

*“Pretty Ugly” is a fascinating tale that takes us from Kansas City to Washington, D.C. and on to Ireland – a genuine tour de force from a global journalist turned global novelist. It’s a fast-moving triumph from a writer who really knows his way around human relationships, especially those involving politicians, editors, doctors and even strangers lurking in the mysterious fogs of Éire!*” (STEPHEN FARNSWORTH is a political science professor and founder of the Center for Leadership and Media Studies, University of Mary Washington. Multi-book author, Fulbright scholar and national commentator, including The Washington Post, Reuters, The Chicago Tribune and MSNBC.)

*“Start with a natural raconteur who is at home in Romania as Kansas City. Add a shot of old-school newspapering, a sinister dose of big medicine and the right mix of Irish humor and moral indignation, and you get a novel as bracing as a shot of Jameson.”*(MIKE WEATHERFORD is Arts & Entertainment Reporter and Columnist for the 'Las Vegas Review-Journal' newspaper and author of 'Cult Vegas'.)

*“Seasoned journalist and writer John Sean Hillen has filed a story that’s as entertaining as it is timely. “Pretty Ugly” is a richly written novel that is both journalistic procedural and cautionary tale about the cosmetics industry, politics, and corporate journalism. When they collide, it can be pretty ugly.”*(JOHN DEDAKIS is a novelist, writing coach, former CBN White House correspondent and senior copy editor for CNN’s ‘The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer.’ Adjunct journalism faculty member at University of Maryland-College Park.)

*“Rich in detail, this is a novel by an astute observer. Sean Hillen is a curious and peripatetic writer and he gives his readers a remarkable sense of place and time in this elaborate story of political, journalistic and medical intrigue. From a midwestern newsroom to the halls of Congress to the ‘brown-black turf bogs beyond Cnoc Fola,’ Hillen not only takes us on a narrative journey, he places us there.”* (JIM KUHNHENN, newspaper bureau chief, editor and Congressional and White House correspondent, past president of the Washington Press Club Foundation and former member of the Congressional Standing Committee of Correspondents.)

# Pretty Ugly

a novel by

**Sean Hillen**

Copyright © 2016 Sean Hillen

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the author, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

ISBN-10: 1523361158  
ISBN-13: 978-1523361151

[seanhillenauthor.com](http://seanhillenauthor.com)

## **Dedication**

'Pretty Ugly' is published in memory of the late Massachusetts Senator Edward Moore 'Ted' Kennedy, known as 'The Lion of the Senate.' who spent a great part of his exemplary political life supporting varied consumer health issues and was particularly active in attempting to better regulate the cosmetics industry. May his name be writ higher than the Washington Monument itself.

I also dedicate 'Pretty Ugly' to a pre-eminent medical practitioner and teacher, now sadly gone from us, who encouraged me both as a health correspondent and in my first faltering footsteps into authorship. 'Doctor Gray' in 'Pretty Ugly' is a fictional character named to honor Doctor E. Grey Dimond, cardiologist and founder of the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) School of Medicine and the international Diastole Scholars' Center, now under the direction of its president, Nancy Hill.

## Acknowledgements

Thanking all those people who helped me in this literary endeavor might well end up being longer than the book itself. My deepest gratitude, however, go to a host of people in various countries, in diverse fields, who contributed their expertise to help me avoid inane inaccuracies in several domains including health, media, cosmetics and politics, not to mention the native Irish language, Gaeilge. Any mistakes remaining are entirely of my own (un)doing. Blame for this lies primarily at the feet of unbridled imagination, born of a Celtic DNA.

First and foremost of those whose support proved invaluable is my Transylvanian wife, Columbia. May Mother Nature lavish its bounties eternally upon her for her infinite patience. As my anam cara ('soul mate' in Irish), my editor, my designer, my marketing director, my brand manager... one of my favorite poets, W. H. Auden, put it best,

*“my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;”*

But even that's not enough.

