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Light Like Gunshots

March 3, 2020 19 By J.R. ANGELELLA

1.

The cops release me after they review the surveillance footage. I sign a paper that says I was treated with respect and dignity while incarcerated.

Annie picks me up from the police station. Jack and Nicole are both asleep in the back seat of the car. Annie turns the key in the engine.

"Do I even have to ask?"

I point to my ears. "Still a lot of ringing. What did you say?"

"Never mind," she says.

"We need to go back for my car," I say.

"Is it still at that place?" She shakes her head and hands me her sweatshirt. "You're all bloodied." Her sweatshirt is baby blue. "Just pull it over your head." Her sweatshirt is short in the sleeves and tight around my waist with the slogan *Just Do It* printed in pink across my chest.

She pulls away from the police station and merges into traffic.

Tumbleweeds pass between us.

"Are you going to tell the kids?" Annie drives with both hands on the wheel. She checks her side mirror.

"They won't understand."

"You underestimate them. You underestimate me." She stops at a red light.

"How do I underestimate you?"

"You think I don't know." She rolls through a green light. "About Ramona."

"We were just kids."

"She told me about the game," she says.

"That was a long time ago."

"Not that long ago." Then, "you played the game with me."

"That was different," I say.

She pulls up alongside my car in the parking lot of the porn shop.

"Why were you here? What's the reason this time?" She looks at the hot pink neon sign over the door and laughs.

Happy Endings.

I watch a man and woman from the crime scene clean-up crew exit the porn shop with yellow biohazard bags slung over their shoulders. The two climb inside a black van, their brake lights burning in the dark. They signal before easing out into traffic.

I see my reflection in the windshield, streaks of blood still on my face. I lick my thumb and scrub them away. I am unsuccessful.

"What are we talking about here?" I ask.

She looks at the kids in the rear-view mirror, both still asleep, slumped bodies.

"Can we leave my car here and just go home?"

Annie hands me the manila envelope from the police station with my personal effects inside. She shifts the van into reverse and faces me.

"It's time for us to go home. It's time for you to get into your car," she says.

"Is this it?"

"You tell me." Then, "you detect the difference."

I exit the family car and enter my own.

In the passenger seat is a white paper bag from the pharmacy. I watch as Annie speeds through a yellow light, leaving her painkillers behind with me.

2.

I parked in the porn shop parking lot on the way home from campus. I had just finished a lecture on *Great Expectations* and the personal journey of the boy named Pip as it relates to the biometrics of middle-aged men today. I pushed through the blacked-out glass door as a chime celebrated my arrival. Inside was an old man sitting on a stool behind the counter, watching *I Love Lucy* on a tiny black-and-white television without sound. He tossed a handful of popcorn into his mouth, kernels missing and rolling down his chest.

“Movie booths?” I asked, handing him a five.

“They take tokens.” More kernels. He stacked them on the counter.

I pinched the tokens into my palm.

“Booth on the right is broken. Clean up after yourself. Enjoy.”

I glanced up to see a masked man. Gun by his side. Smile beneath the mouth-hole of his mask. He stood next to a shelf jammed with pumps and lotions for different parts, which reminded me to rotate my tires the next time I get my oil changed.

3.

Nicole lost her first tooth today. The tooth had not been loose. Hector Bishop had tugged her down from the monkey bars by her ankles.

Annie called me three times.

She first called from the dentist’s office during my Hemingway class where we discussed the short story “Hills Like White Elephants” as it relates to the sociopathic tendencies of the metrosexual American male. She left a message to say that Nicole’s tooth was gone for good. Before she hung up, she asked if I knew what legal action could be taken against a six-year-old.

Next, she called while I attended the university’s celebratory dinner for Charlie Born, the recently retired Dean of Arts and Humanities, acknowledging his decades of service to the university community. I spent the night listening to him reference his publications like acquaintances we had in common. When Charlie talked about *Coil & Spring*, his novel-in-progress about a three-generation family of male mattress salesmen, Annie called and said she had a good phone conversation with Hector Bishop’s mother, Ramona Bishop. Annie said Ramona understood how a mother feels and invited her over for tea.

She called later, the third time, when I was in my car at a red light, watching a panhandler with a Moses beard and wielding a knife advance on a drunk man in a bowtie and a suit, who was whipping a tire iron above his head like helicopter blades. Neither made contact with the other. As I inched my car across the white line to better read the panhandler’s sign that lay in the intersection, Annie phoned and said that her pharmacist called to say her pain-stopper prescription was ready. She asked if I could pick it up. Annie hates the word *killer*.

4.

Unforgettably, I know Ramona Bishop better as Ramona Rodriguez.

5.

Back in the porn shop, the masked man forced me facedown on the floor. He told me I could count to three hundred or watch my thoughts spray out in front of me.

