

## FRANK GALUSZKA

*Evening, nd*  
Oil on Canvas, 52 x 48 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

## VICKY MLYNIEC

### 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.

Although she had sworn she wouldn't, Pru rushed for the phone—and fell—and knew instantly that she'd broken her hip. Just like an old woman, she thought, as she dragged herself across the floor.

The ambulance came for both of them.

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Now Lucy. Pru's grandniece stood, hands on hips, surveying her aunt, lips pursed. She had driven to Pru's cabin in the mountains to take Pru on her doctor-mandated walk. The old woman raised a hand to her short white hair, flattened here and sticking out there like a half-blown dandelion. But it was Pru's getup Lucy objected to.

"You can't walk anywhere in *those*," Lucy said, pointing to the baggy russet cords of Bert's that Pru had taken off the dresser and cinched around her shrunken waist.

Lucy's own bulky body was encased in layers of stretchy carnival colors, making her look like an exotic moth against the knotty-pine paneling of the cabin. If only Pru could crack open a window and shoo this moth out.

"I'm not changing," Pru grumbled. Lucy sighed and with unexpected agility dropped to a squat and deftly rolled the trouser cuffs well above Pru's bony ankles.

"There! Now you won't trip," Lucy smiled. Pru eyeing her warily, steeled herself for the next complaint. But now Lucy was taking stock of the piles of books, the unwashed plates under open newspapers, the cast-off sweaters draped over every chair, assessing how many hours, how many visits, until she could put things right.

"I thought we were going somewhere!" Pru snapped.

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After Pru lowered herself painfully, carefully into the passenger seat of Lucy's fancy station wagon, Lucy handed in the cane she'd found in the broom closet. Its pronged foot reminded Pru of a metal spider.

Lucy drove with one hand stabilizing her can of diet root beer as the car rocked in and out of potholes. Good tires and German-engineered suspension couldn't tame the mountain's ruts; this pleased Pru enormously. She felt for the window crank, needing relief from the thick aroma of artificial root beer, baseball mitts, sun-baked rubber balls, and Lucy's many grooming products.

Turning to complain, Pru caught her grandniece's face

in repose. Her usual expression of peppy authority gone, she looked older, weary, and Pru was forced to consider for a moment what Lucy might be besides dutiful and interfering.

Pru herself was being a pain in the ass. Lucy had driven thirty-five minutes up from the valley intending to drive Pru down the mountain to walk the smooth, mica-chip sidewalks of her valley subdivision. "And," Lucy had gushed, as if she had the most wonderful surprise, "we want you to sleep over! The boys will bunk together."

"Impossible!" Pru shot back. "My hip," she added, softening her tone. "I can't tolerate more than a few minutes in the car." One of the privileges of injury was the safety of lying to those who hadn't experienced it.

If she had to walk it would be in the mountains, on a dead-end section of Old Turnpike Road, a rare level stretch, and only a five-minute drive from her cabin. Turnpike had been the through road from the valley over the summit to Santa Cruz and the ocean back when it was lightly traveled by Model Ts driven by men in goggles, their ladies beside them with scarf-tied hats and picnic baskets. The old road had been bypassed decades ago by a four-lane highway that sliced through the mountains' curves and carried a capacity crowd that zipped through the greenery to work or home on one side or the other.

"We'll walk up here this *one* time—against my better judgment," Lucy said. "You and your mountains!" she tsk-tsked.

My mountains, Pru harrumphed silently. Yes, she had lived in them longer than she'd lived anywhere, and if she could fend Lucy off she supposed she would die there. But her world was far smaller. The mountains were simply where she and Bert had lived—a backdrop, chosen for affordability and privacy. She didn't *know* the mountains; she hadn't paid them much mind.

She did, however, take offense on their behalf when those who knew them even less expressed quick judgments. "Her" mountains were admired for their beauty and abundant redwood forests and considered notorious for their splashy reputation for disaster (*mud slide! wild fire!*) and crime (*meth lab burns, body dumped, skeletal remains found*). She was especially offended by this last. As if the mountains were responsible! Vast and sparsely populated, the range rose cool and green above the congested,

hot-tempered valley. Was it a surprise that people came there to hide things? That the forces of nature eventually revealed what man wished to conceal?

