

Thomas Kearnes

The End of Our Broadcast Day

A deep orange Oriental fan spanned across the wall. Black mold festered inside the air ducts. A nude Barbie doll with teased, wild hair overlooked the courtyard from the kitchen. Every Wednesday, the maids stole loose change, soda, clothes. Soothing silk sheets wrapped the bed. Two weeks ago, roaches invaded the bathroom. Dexter Wilcox paid these things no mind. His apartment's internal war between kitsch and decay was no more remarkable than heat in August.

He jiggled with anticipation for the series finale of *The Golden Girls* to begin. Dexter had learned of his great fortune that afternoon from the channel guide. He cried every time Dorothy last embraced the girls. He planned to let his phone click over to voicemail until he checked the caller ID.

Beverly called often during Dexter's first few months in rehab. As winter tumbled into spring, however, she accused her brother of using Sacred Promises to hide from life. Dexter insisted his alcoholism required care longer than the customary ninety days. After all, he reminded her, he'd lived at the bottom of a bottle for thirty years. He

praised God she didn't mention Morris.

"I found some apartments right there in Houston," she said. "You could visit them easy."

"It might be smarter to wait for a definite discharge date."

Beverly sighed. "You still don't know?"

"Asking too much makes the therapists suspicious."

"Jesus, Dex, that place is a roach motel."

"We're very sick people."

"Okay, fine. When will you get better?"

Dexter clicked the volume button. *Thank You for Being a Friend* blasted from the speakers. 'Your heart is true. You're a pal and a confidant.' He felt Beverly's question was too ridiculous to warrant an answer.

She waited a moment. "Dex, you've seen every damn episode of that geriatric wet dream."

"C'mon, Beverly, sing."

"No way."

"For me?"

"Not even for Mama."

It was late, especially given the early hour the residents took the bus to Sacred Promises each day. Even as a boy, Dexter required only four or five hours of sleep. The knock at the door startled him.

“Mr. Wilcox,” Tanya called as she opened the door. Residents were forbidden from locking their apartments, even at night. “Welcome our new resident.”

Dexter told his sister about the new arrival and promised they’d soon talk again.

“Maybe he’s the man of your dreams.” Beverly didn’t hide her sarcasm. She didn’t say goodbye.

Tanya entered, fussing under her breath as she carried stuffed garbage bags in each hand. His new roommate carried only a duffel bag. Tanya said, “Please welcome—”

The stranger zipped inside and offered Dexter his hand. “Guy Peterson. Professional speed freak. You ever been to Fort Worth?”

Dexter took Guy’s hand. Amazed, he watched Guy grin and slap his free hand over their knot of fingers. To touch a man so sublime filled Dexter with warmth he hadn’t known for thirty years—before he lost Morris.

“I have a sister in Dallas,” Dexter replied. This was a lie. He wanted to hear Guy’s gravelly voice again.

“I don’t know many women there.” Guy laughed, flashing his teeth. “Never had much use for them.”

Guy was so tall, it surprised Dexter he hadn’t bumped his head on the doorframe. His lightly muscled chest complemented his broad shoulders. He wore khaki slacks

and a short-sleeved buttoned shirt boasting a Japanese design: a dragon perched atop a yin-yang symbol. His blue eyes darted like goldfish, taking in the eccentric décor. Finally showcasing his apartment overjoyed Dexter. The complex didn't allow guests at any time, regardless of gender. This included fellow residents.

Tanya sighed heavily. "Mr. Wilcox, Mr. Peterson. I'm sure you'll figure out what comes next. See you boys in the morning." She dropped the two garbage bags without ceremony and left.

Dexter had entirely forgotten *The Golden Girls*. Only the roar of canned laughter brought him back to the room he desperately tried to disguise. On the screen, Blanche's uncle bewitched Dorothy over a crab dinner. Dexter no longer felt compelled to mouth the actors' lines until the girls' tearful farewell.

"Do you watch this show?" Dexter asked.

"My grandma did when I was a kid."

"Isn't it sublime?"

Guy's lips puckered in distaste. "Horny old women disturb me."

Dexter bowed his head, embarrassed. Maybe Guy was straight after all. Maybe I should slink away, crank the volume and forget the world, he thought.

"C'mon, old man," Guy said, slapping Dexter's ass. "I wanna know about that weird-ass Barbie doll."

