

The Blotter

Magazine
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Among the maxims on Lord Naoshige's wall there was this one:

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January 2006 New York City, and Raleigh



Are You Ready to Rock? Stories of Love by Jamie Allen and B. Seckinger Ash. Art of Flora and Fauna by Alena Hennessy. Poems of Emergency Rooms and Tree Surgery by James Mackie and Matthew Mulder. Also, mckenzee's "Sinister Bedfellows" and the Dream Journal.

The Blotter is:

Johnny Pence.....Yamamoto
Tsunetomo
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Cover art: *Deer Dream* by Alena
Hennessy. See pp. 8-9 for more
from this artist.

Cover motto excerpted from
Hagakure, by Yamamoto
Tsunetomo, tr. William Scott
Wilson. The maxim in question is
this: "Matters of great concern
should be treated lightly."

The Blotter is a production of The
Blotter Magazine, Inc., Durham, NC.
A 501 (c)3 non-profit
ISSN 1549-0351
www.blotterrag.com

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the first half of each month, and enjoys a
free circulation throughout the Southeast
and some other places, too. Submissions
are always welcome, as are ad inquiries.

Subscriptions are offered as a premium for
a donation of \$20 or more. Send check or
money order, name and address to The
Blotter Subscriptions, 1010 Hale Street,
Durham, NC 27705. Back issues are also
available, 5 for \$5. Inquire about availabil-
ity by e-mail: ediot@blotterrag.com.

*This magazine may contain typos or
bad words*

Items Worth Mentioning
from the desk of Johnny Pence**Absence and the Fonder Heart**

I used to smoke cigarettes. I used to really enjoy smoking cigarettes, except for the fact that after ten years of smoking unfiltered Camels, I became acutely aware of the fact that they really don't help you stay healthy and strong. I quit. I gained twenty pounds which I've just had to learn to live with. Quitting was the hardest thing I ever did. I'll still have a handroll or smoke a pipe a couple times a year, but for the most part I've been really good: no store-bought tobacco cigarettes since '99.

So the damndest thing of it is that I still want one all the time—like seriously, every day, a couple times a day. Right now, for instance. I've spent seven years thinking about and listing the obvious health benefits. But just to appease the devil inside me, here is a list of the times when I particularly miss unfiltered Camels in my life:

First thing in the morning, drinking coffee, in the shower, right after a meal, when I smell someone else smoking, drinking alcohol, playing cards, driving, writing, talking on the phone, waiting on food at a restaurant, eating chocolate, on the porch, sitting in a dark room late at night worrying about something, anytime I can smell gas or hay, at the beach, trying to walk through a crowd, autumn, on the toilet, walking in the rain, fishing, yelling at someone, mowing the grass, right after getting off an airplane, watching old movies, playing sports, in the woods, in towns where I've never been, on boats, outside of other people's houses, and sometimes just waking up in the middle of the night to smoke.

So listen kids, take it from Johnny P.: Don't start, because it's really hard to stop. But it totally *does* make you look cool.

"So How's Your Book Coming?"

Funny you should ask. My book is done, ready for a proofer and the printer, ready to ROCK. I also have great manuscripts from two very talented writers just ready to go. The books are doing awesomely.

The business of *publishing* them kinda sucks though. We need some *money*. We don't need a whole lot, but some. We're trying to put together some fundraising for the springtime, but anything y'all can do, suggest, help with, or give is welcome and needed. We could use spaces to throw parties, stuff that people might want at silent auctions, introductions to arts patrons, help from people who actually *know how* to raise money, on and on. There's plenty of details, and I'd be happy to talk with you about them.

—ediot@blotterrag.com

The Executrix

by B. Seckinger Ash

I stood there a minute, unsure, and then I rang the bell. There was a giant transom over the door, throwing the light into prisms of the past. I'd never even noticed it before. The last time I used the front door, I was a freshman in high school and Connie Vuncannon came to pick me up for the prom.

She was a senior with D-cups, her bangs a towering wall of flaxen straw hardened with hairspray and mousse. My father couldn't stop laughing. He was really proud of me that night.

I rang the bell again, waited.

Dad. Hard to believe he was dead, gone, and no longer living in that house.

Now it belonged to *her*: the young woman who opened the door, her auburn hair pulled back in a ponytail, that timeless face of hers decorated with a pretend look of surprise: Ruby, my heart, my love, my beauty.

She was also my stepmother.

Relations between my mother and father came to a head one night after he ate a box of saltine crackers in their bed and left her to deal with the crumbs; his way of telling her it was over. He met Ruby a month later at the country club, but I knew her—or at least knew *of* her—since my pre-pubescent years.

