

Surfaces

by Richard Chwedyk

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I often ask my students what Oscar Wilde meant when he wrote that "All art is at once surface and symbol." Occasionally I get an answer like, "It means it can't just look like art, Miss Ulaszek," but mostly the question is met by a roomful of uncomprehending faces. I can't expect much more at a time when the better part of being an artist is dressing for the role.

So it appears. And so it appeared one evening some years ago as I stood in yet another River North gallery, at yet another opening, staring at another painting that couldn't decide what it wanted to be. Monica, my sister, brought me here, ostensibly to get my opinions on the current work. Usually she took me to gallery openings and loft parties to introduce me to some man. These hitch-ups were always disastrous, but I kept going to see how long the string of flops continued.

"And this?" Monica came up from behind and handed me a vodka and ice. It must have taken some doing in the white wine ghetto, but it was the least she could do for me. We stood before a large canvas, worked heavily with casein or turpentine to affect a hazy, diffuse background. In the right corner foreground stood a featureless figure, something out of Folon or Brad Holland, staring over its shoulder into the smudgy gray and magenta fog.

"You're the expert on technique," I said.

"Which is terrible. But do you see anything *there* Cath?"

"No." I took a sip. "It seems to want to communicate a state of anxiety; but the only anxiety here is the painter's: that he has nothing to paint."

"What I thought." She stepped away to join a chic and influential-looking couple.

As I recall the evening, everyone looked chic and influential to the point where the distinction was cheapened. The women wore variations of the same outfit: tiny skirts and tiny jackets with shoulders built for a linebacker. The men wore shiny jackets with ribbon-thin lapels or baggy jackets with pinstripes and DeSoto tailfins for lapels. In this crowd I certainly didn't match with anyone, and I suffered under some rule that no one could speak to you if you weren't wearing black tights.

Monica was the exception. She broke all the rules with casual impunity; as she had done all her life. She quit art school in a rage when she discovered no one there could teach her anything about technique, and her fellow students not only couldn't draw but refused to learn. She helped finance her degrees in History and Philosophy with every sort of commercial art job imaginable and had no trouble setting up her own design business when she tired of academia. She is a happy prodigy, a difficult trick to pull off and one that engenders equal measures of admiration and jealousy in one's colleagues. To see her-- petite figure, waist-length lemon-blond hair, thin face, smooth forehead, sharp nose, eyes with rings of dark blue around the gray-- commanding the cautious attention of everyone in the gallery, made you feel you hadn't yet mastered the knack of living in three dimensions. I stood quite invisible in my unfashionable denim skirt, white blouse and sweater vest. The people around me were equipped to speak only drivel or prices, so I kept looking at the canvas before me. The execution was adequate, but the composition had too much familiarity about its strangeness. The artist's emotional palette was monochromatic. He had no sense of humor and apparently no consciousness that we've all seen too many of these "disturbing" works to be really disturbed by them. All in all, the work was too--

"Academic."

"Thank you," I said to the man who completed my thought. He stood about five-foot-nine and had thick brown hair in need of washing (though I was glad to see someone with a little hair around the ears, compared to the shaved, 'sculpted' coifs that reminded me of a Barber College Special). He wore a dark blue jacket that seemed to fit, a white shirt and gray slacks that might have been fished from the bottom of the laundry hamper, and he must have knotted his tie in a dark closet. One of the thick lenses of his wire frame glasses was chipped.

He spoke to me but stared at the painting. "Did I get your name?"

"Catherine."

"Your sister is the best artist of the lot, but she's yet to find her subject."

"How did you know I was Monica's sister?"

He ignored the question. "I'm afraid we're at the point where there are so many galleries, the market will pick up any merely competent artist just to fill space."

"And *your* name?" I tried.

"Wilford. It won't last, of course."

"First name or last?"

He stared through or at me. The thickness of his lenses made it difficult to tell. "Charles." He inspected me briefly, more briefly than the painting, which he didn't like. "When the market collapses, only feeble stuff like this will survive. We have a generation of artists with, as a birthright, more freedom than any artists in all of history. Squandered completely. Externally, they are free; they'll advertise that fact to everyone. Internally, they have fettered themselves strictly to fashion."

"I won't argue that."

"Why not?" He gave up on the painting and returned to me, or my general vicinity.

"Because I think you're right."

His expression maintained its intense deadpan. There was no way to tell if he was pleased or insulted.

I continued, to see what I could provoke. "Mannerism is mannerism. The rebels reject the establishment and create one of their own, which is simply the negation of the old one. They complement each other."

A twitch animated his chin. He may have been trying to smile.

Monica arrived at this moment. "I figured you two oddballs would hook up eventually."

"Now we are three," I replied.

"I told you about Cath, Charles." She put her hand on my shoulder. "She's a writer who makes a living teaching the joys of language and literature to the snotty little Catholic girls we used to be. Then she teaches it all over again in her junior college classes."

"I've taught," Wilford said, as if making the definitive pronouncement.

"What subjects?" I asked.

"Classical languages. Art History, French," he recited with a touch of impatience.

"It's about time we go," Monica said. "The smell from this carpet is giving me a headache. Do you need a ride, Charles?"

His face registered a slight change of expression as he stared with myopic precision into the space between Monica and myself. "Would you be interested in seeing something else?"

"What do you have in mind?" Monica sounded a little strained.

