

Nick LaRocca

Letters

The back of the truck was a freezer kept at -1 and filled to bursting with fifty-pound bags of ice, and when Wayne Lafontaine and I got dispatched, we had to hit the gas and make ice runs between North Boynton and South Boca lickety-split. I drove. Wayne was a speed demon; he captained the white truck like there were no other cars on the road, and the last time I let him drive was the time he put the truck in the lake at Hunt Club Estates. After that he was all the time claiming from the passenger seat that the accident wasn't his fault but the fault of two girls we saw who'd been dressed in thigh-highs and pleated golf skirts as they walked the links with their buff milf. "I've got a thing for whore moms," Wayne said. "And their daughters."

I did, too—everyone does—but I didn't like confessing my various lusts to Wayne because he was red-faced and his cheeks were pockmarked like baby swiss—and he was twenty-eight, had a nasally voice as though his scrotum were being stung by hornets, and considered the delivery of ice under emergent circumstances to shi-shi restaurants in Palm Beach County a *career*. I was twenty, a college dropout, a thrill-

seeking ex-student guided by his emotions. My motive was the legal tender—acquisition, capitalism, entrepreneurship. And Wayne was Butthump Lafontaine, The Wayne-Taint. So there was no connection to be made in telling him what I whacked off to religiously (supple maidens hot to build my burgeoning will to power). And he was so sexually imbecilic that I could have put those golf dolls right in front of him, they could have begged him to reveal what he wanted to do to their bodies, and he wouldn't have seen theoretical incest as foreplay. He would have been satisfying a *responsibility* by confessing, as though his disclosure were one of our day's sudden work orders. When to my mind, there was sexual disclosure or there was nothing at all.

Our job was to load the truck at headquarters to start the day, sweating in the breezeless commercial section of Long Boca Way and Spanish River Boulevard, equidistantly inconvenient to the steakhouses and country clubs of West Boca and the redone, faux-Spanish-mission-style mixed-use monstrosities of Downtown Boca—Misner Park and Misner Crossing, with their one-shirt-in-the-window boutiques and kinetic mannequins. (And the cost of this shirt? \$2,999.00. By the way, if we landed in Boca for the evening and had a moment to stop at The Yardhouse for a dog or burger—weekends we worked from 8:00 in the morning til 2:00 the next morning—we might see across the way in Boca Prime some bewigged, wrinkly dandy having a martini with a twenty-three-year-old half-hooker. She would be sporting a Gucci bag upright on the bar and a bandage on her nose by Pillersdorph and Associates, and he would be wearing the same god-awful almost-blouse we'd seen in the window of Carter's or Samuel Clover's a week ago.) We'd be wherever we were with the ice truck, and we'd get a message from Jim Text that a restaurant or hotel needed us—his last name was McGuire, but we called him Text for obvious reasons. We had to drop whatever we were doing and hit the road.

Jim had a fleet of three trucks, so our destination wasn't too far. Eugene Jones and Emmit Franklin patrolled the north end of the county, so they had the longest hike from headquarters; Tim Clausen and Ostentatious Dunbar were assigned to the Lake Worth Corridor—with Tim doing the driving because he was a white guy and less likely to get pulled over; Wayne and I got the south end. *Emergency Ice: For All Your Cubed Needs.*

This was what I'd wanted: to be “working class,” part of a crew: the romance of toil and the machismo of grunting my way through the livelong day.

The morning Wayne put the truck in the water, we were parked ass backwards and too far from the clubhouse at Hunt Club Estates—where Jon Lovitz and the keyboardist in Bon Jovi live, among others. There was a golf fundraiser going on, and Jon Bon Jovi and Richie Sambora were rumored to be on the premises, so the energy was very Beatles-debut as we used the hand truck to haul fifty-pound bags of ice into the clubhouse until the club's coolers were filled to the brim. When we got back in the truck, shaky and beat—we must have delivered and emptied two hundred bags—Wayne readjusted the side view mirror. He'd whacked it with his huge head as he'd walked the hand truck. By fixing the side view, he picked up those two daughters and their mother, holding putters like erections, sauntering over to the putting green beside the fake lake, where a fountain ejaculated. He put the truck in reverse by accident and hit the gas hard—the way a guy will replace his dick with a gas pedal. The truck shot backwards onto the grass and crossed the golf cart path. We were lucky no one was walking behind us or they'd have been squashed.

