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The Blotter

magazine



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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 submis-
sions)

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

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"Circadian Arrhythmia"

Aaron Sorkin (I'm not going to tell you who he is, either you're already well aware and it will be ironic, or you're not and I will be left foolishly mansplain-ing) said something to the effect of "the first sin of writing is to tell the reader what they already know."

Elder daughter says I talk too much. Sort of the same thing, I guess.

It's late spring, and there are perhaps a handful of lovely cool mornings remain-ing in the inventory. The alarm pushes me out of bed and downstairs to my key-board and just before I sit I peer out the window. I have no foolish thoughts that I am the only one awake and the moment is peaceful; outside are the dog walkers, the school bus riders, the running women and men getting cardio, the landscape workers prepping their gas-powered weed-eaters and edgers while checking their watches for that seven-thirty start time.

Across the street is another me, my neighbor who I don't know a thing about except that he likes to sit on his porch and watch the world, our very small slice of it, pass. I'm on my side, he's on his. We claim no right to quiet, to privacy, to... empire. We just sit. He reads, I read. If someone is blowing leaves or mowing the lawn, I go back inside. (I stay out for the stink of steak sizzle on a grill, though. I mean, who doesn't?)

Occasionally we wave hello – or goodbye – to each other, to other neighbors walking by. I wonder what they think of us - two silent, frumpy sirens past whom folks must navigate to go home. I wonder what he's got in his tumbler. I have pineapple-juice and seltzer in mine. Nothing hard, nothing sugary (please don't tell me any truth about pineapple-juice. At least it's better for me than the aeronautic zoom and crash of sweet tea.) And no, I'm probably never going to get up and wander across the street and introduce myself.

One of my favorite things is catching people power-walking while they jabber away on Bluetooth. It is efficient to walk and work, but they seem to be talking to themselves and there is an element of fun to pretending that they aren't. As they pass my perch, I say hi when they say hi. I try to answer questions they ask the person they're on the horn with. My goal, of course, is to earn the stink-eye. It is silly and who couldn't use more silly?

Right now, my autocorrect is trying to get me to change "more silly" to "sillier." I refuse to be bullied.

The days get longer. Dawn cracks at Five fifty-five. Five, fifty-two. Night leaks out of the overturned bottle. Every morning, first light peers over my horizon in shades of watermelon and carnation, lilac and fandango. It's difficult for me to decide if I like spring (because of warmth and rebirth and new bloom) or if it is troubling (because I have to come out of my cocoon, leave my comfortable cave of winter.) Do bears feel this way, I wonder. Or are they just happy to get a meal after a long fast? Along that line, I am not a morning-feed person. In December it feels strange to eat when it's still dark out. By the time warm weather has returned for good, it is still an oddity to me to think about eating

breakfast. I do, however, enjoy a couple of eggs over-easy and a rasher or two of bacon before settling down to a long night. This is of course an evil thing to do, cooking up when everyone else is asleep. Their dreams must warp from flying unicorns and magnificent shopping malls to coming down to the feast-perfumed kitchen only to find it empty, or worse – full of dirty dishes.

This morning I grind the beans, prop open the clean, brown, climate-change reversing filter and make the coffee. I put together the tasty lunch for my youngest (not so young anymore, though) and crack the blinds. Crank the desk-top like an old flivver. We had a run-in, my computer and I, this year, but with some minor open-heart surgery and a software facelift she's back in fighting trim. I like writing in the morning. It is akin to scrubbing your face with a clean wet washcloth. Get everything out there, on paper, even if it's not much use later. Reveal things. Unclog the pipes, turn the soil over to the day. Yes, I'm fully aware that Victorians defined "soil" differently than I do. Ah, well.

Here in my "office" – the coopted formal dining room of this house – I have stacked my desk with the clutter of failed attempts to focus. ARCs, sketchbooks, shells I picked up on the beach, old bookmarks as weathered and dog-eared as the books they stood watch over for me. No food-crumbs or dirty coffee-cups, though, so points for effort. There are four different chairs at the table, so I can wander around like Isaac Asimov – a new spot for each change-of-project. I turn the monitor and reposition the keyboard and carry on. It's silly, I know, but sometimes you need to be silly to keep going. There's also a terrific wing-chair, leather, in the corner beneath the snick-snocking cuckoo clock. It's a great chair. Not a couch – god, I would lay down to rest my eyes and wake up four hours later and stay up all night (not that this would be particularly terrible, but...) – just a good reading chair.

For those of you keeping count, I stole two references to Julie Andrews' movies in paragraph six. Go back and see if you can find them!

I think I'm pretty fair at drafting (not the thing where you pull your car up on the bumper of the driver in front of you while roaring down the freeway to try and save a couple of pennies of gasoline but plowing the field of a writing project and getting words down) and know all of the hints & tips - don't look back, just keep typing, edit later, etc., and just keep typing. Elementary stuff, but you would be surprised by how many folks keep bunching up their panties with the first paragraph of their story and never finish the damned tale. It's a perfect paragraph, though, so there's that.

Well, my nutritionist says I have to go now, get outside before the heat of the day becomes an excuse for not doing my half-hour of aerobic exercise. Yes, I have a nutritionist, and she's very smart. Doesn't take any clever crap from me. I go out and walk and pretend to be on Bluetooth while I actually talk to myself about schedules and morning sunshine and writing and such. Of course, just when you get a handle on the whole spring thing, Daylight Savings throws it all into a cocked hat.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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CAUTION

You go to lost wages, lost wages...

"Chicken Dinner"

by James Glisson

Robbie's momma needed to hurry up and die. Best thing for him if she did.

That morning, Robbie told his floor manager, Lon Estrich, at Wilcox Wholesale that he wanted to step up to a driver position when the new delivery truck arrived.

"If you keep missin' work to take care of that momma of yours, you can't be counted on to deliver every day," said Lon.

