

down in the dirt

revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

v.055

February '08



# Table of contents

02/08, Down in the Dirt, volume 055

Chad Newbill .....	1
Pat Dixon .....	2
Ryan Glaser.....	8
Eric J. Krause.....	13
G.A. Scheinoha .....	16
Andre Kocsis.....	17
Aneela Khalid.....	22
Ken Dean .....	23
M. L. Erwin & T. J. Scott .....	27
Chuck Roberts .....	31
J. Grossbard.....	34
Mark Scott .....	35
Tammy Manor .....	37
Vincent Spada .....	38
Barry G. Gale .....	39
Benjamin Green .....	41
Steve De France .....	43
Cynthia Ruth Lewis .....	44

Scars cover art of trees along the side of the expressway in Pennsylvania.

---

## Laughing in my Lawn Chair

Chad Newbill

I've spent some of my worst days accelerating my human condition in a lawn chair.  
I look at existence and try not to laugh.

There's a fine line between genius and insanity

The line is blurry, so I straddle the middle

Serenity is a state created by those who do not think enough.

Legally declared mature and intelligent

Socially declared a wasted talent.

# Vox Populi

Pat Dixon

At 11:32 p.m. Monica Welles plunged an ice pick beneath the sternum of her husband and into his heart. Less than three minutes later Charles Hamilton Welles—who was barely able to gasp the words “Why . . . now, . . . Monica?”—expired in his reclining chair.

Kathleen M. Burns, a rising Dade County prosecutor, made a reasoned yet quite impassioned plea to the jury that this monstrous act of spousal murder must be punished in the manner traditional amongst Floridians who believe in the sanctity of life and marriage and who desire to live in a safe and ordered society.

“Three centuries ago, this woman would have been thrown to alligators so that the Lord’s will might be done. Two centuries ago, she would have been hanged by the neck and then deep-sixed a mile out to sea. In the last century, she would have been electrocuted or gassed or a combination of these and her remains fed to the hogs. In accord with our current thinking, the fitting end for such a disgusting mockery of matrimonial obedience is quartering by SUVs. The state foregoes requesting the prior ‘drawing’ of her entrails in respect of the fact that she was born of the white race, however horrendously she has acted upon this earth since that birth.

“Our evidence will confirm that Mrs. Welles has confessed to police that she had a little argument about the dinner dishes, which her husband was actually at that time washing, and that, following that little argument, she sought out an ice pick and slew her divinely sanctified master as he readied himself to watch the Tonight Show with Jay Leno—watch it with her, I might add.

“We will further show beyond a reasonable doubt that Mrs. Welles was as sane as any woman of her age and hormonal condition can be—i.e., totally sane in the eyes of the Law of the sovereign state of Florida—that killing one’s husband is in fact a capital crime in this state, and that her late husband, Professor Charles Hamilton Welles, professor and head of the Mathematics Department at G. Dubya B. Junior College for the Very Special, had made no threatening gesture towards this harpy nor, in fact, had any idea the blow was coming. In fact, according to her own confession, his very last words, in fact, were a special variant on the age-old and universally applicable question raised in the scripture of the Book of Job—‘Why, Lord? Why me?’”

As usual, the jury, especially the nine older women on it, were spellbound by her rhetoric. In the ensuing two weeks the state’s witnesses, including five forensic psychiatrists, laid out the details of Ms. Burns’s case. All prosecution exhibits, including the defendant’s signed statement of confession, were accepted without objection, and, after each witness appeared and testified, Cornell Kelly (“C. K.”) Lieberman, Mrs. Welles’s white-maned lawyer, rose to his feet and, like a broken talking doll, iterated, “The defense has no questions of this

witness, your honor.”

One the fifteenth day, Monica Welles took the stand to testify.

“Mrs. Welles,” said Mr. Lieberman in his rather cracked voice, “speaking under oath, kindly tell the ladies and gentlemen of the jury exactly what was the nature of the dishwashing argument on the evening you stabbed your husband through his heart with an ice pick.”

All eyes stared unblinkingly at the sixty-two-year-old widow, a moderately handsome gray-haired woman, attired in a simple dark brown dress and wearing no makeup on her smooth, diamond-shaped face.

“As he washed the dishes,” she said, looking each juror in the eye for three or four seconds apiece, “he asked me what might seem an innocent question—one involving mathematics, which was, as Ms. Burns has pointed out, Charles’s pet field of recreation as well as the chief source of his professional income at G.D.B.J.C. and of his reputation in the larger world of academe across the county.”

Her gaze was fixed upon Ms. Burns, and Ms. Burns met that gaze with her own and smiled almost pityingly, in the certain faith that Mrs. Welles was now doing the prosecutor’s own job for her.

“Charles said to me—yes, that was what I called him, as so did nearly everyone else who didn’t call him ‘sir’ or ‘professor’—*Charles*, for no one has ever called him ‘Charlie’ except his mother, and when she went into a senior care home, he said, ‘I *told* that bitch a thousand times to call me Charles, not Charlie. Maybe I can’t kill the bitch, but I *can* kill the bitch’s bitches,’ and then he euthenized her three dogs that we had agreed to adopt in exchange for her giving us twenty thousand dollars. But I digress. Charles said to me, ‘Monni . . .’”

“Objection, your honor!” Ms. Burns was on her feet. “The victim is not on trial here, and even if he were on trial, this would be unsubstantiated hearsay as to an oral contract that might have been violated—or not—and which has totally not the least bit of relevance to this case.”

“Sustained,” said Judge Thomas. “The jury is herewith instructed to disregard all of this defendant’s remarks as to her late husband’s statements and actions pertaining to his mother’s dogs. The defendant is likewise hereby instructed to stick to only the matters of the present case and to answer the question that was earlier put forth unto herself.”

“Yes, your honor. I . . . I apologize to the court for my . . . stupidity. Charles said to me, ‘Monni’—that was his nickname for me whenever he didn’t want anything from me, and that is what led me to expect he was going to prove to me yet once more that I was merely a stupid woman, deserving his corrective belittlement if not a thorough thrashing—as he tended to say to me more and more often during the past seven or eight years when—I . . . I’m sorry, your honor. I was recalling my state of mind that night.”

She sighed and looked briefly at the ceiling before continuing.

“‘Monni,’ he said to me, ‘there once was a man who washed dishes. This isn’t a limerick—it’s a kind of story I’d like to tell you. He used to wash dishes every

day of his adult life—as a very happily divorced man. At breakfast he always had the same general things—a big bowl of cereal, some kind of fruit in a small dish, and a mug of coffee—and his breakfast dishes, lined up side-by-side on his kitchen counter, measured eighteen inches. He was a man of a curious state of mind, as most men are, you’ll understand, and he measured them before putting them into his sink to soak all day. At his lunches, this same man always had the same sorts of things—soup and sandwiches and a bowl of fruit and another mug of coffee. These he measured to be another eighteen inches when put side-by-side. And, for his suppers, although he varied his diet, he always used a small dinner plate, a small salad bowl, a dessert bowl, and yet a third coffee mug—although this time, because he considered suppers to be special meals that were somewhat more formal, he put a small saucer under his mug.’

Mrs. Welles paused and glanced at the judge, who was staring at her with a somewhat heavy-lidded expression.

“Charles was silent for a few seconds, and then he asked me if I were following him thus far, and I said I hoped I was. I had, by the way, earned a master’s degree in electrical engineering at Penn State and had been able to work to support both of us for five years while Charles completed his doctorate. Later, our combined incomes allowed us to make a substantial down-payment on our first house. But I digress. Charles resumed his narrative to me: ‘These supper dishes measured, when laid side-by-side, a total of twenty-four inches—which gives a grand cumulative total of how many inches, Monni?’

“I confess that I feared this might be a trick question of some sort, and so I said, ‘Charles, am I to understand that the silverware is not to be included in the total?’ and Charles replied, ‘We’re taking this one baby step at a time, Monni. For now the silverware, as you call it, is not to be considered. Later—perhaps—it will be a factor in your calculations.’

“So I hazarded a guess and said, ‘Sixty inches, Charles—five feet.’ And Charles said, ‘Excellent, Monni. You *may* have a natural bent for figures. Now let me add that this gentleman, who like many unmarried men did his dishes but once a day at most, also measured his flatware—for he used stainless steel utensils, not sterling or even silver plate, being a practical fellow who had no interest in feminine things like two or three big sets of so-called fine china or sets of real silverware—he measured his flatware and determined that, laid out the long ways, his breakfast flatware measured eighteen inches, his luncheon flatware was also eighteen inches, and his dinner flatware was an even twenty-four inches in length. How much is that, Monni?’

“Again I totaled these figure in my mind and said, ‘It’s also five feet, Charles.’ And he said, ‘And how long would both the dishes du jour and the flatware du jour measure, Monni?’ And I replied, ‘One hundred and twenty inches or ten feet, Charles. That’s an even ten feet per day.’” And Charles smiled, placing the last plate into the drying rack and waving my hand away from it, for he preferred to let the dishes drip a bit before I dried them with a towel. ‘Perfect, Monni,’ he said.

“I confess I had expected a trick of some kind and felt my shoulders begin to relax. Charles then went into his home office to do whatever he did, and I prepared a meatloaf for the next day’s meal, washed up the mess I made with this project, and then graded about a hundred and twenty double-E exams for the courses I teach at—I’m sorry, double-E is slang for electrical engineering—grade the exams for the four courses I teach as an adjunct professor at three of our nearby universities. At eleven in the evening, both Charles and I both stopped whatever we were doing and sat down to watch the late evening news for half an hour, as was our wont—our custom.”

Mrs. Welles gazed down at her hands—the very hands that had held an ice pick and had forced it through her husband’s epidermis, dermis, diaphragm, and heart—and gently sucked on her lower lip for a moment. Then she cleared her throat, took a sip or two of water, and looked carefully at each member of the jury with calm, frank eyes. She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, took a shallower breath, and spoke:

“During the first commercial, Charles asked me if I recalled how many feet the dishes and flatware washed in one day, which we’d discussed earlier, had measured. I replied that the distance was ten feet or one hundred and twenty inches. I admit to you that I was half expecting to be asked to convert these figures into metric numbers, but it turned out I was mistaken. After a thirty-second silence, Charles asked me, ‘How long would that be for a week, Monni?’ I answered that it seemed to be, given seven days in a week, a total of seventy feet. I held my breath, expecting him to ask me how many inches this was, and I tried to figure that in my head to be ready for him. Seven times one hundred is seven hundred, and seven times twenty is one hundred and forty—and so seventy feet is eight hundred and forty inches. But Charles said nothing, and the news came on for another four or five minutes. During the next commercial, Charles asked me how many feet long would the would the man’s washed dishes and flatware be in a typical thirty-day month, and I quickly replied, ‘Three hundred feet, Charles—and three . . . three thousand, six hundred inches.’ And Charles, whom I looked at for some clue, simply smiled to himself and said nothing further.”

Mrs. Welles closed her eyes and bit on the insides of both her lips for about ten seconds, apparently anticipating the small gap to be covered between this part of her narrative and the fatal blow she would presumably be describing.

“After the next four minutes of news, we had yet another commercial break, and Charles asked me the expected question—‘And how many feet of dishes and flatware would the man wash for a typical non-leap year of three hundred and sixty-five days, Monni?’ And I, who had been dreading that my flashy reply in inches would come back to bite me on my backside, heaved a sigh of relief and answered, ‘Three thousand, six hundred, and fifty feet, Charles. Definitely.’

“And Charles, after another thirty-second pause said, ‘What would you bet, Monni? I’ll bet you all of my salary for ten years against three months of your salary that you’re dead wrong. I’ll bet you that rag-top car I’m saving for against the new living room sofa you’re saving for that you’re dead wrong. What will you bet?’

