pace.

It was hard to rush in the rush. When he popped out of the subway beneath the neon godlessness of Times Square, he tried to jaywalk to avoid the bustle, but this meant dodging the taxis. Still, the wide expanse of 42nd Street as it swept westward from Broadway was his lifeblood. It was noisy, garish and fraught with every aroma from sausages to sewer exhaust. Still, the world exploded into a million colorful lights and unmitigated promotion. Pedestrians walked in buffalo clusters — a human herd against traffic and signals and caution, each destined for their own slot in this dizzy city of the eight million.

Philip rushed across 7th Avenue and, on the other side, the hustle was less. He drifted between parked cars and street vendors heading toward the crappier side of the island. He spotted a digital clock sign that told him he was later than he thought. This inspired him to a gallop. He began to sweat, and now worried about the borrowed shirt. Sprakie would have more than a fit if it had sweat rings — those ugly little armpit smiles. Suddenly, he spied a cop. He broke out into a walk. It was a natural, but unnecessary precaution. The policeman could care less about a slinky faggot running to his job, but Philip wouldn’t chance the law following him to his place of employment. It was legal . . . at least he thought it must be by now. However, the last two mayors had cracked down on the neighborhood, proscribing anything construed as obscene. Late, he would be. Trouble, he could accept it. However, he wasn’t about to invite the fuzz to the party and chance a fine or even an eviction. Even though his salary here was a trickle (mostly tips), it was better than the alternative, which he knew was illegal.

Clearing the cop’s sight line, Philip picked up the pace, and then darted down 49th Street. Between 9th and 10th Avenue, the street was lined with parking garages and warehouses. Three-

quarters down, between the Cross-Town Parking Center and Gutman's Furniture Storage was a doorway. It wasn't marked, except with a number 1456-A. Philip looked both ways, and then pressed a buzzer over the squawk box.

"Who?" came a voice over the box.

"Flaxen."

"You're late."

"Let me in."

Long pause. Philip banged the door, and then pressed the buzzer again. Finally, after another punitive pause, the door lock buzzed and Philip pushed his way into the foyer's darkness. He was in for it and he knew it.

End of Sample Chapter – Turning Idolater
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Come, Wewoka & Diary of Medicine Flower

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The Awakening
Catherine and Other Poems
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Gay October
Provincetown Poems
Songs: Not Just Survival
Plum Journey Visions



Author Edward C. Patterson has been writing novels, short fiction, poetry and drama his entire life, always seeking the emotional core of any story he tells. He has currently 30 published books. He is known for spinning magical and fantasy yarns grounded in history and favors epic tales revealed in books series. His flagship works are The Jade Owl Legacy Series, The Southern Swallow Series, The Farn Trilogy and the Nick Firestone Mysteries.

In many of Patterson's novels, he combines an imaginative touch with his life long devotion to China and its history, having earned an MA in Chinese History from Brooklyn College with further postgraduate work at Columbia University. This background is the cornerstone for The Jade Owl Legacy, The Southern Swallow Series and Master Wu's Bride, works drawing on Sung and Ming Dynasty History and Culture. History has played a major part in the coming of age tale Little Vin at Dreamland.

Patterson's military experience is reflected in such works as Surviving an American Gulag, The Road to Grafenwoehr and Pacific Crimson - Forget Me Not. His gay life-way and work in diversity is reflected in his novellas No Irish Need Apply, Cutting the Cheese, Bobby's Trace and Mother Asphodel; and in larger works - Turning Idolater and Look Away Silence.

A native of Brooklyn, NY, Patterson has spent over five decades as a soldier in the corporate world gaining insight into the human condition. He won the Year 2000 New Jersey Minority Achiever Award for his work in corporate diversity and is a proud U S Army Veteran of the Vietnam Era. Blending world travel experiences with a passion for story telling, Patterson's adventures continue as he works to permeate his reader's souls from an indelible wellspring.

His novel No Irish Need Apply was named Book of the Month for June 2009 by Booz Allen Hamilton's Diversity Reading Organization. His Novel The Jade Owl was a finalist for The 2009 Rainbow Awards.

Edward C. Patterson is the proud founder of Operation eBook Drop which, in its heyday, distributed over a million eBooks to deployed Armed Forces members from over 2,000 independent authors. He has guest blogged extensively and has appeared on the Bobby Ozuna - Soul of Humanity Show. He is also proud of his Cherokee heritage, knows seven languages (including Cherokee) and is a contributing member of the ACLU.

“The little voice from between the lines can become a lion's roar, one listener at a time.”

Contact author at edwpat@att.net — Feedback is always appreciated
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