

*Mere child's play; a story by James DeMonte; poems by wolfiewolfgang;
a new Paper-Cuts; a new Best In Show;
The Blotter's "Best Of" List; and The Dream Journal.*

The Blotter

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MAGAZINE



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When I say go, you press release. Ready?

Front cover "One Person On The
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by Beatrice.

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"Rules of the classroom"

A few idle thoughts. We received a note from a fellow in Cambridge, MA, chiding us for what he sees as the illogic of our claiming to be *apolitical*. One can't be apolitical, he mused, because inaction effectively rewards someone, whether one cares or not. At first, I fussed at him for being a stiff, but in fact he's quite correct. I realize that we have used the wrong word. We're not apolitical, actually. We're quite political. To say that we're non-partisan is more accurate. Or call us lazy because we don't want to get into an agenda tinged contest.

We are, however, excited about our fiction contest. It was something we'd been mulling over for a year or so, trying to decide if it was the right thing to do and what would the details entail, so to speak. Rules are really important with something like this, a contest, because people often feel cheated in life, by circumstance and action, and we didn't want to add to that. Writers can be touchy about their work, and want, simultaneously, to be praised and judged fairly. Give me the good and bad news, doc. So with some help we came up with our contest rules, and hope that everyone is satisfied. There's no telling, of course, until the thing comes to a boil.

Speaking of rules, my younger daughter, Bea, just started second grade. Her teacher, rather wisely, has the class thinking about behavior inside and outside the school. How should we act in class? What can we do, and what shouldn't be done? Bea took this all very seriously. She brought home a piece of class work that deserves review, I think. It's her list of classroom rules, illustrated, naturally, and labeled "I think these rules would be good for our classroom." They are as follows:

- 1) **No littering. Put things in the trash.** (This is just good thinking. Start with Disney books where all of the bad characters are interesting and the good characters are often rather bland. I mean who do you love, Cruella de Vil or the pipe smoking, piano playing pinhead that owns the dalmatians? On family TV night I find myself constantly editorializing, "Isn't that woman mean?" "Yes, Dad, but she drives the cool car." And what kind of lesson is that for a seven-year-old?)
- 2) **No head butting each other in the stomic.** (English soccer hooligans, take special note.)
- 3) **No kicing each other in the leg.** (Quite right, quite right. Kick each other in the backside. That's why it's there, for heaven's sake.)
- 4) **No pocheching.** (Although this could have read *no poaching* – we do have deer on the estate, you know - I thought it meant *no pushing*.)

Possibly in Slovak, a language I wasn't aware she even knew yet. Bea doesn't like being pushed, but will push when the situation warrants it. As the younger sister, she often gets picked on and has to follow big-sister's rules of every game, which can't always be fun. But in the end, she confirmed with me that it's *no punching*. A pretty hard and fast rule in our house is that punching is saved for bullies and only after seeking assistance from the teacher two times. An imperfect rule for an imperfect world. The girls have been taking karate lessons for some time now and occasionally sock each other, but Bea has heard me explain the punching rule many times. So I've been waiting and watching to see how she deals with bullies on the playground and at the pool. Can you say "short shrift?")

5) **No tackling.** (That's tackling, of course. Like any good Chapel Hillian, she's worried about the safety of this year's Tar Heels. So, no tackling them, guys. Two hand touch, if you please.)

6) **No scratching.** As in, "...your eyes out." ("Nuff said! This may have come up in a Hannah Montana episode, but I could be wrong. Where are those fingernail clippers?)

7) **No pulling hare out.** (Now, it should be explained that we have rabbits outside, two big old black-and-white hutch bunnies named Kiki and Gabriella, so this could go either way. I'm thinking, however, that someone at school pulled someone else's tresses, and as they say at the pound, that dog don't hunt.)

Well, as you can see, second grade is still a tough place, as tough as I remember when Mary Ann used to throw up every time Miss Muller was absent from class. So wash your hands after recess, don't leave books open on their spines, stay away from the library paste no matter how hungry you are, and only one person on the slide at a time, OK?

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com



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CAUTION

Everything in moderation. Take the bad with the good. Raise your hand if you have a question. Play hard, but play fair. Win if you can, lose if you must. Finish your lima beans. Brush your teeth.

“Communion”

by James B. DeMonte

Louis first met Carl at Jackson's Sewer Pipe, and could only recollect that Carl had gained a reputation as an excellent fitter. His hands were calloused and hard, but they shook now and sometimes looked like they were vibrating. From what Louis remembered, Carl could have worked most anywhere. Carl wasn't a drunk like so many out of Pipefitters Local 396, though he enjoyed a glass of beer one day and a glass of wine the next while at Lakeside. He had saved his money, as far as Louis could tell. He had heard Carl would sit in the back of Pelligi's Grocery in the old days, after hours, but only to watch the men play cards.

When the two met at Jackson's Sewer Pipe, their interaction was brief. Louis stayed for six years, while Carl was on his way out. Louis remembered that Carl was about several years behind him in school, at St. Michael's. Louis left before what it is now called junior high, while Carl nearly stayed through high school graduation. This was about all Louis knew of Carl prior to their living arrangement. Now, Louis found his life shared with what was once an athletic, quick-witted Polish man (an irony to Louis), judging by the trophies, rubics cube, and accordion

sitting atop Carl's shelf.

“When's that preacher coming, Carl?” Louis asked, removing the flannel cover from his face. He had been awakened by Carl's morning exercises which consisted of briskly walking circles around the cramped room.

“Oh, I suppose so,” Carl said.

