

*Life is short...Daniel Lalley, Joe Buonfiglio,  
Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal*

# The Blotter

July 2015

MAGAZINE

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## "Goodbye, Facebook"

Like anyone with a grain of sense, I like ice cream. It's one of the reasons I hang around on this planet. It gives me pleasure in its taste, texture, how cool it feels on my tongue, the luxuriousness of the frozen cream. I could go on and on.

Ice cream every day is great. Chocolate ice cream, every day. No, wait. Vanilla...yes, vanilla. Every live-long day. Hang on! I can have lots of different flavors. How about coffee? Cookies and cream? Something different every day. But not different; always ice cream.

Until, not suddenly but undeniably, I no longer want a bowl of ice cream. Of course this can't be true. I must be mistaken. Standing for a while in the frozen confection aisle, nothing. Not in any flavor, not with any topping. The eight o'clock craving for something cold and sweet is gone. Once upon a time, ice cream wasn't available to me all of the time. It was a summer thing. Strawberries were a spring thing. Corn - summer! Pumpkins, fall. Halloween and Easter candy - as those holidays fell. Raisin bread - once in a while. Chocolate cake - birthdays. That is how my parents rolled - and we children didn't complain because it was the way things were. That's not true - we complained, but quietly because it didn't fix anything.

And we loved those things, each in their own season. Missed them when they were gone. Craved them when we couldn't have them.

Like wanting to hear a good song. Back then, , you know, Cousin Brucie had a playlist, which had many good songs on it, and some not so. But you listened to everything else before your song came back again. And that included Perry Como and the Mantovani orchestra. And although it made you want to pull your hair out, you waited. What else could you do?

Oh, you could mow a few lawns and save up your allowance and buy the record. Oh, and a record player, because Dad sure wasn't going to let you play Mick Jagger on the Hi-Fi. And that fiscal accumulation took a few seasons. And then you wore out the needle, and eventually scratched the track. Still can't get no satisfaction. Ah, well, it was good while it lasted.

And movies! We would ask ourselves, "Now, why don't they make a movie about Spider-Man? The Amazing Spider-Man?"

Mostly, though, you got *The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes*. And *Flubber*. (Went to see it, anyway.)

Eventually, someone thought that if we like it sometimes, we like it all the time. Maybe it wasn't eventually. Maybe they thought this very thing, all

the time. Of course.

But for me it is a simple conclusion: you can have too much of a good thing. A lesson for any...second grader. Yes, but so what?

I think it is also so that you can have too much of a mediocre thing. And that conclusion is often reached later than that of the good things. The ones you are having too much of. Why do you suppose that is? Here's my theory. Good things are analyzed by your brain - trained from birth to prepare for the misery of adulthood despite all of the products being rolled out to give us seven by twenty-four pleasure to all of our senses - and it decides that good equals play. Too much play - time to get back to work. But mediocre things are analyzed as already being work, so...

So, I am clicking off from Facebook. Not because it bores me, not because I don't like pictures of tonight's supper, lovely sunsets somewhere other than where I am, or seeing an unknown Dad being kicked in the nuts, but I joined (the root of the word culture is "cult") the rest of everybody under the auspices that I would like my friends and they me and we could do all sorts of things (do being a very non-specific verb) together, but not actually together. What I forgot was that Facebook (I just now inadvertently typed "Favebook" which it is not, unless you count letting someone else's magical algorithm deciding what you want to see as being your favorite thing to experience, and there are many of you who do) is a business, intended to make money for its stakeholders, and I am certainly not one of those. It is in the business of influencing me to stay on Facebook as much as possible.

Here's the net-net of what happened to make me want to leave: I consider myself, when I take the time to have such considerations, of a particular political/social bent. Facebook permits other people - even people you don't know - to volunteer you into conversation feeds. To opt out of being *voluntold*, you must actively do so. I'm not much of a joiner, but I'm even worse at asking to leave a shindig to which I've been shanghai'd. And so I was suddenly receiving too much of the same stuff - the idiocy of the "other guys and gals," the foolish mistakes of our esteemed opponents, the end of the world as we know it brought to you by...them. I found myself bloated in my gloating. I mean, I can only enjoy beating someone up so much, right? Furthermore, I discovered I was starting to think that the other guys and gals were the underdogs, deserving of my sympathy.

Holy crap.

So, goodbye, grumpy cat, *hasta la vista* selfies of all shapes and sizes, *adieu* to pithy opinions on the use of homonyms. If you want to reach me, I'll be out back, reading a book.

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CAUTION

*I don't want to do your dirty*

## "Mr. Flip"

by Daniel Lalley

Here is a man in a large, open room full of people. This is a bright one with an exposed panel ceiling, and it looks gutted with crepe ribbon. The floor is waxed, glinting, pulling warp from rafter light, and here he stands beside a bowl of rum punch and a Dutch-glazed cake. This is a man named Dexter Clowe – Assistant to the Director of Special Projects for the California State Lottery – and he's slept like bush prey for the last fifteen years. He stands rocking up on the scabbed soles of his loafers, drinking fast from a plastic party cup. His face looks wired and shorted. The deep-cut lines from years of forced grin stretch flush for more as he waves and nods to the people who walk past him. He has not removed his double-breasted trench

coat or his beaver felt fedora because he will only be a minute. This will not be his Friday night. He stands there, glancing sidelong over his shoulder, this way and that, his fists clenching in and out of white knots, his arms hanging beside him like wrecking chain. People file in through the open exits where there is a banner that reads *You did it Phillip!* They make like carpenter ants for tables stacked with crosscut tuna sandwiches and pared fruit. There's an open bar staffed by men with chapped knuckles and waist coats and it's all for a man named Flip, who will be the boss of no one by the end of this night.

For the past fifteen years straight, it's been Dexter at the elbow of this man who is the head of all projects special and otherwise for the California State Lottery. This man, who hasn't ushered in a jackpot the likes of which could compare to tonight's *Fantasy 5* draw in his twenty-seven years as Director of the Special Projects Division, is to be received with hip and hooray any minute now. This is a man who rides into work atop the hot-coiled pipes of a Harley Night Rod and entertains absolute zilch in terms of shit from anyone. He stands just nigh of four and a half feet and is built like a boll weevil, his nose the same length of

the torpedo-nubbed Cohibas he smokes so that when he's got one in a gnaw his face looks pronged. He has the tracking stare of a drill instructor and likes to say things one time and one time only. On his desk, he keeps a framed 8x10 of Vice President Rockefeller. His is the office on the corner with a sweeping view and a sign on the door that reads: *No sniveling*. Tonight, it's all got to come together for him. Every card must fall just so, and as Dexter stands grinning through fistfuls of Planter's mix, bobbing like a piston, he thinks about how he wouldn't miss it for the world.

