

# **The Abraxas Marvel Circus**

Stephen Leigh

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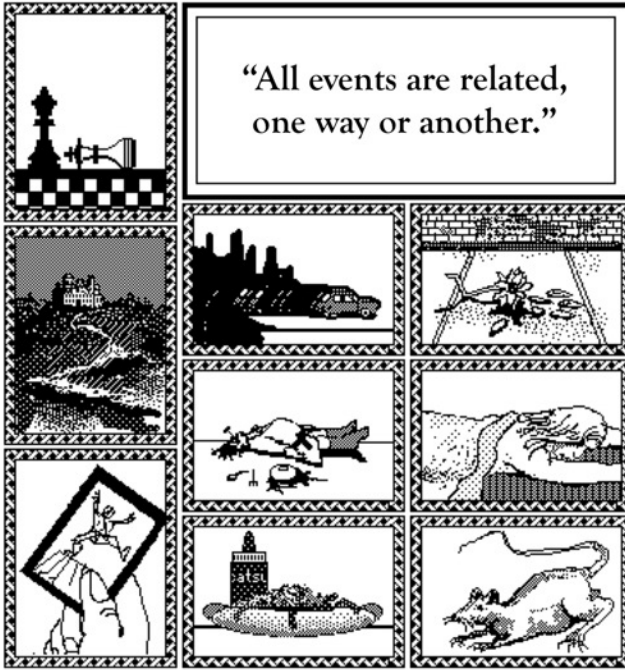
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and not to forget...

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# THE ABRAXAS MARVEL CIRCUS

Part One



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## 1: Dirk Gets Lucky

Wednesday had to be the most depressing night of the week in any nightclub.

None of the social energy was there. It was two nights too early for the weekend party crowd, and the regulars had other reasons for being in the place. The majority of those in the club didn't care if there was live music. Most of them didn't bother to listen to what the band was playing unless it was utterly obnoxious.

Even as he postured and strutted across the stage in front of the sparse crowd, even as misty wisps of dry ice vapor curled around his ankles and slid like a moldy shower curtain to the dance floor, even as 150 decibels of "Animal Love" slammed the back wall after nearly drawing blood from the idiots standing directly in front of the JBL drivers, Dirk Masterson felt like hell.

Part of it was because his real name was James McCarthy—Jimmy, not Dirk. The name change had come because Stan Fedderman, the band's manager, thought 'Jimmy McCarthy' inappropriate. Actually, Stan had been a bit more vehement than that, shaking his balding head as he leaned back in his padded leather recliner.

"Your name's too ordinary, babe. Too damn Catholic for a band called 'Savage.' Chris'sakes, who's going to be in awe of someone named Jimmy? You can't even be a good president with a name like that. C'mon."

For another, Dirk had forgotten just what town Savage was in and it didn't much seem to matter. He was tired of small college clubs throughout the Midwest. At thirty-three, he was beginning to look noticeably older than the audience. He was beginning to reconsider the whole idea of being a rock star.

This was "making it?" This was where six years and Stan's promised record contract got you? This was why he'd left Baywood College in the second year of his teaching contract? This was what he was doing with his Masters degree in History and the minor in Mathematics, with the years of study and a doctorate thesis-in-progress? It was almost enough to make him long again for the plagiarized term papers, the bored students vegetating in *Introduction To Western Civilization*, and the brown-nosed types who made admiring comments in class and then ignored him in the quad.

Also, he and the lead guitar player were fighting again. Lars wanted to sing the lead vocals on the title cut for their unrecorded second album: *Animal Love (You're A Bitch)*. He wanted it to be a goddam contest. "Look, Dirk, all I'm saying is that we should use the best voice for the song. You sing it, then I'll sing it—let the guys decide which is better." The afternoon's practice session had left Dirk's stomach sour even though he'd 'won' the competition.

(Lars's given name was Fred. Stan had turned away from Jimmy and lit his cigar. A fragrant smoke wreath curled about his head. "And 'Fred'! God, what a dork monicker. All a Fred can be is a fat redneck or some geek nerd. Did your parents hate you or what?")

Dirk was only going through the motions tonight because of all of it. Depression swaddled him like baggy boxer shorts: he kept pulling at the nagging thoughts. He slid up the G string of his Rickenbacker bass to an E as the band segued into "Animal Love's" last bridge, arching his back in feigned musical orgasm as the note throbbed. He grinned at Lars as if they shared some communion of the backbeat. Lars grinned back. Neither one meant it.

Facing each other, they swayed together as Lars laid down a screaming, gliding lead.

Dirk wished he could just ram the Rick's tuning heads into Lars' satin-covered crotch.

The final component of his depression was the fact that Dirk had told Alf, the drummer, about a blond groupie who had supposedly propositioned Dirk the night before. "She's fuckin' crazy, man. I mean, no inhibitions whatsoever. I gave her my extra key and told her to come by after the gig. I tell you, she's gonna make Fish look like nothing."

In fact, the blond groupie had been a fantasy Dirk had indulged in the night before. He'd had to do something. In the next room, he could hear the screams and grunts and moans as Alf and the groupie he called Fish ("Because her mouth goes like this, man") tried to push each other through the mattress of the waterbed. The only blond—or anything else—Dirk had had the entire six-month tour of America's backroads had been his own palm. As Alf and Fish thrashed the waterbed into tidal wave frenzy, Dirk found his own release with the mental blond whose tits defied gravity: a type of voyeuristic mutual orgasm. The only trouble was that afterward it was no fun cuddling with his hand.

Dirk's celibacy wasn't due to The Woman Back Home or even from lack of offers. Dirk wasn't much of a talker offstage, whether the stage was a nightclub or a lecturer's podium. Actually, he was rather painfully shy and tended toward one-syllable replies when someone tried to strike up a conversation. Dirk generally needed to be hit over the head with a baseball bat before he realized that he was being flirted with.

