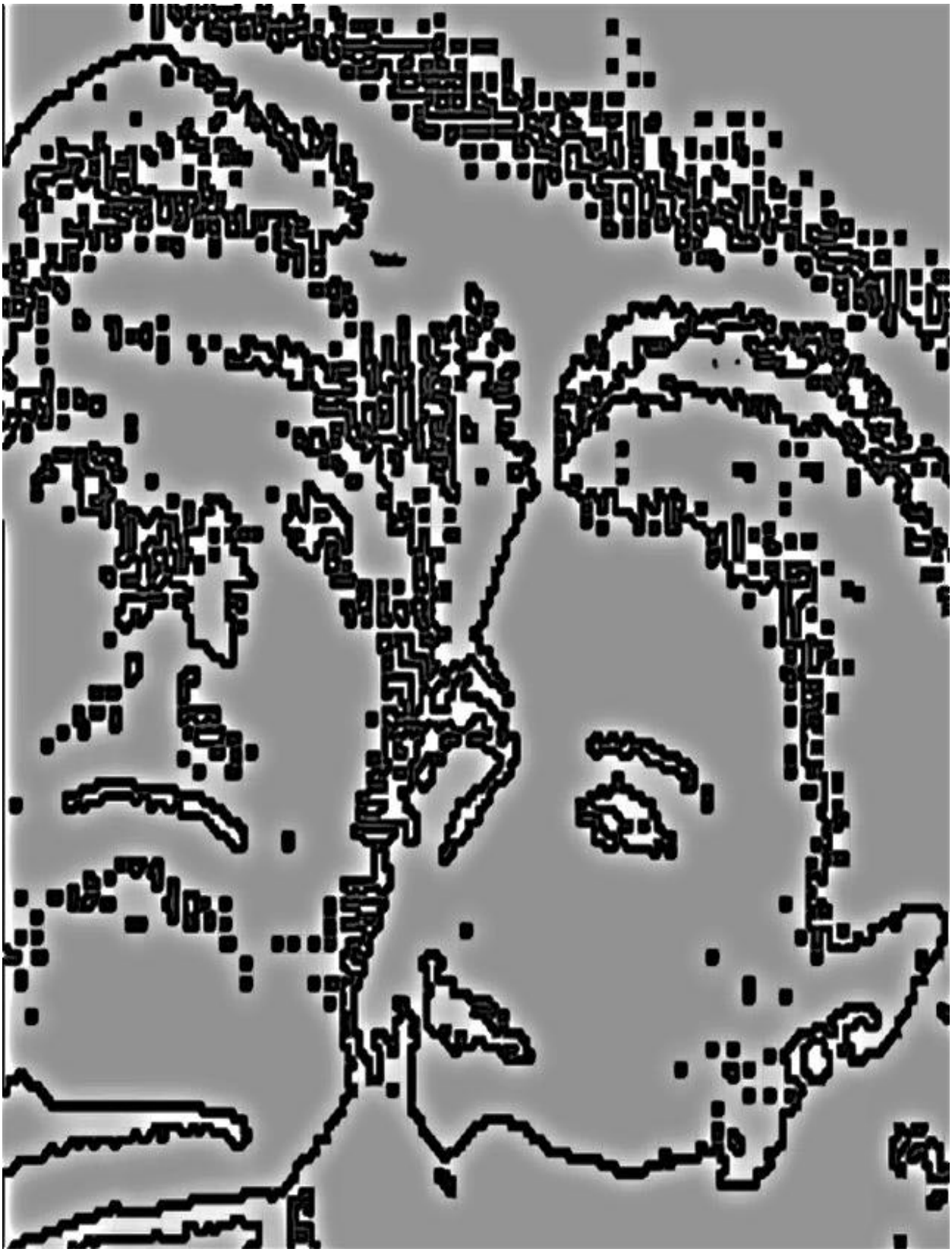
BURST

Edward Drobinski



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Chapter 1

"She's a sweetheart. But, cross her and she'll kill ya." That was my introduction to Rikki. At the time I thought it a joking comment from her boyfriend, Mal; the couple just having come in through my back, mainly glass, dining room door.

It was a logical reaction, as I had already known Mal for a month and I found that it was hard to get him to take anything seriously; especially the handyman work I was trying to get him to do around my house. If you've had the pleasure, you probably know that artists can be difficult at times.

