

*Tempered Steel, C. Hope Clark,  
Phil Juliano and The Dream Journal*

# The Blotter

November 2012

MAGAZINE



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## "Secession. Or Cessation."

Lately, I've been rethinking my positions. For example, I have heretofore believed that public figures were generally smart enough to do most of the things they were elected to do, and that people will select candidates wisely if offered a reasonable choice; that those same public figures were proud to have won their positions in open elections, and enjoyed being role models for those that they represent; and business people made products that we needed or at least wanted, and assisted us in our purchasing decisions based on need and our ability to afford them. If something turned out to be a mistake, with science showing us the corrected way, the scientists and business men worked in harmony with one another to bring about change in habits and styles. Most people preferred to work at something they like doing or are able to do pretty well, and usually make the best life choices available to them. Publishers pick through their slush piles, searching for the finest literature. Computer manufacturers give the people the newest, most brilliant technology. Athletes run, catch, swim, shoot, ride, kick and/or hit as well as they are able. Dentists have no higher aspirations than attending to the whiteness of your smile. Actors deliver their best performances on stage and screen, and singers give even the birds a run for their money.

I know better, I really do. Public officials occasionally choose poorly. Private individuals sometimes attempt to influence those choices to their own ends. People aren't always concerned with the ramifications of their actions. Publishers are limited by time and energy and athletes get tired of it just like other folks. Perhaps there is a flaw in my premise that people are basically good. That people are basically kind. And that kindness is basically...good enough. But the truth is most people are kind of good, but mostly basic. They think about themselves first and often, and if kindness happens to be good for them, well, *good for them*. Is this good enough? I don't know. I do know that even the gentlest hound will pack up and tear open the coop. Old friend Trey wandering home with down-breath is not a new notion. We tend to bite kith and kin as often as the stranger and we do swallow our seed-corn if it's not guarded. We occasionally lean towards a "let the night shift guy clean up aisle three" laziness. Or is this societal fatigue? Are we all reporting up the chain of command to General Malaise? What's the point in working well, working hard? What's the point in voting for the least foolish in the lineup? Wise men fall under the spell of rhetoric. Politicians lose the point of being in public service. Bricklayers tire of squaring corners. Although I've still an idealistic optimism for folks who become doctors, chaplains, and asphalt-road-repairmen - the maddest of mad skills, used wisely to benefit each and every one of us.

Still, groaning beneath the burden of evidence I declaim that our civilization's high point took place during my life, and that it wasn't all that high. Some departmental research shows it to be the fall of my freshman year in high-school. *Pioneer* wending its way towards the edge of the solar system. The last men on the moon. A light at the end of the tunnel in Vietnam, the culmination of anti-war demonstrations and other concerted efforts of good citizens of the US and the world. The beginning of the kicking around of a corrupt presidential administration. The release of "Pong."

And although technology and medicine made further, rather titanic strides during my adulthood, there is a great *meh* in my soul about it. The Internet is a vast field of manure with magnificent slices of chocolate cake sprinkled around. Medicine is managed by Insurance in the same way dessert is managed by a mom with no sweet tooth. Apple's brilliance is the telecom industry's burglary. Facebook is a block party you can't bring your greenbean casserole to. And all the hand-eye coordination you developed in your video-game youth doesn't amount to a cup of spit on your resume.

I wonder if we've wandered so far from one another that we can't find our ways back again. It happens, you know. People get lost all the time. Anger and opportunity take over. Our opinions are made public, in caps. Then one of us says something that painfully pricks the tender flesh of a friend – a good friend – and that friend says nothing, but files the pain away in that place where we remember all offenses against us, all the grades we didn't deserve, all of the Christmas presents that didn't measure up to what we wanted or at least thought we wanted. And so the wound, not slight but not serious enough for this kind of result, gnaws and festers until the friendship spoils. So we try to analyze what happened – how did we break this friendship? Was it so fragile and we just didn't know? Were we insensitive, unfeeling dolts? So in order not to repeat such a thing, we become more attuned to our words, our actions. Eventually, we all tiptoe on eggshells. No one can open their mouth without anticipating an angry rebuttal. We flinch inwardly, hoping that nothing will happen. Is that any way to hold a conversation? Hoping for no response at all?

I suggest calm, but I could be wrong.

Meanwhile, here at home, old branches tumble down onto the driveway when a front blows through, and squirrels are temporarily puzzled by such changes. Frogs that took up residence in an abandoned wading pool and squatted all summer in the shade of a tulip poplar's thick green canopy have packed their bags. The cool-weather flowering weeds grow tall between the spring-blooming azaleas and forsythias, and I am equally proud of them. It is the tail-end of cicada season, and their Skilsaw song drowns out all other. I'm not fond of that tune, but their noise does preempt the neighbor's Saturday evening party tunes. Cicada beats Ke\$ha's or Rihanna's misogyny every time. Whoops! There I go. Even after all my preaching, I can't keep a thought to myself.