"Gill?" Ruby leaned against the big mahogany door with a sad grin. "Come in, come in."

The house looked much different from when I'd lived there, back before the divorce when my mother

bought antique furniture by the truckload, cluttering up the house with chairs too fragile to sit in, rancid smelling cabinets, gimped credenzas.

Ruby had cleared all that stuff out, breathed a youthful energy into the rooms that brought the house back to life. She kept things simple and sparse, seemed much brighter inside. It smelled like her.

Ruby grabbed my hand and led me to the kitchen.

"How are you holding up?" she asked.

"Ok, I reckon. Taking some time off from work, figure out what I wanna do."

Ruby pushed me down on a stool by the counter and sashayed over to the fridge. She swung it open with her foot and showed me a beer, her eyebrows raised.

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

"How's your mother?"

My mother was fucking loony tunes, always drunk, searching for the perfect cocktail of meds to keep her many neuroses in balance. She'd become obsessed with reality television shows—she referred to them as unscripted dramas—and talked of putting cameras and high-sensory microphones throughout the house for fun. Last summer she married a Russian linguist whom she met in an Internet chat room.

"Fine," I said. "Mom is fine."

Ruby handed me a beer, got one for her, and sat in the stool next to mine. She took a long drink, looking at me the entire

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Shock Wave, Vomit Comet

[After a pleasant amusement park ride, it is now time for the "Shock Wave," which looks like a normal house with seat belts on all the chairs] ... I hurriedly picked a seat on the couch, the one that gave me the best access to the exit, just in case. I thought the lights would dim, but they didn't, and I didn't think the ride had started, but it had. A strange blow-up robot-creature was bouncing toward me making a horrible, high-pitched noise. I looked at the couple in front of me and said, "You guys are going to help look out for me right?" They only stared and shrugged. Their eyes were already dead. The blow-up robot came closer, and I pulled my feet off the floor, curling up to keep it from touching me. I knew that if I ignored it, it would probably pass me by, but I couldn't help it; the noise was so loud; I began to scream. It turned to me and bounced onto my lap, gripping me and giggling in a dog-pitch squeal. I couldn't get it off me. I could see other monsters attacking the couple in front of me. As I struggled with the red and gray robot, I noticed a banner around its waist. It read "Death by Madness." I screamed. The robot shrieked.

—R.M., Chapel Hill

[After watching a very unflightworthy and ancient-looking airplane called the "Vomit Comet" terrify its passengers with impossible aerobatics, apparently some sort of training exercise] ... I realized that I was in the next group who were supposed to go for a ride on the Vomit Comet. As I boarded the plane, which was just as shabby inside as outside and was soaked in puke and other bodily fluids, I realized that they were piping in Fleetwood Mac's *Rumors* album in an attempt to relax us. I thought about Lindsay Buckingham and sat down in a wet, stinking seat. I couldn't find my seatbelt and got a little nervous. The next thing I knew, the ride was over and everybody was telling us how brave we were. I had no recollection of the flight at all.

—J.P., Athens

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time, waiting for me to continue.

"It's just bizarre, you know?" I said. "I can't believe he's really gone."

"I know Gill," said Ruby. She gave a long, sexy sigh. "I know."

I dropped my eyes and started peeling at the label on the bottle. "And you?"

She rolled her eyes and drank at the same time. "I'm 25, Gill. Husbands aren't supposed to die when they have wives my age."

I just nodded, looked around the kitchen, not sure what to say.

"Kermit was going to take me to Paris for our first anniversary," she said, all dramatic. "He told me when we married that I would be the executor of his will, but I had no idea what the hell that meant. Now I'm up to my ass in all these damned provisions I've got to be carrying out."

My father died inside of Ruby on Christmas Eve—heart attack. Sitting there looking at her, I couldn't help but be thankful that the old man went out in style.

"If there's anything I can do ..."

Ruby smiled.

I drank my beer and thought of Connie Vuncannon, those big funbags of hers, how close I'd come to copping a feel that night after the prom. We were parked in my drive-

way, making out in her car—a bright yellow Peugeot with lowered suspension, chrome wheels, and glass-packs in the muffler—when just before I had my hand around one of her tits, a glint of reflected light appeared in the rift of her cleavage. It hovered and spangled and ran upwards past her neck, chin, ending with a spectacular nimbus upon hitting her braces.

Connie caught sight of the winking luminosity and traced it to the living room window of the house. She slapped my hand away and screamed like some angry badger.

