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magazine



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"Oh My God - I'm That Guy!"

It's January and perhaps now we can finally talk a little about this year's Thanksgiving family get-together meals. But before I get started, I want to let it be known that I miss Turkey (the food – I've never been to the country and cannot actually miss it until I do) and Romaine lettuce, which is acceptably green and crunchy, and pecan pie (I am counting calories and pecan pie really is higher math) and some other things that seem to be troubled by the rules of engagement in our modern food world. Instead, we had chicken, good old reliable and unruffled chicken, with dressing...and it was noteworthy in its adequacy. The cranberry relish, on the other hand, was marvelous, the potatoes good enough for government work and there was wine but I didn't drink any wine, because I don't. Quit judging me. Yes, you were.

There were other things to eat and I ate them, too, but so what? The point of this essay is that the Thanksgiving meal is mostly about talk, and talk we did. Talked about all those things that have stewed in the back of our minds since last Thanksgiving. And, oh boy, there was drama, but now two months later it is no longer as fresh as a new paper cut (with that self-effacing annoyance that it ever even happened because who here hasn't gotten a paper cut and wondered why, oh lord, why me?) So, here's a review:

It may be your opinion that we either caused or exacerbated a problem by spending the whole week together. Actually, it worked very well. Because more of something is always good, right? Can any of you imagine this? Spending a Thanksgiving week together? Madness! Mayhem! And I would like to tell you that we have broken the code on Thanksgiving, but even I cannot lie that bald-facedly. But here's what I think. I think we argue with my relatives and friends because I'm supposed to. If you can't talk to those folks, get the toxins out of your system, well, who can you talk to?

Which is my theory as to why it is actually a very good idea that we have Thanksgiving in a rented house at the beach. Because no one has the home-field advantage. You can't escape into your comfort-zone cave, or fetch the car keys and drive off (well, you can, but where are you going to go?)

And I will say right now that this essay seems to be taking a maudlin, basic-cable drama turn, so I'll nip that in the bud right here. What I've actually discovered is something about myself. I miss arguing with my family the rest of the year and I like Thanksgiving. Quite a bit.

Here's the short list of reasons why: my family is pretty smart. I mean, we argue about some important topics, such as how loud do you really need to yell "bingo!" when you've filled a row or column in your card? Correct answer – "not that loud, you hurt my ears. And can you take that game downstairs, I want the whole living room to myself and this TV program on how dolphins and some kind of diving bird work together to catch herring." Or: "are you still watching that documentary on baseball? The season is over, move on!" Correct answer –

“why don’t you carry the garbage down to the curb and hop on into the dumpster, too?” And “who took the last piece of key lime pie? Correct answer - my name is Inigo Montoya and you must die!” With lots of applause for the last one’s rhyming scheme, naturally.

We also fuss about politics, religion, science, the bad traffic on the way to the grocery store. The bad traffic on the way home from the grocery store. We do not fuss about there being no coffee. There is always coffee. I mean, we’re not animals.

By the way, I am the *paterfamilias*, a role with no authority whatsoever. I can start an argument, but rarely win – even if I’m right, which is a rarity but still statistically possible. I get cranky when they all gang up on me, play devil’s advocate, or devil’s Uber driver, or devil’s sous chef, whichever is necessary to move the ball downfield. But not really cranky. I don’t turn up the football game and pout. And it is mostly my fault that we will take an argument to the illogical extreme, or at least what we think is the illogical extreme. Some of you probably throw stuff, or jump up to try and remember the combination to the gun safe. That’s not our thing, however – to end Thanksgiving once and for all. Just make it memorable.

In the end, we still like each other in my family. All these years later. And there’s a new generation of adults, my nieces and nephews, and my own daughters coming up, taking responsibility for leading the discussions. No one is off the hook – escaping from the rest of us trying to be in their business. We talk about each other’s problems – the real ones and the ones we just seem to make up out of the evidence we reveal about our lives. For example, my family thinks I’m nuts. I have no idea how this conclusion was reached. Was it my leading a discussion on “mansplaining?” Was it my monthly blog, posted for everyone to see? A rehash of the phone calls I’ve made to customer service? My home-made bumper-sticker affixed to the wife’s car? “Hot Flash! Pull Me Over At Your Own Peril” (This last is pure fiction – but funny, right?)

They expect such behavior from me, and no one takes it particularly seriously. Counselling is suggested, but not mandated. Also, I try to turn the tables on myself before they can, and say “I’m just blustering here, but…” or “pardon my uncredentialed bombast, but…” and they know I’m about as full of shit as I can be full of turkey, which is a lot.

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CAUTION

Indistinguishable from magic

“Do You Hear The Coffin Bell?”

by Kat Devitt

Our love story ended there. With him in a casket, and me gazing down on him, as if he was a penny dropped into a well.

I once hung all my wishes on him, foolish enough to think it took a man to change my fortunes. But I wronged myself in believing it took love to create happiness. I'd found nothing but disappointment in his arms, watching as my wishes disappeared in the ripples of his lies, hitting my heart like stones.

Even the man he presented to the world had been one grand deception. He made a stranger feel like a friend in the glow of his pearly smile, a beggar a rich man with a few kind words and coin weighing his pockets. He charmed, and he enchanted. He knew the art in life, and he continued it on in death as mourners crammed into the parlor at the rear of his mother's house.

Many waited behind me for a chance to stare at his corpse, but no one dared rush me on. Who would hurry a dead man's fiancé? Especially when our pairing was considered a love match, and it had been, until his secrets splintered his near perfect image.

I brushed my fingertips against his cheek, cold without his blood flowing beneath his pale flesh. *I still love you*, I thought. *How is it I do?*

My mind held no answer as tears welled in my eyes. His coffee-toned hair, ashen face, and dark suit, tailored just for this occasion, blurred in the mists of my sadness. I had nothing but memories of him, of when he walked in the vibrancy of his youth, a man not yet thirty.

“Mary.” A hand brushed lightly against my arm. “You've been standing here for five minutes.”

I glanced up to find my friend, Kitty Everly, standing beside me, her china-blue eyes holding me with concern. Her mourning veil was thrown back over her auburn hair, her cherry-red lips curved into a frown. She assessed me with the same knowing look from when we were

children, when I wept over the loss of my adored Silky. Only, this wasn't an eight-week-old kitten we were burying.

She took my hand in hers, her warm fingers so different from George's cold corpse. “Come sit with me by the hearth.”

And with that, she led me away. She disrupted my thoughts when no one else would, as she'd always had the liberty to do. No one else had claimed such a right. No one, except for George, when I had trusted him.

Fool that I am. I choked down a sob. *Fool that I was.*

We settled onto a chaise lounge, gold thread forming a pattern of fleur de lis over a deep crimson. A screen, red and gold roses embroidered into its white cloth, shielded our faces from the crackling flames nestled in the hearth. Burning oak filled my nose as smoke rose from the small fire, climbing up the chimney in swirls. I imagined a soul did very much the same when leaving a body.

