



wen FleCk . . .(owen fleck)

. . . by SteV en SchutZman

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest Editor SALVATORE DIFALCO writes... *The reasons I like Steven Schutzman short story “Owen Fleck” are manifold. On the one hand, he achieves a remarkable consistency of voice with his first person narrator Owen Fleck, a garrulous, neurotic and perhaps deluded, but always earnest character, who is prone to using adjectives such as swell and wicked and yet is something of a ladies’ man. Owen and his primary girlfriend, the fabulously zaftig Carol Ann Hartley, perform an odd and mesmerizing tango throughout the story that violates and punches in the teeth pretty much every politically correct trope you can think of (and then some) and for this alone it is worth reading. This is NOT a story that would emerge from a MFA workshop.*

While somewhat erotic — inescapable given Carol Ann’s larger than life physical appearance and dimensions — both crude and more subtle humour keep the story from ever getting too sweaty or self-pleasuring. And while self-aware enough not to lapse into farce, Schutzman allows the characters to breathe and live on the page organically, and within the parameters he has delineated from the outset. The dialogue engages and pleases throughout, however improbable it seems at times.

But where this story truly succeeds is at the level of the sentence. Schutzman, a craftsman, provides a pleasing abundance of sharp language and granular detailing. For instance, “I sit down in Carol Ann’s purple and plush leather chair that surrounds and holds me like a soft oyster on a bed of ice.” Or this startling image: “My large, pale dick looks otherworldly, hanging from my beanpole body.” But one of the finest examples is Owen’s quasi-mystical and paradoxical description of Carole Ann near the end of the story: “She is lit up from within, her face, her eyes, her breasts, her love for me shining from her as if she has been painted by an old master.”

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... *“Owen Fleck,” by Steven Schutzman, is an appreciation for a style I cannot put my fingers on. Oh, don’t get*

me wrong, dear reader, you will want to read this story, for it is homage to all of your favorite dirty writers, but that doesn't mean I can pinpoint the entirety of Miller and Bukowski for funsies for this one – I feel they loved their women more.

Like a campfire side story, Owen Fleck will talk about his dick. His is the only one that women want and women need, but he is stuck on a bank teller that loves him.

There is a chapter in Women, where Bukowski has, and I'll gladly fuck this up because I haven't read the 20-plus books I have by him in a while, a woman of his who makes a sculpture of his face. I believe she keeps it close or on her piano. He balls it up. Somehow, she throws it at him in an apartment where he is staying with an ex of his. I don't even really care if I got the steps wrong or right, but this story is a small attempt to be a womanizer who is relatable and it isn't up to me to decide if you agree or not.

Point being, there is a writer who has created a sculpture of an idea, an Adonis, who is or is not a writer - but has a cock.

I will say this with all my heart, this story is damn clever.

I will also say this: this story is a poor love story.

I don't necessarily mean that in a bad way.

I mean a poor love story in the sense that there is no love here.

Fleck can't love.

Carol Ann only wants to give love and weakness begat weakness begat weakness...

*This is a story about a bad person, who convinces a good person to love them out of desperation, and the story does it well. You may or may not like that conclusion, but conclude it must. The cock wins – and a garbage cock at that – but, as Tom Cruise in Magnolia taught us, we must “Respect the cock and *whipping motion* tame the cunt.”*

“Owen Fleck” deserves five stars because some will hate this concept (apropos) and some will not (“he's got style”), but the important thing to remember is that the debate about why or why not Owen Fleck is a piece of shit is the metaphor of the story. He is garbage so you can know why you aren't – and, if you don't know why you aren't, you have a great example of why you, too, are a fucking waste of space who treats the woman you love like shit because you lack empathy and, no matter how much you talk about your cock, your cock is short so fuck you.

Learn from Owen Fleck, don't be like Owen Fleck.

“Owen Fleck” should be read at Five Stars – the character should be respected at none.

Five stars

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

“No underwear. What are you fuckin' crazy?”

“I'm sorry. I thought you would like it. Easy access twenty-four hours a day, like our 24 hour ATM, Owen Fleck.”

“Your ass is so big, I could see it all the way from Mars. Go get me a drink, scotch, neat.”

“No. I won’t. Make me, Owen Fleck.”

If I took downers, the shaking and images and hallucinations stopped, but then reality slowed down so much I felt like I was on a bus full of suicidal Swedes in an art film, and that was worse. My speeding mind and shaking hands were at cross purposes with my desire to draw pictures and capture likeness like magic.

