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The Poison Artist

Written by Jonathan Moore

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The POISON ARTIST

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ONE

AFTER HE CHECKED in and got up to his room, Caleb stood in front of the full-length mirror screwed to the bathroom door and looked at his forehead. In the back of the cab he'd stopped the bleeding by pressing his shirt cuff against the cut, but there were still tiny slivers of glass lodged under his skin from the tumbler she'd thrown. He picked them out with his fingernail and dropped them on the carpet.

Then the blood started again: a thin runner that dropped between his eyes and split on the rise of his nose to descend in twin tracks toward the corners of his mouth. He looked at that a moment, the blood on his face and the bruise just getting started on his forehead, and then he went to the sink and wet one of the washcloths. He wrung it out and wiped the blood off, then went and sat on the floor with his back against the closet door. The little blades of broken glass glittered in the weave of the red carpet.

It was good glass. Murano crystal, maybe. They'd bought a set of the tumblers at the Macy's fronting Union Square a year ago at Christmas, right after she'd moved in. There'd been ice-skaters going in circles on the rink beneath the lit-up tree, and they'd stood there awhile, side by side, to watch them. She'd been so warm then, as if there were embers sewn into her dress.

Radiant.

That was the word in his mind when he pictured her. Even now. It was a dangerous path to stroll down, but what wasn't?

He picked one of the shards out of the carpet and held it on the pad of his fingertip.

On their third date, they'd walked on the beach across the road from the western edge of Golden Gate Park. She'd taken off her sandals, had slapped them together a few times to get the sand off them before putting them into her purse. The Dutch windmill and some of the big cypress trees were breaking up the fog as it streamed in off the ocean. Bridget was holding his hand and looking at the blue-gray gloom of the Pacific. She'd cried out suddenly, falling into him as her right knee buckled.

"Ouch. *Fuck*."

"What?" he said. "What?"

She was hopping on one foot now, her arm around his waist.

"Glass, I think. Or a shell."

He helped her to a concrete staircase that led up the seawall to the sidewalk. She sat on the third step and he knelt in the sand and took her small bare foot into his hands. It was tan and slender, and he could see the Y-shaped white mark where the thong of her sandal had hidden her skin from the sun. For a second, he saw up her leg, the skin smooth and perfect all the way to her pink panties. She saw his eyes' focus and blushed, then used her hand to fold her skirt between her thighs.

"Sorry," he said.

She smiled.

"My foot, stupid."

"Right. Your foot."

The piece of glass had gone into the soft white skin in the arch of her foot. It wasn't bleeding until he pulled the shard out, and then the blood came. It trickled to her heel and then dripped onto the bottom step. Bridget made a low gasping sound. When he looked up at her, she was biting her lip and her eyes were closed.

"You got tissues or something in your purse?"

"Yeah. Take it. I can't look."

He took her purse and found the plastic-wrapped package of tissues. He pulled out a handful and folded them into a thick pad and then pressed it against the cut, holding it tight. She made the gasping sound again.

He didn't know her well. Not then. He'd come to know her sounds, would know the difference between a gasp of pleasure and one of pain, or the quick way she would draw a breath when she was afraid, like a swimmer getting one last burst of oxygen before a wave washes over. But that afternoon, on his knees at the edge of the beach with her foot in his hands, he didn't know any of these things yet. She was the girl he'd met at a gallery opening two weeks ago. The beautiful shy girl in a thin-strapped black dress, who, it turned out, had painted half the work in the show. He didn't know much about her except that he wanted to know everything.

"Am I hurting you?"

"I just really don't like blood."

"Pretend it's paint."

She laughed, her eyes still closed.

"I'll carry you to the car, so the cut stays clean."

His car was a quarter mile away, to the north, where the beach ended and the cliffs began.

She opened her eyes and looked down the beach.

"Can you manage it?"

"Easy," he said.

And it was. She hooked her elbow at the back of his neck and he lifted her up and carried her in his arms, and thirty minutes later, when he parked outside his house on the slope of Mount Sutro, he carried her inside. He cleaned her foot with hydrogen peroxide and covered the cut with gauze and tape, but that came off in his bed soon enough, and neither of them noticed. The wound traced the patterns of her pleasure in blood on his sheets as he knelt before her and learned the first of many lessons about the woman he would come to love and to live with. Later, when they realized her cut had reopened, he took her down the hill to the hospital, where they cleaned the laceration a second time before closing it with stitches.