Then I dance a dizzy waltz from tiny rocky islands off the northwest coast of Ireland to the metropolises of Belfast, Galway, Dublin, London, Basel, Kansas City, Las Vegas, Tucson, Washington and New York to round-up all those whose literary footprint lies within the pages of 'Pretty Ugly.'

Not in alphabetical order nor necessarily in order of importance, they include:

Word lovers Mark and Tina Gregory in Belfast and Connie Ward in Basel who waded through 'Pretty Ugly' wearing microscope editing lenses.

Sandra Katz, book lover, skilled ophthalmologist and incurable world

traveler who with long-time friend, Diane Stephenson, considers Paris and Havana equally intriguing in so many different ways.

For scientific help in better understanding the power and potential of nanoparticles, my deepest gratitude goes to Professor Terry Tetley, researcher and professor at the Faculty of Medicine, National Heart & Lung Institute, Imperial College London who initiated the college's strategy on 'Nanoparticles and Health' as well as to Doctor Olwyn McWeeney and barrister-cum-medical writer, Paul McGinn, for their advice.

I would be amiss not to mention Dr. Felix Sabates founder of the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Medicine's Department of Ophthalmology half a century ago, of the original founders of the Missouri Ophthalmologic Society and the 'Sabates Eye Centers.' As health correspondent for 'The Kansas City Times,' interviewing him increased my knowledge exponentially about the human eye, our body's most complex organ. It's amazing something so small can have so many working parts.

I also wish to acknowledge the important research and consumer activism of Stacy Malkan, author of 'Not Just A Pretty Face' and co-founder of 'The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics,' a coalition project with founding members that include non-governmental groups such as Friends of the Earth and the Breast Cancer Fund, as well as Health Care Without Harm, a worldwide organization of health professionals, environmental groups and governments to promote safe practices and products in healthcare.

My knowledge of Irish islands is due in great part to helpful 'Sabba' Curran, captain and operator of ferry boat, 'The Cricket,' to Donegal's Gola Island and Pól Ó Muireasáin, linguist extraordinaire 'as Gaeilge' and self-styled sea-scavenger.

On the esoteric subject of entomology, biologist Mircea Ciuhrii deserves strong praise for his development of skin creams using insect proteins whom I interviewed at his Bucharest lab. Ciuhrii sadly passed away earlier this year.

As for close journalism colleagues in both print and broadcast, I deeply apologize for tying you to a railing and making you read this manuscript, thank you:

Stephen Farnsworth, who has parlayed his extensive media acumen into academic excellence as professor of political science and international affairs at the University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, Virginia.

John DeDakis, CNN editor for 25 years and former senior copy editor for 'The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer' and now creative writing coach and author of four suspense novels.

Jim Kuhnhenh, who spent much of his illustrious journalism career in Washington as newspaper bureau chief, editor and Congressional and White House correspondent, and who is as insightful an analyst of a football game as he is of intrigue on the 'Hill.'

Mike Weatherford, long-time reporter and columnist for the 'Las Vegas Review-Journal,' who may yet, one hopes, with his brilliant script-writing skills, turn 'Pretty Ugly' into a much-loved, Oscar-winning movie, starring...

To you all I say a huge thank-you. With your help and encouragement, 'Pretty Ugly' has gone from thoughts in my mind to words on a page.

## Chapter one

Kate Moss. Naomi Campbell. Heidi Klum. Elle McPherson. Sienna Miller. The crème de la crème of fashion and style. A gathering of elites. Giants of stage and screen, stars from the intoxicating world of scent and sparkle. The most delectable of eye-candy parading their wares.

She approached knowing the routine, No turning of heads. Unforgivable in such heady company. Pretense was the watchword. Overt displays of interest avoided at all costs. Furtive, nonchalant, all-encompassing glances best advised. She could almost hear the hum of electrical impulses racing from optic nerve to brain. Analysis of every contour.

