

Tuumba II

Series 2

NO SLEEP

by Barbara Baracks

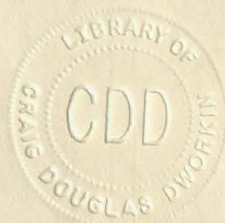


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NO SLEEP

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No sleep is a matter of habit. After a few days of it I drift into the perceptions of a dreamer, slipping among objects in a viscous fluid. The inner voice is vigorous, but when I speak out loud trails of logic wander away. A few moments of sleep recharge the cycle, sloughing off layers of fatigue. Each time I reawaken I've brought back bits and pieces from my childhood, to see for the first time from the outside.

Today the morning shot through with the most brilliant light, the one tree a green so deep it answers for itself. Red bricks around it spread into buildings, apartments burned out, tattered muslin curtains at the windows, pigeons flying in and out of the gutted apartments, rushing into the open sky.

A lost set of even earlier memories behind these intact membranes: the taste of babyfood, the hot summer when Japanese beetles seemed to generate of their own accord in clumps on the lawn, learning to turn on the TV set by myself. When I ate food filled first the feet, then legs, the torso, and finally the head. After dark snow fell in chunks big as mattresses to get that deep.

When the little girl thinks her mother is god, how is she dissuaded? By finding out that half the time her mother is lying her ass off. The fallen god is shit: inevitable and bittersweet. And so my mother and I resent each other when we meet. Your sister flew in from Cleveland when I was born because you were too nervous to hold me. I bet at that point you would have dropped me down a well if they'd let you. You did the next best thing, socially acceptable: you never let me stray from the circumference of your eye, to protect yourself from your revenge running full circle and snuffing me out anyway, delicious secret desire. And so for years I swallowed sticky balls of anxiety by your side. Only recently have I linked this to later fantasies of being retarded or crippled. These fantasies were potent as sex, and for a while I confused them with sex: sense of wonder in limitation, shutting down reflexes, delight in a giant trap.

Bald man in red knitted cap.

Conjure ultimate movie torture scene. Man camping out falls asleep by pot of water boiling on campfire. Somebody comes by and pours the boiling water on his face.

My mother napping on the couch wakes up. The phone is ringing.

I learned not to look like something that just came down a laundry chute.

I went downstairs to get the mail. One bank credit reference, one magazine, one love letter. In that order?

My parents' house had been built in 1951—the year I was born — just before the development house boom. It stood at the juncture of three housing developments which shot up within the next few years. The developments gathered families from specific geographic locations, and evidently recruited by religion. There was a Catholic development project, a Protestant one, and one that was mixed Protestant-Jewish. The kids from the Catholic project were Irish and Italian, had just come from the city, and were very tough, setting fire to the back of the school bus and beating up the bus driver. The kids from the Protestant development dressed very well, and the kids from the Protestant-Jewish development—the children of Protestant FBI investigators and Jewish dentists—were noisy but never hit, only threw things sometimes.

Each year the school district bus schedule decided my fate. If I rode with the Protestant development I'd look out the window and yawn a lot. If I was allotted to the Protestant-Jewish development I'd holler and throw things with them. Or, and I trembled each August when the county newspaper published the charts, I'd ride with the Catholic development. As luck would have it that's what happened in seventh grade.

About half-a-dozen guys on my bus, developing the voice and physique of Marine sergeants, dominated the daily ride. Sitting among them the first few days, I was frightened for no apparent reason: I was being ignored. But my split perception couldn't tolerate remaining silent. I was distressingly literal when I took things in, a slavish imitator of certain kids, or TV images, or random adult moral codes (for instance a Walter Scott cleaned-up medieval code). But when I let things out, that is, when I talked, I tried to enter into the flat images with a language inversion: often I'd say the opposite of

what I really meant, and was genuinely bewildered when people didn't understand that by cold I meant hot. And talking, at that time, was as compulsive as breathing. Unless I made a wedge of speech aggressing into physical space I feared I wasn't there at all. The patter was supposed to be funny.

I was not, of course, funny. It didn't help that I was that classic Jewish kid with books and glasses in a busload of kids whose parish priest had specifically forbidden them to attend the bar and bas mitzvahs cropping up. Woody Allen would have found them a hard audience, and as for me, the best I could do was exude a negative charisma, conspicuously vulnerable. It's a lot easier for me to analyze this than to find specific visual incidents. The spitting boy behind me who said, "It's only spit, there wasn't a clam in it." The girl who needled me until we erupted in a screaming, kicking fight all the way to school where we were hauled—me sobbing, she stoic—into the vice-principal's office. The kids mocking our bus driver's subnormal intelligence and his lack of a couple of fingers on his right hand (he was rumored to be the brother of the bus company owner). Evenings I spent at home terrified of the next day, pacing the cellar floor where no one could hear my steps.

