A black and white profile photograph of an elderly man with deeply wrinkled skin, looking towards the left. He is holding a pipe in his mouth, and a plume of white smoke is visible behind him. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light.

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The Blotter

magazine

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"Decompression"

I have recently completed writing a first draft of a new novel. I understand that some writers celebrate when they reach this milestone, like a marathon runner finding the last bit of energy to raise their hands to cross the finish line, waving a banner or spill a little champagne around, but that's not what I did. Before I wrote, imagined that this was a time for scotch and a cigar or something like that, but perhaps I've gotten old (and more aware of the time left to me, an unknown quantity but still something definable – a small handful of decades at best. So I typed those magic words – The End – and filed the opus away in three or four real and virtual spaces so that hopefully it won't get wiped or lost.

If this sounds like a textbook definition of underwhelming, I suppose it is. Where was the party? What was the reward for a difficult task well-done? And where were the many people – family and friends – who support me in my work? Where are my sycophants, my groupies, the people fawning over each word I speak and waiting with hidden recorders for those words I haven't yet applied to paper? Hoping to capture a bon mot or catch me in a truth. Or a lie.

There aren't any fireworks or parades. And for this I am thankful. Because I am not very good at that part of writing-that-has-little-to-do-with-writing. I'm not the marketing guy, the social butterfly, the tall one at the cocktail party smiling and laughing and witty about any subject. I'm not an analyst or a critic or a hanger-on. And I'm more-or-less unpublished. Oh, I know about the writer's platform, and about submissions and cover letters and everything else that goes with it. I'm just not with it.

I prefer to get back to work. That's not practical, however, when one has been deep in a WIP. I think that to jump into something else, something new, without...decompression can give a scribbler the bends. The storytelling bends, with bubbles of the previous story relentlessly working their way into the new yarn, precisely where they don't belong.

Instead I've been pacing around the house for a couple of days, revving the engines, sitting down to the computer and immediately standing up again. I pull books off my shelves, looking for something to make my mind slow down or speed up, go someplace other than the last pages of the story I just finished. It is far too early in the process of writing/editing to begin second-guessing my work, wincing at the things I thought were funny, shaking my head at those bits that I imagined profound. I do, however, take notes, put them on an app in my phone and file them by date.

Here's one: "There's no place in the scripture where it says that Grace is immediate. It makes more sense that it comes with a grace period."

I have no earthly idea where that peculiar gem fits in my novel, but it's in my

notes, so there you are. Another entry says just the two words “tantalizing stench.” Yep. I like it, but that’s a head-scratcher, too.

I’ll eventually edit. In the meantime, the story needs to air out, like crushed grapes fermenting in the barrel. Then I can see it from the right distance, and should be able to do the rewrite justice.

I tell myself that I require little to no acknowledgement for my writing. That said, it is just as plausible that I deserve little to no...success. What I mean, of course, is that this – the norms of authorship - are not why I write. But why I do write is not easily explained. I have stories. I like telling them. I think they are good stories, and I am able to tell them well. Maybe I’m wrong. So did I lie in the previous paragraphs? Do I really want no kudos? The truth is I don’t know.

At this particular place in my life – the downstairs “office” I’ve commandeered out of the dining room – I just like typing my words into the computer, a cup of cold coffee at hand, the radio on the classical station so quiet I can barely hear the brassy blare of Tchaikovsky, much less the softly blowing leaves of Liszt. It’s a good workspace. There’s a comfortable chair in one corner, I highly recommend it for taking a nap.

There are books on the shelf next to it. I’m trying to read things I never read before but should have. And, because we live in stranger than before times, there’s also a five-pound bag of Idaho baking-spuds. My office has become an extension of our pantry. It’s excellent that there’s a mini-fridge near my desk, but not a drop of beer resides within. Butter. An extra dozen eggs. Leftover tomato-sauce from last night’s spaghetti dinner.

I don’t mind the intrusion of noise - I’m not living in a cloister – there’s traffic to the kitchen next door all of the time. The scent of grilled-cheese sandwiches. The cacophony of the blender making a smoothie. My daughters will both be off to school soon, and I relish their being here right now and will miss the chaos of them when they are out. I smile when they say, “what are you up to, Dad?” They know perfectly well, of course.

I like telling a story – good, bad or indifferent. I have fun reading them aloud; to others, yes, but just as satisfyingly to myself. My wife comes down from her own office and asks me who I’m talking to. Myself. Oh, OK, she says and grabs a bowl of cereal and retreats back upstairs. I appreciate that level of comprehension, of appreciation.

And so, as the man says, it goes. I type, I read, I think, I pace in proscribed circles. I look out the window, to see if the sun is past the yardarm, so I can go and sit on the porch for a while. It’s a writer’s life.

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CAUTION

La, you got me on my

“Darkness”

by John Allison

At recess, the teacher required the class to perform square dancing routines that mortified all of the boys and some of the girls. There was no escape from their humiliation. Couldn't get away with giving lip to the teacher about it, either. One kid, Dennis, within earshot of Mrs. Wardley, called the teacher an old witch for making fifth graders do little kid stuff.

When Dennis returned to school after a two-day suspension, he showed the other boys the results from the principal's long, thick wooden paddle with holes drilled in it for the purpose of raising bright red welts. After that, they all just did as they were told.

That said, nothing forced the class to welcome Juanita Benavides into their dancing circles and twirls. The other kids wouldn't take her hand. Said she stank, two of the boys saying it loud enough for her to hear. Her eyes misted over with a deep, weary sadness. Scott didn't take her hand, either. She did smell kind of bad.

Then, and even later when Scott was in college, people in that part of the world didn't say Hispanic or Latino for someone with a Spanish surname. Instead, they said Mexican, or a bastardized version of the word, even if the person referred to was a fifth-generation American. Or from Bolivia, for that matter.

#

Scott found his mother in the living room the next morning before breakfast. “Mama, you know, yesterday, we did something bad. The class. To Juanita.”

“What went on?” she asked him.

After he told his mother what

happened, she looked straight at him. “You feel like a total jackass, don't you?” He nodded agreement.

“Good. I hope you feel like that for a while. You think it's the girl's fault? Do you, son?”

He made a pained, silent shake of his head to each side.

“She's a kid, like you. Right? Not much older.” He nodded assent.

Mary Blanchard continued, “I know about those houses where most of the migrant workers live. Out near the lake the railroad built years ago for filling engine boilers. They're not on the water system, and those folks have to carry water up the hill from the lake. The girl probably can't wash as often as you do. But she probably wants to, right?” He nodded yes again as he sank farther into his dad's tattered easy chair.

“Teachers in this little two-bit school don't treat her great, either, I'll bet. Do they?”

Scott replied, “No, Mama.”

The boy silently recalled how Juanita had also been in his class the previous year for a few months during fall cotton season before her family went to the Rio Grande Valley for the citrus harvest. He didn't remember hearing either last year's teacher or the current one ever speak to the girl, much less introduce her to the class.

Then, Mary Ellen Blanchard continued, “You know, in high school, I worked part-time at a pants factory in Clayton. Ran a big sewing machine on the assembly line.

“Got to know a girl who worked there, too. But she was full-time, had been there three years. A Mexican girl.

Named Bella. Nice. Smart. Wasn't long before I figured out she was just like me. No different. We became friends. Understand, Scott?”

The boy nodded.

“Yeah. When I found out I made more an hour than she did, I felt terrible. Ashamed.”

Returning to the present, Scott's mom said, “So, this girl, Juanita. What do you intend to do about it?” He didn't answer. Said he didn't know. But he did want to sleep better.

