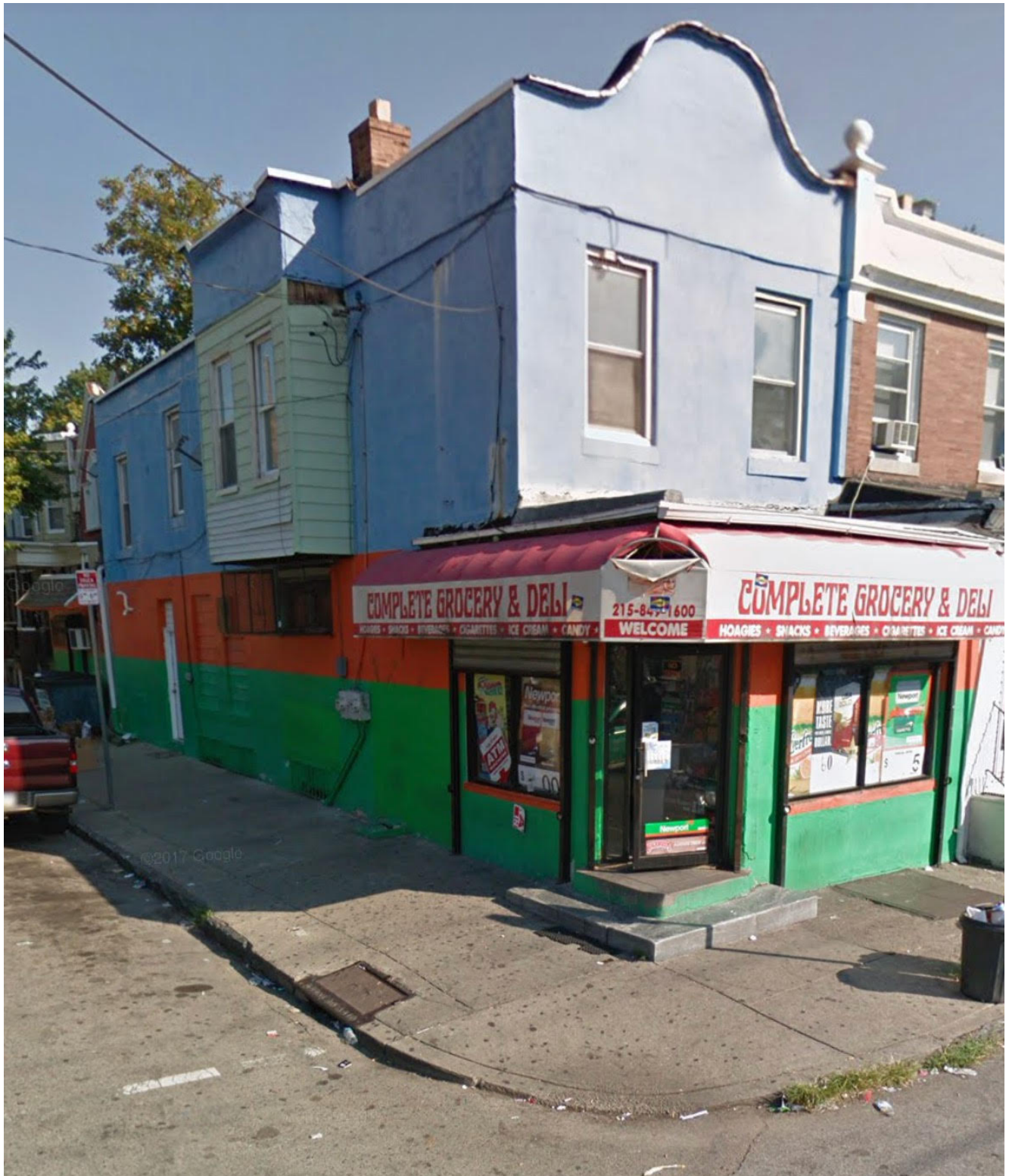


New Fiction from Andrew Snover: Dana and the Pretzelman



The Pretzelman died yesterday. He was shot on his corner half a block from his home, and if he has family they'll pile stuffed animals, and one of his boys will spray-paint *RIP*, and someone will take his corner. Old ladies will sometimes mention him, but that will die out as well, and the neighborhood's memory of him will fade like the colors of the teddy bears' fur and the sharpness of the letters *RIP* and the print of the newspaper clipping in its vinyl sleeve stapled to the telephone pole.

