

*Laine Cunningham Novel Award Winner - Enid Harlow,  
Gray Griffin, Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal*

# The Blotter

August 2014

MAGAZINE

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[ c l m p ]

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## “I love big words and I cannot lie...”

Did you know that the French term “glissade” means both a particular dance move in ballet (that open armed side-to-side movement that resembles a butterfly moving from bloom to bloom) and the act in alpine mountain climbing of hurriedly sliding down a snowy slope on your frozen backside, legs spread and arms akimbo?

Or did you know that “akimbo” comes from the middle English, but is also the same word in Spanish? Which makes me wonder why this word is the same for those two languages and why “crocodile” is not. Why is crocodile in Spanish “cocodrillo”? It is “crocodillo” in Portuguese and my history study tells me that it is likely that the first post-fall-of-the-Roman-Empire Europeans to see a “crocodilus” were probably Portuguese. Linguists claim metathesis - honestly, doesn’t that seem like a mis-spelling in court correspondence between medieval Lisbon and Madrid? Or worse, could it actually be a typographical error? Some guy at that new Gutenberg doo-dad the king just purchased from Saxony Business Machines, trying to understand the operating instructions? *Um, lay the type in reverse order from bottom to top. Kill orphans and widows. Wait, what?*

And the English just took as their own the Portuguese/Latin version of the big Nile (or Congo, or Zambesi or Limpopo) river lizard.

River lizards. Which they are not now, but once might have been. Why else did the English name the other modern dinosaur an “alligator” instead of a “caiman” as the Spanish did when they first laid eyes on one and heard it called a version of the word caiman by the Carib natives? Or was their some kind of third party interference – a zoological Amerigo Vespucci throwing a monkey wrench into the naming convention: “Hey, Hernan de Soto, what’s a ‘caiman’?” “I don’t know, a freakin’ big lizard.” What?” “A big ‘legarto.’” “El legarto is ‘the lizard’?” “Si.” And down on paper it went.

Speaking of monkey wrenches – they are not named after inventor Charles Moncky (Baltimore, 1850’s), but from a predating usage in the English Navy for giving anything smaller or readily available for use the prefix “monkey,” as in monkey spinnaker, monkey foresail, monkey bridge. (Smaller and readily available? Makes some sense. Apparently, children have been affectionately called monkey since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.)

My friend John notes that the sixteenth century Italian Renaissance art observation/criticism *Chiaroscuro* - meaning the tension of interplay between light and dark - has a Japanese sibling that it doesn’t even know - the word *shirokuro* - meaning black and white. With no linguistic interaction that we can discern in our etymology

hunts, we find this mysterious, bordering on magical.

Speculative fiction author Harry Turtledove made a decision in his books that if the South won the Civil War then the North would be allied with Germany during an inevitable World War One. Because of this turn of events, and the subsequent mutual USA-German development in armored warfare, tanks wouldn't be called tanks in America, but "barrels." No explanation is necessary to "roll out" here, is it?

But why were German tanks called "panzers?" When I was a kid, I assumed that panzer was German for "panther" (yes, that is stupid, but I said I was a kid, right?). It turns out that German for panther is "panther." Is panther a German word? Nope. It's Greek – and remains basically the same into Latin, Old French and into modern German. You see, panzer is German for "armor," from the Old French "panciere" – armor for the belly, or a coat of mail. Panzer has also meant "wall", "shell" and in that inimitable German way of cobbling together prefixes and suffixes, just about anything to do with protection. Which begs the question is there a prophylactic named Panzer for sale in Hamburg drugstores, and if not, why not?

And to exacerbate the less obvious; there is no accurate etymology for the word "Jazz," that perfectly imperfect American musical art form. Linguists try to attribute it to "jism" but since that word has no etymological precedent either, and cannot be found in context before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it's a fool's errand. On the other hand, and no pun intended, I like the connection: it's raw, a little "dirty." Interesting: Jazz arguably arrives in New Orleans in the 1890's with bandleaders Buddy Bolden and Papa Jack Laine, when his musicians – black, white, creole – started playing with a "ragged time" to get variations in the music's tempo in order to make it "swing." Next stop – ragtime.

That language might be based on little errors is fun.

Note: we do know the date of the word "razzmatazz" is 1894, and that it is probably a silly reduplication of jazz. How long does a popular word have to be around before its edge must be resharpened? Anyhow, I like that the rest of the world uses the word glissade for those two remarkably unrelated actions that somehow connect, and don't try and come up with a local, national, "our own language" word for them. We do that too much already, letting words be barriers.

