

*Nineteen of the best minutes you'll spend this month:
Shana Raphaeli, Phil Juliano
and The Dream Journal*

The Blotter

July 2013

MAGAZINE

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"Read With Me"

On Wednesday and Thursday afternoons I meet at my daughter's school to read. Not with her, mind, although that would be excellent. I am charged, rather, with spending a little time with a couple of six year old lads, Otto and Lucas, and reading books to them. They're a little behind in their reading skills and studies show that some one-on-one reading time with them should help make up the difference. That's it. Easy. Except that little boys like to be read to for a while, then they like to talk, then they like to get up and run around and stuff. If you want to keep little boys on a path, you have to make sure that the edges of the path are lined with interesting things. So I read to them and then we take out paper and crayons and color, then we talk about things. I talk, they listen. They talk, I listen. It is fascinating to me to relearn all about six year old boys. Trust me, it's funny stuff.

Firstly, I've rediscovered that little boys cannot discern between truth and the utterly fantastic. I had forgotten that when adults ask you questions, the object is to get them to say "Really? My goodness. That's incredible." An acceptable alternative is, "No WAY! Did you really? That's the funniest thing I've ever heard!" Recently, Lucas taught me once again the art of expanding on the truth:

Me: did you like that story about the Power Rangers?

Otto: I did. I want to be a Power Ranger when I grow up.

Lucas: Me, too! I want to be a Power Ranger when I grow up.

(I have my own preconceived notion of why, but I really want to hear it from Lucas.)

Me: Why do you want to be Power Rangers?

Otto: I like the laser samurai swords. I wish I had one.

Lucas: I have one. My mom brought it back.

Me: Your mom? Brought back a laser samurai sword?

Lucas: Yes. As a souvenir.

Me: (wondering if Lucas actually knows what a souvenir is.) From where?

Lucas: From Iraq. She's an agent in the CIA.

(Alright. It's possible that Lucas' mom is in the CIA, but I didn't know about laser samurai swords being used in Iraq. That's news. But I press on...)

Me: Your mom is in the CIA?

(Otto jumps up between us.) Otto: My dad flies helicopters.

(But Lucas will not be upstaged.) Lucas: My uncle used to fly helicopters, but he crashed and they don't let him anymore.

Me: He crashed? I'm sorry. (Maybe that makes sense, though. Like

helicopter-crash time-out.)

Lucas: Yeah. Can we have some snack?

And so just like that we're having some girl-scout cookies or goldfish or some popcorn, and I'm reading again. I pick up a book we've read before, something that frankly surprises me with its power to hold their interest – *Blueberries for Sal* – and start in. There's no real way to predict which books work for this and which despite the best writing and pictures and subject matter selection don't hold their attention as well. My guess is it has a lot to do with our love for our Moms. And snacks.

Another reason this is great fun is that they are absolutely in this together – if one boy starts to fade, the other does, too. If one is having a particularly chattery afternoon, the other is fully on-board with talking with him. I have to be on my A-game to keep them engaged in the book. I read as if I'm trying to keep Shahryar from pestering Sheherazade (even when I'm on a command performance book, like the *Encyclopedia of Monster Trucks*.) Both guys chime in if I turn the book and point at the page when I see a "sight word" (my own ah-ha moment was learning that this is a word that at age six they should know on *sight*). And that's my own personal main goal here, to get them to like reading, to not feel bad because they don't instantly recognize an "easy" word. So we have fun.

I've been doing this for four years now – different lads in kindergarten and first grade - and If there's a sight word, I read it in a different voice. I can imitate *Sesame Street's* Grover, or Spongebob's friend Patrick, or Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*, or even a bad-guy from Power Rangers. So I do. Because reading should be the second best thing to do. Reading with snacks the first best.

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CAUTION

"Is there gas in the car?"

"Yes, there's gas in the car."

"Template"

by Shana Raphaeli

Glen wears a rumpled button down, his messenger bag at the foot of our table. Yellow light from the low hanging bulbs bounces off his eyeglasses as jazz vocals fill the gaps in conversations in the coffee shop around us. Students and professors slurp espresso drinks, articulating key points with their sandwiches in hand.

"Where did you grow up?" Glen asks.

I fold my hands in front of me.

"Your profile indicated Pennsylvania but not where in Pennsylvania. I was wondering,"

he adds.

"Suburbia. It's the same everywhere."