"But I feel a spark between us, don't you?" I said, dodging claws.

Connie pushed my face between the dashboard and the windshield, and that's when I saw my father standing in the window, looking at us through binoculars. It was too late for him to hide or even put the Army-issue field glasses behind his back, so that old laughable son-of-a-bitch just waved at us.

The only sparks that flew after that came from Connie's Peugeot when it bottomed out at the end of the driveway as she was leaving, waking the entire neighborhood up with the sharp crackle of her glass-packed muffler.

Later that night, my father brought a 6-pack of Shcafer Light up to my room and shared it with me, retelling some of his own youthful mishaps and failed teenage liaisons. He church-keyed a few beers and I torpedoed them. I caught him looking at me, smiling. "That girl had the biggest bank accounts I've ever seen," he said, referring to Connie's breasts. Soon he was giving me a fatherly

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lecture in the art of cunnilingus, but when he tried to illustrate the different variations of a technique he called “the shocker” using a rubber band and a baseball mitt, I vomited and we called it a night.

Ruby grew up in a house just down the street, went to a private all-girls school in Chattanooga. I saw her when she came home for Christmas and Easter.

She was always jogging. During the times she was home, I would watch her from my bedroom window. There I had a clear view of the sidewalk where she began and finished each run. I would hide naked, wrapped in the window curtains. I used the old man’s binoculars because I liked having her closer to me.

The phone rang. Ruby grumbled, picked up the remote-phone off the counter. “It never stops—Hellooo?” She acted as if the phone was sucking away all her energy. “Hello, Herman.” Ruby put her hand over the bottom of the phone, “It’s the lawyer.” She stared at me and studied my face, her ear to the phone. “No, no, no,” she said. “Don’t *bullshit* me, Herman,

you fucking goat, you. I know what the goddamn provision states....” Ruby rolled her eyes and pulled the phone away.

“Is there a problem?” I asked.

She just sighed and put her beer down. She knocked on the receiver for a few second before putting it back to her ear. “Is Herman an accountant?” Ruby said, and then tapped it on the counter. “Is Herman an *accountant?*”

For a moment I thought she was asking me.

“No,” said Ruby. “No, Herman is not an accountant. Herman is my lawyer, and I need him to be my lawyer and not my *what?* That’s right, Herman, go ahead and say it for me ... *accountant*. Just be my lawyer, Herman.” There was a pause and then Ruby said, “Kermit knew what he was doing ... Jesus, you know what, Herman, you snaky Jew, just fax me the deed, I’ll give it a look, and then get back to you.” Ruby hung up the phone and adjusted herself on the stool. “That was Herman,” she said. “Such a sweet old man, Herman, he’s been like a father to

me. He wanted to marry my mother once, you know, but she turned him down. You know why? She said he had an ugly golf swing. Isn’t that funny? Do you play golf, Gill?”

“No.”

“Mother said Herman’s swing had more jerks and yanks than a sperm bank in New York City. She told me to never marry a man with an ugly golf swing.”

I finished my beer. Ruby took it, threw it away, and came back with another.

“Gill? I’ve decided to keep the Kennebrew name. How will your mother respond?”

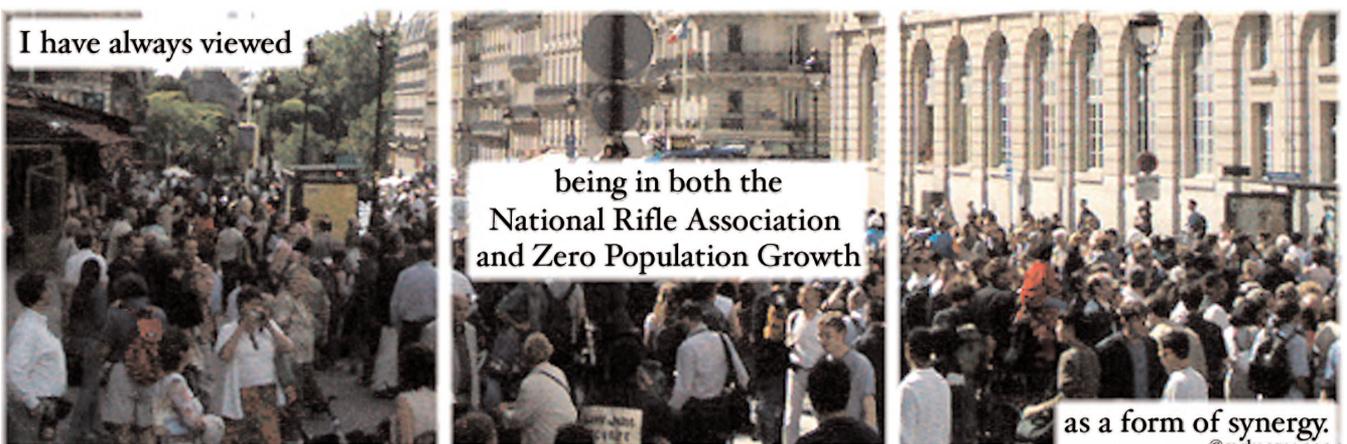
“Most likely in butchered Russian.”

