

Blue Esther

Tyrone Jaeger



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On Mother's Day, 1969, Alvin Wund, a widower of 121 days and counting, stood at the electric stove and watched coagulated bacon grease liquefying in a pan. The grease spread thin and sputtered. The coffee percolated. Alvin blinked repeatedly behind horn-rimmed glasses and gathered eggs and bacon from the refrigerator. He was 52, old enough to have raised a family and lost a wife. These last months in the house alone, nothing but the rueful music of his aging body in a house that once teemed with life—human and animal alike—ages ago, the girls squealing after Esther's pet coons, the hoot of her owl, the drumming of a fawn's hooves across the porch. Esther at the hub of it all. And now only Alvin and his socked feet whispering on hardwood and linoleum, his achy joints popping, and the constant belching and farting. He was an accordion with leaking bellows, a one-man band of sorrow.

At the kitchen sink, he looked out the window, and in silence absorbed a sky swirled in pink cotton, cut and framed in dull tin. Around the basin of Alvin's nearly idle farm, the land lifted and dipped before ascending abruptly to Eldorado Canyon. To the east, a plateau hid the Rocky Flats weapons plant, where Alvin worked security. Twelve years back in 1957, he gave up full-time dairy farming, as well as the ranching he did for his neighbor, Emory Mota,

and started at Rocky Flats as a janitor. Düm Chemical gave him the best pay of his life. He had worked plant protection for six years now, and most days he thought that it beat milking cows, mending Emory's fences, and chasing steers up and down the high plains and mesas.

An Econoline van the color of a fingerling potato sat in his driveway. The van door opened, and Ursula, Alvin's youngest, exited and tugged down her skirt. Ursula's hair was a thicket of brown tied at the top of her head, and she adjusted the knot of what looked to be a striped tube sock. Noticing Alvin at the window, she waved, pointed at the beat-up Rambler wagon, and pantomimed driving. The title was still in his name, though she had hijacked the car six years ago, several years before the state deemed her fit to drive. Alvin was going to let her leave, but then she was striding toward the house, hungry he assumed, and the screen door soon slapping behind her.

"Looks like you was rode hard and put away wet," Alvin said.

Ursula snorted a defiant laugh.

"A woman your age should take better care than to disgrace herself in a van in her own father's driveway. Your mother not even cold in the grave." He made a high-pitched sound, a cackle of sorts. It was a sonic reflex that came when he regretted his words. He made the sound more often than he cared to admit.

He pulled a Coors from the fridge and poured the contents into a water glass. Saltshaker in hand, he issued four taps over the beer and watched with satisfaction as it fizzed. The radio hummed with the weather, sunshine and no rain in sight. Alvin scraped eggs onto plates and poured coffee. "You want butter or jam?" he said. They made the sounds of eating and of small talk.

Wearing only a man's T-shirt that did not quite conceal her underwear, Vivi shuffled sleepily into the kitchen. Her dirty blonde bangs were damp with sweat, and Alvin guessed that she had been rolling around with her long-haired, guitar-playing husband. While he believed in the power of nookie, that his daughters would fornicate on his property—in his house no less!—seemed like pure treachery. After all, he had always done his best to shield their eyes from the beasts copulating in the fields.

"Is there any good reason why your sister came crawling out of that drummer's van this morning?"

"He gave me a ride from the radio station." Ursula winked at Vivi. "We did an interview for my show."

"Two daughters headed down the road to ruin. You should have been boys."

"If we had been boys," Vivi said, "there'd have been no reason to sneak off with them. Where's the fun in that?" She poured a cup of coffee and said, "You plan to eat that egg?"

Alvin breathed a cowardly sound of resistance and consent.

Driving home after Esther's cancer treatments, he would steer them home with a beer between his legs, Esther fetal on the backseat, radiating pain that he hated to imagine. He had wanted to help but words were his weakness, so he offered her his preferred elixir, the bottle, and she drank. He would refresh her drinks when they were empty. It was the only thing he knew. "We might have done better," she had said one night, Cutty Sark and pain pills thickening her tongue. Years before, she had taken to sleeping in a room upstairs, leaving Alvin alone nights in their bedroom. The last week, when she could no longer make the stairs, she resigned herself to their marriage bed. He had felt it impossible to sleep with her so close by, dying, and he would ruminate on his own inevitable death and what a lonely voyage it promised to be.

