

Biographers

GREG AMES

She was born in Pittsburgh in 1971. As a child she played alone in the dirt lot behind her family's wooden farmhouse, hacking the synthetic hair off her dolls with left-handed scissors. "Naughty!" she scolded, roughly swinging a new doll in her fist. "You are bad bad bad!" She'd dig a grave, carefully pouring kerosene into the hole before dumping in the plastic or cloth body, then she'd drop a lit match on it and run inside for supper. From a distance, standing behind the wooden fence, picking our noses, we watched her.

We began to call her The Artist. We were all a few years older than she was (Clive was the elder statesman at eleven), but we recognized genius when we saw it. Judging by the confident way she leaned against that wooden fence, smoking Newports and spitting into the dust, we knew that she'd be famous someday. And each one of us wanted to be first to write an unauthorized biography of her.

When she was nine, metal braces were clamped on her teeth to correct a slight overbite. She did not open her mouth for months. I attempted to write a chapter about that pain and alienation (entitled "Her Angry Silence"), but there really wasn't enough there to hold a potential reader's interest. In 1981, her left leg was broken in a bloody accident. We were immensely encouraged. She crashed her cousin Darryl's go-kart into a tree. Breathlessly that evening, I wrote in my journal: "Her tibia snapped like a breadstick." I thought I might use that line later on. I was thirteen and had just invented similes. I liked

them a whole lot.

But many years passed without any further notable incidents. The Artist attended Harry Truman middle school in Pittsburgh, played a passable clarinet in the band, even auditioned for the lead in “Anything Goes” (losing a close battle to Traci Lynn Baxter, a mezzo soprano). Again we became discouraged. “She’s destined to be a nobody!” Julian railed, sipping his espresso at Mo’s. As always, Julian did have a point. He was wise beyond his sixteen years. “After such a promising beginning,” Celia sighed. “I have to say...I’m disheartened.”

The nights were long. I would like to add that I cried a great deal, but I do not know that to be true. Strangely, I do not really remember my own childhood.

No matter.

In 1987 (‘The Boon Years’ is how I like to think of them), her father was relocated to Buffalo. Packing our bags, we rejoiced and laughed. “It is a new beginning!” Celia gushed, filling her suitcase with stuffed giraffes. Even Clive cracked a thin grin. In short time, just as we had hoped, The Artist — alienated, lonely, anxious for acceptance — fell in with “the wrong crowd.” We were thrilled, of course. Drug use, sexual experimentation... We sharpened our pencils. We longed for an unplanned pregnancy or venereal disease. “The clinic looms like a citadel over our dreams,” I wrote one chilly November morning. “Dark days barrel towards us like a DeLorean at dusk.” I had discovered alliteration in late 1986. I applied it liberally to every paragraph in my journal like a salve.

We snapped covert photos of The Artist walking through the city of Buffalo: her spiky red hair, ripped jeans and combat boots, and that

delightful bullring through her septum. Her image was perfect, right down to her double-barreled breasts jutting angrily from beneath her torn Sex Pistols T-shirt. She was on a freight train to the correctional facility and I'd be there to record it! ("I'm getting goose pimples," I cried.) Unfortunately, her rebellion manifested itself only in her attire (she was still rather boring and conservative, alas), but we hoped her dissident uniform would lead directly to more subversive, innovative expressions.

We waited.

Wet snow clumped down on our heads like spitballs from God, winter after Buffalo winter, as we huddled outside her favorite lesbian coffeehouse, Café Gash. She never read any poetry, only listened and clapped politely. Did she know how disappointed we were? It was misleading to appear rebellious and interesting, and yet be bland as milk. Why couldn't she at least break something? "Damn it, I'm going to find a new Artist," I threatened one night at the Old Pink Flamingo. "One who produces!" The others ignored me. Clive angrily ordered another round of Rolling Rocks. We were in too deep to turn back — of course I knew that! — it was too late to choose another artist. We were stuck with her, as she was stuck with us. I went home and stared at my stacks of notebooks, filled with nothingness.

