

Grass *Diaries* : Tracking Jane's Journey

Derek Michael BESANT

It was in Texas. Around ten or so years ago, I think. Austin has a street of curiosity shops where I have gone for years now to seek out the past and not think about the future. It was there I found the trail leading to Jane... or away from her.

Waiting there, contained in dusty cardboard boxes on green paint peeling wooden shelves, sat files of old photographs in compressed rows. Inmates. Bedfellows. Bins that had been shuffled like a million card games so that each one was far away from whatever might have lived next to it in the sanctuary of the origins of the shooter. Now well- travelled stills mix and mingle with perfect strangers, the vestiges of those who also have ended up where everything finally goes... like this place on a Texas street corner on a hot day in July. Obviously the remnants from inherited estate sales, yard auctions, fire sales, lost collections caught in limbo or unwanted dispersals from distant estranged relatives: the misplaced albums from Aunts or Uncles or second cousins. The lost and profound memoirs from darkrooms with the scent of silver and gelatin: The marriage of the unaccustomed immigrants. The crippled child of the unwed lovers. The awkward teenager convulsing in tears or laughter. The reluctant stand-and-grin in front of the dead deer splayed on the hood of the pickup.

Photo emulsions cracked or peeling with age, fading ever so slowly from blacks into grays to complete white outs. The photographic fates hard at work. Serrated paper edges with dates in numbers. Polaroids streaked where the sealer missed. Hand-written scrawl on the backs of names you don't know. And then, there she was...



She wore a red coat, red shoes, a black skirt.
Blond, like the women in detective novels or film noir shown on late night television sometimes.
Her name printed by hand in the margin of the photo.

Jane.

She had her back to me, looking out to water in the first photo. All alone. But who took the photo then? The land was red sand or salt. Where is this? The Dead Sea? What was she doing out there? Lost in thought or looking for something else we cannot see in the picture's frame. Waiting.



The second photo I dug out of the same box had her standing still at the top of a long vertical concrete stairway outdoors (presumably from the same day at the water edge). The red coat was gone and a black sweater replaced it. She

seemed to stop in her tracks, as if whoever was holding the camera caused her to freeze in the photograph. Deer in the headlights. Red stained foliage seemed to reach out wanting to caress her hair from the left side of the stairway. The sky was all too turquoise. In another box I discovered her once again. This time poised next to a manicured lawn with a swirling walkway of stone at the ocean edge. Waves crashing. Spray mist in the air. Yucca plants with leaves like swords all around her. Fear of drowning or desire.

Nowhere else to go. Looking and longing for the other shore. The far away place under a pale yellow sky.



I bought the three oddly colored photos for nine dollars and I left with them in a white envelope. I never thought much about them again till I wandered back into the same store almost three months later. Old habits. And there I was again, flipping through the stacks as if watching some dissected old movie in the dark. The pieces of lives recorded. Light flickering off the surfaces of old photos, revealing private moments and public secrets. Time travelers.

And there she was again...



This time she was seated in a row boat on the sand waiting for the flood. Noah's Ark carrying only one woman of the species,

waiting for him to get there in time. Not biblical so much as desperately waiting in the getaway car at the bank job scene. Same black sweater as before or one like it. That blond hair. Turned away. Couldn't tell if she was there on her own accord or had the shooter tied her there for the photographs? She wasn't moving. Were these photos something she had tried to get to someone to warn them? Was she in actual trouble? I left the store with the next two photos; but wary at what I saw in them. Still, I dreamed about her that night with the boat turned blood red and the sand casting a greenish glow like you see on those wristwatch faces at night. I returned to the store the next afternoon before closing to look for more photographs of her, but never got in the door.

A stationwagon pulled up to the crosswalk. A surfboard strapped to the roof. It was her... The woman behind the wheel wearing a red blouse and the same blond hair as in the photos I had come across in the cramped bins. I only saw her as the light turned red.



She drove across town.

She drove out of state.

She drove across county lines.

She drove me to follow her.

She took the secondary roads when she could.

She drove along the interstate to where Route 66 crosses to Roswell. The town where they say the aliens landed in the desert back in the 1950's. I photographed her when she'd get out of her car at gas stations to fill up, always staying out of sight, but near enough to not lose her. Her, looking off into the

distance. Me, following the trail.

No bank jobs or hold ups. But she looked like she was going to meet someone at a designated rendezvous. Kept looking at her watch. A handgun in her purse, or so I imagined. That part of the country is easy to keep an eye on a moving target. Keep your eye on the road. Keep out of trouble. The sign posts flying by. Miles to go before you can sleep. Heat haze and circling hawks in the sky. At dusk as the gloom starts to settle from blue into a reddish bloom, she pulled into a little motel off the Freeway for the night. The palms in the parking lot waved in the wind as if to say farewell, Jane.



I slept that night in the car and dreamt about her again. This time she is in France by the base of an iron tower looking to water again. Hydrophobia. The lake is not a lake but a fountain. Classical statues surround the perimeter. Each marble figure grasping hold of squirming guilt fishes that spout water in streams like pissing by the roadside. A fountain this far from the ocean is not a good sign; just like how you'd never eat shellfish this far inland.



The curve of sky reminds me of a stage set with curtains opening up. The lights go down. Silence. The play is about to begin. Music rises from the orchestra pit. The light reflections hang like stalactites on the far shore. Blue ice-cycles against

gravity in a foreign city made of plywood, paint and glue. This is all done with fake cutouts arranged in perspective to fool the eye and make you believe that the Institution on the other side of the lake looks like a hospital, long white buildings with repeated pillars. Is this where she was heading to... or the ghost of where she has escaped from? The sun threatens to melt it all way or perhaps it is merely smoke gathering from a fire on the fourth floor bedroom. Why doesn't someone yell " fire! " .

I don't hear sirens, but I see one. Jane looks unmoved by the possible scene. As if she too is watching all this in the cheap seats of the theatre in front of me. Just another pedestrian wandering into this play from the street, killing time before heading home to cook dinner, pick the kids up from school, make love to her partner, and walk the dog and have a smoke before bed. Jane wades into the fountain picking up small change for the pay phone and has disappeared before I wake up.

But then, I only dreamed this.

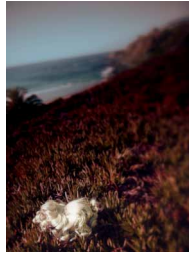
I search the parking lot for the station wagon, but it is long gone.

I ask at the motel desk if the blond woman checked out and where she might have booked ahead to next. But the clerk tells me that there was no one of that description staying in the motel last night.

Then the curtain falls and the play is over. I am standing wide-awake at the shelves with dust falling off them on a hot day in July in Southwest Texas.

I had never left the little store in Austin. I am standing there with my hands buried in the old photo albums and worn paper

of cardboard bins. There are no more photos of Jane that I can find. I know I will never find more of them either. As I walk to my car in the parking lot, I look down on the grass meridian by Guero's Bar along the street. There's a blond wig lying there in the strip and no one else is around. I can hear the ocean in my head but that's impossible this far from the water. Like that old trick when I was a kid and my mother would hold a seashell up against my ear to hear the waves. "Listen... listen to your bloodstream". The wind moves the burnt fire ant grass for a bit, which trembles and shudders, then is perfectly still.



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