

FICTION

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THE OTHER PLACE

BY MARY GAITSKILL

ILLUSTRATION BY BARNABY FURNAS, "BROWNS RAIDER (DANGERFIELD NEWSBY)" (2008). COURTESY MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY

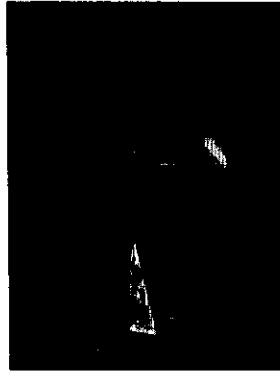
My son, Douglas, loves to play with toy guns. He is thirteen. He loves video games in which people get killed. He loves violence on TV, especially if it's funny. How did this happen? The way everything does, of course. One thing follows another, naturally.

Naturally, he looks like me: shorter than average, with a fine build, hazel eyes, and light-brown hair. Like me, he has a speech impediment and a condition called "essential tremor" that causes involuntary hand movements, which make him look more fragile than he is. He hates reading, but he is bright. He is interested in crows because he heard on a nature show that they are one of the only species that are more intelligent than they need to be to survive. He does beautiful, precise drawings of crows.

Mostly, though, he draws pictures of men holding guns. Or men hanging from nooses. Or men cutting up other men with chainsaws—in these pictures there are no faces, just figures holding chainsaws and figures being cut in two, with blood spraying out.

My wife, Marla, says that this is fine, as long as we balance it out with other things—family dinners, discussions of current events, sports, exposure to art and nature. But I don't know. Douglas and I were sitting together in the living room last week, half watching the TV and checking e-mail, when an advertisement for a movie flashed across the screen: it was called "Captivity" and the ad showed a terrified blond girl in a cage, a tear running down her face. Doug didn't speak or move. But I could feel his fascination, the suddenly deepening quality of it. And I don't doubt that he could feel mine. We sat there and felt it together.

And then she was there, the woman in the car. In the room with my son, her black hair, her hard laugh, the wrinkled skin under her hard eyes, the sudden blood filling the white of her blue eye. There was excited music on the TV and then the ad ended. My son's



attention went elsewhere; she lingered.

When I was a kid, I liked walking through neighborhoods alone, looking at houses, seeing what people did to make them homes: the gardens, the statuary, the potted plants, the wind chimes. Late at night, if I couldn't sleep, I would sometimes slip out my bedroom window and just spend an hour or so walking around. I loved it, especially in late spring, when it was starting to be warm and there were night sounds—crickets, birds, the whirring of bats, the occasional whooshing car, some lonely person's TV. I loved the mysterious darkness of the trees, the way they moved against the sky if there was wind—big and heavy movements, but delicate, too, in all the subtle, reactive leaves. In that soft, blurry weather, people slept with their windows open; it was a small town and they weren't afraid. Some houses—I'm thinking of two in particular, where the Legges and the Myers lived—had yards that I would actually hang around in at night. Once, when I was sitting on the Legges' front porch, thinking about stealing a piece of their garden statuary, their cat came and sat with me. I petted him and when I got up and went for the statuary he followed me with his tail up. The Legges' statues were elves, not corny, cute elves but sinister, wicked-looking elves, and I thought that one would look good in my room. But they were too heavy, so I just moved them around the yard.

I did things like that, dumb pranks that could only irritate those who noticed them: rearranging statuary, leaving weird stuff in mailboxes, looking into windows to see where people had dinner or left their personal things—or, in the case of the Legges, where their daughter, Jenna, slept. She was on the ground floor, her bed so close to the window that I could watch her chest rise and fall the way I watched the grass on their lawn stirring in the wind. The worst thing I did, probably, was put a giant marble in the Myers' gas tank, which could've really caused a problem if it had rolled over the gas hole while one of the Myers was driving on the highway, but I guess it never did.

Mostly, though, I wasn't interested in causing that kind of problem. I just wanted to sit and watch, to touch other people's things, to drink in their lives. I suspect that it's some version of these impulses that makes me the most successful real-estate agent in the Hudson Valley now: the ability to know what physical objects and surroundings will most please a person's sense of identity and make him feel at home.

