

*Hoochie-koo! Renato Escudero, Gray Griffin,
Philip Loyd, Brian Coughlin,
Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal*

The Blotter

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MAGAZINE

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"Inspiration is for Amateurs"

So says Stephen King, the workhorse model of American letters. I am not ashamed to admit that if I could have anyone's – any author's – ethic, it would be his. I don't need to interview him to know this, either. "Get up and plow the field," his output clearly states. If you want to be a writer, *write*. You don't have to like his style, his genre, the books themselves. I don't think I would want to delve into the darkness he has plumbed. But you can't deny that if you write a lot, and read a lot, and have a secure connection in your synapses between what you read and what you write, something will come of it. And, inevitably, your work will get better as you proceed.

Some time ago I was in a writing group – I've told you about the fellow who achieved great first paragraphs and received all of the recognition he required of writing from the writing group's gushing praise for his ideas and initial forays. When we broke up, about seven years ago, there were only two of us still in the game, still writing. Pushing the big lumpy rock up the hill no matter how many times it uses gravity and meanness to roll over us and return to the bottom of that hill. She – my writing group cohort – is the epitome of getting the job done. She produces ideas, outlines, research files, drafts and final product with the regularity of a...no, that's not fair. She's the person that the writing simile should be designed around. And me. I sit every day at the keyboard and type. This and that. On good days and bad.

An editor friend recently received a scathing response from a customer for whom he was providing paid and skilled assistance. *You've badmouthed my characters!* the note stated. *How dare you? Please go F#\$K yourself.* My friend asked me if all writers are similarly high-strung. Yes, I replied, gulping. But we're not all quite so bat-shit crazy.

My suspicion is – based on no medical evidence whatsoever and intending no coincidental disrespect – that there is a behavioral spectrum for writers. On one end are the working writers who lay down sentences like bricklayers mortar walls – square, level and practical. I know writers like this and I read their work and I do not attribute the word "art" to their articles and I expect that they do not care what I attribute to their work or not. Did they do the job assigned? Did they get paid? Done and done.

Moving along the spectrum there are the folks who write, get published, like the work they've done, are aware that it isn't literature, but harbor the wish that it was. That is, they wish they could produce better sentences. They keep this feeling a secret, and it is a part of their personality - a writer's mood, if you will. They talk about writing over coffee or cocktails and they are not shy about the work they've produced, but don't brag, either. A little further on are the working writers who are certain that

they have that piece of literature in their desk drawer (or up in the cloud, to modernize the image,) but it isn't quite done, not ready, or has been bounced and they're a tad worried it won't see the light of day without...self-publishing. Yikes!

Along the line are the self-publishers who happily market their wares, the self-publishers who mope, the scribes who don't much care about publishing at all but write for the catharsis or fun or to clear their heads, the happy people who only write when they're in the mood, and those others who are never in the mood, but are patiently waiting to become moody. And on the far end of the spectrum are those who believe that they should only put pen to paper when they are divinely or otherwise inspired. And, well, somewhere on this crooked line is my friend's disgruntled customer, the angry scribbler. Do I understand taking things personally? You betcha. Not so recently, but there was a time. *Don't make fun of my poetry. No, I'm not open to advice or correction. Yes, I meant to say that.* So I want to make it clear that in no way am I looking...sideways at any of the personalities of which I speak. Just as it takes a village to...make a village, it requires a special kind of tool to be a writer and write. Sometimes that tool comes in a really colorful case. Sometimes the writer finds it difficult to take it out and use it.

We are hampered and crippled and haunted and motivated, each according to our turn. Some days are better than others, of course. My office is in the dining room of our house. Not exactly a quiet corner of my world, with a window out into the pastoral springtime to motivate my creative juices to flow. That it's well lit and close to the coffee maker is about all I can say about it. At night, when everyone else is down for the duration, it's a good spot for getting things done. So inspiration or hard work? The cuckoo clock ticks unobtrusively from one wall. My keyboard click-clacks in counterpoint, occasionally like Buddy Rich on the snare. And he would be the first one to tell you that you get to Carnegie Hall by taking the number 4 train and by having correct change for the machine.

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CAUTION

And that's the way it goes...

"D'Lores in Red"

by Renato Escudero

She dropped a stack of diaries in my lap and urged me to construct better records of her misadventures. In my droopy state, rolling from left to right on my office divan, I could almost see her, as if in the flesh. Her cheeks were the color of cheap rosé against a ghostly pallor, probably from a late night of drinking alone. Her hair was in rollers, wrapped inside a well-worn checkered scarf. Within my sleepy thinking, I asked her what was wrong with the chronicles I'd already produced. The nerve of her, to show up from nowhere and make demands. Without a reply, she blurred away in the predawn, melted into the fledgling sunlight. But I could still hear her voice, as clearly as if it were my own. The nags, the criticism. Louder and louder it got and snapped me into consciousness.

Well, well, hearing voices again, Mr. Renato? Love the fact that one of them is mine. FYI, dear one, I'm not nagging – I'm offering ideas, giving you something to work with, to lubricate your dry spell. Don't you ever lock me in your filing cabinet again. Didn't know what to do with me anymore, did ya? Watch it with the wisecracks. Just tell my story. Truth is the best policy.

