

The First Two Pages of “Volcano” by Alison McMahan

From *The Great Filling Station Holdup: Stories Inspired by the Songs of Jimmy Buffett*

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An Essay by Alison McMahan

It was 1988, I had just gotten married, and my in-laws had very generously sent us on a honeymoon to Fiji and Vanuatu.

In Vanuatu we stayed at a little hotel at the foot of a volcano, one of few active volcanoes in the world that is safe for people to climb. The location was so remote that the hotel was simply a collection of thatched huts with the luxury of cold running water. Local guides took us up the mountain (which was absolutely smooth from layers and layers of ash) in a jeep, let us peer over the edge for about twenty minutes and watch the seething lava below us, gave us some lemonade to un parch our throats, and drove us back down to the hotel. For us it was a magical, once-in-a-lifetime experience, but for them, who did it several times a day, it was quite routine, even boring. They entertained themselves by arguing about silly things and sometimes asking us to weigh in on their arguments.

When they found out we were Americans (at the time, pretty rare: mostly they got New Zealanders and Australians), they wanted to know if we'd met Rambo. After I asked them several questions it became clear that they thought

Rambo was a real person. They had the idea that in movies, real people played themselves. They didn't get TV reception where they were, they only had a few VHS tapes, and one of them, of course, was *Rambo: First Blood*.

I tried to explain to them that Sylvester Stallone was an actor and that the movie was a story, but the concept seemed completely foreign to them.

In my hotel room I'd found some old film magazines a previous visitor had left. When we returned I leafed through them. Sure enough, there were some pictures of Sylvester Stallone in a tux on the red carpet. I found the guides and showed them the picture.

Their reaction was really extreme. Something definitely “died” for them when they understood that their hero was mythical. They were extremely upset with me. Luckily my husband came by about then and whisked me away.

I thought about this experience for years, about the impact of buying into a myth and having the myth erupt on you. I knew I wanted to work it into a story, a story that included a volcano. But mostly I write historical fiction, so the opportunity didn't present itself. Years passed.

And then Josh Pachter came along. I'd written for another one of Josh's anthologies—the wonderful *Beat of Black Wings*, based on the songs of Joni Mitchell. So as soon as he asked me to contribute to *The Great Filling Station Holdup*, I started going through the Buffet albums. When I heard the song

“Volcano,” I knew the moment for me to tell my volcano story had arrived. I had my theme, I had my song. Easy, right?

Wrong.

First of all, my assignment was to write something based on the song. The refrain of the song “I don’t know where I’m a gonna go/when the volcano blow” worked well with my concept, but later in the song Buffett lists a series of places that at first seemed to have no connection, from Three Mile Island to San Diego to Buzzard’s Bay. Why were those places in the song? I didn’t know. Why was the Ayatollah mentioned? How would I work all that into the story? No clue. It took some research.

It was easy enough to find out which volcano Buffett was referring to, indirectly. It’s on the island of Montserrat in the Caribbean. Buffett and many other recording artists liked to record at a studio there, which went out of business when the volcano erupted and made more than half the island unlivable. Buffett fans know that. So my first change was to have my characters fly to a Caribbean island.

Then came the work of the first two pages: I had to set up a Sylvester Stallone type star, someone who owned a small plane and would be able to fly to visit a volcano on a whim:

“What’re you doing with a machete? It’s supposed to be a boomerang,” I said to Keith’s still-impossibly-broad back. “And where’s the picture of the Ayatollah?”

He swiveled around. “Oh, thank god you’re here. I need help. As you can see.” He sliced the air with the machete. His biceps were as round and his legs as shapely as ever.

Then I had to set up his antagonist, someone he would take on that trip with him but who would have reason to kill him:

He got down on one knee. “I need you. I need you to save me. Save all this.”

And that was it. No *I’m sorry I dumped you*. No *I’m sorry I got rich and left you to a lifetime of service jobs and poorly-paying gigs*. Not even a *Long time no see*.

Nope. All that mattered was that I save his hide. Take the mess they’d made of my screenplay and rewrite it. Make it truer to my original vision. The vision Keith had abandoned as soon as money and fame beckoned, the same way he’d abandoned our vision of us as the Schwarzenegger/Shriver of the indie movie world.

The theme of the story, about people buying into a myth to such an extent that they lose sight of reality, stayed the same, but it is the aging movie star who has lost sight of reality, and when their guide on their climb up the volcano turns out to be an over-enthusiastic fan, things go terribly awry.

After the volcano erupts, the writer manages to get off the island and rewrite what happened, adding her spin to the myth already surrounding the movie star. She profits from it as the movie star once did. For that to work thematically, I had to set up the movie star’s mythic persona, and the writer and ex-girlfriend’s resentment from the very first lines of the story:

When the phone rang, all three of Keith’s managers and both of his agents were on the line. Keith was already in New York, they

said, prepping the play, and the play needed help, so would I get on the next plane east?

I dicked them around a bit, which got me all-expenses-paid instead of most-expenses-paid, along with a hefty paycheck. But there was never any question in my mind. I was packing for October in New York with one hand even as I played hard to get on the phone.

And now here I was, in the fabulous Broadhigh Theater.

“The play” was based on my screenplay for the movie that had elevated Keith into superstardom thirty years ago. The movie that had turned Keith into Smokey Rob for life.

Just looking at the set, I could tell the play was taking a lot of liberties with my original script. I could see the vista of Three Mile Island through the set window, sure, but not much else matched.

Remember that mysterious list of places in the song? Comanche Sky Park, Buzzard's Bay, someplace in Mexico, San Diego, Three Mile Island, on top of the Ayatollah? It took some digging, but finally I found out that they were all places where Buffett (who travels around in small planes) almost had a crash or near-crash. Makes sense that he would sing that he doesn't ever want to return to those places.

Again, it's the sort of thing Buffett fans would know, but not anyone else. I worked some of the locations into a conversation between the movie star and his pilot, had them joke about places they'd flown and almost crashed. And I worked two of the locations right into the opening paragraphs, as you can see above.

In the end, it was the list of locations that embodied the theme for me, that list of exotic places where the confrontation between his reality and someone else's had led them both to crash and burn.

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Alison McMahan is an award-winning screenwriter, filmmaker, and author. Her most recent film is *Bare Hands and Wooden Limbs* (2010), narrated by Sam Waterston. Her non-fiction book, *Alice Guy Blaché, Lost Visionary of the Cinema* (Bloomsbury, 2002), was translated into Spanish, and film rights sold. Her historical mystery novel, *The Saffron Crocus* (Black Opal Books, 2014), won the Rosemary Award and the Florida Writers Association's Royal Palm Literary Award. Her short mysteries have been anthologized by Level Best Books, Wildside Press, Down-and-Out Books, and in the *Scream and Scream Again* middle-grade horror anthology edited by R.L. Stine for HarperCollins. She is a two-time Derringer finalist and chosen as one of the "Other Distinguished Mystery Stories" authors in *Best American Mystery Stories of 2018*. Represented by Gina Panettieri of Talcott Notch Literary. <https://alisonmcmahan.com/>