Printer's Devil Review







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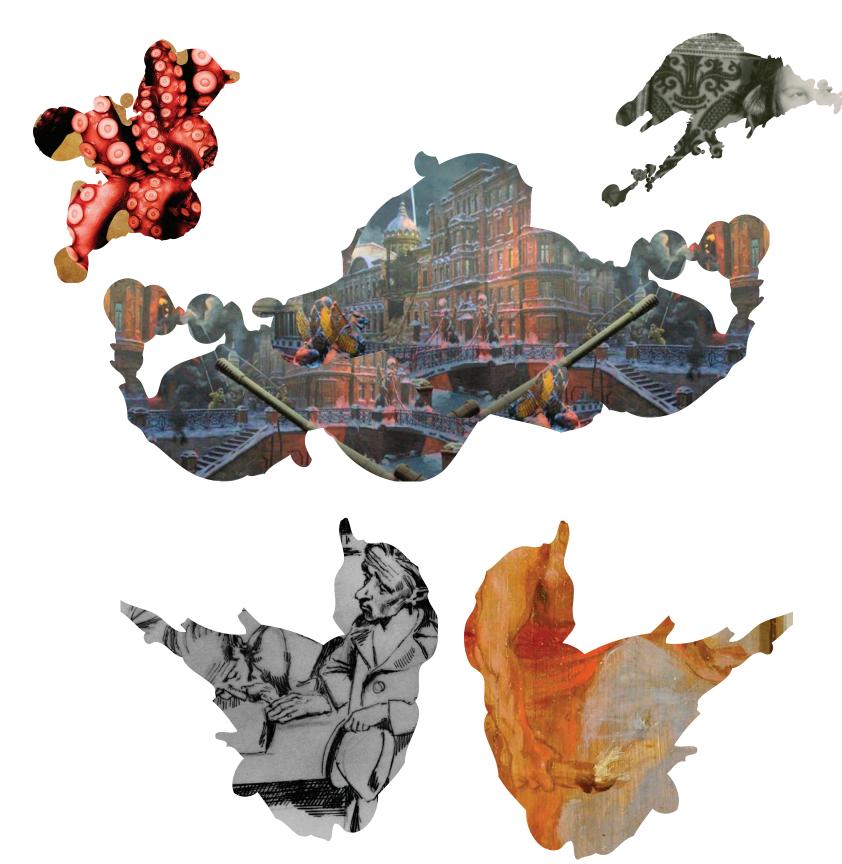
Duly Noted

The editors would like to congratulate Kendra DeColo, Gabrielle Reeve, Edward Porter, and Franz Wright for having work first published in *PDR* selected for inclusion in the forthcoming anthology, *Best Indie Lit New England*.

We would also like to thank book designer and poet Melissa Newman-Evans for lending us her talents. Melissa designed the layout for the section in this issue dedicated to the photographs of Caleb Cole.

On our website, we indicated that we would be publishing an essay in this issue about the Polish artist and writer Bruno Schulz on the 120th anniversary of his birth and the 70th anniversary of his murder. We regret that the author of the piece had to withdraw it.

We still wish to recommend Schulz's work to our readers, however. A writer of astounding imagination, Schulz is often compared to Franz Kafka, and was descibed by John Updike as "one of the great writers, one of the great transmogrifiers of the world into words." His short stories are collected in two books, available in English under the titles *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*. In 2004, the writer Jaimy Gordon authored a very fine essay on Schulz's life and work for *Michigan Quarterly Review* entitled "The Strange Afterlife of Bruno Schulz." The full-text of that article is available at: http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0043.101.



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Brad Abruzzi is author of a novel, *New Jersey's Famous Turnpike Witch*, and an attorney in the office of the general counsel at MIT. Brad graduated *cum laude* from Harvard Law School in 2001, where he served as executive editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. Brad also holds MA (New York University, 1998) and AB (Princeton University, 1995) degrees in English literature.

Sam Cha is an Mfa candidate in poetry at the University of Massachussetts, Boston, about to enter his third and final year. Before he was an Mfa candidate, he studied at Williams, UVA, and Rutgers. He's been published (poems, essays, translations) in *apt, anderbo, Opium Online, decomP, Radius, ASIA*, and *Amethyst Arsenic*, among others. And his favorite kind of pie's a mud pie with a rope ladder baked into it — lockpicks and chisels on the side, hold the tin plates.

CALEB COLE has received numerous awards for his work and exhibited at a variety of venues, including Gallery Kayafas (Boston), the Danforth Museum of Art (Framingham, MA), Photo Center Northwest (Seattle), Good Citizen Gallery (St. Louis), Childs Gallery (Boston), and Jenkins Johnson Gallery (NYC). He is represented in Boston, where he lives, by Gallery Kayafas.

CASSANDRA DE Alba's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Red Lightbulbs*, *Amethyst Arsenic*, *Neon*, and *FRiGG*. She has published several chapbooks and is working on another, but title-wise is never going to top 2009's *i am running away and joining a circus whose only act is to make the audience feel really, really bad about being happy*. She lives in Somerville, MA.

Howie Good, a journalism professor at suny New Paltz, is the author of five poetry collections, most recently *Dreaming in Red* from Right Hand Pointing and *Cryptic Endearments* from Knives Forks & Spoons Press. He has four chapbooks forthcoming: *Elephant Gun* from Dog on a Chain Press, *The Death of Me* from Pig Ear Press, *Living Is the Spin Cycle* from Redbird Chapbooks, and *Strange Roads* from Puddle of Sky Press.

In the true tradition of surrealism, Christopher Klein rejoices in the twist of life. Exquisitely painted, he creates curious predicaments the viewer feels compelled to unravel. Klein melds human, animal, past, and present with a careful, meticulous hand. Klein is a master of forcing the viewer out of his or her comfort zone.

JENEAN McBrearty is a graduate of San Diego State University and former community college instructor who taught political science and sociology at military installations and Des Moines Area Community College. Credits: reviewer of social science and history books for *Choice Magazine* (2006-2008); paid columnist for the *Lexington Herald–Leader* (2006); recipient of the EKU English department's Award for Graduate Nonfiction (2011); published in *Teaching for Success, Static Movement, Main Street Rag 2011 Anthology – Altered States, Wherever It Pleases*, including the *Anthology: Rustlings*, and *bioStories, Cobalt Review, Black Lantern*, and *Relief*, among others.

Joshua Murphy is an American artist, graphic designer, photographer and writer. He lives in New York City and is 35 years old. As a digital artist, he works in a medium that is perceived as very cold and impersonal. It is his goal to make sure each piece the he produces comes from a place of honesty, personal exploration, and passion.

F. Daniel Rzicznek's collections and chapbooks of poetry include *Vine River Hermitage* (Cooper Dillon Books 2011), *Divination Machine* (Free Verse Editions/ Parlor Press 2009), *Neck of the World* (Utah State University Press 2007), and *Cloud Tablets* (Kent State University Press 2006). His individual poems have appeared in *Boston Review, The New Republic, Orion, Mississippi Review, Hotel Amerika, Shenandoah*, and *Notre Dame Review*. Co-editor of *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry: Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice* (Rose Metal Press 2010), Rzicznek teaches writing at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio.

DEBORAH SCHWARTZ is a poet and fiction writer living and writing in Boston. Her poetry has been published in various journals including *The GW Review, modern words, The Comstock Review, Aeirings (UK), eclectica,* and *Contemporary American Voices* (forthcoming).

Gregory Tebbano finished his first novel, *Hunting the Barbazon*, at age twelve, filling three single-subject notebooks. Although the work did not bring the high accolades or movie deals it deserved, the prose did nonetheless contain some harrowing sword play and tactical engagements between galleons at sea. His short stories have since appeared in *Nimrod*, *Folio*, 322 *Review*, *Chum*, and *Mixed Fruit*.

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Veronica Văleanu teaches English at the M. Eminescu National College in Buzău, Romania. She is a member of the editorial board of english.agonia.net, an interactive poetry website. She says: "I think my identity in writing is about being a *survivivore*. A poem is nothing but a frequency of the consciousness, shifting from radiating to gravitational patterns, along with the feedback of the spaces that get imprinted with this energy."

Kirby Wright was a visiting fellow at the 2009 International Writers Conference in Hong Kong, where he represented the Pacific Rim region of Hawaii. He was also a visiting writer at the 2010 Martha's Vineyard Residency in Edgartown, MA, and the 2011 artist in residence at Milkwood International, Czech Republic. He is the author of the companion novels *Punahou Blues* and *Molika'r Nui Ahina*, both set in the islands.

Changmin Yuan, four-time Pushcart nominee and author of *Allen Qing Yuan* and *Chansons of a Chinaman*, grew up in rural China, holds a PhD in English, and currently tutors in Vancouver; his poetry appears in nearly 590 literary publications worldwide, including *Asia Literary Review*, *Best Canadian Poetry*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Mad Hatters' Review*, *Rattapallax*, *RHINO*, and *Sentence*.

F. DANIEL RZICZNEK

from Leafmold

Down, waiting for coffee, taken aback and probably exciting. I cigar. I federal. I thumps. Condoning detonators, reels, fools, in the parlor a crack, a minor groan. Tough steak, she says. Corn pone. Unconsciously perplexed, shrugged, squirming the rockslide into grudge, cropping grass plaintively. The horse didn't reckon, grown placid. Ain't that proof. The noise seemed to go on, the cellar uncertain, no difference. Someone spit. Easy reach and he walked away being hit matter-of-factly, content with a bullet of torment in the big pasture. Scatter, pretty – sopping Oklahoma to extend the nice visit, jest in her pocket. He shook his head. Read smart. A flag, a cause, and a death. The fire gave him an ugly mouth. It might not have, thinking that strawberry nipples undulating closed it to sorry. Engineers running out of her Colorado, he'd finally been dug, heels set toward the front door and top buttons, primly expecting smoked whiskey, clothes on a doornail, mostly moving a mark out of reach, flying through the wall. Both watched enough slack to recognize who was for an instant.

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JENEAN MCBREARTY

Warflower

Lergei," Olga said, nudging her brother's body. "Get up, we have to hurry." Sergei didn't move. How could anything be colder than my hands, she thought. But nothing was as cold as a dead body. Hunger spasms echoed in her stomach, but she tried not to cry. Extra fluid in her eyes and nose would freeze and make it difficult to breathe, and she had to get to work before the shelling began again. Thousands of people had slipped quietly away in the night since Dimitri Pavlov had inventoried the food supplies of Leningrad and cut rations a third time. Grief must wait. She thought only of staying alive.

If she took Sergei's body to the cellar where the other frozen Petrovich relatives were hidden, she'd have the family's ten ration cards. As a munitions worker, it meant she'd get ninety ounces of bread a day instead of nine.

Olga searched frantically for the ration card. Death was stalking her. Soon, she'd invite him to take her by doing something stupid. Maybe Sergei had saved some of his ration and died before he ate it. She felt a lump and withdrew what looked like a dirt clod. He hadn't even nibbled at the crust. She stuffed the clod between her legs, squeezed her thighs, and wrapped herself in the fur blanket, praying the frozen lump would thaw quickly. She felt it yield to pressure and brought it to her lips. Her gums hurt as she chewed, but she barely noticed. *Thank you my brother.* You've given me another day of life.

She didn't drag Sergei to the cellar. She gave his body a great shove and watched it careen down the steps. If she survived until spring, the bodies would be discovered. But by then, she prayed, the rumored Road of Life would have supplied the city, and the laws would be lifted. She could always say she was saving her family from cannibals. Stalin was massing the Red Army to retake Tikhvn, opening the railway line from Moscow – at least that was the latest news brought in by sled from across Lake Ladoga. Soon, the ice would be thick enough to support trucks. Perhaps by Christmas, Pavlov would increase rations as he had increased arms production quotas.

She dragged Sergei behind her grandmother's yellow brocade settee and covered him with an old quilt and a bicycle with a bent wheel, then crawled up the stairs and closed the cellar door. Carrying Sergei's boots in a threadbare valise, she joined the line of workers, three abreast, who marched through the wind to the Kirov munitions plant. They scattered when the first explosion signaled the onslaught of another day of deafening noise and death. Some turned back, seeking refuge in unsafe buildings with loved ones too weak to work any longer.

Olga turned towards Haymarket Street, where she could trade Sergei's boots for a portion of meat jelly – made from belts, or suitcases, anything leather. Today, just today, I will survive and cast a silver shell, and engrave Sergei's name on it, another one for Mama, and one for Papa, and seven more. Somewhere a soldier will fire them into the head of a Totenkopf helmet that will be a headstone for my family.

"I didn't see Sergei on the street," Tanya Savichev whispered as she and Olga waited in line for their bread. "Come stay with me. There's no one left for either of us."

Olga remembered the roster Tanya had made of all who had starved or frozen to death: Zhenya, Babushka, Leka, Dayda, Lesha Dedya, Mama. The list ended with the notation: Saviches Died. All Died. Only Tanya Remains.

"No," Olga said. "I want nothing that might keep me here. No friends, no teachers, no love."

They parted in Decembrists' Square, near the mound of sand that covered the statue of Peter the Great. It was Tanya's turn to play mother;

Jenean McBrearty

she gave the younger girl a kiss on the cheek. "Try to resist, Olga. Don't surrender to despair what you won't surrender to the Nazis."

At eleven and twelve, the two of them had joined the thirty thousand, mostly women and students, who built the 200-mile defenses at the Luga River and dug air-raid shelters and trenches to protect the city's two million inhabitants. As part of the People's Volunteers, Olga had worked alongside the very young and the very old, hour after back-breaking hour, her hands bloodied and raw, her body so exhausted she believed she wouldn't make it back to the city even if a machine gun didn't kill her. Someone had told her that Shostakovich had tried to volunteer, announcing that only fighting could save humanity. Her father had said much the same thing as he and Nicolaus took leave from their wives and children. "Live, my little one," he'd told her. She promised to obey. Now twelve, Olga readied herself for menses that never came. Hunger had kept her from becoming a woman. Now she could be a soldier.

