

TESS WHEELWRIGHT

# The Future of Delmar Güner

THERE WAS A TIME Delmar Güner slept all day and kept lookout for signs all night, unglued and on drugs and scared of being alive—but he was a new man now. In a new love. It was summertime, his wife Tasya was researching mortality in Rubtsovsk, out of the States since May. The truest of his painting students, Fiona, had graduated and moved, by chance, to his town. A year before, Delmar'd taken her for beers after a crit—her and her boyfriend, the little wiseguy, stinky and twitchy and too facile a painter, too like Delmar's own young self. At the bar, Delmar'd told them how he'd first fallen for Tasya: his brother-in-law's cousin, a visitor to the country and included at the Güners' for Thanksgiving. She was severe but womanly, quiet and foreign, light-haired but with Asian eyes, and she'd performed this kind of martial art that went with the words *Kozachiy Sploch*—he wrote them down, along with her phone number—that was, as he told the two kids, very *curvaceous*. They'd laughed, sort of, and he'd remembered about Students and Teachers. Okay, Delmar. You've had enough. Old Del. Old self. He bought a coffee and drove home to the next state and his wife.

His wife was so foreign! But how the fuck were you supposed to be, he guessed. Delmar had almost no friends left. This woman, this colleague of Delmar's at the college, had a husband who died of a heart attack. She'd given Delmar his shoes. No, no, no! said Tasya, almost shrieking, and he wasn't supposed to bring them in the house for forty days. What the fuck?

They had a kid. A shocking and beautiful kid. Way prettier than either of them, smart and silent and sort of sad already. "Oki, what do you, you know, think? About this one I've got going? Or, I mean. . .?" Delmar had asked the kid, one day when he had him at the studio. He really trusted his kid. He loved his kid. A lot of times he wished he could be four again just to hang out with him, kid to kid. Oktur'd wiped charcoal on his little pants and come over and stood in front of the painting for a couple of whole minutes without saying anything. Then he said, just, "Dadda, I don't like it." He looked scared of it. Well shit. Delmar'd thrown the canvas in the dumpster the next day.

Fiona! Fiona Fiona Fiona. She had a little girl's face. Looked at the floor when she was his student, though he'd watched how she was with the other

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kids. She made everyone laugh. Who wasn't a little in love with Fiona? He bought her painting, at first to kind of flatter her—but now Jesus Christ. Of course he thought about her all the time. He couldn't take his eyes off it; it was about everything he couldn't quite explain. It was a portrait that had swallowed its background; you were inside and outside, seeing in but being looked at; with our strange, sundry, windy internal landscapes, we confront the world. A heavy-limbed king kicked a ball stiffly, a fat frozen cat watched from on top of a very tall stump, a dog off its chain huddled nervously beside its little weightless doghouse—and behind them a text of Bs and As floated in small disintegrating trains up toward two eyes in the clouds, where it all gathered up and looked at you. It looked at Delmar, anyway. He hadn't remembered how big it was until she brought it over. And then there it was, filling his hallway, so right, about things. . . Jesus.

She was broke—so he hired her. The boyfriend had taught her how to stretch canvases decently, so he let her do that. Leaving her in the studio with three cigarettes for five hours, as if he had these other places to be. He bought a coffee and walked down by the Sound. The second time he left her a sandwich. Then she came over and tried his chutney. . .

Tasya called once a week. Updated him on Rubtsovskian public health. Told him slackly that she missed him. She was a stranger. Delmar hung up the phone and went to look at Oki asleep. Tomorrow they'd walk to the park. A father and a son. The world turns so fast. Delmar leaned in the darkened doorway and felt, again, how recent it seemed that *he'd* been the son, a kid, at the edge of the backyard, watching the adults, eating grass. Del, where are you going so fast, buddy? But he kept his thoughts in his head and went to bed.

And then, on a Monday, Fiona invited him over to come look at her drawings in ink. She worked in the kitchen of her little apartment, which had boxes still on the floor and a creepy Piero della Francesca over the toilet. No, *not* creepy. Beautiful. . . Who was this girl? Delmar had brought Oki, and when he came out of the bathroom, the kid was lying on his back at the bottom of Fiona's bed with his arms up over his head. And he was laughing. She was crouched down next to him—my God!—and when Delmar came back in they both went quiet. Delmar said, "Did you have lunch? Should we go have a sandwich, or, well. . .?" And they went. She was shy but making all the right faces at Oki—he was so happy!—and Delmar suddenly felt like talking a lot. Did she see how the glacier had dug out, you know, a little safe nest for the city between East Rock and West Rock, had she heard about the crypt beneath the church on the green, did she know about the three judges condemned by the king, hiding out in a cave, could she believe it there'd be silver-lit clouds like these, today of all days?

