

LEE BUMBICKA

# REVISIONIST FUTURE

A NOVEL



**REVISIONIST  
FUTURE**

LEE BUMBICKA

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FUTURE



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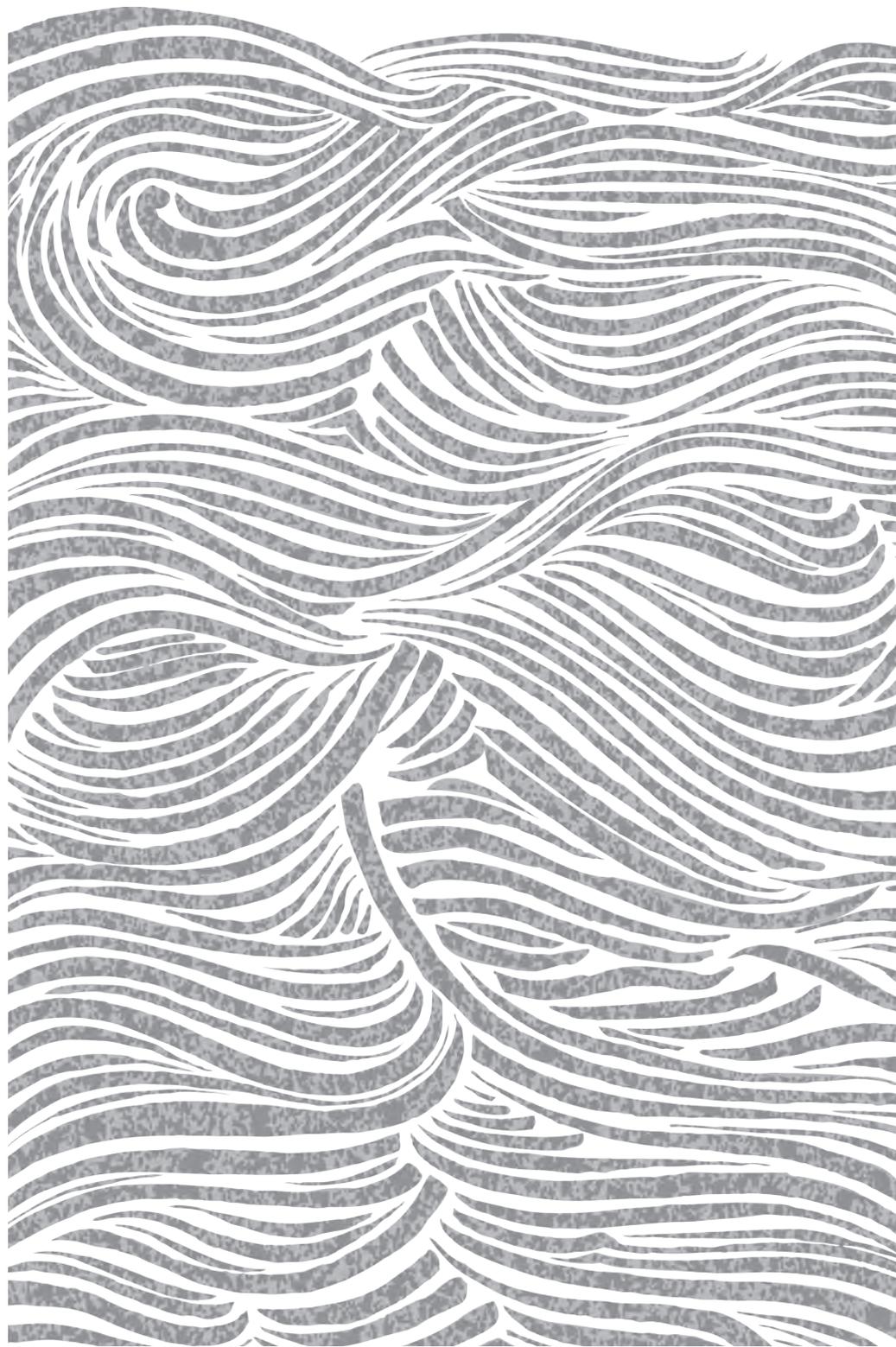
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*To my wife Debbie*  
*and my children Katy and Mikey*





# I

## THE NEW ENGLAND SHOP



**H**E DROVE THROUGH THE NIGHT, CHASING THE ILLUSIVE distant light of inspiration. Instead, he found himself on the highway to mental anguish, played out in the arena of the absurd, culminating in a life-and-death struggle with the man who would become his nemesis.