“Of course I redid all the math in my head as Charles smiled at me. I hesitated. Then he handed me a small pocket calculator from the end-table drawer and said, ‘Do the math with this—if you have a mind to.’ I said, ‘I’ll accept what I said before—and I’ll bet a weeks’ worth of dinners at a nice seafood restaurant versus my doing the dishes alone for the next . . . next three months.’ He shook his head. ‘No,’ he said, ‘what about an activity bet instead? If I’m wrong, I’ll tell all our friends, relatives, and colleagues that you are the best lover and smartest wife a man could have, but if you’re wrong, you’ll tell all of them that you’re the worst lover and dumbest wife a man could have—and we’ll put it to a panel of four of your colleagues and one of my colleagues to decide who is right. Sound fair?’ I took the calculator and checked my figures—ten feet times seven, ten feet times thirty, and ten feet times three hundred and sixty-five. My mental math had been flawless. I didn’t like the conditions of the bet that well, but it certainly seemed that the panel of five colleagues was weighted in my favor. After a four-minute forecast of local weather, I agreed to the bet—and held my breath.”

Monica Welles paused, and nearly everyone—spectators, reporters, camera men, jurors, the bailiff, the stenographer, Ms. Kathleen M. Burns, Judge Pat Thomas—all but C. K. Lieberman—seemed to be holding their collective breath, awaiting the outcome of her testimony.

“Charles then asked me, ‘Monni, try *very* hard to think now: if a real person washes eleven or twelve dishes each day, and those dishes measure ten feet from end to end, dirty or clean, what dishes would be used on the next day? And tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, as Macbeth might say?’

Monica Welles’s eyes squinted at the ceiling, and suddenly her voice dropped half an octave and adopted a sarcastic tone: “‘Would any sane person ever have even seventy feet of dishes, let alone three hundred feet of dishes or three thousand, six hundred, and fifty? The answer is ten feet! You are *so* stupid—and even *your own colleagues will rule against you, and*—well, you know the rest. You only *think* you’ve had forty years’ experience at teaching, but you’ve really only had *one* year’s experience—forty times. With just a piddly master’s degree, they’ll never let you teach anything but the basic two introductory courses. You don’t even know the first things about mathematical sets, do you? If you have a ten-inch bowel movement every day and wipe your fat ass every time, does that mean you wipe seven fat asses every week? Ha! I’ll bet you think you wash three hundred and sixty-five smelly bras and panties a year, when it’s really just your same old four or five ugly-looking old-lady things over and over and over . . . and over and over again.’

“My face . . . my whole face suddenly felt very strange, and my jaw went slack as if I’d had three injections of novocaine and it hadn’t yet worn off and I didn’t yet have proper control of my mouth and jaw muscles—and I suddenly felt as if I were going to start drooling down the front of my blouse. Charles stared at me curiously with a broad smile that seemed to broaden by the second. Then he spoke again: ‘Will

you keep your word, Moany—or doesn't that mean anything to you—you loser?"

"And then he began to laugh in a very phlegmy manner, and I stood up and walked slowly out to the kitchen and leaned against the counter and took a dozen or so deep breaths with my hands covering my eyes. And when next I looked at my own hands, they were holding an ice pick—which was sticking out of Charles's chest—and my cheeks felt all flushed as if I had a case of hives or an allergic reaction of some sort—and my own chest began to ache. I let go of the handle, and with blood all over my fingers I called 9-1-1 and gave them our address and the nature of the problem—a recording of which Ms. Burns has played for the jury at least three times. Then I bent over Charles and heard his last words."

Mrs. Welles took another sip of water and continued."

"Then Charles suddenly went very pale. He'd always been a very *pink* man . . . a very pink man, and suddenly he looked very, very white. When his heart stopped beating, the blood that was pumped up to his head—to his face—just all drained back down into his . . . body."

Kathleen M. Burns was on her feet instantly. "Objection, your honor! Such information pertaining to the victim is irrelevant and immaterial to the question which was asked by the defense's attorney. Further, it is speculative on the part of the defendant, who is neither a medical doctor nor has been shown to have any special competence within the medical profession whatsoever."

Judge Thomas glanced at C. K. Lieberman, who shrugged slightly and tilted his head to one side.

"Objection sustained," said the judge. "The jury is instructed to disregard the defendant's last remarks as to the color or colors of Professor Welles's face and the cause or causes of any alterations thereunto. Mrs. Welles, for the second time I am cautioning you again now. I am herewith further warning you. Do not try to try my patience. You *will* not receive a third caution in my court."

For ten seconds Monica Welles looked at Judge Thomas's face without speaking. Then she glanced down at her hands again and said softly, "It won't happen again, your honor. It will not happen again."

After half a minute of silence, Mrs. Welles gestured with her a little flutter of her hands to indicate that her testimony was done. Mr. Lieberman rose and asked her if she had anything further to add, and, when she shook her head, he said, "Let the record indicate that the defendant has indicated that she has nothing further to say."

After a brief pause, he added that he had no further questions, and Ms. Burns stood up and echoed his statement. Following the spirited summations of both adversaries about physical murders and "soul" murders, the jurors received Judge Thomas's instructions and deliberated for sixteen days without reaching agreement on any charges. In this trial and in the three subsequent trials, the vote was consistently five for conviction and five for acquittal, with two jurors perpetually undecided.

There was no fifth trial. The state decided that Mrs. Welles—four years older, unemployed, homeless, and without property or savings—had been punished enough.



# Smaller Terriers

Ryan Glaser

I wasn't sleeping so well, then but a few restful hours a night. When three days passed with nary a wink I'd all but exhausted my methods of nodding off: counting pugs, spinning ambient records, or thumbing a David Sedaris paperback, the latter a form of torture in autocratic countries.

The television proved an obvious respite. I mistakenly held that peeping insipid infomercials shilling glorified food processors, shark cartilage turned weight loss miracle drug, or real estate secrets divulged in Holiday Inn conference rooms would help me rope in a few hours of solid sack time.

The nascent insomniac knows when a few restless nights morphs into true Insomnia. Once coherent disdain for late night shamming becomes a well-reasoned interior monologue: *what if I do want to have guacamole in under a minute; those pills would save me the hassle of wrestling a shark; no one's Continental break-fast touches Holiday Inn's, those muffins!*

Work was becoming nothing to speak of. Sean, a dopey coworker with a mess of untamed curls was the first to note my despondence. He spoke with a warbling monotone alike the humming whirr of an electric toothbrush.

"Rough night?"

"Not at all, why?"

"Looks like you hit it pretty hard. Get yourself some coffee, something."

"Check," I said pointing at a Styrofoam cup.

"Ha, takes some onions to show up like that."

I ducked into the break room for another cup of Hills Bros, an unpleasant blend akin to spooning dirt into well water. The clock on the wall indicated I'd been at work a mere eight minutes, but that couldn't be right. Voices from the hall seeped in with weekend accounts of Miller Lite binges and NFL roundups, staple office banter.

On the table was an assortment of donuts, some tasting like Coco Puffs, others like a mixed bag of Otis Spunkmeyers. Employees tore into them like bears at the dump. Free food of any variety whipped workers into a frenzy, mimicking a pack of parched Little Leaguers descending on a cooler of Capri Sun.

Such was the case with Rebie stacking three donuts on a napkin before spying me. She looked like a hefty John Cleese plucked from a Monty Python sketch, only somehow less feminine. Her voice held a booming resonance more suitable for deafening construction sites than Corporate America.

"What's up kiddo?" she barked.

"Nothing really."

"You have any donuts, they're going fast!" she said inhaling a honey glazed

for emphasis.

“I already ate, but thanks.”

“Alright kiddo, you’re missing out.”

“Ha, yeah.”

“Well kiddo, glad I could make you laugh!”

In came Carol, the cloying toxins of Dunkin’ Donuts stirring Mama Bear from her cave. She had a sense of smell like a timber wolf and began devouring a pair of chocolate donuts the way a whale attacks plankton. Her closet paid homage to the racks of Dots and Pay/half.

“No one said there were donuts,” she said padding her thighs with a high-calorie offering.

“Guess they figured you were still on a diet.”

“I am, Dr. Phil says I can have a little bit of chocolate. ”

“Couldn’t hurt.”

By the third day, work was torture. My manager approached my cheerless cubicle as I was eyeing the print-off of appointed days off, my sole contribution to the cube’s décor. Her name was Holly, hard as a jawbreaker with Camel Light stains the color of my scuffed Oxfords. She appeared the sort you’d expect to find polluting her gills on a break outside Great Clips or smudging up a skank pole for crumpled singles.

“What do you have going this week?”

“The wheels are in motion, you know, full pipeline.”

“Are you keeping up on your accounts?”

“Ship shape,” I said regrettably.

“John, you seem a little out of it.”

“No, no, just get a little nervous on Wednesdays.”

“Is your computer working ok?” she asked eyeballing a blank screen.

“I have to reboot it, gets a little bogged down,” I said realizing I was still wearing my coat.

At lunch I went for a walk dropping business cards in restaurants’ fishbowls and hoping the cold air off Lake Michigan would breathe life into my exhausted body. Officially my business cards bore the absurdly inflated title Directional Media Consultant, similar to referring to my boyhood paper route as self-contracting. Lunch passed and somehow the day followed suit.

Walking into my apartment I went straight for the refrigerator and fished out a container of leftover salad. It was time to settle into the hay early lest a random drug test greet me come morning. I’d heard grumblings from a clique of female coworkers that I was “on something” but ultimately their issues of *US Weekly* proved more entertaining. Celebrity gossip invariably drifted through the air like the ubiquitous smell of legal paper.

It was futile. I’d exhausted my means of trying to steal a few hours of rest from the hands of out-and-out wakefulness. I closed my eyes and started counting the amount of times someone had asked me if I was dabbling in narcotics.

Nothing.

I turned up the Brian Eno record and folded my pillow.

Likewise.

I reached for a bedside copy of *Me Talk Pretty One Day* but opted to line the trashcan with its pages.

Sleep wasn't happening. The television beckoned.

In the small hours I probed about the dial falling on campy Hispanic channels and indiscernible music videos emanating from Eastern Europe; Don Henley had seemingly revamped his career in Bosnia. Eastern Europeans are ostensibly a solid fifteen years behind the times, still donning hip-sacks like my grandmother at the Grand Old Opry. But it was another infomercial that held my tired interest.

Standing before an underground pool in matching double-breasted suits were two dwarfs, their pudgy hands gesticulating as they unveiled tips on scooping desolate properties for little coin, their plump fingers like Little Smokies handling stacks of sucker's loot. Fantastic! I wanted to tuck one of them under each of my arms and chuck them in the pool. But there were testimonials abound. People were listening! People were buying!

In saner times when Mr. Sandman recurrently sprinkled the stuff of beddy-by time, I'd read Gabriel Garcia Marquez alleged he simply woke up one morning and knew how to write a novel. I hadn't slept in almost four days but an epiphany the scale of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* had taken hold: I was going into business for myself.

I dressed for work early rehearsing the indubitable news I would be resigning my post in the spirit of entrepreneurship. My plans were kept under wraps lest an industrious coworker snipe my ideas and come between me and the imminent stacks of high society I schemed to wrest from the boney talons of wealthy dog owners. I was thinking specifically of Anna, a Hispanic woman in the cube across from me who already turned a decent profit snaking printer ink and unloading it online. I doubted she would care about anything unrelated to Ecko hoodies or Baby Phat jeans, but I couldn't be too sure.

I scanned my employee card and was greeted by Lana, the company receptionist. Lana took to me the way a mosquito takes to a citronella candle. Dental benefits had allowed her to yank and twist her mangled Chiclets into a presentable smile but she still appeared as though she should be hassling you outside the train station with a cup in her hand. I was no longer a man in possession of his faculties.

"Morning John," she said halfheartedly.

"Good morning. Say Lana, I think I saw you last night."

"You did?" She perked up.

"Were you in my neighborhood last night, forging through the dumpsters behind Jimmy John's?"

"Say what?"

"I wouldn't blame you, hear they throw away plenty of fresh bread."

I kept walking out of earshot with bigger objectives in mind but whatever she replied definitely contained the phrase “boy you on drugs!”

Before I arrived at my threadbare cubicle the division manager walked past me for once referring to me by my first name. Here was a man with close-cropped hair and the sort of smile that would indicate there was a knife indelibly lodged up his rectum.

“Hey there good morning John. I like your smile.”

“Good morning Mr. Walker.”

“Steve. Call me Steve. Listen, you’re going to want to talk to your manager. She’s looking for you.”

“Since when does she roll into work on time? I’ve been looking for her too, like to ask her who she’s related to that she’s not watering the plants ‘round here.”

