



UNDERTOW

BY

Thomas R. Long

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

I like, "Undertow," by Thomas Long because it scares me. I think about a man who has a wife, estranged, walking up and down life. A man who may have kids, we don't quite know, but certainly shouldn't. A man with a woman who is definitively not his wife, but who siren calls him

towards her. A man who manages a relationship with such delusion and toxicity that it almost seems beautiful. A man who murders people.

For the record, I don't murder people, but when characters who murder people come up in my day I don't try to shy away from the possibility of empathy – that would be what makes them good characters.

What did Harvey Keitel say?

“That you are a character doesn't mean you have character.”

Something like that.

This story has character. This story manages to gut-punch you a few times though it may still seem that your getting offered a chocolate covered strawberry, the carrot and the stick, and as you read, stuck in your chair because it can take a minute, you can almost understand why.

Almost.

I think about a man who would do anything for love and it scares me.

“Undertow” is about the desperation for love, the need to be needed, to have your desires to be fulfilled, only, and in true fashion, to be taken to the brink and broken for grandeur.

I hope this story scares you a bit too because there is a lot of love here.

Enjoy.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language...)

Princess ignores me, chewing her next piece of pizza slowly, eyes closed. She moans softly, like how I imagine a dolphin might moan. She makes love to her slice, licking the under crust before sucking off a layer of cheese. She makes me a little sick, and a little aroused.

Her fingers are like tentacles that suck and kiss my body. Greedy mouths, bumps and craters, hardness where others have softness, softness where others are hard. We pulsate up and down together defying gravity with our antediluvian magic. Wonderful puss explodes out of our bodies. It's all one, dark and beautiful.

Why do we kill what we love? Because the things we love are too much like ourselves. We love what we love until it is nothing but our love, and our love is only us. Again alone. It is ourselves we can't stand.

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Princess reclines in the sand next to me, supporting herself with her meaty arms. Bobby Boy, a mangy little Border Terrier she heard barking from a steakhouse dumpster last Tuesday night, nibbles the belly skin peeking out from under her pink sweats. We are alone in our corner by the sea. The off-season chill blows across the empty beach.

“You know, Carmen hates the boardwalk, but she loves the beach,” I say to break a ten-minute stretch of silence. Even before completing the sentence, I regret mentioning my wife.

“That’s the darndest.” Princess only makes the necessary facial movements to produce the sound.

Bobby Boy yelps at the distant blast of a steam whistle. My attention is drawn to a fishing boat approaching a freighter five times its size. Both ships are poised on the horizon like cardboard facsimiles at the boardwalk shooting galleries. They’re headed for an imminent collision, and I grunt to bring Princess’ attention to the scene. The ships collide on the horizon but miss each other by a hidden separation I didn’t perceive. Princess opens another bag of chips and places one in Bobby Boy’s eager mouth.

“I’ve discovered magic,” Princess says before filling her own mouth.

I let the comment sit for a moment. We haven’t started drinking yet. I wait for her to elaborate, but after a minute my curiosity gets the better of me.

“And what kind of magic is this?”

“Possession of others, or more to the point, dispossession of self.”

“So, you’ve finally found the Necronomicon, the fabled text that will allow you to summon the ancient ones.”

“I’m serious, you fuck.”

She slowly chews the corn-chip mulch in her mouth, and in no time, I feel guilty.

“I’ll bite. What magic is this?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

“You can’t tell me never mind, not after a bomb like that.”

“But you’re not going to believe me anyway, so never mind.”

“All right, then just never mind it.”

Princess has tied Bobby Boy to a bike rack outside Giuseppe's pizzeria at the entrance to the boardwalk. I glimpse his pink snout bouncing into view through the window. Princess eats pizza like I imagine cannibals eating flesh in some prehistoric savanna. She holds the slice over her upwardly stretched face and tears pieces off with her teeth, sucking the strips into her mouth. I divert my attention to a pale boy with long, greasy hair. He has spider-thin arms but wears a gray wife beater. The boy sits at a table across from us with his arm around a girl, equally awkward and spindly. Her hair is short and bright red, her face marked by disfiguring clusters of freckles. The boy, cratered with acne, is uncomfortable in his body. They seem sewn to each other with their stuttering kisses and whispered secrets.

Princess seems as oblivious to the teenagers as she does to the three tomato-sauce splotches on her pink blouse.

