

ROBERT BILENSKY

Golgotha, 2017
Oil on Wood Panel, 60 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

KAREN ACKLAND

Old Haunt

When I was younger, I wanted a house. I wanted a house the way some women want a husband or a baby. I hadn't ruled those things out, but I didn't want either of them as much as I wanted a house. If asked about my plans, I would have said they included becoming a marketing director or living abroad. Those were the kinds of goals I felt a single career woman should have, goals that showed ambition, independence, and self-confidence. But what I wanted was a house.

I was thirty years old, living in LA, and getting a late start on a career. It didn't seem like a house was within my reach. But five years later, following a move to Northern California, I finally scheduled an appointment with a realtor and bought the second house I looked at. Mine is a two-story house with a reverse floor plan, newer and smaller than its Victorian neighbors. The living area upstairs—my favorite room—has a high ceiling with clerestory windows and redwood paneled walls. Buying a house disproved the adage that you can't buy happiness. I loved my house and I was happy, or as happy as a woman can be whose best friend once made her a T-shirt with "cheerful malcontent" printed across the front in purple flocking.

* * *

I was upstairs reading when David brought up a box from the garage. When we married, he moved into my house. For years we talked about buying a place together, and from time to time we flipped through magazines, noting floor plans we both liked, but this house suited us and we've been happy here. Over the years, we've extended the back deck, remodeled the kitchen, and replaced the outdoor siding, which had become spongy with termites. But since we both retired, this house, which I'd loved faithfully for over thirty years, felt cramped.

"Should I toss this?" he asked. He sat the box on the dining room table. He'd been cleaning out the garage, trying to create space for a workshop. "It looks like it hasn't been opened in years."

"Let me take a look first."

Inside I found keepsakes from when I lived in LA: playbills and trail maps, self-help articles and travel brochures. I remembered during those years feeling lonely and out of step. But sifting through the box, I found tickets from a diving competition for the 1984 Olympics, maps from

a road trip to Napa, and birthday roses from someone named Ted. Apparently I hadn't sat around moping all the time.

I picked up a manila envelope and three photographs fell out. The first pictured a two-story Craftsman-style house made of wood shingles and clinker brick. Three wide steps led to the front terrace and a stained glass image of an oak spread across the double front doors. Looking at the grainy snapshot, I felt my stomach cramp. Once again I was the lonesome young woman who wanted a house and didn't know how she'd ever get one.

The second photo was taken at the turn of the twentieth century. A man stood at the front of an open trolley car with a group fanned out behind him. The other men wore jackets, but the man in front was in his shirtsleeves, one hand on his hip as he stared into the camera.

The third photo was of me: a young woman with smooth skin and shiny hair. I handed it to David. "Look at this."

"Your hair was brown."

"Among other differences. And this." I held out a program of the Royal Shakespeare Company performing *Cyrano de Bergerac* at Royce Hall.

"What am I looking at?"

"Derek Jacobi played Cyrano."

"I, *Claudius*."

David pointed to the photo of the man in front of the trolley. "Who's this? A relative?"

I pointed to the house. "He owned it."

He lined up the three photographs along the edge of the table. "I'll scan these tomorrow." Scanning our photos was another of David's projects. For an hour or so each day I'd hear the cla-clunk cla-clunk as he slid a strip of negatives into the scanner. I couldn't imagine anyone would ever search through the digital images, but he was a man who liked to be thorough. "Are you coming to bed?" he asked.

"Soon. I'll finish sorting this box first." I watched him walk downstairs. We'd developed a routine where he got up early in the mornings, and I stayed up late at night. That way we both had some time to ourselves.