By the time Wayne figured out what was happening, we were halfway to the lake. I was slamming the windowsill and shouting, “Brake! Brake!” But Wayne panicked and pumped the gas instead of the brake

until we were halfway in the water and every Republican in America was looking at us. My shoulders caved in. I blinked behind the windshield in terror. But the thing was, they all just went back to what they were doing. Once it became clear we could get traction and pull out of the lake, no one came over, no one even yelled at us. Our activity, to them, was neutral.

The upshot was, Jim Text had to re-sod the path from the parking spot to the lake, the club installed parking bumpers at great cost, and Wayne had to pen a letter of apology to the residents of Hunt Club.

“Can you help me with the letter?” he asked.

Here’s the first draft:

Dear Hunt club.

I have resently been in the water of your lake. this was a accidant. when I went in the truck to start it I was captavated by the view of the lake and the patrones of the lake who were walking in their veroius attires. I am deeply sadend by my misstake. please fergive me. I will enhance my dutifulness to the utmost. When one day I am you, I will reemberse for the parking bumps.

Sincerly,

Wayne LaFontaine

“Jesus, Wayne. It’s... indescribable.”

“Straight from my heart, man.”

I fixed all the spelling errors. I couldn’t let him present the letter as it was. But what an effort. We went back and forth, because after I fixed the errors and told him to rewrite it, he made more errors, and these were truly breathtaking.

The letter took four drafts.

The final draft ended up in a stand on the bar of the clubhouse. I wouldn't have known, except the next time we were at Hunt Club, a good month after the accident, the maitre d' asked me to fill the front cooler, which is usually full—if your front cooler is down, you have a serious emergency. So while Wayne was in back, I was behind the bar, and I saw the letter, handwritten on loose leaf paper, propped up in a holder on the bar counter. I didn't tell Wayne about it.

What was really odd was that they'd displayed the letter below a picture of Wayne we hadn't supplied, smiling with crooked teeth and a clownish cockiness in his eyes, as though the person taking the picture had duped him into believing it was a corporate headshot. Wayne was wearing his green Emergency Ice polo. The collar was mussed; it caved in on one side, and on the other it folded into itself like a burrito.

Ostentatious was bisexual, but that wasn't why he was kicked off the football team at Florida Maritime—not precisely. He maintained that accounts of his dismissal, which had made the *Sun Sentinel* and *Palm Beach Post*, were “inaccurate,” and that the whole thing was “an exaggeration, maybe more,” but he would “go no further because I don't want to besmirch anyone.” According the story, Os “assaulted” a teammate in the locker room. “All I did was, I smacked his dick with a towel.”

He was telling me his story for a reason I was by then adjusting to; I had a face to which you reveal secrets and a history that suggested academic prowess yet hippie-ish devil-may-care-ness: I wouldn't judge, confessors suspected, and if I did, I would judge fairly. My equanimity was a fable, by the way—though if as a matter of course men wanted to confess to me, I allowed it in order to practice my listening skills with women: to pay attention to the words, not the lips.

