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The Artist

by Darryl Benjamin

The glittering mastodon of screeching wheels and crackling electricity passed us by, faces lined like dominoes in the windows. Katie waited a moment before she announced, “I’ve got an idea,” and then was immediately drowned out by the steel wheels that ground to a halt at the station.

She was always having an idea. I was eyeing a Pomeranian not forty feet ahead when I felt Katie’s hand on my elbow steer me into an alleyway.

Katie and I were in graduate school in Boston. She had a tattoo that said “Against the Machine” on her wrist; san serif text wrapped in barbed wire. I had no idea what it meant. The one time I asked her she had mumbled something about *Cuckoo’s Nest* and my interest faded along with the poorly executed tattoo, so I never asked again.

Katie thought she was a Lesbian, as did most of the girls attending the college, and it made me want to yawn or vomit, I couldn’t decide which because I couldn’t decide much of

anything at the time. I was going through my Existentialist Phase. I didn't care about anything, except maybe Kafka and occasionally Nietzsche. I wore a floor-length black trench coat and carried a cane. I pretended I was an old man though I was only twenty-three, the same age as Katie.

Katie was trying to break me of the habit of kicking small dogs. It thrilled me to see them hurtling through space only to be brought back to earth, yelping and squealing, by the hand of gravity or if it was on a leash the hand of man. More often than not that leash was held in a death-grip by some uptight bitch with too much money. They were easy to spot because they wore more clothes than is technically necessary, wrapping themselves tightly as thread around a spool. For some reason it was always a female walking the unsuspecting dog.

"For my thesis," Katie said, once we could hear each other. The streetcar stomped on to the next station, freezing citizens impatiently clustered at opposite ends of the boulevard, waiting for the light to change so they could cross.

It was a blasting freezing cold day with little spit pellets of snow and ice that homed in on your eyes like Taliban missiles. "What are you talking about?" I asked irritably.

"Our art project, dammit," Katie said. "I've got an idea for it." She was tugging on my trench coat. I wrested it away from her. I waited. Katie never came out and said directly what she was thinking. Instead, she made a puzzle of everything, a maze you had to negotiate. I could never figure if it was fear or control. Just then I didn't have the patience. "Well?" I asked, "are you going to tell me before I freeze to death?" I was feeling ornery and didn't want the Pomeranian to wander too far off.

"You're a slug, you know that?" she said to me. I ignored her and repeated my question.

She grabbed me by the weenus like a cop dragging some poor slob off to a life-scarring interview who'd just stolen a ninety-nine cent lip balm from a cheesy drug store. I hobbled after her, leaning heavily on my cane to piss her off.

We were passing the Rosenthal-Newman Health Center, which everyone knew in this pathetic little town was an abortion clinic. It had been moved to this heavily fortified location after it was bombed by some psycho at the last location, which was only a mile and a half away. Some hapless secretary had bought the farm. Who knew if she even had any thoughts on abortion? Maybe she was just a poor student trying to make an extra dollar so she could go to a local club, meet some guy and fuck his brains out? Did she deserve to be blown to bits by some god-fearing loser with a bomb strapped to his crotch?

In front of the clinic there stood about a dozen protestors. Lordy they had their work cut out for them in this primarily Jewish neck of the woods, which was a bastion of liberalism, probably the sole reason it had been relocated here, between a huge heartless bank and a bagel store.

At first I thought Katie was taking me to get a bagel. We were not strangers to the joint, which had acceptable lox cream cheese on a not-too-spongy bagel at a price we could both afford, more or less.

Instead, Katie stopped me in front of the first protestor. They were lined up to city-mandated limits: not too close and not too far from the clinic, not necessarily blocking passers-by but not completely off the sidewalk. They were a mixed-bag of male and female, from mid-thirties to up to about a hundred. They shared the same kind of blue-collar washed out been-around-the-block-too-many-times look. Their hair was a uniform faded grey, indefinable, draped over eyes and ears like the way you might picture Joan-of-Arc on her way to flambé. You

couldn't tell what kind of clothes they were wearing because they wore sandwich boards – posters in front and behind each person, secured with a piece of dirty rope over their shoulders. “Umbilical cords,” I whispered to Katie. The protestors acted as though they hadn't heard.

