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Paper Conspiracies

SUSAN DAITCH



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Train-Eating Sun Blinded by Eclipse

How many stories could begin, “What are you doing here, you’re supposed to be dead?”

The door opens, light shines into the dark hall, and the curve of a cheekbone appears vaguely familiar. Other guests, innocent family members in the back of the room don’t notice the new arrival. You think it can’t be possible that he or she might only be visible to you. No, it can’t be. You shut the door, looking up at the transom, then down at the gap between the bottom of the door and the threshold to be sure no shadow has slid into the room.

The encounter might take place on the street, in a train station, a busy intersection, a back alley, *you’re supposed to be dead! What are you doing here? What do you want from me? Leave me alone, please.* You’re in trouble. Calling the police is useless because a history of guilt and complicity on your part isn’t entirely buried and forgotten. Could the likeness be only a coincidental double, not the real person, not the actual birth-certificate-waving human, not the citizen who might have made your life a living hell? That’s how I felt at work when restoring old movies. Shadowy figures assembled into frames began to look familiar, to hum and vibrate with amorous longings, embarrassment, coyness, the desire for evening old scores, or simmering with rage, they fade into an indistinct background.

A silhouette skating like a banshee over pebbled glass, a profile reflected in the rearview mirror of a parked car, I twisted around quickly, not believing it possible. *Is that you? Wait a minute, let me be certain.* I grew up the only daughter of two people

who didn't know where they wanted to or even could go, so they ended up in a small city halfway between New York and Montreal. Both of them, but my mother in particular, were not destined to feel at home anywhere. The idea of home stood on shaky ground: a house, an address on a steeply inclined plot of land on which sprouted a one-story house called a ranch but there were no palominos or branding machines on this idea of ranch. It was just a one-story house so you didn't have to go up or down stairs. There were no grandparents, no uncles, aunts, or cousins. One distant cousin landed in Argentina in 1940, but his children were disappeared in that country's dirty war of the 1970s, and he ended his life jumping from a balcony shortly thereafter. His letters, written in a hybrid of Spanish, Russian, and Yiddish were kept in a drawer along with tax forms, photographs, fliers for discounts at car washes. I was unable to read them completely, and no one was willing to translate his macaronics for me. In one letter I could make out *Nokh a kish funa gonif, dezehl iber dayne tzende* (If you kiss a thief, count your teeth) and figured someone was carrying on with someone they shouldn't have, but the specifics of who was tangoing on the wrong street, I couldn't make out. I'm not sure each page really revealed much anyway. The letters were murmured over when they arrived; a few years later my mother wept over them. Alone, sneaking the pages out of a drawer at night, I figured out some of the Spanish parts that referred to quotidian details of an increasingly frightened life, as if by burying the anticipation of death squads under details about a trip to the doctor's, the fear might be buried, too. Houses broken into in the middle of the night, children going into hiding in country houses, in the jungle, in museum basements. My mother, a woman who fought chaos with chaos, snatched them from my hands, saying she'd heard all this before, and I didn't need to hear it at all. When I turned fifteen, around the time the letters from Argentina stopped, she spent a lot of time wandering around a newly built windowless shopping mall looking for light switches (prices slashed), wrap-

ping paper (after holidays), out-of-stock paint colors, and other semioseless objects because you never knew when there would be shortages or how these things could become useful if flight or hiding became necessary. Both my parents were talented at putting mechanical detritus to good use: radio innards were used to fix the telephone, a turntable mutated into a gizmo used to stir prints in my father's darkroom, a speaker made of plywood the size of a refrigerator box blasted music all over the house. As a child I was convinced they could turn a desert junkyard into a phalanx of robots. The one-story house became a vault for packages of jeweler's screwdrivers (what if you have to fix a watch?), picture hooks (could pick a lock), rolls of tape of all kinds, and tins of sardines and vacuum-sealed bags of raisins with expiration dates from before the camera was invented. While my mother was preoccupied with this kind of shopping my father spent more and more time tinkering with electrical machinery and a homemade computer as big as a bathtub, with disks the size of dinner plates. Chaos reigned. No one would answer my questions. I only knew I was named for someone whose name began with the letter *F*, someone who was born in a town whose name was made up of consonants and couldn't be found on any map.