True, there was a certain flavor of the Wild West about the silent, timbered shacks and ramshackle cabins that sagged beneath the trees on many a mountain road. Neighbors, for that matter, may have speculated on the hermit-like life Bert and Pru had lived in the past two decades on their small property. Their cabin was sturdy, though. It was never overhung with creepers, their driveway not taken up by rusting clunkers with popped tires, their windows never covered over with warped plywood. If anyone were listening, they would have heard laughter and hooting, and, listening more closely, the sound of tender voices, of soft flesh smacking. A couple.

A couple, something understandable and benign. And Bert—damn him for it, really—had left Pru a feeble survivor. Now she was forced out into the world to work the road like a hamster in an exercise wheel, to limp along the potholed pavement, putting forth a phony desire to be out in the sunshine moving around with the rest, eager to demonstrate mental health and physical vitality. All in order to be left alone.

"Turn there, just past the old orchard," Pru pointed.

Lobbying to walk here, Pru lied, telling Lucy that she and Bert had often taken walks on Old Turnpike. Lucy had given her a doubtful look. Fresh air? Exercise? She had seen little of great-aunt Pru until Bert's death and Pru's fall, but their reputation as reclusive degenerates was family legend.

"Park there." Pru indicated a small turnout bracketed by yard-high purple nettles. A yellow road sign, its metal face pocked with bullet holes, announced a dead end.

As Lucy was hiding her purse in the back, Pru began hoisting herself up. "Wait!" Lucy called, thundering around to help. Pru held her breath to keep the pain that shot from her hip from reaching her face. "I would have helped you!" Lucy chided, handing her the cane. "You're gonna wear yourself out before you even start, for Pete's sake!"

A cane, a walking stick—a centuries-old aid to the feeble—a simple thing. Reach, step, reach, step. What was simple for others often confounded Pru. "Use it for balance," Lucy instructed as Pru fumbled. "Lean on it if you need to." Her tone was mild, not interested in unmasking

Pru, who had obviously never used the cane, despite claims otherwise.

Seething with frustration, Pru longed to fling the damn thing, to hear it whistle through the air and ring as it hit the boulders on its long way down. Without it, maybe she could coordinate her numbed limbs, manage the pain that glowed like an ember deep within her hip. Instead she bit her lip and grimly reached and stepped, Lucy's minty breath in her face, urging her on as if she were one of those rubbery kids of hers. Pru focused on the asphalt at her feet, studying it as if it could save her.

"People!" Lucy said, coming to a stop in front of a smashed beer bottle, its broken neck sitting amidst an explosion of brown shards glistening in the dirt. A yeasty odor rose from it, mingling with the scent of fermenting blackberries on the spent bushes.

"Calm down," Pru said. "This is the only litter I've seen and all I see is the ground."

A car was approaching, the thumping pulse of bad music preceding it like a force field. Lucy slipped an arm through Pru's and the old woman raised her shoulder in protest. A dented Camaro swung by, a tattooed arm crooked out the window, slapping the door in time to the music, and disappeared around the curve ahead.

"Honestly!" Lucy began. "Next time we'll walk in a sunny neighborhood with nice sidewalks. It will be safe and *far* easier on you."

To Pru's relief, around the bend Lucy found something she approved of. Here and there, newly built houses with smooth driveways and undented mailboxes could be found amid the weather-beaten cottages and derelict shacks. Awed by the trees, newcomers with high-pressure jobs in the valley designed homes with jutting decks meant for entertaining and huge windows to view the woods, and rarely was anyone home.

While Lucy stopped to admire the rustic opulence of one such house, Pru, hollow with exhaustion, worried how much further she could make it. She had remembered the dead-end section as short, but on foot with a cane it was another country—the El Camino Real of the padres, a day's journey between missions. Being able to walk this on her own was the only effective Lucy repellent. But already her legs felt ghostly and her hip beat with pain. From the wide deck of the sprawling house set below the road



a black-and-tan striped chaise lounge, cushy and shaded, issued an ungodly Siren's call; its temptation enraged her.

