

The Blotter

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"What are we going to do about Alice?"

I'm so late to this party. We've already dismissed her, won't buy her books anymore, have turned our backs and shunned her, like an old-time religion. Because she was deeply flawed as a human being. A trainwreck of a life.

Her writing, on the other hand? Often heartbreaking to the point of shattering. Perhaps the pinnacle of the genre in terms of balance, development, love of the language. Often about difficult subjects, about growing up in the deeply dreary, the cruel and the cold. But still sublime in their beauty.

So what, then, is the problem? Yes. Her behavior.

Did she commit evil, or by ignoring it, let it thrive? No doubt. But she is gone, doesn't know what we do to her memory anymore. If you believe in oblivion, she is there. If not, well, that is different, but also your choice. Read her stories, or don't.

I know the answer to this question of what we ought to do, and yet I don't. Still, rather than being a paradox, this is more along the lines of being a conundrum. You see, as with so much of our current information overloaded culture, we have a tendency – a need - to tie our observations together. To tie with silken thread the sheaves work to the author. To the author's life and activity and choices. The artist then becomes the art. If one is good, the other is... good?

And I can't possibly tell you how to feel about that, because I'm already uncomfortable telling you how I feel about it. We are each motivated by those considerations unique to ourselves. Some stand more firmly on what they imagine is good moral or social or cultural ground, or the shoulders of others, or on other foundations of iron. Personal algorithms created by our lives and learning and interactions with others.

And because it is so personal, I think it becomes a moot point in the most accurate definition of the word - subject to debate, dispute, or uncertainty. I cannot convince you to

ignore the proclivities of a person, the decisions they make or don't, their foibles, habits and weaknesses and simply attend to their writing. For which of us is a first-stone-caster?

I read your stories. That is something I do. I consume your poems and flashes and essays, look at art in galleries and the walks of coffee shops, not aware of the artist until I contact them and offer to publish, or even purchase. No other designation beyond good or bad.

No, even that is not so. I am not an arbiter. I can only decide based on what I like. Wait, even that isn't true. I select what I think you, the reader, will enjoy. Sometimes it isn't my cup of tea. (By the way, my cup of tea is Lapsang Souchong.) But I choose work for being worthy of being seen by more eyes. Yes, that sounds fatuous. Let's move on, anyway.

And I guess what I mean by all this is I do not know what you are up to. I don't google your name and sift through social media for noise. (I hope I am not virtue-signaling, either – a concept that I only this season learned from one of my children, and a behavioral stone that makes me tired just thinking of hefting it.) I wish that everyone was a good soul, a right fellow, but it just isn't so. Being human is messy. I wish that no one had ever asked a certain writer what they thought about something other than their writing.

We already have a lot on our plates, you and I. It would be nice to just read the story.

By the way, an AI defined the term moot – incorrectly, in my opinion, as “the term “moot” is used to describe an argument or issue that has no practical or useful significance and is fit only for theoretical consideration. It means that the topic is unlikely to happen and therefore not worth considering.” Wow, that's so very wrong. What I think the tool did, was take the two extant definitions and merged them without nuance.

And that is how our language becomes even more muddy.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

there's no doubt

“Still Be My Vision”

by Zac Walsh

What brings me here today, and thank you kindly for asking, is that I’ve been the innocent party in twelve car accidents in the last eighty-nine days, none of which were even partially my fault. I understand if you doubt any part of that, but I have the paperwork here today to prove it, legit and bonafide by the law. Johnny Law had a helluva time believing me too, so you are in good company there if you doubt me right off the bat, or depending on how you might feel about Johnny Law, I reckon. Though considering my present company, I’d bet you all are cozy ‘nuff with him. But I never did reckon I’d be the star of the show, the show being the clear as a bell unlikelihood that a fine woman who has never had a traffic ticket or as much as a fender bender in her 60 some-odd years of being a motorist all of a sudden comes to find herself with twelve accident reports to file, twelve insurance agents to chatter with, twelve new strangers to hate in cars much better than hers, twelve claims and forms and headaches, not to mention a neck brace, a sling and a litter of angry rental car lot attendants.

