

THE WARHOL GIRL

Susan Neville

Someone blowing leaves off a sidewalk. Everywhere that high shrill scream. The homes small cottages with English gardens. No visible places of employment. A high school but no children playing. No gravestones in the graveyard. No jet trails in the sky. An iron bridge over a picturesque river, connecting one state to another. No one passing either way since he himself crossed over. He was early for the appointment and hoped to get his bearings. The wind!

She had said the house was second from the corner, a simple brown cape with a rectangular dormer over the front porch. He found it easily. The gardens had been cut back for the winter. Pine needles piled underneath the rhododendrons. Leaves falling en masse from a linden tree in the front yard, like they were being poured from a bucket. Could he walk from the car to the house? What had possessed him to make this appointment?

He could. He walked. Head down. The wind. Yesterday he had buzzed his hair like it was in Iraq. He had ironed his clothes. He looked unfamiliar to himself. He smelled of soap. There were times he thought it might be easier to navigate this world now if he had a cane.

The leaves! The reflections of leaves on the blue windows of his car appeared less frenetic than on the trees where the branches were frantically shaking off the dead. Which image was the real one? The reflected ones were only bobbing, bobbing. The disconnect made him feel seasick.

He tells himself he won't look back at the car but he looks back to make sure it is still there as he'd left it.

And there is a crash test dummy sitting, staring forward, in the driver's seat.

He turns fully around and stares at the dummy's staring. It only takes a second to realize it is the shadowed headrest. Still. In that beat he thinks he sees the head move toward him. He thinks he sees the dummy blink. The silvered reflection of the leaves in the blue-green glass give it mirrored glasses. The back seat belt looks like the back of the dummy's suit. The seat itself looks like his chest. Perhaps it was the accumulation of fumes. Years of fumes. They've widened the perceptual beat, that weird hallucinatory space only the

artist and the mad were destined, it seemed, to consciously account for. Which one was he? Both, he was afraid. Had always been that. Afraid.

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He rang the front bell and waited for the woman inside to answer. The wind. He needed to be inside the house. He was familiar with the house from the photographs she'd sent him. When women sent him pictures of their houses, there was always a ghost image of the camera-taking woman somewhere in one of the photographs: in a mirror, most often, in the glass covering a photograph or a metal knick-knack or even an appliance. It was difficult to take an interior photograph without, at some point, getting a reflection of yourself taking the picture. And so the woman who opened the door was not completely unfamiliar to him. A blessing. She had been wearing a loose dress in the reflection. The camera had been covering her face in the image she'd sent, of course, but she was dressed in the simple way of a woman who has always been beautiful. He could tell a lot of things from the way her hands held the camera.

Are you the woodworker? she asked him. She put her right hand up to shade her eyes as though she were looking out the front door directly into the

sun, but today there wasn't a sun. He couldn't see her face in the mix of gloom and hand.

He said that yes he was. He stood waiting. What else did she want him to tell her? I've brought the samples, he said when she didn't ask him in and just continued squinting out the door at him. To turn around in the daylight, to walk back to the car, to make it across the bridge and then home was impossible at this moment, but right now making it across the threshold seemed equally impossible.

He reminded her he was there so she could check the wood and stain since the table would be made particularly for her space. This was of course a lie. A copy of a copy, Amish made, it was already in his workshop, waiting for him to apply the stain. You asked me to come, he said.

She backed up into the front hallway and motioned him in. From the photographs she had sent him, he expected light and air. There were ceiling to floor cottage windows in the living room and dining room, but today the shutters were shut as though the woman were preparing for a hurricane or burial.

They were at least five hundred miles from the sea in any direction. 6,624 miles from Fallujah. A relatively safe place, this. The center of the country.

The walls were painted, as he knew, a glossy deep green with white trim. The dark paint did not, in photographs, appear dark as in dreary. But with the shutters closed and the lamps turned off, it was in fact dreary.

The woman closed the door behind him. I hope you don't mind the dark, she said, and she pressed her hands against her temples. I think I may be sick, she said, and she walked down a step into the living room.

The floors were slick with shine. For a second he was afraid to step down. It was water, endless and dark. It is a floor, he told himself. It will hold you. Take a step and walk. He walked. The danger was of course that at any step it might turn again to water.

The woman lay back on the couch. How trustful she was. He recognized the couch from the photographs. She picked up what looked like a wet cloth from the floor in front of the couch, where his coffee table would soon be, and she laid it across her eyes. He worried about the damp cloth on the hardwood. Despite everything, he still loved the grain of wood.

