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magazine

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“Inspo”

I don't know about you, but when certain things happen, I am intrigued and want to know more about them. Like “inspiration dreams.” Why do they happen to me, and how can I get them to happen more often? Am I doing something special? Do they happen to others? Am I depending on them to get over inertia. Am I misdefining inertia? So many questions...

An inspiration dream, for a writer, is that slightly fantastic moment when you aren't sure – can't really believe – that something so wonderful and clear and competent has happened during your sleep that you should get out of bed and go and scribble down as quickly as possible what you just experienced. Sure, you're tired and a bit addled. Sure, sure, it is also possible that this will actually make sense, be something, in the morning when you look at it again, however the only writing implement close to hand is a pink highlighter, so there will be a fair bit of decryption involved. *Stay down*, says your internal Mickey to your Rocky. You've been knocked around too many times. *Watch that bum eye, kid*.

Here's what it's like to have a complete, or seemingly nearly so, work-in-progress pop into your skull: exhilarating, frustrating, furiously curious and enlightening. All at once. Like a Long Island Ice-Tea, if you know what I mean. The bartender doesn't care how many you consume. Pace yourself and tip your waitress. What could possibly go wrong?

Like you, I'm often tired at night, when I'm in bed. I get up anyway. Wander carefully downstairs. Try to not stub my toe on the full laundry basket parked in the dark hallway like Sam Spade with his gat in hand. I begin typing, trying to recapture as much of the dream feed as possible – characters, mood, plot, time-and-place, any punchlines to jokes, just in case they were actually new and funny.

Don't settle for jotting down keywords. Write what you saw. Where did it happen? Who was there and what they looked like.

Dialogue is key, as we all know. I try and recapture any dialogue I can. What were people saying and why were they saying it? If it's done correctly, dialogue between characters moves the plot along, maintains pacing. In a dream, it is often gibberish. A sci-fi fantasy with dragons fighting Martians turns into your sophomore year Geometry teacher asking you why you don't know side-side-angle-side. Or is it sine, sine,

cosine, sine? I don't know. This is a terrific way to determine if you're down a rabbit hole. Or a sign-sign you're even cogent, sigh.

Go back to bed when you find that you've forgotten more than you remember. Dreams are like that, ephemeral, flighty, mysterious. Don't forget to save your document, for god's sake. Somewhere you can find it again. No, not in the old tax documents. Yes, in your porn stash. Whatever.

Set your expectations low, early and often; that's my advice. You're a writer and you know as well as I do that the very word that describes us should be a reverse-homonym. We are, mostly, wrongers. Entire pages of programming code exist to keep us from poor spelling. Editors exist – or at least used to – to fix our shit. Writing is the baseball of art forms, where hitting the ball at all, even foul, counts for . . . something.

So get up. Grab your reading glasses. And put your slippers on, I beg you.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

Or you can go with this...

“I Got Gassed at Auschwitz - conclusion”

by Chris Jansen

Block 11 is dark, narrow, and thick-walled, like being inside a submarine. Lydia describes how the cells were used for isolation and torture. There was even a makeshift gas chamber in the basement. I feel trapped and I break off the group to get out into the “courtyard of death” again. At least there’s some light there.

I hang out at the execution wall. There must be an ocean of blood under my feet. What does earth know? Ehh, it’s just my fanciful poet mind trying to make sense of things. Nada y nada. People did a thing.

Lydia appears from the dark doorway with the tour in tow. They spill out into the courtyard. Everyone looks relieved to be out of Block 11, a mini-liberation.

Barely a pause at the Wall of Death and Lydia is off, her little legs pumping like a duck moving upstream. I keep losing sight of the group as they gallop after her. Of course our time is limited and we have to keep on schedule, but I keep stopping before things. I touch the gravel on the pathway. I stare at the highly stylized Gothic lettering on the buildings. What can it mean? It occurs to me I don’t want information. I know most of what she tells us from my research. I don’t want a tour; I want a feel. A think. A mean. God give me understanding. Even just a little.

I see my group far ahead,

winding their back toward where we came in.

“And this is the gallows where the cah. cah. cah. Where the CAMPCOMMANDANTWASHANGED.”

Everyone is bunched up around a grassy hill that reminds me of an Indian mound back home. But this mound has a concrete door and one by one people are disappearing into it.

Lydia must already be inside because I’m hearing nothing. Single-file line. One at a time. Inside, underground, one large room with smooth walls like being in an enormous bathtub. This is...? Into a smaller dungeon where four large people-shaped brick ovens stand. The crematorium...so the other was...the gas chamber. I push back through the line to go inside. Touch the walls. It must have been so dark and terrifying in here. Dark and close, barely able to breathe. More pushing in. This is death, the definer. God. The limit of life. Feel it. Think. What can you believe from inside this green tomb?

And then we are out again. I would say “into the sun” but the sun was only out for about ten minutes and it is in full retreat now. Dirty slush-grey clouds moving in from all directions.

We leave through the main gate, beneath the ARBEIT metal arm, drop off our headsets and rally

at the idling mini-bus for the trip to Birkenau. I recall the prisoners were made to walk. If they couldn’t walk they were loaded in a dump truck and dumped off at the gas chamber like trash.

A few minutes later we are pulling into another parking lot. There’s nothing here though. No fine dining. No snack bar. No gift shop...er, bookstore. We stream off the bus, chasing Lydia who is already headed toward what looks like a railway station. Oh...wait, it’s that railway station. That squat brick demon with tracks disappearing into its belly... Moloch. This is Moloch of old.

Lydia pauses just inside the depot.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are standing at the entrance to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Now you will see why prisoners called Auschwitz a 5-star hotel compared to this camp.”

