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The Blotter

magazine



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“200”

I had intended to make a big deal about it – out of this being our 200th number. Over sixteen years of monthly publication, and how cool was it that number 200 would fall on the second month of this year – 02/2020. Pretty cool. Well, pretty *something*, anyway.

Truth: it’s the dreariest time of the year – sorry all of you who have a birthday with Washington and Lincoln. No one likes February. It’s unlikeable. Most people pronounce it wrong, and I think that’s on purpose. It doesn’t deserve to be said correctly. It’s the egg-salad sandwich of months. The French, wise folk that they are, named it “Ventose” when they changed their calendar after the Revolution. Ventose either means “windy” or “bad breath,” which is accurate enough for a month worth only 28 or 29 days because who in their right mind wants more of windy, cold and wet?

You know, I suppose it’s hard to get excited about a literary magazine, in February of an election year, just after the Super Bowl, during Lent, before Spring Break and the Academy Awards when what’s-her-name just posted a bikini pic with no make-up, not even *foundation!* But we always imagined that we broke the code on highbrow/lowbrow reading. Sixteen monthly pages of damn well-written stuff on just about any subject, sent to you from around this great big world. Worth a sit-down and a page-flip, but probably not a parade.

So I kind of get it. Not as big a deal as we’d imagined. And I don’t know about you, but everyone here has been busy – returning holiday gifts for store-credit, dropping a buck on the lottery, trying to figure out what that itch is, playing klondike solitaire while clipping those weaponized toenails and shouting at Alexa to start the third best playlist, that one with the Lil’ Fredo/Ginger Roadmap mashup. Who can compete with that?

Surely it meant something, right – all of that coincidental numerical silliness? Basic cable television shows have been produced on less of a platform. Wasn’t it worthy of recognition? Maybe we really could have had a party with bands and liquor and a couple of food trucks that make sweet and savory crepes and then invited folks to come celebrate this...what? This pretty big deal? But what’s in a number, really? A status statement? Some kind of benchmark of success?

So the day got closer, the moment when we would go to press, and nothing came along for us to say or do that would make it special. I swore I wouldn’t get snarky about it, either, descending into absurd popular culture images

that have no basis in reality. If it worked out, we would do something, make a splash., run it up a flagpole and see who saluted. But I have nothing.

Or do I?

Well, I have good stories. I mean, we always do. They're right here for you, and all you have to do is turn the page. Simple! If you like what you see and read, and you've never picked up a *Blotter* before, you can go to our website, the URL address of which is down in the lower left hand corner of these pages, where there are about thirteen hundred more stories and poems and essays and pieces of art, archived, well, just for you. It couldn't be more convenient if you were sitting on a cabana chair in Bermuda and a man in a white shirt and oddly length'd shorts brought it to you with an icy Dark and Stormy. If you don't particularly like what you read, well, give that archive a vigilant look-see and maybe there's something else that will appeal to you. Think about it: 1300 things in 200 issues spaced over almost 17 years. Hey, the odds are actually in your favor.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

Kiss your sass

“The Hideous Summer”

by Robert Levin

Imagine that suddenly, with no expectation of the impending event, you void your bowels on a stalled and packed rush hour subway. Imagine that the ventilating system has shut down and that the lights have remained on at full wattage. Also imagine that, stuck in a tunnel and still a half-dozen stations from your destination, your best choice will be to stay on the train when it starts to move and make normal stops again. Now think of being trapped in such a nightmare circumstance not for twenty minutes or an hour but for *nearly two months*.

And that’s just a piece of it. Imagine as well that throughout this period you feel as though a butcher knife has been planted in the very center of your heart. If you can imagine these things, you’ll have some inkling of what much of the summer of 1994 was like for me.

That hideous season of very bad days, sandwiched by days that were worse than very bad, began in early July when Maryellen split. It would have been awful enough had Maryellen left me with only the aforementioned deep and abiding agony in my chest that derived from the loss of a woman I cared about. (And awful enough with only the cluster of collateral tribulations that would immediately follow the loss.) But because of what triggered it this breakup was, you could say, beyond devastating.

What happened was that—I’ll state it flat out—Maryellen, who’d been living with me in my apartment for nearly two years, caught me *flagrante delicto* with Debbie, her Cocker Spaniel.

Coming out of nowhere, with nothing in my history to predict it, I wasn’t sure at first that what I’d done was really so “perverted” and “disgusting,” to quote Maryellen, and I didn’t agree with the character judgment implicit in her reaction. It didn’t seem fair. I felt this way because I’d always had a probing mind, a mind that, forever in search of recondite truths, often drove me to challenge things that others took for granted. It

being a bit removed from what I usually focused on, and although I don’t remember thinking about it specifically, the assumption that boundary lines in nature are fixed and inviolable would be an example. It was entirely possible that my philosophical bent had subliminally impelled me to take the leap from rumination to physical inquiry. Moreover, if a scientific motivation wasn’t reasonable and innocent enough, when you name your dog “Debbie” you’re asking for trouble. And, Jesus, hadn’t Larry Flynt confessed to the *serial raping of chickens* without incurring any damage to his reputation?

But thoughts like these ended quickly. It was impossible for me to deflect for long the horror in Maryellen’s eyes when, on the evening in question, she came home early. With the stereo blasting, I didn’t pick up on the fact that Maryellen was there until, all at once, she was big in the room. Debbie I realized afterwards, was aware of Maryellen’s untimely return before I was. I saw one of her ears rise and I saw what I understood later to be an expression of apprehensiveness as she turned her cranium towards me. But probably because her countenance was open to multiple interpretations at that moment, her heads up went straight by me.

At any rate, I hadn’t seen the rage and revulsion Maryellen’s face presented to me since, standing next to my mother, I barfed into the family “Important Documents” chest when I was five. The abhorrence it conveyed seemed, in its breathtaking proportions, to have issued from the depths of creation itself. No, try as I might, I couldn’t deny it. Diddling Debbie had been an egregious act—a crime against all that was sacrosanct. That it was, as I’ve indicated, unpremeditated and, in my case unprecedented, made of its true origin a mystery that would eat at me for quite a while. I mean, I’d always been indifferent to dogs and that included Debbie. If I perfunctorily scratched

her head from time to time, and walked her when Maryellen couldn’t, at no point had I bonded with her, not as a pet or otherwise.

Well, what can I tell you? This turn my life had taken was more than I could cope with. I went, I guess, into something like shock. For the next three weeks I never once left my apartment. While I managed to phone my boss, Mr. Mintz, every couple of days to make reports on a virus of some mysterious, thoroughly debilitating and likely very contagious strain that I’d contracted, all I did besides that—and when I wasn’t pacing furiously from room to room—was intermittently endeavor to lose consciousness for a few hours by consuming tall glasses of scotch mixed with beer.

Now much as I’d like to, I won’t pretend that, though it was not of a similar kind, I’d been without an emotional issue before the incident.

In contrast to Maryellen, who worked for an investment firm and recently gotten a second promotion in less than a year, I’ve had, since my quite ordinary middle-class childhood, a childhood (if you skip the vomiting episode) free of any noteworthy traumas, some problems with applying and executing. I’m not good at those things. Functioning on an elevated level isn’t my forte. My IQ is high, but I’d barely made it through a year of college. I think this is because the ugly fate of decay and dissolution that awaits everything with a body rattles me too much. I know that the inevitability of death disturbs everyone. But where others are apparently capable of putting it out of their minds, and of masking their fear of it, I’m not. When the gods were distributing psychic forms of armor against the dread of death, they’d been outrageously skimpy with mine. It isn’t just that being born under a death sentence that could be invoked *at any time* scares me but that it also makes me feel guilty. I must have done some serious shit to be in so much trouble. And it makes me feel ashamed as well. Unable to alter my situation, to change the given, I’m incompetent where it counts the most. Brooding over my destiny, and persistently cogitating about ways to handle it, is a perpetual distraction that results in my tending to lose my concentration in

practical matters a lot.