It was like a grenade detonated in the aisle. Heads rose from their cubicles, Rebie’s insufferable voice decried my insolence, and Lana reeled around the corner shouting, “that boy’s done on something!”

The pesky task of drawing a steady paycheck was behind me, though I wasn’t able to track down my manager before my employee pass was brusquely torn from my mitts. Bigger waters lay ahead akin to those treaded by shifty Brits dragging cut-rate vacuums over a mess of tacks, or that mustachioed slob stuffed in a chef’s coat driven to hysteria over cutlery purportedly capable of halving cutting boards.

The plan to offer boutique terriers to well-heeled dog lovers seemed absurdly obvious. I’d taken pains to search the web on the company’s peso and assembled an impressive handout to pinup on pet store bulletin boards and stack in establishments frequented by stuffy old widowers. Going on five days sans sleep, I hadn’t bothered to posit how I would breed these smaller terriers, let alone produce a passable pooch. Nonetheless the flier promised: “RED BOSTON TERRIERS! ALL WHITE ROUND HEADS! BLUE FRENCH BULLDOGS!” The latter proclamation was a sure testament to my sleep-deprived madness.

When I noted a bridge club next to a convenience store on my way home from work I put the plan in action.

“Excuse me, how may I help you?” asked a woman handsome in an Eleanor Roosevelt sort of way.

“Oh, don’t mind me. If you’d just hand me some Scotch tape I’ll be on my way.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Some tape, unless you’d prefer I leave a stack on the tables and you can tape one in the window when you have a moment.”

She just stared at me. I raised my voice; poor old broad must be rather deaf.

“I’m going leave a bunch of these papers behind. Feel free to hand them out yourself.”

“Whatever are you saying?”

I pressed the stack of papers in her boney claw, pawed out a few chessman cookies from a glass bowl, and was on my way. Mostly she just stared at me and

shook like a French soldier in dismay; apparently well along in a battle with MS.

The sun seemed impossibly bright and every noise around me amplified tenfold. In a delirious haze I stumbled about holding out fliers to every passerby.

"No, no, I'm good man," said a degenerate waiting for the bus.

"You wouldn't know a blue French bulldog from a pug!" I countered.

Sleep. Must rest my eyes. The world was closing in fast save the soothing high-pitched voices of infomercial infamy.

"Over there is as good of spot as any," said the dwarf in a blue double-breasted suit.

"I agree," echoed the other dwarf.

"Fellas you look much chunkier in person."

"Rest, you need to rest," they said in unison.

"Agreed. Maybe I could crash at that palatial pad of yours I saw on the television. Looked comfy as hell."

"Here, lay your head down."

"I couldn't possibly sully your lovely suit."

"Rest now, relax. We're here to help."

"Don't I know it. And listen, there's a sinkhole down the street you may want to peep. Real potential there fellas."

"Shh" they said placing a plump finger to their lips.

One removed his suit coat to use as a pillow as I curled up in the entrance-way of a garage in the alley. Before I could apologize for wanting to hurl them in the pool they had vanished.

There I slept like a drunkard until an ungodly thumping jolted me to my feet; some kids were playing basketball a few garages over. Awake and partially coherent I noticed an obscure figure offering me a hand.

"Odd place to catch a wink," said the Columbian man with a bushy mustache.

"Where are the dwarfs?"

"No dwarfs here I'm afraid."

"Well sir, when infomercial celebs tell you to lay down, you curl up real fast."

"You can call me Gabrielle, or Gabo if you will."

"Oh, I will, Gabo. And I must confess to be finding your novels a bit much. If I kept *One Hundred Years of Solitude* on my nightstand I wouldn't be sacked out in alleys."

"Ha, well then tell that to Oprah and her book club!"

"I will, don't you worry. May even sell her a boutique roundhead or two, if she can afford them."

He laughed heartily moistening his soup strainer with his phlegmy hoot.

And I arose awkwardly to my feet secure in the arcane knowledge of how to write a novel, a real plus since I had no idea what to feed a discolored push-face.

Besides, *no one would ever take me for a salesman*, I thought.

# 1-800-FUN-TALK

*Eric J. Krause*

“What are you wearing?”

“Not much,” Jan told the voice. He said his name was Ben, but she didn’t believe that. After all, she’d said her name was Melissa. “I have on hot pink socks and a thin white nightshirt which is practically see-through.”

“Oh, god,” Ben said, practically moaning. “Anything underneath?”

“Just my birthday suit,” Jen said. “I don’t have an air conditioner, and it’s awfully hot here.” She had to hold back a snicker. She liked being a tease. Now she understood what the pretty girls saw in it.

“How do you look?” He had trouble getting the words out.

Hell, she thought, he’ll never see me. Why ruin his fantasy? “I’m five foot six, one hundred and five pounds. I have a very tiny waist, but my breasts are C-cups, and at times I think I should be a D.” He groaned at that. “My finely-sculpted body is still a bit sticky from my two-hour gym workout earlier this evening.” Hey, a girl could dream, couldn’t she?

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,” Ben muttered. Maybe she didn’t really look anything like that, but she sure did in Ben’s imagination. She hadn’t had such a nice ego boost in a long time. She’d have to make sure to write a nice thank-you note to 1-800-FUN-TALK.

“Is the nightshirt sticking to you?”

“Only in the right places,” she said.

Ben’s next sentence came out in a barely audible whisper. “Do you need someone to towel you off?”

“You offering, baby? Let me slip out of my nightie, then you can describe just how you’re drying me off. I know you’ll be oh-so-gentle.” She didn’t want a description of his fantasy self, as she already had one in her mind; she pictured him as a mix between Brad Pitt and a young Harrison Ford.

“Wouldn’t it be better if I was there?” His voice was an excited whisper.

She laughed. “Sure, honey, but that ain’t gonna happen, so let’s just keep going.” She moved back to her sexy-tease voice. “Now, where are you going to rub that soft towel first?”

“But I can be there real soon.”

Time to end this call. Weirdos always had to ruin a good thing. So much for 1-800-FUN-TALK being perfect.

“Melissa? Are you still there? I said I can be there soon. You’ll like that. Please don’t change out of that nightshirt. And leave the socks on. Very sexy.”

“What the hell are you talking about? You don’t even know where I live.” She was in the process of slamming the phone down when she heard his voice, crystal-clear through the receiver.

“Sure I do. You live at 2732 Borland Street. Apartment 3418.”

Her heart missed a beat and she brought the phone back to her ear. “How do you know that? Who the hell are you?”

No answer, just dial tone.

Jan hung up and started to hyperventilate. How had he known? Was he actually coming over? She sat down in her easy chair and put her head between her knees. Or as close as her oversized belly would allow.

Cripes, get yourself under control, girl. She just needed to call the police and explain the situation. Then she’d call 1-800-FUN-TALK and find out what the hell they were doing giving out addresses.

The call to the police only took about a minute. Though they didn’t view her call as important, they did promise to run a police car through the area. She supposed that was as good as she could hope for at this point. With that call out of the way, she dialed 1-800-FUN-TALK.

At the beginning of her first call, before being connected to Ben, she’d gone through an automated menu. She hadn’t made it to the end, but she was sure if she waited through all the choices, there would be a chance to talk to a live operator. If she played her cards right, she’d be able to sue the company, maybe for millions.

The phone rang one and a half times. Instead of hearing the 1-800-FUN-TALK jingle, a recorded voice greeted her. “We’re sorry, but the number you have attempted to dial is incorrect. Please check the number and try again.”

Jan let out a nervous laugh. She must have hit a wrong button in her hurry. She dialed again and got the same message.

“What in the hell?” She took a deep breath and dialed the number a third time. The same recorded operator came on, but this time the message was different. “I’m sorry, but the phone number you are trying to reach no longer exists. It has served its purpose. Please make sure your front door is unlocked, you stupid slut. Enjoy your night.”

Jan slammed the phone down and started crying. What was happening? She noticed the sliding glass door to the balcony stood open. She raced over and latched it shut. Sure, she was on the third floor, but why take any chances? The front door was both dead bolted and latched shut with the chain, but she pushed an easy chair over in front of the door anyway. It made her feel a tiny bit better. She’d locked the window in her bedroom this morning, and she hadn’t opened it when she got home from work. She was locked in safe.

The front door rattled. Coincidence? She doubted that. Who was this guy, and what the hell was 1-800-FUN-TALK? Not an entertainment party line, at least not on her end.

Someone rapped loudly on the door. “Melissa, I’m here to towel you off. Open the door, baby.”

She bit into her palm to keep from making a sound. Maybe if she just stayed still he’d go away.

He knocked louder. Would he break the door down?

“Melissa! You put me in this state, and you’re going to get me out of it!”

She bit harder into her palm. Just go away, she kept saying in her mind. Just go away, just go away, just go away.

The knocking ceased. She ran to the door and glanced through the peep hole. When she saw the area in front of her door empty, she let out a huge sigh and crumpled to the carpet. It’s over, all over, an irrational part of her mind said.

She turned and looked at the sliding glass door. A man, about six-and-a-half feet tall and 200-plus pounds, wearing a paper bag complete with two eye-holes cut into it, stood staring at her. The sight of such a large man wearing a paper bag might have been funny had it been under different circumstances. But it wasn’t, and Jan screamed at the top of her lungs.

The bag-man tried to open the sliding glass door, and Jan thanked every holy being she could think of that she’d thought to lock it. How had he gotten up there so fast? There was a fire escape ladder, but it wasn’t accessible from the ground. Besides, hardly any time had passed from when he was at the front door to now. Were there two of them, or was this guy more agile than he was big? Both were scary thoughts.

She reached for the phone to call 9-1-1, but there was no dial tone. Dead. Not surprising. Maybe she should arm herself. She didn’t have a great knife set, but what she had would hurt someone if she stabbed them. She scrambled into the kitchen and grabbed the largest of the set. Back at the sliding glass door, the balcony was empty. Again, hope flowed through her veins. Those were the only two realistic entrances to her apartment, and since neither was open, he’d given up to go harass an easier victim. Or maybe someone in her building had heard her scream and chased the bad guy or guys away. Or maybe the cops had driven by as they’d promised and scared them off.

Then, through the bedroom, the small bathroom window broke, followed by a loud crash that was probably everything on the sink being knocked to the ground. There was no way he should have been able to get to that window, and no way a man of his size could fit through it. There had to be more than one of them.

Jan stood, shaking in the middle of her living room, listening for any more sounds. She debated whether she should stand here and wait, or take her knife and investigate. This was her place, though, and she had to defend it. Maybe she’d even get the drop on him. Hell, stranger things had happened.

When she reached the bedroom door, she took a deep breath. What the hell was he doing in there? He’d moved so fast so far, why hadn’t he attacked her yet? She reached her hand around the corner and flicked on the light, then rushed in. Before she could focus on anything, a sharp pain hit the top of her head, and she fell into the dark cave of unconsciousness.

#

Jan opened her eyes. The world swirled around her in blurs. Her head felt like it had been slammed with a sledgehammer. She jammed her eyes shut for a few sec-



onds and then opened them again. It helped, and she found herself lying on her bed. Everything rolled back into her consciousness, and she sat bolt upright, looking for her stalker. He stood at the edge of the bed.

“You’re a liar, Melissa,” he said through his paper bag mask. “Or should I say Jan. I told you my real name, and if you would have asked me to describe myself, I’d have told the truth.”

She swallowed hard, which made her head feel like it was going to explode. “So why did you bust in here, and why are you wearing the mask?”

“I’m just following procedure. If you had been telling the truth, I’d have taken off the mask when I first saw you. But you weren’t, so I didn’t.”

Jan scoffed. “Like I want to see what you look like. Why don’t you just leave?”

“No problem. I’d have left while you were asleep, but I needed you to know how disappointed I was with you.” He turned to leave.

“Wait,” Jan said. She wanted him out of here. He was obviously a few cards short of a full deck, but she had to know. “How did you get in here? For that matter, how did you know where I lived? How did you get from my front door to my balcony so quick?”