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Eighteen feet below the KWGS-TV news studio, everything is brushed steel and bulletproof, poreless and fluorescent-cast, barren for shine or shadow and it's all tracked with lenses and monitored by men in a blue-lit room. There's a vault in the middle of this room and inside it, more lenses and needles of red laser light. There are two doors on opposite ends of each other with two separate locks for keys with different cuts of teeth. Three times a week there arrives, by private courier, a new key at the reception desk of two competing auditing firms in the greater LA metropolitan. Inside the vault there are ten machines and ten identical sets of eighty balls, measured and weighed to the thousandth of a gram. The auditors arrive through two separate doors two hours before the draw and stand before the locks. They wear a name and



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number pinned to the back of their sport coats. Tonight they read: *D.T. Johnson, 23, KPMG* and *C. Shultz, 9, PwC*, respectfully. They enter the vault together, their faces cheekless and business-browed. They shake hands at the wrist for a reason.

Most people believe that for their dollar they get a single draw on a Friday night; one blind stab at the gears of fate and a long shot to hit it big. What they don't know is that the Friday night *Fantasy 5*, like most lotteries, actually consists of a chain of preliminary draws before the balls are even fired up on live television. The first draw of the evening determines the machine, the next two determine alternates and the one after those determine which set of Olympic competition-grade table tennis balls will spin like boiled atoms and hatch a winning set. These preliminary lotteries take place on a separate machine in the corner of the equipment vault, the chosen numbers of which correspond to a different key of random, computer-generated integers that then correspond to numbers marked on the ten different machines and four cases of draw balls – the random selection software having been the first of its kind and the brain child of a late MIT Abstract Algebra professor who was found years later in a derelict Brighton town home rigor-locked with one fist in his hair and the other with hair in it after a summer spent trying to disprove the Butterfly Effect. The very same low-bit MS-DOS PC is still used to run the original algorithm and plays a stilted, mono-

phonic rendition of the *Jeopardy!* theme as it drums up the coordinates for each draw – this being the cherry-feature that really set the late professor's brows to bob and grin to a curl in its initial pitch.

The two auditors toss and call a Kennedy coin to determine who throws the switch for the first draw. The best man twice-of-three in a Rock-Paper-Scissors bout flips. C. Shultz loses once to rock then again to scissors and swallows a lump, his eyes slit down under a V of forehead furrow. D.T. Johnson removes the coin from a felt pouch atop the machine and flips it to a sharp whir. He slaps it against the back of his hand and looks up. Shultz calls it heads but it isn't, and he just stands there sucking wind as the balls get to it, tapping his foot against the muted concrete.

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If you really want Dexter's take on it, there are a few reasons Phil Flip can bend at the hip and kiss his white, Irish end, but you could probably start with the mutts. These are two hell terriers with knotted coats and heads the size of Easter hams, both blind as mole pups and they need walking twice daily. This is task that's befallen Dexter and the reason he hasn't had a decent pair of chinos for fifteen years running. Flip likes to bring them into the office every morning and have them sniff out what he calls *foul vibes*. He says what the good Lord left to be desired visionwise they make up for in intuition, and he seldom enters a room until they've personally cleared every shin and inseam.

Over the years, there have been a few carbon-backed complaints shot up the HR tank's tangled command constellation, but they've all come back pruned with red ink and deemed just beyond the pale of harassment, sexual or otherwise. The complainants never seem to last long for one reason or another, and everyone else has more or less learned to hold their breath and take up interest in ceiling tiles when the elevator beeps at ten in the morning. They ride in on Flip's Harley, buckled into a sidecar with special helmets and blackened riding goggles, the commute leaving their coats whorled and their tongues hanging like razor strops. Flip used to keep a twenty-pound bag of kibble and a water pail beneath the left section hutch of his desk but was asked to stop when the sounds coming from beneath foiled a major vending deal in the next office – the client, already on edge just being in the bowels of a major gambling institution, had said that the noises were, so far as she was concerned, *fla-*

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grantly unchristian if not pornographic altogether and that that was the straw that broke her and she would rather just sell her small Midwestern market share of retail drugstores if that's what it took, thank you kindly. This was Flip's one concession.

Now it's Dexter, Monday through Friday, hopping and stilted down 119<sup>th</sup> with one hand in a leash knot and the other sheathed in a plastic bag. He's standing in the alleyway five mornings weekly cranking the tops off Alpo cans the size of marching snares and holding a hose on blast against some pretty explosive chomp. Flip has him outfitted with a company cell phone and watches from his office. At the end of the workday, the four of them go into the alley and Flip throws a game of fetch with a hiking crutch. When traffic is especially heavy or the stick lands across the street, the dogs get waylaid from the sonic trail and it's Dexter staggering through two rows of horns and a bus lane. All this until the mutts shit and keel and the two men go to work on their pink, spotted bellies while their hind legs pump like glitching derricks.

Flip leans into it and closes his eyes against the rough cuff of a steak-sized tongue. He smiles and there's a battery of : "Who's the sweetest [l]i[t]le poochy woochy?" and "Who [l]oves his daddy?" and "Who's the best [l]i[t]le boy in the whole wide world?" Through bunched cheeks and a pucker, he answers: "Yes he is! Yes he his!"

He looks up at Dexter with his glasses wompy and fogged to pearls, mouth slick as a burn, and says, "Come on boy; put your back into it. Let's hear 'em say uncle!"

Dexter rakes their white, down bellies in one direction, his face bouncing off the hammering legs. A muddle of sounds can be heard from beyond traffic and high into office spaces above. Sometimes it's Flip who's the loudest. The dogs will sort of stretch and shudder at the end and then lie there until it's time to buzz down the PCH for home. Dexter will tie their necks with paisley riding scarves and fasten them into the sidecar, their mouths sprung and limp, shedding knotted ropes of saliva in their wake. He'll stand hunched and watch them rumble down the alley - all three reclining over the Night Rod's baritone chug. It's rumored that Flip hasn't shared a nuptial bed with his wife in quite some time and that he and the dogs sleep like the nested dead in his California king as soon as the street lamps flicker.

