

CONCRETE

by M.Vidakovich

"There he goes again." I say to Ron. "Does he ever come up for air?"

We're at a Christmas party being held by one of my neighbors. It's an annual gathering that's been going on for about five years now. My friend Ron and I are watching the guy who's wearing a ball cap. We gaze and gossip as he regales a small group of men out in the garage which serves as a combination smoking-conversation area. The group throughout the gathering mainly consists of couples and singles who are in that thirty to forty year old demographic.

Or the "Are We Happy Yet?" group.

We wonder if we're happy yet because all of the dangerous obstacles that could trip us up in a bad way have either already done so, or never appeared. It could be drug addiction, infidelity, alcoholism, acts of violence, foolish decisions, or even, foolish non-decisions. Or maybe tragically unhealthy children, or tragically unhealthy couplings. It has all been laid out there either nakedly conspicuous or cloaked in oaths of secrecy. And with this particular gathering, you are either all the stronger for it, or at the very least, you're not here tonight.

But the fallout to these existential shocks are the stories that sometimes come with them. It turns out that Ron has a doozy. And I'm about to hear it.

Ron Szymanski is in the concrete business. Big Ron; linebacker shoulders, hands like two hams, but gentle as a puppy. If Ron wanted to make people laugh at gatherings such as this, his answer regarding what he did for a living was;

"I'm in cement, but then so is Jimmy Hoffa."

Sometimes people would laugh. Sometimes, they wouldn't.

Right now, he's telling me about how he'd "gotten in a situation" at last year's party. Ron had an encounter with one of the women here. It happened after a conversation he had with her in the garage during a cigarette break. Her name is Shannon. They were alone, as it was getting later in the evening and some of the guests, myself included, had left. Ron's wife Carla was involved in the Karoake upstairs, so he knew she would be tied up for awhile. Carla Szymanski loved Karoake, and always had a favorite song she'd wait for. Something by the B-52's, I can't remember which one though. Anyway, Ron said that he thought he'd been sensing something between himself and Shannon all evening. She had been giving him a surprising amount of attention; not so much in the amorous sense. She was asking him a lot of questions about his business; not a word about Carla. So after the cigarettes were stubbed out, and she followed him

toward the door, he turned and looked at her for a brief moment, weighing his options. Then, he went in for the kiss.

"Whoa?!" Shannon responded, holding up her hand like a fifth grade safety patrol girl. She then backed up slightly. "Shit", Ron thought. Then, after giving Ron a defensive gaze, her look softened to an unblinking smile as she moved forward, grabbing the back of his head and giving him a long kiss. Shannon's tongue slowly rolled around, and Ron soon had the taste of her red wine and cigarettes inside of him. He said that since then, for the past year, he's "been in contact" with Shannon.

"Whattaya mean, contact?"

She had started calling him on his cell phone. Then, Ron admitted they had shacked up at a motel there in South Weymouth.

"Jesus, Ron." I said, growing more slack-jawed.

"But that's not all..." he goes on as he leans in closer, lowering his voice to a whisper. He then looks away as his voice trails off, "Hey, Brett!" he says to a passing guest, signaling that maybe he's done talking about this.

I'm taking in Ron's story and being thankful-jealous that it wasn't me. I couldn't handle a woman like Shannon. And Ron and Carla are fairly happily married. I thought.

"Shit. I'm a pretty good Catholic, y'know? But when I look at *him*, and even Shan...?" Ron continues as he lowers

his voice again, "I don't feel bad at all. Then he slowly shakes his head and just as slowly and softly emphasizes; "Not....one.....bit." Shan?.... hmmmmm.

I want to ask more, but his body language says he's sorry he told me this much. So he blows the whole thing off with a loud laugh.

Then, Ron Szymanski walks away.

And the "him" that Ron referred to is the man in the ball cap telling the endless story to the captive all male throng. He is Shannon's husband, Jeff Crickle, terminal asshole, the guy who "can't come up for air" as I had mentioned. He's also in that "no obstacles" group I talked about. Jeff's a silver spoon kid from Hingham. His road to middle age has been as smooth as Shannon's shoulder length hair.

Jeff's very successful drywall business fell into his lap after his father left Jeff's mother for an older, well-to-do divorced woman. Before that, Jeff spent his time coming up with scams that he'd try to foist on friends. His interest in taking friends along on these sometimes misguided business excursions was so that if Jeff got busted, he could deflect the damage, or pass the buck. These skills were honed as early as fourth grade when he had been playing with a neighbor girl up in an apple tree in the Crickle's back yard. The playing got way too rough as Jeff

gave the girl a playful push, causing her to fall and break her arm. His story was that the girl had slipped on a wet branch. When both families were gathered in the hospital as the young girl lie there in a cast, they all demanded a final truthful answer as to what caused the tragedy.

