

Alexandra Isacson

Matchmaker's Ashes

Inside Elyse's old black Mercedes, Stacey could hear the faint hum of Juniper and Ash trees among the chants of red sandstone rocks. Cabins, adobe casitas, and cars passed by in a sibilant rush.

"There's Bell Rock," Vincent said, one hand on the steering wheel, brushing his other hand through his dark, wavy hair. He wore a paint splattered wife-beater with a pair of dark suit pants. The car wound through the narrow street, passing some restaurants and Native jewelry stores in the Arizona town. "Do you feel the vortices?"

"Even when I'm not in Sedona," Stacey said, watching vermilion and ochre dragon tats writhe on his muscular arms.

"Me too, the way I trip."

"Let's get out and take in the view before we drive to Jerome."

"Sure."

"We should let your dad sleep it off," she said, glancing in the backseat, checking on Elyse's small cobalt glazed urn, cradled in a safe place on the floor. It was her last wish to have some of her ashes scattered in Jerome.

Through the 1960's Mercedes back window, light illuminated a vast decal of fiery Harley wings like stained glass. Harvey sprawled out on a supple leather seat, his dark court suit and white shirt ruffled, and his gray tie loosened. Elyse had been Harvey's lover for years and the widow of his older brother.

Stacey sipped water and thought about sand-paintings, healings, and primal ceremonies. Undulating clouds floated through the soft blue sky. Gift shops and people's thoughts congested the area. She tuned out the voices, allowing herself to hear soft drumming and chanting. Vincent parked. He tied the laces of his Chucks and grabbed a pack of smokes,

lighting one outside the car. Stacey slipped on her black Italian sandals.

"I loved coming up here with Elyse and my other circle sisters," she said, walking with Vincent. "Elyse did a feminine mysteries initiation ritual for me here."

"Tight."

"It was totally tight, Vincent," Stacey said. "We were in a cave at night with fire and we chanted and drummed beneath a full moon. Then we could smell and hear rain."

Stacey felt calmly surreal, a pasted silhouette, against the hush of the red rock valley. Her body traced the draped shadows of the valley. Stacey's black chiffon dress and wavy, long strawberry blonde hair blew silk in the light pulses of eternity. It was hard to believe her spiritual mentor was dead. She had found acceptance in Elyse's group. Stacey had always been a vessel for extraordinary sensory experiences that intermittingly flashed through her body's consciousness that she channeled into art. It was a mystery passed to her from the women in her family, which was simply in her blood.

"On our way back, we'll have to stop at all the galleries," he said, cupping his cigarette, taking a drag, looking at the red mountain. "I'd be a dream to show our work here."

"Some of the paintings in your bedroom," she said, touching his painted arms with her eyes, wanting to touch them with her fingertips.

"I'd like to do more nudes," he said, lightly touching her freckled hand.

"You interested?"

"Think so," she said, pulling her long hair back, tying it in a knot. Stacey was afraid of the entanglements of a relationship. She wanted to sketch him without his shirt on in this beautiful place. It would be a slower, safer way of taking him into her. A sweet meditation. Making art was always transcendent for her; she always felt a part of her subject.

"I'd be a tight place to work and live," he said. "The old man has his

cabin rented out now. After they're gone, he wouldn't mind us staying there. He likes people living there to keep up the place."

"It might work with us," she said, unknotting her hair, breathing in the fresh valley air. "I've stayed there with Elyse. It's so gorgeous by Oak Creek. Tomorrow, we should go up there."

"Sweet."

Vincent reached into his pants' pocket. "I have something for you from Elyse."

"She always wore this bracelet."

She looked at his paint whorled fingertips and paint stained hands as he clasped the gold bracelet on her arm. The bracelet was alchemic with the mingled emotions of Elyse and Harvey. Closing her eyes, she could see Elyse's face and her beautiful combed-up dark hair. Hugging him, she ran both her hands firmly across his shoulders, slowly down his painted arms to his big hands. She wanted to massage his body with sensual oils.

"You feel nice," Vincent said, touching her hands.

