

# The Darkened Corner



by Tom Hamilton

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## **1. Freeze It So That It Doesn't Freeze / Tampa / December 80**

Sharp palms scratched against a clear, cold sky and the fading yellow light baked away from the black outlines of the buildings like a beautiful gas. Out in the groves we could hear the sprinklers spitting as the farmers tried to cover the tangerines over with ice. Their goal was to coat the trees with just the proper amount of slush. If they could manage to keep the temperature right at 32 degrees Fahrenheit then they could preserve the endangered crop; freezing it so that it doesn't freeze. Like lowering some one's pulse rate so that their heart doesn't burst. But like every idea this was much better in theory than it was in practice and if they were off by only a couple of degrees, the trees wouldn't be able to hold the weight of the hardened ice and they'd split down the middle like a broken heart.

Joe Flannery and I could hear the jets of water slicing through the branches from where we were sitting near the entrance to the old campground. It was so cold that we could see our own breath. Once darkness fell the wind had turned crisp and we'd sought shelter underneath the overhang in front of the rec room. There wasn't very much in the way of recreation in there: just a red velvet topped pool table, a phooseball game, a couple of pinball machines: 'The Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders' and I think perhaps 'Grease', plus a snack distributor and a pop dispenser.

For Joe and I it had been a long day of doing not much of anything. We were Irish Traveler kids which is tantamount to being a gypsy. Standard procedure for brats our age was to be pulled out of school early so that we could help our fathers at work. So Joe and I had both hit our last book the previous spring, even though we were barely preteens. But on days when our old men choose to end up at the Temple Terrace Tap instead of working, we didn't have much else to do aside from hanging around at the front of the campground.

That morning, Joe had come walking down the road telling me that John Lennon was dead; gunned down by some lunatic in New York City. We talked about it for a couple of minutes and then didn't think too much more of it. Actually, 40 seemed pretty old to me. I remember thinking that if I could

make it to that age, I probably wouldn't feel cheated if I got gunned down by some lunatic.

Joe had only recently reemerged from the woods after an earlier incident; there were usually several younger children milling around the billiard tables begging for coins, which they would either pump into the pinball machines or use to buy snacks. I wondered what the hell Joe was doing when I saw him holding a quarter in between two Popsicle sticks, running a cheap, transparent BIC cigarette lighter along its silvery surface; heating the coin until it was an almost liquid white. When it was ready he dropped the molten money in between the pool table and the far one which bracketed the little impaled soccer players. He then twirled around as if he had dropped it by accident and was now searching for it. Many kids leaped up and dove after it, anxious to fund a bag of Frito's or play the silver ball. But Mick Whitney, a peculiar white haired kid whose I.Q. must have topped out somewhere in the high teens, was the fleetest of the bunch. He grabbed the simmering quarter and, for a fraction of a second, grinned in celebration. In the next instant, however, he screamed in agony and dropped the coin back onto the hard concrete floor where it spun around a few times before landing eagle up. I cannot say that there was a red raw depiction of George Washington branded onto his palm but the skin had bubbled to a blister as he ran crying back down the gravel road towards the trailers; Joe laughing after him for a few feet before veering back off and chortling his way up underneath the overhang.

Of course it wasn't long before Aunt Jane, Mick's mother, was marching up towards the rec room, her white haired offspring hanging from her shoulder like an organ grinder's monkey. By this time, however, Joe had retreated into the tropical woods, which were nestled in between the swimming pool and the laundromat. In his absence Aunt Jane turned her fury towards me as Joe's frequent accomplice. As she pelted me with heated accusations I patiently kept repeating that it wasn't me who had done her son wrong. Several of the smaller kids, when questioned, also said that it was not me but Joe who had done the depredation. Finally, frustrated, Aunt Jane gave up on the verbal assault and turned back down towards the trailers. Mick, who by now had cried himself into a stupor, which his M&M sized brain was never

far from anyway, followed her while blankly holding the now bandaged hand close to his ribs. Once they were gone Joe reappeared. After the smaller kids had filled him on all the drama he'd missed he looked over at me and grinned conspiratorially.

After that dusk began to settle and soon the fading light lost its grip on the spikes of the palms as the temperature plummeted. Florida cold is like no other cold you've ever felt and we could feel the shocking sip of the frigid sea on the salt choked wind. The smaller children, chased by the chill, dispersed towards lit up trailer windows which held the promise of guffawing heat vents and steaming suppers. This left just Joe and I to sit outside on the painted logs.

Until we spied the outline of a serene figure slowly walking up the gravel road in the slanting light. After a few seconds we could make out the feminine shape of a woman or girl headed in our direction. Whoever it was they were wearing a white fur coat with the hood pulled over their face. When I saw the way that the celestial light refracted off of that face, I knew who it was. Although Joe was the one who sounded the name out.

“Jesus,” he said, “I think it's Katie Rose.”

I didn't answer but my heart began to beat faster. Now she was almost upon us and, although I averted my eyes, I still caught a glimpse of that long black hair escaping from the sides of the white hood like dark water cutting a trail through melting snow. She did not pause or even seem to notice us before gliding into the rec room.

Joe looked at me and raised his eyebrows. “From Russia with Love,” he said as he got up. He was referring to her white hood. “I'm gonna go back to the back, try and get in one more football game with Owen and them before dark. You wanna go?” He asked.

“It's dark now.” I answered.

“O.K.,” he said, “I'll see ya back up here in a little while.”

I nodded and Joe trotted off.

When he was out of sight I circled around to the side of the rec room and blended into the darkness near a cypress bush. From where I stood I

could easily encompass the severe brightness which leaked from the windows and see directly inside to the pinball machines. Katie Rose had bucked the hood down and was now standing with her back to me. The streaming black hair had been set free and it flowed down past alabaster cheeks which were as smooth as white glass. The reflection of her translucent retinas glittered off of the glass scoreboard in a sort of kaleidoscope effect. Even though I knew, from staring at the photograph that I kept of her in my wallet, that her eyes were, in reality, as black as the bottom of a coal mine. There was no way that she could see me out here in the finished darkness, therefore, I felt peaceful and safe inside my toasty infatuation. Like a tropical swamp animal gazing from its muddy marsh at a hypnotic camp fire.

I was twelve and she was fifteen in 1980 and I couldn't really even think of her as my secret crush. For it was far too absurd to be labeled a secret, even from myself. But it did make me feel privileged just to stand still and watch her. And so I sat there as motionless as a Seminole, resolved to gaze at her for as long as I could remain hidden or she would keep playing. She didn't bump or grind against the machine like some promiscuous tramp. She stood straight up with dignity and poise as her slender fingers, the manicured nails painted peach, opulently operated the buttons. Like a flamingo standing in shallow water: stoic and still, surveying the area for predators with smarts and caution, or a sculpture made from salt which surely tasted like sugar.

And she may as well have been a statue as far as I was involved, for I would never have the courage to move her. I was too afraid of reproach to approach her and even if I had, she simply would have flown away like a slender and pink tropical bird sensing a reptile in the vicinity.

## **2. Singing Galway Bay / Freeport IL / June 77**

Some people blame my old man for how I turned out. But I don't necessarily subscribe to that criticism. For I could always feel a slithering twinge within my innards long before he and I rode out to work every day in his brand new 1977 Tommy Lift pick-up.

Most days we just tried to score something simple: we'd hop up to patch a roof or slather seal coat onto a driveway for a hundred bucks here or there. But on this particular occasion we were working on a jackpot.

We were sitting in an elderly woman's living room; my father's corpulent frame perched proud on a flowery couch and I on a fancy back chair. My small ten year old back resting against a crocheted depiction of a seventeenth century suitor who was kneeling before a seated maiden. She was wearing a white dress with purple trim and her impossibly small waist blossomed into a fluffy hoop skirt. A silver slipper atop a tasseled pillow was being offered to her.

A bowl of melting ice cream, which I had barely touched, was balanced in between my knees.

An elderly woman was seated across from us in a massive leather wing tipped chair which was held onto its frame by a straight rash of brass buttons. It swallowed her shrinking form whole. She was wearing what I thought was a strained smile. But after a few minutes of contemplating this frozen sneer I realized that it was the only expression which her palsy stricken features were capable of.

