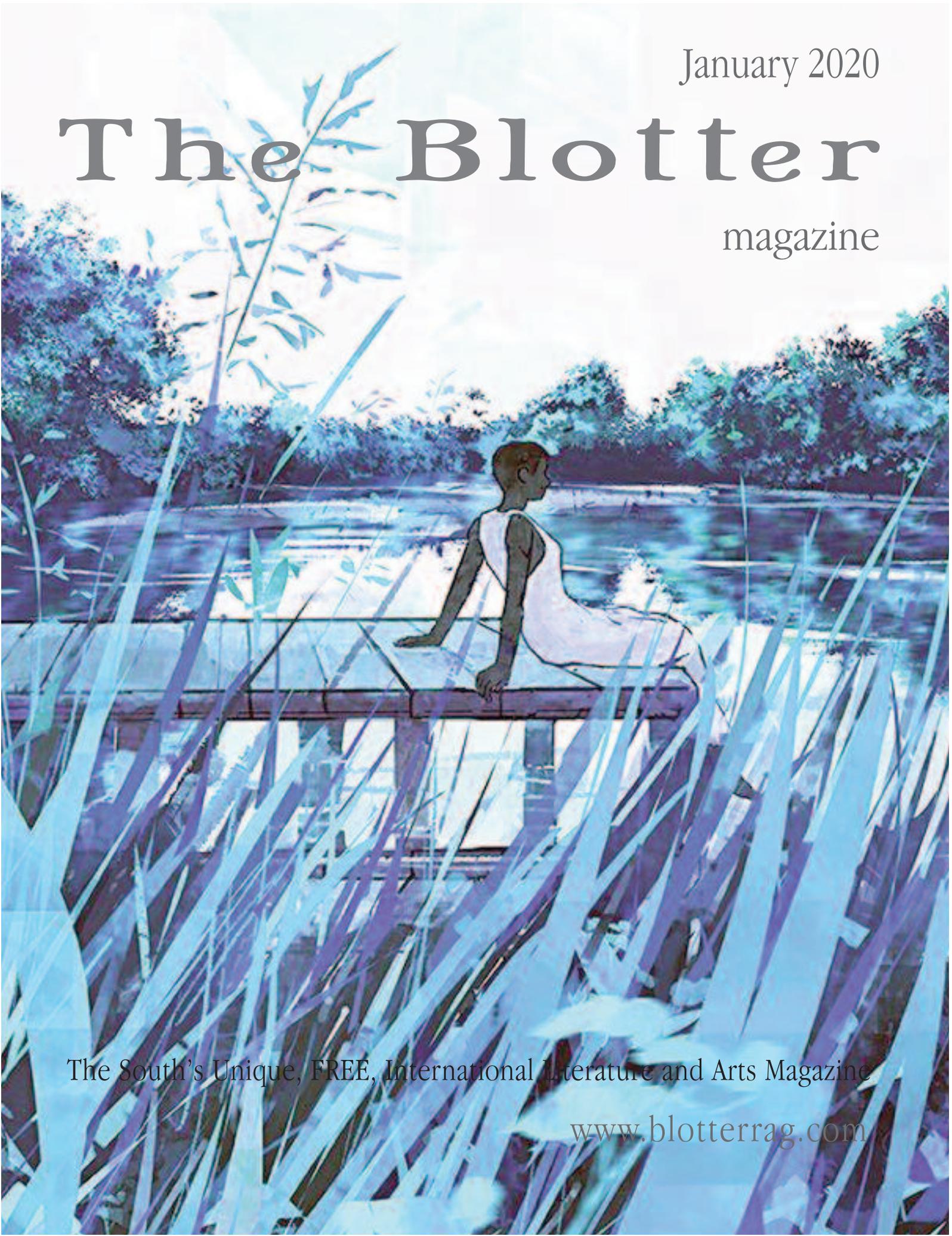


January 2020

The Blotter

magazine



The South's Unique, FREE, International Literature and Arts Magazine

www.blottermag.com

G. M. SomersEditor-in-Chief
Martin K. Smith..Publisher-at-Large, Treasurer
Marilyn Fontenot....Director of Development
Laine Cunningham.....Publishing Consultant
Brace Boone III.....Marketing Advisor
Richard Hess.....Programs Director
T.J. Garrett.....Staff Photographer

Subscriptions Contact:
Martin K. Smith
M_K_Smith@yahoo.com
919.286.7760

Advertisers Contact:
Martin K. Smith
M_K_Smith@yahoo.com
919.286.7760

Submissions and Editorial Business to:
Jenny Haniver
mermaid@blotterrag.com

Garrison Somers, Editor-in-Chief
chief@blotterrag.com

919.869.7110 (business hours only! you may
call for information about snail-mail submis-
sions)

Marketing & Public Relations Contact:
Marilyn Fontenot
marilyngfontenot@gmail.com

COVER: Original art by Maryia Kapitsa.

Unless otherwise noted, all content copyright
2020 by the artist, not the magazine.

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



Council of Literary Magazines & Presses
www.c l m p . o r g

“It is absolutely within the realm of possibility that I am losing it, (and other private thoughts that have escaped from the asylum.)”

Two bits.

By midwinter I tend to look homeless. Need a shave, a haircut, sunshine. I wear sweaters beneath my jacket, and they hang out. This used to be radically cool – when RAF flyers were the wizards of the air – with long turtle-neck sweaters and short wool jackets. And scarves. Goggles. OK – belay the goggles, but cool hats, tipped jauntily. And they were twenty-two or -three years old, so, there’s that. I am nowhere near twenty-three anymore, and tip well past the maximum weight for a Supermarine Spitfire. (Still, I have dreams I am in a kite over Herefordshire or Hampshire armwrestling Dorniers or some such. This is all a synaptic manufacture of my still childish dreams, but I wake up feeling like a Player and a cup of tea. I hope this never goes away, is what I’m saying.) Having wandered away from my point, and only just now returned, my family is generally appalled by my appearance. I would say that I’m sorry and I hope to do better, but that would be a lie and I’m averse to such fibs. I like winter for its acceptance to some extent of raggedy, slovenly appearance. Don’t we each of us own some old mittens well past their prime, or a toboggan from school days? Put them on. Stick out your tongue at those who would look down their noses. Don’t lick the flagpole, tho...

