

October 2022

The Blotter

magazine



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

www.blotterrag.com

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The Blotter is a production of
MAGAZINE
The Blotter Magazine, Inc.,
Durham, NC.

A 501 (c)3 non-profit
ISSN 1549-0351
www.blotterrag.com



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

“Notes on a Life”

A friend of mine died. It was in March, but I didn't know, because I was consumed with the health problems of another friend, and I had just emailed him and although I knew that his heart was failing I didn't know that it was not going to last much longer. Perhaps I should have sensed something was happening, something was wrong. He asked me for my home address, said he wanted to send me something, but didn't say what it was. Maybe a picture. Maybe a book. And though I'd given my new addy to him before, I didn't think anything of this re-request. We sometimes ask for something more than once and are chided for not remembering. I don't know what happened to it, he might have typed. No big deal, I would have responded to such a thing. Here you go. Even only typing, without the reassurance of hearing someone's voice, conversations with old friends can be indolent and comfortable, like telling a story to someone who's heard it a hundred times before when you enjoy your own words and they just don't mind that you're doing it again, or maybe they do, just a little, but they cut you that break. That is how friendship works.

He was an artist. He worked in paint, clay, pencils and pens. The world is full of people who can take what they see and make something else out of that vision, raw or refined, complex or spare. I am not one of those people. I don't resent the lack, but I respect that capacity in those souls I come across. I'm sure you know what I mean; you know someone who can draw or carve or dance or sing or build or compose. Don't you like knowing them? Isn't it special? I think it is.

He didn't follow many rules. Had a tough time with certain kinds of authority. Colored outside the lines, sometimes. Didn't believe in God, except in that he saw all of nature – creation - as something remarkable, fantastic. The creation out there. That which came from inside himself, and others. All divine.

He had a big heart. His morality was a simple one that requested we all be nice and share. A child's idea of right and wrong. He gave things away – anything he had, things he made and things he found that he thought you might like or need. Sometimes he came over and needed to sit in the woods and work or just to get some peace and quiet - asked me for a folding chair and did I have any beer in the fridge? or where was my fishing gear? Such simple audacity made it easy to tell him yes and *over there* and make himself at home. I wished I could be like that, all of the time. I still do.

He made a life-sized clay bust of me one Saturday, long ago. Before the hurricane, as I track things. When there were so many more tall old trees in the woods. I sat in my kitchen, and he spread everything out on the table: an oil-cloth tarp and the plywood plank upon which he had affixed an armature and a burlap sack of brown clay. The armature was a small white skull, trou-

blingly realistic. He talked while he warmed the clay in his hands and began attaching it, bit by deliberate bit, to the armature. About work, which he was about to quit, because he was planning to relocate. About his family and their crazy lives. He knew people, vaguely famous people in art and in music and in that way that someone who is gregarious and odd and interesting is permitted to infiltrate themselves into the world of celebrity. He would tell me when it was OK to take a sip of coffee and when I wasn't allowed to move around, so I mostly had to watch him work out of the corner of my eye. The memory, therefore, is more auditory and peripheral than I wish it was. Don't we all have moments in our lives that we wish were more intentional, more aware of their importance down the long road?

Not long after that – when the clay bust was sitting, slowly drying before firing in a studio the next town over, he did leave, went north to a city where he'd found an old house he could afford – one of those situations where both house and city need so much work that no one even considers them fixable. He got it for a song and started in on it – tearing our walls and re-glazing windowpanes. I've taken out all of the bedrooms upstairs, he told me, and turned it into one large loft. Lots of light for painting. Or a basketball court. I wouldn't have been surprised if he wasn't joking. He found work that paid enough and grew his own vegetables in the little front yard – if you're going to grow food, you should be ready for people take some, so make it easy for them – and drew and painted.

He didn't pass away. Passing away is for people worried about dying. He didn't worry about it. Didn't run full speed towards it, either. He just wasn't all that upset that his health hadn't been great for a while, that of all things it was his heart that gave him trouble. He missed working, told me that sometimes he was just bouncing off the walls bored, but that wasn't very often. There was a fairly long period when what he did, volunteering on a suicide hotline, kept him out of his paints and pencils. He said it drained his creative energy, and yet he gave it freely away. I asked myself more than once, who does that? Who makes that sort of sacrifice?

Near the end, he was back to drawing, because he could hold and control the pencils, but not painting, because brushes didn't quite go where he wanted them to. He didn't mind, though. Or, perhaps he did, but he kept that to himself.

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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@blotterrag.com.



CAUTION

why don't you go where fashion

“How Much Do I Love Thee?”

by Dennis Vannetta

“I don’t like nuts,” the boy said.

“Nuts?”

The boy pointed to the hamburger, which lay untouched on his plate.

“Oh, those? On the bun?” Mitch said. “Those aren’t nuts. Those are sesame seeds. They’re delicious. Give it a try.”

The boy scowled at the hamburger.

“Look, Carter, if you don’t want to eat the sesame seeds, just take the top bun off. The bottom bun doesn’t have any seeds. Pick that baby up and eat it.”

Carter peeled the top bun back far enough to see the burger. He frowned, his nose crinkling like he’d expected beef but found a cow patty. He let the bun fall back in place.

“I like McDonald’s hamburgers better,” he said.

Mitch eyed him. Carter was nine years old, but he was slouched so low on his side of the booth that his head barely rose above the tabletop.

“If you keep sitting on your tailbone like that, you’re going to wind up with a bad back. Believe me, I know. When I was a kid, I had lousy posture just like you, and now I have chronic lower back pain.”

