

the Rambler

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a magazine of personal expression

What happens when
you're supposed to die,
**AN INTERVIEW
WITH ACTOR
AND AUTHOR
EVAN HANDLER**
but then you don't...

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know where you're going
till you get left there

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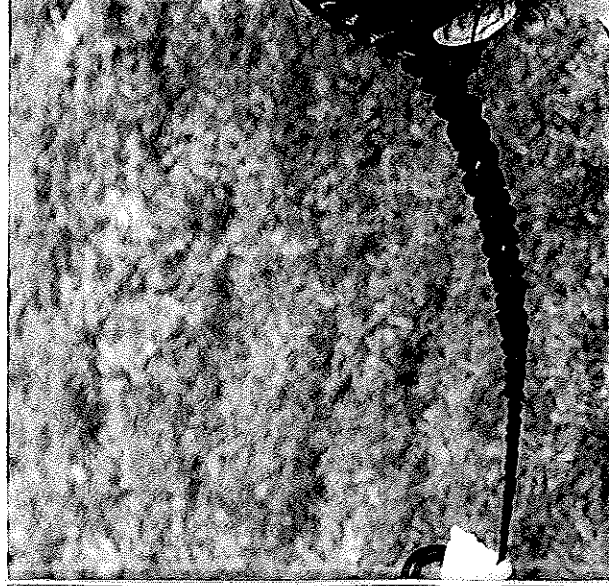
by Julie Wittes

Walking home from work today, I passed a homeless guy, a street person, giving a zealous performance. He clutched a drinking straw like a crooner's microphone and sang an unrecognizable tune, accompanied by music that only he could hear. Maybe the juice box pecking out of his pocket was the orchestra to his crumpled and filthy straw. He reminded me of you, not more than four years old, sitting in the backseat on a long drive home, listening to your Walkman, to Big Bird and Pete Seeger.

With a child's incredible tolerance for repetition, you listened to this tape over and over again, and every minute or so, as the chorus came around, like some happy lunatic you roared, "Don't you ever forget the words of Martha Lurba King!" You sang, as you did most things then, with gusto.

Do you recall that trip, those minutes and hours of arid, uninhibited joy? I ask because clearly we have different views of our history, apart and together. I will not try to persuade you that yours is wrong. I will only share what I do and don't remember.

In your first weeks of life, as you cried from midnight to three a.m., tearless wails would rick your tiny body, your face would turn red and hot to the touch, and you would scream, inconsolable. "Poor little girl," I'd whisper. "You don't know what's happening to you." I'd hold you, rock you, feed you, sing to you, pace with you, spend those deep night hours



scared and sad that I couldn't seem to help you, wishing that your father were home instead of at work, wishing that you would sleep so I could sleep, feeling so helpless at first, then so resigned as I grew to predict it, to weather it. I taught myself to accept your pain, to see it as a normal phenomenon of growth and life in general. And by the time you were seven I saw that you experienced minor slights as major rebuffs, little aches and bumps as enormous physical insults, so I started to set the bar higher, to demand proof that something was really wrong. And so I guess I trained you to deliver.

I remember watching you sit beside your friend on the roof of the log playhouse at school. It was recess; the playground was bubbling with flushed and dashing children, racing each other with sneakered feet and high-pitched voices. The two of you sat above it all, glum and silent. Arms crossed, you stared down at the darting, yelling kids, exuding an almost palpable sense of needing to be anywhere but there. You looked distant

even from your friend, perched precariously on the peak of the playhouse roof.

Soon came the poems and drawings, vivid with darkness, strewn around your floor with the dirty laundry, the chewing gum wrappers, animal stamps, Dylan lyrics, postcards, photos of your sister, wads of tear-drenched toilet paper—debris that seemed to mirror your soul.

I don't remember the analysts or the context. But I do remember the defiance I felt in those years, the love and pride surging through me at those glorious moments when you'd grin or show a flash of insight or make a joke or offhandedly say something breathtakingly smart, reflecting that abstract, mathematical, powerful, and irrepressible mind of yours. *She thinks too much, she feels too much, but isn't the world better for having people like her in it?* I'd think, challenging some invisible army of judges.

Last night I dreamt I was in Japan. I was silent, living in a

silent coastal village on which a tsunami was bearing down. In the dream, I knew that if I swam out to greet the wave, if I swam *into* it, I could delay the catastrophe. I stretched out in the water, feeling like a bobbing seal, and the water, the single enormous wave, was black and smooth as granite. It pulled me in and steadily up to its crest, and I rose and rose, defying gravity, jettisoned into wakefulness before the wave ever broke.

Awake, I realized that the catastrophe has already happened. Some inner earthquake has made you rise and cast me off in your thundering rush to a distant shore. And me, I've washed up on the wrecked beach, gasping for breath.

I don't remember how it felt to be adored by you, but I know I was.

Sometimes I imagine that the phone will ring and it will be your husband calling. He'll tell me that you've been in an accident, that you're in a coma, that I should come. And then in my fantasy, I'm sitting by your bed, holding your hand, stroking your forehead, calm now that I can see you. You open your eyes, blink a few times. I can see consciousness form behind your eyes, and I hold my breath. Then you smile your glorious smile, and it's clear that you're all back, that you're going to be fine, that you recognize who I am.

I don't remember when I last saw you—that is, not the time of year, just the luscious green of the rain-bathed trees and the desolation of having to leave you. *