

Shangri-La

Trebor Healey

I think of the hospital as we make love. The ritual of it, putting this here and that there and doing things to one another, so like surgery. Do we surface horribly scarred I wonder, or healed—or is it a little or a lot of both?

We're silent, sheltered under the blinking neon, which I thought just then was like some mother's heart beating for two dark twins in the uterus of the city, as yet unborn. I know I am his only friend now, though he's talked of friends from all across the country. He's lost touch with most (they too were moving and wouldn't be traceable anyway), or had final arguments that left them estranged. He tells me now, out of nowhere, that many accused him of stealing things from them, as if it were the most outrageous and unlikely of suspicions to have toward him.



Sven Davisson

“Did they steal from you too?”

He looked at me like I was being ridiculous. “I don't have anything. What the fuck would someone steal from me?” I think of his ideas, his energy and brilliance, his unique physical beauty—they'd likely fed off that as I had. But he gives himself no credit. I'm beginning to think that his whole life is an ugly barter with the world—he steals and is stolen from.

I looked over at his slouched little boxes that held all his possessions. I'd never really looked at them before, but suddenly I noticed addresses written on them. I hopped out of bed, and read them, pausing as the light came and went. All of

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them read the same: ‘Denver.’

“The boxes are from Denver, Vince!” I said triumphantly. “That’s where you were.”

“I’ve been there a thousand times, Neill.”

“Well, that’s where you got the boxes,” I said, smiling.

“You’re a real fucking Colombo or whoever.”

“Come on, Vince, what happened there?”

“Nothing happened there, Neill, fucking nothing.” And he said it firmly so I wouldn’t ask again.

“I’ve never been to Denver.”

“It’s a shitty place,” he said apathetically. “Only the mountains are cool, you can see ’em out there on a clear day—these big, fucking rocks covered in snow. That’s all that’s good about Denver.”

“Did you ever go out to them? —the mountains I mean.”

“No, I just looked at ’em, Neill.”

“Let’s go to the mountains, Vince,” I said with enthusiasm then. He didn’t match my exuberance as he answered indifferently, ‘sure, whatever,’ so I didn’t consider it necessarily something that would happen. It involved a lot of planning after all; it wasn’t something you just did. But I thought then I wanted to share that with him. I thought that was something I could give him.

He was thinking of those other mountains still. “I was in Denver for two years, Neill, and I was a junkie the whole time. Nothing happened,” and he said it bitterly. “You fucking happy now?!” And he said it angrily like I’d pulled it out of him. He even pushed me, so I got up from the bed. *Even I* had an urge for a cigarette then. The claustrophobia of that tiny little room and the shifting weather of it was almost unbearable at times.

I yanked up the window and sat on the sill. “How can I love you if you don’t tell me your story, Vince?” I chanced, knowing it might fall flat, as it did.

“What the fuck does that mean, Neill? In fact, all that proves is how incapable of love you are.” And he was once again off. “You gotta know everything to try to convince yourself that I’m loveable. Well, I’m not, asshole!” And he looked directly at me. “My parents supposedly loved me, so I’m not interested in your fucking love either. You can dig me all up, spread me all over the fucking street, you won’t find what you’re looking for, Neill.”

“Your parents didn’t love you, Vince.”

“What the fuck do you know?” he snapped angrily.

“I love you already, that’s why I want to know everything. I want to get



closer to you.”

“Well, don’t, you’re way too fucking close as it is. Quit while you’re ahead.”

He got up now and violently yanked up his pants and put on his clothes.

“I don’t want to talk about me or ‘love’ or any of this shit anymore,” he commanded. “You fucking hear me? Quit asking me to spill all this shit! I don’t like it, Neill; I don’t like to fucking remember it! I hate my fucking life!” He was yelling at top volume now, and I was just sitting their half in shock and half in awe. “And if you’re a fucking part of it, I hate you too!” He was about to start balling, but he sucked it up, and went to the sink and splashed cold water in his face, breathing heavily to calm his nerves.

“Let’s go, let’s get the fuck out of this fucking room!” he exclaimed. I did what he said, stood up and put on my jacket. He slammed the door behind us. I knew better than to even offer a sorry. Too bad the old geezer coming toward us from the other direction couldn’t read his mood. He was muttering, and it rose to an audible level as we drew nearer.

“Know ye the wages of Sodom....”

“Oh fuck you, you Christian pile of shit; a lot of good Jesus has done you!”

