

Asylum



and Mirage

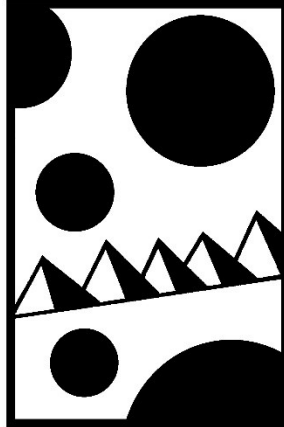
Michael D. Smith

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cover art and design by Michael D. Smith

For my wife Nancy, and not just for reading my fiction! All my books would be impossible without her. Her advice that everything in this life is for my art continually guides me.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Sketchbook

October 9

Dave checked out the girl squinting at the bulletin board. She was a typical neurotic college girl, damaged, hunched over, round-shouldered, her hair a tangled ball of muddy tones matching her tatty brown sweater. Dave had seen her type before and was certain she wore that sweater to cover mousy little breasts.

She turned, shot him an icy glare, and wrapped the loose cardigan around her.

Dave dropped his eyes to his sketchbook. A third of the way through so far. He'd recently begun forcing watercolor directly into unfixed charcoal, diffusing the charcoal, dimming the tones. He referred to this process as *compromising the color*. Pencil or charcoal kept the tones murky. The effect was more subtle than he'd ever achieved.

But he'd endangered his sketchbook by bringing it here tonight. He knew damn well he hadn't intended to sketch. He'd come here to sit on the stone bench in the student union and look sensitive in front of college girls. He'd exposed his sketchbook to loss, to splashing from bicycles passing through puddles, to sand contamination from his walk on the beach.

Dinner had just finished. Students issued from the cafeteria along with the smell of pork chops. Cute girls were paired with good-looking young men. But the girls seemed so immature that Dave couldn't imagine carrying on a conversation with them. They didn't have the faintest inkling of his conceptual patterns. It gave him bitter pleasure to study his art and ignore them. What did eighteen-year-old females know about sex? They were just full of tension, coming at you with arrogant combativeness and fear. Who wanted to fool with that?

Outside the windows they unlocked their bicycles and laughed with the boys. Friday evening, sunset. Easy sex coming up for all of them. All a guy had to do was suggest a beer up in his room, and the girl would nod and say: "All right ..." They formed pairs so effortlessly. Even when they read the bulletin board together and pointed to photos of cars or bicycles, Dave knew that within the hour they'd be greedily exploring each other's bodies. Dave would be walking to his car with his sketchbook.

"Dammit to *hell*." To his horror, he'd let his sketchbook slide off his lap onto the stone bench. It could've been dented. What an inexcusable lapse of discipline for an artist.

He caught the neurotic girl studying him. She had a round face and dark hurting eyes beneath disheveled hair. Dave averted his gaze, heart churning, but to his astonishment he found himself standing beside her at the bulletin board. "Uh, hello."

The girl gave a neutral nod. "Hello."

What were full, sensuous lips doing on a neurotic college girl? Her cheeks were coolly composed, almost frozen, yet the face was sensual. She didn't even seem to breathe. Usually neurotic college girls bubbled with anxiety.

"I just thought I'd come over and ... talk, you know." He'd started the entire encounter without giving it a second thought. Normally he'd agonize about what to say for ten minutes before finally getting up his nerve.

"Well, that's nice." She checked out guitars, clarinets, and amplifiers on the bulletin board. Now he saw her hair was really a deep russet, with wild gold streaks. He focused on the odd outline of her nose. She was pretty in a weird sort of way.

"Uh, my name's Dave."

She turned. "You looked so lonely sitting over there. Like you were thinking about someone." Dave was stunned by the low musical voice.

“Me? Thinking about someone?”

“Yeah, that’s what you looked like.” She bent to read some lower notices, and Dave swallowed as her sweater parted. He’d been completely wrong about her breasts. Under that nasty brown sweater she wore a transparent lime-green blouse, the top three buttons undone. Beneath that, a lacy crimson bra barely held back enormous, round, heartbreaking boobs. Everything was so sheer he could see her brown nipples. Unbelievable that he’d been checking her out all this time and missed this.

“Me? You mean--me?” She really had him going now. How could a college girl lead him around like this? “I guess I was thinking about, you know, talking to you.”

The girl caught his glance and pulled her sweater around herself. “No, I’ve seen that look before. You’re in love with somebody, and you’re thinking about *her*.”

Dave locked onto those unfathomable eyes and struggled to put defiance into his tone. “Well, you’re wrong there. I was just sitting there, I guess. Maybe I always look like that.”

She fingered the sweater right where Dave wished she would whip it aside. “My name’s Marina, by the way.”

