

LETTER FROM EFFINGHAM JAIL

Jon Tuttle

Editor, *People* magazine,

I read with considerable interest your story (“Twice Blessed,” November 24), about Matthew Mastroberti, the successful podiatrist and father of five who somehow survived a horrific gunshot wound to the head at his thirtieth high school reunion. I am pleased to hear he’s on the road to recovery, partly because I’m the one who shot him, but primarily because I consider him a close personal friend.

While your article was correct in many of its particulars, I would quibble with certain others, beginning with your description of the incident as a “furious rampage by a deranged loner.” I am not a loner. I have in fact been married twice and have over two-thousand Facebook friends. And while you correctly point out that the shooting was not Mr. Mastroberti’s first brush with death, I would address some of your misperceptions regarding the “tragic gas station conflagration” of 1983, an event that “so badly burned over half his body, including his ruddy, cherubic face, that doctors had to induce a coma.” The truth, as I will demonstrate, is that getting immolated as a sixteen-year-old was the best thing ever to happen to him.

That’s because until he pulled up at that fateful Shell station, Matthew Mastroberti was The Masturbator, a sobriquet given him in third grade, long before any of us could possibly fathom what masturbation was. It was our classmate, Tripp Severance, who so christened him. He shouted it, actually — “Hey, Masturbator!” — from the back of the bus.

Tripp Severance was the only boy in elementary school whose scapulae did not protrude through the back of his tee-shirt. He wore studded leather wrist bands, cowboy boots and a big, silver belt buckle. Whenever he was about to get in a fight, which was every morning, he would whip that belt off and lasso it over his head like a drover.

(I hope you will forgive my little rhetorical indulgences. I consider myself the poet laureate of the Effingham Correctional Center. There is little else to do here but read my thesaurus. Our most fascinating conversationalist is a pederast named Leland who insists on examining his own prostate at the top of every hour.)

Anyway, I was sitting near Matty, up near the front, when Tripp Severance loudly dubbed him *The Masturbator*. At that, of course, everyone fell silent, even the driver. At first, Matty just closed his eyes and sort of slumped in his seat, but then came the laughter, then the taunting, then the throwing of baloney slices, and his cherubic little face turned very ruddy. He looked out his window to watch, I suppose, the quartered carcass of his happy childhood bleeding out on the sidewalk.

At the time we were both new at school, I having moved from Schenectady with my father, he having transferred from Loveland Elementary, where the Samoan Brothers had beat him up. He wasn't alone in that. There was always a steady stream of refugees from Loveland seeking sanctuary from the Samoan Brothers. But Matty made a particularly easy target. He was too small, and too good natured, to be so handsome. I suppose I was lucky to have been born with a bit of a sloped forehead. It's a family trait, said my father, that goes back over a quarter-million years.

And I liked Matty. He lived two streets over, but sometimes we'd find ourselves riding our bikes to the veterans' cemetery to watch the older kids shoot squirrels. We both watched *Gigglesnort Hotel*, a Saturday morning show with puppets that vomited. On one occasion, I showed him the pictures I'd drawn in my sketchbook. He looked at each one for a very long time, and then up at me, and then on to the next one, and so on, and I felt at that moment we were simpatico.

But once he became *The Masturbator* everything changed. His mother wouldn't let him ride the bus anymore, and he stopped riding his bike around the neighborhood, and so I played alone in my driveway with my telescope. At school, he gave up going to recess, and through middle and high school he would skulk along the walls, head bowed, and wouldn't drink anything lest he'd have to use the restroom. By the time he went home each afternoon he was dizzy from dehydration, as were many of us. Long indeed was the list of students so doomed by Tripp Severance and his ilk. Perhaps in my next letter I will recount their stories, but here I will tell only one.

Her name was Phyllis van Cleave. Her house was seven doors up, precisely one hundred-forty steps, door to door. She had long, luxuriant red hair and what I would call an aura of inscrutability.

