Thursdays, we meet in the back of Hot Stuff, a small BBQ joint a few miles north of Austin, near the intersection of Braker and I-35. Most of us get there from home, after dinner. We push tables together to sit as a group. We all get along.

Everyone’s grateful to Rita. She runs The Hot Stuff BBQ Shack and set up the Hot Stuff Writers’ Workshop. Even if I’ve eaten dinner at home, I buy a Shiner, an Uncle Billy’s or a slice of pie. Everyone does. Those who don’t get home for dinner get one of Rita’s great pork sandwiches and a brew. I’ve seen her make the sauce: she starts with a can of Heinz, but she cooks it up with garlic, chipotle, and red onion. Sometimes she adds beans, corn and a touch of cider to sweeten it when the peppers get too hot.

She runs the writer’s group to preserve her self-image. There are regulars and those who just come every once in a while. Usually a few core members show up, but most of the cast of characters are episodic.

Last week, as always, Alain Poutine, our youngest member, was seated at the table. Imagine someone called Alain Poutine from Texas. Well, his kin had to come from Louisiana, ’cause no one west of Houston would name a kid Alain. Anyhow, he’s core. He always makes the most incisive comments on our writings. He’s south of thirty, but wiser and more insightful than any of the rest of us.

Hot Stuff has very few rules. But Rita says no one’s to read for more than 8 minutes. She’ll cut you off before you get 2000 words out. But a few weeks ago, someone came in with some sort of fable. After about 10 minutes, James butted in with some non-sequitur like, “Rita, do you have a Dos Equis?”

“Hush your mouth, James,” she said. “Why do you gotta always be such a rude Texan? Can’t you listen to the story till it’s over?” Rita clearly liked what she was hearing and wasn’t having any of those limits she imposed.

With somewhat unstable attendance, and Rita’s rules, the workshop has never been a good place to read longer pieces such as novels. A novel dribbles out over months. None of us can maintain a novel’s longer arc. Criticisms then get restricted to things like grammar. So most of us bring stories, snippets, and poems.

A week in February some guy called Nathan came by our meeting. He introduced himself, “I’m the fiction editor from Brown Dirt Press. We need some good stories to sell to the schools. You’d get 10% so if you’re getting any good ideas about middle school stories, you contact me. That’s Brown Dirt - in Austin. Ya’ll be sure to send me any of your best writings.”

We hung onto his words. I mean, we all want to earn our bucks writing. That’s why most of us write. He musta come because the reputation of Hot Stuff has grown. And it only grew ’cause the criticisms one gets here are high quality.

Or maybe it’s the BBQ. Maybe that’s what inspires all of us. Those sloppy BBQ sandwiches on hoagies. The sauce gets over everything above your belt when you squeeze the hoagie to fit into your mouth. Always a mess. Maybe we write better to ‘earn our place at the table.’ Anyhow, there’s been a steady increase in the range and quality of what we’re writing. By August the readings were pretty respectable.
If the criticism is the elixir, Alain has a lot to do with it. He's the pro. His critical skills haven’t yet translated into any pubs. He’s got nothing in print. I don’t know if he’s even got a real job. Whenever I attend, which is more often than not, I’m surprised to find Alain has brought a chapter of his novel to read. Most chapters take more than a month to read through. But that doesn’t daunt him. After seven months, in August, we were somewhere deep in Chapter Five.

In contrast to his criticisms, Alain’s novel never rises to the level of maturity one could expect from someone who gives out such solid comments. Rather, it’s all action – macho violence. Strippers and whores find themselves emotionally tied to murderers, rapists, and extortionists. His pages are populated by neither a rounded character, nor physical descriptions. Flowers, trees, wall paper, colors, are replaced by calibers, corpses, stilettoes, and stranglers. By Chapter Four, the casualty list included three drug dealers, two users, a pimp, a stripper, a night club owner and an accidental stray or two. The inventories of weapons employed, causes of death, and the like were also staggering.

