

MY LEAST FAVORITE PART (CONT.)

BY DANIEL DEISINGER

watched, one of them adopted the features of a person long-dead; the dead person's voice came from its mouth. Nobody responded; the Returned melted away as trees swallowed it again. Ames turned. "You know kids. They want soldiers they can defeat, weapons that do something, battles they can win. Special things that cure the world and stop the trees. Something to bring the world back and keep us all safe. They don't want something unstoppable. They want a better place."

"Let them have their fun." Old Papa looked up from his work, dark eyes on a corner of the room. "It's terrible when it happens. I still remember when it happened to you. It's my least favorite part. Not going hungry. Not our world unraveling and bleeding atoms out into space and being replaced by black trees. Not even our loved ones returning to try and coax us to our deaths in the trees. It's when the children realize nothing can be done. My least favorite part."

THE PORTRAITS

BY ERIC DURAN-VALLE

As I reached up to take the old man down with me, I hesitated. I should have known in that moment that they were inseparable. Maybe I did know and acted against my better judgement anyway.

He was one of two oil paintings I found on the pegboard wall of an antique store. They were near a set of saltwater-stained beach chairs and Kodak brownies, set in identical pine wood frames.

The portrait on the left was of an old and wrinkled woman. Although she was well past her prime, her smile and blushed cheeks told the story of a once young and vibrant girl. Her clothes were modest. She may have even sewn them herself. The only luxuries she possessed were the small chain around her neck and the thin earrings hanging from her tiny earlobes. She covered her gray hair with an orange scarf that draped over her head like a wilted flower petal.

To her left was a man who was similarly plain in a beautiful way. His face suggested that he was always old, beaten by years of labor or stress. Even so, he was smiling as he eternally smoked a slender wooden pipe. What sold me on the portrait of the man was his bizarre, droopy brown hat that looked more like a boot.

The duo had been painted so that they faced each other. Not eye to eye, but as if they were in the same beige room looking at the same thing. A Sunday ham they had just prepared or a small dog doing tricks. They could have been husband and wife, lovers stubbornly evading marriage into their old age, friends, brother and sister, cousins, or metaphysical twins. My reticence to take down the man might have been their magnetic resistance to being pulled apart.

The cashier was in on this, or at least pretended to be. As he used a cheap calculator to come up with the sales tax, he said, "You're only buying the one?"

"Yeah," I said, "unless there's a discount for getting both."

"There isn't."

"Then I only have enough for the one."

He shrugged as he put the painting in a paper bag. "I don't remember when they got here, but something tells me those two paintings are supposed to stay together."

"Right," I said. That was probably just some ghost story he came up with on the fly to make the store seem mysterious. Something for tourists driving through to take back home when they get asked for something interesting about their trip. I thought I saw through the bullshit.

As the cashier handed me the receipt and the bag, I thought, why did I just buy this? Beside a midcentury lamp and a futon, my apartment was pitifully barren. Neat, polished, and sterile. It wasn't always like that. Doreen said that we should go thrift shopping more often, not just when we needed furniture. Now that I

was stuck with myself, I understood her desire.

Outside, the pleasant Sunday afternoon had turned gloomy and ugly. While I stood on the street corner, fishing in my pocket for my car keys, the small town I had spent the last ten years in suddenly felt foreign and foreboding.

I didn't have a proper wire to hang up the portrait, so I used some fishing line from the kitchen drawer. The wall of my small living room was riddled with pinholes. The man covered up only a few of them. Doreen would have remembered to stop at a home improvement store on the way back to grab some wire and nail hole filler. It was her way to consider things like that.

I flicked on the lamp, which was also thrifted. It cast a warm glow on the old man. My smile was short-lived. The light revealed several imperfections I hadn't noticed. The oil looked dry and chipped. The wooden frame had scratches visible from far away. I figured that I had overlooked these flaws in the store.

I played some Charles Mingus on my phone. The turntable had been around so long that I forgot it was Doreen's, which made its absence even more pronounced. I didn't realize how much she had invested into what we were, and conversely how little I put in, until she took everything and left.

The saxophone scratched at the night. I had been having trouble sleeping for a while by that point. I started to worry that I'd start seeing things. Maybe that wouldn't have been so bad if I could have seen her again.

But all that I got as I drifted away on the couch was the nagging sensation the old man was watching me. He looked disappointed.

The justification for the portrait changed each day. It was an ironic statement about accent artwork. It covered up a secret escape route. On the night I hosted a party, it was simply a "conversation piece." It straddled the line between tasteful and kitsch. The right amount of competence and humility to be endearing.

Couples that I barely recognized anymore would look at him briefly, whisper something to each other, then head back to the kitchen for more snacks. I wasn't really talking to anybody, just bouncing around from person to person asking if they were having a good time.

A friend who I hadn't seen in a long time grabbed me by the arm and took me outside to the balcony. We smoked while looking out at the distant mountains. After running through the memories from when we were still in school, I asked, "How are you and Taylor?"

"Great. We're moving in together."

I scoffed, then covered my mouth. "Sorry. Didn't mean that."

"I get it, you're good. I was actually gonna ask..."

"Go ahead."

"Have you talked to Doreen at all lately?"

"No," I snapped. "Why?"

"Because I thought that creepy painting was her idea."

Creepy? I was more confused than angry. We went back in inside to take a look at the portrait. Inexplicably, the man's smile had faded and his pipe was burnt out. The brown hat was deflated like a sock that had been through the wringer one too many times. There were deep chips and scratches in the wooden frame.

"See what I said? Creepy."

My hands trembled. I felt the need to vomit. I yelled, "who wants to do shots?"

