

## **Dangling In My Mouth** by Jonathan Sercer

When I was a young man, Dominic carried us all on his back, and we lived the free life of a rover. From Murray's old pub, to the dusty benches out back of our dormitory, that Fool Dominic waltzed us into a concatenation of wit and reason that always culminated in a feast of soul and flow of camaraderie. The ebb of this tide would peak when the drunkards would all stumble off to their homes, leaving the four of us to pick up the pieces and move on. We'd sit for hours until dawn, just talking.

Whenever the night had ended, the three of us would carry it on until morning, waiting to break out the bottle of Jameson and cigars until everyone else had left. Usually, it would be Luke and Dominic carrying our conversation, leading us through mazes of ridiculous ideas and insight that would be priceless, I couldn't help but think, if recorded. If we got too serious, Dominic, like a good Fool, would bring us back to earth, opening or closing or pushing his wide lips and mouth around, laughing at any and all of us, while Luke would invariably, in exasperation, clench his teeth, and, probably realizing that his 5'6 could not even touch any of us without retribution, rip off another article of clothing, before beginning to join in the general laughter. We probably couldn't match the intellect of Luke; luckily, he was intelligent enough to know that. And we had David on our side.

While having Luke ensured we endured the school part of our college experience, David was our muscle who could control us all. He had a red mustache and red hands. Once a huge kid, a drunken freshman, threw up on our special flower couch. Screaming at him to sober up, David picked him up by the collar and helped him outside into the nearby pond. Must have thrown him ten feet. Then, twirling his mustache with the chunk of meat that was his index

finger, he proceeded to muscle the couch as well out the door and into the pond—"It was deflowered," he explained. David was our Goliath. I remember every night that we would sit up; but David would often not see it to the sun's rising, having drunk too much to keep his eyes open. As we would slowly drown in alcohol fellowship, David would blissfully sink into slumber, until our conversation with the night would harmonize with the ponderous and rasping wheezing peculiar to the smoker-athlete. If Luke got too high in the clouds, David could send him crashing back to earth.

Dominic? This is how it was in the beginning with Dominic. We were all scattered and derelict college students, boozing it up, wasting our lives, and drunk on life. Dominic entered our lives and within days had bested us, me at least, in the picture we painted of our world. We were drunkards? Sure! But Dominic could finish his power hour and still have the stomach for another beer run. Athletes, all of us? Indeed, but Dominic could out-smoke us all, on the field or in the bar! Packs of smokes, of whatever Michael at the corner drug store would sell as two-for-ones, littered the Fool's impossible apartment room seemingly supported with books, books, and cigarette ash. We could dangle our meats with the best of them, but only Dominic gave us the courage to scream lustily "balls-wet!" as we pass that spot with great acoustics near the computer room. Of course, being mature college students, we allowed our minds to run with that image, and we soon could apply it to just about anything we wanted. Of *course* it was perverse, but for us it was always like the point of the red wheelbarrow, glazed with rainwater, on which so much of everything depended. Our lives seemed like that, often: everything important to our group depended that one small point, hung down from that one perverse and pervasive exclamation.

Generally, for our late apartment nights spent talking, I preferred myself to sit back, gazing in growing wonder, that two heads small as Luke's and the Fool's could carry all they knew.

The coffin was inside, in the living room. We were all assembled at the wake of the fool, Dominic. He was, no doubt, a great man—the very mourners, which included three Ph. D's and two priests, gave testimony to that. I came; I had to see what was left of the memories and prophecies; I had to prove to myself that the fool was indeed a great man. Lots of alcohol at the wake—good, I thought; lots of drunkenness—how appropriate, I laughed; lots of women—necessary, in my opinion, to Dominic and his movement.

Dominic's friends gathered at the wake, which began at noon and continued throughout the night. We drank around the open coffin, we fumigated every room, we littered the floor with shiny glass bottles, every light bulb was shattered eventually. We hung golden and silver streamers from the smoke-greyled ceiling tiles, making a glorious sepulcher to encase the fool before he departed down into the ground, where the dead men go. The scarred tables were jammed up against the west wall, covered with half-full glasses of beer, wine, and mixed drinks. There was, at the apex of the evening, at least fifty people scattered around the house and small surrounding lawn.

