Beach beach beach! Laine Cunningham gives us a peek while Lara Falberg raves;
Christopher Major's high, Ally Motola's plaint and A. J. Jackson's heat.
Marty's *Paper Cuts* and *The Dream Journal*. Breeze it, buzz it, easy does it...

The Blotter

MAGAZINE

JULY 2007

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Cover art: Something manipulated in Photoshop with no explanation. And there's no centerfold. Hefner never pulled crap like this on his watch.

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De Gustibus Disputandum Non Est

You may already have noted the lack of a pictorial centerfold this month. It is not for a shortage of visuals submitted to us. We do, however, have an abundance of summer reading for you to tote to your fave shore venue.

Some M.B. Eaddy types have recently given us the bum's rush, claiming that The Blotter deters their customers from fullest intended enjoyment. We're not certain what the problem is. Our pictures? The words? The sentence structure? Subject matter? Perhaps our choice of three column page format. Or our font selection. Please tell me it's not because of Mary Jane Antique! And I'll admit to using "rather" rather than "instead" and occasionally mixing metaphors. I suppose that this could get under someone's goat.

Ah, well. What can you do? If we shadows have offended, think but this and all is mended: Blah, blah, blah.

How long has it been since we asked for money? Well then, let's not cheapen this moment with maudlin pleas. If you like what you've been seeing, why don't you get your lazy, narrow ass out to our website and donate a couple of bucks. Or send a check to Uncle Marty's address over there, and we'll add a subscription as a premium for your trouble. Don't leave us hanging.

Sorry. I've had an attack of gout recently, and it makes me irritable. We could really use the money, and it's probably our upbringing that makes it difficult to ask for donations. Don't believe me? You don't think it's hard being a Lutheran writer named Garrison?

As an, ahem, literary endeavor, we're a bit more interested in the art, science, history and minutiae of words than your average fellow walking down the street, unless that fellow happens to be, say, Reynolds Price hoofing along Ninth to

snare a burger at Elmo's. Anyway, without belaboring this preamble, suffice to say that we were recently thinking about similar sound strings in sentence structure.

The Hawaiians named one of their common experiences - the flow of lava - either (phonetically) "ah-ah" or "pa-hoi-hoi", depending, naturally enough, on the molten rocks' consistency. They're almost playful sounds, rather than the ignominious igneous end of the world. In Japan, I am told, one answers the phone "mushi-mushi?" I would like to know if that is really a standard manner of saying hello, or if it is rather like being from Philadelphia and shouting "Yo!" to Father Carmine to throw down a blessing just in case I get busted up in tonight's fight.

The associative repetitive alliteratives in perfectly appropriate sentences often make me stop and think. For example, is it OK for appliance repairmen to have a love of ovens? Or might historians reference the conquistadores questionable relationship to the Church as, "out there they're their own men." Should Londoners wonder "Are our R's articulate?" Or have we retreated into the realm of low humor, with the nyuk-nyuk, the knock-knock, the poke-eye and the punny?

I don't know. Still, I occasionally wonder about the salesman who dreams of customers visiting his store before four for forty percent savings. Maybe I'm not getting out enough. No, that's a given - I really don't get out enough. You must decide for yourself, though. Did Ian Fleming ever imagine typing, "Odd-Job's secret remained just that: that that hat that he wore was a deadly weapon." Only MI-5 knows for sure.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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CAUTION

The Blotter *may contain certain words or ideas that offend. Or will probably offend. Either way, we're sort of sorry, and sort of not. Like a precocious child, you have to love us and hate us simultaneously. Life is weird that way.*

"The Precious Dead"; an excerpt from the novel "Message Stick" by Laine Cunningham

When a man dies in the desert, he is completely alone. At thirty-nine, Ian McCabe knew this simple fact. He had spent most of his life working the demanding seasonal jobs that kept Australia's rural towns alive. He had seen a flat tire turn deadly, and knew that beauty and danger were the sisters that bore the land.

Ian was not a tall man but a shock of blond hair added inches to his height. Quick blue eyes and a steady aim were useful in his career as a kangaroo culler. Every night the slim .22 found its target between the shine of an animal's eyes. On cattle stations hundreds of kilometers wide, engine trouble and the bite of the brown snake posed constant threats.

Ian's white Land Rover was nearly twenty years old and it still ran like a lizard drinking—nonstop and practically unstoppable. In the rear a skillet, bedroll and a case of green beans were strapped onto narrow shelves. A bottle of port nestled in its own padded compartment, and a few golf clubs were tied to the wall. Sleep, slurp and sport, he called the collection, everything a man could want in one mobile space.

He eased the truck down the track. The spur was rough, really a strip of earth scraped clean of boulders, but it saved nearly half an hour. Besides, the less traveled a road was, the happier Ian felt. Cities, he knew, were for suckers. Why squeeze into a rabbit hutch when the outback was right next door?

This area, so close to the Davenport Ranges, was typical of the Northern Territory. Wide plains of twisted mulga trees reached southwest to Alice Springs. A network of creeks and rivers that ran only during the Wet sustained gum trees taller than most buildings. Cockatoos raised their young in the hollow trunks, and after a rain lorikeets gorged on the nectar in the blossoms.

Grass was sparse, edged out by the ubiquitous spinifex that cut flesh as cruelly as broken glass. Only the toughest creatures survived and half-feral Brahma cattle were the breed of choice. To a rancher beleaguered by drought and debt, every blade eaten by native animals robbed them of beef. Roo shooters were always welcome. And judging by the sun, Ian would arrive at the station house in time for dinner.

A flash of metal caught his eye. Through binoculars, he watched a red SUV beetle across the property. The truck stayed behind the ridges and moved slowly enough to keep its dust cloud low. The same stealth kept Ian from sight as he followed.