Downward thrust of her hips, the drop of her arms, the fullness of her breasts, the angle between head and neck. She knew the telltale signs they were looking for. Thickness in the ankles. Tiny blue threads behind the calves. The ghost of stretch marks along the lower thigh. A bulge of flab lurking beneath armpits. Why? A potential rival? Her? Hardly. Not now. Not anymore. Remembering the preying eyes, the unspoken slights and stares, she controlled the urge to hurry on. She imagined – though harsh reality meant imagination was hardly necessary – their air of superiority etched with regal-like arrogance. The prerogatives of rare species - the rich, the famous, the supremely, stunningly, sublimely beautiful.

She drew in a deep breath, slowly, softly. With the power of instant observation, a primordial trait peculiarly inherent to womankind and particularly adept when applied to other members of the gender, she noted their trademark expressions, their fixed public faces. Some wore porcelain smiles; some as solemn as stone; others mocking and playful; still others devilishly wayward.

And the make-up. A state-of-the-art science in all its wondrous glory. No lumpy powders or scratchy pencils. Acetate reds to glaze lips. Lurex

golds to highlight cheeks. Mink browns to accentuate eyes. An artisan's well-honed skill applied with excruciating patience. Forcing wrinkles to surrender their ill-gotten gains and skin immune from crack and ripple under the relentless glare of smoldering studio lights. Delicate dusting, broad brushstrokes almost imperceptible in their lightness, faithfully following the natural contours of the faces they caressed so lovingly. Perfectly applied they might be, but to the knowing eye the imperfections remained glaringly obvious. Veneer that failed to vanquish vanity. It took so little to show so much. A cocktail too many. A sleepless night. Cross-Atlantic long-hauls in pressurized cabins. Free radicals, nasty little molecules, potent toxins with a lifespan of a millionth of a second, that poked holes in skin fibers, attacked collagen, weakened support structure.

The result: catastrophic collapse. A crack below a pouting mouth. A discolored crease in the cleft of the chin. Hyper pigmentation. Under-eye circles. A solitary spot where a spot simply shouldn't be. Standing, staring, she knew the effects of oxidative damage only too well. No better person to notice them. After all, hadn't she been one of them. Queen of the product junkies? Hadn't that led her to this?

Seeing the parade of faces before her, she remembered, and her shaky self-esteem shook a little bit more, for she wore no face powder, not even a swipe of foundation. And for reasons she dare not think about, not a single stroke of concealer. Her face felt like plastic, her hair nylon wire. Glancing down, things got worse. No satin, no silk, no leather no lace. Plain, worn sneakers. Jeans threaded at the bottom, a faint star-shaped shadow of soil clutching obstinately below the knee. Was a disguise really necessary? She wasn't even herself – yet.

The resolve she'd built up on the journey here slowly unraveled, unhinging carefully-crafted determination, sending shivers of discomfort through what she now felt was an utterly ill-dressed, ill-kept, ill-fitting body. She had been warned certain situations might bring this on. That she needed to stay strong, ignore the inner voices. She thought she was prepared. She was wrong. Whatever semblance of self-belief she had set out with swayed like the proverbial reed in the wind. Confused, naked, vulnerable. Caught unawares and, lacking decent heels - so comical if it were not so serious - firmly flat-footed. She sensed the swift spinning downward spiral begin again, bringing with it the fear, the self-flagellation. How could she not control simple emotions in a situation as simple as this, among cardboard cutout women whose company she'd shared often? Remembering the breathing techniques, she tried to calm

her racing heart. There's nothing to be ashamed of, she repeated mantra-like under her breath, reminding herself of her familiarity with the faces before her, recalling specific places, occasions. Canapés, carpets, catwalks; clinking glasses at glamorous galas.

For goodness sake, she'd sat half-naked with them in frenetic pre-show dressing rooms, with urban sexy-chic bras scattered about; skimpy, alluring panties draped over chairs, colorful French corsets dangling from hangers. They'd exchanged dirty jokes and raucous laughter and snide remarks lightly cloaked in humor. They'd gossiped like old hags dressed in the finest of haute couture.