We Wish You a Hairy Catfit (what the recent holidays have become.)

My sister asked if she could bring the pies. Four of them. “No one else should make pies” she said. When I asked why not, she said “I have it under control.” Oh, OK. But my argument: you just cannot have too many pies. No one is going to judge you for any reason I am aware of if you have three apple pies and two pecan and a couple of pumpkin. Chocolate chess. Oh, and mincemeat. Even if someone says they don’t even like mincemeat pie, you can have one on the card table, ready to be served. Why? Because this is America, dammit. Or something like that. An inalienable right, like voting, singing in the shower, and/or picking your nose in private. Yeah, and that speech thing. The right to tell someone who doesn’t like mincemeat pie that they are welcome to shove a slice of it.... Just kidding.

Woof.

My one daughter wants a cat. The other recently got a dog for a few weeks and discovered that being a student in a one-bedroom apartment with a full class schedule and work-study don't mix. She was very sad when she gave it to a friend to care for it, but she now understands what I've been saying for a little while. I know, many folks make keeping pets work. Some don't. It's not one more thing that divides our nation, just an individual decision each of us makes. The person who owned our house before us had a cat. It shed. We know this because the refrigerator broke about a month after we moved in and the repair-person found a substantial amount of dander in the fridge's guts when it was turned around. The condenser took the worst of it, I think. We might have created a whole new kitten if we'd been given some time and a bit of magic.

By the way – I don't mean to say that some people actually make their pets *work*. Well, some do, of course, like herding sheep or ferreting out illicit drugs or guarding piles of baseballs hit over the fence by little boys, but not cats. I mean, you're killin' me, Smalls - cats don't work. Not for love nor money. I mean, cats are most effective at being feline, but you cannot make a cat do a blessed thing on command. You know what I'm trying to say, don't you? Certainly you do.

Pranks. Thanks.

On a completely different note, I recently bought a small aerosol can of "new car smell" at the Ace hardware store. It cracks me up a little bit to spray it in the can after...dropping a load. And so much better than anything floral – which instead of disguising the abominable event, instead presents a whole new olfactory horror, like giant, ancestral hummingbird's fossilized doody. I do not, however, recommend duplicating this prank at home. I have spent my entire adult life doing such...irresponsible and yet (for the most part) harmless things and while it is not "expected" it is "comprehended" that I know I've done something wrong and am not particularly penitent.

Praise be...

Never let it be said that I left a terrible idea on the table. Or let it be said, it's all the same to me. It turns out I just might be that guy who goes one step too far, every time. Or tells the Dad joke that mustn't be spoken

continued on page 15

We often use Bobco fonts, copyrighted shareware from the Church of the Subgenius. Prabob. We also use Mary Jane Antique and other free-ware fonts from Apostrophic Labs and other fonts from other sources.



in the Great State of Georgia!



The Blotter Magazine, Inc. (again, a 501(c)3 non-profit) is an education 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 welcome, as are ad inquiries.

Subscriptions are offered as a premium for a donation of \$25 or more. Send check or money order, name and address to The Blotter Magazine Subscriptions, 1010 Hale Street, Durham, NC 27705. Back issues are also available, 5 for \$5. Inquire re. same by e-mail: chief@blottermag.com.



CAUTION

Owner of a lonely

“Manegache”

by Jason Sallinger

Victor Tallegio slowed his Lincoln sedan to the side of the road and peered under the blue shade band, down two houses. The second story windows showed no indication of the accountant, or his wife. Only her car was in the driveway. It was possible they were out shopping. Victor resumed to the market.

He brought up the list on his navigator. Everything here could wait except the tomatoes for Lynne’s manegache. She was a world-class chef in his mind, and he was happy that she served him personally in that capacity. He had joked that she could have made a career out of it. But Victor had made it so that Lynne never wanted for anything. This only brought her creations to a new level.

Sunday she had spent three hours making chicken tikka masala. She’d made this before, but this time it was a new recipe. Thighs instead of breasts, skillet instead of slow cooker. The thighs were seared and cut into bite-sized pieces. (bite-sized for Victor. Lynne still had to cut hers up a bit before eating) The sauce was a burgundy ragu, darker than how it came out in the slow cooker. While he couldn’t stop eating it for the next two days, it was disre-

specting the exit process. He was looking forward to her manegache. Italian comfort food, is how she explained it to Victor’s mother, who was a cento-por-cento Italiana.

The hands-free system rang. ‘Lynne’ read the navigator. “Hey kidd.”

“Hey baby. I got the tomatoes. On my way back now.”

“Ok. I didn’t mind. Had to head that way anyway.”

“Yeah, thanks. I had to get some diet coke.” Lynne’s only true addiction was soda. It was withheld from her as a child. When she moved out and went to college, alcohol became her drink. When alcohol saw fit to end her college pursuits, she tended toward soda instead. She once said something about the bitter stinging taste of alcohol.

“What time are we eating, kidd?”

“Be home for 7:30.”

“Ok. I ought to be there by then. Looking forward. Love you.”

“Love you, baby.”

Victor’s stomach started growling in anticipation of the feast. At once he forgot about his stomach, and the manegache, and even

Lynne. Morton The Accountant became his focus. This was Tuesday. Even though Victor was sure the accountant was off somewhere with his linebacker of a wife, it didn’t hurt to make a run through the 30th floor of the Paragon Building. He’d only been up there once in the last two weeks, and so he didn’t worry about being made.

When he pulled up before the Paragon Building, he found a spot on the street. The meters only asked that you feed them until 5, and it was now 4:45. Victor backed in and placed his amber-tint shades in the console. While he was fond of them, he was aware that they served as a focal point. Eventually he was going to have to part with them for good.