#

When square dancing time came the next week, he really wanted to take Juanita's hand. He decided it just didn't matter whether she smelled good or bad. He looked at her as she approached. As he began to reach out, the other kids gave him cold stares, leaving him feeling as though he was standing in the center of a stage with the spotlight shining on him alone, the audience waiting for him to inevitably screw up. His mother's words abandoned him as he drew his hand back. Juanita danced alone, as she had before. At lunch, Scott couldn't choke down his peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Scott sometimes thought about square dancing, but that wasn't the thing that habituated his night hours during the intervening years. That wasn't the real thing.

#

Summer 1967 began after Scott's freshman year in college. To be on time for Roby and his brother-in-law Eugene to pick him up for the trip to L.L. Grace & Sons Church Furniture Co., Scott had to be out of bed by 5:15, far earlier than his young

body had any business doing even if he had slept well.

But the previous night hadn't been a good one, as images of Juanita and three burly guys jarred him intermittently to near wakefulness. He hadn't gone more than two weeks since age 11 without nighttime perturbations. Sometimes he saw the high school guys, other times it was Juanita holding her hands over her eyes as she quaked, or Juanita leaving the gym that Halloween evening after Marky relayed the false message.

His head felt like a specially bred turnip of freakish size as he lurched to the refrigerator for eggs and bacon to fry and sharp cheddar cheese from which he trimmed scattered patches of green. An apple with squishy brown splotches needed surgical repair, as well. Nothing was wasted in the Blanchard household.

During his first year in college, he drove the new baby blue VW Beetle his brother Larry bought while on leave from the Marine Corps and left for Scott to use. Then Larry came home for good and reclaimed his car. Consequently, Scott was without transportation that summer and would remain so through his sophomore year.

Scott had no inkling at the time that Larry would team with their father, Ed—Pop to his two sons—to surprise him at the end of the next school year with a \$750 loan for a tan 1965 Beetle. It would be a dearly beloved car despite having an AM-only radio one needed to hit frequently with great passion to hear The Rolling Stones or Jefferson Airplane on a top-forty station because it was a twelve-volt apparatus in a six-volt car.

Roby, who had told Scott the furniture factory was hiring for the summer, had been his best friend since first grade. The Paul Bunyan-like Roby was salutatorian in high school and did well in community college for a

year, but said he wasn't going back to school in September. He just wanted to work, keep a nice car, afford a girl, maybe get married, and later take over the large family farm with deep, rich soil.

Scott? His personal anthem since it hit the charts the previous autumn was *We Gotta Get out of This Place (if it's the last thing we ever do)*, by Eric Burdon and The Animals, which he decided should apply to everywhere he'd been at that point in his young life.

Until Scott was five, the Blanchard family lived in Clayton, a small city of 80,000. They then moved to a 31-acre farm less than a mile from Dunham, a town of 1,200 that lay forty minutes to the east of Clayton.

No one could make a living on a farm that small, and the lousy soil further ensured it, so Ed Blanchard supported the family by continuing to work in the city at a factory making car and truck tires. The farm's economic viability was not the point, though. Moving to a rural area permitted the Blanchards to be property owners rather than lifelong renters. The boys' father worked lovingly on the place much of the time when he was not at the factory.

Though his mother also enjoyed owning a home, she harbored a strong dislike for the community. There were just enough overt racists in the area to make things unpleasant for Mary Blanchard, and she could only guess how many of the others were quietly confident in their superiority. She seethed, but did so quietly. One didn't speak up about such things at that time in that place. Ed agreed with her, but was more resigned to how people truly were, and pushed it to the back of his mind.

To Mary, even those who were fine, decent folks were just so damned boring. "Nobody out here ever opens a book," she was fond of saying. She had stood near the

top of her class at a large high school in the city before quitting a few weeks before graduating to work full time so she could move out of her parents' house after a final fight with her brilliant but remorselessly selfish father, a man who broke nearly every promise he ever made to his wife and daughter. However, Ed's sheer joy at having a place of his own meant that remaining there was an open-and-shut case.

#

On Scott's first day at the furniture factory, twenty-something Danny Hayes took a chunk of soft foam packing material, cut a deep slit in it, and filled the slit with a gooey wood glue made warm from the ambient heat. Slack-jawed with ecstasy, Danny squealed, "Quick, boy, stick your fingers in there. Tell me what it feels like. Ooh, baby!" Scott turned away.

Scott may have been nineteen and unable to avoid thinking about sex most of his waking hours, but from his earliest years he observed how his father treated women. He patted Mama on the butt, nuzzled her neck, and nibbled at her ear. When she spoke, he looked directly at her and listened intently. He consulted her before making a decision of any consequence, usually took her advice, opened doors for her. Never corrected his wife, didn't talk over her. Scott and Larry observed him treating many other women the same way except for the patting and nibbling.

On that same first day at Grace & Sons, just after lunch, Danny insisted that he was descended from Chief Sitting Bull. Scott was sure to a statistical certainty that Danny was totally full of shit. Even if there was no other evidence to support this inference, everything else Danny had said that first day was magnificent in its flights of fantasy and sheer fraudulence.

The strongest evidence of Danny's mendacity in this regard, however, was that a serious claim of

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descent from Native Americans was so greatly at odds with the guy's ignominious racism that it defied plausibility in the way that a perpetual motion machine defies the laws of physics. When Scott later brought it up, Danny didn't remember having ever said such a thing, instead offering up the assertion that he was descended directly from President Rutherford B. Hayes.

The company gave goggles to the guys on power saws and sanders, but not to any of the other workers. This might have helped Scott, but still wouldn't have kept his eyes from becoming swollen, itchy, and red-filigreed. In prior summers he was able to last no more than half a day doing the only paying work available—mowing, loading, and hauling hay, or driving a tractor and shredder over acres of Johnson grass and sunflowers—until he could barely see or breathe.

This factory job in Clayton was something he thought he could do. He soon discovered that the air in the hay fields was no match for what he breathed at Grace & Sons—a swirling brew of not only dust and larger wood particles, but also vapor given off by the polyvinyl acetate used to glue wood veneer onto church pews, podiums for preachers, and other assorted church appointments. There was not yet an OSHA and, naturally, Texas had no state laws to protect workers against breathing muck.

#

On Friday of his first week, Danny began urging Scott to go with him after work to “get some Meskin pussy, you know, over there close to where my buddy Frankie lives.” Scott didn't reply, instead trying to change the subject to the upcoming college football season. After being ignored, Danny sulked all afternoon. Scott wondered whether the foreman, a former Army sergeant named Billy Guy, might be willing to unpair him from Danny. During lunch break, he asked. Billy, who said he was sympathetic but needed to keep the

two together for at least the time being. Then, intermittently throughout the following night, vivid images of Juanita afflicted Scott's sleep. The clearest of the visions was that of a young girl being pulled along in dim light behind the school gym.

Lost in the job's boredom when Danny wasn't ranting, Scott's mind wandered, often returning to the necessity of finishing college and then finding some way to attend graduate school for as long as it took. Scholarships plus money from part-time work hadn't kept him solvent all the way through the previous school year, so he needed to generate as much cash as possible during the summer.

Beginning work at L.L. Grace & Sons paid \$1.25 an hour, the minimum wage at the time. This was a quarter more than his pay at Mack's full-service Conoco gas station on the Old Fremont Highway at the edge of Clayton. He worked at Mack's the previous school year as many weekends and breaks as he could while Larry's car was available. Scott enjoyed working at Mack's, but the extra 25 cents at the factory was a big deal. After ten days at the furniture factory, however, he began to wonder whether a quarter was as big a difference as he'd first imagined.