And neither will I attempt to portray my relationship with Maryellen as unfettered by difficulties before the Debbie debacle.

Four years younger than me—at our separation I was twenty-seven and she was twenty-three—Maryellen, whose pleasing face (which brought to mind my favorite aunt), affable personality and sense of humor had speedily won me over, was from a well-off, straitlaced upstate New York family. Like her older sister, she'd majored in finance at a local college before coming to the city to pursue a career. Unlike her sister, who'd gravitated to the Upper East Side, Maryellen had what she proudly referred to as a "maverick streak" and she wanted to live in Greenwich Village. Planning to get a place in the Village once she'd found a job, she was staying, when we met, in the adjoining neighborhood of Chelsea, with Debbie and her college roommate Barbara. Charmed by my bathtub-in-the-kitchen Village walkup near the Hudson River, visibly enthralled by my pontifications on subjects ontological and titillated by my regular, though (I swear) moderate use of alcohol, when she discovered I was on a first name basis with the bartenders at the White Horse she and Debbie moved in with me just days later.

And that first year with Maryellen was nothing short of excellent. It was a year in which we had an abundance of sex, took long hand-in-hand walks around the Village, went to scores of cultural events in the area and hung with friends of mine, most of whom were of an artistic persuasion. But after that year and, it doubtless being relevant, a year in which she'd found lucrative employment, her "maverick" thing began to wane. Souring on the Village and our lifestyle, she would talk frequently about us moving to a "normal" apartment and to a neighborhood with different people, maybe somewhere near her sister. She also wanted me to make my drinking less than regular and moderate. When my responses were essentially evasive and transparently intended to delay such changes, she gradually became moody and distant and after a while it would sometimes seem that all of my foibles

had become sources of irritation to her. My tendency to drool when I slept, which she'd initially been amused by, started to antagonize her. And, unnoticed before, the sartorial faux pas of wearing socks that matched the color of my shoes and not my pants, captured her attention one morning and incensed her no end.

It was, however, my job and lack of real money that were the primary and most constant aspects of me to rankle her. A typesetter for a printing company housed in a rundown building on a still only partially gentrified street near the Garment Center, I made just enough to get along, had no opportunities for advancement and didn't have to wear a suit, all of which grated on her not a little. Referring to me on more than one occasion as a "glorified typist" who worked in a "type factory" she took to calling me a "slacker" and was incessantly after me to connect with a "respectable" profession.

I suspect that having her meet me at work one evening when I had to stay late played a role in much of what I've recounted. The last to leave, we were almost out the door before she said she needed to use the bathroom. Having only the men's room key, it was the men's room to which I sent her—utterly forgetting that the only person who hadn't been granted a key to it was the janitor. I'll spare you a detailed depiction of the men's room. Suffice it to say that some unspeakable carnage appeared to have taken place there and that upon her emergence Maryellen was weeping.

Still, her disdain for my job, her increasing displeasure with our way of life and, yes, her disaffection with me in general notwithstanding, I remained confident that Maryellen would stick around. I say this because we'd already lasted almost two years, and because she had a conspicuous flaw of her own, a flaw that limited the field for her. You could call it a weight problem, but it wasn't so much that as a weight *displacement* problem. Spherical at her bottom and tapering markedly toward her top—and with a stem-like ponytail to complete the resemblance—Maryellen was the very picture of a pear, which is a fine shape for fruit (not to mention pendants and tones) but not that terrific for human bodies.

Understanding from the start that this imperfection had contributed to making her available to me I was actually grateful for it. Bottom line: She was a woman whose figure was suitable to my station in life. (And to my own physical composition. I was all of five foot six, more skinny than slim and with a nose you would think must obstruct my vision.)

So when, after a call to her sister—who had a car and who would wait in the hall to help her—Maryellen hurriedly packed her things and, with Debbie clutched under one arm, fled the apartment, I was stunned all the more by having dismissed the signs that our union was in jeopardy to begin with. And in those first three weeks I just wasted away. Indeed, I lost twelve pounds I didn't need to lose. This was mostly due to the lack of an appetite. But it was also because Maryellen had, without my catching it in the state I was in, emptied the kitchen cabinets and refrigerator of the victuals *she'd* purchased, leaving me to survive on an economy-size jar of Marshmallow Fluff and a dozen frozen waffles (along with my booze stash which was untouched).

If that wasn't enough, my wretched condition was soon compounded by a number of physical ailments and handicaps. For one thing, thick clots of mucous were continually sliding from the back of my nose down into my throat. For another, a tooth with a chronic abscess was acting up again. Although the pain it caused was only occasional, I knew it was on its way to meaning business this time.

In addition, I had a substantial eye crisis. Already living with one frayed contact lens, which clouded my sight and made it feel like dirt was enmeshed inside it when I blinked, the other one blew off my fingertip one night and vanished down the sink drain. And just minutes after that happened, I proceeded, while I was pacing, to step on my backup glasses. These misfortunes forced me to view my surroundings and myself with what amounted to one crippled eye. But even with this impediment I could still perceive, when I looked in the mirror, a growing bump in my jaw and, in need of a barber weeks earlier, that my head was now crowned by a wild man's hair. But

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leaving my apartment for any reason at this point was out of the question. I couldn't even summon the will to shower with regularity, or to shave at all.

It might have helped to talk to a friend about what was going on. But reaching out would have involved a discussion of my transgression, a transgression I had no stomach to reveal to anyone who was ignorant of it. The few times someone called *me*, and knowing it would not be Maryellen, I didn't answer and disregarded any messages that were left.

To cap it off, I was enduring my loss, humiliation and physical maladies with only a semi-functioning air conditioner to combat the onset of a hellish heat and a level of humidity that would have suffocated a rainforest.

I did consider suicide. Craving eternal oblivion, dying to that end would have been a blessing now. But absent the assurance that my grievous Debbie offense wouldn't lead the gods to punish me with an afterlife, one even more gruesome than the life I was living, I rejected it.

With suicide off the table as a means with which to escape my forlorn straits, I concluded that to feel any better there was really only one recourse. It was to get Maryellen to forgive and return to me. Accomplishing this objective became an all-consuming goal. And the way to go about it, I reasoned, was to reconstitute myself. I would rebuild myself into a healthy-minded man of purpose and ambition. This notion got me fired up. But as eager to begin as I was, my enthusiasm was soon dampened by a disconcerting thought. An undertaking of such dimensions would require time to complete. (Especially when I was clueless as to how to begin.) Unaware of it, Maryellen would only get further away from me and one day—it was bound to happen eventually—take up with someone else. Prudence dictated that I tell her of my plan and the new me it promised. So, impersonating an old friend, I rang her parents and learned that she'd gone to stay with Barbara again until she could get a place of her own. And that evening I called her there. Actually, prodded by the magnitude of my news, I called her there every few minutes because each

time Barbara would answer and hang up at the sound of my voice.

With that, I knew I had no alternative but to tell her in person, and the size and urgency of my mission overrode my reluctance to face the outside world.