The posters were of bloody aborted babies in various states of soul-freezing horror; you could see body parts and recognizable-as-faces tissue. When you couldn't make out anything you just saw oodles of bloody, stringy entrails or babes-in-a-trashcan. It was enough to make you hurl. I felt for the bagel business. If you were that businessman you probably wouldn't want a bunch of people with lacerated fetal pictures exhibited outside your joint. Still, it didn't seem to make a difference because the bagel place was always crowded, especially on cold days like today because they sold passably good coffee. Most people regarded the protestors as scenery, anyway.

Katie jabbed me in the belly with her elbow because I had cocked my foot in anticipation just as the Pomeranian her fat snarly-looking lady owner passed. I relished the yelling and screaming and threatening part, but I was to be denied because Katie spun me around. “Look, look!” she said, pressing her nose close up to one of the fetuses. “Isn't that the most lovely shade of red?” she asked. I had to agree, it was. “So?” I repeated.

“So, our art project,” she said with the finality of a hammer thrown through a glass window.

I shook my head, not understanding, and glanced behind, but it was too late. Dog and master had waddled out of range. I kicked a mound of snow.

There was to be no satisfaction today.

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“My father is a redneck,” Katie said. We were sitting in The Alluvial Fan, a pseudo-hip club with overpriced drinks and pictures on the wall of natural geologic formations, something the owner – a retired geologist, I had read – had been into before he decided to cash in on Boston’s student population. That was back when I first met her.

She wanted to know why I always wore a suit and a tie. That was when I was still in my Formal Phase. “No one in art school wears a suit and a tie,” she had informed me.

“Maybe that’s why I wear one,” I said. She liked that, so she asked me out for a drink.

We were both above the drinking age so I said why not, and then she was telling me her life story. Her father was her life’s story.

“Eight years ago he was fired unjustly from his job at the high school. He was a grounds maintenance guy and when he told the truth about the poor condition of the equipment they fired him. Basically, he sits around and drinks too much, yelling at the football players while his toes fall off. He’s got diabetes and he’s overweight but he doesn’t seem to care about anything.”

I sensed she was getting teary. “What’s he yell?” I asked.

“What?” she said, looking up from her Manhattan.

“Your father. What’s he yell at the football players?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

“Run nigger, run nigger, run nigger, run!”

I looked at her.

“We’re from Dallas,” she said defensively. Sensing that wasn’t quite enough, she added, “He doesn’t really mean it. He’s not really a racist. He’s just. . . funny.”

“Sounds hilarious.”

She shrugged. Her straight blond hair was cropped short and presented a boyish look.

“Anyway, we could barely afford to send me to college on my mother’s high school teacher salary. I was lucky I got into UT Austin. Hook ’em horns,” she said, showing me her fist with her outside fingers extended.

“OK,” I said. I had no idea what she meant.

“Anyway,” she said, pushing back hair from her ears, “he’s into shooting animals. He goes to a hunting lease with his good-time buddies and they get drunk and stoned and shoot up furry animals.”

“Did you ever go with him?”

“Once. I didn’t shoot anything, though. It was paintball weekend. I just sort of sat around the bonfire. The other guys sat around and said, ‘Say Hank how come you’re so ugly and your daughter’s so cute?’”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“I wish he’d stop drinking,” she said. “He’s an alcoholic and doesn’t even know it.”

“You could tell him.”

She shook her head. “It’s a sensitive subject. He’d rather talk about me. When he’s in his cups he holds my hand and tells me I’m the only good thing he’s ever done with his life.”

“And your mom?”

“She just kind of ignores it all. Makes believe everything’s fine all the time. There could be a fucking atomic explosion in the living room and all the antlers on the wall could be on fire and she’d just stand there.”

“And do nothing? Really? Aren’t you exaggerating?”

“Maybe catch a light for her cigarette from a smoking stuffed squirrel.”

“Oh,” I said.

Mr. Alluvial Fan was making the rounds. “Everything OK?” he asked. If there’s one thing I hate, it’s when the proprietor of some crappy establishment wants to know if everything’s OK. Why don’t they just piss off and leave the patrons be? Aren’t they there to relax and chill, maybe something they can’t do elsewhere, instead of being interviewed for some free marketing feedback? Besides, it spoils the mood.

