

*Wonderful, wonderful, with Nathan Elias,
Anonymous, Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal*

The Blotter

March 2017

MAGAZINE

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COVER: "Creator finds inspiration,"
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The Blotter is a production of
MAGAZINE
The Blotter Magazine, Inc.,
Durham, NC.
A 501 (c)3 non-profit
ISSN 1549-0351
www.blotterrag.com

[c l m p]

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"A response to my daughter, when asked the age-old question 'why do I need to know this?'"

(With Deepest Apologies to Meredith Wilson)

Math for the income tax, math for the purchase price,
math for the road map, math for the meal's tip.
Math for the miles per hour.
Math for the adding and subtracting and the total,
Math for the cook book, a cake baking recipe.
Math for the teaspoons and the gallons and the tablespoons.

Hey, what did you get? Whatdidjaget, whatdidjaget, whatdidjaget,
whatdidjaget?
What was your answer?
Whatdidjaget?

You can add up a column, you can figure, you can add. You can figger,
figger, figger,
you can add all you want.
But the difference is the words that they use in the classroom now

No it aint, *no it aint!* You just gotta have a glossary!

Tick tick tick tick tick you're running out of time.

It was those damned ancient Greeks
who first got us all to thinkin' 'bout it,
started all the trouble back six five four three a couple thousand years ago.
The man was named Pythagoras,
and the problem is his theorem,
You don't have to understand, you just gotta *memorize* it
Math taught by Euclid, Cones by Eudoxus,
Numbers thought a lot about by ari-ari-Aristotle.
Back when there wasn't even measurement for demijohns
They sat around and thought a lot on side, side, angle, sides.
Multiplying fractions, what is the denominator?
Rectangle, pentagon, three-point-one-four-one-five-nine-two-six-five...
You're running out of time, tick tick tick tick!!!

Can you solve for x when x equals a coefficient?
there's absolutely no efficient way to solve for x .
Can I please use a calculator?

(Gone gone, gone are the teachers with the white chalk.
 Gone are the days with the pencils and the slide rules.
 Gone the bottle-bottom glasses sliding down their greasy noses.
 Pocket-protectors, full of protractors.
 Short-sleeved white shirts stained in the underarms.)

Whatdidjaget, whatdidjaget whatdidjaget for number forty-seven
What was your answer?

I dunno, I dunno, I dunno, I dunno. What's the square root?

A locomotive going forty-seven down an incline
 Meets another train leaving Iowa on Saturday
 How many passengers will have to get a hotel
 And buy another ticket if they want to get home?

Please work the problem out to seven decimal places!
 Seven?
 Seven!
 Seven?
 Seven!

Show your work, show your work, show your work,
 show your work.

Show your work.

But I have to use the lavatory!!!

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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 concern. Our primary interest is the
 furthering of creative writing and
 fine arts, with the magazine being a
 means to that end. We publish in
 the first half of each month and
 enjoy a free circulation throughout
 the Southeast and some other places,
 too. Submissions are always wel-
 come, as are ad inquiries.

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 Durham, NC 27705. Back issues are
 also available, 5 for \$5. Inquire re.
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CAUTION

*Good morning, good morning, it's such a
 lovely*

“The Al Capone Suite”

by Nathan Elias

Darryl got a job cleaning rooms and working the front desk at the Park Lane Radisson in downtown Toledo. It was her preference to work the night shift when the real creeps and crazies showed their faces, between midnight and sunrise. When Darryl interviewed for the job, her boss, Mr. Ornacki, a stout, balding man with a graying ponytail, bragged about all of the stars who used to stay at

Park Lane during its heyday.

“We’ve had our fair share of celebrity,” the man had said. “You name it. Miss Marilyn Monroe, herself. Ella Fitzgerald. Bob Hope. Cary Grant. And, my personal favorite—” he leaned across his desk, his voice at a whisper, “*The* notorious gangster, Al Capone.”

Darryl’s eyes widened at the name, as if to impress her potential employer, even though she wasn’t familiar with Al Capone’s crimes.

“Are people allowed to stay in the room?” she asked. “Was there blood in it?”

The man’s eyebrows wriggled like caterpillars.

“Some might say that is part of the allure of the suite.” He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and lifted a key ring with his pinky. “Would you like the grand tour?”

Once Darryl and Mr. Ornacki were inside the suite, Mr. Ornacki dead bolted the door and cracked his knuckles. “Just our luck,” he said. “The suite happens to be vacant. We can really take our time now.”

“So this is it?” Darryl said, inching further into the vintage-designed room. The walls, pale greens and blues, bounced light from the wide window overlook-

ing the Maumee River. With the oceanic beams Darryl felt like she was in an aquarium, Mr. Ornacki an eel writhing around her.

