

*A Little Comfort Reading: Marsha Temlock and A Lorenti,
Phil Juliano and The Dream Journal*

The Blotter

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MAGAZINE



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FRONT COVER, "Might as well
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"Lessons and Decisions"

My oldest wants to be able to walk by herself across the university campus to meet me at the car in the church parking lot. I am no longer required for such a propitious journey, either as guide or guard. I've already told her no. The reason comes to my lips in terse syllables: the world is a strange place. I live in a college town and I don't know everyone and I am...*careful* around strangers. I avoid eye contact as I walk along a sidewalk...well, that is I don't, but that's what I've taught my daughters. How to carry their purses, which they don't carry yet. How to not be a potential victim. A lesson that needs learning.

For what it's worth I admit the obvious: I'm overprotective. Hell, I'm the east-coast distributor of overprotective. In my defense, I took on the assignment of stay-at-home Dad without a job description, at the entry level pay scale. I always knew that it was more than change diapers, feed and water regularly, deliver and pick up on time. That was, not to be coy, kid's stuff. Making sure a child brushes their teeth, doesn't cross the street in the middle of the block, practices their piano, learns their times tables, is one thing. Call it the hammer-and-nail approach to parenting. But there was also, if you will, real education. Finding poetry for them that was meaningful. Drilling into the kernels of things to find understanding. Answering why whenever it was asked. Showing what is by introducing what came before. Listening to the music. And I love doing that. Love in a way that redefines love for me, because it changes my comprehension of what has been valuable in my life. What is my real legacy. (For a writer with expectations this is called a *Hello* moment. An epiphany, if you will.) So maybe this is the real gift, I think, given and received simultaneously.

"Dad, you're not the boss of me," clicks awfully tinny in my ears. I'm really not trying to be, at least I think I'm not. Samuel Clemens said that humans have to be taught and re-taught how to be human. Everything I know, or think I know that is, as they say nowadays, age appropriate, I have taught her. The poetry of W. B. Yeats. How to shoot from the left side of the basket. The joy of watching for the Pleiades meteors at two in the morning, and scary movies at two in the afternoon. Eating a good meal with the fewest dirty dishes. The comfort of an old leather flight jacket. But also all of those other things. How long division isn't terribly hard and is totally necessary to figure out a pitcher's earned run average. The beauty of an aria, even in a language you don't understand. And an hour is the minimum one should spend reading one book before taking a break.

Now she is a teenager with all of this valuable knowledge on board, and what has changed is that she's using a new...filter, if you will, to discern truth and make decisions. Why? What was wrong with the old filter, the Dad is almost always right and when he was wrong he had good intentions in his process? At the very least, I am a benevolent dictator. Right?

We have wrestled with the rarified *philosophy of the individual* for the entire existence of our country. The individual has inalienable rights, to pursue individual happiness whatever form that may take. Our laws are built so that our rights, mine mostly, and occasionally yours, are protected. Even when we imposed our moods on others (mostly those not considered "us")

we believed that we had the high-road – and the rights of individuals were for the “common good.” Frankly, we may be alone in this thinking that each man can pull himself up by his bootstraps, each of us is responsible for ourselves alone, that the lone man out there in the universe, the prairie, the mountaintop, is the reason for existence. Most of the rest of the universe thinks differently. To each according to his need. The common good. As Hollywood’s benevolent alien says, “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Or the one.” And sometimes we need a friendly fictional character to tell us what’s good for us. Speedy Alka-Seltzer. Tony the Tiger. Right?

Hit the pause button for a moment. What does that mean? Why, when we tend to think of ourselves as being pretty good folks, fair and kind for the most part, do we get all tangled up in our shoelaces about thinking of others *first*?

Is it so different in other modern cultures - admittedly forged in the warm and often terrible fires of thousands of years of trial and error? Their philosophy often appears to be that decisions I (the individual) make actually affect others, and those effects must always be considered during the decision process. Will your garden require too much water? (so that we all will have less?) Then it doesn’t matter if you can afford to pay for the water, you cannot have it. And you must (because socially you want to be part of the group of “us”) not plant such a garden that will require so much water. There are days when I like that and days when it rankles a bit. And anyhow, it isn’t helpful with my problems here on the ranch.

I suppose if I lived in the sixteen hundreds I would tell my daughter that she can’t marry that Quaker fellow in her class and move with him to some place called Massachusetts Colony. For heaven’s sake, I know about how filthy ships get and all about the habits of sailors and where cholera comes from and I know they can’t afford a first class berth with the clean water barrel. Her argument would be? Some rigamarole about personal freedom. And what’s up with that?

