

THE NAKED NYMPH IN THE DARK FLICKERS

Sample Chapter

Prying earwiggers outside Patricia Metcalf's dressing room stopped jockeying for position and reluctantly edged out of my path when I put an easy shoulder into them. Hangdog stares and muttered oaths greeted me—the wet blanket smothering their fun just as the fun got cracking.

“Careful, Brand,” grated a man's voice behind me. “That putz in there has a gun.” A murmur of voices backed him up, but nobody moved to stop me.

I squeezed through the lightweight door and firmly closed it behind me, blocking a sea of wide-open eyes struggling for an inside glimpse of the hokum they took for melodrama. The little man who had the floor in the center of the modest room whirled to face me when the door clicked shut. He goofily waved a Smith & Wesson snub-nosed .38 Special in a tight circle, but didn't get around to pointing it at me.

I looked calmly into his reddish eyes and ignored the revolver. “Put the gun down, Cleland. You've lost your audience.”

Cleland VanderSaant leaned forward slightly and tried to focus on me. His right arm lowered so that the .38 pointed at the lushly carpeted floor at my feet. A few minutes before one o'clock at the start of a long afternoon and the bimbo already had his buzz on. Some would think the skinny little gink cuddling the S&W J-frame was right on schedule.

“Cut,” VanderSaant snarled. His leonine head—much too big for his slight build—rolled back and he looked down his long nose at me. “The director has not enjoined you to enter his scene, and you are not welcome. Kindly remove yourself.”

The striking woman sitting regally on the barstool smiled vaguely at me and sadly shook her lovely head. Long diamond earrings caught the light and glinted brightly. Her white cotton robe parted to show a long stretch of delicious gam that she took her time covering. Her vague smile brightened as she watched me watch her.

Beside her, a tall early-twenties bimbo—wearing navy slacks, a light gray shirt, a white sport coat, and a loosely-tied cravat that matched his slacks—leaned against the curved bar for support. An up-and-coming actor billed as Russell Cave, he could have been playing the part of Max Schmeling on the ropes against Max Baer. His taut face told me he found no enjoyment in this odd show.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Cleland, will you stop this nonsense?” Patricia Metcalf’s amused eyes indicated a loveseat. “Do sit down.”

VanderSaant turned fretful eyes on his wife. Patricia Metcalf kept her hands folded in her lap, her waterproof face composed, her eyes hooded. Apparently, her strutting husband had nothing to say that she had not heard before, but something about his scene-chewing performance apparently still entertained her.

Cave started to say something, but apparently forgot his lines. Patricia’s lover shaped up as a hot meringue with no substance, just the kind of dessert Patricia Metcalf liked to taste and tease. A few weeks earlier Cave had apparently decided a fiery and not very secret affair with a beautiful and highly popular actress—even if slightly older—would boost his fledgling career. Patricia Metcalf did not dissuade his pursuit of her. That sort of initiative had long since become commonplace in this loose town, for both sexes. It provided a quick means for moving up stardom’s rickety ladder if you played your part correctly. It could blow up on you in a hurry if you miscalculated.

“Nonsense?” VanderSaant staggered slightly as he turned to face his wife. “You say this is nonsense? My dearest, nonsense is a woman of your social stature carrying on at your age with this young whelp who is most certainly not worthy of you. It is an insult to our professional status. In short, it is humiliating.”

Cave seemed to waver in his role of the effusive, hot-blooded lover. His handsome pan turned the color of a glass of milk beneath his oiled, coal black hair combed straight back, no part. His dark eyes burned holes in VanderSaant.

“Humiliating to whom?” Patricia asked. “To you or to me?”

VanderSaant wiggled the .38. “To both of us, naturally.”

“Perhaps I should have married a priest.”

“I don’t think that is allowed, my dearest.”

Patricia had the attention of the room now. With elegant precision, she withdrew a silver cigarette case from her robe pocket, extracted a gasper, and held it expectantly. Cave didn’t move.