The week before Esther died, Vivi had flown home, and during the week that followed, Esther did not give him as much as one last look. *Had he been that awful?* Twenty-nine years of marriage, two daughters, and she did not grant him so much as a nod in farewell. In his own way, he had tried to be a good husband. Esther's final slight, Alvin thought, was to make him feel past redemption, her grudge eternal.

Two weeks after Esther passed, he awoke—bolt upright—his body as a stiff as a Lutheran church pew, and at the foot of the bed Esther radiated a blue light, like plutonium gone critical. He did not believe in ghosts and thought it a dream or, perhaps, his mind betraying him. Still, after he saw Blue Esther, as he had now come to think of her, he traded the mattress from his room for the one in Vivi's old room. Though Alvin did not tell Vivi, she and Mack now slept on Esther's deathbed, a fact that Alvin had accepted as evidence of his cowardice.

Ursula said goodbye and as was his superstitious habit, Alvin, said, "Don't ever say goodbye. It's so *long*." He stood at the screen door, a cool breeze at his socked feet. Perhaps Esther had been afraid to say goodbye. They were both superstitious that way. Ursula started the Rambler, putting it in gear before it even had time to warm up, dust rising from the spinning tires.

He sat down and wiped the remaining yoke with his toast. "It's Mother's Day," he said. They forced tight-lipped smiles. Vivi would not look at him. Only a few years away from thirty, she was no longer a child, and this pained Alvin more than the inevitability of his own death. Blue Esther he could drink through. A Blue Vivi or a Blue Ursula, and he'd most likely take a flying leap from the lip of Eldorado Canyon.

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Alvin sat in the Rocky Flats Lounge sipping one beer after another. He would have preferred drinking at the Abyss back up in Eldorado Springs, but on Sundays Harry didn't open until three. The Abyss was Alvin's favorite bar, but it wasn't what it once was—these days it was overrun with longhairs and

women that didn't have the decency to shave their legs or armpits. He had spent many a Mother's Day at the Abyss. Nearly 20 years before, he had burned the hell out of the hotdogs and hamburgers he had been grilling for a Mother's Day cookout. He had been in the sauce but only to clean out the dregs of a terrible hangover. One thing led to the next. He insisted they go to the Abyss, though Esther protested and her mother flat out refused. Soon after they ate, Esther was ready to leave, but he had cunningly kept the girls in quarters for the jukebox. They clamored to remain. Esther and Alvin ended up in a shouting match, and he denied her the keys to the car. Too proud to ask for a ride, she and the girls had walked the mile home. He had woken up inside the car, the windows frosted over, his leg in terrible pain. Pulling himself from the car, he saw that he had busted through his own damn fence. His leg broken, Esther and her mother spent the next day and a half trying to corral the escaped cattle. It was not the end of the world. Livestock did break the fence on occasion. This was one small humiliation added to the pile. Not until Esther was dying did Alvin realize that the pile was a mountain of shame and that they had been living in its shadow for years.

These things he thought as he listened to Johnny Cash singing "The Ballad of Ira Hayes" on the jukebox. Alvin was two shots and two beers further into what promised to be a full-fledged afternoon when the barkeep extended the phone. "Sounds important, old man."

"I'll old man you."

"Alvin, we need you at the plant." It was Percy Miller, Alvin's boss.

He made a face like a child forced to drink castor oil. "Percy, to be honest, I've had more than a few. It's my day off. Mother's Day." He didn't know why he mentioned the holiday.

"Look, Alvin. We've got a fire. A big fire. I don't give a damn about your vices."

Alvin gave the phone back to Wayne, and muttered, "They've got a fire?" He threw a few dollars on the bar and walked toward the door, only to return and polish off his beer. "Watch out for the blue light," Wayne said, making a joke about criticality he had heard the plant workers make. Alvin's hands shook. A fire. Didn't Percy realize it was Mother's Day? He looked Wayne in the eye and said, "You're about as funny as the clap."

At the guard station, Paul Brewer looked up from his game of solitaire. "Production's down today. It's a safety-first day." Paul, hesitant and embarrassed even when trying to be funny, leaned onto the window counter. He wore the same threadbare uniform and secondhand pistol that Alvin would have worn had it not been his day off. "It sounds awful, Alvin."

"So what the hell do they want me for?"

"It's the complex, Alvin, and from what I hear, the firemen they sent in are already hot. They could call in local fire departments, but then we've got a

black eye.” Alvin pulled the hip flask from beneath the seat and took a swig. “They’ve had trouble getting a hold of other off-duty men, but I ‘spect they knew where to find you.”

Alvin held the flask out but Paul begged off. “How bad is it, really?”

