

# Typewriter

by [Nick Young](#) (May 2025)



Laurence Typing (Fairfield Porter, 1952)

**There was only one part** of the room left to go through, not much more than a narrow cubbyhole off a back corner. He had called the basement his “office,” but it was never that,

really, just a workspace.

Along one whitewashed wall ran a long narrow bench where, as a hobby, John Guth had tinkered with secondhand radios. Armed with needle nose pliers and soldering gun, he'd attempted to reawaken them, get them to stop hissing and crackling and actually pick up stations again. Sometimes it had worked, but more often than not, the disemboweled tubes sat amid a welter of disconnected diodes and resistors until he gave up and cannibalized the remains, depositing each harvested part in one of a series of neatly labeled Maxwell House coffee cans that occupied a shelf above the bench. He had never seemed to tire of this scavenging ("*You never can tell when one of these might come in handy.*"), though what he amassed was more than what he would have needed during two lifetimes.

Across the room, a plain three-drawer desk—oak, darkened and scarred by use—and a swivel chair occupied a corner near the door leading to the main floor of the house. And for all the years that Tom Guth could remember, on top of the desk had sat one of those old-fashioned industrial work lamps, the kind with a dull green metal dome cupped over the lightbulb and an ungainly hinged arm that jutted, the whole resembling nothing so much as a heron in distress. This is where John spent time in the evening, retiring after he had watched the evening news and helped his wife Marge with the dinner dishes, to smoke a favorite pipe and listen to *Gangbusters* or *Boston Blackie* on a tabletop Philco radio, one he had successfully raised from the dead.

It had been two days since his cremation and brief sendoff by the minister at the First Methodist Church across town.

"You know, he was a truly good man, Tom," Reverend Parker had said with the requisite note of unctuous sincerity that marked him as a member of the shepherd class. He had glanced at his watch as Tom replied with a wan smile and muttered thanks. He was eager to wrap up the formalities, and apparently so was

the minister, Tom suspected, in order to make his tee time at the country club.

Now all that was left was to take inventory and tie up the loose ends of John Guth's life. There was no one else to do it. Mother had been gone for five years; as the only offspring, the duties had fallen to him.

It had been many years since he had ventured down to the basement. It still retained the faint mustiness that Tom associated with no other place. As he looked around, catching sight of so much that had been familiar to him as a boy, the flood of memories began.

When he entered the small side room, he realized that he'd forgotten just how cramped it was—no more than ten feet from doorway to back wall—with narrow wooden shelves built by his father along either side. The single bulb in the ceramic fixture overhead didn't provide much light, so it took a moment for Tom's eyes to adjust. When they had, he let them roam over the contents of the shelves—cardboard boxes each labelled in his dad's carefully printed hand (*Bank Statements, Correspondence, Miscellaneous*)—more evidence of the man's penchant for organization. There were also stacks of old magazines, back issues that he'd saved and dutifully arranged for storage but probably hadn't laid eyes on in decades. (*"There are a lot of really informative articles. You never know when you might need to refer to one."*)

*Dollars to donuts*, Tom said to himself, *there's a Popular Science in here from when Ike was in the White House*. He let his finger drift over the thin spines in one tall stack before stopping and extracting the magazine. He angled it in the light, the better to see its cover, with a colorful image of a smiling man proudly standing alongside a new yellow-and-white Ford Fairlane. Laughing, Tom read out loud:

"October, 1957. Do I know the old man or do I know the old

man?"

He laid the magazine aside and continued perusing the shelves, finally reaching the bottommost corner at the back wall. *I'll be damned*, he thought in mild amazement as he caught sight of an old typewriter resting in the shadows. He recognized it immediately, though he was sure he hadn't seen it in forty years, if a day. Fresh memories began to push their way in as he bent and inched the bulky machine free enough to allow himself to get a firm grip and slowly lift it up and away from the shelf. Cradling it against his chest, he slowly backed out of the tight space and carried it to the desk, depositing it with a thud as he jerked his fingers clear. Switching on the desk lamp, he brushed away a thin layer of dust from the typewriter's black matte cover.

"What a beast," he muttered, lightly running his fingers over the keys, flipping the carriage return and giving the platen a crank. It was a Remington, vintage 1945, the year that John Guth had come home from the war and started his job in the warehouse at a local farm implement dealer. He was a sharp, conscientious guy, so it didn't take long for him to trade his coveralls in the shop for a bow tie, one of the company's crisp work shirts and the title of assistant parts manager. The salary was better, if modest. It was the right kind of job for him, such was his attention to detail. And he was personable enough. He knew all the customers by their first names, and they appreciated his easy banter at the counter.

