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“My Desk Needs a Cleaning”

Oh, boy, does it ever. The dust, where you can even see *desk*, is old and deep like a powdery Loch Ness, and doing no one any good. Also, there is much clutter, the type of accumulation that if I weren't a “writer” would be troubling to my wife. Actually, it probably is troubling to her, but she's being patient. So far. Besides the two computers, the two monitors, printer, scanner, all of the connecting paraphernalia and such, there is much rubbish. Not really rubbish, of course, but what happens to me when I see something or hear something that needs to be written down – captured, if you will, for possible use later. You scribblers know what I mean. It's why we carry little notebooks around and bits of pencil, or have, readily available on our phones, apps that let us whisper surreptitiously into them that clever line or strange word that we want to work with later like a date with a secret lover. People who aren't writers – and people who claim to be writers but aren't, not really, don't understand. It's an oddity that we do, and there's no cure that I know of.

What else is here? A paper diary, in book form, that permits about five lines of my furtive cursive each day. Like “Today I spilt my coffee, damn it, and had to make a new pot. And there were no more filters, so I reached into the trash can and pulled out the old filter and rinsed it out. What we do to survive...” A small stack of print-outs, flipped over for me to use as scrap paper. When I'm trying to find a word in the caverns of my skull and the right one won't avail itself to me, I put mnemonic devices on scrap paper to the left of my keyboard in pencil. Tickling the synapses, if you will. Sometimes it works, other times not so much. It's alright, though. We can't all be Hemingway, which is fair because Hemingway can't even be Hemingway anymore, because the world is round and spins and rotates around the sun and the universe expands. (Yeah, I'm not sure what I mean by that, either.)

Here is a post-card with some exercise instructions – I should walk about thirty to sixty minutes per day. The person who wrote this didn't understand the idea of staying focused when writing, and not messing with the creative gods when one is on a roll. Stopping every hour to walk for five minutes or taking a break to do a couple of laps around the neighborhood may be a terrific idea. I'll never know.

In one pile, semi-neat, much incoming mail. Old school. I like getting mail. Poems on paper are...lovely even when they're not quite right. I don't know about you, but I think that on paper you can feel the effort put into the crafting of words, both as writer and reader. Not that there are erasures and white-outs and torn pieces, cut and replaced (although this has happened before) but one can get a sense of the love that the poet had for their work, or the trepidation or regret, and still they folded their creation and put it in the envelope and sent it on. Submission is a hell of a thing, when you think about it.

My printer gets a lot of use – I like to print things out and carry them around and read them. My own work. The work of other writers. Yes, I do chase my family around and ask them to listen while I read. They are patient and kind, most of the time. I have to be careful – I find humor works better in the reading-aloud category of personal anecdote than the gloomy nostalgia sub-genre.

There is a set of chessmen, made in India and without a board, standing near a small bottle of rubber cement. Not much to say about the rubber cement – things fall apart, the center cannot hold – but the chessmen, well, they're quite something. Even without a board, chess pieces look... noble, sitting on a table. Like a copse of trees on a hill in the coolest part of spring, waiting for their first buds to come forth. They are handmade and would have been expensive except that they are "imperfect." I have looked them over quite closely and I cannot find the imperfections, which seems right and honorable. Our imperfections are sometimes hidden from each other and make us *who we are* much more than where we were born or who our parents are or what we studied in school. I plan to make them a board this summer out of some wood I found – red cedar and beech. I don't know how it will turn out, but I am hopeful. I made a backgammon board once, a long while back, that I was quite proud of.

Here is a box of pencils. A small handful of paper clips. An IBM type-ball someone gave me a long time ago with the typeface Title - 96. That should be the name of a book – perhaps a memoir. Next to it, a replica of an enamel-covered tin coffee cup from the HMS Caroline (a WWI cruiser that survived the Battle of Jutland), my Swiss Army knife, a pair of reading glasses, a clipboard with twenty-odd sheets of college-ruled paper in it – you know, in case the professor wants me to take some notes – an antique Savarin coffee tin, a pencil sharpener, three electric votive candles, rollerball refills for a pen I don't own. The disc for the game Zoo Tycoon – because who doesn't like playing that from time to time? The remains of a ream of printer paper, and some zip-ties. An old microphone I borrowed for a podcast project.

Except that I need to finish this, then have a sandwich for lunch, then go for a walk (thirty to sixty minutes, around the block) then heat up another cup of coffee, then read for a while, then check how my fig tree in the back yard is doing, and read some more.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

So far, so good...

“Spider Rights”

by Jason Sallinger

On the weekend of my last birthday, I took a small vacation with my wife back to New England, the cradle of my youth. I only had three full days and two half days to spend, so I had to be judicious with how best to use my time. The first full day was a Saturday. We planned in advance to spend it with Tom and his wife. I had known Tom since early college days. Now that we lived several states away, I talked to him nearly every day, mostly through texting apps.

We were happy to see Adam, their son. The kid was being raised right. He was ahead of the curve in sports, and he liked the hard rock that Tom and I favored. He even had a good joke to tell when we had arrived:

“Did you know French Fries weren’t made in France?”

“Heh, no...”

“They’re cooked in Greece!”

Funny kid.

So even though we really like Adam, the four of us got a reprieve when we learned that he would be staying at a friend’s house to sleep over. Tom’s wife Sarah got back and relayed the good news. She wheeled around the hassock where Adam had once been playing video games to join the conversation with me, Tom, and Danielle. Tom moved to sit on the hassock to shift pillows and make room for Sarah.

“Hey babe, watch out.”

“What...”, he looked side to side.

“Looks like a spider.”

Tom moved back to the couch. On the beige hassock towards where Sarah was pointing looked like a fuzball. Tom slid his finger toward it and sure enough, it jumped back two inches. Sarah put the back of her wrist to her forehead and guffed a sigh of exasperation. She stood up and wheeled back around the hassock toward the open floor.