Try getting people to believe you when you tell them you just had another car accident after you already told them you had six or seven or eleven in the last few months. Try to imagine the scrunched-up look off of the faces of your coworkers who think you’re a quack, try to pretend like the supposedly good people at church don’t have that smug face that says, “oh, we knew the poor dear was loopy, but this sure puts the nail in the cake!” Try becoming a prayer request to everybody, even though you never

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once in your life called the “prayer request hotline,” that phooey run by old-as-the-moon Bessie, bless her cold judging heart. Try the hardest part, try convincing yourself you haven’t had a nut knocked loose, tell yourself over and over til you’re blue in the face that you haven’t been living in a home taken over by invisible creatures that discombobulate your head while you sleep, messing with the gears that make it so you can drive to work or church without that sudden crunch, that army of mean, no good icicles that march up and down your spine every time your life is rammed into another. Or don’t try, cuz I’m here to testify it don’t make a lick of difference.

Though the reason I am here, gentleman and some ladies, as you all know is not because of the fact that an old lady keeps getting her car smashed into but because of the reason each and every one of those so-called drivers had for why they up and ka-blammed into my vehicle, my own and all of the rentals alike. You all know it, but I’m supposed to say it here all official-like, here where it’s serious. Where it counts. Each and every one of them lollygaggers behind the wheel said to the officers on the scene and to every insurance person in the chain that I was not there. Try that one on for size, since we’re here trying. I was certainly there after they hit me. No one disputes that. I just wasn’t there for the real important parts, the before parts. I was there for the during of it all, the bang and shatter and all that, and I was there for the after part where they all scream all sorts of tarnation at me. At me, can you picture it?

Poor old not-there-one-moment and there-and-injured-in-the-next-moment me. Of all the things, and in a life that had me fooled into thinking I had heard it all.

So I am here before you today to testify, I suppose. I can't pretend to much understand what I can do to help all you good folks on the committee, I must cop to that upfront. That is, seeing how I don't understand a golldarn thing about all this, other than what I told you already. But I've always been an upstanding citizen, and I intend to do my part. Never missed a jury duty call, though I hear some real fanny boys just throw those notices in the trash. Paid every dime of my taxes. May have even overpaid a time or two, just to be safe. And anyhow, if it all goes to Uncle Sam one way or another then who is Dorothy Winters to complain?

Miss Winters, may we proceed with asking you a few questions? Would that be alright?

Isn't that what I just said, sir?

Wonderful, then I will begin. Can you tell us where and when you were born, Miss Winters?

I was born 79 years ago near a place called McMullen, Alabama. Though I'm not sure it is legal to even call such a nothing place a "place." Don't a place need life in it to make it so?

If you don't mind me saying, Miss Winters, you seem to have a fantastic amount of, umm, what's the word I am looking for here...vibrancy for your age. How do you account for that?

Now Mr. Senator, if you are here to ask me out for a wine supper and some necking, then I must say this is all a bit too much, sir. I don't take that much convincing. Who has time to be convinced these days? Who has time to put on airs, now that the last days have come?

The last days, Miss Winters?

Please, we've known each other long enough now. Will you call me Dorothy?

The last days, Dorothy?

Two men will be in the field – one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left...You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come...And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth...

Miss Win...Dorothy, excuse me, I am not following how these Bible verses that you have committed to memory, and impressively so I might add, have anything to do with your unusual circumstances which we are here to discuss today. Can you shed some light on this for me?

Would you not agree that an old woman with a pristine automotive record for many decades who now finds herself in an outlandish predicament such as this would qualify as wonders on the earth?

I see, so you are saying you believe your unusual circumstances are a form of proof that certain Biblical statements are coming true. Is that it?

Not to be salty, but as the squirrels say, in a nutshell yes, sir.

As I am sure you are aware of by now, Dorothy, you are not the only American here today who has been asked to testify regarding some, well, some what you might call your not the everyday kind of circumstances. I am sure many hypotheses float out in the crowd around us. Who can avoid being aware of what social media has to say? So, with that said, what makes you so cer-

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tain these accidents you were in have anything to do with, how shall we put it...larger eschatological concerns?

Timothy.

Miss Dorothy?

Gladys's golden retriever Timothy. Just the other day we were at Gladys's house, like we do every Tuesday at lunch hour, the welcome-wagon ladies and myself, and we were there like we always are making cookie batter and baking cookies and setting them on little plates and wrapping them with cling wrap as one does, you understand, to take to the newcomers at church so as to make them know they are already a part of the flock of the Lamb, which goes without saying I'm sure.