Dana knew the Pretzelman. She was a fifteen-year-old girl from up the block. She knew of the Pretzelman before he had the corner, because her eldest brother had fucked the Pretzelman's cousin for a few months, but the two of them never met until the Pretzelman took the corner and began to make himself known.

He stayed on the corner all day, unlike the men who owned neighboring blocks and took breaks on the hot days to drive around in their cars with their music and air-conditioning blasting, just to make themselves seen. He just walked down in the mornings and stayed there all day, every day. He and his boys would talk to each other, and stare down cars whose drivers they didn't recognize, and sell to those who bought.

Dana first met him one morning when her grandmother sent her out for a forty of Olde English. It was a hot Sunday, and her grandmother's favorite treatment for the brutal heat of their home was to drink something cold. The house smelled of death from the time that a great-aunt had declined and passed in the living room. Because the family had no money to keep her in a hospital, and because her bed couldn't fit up the stairs, for six months she had been in the center of all activity in the house. The stench of her sheets and her disease had slowly permeated everything, and then she had died. Dana liked being sent to the store for forties and half gallons of milk and packs of Newport 100s because it got her out of the smell.

She walked down the street, looking out for any of her friends who might be awake and out on their stoops. She didn't see anyone as she walked the block, so she crossed diagonally through the Pretzelman's intersection toward the store that stood on the corner where he usually stood with his friends. The small white awning read, "Complete Grocery and Deli," and there was a sign that said, "Hoagies Snacks Cigarettes We Appreciate Your Business."

Dana knew enough to know what groups of boys said to girls walking alone, and she knew that her age was no longer a protection now that her body had changed. That day there were three others besides the Pretzelman. As she walked up to them, and they looked at her flip-flops and her shorts and her beater and her purple bra underneath, she prepared herself to deliver an insulting reply to their comments, but no one said anything. The Pretzelman smiled at her, and she passed through them into the store.

She walked up to the glass, spoke loudly, "Olde E," to the distorted image of the lady on the other side, passed through the slot the five-dollar bill her grandmother had given her, waited for her change and the brown bag to spin on the carousel to her side, and left. As she passed back through the group, the Pretzelman said, "Have a good day now," and she didn't say anything.

That day the heat endured, so Dana was sent back to the store two more times on the same errand, and by the last trip, she had smiled at the Pretzelman. He told her to have a good night.

The Pretzelman lived in an abandoned house around the corner that he and his boys had fixed up a little bit. He said hello to the old ladies. He threw his trash in the can, at least when he was on his corner. Dana wasn't sure if he made his

boys do the same, but there wasn't much trash on his corner compared with the other three of that intersection, so she thought that he did.

He got a puppy from a man he knew who bred pits. It was a brown-and-white dog with a light nose and light eyes. He walked it on a leash down to his corner in the mornings, and then he tied it to the stop sign, and it stayed with him and his boys. They fed it chips and water ice and other things that they bought from the store. The old ladies sometimes would stop and pet it.

Dana loved dogs, and she asked the Pretzelman one day if she could pet it, and he said, "Of course," so she petted it and talked to it. After that, on trips for Newports and chips and hug juices, she would always kneel down quickly and whisper in the dog's ear, "Good pup," or "I love you." The Pretzelman would smile down at her, and she would tug on the dog's ear and then run in and finish her errand. One day as she knelt down to pet it, she looked over at a parked car and she saw a pistol sitting on top of the rear passenger side tire.

She got more comfortable around the Pretzelman through her relationship with the puppy. She asked him one day if she could see his gun. He chuckled and he said, "That stuff isn't for girls like you," but when she asked again a few weeks later, he reached into the wheel well and picked it up. He did something to it that make it rasp and click, then handed it to her. The weight of it frightened her, and she stared at it in her hand, thinking in a haze that it must weigh more than the puppy. She put her finger to the trigger, and the gun was so big that only the tip of her finger could reach around. She stood up and pointed the gun at the Pretzelman, and she heard her own voice say, "What now," and she saw the Pretzelman's face drain.

