



Theater of the Cruel
by Eugenio Volpe

from *Post Road 9*

Selected by Adrienne Miller, author of *The Coast of Akron*.

Theater of the Cruel is a nimble piece that struts and swaggers, and then just about rips out your soul. – AM.

If Santo was into a book, there was no pulling him out. Voracious. A defense mechanism geared to remedy the constant knocking at the kitchen door. School nights with men coming and going at all hours. Off-duty cops. Neighbors. A member of the Zoning Board. Mostly the jobless, the laid-off, men spending their unemployment checks before their wives got hold of them. Black Monday merely stimulated business.

Reluctantly, he would bookmark his page to answer every knock. Often times, his head remained with the writer. The night his favorite poet, Antonin Artaud, appeared at the door, Santo couldn't remember if he had put the book of poems down. It was well past midnight. He had been reading since after dinner.

Illogical, he thought, staring at Artaud through the screen door. Then again, I am reading the poetry of a schizophrenic, a madman who wrote of bodies without organs and a dead rat's ass

suspended from the ceiling of the sky. Therefore, why should I find it strange that he is here? My life *is* this weird.

Always the performer, Santo greeted Artaud in French.

“Peux-je vous aider, Monsieur?”

The man standing in the doorway wrinkled his face in annoyance. Santo found this reaction odd. Perhaps my French *isn't* so polished, he thought. If Artaud is here in Marshfield, maybe he wishes to speak English.

“May I help you, sir?”

The man's face straightened into a more familiar form, that of guilt. Santo quickly recognized that Artaud was not there for him, but his mother. All her customers assumed such a look when the fifteen-year old welcomed them at the kitchen door. Santo did not want to believe that Artaud had come for his mother, but he knew better. He knew Artaud's character all-too-well. He had read countless biographies and hundreds of his poems. Artaud the sinner. Artaud the heretic. The man who founded the Theater of the Cruel. In this regard, Antonin Artaud's presence did not surprise him.

What did surprise him was how little Artaud resembled a Frenchman. Santo cluttered his bedroom walls with photocopied prints of Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Camus. Before leaving for college, his brother Ercule sketched him an erratic line drawing of Artaud, which Santo tacked above his bed. The Artaud standing in his doorway looked like none of these men. The more Santo stared at him, the more he resembled Sully, the bartender and owner of Sully's Place, a pub where his mother met most of her customers. He desperately inspected the man's features for French qualities. Other than the prints in his bedroom and a black-and-white photograph of his maternal grandfather, whom he never met, Santo had only seen one French person.

Cape Cod. The summer his parents divorced. They already lived on a beach, but their father made one last attempt to keep his family together. They all piled into the car and drove the hour to Welfleet, their father forcing conversation the entire ride. He tried to get them all singing *Inamorata*. It was hopeless. Everybody in the car knew it except for his father. Things brightened at the beach. The dunes protected them from the hot offshore wind. The waves were spectacular. A hurricane hundreds of miles off the coast. Their mother and younger sister Bel sat up on the blanket tanning while Hercule, Santo, and their father bodysurfed. The waves broke hard over a shallow sandbar. Santo mostly ducked under the rumbling whitewater. His father and brother angled their muscular bodies underneath the tubular crests. The three of them were getting out of the water when a thin man wearing what looked like ladies underpants passed them and entered the shore-pound.

“What kind of bathing suit is that?” Santo wondered aloud.

“They’re grape smugglers,” Hercule snickered.

“He’s French,” their father said. “That’s what the little sissies wear over there.”

“Aren’t we French?” Hercule acknowledged nervously.

“*I’m* all Italian, but *you guys* have a little French. Your mother’s half and half, which means you each got a quarter sissy in you. If you’re not careful, you’ll both be prancing around the beach in a pair of those banana hammocks next summer.”

Before the three could laugh, a giant wave lifted and drove the Frenchman headfirst into the shoreline. It was like watching a car explode on television. The whitewater washed the Frenchman up onto the sand and then receded, beaching his limp body like a bed of seaweed. Everybody thought he was dead. Eventually, the man slowly rose to his feet as if drunk. Blood trickled from tiny scrapes on his chest.

“Fucking sissy,” Hercule whispered into Santo’s ear.

After close observation, Santo concluded that Artaud must originate from some part of France where the people don’t look French. Close to Germany maybe. He looked nothing like the cadaverous bodysurfer. A well-trimmed beard unsuccessfully concealed pockmarked cheeks. He wore his hair in a mullet, spiked on top. Minus the small potbelly awkwardly centered on his belt line, everything about him was long and gangly, including his nose. Artaud finally grew impatient with Santo’s staring.

“Hey kid, you gonna let me in or what?”