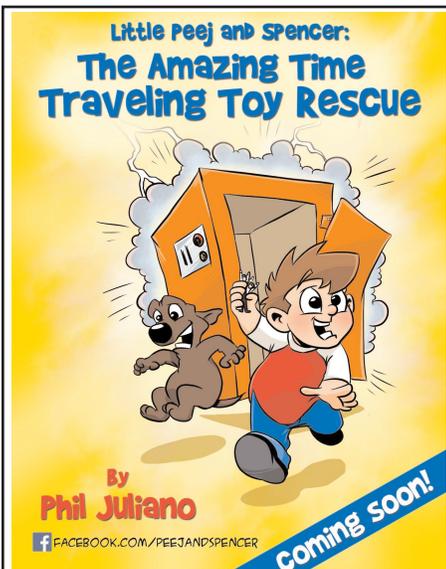
“As you can see we have retained the Modernist and Art Deco interior.” He sat down on the velvet, celadon couch and stretched his hairy arm across its crest rail. “You happen to be standing in the very spot where Mr. Capone himself purchased the Tommy Gun he’d use in the Saint Valentine’s Day Massacre from the then-owner of Park Lane.”

Darryl looked down to her feet, imagining the transaction taking place—the dirty cash, the cold steel and bullet shells. She realized working at the hotel was her dream job.

“Are there many opportunities for growth in this establishment?” she said.

“I’m going to say to you what Al Capone said to the owner before he shot him on an earlier replica of this couch.” Mr. Ornacki eyed Darryl up and down, circling his palm on the cushion beside him. “Why don’t you come over here and find out?”

She sat down beside him, resisted the urge to shudder when his sweaty fingers pinched the back of her neck. As he mounted, her clothes found their way to the ornamental flowers woven into the Persian rug. Darryl would have liked to think that it wasn’t the only thing that got her the job. This was the first time she’d been



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 2016/17. Follow along with the project at www.facebook.com/PeejandSpencer. and help fund / advance order via <http://www.gofundme.com/peejandspencer>

with a man since leaving Knoxville. She would have liked to admit that it wasn't going to happen again.

"I got a good feeling about you," Mr. Ornacki whispered in her ear, that familiar reek of booze on his breath. An image came to Darryl's mind—the Park Lane owner lying perforated with bullet holes, the babe-faced gangster standing over him. *Life and death*, she thought, her eyes focused on the rays of seafoam light. Shacking up wasn't exactly her top priority after her life fell apart and her siblings had to save her with a good old intervention. How could she possibly think of being with a man or having sex after her son's accident? Darryl switched to autopilot after the funeral, after leaving Florida, after returning to her isolation in Tennessee. It was a miracle she lasted the two months until her siblings drove down to her rescue.

Her older sister, LaShae, and their baby brother, Zane, abducted Darryl from her down-trodden house in Knoxville and

transplanted her to Toledo. Three years, four jobs, and one suitor later and Darryl was no closer to escaping depression than she was in her overgrown hillside garden eating dead, rotted blueberries. At least in the thicket of wilted flowers and bruised, heart-shaped tomatoes she wasn't chastised for reading Sylvia Browne instead of the Bible. Her siblings didn't know what it was like to wonder if every stray animal that walked into their yards could be the reincarnation of their child. They didn't know how loud darkness spoke, that spectral hymns were the only logic to its empty volume. Believing that the penumbral presence could be her son was the only thing that made Darryl's sleepless nights bearable.

She didn't argue her siblings about leaving Tennessee for Ohio. Zane singlehandedly packed most of her entire house into the back of a Two Men and a Truck rental while LaShae kept Darryl from drowning in misery.

"That's the price we pay for loving with our whole hearts," LaShae had said. "That's the cost of love."

"What exactly is the cost of love?" Darryl said, a bottle of rum clenched in her fist.

"The pain of loss," LaShae said. "The cost of love is the pain of loss."

"Like you know the pain of loss," Darryl said. Her bottle of rum was empty. Her heart felt the same way.

"We both lost our father, brother, and aunt in a car accident on Christmas Eve in 1972." LaShae's eyes locked on Darryl, her nose scrunched beneath indented, painted-on brows. "We were both forced to learn how to grieve when we were children. I can't have children, so no—I'll never be able to fully understand what you're going through. But I am your sister and I can tell you what I've learned. There's only one person you can love with your whole heart and never feel the pain of loss. Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

"And one thing I've learned," Darryl said, "is that there is no point in loving a god who lets your son take his life. Like I would want to be in heaven without my child."

Outside Zane cursed as a box dumped to his feet, the result of Darryl's shoddy job at packing up her life. He lit a cigarette, kicked something metal, and slammed the door before walking inside to find his sisters in a heap on the floor.

