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The Blotter

magazine



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G. M. SomersEditor-in-Chief
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 Treasurer
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 Development
 Laine Cunningham.....Publishing
 Consultant
 Brace Boone III.....Marketing Advisor
 Richard Hess.....Programs Director
 T.J. Garrett.....Staff Photographer

Subscriptions Contact:
 Martin K. Smith
 M_K_Smith@yahoo.com
 919.286.7760

Advertisers Contact:
 Martin K. Smith
 M_K_Smith@yahoo.com
 919.286.7760

Submissions and Editorial Business to:
 Jenny Haniver
 mermaid@blotterrag.com

Garrison Somers, Editor-in-Chief
 chief@blotterrag.com

919.869.7110 (business hours only! you
 may call for information about snail-mail
 submissions)

Marketing & Public Relations Contact:
 Marilyn Fontenot
 marilyngfontenot@gmail.com
 919.904.7442

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"Almanac Entry"

It's 64 degrees Fahrenheit in our living room – because I'm stubborn, mostly, and also because no one else is home at the moment and I don't need it to be particularly warm to type here. (It's cooler outside, but still November-ish sunny and I'm considering changing venues for writing this document.) I have a cup of tea - cream and sugar, thanks - and it's helping me maintain appropriate body warmth. I have a sweatshirt on, also, but the sleeves are rolled up, figuratively and literally. Today has been a very good day.

It started off iffy enough. (I like that last sentence a lot. Say it out loud, three times, fast.) For reasons I cannot easily comprehend, although "tired" leaps to mind, I went to bed at 7:30 last night. Fell almost immediately asleep, woke up ridiculously early this morning and got to work. I'd thought I would read – I mean really read, for a few hours. Serious, uncompromising consumption of text, like so many folks I know say (on Twitter of all things) that they are able to do. "I blasted through that book this weekend. No kidding, man, you just have to *reeeee*ad it!"

Other than the unnerving feeling I have that the dialogue above seems excavated from a dim and crusty tomb from 1978, what I'm thinking right now is that I rarely have the opportunity to lay track like that, end to end. Something always trips and falls in the way. The phone, meals, laundry, someone needing a ride somewhere. Someone needing a ride home from somewhere. Someone wanting something off a high shelf. (How do things get on those high shelves, anyhow? It's not me, is it? I don't think it's me.)

The world conspires against reading, and by direct association, writing. Society is interruptive by nature. Interruptions always take precedence. We not only let them, but we seem to embrace permitting them to unhorse us from our appointed tasks. We are motivated to look at our phones, at the news, at the weather, to ensure that we think we know what's going on right now.

I recently received a rejection notice from a publishing house to which I had submitted a novel, intended for the YA audience. They were very efficient and forthright. And kind, by the way. One reason, they admitted, for not selecting the piece for publication was that I spent too much time at the start of the thing developing the character and setting. My storytelling did not immediately get down to business. As you all know, this function of writing is referred to as *in media res*, which is Latin for "just before the bomb goes off." Sam Spade's lovely young thing pitching a mystery at the door of his office was chapter two. Chapter one was some poor slob being pitched from a moving train.

Back in the day, I was taught that this was just one option of many for an aspiring author. If you wanted, you could always spend a little time getting to know Odysseus and his family, or the Spartan king and his pretty new wife, Helen, rather than having Achilles spearing some giant Arcadian in the shoulder in the first paragraph, although that sure would

have grabbed your ancient Greek *therapeia* (attention!) And if it seemed they were going into a lot of detail about who and where and when and why, it's because there were only three books in the whole world and the *Iliad* was one of them and the *Odyssey* was another and we think the third one was about some hunter fellow named Gilgamesh. So there was something to be said about having a semi-captive audience to your narrative stylings. It took a young short story writer named Moses to come up with that pithy phrase "In the beginning..." and launch a heck of a yarn about sin and redemption. But even his prose contained a fair bit of miraculous window-dressing before it settled down to spinning a coming-of-age story.

Speaking of coming-of-age, if we but leap forward a few centuries or so, we find the first lines of a saga where Our Hero is described by the poet as a baby! What is the point of that? Is the baby even doing anything...Herculean? Nope. Just being named and catalogued. And that's the whole point. We know the story, we even know how it ends. We don't just want to see the baby, either. We want the labor pains. We ought to demand the thing, warts and all. If some *scop* is going to stand up and shout "Hear Me!" after a big meal and a lot of drinking, and even knowing that it's an oldie but a goody like Beowulf, well, starting at the very beginning whets our appetite for a good long winter's tale.

My point is *Gone With the Wind* doesn't begin with the burning of Atlanta. *Catch-22* has no bombings on the first page that I recall. *War and Peace* launches not in the middle of a battle, for crying out loud, but rather a very personal struggle for place at the grownups' table, and a fair amount of French that you need to look up on the footnotes page. Anyhow, there is much to be said for getting to know people before you put them in harm's way.

