

Summer 2006

OUR STORIES

Interview
Richard Bausch

Airplanes
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All There Was to Say
Peter Syverson

Swimming Pool
J. E. Ogle

Just An Old Fashioned Love Song
Jenny Di Flacidi

The Girl On The Bus
Brian Patrick Heston

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OUR STORIES

OUR STORIES

A UNIQUE LITERARY JOURNAL

Our Stories is the literary journal of SlushStories.com. It is comprised of the creative work of men and women around the world who submit to the online editing and reviewing service of www.slushstories.com. *Our Stories* only publishes short stories, but we publish all types, lengths and forms. *Our Stories* only accepts online submissions. We read stories 365 days out of the year and publish on a quarterly basis.

Our Stories is put together by the staff of SlushStories.com, a for profit business, supporting the literary arts and the hungry MFA grads who are unemployed, underemployed or have been driven into debt for the love of this crazy, amazing, beautiful field of literature.

The staff would like to thank all professors who coached, supported, haggled, hacked our stories to death and picked us back up. We'd like to thank our fellow classmates who took us for beers after workshops, smoked cigarettes with us, sat in our cars and listened to us bemoan and groan. Finally, we'd like to thank every journal that sent us a SASE with no more than "no thanks" scrawled on their rejection slip top of it, without you we would've never thought this crazy idea may just work.

Come visit us at www.slushstories.com - because no story should just sit in a slush pile.

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Editor's Corner

There's something wrong with the system. It doesn't make any sense to me. It shouldn't make any sense to you, really, it shouldn't. Here's the first thing you should know: there's no such thing as a slush pile, at least not with us.

I've sat on the boards of literary magazines. I did this as an undergraduate. I do this as a graduate student. Here's why the system doesn't work: What gets into the hands of a literary board has to be so darn spot-on-perfect to advance to the editor that the process of elimination knocks out talented, creative and powerful stories on the basis of steroid-driven Darwinian literary theory. If it's less than perfect, it's gone. If it misses the mark by a paragraph or there's something that they don't like, guess what? It's gone. If the first three pages don't hook the reader, guess what? It's gone. If something is misspelled in the first paragraph, yup, it's gone. If your cover letter is too cute, font too obscure, title too odd, the story is stapled on the wrong side, or your name reminds them of a bully in 6th grade, and so on and so on- yeah, it's gone. The average literary board does not look for strengths in writing -they look for weaknesses- this is the only way to eliminate material that comes in. This is a brutal, frustrating and entirely circumspect process that has excised any voice from the literary board that tells the author -why- they were rejected.

Most of us don't get any feedback on how to improve our stories, yet, if you asked any reader for a literary magazine they'd be able to verbalize 100% of the time why they sent that rejection letter. You don't get another chance though and there's no incentive for them to let you know. Again, brutal. So the SASE comes back with a "no thank you" and you go back to square one.

I send stuff out too, don't get me wrong. I don't sit on a high horse and just send out rejections -trust me- I get rejected. Yet, for those golden times in my life -when the stars aligned- and I was published, those have been far and few between (they always will be) compared to the of rejection letters I've received. Sometimes I get nice notes. Sometimes I get nada. Just a slip of paper. I want to know -you should want to know- whether you're missing the mark completely or whether you are getting close.

I've always been curious, asking the wrong questions in class, trying to make sense out of things. This is what you need to know about me: I hate rules. I hate

order. Just 'cause a thing has always been one way doesn't mean it always need to be that way. Hence, I'll say it again: The system is broken.

I'm doing my MFA, I'm finishing off my last credits of a three year program (one of the longest in the country). I've gone into debt to do it. I've learned a lot, I have. I've met great people, written great things. It cost a lot though, and I never got published just 'cause I was doing my MFA and that by itself, well, that will never just do it. It never will. What matters is the writing, getting it right and having someone to tell you when you're not getting it right, "automatic shit detector," is what Hemingway calls it. It's not something not many of us have, but we can hope someone else will tell us when our stuff stinks.

I've done online writing workshops. Some of them make you pay 50 dollars a year. They work like this: you put your story online and some people who you don't know critique it. Maybe they've never read something in English before, or maybe, they're an MFA at a top school in the country. Sometimes it's been good, sometimes it's a waste of time. I've actually had people say they didn't like the font my story was written in. Yup, the font. I've been thrashed because of curly quotes versus straight quotes, seriously this has happened. It's a hit or miss thing.

I've paid money to have my work reviewed by magazines. I paid twenty dollars. The only thing I ever received was an email rejecting me. No thoughts. Nada. Still didn't know whether I was at the bottom or near the top.

All the same time I was sending things out I was reading work coming into literary journals I was working on. I read material that was getting close, work that I wanted to accept but it wasn't perfect, it needed another draft but there wasn't the way for me to communicate back with those authors and just say, "take out this last page!" or "your dialogue went on too long" and "take out the drug dealer on page three with the poodle, it doesn't fit!" How can you, as a writer, not want to communicate where you think writing can be improved?

Writers, professional writers like me, eat, drink and sleep writing. Not everyone is like us. Our staff likes to read stories. We like reading any story that comes our way. We like giving advice to people, to other writers. Problem is we don't have time to do it for free all the time. Writers are broke enough as it is.

So I did this website, let's see how it works.

Our philosophy is simple. You pay us twenty bucks to review your story. If it gets into our journal we refund your money. If it doesn't, well, we give you advice. We've gone into debt and studied this stuff so we know a few things. Maybe

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you'll like our advice. It is all subjective, but our eyes are good and we have the experience.

What do we have to lose? I mean, we dedicated our lives to this stuff and have the training to let you know what's going on with your story. We're not just going to toss your story back with no comments. We don't care about what font your story is written, really, we don't. I can think of worse ways to spend \$20 and not get anything in return. If your stuff is good you get the chance to publish and get your money back, if your story doesn't hit the mark you get some sound advice from people who have studied this stuff and have gone into debt to do so. Why not try us out? It's either this, or let your stuff sit in the slush pile.

Alexis E. Santi

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INTERVIEW

WITH A MASTER

RICHARD BAUSCH

Besides all of the literary accolades, awards and accomplishments that could encompass three or four lifetimes, Richard Bausch is a wonderful professor and a great friend. A long time professor in the Creative Writing program at George Mason University, who along with Susan Shreve, built what is now a top-ranked MFA program. He currently teaches at The University of Memphis where he holds the Moss Chair of Excellence. He was at GMU (and always will be wherever he teaches) a tireless advocate of his students. Known for spending countless hours in the classroom and never shy of taking them all to the local bar to get to know each other better. Over a baked trout and a glass of wine, he would encourage and counsel scores of students in the MFA program.



He never seemed to mind what genre someone worked under, or whether they had taken a class with him. He is committed to getting his students to know, to believe that their voices need to be heard and that the craft called them to a seat at his table.

Q: — So how is life treating you? How is Memphis?

Memphis is a great town—lots to do, lots to see, southerly winds, pretty blossoms early, best music anywhere on the planet, good restaurants, galleries, gardens, playhouses, cafes; and the people are friendly.

Q: —And have you found a bar to replace Brion's Grille as your hang out?

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Yep. It's called RP Tracks. Four minute walk from Patterson Hall. They don't have trout, though, or any fish on the menu. Good wine, though.

Q: —So I hear you finished another novel, this is number ten, correct?

Ten, yes. Started another, too. Or went back to the one I was working on when I started THANKSGIVING NIGHT.

Q: —Could you tell us a little bit about Thanksgiving Night?

I started it as a contemporary novel in 1999, but it took so damn long to finish, it's a historical novel now. :-) It's about several people in a Virginia town, who keep getting it wrong until they begin to get it right. I'm calling it a love comedy with sorrows.

Q: —You've now completed 10 novels, another in progress and have six short story collections. Do you have trouble juggling the two; the novel and the short story form?

