

# RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

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# BLOOD SUGAR

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RPM 02, 28 April 2009

*A Penny Dreadful for Nothing*

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# RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

## ~ABOUT RPM~

RPM is a free, internet-distributed general fiction magazine. We are not tied to any particular genre. We believe that different themes and moods can thrive together in a handy, readable format, and that Story transcends time, environment and clothing.

Having said that, **please** do pay attention to the reader guidance at the start of each story: RPM writers are rugged sorts who can play a little rough sometimes. We will try to alert you to potentially disturbing elements.

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# RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

## ~SUBMISSIONS~

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# Come for a Cleansing

*Christopher Allen*

**Localisation:**

US English

**Reader guidance:**

Violent psychological horror involving a young child. There is some swearing.

Y'all gather on in here real close now. I'm gonna tell y'all all I know about what happened at The Farm, and y'all gotta believe me. I seen him with my own two eyes: the dirty boy.

(I wonder why we call it The Farm. There ain't nothing *but* farms as far as you can drive in Bell Buckle. They used to say a witch lived there, and I reckon witches always live some place special, like The Farm.)

It was August and hot, right after World War II, when one-legged soldiers were coming home. My daddy had just given me my first and only bicycle for my tenth birthday, so I was mobile. And being mobile meant I could find me a job. Daddy said it'd be a good idea seeing as how we didn't have much to eat besides possum and polecat. And Mama was with the Lord, something we didn't talk about much. There'd been some killings, but seeing as how I was just ten, nobody talked to me about them.

I rode my new bicycle to the Messick's place and then on out to the Beech farm and then down the road a piece to Old Man Summer's place, but nobody came to the door. At the Hatchet farm, I seen Mrs. Hatchet poke her head out the backdoor, but when I went around to the back, she'd done gone. Folks were a little on edge 'cause of the killings, I reckon. So I

rode on down the road a piece in the mean heat. Drops of salty dirt stung my eyes.

The grit from the road and my own sweat ganged up against me to muddy my clean britches. *It just ain't right to get that filthy.* I could hear my Mama just like she was standing there in front of me. *Cleanliness is next to . . .* Filth cut a deep line in my mind. That was when my mind flickered. I reckon it was the filth that did it. I can't describe it no other way. Sometimes things just flickered like lightning at night, a flash and then darkness, and then I was behind the little dirty boy who looked like me. But then just as quick, he was gone and I was looking down at the dusty road in front of The Farm. I don't know how long I'd been standing there when I heard the old witch's voice coming from inside the front door.

"What you want?" Her voice was scratchy and mean, like an old bobcat stuck in a trap. I heard a creak and saw her shadow inside the gray screen door.

"Nothing," I yelled back and hit the road, hell for leather and dust. I was sure I saw her gray shadow chasing after me.

The next couple of weeks, me and Daddy ate polecat and poke salad. We didn't talk much. We never talked much anyway. After the killings, Daddy spent a lot of time in the front room praying. He bolted me in my room at night, said it was for my protection. After Mama was sent off to be with the Lord, the house just went to pot. I wasn't in the mood no more to clean. But I guess y'all know that.

I looked for a job for weeks before I went back to The Farm. I had to go back. It was the last place in Bell Buckle anybody'd want to work, so even if she was a witch, she had to have something for me to do.

“What you want?” she yelled again from her dingy screen-door shadow, as I stopped in a cloud of dirt in front of the house.

“I’s looking for work, ma’am!” I called back, choking on the dust. See, this time I was ready for her. I was mighty hungry.

“You? Work?” The screen door shook with laughter. “You don’t sound no bigger than a pissant, you muddy little turd!” The screen door went *thwack, thwack, thwack*.

“I can milk real good!” I yelled, wiping the sweat off my brow with my stinking shirt.

She opened the door them two inches again and just kept on laughing louder and louder. Y’all know it ain’t right to laugh at a boy when he’s trying his best.

“I can clean!” I heard the dirty boy yell. He was standing right in front of me.

That stopped her high-hat laughing. “Be here in the morning at sunup.” The screen door twanged shut. *Thwack, thwack, thwack*.

Now I know what y’all are thinking. I didn’t say I could clean. *He* said it. But dangit, I had me that job. I know she was talking to me. A job! But now, I dared not tell my daddy where. And y’all can’t tell him neither. Judging from the stories he told about The Farm, he was scared of the witch too. Folk said she was a banshee and that before one of their loved ones died, they could hear the old lady screaming down the road in front of their house. There was folk that said she worshipped Satan and sacrificed little children to him in her corn crib or the hog barn, but most folk thought the likeliest place was the springhouse, where she could wash the blood away easy-like.

That did scare me a little ‘cause I knew the springhouse was where I’d be washing. Mama’d taught me how to wash my drawers in our springhouse, so I knew how to do it real good.

Mama was particular about cleanliness (as y'all know). She said the Bible'd punish little boys that got dirty. We had a big Bible, big as a washboard. I tried not to get dirty. But sometimes it just happened—no matter how much I prayed for it not to.

The next day I was there at sunup like she told me 'cause I weren't no pissant. When I stepped up on the front porch, she was sitting there in a rocking chair with her eyes closed and her head back like she was getting a tooth pulled. I gawked at her wrinkly face for a good long second or two. She must have been two hundred years old. Her skin was a ruddy cornfield in October. She smelled like a dead cow.

"Sonny?" she whispered, opening her glassy, gray eyes. The old witch was blind.

"Shoot-fire." I shuddered, and there was that flicker of light.

"Well, shoo-we. You done messed your drawers. Mercy! You git on back there to the springhouse and wash them out right now." Them blind eyes looked right into me and out the other side at the dirty boy standing behind me.

"All right," he said and we headed off around the corner of the house.

"People call me Mami," she yelled after us.