“Upper management’s on the way.”

Alvin lit a cigar and, with his foot still on the break, put the car in gear. “I’m not properly trained. I tell you that much, Paul.”

Situated on 400 acres of high plains northwest of Denver, the plant was a massive compound of cinderblock and sheet metal, and during the workweek, it bustled with energy, high production at low-cost, bomb-making contracts with the Atomic Energy Commission. The plant was a foundry for the plutonium triggers used in hydrogen bombs. Alvin knew the basics about the production process, though his job didn’t require scientific knowledge. The production of the plutonium triggers was dirty and dangerous business, but his perfunctory faith in the system kept him from worry. He made rounds in a truck, knew each building by its number, and checked each number with a ballpoint on a clipboarded sheet of paper. He preferred the quiet of the night shift, where he could play pitch with the man at the entry station, take a nip of Cutty, drive around, read a dirty book, take a nap. Some guards thrived on crisis. Not Alvin.

He parked at the far end of the lot and stole a look at himself in the rearview. Drunk and cowardly came to mind, so he swiped a comb through his hair and wiped cigar spit from the corners of his mouth. He dipped down behind the steering wheel and took one more hit of liquid courage. What the hell—Percy knew that he’d been at the bar. He had half a mind to boycott the Rocky Flats Lounge. If he had been at the Abyss, Harry would have never handed him the phone.

Fire trucks sat on either end of the complex, diesel engines chortling. A perimeter of men and cones and yellow tape surrounded the building. Men in hardhats conferred in groups and shouted orders. The concrete and sheet metal building emanated heat. The smell of chemical burn hung in the air, and Alvin imagined the building bubbling with toxins: plutonium, uranium, beryllium, and countless acids and solvents used to process the materials and clean the shop.

“Happy Mother’s Day,” Roman Nurnberg said. He leaned against Alvin, and whispered, “This is shit, my friend.” Romey wore a stained Broncos ball cap, and he smelled of stale beer and sweat. When Esther died, it was Romey, his true friend, who came with a borrowed backhoe to dig her winter grave.

Men hustled about the building like worker ants on a just-kicked anthill. They arrived with coveralls and air tanks, facemasks and fire extinguishers. Hulking forms in makeshift astronaut suits exited the building. Men removed their air

masks and the safety manager ran the Geiger counter up and down their bodies. The beeps were loud and frequent.

“I appreciate you showing on short notice, it being a holiday and all,” Percy Miller said. He tipped his bowler back, pushed up his shirtsleeves, and hitched his pants about his gut. “We’ve got hot firemen and no others to replace them.”

Romey laughed nervously. “You want us to go in, Percy?”

“That’s why I called, Roman.” Percy dug a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped sweat from his forehead and jowls. Safety officials escorted firemen away in pick-up trucks. “They’re hot,” Percy said. He stared at his handkerchief. “They been in there for hours.”

“We don’t have training for this,” Alvin said. The words were out of his mouth and then he was pulling one pair of coveralls overtop of another. He was fitted with two pairs of rubber gloves, duct tape wound around the seam between the gloves and the coverall sleeves. “I don’t like this one bit, Romey.”

“We’ll show them, Alvin. Then we’ll get us down to the Abyss.” Percy hovered over them, a hog’s scowl written across his face. As they were about to stick their heads inside masks attached to Survive-Air packs, Romey said, “It’s the plenums filters we got concern for. They burn, goodbye Superior, Broomfield, Westminster, Federal Heights, and bye-bye Denver.”

“Look out for the blue light,” Alvin said. He squeezed out a cackle. He took a deep breath before he pulled the mask over his head. They entered the double doors, and before they had a chance to take two steps, the doors closed behind them.

They were submerged in an orange and gray sea of heat. Alarms echoed through the complex. *Wah, wah, wah*. Red lights flashed on the walls. Beyond the four feet of suspect visibility, orange glowed in the distance. Alvin knew the complex well. On occasion, he had been given the nighttime assignment of burning documents, a suspicious detail, but he never asked questions.

Stepping as carefully as possible, they moved forward, like soldiers expecting an ambush. They sprayed powder from their hand pumps. The alarms rang. *Wah, wah, wah*. Still, Alvin heard his own breath, labored and desperate.

The hand pumps were soon finished. There were no more outside, and Alvin wondered why Percy had sent them on such a pointless errand, a self-guided tour of hell. He wanted to cry out, but Romey grabbed his arm and led him to a magnesium bucket against the wall. They inched farther, gathering more buckets, dumping these on anything that burned. The buckets did not last.

