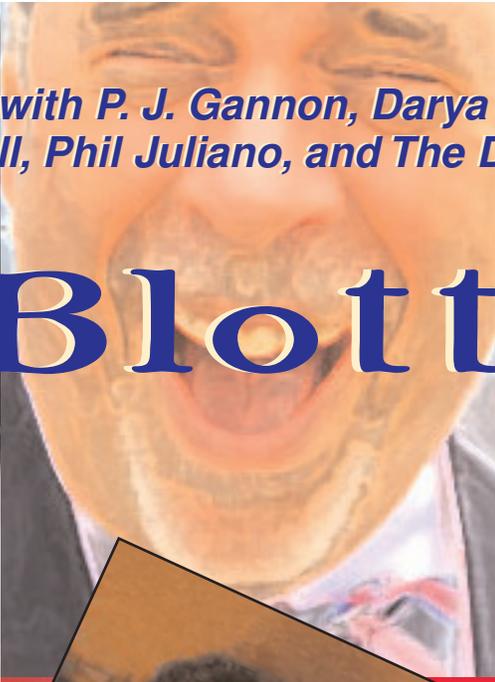


Looking good, feeling good with P. J. Gannon, Darya Tsymbalyuk, Carl "Papa" Palmer, Dylan Hull, Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal

# The Blotter

Fourteenth Anniversary Issue

MAGAZINE



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COVER: "It's not a bad day for it,"  
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## "Health Care"

Duke Hospital is beautiful. I went there, recently, to have an MRI because I was told to. I'm not a fan of MRI's, nor going to hospitals, but with all of the current political malaise I know better than to complain that I have people watching out for my health, so I did what I was told to. Also, I was promised sedation, so there's that. I woke up at dawn's crack because I insisted on showering. I was always told to be as clean as possible when doctors are going to probe you. You know, so they won't talk about you during coffee breaks. Do doctors actually take coffee breaks? I never see it on TV. Sex, yes. Coffee? Hmm. Maybe. But not so much chit-chat about hygiene of patients.

Anyway, we were off before rush-hour traffic. The girls were left to their own devices, making their lunches, waiting for the ride to school. Elder had been nervous for a few days – what is wrong with Dad? Younger, not so much. I think she's pretty sure she has a bead on things, what kinds of things happen in her world and which don't. Water-main break so we can't take showers for a day or so? Yes. Dad really sick? Nope. I like her thinking, although it has no basis in science or logic.

Drive, park, walk. (A significant part of my life. More than I would choose – I'm not much of a traveler or a tourist.) I followed herself out of the garage. It was a cool morning, almost crisp and the sun's glare was welcome. I was starting to feel that fight or flight thing I am reliably told is an instinct, but which I also think is ingrained habit. I seem to need to be more than just cajoled to do things outside my comfort zone, which extends all the way out to the sidewalk in front of the house and out back only to the patch of ground I'm turning into a rose garden. My brain wants to find reasons not to go out on the town. This is defined as social anxiety, folks. So this morning I kept pushing one foot in front of the other, across the street, along with the nurses, doctors, students, other patients, administrators, attendants, visitors, vendors...

Into the enormous hospital building. Correction – hospital *complex*. My vision, in such situations, gets pretty, well, *tunnelly*. Where do I need to be, what do I do when I get there, how soon until I can leave? I did look from side to side, occasionally, because I didn't want to bump into people who wanted to arrive at their appointments somewhere faster than I did. There was a big entrance hall, like a hub of a wheel with hallways for spokes.

We chose a spoke. One wall was windows, open to green space; draped with that kind of ivy and tree which does well enough in the areas shaded by tall buildings. The other wall had paintings on it, Impressionistic prints, I guessed. Pretty. Reaching the end of the hall, we turned left and saw that we had run out of hall without achieving our goal. Oops. Herself hung another left into a waiting room – not ours - and stood in line to ask the woman at the desk where we should be. In a minute, the woman corrected our directions. Off we toddled. Outside again, we saw the next building, our building, had our *ah-ha* moment, and made our way through the fractal flow of people and into the coffee shop. I said nothing. *No coffee for you*, I told myself. I actually had the presence of mind to imagine I had a yearning for coffee that took precedence over my fear of that which was coming in my morning. Maybe some coffee later? Again, a positive sign, that I could imagine a later, after what was coming. *Good*, I told myself. *Good boy*.

So we signed in. And then someone came to get me. I mean, like a concierge. My person. Fast, as in expeditiously enough that I didn't really have time to

boot up my fight or flight simulation software. (Would I ever just get up and leave? Probably. Even if my wife was there, and didn't chase after me and had to catch a cab home? I really don't know, and don't want to know.)

My person talked, about what was going to happen next. Did I know? No? OK, then, here's the deal. He spoke softly, almost conspiratorially, as if how I should take off all my clothes and put on two robes – one backwards and one normally (so I was comfortably covered up) was a secret he didn't reveal to every patient. How to secure everything in a locker, even though herself was right there. It was, not surprisingly, effectively reassuring. It would be easy, he said. He would be there with me the whole time. And he nearly literally handheld me through the discussion about medication and how it was going to make the next hour so much better. So much.

I won't explain the details – I know we've all been through something similar to it. It is difficult to describe personal fears. Fine authors make a decent living doing it. Suffice to say that finished, still floating somewhat, I dressed to go home.

Herself led our way back along the hallways. Someone was playing a grand piano downstairs in an atrium. An employee, she explained. Further along, a small fireplace burned behind glass, the heat from it going somewhere else as the day was now warm and the hallway comfortable. People were sitting nearby, looking at the flames for portents or the calming relief or the magic held within their flicker.

Around the corner, a young woman in scrubs was playing a violin. On her break. A bit further, two women were talking, one in tears, the other – in scrubs – hugging her.

