

The Blotter

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The South's Unique, FREE, International Literature and Arts Magazine

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The Blotter

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"The Problem with Sardines"

There are two scenes, side by side in my head, like a forced-choice preference test.

In the scene on the left, a doorway opens into a kitchen; the counter and sink on the left and the refrigerator flush against the right corner forming the small L-shaped room—barely large enough for four paces. Dimly lit with a yellow lightbulb that flickered every time someone's stride accidentally turned too much into a stomp, the vinyl floor sticks to your feet and raises slightly with each of your four steps like lifting your thighs from a leather car seat in the summer.

There's a window to the left of the fridge letting a ray of natural light stream onto the bowl of peaches next to the sink, freshly purchased from the truck parked at the corner down the road, and washed. A box of corn flakes sits next to that. There are two spoons that were used to stir sugar into that morning's coffee sitting rinsed in the sink, and the room smells like toast and cinnamon sugar. The cool air from the vent blows up your legs as you stand at the window and let the sun peek through the slits in the blinds and soak through your eyelids. The fridge hums a bass line while the blue jays outside provide the melody.

In the scene on the right, stainless steel double doors open to reveal three pristinely polished glass shelves. On the top shelf sits a white tazza bowl with Sicilian blue patterns painted along the rim, holding three handfuls of strawberries—the red of the berries painfully popping against the white of the bowl—vanilla beans tightly wrapped in crinkled parchment paper, a sand-colored ceramic egg cradle with an egg placed politely upright in each divot, a thirty-two-ounce carafe of what could only be assumed is milk, a head of Romanesco broccoli, and a jar of Bonne Maman apricot preserves.

On the second shelf in between a vase of pink peonies and a lavender sprig planted in a rocks glass is a silver cake stand balancing a half-eaten croquembouche—the flecks of chilled, chipped caramel leaving a subtle ring around the stand. Next to the lavender, a porcelain figurine rabbit crouches beside a bundle of white asparagus tied with twine and a ginger root resting on a tea plate. On the third shelf is a copper pitcher with carrot leaves dangling over its lip and a lazy susan holding mason jars of grapefruit juice and spearmint tea, and a bottle of white wine.

Two scenes— two roads diverged in a hopeful, yet ambivalent, wandering mind.

There are two wolves inside you, and one wants you in a house like your grandma used to live in; surrounded by trees, with a chair that's *yours*, and a bookshelf that's *yours* with books that are *yours*— only living with what you need and want to get by. A good bowl of peaches and a coffee machine that *does the job*. The other wolf wants fancy jams and indulgence and yummy soaps for you. It wants you to bask in the fruits of your hard labor. *If you must do the labor, why not reap the rewards of it?* It whispers. Splurge on the name brand, replace the torn pair of socks, get the medium over the small. *Maybe even go to Whole Foods, wowee...*

There are two paths and one is a coastal South Carolina kitchen built in the 70s and the other is a fridgescape designed where Marie Kondo meets Marie Antoinette.

To be this or to be that: that is the question. A completely ludicrous question for someone who must remind themselves when ordering something as trivial as a coffee that it's neither the last coffee they'll ever have nor the final decision they'll ever make! To purchase the coffee or to not purchase the coffee—or to say fuck the coffee and get a chai?

Or say fuck the chai altogether and slide that five to seven dollars into an IRA? A CD? My 401K, a BA, wait what about a home savings account??

I'll sit on the Penrose staircase and wait for the coupon clippings in the mail, and I'll push that best buy date on the yogurt by a couple, thank you very much.

Fridgescaping (*noun*): the practice of aesthetically styling a fridge's interior as a curated, intentional space rather than mere food storage; popularized during economic downturn and periods of cultural uncertainty, it reflects a shift toward glorifying groceries and managing scarcity—romanticizing what one could afford rather than highlighting what was lacking, a form of minimalism that became both a coping mechanism and a subtle performance of controlling what you can.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

it's just a shot

“What Happens at Deer Camp”

by William Matthews McCarter

“The best thing about deer camp is you get to start drinking at six in the morning,” Roscoe said smiling that Jello-faced smile of his. He already finished off more than a twelve pack and was rapidly deteriorating into some kind of swamp oracle—eyes poached, the whites blood-shot with road maps of red highways leading to nowhere good.

But it wasn’t just his eyes. No, dear reader, it was the whole sorry spectacle, punctuated by the floral muumuu he was wearing. Yes, you read that correctly. A muumuu. A tropical pattern of hibiscus and palm leaves that made him look like a forgotten relic of a Florida retirement community. Sitting there in the middle of Mark Twain National Forest on that ratty old couch, lost in its matted-up cushions, he bore an unsettling resemblance to his mamma, my Aunt Charlotte, though, to be fair, Aunt Charlotte had never been that drunk. Roscoe leaned forward and poked at his wet boots, which steamed by the campfire like roadkill on fresh asphalt.

Now, I know you’re sitting there, clutching your pearls, blinking at the page in disbelief. How, you ask, did we arrive at this moment? What sequence of poor decisions led to a grown man, drunk and barefoot, wrapped in his mother’s house dress, holding court in the middle of Mark Twain National Forest? Well, I assure you, truth is stranger than fiction. Let’s return to the moment, which, I regret, is about to take a sharp turn.

Not far from the campground, a truck growled down the logging road, bounced over ruts, engine snarling like a rabid dog. The driver, an unfortunate soul with no idea what absurdity awaited, looked out the window of his truck and saw Roscoe—a backwoods prophet in a muumuu who had misplaced both his congregation and his dignity. Whatever thoughts had previously occupied the driver’s brain abandoned ship.