So here’s how it stands. My daughter and I went for a walk together downtown yesterday. A man walked up to her and asked her for some spare change, and she told him that she didn’t have any money on her at all, which was true. When he moved on to the next possibility, she took me by the arm with both hands and held close. Which was nice, but not my point at all. Or perhaps partly my point. In any case, I feel like there’s a lesson here, but it can’t come from me.

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CAUTION

*"When I was a little boy,
and the devil would call
my name, I'd say now,
hoodoo!"*

"Ninety-One Days"

by Marsha Temlock

The child stayed behind in the pickup, swirling circles in his spittle on the back window. Claudia could see he had rust-colored hair, the same color as Skeet's before Skeet shaved it off and tattooed a Roman cross where the swing clipped him above his ear when he was seven. The same age as the boy.

Skeet was saying, "He won't give you any trouble, Ma. He's a good kid."

"It's not that kind of trouble I'm worried about."

Kate Timothy came out of her house to get the Clearwater Daily lying on her doormat. She tucked it under her arm, waved. "I see you got company, Claudia."

"My boy, my grandson," she shouted back.

"Well, enjoy."

Claudia watched her neighbor on the right go back inside. Soon all of Sundial Acres would be out, poking their noses in her business. "He

can only stay two weeks, Skeet. Those are the rules."

"Angela will be here. I told ya."

"And what about school?"

"It's winter break. He's got off."

"You're sure you cleared this with Angela?" Claudia could see he was in a rush to leave, but she had to make sure she wasn't stirring up more trouble between them. And there were all those times her son had lied to her. Disappointed her. The gold bracelet that was her mother's. Poppa's watch. She never said a word, but she knew, oh, she knew.

Claudia sighed. "What if she doesn't come for him while you're ... away?"

"Two weeks tops. Angela just needs some time to get things settled. She's got this job in Michigan and is moving in with a friend. It's temporary until she finds a place of her own. But she promised to send

for the kid soon as she's set up." He looked at his watch. "Look, I gotta go."

"All this back and forth. The boy is not a yo-yo."

The neighbor on her left came out. "Go get the boy, Skeet," Claudia said quickly. "Good morning, Marvin."

"Looks like it's going to be a nice day." He stared curiously after Skeet.

"We need it after all that rain. I've got visitors. That's my son and he's brought my grandson who'll be staying a few days."

"What's his name?"

"William. And you remember Skeet. How's Marion?"

"Bout the same."

"Well, say hello for me." She waited nervously while Skeet got the child. As soon as they stepped onto the porch, she opened the door to let them in and turned the lock.

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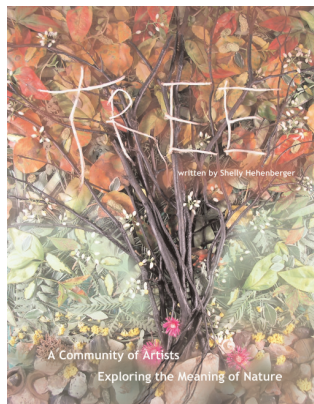
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"You sure I can't give you something to eat?"

"Thanks, but I gotta get back." Skeet turned to the child who'd buried his head in his side. "Listen up, William," he said. "Your grandma, she's the boss now. You gotta listen to what she says. No back talk, understand?"

"When are you coming back?" the boy whimpered.

"Couple of weeks."

"Where you going?"

"I told you, I gotta go to the hospital to get something fixed. Grandma will take you to visit me. Right ma?" He freed the boy from his side and took a step toward the door.

"I'm not making any promises," she said wearily. "Come on William. Be a big boy. Your dad has got to leave now. I'll show you where you'll be sleeping and we can

unpack your things."

William pressed the backpack against his chest. He hung his head, but she could see tears filling his eyes. She shook her head. What was she getting herself into?

"Guess we can unpack later. Meanwhile, how about some lunch?"

"You know your grandma's a real good cook," Skeet said.

"I'm not hungry."

Claudia watched her son. His mouth was twitching. "Well, if you're going, go."

Skeet bent his six-foot frame and pecked his mother on her wrinkled cheek. "Thanks, Ma. I won't forget this."

"I'm not doing this for you, Skeet. It's William here. He's not to blame for your mess." She rested her hand gently on the boy's shoulder. "Come with me, son. I'll show you

how to work the television."