Down the long hallway, with the paintings proudly hung along one wall, with lights and little cards. I stopped to look. I was in no hurry. The paintings, it turned out, were created by employees in a class offered by the hospital. Yes, you heard me correctly.

In our car, I pondered this place full of frightened people. And people trying to make them less frightened. That's it, isn't it? That's what a hospital really is. And this isn't intended to be an advertisement for Duke, just my observation. Any large organization can lose sight of what's important. Or it can decide from the top down to be what it should be – loving, kind and as gentle as possible. Beautiful.

Garry - [chief@blotterrag.com](mailto:chief@blotterrag.com)

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CAUTION

*I like little baby ducks*

# “A Little Something For The Wife”

by P. J. Gannon

His wife Rebecca, arthritic and half-demented, had needs that he could barely meet, and as he helped her undress—her orthopedic shoes and ankle socks before her pullover sweater and jeans—his mind detoured to one of the darkest periods of his life: 1962, the year Florida real estate was booming, and he, Sidney T. Bloomfield, all of 28 years of age and hungry for a rich and lavish lifestyle, started dealing in Everglades swampland. With commissions as high as ten percent and no shortage of gullible, aging New Yorkers, he was “making money like it was nobody’s business.” After his arrest, his lawyer argued that Sidney believed he was selling dryland but based on the wiretaps, the prosecutor refused to cut Sidney a break, so Sidney wound up pleading guilty to mail fraud. He spent 48 months in a federal penitentiary in central Pennsylvania.

Had he learned from the debacle? No. He’d kept taking risks. Foolish, nonsensical ones. One after the other, until he’d forged an unbreakable chain of infamy.

When Rebecca was undressed, he helped her lie down on their bed. Her feet were bothering her, and they sure

looked swollen. He covered her bag-of-bones body with the quilt and stared at her lined face. Why had she married him? She could have done better.

The following afternoon, on his way home from the gastroenterologist, Sidney walked into Stuyvesant Square and spotted Ralph Fava sitting on a bench staring at the fountain. Ralph, who at 85 years old was three years older than Sid, wasn’t doing so hot either. His wife Fran had recently died—her liver had stopped filtering the toxins from her body—and he was now alone in life. His sons Nate and Eric had died years ago, Nate in a motorcycle accident and Eric of brain cancer. Other than walk in circles in the park, he no longer knew what to do with himself.

“Cheer up, Ralph. Things aren’t so bad,” Sidney said, approaching.

Ralph, whose skin appeared as if it might fall off his face, looked up at him. “What the fuck do you want?”

“My stomach’s in knots from indigestion. One of the privileges of getting old.” Sidney nodded to the bench. “I’d like to keep you company.” Ralph grunted, and Sidney sat down beside him. Ralph had a newspaper opened on his lap to the horse racing results. “You still doing the online bet-

ting, Ralph?”

“I have very little money for it.”

“I was never much for the ponies,” Sid said.

“You were too busy living the good life.”

Sidney smiled and remembered being around thirty years old and opening a bottle of Dom Perignon on some Portuguese heiress’s yacht off the French Riviera. “Did I ever...”

“I hate this online garbage. I miss the OTB. The televisions, the smell of cigars, talking pussy with the fellows....”

“I can understand that.” There was silence and Sidney remembered that Ralph had once told him that he too had spent some time behind bars: five years in Otisville in the mid-seventies for heading up an auto-theft ring. “I’m thinking about running a little operation, Ralphola.”

Ralph sneered. “You got one foot in the grave and you want to run an operation?”

“Social Security ain’t enough.”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“I thought you had a nest egg?”

Ralph picked his nose; it looked as if it were made of clay. “I’ve outlived my money.”

“What about your supermarket pension?”

“Eighty three dollars and forty three cents a month isn’t much.”

“After I pay rent and electricity, the bride and I are left with only two hundred seventy five dollars, and I’ve maxed out my credit cards. Without rent control, you and I would be living in shacks in the Adirondacks.” Sidney pulled out a bottle of Tums. “Well, I ain’t gonna have the bride eat no dog food.” He shook out a tablet and popped it in his mouth.

“Don’t you have a son?”

“I told you, Ralphola. He moved to Oregon.”

“What the hell’s out there?”

“A Buddhist monastery. He’s busy meditating. Wants nothing to do with making a buck or helping Mom and

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Dad.”  
 “Did you call Meals on Wheels?”  
 “I’ve never been big on handouts, Ralph.”

“Instead, you want to run an operation.”

“I thought you’d be interested.”

“We’re too old to run an operation.”

“Okay, okay. Forget it.” Sidney went to stand but Ralph blocked him with his arm.

“Not so fast,” Ralph said.

“It’s not easy to say no, is it?”

“What exactly are you thinking?”

Sidney smiled. “We’re a lot alike, huh?”

“Enough. Just tell me. I need a good laugh.”

So, Sidney explained. He wanted to start a charity for the poor and elderly and pocket 95 percent of the donations. “It’s not like we’d be lying either,” he said.

“Of course, we’d be lying.”

“Not really. *We are* old and poor and in dire need. We’re just too proud to ask for handouts.”

“That’s not much of a scam.”

“I’m open to suggestions.”

Ralph stood. He had a nutcracker in his hand and from his trench coat pulled out a walnut. “Let me think it over. I have to go home and take a nap.” He cracked the walnut. “Why don’t we discuss this tomorrow?”

The following day, after helping Rebecca get in and out of the shower—she’d recently fallen so Sidney didn’t want to take any chances—Sidney went to Stuyvesant Square and saw Ralph walking in circles near the fountain. “There’s one thing I always wanted to do,” Ralph said to Sidney as he approached.

“What’s that?” Sid asked.

Ralph pulled out his nutcracker but said nothing.

“Are you gonna tell me?” Sidney stopped in front of Ralph. Ralph, who was at least six inches taller, pulled out a walnut and cracked it.