Michael Schatten gazed through the dark and into the clear night sky. His mind was free of thought, and this was his dilemma. His brain, normally alive, painting imagery with all the colors of the English language, was a blank canvas. This was the worst writer's block he had ever known. It had been weeks now since his publisher had so graciously

advanced him the funds to pursue his great American novel. At the time, he had it sketched out completely in his mind, but now the concept didn't make any sense. This, and recent events, prompted him to take a sabbatical, convinced that he had to escape to free his mind and rebuild his shattered life. The divorce was bad enough, but being laid off, taking away his stability, confidence, emotional and economic base, and the work he loved, was too much to bear. It was as if someone was conspiring to test his sanity.

Feeling the desire to be by the Atlantic Ocean, he'd decided to drive to Providence, Rhode Island. The many small towns and scenic highways, which he'd canvassed on the internet, promised the serenity he craved. Schatten had stayed up late searching the net until he found two properties in the small town of Fletcher, just south of Providence. About ten years ago, he had worked in that area of New England for two weeks and thought it was fascinating. Schatten especially recalled the restaurants serving lobster bisque and clam chowder and the old lighthouses. He'd always wanted to return, and now was his opportunity.

Schatten never planned any vacations. He thought that prearranging every detail ruined the adventure. It was one aspect of his personality that exasperated his ex-wife. His obsession with punctuality also infuriated her, as did his habit of looking at his watch during their conversations when she demanded his attention.

So, this time, he hadn't planned anything either, except to drive all night to get to Providence late in the morning, hoping the drive would be therapeutic and provide some

stimulus. But eleven hours into the fourteen-hour trip, his eyelids became heavy, and his car had drifted over the white double lines on more than one occasion. Reaching over to the passenger seat, his fingers probed for a plastic bag containing snacks and caffeinated drinks. He downed two bottles of cola before his body screamed for rest. It was with great relief that he spotted a sign off exit 112 that offered service stations and lodging. He filled his tank, then mustered enough clarity to navigate the distance from the gas pumps to the hotel.

After checking in, he lumbered to his room on the second floor, distaining the elevator as an affront to his physical conditioning.

Trudging up the steps, dragging his suitcase, he came to the hallway door, which he propped open with one hand while throwing the suitcase into the hallway with the other. Mercifully, his room was only two doors down. He didn't bother to unpack but just plopped onto the bed and fell asleep immediately.

The next day, Schatten explored the region south of Providence off Highway 95 until he found State Highway 1, which allowed him to drive along the coast at a leisurely pace. Pulling down his visor to shield his eyes from the sun, he inadvertently released a piece of yellow note paper he had wedged there the day before. It held the phone number and address of the realtor's office responsible for a beautiful stretch of small vacation spots on the beach.

He pulled over to the shoulder and retrieved the note from the floor, plugged the address into his phone's GPS

feature, and followed the female voice's instructions. A half hour later, he arrived at the realtor's office and parked his car in front.

Schatten walked through the door of the old storefront that served as the entrance to the offices of Hastings Realty and Rental. Seeing no one, he hit the bell at the desk.

A few moments later, a clean-shaven man in his late fifties wearing a T-shirt, shorts, and sandals with slick black hair graying at the temples came out to greet him.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm up from Indianapolis and wanted to see if you had something I could rent for a few months," replied Schatten. "Nothing fancy, preferably secluded but close to the beach. I'm writing, trying to finish my book."

"Writ'n a novel, are ya? That would look good in our brochure for sure. Well, young fella, I've got a property down by the water's edge. I can give you a good deal, but it's rough, and I ain't got time to work on it. It's furnished, but no frills. I'll even leave ya the washer and dryer I was gonna move to another place."

"That sounds great. How much?"

"I'll tell you what, you rent it for three months, and I'll let ya have it for eight hundred dollars cash up front."

"Eight hundred dollars a month?" asked Schatten.