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CAUTION

*Preheat to 350 degrees of separation.*

# The Blotter Magazine

announces with great pride  
the winners of the

## 2014 “Laine Cunningham Novel Award”

1st Place: **Enid Harlow** of New York, NY

for her novel “Love’s Wilderness”

2nd Place: **Barbara de la Cuesta** of Beachwood, NJ

for her novel “Rosa”

3rd Place: **Lora Hilty** of Columbus, OH

for her novel “Good Enough Mother”

Honorable Mention: **Anoop Ahuja Judge** of Pleasanton, CA

for her novel “The Rummy Club”

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# An excerpt from "Love's Wilderness"

by Enid Harlow

## ONE

All that blood. It was the first thing she thought of in the morning. *Saturday, June 14: mattress soaked in blood.* And today, three weeks later, *Saturday, July 5*, she was still thinking of it. It was a habit of hers to mark off dates in her head, even more frequently and indelibly than she placed them on her calendar. *Saturday, June 14: mattress soaked in blood. Saturday, July 5: three weeks since it had happened.*

Rain nearly every day for three weeks. They went together. The rain and the blood. Sometimes heavy, sometimes barely perceptible, but in one form or another rain had fallen on the city nearly every day since the day the blood began to flow.

Actually, the rain had started the day before the blood. *Friday, June 13<sup>th</sup>: rain begins.* Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. She had found that ominous.

*It's falling in anger and with vengeance.*

"That's ridiculous, Veronica. The rain had nothing to do with it."

Her mother was wrong. The rain had everything to do with it. The rain was an intricate part of it.

Since Friday, June 13, it had rained far more days than it had remained dry. And even on those few dry days, the skies were so overcast and the air so humid it might as well have been raining. Some days the rain fell steadily throughout the day, as if pipes had burst all over the sky and could not be repaired. Other days, it fell in intermittent sprinkles, coming down softly, sweetly even, as if to remind the city that it was still there, that it had not dried up or evaporated.

Veronica woke early on the morning of July 5, three weeks after the rain began. In the same instant, she thought of the blood and heard the sound of the rain. A staccato ping against the top of her bedroom's air conditioning unit. Then the music playing. It had happened like something already decided. Like a part of her life she didn't yet know. She

awoke, and there was the blood. On her gown. On the sheets. Soaking into the mattress. The rain at her window, the music coming from the radio by her bed. A piece she couldn't immediately identify. She remembered thinking how Carl would hate to know she couldn't name the piece. *You didn't know it, darling? You couldn't name it?*

It wasn't that she had started marking off dates in her head or on her calendar on that day, the day it happened—Saturday, June 14. She had always taken note of the day and month an event of any consequence occurred, marking it off in her mind, and later, physically on her calendar, if it was something she particularly



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wanted to remember. *Sunday, April 15: married Carl.* And then, six months later, *Tuesday, October 23: first saw Jack.* She didn't know why that particular occurrence, first seeing Jack, had popped into her mind, for it was not something she wanted to remember. Not something she even thought of anymore. Or not often. She might as easily have thought of *Friday, November 30: Jack left.* She didn't want to think of that either. Neither of those dates—October 23 nor, five weeks later, November 30—meant anything to her any more.

What she thought of today, first thing in the morning on Saturday, June 14, was the blood soaking into her mattress and the rain that had been falling on the city nearly every day for three weeks. She also thought of the radio beside her bed and the piece that had been playing that she was unable to name. *I'm surprised at you, Veronica.* Carl's voice was stern. *That station's repertoire is extremely limited.* She hated that sternness of his voice and the fact that he was surprised. *It must have been something you've heard me play a million times before.* (Why was the radio on, anyway? She hadn't turned it on. Had Carl set the alarm to his favorite station and then forgotten to turn it off before going out for his morning run?)

Carl ran every morning, rain

or shine. Veronica remembered thinking that morning as she listened to the rain that what was about to happen was there, waiting for her, bound up somehow in that part of her life she didn't yet know.

"Waiting for you, dear?"

"Yes, Mother. Waiting."

"That's a morbid way of thinking."

The rain was part of her now. Perhaps it would go on raining forever. Perhaps the earth had entered a period of permanent moisture as the result of the terrible things that had happened to it in recent years. The unending war. The devastating hurricanes in the U.S. The tsunami in Southeast Asia—230,000 people dead, two million displaced. The numbers were unfathomable, biblical. Perhaps whatever seismic shifts had caused those disasters had also caused this unending rain. Three weeks of it. That was purposeful. That was evil. A malevolent rain, intent on flooding the city, drowning its residents, placing a curse on its streets.