He was drunk, his words smeared, and not a trace of French accent. Santo stepped away from the door allowing Artaud to enter the kitchen. A knot of dirty dishes and glassware overflowed from the sink onto the countertop. The tessellated pattern of the linoleum floor was worn into a single shade resembling the color of bad teeth. Artaud took a seat at the cluttered table as if he had been there countless times. He kept his eyes as far away from Santo as the small room would allow. This was common practice of the men.

“Is Sofia awake?” Artaud asked, keeping his eyes on a week-old newspaper.

Santo did not want to wake his mother. She had already seen two men earlier: Flaubert and Zola. Hardly, did she see more than two a night. It was an unspoken, agreed upon limit between mother and son. Santo wanted her to rest, but the last time he turned a man away, she accused him of being a moralist, like his father. He thought it better that she decide for herself. He politely asked Artaud to wait while he went upstairs to wake her. Santo dreaded his parents’ bedroom. He hated going up there. He usually called to his mother from the bottom of the

stairway, but he knew that she was too drunk for that this particular night. He would have to wake her with at least some amount of physical force.

The entire house was cheap. Veneer paneling walled the stairway and two bedrooms upstairs. He still referred to both rooms as “Bel’s room” and his “parents’ room”, although his sister and father no longer lived there. The high ceiling and hollow walls of the stairway made for good acoustics. Standing on the middle step, Santo would serenade his family on Sunday mornings. Bel, Ercule, Marcello and Sofia squished into the queen-sized bed while Santo set *Ave Maria* loose with youthful bravado. Things had changed dramatically since then. First their father, then Ercule, Bel had been the most recent family member to leave the house. Santo tried to convince his sister to stay, but the recording studio-like acoustics of the hallway, which would amplify the symphony coming from their mother’s bedroom across the hall, was too much for a twelve year-old girl to endure.

Santo stomped his way upstairs and pushed aside the half-opened door to his mother’s bedroom. The green glow of the digital alarm clock outlined her body. She lay amongst the yellow flowers of a bare mattress, facedown, wearing only a pair of blue panties, her right arm hung over the side of the bed: a position of deep intoxication rather than comfort. As Santo trespassed towards her, he became shamefully self-conscious. Graphic images of what typically transpired in the room invaded his thoughts. He saw her as they do. Something to hold, conquer, and cohabit. Something warm to enter. Something beautiful.

The mattress, the bed covers shed to the floor, her body, it all smelt of sex. When boys at school asked him if he had ever “smelt pussy”, he responded yes. He did not admit to knowing the odor by way of his mother’s bedroom. Santo poked two fingers into the center of her shoulders. She did not stir. Touching her body, clothed or unclothed, always made him feel

uneasy. He didn't trust his hands. He was a young man with certain impulses. Boys at school had also told him to take it where he could get it. And why not with her? He no longer viewed Sofia as much of a mother figure. Only during those few mornings a week when she cooked him breakfast did Santo find her at all maternal. He poked at the center of her back again, this time imagining her as one of Matisse's reposed harlots.

"*Ma mere. Ma mere.* There is someone here to see you!" He tried sounding urgent.

Sofia finally stirred. Santo kept his hand pressed against her back. Remaining on her stomach, she spoke into the mattress.

"What? What is it?"

"There is somebody here to see you."

"Who?"

"I'm not sure. I think it's Antonin Artaud."

"Who?"

"I'm not sure. I guess it could be Sully." He finally slid his hand away.

"What time is it?" she asked.

Santo looked at the digital clock; it practically reflected the time on her back.

"Quarter of two."

Sofia rolled over on her back and sat up. Her small breasts barely moved. Strands of loose hair clung to her cheek.

"Go over there and throw me my jeans."

Santo obeyed, tossing her the jeans in the doorway of the adjoining bathroom.

"Now open the second drawer and grab me a shirt."

Santo pulled out the first piece of fabric he touched.

“No, not that one. Pick something else.”

A new shirt landed on Sofia’s lap. She pulled it over her head and told Santo to go downstairs and tell who ever it was waiting that she’d be right along. Santo tried to persuade her otherwise.

“Ma, why don’t you go back to sleep? It’s late. You’re tired.”

“I’m not in the mood for a lecture. You sound like your father.”

The accusation silenced him. She pulled the pair of tight jeans up over her hips with a certain testament which declared *As long as I can fit into these jeans, you have no right to question the way I live*. She was that vain, with the looks to back it up.

Sofia pulled her hair back and pointed Santo towards the door with her eyes. Santo again tried convincing her to stay, but she had already turned on the bedroom light, and was standing in front of the mirror picking at her face. The brightness of the room somehow empowered her. He could not conceive this woman forcing his infant body from her uterus. The same mother who taught him to fertilize the tomato plants with broken eggshells and coffee grinds; who held the telephone to her ear with a shoulder while smoking a cigarette and washing dishes, laughing with one of her two sisters like a teenager. The woman in the mirror could not possibly be the same mother who had combed his hair for school every morning. Held his face in her fragrant hands and esteemed him by claiming *piu bello ragazzo, piu bello ragazzo nella scuola*.

