

The Shiny Surface

Don Webb

According to the National Geographic, the greatest density of writers in the USA is not in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago or San Francisco, but in Austin, Texas, which is where Don Webb, maven of the small press magazines, lives. He has published dozens of stories, some of them collected in The Seventh Day and After (Word Craft Speculative Writer Series), as well as a unique collection of intense, metamorphic prose pieces. Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book (Illinois State University/Fiction Collective). Records have always meant a lot to him: 'I had a cousin who had a singles player. When I saw him putting a record on that big fat spindle, I had my first realisation of how sex must work - a twentieth century moment.' In 'The Shiny Surface', Don Webb magically realises the notion that if Proust had been born into the latter half of the twentieth century, he wouldn't have needed to bite into a madeleine; he'd simply have put on a record and danced.

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I

t was something I'd never known, never guessed. It changed everything.

The story begins in three times - in 1870, in 1966, in 1992 - but it's probably a story that everyone partakes of whether they know it or not.

By my forty-third year I had achieved two lifelong dreams. I had married the perfect woman ten years before, and our marriage had grown with each day until we were filled with absolute knowledge and love for the other. Twelve years before I had ploughed all the money I could tap into a rusty dusty junk shop. By hard work and luck I had made it into the finest antique store in the Dallas metroplex. Customers flew in from Chicago and LA to see what I had to sell. Lately people wrote in from Paris and Tokyo. My little shop was reaching around the world. My stock included a nineteenth dynasty scarab from Egypt and a framed Jimmy Carter campaign poster, so it pressed at the boundaries of human time as well.

My assistant Janet Brammer and I were opening a carefully packed selection of American Victoriana from Normal, Illi-nois. I'd visited Normal

once with its beautiful quaint homes and ugly modern university. Houses were cheap there - very cheap by Texas standards - and I fantasised about retiring there in Victorian elegance. I even dreamed up an outfit for her - a special high-collared Victorian dress of red crinoline and black panels appearing to be silk, but in reality on close inspection see-through silk. I can see her in the parlour with her spinning wheel. . .

Reverie ends and we carefully cut into the case. The box of someone's great-grandmother's things: a silver-and-enamel teapot made for Tiffany & Company; a Koloman Moser jewellery box of silver, enamel and semi-precious stones; a pair of brass candle holders enamelled to resemble cobras; a souvenir reproduction of the Eiffel Tower; a Charles Fouquet comb - gold, tortoise-shell and amethysts; a silver-framed daguerreotype of Lincoln; and a small ebony box containing a convex mirror, upon which a folded letter rested, brown with age.

I had never seen a mirror so made: a concave dish, it frankly reminded me of an ashtray. I took it to my office to look through my reference books. Janet cleaned up the trash and prepared to mark the other items. In my office I carefully unfolded the letter.

The Brotherhood of Eulis
26 Boylston Street
Boston, Mass. September 5, 1870

Dear Mrs. C

I am in receipt of your draft for sixty-five dollars. As you know, I was in great financial straits when I agreed to create this mirror for you. You have grown adept in poisim and volantia and should have no trouble maintaining the mirror's magnetism. As per your request I have so constructed the mirror that it may be used by anyone, in order that you may make of it a family heirloom. I feel that you are creating a hateful thing, and had I not given you my word I would smash this instrument to flinders.

My only consolation is that in order to work, the mirror must be washed with pure water derived from melted snow before each usage. Clean the mirror only with such a chemical and a chamois cloth. Then you will be able to divine the heart's desire of those in its presence. I believe that we are often best left in the dark; for we are frail creatures, nourished by our illusions as the delicate flowers are by the dew.

If, Carolyne, you will promise to return the mirror to me unused, I will refund your monies in full. Think what heartbreak this device can bring. For once I urge you not to try.

Yr Ob't servant,
Dr Paschal B. Randolph

This was pure gold! I'd never had a 'legendary' item before. I would set up a special glass case just to display it. I would have to figure out if I wanted to sell this or set it up is a draw to the shop.