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Suddenly, there were so many beautiful things. “Fiona, come home with us! Or, I mean. . . Right, Oki?” He turned to his kid, lost.

That afternoon, life raced out of his control. Being, acting, saying, got ahead of thinking. They went to the gardens, and he picked things and watched Fiona and Oki eat them, sideways out of the corner of his eye. They sat on a hillside, Oki kind of leaned against Fiona and napped, the sun got low. A hawk rose up and sailed as a mark against the sky. Delmar was sort of crying. He’d thought Fiona had noticed—he’d felt like they were kind of inside each other, that they were each other, for at least the last hour—but suddenly she had looked at him and been shocked. He had to touch her. “I ha- I have to touch you. Fiona, this is so—Can you believe this, Fiona?” And he reached for her back, hooking his fingers around the edge of her shoulder blade. She stared at him, paralyzed and open. Delmar drew in, drew in. . . and he put his lips on hers, swelled and soared and nearly fainted, felt at once like he was the hawk and like the hawk was trapped inside him, thumping around—recovered a little, pulled back and stared at her two eyes. He was sweating and he couldn’t move. She smiled, with a wobbling lower lip. “Fiona!” Delmar said again, louder, daring now to stare back at her. He laid his hand along her cheek and jaw and looked further into her face. Fiona looked down at Oki, asleep. She looked at the sky, she reached out a hand for Delmar’s neck; she kissed his shoulder. “I- I’ve—Love,” he said. She didn’t say anything. He reeled. By the time they stood up and brushed off, Delmar felt like this was his wife. He shook his head in disbelief, connecting things for the first time all day. He remembered being in her little studio at the art college, being her teacher, considering a very tender portrait of some spoons planted in a flower-bed, moving his hands a lot while she looked at him. “I couldn’t even look at your fucking face,” he remembered, shaking his tired head.

Fiona walked home, and Delmar made hamburgers for himself and his son. He whistled; he addressed Oki but he didn’t make sense; he drifted around the kitchen, flashing on that perfect face. It was only twenty minutes later, reaching into the fridge for ketchup, that his vision blurred and he had to hang onto the door to keep from folding down onto the floor. He thought he would puke. No no no! What’d he been *saying*, and doing? He let the door fall closed. He couldn’t turn around; a younger Oki stared out from a photo, wearing a little Russian hat, standing in a distorted shadow that Delmar knew was his wife’s. Before he could answer his son, seated at the table with a pile-up of questions, Delmar had to say to himself “No way, Del. No more. Not even close,” and he had to believe it. And he did. And they ate their dinner, and slowly Delmar felt steadier. And maybe that could have been that. But it wasn’t.

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The thing was, Delmar'd always had this feeling his paintings told the future. They were the forms, and then life rushed in. When he was a very little boy, he'd had such bad asthma he had to spend most seasons inside and one spring in a bubble. One August morning, his face packed and blotched with snot and hives, he'd done a careful drawing of himself with very huge muscles, on top of a hill. That winter, he'd grown six inches and gotten healthier; he was allowed to join some team or other and he made a friend. And that spring, he raced a kid who called him weird, and beat him, while the friend cheered—to the top of a hill! He hadn't told anyone. And that was just the beginning. When he got to high school, he recognized nearly all the pitiless characters already filling his sketchbooks. After college he traveled, and when he entered the cemetery in Marrakech in the late afternoon, the sun-shafts falling full of glitter across the crumbling stones, it was like walking again into his thesis show. Now, his upstairs neighbor had laid in brick in a square in the grass behind the house—like a raft, said Oki, teetering at its edge on the heels of his sneakers. It was the next afternoon; Delmar was having a restless sit in the sun, trying to stay away from yesterday in his mind. Okiur pointed out imaginary sharks. Delmar had another look around him, at the green yard, the new brick patch and the red chairs on it, the covered barbecue that stood shining in one corner, bouncing the sun's light around. Round, like a silver moon. . . Full faultless moon, shining roundly awa—I've painted this, Delmar felt suddenly, straightening. But what— how? From above? Maybe? “Please catch me, Dadda,” Oki said and dove off a red chair, and Delmar did, barely. Swinging him down, Delmar still considered, madly: silver medallion—dollar—silver nickel, you great Nickel you. . .—and then he had it. The dream paintings, from two winters ago. The silver circle that had landed like a tossed coin in each one, insisting. He'd had to buy real Leaf; he'd tried aluminum-flaked Iridescent Silver. And in the last two, in the last one, shit, in one at least, the silver is buttoning a red square to mud green. . . My god! Right? And? So? He went in to look at the slide. Of course, in the painting it was darker, and something blue and winged swept into the frame from the top left. He tucked the slide back into the sleeve, and gave Oki dinner and put him to bed. He went back out for a smoke. He checked out the stars. “Hi again, Delmar,” someone said, and it was Fiona, coming around the left corner of the house, in a blue dress. Delmar was done for.

