

The Blotter

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The South's Unique, FREE, International Literature and Arts Magazine

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"It's Getting Late"

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I recently attempted to read an article in a magazine about the post-literate world, sent to me as an email link by a friend. There was a teaser paragraph or two, and then the firewall went up and I was instructed to subscribe to said journal to see the rest of the article. Thwarted, I smiled and closed the window and went back to checking my email. Feels ironic, I thought. Like they don't want me to read what they've published.

In any other period in human history, that sharing would have been not only possible, but encouraged. Someone would buy a copy of a periodical from a newsstand at the train station, see something interesting and leave it on the seat, open, when they got to their stop. Or take it home and hand it to a family member with enthusiasm. Hey, check this out. Someone had a typeset broadsheet shoved in front of them, tucked it in their coat, brought it home to give to the aunt who could read and asked what it said. Monks hand-copying manuscripts. Scholars reading scrolls at the library. A fellow on the way home from the agora sees graffiti on the wall and pokes at their friend. Iulius! What news?

Part of me wants to remind that magazine that they are on their way out in the very post-literate world they saw fit to publish a tid-bit about and then only show a teaser. Although I understand the financial aspect of this, I think that wanting to monetize everything, even if only to remain extant, will be the death of them. And then my use of the word "remind" assumes that they have given any thought to this situation – that readership is down. Readership of anything.

Another part of me wants to just stay out of it, sit in my chair and read while the reading is good. Because maybe I'm wrong. Maybe this is mid-transition of a very fruitful transition to the post-literate world.

Questions: If some people can but don't want to read, or don't read because they cannot read, not at all the same thing, who am I to try and force it on them? Should we insist that they get with the program? And if some publishing organs want you to read, but make it unaffordable or merely one step of difficulty too far, and others want you to read but don't want to pay writers and only provide slop, and others simply can't be heard over all of the noise so there's nothing left that's good to read, well... really, who am I to tilt at that windmill?

It seems we are in the not-particularly deep weeds here. What

are my proof-points, that no one reads anymore? And, conversely, that there will always be a need for writers?

Good question. I don't know – I couldn't see the article.

Maybe I should have paid to see it. Ahem.

Don't you think writers deserve to be paid?

Yes. Next!

No more questions for now, your honor.

We do have a problem. We just don't know what exactly it is, and therefore if it is real and if it can be fixed. I recently looked up what went wrong with a particular houseplant of mine. One that was, in a word, dead. The helpful response was "you may be watering it too much. Or not enough."

Maybe it's just me. I'm not programmed to figure out assembly instructions that are just or mostly pictures. I abhor being sent to videos to hear someone slowly and carefully explain the steps of assembly. I'm a reader.

My solution is no solution, I fear. I am inclined to consider that we are possibly asking the wrong questions (and this wouldn't be the first time). A post-literate world? Or, based on a statistic I once read - that 70% of all books published (in English) are non-fiction – and adding to this that no one is reading, I pose the question: are we actually in a post-fact/post-knowledge world? Are we headed to post-information age? If social media relies on video and limited character sets, is this the post-word world? Aren't my thousand-word screeds far too long? Short attention spans are presently disorders. Will they become the norm?

How long until Fahrenheit 451? Sorry, folks, I mean 232 Celsius. For those of you who don't know what I'm talking about, it's a novel by Ray Bradbury in which a future...soon or very soon... exists where books are illegal. So-called firemen are charged to go to homes where folks hide their books and magazines and secretly read them. Or maybe they don't. They just hide them. They're all old people, too. Lovers of books. Accumulators of knowledge. Sorry, Ray. The whole premise tilts on its ear. There's no need for "firemen" to come burn books. Why bother, when the radical sentences contained within can't be shared?

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

You're simply the

"Plato and the Girl"

by Chris Jansen

"My claim is that I know nothing, aside from erotic matters."

-Socrates, from Plato's Symposium

"Smell me!" she says.

She juts out her bosom like an adorno on the prow of an 18th century man o' war, and I close my eyes and take a long, slow snort, the way you do with the first or last line of cocaine.

"It's Ariana Grande!" she declares as I came up for air. "It's called 'Pink Cloud'."

"Nice," I say. "Smells like gummy bears."

She makes a stink face, registering her discomfiture.

Uh oh. Danger.

"Just kidding, baby. It's a very nice scent.

Very sweet. Like you."

Everything about this was wrong. She was 19. She had no opinion on the Clinton years and no memory of 9/11. She didn't even know who Eddie Van Halen was.

And she was crazy. "My last boyfriend was an Aries. That's why we could never get along."

But every time her craziness surfaced I remembered my friend J'Dion's appraisal of her photo: "Them titties ain't crazy. They real sane."

"So whaddya wanna do?" she asks, as if there was anything else I wanted to but be here at this exact moment.

"Now, or later?"

"Both."