My father was singing 'Galway Bay' in his impressive natural bravado. Everyone said that he could have been a professional singer and it was difficult to doubt these opinions as the handsome song reverberated off of the high beams. As I followed his voice to the painted mahogany rafters I noticed that the ceiling had been separated into slats like copper shingles and that each rectangle housed an individual depiction of a livid mermaid. As if I were beholding a hundred strange and foreign pennies or a hundred ladies with

blinding fish tails emblazoned by the relentless twinkle of the June sun which poured in through the living room's front picture window.

O'Leary: that was the old woman's name. Same as the lady who owned the cow that had supposedly kicked over the lantern which started the Chicago fire. And the same name which was inscribed on a relatively fresh tombstone at Saint James' Cemetery across U.S. 20. And the same name that she had taken from her husband some forty eight years earlier and the same name which was on the deeds of the three farms which he had bequeathed to her upon his relatively recent death. As my old man honed the final note a solemn tear ran down the ancient woman's cracked and yellowed cheek and she applauded softly.

"That was beautiful Mr. Gorham," she said in a croaking voice, "Galway Bay was my husband's favorite song. He was from Moycullen you know, not very far from there at all."

"That's where my grandfather was from," Da lied.

"Well," she said, "It must be a beautiful place. Now let me fetch my checkbook." She got up and walked into the kitchen. I turned my attention to a far parlor which we were separated from by a plush, purple curtain. In my child's mind I thought perhaps that there was a walking cadaver behind there; a bleached corpse in a smart blue suit holding a vivid bouquet of violets. Perhaps a muscular little demon with tight red arms or some other form of evil which was hidden from us.

Although the high ceiling was illuminated by the invading sunlight the tall corners of the room were still somewhat dark and I didn't want to imagine what types of phantoms, large spiders or bouncing poltergeists resided in those shrouded triangles. I was interrupted from this disturbing reverie by the big hand of my father roughly tapping me on the elbow. When I came out from my trance and looked at him he motioned for me to finish the ice cream. He hadn't wanted to speak less the old woman should hear him. My eyes fell back to the bowl. As near as I could tell the foul treat had been derived from some sort of sheep's grease. It was the off tan color of a shaved lamb and there were unidentifiable chunks of what looked like frozen mutton floating around in the evaporating stew. Still, for my old man's benefit, I tried to take a bite or

rather a sip of the cruel gruel. I was in the process of doing this when Mrs. O'Leary reappeared from the kitchen holding a small piece of paper in her hand. She must have noticed the disgusted look on my face, because she said, "Why you little dear, you've barely touched your ice cream."

"He's so finicky in this heat ma'am," my father countered, "we can barely get him to eat anything."

"Oh well," she mercifully took the bowl from me, "can I get you anything else dear?"

Before I had a chance to answer my father said, "He's fine for now Mrs. O'Leary."

"Oh, well, maybe he should go swimming when he gets home later huh," she smiled and grabbed me underneath the chin with long skeletal fingers. I smiled back as my father beamed at her and nodded.

"And who do I make this out to?" She said as she sat back down and pressed the check against the top of an unpainted wooden tray table. There was a portrait of a black and white Holstein cow baked into the paper. "How much do I owe you?" she said.

Lightning rods. They were my father's favorite angle. Oh sure we'd dabble in other grifts: Gilsonite, Tarconite, Aluminum, S.S. Tact Coat, Elastamaric, Thompson's Water Seal, Brewer Coat or any other muck which we could slop onto a flat deck, metal roof or driveway. But when my old man's back was up against the aluminum siding and he really needed to get my mother off of his ass, he always returned to his first love; invented by none other than Ben Franklin himself: lightning rods.

He went on to explain how we'd repaired the (lightning rod) systems on all three farms when the truth was that we'd actually only been to one of the homesteads. He also told her that we'd used three times the amount of aluminum cable that we had in reality tacked on and then charged her ten times what that wire would have been worth. But the old woman didn't complain about the price, she simply wrote out the check for the amount he'd quoted her. My father thanked her kindly and smiled widely, his neck orange from the sun and his big beige face leering like a pumpkin.

I was looking forward to getting back inside the cab of the Tommy Lift where I could re-read Spider Man #170. 'Madness is all in the Mind!' Spidey versus Dr. Faustus. Besides, when this caper was over I knew that a cheeseburger couldn't really be too far behind. My father was a loquacious storyteller as well as a hearty singer, however, and there were far more phrases floating around in his brain than could ever fit out of his mouth. So even after he'd bid the old woman goodbye he just kept jabbering on for what seemed like hours but was in reality only about twenty minutes. During this time a tawny tabby brushed up against my legs. The furry, sinewy feel of its living skin put me in the mind of a rat and I was then reminded of how frightened I'd been earlier and of the mysterious shade which coveted and covered the difficult angles of the house's high ceilings. I shivered and decided not to look up again.

On the way to the bank my father was petulant and nervous so I knew better than to ask him any questions. I didn't blame him for being apprehensive; for on more than one occasion I'd seen him go through this literal song without the dance only to have some suspicious head teller or bank manager refuse to cash the check he'd raved and sang so long for.

As soon as I seen him coming out of the bank, however, which turned out to be a credit union, I knew that this was not the case. The difference in his manner when he succeeded or failed was almost imperceptible; but I knew his nuances well; the baby bounce in his step, the slight turn up at the corners of his mouth.

When he pulled his big frame into the cab I could see an envelope sticking out of the front of his work shirt. It was full of grayish green bills. He peeled off a twenty and pushed it in my direction. But just as I went for the money and thought that I'd dodged my punishment, he clutched my wrist roughly; the sharp new bill crinkling up in his fist. He then quickly switched his grip to the scruff of my neck and violently bashed my forehead off of the dashboard. Fireflies danced across my field of vision and just as I realized that it was not yet dusk, they vanished into the summer air.

“NEXT TIME,” he said, “if an old woman offers you a bowl of shit, you eat every bite of it and YOU LICK THE SPOON!”

### 3. Unamused / Tampa / December 81

I did not raise my arms above my head nor did I shout with joy as the roller coaster took the plunge. Most everyone aboard was either screaming, laughing or spitting out some combination of both. A street drill like noise erupted as a massive break took hold of the cars before they hugged the final turn. There then the convoy abruptly slowed and we crept into the same station where we had waited nearly an hour to board the buggies. The padded bars went up and the thrill seekers clambered out while chattering excitedly. As the crowd began to disperse I headed towards the exit stairs at the far edge of the platform.

“Where ya headed fat boy?!”

When we were upside down on one of the loops I'd thought that I'd recognized a cruel laugh a few cars behind me. I quickly dismissed this notion, however, as the sound was soon lost in the mishmash of shouts and cries. Now, however, I was addressed by that same tone and this time I instantly associated the voice with the hated face behind it:

Jaqueline's hair-do was the hue of tomato sauce, framing a *Planet of the Apes*-like face. Her complexion was dotted with fly shit freckles and she looked as if someone had been putting matches out on her flat cheekbones. Her personality was an even bigger puzzle than her askew grin, since every person in her family, from her brother on down to her three sisters and all the way back up to her parents were affable and polite people. Jaqueline however was brazen, brusque and downright rude. In other words she was a bitch.

Helpless and hurt by her heartless attack I ducked my head and put my hands in my pockets. Even though I had done nothing wrong I felt as guilty and reprehensible as a terrorist and could think of nothing else I would rather do than to disappear into the bright crowd. Still, I somehow felt compelled to take a half turn in my tormentor's direction. When I did I was surprised to catch a glimpse of a striking form: a figure decked out in perfect purple who was known to me as Jaqueline's stunning first cousin; her lavender eye shadow streaked above black irises as if in passion or violence. For a

wondrous vision had enjoyed the ride with her homelier relation and it was none other than Katie Rose herself who stood before me.

Although most people had by now cleared off the runway, I instinctively slowed, as did the world around me. As I involuntarily gazed upon that comely face, however, I soon realized that she was looking at me only out of pity as if I were an injured puppy. Meanwhile Jaqueline had not let up.