My mother couldn't use an oven and cooked quickly over a stove, burning pots and pans, throwing them out whenever possible. Food that was canned or frozen presented a language that, for all its simplicity, held hidden dangers, the breaching of food taboos. What was she seeing in the turquoise packaging of a frozen macaroni-and-cheese dinner? The bits of bacon rendered it inedible, and the whole thing had to be taken outside and put in the garbage. The staring into space got worse after my accident, which wasn't really an accident at all, but a letter bomb directed at all of us. I was the one who opened it.

"Where will we go? Rio?" My father grew angry at my mother's hysteria, useless and irrational, as far as he was concerned. "Shall we join your cousin whose children were dropped out of a helicopter over the Atlantic Ocean?"

“You’re always the last one to get it. You stay behind until the wolf is at the door, until his tail wallops the glass, and then it’s too late.” My mother dumped the contents of her bag on the floor, looking for her keys so she could make an exit. “Frances, were you going through my things again?” I’d just gotten out of the hospital and I wasn’t going anywhere. Half my face was bandaged over, my hair hung limply out from under white strips of gauze.

We weren’t going to go anywhere. My father had a stable job teaching biology in a high school. In the spring when he got to the unit on evolution a few of the English teachers who were creationists would somehow have sniffed this out and, during lunch, they would try to convert him, but in this task there lay madness. Perhaps they saw the classroom charts that mapped relationships between family, species, and genus laid out in green and blue lines like the veins of a leaf. In Darwin’s theory of natural selection they saw the cosmos reduced to chaos. The collector of beetles and carnivorous plants who rode a tortoise in the Galapagos opened the universe to random terror. This cracked my father up. He didn’t take the creationists seriously. He might notice them peering at him as he rode into the parking lot on his motorcycle, but he never described them in condescending terms. As far as he was concerned, the argument could be parsed into two obviously warring camps: evolutionists whose soldiers could refer to the Salk vaccine, the H-bomb (even though it had to be tested many times and even though it could be said to be a dubious achievement), walking on the moon. The soldiers on the other side drove their stake into ground with the solidity of the Everglades, and though they unfurled their banner with conviction, it was true, what did they have to brag about really? Galileo under house arrest because he wrote that the sun was the center of the universe? My father lit a Marlboro and tapped ash into a glass ashtray in the shape of the Apollo 11 rocket.

To my mother the creationists were nauseating, a grave affront. Pour water on them and they would melt into the floor in

a plume of smoke. To her they were all complicitous bombers, and she longed for cities with narrow streets set at odd, unpredictable angles where the shadow of Nosferatu or a golem gliding across a wall would be as prosaic as meeting a friend in a café where you could talk about movies, plays, show off new clothes, and gossip in a language all your friends understood. Your feet made noise on the pavement instead of the silence of asphalt parking lots. After the letter bomb she embarked on fits of driving, traveling to the far-flung provinces of provincial life. On her journeys she discovered apple stands and strip malls, cut-rate carpet dealers and fish fries, public libraries set up in defunct churches, and covered bridges on unmapped roads.

My initial fifteen-year-old response was to try to blend into the town my parents had picked out of nowhere. I daydreamed in school, drawing relentlessly in notebooks, the margins of textbooks, on desks. I still have a few of those sketches of futuristic cities based on my mother's stories of buildings honeycombed with crowded apartments which I imagined were Gaudí-like, glittering with tesseræ, built like huge stalagmites. It was a means of imagining my way out. In the meantime I made an attempt to be anonymous, but the project was useless. After the letter bomb I realized it was impossible to hide behind ordinary clothes and straightened hair that only lasted for a few hours before it boinged back to its curly state. I went to Ravi Shankar and Nina Simone concerts, but if I cheered when she exhorted the crowd by saying *if a few white men can run this country you can take over this university*, nobody cared or noticed my enthusiastic response.