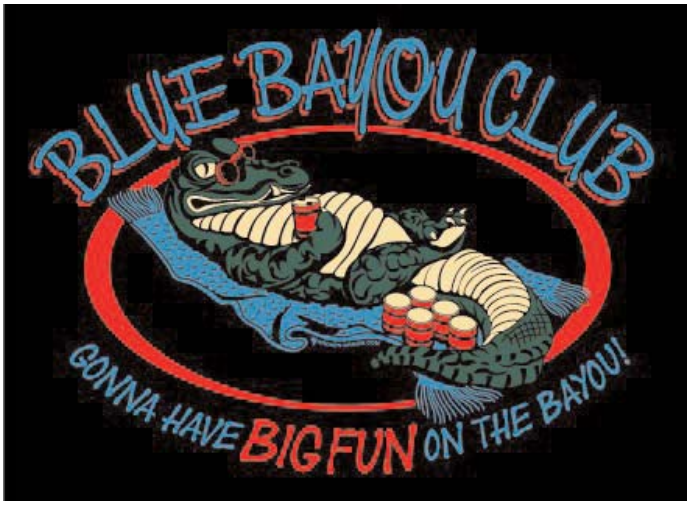
Eventually the trespassers parked beside a hill topped by a stone pinnacle. Ian stuffed the Land Rover under a mulga tree and watched as a pair of men hiked up the slope. The first, a sturdy white fellow about thirty years old, clutched a rifle. His legs were bowed so severely he rocked as he mounted the boulders.

The other man, an Aborigine who might have been in his sixties, moved steadily upward. He was wiry yet had the grace of a predator. The outback was filled with men like them, drifters who found the bush far removed from the law.

At the top, the elder found a cleft in the rock. From this cache he retrieved a board nearly as long as his arm. Ian had seen dancers perform with similar objects and knew they were supposed to be magical. The cubby surrendered perhaps a dozen other artifacts. All would fetch a small fortune on the black market.

While the older man worked steadily, the bowlegged bloke couldn't keep a proper watch. First he rubbed his nose with the back of his arm. Then he adjusted his shorts. He scanned the landscape, rifle at ready. Then he swatted a fly. Rubbed sweat through his hair. Tugged at his crotch. Abruptly he was alert again, scowling while the gun grew hot in the sun.

As they retreated, the Aborigine erased his footprints with a leafy branch. Ian let the SUV jangle out of sight before picking up the trail. They traveled



faster now and corkscrewed across their original path. When the spur intersected a paved road, dusty tread marks headed toward the Stuart Highway, the only paved north-south road through the Territory. The pair could pick from dozens of unmarked byways. The artifacts would disappear.

Ian pushed the Land Rover to its limit. Although the old truck handled beautifully in the bush, it was as sluggish as a fly in winter. The needle was still climbing when Ian saw the red SUV parked beside the highway. If he pulled over, the men would surely notice when he followed them later.

The Toyota, a new model free of dents or scrapes, faced the road. The younger man smirked and the lines around his mouth twisted. Again Ian was struck by the elder's expression. White pipeclay severed his forehead and chin, and his face was a jigsaw of violence.

"So you've seen me," Ian murmured, "and I've seen you." He adjusted the rearview mirror but couldn't make out the tag number.

A roadhouse a quarter-hour away was a convenient place to watch for the men but they never appeared. It was possible they had turned east toward the coast. More likely they had dodged off into the bush. As night covered the sky, Ian had plenty of time to consider his next action.

He didn't need a fraction of it. The kangaroos could wait.

* * *

Thousands of kilometers to the east, Gabriel Branch loaded the last of his bags into the hatchback. At six feet tall, Gabe barely fit behind the wheel even with the seat pushed all the way back. But the rear compartment was roomy enough to hold all his diving gear, and the hatch was easier to use than a station wagon. He squeezed in and steered for the coastal highway out of Townsville.

The next few days would be spent an hour or so south on the Whitsunday Islands. In the forty-five years Gabe had lived in Queensland, he rarely traveled more than a hundred kilometers inland. The neighbors never quite understood why his vacations didn't take advantage of the expansive desert at their back doors.

They didn't understand the...complications of Gabe's life. Oh, they knew about Aboriginal land rights issues that had consumed the media for decades now, and had heard about the children adopted by white families in an effort to assimilate the race. But they didn't know what it was like to be caught by those issues against their will. Only a biracial Aborigine who had been assimilated at the age of three could tell them that. And Gabe wasn't talking.

Nor was he interested in drawing attention. Black faces were scarce in Australia, so he stuck close to the coastal cities that hosted international travelers in all their rainbow colors. He blended in better there and no one asked many questions about his background. Even if they had, they would have been met with silence.

Silence had kept his life on the smooth, orderly track he worked so hard to create. Last week he had hit a bump—a big bump—in his relationship with a Jamaican woman. Chance hadn't been in the country more than a few years. But she had some definite ideas about how much Gabe should say about his experiences and how loudly his voice should sound.

They had fought about it more of late. He supposed it was the same with all couples, as if money or household chores or work schedules were the cause of their problems instead of a symptom. Whatever the real reason, Gabe and Chance had split up last week. Ostensibly the separation was temporary, just a little breathing and thinking room, but Gabe knew where that would lead.

If Ian had been available, Gabe would have talked things over with him. In fifteen years of friendship, the men had seen each other through a number of breakups. None had been as serious as Chance, though, and Gabe wished Ian would call. He already

missed her rapid-fire commentary and her odd machine-gun laugh. Before the split, Gabe had been thinking of proposing. But courage in one person required courage in the other. And that, he knew, was the real reason their separation would be permanent.

When Ian did call, Gabe heard only the clack of sugar cane as he sped past the farms.

* * *

Ian tracked the men for days without coming within twenty kilometers of the truck. The outback was so big and its population so small, a little luck and a few calls let him keep tabs on the thieves as they passed through different roadhouses. At a tourist site called Devil's Marbles, a vendor remembered the odd pair and pointed to a faint track heading west.

When he located the Toyota, he parked some distance away and hiked in for a better look. Perhaps a dozen coffins had been removed from crevices in a wadi. The thieves were stealing bodies. Ian trotted back to the Land Rover and gunned the engine, all but honking to make sure they heard as he rattled toward the ridge.