She was an Instagram post come to life, alluring, and flawless. Like all those girls dancing on TikTok. Dancing and dancing in TikTok heaven. I was more of a daguerreotype, a frayed time-traveler from the sepia-toned past, dislocated by modernity and awed by all the

new inventions, fading more and more every moment. And I spoke a different language, untranslatable. That's why the relationship worked. And why it was so wrong.

"I don't know," I said, "What do you want to do?"

The perennial question. What I wanted was for her to know I wanted to do and do it. To know, telepathically, every perverse desire of my heart and to suggest that she had known them since the beginning of time and had just been waiting for me to arrive in her life. And she to arrive in mine, as promised, not only incarnating my carnal desires but much more importantly, to pronounce them good and acceptable. To pronounce me good and acceptable, so that in the future I might stand up sometime, somewhere like a deacon at a prayer meeting, and say with blessed assurance, "God keeps his promises."

Crazy Nirvana, with her star signs and pop-culture enthusiasms and teen tart perfume.

It worked. It was wrong.

"Let's siddown," I say, indicating my luxurious futon.

We sit next to each other with first date awkwardness, though this is not our first date. We never had one.

We'd met at Jittery Joe's, the coffee shop where I labor over my laptop, making lots of money for my employers, who apparently had never heard of the trickle-down theory, and preferred to keep every surplus dime for themselves.

To keep myself sane I always brought a book with me. It might be Carl Jung's *Man and His Symbols*, or Bukowski's *Love is a Dog*

from Hell, or Galway Kinnell's *When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone*. If someone had asked why I was reading this, which they never did, I would have said it reminds me of who I really am as I battled one vulgar business crisis after another. And it reminds me there is another world out there, a beautiful world of ideas and possibilities. But no one ever asked.

This is what I told myself, pleased with the tale of my indignities in the workaday world, and my yearning for something higher, something perfect, like Plato's realm of the forms.

The truth is, though, it was bait.

Nirvana was one of the baristas. Initially just another one of the Protean army of young girls, slinging pumpkin spice lattes with almond milk for the UGA girl-children who crowded the coffee shop like an occupying army, though in hindsight, there was something about her. She wore artfully ripped black stockings, sometimes with the image of cats in bow ties at the knee, her eyelids were flecked with glitter like gold dust, and her hair was tied with a silk scarf on which I could just glimpse an image from Van Gogh's *Starry Night* rolling along the edge.

One day, as I was deep into unraveling the Eleusinian mysteries of a spreadsheet called "Express Trucking LTD," she glanced at my table and said, "That looks good!"

This time it was Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae*, with the image of Paglia as Nefertiti on the cover.

"It's great," I said. "Do you know Paglia?"

No, but that cover, she said.

She loved Egyptian art. She had been studying it in her art history class.

"The Egyptians knew some shit for real," she declared. "And that title is so intriguing – what's it about?"

Intriguing.

"Well," I said, "it's all about how there are these two worlds, the world of art and beauty, which she calls 'the Apollonian,' and this other world of nature, which is sort of slimy and

bestial and amoral and is always threatening to overwhelm the Apollonian. She says beauty, like art and stuff, is our weapon against nature."

"Wow, that's fascinating," she said. "But isn't nature beautiful too?"

Fascinating.

"I guess...I don't know. It can be, but...I suppose it's complicated. That's why the book is so big." (Haha)

"Nirvana. Can you help?" called the other barista. I looked over and saw a line of sorority girls had formed at the counter, and my heart broke a little.

"To be continued," she said, with the most charming smile, and scampered back to her post.

Damn, I thought, cracking open *Sexual Personae*, and beginning the art of conspicuously reading. It finally worked.

I couldn't read though. My eyes flowed over the words: "chthonic," "Christianity," "daemonic," "archetype," but my mind was untouched. It all seemed irrelevant, a silly waste of time, this reading, these philosophical abstractions. The life of the mind seemed a sickly ghost, a last resort, like marijuana or masturbation, when things weren't working out right. But now! Who needed Plato or Plotinus or even Bukowski when the girl with the ripped stockings had said, "To be continued."

I started to look forward to going to work. I'd get to the coffee shop at 6:30 when they opened, and the only other patrons were the regular group of septuagenarians who gathered to read actual newspapers and remark on the decline of civilization and the hopelessness of the youth.

Sometimes she'd be there, sometimes not. When she wasn't there I was dejected, like Christmas was cancelled and I went about my work in my usual sullen and resentful way. God, why do I have to be alive and do bullshit all day? What's the point you're driving at?

When she was there, the world literally

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changed, from gray and loveless, to vivid and warm, like going to my grandparent's house when I was a kid. You are welcome here, we've been waiting for you. There's homemade bread. Eat. She would always find time to take a break and sit with me and we'd chat while she stared at me with doggy-dinner-bowl eyes until the call from behind the counter, "Nirvana!"

To be continued.

