

*Amphibians rule with Dr. Bill Meulemans,
Jerry Vilhotti, Dr. Steve Yarris, Andrew Walker,
Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal*

The Blotter

November 2017

MAGAZINE



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“Thirst”

Alright, I’ve been giving a lot of thought to this. I have an entire drawer in the kitchen full of refillable water bottles, with the goal of not buying bottled water from the store. Logical and frugal, right? But here’s the thing: once upon a time, I didn’t carry around water. I lived in a place called a town, where I had a dwelling called a house (or an apartment, or a dorm room). I went from task to task, and when I felt the oncoming urge to sip at water, because the saliva in my mouth had turned to cotton, or when a headache came on and I needed to ingest a couple of aspirin, I found a restroom or a water fountain or I went home into a room called a kitchen and turned on the tap and let the flow of water fill a glass, then I drank it and relieved this urge to sip. If I was playing outside, say a rousing hand of whiffle-ball or home-free-all, and that need to sip came over me, I called “Time-Out!” and ran to my house to do that drinking-a-glass-of-water thing all over again. Like I hadn’t done it just a couple of hours earlier!

Frustrating? No, not really. If I didn’t want to run all the way home, I asked a friend if we could go get a glass-of-water at his house. If he didn’t want to go all the way inside, we might turn on the outside spigot and drink from the hose! I’m not proud of that, but they were tough times. And if no one wanted to take a time-out for some water, I might just say “OK, see you tomorrow!” and go home to imbibe in a couple of glasses of water. Maybe even with a plunk of ice!

Here’s what I imagine: a bunch of old men in the late 90s (the era, not their ages, although you never can tell) in rumpled, expensive suits, sitting around a table thinking about the sort of things such bitter people do.

“Hey,” one of the old farts pipes up. “Try this one on for size: if we bottle the water, everyone can just keep on doing whatever they were doing. More productivity because of shorter breaks, right?”

“We’ve already done that, Fitzwalter, you idiot,” growls a wizened little insect-gnome of a man in a tall leather chair. “Too many people stand around the water cooler already!”

“No, no! That’s the beauty of this,” Fitzwalter the Idiot replies.

“First, we convince them with advertisements and celebrity endorsements that they need to take a sip of water all the damned time. I don’t know, let’s put a stake in the ground and call it ‘wetting.’”

“No – that’s too much like our adult diaper campaign, whines the ancient gnome.

“What about ‘hydrating’” one of the others shouts.

Fitzwalter points a yellowed fingernail at him excitedly. "Even better. And we'll put their water in individual containers at each desk, so they don't have an excuse for getting up!"

"Won't they just drink the bottle up and leave it behind?" asks the gnome-man.

"Not at all, sir. We'll convince them through...medical testimonials, that gulping down water causes cramps, especially when they're really hot or thirsty."

"We have medical testimonials?"

"Not yet, sir. But we will."

A fourth gentleman, younger than the others but just as cold around the eyes, holds up his hand, tentatively. "What if, and I'm just spit-balling here, we sell the water to them, as...I don't know...spring water. We'll get the boys in marketing to work up an explanation for how it's even better for them."

Croaks of "Oh, sir! Genius, by god! Pure genius!" and a spattering of applause from the others. Everyone lights up a victory cigarette and they disappear in the billowing smoke like Pompeii beneath Vesuvius. One fellow, however, slouching deep in his chair, rubs his razor-scraped chin and goes dark. What if, he thinks, we just don't make clean water come out of taps? What if we just don't repair anything after, say, a storm? What if we didn't have to spend any marketing funds to sell our product, because there was no alternative at all?

So I am returning to my youth. I don't carry around water, and yet nothing in my life goes on without me taking a water break. While I can, I stop and go to the sink. And when I'm really thirsty, I'll gulp a whole glass of water, too. Just try and stop me, you bastards.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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CAUTION

Can you spare a fellow American

“Neighbors Who Aren’t Friends”

by Bill Meulemans, Ph.D.

Ed. note: Dr. Meulemans says it better than we ever could, and so we quote: I hope you will find this article to be of interest to the readers of *The Blotter Magazine*. In my judgment, it goes to the heart of democratic theory as we practice it across the country.

Sincerely,
Bill Meulemans, Ph.D.

The founding fathers got it wrong when they wrote the First Amendment to the Constitution:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; the right of the people peacefully to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

From our very beginning,

the freedoms of press, speech, religion and assembly were not protected at the local level. The myth prevailed that local people were the defenders of individual liberties, but the theory of democracy at the local level was flawed, and those in the greatest need of protection had nowhere to turn.

Let’s imagine it’s during the early 1920s, and several things occurred in your hometown. The local school board denied the right of minority children to receive a public education. The mayor shut down the local newspaper because the editor had criticized his administration. And the chief of police decided to ban all public meetings because outside civil rights advocates were motivating local people to protest against the law.

All of these acts were a clear violation of basic constitutional rights and you would expect the First Amendment would have

protected those rights against infringement, but you would have been wrong. Read the amendment again. It states clearly that “*Congress shall make no law. . .*” You had false protection because the most abusive situations of this kind occurred at the state and local levels.