I gave him a dirty look and thought of mentioning watered-down alcohol, but Katie said “Fine,” and he was gone.

“OK, your turn. I’ve spilled my guts. Now you.”

“Nothing much to tell, really.”

“Oh c’mon. Where were you born?”

“How should I know? My birth certificate says Brooklyn, and there’s a little foot imprint on it, but it could be someone else’s.”

“Why’s there a footprint on it?”

“That’s the way they did things back then. I guess if you were too small a fart to have fingerprints.”

She appeared to think about this for a second. Then she nodded.

“My family comes from poor, uneducated stock. My father did well for himself. He went to kill some people in a war, then came home and built a family. Put himself through college by working days and going to college nights. Became an engineer, started his own company. Had six kids. I was number three. Then he fucked his secretary, divorced my mother, and she went insane.”

“Insane?” Katie looked up from her drink. There wasn’t much left in it. “Aren’t you exaggerating?”

“Do you want another?” I asked, ignoring her question. “Sure,” she said. But I couldn’t find the waitress. Nor Mr. Fan.

“No hurry,” Katie said. “Go on. How did your mother go insane?”

“She started getting obsessed with small things. She started talking about the dust under the refrigerator. It concerned her. She giggled inappropriately. She murdered my dog.”

“Murdered your dog? You mean she shot it?”

“Not exactly. When my oldest brother left home I sort of inherited his dog. Then when my parents divorced I became attached to the dog. I’d carry her home from the fights that she lost and wash her blood off in the bathtub which I filled pretty much by crying. We slept together and hunted squirrels together in the woods.”

“How come she lost her doggie fights?”

“She wasn’t very big. She was a Welsh Corgi. Short legs, full body. Smart, but small. Brave, but small.”

Katie nodded. “So how did your mother kill her?”

“Part of my mother’s insanity was that we moved every two years. No matter what the weather, every two years I was going to a different school. Don’t ask why. I still don’t understand it.” I took a sip of my Bloody Mary. The celery stalk was limper than melted cheese. I took it out and left it on a napkin. The Alluvial Man was on the march again and I wanted him to see it laid out in state. He passed our table and I stopped him with a nod.

“Could we possibly get another drink for the young lady?” I asked. He practically fell all over himself saying yes. Then I stuck out my foot and he tripped, crashing into the table next to

us. "I'm so sorry," I said, "I was just on my way to the men's room." He recovered himself and said it was nothing, his fault entirely, drinks were on the house and the couple sitting next to us. Sorry for the inconvenience.

When I sat down again Katie said, "You're one pathological fuck," but she was smiling. "You're more curmudgeon than a suit-and-tie guy." That's was the beginning of my Existential Phase, but I didn't know it then.

"You still haven't finished your story," Katie reminded me.

"Oh. Well, one of the places my mother wanted to move to was called Buttonwood Estates and it was one step above a motel, a white middle-class ghetto, in shape a huge square with back-to-back rental duplexes. But no dogs. My mother put Bessie in a kennel."

"Bessie?"

"Yeah, Bessie Schneck. That was the name of my dog. My father named her. He was obsessed with the Queen of England. The Schneck part must have been corrupt Yiddish from his corrupt youth."

Katie looked at me blankly, so I went on.

"Bessie ran away from the kennel and somehow found her way back to me. I hid her in my room for a week before my mother found out and put her back in the kennel. I visited her every day. She was so happy to see me she knocked me down. This little dog knocked me down. She launched herself at me like a missile. One day she ran away and I guess she was on her way back to me and she got run over."

"That sucks," Katie said after a pause. Her drink came.

"Yeah."

That night Katie and I slept together, the only night we ever slept together. She wasn't my first and she wasn't my best and maybe she preferred Lesbians, but it didn't matter, because we became close friends after that.

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Six months was all we had to complete our art project. The assignment was simple: create art out of the ordinary "on a grand scale." What that meant, exactly, was wide open for interpretation. Our attempts to pin down the professor were met by a mysterious smile. "If you want certainty, become an accountant," she said.