Of course we were the last ones to leave: Dominic, now trapped in a coffin, could not leave the darkened and trashed living room; David had passed out drunk, and could not leave; Luke had tried to leave, but had tripped on the one stair leading to the outdoor covered patio, and now lay on the ground, refusing to get up. Being too drunk to help him, I stumbled over his body and flung myself into the tattered, flowery pink armchair of the patio. The night!

One last night together, I thought hazily, to sit on the porch, and watch those old dead memories march before us.

Luke was mumbling something, propping his head against the stair, head barely grazing the wooden paneling of the doorjamb.

“We depended on that guy for everything.... —Give me a cigarette.”

I couldn't help, being drunk, but appreciate the irony of his assertion and imperative—I was out of cigarettes, but knew where to find some. Making my way inside, I went silently up to the coffin. I approached from behind Dominic's head, the yellow roses on his chest appearing first through the deep-night gloom. He had wanted to be buried with his beloved Marlboro Reds, so the coroner tucked a carton in under his head. Gently, lifting the head of the corpse, I slid out the carton and removed a pack. The head was feather-light, and the dark hair was sticky—Brendan had donated a mixed-drink libation to Dominic earlier that night. The Fool almost smiled at me, lips curled up, only I was looking from behind so his half-smile looked upside down; he was laughing then, head leaning back in my arms.... I shook my head: for one last night only, we would depend on Dominic to supply our nicotine and vices.

There was a crash. Then another, and I was beside Luke and stopping him from beating the doorposts, and Luke's body went slack, and he began sucking abstractedly the dark blood welling from his hand. “Have one of these,” I said and Luke got up, shuddered, and sat down ponderously in another flowered armchair.

His voice was quiet and even and surprisingly clear as he lit Dominic's cigarette.

“Once we walked all the way to the woods in a hard and driving rain. Remember the first conversation we had, all four of us, in our first apartment on Trively Street. Surrounded by block brick house and shit apartments all around, he showed us the woods only a mile or two

away. The woods became our haven from the madness the city was making us see; it was destroying us, James, and we knew it, and Dominic led us out.”

He did indeed. Rejecting the machinations of the present society, we set about creating our vision of hope for the future. Our quartet tonight showed our hopeless case of Romanticism; we all still were languishing in our respective grad-schools, accomplishing the same old nothings, doing nothing with our lives, only reliving past dreams of past glory, and accomplishing nothing if not drunk or hung over six days a week: and the fourth one was dead.

“Jerry got married only a year ago, and the Fool gave the best man’s toast. ‘You all,’ he shouted, drunk as usual, ‘know this man. You cannot know about him; you cannot sing of him; you cannot help but sing the man himself.’” He smiled dreamily. “And then, Dominic sang Jerry’s arms....”

Taking a quivering drag, he dropped the spent butt in between his feet—still wearing the same rugged-ragged rubber old boots, I noticed.

“We did ourselves good tonight James, didn’t we? The music, the women, the booze; Anthony didn’t even ruin the evening....”

He fell silent as we stared out into the deepening gloom of the early morning, last night’s revels as far and distant from me now, as the night we all first met.

“Dominic taught us how to do this,” he broke the silence (Luke would not stand long for silence). “We were—at least I was—stuck in the green and muddy sewers of the academic world, shooting downward along with the shit we were taught towards the great big cesspool of knowledge underground, while Dominic brought us out. He didn’t ever so much teach us what was great, no! he just allowed us to see the world for what it is. And we are all escaped now. Damn it James! Now it’s up to us, huh? We are all mucking around with this school stuff: no

more! He showed us in throughout his life and told us by his will that college was bringing us down, and that we needed to get up and live!”

I gave silent acquiescence.

“You know when I found out? It was when he and David did that smoker’s marathon—two hours straight of running and smoking at the same time. The two of them, sitting in the apartment right afterwards? They had just finished, after two packs each of cigarettes, and they had just stopped smoking and begun drinking when Dominic seemed to hack out his lung and walked out back and spat bloody gunk all over the porch.”