Assuming that Maryellen would be home, I picked a Saturday and set out for Barbara's apartment with a dangerously racing heart to accompany the now throbbing bump in my jaw and the commencing of a soreness in my throat from my post-nasal drip. The headlines on the newsstands I passed announced "ANOTHER SCORCHER," and at only ten in the morning my shoulders were already burning under my shirt when I came upon a major street fair replete with merchants of every category, live and loud music and some seriously teeming humanity. Worse, an upward slope on the main avenue made it clear that this thing went on for blocks, smack to the border of Chelsea.

Barbara's building was just on the far side of the fair. But the fair also stretched down intersecting streets and this made circumventing it more daunting than advancing directly. So arms tight at my sides, I walked right into it. As it turned out the disaster that had befallen my appearance worked to my advantage here. Instead of being bumped and jostled or repeatedly forced to stop and wait behind ambling fools who, unlike myself, had no important business this day, spaces were opened up for me. So fast were people to move aside it was like stepping through a series of automatic doors.

Then, as I made my way, I passed a stall of grilling sausages. The aroma of them took me back to an evening in the third week of our living together when we'd gone to a festival in Little Italy and, tossing softballs at a mechanical monkey and pitching quarters into a glass, I'd won, in rapid succession, a can of Spam Lite and a yellow parakeet. That the very next day the bird, when we released it from its cage, would fly headlong into a closed window and expire, took nothing from my memory of that extraordinary evening. I felt perfectly centered that evening—and fearless. Unencumbered by my chronic engrossment in my body's eventual disintegration, I was absolutely

without inhibition. I could, I felt, have *excelled* at anything I cared to do.

It was also on that evening, and just after I won the Spam Lite, that Maryellen unexpectedly turned toward me while we were walking to the parakeet stand, pulled me to her, kissed me squarely on the mouth and told me, for the first time, that she loved me.

Arriving at Barbara's street, I saw her building, took a deep breath, entered the vestibule and found a sign that said the inner door buzzer was broken. Expecting the usual reaction, but with no option other than to go home, I went to a phone booth on the corner.

Presumably Barbara was out because it was Maryellen who picked up.

Too taken aback for any salutations, I went, following a startled pause, directly to the meat of it and said: "I need to tell you something."

After a long silence she said: "You need to tell me something? I don't want to hear it. Just the sound of your voice creeps me out."

Although I would rather have received a warmer reception, that she stayed on the phone made me giddy, so giddy that I lost sight of my purpose in contacting her.

"Maryellen, I love you, but you know only my grandmother's allowed to say that."

"This is a mistake," she said. "I shouldn't be talking to you. I'm going to get off. I'm cringing right now. You don't seriously think...? God, I'm so embarrassed for you. I knew you were warped and a slacker...the drinking, that job, the saliva thing, always putting things off, those *morbid*, convoluted...*musings*—oh yeah, that reminds me. That thing you said about why people procrastinate. What was it? 'The longer you put it off the longer you have to live'? What the hell does that mean? Who knows what that means?"

"I told you and you seemed to understand. There's no such thing as 'lazy'. It's about the sense the procrastinator has that he's suspending time. Did you ask somebody?"

"Why would I ask somebody?"

She'd obviously vetted my intellect with someone who'd been critical of me. I was stung by her need to do that and by

the negative verdict, but I did stay giddy. "I've been wanting to explain the hidden genius of the slacker to you," I went on. "You're forgetting the benefits. If you don't stick out too much, don't achieve too much, the gods might just forget about you. Forget, you know, to kill you."

"You're an idiot, too."

"This attitude you're taking. It's really about that driving mishap in Rochester, isn't it? If you remember, even the judge said I wasn't entirely to blame. He said that family must have been really stupid to build their house just a hundred yards off the highway."

She didn't laugh.

"Look," she said, "I know you have serious problems and I don't want to be insensitive, but I have a major meeting today and I have to go."

"It's the *weekend*, Maryellen."

"That's what I told my manager."

"Listen," I said. "Please. I can see how what transpired might have tainted my mystique for you, but if you really can't stand me anymore, maybe we could be best friends."

"*Friends? With you? My God, you're lucky you were born before they invented amniocentesis!*"

She hung up.

I called her right back.

"Can't you find someone else to call? Like maybe a doctor?"

"Something's terribly wrong here. I did call someone else. Just this morning I called Jeanne Dixon. She said 'Reunion with a loved one, today.' That's got to be you."

"Well, it's not. Maybe Lassie's coming home again."

She hung up once more and the only thing I could do was wait for her to go to her meeting.

I didn't have to wait very long. Just a few minutes later I saw her distinctive silhouette behind the shaded glass of the outer door. But when she came out and saw *me*, she pulled back and the door shut.

I wasn't sure what my next move should be. Reckoning that she'd returned upstairs, I let a minute pass before calling her again.

"You're not *afraid* of me now?"

"What are you *doing* here? Do you

know what you look like?"

"I'm here for the fair. Remember the para...?"

"This is harassment. If you don't go away, I'm calling the police."

She hung up still again and I called her right back. I couldn't help it. "That's it," she said and threw the receiver down.

The blood gone from my legs, I just stood there. I was expecting half a dozen screaming squad cars to pull up from every direction. But what I got, some ten minutes later, was a slight and seemingly fledgling cop on a motor scooter circling to a stop in front of her door. Seeing him looking around and past me, I have to say that as a taxpayer I was a trifle vexed by his size, his youth, his vehicle and his inability to spot a perp who was standing in front of him. (In fairness, I should note that there were a number of other guys on that corner who, if they weren't in the process of harassing a woman were for sure considering it.) In any event, when he entered the building on the heels of a resident apparently grasping a key, I knew it was time to leave.

Not that, as my legs recovered, my evacuation meant I was ready to give up on her. No way. If so much had gone wrong, if, and worst of all, I had, in my giddiness, failed to inform her of my mission and was now at a loss as to how to communicate it to her, I was nonetheless encouraged. Why? Because I realized as I made my retreat, that she hadn't given 911 my description. This was a telling omission that betrayed, at the very least, a lingering conflict about me.

When no police showed up at my door in the ensuing days (meaning that she hadn't provided my name either), her ambivalence was confirmed for me and I decided that to reappear in her life at some point in the near future, stylishly dressed, financially thriving and glowing with mental health, had been the right path, the *adult* path, to take all along. So, determining that my initial order of business should be to pull myself together appearance-wise, I got a haircut.

Preferring not to have my regular hair cutter see me in the plight I was in, I found a barber in the catacombs of the Fourteenth Street subway station. Since I didn't want my face hanging out too nakedly, I asked him not to take too

much off, to just "shape it a little."

Twenty minutes later my hair had a style again. That it was early Ringo Starr was unfortunate, but I reminded myself that at one time at least it had been fashionable.

Then, fantasizing that Maryellen was watching me and to demonstrate to her that I could be a responsible citizen with a social and political consciousness, I kept the TV on and tuned to cable news. And I expanded my range of concerns. To my personal worries I amended Bosnia and Rwanda and the Chinese withdrawal from the nuclear moratorium, among other things.

I didn't go to the dentist though. This was because (and I thought about it long and hard) relinquishing my physical suffering before I'd completed my rehabilitation was too dicey. It would have been like cheating and might have made the gods madder at me than they were already. (That the tooth pain, which by now was snaking along my jaw line from my chin up into my ear needed to be suppressed by outdated Percodan from a years ago root canal if I was to carry out my project was something I fervently hoped they'd cut me some slack on.)

Nor, for the same reason, did I alter my eating habits very much. I continued to eat sparsely and to watch that I wasn't getting too many nutrients. Under the current circumstances gauntness was good, gauntness made me feel less likely to provoke more wrath from the gods.

