ESCAPE ARTIST

Saramanda Swigart

IMAGE: Robert Eliason

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The moon was an escape and a trap. My life is this way; frying pans to fires to frying pans.

I shook a frying pan full of eggs over the burner. Rick, who lit his cigarettes from the stove, pushed me aside, leaned down, blond hair hanging over the flame. He singed a few hairs up front but didn't catch fire. It was hard to tell what was lighting what, the flame or the man.

Rick and I lived together. He was a heat-seeking missile, and I tried to stay out of his aim. The house sweltered when he was in it. He rarely wore a shirt. I used to love the scar that ran over his pectoral muscle, passing close to the nipple. "A shiv made from a *toothbrush*," he'd said proudly. The bullet he wore around his neck on a chain swung now near the blue-yellow flame. It was a live bullet. "It's for a certain someone," he often said. "I'm saving it." Longingly, I watched it swing. *Swing-swing.* But it didn't go off.

I went to the moon to escape Rick. It wasn't a prison yet.

The moon was just a couch in the mud room, which had nothing else in it but a dart board. No darts, bullseye worn almost to invisibility, but still there. Still there. Flame and cotton and needle were involved by this time. After injecting myself I curled into my own mind on the couch. And *swing-swing* went the bullet of my mind over the flame that was Rick. Someday it would go off, straight into him and out the other side.

He stood talking. *You burn the toothbrush bristles so they melt into one, rub the sides against a rock until you get a blade that cuts.* He touched his scar. When he spoke he spat out great raspberries of flame, or so it seemed to me. They curved, those flame-words, beautiful, solar flares through the skylight's night sky, not so much meaning anything as embodying meaning itself.

"Look at the state of you," he said into my face. "This is some disgraceful shit." Smoke billowed, dragon-like, from his nose. I smiled. He'd been cremating me, a little each day, and soon I would be nothing but ash. But on the moon-couch, ice crystals formed on my body, and for the duration I was protected from the heat.

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I got a taste for the cool at work. I worked at a construction site, often just a grinning hole in the earth, where I sometimes showed prospective buyers the shapes made by construction tape and explained their potential. The foreman thought I had the right blend of street-smarts and refinement because I came from education but I'd been living rough for years. I could talk to the crew in clipped, slangy patois out of one side of my mouth, and out the other, I could talk seriously of the building's integrity and practicality.

Things started to slip long before I was fired. At the market I thumbed the embossed numbers on my credit card before handing it over. My father sometimes paid it off, sometimes not, and I wouldn't know until I tried. I began to forget the names of people I was talking to, and to break off mid-sentence and stare, and to sidle in with dirty, wrinkled shirts. I styled my hair in cornrows, but I had white teeth that were straight like tombstones—and that counted for something out at the site, where I existed between two things. I was an ambassador between creation and consumption, and the politics of each.

Before things started slipping I sat on some sandbags. Right and left foot swinging in the August heat. *Swing-swing.*

Star came by. Star handled heavy machinery like the men. She said "What the fuck" about my bruised eye and mouth. I shrugged, too lazy and sad to make up a story. No mistaking the provenance of that kind of injury.

"Ever been to the moon?" she said. She tossed me something, a bag with a little trapezoidal pill that was strangely cold to the touch. In an alley behind the site I crushed it and inhaled it. There was a gift shop across the way full of figurines. A terrible pain shot down my throat and into my brain, but then, all at once, I traded places with myself, and where my feelings had been I now had the power of freeze. The figurines in the gift shop began to move. There was a sea lion, and a bear, and a stag. They turned toward me as one, then changed places while I stared. They were either glass or wax or maybe ice, like my hands and feet. When I opened my mouth, I swear icicles fell to the ground with the angel sound of breaking glass.

"What is this stuff?" I asked Star back at the site.

"Ice-nine," she said. "You like it?"

"Like in the book?" I said.

"What book?" Star eyed me in a way that could have been wry or angry or covetous. I traversed the rest of the workday in delirium.

I was out of the frying pan. I didn't need Rick, *der freischütz*, his bullet staring at me like a third eye from his chest like it had special plans for me.

After work Star took me to a building with other people in it. Star said, "What's up," and it wasn't a question, and the black man with the one blue milky eye said, "What isn't," and it wasn't a question either. We sat in a little Bermuda triangle and watched our thoughts eddy around the drain and disappear. Star had huge arms with big muscles and each had a tree tattoo that was really a woman. Across the street was a travel agency with a sign in neon that read, *What is Jesus doing today?* Just a question, no answer.