Vince barked at him, scooping up a discarded shoe from the floor and firing it at him at high speed. I’d never seen this guy before and almost wanted to warn him, but he only shielded his face and smiled as the shoe ricocheted off his shoulder, probably comforting himself with the satisfying martyrdom of the attack on his ‘walk with God,’ or whatever he called his rotten, judgmental way of greeting so-called ‘sinners.’ Who’s the pervert? I wondered to myself.

Vince pushed the down button and told the geezer, “The booze will wait old man; you take a step closer to me and I’ll fucking rip your heart out and feed it to Satan!” The guy stood back, needless to say. Vince explained on the trip down that the man was a hopeless alcoholic who spent most of his time at a bar two doors down. “He’s usually too drunk to proselytize, but I guess after a nap or whatever, he feels guilty and wants to dump all his shit on someone else, the motherfucker.” I noticed Vince was pale and shaking. But I didn’t dare mention it.

The old geezer wasn’t alone of course in having problems with Vince. He never complained at the desk though as he likely didn’t want lost souls getting away before he converted them. But other people did. It’s not like the hotel would investigate any claims as most of them were of the ‘he’s an asshole, that guy in Room 645, you oughtta kick him out of here’ variety. He said, she said, blah, blah, blah. Vince was not in the minority thinking that everyone here was crazy.

“What did he do?” the Arab would tiredly ask, when a complaint against



Vince or anyone else was lodged.

‘He called me a bitch!’ or some such would be the reply.

The Arab would nod, unimpressed. “OK, I’ll ask him about it.” The Arab liked Vince more or less, but he didn’t want to deal with these people anymore than Vince did, and Vince was making his difficult job more so. He told him one afternoon before we went up, “Vince, don’t argue with people so much. I’ll kick you the fuck out.”

“Yea, yea,” Vince would reply flippantly.

“I’m serious,” and he ran his index finger across his throat. He only gave Vince more leeway than others because he wasn’t as crazy or fucked-up as the other residents, and he paid on time. Sane people are attractive tenants in such a setting no matter how rude or arrogant they behave.

Vince stopped once outside the big glass doors and he looked almost disoriented. I’d wondered where we were going, but suddenly it looked like he was at a complete loss. I don’t know what made me do it, but I just grabbed him and held him hard to myself and he squeezed back with even more gusto.

He released me and shook his head hard, like a dog after rain, and then growled out a deep roar, before blinking his eyes and saying, composed again, “I shouldn’t have done that.”

I just looked at him as he became his old self again, full of ideas and places and things to show me. “Come on, you need to come to this Tibetan place with me, man.” ‘Oh that,’ I thought. I hadn’t read the book he’d given me, and wasn’t terribly enthused about visiting whatever place he had in mind, but I wasn’t going to be contrary just now. A little jaunt would do us both some good I figured. We’ll let the world absorb and neutralize our pain; dissipate it; blow it away like unlucky blossoms or dead leaves in the wind.

“Did you read the book?” he asked me.

“Some of it,” I bluffed. I’d actually only looked at the pictures, one of which, I thought now, Vince had assumed the character of for the past 10 minutes.

“You need this shit if anyone does,” he said arrogantly, though I felt suddenly very together considering. This shit was apparently Buddhism, a Zen assessment if there ever was one. “It’s up near the park.”

“What is? Where are we going?”

“Something ‘gotso’ or some name like that. I don’t fucking know Tibetan,” he answered impatiently. “Anyway, you’ll see. There’s a lama there; he’s kinda cool. I met him a few days ago.”

“At the Zen Center?” I queried.



“Fuck no, not at the Zen Center. You know I don’t go there anymore. This guy’s Tibetan anyway.”

Vince had once taken me to the Zen Center on one of our day-long excursions around town, but of course that was Japanese Buddhism, not Tibetan, as he’d just now reminded me. We’d gone looking for the Zen Center after he’d read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*—though it was probably the author’s nervous breakdown more than the book’s Buddhist philosophy that had first inspired Vince to seek it out. A sprawling brick renovated girls’ school from 80 or 100 years ago, the Zen Center was surrounded by trees and always looked to me like the kind of place you’d want to go inside of and look around. And it didn’t disappoint. It was replete with stairways and arched little windows, courtyards full of plants and old relics and bells from the mysterious faraway worlds of the Buddhas. We went to the zendo and did the meditation, after which I remember walking down Haight Street while Vince enthusiastically and maniacally went on and on about his newfound desire to go live in a cave or mountain meditation center where he’d heal all his wounds and leave this wretched and impure world behind forever. I was surprised he’d be interested in anything so structured, or with any kind of rules other than his own for that matter. Vince always seemed an unlikely candidate for Buddhism. Wasn’t it about patience and peace of mind? But I figured it was just another of his momentary enthusiasms, like film school and all the rest.