“Go!” she waved him away with her hand holding the lipstick tube. “Tell him I’ll be right there.”

Santo didn’t stand a chance. She was already in the bathroom brushing her teeth, mumbling over her toothbrush for him to hurry.

Downstairs, Artaud read the sports section of the same week-old newspaper.

“Ma mère sera avec vous bientôt,” Santo said.

Artaud again rejected his attempt to make conversation in French, this time by impatiently staring at his watch. Santo nervously scratched his head and apologized to the surrealist poet. He did not want to incite one of Artaud’s violent tantrums. The Frenchman was famous for them. Also known for scatological tirades, namely against America and the Catholic Church, Santo thought it best to leave him alone.

“Bon nuit,” Santo squeaked.

Artaud did not look up from the newspaper.

In his bedroom, Santo contemplated dramatizing the rest of his mother’s clientele. Who would she sleep with next? Mallarme? Gide? Rimbaud? The possibilities seemed endless. I could do this forever, he thought. When he heard his mother’s footsteps descend the stairs, he sat motionless and eavesdropped.

“Hi there. It’s a little late, no?” Sofia asked.

“I’m here for that money.” Artaud’s voice was blunt.

“What money?” Sofia tried to keep things cool.

“Don’t give me that shit. You know what money. The money for the snit.”

“I thought it was free, no?” She tried sounding sexy.

“Did we fuck afterwards?”

“I can’t remember.”

“That’s a great answer, *no?*” he said sarcastically.

“It’s the truth. I honestly don’t remember.” There was a hint of helplessness in her voice.

“Well either pay me now, or get your ass upstairs.”

The inside of Santo's head clenched as if making a fist. He wished that he possessed the rage of his brother and father, the ability to commit himself to a violent encounter without hesitation. It would have also helped if he shared their physiques. A few nights before Ercule left for college, their mother brought home a young man only a few years older than Ercule. As soon as their mother excused herself to the bathroom, Ercule ripped the young man to the floor in a headlock. He dragged him outside onto the patio, where he threatened to kill him if he ever saw him near his house again. Santo and Bel watched from the kitchen window in awe. An argument between Sofia and Ercule followed. Sofia claimed that the young man had offered to take her out for dinner. Ercule didn't buy it. He packed his things that night and left for their father's house. Before leaving, he told his younger brother that he would rather live with Mussolini than Madame Bovary. A few days later, Ercule left for California. He never called the house to say goodbye. Santo got the feeling that his brother wasn't coming back.

After a brief period of silence, Artaud and Sofia went upstairs. Their footsteps mumbled from the ceiling above. Santo heard the sound of bodies settling into the mattress. A surge of nausea flooded his stomach and chest. He reached over to his nightstand and grabbed his headphones from on top of the stereo. His mother had bought them for him last year as a way to drown the noises coming from the floorboards above.

Santo loved jazz. He played clarinet for the school band and sang. His favorite performer was Pee Wee Russell. He lay in bed wide-eyed like a zombie. The grunting and squeaking upstairs silently filled in around him. Santo knew it was there, but in his ears, Jack Teagarden sang over Pee Wee's shrilling obbligatos.

O mamò mamò mamò, where did you stay last night?

O mamò mamò mamò, where did you stay last night?

'Cause the last I saw you, your head didn't look just right.

The music occupied his head for only a few songs. Then he thought of his brother flinging the man to the brick patio. What was he doing there in his bedroom listening to jazz? Famous poet or not, he thought, I should march upstairs, pull Artaud off my mother, and throw his ass out the window. If I am not going to protect her, what the hell am I doing staying in this house. But Santo didn't move. He turned the volume up to his walkman. Pee Wee Russell's clarinet wailed.

“Fucking sissy,” Santo muttered to himself.

When the song ended, Santo removed the headphones and attended his ears to the clangor of his mother's bed. He needed to hear it. It sickened him. He needed that sickness to combat his desire to be with her. Hearing her with others was the only thing that kept him downstairs at night.

A mere four hours later, the sound and smell of percolating coffee woke Santo for school. His mother saw him off on mornings she felt especially guilty. She'd also make him lunch. Wearing a pair of yellow rubber gloves, she waited for Santo to finish showering before untying the knot of dirty dishes in the sink. They never had enough hot water to do both. Neither could two people shower simultaneously in the upstairs and downstairs bathrooms. Their old hot water heater had burst. Sofia didn't know any plumbers and was forced to pay cash. She could only afford the cheapest one available.