“He never feared death,” I murmured as I stared into the smoke.

Kitty took my hands into hers. “He passed away in his sleep, when he was dreaming. I'm sure of it.” She gave me a hard squeeze, to where she might've cracked my fingers. She only did this when she was trying to lie to me for my own good. “He was thinking of you, perhaps, when he took his last breath. Don't all men dream of the women they love?”

“Women.” I chortled at the word. Women, plural. Not singular. George's love had not been singular.

“You mustn't feel guilty, Mary.” Her taffeta skirts crinkled as she shifted closer to me. “This wasn't your fault. None of this was expected. George was a vibrant man, and with such a vibrant love for you.”

“He died without peace.” I turned from her, from the hearth, as fresh tears started to roll down my cheeks. “His

mother told me that he was faint in the hours before his death. Servants were coming into his room with buckets, for his vomiting, and he was grasping at his abdomen, swearing at an acute pain.”

“Shhh.” Kitty guided my head to her shoulder. I eased into the crook, breathing in her lavender scent. She always reminded me of a walking garden, bringing calm wherever she chose to reside. “None of this will help you.”

“You would rather lie to me instead?”

“I prefer to call it ‘painting a pretty picture.’”

A small smile bloomed on my lips, a flower burgeoning through a harsh winter. “How could I trust you if you provide me with tales, rather than with facts?”

“Because it is for your own good.”

Wailing rang throughout the parlor. I peeked up to see who could be more grieved than me. Mrs. Blackbourne, George's mother, the woman who bore him and reared him. She sat on the floor in a pool of black silks, rocking back and forth, her hands lifted up to God.

“My son! My son! Give him back to me.” Her voice cracked. “*Please!* Give him back to his mother.”

Mr. Blackbourne came to her side, kneeling beside her, whispering in her ear. But she would not stand. She tore away from him, her tears coming harder, staining her cheeks, flowing down her chin, and splattering onto the floor.

“Come now, dear,” Mr. Blackbourne said. “Let us not make more grief for those who have come to see George.”

“He's not dead.” She tore herself away. “My son, he lives. I know it. All I must do is pray, and beseech myself to the Lord.”

“There's nothing He can do.” He paused for a moment, looking about at the growing audience. “He has called George home.”

“No! No, I know it. George will return to me.” Her head fell back, her sobs echoing through the room. Her black veil rivered down her back, like ink in water. She thought she could rewrite this tragedy with a prayer, but it wasn't to be. I knew more than anyone why his death would remain as it was.

Kitty tapped my shoulder. “This

sadness isn't good for your health." She took a handkerchief and dapped underneath my eyes, at tears I hadn't realized I spilt.

"My love has died."

"You will come have tea with me tomorrow." She said it as if a body didn't rest in the room, as if it was any other ordinary afternoon, in any ordinary home. "Will you promise me?"

I nodded. I couldn't object to her. Either I could lay in my bed, fretting over my mistakes, my regrets, and crying over George's betrayal, or I could sit down with my friend for a few hours, pretending all was calm and ordinary.

"I will," I said, when I noticed the lacy hem of a dress from a woman passing by. My gaze shot up to catch the woman, without understanding why. And I recognized her for the whore she was.

She walked over to Mrs. Blackbourne with a calm, stringing her ten-year-old daughter along. Her lace swept against the floor, brushing a path for her and her daughter. Her ebony sleeves cascaded down to her elbows as she shook out a handkerchief. She fell onto her knees, beside Mrs. Blackbourne, her arm hooked around her, as she offered the cloth.

Resentment brewed in me, like oversteeped tea, turning my soul bitter. How dare she come and show her face here. How dare she enter into this house, with that brat of hers. I wanted to stand up and scream. I wanted to rush across the room and claw at her face. But I remained in my seat, my hands in my lap, Kitty ignorant to my stewing.

Nothing in this house was ordinary. Nothing about this funeral was ordinary. Even an afternoon alone with Kitty wouldn't return the ordinariness of my life. All the tea and pastries in the world couldn't change what had happened. And no one knew this better than me.

"I saw you staring at that woman yesterday." Kitty reached for a lemon tart and served it onto her plate, beginning the conversation with what she considered a polite question. But she hadn't an idea how my anger permeated.

"Who?" I asked, trying to avoid her study.

"She toted a daughter along." She tore into the tart, continuing with a mouthful, "She comforted Mrs. Blackbourne during her...her episode."

"Her hysterics, you mean?"

"Well, Mary, I was trying to tiptoe around that particular word, for the sake of politeness, but yes. Her hysterics."

I took a sip of the Earl Grey tea, warming my belly as I raked over my sorrows. I knew the woman, and I knew her well. I never made her acquaintance. I never even bumped into her on London's streets, but I knew the sinner she was. I knew her caliber, those who take, and take, and take without thinking from whose table she snatched from.

"I've never met her." This wasn't entirely a lie.

"Mary." Kitty gave me a hard stare. "Her presence incited you. Your breathing quickened, and your hands fisted in your lap. I saw nothing of your face, but I saw the tenseness in your back, your shoulders."

"I was joining my grief with that of George's mother."

"Liar." Kitty leaned closer, rattling the teacup against the saucer now in her grasp. "You know her." She sipped. Glared at me over the rim. "And she vexes you."

I averted my gaze from hers. "You needn't know."

There are those who become heated during anger. Their blood simmers beneath their flesh, their cheeks redden, as if lashed a thousand times with a horsewhip. But not me. I become stiff. Sometimes like a reed. I become brittle inside, and I could be broken into pieces, broken up in the waves. Like with George, when I learned of his betrayal.

But sometimes that anger stiffens even further. I become like a rod, ready to thrash over the heads of those who anger me. Much like after his betrayal sank into my mind, and I struck. If anything, this interrogation infuriated me. And I was stiff enough to lash out.

"Come now." Kitty placed her teacup onto the round rosewood table resting between us on clawed legs. "We are friends, Mary. We have been for nearly twenty years. Surely you can tell me a little about this mysterious woman."

"I said no."

"Will you not tell me even a little...?"

I slammed a fist onto that table, silver and china rattling and sliding as it rocked on its legs. "By God, Kitty, I said *no*."

The table righted itself without falling, but my outburst shook the closeness between us. Kitty leaned back in her chair, her brows furrowed, her lips parted. She sat for a moment recollecting herself.

"Was she George's mistress?" she asked.

Her question came as a dagger to my chest. Sharply, I inhaled. I grasped the wooden arms of my chair, digging my nails into the carved faces of cherubs. I imagined myself gouging out their eyes, making those winged fools, shooting arrows at victims, doomed to learn the pitfalls of love, writhe with the pain in my heart.

Kitty's gaze softened into pity.

"Your face tells it all."

"I told you too much when I told you he had a mistress."