Sure enough, a few weeks later, his Zen plan and its promise of enlightenment self-destructed. He’d had a run-in with another ‘practitioner’ on one of his visits there who’d made the mistake—the ‘zealous, little, by-the-book, new age creep’ Vince later called him—of grabbing Vince’s shoulder and gently turning him since he’d accidentally faced the wrong way in the zendo. But no one touched Vince without permission, gently or otherwise. “I don’t like those people,” he’d decided after that, and I assumed that was the end for Buddhism.

But just as one book had led him to the Zen Center, it was yet again this *Tibetan Book of the Dead* of his—with the aid of an old junkie acquaintance—that had brought him propitiously into contact with the lama. Vince had met the lama while foraging with his drug connection through Golden Gate Park, on his way to score some acid or whatever else might be available up on hippie hill.

“I met this guy in the park,” Vince continued as we hopped on the streetcar, paid our fare and plopped down. “He was sitting on a bench, and Hal dragged me over to meet him. You know, I’d fuckin’ read that book, so I wanted to ask him some shit. I never even got the acid,” he laughed. “Tibetan Buddhism *is* acid,” Vince beamed, “it’s nothing like that Zen crap.”



“So what’s this place we’re going to then?” I asked him, curious, but also skeptical. I’d noticed that he was careful to point out that Tibetan Buddhism was altogether different from Zen, thus preventing me from possibly protesting that he was being inconsistent.

“Shangri-La,” Vince joked, answering me sarcastically, before telling me. “It’s like a house they’ve turned into a Tibetan shrine. There aren’t loads of people like the Zen Center; that’s what Hal says anyway.” The less people the better was a general rule with Vince of course. He was always more drawn to ideas: the ideas pulled him in and the people drove him away. What an indictment of religion, I thought. One of his many ratty old t-shirts—erotic memories: how many had he worn, and had he worn this one when aroused and refusing to remove his shirt?—said ‘God, Save Me From Your Followers.’ Soon he’d make his own, with a black felt marker, a variation on a theme: ‘If you see a Buddhist in the zendo, kill him.’

“You haven’t been there?” I asked, slightly vexed.

“No, I told you I just met him,” he looked at me as if I were stupid.

Cho Phel Gyatso Center of Tibetan Buddhism was out near Golden Gate Park, within view of the hospital on the hill where Peter had been cut up. How strange, I thought briefly to myself, before dismissing it: yet another new and mysterious thing, like Vince, loitering around ground zero and close to the knives. Maybe I wasn’t living in two different worlds after all.

We crossed the Panhandle, a long narrow section of the park that ran out between two boulevards near its eastern entrance. It was a blustery day, as this was summer in San Francisco, and the high branches of the giant eucalyptus trees whipped about, looking furious and put-upon. We reached the opposite side, and crossing the street, saw before us the red and gold painted Victorian which was our destination.

We climbed up the house’s steep wooden steps and knocked. A middle-aged woman opened the door for us, smiling and saying hello softly. Vince told her we were there to see Lama Tenzin, and she asked us if we had an appointment.

“No, I just met him in the park and wanted to see if he was around, and for him to meet my friend,” Vince said with uncharacteristic politeness, offering a thumb in my direction. She looked a little perplexed or unsure what to do, but he kept talking. “He said come by anytime. We were talking in the park about the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. She relented finally, inviting us in, where we removed our shoes and followed her up the stairs.

When we reached the upstairs landing, we were in what I supposed was once a living room, it having since been converted into their meditation hall, an elabo-



rately decorated shrine room that reminded me of a catholic church, what with all the candles burning, incense wafting and its endless array of saints, or what they called ‘incarnated emanations of the Buddha,’ lining the walls. Opposite us was a huge bookshelf-like structure filled with literally thousands of small, golden Buddhas. The rest of the room was hung with numerous silk Tibetan tanka paintings of various other Buddhas. A large gold-trimmed wooden altar and throne sat at the head of the room, in a garden of statues and flowers, burning candles, incense, and offering bowls of rice and fruit. Before us, all across the floor, like waves in a sea,



were rows and rows of red and gold cushions for meditators. I’d assumed that all Buddhism was simple and unadorned like Zen, but this was like the catholic church all over again, and then some. There was something both comforting to me and vaguely threatening in that fact. I thought it rich and pretty, peaceful and warm—a sanctuary. But I remained wary of whatever belief system propped up all this beauty.