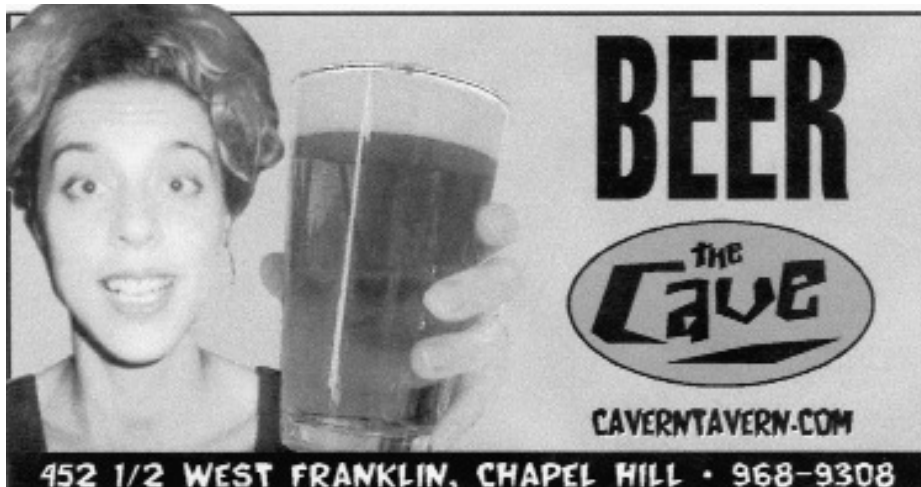
At the end of his day, Dexter's back in the office to wrap it up. Flip's got him playing a numbers game on the *Fantasy 5* project, tracking sales concentrations across their allocated regional markets. This has been the bread and spread of their spring revenue push and a personal feather in the senior managerial cap for Flip. There stands, in the middle of the special projects sector, a five-by-seven swiveled easel hung with a topographic tack map

of California. It's studded right through the major metros with pushpins and inked up with broken lines and black circles. When Flip stands before the map he needs something hard to gnaw on. He's passed hours in front of it with his hands clutched behind his back and his head crooked, muttering to a gallery of beet-faced lackeys with cued pens and steno pads, hands literally coned at their ears.

For the last few days he's been holed in his office with his cuffs rolled to the elbow and a pink forehead. He's on the phone in hushed tones with his chair turned into a darkened corner and Dexter's in his cube with his feet on the desk and his hands linked behind his head. When Flip comes with the dogs at ten o'clock, they practically heel and shake Dexter's hand before he pats their heads and sends them on to the next crotch with their tails wagging. He grins at Flip before the leash snaps and pulls him off his heels. This is a man who knows the score for the first time in fifteen years and is sleeping right through his alarm as of late. He whistles behind splayed issues of *Justice League* and *Doc Savage*, his seat hinged like a dentist's chair. He looks up at the map; at the huddle behind it and Flip standing before everyone like a punished child, and smiles. The calls have been pouring in and the tack scatter looks inflamed. There are billboards over the highways with stakes like timer digits and they're being raised daily. Headlines across the state read: *Jackpot!*, *Place Your Bets!*, *The Big One!*

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C. Shultz has been clearly instructed. He's balanced C-corp AR and aging backlog for PwC the last ten years and now his eyes are about an honest inch closer to the back of his head than the average human's. His was the name on the badge that came Certified Express along with one of two keys needed to access the equipment vault below the news studios of KWGS-TV. He's spent the better part of a week beneath PwC's Los Angeles



campus in one of two lamp-lit interrogation rooms with a stainless steel training table and two men with chests like still kettles standing sentry at the door. He's been offered cold drinks and cigarettes, and they've been through it a thousand times.

Now it's lights and cameras and he's framed in a series of blue-hued monitors tapping his toe and chasing his periphery. Even through the Lo-Fi and loose grain, his forehead is visibly dew-broken and squirming with shot veins. From inside the control room, Gene Pollack, acting host of the CSL Friday night draw, sits hunched on his elbows, eyes all one color and glowing, beside a commission agent with a cliffed brow and teeth like splintered brick. Gene is prepped and bibbed for make-up. He holds a steaming mug in front of his lips and sits peering through the vapor. The agent leans into his seat, glazed, bored, coffee jolt having long since peaked and crashed to a clammy lull. His eyes are puckered and reptilian – the rest of him exactly what one would expect from a man who watches screens for a living.

Because he's looking for it, Gene can see that Shultz is all edge and nerve. He's got his hands in his coat pockets and Gene's looking back at the commission agent to see if he's noticed. This is obviously a breach in the pre-draw protocol and it seems as though even D.T. Johnson's staring up at him with a crook in his brow as he cracks his knuckles to begin plugging the drawn numbers into the MS-DOS.

"Take this down," Gene says, staring glazed into the row of blue and glint.

The agent removes a pen from behind his ear, his chair groaning to an upright. He pulls a jot-scored log from a drawer beneath the monitor platform and records the numbers: 5, 19, 9, 21, 32. Gene checks the log against the digits as they appear on the PC. He scrolls past Johnson who's parading his thumbs in view of the camera track. He

pans and pulls out on a full profile of Shultz who's rocking back on the heels of his loafers, his face steel-white in the monitor's hue. He's looking up at the camera like it's got an answer and Gene's staring back at him through the control room monitor and they both breathe in deep as Johnson hits Enter and the theme of a popular game show sort of sings the passing of time that feels very stretched indeed.

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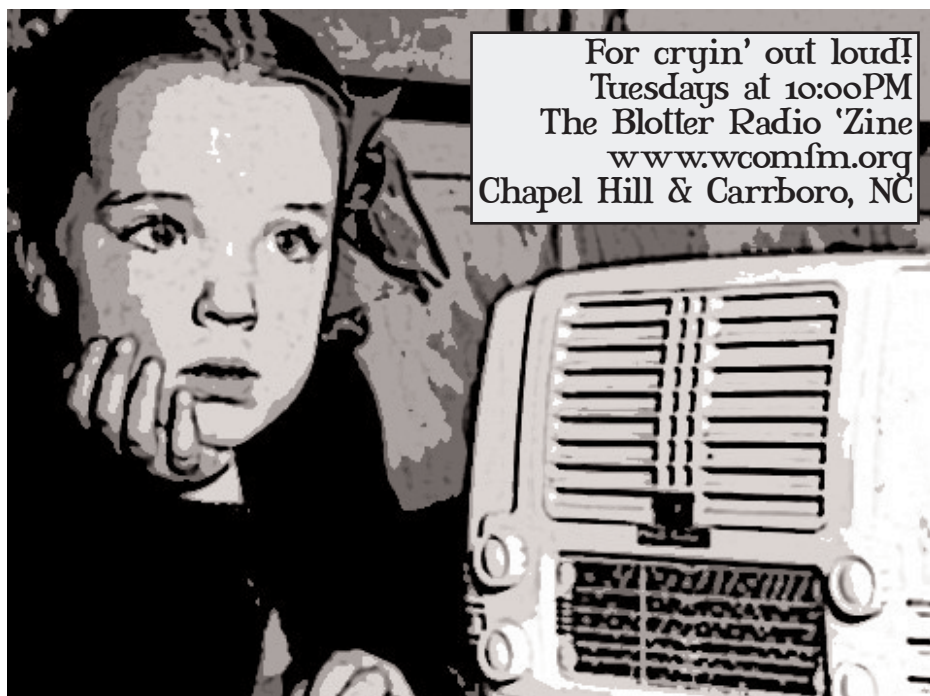
Outside the narrow, reed-beveled panes and Flemish Brick of Hilton North Hollywood's west ballroom, beyond the roll of grand-scale chitchat and Ini Kamoze's '95 pop smash *Here Comes the Hotstepper*, Dexter hears their engines hot and coughing, gargling into the back lot, and without them, there would be no party. These are the ragtag and road hard; the goon squad of the Sons of Thunder's left coast chapter. They roll in on Fat Boys and dropped choppers with ape hangers, arms webbed in tarnished ink, faces punched and studded like rivet sheets – all attitude. Muscle in motion.