“Damn it, Carl, when's that preacher coming? It is Sunday, isn't it?”

“Oh, I think he should have been here by now.”

Louis glanced at the alarm clock, a gift from Renee that previous Christmas which was always positioned by his bed and whose alarm was never set. 6:23 AM, it read. The preacher never arrived until after Sunday services. Louis began to pull the covers back over his head.

“You want a muffin? They got muffins, I think. Blueberry ones, probably,” Carl asked Louis as he halted his circles.

Louis nodded. When Louis worked in the mines or on side jobs for family he never took muffins or cakes or sweets. He would take a couple of bananas often. One in his back pocket and one in his hand when he'd leave home in the morn-

ing. He could eat them quickly and toss the peel, without having to stop.

“How about some coffee too? They got that good coffee down there. Cream? Sugar?”

“That'd be all right,” Louis responded.

Carl took off. Louis expected him back in about an hour or so, after Carl made all of his morning rounds. Louis pulled the covers over his head, and slipped into what had become all too routine: no sleep, but rather a haze that stole more and more of his day.

It was probably around seven or eight o'clock when Carl returned to the room. “Hey, 'ol buddy, you want a muffin? Maybe some coffee?”

Louis was convinced that Carl had been sharp at one time, before he was thrown in here. Sharp or not, Carl was happy. Louis didn't respond this time and kept his cover in place.

“Be back in a minute, 'ol buddy,” Carl said, as he left the room in a scurry.

As had become customary, Louis knew upon Carl's return, he'd have a muffin and coffee, black as Louis preferred, just in time for Renee to take the two to breakfast. It didn't take long, and Carl arrived as Louis had predicted. Renee followed.

“Oh, I see Carl has something for you. Carl, honey, why don't you set that aside,” Renee, the young, heavyset nurse said. She

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took the muffins and coffee from his hands and placed them on the table. "We'll head down to breakfast now."

Carl had left in the middle of Renee's sentence.

Louis turned away from Renee, in his bed. "That's all right," he said. In the morning, turning over to one side or the other was about the extent of Louis's movement. His legs, once like tree trunks from a life of duckwalking in the low mines of Ohio's most northern Appalachian counties, oddly placed below a slim waist and narrow hips, now looked more like those of Speedy, his little beagle, right after it was maimed by the German shepherd up the road. If you looked at them when he'd wear pants during the daytime, the material fell over the bone and the legs looked crooked and busted underneath, like someone had taken a sledge and hammered an aluminum pole every which way.

"Let's go, Louis. Breakfast is waitin'." Renee pulled the covers off, coaxed Louis to sit up, and hoisted him into his wheelchair.

As Renee wheeled Louis into the cafeteria, he peered into most of the doorways on the way. There were those he knew and those he didn't, but at this place, they were all the same, regardless of what they dug, what language their fathers spoke, and what kind of suppers their mothers had fixed. He noticed that Red Hoss was missing

from the room he typically was tied up in with all those tubes. He asked, "Where's Red?"

"Oh, they took him to Sisters of Mercy last night. That flu took just about everything out of him."

"Should have buried the bastard ten or twenty years ago. A regular, first-class bum."

"Louis, you don't mean that," Renee said, as she wheeled him next to Carl.

"What do you say, 'ol buddy?" Carl was rubbing his sleeves furiously. "Rub, Louis, rub," Carl said quickly. "It warms it up. Makes it hot." Carl worked the nylon sleeves at a remarkable pace. He continued, "Truck drivers wear this material to stay warm, I suppose. They break down, they can rub the night away!"

Louis glanced at the hot oats that had been placed in front of him.

"Eat some oatmeal, Louis," Renee said. She placed the spoon in his hand.

"No thanks. None for me."

"It has brown sugar. You like brown sugar, don't you, Louis?" Renee winked.

"Never tried it," Louis said as he laughed and softly tossed the spoon back towards the table. It missed and fell to the ground. Louis moved his arms back and folded his hands over his lap.

Carl continued to rub. Eyes that were barely visible through the wrinkled slits on his face focused

deeply on the Henry's Asphalt jacket. He said, "I wonder how they engineer a material like this." Carl moved his hands to his belly now. "Why don't you give a rub? Feel that warmth. Piping hot!"

Louis didn't feel like eating anything at all. He hollered to Renee, who had gone for a minute to talk with some of the other help by the fruit bar, "Hey there, Borango,"—Louis got a big kick out of the fact that this young black woman was engaged to an Italian named Borango—"let's get going."

"Louis, you didn't touch a thing," Renee yelled back. She slowly approached and then wheeled him to his room. While Renee would roll Louis down the hallway, he kept his hands folded on his lap and stared straight ahead. Often, he would move his feet on the ground as fast as the wheels would move.

Two hours later, Carl entered the room with the preacher. Carl said almost nothing to or in front of the preacher on Sundays. He nodded and stared while Leon Jeffries read Bible verses. Louis sat in the plaid recliner that had been placed on the platform by his bed. He sat with his face covered, the blanket pulled over him. Jeffries hadn't spoken to Louis much, beyond simple pleasantries, since Father Ralph began bringing Louis Holy Eucharist (though Louis hadn't taken communion for twenty or thirty years prior to his stay at

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Lakeside's Golden Community, outside of an occasional funeral). The preacher must have noticed Father Ralph's absence on this Sunday, Louis figured. The Bible-toting, part-time insurance salesman approached Louis, whose covered face was hard to maintain while sitting up.

"And how has your roommate been, Carl?"

Louis kept his eyes shut.

"Lou, how are you?" Jeffries asked as he leaned in.