“Darling.” Her voice carried a faint hint of exasperation.

Cave shook his head slightly, as if coming out of a trance. He reached for a small box of matches on the bar, tried to strike one, failed. His hand shook like a scarecrow in a hurricane. I took the matches from him, struck a flame and held it out for Patricia. She took her time, her eyes never leaving mine. She exhaled smoke toward the ceiling, fixed me with a smile that made my tongue burn, turned her attention to her husband. "There are always exceptions, my love."

VanderSaant squared his bony shoulders, the motion leveling the roscoe's barrel and squaring it at my chest.

"Put the gun down, Cleland," I said, stepping closer to him.

The trembling in his hand became more pronounced. He tilted his head again in a practiced pose he had most likely used many times as a stage actor before his career as a leading man dried up and he turned to directing motion pictures.

"One more step, sir, and I will be forced to defend myself. I warn you."

"You will be forced to go to jail if you pull that trigger."

"Do as he says, Cleland." Patricia's purring voice had the tone of a schoolteacher talking to an unruly student. "Sit down and let's talk rationally."

"Rationally? How can a man speak rationally to a woman who insists on taking a mere child into her bed, almost under the very nose of her quietly suffering husband?"

"My dearest." Patricia's light laugh sounded like tinkling wind chimes. "You do not suffer, and if you did, you would not do it quietly."

VanderSaant turned his head to his wife. I reached out and plucked the revolver from his hand. He staggered backward against a loveseat, clutching his chest.

"You dare assault me, you cur. You, sir, are a poltroon of the lowest degradation."

I looked at the gat. "Cleland, this is a prop." I pushed him onto the loveseat. "It won't fire, you know." I dropped the snub-nose on an end table beside an overstuffed Queen Anne wingback.

VanderSaant's wild eyes still raked me. "I am aware, you buffoon. A great actor cannot perform to his standards without the correct props. But I would not expect a knave of your low standing could appreciate that."

Russell Cave grabbed an ice bucket and pulled a Daniel Boone.

"Sweetheart," Patricia said amiably, addressing Cave without taking her hazel eyes off VanderSaant, "if you find that necessary, please do it in the bathroom."

Cave nearly tripped over a barstool, somehow kept his balance and made a

beeline for the bathroom, his reddened face buried in the bucket.

“Somebody tell me what this is about.” I looked at Patricia. “Half the ginks who work at this studio are crowded outside your dressing room, getting an earful. Good thing it’s Wednesday and Harry isn’t here or he’d be screaming his head off by now.”

“Precisely why I picked today,” VanderSaant said. “I knew the imperial Mr. York was absent and could not interpose his repugnant authority into my concerns. As you also work for him, you no doubt understand how he enjoys running everybody’s affairs, how he revels in meddling in matters that are none of his business. I am getting quite fed up with your Mr. York. Sooner or later that bohunk will learn his place.”

“Cleland, I don’t think Harry’s going to have you around long enough for you to teach him anything. All the king’s little men won’t keep York from hearing about this little crack-up.”

“I suppose it was that ridiculous little person who goes by the absurd name of Merly who brought you running.”

“That’s his job, Cleland.”

Cave staggered out of the bathroom. A small white towel had replaced the ice bucket. He poured a stiff drink from a bottle of brown plaid and sat on a stool at the opposite end of the bar from Patricia, ignoring her. He took a long pull. Something in the scotch stiffened him enough to stare vacantly at VanderSaant.

“I ought to break your neck,” Cave growled. A voice coach had likely taught him that tough guy snarl, but hadn’t taught him how to make it carry weight.

“You sit there and count your toes,” I told him. “I can’t do anything about these two, but I have a license to crack open eggs like you.”

For a fleeting moment, Cave looked like he might try to brace me, but Patricia’s voice pulled him off any thought of trying. “Russell, darling,” she said soothingly. “Do sit quiet and try to be a good little boy.”

Cave slumped back against the bar. He threw Patricia a helpless look and began studying the dark brown Aurlands on his bare feet.

