


BLAZE

A Novel

RICHARD BACHMAN

Foreword by Stephen King

SCRIBNER

New York London Toronto Sydney

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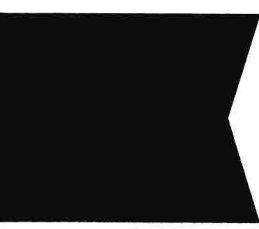
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For Tommy and Lori Spruce

And thinking of James T. Farrell

These are the slums of the heart.

JOHN D. MACDONALD

The logo consists of a solid black rectangle on the left, followed by a white chevron pointing to the right, which is partially overlapped by the black text.

BLAZE

DEAR CONSTANT READER,

This is a trunk novel, okay? I want you to know that while you've still got your sales slip and before you drip something like gravy or ice cream on it, and thus make it difficult or impossible to return.¹ It's a revised and updated trunk novel, but that doesn't change the basic fact. The Bachman name is on it because it's the last novel from 1966–1973, which was that gentleman's period of greatest productivity.

During those years I was actually two men. It was Stephen King who wrote (and sold) horror stories to raunchy skin-mags like *Cavalier* and *Adam*,² but it was Bachman who wrote a series of novels that didn't sell to anybody. These included *Rage*,³ *The Long Walk*, *Roadwork*, and *The Running Man*.⁴ All four were published as paperback originals.

Blaze was the last of those early novels . . . the fifth quarter, if you like. Or just another well-known writer's trunk novel, if you insist. It was written in late 1972 and early 1973.

1. In saying this, I assume you're like me and rarely sit down to a meal—or even a lowly snack—without your current book near at hand.

2. With this exception: Bachman, writing under the pseudonym of John Swithen, sold a single hard-crime story, “The Fifth Quarter.”

3. Now out of print, and a good thing.

4. The Bachman novel following these was *Thinner*, and it was no wonder I got outed, since that one was actually written by Stephen King—the bogus author photo on the back flap fooled no one.

I thought it was great while I was writing it, and crap when I read it over. My recollection is that I never showed it to a single publisher—not even Doubleday, where I had made a friend named William G. Thompson. Bill was the guy who would later discover John Grisham, and it was Bill who contracted for the book following *Blaze*, a twisted but fairly entertaining tale of prom-night in central Maine.⁵

I forgot about *Blaze* for a few years. Then, after the other early Bachmans had been published, I took it out and looked it over. After reading the first twenty pages or so, I decided my first judgment had been correct, and returned it to purdah. I thought the writing was okay, but the story reminded me of something Oscar Wilde once said. He claimed it was impossible to read “The Old Curiosity Shop” without weeping copious tears of laughter.⁶ So *Blaze* was forgotten, but never really lost. It was only stuffed in some corner of the Fogler Library at the University of Maine with the rest of their Stephen King/Richard Bachman stuff.

Blaze ended up spending the next thirty years in the dark.⁷ And then I published a slim paperback original called *The Colorado Kid* with an imprint called Hard Case Crime. This line of books, the brainchild of a very smart and very cool fellow named Charles Ardai, was dedicated to reviving old “noir” and hardboiled paperback crime novels, and publishing new ones. *The Kid* was decidedly softboiled, but Charles decided to publish it anyway, with one of those great old

5. I believe I am the only writer in the history of English story-telling whose career was based on sanitary napkins; that part of my literary legacy seems secure.

6. I have had the same reaction to *Everyman*, by Philip Roth, Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, and *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter*, by Kim Edwards—at some point while reading these books, I just start to laugh, wave my hands, and shout: “Bring on the cancer! Bring on the blindness! We haven’t had those yet!”