I'm usually always writing stories anyway—though I've gone a good two years now without writing one, which feels strange. I'm just now working on a couple, and beginning to feel my way into them again. HELLO TO THE CANNIBALS was such a long work, such an undertaking, that it ate up a lot of my impulse to do stories. And then this latest novel was composed during quite a bit of personal upheaval, and the time to work the shorter form just wasn't there. It's getting better now, and I'm hopeful about the coming months.

Q: —What piece has given you the most trouble over the years, that you revised the most?

Well, over these years it was THANKSGIVING NIGHT, which took a lot of re-writing and re-casting. But all of it is hard to do. Wouldn't be worth doing if it was easy.

Q: —SlushStories.com is a website that allows committed writers to grow from the review process. Our staff, the readers, who are doing their MFAs, advise and counsel writers when their work doesn't make it into print. Keeping this revision process in mind, I was wondering if you could say something about your own revision process and how it has developed over the years?

Oh, I just keep reading it and writing it and reading it and writing it, over and over. It's just educating myself about it, getting smarter and smarter as to what it is, where its real heart is, where it matters most, and then trying to make it as

clear and as unobtrusively involving as I can.

Q —You did your MFA at Iowa, did you grow close to the other writers in the program at the time? No, that’s not what I want to ask. Was there a sense of camaraderie and commitment to each other’s work? No, that’s not it either. I guess what I’m trying to ask is, did you have say, TC Boyle in your corner, going “I damn well liked his story!” arguing tooth and nail with Alan Gurganus, and then get coffee and argue with Jane Smiley over the finer points of so-and-so’s short story?

Not really. We did meet a couple of times in wildcat workshops, and we would occasionally show each other work. But mostly it was just being involved in each other’s lives. I didn’t really know Tom Boyle then—though he was still in Iowa at the time. He’d finished the workshop when I arrived. I was in classes with Allan Gurganus, though, and Jane Smiley—her name was Jane Whiston then. We had fun.

Q —Did you ever, at the time, look around the room and say, “Damn, this is the future of American letters?”

Not really. We were all just hell-bent on writing something good, and on reading everything that had ever been written that WAS good.

Q —You’re noted by your students as a tireless supporter, encourager and believer in their work. Where does your steadfast support come from?

I think that whatever effectiveness I have as a teacher comes mostly from remembering well how it felt—and what misconceptions I was subject to—when I was a student.

Q —What comes to mind when I say the word: “doubt”?


Misconceptions about the task. It’s hard. It’s hard for a reason. Nobody ever did it with much ease who was any good at it.

Q —You’ve been published everywhere: in Atlantic Monthly, Harpers, GQ, The New Yorker and plenty of others. Could you say a little bit about the first? What was the first one for you, where that short story got into print and let you know that you weren’t just railing all night alone? The first that cracked the door open and you could see the light?


First story in a magazine that paid real money was in The Atlantic Monthly, back in the spring of 1983. The April issue, a story called “All The Way in Flagstaff, Arizona.” It was actually a late chapter of a failing novel—what I had to write to

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get that story. I left it out of THE STORIES OF... because I had grown a little tired of it over the years. Fact is, there were seven or eight stories I left out of that book.

 —What's next on your desk that you're working on?

Couple stories—one called “One Afternoon in the History of Love” that I think might end up being a novella. I love the form, though it's nearly impossible to publish them except in a book.

 —I'd like to close with something I love hearing you talk about, something we've often discussed, could you describe your perfect writing night?

You don't know the night has passed. You are so gone in the work that you do not hear a thunder storm come and go, and when the light comes you see the rain on the leaves out the window, and you have that feeling of using your talent well and virtuously. And then maybe you have one small shot glass of whiskey so you can sleep. Or you take a friend's book to bed and read slow, until the drift starts—that psychic snow shutting you down. I think I like working at night better than at any other time, though I am lucky in that I can write at any hour, if there's something to write. So far, there has always been something to write.

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Airplanes

by

Christian McLean

Airplanes, all he had were airplanes. We were at the beach lying on plastic lounge chairs behind the wooden, shacked cabana where I spent my summers. Its address was G 14, but we just called it “The Cabana.” Like always, I wasn’t working a summer job. I spent my time a hundred or so yards from the Atlantic Ocean, doing nothing. I smelled like Coppertone 30. It didn’t have the same scent as the 10 or even the 15 that all the bronze Baby Boomers wore. There was no tropical coconut or piña colada seeping from my skin. The smell was noticeable. Even when the smell had lessened, you could still tell, by my glimmering white body, that I was wearing it. Steve didn’t believe in sunblock. He sat shirtless, ball cap pulled down over his eyes, smoking a cigarette, enjoying his day off.

“I can’t believe you woke me up this morning,” I said.

“Morning- It was noon!” He retorted.

“I was still sleeping. That means it was morning.”

“Sorry to inconvenience you, but I’ve been up since six-thirty.”

“Wow,” I said sarcastically, “you’re my hero . . . Why didn’t you go to work anyway?”

“Gas leak.”

“And I’m sure you had nothing to do with that.”

“I didn’t,” he said defensively.

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“Just like you didn’t have anything to do with the three fire alarms the last week of school.”

Steve worked summers at the elementary school in our town and he hated it. Even worse, he hated not having money. So he worked and his mother yelled because he wasn’t taking it seriously. She yelled because he was out until four in the morning, and about how he slept on the job and because he never washed his dishes, and because his flight books were all over the basement. Everything she yelled about was true. Most outstanding were the flight books. They were everywhere; in front of the washing machine, in shoeboxes, in the stairwell and all the way up the staircase to the door. They were stacked three and four high in some places scattered in others, but all in immaculate condition.

“TWA, DC-10 going to Tampa,” he said.

“What?”

“Up there, you see the red tail?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s how you tell it’s a TWA.”

“So . . . how do you know it’s a DC-10, and how the hell do you know it’s going to Tampa?”

“Well, it has one jet engine on each wing and one on the tail, which could be easily confused with the MD-11, but that hasn’t been introduced into commercial fleets just yet, therefore making it a DC-10. And it is 2:58; there are TWA flights to Tampa at 7:38, 10:15, 2:42, and 6:12 every day from JFK. It was probably delayed a few minutes, but it is definitely going to Tampa. If it left at three, I would say it was going to Miami. They leave every four hours on the hour starting at 7:00 o’clock.”

“Who are you?”

I had no idea if he was right or not, he might have been making the entire story up. Tampa at 2:42, LAX at 9:28, my mother's house at 5:45, I would have believed it all. He was ardent about planes. It wasn't so much the make up of planes, or the physics of flying, but where they were going and what time they were leaving. He had no desire to learn about jet propulsion or hydraulics, it was simpler than that.

"I slept for three hours at work yesterday. I found an empty classroom and went to the back, put my head down and slept. One of my buddies, this guy Mike, he found me and told me the boss was making rounds so I had to get up."

"Didn't he get pissed off that you were asleep?"

"He didn't care. He told me he used to do it back when he was my age."

"Back when I was your age . . ." I mocked.

"Shut up, he's a cool guy."

"What is he pushing eighty?"

"He's like fifty, maybe a little older. He has two kids. One's at Buffalo and the other's at Nassau. He's been working as a custodial engineer fo--"

"A what? A Custodial engineer?" I laughed.

"They're not janitors anymore, they are Custodial Engineers and they get pissed if you call them janitors," he responded.

"Well, shit then, I'm an Aquatic and Solar Enthusiast."

"What?"

"I'm going swimming," I said and went back into the cabana to grab a towel.

"You coming?" I asked.

"No, just gonna chill here."

"All right, see you in a few minutes."

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He didn't really hate work. It was a perfect job for him. He slept when he wanted to and got paid. He even had some scheme to steal computers and TVs, but he would never go through with it. The job got him out of the house, away from his mother, but I think there was something about it he feared. He didn't want to be like Mike, mopping floors to put his kids through college. It was fine for summers, but for a lifetime, well, he wanted something better.

The water was cold and the waves were large. The television reports said there was a tropical storm coming up the coast. It saltwater pickled my lips as I jumped the waves. There was a rumbling overhead. It echoed the waves on the shore. I looked up at another airplane flying overhead.

"Must be Miami," I said thinking of Steve sitting by himself.

