

Warm enough for you? *Jasmine Rizer, Allegra Lingo,
Barbara Barnes, Phil Juliano
and The Dream Journal*

The Blotter

June 2013

MAGAZINE

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FRONT COVER, "Taste Music" by
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The Blotter is a production of

The Blotter Magazine, Inc.,
Durham, NC.

A 501 (c)3 non-profit

ISSN 1549-0351

www.blotterrag.com

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"Regret"

"I coulda been somebody..."

It can be rough thinking about what you might have done or been. Sometimes it hurts like an old football injury (is supposed to, in the old days when real men didn't wear helmets. I have no idea.) And we can be tough with ourselves, imagining that the goals we didn't achieve were just a fair day's effort away. Why didn't we give it a go? Why aren't we rich, famous, respected, adored? What's wrong with us?

So occasionally we get in that mood. You know, that one we get in. Blue. Deep funk. The Ditch. And it doesn't help that a lot of otherwise kind and empathetic folks will tell you to cut it out, wipe the tears off your face and move on. Your mom and dad, maybe. Your high-school guidance counselor, for sure. Your bestest-best friend (horrors!) Hey, maybe they're right.

Regret, in other words, is for sissies and baby loser-pants. Stop moping, we are told. Stop thinking about yourself so much. Something went wrong? So what? Dust yourself off. Get back on the horse. Here - wherever you are - you are driven to move on without looking back, except in private nostalgia or with that *au courant* fad of self-loathing who we were and what we once adored. (I must admit without sheepishness that I do love the '80's. Not everything about them, of course. But it's so true - she blinded me with science. She blinded me! With *science!*)

Tangential thought: what is the deal with having such blistering hindsight? That was indeed your dance-style, your mascara color, your favorite song. You wore those pants, and happily. Whose opinion do you value so highly that you would bitch-slap that earlier you who loved them so well? And do you do the same for places you've lived, people you've loved? I hope not. I trust that you keep your heart of hearts honest and untainted (see, even that last sentence smacked of sarcastic, Lettermanesque smarm).

It begs my first question - is there anything left that we can look back on without a sneer? The photo of tall hair? The tattoo of a bar-code? Your beautiful twenty-something girlfriend who was as mean as a rattlesnake? And speaking of which, must everything be picked apart like roadkill spotted by buzzards soaring in the updraft of a July afternoon? I get (but don't agree with) your hatred for your old Jen Anniston do, but your scathing indictment of a misspent youth because you didn't finish your college degree? Come now. I understand the disappointment of having missed out on the 400 level

courses at your university, the camaraderie of beer-and-arguments about multiverses and the transcendentalists. Nobody else thinks going back and finishing your bachelor's degree is something to look askance at. And if you never do, well, so it goes. But disappointment is different from regret. At least I think it is. (MS Word's synonym check disagrees – which doesn't dissuade me in the least.) Disappointment is a random twinge in your memory. Regret is a needling in your memory banks that layers frustration on top of frustration. I should have. If I had I would be. What a shame I didn't.

Because there was a strange warm week in February, then a hasty retreat to winter for March and most of April, the camellias out front did not bloom as abundantly as they usually do. The fiery red blossoms were like stars in the too street-lit Chapel Hill skies of today, not twenty years ago when I first moved here. Regret? Not really. This was a great and beautiful spring. The geese and ducks squawk when I come to check on them. The Persian green pine-pollen coats everything, waiting for rain to wash it into the ground. Underfoot, it will become nutrient to all, payback for all the grief it has given my sinuses. Regret? Never. My eldest went dress-shopping with my wife to find something special for a spring dance. She's growing up. Regret? Of course not.

We've spoken about rejection before and I received four this spring. Ask any editor: rejection isn't (or shouldn't be) cause for regret. Don't misunderstand me. Rejection sucks. It makes you feel lousy. But regret none of the pieces you put out there to be judged for some manner of worthiness. I regret none of the rebuffs I've received in my life. I believe in paths and like Mr. Frost, I know that this one I am on has made all of the difference.

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CAUTION

Looking for love. Wrong places? No such thing.

“Better”

by Jasmine Odessa Rizer

When I am a teenager and even a pre-teen, I will be exceptionally morbid, having crushes on Edgar Allan Poe and napping in the cemetery on the tiny college campus where I attend gifted summer camp, painning my nails black and reading Lovecraft and *Dracula* and listening to the Stooges while my perhaps better adjusted peers are rocking out to Janet Jackson and wearing drop-waist velvet dresses to eighth-grade dances.

But before I will be an adolescent in the early Nineties, I am a child in the late Seventies and early Eighties, and before I am six years old, three people I know personally will die. This may be what will make me so strange and dark, leave me trying to squint through the veil

even though a loving mother and father and countless play-friends remain here, in this world, with me.

*

My mother’s grandmother passes away when I am four, and everyone will say that I am too young to remember her, but I’m not. Not really. I lie in bed beside her after her stroke, and there I store up memories of her voice, her gleaming white hair, the drugstore perfume that Mama still dabs on her throat every day. Later, I will hear stories about her from Mama: how she rescued orphaned canaries from the pet store, poking food down their tiny throats on the end of a stick, keeping them alive through the same combination of stubbornness and tender care that she brought to everything. How she lost children, and grandchildren, to crime and to sickness and to custody battles in an era when respectable, mentally stable women didn’t file for divorce. How she was so beloved by her African-American friends that she was invited, regularly, to the black church in town at a time when races did not mix.

These stories will impress

me later. All I know about her now is that she is the best old lady in the world. I tell her so, often. “Alice,” she says to me. (I am named after my grandmother, a woman my mother will later describe to me as “just so fucking crazy, I don’t know where to start.”) “Alice. Out of all the little girls in the world, I would choose you.”

Her words are a little hard to understand. Maybe. Not if you’re really paying attention. I have very little patience with other sick children who are afraid of their sick or injured relatives. “Paw Paw talks funny now,” someone might say. “It’s creepy,” and I will probably call the speaker a scaredy cat. Like all the women on my mother’s side, I am going to have to learn the hard way that I am lucky, that not everyone was born with nerves of steel.