"New plan," he said. "I'm

**"Who gave these idiots
microphones?"**
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not going to break my back trying to get all this into a truck. Take a day to get the things you absolutely need and you can stay with me until you get on your feet.”

*

Three years and still Darryl wasn't on her feet, living in the spare room of her brother's house with barely any money in the bank. Since working at the hotel Darryl paid for the groceries and even helped with Zane's electric bill. It was the least she could do to feel like she wasn't freeloading. A month into the job and Darryl already had the flow of Park Lane ingrained like second nature. For once she felt like there was hope in retaining a job, that she might actually be good at something. Looking down at Mr. Ornacki sprawled out on the celadon couch after their bi-weekly “security inspection”, Darryl would button her jeans and think that she could do his job and then some.

Each night she learned as much as she could about the business and upkeep of the hotel. She was surprised at how

many of the hotel guests were regulars, practically living out of the overpriced rooms. Half of her job entailed chasing away visitors that were unpaid for, louses trying to take advantage of the hotel's amenities for free. *No, sir. Not on my watch.* Darryl had been let go of on the spot plenty of times to know not to let this job slip through her fingers.

*

On Saturday night Park Lane was at maximum capacity due to a technology fair at the Convention Center. Darryl hadn't seen Park Lane with no vacancy since the week she started and the president was in town. Every hour she double-checked the registry to verify the amount of guests that were allotted to each room. Next to the occupancy list she kept a notepad and tallied the different people who walked in and out of the doors: tired businesspeople, kicked-out husbands, potential prostitutes—these were the categories with the most tallies.

So far the amount of guests added up since the start of her

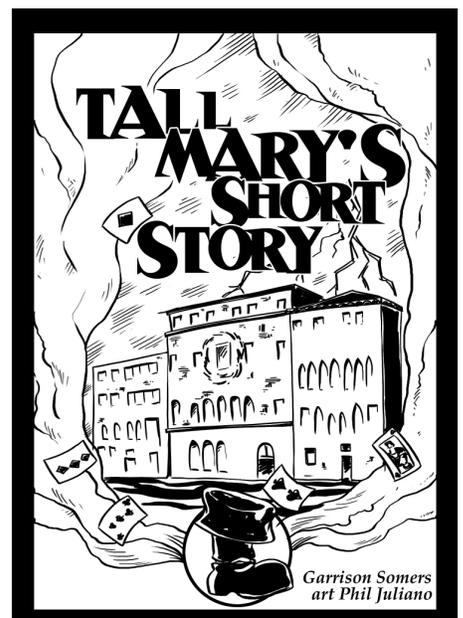
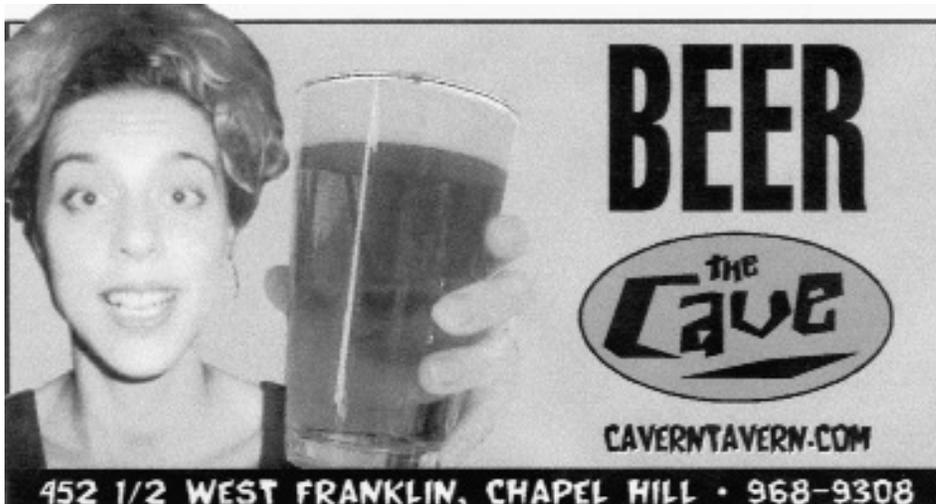
shift—not a single guest over the allotted count in the hotel registry. She was hoping that Mr. Ornacki would see how tight she could run a shift and promote her to Assistant Manager. Maybe then she'd be able to afford moving out of Zane's house.

It was quiet for a Saturday night, the only ruckus coming from Rochelle Evans, a robe-wearing elderly lady in room 205. Complaints rang to the desk about a sound similar to a cat's yowling, in-heat mew. Darryl worried that Rochelle had snuck in secret suitors. *Maybe she's just trying to get herself off,* Darryl thought. Lord knew she'd been on that side of loneliness—but she'd never let a hotel full of people hear her in the process.

Darryl picked up the desk phone and dialed room 205.