"Patrick picked up another building not too long ago. A two-flat, unoccupied for years, the second floor longer than that. A man named Uldis Kopacz used to live there." He pronounced the name YOU-dis KOpalish.

Monica looked at me. I looked back. We shrugged in unison.

"I didn't think you'd recognize the name. He was a fairly anonymous fellow who did some boring, methodical job in a printing plant for fifteen years before he was arrested for two murders and an attempted third."

Monica shook her head. "Sorry, Charles. I'm not interested in taking the Famous Murderers Tour."

He changed his stance slightly placing his feet further apart. "When the police entered his apartment they found every inch of his walls covered in elaborately detailed pictures."

"What do you mean by pictures? Pin-ups? Murals? Wall scrawlings?"

The two matched each other in exchanges of irritated looks. "Not scrawls, hardly," Wilford replied.

"Murals' might serve, but they're something other than that. It's painted, and the odd thing is that Kopacz never had the most rudimentary training. He was a dropout, a notch above functional illiteracy"

"Charles." Monica spoke clearly and directly. "I'll ask you once: is this worth the trouble to see?"

Wilford met her gaze as directly as he could with his befuddling vision. "I've seen it several times. The police dubbed it 'The Tattooed House'. If it were just more naive primitivism I wouldn't take you one inch out of your way."

Monica inspected him carefully before turning to me. "We won't be long."

"You're the driver." I shrugged, resigning myself to the detour, but doing my best to flash her an expression of reluctance.

"I'll get the keys from Patrick," Wilford said. He disappeared into the forest of inverted triangles, orange hair and black tights.

"Who's Patrick?" I asked as soon as Wilford was clear of us.

"Patrick Waveland. His old lover. Owns three galleries, including this one. He does plenty of rehabs in the hot neighborhoods."

"Now, the hard one is, who's Wilford?"

Monica let out the sweet, fluttering laugh she inherited from Mother. "You find him a little odd?"

"I don't mind that. Just assure me he's not leading us to something boring or dangerous."

"I can vouch for the former. If Charles says something is worth seeing, I see it. His eyes are in bad shape, but he knows how to use them."

Wilford returned and immediately instructed Monica, "We'll take Orleans to Kinzie and turn right. Then turn left on Union."

"Why don't we get to the car first, Charles."

We left the gallery for the damp, chilly streets of late winter. "I'll be happy if this doesn't live up to his description," I told Monica as the wind whipped her hair around.

"One thing you'll learn about Charles is that he never exaggerates."

He walked behind us at a steady pace, head tilted upward, as if he were craning to peek over some horizon.

* * *

It's been called West Town for a long time, but recently the chic and savvy waiting to make a fortune on its redevelopment renamed it River West. We went by blocks of houses, mostly woodframe, some with brick fronts, most with tar paper roof; interspersed were blocks of single story brick shoeboxes of manufacturing and trucking firms, a few still in business. Most of the frosted wire-mesh windows on these places were cracked or broken. Plenty of dull graffiti covered even duller walls of brick and cinder block. The streets had names like May, Fry, Dix, Lessing, Ancona, Aberdeen-- I tried to remember them and look for landmarks, in case my trusting sister's instincts proved unreliable for once. In the dark, the streets looked threatening in their desolation.

"Nice place to dump bodies," Monica said.

"Two this past week," Wilford informed us. "Gang killings," he added, as if this made up for it. "After all, you're just six blocks from Cabrini Green."

"Just," I said, one hand gripping the door handle. He told Monica to pull up at a stunted brick two-flat in the center of a block with a few wooden A-frame houses at each end. The lots to either side of the place were vacant, as if to give it plenty of room. From the tall, matted grass and the large amount of rusted debris, I guessed the lots had been vacant for many years. Even in the streetlight glare you could see layers of chipped away red and white paint that had ultimately failed to hide the two-flat's mushroom-colored bricks. The window sashes were gay and rotted. The entrance was a flat replacement door, painted white and covered with grime, and one corner of the metal sheet around the lock had been pried up: perfect for snagging one's clothes or acquiring tetanus.

"This place looks like it's about to cave in on itself," I said to Wilford.

"The structure is sound." He fiddled with the set of keys Waveland had given him. "All the wood will have to be gutted: floors, staircase, windows, all of that." He raised the flashlight in his other hand. "This is only for the stairs. There's light in the apartment."

Wilford opened the door with a twist and a grunt. I held off going in to the very last.

"Come on," Monica goaded. "It doesn't look any worse than some of the places I lived in when I was a student."

Wilford looked slightly puzzled at my apprehension, and his cool expression did make me feel slightly silly. "It's not the floors you should be worried about."

We bunched into the vestibule. The beam of his flashlight bounced about the grimy, fractured, pockmarked walls of the stairwell. "Kopacz didn't live very long after his arrest, and much of that time he spent in various degrees of catatonia. In a brief period of coherence, he told a prison psychologist that his obsession with the walls began with their texture."

"Texture?" Monica asked.

"Not even the most neatly painted wall is ever really smooth," Wilford explained as we climbed the stairs. "The roller or the brush leaves a texture, irregularities, a little bumpiness. If you stare at one spot long enough, the random texture gets interpreted into some coherent image, or the suggestion of one, like an inkblot or those decalomania and frottage pieces Max Ernst dabbled with." The stairboards groaned resonantly, while the sound of our steps was muffled by the mush of matted, mossy carpet.

