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ICKY
FIVE NOVELS ABOUT BEAUTY, HORROR AND TRUTH

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"I think it's part of the responsibility of an artist to shock, to upset, to make people think differently, and to surprise people. And that's where the good humour is, if there's a surprise and there's something unexpected. Something that's not normal, not in the realm of general living expectations."

Bill Plympton

"I spent my life trying to learn everything. Then, when I was drunk enough to think I knew it all, I realised that only 10 people cared any more. They were two handfuls of kindness in all of the madness. Luckily, with my icky brain, it was all I needed before my exit stage-left with a beaming smile."

Steve Hussy

BOOK / 10

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since press writing at the
2004 razor's edge

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Academic

“The problem was you had to keep choosing between one evil or another, and no matter what you chose, they slice a little bit more off you, until there was nothing left.

At the age of 25 most people were finished.”

Charles Bukowski, Ham On Rye

“I only had one life, and I’d be damned if I’d live it in a way that would make me unhappy and please somebody else. I had already lived that kind of life, too much of it already.”

Larry Brown, Big Bad Love

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Academic

by Steve Hussy

1

Working in that bar started everything that rumbles around in my brain. It's there when I'm asleep and it's often there when I'm awake.

All that I have learned needs to be controlled or killed. I don't know which is best, but writing about it might help me.

I was 21 and I had to be drunk to slide through time. The bar was linked to a holiday camp. I served people whose idea of a holiday was to spend time with the same people in the same country with the same comfortable normality.

There were the rare great people, but trying to keep the rest happy with booze was like firefighting with kerosene. And where were the attractive women? I slowly learned that no right-minded and good-looking woman would visit the holiday camp when they had a decent job or a loose-pocketed partner.

This meant that pleasure was limited to a borderline illegal yet highly developed daughter of a fuckwit: "Can I 'ave an Archers 'n' lemonade?"

She would be 16 and wearing a short skirt with "ANGEL" written on the back. She would have overblown make-up that destroyed her face and mind.

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I'd say: "Are you sure you're old enough?"

She'd lean over the bar and bare her already yellowing teeth: "Err... puh-leeese?" Her cleavage was presented on a Wonderbra shelf.

Idiot that I was, I would say: "You wanna double?"

I spent 35 hours a week serving drinks and watching the repeating stereotypes. Cynicism is lazy but in that bar it was all there was. As with any job, it was time sold to buy space elsewhere.

The primary upside of *The Bermuda Club* was finding the truth in everyone's lives. The promise of something strange was always possible, even as I got back to my boarding-house after I clocked off at midnight.

Ms. Devgan was there most nights cleaning the lobby and watching out: "Hi baby!"

She smiled and her bright amber eyes flitted around: "You ok?" She was in the ground-floor flat behind a tapestry screen that she had crafted herself: "How has your tummy been? You looked so pale, I could see it yeah?"

"I'm ok... honestly."

"Here, baby," Ms. Devgan shuffled into her kitchen then popped out again, "take this." It was a little baggie of ginger.

"Thanks," I said, "you didn't have to."

She looked at me slyly: "Come here, baby." So I did, and she whispered: "Emma's got a boy tonight so be careful, ok?"

"Ok, Ms. Devgan."

"Night, baby."

She loved mothering the people there. We were all young,

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travelling, or studying in a part-time university course. She watched proceedings and didn't intrude.

Ms. Devgan was classy, and she must have felt she was keeping the riff-raff out. I didn't have the heart to tell her that we were already in...

I creaked up the sticky staircase with its thinning carpet. I stupidly went into the shared toilet without knocking: "AH!"

Emma was riding some fat dick in the tub.

He looked astonished: "Uhhh?" He was monged-out with flabby features. He let his head sink under the bath's rim.

Emma turned and smiled at me: "Oh, hey Steve!"

Emma was a pretty, blonde 20-year-old. She had kind lips and blue eyes. Unfortunately I focussed on Emma's giant, pimped duck-ass peeking out from her shiny black t-shirt.

I had seen all of her body before when she would drink with me in her large and lacy underwear. That time I couldn't see any forbidden skin other than the backside she jutted out and wobbled as she walked.

"Want me to shut the door?" I asked.

Emma smiled, nodded and I shut it.

I pissed in the stall. Halfway through my waterfall I heard Emma and her new boyfriend finish their fucking.

It was dry, noisy and frantic.

It sounded like the creaking stairs.

2

Living in the boarding-house wasn't all bad.