My own badassery deserts me on the day when my grandmother, Grandma Alice, greets me at the door of her mother’s room and tells me that she has some bad news. “You won’t be able to see Nana anymore,” she says gently. Sometimes she can be really almost kind. I am too little to really understand the idea of *dead*, but I know Nana has gone away forever and that nobody can do anything about it, least of all Nana herself. Rage and despair well up inside me, and I start to cry. I never imagined the

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world could be so cruel.

*

When I am five, we live in a big white house, and Mama and Daddy and I are pretty happy, except that Mama and Daddy fight a lot. It's not bad, like fights you see on television, or the kind of fights where you are supposed to tell another grownup – not your parents, who are the ones causing all the trouble – what's going on at home. Mostly I hear them talking very fast and low, and when Daddy gets too mad, he just gets in the car and leaves. He doesn't waste time yelling, and he doesn't hit anybody, and he doesn't threaten not to come back. Sometimes I think Mama wishes he wouldn't come back, but she never says so.

When Mama is worn out from the fighting, we go across the street to Shirley's house. Shirley is a good neighbor and a good friend. She has a fat little dog named Foxy, who snaps at me but never really bites me. I chase Foxy up and down the stairs and she wags her stumpy little tail with delight. Mama sits in the kitchen with Shirley. They drink tea and coffee and have private conversations that I am probably not supposed to hear. Every now and then I hear phrases, like "just feel like giving up" and "go down in the basement and scream" that make my stomach twist painfully, like I'm

scared but I don't know why.

In July, Shirley goes out of town for a long time, and when she comes back, there is someone with her: her grownup son. He is an incredibly glamorous figure to me, as anyone's grownup son would be. He has made the perilous journey to adulthood and still remained an ordinary person with a mother. I have proof of this because I *know* his mother. The idea of someday being my own parents' grownup daughter is both thrilling and terrifying and I am what Daddy calls "busting a gut" to meet Shirley's son, but I am not allowed even a glimpse of him. My mother says that Shirley's son is very sick and needs some peace and quiet. I want to know if I can meet him when he gets better. Mama says, "Honey, he might not get better. It's very sad."

I am about to ask, *What, he'll just be sick forever?*, and then I remember how Nana got sick and didn't get better, and suddenly I don't want to ask any more questions. I want to forget all about Shirley's son, as a matter of fact.

Mostly this is easy to do, because he stays in his own room most of the time – all the time, when Mama and I are visiting. But one day, by mistake, I go into his room. I am looking for the room full of Shirley's turtle figurines. She has what seems like about a million

turtles, not cutesy ones standing up on two legs in hats or clothes, but turtles with four legs and a shell, like in nature. They are all sizes, made of glass, marble, clay, every substance imaginable. Shirley lets me look at them any time I want to, because she knows I will not try to take them down and play with them like some kids might. Only instead of the turtle room, I end up in her son's room.

It's not too scary, because the first thing I see in it is a hospital bed, like the one I lay in when Nana and I were talking together. Then I see the man in the armchair, reading by the window.

Later, I will realize that this man should have scared the hell out of me, because he was very visibly very sick, paper-thin, the bones showing in his hand that holds the book, his eyes spooky-bright like Foxy's. But right now, the most beautiful lady I have ever known (besides my mother, who really is movie-star lovely by anybody's standards) is my great-grandmother, who could only move one side of her face during the time that I was closest to her. So I don't know that I am supposed to be afraid of this very sick, in fact dying, man.

He looks up at me and smiles a tired little smile at me, kind of like Mama's smile on a day after a bad fight with Daddy.

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“Sorry,” I blurt. “Excuse me. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he says. “You must be Alice,” he says.

“I like to read, too,” I say, pointing at the book in his hand, because now that I am accidentally in his room, disturbing his peace and quiet, it seems only polite to say something about something besides his mystery disease. “Is that good?”

He looks down at his book, which I can see is called *Tales of the City*, gives a short little laugh, and says, “Not really. Now that you mention it, not really. Guess I’d better quit wasting my time on it.” He winks at me. “Thanks, kid.”

This is the first and last time I ever meet Shirley’s son. We never become great friends. He does not do me any extraordinary kindness on this occasion, except that he does. Some part of my five-year-old mind must somehow grasp the generosity of this dying man, who rises above whatever fear and bitterness and exhaustion trail him constantly, for long enough to be civil to a child. To remember her name. I must understand this on some instinctive level, or maybe it’s just that Mama, who was herself raised right by her grandmother’s people, brought me up to appreciate civility in a world that will have increasingly little of it as I grow up. Whatever the reason, this dying man more than impresses me; he stamps his image on my heart in such a way that I will never get over it. Later in life, I will come to understand that Shirley’s son is one of the first people to die from a disease no one wants to discuss, a disease that some people will come to think is hilarious because it seems, at first, to be mostly killing a certain kind of man. I will meet pious little church ladies who assure me confidently that men who love men deserve to die slowly

and horribly. I will have difficulty not slapping these ladies, starting hair-pulling fights with them in the way that Grandma Alice started fights with romantic rivals in her heyday. I will have even more difficulty reminding myself that it is not God’s fault if these ladies claim to speak for Him.

I will also be friends with such a large number of gay men that even my therapist will call me a fag hag. (Of course, my therapist will also say things like, “I feel you’re wearing very masculine clothes to these sessions to try and protect yourself against *the process*.”) And I will be utterly unable, for the life of me, to read *Tales of the City* and form my own opinion of it.

*

The last person I know who dies before I am even in the seventh grade is Granddaddy Sal.