I encountered my own equivalent of the creationists. My classes were full of small-town boys, mediocre athletes with buzz cuts and monosyllabic names whose lives seemed fixed if not gated. My parents blinked and saw the lot of them crammed into Mr. Wizard's Way Back Machine. All of them were the descendants of the Gaston who had joined the Children's Crusade and all were ready to march on infidel-filled Jerusalem if their draft number came up. The letter bomb proved it. I wasn't so sure.

What happened when they, these boys who knew little of life beyond the next town, ended up in Vietnam, Beirut, the Persian Gulf? One bearlike boy who read *Soldier of Fortune* magazine bragged he would go to Afghanistan or Zaire, names he proudly mispronounced. The ingredients for explosives lurked in their cellar workshops, with how-to manuals hidden in drawers full of jock clothing; they were my suspects. I never knew exactly which one or ones created me, turned me into a target, one-eyed and angry, with no effective means of striking back at them. My parents who looked like Persians with Boris and Natasha accents made me an easy mark. My mother, in particular, was a sitting duck for mimics, and I knew it. Since I'd lost an eye to the anonymous letter bomb I was a sitting duck myself.

In school I had wanted to study Latin and Greek — as if dead languages might explain how images were first connected to words. I imagined hectoring mobs of things (lions, columns, arenas, aqueducts, toga pins, constellations) marshaled into categories: nouns, verbs, syntax — but my family insisted that I do something practical, so I studied the most insubstantial thing I could think of: light.

The job posting was the stamp on my ticket: *Library of Congress Film Restoration Project, Paid Internship*.

I was charmed by the idea of working in film, but intensely camera shy and happy to work as a kind of handmaiden to “the industry.” All right, I thought, at least I have a hand or an eye in something. Here, I wouldn't be a target, wouldn't be stared at, few questions asked, go on with your business, please. The process of learning how to put a brush to aged celluloid gave me a sense of professional identity, saved me from the night shift at a movie-rental shop with a large independent section, answering urgent questions about matrixchopsockeystarwarsdirectorscut. Now I had a hood I could pull over my head, a burrow, a bunker, a fallout shelter with a periscope.

I left for Washington at the end of the summer so my de-

parture could be confused with going off to school, and it was still hot, but in a last gasp kind of way. Department store windows displayed artificial leaves while children on our street still ran through hoses and hydrants in brilliant fuchsia and purple bathing suits. My mother said good-bye at the house; seeing me wave from the window of a train was not possible for her. I kept looking out the car window all the way to the station, armoring myself against her resentment and despair, her sense of betrayal that chased me no matter how much my father, imitating Peter Lorre, said *full steam ahead, Frances*. Since we were early my father and I stopped at a Dunkin' Donuts near the station.

"What do you think about Cuba?" he asked, stirring and staring into the parking lot.

"What do you mean, what do I think about Cuba?" My father, who was a very calm man, was making me nervous.

"They're looking for science teachers."

"You can't go to Cuba. You're a United States citizen. If you moved to Havana you'd never be able to come back."

"I've left a lot of places that I can't and don't want to return to."

"You've lived in Israel. You won't be let in."

"That was a long time ago. Maybe they won't notice."

"What about Mom?" The point I feared was that she occupied one of the places he didn't want to return to.

"I need to get away from here. Between the creationists who guarantee me a life in everlasting hell, who think petri dishes are something you hang from a Christmas tree, and your mother, who mistakes family photographs for expired discount coupons and tosses them out, I think for me, personally, it's time for a change."

There was no arguing with him. I didn't know if he would apply for Cuban citizenship or not, but I knew now that I was leaving, he would as well.

