

Trudy

by Nick Hayden

I saw her first when I was twelve. It was during Social Studies. The teacher yammered on about Indian burial mounds in a way that sapped all the mystery out of the subject. I doodled along the edges of my notebook. Figments and snowflakes of worlds showered the edges of the paper. Rocket ships ignited the atmosphere and sped toward unknown worlds. Goblins, dressed in their dress blues, navigated their dirigible over enemy waters. Flint-eyed men in dark trench coats lurked in the shadows of buildings and the protective circle of the street lamp.

This, at least, is what I saw as I flipped through the pages, searching for a square-inch where a dog or thrown knife or alien figure might hide away. These creatures thrived from page to page, melding one into the next like the images of a dream. They gathered in the margins of knowledge, driven to the edges by quadratic formulas, element abbreviations, and comma rules.

In the upper corner I began it, a few sketched lines of a face. Sometimes I didn't know what I was going to draw until I began to see how the lines flowed. The curve suggested one thing, the thickness something else. One line followed another, the semblance of shape looking for meaning. The unsorted male adolescent mush of creativity, blindingly bright and dully capable, added eyes and mouth, nose and hair, a scribbled mass of afterthought adjustments—a girl looked across the scrawled archeological remains of the Mound Builders to the knight storming a gloomy castle.

That was the first time I saw her—or, so I remember it now, looking back and trying to pinpoint where it began.

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She returned in a pencil drawing in high school. We were supposed to cut out a face from a magazine or print one off the Internet and render its likeness in shades of lead. Such realism was a struggle for me. The image entered my eyes just fine, but somewhere between my brain and my hand, I failed to see, at least if it was my job to reproduce as a camera does.

What I handed in bore three or four layers of image, erasures burying one attempt at facsimile on top of another, like those ancient cities with older cities beneath them. I was frustrated and exhausted by the exercise. But it did look like the woman I had torn out of *People* or *Us* or whatever the magazine had been.

The teacher hung her up in the hallway with other works the teacher enjoyed, and she looked at me as I walked to and from my locker. She watched me, smiling, trapped.

I stayed late one night, I don't remember why, and I found myself staring at her, trying to determine what had gone wrong. Plenty. But it wasn't the wrong curve of her lips or the slight disproportion of her forehead that bothered me. It was something else.

At the end of quarter, I got her back. I took her home. Pencil in hand, I tried to pinpoint the source of my unease. I tried to even out the shading beneath the chin, add more detail to the hair. My every correction marred it in some further way. Finally, I began to erase, to let my hand move the lines out of their perfect places. I peeled away two or three layers of realism. By this time, the paper was beginning to wear through, but she was there, somewhere, beneath all the marks and remarks.

Who? I didn't know. But she was almost free.

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I formed her, day by day, the summer after graduation, working to perfect the details. It was a process I cannot quite explain. I was uncovering something that had always been. Where did Jim Henson find Kermit or Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes? Where did comedians find their alter egos or musicians, the sound that marks their work?

At least, that's how I explained it to myself.

She was a rather unassuming young woman, unlike those hardly-clad super-females in video games and comics. Her name was Trudy—it just was. She wore layers. She had these too-large glasses she wore, but only when the fancy took her. She didn't need them. She liked to stomp her foot at irritations. She smiled, very slightly, when the sun was out, and laughed, very loudly, when someone stubbed his toe. She peered closely at headlines and the spines of books, enjoyed her cup of tea religiously, loved to travel but preferred her own bed. She was fabulously educated and not at all interested in politics. Her garden was the center of her world, and she dreamed rather more than she let on.

I found these things out by painstaking trial-and-error. If only she could have spoken up, pointed me in the right direction, but no! I drew her in an office, at her computer, and I tore it up. I tried again, putting a flower at her desk. A bit better, but still, I *felt* the wrongness of it.

Day after day, I uncovered Trudy. It was like rubbing your pencil over wax paper to record an inscription. Keep at it long enough and the picture becomes clear.

* * *

I showed Trudy to a few people. I didn't like to. I had brought her into existence, and I felt a jealous possessiveness over her. When I showed Rick, I brought him into my room, closed the door, and said solemnly: "I'd like to show you something."

"Yes?"

I brought forth the notebook from my desk drawer, opened it carefully so that only I could see, chose the page I thought represented her best, and handed it to him. I said nothing. He looked at it for a few seconds. It couldn't have been more than five.

"That's neat. I like it."

"She won't talk to me."

He looked at me. "What?"

I hadn't meant to say it. "I thought about doing a comic with her, but I can't figure out how she would talk."

He shrugged. "Give her a boyfriend or something. That always works."