When people tell me later that I was too little to remember Granddaddy Sal, I will know, in this case, that they are mostly right. Mostly all I will ever be able to remember about him is the smell of his pipe smoke and the wonderful sad country music that he loved. Granddaddy Sal is confined to one or two impressions at the farthest corners of my memory because he and Grandma Alice have been divorced since about the time that I learned to walk. I do not see Granddaddy Sal in the hospital while he is dying, but Grandma Alice is over there all the time. My own parents are divorcing by this time, and I am not puzzled as to why my grandmother visits her ex-husband in the hospital so much. Divorce, everyone reassures me constantly, does not mean that two people *hate* each other. And after all, he is probably dying. Like Nana and like Shirley’s son, he might not get better. What puzzles me is that

although it seems to me as if Granddaddy Sal should be the center of the attention, since he is the one lying in Guthrie-Maddox Memorial Hospital with failing organs, Grandma Alice is pretty much the star of the show. She recounts her visits to the hospital in great detail, with as much flair as a storyteller I once saw at the state fair. Making sure that everyone can see her blinking back tears, she says things like, “I thought Sal was asleep, until I heard this little tiny voice say, *Alice, I’m mad at you.*”

Sometimes I get really sick of these storytelling sessions, and I also get angry at my grandfather for handing her these stories to make herself the star of. I know this is a terrible way to feel about your own grandparents, especially when one of them is dying, and sometimes I think that God will strike me dead, for being so mean, until one day I hear Mama on the telephone, saying, “Don’t, Dad. You’re playing right into her hands.” I’m not sure what *playing right into her hands* means, but I do have a feeling it indicates that Mama feels much the same about the whole situation.

When Granddaddy Sal does die, I want very much to grieve, but I barely remember him. I’m sorry, for his sake, that his life is over, but it’s not like when Nana died, leaving me behind with what felt like a cannonball-sized hole where my heart used to be. On the day of his funeral, I am sent to my friend Julia’s house to play all day, because Mama says there is no point in dragging a five-year-old to a Catholic funeral service.

*

It’s only when I get to be about twelve, and interested in love stories of all kinds, that I begin to try and unravel the mystery of how my grandfather died, and why he

would have been angry at my grandmother about it. Based on the information I can squeeze out of my mother, I infer that while my grandparents were still married, Granddaddy Sal developed some sort of rare and potentially stomach polyps. His doctors scraped everything out and told him that if he avoided drinking alcohol, he need not worry much about a relapse. A few years later, Grandma Alice started acting mean and crazy – and probably, I figure, cheating on my grandfather. They got a divorce, and that was pretty bad in itself, because Granddaddy Sal was a Catholic, and he had already gone against his religion to marry my grandmother when she had been divorced three times already. It wasn't the divorce that made him start drinking, though. He had believed in his wife absolutely, and he drank to forget how badly she had disappointed him. It wasn't suicide, not really. He would have preferred to be able to drink without the polyps coming back and eventually turning malignant. But as it was, a shortened life was the price he was willing to pay to keep from thinking about my grandmother all the time.

I carry this story around from the age of twelve and think about it, and by the time I am halfway through high school, it has led me to this conclusion: true love is a vicious lie that killed my grandfather.

This is one reason why I would rather listen the bleak "love" songs of the folk singers in my mother's record collection, or the blistering angry Stooges and Velvet Underground records my dad collected in the Sixties, than the songs some of my friends love. Their songs have titles like "Vision of Love" and "Everything I Do (I Do It For You)." I snort disdainfully and sit with my Walkman, listening to

tapes I made sitting at the living room stereo, or at my father's house on the weekend. Every mix tape I make, for myself or for anybody else, ends, without exception, with Carole King's recording of "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?", from *Tapestry*. I think it is the saddest song I have ever heard, because its moral is that you cannot trust anyone. Not even about the guy you are about to jump in bed with. *Especially* not the guy you are about to jump in bed with. As far as I am concerned, all the truth of the world is contained in "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?"

*

I also have very little sympathy for my grandmother, whom I consider to be the other vicious and false thing that killed Granddaddy Sal. After she herself dies, when I am in college, I get riotously drunk and tell my horrified roommate that it is my intention "to put the *fun* back in funeral." At her actual funeral, I am dry-eyed and stony. So is my mother, but she seems to feel a lot more stunned and sorry about her own mother's wasted life than I do. I try to explain to my roommate that Grandma Alice was a horrible person all her life. Her gentleness to me after Nana's death has been completely forgotten.

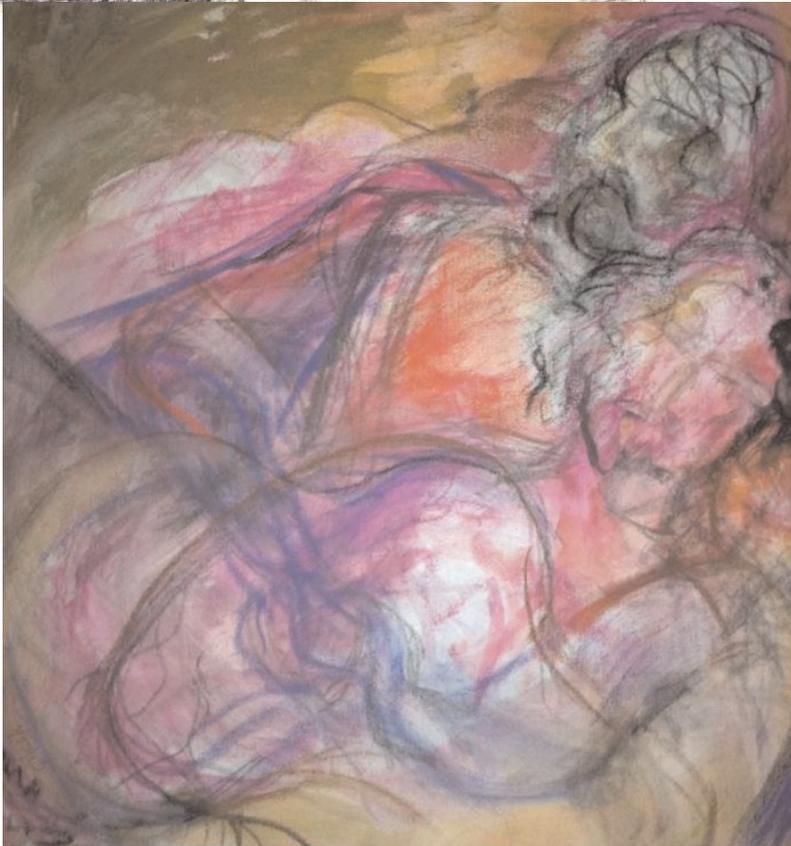
Not long after this, I will fall in love with the brother of one of my million and one gay friends, a gentle hippie English teacher who reminds me a little of Zonker Harris, from the comic strip *Doonesbury*. ("You're attracted to a guy who looks like a cartoon character?" Julia, who goes to school in Philadelphia, asks me on the telephone. "What are they doing to you down in the Dirty South?") Because I know true love is a vicious lie, and because I recently turned twenty-one, I begin drinking heavily to make the feeling go away. True to my heritage, I also start acting mean and crazy, in order to drive this young man away, and because I *feel* increasingly mean and crazy. I am mean and crazy all the time and sometimes, in class or at my job at the bookstore, I dream about crossing myself out forever with a big black crayon, a giant X left sitting in the chair where I used to be. I wish I could rip my own heart out sometimes, and eat it. Once or twice, at home, I pick up a knife in the kitchen and think about sinking it into my chest so hard my sternum splinters, or cutting my wrists over the kitchen sink. The thing that stops me from doing this is the thought of my black shaggy dog, Buster, coming into the kitchen to find me lying on the floor all cold and bloody, wondering why I don't