“You might wanna watch how many rides ya get on lard ass,” she said, “with all you've ate today you might throw up.”

Mortified, I licked my teeth in embarrassment. By now there wasn't a patron left on the platform and I felt as if I were on a deserted train station at the end of the line. Where a heartbroken Katie Rose dressed in a white hat and long gloves which covered her elbows had come to sadly bid me farewell. The presence of Jaqueline, however, annihilated this reverie and I was charged with anger and mute with melancholy; devoid of even the most remote and imaginary notion of romance. She opened up her vile mouth again. Surely prepared to launch another insult, but this time Katie Rose stopped her:

“Don't Jackie,” she said, “he's just a kid.”

Inexplicably I then spoke, “That's okay,” I said, “I like it.”

It was the most nonsensical babble I'd ever uttered and Jaqueline pounced on it right away. She threw up her right hand, “That's okay Kate, he likes it. The Pillsbury Dough Boy likes it.” Tiring of me, she then turned and walked towards the opposite stairs. The coaster passed overhead and screams shot out from the tight loop. Boxes of popcorn, hot dog wrappers and small bits of palm were washed away by the wind the carts created and Katie Rose's dark hair swirled away from her picturesque face revealing a neck as white as a swan's.

#### **4. The Changeling / Cleveland OH / April 85**

If you look at city blocks from an airplane, there are way more squares than there are rocky diamonds. I remember this when I'm on the ground. And I did as I drove around searching for a mark. It's not as easy as just finding the house with the most expensive car. The people who have all the money are smart enough to want to keep it. No one could possibly lift each fancy brass knocker or ring every single doorbell. I don't have the strength or perseverance of the mailman.

So it pays to notice the subtlest of nuances: like your composition roof with just that ghostly hint of whip marks; the trademark of some long gone fly-by-night gypo who had once sprayed the shingles with a useless aluminum coating. Or a set of lightning rods attached to a ridge roll in the center of town. Or a pick-up truck with a sturgeon on the camper or a carved wooden plaque which says: Grampa and Grandma's house.

When people think of con artists the most elaborate and complex schemes usually come to mind: the pigeon drop, three card Monty, the king in the tower. But it's nowhere near as complicated as all that. It's simply a matter of finding someone old and feeble enough to impose your will upon. Preferably someone who still has access to their banks accounts and doesn't need a second signature from their son or daughter, nephew or niece. Then gaining their confidence while breaking down their resistance with a presumptuous and forward politeness. Like a fast, sleek point guard taking the defender off the dribble. Worming your way into their quilt covered, big box TV living rooms and...

My thoughts were interrupted by a streak of color off to my right. A strikingly attractive young girl wearing a tan, polka dotted sun dress was being tugged along by several leashed dogs. She was tall, taller than I like them, with auburn hair flowing down past her freckled shoulders. Framing a fair face which held thick and sensual lips, the shade and perhaps the flavor of Carmel. A song on the radio told me the color of her eyes in a moment of almost supernatural synchronicity: "...auburn hair and tawny eyes, the kind of eyes which hypnotize me through, hypnotize me through."

The dogs were a perfect match for their master: an orange sherbet Irish Setter, a caramel apple Lhasa Apso and a Golden Retriever following a streamlined Doberman Pinscher which was the subtle color of coffee infiltrated with cream and just a hint of sugar white fur underneath the chin. These animals foraged across the silver concrete straining at their burnt orange chords as if they wanted to circle the globe on four feet.

Almost involuntarily I pumped the truck's brake. Waving my arms in a desperate attempt to get her attention. For I felt that I needed to be seen by her and to be thrilled by her reaction, perhaps a clean and comely smile. For my poor ruined heart had been packed in that much ice that it was like a donor organ being transported in a six pack cooler. It needed to be jogged back to life like a dead battery jolted by jumper cables; it needed to be held in someone's tender, soft, svelte and petite female fingers; to be nursed back to health like an injured red bird. But she didn't seem to see me and only kept on walking, as if senile or impaired somehow. Oblivious to my deep sexual stare.

Finally, and with much help from the prick who was laying on his horn in the car behind me, I was forced to round the corner. By the time I'd completed my turn and shed the road rager I was nearly at the next block. I tried glancing back over my shoulder across a vacant lot strewn with shards of burnt brown broken bottles and the bushy hair styles of weeds. But the girl and her dogs could not be seen anywhere. Of course I made the square in an effort to relocate them, but it was as if they'd slipped into a doorway or dropped through a manhole. Sometime during my third trip around the block I realized that they were gone.

\*

“Well that seems kind of high Timothy,” the old woman said.

“High compared to what ma'am?” I quipped. “Every thing's high nowadays.”

We were sitting on lawn chairs inside her garage looking out over a freshly seal coated driveway. A pitcher of iced tea sat on a wooden 'Cleveland

Indians' tray table along with two transparent plastic cups. She was frowning down at the invoice I had just slid across to her. When she didn't say anything else, or more importantly, when she didn't start writing the check out, I knew that I would have to talk.

“Hey,” I said, “you're a senior citizen aren't you?” It wouldn't have taken a carnival weight guesser to make this estimation. “Are you over sixty five?”

She looked up from the bill, pride twinkling in her eyes. “I'm eighty nine,” she said.

“Well that makes you eligible right there.”

“Oh,” She puffed up and purred, “for what?”

“For the senior citizen's discount.” I tapped the calculator, “and with your 10% discount, that brings your total too... one thousand four hundred and seventy five.” She didn't look much happier, but she did start writing the check out. After she'd put her John Hancock on the document, however, she seemed to brighten and was soon back to her old affable self.

“Would you like some more iced tea Timothy?” she asked. I despised Iced tea. To me it tasted like dirty eggs which had been soaked in tap water. It was all I could do not to wretch upon sipping it.

“Yes Ma'am,” I answered, “that would be wonderful.” I watched the bile colored liquid cascade down through the ice squares.

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome Timothy.” Of course my name wasn't Timothy and it was obvious that the old woman's weakened mind was confusing me with somebody else; someone from the lost and darkened decades before I was born. I was curious, however, and once I had the check in my wallet I asked her:

“Timothy? Is that your son?”

“No,” she said as her countenance darkened and what had been an unbridled sun was swept behind a cloud as huge and gray as a castle.

“But I did have a child once; a long time ago.” Her shrunken, slouching shoulders shrugged, I believe she was trying to guess my age. “Maybe... fifty year before you were born.”

“Oh?” I said before taking another gulp of the horrid de-freshment.

“Yes,” she said as her forehead cracked like a bulldog's and her eyes filled with tintured water and looked as big as buckeyes. Her features blackened and sank until her face looked positively possessed.

“We were trying to make it to the Quad Cities,” she began, “my mother knew a doctor there. Oh they had automobiles then, but no one that we knew could afford one. So I just lay there big as a house in the back of the wagon, exasperated from the heat. Then my balloon burst and there was water all over the boards. We had to get me off of the gravel so my father pulled us into a roadside park. It was in Winslow Illinois, or is I should say, it's still there. Has been there since that August, 1918.”

I wasn't going to ask where the husband/father was, but just as I wondered about this she volunteered the information as if she'd read my mind:

“Killed in the big war,” she said, “they never told me how it happened but I knew, lost my wind in a dream one night, he'd choked the gas down just like all the others.”

It was past time to get up and leave. But not only was I obliged to hear the end of the story, I found that I wanted to.

“Anyways they spread a quilt out over a big picnic table and lay me down on the oak green boards,” she continued, “the wind picked up in the afternoon and the horses spooked. It was all my father could do to keep them rounded up and settled. We had a woman traveling with us, some type a tramp or gypsy. She said that she knew something about birthin' a child. Anyways, regardless a what she knew or didn't know, I don't suppose there was much choice left at that juncture.” The old woman paused before continuing with a violent demonstration: she thrust both hands in front of her as if clutching something and her contorted features tightened even more.

“She reached up deep inside of me and pulled that child out. If a child's what it was? If that's what you could call it.”

I swallowed and almost coughed.

“Well the blood hit the front of them long skirts like a pig was sloppin' it out of a bucket and they must have seen the baby before I did because they stepped back, stepped back aghast in the presence of the abomination they were witnessin'.”

