

Blogged

By Hugh Lessig

She leans against the bridge rail and stares down at the James River. The flat, dark water is reflected in her face. As I jog toward her, a prayer escapes my lips.

“Sweet baby Jesus, let her jump. Just leave me alone.”

She fiddles with something lashed to the rail – a wreath with ruffles and white lace shit. It looks like those makeshift memorials you see along the highway to mark where little Tiffany got greased by a tractor-trailer on her way home from the prom.

I’m sorry, but those things are creepy.

Now I guess we put them on bridges to mark where people jump, but I’m not sure that’s kosher. Little Tiffany didn’t deserve to die, but if you jump, aren’t you asking for it? What merits a wreath in that case?

Yeah lady, talk to me. Please.

She might be fifty years old. Her arms hang loosely, palms facing backward, the way fat people hold themselves. Mouse-colored hair and clunky shoes complete the Hausfrau ensemble.

The walkway is just big enough for two people to pass. She leans toward me and tries a half-smile, which doesn’t quite work and probably never did. Our shoulders rub together as I jog the other way.

“Nice night for a run,” she says.

Eewwww.

Jennie would have stopped to talk. That’s why I’m out here on a Friday night, sweating through my clothes, trying to chase her from head.

She left me today – for good, I think. Hell, she went caterwauling down three flights of stairs and out the door, vowing to stay with a friend for a while. She was going to spring some “major surprise” on me, and then we got into another fight about politics. Was it illegal immigration? The emerging China? I forget now. She starts in about how I never listen to her, how I don’t give her credit for having half a brain. I suppose I interrupted a few times, but hell, I do that to everyone.

She needs to get a thicker skin.

Retracing my route, I return to the bridge an hour later and there’s the little memorial again. Hausfrau is no longer on the scene. The paper wreath frames a color photo of the man who apparently jumped to his death at this spot. “Woodrow” is scrawled across the bottom border.

It shows a respectable man with a respectable smile sitting at the dinner table.

Woodrow the Bridge Jumper.

Woodrow the Header of the Family

He wears a red polo shirt with a small logo on the left breast. I get up close. It is an elephant, the symbol of the Republican Party.

Oh, this is priceless. Woodrow the Republican calls it quits and the public mourns. I’m misting up.

Back home, I fire up the laptop and get online. In the blogosphere, I am known as SPO63, which is short for Shadowy Political Operative. I chose 63 because it was November 1963 that the Democratic dream exploded all to hell even as Jackie climbed from the limo to retrieve the chunks of it, and now look where the fuck we are. Men die in Iraq for the worst president since Millard Shitbird Fillmore. We talk about the “homeland” like Nazis. The government can eavesdrop on whomever it wants and send people to secret prisons and maybe, just maybe, the survivalists in Idaho had it right all along and those black helicopters wait silently for us, just around the corner.

Therefore, I blog.

I blow off steam.

I keep the assholes where I can see them.

My blog is called Old Dominion Blues, as in Virginia will be a blue state one day. (Jennie got pissed when I explained it to her - blue for Democratic, red for Republican, hello? She knew it, but I just had to twist the knife.)

Type, type, go my fingers.

Check out the nickel bridge. Some guy named Woodrow has a memorial from where he jumped. There's a photo of him wearing a Republican Party shirt. Seems even the GOP can't stomach itself anymore. Could this be a trend? Dare we hope? Lemmings on parade!!

The next day, twenty-three responses come flying in, including a few who actually think I am funny. Most call me a dickhead, but that's to be expected. The last reply stops me.

Woodrow's politics had nothing to do with his death. You should do some research -- ViewFinder58.

I reply. *How would you know about Woodrow's death?*

The answer hits back.

I'm the one who killed him.

You get these shitheads sometimes. They draw attention to themselves and expect others to enable them. I tend to be unimpressed, considering that my line of work is tearing people apart.