The thieves took the hint. After the Toyota disappeared, Ian walked into the gully to inspect the damage. The coffins, each a cradle for the precious dead, were lined up in the center. Tarps and coils of rope had been left behind, along with cigarette butts and candy wrappers. The urine drying on the cliff face was still sharp.

Then Ian spotted the truck tucked under a ledge. It was the same one he had seen leave, he was sure of it. The guano he had noticed days earlier was still smeared on the side window. Yet the culvert had no other entrance except the one he had just walked through.

A bullet spun him off his feet. He heard nothing, not even the echo of the shot, as his shirt soaked in a red tide. The blood was brilliant at first, like the eyes of the metallic starlings that congregated around his boyhood home. He saw the Aborigine kneel beside him and his breath fled past his tongue.

The man was older than he had thought, much older, and carried with him the aura of ancient things. He wore little more than a string belt, a pair of shorts, and bands on his arms and legs. Tufts of cockatoo feathers framed a radiant face. On his chest a swirl of dots and circles, made hypnotic by his breath, pulled Ian into a galaxy of red.

He was terribly confused. He tried to separate the ringing in his head from his memories. *They ran away,* he thought. He had *seen* them drive across the plateau that drained west of the escarpment, had watched them until they were out of sight. The tire tracks he had crossed floated in his mind. Only one set of tracks, he realized. The truck had never left. How could he have been so wrong?

As if to offer comfort, the elder caressed Ian's forehead. The man's hair, shot with gray, looked nutmeg. It was as if his great age had worn the shine off the strands and leached away the pigment. His eyes were luminous, though, beyond the touch of time. Ian thought of the dingoes that gazed into his spotlight. The dogs always waited, knowing he would leave the kangaroo's heart and liver and kidneys for their feast.

Suddenly he understood. This man was a shaman. Ian had been lured into the culvert just as he had been tricked into speeding down the highway. He smiled and reached up.

"There, now," the man soothed, and flicked his blade across Ian's throat.

"Last night I dreamt I was a chicken"

by Lara Falberg

I must be a phenomenal actress. I can't believe the faith people instill in the gobbledegak I spew their way, and then they pay me for the pleasure. I guess some people just don't have enough to do with their money, and they don't believe in charity. I share an office with a hypnotist. Who the hell knows if he can really do it. I don't see him or his clients. We both get the rent bill in the middle of the month, and we both pay half. I have the space from 8a.m. till 12:30p.m., and he has it from 12:30p.m. till 5p.m. Then Allen and Dari, the couple who own the space, teach an art class every weekday evening from 6 to 8. I have only met the hypnotist thrice. He had auburn muttonchops, and a noticeable but not unattractive gap between his teeth. I am always out by 12:25, and he's always running late. I am a dream-analyst. It's ridiculous. My training is in social work, and I just developed a schoolgirl interest in dreams, so I read a lot of books. I started analyzing my friends' dreams, and then they started referring people to me who wanted to give me money or chickens to analyze their nighttime subconscious thoughts. It's better than acquiring food stamps or free housing for people that are not me. Do I sound selfish? I should, because I very much am. I didn't go into social work because I really wanted to help people. It just seemed like an easier major than engineering or even English. Ugh, all that reading and pretending to understand the layers of meaning and innuendo in novels written two hundred years ago by people who only knew the people in their families and the guy from whom they bought apples. Anyway, I had to pretend to be interested in really helping people and empowering them to have better lives by being, maybe the first person ever, to really believe in them, and take an interest in their lives. Wow, that actually sounds pretty self-serving if you think about it. People like to help others so they can feel good about themselves. Okay, that was definitely part of the allure as well. People love to hear they have a big heart. This is different than an enlarged heart, although some people have both.

Back to my career. So, I started out by meeting my clients at various coffee shops or at their homes. I stopped doing the home visits after a woman left a note for me on the door telling me to let myself in. She had left a trail of tulip-petals for me, which I had disclosed were my favorite flower when asked, leading to the bathtub. In the tub she was laying in a very unnatural position, with one leg draping over the tub and the other leg was suspended in the air as she lovingly carved a star into her leg. I not-so-calmly asked her what the *%#$ she was doing, and she told me she kept dreaming of stars, so she wanted one permanently with her, but she didn't want a tattoo because they are too trendy. The coffee shops worked for a while, but then I had a client who kept running into people he knew and introducing me as his girlfriend, sister, or even mother once. It was also a source of contention that he'd make a big deal about having my favorite drink, chai latte with skim, waiting for me when I arrived, then deducting it from my fee.

I needed office space, since I was seeing approximately seventeen clients a week. I saw an ad renting space in an artist studio directly above my favorite little coffee hang. It turns out the hypnotist found our space the same way. It was the only way they advertised it, so not such a cute story. It was cheap, not filthy, and not so distracting that I couldn't focus on what people were telling me. Plus, right next door was a studio were two guys, big, sneering men who were always looking at every other man as if to say, "I know you are thinking or about to think or say something that I can somehow construe as an insult and I will pummel you, then stick my fingers up your nose and carry you around like I'm casually holding my girl's purse." They practiced meditation and played gin. Every morning. It was comforting to know they were there, and when either saw me, they would demote the sneer to a minor scowl and grunt something in the way of "Good Morning Lass." I think they were Scottish, not sure.

One of my clients kept dreaming a monster resembling something out of a lagoon was chasing him. I only say that because I was just thinking about Scotland, but you get the gist. Then after he stops running and hits one of those climbing walls with the foot and hand-holds that look like large pieces of Bubble-Yum, he turns around and it's a little girl holding a clove cigarette in one hand and a brown

leather pump with a broken heel in the other. When he stops and looks at her, she says to him in a charcoal voice, "You ain't trying to leave me and them, are you Roy?" His name is Kevin. Obviously this is about his mother, and the girl he married who is just like her and the daughter she is pregnant with whom Kevin fears will become another yet, trashier version of them. Roy? We figured it's his alter ego whom he rejects yet can't escape. He seems satisfied with this explanation, and is now trying to figure out how to leave them all behind, and use his uncommon skill of lighting a cigarette off his chest hair, flipping the cigarette in his mouth, flipping it back out again, putting out the fire on his chest with one beat of his left fist, then flipping the cigarette back in his mouth and swallowing it. I sent him to a career counselor.