I would have to see if I could dig up any more on this Randolph guy.

That afternoon, Hal dropped by. If Hal had had a classier shop, he'd've been a rival. But he went for sleaze, trash, buzz pop. He had made a discovery. The seven-inch single was dead. He's been to Sound Warehouse.

'We're growing old, Jim,' he said.

'Thank you for that piece of news,' I said. 'It has made my day.'

'But I propose we have a final fling. I'm throwing a party. A dig-it-out-of-your-closet party. A Zenith Cobra-Matic came in the shop yesterday - which is why I'm out looking for singles - and I want people to bring their singles that they've saved - dress in period - I'll supply Tang and smokeables.'

'Tang?'

'Well, I hope we're going to be orbiting.'

With NASA visions dancing through my head, the day passed.

Ordinary business intervened for a while, then one day Janet brought her lunch - some multi-grain bread sandwich and a clear bottle of some healthy water. With idle curiosity I picked up the bottle (bright with my shop's light). One hundred per cent Pure Glacial Water - The World's Purest.

'Glacier water?' I asked.

'I know,' she said, 'it's probably not worth it, but the image seems so good on a polluted day.'

Glacier water.

Snow water.

I could put this with the mirror display.

My research hadn't been as fruitful as I would've liked. It seemed that 'Dr' Randolph was a mulatto philosopher and magician who managed to carve a niche for himself against the grain of a resistant America. He advocated women's rights, the transformation of society through romantic love, and the practice of magic, particularly clairvoyance. He'd written a novel, *Ravalette*, and several books on magic including *Sexual Magic* and *Seership*. His occult society, the Hermetic Order of Eulis, included such notables as Abraham Lincoln, General A. H. Hitchcock, and other movers and shakers of the Civil War North. Those following his sexual teachings (without the benefit of romantic love) included the OTO and the Fraternitas Saturni. His healing techniques sans both romance and sex are practised today in black Chicago evangelical churches. All in all, he seemed to belong to that order of nineteenth-century visionaries possessed of a global and restorative vision. Move over Owen, Michelet, Proudhon and Fourier.

Janet drank about half the bottle. I asked her for the other half and she said yes.

I had other duties, but arriving in my office eventually I wet a chamois with the Canadian water and polished the mirror's bright surface. Janet came in with the mail.

She bent down to hand it to me and when the depths of the mirror should've reflected her features - I saw instead my own. The image lasted only for an instant. She smiled and walked out.

Janet?

I could almost cry. I liked her so well as a friend, but she could no more take Monica's place than fly. I couldn't just play like I loved her back, but I knew things would be creepy for me from now on. I would re-weigh my every word. Am I giving her false hope or being too cruel? All the ease of five years working together was gone.

Assuming - of course - that the mirror worked. That there wasn't some

strange ego projection or hallucination involved.

And yet I had something that was actually *magical*, actually fairy tale. It was mine and it worked. I was in contact with and part of the mythic. I knew a secret, a real secret, about the way the world worked.

I would have to test it. I couldn't stand not knowing. Hal's party was in three days.

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I didn't own any singles. When I'd bought my shop, I'd sold off all my treasures. The past had always been a thing for sale to me. I'd majored in classics - get this one - because my high school Latin teacher gave me a brochure from the Junior Classical League that said that businessmen dig classics majors. They respect the learning and dedication - and after all they have to train you to do things their way anyway. Predictably I minored in history. Neither of these impressed anyone, but I worked for a museum for a while -unpacking things, moving them around - and I saw that the past sells.

When I needed money for my business, I sold everything. My comic books, my records, my grandmother's china. Monica had a couple of 45s and some period clothing which had hidden itself from my selling mania deep within the garage.

But I needed some records. I went to the Half-Price Books store. Hal had been right - not only were 45s gone, they were disappearing even from used record stores. Half-Price had a bigger section of CDs - *used* CDs - than 45s. The singles that were around disgusted me. Seventies light rock garbage. Sentimental slime that you could only listen to in the throes of adolescent lust.

