

of yore, some holdover from an age of primitive printing processes who should be wearing a cape.

“Zot . . . zot . . . zot . . .”

Tyler looks at me. “She okay?”

I nod gravely, purse my lips to shush him. I’m wearing my old New Grubs shirt, which shows a big red balloon about to land on a needle. There’s a small hole in the back and another in the armpit. If I don’t move too much, no one will see.

“Zot . . .”

A few minutes of this, an hour. Cops enter, cops leave. I’m totally focused. It’s a rare thrill to watch my wife in action, throwing around her corporate muscle, but even I feel fatigued. At last the Phantom slaps the table in exasperation, blurting, “So what’s this ‘zot, zot’ about?”

“That’s *enough* out of you,” Tyler says. I picture a generational struggle, their years-long feud bubbling to the surface at last, a duel at twenty paces.

My wife opens her eyes. “I know who did it,” she says. The hairs on my arms go up. The Phantom gasps. She writes something down on a slip of paper and seals it in an envelope and places it inside a box, like a tackle box. She hooks a small padlock through a hoop and snaps it shut.

“Why’d you do that?” The Phantom whines.

“She has her ways,” Tyler says. He winks. “Always trust the process, right, boss?”

“Always,” she says.

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We drive home in silence. I have about fifteen minutes before I need to go to work. I head to the man cave, the corporation on my tail.

She’s holding what looks like a giant cockroach carapace or some sort of meat that’s been forgotten. “Where were you last night?”

“Home.”

It’s one of my old dress shoes. “Look at the soles. They’re ruined from the rain.”

I shrug with flair, like, *Woman, I’m not the weatherman*. “C’est la vie.”

She presses the still damp tongue to my cheek then lets the shoe drop to the floor. “Listen,” she says. “I can’t keep covering for you.”

I don’t say anything.

“I’m a corporation now.”

“I know that.”

“And you’re on my payroll.”

“It’s just for taxes.”

“This can’t keep happening. What’s ‘zot’?”

I look up. “How should I know? You were the one who kept saying it.”

She shook her head, sadly. “Zinnias . . . orchids . . . tulips. Right?”

“I don’t know. *You’re* the psychic.”

“Put your hand down.”

“Make me.”

“I’ve got Tyler on speed dial.”

“That’s a load of bull.”

“Try me.”

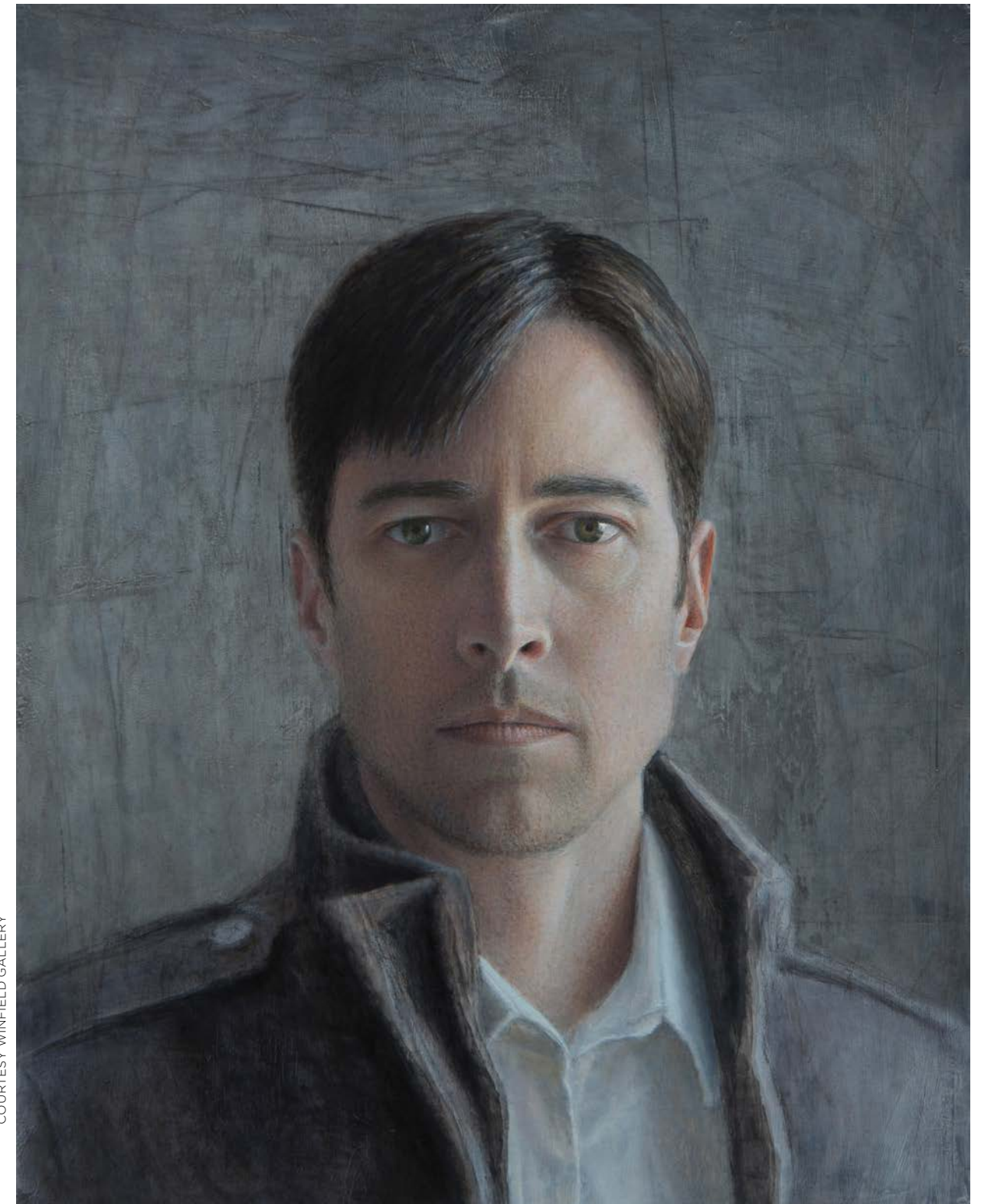
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I don’t go to work. I stew in my man cave and send the Super Ball whizzing off every surface. At the police station the next day, I tell Tyler and the Phantom about my stoner friend, but there’s no record of any call. My alibi is destroyed. Where was I? The GPS in my phone made it easy to trace my path. Apparently I visited every flower shop in a ten-mile radius, trying to sell them ads for the big spring promotion. Apparently it didn’t go well. Apparently that night I paid another visit, and apparently my name is Max and I’ve got a song in my head, a real bitch of an earworm, this little blond Frenchman that won’t do the decent thing and button it, just button it, just stop for once in your life.

Ed Park is a book editor and fiction writer living in New York City. His novel, *Personal Days*, was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. His stories have appeared in the *New Yorker* and other places.

DAVID MOLteni

Self Portrait, 2016
Oil on canvas, 14 x 11 in



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