I wish that Doug had this sensitivity to the physical world, and the ability to drink from it. I've tried different things with him: I used to throw the ball with him out in the yard, but he got tired of that; he hates hiking and likes biking only if he has to get someplace. What's working now a little bit is fishing, fly-fishing hip deep in the Hudson. An ideal picture of normal childhood.

I believe I had a normal childhood. But you have to go pretty far afield to find something people would call abnormal these days. My parents were divorced, and then my mother had boyfriends—but this was true of about half the kids I knew. She

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and my father fought, in the house, when they were together, and they went on fighting, on the phone, after they separated—loud, screaming fights sometimes. I didn't love it, but I understood it; people fight. I was never afraid that my father was going to hurt her, or me. I had nightmares occasionally, in which he turned into a murderer and came after me, chasing me, getting closer, until I fell down, unable to make my legs move right. But I've read that this is one of those primitive fears which everybody secretly has; it bears little relation to what actually happens.

What actually happened: he forced me to play golf with him for hours when I visited on Saturdays, even though it seemed only to make him miserable. He'd curse himself if he missed a shot and then that would make him miss another one and he'd curse himself more. He'd whisper, "Oh, God," and wipe his face if anything went wrong, or even if it didn't, as if just being there were an ordeal, and then I had to feel sorry for him. He'd make these noises sometimes, painful grunts when he picked up the sack of clubs, and it put me on edge and even disgusted me.

Now, of course, I see it differently. I remembered those Saturdays when I was first teaching Doug how to cast, out in the back yard. I wasn't much good myself yet, and I got tangled up in the bushes a couple of times. I could feel the boy's flashing impatience; I felt my age, too. Then we went to work disentangling and he came closer to help me. We linked in concentration, and it occurred to me that the delicacy of the line and the fine movements needed to free it appealed to him the way drawing appealed to him, because of their beauty and precision.

Besides, he was a natural. When it was his turn to try, he kept his wrist stiff and gave the air a perfect little punch and *zip*—great cast. The next time, he got tangled up, but he was speedy about getting unstuck so that he could do it again. Even when the tremor acted up. Even when I lectured him on the laws of physics. It was a good day.

There is one not-normal thing you could point to in my childhood, which is that my mother, earlier in her life, before I was born, had occasionally worked as a prostitute. But I don't think that counts, because I didn't know about it as a child. I didn't learn about it until six years ago, when I was thirty-eight and my mother was sick with a strain of flu that had killed a lot of people, most of them around her age. She was in the hospital and she was feverish and thought she was dying. She held my hand as she told me, her eyes sad half-moons, her lips still full and provocative. She said that she wanted me to know because she thought it might help me to understand some of the terrible things I'd heard my father say to her—things I mostly hadn't even listened to. "It wasn't anything really bad," she said. "I just needed the money sometimes, between jobs. It's not like I was a drug addict—it was just hard to make it in Manhattan. I only worked for good escort places. I never had a pimp or went out on the street. I never did anything perverted—I didn't have to. I was beautiful. They'd pay just to be with me."

Later, when she didn't die, she was embarrassed that she'd told me. She laughed that raucous laugh of hers and said, "Way to go, Marcy! On your deathbed, tell your son you're a whore and then don't die!"

"It's O.K.," I said.

And it was. It frankly was not really even much of a surprise. It was her vanity that disgusted me, the way she undercut the confession with a preening, maudlin joke. I could not respect that even then.

I don't think that my mom's confession, or whatever it may have implied, had anything to do with what I think of as "it." When I was growing up, there was, after all, no evidence of her past, nothing that could have affected me. But suddenly, when I was about fourteen, I started getting excited by the thought of girls being hurt. Or killed. A horror movie would be on TV, a girl in shorts would be running and screaming with some guy chasing her, and to me it was like porn. Even a scene where a sexy girl was getting her legs torn off by a shark—bingo. It was like pushing a button. My mom would be in the kitchen making dinner and talking on the phone, stirring and striding around with the phone tucked between her shoulder and her chin. Outside, cars would go by, or a dog would run across the lawn. My homework would be slowly getting done in my lap while this sexy girl was screaming "God help me!" and having her legs torn off. And I would go invisibly into an invisible world that I called "the other place." Where I sometimes passively watched a killer and other times became one.

