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C U S P O F S E A S O N S

WHEN THE WRONG COLLEGE STUDENTS MIX IT UP WITH THE WRONG
TOWNIES, THERE'S USUALLY ONE OUTCOME **BY CARLO ROTELLA**

DURING THE SUMMER IN A COLLEGE TOWN, the campus is like an estate whose inhabitants have fled to the seaside. The few students kept in residence by summer session, work or inertia have the run of the deserted grounds—the wide reaches of close-cut grass, the fine old buildings and the ugly new ones, the cool, dark library. At night, they drift down the hill to the bars along the town's main drag, where, outnumbered for a change by the locals, they behave more circumspectly than they do the rest of the year. They feel obliged to practice, often for the first time in their lives, a more adult sort of drinking, steadier and calmer than the howling, convulsive drunkenness typical of 19-year-olds who have sprung from well-lined parental nests and find themselves among a flock of like-minded peers in the same condition. In high summer, the terrific momentum generated by the students' prospects and the college's endowment abates enough that students can begin to make out the shape of life in the town. Then comes September and a new semester, and, moving again within the flock of their kind, even the students who summered in town soon

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go back to treating the local bars as stages for the kind of frantic self-dramatization that drives away almost everybody else.

Summer in a college town does not end when the students come back. It lingers into a brief period of overlap, the cusp of seasons, when the waning gentleness of the air already inspires nostalgia. Back in force but not yet ready to let go of summer, the students resist admitting to the necessity of a jacket or sweat shirt when they go drinking in town, accepting goose pimples as the price of wearing just a T-shirt. It's not cold yet, exactly, but the evening breeze already bears the first promise of long, high-shouldered return walks up the hill to campus in the coming months.

On one of those nights in the overlap between summer and fall a few years ago, a handful of students and a scattering of locals were drinking with no great urgency at John B.'s, a bar on one of the narrow side streets that slant down toward the river from Main Street in Middletown, Conn. John B.'s was the kind of sweaty, droopy place, found near campuses all over

student and nonstudent, summer and fall, the kid from Jersey he had been and the outsize character he had become—that encouraged him to forget that in the local bars he was playing to a different audience.

Sudden pounding and then a sharp crack from the back of the room caused everyone in the place to look up just in time to see the Henchman wrenching the flimsy bathroom door off its hinges. Apparently it had been secured from inside and he had grown impatient with the need to void himself. He was surprised but pleased after the fact to have broken the door, Conan-like, and was just beginning to consider what to do next when a thick, hairy guy came out of the bathroom and shouldered him aside. They exchanged strong words. The Henchman, still holding the detached door by the handle, called out the Count's Christian name in a peculiar singsong voice, as if invoking a guardian demon. The hairy guy from the bathroom inspected the Henchman, then the Count, then the Fellow Traveler, weighing the business at hand against the

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America, that students and professors regard as a town joint and that locals regard as overrun by college types.

Sitting on stools at the bar were a couple of notorious characters from the college, the Count and his Henchman, attended by a satellite, the Fellow Traveler. The Count was the kind of guy who, upon being deposited in front of his freshman dorm on the first day of college with floor lamp, hockey sticks and a blue blazer already too tight in the shoulders, suddenly realizes how far physical competence and self-possession can take him among harmless, still-unformed classmates. Bandy-legged and improbably muscular, radiating selfish dynamism, he had swiftly discovered that almost nobody on campus would stand up to him. Adopting and flourishing in the role of campus villain, he had metamorphosed into the Count, a devil-may-care brigand who feared nothing and lived only to add dastardly exploits to his rap sheet: ripping off a woman's shirt at a party, climbing up the outside wall of a dorm to harass and despoil its inhabitants, leading a late-night assault on the quad in which a male pothead was whacked in the eye with a hockey stick. As always happens in these cases, his aura of swashbuckling efficacy attracted generically appropriate lackeys, broad-shouldered young men of weak character who found themselves, true to type, vying for his favor and chortling nefariously while perpetrating misdeeds. First among these was the Henchman, a helmet-haired blond lout (reputed to have wielded the hockey stick in the pothead-bearing incident) who was considerably larger than the Count but lacked the spark of inspiration.

Astride his bar stool on a slow weeknight, joking with his retainers, the Count should have been beginning his junior year, but he had been suspended for the semester after a couple of scrapes with the college authorities. Perhaps the suspension helped maroon him in a state of in-betweenness—between

moment in which he confronted it.

