

DAMIAN

Damian slid through the half-open doorway as unobtrusively as a stale breeze in a smoke-filled bar. The girl lay on his bed, a smile spray-painted on her tanned face. The once-sought legs now blended with the rumpled quilt; just two more bolts of heavy fabric. She lay in posed bliss -- attempted sensuality even in sleep. He reached for the silver flask and poured down a raw throat.

The walls were what Duron Paint called Antimony Grey. Damian liked the color by virtue of its near-absence. It quietly enhanced the one poster in his basement suite. The painting showed an adobe church in New Mexico. The church rose from the desert, its curves far more seductive than the transient body lying a dart-throw away.

He sat, serenely facing the painting. He had been there once. Married to legs, breasts and an eastern laugh, he had seen the church.

Damian and Andi flew into Albuquerque National Airport on a connecting flight from Chicago. The airport had no extendable ramp and they walked to the terminal. It was past lunchtime and the path from the plane to air-conditioned splendor danced in a draining rhythm through the diesel exhaust hovering above the concrete. There was no wind, no moisture, no grass. Damian breathed in the heat and smiled. This was his childhood airport. It was not the surrealistic nightmare of the big-city airport. It was personable in its simplistic poverty.

They borrowed a decaying jeep from an old neighbor of Damian's and drove North. There was no destination.

Andi had doubts about Damian. His college depression was predictable, understandable, damn near normal. She liked him because of his off-the-cuff philosophical muttering. In college, a dialogue existed. He would see the economics teacher as an insect-punctured leaf -- she saw him as an asshole. Still, there was grounds for something. Now, he seemed more in love with the dead grass than with her. So they drove.

Amongst idiots, Andi was fine. She just wasn't abrasive. And Damian could deal with her, in class, in the student cafeteria, in bed, with the attention of a phone operator picking out the essentials of the caller's chatter -- area code/number/collect or person-to-person: Damian would catch key words and tune out for one cigarette and then say something. Andi ate it up. Now there were no campus morons to screen the faults. Damian was so goddamn close to being happy and then she'd squawk something inane.

It was a Thursday night, Damian was at his best. The clouds stood in massive testimony to his smallness. These were not eastern clouds, clouds so passively layered that a jet stream could rival them in beauty. No, these clouds pummeled the atomic mushroom in stature. They stood as nations, distinct buffer zones hiding slow alliances. Damian would silently chase these clouds, heeding only the constraints of barbed wire fences, lone trees or fleeing animals.

Andi was counting. They'd almost crashed twice, driving around other people's property. Still, she felt special -- a word she was fond of -- pretending to understand Damian's oddities. She felt nervous, sure, but she

could just see herself explaining Damian in sweeping adjectives to roomies in Praeger West. So they drove, Andi doing her best to play the sympathetic heroine to the shell-shocked vet.

The clouds threw grey splotches on a greying desert plain. It was past nine. Damian almost hit the church, except for Andi's yelp. It wasn't that hard to miss, it was nothing more than an extension of the desert curves. Damian slowed, then stopped. It took them a while to find an entrance; longer to realize it was a church. There was no glowing plaque with detachable white letters proclaiming the day's sermon. No parking lot -- understandable since they were miles from any paved road. No minister, nor evidence of there ever being one in the last century. No fidgeting children. No born-again sophomores with a touch of quasi-existentialism still in their restless skulls. No door to close. Nobody and nothing.

There was one central room, which the adobe walls deemed to be vaguely rectangular. The floor was packed sand in a frozen undulation. There was no pulpit. There were at most fifteen seats, or rather places to sit, carved out of various walls, with no common focal point. A wooden cross was set in an enclave so hidden that Damian found it only after half an hour of awestruck wandering.

Andi sat, nervously waiting an owner's return. There had to be an owner. Everything had an owner. She fidgeted, not sure what to do. Should she pray, thus suggesting to Damian that she too was experiencing something spiritual? Sure, this was special, someplace she and Damian could talk about when they got back east. She had no camera, no way to record their presence. But yes, she could carve D + A into the damp walls, and preserve their experience. Should she mention hunger? (They hadn't eaten since sunrise.)

Damian glanced at her handiwork. A stab of pain shot through divine tranquility. There was no presence. He felt hungry, tired, even hung-over from mental excess. He tried desperately to regain the joy, the absence of depression and mundane thoughts. He failed.

He left her there, impotent to all hope and desire. He felt like grabbing her head and throwing it at rock after rock until the blood formed a gentle mosaic on the sand floor. He would leave her carcass, buried under dirt, as an extra curve. But he could not.

Damian sat, waiting for the girl to wake, mumble superlatives about the evening, and leave. He would receive the bill sometime in March along with more mundane Visa expenditures. Her services would be itemized as Enlightened Hardware of Wheaton. It was a convenient system.

Meanwhile, he was content to wait; the flask as unending as maintained credit.