So now it's 11:33, and my client was a no-show, so I head down to the coffee shop, something I rarely do this early. I'm more of an evening caffeine-needer. I see Mutton Chops/Gap Tooth immediately. I suddenly become self-conscious about if my bra can be seen through my sheer white t-shirt. He's not looking at me, which makes it hard for me to make casual eye contact. So, I begin to sing a 10,000 Maniacs song under my breath, cause I fancy myself a Natalie Merchant sound alike. He looks up, but looks irritated with me for singing, but I don't stop right away. Then he recognizes me, and because my peripheral vision is outstanding, I see him acknowledge that he knows me, hesitate, and then opt not to speak. Dammit. I sit at the table next to his. There, that's it, that's the only thing I'm going to do to make this easy. Why the hell do I care? Whatever. I pretend to read. Then he finally speaks to me. Oh, but it was so worth the anticipation. He says to me, "Shannon, you sometimes forget to lock the door, and I wish you would try to remember." It was filled with innuendo and double entendres. Well, he knows my name, so that's a good thing. Wait, again, not sure why I care all of the sudden? This man puts people into a receptive state of semi-consciousness for a living. He walks them though open fields or into castles or pyramids. He tries to access recesses of their brains that are meant to be under Level 12 security. He's a freak for this, but I pretend to understand people's dreams and get lucky and hit what they think is the nail and make them feel all understood and that they've had epiphanies and break-throughs, and I'm a fraud. So we are two frauds who don't really want to work for a living but just want to live in make-believe places and deal with semi-reality. He might be the one.

So, I respond to his statement. "Vic, I apologize, I am bad about that at my apartment too. I will be more cognizant of it from now on. But, I have one question: Why does it matter if I lock the door since it is just a room with a love seat, two chairs and small desk? There is nothing to steal, plus you come in right after I leave."

"Shannon, in theory, that is true, but it is not our space and we don't own the things in that room, and it's disrespectful to Allan and Dari if we don't lock up."

"Okay Vic, I'm with you. It will not happen again."

"Thank-you."

Now I didn't know what to say. I felt scolded as if I had taken two cookies instead of one, when I had been explicitly told only one. Now I was sure it looked like I was trying out for a wet t-shirt contest. Now I thought maybe he and I would not fall in love.

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.

mermaid@blotterrag.com

i was watching "deal or no deal" on board a cruise ship. it's not clear whether it was on TV or whether i was in the audience. the contestant was a middle-aged guy, not in great shape. he was only wearing a pair of nylon soccer shorts. i thought this was bold, since he was kinda flabby and hairy. soon enough, after he was jumping up and down, his respectably large johnson ended up falling out of the leg of his shorts. he was mortified. howie mandel laughed and laughed.

then i went on a brief tour of the cruise ship, and it had some cool recreational amenities. i was bummed out because i didn't have my favorite sunglasses and had to make do with a cheap pair that were hard to see through. i forget some of the things that happened, but there was another family with me, and i had to kinda bite my tongue to be nice to them.

then i was back home in athens, pushing two boxes down the street. one was very heavy, and i had mailed it to myself from the cruise ship, but i had no idea what was inside. it was some sort of christmas present, either *for* me or *from* me *to* a bunch of other people, and i had forgotten. the other box was light and didn't matter too much. i was worried that just pushing them down the street was damaging the bottom box, so soon enough it was like i was driving the boxes like a truck.

then, suddenly, the road was full of snakes and other reptiles. i was amazed that there were so many, and i tried not to run them over, but there were some necessary casualties. it was now clear that the heavy box was presents for other people and i had to deliver them, and the safety of the snakes couldn't be my primary concern.

J. P. - Athens

Paper Cuts: Books You Might Not Have Read

by Martin K. Smith

Agatha Christie:
The Mystery of the Blue Train (Dodd Mead & Company,1928)
4:50 From Paddington (Harper Collins, 1957)

These are the two books that first got me hooked into the murder-mystery genre. My grandparents lived in England briefly during the Fifties, and brought back a whole set of Christies – English paperback editions, marked with exotic English prices like "2/6", two shillings sixpence. I was maybe in third grade, already a voracious reader and hard-core train geek; there were the books on Grandpa & Grandma's shelves; and both titles invoked railways. (Paddington is the London terminus of lines to the west of England.)

Agatha Christie (1890 – 1976) was touted as head girl among Brit mystery writers, and colloquially known as "The Queen of Crime". She was prolific and successful, certainly, if not the most skilled author around. Her writing rarely rose above pedestrian. Her characters had no great depth or nuance; one reviewer called them "pasteboard figures". Her plots could be fantastically improbable, relying on things like disguises, switched identities, missing heirs, elaborate contrivances, and deft sleight-of-hand slipping of exotic poisons into the teapot. (My mental picture of her is a stout matron with grey hair and a somewhat perplexed expression, as if saying "They tell me the British Empire has collapsed. Goodness, whatever next?") Then again, they neither needed nor were intended to be Great Literature. They were "for entertainment only", as the astrology ads say; and as entertainment they did their job. I never worried much about solving the murders, as I quickly learned that the detective explains everything at the end – "Lord Least-Likely, in the Orangery, with an untraceable Punjabi poison." I was more intrigued by that fascinating semi-parallel world called Everyday English Life: tea at four, dinner at eight, and an extra "u" in words like "colour"; local trains to rural villages, with a Vicar in the Vicarage and an Ancestral Stately Home nearby; and those intriguing exotic beings called Servants: butlers, maids, cooks, valets, gardeners and so on. (Servants were unknown in my childhood suburbs, save for an occasional cleaning lady.) Everyday English life was what Christie knew, and what she did best. Her stories have a quality I can only describe as "charm" – an adjective with which I risk nauseating ironic hipsters everywhere; but so be it.