A joint project was approved. The summary read:

"We intend to modify existing fetal art exhibited by anti-Abortionists by adding color, dimensionality and social relevance that simultaneously amplifies and clarifies the message into an anti-anti-abortionist, or Pro-Life statement, by exaggerating the imagery beyond the absurd."

This was immediately approved by our teacher who said it "sounded interesting" and she looked forward to seeing the result.

Since Katie had penned the brief and I only gave it a cursory glance I had no idea what it meant or what the purpose was. Instead, I spent most of my spare time learning Tai Chi so I could perfect my dog-kick using a minimal amount of energy.

One day Katie told me she was ready. "Ready for what?" I asked her. She pulled out a Reinhold G34 Paintball Gun. I had never seen a gun in my life, paintball or otherwise. "What the hell's that for?" I asked.

"Phase I of the Art Project, dummy," she said.

Four o'clock in the afternoon bustled. Rush hour was in full swing and the streets were filled with fast-moving semi-frozen crowds.

Katie had scoped out the neighborhood. The plan was we'd take a taxi that would pass by the sidewalk trenches occupied by the anti-abortionists. From the back seat of the cab she'd drape my trench coat with her left hand to shield her from passers-by while using her right hand to aim the paintball gun at one of the gruesome posters – in particular the one with the lovely shade of red, if she could find it – and fire several rounds of paint on it. I was to record the whole thing as a video with my digital camera.

Thus we'd document the reactions, the new color pallet and draw a conclusion. The whole thing would take maybe thirty seconds before the cab would make a sharp left onto Harvard Street and make a safe getaway, no one the wiser.

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"I still don't get it," I told Katie. "We throw some paint on their posters. What's that supposed to prove? I can tell you right now what their reactions will be: Horror! Disgust! Anger! It's not an art project. It's an act of terrorism."

"You really don't get it," Katie said, annoyed. "It *is* war. It *is* an act of terrorism. This is the Art Defense, throwing our color against their color – whose is stronger? Whose magic is more potent? They get to have their say, and now I get to have mine. I guess I'm an activist. An Artist."

"A terrorist for the arts?"

She smiled back at me. Her eyes were clear and bright.

Although I wasn't completely sold, I went along. Katie was driven and that meant I didn't have to drive, at least not for a while. She concealed her weapon in her portfolio case. The night before she had spent an agonizing hour choosing the right colors. "Moods and color are interlinked," she said meditatively before turning to me. "You should really help me choose. After all, it is a joint assignment, and here I'm doing most of the work."

She handed me a piece of paper of the paintball colors she had ordered and had been delivered by Fed-Ex the week before.

I chose three colors: Chili Pepper Red, Cherry Tomato and Blackberry Wine, mostly because I was hungry at the time) and she chose pastels, to "offset your male harshness" (Pale Peach, Light Lilac and Camel). She emptied her purse and put the paintballs in.

"Are you a good shot?" I asked her.

"Are you kidding? I've been shooting at the range since I was three. I was practically born with a gun in my hand." She zipped up her purse. "That's twelve-seconds worth, much more than we need. Is your camera ready? You've got it set on high-rez video?"

I nodded.

"We're off to make the world safe for abortion," she said. "Let's go."

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The day of the art project was cold and rainy. The skies threatened sleet, then snow, but apparently then thought better of it and provided only rain. We hailed a cab on Tremont Street. Katie sat behind the driver and I sat next to her. "I want your full attention on the project," she said, "no distraction by Chihuahuas or Pomegranates," she said.

"Pomeranians," I corrected her. "I'm fine, I'll be fine."

We were stuck at a traffic light and the meter was ticking and clicking, racking up the coin of the realm. “Are we going to split this, or what?” I asked. I had been running a little low on cash lately. Not that Katie had any to spare. Her parents couldn’t afford to visit her.

“Yeah, yeah, we’ll split it,” Katie said. “You’re such a dweeb.”

I tapped my cane on the floor.

“What’s that noise?” the cab driver demanded.

“Nothing,” I said. Then, after a pause, “So what’s the purpose of this again?”

“Didn’t you read the brief?”

I recalled that I had, but couldn’t remember exactly what it said. I said as much.

“By exaggerating harsh reality we elevate it to art,” Katie said impatiently, “now will you be quiet while I get myself ready? Mentally, I mean?”