"I know, Mr. Estrich. I'm sorry."

"I'm gonna have a time explainin' to Mr. Phillips why he should keep you on payroll." Lon took the red coffee straw out of his mouth. The end was twisted and curled where Lon's teeth had ground the thin plastic. Robbie was nineteen and his momma thirty-seven. Robbie had worked more in his life than his momma ever did. By Saturday night each week he felt like those chewed up red plastic straws of Mr. Lon's.

"You know I need the work, Mr. Lon."

"I know you do, son, but you

need to make up your mind about how long you gonna be your momma's keeper. Ain't like you one of them shepherds in the Bible and she's some lost little lamb."

"It ain't just momma, Mr. Lon. It's Holly and Lacy. You know I got a baby on the way." Robbie walked over to a pack of Doral cigarettes by the coffee pot. He and Mr. Lon were close to the door that opened into the air-conditioned offices of Wilcox Wholesale. The warehouse was cooled by industrial fans forty feet off the ground placed on the outer walls. The concrete floor was always cool, no matter the temperature outside. Robbie occasionally rested in the dull embrace of the concrete floor and watched threads of smoke from his cigarette dissipate into the vastness of the ceiling.

"I know, son."

Robbie lit a cigarette and spoke, "What am I supposed to do?"

"I ain't yer daddy, Robbie, and if it meant I had to babysit your liquored-up momma all the time, I wouldn't be your daddy for all the money in Louisiana."

"I never knew my daddy."

"I didn't either. He took off out West with the railroad."

Robbie took another drag and watched the smoke rise. "I just don't know what to do, Mr. Lon." The gray mist was lost in the white ceiling.

"I don't know, son. I ain't got no answers for you other than keep workin' hard on a good job, like the one you got right here. If you can prove to me you ain't gonna need to take off after that momma of yours every few weeks, I'll mention you to Mr. Phillips. Maybe you can take over Taylor's route when he starts makin' the runs down to Magee." Mr. Lon took a fresh red coffee stirrer from his shirt pocket and threw the crumpled one in a garbage can made out of a fifteen-gallon jug.

Robbie leaned against the scaffold and took a drag. "I'd get a raise with a route?" Dwarfed by the scaffolding, Robbie rubbed his free hand along his eyebrows. The pallets of flour, peanut oil, and sugar seemed to arch over him, ready to fall any minute and crush his body against the floor until



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his skull popped right open. Robbie exhaled. The dirty smoke was prominent against the unworn brown paper of the twenty-five-pound sugar bags.

"Sure would. Flat rate and ten-percent of the sales you make." Mr. Lon put the new straw in his mouth and continued, "That be enough to feed that growin' family of yours."

"I hate to ask, Mr. Lon, but you think I could get an advance this week?"

"What you need money three days early for?"

"Holly's birthday is next week. Lacy wants to take her to one of them fancy dress shops downtown and get her an Easter dress."

"You gettin' to where you're askin' for advances more and more, Robbie."

"I'll be honest, Mr. Lon." Robbie took a long drag and spoke as the smoke left his lungs, "I saved some money, but mamma found it and blew it on a half-day's worth of nine-ball and a man named Dimple."

"Damn, Robbie. You ain't got to clean up after your mamma no more. She never was worth a shit."

"She was. At some time, she was worth a shit, and who am I to kick her out of the house? That's the house I grew up in, *her* house." Robbie put

his unfinished cigarette out with his boot.

"Look, Robbie, you're a damn good worker when you're here. Hell, I bet you work harder on your mamma than you do for me."

"Ain't so."

"Robbie, I'll speak up for you, but you gotta put *you*, that baby, little Holly, and Lacy ahead of your mamma."

"She bore me. I can't do that." Robbie punched a bag of sugar at eye level on a wooden pallet.

"Calm down, son. I ain't gonna fight you about it. But you just think, she carried you inside for what, eight months? How long you been carrying her?"

Robbie looked away. He wanted a shot, another smoke, and another shot.

Mr. Lon continued, "How long Robbie? What is it? Eight, ten years or some such? How old were you when you started cleanin' yards? Ten?"

"I don't want to talk about it no more, Mr. Lon."

"Then when did you start at the lumber yard? Twelve, thirteen maybe?"

"Be quiet, Mr. Lon."

"I just want to make sure you hearin' these things inside that head of yours. You ain't got no daddy to tell you straight up. Maybe your mamma learned you real young that you was supposed to take care of her no matter what."

"She ain't."

"Maybe she wanted to drink the rest of her life away and leave you the bill." The straw in Mr. Lon's mouth twisted upon itself as he ground his teeth. Mr. Lon remembered not having a daddy and the dozens of men who looked down to him as they sat with his mamma on the couch and made her giggle and laugh in ways she never did around him.

"She ain't."

"Not just the money bill but the damn emotional bill. You're tough, son, but if you don't get away from that crazy ass mamma of yours, you gonna start takin' shit out on Lacy, and when that baby comes out, well, maybe you gonna start takin' shit out on the little one."

"Never. I'd never do that!" Ronnie punched the bag of sugar again. "No matter what. I won't do that."

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"You think I'm bein' hard on you, Robbie?"

"I say you are."

"Robbie, if it means I gotta take a day off to haul your momma off to the crazy bin I will, but if you have to take off one more day 'cause of your momma, well, I don't think you would be gettin' that delivery route."

"No." Robbie looked away from the red letters on the sugar bags and into Mr. Lon's eyes. "What do I gotta do, Mr. Lon. I promise I'll do it."

The door to the administrative offices opened, Evelyn, the secretary, stepped into the warehouse and said, "Robbie, your momma's on the phone. She wants to speak with you."

"Speak of the she-devil."

"I promise, Mr. Lon. This is the last time."