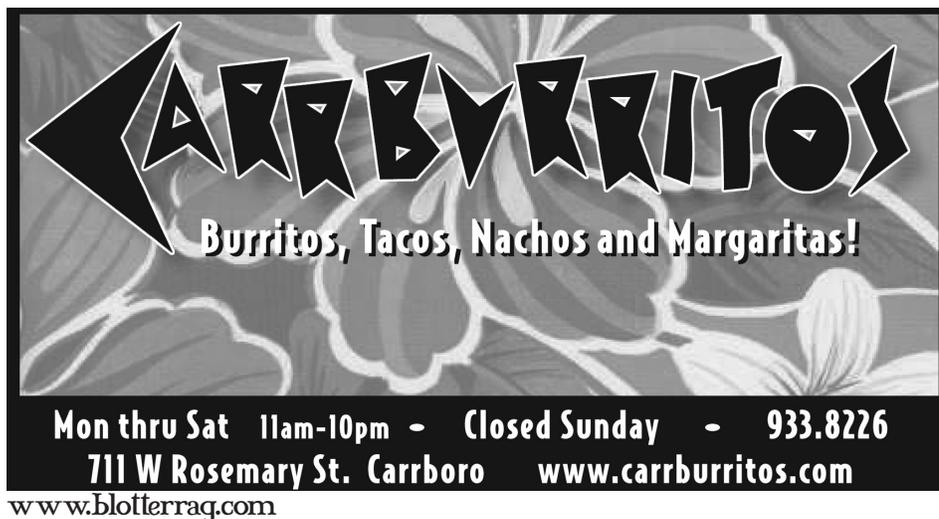
*Now that's just plain morbid!*

*The curse.* They had called it that back in high school when, knowing nothing about anything, they knew everything about everything. *The curse* they called it, not knowing what that meant. *Having the curse.* *Getting the curse.* Becoming women,

but children still. Arrogant, ignorant children. *I've got the curse,* they said. Because it made them sound tough and hip to speak that way. *The curse.* Because it occasionally interfered with their weekend plans, preventing them from going swimming or sleeping with boys who were queasy about getting blood on their dicks. *The curse.* Because of the cramps, the pain. And for some of them it was a doubling-over, shocking, sickening pain.

For Veronica it had been like that, right through her twenties. Not every month, but every third or fourth month, the pain shot through her, seeming to hollow her out, squeezing her abdomen as in a vise. It made her skin go alternately clammy and cold, dry and hot. It made her feel faint and nauseous. Sometimes, when sitting on the toilet, the heavy blood flowing from her into the bowl, she would feel herself about to pass out and would have to slide to the floor, where she'd lie, curled on one side, cheek against the cool bathroom tiles, seeking their relief, holding herself against the pain.

*The curse.* Because it sometimes gushed from their loins without warning, soaked through their underwear and spread to their outer clothing—a dark, angry bloom, unmistakable, there for all to see. Once it had happened to her in the middle of a field hockey game. In Central Park, a public place, where people... *strangers!*...had gathered to watch them play. Veronica hadn't even known what was happening, for it had snuck up on her that time, as it sometimes did, stealthily, without the slightest twinge of pain, and she might have gone on racing up and down the court in her left-field position, laminated wooden stick held tight and high across her chest, unaware, oblivious, if at the next out-of-play, the referee hadn't blown her whistle and sent in a substitute. The



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sub had come running up, carrying a sweatshirt she had been instructed to hand to her and whispering the facts in her ear as she took over her position. So the ref had seen. The sub had seen. The others waiting to play—all of them—on her team and the challengers' team, sitting cross-legged in the grass in two opposing rows on opposite sides of the field, *all of them* had seen. The strangers, too, standing on the sidelines, having arbitrarily chosen a side for which to cheer, watching her run up and down the field, her eye on the ball, her heart thumping in her chest, her stick pulled up and back, prepared to strike, the angry red stain blooming on her green gym shorts—*all those strangers* had seen. Veronica had snatched the sweatshirt from the sub, knotted its arms around her waist, letting the bulk of it hang down behind to cover her shame, and trotted off the field, head lowered, stick grazing the ground. She had taken her seat on the side-lines, crossed-legged like the others, and draped the sweatshirt over her knees. She had felt the humiliation of the moment run through her, then the sticky trickle on the inside of her thighs, warm, viscous. *The curse*. Because of the repetitiveness, the inescapability. There, inside them now and for all time. *The curse*. Because it branded them, stained them. *The curse*. Because it marked them for life.

But that was a different blood. A blood that held the promise of life. The blood in her bed that morning ended it. She knew that the moment she pulled back the covers and looked. Knew it even before she looked. She knew it before she opened her eyes or heard the radio by her bed playing a piece she couldn't immediately identify. *You must have known it, Veronica. It could only have been Mozart or Beethoven or Haydn.*

*That's all that station ever plays.*

She knew it in the instant she heard the ping of the rain falling on her air conditioner. The blood and the rain were joined. Both could nourish and kill, now giving, now taking life. For the past three weeks, the first thought in her head when she awoke was of blood coursing through her body and rain falling from the sky. Carl had been running round the Reservoir, while she lay in bed, blood seeping from her. She imagined the rain turning to a kind of gel, spreading over her face, sealing tight as plastic around her nose and mouth, cutting off her air. Like waterboarding, she imagined it.

Was this her true curse? Had some vengeful God taken note of what she had done and decided this was the punishment she deserved?

"It doesn't pay to dwell on things," her mother had said to her just yesterday—*Friday, July 4*—having dropped by for tea.