There's a moral postlude to this, straight out of Sir Walter. A few years later in high school I was hitchhiking, and got a ride from one of those kids, who'd grown his hair long and dropped out of school. He lit a joint, passed it to me, and apologized profusely for the bad time he'd given me, said he'd felt awful during that time. I'd like to look up some of the others I rode with, find out what they remember about that time, and what's become of us since.

I was in high school conducting experiments in sex and drugs. But when my parents caught wind of it they decided to sign papers consigning me to a period of "voluntary" admission to Rockland State Mental Hospital. Voluntary in the sense that I, a minor, was volunteered.

Now, once you've been put away, coming back is a different story altogether. It's got little to do with the discovery that drugs and sex inside Rockland State were a lot harder than their high school counterparts. Nor does it have much to do with reputation, since it was soon enough time to leave home for better things. It has to do with living in a place where fantasy is just deformed imagination, which leads to underdoggedness. . . and doesn't the dog whining, genuinely want to be whipped, as proof of its place?

A creature my own age taught me how to mop the stairwells. "You've got to broomscrub, broomscrub, to get all the dirt out." She loved that place and her place in it, as she did every institution she'd spent her life in, such as the home for the retarded. When I was first admitted she interviewed me with an insane patience, a pseudo-job good for staff laughs.

"That attendant told everybody he wanted to get between my fat thighs," the pregnant hooker told me, and, as all could see, he did, then quit his job to keep his record clean. The other pregnant woman on the ward had been dumped there by her family; the nurses got a kick out of her—they liked to stand around and comment while she showered in the open stalls. Eventually a screening panel composed of social workers and psychiatrists and such, convened with great dignity in the cavernous bathroom, questioned and released me. The unease I still feel around people with power comes from fearing the servility in myself at that time, the mindless reflex of the abject.

Despite the gun embankments, rusty war equipment, and rubble craters littering the mountain, there were no paths through the underbrush. All that summer in 1968, after riding my bicycle thirty or forty miles each day between hostels or pensions, I read French pornography and Oxford histories of Mesopotamia, with limited comprehension. The pleated ground forced us into following a looping circuit of ridges, sometimes looking out over Marseille and the sea, sometimes facing the inland rolls of hills. The two boys from the hostel I was climbing with hardly mattered: we were here out of breakfast conservation, and had scarcely said a word since.

I was in the practice that summer of riding my bike through intersections without looking for oncoming cars; I wanted to find out if they would actually hit me. The point was to be open to accidental factors and I interpreted that absolutely literally. In the same line I was climbing mountains like crazy. Up the last slope of scree I swayed in the vertigo stirred by the finger of hot breeze.

The way back down wasn't as easy. Our make-shift paths were continually interrupted by chasms camouflaged by scrub. Without the goal of the peak it was endlessly confusing, and throughout the long afternoon we repeatedly had to climb up trying to find a new way down. Probably half an army once hid here. As we became thirsty and footsore, unsure if we were genuinely in trouble, our chief reaction was anger—we hadn't expected this adventure to hurt. We got worked up enough to climb down cliffs first judged too hazardous, tear through sharp-thorned thickets, stumble in semi-darkness across clearings of rock, all to reach the road back to town in the soft evening.

Late one night when no sleep was exercising on my typewriter somebody knocked on the door. It was a cop in plainclothes, claiming he thought he'd seen from the street somebody on my apartment building's roof. For reasons unclear to me it was necessary to knock on my door first. We talked for a while on the theory and practice of noises on roofs, and eventually he ducked back into the hall, and up the stairs to the roof. If anyone had been up there, he'd certainly have completed his business by then. And so a few minutes later there was another knock on my door. It was the cop: he came in, we discussed photography and other polite matters, and eventually he got around to asking me out for a date. I used the steady boyfriend bit (it almost never fails).

Only after he left did it dawn on me he could have been any lunatic on the loose with a mangy police department card; or he could have been any horny cop with his gun and word against mine, and had his date right there at two a.m. I live on a time delay while I separate the real threats from false alarms, caught—or rather, fascinated—by the sheer absurdity, the improbability, of the situation and the presumptions behind it. This time I was so thoroughly separated I watched myself play out a ridiculous good will routine while my mind went through baroque logic to arrive at the obvious conclusion: don't let this guy in.