“That’s a ... sexy name,” Dave said, deciding to spell it out in full for this dimwitted college girl.

She shrugged. “And you said you were ...?”

“Dave. I guess that’s not a very sexy name.”

“Well, then hello, Dave. Are you looking to buy a used laptop? Too bad we don’t have Internet anymore. You could’ve just texted anyone. Now we’re back to bulletin boards.”

“Uh, no, I guess I was looking at *you*.”

She shifted an armload of books. Dave could see from the spines that she’d been to the university library. On Friday night? She was a serious case. Again her sweater fell open. Only now did he realize how short she was, maybe five-five. Tiny, but with such a sensual face and such glorious breasts. Neurotic, definitely.

“Well, I’ve been looking at you,” Marina said. “For quite a while now. You do look lonely.”

Dave’s brain raced to keep up. Her voice was so intoxicating he was afraid she might break into song. He’d definitely latched onto something weird. He might even miss his own party. He hadn’t counted on this. “I’m not really lonely, I don’t think.”

“But you’re hanging around this bleak dump.” Marina indicated the tan walls and the sunken pits with purple lounge chairs. “A lousy place to pick up women, no doubt.”

Dave opened and closed his mouth. “But you’re here too.”

“At least I can say I didn’t come here to pick up a man. I’m looking to find a cheap laptop. But I found you.”

Dave felt as if he’d blown a speaker in one ear. Her voice came in so faintly he wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly. His gaze jerked up and down between those full lips and those big lacy knockers.

“Look, Dave, we’re obviously trying to get to know each other. But this is an awful place for that. Would you care to come up to my room for a drink?”

“Well, that’d be fine, I guess.” It finally sunk in that Marina’s body would soon be his. “Great idea.”

“Well, come on then.” As she led them out of the student union, down the handicapped ramp and then across the beach leading to the dormitory complex, Dave couldn’t say a word. Marina let the silence go on.

It was chilly on the beach. The sun went down over the black lake in appalling orange wedges and jagged clouds. With anyone else in the world he would have exclaimed how beautiful the

sunset was. But now it was just a backdrop to the rank smell of fish. Dreary little waves lapped at sand and trash.

"You have a roommate?" he finally blurted.

"No."

"Got a room all to yourself, huh? You must be lucky." A young guy passed, shooting an envious glance. Dave realized he was now one of the lucky guys with access to easy university sex. It was high time to kiss Marina on the beach. He looked over at her. Swallowed. Couldn't bring himself to do it.

"You know, you're a very sexy girl," he squeaked, dimly aware that "sexy" was the completely wrong word.

Marina smiled unnervingly, shaking her tousled dark hair. "I'm glad you think I'm a sexy girl, Mr. Dave."

Dave still couldn't move toward her. "Well, you are."

"And you're a very sexy boy."

Dave blanched. He wasn't a boy. This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen. He was thrown back to what it really had been like to be seventeen, long before he'd first gotten laid. Okay, so it had been late for him, when he was nineteen. Most kids got it far earlier than that, after all, when they were sixteen, or twelve even. Still, you didn't start understanding sex until much later, when you were twenty-five. Dave hadn't understood a damn thing when he was seventeen. He'd fantasized about getting that girl from French class naked in an endless rolling field in the middle of nowhere. They'd been speaking French, too, because the fantasy needed to take place in a foreign country. What was her name? Canda? Casda? Some exotic name. She'd been willing, that was for sure, at least in the fantasy, because in real life she hadn't known he existed. But at least he'd banged her in a sunlit field, for God's sake, not this foul beach lit by a dying star across the lake. What was going on? Had he really regressed to seventeen? Where was this girl leading him?

"Where the hell do you *live*?" he gasped.

"Barnes," Marina replied. "It's pretty nice. It's not too far. Just at the end of the beach and half a block up."

"I know where Barnes is." He couldn't bring himself to add that he'd lived there ten years ago. He berated himself for not taking that chance to get one up on her. He was losing ground fast. Marina had control. The dull waves made him want to leap out of his skin. His mind raced with excuses. *Look, I'm sorry, I just realized I have a party later tonight I have to get to. Look, I'm sorry, I'm hosting a party later tonight and there's a lot of preparation for it. Look, I need to go. Maybe I'll see you around.*

They climbed the wide steps leading to Barnes. Dave craned up the brown stone cliff of the dormitory. "Yeah, this is where all the suicides like to come."

"We've only had one this year," Marina said. "I know it was a real fad years ago."

"Yeah, get to the top balcony and then go." Dave gestured to show exactly how thirty-three students had sailed off Barnes his senior year. "Of course, it's only October now. See where you stand by June and all."