And even when, miraculously, things got to that point where he might ask someone to go back to the hotel room with him, he'd start to wonder about how she'd look when the lights came on or whether she'd leave him with some unpleasant and probably permanent reminder of the night, or if he'd be accosted a few months

later by a paternity suit.

Dirk's flirtations were haunted by the specters of AIDS, syphilis, herpes, and pregnancy. He half-believed every horror story he'd read in the newspapers. If *Time* ran an article—NEW VENEREAL DISEASE SIGNALS END TO PERMISSIVE SOCIETY—he was certain that all the women he met were already infected. He was surprised that the other guys in the group hadn't died yet.

The one time he'd actually gotten someone in bed with him—an art student named Patti who'd come to see them in "The Tiki Club" in Terre Haute, Indiana—he'd been so worried that she Had Something that he'd been struck as limp as well-boiled vermicelli. After several vain attempts to impale herself, Patti had given up and gone back to the dorm. Loudly. Everyone in the hotel had no doubt heard her scathing review of Dirk's performance. He'd distinctly heard Lars's giggle down the hall. For the rest of the band's stay in the Tiki Club, Dirk was convinced the coeds in the audience were pointing at him and laughing. He was also convinced that he'd caught Something for Nothing.

*"Mama always said you can't get something for nothing.*

*But baby, I got something for nothing from you."*

Dirk thought he'd put that verse in the next song he wrote.

'Animal Love' snarled to an end with a barrage of electronic snare and toms, and a cascade of brass chords from Kyle on the Yamaha DX7 synthesizer. As Alf clicked off the next song ('Hot Dog Buns') and a few dancers filed out on the floor, Dirk saw her.

She wasn't the blond of his fantasy. Dark curls swayed around her shoulders. Her face was round instead of angular, her body full rather than fashionably anemic. She wasn't what Dirk would have thought of as beautiful at all, but something about her made him stare as Kyle did a sliding glissando into the intro and Alf battered his ride cymbal into submission.

She had *Presence*.

Her dancing partner had the build of a steroid-puffed lineman. The handsome bunch of muscles was a lumbering dancing bear alongside her.

She moved like a sleek, luxurious cat, as if dancing were some wild celebration of life. She flung herself into the music with a reckless abandon and an unconscious grace, seeming to dance in a trance. As she swayed, she tossed her head back and laughed, her eyes closed. The stale air of the club seemed to visibly spark around her, as if her body was a dynamo throwing off charged ions. Her dance had an intensity

and an expressiveness that made everyone else's movements seemed contrived. She flowed with the music, became a part of the pulsing beat so that each movement seemed somehow right, as if her interpretation was simply an extension of the song. Her dance was dark and primitive, like some ritual glimpsed through shade; deeply physical, sensual, frankly sexual. Sweat beaded on her neck and darkened the hair at her forehead; her mouth was open, the head thrown back as she whirled with arms wide.

Dirk was not the only one who noticed. Half the dancers had already stopped to watch, alerted by some sixth sense. She was magic, a perfect blend of primal motion. Her dance was a spell; it snared them all. Her skin was glossy with its heat.

Her spinning, ecstatic joy brought her close to the stage as Dirk started to sing the second verse. He stared down at her through the glare of the fresnels. Heavy breasts joggled under her red t-shirt, her jeans were enticingly tight. Dirk's gaze followed the creases of blue cloth to where they triangulated the pubic mound, then slid along the line of the central seam to that place he suddenly and desperately wanted to be.

She must have felt the pressure of his gaze, for she glanced up at him. The unexpected eye contact nearly staggered Dirk. Her eyes were a deep, surprising green that contrasted sharply with the Mediterranean complexion and black hair. Dirk knew that she'd seen his fascination with the hidden, forested landscape between her legs.

Dirk thought she'd respond with a frown, maybe even say something to Mr. Pectorals. *That would be about my luck*, he thought. *Great, a wonderful confrontation after the set for everyone to watch. Lars'll love it.*

But instead, she gave him laughing grin full of white teeth. Her stare challenged him, and he was caught. Nothing existed for a moment but those eyes, framed in sweat-plastered ringlets. Dirk forgot the fantasy blond. He also forgot the words to the second verse and stumbled through two lines before he found them again. Kyle shook his head, Alf guffawed good-naturedly, Lars glared.

She'd noticed too, for she laughed and moved away from the stage as Mr. Pecs frowned up at Dirk with narrowed eyes. Dirk lost her in the stage lights as she stopped dancing and made her way back to the tables. The dance floor remained empty through the rest of the song, as though the others were embarrassed to dance in the afterglow of her energy. Though Dirk watched, he didn't see her again the rest of the set.

"Thought she was blond, man," Alf said as the stage lights dimmed and he slid his way from behind the barricade of drums. "Looks like you'll have to fight off the Hulk first. Not that I blame him. Christ, if she moves like that in bed..." Alf shook his head and flexed his own drumming-swelled biceps. "Want me to come with you for

protection?”

Alf had kept his own name. (“Drummers can have stupid names,” Stan had said. “It’s expected.”)

“I don’t need help,” Dirk told Alf sourly.

Alf snorted. “It must be wonderful to be so self-sufficient,” he answered.

Dirk gave Alf an automatic finger, leaned the Rickenbacker against his amp, and walked around to the stage door. He nodded to the bouncer stationed there and went out into the club as the house sound system began blaring an old Beatles album.

The place looked and sounded like any of the other dozen or more college nightclubs they’d been in lately. This one was multi-leveled, making it easier for the drunk or stoned students to stumble and cascade plastic cups of beer over the tables—that happened at least once a night in every club Savage had played. Sometimes the fights that ensued received more attention than the band. The lighting was dim and predominantly red. The patrons—almost all students—stood around in clusters shouting into each other’s ears over the general din.

Dirk glanced out to where the soundman had set up the board: Jay was already leaning toward some techie-type with too many pens in his shirt pocket, pointing to the racks of amplifiers and talking watts and linear frequency responses. Dirk elbowed his way past the the students and the attempts at screaming conversation (“Hey man, you gonna do any U2 next set?”) to the bar.