She'd glide quietly through the halls, her books clutched tightly to her nascent bosom, her eyes demure and downcast. She smiled only furtively, though when you made her laugh she would double herself in half and crow with delight. Twice she beat me in our spelling bee, and every evening at six she practiced her piano. Her favorite color was teal.

In eighth grade, after we were shown a movie about venereal disease, Tripp decided that she would thenceforth be called Syphilis van Cleavage, the Little Red Peril.

And that, of course, was that. For the next four years poor Phyllis would be shackled with her reputation as our class slut, and there was nothing she could do about it, so she started wearing water bras and miniskirts and by her sophomore year was banging the older boys, including Tripp Severance himself, or so he said. When we came back for senior year, poor Phyllis was gone. Her family had moved, went the rumor. No one knew where.

But enough. Back to the gas station, where Matty is topping off the tank of his mother's Dodge Dart. A pick-up truck pulls up at the pump beside him, and from it emerge, because it's a small small world, the Samoan Brothers. They had been huffing nail polish, as was their custom. Without planning it, without even talking about it, the older Samoan aims the nozzle at Matty, and the younger one lights a match.

I suppose Matty has no time to think. I suppose by the time he is saturated with unleaded, he hardly knows what's going on. Perhaps he looks up and recognizes his tormentors and it strikes him, suddenly and horribly, what's about to happen. But it's too late, because *whoof!* He is conflagrating.

The security camera footage played on regular rotation for the next week. You could see him flailing and rolling and crying out, his hair billowing smoke, his skin peeling from his limbs until a heroic stranger happened by and beat him with her purse. It was a gruesome spectacle, and I found myself unable to look away.

But here I submit that it was at this very point Matty's life became the stuff of Disneyesque fantasy. True, he would endure four months of excruciating therapy and multiple skin grafts and have to teach himself again to walk and eat. But when he returned to school it was as a conquering hero, heralded by much fanfare and special announcements over the intercom, for who wouldn't love the loveable little Italian boy limping like a puppy through the hall, a scar like a teardrop under his eye? How could the girls not embrace him so tightly that he'd wince, nor kiss his ruddy little cherubic cheeks? How could the boys not now call him The Maestro—"good morning, Maestro, I'll carry your books for

you!”—and give him an honorary varsity letter? At commencement it was The Maestro who led the procession, The Maestro who delivered the valedictory, The Maestro who led us in our class song, “Hungry Like the Wolf.”

It’s a funny thing, the human skull. Fire a bullet at it from just a foot away, and ninety-nine times out a hundred it will blast through the frontal lobe and exit out the cowlick. But just once, just that one time, it will ricochet north and burrow up across the scalp like a gopher, causing only superficial damage. Which is precisely what happened in this case. For a full four seconds after I’d shot him there on the dancefloor, amid the kaleidoscope of disco lights, Matty just stood there, astonished. And then he simply folded up.

And suddenly my classmates were upon me. Like savages.

Your writer had the temerity to suggest that the incident was somehow inspired by never-ending stream of school shootings, like Columbine, or Virginia Tech, or Santa Monica, or Santa Barbara, or Marysville, or Newtown, or those Amish children in Pennsylvania. He indeed called it a “copy-cat, post-facto school massacre perpetrated by a misfit meting out revenge for a lifetime of mediocrity.”

Alas, your writer is a sensationalist, and I take due umbrage at the term “lifetime of mediocrity.” Notwithstanding my two previous brushes with the law, which I can explain at a later date, I am proud of my accomplishments and have attached as Exhibit A my *curriculum vitae*, which you may publish alongside this letter. I would point, for instance, to my three masters’ degrees from the University of Phoenix and the five graphic novels I’ve published in the vampire actuary genre.

Also, and perhaps more to the point, my intention was never to commit a massacre. I had, after all, only two bullets in my clip.

My intention was this: I would loiter by the punch bowl, chatting up the sweater vests, and then, when the moment was right, I would elbow my way slowly through the throng, meandering like an anaconda, all the way up to the dais, where the reunion committee sat glowing.