* * *

Dexter informed Guy of the many, many rules that governed Winter Elms Apartments, home to the patients of Sacred Promises. No exchanging cash for goods, no sex, no provocative clothing—Dexter had no doubt he'd forgotten several more. Incredulity washed over Guy's face; he compared the complex to a prison. No, he continued, at least you get laid in prison. Dexter knew he should laugh, forge an illicit kinship, but Guy's narrowed eyes and set jaw spooked him. Sacred Promises ejected at least ten patients each month. Dexter feared his time with Guy Peterson might end shortly.

Later that night, while Guy became acquainted with the shower that spit a puny spray, Dexter wandered into the bedroom the two men would share. Guy had yet to unpack; the two garbage bags and duffel rested upon a bare mattress. Dexter looked behind to see if Guy approached despite still hearing the shower. Satisfied he was alone, he opened one of the garbage bags and peered inside. Upon a nest of clothes in a rainbow of bright colors, Dexter found a stuffed Tigger doll the size of a bread loaf. At that moment, he felt a spasm of true affection, perhaps love, for this man who might spend the next few months sleeping across the room. He took the Tigger from the bag, mashing his fingers into the plush. *Morris*, he thought, my life has ended. It ended so long ago. The water had stopped without Dexter's notice. He shoved the doll back inside the bag moments before Guy entered, drying his hair with Dexter's towel. Dexter offered to help Guy unpack, but he simply grinned like he'd heard a wicked punch line. Trying to peek at my delicates, he asked. He kept grinning, the sort of smile that turns ghoulish if glimpsed too long.

After slipping into lounge pants dotted with outlines of wild game, his smooth chest bare and shiny, Guy surveyed the fridge. Hovering at the kitchen entrance, Dexter

wanted to offer apologies, explanations. Instead, he remained still, his jaw slack. Why not toss the boxes after the Cokes are gone, Guy asked. Dexter fumbled for a reason, finally threw his hands in the air and admitted housekeeping was a difficult concept for him. Guy sighed and clicked his teeth, glided past Dexter. His skin brushed Dexter's shirt sleeve. Dexter didn't move until he heard a door shut followed by running water.

Dexter stayed up late, later than usual. He drifted into oblivion shortly after two, his last memory consisting of an aging supermodel hawking moisturizer. He clicked off the television, plunging the room into darkness. He squealed after colliding into a wall. He then held out his arms like a mummy until he reached the bedroom; luckily, Guy had left the door open. It was too dark to discern his new roommate's form in any detail. Still, Dexter stared, breathing deeply as if he wore a paper sack over his face. After a few minutes, Guy turned, and the amber light from the streetlamp fell like dust upon his face. Dexter vowed to watch him until sleep again snuffed his desire.

* * *

The kitchen window provided Dexter with a daily crash course in the chaotic social politics of Winter Elms. He noted which residents embraced and which merely nodded to say good morning. He observed who asked for cigarettes, who obliged and who refused.

Dexter called for Guy to join him, tired of gossiping with himself. He'd assumed Guy was in the bathroom since the door was closed when he woke. Dexter, however, soon discovered himself alone. Crushed, he shuffled to his bed for a few more

minutes of sleep only to halt and gaze unblinking at Guy's side of the room. All the outlandish shirts hung in the closet. Far too many pairs of shoes lined up like soldiers beneath the bed. The Tigger doll presided over Guy's crisply made bed, propped up by two pillows so full and soft, he surely brought them from home. Dexter flopped onto his bed, all the tickling excitement from moments before condensed and heavy like a cannonball in his gut. Somehow, he summoned the optimism to return to his feet.

Dexter couldn't help feeling a perverse pride when he glimpsed Guy shaking hands and laughing with one new neighbor after another. He wore a long-sleeved jersey with a racecar and checkered flag stitched on the front. His wavy blonde hair glistened in the morning light. Guy's eagerness to mingle allowed Dexter to moon over him undetected. It was far more welcome than the scripted flirtations between the two anchors on the morning newscast. Of course, Beverly found a way to burst his meager joy like a soap bubble.

"I have wonderful news." She loudly sipped a drink; Dexter recoiled from his phone.

"You know not to call till after three."

"It couldn't wait."

