

FLORILEGIUM, Where the Madmen Rave and other untended patches is a compendium of short vignettes that will stretch your mind and leave you wondering on those lonely nights when the house creaks and things in your head go bump.

FLORILEGIUM: WHERE THE MADMEN RAVE... AND OTHER UNTENDED PATCHES

By T A Ciccarone

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FLORILEGIUM*



WHERE THE MADMEN RAVE

And other untended patches



T A CICCARONE

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*Florilegium noun

flo·ri·le·gium | \ ,flôr-ə-'lē-j(ē-)əm

a volume of writings: ANTHOLOGY

For Robert and Jerry

IRON CHAIN

My Brother My Father

What loss would teach us

To be true

To instincts old as

Clubs and glacial stones

That we may grasp and hold and keep

The iron chain from breaking

Between you and me

And me and him

That we may delve

Down to the darkness

Of the wells

Of me and thee

To find that all dark waters

Are flowing and the same

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1. Susan's Dream



Susan's Dream

Roosevelt Beignet never liked Charles Wainwright III, the way a child resents a more handsome and clever cousin, from the moment he laid eyes on him at the faculty mixer. The University of Hartford Art School periodically hosted these soirees to promote peer bonding for all the good they did. The staff mostly showed up for a few glasses of cheap Chablis and chit-chat. Roos had researched every faculty member long before applying to the University, and it made complete sense he knew what kind of circumstances he would find himself in. The credentials of the faculty were solid for the most part, all of them being competent artisans, which Roos thought was a rarity these days.

The graduates were another story. After commencement, they mostly springboarded into positions of baristas and waiters, occupying apartments in their parent's basements. The local coffee houses never looked so avant-garde. The new generation of professors seemed more lenient, demanding less production from the pupils and more political correctness. At least the professors could still do art, except for Charles Wainwright. There was nothing special or notable about his abilities in the world of art. How Charles had risen to the lofty position of assistant head of the art department was a mystery to Roos. Even Charles wasn't sure how he had landed the job. His brief resume included a stint in educational administration, but it was in middle school in his hometown of Wellesley. He considered himself lucky to have gotten his foot in the door of the collegiate system; now, all he had to do was teach a few art classes. How difficult could it be? The lack of experience in the field of art left Charles with a nagging feeling of inadequacy as he soon realized the students, pound for pound, knew more than he.

To make matters worse, Roos believed his feeling of disdain for Charles was reciprocal. It wasn't merely that Charles never initiated a conversation with him at the mixers or responded to pleasantries; it was the apparent fact Charles blatantly looked down his nose at Roos whenever they met. Roos never had any use for an artist that didn't create, and he firmly believed Charles had no use for one that did. He

viewed Charles, not as a true artist but as one of those *artist types*. It was in the playing of second fiddle to someone of lesser talent that Roos found the irritating discord.

Roosevelt thought about the hundreds of bronze pieces he had created and sold. Hadn't he created the nationally acclaimed bronze rendering, *In Love*? Roos thought about how some critics labeled the sculpture as pornography and nothing more. Still, it stood on display in the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington DC for over three years until they shipped it to Gallery Arcturus in Toronto. Charles couldn't lay claim to anything of the kind; in fact, he had never made a single piece of art, let alone even sold one. Roos recalled the pride on his Uncle Lincoln's face at his nephew's first casting of a thermometer, made in his studio at the age of twelve. He doubted Charles could even have done the simple study.

Roos was under no illusion Hartford Art was a top art school. On his thirtieth birthday, he abandoned his dreams of teaching in the Ivy League, pushing the hope to a back burner, and that pot had soon stopped sizzling. Hartford was, however, a step up from his first teaching contract at Manchester Community College and still within commuting distance of his apartment in East Hartford. The pay was substantially better too.

Roos spent the first month getting to know his pupils and setting up the casting lab. Things moseyed along predictably enough until he found the note in his mailbox: *Please meet me in my office this Tuesday at five p.m. CW.*

Both men had afternoon classes to teach on Tuesdays, which meant Roos would have to hurry if he wanted to be punctual. Roos was never late; he took his new job seriously, cared deeply about his students and art in general, and felt punctuality went along with it. Charles, on the other hand, had to answer to no one. He often missed classes, scheduling an intern to do the lesson plan. When passing Charles' room, Roos felt a wave of contempt upon noticing Charles was playing the film *Forrest Gump* as part of the curriculum. Roos mumbled as he passed the door. "This is an art class and not a theater class."

Tuesday arrived with no small degree of anxiety, and Roos hurried across the quad for his appointment.

When Roos arrived at Charles's office, the door was open, and he stood at the entrance waiting for Charles Wainwright to look in his direction. Wainwright was absorbed in the important process of shuffling desk flotsam for an inordinately long while.

"Oh, Roosevelt, you're here. Come in, come in. Take a seat." Despite the invitation, Roos felt as if Charles was dismissing him. He sat in the chair by the desk and seemed to sink into it as the cushion's center sagged. He felt small and insignificant as Charles towered over him.

"The reason I asked you to come to my office is to discuss what projects you are currently working on. "I..." Charles paused, correcting himself, "The University is initiating a new policy. The guideline is that all art professors should do art as an example to the students. You have been here for three months. "We," he bent the word *we* again to add a degree of gravitas to the statement, "here at Hartford Art, always like to keep tabs on the projects our faculty members are planning." Charles paused and waited. Roos wondered what Charles' project would be.

Roos was confused. There was never mention of being a producing artist during the three job interviews. Art, good art, would be impossible to do under the weight of teaching a full load of students. What did he have on his roster, over a hundred pupils? Roos sank lower into the chair.

"I'm putting a project together now," Roos said, trying to sound nonchalant about it and not betray his anxiety about what was no less than an inquisition, but it came out watered down and meek. He straightened up and sat on the edge of the seat. "It's something I think the University will enjoy," Roos said, wishing he had sounded more convincing.

"Um-hm," Charles murmured as he stared out the office window. Roos wasn't sure the man was paying attention or even hearing him.

That day, in Charles' office, Roos decided he would destroy Charles and, what was more, he would do it with art. If Charles Wainwright wanted art, Roos would give him a lethal dose. Finding the right project would be the key, and Roos believed it would have to be better than merely good art. It would have to have power enough to

silence even Charles Wainwright III, Artist Type, once and for all. Roos abruptly stood up and, thanking Charles for his time, left the office.

The request to do art stymied Roos, and what the project would be vexed him. He was a masterful sculptor and bronze caster, but everything had been done. After the removal of *In Love* from D.C., the past three years had left Roos at a dead end, and he felt as if the switch controlling his creativity had been turned off. He knew he would need something fresh, never seen before. Roos agonized for weeks and came up empty. The holidays were approaching, and maybe he would think of something over the break.

The girl stayed late after class on Friday after the last student rushed to their weekend plans. She had ideas of her own for Roos and waited until they were alone in the casting lab. Roos finished stowing the casting equipment and noticed the girl standing, watching him go about his routine. She was pretty in an artsy sort of way. Her oversized clothes resembled boy's attire, but many girls dressed as men in the casting lab. Susan Marquis was one of the more talented sophomore students. Roos made a mental note to keep his eye on her in the following years.

"Susan, can I help you with anything?" It wasn't unusual for a student to wait until class was over to request a consult.

"I just wanted to say how much I am enjoying the class. You're such a good professor. I've never made such progress before."

"Thank you, that is very nice of you to say." Roos tried to sound professional. "So, how can I help you?" She was more than pretty when he viewed her up close.

"I was wondering if you would like to come to our house for the weekend. My brother and I live alone and have plenty of room." Was this odd? Roos thought about it for a minute.

"Where do you live?" He knew little about his students after three months at the University.

"My brother and I live in Newport. It's less than two hours away from the University. Please come; it would mean so much to me. We have something we would like you to see, and my brother thinks it would be perfect for your particular set of talents. We both adore *In Love*, and it's a shame they moved it to Canada."

Roos wasn't married; he didn't even have a girlfriend. There was no reason to say no. "What's so important, if I may ask?"

"Uh, uh, you'll have to come and see." With that, Susan smiled and left the room, calling over her shoulder. "I'll see you tomorrow. We eat dinner around five. Don't be late; you'll make Clara angry." Roos had the feeling the young woman had played him, but curiosity is a powerful enticement, and without actually saying so, he agreed to go.

Roos felt like an outsider as he parked his Toyota in front of the mansion on Walnut Street in Newport. He checked the GPS several times to be sure of the address. Roos sat in the Corolla, staring at his phone, and was painfully close to abandoning the invitation and returning to Hartford out of panic-driven anxiety. He didn't think it possible the building he parked in front of was the Marquis House Susan had invited him to, and it would mean her family was fabulously wealthy. The young student didn't project the persona of inherent wealth, but what did he know?

A thin gray December drizzle of sleet fell on the Corolla, and the car seemed to shiver when Roos cut the engine. He grabbed his overnight bag and trotted up the long front walk, trying to dodge the sleet pellets as he made his way to the front door. He felt out of step in his Costco khakis and boat shoes and wished he had better clothes to wear. Roos read the plaque on the door; 'MARQUIS.' Under it was a brass doorknocker in the shape of an anchor. Roos lifted the knocker, noticing it was hand-cast, and let it fall with a single clack.

