

*Make a little noise with James Barnett, Sarah Goodyear,
Michelle Dacus Carr, John Grey,
Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal*

The Blotter

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MAGAZINE

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"Wind: Part 3"

There is nothing exciting about watching a sailing race. Unless you are a sailor, or some commentator is yammering in your ear about the trigonometry of speed and distance, it is almost impossible to see who is winning or in a better position to win from the cluster of things moving back and forth across the water. When we watch *Captains Courageous*, who can figure out what Cap'n Disco is thinking when he appears so far behind the fishing boat he's trying to beat to market. Cut across what? So why doesn't Freddy Bartholomew ask that question for us? What *are* shoals and why not go through them? And anyone watching us on this Saturday would have wondered why we bothered. We were so slow. For all their sail, our class of sailboats was pre-global-warming glacially slow. But when you are out there, it is all about the wind. Wind, it seems, is not invisible at all. It is blowing in your face, your ears, on the back of your neck, kicking salt-flavored, river-musked spray up off the bow, pointing the tell-tales in a peculiar direction, rippling the sun-dappled water in a place off in the distance. It is the behind you, blocked by another 150 square feet of sail with a different number on it. It is following other sails whose crews fight to control them, or not following other sails whose crews struggle with slackened sheets, trying to find an elusive puff. As much as being a game with other sailors, and as pompous as it sounds, sailing is a game with a life-force called wind.

Sailing is also the pain in your shins and your back and arms. It is the heady risk of taking an instant to grab the hand-pump to bail out some of the water sloshing over my Topsiders. Water weighs eight pounds per gallon. Remove a gallon, two, and you've a few inches per hundred yards of speed. In a mile, that's the length of a boat. It is thoughtful and exciting, yes. It is also fearful.

Everything seemed on the verge of going wrong. I scootched down in the boat to grab the pump. Tugged-and-shoved the plastic handle like a madman, like a dervish doing a breakdance, to get as much water out as possible. *Hike out!* my friend shouted. I instantly dropped the pump and slid my ass over the side, leaning back, my toes beneath the hiking straps so I didn't dip the back of my head in the Bay. That's why I was here. I was heavy. Well, then, thank God I'm heavy! Where did that blast of wind come from? It shoved us ahead a couple knots faster, but it almost took us over. Did anyone else get it? Did they tip? No time to look around. One second of looking around like that and everything can suddenly let go. The wind shifts and there's an uncontrolled jibe - the sail catches wind and the heavy boom is now coming at the back of your head, or worse, missing the back of your head and swinging out wildly to pull the whole boat over. And you can't look everywhere at once. You cannot actually predict what might happen next. It's nothing at all like driving, or walking down a street or leaning back on a couch and watching sailing. It's *sailing*.

We seemed to me to be beyond the first barrel. Everyone else had already turned and pointed themselves at the second barrel. We were counting on the Bay being at full-high-tide with no current against us. *Ready to come about!* my friend finally shouted his warning. *Come about!* He knew that I didn't need to respond, didn't even have the breath to. We scuttled

over to the other side as swiftly and carefully as two full-grown men can on a little wooden boat. The boom - so aptly named - swung past my head, the lines sweeping my hair. *We're on another reach now, while they're tack-*

ing, my friend taught - information that sort of made sense to me. Our opponents would have to change direction a few times, slowing each time they did so, while we could just keep on in this direction, steady and true, at this speed for most of the next leg. Yes, indeed! It was strategy.

But this is not a sailing lesson. You've probably had quite enough of nautical terms, and you're not on the water yourself. You don't care about the labor pains, you just want to see the baby. We were so far away from everyone else that we could see it unfold. The clouds that had held the rain (and the wind, it turned out) were dissipating, drifting off over the distant highway 35 bridge. The July sun was now fully on, with sudden warmth and we hit a patch of dead air. Our forward motion slowed and we watched the other boats take the final turn and head for the finish line. *Come about*, my friend said softly, seeing a puff off to port. We did, and halfway through our turn the sail was luffing and the boom wouldn't go over and we used the paddle to push it out to try and force ourselves on. And we sat there.

And the breeze did pick up a little, eventually. We went around the barrel and poked slowly to the finish line. By the time we crossed, dead last, the Bay was beginning to turn to glass. The committee kept looking and checking weather reports on the radio and such, to determine if there was going to be enough wind at all to have the second race. With a bullhorn they announced that it was a wait-and-see. All of the sailboats crept back up the river to the club. Most had to paddle the last hundred yards or so, ignominiously, sheepishly. Along the shoreline beauties bathed, *Huck Finns* swung out over the water on rope swings, and for all we knew juleps were sipped.

Waiting for the committee boat's final decision, my friend fetched box-lunches provided by the host club. I gnawed through my ham and Swiss sub like a convict escaped from Devil's Island. My God - Fritos Corn Chips! Dr. Pepper! What had I done to deserve such riches? Full, I became sleepy again, and in the back of my mind, I wanted our day to be done. What could top this - to be tired and wind-burned and only slightly soggy and in last place? Let the sea-breezes go, Neptune. I sat by a tree and closed my eyes. An hour later, my friend woke me to tell me sadly that the second race was cancelled. I tried to look suitably discouraged, but my energy in getting *Gizmo* out of the water and back on her trailer gave me away, I'm sure.