I'd dedicated myself, such as I could, to learning about women—their eccentricities, their proclivities, their perversions, which are more profound, destructive, and compelling than those of your most virile male. You think peeing on her is the height of sexual dominance, but she just thinks it's a nice, warm shower: this is a woman; a baby will grow inside her belly and be birthed out of her vagina; do you really think she finds it mind-bending to be urinated on? When I'd dropped out of Florida Maritime, I had told my mother it was because I wanted to learn about "the world." She was kind and supportive and frightened. I was too scared to say anything about my decision to my father. In fact, I hadn't said a word to him and he hadn't said a word to me since spring term ended and I decided I wasn't going back—not a single word from a man who'd taught me to throw a baseball and not let my edgy desire for "freedom" be an excuse for carelessness like the punks he'd grown up with in Brooklyn. I thought he was being a bully: his values for mine, his generation's for mine. I assailed Hillary and Bill; he liked to watch Mr. Clinton playing his sax on Arsenio Hall. He said the guy really played, and at those times, at least, he wasn't "Slick Willy." But if I'd have had the guts, I would have told him his heroes were frauds every moment of the day, and nothing that was purported to be true was to be believed.

So allegedly, I was taking time to "learn about the world." But I was really just interested in what can't be called anything but *pussy*—not women, not romance. *Pussy*. Over and over again, pussy. I figured I needed a few bucks to pursue my interests. Yet I had also become, somehow, an armchair therapist to men like Wayne and Ostentatious, who was giant, as wide as two men, six-foot-three, two-hundred-and-fifty pounds, all of an NFL linebacker by frame but lacking the killer instinct necessary to accept ongoing concussions.

Os confessed everything to me one hot morning out back of the ice depot on Long Boca Way.

We had just finished loading the trucks. Wayne was down but not out with a case of bronchitis that made him drool, and halfway through loading, he'd disappeared on me. I kept looking around for him like a little brother until I realized he was hiding and I was stuck loading ice on my own. I walked here and there in a stupid loop, into and out of the freezing depot, cursing Wayne loud enough that if Jim Text happened by he would hear me and note my one-man diligence. I hoped everyone else would take mercy on me in at least a theoretical way, if not by volunteering their assistance. But Ostentatious *did* volunteer. He had no problem hauling two bags of ice at a time, which meant he and Tim Clausen, a little Irishman with the ego of an IRA operative who just about sprinted from the depot to the truck, were the equivalent of three people. Meanwhile, I was one man and slowing down fast, the law of diminishing returns kicking in as, disheartened, I noted how empty my truck was and how many more bags I had to go.

Ostentatious came over while Tim Clausen smoked a cigarette. "Let me help you, little man," he said, though I wasn't exactly little. I was built like a shortstop, toned and supple, sinewy and flexible.

Together, Ostentatious and I moved many bags. Thanks to his help—which was effortless, even after he'd already loaded his truck—my spirits were renewed. I started moving like Tim, jetting between the truck and the depot, though by the time we were done, I was shaking with fatigue and cursing Wayne. I had to sit down.

Ostentatious sat with me; I thanked him; he said it was no problem; he asked what it was like to drive with Wayne; I said, "What do you think?"; he laughed good-naturedly; I said, "How's it with Tim?" he said, "Not bad. Dude's a trooper. A string bean but a trooper;" he asked why the hell I wasn't in school; I said I was exploring my options.

I asked if he was ever going back to Maritime—because when he was kicked off the team, he lost his scholarship and couldn't afford college on his own. He told me he planned on it. He was only two semesters from graduating, which was part of the problem: other schools wouldn't accept his upper-level credits. Graduates had to earn a minimum number of credits from their programs. Which meant he was basically locked in to Florida Maritime, from which he'd been banned for three years.

“What happened?” I asked.

We'd bonded over bags of ice, but I still expected him to click his tongue and say it was too long a story.

Tim came over and announced he was making a run to Chevron and did Ostentatious want a Gatorade. He did. Blueberry Freeze. Os started to take out his wallet, but Tim refused.

Wayne was MIA, so once Tim took off, Os and I had nowhere to go.

“I didn't really think much of it,” he said.

He had an attractive face, wizened and broad, as much Greek as African-American. He was pleasant to look at—reassuring, in a sense. In pictures of him at Florida Maritime, he was charmed by life. By the time I knew him, the naiveté had faded, but his countenance indicated an understanding that as the day goes on, circumstances, lousy though they may be, are not permanent.

