The End of Fun
Paul Luikart

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol19/iss1/3

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yalobusha Review by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
THE END OF FUN

Paul Luikart

Andy kicked the wide, glass front doors of Phoenix First National Bank out of his
way and stuffed the .38 into the back of his jeans. He leaped down the marble
steps, skidding in his cowboy boots, all the while trailed by rogue bills—hundreds
and fifties contorting little escapes from his pockets and the bulging pillowcase in
his left hand. He hollered, “Yeehaw!” and fumbled with some keys, hollered, “Fuck
you!” over his shoulder, yanked open the driver’s door of the rusty blue Camry,
jumped in, and was gone. A pale cloud of toasted rubber, asphalt, and a few lazy
bills spun in the desert breeze.

He didn’t stop till Wickenburg, almost into Yavapai County. The Camry was about
out of gas anyway, so he filled it up, stole some Red Bull, and then pulled into the
McDonald’s parking lot. Robbing banks will leave a body famished. Just a
completely hollow gut. Andy felt it bad, a bulb of an ache right below his stick-out
ribs. He sat in the car for a few minutes, patted his skinny belly, then smoked a
cigarillo down to the plastic tip. Checking over his shoulder too. There was
nobody. He got out.

“Couple of Quarter Pounders, give me two fries too, big sized, and the biggest
Coke you got.”

“Will that be all?”

“Throw a couple of pies in there too. Make ‘em apple.”

The kid pushed a few buttons, red ones and blue ones, and then the total
popped up. He handed the kid some money.

“Oh,” the kid said.

“You ever seen one of them before? Probably not.”

“I can’t give you change, not from this drawer. I’ll check with my manager.”

Andy’s hand shot out and grabbed the kid’s scrawny wrist. “Don’t check with
your manger. I don’t need no change. Hell, keep it yourself. I’m starving, so hurry
on up.”

The kid’s eyes bulged. Big brown circles in big white ones. He looked like he
was about to say something, but then he straightened and worked his arm loose of
Andy’s grip.

“Keep it?”

“Keep all it.”
The kid put the bill in the drawer, under the till.

Andy was the only customer in the place. He chomped and slurped and stared out at the desert. It went on forever. There were cacti and low, jagged mountains off in the distance, all of it baked by the sun, baked by it for, what, thousands of years, millions maybe. Baked down to little nubs of plants and rocks, with little stunted animals creeping and darting here and there. Everything cooked off but the main guts of some ancient, spooky geology. Water sometimes choked out of the hard sand here and there, enough to make dark brown circles that took about five minutes to evaporate completely. That’s what they call springs. Nothing but a tease. Andy pulled out his cell phone, touched some buttons, put it to his ear. The call went right to voicemail.

“Mama,” he said, cupping the phone to his mouth, “It’s Andy. I been thinking about home. Sis told me you buried Tommy in April. Can’t say I’ll miss the sumnabitch. I know you’re gonna. For some damn reason. You got your reasons, Mama, I know you got ’em.”

Andy’s eyes swooped around the McDonald’s.

“I just love my mama. I just love her. Andy loves his mama.” He flipped the phone shut and wiped his eyes with the tough skin on the back of his hand, then stuck the phone back in his pocket. He stuffed the Quarter Pounder wrappers into the fry boxes, drank off his Coke, and picked up the pies. He went back to the register. In two seconds, the barrel of the .38 was between the kid’s eyes.

“Changed my mind. Let me get that bill back, plus whatever else’s in there.”

The kid was frozen.

“Did I just make you piss yourself?”

“No.”

“I’m nice enough. Don’t I look nice? Look at my face. It’s a nice face, ain’t it?”

“I guess so?”

“You guess so? Let me ask you something, and be honest. You like your job?”

“What?”

“I like my job. I like my job real well.”

“Hey.” The manager who this probably was, a bald middle aged man with a clean white shirt and a black bow tie with teensy Golden Arches all over it.

“Hi there. I’m sticking up your employee here.”

“Don’t hurt anybody.” The manager held his hands up, palms out.

“Hurry up, son,” Andy said, eyes on the manager.

“Give it to him, James,” the manager said.

“James. Why don’t you shove it in that bag there?”

James stuffed the drawer’s green contents into a to-go bag.

“You want the change too?” James said.