I got to know her. At least as well as any man knows any woman. She used phrases like "late capitalism." Her parents paid for everything. She was an artist, she claimed, but had yet to find a suitable medium. She spoke of her disdain for all things popular but was fervently devoted to TikTok and the music of Billie Eilish. Once she asked me about my rehab memoir, and I told her to not read it. "Why? It's not too racist or sexist is it?" "No," I said. "It's just the right amount." She didn't get the joke but seemed greatly relieved when I said I was kidding. I was really just worried if she actually knew me she wouldn't like me.

I didn't see her a few days and though I was slightly heartbroken, I resigned myself to thought she might have moved on like so many of the young people that came here. Figures. Thanks for nothing, God.

And then there she was behind the counter again, with the ripped stockings and go-go boots and her hair put up under the gold mosaic of Gustav Klimt's The Kiss.

During a lull in the counter action, she came around and sat with me as I was performatively reading my friend Nils Peterson's book of poems, *The Comedy of Desire*, with its teasing outline of a nude woman's back on the cover. I told her about a recent trip I'd taken down the Flint River, searching for artifacts. She brought up "indigenous ways of knowing," and how they were so much more enlightened than we are.

Now there comes a moment when if you fail to act, everything is lost. When God himself is screaming in your ears, "WHAT ARE YOU

WAITING FOR? DO IT!" I'd accumulated a lifetime of these painful memories, missed opportunities when the moment of action was lost while I brooded like Hamlet over what to do. But as Hamlet discovered, the past is just a bitter, lonely ghost who can only be redeemed by the present.

"Say, what time do you get off?" I asked. "I've got some cool indigenous pieces at my place I think you'd like seeing."

"I can leave at noon," she said.

To be continued.

We never got as far as the cool indigenous pieces.

As soon as the door shut I turned to her and kissed her. Right there in the middle of the goddamn afternoon with the all-seeing summer sun beating down and not a storm cloud in sight. While every other human was out working or pretending to work while looking for a better job. Those poor bastards.

I led her lovingly by the hand upstairs. Her body disclosed its secrets in bed, though her mind seemed to hold none.

It was then I made the most remarkable discovery. My diagnosed "treatment-resistant" depression - my melancholia, my cynicism, my ennui - had all been cured in a moment. I suddenly realized that all those hours I'd spent talking to my kooky therapist Dr. Rachel had been a colossal waste of time. If she really wanted to help me she would have prescribed an afternoon with the girl with ripped stockings. ("So like where do I fill this, at a brothel?")

No, it was this that was missing. And not just for me, for everyone. This is why all those young guys at the coffee shop were studying for the LSAT. This is why the guys at the gym took Tren shots and sweated out the extra reps. This is why guys bought Rolexes, and went to dental school, and wore expensive suits, and punched their best friends in the face, and did handstands across the beach at Destin on Spring Break. To have this.

And not having this was why old guys took up birdwatching or made ships in a bottle and young guys took weed gummies and micro-dosed and argued with strangers online or just got real into guns. The loneliest and most abject read Plato and poetry and contemplated quantum mechanics.

To have the girl with the ripped stockings and gold glitter curled up in their bed, her tights now shed like a snakeskin on the floor, bunched up next to her t-shirt and her panties - totem and trophy of one's belonging in the world. This was that elusive thing that everyone was searching for. Everything else was a lie.

"You good, bro?" she asked.

Yes, but...what does all this mean? I thought, but didn't say.

Are we a couple now? Do I meet your parents?

And what kind of a person just does this?

And what kind of a person am I, that I did it too, with no dinner, no date, no courtship or romance of any kind. Yet I'm actually happy, profoundly happy for the first time in a long time.

If it works so well how can it be wrong?

"I'm good," I say.

She collected her things and slipped out the door as casually as she entered.

To be continued.

I went back upstairs and lay down in the disheveled bed, swaddled in the scent of her perfume. It made me think of God. In Exodus God gives Moses instructions for concocting an anointing oil, "of fragrant cinnamon and fragrant calamus...the work of a perfumer." He says to spread it around on things "and whatever touches them will be holy."

Thank you, God, for giving me the scent of you. I was wrong to be so cynical. To be continued.

We never talked on the phone. We barely texted, aside from "WYD?". When I'd see her at the coffee shop she would stop at my table and chat for a bit, but as far as anyone could tell

we were just acquaintances. I was happy with that. This is why it worked. This is why it was so wrong. To be continued.

"So whaddya wanna do?"

We went upstairs again, like we always did, and performed the ritual as prescribed by God and performed it well, offering our strange fire before the Lord. But whereas we had always met in the afternoon, after her shift, this time it was night and the bedroom was lit by darkness.

Tomas Tranströmer: "In the darkness, I have seen things very clearly that were not there."

As the flush of orgasm receded, I saw something new. An image of pale, pitiful Jesus, his wide sad eyes accusing me. It doesn't matter that this works. It was a mistake. It was wrong. And furthermore your whole life has been wrong. You have made the same mistakes over and over and will continue to make them and you will know nothing and learn nothing and leave this life as ignorant and confused as you entered.

I held her tenderly in the darkness. I wanted to ask her to forgive me. Instead I said, "I love you, Nirvana."