The door opened, and there stood his pupil. Susan wore a black bikini and a translucent, flowing flower print silk robe. She looked completely different than she did in the sloppy oversized clothes she wore in the casting lab.

"Hey, professor. You made it. I wasn't sure you'd come." She held the door wide, "Let's get you settled in." Susan was different, all right. Instead of the reserved, shy student, she seemed to bubble over. Roos noticed she was quite attractive when she smiled.

"Wow," Roos said, sounding foolish to himself as he peered around the grand foyer.

Susan ignored the compliment and said, "Michael will be home soon. He hit stripers big time and has to pack them out to market. Michael loves to fish." She said, rolling her eyes, "He's bringing home lobsters tonight. You eat lobsters, right?" Roos nodded; lobsters were good. "Come on in; I'll show you to your room."

The sweeping staircase circled halfway around the grand foyer, which was larger than most homes, and led to an upper hallway large enough to be in a hotel. Susan briskly led him along the hall to the fifth door. She chattered excitedly, drawing Roos's attention away from the pictures on the walls. The young student opened a door, and Roos could smell the faint odor of sea breeze and gardenias. The bedroom was decorated in a sea blue with accents of stormy gray and was more expansive than his entire apartment. All Roos could think about was it must be nice to have money. "Susan, your home is beautiful." Roos stood in the center of the bedroom, afraid to touch anything.

"Why, thank you. Mom was a very connected decorator; her work was in all the magazines. The bathroom is through there. Come down when you get settled, and we can do cocktails."

Roos turned around in the room. Every detail was unique. He sat on the bed and lay back, kicking off his boat shoes. No sooner than his head lay on the pillow, the mattress rose to ensconce his body; even the bed was perfect. Roos lay there gazing around the room. The pictures adorning the walls were art, real art. He stood up and walked over to a seascape on the north wall. The signature was Hill. Roos knew this artist, William Hill. His canvases auctioned in the mid-six figures. He walked to the dresser and looked at a miniature bronze of Degas's *Little Dancer*. He turned the small sculpture over. The mark *degas 1* was stamped in the base. Roos had a feeling this was an original casting proof. He looked at his watch and noticed thirty minutes had elapsed. Not wanting to seem rude, he went back downstairs to the entryway. There was art everywhere. How he had not noticed it all on the way up was a mystery to him. A massive Chihuly chandelier in the foyer? Roos had never set foot in a home such as this.

Susan met him at the foot of the stairs, "I made you a Mojito. I hope you like it. It's my special recipe. We're eating as soon as Mike gets in. He just texted me." Susan led him into the kitchen. A woman

stood at the counter, slicing vegetables. "Clara, this is Professor Beignet."

"Please, call me Roos." He smiled.

"Michael got home a few minutes ago. He's cleaning up now. I put out some snacks in the dining room to nibble on. Susan, if you would please show our guest some Newport hospitality." Susan made a face at the scolding.

Clara McNeil had worked for the Marquis family since she emigrated to the United States from Jamaica at eighteen. Now that Veera and Nobel Marquis had passed on to Elysian Fields, Clara viewed it as her responsibility to keep the children in line, no matter how old they were. She had promised Veera this on her deathbed, and a promise was a promise.

Roos followed Susan through double doors into the dining room. As soon as Roos entered the room, he stopped short. He had never seen a table with twenty-eight seats. The house's opulence was too much for Roos to assimilate, and he stared at the original classical masterpieces gracing the walls. Roos knew there were rich folks in the world, but he never had the opportunity to rub shoulders with them. Roos estimated the value of the art alone to be worth more than the value of the house and tried his best to hide his chagrin.

"Michael should be up in a few minutes as soon as he feeds Norvos," Susan said as she picked up a shrimp and took a bite.

"Norvos?" Roos asked. "Is he the dog?"

"No," Susan chuckled. "Norvos is a special guest. You'll meet him later. He is the reason we invited you here this weekend. He'll be leaving soon, and Michael and I want you to consider doing a bronze study of him while he's still here." Roos was confused. He hadn't thought about art and believed this weekend was supposed to be a holiday. In the back of his mind, he entertained thoughts of a romantic interlude with his student. She was a woman in her mid-twenties. So far, all the signs had pointed to this, the invitation, the bikini, and relaxed congeniality. Roos picked up a canape and took a bite as a tall man entered the room.

"Roos, I'd like to introduce you to my brother Michael. He is a local fisherman." Susan smiled, obviously proud of the fact. "Michael,

this is my professor, Roosevelt Beignet. He is the one I was telling you about."

"Ah, the bronze caster. I've been looking forward to meeting you." He glanced at his sister, "Time is getting short." Susan nodded.

Michael looked at the mojito. "I see you already have a drink. I'll catch up if you don't mind." He faced Roos with a most serious look and asked, "Say, would you like a real drink?" He looked down at the mojito and smiled.

"Hey, what's wrong with my mojito?" Susan asked, clearly irritated.

"I have a wonderful bottle of pre-World War I; single cask scotch I've been waiting to open." Roos was fond of scotch and considered himself somewhat knowledgeable in the niche.

"I do like scotch very much. What brand is it?" Roos felt he was finally on a firm footing; up to now, the whole experience had left Roos feeling a bit off balance.

"It doesn't work like that with this stuff." He smiled, and Roos felt his footing shift.

Michael turned, walked to the small bar in the corner of the room, and reached behind it to produce a brown quart bottle. He picked up a corkscrew, a silver stopper, and two square crystal glasses and set them on the table. "This is unbranded. We believe it is from the Drummond family's 'Hosh' distillery but can't be 100% sure." Roos felt his footing destabilize further. *Yes, money is good*, he thought to himself. Roos noticed the bottle was unlabeled; the only mark was the embossed stamp of the letter *D* on the black wax cork seal.

"Michael, why do you always have to steal the show?" Susan sounded playfully miffed when the conversation no longer included her.

"Oh, Susan, I'm so sorry. Would you like me to get another glass?" His tone was innocent and chiding.

"You know I don't drink that stuff." She smirked and took a sip of her drink.

Michael carefully peeled the wax from the bottleneck. He inserted the auger of the corkscrew into the cork and slowly turned the handle taking care to avoid disturbing the hundred-year-old pith as much as

possible. "This is the hard part." He said as he twisted the screw in until the pigtail disappeared. "The trick to not breaking up the old cork is to go slowly." He spoke the word slowly, like honey dripping from a jar. He placed the bottle between his knees and held it firmly with his left hand. He began to extract the cork, teasing it to see if it was bound to the bottle. Roos stared in fascination as the plug moved slightly. "There, the hard part is over," Michael said, relieved.

"You don't want to muck it up with a bottle like this. I hate cork pulp in my drink." Michael said, shuddering. He gently pulled the corkscrew handle, and the cork came free with a pop. "Ah, there you are." He sniffed and tasted the bottom of the cork. "Perfect. Well, shall we?" He filled the glasses half full and then picked up a silver knobbed cork, plugging the bottleneck. "Three fingers should about do it, right?" Michael handed a glass to Roos.

Roos had tried many scotches; he even had taken a tour of Scottish distilleries four years ago. Roos raised the glass, sniffed the aroma, took a sip, and knew he was out of his depth right then and there. This wasn't like any scotch Roos had ever had. The subtle flavors and afterglow were transcendent, as if he were tasting the liquor for the first time. He took a second sip and sighed.

"Nice, huh." Michael looked at Susan, "you don't know what you're missing, girl."

"Please," she took a sip of the mojito, taunting her brother.

Michael looked back and forth between Roos and the drink, "What do you think?"

"This must have been crazy expensive," Roos said, taking a sip. He didn't want to ask outright what the bottle cost at the risk of sounding gauche.

"Well, I got it at auction, so it wasn't cheap, but it is what it is." Roos's curiosity was peaking, and he tried to figure out a way to ask but not be improper. Susan watched the charade play out; she saw the conversation was going nowhere and wanted to move on to more important things, to her plan.

"What Michael won't tell you is that it cost just under ten thousand dollars." Roos almost dropped the glass, which would have wasted over six hundred dollars in liquor. Oh yes, money was good.

The evening meandered on, a young kitchen staffer served the lobster stuffed with sea scallops and morels, and the conversation kept casually returning to Norvos. The night was flecked with curiosity, and Roos's imagination was stained.

Susan looked at her brother in between sips of a delightful Weingut-Keller Riesling. "Did you feed him? It will be better if he eats early tonight." She took a bite of scallop stuffing.

"Yes, Susan, I fed him as soon as I got home," Michael said, looking askance at his sister.

"What did you give him?" Susan asked.

"I gave him a striper; it's his favorite." The brother answered.

Roos was now thoroughly confused. Something was not right here; he finished the meal, listening in silence. It was clear he would soon meet Norvos, whoever or whatever he was.

A beetroot sorbet garnished with praline lace followed the meal; of course, Michael broke out a delightful 100-year-old Grand Marnier cognac. Roos never wanted the meal to end; it sure beat the devil out of his regiment of fast food. Money was good; the pesky problem of acquiring it was always the problem.

The conversation turned more serious as the liquor flowed and the dessert disappeared.

"So, I get the impression I'm here for a reason other than dinner." Roos stared at Susan. He felt this was her show, and she had the answers. Michael sat back, quietly sipping the Grand Marnier.