His foot slipped off the gas. The truck jerked off the road and in a feat of physics I cannot explain the man rammed his truck into a tree. Roscoe, unfazed, looked at the truck. The driver stared back at him with the dull incomprehension of a man who had just had his entire worldview forcibly rewritten by a single, horrifying image, like Roscoe had just participated in an extraterrestrial baptism.

Roscoe took a sip from his beer, and said, “Why don’t you take a picture? It’ll last longer.”

And that, dear reader, is where we begin. This was no isolated incident. No moment of foolishness to be laughed at and forgotten. This was merely Act One of a weekend that would unravel with all the grace of a three-legged hound dog on roller skates. So, buckle up, pour yourself a drink—hell, make it a double—and let me tell you exactly how we got here.

What I hated most about deer season was waking up at the ass-crack of dawn. Didn’t matter how many times I did it, it never got easier. On that November morning, my breath curling into the air in little ghostly huffs, I threw my hunting gear into the back of Roscoe’s van—The Kluge—a lumbering, shit-colored beast that reeked of old beer, motor oil, and gas station cuisine. Before I could climb in, Roscoe stretched his long muscular arms toward me and handed me a beer.

“No thanks,” I said. “Still on my first cup of coffee.”

“Suit yourself,” he said. “By the way, it’s official.”

“What?” I asked, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes.

“Imperial is exactly six beers away from your driveway.”

I blinked at him. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m telling you,” he said, gesturing with his half-empty can, “I drank six beers between

the 7-Eleven in Imperial and your driveway, so that's how far it is."

"Most people measure distance in miles, Roscoe."

"Wait a minute," I added, zipping up my orange camo jacket. "You drank six beers in a little over seventy miles?"

"Yeah," he said, "That's about ten beers per mile... I mean ten miles per beer."

"Good to know your math skills are still sharp, Roscoe."

"In a few more hours, I won't be able to count my balls twice and get the same number." He let out a whoop, slamming his palm on the wheel.

"Hey, Scoe," I said, "Are you sure you don't want me to drive? Since you are six beers in?"

"I was driving drunk when you were still shitting in diapers, Sprytle" he said.

There it was. That name. Sprytle. Years ago, Roscoe decided I was always underfoot, too fast, too annoying, like that little shit from Speed Racer. Despite being practically grown, seventeen and getting ready to graduate from high school, Roscoe still thought of me as that little bastard from Speed Racer.

"Deer camp's only two beers away," Roscoe continued.

"And to think," I said, "I thought the metric system was complicated."

The Kluge rumbled down the road, past old, dilapidated farmhouses, the early morning sky stretching wide and empty above us. We were heading for Beaver Slide, a place deep in the National Forest where the trees were thick, the roads were shit, and the deer were plenty. Just after we veered off the state highway, Roscoe said, "Fish me another Falstaff out of the cooler."

I dug in the ice and pulled out a Budweiser. I didn't know how it started, but when Roscoe got a buzz going, he called every beer Falstaff. Falstaff was a St. Louis brand, but I hadn't seen any in years. Didn't matter to Roscoe—Budweiser, Busch, Pabst, all of it was Falstaff if he was half-lit.

"When's Uncle Jake getting here?" I asked.

"No idea," Roscoe said, flicking his cigarette out the window. "Said he had shit to do. To be honest, I'm surprised he's even coming."

I knew what he meant. Little Jake—his son—had been killed in an accident a few months back. It was the kind of thing you didn't talk about because there weren't words for it.

"Gram says it ain't natural," I said, watching the trees whip past. "Parents are supposed to outlive their kids."

I thought back to deer camp three years ago. Big Daddy was dying in the hospital. It was the first time he hadn't been with us and the place felt hollow, like we were just going through the motions. Uncle Jake spent the entire weekend getting wasted, barely even pretending to hunt. I figured this year would be no different. Too much booze, not enough hunt.

The road twisted deeper into the woods. The white oaks and sycamores thickened, whispering their old secrets, and the gravel cracked under the weight of the tires. We were almost at camp. This was a harsh place, unforgiving. But the hunt began and ended in the wild.

We dropped the cooler beside the fire pit when we got there - a ragged circle of old river stones, blackened from years of burnt-out beer cans, half-melted into the dirt like relics from some ancient ritual, the ghost of last season's mischief still lingered in the air.

"Let's get firewood," Roscoe said.

We scattered, cracking twigs under our boots, pulling dead limbs from the underbrush. The kindling caught easy—tiny sticks curling into embers, a thin line of smoke snaking up into the trees. But we needed something bigger.

Roscoe suddenly stopped and yelled, "Come here and look at this."

I walked down by the pond, about twenty yards through the fire break, to where he was standing. And there, like some abandoned altar to the redneck gods, sat an old recliner and a couch—ratty, brown, mildewed beyond reason, moss creeping up the sides, stuffing torn out like something clawed its way free. Someone dumped them off there.

"Help me carry these back to camp," Roscoe said, already testing the weight of the couch.

"Why?"

"Because I forgot to bring lawn chairs, and I want to sit my ass down."

I sighed but grabbed the other end. It

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smelled like old dogs and rain-swollen wood.

Once we dropped our salvaged furniture beside the fire, we went looking for logs. The rule in the National Forest was simple—only use what’s already on the ground. Roscoe, naturally, had his own interpretation.