“Perhaps I’ll ask her to lunch.” Ruby looked at her watch. “I’m gonna change and go for a run.”

I followed Ruby upstairs and went to my old room. It was always sad, visiting the room of my youth, seeing that old bed, feeling the agony of never having gotten laid in it.

Ruby passed by the door. She’d changed into some tight red running shorts that offered up a very

Sinister Bedfellows by mckenzee



generous view of her thighs. She had on a thin black sports bra that lent itself to her nimble cleavage and left her midriff exposed.

After she left the house for her jog, I fetched the old binoculars from a shoebox in my closet where I kept them hid. I went to the window slowly, sneaking up behind the drapes, and peered outside. The trees had grown bigger, but I could see Ruby, and I watched her run about fifty yards down the street until she disappeared behind a row of dogwoods. I kept the binoculars focused on the spot where she always returned. I didn't know how long I waited, maybe five or ten minutes, when I heard the front door open, followed by rapid footsteps coming up the stairs and then down the hall toward my room.

I dropped to the floor on my hands and knees, slid the binoculars across the room in the corner behind the door, and I looked under the bed like I was searching for something. Ruby knocked once and stepped in the room.

"Gill? Are you hiding?"

"Down here." I stuck my head out from under the bed. "I was just looking for my old tennis racket."

"I found myself suddenly bored, running for no reason," she sighed. "Besides, two miles is enough for today. I'll just go extra hard tomorrow."

I got to my feet and looked at her there in the door. Ruby was glistening, sweat covering her body just right, using perspiration as a prop on the grand stage of her splendor and playhouse swagger. She walked into the room, hands

on her sides and still breathing through a tiny pursed hole in her mouth.

"I must've gotten it already," I said, brushing my hands.

"What?"

"The tennis racket."

Ruby crawled on my bed and laid her body down, head on the pillow. "Tennis is sexy. Not as sexy as golf, but sexy."

Her breathing was slowing down and quiet. She was fanning her face, digging and poking her finger in her belly button and rubbing her stomach. I poked my head in the closet, pretending to be looking for something.

"So this was Gill's room?" said Ruby, coy. "Was this your *special* place, Gill?"

"More like my *only* place."

"I love Fleetwood Mac," she said.

"What?"

She pointed toward the poster on the wall. "Stevie Nicks."

I acted surprised to see it, although I'd forgotten all about the poster. Having hung there for so long it had melted invisible into the wall. "She's a looker."

"A *looker*? Stevie Nicks was the hottest bitch in rock," Ruby said, sitting up, sporting a mischievous grin. "Gill? Did you think of her when you ... *you* know," she said, "did you look at that picture when you used to ... *you* know?"

"Hell no! I mean ... huh?"

"I'm sorry," she was laughing, covering her mouth. "What? Were you not allowed to have girls in your room?"

My face flushed red and I started scratching my head like a monkey. "Oh, I thought you

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meant ... yeah, I mean, I had girls up here *all* the time. There were always girls up here, definitely. I thought you ... never mind."

"Well," said Ruby climbing off the bed, "I'm not surprised. You're a good-looking fella, a tall drink like your dad. You should take up golf," she said. "I bet you'd have a great swing."

Ruby walked out of the room and down the hall to the master bedroom.

When I heard the shower running I leaned down and buried my nose in the sweat-stained bedspread where she'd been.

It didn't even smell.

I found myself walking down the hall toward her room. Going through the threshold of the door, I saw Ruby's sweaty shorts, sports bra, and other discarded pairs of panties scattered across the floor. I wanted to rub them all over my face and arms, wanted her smell, wanted to jump out of my skin. The bathroom door was wide open and the steam from the shower was creeping around the doorway into the bedroom. Feet advancing toward the bathroom, floating through the cloudy vapors, I stopped at the door and saw her silhouette through the shower curtain. The first whiff of the hot shower mist hit my nose and tickled my windpipe. The need to cough was overwhelming. I buried my head in my armpit, did my best to mute it.