"Well," She paused, not knowing exactly how to proceed. "The man we mentioned, Norvos, is not your usual person." Roos had surmised as much. "What we want, what I want is a full bronze casting of Norvos and me making love." Susan didn't wince when she stated her wish; quite to the contrary, she looked directly into Roos's eyes, which were open wide with shock. There went Roos's hopes of a liaison. Roos looked over at Michael, who merely shrugged, spooning the dregs of the sorbet.

The glasses were empty, and there was not much left to discuss; Susan stood up. "I guess it is time to introduce you to our guest."

Susan led the two men to a door at the back of the kitchen. Clara looked up as they passed through her domain, her eyes wide. Roos

thought her glance was disapproving for an undefinable reason as she shook her head.

"Child, you're not taking your guest down there, are you?" Clara said. "We talked about this. If your mother were alive, what would she say?" She had the girl there. Michael was silent as they argued.

"Clara, I wouldn't do this if there was another way. Please try to understand," Susan pleaded.

The older woman tisked and, shaking her head, muttered, "Your mother would be turning in her grave if she knew." The two held each other's gaze briefly, Susan trying to make her surrogate mother understand something she didn't understand herself, Clara trying to protect her beloved ward from something that, in her mind, was no less than an abomination. Susan broke the trance and walked to the basement door without a word.

The curving stone stairway descended to the basement in a massive medieval sweep.

"This is the entrance to the lap pool. We couldn't find any other place to put it." Susan said as Roos followed down the stone steps and wondered why he would meet the guest in the lap pool room.

The basement room was large, perhaps a hundred feet long and half again as wide. The first thing Roos noticed was the ceiling vaulted close to fifteen feet high. He immediately felt the humidity caress his skin from the lap pool. The side of the pool, which was eight feet in height, was made of some transparent sheet, and Roos assumed it was Lexan or some such material. Roos peered down the length of the Lexan tank, which had no breaks other than the supports which held the sides every twelve feet. Yes, it was good to have money.

"When do I get to meet your guest?" Roos was now confused. Were they going to go for a late swim? He turned to Michael, who had been silent since dessert.

"Here he comes now." Michael nodded to the far end of the pool. Something was moving towards them.

Roos had seen a lot of things in his life. He had visited a dozen countries, toured the world's museums and galleries, and was no stranger to Avant-Garde cutting art. He considered himself unshockable, but his opinion of himself changed in the beat of a heart.

The object neared, and Roos, squinting through the diagonal angle of the Lexan, thought it was a man. It approached, swimming near the bottom of the pool. The swimmer, Norvos, reached the end and stared out at the three people who all stared back, but none were more in shock than Roos.

Norvos was a man, sort of, at least from the waist up. In that respect, he was of average size except for his fabulous physique. It reminded Roos of the exaggerated bodies of comic book heroes. It was the lower extremities that amazed Roos. They were tentacles, bluish-black tentacles, and not just normal ones. These appendages were ten feet long, maybe longer; it was difficult to tell. The tentacles were lined with the expected milky white suction cups, and two legs attached to the Lexan, anchoring Norvos in place as he stared through the window. The eyes were what captured Roos. They were black and wide apart, reminding Roos of fisheyes, not unlike the eyes of a grazer, less forward-situated than human predatorial eyes. Roos stared at Norvos and wondered what this creature perceived; did it see beauty on the other side of the Lexan too?

The other appendages moved in a constant interweave of motion, mesmerizing Roos. Then, in an action Roos could only describe as heartbreakingly beautiful, Norvos detached from the Lexan and swam in a wide arc, tentacles flowing behind. As Norvos turned, Roos noticed the creature's back sported gills, two rows of four, from shoulder to waist, which bellowed and pulsed as he swam in circles. His hair was long and black, and he cavorted as if performing for an audience. There were markings across Norvos's shoulders and down his arms. They looked like deep sea-green raised blotches. Roos wanted to touch them. He had no time to question how this could be; it was all happening too quickly. Roos was immediately sure that Norvos was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. Roos was certain beyond question; he had found his sculpture study.

Michael leaned and whispered in Roos's ear, "I picked him up in a deep scallop drag-net about two months ago at 800 meters. He's very fond of scallops."

"You pulled him up in a net?" asked Roos.

"Yeah, crazy, huh?" He nodded towards the Lexan. "The pool was salt water already. All we had to do was adjust the chemical solution. It's close to the balance you will find in a lobster tank. He seems to like it. We can't keep him here; it wouldn't be right."

"Can you communicate with him?" This creature now enthralled Roos.

"Susan can, or so she says. She claims it's more mental, but there are some signs they use."

Roos looked at the creature and Susan. She had discarded her robe and pressed her hand against the pool wall. Norvos did the same, and they looked like a bizarre mirror image. Susan turned to the men.

"I'm going to go in now. Are the cameras set up?" Michael nodded. He turned and set a tripod up with the digital recorder facing the tank. She walked to the end of the room and climbed a set of steps. Roos watched as the young woman stood on the platform at the pool's edge and removed her bikini as if nothing unusual were about to occur. Roos felt it would be improper to stare at the woman's perfect beauty blatantly, yet he found he was unable to look away.

She stood for a moment, a diver composing herself for her great dive. Roos watched Susan launch herself into the saltwater; all was perfectly visible. He watched the beautiful woman's body slice through the surface, and he had the urge to weep from the beauty of it all. Was this thing tugging at his artist's heart the beginnings of love? It would be the first time he felt it. Yes, Roos Beignet, artist in his heart of hearts, would weep, but it would not be at the beauty of it all.

What took place next captivated Roos. Norvos shot through twenty feet of water instantly and embraced Susan in a jarring collision. He wrapped her in his great tentacles, and their mouths joined in what, at first, looked to be a kiss. As the act continued and the couple didn't break the surface, Roos understood Norvos was breathing air into Susan's lungs. If sex was an act of trust between two lovers, then this was the ultimate manifestation of that trust. Susan depended on this magnificent creature not only for pleasure but for her survival as well. Susan and her strange lover rolled and twisted in what Roos believed to be exquisite ecstasy. The three-dimensional dance they performed became more frenzied as she remained connected to Norvos's lips; the

woman went rigid. At the same moment, the water became black as Norvos released his reservoir of ink.

"He always does this at the end," Michael said from behind Roos. He had seen this spectacle several times. Roos started to turn away. "Keep watching, don't stop." Roos focused on the inky blackness as it began to dissipate. Roos was confused by what he saw next. There were undulating tentacles, many of them thrashing from the inky cloud. The ejaculation of ink wasn't the 'grand orgasme' Roos believed it to be.

Roos swore he could feel the thud as the lovers slammed into the Lexan of the pool in a violent completion of their bizarre act. It was impossible to discern where Norvos started and ended. The confusion rocked poor Roos's brain when he realized the tentacles were no longer black; many were blue, as bright as an October sky. The lovers were spinning and writhing as they moved in and out of the inky strata. Susan Marquis was no longer the woman who plunged into the pool. Somehow her body was transmuted and was now the same as her lover's. The couple panicked and rioted in their lovemaking until it was over, like the breaking of the seventh wave. The two creatures, Susan was now the same as Norvos, drifted slowly, spinning in the aftermath of the union.

Roos turned to Michael, the look in his eyes imploring. "Will she be like this forever?"

"Usually, she returns to normal by morning, but it takes a bit longer each time." Michael stared into Roos's eyes, confirming what he already knew was there.

"You have feelings for her, don't you? It's not unusual; everyone does sooner or later." He patted Roos on the shoulder, "Thank God I'm her brother." Roos stared at the lovers through the veil of his weeping.

Clara and the house staff were off for the remainder of the weekend, and Michael and Roos picked at leftovers from dinner. It was after five the next afternoon when Susan entered the kitchen. She wore the same translucent robe and sat across from Roos. Susan had pulled her hair back in a severe ponytail; Roos detected the faintest salty tang of the sea. Roos noticed Susan was naked save the thin silk robe and tried not to ogle. Michael picked at the shrimp, not looking up.

"How was the transition back? It takes longer each time." His voice carried a tinge of concern.

"I know." Her whisper emanated up from a deep well of abject sadness. "We have to release him soon. I don't know if I can do this again. Each time it hurts more when I revert, and while I'm under, I don't want to change. I want to go with him." She looked up at the men; her admission seemed to cause her anguish in a place they would never understand, let alone visit. "I know it's not right, but I can't help it." She began to sob. "It is not only the sex. He touches places in my mind; I can't describe it. He sees me; he sees me completely and loves what he sees, and," Susan paused, "I don't know if I can live without that." Her tears fell like winter rain, desolate and inconsolable, like the wind and sleet tears spattering Marquis House.

Michael reached across the kitchen table and held her hand in his. "We'll take him tonight. Roos will help me." He glanced at Roos. Yes, he would help; of course, he would. He would also try to have Susan Marquis for himself.

Norvos slipped into the dark sea, under a fingernail moon, off the vacant town wharf in Newport Bay after midnight without so much as a backward glance at the two men. There were no goodbyes between the men, and Michael knew Norvos would not give him so much as another thought. He also believed Norvos was not yet through with his sister.

Roos watched as Norvos disappeared into the inky sea and knew, for the first time in his life, the meaning of hate.

Susan returned to her room. She said her farewell through the Lexan wall and fled up the stairs. Susan raced past the art and chandeliers without a thought other than to her breaking heart. Susan wept into her pillow; she knew this was not love; it was more.

