

Vol. 8, Issue-II (April 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Sr. No. 40]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

All the Stars are Dead

James Prenatt

Space travel is so hard on the human body that you can lose up to 40% of your muscle mass and 12% of your bone mass. When you come back to Earth it takes time to get used to gravity again. Astronauts often have difficulty walking and it can take up to a year before they regain their normal strength; the closest I would come to knowing what this was like was when I woke up from surgery and realized I couldn't move my leg.

I tried my brace on for the first time today. I chose red and black as though the school colors would perhaps heal me faster and then I could play again. I locked the pad just below my knee and flexed a bit. It was clunky and awkward and at first I could hardly walk, but after enough readjusting and stubborn *move, damn it* steps, I got it right. For some reason it made the limp worse, but eventually I managed to jog. This was always a difficulty on our roads, which had no sidewalk to speak of. I couldn't let go like I used to. All I could think about was how slow I felt and how funny I looked. I ended up walking more than I cared to. It wasn't just painful and frustrating, it was boring.

I'd torn several ligaments in my knee, the most important being my ACL. I wish I didn't have the surgery, because it wasn't like I was going to be any good for a while. I always thought that if this happened to me I'd be flooded by get well soon cards and encouragement enough to get back into the swing of things.

No one paid any attention at all, not after my dad went crazy.

When I got home, not sweating from the cool weather that day, I gave Penny a call.

For the first time in a long time, her parents didn't pick up.

"Hey Penny. How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"I was wondering if you wanted to hang out tonight. Or tomorrow. Or maybe this weekend?" Any time really, just please talk to me.

"I have plans, sorry."

She always had plans. When her parents picked up the phone they always said she wasn't around or was too busy.

It's funny how quick you can become a ghost in high school. One minute you're a celebrity of professional proportions, the next you're invisible. One minute you're dating the hottest, most popular girl in town, the next she doesn't acknowledge your existence. The next she's dating the boy you look up to most and he cares little for the fact you just broke up with her

Well, sort of. We never made it official.

The only class I had with her was AP Lit and while she kept up her usual I'm-perfect-and-smart façade, I could tell something was wrong and if I asked, she told me she was just tired. One of few parties we went to I sat on the couch next to her and tried to hold her hand, but she barely moved and later I caught her making out with Jason Webber. When I said something about it he went, "Pit Bulls learn to share" and patted me on the shoulder, then said, "Hey man, how's that knee coming along?"

That night I found my little brother eating ice cream and pizza at midnight, watching some show he was too young for and happy as a demon in Hell. I grabbed the food from his hands, threw it away and turned off the TV. Someone had to play dad. Afterwards I got so angry I punched a hole in the wall. My Dad had worked for months on that wallpaper and I don't think it can be fixed to its original state. I still feel bad, but I couldn't control myself. Not to you: don't punch walls. If you're going to break something, break your own damn stuff.

I figured the least I could do was clean the bathroom. I've taken to doing chores I used to hate with an obsessive level of detailed proficiency. I wash the car, I organize the garage, I clean the kitchen and mow the lawn, etc. I turned eighteen last summer and it's freaking me out. Did I mention I've got hair on my hands? One day I woke up looking like Lon Cheney Jr.

I've been playing this stupid game of catch up as I grow into an adult at the same time and it's exhausting.

There was still one person I could rely on. My best friend Mitchell had just gotten back from a road trip in which he said he was going to pursue his musical career. He had real guts like that and was never afraid to take a risk. He was currently working at a busy gas station off 301. I picked him up frequently because he didn't have a license and with both his parents not wishing to take care of him, he had to live at his girlfriend's. After she got pregnant, Mitchell had decided to give up on music and get a real job so he could support his wife and unborn child.

I waited for a half an hour in the parking lot. Mitchell-time means taking anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour longer than he says.

He climbed in the car in a hurry. "Get me out of here man. If I have to say 'no shirt, no service' one more time I'm gonna pop my urethra."

People from Bowie are assholes. It's the racist capital of Maryland and I don't recommend a visit.

We went for a spin down Governor Bridge Road and I drove as he advised me, the best way down such a windy, tight road: “Just fast enough that around each bend you get nervous that you’re gonna die the next turn. That’s the best part about these roads. They’re like life, you never know what’s gonna happen next.”

