Wanderers [1]

December 8, 2014 Short Stories [2]

Short Story by Douglas Cole



Out in the dark field, Ronnie was running. I was running, but my gut was too full of beer to keep it up. She came back with a few deep breaths and hands on hips. John wasn't even trying. I love that guy, but he's soft in the middle—a soft, Connecticut, slow-moving mescaline freak.

John had driven his car into a drive-through burger joint. He was so drunk he just plowed right into it, stereo blazing, chairs flying up, glass shattering and billowing out like a big coke sneeze. He was going to do jail time for sure, but his folks got a good lawyer, and they worked the system and greased the great wheels of justice and got him off to a couple of weeks of walking along the highway in an orange jumpsuit picking up trash. No one was injured in the drive-through. Justice for the rich stings, but it doesn't hurt.

Ronnie, my angel—you had a track scholarship and blonde hair flowing and beauty and—maybe that was it? Why else the penchant for uppers of any kind and hanging out with oddballs like John and me? Thanks for the speed, girl, and your red convertible and this night heading over the Bay Bridge into San Francisco. We're movie stars! We're lost and driving around looking for a party. We're fearless and stupid and

"I swear it's around here somewhere," John said.

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“Who told you?” Ronnie asked.

“A guy at the dorm.”

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Who knows where we are? San Francisco’s a good escape from Hayward and the college on the hill above the rippling flags of the car dealerships and the highway and the loading docks and

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“Look!” John said. He actually pointed.

Have you ever felt like the moments you were moving into had been written especially for you? And that even, in some way, the wildest thing you could imagine might actually and sometimes does happen right after you think about it? As if you were some kind of magic dreamer inventing worlds alongside these beautiful friends you might have imagined or maybe really met? Who knows if their histories are real? Maybe it just seems that way. Who knows what you said?

We walked into the lobby like three musicians trying to dodge the cameras and the interviews. Back then, or maybe now, the Grand Hotel was like a city turned inside out. Elevators ran up the inside ribs—you know the kind—they look like Victorian rocket ships. And below, the tables and bars were buried in a jungle of leafy garden boxes and iron fleur-de-lys arches—Paris in a cup.

Up we rode into the great rotating room, and—twisting, rubber-limb, Dr. Seuss grinning fools that we were—we were given a table to sit at.

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Crossing the Bridge, the pipe went around.

“Try this,” Ronnie said.

I think the pills were red.

“What are these?” I asked.

“Just diet pills,” she said, but her laughter meant *fuck you, you pussy*.

I gobbled them up like I wanted death or a great vision.

The lights of the City.

Someone is singing it.

John brought vodka and tonic and ice. He was a mobile bartender, mixing up drinks.

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It was weird to be in Berkeley with these two new friends. This is my old land. And these are foreigners. Now I feel foreign. I don’t remember ever seeing this dormitory. It looked like a building in some gulag. It was really not much different than our own—just bigger. Wandering the hallways, it was like a funhouse of parties.

“Who do you know here?” Ronnie asked.

“I don’t know anyone here,” John said.

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“Whose idea was this?”

John could barely walk. How does he get so drunk?

“Not my idea,” I said.

This was too crowded—how could we get through? We were lost, incredibly lost, in a mad-hive parlor of faces—who poses like that? Then a wave of something we took on board hit me, and I fell in love with everyone I met and, “Yeah, I grew up here…no we’re not from…what? Ha ha! We’re looking for…a party.”

“This is a party.”

“Who are you?”

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I think somebody called security. I could leap from this window right into the plaza below. The splat, both sound and hot-flesh flash, is as real to me as this plastic cup of beer. Someone was getting cheered on. The girls were kissing each other. Where are my friends? How did I get separated from them? But you know—I have no idea how I am going to get out of here—but you know—I don’t care. That’s right. I saw everyone’s halo. Through the skin and through the bones. The circuitry of nerves, cluster bombs going off in the brains. I was smiling and drifting down the corridor and laying healing hands on the afflicted. Brothers. Sisters.