"Yes, ma'am," I yelled back.

The springhouse was a cave inside a little shack. We liked it in there 'cause it was cool, and it looked like summer was never gonna let fall have a turn. The rock walls made our voice echo, so it was good for singing. Me and the dirty boy liked to sing. So we washed clothes together about every day at The Farm. Lord knows where all them clothes come from. We sang songs like "At the River" and "There's Power in the Blood" and had a good ole time till that day that everything changed. We was singing:

*Would you be whiter, much whiter than snow?*

*There's power in the blood, power in the blood;*

*Sin stains are lost in its life giving flow.*

*There's wonderful power in the—*

—when the door to the springhouse swung open, and Mami was standing there like a roily shadow of a body under muddy water.

“Sonny?” she said. “Is that you singing down there?”

“What?” I tried to shake off another flickery feeling, not looking up much from the britches I was scrubbing on the washboard.

“I love you,” she said. She started down the mossy stone steps into the springhouse.

Then, I was standing behind the dirty boy. Oh, I could see the stain, y’all. The boy’d had an accident in his britches again, I reckon. He couldn’t help it, could he? It just wasn’t right that he had to wash it out himself. It stunk, and he wanted to go play—

“Sonny?” she said, still feeling her way down the slick steps. “You been down here for three days. Sonny?”

It wouldn’t come out, and she would whop the dirty boy again for it. Y’all know it. If anybody knows it, y’all do. She hated that smell more than anything. I couldn’t blame him for crying. I felt so bad for him. Y’all can’t hold it against him what he did.

“Sonny? You crying down there?”

She was standing right over him and waving her hands around to find him. I had moved into a dark corner and stayed real quiet so she wouldn’t sense me.

But the boy could see me. He turned to me with them mean, dirty eyes. “She,” he mouthed. “She made me this way.”

“What are you whispering?” She started reaching down low where the voice was coming from. “Son?” She just kept feeling around till she had him in her stinky hold.

The dirty boy, his eyes still fixed on mine, put his finger to his mouth and grinned. “Sssh.”

“Who you shushing?” asked Mami, her head turning in my direction.

“You ain’t gonna make me wash them britches out no more,” the dirty boy said, staring down at the washboard in his hand. “You’re gonna wash ‘em.”

“Something ain’t right. Who else is here?” Mami let go of him real quick, which was a mistake.

The boy jerked his head around and looked straight at me, humming that hymn he’d just stopped singing, telling me with them eyes that he wasn’t crazy and wasn’t nobody gonna tell him he was. He wasn’t dirty. He was clean. He was whiter than snow.

I nodded. He nodded.

The old blind witch was already at the stone steps. I reckon she was fleeter than she looked, but we was faster. We just wanted to stop her so she’d come back and wash the britches like she ought to, but I reckon the dirty boy did more than stop her. I reckon he hit her more than once with that washboard. I didn’t want to hear her scream, so I just sang and sang.

*There is power, power, wonder working power*

*In the blood of the Lamb;*

*There is power, power, wonder working power*

*In the precious blood of the Lamb.*

Now, I know I can’t prove the dirty boy done it, but y’all gotta believe me. After it was all over and the boy was gone, I

thought it best that I just hightail it on home. I stopped off at the creek to swim 'cause there was a spot or two on my shirt.

Couple months later, I heard my daddy tell another one of his stories about The Farm. Something about the Devil coming to get the old witch. Something about the Devil beating the blood out of her until the spring run red. It was a good story. It even made him get tears in his eyes. I liked his stories about The Farm. I reckon they was meant to keep little boys away from it, and believe you me, they did.

“Who you the dickens you talking to in there, Sonny?”

“Nobody, Daddy. I ain't talking to nobody.”

“Lord help me. Don't lie to me, boy.”

“I's just praying to the Lord, Daddy. You ain't gotta bolt the door like that. Y'all sing with me now:

*Would you be free from your passion and pride?*

*There's power in the blood, power in the blood;*

*Come for a cleansing to Calvary's tide;*

*There's wonderful power in the blood.”*

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# Even Up

*Gary Helm*

## **Localisation**

US English

## **Guidance Note**

Contains some mild swearing.

### I.

Edward Packard walked slowly up the East side of the narrow valley swinging his metal detector. He held a pointed four-foot long steel rod in his other hand to probe the ground wherever the detector made a beep. The valley was now a cow pasture but Packard had permission to go treasure hunting from the farmer who owned the land.

“You find a chest of Confederate Gold—it’s mine,” the farmer laughed.

“I find a chest of Confederate Gold, you’re gonna hafta rassle it from my cold dead fingers,” Edward laughed back.

He parked his car just off the highway beside the pasture, climbed the fence and started quartering the open space. The day was beautiful: warm and clear with a slight breeze to dry the perspiration induced by the North Georgia humidity. Edward was seeking civil war relics. He didn’t really expect to find any gold, but he had found lots of interesting things from his weekend jaunts to the local battle fields, including belt buckles, shoe nails, coins (old and new), broken bayonets and lead minie balls by the hundred. His best find ever was a rusted Navy Colt

pistol. He had found that one buried under a bush on the Antietam Battle Field. He had been forced to leave the pistol in the possession of the Antietam Historical Society, but his name was on a plaque beneath it so he didn't mind.