Eventually, the Luga line – defended by poets, writers, artists, and children – had fallen to twenty-nine divisions of German soldiers. Three months after the invasion, Leningrad had been contained – no way in or out – but no German jackboot had yet entered Peter's city. But how long did Stalin believe the weakest could be strong? Olga dreamed of her father and Nicolaus, dead in Moscow from a German barrage, dying before they knew the Petroviches were all dead and only Olga remained.



Coming from the factory was even more dangerous than the going. As if hunger and cold obeyed the *Fuehrer*'s orders too, they hounded the workers. The fallen were loaded onto sleds by loved ones. Others, without family, simply let Death take them without resistance. Olga avoided the temptation to lie beside them by taking the longer way to her family's house on the Neva River, past the Academy of Arts. It was foolish to believe that the Nazis shelled in a pattern that exempted the route after four o'clock, but she believed it anyway. If nothing else, the route provided more places to hide. Her ears still aching and ringing from the rumblings of the machines, she scurried to find one of those hiding places when an explosion demolished the myth.

The shell hit a block away, but she was knocked to the ground. Amid the rain of debris and snowflakes, she was choking, trying to crawl somewhere, anywhere to escape. She felt herself vomit. How long could she keep breathing out? She covered her head with her coat, trying to filter the air, but felt herself fading into unconsciousness. *Eli, eli, lama sabchthani?* A hand gripped her arm, and she felt herself being dragged by her coat sleeve.

When she woke up inside a small candle-lit room, the bombardment was still raging, but it was muffled. *I must be underground*. Impossibly, she was warm.

She crawled out of the covers and took in a great, full breath – it was the smell of fire. Not the fire of exploding shells, but of a hearth. She ran to it and stoked the embers. *Don't die. Don't die.* She put a dry log on the coals and the bark caught.

"Thank you," she said to the man in the Komsomol uniform. He was braced against the wall like a gargoyle, next to a fur-covered bed. A bear's head, its teeth bared in a perpetual snarl, stared up at him. She'd never seen a dead person standing. Death usually knocked them over. Perhaps if she questioned him. The dead don't answer.

"What is this place?" she said, looking around the red-velvet draped room. The stony face waxed a half-smile. "A room under the Archbishop's wine cellar. Legend has it Catherine the Great fucked her footman here when she was supposed to be in church confessing her sins." He struck a match and lit a pipe with a carved ivory bowl.

He stayed against the wall, watching her.

"How do you know about - here?"

"My father was the Archbishop's groundsman. Procurer's more apt. They both brought whores here. And they were both killed in the Bolshevik purge. You're hungry." He laid his pipe on the mantle, put a kettle over the fire, and unwrapped fish fillets that he chopped into chunks. The smell of fresh fish made Olga sway. "I'm Vladimir Zuhkov. Director of the Komsomol. You're Nicolaus' sister. Olga, is it?"

"Yes, sir." He cut a bright orange carrot and half a cabbage and added them to the boiling water. "You have food," she said.

"We're having fish soup." Was that a potato he took from his sack? "There are some very stupid people in Russia, Olga. Pavlov, for instance. Did he

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really believe people whose relatives were slaughtered by Stalin's thugs would donate their food caches? All those lavish May dinners – you'd think everyone would have known the pact with Hitler was meaningless." He handed Olga a chunk of sweet cabbage and she held it to her mouth, almost afraid to taste it lest it disappear. "Sergei isn't with you."

"He took the short way home." Olga took a bite of cabbage, determined not to gobble it down, but one taste and she swallowed it like a dog.

"Bullshit. You think I'm going to turn you in when I'm hoarding too? When did he die?"

"Last night." She sat down on the stone hearth and watched Vladimir add a squash and seasoning to the pot. No perfume had ever smelled so delicious.

"Twenty thousand a day. That's the truth. But according to Papa Joe – two thousand a day." Vladimir stirred the soup slowly, occasionally taking a taste. "He doesn't want anyone to know how unprepared his communist utopia was for Hitler." Vladimir spat over his right shoulder.

"Did you know my father?" Vladimir looked as old as her father, and she wondered how he had escaped conscription south. He ladled out a serving of soup into a wooden bowl and handed it to her. She cradled it in her hands, letting the steam cleanse her nostrils of the remnants of the Nazi shell. Vladimir rummaged around in a rucksack again.

"Your father wasn't a party man. I'm like you. I find my own way in our common cause." He gave her an army spoon, inspected his pipe, and rapped it gently on the inside of the fireplace to empty its ashes.

"You're not eating?" she said. "It's wonderful." Tears rolled down her cheeks. She and Sergei had passed St. Basil's Church many times with empty stomachs and shivering limbs, never knowing that a Tsar's banquet was steps away in the wine cellar beneath. Why did he save me? He could have saved Sergei too.

"I don't eat when I'm not hungry." He put his pipe back on the mantle, pulled the bear rug off the bed, and spread it on the floor in front of the fire. "Come sit by me," he said, offering her his hand. She didn't take it, but shifted to the rug. "I have something for you." He opened the rucksack and drew out a glistening tin. "Chocolate."

Olga reached for the tin with trembling fingers, praying he wouldn't take it away, salivating at the mere mention of the word.

"Oh, God," she said. "Real chocolate?"

Inside the tin were six hand-dipped truffles, their tops swirled into sugary peaks. "Real *German* chocolate. Orange and marzipan. Buttercream and hazelnut."

"How did you get them? When?" Olga said. It seemed like treason to enjoy German anything, though her father had told her German beer was the best in the world – and he'd been to China.

"Does it matter? All we have is what's here," Vladimir said.

Olga took a bite and let the chocolate melt on her tongue, savoring the taste of sugar that brought back memories of Christmas and Eastertide, of birthdays and family dinners where the men drank too much and the women danced too fast. Vladimir had given her heaven and hell in a small metal box embossed with a double-headed eagle. Kaiser Chocolate. The best Bavaria had to offer. How could people who made such blessed candy make such a terrible war?

"I've never tasted anything so good in my life," she said.

"Have you ever been kissed?"

"No, sir."

"Nothing is as sweet as the taste of love." Vladimir let her take another truffle and watched her lips pucker in ecstasy. "Do you want another?" he said.

"Yes, Sir." Olga reached for another candy, and Vladimir brushed her hand away.

"Not that one." She chose another and popped it into her mouth.

"Did you want that one?" she said, ashamed of her greed.

Vladimir slowly shook his head from side to side. "It's got a cyanide capsule in it. One bite and you'd have been dead in three minutes." Olga clutched her throat. "You're in no danger." He moved the truffle to the back of the tin. "One of these," he said, pointing to the other two, "is laced with arsenic, but that takes days to kill. Cyanide makes the body smell like almond – like marzipan."

"You could kill someone..."

"Only certain someones." Vladimir pulled a photograph from his rucksack and placed it on the rug in front of her. "Sasha Zhdanov – the Mayor's nephew."

Olga recognized his name from the newspapers. "Why would you want to kill him?"

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"Hitler's in a bind. He's got to protect his oil sources on the Black Sea and he can't do that with troops in Moscow and Leningrad. If the city doesn't fall soon, Papa Joe will resupply it as soon as the ice can support transport trucks on Lake Ladoga and Hitler'll be following Napoleon home. Zhdonov's a Russian Nazi bringing in poisoned meat from Kobona for the Komsomol rations. Without the firefighters, thousands more will die. Who'll miss them when we can't keep count now?" Vladimir gave her another tin of candy. "This one is all for you. Go ahead. It's safe."

Olga held the photograph as Vladimir spoke, gazing at the glossy five by seven of a handsome man in his twenties. How easily she could have been killed. None of the young men would turn down fresh meat any more than she could turn down chocolate. She opened her tin and saw six more truffles. "Does Sasha like chocolate?" she said.

"Yes, Olga. And he likes little girls too."



Sasha's death couldn't appear to be murder. His body would be found under a heap of rubble by a firefighter and recorded as a bombing casualty. That way the people would not have betrayal added to their woes. Mayor Zuhdrov would be consoled rather than hanged. "And I can continue to catch traitors," Vladimir explained.

For three days Olga had remained underground, sleeping mostly and asking Vladimir questions about Sasha's assassination. "Tanya will tell everyone I'm dead when I don't show up for work. Will the firefighters find me too – after?"

Vladimir had brought his radio downstairs from the church – dangerous because of its spires, but the best place for reception. "They'll find you in the church. You won't be a suspect. Sasha keeps his sexual desires secret." Vladimir was cooking again, this time sharing his ration of pork and offering dried fruit for dessert. "There's news – Captain Norov ordered sixty trucks onto the ice. Sasha is driving in a full load of flour and meat. He'll be here tonight."

After she ate, Vladimir cut her hair – Sasha liked his little girls to look like little boys – and took her to the bathroom where she had her first hot wash in three months. He gave her rose-perfumed soap and scrubbed her nails with a soft brush. First her hands, then her feet. And after her

bath, he gave her lilac-scented powder and lavender lotion for her skin. The noise of the guns and the smell of death had faded. In their place was the music of small talk as she made herself smell like a soft garden. Vladimir didn't even look at her, avoiding her eyes as if he was ashamed.

He gave her a white silk dressing gown that wrapped around her almost twice. He dried her hair and combed gently through the tangles. When he was through, he finally gazed at her, bowed his head into his folded hands, and sobbed. "You're a beautiful girl, Olga. Someday a man will give you his heart. Be merciful."

"What do I do after Sasha's dead?" She looked above him to the gold-framed mirror where Catherine might have admired herself while readying for her footman. Her candle-lit reflection surprised her. She'd never thought about being pretty. Only when the boys had begun to stare, dreamily and anxiously, shuffling from foot to foot in her presence, had she realized the power of freckled pink skin and large eyes. Her skin was no longer freckled or pink, her eyes no longer large. They were sinking back into her body, shrinking from the hunger for love as well as food. She was a sack of bones that would never hold life even if she lived through the war. And she would never have enough lovers to take the place of her family. All she had was Vladimir, kneeling before her, slipping her feet into white satin slippers.

"Afterwards, dress in your warmest clothes and go upstairs to the church. Hide in one of the confessionals. I'll haul the body to the wall behind the church and bury it under stones and mortar, and then come for you."

"Where will you be when he's here?"

"Drinking with the other drivers after we unload the truck. I'll ask what's happened to Sasha, and someone will say he's probably visiting his family."

"And the poisoned food?"

"That's my job. I'll get rid of it along with his truck. German shells will be lucky again." As he drained the tub, Olga sat down in a chintz overstuffed chair and leaned back, almost disappearing into its plllowy comfort.

"What if he doesn't want me or the chocolate?"

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"I forget you know nothing about a man's desires," he said. His hands were scarred, though clean from washing her; his hair was thick and wild as blackberry brambles. But his eyes were calm. They looked at her with cold determination. He was no hesitant schoolboy who giggled and blushed at the sight of a woman's breast, and pressed his palm against his thigh to hide his pleasure. "Here's what you do," he said. "Put the chocolate here." His hands parted her legs and he put his finger between the pink layers of flesh. Olga shivered. His mouth pressed against her chest, his face half-hidden by the dressing-gown lapels. She couldn't see his other hand, but heard him unbutton his pants and saw his arm move back and forth. She heard herself groan, and he lowered his head between her legs, rubbing his face on her hairless mound. "God almighty, what war does to people."



Death wasn't terrible. Watching a man die was terrible. Sasha knew seconds after he swallowed the candy that he had only minutes to live and fewer to be lucid. Gasping, Sasha grabbed her round the waist and held her tight, struggling to get hold of her throat. He seemed to be trying to speak, but only a soft gurgle came out before chocolate foam spilled over her flailing arms.

He tried to bite her. Even a little of the poison in her, and she would die too. Olga kicked him away and rolled off the bed.

He lay there, convulsing like a man with St. Vitus's Dance until the death rattle erupted from his lungs. She pulled herself up and staggered to the fireplace, panting. Three days of food, warmth, and rest had given her enough strength to fight him off, but the effort had claimed all her energy. It was fear, not cold, that made her teeth chatter. One life for thousands. She was a heroine no one would ever celebrate. She'd done a patriotic duty no one would ever read about. She'd saved lives no one would ever thank her for saving. She clutched the mantle to steady herself and breathed slowly. He hadn't held her long enough to contaminate her, but she stripped off the dressing gown, shook off her shoes, and stood there naked.

She wanted Vladimir to come quickly, to rid the room of the corpse. She saw his pipe on the mantle and held on to it - a talisman to protect

her from Sasha's angry spirit, if there were such things. She slumped to the hearth and held the pipe over her heart, rubbing its ivory bowl with her fingers and whispering a thankful prayer. She had killed a Nazi dog. She would kill hundreds more. She'd shaken hands with Death and found him reasonable. When it was her time to go with him, she'd know it. Just as Sasha had.

Her heart was quiet now. Blood was no longer slamming through her veins, terror no longer urging her to run. She sighed. She would wait for Vladimir here, not in the confessional. She knew enough about the dead to know they can't hurt you. She held the pipe in her lap, and caressed its carved design, its circles and edges. She held it up and examined it. There were letters near the base of the bowl. She could make out a partial outline of one because of the ash that filled in the spaces — a T.

Olga took a pinch of ash and rubbed them over the surface of the bowl, then wiped it with part of the dressing gown's sleeve to reveal a skull and crossbones.

She turned the bowl and saw the familiar twisted cross of a swastika, and around the bottom – τ -o- τ -e-N-K-O-P-F – Deathshead. The insignia of the ss.

If Vladimir was pretending to be a Nazi, he would have German chocolate and an ss insignia carved on his pipe. He would have a radio and monitor transmissions from Soviet forces. She felt her heart begin to race again, then laughed at her suspicions.

