

TRAVIS COLLINSON

Upsidedown, 2007-10
Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 66 in



COURTESY ANGLIM GILBERT GALLERY

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The Old Woman and the Boy

The Mother rushed out of the crowd, Boy in tow. She addressed the Old Woman, who sat on a bench reading a book. “I’m sorry,” she said, swiping her brow with the sleeve of her sweater, “I don’t know you, and this sounds like an odd request probably, but could you watch him just for a few minutes? We’re in that line over there.” She pointed to a long line for the Seattle train. “I have to use the restroom. The man in front of me is high on something or just a strange guy maybe, and he . . . I don’t know.” She glanced at her son, who looked back at the line he’d been pulled from and frowned. “Anyway, I don’t trust him, and the jerk behind me said yes, he’d hold my place but my son was old enough to watch himself, and I really . . . When I left my office I was in such a rush. I bolted down a burrito on my way to pick him up, and it’s just not agreeing with me or maybe I’m coming down with something. I hope not, but . . .”

“Mom,” the Boy interrupted, “you said you’d ask. I said okay. You don’t have to say why.”

Actually, thought the Old Woman, you really do need to say why. And why trust me, she wondered. I could be Jane the Ripper. I could traffic in children. She knew, however, she looked like harmlessness itself, with a soft gray bob framing a small face and the face itself a medley of wrinkles that surely, if the stereotype was correct, must have gotten there from a box of kindness she’d been drawing on year upon year, like an ever-renewable Kleenex supply. Her smile barely raised her jowls, but she offered it. After all, even though she’d never needed to use a bathroom in a public place with a child beside her, it must feel like an emergency. Once, you could leave children standing around without fear they’d be snatched away, but no more.

She took stock of the Boy. He may have been eight or nine, nattily dressed in a pair of brown cords and a white cable-knit sweater under a blue down jacket. He had pale skin and neatly combed flaxen hair. *A little man*, she thought.

“Go ahead,” she said, and the Mother rushed off, a cry of gratitude flying over her shoulder.

The Boy sat down on the bench and regarded his temporary guardian for a moment before meeting her eyes. “You wear funny clothes,” he said.

The Old Woman knew that most children felt they could say anything to an old person. She’d never had any

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children, but she suspected this fact was both good news and bad news to grandparents.

"You're not laughing," she said, "so why do you claim they're funny?"

She'd been a defense attorney, and she felt her career had left her not a particularly patient older person. Nevertheless, she decided to try to be patient with this little man as a sort of experiment in consciousness, a check-in with herself to see how eroded her tolerance for youth might be. It had been a full year since she'd quit her yoga class because, following every final meditation, the twenty-something instructor always insisted on telling her yogis how to live a good life, while the old woman, the eldest present, sat invisible in the front row in perfect Siddhasana pose, not even consulted on the topic.

The Boy declined to answer and turned away. He raised and lowered his feet from the floor, first one, then the other. Nervous, she thought, or bored already. Maybe he'd had to leave a broken Nintendo game or his iPhone, or whatever children did now, back at home. Commenting on her clothes—a midcalf black wool dress with multi-colored wooden buttons down the front, vertically striped black and magenta tights, short black boots, a deep violet goose-down jacket around her shoulders—might be his idea of something to do.

Since their acquaintance was to be short, she decided not to tell him how tired she'd become of all the suits in beige and shades of gray she'd had to wear in courtrooms and an office filled with similarly attired male partners for forty years. Besides, she'd been a child once, and so she knew that children thought of a person of her age as born old. Storybooks presented them as such. Her own introduction to this thinking came via the Grimm brothers: The Old Hag in the woods who wanted to eat Hansel and Gretel; the grandmother in Red Riding Hood. Some Old Woman or other was always popping up. Whoever read stories to children in these more supposedly enlightened days should first remember how they thought as children and then explain aging, or perhaps add an aside about how, for example, the grandmother who'd been gobbled up by the Wolf felt about sloshing around in his stomach juices and how she probably wondered about wolf enzymes and how long it might take to be digested. Likely, she was remembering her own childhood and how short a time ago it seemed, and worrying about the fate that awaited her dear granddaughter who was on her way over with a basket of banana bread and muffins, and how unexpected it was to die by being "wolfed down," so to speak, in one piece. A heart attack, yes. Old age, surely—eventually. But to be born, give birth to Red's mother, be present for Red's birth, buy a house in the country where parties were held at every opportunity, and maybe, like herself for example, hike up Mount Hood not once but twice, volunteer many hours at the village animal shelter, and then, in the end, to be eaten by an animal with the audacity to put on her clothes and get into her bed!