“That’s because you’re old.”

“Old! Ha. I’m thirty-eight.”

Carter gave him a look as if to say, Like I said: old.

Mitch wished this were a movie. A movie would start just like this, with the boyfriend doing his absolute best to become buddies with the girlfriend’s little creep of a son only to have the little creep throw it all back in his face. At the end, though, there’d be some big emotional crisis, and

when they came through it, the two of them would have bonded, and all three—boyfriend, girlfriend, and creep—would sail off into the etc. etc.

Mitch really did want this thing with Trudie, the boy’s mother, to work. He was borderline in love with her. And why not? She was really something. When he took her to the company picnic—she wore an orange halter-top, painted-on white slacks, and six-inch heels—the guys’ eyes about popped out of their heads.

They elbowed him and gave him high-fives and said, “You rock, Mitch,” and “You dog, you.” But when Jared said, “You cradle-robber, you,” that hurt.

No, thirty-eight wasn’t old—it was ridiculous to even raise the issue—but he knew that thirty-eight was old enough that some women were too young for him.

Trudie, though? Trudie was no teenager. She was twenty-nine and if she often looked younger, she sometimes looked older, too. She’d been married three times and had had, she hinted without going into details, a lousy childhood, so she’d earned the right to all that makeup.

Even when she was wearing sweats and no makeup, though, he felt the difference in their ages, especially when she called him “Pops” and “jelly belly” and slapped his midsection to see his flesh jiggle.

He’d done his best to minimize the effects of the age gap, with mixed results. He bought Adele and Dr. Dre and Billy Eilish CDs and played them with Trudie in the car, but when she appeared to take no notice, he returned to his jazz with relief.

He tried other tactics. When

he was a youngster and social media was gaining traction, he’d been into video games and just never got into all that stuff. But Trudie spent half her life on her smart phone checking this and that, so he decided to try to get in the spirit of things. Facebook made him nervous, though, all that friending business. He was pretty friendly with several of his coworkers. Why did he need more than that? Twitter? He tried Tweeting Trudie a couple of times but had trouble thinking of 280-character-worth of things to say. LinkedIn seemed more promising, professionally, at least, but when he mentioned it to Trudie, she just rolled her eyes.

He did do a little better on the physical side of things, though. He purchased a membership to Gold’s Gym and worked out three or four times a week. His muscle tone improved, and he thought he could feel that belly firming up a bit although it was hard to see any difference in the mirror, so what was the point? The sad truth was the battle against the calendar was never going to be any better than an orderly retreat.

But he was trying. He wanted it to work with Trudie—or at least he kept telling himself that. There would be no doubt about it if it weren’t for the boy. He told himself that Trudie had earned the right to a child—three marriages!—and he was lucky there weren’t more than just one. Still, there was that one. Did he love her enough to include Carter?

His only marriage hadn’t lasted long enough for children to come up for consideration. But he had nothing against parenthood, in theory.

Across the booth from him slouched on his tailbone—this was not theory.

*

“At least eat some more fries.

You've only eaten two so far—one and a half, really. That's not enough lunch for a growing boy."

Carter picked up a fry and turned it slowly this way and that. It hung down limply whichever way he turned it. He dropped it back onto the tray.

"I like McDonald's fries better."

"You know, Carter, I brought you here because Buster's serves such good food."

Without looking at him, Carter grunted and said, "Oh yeah? Why aren't you eating anything, then?"

Mitch said, "I have a special diet because of my colitis. Seriously, though. In the *Tribune* readers' poll, Buster's won first for the best burgers and fries in town."

At this, Carter sat up and declared, "Huh *ub!* McDonald's does. Every kid likes McDonald's best."

"That's because you've all been sucked in by TV commercials, and you're just too goddamn dumb to know it."

Carter flopped back into a slouch and stuck his lower lip out.

"Sorry," Mitch said.

He picked up the menu and started searching through it.

"Let's see, let's see. I don't usually eat desserts, but I'll bet they've got something good here. . . . Look at this. They've got brownies with hot-fudge sauce. That sounds delicious to me."

Carter pulled his lower lip in long enough to say, "I like the McFlurrys at McDonald's."

Mitch slammed the menu down.

"Screw McDonald's!"

He stood up from the booth, then leaned down over Carter and said, "I'm going out. I might be back. I might not. Arrivederci."

Walking down the row of booths toward the front, Mitch caught the waitress's eye, and she met him at the front door.

"Here," he said, handing her a twenty, "I don't want you to think I'm running out on the bill. I'm just going to step outside for a smoke. The boy's still back in the booth. He'll be OK."

He did need a smoke—he patted his pockets—but he had no cigarettes.

Next to Buster's was a car wash, and beyond it was a 7-Eleven. He walked down to the 7-Eleven, bought a pack of Winstons, went outside, realized he didn't have a lighter, and went back in and bought one.

It was a mild summer day, and he enjoyed that cigarette as he sauntered back toward Buster's, keeping to the rear of the lots so that Carter couldn't see him from his booth in the restaurant. If the little bastard thought he'd been abandoned and got scared, good for him. Might teach him to be a better kid. This wasn't the Disney Channel, after all. Not all kids were good kids. Luke from work told Mitch that he'd taken out a \$20,000 IRA at the birth of his son, a start on college expenses. "It's still in our names, though. If the kid turns out to be a creep, we'll just keep the money for ourselves."

That was parenting in the real world, by God.

