

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME



*Neina Gordon*

DARLA HAD COME to dread Wednesday evenings at The Actors' Lab, a drab studio in a two-story building off of Hollywood Boulevard that looked more like an abandoned office space—with its beige stucco exterior and opaque windows—than a theater. A web of shattered glass extended from a cavity at the bottom right of the front door, above which hung a weathered wooden sign with “The Actors' Lab” painted on it in sun-bleached black letters.

She couldn't understand the seriousness of the students. Every time the instructor, Mrs. Avery, stood on stage in her floor-length black skirts and tops as shapeless as curtains, the students' eyes narrowed and they nodded eagerly as she spoke of emotional truth, of how they needed to risk their egos for the sake of the character and use all their will to reveal what the playwright, through his words, demanded they reveal. This was acting class. *Acting*—a profession based on pretend and glamor. It was the world of the

unreal, not the real. But here in this theater with its black walls and dusty air, where most of the time Darla sat with twelve other students on stage doing exercises that were supposed to get them to zero—a neutral state where their own behavior no longer interfered with the behavior of the characters they were supposed to become—Darla was overwhelmed by the students' sense of purpose. She just wanted to get up on stage under those lights and be seen.

Tonight was scene study and it was Darla and Lewis's turn to take the stage. Mrs. Avery had assigned Darla to play Laura, and Lewis to play her brother, Tom, from *The Glass Menagerie*. Darla paced back and forth between the tape marks where the furniture was supposed to be, where she had to imagine it, while Mrs. Avery stood off stage and directed her. "You've got to get the first moment." Her voice was the rich and coarse voice of an old movie star—a Katherine Hepburn voice. Darla listened to it and ignored the shaking in her hands. "Now remember," Mrs. Avery continued, "Tom's coming home from a late night and you're relieved because you sense it's only a matter of time before he takes off for good. Look at the room. Where's the Victrola?" Darla pointed downstage right. "Where's the picture of her father?" She pointed down center. "And Amanda, her mother, remember she's asleep so you must be quiet. Stay with your senses."

All Darla noticed was that the room smelled like an old cupboard, the students sitting in the audience didn't make a sound, and the dust beneath the stage lights drizzled

around her. Mrs. Avery wouldn't stop talking. "And where's the glass menagerie? Is she playing with it before she hears Tom fumbling at the door? Go find the glass, let it catch your eye." Darla walked to that part of the stage where she imagined the shelf with the tiny sparkling animals. She could hear Lewis at the door trying to get in, so she walked across the stage and opened it. "Look at him, Darla," Mrs. Avery said. "Really look at him and let him affect you. He's the only connection Laura has to the outside world, the only real thing." Lewis smiled at her, sad and resigned; he stumbled towards her, his round eyes searched for something from her. He was supposed to be drunk and he looked it, but she couldn't respond. Her insides turned to concrete. His wanting and sincerity, the genuine desire to engage up there in front of the small audience of their class, and the lack of fear in him, made her all the more fearful. The air left her body and she couldn't get it back.

She heard the turn in Mrs. Avery's voice: an exasperated sigh, a clearing of the throat, and when Mrs. Avery spoke next the sound was small and tight. She looked at Darla, but spoke to Lewis. "Get off the stage, Lewis." And then—"Darla, you stay." Oh God. Darla knew what was coming. For two months she'd been able to avoid it. The patience Mrs. Avery allotted her for being new had been exhausted. She'd seen this change before with the veteran students.

"You've got to get into your goddamn body, Darla," said Mrs. Avery, the restraint in her voice thinning. "Now I

want you to punch out at the air. Don't just stand there. You know the exercise. Punch!" Darla resisted rolling her eyes and raised her fists. She couldn't understand how this petite woman could become such a force, so intimidating. It came from a pure conviction and those regal features: rectangular jaw, ruler-straight nose, plum, heart-shaped lips, and brows like black arches above her deep-set hazel eyes. Mrs. Avery yelled, "Punch!" again and Darla punched. She punched so hard she could feel the sockets in her shoulders give. Mrs. Avery wouldn't stop. "I know you hate this exercise, Darla. I know you hate it. Put that hate into it!" Then Mrs. Avery turned towards the students sitting in the house. "Class, get up on stage and create a circle around Darla. Darla, don't stop punching." Darla was certain she was going to be sick. She could hear them all moving, whispering, and then they surrounded her.

She punched the air, choosing specific points in the distance, out in the dark of the theater, where the seats were empty, where she could avoid the other acting students, until Mrs. Avery yelled, "Be here! Look at your classmates! Punch at them! Choose any one of them, one you can love or hate." Darla tried. She lifted her eyes and then lowered them immediately. Lifted and lowered. The other students never hesitated to expose themselves when they worked. Willingly they ripped at their insides and toyed with their psyches in the pursuit of emotional truth. Like acrobats they contorted themselves into whatever shape their imaginations and a script demanded. When

they took center stage they presented all that muck on a gold platter while they asked the most humiliating question: Love me? And Darla, there in the center of the circle, couldn't give them anything in return. It was too close, too intimate, too much.

Lewis was the only student who still expected something from her. But he was her roommate—he didn't count. She searched the actors' faces for reassurance, for the secret understanding that this was all bullshit. A smirk would help, a look to confirm that Mrs. Avery was out of her mind and that it wasn't because Darla just *didn't get it*. It was supposed to be *acting*. But their faces were a combination of impatience and pity. She knew they were sick of her wasting their time.

She settled her gaze on Lewis and punched in his direction. His eyes were so dark she could never tell what he was taking in. He seemed to tremble with hope. He sucked in his lips like he was bearing pain. She flushed with embarrassment at the thought that he hoped she'd have a breakthrough. Briefly the question—could I love or hate you, Lewis?—presented itself in Darla's mind as if on a marquee. No answer followed.