It took time for Roos to do the sculpture, over two years. He could have accomplished the task sooner, but Susan insisted all the work be done in the casting workshop she had set up in Newport. Roos was astounded when he entered the studio. Susan had the money and did well in the design. The forge and casting furnace was much larger than the fair-sized furnace in Hartford.

Roos spent his weekends cloistered in the shop on Coddington Highway. He ate and slept in the workshop and tried to avoid Susan as much as possible. The artist feverishly worked on the complex piece, but it was slow going. It wasn't the rendering of Norvos that was the glitch. It was almost easy for him, as the image of the creature was branded indelibly into his memory. The hard part came part and parcel with the decision of how to sculpt Susan. Roos knew he had to do it right the first time; there would not be a second chance. The question vexing Roos was whether he should depict Susan as a human or an amphibious creature, as the unbearable memory of her perfection tortured him night after night. The artist had seen her as both, and the lurid images scalded his mind. He agonized over the decision as he sculpted the body parts of Norvos.

Roos was aware art was dangerous; he'd lived with this knowledge most of his adult career. It wasn't dangerous in the ordinary sense but more complicated. Roosevelt had felt the pull of obsession only once when he created *In Love*. He spent his life searching for this driving obsession, and the absence of it filled him with terrible longing. *In Love* had taken so much out of him, Roos wondered if he would ever be whole and be able to create again.

The void of feelings after showing the sculpture had driven him to teach at Manchester Community College and later at The University of Hartford. He felt safe in the college environment, surrounded by students and faculty, as he kept the longing at bay. Lately, the other professors steered clear of Roos as if an invisible icy breath separated them. Even Charles found daily excuses to avoid conversation. The Assistant Director never mentioned the project Roos had wrestled with for so long and was agonizing about now.

Roos taught his classes, spoke with his peers, and sleep-walked through his days, waiting for the weekends when he could return to the casting studio on Coddington Highway, where he would once again feel alive.

It was after midnight when he ran his hands over the finished clay model of Susan.

The trembling touch of Roos's hands to the clay was the closest he dared to let himself get to the young woman. He ran his hand up the

raw clay of Susan's back as the figure lay in Norvos's arms but could not bring himself to touch the finished visage of Norvos. Yes, this contact with Susan was the only small luxury he would permit himself. He squelched his emotions back and returned to the complexities of making the massive ceramic mold that would encase the waxed model. When the sun rose, Roos was oblivious to the beauty of the summer dawn. He sat contemplating the figure he had made and the three years it had taken him to do so. Roos knew it was finished, and he dared not alter the lump of clay. Anything added or subtracted would diminish it.

The next step was the firing and casting of the sections of the investment. Roos would need helpers to carve and cast the ten-foot-long creation.

"Michael, can I have a word with you?" Roos said as he stared across the kitchen table at the man he now considered his brother. They often ate lunch together when Michael was not on the water.

"It seems that I am going to need help as the project continues. I've gone as far as I can alone." Roos waited. He knew Michael was busy. He had four trawlers, and they fished full-time. Michael hadn't been to the studio and wondered what the term help meant. The silence deadened between the men.

The sculpture was massive, more extensive than any piece Roos had attempted thus far. In addition to that, it was complicated. Roos estimated the model would have to be divided into no less than two dozen sections and cast separately. The assembly of the piece was another matter entirely. Roos knew he would have to braze the sections together and finish the joints into something resembling art. That was, after all, the trick; take a mental concept as elusive as beauty, which resided in the mind of the creator, and bring it forth as a reality in the eye of the beholder. Roos wondered if he was even capable of such a task, but he was in for a pound, and there was no turning back on the sculpture or in this new life.

"How much help, and what kind do you need?" That made all the difference in Michael's mind. Then he added, "and for how long?"

"I guess I will need five helpers who aren't afraid to work in a dangerous environment." Casting in bronze could quickly go wrong,

and the resulting damage was often severe. The 2000-degree molten bronze could kill a man if the crucible were dropped or spilled. If it were miss-poured, the blind wax ceramic mold would be useless, and Roos would have to begin from scratch. Roos was under no illusions he could ever sculpt this piece again. This piece was a one-shot deal. The difficulty was not in the technical aspects of the sculpture but in the decisions. Every decision seemed to strip a sliver of Roos' soul away. He thought of Michelangelo's response to the query of how he had created his masterpiece, *David*. "It was easy," Michelangelo's answer is said to have been. "All I did was chip away everything that didn't look like David. But whenever Roos added or removed a skive of clay, he felt he was altering a piece of himself. Bringing *Susan's Dream* forth made him wonder if he was slowly dissolving.

"Do they have to be artists?" Michael, always the pragmatist, believed this question lay at the bottom of the discussion.

"Not really, I suppose, as long as they can follow directions," said Roos, thinking of the times he had tutored the art students in the complicated process of constructing a lost wax casting. He would prefer them to be a bit smarter than them. The process was complex and tedious. It would have to be repeated for each section to make the process worse. "It is going to take a while."

"How long?" Michael said as the request grew, he wondered if it would become a monster.

"Each section must be divided and made into a silicone sheet, a perfect likeness. The silicon would then have to be peeled and filled with wax. The silicon in each section is removed, and the cooled wax is then cast in a ceramic investment, which will be the actual forming mold. If all goes well, we can pour the bronze into the investment, where it melts the wax and is allowed to cool. The ceramic investment is then chipped away, revealing the unfinished section, which has to be burnished and assembled with all the other parts." Roos shook his head. Even he had his doubts as to the viability of the statue.

"And you say this has to be done for each of twelve sections?" Michael's tone reflected his skepticism.

"Two dozen or more." Roos wanted to be honest, and he thought of the complexity of the tentacles.

"So, how much time are we talking about?"

"A year, maybe longer," Roos said and immediately realized how improbable the project was. Michael blew a hard sigh.

"A year, huh? Let me see what I can come up with."

Michael Marquis had done well for himself in the fishing fleet of Newport. Everyone in town admitted it. It's easy when you're loaded; the other boat owners would quip in hushed whispers. But Michael's crew would lay down in traffic for him if he asked, and the townies all thought it counted for a lot.

A captain and four regular boat hands operated each of Michael Marquis's trawlers, along with an additional crew of four shift rotation hands. They all stood in the pack-out warehouse the next day at dawn and waited to learn why Michael had called them all together. Usually, the men would go directly to their boat, and each captain stood brooding over their crew. The men fell silent when Michael entered the warehouse. The owner drew a deep breath and began.

"I know you are wondering why I've called this meeting." The men were curious; he had never done this before. "I need five men to do a special project." He scanned the group. "It is going to be a long project, maybe over a year. There are problems you need to be aware of. One, you must commit for the full duration, no backing out. Two, this project has nothing to do with fishing, in the sense you think of it. Three, there is an element of danger involved, and four, if you sign on to this, you must swear to secrecy until it is finished. The upside is anyone who signs on will receive full pay and a bonus upon completing the project. You will learn a craft that, my guess is, you have never even thought about. Lastly, I am not at liberty to discuss the details of this job." Michael finished the spiel and had his doubts. Why would anyone give up his livelihood for an offer as vague as this? "Think about it and get back to me in a day or so." He looked over the men, "Okay, let's get to work."

Susan never went to the studio, even when the curiosity seemed as if it would consume her. She was in her final year at Hartford Art and finished at the top of every class. Susan spent the weekends at home

and did her best to steer clear of Roos and her brother. She felt no good could come of it. The night Norvos had returned to the sea, Susan realized she had feelings for Roos but doubted they were strong enough to make her forget the creature with whom she had communed. The thought of Norvos made her desire for Roos shrink until it seemed no more than a tiny insignificant murmur in the back of her heart. Susan spent her weekend evenings down on the town pier as the moon rose. She routinely made her way home as the moon passed its zenith and always felt betrayed and forgotten, but the sea was a big place, and Susan clung to hope each night and sat staring out at the black depths, watching and waiting.

"Fishermen, huh?" Roos said.

"Yes, they are all good men, hard-working and smart. I could only get four to volunteer."

"I think I can make that work," Roos replied, wondering how soon they would be available.

"You won't have to; I have a fifth." Michael paused.

"Do you know him?" Roos asked.

"Yes, I guess you could say that; the fifth is me. I need a break from fishing anyway."

The statement wasn't exactly true. Michael loved fishing, but he loved his sister more and wanted to see this through to the end. He wanted Susan to know how much he loved her and only wanted the best for her. Maybe now, he could show her.

"You?" Roos would never have pegged Michael to want this. He nodded silently; what else could he do?

Roos looked down the roster: Ron Nesbit, Troy Panda, Zeke Talbot, Bob Willmott, and last, Michael Marquis. The men stood in the studio, and Roos began what amounted to the master class on bronze sculpting. Roos was not a good teacher; he was a great one and determined to make each of these men become artisans in their own right. He was a firm believer in rules and protocol, and the three inviolate rules of teaching were: 1. Start at the beginning, 2. Explain everything, and 3.

Omit nothing. This was how his Uncle Lincoln taught him the craft of casting, and he adhered to these rules with a zealot's fierceness.

Roos laid out each phase of the process and began to execute the study piece by piece. Day after day, week after week, the investment molds were formed and inventoried for the final stage of casting—the pour.