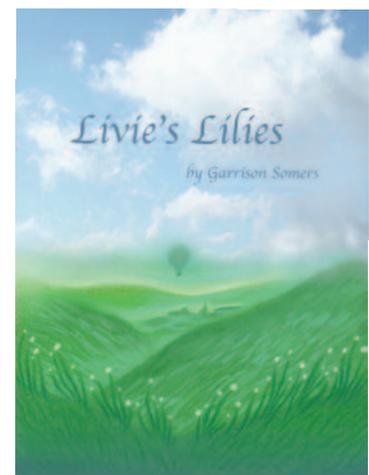
"We are friends, Mary. We share each other's secrets."

Not all our secrets.

"None of this is your affair," I snapped.

"It is when it concerns you."

I glanced down at the tea, steam no longer lifting up from the chasm of the white china. I thought how easy it might be to taint it, to put an end to this conversation of ours. But I couldn't. I



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had left my secrets at home.

"I do not wish to share my humiliation with you." I flew from my seat, storming over to the window to stare at the dark cobblestone streets of St. James's Square. "She was once George's harlot."

"Why might she be invited to his funeral?"

"He acknowledged her daughter as his. Made his parents accept her as their grandchild." I fumed as I saw a mother and daughter pass by the window. "I do not know why they were there, but I do know this, George lied to me. He never told me about their existence. I learned too late about his illegitimate family when I wondered...I wondered..."

"You wondered what?"

"Why his calls became more scarce. He claimed preparations for our wedding day kept him away, but I am no fool. I sent my lady's maid to follow after him one day, when he sent his pardons for having to miss another visit."

"You needn't tell me more."

I whipped around. "You pressed, and pressed me, and now you shall know the reason for my ire."

Kitty slid onto the edge of her seat, about ready to rise. "I see how it upsets you—"

"My lady's maid trailed after him, and she found him on the doorstep of that harlot's home, shoving his arms through his coat, kissing her goodbye." Something cool trickled down my cheeks. Something salty fell onto my lips. I had cried so much these last few weeks, I was becoming numb to my tears. "I confronted him with my evidence, and he denied it all. I believed him for a time, until the old suspicions bittered my heart. I followed him myself, and I saw him go to her house. I never trusted him again. Not after that."

"Come, sit by me."

Kitty waved at a chaise lounge, but I couldn't rest when my guilt stirred. I already confided too much into my friend. Another hour, another cup of tea, and I'd spill the whole of my tale for her ears to hear.

"No." I started from the room. "I promised to visit George's mother tonight for a poetry reading in his honor. I will be late if I dally here a moment

longer."

"Wait, Mary. Unburden yourself to me."

I slammed the door on Kitty's plea. I couldn't tell her how the wrongs of a sinner twisted me into a monster far worse. I couldn't admit to anyone what I had done, or else I might find myself at the end of a hangman's noose.

I sat on a plush chaise lounge beside Mrs. Blackbourne, tears streaming down her cheeks as a guest recited from memory *Queen Mab* by Percy Bysshe Shelly. She clasped my hand into hers, but released me to retrieve a handkerchief, as the reader came to a few lines regarding death, the recurring theme of the night.

*How wonderful is Death,
Death, and his brother Sleep!
One, pale as yonder waning moon
With lips of lurid blue;
The other, rosy as the morn
When throned on ocean's wave
It blushes o'er the world;
Yet both so passing beautiful!*

Mrs. Blackbourne snivelled beside me, her whimpers muted by a handkerchief she pressed over her mouth. I stroked her back in small circles, as Kitty would do for me whenever I grieved; for Silky, for George, for lost love.

My tears mingled with hers, but for different reasons. She wept for the emptiness in her bosom, for the loss of her son, while I salted my regrets. I committed unspeakable acts, and now a body lay in a coffin, beneath feet of earth.

"He's not dead," his mother swore. "He's not dead; he only sleeps."

I regarded her claims with the same air as everyone else in the parlor—George was dead. He'd been without breath for two days. He was gone from us, his soul risen to the arms of heaven, like smoke rising from a flame.

"Will you read this evening?" I asked, wishing to distract her from her mourning. If only for a minute.

"I've never been one for exhibition."

I doubted that very much. "Not even a few lines from Lord Byron? Or

Keats? I know how you favor those two poets."

"They're long dead. Only their words survive." She blew into her handkerchief. "But not my George. He lives on."

"Of course he does. In our hearts."

She turned to me, her eyes red around the rims, her nose chafed from blowing and blowing. "You're a sweet girl." She brushed the back of her hand against my cheek. "But you do not understand."

And she began to cry again, much as she did yesterday. Only, she did not wail as the words of a new poem, Shakespeare or Pope or some dead bard, drifted over the grief mingling in the parlor. She sat there shaking, her tears silent.

I rose from the seat as I crossed to the back of the room. I went over to a table laden with refreshments, but I did not bother to pour myself a glass of wine, sherry, or lemonade. I simply watched as friends and family of George dabbed beneath their eyes, staring at the swirls of the Oriental rug beneath their feet.

My throat tightened. Love for George flooded my heart, but remembrances of his mistress and daughter, from the day before, damned the tides from entering my veins. My last image of him struck within my mind, like lightning in a storm. Him rising from his overstuffed wingback, offering to walk me to the door, our empty cups on the table in his study.

Tears slid down my cheeks. I almost turned around to flee when I collided into Kitty. She wore a muted gray dress, lace fringing the neckline, accordion pleats in her skirts. Her hair was pinned into a coif, her mouth pressed into a thin line.

And her china-blue eyes were like fragile porcelain. "We must speak. Now."

"After another poem."

"I went to your home to find you."

"I came here straight away to give my comfort to George's mother." I glanced across the room at the back of the old woman's head, her lace cap covering her bunches of gray curls. "I must remain for her."

"I waited an hour for you."

"I'm sorry for your lost time."

"You know how restless I can get, waiting."

I pinned Kitty with a stare. "What did you do?"

"I nosed around your house. For no other reason than curiosity." She pulled a handkerchief out from the pocket of her dress, revealing a vial. "And I found this."

I stumbled back a step as I read the label. I knew the secret she held in the palm of her hand, I knew the consequences I might suffer. That is, if I didn't sprinkle her ears with lies. Anything to abate the suspicious look in her gaze.

"Tell me now, Mary," Kitty demanded.

My eyes darted about the parlor. "Put that away."

"Not until you tell me what you used this for."

"Mice."

I hooked arms with her as applause circled around the room. Another recitation had ended. But mine had only begun, and I was raking through my head for an excuse for that blasted vial.

"Come, step into the gardens with me."

I tugged on her arm, but Kitty stood firmly by the wine and sherry.

"This is more than what's needed to kill a few rodents," she said, wrapping and tucking the vial back into her dress' pocket.

I could've done a dozen things to rid myself of it. Smash it into a thousand tiny shards. Sprinkle my lawn with the powder. Drop it off in the Thames. Slip it into someone else's pocket. Anything to avoid discovery. Why had I kept it?

Perhaps a part of me wanted to be found.

"Do you not believe me?" I asked.

Kitty shook her head. "I don't know, Mary."