Miss Dorothy, only because we have a long hearing here to get to –

Oh, yes, cut to the chase, yes sir. Timothy starts to barking at Gladys like he's never seen her before, and like I'd never heard before, really, just like she became a robber in nothing but the blink of an eye, just like the Good Book says matter of fact, or could be like the dog could see some sort of giant demonic woodboard coming out of her eye like in one of those childish godforbidden horror motion pictures that seem to be all the rage today, and you must understand this dog here Timothy is as sound of mind and character as any canine comes and loves Gladys to bits, so how do you explain all that barking at her as if she were some kind of phantom, some kind of fiend?

Well, I certainly do not know, Miss Dorothy. Why don't you tell us your explanation, if you would be so kind?

Ain't it just plain as day? The Good Lord is trying to take some of his saints home, now that we have reached the last days that is, but something has the works all fouled up. Something wicked is in the hopper, jammed up, in the way of the divine

sprockets. A hellish wrench, that's what it is. An underworld tool so surprising to us all that it seems even the strongest prophets weren't able to warn us about what has come. It's sinister is what it is, as clear as the difference between sand and rock. That's why I am so glad to be in these hallowed halls today, so that you men in fine suits with your fancy technicolored laminated poster boards can make sense of it all for me and for the rest of the people of this fine nation.

But Dorothy, that is what you are here to do, remember?

Well sure, I just didn't want to seem presumptuous is all. So, you want me to just lay it out on the table like a red and white checkered cloth then? Before you say yes, just know you ain't gonna like it none.

We appreciate the warning, but yes, please lay the cloth on us.

Alright, well, suffice it to say I am none too handy with the computer. My children try to show me, but they ain't no spring chickens neither so they don't know as much as they pretend to, but suppose in that way they aren't much different from any of the rest of us. But they teach me some words, some terms here and there, and sometimes when my old box muffs up and I tell 'em that the computer is all muffed they come along and explain to me that "muff" is not the word for what is happening. They tell me how it is very, very important to use the correct word for what is happening, for what is real, they say, and when it comes to a computer not working properly it is not muffed up. It is suffering from a glitch.

Yes, that is all fine and good, but can you please help us along in understanding what this has to do with our current, uh, topic of consideration?

I forget I am speaking to fine, upstanding pagan men here, men without the pre-

requisite knowledge of the holy things. I can see I made assumptions. Here, let me lay my cards down quick and clean before the Dealer lays 'em all out for us. Reason Timothy was barking at poor Gladys is because Gladys was there one second, gone the next, then back again and the dog knew this was not the Lord's way of things, because the dog is so much nearer to creation than any of the rest of us, and so he got to barking like he was looking at a devil in Gladys clothing when she came back so fast from being taken off to Home. And I'm sure you can all put the pieces together now, but since I've been wrong all day about just about everything, I'll lay this last part out too. That's why I keep getting cars slammed into me while I am driving and why those drivers all say the same thing, it's because they ain't lying. I really was not there, and then I was. God is trying his damndest, forgive my language, to take my old ass home but the glitch in the Rapture is getting in the way. Whew, now, I do believe I have done my part, but it might take some industrial strength hair gel to hold it down. Lord have mercy, please Lord do.

So, just to be crystal clear for the record, your testimony is that your accidents were caused by a failure in what the Bible refers to as a "rapture." You believe the God of the ancient Hebrews is trying to pull His servants from the Earth and up into Heaven because the end of the world is near, but He cannot because of a computer glitch standing in the way?

Does a glitch stand? Does a glitch sit? Does a glitch rest, or laugh or feel relief in scratching a hard to reach itch? Does a glitch wake on a Sunday morning and feel the gnawing lack of love, a love it once felt when it was an adolescent glitch, knowing Church would provide answers, if only for a piece of a day? Does a glitch have the

capacity to mourn the dead and the lost? Can a glitch contemplate the eternal and shudder so deeply its knees feel like feet? A glitch cannot be enraptured and it cannot be emptied of what it never had. A glitch, as best as I can figure it, is a slippery flickering. A digital mutant, momentary, not set apart, but entwined like poison ivy on the puckering skin. And you men in your fine silks and cottons and lotions, you worship this inhuman and inhumane glitch because it promises you what Baal promised the Canaanites before and what the Demiurge promised our first ancestors before that. The glitch needs gold to conduct itself, needs ores hidden way deep within our mantle that you start wars in order to unleash from the cruel, foreign grounds. But did you ever consider that your own grandchildren might be born pure and righteous in the eyes of the Lord? Did you ever pause to think what would become of your hearts if your own beloved were kept from their eternal birthright because of the glitch you birthed into this measly world of flesh and crown? A glitch you nursed to fullness because it promised you power laid atop power and covered in power forevermore? And I know, I do, that nothing I say will change you. That is why I am not here asking for change or hope or even something as useless as joy. I am only asking for remuneration of my vehicle and legal expenses, and who better to ask for remuneration than you, the Kings of such things.