He made it through that tenth day. The following Monday, after two weeks of vile effluvium from Danny Hayes, Scott mimicked the voice of Bela Lugosi in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, said he was studying chemistry in college, and if Danny didn't restrict his conversation to the work at hand, he probably should start watching his lunch box more closely. Although it would be a stretch to say that Danny behaved as a gentleman during the next two days, he was at least comparatively quiet.

Then Danny lurched back into loathsomeness. On Wednesday of Scott's third week, two days after his not-so-thinly-veiled threat to poison Danny's lunch, Danny again became bolder after his brief deflation. He greeted Scott near the time

clock where they punched in every morning.

“Hi, you fucking little squirt.”

Scott said nothing as he pictured his fist going deep into the sweet spot just below Danny's diaphragm. Danny was six inches taller and sixty pounds heavier than Scott, however, with a nasty three-inch scar on the cheek below his left ear that Scott imagined to be the result of a broken beer bottle. Thus the satisfying image of Danny doubled over in agony would remain stored in Scott's imagination.

“Better say something when I talk to you, you little shit.”

“Danny, I'm tired. Real tired. I feel like hell this early in the morning. Just leave me alone.”

“Well, la di da. Not enough beauty sleep, little man?”

Scott didn't look at Danny and said nothing.

“You little peckerwood. A head shorter'n me and you think you're big shit. Your buddy Roby said you was valdicterin, valerdictin, shit, whatever, top shit in high school. That's high school for you. Now goin' to some big shit college. Can't get you to joke, have fun. Shit, life sucks if you can't fuckin' play around. What the hell's wrong Meskin jokes. Pussy jokes. Hell, I'm just playin'. My buddy, Frankie, me and him make fun of 'em all the time. Tell each other about all the little spic girls we screwed. Drink beer together over at Freddie's Night Owl, you know, over east of here. And man, oh man, has he got a neighbor girl down the street from him, a little Meskin. I seen her twice. Whoeee.”

Scott felt himself beginning to burn, but then, thinking again of that \$1.25, and of that ragged scar on Danny's cheek, he cooled, walked away, and headed toward the deadening work that awaited. Danny followed. “Hey, wanna get some Meskin pussy after work? She's not more'n fifteen. Hot as a rock from outer space, ripe, know what I mean? She likes me, I can tell. Talked to her last week.”

"Nah, Danny, not interested."

"You got a dick, don't you? Or maybe you don't. You queer or somethin', you little shit? Get off your high hound."

"Horse, Danny. High horse."

"Fuck. Whatever. Horse, hound, fuckin' grizzly bear. Don't matter."

"Well, it might matter if it's a grizzly bear, Danny."

Clearly puzzled, Danny continued. "Anyways, pretty sure five bucks'll get her to fool around. You know, after we quit work. If you like her you gotta give me five bucks. Her people all work like dogs somewhere and she's there by herself a lot."

"No thanks, Danny."

"Shit, man, you could go a few rounds with her if you ain't queer."

"Go away, Danny. I've got to work or I'll lose this job. I need this job."

"You little shit, it don't even matter if you wear nothing on your pecker. She don't have a disease yet, pretty sure. Don't matter if she gets knocked up. Her family might think her brother done it. Or some cousin. Course you gotta put up with the smell."

Scott felt the tissue go raw somewhere in his brain. Something had taken coarse sandpaper to an exposed neuron, pushing its gravelly surface back and forth until Scott screamed inside. He couldn't breathe. His heart quickened, then raced. Then he was back where he had gone many times in the previous eight years.
#

Juanita, who was two years older than the rest of the class in the little rural central Texas school, was highly developed for thirteen. In fifth grade, Scott was at the school's annual Halloween carnival in the cavernous old gym covered with white squares of asbestos siding, heated inside by ancient steam radiators that on a cold day made clanking noises like a ghost dragging its chains.

The carnival was a night of innocent amusement for most, with many decorat-

ed contest booths lining the gym's walls, sales of greasy corn dogs and sticky pink cotton candy, the crowning of the eighth-grade carnival king and queen, and the announcement of raffle winners for the grand prize of a huge recliner that was perfect for watching Ozzie and Harriet on TV. As an added treat, those paying 25 cents could dunk a teacher in a vat of water by throwing a fastball hard and accurate enough accurate enough to hit the levered metal flap releasing a trap door beneath a volunteer victim.

But it was a night of illicit fun for some of the boys who smoked stolen, unfiltered Camels and shared bottles of Lone Star beer some kid got from an older brother, a wayward uncle, or for an exorbitant price from a high school guy. The event was supposed to be just for kids up through eighth grade, but sometimes a few of the high school boys hung around outside to see if they could find some of their own brand of fun.

Juanita came to the carnival that year, her mom having dropped off her, two of her sisters, and her little brother by the gym in an ancient Dodge pickup truck. It would be fun, they thought.

Three high school guys, Hank Waters, Charlie Knox, and Sammy Winters, all football players looked up to by the fifth-grade boys, came early and watched from Charlie's Buick Roadmaster as people walked into the building. When Scott arrived, he saw them in the car with brown bottles upturned.

While Juanita stood inside not far from an exit door watching the goings on with vicarious enjoyment, the older boys sent a classmate of Scott's, Marky Fielder, to tell Juanita that her little brother was in trouble and needed her help. The guys had either paid off Marky, or depended on the fact that he was too dumb to know what they were up to. Marky was apparently convincing, Juanita going outside and around the corner of the gym where he led her. Scott followed Marky outside

and saw it. He later questioned Marky, who pleaded total innocence.

One of the guys enveloped her in hairy, heavily muscled arms and pulled her farther into the dark. She didn't scream. She didn't make a sound, at least not one that Scott heard. Beyond the one who grabbed her—Scott thought it was Charlie—were the other two guys appearing as faint shadows in the feeble light of a recently risen quarter moon.

Even at age eleven, Scott knew what had to be going on, especially when, twenty minutes later, he saw Juanita walking funny out of the dark, then standing around the front corner of the gym just out of sight of the white people having fun inside. Scott saw it, but said nothing. Did nothing. A while later, Juanita was gone. Her sisters were gone.

Not long afterward, Scott saw Charlie, Hank, and Sammy talking, laughing, punching each other on their biceps as they talked football, cars, and girls. Scott told no one. Throughout the ensuing eight years, the image of Juanita walking strangely, hands covering her face, and shoulders shaking still visited Scott with regularity.
#

The image blurred, then dissipated, and Scott was 19 again and back at L.L. Grace & Sons with Danny Hayes. At the end of the day's work, he strode quickly around the corner of the sawing and sanding building and down Elm Street to a pay phone, calculating as he went. He called Mack, being pretty sure the man would welcome him back to the Conoco station. There was a lot of turnover among Mack's employees, both voluntary and those he fired for stealing or lingering at a windshield craning over to look up the mini-skirt of a young female driver.

Scott enjoyed that work, trotting out to greet customers, asking them how much gas they needed, starting the pump, washing windshields, checking tires, and inspecting the water in the radiator and battery. Car batteries were not sealed as

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they were in later years, and would go dry from the summer heat and fail if the water was not replenished periodically.

There were occasional flats to fix, usually either Mack or another good-natured employee to talk to, and a rocking chair just outside the station office's front door where Scott could sit reading *Goodbye Columbus* or *Go Tell It on The Mountain* while alone late at night with few customers.

There would be no one around like Danny. Mack at age fifty was an old-school conservative guy, and was a genuinely decent man, tolerant except of fools, and at six-one and two-fifty would have obliterated Danny with a tire iron in the blink of an eye had he been there fulminating.