There are rules for writing a novel, but no one knows what they are, to paraphrase another Somers(et Maugham) type. Or maybe they're not rules, but...aspects of narrative that readers are currently in the mood for. But if all stories start out the same way – then how do we differentiate between them? The level of immediate excitement? The increasing violence or terror or sex or other fascination-factor splashed onto the page by an ever more exhausted author stable trying to please a jaded, slippery-sloped readership? Perhaps.

Perhaps not.

Maybe I'll try again, tonight. I've a lot of very good books on the nightstand. By the way, my daughter is reading King's "It." She's on chapter three. Tells me she's a little bit bored because right now it's all about adults. She asks me if they all kill themselves. I sigh. You're on page fifty of a thirteen-hundred page novel, sweetie. Give it a chance.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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CAUTION

"There's a hell of a distance between wise-cracking and wit. Wit has truth in it; wise-cracking is simply calisthenics with words."

Dorothy Parker (*The Paris Review*, Summer 1957)

"Sea-Monkey Necklace"

by R. J. Fox

When you are a once-bullied child, you often think about going back in time and fixing your childhood. You think about it a lot. Sometimes you dream of changing the other kids, or changing the situation. Often, you think about changing yourself.

If I could talk to my childhood self, the first piece of advice I would give him is this: don't start out your fourth grade year sporting a Sea-Monkey necklace.

If you aren't fortunate enough to be already familiar, Sea-Monkeys are a hybrid form of brine shrimp that hatch instantly after adding water and are most commonly found in the science section at Toys "R" Us, next to Magic Rocks and ant farms. And unlike Uncle Milton's ants, Sea-Monkeys don't bite when given the opportunity.

Invented (or, more accurately marketed) in 1957 by Harold von Brauhut, Sea-Monkeys roughly resemble enlarged sperm, growing to a few inches in length. They look nothing like the picture on their package. They're advertised as long-limbed, mythical creatures with a dragon-like tail and three horns coming out of their heads. Sort of mermaid and magical. But never, at any point, would *monkey* be an accurate description.

According to their packaging, "Sea-Monkeys are a true miracle of nature. They exist in suspended animation inside their tiny eggs." That is, until water is added, making them "real life time travelers asleep in biological time capsules for their strange journey into the future!" The cherry on top is the fact that "anyone can get perfect results without any knowledge of chemistry or biology," which was ideal for a scientifically challenged youth like myself.

Like legions of other boys, I first discovered Sea-Monkeys advertised on the back of comic books. They were

also sold in the Johnson-Smith Company catalog, which specialized in novelties like fake poop and snapping gum. How could I resist becoming the owner of "the most fantastic pets to ever live and breathe?" In fact, I was guaranteed to "have more fun with them than any aquatic creature you've ever owned. Unlike make-believe toys, pet Sea-Monkeys are really alive and are always ready and eager to put on a show!"

I got a deluxe Sea-Monkey kit for Christmas in first grade. It was love at first sight. And though my excitement for Sea-Monkeys has never worn off over the years, I will never forget my first time.

Fueling my excitement was the misguided assumption that they would look just like the package. They didn't. They looked like sperm cross-pollinated with a fetus. Despite my initial disappointment, I held steadfast to the belief that someday, they would live long enough to grow into the image of them depicted on the packaging. Part of me still believes.

Included in my starter kit was the traditional plastic aquarium. It also came with three small, color-coded, numbered packets. Packet #1: "Sea-Monkey Water Purifier." Packet #2: "Sea-Monkey Instant Life" (the eggs). Packet #3: "Sea-Monkey Growth Food." The kit included a double-sided spoon for feeding purposes: one side for baby Sea-Monkeys, the other for adults. The packet of food is so small, it raises the question: what happens when it runs out? However, I quickly learned that Sea-Monkeys usually don't outlive their food supply. And if by some rare miracle they do, replacement food can be ordered through the catalog.

One way to help make them live longer was to make use of the included "Sea-Monkey Million-Bubble Air Pump," which allows fresh oxygen to be manually pumped into the water. It

can also be used to suck up feces, corpses of fallen Sea-Monkey comrades, and other debris.

Eager to hatch my new pets, I filled up the tank and added the water purifier, only to suffer through what every Sea-Monkey fan can relate to: the 24-hour waiting period before the eggs could be added. The wait to bring new life into the world was excruciating.

When the time finally came to add the "Instant Life" packet, I spilled at least a quarter of the contents onto the counter. Once I rescued as many eggs as I could, I stirred the contents with a spoon for a full minute, setting forth in motion the miracle of life.

After mixing my Sea-Monkey cocktail, I peered into the tank, but was unable to locate any discernable sign of life through the murky water. The legitimacy of the whole ordeal was brought into question. My dad promptly suggested that I hold the tank up to the window and into the light. Lo and behold, I noticed a hundred or so tiny, swimming specks, which were even more evident when seen through the numerous bubble magnifying glasses on the side of the tank.

After a few days, I no longer needed to find them through the magnifying glass.