The ocean wasn't that much fun alone and the undertow was stronger than I had expected, so I headed back toward shore. I had drifted a little, not that much, but enough to notice the lifeguard tower was now on my right instead of my left. I swam until the water was waist high and then walked the rest of the way, flicking the saltwater out of my hair.

If you were to wade through the stacks of flight books, you would see, in the back of Steve's basement, a ping pong table up against the wall covered with hundreds of little airplanes. It was a miniature model of JFK Airport made of Legos. Steve had it separated: domestic, international, and cargo. He had everything from Air Morocco to Swiss Air, to Delta. There must have been at least five or six Federal Express planes, there were DC-10s, 747s, 777s, props, and on and on. To add to this fixation, sitting on the corner of the green table were four sheets of paper listing every departure and arrival for the day. The amount of planes on the table corresponded with the schedule, so at 2:42, if he

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had been home he would have removed a TWA DC-10 from its passenger bay and placed it in one of the shoeboxes he had next to the table. He was like Rainman about the whole thing.

Steve didn't realize that I had come up behind him until I shook the remaining saltwater from my hair onto him.

"Thanks asshole, now I'm all wet."

"That was Miami, right?" I asked sitting back down.

"Nope," he said smugly.

"It had the red tail though," I said.

"Yeah, it had a red tail, but it was Virgin, not TWA," he said.

"It's 3:05. You said that the TWA flight to Miami leaves at 3:00."

"True, but Virgin flies from London Heathrow to JFK, landing at 3:10, Eastern Standard Time, and it's a little known fact that Virgin tends to arrive earlier than scheduled, while TWA, as we saw from the 2:58 departure has been delayed sixteen minutes. Plus, the plane you just saw was going west, landing. The Miami plane would have been going south, taking off. Thus, destroying all possibility that that plane was going to Miami?" He explained.

"Thus?" I said mockingly.

"Yes, Thus," he retorted.

"But why would the Tampa flight affect the Miami flight?" I egged on.

"Computers."

"I guess you're right, can't argue with airplane boy," I said as I adjusted the towel that I had hung on the back of the chair. "You going out tonight?"

"Umm, I don't know, my mom's being a bitch again."

"What now?"

"She yelled at me this morning because I came home too late. She says

she can't go to sleep 'til I get home."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, she's paranoid. I guess she thinks that if she's awake nothing will happen to me, something like that. The worst part is when I stumble in half-cocked and leave all the lights on. She goes crazy about that, 'cause then she's got to go downstairs and shut them all off. She's fuckin' out of her mind."

"So, just ignore her or crash on my couch. You can borrow the alarm clock. I sure as hell don't need it."

"Naw. Whatever, I'll just come home late and deal with it. You know she doesn't even cook me dinner most of the time, and she says it's because I 'come and go as I please and have no respect for her,' she sucks. That's Miami. See its going south."

"3:15. You're a minute off," I said looking at my watch.

He despised his home. There was no balance, his mother drove him nuts and he hadn't seen his father since his first communion. I didn't know Steve then. I just met him last year. We were in gym class together, he was always making a scene and I egged him on. He was an only child so all burden was placed on him, she tried to make him "the man of the house," he said. He just wanted to play football. Maybe there were times when he was happier, Little League baseball or something, but ever since I've known him, smiles have come sparingly. I don't know if he wanted to see his father, he didn't talk about that kind of stuff. He just said he wanted to move out. Live in an apartment. Get away from his mother. That was the real reason for his summer job, he was saving.

I woke up sunburned. The 5:53 flight to Zurich was leaving and black

storm clouds were rolling in. It seems SPF 30 doesn't work that well after you go swimming. I think it mixes with the pollution of the ocean and dissolves in the semi-toxic tides of the great Atlantic. There's probably a three-eyed Bluefish out there that is impervious to the sun's rays.

"HO-LY SHIT, you got red," Steve laughed.

"Thanks, Einstein. It's gonna rain soon, you want to jet?" I said.

"You are so red," he repeated.

"Okay. Let's go, though, my wipers don't work well."

We started packing our gear. We shook out the towels and moved the lounge chairs. The storm rolled in more quickly than we had expected and we decided to stay in the cabana, waiting out the heavy rains with games of dominos and chess. There was no television, only a radio and a freezer full of frozen hamburgers and raspberry ice-pops.

We listened to the radio and Steve drank my dad's Coors Light. I found a deck of cards and we played Gin. I won eight dollars and he smoked a cigarette. I looked in a cabinet for some Solarcane, but there wasn't any.

"Hell of a night," I said sarcastically.

"Just think, it could be worse if we were sunburned- Oh, wait, that's right, you are," he said sipping his beer with a chuckle.

We invented a new game, I bet Steve the eight dollars that he owed me, that he couldn't throw one of the frozen hamburger patties into the pool, which separated my cabana from the ones on H-court. We alternated throws. We stood at the open doors and launched them like frisbees. For the most part they fell short, landing on the concrete patio surrounding the pool. By the time he finally got one in, the rest of them had started to thaw. I said I felt sorry for the lifeguards. He gave me a smile and we started a new game of chess. Steve wanted to be white, because he wanted to go first. He made his move then went

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to the backdoor of the cabana to relieve himself. He said he tried to write his name in the sand, but the rain just erased it, then he sat down and finished another beer. I found some frozen hotdogs in the back of the freezer and they followed the path of the hamburgers. I won my eight dollars back. It was like a fourth grade sleepover party, except for the beer. We ate ice-pops till our tongues turned blue.

The rain let up around 11:30. We locked the cabana and headed towards the car. I held my T-shirt in my hand because it hurt too much to put it back on. I took my sandals off too. I hated the way my flip-flops kicked wet sand up onto the back of my legs. The drizzle felt great on my burnt body. The rain picked up again half way home. You could smell the humidity as it was drawn through the air-conditioning vents. The radio station said that heavy rain and lightning would persist throughout the night. I pulled up to Steve's house. It was now a downpour. Looking up through the moon roof, he said, "I guess there were a lot of cancellations tonight," then opened the door and ran into his house, turning on the lights.





Christian McLean is a staff writer and photographer at Dan's Papers, based out of Bridgehampton, NY. He holds a Master of Letters in Creative Writing from the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. His work has been published in Scores Anthology and performed at The Little Theatre (NYC). McLean's first children's book, Duckhampton, will be released Spring/Summer 2006.

Swimming Pool

by

J. E. Ogle

He stepped out of the bathroom, his razor buzzing against the grain of his beard. He had noticed earlier that the pool was about an inch low. He wore his favorite pair of faded Levi's shorts. When he slid them on he had noticed they were a little snug in the seat. He reached above the waistline, pinched an inch of softness hanging over the edge of the constricting waistband. Hopefully the denim would loosen over the course of the evening. He headed for the small garage through the laundry room, tripping over a pair of size five baseball cleats caked in dried mud.

"How many times have I told him to put those goddamn things on the shoe rack?" he muttered to himself.

He gave them a good kick against the drywall, knocking away a hardened chunk of mud with holes like Swiss cheese.

"Fuck!" he shouted.

He kicked them again for good measure and opened the irrigation system main control box. He turned the dial to pool fill, number sixteen in the sequence, program B, and set it for fifteen minutes. Then he pushed start, all the time shaving with one hand, and went back into the house. In the family room he looked through the windows to make sure the pool was filling, confirmed it by a jet of bubbles spraying from the fill port at the shallow end.

By the time he returned to the bathroom he found the door closed and

locked. The splatter of water could be heard against the floor of the shower as he rapped on the door.

“Hey,” he said, “what’s the big idea?”

When she didn’t answer he banged louder. “Let me in.”

“I’m getting clean,” she said.

“So what? Why’d you lock me out? I’m in the middle of shaving.”

“I told you.”

“Christ, Annie, I’ve seen you naked nearly every day for fifteen years – seventeen if you count college.”

“And?”

“Be reasonable.”

“Leave me alone.”

He pounded the door once to emphasize his frustration. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Wait. Or find another sink.”