She just wanted it to stop—the churning inside of her, the humiliation. And if she kept punching, would it go away? Would Mrs. Avery stop talking? Her voice was a drum. “You can't be a civilian on stage! How do you expect to surrender to something greater than yourself if you don't allow yourself to feel?”

Darla wasn't as vulnerable as Laura Wingfield. So what? So what if she couldn't bring Tennessee Williams's sister to life—that hidden and debilitated soul like glass that shattered upon encountering the world? Who would willingly put themselves through such pain for a character? Darla was a pretty girl. People liked to look at her. Didn't that count for something? Just a week ago, when she was working at Koo Koo Roo in that absurd faux chef's uniform with the winking chicken on the breast pocket, that man had come in and couldn't stop staring at her. He was an older man, a modeling agent, with gossamer hair and delicate bones. Tippit was his name. From behind the counter she handed him his plate of chicken and a medley of salads, and with his long fingers he placed his card in her hand. "I do hope you'll call," he'd said. "You have a beautiful face and I've been looking for someone with copper hair." The man's fingers brushed her hand and she twitched.

Modeling would be simpler. In this studio with Mrs. Avery, beauty didn't count for anything. Right now, as Darla stood center stage in a circle of students who looked at her indifferently while she punched and lost her balance, and with the lights so hot and bright she could feel her makeup run into her eyes, she realized that she was as talentless an actor as when she started, and it took all the restraint she had not to scream, "I hate you, Mrs. Avery! I hate you!"



DARLA SAT IN the passenger's seat of Big Blue, Lewis's pick-up truck that wasn't very big, and was only partly blue—he'd been in an accident last year, a white car had sideswiped him, lifting most of the paint from the left side of the bed and replacing it with a sizeable dent and a long white tail. The other driver was at fault, but Lewis refused to get the car fixed. It wasn't broken, according to Lewis; the damage was just cosmetic. They drove down Hollywood Boulevard. Darla rolled down the window and stuck her head out. The air was dirty and dry and hot. It was just after ten o'clock in the evening. The sky was brown, grainy with pollution and heat. It could have been day or night. The brassy lights on the Boulevard and the neon signs vied for her attention. The people on the street looked like misplaced extras on a movie set.

Lewis was playing with the knobs of the radio. Big Blue didn't have a CD player or air conditioning. Keep it simple was Lewis's motto. He kept catching static. Darla waved his hand away.

"Concentrate on the road," she said.

"My, my. Aren't we in a bad mood."

She scanned through the channels and settled on a station playing Jamiroquai's "Virtual Insanity."

"I'm fine," she said and leaned her head back into the seat. The music bounced in the cab. She closed her eyes and watched colors twirl and dance, the quick sounds of jazz making sense of chaos. The rhythm slipped into the tension that gripped her neck and stomach during class.

“You’re not fine, you’re all pent up,” said Lewis.

“Two more classes and I’m done. So there’s nothing to worry about,” said Darla, keeping her eyes closed, trying to escape into the music.

“Who’s worried? I’m not worried.”

It was true, Lewis rarely worried, but in class his face wrinkled with concern and she saw him biting the inside of his cheek.

“You give up way too easy,” he added.

Why wouldn’t he just let her be? “Fine, I give up too easily. But acting is obviously not my vocation.”

“Why did you even try it?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Marisol suggested it.”

“Oh, that’s big of you, blaming Marisol.”

Darla fought the impulse to grab the plume of dreadlocks that sprouted from Lewis’s head. “I’m not blaming her. Can you just let me listen to this song?”

Marisol was their other roommate and of course it was easier to blame her. She had an amusing yet intriguing L.A. quality that Darla, coming from an arid no-man’s-land in the central valley with a vague identity of not quite city and not quite country, had found hypnotic. Marisol spoke with a Latina accent that made her words linger in the air like a floral perfume, her hair was as long as a horse’s tail, and she had fierce reptilian eyes. She was convinced everything she said mattered and after graduation was planning on returning to Mexico, where her family was from, to become a curandera. Darla tried to get her to

explain what exactly a curandera was and when Marisol told her a soothsayer, a healer, Darla still couldn't grasp what she meant. "Do you mean like those psychics who give readings for \$10 on Westwood Boulevard?"

Marisol blew air from her oversized lips. "No estúpida," she said. "Curanderas help heal the soul."

Marisol would say things like, "You need to buy some gold earrings, it'll help heal your wounded image, put you in touch with your inner Aphrodite." Or when Darla had severe cramps, Marisol made tea out of dried raspberry leaves, chamomile, and passion flower, placed it in front of Darla, and said, "Drink this." Voilá, the pain disappeared. So when Darla was listless last semester, moping around the apartment because she'd decided she didn't want to be an International Relations major anymore and didn't know why she'd chosen it in the first place—it sounded smart?—Marisol recommended she try acting. It was Los Angeles after all. Who didn't consider acting? Living out drama without consequence, saying things you would never dare say in actual life, the freedom not to be you, but someone else. Such expression appealed to Darla, and when Marisol encouraged her it was as if Darla had been given permission to seek a forbidden dream. Yet every time Darla got on stage, she closed instead of opened. Mrs. Avery would say "Speak" and Darla would go mute.

The song ended and she started flipping through the channels again. It was all crap. Lewis hummed, calm and focused on the road; he didn't even seem to notice when

she turned the radio off.

“Why did you sign up with me, anyway?” Darla asked.

He shook his head, and exhaustion pulled on his face. “Because you pinned those big blue eyes on me and begged me to go with you.” A sly smile broke on his lips. “We both know you just needed a ride.”

“I would have taken the bus.”

“Yeah, right,” he said.

“I would have,” she insisted. She would have hated it and complained incessantly—an hour and a half to get to Hollywood from Westwood was ridiculous—but she would have done it. Although without Lewis she probably would have quit within the first few weeks. His mere presence was a support she couldn’t do without. He had a confidence that was foreign to her, a warmth and honesty that seemed too generous considering his past: drug addict at 14, dealing at 17. He didn’t like to talk about it except to say that he made it out by the grace and love of his family. It was a past she might have thought he fabricated because she could only see him in the world as he was now, so present and full she couldn’t imagine him ever fleeing from it, but there were the raised tracks on the inside of his arms, scars like tiny, dull, hard blisters, an anomaly in the smoothness of his skin.