"Never been better, buddy." Louis didn't open his eyes.

"Lou, I thought maybe you'd like to join Carl and I in prayer." Jeffries moved his hand towards Louis's.

Louis didn't respond, as he curled his hand into a fist so that Jeffries could neither hold nor shake it. He had opened his eyes now, but peered outside, where three or four inches of snow had fallen. This is why Father Ralph must be late, he figured. He stared at the snow. He remembered driving the county's one ton. It was a green Ford, and was similar to the orange International that Louis's brother had found for him shortly after he retired for good.

After he quit the coal and clay, and after six years at Jackson's Sewer Pipe, Louis finished out his career for the county's road and bridge department. In the winter time, back when you could count

on real snow, terrible blizzards, Louis'd drive the one ton and dump ash and salt along the roadways. When Louis worked on the county, there were at least seventy other men there at any given time. He had heard the county was down to eighteen or nineteen now.

"How about I just leave you with this?" the preacher asked. He placed a King James Bible on Louis's night stand. A Catholic Catechism sat nearby, unread and dusty, under a copy of Lakeside's Golden Community Newsletter. Louis hadn't ever read a book, not that he could remember anyway. His older brother, Sam, had read constantly, from the time they were boys, enough for the both of them, Louis figured. Sam left St. Michael's the same time Louis did.

"Do you think you might read this when you get a chance?" the preacher asked as he tapped the Bible with his fingers.

"Sure, all the time. I can't get enough of it, buddy." A year or two ago, Louis might have still had the energy to tell that preacher that there wasn't anybody that ever lived here that was coming back to save anybody else.

"Lou, there's still time. Jesus always has time for anyone interested in becoming Christian. In being saved." The preacher began to walk away, as Carl quietly sat with his own copy of King James's Bible in his lap, unopened. He

smiled as Louis spoke up.

"Let me ask you something, you say Jesus has time? Time for what, I wonder?" Louis asked, now speaking with a little more pep.

"Time for you, Lou. Time for anyone interested in turning their lives over to him."

"For what? Give lives for what? What the hell does he give back?" Louis's cover had fallen to his lap, and he put his glasses back on, having retrieved them from the nightstand.

"An opportunity, Lou. An opportunity to live in paradise. Eternal. At the feet of the Lord. Eternal worship."

"And what about if I don't give it to him? What do you say happens if I stay as I am and have been? What then?"

"Lou, I think you know." The preacher's words stretched slowly as his face started to grow red. "I don't have to tell you."

"Tell me, goddamnit." Leon Jeffries, a tall, lean man, broad-shouldered and slim at the hips, couldn't have been used to anyone challenging him like this. He became visibly riled as he said, "Hell, Lou. Hell. Forever suffering."

"Then what is this? What in the hell is this?! What am I doing here?"

The preacher was now red-faced and shaking hard. His voice grew gravelly as his square jaw pressed towards Louis's face. He said, "Lou, you've got an opportunity, an amazing opportunity to become Christian—" The preacher gathered himself and continued, "Lou, this, this place, it isn't the end."

"To hell with you. And to

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hell with anybody who thinks he can die and come back to save anybody else. I want to tell you something: I never had to save no souls and Jesus Christ never had to dig number seven coal. You ask me, he and I are square." Louis took off his glasses and placed them back on the nightstand.

Carl remained smiling, hands folded and resting atop his Bible.

The preacher grabbed his coat, hat, gloves, and scarf. He didn't look at Louis as he said, "Lou, I feel sorry for you. Your body may be broken, but your mind is whole. But now, now you've let your spirit decay. The Lord has no place -"

"Good. Good, goddamnit. Let the weasel have it. He can have my place." Louis motioned towards Carl as he said, "What do you say, buddy, want my place with Jesus Christ?"

Carl smiled and sat in place.

"I have to leave. I'll see you next Sunday, Carl." Leon Jeffries exited and traveled down the hallway, towards Maria Monticelli's room. Surely, she'd proposition the spry, sixty-something man of considerable height, even in his agitated condition.

Carl sat still, as he always did when the preacher exited the room. This was the only time of the week that Carl remained still in a seemingly meditative state. It usually lasted for close to an hour, at least forty-five minutes, before something would break his concentration. Normally, Carl would stand up, place the Bible next to his First Place Piedmont Bass Competition golden trophy, and walk out the door. Louis grabbed his covers, pulled them up and over his head, and began to drift. About twenty minutes into this state, Louis awoke to Carl's mumbling. Louis ignored him at first. He heard him again, though, and this time, it was clearer.

"You're right, I suppose." Carl smiled still.

"What? About what?"

"Oh, about Jesus Christ."

Carl had gained Louis's attention, more than usual. "And Reverend Jeffries and Heaven and Hell and life and death, I think."

"Hell, I just planted a seed and got him going. That was all. Goddamn dummy."

"Do you really believe in any of it, though?"

"No," Louis said. He continued with a little more energy, "No, to hell with it. Just keeps guys like that Jeffries boy in business. That's all."

"What?" Carl asked.

"Keeps 'em in business. Guys like the preacher." Louis spoke louder.

Carl removed his ball cap and cupped both hands to his right ear.

"Nothing."

"Oh." Carl put his cap back on and continued, "I do think you're right, though. When I was a kid, I had trouble believing in any of that business. One thing I knew, though, at the time anyway, is my mother survived."

"What?"

