



**Dilated Pupils by Cynthia Karalla**  
Dilated Pupils 2000 - Edited by Nathalie Bru  
Dilated Pupils 2021 - Edited by Helene Stapinski

# **THE SAME STORY 20 Years Apart**

## INTRO: By Helene Stapinski

Memory and perspective are slippery things. Artist Cynthia Karalla recently recounted a dramatic childhood memory, only to discover accidentally that she had written about the same event 20 years earlier, a piece of writing she'd forgotten even existed.

With the passing of time, facts change. The ground becomes softer, the lessons become clearer, the tale more entertaining parable than preachy horror story. Karalla, a successful art photographer, is no longer the bruised and battered little girl with dilated pupils, running for her life, but the victorious survivor with new eyes, pupils back to normal size. Through art, Karalla has used those eyes to photograph the world around her, and make a new life, one that is still exciting and adventurous, but in a good way, a happy life filled with joy and possibility.

Comparing her two stories, we learn a new lesson: that we reinvent our awful past to keep it in line with the more pleasant present. As we age, we become better storytellers, smoothing the edges of anger, condensing or leaving out the nastiest bits, air-brushing the painful details, eliminating whole chapters and anecdotes altogether. What a difference a score makes.

## **Dilated Pupils 2000**

Edited by Nathalie Bru

The breaking glass bounced its hollow shattered sounds off the walls of the room. My hand throbbed in pain as my blood started to rise to the surface of the cloth. My breath fell short as my heart raced with fright. I escaped down through the empty hall and into the bathroom I shared with thirty other girls. Running the cold water over my cuts, I watched my blood turn a delicate pink and disappear down the drain and into the sewers of the streets. In the common room, the commotion rose to great heights, as the broken window became known. The girls took turns sneaking their eyes down the long hallway, to grab a glimpse of the maintenance men that came ready in hand with a replacement window. I tried to look indifferent reading the many empty magazines that laid about. Staring blankly at the pages, I listened to all of what was being said. My hand was easily concealed by the long sleeved oversize uniform. No one even noticed my return. The maintenance men finished as the bell announced the time for dinner. The excitement of the broken window gave all a topic of conversation to be shared over the breaking of bread.

Jeannie and I looked at each other with a knowing smile. The first part of our plan was successful. When winter dark fell upon us in a final blow, the other fourteen girls and myself crawled into our assigned beds. The key in the door rang its signal of lock as the voices followed with the words, "lights out." I could not move my eyes from the replacement window. This window meant everything to me. The supervisors did their usual tour of re-checking the door locks. They took count with their flashlights, spotting the lumps of helpless flesh that lay beneath the scarcely warm covers. They viewed their control as enforced just the same as all the nights before. This night was not the same as every other night. I rose from my bed to the locked door. I stood silent to listen to their footsteps disappearing into a faint shuffle. I moved quickly to the window of replacement. The white caulking was still soft. I began to peel it away. I cracked open the four-inch window and

tapped the replacement window loose. Jeannie now left her bed with a few of the other girls' close behind. Quickly we started tying the bed sheets together. We dropped one end out the window and tied the other end to the radiator. Jeannie and I greased our hips to enable us to slide through the 8 by 10 inch opening. Jeannie was pouring in a sweat of fright and begged me to go first. I had no fear of leaving, only the fear to stay. Sliding out the window I stood on the three-inch ledge looking down at the grounds 50 feet below. I convinced myself not to look down, except, think of what tomorrow could be, something more of hope than what this place could ever offer. My fingers clenched the white knots as I moved down the sheets only to find myself in a glare of light. In the frame of the second-floor window, I saw Mrs. Hawke-Eyes and Mrs. Ricks cluelessly smoking their cigarettes. Mrs. Hawk's back was to me; Mrs. Ricks was facing her. I did not see her eyes. She did not see me. As I breathed a sigh of relief, above my head the sheet started ripping. I froze in space wondering which would do away with me first, the ground that I could not view or these head mistresses suddenly noticing the shape of me dangling on their outside window. The sheet ripped and I fell. I laid in the firm cold mud. The girls up above, took turns popping their heads out the opening to see if I was still alive. Then Jeannie tried to mold herself out of the window, but as she looked down she grew frightened. She changed her mind and I was on my own.