She squirmed and acted like she didn't hear me. Finally she said, "You're pretty chill, bro."

To be continued.

I come in Monday early. I've been neglecting work for pleasure and the spreadsheets are calling. I'm starting to get emails that begin, "Per my previous email, we're still waiting on that breakdown of charges..."

She comes in late, rushing and flustered. Before we get a chance to talk the manager calls her over. "...You don't do the things you've been asked to do...late six times...always talking with customers..."

She sprints from behind the counter with her keys in her hand and her look tells me

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she knows I heard. Before I can say anything, she's out the door and getting in her car. I get up to follow but she peels out and is gone. I text her. I even call, but she never responds.

I never see her again. Like it never happened. Like she had never revealed her secret places to me in, like I'd never told her things. Like I'd never thought about a life together. About marrying her and living together and all our friends blessing the odd match, "Well, they're happy, so I guess that's all that matters."

Sometimes things work, even though they are very wrong. And when all is finally revealed, we cry out to God, like Jeremiah, "O Lord, you have deceived me, and I was deceived." It worked and worked and worked, and it was wrong. But how could that be? Was God so fiendish as to delight in my delight, and then

take it all away without remorse or even a proper ending?

Socrates was said to be so wise because he knew nothing.

Nils Peterson says, "I did not know who I was, until she taught me desire. And then I did not know who I was."

What Jesus told me in the vision was right. Desire isn't a teacher. You'll learn nothing from it. You'll still leave this world just as bewildered as you entered it.

Only you won't leave it as the same person.

To be continued. ❖

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.

When I fly too high in my sleep – during dreams I mean, I get dizzy. It is as if I am afraid I might tip myself over backwards and plummet to the earth. The sensation is similar to motion-sickness, only it happens while I am sleeping, I am not sure how that is possible. I am aware that certain positions of sleeping prevent me from successfully flying in my dreams, like I cannot get off the ground no matter how fast I run or how high I jump, key factors in me being able to fly in a dream, along with subject matter of the dream and location where the dream takes place. I enjoy flying in dreams, and have heard or read that it is something that many people lose as they grow up or older. (A Peter Pan effect of some sort, where you become more logical and don't clap when you are told that it will save a fairy's life.)

All of which sounds way too clinical for something as ephemeral as a dream. And dizziness? What is happening in my inner ear while I lie in my bed that makes me feel the sense of falling? Are my feet out from beneath the covers? Have I rolled over only to be at the edge of the mattress? Have I pushed my face into my pillow and made myself short of oxygen?

There is no evidence of any of those when I wake. Everything seems alright, whatever that means.

Chili Conversion - cyberspace

"Don't Wake the Gators"

by J. Rizer

My friend Betty Jo knew a lot of brilliant, damaged men. The night I'd met my friend Richard, he'd been sitting fully clothed in Betty Jo's empty bathtub, crying. So I wasn't surprised Conrad Glasgow was part of her circle.

Conrad was a hotshot political operative who had aligned himself with a lot of noble causes, but his reputation for ruthlessness had caused the word "evil" to be bandied about. As in "Conrad's evil but I don't think we can do this without him."

"Conrad's not evil," Betty Jo assured me one unseasonably warm afternoon in November as we sat eating cake on her fire escape. "He's just ... damaged."

Betty Jo's family and the Glasgows knew each other from way back. Conrad was a few years older than us, but his parents' machinations hadn't been lost on Betty Jo, and had left a permanent mark on their son. "They fucked him up good," Betty Jo said. The standout bullet point on their resumé of wrongdoing was the fact that they'd bought off his ecology-major college boyfriend with a job in the ass end of nowhere. No one else had ever been able to replace him for Conrad. As Betty Jo put it, "That boy in Ass-End Forest is The One Who Got Away."

I had one of those too. It wasn't that I had watched her walk away and dramatically decided, I'll never love again. It was just that I had never loved anyone else quite as much, or in quite the same way. I understood what Betty Jo was talking about.

"But here's why I'm talking to you about Conrad," Betty Jo said. "There's a charity thing about to happen out in Ass-End Forest where his parents sent that boy all those years ago. He still works there. He's something important in the Department of Natural Resources now."

Ass-End Forest was actually named Bluebird Forest. Nobody could visit without a permit. It was also home to a big mansion that had belonged to some debauched millionaire in the 1930s. The property sat abandoned for years before being restored in the early 2000s to become the site of super-posh charity events.

"Let me guess," I said. "Conrad is going to this charity thing. And he's planning to fall into his old boyfriend's arms and live happily ever after."

"That's not exactly what he said," said Betty Jo. "But I think it's what he's hoping for." She waggled her eyebrows. "And we're gonna see it happen."

"What do you mean?" I asked, imagining some sort of livestream of the charity event.

"I mean," said Betty Jo, "my folks were supposed to go to this Save the Libraries thing there, but Dad's got another thing he wants to go to, and he gave me their tickets."