"Then teach it patience." Dexter kept his vigil at the kitchen window. Guy seemed distracted by someone tucked beyond Dexter's view. Perhaps it was Finn. He hadn't thought about the little slut since Guy's arrival. Dexter doubted Guy could resist Finn's charisma and deep brown eyes; Dexter certainly couldn't.

"Trent cashed in his frequent flier miles," Beverly said. "I can't imagine where else

we'd go."

How about to hell, Dexter thought. "This is rather...um, when? The therapists don't like surprise."

"Actually, I thought you and I could have a powwow with whoever decides things there."

"What for?"

"Dexter, your life won't wait forever."

"This *is* my life."

Beverly went silent then replied in a hard voice. "I will not accept that."

Dexter slumped helpless against the window as Finn Worsnop giggled at Guy's antics. Finn carried a paperback novel; he informed anyone with ears he intended to catch up on the classics. The only time he'd been inside Dexter's apartment, he brought *Wuthering Heights*. After Finn sucked Dexter's dick two months ago, the older man tossed him a carton of menthols, holding up the bargain struck on the bus home.

"You're interfering with my recovery, Bev."

"You're interfering with my bills, baby brother. Sobriety ain't cheap."

"Don't do this," Dexter whined.

"You think Morris would put up with this crap?"

That bitch, he thought. She brought out the big guns at the first resistance. “When?”

“Monday afternoon.”

“It’s been too long, Bev.” He hoped he sounded sincere.

As his shameless sister rattled off her itinerary, Dexter spied on Guy and Finn chatting, touching more frequently the longer they spoke. Worst of all, both men sipped Cokes. Dexter’s fridge was empty; he knew who had supplied refreshments. Finn often ran out of cigarettes but never soda pop.

The staff of Sacred Promises graciously allowed patients fifteen minutes to smoke after each group therapy session. Patients could gossip, ridicule and malign with impunity. From his position on a bench at the far edge of the smoke deck, Dexter watched Guy maneuver among all the addicts desperate to befriend the handsome, stylish stranger. Guy slipped away, however, and joined Dexter on the bench. No one followed. The patients’ enthusiasm for Guy couldn’t overcome their aversion to Dexter.

“Finn tells me you two are old friends,” Guy whispered despite their seclusion. This spooked Dexter; surely Finn’s indiscretion had its limit.

“We did some business a while back.”

“Oh my. Sounds shady.”

“Some are sicker than others.”

Guy lifted his wraparound shades, left them perched atop his head. “I want that man’s dick in my mouth.”

“You move fast.” Dexter lit a Winston.

“About that...” Guy patted Dexter’s knee, his hand remaining there once still. Dexter knew the gesture was calculated, but he felt a flutter in his stomach anyway. “I know it’s tacky to ask a favor. I’ve been here less than a day—”

Dexter spit smoke, asked Guy what he needed. He wondered if this was the fate of middle-aged fags: to sit like wallflowers until a beautiful man calls our name so we may rise like a phoenix—until he forgets us again.

“Just ten minutes, long enough to work out our frustrations.”

“Where?”

“Our bedroom.”

“Why not his?”

“Finn’s roommate is some redneck asshole. He’d squeal in a second.”

“Where will I go?”

Guy’s cheeks flushed. Dexter braced himself for greater impositions. A tech ordered the patients back inside. Guy spoke quickly and softly, his voice oddly calming if divorced from the message it carried. Guy asked Dexter to wait outside the front door and dial Guy’s cell phone, letting it ring three times, if a staff member approached.

Dexter wanted to inform Guy that Finn didn’t require such subterfuge. Dexter was watching *The Facts of Life* while Finn sucked him off. All he needed was one

commercial break.

“Sex is against the rules, Guy.”

“Baby, I’m a junkie. Rules don’t impress me.”

Dexter sighed. Defeat loses its sting if you forget the narcotic rush of triumph.

“When’s the little shit coming in for a landing?”

Guy divulged more details. He didn’t finish until he and Dexter sat alone on the smoke deck, perhaps forgotten by the staff.

* * *

Finn swept into Dexter’s apartment without knocking, without a hello. The blank look he gave Dexter led the host to believe Finn, too, found Guy’s plan far from ideal.

“Where is he?” Finn asked. “The staff might notice I’m gone.”