Remembering this elevator, he quickly found the Close Door button first. A Hindi woman came into view. Victor thought if she didn’t have to struggle with her gown, she would have made it onto the elevator. Behind her, he could see a 3-piece, replete with briefcase coming at a faster clip. Simultaneously he could read the disappointment on both of their faces as the doors closed.

Having a moment to himself (but knowing that there were always eyes in the sky), he surreptitiously patted down his pockets and windbreaker. He knew he had his tools, but the reassurance was nice.

The bell rung at floor 30, and he stepped out. Good fortune had the receptionist working on a delivery issue with an overnight shipping man in shorts too tight. Victor moved to the right of the desk, away from her line of sight. He knew that the floor plan connected all the way around. As he neared the accountant's office, his gait became imperceptibly slower near his secretary's desk. She was on the phone. "...Oh, I know! Too funny..." Personal call. Cat is away. With a sweeping look Victor determined that the accountant's office was both empty and dark. He resumed the full circuit, back toward the elevator. As he turned the last corner, Victor's world started to move into slow motion. From out of the elevator a blond girl aged roughly 14 came onto the carpet. Only, Victor knew she was exactly 14. 14 years, three months, and one day. From behind his daughter, Vicki, he saw the accountant emerge, and Victor felt sick. He quickly checked himself and bent down to tie his sneaker. Vicki and the accountant headed away from Victor, passing to the right of the reception desk.

Swirling thoughts of what he considered his worst mistake and his greatest achievement hit him all at once. Victor knew this was the only profession he would ever have. Having a child was a point of weakness. Helpless to his past, his thoughts turned to when he was a single man, while he re-tied

his sneaker:

He saw Lynne at the craps table. She was standing next to his mark, who was oblivious that he would be dead the next morning. Victor was coming out. He selected two dice. Lynne noticed how small the dice appeared in his hand. She imagined that he could wrap her up much like that, like she could disappear in his broad chest. She smiled when he looked at her and put the tip of her tongue to her incisor, in plain view. Victor looked back and didn't smile. He shook the dice and kissed them, then tossed them, never looking away from Lynne's eyes. That night Vicki would be conceived.

The next morning at the casino hotel, Victor kissed Lynne while she slept. He left her a note that he was getting pastries. His path went from room 629, to room 414 for a quick stop (and a moment's exercise), down to the lobby for pastries and coffee, then back up to room 629. They shared breakfast and Lynne was floating on a cloud the whole time, that this man came back, and stayed. And so, she didn't question when he suggested that they check out without showering, and that she follow him back to the city to resume their time together.

Victor married Lynne four months later. He didn't feel pressured because of the pregnancy. He genuinely loved Lynne. His mother approved of her, and Victor's

chemistry with her was natural and effortless.

Lynne also felt this marriage was in lockstep with the progression of their relationship. As she was 7 months along, Victor had The Talk with her. She learned about Victor's trade, about what he was doing at the casino that night (and the morning). And how if he had a child, it could be used to get to him, an unpleasant bargaining chip. He put all the cards on the table. He assumed she would need some time to think about it, and even prepared for her to balk. A greater part of him felt shitty for not having this discussion before they married. But at that time, he wasn't sure he would want to keep the child or not. He was overjoyed when, after only 1 minute of silent contemplation, Lynne let him know that raising a child was never on her plate, and that only Victor mattered to her. She didn't mention how his trade made her feel. But she was beaming, and he knew what he saw in her eyes as true love.

Victoria Lynn Tallegio was born two months later. They had found suitable adoptive parents, who didn't live in the city. This was important to Victor and Lynne. They had rather not run into her under any circumstances. 14 years ago. 14 years, three months, and one day. Victor now had another reason to utterly hate social media. He had been secretly looking at Vicki's Facebook page for the last

The Blotter

two years.

After retying his sneaker for only the second time, Victor stood and headed back around the circuit of the 30th floor, to the left of the receptionist's desk. As he turned the corner, he could see the desk of the accountant's secretary, across the open floor. Vicki was facing the secretary, and the accountant had his hand on her shoulder, in a familiar, paternal way. Victor fought with memory lane to place the faces of the adoptive parents. No. That man would have been much younger. And the wife was slim and athletic. 14 years of life would not have given her the same, unflattering frame he'd witnessed days ago. So, the original adoptive parents must not have stuck it out. This was highly problematic.

How could this happen? How did he not know who the parents were? He blamed Vicki because she never had photos of her parents on her wall. He thought to negotiate with the agency, see if they would take down this chit. But he knew it was non-negotiable. Victor turned again, back towards the elevator. He knew what he must do.

He returned to his car, which afforded him a view of the only entrance to the Paragon Building. He pressed his navigator display three times and the hands-free started to ring. "Hi. What's up, baby?"

"I might be late. Got to put in a bit of overtime."

"Ok. Do you know how late? Wondering if I should keep it warm."

"I'll be a while. I'll heat it up when I get home, ok?"

"Ok, baby. Be safe."

"Love you."

"Love you."

Victor put on his amber shades and studied the entrance. Forty-five minutes later the two of them emerged. They headed down 15th Avenue, away from Victor. They turned the corner to the right, walking on the far side of the Paragon Building.

Victor merged with traffic and signaled to the right. As he took the turn, he could see the accountant's Honda, about to pull into traffic. Victor pulled ahead of the Honda by four cars and put his right signal on. Once the Honda was at the next intersection, Victor resumed the tail.

Victor parked next to the house three down from the accountant's. He could see the two of them just getting in ahead of the screen door. The twilight had barely set in. Some more night, his ally, would be welcome.

After another forty-five minutes, Victor closed the door to the sedan. The amber shades had long been placed in the console.

The murky dusk enveloped him. With his dark blue windbreaker, grey sneakers, and blue jeans, he was not attracting extra attention. With appropriate tools of the trade, he achieved entrance effortlessly and quietly.

