

## Natalee Caple / GEORGE LOVES ODETTE

Odette is sitting in Commerce Court eating her modest lunch. She chews slowly and reads the book that is resting in her lap. A tall aboriginal man with long, gray streaked hair walks hesitantly up to her. When she glances up he says, "Can you spare a dollar for a sandwich?"

She looks quickly down again without answering. He continues to stand in front of her. She can see his legs trembling inside of the thin fabric of his pants. She feels him moving and she looks up. She feels the people around her gasp. He is holding a gun to his ear. He looks into Odette's eyes.

"I'm a good man," he says, "I'm an educated man."

And he shoots himself. For a few seconds he remains standing, startled, and then he crumbles at her feet.

She is late for work. When she steps into the studio she leans against the wall and slides down to the floor and pulls her shoes off.

George comes around the corner with his Polaroid camera in one hand, the other hand dragging a tape measure.

"Take a picture of my head," he says.

"What?"

"Take a head shot of me, take a picture of my face. Come on, Odette."

He thrusts the camera into her hand, straightens up and smiles wildly. Obliging, she photographs him. She pulls the black square to make it roll out faster and shakes it to help it dry.

George is pulling the tape measure around his head, apparently measuring his skull.

Odette watches him quietly.

"George," she says, "don't call me Odette. My name is Carolyn."

He looks at her and smiles.

"Carolyn's not a good name for an artist's model. Odette suits you better."

She shakes her head and folds her arms across her chest.

"I don't care. My name is Carolyn."

He puts the tape measure down and cocks his head.

"I tell you what, we'll spell it c.a.r.o.l.y.n. but we'll pronounce it Odette, O.K."

She looks down at the Polaroid. George's face is beginning to emerge from the gray, photographic milk.

"Here you go," she says, and hands it to him. She pulls her book out of her pocket and tries to find the page she left off at. She finds it wrinkled and spattered dark brown.

Glancing at the cover George shakes his head.

"Odette, why can't you read trashy novels?" His voice is wheedling. "I would like you better if you read trashy, romantic, historical novels."

She doesn't respond. She just curls herself into a fetal position on the floor and continues to read. He steps behind her and crouches to the floor. He puts a hand on her shoulder and shakes her lightly.

"Hey, why are you still dressed? What time is it? It's four o'clock already, we have to get started." She doesn't respond. He falls behind her and lying on his side he gathers her against him and pushes his face through her hair to her ear.

"Odette, Odette, Odette, something's up, tell me." But she doesn't answer him.

"Look at my teeth. They're all stained and crooked. These aren't my teeth. All I need are the dental records to prove it."

Odette stands on her toes to look at his teeth.

"Your teeth are ugly but your teeth were always ugly, you just never noticed before."

He pushes her away and says sadly, "Yes, but they were my teeth. It was my ugly."

Odette turns her back and walks away from him.

"George, if someone replaced your head you'd die, believe me."

He regards her suspiciously.

"Are you a doctor? Tell me Odette, what do you know about transplants? About immuno-suppressant drugs?"

He stares into his coffee. Swishing it around and around in its

heavy clay mug.

"I promise," she answers wearily, stretching her arms up over her head as she speaks, "if I ever cut your head off, I won't give you another one."

The room is cold because the studio windows are open to the night air. Odette is sitting naked on top of a four foot pyramid of orange crates, her legs crossed, her arms wrapped around herself for warmth. Her teeth are beginning to hurt from chattering. The curtains billow in with the wind.

George is supposed to be sketching but he is poring over the head shots that he was able to find of himself, taken over the last few years.

"You know it probably isn't a bad idea for you to take a head shot of me every day even if it does turn out to be my head. After I'm dead you can put together an animated film of me aging."

Odette turns her head and looks out the window across the street at the apartment building. In the window parallel to hers a young boy, maybe ten or eleven, blond and fragile looking, is standing, staring at her. She cannot see what he is doing with his hands. When their eyes meet he moves to the side, behind the curtain.

"George, I'm cold," she says.

He looks up from his desk at her and his pupils dilate. He sees her trying to control her shaking. He sees that her lips and knuckles are beginning to edge blue. He opens a drawer and takes out the camera. He lifts it to his eye and she is blinded by the flash and the sudden mechanical whir.

They are lying together in bed. Their bodies shine with the last bits of light left from the day.

"It is cold," he says with real wonder.

Odette rolls onto her back and stares at the bubbled paint on the damaged ceiling.

George crawls up against her and throws one arm and one leg across her body to reel her back into him.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" he asks her. She is counting



to a thousand in her head.

"I have an older brother. He's in school in B.C. He's going to be an architect."

George stops her by rolling on top of her and kissing her mouth. He smooths her hair away from her face and stares at her. He measures the length and width of her small face underneath his hand.