"Comic as it sounds, he first noticed the effect in the bathroom, while seated on the toilet." At the top landing he redirected the flashlight to the tangle of keys in his hand and left us in greater darkness. "It was a faint outline of a bald man in a robe, something like a Buddhist monk, mounting a naked, oriental-featured Woman. For a while he did nothing about it, but the more he looked, the more clearly he saw it."

"What did he know about Buddhist monks?" Monica asked.

"Nothing consciously, I'm sure. Eventually he found some pencils and delineated the outlines. After that, he started buying paints and brushes. I said before that he never took art classes, never so much as held a paintbrush in his hand."

"Should have taken a magazine with him to the john," Monica said.

Wilford ignored the remark and continued, keys in his hand. "Details and backgrounds became more discernible. Behind the monk he saw the gray walls of an old temple. Around the temple were huge stones, the vestiges of an older structure, and beyond them a forest. Around the stones, in the shadowy parts of the temple, and in the clearings and bowers of the forest, he made out more figures."

"How many figures?" I asked.

The jangle of keys stopped and the flashlight beam shifted to the door-lock. I heard a metallic ripple followed by the snapping back of a deadbolt. He opened the door and shone the flashlight into the apartment, where it illuminated the opposite wall.

In the dim, unsteady beam, the wall looked like it had picked up a terrible infection, or was sodden with mold and dirt. The light bounced about the room as Wilford searched for a lamp. Everywhere the light met the wall it revealed more of the patternless pattern. I hesitated at the threshold, every bit of my flesh humming, feeling that I was walking into an enormous, magnified sore.

Wilford turned on a shadeless table lamp that sat on the floor in a corner.

The room was empty of furniture. The floorboards creaked slightly beneath us, but not enough to make me fear they might give way. Wilford raised the lamp.

"How many figures?" He moved the lamp in an arc, which we followed from wall to wall. "I suppose one could make a count, but what would be the point?"

I moved slowly, cautiously to the nearest wall. The figures were indeed countless. Here were great bearded princes and strong-thewed soldiers; milky-skinned women in transparent silk coverings, suggestively poised and curved. Those not beckoning for attention or seeking out the beckoners were receiving attention head-on. There were bull-men and goat-men and beast-men of every sort, beast-women thrown into the bargain, with fangs, tails and talons. All of them astride each other, for

purposes of pain as much as pleasure, in every imaginable variation. They filled the wall from end to end and baseboard to ceiling.

Even the ceiling: black clouds were highlighted with a volcanic red glow, and flying through the clouds were leather-winged creatures, all sharp beaks and claws and fire reflected in their eyes. I wanted to exclaim but the air hissed through my lungs as if I had lost my larynx.

"Every room is like this," Wilford said. "Every surface that is usually painted is painted like this."

The lamp had a long extension cord. He brought it up to each wall of the living room (the double entendre of that term still unsettles me), then the dining room. Each glimpse added to an ever-expanding vista of Sodom on a Saturday night, as if Dante, Bosch and S. Clay Wilson were all writhing in the same nightmare, all falling out of bed in a cold sweat, and this is what they had seen: gang-banging, disemboweling, naked bodies flung onto barbed wire, swollen genitalia sprouting under trees like mushrooms, swarms of vermin, streams of excrement, vermilion flames smudged with thick soot.

The effect in some respect was not unlike a tableau of pre-Renaissance design, except that its realistic depiction of the human form was extraordinary; especially if the artist, as Wilford claimed, was untrained. There was no foreground, unless it was all foreground, and by that effect it was also utterly timeless. The walls were a frozen instant of eternal carnage. Every figure was captured mid-atrocity, victim and victimized. Each atrocity was violent or sexual, most often both: a man wasn't decapitated without also being emasculated; a woman was never 'merely' raped. There was no respite from this theme: swords and fire and axes and clubs; figures sprawled over rubble and ruins. The more closely you looked, the more detail you discovered. The flames of a bonfire were reflected in every bead of sweat on a strangled man's face. You were afraid that if you took a magnifying glass to the wall you would see even more, down to the maggots and microbes.

It was impossible to believe one human mind could conceive of so many variations on the theme of atrocity, or rather, one could believe it intellectually without comprehending the vastness of its demonstration, its catalog on these walls. I wondered if a sufficiently jaded wag might render this place ridiculous with a few well-aimed jokes, but then I recalled seeing a couple of college students chuckling their way through the Musee D'Orsay's collection of Rodin sculptures. Before the Porte de L'Enfer they fell silent, and this place made the Porte de L'Enfer look like the heavenly gates.

"There really is nothing to compare this with," Wilford said, continuing his curatorial voice as we moved from the dining room to the hallway and the first bedroom "The scope is monumental and the execution is impeccable. And it grew from pure obsession, from an untrained machine operator in a printing plant. You can't simply dismiss it as the work of an energetic autistic savant or an obsessive compulsive. There's no categorical box in which you could fit this."

"There is," I said, feeling dizzy, looking in vain for a place to sit. "If you can call it a category. How about evil?"

Wilford turned the lamp on me "Evil? Kopacz?"

I shook my head. "You don't call people 'evil'. It implies that they choose to be evil, and I don't think that's wholly true. Evil is a force, Some of us are more affected by it, but no one is completely immune, Empty people may wake up one morning and find their emptiness filled with evil." I gestured around me. "Like this."

