

ABLONG

A NOVEL

BY

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“No shit? Are you serious?”

“When you put it that way, I’m not entirely sure,” I say.

“No,” he says. “I’m really curious. Is that what it’s about?”

“Do you care?”

“I’ve been asking around. And that’s the first explanation that fits at all.”

“In what way?”

“I mean, I can see what the fuss is about.”

“There’s more,” I say. “Theater’s a condensation of life. But life, it turns out, is a condensation of something else.” And these green guys, I think, are a condensation of theater. An image half-forms in my mind.

Tex brings by a new friend of his, guy named George Rhyth.

“Spell that.”

He does.

“Do you realize you’re just one letter short of all the good stuff?” I ask.

“I think you guys might enjoy talking,” says Tex, and he goes out on the porch. We stare at each other.

“I don’t really understand my son’s thought process,” I say.

Rhyth begins looking down, can’t quite meet my glance. I can torture this guy.

“Hmm,” he says.

He’s still checking out his shoes. I begin to worry what’s inside them, and what would happen if it got out.

He reiterates. “Hmm.”

In a sudden wave of illumination I understand his predicament. He’s been told what a bastard I am, and he’s shy about confessing it because he doesn’t want to hurt my feelings.

“Look,” I say. “If you’re worried that you’ll say something to me that no one else has, I can put your mind entirely at ease.”

He lifts his head slowly and looks at me with wide astonished eyes.

“How did you know what I was thinking?”

“I think you’ve been briefed,” I say.

“Briefed about what?”

“How well do you know my son?”

“I’m not sure what scale to use in measuring that,” he says.

“I’m gonna go watch some TV,” I say, and I go into the bedroom and close the door.

“George wasn’t happy when he left,” says Tex later that night.

“I hope I didn’t have anything to do with that,” I say.

“You had everything to do with it,” says Tex. “You rudely went into the other room and closed the door.”

“I went into the other room,” I said. “But I didn’t realize I did it rudely. Was it the way I walked?”

“The rudeness was—oh, hell. You might really have enjoyed talking to this guy.”

“Why?”

“Because you might have.”

“I might have enjoyed talking to a green ball of ooze,” I say. “It doesn’t mean I’ll do it. But why do people keep coming by?”

“What do you mean?”

“There are much nicer people in the world to visit.”

“They feel comfortable here,” says Tex.

“But why?”

“It’s your personality,” says Lester, from the kitchen. I didn’t even know he was there. “You’re everyone’s first experience of the world, where it looks like all it does is bite.”

A week later: Rhyth is back.

“I want you to see this,” he says.

He puts in a DVD which, he explains, was filmed on a recent date.

“You could have just said it was filmed recently.”

“No, I wanted to make the point that it was filmed on a date.”

“Everything happens on a date,” I say. “It’s part of the space-time grid. Get used to it. And wash behind your ears.”

“I don’t mean a date in time,” he says.

“Well, what other kind is there?” Maybe the green fellows could help out on this.

“I mean, two people out on a date.”

My mind is taking it in literally so I have an image of them walking along the surface of a calendar. I look at him helplessly.

“A date,” he repeats. “Two people. Wine, roses. . .”

“Oh, you mean a date.” Wait for it, thoughts realign. “You filmed your date?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to see if what happened was what I thought had happened.”

“Did she know you were filming it?”

“Yes.”

“And she didn’t object?”

“It was her idea.”

“It can’t have been a very spontaneous experience,” I say.

“It was,” he said. “Hyper-spontaneous. At first, yes, we were self-conscious, but then we forgot, and it was as if the parts of our brain that normally held back—the designated watcher, if you would—realized they could join in, so we were entirely in the experience.”

“That’s not what would happen to me if I was taping.”

“Just watch, OK?”

“Is there sex?”

“No,” he says.

“See, that’s the effect of taping it.”

“Just watch,” he says.

“You’re sure there’s no sex?”

“Yes.”

“It so happens,” I say, “that I have the third largest porn collection on the Eastern seaboard.”

“I didn’t actually know that,” says Rhyth, thinks a minute. “How do you know? How is that measured?”

“By reputation,” I say.

“That can’t be the right metric,” he says.

“OK then: by temperature,” I say.

“Just watch the damn DVD,” he says.

It’s a breathtaking place, somewhere out West judging by the red rocks. He’s with this woman, red hair and musical curves, I’m sure a lot of guys would like to play that instrument. They’re sitting high above a valley, lushness of red.

“Now it all fits,” I say. “I can see why you filmed a date with her.”

“It was her idea,” he repeats. “Now will you watch?”

“Your wish is my demand,” I say.

“Command,” he says.

“Let the waters part,” I say.

“Sorry?”

“You told me to command, so I did.”

He thinks. “Oh, so you’re God now.”

“I’ve always wanted to play God,” I say. “Maybe in a short-length film—”

My attention’s caught by the expression on the woman’s face, the most beautiful look I’ve ever seen.

“Her name’s Beatrice, right?” I ask.

“How did you know that?”

“You’re kidding, right?”