"You heard me—turn off that fan."



It's true that I started drinking and drugging right about then. All my friends did. My mom tried to lay down the law, but I found ways around her. We'd go into the woods, me and usually Chet Wotzak and Jim Bonham, and we'd smoke weed we'd got from Chet's brother, a local dealer named Dan, and drink cheap wine. We could sometimes get Chet's dad to lend us a gun—in my memory he had an AK-47, though I don't know how that's possible—and we'd go out to a local junk yard and take turns shooting up toilets, the long tubes of fluorescent lights, whatever was there. Then we'd go to Chet's house, up to his room, where we'd play loud music and tell dumb jokes and watch music videos in which disgusting things happened: snakes crawled over a little boy's sleeping face and he woke up being chased by a psychopath in a huge truck; a girl was turned into a pig and then a cake and then the lead singer bit off her head.

You might think that the videos and the guns were part of it, that they encouraged my violent thoughts. But Chet and Jim were watching and doing the same things and they were not like me. They said mean things about girls, and they were disrespectful

sometimes, but they didn't want to hurt them, not really. They wanted to touch them and be touched by them; they wanted that more than anything. You could hear it in their voices and see it in their eyes, no matter what they said.

So I would sit with them and yet be completely apart from them, talking and laughing about normal things in a dark mash of music and snakes and children running from psychos and girls being eaten—images that took me someplace my friends couldn't see, although it was right there in the room with us.

It was the same at home. My mother made dinner, talked on the phone, fought with my dad, had guys over. Our cat licked itself and ate from its dish. Around us, people cared about one another. Jenna Legge slept peacefully. But in the other place sexy girls—and sometimes ugly girls or older women—ran and screamed for help as an unstoppable, all-powerful killer came closer and closer. There was no school or sports or mom or dad or caring, and it was great.

I've told my wife about most of this, the drinking, the drugs, the murder fantasies. She understands, because she has her past, too: extreme sex, vandalizing cars, talking vulnerable girls into getting more drunk than they should on behalf of some guy. There's a picture of her and another girl in bathing suits, the other girl chugging a beer that is being held by a guy so that it goes straight down her throat as her head is tipped way back. Another guy is watching, and my smiling wife is holding the girl's hand. It's a picture that foreshadows some kind of cruelty or misery, or maybe just a funny story to tell about throwing up in the bathroom later. Privately, I see no similarity between it and my death obsession. For my wife, the connection is drugs and alcohol; she believes that we were that way because we were both addicts expressing our pain and anger through violent fantasies and blind actions. The first time I took Doug out to fish, it was me on the hot golf course all over again. As we walked to the lake in our heavy boots and clothes, I could feel his irritation at the bugs and the brightness, the squalor of nature in his fastidious eyes. I told him that fly-fishing was like driving a sports car, as opposed to the Subaru of rod and reel. I went on about how anything beautiful had to be conquered. He just turned down his mouth.

He got interested, though, in tying on the fly; the simple elegance of the knot (the "fish-killer") intrigued him. He laid it down the first time, too, placing the backcast perfectly in a space between trees. He gazed at the brown, light-wrinkled water with satisfaction. But when I put my hand on his shoulder I could feel him inwardly pull away.

As I got older, my night walks became rarer, with a different, sadder feeling to them. I would go out when I was not drunk or high but in a quiet mood, wanting to be somewhere that was neither the normal social world nor the other place. A world where I could sit and feel the power of nature come up through my feet, and be near other people without them being near me. Where I could believe in and for a moment possess the

goodness of their lives. Jenna Legge still slept on the ground floor and sometimes I would look in her window and watch her breathe, and, if I was lucky, see one of her developing breasts swell out of her nightgown.

I never thought of killing Jenna. I didn't think about killing anyone I actually knew—not the girls I didn't like at school or the few I had sex with. The first times I had sex, I was so caught up in the feeling of it that I didn't even think about killing—I didn't think about anything at all. But I didn't have sex much. I was small, awkward, too quiet; I had that tremor. My expression must've been strange as I sat in class, feeling hidden in my other place, but outwardly visible to whoever looked—not that many did.