"Kermit?"

I got out of there, made fast back to my room. I sat on the end of the bed and breathed, images of Ruby lying underneath my old man, his old skin to her young; his

hairy, ursine body ravaging the honey of my youth. My cock hurt so bad I wanted to cry.

The shower stopped. I heard Ruby coming down the hall. She knocked on the door once and then just came in, still wet from the shower and wearing a loose terrycloth robe that had my dead father's initials on the front.

"Wanna stay and have dinner with me?" she asked.

"I better not," I said.

Ruby was running her hands through her wet hair, twisting the ends, and she glanced down and saw the binoculars laying there behind the door.

"You found them," she said all excited. She picked them up. "Kermit had been looking for these."

"Looking for them why?" I

asked.

Ruby kind of laughed like it was a secret, and then she said, "Kermit told me the story about your prom date, the one with braces and big forearms."

"She had D-cups and was captain of the Dance Corps, if you must know," I said. "What's that got to do with the binoculars?"

"I told him how you watched me run all those years," Ruby said casually. "Kermit was gonna get your initials engraved—"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait. You *knew*?"

Ruby nodded. "Why are you sweating?"

I shrugged and she cocked her head to one side.

"Were you just in my room, Gill?"

cont'd., p. 10

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I looked at her feet, bit the inside of my lip, scratched my forehead, crossed my legs, shrugged my shoulders.

Ruby came over and moved in close to me, so close that the water from her hair was dripping onto my shirt. She smelled delicious. She straddled one of my legs, lifted her robe up a little, and sat down bare-assed on my thigh. I could feel the warm moisture seeping through my jeans. I wanted to cry.

Ruby rubbed against me, stirred her hips. Sweat motions. Then I was naked and in her, our bodies wrapped in my father's old robe.

Together we shared a light-hearted cum.

She rolled over on the bed, naked and more spectacular than a sculpture, the robe hooked around her arms, flayed out to the side.

"Stay with me, Gil. Stay with me tonight and tomorrow and forever."

"I'm sorry."

Ruby sat up, wrapped her robe around her tight, putting her body away. She sighed, frustrated. "People die, Gill!" she said. "It's what they're supposed to do."

I was already putting on my clothes.

"Gill?"

"Yes?"

"I want your seed, Gill." She was sprawled out, inviting.

"Bye, Ruby."

I left the room, started down the hallway. I got down the stairs and was walking out the front door when Ruby called from the steps.

"Gill?"

I looked up at her.

"Will you be coming home for Easter?"

I was out in the car and my hands were shaking so bad I couldn't get the key in the ignition. I pounded on the steering wheel and thought about going back inside. I looked down at my jeans and there, on my thigh, was a pear-shaped waterline.

It looked like a giant teardrop.

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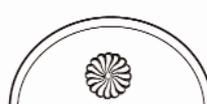
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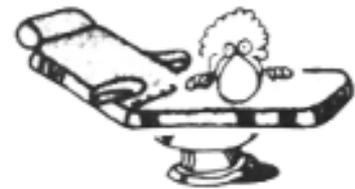


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Walk the Dog

by Jamie Allen

Wake to a long, wet tongue dragging across the face, leaving behind a cool trail of lightly scented saliva, like coffee beans mixed with peanuts. Eyes closed, squinting into a wine hangover, not wanting to ruin the sleep. Say to the quiet room, "Can you take her out?" Get no response. Roll over. She's not there. Again.

But the puppy *is* there. Four months old. Gangly and brown. Unusually large paws. Wet, happy tongue. Wagging all over. "Good morning, good morning," the puppy seems to say. Wanting to greet the bright, cool weather outside and lunge for squirrels thirty feet up a tree and walk and smell and feel the freedom of peeing on the cool grass.

But she's *not* there. Again. She's with *him*. Again. Even after the talk. Even after the promise just before she left for the night out with her "friends." The phone never rang last night, and now it's morning and she's not here and the marriage is over and the dog—which was suggested by the marriage counselor as a way to bond over something since there were never any kids, anything to rekindle a fire drowned—wants to go for a stupid walk.

But it's not the puppy's fault. Ignore the headache that comes from drinking wine and watching television until after midnight. Ignore the sick, dizzy feeling that might have nothing to do with the hangover. Get dressed. Get the leash.

The goddamned thing about it is that it was agreed the marriage would end. It wasn't working. It never

worked. So it would end; but divorcing is not like *breaking up* with someone. One doesn't just decide it and walk away. This is marriage. There are years to consider and add and subtract and consider more. When someone finds out they're dying, they spend days, weeks staring into the distance, taking stock of their life, trying to understand it. When a relationship finds out it is officially dying, it needs the same courtesy.