Within a couple of weeks, Sea-Monkeys grow to about half an inch in size. Before long, up to three quarters of an inch, well on their way to becoming the humanesque caricatures on the package! Hope quickly faded into disappointment once I realized they weren't going to grow any larger, nor come close to the package's deceptive playful, carefree depiction in any size, shape, or form. In fairness, they did have long tails and horns on their heads, but it still begged the question: at what point does false advertising come into play?

Another disappointing early discovery was the alarming death rate. What started out as a bustling village of around a hundred living creatures was quickly cut in half. My initial thought was that they were sick. However, I would later come to realize that this was par for the course.

Another week or so later, the Sea-Monkey apocalypse was reduced to a baker's dozen. The only upside to a smaller population was that I could give them names, such as Muffin, Cupcake, Cheesecake, Biff, Bert, Ernie, and Chet.

Sea-Monkeys, as one can imagine, are indeed, a most playful creature. The manual is chockfull of items that can be mail-ordered and sent directly to your doorstep! One of the items I ordered (for just one dollar, plus four dollars shipping and handling) were "Sea-Monkey Sea-Diamonds, the Anti-Gravity Toy." They came in a small packet similar to the Growth Food and Instant Life and contained small, plastic pebbles designed to look like diamonds. After dumping them into the water, they began to float at various levels of suspension. According to the product description, Sea-Monkeys were supposed to have a field day with them, tossing them back and forth like beach balls, playing soccer, or even surfing on them. In reality, the Sea-Monkeys ignored them, coming into contact with them only by accident. It sometimes even resulted in their death, if they were crushed beneath a lethal Sea-Diamond.

Other items I admit to ordering through the years: Grow-Kwicky Sea-Monkey Growth Stimulator, Red-Magic Sea-Monkey Vitamins, Sea-Medic Sea-Monkey Medicine, and Sea-Monkey Banana Treat. This last one was a banana-scented powder, because, what *monkeys* don't love bananas? There was even a mating powder (Cupid's Arrow) "for shy Sea-Monkeys afraid of marriage...this fabulous formula will give them a quick

trip 'to the altar'! Once 'hooked,' former 'bachelor' Sea-Monkeys will fill your tank with oodles of babies—fast."

And finally, the best thing of all was the Sea-Monkey necklace. And by necklace, I don't mean a medallion resembling a Sea-Monkey. What I mean is, an actual miniature plastic bubble hanging from a red string that you can place a few of your Sea-Monkeys into (suctioned with the "Million Bubble Air Pump" of course!) and carry around town, or, in my case, school.

Despite constant teasing, I naturally convinced myself that they were jealous and/or didn't know a fashion statement when they saw one. Why the ladies didn't flock to me is something I'll never be able to figure out! Wearing it, I felt an overwhelming sense of protection, especially from bullies. Never mind that the bullying was inspired to some degree by the necklace itself. It was a vicious cycle.

I will never forget that first day of school. I couldn't put that necklace on fast enough. But first, I had to carefully fill the bulb with my little buddies. Though I had my favorites, I took the first five sucked up by my pump. I felt bad for the ones who didn't make the pick, but there would be other days.

Or, so I thought.

My excitement that morning overshadowed the usual stomach ache I would get on the first day of school. In fact, I got stomach aches most days of school, elementary through middle school.

This year, I had an aquatic amulet to shield me, filled with an army of monkeys of the sea. Best of all, I would finally be able to share them with all my classmates, new and old alike. They had only *heard* about Sea-Monkeys at that point. I was certain that *this* would be the year I finally gained acceptance.

Well, I certainly got their attention. At first, nobody seemed to notice at all. But one by one, they all did. And though nobody was impressed, they were certainly entertained.

Though some of my classmates were genuinely curious, I sure as hell wasn't going to start a Sea-Monkey craze. Perhaps if one of the cool kids did, it would have been a different story.

"Hey, look! Bobby has a bowl of sperm around his neck!" one of my tormentors exclaimed.

My amulet was letting me down. And all its inhabitants could do was swim helplessly around. They had no clue. Ignorance truly was bliss.

And how in the hell did he even know what sperm was? Sex-Ed was still months away. Incidentally, the same kid who referred to my pets as sperm couldn't get his hands on my amulet quickly enough.

Fortunately, my teacher came to my aid, but only to scold me. "Why don't I just hold on to these—whatever they are—for you. They are much too distracting."

So she put them in her desk, forcing my little buddies into darkness for the rest of the day.

I spent the rest of the day praying

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the necklace wouldn't leak.

When my teacher gave them back to me at the end of the day, she suggested that "Maybe they should stay at home where they belong."

Who was I to argue?

But that evening, I decided that I wasn't going to go down without a fight. From that point forward, I wore my amulet under my shirt. Its weight against my chest was oddly comforting and I was convinced I could hear soft, Sea-Monkey heartbeats in time with my own. Sometimes, it would leak, sending a warm trickle down my chest. Sometimes, the necklace gave off a nasty, musty odor, which, of course, did nothing to boost my social chances.