I took a tiny controlled breath and tried not to spit on the ground.

“And then I saw it: looked a bit like a bat, you know a vampire bat only covered in brown oil or some type of red syrup, like STP; but with ears like a cat sort of, but it wasn't innocent, that was what you gathered from lookin' at its eyes; it had the knowledge of someone or something what had lived ten thousand years; eyes black as the bottom of a coal mine.” The old woman paused again, lost her intensity, leaned back in the lawn chair and began to speak quietly:

“Anyways it fell off the picnic table onto the grass, they never even tried to catch it. The midwife or whatever she was took a leak right there in her long gown just from lookin' at it. I was passed out by that time, but years later, before my sister died, she told me that it was tryin' to move around on the ground a little bit, flapping on the ground like a bird with one wing. Then Apple Eater, Apple Eater was my dad's old Cocker Spanial, well he scooped it up in his jaws and ran off into the high weeds with it. They never even followed that old pooch; never even tried to save what had come out of me.”

I was at a loss for words. The old woman got up and took the pitcher of iced tea. She then walked over to a laundry sink and poured it down the pipeless drain. The diluted water dropped straight down into a rusted filter in the concrete and swirled until it was gone.

“Dad found Apple Eater the next mornin' though,” she said, “he was back in the heavier woods, his body all dried out and emancipated, but perfect like a taxidermy trophy. Funny, his brown fur had all turned gray, I knew that could happen to a person but I didn't know that it could happen to a dog. Looked like a goddamn snow wolf.”

I was usually great at thinking of excuses to leave. But this time my tongue felt thick and bulky. I tried to get up from the lawn chair, but my muscles wouldn't respond.

“You want a piece of pie?” she smiled brightly as the lived sun reappeared, as if it were mad from having to battle the winter for far too long. “I've got pumpkin and lemon meringue, but vinegar is by far my favorite.

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The city seemed different to me somehow. As if an aura of trepidation and dread had settled over the houses and tenements. The smell of all the oil and all the petroleum and all the fumes was making my stomach feel as if it were full of gasoline. The old woman had given me a check on some sort of credit union and I had no idea where it was or how to get there. Most credit unions closed at 4PM and it was already well past three. As I scanned the avenues and the street corners and the storefronts in search of a payphone or for an informed Samaritan who could perhaps tell me the way, suddenly I saw her again.

She was wearing a black leather mini-skirt and tall biker go-go boots all the way up past the knee. Her eyes were a swirling black; formed with pressure like the cascading darkness at the bottom of a hopeless ocean. The eye shadow above and the lipstick below had been streaked on carelessly in dreamy shades so black that they looked blue. Her long flowing hair was as cruel and beautiful as the mane of a wild mare.

The dogs were there too: a fidgety Boston Terrier, black with white patches, a huge Rottweiler with a head as big and black as a bucket of tar, a moody faced, pristine and freshly shaved black Poodle with knobs of hair at the ends of bare legs and above the grayish black paws. And a Doberman Pinscher: so black that its coat shone like vinyl; a fountain of tan fur bubbling out from underneath the chin then disappearing into whiskers near the dangerous teeth.

The girl looked even more stunning than she had earlier and her curves affected my emotions as if I were riding on a tilt-a-whirl. This time however, I had no desire to look into her eyes. For I no longer wanted to be thrilled as I was already charged with a terrific sense of fear. I tried to look away and discovered that I could not. Because the changeling was now looking at me and her eyes showed me what it was like to be old and feeble and helpless and unprotected. I felt the self scorn, humiliation and foolishness that goes along with the experience of being mulcted by some little prick just because he has a boy's face or looks like your son or nephew or some nice guy that you knew from the U.S.O. dance during the big war. And I was suddenly paralyzed behind the steering wheel. My arms went dead as if in a nightmare or like they were tied down with underwater weights. The truck veered out of control and headed for the curb. My strength returned just in time to avoid running off the road where I would have totaled out a parked El Camino.

I was able to right my Chevy Silverado but by now I was past the group. Once I'd gathered myself I looked back and saw that the Doberman was looking at me. They say that dogs are incapable of smiling but I must disagree. For before the Doberman was pulled along and forced by the constraints to rejoin its party; before it turned away and jogged out to lead the evil pack which was headed southwest, it took the time to pause and see how I had made out in my near mishap. Once it saw that I'd avoided disaster and was once again on the smooth asphalt it raised its small yet vicious head and met my gaze. The eyes were tiny yet stern like black marbles sprayed with Windex. And even though I was now too far away to hear a bark or a yelp or even a whimper; too far away to decipher what hate or loathing or lack of quarter those eyes held for me; Still, I somehow knew that it was laughing.

## **5. Addicted To Sadness / Orlando FL / January 86**

When I saw Katie Rose and her husband at a bar-b-que restaurant on Orange Blossom Trail, I could not help but stare at them with a mixture of curiosity, fascination and manure green jealousy. Richard was actually a distant cousin of mine like Humphrey Bogart and Lady Diana (They say that official relation ends after the fourth cousin) and I'd had just about as much dealings with him as the Princess of Wales had had with the late screen idol.

From what I did know he was a repulsive, repugnant and visibly sweating man who wore an agricultural hair-do which was separated into fuzzy yellow rows as if he were part negro. His ruddy and ruined complexion was ravaged by whiteheads and pock marks. Just by looking at his damaged face you could see how he had come by his disparaging nickname: 'The Dart Board'.

I did not ask myself how or why Katie Rose, stellar Venus that she was, had ended up with such a deplorable character because I already knew the answer: marriages between traveler couples are often arranged; mostly due to convenience, family alliances or good old fashioned dirty money. I didn't know which of these three had pushed Katie Rose down the aisle but it didn't really matter, since the unthinkable end result was the same. Even though from where I sat, above a Coors Light on my high horse bar stool, she didn't really seem to be warming up to him, this also didn't matter, for he was still living with her day and night; breathing in her fresh, clean, feminine splash, while I familiarized myself with the spoiled shark scent of the listless whores who stumbled trance-like along the shoulder of the Trail.

I stared at the opposite couple for a long while from inside the rectangular window which separated the bar from the restaurant. At no point could I catch Katie Rose's eye or arrest her attention. Although I couldn't hear what they were saying I tried to tell myself that their conversation seemed strained and one sided. The Board was doing most of the talking while Katie Rose only nodded slightly now and then or offered up a frigid one word reply. Most of the time she just looked down at the table, her tumbling black bangs almost covering over her crestfallen eyes. When they finally got up to leave

however, her curve hugging purple dress came into view and this forced me to contemplate their sexual situation. Domesticity seems to me to affect so many different women in the same way as to almost render them stereotypical. The body spreads out, even if the wife hasn't gained a pound or yet given birth to a child, to accommodate the form of the husband, to forge with him like a lock enveloping a key. The long flowing wild mane of the young mare is cropped to halves or thirds, maybe out of convenience or perhaps even a purposeful, almost suicidal self image of melancholy or helplessness. Their make-up is several shades darker and there's a lot less of it. Their giggles turn to deep, husky, muddy, short laughs which are cut off quickly as if they've absorbed a karate chop to the throat . The keen eyes lose their sparkling butane twinkle, unless of course, the fire of true love is being shoved into their bellies nightly like coal into a steam engine, which in the case of the average traveler girl almost never happens.

Katie Rose seemed to show signs of all these symptoms or was I only imagining these maudlin maladies just to please myself? And was there any part of any of it that could really please me anyway or even be a cause to ebb some of my pain?

Maybe not, but the grass is always browner on the other side and as comfortable as Richard's shoes seemed to me I had heard the rumors. Katie Rose recoiled from her husband's hand as if she were backing away from a cobra's head. She spent most of her time at her mother's trailer, while Richie was either at the bar or at work. She had not become pregnant with his offspring despite nearly three years of marriage and she had supposedly told her girl friends: "I'd rather fuck a dildo than I would Richie." Although I could not picture these vulgar words coming out of her holy mouth. This quote also could have been chalked up to the fact that Richie had many hated enemies, which I was the very least of, and it would have been easy for them to put these illicit words in her pink mouth and circulate it as black gospel.