"Naw, total. Things are slow right now, and I need cash. I just can't afford to fix the place, so you're helping me out, big time. If you don't take it, it'll just be collectin' dust."

"Now, this place has an air conditioner, stove, refrigerator, and a TV, right?"

“Course it does, but you have to lug the trash up the hill to the dumpster once a week,” replied the proprietor. “They collect it every Wednesday, and no one will come in to clean or change the sheets.”

“Sold. Where do I sign?”

In exchange for Schatten’s eight one-hundred-dollar bills, the man gave him two keys and a receipt along with directions and a map.

The map showed the picture of a lighthouse in close proximity to his cottage, towering over the cove. Some twenty miles from the office he passed it and several minutes later the GPS on his phone announced that he had arrived. Schatten pulled over onto a gravel road to the left which led to a small square parking lot. Schatten got out of his car, scanned the ocean and the surrounding area to see a plastic green dumpster alongside a red steel mailbox, matching the address he had been given. He locked the car and descended a steep hill.

There, some fifty yards straight ahead, was an old, rundown house which only looked worse the closer he came. It was obvious why the property was such a bargain. Most of the faded white paint had peeled off the old one-story place. Schatten viewed the entire exterior before inserting the key into the front door lock.

As he entered, he felt sponginess beneath his feet. The high tides and driving rain had breached the small gap between the floor and the underside of the front door. The carpet was a testament to the storm’s ferocity. The living room exhibited a black Naugahyde couch with a rectangular

glass topped coffee table, flanked by a small oak table with a desk lamp on top and a brass floor lamp.

He entered the kitchen and found that the refrigerator, faucets, and light switches were surprisingly functional. There were dishes and standard fare in the drawers and cupboards and a microwave oven above the electric stove.

Turning away from the window, he walked down the narrow hallway toward the bedroom, bereft of blinds or curtains, just like the others. The bathroom, featuring a shower and bath, was just a few feet head. He followed the hallway to a small, open area and the back door. There, he discovered the washer and dryer hidden in a small room just to the right.

His initial survey of the house completed, Schatten decided to bring in his things. He had to make three trips, struggling to navigate the steep incline before bringing in his laptop, which he gently set on the sturdy, wooden kitchen table.

The move-in behind him, Schatten made a list of everything he would need before he ventured into Bedfer, the closest town, for supplies. It took twenty-five minutes to get to the quaint little village. The red stone store fronts, ornate black lampposts, and slow lifestyle seemed to exude New England charm. He slowly drove through the town, surveying all the small stores and restaurants. When he saw the Farmers Market, he parked and went in to stock up on everything from orange juice to frozen dinners. He even found a shower curtain and towels.

Returning to his house, Schatten realized that it would be challenging to trek up and down the hill where he'd parked

to unload the groceries. So he searched until he found a gravel road that snaked along a trail to the right, which he took to his back door. He unloaded the car, struggling to open the front screen door that slammed in his face several times during the process.

It was time to explore the surroundings. He put on an old pair of tennis shoes and a worn pair of khaki shorts. He stepped through the front door and stood on the small concrete porch and surveyed the area. There wasn't much beach at his location, and large rocks were everywhere, breaking up the landscape. He looked to his left to discover a pathway winding in and out some three miles toward the lighthouse. He saw no signs of anyone else and realized the extent of his seclusion. Large rock formations formed a wall around the left side of the beach, creating a cove. It wasn't a place for children.

The temperature was in the low eighties as Schatten began his trek down the beach, feeling the surf on his feet and ankles. Seaweed washed up on shore and drifted back and forth with the tide. He walked out up to his knees and felt the powerful tide push him backward. Looking out to sea, he saw a channel that led to the Atlantic. Schatten's house was in a cove near several formidable islands exhibiting steep, jagged solid rock sides, discouraging any boats from landing. As he continued down the coastline, the wind caressed his face and the constant serenade of seagulls provided background music. He had traveled the meandering pathway about two miles before seeing the lighthouse in full view. It was perched atop a rock wall where it looked majestically

down on the sea. Schatten wiped his face occasionally when large waves eluded the rocks to splash him. As he reached the lighthouse, he found no easy pathway up the hill; he'd have to scale the rocks.