I took the notepad from him. "Maybe."

He didn't understand her. No one did. I hardly did. I didn't want to make a comic with her. That was a lie. But I desperately wanted to hear her speak. I wanted to give her a voice. But I couldn't find the words. Whenever I added a speech bubble, the words rang hollow. She became a puppet, not the personality that drove my pencil.

She stared at me. She worked in her garden and traveled the world and investigated local haunts. She observed and cogitated and stored everything away behind those enormous spectacles of hers. She was quite content.

But I wasn't.

* * *

I entered college. I proceeded to flunk out. I wandered from job to job, holding down an apartment with two other guys. I stayed out of their way, and they stayed out of mine. I met a girl. She was pretty enough, and she liked the art thing.

During all this, I drew obsessively. My parents yelled at me first for my grades, then for my hand-to-mouth lifestyle—I sent Trudy on a cruise, which she didn't really like, but she managed to solve a murder mystery, which was all well and good. I scraped by on a diet of Ramen Noodles and Netflix. Trudy canned who knows what and filled the shelves in her pantry with amused satisfaction.

But she refused to speak.

I threw her into protesting mobs and silent churches and crowded theaters. I punctured her tire and sent the storm and disoriented her in the forest. Nothing. Not a word of protest. Three dozen finely expressed emotions. The perfect arch to her eyebrow, the exact way her left foot led whenever she started to walk, but not so much as a syllable of exasperation or contentment. She enjoyed everything fiercely and spoke not a word.

At my wit's end, I gathered up my notebooks and threw them in the dumpster. I filled it with pages and pages of Trudy's life. I snapped my pencils, cracked my pens.

I woke next morning in deep regret, rushed down in my pajamas to retrieve them, but the trashman had already come.

I lay in my bed for the next hour, and I think I cried.

But I held strong in my decision to let her go. I grasped a #2 but put it down again. I refrained from pulling that crumpled piece of printer paper from the trash and flattening it. To stay my hand, I journeyed out into the street.

It was snowing, and it was cold, and I remembered it was almost Christmas. Trudy loved Christmas. She didn't care a thing for the presents, except that they were nicely wrapped and tied in a bow. She liked to wander the rich district and gaze upon the decorations, pretending she lived in older, simpler times.

I stopped. Across the street, I had seen her, in the flesh, but when I looked, it was just a woman, my mother's age.

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My girlfriend and I went to a movie soon after. The din and frenzy of the screen rioted in my senses. The lights rose at the end, and she turned toward me. For a moment, I thought—

"Did you like it?"

"I can't do this." I rubbed my eyes.

"Do what?"

"Who are you? Do I know you?" Her expression, confused and hurt, burdened me too much. "I'm not feeling well. I'm sorry."

"Well, I liked it." She stood, pulling on her coat.

"Do you remember Trudy?"

"That girl you draw? Of course."

"I killed her."

She stared blankly at me.

“She’s gone. I won’t bring her back. She won’t talk to me.”

“I’m glad you’re done drawing her. It was getting weird. Now let’s go.”

I stood and got my coat on. I had wanted to say, “I miss her,” but it wasn’t possible now.

“It wasn’t that weird,” I said weakly.

“At least if it had been some over-endowed, half-naked fantasy woman, it would have made sense. For goodness sake, it wasn’t even funny. Just boring, like a weak cartoon version of Norman Rockwell.”

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I don’t know what I did after I wouldn’t let myself draw. All kinds of things, the kinds of things people wait for the weekend to do, parties and movies and shopping and long, long nights shooting each other on big screens. And in the time between work and DVR, between headphones and sleep, between the last bite and out the door: a phone in my hand, a quick Snapchat, a retweet, a BuzzFeed list, a YouTube parody--death by a million electronic paper cuts, coma by a million anesthetic injections, life by a million second-hand experiences.

If only I could hear her.

One night, I found myself driving. It was Friday, and I was driving out of town as the sun set and the clouds burned and filled the night with their thick smoke; driving with my phone on the passenger seat, trembling like a genie in a lamp with the voices of my thousands of friends; driving on dark roads, away from the lights of the freeway, away from the billboards and bright lights of hospitable exits; driving until the dashboard blazed with the red light, warning of low fuel; driving until, at last, against my sincere conviction that I could drive forever, my car sputtered and came to a stop.

And here I was, corn on either side, no one in the rearview mirror, no one ahead, alone. My phone buzzed, and I switched it off, completely off. The din of silence, that seashell echo of the empty night, filled the car. And I listened.

Speak to me, I willed, not daring to open my mouth.