Wilford brought the lamp up to the wall again and reviewed the images. "Poetic way you have of putting it."

"Expect nothing less of a poet," Monica said, wrapping her jacket more tightly around her shoulders. "Cath here pretends to be an expert on the subject of evil."

"Not true, but I've had reason to contemplate the subject."

Wilford didn't ask for explication but Monica volunteered some. "When Cath was sixteen she ran afoul of a very nasty boyfriend. He tied her up and drugged her and-- "

"Monica." I raised my voice "This isn't the place or time."

"Somehow," she replied, "this seems like *just* the place." Monica has a cruel streak. I didn't feel well enough to counter it. My dizziness had not subsided, was in fact getting worse. The images on the walls if not the source, at least aggravated my quickening pulse, the weakness in my limbs, my shortness of

breath. Another feeling-- not quite nausea and not unlike it either-- quivered in my stomach. I might have recovered if I had stopped looking at the walls but I couldn't. Something about representational images lures the eye, demands that you inspect them. I can't put a stamp on a letter without glancing at the face or picture. Any direction you turned in the apartment, there they were, even in the dim corner of the room where the light didn't reach. That may have been the worst, the scenes you couldn't quite see and imagined were there, for then you were compelled to inspect them and make sure they weren't. It would have been intolerable to discover your own worst dreams implicit in the texture of anonymous walls waiting for a Uldis Kopacz to fill them in like an enormous paint-by-numbers kit.

"Why hasn't anyone tried to paint over them?" I asked, losing breath with the effort.

"They have." Wilford moved the lamp slowly past another wall. "The last owner gave Patrick a long report of the number of times he tried, all the different paints, stripping chemicals, sanders, scrapers and spackles he used. The walls always returned to this state."

"Ghost stories," Monica countered. "Something to make the place interesting to the next gullible buyer."

"Probably," Wilford said. "If it's true, I'm not entirely disappointed that they failed."

I had fallen behind by the time they inspected the second bedroom. A steady buzzing ground at my nerves. I needed to sit, but there was only the floor, and at best it needed a good sweeping. I couldn't bring myself to use the wall for support. Knees bending, I made it to the door frame and leaned against that. By then my brain was slipping into a tingly effervescence. I started a slow descent to the floor.

I could still hear Wilford and Monica.

"I'd have been *less* surprised if he had followed the more sophisticated route," Wilford said. "Abstract, irrational shapes. Bimorphic, like Ernst or Tanguy."

"It wouldn't matter if he painted nothing but cute bunny rabbits," Monica replied. "It would still be sick."

"Not evil?"

"Cath is an anachronism. She'll tell you that herself. The relativistic universe is too big for concepts like good and evil."

"Personally I believe in just two forces: enlightenment and obscurity. By the way, where is she?"

When they found me I was shivering, though I didn't feel cold. On the contrary, my pores were busy unloading streams of sweat.

"Cath, what's the matter?"

"I'll be all right," I said, taking off my glasses and pressing my brows together. "I must be worn out."

Wilford knelt next to me and took my wrist. "Your heart's racing, isn't it? Head swimming? Motor systems over-responding while all your voluntary movements are thwarted?"

With some effort, I nodded. "What's going on?"

"I felt it the first time I came here. Patrick felt it too but he wouldn't admit it. It's vaguely primal, half lethargy and half arousal."

"Come off it, Charles! That's sick!" Monica joined us nearer the floor.

"I didn't say it wasn't. Autopsies on Kopacz's victims showed that they hadn't struggled, even though they had been violently assaulted. There were no traces of drugs in them." Wilford put one hand on my shoulder. "Can you get up?"

I pressed my hands to the floor behind me, bent my legs and pushed. If Monica and Wilford hadn't been there to help, I might not have managed it.

"This is embarrassing," I said to Wilford. "I'm really sorry."

"We'd better go." Wilford lifted my arm and braced my shoulder with his.

Monica took the lamp on the long extension cord and lit the way down the corridor. "I don't believe any of it."

"Are you saying you've never received a visceral sensation from looking at a painting?" Wilford helped me along to the living room.

"Eliminate every other cause-- paint fumes or something-- and I might consider your crackpot notion." She held out her hand for the flashlight.

At the entrance door, my heart was racing even faster and my head was ready to float away I started to cry, but it sounded more like giggles.

Monica aimed the flashlight at the doorway as it flew open and revealed a man with his arms upraised, roaring like a charging gorilla.

My sister leapt back, screaming. It's possible my screams drowned out hers. I don't know, because my next complete memory was of staring at the vinyl ceiling of Monica's Taurus from the back seat, where I unceremoniously sprawled.

I could hear voices outside: Monica's, sharp, unraised. "You could have given her a heart attack!"

In a high-set, rattling treble: "Hey how was I to know? I just came for the keys. You guys came up here to scare yourselves, right? So, hey, I thought I was helping."

Wilford's deeper, less abrasive voice: "It was a very stupid thing to do, Patrick."

"I said I'm sorry. I just happen to need the fucking keys back, okay?"

Wilford's voice again: "You've been drinking."

"Charles," the treble voice said with an affected sigh, "don't start."

"It wouldn't matter to me, if you didn't always take it too far."

"In case you didn't notice, Charles, it's *my* life.