"Pru?" Lucy squeezed the old woman's arm, noting her expression with alarm. "I think this is enough for today."

"No, I am having a ball!" Pru snarled.

Her frustration built on itself, driving her down the straightaway and around the next curve in short willed steps, the bottoms of her shoes barely clearing the pavement, her pride and sorrow transformed into interlocking gears in a treadmill of pain. She would *not* pant; she would *not* gasp.

Ahead of her on the road an iridescent shape glimmered. A flattened reptile. Pru halted before it.

"Pru? All right?"

She nudged the victim with the cane.

"What're you doing?"

Pru dislodged the paper-thin creature and inched him slowly off the pavement, leaving him to rest by a yellow leaf and a small wedge of sandstone. She stood over this tableau a moment, noting that the reptile, with its turned and flattened head, resembled the number seven. She found something pleasing about this arrangement. Rock, paper, lizard? No Bert to tell. Then walking again. Lucy baby-stepped alongside her, wordless finally, her constant questioning eyes on Pru like an itchy sweater. If only she'd look away Pru could clutch her hip, try to rub away some of the pain.

Soon she stopped. "Lucy," she said, leaning hard on the cane with both hands, dreaming of Lucy returning with the car and swooping her into its soft interior. Lucy stared, wide-eyed; Pru rarely used her name. "I think we're almost there," Pru sighed, moving again.

"Now you listen to me, Pru!" Lucy called after her, voice cracking. "I don't care where the end is, we are turning around *right here*."

Pru mustered a look of disappointment and turned around.

Of the trek back to the car, Pru recalled only the delicious pleasure of finally sinking into the luxurious seat of Lucy's station wagon and Lucy rummaging in a wicker basket in the back and handing her a juice box and a granola bar, as if Pru had just finished soccer practice. Clutching her school-kid snacks and inhaling the car's aroma of apple juice and sports equipment, Pru began to laugh. Lucy shot

her an uncertain smile as she pulled onto the road. Pru laughed and laughed, hilarity expanding in her throat and filling her chest until she was breathless, snorting and slapping the seat, tears running down her cheeks. If Bert could see her now! Could he?

"Should I pull over?" Lucy asked.

The air Pru had swallowed emerged as a painful case of hiccups, short-circuiting the wild sobs that were gathering, ready to push their way up her throat.

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When Lucy called the next morning Pru told her that she had come down with a cold. The doctor? Already phoned him. Rest and fluids, and no exertion until it was gone, Pru lied. "Well, what can I bring you?" Lucy asked. "Cough medicine? Groceries? I can drive up after Cole's practice with whatever you need." Pru could hear happy thuds and shrieks in the background. Lucy would be relieved to be off the hook. No, no, Pru told her. Why drive forty-five minutes to watch an old lady blow her nose? There were always neighbors if she needed something. Not such a lie—hadn't the young couple across the road appeared with a casserole after Bert's death and then obligingly disappeared again?

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The Datsun had the abandoned smell of cold vinyl and old motor oil, but it shook to a start right away, the needle on the fuel gauge jittering just above empty. Pru found a gas can in the shed—almost empty, making it light enough for her to lift. The cooperation of inanimate objects cheered her.

Pru parked in the turnout and set out on the road with nothing in hand. She wore her own denims and Bert's stretched-out green vest, its wooden buttons dangling loosely, its loose wool rich with the scent of pipe tobacco.

In the absence of Lucy's large, warm-blooded presence and yesterday's battle with the cane, Pru felt an invigorating coolness against her skin. Evergreen air hovered between the corrugated trunks of the redwoods that spiked the hillside and edged the road, straight as soldiers. Pru was grateful for the indifference of the trees, and in exchange, she did not marvel at them. Her eye was for the dotted yellow line that drew her toward her goal. "No need to come," she would tell Lucy at the end of the week. "I'm

driving now—to my walk. In fact, I've walked to the end of that road and back. On my own." Lucy would be absolutely furious, and probably secretly relieved.

