

## ANDA DUBINSKIS

*Where I Was*, 2007  
Gouache, 29 x 19 in



## UMBERTO TOSI

### Didn't You Used to Be DawDaw?

*—To my dear and wonderful daughter  
Alicia Sammons, globe-trotting former  
denizen of Ventura, California,  
and keen cultural observer.*

Henry took a melon from the refrigerator and held it out like Hamlet remembering Yorick. He made an unlikely prince—hawk-nosed, beady eyed, and Dumbo eared. Better cast as Yorick, if the jester's skull had been a speaking part.

“Alas! We *cant-aloupe*, honey! Your *mooder* already mailed *dem* announcements!” He did the crackly, singsong, incongruous Swede voice that anyone who grew up in the 1980s or 90s would recognize as that of DawDaw McGee, the absentminded clown in yellow overalls who got kicked by a Hortense the Cow every morning on *Uncle Jerry's Phun Farm*. Henry had played scores of different side characters in mostly forgettable movies since then, but people watching would still ask: “Hey, didn't that guy used to be DawDaw?” There was no escaping kiddie-TV hoosegow for Henry, and his doing DawDaw knockoffs in occasional commercials (deftly skirting Uncle Jerry's ownership of the character) didn't help.

His stepdaughter, Elana, still called him DawDaw, even though she wasn't even born when the show was on and had only seen blurry YouTube clips of it. Elana smirked as she breezed into the kitchen from the backyard, solid, tall, and barefoot in black halter top and shorts, her choppy-cut, curled coppery-auburn hair (inherited from her mother) still damp from running the garden hose. Almost Halloween and only midmorning and it felt like a hundred out there.

“Gawd, DawDaw,” Elana mouthed in mock, old-movie-channel, society-dame contralto, grabbing her mobile phone off the counter where it had been charging. “Jesus told that joke in the third grade.” She was forever doing voices. She had to speak up. The *thud-thud-thudding* of a water-bucket-porting helicopter passing low overhead en route to the fire lines nearly drowned her out.

“That's where *he got* the joke, honey,” said her mother, Daisy, sitting at the kitchen counter opposite Henry. (Technically, Daisy and Henry were exes with papers from a bombastic divorce ten years earlier to prove it. Later they had reunited, but never made it official.)

“DawDaw sat right behind Jesus. He used to copy his answers,” Daisy added, with a half-suppressed giggle. Henry didn't need to be clever to elicit nervous laughs. He clung to punch lines like a drowning man trying to reel himself out trouble. People laughed at him and felt a little guilty



for it. He seemed to always be treading troubled waters. Back in his early film career, if you could call it that, critics compared him to Buster Keaton, but with more pathos and less grace.

“Everybody’s a comedian,” said Henry. “Come to me, my melon-choly baby . . .” He sang to the cantaloupe in a nasal voice, stretching the syllables as Daisy and Elana groaned.

“ . . . And off with your head!” He put the plump, gray-green melon on a wooden chopping board and halved it with a butcher knife, executioner-style, laying open its fragrant interior.

He grinned like a pickpocket over a hundred-dollar bill. His lankiness lent a macabre awkwardness to the knife wielding. He knew how to play this, having grown up as a perennially clumsy kid who had learned to cash in humiliation for laughs. Like a penguin, he could only be graceful in water, not on land. So he had joined the swim team in college. Now edging close to sixty, he still swam laps at a local club from time to time—even in the Santa Barbara Channel offshore, currents and weather permitting.

Daisy—or Margarita as she sometimes liked to call herself this Day-of-the-Dead time of year—gave him a rictus smile through her skull-white *Día de los Muertos* makeup. The juxtaposition gave him vertigo. She toyed with a gold-and-silver cameo of a strangely sensuous, distorted female face crowned with snakes that hung from her neck on a gold chain, one of her creations from the foundry shop at the artists’ center on upper Main Street. “Our house could be incinerated in a flash,” she said. She had resigned herself to her husband’s corn long ago, but could not help wishing for more.

“Laugh all you want,” he goaded his captive audience, taking a slight bow. “Soon, there will be one comic less around here!” He put down the knife and thumbed his chest. “I will be director! Actually, writer-director. No more washed-up DawDaw. No more has-been product-spokesman TV spots.”

He smiled at Daisy and opened his arms wide. “*You* won’t have to sell crafts at the pier on Sundays.”

“I like my *crafts*,” she wrinkled her brow. “And don’t trivialize what I do as ‘crafts.’ It’s an art and people love my pieces. Just because we’re not on some almighty screen like all your friends—so full of themselves. Besides I sell online. The plaza thing is just for fun.”

“They’re not my *friends*,” he said and went silent for a moment. “ . . . Come to think of it, I have no friends,” he added.

“Poor you,” she said.

“I didn’t mean it as a bad thing . . .”

“What about me? What about us?”

“Well, of course.” He cleared his throat, making like the smoke got to him, though his eyes really were tearing up.

“Don’t jinx your project,” she added.

She made a sign of the cross, in her nonpracticing but believing Roman Catholic way—a habit from when she had converted from Judaism to piss off Mama Rosalia when she was fourteen. It hadn’t worked.

“It’s a little late for that,” he said. They had been talking about his prestige crime-comedy series—a quixotic, slightly unhinged detective quasi-antihero thing he had been negotiating with Hulu about for a month now.