"I was hoping you had sisters. I had this image of three little Odettes, the oldest one nine, another one eight and the youngest only six." She stares back at him, her eyes crossing because he is so close.

"Why do you want me to have sisters?" she says. "So that you can have more models lined up for when I'm too old for you?"

He laughs and bends to whisper in her ear,

"No Odette, I want to know what you looked like before I met you. I want to watch you turning into a woman over and over again."

She turns onto her stomach knocking him off her as she turns. She bunches up the pillow against her face. She bites the inside of her cheek until it bleeds. He takes this opportunity to slip inside and begin again.

In the middle of the night he sits up straight in bed and screams as if all his internal organs are twisting themselves inside out. She covers his mouth, she begs him, but he continues to scream.

"George, what are you dreaming?"

"This is not my head," he says. "These are not my dreams. I am thinking things that I have never thought before."

In the morning she lets him sleep. She sits at his desk and pores over the Polaroids that he has taken of her recently, her toast in one hand, her coffee in the other.

She does not know that he is around the corner watching her look at herself.

"Odette," he asks himself, "Would you still pose for me if I weren't paying you?"

He looks at her again and sees himself sitting at his desk. The

absolute nakedness, the absolute feminine vanity of his infinite white skin seeing itself, seeing the light hitting it. He steps back and imagines that he is a bullet aimed at Odette, struggling towards Odette through this glance.

"Odette, would you still pose for me if I weren't paying you?" She looks over to see him lying on the floor by the corner.

"No," she says. She cannot understand the question.

"Would you still be sleeping with me?"

"You don't pay me to sleep with you," she says, and looks back to the pictures as if he has been easily dismissed.

"I pay you to come here and that's one of the things that you do when you come here." George is beginning to sound tortured. He is pushing his body towards her along the floor with his legs.

"George, if you want me to pose I will pose, if you want to fuck I will fuck, but for God's sake get off the floor. You're making me nervous."

George stands up and stares at her. She ignores him.

"A person can live within another person's head," he begins to yell, "can migrate into new patterns of thought, incorporate someone else's memories into their own fascination with themselves, but when you take their arms and legs and heart as well they have to die. They have no choice."

Odette throws the scalding mug of coffee at him, picks up the photographs of her and leaves, slamming the apartment door behind her. George rushes to the window and calls after her as she runs down the street.

"Odette! Odette! Carolyn!"

And for two weeks he is calm. He calls her at night and whispers all of his memories of her over the phone, the things she wears, the way she sleeps. He makes outlandish promises concerning vacations, time away together, some place warm. He manages to convince her to come back. He gives her the cheque when she comes in the door. He photographs her with her clothes on. He brings her coffee and even leaves the windows closed, the curtains drawn.

On the first day that she agrees to undress for him again he places

a chair in the centre of the room for her, opens the curtains and busily gathers his pencils and papers.

She is good for me, he thinks. Everything about her makes sense as long as she is actually here.

"Odette," he says without looking up from the heavy paper and charcoal. "Tell me a secret."

"Don't be stupid, George. A secret is something you don't tell anybody."

"You don't have any do you?" he says and smiles at her warmly. "You're so innocent you could smuggle cocaine across the border cupped in your hands and nobody would ever stop you." Outside the window a man in a cherry picker is working on the electrical lines for the building. Because it is day and the light shines on the windows he cannot see Odette, sitting naked only a few feet away from him.

"I have secrets," she tells him disdainfully, and shifts her legs, watching the cherry picker carefully, unsure of her protection.

"Tell me then," he says and stops his drawing of her.

"I can't." She is unnerved by his attention being directed under her skin. The man in the cherry picker is very close to the window. She thinks to herself, if his shadow falls across the window he'll be able to see through me.

"You keep a secret for a certain length of time and then you can't tell it anymore."

George lays his pencil on the floor and it rolls away. He walks over to Odette sitting in her wooden chair in the middle of the wooden floor of the huge white room. He falls on his knees in front of her and puts his arms around her waist, his face into her lap.

She puts her hand through his hair. She leans her body over him but she does not know how to comfort him.

"He's going to meet you on the street." He speaks to her belly. "He's going to look at you and know everything that I know about you. He'll see you with your blouse open at the front, with your dress pushed up to your waist, with your long skirt flipped across your back. He's going to see you and he's going to look around in my head and figure out where I live and come here and kill me."



George is shaving in the bathroom. Odette has not arrived yet. As he holds the skin of his cheek taut and pulls the razor along it he becomes increasingly irritated by having to continue caring for a face that no longer belongs to him. He puts the razor aside and looks at his shoulders and chest. He runs his hand over his stomach. He leans in close to the mirror to examine his neck. He hurries into the studio to find something.

When he returns to the bathroom he has a red marker in his hand. With a towel he wipes the area around the base of his neck dry, and taking the cap off of the marker, he begins to draw a line around the precise border between him and the other.

