

A PHOTOGRAPH, FRAMED

Lisa Kavchak

Although I know she wishes I would, I don't laugh when Danni shows me the photograph. I don't laugh for these reasons: it's miserably hot and my mood is lousy; I asked her not to show it to me; it's not funny.

"You've gone too far this time, Danni," I say from my bed, my cheeks burning as I avert my eyes—in shame, pity, recognition?—and let the photograph (a photograph she has carefully matted in a gilded frame as if in some obscene way she treasured it) slip from my hands and onto the floor where it lands beside my whirling fan with an accusing thud. I look hard at her, and wonder how anyone, even Danni, could find the images contained within that photograph funny.

I close my eyes, to try to forget the heat, to shut out Danni, to blink away the expressions written on the girl in the photograph's face—expressions I've worn before, surely, on my own face—terror, humiliation, helplessness. None of these things is funny if you can recognize another's pain, transfer and decode it into your own consciousness. But of course Danni isn't capable of this. Dannie recognizes nothing outside of herself and therefore bears no burden of other-awareness.

Danni is in fact at this moment roaring with laughter, her bare shoulders quivering, her face convulsed and glowing—no, beaming. It's too much, really, this display of hilarity at another's expense. But that's Danni. Danni is beautiful. Danni is a bitch. I love her and hate her with a ferocity that dismays everyone we know. She is my best friend.

The photograph that Danni has just shown me—the photograph that has just fallen, thankfully, face down on my bedroom floor—is a photograph in intent like all the others Danni has found it necessary to force upon me, a photograph symbolizing questions of such moral magnitude I'm certain the images contained within it will change my life forever. Everything I touch that was Danni's first alters me in some significant way. I haven't always been aware of this, and even now, in awareness, this knowledge doesn't mean a thing. I open my eyes and look at Danni, who is laughing still, and decide that today I will hate her more

than I love her.

I sit silent and watchful while she laughs, patient in the curiosity that has risen up inside me, patient also in my abhorrence of this curiosity, waiting for her to stop her convulsions, focus me into existence. She throws back her head and sighs a breathless “Oh God,” picks up the photograph and pushes in beside me on the bed.

“Isn’t it a riot?” she asks.

“It’s a riot, all right. Did you take it?”

“Of course I took it.” She glows, is evidently very pleased with this admission. Her eyes are sparkling and wet-looking—luminous.

“Why do you do these things? Why do you torment me with them when I’ve asked you not to?”

“Because I can,” she winks. “And because I know it excites you, even if you won’t admit it.”

I’m intrigued. I’m ashamed. I want to know everything. Danni must read this in my eyes—she hops onto her knees, leans in close to my ear.

“You should’ve seen her expression when she saw the camera,” she breathes, not noticing, or noticing, not acknowledging, how I wince when she says this. “I thought she was going to die. Really. It was priceless.”

She tucks her bottom lip into the thin space between her teeth, an act so spontaneous and artless—so beautiful—that I watch with unblinking eyes the color in her lip drain from raspberry pink into the palest of whites.

It is suddenly beyond stifling. In spite of my fan, which is now squealing loudly, grating on my taut nerves, there is no air circulating in this room. It must be one hundred degrees. I’m dizzy, the room spinning. I hover between the images of the photograph contained in the curve of Danni’s pink palm, the pink palm of Danni which contains the photograph. Which is more real? I realize I’m not breathing, am about to pass out. I concentrate, focus hard on Danni’s face. She smiles and nudges my leg with her knees. I breathe, ask what I know Danni knows I must now ask.

“How did you get her to do it?”

“There were ten of us. It was easy. We dragged her out to old man Satchell’s farm and threatened to tell her father she’s sleeping with that derelict Joe Watson. Of course she isn’t, but her father being the psycho he is, we had her.”

I reach over and take up the photograph from her lap. I gaze into the flash-stunned eyes of the girl captured for eternity on a piece of glossy paper in a pose she won't likely forget for an eternity, a pose that could cause irreparable damage to an already fragile psyche (the girl—I do not know her well—has a very public, very troubled family life). This ought to affect me profoundly. And it does—would—if it weren't for Danni. Danni makes it possible to ignore even this, this aberration, this degradation of the human spirit that isn't funny, no, in any reality but Danni's—my reality when I'm with Danni—is not funny at all.

It could be me on display in this photograph, I think, as I have on several occasions before. It could be, but it isn't. I look closely at the photograph, and for a moment, but only a moment, I convince myself that except for the eye and hair color, the shape and structure of the face, it *is* me.

For some reason this makes me laugh. I laugh and Danni joins me. Soon we're roaring, falling over each other on the bed, two young women, age 17, the best of friends. Through tears I watch Danni laugh as Danni watches me laugh. The air seems suddenly to have grown thinner, the heat, dissipated.

As for the girl in the photograph, the girl with her lips forever drawn back in a grimace as someone's disembodied hand guides the glistening sheep entrails into the black cavern of her mouth, that girl, this photograph I hold in my hand—a reproduction of a former reality, for that's all a photograph really is—what has she got to do with me, with Danni, with *now*? I have never really hated Danni.

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