

Picassos in Prison

I had gone to visit him in prison a few years after what he had done because I knew that no one else would and no one else knew. All bravado had been beaten and bugged out of him. Bob's face and hands were dry and creased like a crumpled up page from the phone book. The playful bright blue eyes now a milky grey, looking inward, as a guilty man should. He seemed shorter and much older, all hunched in his chair, just beyond the wire mesh safety glass. "Your mother OK?" he whispered. "She is." I answered. "School?" he asked. "Doing great" I lied. "What about a girlfriend-you have one?" This is more of a demand than a question. We didn't so much talk, as exchange facial expressions, slowly shaking our heads back and forth, with thin-lipped looks of regret and remorse. He told me to get a haircut.

I walk heavily out of there, hearing all the loud, lonely clanging, and steel crashing echoes, calling out behind me. Under my arm, I fumble with a large clumsy roll of ridiculous children's pencil crayon knock-offs from Picasso's "Blue Period". I've promised to try and sell these drawings, and then send the money to his daughters. I got him a wall in a Toronto Beaches café gallery, where the old tie-dyed guy, loved the story more than he liked the drawings. But then, lit incense falls to paper, and it all burns up, and down to the ground.

From across the road where we jump from the streetcar, it smells as cozy as coffee brewing on a campfire. Closer now, it typhoons around us, shrapnel shards of thick choking smoke, screaming painful sirens, and all the urgent strobing lights. Shadows and shapes, darting past muffled cries. His drawings are only raven's feathers of floating ashen black, the roaring heat sucking them up, in an angry vacuum, spitting into a starless sky. Any hope of any hope, gone.

She's wrapped snug all around me like a life-jacket, with her head nestled into my back, a welcome weight on the shoulders, like giving a kid a piggy-back ride. Anne's sort of swaying and rocking us, like a mother would a cranky baby. I couldn't hear it, but I knew she was crying too. I could feel the sobbing, broken pulse of it, rattling around inside of me.

One Sunday morning, a few years back, Anne realizes she hasn't actually seen her mother in a few days. They've spoken on the phone some. The usual mom questions, "Did you eat breakfast? Did you do your homework?" She comes home from school after band practice and sees that almost all of her mom's stuff is gone. Her clothes, photographs, the watercolours of humming birds she'd painted long ago. A rather battered Lay-Z-Boy chair that her Dad was almost always sitting in with beer in hand' was upside down out in the back yard. It wasn't long before he stopped coming home too. If he did show, he'd stink of it, and look and sound like shit. When she tried talking to him at the kitchen table, he'd only say something like, "C'mon sweetie, please... just screw off." Her home wasn't one, so Anne left too. The police found her shivering and asleep, sandwiched between some damp sheets

of cardboard in the corner of a parking lot. Social Services, a couple of foster homes and then the girls group home near me.

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My buddies and I had taken over a garage in our back alley for a hang-out. We spied awhile, leaning nonchalantly against fences, feigning conversation, all the while we kept an eye peeled, and soon determined one to be abandoned. There was a side door densely grown over with grapy vines. We used this entrance, so we wouldn't be so easily spotted coming and going. We'd hang there, and shit-talk our parents, teachers or various jerk-offs from school. For hours, we'd invent schemes, and pranks of revenge or fun, well beyond the classic "burning bag of dog shit" on the balcony gag. The Group Home girls welcomed themselves to share our secret hideaway, all boldly traipsing in one sunny Saturday afternoon, being sexy and smiley, and asking if it's OK. We agreed to a one week trial. They would hang around the work bench near the small grungy window. They would smoke a lot, and all laugh and talk loudly at the same time, even while putting makeup on. Sometime I'd watch the girls. Seeing the strong red ellipse drawn so carefully and perfectly around the dark wet emptiness of their mouths made me both excited, and confused. A couple of times I heard my name in their conversations, but never knew what it was about.

The next weekend, Anne and I were alone together in the garage for the first time. I was sitting on an old suitcase when she came in and nodded at me, saying hi. Anne hauled herself up on to the scarred and paint spattered wooden workbench against the far wall. Her denim skirt climbed quickly up her thighs. I glimpsed a white triangle in the dark up there. I had once overheard an older boy saying that this was like "The Bermuda Triangle, that you'd be lost down there, and never get back" I didn't get it. She's older than I am. I figure Anne is probably twelve or thirteen. Behind her was one of those cork coloured peg-board walls, with all the shiny S-Hooks, scattered about in the hundred dark holes. I thought it looked like a big dreary "Lite-Brite" for dads. The tools were long gone, but still you could make out the shapes, the stencil-stains of where they once were, like some gang of dusty ghosts of things undone. Promises not kept.

She pulled a pack of Players out her bag, popped a fag in her pretty mouth, and lit it up with her big old Zippo. Anne took a long hard haul off her cigarette, and then exhaled from between her lips while pulling a parallel stream of smoke sharply up into her nostrils, looking sophisticated and pretty cool. Her legs were crossed at the ankles swinging slow beneath the bench, swaying in and out of the dusty light. Pouty, and pushing out smoke rings, she looked over at me smiling with her spring green eyes asking, "Smoke?" I stood up and shuffled over to her. She stuffed a cigarette in my mouth, pulled me close, and whispered in my ear, "You can finger me if you want, five minutes for fifty cents". Then she laughed a strange strangled laugh, pushing me away hard. This made no sense to me. All I knew about "fingering" someone I had learned from old gangster movies.

I did have some money somewhere in my room. Often, I'd bump into Bob late in the afternoon, out on the street somewhere. It was always an awkward surprise for me when we met like this. All boozy, he'd reach down and shake my hand, slap me on the back and

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give me a crumpled-up dollar bill, while slurring, "Promise you won't tell your Mother you saw me, OK?-You promise Davey?" I would tell her about seeing Bob, but not about the money. I had said to Anne that I'd go and get her the fifty cents, and be back. But I was scared, and so I was lying. I didn't go home, and I sure didn't go and "finger" Anne in the garage.

Instead, I walked slowly along, scuffing at everything on the sidewalk. Pebbles, twigs or garbage, I kicked at it all. I wasn't too sure what to think of Bob. It only made sense that my mom would get lonely, and she needed friends too. He needed me to like him because he liked her I guess? Bob had taught me a few card games. I learned a little about Euchre, and a lot about poker. He knew some tricks too, but I had no interest. Guys that did card tricks had always made me uncomfortable, or annoyed me, somehow. There seemed something desperate about them, that I couldn't trust.

He didn't live far from us. His place was just out on Woodbine Avenue, only three or four blocks away. The house was a scruffy little wooden shack. I sometimes wondered why he wouldn't paint the place. Fix it up for his family. He lived there with his wife and two girls. His wife was as pretty as my Mom was. The daughters wore those frilly Barbie Doll dresses. The one girl was maybe six, and the other probably four. They were very cute and quiet. Almost too well behaved.

Guns drawn, and held up high and close, the police swept silently into the place. A long stark line of light pierced past the closed curtains and shafted across the living room floor. She was found splayed face-up on the carpeted floor. The body was lying tight up against, and with one arm under, a glass and chrome coffee table. The glass and her face were badly broken. Sparkling shards were jutting in and around her eyes and much of her neck, like satanic, S&M jewellery. The children were cuddled up asleep against her. Bob was found passed out upstairs in the empty bath tub. He was snoring and stinking of booze. Bob wore only his boxers, and held a pencil in his right hand, that lay across his crotch. There was no note. A skinny kitten stood on his wife's chest licking the blood from her face.