“Look at this customer service,” Andy said, “No I don’t, thank you for asking.
Give James here a raise, would you?"
   The manager nodded, but didn’t make eye contact with either of them.
   “Hey, do me one favor before I go, James.”

   The kid’s face was blank.
   “Why don’t you get a cheeseburg. Go on. Then bring it out here.”

   When the kid got back with the small loafy thing wrapped in yellow, Andy said, “Now, heave it up into the air. Wait. Ain’t enough room in here. Come on, we’re going outside. You too, let’s go. Get all your people from the back. Get ‘em. Make it quick.”

   Andy directed the manager around the restaurant with the gun barrel. The manager spoke in a strained voice, panic leaking into his words. He was whispering mainly, but it was like his brain wanted to scream. Everybody filed outside into the parking lot, a platoon of maroon-shirted, black-hatted kids, then the manager in white, then Andy.

   “You got that cheeseburg, James? Watch this. Heave it up as high as you can.”

   The kid looked at Andy with pinched-together eyebrows.

   “Well, come on.”

   The kid reared back and threw the cheeseburger so high and hard he left his feet. Andy aimed and fired, a miss. The crack echoed off the McDonald’s windows and rolled away out into the desert. The cheeseburger plopped down on the pavement. Nobody said a word. Andy stepped to the burger and fired a shot into it, meat and pickles and shredded bun flying all over his boots.

   “That got it.” He looked up. “See you all.”

Fifteen minutes out into the desert, there appeared suddenly a band of mustangs along an old barbed wire-toped fence that vanished with the I-10 over the horizon. Andy whooped and stomped on the breaks, the little Camry fishtailing to a halt on the shoulder. He leaped out, slammed the door, and scrambled up the berm to the fence, little cascades of brittle granite sliding away under his boots. He watched the horses run. He howled, his voice ragged and sputtering on the lingering dust cloud. Several hundred yards away, the horses wheeled, scrabbling over each other, and romped back. Andy’s breath caught in his throat. He got as close to the fence as he could, close enough almost to get his chin hung up on the barbed wire.

   The animals were magnificent. The thunder of their hooves rattled his teeth. Out shot their forelegs and back under their massive bodies they curled over and over, huge, angular chunks of the hard pack sand flying up against the sky. Most all had white blazes from blonde forelocks on down to their pink and gray speckled noses, the nostrils flared and pulsing with each voracious intake of breath. Their
manes and tails flamed out behind them. And the sweat darkened their massive flanks, patches of wet down their bare hides, giving shape and definition to the rolling muscle. When they were past, a spray of wind and stink and grit slapped Andy on the back and he stared after them with his mouth hanging open.

The horses wheeled again. They charged back along the fence, unaware of anything else, it seemed, except each other and the ability to run. They nicked, bit, whinnied, shoved. Once again they were almost upon him, only a few feet on the other side of the fence. Andy smiled, closed his eyes and threw his head back, drinking the same heated air into his lungs the horses were drinking into theirs. He laughed, a long, rolling laugh that poured out of him like a monsoon waterfall blasting between rocks.

Then a snap, then a scream. The horses suddenly cleared off, each running in its direction, except one. A stallion, screaming so hard its tongue shot straight from its mouth, a pink slab wedged between yellow-white teeth, gray lips curled back. White flecks of froth in the corners of the horse’s mouth. With each scream, its entire body shook. It reared on its hind legs over and over, bucking and snorting, and its eyes were on fire. Andy, ducking the barbed wire, pressed into the fence.

The animal’s right front leg had snapped at the fetlock, its hoof now swinging freely. It moved like a sock with a bar of soap in the toe. The animal’s rear legs gave out and it stumbled and fell, its entire weight crashing down on the wounded leg and the horse screamed louder, bitter screams that ripped the air. But the animal clamored up, tossing its head and leaping, raising a thin brown cloud in the air around itself. The fall had compounded the fracture, and Andy could see the stark white of pointed bone sticking through the skin, the chestnut of the coat around the fetlock reddening.

“Ohnohshit,” Andy whispered.

The horse danced in a circle, almost breaking its neck, its broad back rolling and snapping as if it was trying to throw an invisible rider. Just for a second, Andy’s eyes came square with one of the horse’s, a glazed-over orb. The thing was trying to say something. The head bobbed again, the eyes now heavenward and it would not stop screaming.