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CAUTION

*"One look is worth  
a thousand words"*

*F. R. Barnard*



## An Excerpt from "Low-Country Bribe"

by C. Hope Clark

O-positive primer wasn't quite the color I had in mind for the small office, but Lucas Sherwood hadn't given the decor a second thought when he blew out the left side of his head with a .45.

As the county manager, I identified Lucas' body for the cops, and gave the poor man a quick moment of silence with thoughts to a higher power that he be let through the pearly gates. He died in a place he didn't like, doing work he wasn't very good at, having no place else to go. No mother gives birth thinking her child will end up like this. The unexpected note scrawled across his desk pad gripped me. "Sorry, Slade." Apologizing for what, I didn't know.

Damn it, Lucas. What were you thinking?

He was a fifty-year-old divorced alcoholic, an agricultural technician five years short of a dreaded retirement. I was the closest thing to family for him, but couldn't dial his phone number without looking it up. What forgiveness did he think I owed him?

Three days later, I stood poised at the door of Lucas' office, hand on the knob. Yellow crime tape blocked the doorway to a room resembling a Tarantino movie set. A cleanup crew waited in the lobby. I'd received the

official nod from local authorities to enter his office and have it cleaned. Finally, I broke the spell and opened up the room. Painful or not, we ran a business that couldn't stop long for tragedy. People depended on us . . . on me.

My signature line read Carolina Slade Bridges, County Manager, United States Department of Agriculture. I made government loans on behalf of the American taxpayer to the rural residents of Charleston County, South Carolina. Problem was, I spent more time trying to get the money *back*. Poverty made repayment difficult. My job made for stories the average urban dweller would never comprehend.

Charleston County contains the stylish historic city, which everyone associates with culture, Southern charm, and plantation blue bloods living in antebellum splendor overlooking The Battery. No one envisions small-time farmers scrambling to make a living on Rhett Butler's stomping ground, but the string of islands along the coastline offered them a reasonable subsistence with the support of federal monies. I admired their pride and tried to ignore their plight, so I could sleep at night.

On the Friday after the suicide, the three remaining members of my staff expected directives from me. A pile of work awaited us, and I assigned tasks attempting to create a semblance of normalcy. Normal lasted about five minutes.

"How can we just sit here like nothing happened?" said Ann Marie. My middle-aged, wide-eyed clerk always wore a look of surprise on her face, as if she'd just witnessed a miracle. For some reason she adored me, and her ritual Monday morning sugar cookies were a thank-you for taking the time to explain instructions to her. Her perpetual smile dimmed on rare occasions, and talking about Lucas was one of them.

Jean Sparks, my office manager, sat with a ramrod spine and a steno pad. "Honey, life goes on." She tossed her coifed head of ink black hair locked with sprayed lacquer.

"He seemed so lonely," Ann Marie said, her soft pout bordering on tears.

"He didn't do sh—"

I cut Jean short with my stock, green-eyed "don't start with me" glare.

"He's gone," I said. "Let's honor him with our prayers, but remember the work's stacking up." I turned to



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Miss Mouth. "Jean, how far behind are you with *your* deadlines?"

My return to discussion about workloads settled them down. We covered the basics, and with a residual mourning of a minute and a half, we adjourned minus the usual chatter about kids, mall sales and local politics. Felt funny without a man in the room.

Lucas Sherwood was death number two. A year ago, almost to the day, my easygoing boss Mickey Wilder drove to one of the islands and never returned. I'd immediately stepped into Mickey's job, but sensed he continued to peer over my shoulder, my perpetual mentor. His leadership spirit still hovered in the office. Based on a string of personal factors I wasn't privy to, the cops had labeled his disappearance a probable suicide. Then they'd moved on. We remained behind, our respect for Mickey shaken, thanks to the whispers and innuendo. At least in Lucas' case, the staff had found closure.

I didn't. Mickey made no sense. I still expected to see either man walk into my office, Mickey telling me to get out of his chair.

By ten, phones rang and clients trickled through the door. I remained in my office dissecting complex applications. Slim chance upper management would replace Lucas, considering the minor contribution he made in the grand scheme of things. He inspected property

held as collateral for the millions of dollars in loan portfolios. I would assume his duties, which meant counting heads of livestock, inspecting equipment and monitoring crops. Mud-on-my-shoes work. Duties in the outdoors I'd genuinely come to miss since becoming the boss.

Ann Marie poked her head around the door. "Slade, the Rawlings are out here to see you."

Slade was my maiden name going back to my great grandmother from Mississippi. Only my Mom and Daddy called me Carolina, and nobody who knew me used my married name, Bridges. I loved my heritage, but I didn't love my husband. Slade was the best title for all concerned.

"Did they say why?" I hated drop-ins. I liked order. Especially since I'd seen so little of it lately. I slid the oversized paper clip out of my hair. I'd been too busy to schedule a trim, and the thick dark strands didn't take well to a curling iron once they overlapped my collar.

"Jesse said he has a check to give you, but he's short on his payment." Ann Marie preferred to make nice with the public and direct problems to me, since I possessed a reputation for squeezing money out of rocks.