He looked around for a glimpse of the red t-shirt, but didn’t see her.

“Coke,” he said to one of the bartenders, a kid who looked too young to be serving drinks.

“Ooh, the hard stuff for the band,” the kid retorted. He sniffed significantly and winked. “Need a straw?”

“No. And make it diet,” Dirk said wearily. He heard that one at least three or four times a night. Bartender humor. It hadn’t been funny the first time.

“Same for me,” a voice said behind him—a scratchy, odd alto. Dirk turned. She looked better close up, and the neon beer advertisements behind the bar gave him a good view. She let him stare at her with that tolerant wide smile, her head tilted a little to the right.

“Angela,” she said.

Dirk blinked. “Hmmm?”



She brushed her hair back from her eyes; crystal droplets showered the floor. “I saw you watching me. You should at least ask my name now that you’re on such intimate terms with my body.”

Dirk opened his mouth to speak. Nothing came out. He shut it again. The air between them seemed charged; he could almost hear it buzzing in his ears.

“It would be polite to tell me your name now,” she said with that strange, dusky hoarseness. One eyebrow arched quizzically.

“Ji—uh, Dirk.”

“Your band’s got potential, Dirk,” she commented, leaning a little closer to him as the Beatles faded into Genesis. Dirk caught a wisp of fragrant perfume and perspiration, a hint of sexual musk. “The songs are decent if a little too simple. You made me want to get up and dance. Did you know that it shows that the band’s not getting along offstage? If all of you were tighter personally, you’d be tighter musically, too. The keyboard man and the drummer are excellent; the guitar’s adequate. Why are you using a Rickenbacker?—a Fender’s got a fuller bottom end.”

Dirk didn’t know where to start with that. He picked up the two cokes the bartender had sat in front of him and handed one to her. He decided to start with something he knew something about. “The Rick’s better overall—for sound and fingering.”

She seemed to be waiting for him to say something else, then she shrugged. “A matter of taste, I guess.” She glanced at him, her lower lip stuck out in a pout. Then that brilliant grin split her face once more. “You’re not very good at this, are you?” she asked.

Startled again, Dirk could only manage a weak “Huh? The band’s-”

“I’m not talking music,” she interrupted. “I’m talking flirting.”

“Oh,” Dirk said. Somewhere, a faint light was dawning. He could hear the whimpering of his libido. “Look, uh...” He stopped.

“Angela,” she prompted. “Please try to remember.” She softened the blow with another smile.

“Yeah. Angela. I thought you were with-”

“Edgar? He’s been trying to get into my pants for three months now. He has just about enough intelligence to remember his phone number. He’s good camouflage, that’s all—even if he can’t dance. Don’t worry about him, Dirk. He’s actually very nice, like a pet Doberman.”

The image made Dirk roll his eyes. “Please keep him on his leash, then.”

Angela’s laugh rang like a crystal wind chime. “There, I knew you could talk like a normal person. So, why were you watching me on the dance floor?”

Dirk blinked, shrugged. “*Everyone* was watching. There was something.. I mean, it wasn’t your face or body.. Just-” Under her smiling stare, Dirk flushed and ground to an embarrassed halt. *Asshole*, he berated himself. *It’s magic fingers time again tonight.*

“You mean that I’m not particularly good looking and ordinarily you wouldn’t have given me a second glance?”

“No..” Dirk began. He felt bewildered.

He’d felt the same frustration the one time he’d tried to play a rated chess player. Dirk considered himself a decent amateur at the game, and he’d been the terror of the teacher’s lounge chess set. Still, that time he’d challenged someone truly good he’d been thoroughly outclassed. Whenever Dirk thought he’d made a good move, he’d found that it had been anticipated. After the opening gambit, not even that far into the middle game, he was utterly hemmed in, all his strategy blown to hell. There hadn’t been a good square open and he’d pushed over his king. Talking with Angela was the same—there was a rook sitting on every conversational file.

*Check.* “You don’t understand,” he said.

“I think I do.”

The lights on the stage brightened, then dimmed: Jay’s signal that the break was over. “Listen, I have to get back.”

“If I dance, will you watch me again?” As Angela spoke, a student pushing through the crowd to the bar jostled against Dirk. Off balance, he stumbled up against Angela. Before Dirk could move away, he felt her forefinger trace the bundled pouch under his leather pants. It might have been accidental, but he felt himself jerk in response. His cock howled like a wolf at the full moon. Angela smiled innocently up at him. “Well, will you?”

“Yeah,” he breathed. “I will.”

“Then you’d better get up there,” she said.

Check and mate.

Dirk decided that anything else he might say would only be anticlimactic. He fled back to his bass.



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## 2: Taken For A Ride

“Light cannot exist without darkness. There can be no heaven without hell. Opposites define themselves.”

Father Mayer tossed that pablum back at Jimmy McCarthy in the warm, shabby classrooms of Holy Trinity High. This was after Jimmy spewed out the litany of hatred during Ethics and Morals—also known as Religion Class. *How can God be both omnipotent and benevolent?* Jimmy had raged. *Hey, if He’s omnipotent, then He has the power to make all things good. If He chooses not to do so, then He’s the absolute opposite of benevolent. If He’s benevolent, then He can’t be omnipotent or He couldn’t stomach what we humans do to each other.*

Father Mayer had blinked owlish eyes behind his horned-rim glasses, sighed deeply, and uttered platitudes.

Even at seventeen, Jimmy McCarthy (who had no idea at the time that he would one day be a failed rock star and former historian named Dirk) was aware that life was a wallow in the universal midden. He knew this for certain.

After all, Debbie Imhoff had started shrieking when he’d tried to put himself inside her.

