

NEW WEST REVIEW

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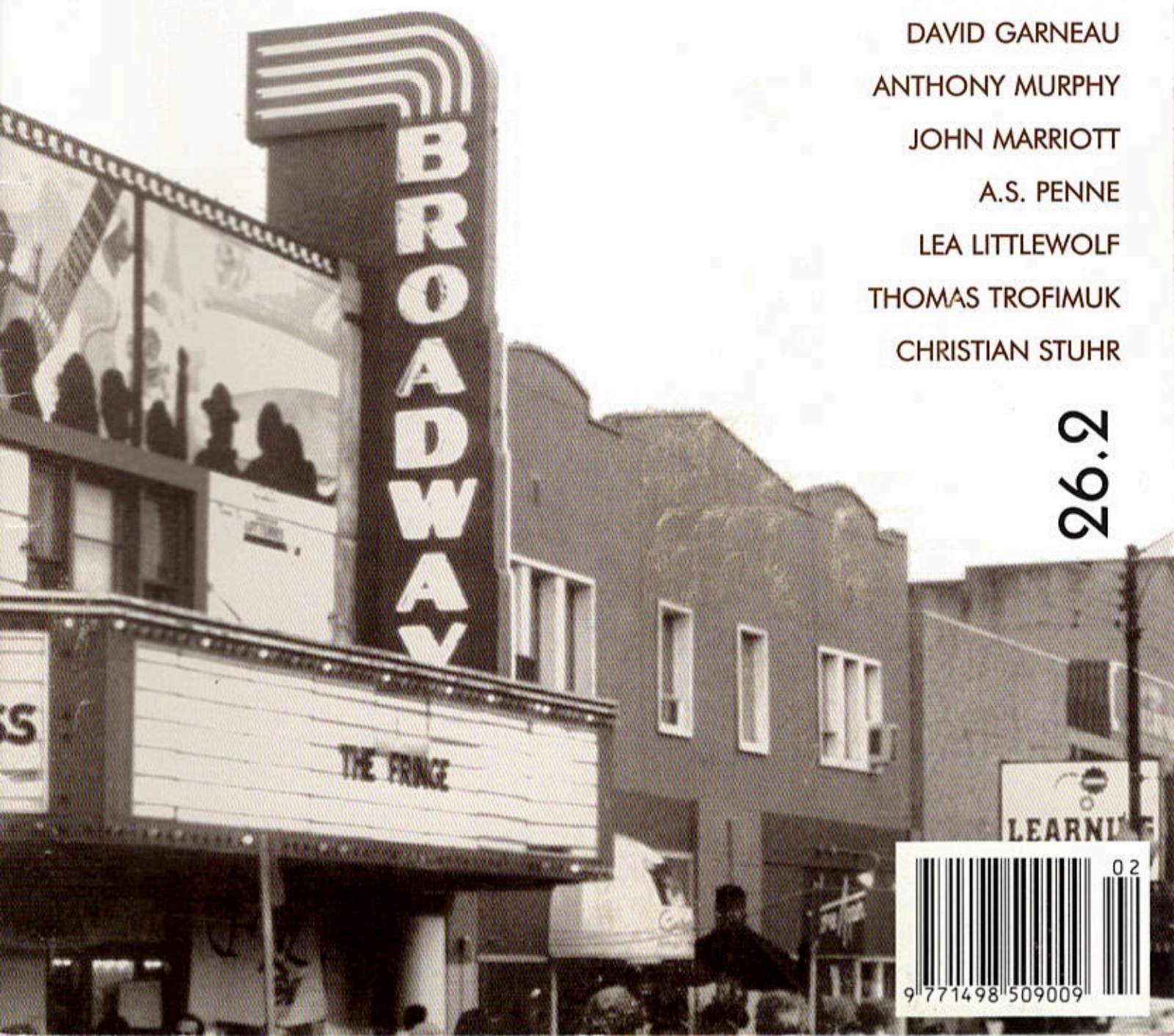
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TEACHING MY DAUGHTER TO AID AND ABET

I was looking forward to spending the weekend with my daughter. Too bad she didn't like brainless teenage videos, I thought. We could curl up on the couch and eat popcorn. She could get all embarrassed over the cute boys and I could worry about her getting pregnant. But Erin wasn't like that. She had too much sense.