There was a round black circle in one corner where a plant had obviously been. That stain would bother him. He would sand it out or replace the boards. He would suggest this. He would suggest painting the room a more cheerful color. The tasks would add up, if she would have him. He had just enough

energy to make it through a series of odd jobs before he hit bottom again. Perhaps she would care. Perhaps she had a spare bedroom. She would feed him and make the bed with clean sheets.

It will just take a minute, she said. So sorry, she said. This happens rarely.

Migraine? he asked.

She lifted her hand and made a limp motion that seemed to indicate yes.

It's the wind, he said.

He'd never had a migraine, but he recognized the signs. And it seemed like migraine weather.

She made another motion with her hand, again an affirmative motion.

Her legs were long and so were her fingers.

There was a piano in the corner of the room. An old Steinway grand. The black wood shone and reflected greenly from the wall. It was like he'd come in from the dying tones of a Midwestern autumn to something verdant. There were magazines and books all around the room, notebooks and pencils. There was a long window seat that served as a bookcase. He counted each breath. He closed his eyes and looked for the red spot that helped him meditate. It was there.

Perhaps I should come back at another time, he said.

She made a motion that seemed like no, though he wasn't sure which question she was answering.

Her hair was thick and long. There were strands of it across the couch pillow, like an arm. There was something seaweed-like to her hair. Perhaps that too was the green. Was it gold or silver, the hair? It had been hard to tell in the silver reflection, and it was hard to tell now. He hadn't noticed at the door. Her skin was a bit green as well. The color of mint. From an illness? He had been wrong about the floor. It wouldn't hold him.

Breathe, he told himself. Silver and mercury glass urns and vases filled a bookcase on one wall. That's where he'd seen her image, multiplied in the photograph. They appeared to be old, not reproductions. He wondered if mercury glass had ever been made from mercury. When he was a child he liked nothing better than sick days when the thermometer would fall and break on the kitchen floor.

The balls of quicksilver would roll together and form amoebas of silver. Quicksilver. How was it stored when it wasn't in glass? In some type of bladder. Like eye drops. Wine. A miraculous substance, quicksilver, but poison.

Outside the windows, the leaf blowers continued their alarm. When you took the photo of the room, he said, you had the shutters open. The windows.

She nodded.

Do you have auras? he asked.

No answer.

With the migraines, he said. He didn't know what else to say. I have auras, he added. He was of course lying.

Her hand said yes. His hands were shaking.

I have the ones that look like fortresses, he said.

Where had he read this? Was this an odd thing to say? She didn't seem to take it as odd. She had no reason to trust him, but she seemed to trust him. He had sent her many photos of his work. His student work. She had called him a true artist.

She took a deep breath. He could see her chest rise. Tea, she said. In the kitchen, she said. Would you? She asked. The caffeine. She had mentioned it in her email. You'll come for tea.

He made his way across the watery floor.

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The kitchen was painted a lighter tone, but still that minty green. There was a thermos on the countertop and two cups. He opened the top of the thermos. He breathed in the steam, felt it warm his face. He screwed the top back

on. The shutters above the sink and in the breakfast nook were closed against the wind and light, and there was more of the mercury glass mixed with polished silver on a sideboard. It was everywhere. On top of the refrigerator, on top of the stove, in the doorless cabinets. Enough to kill a person.

Above the sideboard was what looked like a Warhol print. He had noticed one like it in the living room. He was close enough to this one to see that it was signed. He walked carefully around the table to the sideboard to examine it. The colors were bright, pink and red, sharp colors against the dull green of the woman's walls. 1968. The year his parents graduated from high school. He was struck by the mouth and hair of the model, a silhouette. The aristocratic nose and chin of the woman in the living room. He wondered if she'd paid for the portrait or if he'd asked her to model for him. Then again, how old was the woman in the living room? Whose choice, the woman's or Warhol's? Was the model for this print a daughter or mother or sister or the woman herself?

A Warhol girl. What had he thought of Warhol, back when he thought about such things. Art school. Before Iraq. He'd envied Warhol, surely. The life he'd had. The freedom, the notoriety. The confidence. And hated him.