Dexter checks his watch and it's all coming right along. In moments he hears the crunch and clink of chain-decked leather, the fast clomp of bleaker

boots on sealed marble - on one side of them there is a wake of stuttering door-men, gasps, something shatters in the hallway, on the other side the party slows, eyes toggle between bunched cheeks and low foreheads. They march in and pause at the doorway, looking one way then the other. They wear red felt bowties over leather vests and riding chaps, all of them captained by a real keg-bellied bruiser with two cauliflower ears and a jaw like a tiki idol, and he wants to know just where the hell is Flip.

Dexter's standing there among the hand wringing and nail gnawing, unaware his grin is arched near to his temples and he's rubbing his hands like he's in front of a campfire. This is a man who saw things coming. It's been about a year on the way, and the check is about due for an honest cashing by his estimation.

This is one area where Dexter knows enough to keep his mouth shut and has since the morning Flip looked into his bathroom vanity and saw the red, drawn proboscis and Cohiba-cured skin of a man over the hump; just before he entered a Harley dealership with the whynots and came out armored against asphalt with one more on his key ring and a heart-to-heart



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pending with Mrs. Flip. He smiled and waved the first day Flip showed up gunning it in the alleyway with the dogs chomping and baffled in the sidecar. Before long, Flip was tipping his black leather captain's cap at the passing ends of reception staff and curling kettle bells in his office to cassettes of Credence Clearwater Revival and Alice Cooper.

He even accompanied Flip a few Friday nights casing burnout bars and chopper clubs up the 405 from Fountain Valley to Van Nuys, sitting unbuckled, chin-to-kneecaps in the sidecar, holding fast to a helmet probably better suited for the parietal crown of an alpha mastiff. Flip would have him scout the doors at dives like The Suck & Blow or Six Bitches Saloon or The Goddamn Shame to assess their colors policy, which was for the most part pretty exclusive and closed to enrollment. Dexter found this out the hard way on more than a few occasions, one of them involving a dart taser and a circle of patrons shouting, "Me next! Me next!"

There was a lot of talk about *the lifestyle*. In lieu of the bars, Flip began hanging around tattoo shops. He covered his left arm to the wrist with flames and dedications. From the shoulder down there were inked stills of his Night Rod, the dogs, three ping pong balls numbered with the date of their litter, and a banner-framed portrait his wife, who he now calls his old

lady. He made Dexter sit for one first; a dry run he explained and when Dexter couldn't decide what to get, Flip spoke for him and he went home with a curt, candid-eyed rendering of the 41<sup>st</sup> vice president in an area he would later only have to explain post-coitally with considerable distance in his eyes.

This was just the proverbial tip and now he's standing like a wound prizefighter in a big open ballroom, staring at man who buys his leathers whole-hide and eats his Chex with a weeding trowel. This is Billy The Wheel: former defensive tackle for the XFL's Memphis Maniax, four-time felon, two-time loser, and first-string shot caller for the Sons of Thunder Motorcycle Club of Orange County. This is the man Flip began to talk numbers with on Friday nights; both of them bent over parlor chairs, clenching shop rags in their teeth while men with names like Nail and Grasshopper inked in the pink, petal-smooth flesh around their shoulder blades or arm pits. Billy collects for a daily three-digit pick racket with bookies all the way from San Diego to Sacramento; what Flip calls your mom and pop lottery. The stakes aren't big enough to break the mining class but at the time they met, the pool was growing at a rate that left Flip's bite rag fit to be wrung. One night after a flame fill-in, he explained all of this to Dexter over the chug of his homebound Harley, his grin trapping flies like a diesel grill.

Dexter hasn't seen Billy for a few months, but waves to him as he inches through an hors d'oeuvre buffet, extending a right hand the size of a catcher's mitt to CSL top brass. They're all wince and rubber from the shoulders up, and speak like they're chewing on something unpleasant. Billy looks to his break-neck periphery every thirty seconds for Flip, and narrows his gaze at Dexter when he's nowhere to be found. On the north wall of the ballroom, a drawn projector screen glows with the KWGS-TV station bug. Above it, the jackpot amount is framed in a loop of chasing bulbs. It reads: \$450,000,000. They're all waiting for the lights to dim and cue to fire, for Gene Pollack who wears suits a decade out of style in either direction, to call up the lucky numbers so some of them can celebrate history or so some of them can just get on with their nights. Billy is beginning to work the room more like he's hunting for lost car keys than a living person. The crowd gives him and the goons berth to romp and stalk as they please. They call him Billy The Wheel because he was known for running people down both on and off the XFL gridiron.

In lamp-lit rooms across the state there are men with shadow-cropped faces sitting in armchairs beside their telephones. They're tuned to KWGS-TV and waiting. If the numbers don't come up just so they'll be calling Billy, and all this was explained to Dexter in a locked, shutter-drawn office with the dogs growling, half-heeled and on their marks.

"If there's any funny shit whatsoever you'll be calling keno in blue hair lounges. You'll be working on tips and repeating yourself very slowly for a living," Flip explained, hunched and sweating over a strewn desktop. "They're blowing this thing up and down the state and it's the biggest god damn pot I've seen, but they expect to win it, do you hear? There's enough in it for all of us; we'll cash out six pools at a million point five – that's tax free,



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then enough left over for the rest of us to wet our beaks, but we've got to be on the same page, you and me. The others know fuck all and let's keep it that way."