Because she was so down-homey, I forgot sometimes how much money Betty Jo came from.

"I mean, obviously seeing if Conrad hooks up with his old boyfriend isn't why we're going to Ass-End Island," Betty Jo said. "That would just be creepy. We're going to see otters and bald eagles, and to get all dressed up and go to a party. I know that last one's not always your favorite, but it's fun once in a while, isn't it?"

I had to admit that it was.

Five weeks later, Betty Jo and I were in her car, creeping across the wooden bridge to Bluebird Forest. We followed the signage to a tiny parking area and got out, and a big bulky guy came up behind Betty Jo and put his hand on her shoulder while I was rummaging in the back of her car for my jacket. She turned

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around, squealed, and flew into his arms.

"Conrad! You excited to see the exotic wildlife?" Her tone of voice made it clear that she was talking about his old boyfriend.

"Now that I'm here, I'm not sure this is the best idea I've ever had," he admitted. "I'm wondering, just how badly am I allowed to want this? It's been twenty years. I couldn't find any record of his being married, but what if he's with someone? What if he's straight now, or pretending to be? What if he hates how I look now?"

Betty Jo patted his belly and cooed, "You look precious."

"This is my friend Emma," she said, pointing to me as I shut her trunk.

Conrad looked abashed. "Sorry," he said. "Nice to meet you. I didn't see you there, or I wouldn't have shut you out of our conversation."

"It's cool," I said. "I was eavesdropping."

He laughed with surprise, and when he laughed I realized there was something electric about him. If I hadn't been kind of asexual, I might have been attracted to him.

But I was also a little afraid of him.

Betty Jo and I were supposed to be staying at a guest cottage. There were a handful of small buildings in Bluebird Forest, for scientists and for charity-do attendees not quite rich enough to be staying at the mansion. A very nice man in a suit and glasses, who introduced himself as Leonard, told us nervously that there had been a mix-up.

"One of the guest cottages ended up double-booked," he said. "We might have to put a couple of you up in the dormitory, across from the ecology grad students."

Conrad offered to let us stay with him in his guest cottage. "No, you might need to host some VIP from the Department of Natural Resources at your place tonight," Betty Jo said, and leered.

Conrad looked almost flustered. I suspected actually flustered was not in Conrad's emotional repertoire.

Leonard walked Betty Jo and me to our

dorm, which was right behind his tiny office. These dorms were the same kind of almost aggressively ugly brick structure I had lived in as an undergraduate. Across the quad, four ecology grad students were listening to Taylor Swift on someone's phone and singing along loudly.

"This is cute," said Betty Jo.

"It's awful," said Leonard. "I'm so sorry. You didn't come here to stay in a dormitory building that's older than I am." He put his head in his hands.

"Don't cry!" said Betty Jo. "We like it!"

We had a suite with two tiny bedrooms, two tiny bathrooms, and a tiny kitchen. It was old and shabby but very clean. It wasn't glamorous by any means, but glamour intimidated me anyway. When I expressed this sentiment, Betty Jo waved her hand and said, "I'm sure you go to glamorous book things all the time," referring to my modest career as a graphic novelist.

I did not go to glamorous book things all the time.

What I was really looking forward to was the tour of the island we were supposed to go on the next day. "Ooh," said Betty Jo, looking over my shoulder at the itinerary, "Nature tour led by Jake Alley; that's Conrad's man!"

We figured we would walk over to the old mansion, but Leonard materialized again in a golf cart as we were setting out.

"I know this isn't a glamorous mode of transportation," he said apologetically. There we were with the glamour again. "But there are strict rules about no real cars anywhere besides that designated parking area."

I had a small panic attack when we got to the event. The mansion looked bigger than my entire apartment building. "I can't go in there," I said, grabbing Betty Jo's arm. "They'll all know I got this dress at TJ Maxx."

"I won't let anyone pick on you," Betty Jo insisted, dragging me along.

We hadn't been inside for long when someone at my elbow said, "I like your shoes, Betty Jo's friend Emma." I turned around. It

was Conrad Glasgow. We both looked down at my silver menswear oxfords.

"Are you making fun of me?" I asked.

"Indeed not," smiled Conrad. "They're a bold, androgynous choice."

"Definitely the look I was going for," I lied.

"This is a beautiful place," said Conrad. I didn't know if he meant the mansion or the marsh and forest until he continued, "Do you ever think you'd like to live somewhere like this, away from all the drama and the stress?"

"I don't know," Betty Jo said thoughtfully. "With the Internet, drama and stress can follow you anywhere. And I know they've got Internet out here, because we heard those kids listening to Taylor over at the dorm."

"I want to pretend I'd like living somewhere like this," I said. "I like to imagine I'd read and write and draw, and become this very intellectual and spiritual person. But the truth is, I'd probably crap my pants the first time I realized I was three hours away from the closest Piggly Wiggly."

"Why are you talking about living in the ass end of civilization, Mr. Mover And Shaker?" demanded Betty Jo. "Did Jake propose to you?"