“Wait here,” the woman softly instructed us. We looked at the square cushions—the Tibetan version of a zafu I assumed—but not knowing how long we’d wait, and being in new surroundings besides, we remained standing, a little restless in the almost oppressive silence of the place, gawking at the decorations that Vince was now exclaiming as “fucking dope!”

Momentarily, the lama appeared, smiling. He was a diminutive little Tibetan



man, only around 30 or so years old, with a shaved head and robes of magenta and gold. He softly said hello and bowed his head quickly, before motioning us to follow him into what was ostensibly the center's library.

The lama gathered up his robes to carefully seat himself in a chair, and motioned us with a nod to sit in those opposite him, which Vince and I quickly plopped into.

Vince introduced me as "... his homosexual lover." I was mortified, having been thus outed against my will, and for the first time—and in front of a religious man no less. But I was also strangely flattered to have finally heard Vince refer to me as any kind of lover or boyfriend, though I realized he was probably only using it to discomfit the lama, which seemed, considering the circumstances and Vince's assessment of him, even more disrespectful than usual. I blushed.

But the lama just laughed, a sort of jubilant open-mouthed bark almost, which relieved me somewhat, but also made me more vexed as to how to act in front of him. He reached out to shake my hand heartily and I managed a tentative smile.

He liked Vince, he told me, and proceeded to ask him all sorts of personal questions about his money and job woes, his feelings about society and his family. He seemed to know a lot about Vince, but I thought they'd only met briefly. I was still recovering from Vince's introduction, but now I was beginning to wonder about just how long they'd actually talked that day in the park. They were going on and on about all sorts of things, like old friends. What would Vince steal *from him*, I wondered absently.

With no other recourse, I just listened. The lama, whose English was impeccable, displayed a combination of patience and lightness in talking to Vince, which was wholly unlike anyone else's reaction to him. I could see he took Vince seriously, but not what was happening to him, whereas Vince himself as well as everyone else seemed to do just the opposite. The lama didn't mock him or trivialize him, but he laughed at Vince's dramatic reports of injustice and paranoia. When Vince looked hurt, the lama would simply smile briefly and kindly, and then he'd get serious and say something like: "The activity of the world is empty and pointless. None of it matters Vince. None of it is what's in your heart. Your heart is the world that matters and that is real."

Vince would accept such answers, but I'm not so sure he'd agree. He didn't have that opinion of his heart or the world. He went on and on instead with his litany: he'd had it with the welfare office, they were worthless, having no desire to help anyone. Smiling again, Lama Tenzin agreed. "And that is the nature of the civil service. They are not the people who decided this generosity they dispense. They are



only the administrators of it, and as such are more interested in keeping it all in order than in helping anyone. You must understand intention Vince. You see, they aren't there to help you; that is not their intention, though there may be individuals who are there for that reason. But ultimately, they are there to execute certain duties, that's all. You shouldn't expect otherwise, though sometimes you may benefit from a kind person who works there."

"I disagree," Vince snapped.

"Please explain your position, Vincent," the lama calmly replied, calmly.

"They are paid to help me; to serve me. They don't do either of those things."

I remembered then one of his nuggets regarding me and the middle class: 'the worst thing about the middleclass is that they not only want, but expect, something for nothing.' I thought in that moment that every insult he'd ever hurled at me was really aimed at himself.

The lama continued: "Ask them next time you are there what they are paid for, Vincent. Ask them how they get promotions. I think you will find that it has little or nothing to do with love, which seems to be what you want from them."

"I want their money; I don't want their love," Vince said defensively, looking almost shocked at how the lama had called his bluff.

"You don't need either Vincent, but you do seek their love in your odd way. That is wholly natural; we all seek love. Good for you." Vince bristled and then looked confused, his brows scrunched up to frustration as if to say, 'What the fuck are you talking about?' But the lama was so disarming, it threw Vince off. 'My god, he's met his match,' I thought to myself, watching them spar back and forth like they were playing ping pong or tennis. "You tell me you want them to help you," the lama continued articulately, "and maybe they are helping you. I think they are. Vincent, remember what I said about nothing is as it seems. You are too suspicious of everything when you try too hard to understand it."