Owen Fleck

Seconds after we enter her swell condo, Carol Ann Hartley shoves me back against the front door and, like a terrible actress in bad porn, says, ‘I’m going to fuck your brains out, Owen Fleck.’

Carol Ann lowers her head to mine, shoves her tongue into my mouth and breathes into me, hotly like a big, winded bear. She is normally nice and pliable, if you know how to handle her, but she is tipsier than usual tonight. She is wicked smart, and pretty too, just big, perfectly proportioned but big, like a gorgeous model inflated with too much air. Taller than me, almost six feet, strong, and outweighing me by at least fifty pounds, I am sure she could pretty much kick my ass if I ever let her think in such terms.

“You don’t do me like that. I do you,” I say, toughly, sounding exactly like a movie actor, I can’t think who, but exactly like whoever it is. Perfect. “Else, I’m outta here.”

Carol Ann Hartley hangs her head. She rounds her shoulders and tucks in her arms, contrite as a dog who knows it has done wrong, but still with a little smirk playing about her mouth and a playful glint in her eyes. Her acting is so weirdly bad, I enjoy it.

Because she manages a bank branch with eleven employees under her, I was surprised at first that Carol Ann would take this kind of crap from me but she likes rough treatment and rough talk and to be bossed around, it turns out. Bossing all day, bossed at night. Makes sense. Once she asked me to slap her beautiful breasts around, hard, but I really didn't feel like it and told her she hadn't earned being spanked by me yet, and when she did she wouldn't forget it. I have gotten good at these games and their hidden codes though sometimes I feel like I'm in over my head.

“You're daring me to be bad, aren't you, Owen Fleck?”

Twisted. The way she always uses my full name like she can control me with it. One sick chickie.

I often wonder how a smart, high-paid woman like Carol Ann Hartley could fall for someone like me. She gives me cash whenever I ask, and lets me filch bills from her alligator-skin wallet without ever calling me on it. She has to know I am taking money, running a bank like she does where the figures always have to add up at the end of the day. The balance. No business day can end without the balance, she says like it's a religion. The balance. The balance. Carol Ann's end of the day mantra, so she can go home at a decent hour.

After Carol Ann Hartley loads the bank's ATM, her hands smell of money, that cool and inky, leathery and sweaty smell, the same one that wafted up from the various boxes, cases and brown paper bags me and my buddy Marv got when we pulled off our

biggest deals. I always loved that smell and the money, but I was done with crime because I knew that I didn't have it together enough anymore not to get caught, and I also knew that I'd go crazy or worse in prison where that poor sap Marv has been for over three years. Unlike him, I am scared enough and smart enough now not to try to be too smart again. So I have become a kept man.

Despite me being pale, slight of build with a bit of a caved in chest, and having a face like a porcelain doll, almost female, almost dead, in its wan delicacy, women like me a lot. Marv once said it was because I have the vampire thing going. I think my physical fragility inspires motherly feelings in women, or maybe they just like my dick, though I hope that's not it. My large, pale dick looks otherworldly, hanging from my beanpole body, as if it has colonized me, like an alien life form from another planet, like a pod, dormant yet in control, making slaves of women and, maybe, a slave out of me too, being a kept man and the rest. Yes, one day the dormant colonizer pod will come out of hiding and let planet Earth know of its demands.

I have my women on a weekly schedule, Carol Ann (Saturday and one other random night) and Leslie Swink (alternate Tuesday nights) and, after losing Wendy Schlossburg (also alternate Tuesday nights) to a job relocation, I am working on Julia who runs the UPS store at the strip mall but I really don't have my heart in it anymore. Being kept and staying free at the same time is turning into an ordeal, or worse, a job.

Carol Ann Hartley is my main squeeze and support now. I like her best, really, something about her smarts, her slavish niceness, her way of looking at me, and sometimes I will flash with love feelings for Carol Ann. Her body is perfect, just big, and when

she holds me in bed after making love, I feel like a child in its mother's arms, all warm and dreamy and outside of time, and I never have insomnia, never, in her bed.

Carol Ann has short-cropped blonde hair pumped up like a football helmet around her head, definitely not her best feature, pretty blue eyes, a perfect nose and a wide, kissable mouth that goes slack when she drinks too much like she has tonight. Her lips are full and plush, and I enjoy our midweek make out sessions in her car in the bank parking lot at lunch hour. Carol Ann encourages me to visit the bank and try to cop a feel as she performs her various managerial tasks; sitting behind her large metal desk, greeting and directing customers into line, in the safe deposit alcove, in front of the vault that looks like religious altar, all lit up gold and silver and, most brazen of all, when she takes over for an absent teller.