Only late afternoon and it’s become so dark. The grey sky is being obscured by sinister white bubble-shaped clouds, and the temperature is dropping rapidly.

We walk through the wide archway. Inside there is nothing. A vast grey scene that stretches out in all directions, with many small brick chimneys like a denuded forest. There is nothing, nothing as far as you can see. In a study in inadequacy. Couple of long wooden shacks. Skinny barbed

wire, slim chimney, vanishing wood. Thinner, thinner. This story is about vanishing.

Oh, now I get it—Auschwitz was a work camp. Arbeit-lager. This is an extermination camp. Vernichtung-lager. It means “annihilation”.

The only solidity left here is the train tracks which divide the camp and terminate a short distance ahead at some concrete rubble that looks like a bombed-out swimming pool. There is no pretense of charm, no buildings like Auschwitz I, no care. No care!

“The camp has been l- l- luh LEFTASITWAS when it was liberated,” says Lydia. “Most of the barracks have rotted away.”

It goes on as far as you can see in every direction. Flat and dark and barren as if every beautiful, cared-for thing had been obliterated from the earth.

“The only difference is that these fields would have been mud as there was n- n- n- n- NOGRASSHERE.”

Why was there no grass? I ask. It seems gratuitously horrible.

“Because the prisoners ate it.”

As Lydia explains how the “selection” took place here, I catch the eye of my Dutch friends. Mom the hospice nurse is looking at me with pained eyes and an apologetic smile, as if to say, I’m trying to be a good person. I wouldn’t do this to you. You wouldn’t do this to me. We must find a way to be kinder.

“You see how the tracks end here. The boxcars would unload and the SS man would point to the left or to the right. If he points to

the right you go to these barracks to be worked to death. If he points left you walk the rest of this path, which was called H- H- H- HIMMELLSTRASSE. That is, the “road to heaven”.

Swipe right you are worked to death. Swipe left you die right away. I think of a joke but I don’t say it. I just lower my head and go.

We walk the Himmelstrasse. On the way, Lydia points out the women’s section on the opposite side of the tracks.

“Many people assume the female guards would be more compassionate than the males but this is not true. In fact, one of the most notorious guards was a woman called the Buh The Buh The Buh The BEAUTIFULBEASTOFBIRKENAU. She was famous for her cruelty.”

The sun is all but gone and there are no lights. It’s only a little after 5, but because of the way they do time zones here it’s “really” closer to 8. Darkness sucks every dab of color from our little group and we are now a spectral gray mass, indistinguishable, walking the final way. A short walk and we are standing before the ruins of the largest death factory in human history. It is mostly concrete rubble in the ground, having been blown up by the Nazis when it was clear the Allies were coming. The only thing left are a few concrete steps going down into the ruins.

Standing there before the cold horror of it all I have an idea.

Isn’t euthanasia legal in Europe? And according to the media there are Nazis around every

corner. It would be easy. I could pay a Nazi, a real Nazi, to euthanize me here. We could sneak in at night and do it. Oh the sweetness of this. That way my death would be inconsequential. Upwards of 2 million people killed in this very spot, so how could 2 million + 1 matter? And then my story would be commingled with that of the victims; not the same but commingled. I would be safe, part of history, the last victim, and if there is such a thing as a soul surely mine would fly to the bosom of Abraham and I would be with the Jews and I would never be lonely again.

It’s a good idea. Too bad I have commitments. Miles to go before the Himmelstrasse. Goddammit.

Ladies and gentlemen, this concludes our tour. We stand for a while in the midnight darkness on the lip of that hole that was the undressing room, bad und disinfection. I’m still trying to think my way to a conclusion, but there is nothing to think. It is just very sad.

On the way back to the bus we pass under the rail station again. It is even more terrifying in the sickly yellow security light.

What do I feel now? Who cares. It’s what I think: numbers. The mechanization of death tuned for maximum efficiency. Numbers. The piles of suitcases, the jagged mouths of empty Zyklon B canisters, the shoes, glasses. No personhood, only numbers. They kept meticulous records of everything. But why? There’s that “care” again that was strange. How

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could you care SO much about a stove and not care at all about a little girl holding her mother's hand? There were Nazis who played Mozart and Bach. One historian said they knew philosophy, the leadership did. They could all quote the categorical imperative. And yet they applied such scholarship to murder.

Reason, reason. The tyranny of reason. The terror of Father. In the searchlight on the tower. From the carefully laid brick of Auschwitz to the barren field of Birkenau with its vacant chimney-marked cells like a blank spreadsheet.

Thought-sick, number-drunk reason like an insane mathematician.

I'm glad to be back on the bus. It seems our group has gotten mixed in with another and there are new people on the bus and my Dutch friends are elsewhere. A group of Irish chavs in identical Canada Goose (\$\$\$\$) coats get on. It's a long ride back to mother Krakow through the dark country.

From the darkness behind me I hear rap music, then laughter, then dance music, then drums, then a robot voice... someone is scrolling through TikTok. That's really gross. This should be a time for somber reflection.

"Doon doubt me, boyos, when we's gettin in ahm headed for the club w' that vodka. Gonna give it to that barmaid. Manky whore, put it right in her arse."

Grunts of approval from the others. This must be their leader.

"Feckin hell, lads, you got muh vodka, Noah? Ahl be fookin 'her

right well this evening."

He goes on loudly broadcasting the plans for this evening and the toadies go on grunting.

Wherever I've been in the world, I have seen how unpartnered young men in groups are very dangerous.