Scott was optimistic that some kind of transportation would materialize, so that he could work at least forty-eight hours a week in the summer. Mack paid in cash, withholding nothing, so Scott decided he could just about match the checks from the furniture factory for the remainder of the summer, and probably during the rest of his college years. A bonus was that the Conoco station stayed open eighteen hours a day, and after school began Scott could work two twelve-hour shifts on weekends by driving the two hours from college to his hometown on Fridays and then back to school very late Sunday nights. More work would be available during breaks, especially between semesters. Mack knew it was safe to turn the station over to Scott when he wanted time off. The books would always balance.

Mack said Scott could start work the following Wednesday. Then, apologizing for the short notice, Scott told the foreman he wouldn't be back on Monday. Billy said it was okay, he knew it was a shit job, and told Scott when he could come back for his last paycheck.

In the meantime, Scott had another sort of work to do. He figured that Juanita hadn't left the general area unless she still

traveled the state breaking her back in the fields, and he hoped she'd escaped that life. He didn't know if her last name would be the same. In his parents' Chevy pickup, he spent Saturday speaking with people in and immediately around Dunham. Because she was Mexican, a couple of those he talked to wondered if he was looking for her because she'd stolen something. None of them knew anything.

On Sunday, he started early and spent the morning and half the afternoon driving the back roads within a radius of eight or nine miles from the town. At one of the households, he finally learned that Juanita left her family and went to Clayton when she was about fifteen.

At another home on a cratered gravel road, Scott learned more. Juanita hadn't gotten married, hadn't had kids, and worked in Clayton sacking groceries and cleaning houses. She lived in a neighborhood on the south side of the city, whether alone or not he didn't know.

The next day, Monday, Pop began two weeks on the swing-shift at the tire factory—4:00 p.m. to midnight. Scott arranged to take his father to work on Monday afternoon. From there he drove the family's truck to the part of town where Juanita was said to live. Further persistence ultimately paid off with her address, and by 8:30 that evening he approached a clapboard house with peeling gray paint on a street that bespoke hard times.

Three hard knocks on the door.
"Juanita?"

Darkness was just beginning to fall. Scott stood on a front porch bathed in the light of a bare incandescent bulb, colored yellow so as not attract moths and mosquitoes. Suspicious brown eyes stared at him through a four-inch aperture between door and frame. He heard no sound coming from inside the house, and detected only faint light behind the figure on the other side of the opening.

"Juanita, it's Scott Blanchard. Remember me? We were in school together off and on for a couple of years. You left. Can we talk?"

In truth, Scott didn't have any idea what he wanted to say to Juanita. He didn't know what he wished to accomplish. Wasn't even sure why he was there. He needed to heal a wound, but the realization that hers surpassed his own by a factor that mathematics could not calculate made him feel small and selfish and dishonest.

"May I come in, Juanita? For just a few minutes?"

The fingers of a still-unseen hand opened the door a few inches wider.

"Scott. Did you say Scott? Blanchard?"

"Yeah."

"I remember you," she intoned without inflection.

"Can we talk?"

"I got nothing to say to you." The dark eyes were hard. They didn't move. They didn't blink. The door began to reclose.

"Juanita. Wait. Please."

The door finished closing. Not fast, not hard, just shut tight. A lock clicked.

Scott trudged back to the truck for his return to Dunham.

Later doesn't work. Later doesn't do shit. Scott knew that. He had already known it, but now the knowledge was a branding iron hissing as it pressed deep into his flesh.

As Scott drove home in silence, he understood that he had to visit Danny. After that, he just didn't know. ❖

“A Store for Men”

by Brian Moore

Max woke Sunday morning with a buzz-saw headache, a steel-toothed, cavity-drilling, icepick through the eye ripper. The pain was so intense that he began making promises to God. He splashed water on his face and ground the heels of his hands into the bone around his eyes until he saw stars. But the headache swelled and diverted and flooded back again, into the hollows at his temples, along tributaries of nerves. He swallowed three tablets of aspirin, tied a tourniquet of ice cubes and a towel around his forehead, and lay down on the living room couch. After a few minutes the throbbing slowed. He caught his breath.

An earlier, sympathetic version of Sylvia would have knelt beside him and spread her long, cool fingers over his forehead, checking, checking, are you ok, where does it hurt, what can I do for you? And he would have said, it's nothing, I'm fine, kissing the secrets out of her palms, apologizing for inconveniencing her. He would have drawn her arms in, pulled her down until she was snug against his chest, covering himself up with her, her warm sweater smelling of hairspray and soap. He would have comforted her, not the other way around. Before marriage, she told him the way he held her, no kissing, no rubbing, was both weird and adorable. It was not unlike love.

The headache dulled, retreated, and settled in for the long haul. No need to bargain with God just yet.

The landline phone rang and startled him. The phone never rang on

Sunday mornings.

“Mr. Swarovsky. This is Constable Turner, Ballyhaise Police Services.”

Max sat up, unwound the towel from his head, and dropped the ice into the fruit bowl on the coffee table.

“Mr. Swarovsky? Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“There's been a problem. You better come to the store.”

Max wondered what the appropriate attire was for reporting to police on a weekend. He settled on a cream turtleneck and charcoal slacks and a navy fall coat with padded insert. Conservative but not self-important. Whatever problem they were calling about, it was probably nothing. He must have forgotten to lock the rear entrance of the store yesterday. As he left the house he jiggled the door handle three times to make sure it was secure. His head continued to ache but not as bad as before.

When he arrived downtown three policemen were guarding the store, writing in notebooks, taking pictures. The yellow tape that cordoned off the sidewalk had torn loose and was flapping streamers into the wind. Glass glittered on the pavement.

“Mr. Swarovsky. Here.”

One of the constables beckoned and reached his arm firmly around Max's shoulders, like an undertaker guiding the widow in for the final viewing.

“A tenant across the road called at three A.M. complaining of noise. Must have happened then.”

All the windows were gone. Of course. The first thing vandals attack, not just to gain entry but also because breaking glass is so simple, so satisfying. The smell of smoke sharpened his nostrils.

“They built a bonfire in the alterations room but no accelerant. It was out when we arrived.”

All the clothing racks were thrown to the floor. Dress shirts ripped to rags. Linings gashed out of the winter jackets. A hundred thousand dollars worth of suits covered in footprints and mud. Hate? No. More like the sheer joy of trampling on something clean, something beautiful. The cash register drawer lay open and ignored, the way Max left it last night to discourage thieves.

A penis squirting jism was scrawled across the three angled panels of the fitting mirror. Pink spray paint bannered the walls with the same words, over and over.

Faggot. Fagguts. Bum-pokers.

“Oh my,” Max said, aware that the policeman was watching, evaluating.

His brain drummed against his eyeballs, too heavy for his neck.

Desecration.

“It won't take long to find who did this,” the policeman said. “They're not the smartest people.”

Max righted the chair where wives of customers sat while their men tried on clothes. It was a straight, firm chair, not meant for lounging. He called it the Seat of Judgement. The wives would ask: Isn't it too tight in

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the rear? Too long? Does it come in grey? Soliciting Max's advice but not trusting it. He fell into the chair and bent over.

"Mr. Swarovsky? Are you okay? Would you like some water?"

There was no hope of opening in time for Christmas. He pulled out his phone and called Donnie. Told him not to come to work tomorrow. He didn't bother telling Donnie about the graffiti. It was a small town. Everyone would know by the end of the day.

He might have fallen. Or maybe the policeman caught him just as his head hit the tile. An electric jolt snapped up through the floor of his skull, a product of bad wiring, and he began to float toward the ceiling.

The store was called Wellwoods Menswear. Max had run Wellwoods so long that customers thought he was the original owner. He bought the business from a small Jewish man named Hershoran in 1988. No one remembered who Wellwood was.

Hershoran used to eat lunch at the Athenia Restaurant around the corner. Every day the same Reuben sandwich, with coleslaw and a rubbery slice of lemon meringue pie for dessert. He was a dressy, fussy man, too perfumed for a town like Ballyhaise. He wore gabardine suits and paisley vests in the middle of July. He dyed his hair black and swept it limply over the white, dandruffed crown of his scalp.

