

The Diane Arbus Suicide Portfolio

by Marc Laidlaw

* * * *

“You’ll like this,” said Schaeffer as he let Brovnik into the apartment. “She was a photographer.”

Brovnik chuckled unhappily till the smell hit him; it fit right in with the buzzing of flies. The other cops’ hard shoes clapped on the uncarpeted boards of the hall; their voices echoed in the cluttered flat. Brovnik walked slowly, as if in a sweltering museum. Dozens of unmounted photographs were thumbtacked to the walls, curled by the July humidity. Schaeffer went into the bathroom with everyone else. Brovnik wasn’t in any hurry to learn the cause of the splashing he heard. He bent close to a picture of a white girl standing against a canvas tent, her head thrown back, arms spread wide, the hilt of a sword and part of the blade poking out of her gullet. The other pictures were just as freakish. He liked them.

“Come on, Bravo!”

He walked into the small tiled bathroom. Too many cops in it, and a humid jungle reek, tainted with carrion. Water dripped from the mirror.

“Give him some room, guys.”

The body slumped in the tub, mostly submerged, short-cropped thick brown hair matted on the surface like seagrass exposed at low tide. She was fully dressed. One arm floated, propped on a knee, the hand looking swollen and peeled. The water was murky pink. Streamers of red, like those little crepe-paper flowers you get in Chinatown; drop a clamshell in water so it slowly opens and a tissue flower unfurls. The room was too small and muggy. He clutched his camera gratefully to his face, confining vision to one small window on a distorted tunnel with suicide at the far end. Her other arm hung over one side of the tub, skin sucked in between the tendons. He nearly stepped in blood as he walked around to get a better angle. It was tacky, two days old, kept from hardening by humidity.

When he finished, the others came back in. He stood in the living room, smoking, agitated. Why? Because she was a photographer? He looked over more of the woman’s prints. Dwarfs, giants, freaks, a man covered with tattoos. Wonder what kind of mind she’d had, to take pictures like this.

A few photos lay spread out on the couch, as if she’d been looking them over while the water was running. He didn’t want to disturb them, but the one on top disturbed him. The last thing she’d seen? A picture of Death standing in a freshly mown field; Death as a woman in a Halloween skull, clutching a white sheet around her. Hell, she’d gone rattling around with a head full of death, hunting it with her camera. He couldn’t understand a mind like that. With his job, it was different. He

was a cop first, a photographer second, though these days he didn't do much of anything but photography and lab administration.

Schaeffer came up next to him, pointing at a picture of a shirtless Latin midget in a hat sitting on a bed with a bottle on the nightstand next to him. Schaeffer nudged him.

“What do you think, she slept with that dwarf to get his picture?”

“You're sick,” Brovnik said.

“Me? She's the one in the bath.”

“Bravo, hey,” came a call from the bathroom. “You drop something in here?”

He walked back toward the bathroom, trying to see no more of the interior than he had to. Morrissey came out with a crumpled yellow foil film packet.

“|Messy, messy,” he said.

“Fuck you, Morrissey. I'm shooting 35--that's a 120 wrapper.”

“Where'd you pick that up from?” Schaeffer said.

Morrissey suddenly looked pale and stupid. “It was under the tub. 1-1 remember right where.”

“You fucking idiot.” Schaeffer raised a hand as if to strike him. “She was a photographer, too.”

Morrissey scurried backward into the bathroom, Schaeffer right behind him. Brovnik looked around the room at all the prints; most were square, two-and-a-quarter format, would have been shot on 120 roll film. Nice big negatives, real sharp. He had this little Pentax, light and quick, good enough for police work though it always felt too small in his hands.

He looked around the room for her camera while Schaeffer bawled out Morrissey, and finally found it in an open case behind the couch. He shivered when he saw she had a Pentax too.