He pressed his forehead to the door jam. “All my stuff’s in there, my deodorant, hair gel, eyedrops, everything.”

“So?”

“Annie, we need to talk. This childishness has got to end.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“We can work this thing out.”

“You might be able to work it out. I can’t.”

“If you would talk about it...”

The water shut off. He heard the patter of wet feet against tile. The door opened a crack. “Don’t start up again, not now. It’s going to be hard enough pretending for Wendy and Todd without this too.”

“We’ll be late for the concert.”

She closed the door again and locked it. To continue the argument seemed pointless. He decided to check on the pool. He switched his razor off, left it on the kitchen table and went out the back door, down the flagstone path to the pool deck. Although the water level looked fine, he noticed some murkiness and a dull yellowish tint clinging to the plaster. With the pool brush he swept the sides and ran it along the bottom to be sure. When the yellow dust-like particles of algae rose, further clouding the water, he knew his pool had been infected again. He bent down, reaching into the water up to his elbow, wondering why the water was so warm. It had to be well over ninety. Then he looked over the hedgerow separating the pool from the equipment and noticed the waves of heat rising from the heater. It had been left on overnight, again. “Nice going, Annie!” he yelled. He scratched the edge of the pool with his fingers, brought his hand out and examined the algae under his fingernails to determine if he had any green or black algae along with the yellow.

Perfection was his goal: crystal clear water. The Ph and chlorine levels had to be checked, calcium added, mineral levels adjusted, prophylactic algacide treatments given. He checked the pool daily, attended to it, cared for it like it was a living thing. In a rare case of infection it had to be tended to immediately or the entire system could be permanently damaged. His neighbor, in the constraints of bankruptcy, had once let his pool go to hell for an entire season. When the house finally turned over to new owners, they had to gut the entire pool, redo the plumbing, put in a new filter. Except for the hole they practically had to start over.

After turning off the heater, John mixed two pounds of soda ash with water and poured it into the pool, then poured an entire bottle of algacide at strategic points around the edges, a few ounces at a time. He watched the viscous blue substance break the surface tension of the water, its murderous, curling

tendrils, swirling and mixing with the infection. If it didn't clear up in twenty-four hours he would have to repeat the whole procedure.

After he finished he checked back on the bathroom situation. Annie let him in while she curled her hair. She had no problem standing in front of him in her bra and panties while he got ready, he noticed. As he looked in the mirror, he noticed his eyes were bloodshot. His backyard was filled with river oaks and Chinese elms, a source of constant irritation. He put in eye drops and massaged the corners at the bridge of his nose where it itched. Then he squeezed out some hair gel, blinking his eyes, rubbed his hands together and ran his fingers through his short hair.

"Look at that, you made me wait too long. Now my hair's going to stand up all night."

"I guess that makes us about even then."

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you, Annie."

She ignored him.

"Todd and Wendy will be here soon to pick us up," he said. "I'm leaving to get Ellen."

She was plucking her eyebrows in the mirror. "Okay, but if you're going to fuck her, make it a quickie so we're not late."

"Quit it."

"It's an honest concern. I mean, you're a known adulterer, right? Confessed and everything. You should be registered or something."

He threw her a distasteful look.

"What, you don't want to fuck Ellen?"

"Annie."

"What's wrong with her, isn't she pretty enough?"

"Annie."

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“Not blonde enough? Not young enough? What?”

“Listen, let’s not start tonight. The kids are upstairs and we’re supposed to meet Todd and Wendy in half an hour. Let’s try to behave. Besides, I thought you said you didn’t want to talk about it anymore.”

She took a damp washcloth and blotted her splotchy face. “You’re right, I don’t want to talk about it. Talking doesn’t change anything.”

* * *

They parked in the restaurant district about five blocks from the arena, in the parking lot of a modern glass office building. Nauseating waves of heat and the acrid smell of hot tar rose from the blacktop to greet them as they exited the white SUV.

“Where to?” said Todd.

“The first place with air conditioning,” said Wendy.

Todd said, “I know a nice casual place close by.”

He led them down a street lined with tents and fair booths, people milling about, getting ready for some enormous social event, to a place called *Alley Gators*, a bar decorated like a dilapidated Key West beach café in hurried brush strokes of tropical greens, blues and pinks. Mammoth plaster of Paris flamingoes and grinning alligators hung on the walls along with stuffed sports fish: marlins, hammerheads, swordfish. Behind a long stainless bar a row of machines hummed, churning a carnival of colored iced drinks with painfully insinuating names: *Sex on the Beach*, *One More Time*, *Alley Gator Style*, *Chilled Ecstasy*. They found a wobbly table in the back corner and sat down. Todd shoved a couple of matchbooks under the pedestal but it was still shaky. John and Todd were trying to adjust it when a waiter came by, tribal tattoos on his forearms, a

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soul patch like a smudge of charcoal on his chin.

“Need menus or just drinking?” he asked.

“Both,” said Wendy. “We’re in a little bit of a hurry.”

“Downtown for the Taste of Dallas this evening?” asked the waiter.

John rubbed an itch between his knuckles. “What’s that?” he asked.

“Huge celebration, lasts all weekend.”

Wendy said, “We’re going to the concert at American Airlines Center.”

“Then you’re in luck. The lead guitar player is here signing his new solo album before the show.”

“Really?” said John. “Cool.”

The waiter took drink orders and left menus. When the drinks came to the table, he took dinner orders and left. That’s when John noticed the centerpiece on the table. It was an advertisement announcing that Byron Kinsey of the *Jason Killborn Band* would be at *Alley Gators*, signing autographs, promoting his new solo debut. He lifted it and showed the group.

“It looks like he’s telling the truth.”

“What does he look like?” asked Wendy.

“He’s a tall, lean, black guy,” said John. “On the CD covers he has this long braided hair.”

They did a cursory survey of the restaurant. The only African American man in the room was seated at a table with his back to them, enjoying an intimate meal and conversation with a woman.

“That must be him,” said Wendy. “We should ask him if he’ll take a picture with us.”

“I don’t want to bother him,” said Annie.

“It’s not bothering him,” said Todd. “He’s promoting his new album. He expects people to talk to him.”

“He’s eating,” said Annie, “and he’s with someone.”

“Oh, come on,” said John. “I’ll go up and ask if he minds taking his picture with a couple of pretty women. He’ll be flattered.”

The women followed John hesitantly through the crowd as he neared the musician’s table. As he approached, John realized the awkwardness of encountering a famous person but felt the pressure of his promise.

“Excuse me,” he said. He had spoken too softly. He cleared his throat. “Excuse me, would you mind taking a picture with the ladies?”

A curtain of dread locks hung in the man’s face. He brushed them back, looking up with a shy smile. “You got the wrong brother,” he said in a British accent.

“This is the third time, Roger,” said the woman to the man. Her lips were tensed, her eyebrows drawn together.

“Third time what?” said John, looking back and forth between them.

“I’m not him,” said Roger.

“Hmm?”

“I’m not the musician.”

“You’re not?”

He laughed. “No, man.”

John felt the blood rush to his face. He rubbed an itch behind his ear where he noticed his skin felt chafed. “Sorry, the waiter said he was here signing autographs. My mistake, I guess.”

The man bit a French fry. “No sweat, man.”

He heard the couple laughing as he walked away. A commotion at the front door caught his attention. A tall African American man wearing dark glasses, a knit cap pulled down low over his forehead, walked into the bar. One of the waiters climbed up on a chair with a microphone and announced that Byron

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Kinsey had arrived and would be signing copies of his new studio album. Annie and Wendy said they would wait in line but they didn't have any money for a CD. John pulled out two twenties and handed them to Annie, then went back to the table to sit with Todd.

By the time the girls came back the food had arrived. They each had an autographed copy of Byron Kinsey's new CD. They were giddy, like kids on a sugar high.

"He's so tall," said Wendy.

"And such a nice guy."

"Did you see his arms?" said Wendy.

"Forget his arms," said Annie, "did you see the size of his hands? You know what they say about men with large hands, don't you?"

John rolled his eyes. "What are you two, in high school?"