She glanced at the Boy. He'd tilted his head back and was staring at the pigeons fluttering from beam to beam up in the high ceiling of the train station, ignoring her. Of course, why should he pay his watchdog any attention? Or she him? For her part, all she wanted was to read her book until her train arrived in Portland and she could get on board and read all the way to Boise.

But somehow, the presence of the Boy made concentration difficult. Her mind flew around like the pigeons until it landed again on Red Riding Hood's Grandmother. If she were the reader of Red Riding Hood As It Should Be Told, she thought, she'd add what the Grandmother had done for a living. Maybe she wasn't even retired yet from

her job as a teacher. But then again, all that background might take away from the story. A bored face might look up at you at some point and say, "I don't care. Get on with what happens."

"I didn't mean the kind of funny that makes you laugh," the Boy said, interrupting her thoughts.

He dropped his head and kicked his heels against the underside of the bench.

"What other kind of funny is there?" She thought she might analyze this with him, leading him down a path that would reveal where the ostracizing of The Old and The Other came from in the human mind swamp. It had been bothering her lately, long before this child came along. She had even started assembling notes for a book in a kind of haphazard way, half hoping she wouldn't tie herself to a desk and a computer for a year or two of writing and half hoping she would have something to say that no one had ever thought about before.

"Oh, you know what I mean," he said, in no mood for paths leading to swamps.

He'd called her on her condescension, and she knew she deserved it. She took off her glasses, gently rubbed the pink dents on her nose where the plastic nubs dug in, and slid her book into her pack. If she had been a mother, maybe she wouldn't have given any background when she read stories about witches and crones to her own children. After all, mothers reading to their children are still too young themselves to think about such things. The most she could hope for was an occasional enlightened mommy who might tap the illustration of the ill-groomed, hideous hag and say something simple like, "And once this Old Woman was a child with rosy cheeks just like you and lived in Faraway."

When she noticed a black string draped over one of her legs, she unzipped a side pocket of her pack, withdrew a tiny nail scissors, and snipped it off. She dropped the string in the wastebasket at the end of the bench, put the scissors back into its pocket, and returned to sit down. "What don't you like about my clothes?" she asked, out of curiosity, no hidden agenda.

The Boy shrugged first one shoulder, then the other. Twice. "I don't know."

"Do you like your clothes?"

He looked down at his sweater and pants and gleaming

white-and-orange sneakers. "Of course," he said, slightly offended. "But you're wearing, like, stripey tights." He pointed a finger at her chest. "And those are shaped funny. They don't even look like real buttons." He frowned. "How old are you?"

"Three hundred and seven," she said.

His eyes widened.

"No, of course I'm not that old," she said, shaking her head. "Don't be ridiculous."

"You said it," he responded reasonably, but he reddened and she felt sorry she'd embarrassed him. "I don't give my age to just anyone," she said. "Only the government and a few friends know it."

"How come the government knows it?" he asked

"I suppose they think they need to know about how long I'll last," she said. "Do their guesswork. Count their beans."

Not to be made a fool of a second time, he held onto his curiosity, but she felt it anyway. "The government doesn't really count beans," she said. "That's an old-fashioned way to talk about money. People used to count beans and . . ." She realized she had no idea whether people ever really counted beans. That would have been quite a labor-intensive job. "Anyway, I apologize for making up a number to tell you. I lied."

"You're not supposed to lie," the Boy said. "But everybody does it. Everybody I know, anyway."