“We were in the locker room, there weren't many people in there, and Joshy, he was doing what he always did. I used to screw him. People never knew that. I kept that to myself. I think he'd'a killed himself if it'a come out. But I used to do him at my place after practice *all the time*. He was gayer than hell. I mean, I like a woman *sometimes*.” He looked around. “But Joshy was flat *gay*. Practice used to drive him crazy.

“And the way you knew he was gay was he was *always* with women. Good looking ones. Always taking pictures with them with his shirt off or walking around campus with his arms around two of ‘em, which I mean is fine, but there’s only a certain kinda girl gonna let you do that. Girls ain’t gonna let a straight man share them—not that easy, not that often, at least, and not publicly like that. I mean, like, there might be *two* girls who’ll let you do that, but not *every* girl.”

In that moment I had a revelation, and the revelation was this: everything I’d ever masturbated to was bullshit. I’d really thought it wasn’t. So I was seated at the picnic table, shocked that my fantasies were fantastic.

Os went on. “The girls all knew. He was... innocuous. Girls flirted with him, and he shifted his eyes. Funniest thing, to watch some girl realize all of a sudden, ‘This dude’s *gay!*’

“But I got tired of it. I was pretty political—this was only two years ago, but it feels like forever—and I was feeling like America needed to be more tolerant, you know? It was in that context. We were in the locker room after voluntary weights. It was a pretty quiet session. In the shower, he had been looking at me like he did when no one else was around. He came over to my unit to change. I spun up my towel and gave him a smack. Except Coach Pierson, the Defensive Line Coach, happened to be walking by. Joshy looks up at Pierson horrified—that he was *caught*. He goes, ‘What the fuck? What the fuck, Os? That ain’t cool.’ He walks away, Pierson walks off, and the next thing I know, I’m in Coach Mack’s office. He’s saying, ‘Josh is accusing you of assaulting him in the locker room. Did you hit him in the privates?’ I’m like, ‘With a towel.’ What else could I say? ‘I was just playing.’ There was a Title Nine guy standing in the corner, like I don’t know where they grow these guys or keep ‘em in a cage for just such a moment. He comes up to Coach

Mack and whispers something, and Mack says, ‘Os, I gotta suspend you from the team. There’s gotta be an investigation.’

“A month later, I’m out of school. And Joshy’s on ESPN talking about how if gay men—not that he’s judging us—want access to all parts of society, they have to play by the rules, too.”

We were back in the bar at Hunt Club, and Wayne’s letter was still up. I tried to distract him—which worked for a long time, let me tell you—but eventually Wayne did notice the letter and went, “Holy shit! My letter.” That was how Wayne noticed things: “Holy shit, sexy hos!” And then we were in the water.

The bartender acted like he hadn’t recognized Wayne the whole time. He was a real good-time Charlie type, an Aryan with kind eyes that screamed sociopath. I would learn he was banging half the women at the club—the married ones. His name was Phil or Bill, and he squinted and said, “That *is* you!”

The bar was packed. It was a Saturday at two in the afternoon, and no one in Hunt Club had anything to do but drink, so the energy was already headed downhill, from festive to edgy.

When we got back out to the truck, I tried my best to convince Wayne he was a celebrity among the monetized.

I’d be sentimental and dishonest to say Wayne wasn’t one of the dumbest people I’ve ever met, but that didn’t mean what I’d thought, which was that he had no sense at all. So when I said, “You’re known at Hunt Club, man!” I really believed he would put on a sweet grin and pluck his head like a turkey and go, “Holy shit, I’m famous!” But he said, “Fuck you, Ray-Ray. I know they’re making fun of me.”

I had an idea for the next time we were back at Hunt Club, which it turned out was that very night. This time it wasn't a fundraiser but a giant party one of the residents, some millionaire, was throwing for the Trumpettes of Boca—John Brennan McCaffery, King of the Flushable Adult Wipe. Some make their money in technology, others in the arts. He made his money one asshole at a time.