He hesitated, then removed the bag. He was a mix of Brad Pitt and a young Harrison Ford, just as she’d imagined. “We at 1-800-FUN-TALK make dreams come true. Do you think we care that you’re overweight? Or that you might not be beauty pageant material? No. You cared enough to pick us, so we chose to pick you. But you messed it up. Don’t bother calling us again; the line won’t work for you.” With that, he turned and walked out of her life. She was sorry to see him go.

---

# Public Bath

*G.A. Scheinoha*

Could you scrub among the multitudes, ala Roma style? No simple tunic, the yards long wrap of plain percale to unswathe here. Rather, stripped of expensive tweeds, intricately woven, button down Oxford collared, Egyptian cotton, the hopelessly bright, endlessly gaudy raiment of your sincerest affectations.

Pretense no longer spun on the loom of illusions. Each peeled away layer by ponderous layer, every encumbrance laid aside, piled at the ready, close to hand near this porcelain portal poised to take you as you were born, bare of hubris, utterly devoid of animus.

And simply step into the current of the masses same as toes first plunged into a frigid mountain stream, invigorated by the babble of frost, washed free of every air till naught persists except a freshly renewed, tautly sinewed, always present yet skeletally considered empty slate.

# Love's Labour

*Andre Kocsis,*

Rooney's lower body had taken up an urgent rhythm of its own, uncontrolled, driving, until a great wave traveled down his spine, and he was racked in a convulsion of release. Another wave, and another, his back arching, a giant hand around his torso, squeezing the life out of him.

And then it was over. With a last shudder, Rooney rolled off Jane. She gave him a peck on the cheek, and turned away. He lay next to her for a few moments, but she was definitely in a different place, he sensed that, in fact he had sensed it the whole time. He felt a vague guilt and befuddlement.

But most of all, he felt thirst. Rooney got up and padded out to the kitchen in his bare feet, his manhood wet against his thighs. He was a big man, with a broad, muscular upper body that made his head seem a little too small.

He took a beer out of the fridge, started to close the door, then paused.

"You want a beer, baby?" he yelled.

"Sure," came the answer from the bedroom.

He grabbed another beer, and hurried back. Jane had propped herself against the massive dark wood headboard, and was smoking a cigarette. She looked great. Her long blond hair in a ponytail, the brown eyes with long black lashes, made to look slightly oriental by some cosmetic trick he never understood. At twenty-two, there was a ripeness in her body that had not been there at fifteen, when he had first met her. He liked these first hints of mature softness.

He jumped into bed, and pressed the cold bottle against her shoulder, but she didn't react, didn't even look at him. She took the beer, took a deep drag from her cigarette, put it in the ashtray on the night table, wiping the ashes she had spilled on the sheets, then raised the bottle to her lips.

Rooney sat next to her, and took deep swigs from his bottle. He was feeling drowsy, but it was too early to go to sleep.

"You wanna watch TV?" Jane asked.

"Sure," he replied. "Where's the remote?"

They looked around the room, but it was hard to tell, with scattered clothes, the remains of snacks, the general chaos of a room well-used. He started to grope under the covers, touching her nether parts.

"Knock it off, Rooney," she said, and there was an edge to her voice.

"I'm just looking for the remote," he said, all innocence. And sure enough, he pulled his hand out from under the cover, the device gripped in his hairy paw.

She took the control, and chose a sit-com. Eventually they had another beer, and then a third, and then it was lights out. He had to be up at five. The

construction site was at least forty-five minutes away, and he had to load his truck at six-thirty. She didn't go to the restaurant until seven, but she liked to take her time with the make-up in the morning.

They lay beside each other, not touching, the street noise a dull hum outside, with the occasional headlight sneaking between the slats of the blind and sweeping across the ceiling in a great arc and then disappearing.

"We should get out tomorrow night," Rooney said.

She didn't reply.

"Go to that pub, you know?"

"Which pub?" she asked.

"You know, the Rose something ..."

"The Rose and Fox?"

"That's it."

She snuggled close to him, and he put his arm around her.

"We can't go back there for a while," she said.

He thought for a moment. "We'll find another one." And they drifted off to sleep.

The next day, Rooney was at the site a little after six. The long line of dump trucks, splattered with mud, stood waiting along the wasteland that would one day be a subdivision of cheap houses, squeezed too close together. His truck was second from the end. He jumped in, and started the creaky diesel, then left it rumbling like an oversized percolator.

He went into the dispatcher's hut, where there were already three drivers ahead of him. The old Italian was handing out routes.

"Pete, you and Todd are on gravel. Get going right away, 'cause they need a couple loads pronto. Marco, you back your rig up by the pit, and Tim will load ya. Take it to the fill site on nineteenth. Off you go, son! Ah, Rooney, I got a special job for you. They're tearing the forms down, and you're taking the scrap to the dump."

"Shit, Luigi, why me?" This was the worst job he could get. Long waits at the dump, the smell of rotting garbage permeating every pore in his body.

Luigi glared at him with his one good eye, the other in a permanent squint. "You want the job or not?"

"For fuck's sake!" Rooney stared at the ground.

"Make up your mind, Rooney. I got plenty waiting to get on that truck."

"Okay, don't get your ass in an uproar," Rooney said, heading out the door. Luigi suppressed a smile.

The day was even worse than he expected. The lines at the dump were longer than usual, and, considering it was April, the weather got surprisingly warm by mid-day. The stench was suffocating. Most of his time was spent waiting, putting the truck in gear every few minutes, moving forward five feet, and then waiting again.

He loved to barrel along the roads in the old rig, but this was really hard work. He almost wished he was back in the lumber camp up north, where he had started

at seventeen. That was before he was a driver, and he generally got the hardest jobs in the camp. He was always exhausted by the end of the day, but it was a good fatigue, not like this, with his nerves jangled by all the waiting.

Rooney had been so proud when he was put on the log truck at nineteen, first as a helper, and by twenty, a full-time driver. Those were good times. That's when he met Jane, she was just fifteen, but already a looker. Jane was just getting over that pretty boy football player that had dumped her, and Erica had just left Rooney, when her husband came back. It all seemed so long ago. God, it was almost seven years!

Rooney was startled by a long blast from a horn behind him, and he looked up to realize that a full truck-length of space had opened up ahead, as the line made its glacial progress toward the tipping site. He put the truck in gear, closed the gap, and then put it back in neutral, pulling hard on the handbrake. It was hot and dusty, and he could hardly breathe. The ripe smell of garbage made him gag, so he tried to keep his breathing shallow.

Flocks of seagulls were dive-bombing everything in sight with their runny droppings, and his windshield had not escaped their attentions. To top it all off, Luigi would probably make him wash the truck at the end of the day, and he would have to stay an extra hour.

Still, it was a job. When they moved to Toronto from the little town up north, he was happy he had the driving experience. On his first job after they arrived, he was driving only part-time; the rest of the time he was lucky when they called him in as a "gofer" on the site. But with this outfit, he was driving full time, even if he did get all the shit jobs. Anyhow, it paid well. With both of them working, he and Jane were not lacking for anything.

Still, he sensed that not all was well. He thought back to the previous night. She seemed ... what was it exactly? Not repulsed, but ... disinterested, maybe. But then, women were different. He just liked getting his rocks off. Of course, it made a difference that it was with Jane. He liked to lie next to her, after. With the pros he had frequented as a youth, he would clear out as soon as he was finished.

A gap had opened up in front of him once more, and he inched the truck forward. Again, his thoughts drifted back to Jane. A vague unease gnawed at him.

That night, they were both tired, and after watching a sit-com, they turned in early. The following night, Friday, they decided to go to the local pub. Jane was particularly careful with her make-up. She put on a thin, clinging dress which showed off her figure, the front plunging to reveal cleavage. Her bright blond hair was loose, reaching to the middle of her back.

The place was not very full, and they sat at a table by themselves. Rooney had a few beers, and she nursed a gin and tonic while they watched the hockey game.

Around ten o'clock, Rooney stood up and said, "Let's go."

Jane looked at him questioningly. "The game's not over," she said.

When he continued standing, she shrugged her shoulders and got up. They walked out into the brisk April night. It had rained, and the pavement was slick.

Jane held her thin coat together against the wind which tugged at her. They walked down the block. There were not as many streetlights in this part of town, and, through their thin shoes, they could feel the ridges in the broken sidewalk. Rooney stopped in front of a bar, gazing through a window at the crowd inside. Jane looked in as well, and he glanced at her questioningly. She shook her head slightly, and they moved on. Finally, they chose a place that looked rougher than the previous, but with a moderately young crowd. Rooney stood outside while Jane went in and sat at the bar, and ordered a gin and tonic. He followed a few moments later, also sitting at the bar. There was an empty stool separating them.

Rooney asked for a beer, and swiveled his seat to survey the surroundings. The main room was larger than it looked from the outside, with another couple of rooms off to the back. The space was dominated by the massive bar stretching the full length of one wall. It was of ancient vintage, made of dark wood, with racks of glasses hanging from the ceiling. The construction of the counter indicated that at one time, decades before, this had been a high class joint. The rest of the space was filled with a number of beat-up wooden tables. Nearly all were occupied, by groups of various sizes. The crowd was early to mid-twenties, and mostly working stiffs. But then, this was not exactly the part of town frequented by the limousine crowd.

A jukebox played in the back corner, and a few couples danced in the small clear space around it. At the bar, the music could be heard only in snatches. The general hilarity at the tables filled the room like some thick vapour straining to burst the walls.

A pretty woman entering a saloon always elicits attention. Hope flares up in the men that this could be the one, even if only for the night, and the women size up the new competition. Jane definitely created a stir as she sat demurely at the bar, sipping her drink. The table nearest her was occupied by a group of almost a dozen revelers, clearly celebrating the birthday of a short, rotund young man of about twenty. There were three women in the group, but the general tone was carried by the guys, who, within minutes of Jane's entrance, started exhorting the object of the celebration with yells of, "Go, Andy!"

And Andy did go, soon enough. With a large mug of beer in his hand, he waddled over to Jane, and struck a pose of sophisticated nonchalance with his back to Rooney. His dignity was somewhat undercut by the fact that he stood a full head shorter than Jane, sitting on her elevated stool, but he was bolstered by yells of encouragement from his table. Rooney sucked on his beer, indifferent to what was happening right next to him.

"Hi, baby," Andy said.

Jane looked at him with the same interest that she would have awarded an unusual species of insect. Andy took this for encouragement.

"We're having a little celebration," he continued.

Jane did not answer; she only raised her eyebrows, neatly plucked and darkened only hours before, into two prone commas arching over her shadowed eyes.

"Yeah, it's my birthday."

“Happy birthday.”

“I just thought you might want to join us.” He was encouraged by the lack of outright hostility, as he continued, “I guarantee you a good time.” He leered at her seductively.

“That’s very tempting,” she said. “Maybe another time.”

Andy stood staring at her for a few seconds, debating whether to push his luck, but decided against it. The walk back to his table was difficult, so he fortified himself with a deep pull on his beer. Once with his group, he smiled at his admirers indulgently, and tossed out some profound witticism which no doubt alluded to the vicissitudes of gender relations. This was greeted by an uproar of laughter, and some back slapping. He glanced at Jane, who had by this time turned her back, and then he sat down to immerse himself in the conviviality of his fellows.

Over the course of the next half hour, Jane was approached by two more potential suitors, and she rebuffed each. In the meantime, Rooney had another beer. He was now facing the bar, appearing to examine the row of bottles displayed behind the bartender. In fact, it was the mirror behind the bottles which held his interest.

The place was filling to capacity as more and more people drifted in, accompanied by gusts of wind from the outside. All the tables were now full, and there were only a few stools at the bar which were still unoccupied. Because Rooney sprawled on the bar, his elbows splayed out, the empty seat next to Jane was uninviting except to the most determined of patrons.

Two young men entered, about twenty, dressed casually, but perhaps a cut above the run of the mill. They had the vibrant health of young bulls, cheeks red from the wind, well-muscled. They could have been construction workers. Equally, they could have been from the suburbs, attracted by the musk of easy pickings in this part of town.

They halted near the bar, looking for a table. Clearly, none was available. They ordered beers, and stood drinking, surveying the scene. One of them, tall, with the easy confidence of good looks, sat next to Jane. Soon, he was engaged in conversation with her. Her face changed, smiling, teasing. Rooney slid off his stool, leaving his half-full bottle on the bar, and slouched off toward the washrooms in the rear.