"I tried to have his bodyguard take a picture but the flash didn't go off," said Annie, checking the screen of her digital camera.

"Did you get it?" asked Wendy.

"No, darn it."

The two couples talked, anticipating the concert while eating their burgers and fries. They ordered another round of drinks. Then the waiter who had announced Byron Kinsey's entrance stepped back up on a wobbly chair with a microphone.

"Okay, Byron's got to go folks, but let's all join in thanking him for stopping by."

Byron stood at the front door with a big smile, waving at the crowd of people applauding him.

"Now we're gonna draw the names for the backstage passes. If I call your name, raise your hand and Marty will come to your table with instructions."

The third name drawn was Annie's. Wendy and Annie screamed and hugged each other. Annie raised her hand and a man in long brown hair and a goatee came over to the table. "Congratulations," he said. He handed Annie four green square stickers. "These are your backstage passes. Whatever you do, don't lose them."

* * *

After the concert they waited as instructed, in a room underneath the auditorium with about twenty-five other people. The concert had been incredible, although their seats had been in the corner behind the stage and they'd had a hard time seeing anything except the backs of the musicians. As the group of winners washed down catered mini sandwiches and chips with chilled imported beers, conversation focused on the possibility that the entire band might make a surprise appearance. No one seemed to be in charge and everyone waited in a thick, humid air of expectation.

When John's phone rang he looked at the number and put it away.

"Who was it?" asked Annie.

"Home," said John.

"Why didn't you answer?"

"It's probably Ellen wanting to know if the kids can camp out together.

Either that or something broke. You know how they get with her. She'll figure it out."

"What if it's an emergency?"

"Everything is fine."

"You can't assume that."

"Okay, okay, I'll call back as soon as I find somewhere quiet."

“Call now.”

“Okay, lighten up.”

He began to walk away from the group, motioning to Todd. “Hey, grab a couple of beers, will you?”

He went to the corner of the room and sat on a plastic chair, phone to his ear. Todd handed him a beer, sat down in the next chair and listened to the one-sided conversation.

“You know I’m at the concert,” he said. “I couldn’t get out of it....No I can’t. I have to lay low for a while....No, of course not....I told you, when the kids are older...Yes, of course I love you.” He looked at Todd, making a farcical grimace. “Listen, I’ve got to go...Yes, I’ll call you tomorrow...Love you too.”

“I’m getting to old for this,” he said, folding the phone.

“Dump her,” said Todd.

“Are you kidding me? She’s fucking sweet.”

“You’re not worried about Annie?”

“Women believe what they want to believe.”

“So, all’s good?”

“One day at a time, my man.”

“Amen to that.”

They clinked beer bottles.

“Hey, what’s up with your eyes?” said Todd.

“Hmm?”

“They’re all yellow looking. How much have you had to drink?”

“It’s my damn allergies.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, my throat’s raw, eyes and ears itch – happens every goddamn spring.”

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“Not a nature lover, are you?”

“Fuck nature.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“You don’t need to tell me.”

While they were talking, Marty, the man from *Alley Gators*, appeared seemingly out of nowhere to make an announcement. “Okay, gang, it’s going to happen now. Everyone with a green Byron patch form a line and follow me.”

There were twelve of them in all, each one wearing a square mint green patch on their chest. They followed Marty down a humid cement corridor threaded with PVC pipes and silver duct work, through a heavy fire door, down two flights of steps and into an underground parking garage filled with the smell of exhaust fumes, the echoing rumble of diesel engines.

“Where’s he taking us?” said Wendy.

Annie primped her hair. “Who cares? It’s an adventure.”

John tried unsuccessfully to take Annie by the hand. He said, “You’re having fun then?”

When she didn’t respond, he kept quiet. It had been an incredible evening so far. Better not to push. The group of twelve was lead to a shiny black unmarked tour bus. After the door opened, they stepped inside to a dimly lit interior. Byron stood at the top of the steps, wearing dark sunglasses, greeting his guests.

“Hey, it’s the ladies from *Alley Gators*,” he said, showing perfect white teeth when Annie and Wendy stepped inside.

“You remembered.”

“Yeah, I remembered.”

“What a great show,” said Annie.

“Thank you,” he said, bending down to receive a hug. “Come on in

everyone. There's room way in the back. Have a seat and grab a beer if you want one."

Following Annie, John noticed Byron allowed his long fingers to linger a second too long on the edge of his wife's hip while hugging her. He felt a wave of heat pass through his body.

The inside of the tour bus was appointed in soft black leather seats and mahogany cabinets. Byron posed for pictures and signed autographs. Annie wanted to speak to him but couldn't get close.

"Come on," said John, overcoming his newfound aversion for the musician. He pulled Annie her by the hand through the crowd.

"Byron," said John, interrupting an ongoing conversation. Can we get a picture with you?"

"Sure thing."

"Wendy, make sure the flash goes off," said John, handing her the camera.

The camera flashed on an image of the famous musician standing between John and Annie with his arms around them like old friends. Annie was smiling straight ahead, while John's eyes were on Annie.

"Well, it's been nice meeting you two," said Byron. "I've got to take some more pictures and make sure I say hello to everyone or my record company gets on my case."

"It was nice meeting you, Byron," said Annie, holding his hand. She quickly lifted up on her toes and planted a kiss on his cheek.

John yanked her away by the elbow. "Yeah, thanks for the picture," he said.

* * *

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They were on their way down the corridor. Annie was smiling when she stopped and said, “Hey, where’s my purse?”

“Your purse?”

“Yeah, I had it on the tour bus.”

“Are you sure?” said John.

“I’m positive. I remember putting my camera back in it and then I must have set it down. I was so excited about the picture that I must have left it.”

“We better get it,” said John.

When the four stepped out of line a security guard asked them to keep moving.

“My wife left her purse on Byron’s tour bus,” John said.

“Okay, the two of you can go back, but the rest, keep moving.”

“It’s okay,” said John to Todd and Wendy. “You go ahead and we’ll catch up in the parking lot.”

John and Annie went back down the stairs and into the parking garage.

“Which bus is it?” asked Annie.

“I don’t know. They all look alike.”

“It’s that one,” said Annie. “I remember it was the second one in.”

They approached the closed door and began knocking when another security guard stopped them.

“Hey, you can’t do that,” she said.

“I left my purse on the bus,” said Annie.

“What’s going on?” said a second guard.

“The woman says she left her purse on the bus,” said the first.

“No one’s allowed on the buses,” said the second.

“We have backstage passes,” said John. It was part of a promotion. We were on the bus five minutes ago. I’m sure we can get my wife’s purse without

any trouble.

“You both can’t go on the bus,” said the first security guard. “Just the lady. You’re going to have to go back where you came from.”

“She’s my wife,” said John. “She’ll only be a minute.”

“Are you looking for trouble?”

“What trouble?” said John. “What’s the big deal?”

“If she wants the purse, you’re going to have to leave, sir.” She said sir like a synonym for asshole.

“It’s okay, John,” said Annie. “I’ll get my purse and meet you upstairs by the front entrance.”

* * *

He waited at the entrance for fifteen minutes, during which he began to itch from head to toe. He’d forgotten to bring his antihistamine tablets with him or he would have taken one. He began looking down the long hall lined with closed refreshment stands with their metal grates pulled down and locked tight. When he had gone all the way around the oval corridor of the stadium, he decided to look inside. In the stadium, stagehands worked on a pair of speaker clusters that looked like giant pine cones, lowering them to the ground and dismantling them. Rows of cables, mountains of stacked amplifiers, tubular rigging and stage sections lay about like pieces of an elaborate erector set.

A man in a red tee shirt called out, “Hey you, what do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m looking for my wife. She’s lost.”

“She’s not in here. You gotta get out. I can’t do my job with people walking around. It’s too dangerous.”

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“I have to find her,” John said.

“What’s with the itching? You an addict or something?”

“It’s allergies. How do I get to the buses?”

“No one’s allowed near the buses.”

He explained about the backstage passes, the meeting with Byron, the lost purse.