Then one day I was with Chet's brother, Dan, on a drug drop; he happened to be giving me a ride because his drop, at the local college, was on the way to wherever I was going. It was a guy buying, but, when we arrived, a girl opened the door. She was pretty and she knew it, but whatever confidence that knowledge gave her was superficial. We stayed for a while and smoked the product with her and her boyfriend. The girl sat very erect and talked too much, as if she were smart, but there was a question at the end of everything she said. When we left, Dan said, "That's the kind of lady I'd like to slap in the face." I asked, "Why?" But I knew. I don't remember what he said, because it didn't matter. I already knew. And later, instead of making up a girl, I thought of that one.

I forgot to mention: one night when I was outside Jenna's window, she opened her eyes and looked right at me. I was stunned, so stunned that I couldn't move. There was nothing between us but a screen with a hole in it. She looked at me and blinked. I said, "Hi." I held my breath; I had not spoken to her since third grade. But she just sighed, rolled over, and lay still. I stood there trembling for a long moment. And then, slowly and carefully, I walked through the yard and onto the sidewalk, back to my house.

I cut school the next day and the next, because I was scared that Jenna had told everybody and that I would be mocked. But eventually it became clear that nobody was saying anything, so I went back. In class, I looked at Jenna cautiously, then gratefully. But she did not return my look. At first, this moved me, made me consider her powerful. I tried insistently to catch her eye, to let her know what I felt. Finally our eyes met, and I realized that she didn't understand why I was looking at her. I realized that although her eyes had been open that night, she had still been asleep. She had looked right at me, but she had not seen me at all.

And so one night, or early morning, really, I got out of bed, into my mother's car, and drove to the campus to look for her—the college girl.

The campus was in a heavily wooded area bordering a nature preserve. The dorms were widely scattered, though some, resembling midsized family homes, were clustered together. The girl lived in one of those, but while I remembered the general location I

couldn't be sure which one it was. I couldn't see into any of the windows, because even the open ones had blinds pulled down. While I was standing indecisively on a paved path between dorms, I saw two guys coming toward me. Quickly, I walked off into a section of trees and underbrush. I moved carefully through the thicket, coming to a wide field that led toward the nature preserve. The darkness deepened as I got farther from the dorms. I could feel things coming up from the ground—teeth and claws, eyes, crawling legs, and brainless eating mouths. A song played in my head, an enormously popular, romantic song about love and death that had supposedly made a bunch of teen-agers kill themselves.

Kids still listen to that song. I once heard it coming from the computer in our family room. When I went in and looked over Doug's hunched shoulder, I realized that the song was being used as the soundtrack for a graphic video about a little boy in a mask murdering people. It was spellbinding, the yearning, eerie harmony of the song juxtaposed with terrified screaming; I told Doug to turn it off. He looked pissed, but he did it and went slumping out the door. I found it and watched it by myself later.

I went back to the campus many times. I went to avoid my mother as much as anything. Her new boyfriend was an asshole, and she whined when he was around. When he wasn't around, she whined about him on the phone. Sometimes she called two people in a row to whine about exactly the same things that he'd said or done. Even when I played music loud so I couldn't hear her, I could *feel* her. When that happened, I'd leave my music on so that she'd think I was still in my room and I'd go to the campus. I'd follow lone female students as closely as I could, and I'd feel the other place running against the membrane of the world, almost touching it. Why does it make sense to put romantic music together with a story about a little boy murdering people? Because it does make sense—only I don't know how. It seems dimly to have to do with justice, with some wrong being avenged, but what? The hurts of childhood? The stupidity of life? The kid doesn't seem to be having fun. Random murder just seems like a job he has to do. But why? Soon enough I realized that the college campus was the wrong place to think about making it real. It wasn't an environment I could control; there were too many variables. I needed to get the girl someplace private. I needed to have certain things there. I needed to have a gun. I could find a place; there were deserted places. I could get a gun from Chet's house; I knew where his father kept his. But the girl?

Then, while I was in the car with my mom one day, we saw a guy hitchhiking. He was middle-aged and fucked-up-looking, and my mom—we were stopped at a light—remarked that nobody in their right mind would pick him up. Two seconds later, somebody pulled over for him. My mom laughed.