"My cellars had an infestation. I needed it."

"A man is dead." Her eyes wandered to where George's body had lain only the day before.

"Kitty." I seized her hands. I gave her a hard squeeze, trying to reel her away from her doubts. "Please, look at me. I will tell you the truth, as I always

have."

"You didn't tell me the truth when Silky died."

"What?"

"You adored that kitten, yes, but when it bit you one day... I saw..." She shuddered. "I saw you sneak something into its water." Her gaze collided with mine, hers set, determined, tearing down my guard. "You take away life when it hurts you."

"I was a child!"

"And now you are a woman." She broke free from my hold. "I thought you kind, and changed. I thought you had grown out of that perversion, but clearly I was wrong."

"Your accusations are unfounded."

Kitty glared at me, her lips poised to say more, when a pounding came at the entrance door, cutting into the night.

A commotion rose in a whirl of blustering and footsteps. Poetry drifted into the night as the reciter lowered his papers to his sides. Chairs creaked as the small audience turned around to crane their heads. And Kitty broke away from me, poking her head out the doorway.

"A watchman from the graveyard is here," she announced to the room.

Mr. Blackbourne rose from his wingback by the window, putting his back to the dusky night. "I'll greet the fellow."

He started across the room, pausing to collect his wife from her perch. And the pair departed from the parlor, leaving their guests to whisper in their wake.

I shifted on my feet, a growing agitation climbing its way to clutch at my guilt, my regrets. I walked up behind Kitty, placing my hand on her shoulder, as she strained to hear the conversation out in the hall.

"You shouldn't eavesdrop," I admonished her.

"Shhh." Kitty nudged my hand from her shoulder. "They're speaking of George."

I tried to angle myself to see the happenings through the crack of the door, but Kitty blocked my view, her being a few inches taller. She gave a little gasp. I started, alarmed at her captivation into the affairs outside. Had she betrayed my friendship? Had she raised an alarm?

My throat tightened. My palms dampened. My heart began to beat in tempo with the ormolu clock on the mantel, ticking away the moments until my capture. Or at least I imagined as I started backing away from her, swinging my head wildly about, looking for a possible escape.

"Mary Smith."

My name boomed from the other side of the door. And I was a cornered animal, without escape from my hunters. Kitty blocked the only entrance, and exit, from the parlor. Only a shove would make her move, giving me flight, and even then, I might be run down.

Kitty stepped aside abruptly. I thought it a miracle, and without a hesitation, I darted for the door. But she grabbed my arm, holding me still, as Mr. Blackbourne poked his head through the doorway, a smile in his eyes.

"Mary, Mr. Redfield, the watchman, wishes to speak with you, too," he rushed. "Oh, come. Come, girl. We might have a wedding yet!"

I furrowed my brows, thinking him mad. I couldn't marry a corpse.

I stepped out into the hall, with Kitty trailing behind. Mr. Blackbourne made no objection to her following along, his giddiness making him seem close to bursting. He shook a little, from nerves, from surprise, from unexplained joy, as he motioned towards a man with dirt smudges on his face, his clothes caked in mud.

"Mary Smith?" he asked, his voice like thunder.

I swallowed. "Yes, sir?"

"Call me Mr. Redfield." He gave me a curious look. "Your fiance lives."

I stood there, in shock.

Mrs. Blackbourne burst into tears, but this time from joy. "He lives! My God answered my prayers. He lives!" She blew into her handkerchief, bending her head over her folded hands, offering up another devotion.

"How?" I asked.

"He rang the coffin bell," Mr. Redfield explained. "I was walking by when I heard, and I rushed to fetch a team to dig him out. He sits in our church, at this moment, with our pastor."

I blinked. Not sure what to say. Not

sure how to act.

Mr. Blackbourne placed a hand on my shoulder. "Isn't this wonderful, Kitty?"

"How?" I asked again.

"He was in a stupor, seemingly dead." Mr. Redfield lowered his voice into a rumble. "We've called the services of Scotland Yard to look into the matter."

This caught Mrs. Blackbourne from her prayers. "Why?" she asked, her eyes widening, her voice snapping.

Mr. Redfield ignored her, his gaze remaining with me, watching me like a specimen beneath a microscope, print beneath a magnifying glass. "He's weak. He's ill. He's in shock, but he still remembers his final moments before falling into his stupor."

I took a step back, but Kitty caught my arm, willing me to stay.

"He says he finished drinking cocoa with you, Miss Smith. His tasting bitter." He paused, watching me. "Shortly after you left, he fell into darkness."

"What are you saying?" Mr. Blackbourne asked. "Was my son sick?"

Mr. Redfield turned his study from me. "I'm not certain." He sighed, his shoulders sagging, as if his profession weighed on him. "Your son is lucky, though, Mr. Blackbourne. I've only heard the coffin bell twice in my experience. And the first time, the man was delirious from poison."

Mrs. Blackbourne swayed, Mr. Blackbourne coming to her aid, righting her on her feet. He murmured a few words to her, their happiness dissipating with this scrap of news. And Mr. Redfield looked on with a craving in his eyes, as if he craved whiskey or gin, weary from this glum business.

"Scotland Yard will figure out this mystery," he assured.

Kitty twisted my arm, her glare catching mine. I saw her reach her hand into her dress pocket, caressing the vial. She didn't withdraw it. Not yet, at least. My breathing shortened, my throat constricting, as I felt the hangman's noose tightening around my neck. ❖

"Apologia"

by Marsha Temlock

Marlene Bellwether discarded a 2 Bam in the middle of the green-felt-covered card table. "It's nine fifteen," she reminded the three other players. "This really must be our last game."

Joan Ryan surveyed the collage of ivory tiles: Winds, Dragons, Cracks, Dots, and Bams. She was only one away from completing her hand. Her orange Bakelite rack (Marlene's mahjong set was a relic of the 60s) held two Flowers, a consecutive run of 1, 2, and 3 Dots, and two Jokers. All she needed was a 1 or 3 Dot to win.

"Your turn, Susie," Joan pressed the thin-faced blonde to her right.

"Oh shit, I think I'm dead."

Gloria Martin drummed three blue talons on the table. "Well, just throw a tile, for heaven's sake."

"Okay, okay. Hold your horses. I'm thinking what else I can do."

"Yes, Susie, do throw something out. It's getting late." Marlene checked her wristwatch.