“Look, I was happy to do it. It was something different. Besides, like you said, it’s over in two weeks and then we’re back to school.” But school wasn’t a consolation for Darla. Unlike Lewis—who at twenty-six was already

working in public health and referred to it as his field—Darla still hadn't settled on a major. He knew what school was for him: a hoop to jump through. He was already counseling and screening people for HIV out of a testing van that covered from Santa Monica to downtown, and North Hollywood to Long Beach. A certificate in public health counseling would, as he liked to put it, make him respectable. But he must have known that what he did was already respectable, helping kids like himself who had gotten lost in addiction and didn't have the love and support of their families, like Lewis had.

She turned away from him and tried to count the pink Hollywood stars that covered the sidewalk like footprints. The wind lifted her hair in a tangle above her head, and she forced her fingers through it, smoothing it down around her face. On the corner of Hollywood and La Brea, where Lewis stopped at a red light, she stared at a Marilyn Monroe who was striking her *Seven Year Itch* pose, blowing kisses with such desperation Darla couldn't bear to look at her. She leaned back into her seat and rolled up the window. The cars and the lights and the people sped past too quickly and blurred together.

"Uck," she said.

"What?" asked Lewis. He made a left onto Fairfax.

"I just want to get home."

Marisol was sitting on the living room floor watching *ETV*—some red carpet event—when they walked in the door. She was skillfully eating Kung Pao chicken with

chopsticks. “There’s more Kung Pao in the kitchen if you want any. How was class?” she asked.

“Fantastic,” said Lewis.

“Shitty,” said Darla.

Darla examined the squishy, orange chunks of chicken, inhaled its vinegary smell, and decided she’d have Top Ramen instead. Lewis rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “You can have it all,” Darla said. At which point Lewis broke into a happy food dance, alternately lifting his right and left shoulders to some inaudible beat, circling his hips like he was swinging a hula hoop, and then pounding his stomach with fervor. He was trying so hard to make her smile and she wanted to be a good sport, but she couldn’t will the sulk out of her eyes. He let out a long, deliberate sigh, picked up the box of Kung Pao, and headed into the living room.

Lewis and Marisol sat on the carpet watching Joan Rivers quack about the sublime and grotesque fashion choices of the stars while Darla eased herself onto the couch behind them. After two minutes of trying to maintain her balance while eating ramen on a couch that might as well have been a waterbed, she moved to the floor. Lewis stretched out like a cat, sat up and began to roll his neck. Marisol walked over to him on her knees and started massaging him. He began oohing and ahhhing as she pushed her fingers into the tender divots between shoulder and neck. From the corner of her eye, Darla watched Marisol squeeze the base of his head; her fingers slid down his spine, she pounded

the muscular wings of his back, and Darla's stomach began to turn as if someone were kneading her insides.

Marisol dug into his shoulders and told him he was too tight, he needed to stop lifting weights, do yoga instead, and start taking Epsom salt baths. The uneasiness in Darla's stomach became sharper, angrier. She shifted her focus back to Joan Rivers, who was telling Catherine Zeta Jones that she was divine and did Catherine know that she and Joan shared the same housekeeper? Then Lewis oohed again. "I'm trying to watch this, Lewis. Could you keep it down?"

"Saar—ry," he said.

The way Marisol flipped her hair, the way she spoke, the sensual and languid movement of her body, the ease with which she seemed to go through life and prescribe ridiculous remedies for the soul—menstrual cramps and tight shoulders were not soul diseases!—made Darla furious. It's what she loved about Marisol and, as she watched her with Lewis, she realized it was also what she absolutely despised. Darla felt her forehead for a fever. She went to the kitchen, filled a glass with ice and Sprite and took it down in a few quick gulps. The sugary soda dripped from the sides of her mouth. She wiped it away, felt her cheeks for heat, counted to ten and returned to the living room. She stood watching them. Marisol laughed as she massaged Lewis's ears—his ears! Something tight inside held Darla; she could see wire coiled around her ribs; it constricted her breath and poked into her sides. She

heard herself saying, “What are you two doing?”

They turned towards her at the same time and their animated faces dropped flat with surprise.

“What do you mean?” said Marisol. “I’m giving Lewis a massage.”

“Whatever you two are doing, please stop,” said Darla. “Didn’t we agree to this before we moved in together? No hooking up. No complicated love affairs. Let’s not shit in our own back yard. Isn’t that what you said, Lewis?”

“Man, I don’t know what has gotten into you.” He put his face in his hands, took the tips of his fingers and pressed them hard against his forehead. He looked up at Darla. “This is not hooking up. This *is* a massage.”

“Darla,” said Marisol. “You take it all too seriously. All of it.”

“And you don’t take anything seriously,” said Darla.

“You are out of line, chica. Why are you picking a fight with me?” said Marisol.

Lewis intervened before Darla could speak. “It was a tough class tonight. That’s all. That’s all this is.” He said it to Marisol as well as Darla.

The lights in the living room were a bright sun. Marisol and Lewis sat on the floor looking at her with gentle and careful eyes, and she knew they were seeing something she didn’t see. A quiver spread across her face. Stop, stop, stop. She pressed her nails hard into her palms and said, “I’m tired, I’m going to bed.” She walked into her bedroom and closed the door.

Marisol could just go up and touch him, put her hands on him. It was so easy for her. Darla thought of when she met Lewis for the first time at the Santa Monica Art Institute when she wanted to be an artist and signed up for a beginner's drawing class. Lewis stood in a sunlit room like Michelangelo's *David* while she and ten other students diligently sketched his firm flesh. Having never sketched a naked man before she didn't know what to do; she was fascinated by the size of his penis and his ability to stay flaccid in a room full of mostly attractive women.