Dexter listened with a feigned face and fixed eyes, nodding slowly as Flip laid it all out for him.

"I'm going to be very frank with you, kid. This isn't the first time something like this has happened and I'll be god damned if it's the last either. You think with this much money up in the air, we really leave it to chance; a lucky bounce? I've been in this business long enough to know better. I've built jackpots big enough, Buffett took notice; craned his neck right out the moon roof of his stretch DeVille and said, 'My God, can you believe how much they'll give you for a pick six?'"

The way Dexter heard it, they'd fix the draw. They'd inflate the *Fantasy 5* pot through the racket game and translate the weekly picks back to CSL tickets, then let the winners hit for five times the average pot – Boom, Boom, Boom, straight across the Pacific Seaboard. The bookies would cash out six winning tickets and split the jackpot, then take their cuts and pay the rest back down the ladder. Flip would get his piece and dole the balance to Billy and The Sons of Thunder.

"I just need you to track the sales concentrations and make sure they're spread like quail across each region," he said. "We can't trust these

guys to do this the right way, and this thing is going to hit six times or more. We've only got a few guys holding capital, but we've got a fleet of real one percent disciples, hell bent for leather and ready to roll into a thousand check stands across the regions and inflate the pot. You do this right and you'll be pricing units of beachfront the middle of next week."

And so Dexter just sat there with this rung tremor behind his eyes, sort of nodding and trying to make like the lights weren't just left on, but that there was also someone home, so to speak. He only really snapped to once Flip had him halfway through the shadowed jamb and slapped his haunch with that clipped, *Got it? Good!* intensity.

He's had a lot of time to mull this over, and as he stands there in a room that's beginning to smell like Stetson musk, listening for the deep-loin roar of Flip's Harley, he can feel something like damp exhaust against the back of his neck. Billy lays a clap on his shoulder and stands there kneading the wad a muscle over his collar bone. He leans in so that his voice is hot and thick against the downy glow of Dexter's ear.

"You stand here like the smartest one in the room," he says, resting his chin against the opposite end of his neck. "So I guess you might be able to tell me where to find him."

Dexter's chuckling with eyes

like launched pinballs, an index finger hooked and yanking at the collar of his undershirt as Billy's grip blurs that line between a firm howdy and a *listen here god damnit*. He looks up and there's a gathering of SOT disciples standing akimbo and tapping their steel-tempered toes in a shrinking ring. They're spanking their open palms with objects long since banned even in the less commercial martial arts and closing in quickly. But before Billy can lean in to give him a helping of his of his mind, the back door creaks and darkens. All heads snap westward.

\*\*\*

What was explained to them in the cold steel echo, two floors below PwC's LA campus, was that the whole thing rode on trajectory.

"Try to bounce these," Flip said, holding out a pair of numbered ping pong balls. "Go ahead and see what happens when you try to bounce these balls."

Gene and Shultz sat there across from him in their undershirts, palms flat against the table. In the room, it was just the three of them, plus Dexter and two goons with shoulders like bison hocks. Flip wore a pair of mirror-lensed clubmasters and a French beret – Dexter, a pair of aviators and an adhesive mustache. They were in an old client-briefing chamber, which had been harvesting dust since the fall of Enron, when PwC shared building space with some of the boys from



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# The Blotter

Arthur Anderson. This was a room cold and conducive to the self-service manicure. Most of the men who'd spent considerable time there, poring over virtual terabytes of hard copy data between presses of dead-eyed revenue agents, have either cleared their eternal calendars via the old hose and Volvo or just walked out one day for the proverbial pack of smokes and no one has seen them since. Shultz had heard the stories and came in with a sort of Calvarian respect for the place, which is why he sat there with his head in a rove and brows like a broken A-frames.

"Give it a shot," Flip said, laying the balls in front of them. "Let's see you dribble."

Gene held one like a picked berry and let it fall between his legs against the white tile floor. It hit the ground like a river stone, bouncing only a few right-biased inches. He dropped the other and it fell just the same.

"Boys," Flip said, peeling a grin. "The balls before you would spin like lead marbles in a regulation draw machine."

"All except for a select five," said Dexter. "And even I don't know which five they are."

"Right," said Flip. "Except for a select hand of lucky numbers, they've all been heated, warped and re-tempered with a thermoplastic polymer, just a few molecules stronger than your nursery-school-variety Play-Doh. They weigh in to the thousandth of a gram, but bounce like footballs on parquet. Don't ask me how we did it, but I can tell you the naked eye would be hard fucking pressed to call them out against the real McCoy."

"And what," asked Gene, tending an itch behind his collar. "You're going to find a way to get them into the Friday night draw?"

Flip leaned in with slivered, shining eyes. "No," he said, drawing nod and grin from the room. "You are."

"What gives you the idea they'd let me anywhere near the opera-

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tion," said Gene. "I just hit the switch and smile. I'm a hired face."

Flip bent at the waist. He slapped his knee and laughed from somewhere low. "Haven't you figured it out, kid? There's no one in charge here! The only ones calling shots are the ones who think they are; the ones that look the part, and I'll be god damned if anyone looks it more than you."

He rolled it all out and mapped it step by step, and Gene's done what he was told to. It was just as simple as Flip said it would be as he clapped him on the shoulder and saw him back through the exit.

The new balls arrive bi-weekly and all he had to do was be there to make the switch. He waited for the armored truck and went in with a firm hand and a face that's on five nights a week, then it was just a matter of: *Thank you very much fellas, but I'll take it from here.* And now it's Schultz's show and Gene's sitting there with a man who could probably monitor these screens in a fevered sleep.

They're sitting hunched on the monitor platform, watching Johnson as he records the coordinate keys into a carbon-backed process log. Schultz is standing by with his hands on his jaw and his eyes clamped to dashes. He's waiting for the numbers to come up, with his fingers nearly helixed. The fixed sets are the ones numbered one and two out of four sets total, and if the wrong number comes up he will have to deal with it the hard way. Gene watches from the edge of his seat and when Johnson holds up the number, he drops his steaming mug all over the platform.

"They weren't going to be happy," says the agent. "Not 'til they had someone come in here and compromise the whole station."

Gene's sitting there, spread like a hay-man, with a soaked shirtfront and steam playing off his lap.

"A little help," he asks, peaking through a wince-wrecked face.

The agent stands. He beats

palls of chip matter from his trousers and asks just who the hell does Gene think he is.

"I'm not running a god damn peep and giggle," he says.

"And I'm on in less than an hour, so go ahead and check the attitude and let's try and remember who's in charge of the big show," says Gene. "Let's not forget who they're tuning in for."