"My mother was widowed at thirty. Five of us to raise. She had only two or three things keeping her going. Kids and Jesus Christ. The Holy Mother too. Hell, any kind of god wouldn't have thrown her out like that. But I went to church, every day. Mass, every Sunday. When I was a kid, I went. Learned Latin, served. And when

Mom couldn't go on her own anymore, I drove her. She died years ago now. Ten, maybe." Carl stopped, removed his cap again, scratched his head, and said, "No, wait, probably twenty or thirty. Quite a while anyway."

"I drove my mother too. My dad never went, not that I can r e c a l l ."

"You been back since?" Carl asked.

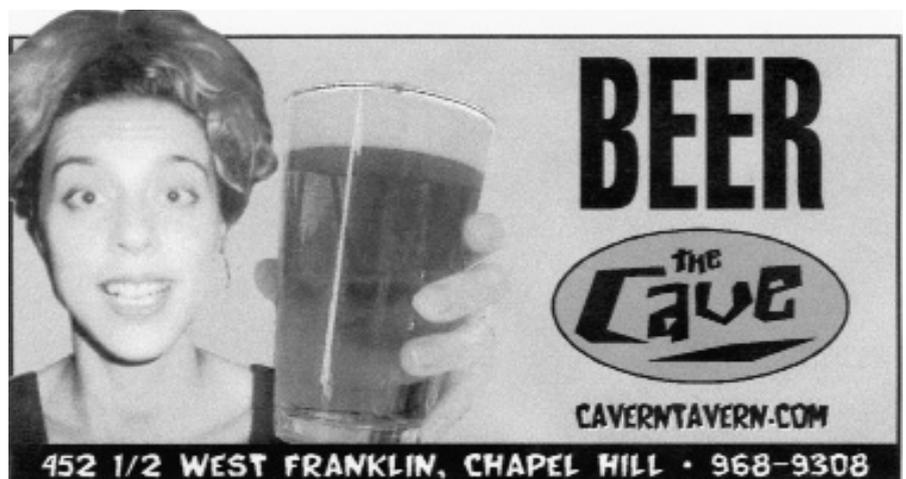
"No. Not outside of a funeral."

"Me neither." Carl stood from his bed where he had been sitting, placed the Bible next to his trophy, and left down the hallway.

Louis pulled the covers over his face. At about four-thirty, Renee entered the room with Carl close behind her. She asked, "You ready for supper, Louis?"

Louis dropped the covers from his face and heard a fast swooshing sound. The brisk movement of Carl's palms on his Henry's Asphalt nylon jacket filled the room.

"Heats me up, Star," Carl said as he smiled towards Renee. She was helping Louis into his chair for supper.





A big Arctic howyadoin;

In the September issue you tossed down the Gauntlet to produce a "happy-snap" of me and the Blotter in a cool place. I interpret "happy-snaps" to mean photographs and have a couple attached here. I'm spending a little time up here in the sub-arctic working for the Army and had a few days off. So, I hopped in my nifty little Toyota Camry rental car and took the pavement as far north as I could without violating my rental agreement. That little satellite antenna on the roof likely keeps track of these things so I behaved. Believe me when I tell you, I was out there. It was me, the occasional semi rig loaded with oil drilling pipe, one or two heavily loaded pickups with recently harvested moose heads pokin' out the back and that was it. The last cell coverage was 75 miles to my 6. No wires, no call boxes, no nuttin'. Needless to say I was real careful turning around as the road is built up high over the permafrost with steep, deep ditches bilaterally. Anyhoo, my turn

around was about 100+ miles of kidney bruising, tire bustin', windshield crackin', no nobody, very badly abused dirt and gravel road south of the Arctic circle, just about 5 miles north of a dot on the map called "Livengood" (go figure) and about 150 miles south of a town called Coldfoot where it is rumored to have gotten to (-)82F or so one winter not too long ago. I can understand "Coldfoot" but "Livengood"? Something like the eye of the beholder comes to mind. What also comes to mind as a way of explanation of this line of thinking is that famous Alaskan women's saying about the ratio of the number of men to women. "The odds are good but the goods are odd." Likely the name Livengood is a derivative of that equation.

Anyway, I believe that I may have made a great discovery, one along the lines of that famous Charlton Heston line, "You have to tell them! SOYLENT GREEN IS PEOPLE!!" Take a close look at one of the happy-snaps and see if you can decipher the code. Have fun. Here's a hint. I can't help thinking what the impact of alternative energy methods will have on hog jowl futures. See you when I get back.

Richard Lewis
The Banks, Alaska (for now)

We're looking for pix of you and The Blotter. Don't be shy. We know you're all slightly whack when it comes to social networking, so don't even try. Send 'em to readers@blotterrag.com, and we'll LOL and be BFF.

The Blotter's Best -Of List

by a bunch of us hanging out in Carrboro, NC

A Triangle, NC, weekly does an annual thing called "The Best Of...", which contains all of the finest (read "most popular") restaurants of each cuisine, saloons, shops, theaters, and so on, for the enlightenment, entertainment and amusement of its readers. It's nicely done, (and feel free to check it out at www.indyweek.com). We at The Blotter have been thinking about this for a long time – as we think about everything we do, because we are slow thinkers. It's all well-and-good to have a best of list, but it needs to go beyond the brick-and-mortar and reach out to the cosmos, where we do most of our real living. Hence, ahem, The Blotter's first annual Best Of the places we know to do stuff list:

1) Now that you've bought your Best of the Triangle burrito (at our own fave – *Carrburritos*) better get it to go. Take it to **The Best Place To Eat A Burrito** (or any other portable gustatory delight) **And Watch People Play Real Football** – Henry Anderson Park on 54 just west of Carrboro. This is where our Latino brethren gather to relax and get pickup soccer games going. It's more fun than watching the college teams practice. In fact, if you crave vast confusion and silly fun, pick any soccer field in the Triangle during Rainbow Soccer. Seeing carload-lots of kids running pell-mell with no regard to the rules (or even the point) of association football is real entertainment. I watched one field of sixteen kids inadvertently kick their ball onto another field with its own game already in progress. The full complement of ankle-biters ran onto the other venue and everyone continued to play there, four teams and two balls. The coaches fell out, parents toppled over with laughter, and everyone agreed that soccer – confusing, silly, and as much running around as the end of the old Benny Hill Show – is probably America's game.