He was gone a while, and when he came back, his seat had been taken by the other young buck. In the meantime, the first one had his arm around Jane, and was leaning toward her conspiratorially. She was laughing at something he had whispered into her ear.

Rooney grabbed Casanova’s arm, pulling it off Jane, and spun him around on the stool.

“That’s my seat, asshole,” he said, sticking his face close to the young man’s.

The latter looked at him with eyes wide, for a moment speechless. Finally he gathered his wits, and said, “What the fuck you want?”

“I want you to clear out.”

“What is your problem?” There was a slight note of doubt in his voice.

“Clear out, punk. That’s my seat, and that’s my woman.”

The buck looked at Jane. She smiled at him, encouragingly. He slid off the stool. He was slightly taller than Rooney, and had the stance of the athlete, balanced, ready. Rooney backed up a step, and the other took this as a sign, shoving him on the chest. Rooney staggered back, seemingly startled, and the buck advanced again, cocking his fist. Before he could throw the punch, if, indeed, that had been his intention, he was staggered by a kick from Rooney that caught him square in the crotch. He crumpled, and Rooney was on him. With three quick but powerful punches he transformed the helpless man’s face into a bleeding landscape.

All this happened in the space of a few seconds. The victim’s partner was frozen in his seat, staring down at the body lying almost at his feet. Jane, on the other hand, was off her stool, and Rooney grabbed her arm as they both made a hasty exit. There was a stunned silence in the bar, and then an explosion of noise as people crowded around the victim, who was moaning on the floor, one hand covering his demolished face.

“You really messed him up, baby, God, you wrecked his face, oh, God, baby, you feel so good, oh Jesus ...” Jane was straddling Rooney’s hips; he was supine on their bed, one large hand kneading her breast. He looked up at the joy on her face, her eyes closed, matching his rhythm, heave for heave.

She was back, yes, she was back, just the way it used to be.

## The First Wife

Aneela Khalid

Sorry my darling, nothing personal,  
Sorry my darling, this must be done.  
I need children, to carry my name.  
Sudden pain shot through her heart,  
Half a woman that’s what she was,  
A woman barren – a desert at best  
She sated his lust, but he wanted more.  
“No,” he continued, “Not a divorce.  
I love you, my first wife you’ll remain,  
Silent in a corner like a beautiful vase  
Forever mine, never to be free,  
And like a mute, suspended in time,  
She bent her head and managed a nod.  
He had the right to four wives,  
The ball in her throat began to expand,  
Until it burst like a million shards,  
Each shard like a razor head  
Piercing her spirit, what was that?  
Blood, the blood of her dying hope  
Slowly, mustering all the strength,  
She rose to feet with a tight smile,  
“I wish you luck,” she managed to say,  
Before her tears swept her away.

# Seeing Michael

Ken Dean

Christina was walking down a street she would rather not be on. This was a bad part of the city, the Short North, and her car had broken down. Plus she had forgotten her damn cell phone! Of all times to be stupid. She had no choice but to walk and find a pay phone or an establishment where she could call her boyfriend.

She was shaking, sweating with apprehension. The buildings were too tall and the alleys dark and ominous; like gaping, diseased mouths just waiting to swallow her.

‘Stop it, Christy, you’re just working yourself into frenzy’, she thought to herself, ‘Everything will be fine once you find a phone or a place to duck into.’

She kept walking, still feeling frightened but wanting to get past this place as quickly as possible. Another dark alley was coming up on her right. She glanced into the deep darkness just as an arm shot out and grabbed her! A grip of steel jerked her into the alley. Christina actually felt her feet leave the ground.

She began to scream instinctively, but in vain as the noise seemed to be swallowed up by the darkness. Instantly the mugger had her pinned up against the alley wall, covering her mouth with his hand. The alley wall smelled musty and disgusting, but the mugger’s hand was even worse; decrepit, like dead flesh. She felt as if she could throw up.

Mugger man pulled an automatic pistol from his trench coat pocket and waved it in her face.

“Just a little something to scare folks with, but I don’t really need it, do I? You can’t move!” the mugger commanded. Instantly she was paralyzed.

He let the pistol hand drop; all he needed was the hand over her mouth. She couldn’t even bring her arms up to try to fight him off. He twisted her head up and to the left using his one hand, exposing her pristine, white neck.

“Ah, beautiful, sensual thing. One of the best I’ve ever seen. My compliments to you dear, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to ruin it. You see, you’re the last one for the evening and I’ll be satisfied, at least until tomorrow.”

Christina could still see his face even though her head was twisted sideways. He had the look of a dirty, ruffian bum, but his yellow eyes screamed of a beast from hell. When he spoke, his fetid breath smelled of stagnant swamps, dead bodies, and everything unholy.

He brought his face even closer and opened his mouth impossibly wide, descending towards her neck. She caught a quick glimpse of fanged teeth and then they sank below her vision. Dear God — not that!

Just then she began to hear a tok...tok....tok sound coming down the street, as if someone was wearing hard shoes or boots. She wanted to scream for



help, but all that came out of her mouth was a whimper. The beast heard it too, snapping his head away from her neck to face the street. She could feel tremors run through its body, as if it was terrified. The source of the sound turned the corner of the alley entrance; a tall man with long, blonde hair who was wearing a white shirt, blue jeans, and engineer boots. He was also shining with a strange luminescence that lit up the entire alley.

The beast had become increasingly agitated and was visibly shaking. He let go his grasp of Christina and began to run away from the alley entrance, wailing like an ungodly banshee. Shots from the demon's automatic as he turned and fired didn't even register on the blonde man. He leapt into the air and came down on the beast, pulling him up by the scruff of his neck and lifting him bodily off his feet.

"Demon spawn!", he yelled with a thunderous voice. Holding out his right hand, a bright light appeared in his palm. The light morphed into a large, silver sword that looked like a cross with a long shaft.

"Go back to hell and join your bastard kin!"

With that, he shoved the mighty sword up the demon's ass until it protruded out the top of its head. The demon immediately turned charcoal-briquette red, then to ash which fluttered to the ground and disappeared.

Christina had slumped down the alley wall, sitting transfixed by what had happened.

The sword vanished as the tall man walked over to Christina. He was still glowing. She managed to get out, "Who are you?"

"Do not worry, young daughter. The trauma of this evening will pass quickly."

He put his hand on her head. "Rest, Christina, rest."

She instantly felt drowsy and fell into a deep sleep. She awoke the next morning feeling totally refreshed, but she couldn't remember how she had wound up in her own bed. Sounds and smells from the kitchen told her that Arnie was making breakfast for them both. Her memories from last night's encounter were all there, but she felt no trauma or fear whatsoever, just a deep peace.

"When did you get in last night, Hon? I didn't hear you come to bed."

Her thoughts went back to her shining, blonde savior. "Arnie, you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Tilde was driving angry drunk far too fast down a country road outside of Copenhagen.

She had just left a party of her friend's and suddenly ex-boyfriend. That bastard Jerrik

had just broken up with her to be with that slut, Birgitte. Tilde had been fooled good, thought he had loved her. She had stayed at the party after those two asswipe lovebirds left so she could get totally drukken. Now here she was driving stupid; letting the anger manifest itself through her foot on the accelerator and hand on gearshift.

Her anger was feeding off the speed and vice versa. Felt damn good. Going

one hundred-thirty kilometers per hour didn't give her drunken reactions enough time to match the sharp turn just ahead. The Jeep and Tilde kept on going instead of turning. A ditch just off the road was all that was needed to send the Jeep tumbling end over end, throwing Tilde out to land on a rock outcropping. The Jeep came to rest several meters away where it burst into obligatory, flaming wreckage.

Tilde could feel the heat from the burning wreckage and even though she was totally wasted, realized this wasn't a safe place to be. She tried to move to get away, but all she got for her effort was an excruciating pain between her shoulder blades that sucked the air from her lungs. Once able to breathe again, she realized that she couldn't move anything from her abdomen down. She coughed twice and tasted blood in her mouth.

Dear God...don't let me die here!

The road was dark in this area except for the flickering of the burning Jeep. How long would it be until it explodes, she thought? What was that? She heard a strange, rhythmic sound from the roadway. Tok...tok...tok. There was a soft illumination on the roadway getting brighter as the sound became louder. Suddenly there was a tall, shining man walking in her direction from the road.

'Help me', she screamed, but all that emerged from her throat was a croak. The beautiful, shining man had reached her side and was knelling down beside her.

"Oh Tilde — what have you done to yourself?"

He reached down and put his hand on her forehead. There was a sudden shock that pulsed through her body, and then a feeling of total peace like a heroin high. She realized she could now move all parts of her body and the metallic, bloody taste had left her mouth.

He suddenly thrust out his hand towards the flaming wreckage. Tilde saw the Jeep lift up and was flung a hundred meters into an empty field nearby as if by a giant's hand. It promptly exploded. Tilde winced from the sound and vibration. She looked back to the shining face above her.

"Thank you, sir. I'd be dead if it weren't for you."

Just then she heard sirens and saw flashing lights coming down the road.

"Tilde, there are people coming to help you, although I'm sure you'll be fine now. Please go with them and take care in the future."

Upon saying that, the shining man faded from Tilde's sight.

Jason Trudoe stood on the railing of the New River Gorge Bridge, trying to get up the nerve to jump. Why had his wife left him for his best friend Tom? It was a betrayal that he couldn't fathom, but it hurt to the very core of his being.

He had cherished and loved her the way he thought a husband should, only to be called a loser as Becky walked out the door with her suitcase and stepped into Tom's waiting car. He should have killed them both right then, but he didn't have the guts. He'd be surprised if he was able to actually step off the bridge to a certain death below. From this height it would be quick, about like jump-

ing off the Eiffel Tower.

Traffic was next to nothing at two o'clock in the morning, so at least he wouldn't be disturbed. He thought he heard something off in the distance, like a woodpecker attacking a tree, but at a much slower rhythm.

Okay Jason — just do it. He stepped off the bridge. Within seconds the air was rushing up so fast he could barely breathe. There was no way to see the river and rocks below — it was too dark. 'Why am I doing this', ran through his panicked mind. He didn't want to — something suddenly was pulling him up by the armpits, stopping his descent and bringing him back up to the bridge.

He found himself standing in front of the person who had saved him. But this was a very unusual person. The stranger stood at least a foot taller than his own six foot frame, and he was glowing with a soft illumination that lit up the entire bridge.

Jason was speechless. He had gone from utter despair, to outright panic, and then to miraculous salvation. All he could manage was:

"Uhh... Thanks."

"It's okay, Jason. You weren't meant to die this way."

He was beginning to get some of his nerve back. Being suddenly saved from sure death brought him slamming back, at least partway, to reality. But he still had the awful despair

deep in his being of what had happened between him and his wife, and it still felt just as unbearable.

The tall man could read his thoughts; see the anguish in his soul. He reached over to Jason and hugged him, even as awkward as that was with his height. Jason felt all the anguish, the unbearable pain, leaving his mind. A flood of quiet, comfortable peace came over him.

"Jason, you need to let go of what has happened. If your wife wants to come back, she will. If not, just start your life in a different direction. It's nothing to waste and destroy your life over. Hopefully what I've given you will give you peace enough to try to settle things out in your soul."

"Yes — thanks. I feel much better now."

"Good, please take care in the future. Remember what I've said."

With that, the tall, shining man began to turn away.

Wait... mister! How can you do all this, and why did you save me?"

"Some things are meant to happen, some things aren't. I come around to stop the things that shouldn't be; to give aid and comfort."

"What is your name?"

"You can call me Michael."

With that, he turned and began walking south towards Fayetteville, his engineer boots making a rhythmic tok...tok...tok on the bridge roadway. He faded quickly from Jason's view as he walked.

# Rebirth

*M. L. Erwin & T. J. Scott*

He was worried. What if she said no? There was no chance of that. She loved him, of that he was sure. Her answer would be yes. He checked to see if the ring was in his pocket. One last glance at the mirror. Looking at his reflection he stopped. Did he look like a loser? No, all those thoughts should be behind him. After all, he was a new person, especially since he'd met her. He wasn't a loser or a nobody. And it was all due to Gwen. She had made such a change in his life. He felt alive and confident as he drove his new Crossfire toward the school where she worked. The children were gone home for today. As she came out of the school she waved at him. He smiled back, realizing at the same time she wasn't at all pretty. So what? She was all he'd ever need. He rushed over to her and helped her put some boxes in the car. They kissed.