William didn't look up when she put the bowl of grapes on the snack table. He stared straight ahead at the television. *Been like that since his father dropped him off like he was a FedEx package. Can't blame William for being angry; after all, we're practically strangers. I might be the boy's grandmother, but what do I know about him? When was the last time I even saw him?*

Claudia racked her brain. *It must have been three years ago when Poppa died. I sent money so Skeet and Angela could be here for the funeral, expecting they'd stay a few days, but right after the funeral they'd driven to Orlando to take the boy to Disneyland.*

What was she going to do with her grandson for two whole weeks? This was an adult community for seniors.



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The Blotter

Claudia stood in the foyer and stared at the back of the boy's head. Her heart was beating like a tom-tom. In all the excitement, she'd forgotten to take her pills and went into the kitchen to get the dose for the day, swallowed the pink, the yellow, and the white with a glass of water.

She'd make dinner. *Spaghetti, kids like pasta.* She'd make meatballs to go with it. There was ice-cream in the freezer.

It took three calls to come for dinner before William came into the kitchen and sat across from her. He made some tentative gestures to spin the spaghetti around his fork, then put the utensil down and started tearing the paper napkin to shreds.

"Why don't you try the meatballs?" she said encouragingly, placing her hand over his to stop the mutilation.

"I don't like them," he said, pouting. "I don't like tomatoes."

"I see. Next time I'll make them without the sauce. You know meatballs and spaghetti was your dad's favorite. He used to call them bugs and worms. 'Mom,' he'd say, 'can we have bugs and worms for dinner?'" She gave a short, false laugh. This was getting harder every

minute.

"Don't like them anyway."

"Well," she sighed, "how about you skip the main course just this one time and go straight to dessert. I don't usually do that but this is a special day. There's some chocolate ice-cream in the freezer."

"No, thank you, ma'am"

"You don't have to call me ma'am. I'm your grandmother," she said shortly and realized how hard she must have sounded. Softening her voice, she added, "I bet you call your teacher ma'am and got us confused. What's your teacher's name?"

William bowed his head. She waited. He refused to look up. "I was asking about your teacher. What grade are you in?"

"My teacher's name back home is Mrs. Rothstein."

"Back in Brooklyn, you mean. I thought you might have a new teacher in Florida. Did your dad take you to school here?"

"No," he replied. "I'm not staying. My mother is coming to get me and she'd be here right this minute except she didn't come yet."

"Yes, I know. But she is coming, William. Your dad promised."

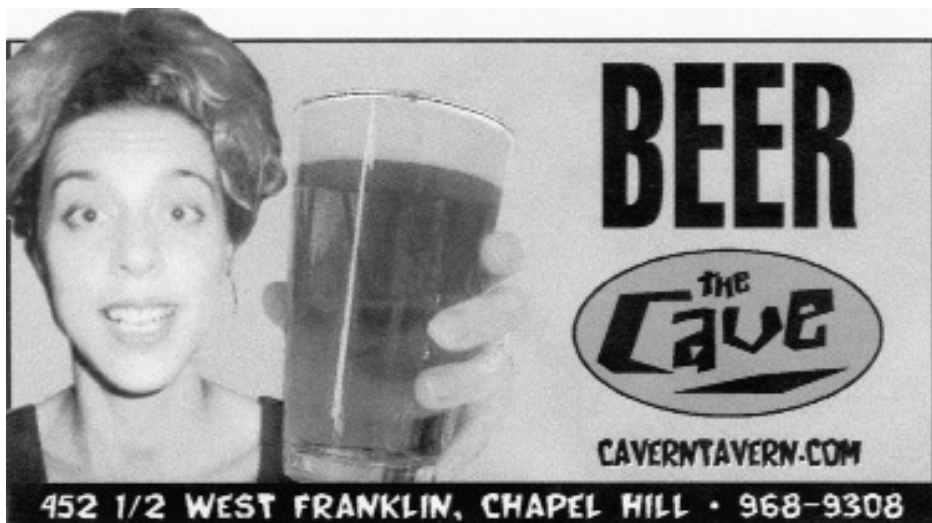
The boy started to cry. Well, she couldn't blame him if he was miserable, could she. Skeet *couldn't*

pull the wool over her eyes. She could understand why Angela gave him the boot. What she didn't understand was what that had to do with the boy. Claudia bit her lip. "You won't be here that long, son, but while you are here, I would like us to be friends. Let's just try, shall we?"

Claudia got up and removed the plates. She put the uneaten portion in a plastic container and put the container in the refrigerator. She wasn't used to throwing out good food. Turning back to the child, she said, "Well, time for a bath and then a half hour more television and then it's shut-eye. I unpacked your suitcase and put your clothes in the bottom drawer in my bureau. Even if it's only temporary, nobody likes living out of a suitcase. You'll sleep in the living room. The sofa bed is real comfy. And I've got new sheets on the bed."

