

RICK PRYLL



a short story from upcoming novel  
**THE CHIMERA OF PRAGUE**

**NOT - P R O M**

# Not-Prom

*A Vignette*

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# Not-Prom

*A Vignette*

**Rick Pryll**

Foolishness Press

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## Preface

This story is part of a novel called *The Chimera of Prague*. The novel is scheduled to come out November 17, 2017. Pre-orders for the book are available now on Kickstarter. Follow the project for video updates on the story behind the story.

## Not-Prom

THE GREAT BLACK SWAMP WAS a glacially fed wetland in Northwest Ohio that existed from the end of the Wisconsin glaciation, which radically altered the geography north of the Ohio River, until the late 19th century. Comprising swamps and marshes with some higher ground interspersed, it occupied the southwestern part of proglacial Lake Maumee, a holocene precursor to Lake Erie. Drained and settled in the second half of the 19th century, it is now highly productive farmland. James B. Hill, a resident of Bowling Green, Ohio, invented the machine that would be used to drain the Black Swamp: the Buckeye Traction Ditcher. It laid drainage tiles as it dug ditches at a record pace.

July 13, 1855. Five men and two boys out fishing on Silver Lake in New York State encounter a 60-foot-long sea serpent, shiny dark green with yellow spots and glowing, red eyes. The story creates a frenzy, with about 100 other people claiming to have seen the giant beast. The phenomenon lasts throughout the summer.

A. B. Walker, the owner of the Walker Hotel in Silver Lake, was the main beneficiary of all the hubbub. When the hotel burned down in 1857, firemen discovered the remains of the legend: a large mass of canvas. He stole the idea from a Seneca legend which explained why tribesmen refused to fish the abundant lake. They feared a giant beast who lived at the bottom of the lake, and did not want to be disturbed.

On this night, May 21, 1988, Dani is a picture: a blue and yellow paisley, handkerchief hem, higher in the front,

lower in the back. Sweetheart neckline with a wide strap over both shoulders. A hidden zipper up the side, it is a mystery how she gets the dress on and off. A mystery that Joseph would like to solve. Her hair is braided, one loose french braid and she has arranged small clusters of baby's breath throughout. She looks like a garden fairy. Her shoes, the strappy gladiator sandals with two small gold buckles on ankles. She has great ankles, slender, muscular, and the shoes highlight her beauty.

She is carrying a Fendi clutch she bought on consignment in Orchard Park. She isn't sure it's authentic, and she isn't sure she cares.

Joseph wears the most delicious gray, wool blend trousers. In an effort to mimic the most recent Calvin Klein ad he wears a white undershirt beneath a white long sleeve dress shirt with the top button buttoned, daring Dani to bite it off. No tie. He's going for sexy casual. On his feet black canvas Chuck Taylor's - he thinks they are an ironic anachronism, when in fact they are the classic go-to shoe for those who want to make a statement of rebellion against a country club for upper middle class folk. He smells clean and fresh, a mix of Old Spice and laundry soap.

The country club at Silver Lake is member's only. There are boats in slips in the marina. Pontoon boats, a few boats for waterskiing. Blue and green canvas coverings. Dani gets them in the club because she is the nanny for the Altobelli's and she is on their "list". The country club is adjacent to an 18 hole, private course. Stone pillars by the entrance, with a trellis of trumpeter vine not quite leafed out. It has been a cold spring, and the

landscaping displays remnants of the Western NY winter. The tennis courts to the left have just been resurfaced an otherworldly shade of green. The wives of members are horrified by the color; they whisper snide remarks to one another about the new “green monster”.

The railings around the deck are painted white. They are strung with party lights. The deck is blocked off - a white tent has been setup and preparations are being laid on for a swanky wedding.