We parked in the oversized parking lot of the Nobleman Ford & Used Cars dealership. Outside the dealership were banners that said things like, “Built American strong” and “Big cars. Low Prices.”

Mitchell licked a rolling paper and fixed a joint. “See that place? I walked in there asking for a job the other day and the guy laughed at me. I’ll show him. I’m saving up for a suit and next time I walk in he’s gonna be blown away and I’ll be the top salesman in the state. Car salesmen are the world’s scum and I’ll clean the place up by giving everyone an honest deal. Want a puff?”

I declined.

“Dude, it’s not like you’re training anymore. Come on.”

“Alright.”

He spoke while holding the smoke in. “How’s your dad?”

I started the car back up.

“Hey man, think I could borrow ten bucks? I need some for dinner tonight,” he asked.

I gave him twenty. He promised to pay me back and I knew he wouldn’t. Given he had a baby on the way, I figured he needed more help.

I dropped him off at his girlfriend’s place and got to driving. I don’t particularly like the feeling of losing control while driving, or losing control at all, but at least it makes me forget temporarily.

“*Shame on you,*” She says to me sometimes.

I popped my Foo Fighters CD in and skipped to the song “Everlong.”

When I got home I barged into my older sister, Bridget’s room while she carefully brushed her red hair, having clearly spent too much time on her makeup.

“Ever heard of knocking asshole?” she said.

“Where you headed?”

“Nowhere. Do you have any other clothes other than that stupid letter jacket?”

“You got a hot date, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Going to a movie?”

“Yeah.”

“Lemme tag along.”

“No.”

“Come on.”

“Fine. We’re seeing *Thor*.”

I sat above her and watched her hold hands with Wallace Grummer. “Wall street Wallace” we used to call him. He often wore suits to school and greased his hair back and knew exactly what he was going to do once he graduated. You know, *that* guy. I watched them hold hands and wondered if I’d ever have that feeling of anticipation again, wondering if a girl was going to reach across the armrest and take your hand, or if maybe you’d have to make the first move. I’d only felt like that once, a long time ago when Penny’s mom took us to see *Iron Man*.

She put her hand on my thigh, moved the denim between her fingers and slowly rubbed in a way that made my skin feel warm. A familiar touch I remembered from childhood.

Afterwards, Wallace dropped me off at home and Bridget went back to his place. Without a word from either of them, we departed. I saw them kiss and quickly turned away and went home.

Walking the hallways at school had become a series of dirty looks and funny, sad glances. I was on my way to Advanced Physics when Clay slapped me on the shoulder and said, “Deadbeat! Damn man, I swear you got an inch shorter with that knee of yours.”

Of course, as is the case with most people, I was still taller than him. “I’m keeping up with the physical therapy. I’ll be in shape in no time.”

“Alright man. Hey when’s your dad coming back?”

“I gotta get to class now, Clay.”

Coach K, who substituted along with coaching, would come up to me and say, “There you are, kid” and pat my belly. “You’re getting out of shape. You may not be fully healed yet, but the least you could do is a couple sit-ups. Being so tall I would think it would just spread out or something.”

“I’ve been working on my bench (I wasn’t),” I would say.

It was funny to see him in anything other than gym clothes. The buttons of his suit were practically popping off, and not in a sexy way. Not joking, I really hope he gets in shape, otherwise he might have a heart attack as he yells at some poor sweating kid out on the field.

“Damn shame, damn shame,” he’d say as he walked away. “Keep your head in check. Don’t want to go off your rocker like your dad.”

“Yes, sir,” I’d respond.

It’s either been interactions like that, or “Hey Seamus, what’s today’s forecast? Man the weather must be nice a foot higher than everyone else!” or “Dude, you really wiped out last Fall. Don’t worry, you’ll come back stronger.” As if I still had another year left. Every now and then I could hear someone say, “That’s the kid whose dad…” and I knew the rumors were worse than the truth.

Prom was coming up and I didn’t have a date yet. I imagined the event as me and Penelope arm and arm entering the room, dressed up like it was our wedding day or something, me surrounded by the Pit Bulls, and my beloved soon to be alma mater dancing and toasting to the end of our high school careers.

It was nothing like that. Penelope went with Jason and they weren’t even there that long.