"And you work in publishing? Your profile said you 'sling hardcovers.' My friend thought that meant you work in the book industry."

I chuckle and nod. "I'm a literary agent. I represent fantasy writers."

"It's important to me to be with a woman who is passionate about what she does."

"What are you passionate about?" I glance at the dandruff on his shoulders.

Then he does it; it's the reason I showed up when I told myself I wouldn't do this again. He smiles that perfect semi-circle, dimples rippling, and transforms from a pocket protector dork to the blooming youth in his profile photo.

"Mathematics, of course."

We order milkshakes and share a slice of cake as thick as a

dictionary. I eat demurely; my restraint is formidable during the day.

"I recently started my PhD here at Columbia. I plan to become a professor so I can continue my research on combinatorics."

"Combinatorics?"

"I am also extremely interested in the intersection of probability theory and algorithmic theory. Statistics."

I watch his mouth speak this foreign tongue and I yearn to eat the words off his lips like morsels of manna. He takes a heaping forkful of cake and gets icing on his face. It pierces my heart.

When we finish and the waitress brings our bill, Glen takes it.

"I got it," I say, accustomed to buying meals for the recent college grads I date.

Glen's brows come together. "What kind of gentleman would I be if I allowed you to pay?"

Later that night a sugar frenzy seizes me, dragging me

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underwater like a great leviathan. I am reading a manuscript after dinner when it takes hold. Earlier at my gourmet grocery I picked up a healthy selection of vegetables and salmon, but I noticed a bag of cranberry walnut cookies. Brown paper wrapped around patties of flour, sugar, butter and eggs. In my 30s I cherish my slim figure more than ever and while I am blessed with a fast metabolism, I try not to tempt fate. I passed the cookies, mouthing a prayer for strength.

Now I can't think of anything else. I am not hungry, I tell myself. My stomach is full. I continue to read, shoving those useless treats from my thoughts. I turn the page and try to concentrate.

But the texture of the cookies beckons to me. I can all but feel their chewiness between my molars. I can taste the tartness of the cranberries, the heartiness of the walnuts. I read on. I read aloud even, desperate to divert myself from this dangerous train of thought. All the while I can sense the cookies crumbling in my mouth, mixing with my

saliva, reducing back to a delectable batter.

I have to have them.

I throw aside the manuscript, not bothering to hold my place, and pounce from my easy chair. I slip on the flip-flops by the door and in a state of semi-dress—I wear a nightgown and a coat—I leave my apartment. I look mad but I'm only going across the street, back to the gourmet grocery store that is miraculously open twenty-four hours a day and carries all manner of sweets.

Before I know it I am back in my apartment perched on my chair, coat on the floor, half a cookie in my mouth. It's harder than I expect, like it has been sitting around, though the expiration date is still five days away. No matter. The cookie softens quickly enough and then I'm in heaven. I feast slowly, reveling in the toasty sweetness of the flavors, swathed in a cocoon of confectionary comfort, my tummy ever so slowly expanding with each sizable cookie I devour, but I don't care, I don't care, I don't care, because I am far, far

away.

Two days later I finally eat solid food again after a juice fast to atone for the cookies. Glen leads me around Central Park, navigating all the paths and routes I can never remember and pointing out monuments and fountains. I listen like an Ellis Island hopeful. We sit down on a bench. He wraps his arm around me and we look out onto a nearby playground where toddlers swing through the early evening air and parents chat on the periphery.

"For crying out loud!" Glen gasps. I follow his gaze to a woman smoking a cigarette as she traipses toward the sandbox. "Scientists have identified more than 4,000 different chemicals in secondhand smoke and at least 43 of them cause cancer. That mother should be ashamed of herself."

"She might be a nanny. Or even a babysitter," I respond.

Glen's expression contorts as though I have presented him with a faulty logic proof. "She has no business smoking around chil-

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drin.”

Maybe it's the hint of spring in the air or the warmth of Glen's body close to mine, but I turn to him and say, “Do you think about kids a lot at your age? Having them, I mean?”

He pulls me closer toward him. “Why else would I pursue someone like you?”

Our lips meet and a whirlpool of pheromones swirls in my head, picking up steam with each full loop he traces on the bare skin of my lower back. I squeeze my thighs together and let the waves break over our lifeboat, relishing every splash.

