

## The Gallery

by R. Michael Burns

The girl sat alone on the low bench in the middle of the wide hardwood floor, gazing long and rapt at the work on display beneath the tasteful track lighting. All around her, other pieces writhed on white walls, squirmed atop pristine pedestals, yet despite their savage grotesquerie, their hideous beauty, she scarcely noticed them. She'd taken them in before, each terrible one of them, but none of them held her as this one did. How could they?

Zoe Atropos wiped a stray tear from the corner of her eye.

It had taken her months to find the Gallery -- months even to learn of its existence. Long, wandering nights like some PCP-fueled fever dream, sleeping away more and more of the sunlit hours to take advantage of the anonymity of darkness, making contact with the people who never dared expose their doings to the light of day.

And it had all begun so innocuously, with a phone call.

"Hi, Zoe." Mark's voice on her machine sounded maybe the tiniest bit more fatigue-ragged than usual. "Look, something's come up and I'm not gonna be able to make it tonight after all. Really sorry, hon. I'll make it up to you soon, promise."

She hadn't felt terribly concerned about it then. It was only dinner and an art-house flick, and hardly the first time he'd stood her up. Med school did that to him -- took greedy and unexpected bites out of his social life. A night they'd planned to spend curled up on the sofa watching "Psycho" or "A Touch of Evil" would get swallowed whole by a sudden bout of studying; an afternoon intended for coffee shops and dusty bookstores would vanish down the gullet of a day's paperwork at the hospital where he'd eventually do his residency. Another woman might not have put up with it, but Zoe understood the demands, the hours, the stress Mark had to deal with. And in truth, she didn't mind the freedom, time to spend lost in her own ruminations to a soundtrack of Lydia Lunch and Skinny Puppy. More, though -- he made it all worthwhile, had

awakened something in her that none of the other guys in her life had even suspected. He'd stoked her secret passions, breathed heat into them when Zoe had taken them for cold, for all-but-dead. He'd challenged her, dared her to ride the ragged edges of herself. Not just with the semi-suicidal games, the skydiving and bungee-jumping, but with poetry, philosophy -- and art. He'd assaulted her middle-class, public-school mentality with words and thoughts that flensed the banality from her mind, skinned and stripped the commonplace away for once and all. How could she not love him for it? How could she not forgive his transgressions, accept being a close second in his life to the quest for the profession that would complete his self-definition?

Anyway, he had that smile, open and ever-so-slightly lopsided and deadly, impossible to resist. One flash of that grin in her direction and she'd absolve him of all his misdemeanors without a word.

Alone in the gallery, Zoe stared at, stared into the artwork before her, and shivered. Perhaps she imagined it, but the work seemed to shiver, too.

By Monday, she'd started worrying. Mark might go twenty-four hours without calling, might even ignore her messages for a couple of days if the workload piled up suddenly. But he'd never left her dangling for longer than that, no matter how deeply buried he got.

At noon, she called her machine from Penumbra, the alternative clothing boutique she co-managed. A message from her mother, one from a friend she sometimes went clubbing with. A hang-up. No Mark.

She locked up the shop a half-hour early and drove over to the big ugly box apartment complex where he kept a place. He spent most of his non-school, non-hospital time at her claustrophobic condo, but occasionally he crashed at the apartment that still had his name on the lease -- much closer to campus. And, he teased, the only place he could get an undisrupted night's sleep.

His roommate only shrugged at her. "I figured he was at your place -- as usual. Can't even really remember the last time I saw him. Guess he's still paying his half of the rent though, 'cause the landlords haven't evicted me yet."

"Any idea where else he could be?" Zoe felt a cold hard knot tying itself up in her gut. Too soon to panic, but she knew in the depths of herself that something had gone badly wrong, had knocked her world askew.

Another shrug from the roomie. "You know Mark better than I do. If he's not with you or at the hospital, I can't even guess."

Zoe bit her lip, chewed at it some. "Yeah, thanks," she muttered. "Make him call me if he drops by, 'kay?'"

"As soon as our paths cross again," the roomie said, offering a smile that Zoe couldn't answer in kind.

She drifted half-out of her reverie, enough to sense someone standing behind her now, still and silent, gazing at the work as she did. The Artist himself, she guessed, not bothering to glance back. In all her visits here, she'd never seen another patron. They came, she knew, but secretly, privately -- just as she did. She'd seen only him, the sculptor whose work dominated the large white space. The genius. The madman. His nearness, palpable as a coming rain, turned her shiver into a tremble.