Tammy Brown and I had only ever been close acquaintances, but I found her attractive in a bookish Luna Lovegood way. We were on a math team a while ago, before I quit to focus on football and she was perhaps one of the smartest people I knew. After we were done with Astronomy, I asked her out.

“Hey, Tammy.”

“Hey, Seamus. How’s everything been? How did you do on the quiz?”

“I did okay (I got a 99).” I rubbed the back of my head. “I was uh, yeah, well I was wondering if you had a date for the prom yet?”

How romantic.

“You know I wasn’t even planning on going, but I’m happy to accommodate you.”

“Great. So should we like, hang out more beforehand or something?”

“I suppose so. Just let me know what colors you’d like to wear and I’ll try and find a matching dress.”

She would do this thing where she went up on her tiptoes and back down, a sort of nervous shrug as we entered that awkward, quiet space between deciding whether or not to leave the conversation. She hid a smile.

We went to Licks for some ice cream to get to know each other, that way things wouldn’t be so awkward. Luckily Tammy was always blunt and to the point. I think she falls somewhere on the spectrum, I don’t know.

It was getting dark and the mosquitos were starting to multiply, the air wet and thick, the brutal Maryland summer on its way. Sitting next to Tammy didn’t feel right, like I was

settling for less, like I was taking advantage of her. The more I looked at her the less I was attracted to her. She had this yellow, wispy hair and eyes so light they almost shined. She was about half my size and had little body to speak of. She wore consignment clothes and her backpack always looked too heavy.

“What are your plans for after graduation?” she asked.

“I’m going to do what ever it takes to see up there.” I pointed to the clouds.

“The sky?”

“Space.”

“How tall are you?”

“Almost 6 ‘4.’ Why?”

“The height limit for an astronaut is 6 ‘3.’”

“You’re kidding.”

I remembered that she had a photographic memory and was pretty much always right. “I’m afraid so, Seamus.”

We took a walk out to Redner beach. Redneck beach, the locals called it. The mud vine grows thick in the trees there and the petals were blowing in the wind, landing about the dark brown sand innocently. We took our shoes off and she dared me to take a dip.

“I’ll come out glowing and yellow,” I joked.

A couple of swans floated by, content and shy. “Such purity,” she said. “My mother always described swans as souls with wings. They’re endangered unfortunately.”

“All pure things must die, I suppose.”

“You’re a bit more esoteric and philosophical than one would expect, Deadbeat.”

“Not the nickname,” I said. I’d gotten that name because Jason called me that to get me to work harder even though I was working my ass off, and so from that point on all anyone had to say was “Come on, Deadbeat,” and I got faster and stronger. Now the nickname was beginning to feel literal.

“I suppose you’ve grown out of such things?” she said.

I shrugged and unlike most people she didn’t push me to talk more about it. “I guess you’re going to be an engineer?” I asked.

“Perhaps,” she said. “I’m not exactly going to college just yet. I’ll probably end up at Acheron or L Triple C.”

“Community college? You’re kidding.”

“I’m not good enough for a full scholarship and my parents can’t pay for it.” I’d heard that her parents were addicts of some sort and at one time or another she’d been living out of a car, but I didn’t ask. She’d given me the courtesy of not trying to get more information out like a therapist, so I did the same. “Well, either way I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

It grew dark and there was a silence between us in which we both enjoyed not talking and thinking about nothing in particular. She put her hand on my thigh and leaned

her head against my shoulder. I kissed her on the forehead and then we ended up lying down on the sand, making out.

I dropped her off at her house, which was tucked away in the swampy woods over by Idlewilde trailer park. I got the feeling the house was to be foreclosed upon soon. With its torn up carpet and grey-going-green shingles, it looked like a Goodwill house. I came in to meet her folks, but they weren't around, so we hung out in her room for a bit.

The room had only two pieces of furniture: a dresser and a bed. Her books were scattered and stacked about the floor, mostly manga and textbooks. Though scratched and half-broken, I was happy to see a copy of my favorite movie, *Bronson*. It's about a guy who wants to be famous, so he beats the crap out of people in order to stay in jail and become famous there.

"You're a fan?" I said, holding the disc up.

"Nicholas Winding Refn is perhaps my favorite director."

"You've see The Pusher trilogy?"