My specialty is opposition research. I work freelance for whichever Democrat is taking aim at a Republican. I search the public record for a personal bankruptcy, messy divorce, custody agreements, late child support payments, protection from abuse order, a court-ordered drug or alcohol diversion program, a mental health commitment hearing, property code violations, landlord-tenant disputes. Two years ago, this better-than-God guy was running for state delegate, except his daughter had been expelled from college for drug use and was an officer in some low-profile gay-lesbian shindig. He forgot to mention this on his “pro-family” platform. In fact, he forgot to mention the daughter. Apparently, they had cut ties. The daughter snorted blow and jumped out a four-story window when my material found its way into the press. And I'm thinking: ‘Honey, your daddy killed you. I just made the gun.’

Anyway, this is a Saturday and I've got some time to kill. Plus, it's late August and campaign activity is down. No harm in tearing someone down – just for practice.

Hey, ViewFinder58, care to spill the details on how you offed poor Woodrow? The audience of Old Dominion Blues is waiting. We want details!

Nothing happens for the next couple of hours. It's always the same – you call out people and they run for the tall grass. They do anything but confront the obvious and admit they're full of shit.

So I'm surprised at the reply.

Woodrow liked little boys. He was arrested, got out two months ago. Then I found him with some kids – again. They were sitting around a table, but I could see where it was going. I told him I wanted to go out, talk about it. We went to the bridge at night, on the unlit side, away from the toll operators. I pushed. Simple as a dimple.

This doesn't prove a thing. From reading my post, she knew he was a jumper and where it happened. I decide to enjoy the rest of my Saturday and leave her be.

That evening, I check my personal email.

I am the woman on the bridge. You knew that, right? You have an odd name, Braxton Tayne, easy to find on the Internet. The bio on your blog says you play in a flag football league. The league has a web site, and I found your team photo. That's you in the green hat. You look fourteen. Braxton, my husband molested kids and I killed him. I need someone to talk to. Can't we have a civil conversation? Your blog is not the place. I hope you don't mind the personal email.

Back at her.

I'm 25, although yeah, people say I could pass for an eighth grader. Now go away.

Not likely. Your blog was easy enough to find. I have Google alerts set up for Woodrow, Boulevard Bridge, nickel bridge, memorial, etc. Your apartment is easy to find, too -- red brick and balconies out front. Google maps are so cool. Satellite photos rule.

Be still the heart. She hasn't found a thing.

Gee, Viewfinder58, it's too bad you're ugly, because this would be better than phone sex. The fact is, 80 percent of the apartment buildings in Richmond are red brick with balconies. All I have is a cell phone. I'm not in the book and you can't find me on switchboard.com. I know. I've tried.

Braxton, Braxton. You were right about one thing. Woodrow was involved in GOP politics. He has voter lists from his door-knocking days. You're on there. You HAVE to be a registered voter, right? Your building is on Idlewood Avenue and you're in apartment five. I guess that would be the third floor. It's considered a swing precinct. Do you swing, cutie pie?

Son of a bitch. I stomp around the apartment and finally call Jennie.

“Brax?”

“Listen, I need to borrow something.”

“Let me guess. You captured a Baptist preacher and you need a pair of needle-nosed pliers and an arc welder.”

I can almost see her blue eyes rolling up white.

“Good one. Listen, do you remember our little go-round about gun control a few months ago and how you were wrong on that?”

“Yes, you said firearms were an extension of the penis, and I said something about yours being sawed off, and--”

“You mentioned owning a rifle.”

“My twenty-two, what about it?”

“I want to borrow it.”

“You? You want to borrow a gun? Why in the world, Brax?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“It’s my gun. That makes it my business. Are you in trouble?”

“No. I have big wasps in my apartment.”

“John Kerry is in your apartment?”

“Be a smartass. Just bring the gun, Jennie.”

“Jesus, why can’t you just talk to me? If I was one of your blogger friends--”

“Sounds like someone is jealous.”