Andy scrambled back to the Camry, slipping on the loose gravel. He ripped into the car by the passenger door, grabbed the .38 from the seat, cussed again, and fairly flew back up to the fence. The wounded horse had bounded away, about fifty yards off.

“Horse, I can’t shoot that far,” Andy yelled.

“Horse!”

The horse was in the gun’s sights now, the gun quivering in Andy’s hands. He tried to hold the weapon the way he’d seen police do it. It was hard to aim at the
bouncing thing. "Horse," he called again. Then he fired.

The stallion leaped sideways. Squinting, Andy could see a little button of red on the horse's flank and the animal stumbled. It flipped its head like it was trying to look behind itself. He fired again and the horse fell over, but its legs beat the air, the injured one below the broken fetlock spinning like a pinwheel at the top of the leg.

Andy slithered under the fence tearing a sleeve on a hidden nail in the fence post. He bolted to the horse and found it sputtering blood, crimson running in little washes down the chestnut hide. When it saw him, it made a lame attempt to get its legs under itself, but could not and tipped back onto the ground. Long, drooping lines of blood like cables from the corners of its mouth tethered the beast to the sand.

Andy caught himself staring. Who knows how long. Before him, the horse rolled, cried, flipped its massive body around in the sand, but every time it made a move, the next one would be less, and the one after that less. Andy rubbed his eyes. Two more steps and the horse's head was square at his feet, still now except for a tremor every few seconds. He held the gun at the angle of the eye and the ear. The horse looked at him and he fired. The head bounced against the sand, the tongue, slimed with black blood, lolled from the mouth and pretty soon a wash of deep red blood flowed out, collecting dust and tiny pebbles and dried petals of yellow and light from the desert floor and pushing on, outward like an expanding halo.

Andy sat down. Little breaths pattered between his lips and the sweat dripped down his forehead, stinging his eyes, speckling his jeans as it dripped from his nose, cheeks, and chin. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, the hand still clutching the black rubber grip of the .38. The gun was heavy. He set it down at his feet. He sat by the horse a long time, thinking about vultures and when they'd show and would they think him a dead thing also, would they pick and peck at his skin, would they strip his bones.

When he stood, the sky was changing. The sun had sunk below the western rim of the world, leaving a glowing orange crust, a line of smoldering embers sprinkled across the tops of the scraggy mountains far away. A blanket of black was falling on the horizon from the east with snags of starlight and two or three burning rips of meteors. He stooped and picked up the gun. There was one shell left. Two at the burger, three in the horse, so one left in the cylinder. He stuffed it in his belt at the back of his jeans and ambled heavy-footed back to the fence. He turned. There was the carcass. The dark mound looked like a rock outcropping. A piece of the desert. An old piece of the desert changed into a new piece anyway. He sunk
down, slid under the fence and walked-slide across the berm to the car. It took a couple of tries, but the engine crashed to life, the headlights came on, and Andy drove off down the I-10 into the night.

At the diner, Neon Slim’s, somebody recognized him. A barrel chested rancher-type with a dyed black mustache and rusty boot spurs. He stepped over to Andy’s booth in the corner and stood beside it. Andy looked up.

“So,” the rancher-type said, “You hear the one about the horse and the bar? This horse walks into a bar and the bartender says, ‘Why the long face?’”

“That was funny when I first heard it about a hundred years ago.” Andy didn’t look at the man.

“Well,” the man said, “I seen you got a long face. Chin up, son.”

Andy stared at the napkin dispenser.

“I know you,” the rancher-type said.

“I don’t think so.”

“I think so. Mind if I sit?” And he sat across the table from Andy without waiting for a yes or no. The man smiled and folded his hands on the tabletop. They were chubby hands with red fingers, the left ring finger sporting a dinged up wedding band. The thin skin around his eyes wrinkled when he smiled. He looked like a grandpa. Maybe he wanted to sell oatmeal. Andy put the coffee cup down on the table. He’d just swigged off the dregs.

“I didn’t say for you to sit.”

“I know it.”

Andy glared. The man gazed.

“My name’s Clark, Ted Clark.” The man didn’t offer his hand for a shake.

“Okay.”

“And you are?”

“Han Solo.”

