THRILL PHOTOS

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Illustrations by Scott Neary

H. chose one.
She held the photo near the cone-shaded light bulb. Its glare further concealed the dissimulating pall of over-exposure. The picture had the nakedness of poor artifice, too.

"A charming innocence..." she called it.
She set the picture on the desk. The light bulb's glare made it almost invisible. H. moved it a bit.
She squinted at the picture.
She liked the toe of the high-heeled boot, the way the point seemed to rest unconvincingly on the floor, and the way the front of its ankle nearly brushed the heel of the other—by a storkish contraction of the leg; while the unbuttoned skirt (so arranged to reveal the graceful curve of naked thigh) draped narrow folds over the leather encased calves; and the hips were creased by a wide, inflexible black belt. Concealed by the ranunculi, the head might actually have been looking out of the rear window rather than at the pages of the book.

Only certain ludicrous and mundane photographs from advertisements interested H. As a child she'd often cut out pictures of actresses and models from magazines and newspapers. Then, tracing the outline of their dresses with a scissors, careful not to destroy any detail of lace or applique, she tried to remove their dresses. She'd hoped to find, when lifting the paper dress, a body of paper, the grey breasts and black nipples of the black-and-white photograph. Now, each time she cut and peeled a paper dress, peeling the body away into thin air, a wave traveled vertically through her own body. It was as if she were peeling away her own skin.

H. moved to another photograph. In this one a woman in tight skirt and high black heels had been moving slowly up a staircase with her back to the viewer. Her wide-brimmed hat left her neck in shadow, and her own shadow was compressed against the adjoining wall. The shadow of the railing opposite her formed a black line broken into regular zig-zags by the ascending steps. One hand rested on her hips, and with the other she steadied herself against the wall. Indeed, there was a hollow, insubstantial quality to the image—owing partially perhaps to the height and thinness of the skyscraper heels, which made contact with the steps only at two tiny points on the page.

There were photographs which H. carefully collected simply because they obsessed her for reasons that she could not understand... and more maddening
that their appearance was unpredictable, guileless, and in the most banal of circumstances. These black and white masterpieces, masquerading under the guise of the utilitarian or the disposable, had a power over her which seemed to increase with the monotony of their recurrences, when the photo was underexposed with just the right mixture of intention and inattention, when the model artlessly betrayed her own needs—or moreover—moved in the opposite direction—her identity drowning in her pose.

"How thrilling, being blindfolded! Envyable and truly feminine."

Though her head was tilted against the receiver, H. did not answer.

"Are you there?" V.'s voice hissed through the receiver. "I've often confessed to a great fondness for it. When I was carried over the threshold for the first time I was tightly blindfolded and saw the house from top to bottom through my fingers."

But H. had already fallen asleep, the receiver on the pillow next to her, and the phone cord lying across her neck.

She woke up and removed her sleep mask with difficulty. The sharp light at the dressing table stung her eyes. She set the picture on the desk and tried to fathom its purpose. A model, advertising a household object, held it before her face, aping uncomplicated delight.

Handling the barber shears surgically, she brought its point toward the corner of the photograph. The gleaming edge of the scissors would caress the crease of the model's glove. It slid into the burning paper with a dry, pulverizing sound. H.'s thighs creased together as the scissors closed in one hand. The paper fell away leaving just an oval border around the model. Disconnected from its setting, the model's pose was even more compelling.

The idea of a conspiracy involving models posing for easily reproduced photographs that left no traces of evidence obsessed her more and more. The models were easy enough to buy off, and in imitating actions and feelings to which they had no connection there were great possibilities of control.

H. languidly peeled a stocking from one raised foot. The thing fell away like a faint outline of her leg. She let it float to the ground. Once undressed she put on a sheer grey nightgown. Caressing the scissors, she brought its point carefully toward the pulp image. The model's face was frozen in a meaningless smile. She held the thing toward the cone-shaded light bulb and began to cut. After she had traced the outline of the body she began to dissect it with the scissors, and suddenly it came alive. Like a snail, which one moment appearing lifeless suddenly issues from its shell, the paper began to ooze.

She removed the arms with the scissors, they seemed to quiver in her fingers like caterpillars; and she held a tiny paper thigh in the palm of her hand, which, like the heart of a freshly killed fish, continued for a moment its independent pulsations. It was only when the fingers were snapped at the joints, the nose cut in half, and the arms cut beneath the elbow and above the wrist that the thing became paper again.

H. went on and on in a strangely obsessive manner, making this and other confessions to the man lying in bed next to her, while simultaneously relishing their details. There was, for instance, the man she had met in the city, noted for his durability. He'd pressed her to such extremes that night she'd suffered fits of vertigo all the next day.