How did rumors get started? How did they leak? Brovnik could never figure those things out. On the strength of a foil wrapper, the tabloids were claiming that the lady had somehow managed to photograph her own suicide. The press had called all day asking if the police planned to release the photographs. Denying their existence didn't help. If the department said it didn't have the photographs, the reporters asked who did. Who'd been in her apartment to take the shots? Did they have any leads?

Leads on a suicide? He had to laugh.

Brovnik was surprised that there had been any interest at all in the woman's death. He'd never thought of photography as "art." But apparently she was known," and all this was just making her known. He wondered if she'd ever have guessed that sliding into a warm bath and opening her wrists would prove to be such a canny career move. Whatever her reasons, she hadn't wanted to flub the attempt; what was left of her blood had been rich in barbiturates.

Reading the papers, he learned a few things himself. Her name was--had been--Diane Arbus. She'd had a few shows, some critical success, though mainly she'd made her living as a fashion photographer. Hard to imagine how a mind like hers would portray glamorous models . . . wrap them in funeral shrouds, black veils?

In the lab, he looked over his own photographs with a more critical eye. The glaring flash had burned out the water in most of the shots, hiding the lines of her sunken body; hard to avoid that. He remembered how harsh the flash effects had been in her photographs. Deliberate? It must have been. She'd worked to get an effect like the one he came up with accidentally. That made him feel better about his pictures. She might've liked police work. Her interest in freaks and death and all that crap . . . reality. It would've been more than just a job to her. And how happy he'd be photographing gorgeous models all day instead of bloodbaths, car crashes, double homicides. God, give him an opportunity like that and he wouldn't waste it on dwarves.

Seeing things afresh, he felt inspired to go through some of his backfiles. Torso murders, decapitations, stabbings, mob killings. Not half bad, most of them. He kind of liked the grainy effects, the harsh lighting that sent deep shadows sprawling like duplicate corpses. Weegee had gotten famous with pictures like these. Not too surprising, really. People fed on this stuff. Consider the popularity of public executions.

A secretary opened the door and told him there was a call for him. No name. She put it through to the lab phone.

"Good evening, Inspector Brovnik. I understand you took some photographs of Diane Arbus in her bath." A woman's voice, small, raspy and hoarse. "I wonder if you'd be interested in a trade."

"Who is this?"

"Just a friend."

"Whose friend?"

"I took the other set."

Brovnik didn't speak for a moment.

"Are you still there, Inspector? Or getting this call traced?"

“That was your 120 wrapper?”

“I photographed Diane’s suicide. Twelve frames. The whole thing. Everything except the aftermath, really, and you took those. I’d like good copies if I can get them, to make my set complete.”

“And what about your set? Do I get a look at those?”

“As I said, we could arrange a trade.”

“You know, the investigation on a suicide is fairly straightforward. You telling me that someone else was involved, suddenly things start to look more complicated. You’re asking for trouble.”

“She killed herself, inspector Brovnik. She didn’t have an accomplice.”

“What about you? You stood back and snapped off a dozen shots while your so-called friend bled to death?”

“Understand, she didn’t want her death to be for nothing. She wanted those pictures taken.”

“And what’d she think she would do with them?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“Look, I can’t make this kind of deal, Miss--”

“You don’t need my name. And if you involve anyone else, then you won’t hear from me again. I got in touch with you because you’re a photographer. I thought there might be some understanding between us.”

“Understanding?”

“Consider that I’m Diane’s agent in this matter, Inspector. There has to be an element of trust. As an artist, you should be able to make the necessary intuitive leap.”

“Who said I was an artist?”

“You photographed Diane in death. Your eye has been changed . . . touched. I’m very interested in seeing your work.”

“This is crazy.”

“All right, so you need to think about it. I’ll get back to you soon. I don’t care who knows about the pictures once we’ve made our trade, but until then, you must act alone or it’s all off. I’m eager for those pictures but I won’t risk exposure. Diane wouldn’t want that.”

“How can you be so sure what she’d want? I mean, look what she wanted for herself.”

“She was very hard on herself. Goodbye, Inspector.”

“Wait--”

But she didn’t wait. After that, he had to live with his impatience for another week.