Why did the founders in 1787 protect you against the federal government, rather than folks in your state or locality? There was a mistaken belief that the greatest danger to individual freedom would come from the national government. The federal capitol in Washington D.C. was distant from everyday life, and was thought to be a threat to the liberties of your friends and neighbors. There was a faith that local people could be trusted more to defend basic freedoms than those who lived in far off places. Built into the American belief system was the perceived myth that people you don’t know well would try to restrict your freedom, but you could feel comfortable with those folks down the street. And so it followed that the Constitution should defend against governmental restrictions from outside your locality rather

Friendship, loyalty, nostalgia; and the joy and healing power of music...

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A lost tape of a beloved band’s legendary show...
A record label, poised to break big, which certain people want to be part of - by any means necessary...
Two visitors, whose own music has been muted by regrets over long-ago bad decisions: Chuck McDonough, former grad student, who skipped town after learning things about himself he couldn’t face; and Penny Froward, whose attempt to help a friend in danger almost destroyed another woman’s life...
A mysterious will by an unknown hand; and murder...

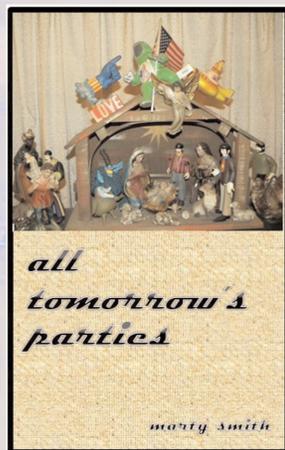
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by Marty Smith

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than local political bodies.

There was a persistent faith that local government was the most responsive to *everyone*, regardless of an individual's race, religion or nationality. Herein was the built-in fear of a central government infringing liberties that did not materialize.

Those who wrote the Constitution had decades of negative experiences with the distant governments headed up by an English king and parliament. Their apprehension of a centralized authority was shaped by real examples of autocratic rule from a government far away. Their struggles with the Crown forces convinced them that central governments were to be feared while local governments were more likely to preserve individual freedoms. But it soon became evident that they were wrong.

Real life experiences teach us that highly homogeneous populations at the local level often repress minority rights. When a community is made up mostly of people who think, look, and act the same, there is a

higher likelihood that they will be unsympathetic to those who don't fit in. When nearly everyone has similar outlook, there is a tendency for the group to become headstrong and turn against those who are different. There is a long history in the US (and around the world) of local majorities discriminating against those outside the fold.

Just ask the new immigrants that came to America, black families that tried to move into all-white neighborhoods, or gay people who want a same-sex marriage in a small fundamentalist community. Otherwise good people can become intolerant and mean-spirited when they constitute a large majority. Hostile discrimination is a common reaction. Homogeneous groups can flex their muscle and push hard against people of another race, religion, nationality or sexual orientation.

But that situation feels very different within the majority. A homogenous group may offer acceptance and security to its own members because they believe, look, and behave like

everyone else. Life in the neighborhood can be a haven if a person fits in. If you are of the same race, religion or nationality, there is little fear of mistreatment or discrimination – people in a large majority are fond of saying, “What’s the problem?”

It is important to note that these trends existed throughout the United States for more than the first 130 years of our history after the Constitution was written. Minority religious, ethnic, racial, and nationality groups were not enjoying the same levels of protection as the majority. It was always a bit difficult at the local level for persons who spoke out on controversial subjects. Freedom of speech, press and assembly was generally secure for the majority but less so for a minority. Depending on where one lived, some Americans were second-class citizens and there was little they could do to improve their status.

Finally in 1925, the Supreme Court used a novel procedure in the case of (*Gitlow vs. New York*) to defend the freedom of speech from a restrictive New York law that made it a felony to advocate the forceful overthrow of the government. The Court held that the guarantees of the First Amendment could be enforced at the state level through provisions in the Fourteenth Amendment. In a series of cases, during the next 20 years, the Supreme Court declared that a citizen's “due process” would now include uni-



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form enforcement of First Amendment rights at all levels of government.

The Supreme Court case is an example of a trend that is often overlooked. It has usually been the federal courts that have stepped in to rescue minorities from abusive majorities. Local and state courts often came down hard on unpopular groups that were out of step with the majority. Surprisingly, it was the government in far off Washington D.C. that came to the aid of “local dissidents” who favored racial integration, or freedom of religion. It was the federal courts that often defended minorities who spoke out against measures passed by state and local governments. The question: why was there such a contrast on the practice of upholding democratic values? Where there different sets of circumstances at various levels of government?

