

Yalobusha Review

Volume 12

Article 21

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Plattner, Andrew (2007) "Bore," *Yalobusha Review*: Vol. 12 , Article 21.
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol12/iss1/21>

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Andrew Plattner

Bore

I wanted to see my older brother, who had been dead for something like twelve years already, and I might have gotten loud about it during a drinking phase at one of the local pubs. That's what I told myself after this woman in hip-huggers, a tank top, plenty of ink on her arms, showed up at my place on a Sunday afternoon, said it was possible, and all that I needed to tell her was what it was worth to me. She was pretty, but held a drab expression, like she was too young and superior to have already seen all that she had. And that I was boring her, even though she was doing all the talking.

We were standing on my apartment balcony, which was where I had discovered her. I lived on the fourth floor and it had been raining all day. She was not at all wet, so that was one thing. The silver drops formed a beaded curtain beyond us. "It'd be wrong of you to get my hopes up," I said, trying to sound blasé.

"Your hopes?"

She did not look like any salesperson, but I really didn't care. I said, "Well, what do people usually pay for something like this?"

"Depends."

"My soul or something?" She gave a smirk at that one. "A kidney?" I said. Then, as usual, I got scared. "I would want to see him before you got the kidney, though."

"Of course," she said. "How old are you? In pretty good health, you look okay. Heard of a Stairmaster?"

"You'll throw that in?"

"Uh, not."

"I want to see my brother much like you are standing right here right now," I said. I thought about reaching, touching her shoulder with the tip of one finger, just to make sure. But she looked like somebody who'd really resent it. I said, "He and I have to shake hands or something."

"No. No physical contact. It's a thing. Too many guys want Marilyn Monroe. Women want Dillinger, JFK. Sorry. I hate rules, but it has to be that way. This isn't an escort service."

"People would give up their organs for it?"

"Well, yeah."

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“It seems . . . I don’t know.”

“Think of what it would be like having Marilyn under you. Think of that huge smile.” The woman was holding her hands out, like she was getting a slinky to go back and forth. “Where would that rate with what else you’ve done with your life?”

“There’s no need to . . .”

“You telling me you would not trade a kidney to sleep with a Liz Hurley, a Serena Williams?”

“They’re alive,” I said.

“I’m just saying.”

If I was twenty and somebody said kidney-for-Marilyn I’d have waved them off without thinking. But I was not twenty now. I thought about getting a visit from Elizabeth Hurley or a vintage Anita Ekberg. I supposed my lamenesses would stand out like burning spears.

“I don’t want a hologram of my brother or something,” I said.

“As real as this Astroturf under our feet,” she said. “Look, you want to see him. I can make it happen. You’ve offered a kidney, I’m saying it’s a deal.”

“What the hell you want with a kidney?” I said, “How does one even get a job like this?”

“How does somebody wind up working for Hertz?” she said.

Shrugged. “One day, you’re standing in a uniform, living the nightmare. You can’t live on your art, even if you’re great. John Singer Sargent was only appreciated after he was gone.”

“Actually, Sargent was quite renowned in his own lifetime,” I said.

She was holding up her hand at this point, but I said, “He painted society’s elite.”

“Wow, okay look, good for him. You asked about me. One day, a guy shows at Bomb Java Bomb and he starts telling me about this job.”

“Did you take him seriously?”

“Sir,” she said, smiled quick, then pinched her lips together. This type of work was clearly wrong for her, and I could just hear her supervisor saying, *You fucking blow one more sale . . .* This would be the final job before she had to call home, ask for a handout. I could hear a silver-haired woman’s voice in Topeka saying, *You got fired from what?*

Anyway, she plowed ahead, started going over a checklist, pressing down one finger, then another, and by this point I started thinking about my brother and how he didn’t take things seriously. I thought a visit would be a lot like real life and that he would just give me a lot of shit. This girl right here was pretty, though, I know I’ve mentioned that. She pressed down another finger and her eyes were looking upward, and I thought, what is heaven? Strawberries and really smooth scotch? If you’d asked me what I really wanted, it would be to let my brother rest in peace and me having the life I had now, only I’d be popular, a buzz-maker, a

getter of everything I'd previously given up on. Heaven, I guessed it would have nice things. But I worried that it would be like living in a small town. Hell (or the Americanized version of Hell) did not scare me at all. A no-exit museum honoring the great men of Halliburton. Inside, on every speaker, would be a 24-hour audio tape of O. J. complaining because Nicole wasn't around to help him raise the children. Seeing how bad it could get, that was part of who we were.