Schatten had always been fascinated with these icons after reading Jules Verne's *The Lighthouse at the End of the World* about pirates attacking a lighthouse around Cape Horn. He had also seen *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, a 1950s classic where a giant prehistoric monster destroys a lighthouse on the east coast. Smiling at the memory, he began climbing to the base of the house attached to the cone-shaped structure. Once atop the rocks, he stared at the one hundred-foot-high construction. The brick house was painted flat red, as was the tower with the addition of a spiraling, broad white stripe, which encircled it from the base to the top where the huge searchlight was enclosed, surrounded by a railing. He knocked on the door, but no one answered. After an hour spent looking at the edifice from all angles, he began the slow descent to the beach and made his way back to his house.

Once there, Schatten ate his lunch and pulled up the files of his book on his computer. Wading through the forty or so pages he had written so far, he realized the spark still wasn't there. It was as though he was reading someone else's words.

"John Taylor was on the second week of a murder investigation when he made a gruesome discovery . . ."

Uninspired, he decided to search the net for some information on the FBI, the organization that employed his character. He attempted to engage his Wi-Fi when the error

message appeared. No network. He had forgotten to ask the realtor about the Wi-Fi.

“What did you expect, a five-star hotel?” he muttered angrily.

He felt like an idiot. His overly trusting nature had often cost him a hefty price, and it was another trait that drove his ex-wife insane. Now he would have to find a coffee shop or go to the library to access the internet. But he could write unencumbered without a network, he’d just have to keep a list of everything he needed to research when he went back to town.

After staring at his laptop for a while, he grabbed the pillows from the bedroom and placed them on the couch, planning to lay down for just a couple minutes. The next thing he knew, it was 5:03 a.m.

He decided to walk on the beach again, hoping to resurrect his lost concept. Barely making an impression in the firm sand during his leisurely stroll in the early morning mist, he skipped rocks out to sea and shivered as the surf hit his ankles. He ventured to the lighthouse once more; he saw it as a symbol of strength, from which he could draw, not just a beacon warning ships and their crews not to venture too close to the shallows.

There was something to be said for the simplicity of its design and how it hadn’t changed from the one at Alexandria thousands of years ago, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. So he began a regiment of walking to the lighthouse in the mornings, hoping this ritual would purge his mind of everything but the story.

But thoughts about his divorce and his last conversation with his boss telling him that he was being terminated kept eroding his creativity. It was during this time that twinges of inspiration would assert themselves, only to fade once he sat in front of his laptop. An obscure seafaring character would arise, only to dissolve into oblivion just minutes later. So on the third day, still uninspired, he decided to go into town and have breakfast at one of several intriguing little restaurants he'd seen.

He selected Mark's Diner, a 1950s style place featuring a 1957 Chevrolet, curb or walk-in service, and an old-fashioned soda fountain. The concrete building was painted light blue with speakers mounted on poles with menus in ten locations where one could place an order without getting out of their car. But Schatten elected to walk inside and sat in one of the booths, Elvis blaring. The service was fast, and he consumed his pancakes in short order. He decided to walk through town before going back to yet another uninspired writing session and was pleasantly surprised to discover a small antique shop on the far side of town. Pressing his face against the window, with hands cupped to shield his eyes from the glare, he saw a collection of everything from cuckoo clocks, muskets, bullets of all descriptions, helmets, model ships and airplanes, vintage toys, flintlocks to a bronze diver's helmet, and a mind-numbing potpourri of souvenirs and historic memorabilia. Intrigued, he pressed the latch and opened the old wooden door, triggering the bell that announced his entry.

"Mornin'," said a voice from the rear of the shop.

“Good morning,” Schatten replied.

The shopkeeper, a white-haired, bearded man of small stature dressed in a white shirt and coveralls, approached him. Schatten’s first impression was that the individual was the perfect curator for the vintage collection; an old man who’d seen it all with stories to tell about each item in his store.

“You see anythin’ that strikes your fancy, don’t hesitate to ask.”

For a brief moment, Schatten thought that he had met the man before or at least someone who resembled him.

“Thank you, I will.”