I'd spent the morning showing *The Seventh Seal* to my first-year film students—then struggled to keep them awake for a discussion. The afternoon was a repeat with the third year and Pasolini. The entire week had been exhausting in its predictability—the inevitable lethargy that occurred during lead-up to spring break. Just two weeks to go, I thought.

I opened my front door with a heavy sigh.

"The beast is loose—the beast is hittin' on L.A.—the beast is dead in the North—the beast is leavin' the Rez."

Sitting cross-legged on the couch with a bag of microwaved popcorn was a Native kid with metal braided through his hair. He was singing—sort of singing. More like chanting. He must have been about fifteen like Erin. Maybe younger. Whatever he was, he looked cosy—he'd brought his own blanket. A knapsack spilled out its belongings onto the Turkish carpet. Pieces of wire—strips of tin—car chrome—a pair of pliers . . .

"The niggers on the reserve—death to the elders—the smoking of shit—the broken circle."

"Erin," I called.

"Break the circle momma—run straight through—break the circle momma—the beast is loose."

"Erin," I called again, this time hearing the panic in my voice.

Erin stood on the top landing wrapped in a towel, her wet hair clinging to the nape of her neck. "Hey dude," she said, floating her words above the stairwell as if they explained everything. "Chill out."

I am chilled, I wanted to yell, but was too upset about the "dude" thing. I was no dude. I was her father.

I walked halfway up so I could keep my eye on both of them. The kid still wouldn't shut up. "Don't fuck with me—with your bitch-bangin' whacker—don't fuck with me—with your dream-catcher tool—sweet grass—super class—shove it up your white ass—black boy Tonto gonna pow wow you . . ."

"What's going on?" I demanded to know.

fiction by
**Tom
Bentley**

Erin gave me the *Reader's Digest* version. The kid's name was Acid. He was between foster parents and some social worker told him to spend the weekend with his sister. But his sister was a hooker and the last time he stayed with his sister it was "like not cool." So Erin said it was okay for him to spend the weekend with us. Except he might be leaving the country anyway so "chill out."

I couldn't help wondering what he'd done to earn the status of "between foster parents." I asked Erin why he talked like that. She said it was the only way he knew how to talk and that if I listened I'd know he was a visionary. "Besides," she said, flipping her wet hair in that way she does when she wants me to feel like an idiot, "he thinks he's black and lives in L.A."

Oh, I thought, and got on with the practical matters at hand. "Is he a vegetarian?"

"Check out my skin momma—I come to your home—check out my skin momma—I'm leaving town."

Erin often brought stray kids home. Usually they were of the female variety who stayed the night to the grateful relief of their parents—not a colour-blind native kid who was obviously geographically-challenged. This kid had never been out of the province—let alone lived in L.A. He probably grew up shuffled back and forth between the reservation and the inner city.

I knew if I suggested we track down the social worker, Erin would spin out and say we were playing into the hands of a system that caused the problems in the first place. And she was usually right. Before doing anything, I had to figure out what was going on and what exactly Erin had in mind.

Twisted coil—hooks—pieces of antenna—bicycle reflectors—shards of steel—a can opener. I missed the days when the living room floor was covered with soft objects. Sleeping bags and teddy bears. Erin's girlfriends giggling into the wee hours of a Friday night. I also missed the days Erin went for sleepovers at somebody else's house. She stopped because she couldn't stand the compensating mothers who felt she needed a good dose of female sensibility. Too bad really, I used to play the single-parent card quite successfully. Now whenever we needed a break from each other, it was up to me to have a sleepover at my girlfriend's. But not this weekend. This weekend I was home. This dude was home.

"The broken circle—the smoking of shit—get out of town momma—the beast is loose."

Erin sat with her back to Acid on the couch as he braided wire into her hair. I sat in my leather lounge chair balancing a plate of Vietnamese take-out on my knees. They'd finished ages ago. I was stalling, my chopsticks tracing slow patterns in the rice. Every once in a while I'd lift a single grain for a good long chew. I figured at this rate I could keep an eye on them until school started again Monday morning.

The two aliens looked strangely beautiful—like fallen angels playing dress-up—caught in a secret that was light years away from my understanding. As Acid tugged gently on her hair, Erin's chin glided above her body until her proud profile hinted of an arrogance that made me feel lonely. She listened intently as if she understood everything he was saying.