Danielle half-smiled and looked toward Sarah. “You too huh?”

I knew all too well the struggle that Danielle had with spiders. Even though she was a tomboy as a kid and had turned over rocks to look at bugs just like me, she had a traumatic experience that has changed her life forever since. She was under a porch on her knees looking for a ball that rolled there. One of her cousins walked up behind her and shouted to watch out for the black widows. Danielle on reflex shot her head upward and hit it on the underside of the porch. Ever since she’s been afraid of spiders.

At home I have several jobs. One of them is insect/spider negotiator. If it were up to her, I would squash each of these that cross her path. Occasionally I need to, as with the time a wasp had gotten into our living room. Most usually I will capture and release to the outside world. I’m not much for killing anything.

Sarah said, “Yeah I have this struggle all the time. I mean, do I let it outside, or...”

I looked to Tom and smiled, knowingly, “Kill it, right?”

Sarah continued, “No, we never kill it. I’m just not sure whether we

should let it out or not.”

I felt a bubbling guffaw coming up and tried to control it as I asked for clarification. “Wait, do you mean – heh, heh – that you aren’t sure, whether this spider is domesticated, and won’t survive in the wild?”

Sarah and Tom were laughing, but not in full accordance with my sarcasm. It was a nervous laugh.

“Oh. You’re serious...”

Danielle, sitting next to me and leaning on me, was laughing so hard she was shaking me. But she wasn’t laughing aloud. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was open with no sound. She opened her eyes and they were watering a bit. I always enjoyed an opportunity to keep my wife breathless and in stitches.

“Like, does this spider not possess the hunting and gathering skills to keep itself fed? Did you have its back claws clipped – will it not be able to fend off attackers?”

Sarah was smiling, waiting for me to slow my roll. “Yeah! Well, this is the environment it knows. It’s their home as much as ours.”

On the one hand my mind was blown. I had never considered this perspective. If a tiny living thing were discovered in our house, the next step was a given. Do not pass go, do not collect 200 dollars. Outside you go. But now, insects and spiders have RIGHTS.

On the other hand, I had some ammunition against Danielle the next time I was comfortable on my recliner, and she demanded me to go into motion to evacuate a perceived pest. I mean, hey, these little guys have rights, eh? ❖

“Maureen Campbell’s Spring Break”

by Jasmine Rizer

Maureen Campbell, pink-haired and tattooed, stared into the ladies’-room mirror at Guillermo’s Tacos and reflected on how some people assumed things like pink hair and tattoos were signs of moral turpitude. Maureen thought about how disappointed these people would be to discover what a boring good girl she was, and that she had not crossed the state line in order to attend a cocaine-fueled orgy or a Satanic mass, but was, in fact, on vacation with her mom.

At twenty-one years of age, Maureen’s most scandalous personal traits were a tendency to be a smartass, difficulty not drinking too much, and a large scary blank space in her head about what she wanted to do with herself when she finished college, which was supposed to happen in a little over a year. Maureen was an English major, which caused a lot of people to laugh and say, “Would you like fries with that?” Maureen thought this was mean, because it was not only insulting to the humanities, but also to many perfectly nice people working in food services. Most of the time she was too much of a moral coward to say so. When she did, it usually just made the other person laugh more.

Many of these same people might also have found it hilarious that, while many red-blooded American girls were spending Spring Break 1998 getting blackout drunk at the beach, Maureen was hanging out with her mother in Louisville, Kentucky.

Maureen was familiar with blackout drunkenness. In her experience, it was scary, and your friends yelled at you afterwards. Since turning twenty-one and being allowed to drink in front of more fully formed adults,

Maureen had been experimenting with moderation, with an erratic level of success. So when her classmates said things like, “When Spring Break comes, I am gonna get fucked-up drunnnnnnnnnnk every night,” Maureen did not look down on them, but it didn’t sound like a very exciting way to spend Spring Break.

If her glamorous, free-spirited mother hadn’t been going out of state to visit friends anyway, Maureen probably would have spent Spring Break 1998 knocking around her college town with her roommate, Lucy. Lucy had been her friend for many years. It didn’t take much to amuse them when they were together. Lucy had, in fact, been invited on this trip to Kentucky, but had decided at the last minute to go on some sort of outdoorsy lark with a group of honors students, one of whom she had a crush on.

“Camping? Are you sure?”

Maureen had asked, eyeing Lucy’s dresser full of makeup and the glittery shoes lined up in her closet.

“Look, I’ve been camping *before*,” Lucy had said.

“Yeah, when we were twelve, and your parents had that camper van that was practically a mansion.”

“Well, maybe there’s a whole outdoorsy side to me that I haven’t discovered yet,” Lucy had insisted, following Maureen’s gaze and irritably kicking her closet door shut. “Anyway, Cait won’t let anything happen to me,” she had added, her voice taking on a sugary sound that had caused Maureen to roll her eyes in disgust.

“I’m not worried about anything *happening* to you,” Maureen had said. “I didn’t actually think Cait Evans was going to have to pick you up and carry

you away from a wild animal, or whatever it is that you’re picturing right now. You are so gross when you get a crush.”

“Well, it’s been too long since *you* had a crush on anyone,” Lucy had replied. “I know you think boys don’t like you or whatever, but at least let your brain have some fun, for crying out loud.”

Maureen reflected on this advice now, as she gazed at the pink-haired girl in the mirror. She was pretty sure that it wasn’t her eccentric sense of fashion and beauty that caused men her age to regard her as unlovable and, more humiliatingly, barely fuckable. She had seen girls who clearly slept in their clothes for days, girls dressed like they were going to CBGB every day, and girls who were very visibly drunk all the time, all on the arms of adoring boyfriends. It was clear to Maureen that the problem was something internal, something *wrong* with her.