And Mal was an artist all right. He wrote crappy poetry and played the guitar like Allen Collins of Lynyrd Skynrd. Not counting the juvie hand-slaps and the required, attendance at Friday morning counseling, done by some psychology major who wanted to appear "down," he now had a bigger problem. He also had two adult felony convictions and couldn't afford another one.

The first thing I noticed when I gently shook Rikki's hand was that her perfectly chiseled face had averting eyes. I guess that's not all that unusual, but at the time I found it strange for one so pretty to possibly be shy. The second thing I noticed was that her lower arms had deep scars; the vertical kind

designed to maximize blood loss. I then considered the much more likely possibility that she just found me repulsive.

Beside other obvious infirmities of the face and legs, I was 65 at the time and had been feeling that way for three years. The second thing I noticed as she walked out of the open dining room into the adjoining kitchen was a body with plentiful curves in all the right places.

The thirty year old former model held up a tanned, plastic, grocery store bag, opened it and said; “Is it okay if I use the oven here?” The question struck me as either unnecessary or posed by one who had learned to proceed with caution. Nervously not waiting for a reply she added; “You like veal cutlets?” I would come to know that this lady liked to cook. In the moment I thought I had detected a veiled sadness, but knew I could be wrong; and hoped so.

I said; “Yes and yes,” offering one, and quickly seeing my first hint of a reciprocal Rikki smile. Since my wife Diane and I had never gotten into “cuisine” of any sort, the counter held one fork, one spoon, one knife, and a long term unemployed can opener. They huddled together on a paper towel which showed that it was last changed a month prior.

Rikki began to futz around with the contents of her bag, and asked; “Where are the other utensils?”

I entered the kitchen, opened the pantry door, and showed her to a form fitting, deep orange tray which held millions of utensils. She said; “Oh,” in a manner I took as positive; though on her next trip she came with her own recently purchased supply of silver coated plastic implements.

The late afternoon sun was still beating on everything its cloud deficient environment lazily allowed, including the only kitchen window. I went back to the open dining area and brought the second and third chairs over to accompany my solitary one abutting the overhanging ledge of the kitchen countertop. Mal and I sat in the shade in front of my laptop. I already had it on Youtube. Jim Morrison had just stopped chanting; “Cancel my subscription to the resurrection,” and the stuff about the mirror and the window. Mal punched in one of his favorite Nirvanas and I listened to something in which I only could make out about three words, while with half closed eyes, he leaned back, obliviously smiled and played air guitar.

I think that I’m not as far out of it as other people my age; fully recognizing that other people my age would say the same thing. But in all honesty I was familiar with “Territorial Pissings,” and “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” despite the very un-cool Youtube person who called the latter; “Smells Like Team Spirit.” I mean, like, in his own “cool” parlance; “Really,

dude?” I’ve got this stupid thing about getting the easy stuff right.

Rikki toiled away in the sun which relentlessly streamed through that one un-shaded kitchen window at its late afternoon, early summer angle. She periodically asked her boyfriend and me if we liked this or liked that and we always said; “Yes.” Our eyes were actually semi-fixed on Cobain; me trying to make out the words of the songs I didn’t know, and Mal probably thinking about the suicide, long ago installed in the history museum. I’d later learn that he didn’t think it was a suicide at all; but a Courtney Love financial doing after Kurt’s announcement of his intent to file for divorce.

After a few of these Rikki exchanges, I thought that she might take our one word, perfunctory responses as dismissive and uninterested. So, I went out of my way to say how much I was anticipating the best meal I’d had in years and stuff like that. And I really wasn’t lying; just conveniently over-stressing a commonly accepted characterization. My Germaine Greer agreeable wife, Diane, never had given the least bit of a damn about using the range to heat anything more complex than soup on the top four pads. That was okay with me, as I had willingly gravitated to the simplicity of exclusive microwave use. Both approaches mesh nicely, in that they avoid the customary preponderance of cacophonous detail.

But, over the years I had learned that my “deficiency” was often interpreted as a lack of interest by those who had a hobby of collecting pots, pans, and recipes. I guess it was, but I never wished to be considered insulting unless first confronted. Perhaps not to be outdone, Mal chimed in with a few “complimentary and eagerly anticipating” things similar and Rikki seemed happy flailing away with the utensils and trying to get the oven to do what she was trying to tell it to do with a series of button pushes on the confusing “control” panel. Apparently, the thing was not in the mood to be the least bit co-operative.