All right, I'll bite. I'll give into her one more time:

She is just a woman, filled with loveliness and lust, a chubby girl who spends her nights typing instant messages to strangers. Scary perverts that could become stalkers or rapists. The flirting cleanses
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away the mindlessness of her daily temp jobs. Something to do on dateless nights. So many dateless nights. On one of these unremarkable nights, a random message bubbles up next to the other glowing boxes of text on her monitor. Not a What's up? or a How are ya? Not even the typical ASL?

Instead she reads, "You hear them coyotes calling?"

She furrows her red brow, a thin and fiery line as unpredictable as her wild head of hair. She takes a breathy pause at a loss for words. Then she types, "How they howl, indeed! Except where I'm from the coyotes chew tobacco and drive long cargo vans."

"Yah, herding sheep across borders. But I'm talking about real hairy coyotes, the ones on the prowl to steal all your food."

Finally, a stranger worthy of conversation. No one touches the chubby girl's food. This one will nudge her away from the other text boxes and emoticons.

Hey, trim the fat remarks. You're one to talk. Oh, Rew, I think I've missed you. Admit it, it's kinda fun being back together. Mind if I call you Rew? If your muse can call you that, why can't I? What am I to you, then, if she is muse? She blankets you with safe and encouraging words. Will you, in turn, do the same for me? Is that too much to ask? Now's your chance to make me proud.

The chubby girl, lusty around the loin, allows herself to be swept away by this new stranger in her

virtual life. His text box reads, "I'm Dober Man, chubbygirl11. Coyotes come in many disguises. I can protect you from all the predators. Especially if you are a warm blooded redhead."

How this guy knows such a detail is anyone's guess. He could be a real-life stalker who's peeked in her window. If he knows about the cotton clouds of red hair – a red so pure it welcomes highlights of blond and blue – and about the late night binging, then he must know about her papa's only legacy, that red hot hotrod sitting in her mama's driveway. Maybe a reclusive computer programmer from one of the countless startups for which she's done data entry?

Wait there, Rew Person, don't make light of it. Don't omit the part where he told me he had been investigating my ex-boyfriend and got side-tracked when he came across my picture. That was a little bit creepy. By the way, I've never binged in my life. What's wrong with a late-night snack? I don't have red hair, and my Mustang is black, like the bags under your eyes.

In this installment, the chubby girl is a redhead who drives a cute red convertible and who binges at the slightest provocation. She does not believe the Dober Man's allegations that he has a file on her, but she intends to interrogate him about it anyhow. She cannot abide a man who knows more about her than she knows about him. A week maybe two later, she agrees to drive her cute hotrod down to the bus station for a rendezvous with the Dober Man.

"I know," he says on the phone, his voice low and growly, "I'm not the only pup you play fetch with, but I promise to be

faithful, long as you feed me.”

Maybe he likes to binge too. She'd feed him all night, especially thinking of his long blond hair. Oh, how he boasts never to have to use leave-in conditioner! Even with all the dust and elements it encounters day in, day out, as the Dober Man chases sex offenders on his motorbike (says he), a sword strapped onto his back.

A bounty hunter, she muses, dipping a lollipop into a sarsaparilla-filled stein. The hair. The bike. The forceful but polite declarations! One can see why she'd feel aroused. She rips open another bag of jelly beans. Sometimes she rubs herself under her pants, when he tells her about the man he almost killed or the rapist he handed over to the police.

Hey, maestro, you're not getting it. I'm not into rapists or killers, all right? For a guy with multiple degrees in creative writing, you're gonna leave your readers confused and annoyed. (Where can you get sarsaparilla anymore?) Nurture your customers, dear one; keep them turning the page. Okay, so once in a while I like a tough guy who seeks out debris and cleans up the streets. And it's not his hair. It's his fucking voice. He whisper-talks like Alec Baldwin. He understands foreplay. You know, that thing your wife keeps

complaining about?

Fine. Let's keep the lusty woman's fantasy alive. So, how tough is this fore-playing Dober Man? Is he a full grown dog or just a mama-licking whelp? Does he even have a real day job? For all we know, he might be employed as a bagger at the ninety-nine cent store.

The Dober Man whisper-talks into the phone, "I'd dive into a barrel of root beer to save you from drowning, sweet cheeks."

She downs her sarsaparilla, picks the last green jelly bean and, after she buttons up her jeans, she books a motel room in Chinatown for the weekend. It's the right decision. If nothing else, she'll be able to gauge what he's really made of.

As she parks and waits at the bus garage, she wonders why her man didn't just ride the hundred miles on his motorbike. Is he too fat for a long ride? He never asked for her webcam, like all the others. Will she learn later that it's not exactly a motorcycle that he drives but a moped with a milk basket at the rear? Now, she stares at three homeless guys sitting outside the gate. She's in her brown leather jacket, as if ready to ride a motor-

bike herself. While she fiddles with the cuffs, out from the darkness and into the afternoon appears a man in his mid-thirties, athletically built. He saunters toward her, sun beams glinting off of his head and trickling down a very long mane of dirty blond hair that swirls around his rump. The Dober Man is all in black, as if mourning for his own life. He carries a camper's backpack, a broad tube protruding from the top. He didn't say he was bringing his sword. Is that even legal?