The red carpet in the porn shop smelled of lemon-scented cleaner and cigarette smoke.

I only got to ten before the door chimed and he left. I stood and walked to the door, still counting. I saw my reflection in the blacked-out glass under the neon pink light and low hum of the *Happy Endings* sign. I could barely see myself under all the bits of blood and bone and plaster.

I hit five hundred and five before the cops arrived. Guns up.

What the masked man had really meant to say instead of *thoughts*, was *my brain*. What surgeons call *grey matter*.

That I would watch my brain spray out in front of me.

My grey matter.

6.

I met Annie twelve years ago when she was an undergraduate in the English Department and a student in my Literature of the Jazz Age seminar where we discussed T.S. Elliot's *The Waste Land* and it's prophetic vision of modernity as it relates to the fractured male agenda and judgment of the past. Annie came to my office one afternoon after Spring break and asked me to accompany her to breakfast. We ate runny eggs and burnt toast with coffee and little conversation.

She asked me if I was married.

I said I was divorced.

She said she was sorry to hear that.

I said that I had lied. I had never been married.

She paid the bill.

I drove us back to campus.

She said this had nothing to do with her grade.

I said she hadn't done anything to warrant a higher grade.

door to a stairway. We pushed out through a maintenance exit to the rooftop. A giant silver fan spun next to us as Annie pulled her shirt over her head and I unbuttoned my pants. We stood naked together next to a silver fan under a blue sky and fucked.

I pressed up off of her.

"Annie. Are you faking?"

"Do you want me to?"

"You're not faking?"

"I *can* fake if you want me to."

"Why would I want you to?"

"I have faked it before."

7.

Annie and I sleep in separate rooms now at the suggestion of our therapist.

This is called *sexual reintegration therapy*.

Organized matriarchal nonsense is what I call it.

8.

The masked man used me as a shield, aiming his gun at the old man, before firing four times. The first two shots tore through the clerk's face, sending his corpse to the floor, while the next two blew holes in the wall.

My hearing dialed out to a singular ring.

The *I Love Lucy* rerun cut to commercial on the tiny black-and-white television, the screen now flecked with skull next to a row of pink and purple vibrators.

Face and brain painted the hole and the wall behind the counter.

I watched a commercial for a new extra-strength dish detergent. The happy housewife held a stained casserole dish between long, rubber-gloved hands, nodded at the camera and smiled. Text on the screen read: *gets out tough stains with ease*.

9.

I was fifteen when Ramona Rodriguez asked me to be her first.

Both her parents had gone to a parent-teacher conference at our school. She made a bed out of blankets in her back yard, facing the Pacific Ocean. The stars watched us from above. I focused on her face as she lifted her

“Ramona, why are you acting like porn star?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does if you’re faking.”

“If I tell you, how will you know I am being honest?”

“I trust you to be honest.”

Every time after that first time I made it a game: to detect the difference.

We were together until graduation when she left for college. We promised we would never forget the game.

This is why I stopped at the porn shop. After all the messages from Annie and the one about Ramona Bishop, I wanted to see if I could still detect the difference.

10.

The cops asked me my name and then about the weapon.

I handed them my license. Told them I couldn’t remember how the gun looked but could tell them how it felt.

One cop unbuttoned his holster and displayed a black pistol, aiming the muzzle at a blow-up doll on the wall. “Did the gun look smaller or bigger than the one in my hand?”

“Smaller when he shot the old man. Bigger when he held it to my head,” I said.

A female cop slapped handcuffs around my wrists.

“You have the right to remain silent,” she said.

“But I have more to say,” I said.

She said, “You have the right to an attorney.” Then, “you are a person of interest.”

11.

Jack joined the percussion section of his school band four months ago.

The music director insisted that we special-order his drum kit from a company in Switzerland. He said that they made the tightest frames. I called the company and found it would cost two hundred dollars to ship to the states. I hung up the phone and drove to the mall.

There, in the percussion aisle, next to a ten-piece drum kit, a store clerk asked if I needed any assistance.

I told her I was looking for a snare drum for a nine-year-old.

She showed me two models.

I asked her if she wanted to get coffee.

She sold me the tighter of the two frames.

Instead of coffee, we went into the back of her band's van; the ceiling stuck with neon green glow-in-the-dark stars, and had sex.

I forgot to ask her if she was faking.

Annie found the condom wrapper in the pocket of my jeans.

"This is a damned frame-job," I said.

12.

The masked man aimed his gun at my head but talked to the old man.

"Old man, you sell any dolls?" The masked man wore a black sweatsuit with red stripes down the sides.

"On the wall. By the door." More kernels. "Take what you want and go."

The masked man's teeth looked like a necklace strung with Vicodin.

Then he was on me and spun me, smashing the butt of his gun into the back of my head. My sight blinked out. My hearing muffled. His hand grabbed my shirt, pushed me up against the counter.