“We’ll help some of it fall” Roscoe said, eyeing a dead tree. He planted his feet, put his broad muscular shoulders up against the tree and gave it a mighty shove. The trunk creaked—then collapsed in a thunderous crash, breaking into a dozen jagged pieces. The birds overhead exploded from the canopy in a panic.

I shook my head. “You’re a goddamn conservationist, Roscoe.”

“Just wait till your old man gets here with the chainsaw.” He grinned, “He’ll really start helping things fall down.”

The fire grew fast, snapping and cracking, sparks shooting up like fireflies on speed. Roscoe flopped onto the couch, testing the springs. They groaned beneath his weight, but it held. He dug in the cooler, pulled out a beer, and popped it open.

“Better get you a Falstaff.,” he said, “These beers ain’t gonna throw themselves up.”

I took one, feeling the damp can against my palm, and popped the top. The woods hummed with the sounds of the wind through the trees. The fire spat and crackled, coughing up embers twisting against the bruised sky, the last traces of morning retreated into an afternoon thick with woodsmoke. The air clung to us, settled into our clothes, into the fabric of the busted couch where Roscoe sprawled like some low-rent deer camp prince, one boot hooked over the armrest, rolling a cigarette – and it wasn’t tobacco.

The Bic flared, a quick burst of orange against Roscoe’s grin, and he took a long drag before passing it over. The old radio crackled, cutting in and out, a steel guitar moaning through the static between frequencies. I took a hit, held it deep in my lungs and then exhaled slowly, watching the smoke drift up to meet the sky.

The silence settled in, broken only by the slow burn of wood collapsing into embers. Then we heard it. A truck. Low and steady, that deep-bellied growl of a V8 winding its way up

the road, crunching through the gravel, pushing through the stillness like it belonged there.

“Your dad is here,” he said.

“Great,” I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

“He still mad about Operation Scarecrow,” he asked?

“No,” I said, “It’s deeper than that.”

“Gram said he didn’t know how to act like a dad, and I didn’t know how to act like a son.”

“Well, you have been living with Gram since you were born,” he said.

Josh’s truck barreled into camp, raising a rooster tail of dust that rolled over us in a slow, dirty wave. The tires crunched to a stop, and for a second, the only sound was the slow tick of the cooling engine. Then the door swung open. Josh stood for a moment, taking it all in—the couch, the chair, the fire—then shook his head, like he’d expected nothing less.

“You two really bringing the goddamn living room to the woods?”

“Yeah, we stylin’ and profilin’, cuz,” Roscoe said, that shit-eating grin splitting his face.

Josh didn’t answer; just started unloading. First, the heavy-duty cooler, followed by the canvas tent, the rifle case—handled with a little more care—a couple of gym bags, the chainsaw, a Coleman lantern, a case of beer, and finally, ham sandwiches from the Kmart snack bar.

“You brought that .30-06 with that big-ass scope?” I asked.

Josh glanced up; one eyebrow raised. “What the hell else am I gonna bring?”

Roscoe smirked. “You could shoot the nuts off a squirrel at 200 yards with that thing.”

Josh shot him a look. “And yet, somehow, you couldn’t hit a barn from the inside.”

I grinned. “That’s funny right there.”

“Shut up, Sprytle,” Roscoe said.

Josh popped the lid on the cooler, grabbed a beer and cracked it open. He drank deep, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Then he set his beer down, grabbed the chainsaw, and jerked his head toward me. “C’mon. We ain’t got enough wood for the night.”

This is how it always went. My dad had to move, do something, keep his hands busy. The woods swallowed us whole, the firelight shrinking behind us as we pushed deeper into

the trees. The ground was soft underfoot, the smell of damp earth rising with each step. Josh yanked the cord, and the chainsaw roared to life, splitting the silence wide open. The blade bit into a dead oak, sawdust flying, the air turning thick with that sharp, raw smell of fresh-cut wood. When the tree finally gave, it was slow, almost reluctant, cracking like an old man's bones before it tumbled to the ground.

Josh killed the saw and wiped his forehead. "Grab what you can," he said. I hoisted a couple of thick logs, still warm from the sun and hauled them back to camp. Roscoe leaned back on the couch, half-asleep, a joint burning between his fingers. Josh cracked open another beer, settled into the chair, the chainsaw beside him like a trophy, like something conquered.

Josh never could sit still for long. Always had that twitch in him, like a coiled spring waiting to snap. Then, with a grunt, he hauled out the biggest Dutch oven I've ever seen and sat it down by the fire pit.

I smirked "Chili dogs?"

"It's Friday night," he said. "Tradition." Then pulled out a slab of ground venison, onions, cans of tomatoes, kidney beans. He had it down to an art—precision, repetition, ritual. Even a spice rack tucked inside a Ziploc like he's running some survivalist Waldorf Astoria. He yanked a folding table from the truck bed, set it up, and started heating the Dutch oven. He sliced onions and peppers like he's gutting a deer—slow and steady, with no wasted movement. The scent stung my eyes, mingled with the first sizzle of venison hitting hot iron.

"Sprytley!" Josh called, tossing an empty beer can at me. I flinched. Roscoe cackled.

"Goddamn it," I said.

Josh smirked. "Still jumpy as hell. What, you still scared of the hairy biped?"

Roscoe grinned, "Hell yeah, Sprytley. You remember shaking in your boots while Big Daddy spun stories about Bigfoot, the hairy biped? How it waits for dumbass kids who wander too far from camp?"

