

## Blue Monday Review, Issue 1 Spring 2014

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# Out of Time

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The newsman says “civil war” but the face on the screen is not Grant or Lee or Lincoln or Bedford Forrest. What are they trying to pull? Harris thinks. The guy's beardless. He tries to think of an important Civil War figure who went clean-shaven.

"It's Yugoslavia, honey," Charlene says. He considers it. Tito. The face isn't his, either. Charlene's an English teacher, what the hell does she know? He turns his head to tell her this but he's asleep before his eyes find the couch.

Some days he's lucid a good part of the time. The pain is always there, the cancer eating his insides -- "tumors like golf balls," Max Rothman told him with a smile after his surgery, like it was a compliment -- but some days it's not so bad and he doesn't need the drugs as much. Then he knows pretty well where he is and what's what. The injustice is that the pain worsens toward evening; by the time Charlene gets home from the college he's doped out again and can't give her anything but grief, in both senses of the word. The visiting nurse gets his best moments, which bothers him because he considers her a stone-faced bitch. She's the imperturbable type, always the even keel, no variation in her manner at all. Harris runs her ragged, when he's feeling sorry for himself and mean, demanding water, sponge baths, ointment for his bedsores. Once he slipped his penis from the urine bottle to wet the sheets so she'd have to change the bedding. She didn't complain. No personality at all.

It's Thursday. His watch on the bedside lamp table says so. He still hasn't adjusted to sleeping downstairs, though the rented bed was waiting when he came home from the hospital in December, like some macabre early Christmas present. It made for a fuzzy transition, not going back to his own bed, and he hasn't yet really felt like he's come home. But the watch also says March 1, so he knows he's been here in the living room for close to three months, which is astounding. He has no memory of New Year's Eve, for one thing, nor of Washington's or Lincoln's birthday, let alone "Presidents' Day," the crassness of which

has always irked him. It's hard to believe in the passage of January and February, as a result. His last January and February, he knows. At least going out with the millennium feels like something. Not an achievement, but in some way significant.

The nurse sees that he's awake. She's a middle-aged woman, maybe forty-five, older than Harris will ever be. She takes his temperature, gives him yellow pills, starts a new IV drip going into his right forearm. Her short, dark hair is dusted with gray and she has brownish spots on the backs of her hands. Harris tries not to resent her age, but he does. At forty-five, he thinks, you should be doing more with your life than emptying bedpans. If not, why go on?

There should be a system to balance things out, he tells himself, keeping his face blank as the woman glances at him, smiles without feeling. Give me some of *her* years; I'm an educator, for God's sake. Next year I'd have tenure and my book would be finished.

He's been writing a history of military vehicles, from the footwear of the Spartans to Hannibal's elephants, Caesar's chariots, the horses of Genghis Khan and Robert the Bruce, the tanks and Jeeps and personnel carriers of modern times, troop transport planes and the future role of space shuttles in deploying troops from geosynchronous space stations to any trouble spot on the globe. He'd just started his research when he met Charlene at a faculty banquet five years ago, and was near to completing it when terrible pains in his abdomen sent him to the Emergency Room of Mass General last Thanksgiving. Charlene had been mortified, thinking her dinner was to blame. But it was cancer, and now *Military Transport*, by G. Edward Harris, will never be finished.

His efforts to continue work on the book were doomed by hands too shaky to type or hold a pen, a mind unable to maintain its focus on the material. His publisher looked at what was done and generously asked if Harris could just augment a few sections, but he had to say no. The History department had also been understanding, and friends sent him six books to review, thinking to keep him busy and feeling useful. But he can't read anymore. Television is all he can handle. He'd always been proud of how little he saw of it, but lately, he thinks, it's been very interesting, indeed.

The nurse asks if he wants anything and he tells her the remote control; she points and he finds it on the sheet beside him, as always. How did he miss it there?

When he wakes, Charlene is sitting on the couch, eating Lean Cuisine off a metal snack table and half-watching the local news while she reads from a stack of typed pages that rests against her denimed thigh. Student essays, Harris knows. Always, always a bunch of damned student essays. In History you just write up two exams and assign one research paper, and there's no need to read their sophomoric tripe every freaking day.

Charlene's work is tedious even for him; he wonders why she hasn't gone mad. The television flickers insistently and draws his gaze. He's looking at Albert Einstein, explaining relativity. To Oprah.

"So time means nothing," Einstein says. He is smiling warmly and the merry lines beside his eyes flow inward from his temples to form directional arrows, pointing Harris toward a sparkling, liquid reassurance. "It has no meaning because there is, inevitably, a point at which it all meets, and the whole damn kaboodle cancels out. You're old and young together, and nothing makes any more sense than it ever did. So quit your bitching, already."

"That's fascinating," Oprah says, gravely. "But we're out of time. Tomorrow..."

Harris is certain it was Einstein. Knowing it's impossible doesn't make it less real. "Einstein was on Oprah," he says. He's glad he lived to see it.

