

Michelle Ross

## Winkelsucher

Oona's young son focuses the hand-me-down camera on his target, a yellow-bellied songbird perched on the stem of the tallest zinnia blossom in their garden. The pink zinnias rise like Seussian *Truffula* trees among the squat squash and melon blossoms.

"It's special," Max says of the bird. "I've never seen it before. Have you?"

Oona isn't sure. She's taken thousands of photos of this garden as it's evolved over the years, perhaps tens of thousands of Max. She photographs him now, in fact, as he adjusts the zoom lens. Like the bird, he doesn't notice yet that he's being watched.

He says, "It's still too far away."

"Then step closer," she says. "But slowly."

Max takes a tenuous step toward the bird, but it quickly flies away. Already Oona struggles to recall the details of the coloring on the bird's head and back. When she tries to locate it later in her files of garden photographs and then her bird book, she will be overwhelmed by the dozens of images of yellow-bellied songbirds.

Max drops his chin to his sternum. "I scared it."

She says, "Another bird will come if you're patient."

He says, "But I wanted that bird."

"I know," she says.

Every other Thursday after Max goes to bed, Oona and her friend Damon watch a double feature in her living room. Because Damon is the film student, he chooses the films. He pairs them carefully, like the wine and chocolate Oona selects for these evenings. Last night Damon paired a short documentary called *The Marina Experiment* with the horror film *Peeping Tom*.

She'd seen the latter in high school. Then, they watched movies at Damon's house. He had a television in the remodeled basement that functioned as his bedroom. They could smoke pot and make out with boys, Damon and his boy on the bed and Oona and her boy on the worn blue sofa that smelled like sweat and potato chips.

She remembered well how the Mark Lewis character murders women, via a blade attachment, with the very camera with which he films them. She'd forgotten that Mark's scientist father had made him the subject of

psychology experiments regarding fear's effects on the nervous system and so was always watching him, recording his responses to stimuli.

Therein lay one of Damon's pairing notes. *The Marina Experiment* is about Marina Lutz's discovery after her father died of many thousands of photographs, audio tapes, and films he took of her from birth to the age of sixteen. In one particular clip, Marina's father says, "Ah, look at this!" as he approaches an approximately twelve-year-old Marina from behind. She's in her underwear and is bent over a bed, busy with some task Oona can't make out. Marina jolts around. The look on her face is caustic, and watching the film, Oona felt as though that look was intended for her.

This is what Oona thinks of when in their garden Max looks up suddenly and catches her lens aimed at him.

He didn't used to mind her photographing him, but now he does. Just like a few months ago, he loved avocado, but now a thin sliver of it on his plate elicits tears.

The look on his face is like Marina's in the film clip, only this time Oona's not a passive spectator.

She wants to say, you were trying to take a picture of that bird without its permission. Of course, he did not vow to the bird that he would honor its wish not to be photographed.

Marina Lutz's archive stands out among other family archives because her father sexualized her. According to Damon, the archive stands out too because of its enormity and because Marina wasn't a willing subject. "All those videos of her sleeping!" he said.

But just yesterday, before Damon came over, Oona photographed Max when he fell asleep on the carpet, and a sharp beam of sunlight from the window exposed the particles of dust swirling around his head like matter accreting to form the universe. More like sixty photographs, though she deleted all but the best one.

Photographing children often involves subterfuge. Helen Levitt, one of the greatest street photographers of all time, attached a device called a winkelsucher to her camera so that she could face one direction, while stealthily focusing her camera lens in another direction. Oona earns the bulk of her income taking *lifestyle* photographs, which are semi-staged in such a way as to look candid. Between shots, the children's parents wave cookies like dog biscuits.

Not a day passes that Oona doesn't photograph Max. Every parent photographer she knows is the same. Why shouldn't they make their children the subjects of their art?

She said to Damon, "I don't think there's anything wrong with the

volume. Heavily documenting your children's lives is the norm these days. You've seen Viv's mommy blog. She could probably fill a 200-page book with that child's dialogue alone."

Damon groaned. "Don't start me on that. It's like Viv thinks that child's words hold the secrets to the universe."

"It's exactly like that," Oona said.

Damon studied her. He said, "This family photography business has corrupted your brain cells. I miss the artsy, raunchy nudes."

"I still take artsy, raunchy nudes," she said. And she told him about how her son once bent over, pulled his butt cheeks apart, and asked her to photograph his asshole. So he could see what it looked like.

Damon nearly choked on his wine. "Not what I had in mind."

Then he said, "But you wouldn't photograph him if he didn't want you to. You wouldn't treat him like the subject of an experiment."

Oona didn't correct Damon. She stuffed a chocolate into her mouth.

What she wanted to say was that all children are experiments—messy, uncontrolled, long-term experiments. Every day, there's more to observe and discover. Is it any wonder that parents feel compelled, even entitled, to document? Like now, in the garden, the anger and betrayal on Max's face is not quite like anything Oona's seen there before, so she is unable to stop herself from quickly pushing the shutter-release button several times before lowering the camera, despite that he flinches as though each opening of the shutter was the prick of something sharp.