The Benelex-lined glove boxes looked like elevated Plexiglas terrariums, glowing with heat. If the Benelex was burning, Alvin figured the fire had been

raging for hours, maybe since the night before. They walked side by side, not daring to lose each other in the smoke. Alvin swallowed whiskey bile and tugged at Romey's arm, leading him to a fire hose. Even Alvin knew that water was never used to fight a plutonium fire—if water pressure caused even the slightest collision between the buttons, it could ignite a chain reaction. A criticality, an uncontainable fire. The End.

Alvin looked up to the roof, toward the filters. They seemed a relatively thin wall of protection between the toxic fire pit and the world outside. The orange glow of the fire entered his brain. The heat penetrated the coveralls and his clothes and his skin. He felt hungover though he was still drunk. His brain was boiling in its own pickled juices. His glasses fogged up and panicking beneath his mask, he thought of Esther deep in the spring ground... wet, wet, wet... dead, her body saturated and bloated. Alvin, doing his utmost not to hyperventilate, found himself thinking about a trick she'd do for the girls where she'd reconstitute a pork rind. He now saw the pork rind and it was her flesh. Reconstituted Esther. He seemed to hear her saying one of her maxims, *Sometimes all you've got is a rock. And then you have to throw it.* She was most generally right, even when he had refused to admit it.

Alvin found a hose against the wall. Romey tugged at another hose. They had no choice but to risk it, and deep down Alvin hoped the whole thing would blow. They walked carefully, one man in front getting sprayed down by the one in back. They walked through a valley of smoke—the vapors of a dying sun, chemical evil—a manmade shadow of death. No talking, no gestures, only movements pure and synchronized, chemical selves. They soaked beams and boxes, moving toward the orange glow, where Alvin was quite sure that the devil waited, that sucker with eyes that shone blue like plutonium gone critical.

Outside, they exchanged air masks and men ran Geiger counters up and down their bodies. They reentered the building and continued to soak. Time faded, hell was constant, an eternal flash. They spoke with a silence that Alvin knew he would always remember, as if they had worked their entire lives to understand the sound of *wah, wah, wah.*

Alvin stepped beneath the glove boxes into the culvert-like sheep dips, the radioactive sludge soaking his legs, and on the other side, Romey sprayed the muck from Alvin's legs, as if to say, *We are not going to die, Alvin. Not today anyway.* He loved Romey as if they were conjoined twins who separated as they stood and walked from the tepid primordial soup, the ocean boiling at their backs, lava-bottomed innocence. They smelled of human ooze and chemical brine.

Alvin's stinging eyes focused on the glow and the mist. He felt something hit his shoulder, and he thought, *Oh, God. This is it. The roof is caving in.* He looked for Romey in the smoke. Ceiling tiles clung to Alvin's coveralls. He dropped his hose and swatted at the tiles, thinking that he might be crying, but he couldn't be sure, not with the stinging in his eyes. He looked down to see that the hose was charred. The damaged hose flayed like a snake, rising and

spitting, and then, as if struck, it spun its head around. Romey turned off the valve and they walked toward the double doors.

When they exited, the Geiger counters said they were too hot to return. “You got someone else that’s going in?” Romey said. “I don’t see anybody waiting in line. We started the job.” Alvin stayed quiet, and though he hoped that someone would physically stop them, he turned and walked toward the building. He would later think, *How many times did they exit and reenter, exit and reenter?* Hell was walking out and choosing to return.

Inside, they followed the glowing arrows to the glove boxes and began again on the Benelex. The sound of the alarms pulsed with his heart. *Wah, wah, wah.* They sprayed and the glow faded and diminished. Alvin smiled, perhaps a smile of relief. Perhaps he smiled with the realization that his entire life was a chemical spill.

A blue light flashed...

Time stopped. There she was—Esther the blue of a pale sky, untouched by clouds and descended from heaven, where she had made a deal with God to punish Alvin. He felt Blue Esther’s embrace, and he thought, *This isn’t so bad, this dying.* He had always imagined that death would hurt so much more than it did now. It didn’t feel any different from the pain and tired numbness that he had felt for hours. How many hours? Without thinking, he removed his mask, and her mouth moved next to his ear, though he could hear nothing over the pop and crackle of static. For one word before she died. Oh, she might have offered love or advice! *Bon voyage! Safe journey, Alvin.* Yes, she was the dead one, but she had known very well that he would be the one cast adrift. He hated her for dying, and he hated himself for turning her into a person who would so willfully instigate his suffering. His throat felt as if he was breathing in her contempt. Esther in his arms now, looking for all the world like Romey in his mask and coveralls. With clumsy hands covered two gloves thick, Romey fumbled with Alvin’s mask, trying to fit it back on his face. The straps caught. Alvin was tired and confused, his fingers numb, fat with his own sweat. He was shaking and ready to fall on the ground. He felt Romey’s hands on his head. The mask was back on, and only now did he realize that the taste in his mouth was the orange smoke. He and Romey pulled away from each other, embarrassed and shaking. He turned to see two men in suits and respirators. One held a Polaroid camera.