"You got a minute?"

"Sure."

As he looked over her shoulder he spotted her Father. He was the Principal of the school.

"Gwen. "

He took the ring out, not smoothly. He almost dropped it. He reached for her hand and tried to put the ring on, but dropped it. It landed in an ant bed. He quickly retrieved it and placed it on her finger. As he asked her to marry him he thought she had a peculiar look on her face. Over her shoulder the Father stared sternly, unmoving.

"Well, will you?"

"Sam, we have to talk."

Her voice seemed to echo and in his mind he'd heard this a hundred, no, a million times before.

She pushed the ring back in his hand. Suddenly he had to shit and piss, his stomach was in a knot. There was a huge lump in his throat and he knew he couldn't talk.

"Let's sit in the car."

He dropped the ring box and looked back over at her Father. This time there was a slight smile on his face. His mind flashed back. In the first grade he'd eaten his lunch alone. The children had made fun of his clothes. He had been the only one that wore short pants. Lunchtime had lasted five hours at least. That's what it had felt like. First grade had got the ball rolling and it had never slowed down. By the time he was in the fourth grade he was use to getting chosen last along with the girls of the class. His Father had died when he was five and his Mother finally remarried. Jake was a man's man, beer, ballgames and a rude mouth. He remembered getting ice cream with him and he'd run into an old friend.

"Hey, Jake, that your boy?"

Sam had smiled. Who wouldn't want to be Jake's son.

"You kidding? That's my wife's son. Bart stays in L.A. with his Mom. He scored

three touchdowns Saturday. Sam, come on and don't get that ice cream on your shirt."

He sat down in the car. It seemed like he'd been sitting like a fool in offices, at home, at the job, and at school, all his life. Waiting for somebody to politely pull his guts out.

"Sam, we're Catholic."

"Gwen, go to hell."

"What?"

"You heard me. Go to hell. You and your old man. Shit, if I'm a loser, you sure as hell are. What are you? Forty? You think guys dream of you at night when they jerk off? Huh? Pamela Anderson, Halle Berry, Anna Nicole Smith, not when she was fat. Gina Gershon, Hillary Swank, Tisha Cambell, these are the women men dream of. You, you ugly bitch."

"Sam."

"You're going to turn me down because of your fucking religion. You think anybody in this fucking country gives a shit anymore? I mean, really."

"Sam, what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. Maybe I can find a whore to give this ring to."

"Sam."

"Fuck you."

He was out of the car. She might be crying or something because big Daddy was rushing down the sidewalk. He got in the car and sped away. His chest felt light like it was empty. He cut the radio on louder. He kept punching the channel until he heard a catchy tune. It was rap, but it had a catchy beat to it. Suddenly he remembered it was Friday. Jake would get off early and come home and give his Mother a lick or two. Somebody began to speak to him. He recognized it to be his voice but it sounded different.

"Take the bull by the horns, boy. Don't bitch up on me now."

What the hell was that supposed to mean, he thought.

Jake stared at Helen. She knew he had other women. She was obedient as a dog. She'd been an okay lay years ago, but now all she could do was work and cook good meals. She slid his plate to him, roast like every Friday. She was such a good cook it melted in your moth. He chuckled. She was afraid to look him in the eye. "Come eat with me, wifie."

"I'm talking to Sam. He's in the kitchen. Something's wrong."

"I bet it is. He should have been in a science test tube instead of breathing air."

"What? What did that mother fucker say?"

"Sam, what's got into you? Watch your mouth."

"I've had it, Mother. No more."

There was something strangely attractive about her son. His tie was loose and his hair hung down in his eyes.

"Helen, come suck my cock. Either you or your son. Whoever. I don't care. Shit, draw straws." He laughed, almost choking on his food. When he looked up there was Sam. "Well, hell, haven't had man sex since I was in the Army, but I

believe I'm drunk enough."

Sam held the huge smoking roast on a plate. It burned his hand but he felt immune to the pain. The plate and the roast smacked Jake in the face as he screamed out. He tumbled out of his chair. He raked what he could of the hot meat from his face, but some of it stuck.

"Okay, boy, I'm going to show you happy endings are for movie scripts. After I whip your ass you can watch me f..."

The pain ripped through the side of his head. Sam had kicked him. I'm going to..." He was struck again. Sam looked back at his Mother. She had an odd smile on her face. Jake clutched his body as kick after kick struck him. He coughed and he tasted blood. When he thought he was going to pass out the kicking abruptly stopped. Through bleary eyes he saw Helen. Her hair had come loose. That and her blouse. An odd thought entered his head. She looked sexy.

"I think I sprung my toe on the bastard. You get going, Sam. I got enough old bruises and fresh ones to show the cops. They'll haul his ass away.

Sam's eyebrows went up as he heard his Mother cursing. Sam left, got a six pack and proceeded to drink and drive. Shit, the car seemed to handle better. At the topless club he watched different women. A Hispanic woman had big brown tits. He smiled at the way she tossed them about. A thin Asian woman made the crotch of her outfit jump in and out. Sam turned up his eighth beer. The D.J. introduced the next girl, giving her a longer introduction than the others.

"Ladies and gentlemen, alcoholics, meth junkies, sex addicts, and felons, I give you the lady Sybrina." She was a short stocky tan-colored black woman. She had a muscular body and her ass and thighs were a work of art. She moved non-stop, twisting and jumping, causing that ass to shake.

"Go get her Tiger."

Sam smiled, his dark half was getting louder. He pushed his way to the stage. Apparently Sybrina was a favorite among the Black guys. He squeezed between two guys. She looked at him, giving him eye contact. Sam waved fifty ones at her. He felt the big Black burley guy next to him staring at him. Sam looked directly at him.

"What you 'spose you can do with that, white boy?"

Sam smiled. "My plans were to try and fuck her, same as yours, I imagine."

The Black guy grinned from ear to ear and he and his buddies laughed and patted Sam on the back. Sybrina twisted her way over to Sam. She put her crotch almost on his nose. Sam inhaled and stuffed dollar bills all around her. She contorted her butt in his face, very little was left to the imagination. Sam planted a kiss on her muscular hip as she strutted away. He liked the high heels. How tall were they? Gwen wore only flats. When he returned to his seat his cell phone rang.

"Sam, where are you? Did you mean all those things you said?"

He was about to say no, but he liked the feel of a pair of balls against his thighs. He'd never felt them before. This pair felt as big as grapefruit.

"I just tipped a woman with a g-string on with a magnificent ass. She smelled like sweat, pussy and cheap perfume and I loved it. She's on her way to my table and before

tonight's over I'm going to find out if blow jobs are a myth or do they really exist."

She heard the phone click. Her Father entered the doorway.

"Was that Sam?"

"What? Yes, why?"

"If he wants your hand in marriage, he'll..."

"Shut the fuck up. I should have given him some pussy and let him play with my hand later."

"Gwendolyn Woodard." She pushed past him. "Where are you going?"

"To see if I can find Sam."

"It's undignified to run after a man."

"I'll be forty next year, Father. Screw dignified."

She crossed her fingers. All she had to go by was the make of the car. Most of the gentlemen's clubs were in a specific part of town. One long row of T & A. Had she thought that? T & A sounded kinky.

Sybrina danced for him. He sucked on her little stubby toes. Gwen had long sexy toes the few times he'd seen them. Sybrina was nice and besides being sexual she did have a brain.

"I thought all the girls who worked here were..."

"You're correct in your thinking. I just happen to like to read. Lucky me."

"So my place or yours?"

She smiled. "My place. I like a king-sized bed."

"Your place it is, then. I'll be right back. I got to see a man about a mule."

She chuckled. He returned and the guys were all around the stage. "Who's on?"

"Some amateur. She says she's here to reclaim her man."

Sam laughed. He couldn't help but laugh and think of Gwen. It would have been touching to find out if. . . "

The D.J.'s voice cut through the music. "Sam, you're going to lose your little honey to a bunch of felons if you don't get to the stage."

Sam stood up and there was Gwen, perfectly styled hair all over her head. He rushed to the stage. The big Black guy was there.

"Damn, don't tell me you're Sam?"

"In the flesh."

"Damn, guys, let's get the hell out of here. This guy's hogging all the women."

Gwen looked at him, giving him a wicked smile. Sam wondered briefly if she was possessed. She had a pair of shapely legs and she handled the high heels gracefully. Was this her second job?

She knelt beside him. "Can I have my ring back?"

"I don't know."

"How about we go to Vegas? I'll let you shave me first."

"Shave your wh..."

She winked at him and he placed the ring on her finger.

He turned his back. "Hop on. Let's get out of here."

The crowd stood up and applauded. Gwen held tightly to him.

# NO GAVOTTES

Chuck Roberts

It is evening. I hurry up the front steps needing a drink before anyone arrives. In the semi darkness I see a couple at the end of the screened porch that surrounds the front and sides of the house. They are dancing to soft music from a small radio. The man's hand slides up the woman's leg, lifting her short skirt. I smile, knowing how my in-laws, Esther and Fred Mathews, would react. When they lived here they were considered models of respectability.

Roy Mathews and I own the big old house now, kind of. When the senior Mathews' gave it to us Esther decreed it be available for use by community organizations.

She and Fred were well known for their generous contributions to the arts, but now they're retired and live at the coast. Among other things, Esther directed me to assume her philanthropic projects. The way she talks makes me want to stand at attention and salute. But I don't mind. It makes her think I care. More important, it gives me something to do. I've arranged a musical soiree' for tonight. Specially invited high donors will come and listen then donate to the Valley Music Festival. Musicians from the Festival are in town rehearsing. Hopefully I'll complete a project of mine too.

We don't live in this house. Ours is the re-modeled caretaker's house in the peach orchard close by. I liked super respectable Fred better when I found out he used to sneak over there when the caretaker's wife was alone. Every family I know has its back story. This one makes me want to laugh every time I see Esther.

Roy is the only one of the four Mathews sons who returned to the valley after college. When it comes to running the large peach orchards his parents still own, he is demanding and successful. However, in bed he's not demanding and often not successful. Our czardas in his college dorm room changed to a horizontal gavotte after we got married five years ago. And

I've had enough gavottes. Roy says it's not my fault but won't talk about it.

I miscarried a few weeks before the wedding. I suppose I could have canceled it but I didn't have a job and the invitations were already out. Plus, of course, Esther would have gone ballistic. That's how she is when something doesn't go exactly the way she wants it to.

The day after graduation we were married in St Luke's Episcopal. Some call it St Mathews' Episcopal. Every time the Esther Mathews carillon goes off we're reminded of all the money they've contributed to St Luke's. The carillon sounds good. Esther saw to that. The whole town suffered for five days while the damn thing played Jesus Loves Me over and over with different settings before Esther had the sound she wanted. Something to make Jesus love her, I guess. I think her secret hope was that the carillon would get her an entrance ticket to the pearly gates.



The Festival musicians haven't arrived yet, giving me time to go to the linen closet and take a quick swig from the bottle of vodka I keep there. I'm waiting for a particular musician to arrive. I have an additional agenda for this gala evening.

Three locals are struggling through a dismal Haydn trio. Their fumbling efforts are out of place in Esther's living room with its antique furniture, authentic Tiffany lamps and oriental rugs all on a polished hard wood floor. The violin and viola players in the trio are high school students not used to sight reading and I'm glad I'm not sitting in. I'm a dilettante viola player.

The cellist is Donald Blabon. Esther used to invite him because he is a college professor and she thought he added status to a gathering. A young lady is sitting close to Donald, one of a series who evidently enjoy being seduced by a father figure. I'm guessing her bonus is a guaranteed A in his class. Donald's offensive body odor permeates the room. I wonder how often he takes showers, alone or with one of his conquests. He didn't bring his acquisition du jour with him until Esther and Fred moved to the coast.