The women knew the only reason Marlene allowed the game to run over the time limit she set was her husband wasn't home yet. Al Bellwether was an accountant and nearing the age when he could collect Social Security. But he was not ready to pull the plug he'd say whenever the subject came up, thinking about

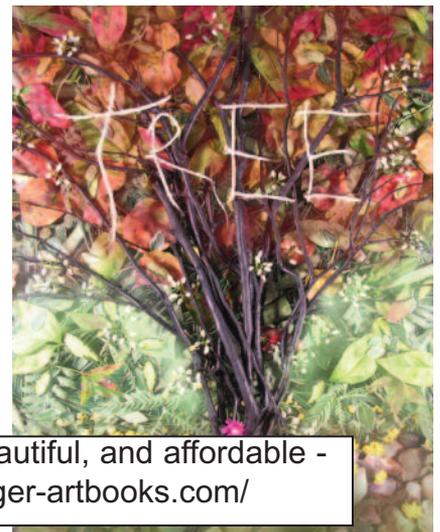
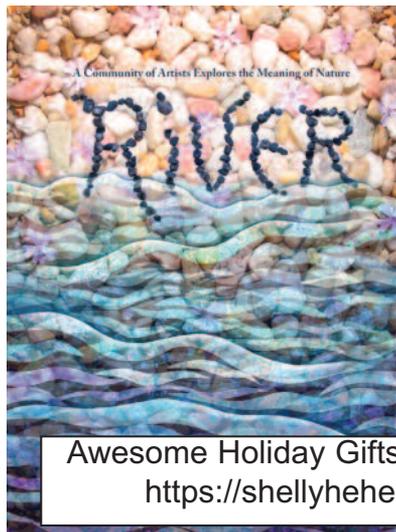
the retirees he knew who spent most of their time at the senior center or trailed their wives down the aisles of Stop and Shop. He kept busy enough and didn't see any reason to move to Florida to play golf twenty-four seven (although his game was improving) which was something Marlene was hoping they'd do. He sang in Saint Michael's choir, worked out regularly at the Fitness Edge, and was an EMS volunteer. Since Al was on duty Tuesday evenings, Marlene was free to have the game at her place as long as it ended by nine because Al wanted his dinner as soon as he came home.

Gloria Martin glared at Susie. "Did you just throw a 2 Crack? Look at the tiles Marlene exposed."

"Well, it could be any one of a couple of hands." Susie was clearly distracted. She'd been checking her phone all evening, expecting a text back from a guy she'd met on Match. She was signed up on three dating sites.

Gloria looked over her own tiles. Then, with conviction, she said, "One Dot," at which point Joan cried "Marj!" and seized the discard that completed her pattern.

Gloria, who hadn't won a single game all night, groaned. "Very nice. If we were playing for money you would have gotten a dollar fifty from each of us."



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The four women began tossing and turning over the tiles that popped and clattered, setting up new walls when, as if a fire had been lit under her butt, Marlene leapt to her feet nearly knocking over her bridge chair. "Al's home."

A tall, burly man in a pumpkin-colored jumpsuit came into the kitchen. Marlene ran up to her husband and wrapped her chubby arms around his thick middle and, stretching all five feet four, waited for him to lean down and peck her cheek.

"Hi, honey. What kept you? I was getting worried."

"At the last minute we got a call from the Meadows. One of the old ladies locked herself in the bathroom. She wouldn't open the door and we couldn't jimmy the lock so I had to get her out through the window. One of us had to take her down the ladder. I swear she must've weighed two hundred fifty pounds."

"She's okay though?"

"Yeah. Just crazy as a loon. Kept calling me Luke."

"You probably reminded her of her husband or son."

Al stared at the three women as if they were the next old ladies he'd be called to rescue. "A bit late for company, isn't it?"

Marlene gulped. "Sorry, we lost track of the time."

Joan pinched her lips to avoid saying what she was thinking while the other two women stacked the tiles in neat rows in the compartments in the worn leatherette case.

"I saved you some dinner. It's in the fridge. It's the plate covered in tin-foil. I made a new ratatouille recipe. Not too many tomatoes because I know you don't like it tomatoey. All I have to do is nuke it."

"I'm going up to change," Al grumbled. "You can bring it to me while I watch the game."

Marlene collected the snacks and paper plates and plastic glasses. Glowing with pride she said, "Isn't it wonderful how my Al saves lives."

"Yeah, it's really wonderful." Joan winked at Susie who was collapsing the bridge chairs.

"Oh, don't bother. I'll take care of that."

The women stood in a half-circle while Marlene took their coats off the hangers in the hall coat closet.

"Thanks for a lovely evening. Marlene," said Susie.

"Yes, thank you," muttered Joan. She zipped her windbreaker and searched in her tote for her car keys.

"Next week we can play at my house," Gloria suggested. Her husband bowled on Tuesdays and played poker on Mondays and Thursdays. Johnny didn't care how late she stayed out.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Wait, girls. I want you to take some apples from our tree. There's a bushel on the back porch. Please take as many as you want." She laughed. "This year I'm drowning in apples."

Marlene listened for the sound of the TV. She instructed the ladies, who were clutching their bags of apples, to use the back stairs. With difficulty they held onto the railing and found their way in the dark to their cars, which were parked a fair distance from the house so as not to block Al when he pulled into the garage.

Gloria got into her red Porsche convertible. She revved the engine and sprayed the driveway with pebbles. Joan unlocked her Jeep and let Susie in the passenger side. They'd come together because Susie did not like to drive at

night. She especially didn't like driving where there were no streetlights.

"Al," Marlene had once confided, "isn't keen on snooping neighbors," which is why they decided to build a house in the woods. Joan wondered what Al did that was so mysterious. It seemed to her anyone who was an EMT volunteer and didn't allow his wife out past nine couldn't lead a very mysterious life.

On the way home, Joan felt free to grouse about that evening. "Jesus, I don't know how Marlene puts up with him."

"Who, Al?" Susie was checking her messages again.

"Who else would I be talking about."

"Oh, Al's not so bad."

"Come on. You saw what I saw. Heard the way he talks to Marlene. And that comment: It's a bit late for company." She snickered. "Like Marlene was going to turn into a pumpkin. Speaking of which, how about that outfit."

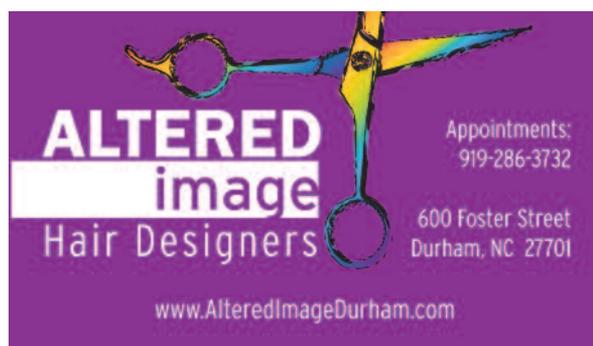
"That's the uniform he has to wear."

"Okay. What about the beard!" She was referring to Al's steely gray-flecked appendage that Marlene thought was just so masculine.

"It's a good food catcher for Marlene's exuberant cooking. All she ever talks about are her recipes."

"Do you believe Marlene made us go out the back way? We coulda killed ourselves on those stairs. You know the reason she made us use the back door? It's because Al was in the den and she was afraid we'd disturb him. It's positively disgusting for a woman in this day and age to be so...so...subservient. Did you get that My Al saves lives. Isn't he wonderful bit?"

"Well, he did help that old lady."



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He's an EMS volunteer. At least he's not just thinking about himself like the guys I've been meeting." Susie reread the text she'd been expecting, scowled, and tapped the keys.