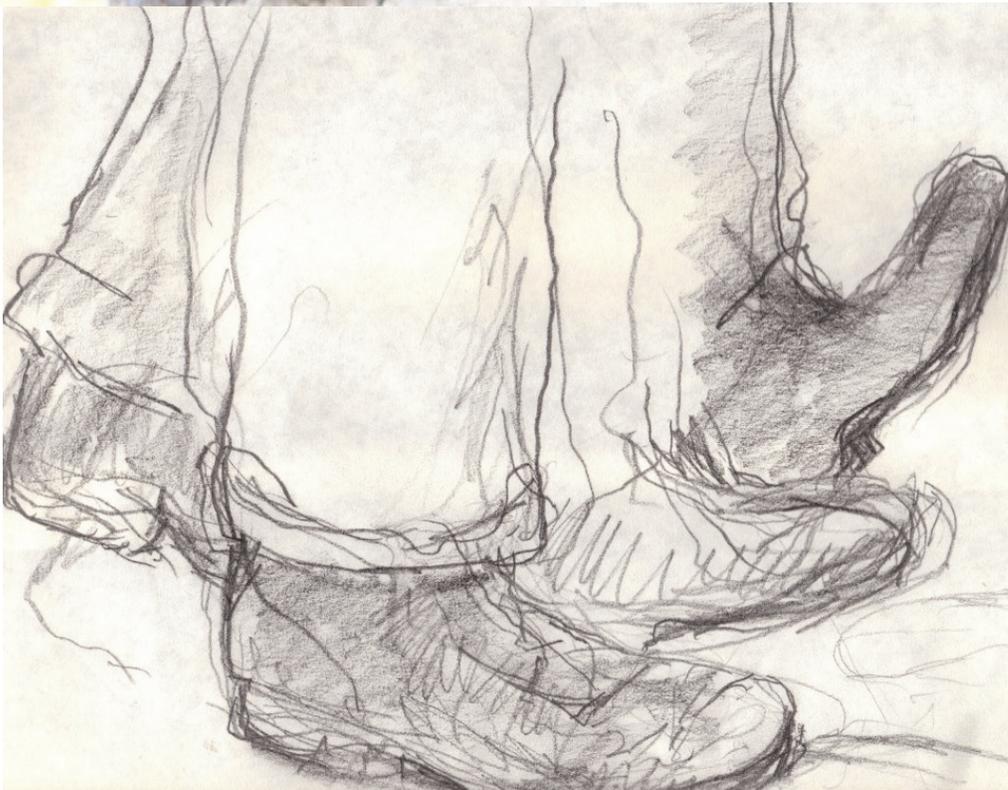
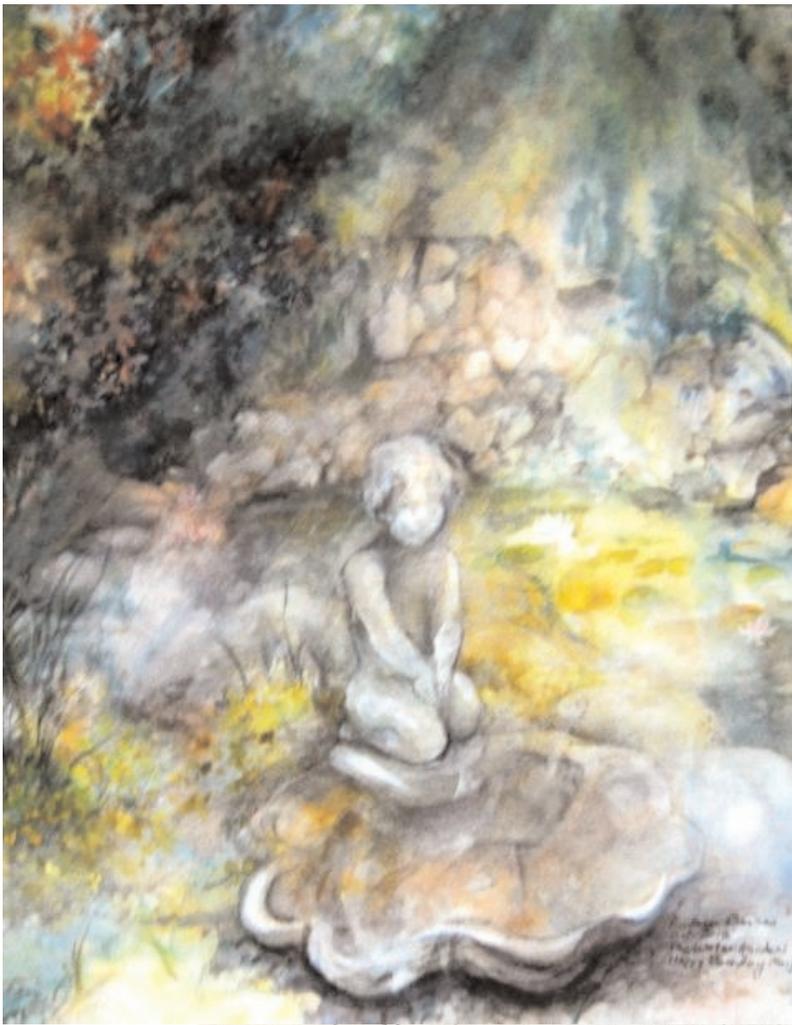


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wake up. That, and my mother having to identify my body down at the Clarke County morgue. Nothing else stops me. I know I don't deserve to live.