Her hand shook and her knees shook, and the Pretzelman took one step forward and snatched the gun from her hand and

slapped her in the face. She didn't cry out, but she shuddered and cried a few tears and said, "I'm sorry, I don't like that." She had scared herself as much as she scared him, and the Pretzelman saw this, and he said, "This ain't no joke. Why you think I said guns aren't for girls like you."

She talked to him a lot about guns after that. They sat on the stoop of the house next to the store, and he told her that most boys held their left arm over their face while they shot with their right because they didn't want to see what the bullets did. He said that only the crazy ones or the liars said they didn't cover their face. She asked him if he covered his face, and he didn't answer for a minute. Then he said, "Not the first time."

He took her behind his house to shoot the gun, because she asked him if she could try it. They walked through the high nettles and the broken glass and the needles, and he said, "Watch out for dog shit." He made her stop and then walked ten feet and set a bottle on the back of a chair and came back and handed her the gun and said, "Here." She pointed the gun at the bottle, and her body jerked, and her ears rang, and the smell made her eyes burn. She looked at him after the first shot, and he said, "Try again, but hurry up 'cause they'll call the cops."

She shot six more times and hit the bottle with one of the shots, but she couldn't tell which one because the cracks and the flashes didn't match up. The wall behind the bottle was soft quarried stone with lots of mica, and the divots and craters where her bullets hit were a fresher shade of gray than the rest, and they sparkled in the light. She thought through the roaring in her ears that if someone were to shoot the whole house, it would look newer than it did.

She told people about the Pretzelman because she was proud to know him. She told her friends about him and introduced a few of them to him. One Saturday night she had her friend Kiana

sleep over, and they whispered about boys until late. "He don't say anything ignorant to you, and he's even nice to the old ladies," Dana said. Kiana rolled her eyes.

"You know he's too old for you. You wouldn't even know what to do when he started to try out that nasty shit."

Dana shrieked and rolled over onto her belly. Then she said, "I would too know what to do. I would too."

That night after the girls had fallen asleep, they were awoken by a string of gunshots and then tires squealing. When it ended they ran to the windows and looked up and down the block, but they didn't see anyone. Kiana fell back asleep soon after, and Dana lay there for a long time listening to her steady breathing, thinking about situations that could be, and in them what she would do.

On her way to the bus the next morning at seven, Dana walked past the poppy store and saw the Pretzelman in his normal spot. He nodded to her, and she ducked her head. She felt a quickness in her chest and heard a buzzing in her ears. When she got on the bus, she tried to close her eyes and take a nap like she usually did on the way to school, but she couldn't find a comfortable position in her seat.

In English class that day, Dana's teacher talked about how the best characters always seem very real, yet a little too large for life. Dana raised her hand and said, "I know someone like that. He's got the corner on my block, and he has this nice dog. They call him the Pretzelman because his skin color is like the pretzel part, and that stuff he sell is white like the salt."

"He sounds like an interesting character," said the teacher. "I would enjoy reading a story about the Pretzelman."

After that Dana couldn't help but think of the Pretzelman as a character. Everything he did was covered with a thin gauze of fantasy. One of the boys on the block wanted to work for him, but they already had a lookout and the boy was too young for any of the other jobs, so they sent him on little errands. One of these errands was to take the bus to Target and buy sheets, because the Pretzelman was tired of sleeping on a bare mattress. Or at least tired of hearing his girls complain about it. The boy took the hundred dollars he was given and rode the bus for thirty-five minutes and went into Target and bought the sheets. The Pretzelman had said to him, "I don't need no change, understand?" The boy knew that the change was to be his payment for the errand, but in order to avoid looking like he was trying to profit too much, he bought the most expensive set he could find. He brought back a set of king-size sheets and proudly presented them to the Pretzelman, but they didn't fit the twin-size mattress. According to Dana, the Pretzelman didn't make the boy go back to Target and exchange them because the mistake had been his to not give the boy more specific orders. They made fun of the boy and called him King Size, and the Pretzelman slept on a twin-size mattress with sheets for a king. Dana looked at sheets the next time she was in Target, and she saw that the most expensive sheets sold there had a thread count of six hundred and cost \$89.99, plus tax.