Ms. Devgan cleaned the shared toilet facilities with a huge pride. You might catch a stray pubic hair if you showered in the morning, but she made us feel secluded and safe.

I usually pissed in my room anyway, and that room is 9ft by 12ft of detail stored inside my insane mind. It was the cheapest I could find in the area but it was good enough. It had a decent bed, no rats and only the occasional cockroach.

There were flame-marks riding up the right-hand wall and stains on the shit-brown carpet. Those were offset by having a personal sink that I could piss and masturbate into.

I liked the set-up. It was a cave for a primitive man.

I would lay down in my bed and feel something different, some knowledge that my brain was misaligned. I'd pull the whiskey to my mouth and let it slide down as I stared at the ceiling. I enjoyed the burn, dulling my stupid thoughts.

I asked: "Why did I say that?" over the woman at the bar. "What if you had done this?" I told myself over Emma. I analysed the microscopic moments until my stomach churned.

I took some of the ginger from Ms. Devgan's baggie, and then the bats started to crawl above in the attic. They talked to each other chitterchitter and crawled over each other chitterchitter and fucked with their chitterchitterchitterchitter.

The incessant noise lasted until six in the morning. I didn't know how many lived there, but it felt like thousands. I opened the mud brown curtains and watched the dark angular forms

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flying erratically, while the rest still chitterchattered away, above, below, around, and sometimes only in my head.

My mind crawled with them as in the room below someone else started fucking. Their bed creaked and pounded against the door. Some movie poster rustled in between each thrust. Stroke, rustle, stroke, rustle. Erg erg ooo erg erg ahhh...

There were so many quick, desperate fucks among those quick, desperate people.

I kept trying to sleep and knock down all the chittering with whatever I could find. I was a child lost in the dark, swimming in the shit of the need created by my isolation.

I had a voice that was tired of my right hand and yet I was tired of the other voice berating my brain. Any feelings twisted my cynicism, but they were there and they screamed.

Concentrate chitter-ahhh concentrate chitter-erg
CONCENTRATE chitter-aaaaah mmmmmmmmm...

3

I first heard him through the wall. He was talking to his cock: "Come on, come on, COME ON."

I listened to my personal stereo to drown out his noise, but it didn't work. My hearing uncontrollably hooked onto the strange and awful.

"Yeah, yeah that's it," and then he shouted, "YEAH!"

I tried to avoid contact. I used the shared kitchen and toilet as little as possible, but I needed some human contact.

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I met him in the kitchen as I was cooking pasta at 1.00am. I had got back from work and felt the hunger and booze pangs. My red wine was already open.

"Hi," I felt myself shrink and I wanted to sink into a black sleep, "I'm Steve."

"Hey dere," he had a middle-American accent, "it's Brad."

Brad extended a hand. He was tall and muscular, but I was big enough to look evenly into his fixed grey eyes.

I asked: "You want a drink?" I'd drink two bottles of wine or a half-bottle of spirits per day. It was nothing heroic...

He said: "Sure."

We went back to his room. He had a few books on the shelves and a tapestry on the wall. There was incense burning and an army kit-bag in the corner.

Brad asked: "What do you do?" It was the question everyone wants to know.

"I'm training to be a teacher." He gave no response to that, so I asked: "What are you doing?"

"Ah'm travellin' thru Europe. Doin' some writin' here."

"Where've you been?"

"Here," Brad stared disconcertingly at me, "and there."

We talked for an hour after that. He had stories about Italy, France and Spain. Like me, he wanted to go to Scandinavia next.

He said: "The wimmen dere 'posed to be lil blonde foxes."

"Yet the place is as fucking cold as here..."

He smiled: "Weather makes 'em grow up hot to survive."

He had a half-bottle of bourbon and shared it happily: "What did you do," I chugged another shot, "before now?"

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"I was a Marine," Brad said.

"Yeah?" The first Iraq War had been three years before:

"You were in the Gulf?"

His jaw set: "I was."

"What'd you do?"

"Everyone ax that." Now he narrowed his eyes: "Ah worked comms. Kept stuff 'gether. Nuttin' much, no fightin'."

"Did you see anything?"

His fixed grey-blue eyes stared: "Everyone ax that too."

"Do they?"

"We worked cleanup." He shut his eyes: "Bodybaggin', that shit. So ah saw shit. One guy in a cab, jus' the top half of 'im. Other half was layin' in the road."

My mouth opened but nothing came out.

He opened his eyes and went on: "We had these little fold-out shovels. Then we stick 'em in the same bag, y'know?"

How had he survived such horror? As ever, my eyes were wide and unblinking. I wasn't any good with conversation, so I said, simply: "Fuck..."

"Ya wan' 'nother drink?" Brad asked.

"Yeah... thanks."

He poured it, I drank it, and then I listened some more.

4

Ms. Devgan's nephew visited the boarding-house. He was on holiday from India and was working as a locum to fund it.

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One night her nephew screamed: "OH HELP ME PLEASE I AM DYING!" in the corridor as Brad and I walked past him.

We looked at each other, moved on by, got into Brad's room and then he locked his door. Brad said: "Shit."

"Hmm."

Brad poured a drink for me. That night we had tequila slammers from a cheapo litre bottle, along with slices of lemon and salt. The shots fizzed in my brain, but not in my voice.

I asked: "Shouldn't we go and help him?"

"He's jus' drunk," Brad said evenly, "lettum figure it out..."

"OH HELP ME PLEASE!" Dr. Singh screamed again.

"Isn't Ms. Devgan about?"

"Nope... ah checked her room earlier." He downed his next shot: "Ah guess she's with her son."

I said: "She told me he was a doctor..." as her nephew wailed some more outside.

"Yeah... Sikhs don't drink," he laughed, "so ah guess he's been a bad black boy!"

I took another drink to dull the urge to hit Brad. Then Dr. Singh said: "Oh help me please!" a little softer.

We drank some more before Emma's door opened.

We could hear her comfort him for a while: "Are you ok?"

Dr. Singh shouted: "NO! I AM DYING!"

A pause, then a near-silence. She must have hugged him, but she left after he only responded with moans: "Oh, oh, oh."

"So ya lookin' forward ta teachin'?" Brad asked.

"I need a career." Now I was the one with narrowed eyes: "And I think I can do it."

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Brad downed a slammer then filled my glass. “Ya sound as sure as ya ever do.” There was sarcasm in his tone of voice.

I wetted between my thumb and forefinger. He poured the salt over it, I drank the tequila and it fizzed away. I didn’t have many answers. The booze helped but interior questions still churned my stomach.

Dr. Singh started to whisper outside but he still stomped up and down. We could hear his feet but they were much slower now: “Oh help me please.”

I asked: “Where are you gonna travel to next?”

“Here, you-rope, Japaaaaan,” Brad’s voice slurred. “Shit, wherever mah mood takes me. Marines weren’t ‘nough.”

“You miss home?”

“Fuck no. My father iz fuckin’ religious.” I couldn’t discern whether Brad was too. “Ah needed to get ‘way. Thaz why ah joined th’ Marines.” He poured another shot of tequila. “Ah did it first with a Filipino, y’know?” Then he laughed again: “Paid ten dollars to a whore. She was a good lil gal an’ she did mah cleanin’ fer a week.”

We sat for another minute or so, listening to Singh’s moans gradually softening: “I am dying... help me please...”

Brad broke the near silence. “Mah old man got crazy once over th’ Armageddon, an’ ah mean he got convinced.” He smiled: “He went inna garage an’ boarded it up. Stocked it up with canned goods,” he laughed, “an’ all that fuckin’ kool-aid!”

I was blinking and unblinking my eyes to focus them: “Kool-aid?”

“Iz fizz fer stupid people.” He took a long slug of tequila.

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“Man, Pop’s face the day it was s’posed to come,” he scratched his head, “Him lookin’ outta there dreamin’ of t’apocalypse!”

There was quiet again as Singh whispered outside: “Oh help me...”

“Listen ta this,” Brad passed me his Walkman and I stuck in an earphone.

I heard: “*Baby, I think of you a lot ya know? Like today, like I was listenin’ to Pat Metheny and I thought of you.*” She continued to drone about her day. She worked as a veterinary assistant. She lived on her own but had spent her after-work hours with music and friends.

“Cassie...” Brad’s dead eyes glazed further.

“She sounds nice,” I said, feeling the weight of expectation. I thought “*average*” but I said: “Are you with her?”

“We split ‘fore ah left. Iz complicated.” Another dreamy look with the hint of a smile. “She’s beautiful. She’s only 18. Ah dunno. She’s smart too y’know...”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah...” he thought a little more. “Man, she’s fuckin’ beautiful, y’know?”

Singh was directly outside the door. He whispered: “I am dying... I am dying...” Then he started to vomit: “HOOOOOROARGH!”

Brad shouted: “Shit!”

The puke pounded against the door and then Dr. Singh must have wheeled around.

