

# The Blotter

Magazine  
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April 2005



**Go Veg:** An uncanny convergence of odd stories about odd plants from Jeremy Brown and Melissa Watkins Starr. The print debut of mckenzee's "Sinister Bedfellows." Poems by E. V. Noechel, Natalie Ross, and Chris Frasier. Plus, the return of Marty Smith's Paper Cuts and the constancy of the Dream Journal.

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This magazine may contain typos or  
bad words

**Items Worth Mentioning**  
from the desk of Johnny Pence**Holy Fershlugginer!**

The Blotter Magazine, Inc. is now a 501(c)3 non-profit entity. Thank you, thank you. It's been a long time coming, but we think it's the right way to go. It makes me, personally, feel a lot better about begging for money anyhow.

So, this non-profit status is step one of a multi-part plan for world domination that you'll hear more about before too long. I don't want to jinx anything, but it's got promise.

Also, this means we no longer "sell" subscriptions, but that subscriptions are a premium to people who **donate** \$20 or more. Potato, potato (imagine those two "potatoes" pronounced differently).

**Artless**

Funny, but we didn't get any art submissions this month. I don't know why, but it works out that way sometime. I remember when I was a kid watching the *Mickey Mouse Club* and I'd get so bitter on the days when there were no cartoons, but it was all music. I think this is different, because the only reason that you'd get mad that we don't have any pictures is if you had a short attention span, or if you were an artist, or if—well, you know the two often go hand-in-hand, and I remember reading about A.D.D. somewhere and I was like, "so am I reading about some kind of pathology or are they just describing my personality?" But anyhow, you know, A.D.D. is just another way of thinking about things and getting things done. I think it made me smarter and a *better* member of the team.

So, what were we talking about?

**Thank You**

Big ups to the Cave in Chapel Hill and to the Standbys for throwing us a Big Blotter Benefit on Thursday, April 21. Y'all come. Also, on the Southern Front, I'll be reading/performing a piece at Jake's Ice Cream in Atlanta on 4-20 under the auspices of the Duck and Herring Company's readings series. For details on the former, check out [www.caverntavern.com](http://www.caverntavern.com). For the latter, [www.duckandherring.com](http://www.duckandherring.com).

**You're Welcome**

Welcome to mckenzee, creator of the bizarrely hilarious webcomic "Sinister Bedfellows." We'll be running some of his stuff in this and future issues. I'm really glad he wanted to be a part of this Quixotic little adventure of ours.

—ediot@blotterrag.com

## Floating Like Fingers and Ears

by Melissa Watkins Starr

In Pennsylvania, if you don't select a mate by the time shown on your MATE BY FATE postcard that comes out of Harrisburg, your mate just pops up on the screen. Any screen ... computer, television. It can happen at that very minute or anytime thereafter. Then you have to get married. It's the law.

My sister Josie tried to thwart her fate by refusing to watch TV or get on the computer, but within three days the neighbors called, saying they saw her mate between commercials on *Jeopardy*. Her marriage didn't work out very well. The guy ran off and left her, but she can't divorce him for three years since the government requires plenty of time for reconciliation. She said she would kill him first. I said, "Be careful who you say that to."

The card they sent me came on January 17. It had Thursday, July 9, 6:46 A.M. stamped on the front as my deadline. I didn't have any particular prospects, so I shoved it in the bottom desk drawer. At the time, I was managing a small apartment complex called Forest Village, and as partial compensation, I got to stay in a one-bedroom end unit with utilities provided.

By July 9, I had forgotten about the postcard, and I was surprised when a small white screen labeled MATE BY FATE appeared on my computer. It had a thumbnail photo in the center, so I clicked to get a larger image. Tom Easton's face spread across the screen with his name underneath. I was kind of

awed. He had the eyes of a paper-back writer.

I had a carton of eggs in my hands when he showed up later that morning. He pointed to a grainy black and white photo of me shot from the security camera at an ATM.

"Are you Sarah Newlin?" he asked.

I dropped my carton of eggs and watched it fall and land upright without making a mess. I picked it up and looked inside at the perfect tops of the eggs and could tell that all their bottoms were broken. A film of moisture had condensed on the cool surface of each one, as if the trauma had caused them to sweat. I gave Tom a quick nod.

"Tom Easton," he said.

"I know," I said. "I got your picture. Would you like to have breakfast with me? I'm having scrambled eggs."

After he came in, I took his photo of me and asked, "Do you mind?" I didn't give him a chance to answer before I crumpled it and threw it in the trash. "The picture I got of you was nice," I said. "You must have submitted a professional portrait or something."