(Then Dorothy looked up to the grand arches of the great hall in which she stood, her frail body behind a pulpit, of sorts, much like the one the various pastors of her long life stood behind as they shared the Good News. What she saw was marble crafted by the earth but mangled into the shapes of man: naked winged children with unfurled penises, roaring fanged li-

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on's heads, swirling pillars moving upward where Nothing was believed to be. She saw eagles frozen in flight under half-circles and fecund olive branches galore, enough green buds for all but here fetid, encased in an unbreakable, lifeless white plaster. And from the western corner of the hall an ancient shrillness rang out so sharp the ears of all in the audience and those on the revered stage plugged up like old wineskins, causing the internal compartments to fill with hot and festering air. Sound was emptied from the highly choreographed space and time was held by its guiltless neck in the talons of the beast that peeled itself from the sculpted walls.

First the wings came free, brown and bronzed like the skin showing ribs of starving slaves. Then the dense gold beak animated and the instant it had life it began to jab and shred without purpose and only need. Its eyes then awoke and of these there were seven, each a distinct color of Noah's rainbow. The head began to take its form the more it slowly spun on its shoulders, like a vessel on the potter's wheel melting in reverse. As the chest came out from the wall and into the musings of the hall a word began to form from the bald skin freed by its falling feathers. In drops of blood seeping from the bare quills one could make out the word knowledge grotesquely organized in the form of a sapling, as if being suffocated by itself. The talons cracked through last, sharpened by unrecorded millennia of embattled cries, the hiss of axes swung through hearts and the stale songs of war without refrain or rhyme.

The owl had come, panoramic and unpenitent. Here was the owl, the one true test, just as the human species had promised itself since it first learned how to speak. And the answer was the owl, the instinct of *Noctua*, the nocturnal itself made into

flight and hunter both. An archetype within the nest of grand hall dreams and falling nightmare scrolls, the culmination of Edom, the white whale reincarnated from the sea and given dominion over the night sky. Its anachronistic and nomadic screech tore through the hall and out through the possessive pinewood doors, through the chambers and hallways and out through the eastern portions of the National Mall where all human scurry was halted, and since all was halted at once it was as if nothing was halted at all.)

Tell me you all saw and heard what I just did. Tell me you see the end soar?

Is that what you would call your last soliloquy, Miss Dorothy? Because what I would call it, kindly I should add, is some homemade, grade-A caliber bullpucky, as my late grandmother would politely call such talk.

But the owl? The empty gouge apparent in your wall there, Mister Senator, sir?

I can assure you, we here servants of the people see no such thing. ❖

"The Meeting"

by John Riebow

It's a gorgeous Saturday night in May, and I'm at one of my favorite local restaurants. Technically it's a brew-pub and restaurant. The beer made on premises and stored in large brass tanks behind the massive u-shaped mahogany bar is the real draw of this place, but the food isn't bad either. The menu is more cosmopolitan than pub grub; the beef selections are tender and tasty, the lobster tail delightful. I read a review of the place in the weekend dining section of the local paper, maybe a week or so ago, that was not so kind. As I recall, they were not very appreciative of the offerings, especially the much-lauded and massive prime rib special. "Disgustingly decadent" was the quote I recall. But who gives a shit what food critics, or movie critics for that matter, have to say anyway? Everyone knows they don't know what the hell they're talking about; they are merely jealous failures of the medium they critique. I don't care what the critics say; Fast Times at Ridgemont High is a masterpiece.