She avoided looking at him, but ultimately looking was all part of the exercise. His hair was long then, braided and tied back with what looked like kitchen string. She admired the muscle in his right forearm, how it surfaced from his wrist like the crest of a wave and pressed against his skin until it disappeared into his bicep. She'd noticed the inside of his arms when the instructor had him change position and wondered at the cluster of black stars—an allergic reaction? The scars from a childhood infection? Heroin hadn't occurred to her.

Large and round, his eyes were as heavy and sad as a basset hound's. They startled her, those eyes, seeming to take in a bigger world than she could possibly comprehend. Pockmarks ran along his right cheek to just below his mouth, and a brush of acne dotted his chest.

One day she looked up from her sketchpad and caught his eyes on her. She blushed and looked away.

Later that year, after she'd determined she wasn't an artist,

she stood in line at Kirby's on campus deciding between a mocha or a latte when he tapped her on the shoulder and asked, "Do you remember me?" She recognized him, but couldn't recall from where. He said, "Art Institute." Oh! Yes, yes, of course. His hair was short now, a plant flowering from his head, and he wore clothes—a white T-shirt and army fatigue shorts. He told her she had an unforgettable face, cheekbones as full as apples. He wanted to buy her coffee. She said she'd buy her own, but he could join her if he'd like. He was direct and good-natured, and he wanted to see her again.

HE WAS EASY to talk to. A military brat, he had travelled all over the country and world with his family until he was twelve when his Dad retired from the Army and the family settled in Eagle Rock, just east of Glendale. "Italy trumps Eagle Rock," he told Darla.

He asked mundane questions like: What's your favorite color? Chartreuse. "What the hell color is that?" he'd said. A type of green and it was the name, not the actual color, she really liked. "Complicated," he'd said and winked at her. What music do you listen to? Radiohead, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Sara McLachlan. He nodded and said there was a whole lot she was missing out on and he could help her with that, if she wanted. What was her favorite food? Crispy hash browns. "Now that's what I'm talking about—the only thing better than crispy hash browns is

some fried calamari with a nice cocktail sauce. Even better is crispy hash browns *and* fried calamari.” He made her laugh. When she got uptight about a C she’d gotten on an economics exam he asked her if she wanted to be an economist. No. “Don’t waste your time worrying then.”

She’d always heard that relationships came down to timing. They didn’t have enough time to figure out what they were or what they were becoming when he informed her that he was being kicked out of his studio in Los Feliz—something about the building undergoing foreclosure and a change of ownership. He was thinking about moving to the west side where the air was cleaner and he’d be closer to school. “We’re looking for a roommate,” she’d said without thinking. And then she introduced him to Marisol.

DARLA CHANGED INTO her pajamas, slumped onto her bed, and bit at the inside of her cheek. Sleep was far away. Her entire body was itching; she scratched the inside of her hands and her ankles. She walked over to the mirror just above the dresser. Her skin was blotchy and red with irritation. What the hell was wrong with her? She grabbed her purse, opened it and dug inside the pockets. Her fingers found the card crinkled up like a piece of trash under crumbs and an empty pack of gum. She smoothed it between her fingers and read the print: Tippit’s Modeling Agency: 213-501-1122.



THE BUILDING WAS located on the edge of Sunset Strip. It was four stories, gray, and unimpressive. Darla thought an address on Sunset Boulevard lent it some credibility. Tippit's Modeling Agency was one among many offices along a narrow corridor that was filled with the electric hum of fluorescent lights.

In the waiting room she crossed her legs, felt the vinyl cling to her thighs and regretted wearing such short shorts. She tried to ignore everything that made her feel uncomfortable: the smallness of the room (it had no windows), the crimson carpet and the baby blue of the chairs, dust as thick as laundry lint that hung from the vent above the door, and row upon row of pictures of Tippit with his arm slung around various movie stars. He looked more like a tourist posing with them than a colleague or friend.

She was the only one in the room besides the receptionist, a girl who looked about fifteen with hair the color and consistency of powdered sugar. The girl thumbed apathetically through an US magazine.

Darla rubbed her hands over her thighs, across her collarbone; she pinched her chin, took in a deep breath and exhaled so loudly the receptionist looked up and her pencil thin eyebrows almost flew from her forehead.

"Does he see a lot of models?" asked Darla.

"He sees a lot of girls," said the receptionist and flipped to the next page of her magazine.

“Today’s just a slow day?” asked Darla.

The receptionist’s face might as well have been numb, there was nothing in it but a vacant disdain. The phone’s ringing cut the silence like an emergency siren. Darla flinched.

“Mr. Tippit will see you now.” The receptionist pointed to the door just to the right of her desk.

“Through there?” asked Darla, looking at her for reassurance or warning.

Without looking up she said, “That’s where I’m pointing.”

“*Thanks*,” said Darla.

Mr. Tippit’s personal office had one dull tinted window where light filtered through and jaundiced everything it touched. He sat in a large black swivel chair. In Koo Koo Roo, where she’d met him, she recalled a refined older gentleman. Maybe it was the light in the office, but he was more emaciated, even skeletal, than she remembered. His eyes were slick with a whitish film like the belly of a fish. Her whole body stiffened—she couldn’t sit down, though he didn’t ask her to.

“Do you remember me?” she asked. Something happened to her voice, it constricted and sounded small and sweet like a child’s. Breathe, she told herself.

“Of course, I never forget a beautiful face.”

She didn’t believe him. There was no recognition in his milky eyes. But what did it matter? Beautiful faces were everywhere in L.A.

She remained standing, waiting for instruction. Pleasure spread across his face as he looked her up and down. He asked her for her measurements. 34-27-36. Had she ever modeled before? No. Why not? She didn't think she was tall enough. Would she be interested in modeling lingerie? Maybe. She hadn't thought about it. He asked her to lift up her shirt so he could see the shape of her waist, then he asked her to lift it higher so he could look at her breasts.