* * *

After he left, I studied the three photos again. I'd found the photo of the house at a yard sale and on the back, written in pencil, was the address of the apartment building where

I lived at the time. The house itself was long gone, but the coincidence had always seemed too great to discard. When colleagues talked about their houses, I pretended that I lived in the Craftsman-style house of the photo and not my dated apartment. When I came home from work, tired from an hour-long commute, instead of the rusted iron railing leading to my second-floor apartment, I imagined climbing a polished wooden staircase. Alone on a Saturday afternoon, I pictured sitting with a book on the sleeping porch looking up at the foothills. During those brief moments, I had a house of my own.

Jane, who'd lived in the apartment next to mine, had found the photo of the man in front of the trolley. I'd been in her kitchen watching her chiffonade a stack of basil leaves when she pointed to a manila envelope on the table. "That's your guy," she said.

I frowned. I'd been taking a break from men. I expected to get back to them at some point, though my track record wasn't stellar. "What guy?"

"The one who owned the house."

I opened the envelope and pulled out the photo of the man in front of the trolley. "Where'd you get this?"

"We librarians have our ways," Jane said. "Remember those old bumper stickers—Librarians Do It between the Covers? What do product managers do?"

"No one knows. The function only exists so we can be blamed for everything." I tapped the photo. "Who was he?"

"Lawrence Vickers. He owned a construction company that built the Shrine Auditorium and some other properties downtown, although his bread and butter seemed to be water towers in the foothills. When the population grew, the water table dropped and we needed our water piped in."

"*Chinatown*."

She nodded. "One of my all-time favorite movies."

I picked up the photo for a closer look. The man stared at the camera as if daring the photographer to knock the hat off his head: a man clearly accustomed to being in charge.

Later that evening, I wedged the photo into the edge of the mirror above my dresser. A bookseller once told me that children like dinosaurs because they are big and scary and long dead. Arrogant and dead, I'd thought: that's my kind of guy.

* * *

When I heard footsteps on the stairs, I assumed it was David and didn't look up. He wanted me to get this done, didn't he? He didn't have to check every five minutes.

But it wasn't David. It was someone wearing the same pinched fedora, white shirt, and short tie as the man in the photo. I tried to scream but only managed a squeak. "Who are you?"

"Is that any way to greet an old friend?" He carried his suit jacket over his arm.

I looked around for something to protect myself with. Could the old calculus book in the discard pile finally be put to good use?

He doffed his hat. "Lawrence Vickers, at your service. You called and I came."

"I never called you." Of course, I'd recognized him instantly. How could I not? Tucked into my dresser mirror, I'd glimpsed him daily as I reached for a pair of underwear. If I squinted, I could see right through him.

"Now that's downright fickle." He pulled out the chair and straddled the seat, his arms across the chair back. "You kept my picture in your bedroom for years."

"I never expected you to show up. Besides, that was decades ago. And you're dead." Where was David? Didn't he hear us talking?

The man made a dismissive nod toward the bedroom downstairs. "He's asleep. This way we have more privacy."

"What do you want?"

"I've come to offer you a place in my house. It'll be an improvement over what you have here. They cut some corners when they built this place, I can tell you that much."

How dare he criticize my house? "I love this house. We're happy here."

He held out his hand. "Let's go."

I took a step back. Was this some alternative grim reaper without the hoodie? I'd been bothered by headaches ever since that utility truck slammed into us in front of the bank last month, but otherwise I was healthy.

"You won't get a better offer," Vickers said.

What an arrogant figment of my imagination. I tugged at the sleeves of my sweatshirt. "I'm not looking for a better offer. My life is here."

He tipped his hat and faded away.

I found myself on the living room floor with my right leg twisted beneath me. I tried to straighten it, but

couldn't move. When I woke a second time, I sat up and slowly walked downstairs, gripping the banister as I descended, and climbed into bed.

* * *

The next morning I woke to the sound of David clattering around in the kitchen, putting away dishes from the night before. I knew I should be grateful for how much he did around the house, but he was making too much noise. I put on my robe and went upstairs.

"You came to bed late," David said and handed me a mug of coffee.