As we were moving ice, I could just about hear the white supremacy in the crowd, which got me thinking about what Ostentatious had told me. I doubted very much that had Os been white, he'd have been kicked off the team. Josh Dombrowski, the tight end, would have never complained about a white guy. He'd have assumed he was overreacting or misunderstanding. But then I started thinking, it wasn't only about race. Because if Os had been the quarterback, Joshy wouldn't have complained, either. Mack would have looked the other way, or Pierson, walking by, would have screwed up his eyes and a moment later gone, That's the quarterback, and it's up to the other team to sack him, not me.

I was just a kid delivering ice, a dropout from the same school Os had been kicked out of. This struck me as something more than a coincidence, something meaningful, most precisely *a close call*—I don't know why, even now, that was the phrase I thought of, as though I could have just as easily *been* Ostentatious Dunbar, having a will exerted over me, exerting no will of my own. Because I couldn't have been. For one simple reason.

It wasn't Wayne who slipped off with the letter. It was I, said the rabbit. Most startling was how easy the theft was.

Wayne was still under the weather, and I was up front again with the cooler. The letter was right there, on the bar over the cooler. Wayne was in back, in part because he was Wayne, in part because people might recognize his picture, and in part because the way he was dealing with his runny nose was by taking

wads of tissue, making them into plugs, and shoving them up his nostrils like he had a nosebleed. He was walking around like that, and it's a fine enough thing when you're in the truck or unloading ice, but you can't be in a civilized-drunken place like the bar at Hunt Club with tissue falling out of your nose like twin icicles.

So I was unloading ice, bent over the cooler, with one hand on the bar, and I swiped the letter holder and knocked it to the floor. A few people at the bar took notice. But they didn't care. Maybe they didn't care because it was a material thing, and this was Hunt Club, so they hoped it broke and there would be a new thing to look at, perhaps a vase or one of those copper sculptures with tentacles growing out of it that looks vaguely like the anatomical diagram of a vagina, the one you were shown in fifth grade. Maybe the joke of the letter was getting old. There had to be a few kind souls among the membership who had felt the display was tasteless. McCaffery might have been one of them, for all I knew: it's one thing to attend to assholes, another to be one. But I knew if Os had knocked over the letter, someone would have told him to pick it back up—or if no one did, it would have been pure white guilt.

I left it on the floor and went back for more ice. On the way out, I kicked it under the bar. I got the ice, came back in and unloaded, went out again, and what I did was, I put all the empty ice bags on top of the letter. So after a while, the letter was buried in empty bags. When I was all done loading the cooler and ready to clean up, I scooped up all the bags and the letter in the holder and walked out.

At the time, it felt like the greatest coup ever pulled. Now I figure I could have just taken the letter. Walked right out with it. No one would have cared.

Yet think of the elaborate scheme I'd concocted, positioning myself up front; swiping the letter to the floor; heaping bags onto the letter; scooping it all up; and the whole time, right up through when I was

moving out of the bar and down the corridor, believing I was tricking them. I was tricking the rich! Because no matter how hard I tried not to, I had made the rich into something supernatural. Because if I were sitting at a bar, and there was a picture of someone I didn't know and a letter by that person standing in a holder near me, and someone took it down and carried it out, would I have cared? Yet I expected to hear a brusque "Halt!" over my shoulder and turn to see the maitre d' heading for me in a speed-walk as club members pointed accusatorily, as though I had murdered their afternoon.

By the time I got out to the truck with the letter, I felt silly, a prankster rather than a man. I put the letter, in its holder, on the passenger seat. We finished loading the back cooler, and in the truck I showed Wayne the letter.

He took it from me and hugged it to his chest. I expected him to toss it out the window onto I-95 or something, but he kept it with him the rest of the night. Though I never asked—because for some reason I was afraid to—I think he kept it a long time. He may still have it.