Beautiful day or not, Edward had not had much luck with his detector so far. He had managed to dodge most of the cow flops that dotted the pasture and had found some cans, wire and other junk but nothing worth hanging onto. He was disappointed. He had hoped to find *something* because this particular cow pasture loomed large in Packard family legend. Great-grandfather Charles Packard had charged west across this valley to stop Federal artillery from raining shot and shell down on Joe Johnston's army as it had moved south in a desperate attempt to head off Sherman's march on Georgia. Charlie Packard had ridden with the Suffolk County Volunteer Light Cavalry as they charged from the tree line on the other side of the highway, but he hadn't made it all the way across the valley. A little more than half way across, amid the exploding shells and flesh tearing grape shot loosed by the guns on the hill, Charlie's horse had been shot from under him and he had crashed down, unconscious. His comrades, though cut to bloody rags by the guns, succeeded in taking the gun position so that Johnston's troops could continue their march south. When Charlie came to his senses he managed to join up with the tail end of Johnston's infantry and finish out the war on foot, getting through without so much as another scratch. He had lived to a hundred years old.

Edward had heard the story a many times from his grandfather who had heard the original story from Charlie himself. Ever since he was a child, Edward had taken a special pride in it and hoped it was true; everyone said he bore a striking

resemblance to old Charlie. The personal connection made it all the more disappointing that the pasture had yielded no treasure.

## II.

The Yankee Artillery battery had run ahead of Sherman's army and set itself on a rise to rain death down on anything that moved through the valley. It was the stopper in the bottleneck that would allow Joe Johnston's Confederate men to retreat south away from the Federal troops who threatened to encircle and swallow them.

Charlie listened with dread to when the officer whose told them that they must take the artillery battery.

"We are gonna wait until almost dark then we gonna hit 'em. What's left of the heavy horse is gonna go first with y'all pretty close behind. We gonna get up on that rise and take them guns. We'll spike 'em so's the rest of Uncle Joe's boys can move on south."

"Sir," someone to Charlie's left said. "They gonna use grape shot and exploding ball, an' use us up before we're halfway 'cross that valley."

The officer looked at the man then swept his eyes over the rest.

"You are probably right, but this is desperate. We must take those guns or the Yankees will sew us up tight here and that will be the end of Uncle Joe's army. Sherman's pushing from the north. We are the only units close enough to stop that. We must take those guns no matter the cost."

There were mummers of agreement through the ranks even though every man was convinced he was going to die a little after dark on this beautiful spring evening.

Charlie Packard was not a coward, though he shook like a leaf in a high wind before every battle. He usually vomited at the first sound of gunfire, but when the troop moved forward he moved with them. Fear was a constant and well-known companion but, apart from the physical symptoms, Charlie mostly disregarded it. He had given himself up for dead months earlier. He had seen horrors that no human should ever see. Friends torn to shreds by walls of screaming minie balls; horses blown to unrecognizable masses of guts; men so afraid they lost control of their most basic bodily functions, and yet they all kept going. Officers told them to charge and they charged, knowing full well that they would never survive.

Charlie knew that the only reason he was still alive was that he had an appointment with death sometime in the near future. It was inevitable. He knew it. As he swung up onto the back of his horse to move into position for the charge he was sure that mystical appointment was waiting just a few moments ahead of him.

*Lord God, Charlie prayed silently, if I gotta die today please let it be quick. Don't let me just get cut in half and lay there screaming like Jimmy the other day. And don't let me get a leg shot off just so's I rot to death in the hospital like Donald Cole. If I gotta die please make it quick.*

The troop moved forward at a walk, then moved up into a trot. The lowering red sun was behind them with the glare right in the gunners' eyes. That was probably why the troop was near a hundred yards into the flat of the valley before the guns opened up on them.

When the first shell burst the troop drove spurs to flanks and began screaming like demons as the horses began to run. Dirt and grass rimmed with explosive fire burst like the flowers of

hell in a line before the charging horses. The men riding did not let their mounts exercise their horse sense to turn away from the punishing noise and terrifying smells, but drove them on into the chaos.

Bone-rattling explosions went off all around Charlie. The concussion of the bursts threw horse and rider from side to the side; in truth Charlie no longer knew if he was charging toward the guns or not, but he drove his heels into his mount's flanks over and over to keep the horse running. He kept his own head down, almost hugging the horse's neck for what little protection it would give him. He never knew what hit him when the cannon ball bounced in front of him and then flew flat, tearing into his mount's chest and throwing Charlie high in the air.

### III.

Edward had truly hoped to find something "Civil War" in the little valley but, though he had swung his detector over a large part of the pasture, he had found nothing worth keeping. *Ah well*, he thought. *Another day*. He swung once more and brought his thumb up to flip the switch, but just as he did the beeper went off. He flipped the switch back on but there was no answering beep. He swung the detector disk around a little more.

*Beep.*

A shiver went through him, though the day was warm. *Goose must have stepped on my grave*, he thought.

Packard moved the disk back and forth some more and soon was centered in on one particular piece of ground. He looked down with some distaste. The detector had centered on a pretty fresh cow flop, and besides that there was something more that bothered him about this find. Something whispered inside his head.

“Okay Eddie,” he asked himself aloud. “How bad do you want to know what’s under the cow pie?” *It’s probably another old beer can or something*, he thought, but still jammed his pointed rod down into the middle of the manure pile. About a six inches down his rod clinked against something hard and the feel of it sent a prickly feeling up his arm and made his breath catch. He began to probe around it to find out how big it was and discovered it was about six inches across. After a little he looked around to find a stick or something to help move the manure so that he could dig.

Packard used a leaf from a nearby catalpa tree to move the cow flop, then pulled a small gardening spade out of his hip pocket. He probed with his rod and dug with the spade; in a few minutes he had unearthed what looked like an odd shaped cannon ball.

“Hum, how ’bout that?” he said to himself, examining it where it lay. The ball was crusted with dirt and rust but seemed to be in pretty good shape. At last he shoved his probe beneath the ball and pried it out of its hole. He brushed as much of the dirt off as he could but it was going to take more than his hands to get the thing clean. He turned it over and over. It wasn’t really a cannon ball. It looked more like a small mortar; holding it in his hands gave him an uneasy feeling.