No one at the hospital had seen Mark, either. He'd had a few days off but should've reported in that evening, and hadn't.

"His shift started at seven," the duty nurse said, shaking her gray-blond head at the sheet of paper on her clipboard. "We haven't officially declared him MIA yet, but he's already in deep Dutch with Doctor Sahir." She pursed her lips, made a smacking noise. "This isn't like Mark, not one bit."

"No," Zoe muttered, "it's not."

Back home, she dug around in drawers until she found the number she needed, then called his mother in Lake George. A long shot, but Zoe couldn't think of anything else.

"I haven't seen Mark in ages," his mother answered in acid tones. She'd said more, but not much, and all of it terse, leaving a bitter talc taste in Zoe's mouth. No, of course, Mark wouldn't have gone home to mother. Not to that mother.

Zoe shambled into her room and flopped into bed, squirmed out of her clothes and lay there a long time, not sleeping.

The big plainclothes cop that the desk sergeant directed her to said they couldn't do much about it. Zoe, only a worried girlfriend after all, didn't have any standing to file a missing persons report, and even if someone else did, Mark's name would wind up at the end of a long, long list. Guys his age, well, they usually took off on their own for one reason or another. Money maybe, the cop told her, or problems at home -- raising a bushy eyebrow at her -- stuff like that. And anyway, the cop went on, there were kids on that long, long list, and whatever manpower the department had for tracking down lost souls would be used for them first, she could understand that, right?

She wandered out of the gray police building feeling dazed by the mid-morning sun, tired and a bit ill. The knot in her gut bunched and doubled.

In her apartment, so many shadows of Mark, amplifying his absence. The art and photography books they'd collected together -- surreal René Magritte prints and vaguely dangerous Maplethorpe pics and various graphic anatomy books all co-mingled on the shelves. The big framed Annie Leibowitz on the bedroom wall. The black-and-white photo she'd taken of him, Mark offering a tight, wicked smile as he held a scalpel blade next to his eye. His dark shirts on hangers in the closet, his neatly folded jeans in the dresser. She tried to discern what was missing -- hospital scrubs? No. Something more dressy, she thought, but -- dammit -- couldn't dredge up a specific memory.

She dug out a Ziplock bag of pot, rolled and smoked. The giddy haze of her high didn't chase the shadows away, but maybe it kept them at bay for a time.

Zoe felt the Artist's fingers stroking her dyed-red hair, gentle as a lover. Long, clever fingers, strong and deft. A sculptor's fingers. Cool and dry as snake skins. This time, she felt no urge to draw away.

She haunted the places where Mark hung out. She sat in a big deep armchair in a corner of the coffee shop where he sometimes studied, downed vodkas at his favorite bar, watched faces float past as if she could read hints of his fate in those strangers' eyes.

It was in one of his classes, visited during an over-long lunch hour while she left the boutique locked and empty, that Zoe finally picked up a thread of Mark's trail.

"Yeah, I know who he is," the clean-shaven Asian kid told her, shrugging. "Med school's a small world. Can't exactly say he's a friend, though. I think. . ." He paused, eyes rolling up as if the memory might be tattooed on his forehead. "I think he hangs out with Molan sometimes."

Zoe felt the first real tremor of hope in weeks, ticklish, almost uncomfortable. "Molan?"

"Guy who washed out of the program last year. Likes to hang out at this bar called Ozone. . ."

\* \* \*

She found it that same night, everything inside brushed steel and watery blue lights, loud music and lots of shadows. TV screens under the Plexiglas floor flashed endless music videos, tangled images like things from bad acid trips. She spotted the guy after maybe an hour, impossible to miss even in the throbbing Friday night crowd. He stood the better part of seven feet tall even though he walked in a permanent duck, like maybe he'd hit his head on one doorway too many. He had a long, gaunt face, hollow cheeks and deepset eyes that made him look like a smack-head, an ambulatory corpse. Well dressed, but not in a way that called extra attention to him. When he settled on one of the point-down steel cones serving as art-nouveau barstools, Zoe drifted over and perched beside him.

"Hey," she said. Her heart thumped hard in her chest as if somehow it knew beyond question that she'd just taken a vital and irrevocable step down a long black road.

Mr. Gaunt gave her a nod.

She opened her mouth to broach the subject of Mark, never mind subtlety or working up to it, just ask the guy flat out if he knew her boyfriend -- then stopped, reined in by an instinct as strong as a leather leash.

"Zoe," she said instead, offering a hand.