The Old Woman decided not to pursue a line of questioning into the Boy's life that would reveal those who had lied to him. "The real reason I don't like to think about how old I am too much," she said, "is because, you know, when you get old and you start counting the numbers, then you start thinking about how these years are going by . . . And, well, the numbers only run so far and rarely any further. You think about how it all went so fast. Do you ever feel that way? A moment ago you were seven and now you're . . . what?"

"Almost nine," he said, sitting up a little straighter. "I don't remember being seven except that's when I got my cat, but she's gone." He scanned the ceiling again, searching for pigeons. "From getting hit by a car. My mom got her for me because my dad moved out."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the Old Woman said.

He turned to her. "Which one? My dad or the cat?"

"Both," she said.

“I miss her, but we’re glad my dad’s gone.” The Boy briefly gazed in the direction of the women’s restroom where his likely partner in these feelings remained. “He hurt his back at work and he started taking pills all the time, and he got sick from them. That’s what my mom said, but it seemed like he just got mean, not really sick. He stole money from my sister when she got a job in the mall and he took money from my mom, too. My sister ran away. That weird guy in line who’s on drugs? My dad’s like him sort of.” The words had rushed up and out, and when they stopped even the busy station full of Thanksgiving travelers sounded almost quiet.

In a twenty-first-century fairy tale, the Old Woman thought, maybe Gretel would be older, and she’d flee the drug-addled parent. Into the woods she’d go, leaving no breadcrumbs behind. Or maybe she’d stick a hot pink Post-it note on a tree: *Don’t follow me!* And when Gretel came upon the Old Witch in her amazing house, she’d be wizened on the inside and treat the woman with suspicion.

The Boy slumped forward, leaned his elbows on his knees, and watched his feet fly back and forth beneath him, his mouth tightly closed.

Maybe Gretel would send an e-mail home to Hansel: “Be careful around strangers.”

All the years of interviewing witnesses taught the Old Woman something: when to ask questions and when to stay silent and wait.

The station clock struck nine. She hoped the Boise train wouldn’t be late. Her sister didn’t like to drive in the dark anymore because of her cataracts, but there was always Uber. She had the app on her phone. They’d eat a late dinner and then talk into the wee hours. Why were late hours called *wee*, she wondered, when they were, in fact, the same length as the others? She smiled to herself. She had caught a fresh and welcome dose of curiosity from the Boy. He wasn’t a little man, after all, as she’d thought, but a child with a child’s curiosity and wits about him, despite his losses.

Wee hours. It occurred to her she ought to say it out loud and ask the Boy what he thought it could mean. Who could foretell which path into what woods such a conversation might take them?

* * *

The Boy loved the rumble and heave of the train. He loved the soft red seats, the smells of Cinnabons and popcorn from the dining car next door, the closeness of the bathroom because his mother needed it again, and the green blur of evergreens, like giant melting candles, sliding past his window. He felt he had an advantage over the ice-cream cone–topped mountain because he could see it from different angles now, not like at home. Still, the mountain could only sit there and never move. He thought about climbing it. Mountain climbers took a lot of stuff with them. You get a bigger pack than your school pack, like the one his sister had taken with her when she ran away, the blue pack with yellow stripes on the sides. He remembered it was her Christmas present so she could go camping with her friends, but they’d never done that.

She might be camping now, the Boy thought. She could be out there in the big trees boiling soup over a campfire. He hoped she’d come back to his bedroom window some night, like that time she woke him up and sneaked inside for a quick hug before she left again. If she came, he could tell her that it was safe now in the house because Daddy was gone, and they’d had a cat for a while, but they didn’t have her anymore. He’d tell her the truth: the cat ran away, too, same as she did. He didn’t like to think about saying that. *My cat ran away.* Sometimes you said something else. It was okay to make things up so you wouldn’t cry. He’d made that rule for himself a long time ago.