Joseph and Dani pull up in the Nissan mini-van, gun metal gray and barrel-shaped. Joseph jumps out of the car and runs around to the passenger side door to open it for Dani. She climbs out, the Queen of Time, Princess of Indecision. She looks at her reflection in the glass window, as Joseph goes to the side door of the van to retrieve his new camera. It's not new. It's a used camera he bought from a local hobbyist in Batavia. Joseph saved up his money to get the Olympus OM-1, a single lens reflex camera that he has read is the perfect camera for a budding enthusiast. He has already loaded the black and white 35mm film into the take-up spool, and is ready to shoot. The light is holding out, which is good; he didn't have enough for the automatic flash he would need otherwise.

Dani applies a fresh layer of clear lip gloss, peppermint. She recalls her horoscope for the day from the Buffalo Evening News: follow your path on a new adventure, and love will blossom. The two seem mutually exclusive at this point, but maybe she's not thinking about it the right way. She nods at her reflection, ready for her close-up.

Joseph figures he'll take one roll of 36 pictures. He'll develop the film himself back at school in the last few days of his senior year.

Dani stands, one hand on her hip, one hand held straight down displaying her clutch. Joseph gets a few full length shots, and he takes a couple of steps closer to get waist up. The white railing behind her, the boats in the slips beyond. Joseph has a couple of shots he can waste, so he tries a couple of different F-stops, to see which one will capture the golden light of the evening just right.

He chose the 400 ASA film, knowing that it would be flexible enough to give him some leeway if he didn't get the settings right. He dials the focus on the lens, and Dani, who's moving her head, lips and eyes in slow motion, comes out of a blur, and focuses before Joseph's right eye. The effect of looking at this young woman who he has known for almost two years through the lens is staggering. She looks like she could be one of Joseph's Guess? models hanging on his bedroom wall. The disc at the center of the viewfinder smooths out. Joseph clicks, and winds with his thumb. He checks the light meter in the bottom left of the viewfinder. It hovers between the plus and the minus. It floats.

Rather than walk back to the car, Joseph carries the camera in with him. He holds out the triangle of his elbow to Dani, she smiles, and takes it. They go in past the stone columns, past the trumpeter vine, and to the maitre'd podium. Dani announces her name, and the young man says, "Ah yes, guests of the Altobellis. Mr. Altobelli called ahead. Right this way. We have your table all set for you."

Windows all around, the tables are all set with white linen tablecloths. The ambience is light and airy, elegant, not stuffy. The maitre'd stops by a window table for two, and waves his hand across. He holds the chair for Dani. She places her clutch next to the spoons, and gasps.

"What's this?" Dani holds up a small card, with a D on it.

Joseph sets his camera on the table, and settles in. "I don't know, open it up." The maitre'd smiles a knowing smile. Joseph notices a card and a gift in front of himself as well, but decides to wait.

She tears it open and bites her lip. "It's from the Altobellis. It says, Have a little fun, would you please? Love, the Altobellis. That's Mr. Altobelli, he says that to me sometimes." Dani's eyes brim with tears.

"Open the gift - aren't you curious?" Joseph is amazed at the generosity of this family. They love Dani, and by association, they have come to love him too.

The maitre'd bows, and walks away.

Dani removes the ribbon and tears open the gift wrap. The box is robin's egg blue. She opens the box to find a velvet pouch tied with string. She loosens the strings, and reaches in. She pulls out a sterling silver key ring in the shape of a heart, engraved on the front. It says, If lost return to Tiffany and Co. New York 925.

"It's a reference to the movie." Dani holds it to her heart.

"The book is better," Joseph can't help himself, he can't seem to find the higher ground.

“You would say that.” Dani doesn’t take the bait. She notices the package in front of Joseph.

She smiles. “What does your card say?”

Joseph opens the card. It says, Dani is going to ask what this card says. Tell her it is none of her business. I was going to treat you kids to dinner, but I didn’t want to undermine you. The bill is all yours. Take good care of Dani - I know you will.

“None of your business.” Joseph puts the card back in the envelope. Dani’s jaw drops.

“Joseph! Tell me what the card says.” Dani is loving this.

“It says, verbatim, it says, *Tell her it is none of her business.* I didn’t write it.” Joseph smiles.

“Fine - listen to him rather than listen to me. I will remember this, Joseph. I don’t forget. At least let me see what they got you. I have an inkling.” Dani rests her hands below the table and she leans forward.