"Only because I was scared the bastards would catch me yawning in line at the grocery store or driving through a yellow light just as it turned red." He stopped talking for a moment and watched me whisk the eggs around. "This is strange, isn't it? I hope you're not completely disappointed."

"No," I said.

## The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

*apple tiger, gut leakage*

I dreamed that it had been discovered by some scientists that a tiger they were studying could talk. But it hadn't talked yet—how they knew it could talk, I don't know. But for some reason, I was chosen as the first person the tiger would speak to. With much fanfare, I was presented to the tiger. We both leaned toward each other, and in a very quiet whisper, the tiger said, "I want ... apples."

—J. W., Richmond

"they won't stop at anything to redo those cars" said my friend as we walked down a paris street.

behind us a giant crane lifted up each parked car and a separate machine gave the lifted car a new paint job and sometimes a new form. later, i was standing in a parisian hotel lobby talking to my drama teacher when i started feeling a lot more liquid coming out of my vagina than the usual.

i went to the bathroom to check it out, and as i tried to wipe it away, more reddish-clearish liquid kept gushing out of me. i started to feel drained and realized it was my guts which had been partially dissolved by embalming fluids, and now they were leaving me uncontrollably.

i got naked and then my roommate came in the bathroom, the same thing was happening to her. behind my roommate came my drama teacher, but she was now a dream freak monster and started to chase us as our guts were flying everywhere. i woke up feeling it, feeling it baddddddd.

—N.R., Chapel Hill

Please send excerpts from your dream journals to Jenny at [mermaid@blotterrag.com](mailto:mermaid@blotterrag.com). If nothing else, we love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.



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After breakfast he wanted me to go with him to register compliance right away. Tom was a big man, not fat, but tall and solid, dressed in a polo shirt and khaki pants. I didn't know he was a multi-millionaire until we entered our social security numbers and created a mutual password to get our marriage certificate. We each got a little MEET YOUR MATE printout when we were done that listed things like age, occupation, and estimated net worth. I felt like I had won the lottery, but, at the same time, was embarrassed because he could see I didn't have much, didn't even own a car.

The state was liberal, though. They had my net worth figured around \$2,000. I thought there must be some money I didn't know about somewhere.

Tom touched my shoulder and said, "They'll have to adjust that figure upwards now." I felt the warmth of his fingers on my skin.

We arranged for my sister Josie to take my place at Forest Village before we left town, clearing it by phone with her and my boss.

And we were ready to go. We headed south down the highway. It turned out Tom didn't live more than 40 miles from where I grew up, but his family's place was way

out in the country. On the drive over, I learned that he and three male cousins, Nebo, Raymond, and Bradley, were the only Eastons left in that branch of the Easton family tree. They were mushroom growers who sold to the finest restaurants everywhere, even overseas, according to Tom.

God help me, I thought. I'm going to live in the middle of a never-ending stink. According to what I had read in the news, the growth medium used on mushroom farms enveloped communities in gagging clouds of stench. I can forget making friends and playing social butterfly, I thought. Area residents will want to drive stakes through our hearts.

"My family developed a method of propagating ordinary mushrooms so that they grow huge and taste better than French truffles," Tom explained as he pulled into the estate.

I waited for the smell to hit me as we drove deeper into the property. "What are you thinking?" Tom asked.

"This place smells okay," I said.

"It always does. Ours isn't a conventional operation. I'll show you where we store the 'shrooms."

He turned and drove beyond a stand of oaks. I almost laughed out loud, because what he was driving toward looked sort of like a spaceship. After a moment, I realized that it was a tower, shaped like a giant mushroom. He parked and came around to open my door.

"It's a money-maker, but it's still a very small operation. My cousins search woods and fields for the places animals have shat. That's where mushrooms grow."

When I didn't say anything, he smiled and said, "It's a joke—a partial joke, anyway. We have one small, climate-controlled building where we grow small button mushrooms to chop and put in the tower. Our mushrooms then grow in a liquid medium. My cousins and I only gather herbs in the fields and forest to use in making our growth medium."

I climbed the tower steps with him to a platform about 120 feet off the ground. When Tom pulled a metal handle to move the door along a horizontal track, coolness and a smell like fresh earth touched me. There were pieces of mushrooms floating inside like fingers and ears.

"How big do they get?" I asked.

"Just breathe the essence," he said.

It made me a little dizzy.