"I finished sorting through the box." I didn't tell him about what had happened the night before. David was skeptical if I misquoted a statistic I heard on NPR; no way would he stand still for a story about a ghost.

"I scanned those old photos for you," he said.

I was sorry he'd remembered. It seemed wrong to store them among people and places we'd actually seen. Besides, I didn't want Vickers to think being scanned was an invitation to return. Inadvertently bringing his photo up to the living room had been summons enough.

"Have you been up long?"

"An hour or so. Are you ready for breakfast or do you want to wait for lunch?"

His ability to postpone breakfast was something I'd never understood even after twenty years of marriage. "Let's go out."

"I thought we were trying to economize."

"We'll skip lunch."

* * *

We went to our favorite breakfast place on the pier. Afterward we walked along West Cliff, watching the pelicans dive for fish and the surfers jockey for position for the next wave. It was a crisp, fall day—my favorite time of year—and it felt good to be outside. I'd always considered ours a happy marriage. We just needed to get used to spending so much time together.

I reached for David's hand and said, "We should do this more often."

"I'll have to get you up earlier."

I ignored the jab and asked, "How's the workshop coming?"

"I've cleared enough room for a lathe. As long as you don't bring anything back downstairs."

ROBERT BILENSKY

Bleed, 2017
Oil on Wood Panel, 40 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

I often left things in the garage that I had trouble throwing away. They'd disappear, and I never missed them. "I've a wooden bowl in my future?"

He squeezed my hand. "Maybe a candlestick, too."

On the way home we dropped off some electronic equipment at the recycling center and three boxes of books at the used-book store. As we turned the corner onto our street, I gasped.

David hit the brakes. "What is it?"

For a moment I wondered if we'd turned down the wrong street. But the Victorian at the corner belonged to our neighbor. The redwood tree across the street was still tearing up the sidewalk. Everything looked familiar, except that our house was gone. In its place stood a sprawling, wood-shingled house, angled awkwardly to fit on the lot. A covered balcony hung out over the driveway.

I leaned forward and peered under the windshield. It was the house in the photo, but I'd never seen it from the side like this. As I watched, slowly our house—green with cream trim—returned to view. A residual shadow of the larger structure lingered and then gradually faded away.

I shook my head to clear it. "For a moment there, I thought I saw another house on our property."

"If there was room for another house, I'd have built a workshop years ago." He pulled into the driveway but didn't turn off the engine. When he turned to face me, his blue eyes looked almost gray. "Are you okay? You're acting strange."

"I'm fine." First Vickers and now the house. I should have let David toss that box unopened.

"If I go to Home Depot will you be all right here by yourself?"

"Stop fussing." I kissed his check and got out of the car.

* * *

As I opened the door and walked upstairs, I noticed the worn carpet. The banister wobbled. The bookcase on the opposite wall was cluttered with books and photographs. One more thing to clean out. I went into the kitchen and heated a cup of coffee.

I was standing at the kitchen counter making a shopping list when I heard footsteps on the stairs. "Did you forget something?" I called.

It wasn't David, but the man in the photo again. I flinched when he walked into the room.

Vickers laughed. "Why so jittery? Besides, it's not like we don't know each other."

"Actually, we don't."

He pulled out the step stool from beside the refrigerator and perched on the top step. "After years in your bedroom, I think I can claim a certain intimacy."

I was annoyed to feel myself blush. "That old photograph hardly represents an acquaintance."

"You yearned for me."

I tried to make myself taller, as if the top of my head was pulling toward the ceiling, the way we practiced in Pilates. "What I wanted was your house."

"That's why I'm here. I came back to offer you a second chance." He took out his pocket watch and compared it to the clock over the stove before clicking it shut. "I understand young women like to say no a time or two before they get to yes."

I crossed my arms and glared. "You understand wrong. No means no."

"A couple more refusals and we'll be off."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"I'm offering a clear upgrade. Bigger house, younger man." He put his hand on his hip, mimicking his posture in the photo. He looked to be in his late forties, but had to be closer to one hundred and fifty.