2) **The Best Place To Sleep In Public** – There are a bevy of pretty

good spots - just follow the kids - but if you're not between the ages of 18 and 21, it's hard to pretend you're a student between lectures. If you must nap outside your own crib, carry a copy of HTML/XHTML for dummies. Open it to any page and close your eyes. Anyone looking at that will decide that you are a lateral-career-mover and understand precisely how you nodded off.

3) **The Best Store To Wander Around In Without Buying Anything** – PetSmart. I don't know anything better for your blood pressure than watching tropical fish do their thing. I'd own my own tank, but my cat would think it was take out sushi. Do you like cats? There are usually one or two waiting for adoption. (We dare you to watch without making a plan to talk your roommate into getting a tabby named Groucho.) And nobody working in the stores has any illusions that you've come in to purchase – they're there for the pets, too. Stand and stare as long as you like. If you're hungry, the custom kibble isn't half bad, grab a handful.

4) **The Best Place To Have A Public Discussion** – The chairs outside 9th Street Coffee Shop in Durham. Raise your voice over a certain secret decibel level and anyone-and-everyone is allowed to join in the argument, whether it's about the fall of Western Civilization or the nit-witticism of Kanye West. Let things get too heated, though, and you'll probably have to spot everyone to a latte.

5) **The Cheapest Rainy-Day Sit Down And Never Be Hassled Spot** – Barnes and Noble. You can't sleep here, but you can get a book and start reading. It's like a giant lending library, only you've forgotten your library card. If anyone asks if they can help you, tell them you've been looking for a copy of Jack Kerouac's "Some of the Dharma." If they come back to tell you it's not in stock – ask them why Amazon always has it in stock, and watch them stalk off in a huff. See, that's no hassle at all, isn't it?

6) **The Best Sunrise** – 64 East on the Pittsboro side of Jordan Lake. Just pull over and watch Mom Nature do her thing. Bring hash-browns from McDonalds for munching. If you're worried about the state troopers rousting you, pop your hood and tell them your Camry overheated. This is particularly effective if you're not even driving a Toyota.

7) **The Best Fishing Spot** – The lake at the IBM fitness club on Davis Drive in RTP. Why? A: There are a lot of bream in there. B: It's fun to fish while the suits sweat it out during lunch before they go back to the budget meetings and blamestorms. And should rent-a-cops ask what you're doing – shush them and point with a frown to your ear facing away from them as if you're wearing a Bluetooth and are on a conference call.

8) **The Best Church Service** – Chapel of the Cross Episcopal in Chapel Hill. Old building, old pews, old Books of Common Prayer. You put down an ancient pillow to kneel for prayer. The place even smells old, like Cotton Mather is about to give the homily. Everything squeaks and groans for your sins. You'll empty your wallet into the offering plate, and gladly. If you can't make a Durham Bulls game, go to church here. Walk away, as the man says, feeling like you've been dipped in magic waters.

9) **The Best Cheap-Date That Doesn't Feel Cheap** – Lowes Foods, (grab a French baguette, a small tub of spreadable butter, a packet of provolone cheese, a quarter pound of sliced low-sodium ham, a bunch of red seedless grapes, a bar of 65% cacao chocolate and a small bottle of Gallo hearty burgundy). Bag it – make sure you have the three B's – bottle opener, bread knife and a blanket. Then off to Lumina in Southern Village on one of its outdoor-movie nights. Cobble yourselves a *sandwich-jambon* and chow down. And don't let anyone give you a rash about the Gallo – they've been making blended burgundies since before Merlot was an English sorcerer.

Paper-Cuts - Books You Might Not Have Read

by Martin K. Smith

Pride and Prescience

(Carrie Bebris, Forge Press, 2004)

Jane and the Man of the Cloth

(Stephanie Barron, Bantam Books, 1997)

There is a young lady of my acquaintance whose honour and reputation, I begin to fear, might be at risk. The lady, Miss Jane Austen by name, has come to dwell in a realm known as the Public Domain, a place which, like the Vauxhall Gardens of her own day, can harbor many perils to a person's propriety and good standing.

For the first exhibit, my lords, I put forth Miss Carrie Bebris's novel *Pride and Prescience*. It takes up where *Pride and Prejudice* leaves off. Mr. Darcy has married Elizabeth Bennett, and Mr. Bingley has wed Elizabeth's sister Jane. At the joint wedding breakfast, Caroline Bingley tries to steal the show by announcing that she too is now engaged, to Mr. Frederick Parrish, a wealthy Louisiana plantation owner. After her wedding, she begins doing strange things. The Darcys, returning from Drury Lane Theatre one night, spy her walking through a skanky part of London, with no

coat, bonnet, or escort, and with a bulging reticule on her arm, attracting the attention of every rogue and cutpurse within range. Darcy routs them with his manly scowl, but when they get Caroline safely home, she has no memory of how, or why, she went to that part of town. Then her normally placid horse spooks and bolts with her on board; and then, one morning, she's found on the kitchen floor with what seem to be self-inflicted knife wounds on her wrists.