Marina shifted her books and the loose sweater parted again. The thin green blouse opened as well, spotlighting a right breast refusing to adhere to its crimson cup, bubbling with her motion across the sidewalk. The blouse tucked itself over a flat tummy into sleek gray pants. Why would she disguise such a stunning figure with loose brown sweaters? He was shocked at how easily and erect she strode. Why had she hunched over in the student union? To diminish herself, to keep men at bay?

She pushed the glass doors aside. Dateless boys milled around the lobby, reading old

magazines on the maroon chairs the way they had ten years before. Dave couldn't bring himself to take Marina's hand. Pretend they were just acquaintances. Pretend up to the moment. Why he wasn't sure. She was so damn obscure.

In the elevator she punched 14. "Huh, top floor and all," Dave muttered. Had his loutish cynicism put her off? If so, maybe he had a bit of control. Some sort of leverage. Kiss her now. He steadied himself. Marina chose this moment to rearrange her books and tug off her brown sweater.

Dave froze at the sight of her lacy bra. "Let me help you with those books." God, would he have those breasts after all? But now he was sure he wouldn't. Marina had control. She'd find some way to deny him. She'd want to discuss Kipling until ten, then he'd have to go do his party. A college girl. And he'd allowed this.

Now that Dave had his hands full of her books, she pulled a pair of glasses out of her purse and drastically altered her face with thick black frames. At once she seemed much older. He glanced at the top title: *Readings in Ontological Deconstruction: Medieval Music Theory and the Postulate of Eternal Mind*. The elevator doors parted and Marina led him down a narrow mustard-colored hall, marching a frustrating step ahead. Clusters of students gathered in the mini-lobbies scattered along the hall. Dave heard laughter and an acoustic guitar, and smelled marijuana. "Wow, it's difficult to get a room all by yourself," he spoke to the dark strap of her bra beneath the blouse.

"Not for me," she said, turning back with an unworldly smile. Would it happen? Could it happen? She ran so hot, then so cold. "It was assigned to me. No problem."

She unlocked 1456 and flicked on a dim lamp to showcase the typical Barnes student motel room. Hundreds of books took up an entire wall of shelves. "You sure have a lot of books." She was an intellectual girl, screwed up, with bizarre passions. At least he had to hope so.

CHAPTER TWO

Dr. Nunn

In the gloom a figure placed cards on a queen-sized bed.

“God, who’s *that*?” Dave said, heart sinking. “I thought you said you didn’t have a roommate.”

Marina took her books from Dave and set them on a table by a dim lamp. “Oh, that’s just my addict. We’ll put her in the other room. Honey, would you mind heading down the hall for a while?”

“Yes, ma’am, of course,” came the soft voice. “I’ll get back to the notes later. I’ve put the new ones up by the pillows here.” Though Dave was repelled at encountering an addict, he was struck by the clarity of the feminine voice. He would’ve expected a slurring, malingered tone. And stench. He finally breathed in. None. Amazing.

“Thank you, dear,” Marina said. “We’ll try not to disturb the notes.”

“Of course, ma’am. I’ll get everything back into order after you’re done.” Despite the darkness, Dave met brown eyes in a pleasant Nordic face with a sharp chin. Long blond hair fell over a blouse in swirling blue-green, with lines of iridescent lightning rising over small breasts. He swallowed and looked away, but this took him down chocolate yoga pants tightly outlining everything, to the circle of lamplight on the floor lighting up bright green sandals and toenails painted cobalt blue. He took a ragged breath. This girl loomed out of the dark like something from a dream. How had Marina been inveigled into taking her on? Had things gotten so bad that college students had to sponsor addicts these days?

“Thanks so much, dear,” Marina said.

“I’ll be down the hall if you need me, ma’am.” The addict ducked her head in a swirl of fine blond lines. She turned to show tight, magnificently outlined ass cheeks as she disappeared down the black hallway. A door cracked to bluish light and soft music, then shut.

“I’ve never seen a Barnes room with a hallway to *another* room,” Dave said. “Do you have two rooms somehow? One for your addict?”

“Oh, they joined two together for me a long time ago,” Marina said. “They knew I needed the space. No problem. And I just got *her* a few weeks ago. No real problem. She helps with the cards.”

“The ...?”

“Right. The cards. Don’t step on them there.” Marina pointed to scores of multicolored 3x5 cards spread in a huge rectangle on the floor. They were covered with scrawls in blue, green, and red. Dave tried to figure out how to maneuver Marina past them to the bed, but several dozen cards lay at angles across the rumpled brown comforter.

“I’m afraid all I’ve got is vodka,” she said, pulling a big clear bottle from a table.