“How can I help you today, Sir?”

I snake my arm across the counter.

“I have a question.”

I slide my hand along the side of her breast.

“Yes, sir. I'll answer it if I can.”

Carol Ann takes a deep breath, her breast swells into my hand and I give it a little squeeze, getting away with something that not many people ever get away with.

“It's like; do you offer no-fee checking?”

It blows my mind that this ultra-professional, well-dressed, branch manager wants me to feel her up during banking hours. With all the rules and responsibility, Carol Ann needs to be bad.

Fake-cringing away from me now, she looks at me sideways, still acting the scared mutt.

“Down on the floor, bitch.”

“Oh please, don’t kick me, Owen Fleck,” she suggests.

Carol Ann drops to all fours on the floor, her head hanging just above the carpet.

“Turn around.”

Carol Ann does a one-eighty so her big backside is facing me straight on.

“Lift your skirt.”

Carol Ann does.

“No underwear. What are you fuckin’ crazy?”

“I’m sorry. I thought you would like it. Easy access twenty-four hours a day, like our 24 hour ATM, Owen Fleck.”

“Your ass is so big, I could see it all the way from Mars. Go get me a drink, scotch, neat.”

“No. I won’t. Make me, Owen Fleck.”

“That’s real nice. I’ll get it myself,” I say, feeling a bit off my game tonight.

“Okay, okay. You’re no fun. I’ll get it for you,” Carol Ann says as she sashays by, her shoulder jostling mine so I have to tense my legs not to lose my balance. “Don’t bite me, Owen Fleck. Don’t bite me.”

I sit down in Carol Ann’s purple and plush leather chair that surrounds and holds me like a soft oyster on a bed of ice. Cold and slimy, it gives me the creeps and makes me shiver so I switch over to the bristling couch and that is better if I remember to keep my elbows tucked and arms and hands off the prickly material. I am feeling agitated tonight, my tongue swelling, the fillings in my mouth humming like radios tuned between stations, weird scary sensations I hope the scotch will fend off.

Carol Ann returns with my scotch on a silver tray that is surely an obsequious symbol in her mind's scenario. She took her blouse and bra off in the kitchen. Her breasts are really lovely, perfect really, like the breasts in an old art painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art where I often go to study the luminous Christs and saints, and the voluptuous, naked duchesses. I love how the pale, saintly faces and pale, swollen breasts seem to glow from within. Now how did the old masters do that from mere paint? I am not an experienced painter, but I have the hand-eye thing going so I can quickly capture any likeness in pencil, ink or charcoal. A few deft strokes and there it is, likeness; I don't know how I do it but I always could and always can. If I could learn one thing though, I would want to learn to how to make things glow from within like the old masters did with mere paint. In the sketches I do of a posing Carol Ann, she doesn't look big, just perfect, to scale with herself, an ideal. I wonder whether she will buy me the necessary set of oil paints and brushes and canvasses, if I ask her.

I drink the scotch down, fast. The alcohol closes my eyes, burns my throat and unscrews the top of my head a few turns. Sweet rescue. I tell Carol Ann to go get me another one. She pouts her little girl pout and skips off into some movie playing in her head. She is crazy in love with me, no doubt about it. She has a tremendous amount of energy for love and for games and I know I will need all my wherewithal to handle her this night when she seems even more energetic than usual.

When Carol Ann returns with my scotch, on the silver tray again, I tell her to strip completely naked and dance for me. She takes off her skirt, hose and panties without any music, a pathetic display of clichéd burlesque routines, flashing shoulders, breasts

offered up in her hands, a slow grinding of her immense hips, blowing me air kisses, so awkwardly bad again I really enjoy it, the complete surrender to me and the movie playing out in her head. She told me that from a young age she had been a big girl trying to be smaller but with me she feels free and comfortable to be exactly her own size. People had been mean to her growing up but she refuses to be mean back, ever. A nice person, no doubt about it.

Carol Ann puts on some kind of an opera music, for the second part of her dance. Who knows what crazy scene is playing out in her mind? I tell to her get rid of the freaking opera and she chooses Dylan. 'Blood on the Tracks'. What? Give me a break. She then chooses "OK Computer" and Thom York's bruised-angel voice goes perfect with the scotch and my mood and Carol Ann's slow grovel of a dance. I watch her dance without offering a smile or any other form of encouragement. Instead, I curl my lip and show my teeth. I am the master and both Carol Ann and me both enjoy my critical, unmoved, sneering scrutiny.