“You just watch. The studio suits will wring everything original out of your project and tell you to DawDaw-ize it into a predictable sitcom that will fail miserably,” Daisy said.

“Never!” he said. “Do you have to throw cold water on everything? I’ve got an inside track!” he announced, though he had not wanted to do so because of its tenuousness. “Turns out Marcus J. Wallach is handling development at Paramount on this.”

Daisy hunched her shoulders and suddenly looked very small. She swiveled away from him.

“You know,” he continued carving up the melon assiduously, “Mark, who used to be my agent back in the day. Well, maybe you don’t remember him because that was right around when—well—Nina died, and you . . .”

Daisy waved him back. “Don’t . . .”

“I mean, you know. We split up. You started going with Leo . . .” he scowled.

“Did you *call* Leo back?” Daisy raised her precisely arching plucked eyebrows.

“Mark is a hawk. He gets what he wants. I wish I’d kept him as an agent, but he moved on. It’s a great sign that he has my project.”

Henry was almost gushing and at first didn’t notice Daisy pulling out another of the carving knives from the wooden holder on the counter and twisting it in one hand. “You can’t trust Marcus fucking Wallach or any of his crowd of grabbers! Walk away before he screws you, which,

‘mark’—as it were—my words, he will do, Henry, my pie-eyed, sad clown.”

“How do you know, Daisy? You take me for a fool, just like Leo and all the old crowd. You don’t know Mark.”

“Oh, but I do,” she said. “He handled Leo while Leo and I were together. Marcus used to invite us to his parties. Disgusting people. All coke and no compassion—ego games, cocks on the walk wagging their dicks, every kind of pissing match, even real ones into the pool.”

“Yeah. Together. How lovely, you and Leo. Remind me.” He sounded bitter, but more by habit than rage.

“Don’t start with Leo,” she said.

They fell silent. She held the shiny knife blade up and stared at her distorted reflection.

Henry took a breath and waved his open hand. “It’s okay, hon. I’ve got this pretty much carved, but thanks. You can help wrapping them with ham, though. You know,” he added, “the way Mama Rosalia liked them.”

“He’s been trying to reach you.” Daisy’s voice grew dead cold.

“Mark?”

“No, like I said, Leo! Leo! Leo! You never listen!”

This time Henry caught the fire in her voice and rose to meet it. Henry scowled. “Did Leo phone you? What is he doing phoning you?” Always Leo. “What did he want?”

“Don’t go all green-eyed monster, Henry! It doesn’t become you!”

“I’m not *jealous*. Talk to him all you want. Go have dinner for all I care. Fuck him.”

“Fuck *you*, Henry. That was eighteen, nineteen years ago! We were split up, and anyway . . . who were you to tell me . . .”

Henry looked down sheepishly, fiddling with the melon slices. “I didn’t mean that you should fuck him, like you *are* fucking him, I meant fuck him like *fuck him*. Fuck him like *fuck mister big corporate video-production mucky-muck*, I don’t care what he does . . .”

Daisy blew into the air as if she still smoked. She recognized Henry’s hesitance as code for not wanting to get into the whole Leo thing, worse yet, about Elena and who was the father—not Leo, but Daisy had let Henry assume that over the years in preference for the ugly truth that she had buried, or thought she had buried anyway. She was not the kind to dwell on what ifs and changes of fortune that made her feel out of control.

“*You* told me that Leo had called YOU, Henry. That’s what I meant. Did you call him back? It could be a gig. You said you needed a backup plan in case the series fell through.”

“It’s not going to fall through,” said Henry. “Leo’s probably calling about the ad campaign they’ve been commissioned to produce—the one for the big insurance outfit, or maybe it’s a bank. I don’t want to do another horrible reverse mortgage ad as back-from-the-dead DawDaw, please!”

“Like we can afford to thumb our noses at that right now?” she said. “Would you rather we had to sell the house?”

“Sell? We’d better hurry, before the Stone Point Fire comes roaring down the mountain. We’re still on alert. We’re not out of the woods yet. Anyway, why do they name fires after gullies, rocks, and peaks? Why not name them after demons and other mythic troublemakers? How about the Moloch Fire, the Abraxas Fire, or the Cerberus Fire with three heads?” Henry put down the knife and attempted a demon face.

Daisy covered her eyes. “You sound like Seinfeld with a bad stomach,” she said, forever digging at Henry’s disastrous attempt at stand-up comedy, though that was decades ago now.

The Santa Ana winds had indeed slackened to a zephyr after three days of blowing pizza-oven hot from the high desert over tinder-dry coastal hills down to the Pacific, fanning flames in their path. The inevitable wildfires—setting records every year due to climate change—had spread out of control from myriad hot spots and crested over all but one of the chaparral ridges behind their ramshackle seaside neighborhood. No one could tell if this was the end or simply a lull in the fires’ onslaught.

“We could pitch a reality show: *California Home Disasters. From Homeowner to Homeless in Sixty Seconds: Fun with Fires, Mudslides, Earthquakes, and Predatory Lenders.*”

“Oh fun!” Daisy rolled her eyes. “I think I’ll kill myself.”

“Actually, that’s an old Betty Prufrock joke,” Henry changed the subject. He glanced sidelong at Elana.