"I'm not dwelling." Veronica replied. In preparation for her mother's visit she'd set out the cups and saucers along with some little cakes

she thought her mother might enjoy.

"Why aren't you out celebrating with Carl?"

"Celebrating what?"

"The birth of our country, of course. Go watch the parade."

"Fireworks."

"What?"

"We have fireworks on the Fourth in New York, not a parade."

"Well, go watch those."

"It's pouring."

"What's a little rain?"

"It's more than a little."

"You mustn't dwell, dear. You must get on with things. A morbid personality is what you'll develop from all that dwelling, and you don't want that, do you, darling?"

"No, Mother."

"I know it's sad, but it's been three weeks."

"Is that all I'm allowed?"

"Allowed for what?"

"To be sad."

"It's all you're allowed to dwell. Look at us, Carl and me. We're sad too, but we're not dwelling."

"You think Carl is sad?"

"Certainly, he is. What a question. He had his dreams, too, you know. Fatherhood, being a father.

## 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@blotterra.com](mailto:mermaid@blotterra.com)

Looking out the window, a dog on a leash. Pretty brown-brindle. He (or she) jumps up on a chair and turns in circles. Looking for the person who should be on the other end of the leash? My dog? I sit in my chair, tapping my toe to crackly radio music. The dog hops off the chair and sits on the floor, still outside. I look for the owner, but no one else is paying attention. It's raining outside now. It must be my dog.

CD - cyberspace

*Her arms are strong looking, lean and muscular.* Her studio is in the “scary room” of the house in which she grew up – on the real hill in Chapel Hill. Not scary anymore - cluttered, busy, interesting. Out front, a vegetable garden is flourishing in the summer sun, although it will be helpful when it rains, perhaps later today.



She wrestled through a Masters in art – learning what the teachers have to teach about drawing and perspective and came out on the other side hoping she had something to offer – all of the schooling was interesting, but nothing original came from her. Felt constrained by the graphic arts computer, paper, small canvases, drawing what she was told. Surrounded by brilliant students who had their own gifts pouring from them, their fire tempered by those lessons. Wondering when and if that will happen for her.



Art became therapy for tough times. She began to see the colors and shapes and the mediums as ways to release a secret presence,





energy. First pieces: “Blade Runner meets the apocalypse.” Spiritually drawn, someone or something is helping.

Art is all about moving forward, a renewing process – light versus dark, light versus heavy. Taking something old and making something fresh out of it.

It all makes sense, the cityscapes require strength to create, like a builder, a construction worker – messy but complex, flat surfaces with deep medium, drawing the eyes inside, colors that cause that depth, neighborhood by neighborhood. I can imagine strong arms slinging paint, tagging the blank with shape, form, movement, weight, energy, life.



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Not that that can't happen still. The doctors told you you could have other children, didn't they?"

"Yes, Mother. They did."

"Well, there, you see? Not that that makes this any less sad. I was even beginning to accept the notion of being a grandmother. Although—at my age!"

Her mother was fifty-seven years old. Veronica was twenty-six. Her mother was a young-looking fifty-seven, trim and supple, thanks to yoga classes and Elizabeth Arden facials and skin as smooth as her expensive creams and lotions could make it. But certainly old enough to be a grandmother.

"And, in all honesty, dear," her mother went on. "It was a little early to be telling people. Ten weeks, I mean. That's nothing. I know how excited you were, it being your first. I was like that too. Couldn't wait to tell the world the minute I missed a period. But I waited just to be on the safe side. You might have done the same."

"You mean it wouldn't have happened if I'd waited?"

"No, I don't mean that, Veronica. I mean you might have waited until you were sure everything was all right. Three months is the usual time to wait. It's generally in the first trimester that things go wrong, if they're going to go wrong."

"They did go wrong."

"Yes, and so if you had waited and not got everyone's hopes up..."

"It wasn't my fault."

"Of course it wasn't your fault. I never said it was your fault. I'm just saying you might have waited."

"Until when?"

"Pardon me?"

"Until when should I have waited? Until June 14<sup>th</sup>?"

"What's June 14<sup>th</sup>?"

"The day it happened. The day things went wrong. If I had wait-

ed until June 14<sup>th</sup> to tell you, I could have told you I was pregnant and not pregnant all on the same day. Is that what you would have wanted?"

"Oh, there. Now see? Talk like that is just plain morbid. It's what comes of dwelling on things. Where's Carl? Why doesn't he take you out to watch the parade?"

"Fireworks."

"Don't be difficult."

"He's practicing. Can't you hear?"

"All I'm saying is, you're young. You're healthy. You can have other children. Be thankful for that. Think of all the things you have to be thankful for."