There I would stand, fully erect, directly in front of Tripp Severance. “Hallo, Tripp!” I would exclaim and, after a few stout pats on his shoulder, I would inquire as to his health, his family, his car dealership, and ask him to introduce me to Tami, his lovely wife. Tami is a tall metallic woman—platinum hair, bronze skin, brass eye shadow—and so utterly breathtaking that he featured her in all his commercials, always radiating joy and fecundity from atop a utility vehicle.

I would bow and kiss the back of her hand, then calmly open my jacket, remove my pistol, and fire one bullet into her magnificent titanium sternum. Everyone's attention having been thus attained, the music having abruptly stopped, all eyes turned toward me, I would whip off my belt, wave it over my head, and fire my last bullet up through my jaw and out my cranium.

But that, of course, is not what happened. For as I stood there, ladling out my seventh glass of punch, for I am no longer afraid of liquids, I heard a cadre of my classmates discussing Tripp. Tami was not with him, it seemed. She had filed for divorce, it seemed, several months before, which caused him to relapse into the alcoholism he'd been battling since childhood. I must confess this news touched my heart—I have always been very sensitive—and so I went about devising a new plan whereby I might assassinate *him*.

When suddenly, as if by divine providence, there he was, right behind me in line, waiting to refill his glass. And whereas in years past I would have apologized and skittered away, now I made bold. "Hallo, Tripp," I said. He looked around, then down. "Brian Gustafsen," I said. "From high school."

"Ah," he said, reading my name tag. I could hardly blame him for not recognizing me. In the thirty years since I'd seen any of them, I'd lost over a hundred-and-forty pounds and pierced my ear.

I patted him stoutly on the shoulder and inquired as to his health and family. He shrugged sheepishly, poor fellow, and scooped out some punch.

"How's yours?" he asked, whereupon I produced the drawings I'd made of my gall bladder, my ex-wives, and my father in his coffin. He looked at them for a very long time, nodding.

And then the most astounding thing happened. He asked me to come sit with him, at his table. In fact, he insisted.

Well! My heart quickened, and I secretly touched my pistol. He led me to the dais and introduced me to everyone, and they all shook my hand, even Lela Newsome, our homecoming queen. And there was much small talk and catching up, until someone inquired as to my health and my family.

"Show them your sketches," said Tripp. And so I did. They made their way slowly around the table, during which time someone offered me a beer, which I drank, despite my reflux, and everyone was so lovely that I had another and then, I think, another.

My recollection of what followed is therefore a little blurry, but I know everyone was laughing, and at one point I must have said something hilarious, because Lela, sitting beside me, snorted and squeezed my arm. By now, I'd abandoned my plan to

execute anyone and was allowing myself to enjoy the fellowship of my classmates.

It was then that there came from across the ballroom a sort of ovation, an actual cheer that made everyone turn to look. Sure enough: there in the doorway stood The Maestro, dapper and smiling, upon his arm his beautiful bride.

I don't know how to explain what happened next. I mean my shooting him, of course, which I regret now, but I remember feeling confused somehow, and at the same time happy, the happiest I'd been in years, because if there's one thing that evening taught me, it's that there's no reason we all can't get along, by which I mean everyone, everywhere, even the Samoan Brothers, who I anticipate seeing after my trial, when I'm transferred to the state penitentiary. I would in fact like to say to them, if they're reading this, that I hope we can be friends.

And I would like to say to Matty, because I hope he's reading this too, that I do herewith and most sincerely apologize for shooting you in the head, because you did nothing to deserve it. And I want you to know how pleased I am that your prognosis is so good, that your life is so good, and that you finally found Phyllis van Cleave. What a wonderful surprise it was to bump into you both at the reunion.

Please tell Phyllis hello, because I always liked Phyllis, I always liked the way she smiled from the side of her eyes, the way she'd bite her lip when spelling big words, and the way she played the piano, which was always the perfect threnody on an autumn evening, with the smell of burning leaves, the distant echo of the shotguns, the setting sun shining on the water treatment plant at the end of the street.