I remembered *that*; it had been all very impressive. Dominic looked spent, his inner thighs raw and red and bloody, with sweat streaking his face and slicking down his greasy and stringy hair. That thin grey T-shirt clung to his heaving chest; he and David looked at each other, kind-of smiled, and sucked down another cigarette.

“He looked at the blood, at us, gave us his half smile, and lit up another cigarette. ‘Post game,’ he croaked.

“Too often, James, a merry going forth brings a sorrowful leave-taking: like tonight’s. It was never so with Dominic. When morning came, we were all tired and drunk, after yet another all-nighter of talking and drinking, but Dominic would just pour a couple pots of coffee, with Bailey’s, into thermoses, wake up David, and we’d all stagger across the street together towards our 8:00 Seminar of History class, still laughing and drinking and smoking away, arms around each other, holding us up, and that professor never understood how we were so alive!”

That class was ridiculous—a three-hour morning class, at eight—and there were only a couple dozen people in it, half of whom didn’t show up, while we four, not a one of us a historian, had perfect attendance. Being often drunk, and, even better, drinking during that class,

we learned very little, but often even the normally silent me was lubed up enough to enter into legitimate conversation with the professor and my roommates.

“It’s what happened after those crazy nights that showed me, James—the post game, as Dominic put it, how something affects us, is what makes us alive.”

Our Fool is gone now, I thought, glancing lazily inside, and right now it is, without doubt, the aftershock.

“The music was the thing that separated us from everything, wasn’t it? So we’d go into the woods, away from everything, and that’s great, nature and all, but we would *do* shit there! Dominic learned every instrument, we learned all the songs, and for hours, wherever, whenever, and every Friday night, we would sing and smoke and drink the night away.”

Songs mean nothing if they are not real to someone, Dominic had told us some night.

“The songs *were* the thing, James; they worked perfectly. The people wouldn’t really show up at the beginning of Friday night, so we’d just mess around at first: the not-as-popular or more obscure traditional ballads to get the music started, then everyone would show up: the rugby tight five, the Phi Kappa Theta guys, the girls from Park Ridge... and then Dominic entered his element; he would happily tear through at least five guitar strings in his effort to make the songs real to everyone... and then we’d run low on beer, and I would go up and stand in front of the fire, always in kind of a shaky voice, asking everyone to donate some money for more alcohol, singing ‘Why spend your leisure bereft of pleasure, amassing treasure? Why scrape and save? Why look so canny at every penny? Ye’ll take no money within the grave.’”

For some reason the Fool had taught Luke that song—I guess Dominic thought that Luke, with a double business economy major needed to be reminded of the important things in life—and Luke took the Fool to heart, and profited I’m sure, even though Luke now, though a

genius, was drifting around from university to university, trying to prove that his GREs were not a fluke. Indeed, his money and leisure was spent in giving others pleasure, but he now was suffering the results of doing just that.

“Then when everyone was liquored up enough, David would do his thing: a colossal scowling guy, back to the fire and facing us, with flaming red facial hair lit up from behind with the flickering flames of the hungry fire, and he would do that absolutely ridiculous song about how he ‘had a horse and his name was Bill; when he ran, he couldn’t stand still...’ perfect for that moment, just a nonsense children’s song, this mammoth man would be singing it....”

David, after meeting Dominic, had become an uncontrollable smoker; always broke, he would hang around with Dominic for hours, bumming smokes from the profligate yet pecuniary fool. He even ended up going to the same graduate school as Dominic, eager for more of the physical and mental insanity that the Fool always inspired. Like a faithful dog, David always depended on Dominic to drag him down into greatness; after tonight, I thought, glancing into the inner room at David’s drunken bulk in front of the coffin, his master would be gone.

“...and we would go on for hours, reciting poetry, telling our sad stories, and letting Dominic amaze us with his musical talent. Michael would always do his Kipling cigar poem, and even Joey would get into it, reading Saint Patrick’s prayer about three-ness and one-ness, and through it all David would kind of drift in the background, talking with everybody, especially the overly drunk or loud, and generally keeping the chaos that was Friday night in some kind of order.

“But what was your song again?” Luke turned to me. His eyes were glazed over, and the pupils looked round and blood-rimmed in the garish light of what was formerly Dominic’s apartment.