While the boy bathed, Claudia hunted for the booklet about Sundial Acres that was included in the residents' packet given to her and Poppa when they bought the house. It was just as she thought, and she put on her reading glasses to check the fine print.

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She listened for the running water. He'd shut it off like she told him. *Even if I can get away with having William stay longer, what kind of life is this for a child?*

She drew the heavy brocade drapes across the double window that looked out on the series of look-alike pastel-colored stucco houses. The peach, lemon, and pistachio boxes curving around the cul-de-sacs and endless parallel streets that made up the retirement community.

Glancing around her, she took in her surroundings. While the furnishings were the same as the ones she and Poppa had brought from Queens, the place had already taken on a different feeling now that there was a child living there. When she and Poppa sold her parents' house after Momma died and moved to Florida, she'd hoped she could buy new furniture. It would have been like starting over. But Poppa hadn't wanted to waste money. They had to make do with his pension and their social security.

"There's nothing wrong with

the old sofa and chairs," he told her. So she hadn't replaced her mother's lamps and pictures although she'd added a few of her own touches. She'd sold her own furniture. There wasn't much worth saving anyway, she told herself when she got depressed, wishing that her life had turned out differently. Wishing she had better sense than to marry a boozier.

Once a week Claudia played bridge with a group of women in the community. Their homes were light and airy, filled with wicker and chrome. Floridian style. The fabrics and wallpaper were patterned with parrots and ferns, and there seemed to be a run on artificial palm trees.

"I'm sixty-eight," she reminded herself, "and all I ask for is a little peace of mind."

"What did you say, Grandma?" William was standing soaking wet outside the bathroom. Claudia laughed. She'd gotten into the habit of talking to herself. "Nothing, William. Go back into the bathroom and I'll towel you off."

"My goodness you're shivering." Claudia tickled him under his armpits. William jumped. "Gotcha."

William smiled. *You've got your father's mouth and your mother's eyes.*

Poor child.

"You know what, honey? Tomorrow we'll go to the mall. We could eat at the food court and do some shopping for new clothes." It meant digging into her savings but she would get him a new pair of sneakers and maybe some polo shirts.

The child protested when she took the remote and told him it was time for bed. He climbed into the sofa bed and she tucked the blanket around him. Tentatively, she bent over to kiss him, but he hid his face in the pillow.

Claudia stood over him before turning off the lamp on the side table. She whispered to the air, "It's going to be just fine, William. You'll see."

The second time she spoke to



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Angela, Claudia was determined to get a straight answer. The two weeks were running out. "But when do you think you'll be here?" she insisted.

"I'm not sure. He's supposed to be with Skeet."

Claudia knew that William was hanging on every word. She put her hand over the receiver. "Skeet has a few more weeks in treatment." The child jerked her sleeve. "Wait, William wants to talk to you."

"When are you coming, mama?"

"Soon."

"But when?"

"I don't know. It must be fun staying with Grandma."

"I want to be with you. When are you coming?"

Claudia had her hands full trying to distract the child. She sent her grandson out to play and called Skeet. There were still a few children visiting their grandparents, but most of them had gone back home. William was on the front porch playing with the video game she bought him.

Claudia tried to keep her anger under control. "Angela doesn't say when she'll be here, Skeet. He's got to leave. They'll be on my back asking questions if they find he's still living with me. You've got to talk to her. Tell her he can't stay more than two weeks."

"The bitch is living with some black guy. She lied about the job in Michigan. She wants the kid out of the way."

"Out of the way," she repeated, her voice rising. "What am I supposed to do with William?" She glanced out the window. Kate Timothy was out walking her dog. A resident she didn't know was car-

rying a golf bag, headed for the greens. "Can't you get out now? Go to some out-patient clinic?"

"I'm not ready. I got to stay another couple of weeks."

"Another couple of weeks?" Claudia could hear voices yelling obscenities in the background. "What kind of place is that? Why won't they let you out? You're not in prison, are you?"

"Shut the fuck up. I'm done when I'm done, asshole. Sorry, Mom. Bring Willie when you visit."

"I'm not bringing him, Skeet. That's no place for a child. But do what they tell you and get out as soon as you can." Claudia began weeping; for herself at first, then for William. She wasn't weeping for Skeet. He'd brought all of this on himself. It was the second time he promised to stay clean. "All lies," she wept. "All lies."