“Somebody answer my question,” I said. “What’s this about?”

“It is quite simple, although I do not see that I have to explain it to an underling. This, sir, is between my wife and me.” VanderSaant waved a hand toward the bar. “And that...that lowest of boors who dares to shame myself and my wife with his unwelcome advances.”

“Darling, unwelcome to you,” Patricia purred. A slight glint in her eyes might have been the remnants of love—or maybe nothing more like sympathy—for her husband. “Russell and I have deeply enjoyed each other’s company for some time, and you know that.”

VanderSaant’s right hand circled the air in little flourishes. “Yes, my dearest, but you two began your tawdry little performances when you were a virtual unknown—a nobody—just like that whelp suckling the hind teat at the bar.”

Cave bristled and started to say something. I stepped toward him and his eyes retreated to the comfort of his shoes. He took another pull on his drink, draining the glass. A slightly shaking hand reached for the bottle.

VanderSaant sneered. “But now, with startling brevity, thanks to the brilliance of my guiding hand, you are an actress of the first magnitude, my dearest. You are what your adoring public calls a star. You have standing. Yet you persist in continuing this indecorous pursuit of wanton lust with this wastrel and without the scantest regard for your station. It is a pitiful deportment you present to your admirers. It is disgraceful.”

“Good god, Cleland, you are not in some stilted old play. You are speaking to your wife on a matter you find important, and I am quite willing to listen to you if only you calm down. I know how much you enjoy creating scenes that display your celebrated temperament, but surely you cannot believe this is an appropriate place.”

“Calm down? Calm down, you say.” He forced a smile. “How’s this for calm? When we first married and you were a rank unknown and you were using me to advance your career, you would—when we retired to our marital bed—perform...shall we say?...unnatural caresses. Then one day you refused. You said, ‘I do not have to do that anymore. I am a star.’”

Her head flew up and her nostrils flared. “I am a star.”

“Yes, my dearest, you are every inch a star, but that Cave mongrel is still an unknown, a minor player far removed from the pantheon of stars. And it is indecent of you to continue to tryst with such a person. You must realize that as your station rises so must your self-esteem. Do you not see that people will talk injudiciously if you continue to wallow beneath your station? You will be laughed at. It is an unimaginable sin for a great actor to bring laughter upon her person.” He pointed a finger at Cave. “That mongrel is not worth your slightest recognition.”

“I have wallowed enough for you, Cleland.” Her voice still purred, but now iron

tinged it. "Going back a number of years."

"Careful, dearest Patricia, careful. We do not wish to air in public our very dirty laundry for all the intemperate world to witness. That would be unimaginable for both of us."

"In that case, my love, and speaking of dirty laundry, what of that nineteen-year-old nymph you are so publically carrying on with? She is at least as unknown as Russell, although I venture not as pretty."

"She is a beautiful young lady."

"And why, my sweet, do you suppose she is willing to romp so indelicately with a dried up bag of bones such as you?"

VanderSaant clutched his chest again. "Dried up? Bag of bones? You are disingenuous. I am in the full flower of my manhood."

"Yes, darling, you have been telling me that for years."

"And as for the young lady in question, what is a man in his virile prime supposed to do when faced with such charming pulchritude?"

VanderSaant found his feet and began strutting again.

"I am a great actor. I am a great director, and there is much I can teach, and I am supposed to impart that knowledge. I am expected to take a young lady of Miss Maddon's considerable promise under my wing and bring the full flower of her talent to fruition. To do less would be sacrilege to my art. It is demanded of me. It is demanded of all great artists. If I should do less, people would wonder what is wrong with me."

Patricia practically beamed. "Darling, I would expect nothing less from you. It would be as if you played Falstaff without the boast."

I couldn't wrap my blistered mind around an emaciated runt like VanderSaant playing Willie Shakespeare's obese Falstaff, but I guess Patricia's point dug a little deeper than anywhere I wanted to go.