Whatever the case, she was now climbing into his bright blue Ford XLT Supercab and I was left alone to consider and contemplate the angles and hard constructed corners of a lonely tropical town. I would probably ride back down the Trail until I reached a familiar collection of grimy skid row city

blocks. The people who lurked in these bars and laundromats and XXX rated theatres seemed to never leave this small area as if by forced imprisonment. But I guess that I could understand this for the penalties which I levied against myself were far more constraining; I was nineteen years old and free to do whatever I wanted in the United States of America; the greatest country in the history of civilization. Even though I hadn't even completed the third grade, I was very experienced at finding ways to relieve people of their extra cash and, whenever I could stay out of the pub, I was not bound by financial restraints or tied down in any way. Sometimes, though, I could not seem to shake the trepidation. I would tell myself that people had gone to concentration camps where their whole families were slaughtered before their very eyes or that innocent babies were starved to death daily or massacred in mindless wars. Did I think that their lives were any less real to them than mine was to me? But still, I couldn't debunk the funk which weighed on my aching bones; I was sucked back inside the cold bubbles rising inside my draught beer; menaced by a darkness which could penetrate the light of a supernova; by a dirt which had been swept into a corner and had nowhere else to go and nothing else to do but turn to the hard film of permanent filth. I was addicted to sadness.

And the most absurd part was that I hadn't spoken a single word to Katie Rose my entire life, not counting of course my moronic reply to her and Jaqueline on the coaster platform, not one other word. Not even to say hello. That's how ridiculous I was.

## 6. The Cuban Store.

Later that same evening I walked into a 7-11 which was also a Cuban deli. The food underneath the heat lamps looked slimy and dry as if it had been coated with bug spray. There was a man behind the counter who looked like his hair had been slicked back with semen. As I walked past him he said something to me in Spanish. I ignored this and moved back to the refrigerators. Once I reached the clear glass doors, however, I discovered a wooden bar across the handles. Devastated, I went up to the register and said:

“Can't I get a beer?”

“It's Sunday,” he replied, “No beer for anyone my friend.”

I stood there and swayed slightly. He had two friends in an adjacent storage room and when they heard the sound of him talking to someone they stuck their heads over the swinging saloon doors. He then reached into a hidden cooler behind the counter and said:

“Unless of course, you want a Budweiser amigo?”

“Sure,” I said, “give me a Bud.”

He then pulled an empty hand from the frosty box as his pals first snickered and then said something in Spanish before laughing heartily. He grinned and stared at me with eyes the hue of a dolphin's skin. I walked out through the chiming door, the choked notes of their laughter rising around me. I barely made it around the side of the store before I put my palm flat against the cool, pink stucco wall. I bent over behind the ice machine and retched with the force of the clear, cold moon.

## **7. The Darkened Corner / Danville IL / November 91**

I was lying on a stinking couch in a stranger's house. The living room was cluttered, as if it hadn't been cleaned out or straightened up for years. Stacks of old 45s and LPs nearly reached halfway to the ceiling. Alongside folded up metal chairs and molded couches; their torn arms molesting up against the bare tan legs of sculpted wooden furniture. Deaf radios sat on the tops of hopelessly blind televisions and infertile microwave ovens with cold barren bellies.

I had the type of headache which can only be cured by sleeping. Yet my eyes stayed open despite my best efforts to bury them within a musty pillow which was crammed into a stained green case. I forced them closed again and tried to think of a peaceful oasis but found my choices limited. After a couple of futile minutes my eyelids shot up again and they saw that the mountains of old junk gave the crippling darkness even more angles to work with than usual or perhaps before. All the lamps and bulbs in the living room and kitchen were either switched off, busted or burned out and there was no light save for that from a dim, partially obscured street lamp which freckled in softly from the empty cul-de-sac outside. So darkness dominated until the gloom seemed to whisper and whip into sinister shapes and objects which by law should have been inanimate but now seemed to shift. I leaped up and tried to focus on that which could not be focused on. But the demons disappeared like blown trash in a whirlwind.

I laid back down and clawed the thin dog blanket up to my chin. Wishing for just five more green bottles to pour on top of the fifteen I'd already consumed. My mad eyes darted from side to side, finally focusing on a far upper angle at the top of the room; in between a heavy china cabinet and the bar which overlooked the rancid kitchen where dishes were stacked like ill constructed towers. It was from that high corner which I sensed someone or something staring at me; something as cold as the early spring worms forced from the loose dirt of a freshly covered grave; something with a face as hideous and white as a gloom fed mushroom virginally growing in an untrammelled forest: something with pink eyes under an anemic forehead; the

glare of a dweller from a shuttered cellar. This evil notion sprung itself upon my consciousness as I shivered and coughed. The temperature in the room seemed to plummet and a clear tear, invisible in light or darkness, streaked down my chapped and reddened cheek.

Horrified, I sprang up again. This time to stride across the room. I tried two different light switches along the way but found them both impotent. Sighing, I zigzagged through the piles of junk and memorabilia as best as I could without knocking anything over. Then I roughly grabbed one of the bar stools. I had no qualms about mounting it for the faded imitation leather upholstery was already laden with lacerations. I propped the tall chair up against the wall in question and, even as it elevated the soupy vomit in my stomach, climbed upon it until my socked feet were on the cushions and I was as tall as Goliath.

Tentatively at first, I forced my bare hand against the ceiling to inspect the darkened corner. Wiping my dry palm around and around and scuffing it purposefully on the smooth drywall. I found nothing of course, not even the gossamer web of the most minuscule spider. And I felt then as if I were looking at my pitiable self: as if I had died and left my body and was now just an empty cadaver in dirty clothes. Lying on someone else's couch; so far away from a home that I never had. Oscillating away from a dream so vague that it was unrecognizable in any memory or kernel of hope. And I stood there on the bar stool panting. Looking over the piles of junk like a man looking down from a mountain at a bankrupt city. Until the adrenaline ebbed and a drunken tiredness returned and I swayed like a tall weather vane in a high wind.

## **8. Pink Water / Edgerton WI / March 95**

It was quite a bit like washing red paint off of your hands. The vivid crimson quickly gets diluted with water and turns a carnation pink before it cascades down the drain.

At first I tried to lay back and just relax in the warmth. Waiting for the symptoms which had been described to me: first I would feel tired, then groggy. I would shiver and shake before turning white as a lamb. Next comes the cold; like when you're living on the streets and have no choice but to walk around all night until dawn. And then right before the end, as the last bit of heat is baked from your body, they say that you get warm.

But I felt awake and alert instead; overly cognizant. I didn't feel as if I were drifting any farther from the beach and if I were some part of me wanted to keep within sight of the shore. I even felt some panic and anxiousness. Doubts. I suddenly knew that I didn't have the courage to be claimed by the eternal sea and that this bathtub was not connected to it by any channel.

When I'd first lowered myself into the tub I really had felt tragic and despondent. I dragged the thin blades across my wrists and the slivery cuts, although not gushing, had leaked a poignant red; surely the color of a broken heart. But now, as I lifted my soaked head out of the stew, the flow of blood seemed to have ebbed. Even when I submerged my slashed wrists below the surface of the water, very little of the life giving sustenance contaminated the clear liquid. When I held the wounds up and squeezed more blood did trickle out. But unless I was actually pressing on them, the minor lacerations refused to bleed any longer.

Worse yet, I no longer felt noble and mysterious. I caught a glimpse of my crass face in the glass shower and I was embarrassed. I felt spoiled and childish. I had absolutely no need to feel sorry for myself or wallow in this troth of self pity.

Besides I had seen people who really wanted out: purple crescent moons underneath irises which blazed as yellow as rattler venom. The red lightning of blood shot veins streaking across the whites of their eyes. People

who cleaved their wrists to the bone and watched all the hectic, terrific color leak out from their bodies in the time it would take for toast to brown and pop.

Me, I was just a showboat; a grandstander among the damned. A facetious tongue and cheek clay head of myself. I didn't have the balls to hang (from the noose) with those courageous sacrificial suicide lambs who were heroes in my book.