In Seattle, he would make a list of things he’d need to take with him if he went camping. For sure he’d take his phone. A long time ago when people climbed mountains, they didn’t have cell phones or GPS. If you got lost, you got lost. Still, boys and girls both climbed mountains from way back in time. He could get to the top of Mount Hood with the right gear in the right pack, plus his phone.

But sometimes cell phones break or won’t work. Like out there in those trees, so far away from everything. You couldn’t count on a cell phone working out there. If one would work no matter what, then he’d still be getting texts, but the texts had stopped a long time ago.

He tried letting his head fall back so he could watch the lights dim and glow in the train ceiling, but it made him dizzy, so he turned to the window once more. In miles and miles and miles, hours and hours away, they’d come

to his aunt’s house. For fun, he tried to picture her with a little girl face, but he couldn’t think of one that would fit right.

He hoped his mother wouldn’t cry at the table like she’d done last year. Thanksgiving was supposed to be a good time. His cousins would be there, too, not over at their dad’s house. All three of them were older, but last year they’d at least played a few video games with him.

He saw his mother coming back from the bathroom. Her face was almost a normal color again and her eyes weren’t droopy but wide open now. He watched as she held onto the seat backs so she wouldn’t fall.

She caved into the chair across from him and put her hand on her cheek. “I don’t think I have a fever,” she said. “It’s not the flu. Food poisoning. I hope that’s the last of it.”

“I’m glad I didn’t eat one of those burritos,” the Boy said. “Where’d you buy it?”

“Food truck,” she said. “Not exactly first-class Mexican cuisine.”

“What’s cuisine?” the Boy asked, but his mother stared out the window, frowning. Three rows of wrinkles, each like a pale thread, crossed her brow.

The Boy couldn’t take his eyes from her. She would get old someday, and the wrinkles would be everywhere on her face. He wondered how old he would be when she started looking that way and if he would remember then what she was like now. One day all the numbers would run out. Then what?

He reached into his jacket pocket, his fingers flat, searching. It was still there. He wanted to take it out and look at it, so he did. It fit perfectly into the center of his palm. The wood, shaped like a crescent moon, was smooth and the color a paler blue than the sky over the mountain. Three bright spots splashed like gold rain across the surface.

He heard the zip of his mother’s handbag and watched as she reached inside and pulled out a cell phone. She leaned forward slightly and held it between them. Before she handed it to him, she said, “So what is the rule again?”

The Boy closed his hand over the button and looked down at the floor where several gray kernels of popcorn lay like tiny rain clouds along the edge of her seat. He raised his eyes to her. “Don’t cuss at strangers.”

“That man in line had a problem,” she said. “It wasn’t your job to point it out to him. Especially with bad words.”

The Boy nodded. He reached for the phone with one hand and with the other slipped the button back into his jacket pocket.

“What’s that?” his mother asked.

“Nothing,” the Boy said. “A button.”

“Since when did you get interested in buttons? Let me see.”

The Boy handed it over. In his mother’s palm the button didn’t look like a moon at all but plain, like a piece of wood that had been cut, sanded, and painted blue and gold.

She smiled and gave the button back to him. “You find all kinds of things in train stations. Once I found a red cashmere sweater in the ladies’ room at the King Street station and wore it for years, until it got holes in it.”

The button felt warm and looked like itself again. He pushed it all the way to the bottom of the pocket but kept his fingers around it for a few seconds before withdrawing his hand.

Andrea Carlisle has published a book of fiction, *The Riverhouse Stories*. For seven years she wrote a blog about being a caretaker for her mother: *Go Ask Alice... When She’s 94*. Her short stories, poems, and essays have appeared in *Travelers’ Tales*, *J Journal* (John Jay College, CUNY), *So to Speak*, *Funny Times*, *Northwest Review*, *Calyx*, *The Ledge*, *Oasis*, *Texas Observer*, *Willow Springs*, *Seattle Weekly*, *Mountain Living*, and various other publications. She is the recipient of an Oregon Arts Commission Individual Artist’s Fellowship (for fiction), a fellowship from the Oregon Institute of Literary Arts (for nonfiction), and was cited as an “out-standing writer” by the Pushcart Awards.