"Remove the bra," he said.

She was floating, weightless. Thrum of traffic from the street. He wasn't real, nor was she. He said, "Remove the bra," again and she removed it.

She heard him say, "A 1940s pin-up girl look." There was a camera in his hands. Flashes brightened up the room. She stared at the white wall above his head until he said, "I think I can find something for you." His lips were two pieces of red licorice, his eyes tiny black buttons that sunk into his skull. He took down her details, said he'd call soon.

Outside, standing on the corner of Sunset and Larabee, the sun blinded her and for a moment everything was white and shapeless. Slowly the landscape appeared. Down the block, the red Hustler sign glared, the 900 Building glimmered silver, fine cars passed in what seemed like slow motion, and people lunched in the shade of café awnings—cool water misted their faces and reflected rainbows—while lanky hostesses stood with animated faces and hands drawing in passersby. All of it was slippery, and pretty, and new, and money. Is this what she'd wanted? The dry air

scratched at her skin and made her shake: What the hell was she doing? He had her tits on camera; the douche-bag had her tits on camera.

THE NEXT DAY Darla called in sick to work and didn't get out of her pajamas. In the morning she went into the kitchen to pour herself a bowl of Kashi cereal and noticed the French press on the counter that was a third full of coffee. So Lewis had already had breakfast and left for the day. She poured herself a cup. It was lukewarm, but the rich smell and full taste of it comforted her. As she alternately took sips of coffee and bites of cereal, Marisol walked in, all breezy and beautiful. The bracelets on her wrists rang like chimes; her skin against her turquoise cotton dress appeared gilded.

Their eyes met, but they didn't say anything. Marisol couldn't be caught by the tangle of emotions Darla cast in every direction. This was the curandera, the healer of souls, who cut back on groceries and starved herself for a week each month so she could afford that obscenely expensive bronzer. If you were suffering she'd offer a sympathetic look and a potion, but anything more than that was too complicated and provoked her signature mantra, "Ay chica, it's too much."

Was Darla too much? She wished the life rumbling inside her fit somewhere. She envied Marisol's free spirit. Even if it meant a more shallow or less intense existence, it

would be easier. If only she could inhale some of that free spirit; if only the compact point within her that she felt sharpen and crystallize into a thousand shards of confusion could be dispelled with the intake of breath.

Marisol went about packing a lunch: slices of avocado, Swiss cheese, tomato, purple onion, and lemon. She packed small plastic containers filled with salt, pepper, and olive oil and then she added a packet of water crackers. In the cupboard, Marisol kept a box of bite-size squares of Ghirardelli's chocolate. She took two. She was working the desk at the Santa Monica Youth Hostel that summer and watching her pack a lunch in the mornings was like observing a religious ritual. Darla knew she should say something about the other day, apologize for her moodiness. But her mood still seemed to have the upper hand and she couldn't be bothered to pretend otherwise. Luckily, she didn't have to because just then Marisol whipped her head around, her face cool and composed as if to let Darla know there was no need for drama, and she asked, "You still mad at me, chica?"

She wished she could stay mad at Marisol; it would be easier than dealing with the tumult inside her, easier than dealing with herself. At least it would be easier for a little while. "No. I was never really mad at you. I'm sorry."

"Ay. No te preocupes. I didn't really think you were mad at me. You know what they say—water under the bridge." Marisol folded the top of her paper lunch sack, placed it in the gaping mouth of her black leather purse, and gave

Darla a double kiss, on the right cheek and then on the left. “You know, there’s nothing going on between Lewis and me. You’re blind if you can’t see he’s loco for you.” Darla turned away from Marisol at the mention of Lewis. The jealousy that had possessed her that night and the fact that they had both witnessed her flail under its power left her too exposed. “Ay chica, when are you going to relax?” said Marisol. She winked at Darla and then flitted out of the kitchen, a bird indifferent to gravity. How had Darla ever expected anything more from her?

The day passed slowly. Darla watched television, flipping through channels but never settling on a program. When she got hungry again, she ate more cereal. She clipped her toenails and her fingernails. On the Internet, she made an effort to read the news but instead found herself being lured to sites like Wonderwall, People, and TMZ—celebrity pictures and gossip. When she looked at the time and realized two hours had passed she slammed her laptop shut, went to her room, and lay on her bed. The ceiling above her became a billboard. On it she saw her pale full pointy breasts and her stupefied face with those doleful eyes, lost and begging for attention. She turned away, rolled onto her stomach and buried her face in the pillow.

She awoke to the sound of tapping on her bedroom door and Lewis’s low, gentle voice: “Darla? Darla?” The room had filled up with amber sunlight. It must have been early evening; the light was warm and brilliant and she felt like she was swimming in liquid gold. There was his voice

again—“Darla? You okay?”—coming through the small crack in the door. She didn’t want to wake up. Her body, heavy and soft, moved sluggishly. It took her a moment to recall that she was even in her bed, had taken the day off work and wasted it moping around.

In her stupor the room looked hazy. On the rug next to the bed her phone came into focus. She vaguely recalled speaking to her mother before she had drifted into sleep. No, it hadn’t been a dream. Her mother always called fifteen minutes before she left for work at Mesa Mementos. Today her mother’s voice had been agitated, anxious to speak with her. Darla pictured her in the kitchen assessing her reflection in the sliding glass door, twirling the tight curl of the phone cord around her finger like a piece of hair, and then straightening her name tag on the dark blue vest: *Beattie*.

“Remember Mandy Starks? She’s marrying Trevor. Trevor Owens. He was in your class, right? Curly brown hair. A real cutie. His family owns the horse therapy ranch. Rumor is she’s pregnant. Saw her at the boutique and she doesn’t look pregnant to me, but you know people don’t start showing until around five months or so and sometimes you never can tell.” Her mother always spoke in a rush, in quick bursts of breath and then nothing. As usual, it was gossip.