"Your house no longer exists and you're dead. Doesn't sound like much of an offer to me. Besides, you have a wife. Won't she be at home?"

He brushed aside my objections. "When we pass, we get to choose a decade and a house. Sue wanted that drafty old Missouri farmhouse of her childhood. Los Angeles was always more my home." He shrugged as if to say it couldn't be helped. "I'm prepared to let you decorate. Most everything's in place, all top quality, but we could use some new hand towels in the bath. I never know what to do with those prissy ones with the crochet along the bottom."

"You're putting me in charge of hand towels?" He was impossible. I turned away and started straightening the cookbooks on the shelf above the counter.

He opened a cookbook and frowned at the photo of a broccoli salad. "Dinner, too. A Sunday roast with potatoes. Fried chicken or a chop now and then. Nothing fancy, mind. I'm not a picky eater."

"These days we joke about meat and potato eaters like you."

“If I can afford meat for my table, why not enjoy it?” He knocked on the butcher-block counter and seemed satisfied that it was solid. He turned the right front burner of the stove on high and jumped back when the flame caught immediately.

I switched it off. “Watch it. You’ll start a fire if you’re not careful.”

Next he opened the door to the microwave and began punching the buttons on the control panel.

I reached over to push his hand away and then thought better of touching him. “Wait a minute. Do you even eat?”

He pulled his head out of the silver box. “It’s not strictly necessary, but sitting down to a meal breaks things up. Time can stretch on.” He pointed to the food processor and toaster oven. “What about those?”

I named each appliance and described how it worked. His curiosity was infectious so I quartered an onion, threw it into the bowl of the food processor, and pressed Pulse. I pulled vegetables from the crisper drawer and soon there were piles of grated carrots, sliced celery, and chopped onion on the counter. I put a slice of bread in the toaster and, even though it was already afternoon, started a pot of coffee. I felt like one of those women at the county fair hawking miraculous, time-saving devices. It slices and dices, it toasts and brews.

Suddenly, he snapped his bony fingers. “Enough. In eternity, there’s no need to save so much time. Let’s go.”

A sudden blast of cold air sent a shiver down my neck. “I said no.”

“I can have you back before supper if that’s what you’re concerned about. Go change into your traveling clothes. I’m as open-minded as the next man, but I have to insist on skirts at home.”

Just then, the front door opened and David called up the stairs. Vickers tipped his hat and vanished.

* * *

I woke on the kitchen floor with David’s face directly above mine. “How many fingers am I holding up?” he asked.

“If you keep moving them back and forth, I can’t focus. Two.”

“Do you know who I am?”

My head was pounding. “It’s 2016, Barack Obama is still president, and you’re my husband. Stop shouting. I can hear you just fine.”

“I come home and find you on the kitchen floor. Of course I’m shouting.” He helped me up and we went to sit on the couch in the living room. “What happened?”

I studied the carpet. “I was tired and thought I’d lay down for a minute.”

“In the kitchen? That makes no sense. Can you smile? Raise your arms?”

I apparently passed the tests because his line of questioning changed. “I was gone less than an hour and you’ve got stuff all over the counter. What were you doing?”

I remembered demonstrating the appliances to Vickers and giggled.

“What’s so funny?”

I shook my head. There was no plausible explanation. “How about vegetable soup for dinner?”

“I want you to make an appointment with your doctor. We should get you checked out.”

“You make it sound like I’m a car. Haven’t you ever fainted before?” I knew he was worried. So was I. But he was crowding me.

* * *

Three days later in her office, Dr. Morrison was her cheerful, personable self. She complimented my appearance, including the skirt I’d found in the back of my closet.

“Any changes since I saw you last?”

“We recently retired and David’s been organizing things, including me.” He’d insisted on driving me to the appointment and been surprised when I refused to let him come into the examination room.