He didn't really explain: “Does it ever happen to you that you walk into your paintings, ever? Maybe one you've forgotten, and then the future—But Fiona, whoah. How are you?” Fiona—Fiona! Rabbit-eyed, leery, but there, again; the prettiest, realest thing he'd ever seen in his life!—didn't answer either question. And, because it had to be, Delmar welcomed her back. He

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got a hold on each of her forearms and squared her in front of him, pulled her in, pulled her in until his brow lay flat against hers. He couldn't believe he could just touch her now. Beautiful, unimaginable Cyclops! He pushed her back out. She was laughing at him a little. He remembered what he'd been saying. "Oh, right. Or whatever. . . I never lectured about that at the art department, did I? Renaissance brushwork, okay—but they don't really like you to talk about your theories on time travel. . ." Delmar laughed, and got kissed on the wrist.

They went to the park. They went to the gardens. They drove up East Rock with Oki between them in the cab of Delmar's truck. They walked out on the wharf and bought hotdogs. They sat for an hour in front of a maroon painting at the little museum, holding hands. They ate lunches, dinners, called each other a half hour after saying goodbye. "Are you there? Are you there? You were just there. . . Anyway, it's Fiona. Calling to say I'm thinking of—oh, your face, the side of your face, the way it crinkles by your eye. And freaking out a little. And also just letting my life happen. Because if we're feeling this. . . Anyway, you're not on your own. I'm here, believing, for now. Goodnight, Delmar." "Hello Fiona. I wonder if you already got in bed. Did you? Did you untie your little boat for the night? Take one last look around and then head on out to the placeless sea? I like thinking of you out there. . . Seeing anything good? I wish I were, you know, with you. Anyway, I'm just calling to say goodnight, I guess. I really liked seeing you today. I want you to know that I know that this all feels crazy, I mean shit, right? Shit shit shit. But I loved my life all day. Are you an angel, Fiona? A bluebird? Do you want to walk out to the woods tomorrow? Are you sleeping?"

The kissing got better and better. Softer and harder and sweeter and wetter. More transformative. "Your lips are so—" said Fiona, pulling up for air. They were on his front steps, his head sunk down into her lap, their flicked cigarettes long burnt out on the pavement at their feet. "IMPOSSIBLE?! IMMACULATE?!" "—Kind." "I wanted to put my head in your mouth!" His fingers shook; she gripped them in her right hand. With the thumb of her left, very lightly, she traced away his tears.

They slept together, and sat up in his bed after, not saying anything and not glancing sideways to check for regret. It felt okay. Fiona reached over eventually, landing a hand on his bowl-ish belly. "So he *is* forty," Delmar said, grinning sheepishly.

The next time it didn't work. There was some fumbling. . . "So many possibilities," Fiona tried, pulling herself up on a knee. . . but, no, oh—shit. "No, there aren't," said Delmar, picking off the condom.

Sometimes they went to Fiona's and made tea or drank beers and listened to child prodigy instrumentalists on CD. They watched a squirrel leap from

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the top of a chain-link fence onto the leafy outermost twigs of a maple outside her window and have to scramble, flashing-tailed, for the trunk, not to hit the dirt when the branch dropped away. "Next time you'll know, then, Guy," said Delmar. "Things are not always as they appear, Friend," said Fiona. "She's right," said Delmar. "Minefield life," said Fiona. Poor Fiona. Poor Delmar!

Fiona had something to say: "Delmar, aren't there two realities? Like, with us? Isn't there like Young Girl and Older Man, or like Professor-Sleeping-With-Student—I think about it when you're not there—but then doesn't that have nothing to do with us, like here, today, on this grass? Eating burritos?" Delmar thought he was going to faint. *He'd* been about to say that, almost. Except now he thought—"Except now I think maybe actually only the one exists, you know? Maybe there is no "Old Man" or "Young Girl" or, you know, "Betrayal," the way people talk and think about them. Because I mean, where are they?"

The only thing left was, Delmar still wanted to tell her about his secret. He sort of tried to bring it up the next day: "Fiona, you know yesterday when you were saying. . . You know, how life doesn't fit the models, how nothing does, how it's not really orderable, it's crazy. . .? Except, well, what about the paintings? What if they're like—if they've been like, kind of, a chart?" Fiona, reality rushes in and realizes my past paintings! It was all very hard to explain. Fiona, it turns out I don't *do* abstract work; Fiona, you *had* to come over that night. Fiona, I did a painting of my front steps with leaves blowing onto them, before I ever even came to this town. Or he could have told her about grad school, he guessed. It'd followed him, darkly, all the way through. He'd done this one of a female monster casting impossible shadows, and then his girlfriend had blackened all these places where they'd been happy and sort of tried to kill him. He did one of himself all fucked and skinny in this forest of needled trees, and before too long he was pretty much a smackhead. He did one where black is trying to push the last bottom corner of pinkish gray off the canvas, and less than a year later he could barely make himself get out of bed, consciousness arriving like a stab each morning in the form of the word "No!"