7. Not in an actual trunk, though; in a cardboard carton.

paperback covers.⁸ The whole project was a blast . . . except for the slow royalty payments.⁹

About a year later, I thought maybe I'd like to go the Hard Case route again, possibly with something that had a harder edge. My thoughts turned to *Blaze* for the first time in years, but trailing along behind came that damned Oscar Wilde quote about "The Old Curiosity Shop." The *Blaze* I remembered wasn't hardboiled noir, but a three-handkerchief weepie. Still, I decided it wouldn't hurt to look. If, that was, the book could even be found. I remembered the carton, and I remembered the squarish type-face (my wife Tabitha's old college typewriter, an impossible-to-kill Olivetti portable), but I had no idea what had become of the manuscript that was supposedly inside the carton. For all I knew, it was gone, baby, gone.¹⁰

It wasn't. Marsha, one of my two valuable assistants, found it in the Fogler Library. She would not trust me with the original manuscript (I, uh, lose things), but she made a Xerox. I must have been using a next-door-to-dead typewriter ribbon when I composed *Blaze*, because the copy was barely legible, and the notes in the margins were little more than blurs. Still, I sat down with it and began to read, ready to suffer the pangs of embarrassment only one's younger, smart-assier self can provide.

But I thought it was pretty good—certainly better than *Roadwork*, which I had, at the time, considered mainstream

8. A dame with trouble in her eyes. And ecstasy, presumably, in her pants.

9. Also a throwback to the bad old paperback days, now that I think of it.

10. In my career I have managed to lose not one but two pretty good novels-in-progress. *Under the Dome* was only 50 pages long at the time it disappeared, but *The Cannibals* was over 200 pages at the time it went MIA. No copies of either. That was before computers, and I never used carbons for first drafts—it felt *haughty*, somehow.

American fiction. It just wasn't a noir novel. It was, rather, a stab at the sort of naturalism-with-crime that James M. Cain and Horace McCoy practiced in the thirties.¹¹ I thought the flashbacks were actually better than the front-story. They reminded me of James T. Farrell's *Young Lonigan* trilogy and the forgotten (but tasty) *Gas-House McGinty*. Sure, it was the three Ps in places,¹² but it had been written by a young man (I was twenty-five) who was convinced he was WRITING FOR THE AGES.

I thought *Blaze* could be re-written and published without too much embarrassment, but it was probably wrong for Hard Case Crime. It was, in a sense, not a crime novel at all. I thought it could be a minor tragedy of the underclass, if the re-writing was ruthless. To that end, I adopted the flat, dry tones which the best noir fiction seems to have, even using a type-font called American Typewriter to remind myself of what I was up to. I worked fast, never looking ahead or back, wanting also to capture the headlong drive of those books (I'm thinking more of Jim Thompson and Richard Stark here than I am of Cain, McCoy, or Farrell). I thought I would do my revisions at the end, with a pencil, rather than editing in the computer, as is now fashionable. If the book was going to be a throwback, I wanted to play into that rather than shying away from it. I also determined to strip all the sentiment I could from the writing itself, wanted the finished book to be as stark as an empty house without even a rug on the floor. My mother would have said "I wanted its bare face hanging out." Only the reader will be able to judge if I succeeded.

If it matters to you (it shouldn't—hopefully you came for a good story, and hopefully you will get one), any royalties or

11. And, of course, it's an homage to *Of Mice and Men*—kinda hard to miss that.

12. Purple, pulsing, and panting.

subsidiary income generated by *Blaze* will go to The Haven Foundation, which was created to help freelance artists who are down on their luck.¹³

One other thing, I guess, while I've got you by the lapel. I tried to keep the *Blaze* time-frame as vague as possible, so it wouldn't seem too dated.¹⁴ It was impossible to take out all the dated material, however; keeping some of it was important to the plot.¹⁵ If you think of this story's time-frame as "America, Not All That Long Ago," I think you'll be okay.

May I close by circling back to where I started? This is an old novel, but I believe I was wrong in my initial assessment that it was a bad novel. You may disagree . . . but "The Little Match Girl" it ain't. As always, Constant Reader, I wish you well, I thank you for reading this story, and I hope you enjoy it. I won't say I hope you mist up a little, but—

Yeah. Yeah, I *will* say that. Just as long as they're not tears of laughter.