The door bangs open and Odette rushes in. She sees the empty studio and walks immediately to the bedroom. George comes out of the bathroom and walks into the bedroom behind her.

"George," she laughs as she turns around and bumps into him. She puts her hands on top of his shoulders and jumps up, grabbing him around the waist with her legs so that he can hold her there. He holds her wrapped around him and listens as she spills her news excitedly forth.

"I've found him. He lives across the street. I saw him watching us through the window once but I didn't know until today that he was the one. It's not even a man wearing your head, George, it's just a little boy. It should be easy to get it back from him!"

"Are you sure?" George asks her becoming infected by her excitement. "How could you tell?" He carries her across the room and deposits her on the bed. They lie facing each other.

"I was sitting on a bench outside reading my book before I came up and I heard someone bouncing a basketball on the sidewalk beside me. I looked up and there he was, standing beside me looking at me, this blond, thin faced boy. He just kept looking at me so boldly that I got nervous. He was bouncing his ball and rolling his look over me the way you do when you are trying to figure out what position you to put me into before you draw me. And then I remembered seeing him before. He lives in the apartment across from you. He stands at the window and looks at me while you draw. I realize now that you don't look at me when you draw anymore, but while you are drawing, he is looking."

George listens intently, nodding his head along with each point.

"And then I asked him what his name was and he just kept bouncing that ball and staring. I asked him again, 'What's your name?' and he kept staring and bouncing. And then he sneered at me, 'I know *your* name.' And I said 'All right, what's *my* name?' and he paused and then he said, 'It's either Carolyn or Odette.' "

George leans up on his elbow and stares into her eyes.

"It's him. We've got to catch him."

It takes them two days to build the cage. They tear apart all the orange crates and nail them together with long cross beams made out of two by fours that George steals at night from a new housing development a few blocks away. The crates make up the top and bottom of the cage and the bars are made of two by fours nailed to the top and bottom. The door is still a hole in the cage. George is prepared to tear off the bathroom door and nail it over the hole once they have the boy.

"Odette, stand in the cage."

Odette looks at George. "But George, I'm helping you."

George takes the two steps that it takes to stand against her. He leans down to brush her hair off her shoulder and whisper in her ear, "Look out the window." Odette looks over George's shoulder out the window and sees that the boy is standing half hidden behind a curtain, watching.

She steps into the cage, ducking because it is not tall enough for her to stand.

"You are such a good girl," George croons. "Now take off your clothes."

Odette unzips her jeans and sits on the floor of the cage to pull them off. She pulls her sweater over her head and sits there in her bra and panties looking at George.

"He's seen you before," he says, so she finishes undressing and George reaches through the bars and pulls her clothing out.

"It's not going to work, George. He can see the door. He knows I can get out again." George stands and stretches his arms to grip the sides of the cage and shakes it.

"O.K., you're right. Come and stand just outside the doorway," he



tells her and she comes. She stands in front of the doorway and covers her head when George tells her to. He walks around to the other side of the cage and pushes it so that it falls over her, knocking her to the ground and trapping her inside. George runs to his desk to get the camera and steps around the cage taking pictures of Odette as she gets up and shakes her head and gathers her legs against her chest.

"I hurt my back. Let me out."

But George is getting a hammer and nails from his desk and striding back to busily begin nailing the sides of the cage to the floor.

"George, I hurt my back. Let me out. He's not going to come over here and jump in a cage with me while you're here. And if you nail it down how can he get in?"

"He's little. He can slip through the bars."

"If he can slip in then he can slip back out again. Let me out." She looks at him through the slats. "But, George," she says, "I'm helping you."

He stands pressed up against the cage with his arms wrapped around the sides.

She looks around to the window and sees the boy now standing in full view in the middle of the window, pressing himself against the glass in imitation of George, holding onto the window frame.

"I'm cold," she says.

It's so dark. She feels the tiny sharp stabs of splinters working their way deeper into her every time she moves. She stares out at the hollow, empty dark of the boy's window. She sits in the corner holding herself together for warmth. Eventually she falls asleep still sitting up, leaning against the cheap, citrus smelling wood.

When she sleeps she dreams she is lying on a beach listening to the water rushing in and out over the sand. She can feel George's body beside her and his low voice whispering in her ear asking her what she is dreaming.

"I'm dreaming that I am on an operating table," she tells him. "There's a huge light shining down on me and people around the table moving around, whispering. I'm dreaming that a man with a cold, deep voice leans close to my ear and whispers to me,

“‘What-is-in-your-heart?’

“‘I don’t know, I don’t know.’ And then I feel a scalpel pressing at the base of my throat, sliding down into my chest, and a hand reaching in and pulling something out.

“From somewhere over my head I hear someone press the play button on an old portable tape recorder, and I hear our voices recorded over the phone, me saying, ‘I hate you, I hate you so much I could spit.’ You saying, ‘That’s all right. Tell me more.’”