So why should she feel any different now, she wondered, scolding herself for her cowardice. The answer, more than obvious. This wasn't a carefully controlled, closed-doors circumstance, with primping, pampering publicists with a prancing menagerie. She stood in the middle of an uncontrolled, most public of public places, a shopping mall for goodness sake. She glanced nervously around. No extended lenses, no whirring monitors. No blinding flashes. No prodding microphones. No peering, peeping paparazzi. Safe. For now at least. How long could she go on like this? When would the nightmare end?

Patricia paused, a rollercoaster of emotions sweeping over her. Confused, bemused, amused. Not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Then, awkward about doing it, but realizing it was the perfect time, she adopted the pose she'd been shown. A matador before a kill, she lifted her chin high, stuck out her chest, stared directly into the eyes staring directly at her. If anyone saw me, realized who I was, indeed they believe I'd gone crazy. Feeling better, she glanced at her watch. She'd better rush. Couldn't be late for her appointment. Turning, she traced an uneven line on her neck gingerly. Then pulled her hand away quickly.

Behind her, faces on the multi-colored billboard on the window remained immobile, their piercing eyes unblinking.

Outside, traffic roared by. Life went on.

## Chapter two

Slippery, shiny, slimy, they sucked silently, succulently, on the shifting soft skin of a sickly soul. Of course it would never get past the copy desk but teasing out the tongue-twister tickled him no end. And it helped while away the time as he cruised well beyond the speed limit along the wide swathe of Interstate 70, past endless fields of Kansas corn undulating either side of him.

Images of the little creatures had filled him with a rising sense of expectancy, presenting him with the hope of a perfect start to a languid, Midwest summer morning and a welcome respite from newsroom troubles.

He imagined them advancing slowly, purposefully, over ever-so-slight ridges of human skin, bone and muscle. Like snow trekkers seen from high above, they'd leave little trails of glistening silver, then burrow assuredly into wrinkles where blood had gathered like miniscule droplets of dark stagnant water in tiny furrows. Their detection and drilling skills exquisite, a true miracle of nature. No effort wasted. No time lost. Quiet, utter efficiency. Bio-mimicry. If oil companies could genetically reproduce them in giant form and harness their innate search-and-find talent, they'd save billions worldwide in wasted bore holes, he mused, smiling at the absurdity of the notion.

He imagined these diaphanous, marshmallow-like creatures in the flesh, hearing their soft moans of pleasure as they curled and swelled with every mouthful like mini-sausages pulsating slowly on a sizzling barbeque. Their voracious appetites, their meticulous, unerring motion, their precise in-built sense of location as they searched for nutritious life-giving liquid mere millimeters beneath a leathery wrinkled cheek, these were things that made his professional pulse quicken.

Art ops were bountiful. With a decent photo – sensitive enough not to make readers throw-up into their cornflakes - it could make a page

one lead with a difference. But considering he was in the conservative Land of Oz and that the President was still battling baddies abroad, he knew it would more likely be earmarked for the metropolitan page mélange wrapped around federal court, education board and city hall coverage. At least it might ‘put some crab in the crab soup,’ as his neighbor on the desk next to him liked to say, as well as escape ‘the horrible huddle’ normally associated with front-page offers. Too many self-important editors, like bees drawn to honey – or, more apt, hungry hyenas feasting on a still beating heart - offering endless suggestions, making countless changes, leading inevitably to stories so disjointed they read as if the sentences suffered from rickets. Yes, losing the front page was always a disappointment but avoiding the ritual mauling was fair compensation.

The main reason Colm was feeling in an ebullient mood matching the cloudless sky above, was at that last he had something to write about. Hot days in the dead of summer were a reporter’s nightmare. “Tedious, monotonous, ‘n as slow moven as a crocordaihle on a suhn-baked mud flaht,” was how his flustered southern colleague put it, his inimical nasal West Texas twang causing bouts of laughter to echo around the newsroom.