This is more than offensive or vaguely threatening though, it's bizarre. The process for getting a ticket was sort of cumbersome, not something you do on a whim. So why would a bunch of young guys travel to dark, cold Krakow, jump through the bureaucratic hoops and commit to the long, boring rides, the lines, the walking and listening? Why bother? Were they forced to go, as part of study abroad thing? Did their parents make them go as a deal to buy them the 800 dollar coats they're wearing?

And after what we've seen how can anyone do anything but be quiet and reflective?

"Feckin hell, boyos, when ah get that vodka ahl be giving it them all, those manky whores."

If this was a movie, you would never write this scene as the end because people wouldn't believe it. You would have this at the beginning and then as the tour progresses the rough, loud boys would become humbled and by the end they would have learned something so when someone piped up on the way home the leader would say shoot yuh feckin mouth and 'ave some respect.

But that's the movies. Here in reality they are monsters, and the

cruellest, loudest, most willing to employ violence is the leader; and the women here, the young pretty girls, instead of being a moderating influence and the voice of conscience are brought into estrus by the aggression, dripping at the thrill of each malignancy and whispering to each other, "There's something about him. He's just so interesting."

I want them to die. I want to murder them, cleanse the earth of monsters.

So what should I do? Should I tell this guy to shut up?

Then what? When we disembark he and his drooggies will beat me up. Maybe kill me. All to the prancing, cheering applause of the women.

It's just evolution. No reason to get upset. Still, this world is fucked. AA tells me to pray for people like this. But I don't want to pray. I want to turn them into smoke and ash. I want send them to the left and cleanse the earth of murderers in the only way that works. Final Solution. I do want that, lust after it. Because I am made of darkness too.

They finally exhaust their vocabulary of vodka and whores and quiet down, and we rumble along through the night for a long time.

It's been another exhausting day of traveling and I can't wait to get home to Gosha's place, her warm kitchen. I want to "sit still" as she said, and watch her go silently between the table and the stove, beautiful, effortlessly graceful in her dress and her apron, making

dinner.

I don't make it to Gosha's in time for dinner, so I wind up walking the streets a bit, tired. I follow a little path under a dark stone archway that terminates in a small restaurant ensconced in the corner of one of those medieval edifices. A young man appears and seats me with elegant formality. The menu is in Polish, but I'm so hungry, I just point to something that contains the phrase "filet mignon" and hope it doesn't break the bank. I wind up having possibly the best meal of my life, though I have no idea what the sauces and appetizer were (some kind of non-sweet cheesecake) and the whole thing was about 15 bucks.

I will sleep well and dream I am in back in my old house with a strange woman sleeping next to me. In the morning I will sit still as Gosha prepares eggs and ham, toast and pastries. Burgundy dress. White apron.

That afternoon I will go down to the city center for a tour of Oskar Schindler's factory. I will see the pots and pans stacked floor to ceiling like those empty canisters of Zyklon B. His desk. His map of Europe with supply lines.

I will be surprised to learn that the interior of his factory has become the Krakow Museum of Modern Art, and I will go there and find it lovely, expansive, full of wonderful works of art.

Remember I told you about the sign advertising a piano recital? Tonight I will go there and be greeted with a slight bow by an elderly polish gentleman, who, with old-world formality reminiscent of

the waiter, seats me in an 18th century drawing room with a few other people, including some Italian tourists which you can always tell because the men are old and homely and the women are younger, black-haired and thin and wear skin tight leather pants with stiletto heels.

In a few minutes a very young man will rush into the room, hang his coat in the closet and be introduced by the elderly gentleman as the performer.

He will play 10 pieces by Chopin from memory, his face quite expressionless until the middle of Opus 28, number 4, when he will suddenly begin weeping.

At the conclusion of the recital, as we gratefully, joyously applaud he will stand, bow, and run away into the closet again and that's the last we'll see him.

In the morning I get up early and make coffee. I hate that I won't have time for a last breakfast with Gosha but I have to get going in time to get to the airport and take yet another stupid ass Covid test (I secretly hope it's positive and I can just stay at Gosha's place indefinitely).

I go down to check out and she is already there unshelling her parka: a long green dress with wisps of diaphanous black nylon. Dark gray and misty outside the big window but her golden hair and smile and radiant intelligence are like a portable sun.

I settle the bill, painless.

As I'm re-shouldering the rock she says "I am sorry we did not have snow for you, but maybe you

can come in summer? It is very nice then."

"I'm sure I'll be back someday. It was truly wonderful."

And wherever the Goshas of the world go, it is always summer.

*

Taking off through rainy gray fog, just like I arrived. At least the weather was suitably grim. There's the old control tower and hangar. Poor Poland. A noble country but held hostage between east and west like a child with two crazy warring parents. A short hop and I'll be in Amsterdam. 23 hours of layover, but I've got it planned like D-day. From the train station to the Rijkmuseum to the Anne Frank house and then back to my micro-hotel which according to the map is only a short walk from the station in the center of the city.

I get an alert on my phone: "new variant sends Amsterdam back into lockdown." FUCK.

*

Descending into clouds and mist again. Is the weather ever good in northern Europe? No wonder Hamlet went nuts.

I summit the last steps of the train station with the anchor on my back threatening to tilt me backwards down the stairs to my doom, out into a misty rain and about 1000 bicycles crisscrossing a busy cobble-stone street. I'm here. Now I need to get there.

The phone tells me to turn slightly left and go forth. Amsterdam! You are a charming, bustling city. And what's this? The clouds part like a curtain and the sun glints off the wet windows of an old church.