I sat up. "Who has my glasses?"

The argument stopped suddenly as if a corpse had risen up at its own wake. I hoped I didn't look that bad.

"Look," said one blurry figure. "She's okay?"

"She's okay," I said.

Another blur, Monica-shaped, handed me my glasses. "Are you?"

I put them on and met her gaze with a nod.

Next to Wilford stood a man in a short leather motorcycle jacket with the requisite number of zippers and chains. His slightly graying hair was cut to a fashionable bristle. The thick, translucent frames of his glasses kept him from appearing too authentically delinquent

"This must be Mr. Waveland," I said.

Waveland, with some hesitation, stepped forward and offered me his hand, which I shook weakly.

"I didn't mean to scare you up there. Pretty creepy isn't it? I'm going to enjoy ripping down those walls. In a few months you won't recognize this place!"

"It won't be easy," Wilford said, handing him the keys.

"Just stay out of it, Charles," Waveland shot at him testily. "It's my place!"

Monica said, "It's time to go," and we left the two of them there to argue.

Monica drove me home. We didn't speak much on the way. Monica has her quiet spells, as we all do, but usually her silences had that pleasant, humming quality of someone working out a creative problem, or trying to forget one. Monica was like a child who, in an empty house, floated and danced with the purest freedom because she believed herself alone. Now, however, it seemed a floorboard had creaked in that house, and the telltale noise betrayed another presence. The dance ended abruptly.

* * *

In late spring, my high school juniors were struggling through *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and my 101s were stonewalled by dependent clauses.

"And what do you think he means by that? 'Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.' "

My juniors stared back with young, impeccably vacant faces. Whether they were struggling with their wits for an answer or drifting into the sleep of boredom, I heard only the buzzing of the clock and the fluorescent lights.

Wilford called one evening when I wasn't teaching at the college. The night at the Kopacz apartment was so backfiled in my memory that it took me a moment to remember who he was.

"You don't have an answering machine," he said, as if I might not be aware of the fact.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Mr. Wilford?"

"I need to see you."

"On what matter, may I ask? I'm very busy"

"It concerns your sister. You haven't seen any of her recent work, have you?"

"I haven't been to her studio in weeks. As I said, Mr. Wilford, I'm very busy."

"Then you haven't heard what's been happening at the Kopacz apartment."

I was afraid he would lead to that. "No, Mr. Wilford. If that's all you wanted to discuss, I'm really-- "

"You would be more interested if you saw what Monica has hanging in the Gallerie Gilles."

Monica is the last person I ever had to worry about, but that never prevented me from worrying about her "What's going on?"

"It would be easier if could meet you in person."

I hated the air of mystery, but agreed to meet him Thursday afternoon at a coffee house on Milwaukee Avenue in what's now called the Coyote area. It's not an easy place to get to from my neighborhood without a car, but I allotted myself extra time.

The coffee house had an old, scuffed linoleum floor and newly painted lime walls. Paintings, too bad to hang in a high school art show, deadened some of the intensity of that luminous chartreuse. Wilford was already there, in a charcoal sport jacket and wrinkled turtleneck.

"My grandfather ran a printing shop not far from here." I sat down and ordered a coffee. "On Division Street. He was supposed to be a good artist. Good lithographer. He passed away before I got to know him very well."

"Patrick is losing his bearings." Wilford looked straight at me, or as straight as he could manage. "He's over there now, waiting for someone from the gas company to reconnect the line."

"Could you start from the beginning? I don't see what this has to do with Monica."

"Monica is there, too. Upstairs. Working."

A young man with long, varnished hair and a Dali watch tattooed on his arm brought my coffee. "What do you mean, 'working'?"

He hesitated. "Patrick brought in a crew shortly after we visited the place. They've been working very quickly-- shortage of work for rehabbers recently. The main structural work is finished. And the insulation, rewiring, new windows-- everything."

"Then they've torn down the walls."

Wilford pursed his lips. "Oh, the walls went down. Patrick's plans called for an entirely new floor plan. I almost hated to see them destroyed. There's no denying the power of the work, but-- "

"You feel there's something evil about them, too."

Wilford ignored my comment. "Some of the workmen retrieved pieces of the plaster from the dumpster. Even Patrick took some home. He had a framer cut them into squares and reinforce their backs." He put his hands on the table and folded his fingers into a latticework. "When I saw that I went to the dumpster and burned all of the work that remained."

"Good for you. I imagine that it didn't put you and Patrick on better terms."

"He threatened to kill me, but he always gets melodramatic when he's stressed."

"What's stressing him?"

"Dropping property values, lack of sales in his galleries." He undid the latticework and reached into his pocket, taking out an envelope from one of those one hour photo processors. "Also, the fact that the day after his crew finished priming the new drywall, it looked like this." He handed me the envelope.

Inside were a dozen snapshots of what looked like Kopacz's murals.

"Yes, they're back," he said with his usual lack of inflection, but much quicker. "Entirely new walls and ceilings and they're all covered with new images. And it's not a sham. I examined it carefully and it's all the same kind of brushwork. No one can do that much work in such detail so quickly." Without a pause he added, "You don't believe me."

I handed the pictures back. "I've seen a number of strange things in my brief lifetime, Mr. Wilford. You won't believe *me*, but this isn't the strangest."