Later that day, I’d find out that they both already had so much alcohol in their systems that they had probably not noticed their taste buds for a year, much less have any real interest in the considered “social proprieties” straining to break out of our earliest conversations.

With me distracted by the rolling kitchen activity, Mal insisted on showing me videos of “Sound Garden” and some other “grunge” band minimally remembered as a result of having been assigned the same category as Cobain. He didn’t make any big deal over them, but included them as one does the lesser known in a web aged attempt to refrain from the obviously well known.

Three feet behind or in front of the micro entertainment module, depending on point of view, Rikki showed a scrunched

facial and a mildly snorting sound of frustration. She couldn't get the damn stove to heat up. I had no idea how to do anything with it other than get the four top thingies to fry the ass off the lone sitting, empty, dark green pot. My wife was off at work, but it wouldn't have mattered if she was there, as she had purchased the stainless steel, computerized monstrosity not to use it, but to impress our up-until-now-once-a-year social obligations. The touch of calloused, poorly, though somewhat reflective post-something-or-other stylishness in an otherwise traditional Spanish casita is supposed to be impressive. Diane's phraseology of that would be different and doubtlessly much more mercifully succinct. However, the momentary crux was, though the thing had been sitting there looking ugly for more than a year, it had not been used by anything other than adventurous bugs; none of them out of a Kafka or Burroughs imagination.

With each blink of the cursor, it became increasingly obvious that Rikki was having severe difficulties with the oversized, un-cooperative Sears special. She was facing Mal and me. The stove itself, and some faded, sixties-ish, real oak wood cabinetry were the only things separating us. She asked what to do and seemed to be directing her inquiry at me. My customary I-don't-know approach was quickly complemented by my true lack of knowledge. Regarding the conceptual aspect, experiences unanimously suggested it was obvious that to say otherwise

always resulted in an unwanted, unappreciated and unintentionally-viewed-as-grandiose can of worms. But, here, in this particular case, was a dripping, pretty handful of unsatisfied heat seeking to get the veal ready for consumption.

When I verbalized that I didn't know, I simultaneously got up from my comfortable position with a complete screen view and left Mal, snickering and pie-eyed in front of something ostensibly classified as music; titled "The Misfits." When I said that they sucked, he said; "No shit. It's a total goof. I still found it to be unfortunate that it wasn't the Marilyn Monroe movie; but rather some very overaged group of poseurs from the flood lands and consequent damage claim game of Lodi, NJ. In fairness, I have to say that the lack of any musical sense was compensated for by the fifty year old's joke of a flaccid, green Mohawk. Aesthetically, rather unimpressed and disinterested with the drone buzz accompanied by an indecipherable yell over, I assumed he meant the group on the screen.

In search of the appealing relief provided by a full view of Rikki, I entered the kitchen and said; "This thing is difficult. I can't even get it to show the right time." As I walked to the kitchen drawer which held various instruction manuals, I answered her unasked question saying; "Diane and I have never used it. It's here to impress through the 'cutting

edge' display of its divine uselessness." I immediately realized that this might contradict something I possibly told Mal. I must have mentioned that "home improvements" had been made because Diane and I had made tenuous plans to sell the house. While the statements seem contradictory they are both true. I've always obsessed on trying to maintain credibility. It never worked, but despite that I have this ludicrous compulsion. Even if I had said it I presumed that he and Rikki had more interesting things to occupy their minds than the ramifications surrounding my dysfunctional oven. He also may have been too fucked up for anything to register. Fortunately, I caught myself before I started babbling about irrelevances, and I perused the drawer and the one below it.

Not finding an instruction manual, I said; "No, sorry. Diane indiscriminately purges these things every once in a while." It was true. My wife's taste for starkness periodically reaches a crescendo; and when I'm gone she disposes of things which range from our 1995 tax returns to the garage door opener. I walked to the stove. Space a constraint; I leaned up against Rikki, getting a scent of something pleasant residing in her long black hair, as we stood in front of the un-cooperative, metallic, heat machine. Her once again averting eyes seemed this time an indication that she was worried about the state of the waiting cutlets.

I said; “I really don’t know what to do. Sometimes when I want to set the clock, I just try pushing all the buttons on the thing and somewhere along the line it gets going.” I pushed them all in no particular order.