It must have been 11 p.m. when I stuck my thumb out to hitchhike a ride. A man pulled up and I got in. Funny, with the desperation to live you would gladly put your life in danger. The possibility to survive from the horrors of the unknown is much greater than to survive from the horrors you do know. He immediately undressed me with his eyes, certainly hoping for quick sex from my still virgin self. To divert his thoughts I spoke of my fable prince who was awaiting me in the neighboring town he was driving to. He slowed the engine of the car in the town before mine and shifted his driving position to free his right arm, which was coming close to wrapping around my neck. Just then, I saw a McDonald's hamburger drive-through. I leaned into the windshield, away from his grip and said, "I am so hungry, if you buy me some food, I will do whatever you want." He smiled a gentleman's grin and asked what I wanted?"2 big Macs, 4 cheeseburgers, 6 fries, 4 cokes, 2 Pepsis and 8 hot apple pies." His gentry smile confirmed his fantasy that he could definitely mount me after I ate such an immovable feast. At the drive-

in window, as his hands piled with my food order, I decided to say my quick goodbye. His face that was full of force and conceit now fell in tune with the burgers that he held so close to his chest.

I jumped a fence that led into a yard. My eyes through the dark tried to get a bearing on where to go. All I could see was yard after yard, all connecting fences to 'The American Dream.' Lost, my breath raced to the beat of my heart. Trying to listen, the silence was disturbed by branches breaking. An approaching hand-held light gave way to an unknown intruder. I jumped over a 12-foot fence without thought or question if I could or could not do it. The adrenaline of fear leaves no room for second-guessing. This is what you have to do; there is no other way. I saw the open highway and turned to avoid it. My legs, wooden sticks that supported the body of flesh that held the pinned wings of arms, all in a motion mimicking a cartoon character endlessly running in the same scene, over and over again. I made a right turn and hit something that jumped into my path, we were both down on the ground when he turned his body over mine and held me pinned to the ground. The lights I had seen before approached, blinding my sight as to who they might be. The two intruders introduced themselves as fine officers of the law. It was their disappointment to find me instead of the burglar prowling the neighborhood that they had hoped to pride themselves on catching. But a new pride came about, without identification and passed the curfew hour, I was caught. I was handcuffed and taken into the police station. I refused to give my name but it did not take them long to know who I was. It was already on the wire that a child, female age twelve, had just escaped from a juvenile delinquent home.

Back to the place that I was beginning to recognize as home. Placed in isolation which is considered a punishment... I loved this punishment. The solitude of silence, to think, read or just dream, this was heaven to me. The two extremes, a 4' x 6' caged cell and the freedom to run all night in the wild, both being one in the same, in the mind and of the body. To me punishment was being herded around like cattle among the mist of those that preferred to accept their fate as it was, and not to try and take some sort of responsibility for their destiny, this is punishment to accept death while you still had breath... So, I am back after another failed attempt to

escape, nothing to cry about, this is only practice for the one that I will succeed at. To fail: is not to try at all.