Through the trees Pru could hear the nearby highway—the work-a-day sound of trucks shifting gears, the swish of sports cars headed to the beach—as she tracked the old road's centerline, a dirty school-bus yellow. It was an inconstant beacon; appearing as a dashed line, a solid line, a double line; disappearing under a patchwork of crude asphalt patches that crumbled at the edges like pie dough; or in places simply worn away.

Landslides, determined roots, and prodigious rains colluded to undo whatever men covered over here. Pru noted the ways a paved surface can rupture, and the useless gestures of repair. Slick tar patches covered sinuous cracks. Others ran like the cursive of a foreign alphabet. Pru's mind worked to string shapes together, hungry for letters she might recognize, letters she might make something of. A message, a sign. At this, an inner voice was obliged to scoff, "A *sign*, idiot? Dead is dead!"

There was only one task now: to concentrate on the movement of her limbs, the bright pain in her hip, the one live thing in her numb and heavy limbs. She had felt that anesthetized weight before, when she awakened on a dark winter morning and could not find her legs. Entwined with Bert's, they had gone to sleep. In the dark she touched a blanketed leg and felt nothing. His or hers? That she couldn't tell felt eerie, as if a law of nature had been violated. She had rolled out of bed and lurched around the room unevenly, until her leg pricked with the return of blood.

A sharp snap of twigs on the hillside. Then the sustained rustle of size. A dog perhaps, or a deer. Pru's eyes swept the slope. Nothing. Only the cheeping of tiny birds and the hopping of small creatures in the undergrowth.

Her hip burning, Pru shuffled to a tree for support. Closing her eyes, she felt the rough bark against her back and breathed in the scent of sap with a trace of yeast and berries. She opened her eyes and saw the tangled berry bushes. The broken bottle was gone; only a few dusty shards remained.

Pru pushed on, determined to reach new territory, and drawn now by the robust intonation of a radio announcer punctuated by festive horns that came from beyond the

next bend. A Spanish-language radio station. A faded red pickup with an array of rakes, pole trimmers, and tarps was parked in front of the house with the striped chaise lounge.

Pru began composing a snide summation for Bert, something about software executives who built houses for mow-and-blow crews to enjoy. She could picture Bert, cocktail in hand, in front of the fire. Could hear his throaty laugh, followed by his phlegmy cough, felt her eagerness for his riposte so she could top it. What point now when there was no audience? She was an old widow woman of the mountains now. Bert's teasing name, Old Mother Earth, was no longer a joke.

A short-legged man with a face like a totem pole was working the leaf blower on the deck while another screwed together sections of a long-handled pole to wash the plate-glass windows.

The men didn't notice Pru until she was shuffling toward the chaise. The totem pole man watched her soberly as he blasted the last leaves off the deck. The other wiped the squeegee with a rag and reached up to take another swipe at the window. "Hola," Pru said, as she eased herself down onto the chaise lounge. They nodded. She shut her eyes.

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With a place to perch and regroup, Pru made it a little further down the road each day. The sly curves coaxed her on, each one presenting itself as if it were the last, only to surprise her with something else entirely. Now and then she'd glance downhill through the trees and realize with a jolt how steep a drop it was to the bottom, the greenery masking the stark geometry of what waited below.

The few cars that passed her heading toward the dead end were never seen again, absorbed by the woods or the long driveways that wound up the hillside or down into the canyon. The few people she saw out walking were in pairs or sometimes with dogs, the lack of traffic on the dead-end road an obvious draw. One oddly gleeful, disheveled young fellow rode by on an old red bike with fat tires. "Grandma!" he called to her exuberantly, as if she were long lost.

She grew used to the rustling of the bushes. Sometimes the sound stopped when she stopped. She began to listen for it. To consider it company.

\* \* \*



Day four and Pru still hadn't found the end, although each day she broached new territory. This day she came upon a wounded family home; its windows boarded up with rain-buckled plywood; a fallen pine wedged in its roof. In the yard an A-frame playhouse, painted yellow to match the house, had been built on top of a flat-roofed storage shed. Its peaked front was almost entirely taken up by a full-size door. A wooden ladder ran up to a narrow strip of deck from which a full-size American flag hung. At the bottom of the ladder sat a hibachi with a slingshot on the cold grill, a can of lighter fluid beside it.