“It’s nothing great but I’ve always wanted to go to the Kentucky Derby.”

“The horse race . . .”

Ralph’s hard brown eyes looked vulnerable. “It’s kind of stupid but...have you ever been?”

“I’m not much for the ponies, pal. But it’s a nice thing, Ralph. The pretty ladies with their big floppy hats....”

“I see myself in the grandstand. Drinking a mint julep. The smell of flowers and horseshit. Picking the winner. A limo waiting for me outside Churchill Downs. Jumping into the backseat. A nice girl on my arm.” He smiled.

“You should go then.”

There was silence and Ralph said, “I thought some more about your idea.”

“It’s a good one, huh? A tax deductible charity organization.”

“It’s a bit involved.”

“What about staging a trip and fall?”

“Collecting on a lawsuit could take forever. I’ll be 86 soon and if I want to get to the Derby, I’ll need the money quick.”

“What about robbing a bank?” Sidney asked.

“You have to be quick and nimble to rob a bank.”

“I have a .22 revolver.”

“Everyone’s such a pussy nowadays; you don’t need a gun.” Ralph paused. “But the banks have all those security cameras....”

“So then a clothing store? Or a bar?”

Ralph put the nutcracker in his pocket. “Problem with that...no one pays cash anymore.”

“When we was young, you needed cash to do things.”

“Brings us back to the bank.”

Sidney burped. “An ATM. At night.”

Ralph paused and waved a finger in Sid’s face. “Some remote corner....”

“We wait for the right person.”

“A hedge fund guy working late....”

“We empty his bank account.”

“*Her* bank account....” Ralph said, picking his nose.

“Yeah, a woman. We can handle a woman.”

“Do you really have a .22?”

“I don’t lie. Not to people I’m doing jobs with.”

“But we don’t want to shoot anyone.”

“I won’t even load it.”

When Sidney returned home, he walked through the front door, smiling. Rebecca was sitting on the couch, paging through *The New York Post*.

“Honey, our 50th wedding anniversary is coming up,” he said, “and you and I are going out on the town in style.” He rubbed the palms of his hands together until they felt warm.

She didn’t respond.

He stepped closer. “Rebecca, you

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## The Blotter

know that expensive restaurant we used to talk about. The Four Seasons. It's like 60 dollars for a tiny plate of food. We're going, darling. Finally."

"Where were you, Charlie?"

"Charlie's your brother, Becky. Charlie died. It's me, your husband, Sid. I met up with Ralph. I told you about Ralph . . . he's a cranky old guy who stares at the fountain in the park all day. His wife recently passed."

"You're not my husband. My husband's young."

Sidney rolled his eyes and took off his threadbare coat. He hung it on a hook on the front door. Rebecca got up from the couch and walked into their bedroom.

Sidney wandered into the kitchen. The sink was filled with dirty dishes. Most days, she knew who he was but it wouldn't be long before he'd forever be a stranger.

Last year the dishwasher had broken so he grabbed a sponge and walked over to the sink and turned on the faucet. As he washed the dishes, he remembered their honeymoon. They had flown to Venice; the little yellow plane had landed in Lido. It was a morning of grey clouds and chirping birds. An old vaporetto took them to the Piazza San Marco. In front of the Doge's Palace, a pigeon crapped on his shoulder, and Becky laughed. "That's good luck," she said to him, her voice as lively as the flurry of notes coming from a nearby café where an accordion

was playing. Though she was no child—she was 27 years old—her face still had the innocence of youth, and her smile was always open to his wild ideas. (He had booked their room at the Gritti Palace under the names "Lord and Lady Bloomfield.") The wind was playing around with her wavy, blond hair. (She rarely tied it back in those days.) She'd been a teenage beauty queen in her hometown of Fort Wayne, Indiana and had come to New York for a modeling assignment. So what had drawn her to him, a slightly-overweight, short guy from Flatbush? Was it his confidence, his fearlessness, his gift of gab? His brain was always spinning with ideas. And he'd been making money too, "hand over fist," selling worthless securities in a bogus investor services company out of an office on Broad Street.

A week later, in Stuyvesant Square, Sidney and Ralph sat themselves down on a bench by the fountain. Sidney pulled out a well-worn map of Manhattan. "This ATM in the Financial District is a good bullseye," Sid said. "Where I indicate." He pointed to a circle that he'd drawn on the map. "A Chase Bank. On the corner of William and Wall. Not far from where I once got busted for securities fraud. The Financial District is always quiet at night too. But there's a limit to how much cash can be withdrawn."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, a thousand bucks."

Ralph looked unfazed. "I could get to the Derby and back on that."

"Well, I'll need almost a thousand dollars for what I got planned."

"You got something planned?"

"I'm taking the bride out on the town for our 50<sup>th</sup>."

"That's gold."

"No, she's gold but she barely remembers me anymore, and I want to go all out for her this time. I want our night to be her last good memory of me. So, if you and I go halves on the job, we'll need to rob two folks." He made a peace sign.

"Well, if we have to do that, let's do both jobs on the same night."

"Absolutely. You think I'm looking to drag this thing out?" Sidney pointed to the map. "After the first stickup, we head over here to Fulton Street...."

"They have cameras on ATMs."

"I'll put a bag over my ugly face."

When Sidney got home that afternoon, Rebecca was staring at the television. Sidney looked at the screen. The set was on, tuned to a soap opera, but the sound had been turned down. "What would you like for dinner, Mrs. Bloomfield?" He took off his coat and hung it on the hook.

"Some macaroni and cheese."

He smiled; she was having a good day. "That's an excellent choice." He stepped closer. "Your glasses are dirty. How can you see anything?" Sidney reached over and took off her glasses. He untucked his shirt and with his shirttails cleaned the lenses.