He didn’t mention the call to anyone, contrary to his plans. He printed a duplicate set of the suicide photos, taking more care in the darkroom than ever before. He managed to burn some detail into the glare of flash on the bath water, enough so that he could see one of her hands with the fingers gently splayed beneath the surface, as if bathed in mercury. He worked long past his regular hours. Her curled prints were always tacked up in his memory, examples of an ideal he’d never known to strive for until now. He found himself working to extract subtle qualities of mood and tone from the negatives, fluttering his fingers beneath the enlarger lens, controlling contrast with split-bath developers--things he’d never bothered with before, except when making bad negatives into acceptable prints. Gradually he found the glossy bright snaps of death becoming utterly strange to him, unlike his other photographs which became more commonplace as he worked them over. These were beautiful, like paintings done in silver; morbid but alive in the way only photographs are alive. Finally he stood back from his handiwork and shook his head in disbelief, because he had made her poor drowned corpse immortal.

It was an awful responsibility. That night, late, the phone rang and he came awake to the reek of sulfur. It was on his hands and made his eyes sting when he wiped away tears. What had he been dreaming?

“It’s me,” said the raspy little voice, and that was when he realized why it sounded so odd. It was a dwarf voice; gruff with age and tribulation, not squeaky but still small. This was one of Arbus’s weird women.

“So it is,” he said. “But it’s the middle of the night.”

“I thought you’d be more likely to come alone that way.”

“What, now?”

“Have you got a pencil?”

He thought of telling her he didn’t have the prints with him, but he found himself grabbing a pen and pad instead. He wrote down an address and agreed to meet her in half an hour. He was backing his car out of the driveway when he came fully awake and wondered what the fuck he was-doing. Was this police procedure?

He decided this didn't have anything to do with the department. This was for the sake of something else--call it moonlighting, like his work in the darkroom. He had to have something in his life besides a job, didn't he? Like Arbus, who'd shot models for a living and in her spare time went looking for freaks. Maybe she needed that, after overdosing on glamour all day. Maybe in his case, after the brutal repetitive ugliness of his day-today--dead junkies and hold-up victims who were a bit too slow (or low) with the cash--he needed something a little fantastic, something beautiful, like that silver glow he'd glimpsed on the surface of Arbus's bath, like the first rays of a silver sun about to rise, a hint of imminent revelation. He saw clues to that light hanging over the marble crypts of Brooklyn which spread away beneath him as he took the bridge; it was more explicit on the waters of the East River, increasingly lovely and plentiful as crushed jewels scattered over the black tombs of the Manhattan skyline. Then he drove down into the tunnel where the glare of fluorescents rubbed his eyes raw, dispelling all magic except for the sense of humid evil evoked by the sight of so much seeping greenish tile lining the tunnel walls. In his mind, water continued to drip from a mirror long after blood had ceased dripping from her dangling arm.

The address the dwarf gave him wasn't really an address. There were buildings on either side of it, in an alley, but the number itself did not exist. All he saw was a low wall of old brick topped by a spiked wrought-iron fence; an iron gate opened in the midst of it. Might have been a vacant lot behind that wall, anything. Shattered windows looked down from three sides, as if the rendezvous were nothing but the bottom of an airshaft choked with trash, castoffs. Not official business, no, but he was glad for his .38 and flashlight as he pushed through the gate into a cemetery.

He'd never seen the place before, not in years of patrolling the city on foot and in cars. He must have driven past--even down--this alley a hundred times and never noticed the wall and gate. As expected, it was full of trash; the old marble and granite headstones were shattered, chipped, vandalized, discolored. His shoes crunched through a fine covering of broken glass; it was like walking on the Coney Island shore, even down to the smell of urine. He flicked his flashlight over carved angels with brutalized faces and seared wings. Stubs of crosses with the arms snapped off appeared to give the finger to the living. Every beam he aimed into the tumble of graves sent off a hundred harsh new shadows. He couldn't be sure where he'd looked and where he hadn't.