A year came and went as the men finished the molds. All the while, Susan waited on the pier, keeping vigil over the sea, walling her heart from the onslaught of sorrow washing over her in waves. On those days, the brine called to her strong, reassuring her she would be better off there than wallowing in such grief. Still, she waited.

Roosevelt Beignet completed Susan's *Dream* in his sixth year at Hartford Art. He was pushing forty and stood in the studio, contemplating his two-thousand-pound creation. It was due to be shipped to New York for the unveiling, where it would be displayed in the sculpture garden at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art.

When the curator, Jessica Marsh, saw *Susan's Dream*, she immediately felt helpless, as if her heart opened and the bottom dropped out. Never had a piece so inundated her. Jessica stood in the studio on Coddington Highway for the longest time as Roos retreated into the corner to not disturb the curator. Even after all this time and ache, he felt as if he was viewing *Susan's Dream* for the first time. Roos wondered if she would see what he saw, feel what he felt, and ultimately want what he wanted.

Jessica Marsh turned to face the creator, and Roos saw the answers to his questions. Tears streamed from Jessica's eyes. The ordinarily stern woman was transported to her first trip to Paris and her visit to the Rodin Museum when she was a teenager. It was there Jessica Marsh decided to devote her life and efforts to sculpture. The profound catharsis she experienced at Rodin paled in comparison to what she witnessed in this small, out-of-the-way studio on Newport Island. This creation, this thing, this mass of bronze and sweat and pain, was the reason she had made the journey to art.

Jessica had always been amused at the comedic quip by Jay Leno, "I don't understand art, but I know it when I see it." It was as if Jessica

Marsh saw 'art' as something more for the first time in her long and experienced life.

The curator turned, facing Roos, and staring into the two exhausted wells of his eyes, said, "Mr. Beignet, thank you. I'll begin the arrangements immediately."

The only other individuals to view the finished masterpiece were Michael, Susan, and Charles Wainwright III.

Roos insisted Charles drive to Newport to assess his project. After much disagreement, Charles acquiesced out of curiosity; he would go to see this project, whatever it was, and then he would be free of that pompous ass, Beignet, finally. Roos's performance as a professor was not substandard; it was good. It might have been a notch below his first year's results, but it was customary for the professors to slack off somewhat as their position matured. Charles had recommended the trustees revoke Roosevelt's contract, citing the non-performance clause. Charles fumed for two hours as he made his way to Newport.

Susan lay on her bed waiting for the sun to set when she heard a faint knock on her door.

"Yes?" She sat up on her bed.

"Susan, it's me. Can I come in?" Michael hadn't seen his sister for weeks, and it was as if she had avoided all personal contact. He opened the door.

Michael Marquis had a reputation around the Island. The men liked him; what was not to like? It was the women who perpetuated his reputation. No less than three dozen laid claims to liaisons with the handsome millionaire, which was absurd. Truth be told, Michael didn't want a girlfriend, at least until he was over fifty, but that didn't quell the rumor mill. The reality was he loved his sister, not in the way of the bad connotations of incest; he loved and was devoted to her in place of their parents, which left little time for frivolous dating. Perhaps, one day love would find him; maybe it wouldn't. Michael Marquis entered the room of the only person he loved.

"Hey, Suzy-cue." That was his childhood name for her. She smiled, and it felt odd; it had been so long since she had performed the

simple gesture. "Can we talk?" Susan nodded. Michael sat on the bed, quietly composing his thoughts.

"It's finished, you know. It's being shipped to MoMA next week. The curator is going to display it in the Sculpture Garden in the center zone." Again, Susan nodded. Michael looked at her puffy eyes and blotchy face and could see she had been crying. "Have you seen it?" He wasn't sure if his sister had even left her room for weeks. "The boys did it with us." He grinned as if it was some private joke running between them that mere fishermen could assist in creating something so marvelous. Susan shook her head no. She didn't know if she could bear the disappointment of seeing something that could never do justice to the experience.

"Come with me; let's go and see it tonight. You need to do this. I need to help you to do this. Come on, Suzy-cue, get your clothes on." Holding her brother's hand, Susan rose and donned clothes along with the last remnant of her resolve, and the two drove out to the studio on Coddington Highway.

Late at night, Charles checked into the Harbor Base Inn on Coddington Highway. He would call Roosevelt in the morning and lay this nasty business to rest. Charles thought about all the reasons he loathed the professor. There were so many; the University had hired Roosevelt Beignet without consulting him; after all, Charles was the assistant Art Director. The man had also sold an extensive array of sculptures, and who the hell did that nowadays? The biggest reason for his hatred was that Charles felt inferior to Roos, and no amount of posturing or political bravado could change this insecurity. In Charles's tweedy mind, it was an unforgivable offense that, deep in his core, he considered Roos his superior. As he drifted to sleep, his last thought was, 'Gotch-ya.'

Susan stood before the colossal piece as Michael slipped the silk covering off. She had the impression he was undressing it, and she felt as if viewing the finished sculpture was, for some reason, immoral, and she had no right to catch such a secretive glimpse of it. The muted light and the subtle glow of the turned-down LEDs gave the sculpture the

appearance of being in motion. Susan had no idea this was how she appeared. She incorrectly thought of herself as somewhat of an ugly duckling and average at best. The effigy of the woman was not average. Had Roos exaggerated the good and faded out the imperfections? She studied Norvos, and he looked the same as she remembered. She stared at the lovers locked in that impossible embrace, and the memories of the times in Norvos's arms flooded over her. It all became clear to her in a cathartic epiphany. There would be no more tears, no more feelings of loss and abandonment. She would either join her lover or die; all the other options in her mind faded into insignificance. Michael watched as she turned and left the studio.

The following day, Charles waited at the casting studio on the outskirts of town. Roos, usually so punctual, arrived a half-hour late, and Charles fumed at the inconvenience. *At least he could show some respect and be on time.* He stood at the gray steel door as Roos pulled the Corolla up and parked.

Roos approached the man who was no longer his superior. "I don't see why you couldn't have sent me a picture; you know, take it on your phone and text it to me."

Roos ignored Charles's complaints and unlocked the studio door.

"There are a couple of reasons I have asked you to come here today. First, and most importantly, a picture would not do this justice, and you should consider yourself lucky to have an advance viewing." The condescension in Roos's tone miffed Charles.

"Yeah, right." Charles scoffed. He studied Roos and continued. "What other reasons could there possibly be?" Charles's tone was threaded with a hint of humor as if this was, for some reason, funny. Roos walked to the center of the studio and gently, almost reverently, slid the silk dust cover off *Susan's Dream*.

Charles gasped at the piece. He looked up at the massive rendering, and the first thought that raged in his mind was, *he's not going to get away with this!* His limited education in art history and inability to make even rudimentary art left him speechless.

He stared agog at the intertwined figures, and it made his innards squirm. He had no words to describe the violent beauty of utter

surrender and the erotic proffering of the subject matter. Roos had ultimately chosen to depict Susan before she transmuted. Why he did was a mystery even to himself. Maybe he wanted to be able to see her whenever he wanted, and after the inevitable, final transmutation would have been too late. She would be, well and truly, gone from his life. He felt hollow and null as Charles turned and screamed.

"This is no more than pornography! I'll see to it you will never display this at the University. Jesus, Roosevelt, whatever were you thinking? This is nothing less than a crude depiction of bestiality." His face was flushed florid, and he seemed smaller to Roos for the first time.

"Yes, Charles, you're correct. *Susan's Dream* will never be displayed at the University."

Roos put his hand on Charles Wainwright's shoulder, and he winced as though a splash of molten bronze had scalded him from the casting caldron as Roos led him out of the studio.

Charles's shock at the luridness of the sculpture was surpassed only upon returning to Hartford and learning about Roosevelt Beignet's recent appointment as head of the Art Department at the University. The shock of Roosevelt's appointment was upstaged by the letter in Charles's mailbox releasing him from his contract and any ties to the University. Whatever would he do now, certainly not art.

The note was signed, *RB*.

The Times heralded *Susan's Dream* as a new era in contemporary art. At last, there was finally an artist capable of creating something new, capable of a singular vision merging technical expertise and a modern view of love! Roosevelt Beignet was such an artist, and not to be denied his place alongside the great masters in the history of sculpture.

The unveiling was hyped up to have all the spectacle Jessica Marsh, and her public relations team could muster. The lines for the opening ran four deep for four blocks and stretched on in sweltering heat, rain, sleet, and snow for over a year. *Susan's Dream* was the most attended art exhibition to hit the Big Apple in history.

Roos stayed in the sea-blue bedroom with accents of stormy gray for what seemed like weeks. He slept and dreamed of Norvos and his

unassailable beauty, and he dreamed of Susan as he prayed to a God he never believed in that she would come to him and stay forever. Servants brought him his food and made the bed. Roos refused all interviews.

The Nor'easter swept down on Newport with a vengeance, and the rain slashed sideways against Marquis House. The boats were tied down in the harbor, and the streets were empty as the houses huddled against the November tempest.

Roos lay in bed staring straight up at his emptiness when the door silently opened an inch; he felt it rather than heard it under the dialogue of the tormenting gale. He lay still, as if cast from bronze, listening to the wind shriek and moan, rattling the windows. Without a word, Susan slipped into the room, no more than a vapor, and slid under the covers. She wrapped herself around him, and for the first time in his life, Roos knew joy, absolute unremorseful, and unashamed joy. They made love over and over under the blanket of the howling Northeast wind, and in the dead hours when even the souls of the faithful have closed shop for the night, Susan whispered in Roos's ear, "It's time, my love. Help me."