He listened for a few heartbeats. No TV, no running water. Vicki said something once. 'Is this OK?', was what he thought he heard. He was hoping for a bit more ambient noise. Victor moved to the garage and looked for a draw. He found it in a wash basin. He opened both spigots simultaneously to full-open and moved to the cover he had picked out. Fortunately, this was a high-flow faucet, and made quite a bit of noise.

Victor knew not to look around the shelving unit until he heard the water being shut off. He unsheathed his muzzled 9mm. He could hear footsteps on the wood stairs now. When the lights in the garage came on, he had the urge to stand. It was better if the faucet were instead tended to. The accountant would be looking away. Less complications. Just before the faucets started closing, Victor heard the accountant's voice. Probably confused. Victor stood quickly and stepped away from the shelving unit. He used this opportunity to close some ground. Measure twice, shoot once. Victor held the tip of the silencer 6 inches away from the base of the accountant's skull.

With the first shot, the accountant went slack. His head had snapped back when he slid against the front of the deep basin. The accountant writhed for a moment. Victor waited for this procedure to end then placed another shot into the temple. As he looked up, he could hear a scream.

Vicki stood on the top-step landing of the garage looking at the accountant, then back to Victor. Victor felt a pang of warning, like an angry hornet, as he saw Vicki hold a .22 snub nosed pistol to her side. 'Daddy's little girl,' he thought.

Quickly assessing his points of access, he knew he would have to go through Vicki. He held his muzzle up, which motivated Vicki to hold her pistol up. Victor pulled the trigger, only nothing happened. Misfire. He queued up another fire and pulled one off. In the moment before, Vicki had placed a hit, into her father's chest. Victor's second shot was up and to the right. He thought to queue up a third. But his knees failed him. Slightly deafened now from the .22 shot in the garage, he didn't hear the second and third shot plunge into his chest, but he felt them. 'Center shot. Daddy's little girl.'

As Victor lay, waiting for time to run out, his thoughts turned to Lynne and her manegache. ❖

"The Oracle and the Cherry Woman"

by Christopher Stevenson

I wanted her to glance up, but all I saw were her eyelids staring back. The undertaker's make-up wasn't hiding Margaret's death yellow skin, or gin blossoms. Looking down at her body, I remembered why I've always hated viewings. I couldn't control my crying. Clyde came up behind me, now the age I was when I met Margaret, and hugged me. In the background, I could hear Sylvia trying to control her kids, who were crying because the funeral home ran out of lollipops. I couldn't take it and I went outside.

Across the street I saw a familiar face I couldn't place. Then she ran across the street toward and almost got hit by a car. She jumped and dropped her purse. The sleeve of her dress blew from the wind. She's the lady with the cherry tattoo on her arm. I knew her. She looked sixty now. This cherry woman was how I ended up with Margaret. Yes, Jenny, the Cherry Woman, as I called her, led me to marriage.

See, the day I met Margaret, Clyde came home from school and said the Challenger blew up. Or rather, he said, "Thank God, the Challenger blew up: another step for kid-kind."

"What the fuck does the Challenger blowing up have to do with kids?" I asked him.

"Teachers died," he said. "I think NASA should recruit more teachers."

I shook my head, of course. This was the first NASA mission to have teachers on board, "Why am I fighting for custody of you? Your mother can have you."

"You don't mean that," he said, smiling with an innocent gleam. "Especially since I have a Book It button, and that means free pizza!"

"Good, we'll cash that in tonight. Go get dressed for dinner."

"Get dressed?"

"Is Betsy coming?"

"No." Betsy was a rebound from Clyde's mother Siobhan. Siobhan who was off starting a new family in this new tradition of divorce. Betsy was something else.

"Good. There's a woman who should be in the Space Program," and he went to his room to look for clothes. I found something for myself. Something less financial. I'm counting on Wendell tonight.

Wendell was a guy at work who used to be homeless. He's that stereotype that we've all heard about: a genius who lost his mind and lived ten years on the streets. Then, Linda, one of our secretaries fell in love with him; they married and she got him a job doing market analysis. He was good, but

The Blotter

crazy. He would make ridiculous predictions, but he was always right. "It's not enough to call humans monkeys," he would say. "They're more like machines. If you give them input, they'll respond the way you want them to, but you have to command them."

He told the company to invest in insurance, and judging by today, he was right. He told me I should have divorced, and he was right. He told me I would find true love tonight—it sounds like bullshit, but he was right about Libya and had a knack for picking Alan Greenspan's every move. The Oracle of Martinsburg West Virginia. We heard stories we'd heard about him. We attached any urban legend to Wendell.

Bob at the office claimed the nine-inch stub joke was about Wendell. We also heard he was so crazy he tried to dry his dog by putting it in the microwave. Also, he was present for the assassination of JFK.

I found a cardigan and a pair of corduroys. It wasn't too flashy, but it wasn't t-shirts and jeans. I went to go get Clyde and he said, "Hello, Mr. Rogers!"

"Shut up," I said.

We hopped in the jalopy and took off for Pizza Hut. Clyde's ideas on what a jalopy was, was very Eighties: anything that was less than a Porsche or at least a Volvo. Sometimes he'd get embarrassed, despite the fact that the

jalopy cost more than the trailer we lived in. But I was frugal. I was able to live cheaply in West Virginia and work in Martinsburg at a satellite of a Washington, DC firm. Of course the closest Pizza Hut was 30 miles away in Winchester, Virginia but it was worth it.

At Pizza Hut, the server set us up with a booth. Next to us at a table, sat a woman and a girl. The woman looked over and said, "Is your son reading books for junk food, too?"

She was pretty, and so I was mostly embarrassed that she was talking to me at all.

"Yes! This is my fifth Book It! button!" yelled Clyde.

"Aren't you adorable?" she said. "My daughter reads all the time, but we figured we should take advantage of this program. I want to enroll her in multiple classes so we can eat free every night."