Back at Buster's, Mitch sat on the low concrete wall that bordered the parking lot and, blocked by a Lincoln Navigator from view from the restaurant windows, finished his cigarette. Then he smoked another. Then he went back inside.

The booth was empty, the table cleared, the boy gone.

He rushed over to the waitress, standing behind the counter.

"Where'd Carter go—the boy?"

She stared at him blankly a moment. "The boy? . . . Oh, the kid you left at the table? He was gone when I went over there, so I thought

you came back and got him and left."

"Came back and left? I hadn't even paid the bill!"

"Yes, you did. You gave me a twenty."

"But that was just to hold the table until I got back! The bill wouldn't even have come to ten dollars. You think I wouldn't have come back for my change?"

"I thought you were just a generous tipper."

"Generous tipper, my ass!"

"Sir, I'm going to have to call the manager if you use language like that with me," she said, but he could tell by the way her eyes started darting left and right, the fact that the boy was missing had finally sunk in.

"Maybe he's in the restroom," she said.

Mitch ran into the restroom. No. Came back out.

The waitress's face was white, her lips trembling as she said, "There was a guy in here. He had tattoos all up and down his arms and up his neck. Dragons and skulls and stuff. Disgusting. He was a trucker, I think. That truck that was parked at the edge of the lot, it's gone now."

It came out as a whisper: "You think . . .?"

"I don't know, I don't know!"

By now a man, probably the manager, had come out of the back and approached them with a questioning look. Other customers in the restaurant were watching, listening, some craning around in their seats to see better.

Then, at the far end of the restaurant, standing in the aisle and pointing into the very last booth, a man called down to them, "Is this what you're looking for?"

Carter climbed out of the booth and walked slowly down the aisle toward them. He had a too-innocent

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smile on his face.

"I like Buster's booths better than McDonald's," he said.

*

Neither said a word as Mitch drove back toward the trailer park where Trudie and her son lived. For a moment, Mitch thought about telling the kid what his little stunt had cost him—an hour at Trampoline World, followed, depending on how things were going, by a round of miniature golf. But Mitch was more relieved than angry. Then too, he had to admit the kid's little quip about liking Buster's booths better than McDonald's was pretty clever. Maybe a decade down the road, if things worked out, they might look back on this day, and Mitch would remind Carter of the little quip and say, "That was the moment right there that I thought, you know, that little creep is pretty sharp. He might be worth getting to know." Hey, it was possible, wasn't it?

Trudie must have seen them walking up to her trailer home. She came out looking surprised, concerned.

"Why are you back so soon? What's wrong?" she said to Mitch. Then to Carter: "What did you do?"

"No, he didn't do anything. He just wasn't much in the mood for lunch is all."

Instead of calming her, this seemed to enrage her.

"Carter, you ungrateful little bastard!" she almost screamed and reared back with her arm and slapped the boy across the face, sending him stumbling two or three steps to the side before he regained his balance. His face was red where she'd slapped him, and his eyes filled with tears, but whether tears of pain or hatred, Mitch wasn't sure.

"Get your ass in there," she said,

pointing to the trailer, "*now!*"

Carter walked slowly to the trailer, almost with a certain dignity, Mitch thought.

Trudie watched him until he was inside the trailer and the door closed, and then she turned to Mitch.

"I'm so sorry, Mitch. You were so nice to take him for the day, and then the little shit goes and . . . Oh, you're shocked, aren't you? I can tell by the look on your face you're shocked I smacked him. You're sensitive. That's one of the things I like about you. But you don't know kids at that age. If you're too soft with them, they'll make your life hell. And he's not hurt, not a bit. Ha, you think that was anything? You should have seen what my old man was capable of getting up to when I was that age. But no, you wouldn't want to. Trust me, you wouldn't want that."

Mitch held his hands up.

"Hey, far be it for me. You're right. I've never been a parent. I'm sure it's hard."

"It is, it is. So hard. And I really want this to work with us, Mitch. You're such a neat guy. I mean it, I really really like you. . . . Oh no. You're going to leave me. You're going to end it."

"Not at all. I—"

"Look, I'm going to say this, even though I know I shouldn't because I don't want to put pressure on you, but I'm going to say it. I love you. There, I said it. I love you and I want this to work. If it's Carter, don't worry about him. I'll get him straightened out. And no more smacking! I'll get him straightened out, and if I don't, my bitch of a sister-in-law in Tulsa always said I wasn't fit to be a mother. She'll be glad to take him. . . . Oh no. This is it, isn't it?"

"No, no, no. I didn't say that. But you're upset now. Why don't we

just leave it for today, and I'll call you tomorrow."

"Sure you will."

"Really. I promise."

Her eyes seemed to lose focus as she gazed just past him.

"What do I have? I'm almost thirty, and I'm a three-time loser. All I've got is this hair," she said, taking a handful of her thick auburn hair, "and these boobs" she said, cupping her breasts and lifting them, "and my boobs are falling and every morning after I shower the drain is full of hair and . . . Oh, hell."

"I'll call you tomorrow, Trudie. Really," he said, backing away.

As he drove off, he couldn't help glancing over at her, but she wasn't looking at him. That was good.

He felt drained, like he'd been suffering from a high fever that had just broken.

He certainly didn't feel good, though. Damn it all, he'd wanted it to work with Trudie, he really had. But it'd probably been doomed from the start even if there hadn't been that thing today with Carter. The age difference.

He almost had to laugh: Trudie moaning about being nearly thirty. She was a kid herself, someone from a different generation. This new generation . . .