Joseph removes the ribbon, a perfect bow that slides off as he pulls one end. He unwraps the paper. A box, Robin’s egg blue. Inside, a key chain. “It says Targa.”

“Mr. Altobelli thinks I let you drive the Porsche. It’s his baby.” Dani is touched that they would go to so much trouble to bestow gifts upon them.

“Help me think of a way to thank them.” Joseph is serious. Dani nods solemnly.

Joseph runs his thumb over the engraving. He steals a glance, and smiles at the memory, Dani driving them to the concert. It is their secret.

Dani picks up her menu. "What should I get?"

"The world is your oyster, Daniella. Whatever you like." Joseph has his eye on the prime rib, and the bruschetta appetizer sounds delightful.

Dani can't concentrate on the menu. She's hollow with hunger. But dinner is just a precursor. She thinks she's ready to tell him.

Dani has returned with her parents from Ohio, Kent State and Bowling Green about 2 weeks prior. Radically altered. On that trip she paid her deposit at BGSU. \$100.00 to hold the room. She filled out the match card to find a roommate. The university sent a letter containing her roommate's name and number about a week later. Dani's anxious to tell Joseph. It's not Cornell and in her mind she already believes he will think less of her. It's a state school in a state known for The Great Black Swamp, Cedar Point, The Cleveland Indians, and The Ohio State University. Cleveland is referred to as "the mistake on the lake." That can't be good. Bowling Green is south of Toledo, Ohio on I-75 about 20 minutes wedged between a corn field and the airport.

Dani orders broiled scallops. For an appetizer, she gets the carpaccio - as soon as she read it on the menu she can taste the olive oil and lemon, the bitterness of the arugula and the salty shavings of Parmesan cheese.

When the appetizers come, they share. Dani takes one of

the crustinis from Joseph's bruschetta, and she feeds him a forkful of the thinly sliced carpaccio.

Dani falls in love with the flatness of the terrain. An ancient lakebed, with an occasional ditch scarring the landscape. It's the anti-Ithaca. She received and accepted an academic scholarship. Bowling Green wants her, she loves it there. What's not to love?

"You're going to wear orange for 4 years?" Joseph knows orange is Dani's least favorite color on the entire color wheel. "Didn't you say creamsicles and beach towels?" He acts cool, and makes jokes, to disguise his disappointment. Their game of chicken is going to end. No one is going to win.

"Yeah, I did, smart ass. You said, prison uniforms and traffic cones." Dani smiles at the memory, like it was yesterday. A sudden heaviness in her arms surprises her. She's excited about her decision, but her teenaged heart, which had been promised to Joseph, is being drained. It is happening at record pace.

The waiter delivers their entrees.

"Actually, orange is the new black. Which you would know if you weren't studying up on your Massachusetts accent." Dani will find a way to love orange like a neutral, she's just not quite there yet.

"Bon appetit, mon amour." Joseph has been practicing. He didn't get it quite right. It's clumsy and cute.

They don't talk about it, but this dinner was a choice. They had already been to three proms. They decide to

forego the fourth. It was Joseph's idea, a grown-up dinner date, a better way to waste a couple of hundred dollars than a teenaged dream that no one could live up to. While they are going over in their minds what the end of the summer is inevitably going to look like, their friends are spilling California coolers on expensive dresses and rented tuxedos.

Between bites of prime rib and scallops, an awkward silence has developed. Joseph looks at Dani, and he can tell there is more that she wants to say.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Joseph's voice cracks.

"I'm sorry. I missed what you said," Dani stalls.

"Oh, I just was asking what you are thinking about. You are awfully quiet." Joseph saws away at the hunk of meat.

"It's nothing. You know, a little bit of everything. These scallops are good, a nice vehicle for the butter sauce." Dani's mouth smiles. Her eyes don't.

"The food is good here." Joseph's heart is racing. It mixes up his thoughts. He is not sure what he is feeling.

"After dessert, we should take a walk by the lake." Dani sees Joseph is struggling, wrestling with a beast. She wants to tell him so much more, but she has to be patient.