"I want to give you something before your mother makes a clean sweep of everything in the house." He handed me a faded sepia photograph of a small girl, about four years old. I turned

it over. On the back was written *F. Baum, 1940*. This was my father's sister.

“So keep this in a safe place.”

Our conversation dwindled in the minutes remaining. Finally he dropped me at the station then went back to his machines. I didn't want to get on the train, didn't want to see him return to his mammoth computers, coverless radios, old turntables spinning wildly on the cluttered floor. By giving me this photograph I'd never seen, he was tearing some part of me away, as if to say, you'll never be able to come back here, and you'll never be able to leave. The train pulled out of the station, and the red brick apartment buildings, the flyblown variety stores already giving way to Kmart's and then Walmart's moved out to the horizon as if they were on conveyor belts, parts of changing sets.

In Washington in a cheap, hastily rented studio apartment I put my tiny aunt's picture in a frame made in China and set out to learn the art of conserving film.

This kind of resuscitation required a steady hand and a life in dark rooms. When beads from a sweater bought in a thrift shop, for example, fell onto an editing table, jamming a reel, it was, for the actors, akin to an avalanche of glass. Every thread, hair, drop of coffee had to be kept out of the danger zone. In my position as assistant to a film archivist at the Library of Congress I wasn't paid much, but I soon became a skilled surgeon of lost performances, an ambulance driver for long-dead actors.

What about my own ghosts? They lived and died in a town I never saw; they drank coffee in bare provincial cafés, had lives circumscribed by rituals and holidays whose meanings organized each year like shifting but predictable constellations. Yet when I watched movies and cartoons made before 1939 I couldn't help but pretend to inhabit those faces known only through photographs, wondering if they had watched these too, and in that projection back, the ghostly clusters took on a mixture of strange and familiar features. Also, and this makes their summon-

ing even more troublesome, they appeared horrifyingly modern, not part of someone's acute but aged set of memories. The murdered live next door, or almost. You can't say: look at their clothes, they belong in another time, because with their fairly well-cut suits and dresses in geometric prints they look as if they could live in the same cities I have lived in, travel in what are essentially the same kinds of cars, respond to the same news of elections and atrocities, although this is impossible. What I mean is they have become personalities I'm capable of trying on although I never met a single one of them. They died before I was born. If this sounds arrogant it's only because they've been at my door persistently, despite my family's need to look the other way.

The new city engulfed me, and I plunged into my job with intensity. Taking on the role of the animating but anonymous power that revitalized Buster Keaton as his eyes grew sadder and (I thought) more disillusioned, or pumping up a flimsy, short-haired Myrna Loy revealed an odd kind of romance I sometimes had with these images. Or maybe it was a case of antiromance, the romance of solitary, imaginary pleasures. I used to notice old men and sullen boys in movie houses and wonder how far removed I really was from them. What kinds of illusions did I labor under? It's a job, I kept telling myself, one I felt fortunate to have.

"Hello, this is Alphabet Films, please hold."

I pushed hair out of my eye. I had worked overtime and so was sleeping late. The call not only disrupted my sleep but the edgy equilibrium of a life lived in dark rooms.

"Hello, is this Frances L. Baum?" A man's voice, respectful but authoritative boomed in my ear.

"Yes."

"This is Julius Shute, director of Alphabet Film Conservation. You were recommended to me by . . ." Groping for my eye patch in the dark while he searched for the name of my current boss,

a displaced Iowan who, though he had no complaints about my work, saw me as a rootless cosmopolitan who would soon move on, the phone slipped from my shoulder and fell into the space between the bed and the wall. I was alone, I didn't need the eye patch, but felt as if a public event were taking place, as if this Shute were watching me sit up in the middle of a twist of bedsheets. "I'd like to ask you to consider working for me at Alphabet." His muffled voice came from somewhere under the bed. In the silence while I felt for the phone, Shute continued to speak, filling the void. "Occasionally people are reluctant to leave the Library of Congress for West 22nd Street. Arbergast, that was who recommended you."