And if they had decided on a second race, after lunch, I wouldn't have gone anyway - remember, I was only ballast for windy days. I would have sat on the club lawn, looking down the river, like a dog whose master has gone to work. Club members showing up might have wondered who I was. *Is that a sailor, or just some...homeless guy? Go ask. No, you go ask.* Staying ashore might have been worse than going back out. I don't know. In any case, we hooked the trailer up to the family wagon, and pointed ourselves due north, heading back to our club to put *Gizmo* away. Did you have a good time? my friend asked. Yes, I replied. I did. At that moment, it was not a lie.

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CAUTION

I got the joy, joy, joy-joy down

“Spirit Gum”

by James Barnett

Two hit men in a stolen Volvo hurried down Elvis Presley Boulevard from Memphis toward Southaven. The winter morning traffic heading north made a river of headlights against the darkening rain moving up from Mississippi. Sherwood Lawson slowed for a stoplight and tossed a small, black box on his partner’s lap. “Open that, and take a look,” he said.

Andy Hardin picked up the pasteboard container and lifted the

lid. Inside, he found a bottle of amber liquid labeled “Spirit Gum” and a clear plastic bag containing what looked to him like two mouse skins.

“They’re sideburns,” Sherwood said. “I need me some security when the wind blows.” He winked at Andy. “Chicks expect guys to have sideburns,” he said, with an air of assurance, as though he had read it that morning in the *Commercial Appeal*.

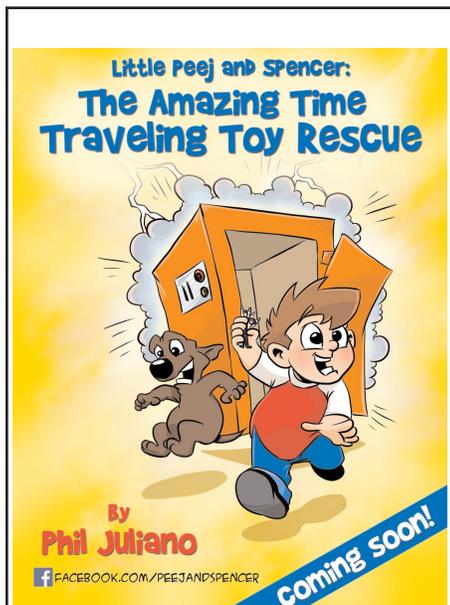
Andy peered at his partner over the rims of his sunglasses. Sherwood transferred the steering wheel and his cigarette to his left hand and pulled back the hair in front of his right ear. Andy saw only smooth skin. Absentmindedly, he felt his own sideburns. Andy hadn’t come this close to smiling in weeks. His decision to kill his partner caught at the back of his throat like a plug of meat he couldn’t swallow. Troubled sleep left him second-guessing what he knew he had to do. Mornings, he often awoke to paralyzing charley horses. Killing strangers was easy.

Sherwood and Andy were as close as brothers. That was the problem. They knew too much about each other.

Sherwood was a talker. Some guys might not be able to take a partner who wouldn’t shut up, but to Andy, Sherwood’s voice was white noise, like a radio baseball game with a Memphis accent. Andy was quiet. He seldom spoke because of the problem.

Somewhere between his mind and his mouth, new words replaced the words he wanted to say. That was OK. He and Sherwood had worked together for nearly ten years. Sherwood usually understood what Andy wanted to say without Andy having to say anything.

They left the boulevard and drove through Southaven’s run down suburban neighborhoods. Sherwood pointed out landmarks from his youth. Andy had been to Sister Lawson’s before. He’d heard all of Sherwood’s stories. That didn’t matter to Sherwood. At the end of a cul-de-sac, they rolled into the driveway of a brick, ranch-style house, anonymous amid gray pine trees and houses with drawn curtains and cold chimneys. Sherwood steered the Volvo through a narrow gap between the garage and a privet hedge and parked in the back yard next to a rusty swing set. They made it through the kitchen door



New book project from Phil Juliano!! 'Little Peej and Spencer: The Amazing Time Traveling Toy Rescue'. A novelized version of the syndicated comic strip, 'Best In Show'. This story has all the typical issues a seven year old has to deal with: bullies, homework and a little sister. What's different? Our seven year old hero begins his story as a middle-aged comic geek so nostalgic for his prized Star Wars toy collection that he devises a way to go back in time to retrieve them. Of course, things don't go according to plan. Expected release Winter 2016. Follow along with the project at www.facebook.com/PeejandSpencer. and help fund / advance order via <http://www.gofundme.com/peejandspencer>

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just as the rain began.