Blue Train, written early in Christie's career when she was still finding her voice, has more extravagance than everyday-ness. (She revealed in later years that it's one of her least favored works.) Ruth Kettering, daughter of hardass American millionaire Rufus van Aldin, is a headstrong woman with a passion for jewels. She's married, not happily, to handsome, raffish, secretly broke Derek Kettering, who'll become Lord Leconbury (complete with Ancestral Stately Home) once his aged parent has ceased to be. Derek has been keeping company with an exotic creature named Mireille, who pursues twin careers as ballet dancer and expensive mistress. (She hangs all over him, calling him "my Dereek", when she's not busy smashing bric-a-brac in fits of Temperament.) She also has a passion for jewels. Ruth meanwhile has rekindled her youthful hots for Armand, Comte de la Roche – only he's not really a Comte, just a slick handsome gigolo / swindler / blackmailer. He too has a passion for jewels, preferably other people's. And it just so happens that van Aldin's latest gift to his daughter is a fabulous necklace containing the "Heart of Fire": "one of the three largest rubies in the world; once worn by Catherine the Great."

Meanwhile, there lives in a small country village a woman named Katherine Grey. She's spent the past ten years as a "paid companion" – a uniquely British arrangement, where girls of good pedigree but no money go to live with elderly ladies as amateur housekeeper / nurse / gofer / extremely patient listener to the same old elderly-lady anecdotes over and over again. Katherine's elderly lady has just died and left Katherine her savings, which, lo and behold, turn out to be an Enormous Fortune. Katherine's distant cousin on the Riviera, Viscountess Rosalie Tamplin, takes a sudden interest in this no-longer-poor relation and invites her down to meet Society. So Katherine utters the well-pedigreed equivalent of "What the hell," buys herself a London wardrobe, and books a com-

partment on the Blue Train, ultra-swank express to Nice.

Everyone who is Anyone in '28 takes the Blue Train; and nearly everyone is on board that night: Ruth, Derek, Mireille, Armand the bogus Comte – and the celebrated private detective Hercule Poirot, who befriends Katherine over dinner in the diner. The next morning they arrive to a shocking discovery: Ruth has been murdered, and the rubies are nowhere to be found!

Much of *Blue Train*'s charm lies in its galloping naiveté. The portrayal of Riviera glitterati is Christie talking completely off the top of her head. She was an ordinary middle-class gal from Torquay, so I doubt she'd spent much time among the heights of wealth and title. I also suspect she had little firsthand experience of Eurotrash bogus-aristocrat gigolos, exotic predatory mistresses or hardass American millionaires. (The Americans in her early books are a hoot. They all seem to be Wall Street tycoons with Old-New-York Dutch names, but talk like, and sometimes are, rootin' tootin' shootin' cowboys. Van Aldin uses the adjective "durned" in everyday conversation; and on hearing from Ruth about Derek's adulterous adventures, "his face darkened [and] his mouth set grimly in the line which Wall Street knew so well.") Van Aldin sends his very proper, very British secretary Major Knighton to Derek with an offer: £100,000 for an uncontested divorce.

"And in the event of my refusing his handsome offer?" [Derek] asked, with a cold, ironical politeness.

Knighton made a deprecating gesture. "I can assure you, Mr. Kettering," he said earnestly, "that it is with the utmost unwillingness that I came here with this message."

"That's all right," said Kettering. "Don't distress yourself; it's not your fault. Now then – I asked you a question, will you answer it?"

Knighton also rose. He spoke more reluctantly than before. "In the event of your refusing this proposition," he said, "Mr. van Aldin wished me to tell you in plain words that he proposes to break you. Just that."

Kettering raised his eyebrows, but he retained his light, amused manner. "Well, well!" he said. "I suppose he can do it. I certainly should not be able to put up much of a fight against America's man of many millions. A hundred thousand! If you are going to bribe a man there is nothing like doing it thoroughly. Supposing I were to tell you that for two hundred thousand I'd do what he wanted, what then?"

"I would take your message back to Mr. Van Aldin," said Knighton unemotionally. "Is that your answer?"

"No," said Derek; "funnily enough it is not. You can go back to my father-in-law and tell him to take himself and his bribes to hell. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," said Knighton. He got up, hesitated, and then flushed. "I – you will allow me to say, Mr. Kettering, that I am glad you have answered as you have."

This early Poirot is a piece of work too; almost a caricature of himself, with his vast pride and extravagantly fractured syntax.

"A thousand thanks for your hospitality, Mesdemoiselles," he cried; "it has been a most charming luncheon. Ma foi, I needed it!" He swelled out his chest and thumped it. "I am now a lion – a giant. Ah, Mademoiselle Katherine, you have not seen me as I can be. You have seen the gentle, the calm Hercule Poirot; but there is another Hercule Poirot. I go now to bully, to threaten, to strike terror into the hearts of those who listen to me." He looked at them in a self-satisfied way, and they both appeared to be duly impressed, though Lenox was biting her underlip, and the corners of Katherine's mouth had a suspicious twitch.

(Lenox, in case you were wondering, is Viscountess Tamplin's sardonic teenage daughter.) These characters, mores and posturings all feel pastiched out of the pre-World War Edwardian pop culture Christie grew up with: romantic novels, stage melodramas and early silent films. (I can see Erich von Stroheim directing, and Theda Bara as Mireille…)

Christie is more sure-footed in scenes of ordinary people having ordinary conversations, like between Lenox and Katherine.

"Why did you come?" [Lenox] said at last. "To us, I mean. We're not your sort."

"Oh, I am anxious to get into Society."

"Don't be an ass," said Lenox promptly, detecting the flicker of a smile. "You know what I mean well enough. You are not a bit what I thought you would be. I say, you have got some decent clothes." She sighed. "Clothes are no good to me. I was born awkward. It's a pity, because I love them."