"Yes, that's my boss."

Apparently, unbeknownst to me, Arbergast, a faultless technician with a phenomenal memory for film trivia which he regaled us with constantly, was greasing the rails of my move which, he believed, was inevitable. I managed to tell Shute I was interested in West 22nd Street, wherever that was.

"I'm traveling to Washington in a week to testify at congressional hearings on film colorization, and thought I could set up an interview with you while I'm in town."

We agreed on a time and place, then I hung up as if nothing unusual had happened, but in my excitement I was completely unable to find matching socks. Mentally I began to prepare my answers to his questions, believing when we met he would back out of his offer as instantly as he'd extended it.

How did you lose an eye? Does it impair your ability to do painstaking work?

Am I wearing glasses?

No.

I see perfectly well with my left eye.

Responding to the usual second question and avoiding the first, I had learned how to be a master at evasive answers when they were needed. It's difficult to say: *a letter bomb* and let it go at that. People want to know more. These kinds of bombs have

been delivered in Rome, Istanbul, Argentina to scientists and governors but rarely to isolated high school students. I didn't want to explain the arrests, the trial, senders not convicted. I knew Shute's name had originally been Shulevitz, but his mother had changed it. In the name Shulevitz there might have been sympathy, but I was no longer looking for it.

Despite Julius's eagerness to meet and his effusiveness about my work, I felt unprepared, a one-eyed amateur, a fraud who should back out of the interview, but lulled by the man's voice, I was prepared to go ahead and make a fool of myself. Alphabet had an international reputation, and I wanted to move to New York.

One week later we met at a Greek diner. Julius disliked expensive restaurants. They made him uncomfortable. Any place with a *maitre d'* was like a hair salon with a perfumed atmosphere, as far as he was concerned. He needed to walk in and find his own place to sit. From a distance he looked like a young Frank Sinatra in thick glasses: angular face; calm blue eyes that drew you in, meaning no harm, interested in only you absolutely, but when one walked closer, sat across from him at a small table, one could see the fraying around the edges, and he was much older than a young anybody. You could still smoke in restaurants back then, and he did, with the kind of assurance that came from years of practice. But Julius was not overly confident either. Despite his accomplishments, his expense account must have been limited, or so his choice of the diner signaled to me. A man who meant business, who didn't bother with the language of extravagant lunches, meals that stretched into the afternoon were of little interest to him. I was too nervous to eat anyway. My spanakopita remained a square brick on my plate, and although I tried to concentrate on Julius's questions, as well as his descriptions of his business, my eye wandered to the revolving display of heavily frosted cakes ringed with glazed cherries, mountainous meringue pies, and other desserts positioned just behind Julius's head

He was a man without a niche so he used expressions that would appear to give him one, to make him seem to be *in the swim* and *a heavy hitter, sounding me out from the get go*. He knew all about the films I'd worked on. I wondered if English was his first language. I asked him how his testimony went.

“Colorization is like tossing a ball into a cocked hat.”

The hearings had been somewhat controversial. Many celebrities and film stars had appeared. Julius enjoyed rubbing shoulders with them and denounced the colorization of old black-and-white films, a process he viewed with disgust and refused to undertake, no matter how lucrative coloring might be.

“Painting Barbara Stanwyck’s dress red in *The Lady Eve*, for example, sends a signal to the audience that she’s duplicitous. Let them figure it out for themselves.”

It was an argument I would remember when Julius and I would discuss how far to go in conserving a particular film.

“Even the word *restoration* represents a threat. To restore often means to impose someone’s idea of what a picture should look like, means a heavy dose of tampering, means this: going too far. Colorization, like putting arms back on Venus, is out of the question.” He turned around and asked the waitress for more coffee, then just as abruptly changed the subject.