I was convinced, with the frightful belief of a child scared of what lay beneath his bed, that she would come. That now, now, as I sat immobilized by my own madness, stunned by my own stupid, useless life, she would speak to me, whisper in my ear, and finally say--did it matter what she said? She would have a voice, this woman who had haunted me since my childhood, who I loved--I think--as a boy loves at first, in innocence, in despair.

I waited, and when it had been too long, I turned my phone back on to see the time. Ten minutes had passed. Disgusted, I switched it off again and sat, eyes closed, trying to envision her face. There was something missing from it. I opened my eyes and searched for a scrap of paper. I found a crumpled napkin behind the seat. I used to keep pencils and pens in my pocket, but I'd stopped. I could never have abstained if I'd carried the tools of her creation around with me.

I emptied the glove compartment. Manuals for everything, instructions and insurance and old receipts. Evidence of my current existence, but nothing to initiate hers.

I settled for a packet of ketchup and a toothpick. I flipped on the overhead light and got to work. I traced the lines with the toothpick several times before dipping the point in the ketchup, but once I had committed the first line of her existence, I set to with abandon, the old practiced strokes returning to my fingers.

Yes, there she was. Trudy, outlined in blood, looking at me with that enigmatic expression that was both a smile and a frown.

I opened my door. The dry *beep* of the car pierced the air, reminding me to turn off the headlights. I lightly laid the image on the outside of the windshield, pressing just enough so that the napkin would stick, then shut the door, reclined my chair, and listened, my eyes upon her singular face.

But now that I saw her, I realized how insane I was. She was a combination of a few distinct lines. The expression was a fraud, a mere smudge. She was simplistic at best, caricature at worst. Did I really expect to hear her voice? She was hardly a scribble.

But I waited, and time passed, and I knew for the first time the long lapse of hours accepted, not feared. I had never before felt each minute pass me in fluid grace, each taking with it a bit of my anxiety and trembling energy until full dark surrounded me and I was awake among the stars. I flipped off the overhead light, casting Trudy into darkness. She wouldn't speak if pressed. I knew that. And I knew, too, that I couldn't ask her to speak now that I had accepted her silence.

I slept, dreaming of nothing, slipping between the hands of the clock into early morning. I woke easily, opening my eyes and looking around. Sometime in the night, the wind had blown the napkin off the window. All that remained of Trudy was a smear. On the horizon was the faintest hint of gray. I got out of the car and stood in the crisp morning air, watching the stars close their eyes.

I started walking. A few cars passed by, rockets of noise crossing the stillness and drifting away across endless space. I had a strong desire to enter the rows of corn and lose myself in their maze. I journeyed on toward the next town. It was ten miles away, if I remembered the last sign correctly. I passed a few farmhouses and saw the families moving in the windows and out in the yard.

I'd left my phone in the car. I could have called a towing service, though it did not occur to me until after the sun had risen and I had begun to warm with exertion. It seemed a strange thing to call when one could walk, like a hero settling for the quest next door rather than pursuing the one over the mountains and across the sea.

When I reached the gas station, I decided to buy a five-gallon gas can and fill it up. It was getting hot now, and I hadn't eaten, but I set upon my return voyage on an empty stomach with determination. I had money in my wallet, but it seemed a distraction to spend an hour eating pancakes when I could return to the road again.

My arms and shoulders ached when I finally reached my car. I was tired and sweaty and a little grumpy. I started the car and headed back to town to fill up before turning back toward home. I almost turned my phone on but threw it, instead, into the glove compartment.

The cornfields gave way to suburbs and traffic stops. The streets grew congested. I returned to the city and, as I waited in traffic, turned my phone back on and skimmed through what I'd missed on my Twitter feed.

When I arrived back at the apartment, my roommates were at work. I hadn't missed my shift, which was scheduled for that evening. The degree of my relief revealed how thin the spell of the night before was wearing. After some search, I managed to dig a pencil out of the couch. I took a blank sheet of white paper to my room, and there, with loving strokes, I reformed Trudy. She stared at me with her knowing expression, a glimmer of disapproval on her lips, a twinkle of mischief in her eyes.

I hesitated before slowly drawing the round strokes of a speech bubble. Trudy didn't talk. She preferred silence. I think I understood now, at least a little, and I envied her--I envied that part of me that hid within this quirky drawing, my alter-ego that treated the ordinary world like an adventure and a joy.

It wasn't really fair but I wrote a word in her speech bubble. I'm not sure she said it, but she could have. She agreed. If she decided to speak to me, it would be to say something like this.

"Live!" she declared to me, holding a spade in one hand and a weed in the other.

I pinned her to the wall above my desk and wondered what to do next.

THE END