The press release had arrived late yesterday, too late for the final edition, its slick design a singular illustration of American medicine as the sophisticated, publicity-driven multi-billion dollar marketing machine it had become. It was neatly printed on quality letterhead, the logo of the medical center embossed along the top with the words ‘Per aspera ad astra’ (Through hardships to the stars) inscribed below. Well written, too, the five ‘Ws prominent in the opening paragraphs reflecting the undeniable talents of an ex-hack’s hand at work, journalistic skills used in the pursuit of public relations’ goals, high salary, bonuses and generous benefits.

Short, succinct, with punch, the first word faithfully adhered to the golden rule of intros: neither ‘the’ or ‘a.’ It struck a fine balance – informative with a catchy opening and the medical center mentioned from the off. Its quirky, tantalizing news lead was a red flag to a bullish reporter. That’s why Colm re-read it. That’s why it didn’t end up spiked and in the trash as had the osteoporosis update from the Dairy Farmers of America and the monthly list of free pre-natal clinics at Baptist Health Clinic.

*Ancient remedy aids patient*

*Returning to the days of our medieval ancestors, local researchers from*

*the University of Kansas Medical Center are using leeches - those flabby, bloodthirsty little creatures - to help treat certain skin disorders. And in a particularly remarkable case, special leeches flown in from California will be used to help a middle-aged woman from Olathe, Ks. avoid a major infection that could leave her face severely scarred for life following a surgical incision that failed to heal properly.*

A tingling feeling crept over him, the kind he felt when a tantalizing story jumped out at him. That's why he was heading to work early. He wanted a head start. Other papers would be on to it and he'd be embarrassed if left behind at the starting line. The thought made him push down harder on the accelerator.

After all, he had a job to do. Not to mention dealing with Pratt, a troublesome managing editor who'd use any excuse to make his life a misery.

## Chapter three

### ***Robbed of everything but hope***

*GALVESTON, TEXAS - When human skin meets fire it doesn't flame – it burns, darkening until it blisters and peels. To survive, the victim must undergo debridement; an excruciatingly painful process to cut away contaminated skin.*

*Six-year-old David DaBell of Odessa, Mo., has had to endure that and other treatments at the Shriners Burn Hospital for Crippled Children here after a fire at his parents' home burned skin over 98 per cent of his body.*

*David is motionless and speechless, communicating only with his eyes as he lies on a special bed of silicon beads, his charred body wrapped in bandages.*

*Doctors' main concern is that David will succumb to infection. The flames destroyed his nerve endings and the lack of protective skin allowed bacteria to run rampant. Six square yards of cadaver skin have been applied to cover the wounds, while any remnants of good skin have been stripped off for harvesting.*

*By the time an eight-hour surgery was over, David's body was a patchwork of new and old skin. He was iridescent with layers of silver sulfadiazine and sulfamylon antibiotic solution.*

*"He was almost dead for 48 hours," said Doctor David Herndon, medical director of the burn unit. "He lost a catastrophic amount of fluid. He was bloated, his arms severely swollen as capillaries leaked fluid..."*

Doctor Gray leaned back from his computer with a sigh. It might just work. He seemed the kind of reporter he needed. Of course there were risks but at this stage there were no other options. For the nth time, he wondered. Was he making the right decision? The thought sent him back to the fateful day a few weeks ago when he got the call.

\*\*\*

“Jack, I’m so glad to hear from you. Any news?”

“Of course, Gray, aren’t I the best ophthalmologist you know?”

“You might well be. But that’ll depend very much on what you’ve got to tell me.”

“My, my, you are piling on the pressure. I’ve not seen you this jittery since your fainting frolics that day in Mass Gen.”