Santo remained in the shower longer than usual. After only four hours of sleep, he was finding it hard to wake up. The night's surreal haze lingered in his perceptions. The warm water

seemed to pulse against the chest of somebody else's being. Somebody he didn't like, someone remorsefully weak.

By the time he dressed, his mother had already finished the dishes, cleared the old newspapers from the table, and flipped his mushroom *frittata* in the pan. It was hot and ready by the time he sat down. Santo didn't have to ask from where she drew each morning's energy. It wasn't just the coffee.

Santo ate as if the meal disgusted him. He guillotined the *frittata* with the side of his fork, chopping it in heavy clanks. His mother ignored his theatrics. Santo realized that she wasn't buying his act. They both knew that her cooking greatly pleased him. Santo also knew that she liked to play along with his fictions. She was the one who had planted certain seeds by telling him stories about her father. Santo's grandfather, Albert Dubois was a drunk, a mediocre clarinet player, and even worse father. Santo knew the truth about his maternal grandfather, but Sofia sketched a more Left Bank portrait for her literary-minded son. She told him that her father had played in Parisian dance halls with Django Reinhardt. That he recited Baudelaire and read Colette to his children as bedtime stories. Sofia told him these things whenever she feared that he might leave.

As Santo finished breakfast, wiping his mouth with a paper napkin, Sofia sat down across from him. He stared down at his plate, not quite ready to let her off the hook so easily.

"I'm not going out tonight," she announced with a humble smile. "I'll be home to cook you dinner. We can eat together."

Her hair was still wet from her morning shower. She pulled it back tightly, held together by a bun that looked like an amputated dog tail. A thin cotton bathrobe formed a V at her neck.

She lightly scratched at the area of exposed skin. Santo appeared pleased, but still hadn't given her a response. His mercy wasn't coming fast enough. He still hadn't looked at her.

"Anything special you'd like me to cook?" she searched under his bowed head for his eyes.

Santo detected a trace of panic in her voice. He finally gave in.

"Whatever you have. Anything." He finally lifted his head. "Really, whatever. It'd just be nice to sit down with you."

The kitchen was silent. They turned their eyes from each other. He afraid to hurt her, she afraid to lose him, the conversation turned illusory, bringing them back together.

"I was thinking of your father last night," Santo said.

"Really? What were you thinking?"

"How do you know so much about him if he left you when you were ten? Did he visit often?"

"Once in a blue moon." She lit a cigarette. "After he left, he moved to New Orleans."

"I know that part." Now he could not take his eyes off her. She sat in the chair as if posing for Matisse.

"Yes, well, he'd come back every couple years, take us out to a movie or jazz club." She blew the first breath of smoke over her shoulder away from him.

"Would he take all five of you," Santo asked.

"Well, Mariana was too old by then. She was already married to Paul with Paul Junior. My brother was more into sports so it was mostly Gina and me. There was a Chinese restaurant in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, Ching's or something. He'd take us down there. Lots of French in Woonsocket. My father called them puddle-jumpers because they were French-Canadians.

'Don't listen to their accents,' he'd tell us. 'They speak terribly. You girls are the *real* thing. Parisians.' We saw Dizzy at that place. Chan's I think it was, not Ching's."

"Are you serious? Was he playing bee-bop," Santo asked.

"Yes, it was the early sixties. He had just returned from playing at the *Pleyel*."

"How old were you?" Santo couldn't believe it. He wondered why he had never heard this story.

"Oh, I don't remember. Eight, maybe," Sofia shrugged.

"That is so cool. I wish I was listening to Dizzy live when I was eight. I had to go see New Edition with Bel. That's been the lowest point in my life so far."

"Well that's not *so* bad a life then, is it?" she postured.

Santo knew she had won. He shrugged it off. "I guess not. Dinner tonight?"

"*Oui*," she said, puckering her lips.

"Can I bring a friend?"

"*Oui, bien sur*."

Santo had only one friend, Eddie Radler. Their contrast in looks and behavior kept their friendship together. Eddie wore a Mohawk with purple-pointed liberty spikes. He mostly wore punk rock concert tee shirts. The Dead Kennedys. Black Flag. The Circle Jerks. The more offensive the shirt, the more Eddie wore it, and he hardly ever washed his clothes. Most of the time, his armpits stank like an Italian sub. Eddie's father was a lawyer. Eddie had seven sisters and couldn't stand any of them. He was so punk that he hated his entire family, but especially his father. At seventeen, Eddie had already lost his license for driving while intoxicated. Before that, his father had spoke at their high school every year about the dangers of drinking and driving. He considered Eddie a major disappointment.