Vince just sighed. "Who fucking cares?" he said dolefully. I winced at his language, but the lama didn't. He seemed to find it almost endearing, smiling whenever I thought he should look offended or shocked.

"Exactly!" the lama now announced, grinning broadly and with complete self-assurance, sitting back as if to signal the lesson for today was over.

It was unbelievable to me. The lama had silenced Vincent Malone. And yet you couldn't say he'd beat him. He just kept kneading the dough of whatever it was until they reached a sort of stalemate where they agreed—or the source of Vince's trouble was once again laid bare. I suppose what the lama did that the rest of us



never could, was to stay with Vince, keep up with him and not react. It was all really just patience. Vince could be worn down too it appeared, or exhausted as the case might be. Or perhaps he really had met his match. Either way, I figured, this exchange is doomed. I looked at the lama then, almost as if to warn him that Vince would turn on him too, but the lama only put his hand on my back as he led us out, patting me softly, as if for encouragement.

“It was nice to meet you, Neill. Do come again,” And to Vince he added, curtly but kindly: “Pay attention, Vincent; pay close attention.”

We ended up arguing on the way home. We were so close to the hospital, nearly in its shadow, how could I not ask?

“When’s your next radiation appointment?”

He glared at me, but he answered sarcastically. “Well, as you can see, Neill, with all my metaphysical dilettantism and such, that I’m big into death, so why would I seek out hospitals?” I rolled my eyes, but he wasn’t going to let me off. He put his face in mine, “Huh, Neill, why would I fucking care about you and your little brother and all your cute little cancer adventures with your fucking family? Huh?”

“Leave them out of this, Vince.”

“Out of what, Neill? Our fucked-up relationship? I thought we were supposed to share everything, tell all our stories ...”. He was gesticulating like a cheerful lecturer now, while the bus crowd watched from down-turned faces and I kept my gaze averted, out the window. “In fact, why haven’t you invited me home for dinner?” I looked at him then. “Huh?” he snapped. “Huh, what’s the deal, Neill, don’t I rate?” I didn’t want to get into it there on the bus, but I was trapped.

“Vince,” and I looked at him as he looked smugly back at me. “Vince, you would never come if I invited you, you know that.”

“You couldn’t do it anyway, you’re a little closet case.” Then he shouted. “Hey everybody, look at the fuckin’ faggot!” Who’s like whose Dad, I thought then.

“You are a total asshole,” I stated then righteously, and pulled hard on the stop-request cable. And I *was* near tears this time, as I got up and brushed by him. He followed me off the bus of course, and we took the long walk home, all the time his half-contrite barking from behind filling my ears, while I contemplated whether I really wanted to have sex with him ever again.

When he caught up to me, he had that look on his face. “Neill, I went on the wrong day, and all hell broke loose, and I called the receptionist a fuckwad and that pretty much got me kicked out of there.”

“You’re a real charmer, Vince,” I answered him, but I felt like I no longer



cared.

“I’m effective. I love mistreating heterosexual women who think they can flirt their way through life. I’m their worst fucking nightmare.”

“And their cutest nightmare,” I added cynically.

“I’m not cute,” he stated matter-of-factly then.

I nodded my head. “No, of course not.” But by then he was already in the corner liquor store and I was stranded, resigned to wait outside. He was back in a jiffy, opening a package of gum with his teeth, a bottle visible in his pocket. Those places weren’t easy to steal from but he’d managed it with the time-worn, and as such, bold deception of buying some trivial little item like gum.

Back to the Baldwin we went to spackle over the cracks. I truly wasn’t that into it, and maybe he sensed that as we rolled and roiled on the lumpy little bed. With one great shove, he’d pushed me off and out of him, climbed out of bed and gotten dressed.

He’d never done that before. I’d always been careful with Vince. He was like a whirling dervish of boldness and fear both, and no place more so than when we were having sex. There were never words between us then, and so I learned to read the warnings that flashed across his eyes, cautioning me that any wrong move could turn me into his father, at which point he’d repel me, then embrace me desperately in rapid succession.

But the embrace did not come this time.