"The growth medium causes the pieces to become fully formed. Some reach seven pounds. Best mushrooms in the whole world," he said. And he began to palpate my abdomen. I can't explain why, but that made me feel like I had a truffle the size of a dinner plate growing inside me, and it became a very sexual rush. I wanted to eat one of his stems.

When we were ready to go, I noticed that the tower was glowing in prismatic colors against pink-shimmering clouds in a golden sky. "Wow," I said. "It's too early for sunset."

"That's from a very special form of insulation the tower's wrapped in. Its appearance changes in different qualities of light."

"Then what's the sky wrapped in?" I asked.

"Cotton candy," Tom whispered, and he carried me down the stairs because my knees were a little noodley.

The next two weeks were a haze of silken sheets and beds of pine needles. I fell drastically, completely in love with Tom. We walked the fields and forest of the estate to gather herbs every morning. We gathered baskets of leaves and roots, and Tom would speak their Latin names. He had fresh mushrooms shipped to us from New Mexico as well, and sometimes he would break the little brown ones or peel the lovely white and yellow skin off another kind and rub them across my tongue with his fingers until the mushrooms of the forest grew into spaceships and carried us to outer realms. I learned to chew little pinches of our favorites to pass to him in eternal kisses. This was our secret. It had nothing to do with his business.

Every few days we caught a glimpse of one of his cousins gathering herbs nearby, but not for long, as the cousins were very skittish and aloof. I would see a shiny bald patch, a hairy arm, or a sprig of moustache in the foliage. Then nothing.

Tom and I were free. There were no quotas to fill, no cameras to monitor our lovemaking in the forest. We actually worked a lot too, but I was so happy I hardly noticed. In the early afternoon, we processed the herbs we had gathered, freezing some and hanging others to dry. Our little button mushrooms grew from spores in wide trays of a jellied medium. On Tuesdays, we sliced them and put them in the tower.

I was always amazed to see how

the pieces had grown into whole mushrooms when we pumped the mature ones out of the bottom of the tank. They looked like big jellyfish, coming out all wet with growth medium, but they dried quickly in the air. We packed them in boxes, and the cousins delivered them to buyers.

My sister Josie took a shine to Nebo when she visited us in August. She claimed she could talk to him, but I never saw it. I told her how much I enjoyed being married to Tom, and I told her about those special mushrooms he had delivered by private planes.

"You mean he's a drug dealer?" she asked.

"No, he just gets them for our private use," I said. "No one else knows about it."

"Someone else has to," she said. "Like the guy who sells them and the pilot who delivers them and God only knows who else. Nothing's a secret anymore."

In September, I had a vision of the three fates dancing in our forest. They were beautiful in their ethereal gowns, but Tom wasn't paying attention. By the time I got him to look, they weren't there anymore, though I could hear their delicate footfalls in the distance.

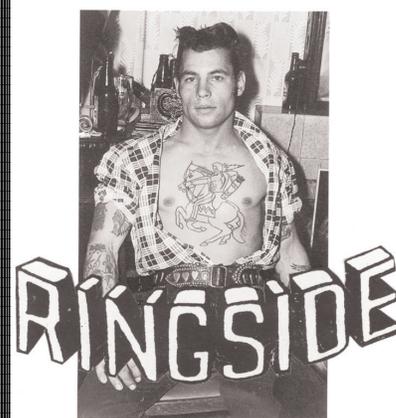
"Listen," I said.

"It's just the cousins," he told me.

But it wasn't. I heard their laughter like tiny wind chimes and wondered if they had played a trick on us.

The next morning Nebo came and stood by our breakfast table with his moustache twitching. "Is something wrong?" Tom asked.

"It's the government," Nebo said. He shoved a thumb at the



## **FRIDAYS**

**APRIL 15**  
**RINGSIDE'S QUEER**  
**STUDENT MIXER**

**MAY 6**  
**FIRST FRIDAYS**  
**RINGSIDE'S**  
**MONTHLY NIGHT**  
**TO BE QUEER AND**  
**HERE**

## **SATURDAYS**

**APRIL 16**  
**F. A. M. E.**  
**BURNING WOMAN**

**APRIL 23**  
**MASALA BEAT CLUB**  
**LIVE BHANGRA AND**  
**BOLLYWOOD**

**MAY 7**  
**D.J. MARCO'S SOLID!**  
**60's AND 70's RAW**  
**FUNK, HEAVY SOUL, FUNK**  
**45's, RARE GROOVES**  
**AND**  
**RINGSIDE'S**  
**BIG-ASS DRAG**  
**CABARET!**





illustration by Erik Minkin

window. "Some kind of inspector out there."