"Where's she at today? Rebold's? Longnecks? Hell, she may be callin' from Mobile for all you know."

"Mr. Lon, if you don't be quiet and let me figure this out, we gonna have to step outside."

"And do what? Step outside and do what, Robbie? Get in a fight? How many fights you been in for the sake of your momma?"

"Shut up!"

"How many, Robbie? Grade school, all them kids makin' fun of your drunk momma. You had to stand up for her. I know you had to."

"Be quiet."

"How many times did you get the shit beat out of you?"

"Stop it."

The secretary stood at the open door. Cool air glided past her to where Robbie and Mr. Lon stood. Evelyn knew Robbie wouldn't hit Mr. Lon. He might get mad as a wet tomcat, but he wouldn't dare hit Mr. Lon, no matter what he said.

"How many times did you defend momma's honor, Robbie? If you didn't, it was all true. You know that, Robbie?"

"None of it. None of what you're sayin' is true. Tell him, Mrs. Evelyn. Tell him." Robbie grabbed a broom leaned against the metal scaffold.

"If you didn't take up for your momma then you'd be admitting she's a drunk, an old whore that didn't think of nothin' but gin."

Robbie smacked the broom handle against the concrete floor.

"Best put that broom down, Robbie. If you don't, you just may not need to come back to work in the morning."

"Damn it! Why? Why can't momma be like other mommas? Why can't she ever pick Holly and me over them damn bar flies?" Robbie broke the broom handle upon the metal scaffold.

"It's okay, Robbie. Your momma loves you," said Mrs. Evelyn as she stepped forward.

"Time to quit fightin' for your momma, son. Time to start fightin' for yourself."

Robbie dropped the remains of the broom handle as he said, "I don't know what else to do, Mr. Lon. I just don't know what else to do." A few tears fought their way out of Robbie's eyes.

Evelyn patted Robbie's shoulder. He didn't look at her. Robbie slumped his shoulders and walked into the air-conditioned office to talk to his momma on the telephone.

"You sure were hard on the boy, Mr. Estrich."

"If I ain't, he won't never change."

"Shame the boy never knew his daddy. Worse that his momma lives with him and don't know her own son. How you think his little sister will turn out? I hope not like her momma, not only for her own sake, but for Robbie's too. I don't think he can handle another woman like his momma in his life."

"Lacy seems like a good girl."

"She is, Mr. Estrich. She's gonna make a fine momma to that child."

"I hope so."

As Robbie walked into the warehouse he lit another cigarette. The few tears had left clean tracks down his cheeks as if soap had dripped down his face in narrow lines.

"Everything okay, Robbie?"

"Yes, Mrs. Evelyn. Thank you."

"I'll make some fresh coffee." Evelyn picked up the coffee pot and took it inside to wash. Robbie walked over to Mr. Estrich with his head down.

"Robbie, this is the last time. I'll finish your load."

"I got time. I'll finish it, Mr. Lon." Robbie looked up to the man who he had worked under for the past year. Mr. Lon's associate pastor said he knew an honest boy who needed a good job to support a family. Mr. Lon

took a chance on Robbie and Robbie knew it. Robbie also knew what Mr. Lon said was the truth. Robbie's mind didn't accept the truth, at least not yet.

"No, son. You won't. And that broom is gonna come out of your paycheck. What all you need money for?"

"It don't matter."

"It does, son. If it didn't matter, I wouldn't be takin' my time to ask. You would have been fired instead."

"Back rent, veterinarian bill, property taxes, Lacy's ring."

"I thought you paid off Lacy's ring last paycheck."

"I just about had it paid for on layaway, but I had to get most of the money out to pay momma's hospital bill."

"See what I mean, Robbie. You just runnin' around in circles inside a silo mill. Never gettin' anywhere but deeper into the ground you standin' on."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lon."

"Here." Mr. Lon took out his wallet and handed Robbie six \$20 bills. "It's all the cash I got. Figure out another way, son. Your momma locked you inside that silo when you was born. Climb out the top and don't look back."

Robbie folded the \$20 bills and slid them into a back pocket of his blue jeans. "Thank you, Mr. Lon. I'll be here early in the morning to sweep the warehouse, gas up the trucks, and check the oil."

"You ain't got to do all that. I just want you to show up, work your time, and go home to your family. Don't be hangin' out at the casinos."

"I ain't no gambler. You know that, Mr. Lon."

Mrs. Evelyn walked into the warehouse.

"Make sure you ain't no drunk, neither. Your momma may have a tighter hold on you than you think. That drinkin' runs down the family tree, you know."

"Thank you, Mrs. Evelyn. Thank you, Mr. Lon. I'll be in early. I'm sorry Mr. Lon." Robbie walked toward the loading bay of the warehouse.

"That boy's been through enough already."

"You want better for him, Evelyn?"

"Of course, I do."

"It's gonna take an ultimatum. Something to force his hand or he won't change. Then what? He feels bad and goes to the bottle for comfort, just like his momma? Then he's drunk and has to take it out on somebody. All that pent-up anger at his momma for the past twenty years, who's he gonna take it out on, Evelyn? Who's close around him?"

"He wouldn't do that."

"He wouldn't, but his momma is inside of him, too. His drunk momma sure would take it out on them kids, every single one of 'em. Lacy, Holly, and that new one on the way. Hell, his momma's probably jealous of that new baby and it ain't even here yet."

"I still say he wouldn't do it."

"I wish someone would have took me aside and told me more about life that I didn't have to learn on my own, the hard way."

"He can learn."

"He can, Evelyn. I believe he can, but his momma may strangle him from the inside before he learns." Lon Estrich turned and walked away before Evelyn could respond. She watched as he put another straw into his mouth and put the twisted remains of the original into his back pocket.