My friend Mariah lives across the street from a cemetery, and at her Hallowe'en party, I drink six big plastic cups of what Mariah's boyfriend calls "hunch punch," which is basically cheap wine mixed with all the odds and ends from the half-empty liquor bottles in his kitchen, plus a bunch of orange Kool-Aid powder, which last is intended to make it look festive. Seconds after draining my sixth cup, I drop it to the floor and head out across the street. October isn't all that cold in Georgia, and I'm wearing a tiny, sexy green dress with no coat or sweater. What I do in the graveyard to get all scratched up, I will never be able to remember, but Mariah finds me halfway up a big oak tree early the next morning with

my shoes gone and my feet bloody. Assuming that someone put something in my drink, she coaxes me down and drives me to the emergency room. As I sit there, insisting that I'm *fine*, I am eventually surprised to hear myself say, "I just had too much to drink. I always have too much to drink. I think I need to quit that."

Mariah takes and squeezes my hand. "I'm really glad you said that," she says seriously. "I think you've been trying to take care of yourself the best way you know how. But I think another way would be better."

As I sit in the waiting room, waiting to find out if I am going to have to have my stomach pumped or what, I think about what Mariah has just said. Reality seems to tilt sideways in my head, but to make more sense from this angle anyway. I am thinking, for some reason,

about Granddaddy Sal, and it seems to me that maybe my calculations were a little bit wrong; maybe my grandfather tried to take care of his broken heart the best way he knew how. It just happened to be an incautious and ultimately fatal way. Maybe true love didn't kill my grandfather any more than it was just being gay in New York that killed Shirley's gracious, smiling, tired son. A hot prickly sensation of shame rushes up my spine as I wonder whether, in my stone-hearted lack of sympathy for my Grandma Alice, I am really all that different from the brittle, self-satisfied church ladies who feel that Shirley's son deserved to die. I think about how miserable I have been for the last year, how mean and crazy I have been, and I think it likely that however much pain my grandmother gave to other people, she was probably in at least that much pain herself. That doesn't mean she was a nice person, or that I really miss her, but now that I've had a taste of being insane, myself, I almost wish I had tried harder to understand her when she was alive.

I sit in a hard plastic chair next to Mariah, and I look at my feet, bloody and curled up on the cold linoleum, and I start, cautiously, to think about another way that would be better.



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"The Girl On The Plane"

by Allegra J. Lingo

We will never know for sure if it was a suicide. If it was, I certainly wouldn't blame him.

I was standing in the middle of Best Buy on a sunny March afternoon, surrounded by suburban tech fanatics waiting my turn for the Geek Squad. My laptop hard drive had suddenly failed on me that morning, going from my repository of stories to a black screen in a time it takes to snap my fingers. My cell phone began to ring, and I pulled it out of my pocket and saw it was my mom calling.

"Lance was in a car accident this morning. Allegra, he's dead. Lance is dead."

Around 10am that morning, with the first signs of Spring spreading across the South Dakota plains still barren from a winter buried under blankets of snow, Lance was driving his beloved bright red Pontiac Grand Am from his apartment in Sioux Falls to Madison, twenty-five miles north on I-29 before turning onto the two-lane Highway 34, where he attended classes at Dakota State University. I imagine he was speeding - above all else, Lance loved

going fast. I can see the car racing down the two lane highway, nearly devoid of all life, probably running late for school. What I can't picture in my mind is his car crossing the center line into the side of the large tour bus carrying fifty senior citizens to the casino, with enough force to cause the tour bus to flip onto its side and into the ditch. It was late enough in the morning that the sun would not have been streaming through the windshield at a vision-impairing angle. Maybe he was changing radio stations. Maybe reaching for his phone. Maybe he was committing any other number of infractions that had caused his license to be revoked and suspended. But he drove that day anyway.

Maybe in that moment he decided he was done and saw the bus as the way out.

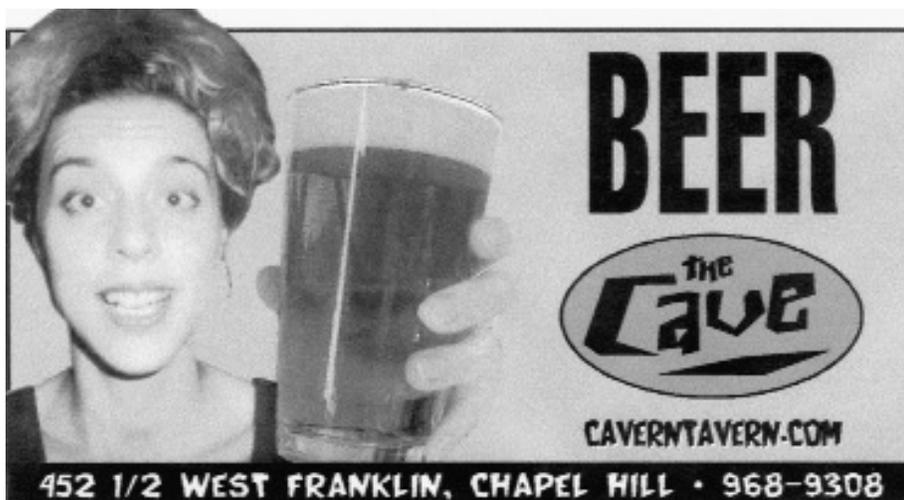
No one in the family really expected my cousin Lance to become a mature adult, even though he was twenty-four the day he crashed his car. His mother, my mother's sister Janine, always said that she wished she could "put him back in the oven and cook him a little longer." He had been hyperac-

tive since birth and was put on Ritalin in the late 1980s while still in elementary school. This added to his troubles, but it certainly wasn't all of them. It wasn't uncommon to see his father, Al, strike him with whatever was nearby, no matter who else was in the room. We never realized how serious the physical abuse was until the Christmas Eve we all watched Al yank the phone off the wall and bash Lance over the head with it. Even then, no one reported it. It's Christmas, the adults told us.