The agent swings his head. He mumbles this and that to the door, and when's he's out of sight there's about three minutes to trip the outlets. Gene corrals the coffee down the backside of the control table and goes in for the sockets beneath with a braid of copper twine. There's a web of blue static and hum before the room dies like a capped flame, and once it's down they'll have about ten minutes before the generators trigger.

\*\*\*

Flip is received with the big whoop. He stands at the doorframe, cased in cobra scale leather, pumping his fists before a real round of meaty applause. The dogs are still geared in their riding helmets and parade in beside him like sport horses, their coats shined and rippling over blades of rolling bone. The reception ramps as he steps into the room's gold light, his jacket shining inky and sharp beneath the flecked hue of chandeliers.

"You've done it!"

"You're a genius!"

"Ya' got moxy, baby! Ya' got moxy to beat the band!"

He's borne smooth through the crowd current, laying skin in denominations of five and two-hand ten. He bites into a fat one and there's half a dozen cupped hands and struck matches at the ready - Zippos crack and hatch glossy, Bowie-dagger flames. The top brass loosen their ties and smile; they open their arms and slap crisp against his slick-hide jacket.

"You son of a bitch!"

"Brilliant, you bastard!"

"You really did it eh, you one-

two cocksucker!"

He makes his way through it all; past the gallery of red, waiting hands, winks and nods. The wives blush and break huddle; they embrace him with one-armed hugs. Their fingers, powdered with cracker crumbs, crane outward like bush limbs. At the end of the line, past the steam-table buffet and the office elders, who pow-wow beside the restrooms and leave the comfort of their own seats for exactly no one, Flip finds his assistant wearing the vein-cabled arm of Billy The Wheel. They stand beneath the welcome banner clapping 4/4 time and nodding slow. The gang stands behind, whistling through their fingers and blowing into party horns which were a part of each table setting along with the pop confetti and place cards – none of which bear the names: Billy The Wheel or Danny The Roach or Barf or any of the other SOT one percenters.

"Here he comes, the man in the snakeskin suit," says Billy, heaving Dexter from beneath the crook of his arm. "And god damnit if he don't know how to split a room."

Flip spins three sixty on the heel of his left foot, flaring the tail of his split-back jacket. He draws hot through the wet end of his Cohiba and breathes white. He raises his arms and swings a bow. The dogs heel rigid as garden statues.

"Well I suppose as long as I've got you undivided and just this side of sober, I'll say something to the occa-

sion." He reaches high and plants a hand just below the middle of Billy's back patch. "Friends, fellow employees, you're all here tonight to see the American dream in rare form. Barkeep, I believe this calls for a round of something crisp and fluted. We're all in the business of making millionaires here tonight, the business of making history in numbers and giving a little back at the end of it all, because isn't that what it's all about; the dreams and so forth and the yada yada yada that helps us sleep like tucked cubs. Tonight the numbers are big my friends, and in the morning we'll welcome the lucky, but for right now, in this moment, let's take a look around this rented hall and I ask you, don't you feel it too?"

Billy leans in close and lays a hand across his shoulder, his pupils pooled like oil.

"With friends like these," Flip says, "I'm starting feel pretty god damn lucky, myself."

\*\*\*

"Lucky number three," says Johnson. He logs the data and holds it up in block numerals for the camera. Schultz stands behind him fanning his face. He asks if it's always this hot in underground equipment vaults or if it's just him. He looks at to the back wall, at the Plexiglas locker where the ball sets are stored.

"Allow me," he says.

Johnson nods and squints back into the PC.

"I'll power this down and we

can load the machines. We'll take them up for the draw here in a minute."

Shultz opens the locker and there they are; all four trays and Flip was right, the naked eye fell head over heels. They look flawless, chalky and matte beneath a soft-watt backlight - shells of cage-free laid AA. He reaches in for the tray labeled 3 and knows what he has to do. He treads over to the third machine to load the barrel, and buckles like a seam. By the time Johnson can snap and curse, the balls are loose, rolling, scattered like buck-shot. Schultz catches a few on his way down and they're cratered; no longer fit even for rumpus-scale pong. They hiss to a crisp silence in tight rolling bounces, and Shultz is right there with them, wet and panting.

"Ruined," Johnson says. "We'll never be able to spin balls like these. Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Shultz rises up and surveys the rolling minefield of white, unrigged plastic, his name and number ripped in half across the back of his jacket.

"Has this never happened," he asks, examining one of the dent-puckered spoils. "Surely, there's a protocol."

Johnson's scratching his head, his face drawn to cock-eyed cringe. He makes his way back to the preliminary machine, cursing a blue streak. He eyes the overhead camera and shrugs all the way from the knees, before flicking the switch and setting the balls back to a whirl.

## Best In Show



by Phil Juliano

## The Blotter

"This is going to reflect very poorly on the both of us, come review season," he says, drawing a new set. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you what they're passing off for raises in this economy, even for those who haven't botched a record jackpot draw."

Schultz is on his ass, heaving at the chest and looking up at the camera, which hasn't roved from the MS-DOS. He stays there until Johnson reboots the machine and amends the recordings in the process log.

"Okay," he says, cueing the software's bright-glass number. "Let's see if we can't set this straight."

The MS-DOS mulls it over for a minute and comes up with a number and when Schultz sees what it is, he turns the color of a cleaned cod.

"Four," says Johnson.

"Four?"

"Bingo."

"Allow me."

Shultz walks over to the locker and removes the other half of the uniform, pro-grade, untampered, cage-free

laid AA, and unlucky rack of draw balls. He holds them to his chest for a second, breathing quick and clipped. He's shaking at the wrists and catches Johnson's eyes as he turns sharp from the blinking monitor. They share the bloated glance of a buck and a hunter before Shultz winces and the balls are everywhere, spread like mica shatter across the sealed concrete. Johnson's head tics above the scatter, chasing a dozen balls in different directions. Certain events can actually happen in slow motion, if the brain isn't properly braced. His eyes roll with the chaos and just sort of hang there as they fall still and silent.

When their eyes meet the second time they are peeled and rattling. They look to the camera, then lock back on each other and draw fast for their key rings. They sprint for the exits; Schultz blocking Johnson at his - Johnson splayed in front Shultz's door like it's damming a flood.

"We'll be thrown to a firing squad," he says. "Who are you working for?"

"I'm not sure anymore."

They lunge across each other for their own exits, jamming their keys in the locks. Johnson turns his, but the door won't give. Its LED indicator glows red above, holding for Shultz on his end.