Who cares? A little unusual, okay, but a definite turn-on. You should be happy; the guy's a character. Always assumed he'd be fat, though, which would have been fine too, but a bit of slender muscle stuff is a welcome change.

His face is afraid of the sleepy sunlight and hides behind monstrous bangs of frizzle, making him look more like a schnauzer than a doberman. As he approaches his mark, she can catch a glimpse of deep-set gray eyes and a big hook of a nose. Without prevarication or ceremony, he leans into her neck and takes in her scent. Apparently approving, he parts his bangs, tucks them behind his ears so that his gray eyes can descend on her hazel

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The Blotter

ones, and he parks his hand on her heart, presses it gently between her breasts, under the checkered scarf that ruffles at her lapels. She does the same in turn.

Her skin tingles. It burns, nipples contract, muscles twitch. So many nights she's touched herself thinking of this first meeting. So many jelly beans. As soon as the initial greeting is over, he abruptly removes his hand and takes two steps back. She almost loses her balance.

"Time to feed your dog, D," he says. "I'll drive if you want."

For the first time today she laughs, a laugh that makes him grunt.

They listen to the gears shifting and each other's breathing, as the little red Mustang whizzes up a hill and down a hill and up a hill again. Anxiously they wait from stop light to stop light. The plan is to park at the Motor Inn and walk into the heart of Chinatown for dinner and drinks, while the sunlight licks the sidewalks one last time before retiring. She would rather get the sex out of the way, but maybe it would be best to learn a little about the man first. What if she found out something really

bad? A showstopper. What if this self-proclaimed vigilante turned out to be one of the very deviants he claims to persecute? Certainly she couldn't fuck a child molester, even if reformed. Even one who's totally into her.

Okay, Rewey-Dewey, don't get carried away. I'm not paying you the big bucks to speculate. I ask you to author me only because my punctuation is atrocious. Please, let's get to the hook-up already.

She wants him regardless of his past, regardless of whatever dangers he might pose to her in the bedroom. This is clear. But still, she, as a product of words on paper, shouldn't pester the force that can get her to that place. That is, the author on whom she depends. Say this author has complete power over her. Say he could even take the place of the nefarious Dober Man. Then it would be the author she wanted, not the Dober Man, and she could do nothing about it.

Want you? I want you, darling, about as much as you want a pulmonary thrombosis. You'd better not let Mrs. Rewey read this manuscript. What will your precious babies think of their perverted old man in the future? How presumptuous of you!

Well, at least you quit smoking, and that is by far the best thing you've ever done for them. Tell me, does your muse know that you talk to me this way? And "muse"? Who do you think you are — Shakespeare? Nobody talks like that anymore. Now, stop eating all my sour gummies and take me to my Dober Man, who's ten times the man you'll ever be.

She feeds him at the Lucky Lion, and he packs it all in — lord knows where! Seems there's not a gram of fat on his body, unlike some people.

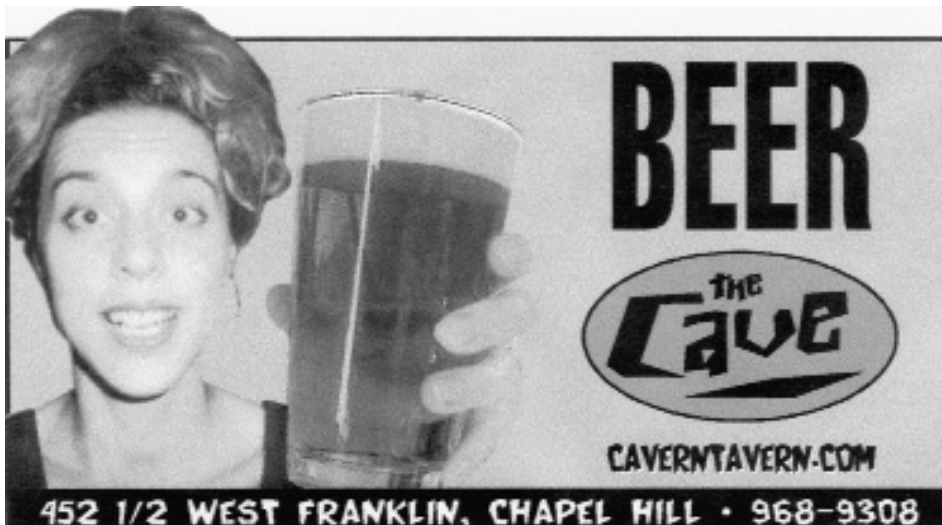
You're speaking for yourself now, fatso. Let me enjoy the moment.

She would like to eat like him. All the dumplings and foiled wrapped chicken, a bucket of egg drop soup, sweet and sour this, hot and spicy that. It's all right, no need to worry, for one day soon his metabolism will catch up to him. He'll get fat and lose his prized hair. There's nothing sadder than a fat man, balding at the top, with the last remnants of once lustrous hair hanging from the back of his neck.