Alain knows he isn’t writing literature. He says he’s writing ‘social realism’ – reality as he lived it. He says he’s exhuming his youth. It’s a period he only recently escaped. A time of sex and violence. But who knows anything about Alain really?

I called Rita once about Alain. I said, “Alain must be writing much better stuff in secret than the shit he was reading to us.”

“You think so? I never really thought about that.”

“Well how could he be writing that crap and giving us such good feedback?”

“Maybe he’s sending us a cry for help.”

Maybe that observation was prophetic. We didn’t see it that way then. I said, “Maybe it’s just fiction and he’s wanting us to identify with the characters in the novel.”

“What knows,” Rita closed.

We didn’t. But I envied those lost years of his: his willingness to adventure – consequences be damned. Those brushes with death gave him experience, something to write about. I coveted his abandonment, his courage to do something more, something different with his life.

It was the third Thursday in August. I was lost in my thoughts about a futile day at the office, and going directly home from work. My malcontent was leading me to consider alternative lives.

Summer rain in Texas usually isn’t but when it is, it’ll be fierce. That evening it sure was. It made the commute brutal. I hated it. Visibility was crap. The road was slick. Nothing moved, even in the HOV lane.

I turned on the radio, flicked around to get some report on what was causing the jam. Nothing. I settled on PBS where some liberal was discussing ‘means ends analysis’ and the standoff with Iran. I was already upset by the traffic. Listening to that, I felt enraged by the slowdown. Too many aggravations were piling up. All got jumbled into some sort of angry stew. I didn’t know what frustration too pay attention to. Was it Iran? My mind immediately coughed up, “Iranian fuckers. Maybe we should bomb them back to the stone age.”

Or was the back breaker the idiocy of this supposed means-end thing the guy was talking about? “Frigging means-ends analysis. Look at this shit. Why am I even on this commute? Is it supposed to be the means to some ends? Like my dead end job? I have a God-damned MBA from Baylor and that got me a job in one of a hundred cubicles in accounting at Blue Frost? Is that the end or
the means? The means to what? To get home to my Eden, to my two screaming kids and angry
wife? This commute certainly can’t be justified by its destinations. It’s like burning a candle at both
ends: the only thing that is getting shorter is my life. Means ends bull shit!”

Reality reentered via a big SUV. It tried to exploit the tiny space free in front of me. I fell on
my horn in response. But it was too late. The SUV had gained entry. I gave him a fist out the
window. With the traffic stopped, the driver had plenty of time to respond. He gave me the finger.
Some young punk. Goddamn it. I opened my glove compartment. I had my peace keeper there. It
had no ammo. Just a show. It’s not as if I expect trouble, but I feel better being able to brandish
the gun if it comes. The punk screamed something, but the traffic began its forward crawl, and he
had to choose: lose your fucking place in traffic to some other aggressive driver, or deal with your
road rage some other day. The SUV moved on. I returned the pistol to the glove compartment.

Movement merely brought choices that I wasn’t ready for. One way home would be to get out
at the next exit, Rundberg Lane. It could minimize my time on I-35 but I didn’t like it. It forced me
through too many stoplights and neighborhoods. But then I was moving again, even if slowly. So I
stayed on, rather than exit. A few minutes later the traffic balled up again to a near stop. Too late.
Like so many other decisions – especially those that led to this perpetual commute.

Why didn’t I just quit my job? I should have applied for that CFO job at that start up. Why
can’t I get on with some adventure? Should have done that before buying that new fake colonial for
my almost fake family. Got to get out of this rut. I haven’t even asked that new hot accountant out
for drinks. All these missed opportunities, and now passing up Rundberg Lane. Just too much. I
banged on the steering wheel with my fist. There’s no payoff to being stuck in life or on the
interstate.

PBS changed the subject. They were on ads in the presidential election. “Give him four more.
Stay with the current situation.” My mind took off. “Sure, four more. Just like staying on this
fucking highway for four more exits. Why?”