There was a black car parked under the tower. Tom moved to get up, but I put my hand on his arm.

"Make him wait," I said, but he wouldn't.

Tom wasn't in a mood to eat when he came back. "He wanted a sample of our growth medium," he said.

"Did you give it to him?"

"Hell, no. I told him it's a family secret, the only edge we've got over our competition. I gave him plenty of mushrooms, but that didn't satisfy him. Claimed he could get a court order for the medium. I told him to go blow."

Tom didn't swirl special mushrooms across my tongue that day, so I fed some to him. They left him sweaty and jumpy. He thought

aliens were tracking him, and he refused to leave the shelter of a hemlock tree.

"They're very near us," he whispered.

"It's just the cousins, doing their jobs," I said. But he didn't buy it.

By noon I saw what he meant. The trees were full of electronic eyes that flew around us like insects. I started perspiring worse than Tom. Finally, I asked, "Can you imagine how naked we must look on the screens those eyes are feeding?"

"Vital eyes," he said.

"What does the government want?"

"Don't want to see them coming," he said, and he put his hands over his face.

"They'll just take it, won't they?" I asked.

"Just as soon they stayed away."

I stopped asking questions and curled into Tom, and we slept until the electric eyes went away.

We felt a little foolish later, walking out of the forest in the late afternoon sun.

By the end of the day, we decided to shuck it off and be happy, agreeing not to trip on mushrooms again for a while.

Two weeks later that inspector came back with the sheriff in tow. He started to rope off our tower with orange tape. BIOHAZARD—KEEP AWAY was printed all over it. Tom was off helping the cousins fix one of our trucks.

"There's really no need for this, is there?" I asked.

The inspector looked at the ground. "No ma'am. We could avoid it altogether if we had a sample of your growth medium."

"Will you give me a chance to talk to my husband?" I asked.

The inspector nodded. He and the sheriff stepped backed a few feet to give me privacy while I made a call on my cell phone.

Within minutes I could hear Tom's truck speeding toward the tower.

As soon as he reached us, he opened the door yelling, "The answer is no! Get off of our land!"

And they did, but not before the rest of that tape went up. When the story hit the papers, a few people claimed they were sick from eating our mushrooms. By October we were paying at least a thousand a day in attorneys' fees to ward off the government and the human vultures.

By then, I was fed up with Tom's stubbornness. "Why couldn't we give them just a small sample of

growth medium?" I demanded.

When he answered, I was sorry I asked.

"Hallucinogens," Tom said. "That's what makes our mushrooms grow. They take them in, and they get high. Then, they get ambitious and expand. But they metabolize all of the hallucinogens out of their tissue by the time they reach full size. The growth medium at the bottom of the tank where we harvest is clean, totally free of hallucinogens. And the mushrooms are clean. The growth medium jellies when the hallucinogens are spent. It separates and sinks beneath the liquid layer at the top of the tank. It's the stuff on top that's laced with drugs."

"So why don't we give him a bottom sample?"

"Because it will never end. They will leave with something like orange K-Y Jelly and come back again when they see it won't grow mushrooms bigger than normal. The sons-of-bitches want our secret. That inspector expects to climb the tower to get his sample. He said so."

"How long will it take until the medium is clean all the way to the top?" I asked.

"Longer than it will take us to run out of money for lawyers."

I started to cry, and Tom said, "Ah, hell," and left the room.

We filed for bankruptcy in March. The farm was gone. The cousins started working for a conventional mushroom farmer in another state who refused to hire Tom. My sister Josie was crushed. She liked living near Nebo and had hopes to hook up with him if the government hadn't matched him to

someone else by the time her divorce came through.

The job market was tight. Nobody offered Tom a job. I found work managing a trailer park, and we got a place to live kicked into the deal, utilities not included. It didn't take long for us to get wild-eyed and desperate for money. In May, we walked from our singlewide to the Department of Social Services to see if we qualified for assistance.

A pudgy Mr. Adkins introduced himself, took our names and told us to sit down. Adkins clicked about on his computer for a while, then shook his head.

"You don't qualify for government help," he said. "Mrs. Easton's net worth is \$2,000. Until you use that money, I can't help you."

"That's crazy," I said. "I don't have any money."

"But you have assets," he said. "You haven't sold your ova yet."

"My what?" I asked.