And inasmuch as a palpable contempt exuded from literally every person I passed on the street—was I projecting my self-loathing or was it true?—I didn't call my optometrist either. I didn't want to see too clearly people seeing me.

But my sick leave days having long since expired, I did go back to my job where, curiously, the posture of Mr. Mintz constituted an exception to the scorn I was experiencing.

Mintz, pushing seventy and who, with his squat body, putty cheeks and bulbous nose, could have passed for a road company W. C. Fields, was an old-time typographer—one of the last of a breed that knew the difference between a dash and a hyphen. I respected him for this, but his impatience with errors and his fixation on refinements that no one

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seemed to care about anymore, made working for him less than agreeable—and particularly when you added his wearying sense of humor to his perfectionism. Upon being approached, for instance, he would invariably feel it necessary to ask, “Was it something I *set*? (I remember that when, just as he was leaving, I introduced them on that men’s room night, Maryellen found this line hilarious. “What a cute old man,” she’d said.) And once a day, at a minimum, he would tell me to inquire how he’d gotten to be where he was in this business.

“How did you get to be where you are in this business, Mr. Mintz?”

“Well, if you must know, I took the type-casting couch route. Okay? I won’t apologize for it. I saw what I wanted and I decided to go after it by any means necessary.”

Another thing I didn’t appreciate was his sarcasm. When, in one of my calls to him, I’d settled on mononucleosis as my reason for being out so long, his response had been, “Poor guy, I didn’t think they still had that disease. I haven’t heard of anyone getting it since my son took a semester off from college.”

I’d supposed from early on that it wasn’t going to pan out with Mintz, that I would have to fire him from his position as my employer. But the shortage of bosses that the advent of desktop publishing was creating made replacing him problematic. Now, as it turned out, I was glad that I’d kept him.

When I returned to work, he could not have been more considerate. I could only assume that my weight loss, swollen face and cadaverous pallor had persuaded him of the authenticity and severity of my illness and made him feel sorry for me. I mean, I made no contribution to the country’s GNP; if anything, considering the quantity of typos I managed to squeeze into the briefest of paragraphs, I probably lost us a few points. (I was still seeing out of one defective eye.) But Mintz never got angry or threatening about it. In fact, he went out of his way to give me only relatively simple assignments that were without urgent deadlines.

It was a strange thing.

Within just days however, I felt myself slipping back to virtually where I’d

been the night Maryellen decamped. Though working had restored a measure of normalcy to my life, Maryellen’s opinion of my job, joined with my inability to think of anything else to do and the fact that I’d never advised her of my plan to reform myself—that I’d failed to put her on hold—added panic to my litany of miseries.

So not making progress in mustering ideas that would result in a meaningful difference, I paced compulsively when I was home and drank myself to sleep each night (so much for moderation). It was while I was engaged in the former activity that I wondered what I was really up to, why I’d been ignoring anything I could claim of common sense. It occurred to me that, besides being a sicko I was also in the grip of an obsession that was blinding me to the reality of Maryellen’s alienation. But upon thinking that, and in no more than a beat behind simultaneously, the parakeet/Spam Lite night came rushing to the fore of my mind and I knew what I was doing. My obsession was rooted in the feelings we’d exchanged that night. Brief as the moment may have been, those feelings had transformed my body from my enemy to a source of enormous pleasure and, by my standards anyway, an instrument of supernatural powers. They’d made me, and more so after the sheer ecstasy of the sex we had that night, *happy* to have a body. Had romantic love been invented to serve precisely this purpose? No. I could hardly let common sense divert me from my attempts to repossess the woman who had stirred those feelings.

The day on which matters came to a head, was the day Maryellen and I would have been together for exactly two years.

I got up that morning in even more physical distress than had become my lot. Along with an inability to properly breathe through my nose and a burning pain in my throat when I swallowed, the ache in my face was deep and sharp and my mirror now reflected a chipmunk bringing home an acorn for the winter. On top of that I had a vicious hangover. The night before I’d doubled up on my scotch, beer and Percodans. But at 4 AM I’d been rudely restored to wakefulness by a fierce banging that was followed by

a nasty grinding and a barely audible, human-like groan—the death rattle of my air conditioner. Incapable of returning to sleep in the god-awful heat, and too nauseated for more alcohol, I could only lie there for the rest of the night, on my back with my folded arms pressed rigidly against my chest, against the torment inside it.

Then, when I arose at seven to shave, I encountered some trouble distinguishing my undulating features from one another in the bathroom mirror. In consequence I opened a deep gash just above my right eyebrow. No amount of styptic pencil would stanch the bleeding and since the bandages had belonged to Maryellen and I hadn’t replaced them it became necessary to apply a patch of toilet paper to the wound.

And when finally I got myself together and, with one finger hooked into a belt loop to hold up my pants, ventured outside, I was greeted by a glaring sun and a pile of festering garbage from a tipped over can. It was all I could do not to upchuck the morning’s portion of Marshmallow Fluff and small consolation to know that my nasal passages hadn’t become hermetically sealed.

At work, where the ribbons on the air conditioning ducts were rippling nicely, it wasn’t long before I lapsed into a semi-stupor. I did, several times, raise myself and careen to the men’s room to pee or gag or both (and, having found no band aids in the first aid box with which to stem a persistent flow of blood, to also replace the toilet paper patch). But in my cubicle, movement was largely confined to the pulsing in my jaw.

Then, just before noon, there was a terrifying thunderclap behind me. I turned to look out the window and saw that the sky had become pitch black.

I also saw Maryellen.

A screeching brake drew my attention to the street three floors below and—my heart almost bolted from my chest and out through the glass—there she was strolling up the sidewalk across from me. Even with only one semi-functioning eye and the light gone there was no misreading the ponytail and that splayed, but oddly endearing walk that often befuddled—and froze in their tracks—people finding themselves in her

path who couldn't be sure on which side she intended to pass. And I could hardly fail to recognize the gray pinstriped pantsuit. She'd worn that new "power" suit to show to Barbara on the night before she left me. If I say that I was beside myself with joy I don't begin to define the emotion I was feeling.

Maryellen was back—*she'd come back!*

Then the rain began and, running, she made a sharp turn into the restaurant opposite my building. Calling out in a breaking voice to anyone within earshot that I was going to lunch, I raced to the hall and, bypassing the elevators, tore down the fire stairs and out to the street.

The rain was torrential now and clouds of steam were rising from the previously baking pavement. Dashing between cars with their headlights turned on and shining in already forming puddles, I was inside the restaurant in what couldn't have been more than a minute after I'd spied her.

I'd never been in there before. Big and softly lit, linen tablecloths, beds of flowers along the base of the walls, all of the waiters male and uniformed, it was well off my lunch break spectrum. (Maryellen's too.) It was also very crowded—every table looked to be occupied. And it was fiercely cold.

Just inside the entrance I stood as still as my excitement would permit and, with my working eye, tried to locate her. People were milling in front of me and I didn't see her. I did see a beefy bartender take notice of me, and I saw customers who were queued in front of the maitre d's station frowning in my direction. Squinting at myself in a full-length mirror next to me I had to concur that I was presenting myself inappropriately. First of all, I was oozing and/or dripping a variety of liquids. Besides the drain-off from a thorough drenching I'd suffered in the rain, and despite the frigid air, sweat was pumping from my every pore. Also, the latest toilet paper patch was already bright red with blood, an overflowing stream of which was reaching nearly to my cheek. Not only that, a mini glacier of mucous was floating from my nostril towards my upper lip. While I could count the socks I was wearing as a plus, the tail of my shirt was hanging out over my pants and my pants in turn were

about to lose their tenuous grip on my hips. What's more, my jaw was now sticking out a couple of inches, I was noticeably shivering and, I could tell even with my clogged nose, that I didn't smell very good. My breath alone, given the taste in my mouth, must have made coming within ten feet of me comparable to entering a chicken coop.