I started hitchhiking. Most of the people who picked me up were men, but there were women, too. No one was scared of me. I was almost eighteen by then, but I was still small and quiet-looking. Women picked me up because they were concerned about me.

I didn't really plan to do it. I just wanted to feel the gun in my pocket and look at the woman and know that I *could* do it. There was this one—a thirtyish blonde with breasts that I could see through her open coat. But then she said that she was pregnant and I started thinking about what if I was killing the baby?

"We were hoping that you could work from work today."



Doug had a lot of nightmares when he was a baby, by which I mean between the ages of two and four. When he cried out in his sleep, it was usually Marla who went to him. But one night she was sick and I told her to stay in bed while I went to comfort the boy. He was still crying "Mommy!" when I sat on the bed, and I felt his anxiety at seeing me instead of his mother, felt the moment of hesitation in his body before he came into my arms, vibrating rather than trembling, sweating and fragrant with emotion. He had dreamed that he was home alone and it was dark, and he was calling for his mother, but she wasn't there. "Daddy, Daddy," he wept, "there was a sick lady with red eyes and Mommy wouldn't come. Where is Mommy?"

That may've been the first time I truly remembered her, the woman in the car. It was so intense a moment that in a bizarre intersection of impossible feelings I got an erection with my crying child in my arms. But it lasted only a moment. I picked Doug up and carried him into our bedroom so that he could see his mother and nestle against her. I stayed awake nearly all night watching them.

The day it happened was a bright day, but windy and cold, and my mom would not shut up. I just wanted to watch a movie, but even with the TV turned up loud—I guess that's why she kept talking; she didn't think I could hear her—I couldn't blot out the sound of her yakking about how ashamed this asshole made her feel. I whispered, "If you're so ashamed, why do you talk about it?" She said, "It all goes back to being fucking molested." She lowered her voice; the only words I caught were "fucking corny." I went out into the hallway to listen. "The worst of it was that he wouldn't look at me," she said. I could almost hear her pacing around, the phone tucked against her shoulder. "That's why I fall for these passive-aggressive types who turn me on and then make me feel ashamed." Whoever she was talking to must have said something funny then, because she laughed. I left the TV on and walked out. I took the gun, but more for protection against perverts than the other thing.

I gave my boy that dream as surely as if I'd handed it to him. But I've given him a lot of other things, too. The first time he caught a fish he responded to my encouraging words with a bright glance that I will never forget. We let that one go, but only after he had held it in his hands, cold and quick, muscle with eyes and a heart, scales specked

with yellow and red, and one tiny orange fin. Then the next one, bigger, leaping to break the rippling murk—I said, “Don’t point the rod at the fish. Keep the tip up, keep it up”—and he listened to me and he brought it in. There is a picture of it on the corkboard in his room, the fish in the net, the lure bristling in its crude mouth. I have another picture, too, of him smiling triumphantly, holding it in his hands, its shining, still living body fully extended.

She was older than I’d wanted, forty or so, but still good-looking. She had a voice that was strong and lifeless at the same time. She had black hair and she wore tight black pants. She did not have a wedding ring, which meant that maybe no one would miss her. She picked me up on a lightly travelled forty-five-mile-an-hour road. She was listening to a talk show on the radio and she asked if I wanted to hear music instead. I said no, I liked talk shows.

“Yeah?” she said. “Why?”

“Because I’m interested in current events.”

“I’m not,” she said. “I just listen to this shit because the voices relax me. I don’t really care what they’re talking about.”

They were talking about a war somewhere. Bombs were exploding in markets where people bought vegetables; somebody’s legs had been blown off. We turned onto a road with a few cars, but none close to us.

“You don’t care?”

“No, why should I? Oh, about this?” She paused. There was something about a little boy being rushed to an overcrowded hospital. “Yeah, that’s bad. But it’s not like we can do anything about it.” On the radio, foreign people cried.

I took the gun out of my pocket.

I said, “Do you have kids?”

“No,” she said. “Why?”

“Take me to Old Post Road. I’m going to the abandoned house there.”

“I’m not going by there, but I can get you pretty close. So why do you care about current events? I didn’t give a shit at your age.”

“Take me there or I’ll kill you.”