Getting that far had been a long, slow process over a period of months—simple kissing, then the touch of fluttering tongues. For two successive nights on her back porch he’d slipped his hand inside her blouse until the lace edging of her bra crackled under his fingertips and he could just feel the hidden softness underneath. It had taken another two weeks before she let him unsnap the awkward hooks and release her budding globes from tricot bondage. A month after that he’d finally gained the plush nest of his obsession and slipped his finger into the moist warmth hidden there. He’d caught the scent of oily arousal.

Two months later on a September evening, he was certain that The Moment had come. They would give each other their virginity in a glorious rapture. The night would be transformed. Skyrockets would pierce the heavens and explode in unsubtle metaphor.

But when the time came, she’d screamed as if the touch of his probing erection on her thigh had burned her. “Jesus, Debbie!” he’d shouted at her shrill alarm. “Jesus!”

It wouldn’t have been so bad if they’d not been in the back seat of his mother’s VW Rabbit, if they hadn’t been parked in the back lot of Holy Trinity during a school dance, if it hadn’t been so warm an Indian summer that the Rabbit’s windows were

down. Debbie's piercing distress carried like the wail of a civil defense siren.

Lights went on in the houses behind the school. Brother Lawrence, vice-principal and chief chaperone at the dance, hurtled from the school building like a burly Archangel Michael, homing in on the Rabbit as Debbie threw the startled Dirk from atop her and fled the car. Dirk had just managed to extract himself from between the seats when Brother Lawrence huffed up, followed by most of the students at the dance.

Brother Lawrence stopped short of the Rabbit and gaped.

Debbie Imhoff sobbed in distress alongside the car, her hands up to her mascara-smearred face, her blouse wide open and her thin breasts swaying under the unhooked bra. The girl's skirt had mercifully fallen down over her thighs, but her pantyhose trailed guiltily from one ankle. Dirk staggered out of the Rabbit, still thinking that he could calm her down and salvage the wreckage of the evening. "It's okay, Debbie. Just be qui—oh, shit."

Dirk saw Brother Lawrence smoldering under the parking lot lights and his classmates trying to suppress their glee. "Brother—" he began desperately.

"Mr. McCarthy." Brother Lawrence's voice was the low thunder of an approaching storm. "I'd suggest you zip yourself up."

Dirk looked down. His corduroys were around his ankles with his boxer shorts pooled inside. A condom hung like a new foreskin from his drooping manhood. Dirk could feel a flush beginning somewhere down around his knees and spreading rapidly. His face was red enough to give off light. Debbie Imhoff's pink cotton panties were clutched unawares in one hand. Debbie noticed them about the same time and snatched them back with a howl.

That was too much for his classmates. As Dirk turned around and bent over to pull up his pants, the first waves of laughter broke over him. For the rest of his stay in high school, Dirk would be known as Limp Meat.

Rubberman.

Jimmy McCondom.

After that, Dirk decided that there wasn't a God, or if there was one, He wasn't anyone Dirk wanted to worship.

A benevolent God would not have humiliated him that way.

An omnipotent one would have at least kept Debbie quiet until it was over.

Dirk felt some of that old frustration again as Savage thrashed their way through the next, final set. Angela had danced again, with that same intriguing energy and magnetism—the applause afterward was more for her than the band. Her spirit was more brilliant than the stage lights; some overflow of that brilliance trickled over and set the band on fire as well.

Dirk played mostly to her, with an intensity he hadn't felt in weeks. The new-found enthusiasm sparked the others. Savage played the first half of the set like maniacs. Angela left the floor during the third song. Dirk had lost her in the crowd, but he could feel her watching. The residue of her energy remained. He bounded across the stage with Alf's insistent beat.

When he'd caught a glimpse of her again, it was to see her going out the entrance with the doberman Edgar on her arm. Dirk's ego came crashing down around him. He was certain that the noise was audible. Lars, of course, had noticed. He heard the guitar player giggle behind him.

Dirk played the rest of the set on automatic. The fire that had ignited Savage fizzled on his dampened ego.

By the end of the set only the usual mix was left. The staff was still there, looking utterly bored and ready to hustle out the last patrons the moment the house lights came on. There was a table near the sound board, all male and staring too intently at the stage to be anything but local musicians in to scout out the competition. There were a few eternally hopeful students of assorted and indeterminate sex flailing around the dance floor, and demonstrating why, at nearly 2:00 A.M., they were still there to be picked up. At a table to one side of the stage the groupies had gathered, dutifully applauding at the end of every song and making the silence in the rest of the club even more appalling by contrast.

Dirk announced the last song with relief. When it ended, he slammed the Rick into its case and snapped it shut as the aftermath of the band's volume rang in his ears. He stalked from the stage with what he hoped was a dignified pace. Out at his table, Jay was covering the soundboard. Kyle had gone to the bar for a last drink, Lars had been surrounded by the local musicians, and Alf was sitting with the groupies, Fish already draped around his shoulders like a decorative shawl. Alf looked at Dirk. Dirk shrugged back, glad that Alf, at least, seemed to understand. Friends don't have to talk. Friends know when the other's hurt and won't say anything to make it worse.

Alf winked at Dirk and settled Fish on his lap. "Stood up, eh Dirk?" Alf crowed. "Guess you'll have to settle for the blond." The groupies laughed dutifully.

Dirk scowled, hefted the bass's case in his hand, and headed for the mixing board. Jay wouldn't have noticed Angela, Dirk was certain. Savage's soundman and head

roadie was a social maladroitness who read Sound Engineering, Science, and Byte the way Dirk read Penthouse. Jay didn't make any distinction between genders at all. There were only People Who Knew Tech and People Who Didn't. On the job, Jay didn't notice anything but VU meters and LEDs.

"She run out on you?" Jay asked as Dirk approached. He squinted myopically behind his out-of-date wire-rims and gave a lopsided smile of sympathy.

"You saw her too?"

"You were kind of obvious, after all. I'm not that blind." Jay wiped his hands on his usual white Oxford shirt. He finished putting the cover over the console for the night and patted it with parental affection, as if tucking in his child for the night. "Besides, the band sounded good there for awhile."