As far as Sea-Monkeys were concerned, my bullies loved to feign interest in my obsession and I was too gullible to even realize I was being teased. Or, maybe I was just in denial. I actually thought they'd be impressed by my lifetime membership in The Fellowship of the Secret Society of Sea-Monkey Scientists. Sometimes, I would share random facts. For example:

"Did you know, that NASA once flew Sea-Monkeys to outer space to test gravity's effect on animals born in a gravity-free environment? The result? They grew bigger and faster!"

"No! We didn't! Isn't that something, guys?" one of my bullies said, holding back laughter.

In the meantime, I cluelessly rambled on about the distinct personalities of my Sea-Monkeys, the way

some kids would talk about their G.I. Joes, their pets, or their girlfriends, as an entire playground mocked me.

Looking back, it probably wasn't the wisest move to break down into tears as I described a Sea-Monkey spill and its subsequent rescue mission. Though most of my little buddies perished, I was able to single-handedly save three off the floor. Two others were squished.

But of all the random Sea-Monkey trivia I shared, the one thing that raised the most eyebrows was my insistence that Sea-Monkeys could rise from the dead. But I wasn't crazy. It's true! The trick is to let the water evaporate after every last Sea-Monkey is dead. Then add water. And *voila!* Instant life. *Hallelujah! Hallelujah!*

As though gym class wasn't bad enough, I decided to come to class one day wearing my amulet. I honestly assumed my teacher wouldn't give a shit.

"Fox!" my gym teacher shouted. "What are you doing with that damn thing on in gym class?"

For the record, this guy was as bad as my bullies. In fact, one couldn't create a more cliché gym teacher than this guy. If you were a jock, you were in his club. If not, you were a constant target, aided by his minions. Aka, my peers.

"Put it in your locker. Better yet, flush them down the damn toilet!"

This mandate was extended to the swimming pool, as well, simultaneously squashing my dream of swimming with my beloved pets and spar-

ing them from death by chlorine.

My insistence on wearing the necklace raises a logical question. Well, probably several questions, but the main one is about my parents. Why didn't they try to stop me? Come to think of it, my parents certainly didn't help my cause on several occasions. But, looking back, I am eternally grateful that they didn't force me to leave my necklace at home, just as I'm grateful that—during that same year—they didn't talk me out of buying the Beastie Boys "License to Ill" album when they would have preferred that I buy the soundtrack to *Grease 2*, but I digress.

I still have Sea-Monkeys to this day. And I'm astounded by how little anything has changed. The packaging. The tank. The spoon. It's all timeless, suspended animation, much like Sea-Monkeys themselves.

Whenever I go into a toy store, I always make it a point to look for Sea-Monkeys and feel a twinge of disappointment when I don't see them. In fact, I gauge a toy store's worth by whether or not they carry Sea-Monkeys on their shelves. On a recent visit to Toys "R" Us, I noticed a variety of different types of tanks with various themes such as pirates, outer space, and even a pink tank aimed at girls, including a "Friendship Locket," the feminine equivalent of my necklace. If only I was able to find a female friend during childhood who shared my passion.

Not only do I still have Sea-Monkeys, but I still have my Sea-Monkey necklace, stored away in a box of childhood memories along with my fake poop and vomit. Every now and then, I consider filling the necklace up. Then I remember the teasing and leave it behind, but I will never leave behind the lessons it taught me.



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"Hope"

by N. E. Matin

Birdie prayed that God hated her as much as she hated him. She paused on the sidewalk to inhale, felt her lungs swell as they were supposed to, not barred by unspoken blasphemy, and moved again by the exhale. The gray skies were a comforter around the city, their cushion stuffed with the down of geese honking by. Rain poked and prodded and brought color to her cheeks, but at least it hid the tears. White into gray into nearly black soot-soiled sneakers made no sound against the pavement, but quickly became soaked in the cigarette-butt lined puddles. She walked faster. The smell of thick air and grime and smoke and hotdog stands merged into one as her thin black hair was soaked, clinging to her scalp in uneven clumps.

Birdie wanted to spit. She'd never spat on the ground before; she thought it was nasty when she would pass a construction site and see hard-hat headed men form a wad of saliva in their mouths and catapult it to the ground, but she was alone and she wanted to spit. She spat. A tiny drop of liquid, not as elegant as the tear nor as vile as urine, joined the masses of raindrops on their way to the ground. She looked to find it, but the spit had already vanished into the puddles. She felt the same.

She arrived at the church to hear voices singing with emotion in voices, sticky and sustaining. The double door housed a family of metal designs with brass twirled in lines and curves, thick then thin, as erratic as a kid entering a maze with a school of children, far too excited by the possibility of finding the center to be bothered with a pattern, a style, a route. Figures were carved in throughout. On the top right, a bearded man. A white robed woman spread her arms around the middle of the left. Three crucifixes were separated with two on the right and one on the left.

The church, tucked into the cor-

ner of 4th and Main, was a geode on Sundays. The outside was covered in dark stone, the rain beat down and sculpted it into jagged edges, gray, damp, but the inside: a glorious collision of crystals. Candles flickered on the rounded edges of high archways made from the same bronzy gold material as the door but not so worn by weather. Tapestries of a Persian intensity lined the walls, a glyptic framing, the red a shade darker than the velvet pillow that lined the oak pews. The congregation did not notice Birdie's late entry; they sang with the choir. Men and women, mostly middle aged with a couple of kids displayed front and center, stood draped in golden robes a few steps from the first pew. Birdie stood at the back, dripping, forming a puddle underneath her shoes, watching. An older woman—tiny, white, age forcing her limbs inward, dressed in Sunday's best—pursed her lips and glared. Birdie saw and crawled into the closest seat.

The music continued, swelling and swaying, and the audience moved with it, slowly to the left then back to the right. The church, Birdie realized, was a geode in shape, but Pandora's Box in spirit. She stifled a giggle at the irony of it: a church reminded her of a myth. It gave hope to the hopeless. It filled souls with the prism of light that reflected back from the stained glass depictions of Jesus as though the glaring light from a picture of the son of God would somehow make the viewer a distant relative. The hope, however, was at the bottom of the box, tucked behind the pedestal of a pastor's prayer. For there to be that hope there had to be the crusades. There had to be wars, there had to be bloodshed, there had to be starvation, misery, a reason to fall on your knees and kiss the feet of someone who preached it was all part of a plan.

Birdie considered leaving. She

made eye contact with the man next to her whose wrinkled eyes looked as though he'd had a premature midlife crisis. He was dressed in a button-down too large at the shoulders and too small at the gut. Birdie quickly looked away from the man as her stomach squeezed itself in the way guts do right before making a noise, and she felt her body lapping hungrily inward to her core. Her left leg bounced up and down, but she didn't notice. She just strained her neck and landed her eyes on the man directly behind the choir. He did not meet her stare. No, he just didn't see her.

She held her seat like a man petrified of flying held onto the first plane he'd been on in years. Her skin was close in shade to that of the heavily finished oak, but as her leg bounced more rapidly and her fingers squeezed, strained, scratched the pew, the white of her bones overpowered her color as her fingers achromatized.

Her nose twitched, something smelled like—citrus? She sniffed. Olfactory did not deceive; the church exuded a lemon incense, lemon with a Florida breeze that hinted orange. A smell that reminded her of childhood: hair brushed on Mommy's lap, summer air drifting in from the kitchen's open window, soft cookies and ice cubes in tea to complement the sun erasing dew from grass that grew taller

The Pregnant Mare or

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in resistance to the weekly mower.

She looked back over to the pastor, and the incense grew too strong. Its power tiptoed under tongue and left a sordid residue; that delicious smell she savored turned vile with memory. Their rainy city had no open fields, no sunny summer evenings, no dew spoiled grass to leave poets trembling. Her palms loosened on the pew's seat. Her daughter's tiny image flooded her thoughts as she prayed, no, hoped to add the scent to her memory as well. They could share its sweet scent, share it anywhere besides here.

Thinking of her child made Birdie miss the ending note of the choir. She missed the people of the church joining hands and harmonizing, or at least attempting to, feeling connected and infinite as though the song could end but their vocal cords braided together in an eternal community. Birdie looked up, slightly bewildered, when the hall quieted.

The members of the choir took their seats with a few praises from mothers and fathers to the younger members. The pastor stepped forward to his podium. He was in that ageless time of a man's life—somewhere between twenty-five and forty. It made no difference. Brown hair, brown eyes, white skin, white teeth when he smiled. Dimples that captured the audience's attention more than any of his words. The taste in Birdie's mouth turned from a tad too much citrus to a bite of rotting fish promised to have been caught fresh that morning.

"Thank you, choir, for leading that beautiful performance!" Pastor Matthews spread his words, savoring their flavor. He stretched every vowel, every consonant; resonance bounced off the church's walls and echoed through the ears of the audience. He

smiled. The audience returned a grin. Birdie did not. She squeezed her hands on her seat again then moved them onto her lap where she twiddled her thumbs.

"It is a blessed Sunday today, a truly blessed Sunday. Do you know why that is, folks?" The crowd muttered incoherently. He continued to smile as though his grin was sewn on and the dimples were the imperfect mark where the string had been knotted and cut. "It is a blessed Sunday because you are here and I am here and we can relish in the glory of our God.

"I was approached by a child in this last week, a little boy, and he asked me a question; he asked me why I believe in God." He paused, expecting silence, but the rain did not oblige; it continued to tap and titter on the roof. "There is a time in all of our lives, myself included, that we must ask ourselves this question. There is a point in our lives where we will question belief. So, in questioning one belief, we must question all faith. In response, I asked the boy how he knew the sun was coming up in the morning, how he knew all storms will eventually end, how he knew summer would fall to winter. This boy, a bright young man, understood my point. There are things in this world we know, things that we accept as truth. God is the ultimate unrevealed truth."