"No," said Conrad. "I haven't even seen him yet. He doesn't normally even come to charity events out here, but I pulled some strings and made sure he got invited to this—oh."

I followed Conrad's gaze. Judging from the way his mouth was hanging open, I guessed that the man who had just walked through the door was Jake Alley. He was blond, looked about forty. Mostly kind of lanky, but with a visible layer of softness at his middle that suggested he might have a fondness for beer. He grinned a self-conscious grin and gave a shy finger wiggle at Conrad, who walked away from Betty Jo and me mid-sentence, dropping his glass and breathing hard and finally too overcome to take another step. Jake closed the distance between them, they stood talking for a few minutes, and then they left the room together.

Betty Jo turned to me. "Well, that's promising," she said.

It was actually kind of fun, looking around at this big beautiful home that had been restored to its 1930s Art Deco glory. Betty Jo didn't know anybody there very well, but lots of people knew her parents. "It's like you're a celebrity," I told her. "People keep saying, Oh, I know who you are."

"A celebrity with a cutie date," said Betty Jo, bumping me with her hip. Betty Jo was straight as an arrow, but I appreciated the sentiment. She looked at me appraisingly and said, "You know, I hope Conrad gets back with Jake, but if he doesn't, you should go out with him."

"Betty Jo," I said, "isn't he gay?"

"Yeah, but he might date a woman if she wasn't always trying to have sex with him. Really you'd be perfect for each other, because he wouldn't be trying to have sex with you, either."

There were a lot of flaws in this line of reasoning that I tried to point out, but I could tell Betty Jo wasn't listening.

Later, when I had to use the bathroom, I left Betty Jo deep in conversation with a waiter who was holding a tray of champagne flutes and had been telling us about his band. On my way back from the fancy powder room, I passed a room with the door ajar. Raised voices came from inside. My instinct was to hurry past, letting whoever was inside argue in private, but then the door flew open so fast it nearly hit me in the face.

As he barreled through the door, Jake Alley was saying, "Not if that's what you think, you entitled bastard."

I flattened myself against the wall as Jake stormed past. When Conrad, who I assumed was the person he'd been yelling at, didn't follow, I went inside.

Conrad was pouring the contents of several bottles from a bar cart into a fancy pitcher, from which he took a long swallow.

"Conrad," I said, "I'm not sure you should be doing that."

"Hey," he said. "It's Betty Jo's friend

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Emma, with the sexy shoes.”

I laughed and sat down on the sofa across from where he stood. It was large and comfortable and it occurred to me that Conrad was built like a big soft sofa himself, and that it was a shame for Jake Alley that he could be in here snuggled up next to this big soft sofa guy but had chosen not to be.

I shook my head to clear it of these thoughts and said, “Not that it’s any of my business, but it seems like you just had a falling-out with the guy you were so excited to see? I couldn’t help but notice him peeling hell for leather out of here.”

Conrad took another swallow from the pitcher as he took a seat beside me. He said, “I always thought my folks bribed him. Got him a job out here to get him away from me. But as it turns out, my parents just assumed I wouldn’t follow him out here. He just assumed I would. And I just assumed that when he told me he planned to move all the way out here and wasn’t it great?, that he was also telling me it was over, and that he’d chosen the dragonflies and the river rats or whatever over me.” He sighed, raised the pitcher to his mouth again, and said as he lowered it, “All of this just came out, twenty-five years after the fact, and I’ve been duly informed that I’m an entitled bastard and that if I hadn’t been a spoiled-ass little bitch who would literally die if he couldn’t get his Dubai chocolate croissant and his vanilla fig latte from the coffeeshop downstairs every fucking day, I would have considered that maybe he wanted me to come with him.” He looked at me with round sad blue eyes and said, “I don’t think that was fair. Dubai chocolate wasn’t even a thing in America when we were young.”

“That’s so sad,” I said, putting a hand on his knee. “That you lost your great love over a stupid misunderstanding. If either one of you had asked even one follow-up question ...”

“Yes, well, how were your communication skills when you were twenty-two?” Conrad asked sourly, raising the pitcher to his mouth again.

“Sorry,” I said.

“No, I’m sorry. I’m being a bitch. A spoiled-ass little bitch, just like Jake said. I said some bad things to him, too, to be fair.” Conrad looked at me solemnly, glanced down at my hand on his knee, and asked in the least seductive voice I had ever heard, “Do you want to sleep with me?”

“Um,” I said. I scooted away from him.

“I know I’m not cute,” he said sadly. “Jake told me so in no uncertain terms. But I’m really good in bed.”

“You know, you actually are kind of—”

“You know what someone said about me on Facebook?” he asked.

“What did they say?” I asked, eager to steer him away from the subject of bed.