Time for him to grow up and quit trying to be something he wasn't. Billie Eilish, Dr. Dre. What a joke.

Time to find a woman his own age, nearer forty? No use kidding himself: the idea repelled him. Where did that leave him, then? He was probably going to wind up living the rest of his life alone. He took it as a sign of his new-found maturity that the thought didn't bother him much at all. ❖

"Never to Return

by William Cass

Tom and Bruce became the best of friends in college where they bonded together largely over sports. They attended the same state university primarily because of its athletic prowess; they'd both been fans of the school's sports programs since they were in grade school. Its football team routinely went to noteworthy bowl games, and the basketball team qualified for the NCAA tournament almost every year. While students there, neither Tom or Bruce ever missed attending a home game for either team, and they watched every away contest on television.

The two of them met in their freshmen dorm and soon began hanging out with the same group of friends, playing on the same intramural teams, attending the same tailgates and parties on weekends, and, of course, rooting on the home team together. Each shared a penchant for accumulating items advertising the school: T-shirts, sweatshirts, caps, decals, cups and mugs, even daypacks and laptop cases. They became dorm roommates their sophomore year, then found a cheap apartment together afterwards until graduation. Tom was tall, slender, and fair; Bruce at bit shorter and broader with dark hair and olive skin. They both did well with women and dated different ones periodically throughout college, though none seriously.

*

After graduation, Bruce had a position waiting for him at the company where he'd interned the previous two summers, moved into a bungalow on the outskirts of the city with an older classmate, and started work right

away. Tom found a job at a tech firm a few months later and shared a townhouse with two other alums nearby. They still spent a lot of their free time together playing sports, going out on weekends, and watching the university's football and basketball games with another college friend named Chris, who also lived in the area. The three of them would rotate places to do that, and the person hosting would be responsible for the snacks and beers. It was a ritual they all looked forward to: decked out in their school gear, shouting together happily or in anguish at the television while they chowed down and drank away. When Bruce hosted, he always used a distinctive stein for himself embossed with the school's logo; he claimed it was his most treasured piece of college memorabilia and brought the team good luck. He kissed and hugged it after their team scored a touchdown or key basket; when not in use, it sat centered in honor alone on a bookshelf in his bedroom, just as it had in the dorm room he'd shared with Tom.

*

Tom met Molly at a social hour his firm held after work one Friday afternoon in early October. He was immediately taken with her. She was different from other women he'd been attracted to: more soft-spoken, reserved, gentle, and pretty in an understated sort of way. She was also a recent graduate from the same university, but had only a passing interest in its athletic exploits. She worked in software design, while he was in marketing. They talked while leaning against a planter with their plastic

cups of wine at the fringes of the firm's central atrium. Molly told him she was taking watercolor classes, liked to knit, and enjoyed exploring the city on her bike along its many greenbelt paths.

"I've been wanting to do that," Tom said. "Just haven't gotten around to it yet."

She dipped her head, then gave him a tentative smile. "I'm going tomorrow, if you'd like to join me. A new section I heard about."

Tom felt a flush spread up through him. He returned the smile and said, "I'd like that."

Their romance ensued in short fashion. It was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. He just cherished being with her doing mostly simple things: riding bikes and taking walks, making jigsaw puzzles, fixing meals together, watching old movies, reading across the couch from each other with Molly's stockinged feet under his thighs. By Thanksgiving, he was spending most nights at her high-rise apartment, and their life together had fallen into a quiet, companionable rhythm. She tolerated his devotion to the university's athletic teams with bemused acceptance, content to spend alone the hours he dedicated to that with her knitting or watercolors.

Tom introduced her to Bruce soon after they'd begun dating and was pleased to see how well they hit it off. The three of them met for drinks at a bar downtown popular with alums. Bruce quickly had her laughing at the way he described some of Tom's quirks while Tom chuckled along. An easy banter followed as they shared stories about school, mutual acquaintances, and work. Bruce even cajoled Molly into doing a round of shots with them, which surprised Tom.

At one point, Molly excused herself to use the restroom. They both watched her leave, then Bruce clapped

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Tom on the back, shook his head, and said, "You've got a keeper there, pal. You son-of-a-bitch. She's great." He grinned and punched Tom's upper arm. "Just don't screw it up."

Tom smiled sheepishly and nodded.

*

As far as relationships for Bruce were concerned, his dating life basically continued as it had in college: he'd see a woman for a month or so, then find some minor annoyance or flaw in her, and call things off. Tom and Molly double-dated often with him when he was with someone and got to know quite a few of the women pretty well; they liked them all. Molly was frank with Bruce about his dating pattern, and after a break-up, they'd often commiserate together about what had gone wrong and what he was really looking for in a woman. She seemed to have a way of getting through to him that Tom had never had, so he stayed out of those conversations.

"You're right," Tom would usually hear Bruce say, his shoulders slumped and his lips pursed when Molly had made a point about him during one of those talks. "You're absolutely right."

*

For Valentine's Day, Tom surprised Molly with a weekend skiing trip. They had a wonderful time, on the slopes each day until the final chair in the setting sun, making love in front of the fireplace, and enjoying lingering dinners over too-expensive wine.

As that last meal was ending, Tom reached across the table and took Molly's hand. He looked at her and said, "Have we actually ever said, 'I love you' to each other?"

She met his eyes and gave a tiny shrug.

"But we do love each other, don't we?"

Her frown seemed mirthful. "I sure hope so."