Clark chuckled, signaled to the waitress and when she came to the table, he pointed at Andy’s cup. She went away, then came back with more coffee.

“Maybe I should tell you what I do,” Clark said.

“Maybe. Maybe go fuck yourself.”

“I’m a Maricopa County Sheriff’s Deputy.” Clark’s hands stayed folded, his smile warm and pleasant, lifting his mustache in the corners of his mouth.

“So?”

“Your face is all over the news. Not to mention your description on all the law radios in Arizona. And not to mention,” and here Clark pointed toward the window, “the description of that little old ride you got parked out in the parking lot.”
Andy looked down, the white plate smeared purple from the blueberry pie slices. Clark took off his hat. His dark gray hair was greased. He spread his thumb and forefinger apart across and down the sides of his mustache.

“Why’d you do it, son?”

“Do what? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You ain’t some sort of dangerous criminal, else you wouldn’t have let yourself get found so easy. What made you hit the bank?” The voice was peaceful, calming, almost overwhelming. A cool canyon breeze from across the table. And Clark’s eyes. They had a shine, a sparkle. Life. They loved.

“You got sick family? Debts you ain’t settled? Not drugs, is it?”

“Fun, I guess.” The words slipped out of Andy’s mouth almost before they clicked in his brain and he realized as soon as he heard himself say them that they were right. It was like a gong going off deep in his soul. “Yeah, fun.”

“Help me understand, son. Armed robbery, and it’s a financial institution now so that makes things federal, but armed robbery is a kick for you?”

“Yeah.” Andy looked at Clark’s face, then down. He shrugged, then spread his arms out wide. “That’s all I can think of. Fun. I did it for fun.”

“Like a thrill.”

“Yeah, like a thrill.”

They were both quiet, Clark watching Andy and Andy, head in hand now, watching the coffee slosh around as he swirled his cup.

Finally, Clark said, “You know, they got things like parachute clubs. Hang gliding. Race cars.”

Andy looked up. Clark was smiling. They both laughed then, low laughter, chuckles that blended in with the talk all around them, talk which rose with the coffee steam and cigarette smoke and the smell of frying bacon, eggs, potatoes.

“Well,” Clark said.

“Well.”

“I guess you know I got a job to do now.”

Andy stared at his coffee cup. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry, son.”

“It’s okay.”

Clark unfolded his hands, put them palms down on the table. He said, “I’d really think—”

He didn’t finish. Couldn’t. The last bullet cut through his gut, blasted out his kidney, bored through the wood of the booth, popped through the wrist of a blue haired lady sitting the next booth over, angled up and thunked into the plaster wall. Little white shards went spinning. Under the table, Andy’s hand was shaking so bad he dropped the gun. It clunked off his boot and settled in the shadows next to some torn up Equal packets. Clark pitched forward onto the table with a grunt.
His fingers moved like he was trying to grab something, grab anything. Then his arm twitched and a peppershaker went flying. The blue haired lady was screaming in pulses of noise— up and down and up and down went her voice. Andy jumped to his feet and backed away from the table, mouth hanging open, eyes wide and round as the rim of the coffee cup. A puddle of blood was spreading between Clark’s boots and the blue haired lady had fallen onto the floor and turned onto her back, kicking like a cockroach. She scooted over the linoleum like a cockroach too and her hand was limp, dragging along behind her gray and loose as she wiggled along. Clark tried to stand, couldn’t, then fidgeted and grunted again. His hands relaxed and quit moving altogether. The lady moved past Andy, swimming over the floor backstroke style, blood laid out like strings floating on the tiles in her wake. He took a big step back. Then another and another, until he banged into a table and fell into a fat cowboy’s lap. The fat cowboy looked at him, smooth jowls trembling, and Andy jumped back to his feet. Nobody moved. Nothing but stares. A phone beeped. Somebody hiccupped. The chimes above the door tinkled.

“Oh my—,” the waitress said, and the rest of her words trailed off.

---

Paul Luikart is a student in Seattle Pacific University’s MFA in creative writing program. His work has appeared in Chicago Quarterly Review, Curbside Splendor, and Pacifica Literary Review, among others. He’s been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Sundress Publication’s Best of the Net anthology, and one of his stories was recently short-listed for the Able Muse Write Prize. By the time you read this, his wife may have given birth to their second daughter (Due November 8th, 2013).