"Molan," he answered, taking it in his long, strong fingers. His touch gave her a subtle electric chill, unsettling, thrilling. She took a swallow of her drink, let the icy vodka infuse her with a sly, tickling confidence.

"So what do you do?"

He smiled, oh-so-slightly. "I'm an artist."

It was the only meaningful thing he said that night, or the next time she saw him, or the time after that. And Zoe cared less with each rendezvous. His obsidian eyes enthralled her, his low, subtle voice gently unwound that knot of dread in her gut. Each time she met him, she swore to herself that she would ask about Mark, finally, tonight. And each time, Molan banished Mark from her thoughts with no more than a single flicker of that Mona Lisa smile of his, so unlike Mark's off-balance grin.

Their fourth encounter ended in her bed, the same one she'd shared with Mark on more nights than she could count. Everything Molan did ripped away yet another shadow of Mark until, grappling her naked and sweat-slick and panting, wringing deep shuddering orgasms from her, he obliterated the man she'd looked to him to find. That scalpel-wielding guy in the frame on the wall could have been anyone, anyone at all.

"So why'd you leave med school?"

He didn't bother to ask how she knew, didn't even seem surprised by the question. He simply lay there, long and solid and still, those clever fingers of his taking absent inventory of her nude body, half-draped over his.

"Life is transient, however fiercely we may cling to it," Molan murmured. "I couldn't justify spending such energy grasping at it, delaying the inevitable by a few days or weeks . . . even years make no impression on eternity. Death will have us all -- you can live to be a hundred and your life won't matter any more than the lifespan of a dust-mite. I needed to focus my skills on more . . . expressive pursuits. To create something less ephemeral."

"So you became an artist."

"Mmm."

"When do I get to see some of your stuff?"

"I don't have any public exhibits. I only show to private buyers, a few patrons who support my work. I'm not sure it would interest you -- it has a rather limited appeal."

He didn't say anything more on the subject for the next several weeks.

His enigmatic silence piqued her interest, as he'd surely intended it to. It occurred to Zoe that from any other guy -- Mark, for example -- all the mysterious pretense would only have annoyed her, would've grated on her nerves like a tiresome game. Yet from her Artist it seemed entirely natural, so innate an aspect of his essence that she allowed him to play her like a marlin after a lure. She accepted without question all the nights when he vanished from her bed, didn't return to her for days at a time. She hung onto her job at Penumbra by her gnawed-at fingernails, then finally lost it, and didn't care. Such banalities could no longer soften the razor-sharp lines of the nihilism he had awakened in her. She slept her days away, waiting to meet him at Ozone, waiting to sense his presence in her bedroom. The things he did to her while they tangled in the sheets blotted out all the rest of it, rendered everything else irrelevant. He knew her body with all the studied precision of his abandoned profession, used his knowledge with the passion-fierce intensity of the artist he'd become. She lost herself and whole worlds in his amazing ministrations.

But it couldn't go on that way forever.

She had no idea what triggered it. Nothing in particular, really. Some door springing open in her brain as she lay naked and awake, watching shadows slither and crawl across the ceiling of the bedroom she couldn't afford anymore. How long since she'd seen daylight -- not the mourning shades of dusk or dawn, but full-fledged daylight? Hell -- how long since she'd seen Mark? Her lover, friend, companion, gone for, what? Three months now -- and she didn't know if anyone on earth was bothering to search for him. Had his mother finally gone to the cops -- would it matter if she had? They had that long long list after all, and without any suggestions of violence in his vanishing they wouldn't make finding him a priority. Mark was a decent guy, deserved better than to be forgotten, to slip through the cracks of the world like so much dust.

Zoe spent a few dark silent hours hating herself. It was a wretched feeling, but a feeling all the same, the first genuine emotion she'd experienced in far too long. Eventually, the crawling passage of time turned her self-loathing into a sort of miserable resolve. She stared into the darkness at her core and reached deep, dredging some tiny pearls of hope from the profound futility welling up within her. Frantic, she clutched at one last slender strand of optimism -- that if she could only find Mark, she might somehow remember why she had ever held onto life at all, had ever wanted to live in this world.

Not that any of her self-searching stopped her from surrendering body to her Artist when at last he slipped into bed with her. She closed her eyes and let his strong, confident caresses carry her away into that almost-oblivion where only the songs of the flesh mattered at all.

When he'd finished and she lay poised on the edge of wiped-out sleep, she murmured, "Did you ever know my boyfriend, Mark? He was a med student too. Some guy I talked to once said he thought maybe you knew him."