It's her turn to have the bridge game. She can almost hear what the women are thinking when they see William even though she'd told them Angela is African-American. His tea-color complexion and red hair come as a shock.

Myra Polaski cut the deck before handing the cards to the dealer, Marian Brodie. "How long is he staying, Claudia?"

"He leaves Sunday. Last round. Would anyone like coffee?"

"None for me. Even decaf keeps me up. What a pity Skeet couldn't take off from work and stay with you." Sandra Harrison, who was on the Sundial Acres Board, scanned her cards with one eye on William who was engrossed in a new video game.

"Nowadays they're lucky they get Sundays off. Two hearts. It's up

to you, Sandra." Claudia could feel her own heart thrashing around in her chest. In another two days, William would have to go undercover.

"You cannot go outside," she tells the boy. "Not during the day. Tomorrow morning I am enrolling you in school." She decided that if they get up when it's still dark, she can sneak him in the car and drive him the forty-five minutes it will take to get him to class. Skeet never bothered enrolling the child. "When your father comes home, he'll take over." Claudia has stopped waiting for Angela, and so has William.

She must take precautions. During the day she draws the drapes, afraid William will cast a shadow if he passes too close to the window.

When Skeet was finished with rehab, she insisted he take the child out on weekends. "The child lives like a mole," she says bitterly. "We leave in the dark and come home in the dark to avoid the neighbors." Together they drew up a schedule, but Skeet is not reliable. More than once he has disappointed his son and not shown up.

"Things are tight right now," he tries to explain.

Claudia notices that Skeet's lost weight. He's jumpy, he keeps licking his lips. But he's clean—for now—she assures herself. "Just a minute." She finds her wallet and hands him two twenties. "William wants to see *Avatar* again. We've already seen it twice." She laughs in spite of herself. The second time the 3-D glasses didn't give her a headache.

She reminds William to lie down on the floor of the pickup after she checks that there is no one outside who could see him, and

watches her son and grandson drive away.

Maybe it is her imagination or her nerves. But Claudia can feel their eyes peering through the slits in the blinds. She hears the whispers behind her back. *Claudia Winters is hiding a child.*

She herself is living like a hermit. She gave up her card game and has begged off invitations to go to the movies. There can be no more girls' nights out. To ward off suspicion she went to a charity luncheon but left before the fashion show. Claudia is terrified William will forget what she's told him. He might look out the window or open the door. "Someone might see you," she had explained.

He's just a child living like a fugitive.

Eighty-eight days. Angela has left no forwarding address. She's

abandoned her son and Skeet cannot be trusted. Claudia knows what she must do. She has no choice. She will put William in foster care. She looks up the names of agencies and makes a list. "Tomorrow," she promises herself. "Tomorrow while he's at school. I'll explain the situation and someone will help me find a good family."

That night William falls asleep in the sofa bed, but is woken up by a flash storm. Lightening zigzags across the room. "Grandma," he cries out, but there is no answer. Claudia has taken a sleeping pill. Hugging his teddy bear, William tiptoes into his grandmother's bedroom. When Claudia gets up to go to the bathroom, she finds him lying next to her. His cheek is rosy, his hair moist with sweat.

She cannot go back to sleep. The child stirs, sighs. In the morning, she packs his lunch and, after

dropping him off, she drives to the Child Welfare Office and talks to a social worker.

Back home, she's taken down the gold-banded china that was her mother's. The service for eight is incomplete. Through the years a cup, a bowl, a plate has broken.

"Another plate chipped."

With trembling hands she wraps each delicate plate, each cup in sheets of newspaper and carefully places them in the moving carton. There is the stemware, and the pots and pans. So much to do. So little time. Ninety-one days. The beginning of a lifetime.

The buzzer rings. She looks at the clock. It's her signal. Her grandson will be getting out of school and he will be waiting for her. She must not be late.



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An excerpt from "Death Gets Sassy - A Sassy Boomer Mystery"

by A Lorenti

Preface

Father Paul finished praying the first station of the Rosary, and was ready to begin the second, when the screen in St. Jude's only confessional slid open. Closing his eyes, he silently asked for God's blessing for both himself and the penitent.

A steady voice whispered, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been more than twenty years since my last confession." Father waited.

"Yes? I am here," the priest said softly. Quiet. After a few moments, he peered through the screen. The confessional was empty. Father Paul offered up a prayer that

the woman would return and accept the holy peace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He picked up his Rosary, and began the second station.