Sister sat on a stool at the counter eating fish sticks and drinking sweet tea. “Well, looky here,” she said, jumping to her feet and gathering her brother in for a bear hug. At nearly six feet, she was almost as tall as Sherwood, but that was the only similarity between the two. Sister was a stout woman, with dingy blond hair, dressed that morning in faded yellow coveralls and puffball house shoes. Her flinty, blue eyes looked out from a broad, bony face. While she gripped her brother, she gave Andy an appraising stare.

Andy nodded. He was never sure if Sister disliked him, or if she merely enjoyed making him feel uncomfortable.

“Sherry,” she said. “I see you’re still hanging out with this sawed-off deaf mute.”

Andy started to say something, but not knowing what he would say, he kept quiet. Sherwood and Sister were tight. Andy figured that they had had a rough time growing up. He came from a stable family, with a strong Christian tradition and commitment to moral values. Who could explain, Andy some-

times wondered, why he and Sherwood grew up to be killers?

Sherwood assumed a boxer’s stance. “Hey, don’t call me ‘Sherry,’” he said, punching the air around Sister’s head, “or I’ll tell Hardin what the boys called you in high school.”

Sister barked out a laugh. Her voice had a deep, tobacco-stained rasp. She backed up a couple of steps and looked at her brother. “Your partner needs to take better care of you,” she said. “You look kind of wormy, boy. Your clothes don’t fit you right.”

Andy almost smiled again. Sherwood took his clothes seriously. He favored big and tall men’s designer styles with coordinated shirts and slacks. A silver-buckled, crocodile belt and a pair of six-hundred-dollar ostrich skin cowboy boots completed his ensemble. Andy imagined that Sherwood’s mother was responsible for his partner’s preoccupation with his wardrobe. She must have dressed little Sherwood in grown-up outfits like the one in the framed photograph by the door leading into the dining room. In the picture, a kindergarten-age Sherwood stood grinning for the camera wearing a gleaming white sailor’s suit, with the round hat cocked on the side of his head and a tiny American flag in his fist.

Andy noticed that Sister didn’t waste comments on the faded Hawaiian shirt and polyester pants hanging rumped on his 5’ 6” frame. Sherwood had tried to convince Andy to trade his sneakers for a pair of cowboy boots, arguing that the boots would add two inches to his height. Andy was happy the way he was.

Sherwood ignored Sister’s comments about his clothes, perched on the stool, and handed her the black box. She held the bottle of spirit gum up to the light and looked at Andy. “Sherry’s got our granddaddy’s full blood Cherokee hair,” she said, “stringy and black as a cat, with no beard to speak of.”

While Sister got to work, Andy sat in a chair and rubbed Loco, an aged and blind Shih Tzu confined to a laundry basket lined with pink towels. Both the dog and the towels smelled of urine. Sister bobby pinned Sherwood’s hair back and carefully painted his skin with the spirit gum. She fussed over the operation with all of the finesse of a mortuary beautician, which she was.

The spirit gum’s caustic, ether smell reminded Andy of Scotch whiskey he tried to drink once. Loco noticed it, too, and lifted her sightless head for a sniff that trig-



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gered a violent, snout-snapping sneeze. A moment later, she sneezed again. Andy felt her tiny body shudder with each outburst. Sister blessed Loco's heart every time she sneezed and regaled her brother with a stream of gossip about their stepmother's side of the family. Of course, Sherwood had his own mouthful of trivia to tell his sister. Andy marveled at how the two of them could talk right past each other like fire trucks racing to different fires.

When Sherwood regarded himself in the mirror, the dark pelts stretched from his hairline to his jaw. After a break to study photos in the movie star magazines piled on the breakfast table, Sister carefully detached the sideburns, trimmed a bit of length with surgical scissors, and pasted them back on Sherwood's face. The talking, detaching, trimming, and reattaching continued for nearly half an hour. Andy watched the sideburns getting smaller. To him, those ridiculous mouse skins fit his partner's shallow, tunnel vision existence. Sherwood's main concern for his future, Andy mused, was fooling women into thinking he had sideburns. Killing a man with no plans for the rest of his life had the ring of justification about it. At last, Sherwood peered into Sister's

mirror, scrutinized the sides of his head, and smiled.

"What do you think, Hardin?" Sherwood said, scrutinizing what was left of the hairy patches.

Andy applauded lightly. While he scratched Loco behind the ears, Sherwood and Sister left the kitchen. Andy could hear them talking in low voices, but couldn't make out what they said. Five minutes later, Sherwood came back, resumed his seat on the stool, and looked at Andy.

"Hardin, I hope you're OK with Sister coming along with us to St. Louis," he said, stroking his sideburns. "She's got to get out of Southaven for a while. There's a little matter with a collection agency."

Sherwood's remark blindsided Andy. He could feel his face reddening, his heartbeat quickening. The idea was absurd. Why would Sherwood spring this on him right here in Sister's house? He stood abruptly, nearly upending Loco's basket. The room tightened, gripping his throat. His gut twisted around his spine. He shook his head "no," and said, "Boots and cats, BOOTS AND CATS!"