"Burning the highway—won't be long—ribcage pounding a bird heart song

One sky momma—set you free—ride it down hard to the new city

Burn down baby burn down—burn down baby burn down

A circle of elders wait cold in the moon—they choose the dry sleep of the snake—her long wet fingers reach out for a face—but they choose the dry sleep of the snake . . ."

I could understand why Erin was enthralled. The boy had a power. Like a hypnotist or an old-fashioned movie star. If I didn't tread carefully, Erin would buy into his anger and try to change the world in a single night—and when Erin unleashed her social conscience there was no stopping her. Yes—I had to be very careful. Find a way of penetrating the spell of their isolation. Then get Erin alone so I could figure out a way to remove little Svengali from my goddamn house.

"Half-man—breed-man—take him to the nigger's house
Half-man—candy-man—take him to the sweat lodge . . ."

I thought about the Native boys who walk along Spadina Crescent, looking over their shoulders to see if the man who drove by earlier had looped around for a second "take"—just like the young girls who freeze on the corners of 20th, dressed in hooker outfits they put together from the Goodwill. Middle-aged white men cruising carefully so they can catch a peek without turning their heads—pulling over to the curb—the side window sliding into the door frame—a dark friendly face hoping the window won't retract and leave them out in the cold. Twelve years old some of these kids.

Outreach programs send vans into the street to hand out

sandwiches and condoms. Most people figure that's enough. It frees them to help the children in less fortunate parts of the world. The city has a national reputation for making hefty contributions to the United Appeal.

I wondered how old Acid's sister was.

"Broken glass—Indian trash—the old men hold their squaw.
Blood runs in the moonlight—the circle is the law . . ."

"Acid," I said, hoping I didn't sound like I was issuing a plea for attention.

"Hey dude," Erin responded, without turning her head.

"Can you just chill out, young man," I said more forcefully, surprised at my choice of words. He must have heard because he reached across Erin's back and touched his middle fingertip under her chin. Then he pivoted her beautiful jaw in a slow arc until she was looking at him from across her shoulder. He kept on singing but with an expression that seemed to be asking "who's the dude sitting in the leather chair?"

"Acid—I want to ask you a question . . ."

Erin stood up and glared at me. Then she stomped into the kitchen. I followed.

"Why are you bothering him?"

"Erin—what is he doing here? We're not his therapists . . ."

"Why are you so insensitive? Why can't you just leave him alone?"

"Leave him alone to what? Do you want us to get arrested for harbouring an underage juvenile delinquent? The boy's disturbed."

"You're disturbed."

"What are you thinking, Erin? Or are you planning to leave the country with him?"

"What—you scared I might go off with an Indian?"

"Don't use that racist shit on me young lady!"

"Would you feel more comfortable if he was a white boy?"

"He doesn't know what colour he is. He thinks he's black for god's sake."

"He's not stupid you know. He can see his hands."

"So why does he think he's black?"

"He doesn't think he's black. He feels he's black."

"Well that explains everything. Why didn't you say that in the first place?"

I opened the fridge. I don't know why. I just opened the fridge. Erin immediately closed it and leaned on the door as if the secret to everything was in the freezer. She spoke with a genuine love and concern.

"Daddy—Acid's got nowhere to go. It's simple as that. You taught me to look out for people—that's what I am doing. All those social workers just pawn him off to people waiting 'til he's old enough to be on his own. Then he can get into trouble and go to jail and we can all forget about him—just like half the other Native men in this province. The only other choice he's got is to go out on the streets like his sister. But Acid's smarter than that. He's got talent."

"Then why doesn't he stay in school and develop that talent."

"Cause he's an anarchist."

"Exactly!"

"Tolstoy was an anarchist. And Emily Bronte. And William Blake. Einstein was thrown out of school because they thought he was a retard."

"Don't use that language in this house young lady." God, I hated how bright she was. "What does that have to do with anything?"



"They're gonna fuck him up. Just like they fuck up anybody who speaks the truth."

I still didn't get it, so cut to the chase.

"Okay—tell me what you want to do. Spell it out, Erin. What do you have in mind?"

Acid stood in the doorway. He looked nervous. "Burn the village you mother-fuckin' elder—the red whore sticks it to the white man's heart . . ." Erin turned to him, her arm extended against the fridge door like she was conducting a board meeting. "Cool it a minute," she told him gently. He stopped. I felt reassured. She looked me straight in the eyes.