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The phone says cross this bridge so I cross the bridge. Small boats bobbing in the canal. There's a row of shops, restaurants. A cannabis cafe. I forgot it's legal here and has been forever. Trudge on, dodging cyclists. Another weed cafe. The clouds are back, curtain closing. I better hurry before it starts raining again. Turn right. Another weed shop. Jesus. The addict in me still feels some excited at the prospect of getting fucked up, but I hate marijuana.

Growing up in Albany you are required to consume cannabis since everyone is hot and miserable and there's nothing else to do. I dutifully smoked all through high school. I bought it, rarely sold it, hid it, celebrated it. Gleefully rolled joints and packed my precious sneak-a-toke pipe.

I hated every second of it. I always felt weird, paranoid, anxious and out of control but I did it because the cool people did and I wanted to be cool and I desperately wanted to change the way I felt. What I really liked was the pre-smoking time. The privacy of it. The secrecy. It's you and me against the world.

Ah, here's the place, my hotel-ish Airbnb. I step inside a cozy lobby and see a gray old man behind the tiny front desk, busily sorting papers. My "host" is supposed to be a young black dude named Feliciano. Definitely not him.

"Can you believe this shit!" he says. "Everything a mess. He leaves it all a mess. Goddamn Feliciano!" I'm not sure if he's talking to me or

God.

"You are Chris."

I am.

"Welcome. I will get your key. It's here some...ach...goddamn you, Feliciano, you little shit!"

As I'm standing there, a tall slim black guy enters hurriedly, giving me a friendly nod and shaking off his umbrella.

"Feliciano! You see this mess!"

"What mess? There is no mess."

The two of them begin bickering in Dutch.

"Vatengehoogen gesen? Huh? Mehurten vies en hoogen!?"

"Gehoogenlurekenmorgen! Voortendgoogengiesen!"

Judging by the level of vitriol between these two I can only assume they are a married couple.

I get the key and head up. By "up" I mean attempting to ascend the steepest twisting dizzying staircase I've ever been on while the boulder threatens to pull me down backwards like a doomed mountaineer.

When I get to the room it's... tiny isn't the right word. NYC hotel rooms are tiny. This place is the size of one of the "punishment" cells at Auschwitz. But I kind of like it. It's clean and functional and the close-ness is comforting in a way, like a weighted blanket.

I had planned to cram a full tour of Amsterdam into my 24 hours here but with new Covid bullshit I've only got less than two hours until lockdown. What am I supposed to do in two hours??? Anne Frank house? Nope. Van Gogh? Nope. Rijkmuseum? Not

even close.

I descend the staircase's rifled barrel again. The older guy is sitting at a table reading a newspaper while Feliciano cleans up the mess that isn't there.

Out on the street and the air is humid and threatening rain again but the sun is still holding on. Where to go? This way, that? I just start walking like I know where I am going. 1 hour 45 now. I have nowhere to go but I better get there quickly. That's life for ya.

I pause by the canal and take a picture. When I get home I will look at it and find how strangely it resembles a Van Gogh painting. Not the scene, but the air, the light on the water. It's odd, uncanny. You might guess it was this kind of scene that inspired the painter but it's more than that, as if visible reality was imitating his style for fun. How could that be? I'm not high, so who knows.

Over the bridge and walk, walk, walk. Who are you, Amsterdam? There's a weed store. Cannabis cafe. Church. Cannabis cafe. I see a sign: "Museum Hours". Well now... "The Museum of Cannabis". Jesus.

Turn the corner. This is pointless. There's no time for anything of substance. What about the infamous "Red Light District"? Those girls who stand in the windows like on HBO's Real Sex back in the day. Not here. I do see some signs like "Red Light Cannabis" but that's it. Turn down a narrow alley and onto another street busy with walkers and bikers. There's a shop dedicated to

gourmet condoms. Who even uses condoms anymore? A pass a “kink shop” with all sort of torture devices in the window. Paddles. Whips. Gas masks. All richly appointed in the customary red and black leather.

Speaking of kink. We need to talk about this. The word has a number of uses now which are mostly wrong. It has come to mean people who are into whips and chains, BDSM, but this is so mainstream it’s hardly kinky. When you have access to multiple clubs in every city that showcase fully furnished dungeons you aren’t all the “kinky.” “Vanilla” is a byword for somebody who likes regular ol Ma-n-Pa sex but this is so rare now it should qualify as kinky. Also, you need to know: all women are kinky. Not actually kinky, but they think of themselves as kinky because they have a sex bag with fuzzy handcuffs and a blindfold. While in actuality, as has been documented in Louise Kaplan’s book “Female Perversions,” only men are kinky, because only men are sexual-spiritual exiles traveling a road that is always night, sniffing panties and electrocuting their urethras in search of God.

Maybe I should consult Google. “Where is Amsterdam’s Red Light District?” The first result helpfully tells me that this is a relic of the past and has been mostly shutdown by the recently elected progressive mayor et al. Oh well. I just have time to get something to eat and head back to my punishment cell in time for lockdown.

Around another corner. Cannabis cafe... then a long gallery of picture windows, floor to ceiling, framed in red neon. But they are empty, except for a lonely chair or just a vacant stall. I bet that’s where the old red light district was. Interesting.

I turn down a narrow alley. Another row of windows, no neon. In the first windows stands a woman with dusky skin and curly blond hair. Big brown cheeks perversely stippled with black freckles. She locks eyes with me, and I recognize the squinty, hateful eyes of certain redneck girls I grew up with. She is naked except for bra and panties and in the flesh-toned lace on her hips hangs a huge, elephantine cock. She winks and kisses the air and beckons to me.

Then an empty window. The next has a very large person who resembles the drag queen Divine.

I keep going. Around the corner, another gallery, like a row of cells. In each cell, a girl. This time they are identical petite blondes. Copy/paste. Naked except black underwear, like a uniform. Some with black stockings. Some without. As I pass, they pose and kiss and pull at the air like fishermen with invisible rods. Come here. You. Yes, you. I love you. Come on!

At the corner I pause and watch another guy with a tourist backpack coming up the street. He breaks up in laughter and smiles as the girls beckon to him. He shakes his head no but keeps smiling and looking back at them.

Hard-eyed saleswomen standing in a window. Not sexy but... intoxicating. That guy with his unconcealable delight, probably happier than he’s been in years. Why? Because it’s easy. For the first time in our male lives, it’s just easy. That river of women, flight attendants from the beginning of this adventure, has been placed by miracle in these windows and they are no longer cold and aloof, uninterested in your existence, or if they happen to take notice, despising it. They are warm and welcoming. They want you, are desperate even, to see you. Touch you. Here about all your adventures, tend your wounds. It’s easy. Like a promise kept by God. Like you knew it would be all along, finally, home.

Only an hour left before the city is locked down. People are scurrying up and down the streets beside the canal. I need to get something to eat before it’s too late. I decide to do one last loop around the window-girl block and pack it in. I pass the same hungry faces again. They seem to recognize me and turn up the pulling and catcalling but I’m immune to the siren song. Maybe if I was 25. Age teaches you nothing but what isn’t true. I still smile and laugh when one of them catches my eye, but it all seems like a sad spectacle now.

I turn down an alley that leads back toward where my hotel is. As I’m doing so I see one last window on the corner. There is a girl standing there, petite blonde like all the rest, yet... I think... I think I know her... Yes... yes, I DO know

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her.

I'm a baby. No, more than a baby but not quite a toddler. I still have to lie where they put me. I'm on my back outside. I'm afraid. A stranger, not mom. a sitter. I don't want strangers! I cry, outraged at being with someone I don't know. I want home. She leans over me, young girl, her face blotting out the high bright sun, Colorado. Her blonde hair gives off golden light. She smiles, delighted by my mere existence. I cry when she leaves. "Nicole."

I'm 13. On the bus on the first day of a new school, junior high. Sitting in the back, goofing with my friend R., who was just as abject as me. I saw a girl getting on, her blonde head bobbing up as she ascended the steps and something in me broke. It was her...

In college I saw her again, driving a Honda Prelude and wearing sunglasses. It took a couple weeks to find out it wasn't Nicole, just someone who resembled her in a certain light. Still, we got married.

Since I got divorced, I've only seen her once, temporarily inhabiting the girl who worked at Publix customer service desk.

*

Hands on hips, she winks. Not lascivious. Cute, familiar. I know who you are. I know everything about you.

The Amsterdam walkers have increased velocity. There's an orderly Dutch frenzy brewing. Lockdown cometh. And yet...it would be a grave and unforgivable error if I failed to investigate this

paranormal apparition.

I walk back toward the windows and she disappears, then the small door opens, and this perfect blond cheerleader greets me like an excited wife. Honey, I'm home.

I step inside the glass.

"Hallo! How many of us do you want?"

From some hidden green room, a whole squadron of cheerleaders appear; they line up behind Nicole, preening and smiling, twisting on their easel legs. But I don't know them.

"Just you."

Standing here unshaven and travel-rumpled, rough and male, surrounded by beautiful blondes in bras, panties and stockings, I feel deeply ashamed and superfluous.

"You are ready to go upstairs?"

"I...ok, so how much...is your time?"

"25 Euros for half an hour. Are you ready now?"

25 Euros to spend time with the goddess who had eluded me all my life. What a bargain.

I follow her up a very dark stairway with black steps to her room.

Inside it is darker than the lip of Crematorium IV at Birkenau. A track of weird purple LED light around the perimeter of a black-sheeted bed.

"I take your jacket, please sit down."

I shed my first layer and as she turns to place it on the hook I allow myself a long look at her body, drink her in with as much light as my eyes can gather in this

midnight-dark room.

When she turns back I look away, embarrassed.

"Here...sit down," she says again.

I sink deep into a black ocean. It's a water bed. A water bed! Who has a water bed anymore? They used to be so popular. A water bed. "I heard she has a water bed." It sounded so good but they were universally awful. Unwieldy for sex, cold and miserable, like being slapped to sleep by a fat man. What happened to them all, I wonder. Landfills filled with water beds. Hated, discarded like the garbage they always were. Full of delusions and broken promises and filthy water, like everything, like everything.

"Why don't you get com-for-tuhble," she says. My whole life I've been wondering that.

I recline on the bed doing my best impression of a com-for-tuhble person.

She looks me over. We've got a live one here.

"Take off all your clothes but leave your underwear on." Hey, that's what Unit Tech Joe told me when I got to rehab. Only this isn't Ridgeview and this girl is pretty fucking far from Unit Tech Joe.

I'm the compliant lamb I was that night on Detox, nearly naked, bobbing on the high seas of this stupid black bed, trying to look suave.

She crawls up, straddles me and stares deeply into my eyes like a little blond sphinx. I feel the heat of her body close, and catch a whiff of bubble-gum perfume as she

rocks forward. My hands touch the soft black nylon on her thighs. Tenderly, tenderly.

“You tell me what you like.”

Well, this is pretty good. . .

“You want foot fetish? Maybe you have blowjob and fuck me in the ass?”

We should have a destination wedding. I can't wait to meet my new family.

I look up at her like I did so long ago, like I did. So long ago.

“Where are you from?” I ask.

She dismounts and sits back on the bed. Her legs resting on mine.