VanderSaant stretched out both arms, the palms of each hand open to his wife. "Precisely my argument, my dear. It is demanded of me, but what is envisaged for an actress of your status is to carry on her liaisons with men who meet or exceed that stature. To do less is to insult your dignity and your station. It is also an affront to the propriety of your suffering husband. Our peers understand such manners, and I am not censured. But to carry on with this Cave nobody? That is intolerable. It is an insult. I am looked upon with pity. A great artist cannot abide pity. Surely you understand these things."

“Cleland, darling, I understand perfectly.” Her hazel eyes twinkled. “Perhaps it is you who has forgotten.”

“Oh, yes, my dearest, you would like me to forget some things, wouldn’t you?” VanderSaant said. “I forget nothing.”

“Perhaps I should remind you that we are no longer living together. You seem to have conveniently forgotten that I have kicked you out. The terms of the agreement we entered into some years past provide me the right to that decision.” She smiled deliciously. “So you are now living in some hovel somewhere in the inner city.”

“Hovel?” He practically howled the word, casting his cold lamps on me. “Hovel, she says.” His eyes returned to his wife. “My dearest, it is a magnificent townhouse at the lovely and elegant Garden of Eden. It is a palace that is worthy of me. Hovel, indeed.”

“Is it worthy of the many young ladies you so selflessly take under your wing, so as not to commit sacrilege?”

The little director collapsed onto the love seat, head thrown back, hands covering his face. “We shall no longer discuss that.”

“Well, Cleland, I should look forward to seeing your palace sometime.” She flashed that sweet smile again. “I should think there is no hurry to do so, as it seems it has now become your permanent address.”

VanderSaant jumped sprightly to his feet. I moved quickly to get between Cleland and Patricia, but he had taken a step to his right, turning his back to me. He pointed an outstretched right arm at the closed French door. Sunlight beating against the white chintz curtains outlined vague forms of a number of people straining to hear this curious performance.

“You ungrateful wench,” he boomed. “I shall throw myself out the window.”

“Cleland,” I said, “you’re on the ground floor.”

He looked at me imperiously, his mouth working like a squirrel cracking an acorn. He slumped back onto the loveseat and thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

“Imagine me, a master of his craft, a titan of the theater, a monarch of the motion pictures, allowing an underling to interpose himself into my affairs. I am sunk to a new low. I should shoot myself and be done with this unmitigated misery.”

“Well, you won’t do it with this.” I picked up the prop gun and dropped it into the side pocket of my jacket. “I’ve cleaned all the diapers I’m going to clean

today.” I motioned to Cave. “You come with me. We’re leaving these two lovebirds to sort out their peculiar affairs in private.”

Cave looked pleadingly at Patricia, who stared at VanderSaant. Cleland’s eyes settled despairingly on the French doors.

“I only came in here,” I said to VanderSaant, “to keep you from shooting somebody. I shouldn’t have wasted my time. Let’s go, Cave.”

Cave, clearly reluctant to retreat, faced Patricia and spread his hands in a gesture of total hopelessness.

“Go, darling. I shall see you later at our usual place. Just now you are rather useless to me, and something of an embarrassment.”

VanderSaant turned beseeching eyes on his wife. He raised his head again in that practiced, arrogant pose.

“My dearest, this frightful matter seems to have given me a headache. Might I trouble you for a tall glass of scotch? And perhaps a bromo?”

About the Author



Ray Dyson first took up eating in Evansville, IN, just long enough ago that, not only is the house he was born in no longer there, neither is the street. He attended The Ohio State University School of Journalism and spent several years as a newspaperman, covering crime and sports. He is a former sports editor and sports columnist, and now lives in Mansfield, OH, with his wife, Pamela, where he works as a freelance journalist. He has a particular interest in American history (especially the Civil War), the American West, and the American cinema.

Dyson is the author of three other books: a baseball story, *Smokey Joe*, a Western novel, *Bannon: The Scavenger Breed*, and the first Neil Brand crime story, set in Hollywood in 1931, *The Ice Cream Blonde*.

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