"I love them too," said Katherine, "but it has not been much use my loving them up to now. Do you think this is nice?" She and Lenox discussed several models with artistic fervour.

"I like you," Lenox said suddenly. "I came up to warn you not to be taken in by Mother, but I think now that there is no need to do that. You are frightfully sincere and upright and all those queer things, but you are not a fool. Oh hell! what is it now?"

Lady Tamplin's voice was calling plaintively from the hall: "Lenox, Derek has rung up. He wants to come to dinner to-night. Will it be all right? I mean, we haven't got anything awkward, like quails, have we?"

(Awkward, you ask? Well, if you've got six quails and a seventh guest turns up, somebody'll have to go veg. or go without.)

Another sign of that sure-footedness is quietly funny character sketching. Before leaving the village, Katherine goes to visit her late elderly lady's elderly friend Miss Viner.

"And you're going up to London to have a good time? Don't think you'll get married, though, my dear, because you won't. You're not the kind to attract the men. And, besides, you're getting on. How old are you now?"

"Thirty-three," Katherine told her.

"Well," remarked Miss Viner doubtfully, "that's not so very bad. You've lost your first freshness, of course."

"I'm afraid so," said Katherine, much entertained.

"But you're a very nice girl," said Miss Viner kindly. "And I'm sure there's many a man might do worse than take you for a wife instead of one of these flibberti-

gibbets running about nowadays showing more of their legs than the Creator ever intended them to."

Miss Viner's remarks are prescient: *Blue Train* has a strong romance-novel angle, as in Who Will Katherine Choose: handsome Derek the possible wife-murderer, or painfully upright, hopelessly devoted Major Knighton? Katherine in her normalcy becomes the story's touchstone, the reader's stand-in, living out the Cinderella fantasy of sudden immense riches, and of being raptured to the heights of wealth and fame but arriving with one's old self intact. Here she's buying her London wardrobe from a famed couturier: "[She] spoke with a certain *naiveté*. 'I want, if I may, to put myself into your hands. I have been very poor all my life and know nothing about clothes, but now I have come into some money and want to look really well dressed.'"

Poirot meanwhile is busy chasing down the murderer (no, I won't tell you who it is), whose capture allows Katherine to get her man (won't tell you who he is either). As is often the case in Christie's mysteries, the murderer's actions and persona as a murderer are so at odds with their character as portrayed in the story that the whole murder plot takes on a haze of not-quite-reality; unreal like Mireille's temperaments or Armand's suavities or Van Aldin spooking Wall Street with a frown. But Katherine comes through the dazzle of exotics and eccentrics and melodrama with her head still on straight – and with a fortune too.

* * * * * *

So the decades pass, like a movie cliché of pages turning in a railway timetable; and on an evening in the late Fifties, Elspeth McGillicuddy takes the 4:50 out of Paddington to visit a friend in the country.[1]

…she sat up and looked out of the window at what she could see of the flying countryside. It was quite dark now, a dreary misty December day – Christmas was only five days ahead. London had been dark and dreary; the country was no less so, though occasionally rendered cheerful with its constant clusters of lights as the train flashed through towns and stations.

About an hour out of London, a local train running in the same direction draws up alongside.

At the moment when the two trains gave the illusion of being stationary, a blind in one of the carriages flew up with a snap. Mrs. McGillicuddy looked into the lighted first-class carriage that was only a few feet away.

Then she drew her breath in with a gasp and half-rose to her feet.

Standing with his back to the window and to her was a man. His hands were round the throat of a woman who faced him, and he was slowly, remorselessly strangling her.

Luckily, Elspeth's friend in the country just happens to be Miss Jane Marple, Christie's other best-known sleuth. When the carcass is not discovered anywhere, she deduces that the murderer tossed it from the train at a remote spot, then returned to collect and hide it. Research with timetables, maps and directories leads her to suspect Rutherford Hall, stately home of the Crackenthorpe family. And since she's too old to be chasing down murderous types herself, she calls in an ally:

Lucy Eyelesbarrow was thirty-two. She had taken a First in Mathematics at Oxford, was acknowledged to have a brilliant mind and was confidently expected to take up a distinguished academic career.

But Lucy Eyelesbarrow, in addition to scholarly brilliance, had a core of good sound common sense. She could not fail to observe that a life of academic distinction was singularly ill rewarded. She had no desire whatever to teach and she took pleasure in contacts with minds much less brilliant than her own. In short, she had a taste for people, all sorts of people – and not the same people the whole time. She also, quite frankly, liked money. To gain money one must exploit shortage.

Lucy Eyelesbarrow hit at once upon a very serious shortage – the shortage of any kind of skilled domestic labour. To the amazement of her friends and fellow-scholars, Lucy Eyelesbarrow entered the field of domestic labour.

Her success was immediate and assured. By now, after a lapse of some years, she was known all over the British Isles. It was quite customary for wives to say joyfully to husbands, "It will be all right. I can go with you to the States. I've got Lucy Eyelesbarrow!" The point of Lucy Eyelesbarrow was that once she came into a house, all worry, anxiety and hard work went out of it. Lucy Eyelesbarrow did everything, saw to everything, arranged everything. She was unbelievably competent in every conceivable sphere. She looked after elderly parents, accepted the care of young children, nursed the sickly, cooked divinely, got on well with any old crusted servants there might happen to be (there usually weren't), was tactful with impossible people, soothed habitual drunkards, was wonderful with dogs. Best of all she never minded what she did. She scrubbed the kitchen floor, dug in the garden, cleaned up dog messes, and carried coals!

Lucy lands a housekeeper job at Rutherford Hall and meets the Crackenthorpe clan, heirs to a cookie-and-canapé fortune. Luther the patriarch is what we'd nowadays call "high-maintenance": bad-tempered, boastful, miserly and a hypochondriac. Daughter Emma is resigned, patient and never-married. Harold is a businessman in London; Cedric a painter on Ibiza, Alfred a small-time shady operator in various disreputable locations. Brother Edmund was a fighter pilot who didn't make it through the War; sister Edith passed some years ago, leaving husband Bryan Eastley and son Alexander.