The sun was going down and when Packard looked up he noticed how red it seemed. A memory of *The Red Badge of Courage* flickered through his mind, about how when the tall soldier died of his wounds “...the sun stood like a red wafer in the sky.”

## IV.

Something pulling at Charlie's leg brought him awake. His head felt cloven and he could hardly breathe because of a weight stacked on his chest. Spears of morning light burned his eyes. He groaned.

"Holy Shit! This one still alive!" the young Negro slave who had been trying to pull off Charlie's boot said.

"Well get him out of there. Roll them bodies off him," a white man wearing pieces of a Confederate uniform commanded.

"Yes Sir, Cap'n. Yes Sir," the boy said and began trying to move the corpses that had been stacked like cordwood. Two other slaves jumped to help him after a moment.

When Charlie was free of the stack of corpses, the slaves gently helped him to sit up while the white man stood beside them watching.

"Just take it easy, Massa. You be all right. We thought ya'll was dead. We's sorry we stacked ya like that."

"Water," Charlie croaked. He felt like his throat was full of grave dirt.

"Showe, showe, Massa." The slave did not offer his own canteen but took the one the white man extended to him and held it to Charlie's lips.

Charlie took a sip then grabbed the canteen from the other's hand and drank in huge gulps.

"Best take it easy, Massa. Too much water too quick'll founder ya!"

The words had no more than passed the slaves lips when Charlie vomited a muddy brown mess between his legs. Two or three more heaves and nothing but clear liquid came up and

when the spasms stopped the slave handed him the canteen again. "Just a little 'is time, Massa. Jus rench ya mouth out."

After a few more sips of water Charlie was more aware of what was going on and he said, "Y'all was tryin' to steal my boots, wasn't ya? Robbin' the dead."

"Wasn't stealin' nothing'" the white man said. "We was taking boots and anything useful to give 'em to the living since y'all was dead and couldn't use 'em no more. No need in burying perfectly good boots and coats and britches when they's plenty of live fightin' men havin' to go bare foot and nigh nekkid."

After a moments considering Charlie looked around, then up the slope where the guns had been. They were not there any longer. "What happened?" Charlie asked. "Did we take the guns?"

"Don' know," the white man said. "Happened 'fore we got here."

"Uncle Joe's boys?"

"Moved through yesterday, headed south," the white man said. He looked around, something anxious in his glance. "Can you stand up?" he asked. "We need to be movin'. Yankee patrols all over."

Charlie rolled himself to his hands and knees, avoiding his spew, then pushed up to a shaky stand. He tried a step and didn't fall down, so he tried another and then another after that. He walked toward a wagon that was piled high with boots, pieces of clothing and a few weapons. He looked down at his waist seeking his pistol only to discover that both pistol and pistol belt were gone.

"It in the wagon, Massa. Since you alive, you can have it back."

The white man, whose name was Arthur Cobb, left three slaves beside the pile of dead soldiers with instructions to finish digging the mass grave. Cobb, the young slave, and Charlie drove the loaded wagon up the highway. After about a mile Cobb turned the mules onto a faint track that lead back into the woods and after another mile or two they came to what remained of a farm. The house was burned to the ground as were several out buildings but the well house still stood and what looked like the sod roof of a storage cellar.

Late in the evening, the young slave Osiris built a fire to warm some cornpone and pinto beans for them. There was no foolishness about master and slave with this food. Osiris dipped beans into tin plates and laid a hunk of cornpone on top. All the men sat around the fire to eat.

Packard noticed that the young slave kept looking at him as the night closed in around them. After a while it began to unnerve him.

“What you lookin’ at, boy?” he snapped.

Osiris dropped his eyes, “I’s sorry, Massa.”

“What was you lookin’ at? I got something on my face?”

“No, Suh. T’wernt nothing’. I’s sorry...”

Packard felt a chill that had nothing to do with the rising damp of the evening. “What did you see, boy?” He demanded. “Tell me!”

“Go ‘head and tell him, Osiris,” Cobb ordered. “We can all see it.”

“Yas Suh,” the young slave said. “Massa Charlie, they’s a light about you that ain’t natural.”

“A light? What kinda light?”

“Corpse light,” Cobb said, “like the glow comes from a corpse sometimes, after it been laying out a couple days. Like the way fox fire glows on an old stump.”

Packard looked from face to face thinking they were just trying to scare him, but in none of their faces, black or white, did he see any hint that this was a joke or a ghost story.

“Massa Charlie,” Osiris went on. “I b’lieve you s’pose to be dead, but you ain’t. I b’lieve Massa Death made a mistake and didn’ take you when he was s’pose to.”

Packard blinked then shook his head in angry dismissal. “I’m alive an’ all that other is just superstition.”

“Yas Suh, if you says so, but soon or late Massa Death, he gonna count up an’ when he do he gonna notice you missin’, and he gonna even things up.”

## V.

Ed took the strange looking shell home and put it in the garage, away from prying eyes. He did a quick Internet search and found that the shell was indeed from a small mortar, called a “kettle gun.” Their shells were among the first to have impact detonators and had only been in limited use because they were unpredictable and as likely to explode in the hands of the man servicing the gun as on impact.

“Hm,” Packard said to himself, turning the shell over in his hands. “No way it’s still live.”

He put it on his work bench and turned to get a gallon can of paint thinner to clean the rust. He didn’t notice the shell roll off the bench and fall toward the floor.

# The Finish Line

*Ethel Rohan*

## **Localisation**

US English

## **Reader Guidance**

No cautions needed

Sunlight shines through the curtains above Dad's bed; my shirt sticks to my back. Dad insists, grunting, on keeping the window closed. The small room reeks of his sweat and incontinence pads. I take shallow breaths. Dad motions for me to begin, his own breathing like water down a drain. I shift in the chair and fold the newspaper in two. Pen aimed, I read aloud the horses' names. Every now and then Dad nods, indicating the horse he wants to back.