I got out of the tub and looked at myself in the mirror. There weren't even any drops of blood on the tiles. I pulled on a robe, sighed and un-popped the stopper. The pink water began to twist into a whirlpool and then swirled down the drain. I supposed that I would have to tape over the slashes so that nobody would know or else I could wear wrist bands like a tennis pro. See again, how could someone who was serious about offing themselves consider wearing wrist bands? Besides, I no longer knew or saw anybody in town much anymore. All my friends were either married, had drank themselves to death or had moved their trailers south for the winter. So there was no longer anybody left around here to gossip about me.

## **9. Behind the Auld Bowling Alley / Rockford IL / February 94**

My jacket was covered with a layer of frost when the blue northern wind woke me up and my face was welded to a discarded piece of aluminum siding courtesy of my own petrified spittle. 'Twas a cold dawn behind the bowling alley. I peeled my mouth away from the plastic and rose up to a sitting position. I then gazed out over the gray parking lot: dull, sleet glazed cars which looked as if they hadn't moved in months were zoned in by percolating semis; their tractor trailers still attached and coughing out puffs of noxious smoke. The truckers didn't like to turn the big rigs off in these temperatures. I supposed that it was possible for me to have frozen to death overnight, but unfortunately, I was still alive.

The spot where I passed out was not exactly invisible from the entrance way. In fact it would have been difficult to miss me for those passersby who wanted to gain access to the bowling alley. How I had not been shaken awake by some do-gooder or menaced by a chickenshit patrolmen was anybody's guess. Although I guess it was possible that someone (not the patrolmen of course) had tried to shake me awake with minimal success.

The last thing I remembered was shooting darts inside the tavern which overlooked the lanes while buying mixed drinks for an attractive fat girl: Angel or Angela or some such name which sounded like that. Turned out she already had a boyfriend (don't they all?) but then he turned out to be an alright joe (whose name really was Joe) who joined us in a game of 301. My last coherent thought was when I dropped a shot of root beer Schnapps into my Old Style Draught and they told me that I looked like James Cagney.

Now the sky began to blush and take on the reddish purple hue of mascara. I reached up and ran my fingers over my sore, nearly closed eye. Even though I could not see my face, I knew that there were black, blotchy bruises imbued with glints of purple and gold above my brow which mirrored the pale sun's daily struggle to rise above the cold clouds. The ghost of that flaming planet broke through the mist momentarily and shimmered as white and tough as a hardboiled egg before vanishing again behind an ache of silver fog.

I knew that it was not Angel or Angela's jovial boyfriend who had attacked me, but rather some forever forgotten, unseen bandits who had picked the wrong drunk to roll. For I distinctly remembered spending my last dollars, generous tip included of course, on a round of drinks for me and my newly acquired party. Hence my wallet was now rendered no more valuable than two sewn together pieces of shoe leather. I did find its cowhide carcass a few feet away with my suspended driver's license, a dog eared picture of a younger, thinner Katie Rose, which I had long ago stolen from one of my cousin's picture albums and several expired or revoked credit cards inside; none which still held any value of course. I had no fare for a cab, not even the silver change which I had foolishly fed into the face of the dart machine.

The asphalt had been bleached white from the relentless snows and the subsequent treatments from the frequent salt trucks. There was an outdated sign out near State Street: a trail of glowing neon tubes which were used to create an imperfect illusion. Long orange strobes were being lit then killed then lit then killed to endlessly show the path of a bright, electric blue bowling ball. As if it were flying down the lanes towards ten tall pins. Then those lights went out and others came on to make it look like all the towers were tumbling. I stared at this effect for a few seconds, before the board died entirely and turned into a black rectangular monolith. A moment passed before the monotonous cadence of bulbs struck up again and repeated the trick.

For some reason this made me feel heartbroken and sad; but never quite sad enough to cry. Which was too bad because I felt that it would have been a great relief to weep. I hunched my head down into my chest. My mind hurt so much that I did not feel as if I could concentrate on the teeth of the zipper. So I pulled the flaps of my jacket together as best I could, coughed a couple of times and spat on the ground. I then straightened back up and looked over my shoulder before starting on the long walk back to the trailer park.

**10. Katie Rose / Chicago IL and over the Eastern United States /  
January 97**

My sister told me that one of our little cousins was getting married and that the wedding was to take place somewhere way out east: Ohio or maybe Pennsylvania. I thought that I knew the girl's family. I couldn't remember any of their names or maybe I'd never known them to forget them.

“Who's the girl again?” I asked my sister. She was busy hot rolling her dark red hair in the little bathroom mirror which was adjacent to the wide hallway I was standing in. Without averting her eyes from her reflection she said, “You know, Brian O'Hara's little granddaughter.”

“The baby one?” I asked amazed.

“Well she's not a baby anymore.”

“Jesus.”

Sometimes, for no reason at all, my heart would start to knock like an engine losing oil. Then it would slow to a tiny tick so imperceptible that a paramedic couldn't locate my pulse; as silent and peaceful as if I were dead. Then it would speed up again and the blood would sizzle through my veins fast as a 'Hot Wheels' car before running out of gas in the balls of my feet. When I pissed the urine was the same scent and color as transmission fluid. I ate one chicken leg per day chased by thirty five cans of Pabst's Blue Ribbon and I could fit into a pair of jeans that would make a waif-like Finnish super model jealous.

“Anyway, you think you might want to go?” she said. “Get outta the snow for a few days.”

I shook my head no. “It'd just be trading in one old snow-covered town for another one.”

“Might be fun,” she said. “There's a lot a nice girls out there. You know people are startin' to wonder if you might be a fag.”

“Jesus,” I chuckled, “they gotta know better than that.”

She appeared to think about this for a few seconds and her reflection furrowed its eyebrows. I think maybe she decided that she was being too hard on me because she said:

“Yeah, they do, they do. But with ma and da gone it's like you're all by yourself out there. You need to start a family.”

I shrugged.

“Well let me know if you change your mind,” she said. “We've got an extra ticket now. The Board decided that he can't go. He's got some job to go do or somethin'.”

My ears pricked up like a tracking dog. “You mean the Dart Board?”

“How many people do you know called the Board?”

“Who's all goin'?”

“Right now it's just me and Katie Rose.”

“Katie Rose is flying with you!?”

“Mmm hmm,” she confirmed nonchalantly.

“The Dart Board's wife: Katie Rose?”

“Eeeeeeyeah.” she belabored as if she were speaking to a simpleton; perhaps she was.

“What about Goopy?” This was my sister's derogatory nickname for her husband Pat. “He's not going?”

“Bugger Goopy,” she said before twisting another one of her maroon locks up into a curler so hot it was practically smoking.

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And there she was waiting at our gate just like my sister had said. When she saw us she brightened and smiled. My sister greeted her with a festive hello and kissed her on the cheek. Before I knew what was happening Katie Rose had pecked me on the cheek as well. Her highly stylized, pinned up hair-do brushing against my forehead. When her soft lips met with my cheek the effect

was the same as if a cattle prod had just touched my spine. It was the highlight of I don't even know how many years. She stepped back then and her heavy eyelashes fluttered like a black butterfly's wing across her brown eyes. The beauty which shone from her face was so poignant that it was hard for me to conceal a gasp.

We had three seats reserved on the plane, but only two of them were side by side. Of course I told the girls to sit together so that they could pass the flight by catching up on their chick chat while I situated myself in an aisle seat on the opposite side a few rows back. As they talked and laughed in cheery voices I tried not to stare at Katie Rose. Although it would have been hard to get busted looking at her since she would have had to turn her exquisite head all the way around in order to see me, and, even if she had done this I easily would have had enough time to avert my eyes. But of course she never did turn around. I could see a trail of thick black baby hairs running all the way up the back of her neck and this reminded me that she was herself an animal, or, if you don't feel that that's human enough, a creature; full of blood and scents and cascading hormonal emotions. I knew then, that like all creatures or animals she was hard wired to insatiable hunger; a slave to appetites which were so secret that they would never be strummed by her vocal chords or converted to sound. Suddenly she pulled the pin from her hair, covering over her smooth vanilla neck with long black locks which shined like licorice and ran like a river with chunks of black ice onto the shoulders of her white leather top.