"Thanks," she said, kissing his cheek. "Weeks ago, Elyse was going to see what was in the cards for me."

"It must've been me," he said, brushing his thumb against his face, taking rhythmic breaths through his nose.

Stacey saw the sparking of white powder on his face, opening her green eyes wide. She had heard all about him from Elyse. Vincent had attended a private prep school. Now he was doing H. and cocaine lines and majoring in art at Arizona State. Because she was a sophomore at ASU, he had assumed she was older. She was seventeen.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It was a trigger, reaching into my pocket. I felt the sack. We should probably get going," he said. "Jerome's about 45

minutes away.”

“I’ll drive,” she said, holding her hand out to him. “I need to take that.”

He handed the baggie to her, and she stuffed in her black lace bra.

After being out in the fresh air, the car reeked of hard liquor from Harvey. Elyse had told her that there were no perfect relationships and the happier ones shared mutual passions. Sitting in the driver’s seat, she reached into her purse and sprayed some diluted rose oil. Stacey adjusted the seat and mirror, glancing back at Elyse’s urn. Vincent slipped in a CD. Enya chanted on one of her older songs.

“Elyse turned me on to Enya,” she said. “It’s such an empowering song.”

“*Cursum Perficio*- ‘My journey ends,’ my Latin was good for something.”

Looking through the rear-view mirror, she could see a pink jeep full of tourists driving by. She gripped the steering wheel with her sweaty hands, driving into the blue sky past psychic and massage places, art, and Indian art galleries that graced Sedona and back through the desert to Jerome, a copper ghost town.

A sign pointed toward Jerome, and Stacey looped around a narrow road on a brush- patched mountain. She could see a couple on a motorcycle in her rearview mirror, both driver and passenger wearing red bandanas and black leather. No red rocks in Jerome like Sedona. She felt dizzy and had a fear of driving off the edge. She felt buoyant like she was careening around in a boat. She had a fleeting thought of herself as a female Charon, a feminist revisionist underworld ferryperson for the dead. Concrete hillside steps led up to old crooked houses settled and stilted on the mountain, some swayed with porches, some abandoned, and some inhabited. Some concrete steps led nowhere and everywhere. Ghost tattered clothes blew on wire lines. Four miles up, they passed an old high school, now an art gallery. Nature spirits and other mysteries embodied the place. And nobody else was there.

“Here okay?” she asked.

"Yeah," he said, nodding.

Stacey pulled off the highway, and gravel kicked up around the car. Vincent slipped his dark suit jacket over his wife beater. With a sleight of hand, she moved the baggie from one side of her freckled breasts to the other. Reaching over the seat, Vincent tried to shake his father awake.

"Leave me alone," Harvey said.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"We need to honor her spirit." She hesitated and asked, "You'll carry her?"

"Sure."

Stacey pulled her leather bag on her shoulder, and Elyse's urn flashed fire in the light. Stepping into the wind, Stacey's strawberry hair streaked against blue; she veiled her black shawl over her head, and tied it loosely across her breasts. Her veined chiffon shawl and dress took flight. They glided by large boulders to a fenced edge of the canyon. The mountains stippled with brush. Yellow Dogwood blooms grew beneath their feet; a hawk soared and rasped, breaking the skin of the sky above them.

"Wow, WPA," she said, pointing to an imprint in a concrete fragment.

Standing beside Vincent, her hair and shawl blew around his shoulders like a wing. She pulled a candle out of her pack, lit it several times, each time the breath of the wind blew it out. Stacey slipped the candle back in the bag, taking out a wilted white rose.

"She's just playing with us," he said. Vincent lit a cigarette, took a drag, and shrugged.

"With all the cool things we did in ceremony, she just wanted something simple."

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She pulled the petals off the rose, watching them floating on the blue fingers of the air. She opened a place in a sacred book with prayers and meditations from everywhere that she had marked with a Tarot, and Vincent held the card. They read a passage together from a Vedic prayer:

Oh Supreme light, lead us from untruth to truth, from darkness to light and from death to immortality.