"We're Libertarians!" interrupted the daughter. "Are you Libertarian?"

"No," I said.

"You look like Mr. Rogers," said the girl.

"Oh Sylvia," said the lady. "I think you look distinguished. My name is Margaret and the one with the mouth is Sylvia."

"My name is Charles and this is my son Clyde."

"Clyde," she said. "What a regal name."

"Say," I asked, "do you want

to come sit with us?"

"Oh, I don't know..."

"Are you Libertarian?" Sylvia asked Clyde. "I don't like it when liberals hit on my mother."

Clyde looked up and nodded his head yes.

"Come on," I said, "are you expecting anyone?"

"You know the Challenger blew up? That's kind of Libertarian," said Clyde.

"MOO-oom, I think we should go sit with them. And you've been complaining about not getting any lately."

Margaret's face got red. I just smiled and said, "Kids. They certainly are adorable, aren't they?"

"Okay," said Margaret. "But don't think for a moment, you are getting any, Mr. Rogers."

"I thought I was regal?" I asked.

"You know, you're cute, but the more words you say, the less cute you become." She looked at Clyde with a stern look.

"What did I do?" he asked.

"Boys really are gross," Margaret said to Sylvia. "One day, every woman relearns this."

"At least we know how to fix the plumbing."

"Pshaw! I said shut up!" Margaret snapped at me. "I'm kidding. Is that what you do, plumb?"

"No, I work for an investment firm."

"Oh baby," joked Margaret.

"Woo me with that nice portfolio?"

"It's just a job. What do you?"

"This is why you are distinguished and your son is regal," said Margaret. I shook my head at her. "I'm a lobbyist..."

"A Libertarian lobbyist?" I asked. I could only think back to Wendell. This lady, I hope was it. I just had to remember: like machines. I just wasn't certain, what that meant. Margaret had spunk. She had humor and arrogance. Gorgeous as hell, too.

Margaret took out some dollars and gave them to Sylvia, "Why don't you and your new friend go play some video games while we do adult talk?"

She took the money and looked at Clyde. "Let's go. 'Adult talk,' makes me nauseous."

The two ran off. Leaving Margaret and I alone. "Look," she said, "I'm working hard to ban tobacco on airline flights."

"Libertarian?"

"You're talking, again. It's complicated. Look, we're both single parents, and I'm pretty and you're handsome. I didn't send the kids away so that we could talk shop. Tell me about your son."

"He's troubled by the divorce. Today he came home with that Challenger thing."

"Well—logically, he's hit a point that Sylvia would love."

"Sylvia?"

"Yeah, she's the Libertarian. I play with her because I hope that one day she'll grow up to be a strong woman, stronger than I ever could be. Sylvia is all excited about the explosion, too. She

thinks that it will force the country to disband the costly space program, and the fact that the two teachers are dead means there two less government employees on the payroll. Kids, who made them anyway?"

"I know what you mean."

"Do you? Do you hate kids?"

"No, I just wonder what my life would have been like... I used to look at my parents and wonder if my birth was keeping their happiness away, and I wonder if, my ex, and I might have done things differently if we didn't have a kid."

"Well, let me tell you a moral to a complicated story. Parents are less important than you think. Mothers and fathers, yes, but birthing and providing sperm are incidental."

"So, where's Sylvia's father?"

"I have no idea. He could be in the arctic or the Southwest... I lived in a commune for a few years in the Seventies. When it fell apart, I realized I was pregnant. There were eight men at that commune, and a whole slew of one-night stands."

"Does Sylvia know?"

"Sure, I've learned that you can't keep secrets from your kids. If you do, then you inevitably make their lives more difficult. I'm adopted."

"Oh."

"So being thirty in the Eighties...you ever watch-

"No, I don't watch TV so much."

"What? You can play games on

the television now. It's the future, communication."

"You were saying about being thirty?"

Sylvia came back with Clyde. "MOM! The machines are broken."

"Okay, well I guess you'll have to wait until the pizza comes."

"I don't want to wait for the pizza. Can't you just box it up and bring it home and me and Clyde will go home and play Nintendo?"

"Well what do you say?" Margaret asked me. "We live right around the corner."

"Uh-I don't know."

"Oh, come on, we're having fun and-

"Alright. Remember your manners."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Yes, thank you Mr. Charles," said Sylvia.

They left giggling. Right after, they left after all our food came. The waiters realized we'd merged tables, but it didn't matter we boxed it up. We asked for our checks, I told Margaret I would get it.

"Okay, I'll play, she said. "I'll get the next one."

"Next one?"

"Let's go out."

"Is there a place to go out here?"

"You're still doing that talking thing. Tell you what. Why don't you let me take you out and you can tell me what it's like being thirty."

"I thought I asked you?"

"You also thought I called you

The Blotter

regal.”

“Well, I think being thirty is a lot like being on death row.”

“Really?”

“We’ll yeah, we hit this moment where we realize our mortality.”

“You aren’t forty.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Tell you what, why don’t we get out of here, and you can tell me about your life sentence.”

“I’m sorry that I’m not exciting.”

“You’re alright. You’re a boy. They’re always worried about something.”

“Huh.”

“Stop talking. Let’s go.”

She took me to a hotspot, *Argessia*, one of those places with a dress code. She joked that I almost didn’t get in because of my Mr. Rogers get up. We did get in though. She claims because she knew the doorman.

“I’m worried about the kids,” I told her.

“How old’s your boy?”

“Eleven.”

“Well, Sylvia is twelve, so he’s in good hands.”

“Oh, older women.”

“So, I know you’re in your forties. . .”

“Thirty-five.”

“I was kidding.”

“And you’re twenty-five?”

She laughed. “Keep talking like that. Thirty-five, but you aren’t getting my weight.”

“So, we’re both thirty-five?”

“Yeah, when were you born?”

“January 17.”

“Really? I’m January 15. Two Capricorns.”

