



THEN



by

*Charles Pinch*

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

*Charles Pinch is a real mensch, you know?*

*Just, a solid guy.*

*Fleas on the Dog head honcho or no, there is a reason why he accepts our stories and bullshiteries (in my case), and I always try to take care to explain why as best I can.*

*I will be concise here.*

*Sometimes you're just that good.*

*"Jog, then Restaurant," is like Tuesdays with Morrie meeting Denis Johnson; My Dinner with Andre as running partners with Blaise Cendrars.*

*There is a calm, a quiet control in the breath, as you know that you're huffing towards the larger score.*

*A calculated sense of time and space and plot under the orchestra of a maestro.*

*Every step this tale takes is like its own artifact dedicated to subtlety and degeneration.*

*"Everything keeps, Tobe, except acts of God."*

*You could write an entire lesson on the short story with that line.*

*I always say that Charles has this lovely touch of Nabokov because he uses language like a scientist flying on an erratic butterfly – objective and lolling and brimming with aestheticism – and that is no different here. But, with this story, I would bring in the comparison more so to Haruki Murakami and being able to control how a water droplet makes a splash on impact.*

*Managing the kinetic although stationary.*

*There is a collapse of time and motivation as a flower blooms.*

*In, "Jog, then Restaurant," the focus stays on the characters and the connections that they make, and, in turn, they reveal their deepest insecurities and their biggest fears, their idea of what love is and the lengths they will go to hide how they can afford such love.*

*There is a great understanding that takes place when you can create good characters that do bad things and vice versa.*

*Pinch has craft and care, movement and stillness, volume and silence, love and desperation.*

*This is a story that knows the way in which the word works.*

*You'll enjoy this story or should.*

*Well done, Bossman.*

*Five Stars*

**QUALITY QUOTABLE: (*for the love of language...*)**

“What line were you in, if I may ask? I recall hearing you say you had a business. Your own, I assume?”

“Oh yes. At one time I practiced law. Sold my hand in the firm and opened a consulting agency. Nothing to do with the law after that.”

“I thought about being a lawyer once.”

“I’m glad you changed your mind.”

“It must have given you something. Apart from a good living. Gatewood Boulevard.”

“Acquired wisdom.”

“You see?”

“During my tenure as a lawyer I learned that brown is the universal color of thought.”

“It is?”

“Think about it.”

JOG, THEN RESTAURANT

By

Charles Pinch

*For Frances, nothing before you, nothing after...*

First it was ‘Oh my God! Oh my God!’ then a gulp of champagne followed by a couple more ‘Oh my Gods!’ Trish couldn’t take her eyes off it. She wiggled her finger—“Put it on, *please!* I can’t wait to feel it on me!”—while spectrums flashed inside the diamonds and fireworks exploded inside her head. It was the

most beautiful engagement ring she'd ever seen and between the two of them they must have looked at hundreds.

The center stone was easily a carat (must have cost you, baby!) and that was surprising. The diamonds in the other rings they'd considered weighed in at half that much.

“What made you change your mind and splurge like this?”

“Love.”

The best and simplest of all explanations. It helped too that his eyes happened to melt her heart like so much warm *ganache*. On either side of the solitaire, delicate scrollwork, a few sprinkles of glittering rose-cuts. “It looks antique...” The first practical utterance in three minutes of gasps and palpitations.

“It is. Nineteen sixties.”

“Oh my God, is all I can say, Tobe!”

“Toby did good by you...yes? Yes?”

“Toby did like *there are no words to describe how good*. I've never heard of Ryan and Co.” Referring to the retailer's name in gold letters on the inside of the case.

“That's the original box. I don't think they're around anymore.”

Then Trish cried. Then she accepted the congratulations from the couple (older, but lovebirds, doubtless) at the adjacent table. Then she gulped a second mouthful of champagne. “I've gotta call my folks. This is my Instagram moment!” And reached for her phone. “Hello, Mom...? You're not going to believe this!”

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out, sir.”

“That makes two of us.” Tobe was as solid and somber as a pallbearer. The light in his eyes had dimmed a few watts since the last time he had stood at this jewelry counter. “It’s still valid, isn’t it? I mean the refund policy?”

“It is. Just because you’re returning an engagement ring doesn’t preclude your buying another in future. We hope it’s from us.”

“It will be. I assure you.”