“Yeah, good.” Dave gingerly stepped around the cards and touched her shoulders. If the addict was gone, then things were wide open now. Marina turned to him with a challenging smile. He’d seen neurotic girls flash on sex energy and temporarily put aside their neuroses. They got saucy. They put everything they had into sex. But Dave felt his stomach drop as she pulled him into her eyes. “Are your eyes really *jet black*?”

“Almost, aren’t they? Everyone says that. Here, honey, take a swig.” She raised the vodka bottle to his lips. She was so short she had to hold it above her head. Dave hadn’t realized he was so much taller. That might give him an advantage. But first he had to reject this idiocy with the bottle.

“No, thanks, I don’t want anything to drink. I want *you*, Marina.”

“No, come on, you said you were coming over for a drink.”

“You--you--”

“Now, c’mon, my sexy little boy,” Marina cooed, tilting the bottle into Dave’s mouth. “Just take a tiny little swig. You promised, after all.”

Dave took the bottle from her hands and downed a mouthful of the burning liquor. “There!” He felt himself whirling.

“Give it here,” Marina said, taking her own mouthful.

“Yeah ... c’mere.” Dave pulled the bottle from her and set it on the table. “C’mon.” She locked onto him, and he found her lips. They were soft and hot and her tongue came hard inside his mouth. He rocked his body into hers. She grabbed his ass and they stood there feeding off each other for a long time. He had her breasts, squeezing them, so deliciously big and soft, the nipples already hard.

“God ...” he gasped. “Let’s get to the bed.”

“Mmmm ... no, the *notecards* are there. Let’s just kiss. Come down here with me, sexy boy.” She disengaged and sat cross-legged on the floor, patting a stretch of note-free Persian carpet. “C’mere.”

“Yeah ... oh God ...” Their lips locked again and Dave found himself pushed onto his back, with Marina climbing atop him in front of her open bathroom door. His fingers worked crazily over her breasts. He couldn’t figure out the buttons. And she was humping him hard.

“God, yes!” he cried, jamming back. He kept fumbling at her chest and driving his jeans into hers, feeling he’d explode any second.

“Stop! Stop it now!”

Dave complied, shocked that Marina’s cry had brought them both to a complete halt.

She smiled down. “Sorry I get so *loud* sometimes, Mr. Dave, but we do need to think about this.”

“No, let’s--let’s *fuck*.”

She straddled him. “No, we’ve got to only do *this* much. Just kissing. This is fine. We’ve got to be careful, honey, I mean, there are all sorts of diseases, you know.”

“We’re not afraid of any diseases!”

Marina draped herself across his chest. He felt her teeth at his chin and a sharp little bite. “Now you *belong* to me, Dave. You do realize I’m a witch, don’t you?”

“What?” Dave sailed into her obsidian eyes. What had been so hard pounding back at her a few seconds ago was now painfully squashed under her weight. She couldn’t be that heavy, could she? Past her right ear he saw a poster of Akard Drearstone tacked to the wall. Damn, here was a girl who worshipped rock stars, and mediocre ones at that. Unlike Dave’s, Drearstone’s cock bulged out of his tight striped pants. He looked bored and cruel, his tangled brown hair hanging over his naked, glistening pectorals as his forearm muscles strained to lay down covering fire from his ultramarine-blue, eighteen-stringed bass guitar synthesizer. “I mean, we really shouldn’t be afraid of any diseases.”

Marina put a finger to his lips. “That’s silly. It’s better this way. We don’t know anything about each other yet.”

“Maybe if we had another drink or something?” He looked around for the vodka bottle, out of reach, high above on the table.

“Want to make love to me?”

“Well, sure ...”

“It’s not going to happen.”

Dave stared at those wondrous breasts in that disheveled blouse. He was pinned to the floor by a madwoman. “No, it’s *got* to happen.”

"No, you've got someone on your mind. You were kissing *her*."

"Huh? Are you crazy? I was out of my *mind*." Only now was Dave aware of the dark room around him. Beyond the bed, sliding glass doors displayed remnants of torn black clouds against the failing russet sky. God, Marina had a room with a window to the Apocalypse. "Look, I mean, I'm out of my mind for *you*."

Marina kept station atop him. "You're in love with this woman. I can tell. You're just looking for a substitute. Maybe you feel you can't have her or something, I don't know."

"N-no, it was *you*. When you started kissing me, I just went *insane*. It was only *you*."

"It won't happen."

"Look, I could really see making love to you. I mean, I think I could, you know."

"No, you're in love with your girl. I'm not going to go ahead with it under these circumstances. I don't want to spoil you."

"You said you were afraid of catching something. Well, you won't catch anything from *me*. I'm totally clean." He reached for a breast. Marina batted his hand away.