Standing next to Santo at the bus stop, the two looked absurd. Santo looked and dressed like Rudolph Valentino. His hair was thick, however, with curls like a Roman hero. His mother liked his hair long and prohibited him cutting it. Sofia did not trust any of the local hair salons with her son's Mediterranean locks. Nobody but her had ever cut his hair.

“When are you going to cut those girly curls of yours?” Eddie joked, throwing a rock against a stop sign with all his force.

The sign vibrated violently. The other kids at the bus stop stood safely away from Eddie on the other side of the street.

“When are you going to stop mutilating your body out of hatred for your father?”

Eddie had eight earrings in his left ear and a tattoo of a blue screaming skull with red horns on his right arm. He knew that it was the stupid-looking, which is exactly why he did it.

“Hey, what are you doing tonight? You want to go trash Sully's Place again?” Eddie was trying to give somebody's mailbox a spinning-back kick. He kept missing. His combat boots too heavy for the necessary lift. “Maybe we should wait. We just did that a week ago,” Santo advised.

“Yeah, maybe you're right,” Eddie said, twisting his body for another kick.

“Do you want to come over my house for dinner tonight? My mother is cooking.”

Eddie stopped abusing the mailbox and turned towards Santo. “Is she going to be home?”

“Yeah, can you believe it,” Santo laughed.

“No shit? Yeah I'll go. Hanging out with your mother is always a trip.”

The bus approached from a distance. Seeing he had little time before it arrived at their stop, Eddie gave the mailbox one last kick. This time punting it as if it were a football. He ripped

the tin tube from its post and sent it wobbling end-over-end into the driveway. All the kids at the bus stop laughed as they lined up on the corner.

Eddie and Santo always sat at the back of the bus. Eddie partially stood in the aisle with one leg, kneeling on the seat with the other. The bus driver yelled back every five minutes, “Radler, sit down! I’m not in the mood for your crap this morning.” Santo sat against the window, watching the town of Marshfield shift to the jerky motions of the transmission.

The bus continued down Ocean Street, past vinyl-sided beach cottages, along a cement seawall, eventually crossing the estuary over a low trestle bridge. The estuary flowed motionlessly into the harbor, where a full moon tide flooded the marsh grass. Bright green blades pricked the purplish surface. Wooden docks were bound to the pier by aluminum ramps. Fishermen loaded bins aboard rusty pickup trucks. Across the inlet, a row of tidy beach cottages protruded out to the point. Whitewater folded over the tips of both rock jetties. Gulls dipped their wings and fought over rotten flounder racks. The morning sky was a sleepy orange. Santo fought to stay awake. This was the only part of Marshfield that he liked.

A short distance over the trestle bridge, the bus passed Sully’s Place. Eddie nudged Santo in the ribs and laughed.

“Look, they’re fixing all the windows,” he whispered.

A mammoth, plastic shamrock hovered over Sully’s Place. Two nights prior, Eddie and Santo had smashed nearly all the windows with baseball bats. They tried pushing the shamrock off the roof, but it was too tightly bolted. They threw rocks at it in hopes of smashing it, but the plastic was too dense. The shamrock’s resiliency enraged Santo into a haywire of wild swings with his aluminum bat. His eyes glassed over as he struck it repeatedly. Eddie finally stopped him out of fear that the bat would bounce off the thick plastic and strike Santo in the head.

Two blocks after Sully's Place, the bus passed the renovated farmhouse of Puritan leader William Bradford. Santo thought of his father. Both men possessed righteous convictions and zeal. Both placed the simplicity of the gospel before the ceremony of church. In school, Santo learned that Bradford connived the natives with such cunning that he could have held office in the Roman senate. His father could have held a high-ranking position in Mussolini's *Partito Nazionale Fascista*.

His father was always a fanatic, but not a religious one. He was a health nut, a bodybuilder, a former boxer and convict. He held his wife and children to the same strict diet that he followed. "What's good for me is good for you," he'd say. He spent much of his time in the bathroom. He showered, shit, and flexed his muscles in front of the mirror, all with the door wide-open. "The human body is a marvel. Nothing to be ashamed of." Santo remembered the time his father called them all into the bathroom after he had been sitting on the toilet for twenty minutes, eating a yogurt. Something he did every day after coming home from work.

"Everybody come in here," he called. "There's something I want you all to see."

He was half laughing by the time they all squeezed in. He knew he was being ridiculous. "You see that," he said, pointing his finger towards the inside of the bowl. "That's what your shit should look like when you eat as healthy as I do. That's what a healthy diet will do for you."

That afternoon, Santo and Eddie returned from school to an empty house. Sofia left a note on the kitchen table.

Sorry...something came up. Lasagna is in the stove. Only needs to be heated. Be home later. If Sully comes looking for me, you don't know where I am. Hope you brought Eddie.