The door next to the sideboard was closed. Cautiously, he opened it. On the other side of the door was a white room. Too vivid. Spare. A south and

west exposure, floor to ceiling windows, obviously a room built on and then closed off. A bed against one wall, bookcases against another, and outside the uncovered windows a gingko tree, still yellow with leaves. Two sugar maples, red. Black and white photos on the wall. The same face. Something pulled him into the room. He walked quietly. Every picture was an image of the girl from the Warhol print, or someone who looked exactly like her, at different ages but always with a famous man. Some of them he recognized from school, or thought he did. Men of genius. A theologian, an architect, several poets, a novelist. There was a senator and a governor. There were men he didn't recognize, but they had a familiar look. Scientists or literary men. In every photograph the Warhol girl wore her hair in a simple bob. She was beautiful in every pose, in any light. In any era she would be beautiful. It was clear in the photos that she wasn't simply a decorative woman. She was in charge of the event. Intelligent. The men were looking at her but also listening. She was giving them ideas, and they were adjusting their own ideas in light of them, though they would never say so. No one would know how essential she had been to them, how necessary. She would be erased, of course. A woman who slept with men as they passed through. Muse. Siren. A wealthy woman with connections.

The largest photo was of the Warhol girl herself, arms uplifted, in a room filled with pillow shaped silver balloons: mylar or something similar, on the ground and floating near the ceiling and everywhere in between. It was an installation. There was a framed article beside the photo. Silver Clouds, by Andy Warhol. The Museum of Religious Art. The balloons were kept moving by some unseen source of wind.

But it was the theologian's face that appeared most often in this gallery. He had read all the theologian's books when he was an art student. Art had been his ultimate concern then and that ultimate concern, the theologian had led him to believe, was sacred. The theologian made him believe that he believed in God even though he said he didn't. It had comforted him all these years. Something to hold in Iraq, something solid. He'd joined the reserve for money while in school. And she, the Warhol girl, had talked to him. And now he was talking to her perhaps. Here, in the pocket of nowhere.

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He closed the door as quietly as he could and poured the strong tea into the two white cups. He walked back to the living room. He took a breath when he reached the glossy floor. It will hold you, he said to himself. In his imagination he could see the coffee table she would hire him to make and it was as

real and solid to him as the woman or the silver vases, so he walked carefully through the space where it would be. He half expected the imagined table to bump against his leg. He put his cup on a coaster on a table next to a side chair. He couldn't see where she might set hers, so he held the scalding cup in his left hand and held the handle out toward her. Your tea, he said, and she held up the talking hand to reach the handle. He helped the two meet. The hand was papery. Was she blind? Thank you, she said.

I couldn't help but notice, he started to say, but she'd begun to drink the tea. He sat down on the piano bench and waited. He knew he couldn't make it easily from the house back to the car.

In the quiet, he pondered the girl in the print. A 60s hippie girl, she was at the center of the world for a time. She had left the Midwest. She hadn't been afraid. She had met the beautiful people, the brilliant glittering people. Her life had been filled with spanglely silver things and white teeth in black lights and with drugs and anorexic longing. She was beautiful and fragile and fragrant and lovely and smart. He discerned that from the photos. And the collection of silver, like the clouds, the stars, spinning, reflecting light.

Was the Warhol girl the same girl as the one in the photographs and was she lying there on the couch in front of him? How old would that make her now? Did he hate or love her? It was too dark to tell.

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He had wanted to be someplace like that once, to be that high with art and life, the way he had been in art school.

Yes, for a while he had been like that! The tea was doing some kind of mojo on him. He wondered, not for the first time, if his madness was nothing more than fear of madness. No, it had almost killed him.

After the military he had come back here for good, here in the center of the country. Less dangerous.

I was an artist once, he said to the woman, gesturing to the lithograph. I was, in fact, very good at what I did. For a time, he said. I was very good.

He put his hand over his mouth to stop himself from talking, but he kept on talking through his hand. Was he talking out loud so she could hear or just talking in his head?

For a while I painted houses, he said. To make money while I did my own work.

There is nothing more intimate, he thought, than the relationship between a painter and the woman whose house he is painting.

And then he started woodworking until he realized he could get furniture just as cheaply from other craftsmen and put all his energy into selling. I was a sculptor, he added. Or was, he added, truthfully.

But you're still an artist, the woman said. Her voice was melodic, haunting, like a poet's.

Oh no, he said. At some point I realized I will never have my work in a museum. I would not be in the canon of artists. As the styles change, my tables will end up in landfills, no matter how much time I spend on them.

Why did he feel the need to disparage his own work to this woman? He had made the originals in the photos she sent him, even if he sold copies when he could get away with it. She wouldn't buy anything from him now. But he felt that, with her, he could go back to his true work. It seemed that he had fallen in love with her photograph. This was not good. It was never a good sign when he felt himself falling in love. He was in real danger now. However, he had never made a single true thing unless he was in love.

But that arc upward that came with love would not stop with the thing made. It was an explosion that continued past the planets and the stars, to the

edges of the universe until it fell back in upon itself, destroying the thing he'd made so carefully and leaving him shivering in the heat.