“I am from Czech Republic. I come to Amsterdam as tour-eeest and I like eet so I stay and work here. I've been here for tree years now.” This seems like an awfully ready reply.

“And what's your name?”

“Natalia.”

Liar.

She slips off those blackheart valentine panties and lets her legs fall wide open like a gymnast.

“You want to keesh pushy?”

I could be persuaded to keesh pushy.

I lean in a bit. Goddess visions aside—this is one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen in my life—and yet hovering over the open mouth of her genitals like a dentist examining an infected molar, I am something less than inflamed with lust.

Gentle reader, how do I say this. . . I am a man with all the desires and perversions gifted men by the Creator, and there is a part of me that wants to take this girl

and have her, savage and brutal without thought or feeling, have her and discard her like those dead waterbeds. Forget it ever happened then, sex like taking a wicked shit. . . but for all her indulgence I have no way to tell her that I harbor the most perverse and unsatisfiable desire of all—intimacy.

Yes, intimacy. Sex of course, but friction is friction. I don't want to be in this UFO room with her feeding me these lines and doing business. I'd rather sit across from her in the break room (every business has one, even a brothel). I'd like to see how she sits at the cheap table and sips her tea, off duty, scrolling her phone with those legs carelessly crossed. Com-for-tuh-ble.

Tell me about growing up in the Czech Republic. Was your father there? What was he like? Did you have a pet that you loved when you were a little girl? What was your favorite meal? Who made it? What did you dream of doing? What was school like? Did you have a best friend?

What do you look forward to? What are you afraid of? Did you ever break a bone? What's the last dream you remember?

“Come on, sweetuh-heart. What you want?”

I want to know who you are. Finally I want to know Nicole; catch the goddess by the tail and make her tell me all the secrets of the universe. And if I can't have that then I want to be loved, just loved.

And if not that then just don't leave me. Please. I will pay. Whatever it takes.

That's what I want, but because of the fucked and depraved nature of the universe, I settle for keesh pushy.

I take her sex to my face like an oxygen mask that just deployed at 35,000 feet.

“Gen-tle, baby. I like it gen-tle.”

What happens now? Well, there's a version of this story where I can't go through with it, but pay her for her time. Or I just ask if we can cuddle or something. That's a good story but it's not the truth.

I take her and have her. She fits beneath me perfectly. Lying over her, kissing her neck up onto her face and hair, inhaling her animal scent mixed with perfume. She fits, just right, just right. Like man and wife. The promised story-ending.

When it's over, I have to get dressed quickly. Only a few minutes left. She swipes my credit card on her phone. Even in this inadequately lit room I can see now. . . something about the nose isn't right. She isn't Nicole. But how could that be? I saw her so clearly from the street. She is still beautiful. Just not who I thought. Not my girl, just another woman taking payment.

I enter the stream of hustlers, nearly breaking my ankle on the ancient cobblestone street. A broken ankle in Amsterdam would suck, but a lot less than a broken ankle in Honduras or one of the other shithole countries I've been to.

Trudge, trudge, faster. Think. I've crisscrossed Europe in a couple

The Blotter

days, flown high, kissed the sun,
kissed a 10/10 blonde. The dreams
of 10,000 years of humanity
realized with a week's paycheck
and I'm just as miserable, lonely,
and confused as I was in the
beginning. What is the point of
anything? And what about the case
of God vs Auschwitz? No
resolution. Only things that
happened.

When I get back to the
punishment cell I fall asleep
quickly.

Two weeks later, I'm home in
bed, confused as usual.

When I had the Vision, things
were very clear, and the voice was
the voice of a teacher: logical,
knowing, authoritative. The things I
was told were true (or turned out
to be later). Sometimes that same
voice returns. It's rare but it
happens. Whether it is the same
voice, or just some ventriloquism
from my unconscious I don't know.
Perhaps the whole thing was a
delusion. But I hear the voice—that
same voice: one who knows, wise
and instructive, knowing things
beyond all things.

"You went looking for God and
you found..." I think of what I
saw—the tangled hair, baby shoes,
Zyklon B. Death.

"You found death. What else?"

I think of the jackknife body of
Natalia, opening to me. Keesh
pushy?

"You found sex."

Yes.

"What else?"

The church. The saint. The

prayer.

"God."

Yes, I see. It all makes sense
now. Sex, death, and God. Always.
Not one without the other.

"And the kind hospice nurse
with her family."

Yes, the opposite of Auschwitz.
Loving kindness.

And Nicole.

Sex, death, God, goddess.

Sex, death, God, goddess.

Sex, death, God, goddess.

No emaciated answers, which
wouldn't suffice anyhow.

Only what is:

Sex, Death, God, goddess.

And at points along the way,
the light of something, call it God,
"the God of our understanding"—in
the compassion, kindness,
suffering-with. The nurse.

"The lesson is ended."



"Autumnal Sonnet"

by Pawel Markiewicz

The mist heralds a dreamy, tender Apollonian dawn.
I philosophize about wings of hawk or king – sparrow.
In amazing grove at the Blue Hours – was born here a fawn.
You should adore as well as praise charm such a moony morn.

The beauty of world is indeed so pulchritudinous.
The autumnal meek leaves, having danced, at fallish stone, lie.
The picturesque mist is shrouded in mood of a sorcery.
I muse about my bosom full of druidic light dream.

The nightingale is under a starlet bewildering.
Flights of birdies are the moon-like thankful melancholy.
The autumnal mood is never ending, sometimes dazzling.
I have fallen in love with wizardly-like fantasy.