“Of course I remember them, Ma.” She couldn’t stop the exasperation from leaking into her voice. It was Reston for God’s sake. Darla’s high school graduating class

had been less than seventy-five students.

Her mother was undoubtedly disappointed by Darla's disinterest in the news. Beattie lived through the lives of others and it had always made Darla so angry, but this time all she felt was a dull ache in her gut. She wouldn't allow herself to take an interest in Mandy and Trevor.

Instead she asked about her dad.

"The usual. He's fixing some machine out at the plant." Her mother's voice sounded absent then, removed. "What have you been up to? How's Hollywood?"

Darla was inclined to say, *Oh, I just shot my first spread for Playboy. I'm considering dropping out and going into the porn industry.* It was more compelling than what she did say, "Nothing. Getting ready for classes. Working."

DARLA STARED AT the mottled rug and an enormous sadness rolled through her. She heard Lewis call her name again. The memory of the conversation with her mom was replaced by an image from yesterday: Tippit's skeletal face and tiny black eyes. The softness in her body turned hard. She sat up, put her feet on the floor, leaned over her legs, and rubbed her face. She told herself not to think about yesterday, about Tippit. "Yeah, I'm here," she said to Lewis. His long dark arm pressed against the door. He stood there beneath its frame, his head tilted, his face inquisitive.

"I didn't go to work," she said.

"I can see that," he said. "Everything okay?" She

wanted to tell him what had happened. Maybe it would make her feel better, admitting it, but then there was the humiliation, and the risk of making it more real. If she didn't say anything, if she just tucked the incident away, it would disappear. She needed to be lively, forge ahead; the past was the past. She stood up, raised her arms above her head and stretched. The sun coming through her window was a warm hand against her cheek.

"You hungry?" she asked. "I'm starving. We could order pizza or some Chin Chin. Chinese chicken salad sounds good." Her voice sounded unnaturally upbeat and she hoped Lewis didn't notice.

"Sure," he said. "You sure everything's okay?"

Her eyes were shifty; she couldn't calm herself enough to look straight at him. "Yeah. I just didn't feel very good today." She hadn't noticed him holding his right arm behind his back until he brought it forward and handed her a package wrapped in white paper and a yellow ribbon tied in a neat bow.

"Here," he said. "I thought you could use some encouragement."

She was taken aback by his genuine sweetness. She didn't know why, but she felt ashamed. Her fingers traced the edge of the small note card under the ribbon and the pen that was taped beside it. The card read: *Darla, Why not give you and Laura Wingfield a chance to get to know each other? Love, Lewis.*

His eyes were expectant and happy. "Open it," he said.

She untied the bow and tore at the paper. A red, leather-bound journal, taut and smooth; she rubbed her hands over it and squeezed the pointed ends that were stitched with tan thread.

“I thought you could use it for the acting exercises Mrs. Avery’s always preaching to us. You know, a character biography, writing out the context of the scene, linking your life to Laura’s . . . you know, just all that stuff she talks about.”

Laura. Fragile, Laura. Shy, crippled, Laura. Brilliant and hidden; forgotten and abandoned, Laura. How could Darla ever do her justice? And why did Lewis have this faith in her? Couldn’t he see how weak Darla was? How much she lacked? A tremor moved through her. Her hands wouldn’t keep steady and her lip—the harder she tried to keep it from quivering the more uncontrollable the quiver became until it spread across her face. She wanted to stop the rippling inside her, grab it, and choke it.

“What’s wrong?” he said. He leaned in to her, placed a hand on her arm and lowered his head to get her to look at him. “Something is wrong. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

The feeling was wide and vast and it came too quick, an enormous wave, it broke. She doubled over, dropped the journal, and gripped her knees. Lewis’s hand was on her back now, heavy and warm. She could feel it move up and down with the rhythm of her sobs.

“What is going on? Talk to me.”

But she couldn’t speak.

“Alright,” said Lewis. “It’s time to take a walk.” His tall frame hovered behind her; his arms slipped snugly beneath her armpits and he lifted her up. “Come on,” he said.

They walked out the door, down the steps and out into the late afternoon. A radiant palette of colors, too luminous and too dazzling to be natural lit up the sky—it was the one upside of pollution. Yellow, fuchsia, violet, and azure all spilled like ink across the horizon and into a thin mist of clouds. He kept his hand on the middle of her back and told her to breathe, to relax. The air was dry and it sucked away her tears. No matter how hard L.A. tried to sell itself as an oasis with palm trees and beaches, Darla just had to breathe in the air and feel the relentless sun on her skin to remember that it was a desert. When the sobs stopped, he asked her again what was wrong.

Her breath caught in her chest. “I’m not . . . a good . . . person,” she said.

“A good person? Oh come on, even good people aren’t all that good.”

“I don’t have . . . character.” She wiped at her eyes and nose. The apartment buildings on the block all seemed to shrug at her—they were dilapidated and needed paint, neglected in a way that only college students were tolerant of.

“Character? You’re twenty years old. You don’t have to have character yet. You’re meant to fuck up and then you develop character.”

“But I have fucked up.”

He stopped, stepped in front of her and faced her. “Are

you trying to tell me something, because if you are you might as well just say it.” He didn’t know how to be indirect and she didn’t know how to face anything. If she told him, that would be it, it would be out there in the world. She gazed at the old, crooked trees that lined the block; their craggy branches reached towards her. His eyes were so intense and focused on her she had to look down at the sidewalk, where the trees’ roots struggled to break through the concrete. His head inched towards her like a turtle’s.

The words came out of her in a gush: “I went to this shady modeling agency yesterday, showed a guy my tits, and he took pictures.”