"Your ova. Your eggs. Every healthy woman under twenty-five can collect \$2,000 from the state if she agrees to sell her eggs to our new invitro fertilization project."

"Why do they want them?"

"The program delivers fertilized eggs, free of charge, to the wombs of married women who

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haven't had a child by the date on their JOKER'S WILD CHILD card. You'll receive a card yourself within two years if you haven't produced viable offspring by that time."

Tom looked as if he were ready to strangle Mr. Adkins, but I said, "Tell me more."

"It's part of the new FULL HOUSE FAMILY INITIATIVE," Adkins said. "A childless married pair is given three eggs over the course of seven years. If they have three children within that time period, they're given a sizeable tax break each year until their youngest child reaches eighteen. Get it? A family of five equals a full house. Of course, married couples can qualify for even nicer tax benefits if they produce three offspring without our help."

"What about unmarried couples?" I asked.

Mr. Adkins frowned. "That's a no-no," he said, "and the penalties are extreme. We route those couples to our abortion facilities, of course."

I felt as if my ears might fall off if I talked to Adkins too long. "If I sell my eggs, how long will it take to get the money?" I asked.

Adkins smiled. "If you sign our contract, I can start the process today. You will receive microsurgery and a check within three weeks. More microsurgeries will follow until they are able to harvest a minimum of twenty eggs. The contract is binding, of course."

He slid a legal-sized document in quadruplicate across the counter, and I took it.

Tom pulled me aside, and I

whispered, "I have lots of eggs. We need groceries." I skimmed the legal jargon and filled the form out quickly. As I signed at the bottom, Adkins said, "Roll up your sleeve so the nurse across the hall can draw some blood, ma'am. You have to pass our drug test to get the money."

"I thought you tested urine," I said, as I tried to calculate whether the substances from all those freaky mushrooms had leached out of my system.

"Not anymore," he said. "The new blood tests are so sensitive, we can tell if you've used hemorrhoid cream in the past five years."

I jerked the contract back, ripped it up and started to cry. I told Atkins, "I can't sell my eggs. It's immoral. It's ... it's ... just terrible."

On the sidewalk outside, I asked Tom, "Do they arrest people who don't pass their drug test?"

He shrugged and said, "Probably."

That left us where we had started that morning.

"Sarah, there has to be another way to get cash," he said.

We knew it was possible, though not probable, for someone to buy a lottery ticket for a dollar and become a millionaire. We figured Fate had been good to us through the MATE BY FATE system, so there was no reason to believe we couldn't curry favor with Fate again. We thought we might have some chance if we bought a thousand lottery tickets. All we had to do was convince someone to loan us \$1,000 against my net worth.

It was easy. Nebo wired us the money, so we stretched our telepathic muscles. Before nightfall, we

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**AMIE EVANS**

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**AARON HAMBURGER**



had bought a thousand lottery tickets, carefully choosing some of our numbers and picking others at random. We went back to the trailer to wait for the eleven o'clock drawing and snuggled and smooched on a dilapidated sofa by the light of an old TV. Tom traced my lips with his fingertips, and we dreamed of days when love was new. When the big moment arrived, my hands trembled as I copied the numbers off the screen.

We sat up all night checking our tickets against those numbers. We checked and rechecked until we were certain. All but two were total losers. Two of our tickets had 19 in the third space, the location of the JUMP-AND-SHOUT number they draw at the end. On that particular day, the JUMP-AND-SHOUT number was worth \$5. Morning light bathed the litter of tickets on our floor, and we knew what we were going to do. We didn't have to speak

it.

Tom and I walked hand in hand as we turned south on Muscagoola. We had stopped on the sidewalk to enjoy a fence covered with morning glories when a homeless man approached. His green eyes reminded me of my sister Josie when he asked, "Could you spare a couple of dollars?"

We gave him the winning JUMP-AND-SHOUT tickets and told him it was all we had. He thanked us and said, "Gonna buy me a six-pack now." The joy of giving engulfed us so much that the sun seemed to follow us into the woods on the outskirts of town.

We came across a the halves of a broken, blue robin's egg in the forest and, not far from it, we found some little mushrooms similar to the secret ones we used to eat. Tom took a small bag of dried mushrooms out of his pocket.

"I've been saving these for a special occasion," he said. "They're all

that's left of our stuff from New Mexico." When he saw the face I made, he said, "They're still good. They last for years."

We started to chew on them, and they were terrible. I didn't want to kiss Tom with that taste on my tongue, so I pointed to the ones growing at our feet and said, "Let's try these."