Mrs. Rojas, the sacristan, found the journal the next morning. Wrapped in brown paper and tied with yellow yarn, she noticed it under the kneeler in front of the statue of the Holy Family. On the front of the package, written with black marker in block letters, were the words "FOR THE PRIEST."

Chapter One

A contented smile on her face, Sassy closed her eyes and sighed happily.

"More coffee, Hon?"

Glancing up, Sassy put down the mug. "Yes, please, Tasha; and tell Red - again - that he makes the best coffee in the entire state of North Carolina. Oh, and I would love a muffin. I know, I know. Not good for me; but I only enjoy one a week."

"You had one on Thursday, Sassy."

"And your point is...?"

"It's Saturday."

"Really? Only three days? Seems like a week. No matter. Please get me a muffin, and leave the pot."

Sassy poured more coffee into her *Eat at Red's Diner* mug. Tracing the cracks in the yellowed ceramic with her nail, she thought, "This is an original mug." On its side, classified ads for a Lube 'n Groove on East Chapel (out of business.), the Law Offices of Brandon & McConnell on West Fifth (McConnell died in '89), and the Ridgeboro Chamber of Commerce.

When Sassy settled in Ridgeboro 23 years earlier, she asked Red why he chose that name instead of something simpler, like *Red's Diner*.

With an Eastern European's barely concealed contempt for being forced to state the obvious, he replied, "People already know it is



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my diner. I do not have to tell them again. What I do need to tell them is to EAT at my diner."

Since the town of Ridgeboro is home to no more than 3,000 souls, and *Eat at Red's Diner* regularly had a few dozen or more of them dining in or ordering out every time she was there, Sassy was sure Red understood marketing better than most Madison Avenue experts. After that, she began asking him what he thought of her designs. To her credit (and relief), he put his greasy thumbprint of approval on 99% of her work; however, when he recommended a change, she made it. Perhaps "recommend" might be too PC a word for a guy like Red. He usually said something like, "Well, that one's crap," and then tell her what to do to fix it.

Four packets of artificial sweetener, with a generous pour from the ceramic cow creamer, and Sassy was ready to work.

Flipping open a slim laptop her son had given her for Christmas, she looked up at Tasha. "Don't you just love the sleep feature on these things? It wakes right up the second I open the lid. No waiting."

"I wouldn't know" she replied, placing a wicker basket and another mug on the table. "Jimmy has his turned on, in his lap, night

and day. For all I know the thing hasn't enjoyed a wink of sleep since he got it."

"You did tell him if he keeps it on his lap, the heat will slow roast the seeds of his future children, didn't you?"

Tasha laughed, "You bet I did, and he said he didn't care - says when he grows up and gets married he's going to adopt like you did. Probably because I keep telling him how great Luke turned out."

"Yes, well, he wasn't always so great. I remember third grade. A nightmare. I spent more time in the principal's office than the woman did herself. I honestly believe she retired early because of Luke. The good news is when the new principal came in, things settled down. I wonder what he said to Luke the first time he found him outside his office - Luke never told me - but there was no more trouble after that. Thank God.

"That was 20 years ago, Sassy. Luke is a fine, upstanding citizen now." She topped off Sassy's cup, left the pot on the table, and headed over to a couple who had just sat at the counter.

"Like I said, thank God," Sassy mumbled, reminiscing. "I remember that one time Luke drew a chalk outline of a woman's body in

Mrs. Seymour's parking space, and signed it with his initials. Little idiot. Though it made it to the front page of the Ridgeboro Times. Of course, I made him scrub that masterpiece off the blacktop on his hands and knees. Too bad he used house paint instead of chalk." Sassy pulled the basket over, lifted the crisp yellow and white checked napkin, and saw two hot "Heaven Better" muffins inside.

"Two! Are you trying to kill me, Tasha? I thought I was your favorite customer!"

"You are," she replied, nodding her head towards the front, "but Abby's on her way in."

Sassy snatched one steaming muffin from the basket, dropping it on her plate, waiting to eat until her best friend in Ridgeboro joined her.

Abby was a pretty woman. Every male in the place - from four-year old Harley Mitchell all the way to his 71-year old grandfather, Joe, had at least one eye on Abby when she entered the diner (Grandpa Joe wears an eye patch due to an unfortunate incident at the age of 11 involving a game of "William Tell" and his brother, Squint).

"Hey," Abby said as she slipped into the seat across from Sassy, "have you asked yourself why you always sit in this back corner

Best In Show Comic



by Phil Juliano

The Blotter

booth?”