The fall belongs to bright Morning star with the enchantment.
I love forever - the Moon in the dearest bewitchment.

two by by Paweł Markiewicz

"Flower-like sonnet"

I cherish the dreamy crocus.
I love the moony cornflower.
I make love to bemused cactus.
I affect dreamed daffodil.

You are fond of vague elder.
You love back a misty dahlia.
You dote on languorous heather.
You idolize the faint freesia.

We prize hazy chrysanthemum.
We treasure indistinct daisy.
We value dim cheery blossom.
We admire the lulling lily.

They like the calming amaranth.
They relish soothing edelweiss.

affect = archaic love

"The flower-like second sonnet"

I conceive the brilliant lilac.
I build admirable holly.
I design pleasant marigold.
I constitute pleasing lily.

You devise outstanding iris.
You discover awesome poppy.
You establish fine orchid.
You forge an amazing pansy.

She forms surprising peony.
She founds the phenomenal rose.
She makes the superb rosemary.
She initiates cool primrose.

We plan tremendous hibiscus.
We produce the strange narcissus.

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.

New Year

There are hallways in my dreams. They are not random. I know them when I see them.

The Midnight hallway from the side door entrance to the first watch-box, which contains a key within it to be turned on my clock once per hour to prove that I've been here and that all is well. The hallway is clean and the floor is waxed and buffed – I know this to be true because I did that work earlier in the day. It is deep night, and the electric lights overhead are yellow-bulbs and are sufficient but little more than that. Windows are dark, those ones between rooms and the other ones to the outside. They provide no purpose, because a window is supposed to let you see out or in, and these can do neither at this time of day. I walk my watch, turning the clock at one end and the other of many off-wings of this main artery, my shoes clacking on the linoleum like a dancer trying to find the beat.

The hallway between the gym-wing of my high school and the music wing. It is long, and difficult to traverse in the time allotted from class end to next class start. There is so much foot traffic that there seems to be a lack of oxygen – perhaps it is consumed by so many young lungs. I have a difficulty breathing, and what there is to breathe is full of sweat, sour breath and pheromones. I only learn later that this is part of me, my social anxiety, my fear of being in crowds. It does not help that there are turns in the hallway, ninety-degree lefts and rights designed by the builders for some obscure, unapparent reason. The traffic piles up in these places, these angles, when someone decides to say hello to a classmate here, or meet for a public kiss - a display of affection and possession. See what I have that you do not? There is no shortcut for me, other than to go outside and try and run along the sidewalk and hope that all of the doors at the other end are open, unlocked.

The hallway behind the church pipe organ that leads up to the pastor's office in my church. There is a single-lane stairway, up or down but one must wait if another is already

coming. A tiny alcove where I find my acolyte robe and stole, and make sure that my candle lighter has a taper in it. A small stool is there for me to sit on, and copies of this week's service liturgy placed there by the same people who poured the wine into the little cups, now sitting down the stairs next to my chair behind the choir. When the service begins, I will light the altar candles and then I will be out of sight until communion, when I will carry up the plate of bread and cups, take my own from the pastor, and return to my seat. Here I don't have to pretend to pay attention, but if I sit apparently stoically, I may draw pictures on the back of my service bulletin with a stewardship envelope pencil while others hear about their sins.

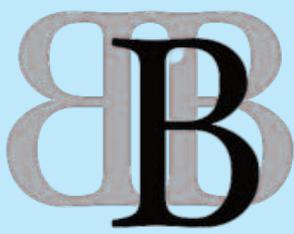
The hallway between the kitchen and the dining room, where the back door meets the coat closet and sometimes create a maze of interlocking handles and fallen wire coat hangers and rugs laid out to accept wet galoshes and those very wet galoshes. The space smells of old wool and the faint aroma of the naphtha of mothballs, beneath the warm perfume of meatloaf and gravy. Who left the door open? Mom calls from the kitchen. Were you born in a barn? No, Mom, I was born here.