“Why do I want to get home anyhow? To see Ann and the two monkeys? Jimmy and Frieda
are going to be all sticky from dinner. Ann will be exhausted from a day of doing nothing. What
did marriage bring? All these days I should just stay on I-35 and go up to Waco. Pick up some
gorgeous co-ed. Marriage? Call Ann and tell her I’m delayed at work? Why the fuck not?”

An approaching siren on the inside shoulder brought me back to my current coordinates. As
the ambulance moved ahead, the traffic began to snake forward. I forgot my day dreams, and
started to move to the right, the exit lanes. The six o’clock PBS news was ending. Then I realized
it was Thursday: Hot Stuff night. Now I was in a rush to get to Rita’s place. It was too late to go
home for dinner and still make the writer’s group.

I called and told Ann I was going directly to the group and would get something at the Shack. I
didn’t expect a full house but when I got there the parking lot was almost empty. I opened my brief
case, checked out the poem I’d printed out a few days earlier. “Super Heroes” – a topic dear to my
heart even if far from my world. I was proud of it and looked forward to Alain’s comments. I
folded it and put it in my wallet, and stepped out of the car. I was pleased that I had braved the
weather to read my short poem.

The shop’s hinged sign above the sidewalk “Hot Stuff: Best BBQ in Texas” was swinging wildly.
Once inside, I found myself alone in the Shack with Rita. Noone was sitting around our table. Rita
began her oft told tale of loss. She warmed up to her story, how she had gone to New York, to
escape the claw of Texas. And to write poetry. I took an Uncle Billy’s lager out of her cooler, and

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dropped a five in her drawer. I knew what was coming next, her father died. Then she had to run
the place to support her two siblings and her mother. She pined for the freedom of Gotham.

“You know Tom, this writer’s table gives me my sanity. It’s my closet of dreams. Once a week,
I open it.”

Her misplaced loyalties and deferred dreams brought me back to my own ruminations. But I
answered, “Rita, your too hard on yourself. It isn’t everyone who can run the best BBQ shack in
central Texas, and a writers’ group.”

Another beer, another riff on the story, and the storm got worse. By the fourth or fifth beer, it
was clear, no one was coming, not even Alain. Damn him.

August 31 was another bad commute, but a more normal workshop. Except, of course, Alain’s
absence. I still had my folded poem, “Super Heroes,” in my wallet, but without Alain I was wasn’t
going to expose my poem. No one could remember a time when Alain missed two meetings.
About half way through the meeting, Elroy said, “Let’s contact him. Just to say we miss him.” But
we realized we didn’t know how to contact him.

A few days later, the Austin American Statesman ran a headline above the fold: “Unidentified
Local Man Kidnaped: Held for Ransom.” There was a photo with it. The picture was blurry but
resembled Alain. So I read it. Some anonymous group mailed the picture to the paper claiming they
were holding this guy for ransom. More information would be forthcoming. It gave me chills.
They identified the man as a 45 year old from Austin. I was relieved to note the age, but the
resemblance worried me.

Rita saw the same picture and called straight away. “Did you see that photo on the front of the
paper today?”

“Yup."

“Sure looked like Alain.”

“It was pretty blurred.”

“Still.”

“That pic could have fit half the young men in the state.”


And that was it. For a few days. Then a follow up. The paper had received a note identifying
the man in the picture as Alain Poutine. This caused immediate concern. Rita called again.

“They’ve got him. We’ve got to help.”

“But it doesn’t quite add up, does it? Our Alain isn’t 45.”

“How many Alain Poutine’s do you think are out here? Let’s at least find out where ours is.”

“OK, on Thursday let’s try again and see if anyone knows how to find him.”

“Till Thursday then. Unless something comes up.”

“OK, anything new and we’ll chat.” But there was nothing new to go on and Thursday came
without a call back from Rita.

Thursday I figured things would be OK. Nothing else had run in the Statesman. I again
brought “Super Heroes;” but Alain didn’t show up. I didn’t recite my poem. No one had a clue how to contact him, and we were worried. No one even knew the color of his car. We decided then and there everyone had to share contact information with all the other group members. We each wrote down our particulars and Rita said she’d put it in an email for all of us. But that didn’t get us any closer to Alain.