For a few moments, sitting there watching Carol Ann Hartley, I see beyond the pathetic striving of her dance, beyond her compulsions and my own, and then her face reminds me of an angel's or saint's face in an art painting. Love feelings for her light up like a super hot filament in my heart, only to burn out in a flash. Bad bulb. Phffft. Gone. Too bad. That is love for me— flash -phffft - not a steady glow from within. My dick may have colonized her but I have the feeling that love, true love, might be the price demanded, the ransom, the balance at the end of the day, from the planet Earth.

Reduce Carol Ann's perfectly proportioned body by one third and, with her beautiful face, she could be a stunning runway model

but as it is she dwarfs me and makes me feel reduced in size. As Carol Ann dances, I squint, trying to make the furniture inflate to change its scale to her body but I can't pull it off. Maybe if I set her up against a giant redwood, an NFL lineman or a Hummer, she would look appropriately sized.

In the bedroom, I give Carol Ann a whole week's worth of orgasms, cursing at her when she begs, laughing when she screams, just the way she likes it. Carol Ann loves me and I can't remember how it had happened: If my dick colonized her first or if her love allowed my dick to colonize her enough to let me lift all those bills from her alligator skin wallet.

I bend Carol Ann over the bureau near the window and go at her from behind, her head and arms scattering jewelry, perfume bottles and whatnot over the surface of the bureau and onto the carpeted floor. I imagine Carol Ann is an ATM machine, with twenty dollar bills spewing wildly out of her mouth. Ka-ching. Twisted. I feel a little bad thinking about her like that.

Bright moonlight pours through the window causing every white object in the room to light up, her immense pale body glowing from within like in those art paintings. I am blown away by the swooping alabaster curve of her spine and the marble of the delineated muscles in her straining shoulders and arms like she is an art statue come to life, gripping the edge of the bureau to absorb my thrusts, my thighs slapping her ass. Slap. Slap. Slap. The whole thing is weirdly beautiful though most people would not think so at all.

After that hard banging and all those orgasms, she goes strangely quiet. Good. I have reached this stage with her just once before, when I experienced a flash of fear that she might be dead. Of course, dead people don't stay upright.

When I asked her about it that time, Carol Ann told me she stopped having any kind of sexual pleasure when that happened and that she became a peaceful stream on which she circled like a leaf in an eddying pool, and that was the best there was to be had in this life. No other man had ever taken her there before, she said. It was a matter of trust to get there and she trusted me, as she trusted me never to really hurt her.

Carol Ann Hartley, bank manager, full of surprises. She accepts me into her body and into her wallet, into her heart and into her life, no questions asked. Early on, meeting her once at the bank, I stole the brass name plate off her desk, I don't know why. 'Carol Ann Hartley, Branch Manager'.

"Are you the stream, the leaf or the pool?"

"All of them."

"That makes no sense."

"Like you ever do, Owen Fleck."

While I fuck her, I watch my reflection in the bureau mirror, the whites of my skin, teeth and eyes weirdly lit up in the moonlight. Humping like mad, I look like the rabid ghost of a rodent having a grand mal fit. I can see us from the side too, in the full length mirror attached to the nearby wall, my rod resembling a sinister glowing probe going in and out of this large shining orb.

I think then, we look like fucking aliens or aliens fucking and instead of shooting little 'mes' out, I'll vacuum little Carol Anns in with my hose and return to the mother ship with them for retrieval to my home planet.

I wonder if the neighbors are watching through the window. Maybe me and Carol Ann would inspire the other condo owners in the development to tear off their skins and emerge as the savage

animals they really are, a chain reaction causing a shrieking, frothing zoo to erupt out in the sedated Westchester suburbs.

When I was in high school not far from Carol Ann's condo, I drew pornographic zombie comics that sold like wild fire but they got me expelled, after my third offense, and it had been all down hill from there. I was seventeen years old. Crime became a habit and drugs addled my brain so I couldn't sit still a lot of the time, and my hands shook when I sketched. Weird images kept crowding my head. If I took downers, the shaking and images and hallucinations stopped, but then reality slowed down so much I felt like I was on a bus full of suicidal Swedes in an art film, and that was worse. My speeding mind and shaking hands were at cross purposes with my desire to draw pictures and capture likeness like magic.