They hadn't spent a night apart afterward, until now.

He sat on the carpet with the washcloth against his forehead and thought the simple artistry of the pattern was something she wouldn't have missed. It might even please her a little, might make her smile in that quiet way she did when the paint covered the last empty places on the canvas and the shapes came into focus as though

a fog had blown clear. Broken glass at the beginning; broken glass at the end. He pulled the washcloth away and looked at it.

"Blood in, blood out," he said.

Like a rite. The code of some secret society. Their sect of two, now disbanded. He wadded the washcloth and threw it into the bathroom.

He'd left the house with nothing but his wallet. No phone, no keys. He'd walked down the hill to the UCSF Medical Center, called a cab from a pay phone. He stood waiting for it, thinking maybe Bridget would drive down. Double park in the ambulance loading zone and come running to him. To apologize, to ask him to come back.

But if she'd come, it was after the cab rolled up, so he was gone.

The bar at the Palace Hotel was called the Pied Piper. A Maxfield Parrish painting hung across the back bar and gave the place its name — ninety-six square feet of light and shadow and menace, the children leaving the safety of the walled city of Hamelin to follow a monster with a face as old and as cruel as a rock.

It wasn't the first time Caleb had taken shelter in a painting, giving himself over to the canvas until both the room and the world holding it went black and silent. Some paintings were made for it, maybe. When he found them, and sat close enough to see the individual brush strokes, the room would eventually tilt toward their frames, as if the mass of the earth had recentered itself. Drawing him closer, drawing him to the world hidden beyond the veneer of paint.

He blinked and looked at his watch. It was a Saturday afternoon, not quite two o'clock.

There were three people in the bar, total, counting the bartender. Caleb pulled out a stool and sat, elbows on the glowing mahogany. The only real light in the place was aimed at the painting, and the bartender gave him time to study it again before he finally came over.

"You like it?"

"Always have."

The bartender had been studying *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* too, but now he turned back to Caleb.

"Hotel commissioned it," he said. "Paid six grand, in 1908. Parrish

knew it'd hang in a barroom. He wanted men to sit where you are, to look up and maybe recognize a kid — to think of their own kids, waiting at home. And then not buy that second drink."

"Does it work?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. You know what you want?"

"Jameson, neat. And a pint of Guinness."

"Look at a menu?"

Caleb shook his head, then looked down at the bar. Someone had left the local section of the morning's *Chronicle*. It had been folded twice so that only one headline was visible:

CHARLES CRANE MISSING 10 WEEKS
POLICE: "WE NEED LEADS"

Underneath the headline was a picture of a heavyset man wearing a dress shirt and a tie. Caleb studied the photograph, then flipped the newspaper and pushed it away. He knew what it was like, having your picture run under a headline like that. Being missing wasn't always so hard. Sometimes the hard part didn't start until they found you. If you couldn't give the right answers, people looked at you sideways for the rest of your life.

He looked back at Maxfield Parrish's painting. In the foreground, the Piper led a group of children under a dark, spreading tree. Rough ground. To keep up, the youngest children were scrambling on all fours over broken rocks. The Piper, his back stooped and his hair hanging in stringy ropes, strode in the middle of them.

The bartender put a tumbler on the wooden plank in front of Caleb and poured two fingers of Jameson.

"Thanks."

"You got it."

Caleb drank the whiskey in one long swallow and set the glass down when the bartender came back with the pint of Guinness.

"I'll have one more of those."

"Now we know," the bartender said.

"What's that?"

"The painting doesn't work."

Caleb shook his head.

"No kids at home, or anywhere. So it wouldn't work on me."

The bartender took the bottle of Jameson from its shelf on the back wall. He poured the drink and pushed it back to Caleb.

"Car accident?"

"Huh?"

"Your forehead. Car accident?"

"No. Girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend, I guess."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay." He paused and picked up the pint glass. "I mean, it's not okay. It's not. But it's okay you asked. The rest, no."