Her friends and family did not like this theory. They regarded it as coming from a mental state somewhere between poor self-esteem and batshit insanity. Lucy insisted that Maureen’s inner condition was one of great beauty, and that one day she would meet someone who saw this inner beauty shining through. Maureen’s father insisted there was nothing wrong with Maureen’s ability to attract men that couldn’t be fixed by a haircut and a shopping trip. Maureen’s mother, as her mother, was basically obligated to believe that Maureen was beautiful, inside and out, and that the string of boys who had rejected her were fools.

Maureen, unlike a lot of people her age, genuinely enjoyed spending time with her mother, but they had gone their separate ways that morning. The arty friends her mom had come to see were always perfectly nice to Maureen, but she always felt a bit lost in their world. Maureen had head-

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ed out that morning in corduroy pants and a cowboy shirt while her mother was still putting the finishing touches on her own, more feminine and sophisticated look for the day, and had spent the late morning and early afternoon poking around bookstores and record stores on Bardstown Road. This left her mother and the arty people free to have brunch at their dining establishment of choice, without having to worry about whether Maureen would feel out of place, which she would have.

Maureen had chosen for her own lunch a cavernous taco joint where she could sit and review her purchases without fear of scrutiny from her fellow diners. Would *ABBA Gold* have met with the approval of the other patrons at an arty uptown hangout? Maureen suspected not. None of the Big Star or Patti Smith albums she had also bought would be sufficient to earn her absolution. She suspected that *The Old Curiosity Shop* would not find much favor either, if people knew she had bought it to read not as an intellectual exercise but because she had started reading it in the university library and now wanted to find out what happened to Dick Swiveller.

After finishing her lunch, Maureen rode the bus back to the fancy hotel with the idea that she might sit on the bed and watch cable television, which she and Lucy did not have in their apartment. Their parents didn't hand over money in the massive amounts that a lot of other middle-class parents seemed to, plus there had been an unfortunate period of free trial cable during which they had both spent seemingly endless hours in front of their TV set, sucked in by the novelty of random entertainment on tap. After that, paying money to lose hours of their lives to *X-Files* marathons just didn't seem like the right thing to do, Lucy's intense crush on Scully notwithstanding.

Riding the elevator back to her

room, Maureen imagined a serious-faced man on a discussion panel back at her college, explaining that this kind of thing was exactly what was wrong with the youth of today. "I met a young woman in Louisville, Kentucky, and you'll never guess what she was going to do with her afternoon. With the whole city in front of her – a wealth of cultural and other resources – this young woman went back to a *hotel* to watch *television*," he would say.

When Maureen got to the room, there was an envelope propped up against the door. It looked like some of her mother's beautiful stationery. Maureen set her shopping and her canvas bag down on the floor, tore the envelope open, and read:

Stewart is staying in our room this morning. He has had a very bad day. Be nice! Xoxox Mom

"I'm always nice," Maureen muttered in a jokingly resentful tone, as if the letter could hear her.

Stewart was the same age as Maureen. He was, in fact, the son of the arty friends that her mother was probably with right now. Of course Maureen had had a crush on him when they were younger. He was a boy, and he was always there, and on top of these qualifications, he was beautiful. Both his parents were good-looking people, and Stewart had gotten the best of both their gene pools. Even when he had gone to college and gained a little weight from crappy dining hall food, he had still been gorgeous. But the last couple of times she had seen him, Maureen had found him less appealing crush material. All were conversations were dark and breezy and full of professors he was sleeping with and his friends' drug habits. He had begun to make Maureen feel like a child of ten by comparison.

Maureen fumbled her key card out of her bag and let herself into the room. The first thing she saw – it was

hard to see anything else – was Stewart, sitting in one of the double beds, staring with glassy eyes at the television. His legs were drawn up under his chin, and his chin resting on the thick nice-hotel comforter he had pulled up over his knees. It was, Maureen thought, like a somewhat mellowed version of a fetal position. The TV remote control dangled from his hand. He didn't look at all well. Maureen cast a quick, guilty glance at his back, right where it disappeared into the fat hotel pillows piled up behind him. He also didn't look at all like he was wearing anything other than the bedclothes.

Suddenly Maureen felt very tired. Nothing had prepared her for the possibility of having to make polite conversation with a naked boy today. There had been times and places in her life when she would have been happy to encounter a naked man. If someone could have arranged for a boy, a man, whatever you were supposed to call them at twenty-one, maybe even this same boy-man, to turn up in her apartment back home in a similar state of undress, that would have been agreeable. A naked boy in the hotel room where she was having a nice family vacation, a vacant-eyed boy who didn't even seem to have noticed her? Not what she would have ordered, if it were possible to order naked men from room service. Maureen felt a slightly hysterical giggle starting somewhere inside her chest and knew she had better get herself together before it escaped. She didn't want Stewart to think she had snuck in to stare and laugh at him. He really did appear to be a mess.

"Um, hi," said Maureen.

Stewart swiveled his head slowly around and stared at her. It was creepy. If his head had turned all the way to the back, like in *The Exorcist*, Maureen would barely have been surprised.

"Maureen," he said.

“Dude,” said Maureen, who in the normal course of affairs almost never used the word “dude,” “what happened to you?”

Stewart said, not quite reproachfully, “Your mother said she was going to tell you to be nice to me.”

“My mother didn’t warn me that you were going to be all weird and naked,” Maureen said. She crossed the room, throwing her bags on the unoccupied bed as she passed, and picked up the little basket of complimentary whatnots that sat next to the television. “Do you want a cup of tea?”

“Why the fuck would I want a cup of tea?”

“I don’t know.” She carried the basket over and sat down cross-legged at the end of his bed. She sat there at a safe distance from him, where she would not be in danger of touching any part of him, not even through the sheets, not even one tiny handsome little toe, far enough away that nobody could have accused her of trying to be seductive. “You seem kind of upset. Y’ read books, someone gets all upset and someone *else*, who really has their shit together, says, ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ *Would* you like a cup of tea?”

