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BURLEIGH BEING BURLEIGH

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IN A RENT-CONTROLLED APARTMENT HIGH UP IN MANHATTAN'S Washington Heights, Nina Burleigh and her dog, Chili, are performing a duet at the piano of "Fly Me to the Moon." To be fair, Chili's contribution is less America's Got Talent and more Hound of the Baskervilles, but it's funny and charming and makes us laugh like kids. Chili is a short-haired black-and-white Mexican mutt brought back to the U.S. after he befriended Burleigh and her family at a gas station near San Miguel de Allende. Something about that vulnerable bundle of fur crept under Burleigh's skin that day—she's always had a sympathy for the underdog, which limns so much of the writer's life. The result is that we're here now, a decade later,

with Chili eviscerating Frank Sinatra at a piano in Manhattan.

Burleigh being Burleigh, which is to say the kind of writer who is forever chasing a story, she wrote about Chili's rescue for *Hemispheres*, the United Airlines magazine. Although she works as national politics correspondent for *Newsweek*, she has a freelancer's feral energy, endlessly sweeping the horizon for whatever adventure is next. Thoughts and observations tumble from her, fragments of ideas waiting to become articles, columns, books. She is in love with the elsewhere, be it Italy or France, where she has lived for long periods at a time, or Baghdad, where she spent six months as a young child with her Assyrian grandparents before

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her family decided to move to Amish country in Michigan. Ask Burleigh what she recalls of her time in Iraq, and what comes back sounds like a fever dream, full of impressions and sensation:

"I remember this almost paradisiac place, with hummingbirds and late sun shafting through palm trees, and defunct fountains everywhere, and we were walking around an abandoned British country club on the banks of the Tigris. I remember frogs jumping around in these empty marble basins, and the sun was setting. I have memories of the streets of Baghdad, the beggars, the neighbors, the two girls in black, 13 years old probably, who my grandmother employed to clean, and who petted us all the time, and the weird toilets—a hole in the ground, hated that. And I remember that we whined incessantly that we wanted American food, cornflakes and hot dogs."

There are no hot dogs on the menu today. Burleigh has whisked up a simple lunch of salad and pasta, and a bottle of wine, and the two of us talk at the dining table in the modest apartment that she shares with her husband, the photographer Erik Freeland, and their son and daughter, ages 16 and 20. The location, within spitting distance of the George Washington Bridge, was chosen to cut the commute time to Cochection, NY, where Burleigh and Freeland live when they are not in the city. They found the country idyll, a converted schoolhouse that sits on a rise above the Delaware River, in 1999, shortly after marrying. In the evenings, the giant windows on the second floor are illuminated with the sun. "For a long time, it didn't have Wi-Fi, and I would go up there when I was blocked or stuck or hitting a hump in a book project," says Burleigh. "I'd get three chapters written in a week because there's no distraction."

When Burleigh returns to Cochection, she is simultaneously summoning the spirit of her childhood in Michigan, a time and place that she characterizes as a kind of child's storybook of lakes and horses and long forest walks. It was a happy time but, for a family that was worldly and ungodly, also instructive. Burleigh's father, a poet and jazz pianist, was eventually forced out of the Amish school where he taught for "teaching too much evolution." Meanwhile, well-meaning Mennonites persuaded her and her brother to go to Sunday school, a move that backfired. "I didn't like it and didn't ever want to go back," Burleigh recalls. Her brother was more sanguine and kept going. "Some children are more naturally inclined to believe in a spiritual dimension," she says. "I was not—it was a social experience for me, and I felt like a total outsider, even more than I already felt."

Meanwhile, her hippie parents, who were always disappearing to march against the war and Nixon, stood out in a deeply conservative community. "At the time, all I wanted was to have parents with the station wagon and doing normal things," Burleigh says. At school, she was beginning to discover her calling in the bookish

habits of her mom and dad, reading Kate Millet and *The New York Review of Books* in third grade, sprinkled in with gothic romances she picked up, ten at a time, from the local library. She won an award for a short story that she describes as a "rip-off of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*." When she went to college she had one criterion: how far could she get away from her parents. She spent a year "partying my brains out" at Tulane University in New Orleans before finding herself on probation. At the urging of her father, she relocated to a small Midwestern Methodist college, where she found her equilibrium studying English and writing for the student newspaper. Perhaps because of Burleigh's nomadic childhood, travel both informs and excites her, whether she's writing about coral-reef restoration on the Caribbean island of Bonaire or Napoleon's occupation of Egypt, or taking time out from a book festival in Arizona to run down to the Mexican border to see for herself what is happening there. What she finds on the journey is often not the story being told in the wider media. In Perugia to write about the notorious Amanda Knox case, she quickly concluded that the "female Charles Manson" at the center of the case was no such thing, putting her at odds with the Italian and British media. On the Mexican border, she stumbled on an unexpected seam of altruism absent in the nightly headlines. Private benefactors were compensating for the incompetence of the government by stepping in to provide for thousands of migrants. She spoke to one developer who donated a 66,000-square-foot building as a temporary shelter. "It's about the kindness of strangers," Burleigh says. "Guatemalan families, hundreds a day, are being released into these towns and they have nowhere to sleep, so the ICE people will literally drive them to private shelters."