Lewis drew his head back. Peered at her. Minutes seemed to pass. She kicked at a crack in the sidewalk and tried to hold herself back from yelling, *Speak!*

Finally, he said, “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know why. That’s the thing, I don’t know why. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“I never thought you were that—”

“*What?*” Her insides twisted at his tone. Her spine stiffened. She didn’t want to hear what he had to say because she could tell he wasn’t going to say it was okay, it was just a mistake and to forget about it. “You never thought I was that *what?* You going to judge me now?” A red-hot fury exploded inside of her. “You of all people,

Lewis. Or don't you recall being butt-ass naked in a room, your dick hanging out—"

"What the fuck is wrong with you! You're going to make this about me? You're suddenly going to get all pissed-off at *me*? I haven't even said anything." He put his hand over his mouth, his head swiveled around—his eyes darted towards the sky, the ground, the apartment buildings. He took a step closer to her, pointed at her chest and spoke with utter control. "It's not the same thing. It was a job. I wasn't being exploited. It was a conscious fucking choice, and it wasn't some seedy, desperate attempt at attention. You want to blame me because you don't know how to deal with your own fuck-up." He shook out his hands. "Man, you are a piece of work."

He'd never been so angry with her. There was a quaver in his voice he couldn't hide. It rattled her, him seeing her like this, acknowledging what she couldn't acknowledge. Her entire body was a cavern, hollow and empty, subject to the tides of her emotions that flooded and then retreated on a whim; her center, a shifting point she could not touch or feel. She was lost. She was water and the world was a structure made of sharp edges, a place where people were measured by their accomplishments and failures, a place where a sense of purpose was paramount to survival, to finding one's way. How was she supposed to enter it? Certainly not through Tippit's door. But what did she want? What, if any, talent did she possess? In Lewis she had always seen possibility, hope. He had been lost once;

he had made it to the other side. She wrapped her arms around her waist and rocked back and forth from her heels to the balls of her feet. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I just wanted to be comforted.”

“Yeah, well, you didn’t even give me a chance.”

From a block over she could hear the traffic on Veteran Avenue urgently rushing by. A car horn honked and she squeezed her arms tighter around her waist. “What do you want from me, Lewis?”

He gripped the dreadlocks on the top of his head and sighed. “You’re so eager to be somebody. I see this sweet and gentle, beautiful young woman who thinks she’s not enough. It’s like you think you’re supposed to be stoic and tough and you have no idea how to enjoy your beauty. I just want you to be real, Darla. To be yourself. But that seems to be the last thing you want. Honestly, you confuse the hell out of me.”

The wind brushed by them, rustling the speckled leaves of the trees. “Do you think less of me now?” she said.

He shook his head and she could sense disappointment, but he said, “No.” He put his hands in his pockets and looked at her. “It’s not your fault. These assholes are everywhere in L.A., but you gotta know that. Put those antenna up, don’t fall for that bullshit.”

She wished he would grab her, hold her, whisper to her, put his hands on her face. The distance between them was her fault. She’d created this space, filled it up with all of her fear and now she didn’t know how to bring him closer.

“Thank you for the journal,” she said.

“You’re welcome.” He bit at his thumb. His large eyes were sorrowful. All the traces of anger in his face were gone. “You’re coming to class tomorrow, right?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Oh, come on. Two more classes, it’ll get your mind off things. It’ll be fun.”

“It’s never fun.” She couldn’t understand why he was always trying to convince her that it was fun. She had seen him on the stage floor during the sense memory exercise when Mrs. Avery told them all to close their eyes and go back to a moment in their lives that was vivid. A moment filled with pain, fear, or elation. What do you see? What do you smell? Taste? Feel? Take your time. Darla could never get through the exercise. Her memories were vague images. Her mother standing in front of the bathroom mirror, admiring her reflection—stiff blond curls, heavily mascaraed lashes, ruby tinted lips—and Darla standing next to her, wishing she was as pretty as her mom. Her mother’s eyes never strayed from the mirror while Darla stood there gazing at her intensely, trying to will her mom to look at her. *Look at me, look at me*—but her mom never did. Her father didn’t appear, but she could hear him: his heavy footsteps on the carpet, the door opening and closing. That’s what stuck, the door always opening and closing—but she never saw him. It was as far as she could ever go with the exercise; her parents feeling so close and yet completely inaccessible made her breath flutter and a heat

rise inside of her that she couldn't bear. So she pretended to do the exercise and kept her eyes lowered and with her back turned towards Mrs. Avery, she snuck glances at the other students. Their faces always turned rubbery with emotion. Once she saw Lewis in the corner, sobbing. Grief stricken. He reached for something and then pulled back. She was struck by how helpless he appeared. This was the closest she had ever come to seeing his addiction—the need and grief on his face didn't match any part of the Lewis she knew. It was not fun.

The sky was turning dark—blue and purple swallowed the red and orange hues. “I give up,” said Lewis. “I can't help you. I don't know why I ever thought I could. You don't know how to show up for yourself.”

Her stomach jumped. She wanted to shake him and tell him not to give up on her. The class was ridiculous, it was too much effort, he couldn't expect her to go after last time, but that wasn't a reason to give up on her. She almost blurted all of this out, but stopped herself. As much as she hated him seeing her this way and wished she could change everything that led up to this moment, she knew now that it would only be an attempt to manipulate him.

The air felt a little cooler. The thin crescent of the moon appeared above them, delicate and sharp. “Let's go inside,” she said. She'd think about the class tomorrow, figure out what to do then.



THIS IS HOW she convinced herself to go: It was the right thing to do. If she couldn't show up for herself she could at least show up for Lewis, who had only taken the class because she'd coaxed him into it. Lewis, at this point, didn't seem to care either way. They barely spoke in Big Blue on the way there. He kept his eyes on the road. There was nothing to say, and although she felt the need to fill up the silence with chatter, she knew it wouldn't help. So she looked out at the Boulevard that was even more unglamorous in daylight, just a long strip of random shops—wigs, souvenirs, posters, and costumes. Tourists teemed about and snapped photos with cardboard cutouts of movie stars, oblivious that there was nothing genuinely Hollywood about Hollywood Boulevard.

As they pulled in front of The Actors' Lab, Darla could already feel the nerves tingling in her hands.