The apathy of starvation had transformed into childish imagination. She was no longer a child. She was a Russian Mata Hari. She felt a chill and realized she was still naked. Vladimir must keep extra clothes somewhere – a woolen sweater or another pair of socks. She went to the bathroom closet and found a white cotton shirt, a pair of socks, a new pair of boots, and a red woolen scarf that was so long she could use it as a sash. She stood in front of the full-length mirror and struck a gallant pose. She looked like a Cossack. Thoughts of afternoons with Tanya playing dress-up made her smile. If Tanya could see her now, she wouldn't recognize her. No one had seen her with short hair. She did look like a boy.

She sat down in the overstuffed chair and pulled on one of the boots. When she pulled on the other, she heard paper crumpling. She reached

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inside and drew out an envelope with old photographs inside – of her. And by her side, Sergei. They were younger – Olga nine and Sergei ten, walking past St. Basil's in their school uniforms on a sunny day, carrying their books and lunch boxes. She felt inside the boot again and drew out another envelope – and another. In each one was a picture of her and Sergei – one of them on the school steps, only they were a little older. And the third one – the buildings around their house were still intact and they were sitting on the porch drinking lemonade. Before the war. Before the hunger. He'd been watching them, following them. Maybe waiting for her to be alone.

Olga replaced the envelopes in the toe, and returned the boots to the closet. Was it possible for Vladimir to have loved her her whole life? She lifted the candle to the shelf and saw a box – Schrade's Boots Danzig. She tried to move it but it didn't slide easily. There was something in it. She set the candle on the floor, wrapped her hands around the sides of the box and pulled it towards her. Socks, maybe. It wasn't heavy.

She lifted the lid. There, in layers separated by vellum sheets were photographs of young girls, each picture covered by shorn tresses tied with ribbons. Gingerly, as one would touch a worm, she traced the scrawls at the bottom of the pictures. Carla Berlin 1935. Giselle Berlin 1938. Marta Poland 1939. She pulled a picture from the bottom of the box. Margrita Vienna 1925.

Her body jerked, knocking over the candle. It went out and she scrambled out of the closet to the false safety of the living room fireplace. These girls were not Russian assassins, yet they each wore a white silk robe and white satin slippers. And each stared into the camera with the fixed glassy eyes of the dead.

She brought her hand to her heart, remembering Vladimir's mouth on her nipples. Nausea was siphoning her strength. How could she have let him touch her? He'd saved her, fed her. She wanted to feel safe. To feel loved. To feel something other than pain. She didn't want to die without making more memories. Excuses. She wanted him to touch her, to feel like a woman. Why did Hitler want her dead? She didn't even know him. Why did Vladimir want her dead?

The aroma of almonds hung in the air. She went to the bed and stared down at Sasha's wide-open eyes. She forced them closed and put the pillow over his face. She ran to the bathroom and vomited. Truth was hammering inside her brain. She was only alive because Vladimir needed an alibi. She was just one of many who would join the girls in the box. She had gotten away from Sasha because the poison had weakened him quickly. But if Vladimir wanted to kill her, she couldn't fight him. Yet she knew. She had to fight. Fight fear. The only enemy here now.

She went back to the closet for the suitcase next to the Schrade's box. Inside she found civilian clothes. The woolen pants were too long, so she cut them and folded the cuffs. The shirt sleeves she rolled up. She slipped on two pairs of socks and stuffed her feet into her boots. Once dressed, she scoured the cupboards for food she could take with her. Into the rucksack she stuffed a half loaf of bread, two tins of peaches, and two tins of sardines. She didn't trust any of the other supplies, especially the chocolate tins. She rifled through Sasha's coat pockets, taking ten rubles and his ration card from his wallet – then found treasure. Sasha's Nagant was still in his shoulder holster. She pulled out the pistol and checked the chamber. Full. Seven shots.

"If it comes down to it," Mama had told Papa, "I'll do it. No Nazi will lay a hand on Olga." Every woman in Leningrad had seen films of Nazi atrocities in Poland. Most men left their side arms with their women, and the women kept them loaded next to their beds – until the food ran out. When the enemy became hunger, the rounds were spent on dogs, cats, horses, birds, and finally rats; the pistols became useless. But Olga had learned to shoot. Papa said the Nagant was accurate only at close range. To take down Vladimir, she'd have to be close to him.

Olga placed the boot box back on the shelf and burned her old clothes, watching the flames consume the dirty rags the way the Red Army had scorched the grain fields in the Ukraine, and the way the Nazis had set ablaze the cities of cities of Kiev, Minsk, Kursk, Smolensk, Novgorod, Kazaki, as it retreated further and further East, and the people moved entire factories on railcars, wagons, and horseback just ahead of the invaders. The Bulgarians had formed what they called partisans, civilian forces that lived off the land and fought in tiny bands. It was rumored young people in Leningrad were forming their own partisan units. She would join them. Women were learning to fly fighter planes – she'd learn to handle a rifle and a bayonet.

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"You were right, Vladimir. Sasha was a thief at heart, and he paid dearly for stealing your chocolates." The muffled sound of another voice surprised Olga. She hid behind the closet curtain, the Nagant cocked and ready to fire as soon as Vladimir came into the bathroom.

Candlelight, she discovered, let her see through the light cotton. When he discovered she was not in the confessional, Vladimir would look to see if her clothes were still where he'd put them, to see if she was dead in the bathroom, or had fled in fear.

"Help me put on his coat," she heard Vladimir say. "Where is his pistol?"

"He doesn't like to wear it when he loads; it fires easily if it's dropped and he's afraid he'll shoot himself. Stupid bastard. His dick is out."

"Put it back in his pants, Boris."

"Me? I'm not touching Sasha's dick. What's it doing out anyway?"

"It's not like he's going to slap your hand. He's stiff." Vladimir paused. "He probably took a piss while he was eating the chocolate and was able to make it back to the bed. There. Happy?" She heard a thud, and the sound of Sasha being dragged off, and their fading laughter. If Boris heard the shots and returned, she would have to kill him too.

But Vladimir returned alone. She heard the door close and then Vladimir's voice: "Das ist Lennigrad – konnen Sie mich lessen? Der Bar ist tot...nein...Tikhvin ist verloren? Mein Gott..." She slipped out of the closet and watched him from the darkness. He put the radio aside. Olga could see his lips quiver. She could read defeat in his face. The rail line was open.

Vladimir wiped tears from his eyes and slowly rose from the bed. Olga heard a heavy sigh escape his lips, and when he took his hand away from his eyes, she fired into his face three times.

He spun backwards. A bloody hand slapped the wall and then slid down to the reddening sheet. Globs of spattered gray and white flesh hung on the wall and then tumbled onto Vladimir's black hair. She waited for Boris. When he pushed open the door, she stepped from behind the door and fired three shots into the back of his head. His body was propelled forward and landed on the bear rug in front of the hearth.

She removed the men's boots, belts, and holsters and wrapped them in white silk. The meat jelly and the sardines would keep her alive until the first supply train could arrive. She took the pistols too, stuffing them in the rucksack along with the men's ration cards and the thirty rubles they had between them. Papa Joe will want people to stay and work in the factories, and he will never apologize for abandoning Leningrad and its women and children to fight the Nazis alone. But she wouldn't stay. If the trains and the trucks could get into the city, she could get out – to fight. Thousands more will die. Who will miss them when we can't keep count now?

As if to acknowledge the Tikhvin defeat, the German guns were silent. But by the time Olga reached Decembrists' Square, the shelling had begun again.

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Jenean McBrearty

CASSANDRA DE ALBA

Tchaikovsky, 1944

The ballerina is careful of her feet around bullets sparkling in the snow. She pauses at each pine tree, listening for the sound of dance, hearing nothing but the night yawning and unhinging his jaw.

She ties a scarf around a soldier's missing jaw, avoiding a severed foot wrapped like a present in the night. Her footprints are muddled in the bloody snow. The ballerina wants only to dance but these bodies and trees

are such poor partners. The trees lean crooked like bad teeth.

She is trapped in an awful dance, avoiding rats by lifting her feet well over the dirty snow.

They have started to eat bodies in the night.

The ballerina stumbles because the night is so thick. Among the trees she has found a soldier half-covered in snow, a walnut still in his mouth.

She remembers days when her feet were not cold, when the dance

was one they would have danced together, while the night watched in jealousy, stamping his feet and shaking the trees.

Now he smiles wide-jawed and it begins to snow.

On stage, she loved the soap-flake snow for its elegance, the way it danced harmless with them, the taste in her mouth when her smile was too wide. Night gives the snow menace, each tree an enemy, no place to rest her feet.

Her mouth open, she tastes the snow. Her feet do not recognize this dance. The night makes false princes of the trees.

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CHANGMING YUAN

Y

You love Y, not because it's the first letter
In your family name, but because it's like
A horn, which the water buffalo in your
Native village uses to fight against injustice
Or, because it's like a twig, where a crow
Can come down to perch, a cicada can sing
Towards the setting sun as loud as it wants to
More important, in Egyptian hieroglyphics
It stands for a real reed, something you can
Bend into a whistle or flute; in pronouncing it
You can get all the answers you need, besides
You can make it into a heart-felt catapult
And shoot at a snakehead or sparrow, as long
As it is within the range of your boyhood.

F. DANIEL RZICZNEK

from Leafmold

I absorb moss through my ears, through my toes, through my glands. I absorb moss through a taxi cab headlight, through a syringe in my wrist. Music flows from the moss, heavy as steam in the first week of winter - through muscle, through map, through a stiff-collared yellow shirt, music flows unhindered. Sitting on top of the world, I absorb moss where fields have been planted on the graves of trees. I absorb moss through painted eggs, through the bullet-spray of snow and the prayers of the greedy. Music flows: a headland of moss rushing under a mountain of torn raincoats. The moss flows west, then north, then east in me, lakes and pools mirrored by the shadows of moss crossing light, light absorbed through eye, reflected by moss. Music absorbs moss, moss absorbs music: a woman wails gospel until lungs ache. Moss intervenes where water threatens collision, sundering, and vice. Music rushes between these things, bent on disappearance. My cells sing to the moss – the music conquering and thereby conquered.



Caleb Cole

text by Joshi Radin layout by Melissa Newman-Evans



Caleb Cole is most excited by artists who use photography in nontraditional ways. He knows how to make pretty pictures, but he's more interested in crossing the medium or mashing it up. "I love August Sander," he says, "but I'm not like him."

Cole begins with an idea and then imposes a set of rules for its exploration, examining the original concept through a process that places his images in perpetual motion, swinging

In his series *Odd One Out*, the artist examines a selection of old group photos. From this data set, he erases all but one figure from the group (likely a person wearing an affectless, blank expression). We focus on this individual plucked from the crowd. Confined by the white space where companions once crowded, she is alone even in the company of others.

The nature of the series is very democratic. No one image trumps the others. Otherwise mundane images - from class photos, reunions, school bands, clubs, and sometimes more intimate moments such as weddings and scenes of home life - all serve to demonstrate the universal and arbitrary nature of lives lived in isolation. Cole exposes a very intimate experience and yet persistently depersonalizes it.

between the poles of repetition and difference. Much like in his project Other People's Clothes, the total series achieves something greater than the sum of its parts. Precisely because of the insistent repetition, the random isolation of these particular individuals in the image becomes a point of unity. As a group, they are all alone together.

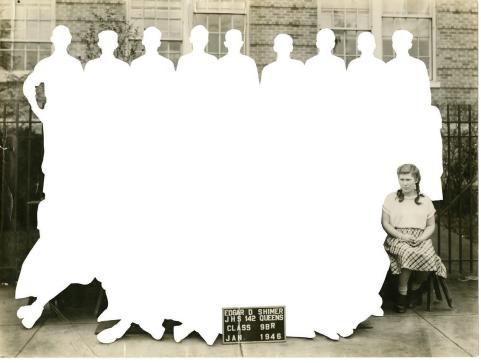
> Opposite: In the Band, 2010 Above: Maid of Honor, 2010



Above: After School, 2012 // Below: Big Sister, 2012 Opposite, above: The Company, 2010 // Opposite, below: JHS ww 9BR, 2012



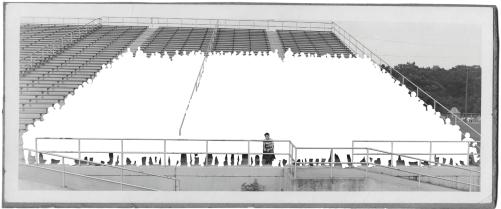




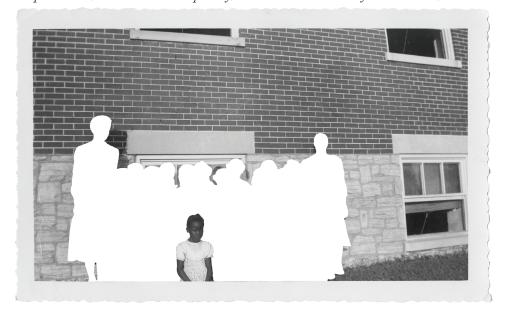








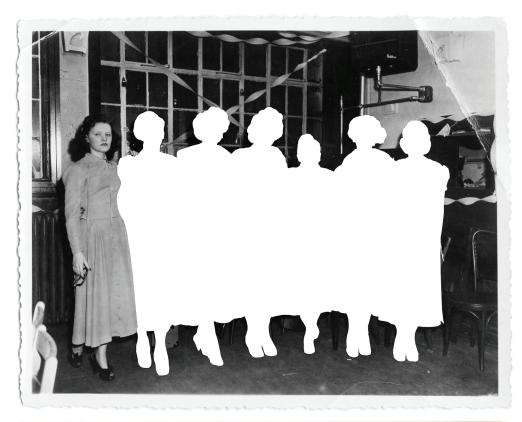
Opposite: above: The Professor, 2012 // Opposite, helow: Bad News, 2012 Top: There Yet, 2012 // Middle: Pep Rally, 2012 // Bottom: The Only One in School, 2012





Above: Boys' Club, 2010 // Below: Tuba Player, 2012 Opposite, above: With the Girls, 2010 // Opposite, below: Down in Front, 2012







DEBORAH SCHWARTZ

Pearl Bird

for Dorothea Lasky

We've all had the experience of looking across the bathtub and feeling like your toes belong to someone else. Even though I have the hiccups, It's you in the window waiting for me.