Sherwood spread his fingers and waved his hands. "Calm down," he said. "I know what you're thinking." He stepped off

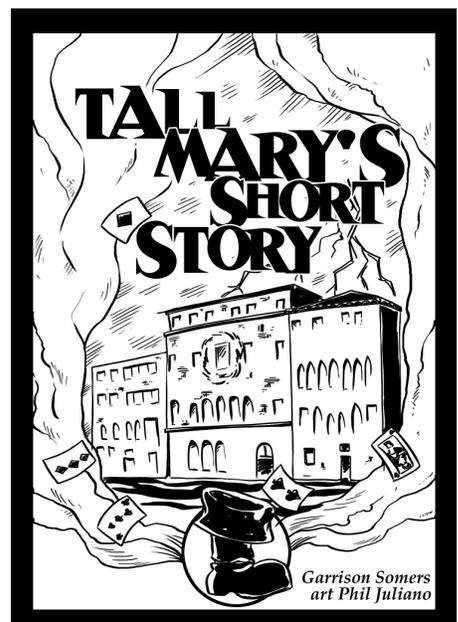
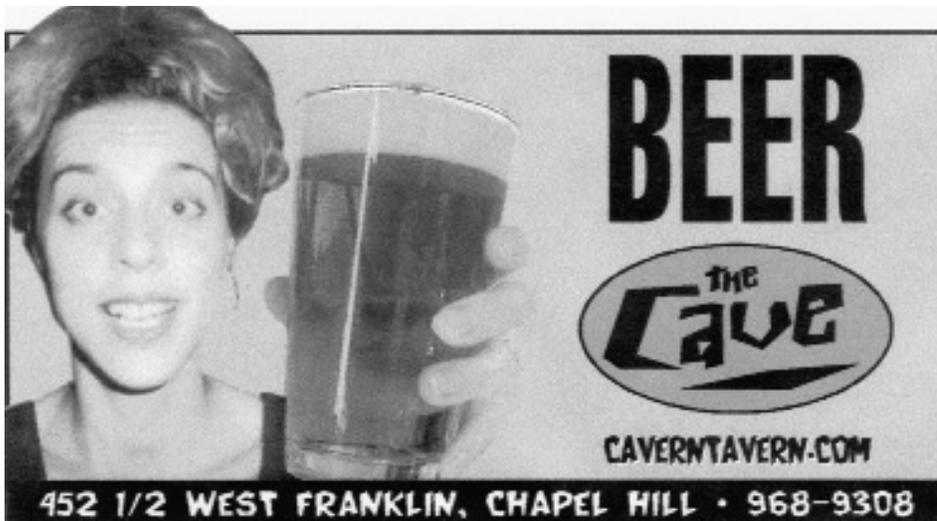
the stool and lowered his voice. "That fact is, Sister's known about our real business for years. She never believed that story about us repossessing cars for banks."

Sherwood's revelation flamed Andy's paranoia like a grease fire in a skillet. What if this collection agency tails them to St. Louis? And what about the partnership? Their tally of kills tied Andy and Sherwood together. No one but the two of them could know about their "real business." Sherwood had broken that symmetry. If Sister knows, Andy thought, then who else knows?

Sherwood must have guessed Andy's fear. "No, no, that's not gonna happen," he said, locking eyes with Andy. "Sister'd never tell anyone about us. You need to believe that."

While Sherwood spoke, Andy's survival instinct began to calm him. He focused on Sherwood as a primary target. He'd left his Browning double-action in his coat on the Volvo's back seat, but a kitchen holds many lethal weapons. In his peripheral vision, Andy iden-

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tified three within his reach. The room's tension dissipated.

Sister clomped into the kitchen carrying a suitcase that looked heavy from the way she toted it. She'd changed her slippers for a pair of orange galoshes. "I take it you two are gonna to shoot somebody up in St. Louie," she said, lighting a cigarette.

Sister had to die, too. Andy quickly decided not to kill the two of them there. A double homicide in Sister's house would be messy. A long road stretched ahead, a journey for biding one's time and picking the right place. Their trip to St. Louis would doubtless present opportunities. All this figuring passed through Andy's mind in a single second. He smiled at Sherwood and Sister and said, "Haste to the wedding."

Leaving Southaven, Sherwood nearly rear-ended a school bus while admiring his new facial fixtures in the rear view mirror. Andy, wearing his coat with the Browning snug in an inside pocket, rode in the front passenger seat. Sister and Loco sat in the back. Andy kept his face forward and his temper in check while Sister jabbered as if they were leaving on a family vacation.

"When you two get done with your business in Saint Louie," she said, "Sherry's been promising me a visit to Aunt Trudy's over in Joplin." Loco sneezed and Sister blessed her heart. "Andy," Sister said, "you're gonna be sue-prized when you meet Trudy. Even though she's my aunt, we're the same age." Sister quacked another laugh. Andy cringed. "That's 'cause Trudy is Mama's bay-bee sister," she squealed.

