

CONSERVATORY OF DEATH



And the Plants are starting to Cry

A Dripping Lament of Sunlight

Dissolving in the Watery Sky

Melting into the Blue Children of the Mushroom

~“Blue Children of the Mushroom”

From the 1968 album

A Million Fractured Dreams

By The Crystal Asparagus

Swatt Winston was colorblind. In 1973, when he was three years old, he discovered his father’s stash while exploring under his parent’s bed and ate six tabs of Mr. Natural blotter acid. When he recovered from the coma three days later, he couldn’t distinguish colors.

Now, thirty years later, Swatt Winston was standing by his kitchen stove with a butter knife in each hand and a clear plastic funnel in his mouth.

He held one knife over the burner; on the other he balanced a nugget of black hashish. When the knife in his right hand was hot enough, he pressed the knives together at the mouth of the funnel and inhaled the thick twist of smoke that rose from between the blades.

He closed his eyes, holding the smoke, listening to the rain spatter the window behind him.

When the sound of the rain had dissolved into a whispering hush, he exhaled, coughed, and blinked at the clock a while. Gwen was late again. She was supposed to be there by noon. It was already two o’fucking clock in the afternoon.

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He knew where she was - getting strangled on a kitchen table or suffocating under a plastic bag, or hanging naked from a closet door by an extension cord; getting stuffed into the trunk of a car.

Swatt pinched another crumb of hash from a crumpled tinfoil fist, placed it on a butter knife, and then lowered the other knife into the fire.

Again, he touched the knives together.

Inhaled the twist. Wait. Wait. Rain. Wait. Exhaled.

He clenched up the foil fist and dropped it in a Winnie-the-Pooh cookie jar on top of the refrigerator. He didn't want to get baked, just buzzed. He and Gwen had a lot of shit to accomplish.

If she would ever show up.

But no, she was too busy getting raped, stabbed or shot. She was getting rolled up in a carpet, drowning in a bathtub, hanging upside-down and naked from a creaking wooden beam. Too busy to help out the guy who had first discovered her. Too busy to help out the guy who had first brought her fame.

He went into the living room, feeling like his brain was floating in warm soup two feet above his skull. High as a cirrus cloud. Again. Oh well...

Depressing towers of unsold videotapes sat stacked against the wall: *Conservatory of Death Volume 3*. Ninety minutes of grainy autopsy footage, Nazi concentration camps, Middle East executions; a Japanese businessman jumping from a skyscraper, *splat*.

Death on top of death followed by death. And then layered with a little more death.

But it was old footage. Stuff he'd cribbed from other (mostly Japanese) death tapes. More Japanese car crashes

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and suicides. Japanese brains being scooped up like ketchup-slathered scrambled eggs by rubber-gloved hands. A Japanese woman hanging by an elongated neck, dead eyes closed to puffed-out slits, a white slug of a tongue oozing between fat gray lips.

Yawn.

Give me something I can *use*. Please. The fact was (and it was the same problem he faced now), Volume Three was uninspired, routine. Boring. And it wasn't selling for shit.

Not nearly as well as Volume Two.

That nasty little fucker was a gold mine, still.

All because of the Beilenson footage.

The Beilenson footage was magic. The Holy Grail captured in a black plastic shell. The Hope Diamond crushed to dust and sprinkled across a magnetic length of tape. The kind of fortune that falls into a man's lap once in a lifetime, if at all.

It happened three towns over, in Breakstone.

On Christmas morning, five years ago, while his wife and seven-year-old twin sons sat on the floor around a fake silver Christmas tree, passing wrapped packages to each other, Arthur Stephen Beilenson came up from his basement workshop and shot them with both barrels of a shotgun. Three times. No shit, he cracked and reloaded the gun twice after the first shot.

They say he was stressed-out after he lost his job. That his wife had talked about a trial separation. That one of the twins had a learning disability.

A video camera that his wife had set on a tripod filmed everything. Filmed it all without distracting *cinema verite'* wobble. Without nervous hands zooming the camera into an out-of-focus ceiling, spinning the room into worthless blurs.

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Without some goody-goody censor shutting off the camera to call an ambulance.

Unblinking. Unmoving. Everything. No shit. Just thinking about it gave him chills.

The only thing it didn't capture (at least visually) was Arthur Beilenson's shotgun suicide, which occurred outside the frame.