“Who? What?” Elana deep dove into texting.

“About Jesus in the third grade. A San Francisco comic.”

“Jesus was a San Francisco comic? *Haaysoose* . . .” she corrected, “who?”

“Never mind,” he said. “Stand-up from the nineties. Friend of Robin Williams. We worked together on a *Cybill*

episode once. Drank too much. Got in trouble drunk driving with kids in a car once.”

As he spoke, Henry seeded, peeled, and sliced the cantaloupe’s peach-colored flesh into crescent-moon sections and arrayed them on a platter.

Elana leaned further into texting, but kept nodding. “I feel, ya . . . Sure. Sure . . . That so? . . . Wow . . . Kids drunk?” She shined him on absently.

“Never mind,” Henry said. “How does a joke come back from the dead like that?” He muttered to himself, “Maybe you saw Betty on TV?”

“Who are you texting?” Daisy asked her daughter.

“Brisa,” Elana barely whispered and hit the send button.

“*Brisa* . . . ? Your Brisa? Isn’t she back in your bedroom right now?” Daisy tried to grab Elana’s phone for a peek, but she pulled it away.

“Uh huh,” Elana nodded. “She just woke up.” Brisa was Elana’s latest romance. They had met at campus protests against police abuses. Elana brought her home from UC Santa Cruz at the close of summer classes.

They stayed through September and now into October, skipping the fall semester “on a break,” Elena said, mum on details. Seemed more to it. Something about Brisa’s “papers” and Manila, where Brisa had been born, though she grew up in Oakland, California, to where her Filipino mother had emigrated to marry an expat Greek shipping executive whom she never knew because he went back to Athens. Brisa related this in fragments over the few breakfasts they’d all shared coming and going.

“What’s Betty Prufrock got to do with it?” Daisy leaned forward and whispered. “Did you sleep with her too, in all that running around you did?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. And anyway, we were split up then.”

Daisy adjusted the lacy hem of her dress as she slid off the stool. “Ready for tonight, I guess,” she said, smoothing the dress.

“Perfect fit. Looks great,” said Henry, mollifying her—he hoped.

She half-smiled. “Trying to get in my good graces?” She asked. “Or my panties?”

“Both,” he said, looking her in the eyes and then getting back to slicing melon.

Her mother, Rosalia, a deft seamstress, had sown the wedding dress for her when she and Henry were to marry

twenty years earlier, when Rosalia still ruled the family roost from this very house. They had planned a June wedding in the chapel of San Buenaventura Mission church on Main Street. Daisy and Henry, who had been experimenting with ’shrooms at the time and doing a lot of weed, had eloped to Las Vegas.

“You broke mama’s heart,” Daisy blurted. Since her mother died, Daisy seemed to throw guilt at Henry about the elopement every time they argued.

“Eloping was *your* idea,” Henry would counter.

Daisy wore the wedding dress to observe Day of the Dead, as she had done reverently, if on the lavish side, every year since her mother had died. “Mama always comes home for *Día de los Muertos*,” Daisy insisted. “I feel her presence.”

Daisy had inherited the mission-style house on the northern edge of Ventura, California, when her mother had died ten years earlier. Rosalia had bought the oceanside property cheap, back in the 1950s, when the beach town was barely a train stop and the modest houses in this cluster were hardly more than shanties for families of workers in a nearby oil field up the coastal canyon, now depleted.

That day, fire threat notwithstanding, Daisy had decorated their California-mission-style, red-tile-roofed, stucco beach house with clusters of Our Lady of Guadalupe votive candles in tall, slender glass containers on shelves, tables, and windowsills. The living room, which faced seaward on a small rise, allowing a partial view of the ocean, was bathed in golden radiance from the autumn sun reflected off the Pacific, lighting up Daisy’s makeshift shrine. She did all she could to make the house inviting to dead loved ones she hoped would visit during the two nights of festivities.

Henry loved the old house when done up like this—inviting him into its memories like one of Daisy’s ghosts. He remembered the loving care—and hours of aggravation—he had put into replacing hardwood floors and tiling in the dining room and kitchen, the red stone patio and its oak trellises, the garden, thick with dwarf citrus trees, rose bushes, and native sages, surrounded by the overgrown redwood-plank fence he had erected to enclose the yard for Elana when she and her playmates were little.

Daisy had arranged bouquets of marigolds in vases everywhere. She had erected her traditional *Día de los Muertos* altar on the dining room table—with dried flowers, beads, gourds, fruits, and pictures of her mother and

other departed relatives, with welcoming objects arranged around a plaster statuette of the Guadalupe Virgin.

Daisy had strewn the altar with Mama Rosalia’s memorabilia—a gem-flecked silver necklace and bracelet, a mother-of-pearl-backed hand mirror, a silver locket, opened to a tiny portrait of Daisy as a baby, and an unopened bottle of apple Sidral Mundet, her mother’s staple soft drink and stomach remedy.

In one corner, next to the window nook, sat a silver box, engraved with roses and the name Nina in cursive script. Nina had been their first child, born with a heart defect. She had survived only a month. The box had contained the baby’s ashes, which they’d scattered at sea, in a boat out near the Channel Islands. Daisy had placed only one long-stem pink rose in a clear bud vase next to the silver box.