The critics and I at least agree that the beer here is spectacular. I'm having a pint of the pale wheat brew, flavored with the hint of raspberry—the perfect drink for a warmish spring evening. It goes down smooth and has a lingering sweet aftertaste. It's almost 8:30 by my watch. I've been here about a half-hour. The bar is full of people waiting to get seated for dinner and will probably thin out in the next hour or so, leaving only drinkers in it for the long haul. Many are standing around, holding pints of the various shades of beer, look-

ing expectantly at their watches, tediously fingering the coasters that light up and vibrate when their table is ready. The bar has two pretty good size plasma televisions in opposite corners. One's showing a baseball game; a national match up of which I know neither team, the other some sort of boat race from somewhere sunny, Florida I think. I find myself watching the boat race because the scenery is nicer and the hint of danger mildly intriguing. Besides, baseball is boring as hell. I never cared for the sport, even though my father and two brothers are avid fans and have followed the Philadelphia Phillies all their lives. Maybe their unwavering devotion to the perpetually losing team has something to do with my mild aversion to the sport, but I'd almost rather watch a show about the art of origami paper folding than sit through nine innings of baseball.

I'm just sitting here, enjoying the beer, my second, waiting. Chillin' as they say. My husband Bert is home with the kids: Jimmy, six this June, and Alicia, who turned four in March. They are probably just about done watching Happy Feet for what has to be the fiftieth time, and he should be putting them to bed by 9:00. The walls of Jimmy's room are adorned with the figures of smiling astronauts, floating amid a sea of stars and planets, some of which glow in the dark and give the room a comforting shimmer when the lights are off. I put them there myself, from one of those kits. Alicia's room features a host of animals on parade: elephants, lions, zebras, bears, horses

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and camels. She chose the stencils from the local craft store and sat in awe as I created the creatures with a few brush strokes. “Is that how baby animals are made?” she asked, convinced that the beasts were alive in some manner.

The kids had their baths before I left; all Bert has to do is get them to brush their teeth before tucking them in. He’ll read another chapter of *Alice and Wonderland* to Alicia and make sure Jimmy feeds his goldfish. With any luck, he will be enjoying a beer of his own in front of our large screen TV by 9:30. He’ll probably watch the baseball game. I’ll kiss my two little darlings before laying my own head down on the pillow. I’ll crawl in bed next to Bert and tell him about my evening. He’ll be awake, no matter what time I get back, ready and eager to hear all the details. I could be a real bitch and not say anything until the morning, causing him a long sleepless night, but doubt I’ll do that because I know he will have been thinking about me the entire time and gotten himself into a state of nervous anticipation.

Oh, did I mention that Bert and I are swingers, playas, in the lifestyle, as we say nowadays? I don’t really care for any of those terms and prefer the euphemism “friends with benefits,” which is really closer to the truth of the situation. We have friends like most people, but then we have our special friends who get to know us a little better than most. We really don’t like to say too much because you never know how people are going to react to the idea of an open relationship disguised as a marriage. Certain situations have forced us to learn to keep our adult extra curricular activities to ourselves, especially after I lost the twenty-year friendship of Susanne, the woman who was Maid of Honor at our wedding, because she found the concept of “the life-

style” utterly repulsive.

“But you’re married! You took a solemn oath of fidelity before God, not to mention all your friends and family,” she argued to some sense of religious morality I’m not quite sure I ever possessed. When the metaphorical did not move me, Susanne turned to the physical. “Don’t you realize that you could catch all kinds of diseases? Crabs. Herpes. AIDS!” This failing, she tried ignominy. “Think of your children. Would Jimmy and Alicia be proud of what you are doing? You have a sickness Paula. You should be getting professional help.”

There was no conversation; no discourse about the sacred and profane, just condemnation, and eventually, termination. Someone who had shared decades of life’s joys and sorrows, a girl I comforted after she was raped by her own cousin, chose to move forward with her life as if I no longer existed on the earth, all because she could not come to terms with one aspect of my personality. To this day, I still find it hard to fathom that Susanne found it better to think of me as dead, rather than reflect on the depraved being into which she perceived I had evolved. After such a profound heartbreak, I learned pretty damn quickly that people were either going to be intrigued by the concept of shared love (perhaps secretly hoping that they might become your lover) or wholly disgusted by the thought of your being free and comfortable with your own body; there was no middle ground.

Even with my vivid imagination, it’s not something that I ever would have envisaged myself doing, going off with relative strangers of both genders to have recreational sex, but it’s been every bit the adventure I was seeking when I thought I was losing a passion for myself, and the experiences have made my mid thirties strangely fulfilling. It’s not something I decided to do one day at

the drop of a hat, nor was it a goal mapped out on a life plan, but rather a gradual sort of heightening of awareness that evolved from feeling the power of one's physicality.