Love, Ma

After reading the note, Santo felt like a cuckold. Such moments caused him to sympathize with his father. If Eddie hadn't been in the room, Santo might have shouted the word "whore" out loud. He might have shouted the words "fucking whore", but instead kept them inside his head and tried to act as if he didn't care. He crumpled the note and tossed it in the trash.

"At least she left us food," Santo said.

The two of them ate in front of the television while they played Mike Tyson's Punch-Out on the Nintendo system that his brother Hercule had left behind. Santo was not skilled at playing video games. He could hardly beat the game's second opponent. Eddie could fight his way to Tyson, and every other time, succeeded in knocking him out. Watching Eddie repeatedly pummel the game's villains eventually annoyed Santo.

"Let's do something else. This is getting old," Santo said.

"Yeah, I'm full. I ate three pieces of lasagna." Eddie put his hand over his stomach as if in pain.

"What is that supposed to mean, that you don't want to get a cramp boxing? It's only a game, idiot. You're not really doing anything."

"Fuck off. I know. I'm just saying, I'm wicked full." Eddie sat up on the edge of the couch.

"No, you fuck off. You fucking slut," Santo playfully poked Eddie in the chest.

"Who you calling slut, bitch." Eddie poked back.

Santo pounced on Eddie and the two boys wrestled to the floor. Eddie was two years older than Santo and bigger, but he kept the match close for the fun of it. After ten minutes of

executing pro-wrestling moves, Eddie's stomach cramped up. He had Santo in a figure-four leg-lock.

"Dude, my fucking stomach kills. I can't even stand up straight. I think I'm going to puke," Eddie groaned, releasing Santo's leg from the hold.

"You can't puke in here. Go in the bathroom," Santo laughed.

Eddie ran into the bathroom while Santo went into his bedroom and set up his chessboard. When Eddie returned, the cramp in his stomach had subsided. He protested playing chess.

"No fucking way. I'm not letting you whip me."

"I just watched you play Nintendo for two hours. Now you have to do what I want," Santo declared, setting the pieces in place.

Santo won the first three games, causing Eddie to quickly lose interest.

"This sucks," Eddie whined.

"One more game," Santo pleaded.

"Last week, you said that you were thinking of moving in with your father."

"Yeah, I was thinking about it, but my Mom was just pissing me off that day," Santo said staring hard at the board.

"So now you're not?"

"I don't know. She's been okay lately. We'll have to see."

Santo looked up at Eddie and then moved his bishop. The sound of Sofia's heels tapping on the patio brick outside broke his concentration on the game. Outside the open bedroom window, Santo could hear Sofia fidgeting through her purse for keys. As she entered the kitchen,

he could tell by her heavy footsteps that she was drunk. A knock quickly came at the bedroom door.

“Come in,” Santo said curtly.

Sofia staggered in with a look of guilt.

“Good evening boys.” her voice sounded hoarse.

“Hi Sofia,” Eddie said bashfully.

“Hi Eddie. Did you guys like the lasagna?”

Sofia walked over to Eddie and put her hand on his shoulder. Eddie immediately stiffened up. He looked uncomfortably over at Santo, who stared vacantly the chessboard as he spoke.

“Yes, it was good. You could have cooked the sauce longer, though.”

“I knew you’d say that,” Sofia laughed. She kept her hand on Eddie’s shoulder while staring down at her son. “Sorry I couldn’t make it tonight. Sully’s been looking for me all day. I’ve been trying to avoid him. I’m going upstairs, but listen, if he comes over, don’t tell him I’m home.”

“What about your car?” Santo asked, still not lifting his head to speak.

“Tell him I went out with somebody. Just don’t let him in. I’m going upstairs to sleep.

Bon nuit. Good night Eddie. I’m glad you came over.”

Sofia slid her hand off Eddie’s shoulder and left the room. Eddie let his shoulders slouch forward. He looked over at Santo who still hadn’t pulled his stare from the pieces. Eddie tried to lighten the atmosphere.

“Hey genius, you’d better fucking pay attention. I’m about to fuck you over with my bishop.”

Santo finally re-focused his eyes so he was actually looking at the board. He inspected every piece as if Eddie might have cheated.

“Where, how am I in trouble?” Santo surveyed the area around his king.

“Your queen, asshole, I’m about to fuck your queen.”

Suddenly, from outside the open window, the two of them heard somebody else step up onto the patio, and then, a light knuckling sound on the tin bottom of the screen door. They both looked at each other like two people awaking from the same bad dream.

“Do you think it’s Sully?” Eddie whispered.

Santo motioned at him to keep silent. He tiptoed out into the kitchen. Eddie waited in the bedroom. Santo poked his head around the corner of the kitchen entrance and looked through the windowpane of the kitchen door. It was Artaud.