After a few aching minutes of staring at her, while trying not to stare at her, I took out my Moleskin notebook and tried to concentrate on writing, what was sure to be, another terrible poem. The words I jotted down were so maudlin and obscure that they made no sense to anyone but me and after a while what I had written looked ridiculous on the page, even to myself. My long hand looked like Chinese characters or the crude shapes of Ms or Ws which artists use to scrawl out birds from a distance in hastily created TV show paintings; or like black crows escaping into a white blizzard. I put the pen down and rubbed my temples, trying to write something with resonance was frustrating and I suddenly realized that I was trying hard not to cry.

A stewardess came by with what looked like a hotel maid's cart and mercifully handed me a mixed drink. It was some type of vodka and cranberry mix; certainly something for lightweight amateurs to imbibe in, but I scarfed it down anyway and set the empty plastic cup in the arm rest holder.

When I looked back up Katie Rose was bustling past my sister and out into the aisle. I assumed that she was headed for the lavatory which was located in the rear of the plane. So I stuck my snout into the Moleskin and pretended to be concentrating on something so that I wouldn't have to look up at her as she passed. Her perfume arrived before she did, like a sugar cookie sprinkled with ground up lilacs. I scribbled nonsense onto a blank page. Finally looking up after she'd had ample time to pass. But she hadn't passed and when I did raise my head I was stunned to see her kneeling down in the aisle before my worn and perturbed eyes not a foot from where I sat; her black eyes gleaming garnet in the sun filled plane and looking right into mine. I stared at her for a few heartbeats while trying to prevent my bottom lip from quivering. I have never been as dumbfounded before or since.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hello,” I croaked while trying to sit still and control my suffocating caligynophobia.

“You don't look very happy,” she said as my eyes were drawn to the sculpted leg which pressed out from the slit on the side of her skirt.

“Oh I am,” I said, “I'm always happy to see good people.”

She smiled then: a light, playful, subtly amused smile which blessed all men bathed in its light. But I didn't know if it was because she'd liked what I'd said or thought I was an idiot.

“I read your book,” she said, “I thought the poems were beautiful.”

“Well then maybe it's true what they say about beautiful women?”

“Oh,” her smile held, “and what do they say?”

“That poetry *is* the way to their hearts.” I didn't tell her that I thought this was foolishness and that poems were not a love potion or an aphrodisiac which worked on beautiful women unless the penmen looked like Antonio Banderas.

She smiled even brighter and if I hadn't been sitting down I would have swooned and then she said: "I heard that some of those poems were about me?"

She made her shimmering eyes into the same question.

"People can make poems be about anything that they want them to be." I said while sparing her the long version of this theory and wondering why I hadn't just owned up to the indisputable fact that the poems were about her. Her smile turned down just a notch but stayed on her face. She licked her lips; transforming them to a livid rose color.

"What are you writing now?" she queried. "More poems about me?"

I told her that I'd gotten to the point where I knew just enough about poetry to realize that the poems that I was writing were real bad, and that poetry was really only something that fools used to pass the time. She seemed disappointed by this.

"I don't think you believe that." she said bluntly through a mock frown and I kicked myself for admitting all this and not just playing along with her. I'd just been trying to be honest with her, but it seemed that the truth was always the worst way to go.

"I guess not." this lie seemed to sound better to her for that wondrous smile came back.

"Are you going to be at the reception?" she asked.

"God knows where I'm liable to be." Once again I'd used the truth and once again I kicked myself for not conjuring a lie. But this time it didn't seem to phase her.

"Well if you do manage to show up," she began, "will you dance with me?"

I wondered what the congregation would think of that: the lovely, austere, respectable married woman dancing with the drunken/mad/poet/idiot/lunatic.

"Sure," I answered simply.

As I finished this single syllable, the plane hit a rough patch and what they call turbulence knocked her off balance. I reached out and clutched her leather clad arm surely rescuing her from a fall onto her fine fanny. She rose and brushed the creases out of her tight white skirt, nodded a friendly thanks and abruptly walked towards the back of the plane, perhaps headed to the lavatory after all.

## **11. The Strip Mall / Pittsburgh PA**

But we would never find out what everybody would have thought about our slow dance. We never saw the shocked look on the faces of the congregation as the luscious Katie Rose pulled the thin, tired boy in the dreary black suit out onto the dance floor. For right about the time the reception began, and long after the last arm of the sun had vanished from the western firmament, I was walking into an all nude BYOB (Bring Your Own Bottle) bar which was situated in a strip mall somewhere on the dreary precipice of Pittsburgh.

I strolled up to the dry bar fully expecting to be blessed with a splash of Crown Royal, only to be told by the burly Dick Tracy-looking bartender that I was not permitted to purchase even a beer. Luckily the Steelers had clinched the AFC East Title earlier that night and a group of rotund football fans were celebrating with three large red and blue coolers at their feet. I went up to one of them: a burly, broad shouldered man with a full beard surrounding his nearly toothless mouth. He was dressed in the traditional AFL colors of black and gold and would have been very pleased to know that he looked an awful lot like Jack Ham. With as much politeness as I could muster I explained to him that I was from out of town and therefore had not known the house rules. Could he be so kind as to lend me one of his beers? I would be glad to pay for it. He smiled heartily, reached down into the crunching ice and pried out a shimmering can of Budweiser. He steadfastly refused to accept my cash and told me that if I wanted or needed another that I should not be afraid to ask. I shook his huge, firm hand, thanked him vigorously and promised not to bother him again. I always rooted for the Steelers after that.

My mirth quickly faded, however, as I sat on a bar stool around a heart shaped stage. I didn't much like the looks of the girls. Some were thin as scarecrows and others had rolls of uneven fat as if they'd recently given birth. Most were no more feminine than I was and I could see the guilt on the palms of their hands shining like the round projection of a flashlight lens. Fatigued, I tried not to look at their fatal faces. For it was a poor neighborhood outside and this weighed on and was reflected in the downtrodden style of their performances. Their movements were uncoordinated and devoid of grace or

glamour. Manly faces which badly needed more cosmetics made pathetic attempts at being coquettish as they licked their fire engine red lips whenever there was a pause in between the songs or a break in the beat. Soon, however, their wormish tongues had driven me and my stinking Bud to nausea as they slathered saliva onto the frown lines which were seared like a brand onto their ruined dimples. It was a good thing that they were totally nude or I would have been wondering if some of them were female impersonators. I had no chance of being aroused especially since I mostly just felt sorry for them. The beatings they'd received from their abusive mates were visible in the miserable scar tissue which puffed out above their gleaming coal gray eyes. I felt that it must be a degrading, taxing and vexing job to twist clumsily around silver fire poles just to feed the ungrateful, selfish children who had ruined their once sexy curves. I coughed into my beer as the current dancer squatted near me. I was so depressed that it took me a few seconds to realize that she expected me to tip her before she would get out of my face. I took out a crumpled dollar and pulled the garter strap away from her blazing skin. Indeed I was shocked by the warm temperature of her thigh. Once I'd snapped the money in she languidly traipsed away.

When I was done looking at the dancers I turned my attention to the ceiling instead. It was very high like a warehouse and had been sprayed with some sort of acrylic foam. This gave it a look like mint cottage cheese and better yet it made it hard for anything to hide in the high corners. But just as I was celebrating this I noticed the color of the curtain from which each new dancer emerged: purple as velvet or funeral home flowers.

The song abruptly ended and it was time for the next girl to emerge. But as the guitar riffs ached out from the big bleary speakers no new dancer appeared. Then the curtain fluttered and a tall, masculine, flat nosed, black girl was discharged onto the stage. For a second I thought that I caught a glimpse of her pusher: a solid red arm about the size of a child's attached to a stump-like body, yet before I could focus on the limb, the plush, purple curtain had swung back closed.

The black woman wasn't doing much for my libido either and I was about to get up and ease away when a lanky colt-legged girl sat down beside me.

“I don't want a lap dance,” I told her before she could ask.

“That's not what I was going to ask you,” she said. She was tall, a little taller than I like them. But she was almost illegally youthful and sternly attractive with her serious falcon-like expression.

“What were you going to ask me?” I wondered aloud.

“I wasn't going to ask you anything.”