I knew it was his father. I’d waited for him. Now something had brought him back or triggered the domino effect of it. I hadn’t been paying attention or I hadn’t cared enough to keep track. Without looking at me now, he quickly grabbed his pack of Drum tobacco and matches, and went out into the hall and on down to the fire escape to smoke.

I don’t know what made me do it. I knew better than to confront him when he was in that dark mood. Maybe I just felt guilty and responsible for it having gone wrong. But I followed after him, hoping against all evidence that this time it would be different; that something would finally change. He glared at me when I approached him, and his furrowed brow said clearly, ‘stay away.’ I reached out for him anyway, as if to break his fall from the fire escape and hold him here; help him push through whatever had once again risen up to cut him off from me. But this wasn’t about a t-shirt, and an embrace was not what would bring him out of it. How could I really know what twisted like a snake through his mind at those times? I’d been arrogant to think I could.

He barked at me, and slapped my hand away, “How dare you touch me!” And



then he reached out with both of his hands in front of him, dropping the cigarette that sparked momentarily at his feet before descending six floors, and he pushed me hard against the doorframe.

I was momentarily shocked; even terrified, and every part of me felt like it was suddenly folding in, or as if the iron of the fire escape had fallen prey to metal fatigue and was now collapsing under us, from where we'd freefall down, down, ending up in the refuse pile of his stolen booty, cigarettes and paper plates far below in the alley. Vince was enormous then, enormous in his anger and in his raw animal fury. I saw fire all over him as the neon flashed, and raging dragons in his eyes

I stood there, every muscle in my body clenched, wholly paralyzed. I knew if I attempted any move he might send me away once and for all, if not attack me outright and throw me off the fire escape. And yet holding him was all I wanted to do, or could think to do. I couldn't very well walk away now. I felt, in fact, that if I turned from him now, he would not be there when I looked back for him. I felt stuck, and my eyes filled with tears for him, one little boy for another, reaching out for him and calling him toward me all at once, but only with my eyes. My body had lost its voice in the one place that belonged to it. And so I spoke words, chancing it all, in a place where no words had ever been uttered.

"Fuck me, Vince," I begged through my tears. He pushed me indoors and did just that. He was like a wrathful god then, one of those crazy tanka pictures from that disturbing Tibetan book of his I'd never read, with flames in his eyes and blood in his mouth; his cock like a reptile, its heartless tongue flipping in and out. He simply crushed me and I bled. He purposely hurt me, and when he was through, he was pale and shaking like he'd been earlier that day. And then he got dressed and left.

I laid there ruminating, dreading that something had changed alright and that perhaps he'd become a violent maniac from here on out. I told myself that I should get out while I still could. But I couldn't turn from him. I looked at the ceiling, stained as ever, making shapes now of it, remembering the old forgotten Virgin Marys I'd found in such places in my youth, and wondered as the tears came again, where is all this going? How did I get here? And why? But I had a vague idea, even if I didn't understand it completely. It was like some part of me that had been lost had been found when I saw him that day in the clinic waiting room. I knew if I left, I wouldn't just be leaving him; I'd be leaving something of myself; something of my better self.

I try to sort it out in my mind, breathing heavily, but all I really feel is like I miss Peter and I want to go home. So I got up then and packed my little gym bag, thinking of how we laughed, and how even when my mother was falling apart,



things never got as twisted as they did here with Vince.

And then he returned, and I saw his eyes, calm again. And in them I saw the part of me that had fought to save itself from that bourgeois sleep of a world that had never been my own, even though it was the only one I knew. I belonged here in the Baldwin with Vince, come what may. I put my bag back down and sat on the floor.

He went to the window to smoke and we sat there together in silence in that sad little room in that rundown residential hotel; and I understood suddenly that *this is it*—this is home. Because what was true and what was a lie was always very clear in Vince's eyes—you could see it there, almost yelling from beyond his pupils—truth, with a 'goddammit' tagged on for emphasis. His truth at least, but often mine too. Whoever he was, and for all his many flaws and poor technique, what looked out from deep within him always relentlessly, vigilantly challenged me to cut to the painful, raw core. I loved him for that. If for nothing else, I loved him for that because no one else had ever demanded the truth, and that was what I'd longed for. I knew now why I'd felt some satisfaction at Peter's scars, my mother's tears—it was the rawness of the love and honesty they demanded. It had taken an actual knife to cut to the core of what mattered between us. I'd needed to bleed too, and Vince is the knife, and I'll take the scar.