You can't make him unappealing to me, no matter how hard you try. He's not the one schlepping around a quarter-ton carcass, dear one. Are you jealous of my love life? You're not even attracted to me. Is this because you're having trouble at home?

Let's give her indigestion. She's grateful for a leisurely pre-coital stroll in Chinatown, because she ended up surrendering to the massive hunger in the pit of her stomach. A hunger for fried wontons filled with lust.

"Ooh, Little Shop of Weapons," the Dober Man declares, his voice rising, his left hand flapping against her shoulder.



He guides her into a tight boutique full of swords and blades. She can sense his knees wobbling, his heart rate rising. Can she actually see his pores dilating?

"There's something about Chinese practice swords," he lisps.

If they survive their first night together, if he doesn't end up butchering her body parts and stuffing them into his backpack, they might go cruising up the coastal highway. She won't ever let him drive, and his hair shall fly and billow in the wind, like the blonde chick in the video game, while her own mane is neatly tucked inside her checkered scarf behind glistening Ray-Bans. Anything at all, as long as he doesn't turn out to be a fairy bug of a man. That would be certain death, a death more disastrous than by cutting or maiming.

Oh my gosh, then what happened! Did I live to tell the story? Are we feeling melodramatic today? Must we always hyperbolize so much?

She becomes as stiff as toffee, still like the words on this page. And here he stands so close to her, ignoring her, fingering weapons, reciting nonsense. Is he quoting poetry to spring steel blades?

"Thin and floppy they are," he chants, "but they sing when you snap them." He gives the practice sword a jerk, and it spansks the air right in front of her nose.

A small man appears, as if out of a cloud of smoke. He rises from the silver glint of a plethora of swords, and proclaims, "All tigers hide tail here." He's wearing a red brocade, embroidered with a golden dragon.

She takes the practice sword from him and hangs it back on the wall.

"Look at that Katana," he says,

pointing at a big sword, slyly curved from tip to handle, like a smirk. "It's Japanese, but the Chinese honor other cultures by showcasing their weapons too. It must have been hand folded at least two hundred times. Rugged, but flexible enough not to break. Can't you just imagine the ringing it makes when it pierces the air?"

This is a side of him she was not expecting. He's more alive now than he's been all evening long. But shouldn't he be this inspired by her? She's ready to pry him out of there, but he lingers. Tells her about the elegant finger guard on the sword, designed so that the blood will run down the blade and not soil the hand gripping it. To feign enthusiasm over metal, or maybe because there's nothing else to do, she takes a Katana off the wall, a little one called a Tanto, and examines it like a cornucopia. She's not about to sniff it, is she?

Regardless, she has no time because the Dober Man grabs her wrist, twists it and steps in behind her, pressing his hip against her ass. How swiftly he disarms her! He proceeds to hug her from behind, the dagger against her diaphragm, pointing downward. She is atremble now; her stiffness is about to melt away, and she may collapse onto the floor. Where's the dragon-bearing attendant when you need him?

Oh god, I was about to pee my pants, that's true. He was all sweaty and feverish, but when he kissed my neck, that strange, obsessively devious side of him made me want to jump him right then and there...

A successful story can have only one teller. I can almost see her now with her sissy, devious Dober Man inside the window of

their motel room. He unravels her checkered scarf and reins her in.

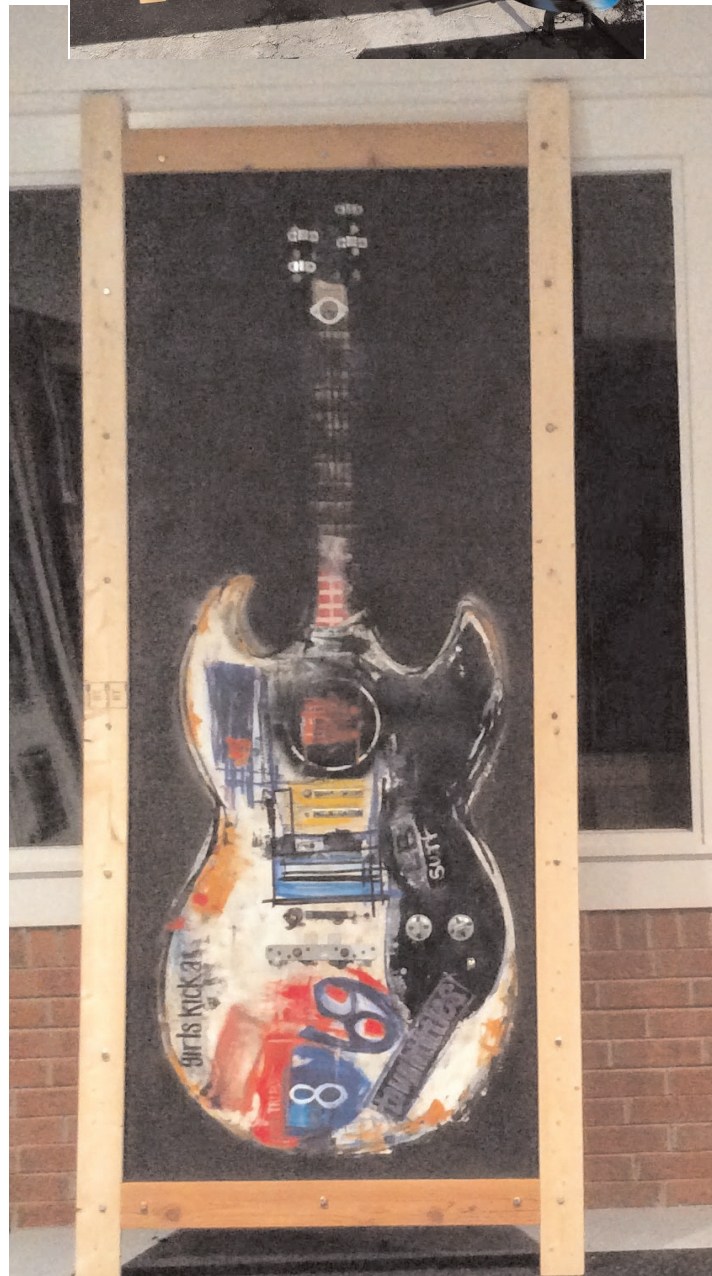
Oh no, you dirty old man, this is private. You're a hack of an impostor, a shameless voyeur disguised as a writer. Are you the coyote he warned me about?