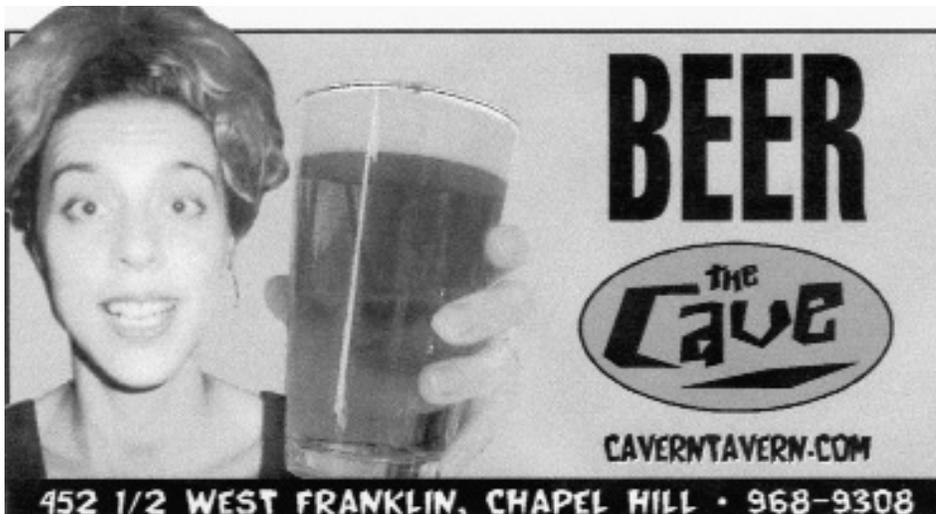
"Where were you, Sidney?"

"I was helping the superintendent. I told you. And with the money I earn I'm going to take you to the Four Seasons."

"For our anniversary...?"

"That's right, darling. The big five oh."

He reached over and put her



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glasses back on.

"You don't have to take me out, Sidney."

"I know, darling." He kissed her lips. "But I want to."

Sidney and Ralph met downtown in front of the New York Stock Exchange. The cold wind was attacking from all directions, and the sky was so dark that it was like they were underneath an enormous black umbrella. Sidney checked his watch; it was close to 11:00 p.m., and the streets were practically empty. "I feel good about this Ralph. I'm excited."

"Let's hope you're still saying that a few hours from now."

Sidney patted Ralph on the back. "Follow me, pal." They turned onto Wall Street and, when they got to the corner of William Street, they stopped. "It's freezing," Sidney said, "but I've got just the remedy." He put on a ski mask. "Now go stand by the bank's door and ask the people walking by if they can spare some change." Sidney pulled out a handful of coins from his coat and dropped them into an empty coffee cup that Ralph was holding. "Relax, Ralph. Your hand is shaking."

"What do you expect? I'm old."

"No, you're nervous. I can see it in your eyes."

"I'm okay. So long as I think about the Derby."

"Good idea. And remember the signal. When you sneeze, I'll come over."

Ralph nodded and walked over to the bank. Sidney stood near the corner by a garbage can. They waited. Some people walked by Ralph, a few of them dropping coins in his cup. Then, a man wearing earmuffs, ignoring Ralph, opened the bank's door and walked inside. A little while later, the man walked out, counting bills. He crossed the street and disappeared into the night.

Sidney took a Tums. How long would it take before the right woman came along? But then a few seconds

later a ponytailed woman in her thirties, holding a gym bag, stepped into the bank. Ralph faked a sneeze.

Sidney put his hand in his pocket and grabbed his gun. He didn't tell Ralph but before leaving his apartment he had loaded it. He couldn't risk going to jail. If that happened, his bride would be left alone with no one to care for her. But he'd only use the gun in self-defense, and, of course, as a last resort.

He walked past Ralph and with his credit card he unlocked the bank's door and stepped inside. The woman was pulling bills from the ATM. Sidney pointed the gun at her. "Excuse me, sweetheart."

The woman turned around.

"Hand over the money."

She screamed.

"I said, 'Hand over the money.'"

Her eyes widened. "Oh my God!"

"Be quiet and fork the money over. Now!"

She took a deep breath and held the money out to him as if she couldn't give it away fast enough.

Sidney grabbed it. "How much is it, sweetheart?"

"Four hundred dollars." The woman sounded like she was choking.

"Take out another six hundred and give it to me."

She started crying.

"Go ahead," he said. "If you do that, I'll let you live."

She started pressing the ATM's keypad buttons. A few moments later, the ATM delivered the money. She grabbed it and handed it to him.

"Now get out of here," he said, taking the money. "Scram. Walk out of here like nothing happened."

She headed for the door.

"I have men on every corner, sweetheart," he said as she hurried past him. "You will see them. If you ignore them, they will ignore you. If not . . ." He waved the gun.

The woman opened the door and left. Sidney followed her outside. On

the sidewalk, he watched as she ran off. According to his and Ralph's plan, Ralph would already be on his way to the next ATM, so Sidney headed off toward Broadway. Ten minutes later, at the corner of Broadway and Fulton Street, he spotted Ralph in front of St. Paul's Chapel, cracking a walnut.

"How did it go?" Ralph asked.

"Exactly as planned," Sidney said, approaching.

"Well, where's my fuckin' money?"

"I knew you were going to say that." Sid turned to face the chapel so that no one could see his hands. Then he reached inside his pocket and pulled out a stack of bills. He counted out five hundred dollars and discretely handed the money to Ralph, who then took it and stuffed it in his coat pocket. Ralph crossed the street and stood in front of a Chase bank. They waited, Sidney leaning against the chapel's wrought-iron fence, Ralph shaking his coin-filled cup at passersby. Sidney started thinking about where he'd take Becky after the Four Seasons. The opera? He could wear his tuxedo. He hadn't worn it in years; he was pretty sure it still fit.

Finally, a middle-aged woman with messy hair walked up to the bank and pulled open the door as if she were angry at it for being in her way. Ralph faked a sneeze.