Our experience has taught us that heterogeneous groups are more likely to defend minorities against a hard-nosed homogeneous majority. That is to say

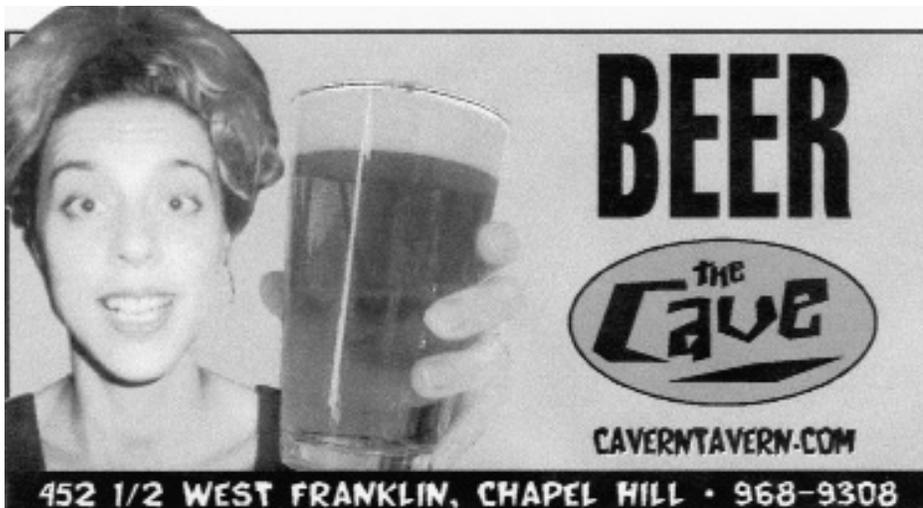
groups made up of many dissimilar parts are more diverse and therefore less able to restrict individual freedom. When the majority is made up of more dissimilar parts, there is a greater likelihood that decision-makers will be open to bargaining and compromise and a more moderate point of view will prevail.

By definition, the national government reflects the views of people from all over the country, folks of competing life-styles, different political/economic orientations, religions, races, and opposing values. It's not that individuals within these diverse groups are more tolerant or understanding – there are bigots in all three branches of the federal government, but *no one group can dominate the entire structure even if it wanted to*. It is the varied composition of the government that often causes the leaders in Washington, D.C. to be more tolerant and willing to defend different minorities across the nation. It turns out that *heterogeneity is the key to personal freedom*. Overall diversity promotes the expression of

minority interest groups at all levels. Racial, economic and religious minorities can gain some relief from stubborn majorities that are more likely to rule at the city or state level.

Despite this clear record of freedom being abused the most at the state and local level, there are still some who argue that government is more responsive to people at the state and local levels. That, of course, is true if you happen to be a member of that power structure, but it is seldom true if you want to change the system. The whole idea of trusting your neighbors to defend your rights comes right out of Norman Rockwell paintings. It sounds so true that it almost sounds anti-American to say it's not true. Just ask America's minorities – they will tell many disagreeable stories about the suppression of freedom at the local level.

Interest groups that support the state rights' doctrine have always had a different goal in mind – they represent the folks who live in the big white house on the hill, not those who live on the other side of the tracks. It is surprising how many ordinary citizens still believe the political folklore that local elites defend the rights of local powerless people. But again, just ask area journalists or local minorities – they will tell you the truth. Bill Meulemans is the author of a forthcoming book, *A Nation Divided: How the Left and Right Think*. ❖



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"Do you hear water?" a prose-poem by Jerry Vilhotti

Often the boy hid from her threats that he would die killed at her hands by climbing high up to the top of the willow tree his father had planted for him and from that perch like a wounded eagle he would see his mother's mother do her havoc on his father's garden - by peeing on all the not for long flourishing plants growing so proudly reaching for the sky as Johnny could hear his father's mighty shouting sobs at the discovery of half dying plants of corn, tomatoes, zucchini and Savoy cabbages; cursing the "great discoverer" who found a land that would allow only those seeking a life who could only speak good American: "You're going to die soon eighty-two year old lady! The devil not God is going to take you to Dante's hell!"

From deep among all the wilting plants, Johnny could hear his grandmother's comeback: "Not before - son of a whore who couldn't keep his fly closed - all you little beauties go before me!"

A large sound of pouring water could be heard throughout every day of the three weeks she remained with them until Deo finally remembered to get her as the father with eyes closed tightly could see a Niagara Falls drenching his prized garden and in the sound of water cascading upon all the plants that could not run away he imagined another scoundrel of all scoundrels - Christopher Columbus - trapped inside his ship; trying to scramble out of his sinking boat hundreds of miles before a discovery of a "new world" could happen but Johnny's father would not allow him to escape; instead, he kept the destroyer of innocent people trapped inside the image of swirling waters and mounds of debris until he stopped

hearing water falling

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

There was a fire on the island where I spent my young manhood. It took place in the kitchen of a restaurant - one of those raised buildings with windows on all sides to let in the sun and on nice days to be opened to smell the sea breeze. The fire was probably grease related, or a rag in a cleaning closet - in any case it was smoky and the restaurant was full of diners enjoying themselves and not paying much attention to anything going on around them. When I got there, the panic had just begun - folks trying to get out the one door that was away from the billowing smoke. I went in that door, working carefully past the escaping diners. I grabbed a hand of one young man bent over his table, coughing and lifted him up into a fireman's carry. I set him down across the street on someone's lawn. It was Leonardo DiCaprio. Imagine.
HD - cyberspace

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“A Change of Underwear”

by Steve Yarris, Psy.D.

“I am sorry to be as agonizingly shy at 80 as I was at 20...”