Henry felt guilty that he could not recall the baby’s face, only how badly their lives had gone after the child’s death—their divorce, Daisy adrift, giving up her music, a series of jobs gone wrong for him. Rosalia seemed the only one who had taken it in stride.

Henry, who loved to cook, would serve platters of appetizers and main dishes for their invited guests that night—both living and dead.

Daisy had arranged all this more than a week before the actual celebration. That way, the dead would feel comfortable if they arrived early for the weekend. By now, Henry felt as if he and Daisy were among the departed, themselves back among the living, taking a break from eternal dreams.

Daisy had let out the wedding dress successively each year to accommodate her ample charms. And every year, they had talked about renewing their wedding vows at the old San Buenaventura church and inviting Mama Rosalia’s ghost—probably in October, around the time she had died, on *Día de Los Muertos*, maybe on a November 1 or 2, if the parish could squeeze it in amid All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days observances.

This year, for sure, they had agreed, they would at least announce their intentions to friends and family—mainly to Elana, since she’d be home from school—and, as Daisy insisted, to Mama Rosalia’s spirit when she showed up for the Day of the Dead.

Daisy brightened up the wedding dress with freshly picked sunset-orange marigolds along its neckline, bringing out the bronze highlights of her tawny complexion, with

high cheekbones and luxuriant auburn hair, hinted in gray now—gifts of indigenous Oaxaca Zapotec and Sephardic Jewish Mexican grandmothers back in Old Mexico. Tall and tan, and young and lovely—though not so much anymore—she would always be the “girl from Ipanema” to Henry.

“Oh, *honeydew*.” Henry grinned at Daisy in playful ardor tinged with uncertainty about where Daisy was taking things.

“You want me to help?” Daisy sounded conciliatory. She was volatile like that—burned hot, but cooled quickly, but that could turn to ice as well. She pointed to the melon slices that were starting to look ragged. “You’re gonna stab yourself the way you are . . . getting all worked up.” She smirked.

“I got it.” Henry unwrapped a plastic package of prosciutto from the fridge.

“Mama loved those little wrapped-melon things,” said Daisy. She batted indigo-mascaraed, Salma Hayek *ochi chyorny*es at him (or was it at the prosciutto?).

Henry pictured himself dropping everything and making passionate love right there against the kitchen counter, just like in all those movies, but lovers rarely do in real life, or if they try it, the kitchen table collapses and they end up in a hospital. He imagined kissing her bare shoulders, taking in the earthy scent of her coppery skin blended with lilac cologne and the wedding gown’s faint mothball fumes. He steadied himself against the counter.

Elena returned to the kitchen. She had changed into jeans, a blouse, and some running shoes, leather purse slung over one shoulder. Brisa came in behind her, but stopped just past the door, looking shy, her large hazel eyes taking them all in, full lipped, with the gaze of a panther resting on a tree limb watching wild pigs foraging, waiting for the slow one.

“Are you two ready to evacuate in case of an alert?”

“Whatever,” said Elana. “You and mom don’t look very ready, unless you plan to ride melon slices out of here.”

“Hope for the best, prepare for the worst,” Henry said. Brisa smiled and suppressed a laugh.

“Looks like you two got that reversed,” said Elana.

“Never mind about us, you just be ready,” said Daisy.

“*Whatever*,” Elana repeated. “We’re going downtown now. Brisa wants to see that Stingray Woman movie.”

“Okay. Keep your phones on. Keep checking the alerts. We’ll text you,” said Daisy. “Take your overnight bag. We’re



not lugging your stuff plus our own. If we have to get out, it will be fast!” said Daisy.

“It’s all just provisional,” said Henry. “If it goes mandatory, I’ll take your mother to a shelter—at the high school. You and Brisa will have to go straight to the shelter from the movie—or wherever you’re going. I’ll text you the location. I won’t be able to pick you up. I’ll be coming straight back here back to keep watch on the house—unless they force me out,” he added.

“*Madre de dios!* Don’t try to be a hero,” Daisy said. “You’re not the type.” She fiddled her fingers and exhaled, craving a cigarette from the old days. Maybe it was the smoke in the air. “Let the firefighters do their job.”

“We’re not going, anyway,” Henry said. He kept working the cantaloupe.

“Mama Rosalia will keep the house safe,” said Daisy.

“No,” said Henry, “I mean the wind is shifting, I can feel it.”

“I can feel mama’s spirit,” said Daisy. “Right here all around us.”

\* \* \*

Daisy and Henry went about the rest of their morning in blissful denial. What fire threat? They had always been safe in that house, through quakes, floods, slides, and other wildfires up and down the coastal mountains. Like most people, they believed everything would be fine until it was not. They had warning when the hot offshore wind picked up at noon. Daisy smelled it first and told Henry to stop making appetizers and start grabbing up what he could.

Henry needed no convincing when he stepped out onto the patio. He pulled out the garden hose and gave the roof another soaking, quickly as he could. He loved that roof and had laid some of its deep-red Spanish tiles himself, falling off into bushes and breaking his wrist at one point, four years earlier.

Ashes swirled down like snow flurries, and the air smelled of burning wood and oil. He looked northeastward and saw a wide column of white-and-gray smoke reaching skyward, fringed by a line of orange flames cresting a ridge so close Henry thought he could touch it. He worried about the animals—the rabbits, gophers, and coyotes. He always did.