I interrupted, saying, "Suppose I want to pick someone other than my brother? I mean I understand, no touching. But maybe somebody brilliant. Einstein. Voltaire."

"That is possible," she said, "But you ought to know that the most requested names can not be clear visually. They can be a little white in spots. If you give me a name, I can check on the condition."

"How long do I get with someone?"

"Ten minutes."

I thought of small-talking with a Lincoln or a Matisse, the larger questions I might ask, if being dead was different because you actually had been someone. "Why ten minutes?" I said, my voice going pretty soft.

"Did you know the first Ford Motors car would max out at twenty-five miles per hour?" she said. "This is as far as we have gotten."

"Send me the papers," I said. "If I like what I read, I'll sign. I want to think about it."

"If you could verbally agree now, it would be great for me." She touched her hand to the base of her neck.

"Do a lot of your customers ask you out?" I said.

"Practically all of them," she said.

"But there's a rule," I said.

"Hey," she said. "You catch on quick." But she looked more confident than before. "I'll send the papers."

When the contract arrived in the mail, I was impressed by its efficiency. A single page with three paragraphs. One paragraph explained the deal in a general way, much as my salesperson had. The next listed the guidelines. There were a number of questions I could not ask my brother (e.g. What it's like? How do you feel? Who's going to win the Stanley Cup?). They had already typed into the blanks my brother's name and then 'kidney.'

For a few days, I didn't sign it. I'd stand in the bathroom, turn my back to the mirror, see if I could even tell I had a kidney. I closed my eyes, tried to feel one inside me. I reached my hands around my back, pushed at certain spots with my fingertips. During the day, I went to my job and at night I returned home and looked at myself in the mirror. Whenever I flipped across a channel on TV where doctors were standing over an operating table, I'd be curious. There'd be a shot of an opened chest

cavity, a heart beating, a surgeon stitching something together. I could not decide which was the more miraculous thing, the goop inside us responsible for running the show or that any of it could be fixed.

The short of it: I signed.

My brother had jumped off the Pierson Bridge into the Allegheny River and the coroner had discovered large doses of coke and alcohol in his bloodstream. Amongst his friends and family, it was thought he would have not done this if he were sober. I started building pages of questions for him, but when I received the confirmation notice in the mail, the appointment date, there was also a ‘Helpful Hints’ page. At the bottom, it said, in bold face, ‘Questions can waste valuable time.’ And for some reason, this immediately made me feel a lot better. Besides just living with one kidney, a worry I had developed was that this deal was going to be like a junk-food binge, or a presidential press conference.

But, shit, this was my brother. He could give me a sign, at the very least.

Trust.

This was what I said aloud to myself while facing the mirror the night before I sent that sucker in.

When the day came, I was where I was supposed to be, standing on my balcony, looking down at the street below, and then I heard a noise inside and when I stepped into the living room, my brother was pulling himself through the window at the end of the hall. He walked out to the living room, stopped a few yards from me. He looked over the place, seemed to be figuring out something. He ran a hand up to his hair, smoothed it over. Looked the same as I remembered, was not soaking from the river he’d gone into or anything like that.

“Hey asshole,” he said. He looked good, young and strong.

“I have a front door,” I said.

“Fucking congrats,” he said. Had his hands on his hips, like Superman with a cape blowing behind his ass.

“Hey, what’s Freedom Fries?” he said.

I felt like saying, *What, your fucking TV has bad reception?*

“Seriously?” I said. He nodded. Right away, I screwed up, got nervous, took a whole minute to explain and I did not do a great job. I had to connect 9/11 with the war on Iraq. And that France would be “punished.” I said they would have banned the things altogether, but then school kids would have nothing to eat.

“You okay?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Don’t take shit hard,” he said. “That’s gospel.”

I found the shape of my face changing, was worried for him, that he’d already thrown down a rule. But he’d always been telling me that, so I

guessed it was all right, even if he was the one who'd gone off a bridge. I was trying to be able to tell something just by looking at him now. I wondered if this was really why it was him I wanted to see.