When Susie told the women that she'd met this new guy online, Marlene gave her a disapproving look. "I don't trust dating sites. You can't be too careful nowadays. There are a lot of nut cases out there."

"And losers." Gloria snorted.

"How long are you and Al married, Marlene?" Joan asked.

"It will be thirty-five in June."

"God, you're dinosaurs," Gloria exclaimed. She and Johnny were going on fifteen. And it had been a rough fifteen, there was no denying. But second marriages were tough. Especially when there were kids and all that baggage.

"In which case," Joan said, her tone acid rain, "you're not one to talk. You have no idea what it's like for single women our age."

"Oh, I think I have a pretty good idea."

But, of course, Joan knew Marlene didn't have a clue. "I think one of us should say something to Marlene. Don't you, Susie?"

"Damn." Susie was out of bars. She refocused her attention on her friend. "About what?"

"About the way she lets Al bully her."

"Marlene loves Al. She doesn't mind."

Something was nagging Joan. "Susie," she said, "do you think Jack resented my being so independent?" Jack had died two and a half years ago. There were many things Joan worried about, things she might have done differently that she felt guilty about.

"You were, are, very independent, Joan. I think you and me, you more than me, we were out to prove some-

thing when we were married. It was all that women's lib stuff. You were the one who really took the movement to heart, and Jack, well, he had to accept that about you if he wanted the marriage to work. If you want to know the truth, I think Marlene and Al have a very good marriage. Okay, so it's a little retro."

Joan felt her heart seize. She supposed the ache that settled there when Jack died had been replaced by bitterness. "Well, Susie, if you want to know, that whole scene just pisses me off."

"Okay, okay. Calm down. I don't know why you're getting so worked up."

Joan said she was sick and tired of talking about Marlene and Al. Could they just change the subject, so Susie asked if Joan had any plans for the weekend since the guy she'd been texting still hadn't said anything definite about getting together. "Want to go to the movies with me and Gloria Saturday?"

"What are you seeing?"

"I don't know. I'll call you and let you know."

Joan parked the car in front of Susie's house to let her out. She opened the window and felt the autumn night breeze cool her flaming cheeks. The moon was cradling a cloud or was it the other way around? It depended on your perspective. "Yeah. I'll go." Saturday, Sunday. This movie, that movie. It didn't really matter.

Two weeks later, when Marlene offered to host the game, Joan decided she'd arrive a little early so they could talk before the others arrived. Joan planned on telling her that the women felt a little uncomfortable when Al was around, and maybe Marlene could sug-

gest he be a little more pleasant. Of course, they weren't blaming Marlene for her husband's bad behavior. It wasn't Marlene's fault. But by not respecting her friends, wasn't Al showing a lack of respect for her?

That was probably a diplomatic way of telling her there was a problem in her marriage. For example, this business about having to end the game early to keep him company the one night of the week she spent with friends, and then preparing his dinner and Al refusing to nuke it when anyone could see that a man who could carry a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound woman down a ladder was perfectly capable of carrying his plate to the microwave. Yes, she would say what was on her mind and hope Marlene would understand she was doing this out of friendship and concern.

It was six o'clock. The mahjong game usually began at seven so there was plenty of time for Joan to have this heart-to-heart with Marlene. She put on her coat and went to the garage to start her car. There was a nasty smell coming from a shelf where she remembered putting the bag of apples. She'd forgotten to bring the apples into the house. The paper bag broke as soon as she picked it up. There were bugs and tiny worms in the bag. Ugh. She had to get down on her hands and knees to collect the rotten fruit before tossing the mess in the bin.

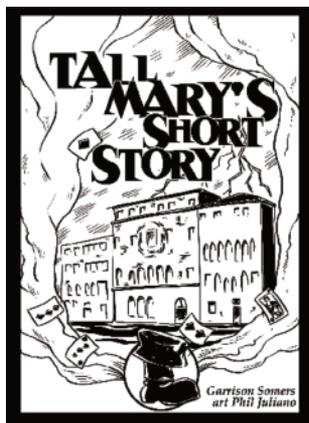
Joan drove to Marlene's. The days were getting shorter and the country roads seemed curvier, darker. This time she was going to park the car closer to the garage, so she wouldn't have to watch her footing when she left. Al would just have to maneuver around her.

She took a deep breath before ringing the doorbell. She listened to welcoming chimes. Marlene, wearing an apron over her red plaid shirt and jeans, came to the door.

"Gosh, what time is it?" Strands of Marlene's auburn hair had pulled out of a messy ponytail. "I didn't realize it was so close to the game time."

"It's just I'm early."

"Well please come in, come in." Marlene gestured with the hand free of the oversized oven mitt. "Sorry things are such a mess. I'm in the middle of a cooking hurricane."



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"It smells delicious." Joan sniffed cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves. "You certainly have been busy. Look at that." On the counter there were a half-dozen pint-size Mason jars filled with applesauce and four smaller jam jars filled with what Marlene said was a new recipe for apple butter.

"Well, I wanted to use up those apples, so I went through my books and came up with this one. I hope it's as good as the last recipe."

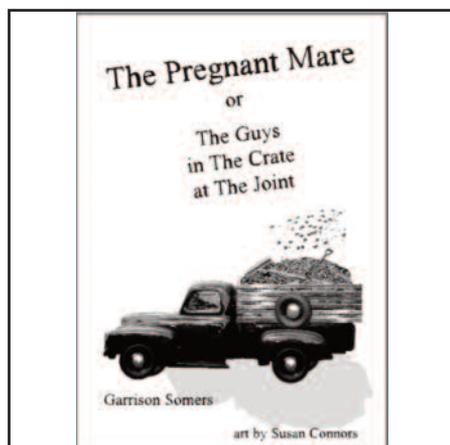
"I have to apologize but I'm afraid the apples you gave me rotted."

Marlene gave a knowing smile. "I used most of mine up. But I can give you some more if you want. And here..." She opened the refrigerator and took out three loaves of apple bread, each one sealed in clear plastic wrap with a printed label: Baked with love from Marlene's kitchen. "I'm glad you came early. It will give me a chance to clean up while you set up the game. I barely had enough time to make Al's dinner I've been so busy putting these up."

"Where is Al?" Joan asked, suddenly uncomfortable, feeling that she'd barged into a place she shouldn't be.

"Upstairs getting ready for a meeting. He was promoted to captain of his team. Honestly, the way he goes on, you'd think he made president. He'll be leaving soon. You didn't block the garage, did you?"

"I guess I forgot," she lied. Then for some silly reason her eyes filled with tears. She fumbled for the keys in her purse. "I'd better move the car. I didn't mean to take up his space." ❖



On Amazon - of course....

"Go For The Center"

by Alfredo Flores

Izzy had his bow and quiver already packed, so he went on ahead to scout for tracks, while his foster-brother, Wes, stayed behind to answer the phone.