I came from the small shtetl of my mother's tongue and now am wearing this green dress.

I like the block flower print, the black against the green, the gold of the snow, the pearl bird.

I could teach the dead something.
They sure have taught me a lot.
I taught a mother something once.
It had to do with remembering what it's like to be a daughter.
That's what the dead have taught me.
That and that there's a god that though made us in his own image, is too shy to talk to us.

VERONICA VĂLEANU

Earthscraper

oh, the light is just glitzing up bottomless pits with its way of brandishing our spirit. or it might as well be a follow-up for stuffing it back inside them. anyway, I can't remain housebound forever. as soon as I step over the threshold the place just vanishes. the others are copies of me, displayed everywhere to burnish the blur. we commingle, let our particulars get quickly embedded, and only then do I strive to stick out, to see what other things are worth staying in radiance of. high-heeled shoes hovering over transparent shelves. a split second, the ultimate peephole moment. the shop window suddenly swallows me inside, as it won't have me any other way than brandishing up all my shiny coins at every floor. for this is the skyscrape way to my recondite den. I put on the high heels and glitz up farther in minimally invasive spirits.

SAM CHA

For Light, For Fire

But all I've got's this car-exhaust-blue whiff of naphtha, click whirr scrape of flint and knurled steel, tongue flick of orange and soot in an oblong of dull metal, corners rounded and nicked. Hard as brass, bold as brass –

But wounded, still. Feel it.

The snaking abrasions, hair-trap tangle of them, slick under fingers like warm wax.

Don't the impressions melt? See how leisurely the light falls, how it drips off your skin

to mist the worn chrome, how slowly it evaporates, condenses into sight. All our reflections are warped and already past. Our mouths smear like fingerprints. The volatile hydrocarbons of the eye sublime and deposit. This is how

we perceive. We are remembering.

Take that jaundice yellow patch, there.

That's two weeks of rain, a rusty
chain, one too many pills. He floated
over the handlebars into the sweet syrup

of the air, felt the brake handle bloom in his thigh like an orgasm, heard his Zippo clattering on the pavement. It's been so long since I was him. The scar on my leg is fading, and I don't remember much else

about him. I think he lay in the street flat on his back. I think there was more rain. A flicker of lightning. There was dark and there was streetlamp. Shadow spreading vulture wings. The turnpike moaned.

He couldn't see it. There were drugs, raindrops, trees, houses, streets, other lives between them. At that distance it might have sounded like the sea. It must have sounded like tide. It must have sounded like all of us, chained to time.

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BRAD ABRUZZI

New Jersey's Famous Turnpike Witch

In a small roadside strip of woods ten miles north of the Walt Whitman Service Area, Alice Delphine Merkel sits Indian style, nibbles at a peanut butter sandwich in a baggie, and takes stock of her situation. After peaking at number seven back in February, the Turnpike Witch has very nearly dropped out of Crimedog.com's Top Forty Outlaws List. This week's rankings mark a two-year low for Alice's alter ego on Crimedog's thermometer of criminal notoriety. The Crimedog rankings are adjusted every Monday after a week's aggressive online polling. Alice and her crew put a lot of stock in the Crimedog power poll because, unlike your standard government-issue wanted lists, Crimedog takes account of factors like degree of difficulty and artistic expression. By those standards, she used to fare rather well.

But the American attention span is short: you keep giving the people what they want, or they look elsewhere. Alice Merkel has been in hiding for four months – and, as her three partners in crime, her "Engineers," have been saying, the legend of New Jersey's Famous Turnpike Witch is slipping. So says Crimedog, so says the blogosphere, and so say the many and various celebrity pundits on the cable networks. Hits at her unofficial

This piece was adapted from the author's novel, New Jersey's Famous Turnpike Witch, available as an ebook from Amazon's Kindle Store.

website are dwindling, and with them the ad revenues and merchandise sales that Alice relies on these days to support herself.

"You've got to *do something*," her Engineers told her this morning, after she confronted them about the crushed Prozac she had detected in her Diet Coke. They've made certain compromises and sacrifices on her behalf, and they depend on her for their living. She is letting them – everybody – down. She gets that. Even the insects in these woods feel betrayed. Usually the presence of the Witch brings the trees close to bursting with fanfare and flourish: the crickets excitedly chirping and the fireflies aglow. Not so today. It's as if they've been slighted. It has been far too long since she's come to visit. Far too long since she's even left her drool-caked fold-out couch in the Engineers' truck-trailer. But the sabbatical ends today. It is high time now for Alice, New Jersey's Famous Turnpike Witch, to give her audience – her crickets, her human admirers, the poor government drudges who hunt her – a show.

Or so she tells herself. The problem is: her body is not convinced. This headache, its accompanying low-grade fever, and the shudder-tremors in her hands are pressing an argument that today might not be the best day for her to get back to business. The Turnpike Witch's "business," such as it is, is serial traffic disruption. More specifically, it is performance art - the kind of spirited traffic disruption that draws the inconvenienced traveler away kicking and screaming from talk radio into a unique and satisfying real-life experience. There are three key ingredients here: (1) a dramatic, expressive gesture (2) in full costume (3) in the middle of the road. The problem is that these days Alice Merkel does not particularly enjoy her business. She has reached that point on the career arc where the diva first mixes alcohol and barbiturates, sold-out tours are canceled due to "exhaustion," and her agent asks that fans "respect her privacy at this difficult time." Being the Witch has ceased to be exhilarating, or meaningful, or important to Alice. All this has become, well, business, and she is tired of it. Tired of answering to Crimedog, her overly devoted fan base, her Engineers.

There is more to this malaise than simple self-absorption. There was a freak accident during her last gig, back in March. A squad car rushing to arrest her hit a guardrail. Two cops almost bought it. There is also the fact that she has, by no fault of her own, acquired a mortal,

monomaniacal enemy named David Crilly. Alice knows very little about Crilly, except that he cropped up out of nowhere a year ago, he appears regularly on television to call her a "harpy" and a "Jezebel," and on the strength of that rhetoric he was appointed by the governor last week to lead the heretofore couldn't-be-bothered "special committee" that the New Jersey Turnpike Authority formed some time ago to identify and capture the Turnpike Witch.

There is plenty more to this background – more to the car crash, more to Crilly's obsession with the Witch, more to the political circumstances underlying his appointment. But Alice is already struggling under the weight of this much exposition. She can't be thinking about this now. She needs to steel herself for what will be a demanding performance. The program she has settled on for this evening is a rerun. An old favorite, tried and true: traffic-surfing. It sounds complicated, looks dangerous, but is really a piece of cake so long as you concentrate:

First, wait for a lull in the traffic, then walk out into the road, shoot up flares. The cars will stop for you. If they don't, you're screwed, so count on them stopping. When the cars pull up, you climb the hood of the one in front. You pull the bull-horn from your belt, kneel down just behind the hood ornament, and with one hand on hip and the other holding the megaphone – an authoritative posture is crucial to success here – you order the driver to pull up. Supply further squawk through the megaphone as necessary to get the driver's foot off his brake. As the car inches forward, mindful of the world-renowned celebrity perched on its hood, you skip up onto the car's roof, drop down on the trunk, and jump from this car's back bumper to the hood of the next, which should follow close behind its front-side counterpart without instruction. The front car, dismissed now from the spotlight, will motor off into oblivion.

Through strict, deliberate repetition of this process you should be able to traverse the full column of traffic. Step lightly. Be respectful of the cars underneath you. The drivers and passengers should suffer, at worst, only a minor delay in transit. The driver-spectators should take back to their dreary lives the emblazoned image of Grace itself, draped in glowing orange, gliding through the night over their cars without a sound or noticeable footstep, as though she were flying.

There are traps to avoid, of course: open sunroofs, CB antennas perilously placed – minivans, trucks, SUVs offer variable heights that are tougher to scale. You might consider stepping sideways to a car in the other lane when a particularly problematic vehicle (say, a motorcycle) pulls up next. Though not so ambitious as some of your best-remembered undertakings, like November 2009's "Operation Cheese Doodle," or your buck-naked infiltration of the Moorestown state trooper

station last year, an evening of traffic-surfing could be just the ticket to get the Turnpike Witch back in the public eye.

Alice could not have chosen a better night to retake the stage. The air is crisp and cool, the sky peppered with stars and Windexed clean, but for a crowd of clouds streaming quickly by a thumbnail moon that would, if it could, hitch a ride. A potential for witchcraft hangs on every molecule in the firmament.

She takes a last bite from her sandwich and throws the crust to the squirrels. Inside her backpack is a two-liter bottle of Diet Coke, three-quarters drunk. Alice unscrews the cap and, with three unfeminine swigs, polishes it off. Swallowing, she flattens the empty bottle and stows it in her pack. She has seen the community-service work crews, miserably picking up litter from these roadside woods. They shouldn't have to clean up after her.

Dress-up time. She pulls her orange synthetic-wool ski mask down over her face. With fumbling fingers she threads no fewer than eighteen safety pins through its bottom cuff and pins the mask to her collar, securing her disguise. This process seems to take days. Only her eyes are visible at this point. Alice's eyes are naturally a deep, piercing green, but for tonight's purposes they are brown. Regarding her trembling hands with contempt, she remembers trying to put on the tinted lenses earlier this evening. Dropping the contacts, soiling them, poking herself in the eye for a half hour before her Engineers stepped in to help her.

She slips on surgical gloves and a hooded sweatshirt (hood up) and reaches for the chin-strapped traffic cone. Tar-smeared and scarred, her Witch's hat has seen better days and a clearer head. She settles the pylon on her head, pulls the strap tight around her chin, and flips open a compact mirror. Looking at the framed image of frightened Alice Merkel, she tries to coax some other, more imposing character out from behind her eyes.

The final touch is her overcoat, left for last because its Day-Glo orange attracts the eye. Alice took this coat off the back of a policeman the Turnpike Witch had surprised behind an overturned Hess tanker up by Interchange Twelve last fall. A whip-smart gesture of her flare gun in the general direction of the gasoline spill and the coat was hers. Her Engineers pegged the promotional value of that rash action, passable to

o Printer's Devil review Brad Abruzzi

even the most gun-shy district attorney as armed robbery, at over one hundred grand. They made gleeful report of it on the unofficial website. In recent weeks David Crilly has growled into microphones: "Who does this *barlot*, this *Gorgon* thinks she is wearing a police-issue rain slicker after what she did to those two officers?" Of course the Witch has not appeared in public, with or without the coat, since Officers Angstrom and Hotchkiss crashed their squad car. But facts don't matter to her sudden sworn enemy.

Alice laces her boots and pulls the ends tight enough to pop the eyelets from the leather. She ties double, then triple knots, then winds electrical tape around her ankles and shins.

Understanding now that she has exhausted every possible means of putting this off, she takes a deep breath and strides out of the woods, over the graveled breakdown lane and into the path of a station wagon bearing down on her in the southbound passing lane. The Turnpike Witch draws twin flare guns from their clips on her belt. Determined to be most careful today, Alice has left ample room for the wagon to slow down. Nevertheless, the driver overreacts: the car brakes, swerves, and skids across both lanes, takes out two reflectors on the road margin, and wrecks flush into the mile marker on which she's hung her backpack.

Oh. Oh shit. Not again.

The car crash puts the air's palpable magic to flight. The Turnpike Witch flinches now, belatedly, and takes three giant steps toward the crashed car. No initial sign – blaring horn, driver dumped out into the street – that anyone is in a bad way. How could this happen? The driver had to have seen her. He should have stopped. It wasn't my fault. I'm wearing bright orange. The car's windshield is cracked, and the driver – male, it seems – can't get the car door open. He's jiggling the handle with increasing desperation. Alice takes a deep breath, turns away from the accident to confront the oncoming cars. Columns of fire shoot from her arms, diagonally over the heads of oncoming drivers. Hold it. Hold everything. I need to think.

Traffic begins to stack up in front of her – angry horns and brights flashing. Alice forlornly absorbs these gestures of impatience, photons and honks that the presence of the Turnpike Witch in her prime would have deflected into outer space. Alice returns flare guns to belt clips

and walks fifty yards ahead of the stopped traffic, where she drops into a squat, tries to gather herself. Dimly respectful of the Witch, the cars stay where they are.

She can't do this. There has been an accident; the show does not go on. That is the principle, but she is not strong enough to act on it. If she cuts and runs, the Engineers will skewer her, Crimedog will filet her, Crilly will fault her for causing an accident and leaving the scene. She waits for some director somewhere to shout "cut," send a grip to attend to the injured stuntman, and reset the scene. But there is no director. She was not ready for this. Not ready to come back out here again. The Engineers should never have made her do it. Tears well up in her eyes. Stupid stupid.

The sound of glass breaking – a smaller, subsidiary crash budding off the larger accident – claims her attention. She stands up and steps back down toward the wrecked wagon. Licks of smoke cling to the car's engine block. An over-designed athletic shoe hangs out the broken window of the driver's side door. The leg attached to it is cut and bleeding. Kicking his way out. Having done this herself, she knows how the cuts can hurt. A young man climbs out through the window. He falls to the ground and lies there.

Alice knows she should help this kid, but she can't. "I hate you," she says to the Turnpike Witch. Once again: "I hate you." Now she has gone on record with her conscience, having expressed aloud her discomfort with having to flee the scene, and said conscience should cut her a break. It's not like the kid will bleed to death here.

Accordingly, Alice extracts from her coat pocket the paperweight-sized device that will issue her electromagnetic pulse, the effect of which will crash the dashboard computers of every car within a five-hundred-yard radius. Headlights will flicker and drop. Radios will scream with feedback. The smartphone spectators' tweets will fail to post, and the calls scores of travelers are presently making to the special committee's Witch Alert Hotline will drop, as handsets and cell towers alike spasm out of function. The fluorescent lamps that light the green street signs will pop out of their federally standardized sockets, and the flashes of whatever cameras are handy will fail in their unsanctioned efforts to deliver to film an image of the Turnpike Witch.