He squeezed her hand. "Well, if this isn't love, I don't know what is."

Tom wanted to say more, but the waiter appeared at their table then with the check and began clearing away their plates.

*

They had a monthly get-together with Bruce they called "Casino Night". It took place on a Sunday evening, so ended early because of work the next day, and was always at Molly's apartment. Bruce often brought whatever woman he was dating, sometimes other friends came, and otherwise, it was just the three of them. After a potluck dinner, the dining room table was cleared, baggies of loose change Molly and Tom had accumulated were passed around to each person, and they played various types of poker – the kind of game was dealer's call. No one was any good, lots of good-natured cajoling and laughter was involved, and when the night concluded, the loose change simply went back into the baggies for the next Casino Night.

Bruce always stayed afterwards to help them clean up. On one of those nights in late May, Bruce was washing dishes and Molly was drying while Tom was talking on his cell phone to his parents in the living room. It was a night when just the three of them had been playing.

"So, listen." Bruce glanced at her. "You two ever talk about moving in together?"

He watched the dish towel in Molly's hands halt for just a moment before she said, "Not really."

"Not yet, you mean."

"I guess."

"What's it been, like nine months you've been together?" His hands remained in the soapy water, their

shoulders almost touching. "Isn't that usually the next step?"

"I suppose it is." She paused. "For some people."

"But not you two?"

She looked over at him for the first time, trying to keep her eyes as steady as possible. "I don't know, Bruce," she said. She set the towel on the counter. "I'm going to take the recycling down."

*

Tom and Molly agreed that it was best to keep things professionally separate between them at work.

Fortunately, the firm was a large one and their offices were in different parts of the building, so they rarely bumped into each other there. That independence was something that extended somewhat to their private lives, as well. They were comfortable doing things apart, didn't seem to feel a need to always be together, didn't text or call each other often like so many other young couples did.

A significant part of just about every weekend was filled for Tom with the university's football or basketball games, and Molly actually grew to look forward to those extended periods of time to pursue interests of her own in greater depth. She took a rock-climbing class during the summer and also joined the same cycling club that Bruce had for long Sunday morning road rides, even purchasing a new road bike like Bruce's. On one of their walks together, they did stop on a whim at an animal shelter and talked about getting a rescue dog together, but nothing ever came of it.

*

Along with Chris, the three of them drove back to their college for its homecoming football game in mid-September. They stayed at the same hotel just off campus; Bruce and Chris shared a room and so did Tom and

Molly. There were dinners and parties to attend, a huge tailgate before the game, and the home team won, so it was rollicking weekend for them all.

Saturday night after the game, things got a little crazy as celebrating throngs of alumni hopped from bar to bar. It was after midnight when the four of them got back to the hotel. Chris turned in right away, but the rest decided to hit the jacuzzi for a night-cap with a handful of nips gathered from one of their room's minibars. Tom and Bruce got there ahead of Molly. They climbed into the steaming, bubbling water and looked up into the black sky. Bruce cracked two nips and handed one to Tom. They clinked the tiny bottles and knocked them back.

"Ah, this is living," Bruce said.

"Pretty damn nice."

"Never thought we'd be doing this when we were snot-nosed freshmen punks."

"Never thought much at all back then."

"That's true." Bruce chuckled.

"But things have turned out okay for us. Look at you, good job, great girlfriend."

"Yeah," Tom said. "I'm pretty lucky."

"You sure as hell are. Hope I meet a woman like that someday." He sighed. "Speak of the devil."

Molly came up to the edge of the jacuzzi then and slipped out of her hotel robe. She wore a black bikini underneath. Looking at her, Bruce sucked in his breath; he'd never seen her like that before. There was something especially remarkable about her wide, bare shoulders. She lowered herself slowly into the water across from them and knotted her hair into a bun at the nape of her neck. She smiled at them.

"God," Bruce said to Tom.

"How'd a knucklehead like you get such a beautiful girlfriend? Beautiful inside and out."

"I just told you," Tom said quietly. "Lucky. Damn lucky."

*

Tom received an unexpected job promotion a few days later, which was exciting, but necessitated longer work hours. Molly and Bruce's biking club added a shorter mid-week after-work ride in anticipation of the coming winter months when riding would become limited. The group often met afterwards for beers and occasionally dinner. Molly and Bruce usually joined them; sometimes the two of them stayed talking alone after the others had left.

Tom and Molly still found time to go for a leisurely walk themselves together on Saturday mornings. When they were returning from one of those on a perfect, crisp late October day, Tom grabbed Molly's wrist and stopped suddenly. They were in front a jewelry shop window where a sale collection of engagement rings was displayed.

He pointed and said, "What do you think of that one?"

She swallowed. "I'm not much for diamonds. Too gaudy."

"How about that pearl one with the gold?"

Molly's shrug was slight.

"Want to go inside and look at some others?"

She shook her head. "No, I've got things I have to do." She kissed him quickly on the cheek. "You're sweet, though. Very, very sweet."

*

A couple of weeks later, Tom was surprised to see Molly leaning up against his car when he came into the parking structure after work. He smiled and waved as he came towards her; she made no gesture in return.

He wrapped her into a hug and said, "Well, this is an unexpected treat."

She kept her arms folded, and he stepped away, his eyebrows knitting. Her face was blank. He said, "What's wrong?"

"I can't do this anymore," she said quietly. "I still respect and admire you, but I don't love you."

It felt like the floor had fallen away beneath Tom, and an icy chill crept up his spine. "Are you breaking up with me?"