"Now look, Dave, we do have to be careful about *that*. I notice you didn't even bring a condom with you."

"You just feed me this story about being careful. Now you're giving me all this shit about my having somebody else. You're just a tease. You'll use any excuse to fuck me up."

Marina's dark eyes bored in on him and she carefully ground her vulva against his deflated organ. "I don't see any reason to use profanity in my room, Mr.--what did you say your last name was?"

"Raavenscorr. Dave, uh, Raavenscorr." Instantly he regretted it. Would she know who he was?

Marina finally climbed off and held out a hand. He reluctantly took it, unable to meet her bantering gaze. "And I'm Marina Nicker Nunn. How do you do?"

"*Dammit*."

"Don't be angry, Dave. I really want to save you for your girl. That's the prime consideration, you know."

"Listen, she's no girl. She's thirty-two."

"So you're going to finally admit that you're in love with someone?"

Dave breathed out. "Yeah. So what?"

"Thirty-two," Marina laughed. "How about that? How'd you manage to fall for such an older woman?"

"Look, I don't want to talk about it. I mean, please, couldn't we ...?" Still on his back, he reached again for a breast. She let him, staring coolly at his hand. "I mean, I want *inside* you."

Marina smiled. "Well, as long as we're admitting terrible secrets, I'll tell you my own problem."

"Problem?"

"See, my problem is that I'm incapable of saying *no* to any man. I can't seem to resist anyone. If they want me, they get me. You understand?"

Dave turned to the notecard-covered bed. "You make love to *everybody*?"

"I screw them. All of them. You might say I'm an *expert*, Dave."

"God, how come I'm the only guy you can say no to?"

"Because I'm making an exception in your case. I can see you're a good guy. The rest are all assholes. They come after what they want, they get it, they say goodbye. So what? Whereas I can tell that you're really in love with this woman. You're a good guy."

"No, I'm not. I pick up women. I'm pretty messed up myself."

Marina laughed. "How many girls have you had sex with in the last year?"

“Well ...”

“Dave, I have sex with thirty or forty men a week. I just can’t say no. It doesn’t matter who they are. A lot of them are just college boys like yourself.”

“Would you get off your *boy* trip? I’m not a college boy. That’s a stupid thing to say to someone who’s ten years older than you.” He finally sat up. “I’m leaving.”

“Mr. Dave, do you think I’m some little coed? Don’t you know who I am?”

“Hell, no!”

Marina flashed to her feet. “I’m Chairwoman of the Music Department! I’m the faculty advisor to this dorm. It is I who am older than you!”

Dave stood too. “Bullshit! I’m thirty-one. I’m a professional artist!”

“Well, you look like you’re fifteen. I’m forty-three!”

“You can’t be! You don’t look a day over--over--”

“Oh, good,” she said, arms folded over her breasts. “I’m ready for a compliment.”

“Twenty, twenty-five? You’re putting me on! No way you’re forty-three!” Forty-three was *ancient*. Marina had no wrinkles of any kind. “I mean, your body’s perfect! I mean, everything’s perfect!”

“Oooh, thanks, dear boy. That’s what all the art students say, you know.”

“*What?*”

“You didn’t know I pose for the life drawing classes? I seem to pick up a lot of young men there for some reason.”

“You--you--” Dave sputtered. “*I* should draw you. You could pose for *me*. I have my own studio now. You’d be ultimate!”

Marina flashed him another unworldly smile. “Oooh, I like this. Too bad I’ve already decided not to bring you to bed.”

“*Damn ...*” But when Dave began to think of hordes of horny male fine arts majors drawing Marina, then penetrating her atop those cards on that bed, he had to draw back. Thirty or forty men a week? She had to have every STD there could be. But she was so *beautiful*. He backed away, bumped into the wall, and turned angrily at something soft and furry. He was disgusted to find that the Akard Drearstone poster was made of velvet. “God!”

“So you thought you were picking up a little college girl? I thought you knew who I was.”

“Well, I didn’t. So what?”

“Everybody at Lake knows who I am. All the boys and their girlfriends, too. All the professors and all their wives!”

“Well, I graduated ten years ago. I guess you weren’t around then. I lived right here in Barnes, 1325, one floor down and all.”

“I’ve been here two years. I taught at Linstar for ten years before Lake.”

“Oh God, you were at *Linstar?*”

CHAPTER THREE

Notes for an Opera

"C'mon, Dave, that was long before the Contamination."

The addict had excellent hearing and the walls were thin. As the voices down the hall grew, she got the entire conversation. Dr. Nunn knew everything. She always had control. All the same, the addict was startled not to hear the usual moaning and bed creaking that ought to have begun by now.