Her mother had leaned forward then to rearrange the objects on the coffee table...Carl's music magazines...*Classical* and *Gramophone* (whose subscription she needed to renew for him)...which he didn't like touched; the small African Violet plant, which Veronica had bought for the bit of muted color it brought to the room; and her own paperback mystery novels, which normally took her mind off things, but none of which she'd felt like opening these past three weeks. Her mother had quickly and efficiently rearranged each of those items. When it came to the paperbacks, she had picked them up in a group and briskly aligned their spines before laying them down again. She had even moved the large ceramic donkey (a replica of Sancho Panza's Dapple, which Veronica and Carl had bought on their honeymoon in Costa Rica), an inch to the right. And the telephone and her address book lying next to it—her mother had nudged those an inch to the right as well before looking up at her and continuing.

"I mean, I'm right, aren't I, darling? You have so many things to be thankful for. Your lovely apart-

ment. Your health. Your overall health, I mean. Apart from whatever it was that caused the problem. They couldn't tell you that, could they?"

"No, they couldn't."

"Doctors never have the answers you really need. I suppose there are too many variables. Stress, for one. Smoking, for another. But you don't smoke, so at least they could rule that out."

"Maybe it was the rain."

"The rain? For heaven's sakes, Veronica. Perhaps something was wrong with the fetus—,"

"Don't call it that."

"In which case it would have been a blessing."

"You think it was a blessing?"

"No, I don't. Of course I don't. I just meant.... Oh, never mind. It was probably stress. Lack of sleep. You never did sleep much. Even as a child. Well, not until those dreadful teen years when all you did was sleep. Fourteen, fifteen hours a night on weekends, if I let you. But this probably just wasn't the right time for you. Things do happen in life you can't explain."

Her mother had turned up her hands then in a gesture of helplessness, perhaps to demonstrate her inability to explain the things that happened in life that couldn't be explained.

"You simply have to accept them and go on."

"I'm going on."

"Are you? You haven't been out of the house for three weeks. That's not healthy. What on earth have you been doing with yourself?"

"Listening to the rain."

"Oh, please."

"And to Carl play."

"All this time?"

"Can I tell you a secret, Mother?"

"A secret?"

"He's lost his touch."

“Carl? That’s absurd. Certainly he hasn’t.”

“He has. Ever since I came home from the hospital, he’s been unable to play a single piece through without a wrong note.”

“Well, he’s been through a lot.”

“He has?”

“You both have, I mean. You know that’s what I mean.”

“It’s the strangest thing. He’ll begin a piece, and you’ll think it’s going to be just fine. Then, not far into it, he’ll hit a wrong note. Listen. It’ll happen any minute now. It’s been like that with every piece he plays since I came home.”

“Well, as I said, he’s been through a lot. You both have.”

“And what he does...each time it happens...he rips his hands from the keyboard, stares up at the ceiling with the most awful look on his face, then goes back and starts the piece from the beginning again. Always from the beginning again. Listen, you’ll hear.”

“He’s a perfectionist, darling. Like most artists.”

“But every single time! It’s driving me mad. All day long it’s the same opening notes, the same opening phrases. Over and over. They’re like demons running under my skin.”

“Demons, dear?”

“There! Hear that?” Veronica shot her eyes toward the heavy sliding doors that separated the living room from the piano room.

“Oh, you know I don’t understand Carl’s music. Never

have.”

Her mother had looked at her watch then, extending her forearm to its maximum distance from her face and squinting hard to get the mother-of-pearl-encircled dial into focus.

“Take my advice,” she said. “Stay active. Get back to work. You have a good job. You don’t want to lose it.”

“I won’t lose my job, Mother. I’m taking vacation time. They can’t legally call it maternity leave, so they’re calling it vacation time.”

“And you just won some kind of award, didn’t you?”

“An industry design award.”

“There, you see?” Her mother brought her compact out of her bag and inspected her face in its mirror. “That’s another thing you have to be thankful for. Your talent. Think of that, Veronica. How good you are at your job, winning that award. We’re all very proud of you, darling. Just don’t dwell.”

“I’m not dwelling.”

Her mother powered her nose and tugged at her highlighted bangs to make them lie across her forehead in a manner more to her liking. Then she snapped her compact shut, and looked up at Veronica.

“Why don’t you go and get your hair done.”

“In this rain?”

“It will do you good to get

out. You need some air. And what does the rain have to do with anything?”

“My hair frizzes in the rain.”

“So does mine. You need to get it treated, that’s all. There are all sorts of wonderful new products on the market. Ask your stylist for a recommendation. Or go to mine. She’ll fix you up with some highlights.”

“I don’t want any highlights.”

“Just a few in front. You’re a little dark under the eyes. They’ll perk you up. My treat.”

“No, thanks.”

“Well, at least get a wash and set. You could do with a good shaping, too. Or buy a new dress. That always helps.”

“I don’t need a new dress.”

“Well, you certainly need a shaping.” Her mother leaned in and lifted the hair on both sides of Veronica’s head, then let it fall back into place. “And some attention to those split ends.”

“All right.”