"Acid's mother left the reservation when he was like nine or something. She was into bad shit so had to leave. And like one night there was this big scene. When she tried to take Acid with her, all these men wouldn't let her. They broke the windows of her car and pulled him out. And like she was bleeding and crying but she wouldn't get out of the car. She just sat there with broken windows—in the rain—waiting for the circle of men to give him back. But they wouldn't. So she drove away."

"How do you know these things?"

"Cause I listen . . ."

"Oh . . ."

"And I guess she went south and Acid started talking funny and then his talking got real good and now he wants to go find her. Like you know—he needs his mother. Everyone needs their mother."

I thought about Erin's mother living on the East Coast.

"So like I'm not stupid—I know it sounds crazy—but it's not. If he stays here, he's gonna end up like really fucked-up. All those do-gooder foster parents and social workers don't get it. They don't get him. And if he stays with his sister, he'll end up on the street. And like she's fucked. She's really really—"

"Erin—stop using that word. Tell me what you want to do."

"Okay—simple. Drive him out of town tomorrow morning so he can hitch a ride. Let him—"

Suddenly I heard knocking at the front door. It had a deliberateness that was far too impolite for a bottle drive or the United Appeal. It was more like the military police. Whoever was there was not going away. Then this weird noise started coming from Acid's throat. "Oh shit," he moaned. "Oh shit . . . oh shit . . . oh shit . . ." And for the first time that night Erin looked like a frightened child.

The pounding got worse. I knew I had to play the part of the father so marched to the door and looked through the peephole.

Distorted on the other side was a scrawny face with a large cigar hanging out of its lips. It looked like an expensive cigar, maybe Cuban, but it was hard to tell because the images you see through peepholes are never accurate, just like the images in a side-view mirror warning you not to believe what you're seeing so you wonder why they put them there in the first place. "Object is closer than it appears."

Then everything went black. I assumed an eye was trying to peek in from the other side, which is stupid, because you can't peek in from the other side. Who'd put something in a door to let people peek in from the other side? But before I could think about it, the light on the porch hit me square in the eyeball. A woman stepped back and raised her fist for a second attack. To hell with this, I thought, and opened the door.

"Oh shit . . . oh shit . . . oh shit . . ."

A young Native woman stood frozen in the doorway. She had the skinny body of a girl but her face was older. It was taut and creased as if she'd been spending too much time underwater, her make-up hovering over dried-out skin. She was wearing a short skirt, satin halter top, and an orange leather bomber jacket. Definitely not your regular winter wardrobe. Her tights were a size too large and bagged down thin legs into the tops of her boots. The cigar hanging out her open lips gave the impression of someone trying to nurse an abscessed tooth. But the most distinguishing feature were her eyes. They didn't seem to exist. She stood alert looking past me through closed eyelids. A stick woman with an expensive cigar. I wanted to tell her this was a smoke-free house.

"Oh shit . . . oh shit . . . oh shit . . ."

The young woman beetled past and went directly into the living room where she started to gather Acid's belongings. She found a five-dollar bill in one of the side pockets of his knapsack and put it in her boots. Acid and Erin ran through the hall and headed for the stairs. Erin stayed on the bottom landing. Acid went all the way up. I addressed the intruder.

"Look here—I didn't invite you into my house."

She turned her closed eyelids toward me and spoke without letting the cigar fall out of her mouth. "I didn't ask to be invited."

When I stepped into the living room, she flung the knapsack over her tiny shoulder, and slipped past again. She shoved Erin out of the way and headed up the stairs. Acid stood on the top landing.

She lifted her feeble arm and walloped Acid across the face. I headed to the phone to call the police. The woman pulled a knife from the inside of her pocket. "I'll slash this little bastard if you pick up that phone. Don't think I won't."

"Who the hell are you?" Erin began to scream. "You're not a sister—you're a—"

"I know I'm not his sister you stupid fuck," she flared at Erin. "I'm his goddamn mother."

Acid started to moan again. "Oh shit . . . oh shit . . . oh shit . . ."

"Mother" was almost a mystical word in our house. Contrary to the opinion of my ex-wife, the word carried an air of great respect. For a moment, everything seemed like it might be all right—just because the word "mother" had come from the cigar lady's mouth. Then I caught my breath. If this was the mother, I thought, God protect us from the sister. This woman was fit to be nobody's mother.