"I know, I know, but still, I mean, *Linstar*," came the shrill male voice. "God, it's all just so horrible. Listen, I need to be going. I'm really sorry for everything. I'll be seeing you, I guess."

"I don't want to hear any apologies," said Dr. Nunn. "What we had here was just fine. Let's leave it at that."

"You just wanted me because you thought I was some little college boy."

"What did you want from me when you thought I was just some little coed?"

"I don't care. This whole thing is *crazy*. Look, I really do need to go. Really. See, I'm actually giving a party tonight, and I need to get to it. I mean, prepare and everything."

"Really. How very interesting."

"Well, yeah." There was an unnerving long pause. "I guess you could come if you like. I mean, I think it'd be okay."

The addict was so surprised at this turn in the conversation that she inched the door open and peered down the hallway. A boy stood in a rumpled, untucked white shirt gesturing at Dr. Nunn, who stood placidly with folded arms under her enormous breasts. The addict was struck by the boy's fidgeting, which seemed in total contrast to his hawklike face and what now struck her as prematurely graying hair matching deep-set gray eyes. He was tall and lean, with a powerful chest and biceps that would've been even more impressive if he just stood straight. Even hunched over, the boy towered over the professor, though it was obvious she had him under her spell. The boy's eyes were dazed, his mouth loose, the planes of his otherwise hard face quivering.

"So you need an ornament for your party, do you?" Dr. Nunn said. "Is that why you came to the student center tonight? To pick up some college girl for an ornament?"

"No, I really needed to get laid!"

"Are you really so alone?"

"Yes! I mean no!"

"Maybe you wanted to impress that woman you're in love with. Is she going to be at the party? Maybe you *do* need an ornament on your arm after all."

"Well, n-no, she wouldn't be impressed, I don't think."

"I'd be delighted. Absolutely delighted. What time did you say?"

"Well, it starts at ten. I like parties that go on all night, and all."

"So do I. Love 'em. What shall I wear? Do you like my transparent blouse?"

"Well, see, I'm a professional artist. This is a party for the opening of my show at the Middeliss Gallery. I'm not sure if this is such a great idea, really."

The addict was so amazed that she found herself halfway down the hall, standing in plain sight if the other two cared to turn.

"The Middeliss! I go there all the time. I always keep up with the new artists. This is perfect. So we're going to the Middeliss?"

"Well, no, it's sort of a strange party. I mean, it's at my place. I have this warehouse over on Perrine Square, and I've got paintings I'm willing to put into galleries and sell, and then I've got ones I'm *not*, I guess."

“So people will come to your warehouse to see the paintings nobody ever gets to see. That’s perfect.” She crossed to a dresser. “Maybe I’ll wear my silver jumpsuit. It’s getting chilly out.”

“Uh, look, I don’t really think ...”

“Oh, I get it. You’re beginning to realize that absolutely everyone in Lake Grafton, apparently excepting Mr. Dave, knows all about the lascivious Dr. Nunn. They’ll know *exactly* why she came to Dave’s party.”

“N-no, it’s not that.”

“How many artists show up with *whores* at their openings? And psychotic whores at that? *That’s* what you’re thinking.”

“Forget it, I’m leaving.” Abruptly the young man turned and fixed his ragged gaze on the addict. “Who the hell are *you*?”

The addict’s brain scurried for something to excuse her presence. “Would you two like a cola? I just thought maybe some refreshments might be, you know, appropriate.”

“No, I need to *leave*!” cried the boy. “Damn, haven’t I seen you somewhere?”

“Mr. Dave here certainly needs something to refresh his vodka hangover,” Dr. Nunn observed. “We certainly can’t have him blundering off the balcony in his condition. Thank you, Caspra, a couple StomachSurges would be fine.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the addict said, edging past the boy towards the bathroom with its little refrigerator.

“*Caspra*?” the young man blurted. “Your name’s *Caspra*?”

She blinked. “Well ...”

“*Caspra* from *high school*? You’re *here*? I can’t believe it!”

“Dave? Dave from *French class*?”

“That’s me! I remember you!”

“Well, that’s funny, I guess.”

“Oh, so you two know each other!” Dr. Nunn laughed.

“That must be, like, like fourteen *years*,” Dave gasped. “But you’re an *addict* now? Really?”

Caspra stared back. The guy was on the edge of hysteria. “Well, I guess so. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll get you and Dr. Nunn a StomachSurge.” She edged around the frantic young man and made it to the bathroom refrigerator, pulled a couple bottles of brown cola, and twisted off their caps. Could this guy really be the Dave twerp from French class? The same tweeby guy from all those years ago? She used to giggle with her friends about the uptight kid who looked twelve years old. But by definition he had to be the same age as Caspra. And his hair had gone gray. Unbelievable, but it was Dave Raavenscorr. From behind she heard:

“I can’t believe she’s an *addict*. That’s disgusting.”