“No sense moping around the house all day.”

“I said all right.”

“You need to put this unhappy episode behind you. There’s so much happiness to look forward to. And it’s not as if you’d had a child, say, for a year or two and then lost it. Or ten, think of that. I mean, can you imagine what parents go through when a child they’ve grown to know

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## The Blotter

and love dies? Think of losing a teenager, Veronica. They're always driving drunk. Think how much worse that would have been. I mean, it's not as if you even knew this one."

"Look, Mother." Veronica picked up the phone. "I'm calling the beauty parlor. I'm making an appointment."

Veronica grabbed her address book up from the coffee table and found the number and dialed. Naturally, it being a holiday, she'd been answered by a machine, so she left a message, requesting an appointment for the following day.

"That's it, darling," her mother said. She stood up then and dusted off the skirt of her apricot-colored summer suit as if some crumbs from the tea cakes that Veronica had set out and that had not been touched might be clinging to it. "You'll see how much better you'll feel."

So this morning the receptionist at the salon had called back to confirm her appointment, and later today, Saturday, July 5, Veronica would go out in the rain and have her hair done. She would not dwell. She would not be morbid.

Still, she could not keep from thinking that the rain, which had preceded the blood by a single day, had in some way caused it. Or been a har-

binger of sorts. *Friday the 13th*: the rain began. And *Saturday, the 14<sup>th</sup>*: the blood began. Had it not rained, would the blood not have begun? Were the rain and blood aligned? Did they mean to teach her a lesson? Punish her for her sin? Was it a sin? She had never thought of it as such, but she had thought, although she had no proof of it, that if she had not gone out into the rain that day it might not have happened. It had been raining hard on that Friday the 13th, even harder than it was raining today, and anyone who knew that she had gone out in such weather might be justified in concluding that she had brought it on herself. *Served her right*, they might have said. But she hadn't told anyone. Certainly, she had not told her mother or Carl. And to go out on such a silly errand made it all the worse. *Foolish woman. Stupid woman*. She had gone out in that rain to get her nails done. She could never tell anyone that. But her nails were a mess, her mother would be horrified, and her award ceremony was that very evening. She couldn't possibly go to a ceremony given in her honor with nails looking the way hers had looked, so she had called her assistant, Rachel, and said she wouldn't be in that day.

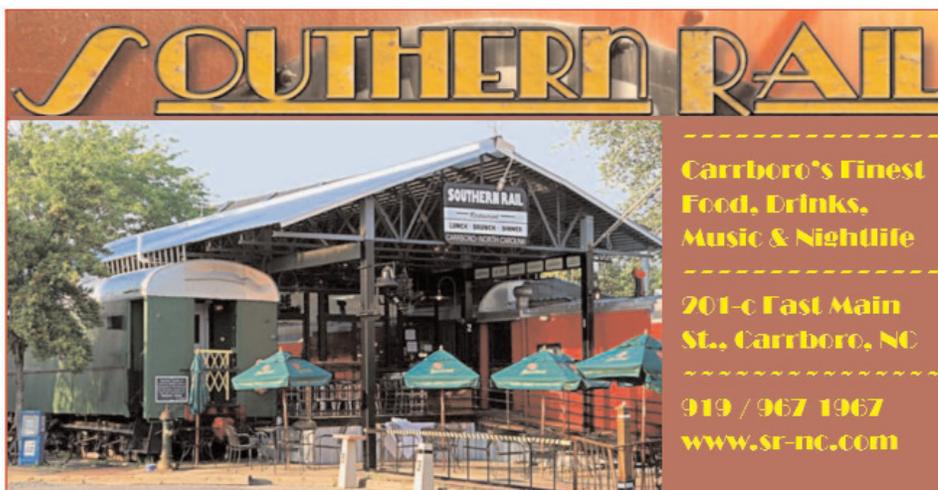
"Too many things to do for tonight," she had explained.

"That's all right, V," Rachel

replied. Everyone at the office called her V. "We didn't expect you in today. I can handle things. Go get beautiful for tonight."

Veronica thanked her and put down the phone and went to her bedroom window to look out. She stood there a moment, staring out at the rain. The sky was so gray and the rain was coming so fast across the park, driven by the wind, it was difficult to see anything clearly. She could make out the tops of wildly swaying trees, the low stone wall bordering the park, the wooden benches placed in front of the wall at widely spaced intervals, but all was distorted by the rain. The park of her childhood. She knew every path in it, every rock, yet this morning it all looked different. Deformed, somehow. And the traffic moving down Fifth Avenue...she knew it was there, the buses and passenger cars, the yellow taxis, each solid and real...yet today all was rendered shaky and surreal, given a ghostly, insubstantial quality by the driving sheets of rain.

