

NICK VEASEY

Lanvin Dress, 2011
C-Type Print, 47 x 59 in



AXIOM CONTEMPORARY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

CHOREL CENTERS

The Escape

My night as a
good samaritan

It was just after midnight on New Year's when I pulled away from my friend's place, the windshield still fogged from a long low rain and mist hanging above the street and sidewalks, muting my headlights. Nearing the end of the block I saw two figures cross beneath the streetlight, running. Exhilarated for the new year, drunk and racing, that was one possibility. But something about their dark swift motion alerted me, their passing which disturbed the dry-ice fog, the staggering, high-heeled stride of the one in the lead.

I slowed far in advance of the stop sign, then was not surprised, somehow, when the woman, knees bare between her coat and boots, emerged from the edge of the street. Immediately she was at my window, gesturing wildly. I rolled it down, alarmed. She was speaking in a rush of panic. Was being pursued. He had struck her, was chasing her.

"Oh my god," I said.

Then he, too, exited the shadows at the edge of the intersection and approached at a run.

"Get in the car," I told her, hitting the unlock. She ran around the front of the Honda and opened the passenger door. She was in the seat, words still spilling out in chaos, and then he was in the open door too, leaning in, warning me, "She's dangerous, unstable. She's lying." Then, "She has a gun."

A flash thought of the heavy gleaming barrel, of driving as a hostage, made me hesitate. Fuck. Fuck. The woman was beautiful, thin and dark.

"I don't have a gun. He's lying, he's crazy, he has a mental problem." The guy was young, his tan and the sparkle of his facial hair visible in the blocky interior light. The situation hard to assess, both of them wild with accusations. Then he was leaning into my car, was reaching for her, his arms, his hands on her shoulders, trying to drag her out. Her voice rose. I threw an arm across her chest.

"Let go of her, let go right now!" All of us yelling, then, and how could I get my phone out of my back pocket and call the police while also holding onto her and shifting into gear and gunning us out of there?

That was it, then: looking into her huge dark eyes trying to decide whom to believe. What was I doing, believing the guy? Weirdly the thought of Bill Cosby emerged: the he said, she said ... the he said, she said—and she said, and she, and she, and she.

“We’re going!” I shouted. “We’re going.” I threw the car into first and he stepped back, seemed to be heading for the back door handle. Fuck. Fuck. I floored it, and his body reeled away. The woman got the door slammed and I felt my heap surge forward, more timidly than I would have liked. In escape, do I stop at the stop sign? Fuck it. My eyes on the rearview, but it was all wet shadows back there, I couldn’t see if he was running after us. We peeled out.

“Oh my god,” I said to her, speeding. “Who *was* that guy?” I was waiting for the gun to come out, waiting for it, but it never appeared. This beautiful woman with her swollen, bloodied lip couldn’t stop apologizing. She was reluctant to say he was her boyfriend. “It’s my own fault,” she said. “I should have known better, I’m so stupid.”

She couldn’t stop apologizing, and all I could say was “No, don’t be sorry,” and “Relationships are complicated, it’s not your fault.” Though I was unsure if I believed it all the way.

“What should I do?” she asked me. We were an hour into the new year. I drove to the police station and we initiated a report, and I took pictures of her distorted lip with her phone and told her, clumsily, earnestly, that she was gorgeous.

Years before when I was living in Oakland, I found myself alone outside the Fruitvale BART Station in the thin hours one cold morning. I’d caught the last train from the city, running to make it from the bar where I’d been partying with friends. But when I came out onto the damp street on the other side of the bay every cab had pulled away and I stood spotlighted, my bare legs and my blurred vision, my whitening fingers wrapped around the straps of my bag. I stood, constructing a prayer.

There, at the red light, an older-model BMW with a handsome middle-aged guy inside. I crossed as the light began to flash and put my knuckles to the passenger glass, and in the moment of his evaluation I heard the door locks clump neatly up. He barely spoke, the wiper blades making most of the noise. Drove me to within a block of my house but no closer, though I was pointing it out, where it stood against the hill. He kept his eyes fixed on the windshield the whole time.

I’d gotten a good stranger that night, and now this woman had too. I dropped her at her driveway, waiting until she was inside her car with the doors locked, waiting

until she was pulling out, heading for her daughter’s, her headlights on the road behind me. And then I turned left and she turned right and it was over.

Even my mirrors were empty of her, and I was alone again.

Chorel Centers studied writing at The New School and City College of San Francisco before graduating with honors from Mills College in 2014. At Mills, Centers won multiple awards for her essays and fiction, was published in *The Walrus Literary Journal*, and served as managing editor on the college newspaper. She currently lives and works in Santa Cruz, California, where she is an editor for a private investigating firm as well as an editorial assistant at *Catamaran Literary Reader*.

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Chanel Packing Heat, 2015
C-Type Print, 47 x 47 in

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