"Patrick doesn't have your experience." He held the pictures before him, fanned out like a poker hand. "He really did snap when he saw the walls like this. He was obsessed with finishing the rehab before, to

get it on the market as soon as possible. He needs the money. Now he's talking about moving into the place himself. He's put a few pieces of the old walls up for sale at one of his galleries, and the prices scare me, because he never prices anything more than a tenth above what he knows he can sell it for."

My coffee had grown cold very quickly. "I never thought I'd hear you say something scared you. Perhaps Waveland's just lost his instinct for pricing."

"He's been taking women up to the place, too."

I felt my brows tighten and bend together. "Wilford, you're a *snoop*!"

"He's never been bi, not for as long as I've known him."

"You still care for him, don't you?"

Wilford amazed me again by blushing.

"Look, it probably doesn't mean anything. Didn't you take Monica and me up there?"

"He's *still* taking Monica up there." Wilford put the pictures down and stared at me.

"Charles." For the first time I used his first name. "Do you want me to talk to Monica? I can't tell her--

"

"There's something else you need to see." He pulled back his chair and started for the door, but-- gentleman that he was-- waited outside until I paid for the coffees.

He led me to the Gallerie Gilles above a Mexican *carniceria* a few doors down from the coffee house. The place consisted of two rooms. In the first, a young woman with severely-mown yam-colored hair sat behind a desk and spoke on the telephone, never once looking up at us. Around her hung a dozen crude, pseudo-Expressionist temperas.

In the next room, however, were a series of skilled graphite-on-paper works, handsomely framed and under glass. There was no mistaking Monica's hand. I looked carefully at the first drawing, less so at the second, the third hardly at all. I had seen this imagery before, on the walls of the Kopacz apartment.

I stood in the center of the room and pivoted slowly taking a deep, very deep breath while Wilford waited for me to say something.

So I said, "No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything.' "

Wilford waited, still and stoical.

"Me too. Okay, Mr. Wilford, you've done your homework, and I'm sure you've given this careful thought. What do we do?"

"That should be obvious by now." We left the girl at the desk, still chattering on the telephone.

Wilford allowed me to find a cab, and-- so I wouldn't feel the responsibility was unequally distributed-- let me pay for it as well.

The two-flat hardly looked like the same place, especially in the daylight. The brickwork had been sandblasted and tuckpointed. There was a new oak door, glossy with clear varnish, matching the new window sashes. You could smell the sawdust and paint from the sidewalk.

Wilford pointed to Waveland's BMW parked behind Monica's Taurus. "Good. They're both still here." At the door he pulled out a set of keys and fitted one confidently into the deadbolt lock.

"Where did you get those?"

"That's the easy part." He unlocked the door gently and opened it with the caution of a burglar.

Inside, the two-flat was a two-flat no more. On the first floor the interior walls had been removed wherever they weren't a structural necessity, creating one continuous living dining/kitchen space. The exterior walls were stripped down to the brick and fixed to them in several places were tall oak cabinets and bookcases. The floors were now parqueted and the old staircase had been pulled down and replaced with a wide, curving structure of steel-braced wood.

Wilford looked around, nostrils flaring. "Do you smell it?"

I smelled paint, varnish, cleaning supplies, all that freshly-cut wood. Behind those was dull, sour odor. "Gas."

"He's probably downstairs messing with the gas line. You go up and get Monica."

He took the stain to the basement, which were directly beneath the ones to the second floor. I could hear them as I made my way up the winding steps.

"Patrick, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Get out of here. The gas company never showed up. Do you think I'm going to wait all day?"

"Idiot! Leave that thing alone!"

"I know what I'm doing, okay? Just leave me alone!"

Upstairs, the living room of the old flat had been expanded, the windows enlarged, allowing in a good amount of hazy afternoon sunlight. The walls, as Wilford warned me, were much the same as on my last visit, only more so for not hiding behind shadows.

Monica sat on the floor, cross-legged before the east wall, a large drawing pad balanced on her knees. To her left was her tackle box of drawing supplies, a box of crackers and a bottle of water; her purse and jacket to her right. Either she didn't hear me enter or paid no attention to my presence until I was a few feet away.

"Don't ask," she said, not looking up from her drawing pad.

"I'm not asking. I came to get you out of here."

She laughed harshly and kept drawing. "Big sister."

I walked around and stood before her, blocking her view of the wall. "That's right."

"I don't want to hear any of your moral entreaties." She leaned to the side and looked past my legs. "Look at this!" She gestured around the room with her free hand. "The sense of movement! The position of light! The expressions! The details! The pure *freedom* of it!"

"It's not freedom" I bent down until our heads were on an even level. "I don't know what it is. An ape of freedom, perhaps. By all rights it shouldn't even *exist*."

She hummed through my words and kept drawing.

I took her by the shoulders. "Monica! Look at me!"

She flapped her arms to shake me off, staring down at her drawing, twitching with agitation.

"Can't you see what's happening? Even when we hated each other, you were never afraid to look me straight in the eyes."

She looked up then, but only for an instant. The walls called her back. Her unprovoked grin was a mockery of her real smile, all the worse for the vacancy in her eyes, as if there was no Monica behind them. Nothing else in that horrible place frightened me more than that.

"Come on!" With an adrenaline surge, I raised her to her feet. "We're going!"