A sin? Was that rain being driven across the park coming to punish her for her sins? She didn't think of it as a sin. An indiscretion, yes. Certainly, she had been indiscrete. She was weak. She was vulnerable. She loved her husband, but at times he turned his back to her and walked into his music and disappeared, and



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in his absence she had recklessly, foolishly fallen in love with another man. A stranger, actually. And long ago the stranger had left her. *November 30: Jack left.* Left town, he told her. Transferred, if he were to be believed, by his company to another city, another state.

*I told you it might happen, Veronica. I warned you.*

As if that mattered. As if that meant anything to her. That she had been *warned*.

So, on November 30 of last year, Jack left the city. The state, the country, for all she knew. And it was not as if Carl could possibly have found out, for she had been careful to cover her tracks (mean and small as that made her feel), and the affair (if you could call it that...they only saw each other a handful of times) had been over for months now. Six months and thirteen days to the day she had gone out into the rain to have her nails done. It had been over for so long it might not even have happened. It might have been a dream. And not even her own dream, but someone else's in which she played no actual part.

*I'd give up the world for you. I'd give up everything I have.*

Besides, she and Carl had reconciled. She was carrying his child, or had been. Not even reconciled, for how could there be reconciliation when there had been no rupture? She

had never broken from Carl, never stopped loving him. And he had never stopped loving her. Of that she was certain. He had simply walked off into his music, and stayed there rather longer than usual. And in the time he was away his music had put up a wall around him. For weeks before she met Jack...or was it months?...Carl had stood behind his wall of music unable to see her. He could see everything but her. It was as if he had gone selectively blind. How ironic that was, for in the beginning he had seen only her.

*My darling girl. My muse. My inspiration.*

In the early weeks and months of their marriage, Carl had been loath to let her out of his sight. He wanted her available to him at all hours of the day and night, and he wanted her naked. Her body was an inspiration to him, he told her. Its nakedness quickened the life in his fingers, made difficult passages easier to play. He posed her in various attitudes and positions about the room. He told her where to sit and stand, how to arrange her limbs. He issued instructions from his piano bench, directing her to turn slightly in his direction, to bend more deeply over the arm of a chair or the back of the couch so he could better see the curve of her breast, the line of her hip. He was patient and kind and helped her

grow comfortable with her nakedness, suggesting that if she thought of it as something outside herself... *something external like a gift you're offering to me...* she gradually would become less self-consciousness about it.

He looked up at her now and then while he played. And he had played magnificently then. Brilliantly, flawlessly. All because of her, he said. Because she inspired him and gave meaning to his music. That wasn't so long ago. Fifteen months ago this month.

*Turn to me. Open to me.*

He commanded her with love and authority. The authority of the artist, for Carl was a musical genius, just as his mother had always insisted, and Veronica, out of respect for his genius, would deny him nothing. She was his young, eager, trusting new bride, new to conjugal life, new to love. She would do anything he asked of her.

*Sit there in that chair. Lie there on that settee. Let me look at you while I play.*

She did as he asked.

*Stand there. Lean into the curve of the piano.*

She sat or lay or stood wherever he directed and in whatever position he indicated.

*You are my muse, my inspiration.*

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# The Blotter

She believed it was an honor to be so singled out, so elevated above all other women. Here was an artist, a musical genius, a man destined for greatness, asking her to play the smallest, most inconsequential role in his assumption of greatness.

*Your beauty leaps from you to my fingertips.*

Carl's mother always said that her son would have been world famous had it not been for Veronica. He would have received accolades on concert stages around the globe, but he chose marriage instead. He chose her and the mundane world instead.

*Move there. Turn slowly now. Let me see you from every angle.*

He played as she posed. His notes flew out into the room, bounced against her flesh like diamonds off a velvet cloth.

It was a long time since Carl had looked at her like that. A long time since he had seen her.

Ten weeks. People think that's nothing. Her mother said it was nothing. *Buy yourself a new dress*, she suggested. *Get your hair done*. They don't know. They can't begin to understand. The connection with the life within. The preoccupation. For ten weeks Veronica had barely thought of anything else. It was her first. She was wildly excited. Nothing in her life, not her marriage, not her first job, had been so exciting. Yet she

was filled with trepidation. Would it be healthy? Would she be a good mother? As good a mother as her mother expected her to be? She shouldn't have told her mother. Nor Carl either, for that matter. It would have been all right to have told her father, and she would have done so, had he been alive. *A grandchild, Dad. What do you think of that?* He would have thought it was fine. *Whatever you want, Ronnie*. He would have been the first person she told, but perhaps she shouldn't have told him either. It was too early to be telling people, her mother was right about that. Too many things might yet go wrong. But she was young and healthy and hadn't expected anything to go wrong.

*Ronnie*. Her father was the only one who ever called her that. It was a name between them. Their name. When she was eight years old, her father had a heart attack. *Massive*, the doctors pronounced it. *Massive*, her mother repeated. Veronica had envisioned a series of tremendous explosions going off in her father's body one after another, in his head, his heart, his lungs. Successive detonations in his chest and stomach bringing his body down as she had seen buildings brought down on TV by explosive devices set within. No one called her Ronnie now.