"That one's on the house, then." The man was pointing at the fresh whiskey.

"Thanks."

The bartender bent down and came up a moment later with a clean towel wrapped around a handful of ice.

"Thanks."

"Looked like you needed it, is all."

"Is it bleeding?"

"No."

Caleb took the towel and held it against his forehead until the heat of the wound drew the melting ice water through the cloth. It felt cool on his skin. He held it awhile and then set it down.

A woman in a black satin dress walked into the bar and looked the place over. Her hair was as dark as her dress, falling just past her shoulders so that it half obscured the choker of pearls she wore. She looked at each man in the room, her lips pressed lightly together as if in concentration.

Then she turned and left.

Her dress had no back to it at all, and her skin looked as soft as a white oleander petal. Caleb watched her leave, and then there was a silence between him and the bartender like a cloud passing by. When it broke, the bartender held out his hand.

"I'm Will, by the way," the bartender said. They shook.

"Caleb."

"What's the ex-girl's name?"

"Bridget."

"She's got good aim."

Caleb took a long drink of his beer.

"I'm not sure if she meant to hit me or not."

"Steer clear till you figure that out."

"Yeah," Caleb said.

He let his eyes go back to the wall behind the bar.

The woman in the black dress had been at least thirty feet from him, but he could still smell her perfume. It was a dark scent, like a flower that only blooms at night.

After the third Jameson, he paid his tab and walked back to his room. He looked out the windows as he made his way across the lobby. It was dark now. The woman in the backless satin dress stood near the valet stand, where there would be no warmth for her. She couldn't have heard him, couldn't have seen him. But she turned, slowly, and met his stare. He nodded to her and then went up the stairs to his room.

He woke in the dark of his room near midnight, sober again.

Even before he placed himself, he was aching.

He swung his feet to the floor and sat drinking a bottle of mineral water, and then he picked up the phone and dialed his home number. By the fourth ring he knew she wasn't there and he hung up. He was hungry but didn't want to eat, and he didn't want to be awake but knew he couldn't sleep. More than anything, he wanted not to be alone, but he remembered how it had gone with Bridget in the morning and the way it had all come to an end before he'd walked out of his house. He knew he would be alone a long while.

He went to the bathroom and took a shower. Then he dressed in the only clothes he had, and went out of his room and down the stairs again to the lobby. He stood at the threshold of the Pied Piper, but it was crowded now, and loud. Standing room only at the bar.

He left and walked out of the hotel, standing on the corner of Market and New Montgomery in the blowing cold. Fingers of fog moved down Market Street and mixed with steam from the street vents as it blew toward the bay. If it weren't midnight, he could walk up to Union Square and stand by the ice rink and the lit-up tree to watch the skaters and scratch open that warm memory until it was flowing and sticky.

He wondered where Bridget was right now.

That was a trap, but he went there anyway, picturing her in the cold fog and the dark, crying. Or in her studio on Bush Street with a bottle in one hand and a brush in the other, slashing the canvas with paint. Or maybe she wasn't cold, or alone, or thinking of him at all—

Across the street there was a bar. It looked open, but it was very dark. The only true light came from the sign outside, each letter traced in red neon:

H
O
U
S
E
of
SHIELDS
Cocktails

He stood with his hands in his pockets and looked at the sign. A few of the letters had bad transformers and flickered. After a while, he crossed the street without looking for traffic, and went to the door.

There were ten or fifteen people in the place, but the only sound as he walked in was the distant, metal-on-metal screech of a streetcar grinding its way down Market Street, and then the door closed behind him and there was silence. There was no music. A few faces looked around from the bar to see who had come inside with the draft of cold air, and after they registered him and marked him as nothing of consequence, they turned back to their drinks and to each other and to the low murmur of their conversations.

Other than the bar and a few vacant booths, there was nothing to the place. He went to the end of the bar away from the group and took the middle of three stools. An empty reservoir glass with a slotted spoon sat on the bar to Caleb's left. There was a faint lipstick mark on it. One of the two bartenders came over and took the glass away and wiped down the bar. He looked at Caleb but didn't say anything.

"Jameson," Caleb said. "Neat. And a Guinness on the side."