"I slipped" the girl said in a cool tone as Jeff looked at her intently. He could talk a lot of people into just about anything. Sometimes, with a dose of fear added.

So as an adult, Jeff's dangerous lies and coercions now involved profit. These scams he and others concocted involved everything from shitty jewelry sent up from cruise ship stops, to fake credit cards; stolen phone cards, and cheap watches that he sold in Florida for awhile. You've seen them. The watch face says G-FORM instead of G-FORCE. If you're lazy or blind, you'll completely miss the ruse. Along with the watches, Jeff also sold Dollar Bill Store sunglasses that he would attach Ray-Ban stickers onto. He became a real one-man Tijuana street corner. Much of the impetus for all of this was due to the aversion that Jeff had for anything resembling real life. Even now, Jeff Crickle still does very little work. He reports to work sites a few days a week. The rest of the time, two overweight office girls take care of the business end of things. Jeff shows up at the work sites with a Snapple, telling bad sex jokes, and making sure everyone's there and

doing their job. His mother has tried to get him to sell the business and move on.

"Are you kidding?" her son would reply.

And as I said, every time I see Jeff Crickle, he just won't shut up. He's an expert on everything, especially about money, of course. Then, there's Jeff Crickle's boat. "Docked right over there in the harbor" as he points toward the bay about a quarter mile up the road. He'll gather himself close as he tells the umpteen tales of all the pussy he's nailed in that boat, before he married Shannon. His attire, even during the winter months is pure Nautical, with a twist of jock. The Cargo shorts, oversize Boston College pullovers, and two hundred dollar Nikes. And all of it is topped off with that cap that usually proclaims his good fortune; something like "ClubTrump", or a casino in Jersey or Vegas. I have no emotional or monetary investment in Jeff, nor he with I. With most people, guys like him simply make you laugh, while the nonsense they spew rolls off your back like duckwater.

My take on Jeff?

It's always seemed like maybe there's something real bad going on underneath that ball cap.

This particular portion of the Jeff Crickle Theater is devoted to excruciating details about his job woes over a two week period. He has a good sized crew that installs

drywall all over the South Shore area. I'm sort of trapped in this current session, because like an idiot, I set it in motion. Oh, it would have been so easy for this to have not happened. But, I had three whiskeys in me and mentioned something about a fold or protrusion in some guy's vaulted ceiling that I noticed. He response was a filibuster of condescending long winded-ness.

It's not Jeff's stage diva tendencies that are so bad. It's that when he finally does come up for air, and someone else has something to share, Jeff walks away. He'll go to the fridge, over to the stereo and turn it up loud, or he'll mosey over to another group of guys who haven't yet had the pleasure of his company. One time, he did stay to listen while Ron was telling a golf story. I can't remember what it entailed, but after the story, which was not very funny, we laughed politely. Jeff, however, sort of shook his head and said,

"Whoa...Guess you had to be there, huh, Ron?"

Then he burst out laughing as he tried to high five me while walking away.

This is why a lot of us say that Jeff Crickel's an asshole.

And thinking of that slight toward Ron reminded me that he and Jeff have a bit of history.

They met on the golf course during a union outing. A

while back, Jeff hired Ron. After about ten months, he let Ron go, never really giving him a reason. Ron had been going through a rough patch and really needed that work. Even Carla had come close to leaving him. Then, just as quickly, Szymanski's luck took a turn upward. With some help from a cousin buffered by a couple of well timed, successful nights at the dog track, Ron was back in the saddle enjoying considerable success.

"In concrete."

But some people have said there may still be some bad blood between the two. When Ron and Jeff golfed together before the unexplained layoff, Crickle would always bring along this guy who was a huge South Shore bookie. A lot of those gatherings on Jeff's boat were less about "pussy" and more about money. We didn't know where he met this guy, and really, many of us didn't want to. Like I said; Jeff Crickle had too much time on his hands. His life, while solid looking from the outside, was really a house of cards. And some have said that this bookie dude was the Ace of Clubs. Crickle has a nice life. Too nice for a dry-waller from South Weymouth.

Then there is the gorgeous Shannon Crickle. Some of us are back out in the garage. Jeff is smoking a fat cigar. He's now talking about how much he's going to win during the NFL playoffs. I listen until I can't listen anymore. Ron's

watching too, not saying anything. He's standing there, with stony look on his face as he drags on his Marlboro. Ron puts the cigarette out and walks back inside. Soon, the karaoke portion of the evening has started. I can hear Ron's wife and Ron(!) singing "I Got You Babe", which makes me smile and shake my head as I walk into the upstairs bathroom. While I'm washing my hands, I hear voices, and when the karaoke stops briefly, I realize that it's two women in the bedroom next door.