Lucy in her spare time hunts for the corpse, and soon finds it, reposing in a sarcophagus. Scotland Yard is called in; and by coincidence the Inspector they send is an old friend of Miss Marple's from previous cases. Meanwhile, various Crackenthorpes have begun expiring due to poison, while the rest discuss the question of Martine, the long-lost French war bride Edmund may or may not have married, and who may or may not have turned up again, either as the dead body or as a live

contender for part of the family fortune. Miss Marple soon figures everything out, and even tricks the murderer (no, I'm not telling) into a confession.

Christie here is in her prime. The murder setup is clever, the pace and plotting competent. The characters are still kind of archetypical: prickly patriarch, dutiful daughter, sons raffish, rebellious and respectable – but more fully drawn; they're maybe 2 ½ dimensional, and drawn from everyday English life rather than silent-film melodrama. Miss Marple, a gentle, kind, shrewd little old lady, was always more credible as a character than Poirot, even after Christie toned him down in later books. There are even flashes of what, from a distance, could be seen as talent:

[Harold] looked across at [his wife]. She was watching him. Just for a moment or two he wondered – he didn't often wonder about Alice – exactly what she was thinking. That mild gaze of hers told him nothing. Her eyes were like windows in an empty house.

There are still flashes of naiveté, though they too are toned down. Harold is "a City gentleman and a director of important companies," whose firm's office shows "prosperity and the acme of modern business taste." It's a false show: "there were no rumours going around as yet about his financial stability. All the same, the crash couldn't be delayed very long." Christie never tells us what exactly Harold and his companies do (finance? investments? property management? making window blinds for British Rail trains?) or how they got the financial shakes, because she doesn't know – and realizes she doesn't know – much about big business. (She once said "I don't do miners talking in pubs because I don't know what miners talk about in pubs.)

Lucy becomes the book's central character. (Miss Marple plays a consultant role, sitting in her parlor and listening to the information Lucy brings.) Like Katherine Grey, she's a sensible, levelheaded person.

"I simply can't make you out," said Cedric Crackenthorpe. He eased himself down on the decaying wall of a long derelict pigsty and stared at Lucy.
"What can't you make out?"
"What you're doing here."
"I'm earning my living."
"As a skivvy?" He spoke disparagingly.
"You're out of date," said Lucy. "Skivvy, indeed! I'm a Household Help, a Professional Domestician, or an Answer to Prayer, mainly the latter."
"You can't like all the things you do – cooking and making beds and whirring about with a hoopla or whatever you call it, and sinking your arms up to the elbows in greasy water."
Lucy laughed. "Not the details, perhaps, but cooking satisfies my creative instincts, and there's something in me that really revels in cleaning up mess."

All the adult male Crackenthorpes hit on her – even old Luther, who assures her there's "lots of life in the old dog yet." She doesn't pick any of them, although Miss Marple hints at the end of the book that she will.

That always bugged me a little: it implied that she'd be giving up her independent life and successful, profitable domestic-goddess racket. I didn't mind Katherine Grey getting hitched, figuring she'd earned it in all those dreary years as a poor-relation paid companion; but I enjoyed Lucy because she was smart and independent and thought up such a clever career scheme. (There was never any doubt in my mind who'd play her in a movie version: Diana Rigg, in her *Avengers* / Mrs. Peel days.) I wonder if the creation of Lucy wasn't a bit of wishful thinking on Christie's part. Her childhood home was fully staffed with nanny, cook, gardener and a varying assortment of housemaids. Ruth Kettering and Mireille both have personal maids; Derek and Hercule Poirot are each equipped with valets; and Katherine has the following conversation with Miss Viner about a housemaid:

"…and tell Ellen she is not to have holes in her stockings when she waits at lunch."
"Is her name Ellen or Helen, Miss Viner? I thought –"
Miss Viner closed her eyes. "I can sound my h's, dear, as well as anyone, but

Helen is not a suitable name for a servant. I don't know what the mothers in the lower classes are coming to nowadays."

But by 1956 when *4:50* was written, Christie was living with the same sort of dilemma Emma Crackenthorpe faced: trying to run large houses, designed for Edwardian-era-sized staffs, in a postwar world where willing, skilled, reliable servants were rarer than snowballs in August, and had to be placated rather than instructed. Lucy goes to tell Emma about the freshly discovered body:

"Can I speak to you a moment, Miss Crackenthorpe?"

Emma looked up, a shade of apprehension on her face. The apprehension was, Lucy thought, purely domestic. In such words do useful household staff announce their imminent departure…"Yes?" said Emma. "What is it? If you think there's too much to do with the boys here, I can help you and –"

As in *Blue Train*, the murderer's behaviors as a character seem quite unconnected from their doings as a murderer. For that matter, the surviving Crackenthorpes don't show any of the psychological devastation one would expect in people who've seen their siblings nastily done in by arsenic. I think that just as Christie was not an expert on Blue-Train-level aristocrats, she likewise had no personal acquaintance with murder and its extended effects. (The "who" in her whodunits takes second place to the "how" and "why".) Everyday English life is so much her strength that the murder element can feel like a bloodied intruder who's blundered into a garden party, where everyone is too polite and English to remark on his incongruity. It's no surprise that Christie and Christie-esque mysteries are sometimes called "the Cozy school".

The two ladies had supper, discussing, as they ate, various aspects of life as lived in the village of St. Mary Mead. Miss Marple commented on the general distrust of the new organist, related the recent scandal about the chemist's wife, and touched on the hostility between the schoolmistress and the village institute. They then discussed Miss Marple's and Mrs. McGillicuddy's gardens. "Paeonies," said Miss Marple as she rose from table, "are most unaccountable. Either they do – or they don't do. But if they do establish themselves, they are with you for life, so to speak, and really the most beautiful varieties nowadays."