Neighbors heard the shots and called the police. They immediately confiscated the tape.

No footage ever showed up on the nightly news. Not even the pleasant Yuletide shit at the beginning. And since Mr. Beilenson executed himself, no jury had to sit through the video, all squeamish and upset and looking down at their sweaty hands.

It was locked up in the police evidence room and it sat there for three years. Most figured it had been destroyed, which was what Mrs. Beilenson's parents had requested.

But three years later, after the case had faded from public consciousness, when the mention of the name Beilenson caused people to pause, think a minute, then snap their fingers and say, *Yeah, wasn't he that guy who...*

Three years later, Officer Bobby J. Brenner, an old high school drinking buddy of Swatt's and rookie Breakstone cop, sneaked the tape out of the evidence room one quiet night and sold Swatt a copy for five-hundred clams.

Best money he ever spent.

The first time Swatt watched the tape he felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. He wanted to cry, almost. He took the shock personally, if that makes any sense.

A key rattled in the lock and the kitchen door opened and slammed shut, breaking Swatt out of his stoned reverie.

Gwen, finally.

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She dropped her keys on the kitchen table, wriggling out of her wet coat. She was soaked, like she'd been standing in the rain for hours. "Sorry I'm late," she said, out of breath. "I got held up at Brian's."

Brian was Brian Moonlight. Alleged filmmaker. Swatt stood up, crossed to the kitchen.

"Jesus, it smells like an Amsterdam hash parlor in here." She started drying her spiky black hair with a dish-towel.

"You've never been to Amsterdam," Swatt reminded her.

"Well, I'm sure it smells just like this kitchen." The rain had melted her face - thick trails of mascara ran down her cheeks, her black lipstick was smeared, her usual ghostly pallor washed away to expose the healthy freckled complexion beneath.

"Want some?" he asked, meaning the hash.

"Maybe after."

They looked at each other and Swatt felt the urge to kiss her. They had broken up almost four months ago but those old, familiar lovey-dovey rituals of young coupledness still pressed on him like an old smack habit. He let her keep the key to his apartment because they were still "friends" and she still hosted and narrated the tapes.

But everything else was over and dead. No more kisses, hugs or holding hands. She didn't even like them to sit too close together on the couch between takes.

And, of course, she fucked Brian Moonlight now. Brian Moonlight, Jesus Christ.

"Hey, can I put my clothes in the dryer while we do this?" she asked, pulling off her black *CUNT* T-shirt. She wrung it out over the sink, twisting pink water over the dirty

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mugs and plates.

“How the hell did you get so soaked?”

“Brian wanted to make use of the storm. Atmosphere and shit. Free production values, he says. Eddie chased me through the woods, then stabbed me and I fell in a puddle.”

She loosened the laces of her Doc Marten boots, pulled them off with little grunts of effort.

Eddie meant Eddie Thunderbolt. One of Brian’s stock company of “actors.” Like Gwen.

She undid her black leather skirt, let it fall to the floor, peeled off her drenched black stockings, and squeezed them over the sink. More pink water. Fake blood and rain.

She removed her black lace bra, then gathered up all her wet clothes and looked at him. “So. Dryer?”

Swatt stared at her body a second, too stoned and stunned to think. She had gained some weight since the last time he’d seen her naked, but she still looked spectacular.

“Uh, yeah, sure, help yourself,” he said finally.

She walked past him. “Thanks XBF. I’m gonna redo my face too. Be back in a few.”

Sometimes she called him “XBF” as in Ex-Boyfriend.

“Take your time.”

Gwen Peloquin was 24 years old and an art student at the State College. When Swatt first met her, she was obsessed with what she called “Acid Portraits” of TV personalities. She painted what she thought Dick Van Dyke or Ed Asner or Shirley Booth would look like if you met them while tripping your brains out on LSD. A couple of them were kind of funny, but most, Swatt thought, were just stupid. A green and bubbling portrait of Mr. Howell, features stretched out like hot putty. Marcia Brady’s face collapsing in on itself, spurting some kind of foamy liquid. Most of the

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time, you couldn't even tell who they were supposed to be.

Anyway, around two years ago, after a bowl of hash and a bottle of burgundy, Swatt talked her into hosting the first *Conservatory of Death* video.

Topless. In a bondage outfit.