“Come on Princess. I’m sorry. Tell me about the magic.”

“You know, sometimes I eat so fast I forget to enjoy the food,” Princess says, staring at the crust in her hand.

“The magic thing,” I remind her.

She ignores me until she senses that I’m about to ask again.

“Okay, so we ordered a split pizza. Your half is mushroom and onions, a weak pizza if you ask me. My half is majestic: sausage, pepperoni, ham, anchovies, and extra cheese.”

“Yeah, and your half doubled the price.”

“Look, you cheap prick, the point is, I could imagine liking your side of the pizza if I were you. If I think real hard, imagine taking a bite with your mouth, I can even taste your side.”

I hold out a slice from my half, “You don’t have to imagine anything. Just take a bite.”

Princess sneers in disgust, “No, dickhead, it’s not about me trying your half. It’s about me being you, trying that slice.”

I’m silent. I thought that if I pushed the point Princess would falter and get that involuntary grin that always betrays her pranks. Nothing.

“I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together,” Princess says. She hums the tune as she chews another mouthful.

“Magic ain’t real unless it’s quantifiable, and I thought you hated the Beatles.”

After a long pause, when she senses that I’m on the verge of saying screw this, she drops her pizza slice.

“All right, this is it.” Princess reaches across the table and grabs my wrist. I instinctively pull away, but she grabs it again, and holds it against the table. She closes her eyes, wrinkles her forehead, and reopens her eyes eerily wide.

“Look over there, that table, the two teenagers.”

“Didn’t think you noticed them.”

“I didn’t,” Princess says. “What kind of pizza are they eating?”

“Just cheese. That’s a stupid question. Just cheese. It’s obvious.

“No, not just cheese, but the best tasting cheese pizza in the world. Bednar Gnaly. That is Bednar Gnaly. Came to America, lived in Hagerstown with his mother. Immigrants from Transnistria. But, at the age of 13, with only a little schoolhouse English, a pizza-pie face, and a foreigner’s name, he felt like a fly among spiders. He changed Bednar to Berry, an American enough name, but, added to his inescapable surname, it translated into middle-school American English as Very Gnarly. Uncle Lomy kept an old Colt pistol in a living-room draw. He showed Bednar how to shoot beer cans lined up on the barbeque pit behind his farmhouse.

“The daily belittlement from his classmates became unbearable. Bednar brought his uncle’s gun to school in a lunch bag one morning and shot an upperclassman in the kneecap. He would have shot a lot more of the sneering devil faces, but the gun jammed.

“The first year of juvenile detention brought unspeakable things. Put in with older boys, he suffered the pain of their growing sex organs. But Bednar was inventive, and he used the plastic from his feed-up trays to bind together a fistful of dismembered library earphones. Using his dorm’s rough floor, over a period of weeks, he sharpened the mass of metal into a formidable weapon.

“His weapon made one boy a eunuch and punctured the lung of another. He spent the next two years in solitary. Always being a solitary soul, he adjusted to the loneliness a little too quickly. He created new worlds on the scant writing paper he received, and then on the walls when he ran out of paper. He created dimensions full of dragons and space aliens, monster insects and intricate flower cities, vampire queens and cotton candy forests. It was almost a disappointment when they took him from the cell on his eighteenth birthday.

“His uncle was now in jail, and his mother was gone without a trace. The halfway house was worse than juvie, and in the streets, there was nothing that incarceration hadn’t prepared him for. But dreams of connectedness never really go away. Perhaps his travails were a blessing. Perhaps they gave him a second sight, a way of seeing below the surface of things, to find a soul like his walking the beach, a soul that didn’t show fear, scorn, pity, annoyance, or superiority in his presence, someone to share a pizza with.”

“Are you reading yourself into this relationship?” I ask, unwilling to admit how much her impromptu biography has unsettled me.

Princess ignores me, chewing her next piece of pizza slowly, eyes closed. She moans softly, like how I imagine a dolphin might moan. She makes love to her slice, licking the under crust before sucking off a layer of cheese. She makes me a little sick, and a little aroused.

“Alright, I get it. Princess? Enough!”