Max said he might be interested in the store, if Hershoran ever considered retirement.

The old man adjusted his shirt sleeve over a skeletal wrist. Gold-plated, monogrammed cufflinks. He had the kind of skin you didn't want

to touch for fear of puncturing it.

"Oh, I couldn't consider that," Hershoran said. "I would miss the customers too much." As if he would be abandoning his children. The kind of men who wore suits in Ballyhaise—bankers, lawyers, and accountants—were loyal to a T to Wellwoods. Wouldn't shop anywhere else. Hershoran laid this story on thick, with wet eyes. The old-time salesmen were coy with merchandise. Everything was personal.

Hershoran died a year after he signed the bill of sale over to Max. His heart ticked to a stop in his sleep and, because he had never married, he lay comfortably in bed for a week before anyone found him. Ever since, when Max opened the front door of the store in the morning and raised the blinds in the windows, he thought, that's how I want to go. He never considered changing the name of the store. Wellwoods sounded like the type of store your mother dragged you to when you were a boy, a place you took your grandchildren when you grew up.

After Max took over, American department chains sprouted like thistle out of every crack in the pavement. They were followed by a mall. Then another mall. The downtown withered and big box stores—stuffed, drywalled crates that sold on volume—swallowed up the industrial land and leached the customers away. They were staffed by teenagers in running shoes and women who waddled in tight, bulging pants, none of whom could be bothered with stooping to measure an inseam or chalk a cuff. Clothes piled up in bins like garbage, rifled and fingered. Everything was returnable, refundable, convenient, cheap. Max hung on. He sponsored peewee hock-

ey teams, chaired the board of the local music festival, and raised money for the hospital. Five or six nights a week he was running to a meeting, volunteering for Big Brothers, or buying something for a potluck. He told himself it was networking but the mega retailers seemed to manage just fine without it. The truth was he liked to be busy. Especially after Sylvia divorced him. His customers aged gracefully.

In 1994, Donnie Miller walked into the store and Max knew at once what he was about. Donnie was not conservative. He experimented with high-collared shirts, wide pant legs, sweater vests, and ornate tie pins. But such a beautiful voice. Like rum on a winter night.

"Where are you from?" Max asked.

"Jamaica, sir."

"Where have you worked?"

"Hamiltons of Kingston for seven years."

"And now?"

"Last year I worked at Michael and Sons."

"And now?"

A stutter of silence.

"I pick apples in the valley."

"What is the difference between a good suit and a great suit?"

He hesitated again, but his eyes didn't look away. "A quality suit has hand-stitched seams and a sewn interlining. Buttonholes that are cut, *then* sewn. A jacket of fine-woven wool that drapes cleanly from the shoulder."

Max sighed, the way Hershoran would have sighed, with a show of resignation, secretly relieved.

"I'll see you at eight a.m. tomorrow. Please be on time."

The town of Ballyhaise lurched ahead, a truck with a bad clutch. The factories dried up and closed. Big city

people retired, cashed in their houses, and swarmed the subdivisions at the edge of town. Tourism became a season and the calendar filled with parades, festivals, and homecomings. Max re-wrote his advertising. Shop where your father shopped. Quality makes the man. Personal service. The receipts bubbled just high enough to give Max hope for a modest retirement of his own. He knew no one would ever buy the business from him the way he had from Hershoran. Some day the rent would jump too far and he would lower the blinds for the last time and learn how to garden. Until then, there was always a new fall line, the winter buyer's show in Montreal, and mothers hauling sons in to find the first, crisp, grown-up suit of their young lives to wear to the prom.

The older customers didn't trust Donnie. There was no soft way of saying it. He was black. He had an accent. He didn't come from here. When they entered they told Donnie they were just looking, then waited until Max was free.

One Friday night Max handed the door keys to Donnie.

"I'm going to be sick for a while."
"How long?"

"As long as it takes. Don't forget the night deposits and courier delivery on Tuesday. If there's a problem call me at home. But don't call me."

When Max returned two weeks later Donnie had established a beachhead of reluctant, bewildered customers. Soon the wives shepherding husbands into the store were priding themselves on their Diversity. The teenagers gravitated to Donnie, who joked, gently, and knew all the trends, while Max wisely tugged jackets over elderly pot bellies, complaining mildly about frivolous styles that didn't accommodate mature silhouettes.

Donnie had no family in town and never talked about friends. He stuck to himself and had no opinions. He was the deep end of a small, cold lake.

Years later, on a quiet, indifferent morning in March, Donnie did not arrive. He had never been late before. At noon the telephone rang. Donnie's marvelous voice was scratched and gouged, as if a schoolboy had taken a penknife to it. He told Max he would not be in today. Not tomorrow either.

"What's wrong?"

"It's nothing. I haven't been well but I'll be fine. I just need a little time."

Nothing. Nothing could mean anything. Max knew how deep Nothing could go. That Nothing haunted Max the rest of the day.

Max closed early and drove to the address of the apartment building written on Donnie's payroll forms. There was a directory with the apartment number and an intercom in the lobby but no answer when he punched the keypad. A woman came in, stamping slush off her boots. He pretended to search for his keys. She unlocked the inside entrance and he trailed in after her.

As soon as he stepped out of the elevator, he heard shouting. He walked to the end of the hall and stood outside the apartment listed for Donnie in the lobby directory. The carpet smelled like grease left overnight in a pan.

The shouting behind the door stopped. Someone was whispering in gulps, as if they were running out of air. A vacuum of silence after each question.

Do you love me?

Murmurs of people in other apartments. Televisions. An illegal dog yapping. The holding of breath.

Did you ever love me?

Holding. Holding forever. A knife point.

Why won't you say something?

Max wanted to scream: stop asking stupid questions. But it was none of his business. Sylvia called them coffin-nailers. She used them herself before she left Max. Once you answer there's no going back. Life tips one way or the other.

He knocked, just to end the silence. He knocked again. The door opened as far as the chain permitted.

"What?"

"I'm looking for Donnie Lumley. I hope I'm not disturbing."

Half a face looked Max up and done, peered around him to see if there was anyone else. Craters of acne in his cheeks.

"Oh. You're the guy from the store."

The chain dropped. The man walked away from him.

It was a one-bedroom apartment, dressed up as an artist's loft. Palettes and paint boxes piled up on a dinette table. A drop cloth unfurled on the floor, crusted to black with old spills. Canvases leaned against bookshelves and walls, or hung by nylon cord from the ceiling as if they were clothes put out to dry. He didn't know what the paintings were supposed to be. They could have been oil streaks in a puddle, tantrums of red and orange, flamboyant skid marks. It must have been the roommate who thought he was a painter. Donnie didn't have that much ego, that much blind indulgence.

Donnie lay on the couch. He was a mess.

His left eye was swollen shut, shading from dark red to blue. He breathed through his mouth.

"What happened to you?"

Donnie said he was attacked while walking home after work on

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Saturday. They got him down on the ground and began kicking. He'd been recuperating at home since then.

"Who? Who attacked you?"

"Some men. I never saw them before."

"Did you call the police?"

"It's not something you need to worry about."

"What do you mean? What kind of thing is that to say? Why shouldn't I worry?"

The other man banged pots and plates into the kitchen sink, glancing at Max and Donnie sideways. He reminded Max of a sasquatch in a grainy conspiracy video, his hair strewn to his shoulders like a stinky floor mop. Skin peeled from his knuckles.

"I'll be fine by Wednesday," Donnie said, clutching a bloodied towel to his cheek. "You don't have to worry about me."

"No, of course not."

What a stupid thing to have done. To have come here, to do what? Who knows how people lived? Max didn't know what to make of the street mobbing story. There were rooms you couldn't open without unleashing damage. And yet, if Sylvia were here she would not have hesitated to pull Donnie out of the apartment, to get him away from his boyfriend, no excuses, no waiting. Once she had started breaking through Max's disguises she couldn't stand for having things covered up by anyone.

A year after Max bought the store, an elderly man called him, someone who had shopped at Wellwoods for decades, but whose mind was starting to slip. He told Max his best dress pants had been ripped by a nail and he wanted to be measured for new ones, in case he was invited to a wedding or a funeral. The man had a

replaced hip and arthritis imploding his knees. He couldn't get downtown under his own power. Could Max do this one small favor? Back then, Max was trying to make a good impression. When Max arrived the front door was unlocked. He stepped inside and the stench of urine was so toxic that his eyes watered. The old man charged into the foyer waving a cane, accusing Max of being in a conspiracy with the Indians to steal his money. He was going to call the police, lock him up where he belonged with the rest of the crooks. All you Jews, he said. All you Jews think you're so good. Max held his ground.

Dementia releases what's buried and forgotten, like turning over a rock on a nest of snakes. He hurled prejudice at Max like handfuls of turds.

No, I don't know anything about the Indians, Max said. Yes, he agreed, it's a sin how the politicians are pissing everything down the toilet. People are terrible. While the old man was searching for the telephone to call the police, Max found a perfectly adequate pair of trousers hanging in a dry cleaning bag in the hallway. Here you are, Max said. Good as new. That settled him down. The old man ran out of steam and retreated to his La-Z-Boy to sulk. Max brewed tea. They watched the hockey game on television, sipping out of Royal Doulton cups he found in a dusty china cabinet, the only clean dishes left in the house. In half an hour they were friends again. The man literally wept when Max left.

You just never knew about people. Max included himself. He wasn't special. It takes a great deal of skill to keep all the stories straight, to make sure nothing slips out.

Max looked at the boyfriend and

back at Donnie. "If you need anything—"

"No, no. I'm fine. Thank you for asking."

Max needed to get out before he embarrassed both of them any further.

On Wednesday morning, Max parked outside Donnie's building at seven A.M. He buzzed the window down when Donnie came out.

"Max?"

"All this time and I just realized you live on my way to downtown. Let me give you a lift."

They stopped at the Donut Town for takeout coffee and Max paid. After that, Max picked Donnie up every day, drove him home every night. There were no more beatings. He never saw the mop-haired man again.

Love was such a rickety, tipsy thing that even when you thought you finally had it anchored down you never knew what was below, ready to spring up and pull you under. Max and Sylvia had no children; fortunate, given that he needed eight years of marriage to finally admit to her who he was. Cornered by his own silences. By lovemaking cold as dishwater. By those questions, the coffin-nailers. If you have to ask someone if they love you, you shouldn't be asking.

Now she lived in Florida with an insurance salesman and sent cards at Christmas with pictures of beaches and mistletoe. Happy Hanukah! A parade of chirpy exclamation marks. She had moved on just fine, determined, boisterous, steamrolling regrets.

He remembered the pinkish scent of Sylvia after a shower, or after sex, or lying together against the burning, seaweedy sand at the beach. He had tried so hard to be in love. She would be getting old now without him: stylish grey hair, powdered age

spots, and veins bluishly threading her calves. What a wise confusion she delivered. With her plain men's shirts and baggy jeans and unspun hair. For her, everything was obvious and unexplainable. You just knew.

"Why don't you stay?" he asked.

"Maybe things can change."

"Max. Stop asking. Stop trying to please everyone."

"Why? What have I done?"

During this final, tired argument, she was weeding in the garden, among wilting trellises of tomatoes and beans and peas. Practical, useful plants, hard to kill, but there they were, dying on the vine.

"You seem so..." She turned her back on him.

"What?"

"Undecided. I would just like to be let go without all your bullshit compromising." She chopped at the ground, annihilating roots. He didn't know why she bothered with all that effort. She was leaving anyway.

He couldn't make her understand what the suits and coats and tuxedos meant to him. The satisfaction of craft, of things well-made. The art of disguise. We are pouches, wrinkles, puckered fat, drooping appendages. What a terrible world it would be without a little dishonesty.

There was a time each afternoon, not too close to lunch but far from closing, when Max moved the Seat of Judgement to the back of the store and sat in a well of shadow behind the tie rack, waiting out the midday lull. He closed his eyes. The air conditioner whirred with a catch in its throat. Someone honked at the intersection. Max's nose filled with the thick, clean stuffiness of wool, the brightness of silk and cotton, the subtle odors of concealed maleness. The fragrance of oak grew tendrils out of the stained

wood floor in front of the notions counter, accumulating and secretly alive like coral. He couldn't imagine himself anywhere else.

"How are you, Max?"

Such an odd question. Like a nurse checking your temperature. A gentle nudge answered by reflex. But when you stripped away habit, it was *How* are you? How did you get here, to this current state of *you*?

"I'm fine, Donnie."

"Headaches?"

"Oh. So-so."

"Light bother you?"

"No. Leave the blinds up. I like to see the street." He kept his eyes closed.

Max catalogued the intersections of his life. He invented alternate paths for himself. If he had never married. If he had taken the job his uncle offered in Vancouver. If he had not bought the store, but driven west, past all the concrete and highways, right into the ocean. He would have made a marvelous beach bum.

"Max. Can I give you some advice?"

"You can try."

"You should be a little less hard on yourself. People start to resent if they think they're always in your debt. Loosen up."

"Well, that's not my way. I can look after myself."

His customers were fleeing to Walmart, where no salespeople would ever pester them. The town had changed. Looking back it was startling to see how quickly people adapted. Flag ceremonies on Pride Day. Men mulling over the best shade of pink shirt. Speeches from the mayor about bullying, sexism, the need for tolerance. No one wore suits on main street anymore and all the adults seemed like teenagers coming home

from school. In summer young men from the Rehab smoked joints at the corner where the banks used to be and played bad guitar, cross-legged on the pavement. Their paper coffee cups squatted, ballasted with coins, between their feet.

Still, the ancient currents trickled underneath. Whispers, just loud enough to be overheard. Jew. Homo.

The truth bruised you, but not as much as when you ignored it.

The seizure in the store knocked him out cold for two hours. He woke in the hospital. The police were gone.

He had known for two months that the tumor in his left temporal lobe was *inoperable*. Such a functional, final word. They should print labels and stick them to your forehead. There was a lot of time to think about Hershoran and Donnie and Sylvia. On the first day of Hanukkah an orderly moved him to the palliative wing. Outside, menorahs were lit in the synagogue, the blessings recited, the hymns sung. Not that Max had been to a service in years. Donnie brought him the newspaper and coffee and danishes from Donut Town. There was mail. Catalogues. Bills. Sylvia's annual greeting card. She wrote that Noah, her new husband's son, was graduating this year. He was thinking of CalTech but Sylvia was hoping Florida State. Hurricanes a pest but they were managing. Hope you are well. Love.

Half of the room was light, normal. The other half was sparkly dark, honeycombs of lightning, campfires crackling up into the night.

There were flowers on the light side of the room and a silver, heart-shaped balloon on a stick. Get well wishes inscribed in large swirly letters.

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Donnie sat in a chair next to Max's bed. He leaned forward.

"Hello," said Max. But that wasn't the sound he heard. More like a belch. The tumor had gummed up synapses, re-routed the circuits. He tried again.

"Herrf."

"Good morning," Donnie said.

Someone had written in green marker on a white board on the wall. Doctor: M. Suleiman. Nurse: Lorraine. Liquids: yes. No dietary restrictions. Intermittent aphasia. Glasses. Dentures. Requires assistance to bathroom.

"How are you feeling?"

"Oh. Din no fill."

"You had a seizure. Do you remember the seizure?"

"What?"

Donnie looked out the hospital window. He had smudges of white in his sideburns, pockmarks on his cheeks like dimples on a golf ball. Flesh puffed in rolls along his throat. My God, thought Max. He's old too. When did that happen?

"Would you like me to hold your hand, Max?"

"Okay."

How silly we are. To have to ask permission to show compassion.

Max did not mind time so much now. He did not resent its speed, its slipperiness, its sly rushing away like a rude guest. Its relentless signposts. In his hospital bedtime lingered and slouched and pattered about. It coozied up to him, ready for a nap.

"I've always been lucky," Max said suddenly, clear as a bell.

Donnie smiled.

Max raised his arm, like lifting it through jello. "Now, I'm paying for my good fortune."

"You made your own luck, Max. You don't owe anyone."

Donnie leaned over and kissed

Max's forehead. Where his lips touched a cool drop of water rested and then expanded, running down Max's face, his throat, his chest, until Max was afloat and the bones of his body were snapping, coming apart, scattering away. Sunset lapped on the green shores of the room. Someone took away the breakfast tray.

Hershoran. That smart old bastard. He had gotten full value for his sale of the store. Max would have liked to have died at home too.

Later, they twisted the IV drop full open and such dreams he had, sloppy, giddy puddles of make-believe, the night melting into licorice. He owned a home in Milan chambered with exquisite furniture and through the home an elegant man glided in shimmering lavender robes, a man he loved one bare shoulder at a time. Paintings hung in the hall, bold, unrepentant, slashes of magenta and wine and chartreuse, real art, deep, vivid, and true. In the middle of Max's extravagant dining room presided a china cabinet, cluttered full of tea service and prisms of Waterford crystal and Royal Albert dishes. Max sat at long table, wrapped in a burgundy robe, waiting for that traitor of a store owner to come and fix his pants. That quiet, self-assured Jew who thought he was so good. He was going to show him a thing or two.

The dreams ran off without him, like laughing children banging the screen door behind them.

With the insurance money he was going to put the store back together. He would re-stock the racks with Ermenegildo Zegna and Brioni and Desmond Marion. No more settling for less, no more competing on price. He would strip the store to the bricks and do it over with polished ivory mantles and cherry wood moldings. He would tear out those lousy, flickering

fluorescent panels that gave his nerves fits and install recessed lighting behind roman columns and french mirrors. No more muddy twilight in the afternoon. No more cheap decorations. Only the best, what he had always intended. A refined, modern store. A fresh start.

There was night ahead, the pain and the dark. He was afraid, but not more than he could bear. He was fortunate and grateful. No more promises to God. He would take what came.

He tasted the thick breath of wool in his mouth. Silk on his arms. The crisp, bright stiffness of a white shirt brushing his back. What he would give for another day. ❖

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.

The hill for the pool is a steep one, there is a paved driveway for going up to the pool, dropping off your children, and coming down again to the street. For me, on a bicycle, it is a great way to gain speed for the ride home – trunks still wet from swimming, my hair streaming behind me to dry, and a sodden towel over my shoulder.

I am being followed. I am being chased. Keep the towel out of the spokes of the wheels or the bicycle chain – I can hear my mom say in my mind. I know, I reply. I do, but it doesn't mean I am being careful. You can't always be careful as you would like to be. Not when you are in a hurry, or when you are being chased by someone. Not a bully. Just someone who doesn't like you, who wishes to do you harm today.

I want to look over my shoulder. I don't, though. Watch where you're going. Mom's voice again. Keep both hands on the handlebars. Always go at a safe speed.

Not today. Not now. Must hurry. I have to put distance between myself and them. The wind whips past my ears, my eyes tear from the heat, but the tears dry on my temples. I am moving fast, but I pedal furiously to try and get more speed. The first cross street is empty as far as the eye can see in both directions and I take it standing on the pedals and pumping for all I am worth. My tires spit gravel and give me an inkling of a feeling that I am not in control of my bike. Hold on, I tell myself. Just go and hold on.

If I had my friends with me, if they had gone to the pool to go swimming with me, it would be completely different. I would not be running away – riding away – because they would be here and we would turn and take on this one chasing me. Cut it out, my friends would say. We would all stand together, as we do.

Another downhill, more speed, the wind I create like thunder. At the bottom of this hill, a slight right turn. I move to the leftmost part of my lane. If I go too far, and a car is coming the other way, I will have to keep going straight and that is a long uphill climb. They will catch me. So the best I can do to take this turn without slowing down is to be in the middle of the road, and tilt my bike deeply, with my right pedal up so that it doesn't catch on the pavement and spill me onto the road.

That would be very bad. But not worse than being beaten up. And not worse than being beaten up after falling off my bike. That would be the worst.

I'm in the middle now, ready for the turn and a car is there, coming my way, coming from the road I am about to turn into. But they are doing it wrong, not coming to a stop at the stop sign that faces them. They have slowed, but then pulled out onto my street, cutting the turn and going into the left lane. I am going to either hit them or fall and they will run me over. Or I will fall, and they will miss me with the car and keep going because they made a bad driving mistake and don't want to get in trouble for it.

Then those chasing me will catch up to me.

Greg - cyberspace

“Alone in the Pine's serenity”

by EG Ted Davis

God, grant me Your serenity out
here within the Jack Pine trees.
Let me breathe your afternoon air,
let me smell the Pine's perfume,
as each tree perspires from the heat.

Yes, indeed, predators do
roam amongst these trees-
but within this forest,
I feel your presence...

as if I am-
less the predators-
not alone.

"Screened Secrets"

by Joel Schueler

I watch you like a spy in a minibus,
a drifter through oval-windowed seacraft.

My brain has downloaded a shape of your memory
mountaineering in and amongst my inner workings

along burbling blood streams
from a bulletproof hard drive.

Walking the street brushing off fairy dust
uptown, you could be anyone

not this thing, this attempt at personhood.
What is it we incognito online agents

of the night have in common?
We spade up the avalanche aftermath

at the gates of self. Our vacuous attempts
at arranging all components of our machinery

to compute society leave us
preferring trees to people

starting new everything's over finishing up
just because it's easier,

disusing bookmarks that remind us of grief
scoffing down ice cream at eight in the morning

losing so much
we cannot feel

found.

Three by S. T. Brant

“The Dichotomy of God”

What's god? A playing on.
The rubric of a god? A song,
Sung as long as needed.
Personality is Power.
So god is a flute piped through,
But God would need no pipe or strings:
Just a melody of birds embowered.

The trunk of Time,
Appendages of the outward seas,
And all life serves as upholstery
That makes his sitting soft.
So is god a king,
But God would be nearer trees:
Live long, uninvolved.

“Sibling Poems on the Nature of Reality”

For Authenticity to dance so near the void that It puckers its lips,
So close, so close they all but kiss;
A happening Authenticity will miss
When Nothing turns away, when what is Real is a batterer, a fist.

This is Light, what is sought for in the dark.
To illuminate the seeker on their quest.
But the light does not
Show not what path remains, nor
That there's a sight to find, nor
Someone still to find it.

“Two Different People Think of God”

Home is the grave.
Time and space will never lace.
This land's no object.
Life is perfect.
God? An attendant that lights the room before you enter, carrying your case.
Created? He flipped a switch, not made the bulb.
He lit the lamp having been handed the match.

“Makerspace: Production Day”

by Amanda Yanovitch

I’m catching up with Scott and Pedro today. I guess they’re pretty chill. They said they wanted to meet up in the makerspace and go ahead with production.