Charlene looks at him. "I didn't know you were awake, G.," she says.

He nods, or thinks he does. Sometimes he can't tell if he just thinks to do things or if he actually carries through and does them. Either way, Charlene gets up, comes to the bedside. He feels the weight of her hand on his scalp, knows that her fingers are in his hair. She leans over the side rail and kisses him, but he feels nothing. His lips are rubbery and dead, shavings off an inner tube. When she moves her face away a thin string of spit stretches between them, breaks and swings to her chin like a desperate trapeze artist.

"The nurse said you were quiet today," she says, wiping her chin on a sleeve.

Didn't she hear what he said? Had he said it? Once, Harris recalls, he meant to ask for water and declared instead that Rommel was twice the soldier Montgomery ever was. He might have gone *non sequitur* again, but he doesn't ask because Charlene looks so tired. Tired, but still beautiful. He's watched her face when she sleeps on the couch or when she manages to escape into a novel and it remains unlined, her skin smooth as a child's. She is

twenty-eight and they've been married three years. Her eyes tremble with tears she will not release in his presence. She loves him and he knows it and she is soon to be a widow. "Are you feeling better today?" she asks. Her voice is fine crystal, the hope in it a delicate thing.

"I didn't shit," he tells her. "So I didn't scream."

She looks away, swallows jagged shards of glass, becomes a flat echo of the nurse: "Need the pan now?"

"No," he says. It's become a reflex, this need to frighten and hurt her. An instant, unthinking response to her caring and the love he feels for her. An anesthetic. And it works.

She nods, not looking at him. "Tell me if you want something," she says, and returns depleted to the couch.

Harris watches his wife seat herself slowly, sees her lift the topmost essay like a small pale corpse from the pile and stare at it. Twin vertical lines appear on her creamy forehead, running between her hairline and the bridge of her nose.

He closes his eyes. He remembers their honeymoon trip to Vermont. The scene is so real he knows Einstein was right and that he's managed to find the point at which past and present unite. He's in the rented cabin and it is again three days after the reception at Charlene's father's restaurant in Lowell. The cabin is marvelous, secluded and snowed in and small. They've eaten dinner and Charlene lies on the floor before the fireplace in sheer blue panties and one of his own sleeveless gym shirts, a mug of coffee and hazelnut liqueur steaming fragrantly at her elbow, studying a problem she's arranged on her chessboard. Harris sits in a hard wooden chair and loves the intense fleshy creases above her nose, watches as the lurid orange light of the flames dips and darts along the sweet curve of her thigh, the long sloping creaminess of her neck. Her hair hangs in a long braid behind her.

He sees her with eyes not clouded by pain or narcotics. He has no bed sores, and there is no bedpan in the cabin. His penis hardens. He stands, and she does not sense his approach until he touches her hip, then the lines at her brow vanish as she smiles with delicious lust and reaches for him.

"G.?" She speaks from across the room, an essay on her lap. The lines *are* gone, for what that's worth.

"What?"

"You were smiling," she says, trying one herself. "What's on your mind?"

He contorts his face as if jolted by a sudden pain. He mimics them well, he thinks, when necessary. "Oh, Christ," he says, gasping. "Get the pan, damn it, I have to dump a load."

Biting her lip, Charlene lowers her head. "You don't have to be brutal," she says.

His hands beneath the sheet angrily squeeze his limp penis, a tiny thing that won't respond, won't rise even to defend itself against him. "Cancer's brutal," he tells her. "Get used to it."

Einstein is on *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno. Charlene has gone upstairs to bed and Harris is pissing in the urine bottle when Jay brings Albert on stage. In place of the usual monologue the audience gets a lecture about time from the greatest mind of the century. Harris misses the opening statement, preoccupied with the bottle. Rothman had suggested a catheter, since the pain and the drugs were sure to make walking to the bathroom unwise, but this was Harris' choice. He half fills it this time, carefully stands it on the lamp table for the nurse to empty in the morning. It stands like a trophy.

Refusing the catheter was a small victory, but Harris had relished Rothman's disappointment. A ghoul, Rothman was. They'd met at the gym several years before, at the universals, and the doctor's rapturous accounts of gruesome case histories had seemed amusing, then. Survival humor, Harris assumed. Laughing in the combat zone. But since he'd become sick, he had seen the sadistic truth of it, and he kept Rothman as his doctor only to inflict whatever minor disappointments he could. No catheter, Max.

"Linear time as a concept is... history," Einstein says with a grin. Leno stands nearby, applauding his delivery. The studio audience chuckles. "Forget tomorrow and yesterday, and today -- as today -- cannot exist. All is simultaneous." He pauses. Leno has slipped backstage momentarily and the audience claps politely in his absence, confused. The famous mass of white hair bobs in acknowledgment of the meager response. Einstein's unruffled manner conjures, for Harris, an early morning Ancient Civs class in which half the students typically slept; making no special effort to engage them, Harris would lecture in his

customary style, accepting that only those with a genuine interest absorbed the material, anyway. "I am not speaking to you now," Einstein continued. "I have always spoken to you and always will. Time is an infinite, unbroken plane upon which we impose artificial distinctions. The most distant past and future are one, and one with what we have taught ourselves to experience as the present. Time as we have known it is an illusion. It doesn't matter."