"Turn your key," he says. "Let us out."

Shultz stares at him beneath a dipped forehead, breathing measured as

lanced a bull. His clothes are soaked through and webbed about his body like a hound's coat. In the space between them, the MS-DOS glows green and stutters with white glitch. The camera is dead overhead; its eye no longer roving, lens no longer a part of this. It is just the two of them now, chambered and thick beneath the cupped hand of so much steel and rock.

\*\*\*

In the middle of it, here he sits picking his teeth. Here he is at a wrecked banquet table with his heels on the cloth, mining his top row with an oyster tine - alone except for the dogs, who sit beneath him waiting for scraps of pepper lox or truffle peat or dismantled club corners. The room is washed with the echo of a drinking crowd, the harmony of a hundred voices flat and busy beneath a seamless mash of synth rock and hook pop. Above them all, there is the screen still blank and glowing, and Dexter's got his eyes on the clock.

The dance floor is packed but static; the only ones on the move wear starch white and bowties. They slink and dodge with all things polished - glassware, thin and empty, streaked pulpy and pink with lip smudge. There are men in leather with cans of beer, who send them back for more. They drink with two fists and crack them one after the other. There are others in black-tie-hell with flutes of sparkling wine and napkin-dressed fingertips and they look on with green envy at those

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in the pounded leather bombers drinking hearty and gasping. In the thick of it, Flip stands beside Billy The Wheel with a rubber grin and a glass of Dickie rye. He's drawn a gallery of square, squinting men who nod and chuckle and look literally *regaled* as he stands front and center chatting loose on the leeward end of a four-drink toast. He claps Billy hard across his back patch and raises his glass across the room to Dexter between anecdotes. Dexter salutes him with the plaqued end of his picking fork. The dogs weave and tangle between the legs of chairs; wrecking through the undercarriages of pop tables like swatted oxen.

"Any minute now," the men say.

"The big draw."

"I love a Friday night."

Billy has his eyes on the screen. He holds Flip by the loose chop of muscle around his shoulder. His head is light with a strong buzz, and he squeezes him to pins and needles as he cuts up with the rest of them.

"This one here," he says, cuffing Flip across the head. "He'll be wearing the patch in no time. He'll roll thunder to the grave."

When the lights begin to dim and the music lowers and the screen flickers to the evening news, he pulls Flip in tight. He holds him with riding hands above the collarbone and shakes him near to whiplash.

"Here we go," he says. "Someone's got it coming tonight."

Dexter stands and marches over, his head cocked up with the rest of them, gums sore and showing. This is a man who knows why the distance is dopplered and moaning; crying with a siren's aria. He knows why the news anchors are holding their earpieces. They're squinting and exchanging whispers before the feed is killed by a Coke commercial. All heads turn and murmur.

"What's the meaning of this?"

"Where's Gene?"

"Where are the god damn balls?"

Billy bears down and whispers, his voice juggy and soaked, and he wants to know just what the fuck is happening. Dexter stands close by with a tucked lip and eyes like bone china. Here is a man who knows what happens next. Here is a man who has learned from the best and knows how to play the part - who knows that no one is really in charge here.

The news cuts back after a two-minute block and all eyes are on the red, bulletin ticker. The anchors are pale with the delivery and squint when they read that Gene will not be announcing the draw tonight. There has been a breach. There will be details at eleven. The crowd is silent except for the dogs who snarl in throttled gnashes. What the good Lord left to be desired visionwise they make up for in intuition, and they are dialed in like Geiger counters on the shuffling hush. Flip collapses beneath Billy's hands and

there's a collective gasp. Outside, the sirens are getting warmer; the pack of called cars synced into one barbed drawl. The dogs are all wuff and fang. They don't like this - not one bit.

"What the fuck," Billy asks, shrinking Dexter with cold-coal eyes. "What's going on here?"

Dexter pants and slinks. There is only crossed leather arms and pointed brows. There is a wall of them. Flip is a mound at his feet.

"I don't know," he says, but he does. This is a man who knows exactly what is going on here. This is a right hand man if ever there was one, and he knows it from every angle. This is a man who's made the call, who could look at the back of his own right hand and then take a look at the plan and say: I'm not sure I know one from the other. Here is a man who knew the codes and keys; who knew where Flip kept the rigged sets, and knows where they are now and they're not two stories below a frantic news studio. Here he is staring down a lynch mob and they're not just the disciples of Los Angeles's toughest one percent now, but they step forward in pleated eveningwear with eighty-proof breath. This is theirs too, after all. They make way only for the dogs who march in on trophy paws and rumble from a place so deep it sounds only technically mammalian. In lamp-lit rooms across the state, the men with shadow-cropped faces are holding onto their telephones with glowing knuckles. They're pounding calls back and forth across the Pacific seaboard, but they will get nothing from Flip. He is a breathing heap.

"Come on," Dexter says, looking into the stare of a fork-and-torch mob. "It was him."

He's cowering and cornered, peeking up through crossed arms like he's stranded in hail. They're on him now, closing in and silent.

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## "Hugh Laurie's Balls"

by Joe Buonfiglio

There is no sense in sugarcoating this, so I'm just going to put it out there and let it speak for itself. Last night, I dreamt that I was Hugh Laurie's balls.

Let that sink in for a moment....

...

...

Yeah. That's how I felt about it, too.

There I was, dangling off the acclaimed and respected British actor as if a pair of anglophilic "truck nuts" with my face painted on each testicle. They just happily conversed back and forth while Mr. Laurie went about the business of rehearsing for a new television show.

"Oh, isn't he wonderful, dearie?" HL-ball me #1 said to HL-ball me #2 in an accent one would expect to hear come out of a Monty Python character in drag.

"Oh, I know," I responded back to my other testicular self. "I've enjoyed being suspended below his Willy since we were in *Black Adder*. But oh my, weren't we truly brilliant in that American thingy the Yanks put on. What was it called?"

"House."

"Oh, yes. We had to affect an American accent, didn't we? That was a brilliant bit of craft there, wasn't it?"

"Oh my, yes. And for a briny little sperm-sack, you're quite the astute one, aren't you?"

"Too kind. You know, I always thought we'd all have been great as the Doctor in *Doctor Who*, don't you?"

"Ooooooh, yes-yes-yes. Absolutely!

Can you imagine scooting around through time and space in a mad dash to save— Oh dear. I'm getting a bit sweaty. How about you?"

"Mmmmmm. We are moving away from the body a bit, aren't we?"