And it's not the kind of thing you announce to friends and family all at once. It's broken gently. They'll be sad, shocked. They deserve to have it broken to them gently. It's not their fault. A phone call. A talk. *Things aren't going well, not at all, and thought you should know.* Get some advice. Ignore it, because it's already over.

It takes time, this business.

Messy hair, plaid pajama bottoms, a long-sleeved T-shirt and sandals. A fine sight coming out of the front door with a puppy. Something that announces to the neighborhood, "She's not home. Again." The puppy tugs down the sidewalk, sees a squirrel, pulls to the tree. The puppy smells. The puppy pees. The puppy wants to walk farther.

And yet, she felt the need to speed the process, to nuke it to oblivion, to have the affair. The humiliation. Then she promised not to have any more affairs until things were settled and a time was picked to move out, and a new place was leased. To stave off more humiliation. Then she continued the affair. In front of friends in the neighborhood, in front of her family, who all knew, who all started to say hello with

funny looks on their faces.

Too nice to write "adultery" on the line. Damage her reputation. She's doing a good job of that herself. No need to put it in print, to save it for generations a hundred years from now, to have them laugh at the poor sucker who got cheated on. It's none of their goddamned business.

Mid-October, and the leaves at the end of the street, in the park, are starting a slow turn and the air is cool and clean. The perfect morning for an affair, to lie in bed with the windows open and linger on a new person—the curve next to the eye, the way the lips mold into a kiss, the ruddiness of the areola, the freckle on the hip, the cleft behind the knee. All these personal things, handed over to another and therefore lost forever.

We're all capable of having an affair. Everyone *wants* to have an affair. It doesn't make a person special to have one. It doesn't mean their need is stronger than others; it doesn't mean that no one understands them except the person they fell into bed with. It merely means they had less respect for the person against whom they are having the affair.

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Tugging kind of hard on the puppy. To the park. Yes, the park. Far away from the empty bed. The puppy sees something ahead, and there is definitely something, *someone* ahead. Loose shorts. Healthy legs. Aerodynamic shoes. Tapered athletic shirt. Light hair pulled off a nice face. A strong nose and eyes a darker shade of her hair. Fresh, like the morning. Maybe it's time to turn around. Not really dressed for the occasion. The puppy doesn't agree, pulls toward her. The female walker gets closer, smiles. Too late to run.

She breathes a light squeal of a hello to the puppy, which mirrors the puppy's excitement, wagging from head to toe. She kneels. The puppy pulls to her. Puppy talk. Licking. Lucky puppy. Petting. Very lucky puppy.

"What a sweet darling," she says. Delightful voice. "What happened to the leash?" Curious, with a hint of light humor.

The leash holding the puppy is in bad shape—frayed at various spots where the dog tried to gnaw through, during sit-downs at the park, under the bench.

"Doesn't really appreciate it," is your shrugged response.

More could be said. So much more. The poor dog: a grand idea, using sharp teeth to bite through the

thing that holds it, biting through to freedom and running and peeing and running and freedom. It's nice for dogs, too. They want it. And the puppy used its brain to realize it could achieve freedom if only it could bite through.

Yet the poor thing, with its big paws and clumsy way, has never had the coordination to see the plan to fruition. Dogs can't see what they're chewing while they're chewing it, and the puppy's huge paws lack the ability to hold the leash perfectly still to better concentrate the teeth on one area. The puppy is only coordinated enough to chew through about half the width of the leash before it slips to a different spot. So amazingly frustrating. And yet the puppy keeps trying, keeps hoping it will one day finally do it and it will be free.

"You're not allowed to do that," the female walker says, her voice light and sweet, a mother smiling as she playfully scolds her child for a minor offense. "Puppies can't go free. You'll get hit by a car, you silly thing." She says more, and the puppy wags its body more. But these things aren't heard because, in a sullen and disgusting interruption of clarity, it is realized that the puppy's plan for the leash is very much like the Grand Idea to be a successful novelist. And further, a Grand Idea that she, the

wife who's having the affair, has always secretly despised.

Oh sure, when the relationship started, she told all her friends, "He's a writer. He's writing a novel." But she immediately connected the idea of writing a novel to having finished a novel and having had the novel represented and published and sold at bookstores by the tens of thousands and having been interviewed by Katie Couric before heading out for the weekend to the Hamptons. The rich, creative life. Free to do what you want. Who wouldn't want to be with a writer like that?