“Retirement can be a difficult adjustment,” she said. “Why don’t you tell me what happened the other day.”

I liked my doctor, but I wasn’t sure how she could help. “David found me on the kitchen floor. Apparently I fainted.”

She nodded for me to continue.

I ended up telling her about the headaches that didn’t go away no matter how many Advil I popped. I admitted that it was the second time it had happened.

“Other symptoms? Are you dizzy? Nauseous? Do you see or hear anything unusual?”

She was perched on a stool in front of a computer stand. Her hands were off the keyboard. “A man appears and asks me to go with him.”

“Someone you know?”

I shook my head. “Only from an old photograph. He’s not contemporary.”

“A romantic figure?”

Was this a medical question? “Not at all. He’s a bossy, old-fashioned male chauvinist. Definitely not my type.”

“You saw the same figure both times? Do you interact?”

I nodded. “We talk. The second time, he was curious about the kitchen appliances. He owned a house I once admired. He wants me to go with him.” I glanced down at my hands. This conversation was ridiculous. How could I make her understand how exciting it had been? “When I’m with him I feel wired, as if I’ve drunk several cups of strong coffee. All the energy without the jitters.”

She scrolled through the open file on her computer. “Have you recently had a head injury? Any previous episodes of hallucinations or seizures?”

I shut my eyes against the turn the conversation had taken. “A month ago a truck hit us when we were stopped at a light. We had to have the fender replaced but luckily no one was hurt. I don’t have seizures.”

“You’re always alone when this man appears?”

I nodded, recognizing that I’d become an unreliable narrator in my own story.

“I’d like you to see a neurologist,” she said. “I’ll ask my assistant to set up an appointment.”

Everything was happening too fast. “What do you think it is?”

“The hallucinations you describe could be symptoms of several things including an injury from the accident. I’ll schedule an EEG. You should have the results before your appointment.”

“What if I don’t want it to stop?” As soon as I blurted it out, I knew it was the wrong thing to say. It was also true. I wanted more of Vickers, not less. There’d been times in my marriage when my attraction to another man had startled me, but I’d never acted on it. But Vickers wasn’t real. That hardly counted as infidelity.

For a split second her eyes widened. Would she write in my chart that I fantasized about a bossy dead man? Was there a diagnosis for that? But when she spoke, her voice was calm and matter-of-fact. “We need to find out what’s going on, Barb. Then we can review the best course of treatment.”

* * *

On the drive home David asked if I wanted to stop and pick up something for dinner.

“Take me home first.” Dr. Morrison had called David back to the examination room and suggested it would be better if I didn’t drive until we knew what was going on. I was grateful when she didn’t mention Vickers.

“What sounds good?” he asked.

“You choose. I’m not that hungry.”

When we pulled into the driveway, David reached over and put his hand on my knee. “I’m on your side, remember?”

“It doesn’t feel like it. Is it too much to ask for a few minutes by myself?” I slammed the car door and went inside. I’d apologize later. He should know by now I get angry when I’m scared.

Upstairs the light by the armchair was on and a book about California bungalows was cracked open on the ottoman. I never leave my books that way. “Vickers,” I said. “We need to talk.”

Nothing.

Perhaps if he’d restrict his visits to once a week, and only when I was alone, we could continue. I’d show him the flat-screen TV. We could stream a movie or watch the news. Flip from channel to channel with the remote. Wait until he saw what we could do with my smartphone.

I heard a rustle of paper, but when I turned, no one was there. I smelled sulfur and faced the fireplace. Nothing again. And so it continued. As soon as I turned my back, something happened behind me. Books fell out of the bookshelf. A light was switched on, then off. The candles on the mantel were lit, then snuffed.

I could play that game, too. I curled up in the armchair and began to turn the pages of the open book. “You’re only a symptom, you know. Some good pharmacology and you’re toast.” I snapped my fingers.

Still nothing.