Been coming out here since I was five. Too young to hold a rifle, too small to be anything but a tagalong, but that never stopped Grandpa and the others from dragging Jake Jr. and me to deer camp and scaring us with Bigfoot stories.

I grinned despite myself. "Yeah. Scared the hell outta me. He swore that thing was out there, watching, waiting. Used to tell me it went after kids who whined about being cold."

Josh grinned. "Didn't he say it comes after boys who don't gut their own kills?"

Roscoe leaned in, eyes glinting. "Or maybe the ones who cried when they shot their first deer?"

They both looked at me, waiting for the old embarrassment to creep in. And yeah, I remembered sitting by the fire, staring into the woods, swearing I saw something moving beyond the firelight. Big Daddy poking the embers, his voice low, serious—the way a man talked when he wanted you to believe. Said the hairy biped was real. Said people had seen it out here. That it smelled like rotten meat, walked like a man but wasn't one. That it waited, just past the trees, watching. Jake Jr. and me, sat there wide-eyed, shaking—not from the cold, but from the stories. The older guys laughing, drinking beer, feeding the legend.

Josh stirred the venison, firelight flickering across his face. "Still out here, Sprytley. I bet he remembers you."

"Maybe he's got a taste for chili dogs now," Roscoe added, grinning through a curl of smoke.

"Y'all are full of shit."

"Could be," Josh said, voice easy, stirring the pot. "But I wouldn't leave camp tonight."

"Yeah," Roscoe said, "You never know who—or what—might be watching."

The wind shifted, rustling through the trees. And just for a second, the old feeling crept in—the same one from when the woods felt too big, too dark, full of things I didn't understand.

Roscoe exhaled. "Bet he still hears them noises at night. Twigs snapping. Wind whispering through the trees."

"I ain't five no more. I'm seventeen."

Josh snorted. "Yeah, yeah, we know. Big bad senior now."

"Almost grown, I'm proud of you, Sprytley," Roscoe echoed, smirking. "Too old to be scared of Bigfoot, right?"

Josh stirred the venison, the smell thick in the air—meat and woodsmoke, beer and damp

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earth. Roscoe leaned back, rolling another cigarette with slow, deliberate fingers. I shook my head and took another drink, but the woods pressed in, big and dark and whispering. The stories were bullshit. They always were. But stories didn't have to be true to feel real.

It was damn near dark by the time Uncle Jake rolled into camp. The trailer behind him clattered over the ruts, carrying his old three-wheeler, strapped down with a tangle of bungee cords that looked like a spider's web spun in a hurry. He killed the engine and climbed out like a man on a mission. "Help me get this thing down," he said, jerking his head toward the three-wheeler. "I want to go look for signs before it's too damn dark to see."

Roscoe, always eager to be in the thick of things, hurried over. Together, they unbuckled the straps and wrestled the three-wheeler off the trailer. Then Jake kicked it to life with a growl that sent a flock of unseen birds scattering into the treetops.

"Hop on, Scoe," he said, eyes scanning the tree line. Roscoe grinned and swung onto the back, barely settling before Jake gunned it, sending them both bouncing down the old logging road, ruts deep enough to swallow a tire if you weren't careful.

"The chili will be done by the time you get back," Josh yelled, watching them go.

"Bet you ten bucks he road hunts all weekend," he said to me, taking a sip of his beer.

"What makes you say that?"

"He brought a damn three-wheeler, didn't he? He won't get a hundred feet away from that thing the whole time we're out here."

"You sound like Big Daddy, always going on about how you 'can't road hunt, it ain't real hunting.'"

Josh snorted. "It ain't. The deer hear that thing coming from a mile away. They'll be gone before he even lays eyes on 'em."

"It's too hot anyway," I said. "They'll be laid up deep in the woods till after sundown."

"That's why we gotta be up before first light," Josh said, stretching out his legs like he was settling in for a long sermon. "Gotta be in the woods at dawn. That's when they'll be moving."

I swore under my breath. It was bad enough

getting up at the crack of dawn, now I had to be up and out in the woods before dawn. Uncle Jake and Roscoe were still out there, bouncing over roots and ruts, the distant growl of the three-wheeler fading in and out moving through the trees.

Josh had the lanterns lit. The tall white oaks, scarred from nails we'd driven in years ago, held them up like old sentries, their light casting long, flickering shadows against the bark. It wasn't dark yet, but the sky had taken on that heavy, bruised quality, the kind that let you know the sun was done fighting for the day. November had a way of swallowing daylight whole. I figured it was about five when I heard the low, sputtering whine of a three-wheeler tearing up the old logging road.

Josh was sitting on the couch, eating a bowl of chili, when Roscoe came into view. He was drenched. Not just damp but soaked. Uncle Jake had caught some of it, his jeans dark with water, but Roscoe—Roscoe looked like a drowned rat.

Josh squinted. "What the hell happened to you?"

Roscoe shot a look at Uncle Jake, who was still shaking water off his sleeves. "I crossed a stream," Jake said, "started climbing the hill, and dumbass here wasn't leaning far enough forward. Bike flipped. Tossed us both into the creek."

"Yeah, and I was the one who got soaked," Roscoe said, peeling off his flannel, "'cause that fucker landed on me."

"You good?" I asked.

"Yeah," Roscoe said. "Knocked the wind outta me, but mostly just wet."

Jake popped open a beer and leaned against The Kluge. He was mid-sentence, explaining what little he had gleaned from his reconnaissance mission before their impromptu swim when Roscoe suddenly let out a long, guttural, drawn-out: "Fuuuuuuck."