“Actually, yeah,” said Stewart. He blinked and looked at the basket in Maureen’s hands. “What kind of tea are in there?”

“This is fancy tea,” Maureen said. “Things like Apricot Sunset and Lemon Chiffon and Scottish Afternoon Blend...”

“That last one,” Stewart interrupted. “Scottish Afternoon Blend doesn’t sound as girly as the others. No offense.”

“Right. One manly cup of tea, coming up.” Maureen got up and started heating water in the little coffemaker. When the tea was ready, she came back over and sat down next to Stewart, a little closer this time, and handed him his cup. “Can I turn this off?” asked Maureen, nodding at the TV.

“Yeah. Sorry. I didn’t mean to waste electricity.” There was Stewart for you. He had been brought up in a very socially responsible household and apparently hadn’t quite been able to break his conditioning, no matter how hard he tried to be a bad boy.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Maureen, switching the television off. She said, “So, look, Stewart, I don’t really know what you’re supposed to do when boys are this upset. I’m not even super comfortable with extreme emotions in other females. Am I allowed to ask what happened, or do you just want talk about school, like we’re sitting downstairs in the restaurant and you’re wearing clothes?”

“You are really hung up on this nudity thing,” said Stewart.

“Well, Stewart, it’s *weird*. I walk in here and find you like this. Tell me you did not flip out and take all your clothes off in front of my mother.”

“Somebody put me out in the hall like this,” said Stewart. “By an amazing coincidence that I certainly do not deserve, your mom stepped out into the hall about five seconds later.” He grinned and looked at her sideways. “Do you want a peek at the goodies? Is that’s what’s bothering you? Because I’d be happy to oblige.”

“Thank God,” said Maureen. “I’d rather see you being disgusting than see you staring into space like you were when I first walked in here.”

Stewart laughed, a real laugh from deep in his chest. “I did something stupid,” he said, staring into his teacup. “I ran into somebody downtown. Someone from university.” Stewart had one English grandmother and was able to indulge in occasional British word usage without sounding pretentious. “Someone who’s always wanted me, but nothing ever happened.”

It must be great to be attractive, thought Maureen.

“I sort of vaguely knew she’d moved up here,” he continued, “but I hadn’t thought about it, because I was-

n’t all that interested in her even when we lived in the same town. But today, I dunno, I was bored, and lonely, and I’d probably had one too many breakfast mimosas. And I was already feeling kind of, you know.” He looked up from his cup and met her eyes.

“Being that you’re a boy, I’m going to assume you mean horny,” said Maureen.

“That’s a very offensive gender stereotype, Miss Campbell. But, yes, I mean horny. So I run into this person, and we’re talking, and she says, *Why don’t we get a room*, and I’m thinking a room at Big Dick’s Motor Inn or wherever. It’s not like we need room service for what – ”

Maureen interrupted, “Is there really such a place as Big Dick’s Motor Inn?”

“I don’t know,” said Stewart. “I was being silly.”

“You’re obsessed with boy parts,” said Maureen. “I think you should try being gay for a while. I think bisexuality would suit you. You could compare your boy parts to all your boyfriends’ boy parts.”

“*Hey*.” Stewart reached over and poked her on the arm with one finger. “Are you gonna listen to my sad story, or not?”

“Sorry,” said Maureen. “But you did instigate the silliness, talking about Big Dick’s Motor Inn.”

“Yeah, guilty as charged. Anyway, it turns out she didn’t have a motor inn in mind. Instead, she’s all, *I always liked you; let’s make this special and go someplace nice...*”

“This has got to be one of your faculty conquests,” said Maureen. “Nobody our age has that kind of money to throw away on a place to do the wild thing.”

Stewart gave her a long, icy stare and said, “You know, Maureen, you used to be so nice. You used, actually, to be *sensitive*.”

Maureen reached over, squeezed his hand, and said, “I’m sorry. You’re like a stranger to me now, Stewart.

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When we were kids, you were so handsome and funny and such a smartaleck, and then you went to college, and I mean, like, look at you, you're still handsome, but all of a sudden all you could talk about was fucking and how many drugs your hipster friends were taking, and I don't know how to be around you now."

Stewart looked down at his hand in hers. He said, "Maybe I really should start dating women my own age more often, because girl, you are one compelling mess."

Maureen raised one eyebrow at him. He might have meant so many things by this, at so many different levels of seriousness or not-seriousness, that she didn't dare to reply in words.

He let go of her hand and said, "Okay, look. It doesn't even seem that bad, now that I'm getting ready to tell it. I mean, it was certainly consensual. I haven't been underage for, what, five years, and it's not like she drugged me or something, unless watching me drink too much champagne with breakfast counts, which I don't think it does. It was just weird. Weird in a way that felt really bad, and that feels really bad even now." He swallowed hard. Maureen watched his Adam's apple move. "Because once we were – you know. She said some weird shit. Things like, *You little bastard, you never thought I was good enough for you before*, just run-of-the-mill verbal abuse like you might expect from a woman scorned, but things it wasn't exactly fair to say to me just at that exact point in time." Stewart sighed deeply and rolled his eyes. "Because, I mean, at that point I guess I wanted to stop, but also, in another way, if you understand what I'm saying, I really, *really* didn't want to stop." His face was scarlet, and Maureen could see the blush creeping down into his neck. Maureen was a little embarrassed, too. She knew that people their age were supposed to be comfortable with sex talk, but her conver-

sations with Lucy and their small circle of friends never really got any more explicit than *Oh all right, all right, I got it on with Cait Evans, now let's go get pancakes*. "I don't know why I can't just use proper words about this like a grownup," Stewart said angrily. "I'm sorry. You must think I'm an idiot."

"It's okay," Maureen said. "I'm an idiot about this stuff, too."