Despite having undergone the rigors of bearing two children, I have a nice body, of which I'm quite proud, but it takes some discipline and a bit of hard work to maintain a shape I find pleasing to myself when I look in the mirror. My mother, rest her soul, was a little on the heavy side most of her life, and even as a child, I could never get beyond the fact that she seemed somehow ashamed of her body, of the thick legs, pronounced belly, and the flabbiness of her arms. It was a subtle thing, really. I never heard her complain about her weight, or comment that she couldn't eat such and such because it was fattening. She seemed to have lead a normal life, with normal dietary habits (she loved pizza and beer), but I can't help but notice that she's covered up in most of the pictures I have, even the ones taken on the beaches of New Jersey during those long joyous summers. I think part of me is secretly an exhibitionist. After seeing the way my mother hid so much of herself away, I knew I didn't want to be like her, so I found this extreme way of showing my body to others. But it's more than just showing; it's sharing, which would have scared her because she conversed as conservatively as she was clothed.

Contrary to what others might choose to believe, I followed a rather typical life course: school, dating, marriage and motherhood. To be honest, it all seems to have come quite easily. I loved to learn and experience new things from an early age, so education was a stimulant rather than a burden. My parents were of the flower power generation, and while I could not picture them partaking in the emancipating aspects of free love, I could imagine them

indulging in the herbal secrets of Mother Nature, which afforded a host of different insights. Their approach to education was to never simply accept what was deemed to be the truth; they turned the tables and asked questions: why did I think such and such? What would happen if? What did I believe motivated a person to act a certain way? What would I do if given the same circumstances? This gentle push to view situations from various angles brought an increase in perception and empathy that has served me well. I learned to not simply to view a question from the angle at which it was posed, but from above and below, inside and out. Each academic success brought encouragement and the desire for new challenges. This held me in good stead as I excelled in high school and was awarded a field hockey scholarship to a small but prestigious Northeastern college, where I applied my love of writing and majored in journalism.

I met the young, impulsive and gorgeous Bert Hammonds in a junior-year literature class about the 20th century American novel, and we fell for one another reading Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. He was the dashing and daring Robert Jordan and I the brave and seductive Maria. It was he and I huddled in those caves, amid that war, facing perilous danger and making love like it was going to be our last night on earth. We continued to date after college, while Bert attended Law School, and were married soon after he was accepted to the Bar.

For a time, Bert and I found fulfillment in our careers: he in real estate law practice and me writing profiles of local business owners and covering the proceedings of municipal meetings for the countywide newspaper. We lived in an apartment less than two years, and then came the house and the dog, which for the first time, made me feel

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like a bona fide adult, a true independent spirit. Jimmy and Alicia soon followed as part of the plan. I have to confess that watching these adorable offshoots of my own self has been one of the most fulfilling aspects of my life, and while I wouldn't trade motherhood for anything else in the world, there came a time, especially after the children had been weaned from direct dependence on my body, that my flesh longed for something. I began to find sexual stimulation in the most mundane circumstances. Wiping down the furniture with a dust rag became the sensual caress of flesh; the sound of wind whistling through the trees the frenzied breath of a lover on the verge of climax; the rhythm of the clothes dryer a syncopated pelvic thrust. It was as if my body had a perpetual craving and was seeking pleasure from the very world itself.

It's no secret that sexuality is one of the great mysteries of humanity. The vast majority of us are born with a definitive gender, but there are some who find the lines of gender roles blurred, while others see no boundaries whatsoever. I've had a tremendous sex drive for as long as I can remember, and never really looked at sexual gratification as being strictly a man-woman thing. A body was a body; certain touches and motions could bring incredible pleasure and I was not one to be confined by the concept that such pleasure could only occur in an opposite-sex encounter. After all, if I could touch myself and bring pleasure why couldn't another woman do the same? She had the same parts as me and presumably knew what to do with them. I formed this view at a young age. My brothers were older and always had copies of Playboy or Penthouse under their beds, which I used to secret back to my room and read under the sheets. I remember being amazed and enthralled by the glossy pictures of the girls;

their shapes and skin tones were mesmerizing. I had never seen such boldness and bravery and remember praying that I would look like them when I grew up, wanting those lips, hips and breasts.