Gray smiled with nostalgia. His old friend was right. It wasn’t often he was this nervous. Not since that forgettable afternoon as an enthusiastic young medical student when he’d collapsed watching emergency treatment of a chemical skin peel gone wrong. Jack was there. Had caught him as he fell. Said as he lifted him that he’d saved his career from literally ‘crashing to the floor’ and a lifetime’s supply of fine wines was but fair reward. The mistake he’d made, however, was not specifying the exact amount, so Gray had escaped penury through his residency years by sending a single bottle of vintage red once a year.

“OK, I’ve got the file here in front of me,” Jack resumed. “Arrival at the hospital after the crash is probably the best starting point, though we can’t ignore the report by the lead paramedic at the accident scene. He said, and I quote, ‘the subject seemed dizzy, rubbing her eyes constantly complaining of pain and severe itching.’”

Gray jotted the words, ‘initial complaints - dizziness, itchiness’ in a notebook.

“A doctor wrote on the admission form, wrongly as it turned out, ‘severe posterior blepharitis in the left eye’,” Jack continued. “I’m afraid, Gray, medical training isn’t what it used to be.”

He waited but getting no reply, continued, “Initial examination showed chronic inflammation of the right eyelid but no signs of chalazions.”

Gray started writing again, ‘initial misdiagnosis.’

“Closer examination by attending physician showed cornea also affected. Gentamicin was instilled and eye was patched. Patient kept for further treatment and observation. Next day ophthalmologic consultation documented impaired vision and a corneal abscess in patient’s eye. Gram stain of corneal scrapings revealed gram-negative rods. Culture of the corneal scrapings presented pseudomonas aeruginosa with identical antibiotic susceptibility patterns. Following inpatient therapy, including subconjunctival gentamicin, infection eased. Upon discharge from hospital, however, dense inflammatory

corneal infiltrate and subsequently, diffuse neovascularization of the cornea developed.”

“Could it have simply been glass fragments from the car’s smashed windscreen?” Gray ventured.

“Negative. No evidence of that. No foreign bodies detected in tissue samples.”

“What other avenues did you explore?”

“We checked for keratitis.”

“Amoebic?”

“She doesn’t wear contact lenses so hardly likely. No presence of acanthamoeba in corneal culture.”

“Bacterial?”

“Negative both for staphylococcus aureus and pseudomonas aeruginosa.”

“What about viral? Herpes simplex?”

“No dendritic ulcers.”

“I suppose onchocerciasis is out of the question?”

“River blindness? We considered it. An interesting possibility. Probably would have been the most celebrated case ever recorded. Considering what she does for a living, she could have been the tragic, modern-day Nefertiti, Queen of the Pyramids.”

“What the heck? You’ve lost me.”

“Our lady travels to exotic places. In fact, she was in Egypt recently on what they call in the business, ‘a shoot.’ But that’s where the remote possibility of river blindness becomes even more remote. Her customary lodgings during such soirées could hardly be described as mud and wattle huts in a mosquito-infested village along the Nile. She stayed in a seven- hundred-dollar-a-night luxury suite in the Four Seasons Cairo. That financial information comes from a reliable source for I’m too much of a gentleman to ask her directly. Head of cardiac surgery here told me he enjoyed such grave hardship at a conference on gene therapy last year. Obviously Gray, we have chosen the wrong specialty.”

“That my dear friend is a discussion for another day.”

“Indeed,” Jack continued jauntily. “So, the chance of blackflies leaving nematode larvae on our patient’s pillow instead of mini mint chocolates is close to zilch.”

“I see.”

“By the way, she was there for Vogue. A special swimsuit issue she told me. But riverside bathing wasn’t part of the itinerary. In fact, strictly forbidden. She wasn’t allowed to take a single swim the entire time she

was there, not as much as a quick sit-down in the Jacuzzi. Bizarre eh! How can you promote a swimsuit without taking a swim? “

Knowing how little it took for his friend to wander from the subject at hand, Gray didn't respond. His silence, however, didn't stop him doing so.

“It baffles me as much as I sense it baffles you. But, please continue.”