“It was ‘Good-bye Booze.’” I smiled, lips pressed tightly together.

“ ‘So it’s good-bye booze, forever more: my boozin’ days, will soon be o’er...’”

I don’t know why that was my song.

“ ‘...We had a good time, but we couldn’t agree: so you see what booze has done for me.’” Next he looked at me again. “That was always an ending song, when the booze had almost done, and David was asleep, and the fire low...

“We walked back to the apartment from the woods in the rain, I think it was ... our senior year. It must’ve been one of the last Friday nights in the woods all of us together. Everyone had left the woods and gotten into cars as usual early Saturday morning for the short drive back to college, except Dominic walked back and I was with him.”

They killed me, those early morning Saturdays, when my job was to open the food court at seven that day after returning from the woods around five. My bed was never made, and I just sat in the bedroom doorway, staring at the clump of my purple bed sheets, sipping a weak bloody Mary with aspirin, trying to keep the pounding out of my head until work; and Dominic and Luke struggled in through the doorway, covered in black and red clay. Luke’s long Jew-curls were plastered to his face, the once dark and fluffy ringlets now thick and heavy with rainwater. Dominic had lost his shirt, and blood stained the sand and the water that streamed slowly down, in yellow drops down his mostly naked body. I had to get ready for work about then, so I left them on our porch, their wet and steaming bodies barely visible in the orange glow of the rising sun reflecting off of the clearing grey clouds.

“That night we talked all the way back about this, this moment, James, and he was right. We got to the doorway and dropped in, and there you were, and Dominic tells me later that your

mouth was drawn in a grimace and you looked like hell. He tells me, ‘James is right’ and I said, ‘OK’ and he, ‘he’s stretched. Let’s loosen him.’”

Dominic always knew that I was secretly weak, and he knew that I was beginning to worry about things such as tuition, employment, and the future that our present life of debauchery would inevitably lead to. When I returned from work at three in the afternoon, the sky had cleared and everyone was still asleep in the apartment, so I wearily came through the doorway and entered my tousled and disordered bed for a long and justly deserved slumber.

“When you woke at about eight, we had everything prepared for you. First a cooked meal—none of that Ramen shit you always would eat ... and we had all the usuals out and ready for you—pre-meal wine, beer and brauts, brandy and cigars after, then hours of our usual talking, over hock and Danish cheese.”

I had woken up beaten to hell; I took a shower, and allowed them to tend to me.

“So when we grabbed you and David strung you up upside-down by the ankle from the doorway, you were pretty surprised!”

They knocked me arse over tit, and I was hung from the doorway with the rope and pulley Dominic and his antics had set up, blood pounding down into my ears and eyes; the door wide open and allowing a cooling breeze to wash my mind into a world of blood and the smoke from the cigar I had refused to drop.

“Then Dominic turned on ‘99 Red Balloons’ and David and he were dancing, me running in-between and around them, arms wide and suddenly our shirts were off...”

They began swinging me in the doorway, slapping my arse and shoving against my back to send me soaring up, out the doorway, and looking over that oily patch of concrete we used as a front stoop, littered with soggy trash and cigarette butts and the Keystone beer tabs, and

probably lots of shattered splinters of glass ... then swinging back into the room laughing, and trying to beat away the clutching and rapacious hands running over my body and sending me back out into the world.

“All the guys began pouring in from the back when they heard the Red Balloons, and of a sudden things were crowded, and beer appeared, and we all had a turn at you...”

Twisting around in my half-hearted efforts to get free, my face had grazed the edge of the doorway, and I saw the edges sharp and defined—yet, the more refined view of that panel’s edge gave me thought, for what seemed to be smooth and even, the paneling, in close view made me see the little ragged edges—ragged perhaps from when David had dragged the flower couch through the opening or when Luke had tried to shove through his poker table or when I had thrown something in a fit of fury...

“When we let you down, you were laughing so hard you finally dropped the cigar you had been holding all that time, and embraced us all ...”

I had known then, in that one brief glance at the little bits and splinters sticking out from the doorway that I had to expose all of those fine things: those things at close view which extended deep across below the arch of the firmament—everything was all upside-down, backwards, distorted.