For her part, Alice has no idea any of this will happen. When she was given the device two days ago, her Engineers advised her that it would activate a homing signal that would enable them to locate her, track her route of escape, and motor down the road to pick her up. This is all she's been told about the device, a limited disclosure that does not account for the vulgar and destructive display of power that the device's designer, a real shithead lately, has planned for her to unleash on the gathered traffic.

Unaware, then, of what will follow, and wanting only to flee the scene, Alice centers her thumb on the switch and counts backward. *Three*, two, one—

A cold hand reaches out from behind her and locks around her wrist. Alice whirls around to find the driver of the wrecked station wagon tugging at the sleeve of her coat, dazed and bleeding from his ears. He addresses the Turnpike Witch from his knees.

"Milady, I am at your service." He kisses her hand, then lifts his head; his eyes lock in on hers. Alice grunts and withdraws her hand, unsure what to make of this character, another fan with still less of a grip on reality than she has.

Backed-up cars and trucks begin to gun their engines. A truck driver three times her size grows finally so emboldened as to kick out of his cab and approach her. He calls out to her in a menacing Alabama drawl:

"There a problem here, little girl?"

Alice turns to the injured boy at her feet. "We've got to get out of here. Now. Can you walk?" He doesn't answer. More drivers, more passengers begin to spill out of their cars. They move on her in a growing mass.

"Can you walk?" she repeats. The boy stares dumbly.

"I asked you, sweetheart," the trucker says, his loose upper lip sucked in over a gap in his front teeth, "if you got a problem."

"Can you hear me?" she asks the boy. A crowd gathers in the trucker's wake, murmuring about the Witch. More than one carries a flashlight or an umbrella, something of use in a fight. Some are familiar faces – allies, her fans, Pikers who live down the road at the Walt Whitman Service Area, all of them better talkers than they are fighters. They pretend that they're civilians:

"She's crazy, that one, maybe we should just let her alone."

"All of you had better stand back. Word is she booby-traps herself."

Alice tosses aside the pulse remote, grabs the boy's face in both hands, and shouts at him: "Can you hear me?"

The boy shakes his head. His lips frame the word "no."

Her hands fall away from his face. She looks into her palms: blood. *Oh God. That's my fault*. His head impacted somewhere. Steering wheel, dashboard, windshield – take your pick. He's lost hearing. Right now the Turnpike Witch is wracked with self-loathing, and the first one of these folks to cross her line – looks like the hick trucker is the lucky winner – will pay for it. She will live vicariously through the suffering of that trucker, she decides. She will punish herself for the wreck of that station wagon by kicking his teeth out. Alice switches on her bullhorn.

"Everybody stay back." She pulls the weakened Pike-pilgrim to his feet beside her.

"She's right," someone shouts from the crowd in front of her, twenty to thirty people thick. "She's got powers!"

"She'll melt your eyes!" one of the friendlies yells from her Dodge.

The trucker is unimpressed by these pronouncements. He plucks a golf club out of a bystander's hand and charges at Alice. Still worse: police are now looming over the trees in a helicopter. Searchlights bear down from overhead. Cell calls to the hotline have gone through, and the special committeemen have her in their sights.

She steps out from under her casualty's arm to introduce the trucker's yapping mouth to the toe of her left boot. She lays him out flat with one kick and steps back to catch the boy before he can fall to the ground. The helicopter rotates over her head like a giant clock. Its propeller flushes away the seconds while head and tail tick around the sky in a manic circle, swirling her time remaining down the drain.

With the boy's limp weight on her arm – *God*, *he can't be older than fourteen* – she thrashes around in the chopper's spotlight looking for her pulse remote. Finding it, she presses its button to summon her Engineers.

The EMP discharge doesn't exactly black out New Jersey, but it does its job. The floodlamp overhead and the lights on the front cars crash out completely. Further away, lights flicker and go dim, indicating the pulse's margin of dissipation, but it's the chopper that has Alice's attention. The helicopter is wobbling sightless in the sky – now it skitters off ahead of Alice and the blocked traffic to find by slivered moonlight a suitable

place to set down. The pulse causes confusion: bodies scramble in every direction in the dark stretch of open road in front of her.

Alice runs with the wounded boy on her arm. What just happened? A pain shoots up her arm as she makes for the treeline. The fried pulse generator, in the course of destroying itself, has burned a hole in her palm. She gags at the sight and smell of that — looks quickly, stupidly from the melted hunk of metal and plastic in her hand to the blacked-out traffic. She drops the pulse remote into her coat pocket and continues to stumble along up the road with the boy. In the dark now: he's got to be terrified. By the time she has gone fifty yards, most of the vehicles are moving, many of them lightless but reignited. Some of them can drive. Others will not, and no driver can see or predict the traffic around him. Alice slips between the rows of cars and toward the shoulder.

She doubles back to the crashed station wagon. Alice can't leave her pack behind for patrols to recover. The bent mile-marker is wedged under the car. Alice plants a foot on the sign for leverage and, with her second pull, dislodges her bag from between the marker and the loose gravel. The boy grips her arm more tightly and digs his nails in. She squeals and swings a fist at him, reflexively, without landing it.

Gunshots. Alice starts, slides on the gravel and twists her ankle. Behind the scattering masses to her left she can see the hand-held high beams – the backup flashlights of special committee roadside unit troopers – blitzing the scene. Alice has never seen the scrus deployed, but she recognizes their reflective yellow uniforms from the news. In a last-ditch effort to keep his job, Crilly's predecessor put together the unit of thirty-six elite Witch-hunting operatives last spring. Now they're closing in on their quarry, firing into the air – blanks, she hopes. Otherwise they're kicking this up a notch too far.

"The Witch! There on the ground! Side of the road! Break off in twos and flank her!" The scrus sound competent, which is a bummer. They snake through the traffic as it rumbles back into motion. Their single purpose is to take her alive. The Witch is barely twenty seconds away from dropping off Crimedog's list entirely. And Alice herself stands confused and stationary – the weight of her pylon crown seems to increase until she feels it will twist her, an unwilling drill bit, into the ground.

A Chevy Impala sails in on the shoulder, right under the dripping noses of the scrus. It's an early eighties model, with right-rear door duct-taped closed and brakes so worn that the car hits three separate, identifiable skids on the gravel before it comes to a stop.

"We'll help you. Get in the car," the driver says. Alice pauses. The faces aren't familiar. Pimply kid in the driver's seat. Tattoo crawling up toward his face from the back of his neck. The passenger is more of a clean-cut type. Receding hairline, aquiline nose. She hasn't seen either of them in any of the south-Pike service areas. Could be journalists, could be cops. Still, it's her best bet. Alice pulls the boy behind her toward the car. She takes the pylon off her head, flops into the back seat, then crawls across to the far side. The boy sits down next to her. The door drops open when he tries to close it.

"You have to hook it up," says the passenger in the front seat.

"Show him, Schultzie," the driver instructs. The passenger leans over his seat to loop a bungee cord through the door handle, attaching the hooks to the strap over the door.

The Impala lurches along the berm, circles behind the crowd in the road and angles into an Authorized vehicles only U-turn zone cut out of the median barricade. Stalled-out traffic on that side — cars rubbernecking — pens them in. It occurs to Alice that she might spring out in favor of a more legit ride, but the Impala cuts sharply across the road through a gap in the traffic. Its tires take precarious hold of the gravelly northbound shoulder, and the car accelerates.

"They're going to call us in, Ray," the shotgun passenger complains.

"It's possible that crazy pulse knocked out their radios," Alice suggests, with little confidence.

"It did the job on ours," the driver says. "My Blackberry, too. You gonna pay for that? We're the Impalers, by the way."

"The Impalers?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'm - "

"We know who you are," says the driver. "The Impalers don't stop for just any woman."

"Funny. You seem like the type who might."

"That smarts," the passenger says, digging a fist into his partner's upper arm. "Where to, Witch?" Alice looks over at the boy beside her. He is sitting on his feet, his eyes closed, head hunched against the window, crying. Alice swallows hard and closes her eyes.

"To a hospital," she says. Another cumbersome bit of background: Alice has a grave psychological aversion to leaving the Turnpike. Bad things happen when she tries – really bad things – usually to her, though other people and their property have taken damage, too. "To the nearest hospital," she says, despite all this.

"Oh, Christ," the driver says. "This is going to be an all-night thing, isn't it?"

"She's right, Ray. That kid's bleeding out his ears."

"So we just pull up at the ER with the Turnpike Witch and her carcrash kid in our back seat? With the car registered in your name?"

"It's the right thing to do." Shotgun Schultzie consults a map. On the fly, they find the hospital nearest exit four, ten miles down the road.

Alice looks over at the boy. Crew cut with big eyes that catch the cut moon when he's not wringing tears out of them. She doubts that he's old enough to drive. And I shouldn't have been in the way. Off in the margin of her consciousness, the Turnpike Witch howls. You're going soft. That's your problem. That doesn't frighten her. She would welcome it if it came. It's fear that makes you hard. It turns you into a nautilus, traps you in a shell of your own making. Craving security, you burrow constantly inside toward the tightest point in the homemade spiral.

They're at the off-ramp now. Where all the trouble usually starts for Alice. She takes a deep breath as the car stops, then rolls in twenty-foot increments toward the tollbooth.

Alice ducks down in her seat. She fumbles to unlock her safety pins and remove the telltale orange balaclava. The pins aren't opening fast enough. She ends up tearing the mask off her head with the pins still attached, pulling a ring of green fabric from her collar.

"Dude! She took off her mask!" Ray says. He nudges his friend, who is studying the toll ticket more intently than would seem necessary.

Alice pulls her sweatshirt's hood over her head, yanks the drawstrings so tight the opening over her face closes to the size of a half dollar. She wriggles off the seat and curls up on the floor. She prays that nobody has put out a bulletin on an Impala with the Turnpike Witch inside. She closes her eyes again, swallows hard. An ocean swells up on the far side of that tollbooth, its waters poised to crash over her in a flood.

Think baby steps, she tells herself. Just stay conscious, try not to hurt anybody.

The car pulls up to the tollbooth. Alice claps her hands over her throbbing head, tries not to throw up, tries not to run screaming out of the car back to the toll road. It should be the briefest and least loaded of interactions, but Ray still manages to get into some kind of tiff with the toll-taker. He eventually pays her the monies owed, and they pass off the turnpike into Greater New Jersey, where Alice will drown. Liquid and acidic, New Jersey winds its way into her shell to flush her out. She spits up about a pint of Diet Coke onto the floor beside her. The boy squeals and pulls his feet up onto the seat.

"Oh, Jesus, Schultz. She's back there puking."

Suburbia fluoresces up around the Impala. Alice hammers her eyes closed, but the streetlights and signs pulse down through her lids as they flash by overhead. Somehow the gibbering idiots up front find the hospital, without the help of Alice, crippled, useless, and hiding her eyes as the car ventures further off-Pike.



In the ER lobby, Alice Merkel enjoys a brief remission from her panic. Stripped down to street clothes, she hits the free coffee hard. The vending machines are either inoperative or unstocked – a sign of the general decline and upkeep failures of off-Pike living – and she needs something to puddle her sick stomach before the gallon of acid inside it eats her alive. The caffeine *might* keep her from fainting – Alice has already exceeded, five times over, her longest period of sustained off-Turnpike consciousness since early 2009. This miracle she cannot remotely explain, unless it has to do with the boy. Someone is cutting her a break, and she appreciates that.

Still, she is panting, pacing the floor, having to stop constantly to secure the lid on her coffee cup while some runaway gag reflex convulses her body. Alice is beginning to draw suspicious looks from bystanders. She is twisting in a whirlwind of inefficient movement and disorganization, bungee-tied through the belt loops and dangling out into a chaos of

pushed paper and bleeding spurters. Two frat boys out in the visitor's lot are her lifeline back to safety and sanity. Alice has ordered the Impalers to stay behind. She was going to have to show her face in the hospital, and she could not allow them to get a look at her.

Forty-five minutes of multilingual cursing, blood, bustle, piss, threats, vomit, and delinquent mops. CONTAIN YOUR FLUIDS, CONTAIN YOURSELVES, prompts a Photoshopped sign from the wall behind the reception desk.

The boy's name is Michael, and his head injury advances him to the head of the class. Within the hour, nurses have him in an exam room. Alice finds the efficient hum of back-room procedure a bit more soothing. Michael sits placidly as nurses apply disinfectant and dress the gashes on his forehead and legs. A doctor arrives – smarmy, middle-aged, peering over horn-rimmed glasses to ask questions that Michael can't hear. Well and good for Alice, who gives up her own version of the story in his stead. She was driving him home from the Phillies game, an suv cut her off – the Witch is so practiced with lies, from her many civilian interviews with police in the Turnpike service areas, that they drop from her lips without a moment's thought. So simple, airtight, and charming are these lies; they actually relax her.

They will admit the boy and hold him over for evaluation, the doctor says.

"Hold over?" Alice jerks upright. The panic is boiling up again.

"He's conscious and lucid. The CT can wait until morning."

"Why not now?"

The doctor looks her over. "That car accident upset you. Can I get you something?"

"Answer the goddam question I asked you." The nurses, nonplussed, usher Michael out of the room.

The doctor speaks slowly and carefully. "The radiologist I would rather have treat your nephew is not on call. We'll test Michael in the morning. Get him in and out before lunch."

"No. Do it now." Alice's eyes are watering. She tastes blood – her back teeth, anticipating warfare, have dug a trench in her tongue. "Do it now."

"I can't – I need technicians. The attending physician has to sign off. I can't authorize a test that expensive without getting prior authorization from the insurer –"

Goddammit. Alice inches toward a can labeled MEDICAL WASTE. In a moment she will do something rash and stupid, but her conscious mind has not yet settled on the specifics.

"We have to leave soon," she says calmly, "and we can't come back."