The best lovers are dorks like Glen. Prodigies whose cuffs are too short and who sweat all the time. We who look past their acne scars find surprising ardor; the ferocity of their brainpower morphs into flames of lust that lick the face like a campfire. Glen literally licks my face now, lapping at it like it is a block of salt and he has run a marathon. My cells yearn for him as though I have shriveled with drought and his tongue brings fresh rainwater. This is how we slake our thirst.

Several days later I find myself in a stew.

“What do you want?” I say, clenching my fist around the keys to my apartment.

The intern's scent—sweat mingled with cologne—gives me vertigo. He hovers above me, half a foot taller than I am. He is a sophomore? A junior? Maybe a college senior? I avoid looking at

him.

We stand on my doorstep. I focus on Glen, whom I know in my heart of hearts is different from his predecessors: boys who broke up with me via text message, concealed girlfriends their own age or turned me over to meddling mothers.

“I know about your thing for guys like me,” the intern says.

He followed me home from the restaurant where we had dinner with colleagues from the agency. He's not my intern; he helps Dan, another agent, and before tonight I had never spoken to him, though he sits at a cubicle outside my office on Monday and Thursday afternoons when he comes to log Dan's manuscripts. When our group got up to leave, he invited me for a drink. I ignored him, said my goodbyes to the others and fled. Within moments he walked by my side. I confess I enjoyed his persistence but I never anticipated the current scenario.

“I want to smell that candle you bought. The one that smells like sawdust.” He reaches for the gate on either side of me.

“Sandalwood.” I remember telling my friend Renee, a pregnant newlywed, on the phone. “You eavesdropped.”

“I want to smell it. You made it sound so good.”

“I am too old for you. I could be your mother.” Your ‘got knocked up in high school mother,’ I revise in my head. His eyes

flicker with defiance and I reel at the thought of what else he has overheard me say. “Look, I'm seeing someone. This isn't happening. Good night!” I push his arm away, but he takes my hand.

“Please.” He is a king cobra hissing so fiercely I cannot see his forked tongue.

At my apartment one night Glen wants to stay up late chatting like girls at a sleepover. He lies on his stomach, resting his chin on his arms. Our affair is in its infancy.

“Why are you still single?” he asks.

The impulse to argue that I am not that old to be single by New York City standards fades when he begins kicking his feet in the air. A wave of tenderness washes over me.

“I guess I haven't met the right person yet.” I flutter my eyelashes.

“How long have you been online dating? Have you met many men on the site?”

I lay back onto my pillows. How to handle his academic curiosity? According to Renee I haven't met even one man but I've gone through whole preschools of boys.

“I don't respond to everyone who writes me.”

“But you responded to me.” Beatitude beams from his smile.

Indeed I did though I tried not to when I saw his age. I had told myself to stop reading the bio describing celebrations he

and his friends hold on Pi Days (March 14th/3.14) and Square Root Days (no idea) and his affinities for the Yankees and rugelach. I knew I had to hold out for a man my age or older, a marriage prospect of the sort Renee would approve.

I shrug.

"Do you always go for guys like me? So much younger?" His feet kick faster, making slightly skewed trajectories forward and backward, crisscrossing occasionally.

My throat constricts. Every part of me wants to lie, even my pinky toes and the ends of my hair, but Glen is more mature than other younger guys I've dated. Serious and ambitious. Brilliant. He could be the father of my children.

"I don't think I've met anyone quite like you." I touch the end of his nose the way my mother used to do when I was small.

"I've never been drunk, you know." He stops kicking his feet and sits up so that we are eye level.

"No?" I ask, grateful for the turn in our conversation. He shakes his head.

"I've never smoked anything either."

I notice for the first time a slight lisp in his speech. "That's very prudent of you."

"And I believe oral sex is the most intimate act between two people."

Oh?

"It should be reserved for

a man and a woman in a committed relationship," he continues.

Based on recent events I conclude this is Glen's way of telling me we're getting hot but we're not going steady yet.

"I have only done oral sex with one person."

Who is this former girlfriend? How old is she?

"It makes things so special that way," I say.

"Yeah." His eyes squint shut with recollections. "It's my favorite." I watch as he pants for a moment, tongue lolling. Then he snaps to and starts speaking rapidly. "At Dartmouth my gay roommate ordered a handbook on fellatio in the mail. It came with a free companion guide on cunnilingus so he gave it to me and I read it."

My eyes widen.