Sidney put his hand in his pocket and grabbed the gun. He crossed the street and unlocked the bank's door and walked inside. "Excuse me, sweetheart." He drew the gun.

The woman, who was rummaging through her handbag, looked up at him and gasped.

"I want you to withdraw one

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# The Blotter

thousand dollars,” Sidney said.

She dropped her handbag on the floor. “But I don’t have a thousand dollars.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying,” she said, stammering.

Sidney paused. “Well then what do you got?”

“Around three hundred.”

“Then give me that.”

The woman put her card in the ATM and began tapping the keypad. A few moments later, the ATM delivered a small stack of bills. She grabbed it, and Sidney stepped forward. “I want to see your balance,” he said.

She stepped away from the ATM, and he craned his neck to look at the screen. But then she lunged forward and kicked him in the balls. He doubled over, the gun falling out of his hands. She picked up her handbag and ran for the door.

Sidney staggered, the pain between his legs reaching a crescendo. Then he straightened himself and turned toward the door. Ralph was trying to block the woman from leaving. Sidney picked up the gun off the floor and hobbled toward the door. “Get out of my way!” the woman hollered. She then shoved Ralph. Ralph fell back and hit the pavement.

Sidney stepped outside. The woman was already halfway down the block. “Help! Help!” she screamed. “I’ve been robbed! Help!” Ralph was lying face up and motionless on the

pavement. “Ralph,” Sidney said, stepping toward him. “Are you all right? Ralph . . . get up. Hurry!” Ralph didn’t move, so Sidney crouched beside him. Ralph’s eyes were closed. Blood was coming out of his ears. “Oh my God. Ralph.” Sidney shook him but he didn’t respond. Sidney looked up and down the street. The woman was gone but she’d no doubt be back with the police. He reached inside Ralph’s coat pocket and pulled out the five hundred dollars he’d given him and hurried off.

The next morning, Sidney went online to see if there was any news about what had happened the night before, but he couldn’t find any. After fixing Rebecca a breakfast of orange juice and apple slices, he went to Stuyvesant Square in hopes of seeing Ralph. But he wasn’t there. Sidney sat down on a bench and stared at the fountain. It wasn’t much of a fountain, at least not today. The streams of water were no bigger—or more remarkable—than the ones that came out of an ordinary garden hose. Why was Ralph so taken by the fountain? Sidney had no idea, but he hoped Ralph was all right. But based upon what he’d witnessed, he didn’t think that was possible. Though he’d never been to Ralph’s apartment before, he knew where he lived, so he got up off the bench and headed over. When he arrived at Ralph’s building, he considered ringing the intercom but the

vestibule would probably have a surveillance camera and he didn’t want to end up on videotape.

Later that night, while at home, he went online and saw a headline from a local news outlet: “Elderly Thief Killed in Armed Robbery.” The first line of the story read as follows: “An unidentified elderly man was killed when the woman he was trying to rob at an ATM decided to fight back.” The police had determined that the woman had acted in self-defense. They were still looking for the elderly man’s accomplice.

Sidney got up from the computer. My God. Ralphola was dead. Sidney’s stomach started churning. He took a Tums. Was there a way the police could track the robberies back to him? His hands were shaking. Rebecca was watching TV with the sound turned down. Though Sidney had walked by Ralph’s building that morning, hundreds of people walked by it every day. He had never called Ralph. He didn’t even have Ralph’s phone number and, as far as he knew, Ralph didn’t have a cellphone. Sure, he talked to Ralph in the park, but a lot of people talked to him.

A month passed and no police officers ever came knocking on Sidney’s door. Thank God. He’d probably gotten away with the robberies. He wasn’t that surprised. For the life of him, he just couldn’t see how the police could connect the jobs to him. He’d done well planning the operation. Not bad for an old guy. He still had what it took to run a good operation. But poor Ralphola. Sidney wondered if there’d been a funeral. He saw nothing about one in the newspapers and no one in the park seemed to know. What a shame Ralph’s life had to end that way.

A few days before his and Rebecca’s fiftieth wedding anniversary, Sidney called the Four Seasons but no

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A mysterious will by an unknown hand; and murder...

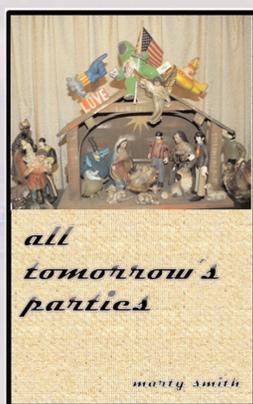
Blotter Books presents:

### *All Tomorrow’s Parties*

by Marty Smith

(publisher & book reviewer, “The Blotter Magazine”; contributor to the “Urban Hiker”; former host of “New Frontiers” and “Laugh Tracks” on WXDU – FM, Duke University Radio)

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one picked up. He called again the next day but the phone just rang. He went online. The restaurant was closed and would reopen in year at a new location. *You got to be kidding me.* Sidney hit his forehead with the butt of his hand. Just when he was ready to go.

He'd have to think of another place to take the bride. Rebecca was seated at the kitchen table, eating macaroni and cheese. "Honey . . . I've got some bad news. That fancy restaurant we talked about . . . well, it's closed. We're gonna have to pick another place. Any thoughts?"

She didn't respond.

He wasn't exactly current on the restaurant scene. It had been years since he'd dined out regularly. In 1987, when he'd gotten out of prison for the third time—he'd served 18 months for writing bad checks—Rebecca had made him swear off illegal, get-rich-quick schemes. He didn't want to lose her—she was all the goodness in his life—so he had agreed to earn a living legitimately. But going to work every day as a salesperson for a regional lifestyle magazine meant never getting ahead.

He remembered Rebecca's brother Charlie visiting them in New York in the early nineties. Charlie had wanted them to meet him for dinner at the 21 Club. Rebecca was excited to go but Sidney nixed the idea; they just couldn't afford it. (Sidney's ego too would not allow him to let his brother-in-law pay.) So, they met Charlie for a drink in his hotel room.