She kept her eyes down, but nodded. A silent moment passed.

"I don't want to make this any harder than it has to be," she finally said. "So, I'm leaving now. Goodbye, Tom."

He reached for her, but she shrugged under his hands and hurried away, her arms still folded across her chest. After a few steps, he watched her begin to run. Her footsteps echoed in the cavernous space until they disappeared into the stairwell. Tom slid down the side of his car and began to weep.

Perhaps five minutes passed before he climbed quickly to his feet, jumped in his car, and drove to her apartment building. He'd just pulled into a space at the curb a few dozen yards away across the street when he saw Molly walk rapidly out of her building's own parking structure and approach its entrance, her arms still folded. Before he could turn off his engine, a man emerged from the shadows in front of the entrance and Molly trotted the last few feet into his embrace. They turned as they kissed, and it was only then that Tom realized the man was Bruce. He felt himself blinking, his eyes wide, sweat enveloping him. He watched the two of them enter the building arm in arm. As the door yawned closed and dark and still

The Blotter

behind them, Tom pounded on the steering wheel with both fists.

"You asshole," he hissed after them. "You fucking, robbing asshole."
*

If Tom slept at all those next few nights, it was only in fits, and he was always startled awake with thoughts of dread and anger about Bruce and Molly. He felt as if he was falling in a deep, deep well that had no bottom. He couldn't concentrate at work, his mind darting between memories of the two of them separately and the three of them together. At one point, he found himself staring at the small framed photograph perched on the corner of his desk. He lifted it closer and studied it. Chris had taken it of he and Molly grinning at her dining room table during one of their Casino Nights. In it, her hand was on top of his, and a few other people sat around the table. One of them was Bruce, and Tom noticed for the first time the way he was gazing at Molly from the other end of the table. He grunted, then heard the glass on the photograph crack as he threw it into the trashcan under his desk.

*

On Friday, Tom took an extended lunch break and drove over to Bruce's bungalow. He parked in the alley behind it, went through the back gate, and tried the side door that led into the kitchen. It was locked, so he walked across the back deck to Bruce's bedroom window. Tom looked around him. There was no movement in the neighboring yards, no sound at all, and he knew both Bruce and his housemate would be at work. The window was a large one only a yard or so up from the deck's floorboards and cracked open on the bottom. Tom worked off the screen, set it on the deck, raised the window, and hoisted himself inside. His heart

thudded away as he reached out, replaced the screen, and lowered the window back to its original position. He went straight to the bookcase, took the stein, and left with it through the side door, jiggling the handle to be sure it locked behind him.

When Bruce got home that night, he found the stein missing as soon as he entered the room and was overcome by a kind of panic. He frowned and tried to remember where he might have misplaced it. He could think of nowhere; he was certain he'd replaced it there after his last turn hosting. But he was late to meet Molly, so although it continued to niggle at him, he pushed it out of his mind.

*

The next afternoon, Bruce drove up in front of Tom's townhouse a few minutes late to watch the football game: a home contest against their university's arch-rival. He turned off the engine and exhaled loudly, trying to keep his breathing and hands steady. He'd only been partly successful at chasing away thoughts of Tom since Molly had come into his arms in front of her apartment building a few evenings before. When those thoughts did invade, he concentrated on how she'd told him that things hadn't been right with Tom for a long time, that Bruce wasn't ending anything between them, that she'd been looking for a reason to tell Tom it was over. Bruce stared out at the overcast sky and repeated their mantra again that it might take a while, but a time would come when they could all be together again. She'd also told him to still go watch the game at Tom's that afternoon to keep things as normal as possible. Bruce's cell phone rang, startling him. He tapped it, saw Chris' name displayed, and lifted it to his ear.

"Hey," Chris said, "you at Tom's

yet?"

"Just pulled up."

"So, hey, I can't come today; Tom knows. I'm sick. . . flu or something. But I wanted to let you know something. When I called him, he told me Molly broke up with him this week. Seemed pretty shook about it. Just thought I'd give you a heads-up."

"Shit," Bruce heard himself say. "That's tough."

Tom appeared then in the front doorway of his townhouse, waved to him, and left the door open.

"Yeah," Chris said. "Really sucks. But I'm going back to bed. See you soon."

Bruce slowly lowered his cell phone and slipped it into the pouch of the old college sweatshirt he always wore to watch the games. He looked up at the open doorway and couldn't see a way to turn back, so got out of the car, walked up the steps, and knocked on the door frame.

"Come on in," he heard Tom call from the kitchen. "Game already started. Be right there."

Bruce took his customary spot on one corner of the couch. There were bowls of chips and pretzels centered on the coffee table in front of the couch, and the game was playing on the big screen across from it. He stared at the game and was vaguely aware that there was no score and that their team was on defense. As Tom entered the room, Bruce kept his eyes trained on the screen. He heard Tom perch himself on the opposite corner of the couch, set down a mug of beer, and slide something across in front of him.

Tom yelled, "Go, defense!"

Bruce looked down at the coffee table in front of him and saw the stein filled with beer. At first, he thought it might be one that Tom had gotten himself somewhere, but then recog-

nized the familiar chip on the handle, and froze. Bruce thought: *he knows*. Then a moment later: *Molly's wrong, the three of us will never be together again; Tom and I won't either*.

A huge roar rose from the crowd on the television as one of their team's defensive players laid out an opposing ball carrier with a vicious tackle. Tom jumped off the couch, shook his fist at the television, and shouted, "Yeah, take that, dirtbag! How'd that feel?"

Bruce grimaced. He glanced once more at the stein, then stood up. "Listen," he said. "I'm feeling lousy, too. Played racquetball with Chris the other day. Think I probably picked up whatever he has, so I'm going to hit the road."

Tom looked over at Bruce for the first time. His eyes showed nothing as he said, "That's too bad."

Bruce made himself shrug. "I'll call you."

As Tom watched him walk out the door and close it behind him, he whispered, "Sure you will."

He walked to the front window, saw Bruce get into his car, watched him pull away, watched him head down the street until he turned at the corner. Tom wasn't exactly sure what he felt at that moment, but it wasn't the sense of satisfaction or retribution he'd expected and hoped for. Instead, there was a kind of numbness inside, a deep mingling of emptiness and loss, like a boat that had become untethered from its mooring never to return. Driving towards Molly's apartment in the gray light of gathering clouds, Bruce felt the same. ❖

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.

When I was little, I was told – I don't remember by whom – that dreams all took place in seconds, racing past like fast-forwarded cartoons. I've never seen this statement since, and I don't know why it was said, or what evidence there was that dreams are not real-time videos that our brains produce – confusingly written and poorly edited, yes, but still moving at a normal speed. Taking their time.

I have had dreams that mutate. Where someone I look at becomes someone else – not remotely the person I thought they were. I have had the sense, in this or that dream, that I had some sort of control over that change. Oh, it's her, I told myself. Oh, no it's not. It's him. Why is he wearing her shirt? What caused the change. The evolution into the other person. When I am awake, I can always say that it is my subconscious that made the alteration, but I wonder. Is there some kind of connection that, if I consider it enough, I can discern the relationship?

Ginger - cyberspace

“Six Chambers/Miss Jones”

by David Lenna

Hello, stranger. My name is Juno.
You are to be at a little ride out with me in.
And know, I promise, it will be interesting.

Ah, indigo, they all you.
Laying dead on your ground.
Because your train has gone away.
So long ago. Go to the second chamber.

Take no notice of curling boughs.
Nor your guts in that spilling tree.
Walk to a circle, full of candles, still lighted.
That is the secret filling your nothing.

Nothing to touch, it is all sacred here.
Dead flies, all lined with far purple past.
The last time before that train's escape.
Before its dust, it has filled your eyes.

Finally, in front of the highlight.
Behind that third door, you are standing.
Is the glass waterfall that all, your dreams.
Constant shattering, that noise means it.

Through that cumulus of shards.
Yes, let blood cover your cheek.
And let red cover your scars.
And fill up your orbits with mud.

A mirror, quiet, just trolling you in the air.
Lucky to have any form of blindness.
But be prepared, we haven't seen the worst.
You must be fair and flow right next to me.

On the snowing floor, do not get frozen.
And here we are, do you see his pose?
Two sharp elbows and a hooked nose.
He is very harsh and fast. You will get it.

His white skin, reversed. Mazes said that.
Our host, running backwards through you.
Still do not understand? That is Time.
Over and over, like you were a ghost.

And your legs stand poorer and poorer.
Why are you shaking with yourself?
Nowhere a shade, do you mind?
To the infinite time. In your brain's branches.

The last remains of marmalade flew down.
The last hall, when strangeness came in
and went out, when your pain is gone.
When you just left yourself.

When you let every trait behind.
I say goodbye to you. Stop screaming.
Shouldn't have trusted me. Want a clue?
So, my going burns the last door
leading through.

“I’ve got skin in the poem”

by Sharon Lopez Mooney

My old skin turns the color of serious sin
at the slightest bump or rub,
its print a bruise that earns sympathy
and almost-hidden disgust.

At 79 this wrinkled hide finally wears
a kiss of tan in skin damage defiance
to its history of burn, blister, peel
practiced by its genetic thin Irish skin.

This hide exposes a white paper like
texture that sports explosions of bumps,
bruises caused by a sneeze, contour lines
like a watershed topical map.

I rehearse appreciating not just the wrinkles
of handsome elders photoed in fancy magazines,
but to cherish my own abrasion of years’
harsh reflection from the mirror in morning light

“amazing power of a haircut”

by Sharon Lopez Mooney

each time I cut my hair I change the world
i take away their strength to hurt me
i twist rules and bend taboos
i turn my back on their styles
each time I cut my hair i am excited
i push a little further into unknown places
i become a landscape i create
the gardener of my own image
each time I cut my hair it gets shorter
i am cutting off their reins
i am growing the roots of a real woman
i am proving my power is not of their making
each time i cut my hair i laugh
i make hard muscles in each hand with the scissors
i cut hair for thousands of women not allowed
i celebrate the fuzz that covers my round skull
each time i cut my hair i am glad
glad!
my hair stands up straight , funny to feel
glad!
glad I believe in me enough
to have no protection

Contributors:

Dennis Vannatta is a Pushcart and Porter Prize winner, with essays and stories published in many magazines and anthologies, including *River Styx*, *Chariton Review*, *Boulevard*, and *Antioch Review*. His sixth collection of stories, *The Only World You Get*, was published by Et Alia Press.

William Cass of Coronado, CA writes, "By way of briefly updating my publishing background, I've had over 250 short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines such as *december*, *Briar Cliff Review*, and *Zone 3*. I was a finalist in short fiction and novella competitions at *Glimmer Train* and Black Hill Press, received one Best Short Fictions and three Pushcart nominations, and won writing contests at *Terrain.org* and *The Examined Life Journal*. My short story collection, *Something Like Hope & Other Stories*, was recently released by Wising Up Press. Thanks very much for your time and consideration."