"Thought we paid you to make us sound that way," Dirk said grumpily.

Nothing flustered Jay. He gave a wide, goofy grin; Jay had a mouth that could swallow a softball. "I do what I can with what I have to work with."

"Yeah, that's the way it's been going with me, too," Dirk muttered. He was thinking of going over to the bar to give Kyle his chance to insult him when Angela walked back into the club, peering through the haze of stale cigarette smoke. She'd changed into a peasant blouse that left her shoulders bare. She looked around, waved to Dirk.

Dirk waved back with what he hoped was apparent calmness. He felt the muscles of his face pulling into an idiotic, too-wide smile. Angela nodded and came down the steps toward him. The grimace Lars gave her as she passed pleased Dirk.

"I was talking to her earlier," Jay said behind Dirk. "Programming, mostly; she likes Pascal. She knows sound, too—even noticed that the horn crossover was set a little too high for the room. We tweaked it down a little and the PA sounded better. She's intelligent. You'd better be careful," Jay said.

Dirk had begun to think that maybe his life wasn't destined to be one McCondom catastrophe after another. Now he glanced back at Jay suspiciously. "What's that mean?"

"It means she isn't Fish, that's all. She's special. Different."

Angela's arrival didn't give Dirk a chance to pursue that any further. She gave Jay a hug, leaving Dirk feeling somehow left out. She didn't make any motion to greet him the same way. "How'd the last part of the set go?" she asked Jay.

"Okay," Jay said. "They've been better. The JBLs sounded good, though. Thanks."

"Sorry I didn't get back quicker," Angela said, swinging around to Dirk. "I had

Edgar take me back to my apartment so I could get my car. Miss me?”

“He played like shit,” Jay supplied.

“Thanks,” Dirk said to Jay. “I can handle my own answers from here on out.”

“Only telling the truth. I can give you all his bad points if you want,” he said to Angela. He began ticking them off on his fingers. “For one, he can’t dance, and you obviously can. He talks to the crowd all night up on stage, but get him one-on-one with a stranger and he doesn’t know what to say.”

“Jay—”

Jay ignored Dirk. “He’s not as serious about music as he should be if he wants to make a career of it. He’s afraid to stretch out and really try something serious. He’s really better suited for the academic life.”

“Jay—”

“He thinks he’d be better off teaching history again. It’s safe. With history, nothing ever changes. He likes to think he’s strange and different, but he’d be frightened of anything really different.”

“Jay,” Dirk repeated warningly.

“Is that last part true, Dirk?” Angela interjected.

“No,” Dirk said stubbornly, glaring at Jay.

“Good. I’d hate for you to be frightened of me.” For just a moment there was an odd harshness in the set of her mouth, in her jade eyes. The seriousness, the hint of sarcasm in her tone, puzzled Dirk. He thought that somehow he’d inadvertently insulted her. Then she shook her head, setting black waves of hair in motion, and the sharp edge was gone from her. She touched his arm, and he found himself holding his breath.

“Let’s go,” she said, and the tone of her voice was almost resigned, almost sad. The suggestion panicked Dirk. He suddenly felt lost, knowing that he hadn’t been able to recall what city they were in; knowing that he didn’t know where the club was or what the hotel’s address might be. The usual panic threatened to take him—visions of Terre Haute Patti ran through his head.

“Let’s go where?” He knew he shouldn’t have said it. It sounded dumb, it sounded stupid. He felt as awkward as old Jimmy.

Jay saved him. “I’ll take the bass back to the hotel,” he said, holding his hand out for the case.



“If you’re sure you want to go,” Angela added. “I might not be as safe as a dry, dusty history book.”

“He likes math, too,” Jay added, ignoring the stare Dirk gave him.

Dirk wasn’t about to make the same mistake twice. “Okay, let’s go.” He handed the bass to Jay. He started to put a possessive arm around Angela’s shoulder as he might have with, say, Fish. He caught a glimpse of her face as he did so and saw a challenge there, a tilt of the head that was a warning. In that moment, she seemed older and somehow dangerous, as if the vitality that had fueled her dance could suddenly be turned against him. The feeling was only there for an instant, but it was enough.

Dirk’s hand came back and brushed his hair instead. It wasn’t exactly a smooth recovery, but Angela was the only one who noticed. She regarded Dirk appraisingly, then looked around the room. Kyle and Lars watched from the bar; the attention of Alf and the groupies was directed toward them as well. Angela gave what was almost a sigh.

“Appearances,” she breathed, and any sense of peril about her was gone. She circled Dirk’s waist with an arm and pulled him to her. Dirk laid his arm gingerly around her back, giving Jay a puzzled, questioning glance. Jay looked back as if he’d seen nothing; he smiled. “I’ll take good care of the bass,” he said.

“Come on,” Angela said. “The car’s outside.”

The car didn’t seem to match her, somehow. In the glow of the club’s neon sign (“REFLECTIONS”, in electric blue), the Chevette sat like a dull gray lump. It was at least a decade old, and didn’t look as if it had been washed or waxed in that time. Dirk slid into the passenger’s seat, his feet crushing an empty Wendy’s bag. The vinyl dashboard was heat-cracked, the rugs were torn, the back seat was littered with paper, wrappers, and books.

“You’re a student, right?” Dirk said as Angela slid into the driver’s seat and tugged at the twisted shoulder harness. She fastened the belt and slid the keys into the ignition. The Chevette grumbled and turned over; Dirk could smell exhaust.

“How old do you think I am?” Angela asked him.

“You’re...” Dirk began. Warning bells went off in his mind. Angela still looked at him expectantly. “I don’t think I should answer that one,” he said. “I have the feeling that I lose no matter what I say.”

She put the car in drive and released the parking brake. “I’m not a student,” she told him as she pulled away from the curb. The transmission whined like a sick animal. “So your guess is too low.”

“Are you insulted or pleased?”