“Hello?” Rochelle said, her panted breath like static coming through the telephone wires.

For sale - cheap - on Amazon.com (where else?)



"Hi, Rochelle, this is the front desk," Darryl said.

"Everything's fine, Darryl," Rochelle said, her heavy breaths metronome-constant.

Darryl fanned the pages of her book.

"Could you just keep it down, please?" Darryl asked. She flipped through the chapter about how to discover your own past life.

"What are you reading tonight?" Rochelle asked.

"Sylvia Browne," Darryl yawned. *"The Other Side and Back."*

"You know all that stuff is a sham, right?" The woman sounded amused, a sharp chirp behind her rapid inhale, exhale. "It's all a bunch of new age hooey. Don't believe everything you read, Darryl."

"I'll take stock in whatever I'd like, thank you very much," Darryl said. "And we'd appreciate it if you kept your voice down, please. It sounds like there is a wild animal dying in your room. Thank you. Goodnight."

Darryl slammed the phone down and smiled. She wasn't about to let some town-maiden destroy the one thing that kept her connected to her son.

*

When 2:30 A.M. rolled around Darryl made her rounds to each floor of the building for routine security inspection. Desk clerks were instructed to check four times throughout their shift to make sure there were no emergencies or alarming activity.

Everything seemed fine until she got to the third and final floor. This was where the penthouses and most celebrity suites were, mostly reserved for VIP guests. Tonight Dr. MacMorton, a scientist, occupied the Al Capone suite. Darryl had helped him with a late-check in on the first night of the technology convention.

"Is there a bell boy?" Dr. MacMorton had asked. He peered down at her through his thick glasses and reddened, copper mustache. Darryl wasn't able to pin point his accent other than somewhat European. "Or perhaps a doorman? I need some help taking very fragile equipment to my suite."

*

"I'm the clerk, bell boy, door man, and maid," Darryl joked. The man didn't return a laugh. "I'd be happy to help you with your equipment."

The largest piece required a special dolly to wheel up to room 317. It was twice the size of the scientist, shaped like The Liberty Bell. The product looked unfinished, as if it needed a coat of paint or polished plastic. Wires stuck out through metal tubes and fine glass protruded, unprotected. While Darryl pulled the contraption behind her, the scientist kept a distance with his fingers extended, ready for something to fall apart.

Once inside the room, the scientist gathered the miscellaneous pieces, hoisted the machine from the dolly, and began reassembling it on the

floor between two double beds.

"You expecting company?" Darryl asked.

The scientist looked up from his tooling hands. "Oh, you mean the beds. It was all that was available on such short notice." His voice went hoarse as his gaze returned to the device. "And quite my luck to stay in the same room as Al Capone."

"Don't mean to be rude—it's just my job. Can't lose this one, too."

"A good vocation is difficult to acquire these days," Dr. MacMorton said, eyes fixed on connecting a monitor larger than the hotel television to the bell-shaped machine. "I understand Mr. Capone utilized the convenience of Toledo while expediting bootleg whiskey from Chicago to New York. As far as ethics are concerned within the perimeter of this facility, I'm sure you lean on the side of virtue."

He stuck out his hand to shake hers, a fifty rolled between his fingers.

"No tip necessary," Darryl said. "Just happy to do my job."

"Virtue," the scientist repeated. "An unlikely quality in such a fragile economy."

Now, standing outside of the Al Capone suite, Darryl stood in the glow that beamed

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from the creak between the scientist's door and the carpet. A muffled *zapp* accompanied each flicker of the light. It reminded her of oversized beetles getting fried in her electric bug trap.

It first occurred to Darryl that the light and sounds came from the television inside the room. She hovered in front of the door, body quarter-turned to walk the other way in case the door to room 317 suddenly flew ajar. The *zaps* grew less frequent, the light on the floor dimming to blackness.

Then came the sound of a moan—not the pleasurable kind coming from Rochelle Evans in 205, but the kind a person lets out when witnessing something both terrible and beautiful and the same time. The kind of moan her ex-husband let out when their first son, Christopher, was born. The kind of moan she let out when she got the call that their second son, Clark, had died.



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“Hello?” a soft, sheepish voice called from the other side of the door.

Darryl froze where she stood. With the occupancy list in her hand, she reaffirmed that room 317 was checked out to only one guest.

Someone's in there who shouldn't be, she thought. It was her duty as night clerk to verify that no unaccounted guests occupied the rooms.

“Don't let my hotel become a whorehouse,” Mr. Ornacki had said on her first shift alone. “And keep an eye out for gangsters. This city ain't like Knoxville.”

Now the entire corridor was silent and dark.

“Hello?” the bleating voice cried again. “Hello? Daddy?”