After a few seconds, I can make out bits and pieces of the conversation. A moment or two later, I hear that it's Shannon and another female talking. I put my ear closer to the wall.

"Are you kidding?", I hear a voice say. Followed by,
"When?.....Gone? Like in.....gone? How long ago?
Why are you telling me this? When did you do this?"

The other female, who's identity I can't figure, is speaking pretty indiscreetly as I hear Shannon finally giving her a "shhh" command. Then, I clearly hear the other woman say,

"Are you in trouble now??. Why are you telling me this? This is so..." and her voice trails off again.

Now I'm real curious and I don't think they know I'm in here, so I figure I'll stick around for another minute, and then, I have to get back downstairs. So I lean in for one

quick, final listen. This time, I use the drinking glass against the wall trick. Right away, I hear the tones getting clearer and a bit more urgent. Then I hear Shannon say;

"It's real fucked up and I had to talk to someone, regardless of how much trouble....you know? But,shit. I'm sure they'll find him. But then, it'll be like, real trouble. For all three of us."

Hmmm. Confusing, right?

I figured Shannon was spilling her guts about having this situation with Ron. Were they having a full blown affair? So I put the glass back in its place and walk out the door as Shannon and the other woman, Lisa, a neighbor I've only met once, are walking right behind me. I act like I'm lost in thought, as though I heard none of what was going on in the spare bedroom. Shannon and Lisa seem to not care as they go on talking right behind me, but it's small talk. When I let them walk by me, I look up and smile at them both, and I notice a slight ring of white powder under their nostrils.

The karaoke has started back up and everybody is a little more loaded than when I went upstairs. How long was I up there? I look over at the large sectional couch that has the guest vocalists jammed in close, singing along to Spandau Ballet. Carla of course, is right in the middle, but Ron's not there. And I don't see the Crickel's either.

After this round of music, people disperse to different areas of the house, dig into more food, open more beers, and uncork more wine.

It's mild for December and the back patio has a few tokers getting baked out in the pitch darkness. I could use a buzz, or a more varied type of a buzz I guess. I see Jim Montillio, who I know from way back. He and his wife Tara have a hair salon in Braintree. Also standing there is Gary Schaffer, who lives across the street from the Crickle's. I sort of shoehorn myself right in as a fat joint finally gets passed my way.

"What's with the Crickels tonight?" Gary says in sort of a smirking tone.

"What do you mean?" says one of the guests standing next to me. Jim and his wife Tara look at each other. Then Tara, while blowing a cloud of smoke out the side of her mouth says, "Somethin's going on with them. She's been giving Jeff the evil eye all night."

Her husband just shakes his head.

"What?" I say looking around.

Gary, shrugs his shoulders at me, but in that way that's more about pretending to not know anything. He's sort of grinning as he looks at Jim and Tara. Right away, I think of Ron. Then, another male guest says,

"I hear he's really got somebody pissed of at him. I

mean, like in a bad way."

"Yeah...well, he's always on the boat with that...guy. You know who I'm talking about?" someone adds. No one answers.

"Bullshit" says Gary; "I hear Shannon's fucking somebody; somebody dangerous to both her and Jeff. Like maybe this guy you mentioned." The three of them sound like high school girls.

Tara Montillio looks around at the two or three people in the circle of now stoned partiers who might be privy to all of this.

"Shut it Gary, O.K.?" she says. Then, everyone just stops talking.

I look off into the distance and see the small lights twinkling in the bay. On the horizon before the bay, I see a large group of silhouetted townhouses and remember that Ron poured the basements there. It was his biggest contract. As people are slowly returning inside, I'm feeling pissed, and a little uncomfortable. I'm uncomfortable because those townhouses suddenly look ominous. And I'm pissed because I hate gossip, or this kind of strange car wreck, blood lust type of gossip. It's the kind of social interchange that has its base in the sixth grade and grows from there, until it's participants become full fledged masters.

Oh, who am I kidding?

I'm pissed because it seems no one wants me or a few of the other guests to know what they may know. Why that is, I'm not sure. Ron's a good friend. It's gotta have something to do with the story he was telling me earlier. Until he abruptly decided to let it hang in the air. Only the select few get to know. Or do they? And, if so, what is it?

Like I said; sixth grade. HmMMM.