Things turned out differently. Here you are, still clinging to that Grand Idea, like the puppy trying again and again to bite through the leash, to break through with a novel and make money and be free and travel wherever your senses take you. And yet, the problem seems to be that, like the puppy, you only have the coordination—the mental capacity, the way with words, the determination—to gnaw about halfway through any novel before you lose your place, lose your thought process, lose what you meant when you started. And you have to start again.

The poor thing: not you and not the puppy and not the pretty female walker, but the wife. She's been

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watching this happen over and over again, looking on with condescension and frustration, as you try again and again to do something you will never do. Would drive anyone to cheat, caring for such a helpless case. What's cheating on a puppy anyway?

And even if you do finally break free, you really won't last. You'll choke yourself on your own freedom, run too far, get hit by a car or a drug addiction or something.

"Pardon?"

The female walker had said something.

"I just said you have to admire the persistence." Oh, lovely female walker. Is that a smile? A flirtation? An invitation to offer something that might intrigue? It's been so long, it's hard to tell. Also, the wardrobe is pajamas and sandals.

But maybe there is hope. Maybe the problem is not with the person holding the leash, or same person's Grand Idea, but with the person it was shared with, the cheating wife. Perhaps this female walker might understand the pursuit of freedom and happiness, even if it takes an entire lifetime.

Could tell her the thoughts about the leash and the novel and how they are similar. Could answer her questions about the novel. Modestly, of course. Could change clothes and meet her for coffee. Could tell her more, about the failed relationship and the affair and the secret jealousy over the wife having known an affair. Could listen to the lovely female walker tell about the man who broke her heart. (No ring. Good sign.) Could bring the puppy home and find the cheating wife there, but refuse to ask her where she was or what she did last night; in fact, try to avoid any talk on that subject,

though she desperately wants to talk about it, to get it off her chest.

Could take a quick shower, get dressed in light clothes to better feel the cool weather, leave the puppy and the wife behind without a word; could walk to the new friend's house, pick her up for a late lunch and then a movie, and then more coffee, talking about the movie and what it meant and how there was a time when movies were everything, when it was all you did and dreamed. A possible escape. A movie-sized window to freedom.

Could repeat the next day and then, when the workweek starts. Could repeat the next evening and evening and evening and evening after that. Could have unbelievable sex, the kind that feels absolutely nothing like the palm of the hand, which had become a staple of the sad marriage diet once lived (and also, a sacrifice for the marriage, as it was not an affair but a way to stave off the need for one; but a sacrifice for the marriage that was stupid because apparently affairs are the thing to do in a dying marriage if you feel like doing it). Now, new diet, naked skin, salty taste, alive and humming beneath, above, around. Joy. Pleasure. Inspiration.

Wake one morning at her house and go home and pack the suitcase and take the leash down from the closet and clip the puppy on and walk with the suitcase and the puppy to this new life. Promises. Travel. Wine. More wine. More nakedness. Someone loves you. This is freedom.

Or maybe it would just be a rebound. Regardless, these things don't happen. Still in pajamas and sandals, for one thing, trying not to stare too hard at someone you don't really know. Need to take care of

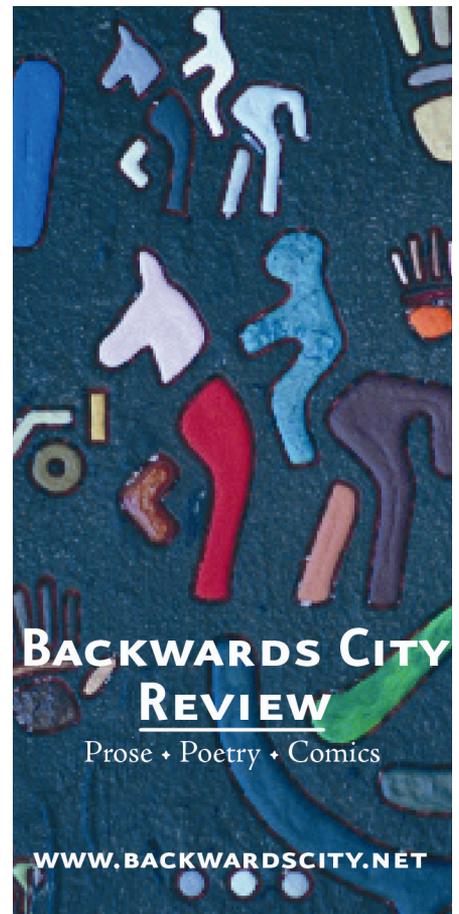
some things first. Some people have a conscience. She has one (the female walker, not the wife). It's easy to tell. Look them in the eyes and it's easy to see.