Darryl's head turned as she inched away from the door. Her fist floated in air, prepared to knock, though she couldn't will herself to disturb the muted air of the third floor. As she began to tiptoe away the door flung open, filling the dark hallway with a pale verdant glow.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” the scientist said.

“I heard something,” Darryl said. “Someone. Someone else.”

The scientist cocked his head, the green light refracting from his round eyeglasses.

“You're a perceptive woman.” He stood aside, allowing entry into the radiant suite. “I'm working on a very important project. For the convention. I'm afraid I'm quite behind in

my work.”

“Who is in there with you?” Darryl said.

“See for yourself, I am unattended.” He nodded, urging for Darryl to enter. “The voice you heard was a projection from the machinery you saw previously.”

She stepped forward, feigning courage as the strange light enveloped her. The door closed behind her, the bolt locked automatically. She turned the corner past the bathroom and there it loomed—the machine, its fragments constructed into a towering hourglass that stood from floor to ceiling.

A sculpture, she thought. *A monstrosity*.

“The voice you heard belonged to my daughter. She's no longer with us. Passed two years ago. She was seven.”

“It's not easy to bury your child,” Darryl said.

“No,” Dr. MacMorton said.

I know how you feel, she wanted to say, to share in the connection of loss with the stranger. Instead she moved over to the machine where upon a large computer monitor shone the image of a little girl's smiling face. One of her front teeth was missing.

“It's still in beta testing,” the scientist said, “but the results have been surprisingly accurate. It's supposed to go live at the convention this week for the first time.”

“I don't understand,” Darryl said. “What is this? What does it do?”

“The idea is to utilize figments of data from people’s lives and recreate a digital, interactive persona of an individual. I believe that it will be able to help those who have experienced great loss. Imagine being able to talk to a loved one after they are deceased. However, I’ve only been able to run the software with data coded from my daughter. And since her life was so short the system doesn’t have many facts or personality traits to go on.”

“My youngest son was nineteen when he passed,” she said.

The scientist removed his glasses and stepped closer to Darryl.

“Access to your son’s belongings, anything that could recreate his digital persona—it could help me advance the demo presentation at the convention.”

Darryl wished she’d kept her mouth shut. There was a reason she never brought up her son’s death in conversation.

“I’m not sure that would be a good idea. I don’t know if I’m ready for something like that.”

“Allow me to ask you a question. Have you ever lay awake at night, tossing, turning, questions rolling around the creaky floors of your mind like marbles? Questions you wish you could ask but will never have the chance to?”

Every night, Darryl wanted to say.

“I know I have,” the scientist went on. “It’s why I created this machine. I knew that I

wouldn’t be able to rest until I could see her face again, speak to her as if she were really here.”

The machine overshadowed Darryl and the scientist. His daughter’s toothless grin widened under blinking eyes.

“Isn’t that right, Vanessa?” He reached up, stroked the monitor’s frame with his hand.

“That’s right, Daddy.” Her rosy cheeks, round face and pig-tails reflected off each lens of the scientist’s glasses.

*

Instead of going to church Sunday morning with LaShae and Zane, Darryl searched the dank basement for the last traces of Clark—water-damaged boxes collecting mold and cobwebs. She couldn’t get the image of Dr. MacMorton’s machine out of her head. His daughter’s voice sounded awfully real—organic, yet hollow. *Access to your son’s belongings, anything that could recreate his digital persona*—the scientist’s tone had went from mournful to ambitious. Out of the five boxes Darryl brought from Tennessee, three of them contained the remnants of her son’s life. Her siblings didn’t question whether or not these objects would be a waste of space in the end, and now they might actually prove helpful in the name of science.

Once everything was stacked in a neat pile upstairs, Darryl fought the urge to plug in Clark’s computer. After three cigarettes she decided that resist- ing was futile. She pushed the

‘on’ button of the laptop, hoping for the hundredth time to find answers to the questions that prevented her from sleeping. The old Dell computer beeped as it illuminated through the cracked screen. A photo of bright, sunny Tampa lay behind scattered files and folders on the desktop.

With her hand on the computer’s mouse, Darryl stared, transfixed, at the photo of Tampa as if she were there again. Nineteen years had passed since she gave birth to Clark there, and twenty-two years since her first son, Christopher. She left Florida to escape her ex-husband eight years ago. Clark took his life there one year ago to the day. Darryl thought that the folders and files in disarray, scattered across the Tampa coastline, were a reflection of her son’s mind. Little squares with indiscernible names overlapped each other, the natural system of rows and columns foregone in order to compensate his frantic, unorganized workflow.

The folder that she had been unable to open in three years, the folder that’s innards gave her relentless anxiety, was titled “Goodbye”, and lay overlapping a photo icon of Clark’s fiancé, Sasha. Darryl double-clicked “Goodbye”, the folder instantly widening to the size of the screen. A single file, an untitled text document, was saved inside the folder. A lightning-sharp migraine jolted through Darryl’s temples. *I should get*

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some rum for this, she thought, but before she realized it the text document had opened and her eyes fixed on the opening words.