“I grew up in Los Angeles. My mother worked in the costume department of Universal Studios,” Julius said, and I imagined the man I barely knew sitting across from me as a child careening around this or that set. “I stole a costume once from a stuntman who was doubling for Clint Eastwood in *Hang ’Em High*. It was a great cowboy suit with these Technicolor yellow suede chaps with green fringe. I wore the suit to school thinking other kids would pay attention to me. They did, but not in the way I imagined.”

He didn’t reveal what kind of attention he received, but because of this story I felt some affection for him, and this was a mistake. Julius knew how to elicit sympathy and attention, and my response, my laughter, made him comfortable, so he plunged

on. Actually, I'd worked on *Hang 'Em High*, admittedly restoring only one section of the film, but couldn't remember Clint Eastwood in yellow chaps. Perhaps the scene with that particular stunt had been cut when the film was edited. In any case I said nothing about it.

"She used to get calls from gossip columnists because actors, even extras, often made startling confessions during fittings, revealing liaisons and uncomfortable memories as if she knew magic words of absolution, as if she had the answers which, believe me, she did not. She was as good as they were at theatrical expressions of shock and sympathy that she recycled from the movies, and sometimes when I'm working on a film I see her raised eyebrows or hand over her mouth. The talent also spoke to one another as if she was invisible, and in this way more gossip was overheard. An uncle got me into the preservation business because they thought I was brainy and useless, but I learned from my mother. My telephone number is unlisted."

Julius, a displaced Californian who took his profession east, was never entirely at home in New York where hundreds of miles of trains rumbled underground, where the odds of an actual earthquake were small, and business was conducted in dark rooms high above street level. He was constantly a bit bewildered, as if looking for a switch in order to turn on the light. Yet Julius could read damaged and deteriorating film history as if it were a large-print book. The old films became a pedestal he lectured from. *Without me, you're nothing*, he'd say, and this always got a laugh from whoever was in the room.

Julius was meticulous, this I knew from his reputation, but ill at ease with responsibility, the kind of man who belonged nowhere and who had landed in a profession that only once in a while demanded he communicate with a live human being. He didn't like the idea of exercise, was gym phobic, but every once in a while would take the stairs. Julius lit another cigarette but held it so his hand dangled over the edge of the booth.

"I don't want to blow smoke in your eyes. Eye," he cor-

rected himself and turned red. I wasn't annoyed, in an odd way his embarrassment and the dangling hand were persuasive.

Over the cash register a television was suspended. The Garwood case was being discussed briefly on the news. *Garwood, a Vietnam POW — some believe he was falsely accused of treason.* We stood up to leave, and I had my eye on that particular story when suddenly Julius kissed me good-bye awkwardly but deliberately. As he bent over I noticed he colored his hair orangey brown (against colorization but dyed his hair) and his eyes were shut. Somehow he made me feel I'd asked for that kiss since I'd laughed at his self-deprecating jokes. His implication was that there was more where it came from; still, I accepted the job. I guess at the time I didn't mind all that much.

When I left the Library of Congress to work for a private company in New York I cut my hair so that no strand would accidentally fall across the frame, and I tried unsuccessfully to quit drinking coffee, which was making my hands shake a bit if I was tired. I made more money but still affected an appearance that combined seriousness with attention to certain kinds of ironic details, like narrow-waisted jackets that looked as if they'd been pinched from old movies and frayed trousers because I wore clothing until it fell apart. This created an image of studied slovenliness, as if my mind were completely on my work and not on the body I actually inhabited. A ten-dollar good-luck ring set with a square, magenta piece of glass was my prize possession until I lost it in a public swimming pool my first week in the city. No longer working with a large number of people as I had in Washington, and knowing no one in New York, I could go for days barely speaking to anyone. I felt like a prisoner in my own skin and began to wonder what the relationship might be between my sense of physicality, my vanity, all unacted upon, and my vocation that was so concerned with preserving the display of others.