"Well, when it was, you know, over, she said, *Go*. I was like, *What?*, and she said, *You can go now*, and she literally shoved me out of bed and started pushing me to the door. I mean, what was I going to do, get in a fistfight with a woman to get to my clothes?" He shook his head. "That's not the way I was brought up. My parents would, like, never speak to me again. You might hit a woman if she's actually trying to murder you. That would be the only good excuse. And even then, my dad would probably by like, *Son, I just wish you could have prevented your own murder without striking this woman*. Anyway, I said, *Can't I get dressed?* and she said, *No, you arrogant little bastard, you can't*, and the next thing I knew I was out in the hall at this super posh hotel, trying to cover up my business with both hands, and I'm thinking *What just happened to me, anyway?*, and I hear a door open right beside me – and there's your mother."

"What did she say?" Maureen asked. She couldn't help wondering.

Stewart laughed. "She said, 'Bless your heart.' And then she let me in here, and she very politely turned her back while I got in bed, and she said she was gonna bring me back some clothes. She didn't ask me anything about what I was doing in the hallway without them, and I certainly wasn't about to tell her. I mean, your mother is super cool, but she's still my parents' friend." Something seemed to occur to him, and he asked, "Where the hell *is* she? How long can she pos-

sibly hang out with my parents? They're not *that* interesting." He fidgeted, looked over at his wrist, and then scowled because, of course, no watch.

Maureen laughed, then covered her mouth with one hand. "Sorry. It's just that she's going to want to dress you up like a little Ken doll. She's probably buying you a whole new wardrobe."

"Well, I did ask her not to bring anything from my parents' house. I told her, 'If you're going to see my mom and dad today, please don't tell them about this.' I kind of got a little hysterical." He frowned. "It's embarrassing to think about now."

"Well, that was some fucked-up shit that happened this morning, Stewart. Getting upset about it is nothing to be ashamed of," said Maureen.

"That's lovely, Maureen. That belongs on a greeting card," Stewart said. "I can just picture little floral borders all around the words *That was some fucked-up shit that happened to you*." He looked at her, more attentively than he had done since she'd walked in the room. "Speaking of little floral borders, how many more tattoos have you gotten since I saw you last?"

"A couple." Maureen held out her right wrist, blossoming with strawberries and white blooms. "I had them copy this one off a jam jar."

Stewart laughed and said, "I could kiss you," and Maureen thought she might just turn to stone from the shock, she could tell he meant it. He added in a rush, "I mean, I won't, because it would just be too weird right now, and also that's probably about the time your mother would walk in. But remind me. Remind me the next time I see you, when I hopefully won't have just been through some weird sex nightmare thing."

"I *will* remind you," said Maureen. "You can count on that, mister." ❖

“Veal Marsala”

by Bryan Davis

The other night I dreamt of resisting a bully who was forcing me to join his soccer team. But it wasn't soccer or any kind of regular sport. It was some kind of contest of wills to make the other side share their veal Marsala. This was interesting and it was a first and it left me pondering over my morning coffee.

In younger dreams I remember being chased all the time, which is not surprising given a very active childhood. Sometimes these dreams would wake me and other times I would be interrupted by the dreams of my father, which I later came to know as night terrors, and these would wake the whole house. The panicked adrenalin shock of it would wake me out of breath and scared.

But in this dream, the opposing team sat on a perfect green field at tables covered in white table cloth and steaming plates of pasta. They stuffed cutlets in their mouths and splattered their shirts in careless contempt of our presence, daring us to approach, defying anyone to challenge their piggish authority and all I craved was their veal Marsala. And even though we all agreed it's kind of wrong to eat veal, we know that it's completely unavoidable, and I don't even like veal, and it just doesn't make sense.

Later at work I recall a crappy three days I once spent trying the Atkins diet as I finish my lunch salad sitting at my desk still wondering about this dream, and it makes my head ache worse. I realize I have eaten almost nothing all day.

I know I need to do better.

I also know these thoughts exist to distract me and keep me from recalling the exact date Dad died. Two

days spent reconstructing details trying to make sure I didn't misplace the reason for remembering in the first place. I know these tricks grief is playing and I breathe deep and try to stay mindful of its purpose and wishing it would leave me alone.

It has thankfully reduced visitation to only stopping by once in a while, but now it surprises me with a one year anniversary remembrance where I strain to recall the details of the last couple days before he passed. These are trivial ruminations, but it's all that's left and I know that over time they will fade. But then it surprises me again dreaming deep in the night and I'm more aggravated than scared at the annoyance of it. It eventually fades and I breathe to relax into a light half consciousness that pretends to be sleep. I try to avoid pondering it's meaning, until I drift into another gray sunrise aching from lack of rest.

It's not out of the norm. Everything I've read tells me this is the regular stuff of grief.

I know I would be a lot worse if not for the efforts of my wife. She's done a lot, and I am slowly getting better with this on my own.

She has been the astute observer of everything leading up to the end. She can calmly recount it all when I become emotionally drowned. She constructs the ladder to pull me back into the light.

She reminds me again that it was Dad who pushed us all away when his health declined and it was his clear decision to keep quiet along with the urging of my stepmother, his wife. As if they were embarrassed and wanted to hide so our family wouldn't notice his tremors and shuffling gait. It was a

cold feeling when I tried to embrace her and let her know that we were all here to help and she snarled pulling away saying “We got this!”

Dad observed this in silence and shuffled toward the car ignoring the brief moment we could've spoken privately as adults while together at our nephew's birthday party. This was the second time our nephew had witnessed adults being ugly to each other and we were horrified at being unable to shield him from it again.

Stepmom's righteous anger had appeared a week earlier when he knocked on their door to invite them to his party since they had stopped picking up the phone or taking voice-mail. We were all frankly surprised they even showed up.

Our stepmom fumed over the betrayal she felt by my brothers and I leaving her alone with Dad all the time. We wanted and tried to help but she always shunned us away in angry disbelief at our inept attempts at support. Not surprising, given that her entire family conspired to keep us distant and ignorant.