And then, one morning when all seemed lost and my life an utter waste and ruin, The Artist and I exchanged words for the first time. In my journal I refer to it alternately as 'The Summit' and 'The Turning Point.'

"Hey man, that's my bike!" she shouted at me, bursting out of the Lexington Co-op with two plastic bags swinging from her fists. "Get off!"

"Oh, sorry," I muttered, dismounting from the bicycle that she had leaned against a lamppost, "sorry." I had just wanted to feel what it was like to sit on her seat. She glared at me with barely concealed disgust as she pedaled away. "I'll call the cops!" she threatened over her shoulder. It was the one and only time we ever spoke to each other. The experience transformed me. I burned all my journals. I called the others to an emergency meeting at the Flamingo. "Look," I said, "what we're doing is not fair to The Artist. Let's be honest. We started with good intentions, but this has become more about us than it is about her."

The others fell silent. Jean-Pierre whistled low and turned his head. Suddenly Clive lunged off his stool and jabbed his index finger into my solar plexus. "Ridiculous!" he shouted. He branded me a hack journalist, a charlatan, a poseur. "The weak link," he spat.

"Biographies require patience," Celia sighed, setting fire to a Winston and crossing her long legs. She exhaled twin blasts of smoke through her nostrils. "Maybe you don't have what it takes. Maybe you aren't really a biographer after all."

I panicked. "Hey, I was just testing you," I lied. "To see if you were up to the challenge." I laughed nervously. Then I related the bicycle incident to them, embellishing it with strong emotional conflicts, mythological references, good vs. evil, innocence vs. experience, all that. "I tried to steal her bike," I laughed, shaking my head. "I had hoped it might fuel her creative juices, you know, inspire her. I did it for us, for the cause. But she has produced nothing."

The others watched me closely. I was trembling. Were they plotting against me? I stood up, then I sat back down. I reached for a

handful of stale pretzels. "What?" I shouted finally. "What?"

In one motion they all turned their heads.

She, The Artist, is now twenty-eight and an assistant manager at a bagel shop on Elmwood Avenue. I have been battling depression, though I am against taking medication to alleviate my woes. The best Art is borne (they say) by struggle. This biography I am writing will be the Boswell of its class, or at least the *Diana: Her True Story*. The others have lost faith in me, but I do not care. Proust went into his cork-lined study and nobody knew what he was doing. What am I saying? They don't know what I'm doing. Or do they know what I'm doing? What if they are watching me? What if this interest in The Artist is merely a front for a more insidious surveillance of me? They are diabolical, fiendish, they are plotting to kill me, and they must be stopped! That's absurd. They are my friends, my closest allies in the fight against lies and misrepresentations. I will continue on, as normal, for now.

Each morning we huddle together, waiting, watching The Artist through the bagel shop's front window. The red and brown leaves swirl around our knit-capped heads as we hug ourselves for warmth.

"She's spreading the chive cream cheese!" Evelyn shrieks.

"Masterful!" Clive nods his approval.

But these moments of enthusiasm are rare. We have become despondent, and many of us have turned to the paralyzing pleasures of drink. "We're all going to hell anyway," Julian grumbles, sipping a Scotch and soda from his thermos. But the sun is out today for the first time in months, burning carrot orange in a hazy white sky, and

despite the chill there is a spirit of rebirth in the air. Behind me, the others are scribbling notes into their pads or are whispering excitedly into tiny tape recorders. I cannot help but think they are talking about me. Earlier, when The Artist took out the garbage, we scrambled for cover. "Leave me alone!" she shouted. "Why are you tormenting me?" But we hurried back. We don't want to miss anything. We want to be present for what we'll later call Her Early Days.

Her apartment is tiny, just one room. She lives alone. Hardwood floor, two small closets, a futon, stereo and a coffee table. Lamps, candles, incense. Boards-and-bricks bookcases. Standard stuff. Sometimes a guy named Dave comes over with a twelve-pack and spends the night, but mostly she sits around in her bathrobe, reading magazines or drinking coffee or watching TV.