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I think someone called security.

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Round and round we go. You can feel it, sort of. The wall behind our backs stayed the same. I think. We were looking at shadows, maybe.

“So the story is he killed someone,” John said. “The killer on the road is autobiography.”

“Why is it autobiography? Why isn’t it fiction?”

“Well, that’s the thing…we don’t really know. That’s how he works. We don’t really know. But people say he *could* have, that he was capable.”

“People say.”

“And—he was incredibly intelligent. 149 IQ. So, it’s possible he got away with it.”

“But why would he do it?”

“Who knows. If you were in the desert hitchhiking and someone picked you up and started to give you a hard time—maybe you’re afraid for your life—it’s possible.”

“Like anything is possible?”

“You guys should get a room,” Ronnie said.

“And the chances are pretty good he faked his death. Really, a twenty-seven-year-old guy has a heart attack?”

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“I think I’m having a heart attack.”

“Enough money to just take off and become someone else and live like a poet….”

“Why get rid of a good life?”

“Let’s have another round of those Harvey Wallbangers!”

“Why are they called Harvey Wallbangers?

“Why is Harvey banging the walls?”

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The bathroom was like a whorehouse—red blood swirling walls—I was leaning into—I swear I saw the blood pulsing through it. My arms could reach across the world. Don’t say a word. Don’t breathe a word.

But on reentry into the other room—nothing was the same. I walked back the way I thought I had come and—nothing. My friends were nowhere. This is impossible! Diners slid by with their smug love and perfect hair.

“What?” I said.

Pugilistic energy crackled in my veins.

“What?”

Don’t you fucking look at me. Those faces looking up from undersea. And I wandered into the kitchen. It looked like a ship’s galley. But I’ve never actually seen a ship’s galley. I’ve seen a lot of movies. Everything was acting like something else. There was a jittery shift in the emulsion of the scene. Knives and forks were wriggling their obscene flagella. The black windows were screens through which strangers were looking in.

“What?”

These aren’t people! They’re spies!

• • •

Oh—friends!

I was back.

“It’s dangerous out there,” I said.

“It seemed like you were only gone for a minute.”

“I’ve lost that period of my life.”

“Some things are better forgotten.”

“Like a trip through purgatory on your way to the bathroom.”

“Like a lot of things.”

“Where are we?”

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“You need this.”

Ronnie’s pills quivered like maggots on the palm of my hand. When I swallowed them, I knew the flesh on my bones had turned fluorescent. And I knew that everywhere I went, the hatch on the top of my head was flapping open and my spirit was joyriding and laughing and waving its fiery arms like a mad general cruising into Paris in a tank at the end of the Second World War.

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“Where is this party?”

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It wasn’t my decision to let John drive. Ronnie’s a great driver. The best. She drives fast, but she eats speed. Why she abdicated the driver’s seat is beyond me. She was twitching. That was not a good sign.

We were back on the east side. We were down by the loading docks with the big cranes lit up like circus rides and the railroad tracks underneath us messing up the alignment and the dark alleyways telescoping like gun barrels.

I was the bartender now, mixing up drinks. It’s not as easy as you think. We had ice in a big bag and the vodka and the tonic—I mentioned that—and every jump bump hump in the road, I imagined I was a jeweler on a buckboard crossing the prairie and trying to make a perfect cut on a well-polished diamond. Well, maybe not.

It was clear liquid—clear liquid and solid. Then it was red. This was a mystery to me. It was red, and I was looking down into it like a cold little fire, then I looked up, and I saw that John was driving under a stoplight.

“Hey, man. That was a red light!”

I don’t think he heard me. How can he see when his eyes are closed?

“Hey, man!”

We were going—fast—I knew that—right past the police station. Who puts a police station here? That seemed like an unfair riddle.

• • •

Lovely, black-in-the-dark palm trees floating by. The lawns looked like pretty miniature golf courses. The streetlights had that star-spangled, dandelion-seed, explosion-of-life dust caught and shivering in the slowest of slow motion. The Grim Reaper had his arms around John. I think they’d met before. I think they were both hungry for the same thing. Now, he was covered in blood! The Grim Reaper had flayed him with his claws!