“HWAAAARGH,” he heaved, “HOOOOOURAAAG. HOO-HOO-HORRRRRRRRRRRRG.”

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Brad laughed but I was transfixed at the closed door.

“He’s fuckin’ goin’ for it!” Brad said loudly over the noise.

“HUH-HUH-HUH-HUH...” Dr. Singh was coughing out there, but was he choking?

“Shit!” Brad said for the umpteenth time. “Ah better go...”

He got up and opened the door and a mound of thick puke greeted him. The stench hit me and I stood up. I reeled and veered towards the wall. I bounced towards my room.

I looked left and saw Brad leading Dr. Singh through his door. My vision slid to the right, and that made me veer to the left. I just avoided some more puke before I fumbled with my key in the lock, and felt it all build inside.

I got the key around, went in, turned on the light and locked the door. I spun around to the sink and it hammered out: “HARGOUGH.” I tried to keep it quiet but it hacked out anyway. Brown and thick, rising up at me and filling the sink.

“HOROUGH.” Another load of acrid brown shit. Even in my fevered head, I thought: “Why’s it not going down?”

“HUH-HOROUGH,” another load. No, no, no, it lurched up at me again, two thirds full now. That fucking chocolate pudding earlier. I vomited again at the sickly sweet stench of it.

I reached down into it with my right hand. It was warm, wetter on top and thicker further down. I got my fingers into the plughole and pushed the solid bits through. Then I dry heaved for ten minutes, saying “fuck” between caught breaths. I brushed my teeth but I hacked up that liquid too...

Then I started to laugh. A big gut laugh wheezed out through my bile burned throat.

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This was nonsense... but it helped to teach me how to think like a fucking adult and accept that shit is everywhere. And, more often than not, it spewed from people's mouths.

5

My teaching trainer's coo-coo voice rattled in my skull. She excitedly asked: "Has anyone had a go at writing on the whiteboard?!"

She was average in every way. Draw your own picture of her as she said: "Let's have a jolly good go at it!"

The training involved super-eager child-adults guiding confused child-adults how to teach. I sat with wide-eyes but I was unable to say how stupid everything was.

I was caught between feeling and the daily grind. I needed a qualification to get a full-time job, but I had a psychotic need for reality too.

I smelt my own booze funk around me. I felt dizzy on the paraffin fumes and they made me happy. They helped me tolerate this new world, as did the knee-booted woman across from me in the circle of the seminar.

"It can be a bit hard," the trainer went on, "but it'll be wonderful practice!"

I peered down at the fellow student's calves in those boots as someone said: "How are you getting on?"

The boots' wearer was repellent in every other way, but those boots and the slivers of her calves were peeking out from

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her just-over-the-knee length skirt...

Some voice again: "Hello?"

My damned brain never saved my cock. I remembered some of the vicious bile the knee-booted woman had spouted. I knew that her legs would be flabby and hairy. The boots gave them more than she had. But still...

"STEPHEN?"

I looked up at the trainer's eyes.

"Oh, sorry." I attempted an innocent little grin.

"Would you like to have a go on the whiteboard?"

"Alright."

"Don't worry if you struggle a bit!" Her face smiled but her voice didn't. "We're all in the same boat!"

"..." I couldn't speak although I knew she wanted reassurance. I was using the whiteboard constantly during my teaching gig, but I was still mastering writing that was **BIG**.

I wrote in my too-hurried script: *"Laura Mulvey was a vital film critic who explored the nature of..."*

"Good, good! Oh! You're getting better!" My writing neatenened but I wanted to stick my fingers in my ears. "Good, good! Oh! You're getting better!" She went on with: "That's excellent! Well done you!"

The other students clapped and the knee-booted woman crossed her legs.

I did that task and all of the others they foisted on me. One Saturday a month, 9am to 5pm. There was an hour break in the middle where I'd go the toilets to eat and top up on some booze.

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Then I would rush home to my room and to peace. I had stacks of books that I had been poring over for a year.

Brad had lent me *Post Office* first, then *Ask The Dust*. I used the internet after that. I picked up *Pimp*, *Hangover Square*, and more Bukowski and Fante. Later I expanded to Hamsun, Tanizaki, Hamilton, Dostoevsky, Trantino, Celine, Himes, Mrabet and on and on... I read slowly and soaked in every line. Those unique worlds and those crazy people.

I also scoured the net to find movies on DVDs. I had a bitter taste for hitmen, serial killer movies and film noir: *Henry*, *The Third Man*, *Seven*, *Blast of Silence*, *The Night of the Hunter*, *Dark City*, *Touch of Evil*, *The Vanishing*.