I stood and smoothed out the wrinkles in my khaki slacks and tugged my sweater straight. We worked with rural folk, and suits

screamed authority. My closet held an assortment of JC Penney separates, simple to match and easy to throw on, using the same pieces of jewelry, a watch, my wedding ring, gold posts and an hourglass necklace the kids gave me for Mother's Day one year.

I walked to the front counter with the undainty gait my mother hated. Plowing the lower forty, she called it. The eight-foot wooden barricade stood as a buffer to the disgruntled. We aided many people in the rural community and loved doing good deeds, but money issues brought out the worst in some. Thus the counter.

"What can I do for you, Jesse? Ren?"

The brothers always arrived together, Jesse doing the talking. Ren was the eldest but the simplest, incapable of completing eighth grade. Dark hair draped thin and limp on his shoulders. He often repeated his brother, as close to a shadow as a being could get. His denim jacket hung long and loose, and his ball cap sat cockeyed. He was tall but chose not to appear so, his stoop making him shorter than Jesse. Rumor was he'd been conceived via some form of incest. I fought to hide my pity.

Jesse, however, was another tale to tell. The broad shouldered hog farmer grinned with a hint of the romantic, flashing white teeth and peppermint breath from candies he carried in his pocket. Here stood a comedy of errors in fashion. He usually traipsed into the office in fresh denim overalls, a John Deere cap and a tan and black hounds tooth sport coat he'd inherited from his daddy. Wearing the coat was respectful of



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my position even though he towered over my average height. I reciprocated that respect.

About my age, Jesse had finished high school and held a universal, good-ole-boy quality that commanded a smile and a handshake. Not the cliquish redneck sort, but the down-to-earth kind one slapped on the back. A man to discuss the weather and commodity prices with, and admire for taking care of his brother.

I felt Jesse held a mild affection for me since I'd exercised some mighty creative financing to keep their farm afloat. They'd lost money three of the last five years, and I'd found a means to stave off liquidation each time.

Jesse chuckled and gestured for me to lean closer. I obliged, straightening my V neck to block his view of my garden-variety 34Bs, not knowing whether to expect a joke or a plea

for a payment extension. Either way, we'd laugh, discuss it and tell each other to have a great day.

"You know how I ain't been making my payments, right?"

I nodded.

"Well, I've got a great idea on how to fix that."

Oh boy, here we go. Some of my clients concocted schemes of borrowing more to make more. In the agricultural world, more debt meant a quicker demise. I waved my arm toward my office, but he shook his head and curled his finger, drawing me in like an anxious kid with a secret to tell. Ren glanced at me and smiled. I returned it, and he tucked his head, embarrassed.

Since Jesse was prone to bouts of silliness, I whispered back, "I'll give you some advice. Just bring in the money when you sell your hogs instead of telling me they keep dying. We both know you've sold some on the side."

"Listen," he said, with a face like stone. "I ain't jokin'."

I kept smiling at the round-faced country bubba, wondering if he played a different tactic to skate paying. Maybe he'd listened to too many boys at the bar. "I'm not joking, either, Jesse. I'd hate to see you lose your place because you don't pay your bill. What would Ren do?"

A calloused hand, fingernails caked with God-knows-what, grasped my arm. A strong whiff of porcine manure filled my nose as Ren drew close. I'd forgotten. He got frantic at the concept of living anywhere but on that small farm with his hogs. I patted his hand.

Jesse loosened Ren's grip on me with a tender tug and handed him a peppermint. "It's okay, buddy." Ren exchanged a grip on me for the candy.

Jesse turned back and spoke flat and cool. "Sorry, Ms. Slade. Come on outside. Got somethin' to show you."

"Somethin' to show you," echoed Ren.

"We can talk here," I said.



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"Please, ma'am. Need you to see my truck. Might help you understand."

Ren reached up again and yanked me toward the counter door. To keep from stumbling, I obliged him, and once on the other side, I pulled away. "I'm coming, Ren," I said loud enough for others to hear. Ann Marie glanced up from her desk, analyzing the threat level. I shook my head and waved, assuring her things were fine.

The brothers led me outside, into the clear autumn day. Ren peered back repeatedly, snickering and gesturing for me to come. My flats crunched on the crusher-run gravel.

Thirty feet away from their truck, I stutter-stepped as I caught the sight of dead flesh. Ten feet closer, rot smells accosted me. Jesse leaned over the tailgate. Ren mimed him. I held a yardstick length back.

"Dead," Jesse said. "Not sold. Not stolen. Dead."

Eight, market-sized feeders lay crammed in the truck bed, making hundreds of flies orgasmically happy. Some pigs appeared dead for a couple weeks. Others just a day. A sow lay eyes wide and bloated while a young shoat had lost much of its hide, dark, rotting muscle exposed. "What'd the vet say?" I asked, trying not to inhale.

"Ain't showed him. He'd charge, and I can't afford him."

And so the cycle went. We'd never be sure what killed the animals, but we could count on the next payment being short.