"Guys'll love it," he told her. "We'll sell a million copies. Most of these things are hosted by some pimply horror-movie geek or a burnout in a blood-stained lab coat. You never see them hosted by a hot chick."

Hesitant at first, the idea soon began to appeal to her, germinating all kinds of exciting ideas, and she came up with the character of Mistress Euphoria Mori. Gwen conceived of her as, "Elvira with real S&M credibility and a heroin addiction. What do you think? We can put track marks on her arms and she can crack a whip!"

From the beginning she referred to Mistress Euphoria in the third person.

And yeah, the whole thing was kind of corny, or cheesy, or whatever, but it was obvious to Swatt that it would appeal to guys and sell a lot more tapes. Let's face it, not many girls bought videotapes filled with smooched brains, shattered faces and yawning chest cavities.

Drowsy now, wishing he hadn't smoked so much hash, Swatt peeled his body off the couch and knocked on the bathroom door. Gwen had been inside for over forty minutes. "You almost ready?"

"I'm coming out, maggot! Lower your eyes!"

He backed away from the door. Mistress Euphoria Mori stepped out of the bathroom.

Her hair was dry now, combed down into straight bangs. Thick Cleopatra eye makeup and blood-red lipstick decorated her angry, permanently-displeased expression. A

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spiked leather collar circled her porcelain throat, a vinyl waist cinch with six silver buckles on the front stretched from her hips to just below her exposed breasts. She wore studded leather panties over fishnet stockings. In her black latex-gloved hand she held a short whip.

The entire outfit had cost Swatt over two hundred dollars - more than he'd wanted to spend, by far - but it was what she'd picked out, so excited, and he'd needed to keep her excited and happy so she'd go through with the whole thing.

The first time she put on the costume and faced the camera, renewed doubts and insecurities started to snap to the surface. It had taken Swatt a bit of gentle coaxing and reassurance to get the first take.

Those doubts were long gone now though. And how.

"Okay, bitch," hissed Mistress Euphoria. "Blood me."

"Jeez, take it easy Gwen." Swatt squeezed a tube of Halloween Vampire Blood at the base of her throat. Deep crimson rivulets trailed down over her breasts.

"Okay, now hold out your arm." Swatt never thought the whole Elvira-as-junkie thing was such a great idea, but Gwen insisted it was an important facet of the character. He dabbed bruises into the crook of her elbow with purple eye shadow, then dotted each bruise with the point of a Sharpie.

"Hey, you think I could get a glass of water?" Gwen Peloquin was back for the moment.

"Yeah, sure..." Swatt went into the kitchen, filled a glass from the tap after letting it run cold.

"Thanks." Gwen took the glass, drank half, took a couple of deep breaths, and then drained the glass.

"You okay?"

She nodded. "Yeah, let's do it."

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They went into the bedroom.

Gwen had turned the south wall of the room into a painted backdrop that resembled an old, stone-foundation dungeon (sort of). Swatt had nailed up plastic novelty chains and manacles and then splattered red paint over everything, Pollock-style. His landlady would probably blow her stack if she ever saw it.

The Mistress had returned and she took her place in front of the wall. Swatt used a 500 watt Omni-light with a red dichroic filter as the key-light, and had placed two 100 watt bulbs in the ceiling fixture for fill-light. He turned on the Omni-light and crouched behind the camera.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Just shoot, maggot!" she growled.

"Okay, then... Action!"

Swatt wrote the narration for the tapes (Gwen didn't like to watch the footage and he could think of sicker, more offensive commentary) but she insisted on writing the copy for her on-camera segments.

Mistress Euphoria Mori cracked the whip and hissed, "Greetings maggots! Your feared and beloved Mistress is back with more graveyard gore than your tender little tummies can take! I'm gonna spill guts and gunk all over the...the ground...all over..."

She stopped and Mistress Euphoria vanished from her face and Gwen leaned forward and the glass of water came shooting out of her mouth, splashing onto the carpet.

"Jesus, Gwen..."

She heaved twice more, the second bringing up nothing but a long strangled gag.

Then she straightened up, wiped her mouth with the back of her latex glove.

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“Are you okay?” Swatt asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine...” She paused a few beats, then added, “I’m just pregnant, that’s all...”

Swatt turned off the Omni-light.

“Could I get a hit of that hash now?” she asked.