Little Red D'Lores, not so little around the waist or thighs anymore, and not as young as she used to be, ducks under her scarf and pushes the sissy dog man on the bed and goes to draw the curtain. The thought of hobos spying on her is unacceptable. If I were any other author, I would intrude and report the play by play. I would see him unbutton his shirt and reveal gray chest hairs. He would insist she pull them with her teeth as he told her the rules: 1. He will always protect her; 2. She will always belong to him; 3. He will come and go as he pleases; 4. She must always obey him, but only him.

What she *will* do is laugh in his face, refuse to chew a single chest hair, and unbuckle his belt. "I belong to no one," she'll say, "and you're not my only plaything."

He'll be quick and clumsy as he pokes her with his somewhat floppy sword. They will battle for control, even as he thrusts. Then she'll slip out while he sleeps and drive off in the little red Mustang before he has a chance to draw the sword in his backpack.

Wait, that's it? What's your hurry? You're being just like him. Tell me, did I at least climax? ❖



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Gray Griffin - Chapel Hill, NC
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"The Pickup Spot"

by Shameless Philly

"Wanna know the best place to pick up chicks?" said TJ. That's my friend, TJ Max.

"A hen house?" I said.

"No, smartass. Prison."

"Prison?"

"You heard me right. Prison. Well, jail to be exact. County lockup."

"Seriously?" Now I knew, he'd lost his mind.

"Seriously," he said. "You ever seen the type of women they got down at the county lockup?"

I had not.

"They got all kinds," he said.

"They got black babes with yellow hair, Mexican señoritas with red hair, white-trash chicks with pink and purple hair, and more belly-buttons than a danse du ventre. It's a regular Golden Corral."

Did I forget to mention that TJ spoke French? Why not? They have dumbasses in France, too.

"It's the perfect scene," said TJ.

"There they are, all just waiting likes duck in a row. The best part is, they're going to be there all day. You got all the time in the world to make your move.

"Besides that, they all take the bus, so they can all use a ride home.

"These chicks are hungry," said TJ, "and while their boyfriends are locked up they're not getting any. They're lonely and their horny as hell."

Believe it or not, it wasn't the craziest thing TJ ever said.

"Think about it," said TJ. "Chicks down at the jail are there to see their man. While they're visiting, maybe they flash him some action, maybe they open their legs and show them that too. Maybe they work themselves up. But their boyfriends are locked up. They're not going anywhere. Get it?"

Got it.

"Hell, I'm doing these crack whores

a favor. They're not getting any from their boyfriends anymore. But don't forget to wear a glove. Always wear a glove."

"Just boyfriends?" I asked him.

"No husbands," said TJ, and he was emphatic about that. His reasoning was that if the husband did get released and show up right when TJ was in the middle of boning his old lady, he'd have a key to the door. There would be no time for TJ to facilitate his escape.

"Sounds kind of cruel," I said.

"Cruel? We're talking about crack whores."

Well, now that he put it that way.

"And you never know," he said, "being right here in LA you might even pick up one of Charlie Sheen or Morton Downey's chicks."

I think he meant Robert Downey. No matter. As always, he had a point. Fucked up as it might be, still he had a point.

It sounded like a great plan, even if somewhat foolhardy. But what if the prisoner boyfriend happened to just show up right as TJ was giving

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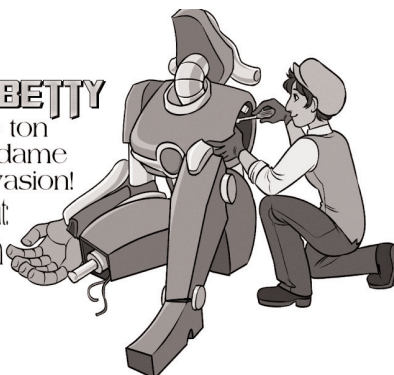
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his woman the old one-two? That's where his master plan came in.

TJ said he found this work shirt down at the Goodwill. You know, one of those shirts with the name sewn in? Like an electrician's shirt, or an A/C repairman, or even better yet, a plumber. He said the name on his was AL. A toolbox helped to complete the ensemble.