The audience sighed in the spirit of all things holy.

"We have our faith, we need our faith. But I'm afraid faith alone cannot help us in this world. We must do more than have faith. We must love: love those next to you, love your family, love your friends, love the Earth, love God, love me as I love you, love and love and love.

"But even then, we are missing something. Corinthians 13:13 puts it best." He moved over to his platform and took out a black leather bound Bible, larger than those tucked into every pew, perhaps a collector's edition. He flipped to a page, smiled again, then looked back to the audience as though the book was a prop to the show he'd already memorized.

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love." He shut the book. It snapped sharply and a distracted teenage boy a few rows ahead of Birdie jumped, "Of course, the quote goes on to say 'But the greatest of these is love.' And although love may be the greatest, we often neglect to hope. You are all people of faith! You have proved that much by merely showing up today. You are kind people, people I know and love, your hearts are open to all those around you. But what do you see of the future? Is it bright? Is it sunny? Or is it weakened by the clouds of rain that surround us now? We must hope that people are good and that it will be bright because—"

"Father Matthews?" Birdie chirped, her voice a pale gossamer over his stone foundation. Despite the audience's previous silence, the hall still quieted, rain softening its fall to make room for her voice. The pastor stood with his mouth ajar, cut off mid-sentence and ready to continue his sermon, his lips lopsided from surprise, eyes wrinkled and squinting in accusation of whoever dared to interrupt. Birdie stood and the pastor lost a shade.

"Father Matthews," she looked him in the eye, her hands tucked below the back of the closest pew to hide their shaking. She glanced around the audience. "Sorry for interrupting everyone's service," she fought the urge to run her hand through her hair.

"No. No, I'm not sorry. This needs to be, I need to..." She inhaled. She exhaled. She looked back to the pastor.

"Father, I have a question."

"Ask away, sister, er—"

"Birdie. Bur-dee. I'm surprised you don't remember." She laughed; a guttural sound that was without humor, it sounded an age far beyond her own. Deep and husky, a prisoner's laugh with the severity of a warden. "Actually, I'm not surprised." She became a contradiction: her apologetic child fought with her steadfast mother.

"Not here," he tried.

"Yes here. Only here." The citrus was still strong, but that wasn't the scent in her nose. She smelled cotton and sweat. Sometimes it could be a

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simple smell, a soft smell, a farmer's cologne and the pastor's aroma. She remembered how that smell had overwhelmed all her other senses, a smell that didn't go away when she squeezed her nostrils shut. "You see, Father," then distracting herself, "actually, for the time being, I'm going to call you Dylan. Not Father. Too much irony—don't you think?"

He could no longer meet her eye, becoming fascinated by his shoes and the ground next to them. His skin grew more pallid: a chameleon leaning against the moon. The audience was torn. Do they look towards the nervous woman whose eyes were a geyser about to erupt or to their beloved pastor who couldn't look up at all? Father Matthew's neck itched. He did not scratch. The itch took his motionlessness as invitation to spread down his back, branch out at his arms, down his legs until even the tips of his toes twitched. His body was in flames while Birdie swam in the retelling, no rain inside to mask her soon arriving tears.

"Dylan, yes that sounds better, I wouldn't consider myself naive. Perhaps that in and of itself is naivety, but I don't think so. What you, what you did..." No tears, she told herself, no tears. "What you did was not my fault." She pursed her lips and looked through him. "You approached me, introduced yourself—'Father Mathews of First Protestant'—when I could barely see straight. Surprised I can remember, actually," this time she giggled genuinely, its sincerity made him cringe. "I bet you're surprised I remember too.

"You were still in your religious garb so I confided in you. Must've thought it was some form of a Catholic confessional shit or something like that." The audience was torn again—laugh at the Catholic jab or scowl at the foul language on a sacred Sunday? "I told you why I was drinking. I-I told you why I'd left the father of my child, of my Lily." Birdie's eyes glazed over. She felt the words of a memory pour through her lips without consent: a stream no dam could contain. Her head told her she

should've left when she had the chance, her heart, her daughter's heart, cheered. She looked to the audience to explain. "Lily's father hurt me when I wasn't his perfect housewife. Sometimes I was and he hit me anyway. He pushed me harder when he came home drunk with his buddies. People complimented me more on my complexion when I started wearing makeup to cover up the bruises.

"I stayed for my little one." She stopped and remembered kissing her daughter's forehead before she left this morning. The rain had slowed to a crawl and then a halt. "I used to pick her up and spin her around, she told me she felt like she was flying. She'd giggle and giggle and then I'd be flying." Pause. "Then, a few nights ago, he came home when I had her in my arms. He was furious, futilely furious with no cause for his anger but our joy. And the liquor. I could smell its dizzy cloud on his breath, on his clothes, on our home as soon as he entered the house. I told you, Dylan, that I decided to leave when he pushed us to the ground. Lily fell and hit the ground and started crying." At this point, so was Birdie. A few women in the audience, those with children, felt their eyes dampen. The men felt bad as well. Not bad enough to cry, but still bad. Of course they did: not all men were like Lily's father. The children who had been dragged to church wondered how long it would be until the service was over.