The walls and windows rimed over with ice while we sat like chessmen.

I could fuck Rick when I was on the moon. *Fate is chiastic and has its own bilateral symmetry*, is what I was thinking while Rick's cheeks pinked. I made an X behind his back with my arms. *Fate is the good curve on the axis that has an equal and opposite bad.* The thought was the kind I had while we were fucking; abstract to the point of meaningless, but I could kill time looking for meaning in my sentence-mazes. Rick couldn't follow me here, so I was alone. I was empty on a cosmic scale, but dark matter hunkered, humming, in the crevasses, watching, intelligent and dangerous, seething with potential energy.

Why stay with him wasn't even a question. He was the parasite I lived with. His inane violence—his general inanity—was a chronic condition. He was a sad and fragile man who was made strong by fear, and I found this impulse useful. Sometimes my anger was the engine that kept my life moving, and kept catastrophe idling.

"I'd die without you," he whispered into my neck. Head on his chest, I imagined my hair burned into a toothbrush shiv, honed and entering his flesh, cutting deep and permanent.

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"Welcome to the moon," said Star every time I met her in that apartment, which I realized was where she lived. She moved the beaded curtain aside for me. The beads in her hand were music. I felt the beads shuddering through my skull.

"The moon and Mister," said Milk-Eye Man, and his eye was a moon that looked everywhere and nowhere. One eye vicious, the other eye frozen in benign surprise.

"That's his name?" I said.

Mister and Star and I mainlined ice-nine in the dull hours of the day. Blankets and beads strung between doorways. Each shot was a brick in my palace of ice and quartz. My mind was the Fortress of Solitude. The center of the palace had a dead lake. It was liquid mercury, trapezoidal in shape, and disappearing into it meant complete invisibility. An ordinary tree grew on the roof garden above the travel agency, but while on the moon it became a great portentous flame tree. The flowers fell orange around its base, and strange, pendulous fruit dangled like testicles, swinging. *Swing-swing.* Little acrobats did a ladder act down my spine in rhythm with the swinging testicles and the thoughts in my head were the bubbles in a glass of champagne; sometimes they dislodged and I watched them rise and surface and pop, and then I no longer remembered them.

"Why don't you move out?" Star indicated the finger bruises like a necklace stretching ear to ear and behind the ears.

"Moth, flame?" I guessed.

"Naw," she said.

I thought. The thought slid around the ice in my brain. "He's my punishment," I said finally. She didn't ask for what. We all have that unforgivable thing. She reached across and caressed me. "Let *me* be your punishment," she said. She pulled me next to her. She had hard and soft parts on her body. I liked the difference. Being with her was a terrible thing, and darkly pleasing.

Mister coughed once, a sound that seemed to come from far away.

"He's going to kill you," she whispered. She sounded more excited than sad.

"Or I'll kill him," I said.

"I'll back that," she said. "Tell me how to help."

Out of the fire.

* * *

In the cool I could stow my rotten-lemon memories or look at them head-on and it made almost no difference. My mother's first suicide attempt became the size of a suitcase that fit neatly into the overhead bin. Or I could pull it out, examine the contents, rummage and rearrange, check items off the list. I found her. I was seven. The bathroom, all white, with a Jackson Pollock of blood sprayed on the wall. It was beautiful. Sick, I looked at the bloody artwork. Mom held her arms to quell or hasten the bleeding and looked, imploring, into my eyes. I dropped my Powerpuff backpack and we looked at each other for an ice age before I started screaming. The event split my life in two. To this day I toggle between the halves.

The second time I was called out of school. Before my father sent a car, a nurse talked to me. *Your family needs you right now*, and I nodded and swung my legs beneath the office seat, *swing-swing*. I couldn't stop wondering what my mother's eyes had been imploring, that first time. Please help me or please let me die—which one? *Your mother needs you to be a big girl*, said the nurse. How? *SWING-SWING* until a loose leg of the seat broke and I fell to the ground. The nurse wiped my cut, placed a Band-Aid over it.

The third time I had almost finished my dissertation, entitled *By Tooth and Talon: Unimodal Narrativity in the Spatial Replacement of Colonized Bodies.*

My father's text message: *It's happened. Come home.*

I still don't know what he meant. I never went home. She's still a Schrödinger's mother, alive and dead simultaneously. *Mom. . . mom*, says my sobbing heart. *Forgive me, mom.* But I feel nothing, I just know "mom" is the shape my feelings would take if I had them.