“That must have been the last true weekend we spent together—then followed finals, and then more raucous rousing times, and then .... Now no more of that ... *depending* on Dominic.”

His voice trailed off as he finally looked at me, drowsy and drooping, sagging down in my chair. “One more cigarette... thanks dude.” The hesitant spark from an unsteady hand finally brightened his face, defining his sharp nose and cheekbones against his curve of jaw line

and billow of his receding hair. We, too, I assured myself, are in sharp definition, and the splinters and jagged edges of our lives are clear to everyone; the fool is gone and we are smoke.

Luke's cheeks depressed gently in then popped out as he inhaled the healing substance, and then he blew a cloud of white smoke into the cooling night air.

“Then one night, it was oh about two...”

As he rambled on and I slowly dropped off to sleep, I could only hear ringing through my mind the deep and ominous tones from the old radio show:

*“It...is...later...than...you...thinnnnk.”*

It is later, far later than we think, I told the fool...

“...and once I looked into the window and Dominic was dancing, all alone in his room; I was probably drunk, so I didn't realize that there was music going on in there; I just saw him *dancing*; his ass shaking, arms twisting in and out, feet sliding around on the scuffed green carpet...”

The end is the same, Fool replied, as he again was before me, with one corner of his mouth turned up in that expression that always pissed me off, not knowing whether he approved or disapproved of my thoughts. Although his movements were somehow jerky, the bottle with the label half torn off dangling from his hand and the cigar drooping from his lips with an inch of ash hanging on proved that he was smooth and it was my perception that was off.

When and that we were but little tiny college boys, there was music that Friday night and I did dance, Dominic continued.

“...I stood out there staring at him...I couldn't believe that anyone would do that, right in front of an open window, just the classic ‘I'm a drunk girl dancing to Fall Out Boy' dance moves by himself...”

What the Hell are you here for, Fool? I demanded. You see what this is! Look at David! At Michael! At your brother, for God's sake! Passed out in his own stinking vomit; none of us have showered in days, we're even out of booze, and I'm still stuck here listening to Luke ramble on about the "good days" when we'd do all crazy shit, skipping classes and screaming "Balls-wet!" and playing beer-pong on the art-building roof!

"... Finally he saw me, but he only smiled in that turned upside-down way of his, *you* know, and then I turned away and tripped and fell on the oily grass only it wasn't grass but hard pavement. I could never dance like that..."

Was I wrong? the Fool wondered, only he already had told me the answer like he always had done.

Yes! I shouted, because this didn't make sense, him here; Yes, look at us now!

Dominic continued sliding around in front of me, and I realized he was now drunk. He wove in and out of my vision, but it was he who was skewed this time.

The world is upside-down now, Fool said, only this time with what I would call a man's smile, none of his halfway question-smirk any more.

Everything in the Old books pointed forward to one thing, the top of the portal, the death of a Man, he told me, this unlettered, unschooled, impractical old dead Fool!

"...he was really something, huh? Hey, dude! ... Dude ... can I bum a cigarette?"

I turned to him. "Here you go." Luke lit up and promptly fell asleep, and ash slowly gathered on the glowing cherry sagging from his mouth.

"Everything after the keystone hangs upon it, and points downward to judgment," the soft breath of the Fool whispered into my ear, "after judgment is the opening of eternity," it continued, louder, "but you are still alive."

I bitterly shook my head. “Sounds great. Great life I got here, right?” I looked at the piles of bodies and bottles and ashes and woke up and turned around. There stood Luke, swaying a bit unsteadily between the smashed doorposts.

He held his key-chain dangling by the left thumb that still was bleeding from the wooden paneling he had broken hours before. “You are still alive, aren’t you? We’re out of booze. Gas station’s five minutes away. Should be open now.”

I laughed this time, no half-ass upside-down man mirth for me. “I’ll drive,” I stated. “I’m still drunk. But I’m still dancing.”

Luke kind of stared at me, wondering as he staggered down the steps. “You sure you can drive, James? You aren’t dancing.”

“Ask David to tell you who’s dancing,” I said, as the same suddenly tumbled down through the doorway and with us, hand to his mustachioed lips, “He’s the one who knows how to waltz.”