I opened my eyes. The old man stood in front of me. Yelled. Pointed with a lit cigarette pinched between his fingers. His other hand dropped to his side, slowly, reaching for something.

Sound cut in and out.

"Just open the safe," the masked man yelled back.

"I'll open the safe when the cops get here in three minutes," the old man said. Then, he pulled a shotgun out from under the counter.

13.

We went on vacation to the beach.

It was evening and had been a long day spent under the sun, in and out of hard waves. Annie went to cover her sunburn with lotion when she discovered she had not packed it. So I drove to the store.

First, I stopped at a liquor store to buy myself a dozen mini bottles of vodka. In the parking lot, a boy, a teen, asked me to buy him a suitcase of beer. He handed me a folded, damp twenty. His eyes darted. His sweat stunk of a bender. I could relate.

"Keep your cash," I said. "This one's on me."

The boy lifted and cradled and hugged the beer in his wiry arms, placing it in the bed of a giant pickup truck, before disappearing.

I find lotion at the convenience store nearby and approach the counter. A young woman—no older than Annie when I first met her—bought a pack of mentholated cigarettes, turned and bumped into me. She smelled like watermelon.

I purchased my lotion.

Walking to my car, I was approached by the young woman who asked if I would join her on the beach to watch the full moon rise into the summer stars.

I followed her to a beachfront apartment. We stumbled out onto the cool sand and lay under the dark sky with the soft growl of the crashing waves invisible in front of us.

She said her name was Harmony. She said that I looked safe. She said she wanted to feel good again. She said she was tired of being broken.

So I put her back together.

When she climbed off my lap and lay in the crook of my arm, I pointed to the sky and the stars.

A cone of light clicked onto my chest. Another clicked onto my uncovered crotch. Another clicked onto my feet.

The cop who clicked my chest arrested and charged me with illegal public acts of a lewd and lascivious nature. The cop who clicked my crotch added the charge of corruption of a minor. The cop who clicked my feet slapped handcuffs on my wrists.

At the station, they told me that Harmony was a known prostitute.

I told them that no legal tender had changed hands.

They let me have one phone call.

I called Annie at the hotel.

On her way to bail me out, Annie was in a car accident.

She called me at the station from her gurney in the emergency room.

I asked her what had happened.

She said she had broken both legs. She said the cops told her some drunk kid—a boy—gunned his mother's pickup truck out from a side street and crashed into her, rolling her and the family car six times. She said the only thing she remembered were his headlights.

I asked if the kids were okay.

She said the kids were asleep in the hotel room.

A doctor prescribed Vicodin to stop the pain, which has never seemed to stop.

14.

The masked man pushed the gun between my eyes. The muzzle burned, still hot from the four shots. He watched the door, listening for sirens, half his face coated in red and grey matter.

“Face down on the carpet. Count to three hundred.”

I laughed. A hard laugh. A scared laugh. A laugh that was my mind short-circuiting from what looked like the end. Death. Impending. Then he laughed too, his laughter mean and hard, what one would expect.

We laughed together: a real moment.

“Wild shit,” he said.

“Very real,” I said.

He said, “If you stop counting, you’ll watch your thoughts spray out in front of you.”

I spread out. Face down. Counting into the carpet.

Thoughts. Brain. Grey matter.

15.

Outside the porn shop, I open Annie’s pill bottle and shake a fistful into my mouth. Chew them up. Swallow them down. Fill me up. Eager for them to bliss me out.

The *Happy Endings* sign blacks out and the parking lot goes dark. The old man is dead. I wonder who killed the light switch.

I should cancel my Philosophy in Film class tomorrow. We are set to discuss Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* and its exacting commentary on the hyper-masculinity of the moment as it intersects with gender violence and sexual exploitation.

Or is it sexual manipulation?

Is there a difference?

I can’t wait for tomorrow.

THE END





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J.R. Angelella is the author of the irreverent and twisted coming-of-age novel *Zombie* (Soho Press, 2012). His award-winning short fiction has appeared in various journals, including *Hunger Mountain*, *Sou-wester*, *The Coachella Review*, and *The Southampton Review*. His original screenplays have won numerous awards, most recently at the Houston Comedy Film Festival and Baltimore Next Media Web Fest. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing & Literature from Bennington Writing Seminars. Currently, he serves as a fiction editor at Angelella Editorial and teaches writing at the University of Maryland, College Park, and Towson University. He lives in Baltimore. For more info : www.jrangelella.com.

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Radio City Bloodbath

Homecoming



1 Comment



Corey Baker says:

August 13, 2020 at 3:22 pm

Great story! Amazing opening hook, that doesn't diminish the potency of the rest of the story. The building burn holds until the BITTER end. If Travis Bickel were a professor, this would be his story! Great! Great! Great!

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