Pack the suitcase. Put it away. Light the lighter, boil the pill. Another brick in the palace of ice.

* * *

Star and I were fired at the same time. The only surprise was how long it took management. In the office, a melancholy man missing almost all of his hair wanted to teach us a lesson.

"How many days has it been since you've been to work?"

He waited. Star made a show of counting off on her fingers.

When it became clear he expected an answer, I said, "Thirteen?"

"That's right. Is that acceptable employee behavior?"

This time we remained silent.

Mr. Melancholy cleared his throat. "OK. I'm letting you go of course. I'd offer back pay but you frankly haven't earned it."

Star and I left the site in a strange glee. We immediately got cool in her apartment.

"You ever 'jump the moon?'" she said. Her tree-trunk arms loose behind her head in our makeshift hammock—blanket tied to girders.

"What's that?"

"That's when you mix ice-nine with firefly. It's hardcore. It's off the hook."

Mister said, "Don't do it, girl," and his non-milky eye had real concern in it.

I sighed a long sigh. I was happy with the current arrangement. But I wasn't.

We jumped the moon. Star mixed it up and I felt it flow through my queered veins, and I said, "Today's the day."

"What day?" she said.

"Chekhov's bullet," I said.

"You mean—"

"It goes off *today*," I said.

While I watched, the flame tree became something else. A gale force shook its fruit and leaves. The air turned violent in my throat. A strong wind could topple all of this, all of us, the whole fucking city, the grinning construction site that never became a building, this House of Fecklessness, exploding all the figurines in the gift shop, until all that was left was myself and Rick, his screaming jack-o-lantern face and endless consuming need and the freshness of his fire. The dead lake within me became a churning ocean, sweeping me up on my feet.

The tree out the window swung its pendulous fruit until the wind stripped the leaves and fruit and sent them hurtling through space. My heart was the wind, a wind that screamed, destroying and purifying as it went.

"Let's go then," said Star, her face going malevolent with love.

We went to my house.

Rick was watching *Complete Blackout* on TV.

"That's him?" Star said, incredulous.

"Who's this," said Rick.

Star feinted at him and he recoiled.

I pushed her aside, got up into his face. I breathed on him, and he stepped back.

"Come on," I said. "Put your hands here." I indicated my throat. "See what happens."

Rick whimpered. He shook his head.

"Do it," I ordered, and he stepped forward, pressing his thumbs into my Adam's apple, rest of the fingers behind my neck. Squeezed. Before my eyes went dark I saw him start to cry.

My head tipped up. I was close to unconsciousness. I wasn't sure if I wanted him to kill me or Star to kill him before she killed me. I let my hands fall to my sides. Clouds began to fill my ocular cavities. Sounds pulsed. I felt confusion. I felt relief. I felt, strongly, that a change was cresting very nearby.

"Mom," I tried to time when my body gave up.

And then Star was beside us. I fell to the ground with a slap. My breath was ragged. The ice-nine and firefly zinged in confusion around my body, into my hands and toes and brain, through my spleen. My body was a city. The arteries were clogged with traffic. The city of my body was about to explode. Sewage, building pressure, was about to erupt through all the city manholes over the buildings and cars and foliage and people. *I don't know what she meant*, I thought crazily, *I don't know what she was trying to say.*

Star punched and punched. She was wearing brass knuckles. I didn't know when that happened. She punched Rick into a rag doll. *Stop*, I said, but didn't because no noise came out.

"Mother*fucker*," said Star. She was kicking now with steel toes. It wasn't Rick she was kicking. It was someone else.

I grabbed the not-kicking ankle and she stopped, breathing hard. I shook my head. I think I shook my head.

She got the message. She sat. She started to cry. I didn't know if Rick would survive but he wasn't dead yet. His ribs heaved. His lifeless bullet had broken from his neck, and lay inert between us. All three of us were sad and small. Rick with his bullet, Star with her brass knuckles, me with my smug masochism. We all enact our revenge on a weaker one. We were a rock-paper-scissors of deferred misery.

"She's dead," I wheezed. "I know she's dead."

"She's dead," Star said through her sobs. "He killed her."

"She killed herself," I said.

Star nodded. "Maybe," she said.

We weren't talking about the same person. It didn't matter.

"Don't leave," Rick said in the tiniest voice. "Please don't leave me."

He wasn't talking to me.

Above us all, the real moon swept through the frame of the skylight. It pinned us to our lives like insects pinned to felt.