The man went away to get the drinks, and Caleb looked around. The high ceiling was painted black so that it disappeared into the shadows. The wall behind the bar was paneled in dark, oiled wood, and the front wall of the room was split up by thick, wooden columns and recessed alcoves holding bronze art deco goddesses. Each nude statuette held aloft an olive branch, and from those twigs sprouted soft incandescent bulbs that gave the only light in the place. This was a high temple of alcohol; there was nothing on offer here but drink. The bartender came back with the Jameson and Caleb took that and drank it, then waited for the beer.

He smelled her before he saw her, that shadow-flower scent, and as he turned to his left the room blurred a bit from the whiskey, but steadied when his eyes settled on her. She was sitting on the stool next to him. Her hands were folded atop a black clutch bag. She pivoted at the waist, and eyed him head to belt and back again without moving a muscle in her neck. Then she smiled.

"He took my drink. I wasn't quite finished with it."

"I'm sorry," Caleb said. "I thought this seat was empty."

"Your seat was empty. I was sitting here." She reached out and used a lacquered fingernail to trace a small circle on the bar top in front of her. "And there used to be a drink sitting here."

She spoke with an accent he couldn't identify. It wasn't a voice that came from another place, but maybe a voice that came from another time. Or maybe that was the dress she wore, and the choker of pearls, and that dark perfume. As if she'd stepped out of a silent film, or crawled down from one of the alcoves where previously she'd been holding up a bronze olive branch, casting light and shadow. She could have been anywhere from eighteen to thirty-five, but whatever her age, she didn't belong to this year or even this century. She reminded him of a painting, but he couldn't wholly remember which one — maybe it was one he'd just dreamt. Seeing her was like finding something that had been lost for centuries, then restored to its rightful place: he was in the hush of a museum near closing time. He felt the distant heat of the overhead spots and the spent awe hanging in the gallery's air, like old dust.

He leaned toward her.

"What were you drinking?" he heard himself ask. It didn't take much more than a whisper — the room was that quiet. "I'll buy you another one."

"Berthe de Joux," she said. "French pour."

He waved the bartender over and repeated the name of her drink; the man nodded and came back a moment later with a tray. He put a clean reservoir glass between Caleb and the woman, poured an ounce of the green absinthe into it, and set the silver slotted spoon across the top of the glass. He put a sugar cube on the spoon and then set a small carafe of ice water on the bar. He nodded at Caleb and then went back to the group at the other end of the bar.

"You pour it," she said. "I like to watch the *louche*."

"I don't know what that means."

"Drip the water over the sugar cube, until I say when."

"All right."

The carafe must have been in a freezer before the bartender filled it with ice water. His fingertips melted through a scrim of frost when he picked it up. He held the carafe above the sugar cube and began to tilt it, but she stopped him. Her fingers were light and cool on his wrist.

"Higher," she said. "It has to be a little higher."

She moved his hand until the lip of the carafe was nearly a foot above the sugar.

"That's right," she said. The way she let go of his wrist was like being kissed by her fingers. "Go on. The slowest drip you can."

He watched the sugar cube melt through the slotted spoon into the absinthe. The liquid in the glass changed from green to milky white, the cold water precipitating something from the spirit. He could smell a mix of bitter herbs now. Wormwood and rue. Anise.

"Stop."

He put the carafe down. She took the drink and dipped in the slotted spoon to get the rest of the sugar, and then she sipped it with her eyes closed. Her eyelids were dusted with something that might have been crushed malachite. When she opened her eyes, she smiled again and put the drink down.

"Your forehead," she said.

She reached to him and touched the wound with the tip of her

forefinger and then showed him the drop of blood. It looked black in the darkness of the room.

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay."

She rubbed her forefinger against the pad of her thumb until the blood was gone, and then she took another sip of her absinthe. He had never seen anything like that. Anything like her. She finished her drink in one last sip and set it down. Then she stood from her stool. Her clutch was still on the bar. She put her hand on the back of his neck and leaned toward him until her lips were next to his ear.

"I have to go," she whispered. Her perfume wrapped him like a cloak. Her left breast brushed his arm, nothing between her nipple and his skin but the slippery silk of her dress. "But maybe I'll see you sometime. Thanks for the drink."