Why not the 21 Club?

Sidney and Rebecca were waiting outside their building, when the limousine pulled up. The driver, a man with crooked teeth, opened the door for them. Sidney, dressed in his tuxedo that was too small for him, helped Rebecca into the backseat. She was wrapped in her long mink coat.

"The 21 Club, please," Sidney

said.

It was a beautiful night; their view from the car window was dotted by headlights, streetlights, and the lights from storefronts and residences. Seeing 52<sup>nd</sup> Street was like running into an old friend that Sidney barely recognized. "Remember when we used to hang out here, Becky. Just the two of us. They called it Swing Street."

"We went to Birdland."

He smiled; she was having a good day.

"We saw Dizzy Gillespie play," he said. "The fellow with the big cheeks." Sid chuckled and filled his mouth with air.

"There was a place over there,"

Becky said, pressing her finger against the window.

"Jimmy Ryan's. I got into a fight with an Italian there once."

"You didn't tell me."

"Yeah, it was before I met you.

He was making eyes at my date."

They pulled up to the 21 Club, and the driver jumped out. "This is some service, ain't it, Becky?" The driver opened their door, and Sidney helped his bride out of the car. "Come back in an hour and a half," Sidney said to man, handing him a folded twenty dollar bill. Sidney put his arm through Becky's and turned to face the restaurant.

"Look at the little men," Becky said.

Illuminated on the restaurant's balcony was a line of colorful cast-iron lawn jockeys.

"How about that," Sidney said. "I forgot all about them."

"Kind of creepy," she said.

Inside the restaurant, a waif-thin hostess checked their coats. Rebecca's blue sequin dress, though too big for her withered frame, looked elegant. The hostess led them to their table. The soft lighting reflecting off the restaurant's warm wooden walls made Becky look twenty years younger. As they sat, Sidney hoped the lighting

would have the same effect on him.

"The jockeys outside make me think of my friend Ralph, Becky. I told you about Ralph, right?" Sidney unfolded his cloth napkin and placed it on his lap. "Whenever he had a few bucks, and it wasn't often, he'd bet on the horses, darling."

"I'm hungry," she said, picking up her menu.

"He died recently. Someone in the park said he fell and split his head open on the pavement. A brain hemorrhage. There was nothing no one could do." Sidney opened the menu. "This place is expensive, Becky, but don't worry. I got more money than I thought helping the superintendent clean out the clutter in the basement."

The waiter, a heavysset, mustachioed man, appeared. "Would you like to start off with something to drink?" he asked.

"The bride will have some sparkling water," Sidney said.

"Very well. And you, sir?"

Sidney paused. His stomach was bothering him.

"Do you need more time?" the waiter asked.

"No, no. I know . . . How about a little red wine?"

"The house cabernet?"

"That'll be fine."

The waiter left and Sid took a Tums and said to Becky, "My friend Ralph used to drink mint juleps. Have

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you ever tried one?"

"No."

"Me neither. For a second I thought maybe I'd get one."

A little while later, their drinks came. Ralph raised his glass. "A toast. To fifty years of wedded bliss. It's been wonderful, darling. You're still beautiful too. You're the best. Me...not so much. But, hey."

They clinked glasses and drank.

On the other side of the dining room a man and woman walked in. The woman was wearing a felt fedora.

"Ralph was planning on going to the Kentucky Derby, Becky."

"The horse race?"

"All the pretty ladies with those big floppy hats. He loved the ponies and he was really looking forward to the Derby." Above Rebecca's head was a painting of a horse stable. "You can't wait to do things in life, Becky, especially at our age. Everything, sooner or later, just goes away. That's why I'm glad we came here tonight."

On the ride to the Metropolitan Opera, Sidney couldn't stop thinking of Ralph: his clay nose, his motionless body on the pavement, lines of blood running out of his ears. Poor Ralphola. And how odd was it that Rebecca and he had ended up at the 21 Club, a restaurant that featured horse racing so prominently. Was it just a coincidence, or had Sidney's subconscious brought them there, or, worse, some evil cosmic force?

The limousine pulled up to Lincoln Center, and the driver jumped

out and opened their door. "Watch yourselves going up the steps," the driver said.

Sidney and Becky got out and Sidney pulled the driver aside and handed him a folded twenty-dollar bill. "Don't go too far, young man. The bride's fading fast."

"I'll circle the block," the driver said. He winked and got back inside the car.

Sidney put his arm through Becky's, and they started up the steps. When they got to the elevated plaza, he stopped and looked around. The monumental facades. The glowing fountain whose streams added up to one big continuous crashing wave. "Everything's so beautiful, ain't it, Becky?" Then he thought of the frightened faces of the women he had robbed. If only there had been a way he could have taken Becky out legitimately, without hurting people.

"Becky?"

She didn't respond. She had a blank look on her face. Did she even know who he was?

"Where are we?" she finally asked.

"I want to tell you something, Becky." He grabbed her shoulders. "It's important, so listen up. I want to apologize. I tried to...years ago, but..." He shook his head.

"What are you talking about?"

"I was a lousy husband, Becky. I wanted us to have the finer things in life but...I was too impatient. And then I wound up going to the big house for all those years, leaving you

alone. Blowing every cent we had."

He hugged her. "I'm sorry, darling."

And, when he finally let go of her—he didn't want to—she turned to the fountain where people were seated and said, "Those people are going to get wet."

Had what he'd said even registered? He didn't know but it almost didn't matter because he'd tell her the same thing tomorrow. He'd tell her every day, until one of them was no more, like Ralph and his Kentucky Derby dream.

"Let's go home," she said.

"You don't want to go to the opera?"

"No. I want to go home."

He looked at the opera house. "Are you sure?"