Stephen King (for Richard Bachman)
Sarasota, Florida
January 30th, 2007

13. To learn more about The Haven Foundation, you can go to my website. That be www.stephenking.com.

14. I didn't like the idea of Clay Blaisdell growing up in post-World War II America; all that has come to seem impossibly antique, although it seemed (and probably was) okay in 1973, when I was pecking it out in the trailer where my wife and I lived with our two children.

15. If I had written it today, certainly cell phones and Caller ID would have needed to be taken into consideration.

GEORGE WAS SOMEWHERE in the dark. Blaze couldn't see him, but the voice came in loud and clear, rough and a little hoarse. George always sounded as if he had a cold. He'd had an accident when he was a kid. He never said what, but there was a dilly of a scar on his adam's apple.

"Not that one, you dummy, it's got bumper stickers all over it. Get a Chevy or a Ford. Dark blue or green. Two years old. No more, no less. Nobody remembers them. And no stickers."

Blaze passed the little car with the bumper stickers and kept walking. The faint thump of the bass reached him even here, at the far end of the beer joint's parking lot. It was Saturday night and the place was crowded. The air was bitterly cold. He had hitched him a ride into town, but now he had been in the open air for forty minutes and his ears were numb. He had forgotten his hat. He always forgot something. He had started to take his hands out of his jacket pockets and put them over his ears, but George put the kibosh on that. George said his ears could freeze but not his hands. You didn't need your ears to hotwire a car. It was three above zero.

"There," George said. "On your right."

Blaze looked and saw a Saab. With a sticker. It didn't look like the right kind of car at all.

"That's your left," George said. "Your *right*, dummy. The hand you pick your nose with."

"I'm sorry, George."

Yes, he was being a dummy again. He could pick his nose with either hand, but he knew his right, the hand you write with. He thought of that hand and looked to that side. There was a dark green Ford there.

Blaze walked over to the Ford, elaborately casual. He looked over his shoulder. The beer joint was a college bar called The Bag. That was a stupid name, a bag was what you called your balls. It was a walk-down. There was a band on Friday and Saturday nights. It would be crowded and warm inside, lots of little girls in short skirts dancing up a storm. It would be nice to go inside, just look around—

"What are *you* supposed to be doing?" George asked. "Walking on Commonwealth Ave? You couldn't fool my old blind granny. Just do it, huh?"

"Okay, I was just—"

"Yeah, I know what you was just. Keep your mind on your business."

"Okay."

"What are you, Blaze?"

He hung his head, snorkled back snot. "I'm a dummy."

George always said there was no shame in this, but it was a fact and you had to recognize it. You couldn't fool anybody into thinking you were smart. They looked at you and saw the truth: the lights were on but nobody was home. If you were a dummy, you had to just do your business and get out. And if you were caught, you owned up to everything except the guys who were with you, because they'd get everything else out of you in the end, anyway. George said dummies couldn't lie worth shit.

Blaze took his hands out of his pockets and flexed them twice. The knuckles popped in the cold still air.

"You ready, big man?" George asked.

"Yes."

"Then I'm going to get a beer. Take care of it."

Blaze felt panic start. It came up his throat. "Hey, no, I ain't never done this before. I just watched you."

"Well this time you're going to do more than watch."

"But—"

He stopped. There was no sense going on, unless he wanted to shout. He could hear the hard crunch of packed snow as George headed toward the beer joint. Soon his footsteps were lost in the heartbeat of the bass.

"Jesus," Blaze said. "Oh Jesus Christ."

And his fingers were getting cold. At this temperature they'd only be good for five minutes. Maybe less. He went around to the driver's side door, thinking the door would be locked. If the door was locked, this car was no good because he didn't have the Slim Jim, George had the Slim Jim. Only the door was unlocked. He opened the door, reached in, found the hood release, and pulled it. Then he went around front, fiddled for the second catch, found that one, and lifted the hood.