Dad only developed an interest in the horses after his stroke, and has won quite a few of his races, too, his luck all the more amazing when his only concern is the horse's name. The doorbell rings: the social worker, Maureen, here to relieve me. Dad watches me, his good eye intelligent. I try not to hurry from the room.

Maureen steps into the hall, talking in that breathless voice she has. Despite the heat, she's wearing her grey wool coat and beige tights. She complains about her day so far: the traffic, the hassles of getting her children to school, the pain in her lower back.

We're probably a similar age, forty-one, -two, but Maureen has the air of someone much older. She struggles out of her coat

and hooks it on the banister, loosening the nut-size bun at the nape of her neck. I've shown her the coat closet but she never uses it. Overhead, Dad bangs his cane on his floor.

I move onto the stairs after her as she goes to respond.

"Maureen, there are a few things I wanted to go over again."

She half turns, her face pained and her hand supporting her lower back.

Would she please put Dad's used pads *in the bin* and be sure to sponge-bathe him *every day*? Her pale hand tightens on the stair-rail. I press on, my heart fast and loud. And could she keep phone calls to a minimum, give Dad as much of her time as possible? She presses her pale lips together, rigid as Dad's Zimmer frame.

In his bedroom, Dad reaches for the TV remote control, raising the volume too high. It's enough to exhaust him and he drops back onto the high pillows. From the TV, a bugle blares. The horses are out the post. Dad thrusts his head forward, egging on the steeds. His horse is number seven, *Lightning Strikes*. They gallop around the track, dirt flying and jockeys' colors streaking past. Number seven's silks are a brilliant red and white mix. The horses round the bend, pound toward the home stretch. *Higher*, Dad gestures to the TV with his good arm. I raise the volume, loud enough to hurt our ears. The horses turn the final corner, sweaty and shining. Dad rocks side to side, shouting. I'm half-out the chair, also cheering.

Dad's horse is going all out, the stallion's neck stretching far from its body. The crowd rises from the bleachers, roaring. Several people scale the fences. It's a photo finish.

The silence is startling.

Dad's chin drops to his chest. I touch his arm; his head comes up. The judges announce their decision. A deafening

noise erupts. *Lightning Strikes* has won. His eyes closed, Dad tilts his head to the side, as though straining to hear something no one else can, an ecstatic look on his face. I think it is the most beautiful and terrible thing I will ever see.

The following week, Dad suffers a second major stroke and is hospitalized.

“I said those horse races were too much for him,” Maureen says.

I want to hit her.

Three weeks pass. Dad is discharged from the hospital. His doctor places him on a priority list for a nursing home. He encourages me, between bouts of a smoker’s cough, to seek a carers’ support group. Meanwhile, I hire Maureen privately. She’ll work ten extra hours a week, in addition to the twelve the state allows us.

I sit at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for Maureen. Any time I’ve mentioned the nursing home to Dad, trying to prepare him, he looks at me as if I’ve stabbed him. He’s only been home from the hospital two days, and I’m already so tired I feel ill. I leave the house as soon as Maureen arrives.

At the end of our street, I hail a taxi. Town, I tell the driver, his wedding band barely visible at the base of his thick finger. We pass my workplace, a tall brownstone building. I don’t miss the office, accounting. In truth, some part of me welcomed Dad’s illness, glad to take a break from it all.

Inside the department store, gorgeous women call from behind the cosmetics counters, touting puffs of perfume and samples of body lotion. I buy a bottle of eau-de-toilette shaped like the Egyptian Pyramids. I determine to see them someday.

The Chanel woman, with luminous brown eyes and a luscious blond beehive, promises to transform me. She brushes foundation on my forehead, cheeks, and chin, her touch electric.

I buy black high-heels with spaghetti straps. The sales assistant tells me I have nice ankles. His hair is so thin and blond I can see his pink scalp. I smile uncertainly. No one has ever complimented my ankles before. He's young and inexperienced; the moustache fuzz doesn't fool me but I choose to believe him. He bags my old pumps and I keep the new shoes on. I have never felt so tall.

Waiting on a fitting room, the pile of clothes weighs down my arm. I look at the clock. I cannot possibly try on all these clothes and be back in time for Maureen. I'll have to return another time. Or I could stay, forget about Maureen and Dad, and go someplace special wearing this new look—say, a champagne lunch at the Westbury; something I've always wanted to do.

Maureen pounces as soon as I turn my key in the front door. Dad is shouting and banging overhead.

“He threw a book at me,” she says.

I know the one, the Brit-lit hardback he keeps on his nightstand.

“This isn't going to work. He went mad when you stayed away so long.”

I open my wallet, count out her money. The sight of cash mollifies her. I see her to the front door.

She turns on the doorstep. “His pad's soiled, too; he wouldn't let me near him.”

Dad calls repeatedly. Funny that he can still say my name so clear. I climb the stairs, pulling myself up by the banister. His stink hits me at the top of the landing. I picture how ridiculous I

will look in my high heels and Chanel make-up wiping the shit from between the flaps that were his buttocks, off his shriveled scrotum.

I can smell myself in Dad's room, my odors mixing with his. I'm with him almost round the clock now, except for Maureen's brief shifts. Dad coughs. My eyes, nose, and throat hurt, the air is so dry. I lick my chapped lips. Dad's lips are also peeling. I put the plastic straw to his mouth, urge him to drink. He refuses, points at the TV. I force the straw between his teeth, lift some dead skin off his lower lip. He bleeds. Still, his only concern is the afternoon races. I turn on the TV. We catch the end of the first race. The commentator announces that one of the favorites—a horse called *Vixen*—suffered a broken leg when she fell and would have to be put down. I turn to Dad. He's staring at the screen, his forefinger pressed to his temple; he fires.