"I know him."

That yanked her back to wakefulness -- know him.

"Would you like to see him?"

"You know where he is?"

The Artist offered her that low-wattage smile. "I think I can find him."

Zoe's heart pounded; that knot tied itself tight in her gut. Could she -- could she just go see him, talk to him, after all this? She'd betrayed him, given herself over entirely to someone else -- sex not the least of it, but not the limit, either. Or had he betrayed her first, winking out of her life with no more warning than that innocent, vague phone message? Either way, bridges had burned. How could she face him?

Into her lingering quiet, her Artist said, "I believe you're ready. I'll take you to my gallery tomorrow night, if you like."

She couldn't fathom if this comment somehow linked to what he'd said about Mark, but nodded and murmured, "Yeah, sure."

The place crouched hidden among derelict warehouses and closed-down factories, their dead smokestacks prodding bluntly at the bruise-colored night sky. Trash gathered along the old building's blank brick façade; taggers had scrawled senseless threats on its boarded-over windows and black wooden door. It all seemed wildly incongruous with any art gallery -- but perfectly in keeping with the Artist.

He led her into a low brick place, deep with clinging shadows, past the entry foyer, up a small flight of stairs and through a heavy door locked with an electronic keypad.

The first thing she noticed, in the unspoiled dark of the gallery, was the smell -- suggestions of hardwood, cloying antiseptics, something thicker concealed just beneath. Then sounds: a sly, caged cacophony. Noises like machinery running behind thick walls, pumps and gears and motors. Wet, muddy sounds she couldn't place at all. The room had an echoy quality that gave her a dizzying sense of size, as if she stood poised on the edge of an abyss.

Then the Artist turned on the lights, and a scream wedged tight in Zoe's throat. She'd been right about the abyss. He'd led her to the brink of Hell.

In a white wooden chair directly before her sat a girl, nude. Dozens of tubes snaked up from holes in the seat, disappeared into holes in the girl -- in her arms, in her throat, between her legs. Blood flowing out, flowing in. The top of the girl's head had

been neatly replaced with a Plexiglas dome beneath which a clear fluid sloshed and churned over the girl's furrowed gray-pink brain.

The girl's eyes flickered open, tried to focus on the cruel intruders who'd disturbed her catatonia, but could only drift lost. Blind.

Beyond, other works. A man hung on the rough brick wall in an oversized frame, one half of him -- leg, chest, arm, face -- flayed of flesh, strange fluids sluicing over raw muscle, pulsing veins. A woman cut off at the torso, reclining in a white porcelain bathtub, her wrists welded to the sides, her lips twitching as if to speak, but issuing no sound. A blond boy broken and folded into a tiny transparent sphere, an idiot-grin etched on his face, rubbery fingers clawing at the slick convex wall of his fishbowl-prison. A pale-skinned girl draped over a fluted pedestal, arms gone at the elbows, legs missing at the knees, clean steel chains affixed to the protruding bone-ends, holding her elegantly in place. A single blue eye gazed from between the sewn-open lips of her labia. Overhead, another woman dangled from the ceiling by hooks sunk into her legs, back, arms -- her face erased, eyes ears and mouth obliterated with seamless skin-grafts. She shook her head back and forth, slow and methodical as a Foucault's pendulum, as if denying her situation.

The gallery held a dozen or more of the demented sculptures -- each clad only in mad tangles of pumping tubes, twisting wires, and each still alive, at least in some coldly clinical sense of the word. Somewhere behind walls, under floors, machines sent pulses to deathless hearts, oxygenated sluggish blood, pushed liquid nutrients into flesh that should have long since festered and bloated with rot.

The Artist sidled up beside Zoe, stroked her neck absently with those long clever fingers of his.

"Aren't they exquisite?" he whispered.

Zoe could say, could think nothing at all. The vast unimaginable insanity of his work had obliterated her consciousness, had annihilated even the self she'd held within her mind. No place so ghastly, so insupportably devoted to sadism could possibly exist, no Zoe could ever set foot within. No beguiling Artist could craft such works of psychotic lunacy.

"Life . . . and death," he said, soft, the words no more real to her than wisps of smoke. "And this -- this is the place between. The two great glories of existence entwined. The chasm bridged. The only real goal of art. The only thing worth aspiring to."

The sound of his voice fell into Zoe's mind like pebbles into a dark, still pond.

"But you wanted to see Mark, after all," the Artist continued. He directed Zoe past the seated girl, the thing on the pedestal, the crumpled boy in the too-small sphere.