There was a small Penlight in his pocket. He took it out. He turned it on and trained the beam on the engine.

Find the ignition wire.

But there was so much spaghetti. Battery cables, hoses, spark-plug wires, the gas-line—

He stood there with sweat running down the sides of his face and freezing on his cheeks. This was no good. This wouldn't never be no good. And all at once he had an idea. It wasn't a very good idea, but he didn't have many and when he had one he had to chase it. He went back to the driver's side and opened the door again. The light came on, but he couldn't help that. If someone saw him fiddling around, they would just think he was having trouble getting started. Sure, cold night like this, that made sense, didn't it? Even George couldn't give him grief on that one. Not much, anyway.

He flipped down the visor over the steering wheel, hoping against hope that a spare key might flop down, sometimes

folks kept one up there, but there was nothing except an old ice scraper. *That* flopped down. He tried the glove compartment next. It was full of papers. He raked them out onto the floor, kneeling on the seat to do it, his breath puffing. There were papers, and a box of Junior Mints, but no keys.

There, you goddam dummy, he heard George saying, *are you satisfied now? Ready to at least try hot-wiring it now?*

He supposed he was. He supposed he could at least tear some of the wires loose and touch them together like George did and see what happened. He closed the door and started toward the front of the Ford again with his head down. Then he stopped. A new idea had struck him. He went back, opened the door, bent down, flipped up the floormat, and there it was. The key didn't say FORD on it, it didn't say anything on it because it was a dupe, but it had the right square head and everything.

Blaze picked it up and kissed the cold metal.

Unlocked car, he thought. Then he thought: *Unlocked car and key under the floormat*. Then he thought: *I ain't the dumbest guy out tonight after all, George*.

He got in behind the wheel, slammed the door, slid the key in the ignition slot—it went in nice—then realized he couldn't see the parking lot because the hood was still up. He looked around quick, first one way and then the other, making sure that George hadn't decided to come back and help him out. George would never let him hear the end of it if he saw the hood still up like that. But George wasn't there. No one was there. The parking lot was tundra with cars.

Blaze got out and slammed the hood. Then he got back in and paused in the act of reaching for the door handle. What about George? Should he go in yonder beer-farm and get him? Blaze sat frowning, head down. The dome light cast yellow light on his big hands.

Guess what? he thought, raising his head again at last. *Screw him*.

“Screw you, George,” he said. George had left him to hitchhike in, just meeting him here, then left him again. Left him to do the dirtywork, and it was only by the dumbest of dumb luck that Blaze had found a key, so screw George. Let *him* thumb a ride back in the three-degree cold.

Blaze closed the door, dropped the gear-shift into Drive, and pulled out of the parking space. Once in an actual lane of travel, he stomped down heavily and the Ford leaped, rear end fishtailing on the hard-packed snow. He slammed on the brakes, stiff with panic. What was he doing? What was he thinking of? Go without George? He’d get picked up before he went five miles. Probably get picked up at the first stop-n-go light. He couldn’t go without George.

But George is dead.

That was bullshit. George was just there. He went inside for a beer.

He’s dead.

“Oh, George,” Blaze moaned. He was hunched over the wheel. “Oh, George, don’t be dead.”

He sat there awhile. The Ford’s engine sounded okay. It wasn’t knocking or anything, even though it was cold. The gas gauge said three-quarters. The exhaust rose in the rearview, white and frozen.

George didn’t come out of the beer joint. He couldn’t come out cause he never went in. George was dead. Had been three months. Blaze started to shake.

After a little bit, he caught hold of himself. He began to drive. No one stopped him at the first traffic light, or the second. No one stopped him all the way out of town. By the time he got to the Apex town line, he was doing fifty. Sometimes the car slid a little on patches of ice, but this didn’t bother him. He just turned with the skid. He had been driving on icy roads since he was a teenager.

Outside of town he pushed the Ford to sixty and let it ride. The high beams poked the road with bright fingers and