Yet at the end of 4:50 there is this notable passage: "'Everything he did was bold and audacious and cruel and greedy, and I am really very, very sorry,' finished Miss Marple, looking as fierce as a fluffy old lady can look, 'that they have abolished capital punishment because I do feel that if there is anyone who ought to hang, it's [the murderer].'" (Who'd have thought the old gal to have so much bloodlust in her?) Mysteries of the Christie-cozy school rarely go into the sordid details of trial and sentence. The murderers just disappear from the story after their arrest. There's no mention of how the prisoner will be taken one morning to a tall building called the execution shed, given a tranquilizer, fitted with a black hood and a noose, and dropped through a trapdoor until the rope snaps their neck, causing death by suffocation or shock or whatever it is. Instead, the clever detective and the nice man from Scotland Yard discreetly remove the bloodied figure, letting the garden party go on as if nothing untoward had happened. But I think about things like execution-sheds; and their non-mention leaves a dark psychic gap in the stories.

I wonder what might have resulted if Christie had set out to write a straight novel with no mystery element, a sort of English Life Without Bloodshed. She had the material: family dynamics, village vignettes, a touch of romance, servant situations; a full range of comfortable British archetypes, living in the England of the times: still a bit bruised from the War, muddling through as best it could in a world where neither the pound nor the Empire went as far as they once did. I think she had the chops to produce quietly witty, observant light social comedy, along the lines of Barbara Pym's novels. Perhaps a tale where Katherine Grey, now of matronly years, hires Lucy Eyelesbarrow for a stint of housekeepery. They could trade domestic shoptalk about Katherine's amateur paid-companion days versus Lucy's professional career. And noone would have to be murdered: the Blue Train and the 4:50 could whistle their separate ways corpse-free.

[1] *4:50 From Paddington* has appeared at times under the dreadful American names *Murder She Said* and *What Mrs. McGillicuddy Saw!* Silly Yank publishers – those aren't proper mystery titles, they're tabloid headlines.

"Turkey"

by Christopher Major

Its cramped,
walls so thin
the banging
and screaming
really carries;
you can hear
every word.
No matter,
I usually just
float aimlessly
from 'fix' to 'fix'
or curl and sleep
'til woken by withdrawal.
I usually cope,
but not with these,
these pains are
something else,
something different.
This time
the pusher's
landed me in
the shit.....
a midwife's taken
me in her arms.

"Happy Hour"

Earlier in the day
he hunted brontosaurus
on the town roundabout,
studied the Turin Shroud
on the mottled glass
of a pub's shithouse door.
As the mushrooms waned,
he fuelled via
the neon screams
of '2 for 1' liquor shots
while he searched
for pussy.
She lay awake,
awaiting the scratch
of a key and
the barrel locks roll
that turned her to sleep;
so unaware that life
had devalued sufficiently,
'breathing unaided'
was now coined 'good news.'

"He": an excerpt from "Two"

by Allesandra Motola

A tryst of two begins at last
A violent convulsion – What, so fast?
And to my Dismay
There he lay
Awaiting some kind of reward for his actions.
But he could tell from my reaction
I was in no mood to play
So there he lay, flustered in such way
I couldn't help but snicker
And insulted by my lack of compassion, he couldn't have left any quicker.

"First Dream"
by A. J. Jackson

We lived on apples
You with dark hair to cover
Your smooth breasts
But thinking not
About the rest

The clouds opened and
Revealed a hand and
From the tips sweet drops
On the waxen the leaves
And then onto our hair

As is agreed upon we
Did not travel far
There was nowhere
To go to get anything
It was already here
As we saw it was here

But of what we saw
There were no animals
Nor other humans
But we did not look for them
They were not missing
There was not a hair

And out of this place
Came others other places
We saw them the same
The trees and leaves
And clouds out of oceans
But never again those
Colors in the sky
If you from me no proof

The air was thick
With what
Seemed like a breath
In the breeze
It blew your hair
Into my eyes

No track or mark
Of us or anything
Lay in the sand
If there were they were
Blown away instantly when
I opened my face
To the wind

Some hair reached
My mouth
I knew not whose
And cut it with my teeth
And then
It was over

CONTRIBUTORS

Laine Cunningham says that her novels weave the tales and beliefs of different cultures and religions through modern stories. Her second novel, *He Drinks Poison*, sets the story of an FBI agent tracking a serial killer against the backdrop of the Hindu epic "The Ramayana". Plus, there's some bodacious kinky sex.

Lara Falberg sends us these notes. Long, awfully funny notes about wanting to be an advice columnist. We've explained to her that this is a literary magazine, but that doesn't faze her one bit. Faced with this, we'll probably do the column. What can I say?

Marty Smith is the leader of the pack. Vroom.

Christopher Major is trying to become a psychiatric nurse and lives in Staffordshire, UK. His poems have appeared in many online 'zines and journals as well as UK print mags, including *Outprints* and *Pennine Platform*. And that's shaken, not stirred.

Allesandra Motola is a world traveler of mixed Sicilian/Colombian heritage and states that she is "not your typical suburbanite". She also chides us not to think "that just because of my age I won't have anything to offer."
Yes, ma'am. I mean, no, ma'am.

A. J. Jackson was born in Oconee County, Georgia, but feels at home in Montana and Idaho. Yet, for some reason he lives in Bogart, Georgia. All of this is too confusing. Just read the poems.

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Tai Chi-tahs vs. Atlanta Rollergirls

~~APRIL 22~~ : Sunday : Double Header
Tai Chi-tahs vs. Trauma Queens
Debutante Brawlers vs. TBD

~~MAY 20~~ : Sunday : Double Header
Tai Chi-tahs vs. Debutante Brawlers
Trauma Queens vs. Tragic City RD (Birmingham)

~~JUNE 9~~ : Saturday : Championship
1st Place Team vs. 2nd Place Team
3rd Place Team vs. Dominion Rollergirls

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