The following morning, with Carol Ann Hartley next to me in bed, her face against my shoulder, her formidable arm draped heavily over my skinny chest, I open one eye, the left on the side away from Carol Ann, in case she is awake and 'love-watching' me again. Eye open. So far so good. It is Sunday and I want up and out, lest I get too used to being there and she too used to having me there.

There is a hallucination on the empty wall across the room, a large fish, beautifully drawn with fine cross-hatches, more like a whale that looks like it has a wheelchair in its mouth. Weird, but my hallucinations don't freak me out much anymore. There are a few that still make me a little nervous; the floating throat, for example, red as the reddest blood, screaming at me as it hangs like an inflated windsock in the air; or the endless line of happy, winking cartoon cowboys twirling their sinister lariats, but those hallucinations never intrude when I am with Carol Ann, not once, and I wonder why that

is. Definitely I am getting better, my mind healing from the damage drugs have done over the years. Now, except for alcohol and an occasional downer, I am deathly afraid of drugs. One toke of weed, one grain of pcg or acid or speed and the floating windsock throats and happy winking cowboys spinning their sinister lariats will show up to drive me out of my mind.

I watch the whale with the wheelchair in its mouth fizzle out until it becomes the number 54 branded into the wall. I smile at that. The number 54 does look like a whale with a wheelchair in its mouth. I have a rare mind, no doubt about it, of no use to anyone. The number 54 evaporates. Pffft.

Assured by her steady breathing that Carol Ann is still asleep and not 'love-watching' my face as she often likes to do in the morning, I open my other eye and search the near side of the bedroom for the clothes I had shed the night before and for her purse, though it is unlikely that she'd have taken it into the bedroom. I am afraid Carol Ann might wake up like she did last Sunday for tender morning lovemaking, afraid that the morning would stretch into the afternoon like it did that day, a walk in the park and dinner and soon we would be living together. My urge to escape see-sawed with my urge to chill there all day and maybe do some sketches of Carol Ann and let her take care of me. On Sundays, I normally go to Morty's Diner for the breakfast special and sketch the other people eating there.

I see my clothes neatly draped over the desk chair. Now when did she do that? I thought I had fucked her into oblivion but I was the one who passed out and she still had the wherewithal to straighten the room before going to bed, down to picking the perfume bottles up off the floor. What a head case. She has more

wherewithal than a dozen of me, just these compulsions. Manages a bank, wants to be spanked. Smells like money, fucks like a bunny. ATMo, no problemo. And she loves me. Anyway, her apartment is so neat, it's sad.

Carol Ann stirs, damn, but instead of tenderly kissing me like usual, she starts to cry. She hugs me and weeps, shaking with powerful sobs, her once-a-week cry. Women. I brace myself, turn over and kiss her wide, sweaty forehead and soon she subsides into a soft whimpering.

"I'm sorry about last night, Owen Fleck."

"Nothing that I know of to be sorry for."

"I drank too much."

"Yeah, so what?"

"You know how I get."

"Yeah, so."

"I can get pretty out there, huh?"

"Are you asking me how out there you got last night?"

"Pretty out there, right?"

"You mean, you don't remember? And me working you over like a Mexican, for what?"

"I hope you don't consider it work."

"No, not work. Slavery. Sex slavery. Just getting put through my paces is all."

"That's okay. I know you love me, Owen Fleck."

"Okay, okay, I've had it: What's with this Owen Fleck shit? Owen Fleck. Owen Fleck. All the time. Owen Fleck."

"You don't know? Really?"

"No, I don't but I wish you'd stop it."

"You really should know."

“I don’t know, like thought control.”

“Thought control?”

“Control,” I say.

“Remember how you came into the bank that time, for our third date, and stole my name plate.”

“What name plate?”

“The brass name plate on my desk. ‘Carol Ann Hartley, Branch Manager’.”

“You’re nuts.”

“A security camera caught you doing it, Owen Fleck. I watched the tape. You looked a little kid with a school boy crush and I knew you really liked me and that’s when I started calling you Owen Fleck. I stole your whole name to let you know I knew you stole my whole name, and really liked me. Carol Ann Hartley in your pocket, Owen Fleck in mine.”

“You’re dreaming.”

“Do you want to see the video tape?”

“You’re one sick, bank chickie.”

“I drank so much last night because I was upset that I had to fire somebody at the bank yesterday.”

“Yeah, what did he do?”

“It was a she, and nothing.”

“Fucking malingerer.”