We were eventually able to learn from a secret hospital source that dad had been falling a lot and had recently given up his driver's license. His sleep apnea worsened and he was becoming deaf but showed no interest in getting his hearing checked (he once confided to me that he never listened to what she said anyway) and now was refusing to wear his CPAP mask. This made his night terrors become more frequent and intense.

We resented knowing Dad's time was short and were being forced to spend it in the dark along with him. His own doctor agreed that Dad should remain ignorant of his diagnosis as the depression it would trigger would make it all worse. This is the nature of a Lewy body diagnosis. After all, look what Robin Williams did when he found out.

So she stands by their car and

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asks us again to leave them alone with Dad at her side dimly comprehending, looking down, rubbing his nose and brushing his shirt as is his habit to signal that he is ready to exit the discomfort of our presence. This was the sort of avoidance that led to his eventual divorce with mom twenty one years earlier, and mom would later confirm that emotional connection was always a challenge to him, and now we watched as it became the theme throughout his second marriage.

We learn that Lewy Body Dementia can only be accurately diagnosed after death through an autopsy, but rather than do nothing the doctor provides an early confirmation in order to set a treatment course. She had seen it before and detected many of the symptoms, and since there was no cure it made no sense to delay a course of comfort care.

So a year now after the funeral I'm still reviewing how things could have gone better.

It was grief at work once again.

Everybody muddled through the process of saying goodbye, trying to make sense of our time together finally finding relief in the end over no longer having to pretend being family any more. As a spliced together group, it was too much for us to expect better. We were not the Brady bunch.

I recounted the good stuff as best I could in the eulogy. I knew it would be my last chance to convince them that any of us in Dad's old divorced family were worth a damn. They had found plenty of reason over the years to draw the line between us and them, and we were more than happy to help.

It hurt us to watch him become a part of their clan, but it was the change he needed. We did not like watching him become one of them.

Over time he became interwoven within the dramas of his new family and blind to everything else. Brothers and I were reminders of a past they were helping him to forget as he trans-

formed into one of them. Eventually he sealed the deal by accepting the call to witness in their church.

Not long after this came the announcement that he had lived his former life with us as an alcoholic. My brothers and I didn't recollect a drinking problem and we joked that it must be part of the whole born again experience to tell a good story since it wasn't just good enough to admit you're a sinner in the eyes of God; you needed a good story to titillate the congregation.

We snickered about their alcohol free, cake and punch wedding reception they held in the church basement—which finished in thirty minutes. It was the perfect social event for anti-social people and it set the family relationship tone for the next twenty one years. A time when the only thing funny anymore would be the fact that nothing was funny anymore.

Dad's funeral would likely be the last time our spliced family shared a space together and I wanted them to consider the life Dad lived before entering their clan, and I wanted them to consider that our lives meant more than just a cautionary tale told at an AA meeting. We were more than just past life mistakes.

I hoped they would listen since I was one of the three people in the room who had known him the longest.

I spoke of our early years when he kept me close by his side and took me to work on his truck and proudly introduced me at all the family owned deli-markets in the suburbs we delivered to around Boston where we would be routinely and generously spoiled with the best sandwiches I have ever tasted in my life. The open hearted kindness and great food left a life-long impression on us both.

But it was hard work and Dad eventually grew tired of the long winters and always feeling like an outsider. So when our family moved back into his home state of South Carolina,

it felt like going from color to black and white.

As a firmly entrenched New Englander I was surprised to learn that the discovery of Pizza had only just dawned on the culinary scene of our new southern hometown. Arriving in a hot Carolina July after surviving a prolonged northeast winter did not cushion this blow.

My teenage years there were about navigating school and getting a job. Our family never got a real cultural foothold. My parents' marriage fell headlong into divorce and I never regretted leaving as soon as I had the chance.

After he re-married, we watched him settle into an evangelical cable tv lifestyle of sports, religion and far right politics, a steady drift into the stew of the non-stop news cycle. Through this lens everything good became bad and he couldn't wait to vote and make it all great again. Despite the outcome, the last vote he ever cast brought him no joy, and he sensed a mistake had been made but couldn't quite put it into words. His own health had just begun to distract his concentration.

His family reassured him whenever he doubted, and were always quick to point out the criminal foreigners who occupied the old mill houses in their neighborhood despite the well-kept yards and children who ran and played freely throughout, and forgetting completely that we were once those foreigners.

They remembered its greatness as a place where everybody worked and went to the same church and followed the rules and spoke English only to see it become "just like it is up north."

Once on a visit I stood with Dad and his new wife at the Blockbuster video store trying to pick a movie we could all enjoy together, staring at a wall covered in boxes of the latest Eddie Murphy flick. She shook her head and sneered under her breath that this was proof that they were taking over.

It made my skin crawl to watch Dad buy into this subtle genteel racism and become not the Dad we knew, but still somehow becoming more himself, finally – whether we agreed with it or not.

It was about two years into this new marriage before she started calling me about his night terrors.

I had forgotten about them since living away for so many years on my own. As a family we all never really talked about it, but mom eventually reminded me that it was no picnic sleeping with him. She muted her reaction when I told her that his garbled screaming had restarted and that stepmom was now being hit and shoved in her sleep.

I instantly regretted bringing it up when her brow furrowed and I thought she might cry, and so changed the subject.

I still wanted to learn more from her since she shared a bed the longest with him and I wanted to be able to compare notes with Stepmom. My own childhood memory could only recall a few instances when I was shocked out of sleep and would wait to hear mom's voice soothing and calming him down, so it could also calm me down too.

My stepmom was dealing with it at least every couple of weeks. She noted some differences from what mom had reported. She was even starting to make out some of what he was saying. This was new and so was the incidence of being hit almost every time the terrors occurred. Mom never mentioned getting the sort of bruising she received. So when it happened on the night of their honeymoon she wondered what she had gotten herself into. Eventually folks at church started to ask questions, and dad of course wasn't saying anything. It took two years before she mentioned anything to me.