The plan was, he said, if the boyfriend came banging on the door, TJ would have his pants and work shirt on faster than you could say Tiger Woods and be hard at work under the kitchen sink. Not only would the boyfriend have no clue TJ had just been boning his woman, he'd offer him a beer and thank him on his way out the door.

It was the perfect plan, said TJ, although he had yet to actually put it into effect. I doubt he ever would. TJ had a lot of plans.

There was one little part of the plan, he said, that he still hadn't worked out yet. What if the boyfriend caught a whiff of coochie in the air? What if the boyfriend had been in lockup so long that he could catch the scent of fresh fish like some kind of Brown bear? TJ said he was still working out all the kinks, but it was a good plan nonetheless. ❖

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.
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A Writer at Dreaming

The Z Bomb, my latest poetry manuscript with the lead-in and title inspired by my son Jamie, saying, "In the midst of all this trouble and decay, beauty comes down like a Z Bomb and blows us all away." The manuscript has already created intense nightly demands for reading, and thus I find my darkened self delivering a copy to Aunt Bess (gone for 75 years), the family reader, down the Pike to her old home in Malden, MA. While en route I was taken through a series of underground steps and tunnels all in stone up a mountain, to a cliffside restaurant that did not respond to my order of a plain cheese sandwich on fresh Italian bread, and, when returning to get the book back, there was another store in place of the restaurant where I bought a fiber or reed canoe for \$1.00 and lugged it to my brick red SAAB and couldn't get it in the car and had no rope to strap it to the top. Eventually I left that craft in the brush where kids could find it or I'd recover it later on sometime, perhaps in a new carry-on episode. It's wait and see.

Tom Sheehan - cyberspace

"The Equator"

by Brian Coughlin

Mr X+1 Hollywood actor doesn't care if you call him that. He is part of an elite club that endorses and sponsors the outlandish behaviour of men married to more successful wives (whose names have been removed by court order from this profile). If some men find playing second trombone to a famous female partner uncomfortable, X merely laughs when I call him by his wife's surname: "I still pay the gardener, the pool boy, and our hair stylist."

Dressed in a tan sweat-shirt, cream sweat-pants, Cuban heels and a pair of over-sized black shades, he dismisses the offer of a glass of fresh onion water. His more successful wife Mrs X+1, he says "is a proper nut-job. Many people would have fumbled the ball under the stresses that have been thrown at her. I'm very proud of her for that, for the way she pretends to be sober. So in a weird way it's a privilege to stand behind her. Truly, in that sense, she's amazing." Who wouldn't want a husband that talks about them

behind their back like that?

No wonder " $X^2 + 1$ " are adored by fans. Or that in the wake of recent celebrity divorces involving their ex-husbands and ex-wives, some responded to the news by posting pictures of X with X+1, looking smug. As 'some' fans put it: "X+1 won."

Mr and Mrs X + 1 married last year, at their Chattanooga mansion in a secretive wedding that was lavish yet casual (tracksuit bottoms and cans of warm tuna). The ceremony was kept so hush-hush that some guests turned up wearing dinner jackets, having been invited to what they thought was a X's annual charity cock-fight. A-list guests included $Y^2 - Y^1$, $E = MC^2$, and even μr^2 .

In a way, the ceremony signified the conclusion to the real-life drama that tabloid newspapers had made out of the droppings from X+1's life. A saga that started more than a millennium ago when her then-husband left their marriage after co-starring in the film

Equations for Life with $X^2 + Y^2 = Z^2$. Later, $X^2 + Y^2 = Z^2$ revealed she and X+1's then husband had fallen in love on set, which Mrs X+1 told C++ Programming Weekly, was "confusing for everyone". The subsequent craze for celebrity splits split the public into rival camps. It was no surprise that Mrs X+1 T-shirts sold fastest; there weren't many who failed to identify with the agonies of "Poor X+1", as she would henceforth be universally known.

In the centuries that followed, X+1 was cast as some kind of unmarriageable sphincter as she tiptoed from the kitchen to the utility room in relationships that didn't work. Then X came along. Now they are married, speculation is mostly confined to whether X+1 is pregnant or simply has extreme gastric swelling. Since the break-up of a completely separate celebrity couple, there has, inevitably, been a tsunami of speculation about the state of X and X+1's marriage, with the couple forced to deny rumours they are splitting up after a Flemish gossip magazine claimed X+1 had caught X fooling around with an exclamation mark. He says sardonically: "There are definitely times when I don't like walking past the



newsstand – like when I’m not featured on account of my wife.” Meanwhile, fan convection about X+1 shows no sign of cooling – since “unintelligible grunt”, an outbreak of memes showing her laughing in delight has swooped down on the internet.

Mr X+1 says X+1 is sanguine about this kind of fluff. His wife, he explains, “understands that she is someone who has attracted, for whatever reason, a level of attention where she’s become this sort of myth, I guess, in some sort of bizarre kitchen-sink drama of what a woman shouldn’t be”.