The gates, the 20-foot barbed wire locked gate had remained open, an unusual event as us girls entered the yard for our daily exercise. Two of my peers looked at me. How predictable I had become. It was a practical theory in my head, running some place felt more productive to me than running in the same place. While the long line of girls took a turn towards the athletic field, I kept going straight; and through the opening I exit, without thought or consequence. The irony of the situation produced a tattooed laugh. You're in the midst of your escape and all you can hear are the words of the head Mistress shouting behind you, "Nadja come back here, come back here now, did you hear me? I said, ``Come back here now or you are going to be in trouble." The words pierced my ears, how much more trouble could I be in? If I turned around at this moment did that mean we could go on living happily ever after? The more I explored the adult's world of intelligence, the more I wanted to escape their prison of logic. I ran and two of the other girls also ran. They were behind me. Within a short time the county cops came upon us with their cars, I just kept running, hoping to elude the cars. The officers had to take to foot. Two started running after the other escapees and one was now pursuing me, over the railroad tracks, through the gravel and anything that was in my path now became his path. I knew it was hopeless, but I refused to turn and surrender. If he wanted me down, he would have to muster up the same passion I had inside me for freedom. All would have to crush me, kill that passion to be free, freedom, the right to live. A child's thirst for life. I fell, tackled by this beast four times my weight and my body frame. He smashed my face into the ground as his hands cuffed my arms behind my back. He lifted me by the new silver bracelets that adorned my wrist, and dragged me to the awaiting distant car. Pushing me inside, he conveniently knocked my head into the metal roof. The drive back to the juvenile center was an unconscious blur. I remember waking up in the main isolation room; the same officer was standing over me with his arm around my neck. He was choking me as he screamed "bite me," I followed his cue and bit the hand he held out in front of me, he closed his arm around my neck as my breath ceased. The Doctor's report: ribs broken, wrist bleeding, neck swelled with many visual bruises and a protruding bump on the head.

The tension in the home started to recall trouble. The word was out. The cops had beaten up Miss rich girl from Hollywood Hills- bad judgment call. I was not one of the juveniles from the surrounding poor neighborhoods; I was there for neglect and because of a custody battle. On a non-visitor's night, my Aunt and Uncle marched in, right into my isolation room, where visitors were not allowed. I always liked their visits, so distant and removed from the current state of the present moment. Always talking about the future and what the future could be. If only I would do all of what they said, and be exactly what they wanted me to be, life could be so perfect. Words and tears flowed just the same as leaves falling from a tree. "You can come home right this second, if you do all of what we say." I could only reply with what was inside my heart, "If I would be what you wanted me to be, it would be a lie, if I were to say such a thing it would only be to escape from here and then again from you. I will not lie to you to make my escape. I will succeed without lying to you, just go now and leave me to my own future plans." If only I could lie and pretend, it would be much easier to run away from them, but no, I could not. I could not pretend that I wanted their life. I couldn't picture myself in any way living their planned existence. I wanted to be me, whatever that might be. I tried hard to understand these adults, but all I got in return was their bloody hedge clippers, trying to trim me like the bush in their perfect green front yard.

My bruises, cuts and ribs healed. I was moved to the upper honor floor. We were going bowling, my first authorized outing in the six months I had spent in this place. There were three of us planning to run, as soon as the car doors opened onto the parking lot of the bowling alley. And run is what we did. To Be, continued.... Dilated Pupil

## **Dilated Pupils, 2021**

Edited by Helene Stapinski

Some of the best stories are found within walls. Proust had his white walls as Genet had his gray walls. Me? I don't remember the color of the walls, only the adventures.

Long before Google and the internet, we had the libraries, but in the juvenile detention center, our makeshift library was a hand-me-down leftover magazine collection. So researching escape plans in the cosmopolitan magazine library was impossible. All escape plans from this tight security juvenile home could only be found by word of mouth or trial and error. I was famous for my trials and errors. At the age of 12, nothing was impossible. Through word of mouth research, I heard about a possible way to escape.

### **The recipe to escape:**

Break one pane of glass in the metal framed window.

When the workers come to repair, it will be replaced with plastic and fresh putty.

Remove the putty and the plastic replacement pops right out.

For the small 8 x 10 inch opening one must grease their hips to get through.

All was in place. I smashed the glass, played with the putty and the night was set for escape. One other girl was going to take the adventure with me. She was an older girl, 15, and her name was Jeannie. There were five other gals in the room, so we had enough bed sheets to tie together to get me down three stories.



As we were all locked in our 12 bunkbed concrete room, we all lay quietly waiting for the supervisor guards to leave the floor. When the jingle of the keys faintly disappeared, we rose from our beds with the excitement that lay ahead. The girls quickly tied the sheets together, as I dressed into my juvie outfit. I pulled out the corking and released the plastic implant of a window. This windowpane was my everything; it consumed my second-by-second thoughts. The windowpane was my door to freedom.

