

FRANK GALUSZKA

Evening, nd
Oil on Canvas, 52 x 48 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

VICKY MLYNIC

Old Turnpike Road

Once again, morning. Pru kept her eyes closed, knowing Bert's trousers would still be there—folded on the dresser gathering dust.

Restless finally, she struggled up and swung her feet to the floor, eyes downcast. She saw her own bare legs, skinny and veined with age, her feet like small blue-bellied fish. That this body was hers was still a surprise.

Her hip was throbbing and that felt right. A deep-in-the-bone ache to accompany grief. Bert gone; Pru the errant straggler. Had she failed him by staying behind, or herself? The pact they'd made as young lovers hadn't been discussed in years, but its specter was huge and unsettling. And it was not too late to honor it.

Feelings of regret and failure deepened Pru's emptiness and sorrow. Yet at odd times a wary excitement flickered—a sense that an unnamed frontier stretched before her, desolate and waiting, like a tome, untitled and unrecommended, that she was drawn to but not ready to open.

Bert would not be wringing his hands like this. He would not have had a moment's patience for this morose and—a far worse sin—*boring* Pru. He would have lobbed a wisecrack, scorched her with sarcasm, made her laugh until she snorted. This was precisely why she missed him so.

Bert's last weeks they spent carousing between fits of coughing that left him doubled over and gasping. Instead of talking about the matter at hand, they'd spent his last days drinking and smoking dope like old fools. Yes, it made him cough more. No, he didn't care. Getting back to bad habits in their seventies was something they'd looked forward to—their sole retirement plan.

The last night—although how could Pru have known—Bert suddenly didn't want a thing. Only sleep. Seeing him lying there so opinionless, so barb-free, sent fear snaking through her. She slipped outside and stood staring into the dark. A lopsided moon lit the trees and the wind stirred branches laced out in blossoms. In the distance a dog yipped in loneliness and she heard the answers, faint but unflagging. Is this what she'd be left with?

Inside there was a new smell, like raw sugar and tilled earth. Bert's breathing was shallow now, and he didn't blink when she cried his name or when she whispered it, lips to ear, the familiar scent of Barbasol on his cheek a cruelty.