Seriously? This is what my nocturnal brain offers up while you slumber away in a fantasy-cloud delusion of long walks on the beach with the cover art from a seductive Harlequin paperback? Your snoozing grey matter shifts into REM overdrive and you find yourself waltzing with Colonel Sanders while in a freefall down an elevator shaft, but I must succumb to the humiliation of transforming into some thespian's family jewels fan club chat room? This somehow makes sense to the driving forces of the universe?

### HUGH LAURIE'S BALLS?!

What type of person dreams they're Hugh Laurie's nuts, anyway? Besides me, I can't imagine anyone in the history of Humankind has ever had to wake up and tell their spouse, "You're not going to believe this, but I just dreamt I was Hugh Laurie's balls."

*Being John Malkovich?* Baby shit! I was Hugh Laurie's balls!

But, why Hugh Laurie's balls? Why didn't I dream I was John Wayne's nut-sack or the testicles cascading off Albert

Einstein? Why not astronaut and American hero Neil Armstrong's libidinous cotillions?

What does that say about me?

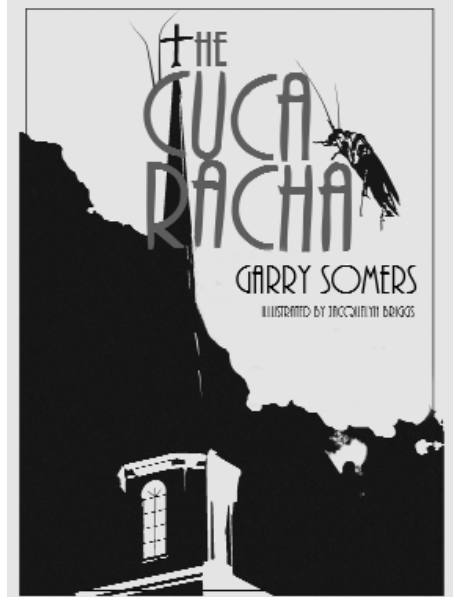
Hell, the fact that you're still reading this; what does that say about *you*?

All I know is I have to find a trucker and bum some uppers and snow. Because there is no way — *NO FUCKIN' WAY* — I'm going to allow myself to fall asleep tonight.

**Ed. Note:** We found Joe sitting quietly in a coffee shop in Carrboro, or was it a loud, smelly saloon, or the back row of the eleven o'clock church service? His absurdist - humor blog "Potpourri of the Damned" is found at: <https://potpourriofthedamned.wordpress.com/>



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The four legged wolf was on top of a hill looking down at the people running for their lives. About 50 feet away the wolf and I made contact and I could see he was a friend and on my side. As he made his way down the hill he began to walk on two hind legs. He stood before me all 7ft tall and his teeth were shiny and fang sharp. Saliva posted its way down the 4inch fang smile.

There was an officer down the hill just below where the wolf and I made a pack and he was surrounded by people who were sharing what they saw on the hill and how ferocious the big wolf looked. As i made my way to the area, the officer was assuring the people that his patrol men had the wolf surrounded and under control. I methodically walked into the conversation and told the officer and the people, "No! The wolf has your men surrounded!!" At this time all you could here were the patrol men screaming for their lives...

When I woke up I spoke to my daughter and shared the dream. She tells me, she had a dream the night before that she was a werewolf.

Atom - 7Atoms, Inc.

## CONTRIBUTORS:

**Daniel Lalley** writes, "I am from Hewitt, TX and currently live in San Francisco where I'm completing my MFA at the University of San Francisco. I have previously been published in the North Texas Review. I have pending publications with Puff Puff Prose, Poetry and a Play, The Pacific Review, Devil's Printer Review, Cahaba River Literary Journal, and have recently been nominated for an AWP award."

**Joe Buonfiglio** writes "...a "Writer & Literary Absurdist. Karma Extractor: On-Call Nihilist Evacuations. Sure I have OCD; but man, do my toilets shine!" Wait. That's my Twitter-account bio. Here. Try this...

My style of craft has been called "ribald academia," "locker-room intelligentsia" and even "the nasty Dave Barry." (I'm not quite sure how I feel about that last one. Shit, I'm not quite sure how Dave Barry would feel about that last one ... but I have a pretty good idea.)

Joe has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Florida, has worked as a marketing director for the Hippodrome (one of Florida's "official" state theaters), became a professional freelance journalist and columnist in Florida's Tampa Bay area, as well as obviously learning how to refer to himself in the third person. That'll be enough of that.

Anyway, I have three regional Society of Professional Journalists awards hanging on my office wall (including honorable mention, outstanding achievement and its highest honor, the award of excellence) and a grant from the Pinellas County Arts Council to create a short-stories compilation. I was a co-creative (writer/director/producer) for the Theatre of the Absurd radio show, **The Entropy Hour**, which aired on public- and community-radio stations across the country as part of the nationally distributed **Radio Works** program out of New York.

After a stint in LA promoting a number of dark-humor screenplays with absurdist inclinations, I'm now in the southern writers' paradise of North Carolina. With my ever-growing flock of Twitter followers (just north of 7,000 at the time of this writing), my weekly absurdist-humor blog **Potpourri of the Damned** attracting lovers of humour noir, pitching the dark absurdist-humor sci-fi/fantasy book-manuscript **THE POST-APOCALYPTIC DINING GUIDE: An End-of-Days Search for American Haute Cuisine and the Meaning of Human Existence**, currently crafting a compilation book derived from the most humorous posts and comments uploaded to my various social-media outlets, as well as a soon-to-be-completed speculative screenplay based on a beloved cartoon from the late 1960s, my literary Muse keeps a never-ending flow of writing projects continually in the pipeline.

As a true believer that "content is king," downtime is not something I find myself with in great supply these days.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled program..."

**Phil Juliano** Is a husband, and Dad, in Minneapolis. He's hard at work on many projects, including a graphic novel.



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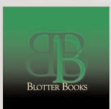
A Southern college town and its thriving local music scene,  
where the music's neither "sacred" nor "profane" so long as it's  
good...

A lost tape of a beloved band's legendary show...

A record label, poised to break big, which certain people want  
to be part of - by any means necessary...

Two visitors, whose own music has been muted by regrets over  
long-ago bad decisions: Chuck McDonough, former grad student,  
who skipped town after learning things about himself he couldn't  
face; and Penny Froward, whose attempt to help a friend in  
danger almost destroyed another woman's life...

A mysterious will by an unknown hand; and murder...



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**All Tomorrow's Parties**

by Marty Smith



( publisher & book reviewer, "The Blotter Magazine;" contributor to the "Urban  
Hiker;" former host of "New Frontiers" and "Laugh Tracks" on WXDU - FM,  
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