Oliver Sachs, Gratitude

Ever since he was a young man, Mel made pained efforts to avoid the lingerie section of department stores. When forced to do so, his inner thoughts punished him severely. *Look at that strange man—ogling women’s underwear. They should lock him up. He’s a pervert.*

For this reason alone, at age 84, Mel had not set foot in a department store for over forty years. Since his retirement at age 65, and the invention of home delivery services, he had spent all of his years locked away in his fourth floor, walk-up apartment contentedly studying his philosophy books from his college years and from volumes he had salvaged from used bookstores and salvation army bins.

The faded apartment was lined with shelves stuffed with faded newspapers, psychology

journals, and unopened mail held together by rubber bands. When Mel found a particularly juicy quote, he scribbled it on any available space—walls, ceiling or mirror.

Over his kitchen sink, he had written the question asked by the ancient Greeks.

“How shall we live?”

Often, as the evening darkness settled in, Mel would sprawl on the cracked linoleum in the kitchen, and stare at the peeling wallpaper and the yellowed lampshades in the dimly lit living room that had become his world. At such times, memories of his long-gone boyhood caught fire.

Sometimes, a vision of his abrasive Uncle Willie would appear before his dimming blue eyes—taunting him mercilessly about his weak body, his fear of girls and his hiding in the school library.

Sometimes, there were kinder images—of long car rides home with his family after Thanksgiving dinner. He could still feel the silkiness of his mother’s holiday dress against his cheek and the warmth of her thigh as he rested his young head upon her lap in the safe cocoon of his father’s Oldsmobile.

One evening after a particu-

larly hellish trip down memory lane, he jumped up, screamed “Enough!” and threw himself on the nearby dusty couch, and buried himself under the multi color afghan knitted by his now gone mother.

He grabbed the DVR remote and screamed, “The hell with you, Uncle Willie. You’ve been dead fifty years now. I’ve moved on. I got a doctorate in philosophy. I was a senior clerk at the Social Security office for 30 years.”

“I’m going to get myself out of this mess, right now, he grunted, as he flicked on the DVR.

He had saved a social psychology series—‘Letting Go Of Past Fears’, for such an occasion. The host was a soft-spoken roundish man with a soothing voice wearing a double-breasted gray flannel suit and pale green tie. He was a professional life counselor and a community college professor with millions of viewers. *Community college professor? What the hell does he know about life? I’ve got more life quotes on my walls than he has in his brain.*

Mel wrinkled his nose. *And yet, he acts so assured—and so many people take his advice.*

Lookingwide-eyed into the camera, with a toothy smile, Dr. Morrow said. “Hello friend, haunted by unpleasant memories? Well, you’ve come to the right place.”

Mel sat up straight on the couch and drew closer to the

“Who gave these idiots microphones?”

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Dr. Murrow paused solemnly as a rippled purple curtain drew back. “Let us begin with tonight’s brave volunteer.”

The studio audience cheered “Welcome.” A stout, middle-aged woman sat alongside a frail, white-haired, wheelchair-bound man, wearing a name tag ‘Charlie.’ His faded shirt was sweat stained from the hot studio lights. His granddaughter, Sarah, nervously dabbed his wrinkled brow with a Kleenex.

He’s the same age as me, Mel mused.

“OK, folks let’s help out Charlie.” Dr. Murrow said. The camera zoomed in for a close-up.

“Sarah, tell us about your grandfather’s trouble,” Dr. Murrow said.

Sarah squeaked into the microphone “Doctor—he hasn’t left our house in half a century. He hasn’t said a word in ten years.”

Doctor Murrow nodded and with an impish smile turned to the studio audience.

“OK, audience let’s all shout out step one.”

““Write down your four biggest fears!” they cheered.

A first assignment graphic popped up on the screen: ‘Pause this tape. Get a pen and paper now. Write down your five biggest fears without pausing to think. Do it now.’

Mel grabbed an envelope and pencil stub from the nearby desk and wrote: ‘pineapples, anteaters, skydiving, downhill skiing, lingerie.’ Easy, peasy, *he* thought as he snapped off the DVR and headed off for his afternoon nap.

Mel was soon in a vivid nightmare—giant anteater paratroopers threw pineapples at him as he skied downhill wearing only his mother’s underwear.

Mel shook himself awake and flapped about in sweat soaked sheets. He hobbled to the bathroom, splashed water on his wrinkled face and spotted a quote from Emerson written years ago on the mirror using his

mother’s lipstick—a keepsake he had impulsively pocketed from her dresser after the funeral.

“Do the thing that you fear, and the death of fear is certain.”

He ran into the living room, flung himself on the couch and eagerly turned on the DVR.

“Hello, friends. Welcome back to lesson two.”

Dr. Murrow said. “First, let’s check in on Charlie,” as the camera zoomed in on Charlie, “Sarah, last time you said he hadn’t spoken in years. Any progress?”

Sarah twisted her lips as Charlie shouted. “Girls! Drink!”

The audience laughed as Dr. Murrow shrugged.

“That sounds like a start. Keep up the good work, Charlie.”

The curtain closed on the pair as Dr. Murrow walked to the front of the stage.

“Ok, audience now that we’ve heard from Charlie, let’s shout out step two.”

The audience roared back. “The last item on your list is your target behavior. Pick a place. Set a date. Then, just do it!”