“Neither.” Her grin flashed in the darkness. “I expected it of you.”

She turned left at the first light. Dirk caught a glimpse of the street sign—Calhoun—but that didn’t tell him anything. Further up the street, he saw a larger sign by a drive: University of Cincinnati, Lot 2. Somehow, being able to give the city a name made Dirk feel slightly more at ease. Maybe he’d be able to remember a few street names... Now that they were actually going, he could even ask: “Where’s your apartment?”

“We’re not going there.”

“Ah,” Dirk said. He nodded. “Umm, where are we going?”

“To another place I know,” she answered. She stopped for a traffic light with a squeal of worn brake linings, turned on the blinker to turn right, and looked over at him. Her face was neutral and unreadable in the shadowy light of the street lamps. “I’ll tell you where if you want, but you don’t know this area at all. If you’re worried, I’ll take you back to your hotel.” The tone of her voice told Dirk that the hotel would not include room service. “Up to you,” she said.

As her serious gaze searched his face, she put her hand on Dirk’s thigh. It seemed to burn near his tightening crotch, perfectly placed—too close to be casual, too far away to be an invitation.

“Surprise me,” he said. He tried to laugh. It sounded more like a cackle.

“Oh, I’ll do that,” she answered. “I can practically guarantee it.”

The light turned green. She took her hand away and turned. The Chevette grated into gear as the heat on Dirk’s thigh turned damp and cold.



### 3: Joan The Flower Man

Angela drove westward. The single working headlamp of the Chevette made a dim yellowed splash on the expressway, through which lane markers fled like startled hares. Dirk sat uncomfortably in the passenger seat, staring at the strange night scenery and wondering if this night with Angela would leave him forever changed.

It would, of course (which Dirk would have known if he'd been at all familiar with Angela), but not in the way he was thinking.

It will take them some time to get to Angela's destination. So we'll leave them for a bit, with Dirk growing steadily more uneasy as the city lights fade to suburban sprawl and then disappear entirely. There are other people to meet, for they'll inevitably be snared in this moment. Angela's all too well aware of that. She knows that there are other people caught in the web of her life, even if she doesn't yet know their names.

As Angela might have said to Dirk on the way: "Life's that way. It's being shoved blindly out of an airplane along with all your fellows, without instructions and certainly without a parachute. The wind tugs and pulls at you, your fellow skydivers do the same. Maybe you can learn to spin and twist in the wind. Maybe you can slow your descent and seem to drift upwards past the tumbling rest of them. Maybe you can even enjoy the ride and the sense that you're almost flying. But in the end, no matter how lucky you've been, there's always The Ground. It might be different if we didn't believe in gravity, but we do. In the final moment, we always go *splat*."

Joan the Flower Man understood that instinctively. For Joan, without death there would be no life. Without death, there would be no floral funeral arrangements. Without floral funeral arrangements scavenged from grave plots, funeral parlors, and several florists, Joan would have nothing to sell and no way to survive.

In appearance, Joan the Flower Man looked to be an obese, grizzly man bent over with age. The folded cheeks (one of which was always packed with chewing tobacco) looked like tree-covered slopes after a forest fire, stubbled with an eternal week-old growth of beard. The smile was mostly gums, with a few rotting teeth leaning like old tombstones in a graveyard, brown with tobacco juice. A baseball cap was jammed down over the balding head and, no matter the weather, a grimy windbreaker covered a torn plaid shirt. The tips of worn canvas sneakers peeked from underneath baggy trousers held up by a broken pair of suspenders.

It was when you caught Joan's profile that you noticed the distinct breasts, and when she looked at you, you could see that the lines of her ravaged face were softer than you might have thought, that the rheumy brown eyes might have been, decades

ago, almost striking.

Joan was a hermaphrodite. Her genitalia and secondary sexual characteristics were a mix-and-match set.

“Buy some flowers, Mister?” Joan croaked, holding out a newspaper-wrapped bundle of carnations that had lately decorated the casket of a certain Anna Fulsom. Her hand looked oddly delicate to be attached to the grotesque figure slumped in a doorway stoop on 6th Street. Most people simply ignored her: Joan the Flower Man was a fixture of the neighborhood, part of the local New York City scenery. She shambled down the long blocks, prowled the back doors of area funeral homes and florists, or sat in her usual doorway surrounded by flower stems, wreaths proclaiming “Dearest Departed”, and yellowed newspapers.

“Two bucks,” she added without looking up.

No one was certain what compelled Joan to accost certain people and ignore the dozen or more others that passed her by in the meantime. No one had ever bothered to ask her, not that Joan herself could have explained it. There was nothing overtly different about this man—another gray-suited clone from the business district two blocks west. It was simply that Joan’s brain was as scrambled and confused as the rest of her body.

To Joan, the clamor and bustle of New York was a montage of her life. Past and present mingled in her mind. Fate stirred her synapses with a cruel spoon. She sometimes lived in the here and now, sometimes in a scene from years ago. The traffic noise might be the hooting of owls in the woods, the wail of an infant, or murmuring voices from her past. In the moments between hallucinations, she would sell her flowers.

The clone had stopped. She thrust the bundled flowers toward him. “Two bucks,” she repeated. “New cut, too. Take home to wifey, eh? She ‘preciate it, betcha.” She gave him a knowing leer and wink, then ruined the dubious effect by spewing a thick stream of tobacco juice at her feet. “C’mon,” she urged, seeing the man’s hesitation.

Her customer shrugged, not without feeling. “Okay, mister,” he said. “You got a sale. Give me the flowers.”

He reached for his wallet. Joan watched with her gap-toothed smile, the flowers in one hand, the other extended palm up. At that moment, like a leaden soldier tossed into a fire, the man’s face seemed to melt and change before Joan’s eyes. It solidified into an all-too familiar face for Joan. “Henderson, you son of a bitch!” she shrieked suddenly.

Joan clubbed at the apparition with her bouquet. Carnation petals showered the

gray suit as the businessman raised a hand to ward off the attack.