She smiled; her dentures were perfect. "Yes."

"Okay, darling. Maybe some other time."

They turned and headed back toward the steps. A man in a baseball cap approached and offered to sell Sidney a rose. "How much?" Sidney asked.

"Ten dollars."

Sidney pulled out a folded twenty-dollar bill and handed it to him. "Keep it," he said, and he took the rose, smelled it, and handed it to Becky. By the time he and Becky had walked down the steps, the limousine was pulling up.

A few minutes later, they were in the car, turning onto Central Park South. Sidney saw a horse carriage up ahead and rolled down the window. A rush of cold air swept into the limo.

"I'm cold," Becky said.

"I'm sorry, darling." He rolled up the window. The smell of horseshit. He'd get the bride home and into bed. He'd help her undress, her heels and stockings before her blue sequin dress.

❖

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# "Days of waiting for an end"

by Darya Tsybalyuk

Out my window I see a fountain. I can't remember the last time it worked. It used to serve as a flowerbed. Now there are only empty bottles in the bottom of it. Most people in town learned not to notice it. From this invisible fountain starts our first encounter. You are sitting on the very edge of the fountain, smiling.

Later, hanging from the edge of the bed, you are drawing an invisible map on my floor. It is a map of airports and train stations. Only after I understand there was no home on it.

"Maybe we have a fountain on the main square, because no heroes were born in this town?"

"Who knows, perhaps, it is even better without heroes."

Our days of waiting for an end begin. I save your first story with special care, catching it like a bird and hiding in my coat: *"A headless marble body, becoming more and more shapeless, is surrounded by an agitated crowd. We are trying to get closer, to make it to the first row, to understand why there are so many people. Of course, there is the body lying, but it has been lying there for a couple of days already, so what's going on? Somehow we manage to get to the centre of the crowd, and we see a man who is clinging to the body and doesn't let anybody close, like a dog on a chain. He has embraced the body with both arms. – Please, go away, it's a tyrant. – I won't let you, I won't let you, you don't understand! – No, you are the one who doesn't understand! – Hands off, I won't let you, won't let you, won't let you... – the man keeps repeating, it's despair – Won't let you, won't let you, won't let you, won't let you... It's December, it's frosty, and he is holding cold marble in a tight embrace. They say everything you believed in was a lie. Why are you so*

*cynical? The man does not give up: my arm is your arm, my shoulder is your shoulder, everything is clear, everything makes sense, everything is reasonable. – Enough! – somebody in front of me sounds fed up and I see a man stepping forward. He's got a black shearling coat and squared shoulders. He blocks the man and the body..."* You fell asleep, or maybe it was me, but I've never found out what happened after.

There is a hill near your house and a big tree on top of the hill. When I look at it from the doorway, it seems the tree is growing right out of the laundry room in front of your house. Climbing the hill and stargazing is a fun thing to do. It would be even better, if we could climb the tree, that would be a whole space trip of sorts. It's a cold night. The Great Bear has stretched right above us, as always, as every night. A small park around is a dark spot. If you step there, you'll disappear. Descending from the hill, you are telling a story. My fingers are completely frozen, and you are merging with the darkness. It is another one of your stories. I keep following you, but see nothing. The Great Bear has fallen asleep and can't hear us. I am trying to grab you and pull you out of darkness, but there is nothing there. After some time, I can see you disappearing completely behind a bush, and the story disappears with you: *"For hours we have been looking for a shower in the mountains, until we found a house amidst the snow. There was light in the windows. We knocked and asked if we could use their shower, they let us. The water was cold, when I got out my hair was wet. It was frosty. I sat down on a wooden fence. To the right of me children were running around the fire holding torches. Their voices rolled into the*

*sky like metal balls. Where did they come from? Why were they laughing? Oh, how joyfully they were laughing, and the stars were laughing together with them. The stars never seemed to be so close and clear. Maybe it was the mountains, or maybe the wind on my cheek. I realised I had to say: "I don't love you anymore." But how could I say that? Everything felt empty and uninteresting. Everything I used to find mysterious began to annoy me. "Is something wrong?" "No, everything is OK". The torches sewed the snow with a red thread..."* You stumble upon a snag and fall. I see nothing, but there is laughter in the darkness.

I've always had home but never had you. "What does home mean to you?" – I ask. "Hmm, maybe songs I grew up with? Poems I know by heart. Yes, poems... Memories... My cat... Yes, something like this..." "And I?" – I want to ask you, but don't. You embrace me like somebody hopeless.

I love to sit in a wooden chair opposite a post office and imagine that it is not a post office, but a train station. A row of trees looks like railway tracks. Two steps, framed by the bushes, lead to the post office. I can sit like this for hours, waiting for the wind to come, the wheels to clatter and the train to take me to the places from your stories, or maybe - to take you, instead.

I keep turning, unable to fall asleep. I am thinking about the infinity of the Universe, and about my inability to imagine it. It makes me anxious. "Don't you think that our post office looks just like a train station from your stories?" You laugh. "Do you by any chance hear ghost trains from my childhood?" *"Out our window we saw a river. I used to sit on a windowsill together with my cat. We would watch the river, the water, our neighbours and stray dogs that lived in our yard. At night, we often heard a train. No railway went through our district, and we could not understand where did the*

# The Blotter

*sound come from. After some time we noticed railway tracks behind garages, on a way to the river. The tracks led to a factory. What could a train be transporting to the factory at night? It was odd though, that the ground around the tracks was covered with tall grass, and tree branches were hanging really low. How could a train pass through? Still, when night came, we kept on hearing the clatter of train wheels... But what could we do? How could we find out? Run out into the street? Head towards garages at night and see with our own eyes?"*

We leave the pub and decide to walk to the piers to look at the sea at night. You are being quiet all of a sudden, and I keep quiet as well. It's dark, there are no stars. I try to fix my gaze on something, but there is nothing except you, all is darkness with no end and no beginning, end-less and beginning-less darkness. You speed up out of impatience, heading towards the edge. Maybe it's wine or maybe the wind, you are staggering while walking, and it looks as if you are about to fall. ❖

## "Baba O' Riley"

After Pete Townshend

We hiked railroad tracks till twilight.  
You worked the graveyard shift at a gas station  
While I did homework, daydreaming of teenage wasteland.  
Remember when we broke into that school bus?