“No, Allison’s a hard worker and didn’t do anything wrong. She just followed corporate procedure for sub-prime loans.”

“Yeah, yeah, security guards living in mansions and shit. What’s with that? You don’t see me owning a house.”

“She did as she was told and got left holding the bag by corporate. She has young kids and I had to let her go. “

“You don’t sound like a banker to me.”

“I don’t care what I sound like. I feel terrible about it,” says Carol Ann and I sympathize deep down but say.

“Don’t forget which side your bread is buttered on.”

“Sometimes, I don’t think I can take it anymore.”

“Don’t be stupid. They’re all thieves. The rich, the poor, every one of them. I say, line the rich up and let the poor shoot them, or line the poor up and let the rich shoot them, like they do in other countries.”

“Why is your heart so scarred, Owen Fleck?”

“That’s it. I’m outta here.”

“My purse is on the counter. Take what you need.”

“Uh, okay.”

“You know what I noticed? You always take less money than I would’ve given you.”

“I don’t think you should’ve told me that.”

“I’m not worried. Because this is the last time, so probably you’ll take all the money. That’s another reason I was crying.”

What?

“What?”

I disentangle my arms and legs from her arms and legs, not that easy a deal, prop myself up on an elbow and look down at Carol Ann. She looks fresh and pretty, even after last night’s carrying-on and this morning’s cry, her lips smeared into a half smile, her eyes deep and sad and full of love.

“What are you talking about?”

“I know about your other girlfriends, Owen Fleck, and you don’t get to have my name plate unless you give me yours.”

“I have no idea what you’re going on about, Carol Ann.”

She sits straight up, turns her large back to me and arranges the pillows against the headboard. She lays back down on the piled pillows, her full, white breasts and their orangy-pink nipples flattening out and spilling over the sides of her ribcage in such a way that I can feel their weight with my eyes. Her sad face is determined, but her arms slack at her sides. That is Carol Ann. Strong and surrendering. Bossy and bossed. Responsible and bad. A love feeling for her flashes in my bad bulb of a heart.

“I want us to go steady or I want my name plate back.”

“I don’t know where it is. I lost it.”

“Don’t you get it, Owen Fleck?”

“What? Get what?”

Then I do get it. She wants me all to herself. She is lit up from within, her face, her eyes, her breasts, her love for me shining from her as if she has been painted by an old master, luminescent. A steady glowing light. No flash-phffft. Timeless. I want to capture her just like that, all lit up with love. It has been a long time since I wanted anything so much.

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay, what?”

“We’ll go steady.”

“Promise?”

“I promise. I promise. Just stay like that. Just like that. I want to sketch you. Don’t move.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Who is to say where the voices and characters in our heads come from? In one way, in the act of writing they seem like possessions when they take hold and the writer’s job is to listen and follow, transcribe and stay out of the way. Of course,*

it is never quite as pure as that, the writer will intrude with thoughts, memories, images, personal obsessions etc, sometimes to the benefit of a story, often not. But I try to stay true to the voice, the language, the perceptions and experience of the character as they unfold in my imagination. Faulkner, for example, was great at letting the voices in his head speak. I remember as a kid being blown away by the authenticity of Holden Caulfield's voice and Huck Finn's and Humbert Humbert's. I wanted to do something like that and that has stayed with me all these years. Kafka's relentless purity and art helped. In terms of "Owen Fleck", I wrote a novella ("A Bride at Every Funeral, A Corpse at Every Wedding", available on Amazon) about a criminal Marv Ronson who in many ways is the opposite of Owen Fleck, and when I imagined Marv's partner in crime, along came jittery, motor mouth, hypersensitive, politically incorrect Owen and he ignited some sparks. Then at a party, I happened to meet a woman who had many of the attributes of Mary Ann Hartley. I saw her through Owen's eyes and the story took off from there.

AUTHOR BIO: Steven Schutzman is a fiction writer, poet and playwright whose fiction has appeared in such journals as The Pushcart Prize, Eclectica Magazine, The 2nd Hand, Alaska Quarterly Review, Painted Bride Quarterly, TriQuarterly, Third Coast, Post Road, Sand and Gargoyle among many others. He is also a seven-time recipient of a Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Grant Award. You can find out too much about him and his work at steveschutzman.com

GUEST EDITOR BIO: Sal Difalco lives in Toronto at the moment. He is the author of the story collections, *Black Rabbit* (Anvil Press) and *The Mountie At Niagara Falls* (Anvil Press). His story **Young Man Among Roses** appears in this issue (fiction).