Back at the building, my staff stood at the door along with a half dozen employees from other offices in the county agriculture complex. Carcasses tended to draw a crowd.

Jesse drew me by my stretched sleeve to the truck bed, my face barely a foot from the nearest body. "There's ten thousand dollars in it for you," he whispered, draping his arm around my shoulders. "If you find a way to get me the Williams' farm. We can iron out the details later . . . in private." He winked and clicked his tongue. "If you know what I mean."

Panic coursed through me at the altered state. Like hearing that your churchgoing mother liked bourbon straight and sex on top.

He'd offered me a bribe.

"Don't be silly, Jesse," I said. "What's gotten into you?"

The Natural Resources Manager, Sid Patten, stepped out from the group and headed toward us.

"Just think about it," Jesse said, his eyes on Sid. "We can chat another time. I got to get to the feed store before they close." He eased his arm

away and regained his six foot two height, sneering as if he'd won the state lottery.

A plastic smile held my composure intact.

His voice relaxed and amplified, the regular Jesse returned. "I only got a little over a thousand dollars for my sales this week, ma'am. As you can see, I lost eight more hogs. Need to know you'll help me on this, Ms. Slade."

Ren handed me a piece of paper from his overalls, the check smeared with various hues of brown. I gingerly took it, fingering the cleanest spot on one end.

"Jesse, if you've got more money, just pay up."

Reaching over, he rubbed his finger over the back of my hand. "I can't pay if I ain't got it, Ms. Slade."

I yanked my hand away.

Sid reached my side and made a hesitant last step at the sight before slapping Jesse's arm. "Hey, man. How's it going?"

"Just great, Mr. Patten. Needed to show Ms. Slade what happened to my pigs."

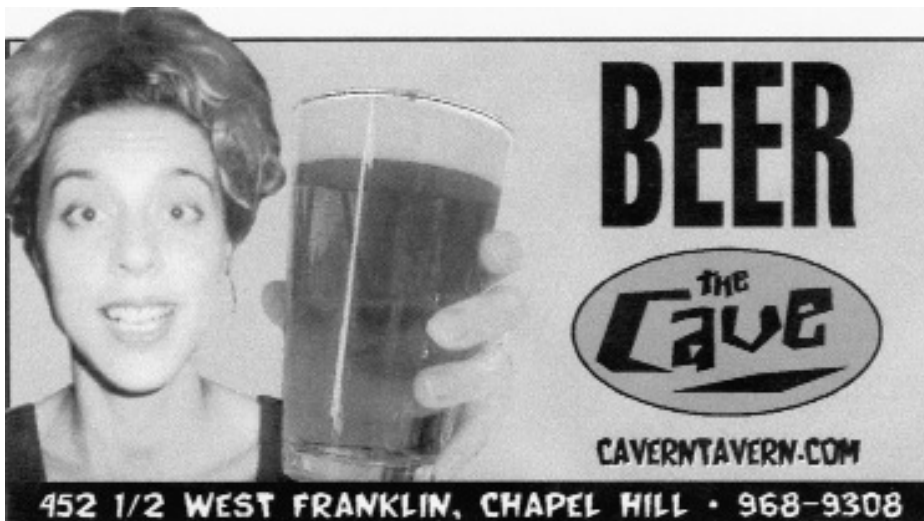
"I see that," Sid commented.

The farmer lifted his hat and ran a hand over thick locks of black hair. He slid the faded, broken-in John Deere cap on from front to back, and adjusted it in place—a move saying, "I got to go" in country talk. Then he buttoned the sport coat like he'd just stood from a pew in church.

"Y'all have a nice day now. I'll be in touch about our payment arrangement, Ms. Slade." He bowed, touching the brim of his hat. He stopped and turned at the truck door. "Shame you losing Mr. Sherwood. Kinda sad when someone kills himself. I'm just glad it wasn't murder, or a crime or somethin'."

Ren bowed and opened his door. "Kinda sad."

The men entered the truck cab, slamming squeaky doors. The truck moved away, creaking with its load,







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grunting as it hit the dip at the road. "What the hell was that about?" Sid asked, a hand rubbing his chin, the elbow resting on his other crossed arm.

"Another excuse why he couldn't pay. I made the mistake of saying I didn't believe him." I took his arm. "Come on. The excitement's over. Time to get back to the grindstone."

The crowd returned to work, happy for the afternoon distraction. Back inside, I wrote a receipt for Jesse's check with a slight tremble in my hand, tossed the payment in the safe for the next Treasury deposit.

No mistaking his offer: money in exchange for abusing my position. If I didn't report it, I was as culpable as if I'd taken the bribe.

The loan manager in me wanted to scold him and return to dealing with the funny, lackadaisical farmer I knew. The hairs bristling on my arms, however, told me to tread care-

fully. Government officials like me easily wound up on the front page of national papers over simple matters. Stupid misunderstandings got feds fired, sometimes imprisoned. A manager in Calhoun County lost his job over something bribery related, and last I heard he worked at a feedlot in St. Matthews making half his former pay.