Sherwood broke in on Sister's family chatter. "We need to have a signal," he said, "a way for ya'll to let me know if one of these side-

burns has come loose." He thought for a few moments. "OK, here it is. If you happen to notice that something needs to be fixed, I want you to bite your lower lip. Like this." He affected an obvious overbite, which Sister and Andy mimicked.

"That's good," Sherwood said, assessing the two overbites. "Now if I need for you to check me out, say, we're about to meet some chicks, and I want to be sure of myself, I'll touch my nose like this." Sherwood laid a finger aside of his nose and tilted his head, like a Cherokee Santa Claus. Sister giggled.

"Shut up," Sherwood ordered. "This is serious. If there's a problem you bite your lip, but if everything's all right, you look up at the ceiling. You got it?"

Loco sneezed and Sister blessed her heart.

Back in Memphis, Sherwood left the Volvo behind a deserted shopping center. Andy hot-wired a Crown Victoria on the periphery of a hospital parking lot. The rain changed to a light snow as they descended the Mississippi River Bridge into West Memphis and joined the northbound traffic on I-55 to St. Louis. Sister yacked about her recent visit to the greyhound races with her Sunday school buddies, while Sherwood drove and told the story, which Andy had heard many times, about the schoolteacher he killed in the fifth grade.

The miles rolled under them. Andy tuned out the chatter. The eastern Arkansas blacklands hungered bleak against the winter sky. He thought about the new life he would live once his partner and Sister were out of the way. Never mind that Andy had no idea what foresters do. He was going to be a forester. He imagined that foresters spent their lives deep in the woods

and sometimes kept watch over vast timberland tracts from lofty, solitary towers. From all he had heard, foresters worked alone. That was the best part. With his killer's secrets locked inside the rotting heads of the two Lawsons, Andy the forester would disappear like a flea on America's hide.

The daydream sputtered and died when Sherwood steered the Vic into Lucinda's Truck Plaza. Acres of concrete rumbled under milling eighteen-wheelers. Passenger cars and trucks picked their way among the semi-trailers, tankers, wide loads, and pulp wood haulers. Covered fueling bays swept out from the space age-looking main building. Sister, toting Loco's basket, carried an argument with Sherwood about the Memphis Tigers from the car through the automatic doors into the mammoth snack bar and gift area, which opened onto a restaurant and lounge.

Sherwood paused beside the magazine stand and laid his finger aside his nose. This was his first opportunity to try out his signals. Sister and Andy kept straight faces and made quick inspections. Both tilted back their heads to gaze at the suspended tile ceiling. Sherwood smiled and headed for the lounge. Sister, still muttering about the Tigers, carried Loco toward the restrooms.

Twenty minutes later, Andy sat eating French fries and playing video poker when Sister and Loco sidled up beside him. She had a wait-'til-you-hear-what-I-have-to-tell-you look on her face.

"You see that trucker?" she said, nodding toward the diner.

Seated at a table maybe ten yards away, a bearded, heavy-set guy wearing sunglasses and a sleeveless denim shirt touched his cap bill. By force of habit, Andy's



Sarah Goodyear - NC
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Upper left - - Guarding My Grave
Left - Gusty Flowers ii
Above - Gunshot
Upper Middle - Dozing ii

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right hand gently felt the Browning in his coat.

“Well,” Sister said, “I was talkin’ to him, and it come up what you and Sherwood do.”

Andy swallowed hard.

“It turns out,” Sister’s voice dropped to a whisper, “he might want to hire you two wonst you finish this business in Saint Louie.”

Andy couldn’t stop the mean assed sneer that creased his face. He stared hard into Sister’s widening eyes wondering what she told that joker about their “business” in St. Louis. His paranoia welling up again, he said, “What the hell’s a monkey doing on Parchman Farm?”

If Sister couldn’t make sense out of what Andy said, she certainly understood his sentiment. “Hey, don’t you start in on me,” she said, narrowing her eyes and raising her voice. “Sherry’s already read me the riot act about keeping what y’all do a secret.”

Sister’s outburst fanned Andy’s anxiety. Trying to take control of the situation, he contorted his face and used subtle hand signals to try and make Sister be quiet.

“Wait a minute. Just wait a minute, you little sonofabitch,” she seethed. “Are you trying to make me look bad?”

People sitting and standing nearby turned to see about the commotion.

Sister held Loco’s basket under one arm, punched a fist into her waist with the other arm, transfixed Andy with a hateful glare, and rocked her bony head first left and then right to emphasize every word: “You – little – sawed – off – deaf – mute – sum – bitch,” she hollered.

More heads turned in their direction. Andy slid from the stool and walked toward the lounge, with Sister and Loco trailing behind. Sister kept yelling at Andy to stop and hear what she had to say. People were staring. Andy had a sudden, disturbing vision of a police lineup, with these gawkers on the other side of the one-way glass. He found Sherwood booth-necking with a woman in a waitress uniform. When Sister’s temper tantrum invaded the lounge, his lipstick-smearred face snapped to attention. Andy made it to the booth, rolled his eyes toward Sister, and jerked a thumb toward the exit. Sherwood said something to the waitress, who stood up smoothing the front of her skirt just in time for a confrontation with Sister and Loco.

