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SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME

By Richard Bausch

HarperFlamingo. 224 pp. \$24.

In 1988, when I first saw him as among the most masterful of America's fiction writers, Richard Bausch had arguably the finest pieces in both the *Best American* and *New Stories from the South* annual prize collections. The surprise lay in how different these stories were. "Police Dreams" limned the nuanced ravines into which family love could drift off course; "The Man Who Knew Belle Starr" showcased a heart-racing ability to stretch ominous tension taut as a hangman's rope.

But, like having a Pedro Martinez fastball and a gift for logarithms, these talents don't blend readily. Bausch braided them deftly in his early 1990s novels *Violence* and *Rebel Powers*, yet in recent years he's used his skill at evoking suspense more in his novels, causing some to accuse him of growing commercial. His stories, however, remain a family counselor's textbook on the geography of the heart.

Just as a novel can present a history while a story has room only to imply one, the dozen stories here keep their pain and violence largely off-stage, as in Greek drama, seldom actually described.

In "Riches," disaster glides in on the wings of apparent good fortune, astounding fortune. With the first lottery ticket he's ever bought, Mattison wins \$16 million. Quickly though, this conventional man whose greatest problem had been his wife's slowness to conceive a child learns the truth of "be careful what you wish for" and finds you can't become just a phenomenally richer version of yourself. Parents, brothers and in-laws want Lincolns and homes, their pettiness coming clear with their avarice. Co-workers all have problems Mattison's money can solve, and college professors beg for stipends to have "time to complete a big study of phallogentrism in the nineteenth-century novel." Eventually, the only pleasure left him is the ability to go alone to a strange cafe on Thanksgiving, reach into his pocket, and tell the band's off-key singer, "This is a thousand dollars. I want you to sit down and shut up."

"Fatality" follows the impotent frustration of a father whose daughter marries a crude, abusive man and breaks off contact with her parents. Bit by bit, they learn from neighbors that the daughter enters stores with bruises and welts. While Frank Kaufman's wife thinks only of herself, Kaufman agonizes over their daughter's mistreatment, her refusal to let him help, his smug son-in-law's defiance, until only one fatal solution seems left.

As in Bausch's novel *Violence*, a chance brush with terror provides the touchstone to reveal character and lay bare the tissue of a marriage in "Two Altercations." Stuck in a traffic jam, a seven-months-married couple ponder separately their own fears and concerns. She "in that unpleasant zone of disturbed silence, couldn't get rid of the sense that her life had been decided for her in some quarter far away from her own small clutch of desires and wishes" and fears becoming "the kind of wife who was always hectoring her husband about his clothes, his posture, his speech." He sits preoccupied by a co-worker's adultery and the sound of the betrayed wife's phone voice when he lies about where the husband has gone. Shots ring out nearby from the roadway. Their unexpected

reactions to this crisis hint at the breach of intimacy with which they must live the balance of their marriage.

Couples in these stories pick at intimacy like a scab. "The Voices from the Other Room," one of the collection's two short-shorts, contains only dialogue. Using this Hemingwayesque technique in a hills-like-a-computer-virus kind of way, Bausch lets us overhear a man two months into an affair with his sister-in-law. After sex, the man's insecurities prompt a series of questions designed to evoke reassurance, succeeding only in provoking exasperation.

In both "Not Quite Final" and the title story, older men appear badly mismatched with younger mates. The former story follows the mingled yarn of love, boredom, comfort and irritation that constitute long-term relationships, while the latter's expert dialogue and well observed characterizing details show a quarrel simmering at a first anniversary dinner, neither spouse wrong, just clearly wrong for each other.

Often, the anguish slides down on a sweet coating of humor. "Par" is a wonderfully light yet astute tale of a middle-aged couple finding each other. The man's obsession with and lying about his golf game to a woman whose "features gave her a look of a sort of continual renouncement" becomes a vehicle to show how we misrepresent and deceive in mating, yet, when needs mesh, we manage to make a fit.

Flannery O'Connor once argued for distortion in fiction "because I am coming to believe it is the only way to make people see." Bausch more typically shows us aberration masquerading as everyday life. Yet, in "Nobody in Hollywood" (included in *Best American Short Stories, 1997*) he provides a menagerie of subtly hilarious grotesques who lie, pursue illusions and grow self-destructive, comically exaggerating how our search for love in ways certain to ensure its escaping us. Ignatius, 4'9", with "the sort of face that asked to be punched," meets his brother's girlfriend, who claims to have slept with Mick Jagger and Jerry Garcia and to descend from Crazy Horse and Mary Lincoln. His brother insists her beauty is unexcelled, "not even in Hollywood," but Ignatius finds her "ugly as month-old pizza," and that's when his heartaches begin.

Employing a variety of tones and techniques, with men who love "orchestrating the impressions of others" and speak "merely to punctuate his wife's anger," and women whose "laugh has notes in it that can alter the way blood flows through your veins" or "fix on you as if you were something to eat and swallow," Bausch again casts colorful light on contemporary humanity, letting us see ourselves as in a glass, less darkly.