Mel snapped off the pro-

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gram and staggered into the bathroom. He pointed his gnarled finger at his reflection and said

“Mel Thompson, this is your challenge—next Wednesday at noon in May’s department store.”

On the street, it was a breezy spring day that brought smiles to all those lucky enough to be outside. Inside the windowless basement of May’s lingerie department, however, Megan Brock was in no mood for spring frolics as she began another ten-hour shift. She had manned the same sagging wooden counter for the past 32 years.

Defying her age, and the giggles of her Co-workers, she wore her usual tight black leather outfit and the makeup of a much younger woman—fire engine red lipstick and peach colored rouge. As she sorted the daily pile of lingerie returns, she ruminated about the state of the nation. *Men have brought this country to its knees*, she fumed.

Lifting her head, to the sound of raspy breathing, she saw bone-thin Mel, in the same faded plaid suit that he had worn since high school.

“I’d like to buy the largest pair of panties that you have,” he said with a clenched jaw.

“Oh, God. Another one,” Megan hissed in disgust. “Where are the real men? Mr. Clark Gable. Mr. Cary Grant. All we have left are men like you.”

“If I could just see the

extra-large panties, please...” Mel continued, with hardened eyes.

Tossing aside the tray of unticketed brassieres, Megan growled for all to hear.

“Very well, panty boy, follow me.”

Megan jauntily walked into the dimly lit lingerie section with its scantily clad white mannequins, racks of slips, Spanx, and all sorts of silky fabrics.

Mel bit his lip, fighting the urge to scream, as he mentally regressed to his tenth birthday, a skinny boy peeking thru bedroom curtains at the bodily mysteries of grandmothers and aunts dressing for dinner.

Spying Mel’s glazed eyes, Megan injected. “Come on old timer. I’m not giving you a sightseeing tour.”

“These are the extra-extra-large panties, here,” she grinned, as Mel squirmed. “Would sir like to try them on?”

I hate this. What am I doing here? Mel panicked. Only his stiff arthritic knees kept him from bolting out of the store.

“Are these the only colors that you have?” he said flatly, recalling his rehearsed script.

Megan smacked a nearby countertop with her hand. “Is this how old man are spending their time these days, pestering us working girls?”

Mel continued “I need to feel the material.”

“Go ahead, you old fool, give them a goodfeel,” she said mockingly, as her eyes searched for a security guard.

Mel’s trembling hand fingered the fabric. It was soft, very soft.

“I’ll take them,” he said firmly.

Disgusted, Megan threw the panties in Mel’s direction. Flashing a wicked grin, she pointed to a curvy young blonde cashier wearing a figure-hugging black dress and laughed “Go and tell her your story.”

Mel willed his stiff legs to the register and placed the flimsy panties on the counter. “I want to buy these,” he said brashly.

She smirked. She giggled.

“Would sir like me to gift wrap these?” she said, her face beet red.

His bald head flushed as Mel shouted: “No, maybe sir will just wear them home.”

He grabbed the panties and stuffed them into his canvas knapsack and stormed off.

Near the exit, he found the more familiar ‘As Seen On TV’ section to calm himself before heading home. He mindlessly bought a ten-in-one vegetable shredder that resembled a prickly samurai sword. “Don’t waste another bag,” he said to the clerk, “just throw it in here.”

The clerk laughed as he glimpsed the sky-blue panties in the canvas bag.

Mel breathed a sigh of relief on leaving the store. His thoughts raced. *What the hell was he to do with these damn things now? What if he fell dead in the street?*

Mel pushed his way onto the crowded rush-hour bus, his hands gripping his knapsack tightly. The bus was filled with bobbing heads, plugged into cell phones and electronic books, all learning about the latest terrorist threat. Mel's clawed hand grabbed at the overhead rail, as the bus lurched forward. In the same motion, the vegetable shredder sliced thru his bag and poked an elderly woman. "Oh, my God. Terrorist, terrorist," she shouted "He's got a knife. We're all going to die."

A screaming frenzy ensued as the crowd jumped to its feet and pounded on the windows and doors seeking escape.

The bus screeched to a halt and caught the attention of two heavily armed policemen stationed nearby. They stormed the bus and threw Mel out onto the pavement. As he lay spread-eagled with automatic weapons pointed at his quivering head, the helmeted sergeant yanked the bag from Mel's hand.

"What's in the bag old man? What's in the bag?" he screamed.

"It's just a vegetable cutter — I swear, I swear," Mel whined. "Leave me alone, please. I'll never do it again."

"What else is in the bag? Old man, what else is in the bag?", the policeman snarled giving Mel a threatening shake

"OK, Ok, you got me. I bought panties. Please, I'll take them back. Just don't shoot."

A younger cop, dreading more paperwork, shouted.

"Come on Sarge. Leave him alone. He's just a perverted old man."

"You think he's harmless, huh?" said the flabby officer. "Let's just see about that."

Hammy fists ripped open the bag and pulled out the vegetable knife. Sky-blue panties fluttered in the breeze, a silky flag atop an aluminum flagpole.

A TV camera crew truck drew up to the curb. A news reporter spotted the dangling panties in the air, the old man sprawled on the sidewalk and barked to his camera man.