After the races, Dad wants to pick his horses for the following day. I reach for the newspaper and read through the list. Dad doesn't choose a horse. I read the list in the second race. I'm almost finished, and again he hasn't selected a horse.

"Are you okay?"

His head moves in a "get on with it" motion. I resume reading. He nods at the second to last name. I circle it in red ink. We make slow progress through six races.

"Let's leave it for today," I say.

He shakes his head. I resume reading. He nods. I circle the next name and freeze. I look from this last one—*Assassin*—to the others he's chosen.

*Nothing To Chance*

*Badfella*

*Off We Go*

*Give Me The Sky*

He pulls on the pillow under his head.

“What are you doing?”

He keeps tugging the pillow, his head rolling toward the wall. The grid of creases on the back of his neck look like gouges.

I’m frozen.

He manages to pull the pillow out from underneath him; his head drops to the mattress.

I’m afraid he’ll look at me, see I don’t want to stop him.

With his one good hand, he presses the pillow to his face.

I finally spring from the chair. “No.”

I grab at the pillow, holding it high over his head. Hope shines from his face. My arms tremble above him.

The doorbell rings.

I shake my head, spilling tears.

His cries, like a banshee’s, chase me down the stairs. Maureen’s blurred figure retreats in the front door’s glass. I reach to turn the handle, call out to her, but stop.

Slowly, slowly, I turn back up the stairs, still holding Dad’s pillow.

# The Captive Life of Kurtis Dillinger

*Josiah Franco*

## **Localisation**

US English

## **Reader Guidance**

Contains violence, cannibalism and rough language.

Now little more than a brain in a ziplock bag, tucked into the back of her freezer, the curse of my condition becomes maddeningly clear. I remember, the pig's name is Kurtis Dillinger, and it makes its demands well known through a constant stream of profane squealing. Mrs. W. Dillinger can, somehow, understand each piercing syllable, and often wonders how the thing knows so much about the inner workings of her mind. GODS DAMN YOUR EYES, PETULANT WOMAN, it oinks, HAVEN'T YOU GOT ENOUGH ON YOUR PLATE ALREADY?

She does. The plate in question will be a white porcelain affair with blue tracery, filled with candy corn, mashed potatoes slathered in gravy, collard greens, and a slab of OTHERDAMNMEAT. Fancy stuff for the hag in the woods. She casts her considerable gaze on the front door, expecting me to swing it open at any minute. She knows though, I like to keep her waiting.

The hair on my arms begins to bristle as I walk the old forest trail to her old hut. A thought has been pecking at my mind the whole way here. A pesky little worry bird of apprehension keeps

on chirping about bad trips and death and darkness. I've been coming out this way for months, and have no reason at all for these lurid ideas—still... The hemlock overhead makes a dusky twilight of the early afternoon, and I can smell the sharp green pine sap. I arrive on time, but decide to be seven minutes fashionably late. I light a Pall Mall, hunker down on her stoop, and consider what I will say Mrs. W. Dillinger. *No wonder the woman's so pale, I think.* The pig lets off another blood curdler. Hansel's dead, Gretel's nothing but Tupperware leftovers in back of the fridge. Now she's working on Kurtis. My reverie is cut short as she begins to yowl.

“Door's open, Padre! Why don't you put that thing out and we can get this over with.” I crush the butt into her untended flower pot and step inside. I'm grinning at first—a theologian's grin, I think, sardonic, puerile, and fake—but this fades when I notice the doorknob is sticky.

“How many times must I tell you, I am not a priest. And what the hell are you eating? Always eating. Always something. It's a wonder you don't burst.”

“Pork is a rare commodity these days,” she says, “We here in OURNECKOFTHEWOODS is fortunate and fat, if you ken my meaning.”

It's too much. The sight of her grease-smearred mug is enough to cause anyone's stomach to do the whirligig. My teeth begin to tingle, and I can hear the gristle and ligaments slosh and pop in her ugly maw.

“How can you eat that OTHERDAMNMEAT?” I say. “Can't you see it's completely destroyed your humanity?”

“Look, Padre,” says she, “I ain't trying to cause no NAZIPIECEOFSHITSANDWICH trouble here, I just enjoy the

taste of a good porkchop in my mouth now and again. I love the way it dances around my mouth like a rag-doll ballerina.”

“I’m not a goddamn priest, you gooey sack of CORRUPTEDTOMBS,” I say and kick her. I feel my foot sink deeply into her spleen, hear the faint gushing oomph that she spews into the general atmosphere. A momentary loss of temper, but it turns out to be a bad mistake. She stands and growls—yes actually *growls*! And the growl rumbles lowly and then begins to jolt up in register until it is a DNDDDDNDNDNDNnnn BARK@THEMOON! And she begins to peel. Flesh tears off, revealing the hairy musculature beneath.

HAIRY MUSCULATURE!

*What!*

*But!*

I thought I was the only—

I mean! She can't be a—

My thoughts are cut short, extinguished in my own howls and those of Mrs. Wolfe Dillinger. And my head is gone.

Gone.

Gone into pleasure!

Horrible claws tear down my thatllgivehimsomething totalkaboutinthemorning back. And I heave a rasping breath as she tears into my back, puncturing my left lung and grasping my spine. She lets me slop to the floor and leaves me staring slantwise at the yard. I see her, my spine in hand, plod across the grass, stop at the OTHERDAMNMEAT fence, and begin to howl.

“HERE SOOIE, SOOIE, SOOIE! I HAVE SOME-THING NICE FOR yooooouu,” she grumbles. IT CAN TALK, I think, and then another thought follows, a blissful dart of sing-songy, non sequitural madness—Kurtis got a peg leg, walks around his

pen. Kurtis don't know it, but she's coming back again. Wolfrage firing down now. I can feel it slipping away, but I scream.