Had it been mid-July, when the college's dispensation went into its annual brief eclipse behind the town's, the hairy guy would probably have taken advantage of the Henchman's belligerent but unready posture—muscles flexed, hands down—to drill him then and there with a forearm to the bridge of the nose, knocking him across the room and into next week. Had it been late October, when the place might be filled with college students under a full head of fall-semester steam (in which case he would almost certainly not have been there at all), the hairy guy would probably have let it go with a final hard look. But, on the cusp of seasons, he considered for a moment, then jerked a thumb toward the bar's front door and said in a low but penetrating voice, "That's it. All of you. Outside." There was a note of fatherly rigor in it: *Get me a hickory switch and drop them pants*. Without waiting to see what they would do, he stalked across the room and out the door.

The notorious characters considered the invitation. The guy was not as big as the Henchman; he was barrel-chested and broad-limbed, but he was no body-sculpted weightlifter like the Count; and if he was bigger than the Count and the Fellow Traveler (who, physically, was a three-quarter-size copy of the Count), it was not by much. He was closer to 40 than 30, with a significant paunch and fierce, curly dark hair growing on every exposed inch of his body except his forehead, nose and eyes. Paunch and hair were abundantly on view because he wore only jeans, gym shoes and a sort of puffy safari vest. He had a Mediterranean cast of feature—Greek, perhaps, or Turkish, although in Middletown Sicilian was a better bet. He looked like a guy who might work for the local concrete company or in construction, who had perhaps done a stint in the merchant marine. More important, he had been drinking in a desperately dull bar on a weeknight, and should have been

left in peace to do that. The notorious characters smiled uncertainly at one another, a possible adventure at hand, as they rolled their shoulders and prepared to follow him outside. Coaches had been telling them for years that one must always warm up before exercise. That their prospective opponent was already pacing up and down in the street, alternately cracking his knuckles and shaking both fists overhead while bellowing, "I am the Terminator" (as far as those inside could make out through the bar's windows), should have given them greater pause, but they were not used to dealing with people like him. They moved toward the door.

They were intercepted by the Sage, a lean, shaven-headed, thirtyish black man in gold wire-frame glasses and a tight brown shirt, who said, "Fellas, I wouldn't go out there if I was you." He did it with the dispassionate air of an outdoorsman pausing in his descent of a storm-prone mountain to point out the late hour and sinking temperature to a trio of robust young novices, wearing shorts and carrying only six-packs of beer,

the Sage, and went out into the street. He sighed and posted himself by the door to watch. The spectators in the bar observed the rest of the action through the wide plate-glass window in the front wall and three small, upright rectangular windows set in the front door.

What followed was not so much a fight as a kind of reasoned exposition, like a lecture, in which an elegant chain of assertions supported by incontrovertible evidence was hammered out on the students' faces. While the Count was still peeling off his tight white T-shirt (*His cape! He flung it from him: thus! And drew his blade: so!*) to reveal his astoundingly well-developed torso, and while the Henchman was following suit, the Fellow Traveler walked over to the Terminator, apparently to have a word with him and perhaps even to head off hostilities. This was also a mistake. As soon as the Fellow Traveler, the smallest and best-natured of the Count's faction, got within range, grinning and holding his open hands high and palms-forward in the traditional "Let's have a little talk, big

ure, in which an elegant chain of assertions was hammered out on the students' faces.

just beginning the ascent. The notorious characters exchanged a long look with the Sage, then stepped to one side and huddled briefly; jocks and sports fans from way back, they knew enough to call time out. There was a chance they might get seriously hurt, but on the other hand they might get the better of the man outside, put him down and hurt him. Since he was not a fellow student, they would be able to go further, perhaps much further than they ever had before, in hurting him. Or maybe there would just be a good fight among equals, a rough scrimmage, at the end of which the Terminator would acknowledge by word or gesture that he and they were all of a kind—hardhanded fellows who got in fights at bars and afterward hoisted drinks with warlike joy.

Had it been mid-July, they probably would have decided that the Terminator was too forbidding to fight on his home turf. Had it been late October, they probably would have decided that there was too much fun to be had on campus, too many submissive peers and too much free beer, to risk getting dragged into a potentially complicated entanglement in town. In either case, they would have turned back to the bar, had another drink and tried to laugh about the fuming townie waiting for them out in the street; and later, when it became a story they told, they would have laughed at themselves, too, and at what a close call they had had. But now—on the cusp of seasons, when neither one nor the other dispensation prevailed—they could not find their bearings. Meanwhile, the interrupted drinkers in the bar, students and locals alike, were exerting a silent pressure to go through with the fight so that something would happen.

Rushed and uncertain, the notorious characters made a mistake. They broke their huddle, brushed dismissively past

fella" gesture, the Terminator punched him, a concise right hand thrown with lots of tight-sprung force and the elbow turned out just before impact. It was a big fist and it mashed most of the left side of the Fellow Traveler's face. He went down out of the spectators' view. The Count appeared, shirtless and bulging, received a couple of punches in the nose—a left, apparently thrown for variety's sake, and then a mirror-image right—and reeled abruptly backward out of the frame. The Terminator advanced on the Henchman, the two disappearing from view between the front window and those in the door. Offstage, so to speak, the Henchman got his medicine as well.