Another amazement she could recount to no one. Pru thrust her hands into the pockets of Bert's vest, which she now wore every day. Her fingers moved through cough drops and slippery wrappers, loose raisins and bits of paper, a broken cigarette. This is what was left her—Bert's pocket trash.

Around the next new bend, a surprise: the road shot from the trees in a short sun-blazed stretch and stopped at a white guardrail that closed off the road. Pru's heart crowded her throat with what felt like fear. The end. At last.

Just before the guardrail was a crude vista point—a slightly elevated plot the size of a picnic table. A knee-high metal sign driven into the ground warned “No Dumping ~ No Trash”; its greenish-white tint and professional lettering looked governmental. But the border that formed it looked homemade, edged with scrounged rocks and chunks of broken concrete.

Pru stepped up onto the cropped weeds and gazed across the canyon at the purple ridge where she lived. She needed to find her place in this vastness. A gust of wind rushed through her thin hair and freshened her eyes. But

the trees she stared at seemed to close rank, pretending to be a wilderness, as if there weren't hundreds of homes among them, hers included. All this way and still lost. She was angry, longed for the strength to hurl something, to feel the bodily pleasure of exertion and the relief of disposal.

Plunging her hands into her vest pockets she rained cough drops and slippery bits of old wrappers on the vista. She rolled the broken cigarette between her palms hoping to revive its scent. It smelled of nothing. A golf pencil and a paper clip joined the trash on the ground. She turned the

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*Coastal Canyon Santa Cruz, nd*  
Oil on Canvas, 13 x 33 in

COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY





pockets inside out and brushed crumbs over a line of ants that filed up from between two stones and disappeared into the weeds. Divesting herself. Bert would have liked that.

On the trudge back, focused on making it to the car on her own and being done, done, done, a sharp creaking made Pru look up from the road in fright. She couldn't understand what she was seeing. Six feet off the road's edge, suspended over the steep plunge to the bottom, hung an old travel trailer, a butterscotch Tioga—the kind of trailer a family would hook to a 1960s station wagon for a trip to the lake. It had been caught pre-plummet by two young trees. Its small metal door was flung open, revealing a gutted interior—cabinet doors ripped off, paneling punched in, yellow foam rubber spilling out of slashed seats. It was so close to the road's edge that a daring person might make the leap. Pru's arms prickled with goose bumps. She had walked right by this eerie presence twice without noticing.

Longing for the familiar cracked vinyl of her little Datsun parked so far away, she pressed on, almost wishing for that damn cane, her breath coming in ragged inhalations that burned her throat.

When the striped chaise lounge presented itself, she ignored the maroon Saab parked in the driveway and made her way to the deck where she collapsed gratefully and drifted immediately into sleep. Moments later, it seemed, a woman stood over her, a cell phone flipped open in her manicured hand. "Whom can I call for you?" she asked.

Since the woman, dressed in a bronze-colored suit and cunningly tied scarf, had no interest in her, Pru allowed her to drive her to the beginning of the road.

"My, this is a long way for you," the woman said as she pulled up to the Datsun. "It might be best to walk with a companion." She ignored Pru's snort and very properly waited to make sure the Datsun started before turning the Saab around.

\* \* \*

"I don't care what you say, Pru," Lucy said on the phone. "I'm coming up on Saturday whether you're on your deathbed or doing jumping jacks." One last day to make it to the end and back and ward Lucy off with news of it.

Pru marked her progress by known landmarks; between them, her eyes fell to the road. A squirrel fight or plummeting acorns might rouse her from her fugue, and

looking up, she would take in something whole that circumvented thought. A loosened rock would roll down the hillside, releasing a cascade of smaller stones and soil, and Pru would notice the deeply etched course of what must, in winter, be a waterfall. The eroded earth, beautiful in its damage, revealed an underpinning of rock and smooth roots crossed by washed-down branches with ferns sprouting in the nooks.

At her leaning tree Pru stopped a moment, noticing that the last bits of broken glass were gone.