“Christ!” He backed away quickly as Joan lurched from her seat on the concrete steps. She spat tobacco juice at him; it splattered the woolen trouser cuffs as her customer turned and fled for more familiar territory. “Henderson!” Joan bellowed in a high, androgynous voice. “Come back, bastard!”

Joan took several futile steps in pursuit, then settled back to her stoop, wheezing from the exertion. Around her, midday New York faded into a night lit by glaring, bare bulbs strung from wires. The buildings became patched tents, the pavement a meadow scuffed bare of grass, the whine of traffic a tinny Sousa march played over speakers hung from trees. She could hear Henderson barking at the marks: “Come and see’ em! Glimpse the fantastic mistakes of nature! All live and guaranteed genuine!”

For a time, Joan had been one of the attractions in a carnival freak show, displaying her dubious charms and oddities throughout the rural southeast. The carnie owner—Abel C. Henderson—had purchased Joan from her mother. Joan’s stay with Henderson was a haze of pain and neglect. Henderson considered his freaks possessions, much like the motley collection of tents and wagons that was the Henderson Marvel Circus. He paid Joan nothing but her keep, and sold her nights, for a reasonable fee, to anyone whose tastes might run to the bizarre. When, during the winter of ‘61 (the same year Dirk had been born), Joan caught pneumonia, Henderson had simply dumped her in Tallapoosa County, Alabama.

It seemed reasonable enough to Henderson. The freak shows were losing money. He’d been used to paying bribes to local officials so they would overlook the conditions of his ‘employees’ in the freak tent; it was part of the normal overhead. The freaks had always brought in enough morbidly curious hicks to justify the expenses. Henderson had brought his carnival south eight years ago to escape the creeping liberalism of the north and the oppressive concern for the ‘rights’ of his collection of deformities—“God’s factory seconds,” as he called them.

Now this humanism dogged his heels in the south as well. The tariff of bribes had escalated out of sight. Local sheriffs and councilmen were quite willing to line their pockets by invoking ‘Decency.’

Along with this, Joan was getting old—thirty-nine and looking another two decades older. He hadn’t made any money prostituting her in months. She wasn’t holding up her end of the business. A sick freak would be an intolerable drain on the resources.

Sick freaks died, after all. Their lifespans were usually short. And a dead freak was a potential bonus for a greedy county coroner. “Hey, babe,” Henderson told Joan as

he and one of the roustabouts carried her off the wagon and into a small stand of trees. “No hard feelings—it’s just economics.”

She hadn’t died, though there were times in the next few weeks that she wished she had. She’d even managed to make her confused way back north to a dimly-remembered New York. There, her memories and the present fused in her mind, she learned to live. Not well, but enough.

There’d been an observer to the latest incident in Joan’s confused life. He was a tall and gangly man with a vaguely asiatic cast to his skin and distinct epicanthic folds around his eyes. He wore a black suit cut in a style out of fashion since the thirties. White kid gloves encased long fingers that spidered down the front of the unbuttoned jacket.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said to Joan, who still muttered imprecations in the direction of the imagined Henderson. Joan started. She squinted up at him and pawed at the mucus in the corner of her eyes. New York City snapped back into place around her.

“Who’er you?” she said suspiciously.

A gloved hand proffered a card. “Ecclesiastes Mitsumishi,” he said.

Joan cocked her head at him and took the card. Her thumb smeared a brown trail over the white cotton paper. “Hell of a name,” she commented. She dropped the card on the sidewalk.

Mitsumishi simply grinned. His teeth were huge. The enamel gleamed like a toothpaste ad. “Missionary mother, Japanese father,” he said. “Both with a sense of humor. I saw you today behind my funeral home. You took Anna Fulsom’s wreath.”

Thoughts chased each other through the warren of Joan’s mind. She thought she saw the street turn into a steaming bayou. An alligator slipped from the curb into the slow waters. “You own that flower place?”

“Funeral home. Mortuary. ‘Remains To Be Seen.’ Mom cared for people’s souls after death, I look after what’s left.” He grinned again.

There was too much mirth in the man for a funeral director, Joan’s befuddled mind decided. The suit, the gloves; he was more parody than reality. She shifted her large girth on the concrete steps and scowled at him.

“Name like that, you won’t be working very long. You new to the business, huh?”

“No. Fourth parlor I’ve owned in five years. Use to run the ‘Corpus Delecti’ in St. Paul, then opened ‘The Body Shoppe’ in Lexington. They went under, like all of my customers.” Ecclesiastes waited, grinning, but there was no response from Joan. “Just

lost my third place last year: 'The Stiff's Upper Lip' in Cincinnati. Had to sell out. Conservative place, Cincinnati."

The bayou shimmered, and for a second, Joan thought the undertaker was a Creole dressed in overalls and a flannel shirt, his bare toes digging into Louisiana mud. She shook her head and the street returned momentarily. "People got no sense of humor 'bout death," Joan observed belatedly. "Strange you get any business at all."

"I'm cheap."

"Huh," Joan snorted. "You better be, or the alligators eat you up." She could hear the muscular tail slashing water. *It'd be on this bank in a minute, sure.* "We gotta go," she said urgently. Joan spat juice, wiped at the stubble on her chin, and struggled to her feet. Her grimy hand clutched at Ecclesiastes's sleeve.

"What's the matter, mister?" His grin wavered.

"Alligator, man," she whispered ominously. Her eyes focused on something just behind the mortician. "Shit, too late," she cried. With a gap-toothed scream, Joan lifted her just-wrapped bouquet and began flailing. A mongrel unlucky enough to have chosen that moment to be foraging the gutter howled at the unexpected floral whipping, and fled with its tail between its legs.

"Damn, that was close," Joan gasped. Petals from the carnations littered the sidewalk, broken stems hung from the newspaper wrappings in her hand. "Big sucker. See those teeth?"