She smiled at me, baring her teeth, and shot her knee just below my ribs with sufficient force to empty my lungs. As I doubled over, my downswing met the upswing of the bound end of her drawing book. I fell back like a poorly balanced piece of furniture.

My glasses rattled to the floor, but my vision had already occluded with the force of the blow. As I lost consciousness I heard Monica mutter, "She's all yours!"

I worked my lungs like a bellows to dispel the sea of pink and gray dots before my eyes. It was worse to be in the place and *not* see clearly. I fumbled for my glasses. When my fingers made contact, it felt as if they were slipping out of my grip, being drawn away or hiding from me.

The room looked darker, as if the windows were no more than *trompe l'oeil* paintings. I raised myself a little from the floor, which felt as if it had been tilted. I could see Monica by the east wall, standing next to a figure in silhouette. The figure was short and thick, big-shouldered-- not Wilford or Waveland. He and Monica looked *trompe l'oeil* too. Everything did, except the murals, luminous in contrast and very real. Real and moving.

On the east wall a fierce, bearded man in a brown robe ran an icicle-shaped dagger across the throat of a woman he held by a fistful of blonde hair, then threw her over a precipice. A chalk-colored horse trampled the skull of an old man. Two goat-legged satyrs played wishbone with a woman's legs. A trio in mandarin robes pressed glowing tongs into the eyes of a shackled, shirtless strongman. I could almost hear the screams and squeals.

I shut my eyes. The angle of the tilt was slowly increasing, like a bridge being raised. I opened my eyes as I struggled to keep from slipping toward the east wall. The new, waxed parquet floor was like a sheet of ice.

The figures on the east wall momentarily ceased their excruciations and stared out into the unreal world beyond the walls.

They stared out at me.

I rolled onto my stomach and slapped my palms hard on the floor, as if the paltry suction could hold me there, or the sweat adhere me in place.

Monica and the shadowy figure walked from the east wall to the west, unaffected by gravity's shifting angle of attack. They reviewed me curiously, as if I were something found lying by the roadside, Monica's arms folded, the man with his thumbs hitched to his belt loops.

"Wilford!" I shouted.

The angle increased. I spread myself as flat as possible against the floor. Still I slipped. My nails were nothing against the solid oak.

The shadowy man approached. All I could see of him were his jeans and heavy workshoes. He raised one foot over my fingers, like a child playing with an insect.

"Wilford!"

The foot, still upraised, shifted slightly, the toe of his workshoe poised before my forehead. He used only enough force to push me along, downward toward the waiting east wall.

I screamed, and with the scream came the welcome reassembly of the norms of the waking world: the floor lay parallel to the ground below it; the room allowed exterior light to re-enter; the figures on the wall, still horrid, were at least still. I sprawled on the floor. Before me stood Charles Wilford, looking as distressed as his stoicism would allow

"I thought I told you to get her out of here."

A noise stuck in my throat, part moan, part roar, part sob. I opened my mouth to shout at him and felt the painful swelling in my jaw from Monica's blow and the imprint of her shoe in my chest. "Right."

My legs wobbled as I stood. Monica was still seated before the east wall, her drawing pad before her.

The smell of gas was stifling.

"Patrick can't close the gas line," Wilford said. "We have to get out of here." He looked at Monica. "Did you hear that?"

"In a minute," she mumbled.

"There's no time! The whole house is filling up!"

Monica wouldn't move. Wilford looked at me, holding out his hands in appeal.

"Don't bother." I said. "I've been through this once." I walked up to her, bent down and, with one efficient lunge, grabbed the drawing pad from her lap.

"Hey!" She leapt at me, almost closing her arms around my ankles. Desperation must have dictated my agility. She flew at me like a banshee. I managed to fly ahead across the room and down the stairs.

"Give it back!" she shouted in a voice not far removed from the days of our childhood fights. "Give it back! Dammit!"

The new front door wouldn't open. Either it was stuck or I couldn't work the lock. Monica threw her full weight at me, locking her arms around my waist and throwing me against the wall. Stunned, I dropped the drawing pad, but Wilford caught up with us, yanked open the door and grabbed Monica before she could retrieve it.

She drove her elbows into Wilford's ribs while kicking at me. It took several minutes to get her a few steps outside. The other forty feet or so to her car seemed hopeless. Wilford was no strongman and Monica, slight as she was, threw all her weight against his arms. She kicked me away, dug her heel into his ankle and almost broke free.

Wilford, face stretched with pain, looked once more to me. "She's *your* sister."

I understood. "Wilford, this isn't the movies!"

Her heel found the same spot on his ankle. "For God's sake!" he shouted.

I made a pathetic fist. She thrashed her head about so wildly I had no idea how to aim it. At last I vied for an open hand, leaned in and slapped her with everything I had.

That slowed her down. I remade the fist and clipped her in the jaw. To my astonishment, it worked.

"Where are her keys?" Wilford asked.

I remembered the purse and jacket upstairs. "Shit!"

"Still have to get Patrick."

We left Monica on the sidewalk and, taking deep breaths, ran back inside. My head was splitting by the time I made it back downstairs with her jacket and purse, fiddling through them for the keys. On the way out, I tripped on Monica's drawing pad and, in frustration, kicked it into the living room.

Wilford had Patrick on the front step. Both of them were bunched over, gasping for breath.

"I don't know what happened." Patrick coughed and spat. "The pressure's not supposed to build up like that."