“Why don't you eat me yourself you werewolf bitch?”

She turns around and fixes me with those yellow sick eyes that match my own.

“Because ye didn't understand me,” the wolfbitch says through bared fangs. The world is fading, coming to a point, going gray.

And all I can think is: JUST LIKE A WOMAN.

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# Willy D

*Derek Osborne*

## Localisation

US English

## Reader Guidance

Drug use from the start

Most guys hid out when they got short. Some did the job same as the day they landed in country. For a few, The ‘Nam just kept getting better. Immortals, we called them, high on God knows what.

For Willy, it was LSD. He got the “D” tacked on to his name that way. He loved to walk point—loved it, he said—the last duty anyone in their right mind wanted. Willy was a big man and marched through the bush like a Bourbon Street funeral. He said it confused the enemy; they’d figure he had to be nuts. They’d let him by but he’d be watching, then drop and start throwing grenades. We always gave him two or three extra. He liked the noise they made. He liked to close his eyes and roll up into a ball as the dull *whump* hit and darkness turned into 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

Willy said things got cleaner on acid. Shadows of green on green turned to patterns and primary colors. He could hear a mosquito land half a click down. Any movement, any movement at all, caused ripples in the dense, soaking heat like stones thrown into a quiet pool. Instead of the jungle, Willy saw lines and blinking red arrows pointing at bunkers, little guys dressed like Cupid and tunnels full of velveteen rabbits. Snakes and centipedes spoke to him in strange tongues. The rains, like Rivendell’s water falls, purified his soul.

On a good day, with Willy in the zone, an ambush was more like Sunday in Greenwich Village. For a moment—a tripped out, Disney-staged moment—all the little men sipping tea, discussing Kafka, would smile and wave as he came down the trail. Dick Van Dyke danced among the tables, wearing his white shoes and pink striped jacket. He'd wink and tip his hat, the signal, and Willy would drop and start pitching. He knew the grenades fell short, but the flash and the noise caused the VC to cover, just long enough for the killers in our squad to set up. Most fights lasted seconds. For Willy, seconds flowed into hours, clocks hanging up in the trees melting Dali-like onto the rocks and ferns; napalm did that, so did the moans of men.

I never really believed Willy was tripping when he walked point, but for some reason he wanted us to think he was. Since he was liked and pulled his weight we played along. It was unspoken, whatever it took, provided you did the job. Of course, the beauty of it all was Willy never got hit. He left Vietnam in February, 1973 without so much as a scratch.

I had been home nearly four years when I got the call. Willy was gone, his sister said, did I want to be one of the pallbearers?

The service in Iron Bound Newark was packed. It seemed he had once played high-school ball and due, I imagine, to his gentle ways, had made many friends. The line came down the church steps and formed around the corner. His family spread out across the entire first row of pews. I remembered him telling me he was number seven of eleven. His mother, a tiny, dignified woman, sat with hands folded. His father was a wreck, and he greeted me as we walked towards the coffin.

“You were with him, weren't you?” he asked, taking my hand, “He spoke of you, the white boy who covered his ass.”

“We were friends,” I said.

“Is it true he never fired his rifle?”

“I think so,” I lied.

He looked back over to Willy’s mother to introduce me, but thought better of it.

“I told him the Lord sees everyone’s heart.”

He looked again at his wife.

“She tried so hard.”

He stood, using my arm like a railing, half hugging and half leading me up to the open casket, smelling like snot and cigarettes and whiskey. There was no Honor Guard, no friends to fold the flag. As far as the rest of the world cared, Willy died a junkie.

“I guess he needed to rest,” he said as we stood there.

I reached inside my coat, placing my Silver Star in his hands, the white ribbon, the red and blue stripes bright against his skin.

“They never did get this right,” I told him.

# Drifting

*Stef Donati*

## **Localisation**

US English

## **Reader Guidance**

No caution required

Mom and Dad and I had stayed at this very cabin last summer. We'd swapped riddles, toasted marshmallows. We'd sung the tunes Dad used to write. That time, I'd slept under the stars, away from them both, where he couldn't touch me or make her admit I was prettier.

Last night, I slept inside. To return here I'd hitched three rides and walked two full hours. Waking now, at daybreak, I went to the cabin's lone window. Overnight a heavy snow had fallen, but there were fresh footprints leading up to the cabin. I blinked. I blinked twice. But the footprints were still there.

I wasn't alone.

The prints stopped at the cabin's edge. Or, I thought crazily, they began from it, reaching in a straight line to the forest up ahead. Whoever had made them could have done anything. Smashed this window, broken this lock, grabbed me.

*Dad.*

The footprints had to be his. He'd trailed me here, with his fellow officers acting as scouts. Or he'd known all along where I would run. Mr. Policeman never could let a bad guy escape. Or a good daughter.

He had come and then left, as a taunt. But he would be back. I wasn't like his music dreams or his marriage vows. I was

something he wanted to keep. And if he did drag me home, he'd tell lies. *Oh, she's just troubled. We're getting her help...*

And his advances would continue.

On weary legs, and with shoulders that ached from lugging my knapsack all yesterday, how could I elude him again?

I gripped the switchblade in the pocket of my jeans. If he caught up with me, I'd drive it into his throat.

*Yes I would.*

Then I'd reach the highway, snag a ride, and disappear.

Maybe write Mom a letter, let her know I was okay.

I laced my boots, put on my mittens and coat, and crept outside. My boots crunched along the packed snow, stomping onto the footprints, matching their ghostly stride step for step. He might still be nearby, plotting his apologies.

*Plot away, Dad. Hurting me was one thing, but hurting Mom... She's the one you should try to love.*

Starting last summer, here, they had talked of wanting a baby brother or sister for me. If Mom was secretly pregnant now, the kid wouldn't have me around as protector. *You're an only child, they'd lie. And we love you.* Showing just enough non-hate so the kid would believe them.