Was it Andy Warhol, he said, who convinced us that marketing is everything?

But that is not true, she said.

Perhaps I could have made more of my life, he said through his fingers.

She waved her hand. Quiet. He shushed himself. He would wait. What was her story?

Perhaps the Warhol girl had a baby before she left for the city. The baby was now in her thirties. She was as beautiful as her mother had been. Her mother was dead. The Warhol girl's daughter inherited the picture. She had it on the wall in her kitchen and this other in the living room. She collected silver and glass. How did she make her own money? She came from money. There were oil wells on her property. The woman on the couch, the one he now loves, is the Warhol girl's daughter, a trust fund girl. He had never known a trust fund girl.

Warhol sent her the silkscreens in memory of her beautiful hippie mother. She wanted to be an artist as well. Perhaps she was Warhol's soulmate. But art frightened her because of its connection with her mother.

I have fallen in love with a photograph, he thought. You mustn't be afraid of art, the Warhol girl whispered to him. You mustn't be.

So he had spoken aloud after all. He got up bravely, he thought, took the measurements of the room and the empty space on the floor. Had had to leave. He left her with his business card. He ran. The memory of the Warhol girl got him through the next dark months.

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Five months after the first visit, he returned to the woman's house with a table. She had been so patient. He had worked and re-worked it. It was an original. The copy of the copy would go to someone else. He had wrapped this special table in cloth and tape. He made it across the bridge again, drove into the pocket town.

It was spring and there had been a flood. There were sandbags along the river.

This time when she met him at the door her eyes were clear, and she didn't cover them with a cloth. Her hair was quite clearly silver, not mint green. The eyes were a soft gray-blue. Clouded. She both was and was not the Warhol

model. He calculated quickly. She could have been the woman in the photographs but not the Warhol girl. She was probably the Warhol girl's mother. For five months she had been his muse.

He unwrapped the table carefully, like he was unwrapping a holy relic. She had a trash bag ready for the covering. It felt like a winding sheet. All the leaves were long down, and they'd been whisked away to the leaf crematorium. They'd been replaced by crisp green. She had the top half of the living room shutters open to let in the pale light. There were thin lines on her face. She was in her seventies, perhaps even early eighties, several decades older than he originally thought.

She wore a blue duster. Old woman clothes. Still, she was quite beautiful in her old woman way. He would care for her if she would let him. Was it his only chance?

The shutters were open. She had already made the thermos of tea and had it waiting with the cups on a silver tray. There was something disjointed about the juxtaposition of thermos and silver and translucent white cups. The inside of a thermos tends to darken and chip like the mercury glass she was so fond of. That occurred to him.

He had put a sort of obsession with her into every turn of the lathe when he made the table legs. He sealed the burl wood with layer after layer of oil. It was the most beautiful piece of furniture he had ever made. Soon some factory in China would be turning out copies, but not one of them would ever be like this one.

She was suitably impressed. She lingered over the burls, the grain.

She had been gardening before his arrival. After admiring the table, she put on a large-brimmed hat. Straw. She took him out to the garden. The roses were uncovered. Soon they would bloom. What he thought had been her back yard was simply an antechamber. She took him through an arched wooden gate. On the other side of the gate there was a hosta garden and an arrangement of pear trees planted so the spaces between them were gothic arches. Through this garden there was another garden and beyond that the confluence of the Wabash and the Ohio rivers. It was a sun-struck day. The river glistened like the blade of a knife.

I've never seen the Midwest more beautiful, she said, than during the flood. All the fields were mirrored with rain. The barns were in the middle of an ocean.

Did you know Warhol? He asked. It's wasn't necessarily the question he'd been waiting to ask her, but it was the one he asked.

My daughter knew him better, she said. I introduced them.

Is that her portrait in the kitchen and the living room?

It is, she said. This garden is in her memory, she said. My little house as well.

So her daughter had been the Warhol girl.

The mercury glass and silver?

The silver clouds, she said.

It felt like joy to me, she said. Silver balloons. The Pentecost. But bruised, he said.

Yes, bruised. Still, she said. They were something a young girl would love.

In this, he saw the influence of the theologian.

What did her father think?

My husband, she said.

Of Warhol?

Of all of it.

I have a house separate from his. This is the house I live in. He lives in another house in another state. My daughter's ashes are scattered here.

Why did you stay?

Her ashes are scattered here.

Why did your husband leave?

Her ashes are scattered here.

How did she die? He asked.

She was a fragile girl.

Was she always fragile?

She was always fragile, but she was never afraid.