Passing the chaise lounge on the deck, her body recalled the melting oblivion of its comfort. No pit stops this time. No rides.

The Tioga's door was shut. Perhaps by the wind. Visit the Grand Canyon! a bumper sticker on the door urged. The ravaged trailer looked intact, a misplaced innocent. Its bald tires suspended improbably in the air, the steep drop to the bottom visible beneath.

The yellow playhouse flew its flag. A red bike now leaned against the storage shed that formed the first story. A bottle of barbecue sauce and two oranges sat next to the hibachi.

At the overlook, just a stone's throw before the guard-rail ended the road, the stubby sign issued its warning and all traces of Pru's littering fit were gone. She listened to the click of insects in the unshorn grass beyond the small crew-cut vista and wondered who on this deserted road was cleaning up.

Again she applied herself to the view, but the panorama was still too vast, too beautiful, too confounding to take in. Why tears? She turned away, resting her eyes on the dried grass beneath her feet. The weeds were trimmed, but how and for whom? Pru searched to see if a wrapper, a raisin had been missed and noticed something silvery, there, just before the ground sloped down into ungrouted weeds.

Lying lightly atop the straw-colored grass was a flattened snake, banded black and cream and coral. Angled toward the snake's wafer-thin head were two flattened lizards, one on each side. Together the trio created a crude arrow pointing to the tall weeds. Pru recognized one of the lizards—number seven from her tableau.

"Grandma!"

The imbecilic smile on the young man's face eased

the surge of fear that shot up Pru's throat. She wavered on the overlook as he pedaled hard to reach her, then hopped off his bike, dropping it with the careless familiarity of constant use. The cuffs of the boy's pants were muddy and shredded and he wore a tattered knapsack on his back. He went directly to the arrangement at Pru's feet, dropping down to make a minute adjustment to the angle of one lizard. Pru watched the back of his head, his pale scalp visible through greasy hair.

He rose, bringing with him the scent of eucalyptus and lighter fluid over long-worn clothing. Looking down at his handiwork he smiled, then turned to Pru, his green eyes boring past hers to somewhere he didn't belong, a grin of delight on his face. He licked his chapped lips and gave her a conspiratorial look. "I got something for you," he said.

Pru's heart began to beat athletically. "You do? Well," she stalled. "Well. First, maybe you can tell me ... do you happen to know who made this?" She indicated the overlook.

He took a proud breath. "Me and my dad. For Scouts," he said, setting his knapsack on the grass. "One of my dads. My best dad."

His skin was weathered, crows feet at his eyes. He was no boy, Pru realized. Her misreading frightened her. She should make no assumptions about this person. She would agree cheerily with everything he said.

"I seen you," he said gleefully. "Walking. And *sleeping*."

"Have you?"

"Yes!"

Suddenly he froze, tense as a hunting dog. He marched across the road and plucked something from the bushes, returning with a red potato chip bag, which he stuffed into his knapsack. Before closing it, he rummaged at the bottom and pulled out a knife.

"What's that for?" Pru asked, fighting to keep her voice level.

"Don't you know a woodsman needs a knife?" he told her patiently. Then he added in a singsong voice, "I got a *sur-prise* for you."

His green eyes were lit with a manic intensity. No doubt he'd seen Pru dump trash on his life's work. Yet he was smiling as if he could barely contain his excitement. She would heap praise on his vista—keep him in a good mood. "What an incredible view," she said.

He stepped up beside her. His body spare, one shoulder dropped lower than the other, looking again like a weather-beaten boy.

"Which way is the ocean?" she asked.

His arm swung up and he pointed in a confounding direction.

"Really? Over there?" Pru considered it. "So where's Oak Ridge then?"

He emitted a series of robotic beeps as he moved his arm in small jerks far to the left, his flannel sleeve almost brushing Pru's nose before it came to a stop, his grimy finger pointing to a spot on the far side of the canyon.

"Ah." Maybe she could believe him. "And where's Mardrone Road then?" Four beeps to the right and two down. She stared hard at the thick forest, trying to picture her hidden home. Their home. Its image was fading, as if she hadn't been there in years, as if all the strange new sights she'd taken in were crowding out the familiar. She was struggling to find her place when the boy whipped around. "Be right back!" he cried, picking up his bike. "Wait right there!" he commanded.