The gang all retire to Netherfield Park, the Bingleys' place, in hopes that a country retreat will calm Caroline's weirdness. It doesn't. She sleepwalks the halls at night and even attacks her new husband, leading the others to discuss, in hushed and mortified tones, the option of a Lunatic Asylum. Worse things happen: a lethal carriage accident caused by sabotage; arson, and ultimately murder. Only Elizabeth is doubtful that Caroline, loony or not, may be the perpetrator of these horrors. She enlists Darcy to help her investigate. They discern the real culprit, in a most dramatic and perilous denouement.

Miss Bebris is capable of pleasing, Austenesque flashes of dry

wit and quietly astringent comment:

"According to Miss Bingley, [Mr. Parrish] was a gentleman of the first consequence. He had one townhouse, two carriages, three tailors, and could walk on water every other Tuesday. He also, anyone within auditory range had been given to understand, was a wealthy landowner, a patron of the arts, and a master of the intricate 'ballroom' style of folding one's cravat."...."Mr. Hurst had dropped the [sherry] stopper on the floor. As he stooped to pick it up, his hand shook. [Elizabeth] observed him with disgust. Were he not a gentleman, he would be considered a drunkard."...."Whatever faults comprised Mrs. Parrish's character – and they were numerous – weakness was not among them. With a backbone of brass and a core of pure selfishness, Caroline was not likely to give up easily what she believed life owed her."

The Darcys banter with a well-balanced mix of wit and mutual affection. (Mr. Darcy, an Age of Reason type, is reluctant at first to credit Elizabeth's detective theories, while she follows the "more things in heaven and earth than dreamt of in thy philosophy" school. Miss Bebris may have had a fancy to make of them a Regency-era Nick and Nora Charles.)

Yet as the book went on, my own doubts began to grow. I was unsettled, for one thing, by all the distresses Miss Bebris puts Caroline through. Caroline's a snob and a Mean Girl, but she doesn't deserve this much grief. The mere fact that Darcy blew her off in favor of Elizabeth is comeuppance enough. I also couldn't help but be dubious about the infusion of characters Miss Austen did not create amongst ones she did, even though I realize that if you're going to graft a murder mystery onto Jane Austen's realm, you have to bring in new faces. Otherwise you'd have to twist Austen's characters themselves into the murderers and murderees; and that of course simply Would Not Do (though I dare say there are a



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number of people who wouldn't mind seeing Lady Catherine de Bourgh bumped off, followed by the Rev. Mr. Collins.) Even so, Miss Bebris saddles Mr. Hurst (Bingley's brother-in-law) with heavy gambling debts, and has the murderer torch part of Netherfield in pursuit of his villainous schemes.

There were also some possible anachronisms that threw me. Mr. Parrish's friend and traveling companion is an archaeologist. Wait a minute – was archaeology even a concept, let alone a recognized discipline, circa 1812? Somebody else says she's wearing her "Wellingtons". Did they even exist in 1812, while Wellington was still alive and fighting Napoleon? (I consulted with Messrs. Google and Wikipedia, who assured me that yes, both items had been invented by that time.)

I pressed on, though, to the aforementioned dramatic and perilous denouement – and most dramatic it is indeed: Elizabeth bound, gagged and in mortal peril, Darcy desperately swordfighting with the villain – as I was saying, I pressed on to the denouement, only there to discover that the mystery is explained in part by – a SUPER-NATURAL AGENCY!! Loud were my cries of dismay and indignation: "What the f— oh now, COME ON." That is so totally *not* Jane Austen. Like, didn't she write *Northanger Abbey* largely – help me out here, Austen scholars – largely to puncture the ridiculous supernatural-kitsch Gothic romances of her day, the *Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Castles of Otranto*, which relied on just such tricks? I was quite regusted.

The book's endpapers inform me that Miss Bebris is a member of something called the Jane Austen Society of North America. They, or her governess, should issue her a Reprimand.

We turn now to Stephanie Barron's *Jane and the Man of the Cloth*. There are certain sections of Jane Austen's life of which little is known, for while she was a diarist

and frequent letter-writer, not all of those writings have survived. Miss Barron has seen this situation as a pleasing challenge. She takes one letter which did survive, from one of those historical blank spaces, and spins from it a tale of smuggling, anti-Bonapartist intrigue, murder, and hinted romance, in which Jane Austen herself, of all people, is the detective.

The Austen family – Jane, her parents and her elder sister Cassandra – are bound for a late summer holiday in Lyme, on the Dorset coast. A carriage accident sends Jane seeking help, and finding it in the unwilling person of Mr. Geoffrey Sidmouth: "a countenance most harshly-drawn, under a windswept mop of black hair. The master of High Down, I presumed; and masterly enough with his dark brows heavy and knit, his eyes glowing and fierce." His house is equipped with snarling dogs, hostile blunderbuss-toting servants, and a mysterious, beautiful Frenchwoman named Seraphine, whose relations to and/or with Sidmouth are quite unexplained. His assistance is competent, though; and after a few days' recovery the Austens are settled in Lyme, with its leisurely social life of cards and dances at the Assembly Rooms, seaside walks and dinner parties. Then comes a shocking occurrence: a local labourer is found hanged one morning, from a makeshift gallows on the waterfront. Town gossip holds this to be the work of "the Reverend", a daring and ruthless smuggler operating in the vicinity. His identity is unknown, but said gossip hints that his initials might be Geoffrey Sidmouth.