"Three times," he says with a grin. "The female anatomy is so complex."

I shudder with delight.

Every time my cell phone vibrates I pray it is Glen. Pop

songs about love and sex come on the radio and I wail along at full volume. I replay them over and over on my iPod in between dates with Glen when I wait for him to text or e-mail me again. I celebrate the flight of my appetite and fantasize about our future. In a few years it won't matter how old I am because Glen will be an established adult. He will have moved out of his parents' home and he'll be on his way to the teaching post he so desires. Maybe we'll get a cottage in Cambridge and while he lectures on stochastic calculus at Harvard, I'll baste the pot roast and check that our infant hasn't turned onto its stomach in the crib.

Often when Glen and I are together he takes my hand in that manly way of his and tells me I look like Katie Holmes. A different but also much younger boyfriend claimed I look like Jennifer Connolly. And another still, fifteen years my junior, insisted I could pass for Miley Cyrus's older sister. People who know me well laugh when I tell them; the resemblances are not



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there. It used to bother me when guys splashed the canvas of my face with the colors of their fantasies, but now I understand. Everyone has a built-in template. In extreme cases it verges on obsession, but even the balanced ones among us have innate preferences and sometimes when a man finds you attractive enough, he imagines you embody the configuration he loves best. He sees what he wants to see, but the fact that he sees it in you and not some other girl is special. Or so I think.

Each time Glen looks at me, quivering with pride, I know he sees the blushing apples of Katie Holmes's cheeks, the blue-green of her eyes, her college girl smile. And I know I've got him.

Glen goes to Austria for two weeks to discuss matrix analysis with a professor in Vienna. After a few days I e-mail him, "Hi. How is it?" but when the Earth has completed another rotation on its axis and I have not received a response, I create a fake profile to check whether he is logging on to the dating site where we first met. He isn't. But he also isn't calling or e-mailing me when he usually does both at least once a day. I draft four different messages ending our courtship and delete them without sending a word. Instead of making calls at work I sit at my computer typing at breakneck speed. Pages and pages of rants, denouncing Glen with every curse word I can think of,

fomenting full-scale mania. A treatise on the infinite ways he has wronged me stares back at me when I am done.

Twenty-four hours and a red velvet cake later, I have new faith in Glen and I am on another juice cleanse. As I swirl a beet ginger concoction in my mouth, I recall with pleasure all the compliments Glen has paid me, his blossoming devotion, the erection I detected the first time he entered my apartment. It was there when I opened the door, before I'd even said hello. He probably didn't receive my original e-mail, I rationalize, so I send him another, lengthier one, updating14.5

"...your screen name?"

"What?"

"The dating site. Do you still remember your screen name? Wasn't it JaneEyreNYC?"

"ModernBronte. What does it matter? I'm married!"

"Renee," I plead. "Do you think your login still works?"

"I don't know. I haven't used it in ages."

I summarize my predicament. I had told her Glen is a statistics professor at Columbia but now I come clean.

"Oh, for Pete's sake! I thought we made that profile so you could find someone your own age!" she says.

"He contacted me. Not the other way around!" I pause, slumping at my desk. "Please help me. I beg you."

She heaves into the phone and I hear the pitter patter of her

typing.

"Give me a minute. I have to figure out my password."

I force myself to breathe.

"What's his screen name?"

she asks.

"Archimedes173."

She groans. "So lame. Spell it," and then, "It's him. He's using the site again."

I feel weak.

"You there?" she asks but I can barely hold the phone to my ear much less form words.

Then I hear the familiar bell through the receiver; someone is sending her an instant message through the site.

"That isn't?"

"No, no! Of course not," she hastens to say.

But it's an SOS with a blade. Glen saw that Renee viewed his profile and he sent her a message. Black specks frolic before my eyes. I throw down the phone and push myself up before I lose consciousness altogether. I charge down the street, searching for a cab. Cars honk and swerve around me.

"Columbia. The main campus," I tell the driver who stops for me. On the grounds of the university, I stomp from building to building, looking for the math lab. When I find it, a sleepy-eyed girl asks me to swipe my ID card in a machine. Otherwise I can't pass through the turnstile.

"I left it in class!" I say.

"ID number?"

I grimace as though I can't remember it.

"Social?"

I slam my fist on her desk. "I have to find someone, goddammit!"

She blinks at me. "I can't let you in if you're not registered here."