“They said, ‘Conrad Glasgow would cook his own parents and serve them for dinner if it would benefit one of his woke crusades.’ I don’t like my parents. But I wouldn’t hurt them. But if people are saying shit like that, maybe I should be afraid of who I’ll be one day, if I stay in politics. Maybe I should move out here to the forest and spoil my boyfriend for the rest of my life. Only he’s not my boyfriend, he’ll never be my boyfriend again, and I don’t want anyone else.” Returning to his original thesis, he said, “That’s why I think you should sleep with me. I may never get another ounce of pleasure from my body with anyone I really want to be with, so I might as well use it to make someone else feel really good.”

“Conrad,” I said, “Far be it from me to put anyone in a box, but wouldn’t it make more sense for you to proposition a man?”

“But you’re right here, and you’re nice. It’s cool, I know what to do with a woman. I slept with a woman from my work a couple of times, before we both realized it was a mistake, and she said I was really, really—”

“Conrad, stop,” I said. I put my hand over his mouth, a gesture I immediately regretted and he immediately misinterpreted. He had slipped two of my fingers into his mouth before I could blink, and I bolted up off the sofa and said, “Ew.”

“Oh,” he said. “Okay.” He blinked. “To-

tally respect that you're not giving your consent to ... whatever. But you could have just said no and I would have backed off."

I surreptitiously wiped my hand on my dress and said, "Conrad, I don't even know if you're aware that this is a thing, but ... I'm asexual. That can mean a lot of things depending on who's using the label, but for me, right now, it means that I probably would like to sleep with you, but only in the sense of curling up beside you and literally falling asleep."

He said, "I'm really good at that too," and I had to laugh.

I said, "If I give you a hug, will you not take it as an invitation to climb on top of me?"

"Yes. I would love a hug. I'm sorry I did that," he said. "I thought that was what you were going for, when you put your hand on my mouth. And I'm not attracted to you, but you've got these tiny little hands and I just want to bite them off. Not literally. I'm sorry. I'm just so drunk and so gay and I guess I've kind of got ants in my pants because I thought Jake and I would be in bed at that creepy-ass guest cottage right about now."

I sat back down and put my arms around him. It was like hugging a bear, both because he was big and because he was terrifying. Over his shoulder, I saw Betty Jo in the doorway, her eyes so wide she looked like a cartoon.

"You can come in, Betty Jo," I called, pulling away from him.

Betty Jo came in, sat down on the other side of Conrad, and asked, "Where'd Jake go? Is he back at the guest cottage taking off all his clothes?"

"Betty Jo." Conrad couldn't entirely suppress a little snort of laughter. "Things didn't go well with Jake. Then I got drunk very fast and made a pass at your friend, who has been much kinder about it than I deserve."

"I wouldn't say you made a pass so much as you offered to donate your services," I pointed out.

"You two stop making me laugh. I'm trying to have a broken heart here," Conrad

spluttered.

We sat with him for a while. He told Betty Jo what had happened between him and Jake. She patted his hair and said meaningless, soothing things. He said he was going to leave. Betty Jo offered several times for us to come back with him so he wouldn't be alone, and he kept saying, "No, stay and enjoy the party." He finally gave Betty Jo the number of his cottage so we could get dropped off there when we did leave.

At the door, Conrad turned and said, "I want to apologize to you again, Emma. My behavior was unacceptable just now."

I went over, pulled him in for another hug and felt him sigh heavily. "Be okay," I said in his ear. "And don't make a pass at Leonard." I assumed Leonard was still hanging around somewhere in his golf cart. "I know he's cute but it would put him in an awkward position."

"What if he makes a pass at me first?" Conrad asked, still holding onto me.

"Then go for it. He's adorable."

Once Conrad had walked out the door, Betty Jo stared at me.

"What?" I said.

"I still think y'all should date," Betty Jo said. "He doesn't let just anyone love on him like that."

"We discussed this earlier, Betty Jo. That man has many needs I could never meet, and I'm not just talking about sex. Plus he kinda scares me."

We hung around the party for a while but I could sense that Betty Jo was worried. As we were walking around the conservatory, she said quietly, "This place is gorgeous, but you read about the guy that owned this place back in the thirties and you just know bad things happened here. There are probably starlets buried under the patio."

I bumped her elbow with mine. "You want to go?"

"Yeah," she sighed. "Let's go."

Leonard was indeed parked discreetly on the gravel path in his golf cart. Betty Jo told

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him we were going to stay at Conrad's. "Not for an orgy or anything," she assured him as we drove off.

"Hey, it's none of my business either way," said Leonard. He was less formal with us than he had been earlier. Maybe he was tired or maybe he had just decided we were safe to be normal around.

"He's super sad and I don't want him to be by himself right now. Hey, do you think he's cute?"

Leonard tilted his head, thinking. "Yeah. I mean, don't get any ideas; men aren't my thing, except maybe in theory when directly asked a question like that. But I can see it. He's kind of scary, though. You know there's a great big terrifying brain in that head. He's cute in the same way that Disney's Haunted Mansion ride is fun."

"I told you he was scary," I said to Betty Jo.

When we pulled up to Guest Cottage #4, Leonard said tensely, "Ladies, wait just a second. Is someone trying to break into this unit?"