"Ma'am," I said, sounding as if I was talking to a blind granny. "Ma'am—I don't care if you're his mother or not—you are not leaving with that boy."

"I got custody."

"Custody my foot."

"I got the knife—I got custody."

A horn blared from a car out front.

"Move," she said to the boy. "I'll cut your face . . ."

Acid began to sing. "Cock-suckin' doorman—wipin' up the floor man . . ."

"I'll teach you . . ."

"Cock suckin' white man—gettin' out of sight man . . ."

"I'll hurt you . . ."

"No one's a cowboy—with fuckin' baby brown boy . . ."

"If you don't get in that car . . ."

"Black brother mother fucker . . ."

"I'll hurt you Acid. I'll cut your face so bad you'll have nothin' left to hustle but your ass—you hear me!"

"Don't hear you—fear you—or come near you—red bitch hangin' from a thin white line—fix her—mix her—put her with the trickster—her body is the bannock—the blood is the wine."

"I'm sick of this shit Acid."

"Sick of this shit—gotta split . . ."

"Get in the goddamn car . . ."

"Nobody's a cowboy with fuckin' baby brown boy."

"They paid good money for you . . ."

Acid began to sway back and forth. "No dumb breed boy is this black motha' fucker 'cause the moon is pumpin' my name on the high-sky fly-by die-by the road code motha-lode of the everlasting kingdom. I drive to the temple—cause ready or not—I won't be caught—in the see me on TV gotta-be-free honey money lip-gloss no-loss dream-queen pretty mean street scene capital of the world . . ." The horn blasted again.

"For Christ's sake Acid . . . please . . ."

The boy began to pound his feet. Then his body went into this sort of jerking movement and he started tossing himself against the wall. It was hard to tell if he was throwing a giant temper tantrum or rehearsing for the Grammys. Whatever it was, it seemed to stop "mother" dead in her tracks. She grabbed the banister and turned her slumped stick body in my direction. It was as if she was asking for help—the sort of thing parents do to each other when they know their children are out of control. Acid continued in his wildness and for a moment I thought he might be doing some kind of rap powwow thing. It had a logic—a violence that transformed into something oddly graceful. He had the power of a charismatic healer—the single-minded vision of a superstar. Only once did I worry about the plaster falling off the walls.

The woman looked helpless—the toughness disappearing from her face as her son bombarded the world from his place in the sky. She looked as much a child as Acid. I wondered how she could be his mother.

We waited until the boy exhausted himself. There was nothing else to do. The three of us below sharing a kind of time-out—a silence that brought us together in a way I couldn't help but resent. Finally he sat down again, taking possession of the top landing as if he was going to stay there forever.

As always, Erin was one step ahead of me. "Go home now," she said. "We'll take care of Acid."

The woman opened her eyes. They looked bewildered and glassy, like an otter's eyes. She raised her knife and walked her emaciated body down the stairs. Erin didn't move. The woman had to walk around her. As she went to the door, she stopped. She turned into the living room and slashed a gaping hole in the leather chair. Then she left. We listened as the car drove away.

"Okay . . . okay," I began, my body starting to shake. "I'm calling the police."

In the brief moment I tried to remember if the number was 991 or 911, Acid came down the stairs. He took the telephone off the hook and looked me in the eyes. I was startled at the intensity of his gaze. He seemed unreal—like a vision—the kind of thing you imagine in a sweat lodge. Messengers—guides from the spirit world—manifesting from some unexplained part of your psyche. It was as if he was forcing me into some goddamn Native thing and it was irritating as hell. Then I remembered.

I was driving down 20th and saw a man pass out on the sidewalk. I pulled over and went to him. Within seconds I was surrounded by other dark faces and had a brief flash that I was in a foreign country. I used my cell phone to call an ambulance. The man opened his eyes long enough to mutter "I'm just stoned for Christ's sake," before some people carried him off. A boy stayed back to warn me I had no business doing what I did. A police car would come to that neighbourhood twice as fast as any ambulance—the man would be dumped in the drunk tank for the night—or worse—taken for a "moonlight ride." And sure enough, the police came screeching up.

I took the telephone from Acid and put it on the receiver. I knew the rules were different out on the street. And even though I was in my own home with a destroyed leather chair, I felt I was now on the street. I had to play by new rules.

I wanted to tell the pair of them to go to bed, but figured that might be dangerous, so I told them to watch television. They went into the living room. Acid was upset because his knapsack was gone. Erin was quiet. I poured myself a scotch.