Rikki pulled down the main door, felt around inside, and said; “There’s no heat coming through.”

I said; “Give it a chance. Might take a minute.”

Perspiring from the relentless sun, she stepped back to the sink. She dropped the cutlets at its edge, and pulled her black, with minimalistic and conceptual, surrealistic “art” logo tee-shirt over her head. She bunched it up and ran water over it. Her half cupped underpinnings seemed focal points in the moment. In the gush of the drench, I was like a delighted victim in Bergman’s “The Silence,” feeling as if I was in a weird but not totally uncomfortable spot.

By this time Mal had apparently determined that his presence in the kitchen was required. He broke away from some noise-horror, metal, quaint-funny-haired, four days unshaven, “bad-ass” concoction with Alice Cooper makeup on the little screen. It was derivative of “The Misfit” act in appearance and sound, but less amusing to me in its apparent seriousness. If that is the least bit believable, it likely made it not particularly difficult for him to depart the screen.

Apparently for Mal, it must have seemed painfully obvious that the joke, if any, was unintended, making it even funnier or something. Personally, I have difficulty laughing at the chromosome oversupplied, but this is no longer My Generation. Mal often just found shit on the web that made him laugh; and then he'd mimic them. I don't think that anyone other than me and Rikki could ever tell when he was intending irony and I know that most of the time I wasn't sure. Mal never felt the need to explain.

That he was a good guy, I'm virtually certain; as certain as one can be. That he was stuck by birth with being a white nigga in-betweener was enough un-articulated explanation for me. Rikki's feelings for him were deeper, and possibly just because of that she would sometimes give him shit; like the time she smacked his steel-tipped boot into his face just on principle; or maybe just because she was loaded and thought the surprise a funny one. Ignoring the obvious physicality, I came to think that their attraction was that he had done everything wrong and got f***** for it; while she had done everything right and got f***** for it. I'm getting ahead of myself as these events and perceptions were to come later. For now, Mal stared at the uncooperative stainless steel "showpiece" and mumbled something. He carefully pushed some buttons, and was effective in attempting to convince everyone present that he knew what he was

doing; though his lack of familiarity with a difficult oven made that highly unlikely.

Rikki put the soaked tee back on. Cool, cool, and cool in every sense; like a standard southwestern swamp cooler all over the top. They had some kind of interchange. You know the kind when nobody knows what they're talking about; but for the sake of "sociability" is compelled to say something absolutely useless, backward, and worse; totally un-entertaining. Well, it was the exact opposite of that.

I didn't know who did what to who, but mental diversions aside, the bottom line was that the uncooperative stainless steel thing, replete with stains that Ajax couldn't handle, started to show signs of life. It had been a half hour, but the bouncy, jiggling steel rods at the floor of their compartment exceeded room temperature for the first time ever. I could smell it.

Jubilation filled the kitchen. In two seconds Rikki used her fingers to re-check the rods and found that their temperatures were on a positive trend. If one was like her, a sampler of early heat; this portended one of those languid Saturday night's versions of a suck-all-the-water-out "Creature Feature," likely a pre-cursor to the negating, 180 boredom sold by Rob Zombie for his ostensible "living."

All systems go; Mal and I sat back down. Youtube had utilized its own built in programming to now have found its cookied follow up. I found this quite impressive. It seemed to me that it would have to have been quite a task to find a follow up to codger-death-petty rebellious-metal by way of low-end-Mexico's knockoff versions of 1970's English "anarchy" brought to us through the hyperlinked hype of the once Brit banned Sex Pistols; which was now known to be an ultimately, self-confessed, and profitably sneering swindle. This aspect was confused for some with the last minute Johnny Rotten San Franciscan confession of a lie about a lie. Our blurred and weary eyes rejuvenated upon seeing a live version of the Monkees' 2011 reunion concert, enhanced with Billy Ray Cyrus guesting on guitar. They were singing "I'm Not Your Stepping Stone" for an audience of North Platte based octogenarians. Apparently, the song was a 21st century update of the early Monkees cover of the 1966 hit written by the original and memorable, Boise based Paul Revere and the Raiders' tune which they regularly performed on "Dick Clark's Where the Action Is." For a bit we got into the humorous aspect, like one watching a very aged, "Laugh-In" re-run; with no understanding of the context. I articulated my degree of cyber-based awe to Mal, who shrugged and said; "No big. They just follow with whoever paid them the most to do that."