“Is that good?”

“Yeah, it’s good, if you believe in that stuff.”

“Yeah,” I laughed, thinking about Wendell. “Who’d believe in that stuff?”

She looked at me and winked. She walked up to the bar to get us drinks. This big guy started talking to her. He was with a waifish blonde, who was a walking advertisement for a tanning salon. She had cherries tattooed on her shoulder, Jenny. I could only wonder if they were drinking Jack and Tab. She was smiling and laughing and she looked over at me. Then Margaret looked at her and drew her gaze to me. Margaret winked again, got two glasses, and came back to the table.

“You’re popular,” I said.

“Just some boy who has some weird kink for older chicks,” said Margaret.

“You like them young?”

Her tone completely changed, “Listen, do you have a girlfriend?”

“Yes, but it’s nothing serious.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“This divorce, then, it must have destroyed you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I know we’re older, but the rules don’t change. I’ve been trying to flirt with you up a storm and you’ve *just* flirted back. Where are the moves? I bet you were shitting your pants when the boy

came up and talked to me.”

I took the drink from her hand. Wendell had to be wrong this time.

“Look—I don’t know what your momma told you,” she said, “and you look like a momma’s boy, but there will always be bad women. All of us. We have that potential. In another mind, I might have gone home with the kid, but I’m here with you. And it doesn’t matter, there’s always another girl.”

She glanced over at the blonde waif. I slammed my drink.

“I’m sure your ex-wife was a wonderful person,” she said. “It’s the age of the Modern Woman. Most of us don’t even know what that means. It has something to do with marriage and divorce and cocaine. That’s what being thirty means. It doesn’t have to be a death sentence; it’s the logical conclusion from our twenties.”

“I went to Vietnam.”

“So, what’s that mean? I protested Vietnam. Listen,” she said and she got up, drunkenly, as if she was going to stand on top of the table. I watched her find her young suitor that made her laugh. She kissed him and brought him back to the table. I looked over and the waif wasn’t happy. The waif grimaced, squinted, and looked at Margaret and her boyfriend walk to our table. She looked me in the eye, raised an eyebrow, and smiled. Machines. I felt that was what Margaret was doing to me.

"Howdy," he said. "My name is Rick."

"This is Charles," said Margaret. "Rick is a former pro-surfer! He owns a motorcycle shop now."

"Motorcycles?" I asked to be polite. "Harley or import?"

"Imports," he said. "So, you're her brother?"

Brother? I looked and she was smiling. She said, "No. He's actually my date."

"Oh," he gasped. "You aren't queer are you, Charles? I mean it's cool if you are, I'm just not interested."

"What makes you think I'm gay?"

"Well, gay or a pussy. You gotta find them and bag them," he chuckled and ran his fingers through his Ken doll hair. "Hey, miss, why don't I take the fag off your hands, and I'll take you home."

"Let's see what Charles wants. Charles? Do you want Mr. Rick to take me home?"

It occurred to me that if I was going to play my cards right, I was going to have to do it now. I got up and walked over to the little blonde that he had been hanging out with earlier in the night. I didn't even turn my back. I knew this was going to be a problem, but I didn't care. Margaret was going to be the machine and this was my input.

"Miss?" I asked her.

"Look, I'm sorry that he- I mean he-" She looked up at me.

"No," I said with more confidence than I had ever mustered. "I just wanted to say that I think you are absolutely gorgeous, the most beautiful lady in here."

She looked at me and asked, "Really?" and I asked if I could kiss her. She nodded. The world changed. I had never made a first move and never anything quite this risky. Her lips were silk, and when I put my hand on the back of her head and my fingers in her hair, my mind played its own aria. The crowd at the bar, who I think were talking about the Challenger was dampened. I was hearing only this lady, who I could tell wanted to kiss me more, when she put her arms around me. She put her tongue in my mouth, which when Betsy did it felt like a horse, and with my ex-wife, never happened. I could smell her perfume, her make-up and hints of alcohol. And then we could hear the Rick tumbling all the way over and he pulled me away from the blonde lady's lips. She tried to hold on, and I felt like a hero. When we were separated, she said, "You are a great kisser!" Most of my concentration was on that magic feeling that takes over your face after a great first kiss. Rick appeared to be mostly a hallucination.

Rick pushed my chest and said, "You don't have a right. She doesn't like you!"

I stood up, chest to chest to the beefcake. I looked him in the eye. "Oh, she does my friend. Trust me, she does. But, you ain't

man enough to make her think she needs to go home with you."

I don't remember too much of what happened, my lips numb and my headspace frantic. I wasn't even sure I had actually done it. Something about, people, machines, and Wendell. I remember that he telegraphed his punch. I remember that I didn't care and I looked at the girl. I remember that Margaret came over and told me to sit down. Rick managed to land a punch on my face and I fell onto my back. I got up, with all my endorphins, and looked at Margaret who was telling me to stop this. I winked at Margaret, faked a right at Rick, and landed a left. When I pulled back, one of my nails scratched his face and drew blood. Bouncers came our way. The blonde screamed, "My name is Jenny!" and she shouted a phone number I wouldn't remember. Something changed. Suddenly, I was attracted to the person I felt was a waif, too tan, too yuppie.

"You're an asshole," said Rick, but I just shrugged, and winked at Jenny. Margaret put a hand on my chest. The bouncers made it over and asked Rick and Jenny if everything was okay. Margaret stared at Jenny and then at me. I think I smirked, but I felt so proud.

"Is this man giving you all trouble?" asked one of the bouncers. "Old man, are you giving these two a hard time?"

"We're just getting ready to go," interrupted Margaret.

The Blotter

Margaret pulled me out of the bar and walked me to my car.

"That wasn't necessary," she said.

"What? The male ritual of fighting for a mate?"

"Is that what that was?"

Because I think it was a brittle old man challenging a surfer to a fight and trying to steal his girlfriend."

"You or her?"

"It doesn't matter."

"You weren't going to go home with him."