“Get your ass out of my way, you little heifer,” Sister commanded.

The waitress, a tough-looking, broad-shouldered woman with a lightning bolt tattooed on her right forearm, laughed and grabbed the

neck of a beer bottle on the table. Sherwood gamely stepped between the two women. A three-way bitch bout ensued, which Andy avoided by backing off and concentrating on what was happening around them. Some of the lounge customers were leaving, while others leered at the drama, anticipating a fight. The bartender, a tall oriental man, held a cell phone out photographing the argument. Luckily, Sherwood had his back to the bar. Something made Andy glance out into the restaurant. The bearded guy had disappeared from his table. In his place sat two highway patrolmen, who apparently hadn’t noticed the fracas in the lounge.

When Andy turned back around, Sherwood had taken charge of Loco’s basket and, with his arm around Sister’s shoulders, was hustling her out of the lounge toward an exit. Andy wasted no time following. Sister continued to bray in anger. Andy’s transgression forgotten, she directed her fury at Sherwood, telling him she was “good and ready to get this Saint Louie shit over with.”

Andy looked for any sign of pursuit as they pulled away from Lucinda’s. They’d been lucky. No law enforcement vehicles appeared in their wake. Behind the wheel, Sherwood checked his sideburns in the rear view. Sister finally got quiet, mumbling to Loco in baby



talk about how she would have whipped that waitress's ass for her if Sherry hadn't pulled her out of that place. Sherwood apologized to Andy for Sister's behavior, twisting around to share his disgusted looks with the back seat. Sister accepted her chastisement with noisy sobs and sniffles.

Andy closed his eyes and willed his thoughts of forestry to override the brother-sister drama. It worked. Deep within an evergreen cathedral, he knelt on a stump the size of an oil drum and counted the tree rings, while wild creatures gathered around, unafraid of the forester. The deer were his closest friends. Part of Andy's job was their protection from the uncouth bastards that hunted them. In the deer woods, Forester Hardin would be a hunter, too. The vision carried Andy across the miles until the Ozark foothills gave way to the St. Louis skyline.

A cold wind out of the Great Plains had blown the spitting snow off toward Chicago, leaving sunshine and blue skies over eastern Missouri. Andy and Sister and Loco got out near the Eads Bridge. Sherwood left to ditch the Vic somewhere around Busch Stadium. Andy went to steal another car. Sister and Loco found a park bench facing the Mississippi River and watched the towboats pushing barges past the waterfront.

Prospecting along Washington Boulevard, Andy found himself surrounded by several grade school classes returning to buses after a visit to the Gateway Arch. Teachers and parents herded the children like noisy little goats saddled with colorful backpacks. A boy dashed past, spun around, and began firing a finger pistol at Andy, making gunfire noises. Andy drew his own finger pistol from his pocket, stuck it in his mouth, and pulled the

trigger. Shades of surprise followed by revelation passed over the boy's face. He looked at his own finger weapon, glanced back at Andy, and placed it in his mouth. Andy nodded. The boy closed his eyes tightly and fired.

By the time Sherwood rejoined them, Andy had acquired an old Chrysler station wagon. Sister insisted on riding in the front seat with Loco, so Andy slid into the back. With a few hours to kill before the job, they crossed the river into Illinois. Andy stared at the passing railroad yards, grain elevators, and rundown business districts. The voices from the front seat grew monotonous and distant. His thoughts returned to his tree ring stump and his critters. The fantasy segued into a dream that lasted until the Chrysler's decreasing speed woke him.

Andy rubbed his eyes as the station wagon came to a stop. Beyond Sherwood's head, he saw that they had joined a line of cars and trucks waiting at a railroad crossing. In the distance, numberless freight cars rolled from right to left behind a lowered arm and flashing lights. By the tones and cadence of the front seat voices, Andy could tell that Sherwood and Sister were arguing. While they bickered, Andy sat looking at the backs of their heads. Absentmindedly, he touched the Browning under his coat. The idea leapt into the back seat beside him.

Andy looked around. On their left, an abandoned gas station with 1970s-era pumps sat rusting in the afternoon sunlight. To the right, the empty roadside stretched from the rail crossing to the rear horizon. Their car occupied the last place in the queue, so Andy figured that he would be able to leave the Chrysler unnoticed. He could shoot Sherwood and Sister and wait to

make his escape the moment the train's caboose passed, while everyone ahead of them was watching the caboose and preparing to move forward.

Andy drew the Browning from his coat and studied the gas station. The place would make a convenient cover for a few minutes, but he knew he needed to be as far away from the Chrysler as possible when someone discovered the bodies. Up at the crossing, the train continued to roll with no end in sight. He pressed the Browning into the seat back behind Sherwood's torso.

Just before Andy squeezed the trigger, Loco exploded with a colossal sneeze. Startled, Andy brought the weapon down. The hesitation saved his life. Something made him turn around in time to see the police car pull into line behind them. Then Loco sneezed again.