She stood and took her clutch. He watched, immobilized almost, as if she'd struck him with a curare-tipped dart.

"Wait," he said.

She smiled, that same half-smile that crossed Bridget's face when a painting was almost done, when whatever final form she'd held in her imagination was about to pass over into the canvas.

"What's your name?" he said.

"Next time. Maybe."

She turned and left, her hair swaying against her naked back as she walked away from him.



TWO

THE KNOCKING WOKE him up. He came from somewhere deep and black and finally opened his eyes, rolling in the bed to look first at the door and then at the window. The light outside was very bright, and the knocking started again. He looked at his watch and saw it was noon.

"Housekeeping."

The door opened an inch and caught on the chain. The maid shut it, then knocked again.

"Housekeeping. Sir?"

"Gimme a sec," he said.

He looked down. He was still dressed. He stood and went to the door.

"I'll be out in ten minutes," he said.

"That's fine, sir."

He pushed the door to be sure it was locked and then he went into the bathroom. He bent to the sink and washed his face, then took one of the glasses and stood drinking tap water. One dream still lingered, clinging to him like a film of night sweat: the long series of knocks on the door, and how he'd climbed from the bed and crossed the room, entranced with sleep but believing he was awake. He'd put his eye to the peephole.

She was in the hallway, curved and distorted by the fisheye lens.

Not Bridget, but the woman in the black silk dress. He'd stepped back and watched the door handle move until the lock stopped it

from going any further. It came up, then twisted down, harder this time.

He hadn't moved. He'd been holding his breath and leaning against the wall for support because he was still too drunk to stand unsupported. Finally he heard her walk away, and then the chime of the elevator and the creak of its doors parting. It was only then that he went back to bed.

Caleb would have forgotten this dream but for the maid's knock. Even now it was getting away from him, something slippery and alive that did not want to be lifted from the water. He let it go. There had been others, worse dreams, but those had already escaped and were just ripples now. He checked his back pocket for his wallet, and headed out. Before he got to the hallway, though, he stopped with the door half open. He woke up all the way then, if only for a moment, and felt the shock-current ripple down his spine and tingle through his arms to his fingertips.

There was a little dot of blood on the door's white paint, a few inches above and to the right of the peephole. Right where his forehead would go.

Caleb got out of the taxi on Haight Street, across from Buena Vista Park. He was still a couple miles from his house, but the air inside the cab was close and hot, and he thought if he didn't get out soon, he'd be sick. It was better once he started walking. Going west on Haight Street brought him out of the sunshine and into the fog.

Over the course of the next three blocks, someone had taped and stapled identical flyers to every telephone pole and lamppost. They fluttered from all the tree trunks, from the public trash cans at the intersections. They were tucked under the windshield wipers of parked cars, where a passing rain had soaked them to the glass. On each page, a grainy black-and-white photo of a man was topped with the words:

HAVE YOU SEEN CHARLES CRANE?

He paused in front of one, looking at the man again. Twenty-five years ago, his own picture might have plastered this same street. A phone number was repeated sixteen times in vertical columns at the

bottom of each flyer, and someone—Crane's wife, perhaps—had scissor-snipped between each number to make tabs that passersby could tear off.

But every flyer was intact. No one had taken a number. No one had seen Charles Crane.

The cold wind helped him keep his pace. By the time he cut through the corner of Golden Gate Park and turned south toward the heights of Mount Sutro, there was rain in the wind and he was genuinely cold. He came to his house the back way, leaving the road behind the medical center and walking along the footpath beneath the eucalyptus trees. The fog here was medicinal, scented with camphor, and he breathed it deeply as he walked. He hopped down a retaining wall and landed on the wet pavement of his own street, and then walked the last bit up to his house. Bridget's Volvo wasn't parked anywhere in sight.

He followed the paving stones through a low front garden and came to his door. He pressed the doorbell, listening to the chimes inside and knowing she wasn't home. He could walk back to the hospital and call a locksmith from his office. He knew that.

Because of the incline, no houses were built on the other side of his street. Looking over his shoulder, he saw nothing but the cement retaining wall and a few parked cars. Above the wall was the ascending, forested slope of Mount Sutro. No one would see what he was about to do.