"I feel nauseous," she said, looking at him holding the open clay vessel. She felt chilled and a dull headache coming on. "Vincent, I just can't do it. Not without your dad."

"He's so wasted," he said, taking a drag.

"It's like dumping part of her off a cliff," she said. "I need to sit down."

"It sounds romantic until you have to do it," he said, letting his cigarette drop, crushing it.

"Maybe your father can."

He carried Elyse's urn back to the car. Harvey was still out dead drunk inside the car. Mouth open, snoring in his immaculately groomed gray goatee. They were outside themselves in the polished black gleam of the Mercedes. Leaning up against the back fender, fiery wings blazed behind them in the window.

"I really like the badass wings," she said. "I think Elyse would like them too."

"I thought they went with the Benz."

"Sweet."

Her shawl flew across his face.

"What is this feathers, Stacey," he asked, running his fingers on the edge

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of the shawl, lightly touching her arms and breast.

“Elyse brought the dress and shawl back for me from Venice; they’re burnt ostrich.”

Motorcycles drove by them; the wind kicked up and blew dirt. Stacey buried her face in Vincent’s chest, and her hair flew around him. After the gust let up, he carefully untangled her caught strands of hair in his suit jacket.

“Jesus Christ, Stacey.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, leaning against the car.

“No, look,” he said, putting his hands on her shoulders, pointing in the direction of where they had done their ceremony.

The wind whirled around, picking up the skin of the earth. Stacey imagined the flowing shadows of a modern dancer, her bare feet gripping the earthen floor, gaining momentum and ascending into the potter hands of the sky, spinning away from them into the canyon.

“You have your phone,” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Take some pictures.”

“I think it’s a good sign,” he said, snapping pictures.

“I think maybe her spirit is out there.”

Sitting in the car, looking out at Jerome, she said, “I just need a moment with Elyse.”

Stacey walked to the edge of the canyon, feeling Elyse’s intoxicating presence, but grieving her physical departure. Feeling quite entranced, white heat streamed down her cheeks. She wanted closure, yet always wanted to remain open to Elyse’s spirit. Her bracelet snaked up her arm,

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reflecting the light. She thought about all the years of being with Elyse in her circle. She felt fortunate to be part of Elyse's life.

Closing her eyes, the mountain and brush around her became a blur of hot colors. She extended her arms, energy sparked through her hair and fluttering silk garments. In a helix of desires, she felt like she was some place out of time. She wondered if Vincent was worth the risk, and she knew they had the ability to create something beautiful together. She blessed her desires. Opening her eyes, she still felt entranced. Pulling the baggie out of her lace bra, powder spilled on her black chiffon dress. She sprinkled the powder, watching the fiery white light float across the canyon. She could feel Vincent's looming disappointment in her body.

"Ashes to ashes and dust to dust," she whispered before she walked back to the car.

"I feel better, but woozy," she said to Vincent when he started the car. She could hear Enya singing. She sipped some water.

"You look sleepy."

He drove up the hill looking for a B&B, passing some old houses, restaurants, a spirit bar, art galleries, and gift shops- many alleging to be former houses of ill repute.

"Let's do some blow together or smoke a joint tonight," he said, sliding his hands inside her dress, touching her breast. "I've got Acapulco. Fucking hard to get."

She took a deep breath. "The weed sounds cool."

"It's good shit," he said.

"Cool."

"Tomorrow we could go up by the cabin and to Oak Creek and do some sketches," he said, caressing her hair, kissing her earlobe. "Drop the old man off somewhere."

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"I love the trees and walking across the rocks."

"We could do some partial nudes."

"If you do me," she said, "I'll do you."

"Cool."

"We could give each other massages."

"Yeah," he said, caressing her breasts. "Your freckles are like constellations."

Stacey brushed her hand against Vincent's thigh, and she still felt electric.

Alexandra Isacson's poetry and prose currently appears in Dogzplot, Eclectica, Fickle Muses, keepgoing.org, poeticdiversity, Slow Trains, Wilderness House Literary Review, and forthcoming in Dogzplot Flash Fiction Anthology 2009, Frigg, and Pank.