Wildfires could pounce across ridges like mountain

lions, creating white-hot firestorms that fed on themselves like nuclear chain reactions. Henry stood, aghast, and remembered the turreted house he had once owned high on one of those ridges, with its spectacular view of the ocean. It would be burned to cinders by now, as would his nemesis—or former nemesis, anyway—Leo’s faux Mayan temple straddling a hilltop. Henry basked in *schadenfreude* for a long moment.

“Henry! What the hell are you doing out there?” Daisy’s voice came through the open sliding glass door. She still wore the jolly Day of the Dead clown-white skull make-up and her mother’s wedding dress but had taken off all the flowers except for an orange marigold in her hair—to greet the flames, perhaps—and had put on a pair of red high-top sneakers.

He heard the growl of squad car sirens pulling up front and deputies shouting through megaphones for everyone to evacuate.

“Just getting something, honey,” he called back to her.

“Well, whatever it is, get it fast or leave it,” she shouted.

By then Henry was in and out of the garage with a large round blue-and-white metal cookie tin he had fetched off a high shelf. It was the kind with little Dutch children and windmills on it, for holiday cookies, except it was heavy with papers.

“What’s that?” Daisy asked, giving him a squint as she came onto the patio headed for the garage. “What are you doing here? Open the garage door and start the car.”

“Later,” he said, grabbing a backpack of clothes and personal items, a couple of blankets, and whatever else he could manage.

He had to turn on the wipers to clear the windshield of ash as they pulled out onto the driveway and rolled down their usually quiet side street toward Main.

“Bye, Mama,” said Daisy. Tears streaked the ashy grime on her face.

A hot gust broadsided the car, causing it to veer seaward and yaw like a tempest-tossed cabin cruiser unaccustomed to such indignities. “Santa Anas,” Henry mumbled, tugging at the steering wheel. “Opposite day . . .”

“What?” Daisy asked.

“ . . . It’s a contrarian wind . . . blows everyone’s life sideways.” His mouth felt dry as burnt toast, his nose stuffed with hot cotton. He fumbled in the cup holder for a nonexistent

# ANDA DUBINSKIS

*What She Does (Upstairs Porch)*, 2007

Gouache, 22 x 15 in





water bottle. “Abandon all hope, along with cozy prevailing westerlies,” he quacked, his voice gone bone-dry nasal.

“He’s a poet and doesn’t know it,” Daisy said. They rode another few moments in silence.

“Did you call Elana?” Henry headed south toward Ventura’s main drag. The wide boulevard was uncommonly empty except for emergency vehicles.

“Texted her.”

“And?”

“There’s a problem.”

“What now?”

“She doesn’t want to go to the shelter. Some problem with Brisa. She says we should get a motel room.”

“Brisa?”

“No, Elana says she would get a hotel room.”

“On what?” He asked. Then shrugged. “We can get something at a motel for all of us. I don’t feel like sleeping on one of those cots out on a high school basketball court.” He slowed down, not sure which direction to go. “Can you check on your phone for rooms around here, maybe an Airbnb? *If* we can afford one.

“Elana’s angling for the Crowne Plaza overlooking the pier and the ocean,” he added. “She’s been into that place since her senior prom there. Our lives are going to hell and she wants to make it a sleepover with her friend and a holiday by the pool, fiddling with rum drinks while Rome burns.”

“Harsh, Henry. They don’t even have their bathing suits.”

“They can buy new ones. It’s only money, and think of all we’re saving by her not going back to school,” he said.

“They’re just taking time off,” said Daisy.

“Don’t count on it,” he said. “This whole thing is on account of Brisa.”

“They’re getting married.”

“Married? Married! You never said anything about that.”

“They’ve talked about it. I heard them.”

“They should elope, just not to Las Vegas.” He gripped the steering wheel tightly, as if holding on. He knew what she was going to say and regretted his wisecrack.

“What, and break Mama’s heart again?”

“Never mind,” he said. “No. I haven’t heard anything about a wedding. It’s something else.”

“You mean about ICE gestapos being after Brisa?”

He nodded. “Why would I have thought you didn’t

know? Yes. Elana called me from school when that first went down, and I looked for a lawyer. The kid got in some stupid trouble about overdue parking tickets or something and one thing led to another, even though the local cops weren’t even helping the gestapo. They’re getting into everything like cockroaches.”

“I knew all about it,” Daisy said. “Brisa’s one of those ‘dreamers,’ but never came out about it, always kept it secret where she was born.”

“Sorry, I should have clued you in,” he said. “It’s like we’re giving her sanctuary, but it’s just a big sleepover.”

Daisy put her hands flat on her skirt, palms up, then clenched her fist. “We need to do something—else, I mean. What is she going to do in the Philippines if they deport her? She’s spent all her life here! She has no relatives there. Our daughter might marry her—who knows, maybe follow her to the Philippines.”

Henry nodded and kept driving. “I want to give her baby Nina’s birth certificate, the certified copy we have in the cookie tin with some of her baby things,” he said. “If that’s okay with you . . .”

Daisy blanched and shivered. “That’s why you got the tin from the garage just now?”

“I would tell you first, of course.” He squinted and flipped the wipers on again.

“Not so sure you would have confided anything if I hadn’t seen you with the tin, Henry, but I’ll take what you said with a grain of salt.”