Mark -- her Mark, the one who'd read her Nietzsche and fire-walked with her and practiced Kama Sutra with her -- hung on a wall in an antechamber, alone. The artist had affixed him to the pristine white plaster with clean steel rods fashioned like oversized pins -- one through each shoulder, one through each thigh. Like an insect under glass. An intricate surgical halo held his head up, thick white thread peeled his eyelids wide on sockets filled with silvery ball bearings. His mouth drooped in a semi-conscious grimace from which two transparent tubes dangled. A glistening pipe snaked up his nude body, vanished into a wide hole in his the sunken cavity beneath his washboard-ribs. In the clean-shaven delta between his legs where genitalia belonged, the Artist had left a clean-slit hole from which protruded his missing right hand. Yet none of this could distract Zoe from the smooth round pit in Mark's chest, the expertly implanted glass fisheye beneath which she could very clearly see his heart beating.

"He's my masterpiece," the Artist whispered.

Zoe nodded, zombie-like, but didn't really hear. The last remaining shards of her mind retreated down their rabbit hole and finally, blessedly, she passed out.

She had awoken in her own bed, semi-dressed and alone, and immediately began convincing herself that it had all been a hideous acid-dream, the sick ugly product of some chemical Molan had slipped into her drink, the kind they sometimes shared to take their sexual exploits into ever stranger, ever more vivid places.

For a week, for two, denial proved terribly simple. No half-sane world could contain such horrors. No mind -- however brilliant, however broken -- could act out such atrocities. It could only have been her own delusion, her own rationality cracking under

the weight of drugs and dark desires and too much time out of the daylight. She couldn't tell the cops, couldn't mutter a word to anyone lest that fissure of madness crack the world open.

But memories of those terrible works sank their claws into her thoughts, whispered from every shadow, crept close to keep her company at night.

For most of a month she drifted in darkness, the gloom of her disbelief spreading itself over everything, reducing her whole life to a meaningless shadowplay. Life merely a series of disconnected split-instants, a meaningless path to the oblivion of death. Each face she looked on belonged to someone already dead, corpses with delusions of life, hope, meaning.

In time, she found her way back to the Gallery.

She shook like a smack-head dying for a fix as she knocked on the back door, again and again, pounding until her hands throbbed.

At least the pain was real.

"Open the fucking door, Molan! Goddammit, open the fucking door! I know you can hear me you psychopath! Let me in!"

She could almost envision all those undead things within, hearing her screams beyond whatever winds of madness blasted through their shredded minds. The thought of them made her sick, made her giggle even as tears filled her eyes. Life and death meant nothing, yawned vast and vapid, empty. Only that insane place in between -- only those unliving, undying works of flesh and machine -- had any reality to them at all.

"Molan, please! Please, I need to get in. . ."

Hope's last light guttered out and she slumped there in the doorway, weeping, overwhelmed with grief or horror or relief, or all those things at once.

When the door opened at last, she hardly remembered where she was. But still she followed the Artist inside when he beckoned.

Nothing had been the same since then. Existence itself had shattered, darkness showing through a million cracks, bleeding into every aspect of her life. Reality inverted

-- everything beyond the Gallery looked hollow and false, facile lies of safety and sanity that the world muttered to distract itself from the abyss underlying the prosaic universe. Darkness the only Truth, the Gallery's brutal fusion of life and death the totality of Meaning. All else amounted to pitiful self-deception, a childish inability to accept the stark horror of being. Hadn't some part of her known it all along? Hadn't Mark led her to that very threshold -- and the Artist drawn her across?

She spent more and more nights in the Gallery, alone yet not, lost in the luminous black of what her new lover had wrought, what her old lover had become.

His hand ran down the long soft curve of her neck, into the hollow of her back, stirring her again, at last, from her memories. She could recall all of it in vivid, austere detail, but it meant no more than scenes from an uninteresting TV show.

"Are you ready, my beautiful darling?" the Artist asked in a whisper.

Zoe nodded, slow, feeling nothing at all now. She rose, shrugged off her loose cotton sundress, let it drift to the floor like a fog. The Artist's long, clever fingers wandered over her, prodding her small breasts, stroking her stomach, exploring her sex -- taking inventory again, she thought distantly.

"Mmm," he murmured, touching, touching. "So beautiful. . . So perfect."

The Artist took her hand in his, led her out of the alcove to the door beyond which lay his surgical theater, his studio.

"I have such plans for you," he told her.

-- End --