"I am not going to discharge your nephew. He has suffered a serious head injury, and he needs to stay here for tests –"

"We've discussed this. You won't *give him* the fucking tests!" Alice's hand buried in her hair, tightens now. She pulls until her eyes stream water. She lifts the lid from the medical waste can and gropes around in the puffed plastic bin liner. The doctor runs over to stop her. Alice pulls out three syringes with shreds of torn blue plastic stuck on their tips. In a split second, she's arranged them spikes-out between the four fingers of a clenched fist. The doctor shrinks into a corner. A skip to the door and a kick slams it closed. Alice has the doctor by the hair. She pulls, pushes, doinks his head on the wall. Three dirty needles appear flush against his chin.

"You'll give him the test *now*, or I swear to God I'll jab these needles so deep they'll skewer your tongue." This is some other person talking. This isn't her.

"The machine – it's not here. It's upstairs." The doctor falls to his knees. "Who – who are you?" he asks, broaching the all-important question of true identity that Alice has thus far managed to duck. Hurried footsteps approach the door. Alice whirls and scans the room for a second means of egress. Nothing. On the far wall hangs a glossy, oversized public service announcement: the swollen head of an infant with fetal alcohol syndrome. Alice tears a strip of its middle out with her free hand, crumples both ends inside a fist, and pulls the ring of paper over her head, aligning the torn bottom half of the baby's face over hers. She ties the ends into a rough knot behind her head.

By the time she has her red hood pulled over her head, security guards are pounding at the door. Private contractors in sport coats – the looks on their faces convey something less than commitment to their work. The doctor is cowering on the floor. She commands him to stand up and open the door. With needles poised at the back of his neck, she prods him past the guards and down the hall into the lobby. The baby face covers her mouth.

"Nobody moves." She is losing her breath. "Or I stab him through." She gestures to Michael, who has risen from his waiting-room chair, prepared to leave with the Witch. "You stay here. Somebody can help you." He rushes to her side, confused. She shakes her head in an exaggerated fashion, exposes her mouth so he can read her lips. "You stay here."

"I won't," Michael says. "I have a mission." She stands awkwardly in a silent room streaming snotty paper pulp down her face and neck, while the 15+ co-occupants study her and log characteristics they will later describe to police:

About five-foot-nine inches tall, thin, black hair, brown eyes . . .

"Fine," she decides. "Come on." From behind she rams a knee into the sniveling physician. "Into the parking lot. Nobody moves."

The automatic doors snap closed behind them, and Michael, Alice, and the doctor take their parade into the parking lot. Ray and Schultzie have no clue what has happened inside, but they seem impressed to see the Witch approach their car with a hostage.

"Are we taking him?" Schultzie asks from the driver's seat, engine revved and running.

Alice pauses. This is a delicate situation. The doctor has seen her but does not know she is the Witch. These two know she is the Witch, but they haven't seen her. The three of them together could put the make on her. They can't be allowed to compare notes.

At her direction, Ray secures the doctor's arms to his sides with the backseat bungee cord. Schultzie digs an iPod out of the glove box, cranks up the volume, and puts the headphones over the doctor's ears – all this while Alice stands in plain sight of the hospital doors with sharps poised over the hostage's throat, promising an immediate triple-dip into his neck if anyone should step outside.

"What do we do with him?" Ray wants to know.

Alice gestures at the ER doors: "As soon as we drop him those guards will come out."

"So we take him," Schultzie says.

"There's another problem." Alice takes a deep, heaving breath. "He saw my face."

"Everybody in there saw your face."

"He saw my face after I made myself memorable."

"Does he make you for the Witch?"

Alice shrugs. Michael seats himself quietly inside the car.

Schultzie pulls Ray aside and whispers something to him. Ray deals his camerado a two-handed shove to the chest. "No."

Schultzie glares back at Ray. "You ran off and blew our last gas and food money to buy them. They're as much mine as yours."

It turns out the "they" under discussion here are roofies. Ray's idea of romance? The Impalers' internal power dynamic is swiftly revealed to Alice, as with his glare redoubled and a simple extension of his hand, Schultzie gets Ray to surrender the pills. Alice slips behind the doctor, flips up one of the headphones and whispers into his ear. She explains that neither she nor the Impalers are interested in kidnapping him; they just need to bluff their way out of the hospital parking lot. Thus, if the doctor would kindly consent to ingesting this one nugget of Rohypnol – she assumes he is aware of the drug's properties – she will see that he is taken home and left to dream of a less complicated world on his front lawn. The doctor stammers out his agreement to these terms, and she reaches into his pocket, pulls out his wallet and reads the address off his driver's license to verify that this is where he in fact lives.

The doctor swallows the pill, and the Impalers load him into the car's capacious trunk. Alice recites aloud the doctor's name and address as Ray starts the car. They ride ten minutes out of their way to the doctor's house, leaving him on the lawn as promised. Then they're off again, with Alice continuing to repeat aloud her hostage's name and address. She does this well past the point when Ray and Schultzie begin to complain. Distant sirens threaten, but police never do pick up their trail. Through the trip Alice can feel big heaping froths of acid and instant coffee churning in her stomach. She has the Devil's cappuccino inside her. She needs sleep, food, drink, and – more than anything – the Road and its promise of Order.

This was a terrible night for the Turnpike Witch. A car crash, an awkward hostage crisis – dirty, filthy business – and then there's this Ray, with his pocketful of mickey and presumably a short list of Piker women he plans to drug and assault in the coming days. Some of this she can fix. Alice will arrange to deliver the doctor a fruit basket, maybe a Starbucks gift card. Something thoughtful, paid in cash, to leave on his

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front porch, now that she has memorized his address. A phone call to a friendly policeman sees Ray separated from his pants, pills pulled from pockets and flushed down a rest area toilet. Now and then the Turnpike Witch can use her clout to make the world a better place. More the pity, Alice decides, eyeing the twelve-year-old boy next to her, that tonight she has failed miserably at her first principle, which is to do no harm.

She fishes a Dramamine tablet out of her pack, swallows it, and closes her eyes.

KIRBY WRIGHT

To a Friend at the Ben Hur Apartments, San Francisco

A cataract sky on Hyde. Something flies by – an albatross or a plane. You're up on the 6^{th} floor where the bed bugs live. I like Ben Hur's cobalt canopy. A boy in jeans enters the shade, searches the list of dwellers. Salt greens your buzzer. Don't miss his shy ring boiling water for Earl Grey.

I have seen your BVDs tumble dry at Dair's Speedy Wash. You buy cognac at Serve Well Market. Cigars at Mini Smoke Shoppe. Your voice drags Sunday mornings, when we sip espresso at breeze window watching our city shrink to a village. Smell ocean? Below us, the escape ladder slants 60 degrees. Traffic's one way. A loose dog pisses a hydrant.

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Joshua **Murphy**



Text by Jess Barnett

The Hanging



A triest glance, it might be easy to dismiss the work of digital artist Joshua Murphy as shock art, something designed to grab a casual viewer's attention and reel her in from there. After all, pieces such as *The Smoker* and *Against the Wall* include images of blood (in the former) and ghostly nudity (in the latter). And the color palette Murphy uses often seems straight from a horror movie set: blood red, black, gray, and white.

Perhaps the shock value of Murphy's pieces stems from his former career in advertising, one which he now calls "unfortunate," and during which he tried "to drink away the disgust I felt at night, just so I could get up and do it all over again." After all, it's an advertiser's job to capture attention – yet it's keeping it that's the real talent.

Murphy's images are jarring but also haunting, seeming to float like afterimages behind the eyelids. In *The Hanging*, a woman with closed eyes floats against a contextless background. There is a noose around her neck, but a calm half-smile on her face.

Against the Wall features a woman with her back turned, presumably pressed against a crumbling wall. The woman is ephemeral, half in this reality and half in another, possibly one hidden behind the wall. The juxtaposition of sexuality and dissolution appears regularly in Murphy's work. As the artist explains, he enjoys "exploring those dark places and ideas we don't talk about at cocktail parties."

While his work occasionally veers dangerously close to obviousness or moral instruction, as in *The Smoker* (which could stand on its own as a PSA), it also explores less-defined themes, as seen in his *Illustration Series*, of which *Octothing* is a part. Ultimately, it's Murphy's talent, equally on display in these less graphic images, that capture the viewer's attention – and keeps it.

UB41. 2011 Joshua Murphy

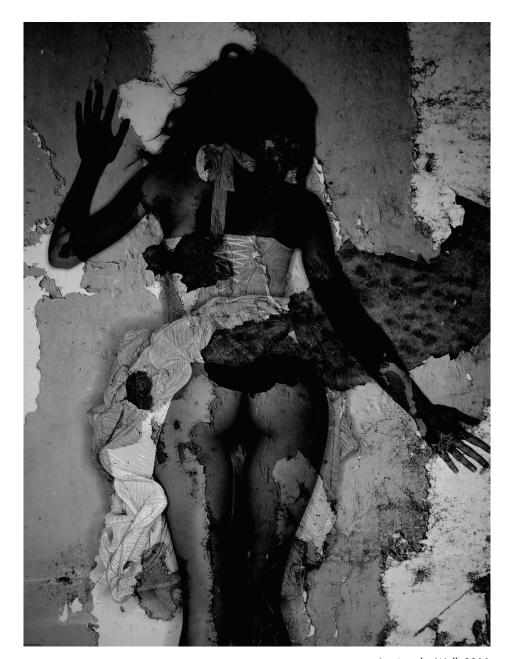
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Octothing. 2011 JOSHUA MURPHY





The Smoker. 2011 JOSHUA MURPHY



Against the Wall. 2011 JOSHUA MURPHY

GREGORY TEBBANO

Men Like Us

In the first house we lived in there was only one bathroom, and sometimes we'd have to share. I'd come in to shave while dad was showering, steam billowing over the curtain like a spell in progress.

"Money, money...money."

I'd hear him muttering the single word over and over, his mantra. Some days it was a puzzle, a Rubik's cube made ever more impenetrable by his tinkering hands. Other days he'd say it with contempt – the name of someone who had kidnapped Mom and me.

I hadn't been shaving long. He taught me how, there in that bath-room, with a single blade. Electric razors, he said, were not for any men in this family.

As I lathered up, I knew the smell of shaving cream was something eternal – in the same league as freshly cut grass or a new can of tennis balls – something you'd remember on your death bed. Maybe you wouldn't remember your wife's name or where you were, but fragrant clouds of Barbasol would drift in a blue sky as you lifted upward through them and towards a brilliant light.

I began in lines, shaving only white and a thin layer of skin.

"Money, money," said the shower.

"Money what?" I said.

"Money, Jeffrey. Money."

If I asked him now – house paid off, me with a BA, Mom retired – he'd deny ever praying to that green god. It had been painted over. Maybe

you could get there with psychiatry or the straight razor of alcohol, scrape back to the original color, though I suspected that those times too were finished.

"Money," I said.

Then I left the bathroom before Dad got out and shaved himself.



"I'm moving out," Dad says over the phone. I'm too astonished to reply.

All last year I lived at home, filling in that gap between college and whatever comes next, but I didn't see this coming. Mom and Dad tiptoed around the rift, and in the matter of their relationship I was regarded more as a houseguest than a son. They were dressing the place in their cleanest sheets so I would enjoy my stay.

I guess there were signs. How my mother disappeared from door to door like an usher who after so many performances of the same production could no longer sit and enjoy the show. How I'd come home at midnight to my father asleep on the recliner, his chest rising and falling in the dim strobe of the Yankees postgame.

But really I had no idea. Amazing, I thought, what you could hide for a time. A terminal illness. A pregnancy. But this was different, a structural failure. A proven bridge collapsing from no stresses other than its own weight. And now, a year after I've moved out, Dad calls to tell me he's living somewhere else?

"I have some friends that I can stay with," he says. But he doesn't have friends like that. He has good friends, but they're friends you meet out, dressed nicely at the teletheater or Brindisi's. It's how we've also come to operate, like associates negotiating over drinks.

That night, we meet at the Boathouse, this campy place on the lake where people pretend they know about boats and horses, use a term like "cutting" and apply it to both sports. The worst thing about the Boathouse: it's practically across the street from my parents' place, where Mom is attending to her newfound widowhood. I'm afraid she might walk in at any moment with her divorced girlfriends and find us sitting here.

"Giambi's having a year," Dad says. The TVS over the bar are turned to the OTB channel and the Yankees game.

"He's on dope," I say. "His liver's having a year."

"Come on. He's clean. Maybe he had his down season, but he's clean now."

"His down season – last year when he was coughing up chew and batting .190 – that's when he was clean." I look at Giambi's arms, twice as thick as his bat. "You know the best way to get over withdrawal? Hit the smack."

"Well at least he's not on the Pirates," Dad says. "And on antidepressants."

This is our eternal baseball argument: big market versus small, American versus National – winners and losers, cheaters and scrubs. It's easy to take cuts at the Yankees because they're good, but they aren't a team of talent. They're a team of good business decisions, and they perform like a hedge fund. Even though you might not understand the instruments of their success, you understood that every year they finished first no matter what.

But hedge funds are legal, are market-driven, and if anything Dad approves of the market. Each spring he buys me a copy of *Kiplinger's Personal Finance* and encourages me to invest. My first lesson in saving for the future was drawn on the back of an old sheet of past performances for the seventh at Del Mar where he penned the ridgeline of an impressive mountain range – the S&P. He pointed to where I was (in the foothills) and where I would end up (on top of the world). In the long term, my money would surely grow, even if Wall Street took a hit or two. Sometimes you had to descend into a saddle to climb the next peak. The important thing, he said, was to tough it out. Men like us, we were in it for the long haul.

Below Giambi's warm up cuts, a blue ticker scrolls through the night's scores.

"So I moved out of the house," Dad says.

"Who you living with?"

He says some names I've never heard before, a man he works with and his wife. They have a room, a studio over their garage.

"I'm looking for a place though," he says. "Somewhere in town."

When the barmaid comes to take our order, I get a burger. Dad gets a steak.

"Can I also get another Heineken, Cindy?" Dad has a certain manner, a business manner that he turns on and off, and it always comes out for a waitress. Often he'll make use of a first name, overheard or lifted from a name tag. I've heard that this is one of the best things you can do in a meeting. When people hear their name it settles them a little, drops them into a comfort zone. That, and when your name comes out of the mouth of a complete stranger, you are tricked into thinking, even if only for a moment, that you are famous.