Robbie walked onto the loading bay, jumped down four stairs and ran to his Chevy pick-up truck. The truck had no tailgate, no seat belts, and no back window. Robbie spun the tires as he left the parking lot, wide open after his momma.

As he drove he stomped his left foot against the floor board. "Damn. Damn, damn, damn! Momma, just leave me alone for a couple of months. Let me get my shit paid off so I can pay for your shit."

Robbie heard a car horn and looked behind him at a bronze sedan. Robbie pulled over and the girl with long hair parked in front of him.

Wearing a tank top and cut-off blue jeans, Ally stepped out of the car and walked to Robbie's open window. "Why haven't you come to see me?"

"You know I been serious with Lacy for a while now."

"Don't mean you can't come see me." Ally reached down between Robbie's legs and continued, "Forgot me already, Rob?"

"Come on now, I got to get going."

"Ain't you supposed to be at work? I just come from Aunt Sara's and I saw you pull out of the parking lot." She leaned over to kiss him.

"Get on now. I can't be caught

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with you.” Robbie pushed her away from the truck.

“You used to think I had the sweetest...”

“I gotta go, Ally.”

As Robbie backed up, Ally jumped on the front bumper. “I *need* to see you, Rob.”

“All right, all right. Jump down. We’ll take off somewhere.”

“Let me grab the keys.” Ally jumped off the bumper and ran to her car.

“Gotta go, Allygirl.” Robbie pulled wide around her. As Robbie drove away, she cursed him.

Across the state line was Rebold’s, the site of a former bus station turned into a gathering point for rail riders, river rats, and loggers. Robbie pulled into the rusted gravel parking lot. A dozen men lingered outside smoking, thinking, and regretting as they looked into the blue-green loblolly pines. A few transients who didn’t recognize Robbie wondered if he had any money to give or maybe steal. Two or three knew Robbie and

were too proud to ask for money. One spoke up as Robbie stepped onto the porch, “Son, I ain’t seen your momma in an Arkansas week.”

“And I hope you don’t, sir.” Robbie had no idea what an Arkansas week was.

“Not if I find her before you do.”

Robbie pushed open the swinging front door. The entrance room to the building was for people that wanted to eat and drink. Robbie walked around the empty tables into the back room where people came that wanted to just drink. Two men sat at the end of the bar and watched Lee Van Cleef and Clint Eastwood squint at each other in a Spaghetti Western. Several other men were scattered around the room. Most drank alone.

Miss Jess was the colored bartender at Rebold’s. If Robbie ever needed a drink and didn’t have the money she always served him. Robbie had been drinking at the bar since the age of sixteen. Sometimes Robbie talked to Miss Jess about his momma. She didn’t like his momma and refused to serve her if she came to the bar. Robbie’s momma knew she wasn’t welcome anymore at Rebold’s, and stayed away unless a man brought her through the front door. Miss Jess comforted Robbie like his momma never did. Rebold let Robbie clean and mop the bar after hours when he was just twelve, for money that his momma would turn around and spend the same night in the casinos.

“You seen momma around, Miss Jess?” asked Robbie as he sat at the bar.

“You know I ain’t servin’ her if she comes around.”

“I know, but I thought she might have come in here with a new man.”

“I heard she was up at the bowling alley last night.”

“Who said?”

“Ellen Cooper was in here earlier. She knows I don’t give a shit about your momma. She was tellin’ me your momma was curled up around some feller from Memphis.”

“Name Felix or some shit?”

“That be him. He used to live round here.”

“He don’t no more?”

Miss Jess picked two boiled eggs out of a blue plastic bucket behind the counter with a pair of stainless steel tongs. She placed them on a paper plate in front of Robbie. “He went off to Memphis lookin’ to get famous a few years back.” She paused and poured Robbie two shots of Jack Daniels. “I guess fame didn’t get the memo.” She poured herself one and swallowed it whole.

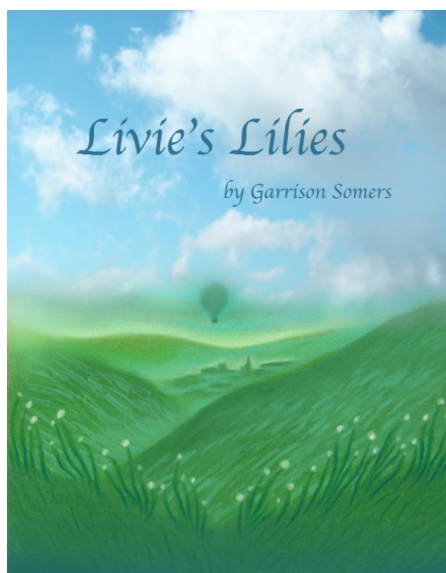
“He trouble?”

“Big talker, lil’ pecker.”

Robbie took a shot and spoke as he rolled the eggs against each other with the tip of his index finger. “I had

“Who gave these idiots microphones?”

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to leave work early again.”

“One of these days, son, you and your momma gonna crash. Slam right into each other like two blind Jaybirds.”

“You’re probably right, Miss Jess.”

“Eat up. Quit pokin’ at them eggs.”

Robbie swallowed one egg and took a shot. Miss Jess poured another shot for both of them.

“Go ahead. You look like you’ve had a shit day so far and you still got nine hours to go.”

“I just feel like I been tryin’ to catch up to my life for the last five years.”

“Shit, son, I felt like that for the last twenty years,” said a man at the end of the bar. “Ma’am, can I get some of them boiled eggs down here?”

Miss Jess picked two more eggs out of the bucket with the tongs and put them on a paper towel.

“While you comin’ down this way, how ‘bout a refill.” The man tapped his glass on the bar.

“Who are you?” asked Robbie as Jess took the man his eggs and refilled his glass with Wild Turkey.

The man picked up an egg and watched it jiggle in his palm. “Ever wonder about the chicken?” he asked.

“Sir?”

