

TABITHA SOREN

John, 2011
pigment print, 46 x 60 in



credit: Kopeikin Gallery, Los Angeles

of the page was the number 1976, the year of my birth. I opened the cover and flipped through the pages, knowing instantly this wasn't something I was supposed to have. Mrs. Beerbaum putting up her hair, shirtless. Mrs. Beerbaum holding a breast in each hand, as if she might give one to you. I glanced at my bedroom door. My mother could walk through it at any moment. The trouble that would rain down on me was unimaginable. Still, I kept flipping. Mrs. Beerbaum looking as if she was about to scratch you. Mrs. Beerbaum straddling a chair, peering over her shoulder. I glanced again at my bedroom door, listening to the sounds of the house. Were they still dropping bottles in the kitchen? Wiping down the coffee table? I couldn't hear over the pounding of my heart. It was past time to put this away, to look again tomorrow. But slowly and deliberately I turned the pages until I arrived at the foldout picture. Careful not to wrinkle it, I untucked the loose flap from the magazine's center and gently spread it open. Again, Mrs. Beerbaum. She was leaning back on a gray boulder surrounded by prehistorically large plants. She was naked except for a pair of high heels and a narrow leopard-skin sash affixed somehow to her waist. Her right hand leaned on the inside of her right thigh, her legs parted slightly, suggestively. She seemed to be looking directly at me. *Everyone, this is Mrs. Willie Beerbaum.* She didn't look like a Mrs. anybody. Naked. My godfather's wife—my godmother? I couldn't put all the pieces together. I didn't understand my father's comment either, the one about being her physician, but I also didn't think much about it. I just felt the smoothness of the magazine, and thought about the way she and Willie had looked in the doorway that night, as if parachuted from a more beautiful locale. Come to save us.

For four years, I moved Lonna from place to place around the house. I was never caught. When the need struck, I'd pull her out of hiding and look over the pictures. It was and wasn't sexual. Sometimes I touched the page, tracing her body, but often we just talked. I asked questions, sought advice on my problems. I can no longer remember exactly what my problems were. I'm sure they were standard. I had a fairly normal childhood, even a sheltered one, but my father killed himself when I was nineteen—a surprise that cast all the previous years into uncertainty.

In any case, it's hard for me to explain the religious devotion I felt for her. She was the first naked body I got to know well, even if it was an abstract knowledge, one-sided. And she was definitely a bracing shock for my hometown. After a few months of the portfolio, she and Willie were invited exactly nowhere else. It must have been something of a plan. But I think what really sealed her for me was the timing—how she appeared that night with Willie for my parents' last party (or at least the last I remember). Some space had opened between my parents, and in it had sprung up something beautiful.

I only saw the real Lonna one more time. I was at the package store with my father, and she and Willie were carrying a box full of liquor bottles out to their Corvette. I was afraid. No one had said anything about the missing magazine—they had probably been so drunk they forgot about it. And Willie brought out other copies at other parties, so he must have had a good pile. But still, being a kid, I was afraid they would see the guilt in my heart. They didn't. Willie shook my hand, asked me how business was. At this point in my life, he was a complete stranger. Lonna sent her greetings to my mother. They got in their car and drove off. Some months later, there was a fire at their home in the country that killed them both. What I remember is my father's surprising grief.

At the package store that day I asked him if Lonna liked it around here. I meant something more profound, like how does she survive, living among us?

"The look in their eyes tells you everything," he said, watching them rev up the Corvette and pull out onto the bypass. "They've got that kind of marriage that answers questions in your life. A love that sustains you."

I've had lots of different feelings about this speech over the years, especially after my father's suicide, when I grasped at it for some sort of hint. But at the time I thought this was a dull-headed answer. Nothing he described sounded special to me: Of course marriage answered questions. Of course love sustained.

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That was twenty years ago, and they're all dust and memories, except for my mother, who appears happy and is currently sailing toward Gdansk on her annual educational cruise. I live in San Francisco, don't sound particularly