David Lenna's poems have appeared in *The Broken City*, *The Blotter*, *Jokes Literary Review*, among others. He lives in Prague, but still you can send him some regards @hehasanaccount.

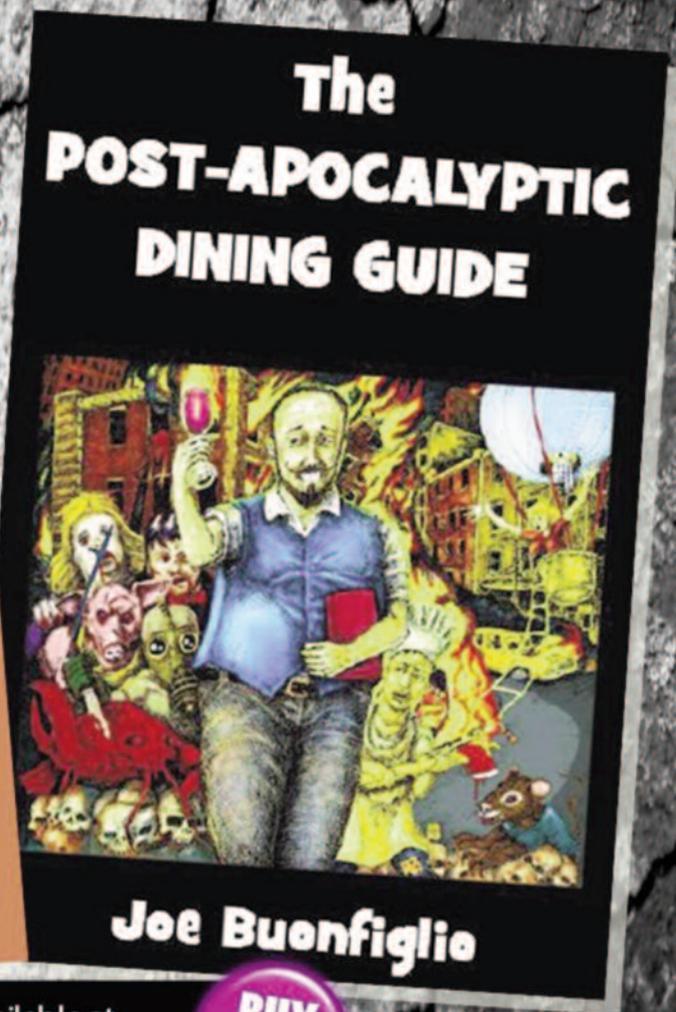
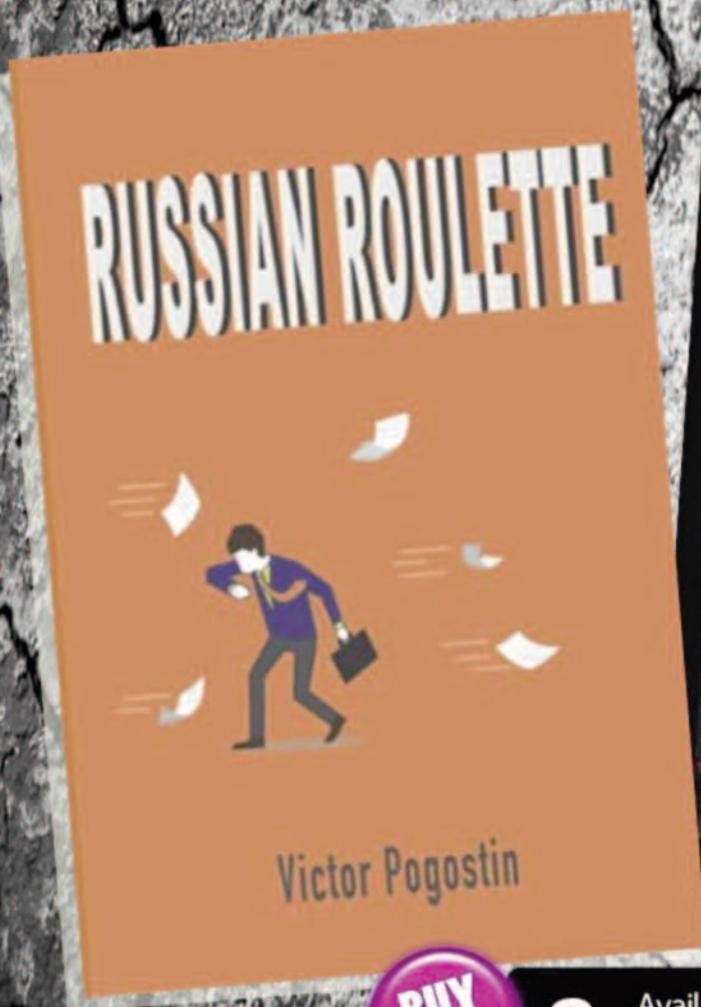
Sharon Lopez Mooney of Sonora, Mexico, writes, "Thank you, also, for reviewing my poems for possible inclusion in *The Blotter*. I am curious to know how my old woman's voice can fit amongst the rising chorus of wonderfully powerful younger voices, styles and break-out-forms of contemporary poetry. And so, I am knocking at your door today as myself. I'm a full time poet, retired Interfaith Chaplain who worked in the death and dying field, and then moved to mainland, costal Mexico to write and live with nature as companion, and now have time to give writing my full attention."

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