“You think anyone ever wonders about the chicken? We eat these eggs all the time, but if the momma didn’t sit on it long enough, or warm enough, did the yolk form just right?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You’re the egg, son. You gonna grow up to be just like momma?”

“Hell no!”

“You workin’ on it.” The man put a whole egg in his mouth, chewed twice and swallowed.

“How so?”

“Chasin’ your tail.” The man gulped down half the amber liquor.

“I ain’t!” Robbie flattened the boiled egg with his hand.

“Have another shot, Robbie,” said Miss Jess.

“Better not.” Robbie stood, pulled a five-dollar bill out of his front pocket and placed it on the bar.

“You take care, Robbie. I’ll call if I see your momma.”

“Thanks.”

“Chasin’ the wind and your tail,” said the man after he emptied his glass.

Robbie shook his head. That man was like his momma, drinking all day, and probably sleeping in the back of the bar. Did he ever count for anything? Robbie walked outside and looked at the man who spoke on his way in. Robbie wanted him to say something, anything, about his momma. The man saw Robbie’s balled up fist and decided against it. On his way to the bowling alley, Robbie did the math in his head about how much extra money he would have to make in order to pay off the bills and get Lacy’s wedding ring by the end of the month. He’d have to work extra almost every night this month. If he hadn’t taken the money out to pay momma’s hospital bill, he could have bought the ring next week, and had money left over for them to take a few days honeymoon down in New Orleans. He would talk to Lon tomorrow about extra work. He had to come up with the money for Holly’s Easter dress.

By the time Robbie pulled into the bowling alley his fingers hurt from squeezing the steering wheel so hard. He wanted to run away from his momma just like his daddy did. She was making him treat her this way, just like a damn child. He took something from the glovebox and slipped it in his back pocket.

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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...

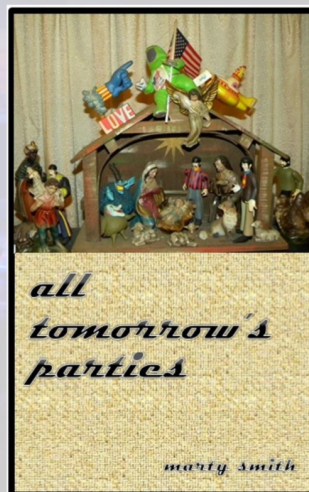
Blotter Books presents:

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, Duke University Radio)

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The Blotter

Robbie said to himself, "I bet this pecker's gonna have a gun. All them little peckers carry a gun. Ha! Ain't none of 'em ever shoot it though."

"Hey, Robbie!"

"Charlie. You seen my momma round here?"

"Hell yeah, she's inside rubbin' all over that feller from Memphis. You need a beer?" asked Charlie as he raised three tallboys still attached to plastic six-pack rings.

"Not till I do what I gotta do. That man named Felix?"

"Shore is. Got his name on his cue." Charlie finished his beer, dropped the can on the ground and opened another one.

"Fucker. If he gave momma moonshine, I'm gonna break it on his neck."

"You gonna tear into him, Robbie?"

"I aim to."

"He claimed that third table."

Charlie went inside with Robbie. Robbie didn't need him. Charlie wanted to see what Robbie had to do to drag his momma home. When Robbie was seventeen, he dragged his momma out of a whore house in New Orleans. Charlie heard Robbie stabbed the man that wanted to keep her. He also heard his momma put up a bigger fight about leaving than the

man that got stuck. A few kids followed as they walked to the back of the bowling alley. Something was about to happen and the children knew it. The glaring yellow scents of urine and man sweat slithered upon all of them as they entered the pool room.

The man had claimed one of the newer pool tables. Robbie's momma wore a lime colored miniskirt with a purple sequined tube-top.

"Shit. There she is rubbin' her titties all over his back. Whose he playin' against? Roger Crum?"

"He ain't gone be no trouble. No one else of any mind in here either," said Charlie.

"Exceptin' Josh Holmes, but he looks half drunk."

The games at other tables paused as the occupants of the entire room noticed Robbie, Charlie, and the spectators that followed. Wearing a red beret, leather pants, and a Journey T-shirt, Felix chalked his cue stick and smiled right at Robbie.

"Get him, Robbie," said a boy at the first pool table.

As Robbie walked toward Felix he spoke, "You been feedin' my momma shine, old man?"

"Well, look-e-here. If it ain't your boy, Robert," said Felix.

"I said, you been feedin' my momma shine?"

"Robbie, I'm sorry. Just let me stay tonight. Felix will bring me home."

"Momma, you been drinkin' shine?"

"Only a few sips here-n-thar."

The two couples that were at the table with Felix stepped to the side. Robbie didn't know any of them, but when he looked the men in the eye, Robbie knew they would not interfere. Robbie looked across the pool table to Felix with his momma. She was always on the other side, never on the side with her own family, her own kids. Why did Robbie always have to drag her back to the side she was supposed to be on?

"Why momma?" Robbie softly spoke as she looked at him.

"Don't be too upset, Robbie. Your momma just needs a lil' fun."

"You picked her up at home didn't ya, Felix?"

"I shore did, Robert. She a grown woman. She can take care of herself."

"Can ya, momma? Can ya take care of *herself*?"

"I used to could."

"But can ya now, momma? Can ya even make it a month without sneakin' round to get yer damn liquor?"

"Hey, that's no way to talk to ya momma, son."

"It ain't? Well, how do you talk to her? How's he *talk* to ya, momma? Does he promise he's gonna take you away to New Orleans or back up to Memphis?"

"I ain't said that, son."

"Momma does he promise he's gonna keep ya full up with gin and shine?" As Robbie spoke he pulled a roll of nickels out of his back pocket.

"He shore does," said Robbie's momma.