“Hey, yourself; and, no, can’t say I’ve given it much thought,” Sassy replied, shutting the laptop lid. Work could wait.

“I think it’s because you are Italian.”

“Italian? I choose a corner booth, in the back of this respected dining establishment, facing out where I can see everything going on at any given moment, because I am Italian?”

“Yes, I think the stories your grandmother told about your uncles got you scared, and you want to be sure there’s time to react in case something bad comes through the door.”

Abby’s right about that, Sassy thought, but it has nothing to do with my heritage.

“Uncle Bruno and Uncle Lefty don’t have anything to do with where I sit. I just want to be the first one to know when Tasha swings out of the kitchen with a new batch of Heaven Betters.”

At the mention of food, Abby got side tracked. “*Heaven Better Have These Muffins*. Who came up with that name?”

“No idea,” Sassy said; her mouth already crammed full with one.

Abby took one from the basket and asked, “What were you working on when I came in?”

“A new project; book covers for a mystery series about a 50-something amateur detective who helps her son solve crime in a small town.” Sassy picked up a folder and pulled out a sheet of paper. “I haven’t had a chance to read the proof copy yet, but according to the publisher’s creative brief, the woman has been a widow for a long time,

has a full life; friends, pets, a career, even a few romantic interests. It says here she is smart, funny, and attractive. Think Sela Ward minus the killer wardrobe. I wonder if there’s an audience.”

“Oh, I think so,” Abby said, “I’ll read them. The main character sounds fun. When will they be out?”

“The digital release – or the Kindle version for you non-techies – comes out late next month, so that’s why I need to get these finished. When done, I want to run them by Red. I also would appreciate your input.”

“Sure. Hey, are you finished with that?” Half a Heaven Better sat untouched on Sassy’s plate. Before she could think to answer, Abby reached across the table with her fork, speared the muffin, and dropped it on her own plate.

“Not fair! I was going to finish that.”

“Too bad; I earned it. I ran an extra half mile today. You did not.”

She was right about that. Not only had Sassy not run an extra half mile that day – she stopped training when her son was four. She got plenty of exercise after that simply trying to keep up with Luke. With a shudder, she recalled a time when he was a toddler, and he just took off as she gathered their things in baggage claim at Raleigh airport. Though she called out for him to stop, and scrambled to grab their bags and run after him, he bolted, disappearing around a corner before she could get within 20 feet. Sassy is convinced that the seconds it took to round that corner, find, and then scoop up Luke shaved two years from her life. Never had she felt

such panic. Running was never her favorite activity. Not then. Certainly not now.

“Okay, I guess you did earn it. You know, I am getting quite fond of these ten extra pounds, and have come to a decision. They can stay. If they start attracting new friends, however, I will submit my entry to star in the next “Extreme Makeover: Weight Loss Edition.”

Abby laughed aloud. “You look just fine,” she said, and reached for the muffin basket. Pulling back the napkin, she picked up another muffin, and said. “I didn’t have any breakfast,” and then poured coffee into her *Eat at Red’s Diner* mug.

“Did you really run three and a half miles?” Sassy asked. Mouth full, Abby just nodded.

“I hate you.”

That was a lie. Sassy admired her friend; up at 5:00 every morning so she could work out before the rest of her family opened their eyes. Abby also took her coffee black; no cream or sugar, not even the artificial kind. Which, Sassy acknowledged, are two of the reasons why the woman can consume half a butter muffin for breakfast and still be the same size she was in high school. Unlike someone like me, she thought, who keeps trying to convince herself that thinking



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about exercising is equal to actually doing it. On the other hand, what harm can one muffin do? Sassy waved at Tasha.

"Another round of Heaven Betters, please - and more coffee!"

Abby grinned like a six-year old.

Killing the engine, Luke hopped from the old truck. Sunrise was another 30 minutes off so he turned on a small penlight to find his way without startling any game or "breaking my damn neck." As he grabbed the pack in the cab of the pickup, a voice from his left whispered, "What's keeping you, Luke?" Without bothering to answer, he just picked up his gear and followed the crunch, crunch sound of his friend's footsteps into the woods.

Their favorite spot to begin a hunt was about half a mile from what his mom would call a "ritzy" community, high-priced homes built on rolling hills with a private golf course, and owned mostly by transplanted Yankees. The blind was 1,500 feet off the property line of a stucco monstrosity that looked like a Spanish hacienda. Luke shrugged.

The type of house someone chose to live in certainly was not any business of his; he did not have to pay the mortgage.