I was raised a Roman Catholic and slept with only five other men before marrying Bert. We were both twenty-four. Ok, so I wasn't a very strict Catholic, but there was nothing in my upbringing; no trauma or inappropriate sexual encounter with a classmate, relative or priest, that drove me to this lifestyle. I'd have "leanings" when I was in college, but never got up the nerve to do anything more than kiss my roommate Kelly on a dare. We were both drunk and didn't say anything the next morning. I got the impression that the whole thing embarrassed her. I was strangely thrilled by the experience and secretly wanted more, but my college years were relatively conservative and the opportunity never presented itself again. School, career, marriage and motherhood took priority over sexual exploration, but an undercurrent of curiosity started to evolve from the ennui of the typical routine as I reached my mid thirties.

I began to have these powerful thoughts and feelings, first fleeting then persistent. I resisted: I was married and had a family. But the thoughts and impulses became stronger, and the more I tried to push them away, the more I felt the need to be something more than a wife and mother. I thought of going back to work, writing a column for the local paper, but it was not my mind that was longing for stimulation. I considered and dreamed and began to share these overwhelming visions with my husband. I thought Bert might be shaken and repulsed by my confessions, but the more we talked about what I was feeling, the more intrigued he became. We both recalled how thrilling dating had been, how

we missed the excitement of going out with someone without knowing what was going to happen at the end of the night. I was the one who joked that the excitement didn't have to end just because we were married, and it sorta went from there. Once we got over the initial shock of what I said, we looked at one another and each saw on the face of the other a wicked smile.

I let Bert arrange the "dates." He finds the partners in the back of the local free press newspaper, or on the Internet. He has our "profile" posted on a lifestyle site that lists our likes (mine: tall muscular men with facial hair and soft curvy women without; his: thin to medium build women with a sense of humor and degree of stamina) and dislikes (mine: pushy people and liars; his: overweight women and poor hygiene). Both of us drink and neither care for smokers. We are willing to travel but not to host a "party" at our home. We play together or separately, but more often apart than together because of our current babysitter situation. (We live more than an hour away from both of our parents and have not had much success with the local girls we entrusted with our children.) Bert is more of a voyeur and gets an even greater thrill of being in the same room with me when I have other partners, but I honestly prefer to be on my own because I'm more uninhibited when Bert isn't around to watch me perform. I've been with men, women, couples and once, two brothers. We "see" Tim and Stacy, a couple about our age on a regular basis, but their kids are older and they spend a lot of time shuttling the children back and forth to sporting events and after-school activities. We try to have dinner with them at least once a month and take turns renting a hotel room for our post-dining activities, so it's tough. We usually get a suite with a whirlpool tub that seats four.

I can see that our activities might be disturbing to those with delicate sensibilities, but to me sex is a purely physical recreation, a form of exercise that stimulates the heart and provides a form of satisfaction that is unmatched by jogging, cycling or swimming. There is no emotional investment; my partners are just a terrain. I can honestly say that I'm not jealous when I see Bert with another woman. That concept may seem foreign or revolting to some, but it excites me to see him happy. We know we are committed to one another, to the loving upbringing of our children, the security of the home we share; something as natural as sex is never going to undermine that.

To be honest, my biggest concern regarding the lifestyle is the fear of whom I might run into. After all, we are relatively anonymous until the initial encounter, and I've sat at meetings like this, half expecting a distant relative, former coworker or one of my children's teachers to walk in the door, and imagine the excuses I'd make, the red-faced stuttering exit. I'd probably scream in the car, pound the steering wheel, and once I got over the initial shock, laugh at the ridiculousness of it all. I can just picture it. They'd go home and imagine what we might have done, and every time we saw one another after there would be the fleeting glances and nervous laugh as we hurriedly went our separate ways.

It looks like the couple I'm supposed to be meeting is walking in the door. I recognize them from the picture Bert showed me. They were on a nude beach somewhere, holding colored drinks with tiny umbrellas in them. I thought they looked happy and fun. I'm going to finish my own drink, so they will be obliged to offer me another, and turn my head towards the dining room. I'm going to make them scan the bar, look at all these people and try to guess which

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is me. No, not the desperate looking older woman leaning on her martini. Not the curvy young blonde falling out of her tank top. Not the Kristy Alley look alike with the insipid laugh. We've showed them a photo with my face blurred. All they know about me is that I'm a red head with short hair and pale complexion. I usually wear glasses but have my contacts in tonight. They give my eyes this cool azure glow. I'm so glad the smoking ban passed last year, because there's nothing worse for contact lenses than the blue haze of cigarette smoke.