Everything stopped. Even the fire seemed to flicker in confusion. Jake straightened up. "What's wrong?"

Roscoe stared at a black trash bag like it had personally offended him. "I went by Mom's to grab my hunting gear before I picked up Sprytle," he said, voice tight. "Couldn't find

a gym bag, so I stuffed everything in a trash bag."

Jake frowned. "Okay..."

"By that time, I'd had about five beers, which was about three too many for Charlotte." That was what he called his mother when she was in one of her moods. "I was in a hurry to get the hell outta there before she really laid into me, and I grabbed the wrong bag."

A silence settled over us, thick and waiting. "So..." I said. "What do you have, then?"

Roscoe exhaled through his nose. "Mom's goddamn laundry." Josh doubled over laughing, nearly spilling his beer. Jake chuckled into his bottle, shaking his head.

"We can dry your clothes by the fire," Jake said finally, wiping his mouth. "Lay 'em on the

rocks. In the meantime, see if there's anything in there you can wear."

Roscoe cursed under his breath, hauling the trash bag into The Kluge. A few seconds later, the sounds of violent rummaging filled the air, punctuated by a couple of goddammits and at least six motherfuckers. Then, out of the darkness, Roscoe emerged, his six-foot frame swallowed up in a faded floral muumuu. The sight of it, the absolute absurdity, hit all of us at once. We stared.

Roscoe, unfazed, adjusted the neck, then let the sleeves flutter in the cool evening air. Then he sighed and said, deadpan as hell: "Somebody bring me a fuckin' Falstaff." ❖

"One Day"

by Valentine Mizrahi

I held the jigsaw puzzle to my chest as I was buzzed through, each door hissing behind me, entrapping me, and making me forget that it was sunny and warm outside. David was waiting for me on the couch outside his room. He was gaunt in his white t shirt and sweats that had no drawstring, slides on his feet. "Get me out of here," he said. "Look what I brought you," I said. I wanted to say, oh my god, how did we get here, this is destroying me, how will I survive this. I joined him on the couch. "Mom," he said, "I want to prepare you. One day you will lose me. Maybe not today or next month or next year, but one day." I stared at the shoes on my feet trying to unlisten. I held out the jigsaw puzzle. This was always something we loved to do when he was younger. His brother and I would clear the dining room table, turn over the box, find all the edges and shout with glee when we found a corner. This one had a picture of a black lab, like our dog, in the middle of a flower shop. "You are not allowed in my room," he said as we both walked in and left the door halfway open. Quickly we dumped the box on the desk and started to work. "Here's one," he said, "and here is part of the dog." A staff member approached to check on David. I took two steps behind the door, David and I locked eyes. When we were in the clear, he smiled at me, like we got away with something and for that moment, he was my boy again, flashing me a smile that transformed his face into someone I recognized and cherished more than anyone. It must have been mealtime because a stench of cafeteria food flooded the air. Visitation was over. "Don't leave me," he said. "Work on your puzzle," I said. I'm going to do everything to get you home." I walked to the first of the buzzing doors. With every step away from him, I was reduced. I got out into the sunlight and shielded my eyes. ❖

"Cold Calls"

by David Rudd

"It's that time of year again, Jude," said Grandpa. "Many happy returns."

Judith always enjoyed hearing from her granddad. Ever since she was old enough to hold a phone, he'd rung on her birthday. He lived up near Trondheim, in the frozen north, "just south of Father Christmas," as he'd once told her. She'd only met Grandpa once, when he'd come for a short stay, but the two had instantly become soulmates. She'd have been about six at the time.

Now it was Judith's fifteen birthday, and the two chatted like old friends. They seemed to share a wry perspective on the world. As they chuckled together, Judith found her recently acquired mask of cynicism falling away.

It was only towards the end of the call that they became more serious, as Judith asked him about his health. He put on a brave face, but Judith could detect a frailty in his voice. "More exercise is what I need," he said. "I'll volunteer to pull Santa's sledge this year!"

Judith laughed but, when she stopped, there was only silence the other end. "Grandpa? Grandpa?" she repeated, her voice rising in concern.

"There, there, Jude," he eventually said. "Don't fret. Forgot my English for a moment!" They laughed again, but he sounded exhausted.

It was time to round off. Normally, she'd signal her mum at this point, to see whether she wanted a word. Almost always, though, Mum would shake her head, backing off, just as she always ran from the ringing phone. Today, though, her mum had removed herself straight after breakfast, claiming she needed to go into town.

"But it's my birthday!" Judith had said.

"Well you're quite old enough to be left on your own," Mum had replied, although she'd been abandoned to her own devices for years.

"You missed Grandpa," she told her mum when she returned, adding, "once again."

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"Course I miss him," replied her mother, taking off her coat.

"No, you missed Grandpa's call," insisted Judith.

Her mother went as rigid as a scarecrow. "But that's impossible, because ... well, Grandpa's no longer with us."

"You mean, because he lives abroad?"

"No, I mean, Judith ... because he's dead."

"That's rubbish!"

"I'm sorry, I was just about to tell you. I've been at the solicitor's with Uncle Joseph."

"But I spoke to him – Grandpa – less than an hour ago!"

"Nonsense, Judith!"

"I did!" Judith realised they were dropping into one of their interminable spats. She nipped it in the bud, leaving the room, though not without a parting jibe: "You never tell me anything, unless it's forced out of you!"