She finally would give the ultimatum that he either talk to his doctor or she would consider leaving him. Dad

gave in and finally went for a checkup. His doctor in turn referred him to see a psychiatrist. He of course refused as he remembered having to deal with one at the end of his first marriage. "All they are going to do is talk us into divorce like the last time." He said it and meant it. He could not trust the word tricks psychiatrists play to make you change your mind.

Stepmom rolled her eyes telling me this and said she had only recently found comfort by moving into the spare bedroom, where at least she didn't have to worry about being hit.

She noticed a pattern and said his terrors happened only on days when his mother stopped by for a visit. She finally caught the subtle gesture or a look in the eye, a negativity that would get dad's psyche into motion. My grandmother could affect him deeply, and even a short visit from her had the power of setting off several nights' worth of terrors. Stepmom resented her visits suspecting he was being used as a tool against her to disrupt her sleep. She felt the disapproval of her mother in law and hoped the terrors would stop when she finally passed at the age of ninety one. But it was not the case.

Her realization that she was on her own with him was only made worse when the scope of his illness became clear. She'd been through it with an uncle and then later her own father, and so knew what was coming and that none of us would be of any use to her in her daily struggles.

She resented us anyway for not meeting the high standards she had come to know from the family of fire men and police that raised her. We were no match—and were in fact more like the types of people who called 911 that they sort of looked down upon. Not like the innocent accident victims they could relate to, but more like the idiots whose tragic choices made no sense, losers beyond reason, almost dangerous, wishing we weren't family so we would be easier

to ignore. And so it was, she took on the task of taking care of him solo for most of the way.

When I finally insisted my way into this process, she allowed me to stay over a few nights to help. I slept on the fold out couch only to be shocked awake again by his terrors, and again I was only able to get to sleep after hearing her voice calming him, but unlike my mother, she was armed with pain meds from the hospice people.

Over coffee she said she wasn't sure if the meds made the terrors worse or made it better. The doctor said there was a lot they didn't know about Lewy body dementia, so we could expect his symptoms to play out with some randomness.

The fearful angry yelling she heard him shout in his sleep, "you black b**ch!" scared her almost as much as his thrashing and hitting. She realized that this was how his brain would kick start his body when he would stop breathing. He was one of the worst cases of sleep apnea the clinic had ever seen. Dad was still refusing to wear his CPAP mask and when I encouraged him to participate in a study that might improve things; he would have none of it. My idea struck them as futile and a total waste of time. What good would it have done for them to know that science was starting to demonstrate a connection between apnea and LBD?

The yelling and hallucinating increased during his tenure with LBD. Stepmom finally asked if there were any remembrances I had involving interactions between dad and people of color. The truth is that there were not many that came to mind and none that had a disturbing element. It wasn't until his sister came into town to visit that we started to get an idea on the subject. Just like dad she too left home as soon as possible and started her own family. She remembered their father having an awful temper and recalled their mother

standing by doing nothing while he beat dad bloody for being out playing with the wrong crowd of kids. Suffice to say they were not white. She remembered so much blood on the floor it was as if an animal had been slaughtered in the family kitchen.

I remembered my grandfather as a man who never smiled and who my grandmother was greatly relieved to be rid of when he died decades earlier from cancer.

We believed that Dad's dreams were his own hashing out of a traumatic childhood and his sister revealed it was the same for her and their other brother who joined the army when he was fourteen just to get out of the house.

So now a year anniversary from his death a box finally arrives with a few of his personal possessions and pictures that stepmom put together for brothers and me. Being the oldest I got last dibs on what remained. Lots of pictures and Sunday school literature, including an impressive collection of Chick publication comics that he used to hand out and leave in public places. I found the family bible bookmarked to John 3:16, preset for brothers and I to heed.

I was overwhelmed to find myself one of the last caretakers of this family history. There were lots of pictures mounted in frames that once hung in my grandmother's tiny apartment and which Dad had also hung around his house. There was one frame though that I hadn't seen in many years. It was a big clunky collage of old pictures and news notices that grandmother had put together and hung in a corner of her place away from everything else. It had obituaries and birth announcements, graduation programs and church bulletins along with school pictures of aunts and uncles barely recognizable to me in their teens. Down in the corner my eye was drawn to the one picture I had ever seen where my grandfather was smiling. He

was maybe in his twenties or early thirties and there was dad maybe six or seven year's old standing in front of him crying. Grandfather's hands were resting on his shoulders but even more strangely was an arm reaching around grandfather's shoulder and disappearing off the end of the print. I opened the back of the frame and smiled when I found some confederate money hidden there.

It took some doing until I was able to extract the crumbly newspaper photo clipping that had been folded over enough to reveal grandpa's one and only pictured smile. Unfolding it revealed many more smiling faces all standing around them at the old town square, and there at the center hung the bodies of two black men from a tree, beaten and bleeding, blending into the banality of the scene like it was something that happened all the time, as common as rain, and I put it down fast feeling my stomach lurch.

I'm glad my brothers didn't see this. There's no need. I thought about calling stepmom but she hasn't answered any calls since dad's passing and I suspect she has moved on to somebody new in her life.

Why am I left with this? How many others in the picture are left with this?

This dream ends with me, and I am not going to eat the veal Marsala.



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

The parkway is nearly devoid of traffic - this alone lets me know that I am asleep and not participating in a reality event. I drive and drive, past the sandy pine-woods and power poles. The mile markers go by with regularity, but I am hesitant to look over at them because it will take me to a different place in the dream, one where I am trying to work out the math of driving, rather than going somewhere to see someone from my past, someone I miss very much and want to see. I don't know why dreams do this - change topics like the magazines on a dentist's office coffee table, but I'll bet some psychologist has it all figured out and can explain in two sentences.