"Of course."

I sat down on the bed and once again the awkward what-do-we-do-now moment started. I'd only ever done anything like this with Penelope and that was in rarity. We made out more and I felt her up, though she didn't do much back. As I got under her skirt she said, "Not yet."

I stopped. "Are you okay?"

"It's just I've never..."

"Oh. Well, me neither if you can keep a secret."

"Some other time, maybe."

"Some other time," I agreed.

After the date I went to Charlie's house. Charlie is Penelope's cousin and lives right next to her. We were kind of like brothers in the sense that no matter how long it had been since we'd hung out, we'd talk like it was just yesterday we last saw each other.

He asked when my next game was and I had to remind him that I couldn't play anymore. I lifted up my knee and showed him the scar. "See?"

"Oh. Is your dad out yet?"

"No."

He taught me a few basic rules of D&D and after that we watched the latest cut of *Lord of the Rings*.

"Goblins are more of a cave dwelling species and tend to be a bit more hunched over, their eyes constantly dilated and they're a bit more pointy, if you will," he said.

"Gotcha. Orcs are a more rural species, right?"

"Yeah, they live above ground and are a bit bigger. The Uruk-Hai are a hybrid between the two with little agency of their own but to serve Saramon. At least, the Peter Jackson Tolkienverse interprets it as such."

I looked at the bandages on his forearms. “How’ve you been since...”

I was the one who made the 9-1-1 call and even Penny hadn’t talked about it to me.

He didn’t say much.

I rewrite my letter every now and then, but I don’t think I’ve got the guts to do it.

I’m not sure I’ll ever meet a happier person than Wes, the team’s giant. Wes the Wall, we called him. At almost seven feet and several hundred pounds, he’d broken a number of players’ bones without much effort. Trying to take Wes the Wall down was like taking on a monster truck. It just didn’t happen. He couldn’t run, catch or throw particularly well at all, but he could block better than anyone in the state. He wasn’t ever too serious about the game; he just liked to have fun. Despite being so big, he was incredibly gentle.

I was working at Bull’s Eye, our one hardware and convenience store when I bumped into him. He picked me up and gave me a spine crushing hug. I cuddled my head against his beard. “Man you’re soft.”

“Check it out, man.” He showed me a fresh tattoo on his forearm. It was our logo, the grey pit bull with red eyes. “The guys got ‘em yesterday. You missed out.”

“I’m not sure I want a high school mascot on my body the rest of my life,” I said.

“Yes you do.”

I gave it several seconds of serious consideration. “Alright, yes I do.”

After work I went with him to the Exotic Tattoo, a sketchy, but reliable place. I had enough money and spent years praising that logo, so hey, why not. I got it on my shoulder, which was supposedly a less painful place. I’d never gotten a tattoo done before. It’s an immediately regrettable masochism I highly recommend.

Afterwards we had our monthly sit on the bleachers and drink 40 oz’s therapy session. Wes was the kind of guy you could talk to about anything without being ridiculed or judged.

“I really missed you out there,” he told me, already on his second 40.

“Yeah, right.”

“No, really. When we won the state championship all I could think was man, I wish Seamus was here.”

“I would’ve dragged you guys down.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said and patted me on the back, knocking the wind out of me. “It’s not true, is it? About your mom and Mr. Tuttle...”

Of course he had to go there. He sounded genuinely concerned though. Wes isn’t a nosy person or a liar. “No, it’s not true. Shall we chug?”

Despite my size, it doesn’t take much to get me drunk. By time I got through the malt, we were on the field pretending to play. He threw the ball to me and as usual I had difficulty catching it. I tackled him, which meant pushing up against him and basically running in place.

I fell down. “Okay, one more sprint.”

This was a drunken zigzag sprint that ended with my knee giving out. It wasn’t bad, but maybe it was best I not try that without a brace.

Wes trotted up to me and picked me up. “You okay?”

I brushed dirt off my shirt. “I’m a champ.”

“Let me see you throw.”

“No.”

“Come on.”

“Okay, but you’ll be jealous. What’s that saying, throw to the moon and hit the stars?” I slurred.

“Just throw, you drunk.”

Indeed I did throw towards the moon and the ball soared over the bleachers and landed who knows where.

“Close enough,” he said.