Dear mom,

I am really scared because I keep thinking that I can't make her happy anymore. Maybe I'm not the right man for her. I keep thinking of suicide—

Outside Darryl heard Zane's truck pulling into the driveway. She coughed, her throat dry, lungs heaving, and shoved her thumb into the laptop's power button. The front door opened before she could put a blanket over the open boxes of Clark's old things. She heard LaShae's voice, upbeat with post-church rigor.

"Pastor Luke had a good point when he brought up Peter 2:24—he himself bore our sins."

"I think I might need to take a break from ushering," Zane answered. He undid his collar button and went to the fridge for a beer.

"I take it I didn't miss anything new," Darryl said. She appeased LaShae and went on Easter Sunday, but her visits had admittedly grown less frequent.

"You're looking through Clark's things," LaShae said. "Is everything okay? Should I call Pastor Luke?"

"It's not what you think," she said. "At the hotel there's this man. A scientist. He built a machine that will let me talk to him."

LaShae sat down in the recliner next to Darryl and unfolded the wrapper of a stick of gum. "I don't think that machine will let you talk to Clark anymore than Sylvia Browne will, Darryl." LaShae stuck the gum in her mouth, smacked her lips as she chewed.

In the kitchen Zane fumbled to secure his beer properly in its cozy. Outside the sharp whistle from a train echoed—the tracks behind Zane's house were close enough to shake the small building when freighters passed. As the train grew closer the siblings stayed silent, prepared for the deafening sound to drown them out.

*

Darryl packed the laptop, photographs, journals, letters, birthday cards, and voice messages into a duffel bag and kept

it under the front desk for the entirety of her shift. Although tempted to fiddle with the contents of the duffel bag, she kept her eyes on the guests passing through, often half-awake in walking comatose. Whenever the lobby emptied she'd reach for the duffel bag, stop herself, and instead reopen *The Other Side and Back*. What would Sylvia Browne say about the scientist's machine? Darryl could summon Sylvia's raspy smoker's voice from the countless audio-books she'd borrowed from the Lucas County library. *We choose this life before we come to this body*, she envisioned Sylvia saying. *We each search for our own Truth*.

There was nothing saying that she had to go to room 317 after her shift. She could call the suite and tell him that she'd changed her mind, that she didn't like the thought of her son's afterlife as a science experiment. The image of the folder from Clark's desktop came to Darryl's mind—he had named the folder "Goodbye". It took her all this time to find the strength to open that folder.



The front desk phone chimed and Darryl dropped *The Other Side and Back* to the floor.

“Front desk,” Darryl answered.

“Is there something wrong, Darryl?” It was Rochelle Evans from room 205, her breaths slow and distanced for once. “You haven’t called to check in tonight. And I didn’t see you walking the halls. I was worried about you.”

“What do you think happens to our souls?” Darryl said. Sylvia Browne’s photograph stared at her from the floor next to Clark’s duffel bag.

“I once heard that Native Americans refused to have their photographs taken,” Rochelle said. “They thought it would steal their soul. Disrespected the spiritual world. But what do I know about the soul? I can’t even keep a man.”

“Everything is fine,” Darryl said before hanging up. “And thank you for checking.” As she clicked the phone to the receiver she looked up to find her boss, Mr. Ornacki, standing over her with *The Other Side and Back* in his hands.

“I told you about reading on the job,” he said. “How can I expect you to keep my hotel under control if you’re busy reading this hocus pocus crap?” He dropped the book into the wastebasket, his ash-white ponytail wagging behind his head like an injured dog’s.

“I guess there’s probably not much room for growth here, then,” Darryl said. She picked

up the duffel bag and started around the desk. “And to think I wanted to be Assistant Manager.”

“Right,” Mr. Ornacki cracked a yellow-toothed grin. “You’d have to put out a lot more to move up in a place like this, honey.”

“You can find yourself a new clerk,” Darryl said. She reached into the garbage can, withdrew the now coffee-stained copy of *The Other Side and Back*. “I ain’t your damn whore.”

The scientist waited for Darryl and opened the door as soon as he saw her through the peephole.

“I thought you might not show,” he said. He took the bag from her hands and searched its contents while Darryl lingered in the corridor.

“I brought what you asked for,” she said.

He took the duffel bag from her hands, surprised by its weight.

“I do believe this will suffice,” he said.

Darryl followed him into

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the suite. The same glow, like nuclear energy, radiated from the monitor attached to the towering machine. Dr. MacMorton splayed the contents of the duffel onto the corner-most bed. Clark’s laptop. Photographs. Journals. Letters. Birthday cards. Voice message tapes. Darryl grimaced as the scientist ran his gloved fingers along the items.