"This is really dangerous," Tom said as I stuffed some into his mouth. I chewed a couple of them myself and they tasted okay, sort of tame. Then, of a sudden, it felt like we had stepped onto an elevator just before the cable broke. The downward rush was so hard and fast, I nearly slid through the soles of my feet. Soon, I realized the mushrooms had formed a spaceship around us. We were in it, and it had blasted right through the core of the earth, out the other side and into space. The ship burned away slowly, leaving us free in the cosmos. We floated until I looked to my right and saw the broken halves of that robin's egg right beside us. I motioned to Tom, and we crawled into the pieces and joined hands, as the jagged edges sealed.

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Author Melissa Watkins Starr is a freelance journalist from Portsmouth, VA.

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Jeremy Brown, over on the next page, is a teacher from Raleigh.

## At The British Museum, London

by Jeremy Brown

In January of 1951, Royal Air Force pilot Thom Sutherland flew his jet over the south Pacific Ocean on what he thought would be another routine mission. However, this mission was anything but routine, as Sutherland spotted an unusual orange colour covering a tiny island. He reported the peculiar sighting to his command and within two days, the S.S. Winston Churchill was anchored 300 meters from the island. Two historical discoveries were made during the ensuing expedition. A new species of flora was discovered-what we now know as John's Leaf. Since the time of this finding, this curious orange plant has spread rapidly across the globe, in large part because of hikers and hunters, and can now be found on six of the seven continents! The second and more dazzling discovery was that of a single diary entry written by a man stranded on the island. The sole entry, which can be read below, was written on a leaf from a John's Leaf Tree.

*I am writing this diary with my blood onto the largest, softest leaves that can possibly be found on earth. One side of the leaf has a brilliant orange hue with short velvety hairs like that of a peach. It is very nice against the skin. The opposite side is a lighter colour, almost manila, and is coarse. It makes for a good paper substitute. These gigantic leaves grow on a tree that I like to call the Dialectic Tree, for I am a very philosophical man and like to think of the*

*contrasting sides of these leaves as a symbol of my current life situation. I am marooned on a small island with another man named John. We have been here for two years. Yet, I often manage to make good of this destitute situation and have long, deep reflections on my life. But I can't reflect right now because I am trapped in a huge hole that John dug, presumably for me. At the moment, John is tossing excrement-covered Dialectic Tree leaves into the hole. John likes to use the smooth, velvety side of the giant leaves to wipe his bum. John is no fool. Right now, as he tosses what I hope is the last soiled leaf, he is yelling out across our small island in search of me. Yet I am certain that he knows I am down here.*

Once this entry was transported to England, it was closely examined by historians and scientists. While the exact date of the entry is not known, carbon dating, nautical records, and the language used by the author all suggest he lived on the island sometime between 1870 and 1950. Two years after its discovery, in 1953, it was put on display for the public in the British Museum and has remained here since. In the first year of the exhibition, more than one million visitors marveled over this artifact. Interestingly, etymologists agree that it was at that time that the expression "getting the John leaf" became a popular way to express being in a unfavorable situation.

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## Untitled

by Natalie Ross

and if the wind blows through me  
remember  
i was never here  
because my lifeline has been severed  
over several lifetimes  
the wind that blows through you  
is what has become of me  
existing in realms not typically seen  
by your humanoid eyes  
and if you realize  
this  
it will be because you, too,  
have become one  
with the wind and instantly  
you will know me the whole way through  
as i  
in the wind  
have eternally known you

## Squish

by E. V. Noechel

Sitting on the cold cement  
of your porch where we share  
cigarettes and talk of whos  
retired tonight with whom, a ticklish  
juvenile back-of-the-bus conversation sucking  
moonlight breezes between cracked  
white slats, I watch a tiny bug  
crawlslither up your leg. Foraging  
through blue cotton.

Does he find the weave a miraculous pattern  
like sidewinder stripes in the sand? He is ugly,  
a bug of the second-to-worst kind. Pincers,  
fangs, but no venom. We called them  
stinkbugs on girls Scout camp nights.  
They never smelled of anything but  
dirt but made us squeal and escape  
into 2 a.m. fog, made counselors grumble  
shut-ups and swat our backsides till we ducked

back inside, pretending to sleep with the prickle  
of pine needles crinkling in our sheets. The culprit  
lost outside to haunt another tent, or perhaps  
wander silent and vaporous, a quick shadow  
movement in the dark. As ephemeral as ghosts  
or fourth grade friendships.