I picked a couple. It doesn't matter which ones. I took them out in the Dallas heat, became nauseated at the thought of what I was carrying, and tossed them into a chocolate brown dumpster. Flies rose. Where was the real past? The past that was so strong it could dissolve the present - the past that had made me. Had I sold it somewhere along the way?

I believed in my present. I was totally focused on my goals and I realised that I was different from most people. I didn't have a theme song. I didn't have a platter that invoked the past. Everything was in my present - what if that were ever taken away?

There is little music for that fine cutting edge called the present. Music calls us to the past. To the friends, the parties, the quiet times alone when we played it. For the new consumers, technology no longer made the single tune easy and cheap to get to. How would they record their lives? And I was in the same fix as them. I'd sold my singles.

I was scared - actually scared - that maybe there was a song that would bring the past so rapidly into the present as to destroy it. I was scared of the past. There's a lot of past out there to destroy any present moment.

Why had I sold my singles? I really hadn't made much money on them - I doubt if I got a buck apiece. Maybe I had a fear of what the personal past could do. Maybe I kept the past under control by buying and selling it.

I went back to work. I had Janet go out and buy me three records from an expensive retro-vogue shop. She found 'I want to Hold Your Hand', 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight' and 'Rodeo Romeo'. They were safe platters and I was happy.

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The Zenith Cobra-Matic had a heavy casing of brown-grey steel. The record-playing mechanism was suspended inside the heavy frame by thick springs, so the record wouldn't skip no matter how wild the dancing. But the feature that made the Cobra-Matic was the tone-arm - with its painted spine, eyes and tongue, it was a thin snake. Definitely the cutting edge of cool. Stereophonic High Fidelity. 16 33 45 78 r.p.m.

Hal was saying, '. . . and when the blue-haired lady sold it to me, it had a great 78, "I Like My Chicken Fryin' Size" by Johnny Bond on the Columbia label.'

Hal's current squeeze, Liz, was putting the first single on - predictably 'Rock Around the Clock'. Eric Towser, the CPA who did all of our taxes, lit the first joint. The electric purple bell-bottoms didn't do much for his paunch.

I set up a folding table in the corner. I'd done Tarot readings as a party trick a couple of years ago. It didn't exactly fit the theme, but people always want a peek at the future. Even a fake peek. I spread red velvet over the table, setting the mirror down where it would reflect my subject. If anybody asked I'd tell them it was my 'focus'. They'd probably be too

blitzed to ask. I kept my chamois and water under the table. Dr Randolph had been wise in his day to prescribe snow water. The owner could've only used it a few times a year. How many Christmas parties did it darken?

Liz walked to my table, handing me a joint. I took a long drag and managed not to cough despite lack of practice. I handed her the cards to shuffle, while I gazed into the mirror. I wasn't surprised it wasn't Hal, but the young black stud who swept up the shop.

Just as I was predicting that money - possible a small legacy - was coming her way (and her green eyes alive with the death of Aunty) Hal walked up and put his hand on her shoulder.

Hal was next. I polished my relic. Somebody put on 'Stairway to Heaven'. I laid down the Ten of Swords and saw Monica's reflection where his should be. Poor sap. Monica would never return his love. Should I pity this friend from college days or should I arrange to keep him the hell away from my wife? Card after meaningless card. Another joint went around.

I found out that Ernst loved Betty and Edward loved Ernst and Betty loved herself. I found out that Cindy loved Robert and Robert loved Laura and that Laura loved nobody at all - just black space - or maybe she loves death. I found out Kitty loved John and John loved Kitty - which was the only complete circle in the room.

And the Cobra-Marie played 'Let's. Spend the Night Together', 'DOA', 'Stairway to Heaven', 'House of the Rising Sun', 'Rikki Don't Loose That Number'. And I was going back to the head I used to have, when I heard those songs.

