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“The Muppet Show” was banned in the town of Ixis. It didn’t need to be, because no one really cared for it. Except for Ilaria, who, at 13, fancied herself as Gonzo as she conjured occasions in her head when she would blithely set off small bombs.

She loved the post-explosion ring of laughter, with her face smeared with black ash and burns; a hand gone poof!

The demented Gonzo inhabited Ilaria’s sweetest dreams. In these dreams she leaves Ixis, but not because the town officials have a robust ideology that requires cartoons of all kinds to be shunned; and not at all because Ixis parents feel so obliged to instruct their young about seriousness that they have nightmares when traveling salesmen are expected, who will tease the children no end and extract giggles and other silly sounds. Ilaria herself is a quite a grave child, and will not be engaged by banter. She does not suffer fools. And she is quite adept at making impenetrable faces at the slightest possibility of a serious discussion.

But she would leave, inside of Gonzo, the very second she drops off into sleep, swept up by an artistic yearning that in Ixis makes people feel miserable and mistrustful. Ilaria usually finds herself in a kind of art school that changes form nightly. It is a desert, a skyscraper, a roller coaster, the inside of a book, a skink’s tiny tunnel of sand, a set of warm covers on cold nights, and at its driest, a laboratory, like Beaker’s in ‘The Muppet Show,’ where bombblast hair is quite the norm. Gonzo doesn’t really know what is what, so it makes no difference what the circumstances are. It is always the same dream to Ilaria, so long as she knows there are combustible things to artfully organize and light up.

Ilaria learns nothing at this dream school, which is in any case visited by the same people who say such dreams are dangerous. The town officials are always present. Only, they are the brothers Ukle and Uwny, her friends from next door, whose parents are rebels and maintain surreptitious transmitters tuned to funny television shows, not because they need to laugh, but because rebellion is a habit, or a tic. So, when Ukle and Uwny strangely become the community dictators in Ilaria’s dreams, she gurgles with delight, and she flies beyond any possibility of learning.

Ukle and Uwny as the town officials, do teach, of course. They endeavor step-by-step demonstrations of how to devise various explosive events. Some how-to’s are commonsensical enough. Like, filling a squeeze bottle with volatile liquid and using the device to draw squiggly long lines while running, running, faster than the stringy fire you’ve lit at the first drop. They also have the equivalent of gym stretching exercises, undertaken for limbering up: light up the edge of an ice cream container filled with water and watch the ring of fire that stops short of the water line. Set fire to a beach ball and witness vertical lights running groundwards at the viscous but rather quicksilver speed of melting plastic.

Gonzo’s explosives are of course artless by comparison, but Ilaria knows that the teachers, beloved dictators that

they are, have other things on their minds aside from splendid combustion. She goes along with the beatific logic of a school. She smiles in her sleep. (Her parents catch these ghostly smiles and they worry. And well they should. A smile is, as they suspect, manifestation of insanity and wisdom.) Ilaria knows enough that teachers must be taken seriously—especially when they are ludicrous, daft, dopey!

Sometimes, in the dreams, Ukle has videos of successful projects, which Ilaria watches whenever there are parts where Gonzo stars. Uwny gives medals for creativity and bravura. On occasion the brothers wear clothes like Catholic priests, with small red caps the colour of blood and fire, so they can give proper drama to art. In fact, Ukle and Uwny have such a fine gift for performance, that Ilaria deliberately returns the following night to the part where they disappear after giving a blessing, or move to the horizon after sprinkling holy water on Ilaria’s head. And this is where Ilaria’s creative longing finds blissful satisfaction: in her growing ability to create the movements, the teachings, the very pinings of her teachers, night after night.

Ukle and Uwny are her marionettes, dancing to her giggles. True, teachers dictate with ineluctable passion, and in Ilaria’s world, such passion is its own logic. But the student, after years of dreaming, and smiling angelically, and tittering secretly, will consume teachers. Ukle and Uwny, of course, know nothing of this. They were watching the tabooed ‘Muppet Show’ when Ilaria lobbed her incendiary cocktail from her window to theirs. Ukle was on the phone, in fact, with Ilaria, inviting her to come over as usual.

The brothers could only be found by their rebel parents in parts. Ilaria’s artfully created bomb was no Gonzo devise. It was refined; made glorious arcs of yellow and red when it touched flesh; and generated a kind of blinding flash that in certain religions meant an introduction to God.

It was observed by the Ixis town officials that Ilaria slept through the din. It seemed at first that the town was under attack. Ixis has been, after all, a complete pain in the neck to its neighbours in the shire. But when it was learnt that Ukle and Uwny were watching ‘The Muppet Show,’ the powers-that-be correctly surmised that the townspeople were extracting what seemed to be a reasonable price for social order. No hunt was organized to seek out the murderers.

It was only when Ilaria was found dead, too, in her sleep, a triangular piece of lead lodged at her nape, that Ixis denizens realized that a miracle had taken place. For Ilaria was the child who so cherished her town’s values, that she had watched the illicit showings of ‘The Muppet Show’ with the will to keep the transgression to herself, and herself, in her child’s innocence, correcting the flaw in nature’s equilibrium. This was what her parents synthesized.

Her accidental death, it seemed to the town officials, was unfortunate but beautiful.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Marian Pastor Rocas.*