He balled his fist and swung it at the plate glass.

The water coming from the kitchen tap was freezing cold this time of year, and he held the fingers of his right hand under the flow and watched the crimson mix of blood and water swirl in the stainless-steel sink basin. He kept his fingers under the stream for five minutes. Then he opened the bottle of peroxide with his teeth and poured it over his hand, watching the effervescence of oxygen bubbling up from the open wounds.

Afterward, he walked through the house, looking at the empty closets, at the blank spaces on the walls. The bookshelves in the living room were denuded and there were no more art books on the

coffee table. In the master bathroom, he opened the mostly empty medicine cabinet and found a bottle of Tylenol.

Except for the broken glass in the entryway and the blood on the floor that marked his path from the door to the kitchen, the place was perfectly clean. The only painting Bridget had left behind was a well-executed copy of John Singer Sargent's *A Parisian Beggar Girl*. She'd painted it herself, as a gift to him, and it still hung on the bedroom wall. The girl stood in dirty white like a cast-off bride, her back against a plaster wall. She held out her left hand, palm up and fingers curled. A hint of blood marked her sleeve, or maybe it was just a strip of red cloth she'd wrapped there. Caleb had never been sure, and he'd never asked Bridget.

Other than the begging girl, she'd taken every trace of herself out the front door. She'd swept up the broken pieces of the tumbler she'd thrown, had righted the lamp he'd knocked over when the glass hit him.

She hadn't left a note.

When he found his cell phone on the counter, he checked it. There was a message from the lab, asking him to call his graduate fellow. Half a dozen emails from a grant auditor at the National Institutes of Health. It could all wait. There was nothing from her. Not even a missed call.

He spent half an hour using scrap wood from the garage to board the broken window, and when he finished cleaning up, he went inside and lit the gas fireplace in the living room. He took off his shoes and lay on the couch, pulling a tartan throw blanket over himself. He stared at the redwood beams in the ceiling.

They used to make love here, on this couch, with the fire going and the lights of the Sunset District down below, the patio doors open so the sea wind could sweep the room. He dug his phone from his pocket and turned it off. That was gone now. Bridget was gone. He could tour the house again and look at all the empty spaces if he needed to prove it. He thought of the woman from House of Shields, the slippery cold silk of her dress when her breast brushed his arm.

The phone in the kitchen had only finished half of the first ring before he was awake and rising from the couch, throwing the blan-

ket aside and coming around the living room wet bar to enter the kitchen. He got it by the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Caleb."

He leaned against the wall and then went to the floor. The sound of her voice, just the one word, his name coming from her mouth, was that strong.

"Where are you?" he said.

"In my studio. But don't come here."

He didn't know what to say. It had gotten dark while he'd slept, and the only light came from the fire in the living room. From his low angle on the floor, he saw a drop of blood he'd missed earlier. A little splash on the baseboard, close to the china cabinet. It was black in the firelight.

He found his voice.

"Will I see you again?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But not soon."

They were silent a long time, but he could hear each breath she took.

"Why'd you call?"

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe I shouldn't have."

"It's okay."

"I'm glad to hear you think so."

"Wait — don't hang up."

He waited, not sure if she'd cut the connection or not. He looked at the blood on the baseboard and thought of what he'd seen on the hotel-room door, above the peephole. The question slipped out before he knew he was going to ask it.

"Do I sleepwalk?"

"Jesus, Caleb."

"When we —"

But she hung up before he could finish. He wasn't even sure what he meant to ask. The microwave clock said it was nine p.m.

He hadn't eaten in more than twenty-four hours. Maybe he was ready for something. He looked at the bare tabletop and listened to the silent house. The only sound was the low whoosh of gas in the fireplace. A clock ticking in his upstairs study. There was food in the

refrigerator, things he could just heat up. He took a step further into the kitchen, then stopped.

Nothing was going to make this feel any better, but staying here would be the smart thing. And he had to go to work in the morning.

Instead he walked down the hall to his bathroom, turned on the shower, and stripped down. In fifteen minutes he'd showered and re-bandaged his fingers, changed into fresh clothes, and put on a jacket. He went into his garage and backed his car into the street.