"He never went to Vienna!" I spin around and speed out the door. Outside I can't help but notice how youthful some of the students look: like they're in middle school rather than college. Glen could turn up in their midst and I can no longer bear the possibility of him knowing I stalked him all the way here. I kick off my shoes and race across the damp grass in my hose, hurrying to the street beyond the lawn.

By the time my cab home pulls up in front of my building, I've soaked my sleeve wiping my eyes and nose. The driver studies me in the rear-view mirror. "Honey, he ain't worth it. You gonna see he ain't worth it!" I whimper and hand him damp cash.

At home I fling myself onto my sofa. The sobs course

through me. I punch cushions and kick my coffee table.

How dare he trifle with me? A 22-year-old nerd who wears a Medic bracelet because of a Tylenol allergy. A dweeb who makes waiters double-check that carrots have not touched his food. A geek in old man briefs with cruddy fingernails. Glen who had me going that he was the one. Glen whom I dreamt I might marry.

Over the next few days I keep my office door shut at all times. I struggle to focus on the sloppy to do lists I write and make sense of the projects I had abandoned. Renee spins Glen dumping me as some kind of boon. It will be years before he thinks about marriage seriously, she argues, and at my age I haven't time to spare. For the first time I don't need her reminders that it gets harder for women in their thirties to conceive and that younger men have brought me nothing but ruin. She tells me I'm the pretty one between us and if she could find a husband

on the dating site, I can too.

I let her lecture and on an overcast Wednesday morning I sign in again to the site. My inbox flashes at me. I find it full of unread correspondence. How can the ether breed so many admirers? I click on a new message, a generic introduction the sender surely copied and pasted from his missives to the other bob-haired brunettes he contacted. He is two years older than I am and works in sales. "Looking for marriage and children," he writes.

Tim the 36 year old takes me to a rustic Italian restaurant where we sit adjacent to one another at a tiny wooden table. This is the first time in I don't even know how many years that I am on an official date with a man who is not at least a decade my junior. Renee came over for lunch today so I could show her Tim's information and prepare for tonight. She scrutinized his profile and each of our e-mail exchanges, and then trumpeted her approval. I tried on six dress-

Best In Show



by Phil Juliano

The Blotter

es before we both agreed on a black wrap and she coached me on how to act interested but reserved.

"Do you prefer red or white?" Tim leans toward me with the wine list.

"Oh, either is fine. Anything, really." Perspiration collects under my knees. I have never been so nervous on a date.

He frowns at the selections. "How about the 2005 Barolo?"

"Great." My face is stiff and I don't know where to rest my eyes. Tim motions for the waiter and makes the wine request. I want to order my food but Tim hasn't opened his menu yet. He concentrates as the waiter describes the specials. I try to

loosen up.

When the waiter is gone, Tim peruses his menu and puts it down. He wears a sports jacket. I'm not used to dates who wear sports jackets.

"So you work in publishing? Selling books?"

I should have told Tim I prefer white wine. Now I worry I won't like what he ordered but I'll have to drink it anyway. "Umm, pardon?"

He smiles, causing a circuitry of wrinkles to break out all over his face, the face of a real man, I remind myself, someone I'd be lucky to "catch."

"Are you ok?" he asks.

I coil the napkin in my hands beneath the table. "Yes, fine, thanks."

"Your profile said you 'sling hardcovers.' I figured you meant books."

Is his hairline receding or is that a very high forehead? "Books, yes, right, I help get books sold."

"Sounds more glamorous than selling enterprise software like me. Do you work with any authors I might recognize?"

His hair is a forest of grey saplings. The soft lighting picks up each strand like so many lightning rods. "Umm, hmmm." I can't think of more than two names from my roster of clients.

"I shouldn't really discuss my clientele, if you know what I mean."

"Of course, yes. Sorry." He waits for me to say something but I don't. "Well, I've been at Google for about eight years. I've been in tech since college though." He covers his mouth with his hand, straining with the arithmetic. "Fifteen or maybe sixteen years now?"

I attempt the math. Is his estimate correct or is he actually older than 36? Maybe he lied about his age in his profile to ensnare more women. I've heard of men who do that. He looks at me with a soft gaze; I look away.

"The best thing about Google is the incredible cafeteria.