“Apparently, you’re a hallucination.” I heard a noise behind the couch. It took all my willpower not to look.

And then he called my name. I continued paging through the book. He called again and it was irresistible, a deep-throated siren call. Nothing seemed as important as seeing Vickers and the inside of his house. Wasn’t that what I’d wanted since I was thirty years old? I’d leave now before the tests, before David came home with dinner. As I reached out my hand, I heard footsteps on the stairs.

When I opened my eyes, the light in the room was fading, and I saw only the man's silhouette. He wore a baseball cap, not a fedora, and there was no aura around his head. David then, my husband.

* * *

That night when I went downstairs, I found David sitting on top of the duvet, leaning against the headboard. Candles were lit on both of our nightstands. "Come here," he said.

I appreciated his attempt at seduction. He'd brought home *tom kha gai* soup for dinner—my favorite, not his—and as we ate he suggested planning a trip. Rome, maybe, or Croatia, both places I'd mentioned previously.

I was flattered, but the most I could muster was the desire to be interested.

"Come here," he said again and moved to the side of the bed.

I stood in front of him, straddling his knees. He unbuttoned my blouse and bent to kiss my breast. I hoped my black lace bra helped compensate for my lack of enthusiasm.

When he started to unzip my skirt, I stepped away. "I'm cold. Let's get in bed."

We undressed separately and got under the covers. I reached up and turned off the light. We kissed and caressed; I started to enjoy myself. And then it was just the two of us, moving together in the familiar rhythm, breaking down walls and stripping the furniture bare.

Afterward, we lay next to each other holding hands. "I don't want to lose you," he said.

"You heard the doctor. I'm just having some tests. We don't know enough yet to worry."

He kissed me and turned on his side. I matched my body to the curve of his back and rubbed my hand along his flank, past the smooth skin on his hips and down the rougher skin on his leg where the hair started. He caught my hand and pulled it across him.

"I love you," he said. The words seemed to float from a parallel plane.

I heard footsteps on the stairs and pulled the pillow over my head, determined not to listen. The steps grew louder, then suddenly stopped.

I waited a moment and then sat up. I found myself in the center of a wide hallway. To my right was a wooden staircase, its thick polished boards pegged together like fine furniture.

I longed to reach up and spread my arms across the joinery, rest my cheek against the wood and absorb its secrets. It had been here all this time, beneath the surface of my life, solid and unchanged.

I walked down the wide hall, Persian carpets cushioning my footsteps. In the living room, a large beam created an alcove in front of the tiled fireplace. "Queen-post truss," a voice said in my right ear. "Spans longer distances than the king's truss." Vickers pointed to an alcove by the window. "We repeated the truss on the other side of the room."

"It's beautiful."

He nodded. "Considered a showplace in its time. Let me show you the dining room."

"Wait. You are taking me back, aren't you?"

He shrugged. "If that's what you want."

I could spend eternity in this house checking out the woodwork. Across the hall the cherries in the stained glass window caught the light and glowed like rubies. At home I knew every stain on the carpet, every scratch in the furniture. When I felt Vickers's hand on my arm, I turned.

"You need to choose," he said.

I felt a chill spreading from my forearm to my chest. My throat constricted. I shook my head, struggling for breath. There was a quick kick followed by deep stillness. I was home in bed. I sensed the familiar curve of David's back, the indentation at the base of his spine.

He sat and looked down at me. "Barb, what happened? Are you okay?"

I stretched my arm toward him, but it didn't move.

"Barb?"

Yes, I thought, yes.

Karen Ackland's stories and essays have appeared in *Catamaran*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Summerset Review*, *Salon*, and other journals. She holds an MFA in fiction from Pacific University in Oregon. She is grateful to fellow participants of the Catamaran Writing Conference, where a previous draft of "Old Haunt" was workshopped, and especially for the encouragement and insight of workshop instructor Elizabeth McKenzie.

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