I hurried back to my office and sat down to think. Whether anyone found out about this bribe offer was up to me. Would it be so bad if I didn't report it? This was so out of character for Jesse. How he'd find ten grand was beyond me.

Instincts told me to forget the conversation. Federal law told me I didn't have that option. A stupid, pissant dilemma.

On the other hand, my red-headed assistant manager loved problems, especially when they fell on my plate. I felt Hillary's eyes on me before I saw her tall lanky frame leaning against the door. So stinking predictable.

"What went on out there?" she asked, a hand twisting one of her diamond ear studs. She wore them with every outfit. A gift from a

boyfriend whom we all knew well.

"You know Jesse. All mouth and excuses. I'll have to go out to his place and count hogs. They crawl up and drop dead in his truck now. No telling how many are missing."

She threw me a sly smile. "So what did he whisper in your ear?"

"He said I looked damn good. That's what all the farmers say in my ear." I moved toward her and she stepped back. I smiled and shut my door.

Hillary hated having a female boss, especially one ten years her junior. It wasn't my design to be younger, higher ranking and more affluent, but she acted as if I were the architect of the stumbling blocks to her life. We'd endured several heart-to-heart talks about her attitude, but even so, she stood next in command in this little kingdom of ours. Some days I bit my tongue, remembering her rough upbringing as a foster child, with a husband who beat her when his tractor trailer rig hit town. But if she heard one word of my conversation with Jesse, she'd use it to her benefit. An opportunist all the way.

I paced my office, a ground level room measuring twelve by twenty with three floor-to-ceiling windows on one side. My desk sat at one end. A long table, perpendicular to the desk, hosted meetings with loan committees, applicants and my staff. A cheap prefab table next to my chair supported my computer, manuals, and management books on

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### Best In Show



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by Phil Juliano



how to be perfect at my job.

The room's length made for good pacing, and a hard look showed the rut in the carpet. Walking beat the hell out of sitting still and rocking my leg like someone needing to pee. A quiet way to vent my frustrations without exposing my doubts to my staff.

A half-joke, half-serious insinuation about a measly ten thousand dollar bribe seemed minor in comparison to what happened to Lucas, but I had to consider the consequences of not reporting it. Why did Jesse have to turn wild boar now, of all times?

My record was as close to pristine as you could get, and a black mark on it concerned me more than a hog farmer. Recalling the touch of his rough finger on my skin sent a shudder somersaulting through me.

I didn't need this right now. Too many threads unraveled in this office already, more than I could control, especially with an upcoming audit by the bean counters in Washington. No time for weakness, either. I'd instinctively learned to hide mine, thanks to a husband who relished sticking a verbal knife in anyone's soft spot. Just like Jesse'd tried to stun me with pig death. My hide stretched thick over my emotions.

Decision made. Somebody somewhere would consider me an absolute idiot for calling in the authorities, but my career and well-earned reputation were more important than anyone's half-assed opinion. Rules were absolute; that's the way I was raised. If I followed the rules, I'd be just fine. That's how life worked.



## Five Minutes With: C. Hope Clark, Editor, *FundsforWriters*

*And because you've been very, very good, we thought you might like to pretend that you just went to an excellent reading, and now you'd like to talk to the author. And we've done all the hard work for you...*

*Ed: Just what made you slightly crazy enough to want to be a writer?*

C. Hope Clark: The independence. I own the ideas and the wording, and my choice of coordinating those pieces creates the ultimate end. It's power for the recluse in me. There's something empowering about being able to control destiny, and when I strive hard, over several years, to create a tale . . . then hear from readers who were moved, changed, entertained, or impressed by my effort. It's then I feel I've touched the world and left my fingerprint behind. That emotional aspect of writing has traveled with me since my youth when I'd secretly meet with a girlfriend and dream about writing a novel. There is something magical and powerful about coming full circle with a story. It's creativity in its purest form. Just a blank screen and me . . . no tricks, tools, degrees or steps. Just my brain, my thoughts, my choices. Yes, I'm responsible for the screw ups, but that means I'm also solely accredited with the successes. There's strength in knowing I make or break my future in this business. I love the scary side of being responsible for all results.

*Ed: What has been your greatest a-ha moment?*

CHC: Oh, I got this! Ten months before *Lowcountry Bribe* came out (it was contracted and in edits stage), I was presenting on grants for writers at the Blue Ridge Writers Conference in Blue Ridge, GA. The conference organizer scheduled a social at the arts council for attendees to formally meet the faculty

members, of which I was one. All of us were asked to do a reading. In my 12 years of writing and presenting, I'd never done a reading! It scared me silly, but I read an excerpt from Chapter One of *Lowcountry Bribe*. I was last, following Robert Brewer, an editor from *Writer's Digest Magazine*, a multi-published young adult author, and Scott Owens from NC, editor of *Wild Goose Poetry Review* and poetry professor. Here I was a commercial type via *FundsforWriters*, with no book credits to my name. I did my ten-minute reading, attempting to fluctuate my voice properly, and halfway through, realized people were no longer milling about. They were watching, listening. When I finished, they clapped loudly, and admittedly, I blushed. But what rocked my world was the moment Scott Owens walked up to me and told me that was writing was remarkably good. Again embarrassed, I told him this was my first attempt at fiction. He said it didn't matter and that it was obvious that I'd been working with words for a long time, trying to write well, and to be proud of what I'd achieved. I floated on that for a long time. For the first time, even after having acquired an agent and landed a contract, I sensed maybe I'd done this fiction thing right. The thrill was amazing.

*Ed: Name one thing a character of yours has done that you wish you had done in real life.*

CHC: While I am reserved and reclusive, I'm a strong-willed person. So is my protagonist. I can't think of anything Carolina Slade did that I have not done short of killing someone, which of course I never hope to do. I would, however, like to know I had the guts of Wayne Largo to risk

## The Blotter

his job for someone he felt a deep loyalty for. But again, I don't know if I'll ever get a chance to test my strength to such a level. . . to take such a dare.

*Ed: Will you ever get around to doing that one thing? Why or why not?*

CHC: I hope not, but something tells me I would do what I had to do. Like Slade, I have few good friends, but I'm fiercely loyal to those few. As a former federal employee who had a little bit of clout, I fought many a good fight for friends, for coworkers, for causes, for justice, risking my reputation time after time doing what was right . . . even if it meant stepping outside the rule books. I wanted some of that in Slade, and ultimately the thread of Lowcountry Bribe turned into such a theme. . . to look outside the rules to solve a problem bigger than yourself.

*Ed: Favorite writing tool?*

CHC: For writing outlines, I want a standard ruled notepad and a Zebra, fine point pen. I own a dozen of them and write them dry so as not to waste one. For everything else, I want my full-sized PC with a large screen. I abhor laptops, and while I love my notepad for checking email while I travel, I wouldn't dream of writing on it. I like a big screen, big keyboard and wireless mouse - all spread out. My keyboard has sticky letters on keys because I've worn off

the original lettering. I'm really simple in my writing needs.

*Ed: Share one habit or personality quirk that, if you were not a writer, might have gotten you locked up long ago.*

CHC: I often take a current event and try to spin it out into a murder mystery. . . to include news about stupid decisions made in Congress. I keep up with politics, a residual habit from my federal days when I worked for a political appointee, and when I see a law proposed, passed, or vetoed that goes against my grain, I've been known to fabricate alternate realities, so to speak. If I spoke of such crazy stories as a non-writer, and anyone overheard, no telling who would come knocking on my door questioning my sanity. But as a writer, we are quite gifted at the "what-if" game, and those spins, twists and turns can get quite elaborate, and they can often serve as a venting tool.

*Ed: Share five minutes of your writing day: Your first five minutes sharpening pencils and adjusting your notebooks; or the last five when you're feeling that flurry of creativity end with a flourish; or the five that are most notable to you.*

CHC: Let me choose the first five minutes first. I rise each and every day eager to jump on the computer. I immediately open two email accounts - Gmail and my web email

([hope@fundsforwriters.com](mailto:hope@fundsforwriters.com)) and search for one of three things: 1) emails from my agent or my publisher; 2) emails from freelance queries; and 3) emails from my readers - both FundsforWriters readers and now my fiction readers. These are real people, and I'm fanatical about responding ASAP to people. Can't think and settle into myself to write otherwise. I then open Twitter, catch up on news in it, and maybe reply to a few comments. Then I check Amazon for any new reviews for Lowcountry Bribe. I fall into FundsforWriters work for several hours. I'm nonfiction by day and fiction by night.

The last five minutes involve writing/editing one of several Carolina Slade mysteries. I write until I'm just too darn tired, which is usually 2-3 AM. Then I check email once more, and if there's a personal need from a reader, agent, editor, I stop and respond. I leave myself a list of what needs my attention the next day, straighten the notebook and desk calendar side by side (making sure I noted the day's accomplishments), put out any sticky notes that require urgent attention, then power down. Then no matter what time of the night it is, I have to read one or two chapters of a mystery, or maybe a mainstream novel. I adore reading for entertainment.

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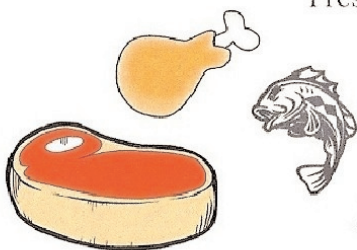
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*Ed: What one question have you always wished someone would ask you?*

CHC: Am I frustrated at all the obstacles to writing and getting published?

*Ed: What would your answer be?*

CHC: No, not at all. A decade or so ago, gatekeepers in the forms of agents and publishers dictated who was published. Many people were rejected, and they had little to no option to publish other than vanity presses which proved debilitating then. I was rejected several times back then, and I'm glad I was. My work wasn't ready, and the rejections were valid. That adversity toughened me, made me try harder, made me edit over and over, each rejection telling me I hadn't arrived yet. When I hear writers fuss about how rejection is someone else's fault, I want to smack them. It's a reality check to be rejected, and it's also a gift from God, fate, whatever you believe in.

Lightning doesn't strike the manuscript, but those rejection letters have the same effect, as if ordering you to go back to the keyboard and try again. Lowcountry Bribe's first draft is 14 years old. I look at it and

laugh. I'm so happy so many people rejected me . . . until the time was right.



## The Blotter Magazine's

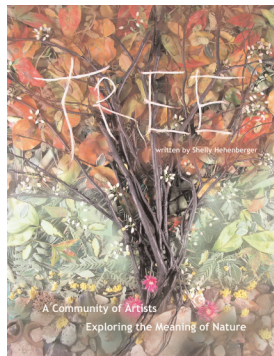
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## The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

[mermaid@blotterrag.com](mailto:mermaid@blotterrag.com)

### Tornado Dreams

Recently I have been having recurring tornado dreams, very clear, full of fear dreams, not quite sure what they mean dreams. They are similar - each with an ominous tornado dragging chaos as it gets near. I watch the tornadoes approach from a window in my basement in total awe-stricken fear.

The tornado arrives and hits hard like a battering ram. It hits so hard that I wake up breathing heavily and wondering where in the hell I am. I lie there wondering what is this dream really trying to tell me? Is this about a tornado or something even worse that I won't let myself see?

Over time the tornado dream has become pretty easy to figure out. It's not the tornado. It's the fear. The fear is what the dream is about. The fear of the unknown, the subconscious fear of what's going to happen next. It's the fear of the future that I face in a fully conscious context.

M. B. Owen - Chapel Hill



I am the mother of a severely injured soldier from the Iraq War. My son, Ret Army Sgt Scott Stephenson and I started Tempered Steel to combat the negative and critical ways in which his scars and amputation have been perceived by the general public. Our goal is to educate the public on how to

support our nation's newest generation of wounded military members.

Our first hand experiences to the responses my son's injuries evoked on civilians and military alike, compelled us to break down the barriers between wounded and disfigured veterans and those who only see their scars. I have witnessed true heartache as my son has been stared at; shunned and even demeaned by the very public he fought for.

Tempered Steel is determined to change those misconceptions of our country's wounded warriors through education and awareness. Tempered Steel's wounded warriors will be speaking at schools, community groups and events, corporate gatherings and Tempered Steel gallery showings.

The name, Tempered Steel, comes from bracelets that my son and his squad leader had made in honor of each other. They basically state "not brothers by blood, but brothers by surviving the fires of hell". There could not be a more accurate statement. All of our wounded have "survived the fires of hell" and came out better and stronger than ever hence, Tempered Steel.

Our wounded warrior's scars are a visible and permanent testament to the physically traumatic experiences each has endured. Yet there are hidden injuries that scar and are just as debilitating. Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are specific examples of these. Our warriors have opened up their hearts and minds to enlighten the public to the humanity within the warrior, the dignity within the scars, and the power of the human spirit.

The beauty that is seen within the images of the photo introspective "Honoring the Wounds of War" is so profoundly and spiritually moving that those who have seen it are changed forever. When you see the love between a father and son, the beauty of a scarred arm holding a perfect baby, an amputee proudly displaying his military decorated prosthetic leg, a veteran with his tattoos celebrating his mother, an IED (improvised explosive device) burn survivor in his "Got Burns?" shirt, a facial scarred veteran with no ears clowning for the camera, you cannot not be touched.

The photo introspective debuted at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in November 2010 and was on display at the Muchnic Art Gallery in Atchison, Kansas from May-July 2012. The photographs taken by photographer Micaela Bensko are a remarkable addition to Tempered Steel and we are constantly adding to the collection and look forward to creating a traveling gallery displaying the images and accompanying stories for everyone across the country to experience the beauty behind the scars and wounds of war.

As the mother of one of our country's more seriously injured soldiers, I encourage our nation to take the time to read and explore more about Tempered Steel, Inc. and our Wounded Military Members. Take the time to look past the scars and into the hearts of those who have chosen to serve and fight for our protection.

I urge you to share our web site with as many individuals as possible. We look forward to working closely with everyone in celebrating the dignity and beauty of our country's heroes.

Sincerely,

Luana A Schneider





# Call for Entries!

## "The 2013 Laine Cunningham Novel Award" The Blotter's *Fourth* Annual Long Form Fiction Contest for Novella and Novel length works

1. The purpose of our contest is to provide a venue for writers to have their work read and commented on by our editors and judges. Additionally, the winner of this contest will have his/her work published here on these pages. And last but not least, the winner will receive a monetary prize! (Award monies are provided by the prize sponsor and the entry fee for the contest helps offset The Blotter's costs.)

2. Our pre-reader judges are intelligent and highly proud of their educations. Our final judge is smart, well-read and fiercely possessive of her personal space. She gets to be the final judge and as Pop says, "there are no ifs ands or buts about it."

3. In a world besmirched by foolishness and scandal, transparency is very important to us, and we make every effort to eliminate any conflict of interest situation from going down in our contest. Blotter volunteers and their family members and/or employees are prohibited from entering our contest.

To enter the contest, please submit your work with a \$25 entry fee by check or money order to: The Blotter Magazine, 1010 Hale Street, Durham, NC 27705. Entries must be received between November 1, 2012 and February 28, 2013 (you see, we're already giving you an extension, so don't put it off!)

Your entry must contain the following: no less than 10 pages and no more than 20 pages of the opening of your novel or novella, (or subject/character-connected short story chapbook) typed & double-spaced, without your name. On a separate cover page type your name, snail-mail and e-mail address, telephone number, the title of your novel or novella and a one page synopsis of your novel or novella. Remember, you have to have the entire book written, so that if and when you win, you can show us the rest! Sounds easy because it is!

**BONUS:** Enter the writing contest AND get a year's subscription to The Blotter for only \$30! (Regular annual subscription donations are \$25 total and you don't even get to enter a writing contest with that price!)

Well, now. \$650 in cash prizes, plus books and other fun stuff we've been accumulating around here that we think has value. All placements, including honorable mentions, will receive an award certificate, proof positive of your success as an author, suitable for mocking your sophomore English teacher, who always wondered how it was that you graduated at all.

Our contest will be run in line with the rules of ethics and mechanics recommended by the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, as outlined in their 2006 monograph on the subject. You can't view for free, but you may purchase the monograph entitled "Publishing Contests: Ethics and Mechanics" through the CLMP at <http://www.clmp.org/about/monographs.html>. This is the document we have used in coming up with the rules and conditions of this contest.

So that's it, then - now get to work!

### CONTRIBUTORS:

**Phil Juliano's** comics can be seen online at [bestinshowcomic.com](http://bestinshowcomic.com). \*\*\* **C. Hope Clark** is Editor of FundsforWriters [www.fundsforwriters.com](http://www.fundsforwriters.com), one of Writer's Digest's 101 Best Web Sites for Writers - 2001-2012. She's author of the Carolina Slade mystery series, of which *Lowcountry Bribe* is her most recent, and she lives on Lake Murray in SC (jealousy!), drinks bourbon (love her!), and raises Dominiques and Orpingtons (if I have to explain, you're just not in the club...) Learn more at [www.chopeclark.com](http://www.chopeclark.com) and [www.bellbridgebooks.com](http://www.bellbridgebooks.com) \*\*\* **Micaela Bensko's** work has been seen in national publications such as *Brides Magazine* and on *Martha Stewart Living*. She has been featured as a leader in her field by Professional Photographer Magazine and appeared on KCAL/CBS 9 as a digital photo expert. She is currently writing a book on photography and commits herself to the mentoring of students by regularly visiting classrooms to share the passion of photography. Based out of Los Angeles, her work takes her around the globe, but her roots are firmly grounded with a husband and four children. She proudly supports the **Iraq Star Foundation** and **The Tempered Steel Organization**. Bensko is also a member of the Santa Clarita Habitat For Humanity **Homes For Heroes** Advisory Board as well as the Los Angeles Army Grassroots Community Advisory Committee. \*\*\* **Luana Schneider** is Executive Director/Co-Founder of **Tempered Steel Inc., The Stories Behind the Scars and Wounds of War**, a 501c3 non-profit Charity located at 16039 274th Rd., Atchison, KS 66002 (913) 370-0238, (800) 294-5039, <http://www.TemperedSteelInc.org> <http://www.TemperedSteelInc.net>

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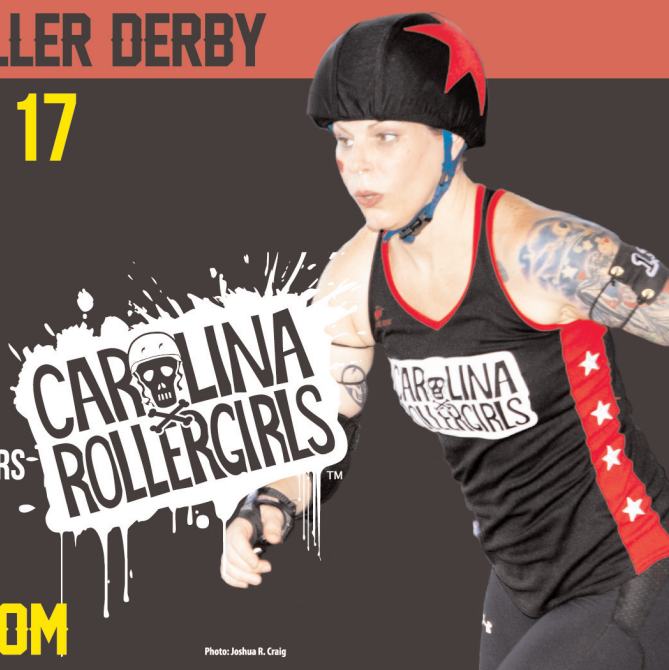


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