We used to collaborate a lot back before Scott got expelled, and it always worked out because I, Ibrahim, am good at the people end of things, and they’re good at seeing past legalities. We made a lot of money first semester just hooking customers up with what they needed. Sometimes it was a test, sometimes it was an answer key. Then Jefferson U. built the makerspace and we were able to take our business to the next level. We made a few products to help customers study. Some of them wanted a higher-end product to help them stop thinking about studying. The fact is that people know what is possible, and I think that’s a sign of an evolved society. We’re just using technology to improve students’ lives, basically.

The makerspace is always empty first thing in the morning. Scott looks good, but Pedro looks like shit. He just worked an overnight shift and had classes before that. Scott has a box of amphetamines that he picked up at the bookstore on his way over, but Pedro doesn’t want any. He says he’s going to need something beyond the norm to pull this morning off. He picks up his phone and settles on a quick dose of TimeShift.

I know my role here: Don’t touch. They will let me know when my unique skill set is needed. I sit on a crate of pompoms and fuzzy sticks and absentmindedly burn the shit out

of my hand with a wireless glue gun while Scott works on the computer. He gives me the thumbs up, and I go to the printer to gather the materials. We finish it off in the nanowave, which smells like scorched popcorn.

The nanowave stops, and Pedro puts in the code to life the gate. Judging by his vocabulary choices, the product is still superheated. And then we lean in to have a look.

Scott says the edges aren’t right, but this capsule looks pretty dope to me. We did it in JeffU colors.

“We coded it PRN, right?” Pedro asks.

Scott nods.

They both look at me.

PRN means *push right now*.

When the original RxChip app got pulled, drug companies had to come up with new ways to let people operate their delivery chips, fast. A lots of start-ups were born overnight to help consumers reconnect. Scott and Pedro learned in high school how to do all of that, but they are also smarter than your average drug company and built an app especially for products that are not very well known. Not approved. Whatever. They do the science. I just help with distribution and quality control. Product testing is my strong suit.

It’s not like testing is absolutely necessary. Drugs usually sell themselves. If we get a bad side effect, we pull the product and work on it and offer the kid some kind of deal, like his money back or not to beat the shit out of him. But I feel like I owe it to people to know what I’m selling them.

There’s a connection there. Our last product was designed to let people sleep while they’re awake. They look fine on the outside—fine but, like, completely bored—and the brain chemicals that cause deep sleep are triggered for 45 minutes. Helps with lecture. It was on point, we just had to stop making it for a while because this girl Brianna found out and literally wrote about what we were doing in a discussion forum in her fucking student development class. Anyway, there were some issues with the first batch, and I still feel bad for those customers.

Scott hands me his Diet Chug, and I pick up the capsule. It’s still warm. I pop it as far back as I can and wash it down.

The guys are watching me. Scott takes the empty Chug back and tosses it in the garbage.

“Okay. Okay. Cool,” Pedro says. “So Ibrahim, you PRN that at exactly noon, and you tell us how much we’re going to charge. I’m going to bed.”

“Gentlemen,” I say. I grab my keys and head outside.

On the drive home, I think about how Pedro rolled his eyes at Scott when I left. For some reason, I’m a little nervous about testing this particular product. Something seems off.

I pass the dining hall and think about my mom. She’s probably leaning into the stove right now, stirring haleem for my dad with one hand and checking her phone with the other and telling my brother and sister to

finish their sugar cereal. My siblings love their Americanized diet of crap. They're so freaking spoiled. Let's see if mom and dad make them go to school for STEM or if they get to do business or dance or basically whatever they want.

The new product is designed for people who need help remembering. Say, for example, you studied all night. You paid attention in class. You went to office hours. You got together with the study group. But when you go in to take the exam, your mind is blank. You can't pull up the info. The information is in your brain, but you can't access it. This product is designed to solve that problem. It's not like a stimulant that helps you pay attention—it's kind of the opposite. It chills out the

mess and the worry that is standing there, freaking out, in the path between the test and your brain. It's like curling, that sport with the little brooms on the ice. This product is the little brooms. A million little brooms that work in a fraction of a second.

At 11:58, I'm alone in my room with my phone, a bag of chips, and my computer. I open a new file in LifeDrive and prepare to take notes on the product. I feel like a living science experiment. What if this thing goes haywire? What if I'm not me anymore? What if I'm a scary version of myself? I know I'm a key member of this team, but I'm nervous. If it works the way Scott and Pedro think it will, it's going to improve the lives of millions of students. But still—I'm not sure if it's a

good call. And. . . it's time.

Here's the app, here's the RxChip code—and the PRN button.

In the piece of a second that passes by as I press the button, I realize that I have ruined this experiment. I forgot to get any kind of exam to practice on. There is nothing I have studied. There is no question. There is no cluttered path. The little brooms will sweep for nothing.

In the next piece of a second, I know that the drug will find a target anyway. There is something I need to know. The drug will reach it.

Scott and Pedro are using me. ❖

Contributors

John Allison, a faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin, has published widely in intellectual property law, particularly empirical studies of the patent system, and hopes he is not as boring as that sounds. He began writing fiction only a few years ago. His stories have thus far appeared in *Mount Hope*, *The Wagon*, *Forge*, and three times in *34th Parallel*, and one of his stories received Honorable Mention in *Glimmer Train's* New Writer's Contest out of more than 1,000 entries.

Brian Moore lives in Toronto, Canada where he worked as a project manager. He is previously published in *Blank Spaces*, *The Barren*, and *Gordon Square Review*.

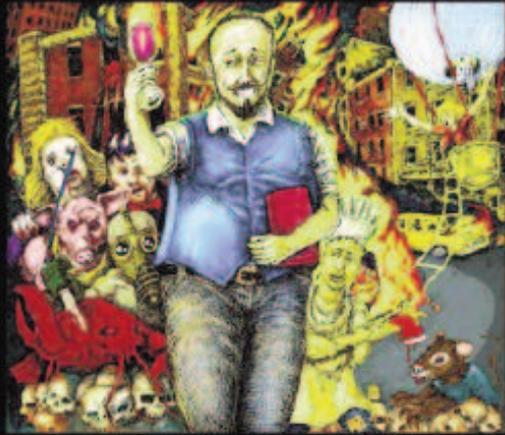
EG Ted Davis is a poet living in Boise ID with work that has appeared in various online and in print literary journals throughout the U.S.

Joel Schueler is the author of the number one international bestseller *Jim & Martha: A Novel on Eco Living* (<http://viewbook.at/jimmartha>) & The number one national bestseller *Love Your Fear: A Quick Self-Help Guide to Managing Anxiety* (<http://viewbook.at/loveyourfear>) Joel's works appear in ten countries in over forty publications including *Pennsylvania Literary Journal* & *The Brasilia Review*. From London, he has a BA(Hons) in English Literature & Creative Writing from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. More about him at <https://www.joelschueler.com> and https://www.instagram.com/joelschueler_writer

S. T. Brant is a teacher from Las Vegas. His recent and upcoming publications include *Door is a Jar*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Rain Taxi*, *New South*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Ekstasis*, *8 Poems*, a few others. You can find him on Twitter @terriblebinth or Instagram @shanelemagne.

Amanda Yanovitch earned a BA and an MA in English from the University of Virginia and worked in publishing until she could no longer resist the urge to take up dry-erase markers and share the good news about composition and literature with students at John Tyler Community College. She lives near Richmond, VA and spends her days fighting to keep STEM from taking away all of the nice things. Her other "Makerspace" yarns are in our May and June 2020 issues - check them out if you haven't already.

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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...

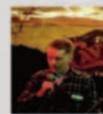
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