John was just tethered enough to this world to pull over when the cop lights came on and the siren hit us with its sonic paralyzer.

“No, really, I’m fine,” John said through the window.

The alcohol was all over us.

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I wanted to reach out and help John as he walked that tightrope over the abyss. But he was out of my hands now. They had him. The goblins! The hungry ghosts!

Goodbye, John. Goodbye.

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With some friends, you feel like you've known each other for lifetimes, even though you've only just met. I don't remember meeting John. He was just there one day—like he'd always been there. Then one day, he vanished. I'm not sure who dreamed whom.

• • •

"You know, you have a lot of opportunities that come with a degree."

My mouth said, "Yes, sir."

My brain said:

Fragit digat atcha hamani ka ka ka!

Not really.

I was coming down.

I was riding in the front seat.

• • •

"I'll drop you off a little ways from the entrance," the officer said. He grinned, his scaly lizard lips pulling back from sharp white teeth. "Wouldn't want to besmirch your reputation."

Ha delagatis lockashoo!

"Thank you."

His hair was so short you could see the skin of his scalp shining through it. His hair was like boar bristle, even though I can't be sure what boar bristle looks like. Does that mean anything anymore? I was reaching over. I had to touch it, the way a kid has to touch a sensitive plant or a sea anemone or an abscess or a dirty needle.

• • •

Ronnie?

She might have been arrested. I don't know what she had on her. They might have taken her home. She might have disappeared. She might have never been there in the first place.

• • •

I walked into the green humming of the dormitory lobby. Nobody but an RA at the front desk and that little guy with the wispy beard and his finger stuck in his ear. I asked him about that once. Everywhere he went and every time I saw him, he had his finger in his ear! So, I asked him, "Why do you have your finger in your ear?"

He looked at me as if I were a simpleton.

"It hurts," he said.

That's no answer! That is not an answer!

I said, "Why not go to the doctor?"

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He said, “I’m from Guam.”

Somehow, that was supposed to make sense.

• • •

I had my path picked out. I was going to my room. I know these hallways like the back of my hand! Wait—no—I am on intimate terms with these hallways!

It was called a study room. There was a sign on it that said *Study Room*. There was a table and some chairs. But you’d have to be insane to study in there! No windows. Bad light. If you prefer life on a submarine or in a post-apocalyptic bomb shelter, you might like this room. I didn’t like this room. No one I knew liked this room. But there was Bob Brasher, not too bright, party dog, quiet, usually passed out—he was sitting in the study room. I was not imagining it. I went in.

I felt like I had entered a hospital room.

I didn’t say anything.

Bob was sitting there, writing on a tablet.

I looked down at what he was writing. I saw:

Help me
Help me
Help me

All over the page and at odd angles with arrows pointing in and sometimes circled-circled-circled.

“Dude,” I said.

He looked up. I’ve never been met with so much love.

“Hey.”

“What are you on?”

“Acid.”

“You’re on acid?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t we get out of here?”

“Okay.”

• • •

Bob is my shadow. Wherever I go, he goes. And I feel responsible for him now. I want to offer him care. So little comes our way. But I’m still buzzing with whirlwind energy of my own. This calms me down, this wandering around in the field under the black pagoda clouds. Bob is close, then he’s away. Sometimes, I don’t see him, but I don’t get very far before he appears again, a ghost-friend phantom. We are just wandering, wandering in hopeless night. Anything but sit in that horrible room. But what do I know about journeys and people’s fates? For all I know, I might have plucked Bob from his path to paradise.

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Douglas Cole has had work in *the Chicago Quarterly Review, Red Rock Review,* and *Midwest Quarterly*. He has published two poetry collections—*Interstate* (Night Ballet Press) and *Western Dream* (Finishing Line Press)—as well as a novella called *Ghost* with Blue Cubicle Press.

He is currently on the faculty at Seattle Central College in Seattle, Washington.

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