It wasn't a bad head. It was different from my current Faustian self. It was a head that said I could slack off, and not work so damn hard all the time. It was a head that said, 'Let It Be'. Maybe I shouldn't be prying into things. Maybe I should relax and not play with the mirror. That old lost innocence seemed not so lost. I resolved to put the mirror away after this party. Then I'd buy an old record player from Hal and start collecting singles.

But it didn't work out that way. Once Faust, always Faust.

Someone broke out his hash pipe and a chunk of Lebanese hash the colour of burnt umber. And I thought about Lebanon and the Middle East and the cradle of civilisation for a while. The Cobra-Matic played 'I Am the Walrus', 'Bang a Gong', 'I Only Have Eyes for You', 'Johnny Angel', 'I Had

Too Much to Dream (Last Night)'.

As the chords of the Electric Prunes classic died the readings' began again. Jerry loved Sue and Jerry's wife Trish loved Gene. Gene loved Maud and Maud loved Robert. Willie loved Etta and Etta loved a man I'd never seen. Butch loved Alice and Butch's wife Marie loved Alice.

Finally Monica came to my table. She knew the cards were a scam, but she was too stoned to care - or maybe someone put her up to it. Jerry Butler's 'What's the Use of Breaking Up' was playing. Well, this was what I waited for and what I feared. I polished the mirror. I saw myself. She loved me and I began to cry. But the music ended and somebody put Johnny Ace's 'Pledging My Love' on the machine.

My reflection wavered. At first I thought it was the tears and the hash. But I dissolved and a teenaged guy with brown hair and sunglasses and a leather jacket appeared. He held a rose, a small red rose; and he stood in the dark. I knew he would always be alone. I looked up at Monica and she was crying - quietly but strongly enough that tears splashed on the cards. I finished the reading. I felt like going home. I wrapped my mirror in velvet and made my good-byes. I gathered up our records and steered Monica out of the door. She moved slowly, as if underwater - or leaving a funeral. In the cannabis haze no one noticed.

We walked home - I only live three blocks from Hal's. The pollution hid the stars and I could smell smog as well as roses - we have these huge bushes - as we walked up to the house. We were tired. So we didn't put anything up.

Around three in the morning I woke up. Monica stood in front of the window watching the ugly night sky.

'Monica?'

'Yeah?'

'That record tonight was pretty special, wasn't it?'

'Yeah.'

'Want to say any more?'

'You know, I didn't realise you could forget great hurts, but I hadn't thought of Johnny in years. He gave me a copy of that single on our second

date. He even got me the whole album later on, the Johnny Ace Memorial Album. This was in '66, which he said should be called Year One - because it was the beginning of our love. He had this thing for Johnny Ace since they were both named Johnny. Johnny Ace was rock'n'roll's first suicide. He killed himself in Houston on Christmas Eve 1954. Well, I should've known what was coining. Johnny had a little band, the Transformers, and they would play "Pledging My Love" as a theme. They went nowhere. But I went to every gig despite Mom's threats. "Pledging My Love". It was for me, you see. This faggot talent scout told Johnny that he could make him a star, but all he really did was make him. So Johnny followed his idol and blew his brains out. I was a little crazy for a while.'

'You want a hug?'

'No, I just want to think. You try and get some sleep.' But I lay there watching her at the window till the alarm went off at seven thirty.

Being a creature of hope, I tried the mirror a few more times. But Johnny had taken my place. I saw him in the braveness of Monica's smile, in the depths of her hazel eyes, in the way she held herself when she was quiet.

The years pass and I see no reason to break up our comfortable fictions. Janet watches me and lives on hope thinner than Himalayan air. I don't know how to fall in love or I'd fall in love with Janet. But my love for Monica remains; although it has grown into a sort of ache. Who can compete with a ghost as a lover? With a memory that can only grow more perfect with the passing of time?

I read that toward the end of Dr Randolph's life he was in a railway accident. His health grew bad and he suffered great pain. He resigned himself to death, yet he met a young woman whose love for him transformed him. With the young woman he had happiness and a son Osiris Budh Randolph. Maybe I will know such love.

I have smashed the mirror into a thousand thousand fragments.

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