

MICHAEL BISHOP - Annalise, Annalise

For you, said the Independent Parcel Delivery person at his apartment door.

What is it? Dexter Olin had expected nothing. Expecting nothing lent accuracy to his personal forecasts and generally stymied disappointment.

No idea, said the IPD worker in a reedy voice. Opening a customer's stuff could get me canned. Dexter accepted a small brown package, and the IPD worker walked quickly away.

Dexter shut the door and tore open the box. It contained a videocassette, unmarked except for a typed legend on a gummed label: Dexter Olin Unchained. This label stuck to the shiny black plastic like an oval Band-Aid.

I didn't order this, Dexter thought. Who mailed it? Who's making mock of me? He could think of no film with unchained in the title except Hercules Unchained. Although Dexter did not much resemble a starving artist, no one would mistake him for Hercules either. He was a guide at a state park, where he led nature hikes and supervised facility maintenance.

Dexter carried the videocassette to his TV/VCR combo and crammed the tape in. No FBI warning preceded the title. White block letters appeared on a cobalt background:

DEXTER OLIN UNCHAINED

starring

** Dexter Olin (as Himself) **

The tape began. Dexter sat down to watch.

A video image of Dexter Olin comes through his apartment door and collapses into the same chair in which he now sat. He pages through the evening paper, rises, fixes a drink, takes a thoughtful sip, sets the drink down, goes into his bedroom, and reemerges wearing a terrycloth robe. Before the big mirror in his living room (which lacked a picture window), Dexter's video self allows the robe to fall and intently scrutinizes his own naked body.

Watching this scene, which he could recall enacting on at least a dozen recent occasions, Dexter shifted in his chair. Had someone secretly videotaped him? He halted the tape and looked about the room for camera vantages. He checked the wall behind the mirror for a clandestine camera niche. Two-way mirrors were not that uncommon, but this mirror, judging by the intact gypsumboard behind it, did not appear to fall into that category. Dexter felt of the wall, banged on it, squinted at it from every angle. It remained only a wall.

No one could have videotaped him from inside the apartment, and yet he had seen himself naked on the tape delivered by the IPD worker. Other folks, when alone, surely studied themselves in a similar way, either longing for a better set of attributes or taking secretive pride in those they actually had. Or did they? Did such behavior brand him a freak?

If it did, did his freakishness derive from insecurity, conceit, or some odd mixture of the two? A delicious frisson of shame and excitement twinged in him, as if he had spoken an unspoken yearning to a lover or witnessed an act both vile and private from an undiscoverable peephole.

But the tape in his TV/VCR unit proved that someone had found just such a peephole from which to document him in an intimate self-showcase. This knowledge scared him; it also amped up his excitement and his curiosity. Realizing that others could watch this tape as easily as he, and see him stripped not only to the skin but also to his jacketless soul, and judge him as a spiritual creature as well as one of sinew and bone, seemed somehow to enrich rather than to diminish him. How could the possibility of unseen onlookers fail to excite him?

Dexter reexamined the package in which the IPD worker had given him the videocassette; it contained no bill of lading, no invoice, no return address. This absence of any clear point of origin also afforded the tape a stimulating, or at least an enlivening, mystery. Spies received such unmarked items, even if the agents themselves usually did not turn up in them as the voyeuristic objects of their own espionage.

Dexter, his napehair electric, dropped back into his chair to reactivate the VCR.

On the tape, Dexter Olin turns before the mirror, runs his hands down his flanks, does a deep kneebend, puts a palm on the carpet, throws his head back, and stares ceilingward, his ribs as regularly etched as Venetian blinds. His video self has a cold masculine classicism only marginally compromised by scars, skeletal forearms, the inchoate pudg about his middle. His virilia, which he has always regarded as boyish, appear to mesh with this classicism: just Praxitelean enough to avert ridicule if not to summon awe. Arms out, Dexter

does another kneebend; then poses upright, shifting his weight from one hip to the other and clutching one shoulder vampishly.

The door to the apartment abruptly opens. A lithe figure in a dark-green uniform enters. The real-time Dexter started at this intrusion, for he always locked his door after coming in from work. His video self, however, sees the intruder over his mirror image's shoulder and pivots, concealing his cock and balls with both hands and blurting, What the hell are you doing here? Get out!

The svelt IPD worker halts and smiles; doffs the dark-green baseball-style cap; shakes out an amber waterfall of hair; toes off a pair of scuffed shoes; peels back the shirt and steps out of the pants composing the remainder of the uniform; and stands before the video Dexter as a buxom and leggy young woman.