Power had gone out as the seventy-mile-per-hour gusts toppled a transformer. The spicules of sleet felt as if they would tear Roos's very face off his bones as he half walked, half carried Susan down the four blocks to the harbor in the darkness. She was so frail, so fragile Roos was afraid she would blow away in the storm if he didn't hold her tightly. The temperature plummeted as the sleet froze into ice pellets, and Roos tried to shield the woman from the relentless onslaught. She wore the same silk robe when Roos first came to Marquis House. She was shoeless and naked save the robe, and Roos led her down to the end of town pier.

Michael woke with a start; icy fingers were pinching his heart, and he checked the bedrooms. Finding the rooms empty, Michael panicked; there could only be one reason the couple had gone out on a night like this. He threw on his robe and, dashing out the front door, headed to the town dock.

Clara McNeil knelt by her bed and, clutching the Gideon's Bible she had brought from Jamaica until her knuckles whitened and fingers numbed, prayed as she had never prayed. Clara prayed for all the

sinners of the world. She prayed for her sin of omission for not speaking out about the abomination in the lap pool of which she was fully aware; she prayed for the child of her heart, the girl Veera Marquis had entrusted to her on her deathbed, and she prayed to God her immortal soul would not spend eternity in the everlasting, fiery torment of hell.

Roos stood on the pier's edge as Susan leaned against him, leeward from the madness of the storm. The night was black as ink except for the harbor buoy light glinting off the roiling sea. Susan stared down into the primordial blackness of the ocean, poised on the edge of the dock. She reminded Roos of Salvador Dali's bronze bas-relief, *Christ Of Saint John Of The Cross*, and how Christ was poised, in ballet slippers, to make his great and final *grand jete* into the abyss of the unfathomable. Roos couldn't let her jump, not alone. He would never let his love go into the void by herself. The strings of Roos's life had been wearing thinner as of late, and the pull of living was no longer more than a frayed musing. He desperately wanted to accompany her.

Roos looked down into the churning brine; that was when he saw it or thought he saw it. He could barely distinguish the shapes of people in the shredded riptide just under the surface. A figure broke the surface of the swirl in the moonless night, flowing black hair, green blotches on the arms and shoulders, and floated there, staring up at Susan.

Susan turned and whispered below the shriek of the storm, "Thank you, Roos. I could never have done this without you. I'll look for you." Susan leaned into Roos, her nakedness pressed against him, and kissed him as the splattering sleet washed his tears away. With a final kiss, Susan fell backward into the arms of her dream, disappearing into the black thrashing sea while the tempest whipped her robe out over Newport Bay.

Roos stood on the pier in the pelting ice, searching for something he would never find in the rushing water or the howling wolf of the storm. There would be no more art for Roos; there would be no new lovers. He wanted to follow Susan but finally understood it would never have been possible; *he had not been invited*. Roos watched the embracing figures of Susan and her lover descend and fade, and he wondered if this had been a dream of his own fabrication. Only the

bottomless pain of his emptiness, threatening to consume Roos, became the casting proof of this reality.

Michael almost knocked Roos into the water as he slammed into him. "Is she gone? She's gone, oh God." Michael moaned, answering his question, crouching down, trying to find solace in his tears. Roos patted his friend's back.

"Come on, my brother; let's go home. She's happy now." Roos said as he helped Michael to his feet. Cold rain and hot tears spattered the street as the two made their way back to Marquis House. Roos now understood that when tears are all you have left, they're not so bad—once you get used to them.

Roos chugged the forty-foot Grady White diesel, the *Susan*, out past the buoy and into the open ocean. He was spending more and more time on the Island. Michael made it quite clear Marquis House was as much Roos's as it was his; after all, everybody needed a friend.

It was one of those crystal blue days, excellent for laying around the beach, working, or cruising to see if the stripers were running.

Roos drove the *Susan* out towards George's Bank. It would also be a perfect day to watch the water. Roos reckoned he was about fifteen miles out when he killed the engine, letting the boat drift. Lately, this was his favorite pastime. He felt free as the gulf stream languidly carried the boat along with a plan of its own. All the petty problems of his new position as head of the art department at Columbia University faded into the background, leaving him at peace.

Roos felt the quiet calling in the back of his head, and he never questioned the urge. Roos leaned over the gunwale and looked down into the rolling swell of the water. He stared into the depths and saw, or maybe, at first, felt the gaze directed up at him. Yes, she was there in her turquoise-blue splendor, and she saw him. She saw Roos completely and loved what she saw, and Roos didn't know if he could live with only that.

Charles Wainwright stood behind the counter facing the young woman in the Hartford Post Office. She had a perennial look of fresh optimism as the future splayed before her, and it was clear to Charles

she thought of herself as unstoppable. She reminded him of the students he used to resent so.

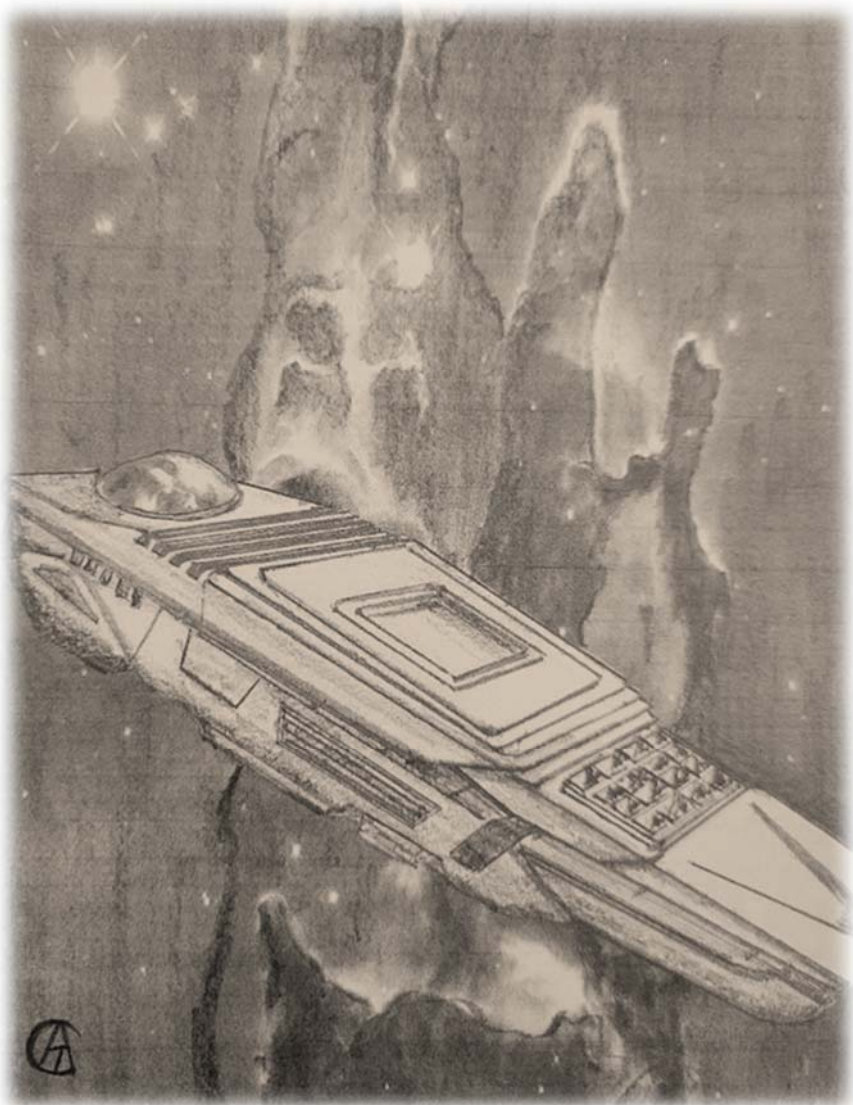
"I'd like a sheet of stamps, please." She smiled as Charles handed her the flag stamps.

"Not those. Do you have the new *Susan's Dream* stamps?" She smiled again; unable to contain herself, she continued, "It's so beautiful, don't you think?" Charles handed her the stamps without a word and completed the transaction.

He looked past the woman and said, "Next."

The man standing next in line glanced at the sheet, "I'll have those too, please."

2. Crabshell



Crab-Shell

Being bonded to a Crab-shell was a choice Margaux Delacroix did not know she was making when she read the old science fiction story at thirteen. The girl did know she would one day explore deep space.

The tale told of a group of space travelers who needed no ships or atomic drives. They wore suits encasing their bodies as they traveled freely in space, exploring the galaxy. The invention of the Crab-Shell made the scenario a reality. Margaux felt special when she signed the contract to be one of the twenty-four elite interstellar explorers. The grueling work paid off as she became top pick from the Space Force Academy, where she enjoyed the distinctions of number one in her class and best all-time cadet.

There were drawbacks. The Crabs, as they were referred to by the medical techs, would never interface with another human directly, except the medical team responsible for the scraping. They would never eat; the Crab-shell supplied all nutrients as it gathered atoms in the deep of space and processed them into nourishment. The user would never breathe open air again, never procreate, and never change their mind, thus abandoning the shell. Communication was in the form of a downloaded data-stream. They were called back to Enceladus Alpha Base every seven years, where they would be anesthetized into a heart-stopping coma for the two-day ordeal of scraping maintenance. This procedure ensured the Crab's survival and another tour of duty.