“It will have to be a company check, I’m afraid. It’s store policy for any refund over two thousand dollars. I hope that’s not inconvenient for you.”

“A check is fine.” Then, because he couldn’t resist, “Long as it’s good, of course.”

Tobe had noticed two things about the man jogging down the wooded path in his direction. He was in his seventies—mid seventies almost certainly, and he was remarkably athletic. Tobe knew this because another thing about this man was his familiarity. It was a rare day when he *didn’t* chance him out for his spin. They jogged the same route (though they started from opposite ends of the park) and usually passed each other near the small bridge that spanned a stream populated by quarrelling mallards. And each time Tobe said to himself, *Okay, don’t nod this time and keep going. Stop and maybe say hello. Introduce yourself.*

Synchronicity kicked in. On that very morning, the loping, steel-haired man, lean as a whip, braked in his tracks and extended a sweaty hand.

“Isn’t this silly? We pass each other every day.”

“I was thinking the same thing!” Tobe insisted with glassy cheer.

“Name’s Frank. You...?”

“Tobe,” he said, omitting his last name since the man had omitted his. “Tobias, if you want to make my mother happy.”

“It’s a great place to flex your muscles. I don’t know what I’d do without this park.”

“I’ve been admiring your sprints from a distance. I hope I’m in as good a shape when I reach your—uh, sorry.”

“Age is nothing to apologize for. Thanks for the compliment.”

“What’s your motivation? I mean, how do you keep going at it everyday?”

“I read somewhere exercise improves your health.”

Tobe chuckled. “It’s certainly improved yours.” His cell rang. “Excuse me.” He slipped it out of the pocket clipped to his waist, glanced at the number and switched it off. “Sorry, again.” He tucked it back into the pouch.

“I never bring mine along. Prefer to run wireless.” He grinned. Not the greatest teeth, Tobe reflected, but that was their generation. “I run out here to *get away* for heaven sake.”

“But what if it’s important?”

“It’ll keep. Everything keeps, Tobe, except acts of God. Even they keep sometimes. I leave my wallet, my iPhone, my neurosis at home when I come here to jog. All I bring with me are my keys.” He held them up.

“Me? I sleep with my iPhone.”

“You’ll have a lot better sex with a woman.” He’d been jogging on the spot the whole time they spoke so as not to break stride. Now he said, “Gotta run. Nice meeting you. Finally!”

“Nice meeting you, too!”

He would try that. He would brave techno-nudity. Run like a Stone Age man. And if the world collapsed? Well, it was like Frank said. Even God sometimes can be put on hold.

A heat-shock shower that special Saturday morning and Tobe emerged, recharged and strapping, from out of the steam. The first thing he did after grabbing his bathrobe was open the top drawer of his dresser. Sock drawer, condom drawer and now...he retrieved the small ring box he had been dreaming about all last night and thinking about all this morning. Each time he opened it a comic balloon formed above his head. *Trish, will you marry me?* Even standing there alone, he forced down a lump in his throat. Her comeback was: *Why do you ask? I’ve wanted to marry you from the moment we first met.* He sat down on the edge of the bed and unfolded the receipt. Robinson’s Jewelers. *One diamond engagement ring. Round brilliant cut center stone weighing 0.55 ct. Two shoulder-set small diamonds totaling 0.10 ct. 14 karat yellow gold setting. \$2,173.49.* Thrift and saving and overtime. He and Trish had narrowed their choices down to four. Then he’d said, “Vamoose, you. I want this to be a surprise!”

What did he really know about Frank? And more important, what did Frank know about him?

He got some of it on a weekend morning in May. He assumed they were neighbors of some sort, distant neighbors probably, because there was never a car parked when he reached the end of the trail where Frank started his runs. The place he would park his car if he drove his car to the woods.

“You live around these parts?” Tobe had asked him.

“Gatewood Boulevard.”

“My God, we’re almost family!”

“You?”

“Yager Avenue.”

“So it is a small world. Do you have a house?”

“Someday. Batching it for now.”

“I did in my time too.”

“Hopefully mine’s up. I’ve fallen in love and I’ve started getting dangerous ideas about engagement rings.”

Frank nodded, smiling without actually managing to smile. “I lost my dear wife a year ago this month.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“After she died I closed my business. I guess that makes me officially retired now. If Sandra was still alive I’d be working 24/7 which was my style. Losing like that, it changes you.”