The stream about a mile out from the main trail had some signs of recent activity. Some of the jewelweeds were popped and chewed on, a couple of toe prints on the soft mud, and some pellet looking droppings were scattered around a small hole.

Izzy took soft steps around the perimeter of the hole, looking for the rabbit's escape route. There was a small grass opening that resembled a gopher hole on top of the tiny hillock, so he grabbed a good sized rock, and on his second try, he picked it up high enough to cover it. The rabbit had only one exit, so all he had to do was cross the small gully, and wait.

He was half way up the far side wall, his hands wrapped around the exposed roots of a tree, when the steps behind him startled him, making him lose his grip. He slipped along the dirt wall into the muddy water. He wiped his face of water and pebbles, and saw Wes with his arms hugging his own shoulders.

"The hell? Give a 'whoop' when you're coming up behind someone. I thought you were a bobcat," Izzy said. He threw a splash of water at Wes, not satisfied with just yelling at him.

Wes was still hugging himself. His eyes kept darting to his sides, like he was looking for help. He crossed the gully to where Izzy knelt on the brown mud. Wes grabbed a stick and drew circles in the mud. Izzy knew he drew circles when he was nervous.

"Hey, are you alright? What happened?"

After about a minute of it, Wes took a deep breath, and said, "The phone call was from your mom."

Izzy spat at the water, and started climbing out of the gully, again. He thought it was something serious, but it

was just his mom.

"Did she call to tell me happy birthday? I hope so because I'd love to tell her it was three weeks ago. Happy fucking fourteenth birthday to me."

Climbing the roots right behind Izzy, Wes said in a strained voice, "No, man. It's about your dad."

Izzy got to the top, and unhooked the bow from his backpack. He was stringing it, when Wes met up with him. Wes' once dark skin was now pale, but then again, only seeing the sun for thirty days out of the year could do that to you. Izzy was just your average run of the mill brown, little Mexican boy when he was sent up here in Melville from Southern California. Now, he could pass for a well-tanned Texan.

Izzy nocked an arrow, aiming at the rabbit hole on the other side. The arrow was steady, and sharp. If that rabbit showed its face, then it's dinner. "What about him? He got drunk and beat her up again?"

"I'm sorry, but he, he passed away," Wes said.

The arrow was trembling, more likely to hit the dirt forty yards behind the rabbit hole than to hit a running target.

"He took his sweet ass time." Izzy put the bow down, and sat on a fallen log.

"That's just wrong, man. He was your dad, and your mom needs you."

He reached into his pack for the bag of spicy beef jerky. He bit off a big chunk, and just chewed. His *jefe* was gone, and there was nothing he could do about it, even if he wasn't almost two thousand miles away.

Wes tapped Izzy's shoulder. "Hey, did you hear me? Your mom needs you."

Still chewing, Izzy responded, "I heard you. I just don't know what you want me to do about it. I don't have anything she needs. It's not like I got any money."

"She doesn't want money, she

The Blotter

wants her son. You got to go.”

Izzy threw the piece of jerky in the gully. “Oh, now she wants me? Where was that the last six years?”

The last time he spoke to his mom, she was playing the “Wanna come home?” game. Every January for six years, and it always ended with, “Oh, too bad. Try again next year.”

Wes sat down next to him. “Look, I get it. You’re still pissed off, but he’s gone. Your family is still there, though.”

His eyes were starting to sting, so Izzy closed them, and said, “Them, family? You’ve been more family to me than they ever were. When I got so bad they couldn’t deal, they sent me here. Why should I go when things suddenly get bad for them?”

Wes stood up, and grabbed his bow. He put his foot in between the limbs of the bow, and bent the top limb back to string it. “Because if it was my dad who passed away, I’d be with my family. I wouldn’t care how angry I was.”

Standing and holding his bow at the ready, Izzy said, “Easy for you to say. The angriest your dad ever got with you was that time you were cleaning that whitetail, and you cut into the bladder. Twenty pounds of meat wasted. All your dad did was sent us to hunt some more dinner.”

“Took us two days, but it was fun,” Wes said, as he pulled the string to flex the bow. “And you’re right. I don’t know what it’s like to have parents like yours, but acting like his death doesn’t

matter to you is stupid. You’re much better than that.”

Izzy stretched the bow again. “Not that much better, I promise. I still remember the angriest my old man ever got.”

Still no movement from the hole.

He went on, “It was when I lit the toilet paper in the school bathroom on fire. The second I got through the front door, he shoved me to the wall, and hit me in the gut so hard he broke three ribs.”

The leaves were starting to swirl around. The wind was picking up, but not hard enough to move the arrow in flight too much. It was noon, but the clouds had gotten darker. Rain was coming.

“When I fell,” Izzy continued, “he started kicking me. I blocked most of them with my arms, but it ended up breaking my wrist. Mom and my sisters just watched. Didn’t try to stop him, or help me stand. After I could walk, they put me on a plane. Trust me, I’m not needed, or wanted.”

Wes lowered his bow, and had his head down. He had heard some of it when Izzy first got there, but it had been almost six years since Izzy spoke about it. Wes grabbed an arrow from his quiver.

The wind was picking up dirt. The water in the gully had ripples from the sprinkles of rainfall, so he grabbed the hat from his back pocket and put it on.

“I’ll tell you this, no matter what, you’re my brother,” Wes started as he took aim at the rabbit hole. “I don’t give a shit if we’re blood or not. You’re wanted here. Never doubt that, but you’re needed over there. At least, until you bury your dad. After that, you can stay, or you can come back.”

Taking his own aim, Izzy said,

“You’re kicking me out, too?”

“No, you’re always welcomed here. This is your home as much as mine.”

“And if I don’t come back? What will that mean?”

“Nothing. Like I said, this is your home. You come and go as you please.”

Izzy’s arrow was shaking. He couldn’t get it to hold still. His breathing was ragged, like he just ran up and down the stairs. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Then, how about this. If I hit that rabbit, you go to your dad’s funeral. If you get the hit, you stay. Simple, don’t you think?”

The arrow stopped shaking. Izzy was steady, and sharp again. Wes was right. Let skill and luck decide.

Izzy laughed. “I think it’d be easier if we flipped a coin for it, but I’m down.”

“Remember, go for the center,” Wes laughed, too. “Say hi to your mom for me, would you?”

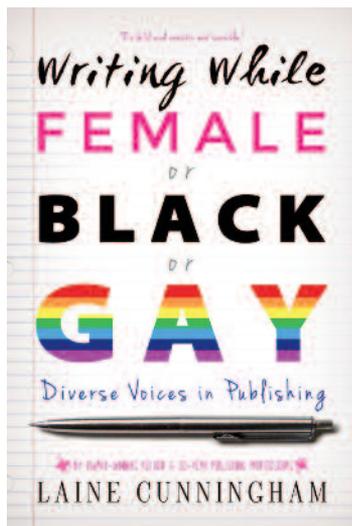
“You sound pretty damned sure of yourself. Last time I checked, I got more kills than you.”

“I’m a natural late bloomer.”