You dont even look when your hand swipes  
your calf, tearing small legs, an upside-down  
spelunker thrown into deep space. Does he hang  
for a second, wondering how immortal he is?  
He can drop a thousand feet and live, a thousand  
tiny wingspans that cannot fly.

## Sinister Bedfellows

by mckenzee



The first UFO I ever saw



came right over



those hills there.



## in the event that someone dies by Chris Frasier

The beamish photo of you  
 against the feathered sky  
 was only a moment - a collision  
 of happiness and light -  
 and will not stand for all time.  
 With head and heels  
 frozen to the steely surface,  
 we will find the artless apologies,  
 the tears that came from an empty room,  
 the broken thoughts  
 like tree branches  
 damming your memory.  
 You diluted truth with desire,  
 let the houseplants wither unwatered,  
 watched your neighbor  
 dance alone in a mindless hush.  
 The bananas turned brown  
 and you threw them away.  
 You gave a man fifty cents  
 and he found God in a needle.  
 Now, in the final blink,  
 in the compromise of sleep and wake,  
 answers leak out like a frosty breath:  
 our clothes will never be clean;  
 language is the fight against understanding;  
 rebirth is a matter of forgetting;  
 there are no wars, only dead bodies;  
 no progress, only distraction;  
 we will all leave behind  
 the silver that sold a friend;  
 the darkest parts of ourselves  
 are the ones we should have explored;  
 history has an appetite for the future,  
 so leave no meat on our bones.  
 In the event that someone dies  
 we will wish to have seen them  
 one last time.

Larry "mckenzee" Holderfield has traveled the world, taking photos, writing bad poetry, and falling in love. He now combines these interests in "Sinister Bedfellows," online at [SinisterBedfellows.com](http://SinisterBedfellows.com).

E. V. Noechel is one of those serious poets whose bio is a long list of publication credits that would never fit in this space. So visit her website at [evnoechel.com](http://evnoechel.com). She's from Raleigh.

Natalie Ross also has an eponymous website at [natalie.net](http://natalie.net) (what a snag!), and is a UNC student transplanted from San Francisco.

Chris Frasier is an old buddy of *The Blotter*, and used to visit us at the Branch's Bookshop readings. But now he's in London getting yelled at by radical anti-American British poets, writing more, and sending it to us.



## Paper Cuts Books You Might Not Have Read

by Martin K. Smith

### *The Life of the Party* Bennett Cerf, Hanover House—Doubleday, 1956

Jokes do not age well. To read a Shakespeare comedy, for instance, you have to struggle through constant cobwebbing of footnotes. And their very act of explaining the humor to you—if they can—tends to bleach out most of the funny. When you have to unpack a lot of socio-historical baggage to reach a joke, you get too distracted to laugh. Most humor is topical—think of Leno’s monologues—and “funny” evolves along with the pop culture surrounding it. (Visual humor’s another story, of course. Immigrants who spoke not a word of English still loved Charlie Chaplin. As long as our human form has a face to throw pies at and an ass to fall on, slapstick will be funny. Woop woop, nyuk nyuk nyuk.) I found this book in my grandparents’ house as a child. What was I to make of jokes like this?

An intrepid explorer set out singlehanded for the Amazonian jungle of Brazil. Authorities equipped him with all the necessary gear, topped off with a miniature bottle of gin, another of vermouth, and a tiny mixer. “What’s this for?” asked the explorer. “You know I don’t drink.” “That’s in case you’re hopelessly lost, without

another human around for miles,” was the answer. “Mix yourself a martini. Somebody’s absolutely certain to pop up and tell you, ‘Don’t make it that way: make it this way.’”

One model agency believes in giving its girls unusual names. Three that seemed to carry things a bit far were: Miss September Maughan, Miss Eyeful Tower and Miss Berthe Day Suites.

Bennett Cerf (1898—1971) founded Random House and the Modern Library series, and put out several collections like this one. The book’s Foreword mentions humor columns he wrote for several papers and magazines of the day. Apparently he collected jokes as a major hobby. Here he’s chaptered them by subject—movies (“Babes in the Hollywoods”), religion (“Heavens Above”), medicine (“Where There’s an Ill”), et cetera. They have an odd Fifties aura about them; odd and at times just a tiny bit creepy:

The new typist, fresh from college, was so pretty that nobody had the heart to reprimand her for obvious shortcomings. The boss saw her frantically searching

through the files one morning, and after pausing to enjoy the rear view said consolingly, “There, there, Mary. If you’ve lost something again, it isn’t serious enough to burst into tears about it.” “It certainly is,” said Mary, choking back a sob. “This time it’s my lunch.”