Her idea of getting herself mentally ready was to stare vacantly out the window.

“Penny for your thoughts,” I said, jabbing her in the belly with my cane.

She flashed me an annoyed glance. Her eyes were gray violet and not very forgiving. The cab crawled through the late afternoon traffic. We had scheduled our event for four in the afternoon when rush hour was peak and when God’s Army would be out crusading against the heretics.

The cab smelled of coffee and cigarettes. “*Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.*”

“What?” Katie said, snapping out of her reverie.

“Just some old post office motto.”

She flashed a brief smile. “Well, I guess that could be our motto, too,” she said. “Look.” She pointed and I saw the straggly, wet line-up of huddled protestors.

“Do you think they’re feeling righteous?” I asked, taking out my camera.

“Probably self-righteous,” Katie said, quietly taking the gun out from her portfolio case and slipping it silently into the folds of my black cape. Black on black. Invisible.

“Do you mind if I open the window a bit? I need some air,” Katie asked the driver.

“It’s raining,” he said.

She was silent. Then he shrugged. “Sure, just don’t get the seat wet.”

“Remember to take the left at the intersection onto Harvard Street,” she said.

“Yup, yup, I got it,” he said edgily.

We were fast approaching the protestors, only something was wrong. The poster that had the lovely shade of red wasn’t there. Instead there were blue-themed posters of oxygen-deprived fetuses. And we were moving too fast.

“It doesn’t matter,” Katie whispered, “remember, *this* baby shoots 12 rounds in 12 seconds. We’ll be fine.”

We had anticipated a traffic light, the streetcar making its cumbersome snarling passage, but it wasn’t to be. Instead, traffic opened like a heavenly ray of light descending on Mt. Ararat. The cab driver sped up and Katie barely had time to aim.

Luck was at least partly on our side for when the loud screech of a streetcar braked unexpectedly for a pedestrian it was just as the instant the *pfat pfat* of the paintball gun spat its load. I aimed the camera and hit the record button.

And then it was over. The cab hooked a left onto Harvard and accelerated as Katie shut the window and whispered frantically. “Did you get it?”

“Yup, I think so.”

“I knew I should have practiced!” Katie said miserably. “We were going way too fast. Did you see any of the impacts?”

“Nope, I didn’t see a damned thing. It’s fucking raining,” I said, “and we were going about forty.”

She slipped the gun into her portfolio, sat back and ran her hands through her hair. “We’ll check it out when we get back to the dorms,” she said.

“My heart is pounding,” she said and took my left hand and placed it over her breast. “I feel it,” I said. We were silent the rest of the trip.

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The video was worthless. It was shaky, blurry and too far away. I had forgotten to zoom. But it didn’t matter; there was a great picture on the front page of the town newspaper the next morning: “Anti-Abortionist Shot with Paintball Gun, Dies of Heart Attack,” the headline said.

Katie had utterly missed the poster but managed a dead-center hit between the eyes of the enemy with Cherry Tomato Red. The impact had driven the 72 year-old protestor backwards, and his head hit the brick wall behind him with a sickening thud, according to the 67 year-old protestor standing next to him, but it didn’t matter, because the heart attack killed him before he hit the pavement, rolling over on top of the poster fetus in what was his final protective act.

It was this picture that was featured on the front page of the *Morning Register*, with a small inset showing the bloody impact in four-color process color.

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The next morning there was a sharp rap at our door. It was only the second time we had slept together, and I suppose we did it more as an expression of solidarity than passion. Repeated requests to fuck off were met by harder rapping. Finally, I got up. Six uniformed agents of the

ATF and three from Homeland Security asked our names. They said something about security tapes recording the “assault” and read us our rights and asked us to dress and please come with them but failed to smile.

We received an incomplete at school and five years in prison. Katie sometimes sends me letters. I’ve moved on, I’m no longer feeling my Existential Phase.

Sometimes I think about the poor schmuck we nailed with the paintball gun. Do I feel guilt? Do I feel remorse? Not really. I won’t say he had it coming, but maybe it was the universe balancing itself after the bombing at the first clinic. I will say one thing: I no longer have the urge to kick small dogs. I miss Bessie. I wish she was here with me. It can be very lonely in jail.