I said, "Do you know any of the salespeople? Who was mine, do you know that?"

"No, man, shit," he said. He tugged at the front of the shirt he wore. "I'm the *thing*, baby. I don't deal with sales."

I was nodding. "You want anything, a Coke or a beer or something?"

"Not really."

"You want me to tell you about something else?" I said. "Your old friends? New Steelers Stadium? They have huge ketchup bottles in the end zone. Mrs. Heinz-Kerry put them there."

"Who? No, man, listen, what'd your salesgirl look like? Young?"

"I didn't say that. That isn't important."

"Asshole," he said, "Talk to me."

I explained her appearance and then I said, "She couldn't go out with me if she wanted. She said it was a company rule," I said.

"Is this fucking Russia?" he said. I shrugged. He appeared to be thinking and for some reason I just stayed quiet. "Find her after I'm gone," he said. "Seriously. Swear, motherfucker. Don't wimp out."

"I will, okay?"

"Hey, man, how long do you think Russia will be stuck with that? You know, 'Is this Russia?'"

"Not forever," I said. For a second, I thought he was going to check his watch or something, just like the first President Bush had during the one debate with Clinton. I remembered the moment that had happened, how astounding it seemed to me, how it really seemed to have spelled out everything that had happened since.

"Asshole," he said. "Listen to me. Chase after the girl." He was shaking his head. Then he held up one finger. "Chase," he said. His eyes went to the sliding balcony door, which was partially opened. He wagged the finger back and forth. "Do not," he said.

"Wimp out," I said. "Got it."

"Fucking swear."

"Okay."

"Swear, shithead—"

"Okay, okay," I said. "Jesus."

Quiet. I knew time was escaping. "Can you tell me what it felt like when you hit the water?" I said.

I thought he would say something interesting. By this, I mean his face appeared to have that kind of answer inside him.

"Wet?" I prompted.

"You'd wish for wet," he said.

Somehow, this must have crossed a line. Either that, or the ten

minutes were up. He left, but it was like a double-exposed photo, part of him going back out the window, the other part standing there, just fading on me.

I tried to think of what he'd say next. Maybe for a minute I stood there and then I thought, okay it's cool. Long good-byes are for chumps.

When they took out my kidney, they did it right. I had the surgery at a hospital and everyone there might have been part of the company or something because no one asked about my medical history or commended me for the donation. The staff was professional, courteous. Distant. The food, of course, was bland and terrible and I lost weight (12 lbs!) during my stay. While in the hospital, I thought about my salesperson's eyes and the shape of her face and what it would be like to wake up with her in the morning. If I was becoming obsessed, then so be it. My brother had practically encouraged this, and, even though his jar had always been cracked, it felt good to obey.

Once I was released, I called her company, and right away they wanted to send someone out to see me. I said, no, look, that salesgirl, she left her sunglasses, tell her she can pick them up anytime. Or, just give me her address . . . But they were totally onto it. Sir, do you want to see a representative or not? Sir? I hung up, told myself to be strong, she was real. Or perhaps the point of all of this was that she was real enough.

I've decided to start looking for her on my own. I've been to a couple of biker bars across town, tried a punk club in the city. I don't fit in, but when I get to talking with people, telling them I'm looking for this woman, that this possibly could involve love, they seem to feel a little better about me being there. A redhead with a hacking cough named Lily Mae even gave me her phone number, which I have not thrown away.

Then one afternoon I even found myself reclined in a chair at a tattoo parlor and then I was nodding when the man with the scraggly, smoke-colored beard said, "Ready?"

My tattoo was going to say this:

Do Not

I had shown up at the parlor, thinking somebody working there might know her name. They were pretty vague—yeah, oh yeah, her—but then the guy started talking with me about tattoos, offering me designs and fonts. I wondered if this wouldn't be a good idea, a way of reminding myself. I wrote it out for the tattoo artist.

"Donut?" he said.

"O," I said, pointing.

A second later he was nodding in a way that said it was all the same to him. Then, the needle was stinging the back of my hand. The pamphlet

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I'd read said a tattoo only hurt for a few days after it was applied. After that, it would be pain free and it would be mine forever.