I was reluctant to open Friday’s paper but there was nothing. By Tuesday, I was relaxed. Some fanciful tale that our Alain was on vacation had replaced the rankling ugly possibility that had monopolized my head. I was whistling a tune when I walked out to grab the paper to read over coffee.

A front headline immediately jumped out at me: “Poutine Killers Slit His Throat.” A big color picture showed a man lying, face down, in a pool of blood. It sure could have been Alain. I had to unfold the paper to get the story. Alain was dead. The story gave some sketchy background: some pimps caught him at a night club on the South side of town. The reporter had done some digging. Now they said he was 47 years old. Born in West Texas, he was a high school drop out, a drifter, a low life who hung out with gangsters. His mother had died when he was an infant. His father was interviewed and said “I never expected much of Alain. But I sure wished he had turned out better.”

I was devastated and even afraid to go back to the workshop on Thursday. But I did, with my poem. I pulled in, grabbed a Modelo, looked around. Alain, of course, wasn’t there. Elroy started by remembering Alain. “He was the only pro we had.”

Nikki added, “the rest of us don’t even know grammar.”

“We should have put up the ransom.” Rita said.

“Who’s got that kind of cash?” added James.

“What are we going to do?” I mused. We discussed what this meant for the rest of us. How would we ever get the kind of criticism that we had come to expect? No one read. No one even admitted to bringing anything to read. Rita said, “Let’s hold a memorial service right now. Beers all around. Pie too.”

The next week was real strange. The weather was beautiful. It often is when the heat breaks in early autumn. My work at Blue Frost had been commended by the vice president for finance. Everything was going well. I was going to get a bonus. I might even be given a desk in an office with a window after the holidays. Going home, I had an easy commute. It was followed by a good dinner with Ann. The kids were strangely affectionate, and I was lulled into a sense of acceptance and pride in my small accomplishments. I left for the writer’s group as usual.

I decided to read my poem even in the absence of Alain. I wasn’t the first to arrive. I took a piece of Rita’s sweet potato pie. We sat around the table, and asked who was reading. I said I was. I reached into my back jeans pocket and took out my wallet. Just as I unfolded the now somewhat old page, the back door to the shack banged shut. I looked up at the noise, and was shocked to see Alain walking toward us, fully intending to take a seat at the table. He was tanned, as if coming back from a holiday in Baja or someplace. He looked healthy but had a long bandage across his throat. You could have heard a pin drop. Even Rita was speechless. He came over and smiled.

“Sorry I’m late. Hope you all didn’t miss me these past weeks. Rita, I’ve gotta have me a pulled pork sandwich if you don’t object. I’m hungry as a bear.” I looked at Rita. She didn’t make a sound. No one else moved.

But as he started his sandwich, Elroy said, “Where you been?” And that just broke the ice.
Everyone yelled out questions, like “What’s with your throat?” “Are you from West Texas?” “Is your mother dead?” and statements such as “We thought you were a goner.” And then came the last one, “You aren’t 45, are you?”

Alain didn’t answer any of them. He just took his seat like he always had been here, like nothing had happened. Rita said, “Well, Tom are you gonna read or are we gonna all just piss in our pants waiting?” I read the poem. It was about an old guy who once had a tattoo of Superman on his bicep. It had gone flabby. There was a moment of silence.

Then Alain jumped up and yelled at me. “That’s was the most anti-male piece of shit I ever heard. Who the hell are you, you cowardly chicken livered bastard? Real men don’t just go off to die, getting flabby and weak. They take their chances. Grab their opportunities. Take viagra and fuck till they die. They struggle for meaning. They don’t just take the same old same old. God, what a shit message.”

I had nothing to say. This had been my day. Someone shouted “Welcome back man, we missed you, that’s for sure.” Then there was great rejoicing and everyone toasted our resident guru’s return. Me? I got up, took a beer, and welcomed him back with everyone else.