But he couldn't be sure even she would get it, and besides that, things with Fiona started going less right. He started to show her the slide which was that night in his backyard, but she didn't remember the silver grill, and smiled and bit her lip, and he buttoned it back into his pocket. Her mother from out on the West Coast told her that if Delmar meant it he should leave his wife and get on with it, it should take about six months to get it all done—but hadn't she learned that people don't change, if he did this once he'd do it again? Then Fiona hit a car door that opened into the bike lane

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and flipped her into the middle of the street, where a swerving car missed her by a foot. She'd watched its wheels go by a dozen inches from her nose. In the back of the ambulance, which cost her 70 dollars later, when there was nothing at all wrong with her, she realized she had lost her balance. What was she doing? She had no money; she had a sense of there being rules she didn't know. He had a kid, and a wife. She wanted to go home—or move to Seattle, with a friend her own age. "I sometimes, I just, I still can't believe this," said Delmar in August, squeezing her bicep, kissing her collar. "I—I don't think I do anymore," said Fiona. She left, and his wife came home.

If Delmar had known. They'd been so impossibly fucking happy! If Delmar had known that there would be a moment when his eyes would run over with tears in the sun of the cemetery where he knew his wife wouldn't find him, as he explained to the keeper how the life he'd set up was crumbling and how he probably had to let it—if he'd known there'd be a night when he had to look his unrecognizable wife in the face and refuse her demand that he never call Fiona again—if he'd known his own grown brother would try and throw a punch at him in front of his son—if he knew Tasya would hear Oki say Fiona and look like she'd been shot—if he knew walking into his house would be like walking into a cemetery—he'd have done it all anyway. How could he not? He knew it wasn't nice. He worried about his wife. He watched other people fulfilling their plans and promises, and he worried about himself. But how could he pretend? How could he pretend not to hear it as the world spoke it to him, in its other language: letting phones ring at just the moment he'd let the caller's name slip out under his breath in a darkened studio, bending rays of light to the West, sending miraculous feathers drifting down impossibly slowly from Fiona's favorite kind of tree to stick him in the breast pocket, over the heart. A little while ago, watching squirrels again, which were everywhere now just like everything else that had to do with Fiona, as if that month of his life had exploded its contents all over the rest, to assure him it wasn't a dream, and so that he didn't start to think time just went by, with each month the same weight, Delmar asked himself, as he often did before the animal kingdom, *Where are my instincts?*

He flew out to Seattle. And she didn't even seem to want to see him. "Maybe in another time, when things are different. . . But for now. . . It sort of seems like we have to just do our own lives for a while." He could see past her into the hallway, which she'd set up as a studio. He could see a great big self-portrait, striding, the face torqued recklessly sideways, like an ancient Egyptian. She didn't say: "This portrait is painted on an old canvas of yours, you know—one I gessoed over. I found it in the dumpster." How would she

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have known to? She did say: "That slide? Delmar? The painting you showed me? I thought it was abstract." And she seemed to think the conversation was over. For Delmar, the conversation was not over at all. Just let me in your hallway, Fiona! Jesus Christ! He watched himself freak out and couldn't stop: "You're manipulative, you're like a devil, you're awful." No, no! You're an angel, I'm wretched! "Also, you're pathetic." Pathetic? No, perfect! Fiona, don't listen to me! I'll take care of you, we'll live together, we'll paint all night, and make love, and have a sandwich. Fiona, I could teach you things and you could teach me things and I like you so much! Fiona, my paintings tell the future!

But could she even have seen it? He flew home, and lay on the couch. The months passed, and his wife couldn't decide to leave him; they acted out a very silent, fragile life. Delmar couldn't really sleep and sometimes woke up crying when he did; he took long walks and drives and tried to figure out what to do. At the college, he tried to be an undistracted, listening Professor, and helped a few kids figure out what they wanted to paint. He himself couldn't paint, and then slowly he could. One night over dessert and a loud leak in the hallway, he and Tasya had a good laugh, and then they were quiet again. Fiona never called anymore, and when Delmar thought of her, he felt very, very tired.

One night after winter, Delmar got off the couch and wandered out back. He lit a smoke; he brushed off one of the red chairs and sat down. The barbecue orb wore a hat of leftover snow, and he rattled it off, exposing the silver. He could see his wife's shadow moving in the lit window, and he heard her call something to their son over running water. And then, as he was checking out the stars, a movement at the left corner of the house caught his eye. A blue jay flew into the yard, swooped in one easy revolution and *kloo loo loo'd* and looked for a second like it might land, and then like a dream it was gone.