Why was her mother so difficult, Judith asked herself yet again. Always so cantankerous! But this time, with Grandpa, she was just wrong. He might be dead now, but an hour ago – obviously – he hadn't been! Perhaps there'd been an error with the time zones ... although even that didn't compute. Perhaps the Norwegian authorities had informed the family that Grandpa was seriously ill, and the message had got mangled in translation. But even without this conundrum, Judith was more generally incensed at her mum's behaviour. Why hadn't she been honest about what was going on?

Later that day, after a tense "birthday tea", her mum attempted to patch things up, suggesting that she'd only wanted to spare Judith the sad news on "her special day". Judith said nothing. "I wanted to break it to you gently," she added.

"Gently?" exclaimed Judith, once again storming out before she exploded.

Several days later, Mum showed her a copy of Grandpa's death certificate. It confirmed

the date of his death, which appeared to have occurred on the day before her birthday. Judith remained unconvinced. There must have been a clerical error somewhere, she maintained.

The next shock came at the reading of Grandpa's will, where his wish to be buried next to his wife (Christine) in their local churchyard (in Harrogate), was announced. Judith had never known her gran. She'd died of cancer before Judith was born. It was after her death that Grandpa had emigrated, taking an engineering job in Norway.

Eventually, his body was repatriated, and they attended the committal. It was here that Judith had a longer conversation with her uncle Joseph (Mum's older brother), who was unexpectedly candid about the estrangement between Elspeth and their dad. Apparently, Grandpa had always been against Mum's marriage to Judith's dad, Roger. When he subsequently ran off with his secretary (Judith had been seven at the time), Grandpa's reservations had proven justified. Yet, for some bizarre reason, her mum held Grandpa responsible for Roger's flakiness.

As Grandpa's coffin was slowly lowered into its narrow slot, Judith quietly sobbed. But then she imagined that gentle voice of his again – an enchanting blend of Yorkshire and Norwegian: "There, there, Judes. Don't fret, lass." She looked across at her mother, who stood on the other side of the grave, dry-eyed and erect.

#

Four years on, Elspeth found herself alone. Relations with Judith – always a difficult child – had deteriorated, especially after the girl had announced she'd secured a place at the University of Trondheim on an exchange programme. Her daughter had secretly been learning Norwegian, enough to get herself accepted. Elspeth was convinced Judith had done it just to spite her. Her daughter had also become involved with Sven, a "Nordmann" who was on the same course. Elspeth had met him in the summer vacation, when they'd visited England. She'd tried her best, but really! Since then, the family had hardly been on speaking terms.

For Elspeth, the shock of *déjà vu* was everywhere. Trondheim itself, for a start. Why on

earth had Judith chosen that place? Although she knew the answer to that one. As for Sven, Elspeth thought him totally wrong for Judith, but then she recalled that her own father had said the same about Roger. ... Could her judgement be at fault? Surely not.

Being on her own so much, such matters increasingly pressed on Elspeth. Her old sense of rightness and rectitude had weakened. Doubts filled her head daily, turning into disturbing dreams at night that nibbled like rats at her mind.

Ever since she'd overheard those intimate conversations between Roger and his secretary on the extension, Elspeth had hated the phone. She'd always got Judith to answer it, as "Mummy has a thing about cold calls." Elspeth laughed as she remembered how Judith used to think they were known as "cold calls" because they came from the frozen North. In fact, it was a view that Elspeth partly shared after her father moved to Trondheim following the death of her mother. Elspeth had found herself on her own, a one-parent mother with no one to talk to. She'd felt deserted yet, for some reason, couldn't bring herself to phone and open up to her dad who, somehow, she held responsible for her isolation. That's how Judith became their go-between and, as the father-daughter bond cooled, that between father and granddaughter strengthened. And now Judith had deserted her, too. Elspeth deeply regretted her flippant remarks about Sven.

But none of that explained why Elspeth was now receiving her own "cold calls" – although, nine times out of ten, there was no one on the other end. It was as if the phone itself were seeking revenge, sounding off at all hours. She'd tried letting it ring, but that was more unnerving, and, of course, it just might be Judith trying to get back in touch, to tell her mum she'd been right all along; that Sven – like Roger – was a rat. So, in the end, Elspeth would pick up.

Although the one-way communication made the calls colder than ever, Elspeth was always relieved to discover there was no one on the other end. Was it just a problem with the connections, she wondered. At first, she just hung up, but af-

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ter several weeks, she ventured a few questions: “Hello?” “Is anyone there?” “Judith, is that you? Did you want to tell me something?”

Over time, Elspeth became more eloquent and began to find consolation in talking. It felt as though she was making contact, yet without any tiresome interruptions or disagreements. She could set her own agenda and, over time, found herself articulating things she’d bottled up for eons – things she’d never made explicit even to herself, let alone others. It was like a confessional but without the judgmental eaves-dropping.

Slowly, Elspeth began to look forward to these cold calls; just so, she found the term increasingly inappropriate. The calls were quite warm and soothing, especially as there was no actual caller at the other end. Of course, she could as easily have raised the phone receiver any time and confided her thoughts to the dialling tone, but, somehow, it was not the same. There was something about the jangling phone that opened a unique space for her, one where she felt listened to, without interference.

Over a period of months, Elspeth had managed to address a number of issues involving all three generations of her family. The phrase “airing one’s dirty laundry” was not one she liked, but she agreed with the sentiment. She preferred an ironing analogy: ridding garments of their wrinkles before folding them neatly into a chest of drawers. Whatever the analogy, the calls were therapeutic. She felt lighter, more relaxed. Now, when the phone rang, she positively ran to it – rather than, as formerly, diving in the opposite direction.