The connection goes dead. Christ, now what’s up with her?

An hour passes and no Jennie. I get back online.

You’d think a murder confession would drive people to my web site, even if they can’t read the juicy stuff in my personal email. But the pickings are slim. A few people say that ViewFinder58 is crazy. Someone says I should call the cops. The most thoughtful response comes from SnarkBoyBlue. We’ve sparred a few times about illegal immigration and other stuff.

SPOMan, I’m reading about the “murderer” with great interest. So what’s the deal?

She went into my personal email after her ‘confession.’ Says she knows where I live, etcetera, etcetera. Says she wants to talk. Can u believe it?

Worried?

You never know.

You got a name?

Nope. Her husband is Woodrow. She’s fat and ugly. I passed her jogging on the bridge.

Ugh. So she’s seen you. Shit, man. Watch your back.

Around one in the morning, someone pounds on the door and jolts me awake.

“It’s Jennie. Open up.”

She comes in with the rifle over her shoulder like some kind of safari hunter. A whiff of her musk sends a twinge of pain down my spine. There was a time when her scent surrounded me like a comfortable blanket and we talked about the future like it belonged to us. She looks good with that gun, I gotta admit.

“I’ll bite,” she says. “I just have to know why you need this.”

“First things first. How does it work?”

She holds it to the light. The barrel is black and the stock is polished wood with a squirrel engraved at the end.

“The magazine is tubular. There’s a little slot for the bullets at the top. It’s already loaded.”

She hands me a box of shells not much bigger than a matchbook.

“The safety is near the trigger guard. When it shows red, the safety is off and the gun is ready to fire. It’s a semi -- no cocking necessary. To get the first bullet in the chamber, pull the slide.”

“Got it.”

“You look scared, Brax.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

“You don’t even want to talk about it?”

“I said I’ll be fine. So why does a tree hugger have a gun, anyway?”

She slams the door and pounds down the steps.

Dammit. I was making a joke.

Jenny is very big on preserving open space. She works as some kind of Ranger Rick for the park service and I used to tease her about it – that she needed to start growing leg fuzz, wear Birkenstocks, get a tote bag from NPR – and she’d get back at me for being such a blue-ass Democrat. Had she stuck around, I would have actually thanked her for letting me borrow the gun.

I return to my laptop and blog out my heart.

Politics is a game for single people. If you want a companion – spouse, transgendered, gay, whatever -- the whole thing’s a crapshoot. I think I’m consigned to the single life. It’s too bad, because I found someone who is half decent half the time.

I sit at the computer, refreshing the screen. Two minutes pass.

Was that your girlfriend leaving the building? I am so jealous! ViewFinder58.

I get the fucking gun and check the two doors to my apartment. Each one has a deadbolt, nothing more, and reaching them isn’t that hard. The front door is up three flights of stairs. You have to get past the main door to the building, which has a keypunch security lock, but people prop it open all the time. The back door is even easier. Walk down the alley, open a gated fence, walk up the back stairs and you’re practically in my kitchen.

I bring my laptop onto the balcony and lean the twenty-two next to the railing. Let her watch me. Let her see the gun.

Hey, tell me about Woodrow. What did he do to those kids?

She comes back.

Woodrow was a software engineer for a health insurance company. We were married for twenty-two years. He taught Sunday school. He took the kids out for ice cream. You want to know gory details?

Where was he sentenced?

Richmond, in the city.

When?

Ten years ago.

For how long?

I don't remember.

Your husband was a child molester and you don't remember his sentence? You should remember it to the day.

It's all a blur.

I assume he was not eligible for civil commitment.

Civil commitment is a barbaric practice. It's a violation of constitutional rights. Don't get me started.

I break off the thread, my bullshit detector redlining.