He wiped off the lid of a relatively clean crypt and settled down to wait. With the flashlight off, his eyes adjusted quickly to the dark. His cigarette made the only human movement. So where was she? A dwarf could sneak around in here easier than a full-grown woman--but it would be hard to come soundlessly in all this glass. He laid the envelope of prints on the stone beside him and smoked three cigarettes before a shadow came out of nowhere. He jumped down from his seat and instantly lost sight of her among the stones.

“Who’s there?” he said.

She came forward again. “No names, Inspector. Of course, I already know yours.”

As he’d guessed, she was small as a child, her face a gray blur of blended shadows. He knew she wouldn’t appreciate any light leaping on her.

Her hand darted out to the tombstone surface and stole away the envelope holding his prints. She slid them into her hand and made a frantic gesture for his flashlight. She turned away from him, crouched over and laid the prints on the ground. Shielding the light with her body, she switched it on.

He heard her gasp, then further sounds of pleasure. He tried to make out details he might use later to recognize her under other circumstances, but her silhouette was as empty as a doorway into a starless sky, with only little wisps of reflected light peeking through her spiky hair like bursts of solar flares. He grew impatient listening to her. She sounded like a starving animal wolfing down a huge meal.

“All right,” he said finally, “you’ve seen enough.” As he stepped toward her, she shut off the light and jumped back. The prints lay on the ground between them like a dozen stray windows into a glossier world. He had the feeling that if he stepped on one he might fall into it--fall into that bathtub full of radiant blood. He could almost see the glare of the flash shining from the time-frozen surface. Even in black and white, it had a reddish tint.

“Come on, you said a trade. Let’s have your dozen.”

She didn’t move. He could tell she was measuring him, reading his character in a way he’d never experienced before, eating him up with the dark sunken pits in her face. He made a grab for his flashlight, wanting superstitiously to shine a beam into those hollows and fill them in with eyes.

She backed away, being small enough that an edge of crypt shadow neatly swallowed half of her. Another stupid move and the rest would disappear. Without the light he felt more helpless than if she’d taken his gun. He held his ground, stooping to gather his prints.

“I showed you mine,” he said, trying to keep the edge out of his voice. “You’re the one who talked about trust. “

“Mine didn’t come out,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the roll was fogged, all twelve negs burned black, pure white prints. Nothing on them. I thought I could bring them with me, but it didn’t work.”

“Wait a minute. You telling me there’s no trade?” Now he was pissed, and ready to make a grab at her. She was little, she could elude him. He’d have to be fast. “Well fuck I’m giving you my prints.”

“I saw them, that’s enough. They came out good. You’re a fine photographer. I can tell how much work you put into them. And I . . . appreciate that.”

That was it for Brovnik. Her whole story of being an accomplice, nothing but a lie to get a look at private records. This was suddenly more than personal; he would make it official, too.

He hurled the prints at her. They curled off in twelve different arcs, like a blossom opening around him as he leapt to cut her off.

She gasped, spinning away, and found herself trapped in a corner where a tall family mausoleum backed up against the brick of the surrounding buildings, below a high row of broken windows. Nowhere for her to go.

He stooped for the flashlight, which she’d dropped. “All right, lady,” he said, and switched it on.

The light caught her for a glancing instant, and that was all it took--all he got for his pains and for his memories. He saw that her skin was shimmery black, her short-cropped hair silvery gray, and the very centers of her eyes, brilliant white. Then she shrank to nothing and disappeared, like a little woman-shaped balloon deflating instantaneously to the size of a speck of lichen on the marble tomb, then even smaller, gone. The beam hit nothing but the chipped brick wall and a slab of marble with some cryptic gang hieroglyphs streaking the side.

He backed up, swinging the beam to and fro, up and down, looking for the crack she’d slid away through, the secret door that had opened to swallow her up, the rabbit hole, anything. Nothing. None of those things would explain what he’d seen, anyway.