“Quiet, Mr. Dave. The addicts have had a rough time. Caspra’s all right.”

“Forget it. They made their bed and they can lie in it. It’s disgusting. Thank God I don’t have one now.”

“Famous last words, Mr. Dave. You might have one before the end of the night, for all you know.”

“The last one I had O.D.’d in my bathroom. What a mess. Who gives a shit?”

Caspra returned with the colas. “Thanks, dear,” Dr. Nunn said. “Just set them down on that table there, by the cards.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want to get moisture on the cards, would we, ma’am?” Caspra said. She pushed the vodka bottle to the side and set the StomachSurges on cork coasters well to the left of a dozen 3x5 cards. The vodka bottle had knocked several cards askew, and she nudged them back into formation with a cobalt blue fingernail.

“My God, of all the lousy *luck*,” Dave said. “I can’t believe this. I’ve fucked up my party. For some piece of ass who was at Linstar, probably *contaminated*. And her *addict*. Caspra from French class. Caspra *Coronae*. I remember now!”

“Wow,” Dr. Nunn laughed. “For your information, that’s *Doctor* Piece of Ass, my friend. And do leave Caspra out of this. I think the vodka has hit you harder than we thought. Caspra, dear, it might be best if you left us.” She gestured down the hall.

“Of course, ma’am. I just wanted to be of service here.”

“Just what are all these shitty cards anyway?” Dave yelled, raising his arm to sweep them aside.

“Please, sir!” Caspra said, blocking his arm with her own. “These are Dr. Nunn’s *cards*.” She pointed to the previous week’s cards they hadn’t gotten around to organizing yet.

Dr: running in high grav in rain. overpass. punks. turn headlights to face.

Something like McPherson collection at library, surreal night exploring, then: locked out of car.

Manager from Canterra, interviews for idiot archivist. I assist. Turns laptop screen to me. Wander to new health club underground.

Tepperson observatory, darkness, then to massive wet buildings at dawn.

A.D.J.--Thurs.

Martin--reread.

live oaks, early morning fog, jetliner cruising down streets, lands in park. Shouldn’t come off as vulgar, more as power in extreme disarray.

Some notes bore the notation FRAG stamped in half-inch-high black. Some in green ink said PLOT. Others had BURIED in red letters. There were three rubber stamps, GRAF, TOLP, and DEIRUB, along with green, red, and black ink pads.

“What’s all this *crap*?” Dave demanded.

“Oh, those are mostly dreams,” Dr. Nunn said. “I like to sleep late and collect them. Caspra helps me organize them. Plus a few to-do notes here and there. But sometimes they mix very well into the overall structure.”

“The overall structure of *what*?”

She picked up a folded piece of scrap paper. “For instance, here’s one I need to transfer to a regular 3x5. Yellow for slow motion or frustration dreams, but this one had a definite *plot*.” Caspra peered over Dr. Nunn’s shoulder along with Dave as the professor pulled out a blank yellow card and transcribed the words from the folded paper: *Hang sheets in basement, argue with parents. Plug leak. pipes. Weird underwater cement.* She inked TOLP and stamped PLOT on the card in green. “Then I integrate it into my structure.” She moved to the bed and positioned the card in a blank space between two rows of cards.

“*What* structure?”

“Normally I don’t let anybody see the cards. I didn’t know anybody was coming over tonight.”

“Well, I guess *I* came over.”

"See, this is the structure for an opera. Of course, it'll also be very visual. So since you're an artist, maybe you could paint some of it."

"What? No, I couldn't--"

"It's called *Reunion Topology*. I've been working on it for a year now."

"*What?* You can't say--*that!* No one says that!"

Caspra flinched at the title herself, even though of course she knew it. Now it gave her pleasure to see Dr. Nunn's grin.

"C'mon, Dave," the professor went on, "*someone* has to express it. I'm just trying to get across the concept of the buried *forces*. That's why some of the dreams are stamped *buried*."

"No, that's how people get contaminated, playing with that sort of crap."

"No, really, Dave, you're an artist, *you* know about these forces."

"I--I do not!"

"We're all repositories for these barely understandable *forces*. Countless numbers of them, all interacting, and we can barely grasp what they *are*."

"No, they *contaminate*. You shouldn't be fooling with them!"

"You're upset I call it *Reunion Topology*?"

"You can't! It's *dangerous*."