This writing was translated into videotape twice. Marcy Brafman shot scenes of me reading and acting out an earlier version of *No Sleep* in Manhattan; then we took the hour-and-a-half bus ride out to my parents' house, where she shot my parents and me trying to deal with some of the problems the writing had raised. We played back the discussion on my parents' TV set and watched ourselves become strident, blocking each other with the thud of football interception.

A couple days later Marcy and I spent a day and part of the night editing down all this tape to make a half-hour cable television broadcast. These images played over and over in a midtown editing studio accelerated the shrinking begun by all this harping on my past. Everyone knows that video heightens self-consciousness, but by pointing the video camera in the particular direction of my past I was being drawn into the mental set of that time. The confident adulthood I'd varnished on in thin layers had dissolved: leaving a nervous twelve-year-old making stupid jokes and intimidated by the casual sexual signalling endemic to this television advertising agency. The next day I had my hair cut as a marker for having time travelled and come back.

I brought the videotape and a revised version of the text to Buffalo for a performance a couple weeks later. The tape had quickly aged, and I spent a lot of the performance time criticizing its inaccuracies—its attitudinizing. A second videotape was being made of this performance, one which framed the first tape with me outside of it, talking about it, fielding questions from the audience, turning the tape deck off now and then to read or think out loud for a while. In the thick of this walked a filmmaker who had spent the last few months in Buffalo destroying himself and trying to do the same to the people around him. Recently he'd provoked a hooker in the red

light district into stabbing him three times; he'd just come out of the hospital the second time for those injuries, having almost died from a collapsed lung. He'd made a habit lately of disrupting performances and openings (including his own) and despite his shaky condition, couldn't miss the opportunity to go hunting at mine.

He was drunk in the way that stiffens all movement (accentuated by the wounds) and he entered in a white karate outfit and impenetrably dark glasses. Looking neither to left nor right, he walked into my performance space and sat in an armchair putting him in full audience and camera view. Beginning at a low mutter, his voice gradually rose to a running commentary on the videotape. Finally audible to myself and the entire room, he was cursing my mother, talking on the monitor, calling her a "cunt," and "whore," not to mention "liar." I exploded, telling him if he didn't shut the fuck up I'd give him three more knife wounds to bleed about. One of the gallery's directors strongarmed him out, leaving behind this solid continuum of myself and my mother.

She'd always made me furious, this housewife with two college degrees who refused to learn to drive and hadn't held a job since she became pregnant with me. Child of immigrant Russian Jews, she graduated from Ohio State at nineteen, then picked up an M.A. from the New York School of Social Work—the professional modern way to turn the social tables. She worked for a few agencies, edited a social worker's journal, moved to San Francisco, and went away for a weekend to an Arizona Ranch. It rained all three days and she stayed indoors getting to know the man who would become my father. He made sure he went in the same car with her back to the city, and kept on visiting her, spending weekends at her place.

They got married on condition that he give up his

cushy but travelling government job and open up a private law practice. Since he didn't want to spend a year studying for the California bar exam, they reluctantly moved to New York, where originally he'd received his law degree at night school. Already in their thirties, they looked for the house and had the kids right away, a girl then a boy.

What they'd assumed was semi-rural in short order became suburban, though the town didn't acquire a movie theater or traffic lights until I was fifteen. But the people and pressures were suburban, and the land as an entity was quickly eroding: each strawberry patch and neck of the woods fast replaced by new development houses. Undoubtedly one source of my anxiety overload is the incredible ease with which each site of play and fantasy was chewed up by developers from one day to the next.

Twenty-five years after they moved in I paid a visit back home, last summer, and my mother finally made the blanket statement she'd been hinting at all this time. "Women are generally less interesting than men," she told me. "And you're no exception."

"You hate yourself and me, that's all," I said. "You have no idea what people are doing now."