Artaud interrupted the silence of the kitchen with another hollow knock. Like a great wind, or gale-forced sigh, stinking of alcohol and stale tobacco, the troubles of the house swept up against Santo’s back and pushed him closer to the door. He dug his heels into the tooth-colored linoleum, but there was too much drift pressing him forward. Before Santo could decide whether to let him in, Artaud looked into the kitchen and spotted him struggling against the flows of desire and fear. Santo opened the door but this time waited for his favorite poet to speak first.

“Where’s Sofia?” Artaud did not appear pleased.

Santo was no longer intimidated by him. This Artaud was his character, his invention, he could make him do whatever he wanted. He pointed him upstairs.

“She’s sleeping.”

Artaud brushed by Santo. Santo leaned his shoulder into Artaud's chest as he passed. Artaud laughed at his gesture and effortlessly shoved Santo aside. Santo wanted to protect his ego by pushing back, but more so, he was angry at his mother for missing dinner. Artaud stopped and turned towards Santo, providing him the opportunity to act on his anger. Santo looked down at the floor, however, and Artaud made his way upstairs.

Santo retreated to his bedroom.

"Was that him?" Eddie whispered.

"No, it was some new French guy she's been seeing."

"What the fuck is a French guy doing in Marshfield?"

"I have no idea. Where were we?"

"I was just about to fuck your queen."

Santo looked down at her. She was dead. There was nothing he could do. He made a defensive move to protect his king. Eddie knocked her down with his bishop. A thumping noise came from the ceiling overhead.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Lets just hurry up and get this game over with."

Santo reached over to his stereo and turned up the music. It was Teagarden and Pee Wee Russell again.

I'm gonna get myself some bricks Lord, to build my chimney higher

I'm gonna get myself some bricks Lord, to build my chimney higher

To keep my neighbors' tomcats from putting out my fire

Santo let Eddie beat him just to finish the game. Despite the volume of the stereo, it sounded as if Artaud and his mother would crash through the ceiling any moment. Eddie kept

staring up at the ceiling and then looking over at Santo for a response. Santo kept his eyes on the game.

“Dude,” Eddie said quietly, “do want me to go up there with you and kick the guy’s ass?”

Santo remained glaring at the board. “No fuck it. It happens all the time. I can’t stop it.”

After the game ended, Eddie left with reluctance. Staring up at the ceiling, he asked Santo if he’d see him at the bus stop in the morning.

“No, I don’t think so. You’ll see me at school, though.”

With Eddie gone, Santo sat up in bed listening to Artaud have his way with his mother. Sofia remained uncharacteristically quiet amongst the loudness. Twice Santo thought he heard her call his name, but he dismissed the possibility as his imagination playing games. The scene reminded him of a Jacobean play, the works of Middleton and Webster in particular. He walked over to his bookshelf and opened up *The Changeling*. The noise above faded before the closing of the first scene.

Two acts later, Artaud descended the stairs at the same moment De Flores promises Beatrice that he will kill Alonzo. The sound of his footsteps spoiled Santo’s trance, forcing him to confront the regret already fluttering in his stomach. The sound of the back door slamming shut jolted Santo’s nerves. He eased out of bed and slowly made his way up to his mother’s room.

When Santo opened her bedroom door, he saw no sign of her. Maybe she hid, he thought hoping. Maybe Artaud was just waiting up there, beating off or something. Maybe she was hiding in Bel’s room the entire time. As he made his way around the other side of the bed, reality found his thoughts. His mother’s naked body lay sprawled on the floor. Her forehead shone with sweat. She did not appear to be breathing.

Santo touched her hair, then her face. She mumbled a little, and moaned as if in pain. Santo carried her into the tub. Being able to lift her body made him feel strong. In movies, he had seen people shower junkies with cold water. This did not revive his mother with the same drama as in films. She did not yelp in resurrection. Her head merely rolled around like an infant's. In the light of the bathroom, Santo could see red fingerprints on her shoulders and biceps. He shut the shower off. Santo dried her body. It was relaxed. Her arms and legs agreed to every task. Once dry, Santo carried her back to bed and pulled a nightgown over her head. He lied on his back beside her. It was only nine o'clock at night, the sky outside hardly dark. Santo could still distinguish the outline of cherry trees bordering the yard. He rested his head on Sofia's shoulder and closed his eyes. Her breathing resumed to normal. She lightly snored. Without thinking himself tired, he drifted off to sleep for a few unimaginative hours of rest.

At midnight, Santo awoke to Sofia fingering his curls. He opened his eyes to catch her staring at him. She then closed her eyes, but continued to twirl his hair.

"Are you okay," he asked.