I was about to try and effect some superficial repairs to my face with my handkerchief when a line of sight opened and I saw Maryellen being seated with her back to me in a far corner of the room. It was a magical moment because the maitre d' was just then pulling back his rope as if to usher *me* inside.

Concerns about my appearance instantly evaporating, I responded to this action with a quick end run around the line that remained and headed in her direction.

Taking those first steps toward Maryellen I was buoyant. I understood that what the real problem had been all along wasn't Debbie's biological category but Maryellen's wounded ego. Witnessing me with Debbie had been a blow to Maryellen's womanhood. And she had masked her injury by descending to a *speciesism* that hardly spoke well of *her* character. With the passage of time, and coming to miss me, she'd recognized this and she'd realized too that as hurtful as my indiscretion may have been, *it hadn't been with another girl!* Now she was contrite about her hysterical reaction. So contrite that, embarrassed to come to me directly, she'd arranged to have our meeting appear to be accidental. She'd maneuvered, by just *happening* to be in my work neighborhood and prancing around in front of my window on our *anniversary* day, to have *me* chase after *her*.

But then my thoughts and emotions began to undergo abrupt and pendulous shifts. Practically convulsing with rushes of affection for her, and more than ready to indulge her in her little game, I quickly became indignant. Did this woman have any idea of the ordeal she'd put me through? What amends did *she* intend to make? Then, just as suddenly, I felt a wave of generosity. I would seek no retribution. I had to concede, after all—and I took some pride in my emotional maturity here—that my own reflex had I come

home to discover a bra, a flea collar, panties and a leash in a sordid pile on the floor at the bedroom door would have been exactly the same as hers.

And then, as I continued to make my way toward her, forcing people to move tighter to their tables, spraying various forms of moisture on them, I felt a really bad feeling. Resting on the seat next to her was a new leather briefcase. I'd planned to buy her one like it—though not so expensive and much less masculine in style—for our anniversary.

But what was even more upsetting than the fact of the case itself was its color. It was *cordovan*. Maryellen hated cordovan. She had what could be construed as a pathological aversion to it. She said it reminded her of the shoes an uncle of hers who smoked cigars always wore. And she'd actually thrown out my best pair of shoes one night because they were cordovan. So seeing that bag profoundly saddened me. It made me feel that she'd already evolved into someone I didn't know anymore; that our estrangement was complete and irrevocable.

Then it struck me (and with a force that almost made me stop in my tracks) that she wasn't here for me at all but to meet someone else, someone I might even work with—maybe even *Mintz* who was being so benevolent because he was guilt-ridden about banging my girlfriend for what was probably weeks now, a girlfriend, furthermore, who couldn't care less that I might see her with him on our *anniversary* day!

And then—I was looking at her ponytail and thinking that she'd kept it—I felt all right, I felt good, because women, it's common knowledge, always change their hairstyle when they're making a new beginning.

But coming to within a few feet of her I got pissed again. She was absorbed in the menu when her neck should have been craned toward the entrance in anticipation of my arrival. I found it gauche and disappointing, that though here to effect a reconciliation she would still take a cavalier stance toward me. *Me* a man who cared passionately about world affairs and who, alarmed by mounting evidence of *his* less than splendid character, worried that Clinton might have a Richard Pryor-type freebasing acci-

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dent and burn down the White House. It was truly irksome. It was past exasperating. It was enough to make me want to grab her ponytail and yank her awake.

And yank is what I did.

“You stupid fool! You think you’ve got a leg up on people slacker-wise? For Christ’s sake, Maryellen. You own a dog you get it fixed!”

The first thing that impressed me about the grimacing face that snapped backwards to meet upside down with mine was the very wrong nose hair. A nanosecond later I was struck by the thick sideburns that ran very nearly to the jawbone. Then, as I was making a mental note to rethink my suicide option, I was reminded of the time my father took me to a Veterans Day parade. I was four and I remembered how he had lifted me up for a better view.

Confused? So was I. What happened was that some pear-shaped schmuck with a ponytail was sitting where Maryellen was supposed to be sitting. And promptly following my moment of contact with him, the bartender I’d seen coming in had embraced me from behind and raised me a foot or so above the floor. (I can still recall the freshly pressed scent of his black linen vest and a hint of Joop! Homme.) Then what happened was that, negotiating the aisles between the tables with a deftness I could only admire, he carried me back along the very trail I had myself so recently blazed and, without a word and much more gently than you would figure, deposited me on the street.

The rain had stopped but the heat had persisted—which ironically was now a relief after the chill of the restaurant, but under the circumstances, hardly something I could enjoy. I wished I had thought to inform this bartender that what we were dealing with here was grossly impaired vision, a very *physical*, not psychological, handicap and that I wasn’t, and could never be, the authentic wacko he thought I was. I also wanted to tell him that he was dead wrong if he thought that Maryellen had never liked me or that we hadn’t been close; that, on the contrary, and albeit on her way to a garbage can, she had once held my cordovan shoes in her hands. Then I wanted to say—my mental and emotional pendulum was swinging again at full throttle

and now I was infuriated—how fucking dare you interject yourself into my personal affairs? And I wanted to say after that: Just what exactly *is* this shit you think you’re handing me?

I got back upstairs and to my desk all right but when I sat down I experienced an amazing weariness. I didn’t care that my pants, soaked from the rain, had made of my seat a bucket of ice. I’d never felt so enervated. It was as though all of my energy had leaked out of me. I half expected, when I looked down, to see blood seeping from my shoes.

I wanted, badly, to go home.

As if the gods were ready at last to show me some mercy I scored a break. Mintz had gone to visit a client and he would not be back. Freeing me of an explanation to make, this news tapped a reserve of adrenaline I was astonished to learn that I had and I got myself out of there too.

Yes, back outside, I thought to check out the restaurant again because it dawned on me that the timing of Mintz’s departure was too coincidental and that maybe the real mistake I’d made was to believe that I’d made a mistake and that it *had* been Maryellen sitting there—and waiting to meet that “*cute old man.*” But too weak at this point to make the effort and the pain in my tooth, which I’d been oblivious to during my misadventure, now back with such vengeance that I had to hold my jaw in the palm of my hand, the best I could do was hope that the cook had hepatitis.

It was right about then, I think, that the commander of my immune system yelled something like “*Every antibody for itself!*” and took off through the nearest orifice. Now I have only the dimmest recollection of making it to my apartment (some fifty blocks on foot). And I don’t remember what I did when I got there; I think I passed dead away, and without a single drink or pill. But I do recall that in the middle of the evening I awoke with a searing pain behind my eyes and with a fever of approximately the temperature in my apartment, which had to have been in the hundreds. The abscess, it turned out, had migrated to my brain and, dispatching me directly to the ICU, the doctors told me later that they were all but sure they were going to “lose” me.

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When I got out of the hospital it was already fall and, to go with an exhilarating briskness in the air, most everything had changed dramatically. For openers: Although I was minus two teeth (which for a reason I’ll get to I opted not to replace), my jaw was back to normal, my nose and throat were clear and dry, my forehead had stopped bleeding and I owned a new pair of contact lenses.