"Really?" she asked. "Because I'll go back in and leave you here."

"Okay, I have the car, and you can walk home with the meat-head while I'll take Jenny back to your place and pick up my son."

"Just get in the car. I'm not sure if you and I should see each other anymore."

"You did kiss him."

"He also bought our drinks!"

"Well, then. Now I'm glad I hit him."

"Why?"

"I'm pretty sure it was rail in our drinks."

She looked at me with disgust. "Just take me home."

I took her back to her house, passing by the Pizza Hut.

"I'll send out your son," she said, shaking her head.

I nodded and she went inside. I was proud of myself. I had managed to pick up Margaret, who I was in danger of losing, but I also impressed Jenny. Wendell had to be wrong, though. I played two women like machines and I didn't
www.blotterrag.com

find true love. A great kiss, but true love? Two minutes later, Margaret came back laughing.

"You should come in."

"I thought I was the biggest asshole?"

"Shut up!" she yelled. She gasped, threw her hand on her hips shaking her head, like she didn't know what she was going to do with me. "Just come inside, weirdo!"

I followed her up the stairs to her apartment and sitting in her living room was my son and her daughter in chairs, in ball gags and shackled.

"I walked in and I found them like this," said Margaret.

"Whose idea was this?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure-

"Where the hell did you all get these things?"

"Uh," Margaret blushed.

We took the gags off and the shackles.

"I understand how one of you ended up this way, but both of you?"

"We were playing Nintendo," said Sylvia, "but then we got bored. We decided to play Houdini."

"You're twelve years old!" I yelled.

"Don't get mad," said Margaret laughing. "Don't you see?"

"See what?"

She looked at me solemnly. "Kiss me," and she started sobbing. "If you want to go hang with

Jenny, I would understand. I know I must seem like a horrible person."

I took her in my arms and wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Sweetie, she really liked you," she said. "I just felt like I needed to sharpen my claws on some boys. Like my girl, I wanted to play Houdini. It just went overboard."

"Well-

"Just stay the night," she said. "Don't talk, just cuddle with me. I like you. Promise me, that you'll never leave me, unless I leave you first."

And like that I said, "Okay."

The next day, I hunted down Wendell. I told him about the night and he gave some mathematical reason as to why I should have found true love. He told me that there was a slim possibility, that I might have found it and dropped the ball, that, perhaps, I should have picked up Jenny. And, when I married Margaret, he said, that while Margaret was perfect for me, it wasn't true love. "True love leads to disaster." He felt Margaret wasn't going to be the last. Before he died in 1995 of a heart attack, something he couldn't predict, Wendell said, everyone would do well, but Margaret wouldn't be the last. His obituary said: "Wendell served in the OSS during the Second World War and after in the Secret Service. He's most known for predicting the Kennedy Assassination two weeks before. He was investigated and found to

have no involvement and discharged from employment. For two decades he worked as a self-published writer and was homeless until finding employment for a West Virginia investment firm to which he's been credited with reviving. He was preceded in death by his parents, 14 siblings. He's survived by his son Mark, and his stepmother Hayley."

Margaret and I had a decent marriage and grandkids. We were good for each other, content with every snore, every toothpaste cap left undone. Clyde grew up to a mechanical engineer and Sylvia grew up to be a mother, and that lady who throws house parties for cookware, chocolate, and sex toys. Margaret died January 28, 2019, thirty-four years from the day we met, also from a heart attack.

Jenny? There she was, walking away, after dodging traffic. Every so often, I would try to remember her phone number. I always loved Margaret, but I couldn't help but wonder, and when Margaret was alive, she always teased me about the younger blonde that I never got. I knew I had to run after her, just to say hello, so, after all she was partly responsible for why Margaret and I got together. I called out her name, and she turned around.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"*Argessia*? The day the Challenger exploded?"

She squinted her eyes and then grabbed her chest.

"Oh!" she said. I saw her lip

cringe and her now gray eyebrows bend in worry.

"How weird. Is *Argessia* even around, anymore? What ever happened to that lady you were with?"

"She and I married."

"How'd that go?" she asked.

"It's her funeral today."

"Creepy. Here I am, walking by her funeral. I had no clue. I mean, I'm sooo sorry."

"Do you want to come?"

"To someone's funeral?"

"What? I'm sorry. No-"

"Yes, I'd love to come, but I'm not sure why."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

I took her arm opposite of the cherries. On her other shoulder was a tattoo honoring the Challenger explosion.

"That was the day we met?" I asked.

"Yes, it was. It was the day I realized I could escape my abusive boyfriend. I didn't know your name. Just the day you changed everything. What is your name?"

"Charles." Ready to face my family and Margaret, I could only imagine Wendell gloating. We stopped. She looked at me. And we kissed. Her lips weren't as silky, but I think it was better than before. I knew I should feel guilty, even during the kiss, but I didn't care. I knew that I had to stop. I couldn't cheat too much on Margaret, today. She just looked at me.

"I'll tell them I used to know her, a long time ago and recog-

nized the name on the front," she said, and we walked to into funeral home. ❖

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.

For reasons I will never understand, I am swimming, as part of a competitive team of four swimmers, the navigable length of the Rhine River. Yes, that Rhine River. This morning it is cold and turbulent, and very wide, with an island in the middle which stretches for a number of miles – something I am sure does not actually exist. The water is swimming-pool blue, which is also a strange fantasy nothing at all like real life. The four of us are journeymen long-distance swimmers, with plenty of experience. This is just another goal to conquer.

I pull along with me one of those plastic kayaks, for resting. Apparently, any one of us can take a fifteen minute break in our distance challenge by climbing up on the kayak and letting the others tow him or her along. It makes some sense, I guess.

I also am responsible for the kayak paddles – which makes no sense at all. Why have paddles if you are not allowed to use them?