Carl's father, too, had died when Carl was young, though not as

young as she had been. And Carl, too, had adored his father. It was something they had in common. A bond between them. He'd told her the story of his father's death shortly after they met, and she remembered how honored she'd felt that he would tell her something like that so early in their relationship. He told it to her once and never referred to it again, and she came to understand it was a story he would not repeat.

Carl was fifteen when it happened. He had an English history exam the next day and was studying late into the night. "I kept going over the dates in my head," he told her. "The names of the kings and queens...who followed who, the places and outcomes of the battles. I went over and over it, but I couldn't get it right. History was never my subject."

Math was his subject. And, of course, music. He didn't need to tell her that. But Carl didn't think of music as a subject, except for the theoretical aspects. Tonal and atonal music. Acoustics, harmony, ear training. She never pretended to understand any of it. For Carl, music was a living thing. It lived within him. In his head, in his bones. It lived in his blood and his fingers as much as it lived on a concert stage or dance floor. And it lived outside in the world around him. Even as a boy he said he heard music in the chatter of

## Best In Show

by Phil Juliano



the birds that filled the trees of his suburban neighborhood, in the whistle of his mother's teakettle, in the drone of his father's electric drill.

His father's hobby had been carpentry. He hung all his tools neatly on one wall of his garage, where he spent long, solitary hours repairing things, building things. He had built a go-cart for Carl for his sixth birthday and had made any number of little wooden toys for him when he was even smaller.

"His ducks were the first toys I remember," Carl told her. He described them as a series of shiny wooden ducks in graduating sizes that his father had carved from soft blond wood and painted in bright primary colors and put on wheels. "He lacerated them all," Carl said. "So I wouldn't get splinters in my fingers. He attached ropes to their necks so I could pull the whole family together, or one at a time, as I liked. Sometimes I'd take one out for a walk, then I'd think he was lonely and go back and get the others."

Carl told her he often went out into the garage to watch his father work, but the truth was he wasn't really interested in the kind of work his

father did. He'd quickly lose interest in whatever project his father was engaged in at the moment and find some excuse to return to the house.

"Dad didn't mind. In fact, I think he was happy to see me go. I know he loved all that hammering and sawing and carving and drilling, but what he loved most of all was being alone while he did it. I got that. At six I got it. Mother never did."

That night before his English history exam, Carl heard a strange sound outside his bedroom window. A low, droning sound, he said. He had looked at the clock. It was 2 a.m. He stayed at his desk a while longer, trying to get the names of the kings and queens in the proper order and trying to figure out the sound. But he couldn't do either, so he got up from his desk, he told her, and went to the window. He saw his father in the back yard, mowing the lawn. "At 2 a.m., pushing a lawn-mower across the yard. Pushing it straight across to the neighbor's fence, then turning and pushing it back the other way. Pushing it to the far edge of our property, then turning and going back to the neighbor's fence. Over and over. Mowing the grass east to west, west to

east, over and over. The moon was so bright I had no trouble seeing what he was doing. Mowing the same strip of ground back and forth, over and over. And right beside him, pacing up and down next to him, turning as he turned, was my mother. She never got it."

Later that week, Carl's father committed suicide. Carl had just come home from school. He was walking down the gravel path toward the garage.

"The doors were closed," he told her. "But the two little windows on top were fogging up. I heard an engine running. I knew he was inside."

"Oh, Carl." Veronica didn't know what else to say.

"I ran in and yanked the hose out of the exhaust. I pulled him out of the car. His limbs were like rubber in my hands."

*Rubber in his hands.*

That was the last time he ever spoke to her of his father.



## CONTRIBUTORS:

**Enid Harlow** is the author of three novels: *GOOD TO HER* (published in 2013 by Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co., Houston, TX); *A BETTER MAN* (van Neste Press, Midlothian, VA); and *CRASHING* (St. Martin's Press, New York). Her short stories have appeared in numerous literary journals of national distinction including *TriQuarterly*, *Boulevard*, *Nimrod*, *The Ontario Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Southwest Review*, *American Fiction*, *Quarterly West*, *The American Voice*, and *The Southern Review*, among others. Her short story, "The One," was named first place winner in the 2013-2014 *Roanoke Review Fiction Contest*. Enid has also been awarded an Artists' Fellowship in Fiction by the New York Foundation for the Arts and has received two PEN Syndicated Fiction Awards. She earned her B.A. at New York University, College of Arts & Sciences, and her M.A. at NYU's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. Enid lives and writes in New York, the city of her birth.

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**Phil Juliano** has been cartooning for over twenty years. "Best In Show" is currently being featured in several newspapers and magazines and is syndicated by MCT Campus where it is distributed to college and university newspapers across the country. To see more of Phil's work go to [www.bestinshowcomic.com](http://www.bestinshowcomic.com)

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