“Pride is the deadliest sin of all, my brother.”

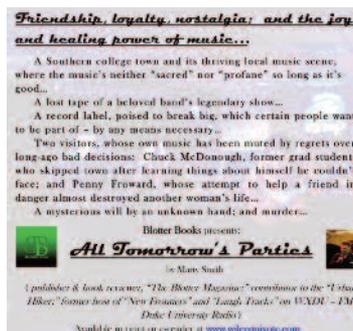
The two stopped laughing when the rocks around the rabbit hole tumbled over. They took slow inhales, and quick exhales. There was a squeal, but nothing came out. The wind was blowing harder, so they pulled even farther back on the string to keep the arrow straight.

After a minute, Izzy’s pulling arm was getting tired, but as he was about to relax, the rabbit bolted out of the hole, and the two loosed their arrows. ❖



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"Looter"

by Jean Blasiar

A scruffy looking young man enters a bus depot waiting room. He takes a seat close to a "brother" who is hanging onto a worn duffle bag for dear life. Both young men are quiet for a while, look around nervously, finally at each other. They jerk their heads up in acknowledgment.

"Wattsup?" the one who entered last says.

The other one shrugs. "Damn bus is late. Broke down getting here. Where you going?"

The man with no luggage shrugs. "The coast."

"It's underwater." Looks away.

"Just meetin' up with some guys."

The one with the luggage looks the other one over. "You thinkin' a makin' a killin'?"

The other one shrugs, looks away. "Maybe."

"Yeah? Well, when we get there, look for my momma's house, a one story frame probably floating down the Little Pee Dee River, or the Humongus Pee Dee River by now."

"Your momma live there?"

"All her life. I was with her through one of these killer storms when I was a little kid. Days later, looters took what was left of our stuff. Momma said we were lucky to have each other." He scoffs at that. "Startin' over again."

"You could help."

The one clinging to the duffle bag looked at him. "That why you goin'? To help?"

The other one looked away. "Maybe I will," he said.

"What?"

"I said, 'Maybe I will'."

"Yeah, that's why you're meetin' up with some guys ain't it... to help."

"You don't know."

"I know. I seen your kind before. When I was ten. Me and momma and grandma in a boat in the middle of the night. Old folks and little kids screamin' and callin' for help. Un uh, man. You do what you settin' out to do and don't look twice at us in the boat."

Sound of air brakes outside the depot waiting room. The bus has arrived.

The one without luggage gets up. "Time to go, dude."

"I'll probably have to kill you, I see you lootin'."

The one without luggage laughs. "You learned to swim I hope." ❖

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

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

mermaid@blotterrag.com

I quite like the idea that a good dream can be a continuous loop of non-accomplishment: a moment in time, one with promise and hope, but in which nothing happens. Our brains are able to suspend the disbelief that we don't move forward, but hold in something *outside* stasis, where that hope and promise is not fulfilled but remains ever out there just beyond grasp, over the horizon, around a corner. The anticipation of pleasure of any sort is satisfaction enough, perhaps, for us. The test we've studied for and are about to take. The lover upstairs, waiting for us. The last hour of a drive home to family. The meal on the table, hot and ready. The finish line in sight. Our ability to imagine joy is one of the great tools of humanity.

JL - cyberspace

"Who gave these idiots microphones?"

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Two by Edward Lee

“What Memories Remain?”

Your mind was an echo
of its former self
before you died,
giving us names we didn't know,
wanting to fight shadows
that weren't there,
recounting ancient events
as though they were yesterday,
vice versa,
then slapping us silent
with a brief knife of clarity,
you yourself for a moment,
before all that you were tumbled back,
and you stared at us
blankly,

until your eyes closed
sealing off the dull light
that sputtered there.

And then all that was left
was your breathing,
your faded chest rising,
falling, rising,
falling,
until there was no rise left
and you died,
the little that was left of you gone

wherever men like you go.

"Some Gains Are Still A Loss"

A shovel that only ever dug graves
 stands in the uneven corner
 of the cracked centre
 of the world,
 some dirt still painting its blunted edge,
 while cackling men and women,
 semi-blind from staring at false suns,
 choose not to acknowledge its existence,
 now that they reside in falsely-coloured lives
 that no longer know death
 as delicately as their ancestors
 once did.

CONTRIBUTORS:

Kat Devitt of Cape May Court House, NJ, is a Pushcart Prize nominee. Her work has appeared in *TWJ Magazine*, *Bold + Italic*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Ariel Chart*, and *Fiction on the Web*, with an upcoming publication in *Magazine of History & Fiction*. She also acts as the fiction editor for *Bold + Italic*. She's working hard on many more short stories, and she's researching for a novel. Check her out at <https://katdevitt.com/> for more.

Marsha Temlock is a freelance writer and professor of English at Norwalk Community College in CT. Her most recent book, **The Exile**, is a coming of age novel about a young girl from Ghana who is caught in the crossfire of her parents' tribal warfare. She was a contributor in *The Blotter Magazine's* March, 2016 issue.

Alfredo Flores of Ontario, CA, writes. "I've have been published in the *Coffin Bell Journal*, *The Rumpus*, and am one of the Mount San Antonio College Writer's Day winners. I am an avid reader of horror, sci-fi, and fantasy stories. My favorite authors in the genres are Neil Gaiman, Terry Pratchett, and Dean Koontz."

Jean Blasiar has many published short stories, plays and books, and was in *The Blotter Magazine's* November, 2016 issue.

Edward Lee's poetry, short stories, non-fiction and photography have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including *The Stinging Fly*, *Skylight 47*, *Acumen* and *Smiths Knoll*. His debut poetry collection "Playing Poohsticks On Ha'Penny Bridge" was published in 2010. He is currently working towards a second collection. He also makes musical noise under the names *Ayahuasca Collective*, *Lewis Milne*, *Orson Carroll*, *Blinded Architect*, *Lego Figures Fighting*, and *Pale Blond Boy*. Mr. Lee resides in Longwood, Co. Meath, Republic of Ireland and his Facebook page can be found at www.facebook.com/edwardleewriter



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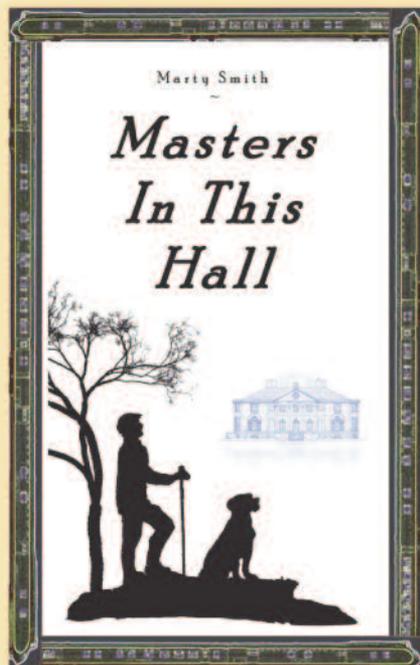
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