"Dammit Sherry, did you smear on more of that spirit gum?" Sister said. "Poor little Loco can't stand the smell." She leaned back and looked at Andy, who held the Browning out of her line of sight. "We're gonna have to swap seats with you before Loco gives herself a heart attack."

As she opened the car door, Sherwood told Sister to sit still. The caboose rocked through the intersection and the safety arm levered upward. Traffic began to move. Andy eased the gun back under his coat. To his relief, the police car followed for about a half-mile before disappearing down a side road. The trio ate supper at a barbecue joint in Belleville and returned to Saint Louis not long after sunset.

That night at 9:00, Andy and Sherwood sat in the front seat of the Chrysler dressed in their black, business clothes. Sister sprawled in the back seat. Loco hadn't sneezed since the train crossing. A block

The Blotter

away, the tall, spired silhouette of Our Lady of the Vineyard Catholic Church loomed over hunkered buildings and masses of trees. Across the street, a grove of shadowy oaks bordered an athletic field. At the far end of the grove, a street lamp illuminated a basketball court where active figures cavorted. The two men blacked their faces and checked their weapons in silence. To complete the ritual, they bowed their heads. Sherwood recited the Lord's Prayer. They both said, "Amen."

Andy was about to open his door when Sherwood said, "Hardin, there's something I need to tell you." He cleared his throat and lit a cigarette. "Sister's been after me to quit this traveling life and settle down."

Andy tightened his grip on the door handle. He glanced back over his shoulder, but the gloom veiled Sister's face.

Sherwood kept talking. "You remember I told you my Uncle Robert started working last year at the new Mercedes plant in Birmingham?"

Andy nodded. He didn't remember.

"He told Sister he could get me on there," Sherwood said, patting his sideburns. "Ain't that right

Sister?" he looked into the rear view mirror.

Sister didn't answer. Andy thought that was odd; silence wasn't in her nature. He looked at his partner's face in the cigarette glow. Sherwood was a practical joker, but Andy couldn't find the little twitch in Sherwood's eyebrows that usually gave him away.

"I've been thinking about Birmingham," Sherwood said. "And I can't see any problem with it. That is, until I think about you."

Andy thought he heard Sister draw a sudden breath, but the sound could have come from Loco. He stared at the distant basketball court.

"The people we work for don't know who we are." He took a drag off the cigarette, exhaled, and looked at his partner. "But you, Hardin. You know."

Even though it was a cold night, Andy felt sweat drip from his armpits down his sides. Then Sherwood laughed.

"Hey, Hardin. I'm just thinking out loud." He slapped Andy on the knee. "We'll talk about this tomorrow. Let's go."

The open doors briefly lit the interior of the station wagon. In the second's worth of illumination,

he thought he saw a look of sadness on Sister's face. On the other side of the car, Sherwood closed his door quietly and moved off toward the church. Andy crossed the street, stepping among the oaks that would screen his approach to the ball court. Somewhere a police siren warbled.

When Andy canceled out the fractions and found the lowest denominator, he knew that Sherwood's quandary was the same as his. Neither one of them could allow the other to survive the end of their partnership. Andy considered his advantage. Sherwood didn't know about the forestry plan. Andy reasoned that Sherwood would likely follow through on tonight's job, collect the payment, and deal with him later.

But, there was something else. Andy paused and thought about Sister's uncharacteristic quietness and that expression on her face that may have been sorrow. Did she think she was seeing him for the last time?

He brought out the Browning and started walking toward the light. Off to his right, the lights of the neighborhood twinkled beyond the soccer field. As he stole through the trees, an owl launched itself from a limb above him. Instinctively, he brought up his weapon with both hands. The night creature flapped away across

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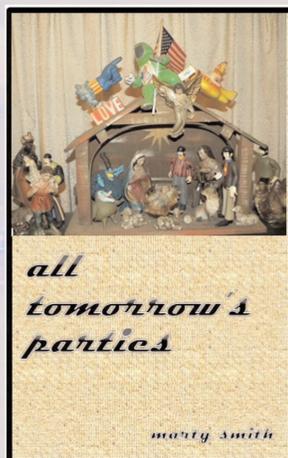
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the playing field. Andy crept forward.

In the pool of light on the ball court, four teenaged boys played a pick up game. Their hot breath plumed and dissipated in the chilly air. The ball beat an incessant tattoo on the concrete slab. The boys' sneakers skidded across the grit. Andy knew there would be a fifth person at the game.

The priest sat on a park bench in the shadows at the edge of the light. He was watching the boys intently. A big man in a black coat, his hands fidgeted together nervously. He could have been trying to keep warm. Andy saw the priest's longish, gray hair flutter in the night breeze.

The breeze.

Sherwood would be somewhere on the other side of the court. He expected Andy to be in the grove. But, Andy moved with the breeze. He left the cover of the trees for the open expanse of the soccer field. The thin air didn't offer any cover except darkness. That was OK. He knew the moon wouldn't be rising for another two hours. Andy felt the breeze in his face. With the Browning ready, he only had to wait for the scent of spirit gum.