I fell to the ground. He carried me home over his shoulder.

My mom treated the prom like one of the most important events of my life, like a damn wedding. I wore my dad’s suit instead of renting a tux. It fit me just right and saved us money. Tammy wore an odd, gold colored dress. It had a tiny hole at the hip I’ll never forget. A darker color would’ve suited her better, but as long as she felt pretty, I didn’t care much. My mom was the usual dorky mom who takes a bunch of pictures from every angle.

None of it felt like a big deal, but to her folks it was. I’m not sure that they’d ever seen Tammy go out on any kind of date and certainly didn’t expect her to go to prom. I may not have been on the team anymore, but I was still a tall, handsome Pit Bull by their standards and I’m sure they expected more to follow from it, but nothing ever did.

We didn’t do much at prom itself. Truth is, I couldn’t stop looking for Penny. For the most part we just hung out at our table and talked about the differences between the force of drag and the force of lift and though her specialty wasn’t aerodynamics, she sure did know a lot about the subject. We slow danced and that made us happy, I think. We went to prom breakfast briefly and then drove home.

I parked outside my place. “Would you like to come in? I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“My parents aren’t expecting me until morning,” she said.

We walked into the room and I undressed as much as I felt appropriate. I like looking nice and all, but suits and ties are really uncomfortable. It’s one of the few outfits that makes your neck and your balls feel like a boa constrictor’s got a hold of you. She saw the white lace panties on my bed and I almost threw up, cursing myself over being so stupid as to leave them above the covers.

“Do you have girls over often?” she said.

I hid the panties in my nightstand drawer. Someone very special left them for me and no one was supposed to know. She made me promise.

“Eh, no, not exactly.”

“Would you help me with this dress?” she asked.

I undid the back for her and as it slipped off I began to forget about my thoughts from earlier. In her naked colored lingerie she looked lovely. We began to make out and after enough of just that, I picked her up and took her to the bed.

“I think I would like to,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

I wake in the middle of the night when her husband isn't there. She's holding me on the couch. She's telling me this is what it means to be a grownup, that this is how they touch.

I moved slowly and I'll never know if she was disappointed or not, but it didn't hurt as bad as she thought. I knew she wasn't elated or in love or something like that, but she seemed content and complete. “You're beautiful,” I said.

“Thanks,” she said in that mousy voice of hers. “You're not too bad yourself. Eight out of ten, I think.”

“You flatter me.”

I don't remember much after that.

I drove her home and she thanked me for a good time. “You're a nice boy, Seamus,” she said. “I hope you reach space someday.” We pecked each other on the lips and I left.

When I got back to my place I logged onto my Pit Bull Family & Fans IM account and talked to Her.

hj10392:

hey

deadbeat91:

been a while. how r u?

hj10932:

I miss you

deadbeat91:

What's there to miss?

hj10392:

Those blue eyes

deadbeat91:

aww. I wish you'd send me a pic

hj10392:

no, no pictures.

deadbeat91:

tell me what you look like again.

hj10392:

I'm 5'5 with short, choppy hair. I've got big almond colored eyes. My husband calls them bug eyes.

deadbeat91:

Thats not very nice.

more please?

hj10392:

My breasts aren't very big. They're starting to lose what little shape they had ... i don't know why I'm telling you this.

deadbeat91:

it's okay, keep going

hj10392:

Can I get a picture first plz?

jpeg uploaded.

deadbeat91:

do you like it?

hj10392:

thank you. can I touch myself?

deadbeat91:

Tell me more first.

hj10392:

ok, but I don't really like myself. I've been running three miles a day and my legs are pretty firm, so there's that.

deadbeat91:

you don't have to tell me the good things.

hj10392:

my husband never wants to have sex no matter what I do

deadbeat91

I would

does he still love you?

hj:10392

no

deadbeat91:

can you keep a secret?

hj10392

yes

deadbeat91:

i love you

All the Stars are Dead

hj10392:

I love you too

deadbeat91:

when can I meet you?

hj10392 has logged off

In Greek, the word “astronaut” literally translates to “space sailor.” We once used stars to find places no one had seen before. Now we reach for them. It’s estimated that there are approximately 200 billion galaxies. How fast we’d have to travel to see them. Perhaps we’re not meant to. They’re already dead.