I decided that her scam had been good enough. “Well, would you like a drink?” I asked, and even as the words escaped from my witless mouth I remembered that the bar was BYOB.

“No thanks.” She chuckled and I looked at my dying beer embarrassed. “You look tired,” she said, “Why don't you come back and lie down?” I started to tell her that I didn't want to go to any V.I.P. room but before I could object she said, “No it's alright, it won't cost you a dime, come on.”

She got up and I followed her. Although she wasn't wearing anything, I didn't look at her body only at the back of her shining hair. The back part of the club branched out into what looked to be an old ballroom. We walked across a bare concrete floor above which a silver disco ball hung brightly like a dying planet in distant space. There was a stage at the very back; with a drum set and several types of horns resting deadily on aluminum stands. We slanted into a dark hallway to our left. I should have been afraid of being beaten up or rolled, but instead I was charged with an inspiration of unknown emotions. They lit up my tight body and threatened to obliterate my limbs. I didn't have enough orifices for all these strong feelings to escape from, and hard, chunky tears, built up from embittered years of wasted time and petty frustrations, struggled out from my below my pearl hued blue eyes.

We proceeded through a door which should have led to an alley, where I fully expected the greasy scent of dumpsters to invade my nostrils or for a fort of cinder blocks to surround a haven for rats.

Instead I found myself on a grand patio, where lavish lawn chairs circled a grandiose fountain. There were two cherubs or perhaps cupids at the apex of the arching flow with water spraying out softly from the tips of their arrows. The sun beat down reassuringly on flat orange and beige stones which had been strategically placed to create the two toned design of an impressive walkway. With some difficulty, I perched my tipsy frame over a long lawn chair and lowered myself onto it. Even when I shut my eyes the strength of the sun filtered into my vision as a cream sickle colored film. So I shut the lids tighter and the tears squeezed out like squashed vegetables until all that I could see was black.

## **12. The Flea Market / Acapulco Mexico/ Mayan Calendar**

In Mexico I wasn't a gypsy confidence man at all, but a finder of missing persons. Not a cop or even a private dick, mind you, for the traveler despises the policeman like the cobra abhors the mongoose.

I didn't think that she'd be too hard to track down. These runaway bride cases are like a day off for someone with my experience. Besides, how hard could it be to find a woman in a full length bride's dress, shimmering like salt and complete with a side winding train, in one of the filthiest and most unkempt cities above or below the equator.

Picture the most rank and despondent slum which you've ever encountered in the United States then demoralize and desanitize it one hundred times yet again and you have the flea market in Acapulco. An air of dying fish gilled sea scum infiltrated the oxygen as the fatal germs wafted across my American sensibilities and saturated the suffocating shanties and the army-green half-tents with open sides.

There was a lot of merchandise for any foreigner or passing peruser to inspect: little mechanized matadors who stepped aside to let the bull pass. All manner of Mexican flags which ranged in size from bar rag to bed spread, Pancho Villa puppets who stepped high like chickens and waved tiny painted pistols at your knees, wigs which looked fake and glossy as if they were perhaps parents to the smaller wiglets hanging below them which also looked far from authentic, Karachi party shakers, red, blue and yellow, tiny shrunken skull-sized sombreros and others which would fit the head of a gorilla, lavish hand-painted crosses which depicted the horrific crucifixion of our savior, pale pearl Madonnas, colorful Guadalupe virgins and other weeping, kneeling Marias lined the gray tables and the shedding wax board shelves along with an eternity of mostly worthless souvenirs.

The vendors called out to me as I passed like carnival barkers, "Nada dinero, nado dinero," urging me to inspect their suspect products. I searched their faces for one pair of eyes which seemed trustworthy, and, finding not one

iota of honesty in any gaze I met, was finally reduced to walking up to the nearest merchant.

He had an ape-like face with deep, primal smile lines running vertically down his chin. He wore your stereotypical white pajama same as when John Huston was filming his father and Bogart. A straw hat guarded his bronze face from an unbridled sun which shown hot and mad as a fire ant.

I took out the photograph of Katie Rose and I on our wedding day; her eyes proud and unclouded. It was a shame that the snapshot had not taken in the entire scale of the background. For we were married at a church made entirely from flowers: the cross, the alter, the pews, the statues, all grown over in a vivid kaleidoscope of plant life. Saint Viatar's was carved into a scenic niche on the side of a mountain not too far from the outskirts of town.

He looked at the picture, scratched his head like a crass chimp, and handed it back to me while shaking his head no. I produced a ten dollar note, probably enough to feed his family for two weeks if the greasy little troglodyte had one. This time he pointed to a distant mountain, shrouded by fog and overlooking the rancid city. I followed the end of his brown finger to a tall Capri which had high walls as pink as a flamingo's feathers. It sat at such a dangerous angle amongst the steep rocks that it looked as if you could reach out and touch it.

“Gato Casa,” he said and made his palms squelch together several times until they made a disgusting sound like flatulence. Then he switched to English and told me about the '*federales*' who guarded the grounds and about the scar-faced man who owned the villa and profited from the promiscuity and prostitution which reined within. A man whom the locals called '*dardo tablaro*'.

I had heard enough. I folded the picture up and put it in my pocket as the first tiny drops of rain began to fall. Seems like it always rains in Mexico at least once a day; the clouds tumbling from nowhere to descend upon the city like a plaque. Only to fair back off minutes later until the dented, scraped, compact cars which have been converted to taxicabs are hot to the touch. And the pedestrians are cooked like bugs underneath a magnifying glass. The storm washed the stench from the streets only to force it up into the nostrils of

the population like a moldy towel. Until sewage rivers bubbled up and ran against where the curbs should have been had they ever been constructed, and unspeakable garbage and wretched trash flushed across the cobblestones and violently disappeared over inexplicable drop offs. I punched...

### **13. Sheraton / Downtown Pittsburgh**

...at the air, and my motion was restricted by a cold sheet which was tangled in with a furry blanket. For a few seconds I had no idea where I was... but then I did remember the strip mall. How I'd managed to make it back to my hotel room at the Sheraton was as confounding a mystery as Stonehenge.

I figured the room must have been stuffy when I'd arrived in, for the window was open and the sounds of downtown Pittsburgh wafted in on the January wind. This gently lifted the gossamer pink curtains which tickled the back of a lavender Victorian short couch.

I always wanted to be one of those people who were already awake no matter how early you got up; sitting at a tubular kitchen table drinking black coffee and smoking unfiltered Camels. But I detested cigarette smoke and had managed to drink a grand total of one cup-a-joe my entire life. Plus, like all abject failures, I hated morning worse than any other time of the day, and I dreaded every second on the clock.

If the room had been warm when I came in it sure wasn't now and I shivered and hugged my arms to my bare chest. I got out of bed and walked across the red tiles with just my briefs on. Once I reached the window the pink curtains rose past my face like a feminine presence and I looked out over the intermittent lights of the city and the windows of the skyscrapers like fuses on a switchboard.

I suddenly wondered if the wedding reception had broken up yet and a surge of panic and regret streaked through my chest. For I was now sober as a Supreme Court Justice and, in my awakened state, realizing that I'd missed my lone chance to dance with Katie Rose. For an adrenaline stricken second I even considered throwing my clothes on and still trying to make it to the end of the wedding dance, but these hopes were quickly doused when I glanced at the red eyed digital clock; 4:14. But that wasn't it either; I could have been standing right next to her or sitting at the very next table, hiding behind the floral centerpiece arrangement, and no matter how many noxious, putrid shots I gulped down I still would not have had the courage to approach her,

even after she'd encouraged me to do so. And even if I had, wouldn't I really just be better off yearning. I was nothing but a worthless, foam sniffing, poem killing dreamer. Everybody knows that fuckin' poets are off their rockers. I didn't have the *savoir faire* to be with a woman like Katie Rose. It was better that I should always just relish her in a reverie. Fantasies were unchallenged. A dream could be controlled. No one could fuck up a dream.

So I closed the window, blocking out the ignorant noise of the traffic. This killed the wind and the dance of the pink curtain failed. Like a fancy handkerchief it fell neatly onto the arm of the short couch as if someone had tossed it there.

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