There were other troubles, too. Just after he got his driver's license during his sophomore year, it was taken away and he was placed in juvenile detention because he spent his nights driving around Sioux Falls, South Dakota, exposing himself to young women. He spent a year and a half in the South Dakota detention center, and on his second day back at school, the beginning of his senior year and with explicit instructions from the judge that if there were any more issues of a sexual nature that he'd be sent back, he fondled a girl's butt in the hallway, and was sent away again.

"It's that girl's fault. She didn't have to say anything!" our Grandma said.

Lance's timeline gets fuzzy for me in the six years between heading back to the detention center and his death. I know they let him out for Janine's funeral when she lost her battle with breast cancer. I know that he was moved for his own safety to another facility because he was bullied and showed no signs of rehabilitation. And then another facility. South Dakota. Missouri. Nebraska. Utah. We began to believe that he didn't care where he went next, as long as it wasn't back home, where he eventually did have to go. We asked ourselves, What do we do with him? How do we help? The same ques-



The Blotter

tions we'd asked ourselves since we had all accepted the fact that no one could bake him a little longer.

*

I thought about Lance as I drove in my own beloved car, Gatsby, a 2001 silver Volkswagen Cabrio, from Minneapolis down to Sioux Falls for the funeral. Like him, I've always loved driving. I'd spent the last three years touring across the country as the saxophonist in the back up funk band for a dance show and, whenever possible, I always took my own car. I liked the freedom and quiet. Just me and miles of highway, and as long as I ended up at our destination in time to load in the theater and perform, I could take all the detours I wanted. Over a three year period I put 40,000 miles of detours on Gatsby.

I glanced down at the rubber duckie hanging out on my dashboard, the one I'd picked up a few months before in Stone, Kentucky, smack dab in the coal-mining region of Appalachia. It was my first time in that part of the country, and I wound my way down the curvy backroads deeper and deeper into the hills, the onset of fall shearing the trees slowly of their leaves, barren branches rising like ghosts mingling with the mountain mists. I couldn't imagine living so far off the Interstate, in so much isolation, and I couldn't imagine why they had booked our show to come play.



Our lodging was at the Comfort Inn. For musicians on the road, staying at a Comfort Inn means that either the people who booked the gig were angry that there was a lodging stipulation built into the contract, or that it was a very poor town and the Comfort Inn was the best place to host guests. It became quite clear as the roads fell into disrepair as I neared Stone that it was the latter. I checked into the hotel and went up to my room, thankful that I had time for a nap and shower before the show that night. On the bathtub was the usual single-ply rough bath towel, but that wasn't all. There was also a rubber duckie, and a note.

"Welcome to Stone. We are very glad your here. Have a great stay."

This was not a normal Comfort Inn; it was a franchise operating outside the controlling eye of corporate, probably because corporate had no interest in driving route 120 around all the twisting bends to this dying town. If they'd let them keep the note, they would have at least moved it from the bathroom and corrected the grammar. I liked immediately that these people in Stone cared, and that they gave each guest a rubber duckie. It made me smile.

Over at the theater that evening before the show started I stood outside smoking with the theater's sound guy, Pickle. We stood silently, watching the stars beginning to illuminate over the Appalachians. I turned to Pickle and said that it was one of the most gorgeous parts of the country I'd ever seen.

"Of course," said Pickle. "It's God's country."

There was no irony or sarcasm in his voice. He was just stating a fact. I looked up into the sky

again, and thought about how hard is it not to believe in something bigger than yourself when you're surrounded by so much natural beauty and peacefulness.

I left early the next morning to get on the road to our next show. The first one hundred miles of my drive wasn't on the Interstate, and I wove my way through the Cumberland Gap into Tennessee. The sun began to peek out over the east, silhouetting the mountains. When I saw a sign for a scenic overlook I pulled off the road, thinking it had to be good because the whole drive was a painting. I got out of my car, walked to the guard rail, and gasped at what I saw. Stretching before me was a valley, hidden amongst the hills I'd driven through the last two hours, a wide river snaking around before finally leaving through an unseen outlet.

It was a shame Lance never saw that view. I was sad he never got his own rubber duckie from a Comfort Inn in God's Country.

*

The funeral parlor was already full of weeping friends and stunned family when I arrived. Pictures of Lance filled the lobby, and flowers filled the empty spaces. I slipped into a row of chairs and sat next to my sister, Marissa, and my other cousins - Lauren, Lance's younger sister, and Taylor, fresh off the plane from his home in Arizona, now the lone male grandchild on my mother's side of the family. The leaflet said that the youth pastor from the First Baptist Church would lead us through the public grieving process with words of comfort. Although Lauren was extremely involved in the church, none of us thought Lance really cared about religion. The youth pastor was young, nearly a youth himself, his pants pressed unnaturally straight, a mourning appropriate tie laying flat

against a plain white button down, modest hipster glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. He stumbled his way through poorly planned words, not so much comforting us that Lance was now held in God's hand, but rather warning us that if we didn't want to go to Hell we needed to keep our eye on the prize, the destination, and forget about the particulars in the journey of life.

Definitely a Baptist.

I found my mind wandering, tuning out the pastor's hollow words. Nothing he was saying were things I agreed with. How could you not enjoy the journey? Isn't God found in the beauty and wonder of life just as much as in how He will provide for us after we die?