Ostentatious also had to write a letter—to get back into school. I volunteered to help him, my second letter of the summer. Os was a much better writer than Wayne. The letter had to be contrite. He had to admit culpability. If he did so, Maritime might just allow him to take online classes. He would never be allowed on campus. He might randomly smack a dick or something.

The letter was more than adequate, and while I helped Os with it, I was mostly just a pair of eyes. I imagined what I looked like, if you were to see me, my brow and my eyes revealed over the top of the sheet of paper as I read about mistakes, moving on, and second chances from a guy who had done nothing wrong. Dombrowski had been drafted in the fourth round a year ago. He was already pretty much out of the N.F.L.,

had opened camp this year on the practice squad of the Buffalo Bills, “a disappointment,” according to his head coach. But at least he’d finished college and was picking up a few easy bucks as a body while he got the rest of his life in order.

It was Os to whom all the damage had been done. And the letter was just another insult.

Four weeks after Os sent the letter, he learned his fate. You already know what they decided.

That day, I was in a holding pattern. Wayne had gotten better for a while, but now he was in the hospital with Fungal Sinitis. He could hardly breathe, and the fungus was threatening his brain. There had been two officials down from the CDC in Atlanta to interview him because the initial concern was botulism, which Wayne ascribed, narcissistically, to terrorism, as though ISIS were after him, as though in a cave in Afghanistan, some mastermind was shaking his fists and saying the key to world domination was to kill Wayne Lafontaine, the ice deliverer. The CDC visit turned out to be a waste of time, but Wayne was still stuck in Delray Medical Center, waiting for his immune system to kick in.

Jim Text had reassigned Os to me and left Tim Clausen to handle the quieter Lake Worth Corridor on this own. When I asked Jim why I couldn’t solo in Lake Worth and to keep Tim and Os together, he said he didn’t trust that I’d go where he told me to. Tim texted us a video, early into our run, of drunks in downtown Lake Worth, carousing on street corners in the middle of the morning. Two junkies were openly arguing on Lake Avenue in front of Starbucks. “The dregs,” Tim narrated. “Thank fucking GOD that ain’t me.”

Os let me drive because he was expecting, at any moment, a decision from Florida Maritime. He kept reupping his Safari connection to check his email.

The email came in around noon, when we were at Yardhouse having lunch. Without saying a word, he passed me the phone. It was a form letter, thanking him for his “application” and denying him admission.

“That’s the same letter they send to high school kids,” he said.

“Are you surprised?”

“No. I kind of hoped—but that was my mistake. I knew it when I was hoping.”

“You okay?”

“Not in the least.”

I passed him back his phone. He shoved it into his pocket. He pushed his plate away. “You want my food, man?”

I looked at his half-eaten cheeseburger, two giant chomps taken out of it. “Look, it isn’t the only school—”

“They’re not gonna let me in anywhere. All these people talk.”

“There’s options.”

He looked at me like I was a fool.

I sat back. “What do you want me to say?”

He got out of the booth. Rising, he was like a god: the size of him. “You can ask for the check.” He put his credit card on the table. “My treat. I guess I owe Jim my life, now. I’m destined to be an errand boy. Ain’t life grand.”

I watched him away. The entire bar and restaurant stopped what it was doing as he passed. He was the biggest, strongest man I’ve ever met, yet he walked like he was floating. It was a good letter he’d written. It was sincere. He’d revealed that he and Josh were lovers. He had to. And all he worried about in doing so

wasn't whether he'd get back in but that someone would leak the news—which would send Josh down the rabbit hole. He vacillated on whether to make the admittance. In the end, it came down to something simple and true: if Josh went down the rabbit hole, and if he truly wanted to climb back out, there would be someone there to help him.

When he was gone, I took out my phone. I sent a message to my father. I hadn't said a word to him in months, yet this was probably the easiest pair of sentences I've ever written: "I'm going back in the spring. Thanks for everything." I hit send. Then I sent another text of just one word, in all caps. "EVERYTHING."