Away from the job, John Guth was a man of mild, unassertive manner and largely a loner—a reader and a dreamer—escaping the quotidian by excursions into Hammett's noir world and Michener's South Seas idylls. And, as it came back to Tom while standing over his desk, he had done it, for a time at least, at his typewriter.

There were the nights when as a young boy he heard the staccato clacking from below and sneaked partway down the

stairs, far enough to be able to see his dad, wreathed in pipe smoke, a bottle of whiskey and small glass alongside the typewriter. That was a picture that had stuck with him through the years. Rather Hemingwayesque, now that he thought about it. Maybe that's how the old man imagined himself, too.

But after a time, the nocturnal sessions with the typewriter became less frequent, then stopped altogether. Dad returned to his workbench, and his literary aspirations, such as they were, receded and disappeared.

Tom had to admit that through the years, he hadn't given any thought to what his father may have created, not until that moment in the basement.

He did remember that his dad had been very guarded about his writing, always removing whatever he was working on and putting it away. There was one exception, Tom recalled, when he had gone down into the basement the day after one of his dad's writing sessions and discovered a sheet left behind in the typewriter. There wasn't much on it, maybe a paragraph or two, and Tom had little recollection of it apart from the sense that it was some kind of mystery story. That was it. He could make nothing else of it. As far as he knew, his dad had never tried to get anything published nor so much as shared a piece of his writing with his wife or anyone else.

So then, what was it to John Guth? Just another hobby? A passing fancy?

*I'm betting it wasn't,* Tom said to himself. *His stories meant something more to him, and I'm betting he saved them.* So back he went into the cubbyhole and began checking more carefully what had been stored there. It wasn't long before he found a small pasteboard box with a faded label reading *Southworth Paper Racerase* tucked onto the top shelf.

"Eureka—maybe," Tom said tentatively, taking the container down and returning to the desk. He placed the box next to the

typewriter and lifted the cover off. Inside, it was about half filled with onionskin. On the top sheet in pica type was a table of contents—short stories, ten of them. He let his eyes work their way down the list, reeling off some of the titles:

*“Mob Gun For Hire...Her Kiss Could Kill...Siren Song of Samoa...,”*  
Tom paused, shaking his head. “Fifty years in this box, and he never said a goddamned word to anybody.

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The afternoon had slipped into dusk as Tom sifted through what paperwork remained, wrapping up his father’s affairs. There was a modest life insurance policy to claim, and he had made arrangements for an auctioneer from a nearby town to come in and sell the contents of the house before it was put on the market.

Once finished, he was hungry, so he drove the short distance to the east end of town for a bite to eat at Mandy’s Diner. If life is all about change, then Mandy’s was the exception to the rule. After forty-five years, the menu looked the same and, as far as Tom could tell, still offered up the identical bill of fare. In particular, it continued to proudly feature the *spécialité du chef*— an open-faced hot roast beef sandwich with gravy on white bread, complemented by generous sides of mashed potatoes and either green beans or corn, both fresh from can to plate. It was food that was obviously a hit with the locals, but it was the kind of meal that Tom never ate, except on his trips back home. Then, a pilgrimage to Mandy’s was a ritual he felt compelled to observe, on this trip in particular because of the memory of the first time his dad had brought him there, just the two of them, when he was seven or eight. It had made him feel like a real grownup, swelling with importance inside.

Dinner took longer than Tom had imagined it would, mainly because he was spotted by a few of the townspeople who stopped

by his table to express their condolences. They offered kind words about John Guth, what a stand-up fellow he was and how the community would miss him. Tom had not minded the interruptions. He knew people meant well, and it was a comfort to hear the high regard they had for his father.

By the time he finished dinner, it was after eight; the wind was up, the October night air chill. Leaves swirled across the sidewalk that curved up to the house, eddying restlessly in the pocket where the stone porch met the foundation.

Inside, and out of his jacket, Tom set about lighting a fire in the living room. Once he was sure the crumpled newspapers and kindling had caught, he stacked a few lengths of split wood on the grate, stood and crossed the room to the liquor cabinet, nudging bottles aside until he found what he was looking for, a half-empty fifth of Four Roses, his father's bourbon of choice. Drinking really hadn't been part of John Guth's life, not in any significant way, except perhaps when he was romanticizing himself as a writer. But once in a great while he would have a drink by the fire, and he would always pull out the bottle and glasses on the occasions of Tom's visits, usually at the holidays. Those were dates to circle on the calendar, Tom remembered, smiling, because they were also the only times he knew his mother to ever take a nip.