The Fellow Traveler came back into the bar, approached a student he knew, and asked, "Does my face look funny?" Informed that the left side of it had inflated precipitously, which made the uninjured side look like a flat tire, he said, "He's really tough," with swollen-lipped conviction. Then he sat by the front window to watch the rest of the affray. Meanwhile, the Count and the Henchman each had another go at the Terminator, who belted them aside, each in his turn.

There was a pause in the action, during which the Sage appeared to reach a decision and went outside. The bartender moved briskly to the door and double-locked it behind him. The Count, who had been lying in the street in a semi-fetal position, got unsteadily to his feet. The Sage went to him and bear him up while managing to communicate a nose-holding distaste for having to touch somebody so bloody and gross. The spectators came to appreciate that the Sage, sinewy where the Terminator was thick, was also a fast and expert puncher. He did not hit as hard as the Termina-

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tor, but the Count was already dazed and went to one knee without putting up a fight.

The Henchman appeared at the little windows in the door, which he rattled for a while before realizing it would not open. A new expressiveness animated his manner. His preternaturally sincere mien, bugging eyes, precise diction (amenable to lip-reading even by amateurs) and hand gestures—the left tipped to his ear with thumb and pinkie splayed, the right bunched and held up under his chin with index finger jabbing insistently downward at the latch—succeeded in miming his passionate wish that the bartender call the police and unlock the door immediately.

In mid-performance, the Henchman was jerked from view by an unseen hand and reappeared, his back to the spectators, in the front wall's big window. The Terminator advanced calmly upon him, fainted expertly with his right, and, when the Henchman flinched away in a posture of entreaty, hit him with a couple of sharp but comparatively light left jabs, each of which snapped back the Henchman's head and caused him to retreat one step. When he had framed the Henchman in front of the window with his left, like tapping a nail to get it started in the wood, he threw the right, driving the nailhead flush to the wood with one blow. The back of the Henchman's blond head bounced hard off the window, making a rich, thrumming boom that profoundly impressed the spectators inside, who exchanged odd confirmatory glances, as if earlier in the evening they had been discussing what it sounds like when somebody's head bounces off a plate-glass window without breaking it.

Stumbling but still on his feet, the Henchman slid laterally along the glass and disappeared from view. The Terminator went after him. Those in the bar could follow their progress, though, by the sound the Henchman's head made as it rocketed off the building's outer wall somewhere between the front window and the door. After a few repetitions the noise stopped. The Terminator and the Sage knocked politely on the door, were admitted with publican flair by the bartender, and resumed their seats and drinks.

After an interval, the Count and the

Henchman came back in to avoid the cops, who screeched up in a blast of lights and sirens. The Count's nose was a pulsating knot of aggrieved tissue, snot and blood, some of which had splattered in a jet down his meaty bare chest. (*I am wounded: Here! And here! But I still live!*) He seemed oddly jaunty, almost thankful to have gotten a beating in the way that bullies can be, and he returned to the bar with a wry expression on his swollen face to drain his half-filled stein of beer in one gulp before the cops got to him. Two of them entered and took a firm grip on his plump biceps to haul him out. More cops arrived. Sensibly, they rounded up the half-naked guys who looked like they had been in a fight. The Terminator and the Sage, whose only injuries had been to the skin of their knuckles, claimed to be innocent bystanders; the arrestees did not gainsay them. The notorious characters found themselves in a schoolyard bind: They regarded telling the cops the truth as finking and therefore beneath them, but on the other hand it wasn't fair that the winners didn't have to go to jail. The small-town cops, who had to put up with too much from college students in general and these students in particular, and who had immediately grasped and approved of the scene's nuances, scotched this developing moral crisis by advising the losers to shut up and letting the winners go.

After the police cruisers had peeled out with the collegians aboard, the Terminator and the Sage finished their drinks and departed. There was no round of applause from the spectators, but it was implied in the tailing off of already muted conversations that marked the victors' exit. They parted ways after crossing the threshold of the front door, one going left and the other right.

Through the front window, those in the bar could see the Terminator trudging alone uphill toward the main drag into a stiffening breeze, fists jammed in the pockets of his puffy vest, seemingly in the grip of post-pugilistic *tristesse*. When he had disappeared from view, everyone could feel the change, like the great steel door of a walk-in safe swinging shut, its time-locks whirring and clicking: Summer was over. ■

Carlo Rotella last wrote for the Magazine about Fight Night in Washington. He teaches at Boston College.