Jane can't help but recall the mysteriously unwelcoming vibe of Sidmouth and his household, not to mention Mlle. Seraphine's habits of walking the sea-cliffs by day in a bright red probably-visible-for-miles cloak, and flitting round the Grange at night with signalling lanterns. Yet she finds herself drawn to the man, maybe because she sens-

es that his harsh temper is fueled by intelligence and sparked by other peoples' folly and hypocrisy. Another murder is done, with diverse clues pointing to Sidmouth, who is arrested. Jane investigates, compelled to solve not so much the puzzles of smuggling and murder and all that, but the mystery of whether or not Geoffrey Sidmouth is as bad as he seems.

Miss Barron has made a better go of things. In her care it's pleasant to visit Austen's era. Chronologically it's the 19th century, but in quality-of-life terms it's still the 18th. England is peacefully agrarian. The Industrial Revolution, with its dark satanic mills and all, has not yet crested the horizon. People speak in a formal, courteous manner that still sounds pleasantly natural:

"I might yet have the pleasure of joining you, all the same," the Captain said then. "I might persuade you both to drive out in my barouche when you tire of your visit to the cliffs. [They] are not far off my road home. When my business is concluded, I shall venture your way, and enquire if a drive is pleasing."

"You are all consideration, Captain," I told him. "I am sure a gentle turn in the sea air should do Cassandra a world of good."

There are also a sufficiency of footnote historical tit-bits: "It was customary in Austen's time to stay at home on evenings with little moonlight, and accept engagements for those nights when the moon would be full. Travel along unlit roads could otherwise be quite hazardous." (I like little historical footnotes, in moderation; they're like mind candy.) I felt more comfortable about the characters than Miss Bebris's invented ones, who had a taint of melodrama about them. Miss Barron extrapolates most of hers from people the real-life Jane mentions in that surviving letter, and invests them with qualities that foreshadow Austen's own characters. Sidmouth is – as you may have guessed – a Darcy type, while others

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presage Lady Catherine and the more airheaded Bennett girls. Jane herself, under Miss Barron's tutelage, is as intrepid as Nancy Drew. She explores a smuggler's cave on a dark and stormy night (without a chaperone, no less!) She hides behind a door to eavesdrop on plotting henchmen. She shows an attention to detail that might earn Sherlock Holmes's approbation:

"...so, at a thought, I gathered up my skirts, removed my right glove, and crouched down to search the rocks at waterline. A few moments' groping sufficed: an iron ring was revealed to my hand, and the manner of [the victim's] dispatching confirmed. Flakes of rust were smeared across my palm, and that the flakes were but lately displaced, I quickly discerned. A boat's painter had disturbed the iron ring, in being recently tied up at the Cobb's end, and the vessel's burden then shifted to the stones, no doubt in the very dead of night...I bent to the stones once more...and saw then the marks of paint."

"But of course! When a simple wooden boat is moored near the jetty, the tide must drive it against the stones, particularly if its crew is bent upon the destruction of one in their midst, rather than the preservation of their vessel. And so the dinghy's prow had scraped against the Cobb, and left its telltale mark. A dark green, a very bottle green..."

She solves the mystery, I need hardly add. Miss Barron is not too proud to enjoy a touch of melodrama herself: Jane, with a pistol put in her hands by an ally – "I had

never held such a thing before, and had not the slightest notion of how to discharge it" – goes in the smugglers' cave (again), hides behind the door (again), and cold-cocks the villain "with a guttural yell that shocked even *my* overwrought senses," as he tries to escape. But alas! – Sidmouth has to leave town, due to plot complications, and seek a new life in America, thus sinking whatever possibilities of romance there might have been.

Both these books spring at heart from a love of Austen and her work. When fictional characters engage our affection deeply enough, or our respect or admiration, we yearn to bring them forward from the books and take them home with us, so their adventures might continue with us included. Writers in particular are susceptible to this phantasy; in fact, it's one of the things that can midwife a writer's desire to write. The author who created the characters can draw a similar fondness: if they made up such delightful people they surely must themselves be delightful. We imagine ourselves hanging out with them, sharing tea and mutual sympathies. It is a truth universally acknowledged, that Jane Austen is one of the most beloved authors in the Western canon; but Love can express itself in some strange ways (as the stalker said to the paparazzo). My objections to *Pride and Prejudice* are already laid before you. My doubts on *Man of the Cloth* are more muted. I'm not an Austen scholar, but my instinct is

that while Jane was as intelligent, perceptive and witty as Miss Barron portrays her, she would have regarded mystery-solving as slightly beyond the bounds of her decorum. (Another qualm is that Barron has written several Jane-as-detective books, four or five thus far, and I worry that if she keeps Jane going at this Nancy-Drew-intrepid pace, the poor dear won't have any energy left when it comes time to write her immortal works.)

I'm not an Austen scholar, or an Austen lover (but I'm not an Austen hater either, honestly; so please put down those pitchforks). I read *Emma* in the long-ago mists of high school and remember almost nothing about it. My husband and I watched the recent Austen adaptations on *Masterpiece Theatre*, he laughing at Lady Catherine, Rev. Collins and Mrs. Bennett as though they were the Marx Brothers. I'm an Austen respecter. I respect her enough to leave her and her characters alone. She doesn't need to be made to run around solving murder mysteries *à la* Nancy Drew and Holmes to draw my – or anyone's – respect. Her reputed character of intelligence, wit and decorum is sufficient unto itself. In his story *The Celestial Omnibus*, E. M. Forster described her, with elegant simplicity and perfect adequacy, as "a maiden lady, full of quiet fun." That works for me.