“The answer is - and I quote our good lady on this – ‘chlorine has an oxidizing affect on human skin. It splits hydrogen from water, causing the release of nascent oxygen and hydrogen chloride. Highly corrosive, it attacks the epidermis, removes protective oils and proteins and leaves skin dry and cracked, eventually leading to premature wrinkles.’”

“Impressive.”

“Indeed. I kid you not, Gray, this lady may know more about skin than you and I put together. If she ever considers a career change - which unfortunately for her, with what has just happened, may be right about now - I'd advise you to get her on your staff pronto. Beautiful, and - surprise, surprise, considering the general IQ level of those doing what she does – as bright as a button. Just what you need to freshen up that dowdy research facility of yours there among the corn fields.”

“My dear esteemed colleague,” Gray put in, sensing the need to rein in his friend's musings. “Beauty, as we both are very well aware, is in the eye of the beholder – and that goes both for this fine lady and my fine lab and this piece of fine land on which it is located. Now can we please get back to discussion of the eye and leave philosophical ramblings on the nature of beauty for another time?”

“Of course, my equally esteemed colleague, as you wish. Let me read on.”

Gray waited anxiously.

“Ok, says here, ‘no sign of bites or worms around the eye tissue, so onchocerciasis definitely ruled out.’”

“Tumors?”

“We checked for choroidal melanoma. Did I say checked? Quadruple checked. Using every examination modality we could muster. Ophthalmoscope to MRI. No sign of abnormal pigmentation or dilated vessels. Vascular layers beneath the retina clear. Doesn't smoke so no obvious carcinogen links. No family history either.”

“Floaters?”

“Plenty. And often. Said they sparkled like diamonds. We thought the floaters might be due to chronic, long-term stress from the intense glare of camera lights and flashbulbs. An everyday vocational hazard, I'd

guess. But no. She said no major problems before. Only recently. Nothing severe. Nothing like that night.”

“So that’s it?”

“Not quite. Getting back to that old Egyptian dowager Nefertiti.”

“Must we?” Gray’s sigh of protest went unnoticed.

“During this time, I happened to be indulging in my favorite pornographic magazine,, ‘Analytical Chemistry,’ and therein I found a fascinating article about how our ancient ancestors, including the great Queen herself, used a lead-based substance in their cosmetics, especially for eye makeup.”

“To avoid a lesson in classical history, are you saying Patricia used something like that?”

“Be patient my friend. Hear me out. During their research, scientists analyzed samples from ancient Egyptian makeup containers that had been preserved in the Louvre in Paris. They identified four different lead-based substances all of which produced nitric oxide in cultured human skin cells. As we know, nitric oxide is a key signaling agent in the body, revving-up the immune system to keep out invaders, particularly nasty little viruses from the dirty Nile river waters.”

“So you’re saying the ancient Egyptians may have deliberately used lead-based cosmetics to prevent eye disease? While fascinating medical anthropological research, I still don’t see the remotest connection to this case.”

“Not to worry. Just another example of my superior intellect. Bear with me a moment, all will be revealed forthwith. Move the clock forward several thousand years from Nefertiti’s day. No longer is there lead in cosmetics. It’s too risky. Instead, the beauty industry uses other substances. Things that even our nitric oxide triggers may not help detect. Things that slip past the guards right into the bloodstream, maybe even across the blood-brain barrier and cause all sorts of problems.... are you with me?”

“I quite certainly am not, but I’m certainly listening.”

“As we know, with the help of nitric oxide, the inner blood retina barrier contains tight junctions that prevent diffusion of damaging materials from the blood into the retina and vice-versa.”

“Yes.” Doctor Gray mumbled, trying to work out where Jack was going.

“Now what if a substance was created that caused the system to loosen these junctions just enough to let small molecules pass through? A bit like sneaking past the velvet rope at a gala party to where all the action

is.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Anyhow, the key to getting in - to the retina, not some post-Oscar party - is claudin-5, an important component of these junctions. Without it, they aren’t so tight. By blocking the cells in and around the eyes from making claudin-5 at the blood-retina barrier, you tweak the system so that it allows molecules of a certain size in.”