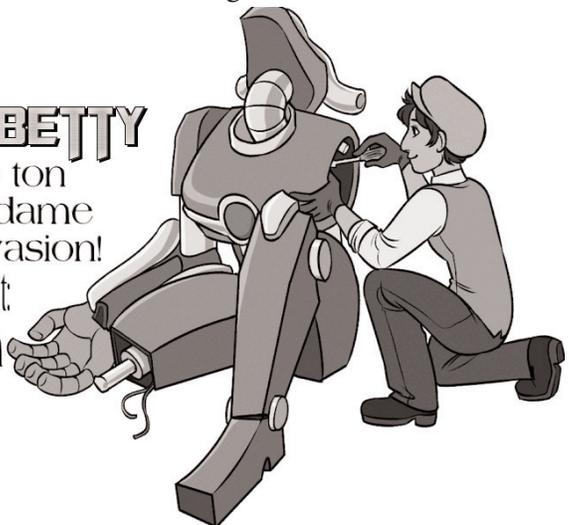
“Be careful with all that, please,” Darryl said. “I don’t have anything backed-up. It’s all I have left of him.”

“Don’t you worry,” the scientist said. “I treat all of my test subjects with the utmost care and tenderness. I’ll need to do some troubleshooting with the equipment before we get started.”

“Do you mind if I sit down, then?” she asked.

“Of course not. Please, please.” Dr. MacMorton opened Clark’s laptop. “First I’ll have to access all of his social profiles, emails, messages, photos, archives—you know, the basic data that guides behavioral information.”

“Right,” she said.



The Blotter

“Behavioral information.”

His fingers clacked on the keyboard the way Clark’s once did. Would his fingerprints be erased after this? After forty minutes of tinkering with the laptop Dr. MacMorton alternated to the photographs and scanned them all, one after the other popping up on the monitor attached to the bell-shaped machine.

“Now to copy vocal patterns,” said the scientist. He inserted the voice message tapes into an old-fashioned player, updated to connect with the monitor.

“Hey, mom, it’s just me,” a voice rang from the monitor’s speakers.

Darryl sprang back, nearly tipping the chair over.

“Wanted to call and tell you Happy Birthday.” The voice was youthful, male with a thin southern drawl.

“I wasn’t expecting to hear that,” Darryl said.

“My apologies,” the scientist said. “If you’d prefer, I can mute the voice messages until we begin the test run.”

“Yes, I would prefer,” Darryl said.

“Right, then.” The scientist continued troubleshooting without another word to Darryl. Watching him pick through Clark’s things gave her chills, as if witnessing a coroner at work on a corpse, the suite his makeshift mortuary. After an hour he turned to her and said, “It is still an imperfect product.” Darryl blinked, double-taking the image of her son’s face on the monitor. It smiled when it saw her, glitching with every small movement. “We put more emphasis on the reliability of the intelligence. We will smooth out the presentation once we receive more funding.”

Darryl felt a dampness envelop her skin. The air in the hotel room went cold. Inside the metal bell came a sound like a flock of hummingbirds flapping their miniscule wings. *The motor*, Darryl thought. *Don’t forget that this thing is just a machine.*

“Hey, mom,” spoke the image of Clark on the monitor. His brown eyes, his wide grin—it was not so different than Skyping with Christopher. The picture lagged and then resumed Clark’s natural flow of move-

ment.

Darryl looked to the scientist. “It’s perfectly normal to respond to it,” he said. “It can recognize you and operates with full retina registration. It sees your movement; it hears you speak.”

Clark’s face retained its smile, waiting for Darryl to answer. If only she were really Skyping with him. If only it were really her son greeting her so casually.

“Hi, Clark,” she said. The inside of her stomach heaved like a broken vacuum cleaner. She wanted to suck the words back into her forever. *Do machines know the difference between ghosts and angels?* she wondered.

“How are you?” the image asked. “How is everything? How’s Chris?”

Darryl looked to the scientist, unable to keep her eyes on the monitor. It felt like looking at the sun—if she stared for too long she’d go blind.

“What is the point of this?” she said. “Why would I tell all my personal information to a computer? It doesn’t care about Chris.”

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"He might," the scientist said. "It's a symbiotic experience, this technology. It possesses a type of intelligence similar to playing chess against your computer—only on a much larger, powerful, personal scale."

"That machine is not my son," she said.

"Well of course not, this machine lacks a soul. But if you approach the machine with an open mind you may discover uncanny resemblances between its ability to relay information and your son's unique, individual personality."

A series of thuds came from the other side of the door—even Clark's digital eyes averted to seek out the cause of the noise. "You got my woman in there?" a groggy voice said. It was Mr. Ornacki's—drunk, Darryl estimated. "You in there, Darryl? You think you can just quit and sleep around with my guests?"