"Best In Show" by Phil Juliano



The Dream Journal

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Unstealthily mating screech owls in the pin oaks out back preempted most of my sleep last night, but when I did nod off I wandered the sidewalks of my childhood, where the great downhill run from the elementary school meandered through the as yet undeveloped hardwoods like a scene from *The Wizard of Oz*. No apple trees throwing their wares, however, but I feared that bullies hid behind each trunk so I ran-hopped away, hampered by one converse low-top having a broken shoelace, in exactly the fashion of my childhood. You know, how if you knot the lace back together somewhere in the threading through the eyelets up from the toe, it cannot tighten well ever again. Bullies feast on little boys with badly laced sneakers, so I do not stop until I am safe beside the crossing guard, whose yellow web Sam Browne belt stretches over her motherly bosom and she slips me a sourball hard candy, which unfortunately for my dream-state, tastes like nothing whatsoever at all.

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The Blotter Long Form Fiction Contest for Novella and Novel length works

1. The purpose of our contest is to provide a venue for writers to have their work read and commented on by our editors and judges. Additionally, the winner of this contest will have his/her work published here on these pages. And last but not least, the winner will receive the monetary prize of \$500.00. (FYI, the entry fee for the contest helps boost our ability to give a prize of this size and any excess funds we collect will help this lil' rag to keep on truckin'. Nobody's getting rich off these fees, rest assured!)
2. Our pre-reader judges are intelligent and highly proud of their educations. Our final judge is smart, well-read and mean as a snake. But we told her that she could be the final judge and what can you do?
3. Transparency is very important to us, and we make every effort to eliminate any conflict of interest situation from going down in our contest. In that light, Blotter volunteers and their family members and/or employees are prohibited from entering our contest.

To enter the contest, please submit your work with a \$25 entry fee by check or money order to: The Blotter Magazine, 1010 Hale Street, Durham, NC 27705.

Your entry must contain the following: no less than 10 pages, no more than 20 pages of the opening of your novel or novella, typed & double-spaced, without your name. On a separate cover page type your name, the title of your novel or novella and a one page synopsis of your novel or novella. Remember, you have to have the entire book written, so that if and when you win, you can show us the rest!

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Our contest will be run in line with the rules of ethics and mechanics recommended by the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, as outlined in their 2006 monograph on the subject. You can't view for free, but you may purchase the monograph entitled "Publishing Contests: Ethics and Mechanics" through the CLMP at <http://www.clmp.org/about/monographs.html>. This is the document we have used in coming up with the rules and conditions of this contest.

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Martin K. Smith is a publisher, an essayist, a novelist, a radio DJ, a philanthropist and raconteur, and while he is the top, the tower of Pisa, he is decidedly not the Mona Lisa. But he's OK with that.

Phil Juliano pens and colorizes and writes and, frankly, does most anything.

"The Sea Says Remember Me"

The sea says remember me,
I've always got it right.

I showed you how to drown, lost in waves, powerless.
Those body shocks were birth itself -
lungs full to bursting fought for breath,
iced fingers gripped your stomach squeezing out your gasps,
weightless feet are useless when you need a merman's tail.

I washed you up and threw you back -
you - crumpled on the shore.
I taught you how to get back up, shake off my Kingdom for your own.
Bruised and cut but set alight by lessons in survival,
you stood again with opened eyes, sharp senses, boundaries set.

I was your mate on golden days when I held you in my arms.
A seductive voice breathed promises I could never keep:
float free, shed fears, embrace a life becalmed.
I muffled earthly pains for you and let you drift caressed.
I spoke of sweet eternity, bodies fulfilled and simple joys.

You knew I lied, that I was not your friend
But today you need my touch.
Walk the prom, enjoy my views, let sparkling water lull you.
My tide will turn, you know that too,
I prepared you well for this.

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Three by Wolfiewolfgang

"Summer"

The flies got there first.
Exploring - greedy for it.
Soon a swarm
busy in the oppressive heat.

All around breezeless silence,
then that buzzing.
Insects, indiscriminating in their hunger.
Nature recycling - no siesta.

The sun paralyzes all other life.
Omnipotent, silent, unrelenting.
Juices dry, skin crinkles,
the shape of bones revealed.

Then a shadow,
sudden movement,
pincer beak with crow-eye aim.

Flies dispersed,
plate cleared,
the chicken leg devoured.

Sun bathing, I shudder,
hot flesh frozen.
Reminded and forewarned.

"The Tale Of An Apple And A Sausage"

My dog stole the sausage.
He knew it was wrong.
No, he knew I was cross.
Well, he knew I could hurt him.
He ate it anyway.

I ate the apple.
They gave it to me,
The naked couple, man and wife.
They got it from a snake
who knew just what they were like.

They knew it was wrong.
No, they knew there'd be trouble.
They ate it anyway.
They felt the punishment
and so do we.

They got chucked out.
They lost out.
God's pets
at play in the garden,
free from knowledge, understanding and pain.

I ate that apple.
It was OK,
juicy in parts with a bitter core.
Not what you expect
but no point in spitting it out.

Final Tid-Bits: Hey now! We're located in some new spots in Greater Austin, as well as the Lowcountry of Summerville, South Carolina. From mighty acorns strong little oaks are born, I always say. Next month we'll be thinking about our Christmas Present reading list, things we've read that we expect you'll like, and things we're hoping to find in our own stockings. Right now, I'm reading the memoirs of Gunter Grass and Donald Hall. Visit your local independent bookstore, they have plenty of things to read - I don't want to hear any of you saying, "I'm bored." Got it? Good!

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