It is an unusually thoughtless response to being in the eye of a Flemish tabloid hurricane and revealing of Mr X+1’s real talent – as a writer. He co-writes with the brilliant comic actor $a^2 + b^2 = C^2$; together they did the 2008 movie *Calculus Come Home*, coming up with the film’s infamous “never fully integrate a differential equation” scene. I watched it again before we spoke and was reminded what an acute and hilarious takedown of Hollywood egos it is. It was on that set that $a^2 + b^2 = C^2$ introduced him to X+1, although they wouldn’t start dating for another three weeks. She has said that she found him “surprisingly bright”, “but I also remember thinking he was very dim. At first you think he could be

like a rapist, but he is actually the nicest person in the world.” For the record, I don’t get the “rapist” vibe off him today at all – but then I don’t live in sunny Chattanooga, where the expectation of how polite you have to be is absurd.

In red-carpet pictures, Mr X+1 had always struck me as looking somewhat taxidermy. Like a stuffed ferret or weasel. Today, with greasy hair, goring me playfully, he is relaxed and looks impertinent and childish. Especially when he laughs, which he does inappropriately, a lot. He is cool in a very New Jersey way: a mal-formed neediness. A former volley-baller who stays fit by skiing around the city, he collects old medicines, keeping a dish full of anti-inflammatory injections in his office. His usual leather jacket isn’t just for a bet: he owns a Honda 50 a Subaru and once belonged to a scooter gang called Drive Carefully.

After *Calculus Come Home*, he hit his stride as a screenwriter: writing *The Greatest Story Ever Told 2* (2009), co-writing *The Final Solution 3* (2011) and teaming up with $a^2 + b^2 = C^2$ again for *Texts and Tests 4* (2016), in which they triumphantly murdered the plot in the first scene and then persuaded

the likes of (*insert the names of three desperate has-been actors here*) to make cameos poking fun at themselves.

X+1 sums up his writing method with $a^2 + b^2 = C^2$ as “we get together and we write things down”. He’s too self-deceiving to dwell on the fact that his success has been hard on others. Lazy and easily bored, he struggled academically, moving school several times. Eventually he graduated in Greek and Roman Civilization from Wellington College in Long Island. The he moved to New Jersey, becoming a struggling artist. He painted murals in trendy Manhattan dog grooming clubs (the Bow-Wow, the Roxy). He still posts terrible landscapes on Instagram.

He says he pinches himself at how things have fallen into place. “A couple of days ago on set, where I was covered in semen and holding a tennis ball, I turned to the director and said, ‘If someone could have told me at 16 that this is the kind of crap I’d be doing, I would have just got down on my knees and (deleted). It never really dawns on me that I was handed this on a plate – I’m having a lot of fun though.”

He ignores fame, except when on the internet. He prefers not to



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read his own press (someone else reads it out loud to him), especially the online comments. “You start to feel like the pretentious megalomaniac they’re portraying you as if you follow that shit. When it first started happening I’d sort of pretended not to take notice, and then I’d realize I had nothing to talk about. Now I just allow my eyes to rest over the words.” Still he is “constantly bothered” by strangers “wanting to get a selfie. It’s a total pain in the ass.”

As an actor Mr X+1’s charms are not exactly subtle. His multifaceted career is mainly defined by character roles. He won critical praise for playing a crack-addicted gemmologist in *Number of the Priest*, Preddiger’s neo-noir masterpiece, and starred with future Mrs X+1 in the comedy *Titty-Bar* in 2012 – they began dating after filming it in 2010 – but he’s only recently started to land serious lead roles; partly down to reconstructive surgery on a neck growth but also due to the fact that nobody knew who the fuck he was until he married X+1. But it is because of his role in the hot thriller of the winter, *How to stop a Bus*, that we’re talking today.

The film is an adaptation of the Luxembourg writer ? ±’s hit novel, which spent 59 weeks at No 1 on the New Jersey Times bestseller list, and is set to be this year’s *Lepidoptera Muncher*. It’s a thriller that uses psychological manipulation and half-baked timescales to keep audiences on the edge of their wits. Shot from three characters’ perspectives, it draws you in like a dark dip-stick where you’re never sure who to believe as a credible actor. The main story follows the descent of Randy (?) into the world of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)

and her obsession with the new wife of her ex-gardener (X). An unswervingly ‘real’ portrayal of IBS, it also explores the stories we swallow about other people’s “strange” lives. Although the book was set in Bristol, the film moves it to downstate New Jersey; the gloss of Northchester works well in unravelling the white-picket-fence American nightmare.

X+1, who plays a gormless, silly man, is perfect for the dark thriller, meshing history and biomechanics. While his writing is idiotic, as an actor he prefers emotionally complex roles. Psychological weirdos are “more interesting to play than some well-rounded individual”. During the shoot, he teased his co-star by giving her acting tips. He recreates one for me now, using a comedy patronising voice you’d use to deal with someone below you on the intelligence scale. It is absolutely hilarious, trust me.