Then, one day, after a long confessional call in which she finally felt herself at peace with her unhealthy past, a fizz of static seized the line. Elspeth distanced the waspish noise from her ear and was about to hang up when the white noise resolved itself into a metallic voice. “There, there, Ellie,” she thought it said. “Don’t fret.”

Tears sprang from her eyes and splashed down her cheeks. No one, apart from Dad, ever called her Ellie! Phone in hand, she stood motionless, trying to think of some way of prolonging the connection. Finally, she gave in,

but didn’t put down the receiver. Instead, she batted the cradle bar then dialled Judith’s number.

She felt the need for dialogue with a live human. Perhaps she’d tell Judith that she, her daughter, had been right all along: about Grandpa, but probably about much more. She might even tell her about that last call, one that had been the opposite of cold. ❖

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.

Young women carrying equipment up to the room where I planned to relax. It is my folks’ beach house, and this is the top floor, mostly storage, but lots of light from windows, doors and skylights. That’s why the women are here – one is an artist, and another is her student. The rest are friends and helpers. I explain that they are welcome – I will move out of their way. The furniture can be moved out of the way as well, I would be happy to help. The main artist, who has taken off her clothes – she is thin and muscular like a Greek statue – and wrapped herself in a robe, says that won’t be necessary. I feel like a fool for offering. So for reasons I cannot explain, I ask them to watch me do something cool. I go out on the deck – the “widow’s walk”, and tell them that this is something I learned in Karate. I never took Karate, but did classes in Tai Chi for years. So I’m lying to impress. And I run and step up on the railing and jump off the third story of my parents’ house, down to the front yard, where people are walking by with their dogs on leashes.

Bizzy - cyberspace

“And Then There Was One”

by Adam Aldrich

I’m thinking back to when I was a child, to a time when I was adventurous and wild. My best friends back then were Billy, Zack, and John, with our favorite activity being to play football on a lawn.

We’d also loved to go bowling, play baseball and hockey, and fish, and felt that for four all American boys, we’d gotten our every wish. We’d spend our summers hanging out at the river or the lake and would play in the winter snow until our fingers would ache.

We’d catch frogs, ride inner tubes down the river, and fly kites, we’d go camping, roast marshmallows, and enjoy s’more delights. The ‘Four Amigos’ is what we’d called ourselves during that glorious time, which was an innocent era that was largely free of crime.

As times changed, we did as well, continually growing up over the subsequent years, discovering more about the world at large as we all grew and changed gears. Elementary school led to middle school and that led to high school and college, in turn, and as we’d segued through girlfriends, degrees, and jobs, we’d discovered a lot to learn.

Before long, girlfriends became wives, jobs became careers, and we all became fathers, with the joyous trials of parenthood being all consuming and overshadowing life’s daily bothers. Just as we’d done as boys, we’d tried to spend as much time together as we possibly could, enjoying trips to the pub, Las Vegas, and ball games more often than our wives thought we should.

There were also many occasions when our families had gathered together for special events, as well, such as Fourth of July, birthday, and New Year’s Eve parties during which we’d whoop and yell. Over the years, as time passed by, we’d shared a lot of laughs with one another, supporting ourselves through good and bad times with the affectionate love of a brother.

There was the time when John got in a car accident and broke his legs, with the other guys and me then occasionally fixing meals for him, including his favorite, steak and eggs. The accident wasn’t his fault as that he was driving within the speed limit and being cautious, when a kid chasing his ball ran out in front of his car and made John nervous and nauseous.

As he’d frantically stomped on his brakes and tugged on the steering wheel with all of his might, John had managed to safely swerve around the boy, but was then presented with another fright. Towering over a cracked sidewalk where it’d loomed, a mighty oak tree had stood tall, wise, and strong, and John had realized that his tires’ squeal on the asphalt might be his swan song.

Like a vicious, white whale, John’s Cadillac had leapt the curb and speared the humongous tree, with the smashing and tearing of his car’s metal frame wailing out like a banshee. Upon arriving, we’d watched as the paramedics had pulled John out from his smashed-up car, knowing that after his recovery the accident would leave him with more than one physical and mental scar.

As brothers do, we’d then made every effort to get John healed up and back on his feet, but had still ribbed him about his accident whenever he’d set off the airport metal detectors and made them tweet. Ultimately, we’d ended up nicknaming him ‘The Tin Man’ from the character in ‘The Wizard of Oz,’ and whenever the pins in his ankles had set off the detectors, we’d all given him a round of applause.

Then there was the occasion when Billy got arrested for driving drunk, with Zack, John, and I then bailing him out of jail and recoiling because he’d smelled like a skunk. He’d apparently hit one as he was being pulled over by a Trooper and thought it dead, but the skunk

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didn't die immediately and repaid the favor back, instead.

Billy had been worried sick when he'd pulled over and had felt like a disgrace, his situation worsening when he'd exited his car and the skunk had skirted him in the face. When we'd gotten Billy home that morning, neither his wife nor his daughter had wanted to be anywhere nearby, with his daughter freaking out when she saw his condition and the awful odor causing her to cry.

The craziest occasion, however, pertained to Zack and occurred on the night that he got engaged, when some jerk made a rude comment about his fiancée in her presence and Zack became enraged. Needless to say, Zack had immediately demanded an apology for his fiancée and walked over to the man's table, but when the man had angrily refused, and with everyone in the restaurant watching, the situation had quickly become unstable.