"We'll call nine-eleven," Wilford coaxed, helping Patrick to his feet, "from your car."

I dragged Monica to the Taurus by myself.

"Help me get her in," I asked Wilford.

At the cut, Waveland slapped his hands to his temples. "No!"

"*Forget it, Patrick!*" Wilford opened the side door, reached in and unlocked the back. "There's nothing more you can do until the gas line is sealed!"

"I can't leave it!" Waveland started running back to the house.

"It's too late!" Wilford shouted. "Patrick!"

Waveland was already halfway there. Wilford started after him. I grabbed his jacket sleeve but he snapped away

Before he could take another step toward the building, it was gone.

That's the only way to describe it. One moment it was there and the next it burst like a soap bubble. There seemed to be a gap between the sight and the effects of the explosion-- some temporal elongation of which I took advantage by throwing myself, and Monica beneath me, on the back seat floor of the car. A good portion of the two-flat-- reduced to its constituent fragments of brick, concrete, wood, glass and metal-- roared over us. The car rocked with the force of the explosion and rattled from the rain of pulverized two-flat. Several pieces of errant debris struck me, like stones hurled by a nasty boy, but the rest flew over us.

After that, except for the ringing in my ears, all was silent.

I climbed out of the car cautiously. Several places on my back ached, and I could feel a spot on my left hip I knew would blossom into a yellow and purple bruise. The car looked like it had been through a Belfast carwash, perforated and dented in a hundred places. The right front passenger window was completely blown out. The front yard and sidewalk were covered with rubble. A haze of dust hung in the late afternoon sunlight and the smell of gas faintly remained. All one could see of the two-flat was the shattered foundation with a few twisted pipes sticking out.

Wilford lay next to the car. I had no emergency medical training, so I followed the first rule of Hippocrates, to do no harm. I removed some bricks and boards that partly covered him and careful not to move him-- was glad to discover a pulse. He returned to consciousness slowly peering through smashed glasses, his chest expanding and contracting as he rasped out "Patrick!"

"Careful," I said. "Don't move."

"Idiot!" he grunted. "I can't move! My legs are broken!"

I took off my jacket and covered him. At least I knew something about shock. The back of my jacket looked like numerous cats had used it for a scratching post.

"Patrick!" Wilford rasped. "He's probably in worse shape! Find him!"

Sirens were in the air now; the noise drawing closer. I had to believe they were meant for us.

"Find him! Hurry!"

Monica let out a wild scream. She sat up straight in the back seat, holding one hand to her mouth and whimpering helplessly, waving her index finger. I pushed my glasses back up my nose to see what she was pointing at. A piece of debris had landed on the dashboard right beneath the rearview; in the space usually reserved for St. Christopher and fuzzy dice, and smeared the windshield with a dirty, oily substance. It was about the size of a glove, but thicker, as if stuffed.

"Patrick!" Wilford called out in the instant that I made out the fingers, thumb, knuckles and nails on the glove-sized bloody debris. I tried to shout something back but stopped short as my gorge came up.

And you wouldn't believe what the windshield stain looked like.

* * *

The explosion was attributed to Patrick Waveland's foolish tampering, though the fire department inspectors insisted that a malfunctioning gas company regulator had to take part of the blame. We stayed clear of that dispute. After telling our stories straight through the first time, we decided it would be best to blame everything on the gas. 'Natural forces' seemed as close to the truth as we could safely get. "Yes, I was feeling a little sick from that. Hallucinated, yes. The gas. That probably explains it."

We never said much more about it to anyone else, or to each other for that matter. I wonder sometimes if the explosion put an end to whatever compulsive force resided in that two-flat, or was it disseminated like the seeds of a dandelion? How many empty people will wake up tomorrow; or the day after, and find their emptiness filled?

When another gas explosion of similar origin shook that same area not long ago, resulting in several deaths and the destruction of a half dozen buildings, the gas company changed their regulators and maintenance procedures.

Wilford recovered from his injuries with an impressive cane and a reserve of stamina one rarely attributes to a man of his appearance and behavior. Recovery from the loss of his friend and former lover was much slower. I will take it from Wilford that Waveland *had* a better side, which deserved mourning. The last I heard of Charles Wilford, he had started a small publishing venture with some antiquarian friends.

Monica, after a brief convalescence at Mother's, returned to work apparently no worse for the wear. Her most recent canvases show more of the maturity she's always sought, and that I always knew was in her somewhere. In Wilford's terms, she's found her subject. Perhaps every artist needs to hear that floorboard creak in the empty house.

I spend my free evenings writing as usual, the fictions of much more conventional mysteries. My days are spent before classrooms of girls who each new year look a little more bewildered and unequipped to answer my questions. The cash receivable clerks and customer service reps who fill my night classes look at me with apprehension and suspicion, probably wondering why, if they've paid their tuition, they can't just have their grade. Why does this woman keep asking them questions?

A stalky girl with wildly curled gold hair, cramped into her seat like a compressed spring, raises the finger of one hand just high enough from the desk to signal a desire to answer; a desire she hopes will go unnoticed

"Ellen?"

"Because... because if art mirrors the spectator, to see beneath the surface is to see beneath *your* surface"

"And that might not be desirable?" Ellen is struck dumb, but shakes her head.

Progress. I muse, and wonder by what miracle humanity has managed to produce *any* art.

Class dismissed.

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