I waited for the television to come on—I wanted to make sure Acid couldn't hear my thoughts. Nobody turned it on—so I waited until he started singing. "Settle the score—settle the score—one sky—nothing more . . ."

What to do? Surely I had to call the police. A crime was

committed. And not reporting it was a crime in itself—let alone keeping a boy away from the authorities, whoever they were. There must be a group home or a shelter, I thought. Maybe I should make sure the boy was safe and then call the police. Yes. Make sure he's safe and then report the whole thing. Take my chances with the law.

I thought about Acid sitting cross-legged on his blanket in his new foster parent's posh Lakeview home, surrounded by Italian furniture and Inuit sculpture, his white stepsisters practising their cheerleading routines in the family room. Then I thought about him hitting the streets and turning old enough to get picked up for an infamous "moonlight ride."

The newspapers had been full of reports about two Native men who froze to death on the outskirts of town. Two police officers were dismissed from duty until the outcome of an investigation. I guess it's common practice for the police to pick up young Native men who are high on whatever they're high on, and drive them past the city limits so they can spend the time sobering up as they walk back. It cuts administration and the expense of tossing them in the drunk tank. People refer to it as the "moonlight ride" and the "long walk back."

But the past few months were brutally cold. And on separate mornings, two young men were found frozen to death. One without his shoes or jacket—his face buried in the snow. The other out past the power plant—only a few hundred feet from shelter. The outcry from the Native community was that it was purely a racist act. No one had ever heard of a white man being taken on the ride. The reaction from the white community was quiet. Wait and see. Just like the reaction several years ago when the murdered bodies of Native prostitutes were found in the river after the ice broke.

I poured myself another scotch and suddenly felt nostalgic for my leather arm chair. It was Italian. I'd bought it three years ago to sit and view videos I was considering for my film class—a luxury I'd told myself I deserved.

I walked, scotch in hand, into the living room. "I shoot the elder—I fuck the game—I shoot the elder—I leave just the same . . ."

Acid was sitting on the couch looking ridiculous in my old parka that I'd been storing in the upstairs closet. At his feet was the knapsack I usually took when I went hiking with my girlfriend. It was full of god knows what sharp objects he'd lifted from the house. Erin was standing on the carpet pulling her down-filled ski jacket over layers of sweaters,

looking like she was preparing for an Arctic expedition. Two pairs of gloves, toques, and woollen scarves were lying on the carpet below her.

"Erin!" I stuttered in alarm.

"Got to make some sandwiches" was her reply, as she strutted into the kitchen with the boy in the parka traipsing after her. She opened the fridge and pulled out peanut butter, mayonnaise, cheese, slices of ham, lettuce, tomatoes, jelly and pickles. I had no idea we'd been hoarding so much food in the fridge. No wonder she'd leaned so ferociously on the door.

"Check out my skin mamma I come to your home—check out my skin mamma—I'm leaving town."

"Enough," I yelled. "Enough already!"

Erin crossed to the breadbox and turned to look at me.

"Yes, enough," she said. "I'm walking Acid to the service station on Highway Eleven. You can call the police if you like."

"Check out my skin—I'm leaving town."

I felt like I was committing a heinous crime. Yet I knew what we were doing was right. I'd suffer the consequences in the end. That's what my ex-wife used to tell me. "I'd suffer the consequences." Well maybe I would. Right now I was busy aiding and abetting—caught in an underground war.

I saw the gas station on the right of the dark road ahead and pulled into the empty lot beside. "Okay—we'll wait until you get a ride," I said, looking over my shoulder to the two kids in the back. We were at a truck stop and I knew he stood a fairly good chance. The rest was up to him. They swung their doors open in unison and stepped into the cold.

"What the hell?" I asked Erin in alarm. "You're going nowhere, young lady."

"I'm walking home," was her reply as she crossed to the other side of the highway. She didn't even say goodbye to the boy, and before I had a chance, Acid was over at the gas pumps talking to some trucker wearing a stupid fur hat. I didn't know whether to chase after Erin or wait to see if he hit it lucky.

I decided to wait. I wanted to make sure Acid got on the road. I wanted to will him to wherever he needed to be. I thought about the power of his unyielding vision of the world. His single-minded bravery. I wondered about his mother—if it was his mother—but decided it didn't matter. The boy was a visionary, after all. He will create a mother. And a father. He is the beast.