The air had suddenly charged electric around the two men when the jerk hurled more insults out, which had then caused Zack to punch him in the face as the patrons began to scream and shout. That's when the jerk's three friends had jumped up from their chairs and leapt into the fray, which had then caused Billy, John, and I to rush to Zack's defense and make them dearly pay.

A violent tornado of punches, kicks, holds, and throws had suddenly exploded and devastated the room, with furniture, dishes, noses, and bones being broken and contributing to the gloom. As expected, it wasn't long before the cops showed up to arrest the beaten group of sorry sinners, but by the fight's end we'd defended the honor of Zack's fiancée and had emerged victorious as winners.

As the sweeping river of time navigated us through rough waters, winding channels, and placid eddies, we'd reveled in each other's company, had lots of laughs, and supported ourselves through a love which steadies. There then came a day when the first of several hammer blows had fallen heavily upon our heads, the type of torturous news which rocked our worlds with agony and kept us awake in our beds.

John had turned forty-eight that year and was enjoying his favorite breakfast one morning with his wife, when his history of eating steak and eggs had caught up with him and robbed him of his life. Many years of eating this meal and other red meats had instigated a massive heart attack, which had then caused his weary heart to go wildly out of rhythm and fatally out of whack.

Numbly standing aside as his shiny coffin was lowered into the gloomy depths of his grave, our tears had been washed away by the torrential rain as we'd all done our best to be brave. One of our beloved brothers had departed and would travel on this newest journey alone, causing Billy, Zack, and I to then experience the worst kind of grief which can be known.

Just two years later, as we were doing our best to be supportive 'uncles' to John's children and spouse, Zack had tragically died in a horrific fire while rescuing his family as it'd burned down his house. His subsequent funeral had cruelly deprived Billy and me of one last opportunity to see our brother's face, with his cremated ashes being housed inside an ornate and expensive vase.

Billy and I'd stoically moved on with our lives afterward and had treasured each other's company even more, when his lifelong smoking habit inspired cancer to take his life in a ghastly manner to abhor. Whereas John and Zack had each died as the result of a sudden and unexpected death, Billy had deteriorated terribly, the grim specter of death only relieving him of his tremendous pain after he'd suffered unbearably.

Now I find myself recollecting all of the joyous times that Billy, Zack, John, and I'd shared over the years, my fond and treasured memories of our adventures warming my soul and helping me conquer my fears. Lying in the hospice bed as my frail life withers away and I discuss our brotherhood with my son, I take my final breath, tell him I love him, smile, and say,

"And then there was one." ❖

CONTRIBUTORS

William Matthew McCarter is a writer from Southeast Missouri. His work has been published in *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *Midwestern Gothic*, and *The Steel Toe Review*.

Dr David Rudd is an emeritus professor who, after 40 years, turned from academic prose to creative writing and found fulfilment. He has published around 60 stories, 21 of which are to be found in his 2024 book, *Blood Will Out*, and *Other Strange Tales* (available through Amazon and elsewhere). Three of these stories were first published in *The Blotter*.

Valentine Mizrahi is a first time contributor in *The Blotter*.

Adam Aldrich writes, “When I’d begun taking writing seriously, I was a single dad, working a crazy graveyard shift, living on a hectic schedule, and was constantly combating a never ending cycle of insomnia and exhaustion, year in and year out. There were times when I’d forced myself to write on 2-3 hours of sleep. Most of that writing was done while sitting within my car at a stop-light, awaiting my kid’s release from the school day, sitting within the crowd at one of my kid’s school performances, standing in line at a store, etc... Even so, I’d always found that, although it was extremely difficult to get started, once I’d gotten the ball rolling, I was able to produce some worthy material. I even wrote a short story about the life and times of a manhole cover, once! I’d been sitting within my car on a baking hot day, that was over 100 degrees, with the ac not working, and was awaiting the arrival of my kids at the end of the school day. As that I’d only gotten two hours of sleep, earlier, since getting off of my graveyard shift, my mind was completely bereft and barren of creative ideas. That’s when my eyes had fallen upon the manhole cover that was within the middle of the street that was before me, thereby catapulting me on to writing the story, itself. For me, it’s a lot like surfing. You’re sitting there on your board, awaiting the big wave, and determinedly pushing through the process of writing, when a gigantic wave of creativity swells beneath you and propels you toward your goal on the crest of imagination. Before you know it, the frustration of writer’s block falls to the wayside and you’re barreling along at break-neck speed, writing away like crazy!”

Bruce Baldwin is an artist in Cary, N.C. and has graced us with his art in previous issues, and we are all better for it. For information on purchasing art contact Bruce at brucebaldwin798@yahoo.com

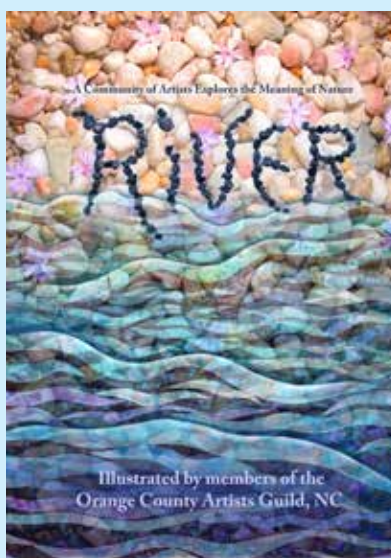


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