"I can take a lot, but, like I told you, as soon as Lily comes into it..." she trailed off and might've left it there if she didn't see the pastor open his mouth to respond. "Don't you dare." She paused again. She let her memory drop in the form of salty tears that fell from her eyes and onto her lips. They tickled. She licked them away. "I was in there trying to figure out how I would pay for us, where I would work, what I could do after doing nothing but taking care of my girl. And next thing I know, I can barely see straight.

"That's where you come in! I saw your cross and, though I am no young boy, I believe I asked you that same question," she whispered, "How can

you believe in God?"

"Please don't do this here. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Oh lord, please, Birdie," he haiku'd. Tears streamed down his face as well. He cried not for her pain, not for his regret, but for the mess he would have to clean up with his previously adoring audience. The indoor waterworks kept the city's rain pouring.

She did not hear him, would not hear him. "I asked you how the Bible was any different than a story told by Shakespeare or Faulkner or Joyce, other than its readability." A laugh, the guttural one. "I demanded an explanation of God. I told the story of Lily's father. Do you remember what you said? You were still trying to be helpful at this point."

"Please."

"Hold on, I looked it up before I came. Even if I don't have the Bible memorized, I'm pretty prepared, don't you think?" she asked rhetorically, then pulled the Bible from her pew. The button-down man leaned away as she reached down. "Aha, here it is: 'Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Be strong and courageous. This is what the *Lord* will do to all the enemies you are going to fight' Joshua 10:25. I mean, what did I expect asking a pastor? But quoting the Bible to justify God... do you know what that's like?"

No response. Silence was expected. Birdie spoke with more strength now as though she was performing a sermon of her own, an anti-sermon.

"That's like if I told you I could get this certain stick off the ground, of proper size and texture and age, and wave it around in just the correct manner, I could make you levitate. And, let's say in the scenario, you have some sense about you, and you tell me that you don't believe me. I'd say something the lines of," she stood straighter and folded her hands: an impersonation. "'Of course, Father Mathews, of course you don't! I haven't shown you my evidence yet!'"

She cackled.

"I would reach into my bag and confirm the story with a book: a big, leather-bound copy of Harry Potter."

The Blotter

"I love Harry Potter!" A ten year old girl whispered to her mother. She was shushed.

"I can't pick up a stick and make things levitate, and no book, no matter how good, can make that so. No matter how great it would be for God to be omnipotent, for Him to have all our problems worked out, for Him to be real, no book can make that so. You had nothing to say to that. Nothing about *the sun coming out tomorrow* or any Annie crap like that. You suggested I go home. I agreed. You decided to take me home. I said I was alright. You insisted." The thoughts she wanted to say warred with the words she could; she prayed that he hated her as much as she hated him.

"Do you know that moment when you first wake up in the morning? When you stretch, refreshed, and you can still remember your dreams, but by the time you've stepped out of bed, they've already vanished." He nodded, the audience nodded, she continued to look through him but all he saw were her empty eyes on his. "I woke up this morning to a nightmare. And it didn't go away when I pulled off my covers." Birdie resisted the urge to look down and memorize the number of wet spots on her worn sneakers and instead looked directly to the giant wooden cross that hung behind the pastor. Then she looked to him, truly to him now. "Lily was in the room, Dylan. She stays in there when I'm out late and can't afford a babysitter. She says it smells like me in there so she feels safe."

She remembered his hands on

her; they moved to touch her waist, her stomach, her breasts, her neck, choking her to keep from revealing him. "She saw what you did to me, Dylan." There was no rain outside, but no sun either. Had the congregation gone outside, they would've seen sullen, puffy clouds, swollen from the sky's tears.

"Father Matthews?" Her words returned to a whisper.

"Birdie," his choked voice started with a gurgle but managed to finish the name with an articulate 'ee'.

"You preach to all these people about hope, hope for Christ's sake." She struggled to continue, tears made her voice quiver like a violinist's practiced vibrato, and he could not look at her nor the audience. They all watched him now. He did not want to experience their sincerity: to do so would be to get a glimpse of a godless world. "You give these people the hope that you have stolen from me." There was a prelapsarian anguish in her voice; her breath sped up, cheeks red, eyes wild, lost, hopeless. She studied him and he studied the ground.

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.' You told us that we neglect to hope. Maybe you're right. But maybe that's because, in your world, God leaves us nothing to hope for." She looked to the wooden floor and let her mouth's saliva swim in the silence. She waited for it to gather like rain in a sewer.