She cocked her head and wrinkled her brow, as if she were trying to be sure she’d heard right. Then she looked down at the gun, and cut her eyes up at me; quickly, she looked back at the road. The car picked up speed.

“Take the next right or you’ll die.” My voice at that moment came not from me but from the other place. My whole body felt like an erection. She hit the right-turn signal. There was a long moment as we approached the crucial road. The voices on the radio roared ecstatically.

She pulled over to the shoulder.

“What are you doing?”

She put the car in park.

“Turn right or you die!”

She unbuckled her seat belt and turned to face me. “I’m ready,” she said. She leaned back and gripped the steering wheel with one hand, as if to steady herself. With her free hand, she tapped herself between the eyes—bright, hot blue, rimmed with red. “Put it here,” she said. “Go for it.”

A car went by. Somebody in the passenger seat glanced at us blankly. “I don’t want to do it here. There’s witnesses. You need to take me to the place.”

“What witnesses? That car’s not stopping—nobody’s going to stop unless the emergency lights are on and they’re not, look.”

“But if I shoot you in the head the blood will spray on the window and somebody could see.” It was my own voice again: the power was gone. The people on the radio kept talking. Suddenly I felt my heart beating.

“O.K., then do it here.” She opened her jacket to show me her chest. “Nobody’ll hear. When you’re done you can move me to the passenger seat and drive the car wherever.”

“Get into the passenger seat now and I’ll do it.”

She laughed, hard. Her eyes were crazy. They were crazy the way an animal can be crazy in a tiny cage. “Hell, no. I’m not going to your place with you. You do it here, motherfucker.”

I realized then that her hair was a wig, and a cheap one. For some reason, that made her seem even crazier. I held my gun hand against my body to hide the tremor.

"Come on, honey," she said. "Go for it."

Like a star, a red dot appeared in the white of her left eye. The normal place and the other place were turning into the same place, quick but slow, the way a car accident is quick but slow. I stared. The blood spread raggedly across her eye. She shifted her eyes from my face to a spot somewhere outside the car and fixed them there. I fought the urge to turn and see what she was looking at. She shifted her eyes again. She looked me deep in the face.

"Well?" she said. "Are you going to do it or not?"

Words appeared in my head, like a sign reading "I Don't Want To."

She leaned forward and turned on the emergency lights. "Get out of my car," she said quietly. "You're wasting my time."

As soon as I got out, she hit the gas and burned rubber. I walked into the field next to the road, without an idea of where I might go. I realized after she was gone that she might call the police, but I felt in my gut that she would not—in the other place there are no police, and she was from the other place.

Still, as I walked I took the bullets out of the gun and scattered them, kicking snow over them and stamping it down. I walked a long time, shivering horribly. I came across a drainage pipe and threw the empty gun into it. I thought, I should've gut-shot her—that's what I should've done. And then got her to the abandoned house. I should've gut-shot the bitch. But I knew why I hadn't. She'd been shot already, from the inside. If she had been somebody different I might actually have done it. But somehow the wig-haired woman had changed the channel and I don't even know if she'd meant to.

The fly bobbing on the brown, gentle water. The long grasses so green that they cast a fine, bright green on the brown water. The primitive fish mouth straining for water and finding it as my son releases it in the shallows. Its murky vanishing.

The blood bursting in her eye, poor woman, poor mother. My mother died of colon cancer just nine months ago. Shortly after that, it occurred to me that the woman had been wearing that awful wig because she was sick and undergoing chemo. Though of course I don't know.

The hurts of childhood that must be avenged: so small and so huge. Before I grew up and stopped thinking about her, I thought about that woman a lot. About what would've happened if I'd got her there, to the abandoned house. I don't remember anymore the details of these thoughts, only that they were distorted, swollen, blurred: broken face, broken voice, broken body left dying on the floor, watching me go with dimming, despairing eyes.

These pictures are faded now and far away. But they can still make me feel something.

The second time I put my hand on Doug's shoulder, he didn't move away inside; he was too busy tuning in to the line and the lure. Somewhere in him is the other place. It's quiet now, but I know it's there. I also know that he won't be alone with it. He won't know that I'm there with him, because we will never speak of it. But I will be there. He will not be alone with that. ♦

MARY GAITSKILL