I just sort of nod at the two or three remaining tokeners, and finally walk back inside. Things have started to wind down a bit as it's nearing one A.M. There's a sort of tightness in the air. It's quieter and people are talking in small, slightly hushed groups. I walk to the cooler and grab a beer and then I go into the den where the music had been going on earlier. Carla is on the couch but now she's wiping her eyes while being comforted by another woman. I'm thinking I should just go. But I decide to take one last trip around the house so I can start issuing my holiday goodbye's and then get on my way.

As I approach the foyer near the front door, Shannon, Jeff and Ron are having an intense conversation. They're very close, right up in each others faces. Jeff starts issuing these poking motions toward Ron's chest. His cap is turned sideways, which tells me he's pretty drunk. Shannon's whispers now get louder as she steps in between the two men and then looks at Ron with a sort of desperate glare. Jeff's

saying something about "*finishing the job*". They can't see me because I am behind a narrow wall that stands before the expensive pottery tile of the foyer.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Carla with her coat on and the woman who was trying to comfort her on the couch a few minutes earlier. Carla's walking toward the foyer while the other woman is saying "Carla, no, I'll take you home!" as she holds her by the arm. While all this is happening, I hear the front door shut. Carla has been escorted out the rear exit to her ride home, so I walk closer to the front door.

I look outside toward the driveway. Jeff is pacing around, smoking a cigarette, occasionally turning to point his finger at Ron's car. Even though he's in a dirty business, I know Ron never takes his black Mercedes to work. Tonight, it looks like one of his trucks. It's shiny, black paint and chrome is covered with a lot of crusty dirt and dust; especially near the rear, trunk area. Then, as Ron is standing with his drivers side door open, Shannon reaches into her purse and hands Ron a fat roll of bills. Jeff flicks his cigarette butt onto the grass and then begins to point and yell again. He seemingly has no concern about who might hear him. And try as I might, I can't really hear what he's yelling about. I understand only one word; *gone*, repeated by all three.

But it's gone, with a question mark.

Which makes it sort of disturbing. And I don't know why. Finally, Shannon give Ron a long stare that turns into the same unblinking smile Ron saw a year ago. But he doesn't smile back. He just gets into his car and drives quickly away. Shannon watches the filthy Mercedes sedan head toward the gas light exit of the neighborhood. She listens until she hears the tires hit the pavement of the Parkway. She turns back to Jeff who's rubbing his forehead in an agitated way. Then, in a moment that sobers me up for the walk home, I see Shannon walk up very close as she places a small pistol into her husband's hand as they both look around and quickly get into their car.

TWO MONTHS LATER

"SHYLOCK FOUND FACE UP IN DOWNTOWN SLAB"

The subheading that sat below the screaming local tabloid headline was a quote from one of the detectives on the scene. It read: "Stupidest Hit I've Ever Seen." The detective then went on to say that somebody's, no doubt, "*In serious trouble.*"

A four by eight foot piece of concrete, was found in a small quarry like setting near the water. It sat there, blending in with hundreds of similar looking pieces of

highway and building debris from a few large road construction projects. The only difference was the dirt smeared face that poked up about six inches above the surface.

ONE YEAR LATER:

Since the party, I've only seen Ron a few times. I've kept my distance. So has he.

The Crickles?

Except for the Christmas party, I never see them. Before, I was dying to ask Ron to finish his story about him and Shannon, and what I'd heard upstairs. Instead, I've done the opposite. I've put it out of my mind. I did see Ron at a golf outing and first thing I noticed was that he seems to have lost some weight. As he was teeing up on the third hole, I also noticed a deep scar on his wrist that got my curiosity up. It looked like a bad rope burn or something. I casually mentioned it and he just smiled and said,

"Yeah, first time on the course since I got the bandage off. Work site shit, ya know?"

Months later, I'm at the Christmas party. Number six, I believe. Ron and Carla are not there. But Jim and Tara Montillio have arrived. So have the Crickel's, which surprises me. It also makes me a little uncomfortable. Jeff is in the kitchen. He's talking but the crowd is smaller and

Jeff's not as animated as he usually is. As I watch him go to the fridge for another beer, I notice he's walking with a slight limp.

I then turn to see Shannon walking back into the den from the garage. She's sort of waving at the front of her mouth, blowing away the last remnants of the cigarette she has just finished as she smooths her hair. She's smiling. It looks like she wants to participate in the Karaoke this year, a new twist for Shannon. Something tells me she's got a great voice.

About ten steps behind her is Gary Schaffer, Shannon's neighbor from across the street. He walks up to me as we both watch Tara and Shannon sing "Total Eclipse Of The Heart". I watch with Gary as Shannon, looking right at me sings:

*I don't know what to do
I'm always in the dark
We're living in a powder keg
And giving off sparks
I really need you tonight!*

She keeps her gaze on me as she continues to sing. Then she smiles.

A long, unblinking smile.