She spat. She felt the same. "Amen." ❖

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

Sometimes I wake up because I smell smoke. Near panic, I sit up and sniff like a beagle, wondering if I left the stove on or something outside is burning or some third possibility I can't yet deduce because I am very sleepy, dark outside and what time is it, anyway? But the smell of smoke is gone from everywhere except in my memory. What was I dreaming? That I was burning leaves, back in my parents' yard - maple and horse-chestnut leaves mostly dry but just damp enough with melting frost to kick up a haze? Or was it that incense I used to burn in my first apartment, sandlewood - ridiculously strong and musky but it was my house and I could do what I wished in it, like not do the dishes until the first cockroach came snooping to see what all the fuss was about and then I became a white tornado with my sponge and cleaning solution (which cockroaches will consume as an alternative to food, more's the pity.) Nothing. Just the sound of the fish-tank filter pump in the next room. No smoke, no fire. Go back to sleep.
Hedy - cyberspace



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Anonymously, of course. mermaid@blotterrag.com

Episode 1 - The Receptionist:

Long, long ago in a time somewhere between the switchboard of Lily Tomlin jests and the endless "prompts" of today's telephonic trauma, there was once a person reachable at the other end of the line. She answered politely, and put you through to your party.

I was such a person, in my very first job, from which I hoped to work myself up to greater things. This job required no more than a great speaking voice and grammatical grasp of the language, a pleasant demeanor and a pleasing visage for the foot traveller to the door of this corporation.

Telephonics were rapidly changing during this time. New telephone systems were introduced by still controlling Ma Bell monthly. My boss had perused them all without decision. Still, the old one clunked along with not enough lines for our constantly growing firm.

Until the day. The day I put down my full cup of tea too abruptly and watched in horror as it sloshed from the cup in a mini tsunami and divested itself into the telephone console.

During the ensuing weeks, the phone calls coming in redirected themselves, got lost into the oblivion of electronic fog that was now our phone system. The boss was forced into decisiveness and was finally forthcoming with a new up-to-date communication system. No one was the wiser. But I have felt guilty all these many decades. I feel almost shriven. Thanks, readers.

Anonymous

Sent from my iPhone



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"Jenna At The Construction Site"

She has this admiration
that even she can't explain
for the guy up on the high girder
in yellow hard-hat and vest.

It's not like she figures
there's any commonality
between her job and his
other than that they both
have their names pinned
to their chest in plastic.
And their personalities
are surely as far apart
as Betelgeuse and Baghdad.

But she respects whoever
does the tough sometimes dirty work
that unwittingly makes her life happen.
Like those who stick
their heads down sewers
or teach ungainly kids
to bus restaurant tables.

Besides, for all her
well-paid office job
and burgeoning sophistication.
she can't help noticing
that he's a hunk
and the IQ, the good taste.
the self-respect.
behind her gazing eyes
would be better served
by looking the other way.

But then he has to go
and wave down at her
like he's been checking her out as well.
What gall, she says to herself.
She feels compromised...
and from both directions.

Two by J

John Grey

"I Only Partly Left My Heart"

I don't know what to make of my time in San Francisco.
I was living downtown, close to the business center,
close to the poverty also.
Like the good times and the bad times,
you'd never know they were within a few blocks of each other.

It was the nineteen eighties, well beyond the classic sixties,
even the self-serving seventies.
a kind of no-man's decade that couldn't just happen to me
but required my constant intervention.

I was by myself and I was with others.
I was working and I was stuck trying to find a job.
There are stories I could tell that make me wonder
why they're some of my most closely guarded secrets.

In the end. whatever was holding me there
wasn't enough to prevent me from moving on.
I could have stayed but how do you tell the locals
that I once lived in San Francisco.
I had to get away from there and then tell it.

CONTRIBUTORS:

R.J. Fox is the award-winning writer of several short stories, plays, poems, a memoir, and 15 feature length screenplays. Two of his screenplays have been optioned to Hollywood. His first book - a memoir entitled *Love & Vodka: My Surreal Adventures in Ukraine* was previously published by Fish Out of Water Books. His most recent publication was a collection of essays entitled *Tales From the Dork Side*. His work has been published in over 30 literary magazines and journals. He is also the writer/director/editor of several award-winning short films. His recent stage directing debut led to an Audience Choice Award at the Canton One-Acts Festival. Fox graduated from the University of Michigan with a B.A. in English and a minor in Communications and received a Masters of Arts in Teaching from Wayne State University in Detroit, MI. In addition to moonlighting as a writer, independent filmmaker and saxophonist, Fox teaches film and literature in the Ann Arbor Public Schools, where he uses his own dream to inspire his students to follow their own. He has also worked in public relations at Ford Motor Company and as a newspaper reporter. He resides in Ann Arbor, MI. His website is www.foxplots.com, or follow him on Twitter @foxwriter7.

N.E. Matin is from Georgia, and has lived in North Carolina, but currently lives in a New Jersey suburb. Next year, she plans to attend University of Iowa to study English and Creative Writing. This is her first publication.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in the *Tau*, *Studio One* and *Columbia Review* with work upcoming in *Leading Edge*, *Examined Life Journal* and *Midwest Quarterly*



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



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