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Issue #10

1 September 08

Saturdays, Mostly

by Ira S. Murfin

I go to Wendy's with Dave on Saturdays, mostly. It's kind of weird because the guy who started Wendy's was named Dave, too. Except he's dead already. They have all these signs up reminding you he's dead, even while you're eating and everything.

Anyway, Wendy's is really easy to get to, you just turn right on Center off of Main and walk for about 10 minutes. It's pretty far, I mean you almost have to walk all the way to the highway. But the food is pretty good, so it's worth it.

Dave and me go over to Wendy's mostly on Saturdays. We eat hamburgers and Frosties. Well, I eat hamburgers and Frosties. Dave eats salad and Diet Coke, which is weird because he's not fat or anything. I like to dip my fries in the Frosties. Dave thinks it's gross, only I don't care.

Sometimes Dave gets a call on his cell phone and he'll just go ahead and talk while we eat. If the person asks what he's doing he just says he's eating dinner and he doesn't even say he's eating dinner with me or anything. But mostly we talk about motorcycles or movies we want to see or bands that play at the bar.

One time this fat lady came in with a whole bunch of kids, like three or four of them. And they were so pretty with this really light blonde hair, like almost white, and these little pink shorts on. I mean, boys and girls, but they all had these little pink shorts on. And the lady was so angry. She was slamming stuff around and yelling at those kids. And I wanted to tell her how pretty those kids were, but I just said,

"Little kids, huh?" Only she didn't answer me so I said, "Aren't they great?" But she just kept banging stuff around real angry and everything and ignoring me even though she had such pretty little kids like that. Mostly we go to Wendy's on Saturdays around eight o'clock. In the wintertime it's dark already, but in the summer the sun sets outside while we're eating. And, you know, Wendy's has those big windows out front like in a greenhouse or something and you can see pretty much the whole entire sky. I try to get to the table before Dave so I can get the seat looking out the window. And on those nights I kind of hope that Dave gets a call on his cell phone.

The sign for the Stop 'N Shop across the street is lit up really bright with all these colors like red and green and blue and yellow and white. And the sky behind it is this really light kind of blue. It turns pink and then red in these big, huge streaks before dark. And I get this feeling like being really sad and really excited at the same time. And I really, really hope that I don't die.

Issue #11

8 September 08

Graveyard of the Atlantic

by Spencer Dew

One morning at daybreak the beach was covered in jellyfish, an undulating glaze, thousands, dying in the pink light. Another day a tour group came from the deaf school, and one afternoon federal agents arrested a kitschy scene painter, cuffed his hands behind his back, standing beside him at the pier, waiting for the day's last ferry run.

I had come to Ocracoke Island after the announcement of my involuntary leave, staying at my father's summer cottage, which, in the wake of his most recent divorce, had become his only place, his home, spotted with traces of his former wives and lovers, stray clues in the guestroom desk drawers or the closet in the entryway. There was a fur-collared jacket, for instance, a blue roll of yoga mat, assorted, variably depleted bottles of perfume.

I took concertedly casual swims, determinedly aimless strolls along the sand. I watched the plovers, their routine at the surf. I stared out at the big ships sitting on the line of the horizon. I forced myself to thumb through paperback histories of the region. Maritime disasters were the main offering of my father's library, plus some pirate legends, technical studies of u-boats and iron-sides.

Just months before he'd gone out after a pair of college girls drowned in the undertow, part of a team, locals, linked together, rope tied to their waist, a harness. They brought out one body. The other girl was just gone.

The summer was lonely in a way this world too rarely allows. What talking we did was mostly over breakfast, sweet, pale coffee and some kind of oily salad my father would spend his morning hours chopping, plating. There was a wide margin around those things of which we did not speak. Instead, he'd tell restrung stories, polished-up versions of old Bermuda Triangle tales or, better, local gossip – the sand dune that got moved by the zoning commission, the hermit who weathered the hurricane by eating his cats.

At night, we sat on the porch with cigars and drinks, listening to bugs hitting the screens. Baffled and numb, relentlessly repeating dead-end trajectories, lured and blocked and lured again, learning nothing, existing without memories. We were men moored, men adrift.

Most nights we'd fall asleep out there in the uncomfortable wicker lounge chairs, though the sound of one of us standing would wake the other, or the flipping off of the light, and we'd each go off to more dreamless hours, then dawn, then day, sundown, the evening breeze, the screams of gulls when the shrimp boats dock and the flutter and slap of moths or whatever else, thicker than a thumb, dark and wide, as we sat in the smoke and silence, squinting out at nothing, just like the last night, absolutely different from anything before.

Issue #12

15 September 08

Mrs. Dalloway

by J. Boyer

Is that my book?—Are you reading my Mrs. Dalloway?—Oh I hate it when you go into my things and just take them like they're yours—No, I don't think you have cooties. I can tell, that's all. Don't get it dirty, don't get your sticky fingerprints all over—Did you just scratch your armpit with my copy of Mrs. Dalloway?!

Don't even go there. There's no comparison. Believe me. Virginia had this way of making the most simple observation sound oracular, as if it were coming from the gods. Here, give it to me. Do you see that? I took out your bookmark and spit on the page. Now do you get it? Do you see what it feels like to have something you love defaced for no apparent reason? Great. Enjoy.

Oh, now that's mature, that's great. Terrific. I can't believe it, you took my copy of Mrs. Dalloway and rubbed it against your crotch, the copy of Mrs. Dalloway I've had for all these years, the same novel I used in Helen Vendler's course at B.U. Boston University? Helen Vendler?—Of course you haven't, why should you. She's simply gone on to be one of the most important critics in contemporary American letters. You've probably heard of Lawrence Taylor though, haven't you? or one of those other bottom-dwelling cretins you're always watching on ESPN. Cotton, and Jumbo, and--

Why shouldn't I call her "Virginia?" It's not like you know Lawrence Taylor, but you call him "L.T."