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I giggle awkwardly, realizing with dejection that Tim seems like someone's dad. The waiter returns with the wine and attempts to pour a taste for Tim but he motions to indicate I should receive the sample. I toss back the wine and signal for more, eager to lose myself in drink. I begin quaffing immediately, but Tim raises his glass.

"To first meetings," he says.

I can't bring myself to words, so I tap my wineglass against his and take a sip.

"By the way, if I haven't already said so, you look really nice."

"Thanks." I freeze up and have to resist the urge to make an excuse and leave. Ideas assault me the way inspiration must bang my clients upside the head when they least expect it. I might have left the stove on or the water run-

ning or I feel a migraine coming on and I'll blackout if I can't turn off the lights.

"You're even prettier in person."

I squeeze the end of the table, my knuckles going white. What if he tries to kiss me at the end of the date? Do older men have bad breath? How many women has he been with anyway? A man his age is damaged goods.

My head spins throughout the meal and I know Tim senses something is wrong with me, but he politely keeps up the momentum of conversation. With my second glass of wine I calm down enough to appreciate the food and the decor of the restaurant, but I can't get past Tim himself. For dessert we get profiteroles, tiramisu and panna cotta so I can try each one. Tim takes one bite and puts down his spoon, content to watch me inhale my cornucopia of sweets, which I wash down with Moscato.

At the end of our date he asks for another and thinking about Renee, I murmur my con-

sent.

That night sleep eludes me. I sweat beneath my tangled sheets. My head throbs from too much alcohol. I kick the covers off and bend up my knees. Still I find no rest. I turn over the pillow and shove the other one off the bed. My mouth is dry, my stomach full, yet somehow I want food. I drag myself out of bed and traipse into the kitchen. I stoop over the open refrigerator, scanning the half-empty bottles of condiments for something to eat, something low-calorie since it's the middle of the night and I shouldn't be eating anyway. I have already had a full meal and dessert with Tim.

Dessert. Dessert at the restaurant wasn't satisfying. There was chocolate but there wasn't caramel, and what I really wanted was caramel, come to think of it. Sweet, silky, smoky caramel. The chocolate cake with caramel frosting that the grocery store sells comes unbidden to mind. I've had it before and the caramel is so thick, so rich. It's transcendental and now that it has slithered its way into my consciousness, I absolutely have to have it. Nothing will come between it and me. I am weak with fatigue and if I ever stood a chance of fighting sugar's siren song, now is not that time.

Soon I face a caramel cheesecake head on. I have already opened a box of caramel turtle candies because I absolutely couldn't wait, but I want more,



The Blotter

more, more. I want milky goodness now, dairy, fluffy substance. Cheesecake. I want the whole damn thing. But there's a cookies and cream cheesecake beside the caramel one and it's calling to me too. Perhaps I want it instead. Sinful Oreo decadence. I gaze at the Oreos impaling the centers of each pre-sliced sliver, sections that won't matter when I polish off the entire thing.

I grab it. I can barely wait to get it open. I need to taste the

Oreo crust, the mushy sweetness of the cake, the cream cheese consistency, its heavy lightness, its fluffy thickness. I rush to the register, place the cake in the center of the belt and dig into my purse for my wallet, ready to pay any price at all for the prize before me.

I look up and gasp.

Ethan!

It can't be!

Ethan?

My childhood playmate?

No! It looks like him! Sandy blonde hair curled in loose, doll-like kinks, big hazel eyes, shoulders too broad for his age. But he hasn't grown up! He still looks six years old, only stretched out in size. Or is he? I can't tell. My eyes can't focus beyond the cash register. Is that a child or an adult? Surely the face shows the uninterrupted puffiness, no, the delicate smoothness of youth, but the body?