I've seen them in the mirror behind the bar. He's tall and broad shouldered. His face is round and bearded. He's balding and wearing wire-framed glasses, like something Clint Eastwood would have worn in the 1970's. She is thin and blonde, with a lot of makeup. Her face appears older than 45. She's wearing a tan coat with some sort of furry collar that looks like a dead animal around her neck. They haven't spotted me yet, but I can see by the way their eyes are scanning the room that they are shivering with anticipation. Once they discover my identity, the three of us will retire to a table to drink, eat, talk and laugh. We'll spend time feeling each other out before we decide whether to feel each other up, and if anyone is not completely comfortable with the situation, we go our separate ways and thank the other for their company.

I'll be home in a few hours; laying on the pale blue silk sheets my mother gave us four years ago for Christmas (her final gift before dying), replaying the evening. Bert will want me to talk slowly, then faster, giving all the details, then slowly again, until he cannot resist his urges and we will come together, a passionate and loving couple devoted to one another, Robert Jordan and Maria, until the last hours of our lives. ❖

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.

For three nights in a row, I was awakened by the vividness of my dreams. Something about them, the urgency of the so-called plot or the clarity of characters, remained with me as I lay in the darkness of my bedroom. However, I did not get up, find a pad and pencil, and scrawl down what I had experienced, and by morning, they were lost to me. Faded down to a morning mood without sufficient explanation. Unfortunate. I am not worried. The changing of the clocks seems to bring on more dreaming for me. Is it the upsetting of my internal timing – I always feel like I've lost an hour of sleep per night for much of the springtime – that throws my dream-patterns into a cocked hat? High school acquaintances pop up regularly in castaway life rafts, or standing in line to get a liverwurst sandwich in a delicatessen I've never seen before (at least, not that I can recall). I wander down hallways looking for the right office to discuss my social security payment, or fish in a crystal-clear stream with my old office manager, who was not a very nice person back then, and keeps 'accidentally' stepping in the water and chasing away the fish. What can she be thinking? My old Toyota hasn't the horsepower to drive over the bridge from Charleston to Mt. Pleasant, so I pedal it like one of those ancient kiddy-cars. Who knew this was an option? Will I be late? Yes. Where am I going? I think it's the barbecue place, that also makes a very fine low-country boil. Who is in the car with me? I don't know. They're sitting in the back seat, among the books and empty cigarette packs and laundry that I'm bringing to my parents' house to wash.

L. Wakefield - Cyberspace

CONTRIBUTORS

Zac Walsh is the author of *An End of Speaking* and *Love in the Utmost*. His work has appeared in journals such as *Two Thirds North*, *Stonecoast*, *Caustic Frolic*, *Calliope*, *Gold Man Review*, *Last Leaves*, *Blue Unicorn*, *LUMINA*, *Gulf Stream*, *Cimarron Review*, *Oakwood*, *Alligator Juniper*, *The Awakenings Review*, *The Other Journal*, *Inscape*, *Big Lucks*, *Lime Hawk*, *Spectre Magazine*, *the DuPage Valley Review* and *The Platte Valley Review*, as well as in the anthologies *Extrasensory Overload*, *Blood on the Floor* and *Small Batch*. He lives in a small, unincorporated town in Oregon with his wife and a very old dog.

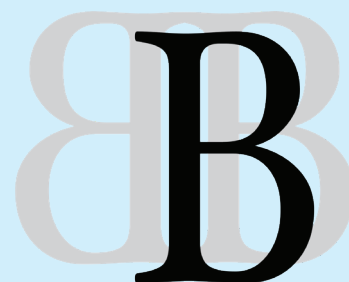
John Riebow was born and raised in Philadelphia, where he attended the W. B. School High School of Agriculture Sciences, majoring in Horticulture. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Landscape Architecture from Temple University, is a LEED-Accredited Professional, and serves as Project Manager for a design-build contractor. He has been writing fiction, poetry and radio drama scripts for over thirty years and his work has appeared in numerous publications. John is currently working on a novel and a collection of short fiction.

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