You worked the graveyard shift at a gas station.  
Naturally, it wasn't an exciting career.  
We pipped in the back of an elementary school bus  
As distant sirens sang Miranda Rights.

I thought becoming Pete Townshend an exciting career,  
Screaming Baba O Riley at the top of my lungs.  
Sirens sang their Miranda Rights for other boys while  
You threw the word faggot around like a baseball.

I sang Baba O Riley until my lungs splintered. I  
Began crawling into my own baggy manhood.  
You threw the word faggot around like a baseball.  
Our voices crackled in your mother's Cadillac.

I soon filled out my baggy manhood  
With hair on my face and a marathon runner's legs.  
You cruised to cramped parties in your mother's Cadillac  
And found out which powders make your nose bleed.

You were a marathon runner; your hair-thick legs  
Hurling from vandalism to cocaine.  
I watched you jittering in bed as your nose bled -  
Don't fuck with me anymore, can't you see I'm fine?

Which was the higher hurdle, vandalism or cocaine?  
Do you sleep where you piss? Some vacant bus?  
We don't fuck with each other anymore. I imagine you're fine,  
Hiking those railroad tracks alone.



**NIGHTSOUND  
STUDIOS**



Two by Dylan Hull

“[Portrait of Insomnia]”

I'm all wound up in this goddamn box.  
 Arrested in darkness, my mind distills  
 Under blue/black blankets and broken clocks.

[When did John Entwistle become the Ox?  
 And what was his last meal, cocaine or pills?]  
 I'm all strung out in this goddamn box.

This night a life sentence, the cell door locks  
 As a blackbird sings eulogies beneath my windowsill.  
 Three minutes pass...? Laughter creases the faces of clocks.

[What's that in the distance, fireworks or glocks?  
 Where are shadows born? Are they sleeping there still?  
 Bound to their blankets or some goddamned box?]

Fuck lying down in this toss-turning pox,  
 I'll drink, smoke, drink until it makes me ill  
 To break the custody of these curb-stomping clocks.

[Cruel is the barn owl, hear how he mocks!  
 Come to me sleep, or death trill whip-poor-will!  
 I'm all fucked up in this goddamn box,  
 Languishing with legions of loathsome clocks]

**The Dream Journal**

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts  
 from your own dream  
 journals. If nothing else,  
 we'd love to read them.  
 We won't publish your  
 whole name.

[mermaid@blotterrag.com](mailto:mermaid@blotterrag.com)

One year after his passing, I  
 am having a conversation  
 with my dad in his living  
 room. I am trying to  
 install a sound system for  
 his big-screen TV, plugging  
 in all of the what-not in the  
 spaghetti of wires hidden in  
 back of the couch. He is  
 standing there behind me,  
 looking thirty years  
 younger, telling me that his  
 cable provider doesn't want  
 him to do anything that  
 would put data in the  
 cloud. I look up, a bit sur-  
 prised - Dad knows noth-  
 ing about the cloud, and if  
 he really is thirty years  
 younger then he doesn't yet  
 have a big-screen TV or a  
 cable provider and there is  
 no cloud. Everything is a  
 little bit quizzical. But  
 gosh he looks great and it's  
 good to see him.

Me - cyberspace

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Two by Carl "Papa" Palmer

"lounge lizard"

throat raw from yelling  
from shared cigarette smoke  
free drinks from smiling servers  
eyes burning red and puffy  
feet sore from walking  
lips chapped face itchy  
ears ringing dry mouth  
2PM just getting up  
buffet breakfast missed again  
tonight I'll go with the crowds  
to all the free outdoor shows  
water ballet at Bellagio  
fire volcano at the Mirage  
try to find someone to share  
a couple 2 for 1 coupons



## “reunion photographer”

making his rounds  
camera in one hand  
mixed drink in other  
shots taken from each

lip prints appear on  
view finder window  
lost focus wipes lens  
hands camera to wife

### CONTRIBUTORS:

**P. J. Gannon writes**, “I am a writer in Manhattan and hold a B.A. in English Literature from Columbia University. My work has appeared or is set to appear in *The Alembic*, *Slow Trains*, *2 Bridges Review*, *Agave Magazine*, *Gadfly Online*, *The Talon Magazine*, *Amarillo Bay Literary Journal*, and *The Ledge Poetry & Fiction Magazine*.”

**Darya Tsymbalyuk** left home when she was 17 and since then she has lived in six different countries. At the moment she lives in the South of France, where she is finishing her Master’s program “Crossways in Cultural Narratives”. In her spare time she writes, paints, collects oral histories and studies traces of waves in the sand.

“My name is **Dylan Hull** and I have been a fan of Blotter since the December issue. I am a poet from North Carolina and have been published in *Runestone Journal* and *The Coraddi*, my alma mater’s undergraduate arts and literature magazine. I hope you will find my work a good fit for Blotter as well.” *Ed. note: We do, indeed!*

**Carl "Papa" Palmer** of Old Mill Road in Ridgeway, VA now lives in University Place, WA. He is retired military, retired FAA and now just plain retired without wristwatch or alarm clock. His motto: Long Weekends Forever. *Ed. note: that’s ours, too!*

**Phil Juliano** of Bloomington, MN, is a good Blotterfriend. Follow his adventures on [philjulianoillustration.com](http://philjulianoillustration.com) and purchase his new book at <http://bestinshowcomics.bigcartel.com/>.

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