Dexter watched a rerun of *The Jeffersons*. It was an older episode; Zara Cully still played George’s hard-drinking mother. He cut Finn an empty gaze. “Can’t you hear the water? He’s in the shower.”

“Ugh!” Finn threw himself onto the corduroy sofa. “Why must queers always groom to excess?”

“You don’t have that problem.”

Finn wore a plain white tee two sizes too large, pinstriped trousers cut at the calves like Capri pants, and rubber flip-flops. He opened *The Good Earth* and never replied. Dexter’s relief was short-lived.

“Look, Dex,” Finn said. “I feel awkward, too, but a secret loses its power if no one discusses it.”

On the screen, the audience howled after Mother Jefferson insulted Louise. “You were an embryo when this first aired,” Dexter said.

“TV is for losers with no imagination.”

Before Dexter could absorb the rudeness of Finn’s comment, Gary chirped for his guest to race into the bedroom and strip down to his smile. Finn, agile and petite, bolted from cushions and crossed the room. He stopped.

“Real life doesn’t take place in front of a live studio audience,” Finn said. “No one’s laughing now.”

Dexter felt Finn had dumped ice water in his lap. He tried to concentrate on the show, but Guy’s moans and Finn’s throaty laughter made it impossible. He never left the recliner. No fool would stand like a post in the cruel August sun so a stranger and a shithead could get laid. He and Morris had risked discovery every time they met nude in the small hours of the morning all those years ago. True intimacy requires courage, he believed.

Both Guy and Finn gaped at Dexter upon leaving the bedroom. Dexter refused to speak, waiting to be approached for his negligence. A powerful thirst invaded his throat. Water wouldn’t do, he required flavor.

“I’ll meet you downstairs with the Coke,” Finn called over his shoulder.

“Terrific,” Guy said. “We earned one.”

“Pervert,” Finn replied.

Dexter wasn't sure what he expected—consideration, mercy, maybe a moment of simple pity. He knew he'd earned one.

“Can you grab one for me, too?” he asked Finn.

Louise Jefferson screeched on the screen after discovering George's latest hare-brained scheme. Dexter couldn't remember a time Finn had looked so unsure.

“Man, I'm sorry,” Finn mumbled. “I shouldn't even let Guy have one. Gotta ration them now.”

“I'll give you a dollar.”

Finn swallowed and slapped his paperback against his thigh. “I really can't, Dexter. Sorry.”

The older man smiled like a salesman and nodded. This gesture put Finn at ease. Dexter realized in that moment Finn was a boy: naïve, arrogant and no match for an experienced man.

After Finn left, Guy shuffled past Dexter, minus his peacock's pride and easy manner. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“What are you sorry for?”

Guy froze at the door. “For whatever just happened?”

“Not your fault.”

“Do you want my Coke?”

“No,” Dexter said, liking this foreign emotion filling his chest: confidence. “I want a Coke from that fucker who just left.”

* * *

Dexter and Morris had a signal when it was time to meet in the dormitory’s community shower. This was the infancy of Ronald Reagan’s command, a time without cable, without infomercials, without hundreds of channels airing absurdity all through the night. Both boys waited in their rooms for KMOH to end its run at one in the morning. That station flashed a montage of nature shots, happy children, a bald eagle and the American flag flapping grandly. ‘KMOH proudly salutes our loyal viewers at the end of our broadcast day.’ After that station switched to a test pattern, Dexter and Morris knew it was time to touch, to taste, to explore under a gentle spray of warmth. They never risked more than ten minutes. They had no idea what consequences loomed if they were caught; this fear of the unknown carried its own erotic charge.

Their nightly trysts in the last stall on the third floor of Rosenbaum Hall merely brought a sexual component to the intense, consuming friendship that formed like a thunderhead beginning their first week on campus. Morris played guitar while Dexter sang melodies so haunting that other residents stopped in the hall to listen. Dexter read sonnets while Morris proofread their essays. Morris stifled his giggles while Dexter tried and tried to break up with his high school sweetheart. The time chugged forward except when it froze, the two boys suspended in bliss.

One night, however, Morris never arrived. Dexter waited twenty minutes for him, his

toes and fingertips puckering in the spray. He didn't dare knock on Morris's door; his roommate awoke if a feather hit the floor. Dexter padded back to his room and solemnly slid beneath the covers. Tomorrow, he told himself. We'll be together tomorrow.