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"Does he promise he ain't gonna dump ya out of his hotel when he finds another gin whore? And then what, momma? You gonna call me to come pick you up? To leave Holly and Lacy at home so I can spend a hundred dollars on gas to come pick you up?"

"I'm sorry, Robbie. You're my special little man."

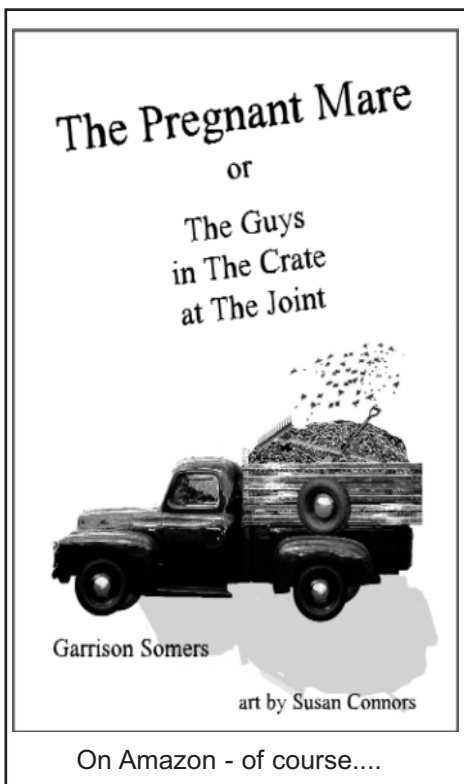
Robbie balled his right hand around those tightly rolled nickels. This was the last two dollars he was gonna spend on his momma.

"Son, why don't ya just leave her be."

"I ain't yer fuckin' son. If you was my daddy, I'd beat the shit out of ya fer leavin' us."

"I'll go home with ya, Robbie. I'm sorry."

"This is the last time, momma. I ain't comin' for you no more. Next time you take off you better make sure you pick a winner."



"I ain't gonna leave no more, Robbie."

"A real winner, winner chicken-dinner, momma."

"I love you, Robbie."

"I love you too, momma."

"You takin' her?" asked Felix.

"I see you around my momma again, I'm gonna sink you in the river, old man."

"Hold on..."

Felix reached his hand out toward Robbie and flipped that pool stick over like he was gonna change the course of the Mississippi with it. That's exactly what Robbie wanted. His momma screamed while Robbie spent those two dollars. Felix never made a solid hit. Robbie got Felix on the floor and sat on his chest as he broke every bone in the man's face. After Charlie finished another beer, he helped two boys pull Robbie off Felix. Making an expanding oval pool, the blood of the old man filled the wooden rack that had fallen upon the floor. Josh Holmes, an assistant deputy, and two cops waited for Robbie by the bowling lanes.

"I guess I won't be needed these." Robbie said as he opened his hand.

The blood of Robbie and Felix mixed together as a leftover slurry at the bottom of a mixed drink. One of the old man's front teeth poked out of Robbie's knuckle.

"Come on, Robbie. You done what ya could for yer momma. She was like this even before you was born," said Josh.

Robbie peeled bloody paper off the nickels. He took five and handed

the rest to Josh.

"Cuff me if ya need, Josh, but can I make a phone call first?"

"Just stay in my sight, Robbie."

The other two cops took momma to the police car. She was screaming her love for Robbie. As Robbie pushed each number on the pay phone he felt the drain of his present on his future. He imagined Lacy, a few years older, cuddling a baby that he had never seen, and Holly getting beaten by an old drunk man just like Felix.

"Hello. Robbie?" asked Lacy.

"I'm sorry for what's about to be. I just killed that man momma run off with." ❖

Paper Cuts - Books You Might Not Have Read

Hell: My Life in the Squirrel Nut Zippers by Tom Maxwell
(Oyster Point Press, 2013)

by Marty Smith

If you're an artist who's created something that makes you Famous, you may find that fame to be, instead of the golden ring you think you've finally grabbed, the tail of a tiger. And the tiger is likely to be just as confused as you are, uncertain whether to lick you all over like an adoring kitten or shred and eat you; or both, doing the latter while convinced it's doing the former. The Squirrel Nut Zippers formed when various Chapel Hill musicians found they shared a passion for the same kinds of music. They began playing together; which led to shows, which led to records, one of which produced – to their surprise – a Platinum Hit; which led to their being, to their further surprise and discomfiture, pegged as the Leaders of a commercialized commodified New Musical Movement, which had absolutely nothing to do with why they'd begun playing what they loved.

Tom Maxwell was in various local bands in the early '90's. Turning on TV late one night after a show, he chanced on a clip of Cab Calloway.

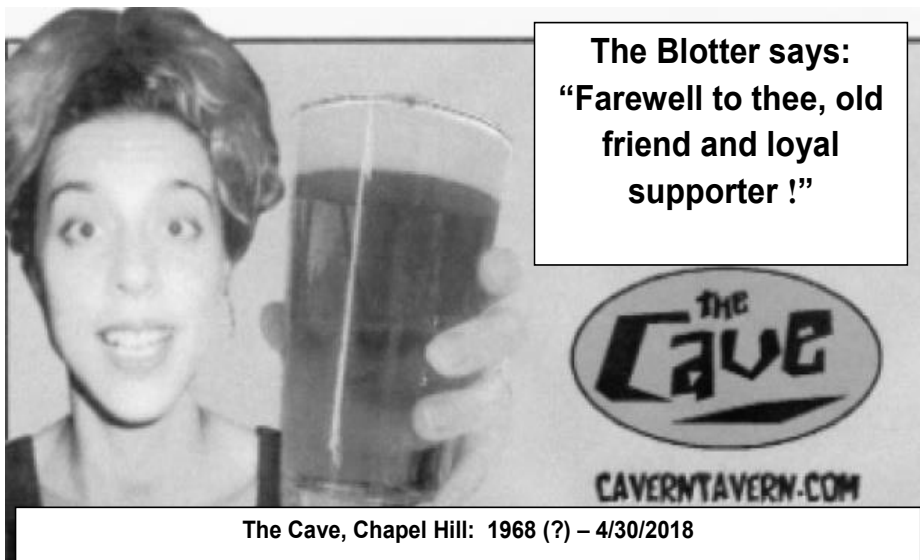
"He was singing 'Minnie the Moocher' in the early 1930s, decked out in white tails. Cut-out lightning bolts hung over the bandstand. I was transfixed. Cab was so creepy and elegant. He didn't have to beat your brains out with volume to rock. I started buying his CDs. From Cab, it's a short hop for the interested listener to finding Fats Waller, Duke Ellington and Django Reinhardt."