Mutter something with a half smile. Female walker smiles, pets puppy, rises, says, "See you around."

She walks past, and there is a sugary smell that lingers, a shampoo without a name. Walk in the opposite direction, but the puppy doesn't budge.

The puppy watches her go; the puppy whines.

See something altogether familiar in the poor puppy's eyes.



Rescue on Route 17

by James Mackie

1.

The Stafford County Rescue Squad ran code, lights and sirens in the dog lamenting night, when the sheriff called to have you picked up out on Route 17. They found you wandering toward the town lights and the phone call you had to make to report evil invading your car, the car you left by the side of the road because you would not ride with evil.

You would rather walk, and walked in your fuchsia slippers of knit acrylic shaped like footwear for gnomes. You said damn that car, damn that evil come to drive you down the road. The sheriff stopped you, your oversized white t-shirt was billowing like a sheet pretending to be a ghost on Halloween. Cold winds were pushing the damp weeds along the road.

2.

The phone woke me, lugged me out of the 3 a.m. dream. I was chased in slow motion through crumbling buildings, a stairwell spiraling down and leading to a floor covered with cracked, dusty bricks, becoming a beach lapped by rolling waves, the calm ocean made a sort of peaceful music.

The nurse's report was a monotone all description and fact. I thought of some Buddhist text about suffering and liberation.

3.

At the hospital you were laughing, sitting on the edge of the Gurney,

eating a ham sandwich on white bread and dangling your loose bell-bottom jeans in the air, pink acrylic slippers sparkling in the Emergency Room lights.

"I can't do two things at the same time, and eating and thinking are two things," you said, and reveled in layers of pink ham, mayonnaise squishing out of the edges, caught by your tongue that retracted like a snail into a shell. Your teeth were shaped by years sucking your thumb. Your devotion to purpose was unique, there in the chaos of stretchers, nurses, and needles.

4.

You said you would talk with me, think about going into the hospital. You didn't want me in your business, not your REAL business. "It's private stuff," laughing then crying in a rhythm that almost matched the waves that rolled to shore in my dream. We were close to an understanding then.

We agreed the nature of night was difficult to determine, many things harbor in the dark. A night in the hospital hidden from evil would do you good, you decided. I knew I would soon return to the beach's calm waters, and lie down once again as a child trying to remember my one prayer.

The Last American Chestnut Tree on Forest Street by Matthew Mulder

The chestnut tree has fallen and its
remains are scattered about the land.
It was the last chestnut on Forest street.
The blight destroyed the tree in less than six months.
From over the mountains came three men,
strangers, and cut its limbs in small portions;
logs made for a man to stack, dry and burn.
In less than two hours the strangers worked up
the tree and left after telling the cycles of nature
and of God and of chain saws that cut trees.
The man with a tattoo of a nude woman on
his right forearm warns to always carry your wallet in
your breast pocket when passing through Chicago.
The man who pissed behind the woodshed has
a naked female tattooed on his right forearm and
told of a winter and a flood and how God uses
these cycles to purify the earth.
The other stranger only hitched his pants
and spit tobacco into the bushes.

What remains of the chestnut tree must be fed
into the open mouth of an empty woodshed.
Piece by piece, stacked along the south wall,
the whole wall from top to bottom, side to side.
The pain of labor enters the body like splinters,
sweat rolls down a naked back during the afternoon's sun.
There is no shade but in the shed, iced tea quenched
the thirst but soon the shoulders and back ache as
the second wall of lumber is created.
A new thirst comes quickly; a new cycle of weariness.
The naked arms, chest, legs are stained with
the tattoo of splinters and bark etching a message into epidermis.
Each mark reminds of the chestnut--the last chestnut of Forest street.

You begin with a shout from that labor that bore you to the labor you love.

Contributor Biographies

James Mackie has a Masters degree in English from the University of New Mexico. He is currently working as a Mental Health Therapist at the Rappahannock Regional Jail in Stafford, Virginia.

B. Seckinger Ash was born and raised in Helen, GA. He graduated from the University of Georgia. He lives in Athens. That is all.

Jamie Allen is an Atlanta-based writer, editor for a line of fairly practical nonfiction books, and also one of the ducks and/or herrings of Atlanta's Duck & Herring Co. literary star factory.

Matthew Mulder works as a New Products Manager for a national weekly news magazine and has had several pieces of writing published, including articles, poems and essays. He's from Asheville.

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