“Sandra’s a beautiful name.”



“Cassandra.”

“Very beautiful.” Tobe reflected on the irony. They were both traveling the same matrimonial road. He was starting out while Frank was standing at the end of it. He wanted to say something without sounding trite but everything he came up with sounded trite. “May I ask how long you were married?”

“Forty-two years. My only wife, too. I say this only because we live in an age of serial divorce.”

Tobe asked, with something between a laugh and a sigh, ‘What’s your secret?’

“Her.”

And on a Friday morning in June, early June when budding had clouded the light woodland with green gauze.

“Are you in the money market?” Frank had ventured. He had wiped a thin trail of sweat from his brow. Exertion had darkened his T-shirt under the arms and around the neck. “You look to me like a stockbroker. Not that I have the faintest idea why.”

“Close. Insurance.”

An agreeable shake of his head. “Everybody needs it.”

“What line were you in, if I may ask? I recall hearing you say you had a business. Your own, I assume?”

“Oh yes. At one time I practiced law. Sold my hand in the firm and opened a consulting agency. Nothing to do with the law after that.”

“I thought about being a lawyer once.”

“I’m glad you changed your mind.”

“It must have given you something. Apart from a good living. Gatewood Boulevard.”

“Acquired wisdom.”

“You see?”

“During my tenure as a lawyer I learned that brown is the universal color of thought.”

“It is?”

“Think about it.”

“So what does he do, Trish? Apart from pursue my only daughter? Hell, my only child!”

“Pursue? He *lusts* after me if you must know the truth.”

“Even worse. What’s he do?”

“He does deals.”

“Eh...?”

“He’s a dealmaker.”

“A dealmaker? What kind of dealmaker? Like for the NHL?”

“No, silly. He does business deals. I’m not sure exactly what.”

“You mean he’s a schmiel.”

“I knew I could count on your support, Daddy.”

“Tony, she needs your support. Say something nice about her Mr. Toby Flick.”

“Rhymes with Moby Dick.”

“Something *nice*, Tony!”

And one time in the rain. On that morning, they were the only two joggers to be seen. Tobe was sweating inside a waterproof nylon tracksuit. Frank was drenched to the skin. A T-shirt moulded itself to his stark torso. Wet cotton bunched in folds at his knees. There was no question he was enjoying himself.

“I guess we’re now officially diehards.”

“Or bubble brains,” Tobe joked.

“Hard inside on a morning like this. For some reason the rain reminds me of her. Not unpleasantly. Lonely, that’s all.”

“No kids to try your sanity?”

“No. No kids.” Regret shaded his voice but he offered no explanation.

And last, on this Friday before the big day. He half-hoped when he saw Frank approaching that something would press him to keep jogging. ‘Hello’ or ‘How’s it going?’ certainly, but Tobe was too focused on his upcoming Saturday night to consider anything more as distraction. He would ask Trish to marry him after a glass of champagne. He would present her with the ring they had narrowed down and for which he had paid \$2,173.49.

He recalled their earlier synchronicity because it showed itself again, just at that moment. Frank was staggering or lurching oddly and he was not the kind to jog while drunk. Then his hand sprang to his chest like a man swearing an oath and a devoutly exercised body collapsed onto the woodland. Tobe blazed ahead,

seeming to fly through the air, his feet barely touching the ground. Frank was jiggling from crown to toe, his lungs clawing for breath, blood fleeing from his stricken face.

“Heart attack!” he managed. “Call 911!”

“I didn’t bring my phone!” Tobe panicked.

“My keys. I’m 19 Gatewood. Couple minutes. Hurry!”

“I can’t leave you!”

“Hurry!”

In his head, while crashing through the lush growth of trees and tangled undercover, he thought: *You train for this. Something makes you want to take up jogging and you do it. And then something like this happens and you can help, you can make that split second difference because when it turns out you suddenly need your strength, you’ve trained for it.*

The house stood back from the street in what appeared to be a state of voluntary withdrawal. Architecturally, it presented a face both lean and candid. Tobe thought it looked like Frank if Frank had been a house. But he did not stop to weigh and observe. All of this transacted itself in a blur. He unlocked the front door, stepped inside and looked around for a phone. Landline? Frank’s cell? He found what he needed in the room Frank used as an office. Papers, discs, printouts piled in sheaves, three computers. His voice surprised him with its steadiness. He answered the dispatcher’s questions calmly, though flames roared inside him.

“His name, please?”

“Frank—“

“Yes. Frank what, sir?”

“He’s having a heart attack. Please! He could be dying as we speak!”

“There’s an ambulance and a fire truck on its way. A police car too. They’ll be there before you get back to him. I must have his last name, sir.”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“We were just acquaintances. I didn’t know him much more than to say hello. I’m calling from his house because he gave me his keys. I’ve never been inside it before. I should be looking for his wallet or his ID.”

“What’s his address? I can search from that.”

Tobe told her.

“Okay. I’ll relay that information to them.”

“Thank you.” He wanted to ask, “He’s going to be alright, isn’t he?” And then realized she would be as unable to answer that question as he himself.

He heard the sirens and prepared to take his leave. A picture on Frank’s desk arrested his purpose. It was a photograph of Cassandra. The woman with the evocative name of a mythological beauty turned a plain face before the camera; there was a thickness about her features he found hard to like though he tried to tell himself he did. Suddenly he felt sorry for Frank and his proud, suffering ardor.

He rummaged quickly through the drawers but uncovered no wallet or papers that could serve his belated purpose. He wandered out of the office, aware that the sirens had stopped. And he thought: *either they got to him in time or he's dead*. At this point, anyway, he, Tobe, was not needed.

Curiosity pushed him through the dwelling and he explored each room he passed, albeit briefly, with clandestine heed. In their bedroom, the bedroom they had once shared, was a wall of photographs. Cassandra and Frank. Tuxedo and mink. Palm trees and sunglasses. The two again with two other couples their own age. Christmas somewhere. The Coliseum, the Eiffel Tower. But no children. In fact, no young people to be seen at all, in any of them.

He opened the top drawer of a dresser. This had to be Frank's side. Balled socks. A leather box full of cuff links, tie bars and a pair of nail clippers. In hers, a ring box. Beside it two watches. A stack of handwritten letters tied with a ribbon and a lavender-scented sachet. And...a ring box.

Inside, in gold letters on the silk lining: Ryan & Co. Tobe had looked at enough diamonds over the last couple of months to estimate that the center stone was probably in the full carat range: it was twice the size of the diamond in the ring he had purchased for Trish at Robinson's. A police cruiser pulled up outside and Tobe just had time, after closing the dresser drawer, to make it to the living room before the front door opened.

He was fully co-operative. He answered all of their questions and he heard the throb in his voice that played to their sympathies when they told him Frank was in an ambulance on his way to the morgue. The woman on dispatch had assured

them how helpful he had been. Nobody or nothing, short of an act of God, could have saved Frank.

Trish was squealing. Tobe, amused, sweetened, watched the champagne blush rise from her cheeks to her blonde forehead. Then she abruptly snatched the phone from her ear and held it out to him.

“It’s Mother. She wants to congratulate you.”

“Louisa?”

“Darling boy. I’ve always wanted a son-in-law since Trish was a little girl.”

“I’m glad you waited until she grew up.”

“At one point she almost lost hope. She told us you were a confirmed bachelor. Tony figured you might be gay.”

“No, I like girls.”

“It was Trish who made you change your mind.”

“It was. Besides, I figured it was time I took the plunge.”

“What’s he saying?” He heard Tony somewhere in the background.

“The plunge? You make it sound like marriage is a cold dip!”

“No, no. Nothing like that.”

“I’m teasing you.”

Tony grabbed the cell from her hand. “So. Dealmaker son-in-law. You do any deals since we last spoke?”

“I made a little over two thousand dollars this morning.”

“Marriage isn’t a cold dip.”

“No? What is it, Tony?”

“Tell them they have a golden future together!” Louisa shouted.

“It’s a polar plunge.”

“A what?”

Trish was pulling at his fingers. She was laughing. “*What’d* he say?”

“Don’t listen to him, you two!”

“Mom...?”

“Do you hear me? *Golden!*”

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *This story was written shortly after Barn Away, South (Issue 12). At this time what intrigued me about story-telling was the use/uses of compression as a strategic literary device. Both pieces share this technique but the styles are very different. Partly inspired by a real-life incident, my fiction shapes itself and what you are reading is what it gave me.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** Charles Pinch cofounded FOTD with Tom Ball in December 2019. He has Master degrees in Art History and Philosophy from McMaster University and the University of Toronto. He speaks English and Italian.