I trudged on.

Yesterday, two blocks from home—their home, now—I began craving one last glimpse of Mom. Even of him.

I should have at least swiped an old photo. Of a father who might again become decent if I just—

*Keep moving. Use the switchblade if you need to.*

Dad's crooning, Mom's reality shows, school thugs and gym classes and algebra tests. I could avoid all of them, forever and ever, if I chose.

At the base of the forest, twigs crackled beneath me. The footprints started to zigzag. Beyond naked trees, on the highway turn-off, I glimpsed a sedan. The color and the make were familiar.

*Him.*

I kept low, until I thought this might not be Dad after all.

Mom could drive, too.

If she'd found the guts to escape, there could be a better future for both of us. Or, if a baby was inside her, for the three of us.

I scrambled up the hill. From the driver's seat, as I approached, a figure rose.

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# Backswings

*David Erlewine*

## **Localisation**

US English

## **Reader Guidance**

Contains high-class ultraviolence

Days like today, I can't imagine going back to school next month. I pound my fist into my glove, admiring the cloud of dust. A few minutes later, I make a diving catch and hold the ball aloft. A couple of the other outfielders yell "show-off" and "asshole". I wink and hurl the ball towards the kid playing catcher for Chris's dad, Mr. Reynolds.

Mr. Reynolds loves assembling teen-agers in his outfield and hitting us fly balls. He developed a computer chip, retired at 29, and bought out his neighbors. Over their homes' carcasses now sit a go-cart track, a wraparound bar, and a baseball diamond. His son, Chris, who I've known since preschool, always stands in center field. In far right field are little spikes and old munitions, in left a pit of quicksand.

Johnny Hammond fell in the quicksand last week. Mr. Reynolds raced towards us from home plate, screaming "Nobody touch him!" Johnny stood pretty still as Mr. Reynolds lectured us on the importance of doing just what Johnny was doing, only stiller. "The quicksand represents all the shithead creditors out there," he said, jabbing his finger at Johnny's slightly visible forehead. "They're just waiting for you to slip, panic, and get

nailed.” When all but Johnny’s hair was gone, Mr. Reynolds grabbed the curly locks and yanked him up.

Every morning this summer my little brother Carl and I have choked down breakfast so we can head over. Mom usually walks us over, dropping us off near the home dugout then strolling over to the bar. Sometimes she and the bartender go inside the house.

Now, Mr. Reynolds bashes one over our heads, clearing the left-center fence. He throws his hands in the air and circles the bases. Chris runs in to high-five his dad as he stomps on home plate.

No one else ever gets to bat. Sometimes one or two of us get to play third base, trying to deflect smashing grounders and line drives. Carl and the other youngsters hang around the dug-out, getting Oreo packets and Cokes from the vending machine, yelling things when we make errors.

Fresh from his home-run trot, Mr. Reynolds bashes one over our heads. I sprint back, eyeing the approaching wall, and at the last second catch it barehanded. I start jawing at the other outfielders, taking a few seconds to realize they are all staring at home plate. I squint towards home, unable to see much, just a little figure lying down. I sprint in, finding Carl’s nose hanging next to his left ear. His forehead is caved in. Mr. Reynolds shakes his head. “Little guy walked into my backswing.” He helps me carry Carl to the house. He types in the security code. In the living room, four guys stand over my mom while the bartender yells “come on guys, look alive here!”

“Mom, Carl is messed up!”

She shakes her handcuffed hands at me. “Just watch your brother, baby.”

The doctors are at least able to fix his nose, for the most part. My dad's law firm gives him 48 hours off to deal with the assorted family crises. From the hospital lobby, he makes some calls. That night, some big, quiet guys show up at the hospital. They grill me about the security password and the layout of his house. When I explain I've never been upstairs or to the basement, one of them spits on the linoleum.

The next day, Mr. Reynolds' son Chris stops his wheelchair when he sees me in the hall by Carl's room. Bandages cover Chris's hands and feet. "Fuckers sliced off my toes and thumbs." He shakes his head.

That night, in the hospital lobby, our dads sign a bulky document promising not to take any further action against one another. They leave us to deal with the rest.

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# Maple Season

*Marsheila Rockwell*

## Localisation

US English

## Reader Guidance

Sexual content

April, and frozen Vermont nights  
Give way to spring-thaw days  
Our time, my love  
\*

I find you, as always  
Waiting in our special place  
Behind the *cabane à sucre*  
\*

You are shy at first, even coy  
Walled off from me  
But I always find a new way in  
\*

One hard thrust –  
I know it hurts, my darling,  
But only for a moment –  
\*

Then my twin spiles slide gently  
Into your sweet phloem  
And you yield your sap to me  
\*

Buddy this year, like bitter chocolate

But still a taste of a heaven  
I lost long ago and yet cannot forget

\*

And brief – so brief! – but my embrace  
Shall not girdle you; I release you  
To wait another long year for my return

\*

The only evidence of my visit,  
A keepsake I leave you:  
Two dark, perfect drops

\*

Sugar on snow

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# RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

## ~AFTERWORD~

Welcome to our second issue!

We have made slight tweaks to format and contents for this issue. RPM's subscribers have said that they would prefer a shorter edition, published more frequently, so in future we will bring out editions on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of each month with around eight stories (and a little poetry).

This should keep your fiction senses bubbling away nicely.

As ever, **please do** keep submissions rolling in; without our writers—and the diligent Stewart Baker, our Poetry Editor and glorious webmaster—we are nothing.

Also, **please don't** hesitate to send errata or any other comments to me at [editor@ruthlesspeoples.com](mailto:editor@ruthlesspeoples.com).

Yours truly,

Dominic Hamer  
**Editor**