Everything was so perfect, I was so tiny, no grease was needed to slide my body through the tiny opening. I was standing on the third floor ledge with a smile and knowing I had no knowledge of where I was going, but that didn't bother me. It was all moving forward as the tied together sheet was being handed to me to climb down into the dark evening of freedom.

I started crawling down the knotted sheets. The girls all popped their heads out the window. Some were in shock, others with "Oh My God, she is really doing it" smiles on their faces. It is amazing to be 60 feet off the ground and to have no fear. A child knows no fear; it is all explained in Luis Buñuel's film "The Exterminating Angel": whereas the children know no boundaries, the adults have to instill the boundaries of impossibility.

As I said before, I was famous for trial and error, and as I was climbing down the tied sheets, there was one little detail in the escape recipe that was not mentioned and not thought of. Right in the middle of my greatest moment, I found myself swinging in a big bright light. The bright light was coming from the superintendent's guards' office. Here they were, two women, chatting and smoking cigarettes as I swung back and forth, frozen in their light, wondering if they could see me. I was afraid to move, but then, the sheet came untied and I fell. But I fell softly in the mud.

I looked up and Jeannie had her head out the window. I said, "Come on," she shook her head "NO." And it was me and the road ahead, alone.

I didn't think much about the facts, being 12, dressed in the light blue juvie clothes or that it was about to be midnight. I just ran as fast as I could to the big four-lane highway and stuck my thumb out. Hmmmm, I just needed a car ride far, far away, destination unknown. Ancient old man of maybe 30 stops to pick me up. With my virginity still intact and my Catholic upbringing, the conversation was all about sex. Damn, I am not even sure at this point where babies actually come from. I'm a child from the 60's, so we were still stuck in cave man mentality when it came to sex. I told this man I had a boyfriend and we were waiting until we got married to have sex. His reply, which I laugh about till this day, was, "That is like going into the shoe store and buying a pair of shoes without trying them on." As I aged, I could see how logical his statement was, but back then I was a mere child.

After our in-depth conversation on sex, I had this feeling the evening might not end well. I knew he started putting two and two together and knowing that I must be a runaway without help in sight. I started thinking of solutions for another escape, an escape from this man. I love the way my brain twirls around in circles and then it happens: words fall from my lips magically. I said to this man, "OK, I am very hungry. If you buy me food I will do anything you want."

This pleased him and I knew not where this was going, but I did know it would turn out okay. So we turned into the drive-in at Burger King and I began to order: 5 super large cokes, 6 big burgers, lots of fries and some hot apple pie desserts. This was enough for his hands to be full and my way to exit stage right. I ran out of the car and jumped over fence after fence after fence. In my laughter, knowing that this guy might still be holding all the cokes, burgers and fries, I jumped over this last fence and landed on someone.

What are the odds? In the pitch black of night someone standing on the opposite side of the fence I was jumping over. I jumped right into the arms of a police officer who was looking not for me, but a burglar. Maybe the universe let me have my fun but wanted to protect me and let me be

caught. So, I was returned back to the juvenile home, much to the surprise of the superintendent guards. They did not even know I was missing.

For my little midnight venture I was being punished, the usual three days of isolation. Oh My God, three days of isolation. I can't believe that they considered this to be some sort of punishment. So the decor wasn't fancy and there was no menu for room delivery, but you could read, nap, daydream. I was in my glory. I was in so much glory that the other girls started crashing in on my pleasure and soon made isolation hip. So hip, the guards decided to end our luxury vacations by making us Brillo the floors. Now I had to get down to business and seriously plan my escape. My estranged aunt and former guardian liked to tell me how I had been born three weeks early and feet first. The better to run, I told her.

For the next 6 weeks I was on the best behavior of my life. Such good behavior that I finally got the mini pleasure of an outing. An outing to a bowling alley. I loved bowling but I knew there was no way I was seeing the bowling ball or the alley. As soon as we got there, the guard opened the back of the station wagon and out I ran, with two girls named Cathy behind me. One Cathy with a C and the other with a K. I must say, as you are running for your life, you can still hear the guards calling you to come back. When you are running to leave, you are running to something that is better than where you just came from. I was not going back.