If I didn't respect the journey for the unexpected turns and detours, I would just fly everywhere. For me, this isn't really an option. When I was little I would have dreams about my death, and it was always one of two ways: plane crash, or falling off the sidewalk and getting my head smashed like a warm M&M. I deftly avoid the latter by always walking on the part of sidewalks closest to buildings, but with our tour schedule there were times I couldn't avoid flying, not when sometimes gigs took us to places like the Caribbean, Washington,

Oregon, and Colorado in the span of a week. My doctor prescribes Xanax for me now, but even doubling the dosage listed on my bottle doesn't assuage the level of fear that overtakes my body. Instead of having full on panic attacks I have silent still ones, my limbs at rest while tears stream down my face, and I calmly and rationally say nonsense like, "I can't get on this plane. If I do, it will fall out of the sky and we'll all die."

When I get into this state inevitably at least one flight attendant will slyly pass a mini bottle of vodka to me from her drink cart, even if I'm sitting in coach and she's not supposed to without making me pay. United Airlines may profess that, with them, you fly the friendly skies, but with Delta you definitely fly the drunken ones.

I tell people that the flight that planted the seed of paranoia was a British Airways flight between Dublin and London in December of 1999. It was an early morning flight and, like most winter mornings in the British Isles, was full of dreary, dense fog. I knew the flight had been a bit bumpy and we'd been turning some, and at one point I looked out the window and lost all sense of where I was. I couldn't tell if we were right side up or upside down, on our right, or on our left. I

have since learned this is what pilots call "The Leans", and when it happens to pilots they have no choice but to rely on their cockpit instruments and the disembodied voices of the air traffic controllers. But as a passenger I have no instruments, no numbers or readings that tell me everything is fine, no disembodied voices. I realize that flying is just an exercise in relinquishing control, which is not my strong suit.

Now that I think about it, it was never Lance's strong suit, either.

There were earlier moments of flight panic and paranoia before that foggy jump across the Irish sea. A memory comes back to me, I couldn't have been more than six, and as my parents and I got on the plane and began to walk down the aisle to our seats my body stopped moving and I clutched my brown teddy bear with his red bow tie, started screaming that I couldn't go to my seat, and my dad had to pick me up to get me to move.

I remember flying home from Germany with my mother when I was five, waiting in the security line in the Frankfurt Airport and seeing a young man dressed all in black leather sprinting through security without stopping, three armed guards chasing after him.



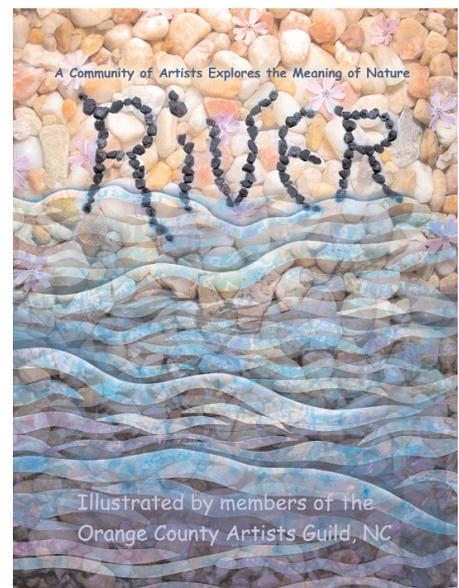
CHRISTIAN THOMPSON

the hog father

PLEASE HELP SUPPORT MY DREAM.

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The Blotter

"There have been a lot of bombs in European airports lately," my mother told me as we watched him run down our terminal.

There was the flight between Paris and Minneapolis that was delayed two hours because of a "leaky faucet". My mind started racing because that didn't seem worth a two-hour delay. I've seen my share of airport bathrooms.

There was the flight on a puddle jumper between Detroit and Kalamazoo that suddenly lost altitude, causing many in the plane to gasp and the African-American gentleman sitting next to me to brace himself between his seat and the one in front of him and yell, "This is why black men don't fly! Black men don't fly!"

It is comforting to know that I'm not the only illogical flyer in the world.

My paranoia does not stop at the plane losing altitude, mechanical failures, or even at airport bombers or onboard terrorists.

I worry that the pilot was bitten by a black widow spider in Amsterdam and doesn't know about the bite until he faints during take off.

I worry that I accidentally left a ninety-nine cent plastic BIC lighter in my checked luggage which will somehow ignite in the cargo hold and blow up the plane.

I worry each time the plane

turns because while I understand enough about the physics of flight to know that the plane floats on the fast moving current of air beneath it, I don't understand how that current can hold the plane when it's just the wingtip pointed at the ground.

*

One Wednesday evening I got on the plane with the rest of my band mates to fly to Seattle from Minneapolis. I was happy we had a 10pm mid-week flight because I thought it would translate to an empty plane. Fewer people I'd be responsible for killing. It was not empty - the 757 was full, all forty-nine rows. I got a window seat, which I have found lessens my panic somewhat, and was seated next to a small girl no more than eight and her grandma. Normally I don't like sitting next to kids on planes. Not because they annoy me, but because I have to attempt to put on a false cloak of bravery for them. This never works, however, and when they ask me why I'm crying I tell them I just watched a sad movie.