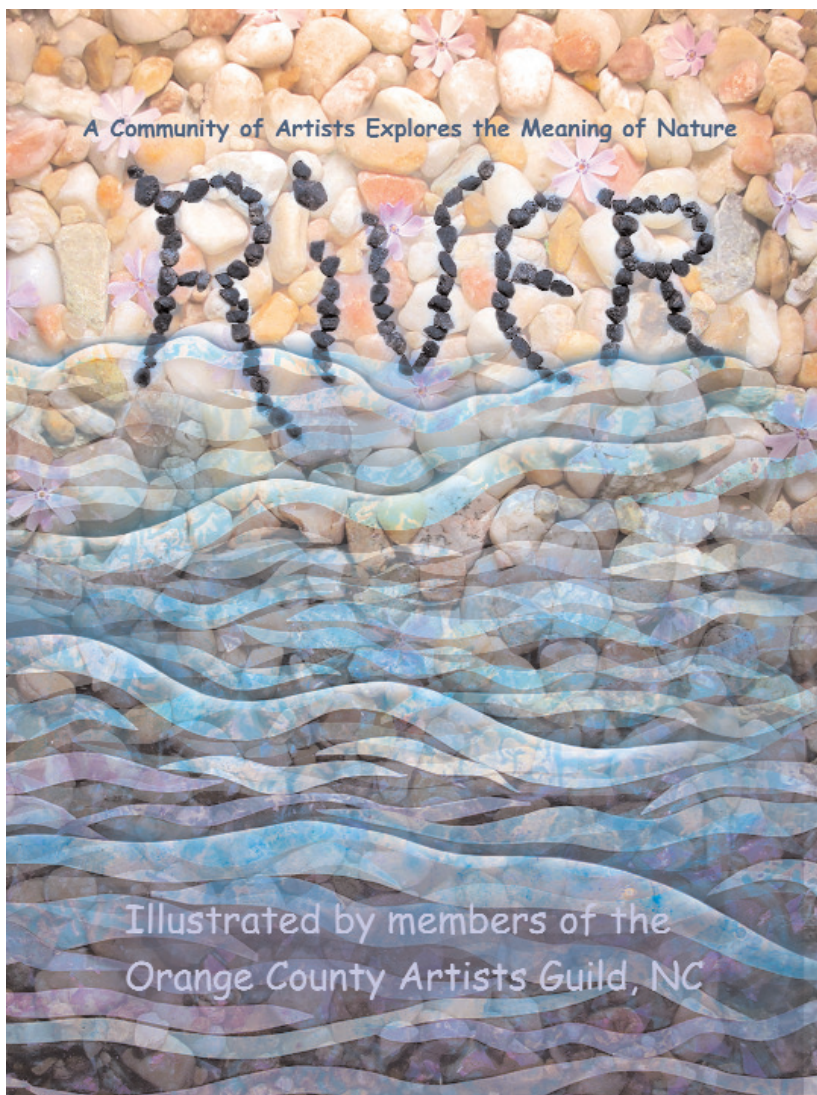
No one could understand why I chose to play with a boy five years my junior when I was young. Today Renee would applaud me for finding someone so relatively in range, but when one is eleven and her chosen comrade only six, eyebrows dart heavenward.

"Ethan," I croak.

"Here," the being says as if responding to an attendance call in school.

"Ethan?" I try again. It cannot be Ethan of sun and grime whom I played with so many years ago. Under the tire swing, with plastic swords, at the Nintendo console. I feel a small dollop of caramel stuck to the corner of my mouth, but I am too awed to wipe it away.

Last I heard of Ethan was he sold drugs and then died of an overdose himself. This was long after my family moved away from the neighborhood where once Ethan and I lived. I was stricken when I heard the news. I hadn't thought of him in ages. At the time I was already sleeping with



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college boys and flirting with the idea of dropping out of my doctoral program. But I never thought of Ethan. He was the first, the precursor to all the ones who were to come. At point of fact, there might have been no Glen at all had there been no Ethan.

And here he is, a big, stretched out boy of a man's height and breadth, bordering on the grotesque but ethereal altogether.

"Here," he proffers a bag of mixed cookies that I suddenly need to have. How does he know the flavors of my desire? My taste buds crave chocolate chips and mini linzer tarts, oatmeal raisin delights, pecans and butter, snickerdoodles. Oh, Ethan, Ethan, Ethan!

"Here." It's the only word he knows, but it's enough. He doesn't bother ringing me up. I resist the urge to hug him. The compulsion to dive into my trove of treasures is too great, and anyway, I need to escape. Ethan scares me, this boy man. He is

eerie and odd. Dead yet alive. Gone yet here. I take the cookies from him—they slip easily from his grasp—and I run all the way home.

Another night after work I go out for happy hour with some of the nonfiction guys. No one stays late because nonfiction agents tend to have long commutes. The college intern walks me home again. Once more we stand at the gate to my apartment building.

"I won't try anything. I promise. Let's go upstairs and have some Moscato."

I roll my eyes. The kid is a human wiretap.

"You're not drinking age." I climb the steps to the front door.