“I don’t know nothing about it, Buddy. All I know is, you gotta leave. You already wasted too much of my time. I gotta get all this equipment loaded and to Houston by morning.” Before he turned to leave he said, “You ought to get that checked out.”

It was useless. He went back to the exterior corridor and found an unlocked door marked *Authorized Personnel Only*. He followed a stairwell down two flights and found another corridor lined with doors. It looked endless, like something out of one of his nightmares. After trying six locked doors he came to one with a glass window about twelve by twelve inches, divided like a checkerboard by filaments of reinforcement wire. Through the glass he could see the busses in the garage. Men in red tee shirts wheeled equipment on hand trucks out to the semi trailers. He tried the door but like the others it too was locked. He knocked, hoping someone would hear him. He pounded the steel door with his fists until it hurt. As he kicked at it with his feet his phone began to ring. A feeling of apprehension overcame him. He broke out in a cold sweat. He placed his right hand against the window, fingers splayed, then he noticed. A pail yellow substance caked the underside of his fingernails and bordered his cuticles. A fuzzy greenish patina covered the thin web-like skin between his fingers. He tried running his fingernails across his incisors, but the substance wouldn’t come off. His phone rang again. Before looking at the number he picked up.

“It’s me,” she said.

“Where are you?”

“Outside, waiting for you. What’s taking so long?”

“I can’t find Annie. Is Todd with you?”

“No, he went back to look for you.”

“Wendy, something’s happening.”

“I’ll say there is. You told me it was over between you and that secretary whore of yours. Now I’m going to have to go and get myself checked out.”

“Not that. Something’s the matter with me. I can’t get it off.”

“What are you talking about, can’t get what off?”

“The yellow and the green. It won’t...”

His phone went dead.

He scraped at the green on the back of his hands with his fingernails until it began to bleed. He itched all over – eyes, ears, hands, feet, armpits, even his crotch was on fire. His joints ached and his head felt heavy and hollow at the same time, like just before the flu takes hold for real. He began to hyperventilate. A strange and urgent thought came to him. He needed to get home. He needed the swimming pool. He would submerge himself in the warmth of the water, emptying his lungs of air and sink to just above the bottom, deep enough so that he couldn’t touch, arms and legs spread-eagle like a sky diver, the pressure building against his ear drums and in his sinuses. And he would hang there, floating in the chemically treated water for as long as it would take.





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All There Was To Say

by

Peter Syverson

All there was to say when Leslie told me, was fuck. And then more of the same. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. It was all I could say and all I could do. Those words encapsulated entire feelings and thoughts, the anger, the love and the disbelief. And then Leslie started to cry.

What a scene it was, the two of us with the lights off, sitting there on the kitchen floor with our backs up against the stove. Her tears kept coming and her shoulders shook. I put the orange I'd been peeling between us on the white linoleum floor, and with sticky hands I reached out to Leslie and pulled her close. I lied and told her it would be okay. I lied because things wouldn't be okay, and I knew it. She knew it too. But lies are good. Sometimes they're all we've got. Someday maybe things would be better. Someday they'd turn out okay. Not this day, or the next or the one after. Nothing and no one would be okay. And it would be like this for her and for me for a long time coming, and only time, as slow as it ever was, would do any good.

I held her there against me as she cried, and all I could think about was how my arms were around the same woman who a month earlier had someone else to hold her, and how all this shit now coming down was a direct result. I could feel my dick getting hard and it made me feel bad and sick but I couldn't stop it. You can't stop the automatic. Its like trying to stop the ocean waves from eating the beach. There isn't a chance in the world, it is what Mother Nature

does. The bitch gives and she takes away just as easy.

I ask Leslie even though I already know the answer. The way her face was scrunched up into itself, her nose and eyes all puffy and red, it made me think of a newborn. And she tells me that it wasn't mine. That it was his. And hers. They had screwed and with that horrible knowledge I could feel the hot knife blade poking around in my gut, and the thought of Leslie with him, some fuck she barely knew. And with no idea what to do now, we just sat there on the cold kitchen floor with the half-peeled orange between us. I wanted to help and hurt and kill and bleed and run and turn back time and all of those things all into one, but all I could do was apologize. For what I didn't know.

Have you called him, I ask? Does he know? She tells me that she has and that yes he knows, but that he hasn't called back because he is busy with work. He works a lot, Leslie tells me. She is in this deep. She is one half of the equation, and here I am on the outside looking in and I already know the score. I know he's running and that he isn't going to call or offer an apology or money and I know that he is a fuck and the only thing that'll work for this guy is a nine-iron upside his head. But I don't say any of this because Leslie doesn't need to hear the truth. Not yet, and not when the truth is about as bad as it can get. Not when the truth will tell her what she already knows. She is alone.

We keep holding onto one another, like nothing will hurt either one of us as long as I'm there to protect her, like I'm her father and not her ex. I whisper through her long curly blonde hair that she'll be okay, and I keep telling her this, that in the end it will be all right. I tell Leslie that life is dirty, that we're all dirty and shit happens. Its like we've been lucky for so long that something like this was bound to happen. Just, fuck, not this. And as I let go of Leslie she wraps her arms around me tighter, holding on, sucking me in. We sit there, not moving, barely breathing, just existing with the crazy dark swirling over us, wrapping

around us like a ghost.

We finally let go and I see her eyes and her lips quiver and she tells me that she feels gutted, and that even when her friend Eve went with her to the clinic that she felt all alone and cold in the stirrups and that was when it set in that she was one of those girls. One of those girls who makes a mistake and feels ashamed, and the guy rolls on and takes no responsibility. One of those girls. And I tell Leslie that this is some Maury Povich talk-show bullshit. She laughs, if only for a few seconds.

Leslie tells me that she cannot eat or sleep, says she's been drinking and smoking for the last three days. I see it in her eyes, and I tell her that for someone who is navigating through the shit storm that she is right now, she still looks as beautiful as the first day I met her. Again I lie, because really when I look at pretty Leslie sitting beside me I also see a girl who I loved who fucked some guy and let him come inside her and now she's crying and wanting me to help her out and all I can think about is how if things weren't so messed up she'd still be bending over for the other guy. And I think about her in those stirrups all alone in some fucking white room clinic with paintings of beaches on the walls and a five-month old People magazine in the waiting room and I immediately want to find this guy and put a cinder block up his ass and pull it out through his throat. I can feel the hot knife poking around in my stomach again, and I wonder why I am here for her, why I'm here in the dark with Leslie.

I tell her that it is late, that she looks like she needs some sleep. I tell her to shower. Take a hot one, I say. I tell her I'll make her bed up and put on some tea and that I will take care of her. What I don't say is that a big part of me is wishing to run like the other guy already has, just take off, fly, get gone.

I put the tea on as she starts the shower, and I can peek through the bathroom door that has never fully closed and watch as she slides her panties

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down over her hips and her breasts slip out from under her black bra and she stands there waiting for the shower to heat up. I instantly want to hold her, to grab her, to feel her skin on my hands and to kiss her neck and forget all of this shit. She steps behind the shower curtain and is gone in a moment, disappeared from my eyes. I move from the kitchen into the bedroom and flick on the lights. I go about making the bed and I begin to wonder if this is where it happened and what position and if she sucked his dick or he made her come or if she was better with him or if I was smaller or larger or if he looked better naked. All of that truth we all think about but never admit to. It is better that way.

Leslie calls to me from the bathroom. Steven, she says. Come here. She's never really called me by my whole name, and it shocks me, like hearing my mom mad at me. But I go in and there she is naked and inviting me to join her, and just then the tea kettle starts whistling, but I don't care at this point, with Leslie inviting me in, telling me she needs me, to feel something other than what she feels right now. She says she needs to feel close to me. And before I know what I am doing or the ramifications of getting naked with an ex, my clothes are dropping to the ground like the first night we spent together. I step in and hold Leslie's soft smooth body to mine, and let the hot water cascade over our shoulders and run down our bodies, washing the dirt away. I soap her hair and wash her back and she brushes against my dick and laughs about how hard I am and I feel bad, like getting a boner in church when the preacher is talking about how Jesus died for all of our sins. But Leslie laughs and tells me that I was always up for sex, and as she laughs the hot water brings life to her face, as if it has ironed out the last few days of no sleep and cigarettes. She smiles, and in the kitchen the tea kettle keeps on whistling, and in that one simple smile I forget everything and it is just her and I and we are laid bare in front of one another and it is like we've been born again with the hot water slipping over our skin and

falling between our toes.