"She's watching television again!" Jean-Pierre whispers to us. He's standing on our shoulders, his nose pressed to the glass. The Artist lives in an attic apartment. It is 10:30 at night.

"What's she watching?" Eduardo asks, his pen perched over his notepad. A coal miner's lamp affixed to his forehead shines down on the page.

"I think it's... Well, it looks like... Oh. Just a commercial."

We sigh collectively. "Damn." As far as I can tell, she doesn't even have a favorite program. There is no consistency to her interests.

"Is she creating any fucking *art*?" Gunnar inquires hotly.

Gunnar has been living off a grant from the Swedish Coalition for Contemporary Art for fourteen years now. His patrons are demanding to see a product *soon*.

"No," Jean-Pierre sighs, shaking his head. "But now she's... she's

clipping her toenails."

"Describe it to us!" we beg of him. "What is her method?"

This could lead to something.

"Well, she's got one foot up on the coffee table," Jean-Pierre says, "and she's kind of hunched over. She appears to moving from, yes, largest to smallest, no, now she's clipping one of the middle toes... But *wait!* This is interesting. There's a bowl of ice cream on the table."

"Flavor!" Anton shouts. "What's the goddamn *flavor* we're dealing with here?"

"Shhh, Anton," we hiss at him. "Relax."

Nights pass like this. We lose parts of ourselves out here under this brilliant moon. I remember my childhood vaguely, sometimes it comes to me like light exploding from a flash bulb. Oh, how I loved to crouch behind trees and car bumpers as a lad. And I peeped through a keyhole as my parents attempted to create my sister. I always knew, somehow, that I would be an unauthorized biographer. I would write about somebody else's life even if it killed me! Or them!

The truth is we want her to see us seeing her, that excites us. We enjoy provoking a response in her, but, ultimately, this is only a distraction from the goal of portraying her as honestly as possible. If she would only just butt out and let us do our work, we would all be happier.

One evening, a few weeks back, she flung open her bedroom window and shouted: "Why do you despise me?"

What could we say? We were shocked. We love, revere, *adore* her. And yet, it is true, our job would be much easier if she were dead.

Well, she wouldn't be in the way, you see; her presence complicates matters; it makes it difficult for us to find out who she truly is.

A tragic accident, I hate to say it, would increase her appeal. But she is so damned careful....

As *The Artist* undresses for bed, Jean-Pierre narrates the action for us. "Ah, *putain*, what a body!" he spits, rubbing his palms on his thighs. He swirls his hips, clockwise. But we have seen it all before, and a good night's sleep has become more valuable to us than pornography. I am nearly thirty now (where have the years gone?) and I'm beginning to question my own artistry, though I never admit this to the others. They would not understand.

Night. We drift off to sleep on *The Artist's* fire escape, my head resting on Miguel's thigh.

At three a.m., Jim Sheehan, a popular local novelist, rides his rickety ten-speed bicycle on the street below. He shouts up at us: "Why don't you write about yourselves for once? Parasites! Don't you value your own experiences? Create your own reality, you leaches!"

We carry rocks in our pockets expressly for smartass local novelists like Jim Sheehan. Gunnar heaves a sharp one. Jim ducks, pedaling fast now. Celia hurls one directly into his spokes and Jim is now flying over the handlebars. The bicycle clatters on the pavement. Jim looks hurt.

Moaning, he cries for help. "Ambulance," he murmurs, holding his palm to bloody forehead.

Maybe it's the tension caused by all this voyeurism, I don't know, or maybe we are just inherently cruel people, but we pounce on Jim like snarling jackals, pulling his hair, kicking him in the face,

GREG AMES

pummeling him until he says no more, until his eyes close, until
nothing remains in the night but silence and the sounds of us, only
us, breathing hard. □