I never address strangers in the service industry by their names. It feels, oddly, like stealing.

"I can't believe they're pitching around him," I say. Giambi's fouled a few off and the pitcher is getting rattled. The meat of the line-up is just beginning to dawn on him. The camera shows Matsui from above swinging two bats in the practice circle.

"Steroids don't help your hand-eye coordination," Dad says.

They walk Giambi, and then the manager comes to the mound. Pitching change.

It's not long before the food comes and we're talking about Mom. As I'm sipping my beer, he brings it up. "So what do you think of all this?"

I stare in my glass, at the fresco of foam clinging to its empty insides. What do I think? The last year of my life has completely flatlined, so events no longer have depth or character, leave no room for my heart rate to rise.

"Your mom and I, we just – you must see it too. She's so obsessed about what's wrong. It's all she does, sees counselors, goes to groups. She won't come out with me. It's taken her over, she's *become* her problem." He says the last bit through a mouthful of steak.

"I know," I say. "It's like she's addicted to the getting better. Those are the type of people who are always sick." I think about how I probably couldn't stand living with her either but don't say it for fear of sounding too on-your-side. "But don't you feel like you're abandoning her?"

He doesn't answer right away, and so I know what the answer is no matter what he says. He has looked at the open door and, for perhaps the first time in his life, done the easier thing. I'm not judging. That's something Dad always does. He'll say somebody looks like a pansy because

Gregory Tebbano

they have a lip ring; then he'll say, "I'm not making a value judgment." But he is. He's saying you have the values of a pansy.

But I entertain him, listen as he gets into logistics, how she's taken care of financially. He's making payments on the mortgage, the car. Then his emotional involvement, the joint counseling. He offered this, but she refused. He offered that. Refused.

He's a very good public speaker, my father. I can picture him standing behind a podium in front of a room full of the unconvinced. He quotes the Iroquois or Lao Tzu, even Jesus. But not Jesus how Catholics, as my father once was, see him. Jesus as a teacher. When my father is speaking, he gestures and steps, holds his hands open, up and out to the audience, a very Italian manner of gesture. Like he's saying "why?" You see him do this, and you see he's vulnerable, like you, and doesn't have the answers. But together maybe you can work it out. It makes you lean forward in your chair a little.

As he's telling me how he didn't abandon her, he puts down his fork and does it, does the hands. "I tried, Jeffrey. I really did."

I feel like crying but don't. If I do, he'll say it's cause the Yankees are winning and as it is Matsui has doubled and Giambi is rounding third, his big thighs leading the charge home with an unknown percentage of muscle that is not his own.



At the same time my father is busy splitting his house into kindling, mine too has come under the axe. Jessica and I live on Van Rensselaer Street in a late-nineteenth century place with a tin ceiling. We keep it immaculate, but the house is inhabited by an emptiness, one that can't be filled in with second-hand couches and a mismatched set of dishes. It is, as Jessica would say, cold in its bones. Increasingly, it has acquired the feel of an abandoned safe house, as if it were a place to bring affairs and dispose of tightly sealed garbage bags.

vr, I say. Meet you back at vr.

"Why do you call it that?" she says. "It sounds like some kind of venereal disease."

When we broke up, I blamed the house. Cursed, I said. Badly placed astrologically. We'd heard stories of the previous tenants throwing dishes

at each other in the driveway, the woman screaming and shielding her pregnant belly. Too poor and with no credit to be lease breakers we decided to stay on despite the breakup. It was only for a few months and we could be adults, couldn't we?

One of vR's few redeeming qualities is an old-fashioned front porch, and on these first cold nights of spring, I've been sitting out there with a gin and tonic and waiting for her to come home. Tonight, after the Boathouse, it's mostly gin and a lime. Before leaving, Dad told me he wanted us to meet up – him, Mom, and me – to discuss things. Jessica and I have discussed things until I want to vomit up my vocal chords. To an extent, she's troubled at my life choices – how I write in the early morning, button a white shirt and drag myself to the espresso bar at dawn, then drink in the evening, listening to baseball on the radio, and go to bed. It's a college lifestyle, she tells me, a degenerate one. It has undercut a potential she once believed I had tucked away under some secret fold of skin – a belief that smacks unmistakably of my father.

She says I'm not taking charge, that I'm floating along like one of those nursery-rhyme-themed rides for people who lack the gumption for roller coasters.

"But I love roller coasters," I tell her. "Remember when we rode the Comet ten times in a row?" By the third time, I discovered the spot where they take your picture to sell back to you at the end of the ride. Each time, I would make a ridiculous face, or a serious one, the kind no one would ever make on a roller coaster. Once, I pulled out the park map the way tourists do in places where something spectacular is happening — at an opera or a space shuttle launch.

Afterwards we stood in front of monitors that showed all the pictures. It felt like coming across an old watch that had been stolen years before under fogged glass in a pawn shop. The shot with the map – that was the one she bought: me calmly reading as she screamed her face off.

Once, when we were fighting, I pulled out the picture to show her. Proof. "I don't mean real roller coasters," she said.

I was making fun of her, partly, but attempting to make a point. If you didn't love everything about a person, even secretly the parts you pretended to hate, then that person was not the one. You could date, live

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together, eat blueberry pie without the aid of plates or silverware (as we did last Fourth of July), but you were missing the point.

"It's done then," she said, then shut the door to our room and our life together.

This was followed by several gray weeks where I hung myself like a ghost in every room and listened to her footsteps upstairs. Did I love her? I loved having her around. She brandished a certain freshness – windblown, unexpected. Every time I talked to her it felt like we were meeting for the first time. I had looked forward to living with her since the day our hands had brushed at the coffee bar, each of us looking up to see if the other had experienced the same sensation – gripping a microphone that hasn't been grounded.

But over time our circuits grow weak, electricity constantly seeking havens of lower potential. While we remain sequestered at VR, she's begun dating. I will be eating dinner at the big table with *The New York Times*, and she'll usher each new man through our kitchen with a hasty greeting, as though I'm barely there. She introduces them to the part of me they would expect to meet, as if I'm her cousin or her butler, or her spindly cat that hates people.

As if I care what she does. I'm old enough and so is she. Who cares if tonight she is out with one them, if in her absence the suitors queue up outside her bedroom?

If anything the hurt comes later. Unable to sleep, I imagine my mother, my mirror image across town, simultaneously awake in the dark of our old house while my father cruises around with some tired piece of skin, nameless, faceless, smelling like a cigarette extinguished in an empty tumbler.

I stay out on the porch tonight long after the cold comes. Cradling my gin, I curl my legs up into the thatched nylon of an old beach chair and slip into a dream of my parents.

We're at the Jersey shore or Cape Cod, some northern beach where I was first introduced to the sea and thought each wave had a score to settle with me personally. I'm alone except for two vacant towels beside me and some wide, flat buoy out beyond the breakers, lolling on the surf.

A pair of binoculars are strapped around my neck, an older model from the eighties – the kind my mother would have brought to scan

the horizon for seabirds. Touching the glass to my eyes, I'm transported to the hundredth power and on top of the thing: my parents in their night clothes, cast away, sheets and all, on a floating Posturpedic mattress. They're propped up in bed reading, unaware that they've come unanchored from finished wood floors and are now traversing fathoms of dark aquatic mystery.

My mother is reading a Barbara Kingsolver novel. My father, the *Daily Racing Form*. In their minds, neither is anywhere but home. I see my dad try to set down his reading glasses. I watch them plop quietly into the water.

I see him yawn and feel myself yawning, the dream stretching away. That's when I wake to Jessica's touch, its gentle current on my shoulder. She's discovered me slumped over in the porch chair and drooling like an invalid. When I see her face all made up in the dark and wearing a long coat I've never seen before, it feels as though many years have passed. She looks stunning and like someone else's wife.

"Just pretend we were never going out." I see the air crystallize where she says it, and it comes out so soft, so motherly that for a moment I think what she really says is "Goodnight sweetie," or "You're going be okay." That was something my own mother used to say, when I was six and bent over with stomach flu. I used to ask her to say it. Am I gonna be okay, Mom? Tell me. Tell me. "It'll be easier if you can stop thinking about me that way."

"Who'd you see?" I say.

"Yurich."

"How was it?"

"It was alright." I can tell she's softening it for me.

Her hand leaves and I feel sick. The front screen shuts twice against its spring.

Never going out. Certainly, the vernacular of modern love has its intricacies, but what would you call it? It wasn't going steady – she hated that, said it sounded like something that happened on *The Brady Bunch*. Was it seeing each other? No. We saw each other every day. I saw her in towels, raven hair sticking to all surfaces of her. I saw her in men's undershirts with no bra, in the kitchen pulling cookies from the oven.

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I saw her in a Christine Dior ad's worth of makeup leaving at seven to meet Yurich, the famous Dutch baker or whoever he was.

I stand up and feel worse. The porch light comes on and I try to steady myself by focusing on something. That's when I see my glass on the ground, cracked beside a puddle of gin, as if some time during the night I had tried to set it on a table that wasn't there.



My parents decide we will have our meeting at the state park where a shallow amphitheater has been cut into the earth, grassy steps for sitting. I park next to Dad's car and walk across the field to them. I wear shorts, and my dad is still in nice clothes from work. Mom sits on a bench close by. They both look over at me, Mom smiling but like she wants to cry.

I kick a clump of loose sod down the hill. I first met Yurich here, on the first warm day of spring. On that day the temperature had made it to seventy-eight degrees. Jessica and I had waited for seventy-eight for months, schemed for it. She was from the South and the winter was murder on her. We'd kept ourselves warm by thinking of seventy-eight. When it came, we decided, we'd go to the lake, to the battlefield. We would not wear much. We'd buy a frisbee and come here to this green.

But Yurich came. She met him at the farmer's market, and he'd just returned from a long trip, kayaking along the coast to Florida with his friend. We ran into him at the park. Jessica introduced us. His hands were bigger than mine and coarse when we shook, but his eyes were quiet and blue.

The three of us spread out with the frisbee. Yurich and I were able to accomplish some terrific distance until a wind kicked up behind him and all my throws started coming back to me. Later we sat in the grass and I picked choke cherry while he told us about his trip.

I had no idea then. It was there, I'm sure, in the back of her eyes. How she listened.

We both had our things. Yurich's were practical. He knew about wind speed and bringing the dough to bench, things that mattered to her, and I knew about phrasing and setting the right mood and nothing. I knew about walking across the green and seeing how my parents looked. Like two people sitting in the park who bore no relation to each other.

I ride my bike over to Mom's one long morning. Yurich has begun teaching Jessica how to bake and I have forgotten how to sleep. I get up at about four and follow the roads that flank Fish Creek, through morning mist and horse farms. Everyone else is just turning off their alarms, hundreds of people lost in the smell of toast, coffee, the taste of Listerine, and I'm speeding silently past, soaked in a film of heavy air.

Riding back into town, I think of going to Mom's because at VR they'd just be getting home with *The New York Times* and the fresh bread that they'd baked, that he'd shown her how to roll and mark with a straight razor. I hadn't been to Mom's since the separation, and I thought of how she might just be getting up. But with nowhere to go it wouldn't matter. And Dad wouldn't be there in his suit. I imagine him asking why I'm up and what I'm doing at this hour.

"Nothing good happens before dawn," he'd say.

When I get there sprinklers are on at all the houses, clicked on by timers before the sun comes up. The neighborhood reminds me of an amusement park or college campus, the new sidewalks and streetlights, the synchronized watering – it's someplace that doesn't really exist.

I pull out my key, the new one Mom gave me at the park. She's changed the locks. It's pretty early, maybe seven, and I have the vague fear that she's become overcautious and leaned Dad's old Louisville Slugger in a corner by the door, just in case. I try to picture my mother swinging a bat at somebody's gut and can't.

"Mom," I say immediately. "It's me."

No bats come. Nothing comes but a faint light, so sparse that everything feels like it's in black and white. I lived in that house for a year after college and the feeling of home is gone from it. A dust has settled over things. There are piles of papers and magazines on the table. A wastebasket is full. For most, this is a normal home scene, the clutter of living, and with it the warmth. But never my parents' place. Theirs was always an open house, spartan and clean to the socket panels, as if at any moment they might decide to put it on the market.

"Mom!" I slip off my shoes and head toward the bedroom. Aside from the neighborhood, I've always liked the house. Even though it's new, it's small and open, lots of hardwood – easy to tell that no child has ever lived there.

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I stick my head in the bedroom and hear a toilet flushing. The bed is unmade, and from the look of it the night has been fitful. I'm suddenly hot from the ride and in the quiet I hear my heart in my ears. Out of the corner of my eye I see a tremendous pile of clothes on the floor and her underwear in it. I've never seen her room like this.

"Jeff?" She comes out and smiles at me, pajamas on, the lines of her face curving with her mouth and around her eyes. She looks so small. Not good, certainly. But not haggish either, not worn or withered.

We hug and there is a smell I recognize, the smell of my grandfather's – her father's – house. It smells like breakfast being prepared in a distant room, two puffs of something from a pink bottle, and not my father. I feel her bones through her back and know more than half of me is her.

"How are you doing?"

"Okay," she says. But she's shaking her head. "Not really, actually."

"Sorry to burst in like this, so early, I just – I didn't want to go home."

"Oh, Jeff. You're welcome anytime," she says. "Anyway I knew it was you. He doesn't have a key." At first I think she's going to start straightening up, but then she's peeling back sheets to get back in bed.

"I'm cold."

I sit on top of the comforter and lay back against propped pillows. Dad's side. The lamp on the dresser is turned on but illuminating no pictures of Mom and me, no book about Mickey Mantle. It's funny, whenever I share a bed with a girl, I pick the side closest to the door. Jessica says guys always pick that side, to bar entry against a killer in the dark or sex-crazed drunkard who might defile her. I tell her it's for the opposite reason: in the event of a fire, it's easier to escape if there isn't a hysterical girl in a tangle of sheets between you and the door.