Leslie leaves the shower first and runs to the bed. I turn off the stove and let the tea cool. I pour two cups of tea into the mugs we bought on vacation in The Outer Banks a year ago. How did we get from that to this? I add milk and honey to Leslie's tea, the way she likes it, and I stir it as I bring the mug to her bedside.

That night I stay above the covers, clothes on, stroking her hair as she falls asleep, falls into a world for a few hours where none of this mess has happened, where she can fly or pass through time and space with a single flip of a switch, where anything and everything is possible. The only thing that stays the same is change, I whisper to her. I tell her time will heal all of this, and I can hear her breathing from under the covers. I spoon her and for a few hours we stay like that and I barely can sleep because all I want to do is hold onto her. We all need things to hold onto, and for these few hours, while she sleeps and I am beside her, I can have her. She is mine. Nothing can touch us as long as we remain here in her apartment. Not that guy, not the past or present. Its like time will stop if we just stay here, Leslie and I. Because once we walk out that front door and into the daylight, reality will come back and hit us like a fucking Mack truck. That is just the way of things I whisper to Leslie.

The hours pass and finally I have to go. I get up slowly, not wanting to leave, and grab her keys from the mantel where the clock reads 5:17am. I wonder where the time has gone, how we get from there to the here and now. For a moment I just stand there in her living room and stare at the clock. I make sure I am quiet, like I am seven again and sneaking my way into the family living room to spy on Santa Claus. But those days are long gone, and the peace of childhood has long since passed us by.

I unlock the front door and step out into the chilly morning air and take in

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the silence of the world at this hour. I turn back, lock Leslie's door, and slip the keys back underneath the door and head off into the morning darkness.





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Just An Old Fashioned Love Song

by

Jenny Di Placidi

You told me the way I remember things is wrong. It may be so. But the shades, the subtle shifts in the colors that coated everything and the way they change looking back, those changes mean something. There is something honest in remembering a thing wrong. It shows what was there, but not noticed, at the time.

At the time it was summer. The radiators against the walls of the apartment were cool metal against our hot skin if we chanced to brush past them. The windows were open to the noises of the city outside and the air conditioner units in the windows lay silent in their broken state. Outside it seemed like, in spite of the heat, everyone was happy. Laughter rang out constantly. I felt, at times, it was directed at me, at us, at what we both knew wouldn't last but refused to walk away from.

The smell of bread always seemed to be coming up from the bakery underneath our apartment. The bakery ovens were large and hot and the floorboards seemed to smolder from the heat the ovens put out. My bare feet, when slapping across those scarred boards, almost burned.

It may have been winter.

The winter before that summer the radiators hummed with warmth. Their off-white shapes, coated with flaking chips of paint, sounded like large cats rumbling away under the windows. The comforter on the bed was huge and

downy. Bright white, it covered us like a tent, letting the light through when it was over our heads but still shielded us from the cold. Rumpled after sex, it lay on the bed, holding the impressions of our bodies like snow angels.

Later when the fall came I remember leaves, bright like fish fins, falling down and around. Short weeks later their brilliant splendor lay in lacy patterns of decay. They reminded me of something I couldn't think of at the time, something, when coming home, was always hard in between us.

That spring when gentle living things pushed up through sun-warmed soil all over the city, the only thing I felt grow was a cancer, deep within.

It is hard to say where one thing left off and another began. Where our differences stopped being laughable, jokes we would find in each other's eyes, lying side by side in our bed under the big window, and became the cause of silences.

When I would laugh you wouldn't. It started small. But like everything it spiraled down until it became deep, the source of everything, the blockage that was deep inside my heart but that neither of us knew was there. It stuck, like stale bread, in the throat.

"Where were you?" you asked, as I came in. My arms were laden with shopping bags, shiny, matte, plastic, heavy paper.

"Shopped." I dropped the bags as you crossed the floor. They lay, like molted feathers, brilliant colors on the pale wood.

"Oh really?"

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I raised one eyebrow, and looked at the bags.

“Yes. Really.”

But before it was nothing like that. It built up and fell, built and fell, like the rising and crashing bars of a symphony. It was apt, because it was symphonies you wrote, beautiful music from your fingertips that climbed up and down the yellowed ivory keys of your 1940 Steinway & Sons Piano. When I walked in through the door you jumped up, papers flying, scattered, sheets of music falling, spiraling, huge white snowflakes, down around us as we ran to one another.

Just a love story. Yes, just a love story, just another old-fashioned love story. Three Dog Night was right -- just an old story.

It is hard to say where it really ended. I remember things leaping inside me as I ran up steps in the heat, ran past sweating ovens, sweating men, sweating radiators, all to leap into your arms, to have you leap inside of me. And later I remember the steps seeming like a marathon, each footstep heavier than the next, pulling hard at me, pulling at my breath. And I know how hard it was for you to see me like that.

“What did the doctor say?” you asked me.

“Easy as pie,” I lied.

“No problem?”

“No problemo.” Without thinking I laid my hand on my stomach. The hard bump under my hand hadn’t been something I could have felt, could have noticed, until the doctor confirmed what I thought.

“And you’ll be okay?”

Something flashed under the surface. “Don’t worry. You don’t have to feel obligated to stay.”

And you didn’t. Which was what I wanted. Yeats said “things fall apart, the center cannot hold,” and it is, it was, it is true. Just an old song.

I thought when you left it was winter. It seemed so cold inside that apartment. The radiator felt like ice when I walked by, everything was frozen. A thousand white comforters couldn’t hold the heat to me.

It is funny now, that I look back, I see it all happened in two months. Just June and July. There couldn’t have been a changing of seasons. There was no fall, no winter, no spring. It only felt like a year of seasons, flooding away from me like the removal of a tumor or my heart, when you left the apartment over the bakery. When you left.

The piano stands in a corner. Sheet music is not yellowed. It is white but it is unplayed, unheard, like the words that lay in between us, words impossible to say. You said it would be impossible to find anyone willing to move the piano out. But I remember hiring four huge men, I remember muscles pushing and pulling, air ripe with curses as they maneuvered it into place. You just couldn’t be bothered to wait long enough to take it with you. I thought you would, but then, it was me who remembered a whole year of seasons in which things came undone, me who remembered a whole year it took for you to leave me, it was me who remembered so wrong.





Jenny Di Placidi (yes she spells it the old fashioned way) speaks English, Macedonian, German, a little Polish and some Arabic. So, because of all those languages, chances are she'll grow frustrated with America before too long and move to Europe, or most likely Eastern Europe, or even more precise: Macedonia. She's known to take her Margritias on the rocks with salt and isn't opposed to a tequila chaser from time-to-time. She's often been told that she looks like Liv Tyler which, surprisingly, has gotten no man closer than a smirk and a toss of her hair. Our Stories is her her first publication.

The Girl On The Bus

by

Brian Heston

It was the first day of spring. The city buzzed like a fly beside a lamp, the kind of thing only adolescence could hear. I walked up the street, passing Maria Torres’s house then the grunting tire factory, where big bellied men laughed through mustaches, discussing the women they had seduced in their uneventful lives. Then I walked beneath the ledges of Eddy’s Happy Tap, a place where pigeons made their nests.

I was coming to the end of my junior year at Saint Steven’s Catholic High School for boys. In my mind, I was already a senior. I had been imagining college since I was a sophomore, never letting it dawn on me that D students do not get to go to college. Though, I did like to read—Romeo and Juliet, the Biography of Alexander the Great, and Augustine’s “Confessions” being some of my favorites. But none of my desires translated in the classroom; Algebra or the cell structure of an onion may as well have been Chinese for all I knew. I didn’t have to wait long for the bus. It came quickly, which meant I wouldn’t miss the public school girls with their tight-fitting jeans and half-tops and the smirking uninterested way they looked at the world.