She sadly nodded yes. Her mouth tightened, chin shivering. Santo kissed her on the forehead and then laid his head back on the pillow, closing his eyes. He was tired and could hardly keep them open. Sofia slid her hand down Santo's face onto his chest. He did not find this odd. Sofia pawed her children often. When Sofia's hand found its way to Santo's stomach, he froze. His mother's breathing had grown slightly deeper, the weight of her hand, heavier. When her fingertips penetrated the waistband of his pants, an anxious paralysis seized his body. Her hand paused as if sensing his uneasiness.

Santo needn't do anything more but slightly raise his hips for his mother to continue loving him. Give her some sign that he wanted to, some physical suggestion, a sensual stretch

and pointing of his toes, a release of tension in his muscles, a twitch of relaxation, a calm breath that causes the stomach to sink, expanding the waistline of his pants, deepening his mother's reach.

When forced there, when confronted with the actual touch of his mother's desire, Santo balked. Contrary to what he had always thought, he was not attracted to her. A stale malaise nauseated his head. He felt carsick. The endless ride to the beach in Orleans. *If our lips should meet innamorata*. His father's voice desperately sentimental. Sofia looking wonderfully indifferent, smoking out the open window. In the backseat, the sun rested on Santo's lap. Sitting between Hercule and Bel, his sweaty legs stuck to the skin of their sweaty legs. Long trips in the car with the entire family always upset his stomach. He wanted to lean across Hercule and vomit into the vacuum of his mother's open window. He wanted his father to pull over onto the side of the road. He wanted out.

Santo politely swept Sofia's hand from his pelvis. She kept her eyes closed, like a child believing it made her invisible. Rejected, she tucked her arm into her side. Santo remained motionless and waited for his mother to roll over before rolling over himself. Once she did fall back to sleep or back to unconsciousness, whatever one it was Santo could no longer guess, he slid out of his parents' bed and quietly made his way downstairs.

In his bedroom, Santo removed the prints and sketches of French philosophers and poets from his wall. Calmly, he tore them into tiny squares and discarded them into the trash. He filled a backpack with clothes and grabbed a smaller bag for books. He wandered over towards his bookshelf, limiting himself to five books as if to be stranded on that famously hypothetical island. There were still many French writers in his collection that he had not yet read. Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault. Theories of Oedipalization and power seemed overwrought and a bit

beneath him now. What could those men tell him that he hadn't already known through more empirical evidence?

Through his Spanish teacher, Santo had heard of an Argentinean writer who emigrated to France. Santo had guilted his mother into buying him three of his books one day after she had been with three men the night prior. A book for each man. He pulled one from his shelf and flipped the book open to where the clerk had placed a complimentary bookmark.

INSTRUCTIONS ON HOW TO CRY

In order to cry, steer the imagination toward yourself, and if this proves impossible owing to have contracted the habit of believing in the exterior world, think of a duck covered with ants or of those gulfs in the Straits of Magellan *into which no one sails ever*.

Santo found this practical advice. He filled his bag with the three books and chose two more. One Cuban and a Colombian. He filled the rest of his bag with CDs, packing all but those that he had kept for the mere purpose of having a large collection. Bands such as Oingo Boingo and Danzig finally abandoned. Santo spotted his headphones on the floor beside his bed. He hoped that he wouldn't need them at his father's but packed them just in case.

Santo exited the house through the front door. Not a whisper of wind, the air temperature unnoticeable: the kind of atmospheric conditions that make it hard to separate the body from the space around it. A tapestry of constellations brightened the sky overhead, but the road before him remained burrowed in darkness. He didn't feel the desire to cry until after he had turned onto Ocean Street and walked a few miles, reaching the cement section of seawall near the trestle bridge. He stopped and faced the nearly invisible ocean.

In search of tears, Santo tried turning his imagination upon himself, just as his new favorite book had suggested. This did not work. Santo had contracted the habit of believing in *the exterior world*. Too much had *happened* to him at home not to, and the intermittent static of lashing waves, sounding from just beyond the boundaries of sight, lightened the shadowy silence of the space around him. His desire to cry intensified, but no actual tears came.

Disappointed, but not ready to give up hope, Santo imagined a duck covered with ants. This merely grossed him out. He then tried combining the two suggestions by imagining himself covered with centipedes. This did nothing but terrify his mind with ideas of death. He wanted to cry, not breakdown.

His desire to cry swelled into a dry, painful lump in his throat. To combat the oncoming panic settling onto his nerves, Santo resumed walking. Looking up, he considered the constellations overhead, and by their positioning in the sky, navigated himself amongst *those gulfs in the Straits of Magellan*. He thought of his mother's heart, that barren cove *into which no man will ever sail*, and still, nothing came, the lump continuing to throb. As he crossed the trestle bridge and approached the greenish glow of a ten-foot plastic shamrock, he felt as if he'd never be able to swallow or spit the lump out, leaving him no other fate but to choke.

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