She killed her husband because he molested kids, but she doesn't believe in civil commitment, where perverts are sent to a "secure facility" after serving their sentence because a judge determines they'll go out and do it again. How can she be soft on crime if she's a vigilante for domestic justice?

So, Viewfinder58, forgive the pause. Civil commitment is certainly controversial. Maybe we could meet away from my house and chat. Pick a spot between our homes. Do you live in Carytown?

No, the Museum District. Hey, are we actually having a conversation?

Maybe we are. It's a hell of a thing for someone to discover that their loved one isn't the person they appeared to be.

I'm hearing you, Brax. Oh, I'm hearing you, sweetie.

Christ, what a psycho. At least I've got enough info to check out her story.

The Museum District is several blocks north. I Google one of the museums and get its ZIP code. Anyone can get online and search the Virginia sex offender registry

with that five-digit number in case you're worried that perverts are living next door. It'll show you their photo, workplace, what they did, and which court handed down the sentence.

I start surfing for Woodrow.

I find her.

I go into the bathroom and retch myself dry.

Her name is Madge Franklin and she is the woman from the bridge. The Virginia Sex Offender Registry shows her with shorter hair, a thinner face. She was convicted of sexual assault fifteen years ago – on a boy, a thirteen-year-old. She got out in ten.

Jesus fuck.

I get the twenty-two, take it into the bedroom, get back on the computer, type an email and send it.

Hello, Madge.

Radio silence.

Madge Franklin, are u out there?

I time it, wait five minutes.

Madge, wtf? You're a state-certified diddler and you're telling me I'm cute? That I look 14? Come to my apartment and I will so fucking shoot you.

I take deep breaths. This is the right thing to do. Confront the bitch and she goes away.

I refresh my email.

Better load the gun.

I position myself in the middle of the apartment, where I can see both doors. An hour passes this way. My chin falls to my chest, pops up. At two in the morning, someone begins to pound up the steps, making all kinds of noise.

On the second floor, a door opens and slams shut – that Goth girl from number three, no doubt, stomping around in those shit-kickers.

Now what? Is the gun leaking oil? I'm wet all down my shorts. It's warm and... oh man. Did I just piss myself?

Oh man.

I did.

Now someone is coming up the back steps – a slow and deliberate climb. I move to the kitchen door.

Squish, squish, go my pants.

That did not happen. It's that simple. And no one will know because the person who walks through that door is already dead.

The knob turns slowly. Didn't I lock the damn thing?

I pull the trigger. The safety is on. I switch it off and jack the slide. A shell pops out and rolls onto the floor. I slide the chamber again, ejecting another shell. My hands are wet and slick and nothing happens. The door opens.

A hand reaches in and moves the barrel aside.

Jenny.

“Brax, do I smell piss?”

From the other side of the apartment comes the sound of footsteps. Somehow, Madge Franklin has climbed onto my balcony and she is opening the French doors.

Jennie walks to the middle of the room and squares her shoulders.

“Not another inch,” she says.

Madge steps forward, a smile on her face.

“Lady, I meant what I said.”

Jennie pulls a pistol from her waistband and fires three times. The noise from the shots spill from one to the other and Madge falls to the floor before the last echo dies.

The police want to know about the piss, which is all over the floor near Madge’s body, part of the crime scene. I am in the bedroom and Jenny is in the kitchen. They’ve separated us for questioning. I’m with a detective, a fortyish guy with a buzz cut and muscles from the neck down.

“Let me get this straight. You pissed yourself?”

“I guess I just got excited. I heard someone coming up the steps and I – went. Right there on the floor.”

The officer writes something in his pad.

“You heard the deceased coming up the stairs?”

“No, I think it was the girl who lives downstairs. The deceased, um, Madge Franklin, must’ve come up right after that.”

“It’s possible that your neighbor let her in. Once inside, she came up to the third floor and climbed out a hallway window, onto the adjoining balcony. Then she jumped over the railing, onto your balcony. Those French doors don’t have a lock.”