“Well, you’ve got me. I took it for the keepsakes. But then, just now, I thought of the birth certificate,” he said. “I’d give it to Brisa, but not tell her what to do with it—just as an option, a resource, a found item. They do that in all the spy shows. Like in *The Americans*, they used identities from children who died in infancy.”

“Not everything is a TV series, Henry.”

“She would know. She’s got the lawyer—also, already this anonymous revolutionary priest is helping her, and he would know how to parlay the certificate, maybe, into a whole history . . . a new identity . . . guaranteed.”

“Nina would come back!” Daisy said. “On *Día de los Muertos*, with Mama too.”

“But it would make her Elana’s sister,” said Henry. “Half sister. Whatever. It would kind of ruin their wedding plans.

“You’re right.” Henry grimaced. “It was a stupid idea.

# ANDA DUBINSKIS

*At the Edge of the Concrete*, 2018

Gouache on printed rice paper, 26 x 19 in





They wouldn't do that, plus it's risky. From tragedy to com-media dell'arte, with mistaken identities and everything."

Henry mused as they came in sight of the towering hotel—the tallest building in town. "Come to think of it, this is why Brisa didn't want to go to the fire shelter. Probably scared they would check papers, which isn't going to happen there, but you never know."

"Well, the girls do have their swimsuits." Daisy smiled and looked to the right as a splendid strip of ocean beach came into view, smoky air notwithstanding. "They stuffed them into the backpacks we made them take in case of an evacuation. You know, they're always ready to beach it, those kids."

Mine's in my gym bag in the back," he said. "I'll buy you one too. Might as well all go down in style. What the hell?"

Daisy shrugged. "You're a feckless idiot, DawDaw." She fingered her snake-woman medallion again, as if invoking a spirit. "You're going to be the big producer now. So why not?"

"Director, not producer probably. But nothing's final." "We're going to stay at the Crowne Plaza tonight, on me," she said. "I want a room with a view, the works," she added. "If we can't take a trip to Spain or Italy right now, and our house is going up in flames and it's the end of the goddamned world, then why not!"

"That's a lot," he said, sheepishly. "But let me get it. One room, with extra bunks, not two, and just for the one night," he added. "They may allow us back into the house by tomorrow—even by tonight."

Henry turned the car toward the pier. "Or never," he muttered. "I hate to tell you this, Daisy, but I'm pretty sure I forgot to make the last fire insurance payment," he added, almost in a whisper.

Daisy took a breath, shook her head, then sighed. "I already know that," she muttered back. "Down, down, down, we go," she said. "No!" She grabbed his arm, forcing him to veer slightly, then let go.

"I'm doing this, and it will be two rooms—a separate one for the girls, and as long as we like." She smirked to herself. "Business has been good," she added softly.

\* \* \*

By next morning, the Santa Ana winds had diminished again, but they had no word on whether it was safe to return

to the house. "I'm driving up there to check," Henry said over scrambled eggs in the hotel restaurant where he sat with Elana and Brisa waiting for Daisy.

"Road is still blocked," said Elana, bent over her phone. "Got a text from Gina. She said her father tried to get in an hour ago and was turned back."

"Looks like the fire's died down from here," said Daisy. She had just come down to the café from their eighth-floor room, which had a north-facing view of the ocean and the hills, afire through most of the night, lighting the smoky sky orange and pink. She ordered coffee. She wore no makeup and was out of the wedding dress and into black shorts and a black blouse embroidered with dancing skeletons—still observing the *Día de los Muertos* weekend, despite the disaster around them. She looked over at the girls. "You two all packed up for checkout?"

"Got everything in our backpacks, checked at the front desk," Elana said.

"Let's hit the beach," said Brisa. "Cool," said Elana. "I put my swimsuit on under this," she said, pointing at her blue jeans and halter top.

"Me too," said Brisa. "Figures," said Henry. "But not me. You two go out there. Your mom and I will find you. We need to go back to the room to get our things."

Daisy grinned. "Now you glad we got the room?" she said after the girls left.

\* \* \*

An hour later, Henry walked along the beach, northward, away from the long fishing pier and the hotel tower where they had spent the night. The tide was coming in. He ignored the splendor of surf to one side and the burning hills to the other and looked down at his feet as he strode long steps. Where was he going? Where was there left to go now. Their intention had been to sneak back to their hotel room and make love—their passion aroused by the strange surrounding of the room and the perils of the last twenty-four hours. Instead, a housekeeper showed up, whom they sent away, but then, put off, they talked.

Attempting to salvage their passionate tryst, they phoned the desk and booked the room another night so that they could take their time. But soon, talk turned to argument, hurtful words, let loose from hellish places

unmeant, like oily chaparral exploding in the firestorms roaring through coastal canyons.

It had to be said, after all these years. Daisy had kept it in, but the fire, and their previous quarrel about Marcus, and his insisting to work for the man, had brought everything to a boil inside her.

Henry was going on about Leo again. Why wouldn't he shut up about that?

"Not Leo," Daisy, exasperated, finally screamed at him. "It was Mark—Marcus—that asshole."

"What do you mean?" "I mean he raped me." "What?" Henry, incredulous, shivered in the heat.