My God, murmured the real-time Dexter Olin. Previously, he had considered the tape only a spookily delicious invasion of privacy, not an appeal to the prurient in him. The appearance of this unclad woman altered his perceptions, definitions, and expectations. Someone had sent him -- or so he hoped -- a piece of homemade erotica, a tape to scratch his libido, stroke his ego, free his pent-up sexual energies.

Still want me to leave? says the naked IPD worker.

No, says Dexter's video self. No!

The woman saunters over to him, lifts her breasts into his chest, nuzzles him under the jaw, and, holding one of his hands in her outstretched hand, turns him in a slow-motion pirouette that the tape's anonymous cameraperson artfully translated into a widening lazy-susan montage of carnality and tenderness, the particulars of which the realtime Dexter Olin watched with a yearning as lofty as earthbound. Every part of his body that could lift -- backhair, nipples, cock, little toes -- had erected, and rhythmic music throbbed not only on the soundtrack but also in his heart-, wrist-, and throat-pulses.

The video images of Dexter Olin and the woman move from his apartment to a drifting canoe to a thundering rollercoaster to a grassy meadow to a biplane's lower wing to a circus trapeze to a hoppercar full of peacock feathers to a boxing ring to a pristine Mexican beach. The insatiability and endurance of his video counterpart daunted as well as heartened Dexter; he could not recall having ever disported with such a willing partner or having ever shown such stamina. That was because neither his video self nor the woman's had the reality of even a shadow at noon, although he had often wished so hard for it -- namely, such a freedom --that he could hear his chains clattering off in his dreams and his blood surging from low metabolic tide to full metabolic flush, and back again.

The tape was intimate and explicit. He could never show it to anyone, but he could keep it in his TV/VCR, and in his mind, as a liberator: an imprisoning liberator. He could also rerun it either mechanically or mentally to trip those synapses that skin-to-skin communion so often left unfired.

Dexter sighed when Dexter Olin Unchained, a movie of nearly two hours' duration, reached its credits, a scrolling of titles or names followed primarily by asterisks:

Dexter Olin Himself

IPD Worker * * * *

Director * * * *

Screenwriter * * * *

Cinematographer * * * *

Etc., etc., not halting until the key grip, the best boy, the caterer, and the director's girlfriend's hairdresser had all had their asterisks screened. Once the tape had played itself out, it automatically rewound -- with a clunk, a whir, and a last emphatic clunk. Dexter figured to play it again.

A knock on the door stopped him. When he answered it, he found himself face to face with the IPD worker who had brought the tape. Dexter reddened, stammered.

The IPD worker touched her hatbrim: I need that package I dropped off earlier. I need it back.

Why?

It's not yours. I delivered it by mistake.

I've already opened it.

It wasn't meant for you. It's not yours.

Who else could it belong to? Dexter fumed to consider that this uniformed woman wanted to take from him the video dream in which she herself met his every longing. To whom did she plan to show it? How could anybody make such a mistake? Her demand was ludicrous, stupid.

Me, she said. It belongs to me.

You didn't know the package you were delivering belonged to you? Dexter strode to his set and ejected the tape.

Hey, you not only opened it -- you watched it!

Yes I did, thinking it mine. And I don't want anyone else to see it. Not even you. Especially not you. What nerve, to ask me to return it.

I've already seen it. I don't want anyone else to watch it either, Mr. Olin. I just want it back so that I can get rid of it in my own way.

You did that by dropping it off here.

A rare mistake. Videos make up a lot of my deliveries. It could happen to anyone.

I don't think so. I've been twice singled out. You can't expect me to yield the incriminating proof, even though I never took part in any of that stuff -- not really. He hit the tape against his thigh. What is this? Computer imaging? Hightech blackmail?

Oh, no. It's real. As real, anyway, as anything you or I ever see on a TV screen.

What bunk. Please get out.

Not without my tape. From what I've seen there -- nodding at the tape -- you must have a degree of chivalry.

The IPD worker was half a head shorter than Dexter. What if he grabbed her elbow and thrust her out the door? He tried to do just that, but she karate-chopped his wrist and slid away from his next angry lunge.

You're trespassing, Dexter cried. Besides, possession's nine tenths of the law, and this tape is clearly in my hands. You gave it to me.

Let me buy it back from you.

You don't have enough money. There's not enough money in the world.

Does money have to be the currency of our exchange? Can't you think of another form of barter, Mr. Olin?

Dexter stopped and squinted at the IPD worker. He took her meaning and thought of another form of barter. A frisson of shame and excitement twinged in his gut, hammered the pulse in his throat.