Jenny’s nervous laughter drifts in from the kitchen. I guess she turns out to be the hero in all of this.

Park Ranger Bags Child Molester

Stalker Finds Three Bullets When She Enters Home.

“One more thing,” the officer says. “You had this twenty-two rifle. We picked up two unfired slugs from the kitchen floor. Can you tell me about that?”

“Um, yeah. My girlfriend came up the back steps. I thought it was Madge. I tried to fire off a couple of rounds and – well, the safety was on, and I tried to work the slide a couple of times – I guess I got flustered.”

The officer nods.

“Target panic,” he says. “Some people call it buck fever. It’s essentially a rush of adrenaline. Hunters sometimes get it.”

He looks back toward the kitchen. “Your girlfriend was all over this. It’s a good thing you shared this with her.”

“I didn’t.”

“Excuse me?”

“I didn’t tell her a thing. She let me borrow the twenty-two, but I didn’t tell her why I needed it. Then she just shows up at the right time.”

The officer shrugs his shoulders.

“Well, I’m sure my partner is clearing that up. Speaking of which, you might want to change your pants.”

“Yeah.”

“And we’ll need your computer. If she confessed to pushing her husband off that bridge, that’s something I want to see. Woody Franklin’s death was suspicious from the beginning, you ask me. He offs himself just after his child-molesting wife gets released from prison? You ask me, he found her with someone, or he suspected she wanted to do it again, and she took care of him. Damn, he was a good man. Stay here a sec, OK?”

The two officers confer in the hallway just outside the bedroom. I can hear Jenny walking around the kitchen, taking deep breaths. I move to a window as more headlines dance in my vision.

Bitch Bullies Boy Blogger Into Bed-wetting.

Buck Fever Brax Bawls With No Balls.

The blogosphere will have a field day with this. The people I’ve offended? Fuck, I’m finished. What the hell am I going to do? I stare out the window as the cops’ conversation becomes more animated.

“Yeah, the guy’s a nervous wreck. I hate to put in the report that he pissed himself, but you got the urine right next to the blood. I gotta explain it somehow.”

“He might have to testify about it, too.”

“We gonna charge the girl?”

“For killing an unrepentant child molester who is also a confessed killer who broke into someone’s apartment? Good luck with that. No, I’m thinking civil trial, wrongful death shit. Someone’s gonna sue someone.”

Wonderful.

Great.

So I go to court. I exit the courtroom. Reporters are waiting, smiles all around. They want to talk to Jenny the hero and Buck Fever Brax. My face is on the six o’clock news, walking away from the cameras, the TV anchor trying not to laugh, my name showing up on News of the Weird.

I’ve got some Oxycontin left over from that hernia operation last year. You take a few, wait for it to kick in, jump out the third story. Jenny wouldn’t care.

More cop conversation now – something about her.

“She had his email password, and when he asked for the gun, she got suspicious and read the back-and-forth on his blog, then went to his email. When she figured out that Madge was staking out the apartment, she did the same thing. When Madge came in, she went up the back stairs. Helluva thing. She has her own online handle.”

“They don’t call it a handle, Pete. That’s for CB’ers.”

“What the fuck do they call it then?”

“I don’t know. A nickname?”

“Well excuse me. A nickname. Anyway, she says her nickname is SnarkBoyBlue, that she has these conversations with her boyfriend about politics and shit, and he doesn’t even know it. She was going to spring it on him, like a surprise, and then they got into this big blowup.”

“Kids – they can’t just talk to each other anymore.”

Jenny?

My God. Have we been talking all this time? Could I have been that wrong?
I reach out and close the window. Then I leave the bedroom and the safety of
the tall grass.

Hugh Lessig is a newspaper reporter living and working in Richmond, Va. His stories have appeared in three previous issues of ThugLit as well as Plots With Guns, Thrilling Detective and Handheld Crime. He is currently at work on a novel.