Margaux agreed to be a Crab on her twenty-first birthday and often weighed her choice's rashness. How could she have known? She now lay in the sterile surgical chamber, about to undergo her thirty-second scraping, and she desperately wanted to, needed to speak with someone face to face. Margaux Delacroix, the last living Crab, was 245 years old.

Margaux wanted to see the galaxy and see it she had. The development of Trans-Dimensional Warp Technology was the basis of the shell's assembly. It allowed instantaneous, faster than light-speed teleportation of living objects of a certain mass, which coincidentally was about the maximum size and weight of a small female. Margaux

had seen sights previously only imaged in the deep space ultraviolet and infra-red photos. In her long life, Margaux had witnessed space breams migrating off the shores of Orion, exo-planets a hundred times the size of Jupiter, and the Eagle nebula star estuaries in the great pillars of creation. All this beauty paled as she thought about her imprisonment in this unending dreadfulness. It was the black holes that fascinated her the most. They seemed to beckon her, offering a blessed peace.

The assistants attending the scraping were not the average medical assemblage. All the techs had to be of a certain ilk with the highest caliber surgical training. The assistants also had to control their gag reflex completely. Sure, the reek of the body inhabiting the Crab-shell was fetid and smelled like offal; they would never actually breathe the odor due to the chamber ventilators, but the sight of the interface between the shell and the body was disturbing in a fundamentally human way.

Margaux's entire derma, save her face, had atrophied as her body interfaced with a million connecting tendrils that bonded the Crab-shell. The scraping would have to be performed meticulously. Any deviations from the stringent protocol would result in a cascading sepsis infection and waste the two trillion credit Crab-Shell cost. The Crab could never return to space, and the remaining existence would be comprised of unimaginable agony as it lived out its life in an embryonic cocoon.

The USF, which embodied the seven-outpost consortium in Earth's solar system, saw these drawbacks as minor obstacles when weighed against the Crabs' data. What was a handful of individuals when compared to the future of Humankind?

The Crabs discovered a myriad of sentient alien species and a thousand more planets harboring life. Where Humanity would migrate, as they ranged through the galaxy like a fungus, was no longer in doubt. The reconnaissance dictated Humanity could go everywhere, which altered USF's plans for the distant future. USF was poised to develop a Large-Mass Interdimensional Transportation Drive, and data collected by the Crabs would point the way to these new worlds.

Red Bowen, the senior surgeon team leader, finished stimulating the Crab-shell tendrils, and the connections interfaced perfectly. He couldn't help but notice the face in the chamber portal had undoubtedly been beautiful before her confinement in the shell. Red felt old as he stared through the chamber's Visi-portal at the perfect face of Margaux Delacroix and sighed. This scraping was the third and probably the last he would perform on Margaux.

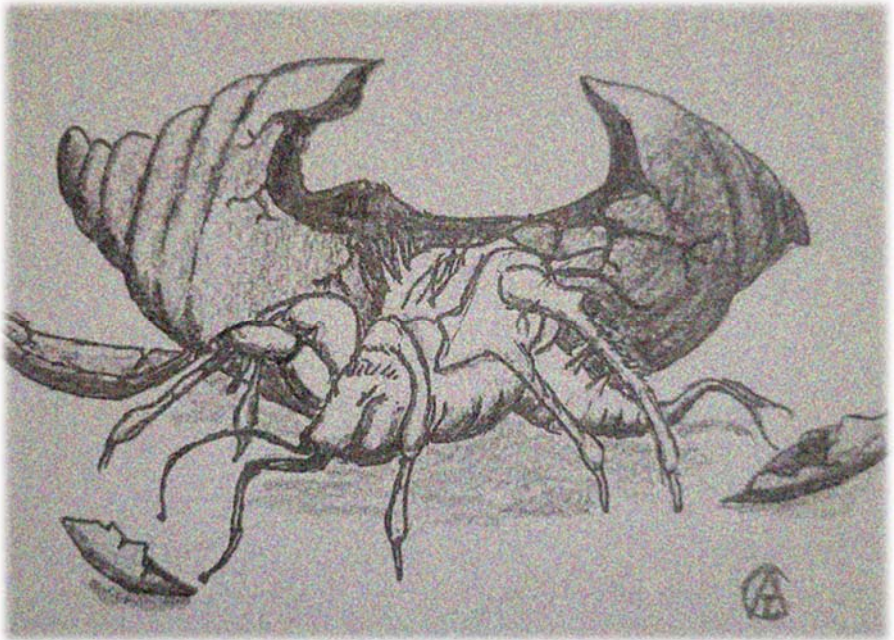
Red had never agreed with the Crab-shell program, even though it began long before he'd been born. What kind of life could this be with no sensory stimulation other than through the faceplate? This was the first time a Crab would respond verbally rather than using the data stream. Red had personally developed the medical protocol for Margaux and felt he knew her. He harbored no small degree of curiosity about what Margaux would say. The team eased her out of the induced deep coma.

The faceplate was poised to be sealed. Margaux would be allowed twelve seconds to speak. It wasn't much, but perhaps it would be enough. Margaux Delacroix opened her eyes and stared up at Red Bowen and, drawing her last free breath, uttered a single phrase. The twelve seconds had eroded all too quickly as the faceplate came down, sealing the shell for another seven years. The Crab-shell was transported to deep space to resume the mission.

Red Bowen lay in bed that night and thought about the phrase the woman, who had once been more human and less machine, uttered. It was only two words, but Red could not get them out of his head as they reverberated.

She said, imploring, "kill me."

19. Symbiote



Symbiote

Martin ruminated about the past as he stood over the portly corpse and prepared it for embalming. He siphoned the room-temperature blood from the body, drinking it as the transfer pump sucked in the embalming solution. Warm fresh blood was so much better, but he had to make some allowance. Martin tried heating it, but it reminded him of day-old coffee or seltzer, which had been left on the counter overnight. Martin stopped sucking on the tube just before he drained the body of the obese older gentleman. He didn't want to ingest the cocktail of formaldehyde, glutaraldehyde, methanol, ethanol, phenol, and water. That wouldn't taste good at all.

He recalled the day he had hijacked the body and assumed the name of Martin Williams 377 years ago, which, by his reckoning, was a wink of a cat's eye. The name was blasé and would enable him to innocuously hide among the throngs of Americans without procuring sideways glances from the neighbors. The fact that his race had no concept of names mattered not to him. There were so many identities spanning his years on Earth he couldn't remember them, didn't want to remember them. What was in a name, anyway? A rose by any other name, right? The nom d' voyages he'd adopted were of little importance as long as he could melt into society unnoticed and survive.

It had been a stroke of luck when the cyst containing the symbiote had landed in a tiny village on the small blue planet on the outer arm of the neighboring spiral galaxy (the symbiote knew nothing about the customs of Earth's inhabitants the first time it took a host over, but it was a quick learner). It wrapped its feelers around the young girl's spinal cord and then snaked the tendrils into the girl's brain, immediately taking the child's thoughts over. It had been a long ride, and the symbiote needed to feed as soon as possible. The symbiote's imprinting made it aware it could only survive if its host drank blood, which was more digestible than solid protein. The young child was easy to coerce to this end, and that's when the madness started. The bodies of the other village children quickly piled up. The mob of terrified villagers, led by the girl's uncle, arrived one evening, under a fingernail

moon, brandishing torches and stabbing objects. That first time was rough on the symbiote. It barely managed to extricate itself from the host's brain as the mob dragged the young girl from her hut and threw her body and severed head on a burning pyre, thus sending it to hell, where the good villagers were sure she belonged. The little symbiote, no larger than a cicada, jumped on the back of the very man leading the mob, immediately reaching its tendrils into the man's mind. From there, it was a matter of being careful, always covering its tracks.

The missing people were always a problem as the trail of desiccated corpses invariably led to the host's doorstep. There was nothing left to do other than flee from host to host, town to town, and ultimately, continent to continent.

Martin chuckled as he finished the ten pints of blood, emitting a satisfied belch. He had also learned the intricacies of being human and their particular brand of humor. Just because the symbiote had traveled, ensconced in a cyst, from the Andromeda Galaxy didn't mean his species didn't have a sense of humor. Having his meals brought to him by the very people on whom he fed was a dose of irony Martin always found amusing. He often thought about the term, his species, and wondered if there were others of his kind. Logic dictated he was not alone in the universe. The symbiote hadn't met any others, nor could Martin recall the distant time before his encysting, ejection into the cosmos, and the millions of years it had spent in transit. The symbiote didn't mind the aloneness; the creature was used to the solitude of its thoughts. It had become painfully apparent to the symbiote the species was destined to live a solitary existence, forever piggybacking on the bodies of others.

Inevitably, it made complete sense he should assume the role of caring for the dead. It provided an unending stream of fresh corpses, and people naturally avoided him socially as a bonus. Still, Martin thought about his aloneness and longed for some relationship, companionship, someone with whom he could be honest and not live in such utter isolation. He hated to admit it, but lately, he was prone to occasional bouts of melancholy.

The front door camera pinged, and Martin looked up at the surveillance monitor. A woman stood in the entryway, peering around.

Martin wiped his lips, ensuring there were no telltale red smears around his mouth, and, removing his apron, climbed the stairs from the embalming room into the funeral parlor.