For dessert they order cheesecake drizzled with caramel syrup. Sweet with the salty. She gets a coffee, one cream, one sugar.

As they finish their desserts, and Joseph pays the bill leaving a healthy tip, the temperature has dropped into the 60s. As they step outside, Joseph offers Dani his coat. She accepts it over her thin shoulders.

“Joseph, I have something you need to know.” Dani walks languidly by the lake. “Classes at BGSU start early. I leave August 9th.”

Joseph stands on the dock, looking down into the water. He sees a ball of catfish, or as they are sometimes called, bullheads. It is a frenzy. They are thick. They are either mating, or eating. It is a tumult. His cousin comes to Silver Lake in the summer to fish for the abundant muscallonge, pickerel and bass with live bait.

“I had an interview for scholarships. While we were visiting. We managed to get the appointment at the last minute. The interviewers were excited that I was willing to leave New York. They hope BGSU will benefit from my decision.”

“Wait - you had an interview for scholarships? That’s crazy. They must have loved you.”

Joseph doesn’t know that she has taken the ACT and scored a 29. She a fast and analytical reader, with serious math chops. She might not have been Valedictorian, but she’s top of her class. She knows she’s talented. She doesn’t need to prove it to Joseph.

“I qualified for preferential housing. They asked me to take two placement tests while we were there. Apparently, I got one of the highest math scores. I don’t have to take math ever again.”

Actually, she got the highest math score. The Dean of Math recruited her hard. Her father had to scoop his jaw off the placement office floor.

Joseph catches up to Dani. He shivers. The moon is waxing crescent 30% visible. They don't know it, but Saturn, Uranus and Neptune are all in Capricorn, her sign. The phenomenon lasts throughout the summer.

“Doors are flying open for you in Ohio. I guess this would not be the time for me to try and convince you to come to Boston with me.”

“Maybe you missed it. I told you over dinner. I paid my deposit. I'm going West.”

“I'm going to miss you. I will write you a letter everyday.” Joseph doesn't know what to say. This might be the end. At the bottom of the Silver Lake, a shiny green creature with yellow spots lays her head down and closes her red eyes.





## About the Author

Rick Pryll is best known for his hyper fiction short story, "LIES". It has garnered praise from the Wall Street Journal and SHIFT magazine, and been translated into Chinese and Spanish.

In order to graduate with a Bachelor of Science, Mechanical Engineering degree, he wrote a novel as his thesis.

He has previously published two books, a poetry chapbook called *Displaced* (foolishness press, 1998) and a book of short stories, poems, journal excerpts and unsent letters called *WALLOW* (foolishness press, 1999).

*The Chimera of Prague*, his first full-length novel, is set to come out November 2017.

Rick lives and works with his wife, artist Holly Spruck, in Charlotte, NC. He has two kids and three cats.





## **Testimonials for *The Chimera of Prague***

“This work is fragile, strong, and poignant, yet cleanly written.” - Bibiana Krall, author of *Escape into the Blue*

“I lose myself in it. It’s captivating! I am vested in Joseph.”  
- Katelin Maloney, author of *Drowning*

### **About CHIMERA:**

Prague is full of metaphors. They’re not lost on Joseph.

He’s on a stone bridge between his old life and his future. He’s building a castle of every architectural style around his heart. He needs to throw his obsession with an elusive Czech girl out the window, in order to crystallize his sense of self. He’s a lump of clay waiting to be animated, and he’s an alchemist in search of life’s secret formulae, to be engraved on a shem and placed

beneath his tongue.

### **About the vignettes:**

History echoes. What came before is woven into the fabric of the present. That's why geology matters. It is one of the myriad influences on the budding romance between two teenagers in the late 1980's. Like water running downhill, the universe conspired to bring them together. They were meant for each other, motivated by forces beyond their control. They are actors on a stage that has been set for them. Their ancestors, alive and dead, are present in their reality. Echoes of triumphs and failures filter into Joseph and Dani, filter into their experiences, and alter their choices. Joseph and Dani are free to do as they please, but they can't outrun the consequences.