Another time Dana walked down to the poppy store and came upon the peak of an argument between the Pretzelman and one of his girls. She was standing in the street screaming at him and making motions with her arms like she was throwing something at him. The motion was like a Frisbee, and the girl did it over and over again with each hand, and sometimes with both. But the Pretzelman, like a character in a different movie, was just standing against the wall of the store. He wasn't looking at the girl, and he wasn't looking away from her, and it looked to Dana like he hadn't noticed that there was anyone else there at all.

There was a certain face that the Pretzelman used when he was out on the corner, but this one was different. His normal stern-faced grill would crack sometimes. The corners of his eyes would crinkle up if he caught her spitting or stopping to adjust her belt or her shorts. His eyes would crinkle, and she would know he had watched her the whole time.

This face wasn't crinkling at all, no matter what the girl screamed about his shithole house and his dirty, grubbing life. Suddenly Dana saw him in the same pose, leaning with his shoulders against the wall and his feet planted, but the vista had changed. The tan car in front of him and the picket fence across the street with its peeling paint were gone, and instead he was at the edge of an enormous, planted field, looking out at the work he had done and the work yet to do. Or he was at the top of a rocky hill, and he was looking down at the river below, at the cattle or the buffalo. Or he was on the balcony of a high-rise, looking past the skyscrapers toward the lower buildings, the row homes, and the narrow streets that he owned. Or he was in the tunnel at an arena, waiting to be introduced over the loudspeakers. Waiting for the roar of the crowd. The girl in the street was still yelling, her hair and her cheeks shaking with rage. He could have been made of stone.

Dana tried to talk to the Pretzelman about how she saw him, what she thought about him. Every time she tried it, her words ran into the obstacle of his eyes on her, the smile starting to play in the corner of his mouth. One time she made it as far as telling him, "You know, you're nice. Really nice." She wanted to continue, but she could tell he was making fun of her when he replied, "Well, some people think so. I'm glad you think so."

In English class her teacher made the class do a writing exercise called "What everyone knows vs. What I know." Dana

continued the first sentence. "What everyone knows about the Pretzelman is his puppy, and his nickname." She quickly wrote a full page in her looping script, smiling as she pictured his eyes, his hands.

She was still going when the teacher said it was time to begin the second part. She wrote, "But what only I know is that he..."

She stopped writing then, and thought about what would happen if she wrote what she knew—really knew—about the Pretzelman. Or if she told it to him out loud. How would his eyes look if she wrote it—all of it—and then handed this letter to him, rather than turning it in to the teacher? When the class ended, her ellipsis was still open, waiting to be filled with what she knew.

Before long the Pretzelman died, and here's how it happened. He woke up on his mattress on the floor between the sheets he got by sending his boy on the bus to Target. He grabbed his gun from the floor next to his bed. He put the leash on the dog, and he hollered to the others to get up. He let himself out the back, which is what they always did so that the front could stay boarded up and keep its abandoned look. He walked around to the front of the house. He didn't carry the dog over the broken glass, as he had done when it was a smaller puppy. He might have waved hello to an old lady. He might have stopped to wait while the dog took a shit.

As he walked down the street, he heard the engine of the car roaring, and he looked up to see why someone was going that fast. He saw clearly the face behind the wheel, and then the tires screeched, and he saw clearly the other face in the back seat, before the bright flashes. He went for his gun, but the bullets spun him around and knocked him onto his belly, and his arm and the gun got pinned under his body. The dog ran off. The Pretzelman bled out onto the sidewalk while one of

the old ladies called 911, and his boys came out and saw what had happened and they ran off. Dana left her house to catch the bus and saw the cops taping off an area around a body that was covered with a heavy sheet too small for the whole creeping stain. She didn't know it was the Pretzelman until she came home that afternoon and her friends told her.

As she lay in bed that night, she thought about the dark red color and feared that she might never be able to think about anything else. She searched her feelings, wondering distantly if she was going to cry. She fell asleep thinking, but she slept well. It rained that night and the whole day after, so the stain was gone. The Pretzelman's mother placed the news clipping of his shooting inside a plastic sleeve and stapled it on the telephone pole, with a note about a reward for evidence leading to the killers. Before long the corner belonged to someone else, and there was a colorful cairn of stuffed animals piled against the fence where he'd lain, and one of the walls nearby read *RIP*. Dana noticed these things when she walked out to the store or the bus stop, and she passed them again whenever she walked back home.