I go to the linen closet for another drink. Mercifully, the Haydn trio ends when several musicians from the Festival arrive and Donald's wretched cello playing is no longer needed. The enchanted high school couple retreats to a divan. They're trying to be cool but it isn't working. There is more than music on their agenda and I doubt it is a gavotte.

The dancers from the porch come inside. I recognize the woman as universally available Ilene Davenport, one of the back row violinists in the Festival orchestra. Her skirt lifting friend is a bass player in the orchestra. Sometimes I wonder why she doesn't hang out a sign that says: Help Wanted.

In the middle of everything I'm the gracious hostess fluttering around acting like I'm the doyenne of all the philanthropic activities in the valley. I'm wearing my wealthy patroness uniform, Italian flat shoes and expensive cotton print dress with cashmere sweater thrown over the shoulders and all screaming Saks Fifth Avenue.

The center piece of the evening is Sidney Rosenfeld, a New York musician and concertmaster of the Festival orchestra. He's my center piece too. He takes off his coat and tie and unbuttons the top button of his silk shirt. He knows I'm watching him. We talked at the opening reception for the orchestra members last week and I liked the way he brushed against me in the crowd there. I wouldn't mind a dance or two with him. But no gavottes.

I'm guessing Sid is lonely. His wife passed away recently. She was wealthy and that explains Sid's expensive violin and antique Rolls Royce convertible.

The two elderly ladies who keep up the place are in their usual chairs, smiling but never speaking. Not one strand of their blue hair is out of place. Recently I caught them drowning their lemonade with gin bought out of the house budget. They are Esther's relatives so I can't fire them, but they don't know that. I'm successfully blackmailing them into not making their usual reports to Esther about my activities.

Four musicians from the Festival start playing one of the dull early Mozart quartets. Bored, I look around the room then focus on the books in the glass front book case. The complete set of Tom Swift fits in. But Lady Chatterley's Lover and a book of Genet plays? Don't make me laugh. The boys must have put them there as a joke. For sure, Esther hasn't read either one.

Roy is usually helpful and during the first break I go out to the porch where he is mixing the punch. Ilene has discovered him and is twitching her butt more than usual. Maybe she is attracted to Roy's prematurely gray hair, but more likely it is the Mathews money.

I go to the kitchen for more ice and another bottle of white wine for the punch. Everyone is crowded in there eating sandwiches. Sid rubs against my back, actually lower than my back, when I slide through to the refrigerator. I turn, face him and press gently against him. Maybe he'll get the idea. He smiles and tells me what a nice evening it is. I touch his hairy arm and rub it ever so slightly. His mouth is close to my ear. An invitation to dance? A tango would be good.

Later during the break I see Sid and Roy talking together. Roy doesn't know anything about music. Probably he's just being the gracious host. They watch Ilene, her practiced eye checking for who might be available.

Roy leaves after mixing the punch. It's the height of the picking season and 4:00AM comes early for him.

After the break the best players start on the Beethoven Opus 59 number three. I could play its great viola part but I'd have to practice and that's a bore.

During the Beethoven, one of the fixture old ladies holds the phone and points to me. The mother of the high school girl violin player is calling to see if her daughter can stay the night. Something I had expected. They live thirty miles up the river and want to pick her up when they come to town in the morning. No doubt daughter had carefully choreographed this. Not a problem with me.

During the next break I go upstairs to check the guest room. The bedrooms are completely furnished as if waiting for the return of all the family. I can imagine Esther standing at the end of this long hall, her stentorian voice calling the boys. I heard that voice once during the Spring vacation when she caught Roy and me getting dressed after doing our dirty boogie.

The master bedroom and bath is at the head of the main stairway. Its massive bed has a tall head board inlaid with several hard woods. I've never been able to imagine Esther and Fred in it together. Esther invited Sid to stay in it during the festival. She told me after she had done this. For once, she did something I agreed with.

Sid had said he wanted to change out of his sweaty shirt. I peak through the partially open door and see he is changing out of his swaty pants and shorts too. Everything inside me revs up.

I go down stairs and outside hoping to find cooler air. Donald Blabon is standing in the Wisteria arbor, his fondling hand under the tank top of his lat-

est. He is admiring Sid's beautifully restored Rolls Royce convertible. It is bright yellow, has wide white side wall tires and newly shined silver radiator. Roy admired it too and Sid let him drive it the other day.

I hear laughter. In the darkness behind the Wisteria two couples are passing a home made cigarette between them, Its smoke hangs in the hot, still air and it isn't tobacco. I wish I could join them. The high school couple is out there too and nothing about their kisses is virginal. It isn't gavotte time for them either.

The evening concludes with the third Mozart string quintet and I play second viola, an inconsequential part for a patroness the guests might feel obligated to ask. I watch Sid. What are his eyes saying? I cross and uncross my legs.

Ilene and her bass player leave together. Her Help Wanted sign is nowhere in sight. Sid stands with me at the door, his shoulder touching mine, thanking everyone for coming. Has the moment arrived? No. He kisses me on the cheek, says he is tired and goes upstairs. So ends my plan. On well. I go to the kitchen to look for more vodka.

It is 3:30AM. Roy gets up. Faking sleep, I watch him put on his hickory shirt and denim pants held up by his trademark red suspenders. He leaves. Then I put plan B into operation. I take off my nightgown, do the perfume thing, put on a peignoir and slippers then hurry through the orchard. I sneak into the side door and up the back stairs. When I go past the guest bedroom I hear muffled laughter in the shower.

I tip toe down the hall and push open the door to the dimly lit master bedroom. A worn floorboard squeaks.

The scene could be from a shadowy film noir. Sid watches me from the bed. A lewd smile spreads across his face and he makes no attempt to cover his hairy nude body. My peignoir slides off my shoulders and drops to the floor.

Suddenly everything inside me goes cold. Someone is in the bathroom. Then, in the dim light, I see a hickory shirt and denim pants with red suspenders attached lying on the floor at the end of the bed.

---

# Untitled

*J. Crossbard*

Back and forth as in between a heated argument, six curious fruit flies hobble over the remains of my pumpernickle sandwich. To my left sits an old man accusing another old man of being a thief. To my right sits the accused. I'm not picky. I sit there dumbfounded and dream. And I write because I can no longer go on thinking. A sensuous barrage of hems and haws, of songs and smells: it stuns my mind more than my senses. My breath lingers there. My pen stumbles there. My soul turns phony in the writing. I argue with myself. How quickly I identify with these lost men!

# Barbara Came to Watch

Mark Scott

They kept Syl's girlfriend and all the other women away from his training camp in Detroit. Syl had what they euphemized as "a history" there and besides those Motor City boys hit like ninety-miles-an-hour fast balls. A man did not want less than total concentration fighting a main event in Joe Louis Stadium.

Syl won that fight four months ago and he still felt mean from his training at the Kronk. Down in that basement, sparring all day, with hardly any air in the place will get a man in shape or dead. Emmanuel Steward, the learned gentleman, called it a "Spartan regimen." Fighters called it the killing floor.

It got him ready for Las Vegas, where everything was hotels, casinos, and no air for fighters to breathe on account of all the smoke. Jerry Thompson, his manager, told him this Foster fight was high-stakes, winner got a shot at Slick Tillman for the middleweight crown. He reminded Syl that the difference between being a champion and ending up a punch-drunk ex contender was only one false move now, but later would make a big difference in his life. That's what Jerry called a fine woman, a "false move."

They had him train twenty miles outside town, damned desert. But don't be surprised, they told him, if Foster's camp sent some little vixens to break your concentration. Syl's fight was Saturday night at Caesar's Palace. Hotel management had sent ring-side tickets to the Friday night heavyweight fight. No vixens so far.

During the prelims Frankie Despacio, a.k.a. "Dess-Patch," came over to talk. Tillman, he said, wanted to defend his title before the summer was over. Guy like him, making a million per fight, odds were he'd put his kids in private school or with tutors, nannies and such. But the Tillmans had five in the public schools, and they went to all the P.T.A. meetings, the whole nine yards. The champ wanted his business for the year over before school started. In fact, Dess-Patch said, Tillman was back in the dressing room right now in case Jerry wanted to talk terms.

"What about Foster? Syl has to win tomorrow to fight Tillman."

"Syl's got his number; already beat him once, right?"

"Yeah, but it was close."

Despacio waved his hand dismissively. "Come on back with me. Syl can stay and watch this next guy, maybe he'll fight him some day." The next fight was at junior-middleweight and the man of interest was a left-handed white dude with red hair. He had fast hands, switched over to right-handed

stance after his opponent would miss with a left hook. Tricky move.

Syl smelled Barbara's perfume and she was partially in his lap before he turned his attention to her. "Oh, excuse me," she said. "These rows are so crowded." She had a tall glass of draft beer in her right hand and a ticket in the left. "This is seat seven, right?"

Syl nodded, and as he tried to make room, Barbara caught her front foot under the chair leg and tumbled face-first into his chest, spilling the beer in his lap.

Next she was rubbing wet napkins all over his thighs and stomach. "Oh, I am so sorry. God, your muscles are as hard as rocks." Her blue-jean skirt, cotton undies, tank top and all they showed were causing Syl a lot more commotion at this point than the Budweiser in his lap. "Oh, jeez, I feel so stupid! My husband sent me to watch this fight just to get rid of me for a while, and now I've ruined your clothes."

"It's all right, ma'am." Syl smiled at Barbara. "It sure was a tall glass, though."

"Oh, God, you must be drenched. Look, my husband is a clothier, out on business. There are several suits in my suite; you can come up and put on a dry pair of pants. I'll have your clothes dry-cleaned and sent to you tomorrow."

"That sounds like a lot of trouble for spilled beer."

She patted his leg. "No, come on, I insist."

When Syl got down to his Skivvies, Barbara said, "Wow, you're *really* muscular. I thought you would be a size...I mean, are your underwear wet?"

"It was a lot of beer with nowhere to go, ma'am."

"Barbara, honey, please call me Barbara." She rifled through a suitcase and handed Syl a pair of boxers with big fruits all over the design. "Here, go in the bathroom and put these on while I find a suit to fit you."

When Syl came out Barbara was bent over the bed, matching up the pants sizes. He could see Honolulu through her silky white panties. Barbara straightened up, looked down at his erection and said, "Oh, honey!"

The following afternoon Barbara personally brought Syl's suit to his room, without having performed the last part of her mission: calling Syl's wife. Barbara could always say the line had been busy. Maybe she had misdialed. Whatever, at any rate she had done enough to get paid. Syl was *such* a good middleweight, and a nice guy too. He did not deserve wrath of his wife when he got home from a hard day's night.

After he won his fight on Saturday evening, Jerry told him, "That's just how I want you to fight Tillman. Relaxed. See, keeping you outside of town away from women was just the right ticket. From now on maybe you'll listen to ol' Jerry."