The woman was Asian and cute. It had been many years since he had a relationship with another. It wasn't that he didn't like sex; quite to the contrary, he liked it very much, but the relationships always ended up the same, as a midnight snack.

"Good morning," he said, using his most pleasantly nurturing, professional voice. Morticians had to sound empathetic. It was a job requirement. "How can I be of assistance to you?" Maybe he would eat twice today; he was running a bit thin these days.

"I want to apply for the job you posted in the classifieds for a mortuary assistant. Andromeda Funeral Home, huh? Cute name." The woman looked around the entryway, assessing the parlor as if already hired.

Martin ignored the comment. "I'm afraid we are looking for a man. There is some heavy lifting involved." Martin thought about the coffins and the bodies. Some of them were downright huge. Obesity meant more blood, but those cadavers were a bitch to move around.

"That's not a problem. I'm stronger than I look."

Martin glanced up and down the petite woman's frame. He had doubts when he remembered the 390-pounder lying on the slab in the embalming room.

"I don't know, Miss; what did you say your name was?" He realized he had misspoken. Why did he need to know the woman's name if he wasn't going to hire her? Her cuteness made him salivate.

"Miyu Kimochi." Martin knew, after his two-hundred-year sojourn in Japan, before he fled the Shogun's Doshin, the name meant "*beautiful feeling*." She was certainly pretty, but business was business.

"I'm sorry, Miss Kimochi. We are looking for a man for this position." Martin's tone carried a ping of finality, and he waited for the woman's understanding to catch up with the explanation.

"But don't you feel you sometimes want companionship?" The question was simple, but the answer was far from it.

"Excuse me; I don't understand?" Martin's mind crinkled as he asked.

"Oh, I think you understand me perfectly." The woman stated convincingly. Martin was about to ask the woman to please leave when she continued. "Don't you ever need some company? That's all I'm saying." Miyu gave the slightest shrug. "Honestly, how long have you lived alone? A hundred years? A thousand?" Martin considered his 3000 years on Earth.

Martin was shocked. Did this Miyu Kimochi know about him, and if she did, how did she find out? He had been careful to cover his tracks when he came to America from Sweden in 1772.

"What are you implying, miss?" Martin said, feeling a bit hungry.

"All I'm saying is our kind has to stick together, and this gig you have going for yourself is sweet. There's probably plenty for both of us." Martin had to admit there was, on a good week. "This is pure genius. I can't believe I didn't think of it for myself. How does it go down, I mean, cold and dead? It's probably okay in the summer when it's hot like it is now."

Martin passed the stage of being baffled and now was in a state of utter disbelief. He looked at the woman; there was so much to consider. Maybe a partner wouldn't be so bad after all. He could take a vacation for the first time in years.

"Alright, I guess." Martin was no stranger to microwaving a pint or two on those cold winter evenings. The truth was, cadaver blood couldn't compare to the fresh hot blood of the living, but at least the police weren't sniffing around and knocking at his door.

"Okay, I'll give you a try. Let me show you around." Martin said, thinking, *the quickest way to get rid of her was to just get rid of her.*

Miyu Kimochi and her symbiote smiled as she followed Martin into the embalming room. Miyu was of the opinion she didn't need Martin, and he was of a similar mind and had no actual use for her. Both were ravenous and could do with a mid-afternoon snack.

When Martin reached the bottom step of the stairwell, he was still taller than Miyu Kimochi, who stood two treads above and behind him. Size didn't deter her from pouncing on Martin's back and trying to sink her teeth into his carotid artery. She had swung her purse and hit Martin squarely on his upper back below the nape of his neck, where she judged the symbiote to be. The tiny creature, which now had grown to

over three inches in length, was dislodged. The symbiote retracted its tendrils free from Martin for the first time in centuries. It wiggled past Martin's waistband, down his leg, and out of his trousers.

Without the symbiote's control, Martin's brain jumpstarted and began functioning independently again. This was the first time in 377 years Martin Williams had a cogent thought of his own, and it was not lucid. He tried to roll away from the small woman's onslaught shouting for help. The dislodged symbiote crawled along the corner of the room, seeking shelter and, if possible, a new host. It had been over three hundred years since it had to flee in fear for its life, and the creature didn't like the feeling one bit. This was worse than the time in Sweden when King Gustav's soldiers tried to burn the släkt down around it.

Miyu Kimochi rolled off the screaming Martin and crawled after the creature smashing her purse down on it. Fortunately for the symbiote, the corner offered it some protection as the woman bashed at it repeatedly. She shrieked, "take that, you little bastard! Why won't you die?" The symbiote's carapace's exoskeleton was thick, and the blows just glanced off as it skittered along the wall into the corner.

Martin sat on the floor, watching the insane scene in absolute terror. He didn't recognize the room or know how he had gotten there. Everything in the room looked strange to Martin; after all, he had been born in 1609. He felt as if he had awakened from a terrible unending nightmare. He didn't know this woman, and what the hell was that giant cockroach bug she was chasing along the wall? He had never seen an insect that huge, and he choked back his spume. The scene was too much for Martin as he kicked back against the wall in shock, watching the bizarre spectacle play out. What Martin Williams witnessed next made him genuinely sorry he didn't run when he had the chance.

Miyu threw her purse in a last-ditch effort to squash the symbiote. It was the third one she had encountered in her long life, and she had succeeded in killing the first two. The purse lay in the corner, and Miyu removed her shoe and crept forward, her arm poised to strike. She peeked under the handbag to reveal an empty corner. That's when the symbiote pounced on Miyu, latching onto her back. It sunk its coils deep into her spine, worming them up to her cerebellum. The symbiote

sensed it was not alone in the host and felt like an uninvited party crasher.

Miyu's first response was to smash the shoe at her back in an attempt to tear the second freeloader out by the roots, but as she said so eloquently, there was plenty for both of them.

This momentous occasion was the first time two symbiotes had communicated in the same host in a billion years. The language they shared was more ancient than the Earth itself and transcended the cumbersome constrictions of speech. The symbiotes understood each other entirely and two other things as well. First, there was no reason for them to destroy each other; after all, weren't their goals the same, to survive and propagate? Yes, there would be plenty for both of them. Second, Martin Williams had to be either killed or re-inhabited once again. He could never be allowed to leave the Andromeda Funeral Home after witnessing such a macabre sight.

The two symbiotes were in complete agreement as they turned and faced Martin Williams, who huddled against the wall, shivering. Miyu, directed by the symbiotes, pounced on Martin, and he had time to emit one shriek as the symbiote inhabiting Martin dislodged itself and latched on to the poor screaming man again.

As soon as the tendrils reached the host's brain, Martin sat up and drew a deep breath. All was as it should be. He looked over at his new partner and said, "Well, that was exciting." They both began to giggle like children who shared a dirty secret. It was a day for the record books. How often did her species communicate? The telephone broke through their reverie.

Hello, you have reached the Andromeda Funeral Home, a place where you and your loved ones can find peace forever. No one is here to take your call now, but if you leave your name and telephone number, we will get back to you within the hour. Thank you and have a blessed day. Beep.

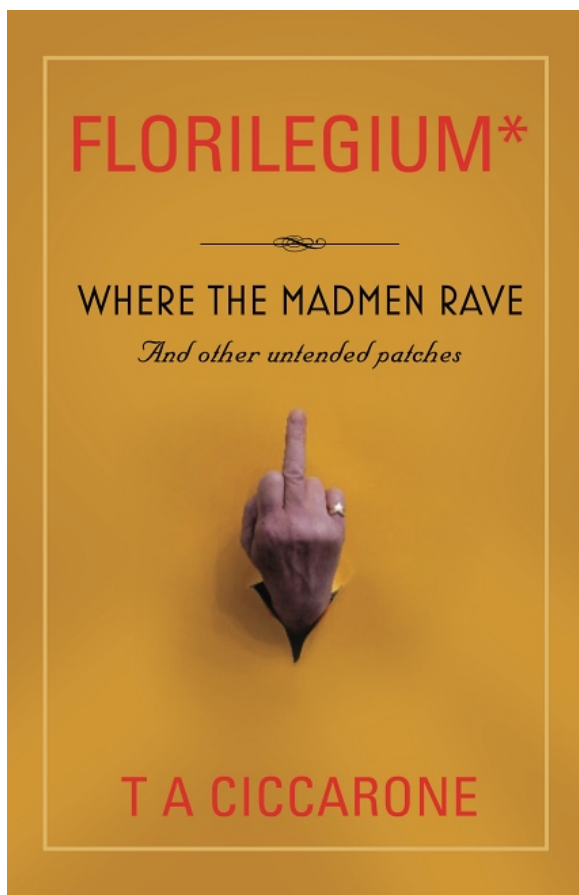
"Hey, is anyone there? This is Danbury ambulance. I have two shooting victims; both are D.O.A. We will be there in fifteen minutes."

Yes, there would be enough for both of them.



T. A. Ciccarone is an American author, avid poetry and non-fiction and science fiction writer, and a multifaceted individual who brings many professional experiences to his creative endeavors of over 60 years. He has worked as an entrepreneur and owned several businesses as a restaurateur, chef, auctioneer, fencing master, fishmonger, poet, memoir writer, painter, antique dealer, moonshiner, media announcer, pilot, and stand-up comic, to name a few.

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