"I'm also not a lightweight like you. It takes more than a beer for me to pitch a zombie idea to political memoir reps."

I burst into laughter. His hands find each other behind my back. For a moment I relax

against his support. His touch is tempting but laden with death. I wriggle out of his grasp.

"This is inappropriate and you are wasting your time. I don't want to have to address this with Dan."

"I can show you some tricks on Final Fantasy. I'm an expert."

Have I ever mentioned Final Fantasy at work? I don't typically publicize my penchant for video games but the truth is I am completely desperate: stuck in the Grand Pulse and I can't level up for the life of me.

"How do you know I have a PlayStation?" I ask.

He digs his hands into his pockets and taking a step toward me, he winks.



CHRISTIAN THOMPSON
the hog father

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Found Poem: "Otto and Lucas' Snack List"

Ed. Note: everything on this list was selected over the fall and spring semesters of this year, by the lads themselves. When reading this list aloud, the word "ranch" must be emphasized.

Marshmallows
Graham Crackers
Chocolate
Vanilla Ice-cream
Gummies:
 Sweet worms
 Sour worms
Whipped Cream, vanilla
Teddy Grahams
Won Ton Soup
Tofu Chicken, Rice, Broccoli
Soy Sauce
Cherries
Different Bowls
Egg Drop Soup
Jello: cherry, lemon
Lemon Pie
French Fries, catsup
Chicken Tenders
Chicken Nuggets
Carrots with Ranch!
Chairs
Power Ranger cake with a Power Ranger head on top of the cake
Push Pops
Candy Corn
Peanut Butter and Jelly
Chocolate Chip Cookies
Root Beer

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

I sat up in bed, my mind reeling from what I'd just heard and a little dumbed down by the drinks we had earlier that night. He sat up quick to console me but it was too late. Those words swam in my head confirming every self doubt I'd had: "How long are you planning on being a poor college student." It was the answer I was given when I asked why he hadn't asked me out on a date. After 2 months of consistent hook ups and hang outs I wanted an answer—and there it was. I was a loser: a 26 year old college student working at an unprofessional job. I wasn't good enough; I wasn't glamorous enough. "Are you fucking kidding me?" was all I could get out. I wanted to tell him how judgmental and completely wrong he was about me. I opened my mouth about to ooze words of distaste but nothing came out; the words hung there in the air, inaudible. I didn't need to defend myself against someone who thought that they were better than me. He began to spit out more trite apologies and excuses: "Don't be mad. I really do like you. I just don't know your plan." I couldn't take them in. I was hooked on the negative words forming one of the most depressing sentences used to describe me.

How could I focus on anything other than the implied meaning, "You're not good enough for me." I was just an easy hook up. It wasn't that he didn't know my plan; it was that I didn't fit in with his.

And my heart fell. I had to ask myself if a heart can even break if you aren't in love. Still I hated that it affected me that much but my heart hit the floor and I didn't want to pick it back up and put it in my chest again. I had tied all these strings to the things I found amazing in him and all I want to do was rip out every feeling that I attached from me to him.

I still haven't been able to cut the strings. He calls me sometimes and I'm too weak to leave the phone ringing. For a couple of days I'm ok and I have these feelings of confidence again; then he calls and I stumble down the steps I built.

And here I am; thinking of him again. I've been raising the bar for myself and my creativity has been overflowing. I wonder though if the reason for my surge in productivity is due to the bitterness he left me with. That it is all rooted in the fact I want to show him he's wrong and I'm more than the mediocre person he thinks that I am. I suppose I should thank him either way. He made me reevaluate my life. I'm a painter and a writer and he inspired me again. Here is the thing about inspiration though: Sometimes the Inspiration you get isn't always the kind you want.

Amanda G. - Cyberspace

CONTRIBUTORS:

Shana Raphaeli writes: "Trained in writing for stage and screen, I graduated from Tisch School of the Arts (NYU) with a BFA in Dramatic Writing some years ago. More recently I earned an MBA at the Darden School of Business (UVA), and outside of my short stint in Charlottesville, Virginia, I have resided in Manhattan for over a decade. By day I work in the financial services sector, marketing mutual funds and exchange-traded funds to investors, but I make time for my writing and have written two unpublished novels. I also occasionally write freelance book reviews and art pieces, but fiction is that place where I live."

Phil Juliano may very well be married by the time you read this. Send him presents and best wishes.

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