He began to unbutton his park-service shirt. That which he had witnessed on the tape was about to fulfill itself in sweaty reality here in his windowless livingroom. The IPD worker gave him an encouraging smile. He stepped toward her, reaching out tentatively for her cap. When he had removed it, he essayed another step forward, to kiss the IPD worker's forehead. It struck him then that the removal of the cap had not led to an explosion of tumbling amber tresses, that the person almost in his arms had a military butch and an odor of cheap aftershave.

Whoa, said Dexter Olin, straightening. Whoa.

I'm her brother, said the capless man in the IPD uniform. Her twin. She was too embarrassed to come back herself. You can understand.

Embarrassment? said Dexter. Sure. Easily.

The form of barter I hinted at no longer interests you?

With her. Not with you.

She wouldn't, Mr. Olin. In fact, she had that tape made for an experimental deinhbiting therapy she's now undergoing at the Welsh-Zacharow Clinic.

Hightech blackmail. I was right, wasn't I?

No. Call it a parabolic Freudian slip -- she enacted rather than spoke it. She meant to give the tape to Dr. Zacharow, but brought it here through an unconscious mechanism typical of her chronic psychological disorder.

Introduce me to her.

It's much too soon for that.

I don't know. I think you could just as convincingly argue that it's too late.

Please give me the tape. Show some decency.

Decency? Did your sick sister have the decency to consult me about this obscene violation of my person?

You don't really view it as obscene, Mr. Olin. And there's too much painful background to review, to explain why she chose you as the model for her deinhbiting therapy.

The obscenity lies precisely in her failure to review that background for me. Not only that, but -- Dexter braked.

What?

A pernicious invasion of my lifespace had to occur to make her tape. It gets me right. It's dead-on in the specificity of its, uh, anatomical correctness.

A month ago I visited the park where you work as a guide, said the brother. While taking pictures of the nature trail, I also took several of you. With film that magically stripped me naked?

Of course not. The clinic used my photos and your family's publicly accessible medical records to project a likeness for Annalise's animated therapy tape.

Annalise, Dexter murmured. Annalise.

Extrapolation from a variety of different biological inputs and parameters. Beyond our failure to consult, there's nothing sinister about the processes involved.

Lovely name. A wondrous name.

Won't you give it back, Mr. Olin?

Dexter slowly rebuttoned his shirt. You can't tell me she doesn't have a duplicate of the tape she accidentally delivered here, he said.

No, I can't. But --

Then I should have one, too. I deserve one.

The idea that anyone other than her doctors and supportive family -- by which I mean me, Mr. Olin -- might have access to this tape mortifies her. More than that, it plunges her into acute, disabling depression. But we're in it together.

Not really. Annalise lived abroad for six years, in a land split by old ethnic hatreds, economic disparities, and civil war. That's part of the background of her disorder. I don't care to say more about it, except to note that you and she have little in common beyond your animated presences in her therapy tape. Please return it. When the brother came toward him with his hand out, Dexter, holding the tape to his thigh, stepped back with an animalistic growl. Get out, he said.

You were briefly ready to trade, the brother said.

I'm not now.

We're at an impasse, then. I brought no pistol, and mayhem has never been my way.

Dexter said: In your case, that's probably the better part of valor.

Annalise's brother kissed all four fingertips of one hand and touched them to Dexter's jaw, permitting them to linger for an unsettling moment. Then he withdrew them.

Goodbye. Your actions in this won't endear you to Annalise or help her toward a cure. You've also forfeited any claim on my affections. I don't think I'm sorry. No?

No. I'm the aggrieved party here, but all you can think of is Annalise and nine hundred ways to lay a guilt trip on me. I refuse to bend to such tactics.

The brother shook his head, then let himself out.

Dexter Olin locked the apartment door -- latch, deadbolt, and safety chain -- and replayed the tape for whose return Annalise's brother had lobbied. He watched it two more times before going to bed, with a growing concern for the troubled Annalise and a steady lapsing of desire, not all of it owing to an involuntary climax or to sheer psychosexual visual overload.

The next day, Annalise herself showed up among the tourists at the state park. She wore jeans, sneakers, and a sweatshirt, not her IPD uniform, and she approached Dexter Olin in a grove of redbud trees just after the morning's third official nature hike. A frisson of shame and excitement swept through him, but he turned to greet her even while trying to ignore the storm of blood to his face.

I'm not the person on that tape, Annalise said. I mean, I am, but for the most part I'm not.

After a beat, Dexter Olin said: Me either.

They squinted at each other through leaf-tangled sunlight. Dexter suddenly knew that he remained as worrisome a mystery to Annalise as she did to him. The point of everything from this meeting forward? Accumulating clues.