"Gonna go home, Neill?" A part of me wanted to still, but I said nothing. "None of that should have happened, Neill. You shouldn't have come out there on the fire escape. You gotta give me some space." I just sat there and listened, feeling he was a blessing and a curse both and I had to take the one with the other. "Sit down, here, Neill. I'm not gonna hurt you. Let me show you something." And out came his books.

We sat there on the floor, the sun streaming through the window during the one hour of morning that the sun reached his room. I watched those ever-present dust moats that always haunted this place or blessed it—or both, or neither. He sat indian-style, with a big copy of Jung's *Man and His Symbols* open to a beautiful picture of a Tibetan mandala, and he started exclaiming on it, sharing his insight and relating it to all the millions of other occult or metaphysical books he'd read. I didn't follow his reasoning, nor see the parallels, but I didn't need to—I was too distracted in fact with the real thing.

I just watched him, and I could see he was hounded by some nagging anxiety, among those countless thousands he rarely shares that claw at him from below—dragging him back to hell? —and he's doing what he does to stay above it, or elude its grasp. He's building a tower. All the time, brick by brick it grows like a big men-



tal edifice—a spiraling, dizzying minaret doomed to fall, with no foundation really but the chaos of his subconscious and the world around him where he gathers his bricks. And inside it, like magma, the pain is rising just as fast, so there's no time to waste. He must have built it a thousand times by now I think, those suicide attempts being the most deafening collapses; the furthest falls.

My eyes tear up because I can't seem to look at him now without feeling the full weight of him and everything that has made him this little bricklayer of ideas and theories, hopes and dreams, conflicts and despairs. He'll build it around himself and he'll build it around me too I suppose. Which makes of it a tomb. I love him surely, but that doesn't mean I believe in what he's doing. I don't.

He stops mid-sentence when he looks up and sees my tears. "What the fuck? Don't suck me into that!" I've angered him of course, and though it smarts, how could I have expected otherwise? I've interrupted the construction. He'll smooth it all over by changing the subject, but he won't cry. Vince never cries—the tower would melt. He believes in the psychologists' assessment that depression is anger unexpressed, and he's happy to cut it off at the pass with his fury and rage. But I'm not crying tears of depression. Albeit, they are sad tears, they are tears of love. You can't expect those from Vince either. He couldn't take that chance.

"Don't fucking whine to me," he says with disgust, "I don't pity anyone." I thought then how he sounded like all the rightwing politicians he was forever condemning, but why remind Vince of his inconsistencies and contradictions? Such a criticism would be just another wrecking ball to his tower and he'd have none of it. I realized then that he had a lot more to lose than I'd ever thought he had—which made me only more tearful. And so I excused myself and went away.

"Where the fuck are you going?" he calls down the hall.

"I'll be back," I manage to say. "I'm just going down to the store for a minute." He believes me, knowing that I know better than to lie to him by now.

"You have nowhere else to go!" he shouts as I clamor into the elevator. I think to myself, 'true,' and 'shame on you, Vince, for saying it.'

As I ride the rickety elevator down, I think sadly that another moment of connection has been lost. Oh, and how many there have been. I think to get in the car and go, but where to? I'll wander in limbo. What better place to fill the role than this skidrow? I opt for silent self-pity, walking the streets in the hope that I can spend my tears and thus save him the bother of them. I stand and watch the passed-out drunks; the muttering schizophrenics; the scamming immigrant kids and runaways, forever scheming how next to score; the tired-looking prostitutes and their heartless pimps. And I don't feel lucky this time.



I only know one way. The body is the way to reach him. So I go to the corner liquor store and I buy a bottle of scotch and up I go, back to the 6th floor.

I knock at his door, and he opens it a crack and then completely, contrite and pulling me in. And he's all over me and we make love again quickly and fall off to sleep.

And then he wakes me up in the middle of the night, shaking me by the shoulder like a kid, like there's an earthquake or a fire or something; like it couldn't possibly wait.

Blurry-eyed, I muttered: "What?"

His eyes shown weirdly young and innocent, and he said: "I love you, you know. I really love you." I squinted and pushed myself up on one elbow, just as he rolled over away from me and closed his eyes again. Had he been dreaming? Had I? I nudged him, but there was no response. I knew he'd never cop to it. But he had. And in the deepest dark of night. He'd copped to love.



Sven Davisson