# War-Torn Heart

Tammy Manor 10/23/06

We sit around a table  
My parents, my sister, my brother-in-law and I  
My dad starts to talk about the war  
This my friends is a rarity  
35 years have passed and this is a story my mother hasn't heard  
He ends the story by saying that there is no glory in going to war and he  
doesn't know any soldier that thinks that way  
My mom tells me a story I'd never heard that night  
About how the war ruined my dad's life and how he couldn't concen-  
trate in school anymore and he dropped out  
I'd never known that  
A lot of people in my parent's generation didn't go to college, I never  
thought much about it  
The man I'm in love with is being sent away for a second tour  
Using the word tour makes it sound so nice  
Gee I think I'll take a tour of \_\_\_\_\_ (you fill in the blank)  
I'm reading A Separate Peace with my sophomores  
It's a novel that takes place during World War II  
The characters, all high school students can't wait to be in the army  
They jump out of a tree into the water pretending they're jumping  
from a plane  
Seems so foolish to my kids but times have changed as have percep-  
tions about war  
One of the characters joins the army and goes AWOL because he  
can't handle it  
We haven't gotten to that part yet  
I don't know what really goes on during war  
I don't know if the movies I see are realistic or not  
I know that the soldiers and former soldiers that I know seem with-  
drawn, don't talk a lot  
It's a common trend  
Politicians sit in expensive suits in plush chairs and talk about how  
great the war is going  
While the next generation is dying in foreign lands

He's shut me out since he found out he's going back to Iraq  
I get to hear from his mother that he's not sure he wants to be in a relationship while away at war  
Him going to war makes me cry, those harsh words told to me by a third party makes me cry, my own pessimistic thoughts make me cry  
We met because of the war, yes this is true  
We started talking while he was there the first time  
I barely knew him and I was upset about him being there  
This time will be so much worse  
I look into those blue-green eyes and wonder what they've seen  
He can't even sleep through a night without nightmares  
This draws me to him, I want to help him but he doesn't want my help  
All it does is anger me about the government, the president, and our whole country sometimes  
He'll be gone in 2 months time  
Don't ask me the day because the army only gives them 10 days notice  
For now I have to sit here with my war-torn heart  
And not only pray that he'll be ok but that he'll also let me into his life before he leaves  
Perhaps we can be miserable together – him for the things he has to see and me for the things that are forced upon him  
He only came home in May it seems so unfair  
He tells me that I could never survive in war because I get scared of a bug  
In truth I could never survive in a war because I feel remorse for killing even a bug  
He sleeps with a gun by his bed and that scares me  
I told this tale at the dinner table and everyone said it was common  
Common maybe, but not something I could get comfortable with  
For now I'm sitting back and letting someone else control my life the way that the gov't is controlling his

## **Destroyed**

*Vincent Spada*

It was there once  
That whole life thing  
But then, it got destroyed

# I Hear Charles Darwin Sobbing Softly in His Grave

Barry A. Gale

## I

Lyell gave me time,  
Uniformitarianism process,  
The *Beagle* occasion,  
And the Galapagos the theory.

Simple logic  
formed the rest;  
The argument  
Irrefutable, I thought;  
The conclusion, too:  
Intelligent Design was  
No design at all.

## II

Nature provides  
Evidence only evolution  
can explain;  
Anomalies which the  
Creationist view  
Cannot fathom;  
Peculiarities which  
An all-knowing  
Intelligence would  
Never create.

Thus instructs the geologic record;  
Thus reveals the geographic  
Distribution of organisms  
In space and in time;  
Thus morphology argues;  
Thus embryology confirms.



The fine line between  
Varieties and species?  
Incipient species is the  
Obvious answer,  
Evolution the obvious tool.

*Natura non facit saltum.*  
Nature makes no leaps.  
Nature's shibboleth.  
Self-evident to most,  
Still inscrutable to others.  
What have people been thinking  
These past 150 years?

### III

Poor Kansas.  
Pray for its people,  
Especially its children.  
Robbed of the precious  
Distinction between  
Faith and fact.  
A distinction that  
Ennobles religion,  
Though school boards  
Wouldn't know that.

Realize now how  
Lucky Dorothy was  
For her brief reprieve.  
Can imagination succeed  
Where backwardness prevails?

I am not without  
Sensibility or understanding.  
Aware it is  
Useless to reason  
With emotion,  
Fruitless to argue  
With what others believe  
Is pre-ordained.  
The solution is simple:  
Belief is why churches are built,  
And sermons are sung on Sundays.

### IV

Myth and illusion  
Die slowly,  
If at all.  
Ignorance is a  
Sticky substance,  
Not easily cleansed  
From the rational mind.

Those that would harness  
Nature with Religion's  
Painful yoke,  
Take a lesson from  
History:  
Galileo demurred but  
His ideas did not.

Though thousands may  
Be silenced by prejudice,  
Fear and hate,  
Science gains its power  
By growing knowledge,  
Not by one man's fate.

I seek a modern Huxley:  
Decisive, courageous, resolute.  
Teach the lessons once again.  
Teach the housewife and  
The farmer;  
Teach the butcher and  
The beggar;  
Teach the children growing up;  
Teach the weary growing old;  
Teach the lame and  
Teach the nimble.

Read in Nature  
Not what others say,  
But what  
Nature itself reveals  
Yesterday, tomorrow,  
And today.

# A cold beer, among friends

*Benjamin Green*

It looked like it was going to be one of those nights. The wind was gusting, a harbinger of the Sahara's infamous sandstorms. David Lynch knew he would have to pull off the road sooner or later. But he wanted to get as far down the road as he could. The guys were depending on him.

The Allies had fought a furious battle here, and Rommel was on the run. Of course, if the Desert Fox was to be cornered, they would have to keep the pressure on. And to keep the pressure on, they would need supplies.

He knew he was exaggerating his own importance, but it was his way of coping with the bitter pill he had to swallow. Right after Pearl Harbor, he'd been another patriotic male, ready to do his duty. Unfortunately, his physical discovered an unsuspected heart condition, and he was certified unfit for combat duty.

He had been crushed, his dreams of combat glory extinguished. He was certified able to work in the rear echelons, in logistics. He was serving his country, but it was far from his dream of being with the Big Red One.

The wind was rising, and visibility was dropping. He was going by a place where a recent battle had taken place. He saw the burnt-out hulls of Tiger and Sherman tanks. Too many Sherman tanks. He heard that the German eighty-eights played merry Hell with the Shermans.

On second thought, maybe he was better off driving a truck. Never mind. He had to get those supplies to the front line as soon as possible. The burnt-out vehicles meant he was getting close. However, the storm was getting worse by the second.

He was trying to decide whether he should risk it or not, when he saw the man. He was wearing an olive drab uniform, and might be a fellow American. He didn't waste another moment on the decision. He hit the brakes, and pulled off to the side of the road.

The truck skidded a moment, and David was afraid he would get stuck in the sand. Of course, it stopped just short of it. A minute later, the door flew open, and the man got in.

There were no identifying marks on his uniform, and his blonde hair was shaved in a bristle cut. A wound on the side of his head had bled all the way down to his jaw line.

"You're bleeding!"

The man held up a hand. "It is nothing to worry about. I cut myself worse while shaving."

The first thing David noticed was he spoke with an unfamiliar, clipped accent that he couldn't place right away. The other was that the cab of the truck seemed to have gotten colder. He told himself that it was the wind, but a

part of him refused to be comforted.

He pushed the thought away. Having another human to ride out the storm was better than nothing. Even if the other man was a little odd.

“Lousy night to be out wandering around.”

The man nodded. “I am very grateful for you stopping.”

An uncomfortable silence fell between them. After another minute, he tried another gambit. “You hungry?”

The other man perked up. “What do you have?”

“What all the grunts in Uncle Sam’s army eats. C-Rats.”

The other man blanched. “That does not sound very appetizing.”

David shrugged. “When your choice is that, or starvation, you learn to choke them down.”

The other man reared back, and laughed. “That’s the spirit!”

His laughter was infectious. Soon, both of them were laughing like a pair of loons. David pulled out a couple of C-Rations, and they began eating. It was a mechanical act, with little enjoyment behind it.

Once they finished eating, David pulled a pack of Lucky Strikes out of the glove compartment. Both men took one, and he lit them both. It had a calming effect on him, because he began to open up. He talked about his family in Akron, and his sweetheart waiting for him.

The other man always had a comment or two for what he said, but he didn’t offer any information himself. When David tried pumping him, the man just got an enigmatic smile on his face. He offered a few tidbits, but they were devoid of specifics.

The cigarettes were burning low. David decided to play his last ace, to keep the man going. From under the seat, he produced two bottles of Budweiser. The other man’s eyes lit up. “You have beer!”

David opened it for him, and handed it to him. The man inclined the bottle toward him. “I must be off, but thank you for the beer.”

David was about to protest. The storm was blowing in its full fury, and there was no sign of civilization in the area. However, the man had disappeared already. Just opened the door, and walked out. David decided he was some sort of secret commando, and dismissed the incident from his mind. Instead, he focused on his beer.

A week later, he was headed down the same road. A salvage crew had a wrecker that was clearing away the burnt-out tanks. David didn’t think much of it, until he saw Harry White.

In his long career, stretching back to the Great War, he’d earned the nickname, ‘Hell-on-earth-Harry’. Those who worked in the logistical field knew how apt it was. He looked like a half-shaved ape, with his big, hairy arms, low forehead, and upturned nose. He was also infamous for using his power to make his subordinates miserable.

David’s heart sank into his boots when he saw Harry signaling him to pull

over. Except Harry didn't have his usual mean smile, which portended officially sanctioned bullying. In fact, his wide eyes, and the fact that he was hopping around seemed to suggest that he was excited.

Once David got out, he was almost whacked to the ground by Harry's ham-sized hand. He pulled up the other man, and said, "hey little buddy. I got a hot bit of news for you!"

David felt a moment of hate for the other man at the insinuation of friendship. Of course, the lure of news was too great. All of them hungered for every scrap that was thrown to them. "What is it?"

"One of the German tank drivers had a bottle of beer in his hand!"

David stiffened, and then shrugged. "What's the big deal about that?" He had a pre-sentiment of what was coming next.

"The Kraut was drinking Budweiser!" He rolled his eyes. "Have you ever heard of them drinking American beer?"

Even though David had seen it coming, the news hit him like a sledgehammer blow. He was unable to say or do anything for a minute. At last, he nodded. "That's really fascinating, Harry. It really is." Then he walked back toward his truck with a stiff-legged gait.

Harry stared after him, a look of puzzlement on his face. He had given the other man a hot scoop, and he was acting weird about it. For his part, David knew he would be in all kinds of trouble next time he saw his boss. However, he felt an urge to start screaming, and he wasn't inclined to explain it.

---

# The Man In The Moon

Steve De France

I am watching the moon  
when I bump into a man with just a mouth  
in the middle of his face.

This mouth—grins—and asks for a light.  
*Is this some kind of a joke?* I ask.

He twists and opens his ancient mouth  
into the shape of a waiting grave.

I stand looking into nothing.

I don't know why or for what reason  
but I suddenly recall a childhood  
memory—a dream, or perhaps both.

I can't be sure—maybe it is now I dream.

A dream of such pure white snow  
it clings like a freezing shroud  
to the windward side of a young girl's face.

Passing me on the street she smiles  
so sweet a smile—its memory & sweetness  
has lasted all of my days.

"Have you a light?" the mouth demands.

My hand, under a broken street lamp,  
trembles & the flame~ethereal—surges.

Just before everything goes dark  
something funny happens to the moon.  
It tilts at a crazy angle as the universe  
pours through a rip in the sky.

# Arrival

Cynthia Ruth Lewis

How much is missed within the breath  
of whispers, the silence that precedes  
confession; obsession, an endearment lost  
in translation somewhere between the movement  
of my lips and the delicate shell of your ear

Never able to hear clearly--the vowels turning  
themselves inside-out, tumbling through  
consonants, parts of speech clouded,  
misunderstood, facial animation of strangers  
never matching tone of voice; communication  
avoided

I try, carefully, sounding words into your  
ear--the hum and hiss of tongue and whisper,  
syllables and sibilance curving through  
canals, scrambled sounds the membranes  
cannot grasp; sense cannot adhere

With timid patience, my eyes, my touch finds  
a place where words cannot reach, someplace  
you don't need sounds to know meaning; the  
push of breath and heart beating, the last  
measured tones, gentle rippling of overturned  
stones beginning to break surface, to hone  
realization, a quiet revelation; a spark,  
a flash of bright light in your eyes to guide  
us further down that road...

Tonight, there is a sun rising  
somewhere near the center of you

---

• **Down in the Dirt** is published by **Scars Publications and Design**, 829 Brian Court, Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA; attn: Alexandria Rand. Contact us via snail-mail or e-mail ([AlexRand@scars.tv](mailto:AlexRand@scars.tv)) for subscription rates or prices for annual collection books.

• To contributors: No racist, sexist or blatantly homophobic material. No originals; if mailed, include SASE & bio. Work sent on disks or through e-mail preferred. Previously published work accepted. Authors always retain rights to their own work. All magazine rights reserved. Reproduction of **Down in the Dirt** without publisher permission is forbidden. Copyright © 2000-2008 **Scars Publications and Design, Down in the Dirt**, Alexandria Rand. All rights of pieces remain with their authors.

Down in the Dirt  
Alexandria Rand, editor  
[AlexRand@scars.tv](mailto:AlexRand@scars.tv)  
<http://scars.tv>

Scars Publications and Design  
829 Brian Court  
Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA

ISSN 1554-9666



1 554996 600005