Me

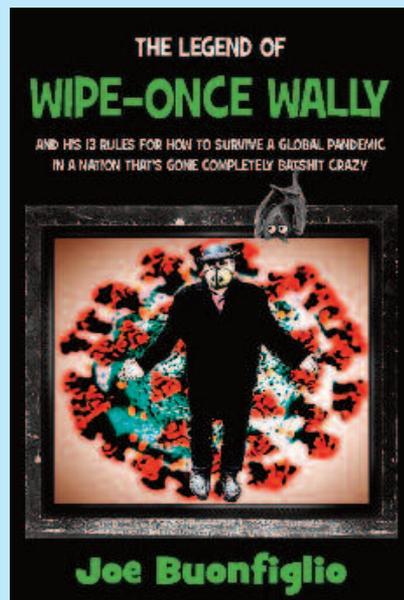
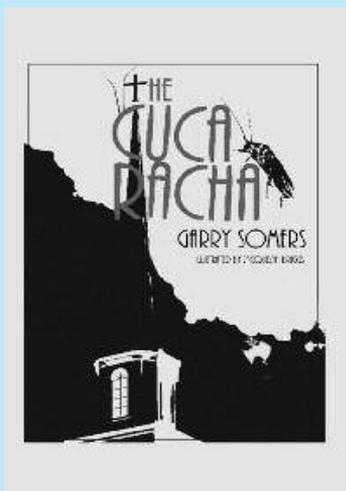
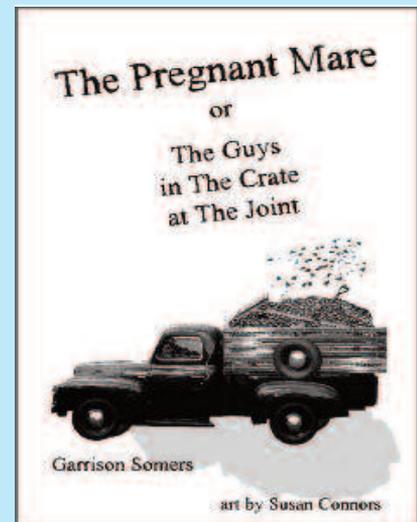
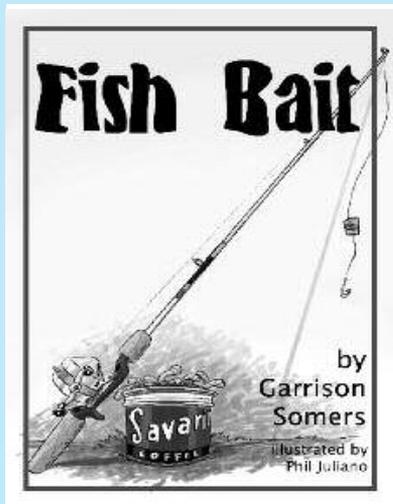
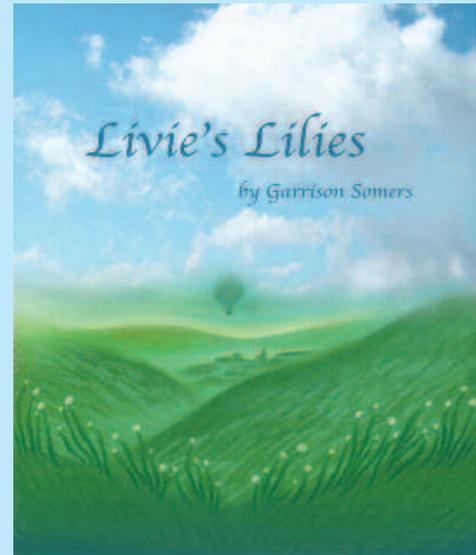
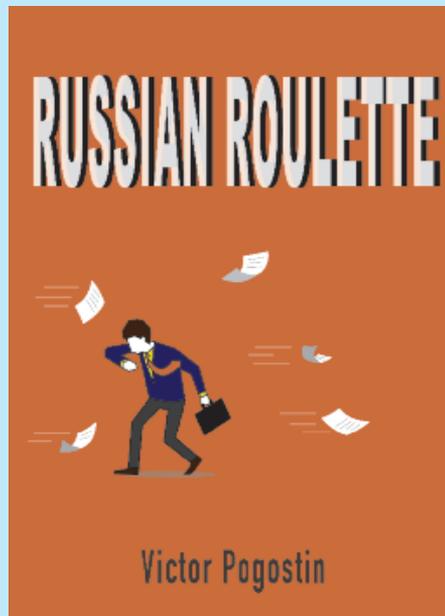
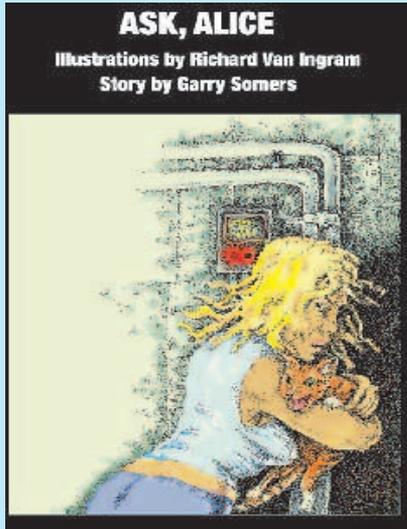
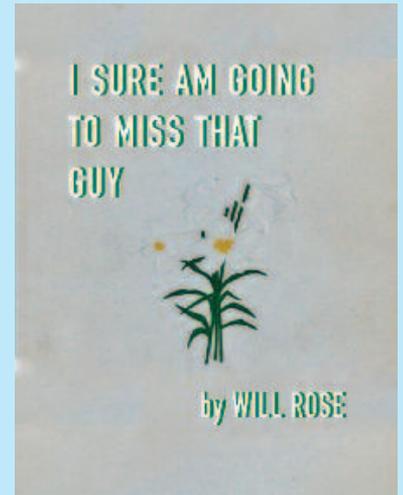
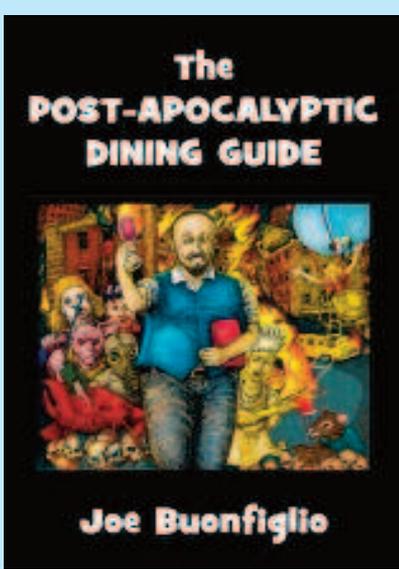
Contributors:

Chris Jansen lives in Athens, Georgia, where he coaches boxing and dotes on his guinea pigs, Rocco and Teddy. He was nominated for 2020 Georgia Author of the Year for "We Can Be Heroes: a Rehab Memoir." **Ed. Note: see part one of Chris' story in the December, 2022 issue in our archives.**

Paweł Markiewicz writes "1983, lives in Bielsk Podlaski - Poland, poet from Poland who wrote some pieces of flash fiction. Paweł was a participant in 2007 and 2010 of the Forum Alpbach, a village of thinkers in Austria. After experience with poetry, he wants to create some good stories. He tender poems, haiku as well as long poem and flash."



Blotter Books



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