Of utmost importance though was the recognition that I was in the god’s good graces, that while they’d punished me severely for my despicable behavior, they’d deemed me *worthy of living!*

With this knowledge I felt relaxed for the one and only time in memory. By weathering all that I had and then surviving it, I felt that I’d atoned not only for what happened with Debbie, but also—it was uncanny—for the capital crime I’d presumably committed prior to my birth. They’d become, in the flush of elation that my brush with and triumph over death had yielded, one and the same.

Well, almost one and the same. To be precise, I still knew, of course, that I would croak someday. But with the reprieve I’d received, the concern that my demise might be imminent, or that a ghastly afterlife awaited me, became remote. *These* burdens had miraculously lifted.

My pacing as well as my heavy drinking were now in the past, but I was still prone to ruminate (it was my nature), and I wondered if the answer to the confounding puzzle of what I’d done with Debbie hadn’t been there to see all along. Did I maybe, in some convoluted manner, set the whole thing up? Was my problem with mortality even more untenable than I’d realized and that, in desperation, and as risky as the challenge to the gods may have been, I’d concocted a chance to experience a sense of near ultimate absolution? Was it possible that I’d subconsciously seized upon the concurrence of a bitch in heat and a random erection to commit a crime that was sufficiently appalling to make it, in my mind, equal to my primal crime but, at the same time, a crime that was pardonable?

Had I fucked a dog to achieve something akin to my redemption?

With these thoughts—and because I

realized that what I'd fundamentally wanted from the beginning was what I got—came other thoughts. Had the transcendent moment with Maryellen on the Italian festival evening merely qualified her to be the personification of an objective that was far deeper than simply winning her back? Was securing her forgiveness, that is, really about *her* any more than the repulsion she'd expressed when she came upon Debbie and me had been specifically about *her* personal reaction? Or had I made of her, in both instances, a surrogate for the gods? If so, I didn't require a proxy now.

I don't want to leave the impression that I was completely okay. Bouts of loneliness were frequent. I also, from time to time, continued to experience spasms of shame and self-contempt. When that happened, though, I would run my tongue into the hollow my extracted teeth had left. This little ritual would remind me of the price I'd paid for what I'd done and it did much to restore my equilibrium.

And, to be sure, I still had no idea what the future held for me or what to do next. (I had the same job—thank you, Mr. Mintz, I guess.)

But I knew that I had a future.

Then, from a block away one afternoon, but for certain this time, I saw Maryellen. She was arm-in-arm with a guy who was a ringer for Richard Nixon and, for some reason, it made me think of a photo she'd shown me of her boyfriend before me who'd had a pronounced unibrow. Although the sighting made my blood jump I didn't follow her. ❖

"Moving On"

by Harlan Yarbrough

Ynge walked into the bedroom and noticed Alex lying on his stomach. She felt sure she'd placed him on his back before she'd gone into the kitchen ten minutes earlier. She walked into her daughter's room and said, "Aleisha, did you move Alex?"

"No, Mum, I haven't been away from my desk for an hour or more. Is he OK?" Aleisha said, as she paused and looked up from her schoolwork.

Ynge had expected that answer but still felt a little surprised, and also pleased. "Yes, he's OK. He must have turned over by himself."

"Cool," Aleisha replied, turning back to her schoolwork, as her mother headed back to the bigger bedroom to cuddle Alex.

Both of Ynge's daughters were early achievers, ahead of their age cohorts at every point. In seven months, Aleisha would leave home and matriculate at the nation's top university at the age of sixteen. Alex developed at a more relaxed pace, having just learned to turn himself over at not quite nine months. Aleisha and her sister had turned themselves over in both directions at five months and four months, respectively, and been sitting up by themselves within a week or two after that achievement. Ynge sometimes worried about the delay with Alex and would like to have shared the reassuring news with Adam, but Adam wasn't home.

He'd gone into town mid-morning, and here it was mid-afternoon and no word from him. Ynge hoped he hadn't wrecked his car again or been arrested or something. She'd had to bail him out once before and had to pick him up another time and have her elder daughter drive his car home, when the police wouldn't let him drive because his license wasn't valid. Ynge hoped she wouldn't have to go pick Adam up somewhere today.

Betina, the older daughter, laughed

about Adam's not having a full license at the age of forty-four, because she obtained her full license at sixteen—and Adam had, after all, been driving for six years on a series of sometimes expired Learner's Permits. Rod, Ynge's ex-husband, also thought Adam's vehicular peccadillos and predicaments a sign of Ynge's boyfriend's general ineptitude. That isn't fair, Ynge often thought. Adam grew up in a place where people didn't need cars. She did, too, but earned her first license, with Rod's tutelage, at twenty-two and her full license before she turned thirty.

Rod—Roderick, but everyone called him Rod—also jeered at Adam's calling her his Viking maiden because of her Swedish family and birth. "What an ignorant clod!" Rod said, after Ynge and Adam were already living together. "You gave birth to Betina two decades ago. Ynge, dear, you haven't been a maiden for twenty years. You're still beautiful, and I still love you, but you are not a maiden."

Ynge had thought Adam's expression sweet and romantic, but Rod said, "Ignorance isn't romantic." He was jealous of her relationship with Adam. He was right, too, of course, but Ynge didn't care about that. Rod was so intelligent and so careful, he was almost always right. Ynge got tired of that and found Adam's limitations sort of appealing.

Thinking about those subjects didn't distract Ynge from worrying about Adam. Neither did cuddling Alex, although her nursing him made both of them feel better. After he fell asleep, his mother lay beside him and worried about his father's absence. Ynge and Adam's relationship now stretched back four years, and Ynge felt uncomfortably aware that was longer than he'd been with any of his previous six partners.

She wondered if Adam was thinking about moving to the city or maybe back to his roots in Dorset. The possibility didn't bother her as much as it should. As

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much as it should? she caught herself thinking. What does that mean? She decided she meant as much as I would have expected. Ynge no longer experienced the glow of joy and excitement that made her feel so good in her first three years with Adam. The black dog she thought she had left behind through her years of counselling and medication and psychiatric treatment seemed to have caught up with her after all.

Ynge didn't want to give up on the relationship, especially now that they had Alex, but she often found her motivation flagging. Sometimes nothing, except taking care of the baby, seemed worth doing, and sometimes motherhood didn't either. She knew those feelings all too well, had lived with them off and on for thirty years, but felt she had tried every solution and didn't know what else she could do.

The girls and Rod were right about Adam's ineptitude. He had always worked in unskilled jobs all his life, because he possessed no skills. He was ignorant, but not about everything. His knowledge of butterflies amazed her and even impressed Rod. Ynge had thought at first that Adam could have enjoyed a career as a lepidopterist, a butterfly specialist on a university faculty, but he had barely finished high school. As she got to know him better, she recognized he could never have earned an advanced degree and maybe not even a Bachelor's. His ignorance didn't matter, maybe even made him more attractive: he needed someone to take care of him, and that someone was Ynge.

Rod had taken care of Ynge, had cosseted her for twenty-five years. He provided not only everything she needed but everything she requested. He had been an exceptional provider and a great dad to the girls and had often bought Ynge beautiful gifts, for special occasions and also just because she liked them and he liked to please her. When she met Adam, Ynge realized she had been taken care of by someone else her entire life. Now, it was her turn to take care of someone, and, of course, that someone was Adam.

He needed her, and she needed that. Rod didn't need her—he was always so

strong, so capable—but Adam did. She liked that in the early days of their relationship. Even now, more than four years after they first began seeing each other clandestinely, she enjoyed that Adam needed her. Ynge was no longer in love with him, she supposed, but she loved him and liked feeling needed.