"You can't handle it that I dared name it after *the south*? After Linstar? Well, none of the other boys can, either. I don't tell just anyone, but word gets around, I guess." Dr. Nunn pointed to the cards on the bedspread. "I think all these dreams are interconnected. They're a *topology* of the unconscious."

"No, we can't *afford* that anymore!"

"But what if they're a *solution* to the hallucinations?"

"You're playing with fire! You think this is an *opera*? God, what are you *thinking*?"

"Well, of course it's an opera. I'll be singing the main part. Do you sing, Mr. Dave? Maybe I can work you into it."

"Into--into these *cards*?" he stammered, pointing a shaking finger.

"Yes, straight into them. You could help me rearrange them. Note new things as they come up. Oooh, I forgot. Let me get the last card and make a note. It had the high gravity struggle in there as well. I knew it was yellow for a reason." She grabbed a thick black pen. Crossing to the bed, she scribbled on the yellow card she'd just placed there.

"God, that's an old Gasnallwell," Dave said. "Those things are worth *thousands* of dollars now."

Dr. Nunn finished with a flourish. "The ultimate technical pen, I agree. I've had it for twenty-five years. I wrote some of my first poetry with it. I don't care if it's somebody's idea of a rare collector's item now. I use it every day." She tucked it into her cleavage.

"You're *crazy*. I can't believe any of this. Look, there's only one way out of this."

"One way out of what, dear boy?"

"We've got to have *sex*. To take care of all these forces!" And he marched to Dr. Nunn and rammed her into his arms, hands grabbing her ass as he slobbered across her face.

"Watch the cards! Watch the cards!" she cried, but Caspra saw she was amused.

Dave jammed his face into her breasts. "God, *please*."

"Ow! Watch the pen, Mr. Dave!"

"S-sorry, gotta get *inside* you!"

"Oh, aren't you a nice boy?" she murmured, pulling his head up but turning her face aside as his lips aimed for hers.

"C'mon!" Dave grunted, rubbing up and down her body. Caspra could see herself relegated

to addict nonentity status. Dr. Nunn, normally so sensitive to Caspra's needs, was tuning her out as well. Caspra could stand here and watch an entire episode of sexual intercourse if she wished. Of course she didn't want to, but she was rooted to the carpet. What if some of the notes were damaged? She had to stand guard. Dave's muddy running shoes were just a couple inches from the first row, after all. What a jerk the guy was. He'd always stared at her chest in French class. Also in Math 450, where he'd managed to exchange seats with another student so he could sit next to her.

"Look, Dave, we really can't do this," Dr. Nunn said, pushing him back. "I know you're a nice boy, but we really can't."

"I'm not a boy! Make love to me!"

"Can I come to your party if I make love to you?"

"*What?* Yes, yes!"

"It's not going to happen. I know you don't want me at your party. I know what you think of me. So I named the price, and you were willing to pay. But I'm not going to let you sully yourself."

"I *want* to sully myself!"

"No, I'm saving you. For *her*. You love her so much!"

Caspra stared. There were tears in her mistress' eyes.

"You--"

"Get out of here!" Marina screamed. "I should never have let you see my cards!"

"Damn you, you're just a tease! You're *broken*. Did you get contaminated down in Linstar? Is *that* your problem?"

"You better hope not, Mr. Artist!"

"You must've been in Linstar when the Seed was planted!"

"I got out of there *before* it blew up, damn you!"

"Maybe you brought the Seed here!"

"Linstar's five hundred miles south. The Seed *can't* get here!"

"This is a goddamn *nightmare*." Dave marched to the black window wall and tugged at the locked sliding door to the stone balcony. Grafton Lake spread beyond, a few lights like jewels on the dark water. "I'll jump off! I swear I will!"

Caspra stared. Dr. Nunn was sobbing. Caspra was truly nonexistent now. Should she walk over and unlock the balcony door? Dave's proposal might really be the best solution. The guy was obviously insane, always had been. He simply didn't need to be here bothering the professor. She couldn't bear the thought of Dr. Nunn crying.

The doorbell buzzed.

"*Caspra, get it!*" Dr. Nunn screamed.

Caspra ran to the door and jerked it open. A long-haired guy with a misshapen nose and foul liquor breath swayed in the doorway, rolling a joint. "Yo, Caspra, dude." He nudged her with a wink. "How is she tonight, man?"

"Fuck it, I'm *ruined!*" Dave cried, charging at the door. The dooper put up his hands and got out of the way. From down the yellow hallway Caspra heard: "Where's my sketchbook? *Where's my fucking sketchbook?* You made me lose it, damn you!"

"Wow, dude," the dooper smirked as Caspra pushed him after Dave and locked the door. Those two assholes could compare notes if they wished.