As he pedaled madly away, Pru recognized her chance. She must summon the energy for escape—for survival. Quickly! But what *could* she do? Hide in the bushes? Sneak down the road? And which was stronger, fear or exhaustion?

She was partway up the closest driveway, its house as yet unseen, when the boy appeared behind her. "What are you doing *here*?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Just exploring," Pru tried. With an inward chill she noticed that he was holding something behind his back.

He nodded, as if her answer made sense to him. "Well, I got something for you," he said. "So you close your eyes now. Go on. Close 'em."

She could still scream—before the knife appeared or something crashed down on her head; maybe someone would hear. Yet she was so tired, so bone tired. And she looked at that eager face with its knowing gleam and suddenly she *wanted* whatever it was he had for her. She closed her eyes. Bird song, fresh pine.

"Open up."

It was a staff he held in front of him, leaning on it like Moses.

"I made it for you. See?" He handed it to Pru. She

turned it in her hands, feeling its smooth weight. “Correction!” He slapped the side of his head. “*God* made it. I found it. The wood was already nice and dry. See here where I smoothed it out?” He pointed to nubs where twigs had been snapped off and the bumps whittled down and smoothed. “And there.” He pointed to a band of filigree carving near the top. “You see that? I did that. I made it up out of my head. Like vines, see? And that’s where you put your hand, right where I done my best work.”

“My, my,” Pru said, her voice quavering between fear and gratitude. “A walking stick.”

“There’s more,” he said.

He dug in his pocket and opened his hand. A round wooden button wobbled in his palm. Pru’s hand flew to her vest to find the missing spot. He delivered the button to her, pinched between two calloused fingertips, then motioned for the staff. He nodded toward the road. “Now you watch! This is a lesson.” He walked with exaggerated movements, tapping the stick, moving it in rhythm with his opposite limb, going slow so Pru could keep up, and looking back to make sure she was paying attention.

She followed him down the driveway and back toward the end of the road, her mind frozen in fearful wonder. Suddenly he stopped. “Show me,” he said, handing her the staff.

Pru took the stick, its weight reminding her that it was also a weapon. Closing her hand around the staff, the boy’s carved vines felt live against her palm. A deep breath and she ordered thought away. Attention only. Just walk. Reach, step. Reach, step.

And soon she came to the guardrail where the road broke apart into weed-choked chunks of asphalt and old concrete, and beyond where it disappeared into a track of high weeds and stiff brush that stretched on beyond sight. Something glinted among the bleached branches and thorny scrabble. Not from a single source, but a multitude.

The boy motioned her to the end of the guardrail and took the staff from her to part the shrubs. Pru stepped past him into the weeds and made her way with short steps down the narrow path to a small clearing from which other paths led further off into the brush.

On the packed earth before her, mounds of broken glass were heaped, some separated by color, others mixed for effect. There were piles of small metal scraps and

bright balls of foil, papers and wrappers weighted by rocks, and a small collection of yellow foam captured by a bit of bird netting.

The boy unshouldered his knapsack and began adding the day’s catch to his piles. Something about the care he took with his strange passion lightened her fear and she felt something expanding within her. A dilation, strange and exhilarating.

She turned to look back through the brittle bushes at the road. Who could imagine her here, come all this way? She was hidden, yet out in the open; alone but not alone, standing amid glittering piles gathered by someone who knew his world—a world—intimately.

And Pru there, ready now.

**Vicky Mlyniec** draws inspiration from the Santa Cruz mountains where she lives, writes, and edits. Her essays and short stories have appeared in venues such as *North American Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Chicago Tribune’s Printers Row* and *Brevity* and have earned her the Tobias Wolff Award for Fiction. Her short story collection, *Accordioned Life*, was shortlisted for the 2015 Flannery O’Connor Short Fiction Award.

## FRANK GALUSZKA

*Greta in the Green Dress*, 2015

Oil on Canvas, 48 x 36 in



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