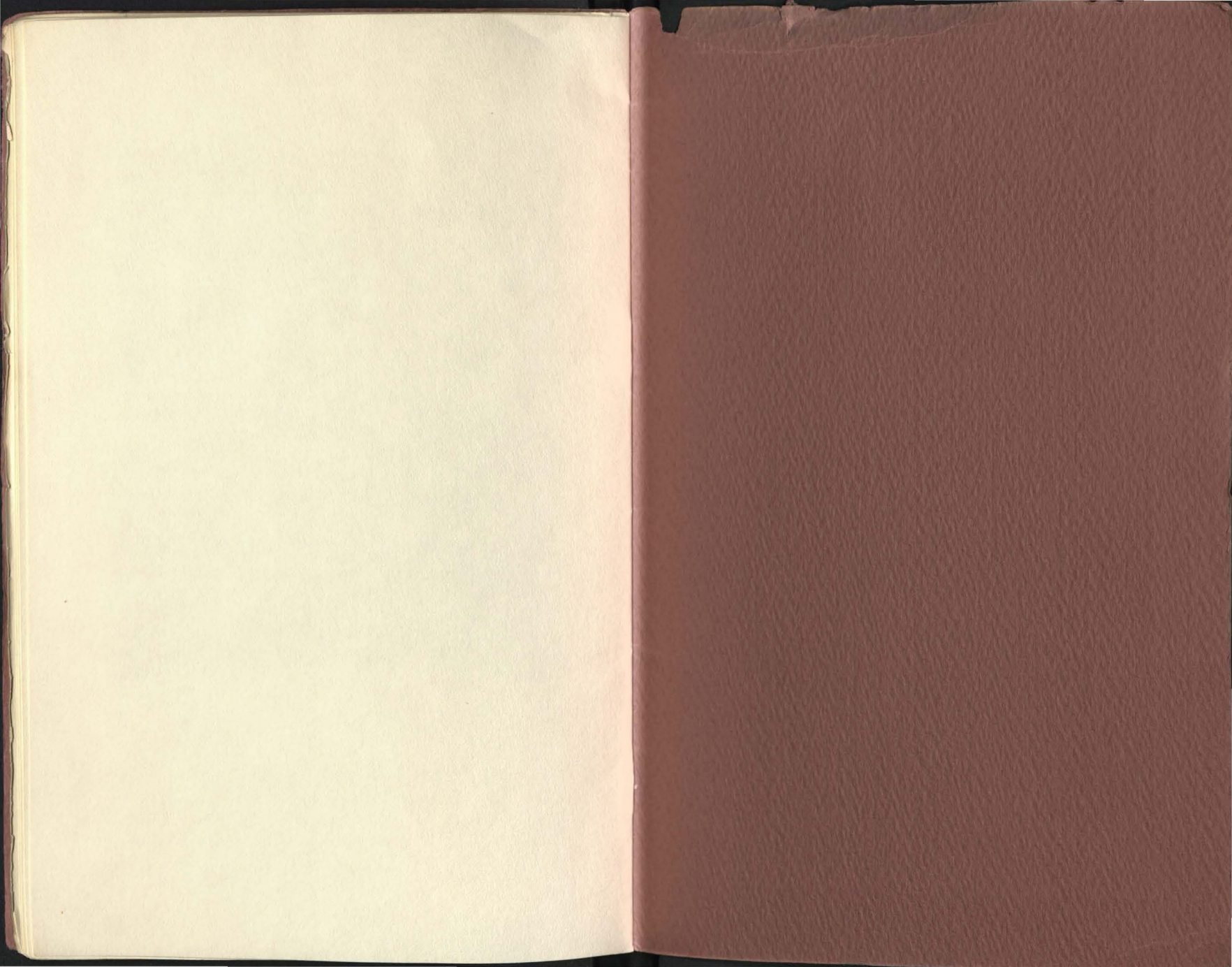
"But I wanted to have you, dear," she said. "And you hardly ever know what's happening in the news. Anyway, I have everything I want: my husband, my children. I know what the score is and I'm a lot happier than you are." She gave me a big smile to prove it.

I could have throttled her. But I was civilized these days. "You fucking bitch," I said. Ten years ago my father would have smacked me good for that, but now he and my brother rose discreetly from the table. These weren't their waters—let the ladies slug it out. We didn't of course. She made a few remarks on how she'd always

been proud of both her children, and saw urgency in clearing away the supper dishes.

I once did hit my mother. I was twelve and tall. I hit her, was blind with rage over something, and when I hit her in the face I felt something give. I ran out in the woods, finally stopping at the bridge over the falls. It was winter and milky icicles bared teeth over the gorge. "I've disfigured her," I thought, and tried to jump, but couldn't, too evil even for that. The heat of emotion finally chilled and I slunk home: I had given her a black eye and she wore sunglasses that week through Lincoln's birthday. I was definitely the most unnatural. . . should be caged. . . but I wasn't really punished for this, and I washed down my insides with confused anger.

This wretched defusing never stops. The filmmaker came back later that night and began shouting how much we hated him, enumerating a long list of the people in the room whom he hated back. The general consensus was to ignore his ploy. And true to prediction, denied of attention he eventually left. This is reasonable and the way things must work; but, like the filmmaker, my violence tears me apart just when things are calming down. An acquaintance of mine, I once found out through friends, had terminal cancer of the lymph system; the next time I saw her I found myself referring, compulsive as a nervous tic, to death. I just couldn't leave bad enough alone.



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