Ah, that Fifties sexism, placid, condescending and unthinking. Although Cerf would probably have sworn on a stack of Modern Library classics that he respected women and was devoted to his wife, the ladies here are pretty but dim secretaries, golddigging blondes, beautiful night nurses and “lovely young starlets”. The institution of marriage doesn’t always live up to its billing:

An attractive young honeymoon couple boarded a train for Niagara Falls, and indulged in the traditional billing and cooing. Suddenly, however, the baffled bride found herself hurling hateful insults at her husband, with his rejoinders matching hers in bitterness and venom. And then she discovered a total stranger sitting next to her in the drawing room. “How did you get in here?” she gasped. “Who are you?” The stranger answered softly, “I’m ten years from now.”

There are other forgotten stereotypes: hayseed farmers, wild shoeless hillbillies, Texas oil millionaires. There’s nothing blatantly racist or ethnic, aside from a few snatches of black-

mammy dialect:

....a story about the old family retainer of the president of a small college down South. The prexy's wife discovered that a cherished friend was moving into the neighborhood and asked the family retainer to go over and help her get moved in properly. The retainer, her mission accomplished, returned to announce emphatically, "I ain't nevah goin' there no more. Dem folks just ain't quality. Dat friend of yours eben washes her own windows." "But, Lucy," protested the prexy's wife, "you've seen me wash my windows too." "Yes'm," admitted the retainer, "but dat woman knows how."

(Needless to say, there also aren't any fag jokes. Fifties society had us stuffed so deep in the closet we were stumbling over casks of Amontillado.)

So while there's nothing really tasteless in this Party (aside from the sexism), there are hardly any real laughs either. Most of the bits I would classify not as jokes, but Anecdotes. Jokes are what standup comics tell; anecdotes are what mild-mannered liberal Protestant ministers open their sermons with—or in Cerf's era, what speakers at business luncheons inflicted on their three-martinied listeners:

A thriving little industrial plant in Panama employed twenty local women. One day they just stopped coming, and such inducements as higher

pay and shorter hours didn't budge them an inch. They had earned all they needed for months at least, they explained: why work any more? The boss, after much worry, finally hit upon a solution. He sent each of them a thousand-page Chicago mail-order catalogue. They were back at their places—every one of them—the following Monday.

(Reading that as a child, I thought "Well, wasn't he clever!" Now I think, "The goddamned exploiting capitalist smartass, corrupting innocent Third-Worlders! I hope he gets run over by a Wal-Mart.")

Cerf's authorial voice is another factor of that slightly-off Fifties feel. It's the sort of voice you'd expect from those droll chapter headings: the calm self-contented tone of someone who fancies himself a wit and raconteur, whether he is or not (maybe because, in Bennett's case, he had a Random Houseful of employees to laugh at the boss's jokes). The term that comes to mind is "avuncular." Avuncular is the dad from a Fifties sitcom, with the sweater and pipe, who pats you on the head and calls you "Son" while giving you condescending advice from his lofty position as the Father Who Knows Best—totally oblivious to the fact that you've no more enthusiasm for his suggestions than you would for a gallon drum of overaged Velveeta. "No, son, those native girls were happy to get those catalogs, and learn about all the great American

products they could buy!"

The book is a period piece: What Upper-Middle-Class White Guys Found Amusing, Circa 1956. It's almost like a relic from a lost civilization; one where traveling salesmen traded tales about farmers' daughters in the smoke-filled club cars of overnight trains. Now the salesmen all fly; and the farmers' daughters, likely as not, are in adjoining seats, having gone to college and become saleswomen. (And Amtrak recently decreed all its trains smoke-free.) Modern humor moves even faster than the salesfolks' planes, zipping around at Internet speed. These jokes—slow, and only slightly and laboriously funny—are a little like a dial telephone: the old tech still works, but requires extra effort. And that, by the way, reminds me of an anecdote:

Two wealthy Chinese merchants of San Francisco were invited to spend the day at a country club outside Berkeley and saw, for the first time, a couple of duffers trying to hack their way out of a sand trap. "Wouldn't you think," observed Ah Sing, "that men as rich as that could get servants to perform such arduous and unpleasant labor for them?"

**Marty Smith** is the publisher of *The Blotter* and a DJ at Duke University radio, WXDU. He will be celebrating his marriage to Robin Gambill in late April. Congratulations.

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