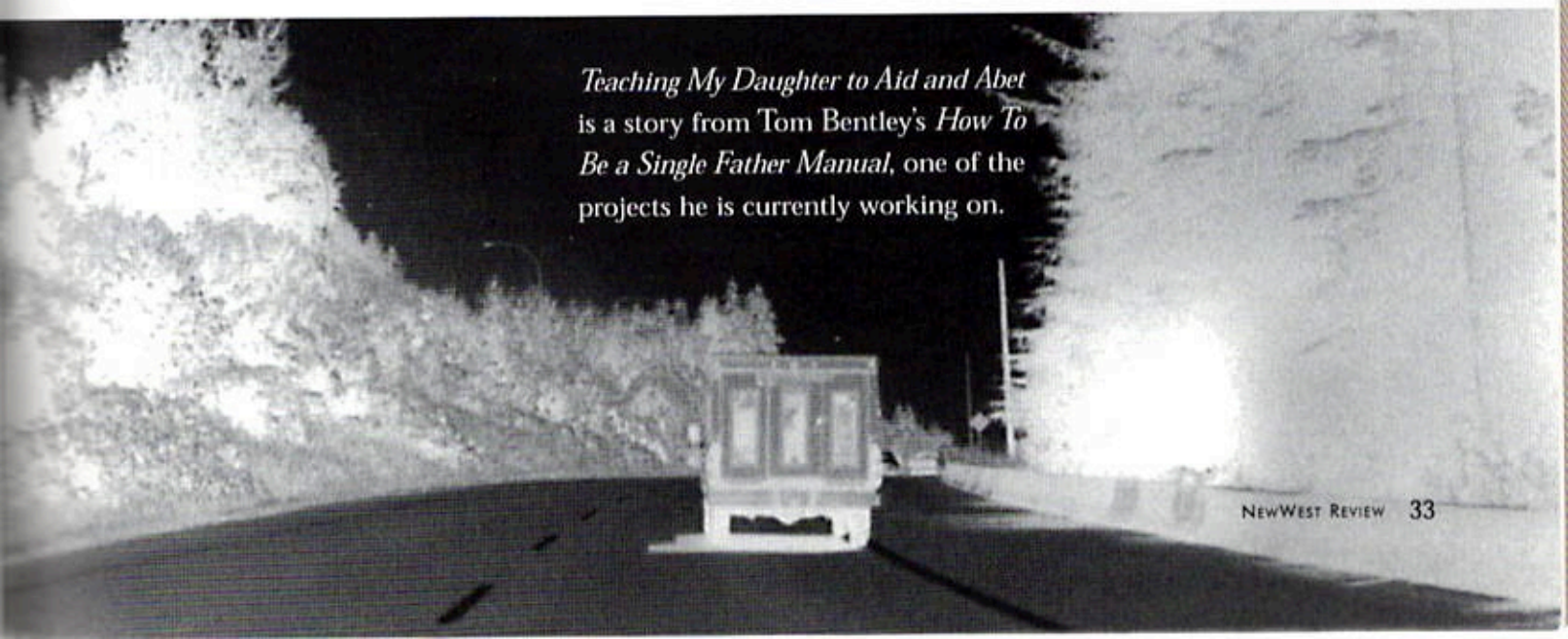
But Erin? What about Erin? What motivates that beautiful and ruthless mind? Is she looking for her mother too? Is it as simple as that? Are we all looking for our mothers? Suddenly I felt ashamed. Embarrassed about being an adult. Enough, I told myself. At least you know where your daughter is tonight. How many parents can claim that?

I watched Acid pull his young self up into the cab of the truck. The huge vehicle spun on the ice and pulled onto the long straight highway. Heading south in search of . . . in search of what? I was too tired to think. It was time to catch up with Erin before she caught her death of cold.

I turned the car around and started driving back to the city. The sky was blue black. My headlights caught Erin in the distance and I decided to slow to her pace. I knew what she was doing. It was her "long walk back."

Snowflakes began to fall gently into the beams of light—diffusing their directness—making the image not quite what it appeared. I wanted to keep my daughter in my headlights forever. But I knew it wasn't possible.

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Teaching My Daughter to Aid and Abet is a story from Tom Bentley's *How To Be a Single Father Manual*, one of the projects he is currently working on.