He stood up and clicked on a big-ass flashlight at the same time that Betty Jo said, "I don't think that's a burglar."

It wasn't a burglar. It was Conrad and

Jake Alley, pressed up against the door and tangled up in ways that barely made sense on a vertical axis. All five of us just stared at one another for a second or two. Either Jake had been waiting for him on the porch when Conrad got there, or he'd come along later and knocked on the door. Either way, they appeared to have patched things up, to say the least.

"Sorry, fellas," Leonard called, switching off his flashlight. "Have fun, be safe, but take it inside, okay? You don't want to wake the gators."

As we drove off, Betty Jo snorted with laughter. "'You don't want to wake the gators?'"

"They won't wake up the alligators," said Leonard. "The alligators are hibernating now, but I had to say something. I would have done the same with a straight couple," he added. "We can't let this place get a reputation for someplace you come to have that kind of an outdoor adventure." He chuckled to himself, "Maybe ol' Conrad's found himself someone who can handle that Haunted Mansion ride."

Betty Jo said, "Jake just still better be ready to get up and show us some otters tomorrow, is all." ❖

Contributors

Chris Jansen is a translator, essayist and poet. His books include *Hamlet Decoded*, *We Can Be Heroes: A Rehab Memoir*, *The Last Mayan*, and *The Lost Poems of Juan Ramón Jiménez*. He lives in Athens, Georgia.

J. Rizer writes, "Previously, my work has appeared in *The Book of 42 [squared]*, *3 Elements Literary Review*, *The First Line*, *Arkana*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *AVENues*, *Twisted Vine Literary and Arts Journal*, *MiddleGray Magazine*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, the *Litwin Press/Library Juice Press* release *LIS Interrupted*, and previous issues of *The Blotter*, among others."

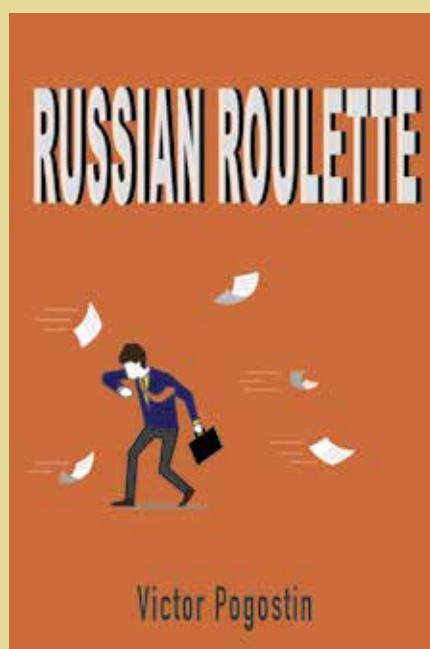
Anna Wyngaarden writes, "I live in Athens, Georgia but hail from Durham. I only recently realized that this magazine I've loved finding at my favorite bars and establishments in Athens, comes from my own hometown. I am not surprised but instead take it as the perfect sign to share my work. This will be my first published poem and I cannot imagine a better place for it."

"Shrine for a Shrew"

by Anna Wyngaarden

I seem to be getting closer to accepting what Death must be.
My hands responding more quickly to sweep up the dead bodies left behind.
An act, for me, in approaching death with reverence and friendship.
When I once would cringe, look away, hesitate to touch.
Quite literally afraid that touching some body that's dead
Would mean Death would quickly spread into my skin and remain,
Unable to be washed off.
That, turns out, is true –
But has nothing to do with this dead shrew.
Death isn't to be washed off,
It's already begun working here.
We reference it in every choice we make,
Every task we avoid,
Every dollar we don't save, or do.
Running some rat race so we can defy Death.
But Death laughs.
Because each moment we spend our Living time running from it,
Instead of toward it,
Is the wrong direction.
Father Time keeps no track of the direction we're going,
Only how long to keep the stopwatch ticking.
I'm remembering that the dead are not better off with us.
We are, maybe, better off with them, but in the spirit of being a realist,
I have to accept the change.
Change – the twin fear to Death.
Change – our reminder that nothing stays.
We are all, always in motion.
An upside I've found in Death is the Living's way of keeping their Dead alive.
That is, to embody that what they loved about their Dead.
He would always beam generosity.
\$70 bouquet of peonies for someone he's never met.
\$20 tomato for the joy of everyone's right to taste.
He would always hug hello.
The way he turned the radio dial.
The way she wore her watch inside out.
The way she mastered arguments.
The way he stood with his hand scratching his belly when contemplating.
All traced through moments of how I now move in my world.
"He is dead now." Stated with love, not insolence.
As if they were candles, burning the brightest flame.
Not extinguished before first giving us our own small wick.
Their parting gift a spark for each of us.
For us to steward ahead, or allow to grow cold.

Victor Pogostin, PhD, tells stories.
Stories on himself, and on others.
Stories that are often funny,
sometimes moving,
but always entertaining.
And they're true.



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