Girl - cyberspace

“Correcting You”

I'm not sure whether you were a dangling modifier
 or a subject-verb disagreement,
 a fragment or some higher order concern
 like a logical fallacy
 or a paragraph going nowhere
 in an essay that pulls the plug
 just when it's getting interesting,
 a human bait and switch,
 an anacoluthon
 embodied in really sweet flesh
 and a voice that made everything
 sound exactly right,
 your eyes taking attention away
 from missing periods.
 Well, one mistake led to another and another
 one after that,
 mounting
 compound errata like books boxed
 in bedroom closets, crumpling
 the hems of thrift store dresses,
 or stored along low-rent hallways needing fresh paint.
 You were all of these and many more—so—
 I failed you,
 didn't I?

Two by Steve Hamelman

“Sweet Spot”

It takes a little work but it can be found
 In the interstice of a tube and pivot-point
 On a bicycle, or between the shell and sound
 In a drum whose heads are tuned to anoint
 The air carrying the track to the tape
 And audience beyond—in a niche's niche,
 A cross-hair of technology or art,
 The bull's-eye for a kiss on someone's nape,
 The quarter-breath of fear before a switch
 Deploys a truth only love can impart:
 Sometimes too in syntax polished, set,
 And sealed like tribal pearls inside a case
 Hidden against collection of debt
 Along the rim of a cave shrouded in lace.

“Susan”

I stood and watched you sleeping, had
stood there watching for nearly five minutes in
the shadow of the
hallway for nearly five minutes of circus
time before I dropped your purse on the chair, quiet as death
and slipped quietly out the door, defying
detection. Your bare back

was open to anyone and everyone coming in, bareback
riders slip in through the cracks of hotel security all the time, defying
even little girl sanctity. Yesterday, I dreamt of your death
how I would deal with it, wondering if you survived the circus
of the imaginary midnight ambushes that haunted my mind, the
big sister duties I'd imposed upon myself stuck in
my head, driving me crazy--Why didn't you call this morning? I had

this idea of how this would all work out, I had
it all planned out, but I can't play everyone's mother, not in
this life. I'm stretched too thin as it is. The
alarm clock rings in my head before true circus
time, and I can't sleep for worrying about you, little girl—death.
Nobody is going to come when you scream. It defies
all logic, but it's true. You left your bare back
open all night. Please tell me you lock your door now.
Please tell me
you're all right.

Three by Holly Day

CONTRIBUTORS:

Jason Sallinger is a frequent contributor to The Blotter. He writes, “I have recently returned from holiday with the wife, inspired to write. Please find attached an account of an anecdote from my travels.”

Jasmine Rizer writes, “Previously, my work has appeared in *The Blotter* on several occasions, as well as in *AVENues*, *Twisted Vine Literary and Arts Journal*, *Reserve and renew: the LIS Mental Health Zine*, *MiddleGray Magazine*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Drops of Crimson*, *Orb*, and *Stillpoint*. My contribution to the column “My Own Private Library” appeared in a 2017 issue of *Georgia Library Quarterly*. My short story “Better” was read on *The Blotter Radio 'Zine* on WCOM in 2015. In 2008 and 2009, I was a regular contributor of artwork, fiction, and non-fiction to Robin Fay's arts-based e-zine, *Moonshine*.

Bryan Davis is a writer and photographer who resides with his wife and cat in Durham. Together they manage to enjoy a very good jazz lifestyle.

Steve Hamelman of Conway, SC, writes, “My most recent publication is a chapter in *The Beatles: Through a Glass Onion: Reconsidering the White Album* (Michigan UP, 2019). I teach at Coastal Carolina University and, whenever I am in Wilmington, eat at Flaming Amy's Burrito Barn, where I have enjoyed coming across *The Blotter* on more than one occasion.”

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Plainsongs*, *The Long Islander*, and *The Nashwaak Review*. Her newest poetry collections are *A Perfect Day for Semaphore* (Finishing Line Press), *In This Place, She Is Her Own* (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press), *A Wall to Protect Your Eyes* (Pski's Porch Publishing), *I'm in a Place Where Reason Went Missing* (Main Street Rag Publishing Co.), *The Yellow Dot of a Daisy* (Alien Buddha Press), *Folios of Dried Flowers* and *Pressed Birds* (Cyberwit.net), and *Where We Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing). She lives in Minneapolis, MN.

"Above the Masses"

when I want to feel important
 I put on stilts before I go outside. I have found
 that when people have to crane their necks to look up at me
 they choose their words a little more carefully
 smile a lot.

I would be tall all the time if I could
 if I could only handle the way the bottoms of my feet start to ache
 from the constant pressure of the metal bar against my arches.
 If there was a way to stretch my bones to ridiculous lengths
 make monolithic heights an average, every day
 way of being, I would endure the pain of skin stretching to near-rupture
 bones broken and reformed, feet elongated to accommodate
 my distorted center of gravity. There would be

no more questioning of my importance if I was that tall
 no more condescending pats on the top of my head
 from drunk guys at the bar, there would be reverence
 scared silence when I walked into a room
 no one would talk down to me.

"His Dreams"

in my son's room
 remains
 of gutted telephones
 electric fans
 my old laptop, toys
 litter the floor, tiny screws
 bind odds and ends
 together in
 random assemblage, the
 beginnings of the
 doomsday machination
 that will make his name
 synonymous with Biblical
 Armageddon
 the last page.

EVENT OMEGA. The end of civilization. The end of the world.
The end of everything. But hey, you still gotta eat.
From the warped and twisted mind of slipstream-absurdist author
Joe Buonfiglio comes

THE POST-APOCALYPTIC DINING GUIDE,
a bizarrely humorous tale of an attempt to save a society gone to hell
when evolution jumps the tracks.

Who knew the end of the world could be so much fun!
Find it on Amazon!