The bus filled up with students at each stop—public-school-boys and catholic-school-boys, along with the public-school-girls and Catholic school girls, all chattering away loudly, as though every word they said needed to be heard by everyone on the bus. Two girls got on at Somerset Street and immediately looked at me. Jose got on with them. They were from his neighborhood, so he always talked to them before he sat with me. The one girl I had seen many times. She

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had hair dark as velvet and skin that had the color and consistency of coffee. Everything she wore was tight, conforming to the winding landscape of her body. Many times Jose would nudge me, saying, “There’s your girl, man. Go get her.”

This was hard, considering that for all the hundreds of times I watched her, she didn’t look at me once. Which is what made it so strange when her and her friend got on, staring at me the whole way to the seats in the back, where the public school kids had made a regular place. Jose had once been in public school, too. Like my parents, his had managed to save enough money every year to keep him in Catholic school.

“Yo,” Jose said. “Your girl smiling. She vibing you, man”

Her large strawberry lips sparkled at me. Her brown eyes wouldn’t leave me. So I couldn’t argue with Jose when he told me that she liked me.

“Come on. Go at it player.” Jose smiled.

Jose had the sort of smile that suggested things but never hinted to what he was suggesting. I stood up, making my way over to the two girls. They watched me the whole way, smiling and laughing. The girl with the coffee skin was slouched back against the seat with her legs spread apart. The other girl was a white girl with hair dyed a luminescent blond. She was sitting straight up in the seat with her legs crossed. Both had hoop earrings dangling down to their shoulders.

“What up,” I said.

“What up,” they giggled.

“You go to Jefferson, right?”

“That’s right.” More giggling.

If I looked back at Jose, I am sure he would have been laughing his ass off.

“Your smile reminds me of Communion,” I said to the girl with coffee

skin. I never knew what to say to girls and always ended up saying the first thing that came into my head, which was usually the wrong thing. But I knew I had to say something to get her to notice me. A girl like this, I thought, didn't go a day without some guy telling her how beautiful she is, or how his heart burns every time he sees her, or that he will die if he has to go another day without knowing what it's like to kiss her. So, I had to take drastic measures.

"What?" She asked.

"You know, how when you go to Communion—after, you feel good inside, clean, like everything will be okay?"

She laughed. But the blonde girl didn't. She turned her eyes down and folded her hands on her lap.

"Yo," Jose said from behind me. "We got to get."

He sounded like he was pushing back laughter.

"Ah-ight," I said. "You're on the bus all the time, so I see you again, right?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah," the girl with coffee-skin said, laughing.

I heard one of their voices from behind me as I walked away.

"I'm Theresa, but everyone calls me T," the blond girl said.

"I'm Pat," I said.

"Come on, man," Jose yelled.

T smiled. I smiled then ran from the bus before the doors closed. Inside I felt as though I had become a man. I was winning races in track. I was made captain. On weekends I had places to go with Jose and George. And now this girl I had wanted to talk to, I talked to. Whatever it was that had to happen to me had finally happened.

Jose and me stepped into the warmth of new spring. There were clouds forming on the horizon, that dark way it gets when it's going to rain. Our all-boys

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Catholic high school rose from the distance like a baton. I looked back at the passing bus, hoping to see my girl inside, but I didn't. When the bus was gone, that's when Jose turned to me.

"Yo, P." He bent over, laughter pouring out of him. "I forgot to tell you, there's bird shit on your shoulder."

At first, I didn't understand him. Then I remembered last weekend, Jose, George and me had got up a game on Newts Court. There were girls practicing on the soccer field. Jose kept making moves to impress them. When he went up to attempt a dunk, I grabbed his long Chicago bull shorts and pulled them to his ankles. That day I found out that Jose didn't wear underwear. The girls laughed and hooted.

"Fucking dick," I yelled.

Jose laughed and ran ahead. "Son, you know better than to fuck with daddy," he yelled back.

I caught up to him and grabbed him, raising my fist as though I was going to hit him. I laughed.

"I can't believe you did that shit."

"I didn't even have to do nothing," he said. "It was like divine intervention and shit."

"Bet, I said. Wait 'till next time."

We walked toward school. The sky continued to darken. Rain was definitely coming—typical April weather.

"For real, though," I said. "You think she like me?"

"Nah. That girl think you a fool."

I turned to him, expecting to see a smile on his face. But I didn't. His face was motionless. He meant exactly what he said.

“Damn, man. Don’t hold back. Tell me what you really think.”

Jose kept the same face. “The other one did, though.”

“The blond girl?”

“Yeah. But I wouldn’t fuck with her. She like a lot of people.”

This last thing he said, I didn’t hear. All I heard was that she liked me. I had liked many girls but had gotten with none of them. Walking down streets, going to parties, and going to track meets on the weekends was like going to a movie, a movie filled with girls I watched and listened to. Now I had made a move, though. A girl liked me. What else was there to think about?

“Maybe I’ll be the one she like the most.”

“It ain’t about that. Look, man. She—she need a lot of dudes around. Like, she need to be told she all that twenty-four-seven. My boy, Pete, ah-ight. You know Pete, right? He was going with her for a year. Loved her ass, you know. She’d hang out with him, acting as though he the only dude in the world for her, like he the only dude who ever lived. And Pete couldn’t help but love her, man. But everything wasn’t right with her. Weird shit, like she say she coming over but never getting there. Not answering her phone for days. Then one day answering like nothing was the matter. This made him crazy.

He was caught, man. So one day he follows her. She go down the street, he hides behind walls. Real Dick Tracy shit. Finds out she got like two other dudes on the side. He sees her with one. Dude got her pinned against a car, rubbing his shit all over her and Pete bugs. So he go to fuck him up, ah-ight. But when he pulls him off, he can’t believe it. This dude, right, got these thick-ass glasses and acne and this stupid-ass hair cut. When he see Pete, he puts his arms up, yelling sorry sir. Sorry. Sorry. Sir.” Just like that. So Pete felt bad. Told him to get the fuck out of there. And when he looked at T, he actually loved her more. Told me this himself. Loved her more because he saw how fucked up she

was, and he wanted to help her not be fucked up anymore. Because in her heart she was beautiful.”

“He still with her?”

“Nah, man. Pete’s moms moved him away. Sent him to like South Carolina or some shit to live with his aunt to keep him out of trouble. Did it mainly because of Therese, too. So stay away from that girl.”

“What if she steps to me?”

“She will.”

“She will?”

“Yeah. She that way. You showed her something she like, and T ain’t never walked away from something she like.”

“So what do I do? No one ever stepped to me before.”

“If it was me, I wouldn’t hear nothing she was saying. But you won’t listen. You making yourself ready for her and don’t even know it. That girl has you. It doesn’t take much, man, with any of us.”

“What should I do?”

“You already know.”

“What if I don’t love her? Then I could just not care what she does.”

“You will, man. Probably already do.”

We made it to school just as rain broke from the sky. We stepped through the doors that led into the lunchroom, soaked. I asked Jose if the rain had washed my shirt, and he said it had. Outside I was cold. But inside I was warm as I let my mind wander freely over the girl who liked me.





Brian Patrick Heston hails from Philadelphia, PA, and because of that, he says his because, more like becuz. Brian attended the University of New Hampshire and received his MA in creative writing, where he worked with Charles Simic. Currently he is wrapping up his MFA at George Mason University. His work has previously appeared in *Confrontation*, *Slipstream*, and *Cake Train*, among others. He was also a finalist in *Walrus Magazine's* Fiction Contest and was awarded a fellowship to attend the Summer Literary Seminars in Saint Petersburg Russia. He currently teaches creative writing in Washington, DC.

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We thank everyone who submitted to *Our Stories* for the Spring issue and wish you success with your rewrites, revisions and future submissions. We take submissions 365 days out of the year.

Publishing schedule:

Summer - August 15th

Fall - November 15th

Winter - February 15th

Spring - May 15th