This little girl hadn't stopped in the middle of the aisle screaming and clutching a teddy bear. She positively bounded into her seat, and spent the thirty minutes before we taxied onto the runway telling me about how she loved flying at night - going really fast and then...zooooooooooooom into the air. Looking at the lights of the towns

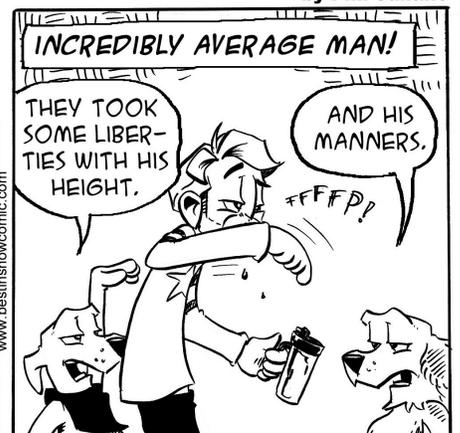
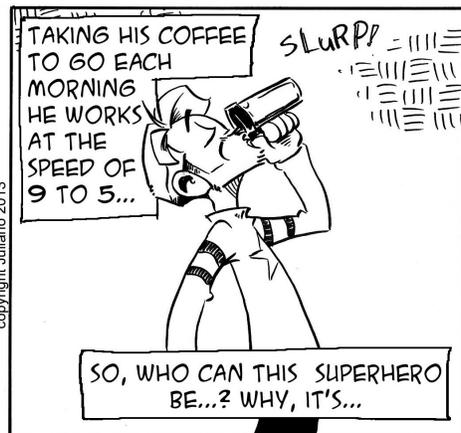
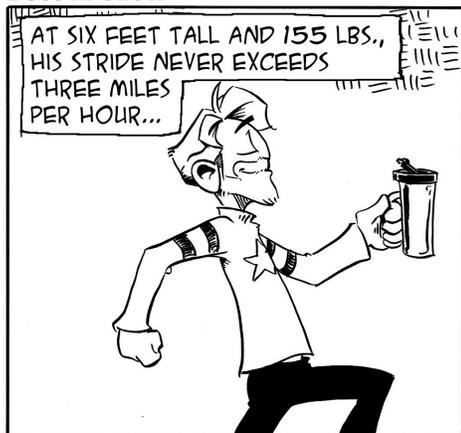
way down below. Seeing the moving lights of the cars on the highway. The nose tipping down and then...zooooooooooooom back onto the ground. I looked at her and nodded my ashen white face, thinking about how the points where she said zooooooooooooom were the points of the flight that the plane was most likely to fall out of the sky, and the lights looked small because we sped through the invisible air five miles above civilization. She interpreted my nod as a reason to continue on about everything that was awesome about planes. I wished she was just a couple years younger, and still in the dinosaur phase.

The pilot came on to tell us that there were a lot of storms between Minneapolis and Seattle, and the first forty-five minutes and the last two hours of the three hour and fifteen minute flight were going to be turbulent. I let out a sigh and slumped back into my seat, the most emotion my Xanax would allow.

The little girl grinned at me and said, "I like it when it's bumpy. It's like a roller coaster."

Then, something strange happened. The pilot flipped on the "Fasten Seatbelt" signs as we backed away from the gate, and with some weird Pavlovian response the girl, in the middle of her reveille, fell asleep on my arm. I glanced at her grandma to see if she would say anything,

Best In Show



by Phil Juliano

but she was too engrossed in her book to notice the kid. I decided not to wake her up, but a small part of me felt really bad.

She's going to miss all of her favorite parts, I thought.

The plane flew to Seattle, zooming up into the air, rocking like a roller coaster, over the stationary lights of towns and moving lights of cars. Throughout it all, the kid stayed nestled on my arm, missing everything.

Some part of her exuberance must have leaked through the Xanax wall into my brain, and I found myself with no option but to enjoy the journey for her.

As much as I try to channel

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

mermaid@blotterra.com

So I never remember my dreams nowadays but I did remember this 1..most..ly...All I remember is me and my friend, Anna being in a car. Maybe hers? After some movie or event? In a parking lot? Lotta smiles and good times. Getting ready to leave. And then out walks the RZA & a friend of his. I'm waving like a dumbass & either we know each other? or he just recognises me somehow? But he stops walking and just stares at me, with his fists at his sides, slowly looking angrier and angrier, with bug eyes and all. Not moving, just staring like that, like I did him wrong or something somehow. We eventually leave and he's slowly backing away. Him and a close to the head afro he had too.

Justin S - Cyberspace

that girl each time I board a plane, enjoying that flight was a singular moment in time. *

Lance's funeral was appropriately somber. The youth pastor from the wake the night before gave the same speech about keeping our eye on the destination, on God. Many people shook our hands, telling us how sorry they were for our loss. This is what you're supposed to say to family of the deceased.

We drove out in a procession to the graveyard, where Lance's ashes would be interred next to his mother's on a patch of green grass not yet full of tombstones, overlooking a small pond, home to the cemetery's pair of swans. A manufactured tranquility blowing amongst the grief. We all bowed our heads as the pastor spoke again of destinations and Heaven. Lance's father cried at the sight of mother and son, now at peace, next to each

other. Just as we began to leave, we heard a distinct squawking behind us. One of the swans had left its silent swim, and began to chase down a random mourner.

My sister, my cousins and I all looked at each other and started to laugh.

"Lance would have loved that one!" said Taylor.

He was right. Lance would have loved the squawking swan breaking the solemnity.

The swan. The sound guy named Pickle. My rubber duckie. The girl on the plane. Those moments of brief oddity in the otherwise straightforward path of time are what I remember, more than any show I've ever played, more than I will remember the details of Lance's funeral.

I think God's totally cool with that.



CONTRIBUTORS:

Jasmine Odessa Rizer writes, "Previously, my work has appeared in *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Drops of Crimson*, twice in *The Blotter*, *Orb*, and *Stillpoint*. In 2008 and 2009, I was a regular contributor of artwork, fiction, and non-fiction to Robin Fay's arts-based e-zine, *Moonshine*. From 2005 I was a section editor, as well as a regular contributor of fiction, reviews, and feature articles, to the e-zine *Mosaic Minds*. Thank you very much for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you." *Ed.: As do we, you.*

Barbara Barnes' work can be seen on the following pages of FB -
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Allegra J. Lingo is an essayist and playwright currently working on her MFA in Creative Non-Fiction at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her work has been published in the *West Trade Review* (2013) and *Rock Paper Scissors* (2012), and her essays and stories have been broadcast on KFAI and Minnesota Public Radio. Lingo lives in Minneapolis with her wife Amy, dog James, and cats Carly and Louisa.

Phil Juliano is wondering if Spring is really here yet in Minneapolis, or if it's another prank by the snow-gods.

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