"Great human-interest story. Get a close up of that old guy's face."

After the police had cleared off the phone video crowd, Mel gathered up his creaky body, stuffed the remains of his knapsack back together, and headed home on foot.

Turning the corner of his block, Mel shook his head in disgust, as he recognized the pudgy pair of middle-aged women, Mary and Louise. Lounging on the front stoop of his building, with their tangled gray hair, stained clothes, and cigarette-yellowed teeth. Their gossipy cackles turned to shrieks of laughter as they caught sight of Mel.

"Well, well. There HE is. Today's Internet star. We've been waiting for you." Mary teased.

"Naughty, naughty boy. Panties flapping in the air," Louise mocked.

Mary grinned "Gosh, Mel,

it's been thirty years since you fell from the fire escape in your tighty-whities when the cops thought you were a burglar."

Damn, my life. These women forget nothing.

Mel pushed past the clown faces in front of him.

"You are such a doll," Louise mocked, "You walk like an animal in heat."

"Louise. I'm 84. This is the only way I CAN walk," Mel protested.

Safely back in his apartment, Mel threw his shredded bag onto the kitchen counter and dived into the couch.

He glared at the scribblings on the ceiling.

'That which does not destroy me makes me stronger.'

"The hell with you, Nietzsche," Mel yelled, "What did you know about panties?"

He punched on the DVR.

"Welcome back to lesson three," Dr. Murrow said with a comforting smile.

"First, let's check in our friend, Charlie."

The camera panned over to the wheelchair-bound man now flushed with rage. "What the hell am I still long doing here? Get that fraud away from me. I don't want his damn twenty bucks. Sarah, get me out of here!"

The curtain closed quickly as Dr. Murrow said flatly. "Well, what can you do? Let's just get on with the next lesson. Usually, the first homework assignment goes well with nothing terrible

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happening. The person learns that his fear was all in his head.

“Why, I remember a man with terrible public speaking fears. His first homework was going to a crowded department store and shouting the time of day at the top of his lungs. Nothing terrible happened. A few people laughed, but then went on with their shopping.”

Dr. Murrow paused and looked squarely into the camera.

“But, to be honest, it doesn’t always work out that way. Not to worry, though, behavioral psychology has the solution. It’s called ‘repeated exposure.’” I

Dr. Murrow smiled mischievously and raised his arms toward the viewers. “And what do we do then—audience?”

The audience screamed: “Just repeat the assignment. Nothing terrible will happen this time!”

Tears ran down Mel’s face. He clutched a pillow to his chest. “Oh, my God.” he moaned “I have to go back to the dragon’s den.”

Mel stumbled to the kitchen, twitching like a squirrel, as he passed a quote from Emerson.

“That which we persist in doing becomes easier to do, not that the nature of the thing has changed, but that our power to do so has increased...”

Megan was sorting hangers when Mel reappeared. “Well, look who’s back—Mr. Lingerie.

What’s it this time—perhaps a 1940s corset for that sagging belly?”

“Today, I just need a brassiere.”

“Let me guess? Extra large? Sky blue? Why not try it on? See how you look.”

She tossed him a brassiere and raced to the nearby dressing room. As she pulled back the curtain, half dressed women poured onto the display floor.

Mel grabbed the brassiere, sneered at the same young cashier as she silently rang up the sale.

When he got back to his building, Louise and Mary were nowhere in sight.

Safely back in his apartment, Mel tossed his new purchase on the kitchen counter. He smirked—Dr. Murrow was right. *Nothing terrible had happened.*

Emboldened, he took his position on the couch and rewound the DVR.

“Welcome back, friend, to lesson four, friend, your final challenge. But, first, some great news. Our friend Charlie is now resting comfortably in a quiet, secure new home. His granddaughter and this show’s producers all agreed that it was for the best.”

The studio audience jumped to their feet. “Best of luck, Charlie!”

“Okay,” Dr. Murrow said as the audience quieted, “Let’s get on with today’s homework assignment,

“To make sure that your fear is gone, we need one last challenge. Viewer, this is easy. You can do this in the privacy of your own home, at your own chosen pace.

“Okay, studio audience, tell those watching the final step to freedom.”

The enthusiastic crowd rose to their feet.

“Tell all the world about your freedom! Walk proudly around your home. Shed your clothes, cast aside the shackles that have kept you, prisoner. Listen to your heart and take that final step. Mel felt a strangely familiar golden glow pulsing from his loins.

He shouted with new found strength “Haughty saleswomen, bully police officers, abusive neighbors. Henceforth, I banish you forever.”

In one motion, he tore off his pajamas, ran to the kitchen counter and put on the lingerie. As he proudly posed in front of the dusty hallway mirror, he folded his hands reverently. For a moment, he was safely cocooned in the back seat of his father’s Buick again feeling the warmth of his mother’s lap.

A rustling at the front door lock broke his meditative bliss.

Mel stood motionless, a wrinkled, pale white primate, bony knees knocking, scantily clad in sky blue lingerie.

The door creaked opened. Louise’s smokey voice croaked.

“Come on in, Mary—he

naps in the afternoon, I can tell when he pulls the shades. I just want to peek in his dresser.”