Through the music community, he met and befriended Jimbo Mathis, recently arrived from Mississippi.

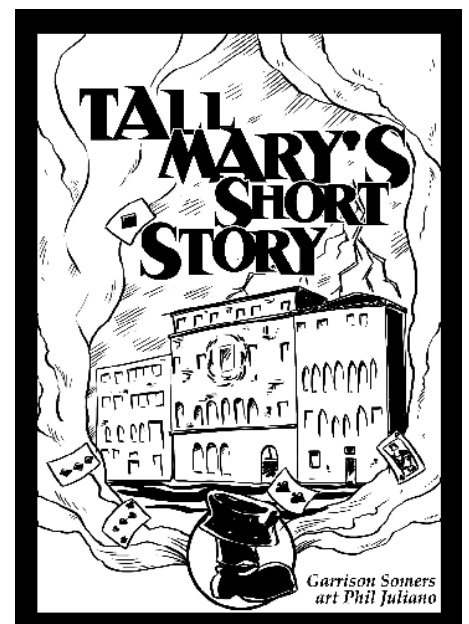
"He would come into the restaurant where I tended bar and hang out. I played him the hot jazz that had so captivated

me; he introduced me to Robert Crumb's Cheap Suit Serenaders, a wonderfully uncool, early 70's Squirrel Nut Zippers prototype. We watched old Max Fleischer cartoons together, especially the strange Betty Boop episodes that featured artists like Cab and Louis Armstrong. ...As we drove around Carrboro one spring day in 1993, Jimbo turned to me. 'I'm forming a jazz band,' he said intently. I knew exactly what he meant. The jazz we listened to was almost all pre-war. I didn't think for a second that any group Jimbo would form would sound like Miles Davis or Ornette Coleman. It would be acoustic and Southern and strange... 'That's great!' I told

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The Cave, Chapel Hill: 1968 (?) – 4/30/2018



him through my teeth. I wanted to be in that outfit...I longed to make the kind of music [he] and I had been listening to."

That "jazz band" becomes the Squirrel Nut Zippers. Maxwell gets his wish. Jimbo soon invites him to join, and to contribute songs. The band already has a solid following in Chapel Hill; now they begin touring, to much acclaim. At their first-ever show in San Francisco, the club is packed with people who know all the lyrics and sing along.

"We only had to play a town once in order to sell out a show the next time through...I didn't quite understand what was going on, but it felt big. It was the start of a golden moment, before the 'swing' boat anchor was hung around our necks... For a little while yet, we were underground. People dressed as they wanted to look, not as style dictated. They danced like Lindy Hoppers, hippies, and spastics. It was wonderful."

In the fall of '95, in a haunted studio in New Orleans, they record the album *Hot*. It includes a song of Maxwell's, inspired by frantic evangelical AM-radio preachers heard in his childhood: "Hell," a raw, driving, desperate calypso about...well, about Hell and its torments.

*This is a place where eternally
Fire is applied to the body
Teeth are extruded and bones
are ground*

*Then baked into cakes which are
passed around.*

(He was originally going to say "rolled into joints which are passed around," but didn't want to upset his parents. I think he should've stuck with it.)

A year later, while working on the

next album, they get a sudden call from their record label asking for an immediate meeting; at which they're informed that "Hell" has become a Hit Single, certain to go Gold (half a million sold) by spring and Platinum (full million) by fall.

"Using marketing groups, the radio people discovered just how many times 'Hell' could be played in a day, every day, before people began to hate it. The object, I suppose, was to wring as much airplay (and profit) from the song by burning it out, making way for the next big thing. We were told they couldn't find the saturation point for the song."

He metaphors it as being "shot out of a rocket," adding, though, that "most of the other descriptive terms people used were ultimately more accurate: we exploded. We blew up."

Meanwhile, though, there is – as always – backstage drama. One member, disgruntled that his songs aren't included on the album, walks out of a recording session and is next heard from in Costa Rica. Another is lost to heroin, despite their efforts to save him. Different people have differing ideas on who the band "belongs" to. The fact of "Hell," Maxwell's song, being their golden money-maker, adds stress. There is a partnership agreement, which some members sign, others don't; and some, Maxwell included, sign without fully understanding. And, the rocket slipstream of their new fame is pulling them into realms they neither thought of nor wished to enter.

"When 'Hell' broke, it took everyone by surprise, not just us. The lyrics, the melody, the style and the production values were obstinately different from, say,

Hanson. I took it as a good sign. Maybe this would break main stream radio open a little bit and make room for diversity. No such luck. A new trend was identified, called Swing. We were the poster children because we were selling records – as many as 30,000 a week by the summer of 1997. There were quite a few bands on the West Coast with whom we were compared. These guys came up playing rockabilly and ska. Theirs was a scene with strict uniformity. Girls wore Bettie Page-style hairdos with bangs; the guys had pompadours and tattoos...It all seemed pretty one-dimensional to me, and all the more strange that we were somehow tapped as the spokesmen for this movement... We called them the Swing Nazis."