That empty space in the wall was meant to be filled with something. When Doreen left, she took what used to be there with her. I must have seen what I lost in that painting. Warmth. Joviality. Comfort. Without that, a black hole started to consume my entire apartment.

I opened up some bourbon left over from the party. It was the first time I had drank in a long time. It was just me, the portrait, and the detritus of life. The old man was utterly emaciated. His lips struggled to hold the pipe in place. A slight breeze could have disintegrated it.

"What did I do wrong? What, what, what..."

The old man's eyes stared longingly in an empty direction, like how an amputee looks at where their leg used to be.

"What did I do wrong?" I wanted to shout but couldn't. "What was so bad?"

"It's not what you did," a voice said, "it's what you didn't do."

My bloodshot eyes bulged out from their sockets. I looked for the source of what I heard, but there was no one there except me and the decaying old man. Somehow, that voice sounded like a mixture of me, Doreen, and what I imagined the old man would sound like.

I went from having trouble sleeping to avoiding it at all costs. I was afraid. When I did sleep, I dreamt of the old man and woman dancing arm-in-arm until their clothes, their skin, their pink tissue burned away and they were just two skeletons.

She gave me one last chance. With the rental truck keys in her hands, Doreen pierced through me with that gaze of hers. I felt like a child being scolded.

"I don't know what you want me to say," I said.

Although she was giving me a sharp scowl, I could see the tears starting to well in her eyes. "Tell me. Tell me that I matter to you as much as you matter to me."

"You don't need me to—"

"Yes I do."

By then it was too late.

I couldn't take it anymore. In the middle of the night I yanked the painting from the wall and rushed to my car. There were no other cars. I was going double the

THE PORTRAITS (CONT.)

BY ERIC DURAN-VALLE

speed limit. I may have passed a cop, but if they saw me I didn't care.

The lock on the antique store's back door was easy to break. I checked around for security cameras, but there didn't weren't any. When I returned to the spot where I had originally seen the portraits, it was unbelievable. The woman had deteriorated worse than the old man. A heavy frown dragged down her pale, pockmarked face. Entire splotches of the painting were missing. I set the old man back in his place. Then I ran out.

It made the local news the next morning. "Now get this, an antique shop was broken into last night, but nothing was taken. In fact, the owner thinks the burglar may have left some things. Field reporter Katie Spinelli is there with the story."

An interview with the baffled owner was played over B-roll footage of the store's aisles. First there were the beach chairs, the cameras, and then them. I paused the playback. The two portraits had returned to their smiling, content selves. They looked as pristine as the first time I saw them.

I would occasionally return to that street, ostensibly to visit a new brewery or millinery shop. But the truth was I wanted to see the miracle of the portraits for myself. After all, that footage could have been old. But I never had the courage to go back inside. Those two portraits possessed something that I never had. It was a bond so strong they were able to compel me, a man of flesh and blood, to reunite them. I walked away from that shop for the last time. My hands felt flaky and brittle.

Across the street was an old payphone. I picked up the receiver to see if it would still work.

PRETTY IN PINK

BY TRAVIS STEPHENS

On the third day of the trial the killer wore a black slacks and a pink jacket. Dusty rose, I wrote on my notepad. Alleged murderer. Becky "Zoe" Monroe, 22, was accused of stabbing 24 year-old Doug Schweitz to death. Of stabbing him fifteen times. The prosecution contended that Monroe was the unstable leg of a romantic triangle. The defense insisted that Schweitz had attacked Monroe and she had acted in self defense.

Either way I figured, Monroe had knifed Schweitz. Stabbed him in the groin, chest, and head. I have a knife which looks just like that, one Sue had given to him some years back. It had serrations on part of the blade and a graceful point. I keep it in a drawer in the hallway and use it mostly for opening boxes. It slices pretty well. No idea how it is at stabbing.

When Monroe was led into the court room the level of conversation rose appreciably. It was the first murder in the county in nine years and this one featured a sexy young woman. Attractive, I wrote in my pad. Standing room only.

I am one of two full time reporters at the Upriver Gazette. The other full time employee is my partner, Jon. We were roommates in college and pooled our money to buy the Gazette. Jon came with more money so he is the Publisher. My title is Editor-in-Chief, which means I get final word on editorials and he gets final word on layout. When this story broke I wanted to assign it to one of our part-time reporters. Darlene Poppe, maybe. Give her a deserved break from dogging advertisers.

"Now way, Pete," Jon said. "We need the big guns.

You cover this. I got feelers out to AP and Reuters. It's going to get syndicated."

"Aw, Jon."

"Don't start. You're going to say you're tied up with your editorial. Or a gripping story on crabgrass control. Just humor me and cover the story. Oh, and take a camera."

"What for? You know WKOW is going to be there." WKOW is our name for the local TV station. With a name like WNOW all the jokes write themselves.

"Just humor me, Pete. Please."

Which is how I ended up in the press box. Judge Samantha R. Nelson has her eye on a State Supreme Court seat and allows cameras in the courtroom. Not live TV, that's the compromise. Up to fifteen minutes of footage, which has to be screened by the judge before released to the station. That's my window to file my report to the papers. The television cameras are located in the balcony. On the first day of the trial, as we waited for the judge I pointed my camera at Monroe from the press box. She saw it and stared for just a moment before presenting a beatific, head cocked smile just as I pressed the shutter. Wow, I thought. A killer. This is how it is going to be.

Her defense team had been brought in from Minneapolis. During the screening of jurors they had run roughshod over the prosecutor. Words must have been said, for the second day of screening the District Attorney himself had taken over.

At the end of the first day of the trial I had caught him on his way out. "Jack," I said, "how do you think it went?"

"On the record? We have a strong start to ensuring justice for the people of our county. Truth is on our