The anecdote of her border visit is instructive. Real reporting, the kind that Burleigh learned in the 1980s as an intern for the Associated Press at the Illinois Statehouse, depends on keeping an open outlook, and requires a knack for nuance and subtlety that distinguishes journalism from Twitter. She is what used to be called a "shoe leather" reporter, getting out from behind her desk and knocking on doors. For her first book, *A Very Private Woman: The Life and Unsolved Murder of Mary Meyer*, she interviewed, by her count, 150 Georgetown people to unravel the story of the Milford socialite, and secret mistress of President John F. Kennedy, Mary Pinchot Meyer.

Sometimes you chase stories, and sometimes stories come to you. In the summer of 2008, Burleigh ran into a friend, Catherine Novak, from Narrowsburg, who told her, "My husband's having an affair." Within six months the friend was dead, at the age of 41, after a house fire that left her paramedic husband, Paul Novak, \$800,000 richer, thanks to insurance payouts. Although investigators viewed Novak's death as suspicious, they were unable to tie it to her husband, who soon resettled in Florida



with his new girlfriend. The case would have ended there had the girlfriend not contacted police in 2012 to confess that she'd covered for Novak on the night of the murder. With another paramedic enrolled for the deed, he'd driven to Narrowsburg, strangled his wife, and then burned down the house.

Burleigh followed Paul Novak's trial for *The New York Times Magazine*, and the piece she wrote is a study in how to create context for a story that might otherwise feel intrusive and tawdry. As with so much of her writing, what Burleigh was interested in was the misogynistic culture that had enabled the murder to happen—the high-stakes world of paramedics, where sex in ambulances and prescription-drug abuse was considered normal and a man like Novak could talk about killing his wife without impunity, no one thinking it out of the ordinary.

Throughout our lunch, Burleigh muses often on the challenges of being a writer without a particular lane. "I have too many interests," she says. "People don't look at my name and go, 'That name goes with XYZ.'" In a piece for the *New York Observer*, she once mocked her own ambition to score a million-dollar book advance, but the lopsided effort-to-reward ratio grates nonetheless. Although she always gets another contract, only her book on Amanda Knox has cracked the bestseller lists. *Unholy Business: A True Tale of Faith, Greed and Forgery in the Holy Land*, her fourth and favorite among her books, didn't even get a paperback run in spite of glowing reviews. "It came out the day Lehman Brothers crashed," she says. "Do you think people cared about Biblical forgery on that day?"

It's true that Burleigh is a wide-ranging writer, but again and again in her writing she is drawn back to the ways in which men malign, marginalize, and abuse women. She likes to point out that she graduated from college just as the Equal Rights Amendment was killed off, largely thanks to Phyllis Schlafly, the staunch conservative who swung Illinois against ratifying the ERA with such hokey but

effective slogans as "I am for Mom and apple pie." In "The Bombshell," her former *Observer* column, Burleigh frequently zeroed in on the way women are policed and patronized, whether writing about Boko Haram ("educated women pose a grave threat to men on the margins") or offering a withering critique of the author Junot Diaz, whose alter ego (in *The Brief Life of Oscar Wao*) "is utterly beholden to his wandering penis, yet never examines his compulsion to bone everyone in sight."

Sometimes, of course, women collude in the gratification of creeps and monsters. Burleigh's latest book, *Golden Handcuffs: The Secret History of Trump's Women*, approaches the president's history of misogyny by looking at the women who have orbited him, including his German immigrant grandmother, his Scottish mother, his wives, and his daughter Ivanka. It's a pacy read, with some juicy insights—Trump's father banned the word "pregnant" from being used at home; his mother worked as a maid for the Carnegie Mansion. But it's also a sad read that reminds us that in 2016 Trump scored more votes from white women than Hillary Clinton. The spirit of Phyllis Schlafly lives on, albeit with waning influence. Last year, Illinois finally ratified the Equal Rights Amendment, and Burleigh is cautiously optimistic that the newly liberated rage of American women will lead to change. "Trump's been great for feminism and diversity," she says, a wry acknowledgement of the president's catalyzing influence on the left.

As for her next project, Burleigh is shopping a satirical TV series based on *Golden Handcuffs*. "The characters are just two steps removed, like a Venezuelan beauty queen," she says. "You don't even have to study hard to write the jokes, because every single day there's some new episode." A cowriter has been helping to set up meetings in Hollywood. "I've been to so many Hollywood meetings over the course of my career, and nothing ever happens, but it's a good idea." Burleigh pauses, and then adds, pointedly, "And we must laugh at the dictator."