The Vanishing was my favourite. The character of Rex was fascinating. He was a sociopath who had horror enforced onto him. He had to prove his love and drink the drugged coffee...

Of course, the sadistic Chemistry teacher called Raymond didn't die at the end and Rex was buried alive.

6

Weeks on, I was eating tomato soup in the kitchen with Erica. A month before, Brad had shared a "69" with her. He said: "Ah was jus' drunk," but the dirty truth was that he wanted pussy and any wet hole would do.

Erica was an American foghorn with a Californian drone. She was tall and fat with a pig-nose and cold eyes.

"Eeeee-yew!" Erica's watery lips wailed at my soup, "I can't

believe you didn't buy HEINZ."

"This was cheaper."

"I only buy brand names."

I was unsure of how I could get Erica to stop talking.

"Ya know," she said to fill the air, "I had my period today and it's like so weeee-ird..." Her snout crinkled up: "It's all like... sticky, ya know?"

I studied her face. It was empty of anything except snide arrogance. "My blood's all black," Erica smiled, "all yukky and gloopy... ya know?"

An image manifested of pulling Erica's head into my soup. Her hands scratched as I watched the bubbles rise.

Then I thought myself evil and said: "Must be pretty rough for you."

As I watched the crazies in movies and books and life, there were louder whispers: "Yeah, this is right. This is IT."

7

Lanny came next, with her beautiful pale brown skin. Before Lanny, my adventures were pornography, fumbled kisses and a handjob when I was 16. The hardcore began with a pretty psychopath called Emma when we were both 17.

The relationship with Emma lasted for a furious six weeks. Her insistence on listening to 120 beats-by-minute dance music like *Slipmatt* during sex made my stroke all too fast. By the second week, I learned how to control my cock. All I had to do was push

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down the muscle above my hard-on. After that, we would end up in a happy and sweaty mess.

I got acne vulgaris just after the break-up with her. It covered my face and back. Was this some reaction to missing Emma? All I knew was the pus put off women for a while.

I was prescribed Roaccutaine and it worked. I had pristine skin again. Sadly, it also drove people nuts. The side effects were insomnia and unnecessary rages. The most profoundly affected by Roaccutaine committed suicide.

They banned the drug a few years later. I'm still here to tell this tale, but maybe the acne spots soaked into my brain.

Lanny was sweet and attractive enough to soothe any scars. As a physiotherapist, she was built for the task.

Lanny had a slight overbite and I loved the cute way it looked when she smiled. She was tall, toned and athletic. Lanny moved with energy and a smile. Her dark brown eyes were always so alive...

Ah. No. Shit. Why I am writing something that makes me remember her again? Why can't I forget? It's just that Lanny had true intelligence and a love of being goofy. Who couldn't love her? So it goes... Brad couldn't but I did.

Brad had met her in the post-graduate bar at our university. Lanny was nearing the end of her physio training. She was suffering yet more lectures and essays, all dovetailed with work placements.

I met her in Brad's room. It was a gathering with him and some other Americans.

"Ya know Steve could hear me jerkin' off..." Brad poked a

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thumb at me.

The other Americans were struck dumb, but the booze helped my line pop out: “I liked to join in... I’d get so hard.”

“Dreeeeeeeee...” Lanny’s laugh leaked out through clenched teeth, while the Americans stared at two crazy Brits.

Brad said: “I heard ya... I’d cum jus’ thinkin’ ‘bout you.”

Lanny exploded into a plummy, horselike wheezing laugh: “uuuuuh-HAAAAAAH, uuuuh-HAAH!”

The rest drew back but I adored her. Energy is infectious.

Lanny wanted Brad. He was confident and muscular. He was the stereotypically perfect fuck. I was the sidekick with the odd decent line but generally I was just odd.

Despite my size, my body language showed how I felt. I was withdrawn, hunched, twitchy...

Lanny stayed with Brad that first night. The next day he told me she had given him a massage: “Said she needed ta practice...”

She had oiled up her tits and rubbed them down his back. Brad couldn’t follow through. They slept together with no sex of any kind.

“Her tits were... funky?” He preferred women with small breasts. “Lanny’s go outta lot.” Brad moved his hands as if to shape them and he scrunched up his face in semi-disgust.

I imagined Lanny in dreams. She didn’t hold any problems for me other than causing an uncomfortable erection in the morning and a need for her to brighten my confusing world.