The boys shouted. The backboard thrummed with a mighty slam-dunk. ❖

N. M. N. F. by Michelle Dacus Carr

Why can't all of life
be like the loose tooth
that one hard bite dislodges?
Amen. It's gone. No muss, no fuss.

Why can't love be that way?
The lover who leaves
walks out, and is never seen again,
never felt again. No muss, no fuss.

Why can't hearts take that cue?
One swift tug, and the longing
fades; bitterness too, and regret.
Life, and love, and hearts: M. F.

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"Desert Drive"

Talk flamed out. Radio incoherent.
Landscape's beginning to impose itself.
Road flat. Mountains in the distance.
Always mountains in the distance.
For all the asphalt below, tires can't help
but wind up the dust. Where are we?
Must be off the map by this.
Fingers fiddle with the dials. Was that
a trumpet sound? Mariachi? Maybe
Calexico. Nah, no one ever plays them.
More static. Like the stunted trees.
Solitary boulders. Scattered bones
from someone else's narrative.
Always between towns. Throat dry
and you feel like you're a refugee,
somewhere between countries.
Passenger closes eyes. Driver opens his
the wider to compensate. Sips from
the water bottle. Forget the gut.
Fluid goes to wherever it's needed.
Checks his watch. Making good time.
Bad times always do.

Two by John Grey

"Turbulence"

She sips her soda gently
even as the plane bumps and rattles.
Her calm is uppermost,
despite these dreaded clouds outside,
gray and menacing.

She doesn't even have to concentrate
like I'm sure the pilot must be doing.
Her hand's so steady, it adjusts
to all this rollicking unknowingly.
My drink threatens to spill at any moment.
Hers never will.

Eventually, we pass the turbulence.
The vessel settles down.
The pilot apologizes for the air.
She's done with her soda.
I have a stain on my shirt,
drops down my cheek,
and still a little liquid in the cup.

She sits back, returns to the book
she's been reading.
I'd do the same but
the plot is dripping from the ceiling,
the characters are underneath
the seat in front of me.

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When you sleep at the beach, right on the beach, where the surf makes noise through the walls of the rental, sometimes you dream about being a kid again, playing "oh, the waves are trying to get me" or "baby shark, do-do-do-do-do." If this hasn't happened to you, you'll need to trust me that it is so. Like being transported in time to when I was nine or ten. Quite a good trip, too. Knowing that the summer sun is somewhere else, and can't burn you so that Mom has to put olive oil on you so it doesn't hurt so bad, but now you can't sit on the couch and relax and play Life with your sisters and cousins, and you wouldn't really want to, anyhow because someone always thinks its funny to touch you on your sunburn and see it turn white, then flaming red again. Not funny at all! So the dream lets you chase the little fish in the lagoons made by the tide going out, and collect shells - all the same kind, too; those clams with the thick, crenellated shells that can be glued to pipecleaners and if someone goes to the store we can get googly-eyes, too.

SN - cyberspace

CONTRIBUTORS:

James Barnett of Natchez, MS writes, "My short story "The Causeway" has recently been accepted for publication by The Carolina Quarterly. My nonfiction books are published by University Press of Mississippi. The Natchez Indians: A History to 1735 was named by Choice Magazine of the American Library Association as an Outstanding Academic Title for 2008. My latest nonfiction book, titled Beyond Control: The Mississippi River's New Channel to the Gulf of Mexico, will be published early next year."

Sarah Goodyear, a Pennsylvania native, has spent most of her adulthood residing in North Carolina. As a self-taught artist, her work is emotive, expressionist, and portrays a playful darkness. Most of her paintings are "slightly" mixed-media, 95% acrylic with touches of ink and oil pastel. To share her artwork with the world, she travels to outdoor art shows all over the US. You can see her original work in the flesh (all dates 2017): Deep Ellum Arts Festival - Dallas, TX - Apr 7-9; Spring Daze - Cary, NC - Apr 29; King's Drive Artwalk - Charlotte, NC - May 6-7; Artisphere - Greenville, SC - May 13-15; Artsposure - Raleigh, NC - May 20-22; Three Rivers Arts Festival - Pittsburgh, PA - Jun 2-11; Stone Arch Bridge Festival - Minneapolis, MN - Jun 18-19; Elmwood Avenue Festival Of The Arts - Buffalo, NY - Aug 28-30; Festival In The Park - Charlotte, NC - Sept 23-25. Prints of her artwork are always on sale in these establishments: The Kress Emporium - Asheville, NC; Lucky Tree Gallery & Cafe - Raleigh, NC; The Dancing Moon Earthway Bookstore - Boone, NC; The Local Company - Johnson City, TN; The Art of Custom Framing - Troy, MI; The Artful Lawyer - Blacksburg, VA; www.SarahGoodyearStudios.com

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Phil Juliano of Bloomington, MN, is a good Blotterfriend. Follow his adventures on philjulianoillustration.com (and check out his current project on page 4).

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