As Dexter dressed for class the next morning, a knock startled him. Morris? Their schedules didn't sync up until lunch. The detective waiting in the hall didn't bother with tact. With his stubble and fedora, he reminded Dexter of a hood lifted from those black-and-white crime films Morris adored. Dexter shook so fiercely he had to grab the doorframe.

"Did you know your neighbor, Morris Becker?"

"He's my best friend."

"When did you last see him?"

"What happened?"

"Was he depressed?"

"What happened?"

"What was the precise nature of your relationship with Mr. Becker?"

"Answer me!"

"He left a note. We found his car in the ravine earlier this morning. Sorry, kid."

Two weeks earlier, Dexter finished reading a sonnet, dreamy with metaphors and promises. Morris looked up from his desk. "One day, I'll write you something that

beautiful,” he said.

“You don’t have to.”

“That’s why I will.”

Dexter wanted to say he loved Morris, but he stopped himself. They had time. They were young. Yes, so much time.

* * *

The day after Finn refused Dexter a Coke, Guy again sought his roommate during a smoke break. He never lifted his gaze from his loafers, even after sitting beside Dexter in the blazing sun. “I feel like a prick asking this, but—”

“Then don’t.”

“What happened to you? Was it pod people?” Guy popped his knuckles, looked around as if a third party might intervene. “I thought you were cool.”

Dexter crushed a cigarette on the bench. “If you get busted, so do I.”

“We’ll be careful.”

“I’ll be more careful.”

Defeated, Guy watched the crowd. Finn soon emerged as several women retreated inside. Sipping a can of Coke, he stared frankly at the two men on the bench.

Dexter slapped Guy’s thigh and stood. “Time to break the bad news,” he said, stretching.

“When do you graduate?” Guy demanded in a nasty tone.

Dexter smiled sadly, dared a glimpse at the sun sliding from behind a cloud.

* * *

Just because he decided to surprise Beverly with a phone call, it didn't mean Dexter would miss an instant of the nightly “Golden Girls” mini-marathon. First up, Blanche gets jealous when Dorothy hijacks all the male attention at Blanche's favorite bar.

“My goodness, Dex. Did someone die?”

“Real death or spiritual death?”

“You're quite a card tonight.”

The Snickers ad aired featuring Betty White playing football in the mud. Dexter broke in a wide, joyous grin. He hoped Betty White would live forever.

“Did you keep the info on those apartments?” he asked.

“I mailed you a copy yesterday.”

“You can't hold my hand forever, Bev.”

“Just a little longer, honey.”

“Guess what's coming on next?”

“That singing dog from YouTube?”

“Sing, Bev.”

“Oh Lord.”

Beverly had been a fixture in the church choir since her teen years. Her breathy soprano brought tears to the faithful and comfort to the lost. If she hadn't been so busy cleaning up my shit, Dexter thought, she could've been a star.

“It's almost time,” he said.

“I can hear the TV, Dex. Goodness, do you need it that loud?”

“Hit it, Bev.” He switched the call to speakerphone.

Beverly knew “Thank You for Being a Friend” like their mother's face. Her golden tone entranced Dexter. The song ended too soon.

She cleared her throat. “How did I do?”

Dexter started to answer but sensed Guy standing behind him, bare-chested and wearing the animal-print lounge pants. He seemed baffled, as if plucked from a dream.

“I heard singing,” Guy said. “It wasn't the TV.”

Dexter handed Guy the remote. “Hope I didn't keep you up.”

“Dex, is that your new roommate?”

“It's your favorite show,” Guy muttered, baffled.

Dexter smiled. “Nothing I haven't seen before.”

Author Bio

Thomas Kearnes is a 35-year-old author from East Texas. He is an atheist and an Eagle Scout. Despite primarily focusing on queer themes, his fiction has appeared in the mainstream venues *PANK*, *Storyglossia*, *Night Train*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Word Riot*, *Eclectica*, *JMWW Journal*, *LITnIMAGE*, *Underground Voices* and elsewhere. He has also published extensively in queer venues, including *Blithe House Quarterly*, *Wide Oats*, *ManLoveRomance Press*, *Velvet Mafia* and the *Best Gay Romance* series. He is a columnist for *Flash Fiction Chronicles* and a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee. He can be reached at trkearnes@yahoo.com.

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