Schatten canvassed the small shop from corner to corner. There were boxes of Clark Bars, Forever Yours Bars, and other candy he remembered as a kid. Toy airplanes, tin soldiers, frogmen, a plastic submarine, a stuffed alligator, and a metallic chess set were in evidence. His eyes were transfixed upon the diving helmet that was just to the right of the display window. It reminded him of Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*.

“Got that from a sponge diver after his last dive, just before he retired,” said the owner, noticing Schatten’s interest.

“Uh, how much for this?”

Schatten had always had a secret desire to own one of these.

“Thirteen hundred and seventy-five dollars for that one.”

“Ouch.”

Refocusing, Schatten began to look over other areas of the store. He went down every aisle, unable to contain a

grin that reminded him of his childhood going through his favorite toy shop or an old Army Navy store with his dad. He felt as if he were in a 1940s or '50s exhibition when he came across several rusty handcuffs, a dozen old hand-cranked wall telephones along with a mechanical calculating device and a few American and Japanese bayonets and helmets. Suddenly, between some dummy hand grenades and an IBM desktop computer, he had a glimpse of part of something that caught him off guard. Partially exposed, it was buried in the farthest corner of the store, under cardboard and metal recruiting posters and speed limit signs. He set the signs aside, rearranged the Halloween masks, an old broom, and a pot that look like a witch's cauldron to expose an old typewriter. He could envision it in the hands of Edward R. Morrow during World War II London broadcasts or some other famous correspondent or writer; perhaps even Hemingway.

Inexplicably, his mind exploded with thought. This could be the key to unlock his inspiration.

The storeowner had been continuously jabbering in the background as Schatten navigated the store isles, but the moment he bent over this device, the man fell silent.

"How much do you want for that?" asked Schatten, pointing to the device. "I think I could really write with this."

The old man made his way from behind the counter and approached him. "How much you willin' to pay?"

"Oh, I don't know, twenty bucks?"

"I mean, how much are you really willin' to pay for what you want?" the old man inquired.

Schatten felt uneasy under the man's stare. The cryptic question didn't help matters, and he felt the urge to leave. "Maybe I better go. I've got work to do."

"Okay, if that's what you want. But this could be just what you came here for . . . to finish the book."

Schatten stopped dead in his tracks. "How do you know I'm working on a book?"

"Well, are ya or ain't ya?" continued the shopkeeper in his thick New England brogue.

"Yeah, I am, but how did—"

"How did I know?" interrupted the proprietor. "Who else would be lookin' for a typewriter?"

"Maybe I'm a collector."

"No, you're a writer, alright," said the man. "We both know why you're lookin' at this."

"Why don't you tell me."

"You can't think, and you can't write, and that's why you came here. And this'll do it for ya, I guarantee it. But like I said, what price are ya willin' to pay?"

"Like *I* said, twenty bucks," Schatten challenged.

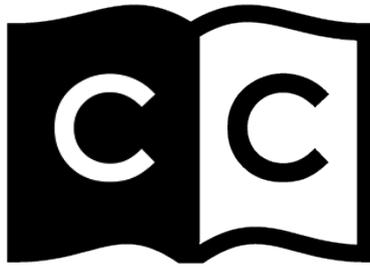
"Okay, sport, twenty dollars it is. Cash only."

Schatten fumbled, trying to remove his wallet from his jeans. He wrestled it out, and his fingers grasped the first twenty-dollar bill he saw, which he immediately presented to the owner.

"I don't give receipts," said the man.

"Well, what if it doesn't work?" said Schatten.

The old man smirked. "Oh, it'll work . . . all too well, young man."



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# WHILE EVERY WRITER'S DREAM IS TO WRITE CHARACTERS THAT COME TO LIFE, MICHAEL SCHATTEN WAKES UP IN A NIGHTMARE.

Suffering from writer's block, Michael Schatten books himself into a remote beachside cabin to find inspiration. In an antique shop in the nearby town, he stumbles upon a quaint typewriter, and begins to type a short story. The next day, he comes upon a dilapidated house just like the one he described in his story. And at lunch in a diner he overhears others use the very lines he composed the night before. What is going on? Has he entered the twilight zone? Gone mad? Or purchased a magic typewriter?



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