In the time he’d had to look at her, really look--and it was an almost subliminal impression--he’d seen that she wasn’t any dwarf. She had none of the characteristic squashed features, no stubby fingers or any of that. For her size, she was perfectly proportioned--like a normal grown woman who had shrunk in the wash. This remained true as she vanished: All proportions stayed constant as if she were zooming backward down a tunnel with her eyes fixed on his, until she blinked out. The last thing he remembered was her faintly wounded look, and her color . . . that shifting silvery black like nothing he’d ever seen in a person--though tantalizingly familiar.

Brovnik hunted through the cemetery till the sun came up, but he didn’t find anything except his twelve dented, scratched prints. He shoved them in a crypt to rot and hurried back to his car. In the strong morning sunlight it was just barely possible

to not think of her consciously. But somewhere inside, his mind kept going over the details; the cop inside him wouldn't quit.

It was his day off. After a few hours spent futilely trying to sleep, he went into the lab, fished out the negatives of the Arbus suicide, and studied them on the lightboard. The hair looked similar to what he'd seen in the flashlight beam--an odd shiny gray, cropped short. The skin was the same shade of silvery black that no negro's skin had ever been. But that didn't mean it was her. The face might have proved something, but he was spared the sight of her piercing white pupils staring out of his negatives because she'd slid face down in the tub. Still, when he looked at the spiky hair, he felt a chill he hoped wasn't wholly based on recognition.

The next few days passed with excruciating slowness as he waited for the sense of shock to move through his system and into the past so he could get on with a life of ordinary things. He had time off coming to him, and he took it. He went to the Catskills with an Instamatic camera and took color snaps of waterfalls and old bridges and empty inner tubes bobbing down the Esopus River. He didn't take any pictures of people. He met a woman in a restaurant bar who spent the night at his cabin; in the morning she was gone but he felt reassured because she had vanished in the usual way, while his eyes were closed. When he got back to the city after a week, he thought he'd put it all behind him; he thought he was refreshed.

His first night back on duty, a man shot his wife through the temples, cut the throats of his two-, three-, and four-year-olds, strangled the family Doberman (not necessarily in that order), and sentenced himself to life as a vegetable by badly misjudging the trajectory of his final bullet. The photography posed a number of technical problems for Brovnik, due to the cramped conditions, but he was working them out in a cool professional way when he happened to look through the open window onto the dark fire escape and saw the four of them standing there. Five, if you counted the dog. A tall silvery white woman, three little ones, and a four-legged mass of silver mist. Silvery white, with sharp white pupils, all looking at him as if he owed them something. It didn't make sense to him at first (and this was how his mind worked, hooked on little bits of logic he hoped might help him understand the larger problem) that they should all be silvery white, when the shrinking woman in the cemetery had been so inky black.

"What the fuck are you doing, Bravo? There's no pulse in that arm." He looked down in horror and saw that he had been posing a limp arm -- adjusting the dead to make a better picture.

He backed off and drew the camera defensively to his eye, aiming it at the mother's splattered skull. For the first time he noticed that she was black. The children were black as well. So was the Doberman. All black.

Lowering the camera, he saw five white negatives watching him.

What did she do to me? he wondered.

“Bravo? What is it?”

He didn't answer the other cops. He knew he wouldn't ever be able to answer their questions. He forced his way to the window and showed his camera to the watchers outside, let them witness him opening the back and exposing the film. He yanked out a yard of it, unspooling the celluloid, letting it go ribboning into the night with all the latent images burned out, never to be seen, sparing them his camera's bite of immortality.

As the woman in the graves had done, they shrank away to nothing. Five new stars burned briefly in the night, a bit too low to top the horizon, then blinked out.

“Brovnik, what the fuck is wrong?” Heavy steps came toward him.

“I have to get out,” he said, stepping through the window. Questioning cries followed him all the way down the fire escape to the street, where he walked away quickly from the lights of the squad cars, his camera tugging like a bloodhound on the trail of everything that had ever eluded him.