The blue light that signals the end.

It was just the flash, Alvin.

They were just taking a picture, Alvin. They were just recording.

Recording the avoidance of criticality.

I thought it was critical. I believed I was dead. I believed it was you, Esther.

In the showers—how had he arrived in the showers?—he scrubbed his skin raw, over and over, dipping a brush into water heavy with bleach. Still hot and scrubbing again. He was living in the shadow of his own shame, and now he was pretending that he could scrub it off, remove the stain, move the mountain. Alvin scrubbed the hair from his skin and then skin from skin, and when they tested him, his legs were still hot. Alvin scrubbed until there was virtually no skin, but he was careful about not drawing blood, because if you drew blood and you were still hot, the heat—the contamination, the radiation—entered your blood stream, and then where were you?

Naked, the water stinging, Alvin wanted nothing more than to be in her bed and to let himself cry in her arms. He wanted to go back to when there was no poison between them, back to the very start, when he was working on the farm and she was still in school, smirking at him, daring him, and he'd have to say her name just to keep from falling to his knees.

But he had craved the canned heat, despite the anger and the shame that followed those many mornings. The tinder of daily spite that left their love in ashes. No fire, nor light left. Not even the suggestion of warmth.

Esther might have said goodbye.

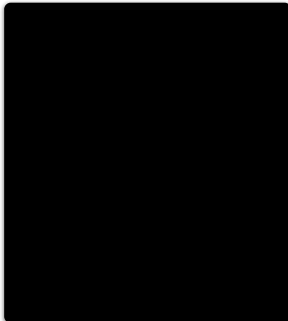
Alvin might have said more. *You're beautiful and our babies are beautiful and the farm is beautiful and we are beautiful.* But he had not. He had tasted of her love, ate it gluttonously, digested, and everywhere he left a trail of shit.

They wrapped his hot leg in a black plastic bag and he waited until six the next morning before they let him go home. On the plastic bag, they had affixed tape that said **Caution Do Not Enter**. Before they let him start his car, they reminded him that when off-site, he should discuss nothing of what he witnessed. Alvin knew this—any fool knew this. He hadn't seen Romey since they had exited the complex.

On the drive back home, his muscles ached from the adrenaline crash and his mind was dull. He longed for sleep and yet he was afraid of ever sleeping again. He yawned, his throat scorched like a stovepipe. On the radio, he searched for Ursula's voice, but the sun was rising and she had already signed off and was, he hoped, sleeping soundly and safely. Maybe she was at home, she and Vivi, just girls again, sleeping in the same bed, stuffed animals and dolls piled high.

Alvin stared at the sun as it rose from the flatness of the plains, and looking at the twilight moonscape of the fields surrounding Rocky Flats, he was certain that he had seen her. It didn't matter that it turned out to be only photographers. A ghost could do whatever it damn well pleased, and her ghost had come back and said, *Suffer, like you made me suffer.* He couldn't blame her, not when he looked out from his tower of sin piled so high. From this height, everything was clear and miserable. Then he smelled the bleach and the sobbing came so hard that he pulled over to the side of the road.

When he regained his composure, he noticed that his hazards were flashing, though he didn't remember having turned them on. He put the car in gear, the sky a fantastic fiery orange. He settled back in his seat, the car easing forward into the radiant morning and the hangover that would be the rest of his life without her.



Tyrone Jaeger is the author of the story collection *So Many True Believers* and the cross-genre novella *The Runaway Note*. His debut novel, *Radio Eldorado*, will be published by Braddock Avenue Books in the spring of 2020. His writing has appeared in the *Oxford American*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *The Literary Review*, and elsewhere. He is the recipient of the Porter Fund Literary Prize, and he has been a member of the faculty at Hendrix College since 2008. Born and raised in the Catskill Mountains, Tyrone lives on Beaverfork Lake, Arkansas, with his wife and daughter. Visit his website: <http://www.tyronejaeger.com>