Tom had never had any such reticence about alcohol, so bottle in hand, he went to the kitchen, opened a cupboard, brought out a cut-glass tumbler and poured himself three fingers' worth of whiskey and drew a splash of water from the tap. Then, settling into his father's worn leather recliner near the fireplace, he took a healthy pull at the bourbon, opened the box containing the stories that he had placed on a small table next to the chair and began reading.

It was after two when Tom finished the final story, carefully turning the thin sheet of paper over and laying it with the rest atop the table. He lifted the tumbler and drank away the

little that remained of the whiskey, having dispensed with what was left in the bottle as the night wore on. He sat for a long while staring into the fireplace embers, reflecting on what he had read and what it had revealed about his father.

The writing wasn't especially noteworthy. Tom knew that. It was uneven, pretty formulaic, no doubt shaped by the radio cop shows his dad had favored and the exotic, over-the-top exploits of rugged soldiers of fortune and alluring native beauties he found in the pages of *Stag* magazine. Still, there were glimmers of talent—a turn of phrase or sharp bit of dialogue. And there was something else Tom saw beneath the predictable plot lines and overheated prose—a man with a restless soul yearning for transcendence from the mundane confines of his reality—a wife and a kid and a job where the conversation never rose above the level of the vicissitudes of the weather and prospects for the year's sorghum crop.

Yet, as frustrated as his father must have been, he never let on, at least not in any way Tom observed growing up. Instead, he bore it stoically. He understood that he would never have been able to articulate what churned his soul. Even if he could, he knew that neither his wife nor those around who he counted as friends were capable of grasping it. It wasn't that they lacked intelligence. John Guth was no intellectual. It was something so subtle and personal that it defied communication from one person to another. So, as Tom realized, his father went at it obliquely through these stories, projecting himself into his tough-talking, virile protagonists and exotic locales. He poured out his dreams and fantasies of a life beyond drudgery...and then he put them away in a box.

It was, Tom saw, a perfect metaphor.

A profound sadness washed over him as he sat in the depth of the night, the silence broken only by an occasional shudder of wind or hiss from the dying fire. There was so much about his father that he did not know, that he would never know, because



John Guth had given up so little of himself to those in his life—bits, pieces, a scattering of clues and these stories.

Yet, in the end, what did the revelations amount to since they had not found their way out of the confines of a pasteboard box? John Guth could not bring himself to take his stories to the wider world, nor even those closest to him. That step was too fraught. It was now clear to Tom that the reticence he had so often sensed in his father was born of a deep-seated dread...the fear of unworthiness.

The wind outside rose; Tom fell into fitful dozing, troubled by dreams he could not later recall.

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Aboard his forty-five foot sloop, bearing west on a gentle breeze toward the Dry Tortugas, Tom roped the tiller fast and went below, returning with a cardboard carton containing ten wine bottles.

The day's drive from the family home just north of Valdosta to Key West had given him plenty of time for further reflection on his father's life and the hidden part of it that the writing revealed. And it gave him time to formulate a plan.

The typewriter he had placed atop a rattan table on his veranda overlooking a broad swath of white beach to the ocean beyond. His dad would have found it the perfect spot to smoke his pipe, ruminare and spin tales of faraway places.

His father's stories Tom had brought aboard with him, carefully rolling up and inserting into the bottles each one in turn along with a note he himself had written with the old Remington on what remained of the onionskin. It read:

*John Guth was a simple man with big dreams never realized during his lifetime. He did not sail the Seven Seas nor*

*find acclaim for his writing. But he put what he could of himself into his stories. This is one of them. He'd be pleased to know you've discovered it.*

Tom lifted the first of the bottles, corked tightly and waxed, leaned over the boat's stern and let it slide gently from his fingers. And this he repeated every few miles until the last of the wine bottles was slipped into the warm Gulf water. He watched as it bobbed in the boat's wake, the rays of the setting sun dancing off the ripples and the deep green glass. His gaze stayed with the bottle until it became a speck and disappeared. Then, Tom Guth freed the tiller, brought the sloop about and made for home.

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**Nick Young** is a retired award-winning CBS News Correspondent. His short stories *Alabama* and *Oasis* appeared in the *Review*. In addition, his writing has appeared in dozens of magazines, journals and anthologies. His first novel, *Deadline*, was published in 2023. He can be found on Bluesky [@youngnick.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/youngnick.bsky.social). He lives outside Chicago.

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