That was one of the main reasons she liked having babies: she felt needed. The other side of that coin presented itself as the girls grew older—they didn't need her as much, and she resented that. Even the attacks of the black dog could almost never keep her from living the role of devoted mother in the girls' first eight or nine years. She had threatened to drown Betina in the river, but that was just to upset Rod. Ynge would never have drowned a two-year-old; a teenager, that's another matter.

So far, she had kept the black dog under control in that respect. She had hit Rod many times but rarely hit the girls. Ynge hadn't felt happy in her relationship with Rod—but, then, she hadn't felt happy in any relationship with anyone, until she met Adam. Her first couple of years with Adam was the happiest period of her life, as she looked back over what now added up to forty-five years. She had naively assumed that golden glow would last forever—Maybe everyone who's in love believes that, she now thought.

When Ynge got involved with Adam, she told Rod she needed to "move on" in her life. Rod, who professed and seemed to be still in love with Ynge, said, "Yes, that's fine, but I would like you to move on with me." She didn't, of course, but now she wondered if Adam was thinking of moving on. Particularly now that they had Alex, she didn't want Adam to move on. She wanted him to stay and help her raise their son. If he were home, she would have discussed that with him—Rod had taught her how to discuss concerns in a relationship—but Adam was not home.

What if Adam decided to move to the city to find a job? That might become necessary sooner rather than later: he had worn out the patience of most of the employers in their remote rural community, and the welfare checks he received

because of an injury a few years earlier must soon come to an end. Will I move to the city with him? Would he want me to? Ynge asked herself several times a week. Would I want to? And then she wondered, what if he returns to England? Will I go with him? Do I even want to? Does he even want me to? She had no answers to those questions and didn't like to think about them. Thinking about them depressed her—but, then, everything depressed her.

The girls' rejection of Adam depressed her. Alex's grizzling, when he was teething, depressed her. Betina's decision not to matriculate at a university depressed Ynge. Aleisha's obsessive attention to schoolwork depressed Ynge. Adam's penchant for watching science-fiction movies on TV depressed her. The constant need for maintenance and repairs on the house she'd bought with her half of the proceeds from the property she and Rod had owned depressed her. Any ill-health among her dozens of chickens depressed her. Not hearing from her father depressed her. Hearing from her father depressed her.

Betina's break-ups with her boyfriend, Dale, depressed Ynge. Betina's reconciliations with Dale depressed Ynge. Watching television with Adam depressed her. Adam's watching television without her depressed Ynge. Having to get repairs or maintenance done on the car Rod had let her use for almost two years—even though he owned half of it—depressed her. Any slight illness in Alex triggered her anxiety, which depressed her. Sometimes the thought that she would have to take care of him for the next eighteen years depressed her. Was there anything that did not depress her? That was not a question Ynge asked herself, nor could she have answered it if she did ask.

What the doctors and other health professionals called "co-morbid anxiety" left Ynge unable to do even simple, basic everyday tasks for a few days every two or three months. She could barely nurse Alex at those times, because she feared she might accidentally smother him. She felt too uneasy to go anywhere to run errands or shop. Rod always used to take

care of things in those periods. Now, Adam did, although not as well—but well enough, Ynge reminded herself.

The sound of a car coming up the drive roused Ynge, but it turned out to be Dale coming to see Betina after his day's work as a mechanic at a garage in town. That suggested businesses were closing for the day - how did it get that late? - and so Adam should be home soon. That made Ynge worry anew and hope he wasn't lying bleeding in a ditch somewhere. Or seeing another woman?

A few minutes later, the sound of another car heralded the return of Alex's father. As Adam walked into the kitchen carrying a plastic bag containing some of his day's purchases, Ynge said, "I'm glad you're home. I've been worrying about you."

"Oh, I'm OK. I'm glad to come home to my Viking maiden," he said, as he gave her a peck on the cheek.

Ynge wanted to feel good about Adam's affectionate greeting but found herself feeling depressed that it displayed embarrassing ignorance. She cursed Rod in her thoughts for telling her about that.

Aleisha and Dale helped Ynge and Adam carry everything into the house from Adam's RAV4. Alex conveniently fell asleep, and Aleisha helped her mother put dinner on the table. Once the four residents plus Dale consumed the dinner, Betina and Dale washed the dishes, while Aleisha returned to her schoolwork and Ynge and Adam retired to the living room. Knowing she was quoting Rod's tactful questions of almost four years earlier and hating that, Ynge said, "It seems like you've been away a lot these past few weeks. Is there anything we need to talk about? Anything you want to tell me?"

Adam didn't look at Ynge but said, "No, not really."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, I was thinking I might need to move to the city in order to find a job."

"You said 'I' not 'we'," Ynge pointed out. "Did you intend to move by yourself, or did you mean all of us?"

"Well, finding housing for all of us will be harder than finding a place for just me." Adam paused briefly and continued, "But of course I want to take my

Viking maiden, too."

"And your son."

"Yes, of course, and my son."

"Do you need to find a job first, or do we need to find a house first?"

"Ummm...yes, well, that's a good question," Adam said, but didn't seem to know the answer or have much interest in discussing either the question or the answer. Ynge had boiled the kettle, so Adam went into the kitchen and busied himself making a cup of coffee. Ynge made an attempt to resume the conversation but found herself competing with the television for Adam's attention and gave up.

The next morning, Adam again headed into town. Aleisha needed to go into town for her weekly meeting with her Correspondence School teachers, so Betina took her sister to the library and its meeting rooms before running errands of her own. When Betina picked Aleisha up later to take her to the Zumba class they both attended, Betina said, "I have something to show you." They cruised down the main street, and Betina pointed toward a café and said, "Look over there."

What Aleisha saw didn't surprise her, but it left her having to work harder at listening to their Zumba instructor. Instead of stopping at the beach after Zumba as they'd planned, the girls went straight home to have a talk with their mother. That brought immediate repercussions and other fallout later, after Adam came home. Betina remained in her room and did not join the others for dinner, and Aleisha retired to her own room to do schoolwork as soon as she had carried her plate to the sink. Adam and Ynge washed and dried the dishes and settled on the sofa as they had the previous evening.

"A couple of people said they saw you in a café in town with another woman," Ynge said. Enough ill-will existed in the household already, that she refrained from mentioning that the couple of people were her daughters. The girls' revelation had already created one major scene. After they told their mother what they had seen, Betina said, "I guess you could say it serves you right."

Ynge swore at Betina and slapped her hard across the face. Betina bunched up her fists but then ran into her room and wept. Meanwhile, Ynge rounded on Aleisha and yelled, "I suppose you think the same thing."

Aleisha rarely raised her voice to anyone and almost never to her mother. This occasion proved an exception, as Aleisha screamed in her mother's face, "Don't you go attacking me. I didn't say anything." She drew a sobbing breath and said, "You attack Betina, you attacked Dad all those years. You have no excuse for attacking me," then burst into tears and ran to her room.

After all that anxiety-provoking drama, Ynge didn't want even to think about the girls, so she didn't mention their role. She didn't have to figure out a way to avoid the subject, because Adam didn't ask "Which people?" He sat quietly for a minute or two and then said, "Oh, I just took that Tracey from the auto parts store for a cup of tea. I couldn't find the right headlight bulb to replace that one that's only high beam, and she helped me find it. I thought I should do something for her."

Ynge at first felt glad Adam was honest enough not to deny he'd taken another woman out for tea. Or maybe he just isn't intelligent enough to concoct a story, she then thought and fought back tears. Keeping her voice steady, she said, "So you aren't planning to see her again?"