I am having a love affair with one of the other swimmers, who only talks to me in German and then only in fables. Statements like “the cow doesn't like to be sneaked up on, but the fox is comfortable with it.” Only in German. Somehow, although I don't speak German, I understand. In the dream. I don't understand it now at all.

We reach a big city, which I think is probably Hamburg, but in my dream I imagine is Berlin – which isn't on the Rhine at all. Here, the water gets more and more shallow until we are finally crawling on our bellies down the middle of a wide avenue, lined with trees and fantastically luxurious mansions. The water is finally gone, and we are pushing through swamp grass and other strange plants on the paved street. My lover and I keep crawling while other swimmers begin to get up and walk.

Finally I push to my feet and start running, like the competition has somehow become a road-race, a sprint to the next deep-water part of the river. The street is dry now, and people are standing on the sidewalks and cheering the runners. I feel thirsty (I am actually, when I wake and go and get some water from the bathroom faucet) and I cannot find my lover anymore, and I sense that the river is gone now and we are not going to find it again.

I wake – one of those false awakenings where the dream has only taken a definite turn – and I am in my childhood bedroom. My spouse is there and asks me if I am so foolish that I think I am the only one who can take a lover. I had no idea that this was the direction my subconscious was intending to go. Was the river mere metaphor?

— Eileen - cyberspace

continued from page 3

aloud. Pull my finger. That said, here is another possibility: using new car smell under my arms as deodorant, just before going to church service. Dear God, what is that odor? It smells like — *victory*....

Call Me Triceratops.

And speaking of fossilized, I am glad to hear that my own name is one of those boy's names going "extinct," according to a recent clickbait passing for news. That is, the diminutive version of my given name was assigned to very few newborns last year, and is expected to be applied to even fewer this year. Good riddance. It isn't a very fine name, sorry Mom and Dad, and is frequently a joke name for characters in Hollywood film and television scripts. A kind of bonehead name – doofy and not very bright. A name should have gravitas, and yet be short and sweet if necessary. A boy's name needs to be...manly and yet playful. Or is that very old school? Am I falling into the binary ditch, the patriarchal nonsense of a bygone age? I don't know. Once upon a time, very much *ago*, a quite famous actor wielding the appellation made it beloved and taken seriously. Heroic, even. But the numbers of kids with my name continue to shrink, so, read into that whatever you will.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

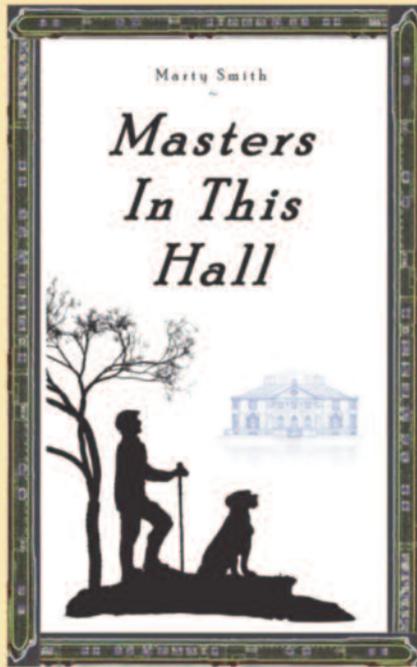
Contributors

Jason Sallinger sends us stories and that thing that writers call CNF (but ought to have a better name, like Cool Truths, Jack! or something like that. He lives around here, and I've only met him once, which as we know from our James Bond, is not enough,

Christopher Stevenson lived in Pennsylvania and West Virginia while driving for UPS, where he was a Teamster shop steward for twelve years. He quit to attend the University of Maryland for creative writing, where He was a member of the Jimenez-Porter Writers House. These days, he works for the Petworth Branch of the Washington DC Public Library (for whose union he is currently Secretary-Treasurer) where he runs three writers workshops, teaches a baby lap time, and coaches people on resumes, genealogy, and the location of the public restrooms. He's been published in Ninth Planet, The Blotter, and The Book of Yow. He splits his time between WV and DC.

Maryia Kapitsa is a freelance artist and illustrator from Hrodno, Belarus.

Now Arriving from Blotter Books
and the author of ALL TOMORROW'S PARTIES



Rick Kingsley's younger half-brother Aidan ran away three years ago. During those years, "ghost trains" – old long-gone streamliners – began reappearing, sometimes even rescuing people in danger. A being called "the Wizard" started entering peoples' dreams, but offering real-world psychic powers. Rick has inherited, from a mysterious recluse he's never met, a vast fortune and an estate, "Haw Court." And the world seems speeding ever closer to apocalypse, with global-warming fires, floods and tornadoes increasing both in numbers and size; along with human evils: "religious freedom" and Stand Your Ground laws, rampant bigotry online and in person, right-wing sabotages against society, topped by Trump's Presidential bid. Now, on the eve of the election, Aidan's coming home. His return may bring Rick to a possible confrontation with the Wizard himself – with the lives of Rick's family and friends, and his own, at stake.

Marty Smith's MASTERS IN THIS HALL
from Blotter Books
Print copy \$30 / Available at: wileequixote.com



Friendship, loyalty, nostalgia; and the joy
and healing power of music...

A Southern college town and its thriving local music scene, where the music's neither "sacred" nor "profane" so long as it's good...

A lost tape of a beloved band's legendary show...

A record label, poised to break big, which certain people want to be part of – by any means necessary...

Two visitors, whose own music has been muted by regrets over long-ago bad decisions: Chuck McDonough, former grad student, who skipped town after learning things about himself he couldn't face; and Penny Froward, whose attempt to help a friend in danger almost destroyed another woman's life...

A mysterious will by an unknown hand; and murder...



Blotter Books presents:

All Tomorrow's Parties

by Marty Smith



(publisher & book reviewer, "The Blotter Magazine;" contributor to the "Urban Hiker;" former host of "New Frontiers" and "Laugh Tracks" on WXDU - FM, Duke University Radio)

Available in print or e-reader at www.wileequixote.com



*all
tomorrow's
parties*

marty smith