

## The Artist

I sat in my dining room at my dining table not paying bills. It was July of 2006 so bills still arrived by something we would eventually come to call *snail mail* and that day all of said bills lay haphazardly upon the kid proof plastic table cloth where I'd left them in favor of something else that used to arrive the same way: A Christmas catalogue. In this case, delivered criminally early in the calendar year. I *could* pre-pre order that box of Christmas pears that we always send to my in-laws each December to which they just as "always" responded with a door wreath complete with plastic bird decoration...

"Mom?"

"What?" I jumped with a yelp. My twenty-one-year-old daughter, Alison, home from college for the summer, shook me out of my conflicted reverie as she entered the dining room, carrying something.

She continued "Geez, Mom. It's only July. Why are you looking at Christmas stuff?"

"To avoid paying bills," I explained.

"Oh. Can we find somewhere to store these when I go back to school?" She placed three 8 x 14 black and white photo mattes on top of the bills.

I reached for the first photo on top: A black and white picture of a roadside sign. It grabbed me for some reason, seeming familiar but also quite odd. The photo gave me a funny little mental slap in the face that both shook and intrigued me. *Where had I seen that image before?* "Can I have this one?" I blurted.

"Sure..." Her eyes narrowed. "That will be twenty-five dollars."

Black/Artist

“What??” I yelped for the second time in three minutes. My hand yanked itself back like a lizard’s tongue. *Did I look that interested?* I invented a yawn too late in whatever game we were playing. Alison was, is, and always will be, above all else, observant. She misses nothing. There were two other photos on the table. One was of a reed-thin, wannabe rock star whose identity, Alison explained, was “part of an opening act for *Hanson*.” Of course. The MMMBop boys were one of her earlier obsessions. The third photo, a snapshot of the word MEN scrawled upon weather-worn brickwork. She informed me that this word was spray painted on the women’s bathroom at the rest stop not far from the location of the subject of the first photo I held of a broken, dilapidated road sign.

“Twenty-five bucks, Mom. It’s totally worth that.” It was, but why, or why did everything in life have strings attached? I liked the photo, yet my college daughter wanted me to pay her for one of the matted black and white prints she had just completed during her summer course in photography at the local community college. She had snapped photos with seeming random disinterest (seeming random disinterest being a specialty of hers) using her amazing pawn shop find Nokia 35mm camera, various bottles of developing fluids and whatever else I’d bought her for the summer course which I also paid for.

“I paid for everything, and you want me to buy the end result?” I asked.

“My talent is worth money,” she explained. “I’m an artist, Mom.”

I blinked, ready to capitulate until, of its own volition “no deal” came out of my mouth. This surprised the enabling mother inside of me, which, at the time, occupied 90% of my identity and was always at odds with my pocketbook. Honestly, I was already this artist’s patron in so many ways.

Black/Artist

With a seemingly disinterested shrug, my daughter gathered up the photos and all of them disappeared with her as she tossed an over the shoulder look that seemed to say, *you don't understand anything about my art. At all.* Well, she was kind of right. The underwear “performance art” piece I never did figure out. But her one-foot-tall bronze sculpture which sits upon my mantle is a clear testament to the artist she was and still is. Four headless but bendy stick figures are curled and tucked in and around one another though they never actually touch. Disproportionately heavy compared to its size, I find the sculpture a snapshot representation cast in bold emotion: A testament to love and complexity that was, when she created it, her experience of sisterhood: Four sisters in a blended family of opposites.

I've always liked looking beneath weirdness to find the importance of it all. Nonetheless, my mouth stayed shut that day. The photos disappeared, but not the effect of that one particular print. Three letters atop what looked like but undoubtedly were not four very large toothpicks. Three letters that looked promising, determined and, frankly, stubbornly stupid. A perfect testimony to a fading ideal in the shape of a bereft, broken sign on the side of the freeway:

-O-P-E

The letter H had fallen off long ago. How can you have H-O-P-E if you have lost your H? How can you not? Who built it? Why was it there, wallowing in shrubbery? These questions haunted me and honed my interest throughout 2006 and all the way past Alison's graduation in 2007. It did so as Alison pursued her dream of curating art and exhibition design, which began in the summer of 2007 for her with her first job: Setting up an art show for multiple artists (herself included) in a northwest Portland gallery, The Art Institute. I proudly attended.

Black/Artist

Kismet, I think, found me standing in front of one of Alison's pieces of art for sale that day. The cost: \$25.00. I handed the cashier cold hard cash, took the print off the wall myself and left immediately, finally taking it home while Alison continued her work that day scurrying around curating, exhibiting and stuff.

Hours later, a happy but exhausted Alison stumbled in the door. I accosted her:

"Alison, look. Your HOPE photo is in the place of honor on the piano."

"Yeah. Cool!" Um... she seemed puzzled. "Mom? It's not Hope without an H."

"Sure, it is!" I mean, *what else would it be?*

"Take another look," she said.

"Why?" I ask.

She sighs. "Mom." Alison nodded downward, eyes on the lower half of the print.

After one obsessive year and twenty-five dollars this was my first, deep breath look. At last. O P E. Strong. Clear. And, it turned out, those three letters were situated right above the blurred words just below:

### *FOOD MART*

Which are stacked above a promise of pickles and next to another of ice cream. The whole of it, utterly abandoned in some unattended, overgrown shrubbery. A bygone era of advertising paraphernalia nestled in weeds on the side of a freeway. It dawned upon me oh so slowly.

Because the letters were off center to the left it looked-to me -like the first letter was missing.

Not the last.

Black/Artist

“Mom, it’s O P E N without the N.”

“No,” I assert. “That is not right. It should say HOPE.” Her deep brown, miss nothing eyes squinted.

“Why would anyone erect a huge, wooden sign on the freeway that says HOPE? And how could you possibly get the word HOPE out of this picture?”

“Because,” my mouth gaped open and closed like a distressed fish. “So people would have some. Hope.” I ended lamely then tried again. “Yes. I mean, YES! Someone would and someone should do exactly that! This photo IS the broken word HOPE.” I vehemently stabbed at the image. “Decades ago, ten hard working regular folks dug out the left-over wood from their garages and barns, grabbed some paint and came out one day in the pouring rain upon the cusp of winter wearing their thread-bare coats to...

Leave (finger stab)

This (finger stab)

Legacy!”

“Sure, Mom.” Her head cocks left. “Art is supposed to affect you, and its interpretation is in the eye of the viewer. You go with that. You go with hope.” The Artist smiled knowingly and quietly left the room as I fulfilled her prophesy, staring at what was and is the perfected image of my human oxymoronic angst: Despair and my albatross: HOPE.



Photo by Alison Irene Wiesner, 2006