I leave Princess behind. I don’t know why I thought this whole thing, diving back into my past, trying to dissolve away my current life with my past life, would fix anything. The past was never that great. Princess no longer seems like a redemptive breath of nostalgia. Seeing that craziness in the pizza shop makes me think of her as an anchor pulling me under, a siren seducing my weaknesses and dragging me back to past pleasures.

I have a few beers and whiskey shots in a local bar to forget Princess’ dramatics. A large man in overalls, blue and comic, strikes up a conversation about the upcoming gubernatorial, or as he says, govern’torial race. I’m in the mood for passionate agreement.

“Damn liberal media don’t want you to know...”

“You know it brother...”

“Need to reward entrepreneurship...”

“Damn freeloading seagulls...”

“Can’t pander to no terrorist...”

“That’s the key. I’m buying the next drink for this true patriot...”

I’m out in the street. I don’t think my experiment with the locals ended badly. This time, there are no bruises on my face, and no blood on my shirt. The people are out tonight, laughing, enjoying the brisk air. They are more a wave than a collection of individuals.

I lost my cell phone two days ago, and I have to try three payphones before I find one that works. It’s situated across from a cotton candy booth in front of the amusement rides with their pulsating assault of light and noise. It takes me three tries to get the number right.

“Carmen?” I shout over the noise.

Click.

I call again, “Carmen, please don’t hang up.”

Click.

I walk the boardwalk, engulfed by the crowds. Drowning. I swim to a seaward bench and slump against the backrest. The cold acts as a solvent to the paint of intoxication, and the surrounding colors and sounds dissolve away. A woman leaves the bench when I start to talk. I’m quiet. I realize there have been no crowds. The rides are shut down for the winter.

I see the pizza-shop kid on the night beach walking hand in hand with the tattered redhead. They now wear hoodies. I wonder if all the things Princess said could be true. Of course, they could be. I’m fascinated, hooked by the idea of this skinny wreck experiencing the best day of his life while I wallow in self-pity. What separates us but a short distance of sand, a thin layer of flesh, and a lifetime of irrelevant memories? What’s more, I don’t feel like myself, any self for that matter. All the things that tie me to me, that let me say hey, it’s me to some lost friend, seem inconsequential.

And in that second, I make the leap. We walk along the beach holding hands. Quiet. She’s perfect, so accepting. There’s an older man watching me from a bench, some drunk. He looks like my shop teacher from the state school.

There’s warmth, a glow that might lift me on a wave till the end of my life. And the poor girl, an outcast like me. A kindred soul. A compatriot against them, all those who would mistake an act of kindness for murder. All those who would condemn me if they found her body floating in the sea, face up, bobbing – a rigor-mortis boat.

Princess wakes me as she plays with my testicles. It’s dark, but I smell the familiar stale air of the beach house. I’m relieved. Somehow, I made it back.

I can feel an erection, an erection that’s mine and not the other’s. I hear Bobby Boy in the dark gnawing on a towel, or a shoe, or a corner of the rug.

“I’m too drunk for that,” I say.

“My hand says different.”

“That would ruin our friendship.”

“I ain’t talking affair. I’m talking dirty, lusty, sexy sex.”

I take her hand, gently and then forcefully, and push it away. I wonder where Princess has spent the night. But then it isn't Princess anymore. She is mature, good mature, like the aunts that visit from Eastern Europe. Sturdy with hard features that protect and nurture.

Her fingers are like tentacles that suck and kiss my body. Greedy mouths, bumps and craters, hardness where others have softness, softness where others are hard. We pulsate up and down together defying gravity with our antediluvian magic. Wonderful puss explodes out of our bodies. It's all one, dark and beautiful.

Princess and I sit in plastic chairs that sink into the sand as we drink gin from Styrofoam cups. We watch the incoming tide under grey clouds. Bobby Boy scurries around the beach chasing seagulls that fly away as he approaches.

I imagine building sized tentacles rising out of the ocean, monstrous limbs that invade the sand and crush the beachside condominiums. This leviathan swallows the distant freight ships and spews its pitch ink across the water line. Not stopping there, it extends an obscene organ towards the sky. Blackness envelopes the sun.

"I killed someone last night," I say, just when I feel Princess is about to talk.

"Fuck your metaphors, your little attempt to make everything relevant."

"If you hate me so much, why did you call me in the first place?" I ask.