Ecclesiastes had spun around with a curiously graceful pirouette and was standing with his hands extended in what was obviously a martial stance. He glanced from Joan to the hound, who was staring forlornly back at them from the next corner. "Thanks," he said uncertainly. His hands dropped back to his waist.

"You know kung fu, huh? Odd for a Cajun."

Ecclesiastes blinked. He decided to ignore the last comment. "Aikido," he said. "Got that from Dad. Listen, when you picked up that wreath from the trash, you dropped this." He rummaged in his suit pocket and pulled out a wrinkled, tattered sheet of notebook paper. Holes along one side showed where it had been torn from a cheap spiral binder. He handed the paper to Joan.

She sniffed at it. The sheet smelled vaguely of formaldehyde; the scent brought back the noise of the city to her. Louisiana disappeared into the recesses of her mind. When she continued to look at the paper in puzzlement, Ecclesiastes tapped it with a gloved forefinger. "It's what's written on it," he told her. "That's what made me curious."

“Henderson’s Marvel Circus?” Joan asked suspiciously. Ecclesiastes shook his head slowly. “Can’t read,” Joan told him. “Never learned.” A sadness spread over her ruined, old-man’s face; the eyes became wetter than usual. She sniffed. “Betsa used’ta read to me nights. She was the Wild Lady, had to eat raw meat...” The words evoked memory, and the sound of Henderson’s carnival began to return. Ecclesiastes saw her awareness drifting and he tapped the paper desperately.

“Carlos Theopelli,” he said. “It’s signed by Carlos Theopelli.”

“—Henderson’d toss her a bloody haunch and old Betsa she tear at it, growling with the juices just running down—”

“I heard about Carlos Theopelli in Cincinnati,” Ecclesiastes interrupted nervously. He was beginning to regret the impulse that had led him to accost this street character. *Everyone in New York is crazy by definition, or they wouldn’t live there.* His father had proclaimed that when Ecclesiastes had called him after the sale of his latest fiasco as an undertaker. *So it’s only fitting you want to go there, too,* he’d added.

Joan the Flower Man growled and made tearing motions with her mouth as she gummed the broken carnation stems.

“He was some kind of eccentric genius, they said,” Ecclesiastes persisted. “In college, I used read his articles. The professors all said it was nonsense, but... This paper of yours is handwritten. I thought maybe—” He watched Joan capering around the sidewalk, making throaty grunting noises.

“Never mind,” he said.

Joan stopped, one leg up in the air. She eyed him sidewise. “I got more,” she said. “More them papers. Found ‘em in the street this morning.”

“I’d like to see them.”

Joan’s eyes narrowed. “Cost ‘ya.”

“How much?”

“You give me all the flowers they leave. Give ‘em only to me, don’t throw none away.”

Ecclesiastes’s grin made its return. “Deal. You can have anything that the family leaves behind. You drive a hard bargain, mister.”

Joan grinned back.

She led him into the building and up a rickety stairwell that smelled of old urine and stale smoke. The second floor hallway’s rug was bare in places, damp in others.



Ecclesiastes followed Joan along the hallway to a door that sagged on one hinge. She pushed it open and motioned him in.

The room had the oversweet flowery smell of a funeral home, overlaid with a stench of rotting greenery. Carnations, roses, lilies, daffodils: everywhere there were flowers in various stages of decomposition, sitting in glass jars with green, scummy water, and scattered over the rickety table, two chairs, and a bed that seemed to be the room's only furniture. The floor was slick with crushed petals. Bugs crawled in the undergrowth.

"Pretty, huh?" Joan said. There was a trace of pride in her deep, cracked voice. "Got more flowers'n *anybody*." She moved around Ecclesiastes, who stood motionless at the doorway. He looked down, saw that his shoes were trampling a wreath. "EST BROTHER", the trailing fabric proclaimed.

"It's quite unusual," Ecclesiastes ventured, stepping delicately over the wreath. He removed his gloves and placed them in the pockets of his suit.

"I get 'em all over," Joan told him, standing in the middle of the room, her arms spread wide. She spat tobacco juice toward the corner. "First check the parlors, then the flower shops, everyday. Go out to the cemet'ries Saturday and Sunday, holidays too—they's the big days for flowers. Bring 'em back here. Get paper to wrap 'em wherever. Sell 'em two bucks, cheap. Flowers mean you care," she added, winking.

Ecclesiastes nodded. The odor of decomposing vegetation was nauseating, overpowering. It smelled the way he imagined the floor of a jungle might smell. "What about the Theopelli papers?" he asked, a little too urgently. He could feel his stomach roiling.

Joan nodded, and began rummaging through the jars and stands and piles of flowers on the desk. At last, she gave a small cry and pulled out a thick sheaf of filthy notebook paper. "Here," she said. She held it out to the mortician, then snatched it back when he reached out to take them. "Deal, remember?" she said.

"Deal." Ecclesiastes took the papers. He went over to the open window of the room, both for the light and for relief from the room's thick atmosphere. He began shuffling through the papers, slowly at first, then with increasing excitement. Joan sat on the bed, arranging a half-dead bouquet of posies in a coffee can as she watched.

She saw his eyes go bright, the way Henderson's sometimes did when a new scheme occurred to him. The room shifted before her. The room became her shabby trailer in the Marvel Circus, the sounds outside those of the roustabouts erecting the tents. Ecclesiastes shimmered and became Gil, the cadaverous boy who was the Human Skeleton. Gil had only stayed with the circus a month before he died.

Everything he ate, he threw up. His body could tolerate nothing except water.

“My God, I don’t believe it,” Gil breathed. His protruding ribcage, the skin stretched over it like flesh-colored shrinkwrap, heaved.

And then, at a dead run, he fled the room.

“It’s okay, Gil, I understand,” Joan yelled after him. “You go throw up outside.” She lay back on her bed, still toying with the posies. Outside her window, the roustabouts hammered stakes into the hard-baked southern ground, cursing each other as they worked.