Okay? Now it's yours. Consider it a present. That's your half, this is my half.

She was not. She was married. To Leonard Woolf, if it matters. They were happy too—in their way. And what does a lesbian write like, anyway? Is there something special about lesbian prose? What if I did that to you, what if I said it stands to reason if you want to play professional football you're probably a homosexual. Well you see the way they put their arms around each other in the huddle. The way they touch each other. The way they touch themselves in those particularly delightful ways men enjoy tugging at their privates.

Yes, I said "privates." I know what they're called, thank you very much. I know perfectly well what they're called, I simply prefer to refer to them as "privates." Okay? I don't have to use the same language—Good for you, Nancy Drew, call them anything you like.

Yeah, that's them on the back. Virginia with Leonard. They do look mad as hatters, don't they. But they weren't. Not for an instant. They were just like us. Perfectly sane.

Issue #13

22 September 08

Assassin

by Tom Barlow

John picked out another loser, with legs far too long for his body, asymmetrical nose, limp hair with dueling cowlicks.

"Hey, sport -- how about a free shirt?" He thrust the mauve-and-melon polo, a new style from their client's competitor, into the boy's hands. The boy accepted it with all the enthusiasm of a refugee for a diet Coke.

John's team leader, Harmony, phoned him before he could intercept a pod of fuglies snaking their way through the lunch crowd on the steps of the school. "Any shirts left?" she said.

"Only half a dozen. It's like a freak show out here."

"Well, hold up. I'll be there in ten minutes with some cash for you. Our client wants us to cruise the freeway exits. When you find a bum panhandling, give him \$20 to wear the shirt."

"That's beautiful," John said.

"Brand assassination is the easiest money I ever made."

By the time Harmony showed up, John had counted four homlies already wearing the shirts he'd handed out.

She had changed clothes since he saw her that morning, out of the company's standard khaki into an ill-fitting wisteria turtleneck with a Piton Gear logo. The color clashed with her red hair, and revealed a sag to her breasts that John had not previously noticed.

Harmony rolled down the window, took a small wad of bills from her ashtray and counted out six twenties. She pulled another turtleneck from the bag on her floor and handed it and the money to him.

"What's with this?"

She shrugged. "Boss wants us to wear these shirts while we're in the field."

"We've picked up Piton as a client?" He wondered about the chances of trading for another color. He was an autumn; purple washed out his complexion.

"I wish," she said, and pulled away.

30 Seconds

by Frank Roger

The man walked up to me and said:

"Hi there. Do you have a moment? I'm a fortune teller, and I can predict the future with absolute certainty. For ten dollars I'll answer a few of your questions. Are you interested?"

"Okay, it's a deal," I replied, mainly because I was a bit bored and could use some light entertainment.

"Let me see. Will I be successful? Will I realise my ambitions and become rich and famous?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you. You see, my knowledge of the future is limited to the next thirty seconds. So your questions should deal with the very near future."

"Such limited predicting skills don't seem very useful," I remarked. "I don't think anything of vast importance is going to happen to me in the next few moments."

"How can you tell?" he countered.

"You may be wrong. Detailed knowledge of the events in the next thirty seconds may be a matter of life and death. Isn't that worth ten dollars?"

"Well, all right," I said. "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. So, will I die within the next thirty seconds?"

"No."

"Will something serious happen to me?"

"No."

"Well, what's going to happen in the next thirty seconds then?"

"Not much. You're about to lose ten dollars, that's all."

"Isn't that what I owe you for your so-called fortune telling?"

"Exactly. We had a deal, remember?"

He extended his hand and I gave him a ten dollar bill, even if grudgingly.

"I still have serious doubts about your predicting skills," I grumbled.

"My skills supply me with a steady income," he retorted. "I wish I had a customer like you every thirty seconds."

Then he walked off with my money, no doubt already looking for another customer – or victim.

Issue #14

29 September 08

Nothing, Nothing, Nothing Like a Song

by Spencer Dew

Then one night you come across the bridge at Wilson with your ponytail and your running clothes, all salt and ipod, sinews, ribcage, those lungs sunk inside it.

We stand there next to the jagged glass of the life preserver box, the metal cables sprawled, uncoiling across the concrete, and you give me the cereal box version of a much longer narrative, your ordeal, as you say, your marriage's dissolution, your disillusionment, this new phase you've entered, alone and with your lawyer – single life and the process of discovery, slow strength-building and the infinite expectation of trail. You would just like closure, you say, but you wouldn't mind a drink.

The precise angle of what it means for you to be astride me, the sounds of your breath at every stage – these are things I've kept memorized, things I've rehearsed, alone. Your body is like a scalpel I've stored inside myself for these three years.

After, we walk hand-in-hand to the White Hen, buy things we don't need – candied papaya pieces, a lollipop that revolves in your mouth, illuminated, some citrus soft drink that promises to boost sensual virility.

You laugh at the phrase, in the parking lot, then switch serious, palms up, telling me that you can't go back to my place, can't stay the night, can't fall into these patterns, as nice as it was, what we did, just now and before, but you're still married, and too consumed with recovery, divorce.

So I walk back alone, without even your phone number, over the hump of that miniature bridge, the river smelling like latex, the life preserver floating at the end of its tether. I don't make a wish, and I don't think about jumping. There is nothing but a dull ache, a droning. My jaw is sore, and all week I find your hair in my bed, imagine that your imprint is still there, in the tussled sheets.

Nights, afternoons, and weekends especially I take different routes, or stay in, but avoid the bridge for certain, and the White Hen, and those streets down which you headed, wherever, without me.