Leno rushes up from backstage. "Well, it matters to our sponsors," he says, smiling hugely. The audience howls. "We'll be back after this."

Harris sits upright in his bed, sweating. Twice now, Einstein has spoken to him, and this time Harris feels he got the message. Quite a joke on an historian, actually, but some comfort to a dying man if time doesn't exist. If you can believe that you have always lived and always will, have always died and always will, the good experiences you've had... always had... are as real and eternal as the bad.

He decides to accept the concept. It feels good to think that when he traveled the road between Charlene's eyebrows to the cabin in Vermont it was real, *is* real, as real as the tumors Rothman told him -- tells him -- it would be pointless to remove. And he's amused to think that what he'd considered the future might not be that at all; he'd thought he was extrapolating from past military and technological events in constructing his space shuttle scenario, but perhaps he merely glanced across the plane somehow to see things as they are and always will be. So much for learning from history!

And so much, he realizes, for grief and loss. In Einstein's universe he and Charlene have always had each other and always will, their happiness as real as their pain. He can concentrate on that, and thank the genius of Ulm for showing him the true big picture, infinitely broader than the puny canvas of linear time on which he'd felt painted over by disease. *Death, thou art dead*, he thinks, and imagines Max Rothman recoiling from the idea. He wonders where the line comes from; Charlene could tell him. But it doesn't matter. He knows, somewhere in time.

The next day -- or what he can't help thinking of as the next day -- he punishes the remote control. He scans the morning news shows, *The View*, Ellen DeGeneres. The nurse offers to read *TV Guide* for him, if he'll tell her what he's looking for.

"Einstein," he says.

Her lips twist in a frown; she doesn't let it reach her blankly professional eyes. "Isn't he dead?" she says.

He smiles, or tries to. His face is insensate. "Yes and no," he tells her.

He spends the day with game shows and soaps, avoiding CNN because it labors under the belief that what's happening is important. He doesn't see Einstein again. He's not thrilled to know that he will watch daytime television through infinity, but he tells himself that it's more than balanced by the time he's spent (it *is* hard for him to think in nonlinear terms) in pleasurable activity. Physical things that pained him to remember during earlier days of sickness -- running on the rec center track, winter hiking in Vermont or New Hampshire, swimming naked in the crystalline lake Charlene found near Providence -- are a solace to him now, and he's glad he has done, or is doing, all of them.

The nurse speaks quietly to Charlene in the kitchen before leaving. Charlene sees her to the door, then stands beside his bed, looking concerned. "What's going on?" she says.

As always, the pain is worse in the evening and he's feeling the pills the nurse gave him an hour ago. He has to think of what to say and say it carefully. His vulcanized lips form words. "What have you heard?" That was good. That was just what he wanted.

She bites a thumbnail quickly, stares at it, crosses her arms. "I heard you expect to see Einstein on a damn *Happy Days* rerun," she tells him.

Harris waves a dismissive hand. Skinny arms, he thinks. He's lost forty-seven pounds since his surgery. "That's stupid," he tells Charlene. "Einstein... only does the talk shows."

Her hands are closed tight around the side rail. She doesn't look away. "Should we try another medicine, G.? Dr. Rothman did say this one could have side effects."

He rests a hand on one of hers. It's pale and skeletal and he pulls it back. "I'm okay," he says. Her skin is warm and lush. Firelight haloes the hair that overhangs her shoulders. "Now move over, honey. Just a little, so we don't spill your coffee."

Charlene puts a palm to his forehead, biting her lip. She is a beautiful young bride, backlit by orange flames, soft hands on his hips, pulling him down.

*Nightline* features interviews with Buddha and Oscar Wilde. The nurse gives Harris blue pills instead of yellow and it's bright in the room and he hears birds. He gets a puppy for Christmas that looks like Tramp on *My Three Sons* and his father dies in a commuter train wreck on a drizzly June morning when Harris is home sick with measles, missing summer vacation. He drops wet dirt on his mother's casket and kisses her goodbye on the corner of Berwick and Fraser Streets before he rushes to catch up with Randy Gilman, a half block ahead on the first day of kindergarten. He makes love to Charlene on the cabin floor and the coffee spills hot on his hand and he'll savor the pain of it always. He beats Rothman at racquetball and Charlene lies warmly naked against him and they talk about children, deciding *later*. He's a young man fresh out of college and touring Europe; the Vienna Philharmonic plays Mozart's *Requiem* and at the finish he is on his feet, breathless, weightless, floating softly with closed eyes toward the ceiling of the Hall, and he knows, he knows beyond question, that he's going to live forever.

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