"This was a bad idea," Darryl said. She reached for the illuminated buttons on the machine, pressing randomly in hope of making Clark's face disappear.

"Stop it," the scientist said. "You could damage my work—you could ruin everything."

"I'll break this damn door down, you hear?" Another series of nonsynchronous thuds came from Mr. Ornacki.

"Dear Mom," Clark's voice started. "I am really scared because I keep thinking that I can't make her happy anymore."

"Turn it off," Darryl cried.

"I keep thinking of suicide," Clark went on.

"The system must be erratically accessing data from the hard drive," Dr. MacMorton said, his attention on the needs of the machine.

"I don't care what it's accessing, turn it the hell off." She started to gather Clark's assorted belongings from the hotel bed, shoving them back into the duffel.

"I just wanted to love her, mom, but she didn't love me back," Clark's voice started to break up, like the other end of a long-distance call. "I'm sorry mom. I just wanted her to love me back."

The suite's door flew open with a booming crack, the sound like sharp axe to fresh timber. Mr. Ornacki stood in the doorway, his shadowed silhouette rising and falling with each of the man's breaths.

"I don't understand," the scientist said. "I pulled the power to the mainframe. The system should be down, the machine should not be running."

"Please forgive me," said Clark's face on the monitor. "I just couldn't see another way to not feel like this."

"It's okay," she said. All the lights in the suite went out except for her son's face, its glow combating the darkness. She cradled the monitor in her hands. "Everything's going to be okay. Momma loves you." ❖

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@blotterrag.com

Here are two things I don't want to happen. I don't want my memories of childhood to fade into vaguery that may or may not seem like something I did. That tree we sat under, was it a maple or a sweetgum? I don't quite recollect. Was it even a tree at all, but actually a streetlight that was burnt out because the twin boys down the road got a b-b gun for their mutual birthday. No utility commission can keep up with boys with good eyes and lots of b-bs. Or were they cousins that spent the summer together? - of an age following their fathers being of an age, close enough to be interested in fishing and running with barky old hounds after the neighbor's cat and jumping bicycles over creeks with no fear and no helmets. The other thing is that my memories only come back to me as dreams, occasional and with all of the bright colors of lawns and tulip gardens faded to pleasant pastel shades but still disappointing because I know that they were once loud and glaring and quite something. Don't let that happen, either.

LL - cyberspace

"New Orleans, 1998"

by Anonymous

The daypack frame grinds my shoulders
into raw meat,
as Zero and I cross the yellowed
Greyhound floor.
Before I can wash Memphis off my face,
a young street kid in orange board shorts walks up next to us,
heaves my bag.
He only has a few bucks
but we are down to hang and
go in for half. We agree to weed and beers. Me, Zero, D.
Outside: animated, dark eyes give his spiel
"I'll bet you a dollar I can knock down this tree..."
With my bare hands... I know this one,
and before I can finish my thought,
his hands tapping down the tree,
tourists smiling,
his hands
their pockets.
We drink 40s of Jax
and shoot pool at a French Quarter dive whose name I've forgotten.
Green dope-sick girl melts
on next door stoop as we exit.
She gets D's last five
("be well, sweet")

My roommate at the hostel
on Carondelet ("let not lay")
had gone for the day,
and I needed a reading,

had been drinking since noon the day before
 tipsy, buzzing, feet sore, walking uptown, and down, St Louis cemeteries
 one two and three
 Burgundy St
 Marigny
 Bywater
 depositing myself at the Saturn Bar in the ninth ward (gone now)
 all murals,
 shirtless young black men with sag-pants, bassy hip hop, pre-bounce
 in sagging strut cars,
 doorags,
 and I float to my table for the evening,
 next to the wrecked jukebox,
 playing Ernest Tubb and Al Dexter sides
 for a dime and ninety cents on Pabst,
 buying rounds with that group of
 Austrian backpackers.
 Anyway, I'd made my way back to the river
 the next morning, my last 20 for the week burning my pocket
 and there she was,
 at a card table on the cobbled river footpath, looking at me
 looking at her,
 and I liked the way her eyes looked.

CONTRIBUTORS:

Nathan Elias is a writer and filmmaker from Los Angeles, CA. He is currently a candidate for the MFA in Fiction at Antioch University Los Angeles. In his spare time he can often be found with selling art with his wife at Venice Beach. His writing has appeared in *Hobart*, *Literary Orphans*, *Birdville Magazine*, *Dogzplot*, and placed second in the Toledo City Paper Fiction Contest 2016.

This particular **Anonymous's** work has appeared in many publications, including: *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Red Savina Review*, *Haiku Journal*, *The Review Review*, and *Into the Void* (UK). He/she resides in New Jersey.

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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