Or the one who liked her to describe every detail of applying her makeup. She sat at the dressing table before a large mirror, carefully mixing the thick base she would later apply to her face, to hide the marks it had already received that evening.
Jars of powder, creams or vials of perfume were spread out before her in a loose semicircle. She spoke slowly, watching herself in the large mirror.

"Just scissors, but then the model's face's got to be concealed. Otherwise the whole effect is ruined."

"I'm certain of it. They use a polaroid camera. No evidence whatsoever."

She rang for Therese. "Bring me the package I sent for!"

The maid returned with a small tube of face mask. A sentence on the back of the tube caught H.'s attention: Watch its shrinkage effect without speech or movement.

H. spread the semitransparent liquid over her features. Then she sat motionless at the dressing table reflected in the mirror. On her lap and on the table (among jars of cream, boxes of powder, and vials of perfume) were cut-outs of figures of models. In conventional poses of mystery they were advertising utilitarian objects. With one hand H. touched the scissors resting on the glass surface of the table. With the other she raised one of the cut-outs close to her face. Then she set the figure down and began to remove the mask.

H. told the man lying next to her that she had a fascination for all masks, and rarely retired without a sleep shade to keep out the light. This predilection stemmed from early adolescence when, because of a skin infection, the doctor had told her she would never be able to use cosmetics again. To make matters worse he had given her a sickly yellow salve which she had had to wear all over her face. Soon after, the idea came to her of wearing a loose white cotton sock over her face which could be secured and kept smooth by an elastic band around the neck. She raised it only to eat or drink until the infection had been cured.

Grasping the edges of the rubber mask with her fingertips while simultaneously trying to keep her chin away from her neck, H. leaned forward. From the side she gave the impression of being about to drop the loosening mask in her lap. Bent over the paper figures, with the mask adhering to her hands, she revealed her face, whose skin's fluorescence in the uncompromising light at the dressing table seemed the same color as the peeling rubber. There was, then, only the illusion that she was trying to peel off her own features.

In fact, the cut-outs of paper photos showing models posed to falsify already suspicious emotions had begun to interest her more and more. If they themselves did not participate in emotions which the rest of us were simulating when we did not know that we were, then there were great possibilities for profit and control. She kept the photos with her constantly, never losing her sense of amusement over their commonness and easy availability. Thousands were scattered about the room. They were spread all over the floor, the bed, and the dressing table, as well as on her lap.

He walked toward her with the scissors, saying it would be fun to cut out paper eyes and lips and paste them on the blank face created by a tightly secured cotton stocking. As time went on, however, she desired a greater sense of restriction and pressure around her face. First, a folded handkerchief was pushed into her mouth and her lips were sealed with a wide piece of adhesive tape. Then a pad of cotton was taped over each eye. A length of flesh-colored jersey cloth was wound tightly around her head, pressing the nose flatly against the cheekbone and drawing the mouth painfully apart in a kind of grimace. Over this was fastened a finely woven black silk stocking. With the features flattened out of sight the face became a shiny black oval. She could hear, but all she could see were large shadows.

She sat at the dressing table, lost in thought, as her reflection hovered before her in the mirror. In the harsh, flat light, she formed a fertile, opaque image with the
newly created black and grey figures spread out on her lap. She bent toward them, lifted the mask away from her face, splaying her fingers so that the rubber stretched and separated into long strands.

She told him about the party they'd gone to, she in a long black dress underneath which her legs were encased in a narrow ankle-length petticoat only a little wider than a trouser leg. Beeswax had been placed in her ears as well as the usual cotton. And her head had been locked in the leather featureless mask with the zipper mouth.

As the mirror darkened the hardened rubber detached itself from her face and the image peeled with it, a mask of flickering light which adhered to her fingers. She remembered that sensation—the pressure of the last turns of elastic around her forehead, eyes and throat when her features seemed to be spewing forth from her face into another dimension.

Among the black and white cut-outs, a transparent image attached to her fingertips was projected more than three feet from her head. It was a grey twodimensional thing. At intervals a white flash burst from it that dropped sparks in her lap. The mask hovered on her fingertips, concave, a hemisphere of grey or yellow light like a convergence of bees on the nodule of a branch forming a negative image of a face. She held it at arm's length and carefully made it up while she ignored the mirror. The lips were brushed with an oily purplish black, a grey shading was added to the cheeks and burning white to the eyeballs. The image hovered a moment before the mirror and then dropped into her lap like a dead ash...

But what else can be said about her? It's like trying to describe an overexposed snapshot of an unknown model who—perhaps desperate for a small sum of money—has blankly surrendered her oval face to the concave circle of some exploding flash guard.