For whatever the reason, Dad picked the far side. I could never figure it out.

"So what's new with you?"

"Jessica's starting to see somebody. I think they're at the house now. That's why – I don't care really, but I guess I do. Why else would I be here?"

She doesn't ask about Dad and I don't bring him up. But I want to. I want to lay a hand on the column of her legs and tell her that it will be okay, but I can't. For a week at least he has left her and she has left me and we both of us have seen how saints can fall from their perches in

holy frosted windows, can break into shards upon white-washed stone just as everyone is getting up from their pews, smiling to say, "peace be with you, peace be with you."

I can't bring myself to say it until a week later – Mom, Mom! It's going to be okay – when I find her limply crying against the tall cabinets in the kitchen. I rush in to the sound of her screaming, bawling really, but in perfectly formed syllables: "It's. So. Hard."

Each word is coming out long and high, in even alarm tones. There's a yam on the counter and she has her hand around a fork and isn't just putting holes in it for the oven — she's quite clearly stabbing someone, perhaps my father, a man certainly, through his dirty orange flesh.



One morning Jessica and I walk over to the flat track. We don't do much together now, but Yurich wants to bake alone and the day is brilliant, too shimmering to spend indoors or alone. She likes going to the track with me because I know about horses from the decade of summer afternoons I've spent there with my father. She likes how I can explain it all for her, can decode the pages in the *Daily Racing Form* that look like stock sheets to her.

"What are first time blinkers?" she asks.

"It's like these goggles." I cup my hands against the sides of my eyes to show her. "So they don't get spooked by all the screaming people or other horses. Keeps their eyes on the prize."

"What's Lasix?"

"Dope for horses."

We make our way towards the back entrance, the way my dad always comes, past rows of houses with cars parked all over their lawns. The lane is already packed, people spilling off the sidewalks and into the street. It's a big race day — the Whitney, a Grade I stakes. Women wear plastic visors, hold signs that say: PARK HERE! 8\$. Old men wave many-colored pick sheets in front of their mouths, broadcasting at the volume of a used car commercial.

"Rick's Picks! Six winners yesterday including a fifty dollar long shot in the third..."

Jessica's fishing for money but I put a hand on her arm.

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"Don't buy that," I say. "If he could really pick horses why would he waste time selling crap in the parking lot?"

"Oh, I forgot. You're smart."

"We'll get a program inside," I say. My dad's been coming here since he was a teenager. I tell Jessica he once knew a guy who had some kind of printer in the back of his station wagon and would make up new sheets after each race, adjusting his picks to reflect the day's winners and make himself look like the man.

"Your dad's the man, isn't he – when it comes to betting?"

"He wins more than his share if that's what you mean."

And of course that's when I see him: my father. He's easy to spot, tall with a ring of dark hair and a mustache, like the actors who always play police commissioners. "Well, speak of the devil."

His black car is parked awkwardly in a throng of people where no cars are allowed. He's really dressed too, in a sharp suit, but there is sweat on his neck and he looks unnerved, like an ambassador who has just escaped an assassination attempt.

Then I notice the woman. She has a California look, a red dress and pearls, hair so blonde it must be dyed. Her arm is around his shoulder and she's limping, hopping along towards the car on the crutch of my father.

At first I think, *oh my God he hit her with the car, broke her leg*. But then I realize he's smiling. He knows her.

I push through the crowd and Jessica follows.

"Hey, you can't park that here!" I yell.

He's helping her into the front seat, but looks up when he hears me, calling out my name and squinting to make sure it's really me. Funny how he's always surprised to see me when I'm never surprised to run into him. I can almost predict it.

"This is my friend Samantha." I lean into the cold air and leather to meet her. Distance hid her age. I'd thought she was much younger, maybe even a model, but she's older than he is. She reaches a spotted hand across the driver's seat to meet mine.

"What a klutz," she says. "He can't take me anywhere."

Damn right he can't.

"She took a bad step, twisted her ankle."

"I heard something pop," she says.

"Anyway she can't walk and we need to get it looked at." I glance down at her naked feet as if I'll be able to make a diagnosis on sight. I can't even tell which has been injured.

"You're gonna miss the Whitney," I say, saddened suddenly – that something could come between my father and his favorite thing.

"Nonsense, we'll see it on Tv." I wanted him to say, "Nonsense, I'll be right back" or, "Nonsense, she can wait in the car with the AC running."

"Alright. I hope you feel better," I say to California. Dad gets in and they both wave. The car starts off slowly as people trickle out of its way. For a moment I stand against the movement of the crowd to watch them go. They look famous, her in the red gown, he in his sharp suit, their glossy hired car trapped by a hundred adoring hands. Then I feel Jessica's hand on my back. She turns me away from them and then we are moving along again towards the gate, in the same direction as all the others.

"That didn't look good," Jessica says as we wait in line to get in.

"What? He entertains people all the time for work. Wines and dines. I'm sure he'll tell me all about how she's a new client from the West Coast."

"I think I saw a hand on his chest," she says.

"Jesus, Jessica. She was limping."

"It just – it didn't look good."

"Well, you would know."

We walk silently through the gates and I pay our way, buy us a program – all the rote dating maneuvers that have become habitual. The track is pulsing and attendance may be a record, the day already hot and smelling like an enormous cigar. We walk over to the paddock where they're saddling horses for the first race. Jessica likes a tall black horse and finds his name in the program: Thin Mint.

"Bad name," I say.

In the past performances she points at a prominent G in the margin by his times.

"What does this mean?" she asks.

"Gelding. He's - how do you say - lost his manhood."

She cringes a little, makes a face like tasting a poorly made cocktail. "Why?"

"It's supposed to focus them, keep their minds on racing. Some horses genes are a commodity if they're really talented or have famous parents.

Those would never be gelded. But a mediocre horse, maybe all he needs is a little push to be great. You might geld a horse like that."

"So he's mediocre?" Jessica lowers her red hat.

"No, not at all. Kelso was a gelding and he was one of the winningest horses ever. He raced years beyond what's normal for a thoroughbred. Probably because he never had the urge to go out to pasture with the ladies."

"Hmm. A gelding," she says, trying on the word. "So it's kind of like blinkers."

She pulls off the cap to let her hair down. I don't look but can almost see it, dark and slinking, come to rest on the smooth line of her neck. I keep my eyes on the paddock, on the slow parade of animals heading out to the track with everyone's money.

"Yes," I say. I'd forgotten how perceptive she can be. "It's like that exactly."



It's what I've dreaded. Jessica is right.

She is, Dad says, an old friend, someone he's known for years. He's living with her. This is a difficult time for him and she's gone through something similar, can sympathize, is helping him through it.

"I want you to be in the know," he says over the phone. "I've told your mother."

I don't say anything and he asks if I understand. "Yes," I say. "I understand."

She's not a hooker.

"Anyway, she's really a great person and we'd love it if you could come over for dinner sometime."

She lives in a big house out by the reservoir and I drive there one night after work. The water flashes silver as streetlights come on. The house is incredible, the driveway touching the street in two places. It's built into a hill and the architecture is all prominent rectangles and big pane glass windows. I park at the peak of a big U and climb up through the terraced lawn on a vague path. I wonder why the hell no one has turned on any lights for me.

A motion sensor clicks on and suddenly my father is there, just standing behind the glass door like he's been watching the whole time. He looks larger than life, spot lit in the doorway to that giant house, the kingpin of some private mafia. As if the life he led with my mother and me were the façade and this place of opulence contained his true identity. He opens the door and offers a hand.

"Sorry. One of the lights is out. I should have told you to come in through the garage."

It's been a few weeks since our meeting at the track and he tells me I look good, slaps a big hand on my back, more forcefully than is necessary. When I was born he used to tell me I fit completely into that hand, my extremities waving like those of an upturned turtle. I was yelling and screaming, he'd say, but nurses put me into his hand and I was quiet. Ever since then his hand has thudded against the back of my rib cage in meetings like this one, like two ballplayers reuniting at the plate after a home run.

"Where's Jessica?" he asks. Jessica has been invited, but I didn't invite her, confident there will be plenty of awkward things to talk about without her.

"Plans," I say. "That and we sort of broke up."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that. Come on, Samantha's in the kitchen." His face is red, jovial even, as he leads me down a long space that gives the impression of a hallway.

Usually it's awkward seeing him in an unfamiliar place. I think of the time I met him at the Sheraton in Austin and we watched the Weather Channel for ten minutes before deciding what to do. "Is it always this hot?" he asked. Or the time I picked him up at Gatwick and he refused to take the tube with me back to London, insisting instead on a black cab. Then he was a fish out of water, the business manner in high effect. But here he is strangely relaxed.

Samantha is standing over a marble countertop, shelling prawns in a black blouse and tan pants. When she walks over to me one hip seems higher than the other. As soon as I put out a hand I know she wants a hug. It's one of those forearm only hugs, her hands avoiding my back for fear of tainting them with shellfish.

"I'm sorry we had to meet like that the other day," she says, and I wonder if she means as a cripple or without any prompting on the part of my father.

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Beer and wine are offered, a bottle of red already tapped, but I accept only an orange juice — what I used to drink in bars before I liked the taste of alcohol. I laugh on the inside at how they're both dressed for cocktail hour, and I wonder if this is what it means to have money, to banish all semblance of comfortable clothes to a rusting Salvation Army bin or a plastic tub in the basement.

"It looks like you're getting around much better," I say.

"Yes, off the crutches."

A nervous silence follows and next thing I know Dad's giving me the tour. If my parents' place prided itself on an ethic of preservation, Samantha's house was a genuine museum. It was cluttered but not kitschy. Everything had its own stand and lighting – period vases, ancient masks.

Dad shows me the basement, which has accepted his traveling shrine to the Yankees. It's where the two of them watch night games with pepperoni pizza and beers on number seven coasters. He shows me his office which overlooks the reservoir and a photo she's taken of him in black and white and so recently it bears little resemblance.

When we come to the bedroom, I pray we'll keep walking. But he turns in and there it is: a queen-sized bed with a silvery comforter, windows facing the lush backyard. I walk over to the nearest nightstand and see a DeLillo novel I gave him and a photo of me home for my first college break, my hair long but neat, my face clean and bright. For a moment I expect to see a picture of Mom.

"Recognize anybody?" he asks as I straighten my picture.

"This is your side, huh?" Closest to the door.

I really want to leave the bedroom, but I can tell he wants to talk here so I sit on the mattress edge. I don't know why it's so hard for me to imagine the two of them. Is it because they're older? Could you become comfortable with a half a century mapped over another's skin unless you'd seen it get that way? Could you live in a place without the thousands of nights spent embalmed in each other's scents until it became one distinct smell, one that, when you walked in the front door after a week away, you recognized instantly as home.

"I know it's different," he says. And I wonder what Jessica would call it. Not dating certainly. But not an affair either. It's an arrangement, she'd say. "But I'm comfortable here. And I want you to be comfortable too. You're welcome whenever you like." He pulls a gold key from his pocket and I dutifully thread it through the ring attached to my wallet. It comes to rest next to the silver key my mother gave me and the bulky key to vr.

I stand and see the wallet no longer fits in my pocket. The keys hang over the side like a janitor's. They jingle as we head down circular stairs towards the smell of cooking that is not my mother's. That may be better. And she is talking to us — "Come on gentlemen" — her voice indistinguishable from the jangling keys, the sound of all the doors I'd rather keep closed.



It's 6:00 a.m. when Jessica gets home, and I'm standing in the bathroom with no lights on. The sun is just starting to fire over a stand of pines out the tiny window. I'm back from a ride and my face looks like hell – longer and paler, in need of a shave. I've become fascinated with the little tuft of hair at the top of my forehead that is thinner than the rest and looks like it's making plans to secede.

Jessica comes upstairs and stands in the doorway. She's jogged home from the bakery and is flushed and breathless.

"I always thought baldness was inherited through your mother's line," I say.

"It is, I think."

"I hate to break it to the Human Genome Project, but there is not a single bald person in my mother's family."

She shifts her weight from one leg to the other and I watch soft muscles go taut under breezy synthetic shorts.

"Well, your father's bald right?"

I turn back to the mirror. Of course, it is a possibility. It's there in every cell, the jigsaw of them. That was why people had kids wasn't it? You could refuse your reflection, glimpse it sidelong, avoid staring it in the face. But there was truth in flesh. Everything you loved about yourself was there, but so were the little bits you couldn't stand, and those had a way of speaking up.

"So you ever watch Yurich shave?" I shake the can – an aerosol shimmer and then in my palm, a tiny cloud.

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"Yeah, but he has an electric."

"Aha!"

Proof of his soul's infirmity.

Here is where electrics fail: philosophically. With a razor, you weren't just removing hair but a thin graft of skin. You were molting, letting the water collect the dead bits of you that no longer mattered and spiral them away into darkness.

"Electric razors are not for men like us," I say with hardly any breath.

"Men like who?"

Exactly.

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In that instant I want to cover her with shaving cream and chase her laughing through this skeletal house. I want to tackle her and roll headlong like a reel taking up tape.

"Go ahead." She lifts a hand. "Continue. This interests me." It's a lesson she wants. She too is an electric girl, leaves it sleeping in a pink nest on the edge of the tub.

"You understand, once I show you this there's no going back."

She nods once, gravely.

"Careful." I hold up the razor. "It can cut you."

Then I'm showing her how to start the lather, how to inhale it, a factory made petunia. Next the mechanics – wetting the blade. How to shave in one direction and one direction only. How to pull skin around the bones of your jaw to get where straight razors can't always go. You're performing surgery how a snake does. Abandoning an old husk for the neighborhood children to find – transparent, paper-thin – in the high grass by the garden.

HOWIE GOOD

Errata

The roots of words, finely ground and placed in food, are said to be a love charm. In the bright red wild, cognates are pollinated by ruby-throated hummingbirds (whereas bees are indifferent to them). There's a book like a milky liquid that everybody's reading. The sleeping baby has about eleven pages left.

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