There stood Mel, frozen, in panties and matching brassiere.

“Oh my god!” Louise said.

Mel crumpled onto the chrome kitchen chair. He covered his head with his hands. His body throbbed with emotions.

“Mary, look. Mel is transitioning—just like that guy we saw on television last night.”

The two huddled around Mel as he trembled.

“Dear, dear Mel, we didn’t know. It’s OK—your secret is safe with us girls.” Mary said in a soft voice.

Mel looked up at the two women, eyes wide with astonishment. He shrieked with laughter.

“All these years—all these books,” he shouted, waving his skinny arms at the yellowed books and scribbles on the walls.

“I’ve been seeking a fearless life—and all I needed was some matching lingerie.” ❖

“Sounds from the Backroom”

by Andrew Walker

Your friends were leaving: for the army, for grad school, for the city. The household of five was being whittled to two. He was what was left.

You didn’t like thinking of him in this way, as the leftovers pushed to the back of the fridge. Once, maybe years ago at this point, he was your friend, his smile and extroversion contagious, with the ability to hold even the pizza guy in conversation for hours.

When he moved—from his family home, from his dorm, from his apartment with friends—you all drew straws for rooms.

Drawing the shortest every time, he was sentenced to the room in the back, the room in the basement, the room without the working overhead light. You cannot help but feel like you were enabling him, winding the cord that would (you never real-

ized) eventually spiral downward. It came when his door was closed, when his computer was on and games were running. It came when he lost and screamed: at the game, at his teammates, at himself. The way the sound would echo through the house and vibrate your bones, shake your core, run static over your thoughts until they were nothing but his pitchy alto pinballing in your ears. You were almost thankful you had the room farthest from him.

You were brushing your teeth the morning he came to you and asked if you wanted to keep living together. He looked ill. His stomach, caved, his once cut hair now long and wily and greasy, the bags under his eyes drooping dark, heavy.

You answered quickly, not wanting to disappoint a friend, and you could see in his eyes relief.

Best in Show by Phil Juliano



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But that night, as you brushed your teeth and he screamed at his games in the room below your feet, you stared into the mirror long after spitting and rinsing.

In the new place, your positions are switched. He lurks above, in the darker of the two rooms, while you try to exist mostly downstairs.

When you are downstairs—cooking, writing, watching television—you can hear him above you. The way he smacks down on his desk, keyboard, the walls. Once, you hear a glass shatter above you as you came home from a long day at work. You stop in the doorway and close your eyes, nearly shouting, but stopping yourself, not wanting to add anything to the cacophonous hurricane of sound that tears through your new apartment. Instead, he goes quiet, all you can hear are the fans from

inside his computer whirring like plane propellers sucking the air out of the apartment.

Once you have settled in, you're sitting alone on the couch, he hobbles down the stairs and exits, without a word, through the door. He returns five minutes later, smoke dribbling from his skin, drips from unwashed clothes, pours over and around his yellow teeth. When he drifts behind the chair on his way back to his room, the punishing stench drowns you.

It's a relatively new habit, the smoking, picked up after you had already given up trying to coax him from his room with booze, drugs and meet-ups with old friends. When you asked him about it, he laughed and said it gets him an extra 15 minute break at work.

It reminds you of your grandmother's house, how her cigarettes hung malodorous from the ceilings and walls. Upon visits, you enjoyed your time, playing games with your brother in the backroom by the bathroom where your grandfather hid *Playboys* behind the toilet. After an hour, you had grown used to the smell, associating it with comfort, with fun, with secrecy. But when your mother arrived you would run to hug her, the late night still clinging to her jacket as the door swung closed behind her. You were so desperate for it—the hug—if not for the touch of your mother, for

the breath of something fresh.

You are both sitting on the couch. He is taking a rare break from his games, and you are watching *30 Rock*. He, shirtless, plays on his phone. From the corner of your eye, you see his fingers fly, typing a message, rolling a ball in a game, scrolling through Facebook. As he scrolls, his fingers stop on a post.

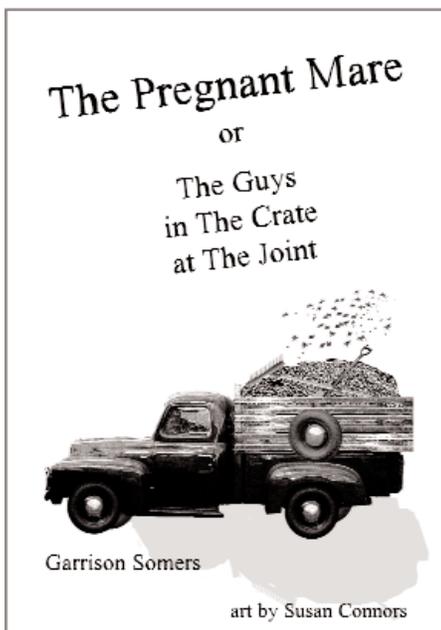
He stands and says, voice quivering, that he needs to step outside for a minute. When the door clicks closed as the lighter clicks on, Tracy Morgan lifts his shirt to smack his belly.