Mrs. Avery wore her normal black. Today it was black leggings and a long sleeve black cotton shirt that hit her mid-thigh. It didn't matter that it was summer, black was her color, always. What was different was the pink chiffon sash she had tied around her neck. This little bit of color made her seem almost approachable.

The class all stood on stage and went through the relaxation exercises. You had to move every part of your body, working down deep to the connective tissue. If you felt any sensation, physical or emotional, you were supposed to make a long *aaah* sound or a short, sharp *ugh* sound. The sound was crucial and had to match the

intensity of what you were feeling. It was a release, and Mrs. Avery had explained from the first class that if they didn't release they would repress, and repression was death to the actor. Lewis moved his limbs and moaned without reservation. Don't get self-conscious, Darla told herself. Don't repress. It became her mantra as the class wore on into scene study.

She found some consolation in watching the two scenes that went up before she and Lewis were expected on stage. Mrs. Avery reamed one of the students, Paul, who was playing George from *Middle of the Night*. Did he have any idea what it was like to be a musician? Mrs. Avery was unconvinced by his whole *cool* act. Did he even know what instrument George played? What kind of music? As far as Mrs. Avery was concerned, Paul was being an imbecile, thinking he was blessing them all with his presence and not giving a shit about memorizing the lines or creating one original gesture. His *cool* was laziness; a one-size-fits-all generic suite of behaviors that any Joe Schmo could play. Just who did he think he was wasting her and everyone else's time? He looked at his toes, shrugged and then Mrs. Avery told him to get off the stage.

When Mrs. Avery called her and Lewis onstage, Darla's stomach began to fire off like a volcano. She just had to concentrate on Lewis. For the next fifteen minutes he was her brother, Tom, and there was nothing to be afraid of. Until there was something to be afraid of, until Mrs. Avery said, "Start the scene," and every part of Darla stopped. It

was the same as last week. It didn't matter what she told herself, her body, her feelings, none of it was in her control. How was it possible that this was happening again, that once again she heard Mrs. Avery saying to Lewis, "Get off the stage." She'd been singled out enough. Enough. Mrs. Avery told the class to line the fold-up chairs in a single row on the edge of the stage and to take a seat. "Darla," said Mrs. Avery, "you're going to do the Happy Birthday exercise."

She could run. Run right down the aisle and out of the building and never come back. Forget acting, forget being somebody, and forget being noticed—it was too excruciating. It only ever backfired on her; she only ended up feeling more invisible. Then Mrs. Avery did the most bizarre thing: She walked up to Darla and grabbed her hand, spoke gently to her. "I know you're petrified," she said. "You don't stand a chance if you don't get past it. Try to be here." And then Mrs. Avery walked away and sat in a seat along with the students. All of them faced Darla; they were impossible to avoid.

The exercise consisted of Darla standing in front of them and singing "Happy Birthday." But she couldn't rush through the song, she had to look at each student individually, hold each syllable for as long as her breath would allow, and when her breath gave out she had to inhale again, move to the next syllable and the next student. "You ready?" asked Mrs. Avery.

"No," said Darla.

“You don’t have to do it,” said Mrs. Avery. “I’m not going to force you.” Had she given up on Darla too?

Darla tried to find her breath, her will. The house was dark, musty. The theater wasn’t much, about fifty seats; it was old, and smelled worn like it carried all the unspoken dreams and heartache of people who had been coming there forever. Did they all come in search of fame or was this space meant for something more than that? It felt too intimate for the ambitions of fame. Mrs. Avery, Lewis, and all the students sat under the lights on stage. Darla took her place in front of them and began.

She started with the first student, a girl named Shelby, who had hair reminiscent of Farrah Fawcett’s. Her cheeks were a sunburned pink and dusted with tiny dark freckles. Darla remembered her saying hello the first day of class, a chipper, optimistic person. There was nothing threatening about her, but Darla still trembled as she looked into her eyes and began to sing, “Haaaaaaa—” Her arm hair stood on end as if her body anticipated lightning striking. Shelby’s eyebrows lifted and knitted together. This wasn’t just difficult for Darla; it was difficult for Shelby too. She took the next breath. Josh sat next to Shelby. “Pyyyyyyyyy—” Josh with the bony shoulders and a neck as long as a stork’s. His face was all stitched up like he was trying to retreat from the sound coming out of Darla.

“Class, you’ve got to return what she’s giving you. You’ve got to have the strength to look back. Darla, slow down and breathe.” Mrs. Avery’s voice seemed to descend

from the heavens, disembodied and definitive. As Darla took the next breath her body weakened; she didn't have the energy to resist the exercise, and she didn't have the energy to push it either. All she could do was breathe and sing, "Birrrrrrrrrth—" And there was Mrs. Avery, her eyes animated with excitement. She kept talking to Darla, guiding her. "See Darla, you're not going to break, you're not going to melt. Keep going."

"Daaaayyyy—Toooooo—" She went down the row, recalling their names, and seeing their faces, it seemed, for the first time. A hot embarrassment broke open inside of her; it pooled until it overflowed and permeated every inch of her being. "Meeeeee—" Her voice was raw and throaty, off-key, out of synch. What a mess she was, what a fucking mess and they could all see it and even when she had thought she was fooling them, when she had convinced herself she was in control and they had no idea who she was, they had seen her then. There was Lewis, right at the end—"Haaaaaaa"—glowing with what must have been a renewed hope. She wanted to feel his breath on her, his touch. There was Mrs. Avery's voice again, "Take a step closer to him. That's right. Now say a line from the scene, any line that comes to mind. Speak to him."

Darla's heart and her chest swelled. "Where have you been all this time?" ☺☹



Cynthia Daniel

NEINA GORDON is a graduate of the MFA Program at UNC Greensboro where she was the Fred Chappell Fellow and fiction editor for *The Greensboro Review*. She teaches creative writing at Salem College. A native of California, she now lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina with her husband and daughter. This is her first story publication.