Adam took a moment to reply. "Oh, I suppose I'll see her whenever I need something from the auto parts store." His voice trailed off as he said, "But not otherwise."

Prone to panic attacks for more than two decades, Ynge felt rather proud of herself that she experienced only minimal anxiety over Adam's behaviour. Rod had already suggested he was willing to raise Alex, so Ynge felt some sense of security. She could always go back to Rod, and he would take care of her.

Unless he had found someone new in the past few days, Rod would take her back in an instant. Ynge knew that, knew he loved her that much. But that would require an apology—she couldn't just say,

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"I want you to move back in with me and the girls." That would be outrageous, and even Rod would see that.

Wouldn't he?

Apologies did not come easily to Ynge's lips, never had. Apologizing made her feel worthless, so she rarely apologized to anyone about anything.

For all her psycho-emotional problems, Ynge was not stupid, quite the contrary. She possessed the intelligence to see, now, that Adam would not remain in her life much longer. She began thinking about what to say and steeling herself to make an apology. Sometimes she thought, But I wasn't happy with Rod. Moments later, she thought, But I haven't been happy with anyone. Another moment, and she thought, Except Adam. Then, again, she thought, But look where that brought you. And around and around.

After three weeks of her diminished—indeed, almost non-existent—relationship with Adam, Ynge decided she could live with Rod's taking care of her and his intimidating intelligence. It isn't his fault he's smarter than everybody else, she thought. Ynge rang her husband—they hadn't yet obtained a divorce because of the expense—and invited him over for a visit. He hesitated, and she assured him that Adam would not be present.

"Have you thrown him out?" Rod asked.

"Not exactly," Ynge replied, "but I'm thinking about it."

Several minutes of discussion convinced Rod to visit, and Ynge felt a renewed confidence that he would provide for her as he had already done for two decades. She even found herself hoping Alex would fall asleep and she could lure Rod into bed—he was a much better lover than Adam. Despite Ynge's own anxiety-related issues about sexual relations, the thought produced an unexpected arousal.

When Rod arrived, Ynge greeted him with a hug and a kiss he obviously hadn't expected. He held her in a tight embrace, as he had always done at every opportunity, and that, too, reinforced Ynge's confidence. She led him to the sofa and got

them seated side-by-side. Ynge wished she could give Rod a glass of fruit juice, because she knew he liked that, but finances meant she didn't have juice on hand as they always had when they were together.

Ynge took Rod's right hand in her left and stroked his arm with her right hand, as she made a halting apology at once forced and sincere. She followed that with, "I'd really like us to be together, and it would be so good for the girls. Please, will you move in here with us?"

Rod extracted his right hand and slid it behind Ynge's back, as he twisted his torso and put his left arm around her right shoulder. He pulled her to him and held her close while saying, "Oh, Ynge! Oh, Ynge!" over and over. With his head resting on hers, he said, "You know that's what I've wanted for the past three years."

"And now we can," she said, as she ran her fingertips down his jaw and his neck and across his chest.

"The thing is," Rod said, "I've invited someone to come and stay with me, and I have to drive to the city and pick her up at the airport day-after-tomorrow. Oh, Ynge! I—"

Ynge felt a chill run through her. Marshalling her strength, she kept her voice steady and asked, "Who is this someone?"

"A woman I met, those couple years I was in Asia," Rod replied. "Tandin, her name is. Oh, Ynge dear, I do want to be with you, and I don't want to hurt you or disappoint you."

"That is so tacky. Go off to Thailand and find some Asian sweetie who's desperate to escape the Third World poverty. Y—"

In his way that always increased Ynge's fury, Rod remained the voice of reason as he said, "It wasn't Thailand and, anyway, she's never known poverty. Her family is prosperous. They..."

Recognizing that anger would not draw Rod closer to her, Ynge changed her tack and sweetened her tone, wishing she had done that sooner. "So," she began, as she again trailed her fingertips along the side of Rod's face, "would you rather be with her than me."

"No," Rod said with no hesitation. "At least, I don't think so. I love you, and somehow I'm still in love with you, so I want to be with you. I want that all the time."

"Then why d—"

"It's just that, if I get back together with you, I'll probably find myself abandoned and heartbroken again, and I couldn't endure that. We might be together for a while, but you might fall in love with someone else next month or next year. I couldn't stand that again."

"Rod darling," Ynge said, "that has to be the stupidest thing I've ever done in my life. I made a horrible mistake, and I hurt you—who deserved that less than any man in the world. I told you I'm sorry, and I meant it." Pausing for a deep breath, she continued with some sincerity, "I did a dumb thing, a bad thing, but I have learned my lesson."

Rod said, "Oh!" in a drawn-out way that sounded like a moan, as Ynge continued, "I would never, ever do that to you again." She kissed him, then took a breath before resuming, "Please come get in bed with me," as she trailed her fingers along his thigh. ❖

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.

I've learned to not trust my handwriting when I wake up with a good idea fed to me by my unconscious mind. I must turn the lock of awakening one more notch and pick up my phone and speak into the notes app I've loaded and say the key-words that will permit me to find the storyline or character-development provided in the night.

This comes with its own set of hurdles, of course. "What did you say?" asks my sleepy partner. "Nothing." I whisper, and my phone dutifully records that conversation along with "salamanders invade but look like humans" which makes some sort of twisted sense but gives me no starting point this morning at the keyboard.

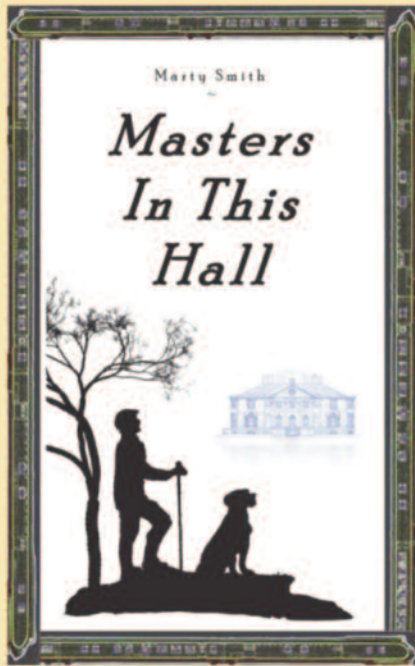
— CBL - cyberspace

Contributors

Robert Levin is the author of "When Pacino's Hot, I'm Hot, a Miscellany of Stories and Commentary" (The Drill Press) and "Against Mental Health: Short Stories" (Cyberwit). He is also the coauthor and coeditor, respectively, of two collections of essays about rock and jazz in the '60s: "Music & Politics" (World Publishing) and "Giants of Black Music" (Da Capo Press). His fiction and essays have appeared in numerous print and online journals, including Rolling Stone and The Village Voice.

Educated as a scientist, graduated as a mathematician, **Harlan Yarbrough** has been a full-time professional entertainer most of his life, including a stint as a regular performer on the prestigious Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee. Harlan's repeated attempts to escape the entertainment industry brought work as a librarian, physics teacher, syndicated newspaper columnist, and city planner, among other occupations. Harlan lives, writes, and continues to improve his dzonkha vocabulary and pronunciation in Bhutan but visits the US and Europe to perform and recharge his bank account. He has written four novels, three novellas, three novelettes (two published), and forty-some short stories, of which twenty-four have been published in six countries. His work has appeared in the *Galway Review*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Red Fez*, *Veronica*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, and many other literary journals and has won the Fair Australia Prize.

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