Princess wants to cry. I can feel it. A mean thought enters my brain. Perhaps she isn't one of the people who are supposed to enjoy life. Perhaps Princess is merely supposed to add variety to the background. She is the oddity for couples in love to make self-flattering, whispered comments about.

"Okay, dickhead, tell me, who did you kill?"

"I killed Vicki Benedict, from Saint Kelly's Academy in New Jersey."

"You're always fucking with me, always. I'm serious about dispossession. I've reached another stage in my life."

I pull her face towards mine by cupping her pudgy cheeks with my palms. Her face and my face meet between the lopsided chairs.

"You could always make me laugh when I was pranking you. How long could I ever hold a joke? Look into my eyes and see the truth."

"All right, say it again." She looks into my eyes like a bulldog with human intelligence.

I speak the words slowly as if talking to an infant, “I killed Vicki Benedict, the girl with Bednar, the girl with freckles and Raggedy-Ann hair.”

Princess breaks away, scans the ocean for a moment, takes a gulp of gin, and groans, “Oh yeah, give me another.” It’s one of our expressions that, if said in the correct intonation, demands laughter. I don’t laugh.

“I wasn’t me. I was Bednar. I dispossessed myself. I sat on a bench on the boardwalk and became Bednar. And I, or he, killed Vicki.”

“I never told you her name,” Princess says. Reality seems as amorphous as the receding sand: solid and ephemeral, ever-present but transmuted with every foamy wave.

“I can prove it. I’ll show you the body.”

“And if you did it as Bednar, how do you know it wasn’t a dream? Hell, if it was you, how do you know it wasn’t a dream?”

I get up, slowly walk behind Princess, and pull the back legs of her chair up into the air. She sprawls into the sand.

We walk the beach and continue past the last boardwalk condo. The beach stops being a planned resort and reverts to its prehistoric chaos. Rocky formations become grotesque as we continue walking, maneuvering around beach grass and mud. The outing thrills Bobby Boy who jumps and barks behind us.

“How much farther are you going to carry this crazy little lark?” Princess asks.

“Over that bluff. Do you see the tire, the one with the red grass growing inside it? Over that bluff.”

We start climbing rock. It isn’t as hard as I remember. It’s layered like steps. I reach the top and wait for Princess to catch up. Bobby Boy impatiently keeps his mistress’ slow pace, licking the sweat from her face as she sits to rest. When she reaches the top, I put an arm around her shoulder and point with the other towards a reef below.

Why do we kill what we love? Because the things we love are too much like ourselves. We love what we love until it is nothing but our love, and our love is only us. Again alone. It is ourselves we can’t stand.

“There. Look over there. No, no, a little to the left.” I twist my hip for leverage and cast Princess off the sea-side drop.

Princess is quicker than I had imagined, and she grabs my foot, taking us both for a tumble. We tumble over flora covered ledges before ending our journey sprawled in the sand below.

When I try to stand, the pain in my ankle demands that I fall back down. I look over to Princess' battered body, still breathing. The rocks with which I had planned to end a life are a little too far away, but they are close enough to shower us with seawater from the oncoming tide. Bobby Boy's frantic barking echoes from above.

I drag Princess' girth towards the ocean. The pain in my ankle is sublime, and occasionally I fall to a knee. I eventually manage to sprawl her body over a rocky alter. I grab the bottoms of her feet and push her head towards the sea.

A kick to the jaw sends my body backward, antagonizing my injured ankle. Princess shoots a fist across my jaw as I'm getting up on one knee. She starts kicking me in the ribs. I grab her third kick and use my grounded mass as leverage to send her gelatinous body backwards. Her head hits stone.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *That we have a unique identity is a dogmatic belief we are born into, even as it is constantly in flux. Our human need for identity wrestles with the truth of interconnectedness. The ocean is a great metaphor for losing oneself and facing the danger and wonder of connectedness. The ocean is all encompassing, visceral, and primordial. People are often nostalgic for the past because they believe they can recapture an identity they've lost. It's like standing on the beach trying to capture the ocean waves in a bucket. I am inspired by writers such as Haruki Murakami, Donna Tartt, and Thomas Ligotti who use surreal elements in their stories to explore the weirdness of existence.*

AUTHOR BIO: Thomas R. Long is a writer living in Baltimore. He earned an MFA from the Johns Hopkins writing program. He sustains himself on local beer and his wife's *madrileño* cooking.