“Okay, but why would you do that?”

“To deliver.”

“Deliver? Deliver what?”

“Think, my old friend. Put that famed, fearless intrepid mind of yours to work.”

“Low molecular weight drugs into the retina to tackle conditions like macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy?”

“Ah, a lovely idea and one that might work well one day. May even be your ticket to Oslo to pick up the big prize one day. But my dear Gray, while your selflessness and generosity of spirit make you an invaluable member of the national medical consumer movement, your commercial innocence sometimes astounds me.”

Gray remained deep in thought, trying to unravel his friend’s verbal poetry.

“You are, of course, absolutely right, but looking in the wrong place for the answer,” was the reply to his silence. “America is in the midst of a billion dollar research frenzy but unfortunately it doesn’t focus on the efficacy of precise administration of therapeutic drugs. In fact, the lucrative product research I speak of is part of the reason why people like you and I are so apprehensive. This, my friend, is our call to arms.”

Gray’s eyes shot open as realization dawned. The word burst from his lips.

“Buckyballs.”

**...end of book excerpt. Order the book  
by visiting [seanhillenauthor.com](http://seanhillenauthor.com)**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



During a 40-year media career, Sean Hillen has been war correspondent, medical reporter, arts reviewer, travel writer, editor, publisher and author, as well as media trainer and creative writing coach with Ireland Writing Retreat.

Born in Belfast, northern Ireland, he wrote for Belfast Telegraph newspapers and The Irish Times before emigrating to the United States to work at the United Nations Media Center in New York. From there he moved to the Midwest with Scripps Howard

Broadcasting, now an NBC-affiliate, and then The Kansas City Times, becoming the daily newspaper's health and science correspondent.

Sean's writings have also appeared in other newspapers including Time magazine, The Wall Street Journal, the Daily Mail, The Sunday Times, The Sunday Business Post, as well as specialized publications such as American Medical News, the national newspaper of the American Medical Association, American Nurse, national magazine of the American Nurses Association, and Nursing Times in England.

After winning regional and national journalism awards, Sean left the US for Eastern Europe immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 as a volunteer with the Human Rights League to establish the

first post-Communist journalism schools in Romania. This led to him working with international aid agencies such as the British Council, United Nations Development Fund, Soros Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). He was a foreign correspondent for The Times and The Daily Telegraph, London, before establishing his own national publishing and events company based in Bucharest for 15 years.

Reflecting his achievements in academics – including two postgraduate degrees in economics and journalism – Sean was elected chairperson of the US Fulbright Commission in Romania, a position he held for four years. He was also honored by the President of Romania for launching the nation’s first-ever Corporate Citizen, Civic Journalism and Community Service Awards.

Sean’s other books include a guide to media training and a light-hearted, intra-country travelogue entitled ‘Digging for Dracula.’ His travel writings can be found at [Worlditineraries.co](http://Worlditineraries.co) and [JustLuxe.com](http://JustLuxe.com)

Sean shares his life with his Transylvanian wife, Columbia, and two enchanting collies, Siog (‘fairy’ in Irish) and Lugh (the Celtic Sun God) in the ‘Forgotten County’ of Donegal, a northwestern region boasting the most awe-inspiring landscapes on Ireland’s ‘Wild Atlantic Way.’

### **Author’s Note**

*I welcome, indeed yearn, for your comments, good or bad, extraordinarily generous in your praise or downright critical (constructively so, preferably). Either way, please get in touch. It’s always gratifying for any writer to receive feedback.*

*‘Pretty Ugly’ is intended as the first in a series of novels focusing on Colm Heaney and his particular, some might say peculiar, journalistic penchant for uncovering intriguing truths that matter, even in the most remotest of places on the planet.*

**[seanhillenauthor.com](http://seanhillenauthor.com)**