You pause the show and sit in the silence, feeling it soak itself into you. It is something you are not used to, this kind of quiet. It is different from his previous smoke breaks. There is a thickness in the air, a guilt that has not hung over you since glimpsing the orange, childproof bottle, similar to your own brand of antidepressants, sitting on his desk in his dirty room.

Upon stepping outside, you ask if everything is okay, knowing it is the good thing to do, if not something you necessarily want to do.

"My cousin just died."

His voice still trembles, as though the tears have puddled in his throat. This is how you hear him drowning. Grasping for anything to hold onto, he finds your body, and you each wrap yourselves around one



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another, trying to pull him from the brewing waves.

His back is so sweaty your hands stick. A single tear drips wet against your bicep, his shuddering quakes your body. This is the first time in your long friendship that you've seen him cry.

You tell him you're there for him. Whatever he needs. You tell him you've felt the same, how the knots claw black holes in your stomach, swallowing everything. The moment lifts from you, dissipated and baptismal, like a cockroach lifting for flight.

He sobs into you, cigarette still clutched between his thumb and

forefinger. The ember burns closer and closer. Feeling the heat on your back like an approaching wildfire, you tense, afraid of the consuming heat. Between sniffing and the ruffling of your clothing, you can hear the tobacco and paper burn centimeters from the filter.

You tense tighter when you realize it will burn him before it ever reaches you.

On rare occasions, you still see him. If not passing by his room with his door open, then when he or you are on your way to work. There are nods, smiles and mumbles of appreciation in the other, but you can still hear him and his games.

Having grown use to the howls and shrieks and wails, you feel as though you have acclimated. But it's still there, in the background, creeping at the top of the stairs, on the other side of the wall, through open windows, overhead, all around.

It's not the absence that haunts you, but the persistence of presence, like a ghost in a faded painting: hushed, dull, muted.

When a friend asks, "Is he still doing okay?" still unsure of why you do, you pause, nod and lie, quiet, hesitant: "From what it sounds like." ❖

CONTRIBUTORS:

Dr. Bill Meulemans, of Aurora, OR, writes, "There has always been a myth that local governments are the bedrock of American democracy – we can trust our neighbors and townspeople to govern with a respectful hand. But for more than one hundred years, it was those *neighbors* that unjustly restricted others who happened to be of another race, religion or national origin. It was the homogeneous composition of state and local groups that caused local folks to discriminate against minorities, and it is the heterogeneous nature of the federal government and courts that have caused them to take on the role of liberator for minorities that had been abused. Yet the myth of local sensitivities to minorities remains even though it has never been true. I am a political scientist professor who has had long-term appointments at Portland State University, The Queen's University of Belfast, and Southern Oregon University. In addition I was a Fulbright Scholar in Israel. I am the author of two books, *Making Political Choices*, and *Belfast: Both Sides Now*, I was also a Fulbright Scholar to Israel. I have a forthcoming book, *A Nation Divided: How the Left and Right Think*."

Jerry Vilhotti (jvilhotti@optimum.net) graduated from the only college that won the NIT and NCCA basketball tournaments in the same year but more importantly than that Jonas Salk who helped rid some of the world of polio with his vaccine was also given the opportunity to contribute to Mankind and graduated from the same NYC College that's called in some circles: "The poor man's Harvard." This and the fact that there was a place of higher learning that indeed gave every race, nationality and creed an opportunity to play in the game of sculpting a better world gives him greater pleasure and as good fortune would have it, a nice publisher has accepted two collections of his: "Gods Depicting Pastime" (you have to like or dislike baseball to enjoy) and "Specks in the Eyes of Seeing" that follows a toddler's journey into manhood. He thanks you for your time and dedication....

Dr. Steve Yarris writes, "I am a retired New York City psychologist who was spent the last 30 years listening to tales of the human journey. I now live quietly in Brooklyn, with my wife and two cats. My mind is filled with fictional adventures of the human drama/comedy which I've been translating into short stories."

Andrew Walker writes, "I currently live in Fort Collins, CO and received my bachelor's in English from Colorado State University. I have been previously published in the Yellow Chair Review, Two Cities Review, and Crack the Spine."

Phil Juliano of Bloomington, MN, just informed us via Facebook that Spence the dog is now 14. Happy Birthday Spence!!! Follow Peej and Spence on philjulianoillustration.com and purchase their new book at <http://bestinshowcomics.bigcartel.com/>.



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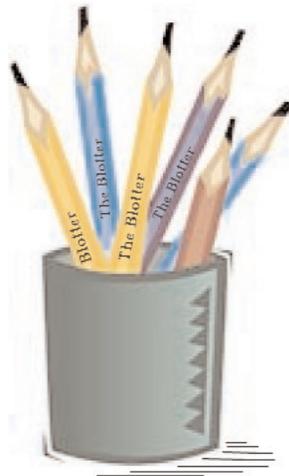


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Hey, you!



Yeah *you*. We said over the years we'd work for food. Writing stories like you've never seen before. Poetry to make you claw out your heart, put it in a pasteboard box and post it to your lovelorn gal. Artwork better than any philistines deserve. Every month like clockwork. *All for you*. But now Daddy needs a new laptop and baby wants a microphone. So you have to ask yourself: can you kick a buck or two to the cause?

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