What Keeps Us Awake

by Chanel Dubofsky

On Friday evenings they play Scrabble, a whole crowd of them. They use books to keep score, page numbers, instead of a long column of pencil scratches. They organize themselves into teams; the English majors all together, versus biology, history and horn players. She and he are on the same team, heads tipped close to one another. He hums under his breath as he fingers the tiles, searching for possibilities. It reminds her of opening a teapot and finding the basket of berries and leaves there, nestled in silver mesh, like a secret. Together they spell “sepia,” “zeal,” “hex” and “cynical.”

The themes at the poetry reading they attend together seem to be sex, dead bugs and hooded sweatshirts. They sit beside each other. His body folds up neatly, politely into the corner. He does not crack his knuckles or fidget, preferring instead to chortle under his breath at appropriate intervals. He looks down at the carpet and notices that she's wearing sandals with holes in the bottoms, held together with duct tape. She will tell him one day, as they amble through the woods, that in these sandals she climbed a mountain.

Her summer is spent making ice cream cones and wearing a purple t-shirt with a cow on it. She returns home at the end of each day with sticky hair and a sore left arm, which is becoming oddly muscular. At night, she drives around with the people who used to be her best friends, to whom she now has little to say. They sit on the football field at the high school, an ancient ritual preserved for the sake of familiarity.

She calls him very early in the morning, when they both agree to be awake. She sits on the porch steps, watching sunlight plod through hazy clouds. When it lands on the sidewalk near her toes, it seems weak and insincere.

He tells her about his father, who is trying to photograph all the Holocaust survivors in the state of Tennessee. This requires driving for hours to small towns, where he is served tea and cookies, sits on

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sagging couches in dimly lit rooms, trips over cats and great-grandchildren, rubbing his beard and running his hands over his graying, curly head, sighing deeply, thoroughly, trustingly.

The bedroom he has slept in for eighteen years is now a studio. Faces peer out from where his posters once were, canisters of film, piles of paper, micro-cassettes have taken over the bureau. His father organizes it, clearing up the mounds, tucking everything into boxes and manila envelopes, moving them into the living room, where they consume the coffee table, the bookshelves, the rug.

When his father isn't around, he finds himself searching maniacally for tattoos, the seemingly purposeless combination of numbers and letters, macabre gematria that adds up to nothing. All summer, it seems, he waits for his father to leave the room, the house, so he can look for the numbers. At night he lays the pictures end to end on the dining room table. He finds scars, birthmarks, moles, wrinkles, hangnails, every fathomable imperfection, but no tattoos. He stayed up half the night, looking at those pictures, hunting, inspecting. They are a blur in his mind now, a tangle of arms and hands and faces.

She imagines him bent over a kitchen table, brow rumpled, studying a pile of photographs. Everything hangs on him a little, except his kippah, which is always firmly ratcheted to his head. His curls spring up around it, reminding her of a mushroom surrounded by moss.

She says, “When we get back to school, I'll help you look.” It is the strangest offer he has ever had. After they hang up, he rests the receiver next to the pile of pictures, as though the residual proximity of her might bring something to the surface.

At the end of August, there is an exhibition of the photographs, in a room in the art gallery at the university. They are arranged at different heights on scarlet red pillars. People shuffle through quietly, speaking in hushed voices, as if they were at a funeral. His father stands in the center of the room, nursing the same glass of wine, nodding modestly at compliments, squeezing hands and offering comfort. Later he says, “It was supposed to be a

celebration.” He frames three of the photographs for his son, two men, and a woman.

His room the following semester is small and rectangular. He fills it with books for decoration. They take over the drawers, the windowsill, the closet. The three photographs hang on the wall at the foot of the bed.

Often there's a thumping upstairs, right above his head. It's probably sex, she says. He doesn't like thinking about that, about who it could be, someone from Politics, someone he sees everyday in the dining hall. Instead he imagines a dead body being dragged around the room, the head whacking against the bed, the doorframe, the desk. In his mind, he tells her, a dead body always looks so neat, like a sleeping person, instead of what it really is, slowly becoming more dead. He has never seen anyone die. Even in his dreams, death is only a legend.

It is nearly three in the morning on a Sunday when they finally find it, in the photograph of a woman with white hair and a sharp chin. The frames have been dismantled, the glass placed on the bed, the pictures on the floor. Freyda Rutstein (his father has written on the back) is looking off to the side, instead of at the reflection of herself in the camera. In the corner of the picture, almost cut off, is a number, smeared and blue, like ink on the heel of a hand, a tiny bruise.

He pushes his glasses onto his forehead in order to get as close as possible, and when he pulls them back down, there are little grease smears, like dimes, on the lenses. He is too wired to sleep now, roused by their discovery. This was his summer, this obsession, this is what he had done while other people were scooping ice cream and making movies and losing their virginity. Another person, he knows, would have abandoned him long ago to write a paper, or smoke a joint, or just because they wanted to. But she has stayed and together they have crawled, stretched, bent, looked from every conceivable angle.

It is getting light outside. She is slumped in the desk chair, paging through Leaves of Grass, reading aloud occasionally. When she

reads something familiar, he moves his lips, turning the words over on his tongue. His eyes close a little, lashes hovering. He stands beside her, his hands in his pockets, thumbs poking against the worn corduroy. He sways a little, and when she finishes, his eyes stay closed.

It is a quiet, gray Saturday when they wander together. They take a road that isn't paved, covered with nettles and twigs and pine cones and full of small holes, big enough for a ground hog, perhaps, or a small package.

The gateway to a parallel universe, he says, when they come upon a tree that's bent into a sharp triangle. He holds an arm in front of her so that she can't pass. They won't be the same once they cross underneath it, he warns. They practice pronouncing their names spelled backwards, as they will certainly be in the parallel universe. In a few years, she thinks, he will be a crazy old man. The other boys, they have more time.

❊ ❊ ❊ **Published in Zeek, October 2006.**