(I gather Maxwell is not a fan of the "genres" thing, calling them "total constructs," a "godsend" for an increasingly centralized music industry. "It helped with playlists for radio stations increasingly owned by Clear Channel, and gave an excuse for music writers to write less about music.")

The final straw seems to be when their label sells itself to Disney, which expects to recoup its investment off the Zippers' success, not even bothering to release the next album but squeezing *Hot* and "Hell" for every squeezable penny.

"I know there are many people who would love to be gathered into such a corporate bosom. I'm not one of them, and suspected we were going to be Disneyfied. It was good that we appealed to all ages, but there was a creepy element to the band, something volatile, that I

didn't want papered over. I did n't want to end up singing some song to a princess on a Disney soundtrack... The next month, we were asked to sing a song to a princess on a Disney sound track."

His writing voice rambles, as if he's telling you these tales in conversation, late-night monologues over a bourbon in some small dive. His passion and joy for the music he loves and loves to make rings through loud and clear. He speaks of how touring allowed him to make "pilgrimages," to the likes of Sun Studios in Memphis and to a Camden, New Jersey church where Fats Waller recorded in the 1920's; and meet musical heroes of his such as Al Casey, Waller's original guitarist, whom he even persuades to sit in at a Zippers show. There's puzzlement, regret, and some justified bitterness, over how something that brought him such great joy could also have so much go painfully wrong; band fights and Swing Nazis and Disneyfication. His theme could be, the tension between those who love to create music out of their passions and influences, versus the ones who want to pigeonhole, market and profit from that music; who want the fame of having "discovered" a new genre like "Swing." The Zippers themselves couldn't quite define what they were. If you'd asked all seven of the original members I bet you'd have gotten seven different answers. (Maxwell's own delightful description is "a combustible, improbable gumbo of joy and menace.")

We played parts that felt good, and were not written down. Our ambition was to put on good shows and make good records, not to take over the world. We never really conformed to expectation, which is

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what made us so interesting... Whatever we were doing must have been right, because nobody in the media could agree on what the fuck was happening. We were described as innovators and rip-off artists. We played homage to the music we loved, but were also ironic hipsters poking fun. We pissed off jazz purists, who bated talking about us, as well as corporate radio directors, even as they put us into heavy rotation."

Maxwell left the band in 1999, not long after the Disney putsch. There was further soap opera: personal drama and lawsuits over that partnership agreement, of which I know nothing and prefer not to. The Zippers still officially exist, under Mathis's command. They're even working on a new album, and planning to re-release *Hot* for its 20th anniversary. Few if any of the original members remain on board, though. To me it's like they're a Squirrel Nut Zippers cover band, the way the Beach Boys continue to tour their classic hits, with a bunch of replacement musicians and only one surviving Boy.

Maxwell is not planning to assist their endeavors. He lives in New Orleans now, and fronts his own band, the Minor Drag, making the kind of music he wants to because he wants to. Over one last bourbon he might tell you that one should always carefully read partnership agreements before signing, as sometimes the other signatory is a corporate type with suspiciously red skin, cloven hooves and Eau de Brimstone aftershave; that for a musician, Hell can be a place where Fame — clueless and vampiric — is applied to the creative body; and that even adoring kittens will eat their owners, if hungry enough. ❖

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

Dream

I saw on "educational TV" that MIT researchers are playing with dream manipulation, and I missed the part where they explained why this was a good idea for a project. Everything they do doesn't have to have a reason — a monetized plan for some product to sell humanity — but it does seem...tricky to me to think that any good can come from changing the subconscious and unconscious mind, in order to what? Make it always allow us to be superheroes in our sleep? Get the girl/boy in the end every night? Win the lottery, and wake up disappointed?

To me, it smacks quite soundly of Total Recall at best and Johnny Got His Gun at worst. Maybe there really are things we aren't supposed to mess with. People's brains are supposed to have secrets, even from the people in whose skulls they inhabit. It's OK to fly, eat a quart of Rocky Road, don't put the seat down after you pee, in your dreams. It's also OK to...other stuff, then wake up, shake your head at your bizarre self, get up and go about your day.

George - cyberspace

“Coming Clean”

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Anonymously, of course. mermaid@blotterrag.com

Episode 4 - The scofflaw:

It seems pale by comparison, juvenile. Like I hadn’t a brain at all. I was fifteen when I stopped, but it still sits out there, in my memory. I even told my kids, my own teenagers. They giggled at the time, but I think it’s in their stash of weaponry to use against me, someday, when the time is ripe.

I broke windows in my school. Windows. Not one or two. A whole side of a school building. The. Whole. Side. Maybe six classrooms’ worth, with four big plate-glass windows and two of those old push-out vent windows.

Why? Because I didn’t like school, thought that taking my frustration out on the actual building made some sort of sense, retribution-wise? Because I was remarkably stupid? It was funny? It was a prank?

The truth is I don’t know, not now, not decades later. I wasn’t caught in the act, nor was I ever even vaguely aware that this was an immense...crime. No one talked to me personally about it. They didn’t even mention it when school started (it had been over the summer vacation.) They probably didn’t want to incite copy-cat events.

I feel bad about it nowadays, occasionally. Like it’s an old tooth with a filling that doesn’t seem quite right, that you worry with your tongue a while and then ignore for a year or two, only to come back to it, because it’s still right there, in your mouth.

Anon - cyberspace

CONTRIBUTORS:

By day, **James Glisson** battles pestilence and disease, but by night he prods the embers of self-reflection with a notebook. He reads equal measures of Larry Brown and Sophocles. He was born in Mississippi and will die in Mississippi.

Martin K. (Marty) Smith is the publisher of The Blotter Magazine and Corner Bar Magazine; he writes, records and performs music in his band Coyote vs Acme, writes novels, stories and book reviews and manages to succeed at a day job. May we all have such creative energy someday.



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