The mother of the Warhol girl walked through the garden and out the gate. He followed her. She pointed to the river.

Last night, she said, the Wabash was streaked with such bright silver it looked like you could mine it. The silver was the real thing and it went on, depths upon depths. If I had placed my hand in it, she said, I truly believe it would have come out glazed. And to the north, it looked as though someone had placed a painted scrim of gold and fresh green fields along the edge of the river; it was that surreal in its perfection.

That type of vision frightened him. It was too much for him. Like an explosion. It would knock him so hard he would never be able to stand up.

You don't think this place is beautiful, she said, but it is extremely beautiful. When you make something out of what you're given, you help justify man's ways to God.

The pear trees in her gated garden, trees usually so flame-like, had been trimmed to form a gothic arch between them, an explosion of arches that formed paper-thin waxed blue cathedral windows out of the night sky. The garden rested against her home as the daughter might have rested against her mother's arm.

They walk together through the town, the crazed woodworker and the Warhol girl's mother. He begins to see things he hadn't seen before. There are sculptures and small gardens, a stone labyrinth. This was the site, she explains, of two nineteenth century utopias. And the art? he asked. I invited the artists here, she said. They felt that this place was a holy place.

Everything he sees is singing. Everything chimes, in pattern and variation of that pattern. The screens in the doors are gold and they glow and harmonize with the gates and an iron flock of birds chimes with the flocks of very real birds and they inscribe complicated figures of light in the air, like a figure skater on ice and all around him, the sudden glimpse of a brooding monk or child or woman or fallen angel—the mind's first draft—that makes him look

again to see that no, it's no monk, no crying child or grieving mother, but a piece of carved stone. Too much. Too much.

This woman with the beautiful translucent skin, the extraordinary radiance, made this. She made this. Trust fund girl.

Did you sleep with him? By this he meant, and she understood he meant, the theologian.

He must know. He believed he knew already. This woman was the muse to famous men. She slept with them of course. She slept with all of them. Slut, he thought. Slut. The word gave him comfort. It made the place stop whirling, the gates and stones stop shouting. Slut, he thought again. She was now his muse. Perhaps he would make his own great art, his great ideas, if he could keep his balance. Slut. No. Tamp that down, something in him said. Please do not fly off, he said to himself. Do not ruin this, he said to himself. Be content with making copies and do not try ever again to become a little god.

He never embraced me, she said, never tried to embrace me. But he had that response to women that you felt that he understood you, he had that empathy. We were important friends to one another. It made his wife jealous of course, she said.

Once I was sitting with him at dinner, she went on, and we had just picked raspberries and I offered him a bowl of fresh raspberries and he said that his doctor told him he couldn't eat anything with seeds.

In the garden, she holds the imaginary bowl of raspberries in front of her and they seem real. She takes a deep breath to smell them.

I said to him that he should just inhale their essence and it would be like it will be in the next world where we have no need of eating but we experience the essence of everything good.

We talked, she said. He wrote. I wrote. We made this place together.

My daughter believed the stories about us of course. That's when she went to New York. She was angry with me.

But the memory of a life, she said, like the house of art, has many rooms. We fill them one by one and century by century. Most of them are locked shut most of the time, dust-covered. Make one true and honest thing, and it will live there even as it's forgotten. Now and then someone will open a door and flip on a light. That someone will discover some indescribable hidden-away beauty. That moment too will be forgotten.

They walked back through the garden and into the green living room. The mother of the Warhol girl picked up the tea service and started to put it on the

table. This is where the service will go, she said. Let me take a photo first, he said. She sat down on the couch, behind the table. He took the photograph. He would take it home with him and work with it. He would add shadows and sources of light. He would carefully remove any images of human beings from the reflections. He would photoshop the woman out of the image. He would sell thousands upon thousands of this particular table. It was gorgeous in that setting. The emerald green of the walls, the white wainscoting, the light.

Susan Neville is the author of four works of creative nonfiction: *Indiana Winter*, *Fabrication: Essays on Making Things and Making meaning*, *Twilight in Arcadia*, *Iconography: A Writer's Meditation*, and *Sailing the Inland Sea*. Her prize-winning collections of short fiction include *In the House of Blue Lights*, winner of the Richard Sullivan prize and listed as a 'Notable Book' by the Chicago Tribune, and *Invention of Flight*, winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. Her stories have appeared in the Pushcart Prize anthology and in anthologies including *Extreme Fiction* (Longman) and *The Story Behind the Story* (Norton). She lives in Indianapolis with her husband and two children and teaches writing at Butler University and in the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers.