

Discipline is the Bread of Contentment

By Dirk Van Nouhuys

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author Linda Boroff writes:*

I like this story because it claws us—note the word—into that bleak and exciting terrain where playful meets deadly. There’s plenty of cat and Catholicism here, one of which I am familiar with, the other is a total mystery. But by the cat-piss smell, Camel smoke and ravenous rats at the outset, we know we are not in for a soothing read. I liked this, not because I am comfortable with, or comforted by it, but because as a writer who pulls many punches from fear of where prose can lead, I easily spot and admire a writer who pulls none.

This is a story about tough men and murder, and its prose keeps persisting toward death: “The cat gave the rat a strong shake, and a tiny snap clicked from the floor. Al glanced down. Feral faced him back, heat in her eyes.” Called to mind that disturbing scene at the claws of Kitty Cassini in Cannery Row: “Daintily she stabbed the mouse and drew it wriggling to her and her tail flicked with tense delight.” And the story pulled me back to Steinbeck in other ways than just the muscine. It’s a venture into the mind of a hitman (or “missman” because I see that Dirk Van Nouhuys can’t resist playing with language any more than a cat can resist playing with a mouse.)

Not being Catholic, I can only wonder at the pervasive power that it holds over certain writers, Graham Greene springing quickly to mind, of course. But this story, told from the feverish perspective of a gunsel who has seen better days, and which includes a shockingly compromised “Father,” is a journey toward a flawed redemption of sorts that could only be told from a Catholic-aware consciousness. Both the language and the perspective are challenging and adventurous, just what we read fiction for.

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Et Al, the former hitman, now missman, former fancier of many Franklin faces, now quarrier of changed quarters, formerly favored by Prudence, now prudent, et by ravenous rats in the cellar, raised his eyes to regard the line of pines ratcheting past the car window, and beyond them the serenely enduring white horizon. Not dimwitted was Al, when he breathed the cat-piss smell and blew Camel smoke out his vents. Yes, somewhere, somehow something had gone bad.

Earlier that day, or another, the jobs called from Baltimore with a motivator: "C'mon, Al," they said. "It's the Way Back." Really.

And Al, et by hatred, bit. Which is why from the back seat Father Rose's resonant voice, which was always on key, although it did not seem so, began to hum Un Bel Di from Madam Butterfly. Father Rose put his pink-gray fist to the small mouth that lurked sphincter-like in the snowy matrix of his beard and said, "Arg, my stomach is bloated." To warn ships at sea it sounded. Et Al smiled, though he could not not.

On his last job, Al had followed the shortman for a weekandaday as he always did, with the purposeful eyes of a workingman.

When not yet et, Al's eyes watched the shortman go to a laundry each day, carrying only the shirt from the last. Thirty minutes passed before the shortman emerged, starched white on a hanger jauntily over a lifted shoulder.

Not yet on Good Friday, Al matched his steps behind the shortman where he left the laundry and turned down a quiet side street and Al leveled at the base of the shortman's skull, his arm crooked professionally, eyes focusing. Then what never happened before happened: Al hesitated. The shortman opened a car and got in, and Al stood, his metal thrust sloppily in his pocket; he considered about the laundry.

Not yet, he had reshafted the metal to its holster and retraced his steps toward the shirthome. He glanced at a storefront and saw that the shortman's car was floating behind him in the glass like a shark.

The fin of the cool wonton cutting the surface in lazy arks left to right and right to left. Al felt the stab of fear loosen his holster in the window. Chineese smiling, little goatee, numbers for sale. Al grabbed and ran, didn't read the ceremony until he was home again, safe in his bunkie above the TV. Dramatic deaths all around gored by surprise Al, the professional.

Father Rose, bishop of Chiusa if he'd chosen, et oat meal wolfishly at Al's sidebar, and, fulminating, said, "By the time you've said so, it's another -; with The Father it's otherwise."

Al lifted the edge of the window shade and looked down, peeking at himself looking like he should. "I don't give a flyer," he said. "A talker turned the tale on me, and it's my head half-way off my neck." He dropped the shade carelessly, and it swayed with a Venetian clash.

The Father smiled and chewed a sweet raisin. "Don't worry your head." Al lit and blew blue smoke.

"La disciplina," the Father expostulated, "la disciplina è il pane della contentezza."

Al stepped behind the Rose and whispered in its flower, "La fuck in la ass. What're you going to do for Al?"

A skeletal rat slithered toward a floored gob of oatmeal, and the pissy cat cast herself from stalk to pounce.

"This," the deranger simpered, "is the answer to it all. A forty-five magnum of l'acqua di semplicità in your ear."

To which the reverend father genuflicked, risen again from the deaf. "On your right hand," he said simply.

The cat gave the rat a strong shake, and a tiny snap clicked from the floor. Al glanced down. Feral faced him back, heat in her eyes.

At the Opera, stylishly late, Al hung by the curtain where the usher placed him, glancing over the balcony seats looking for the back whose seat made a pair with his. Long hair peaked from an unfashionable hat on one side of his assigned. On the other, a worn tuxedo shone. The music died along with the worse soprano, and all rose for a piss and drink.

Finally, she rose and seated her hat. Armed with his glasses, he studied her with rapture: 'Young, brilliant, light as a bird,' he said to himself, 'she is not yet twenty-five. Her beauty is the least of her charms: where else could one find that soul, always sincere, that never acts with prudence.'

Above, a trellis of steel pipe on the roof of the opera house supported reconstruction from an earthquake four years quaked. On the jobs' screen in Baltimore the refocusing metal deconstructed the image of Al's weapon, rerayed from the surveillance satellite into a swarming field of stars.

Prudence, on the other hand, as she was ambidextrous, rubbed her own charms the wrong way. Looking around, she saw her life's opera standing in the shadows, a test of her heavy metal. "Is this what you mean?" she simpered. "Darling?" At which Father Rose rose also in his tight tuxedo, expecting, as always, the man with the gun in his hand.

Al aimed his eyes at the unexpected servant of the Lord. Rose eyed Al. The left corner of his mouth lifted and dropped. Al down the aisle like a groom. Al uplifted his cyclopean binoculars; one axle steered eyebeams, the other fast lead. A flash like a bulb popped.

915 Words

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story is like a cassoulet, not in the sense that people nibbled it nightly, but that it has been bubbling a long time, absorbing this and that. I keep a folder of writing projects that I look into every so often and develop a few and leave most alone. As near as I can remember it began roughly 60 years ago when I was in college and noted down the remark, *La disciplina e' ill pane della contentezza*, made by a linguistically facile friend of mine, who, by the way, many years later died and has been canonized in the Russian Orthodox Church. At some subsequent time, after I had copied it into a computer file, I worked on it a little and had the idea that "Et Al" could not only be a dialectical past tense but also someone's name. That freed me up to be quirky. A couple of years ago I was working on another project, needed a break and opened it again. The bubble of the cassoulet is a quirky way of writing or thinking that generates the story's character. Alliteration helps, like the gas flame under the pot, as does forsaking the nouns that adjectives modify. I got my head into it and finished that way, but I don't think I could repeat it in any other context. The theme?? To have fun.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *I'm a native of Berkeley with a BA from Stanford in creative writing and an MA from Columbia in contemporary literature. You've seen me before. I worked for decades as a tech writer and manager in Silicon Valley. A few years ago, I devoted full time to fiction.*

I write short stories, some experimental forms, and occasionally verse, but mostly novels, four of which have been published in excerpts or serially. About 80 items of fiction and a few poems have appeared in literary or general magazines. I occasionally publish translations and photography. You can learn more about me at my web site, www.wandd.com and see a complete list of publications at: <http://www.wandd.com/Site/Publications.html>.

EDITOR'S BIO: *I wrote my first novel at age ten about my hobbyhorse, Pal, a spirited, cardboard-headed palomino that only I could control. When I was eleven*

my mother told me I couldn't ride Pal to school anymore because the kids were laughing at me. (I would ride him now if I dared, but only occasionally.)

Fast forward, I went to Berkeley and majored in English. My writing has appeared in McSweeney's, The Guardian, Hollywood Dementia, Epoch, Cimarron Review, Prism International, Drunk Monkeys, Word Riot, Hobart, Blunderbuss, Adelaide, Thoughtful Dog, Storyglossia, Able Muse, The Furious Gazelle, JONAH Magazine, The Boiler, Crack the Spine, Fleas on the Dog and others. A short story collection is coming out in late 2020.

I was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and have written one feature film. One of my stories is under option to director Brad Furman (The Lincoln Lawyer) and Sony. My thriller script, Space Reserved, is in development in L.A.

Her story 'PRUFROCK' , J. Alfred Intake Records was published in Issue 5.