Tommy was already up in the blind when Luke got there. "Throw down the rope, Tom." There was a running knot to unravel before he could secure his Martin Jaguar and pack. A gentle tug and up they went. "Get mine," Tommy whispered. Luke's fingers brushed against leaves, twigs and a smooth oval rock before finally finding Tom's pack and bow in the dark. When the rope came back down, he tied everything to it, and then gave the rope another tug.

The men settled in to wait, watching the stars fade into the slowly brightening sky. Tommy rubbed his arms and whispered "Chilly this morning." One after another, nature's creatures began their morning chatter. Luke loved being outdoors waiting for an autumn sunrise. He enjoyed the hunt and he was good at it, but even without the sport, his soul felt most at peace when the rest of the world was at rest. 'A sleeping devil does less harm,' was how he saw it.

Now they could see what was around them, but in that first-

light sepia-toned way when you are not sure if you are looking at a shadow, a tree, or something else entirely. A crunching sound from an animal bigger than a dog came from over on the right. "Doe?" Tommy whispered. Len nodded. They waited. The crunching came closer, and then receded. It was quiet again.

Then it was back; its steps loud and overlapping. "There's more than one of them, that's for sure," Len thought. The sun was up now, and though they could hear the doe, and what sounded like a big buck with her, the rise blocked any sight of them. Luke's heart picked up the beat as he braced himself against the blind, steadied his bow, and sighted where he hoped the deer would end up. The first shot would be his. He and Tommy flipped for it back at the truck.

Tom waited quietly. Then the light got stronger, and he spotted something partially hidden in the leaves. The sun broke over the tree line. "What in the HELL?" Tom jumped up, stumbled into Luke, and almost knocked him over the side. Gritting his teeth at the sound of the animals fast retreat, Luke said, "Dammit, Tommy! You

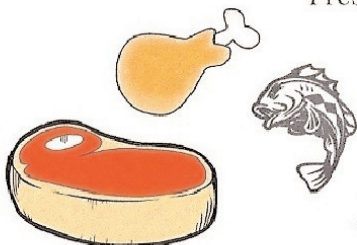
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ruined my shot, you moron!" Then he noticed his buddy's face, white as paper, his eyes staring at the ground below. Luke looked down. When he saw what Tommy had already seen,

he let out a long sigh, and said, "Call 911, Tommy. It looks like we're in for one seriously long day."



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

Drink plenty of fluids and get some rest, says the doctor. Ha! What does she know of getting rest? How can she imagine what passes through my subconscious when I sleep? When I have a cold my dreams naturally take me to places where I cannot breathe. Tops of Andes or Urals. Deep in the metallic bowels of ships. Tense classrooms with short-sleeved mathematics teachers. I stutter and bark incorrect answers across the laughing acre of bemused classmates. I wrestle with rusted valves and too tightly dogged hatch-handles, my brow feverish and breath fetid. What if there is a fire drill? What if the claxon calls for general quarters? I stalk the sharp rime-coated stones, wrapped in a serape, my wool cap pulled down to my chin. Villagers burble in my ears, but I carry no coin of these realms. The wind whips dust and sand into dancing jesters,. I blink back muddy tears. Always I am one unsuspecting sneeze from waking, but the release never comes. My sinuses will not pull the trigger.

Clousiot - Cyberspace

CONTRIBUTORS:

Marsha A. Temlock teaches English at Norwalk Community College in Norwalk, CT. She is the author of **Your Child's Divorce: What to Expect ... What You Can Do** (Impact Publishers.) Her poetry, fiction and nonfiction have been published by the *Weston Publishing Group*, *Chicago Suburban Women*, and most recently, the *Write Room*, and *Airplane Reading*. She also contributes to various online websites dealing with family relationships. She was a columnist for the *Westport News* and *New Canaan News Review*. Currently she blogs about divorce for the *Huffington Post*. Marsha divides her time between Manhattan and Westport, CT.

A Lorenti is the author of **A Writer's Guide to Fame and Fortune** and writes, "author, graphic designer, business writer, editor, public relations and marketing consultant - built two graphic design and corporate communication agencies in the New York metro area during the '80s and '90s working primarily for Fortune 500 companies headquartered up and down the I-95 corridor." Originally a Connecticut Yankee, she now lives in North Carolina with her young son, (adopted at the age of 16 months from Ukraine), and their two cats. When not attending a practice or soccer game, you will find her hard at work on another guide to help self-employed small business owners market themselves and their business, or burning the midnight laptop writing a Sassy Boomer Mystery.

Phil Juliano is getting married. Send him your well-wishes care of this magazine.

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!

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