"It was one of his parties. I was sick, partly out, resting in a bedroom after puking in one of his big marble bathrooms. Mark came into the room and forced himself on me. I had bruises all over, fighting him, then passing out, I don't remember, except the pain."

"Son of a bitch!" Henry sat up on the room's king-sized bed, still naked from their fitful attempt at sex play. "What about that fucking Leo. I bet he tried to pimp you to Marcus—anything to get ahead in Hollywood."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Daisy yelled above the low, rhythmic roar of the surf eight floors below them outside their open, balcony door. "You don't know shit, Henry!"

Henry scowled, but stayed silent. "I got pregnant. It was Mark's." "Did you call the police? Did you report him?"

"It would have been no use. I was drunk. Nobody would believe me. Mark was already a celebrity, a mogul."

"Did you tell Leo?" Henry asked. "You certainly never told me."

"No," she said. "I didn't say anything. But it ate me. Leo and I drifted apart, then—well you know—split up. By then I had Elana."

"And we got together—after a couple of crazy years for me too. I'm sorry . . . all that happened. I'm going to kill that bastard."

"Marcus?" "Yeah." "Henry, you wouldn't kill a mouse."

"Mice are friendly little creatures—pests maybe, but not rapists. No, I am going to kill him," he said.

"Whatever. It's up to you. If you want to take the series

deal with Marcus involved, it's up to you," she said, "but I don't want ever to see him or hear anything about him."

"How can I?" Henry put his head in his hands. "Not knowing this." He attempted to put an arm around Daisy, but she slipped off the bed and into a terry-cloth hotel robe.

"I'm going to take a bath, then go down to the beach," she announced.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" He shook his head.

"I wish I hadn't told you right now, Henry. I don't want this to poison your relationship with Elana," she added. "But the milk is spilt," she said. "What do you say?"

"I say it's awful. Awful for you. Stupid for me, but you know I love Elana."

She moved up against him and pressed his head to her breasts for a few seconds then turned toward the bathroom to run her shower.

"I'm going down for a swim," he told her. "The pool?" She asked.

"No, the ocean. Should be comfy." He could feel the dry Santa Ana heat building up with the offshore desert wind. "I need a swim to clear my head," he said, donned his swimsuit and an orange *Futurama* Bender sweatshirt with "Sweet Manatee of Galilee" inscribed in purple on it and signed in indelible black ink by Phil LaMarr.

\* \* \*

The little boy was barely four and brown as a hazelnut. He stood at the edge of the water, crying and pointing toward the waves. "¡Mi pelota! ¡Mi pelota!" he sobbed. An old woman in a beach robe was walking toward them, probably the boy's grandmother. A big, cheerfully colored beach ball bobbed in the gentle swells, just beyond the weak, almost flat breakers that day.

Henry sized up the situation. "I'll get it for you," he said to the boy, loud enough for the approaching grandmother to hear. "*Voy a conseguir tu pelota*," he repeated in halting Spanish and pointed out toward the ball. The grandmother smiled and rattled something in Spanish to the little boy, who smiled through his tears.

"I was going for a swim anyway." He pulled off his Bender sweatshirt, laid it up on the dry part of the sand, and carefully tucked his hotel room key card in one of its pockets. He smiled at the *abuela*. "*¿Me mirarás la camisa, por favor?*"

He patted the shirt and smiled. She nodded and

smiled back. As she drew closer her eyes lit up. She waved frantically. “Daaa . . . daaa!” She squealed with hoarse delight, pulled the boy closer, and rattled off in Spanish to him, pointing to Henry and gesticulating. “*¡Eres tu el señor DawDaw!*”

Henry gnashed his teeth and tried to make it look like a smile. “Oh, gawd! There’s no escape!” he muttered and ran into the waves.

The water felt surprisingly chill at first, but he got used to it quickly as he paddled through the small breakers toward the bobbing beach ball. Santa Ana winds, blowing offshore, tended to flatten breakers and make for calm waters well out to sea along Southern California beaches. It shouldn’t be hard to get the ball and return it to the boy swiftly, then swim along the shore for a while as he had intended. A promise was a promise.

The rolling swells past the breakers welcomed him, lifting him gently up and down as he swam—and swam, and swam. He realized after a time that he wasn’t getting nearer the ball, as it rose and fell, gracefully, just beyond his reach. He swam some more and picked up the pace.

He was a strong swimmer. The breeze was blowing the buoyant ball at an angle away from the shoreline. He could catch it by swimming faster, he calculated. Then he could rest on the ball and use it as a float to help him get back, even though against the wind. But the harder he swam, the more the ball teased, just out of his reach.

He looked back toward the beach and realized that he had drifted farther than he’d thought from the boy and his grandmother, looking tiny now, well to his north and east. He would have slapped his forehead if he weren’t so busy swimming for his life now. “I’m in a riptide,” the calm part of his brain, accustomed to ocean swimming, told him. It also informed him that he had never allowed himself to be pulled this far out to sea, alone and without gear before.

His muscles felt hot and started to ache. If he could just reach that ball. He should have known better, he thought. Of course, Santa Anas blow offshore, out to sea . . . and make the water look deceptively calm. He knew all that. What was he thinking?

“Didn’t you used to be DawDaw?” he imagined Saint Peter’s voice—played by a B actor—mocking him in English and Spanish as he approached the pearly gates.