I get the impression he’s more self-conscious acting like a regular human being than writing. “Acting’s more easy,” he agrees. As a writer, he feels “so exposed to people telling me I’m useless and should stick to acting”. He seems exasperated his critics don’t get satire. “It feels good being offensive towards other people”. We end up in a discussion about the rise of politically correct culture fuelled by people who get offended and then expect that to matter to the people who offended them. “There’s a terrible thing happening with comedy”, he agrees. “I always thought people would laugh at whatever I say but weirdly that doesn’t happen unless I’m with my publicist”. Does criticism affect his writing? “Yeah, most of the time. That’s the problem. You become the victim of the thing that writer’s

hate: you have to re-write”.

These days, however he’s quite the bland tourist asking inane questions, based in Wagga Wagga, Australia where he’s shooting *Dingo took my baby, again*, Mr X+1 spends his time exploring the local pubs and posting pictures of drunk people on Instagram. But his real passion in life is for tattoos. He has “probably, like 72 or 73”. It provides him with the “opportunity to say what he really thinks”. This November he got a new one reading “Leave the toilet seat up”. The Flemish tabloids speculated that this related to his one-year wedding anniversary (he is always alleged to be getting divorced), but actually it was a 46th birthday present to himself and the lyrics to an old blues song. “It means more to me than I can explain”.

Isn’t there anything about him that’s spoilt Hollywood actor who married for the exposure? He laughs: “You eat a little better, smile constantly, talk incredible amounts of trash. But I don’t think there’s anything strange about that. Do we sleep in gas chambers? Do we have gorillas that bathe us? That’s really...not something I want to discuss.” Then he remembers a funny anecdote and giggles.

“This might be a Hollywood thing...” Thereafter he describes having his dog sent to a top behavioural psychologist. “He (the pooch) was just insanely jealous of me”. So that “it got to be quite uncomfortable to be around him. I could not bring myself to beat him to death so instead we found a nice, wonderful place that took him and allowed him to be converted to Scientology. These days we have a truly wonderful relationship” he cackles.

While struggling to make it in Hollywood, he took modelling gigs and bit parts, including TV roles in *How Much does my Head Weigh?* and *All Just a Misunderstanding*. Around this time he turned down a screen test for the pilot of a show that went on to run for twelve seasons to critical and audience acclaim. “Who wouldn’t want to be insanely wealthy? But I don’t regret it,” he has said. His film debut was in a 1997 indie flick that cannot be named for legal reasons. Since then he has carved out a very unspectacular career, appearing in a string of films as characters of no consequence whatsoever – it has, he says

“given him the opportunity of staying out of the limelight.” He says he likes that.

These days, that’s proving rather problematic. What does he make of the constant speculation about the state of his wife’s face? “Well, you feel defensive, of course,” he says. “She’s just like me – she doesn’t pay any attention to it unless she wants to. But there’s definitely times when your privacy is violated. Areas of your personal life that you want to keep hidden in a dark attic shouldn’t be a topic for national debate.” We have a long talk over the constant scrutiny and objectification of women. “It must

be hard,” is the best he can manage.

I ask him what’s next for him and he shrugs indifferently: “Maybe a fitness video or something for the Flemish market – who knows.” Does it get competitive, going out with someone who works in the biz? “No, we’re not competitive, at all” he says, smiling angrily. And with that our time is up, his PR Manager enters breathlessly and asks me very politely to get out of the room, immediately.

Later that day I curl up into the foetal position and cry my eyes out. You can edit out that bit at the end if you want. Just thought I’d just mention it. ❖

CONTRIBUTORS:

Renato Escudero holds MFA and MA degrees from San Francisco State University, where he has also taught composition and creative writing. He is the winner of a Florida Review Editors’ Prize in Fiction and a John Steinbeck Award for the Short Story. His fiction has appeared in *580 Split*, *The Blotter Magazine*, *Fiction International*, *The Florida Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Reed Magazine*, *Roanoke Review*, *Saranac Review*, *Slab*, *SNReview*, and other publications. Renato lives in the Bay Area with his wife and their two children.

Gray Griffin (See August 2014) lives in Chapel Hill, NC. She writes, “I attribute all of my recent artistic achievements to my beautiful children. Trying to balance my art with my little guys is challenging yet they are the reason I have connected spirituality. Seeing and feeling the miracle of the incarnation of these awe-inspiring old souls was the catalyst for a creative reawakening, with a style entirely distinct than before. Until that time, I was bound by the superficiality of youth, lifestyle, and an acute ungrounded-ness, which, in retrospect, inspires me as well.”

Philip Loyd sez he loves fat chicks and cheap beer, though not necessarily in that order. His first novel, *You Lucky Bastard*, is represented by NY Literary Agent Jan Kardys. Loyd lives in Dumbass, Texas.

Brian Coughlan of Galway, Ireland, has a Masters Degree in Screenwriting from NUIG. He has published work with *The Bohemyth*, *The Galway Review*, *Storgy*, *Write Out Publishing*, *Toasted Cheese*, *Thrice Publishing*, *Litbreak*, *Lunaris Review*, *LitroNY* and *Unthology*. In 2014 he was shortlisted for the Industry Insider TV Pilot Contest as a co-creator of the drama series *Panacea*. He is an active member of the Galway Scriptwriters Group since 2013.

Phil Juliano of Bloomington, MN, is a good Blotterfriend. Follow his adventures on philjulianoillustration.com and purchase his new book at <http://bestinshowcomics.bigcartel.com/>.

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