“I don’t even believe in you,” he yelled back at St. Peter.

“And who decided you should have that curly white beard?”

“*¡No te preocupes, mi hijo!*” Not to worry! It was Rosalia, a young version of her! She sat atop the beach ball, like one of the bathing beauties atop a big plastic ball in a Busby Berkeley movie dance extravaganza on TCM starring Esther Williams. “We need more clowns in heaven,” said Rosalia. “It is so boring. Nice but boring, like a retirement resort, you know . . . They need comic relief.”

“I’m not ready to play retirement homes,” Henry yelled, gulping salt water. “I don’t want to be DawDaw anymore, here or up there, or down there, not anywhere,” he gasped.

“Your choice, *mi hijo*,” said Rosalia, laughing and flashing perfect teeth. “But you can live to clown another day,” she added.

“For what?” He took in water now.

“For Elana. For your Daisy. She picked YOU—fool!”

“I AM a fool,” he burbled, water coming out of his nose.

“Essazactly! She *loves* you, *as the fool you are*—not as a hero, no bossy superman SOB . . .

“Heroes? We ain’t got no heroes. We don’t need no heroes. I don’t have to show you any *stinkin’* HEROES!” All of a sudden she was doing Alfonso Bedoya’s bandit from *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. He laughed, coughed, and spit up more water. Now he knew for sure she was his own hallucination.

“That is *it, mi hijo*,” she sallied forth despite his analysis. “Laugh! You *make her laugh!* She loves you for making her laugh!” Mama Rosalia sang and danced on the spinning beach ball, with dazzling, off-the-water sun glare special effects. It was a regular musical telenovela. “You make people forget all the world’s bad shit a little while, *mi hijo*. That is your gift!”

That’s my exit line—albeit humble, he thought. “I’m going down. I better yell for help,” he said to himself. In all his years of swimming, he had never called, “Help!” His one and only competence had been in water.

But at that moment, he swallowed his pride—with more salt water—and shouted: “Help! Help!” Hoarsely. He lifted an arm, much as he could to wave toward people he saw on the beach now, just to the south of him, including a lifeguard in a beach tower, surfboard leaning against it at the ready.

Nothing. No one could hear him. The offshore wind blew his words out to sea, just as it continued to do with

Henry’s now frantically swimming body and the happily bobbing beach ball.

“Save yourself, *mi hijo*,” he heard Rosalia call to him again, then disappear behind a swell.

The cold, calculating part of his brain kicked in, just as it did on stage when he would plan his gags and pratfalls and look totally unhinged. “If I swim parallel to the shore, edging toward it little by little, I can stop fighting the off-shore current and have a chance,” he thought, eyeing the curvature of the beach and the direction of the waves. “I can rest every few minutes by floating on my back, making sure to paddle a little so that I keep angling shore-ward,” he reckoned. “I might just make it. But maybe not.

“Don’t panic,” he told himself, even though he was already in a suppressed state of terror. “Don’t tire yourself further. Salt water makes me more buoyant, so that helps. That and having gained some weight in middle age,” he thought, “makes me float better.”

“In case of emergency over water,” he heard a flight attendant announcing in his head, “middle-age spare tires may be used as flotation devices.”

He started taking notes for a skit about this as he swam, zigzag, gradually gaining ground against the wind and closing in on the beach. Finally, he reached the outer edge of the breakers, from where he could belly ride a wave the rest of the way to a spot shallow enough for him to get his footing on the sandy bottom. He hit a wall of exhaustion with the last few waves, but managed to crawl, gasping, onto the sand like a beached whale, coughing and spitting up salty water. A bunch of kids ran right by him playing chase with a sopping wet poodle.

He sat there a long while, barely up on the sand. Then he stood up. Suddenly he went all goose flesh. A wisp off the water covered him in fine salty, iodine spray, smelling of kelp. The wind was shifting! The Santa Anas were exiting stage to allow the westerlies back. He shivered, but longed for the comforting embrace of cool gray marine fog.

Just ahead of him now, he saw Daisy, Elana, and Brisa sunning themselves on a blanket only twenty yards or so from where he had come ashore, bleary-eyed.

“Hey *yee*, DawDaw,” waved Elana as he approached. Normality, in all its glorious predicable torpor, felt so welcome to Henry at the moment.

Daisy, dozing on her belly, pulled herself up enough

to notice him. She nodded at him but gave no further sign. Fences to mend, he thought, but at least I’m alive.

“You took a *hella* long swim, there DawDaw,” said Elana. She turned to Brisa. “See? I told you he was a *hella* tough swimmer.”

“We saw you waving,” chirped Brisa, smiling.

“Yeah. Did you see us wave back?” Elana said.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “That was just great.”

Daisy raised herself up again. “Got in touch with the sheriff’s office. The road’s been opened. This part of the fire is under control. The house is safe. So we can go home now.”

“Home.” he said. “That sounds good. But I want to shower upstairs first then let’s have a big lunch by the pier,” he said. “I feel like celebrating—in a George Bailey kind of way.”

“Teacher says, every time a bell rings, an angel get his wings,” Elana did a squeaky little Zuzu voice. “Or her wings,” she corrected.

“Or a clown gets a kick in the pants,” said Henry.

“Much needed,” said Daisy, raising her head.

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