



MIXED MEDIA

ANIKO  
CARMEAN

A SURREAL SHORT STORY

## **MIXED MEDIA**

First Edition: July 2014

Copyright © 2014 Erzsebet Aniko Carmean.

Cover Art by Aniko Carmean, using [DIY Book Covers](#) Fiction Template #17

Editing by [Jacinda Little](#)

### **License**

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.



### **Disclaimer**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

# Mixed Media

A Surreal Short Story

Aniko Carmean

*For MGC*

My name is Mario Santa Maria. On Tuesday, all of the paintings at Vos Museum were black. The works in the visiting gallery had names like *Surreal Forest*, *Submissive Ocean*, and *Cloud Ninety-Nine (As Seen from Easy Street)*. Their placards extolled the sensuous representation of Nature. The nihilism was gutsy, and I wondered why there hadn't been a bigger media splash.

The Contemporary Art exhibit was in the next room; it was well-lit, and the floor creaked with familiar goodwill. Color exploded from the canvases, brighter than a Technicolor dream. O'Keefe's southwest yellow-orange-red swelled near Rothko's angular green-blue-brown. It was all as I remembered it, as colorful and mind-expanding as I remembered -- and then it wasn't. The encroaching black slid over the Contemporary masterpieces. The yellow-hued Ashley to my left went blank. There was no yellow on the canvas. No yellow, no red, no green-blue-brown, not even a pastel. Just black.

"Sir, are you all right?" a security guard asked.

"This isn't art."

"Guess you're a traditionalist. Not saying I understand pieces like that one, though." The canvas he indicated flared with color and shape. When the guard shifted his gaze back to me, the painting went black.

"Did you see that?" I asked.

“What?”

“It changed, was *colorful*.”

“You don’t look good.”

“Maybe I’m sick.”

“I can call an ambulance,” he offered.

“No! I just need to some sleep. I’ll go home.”

“But you’re shaking.”

“It’s nothing, nothing.”

I hurried away from the solicitous guard. Near the front door, the souvenir shop’s neon sign caught my eye like salvation. Shelves of colorful baubles drew me inside. A bin of stuffed bears wore bright t-shirts emblazoned with the Vos logo; I picked one in turquoise for Darla. A cup held water-filled pens with museum cut-outs floating from writing tip to button-nub. Vibrant hues draped the bears, pens, stickers, coloring books, cheap bags, and gaudy hoodies. My shoulders relaxed with each breath.

“Oh, hello! I didn’t know anyone was here.” A woman wearing glasses and a volunteer vest emerged from the stock room. “Are you ready to check out?”

“Yes. Wait, no. Are there any posters for sale?”

“Of course! Follow me.”

The poster display was an oversized book, opened to a page in the middle. Good, clear font labeled a black rectangle. My fingers left smears on the protective plastic where I touched the missing image.

“Don’t see what you’re looking for?” the volunteer asked.

“Funny,” I said. “Really funny. What’s going on here, a psych experiment?”

“Excuse me?”

“None of this bothers you?”

“I may not like every piece we have here but, no, none of it bothers me,” she said.

“You’re serious.” I set the stuffed bear next the register.

“Every object in Vos goes through rigorous qualifying review.” She rang up the bear.

“It’s better than the mess in some boutiques where just anyone can decide they’re an artist.”

“I’ve shown pieces in a couple of those smaller galleries.”

“Maybe someday you’ll make it into the establishment.”

“I don’t care about the establishment!” I slapped the counter harder than I intended. The volunteer cringed.

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” she said.

“Yes, you did. They always do. You and my girlfriend should get together and talk about how art should be run as a business, how I should *establish* myself.”

She put the bear in a bag. “Will that be all?”

“No. I’d like some postcards. Of paintings.”

“Over there.” She pointed at a carousel near the register. “I’m afraid you’ll have to hurry. I’m about to go on break.”

“Of course you are.” I pulled the corners of my mouth back, but it didn’t feel like a smile.

She crossed her arms, looking over her glasses at me the whole time I inspected the spinning carousel of postcards. I turned it, slowly at first, before finally giving it a spin so strong it wobbled. “Why are they all blank?”

“It’s a postcard,” she replied.

“I’m not talking about the back!” I grabbed a card at random, crumpling it as I thrust it towards her. “What is this?”

“Yours, now that it’s ruined. And please mind your tone, or I will call security.”

I smoothed the card on the counter with jerky movements. “It’s like my dreams. It’s all like my dreams.”

“Excuse me?”

“I used to dream, and now I don’t. I thought it was the job, so I quit. It wasn’t the job, and now it’s happening here.”

“What’s happening?”

“All of the paintings are blank!”

“Not every piece of art is going to speak to your soul.” She tugged the card away from me to scan the barcode. “You understand you have to pay for this.”

“Wait!” I grabbed her wrist, and she gasped. “Look at it and tell me what you see.”

Her eyes flicked at the postcard. An agony of russet swam to the dark surface, followed by swirling ochre. It was a man, face between his hands, mouth agape. She yanked free, wiped her arm on her shirt. The image on the postcard disappeared.

“Edvard Munch, *The Scream*,” I said. “Too perfect not to be a setup. I’ve figured you out, now what? Where are the camera men? Or is it the guys with the white coats?”

“I’d like you to leave.”

“I haven’t paid.” I snatched a second, random postcard from the display. Leaning across the counter, I shoved the card at her. She cringed backwards, her attention shifting from my expression to the card, as if it was a weapon and I was a mugger. “Look at it.”

“Escher,” she whispered. “The information is on the back.”



“Don’t look at me, look at the picture.”

She swallowed hard, and blinking very rapidly, looked at the picture. Sure enough, *The Hands* appeared on the postcard. The volunteer whimpered, and something in me broke. I set the card down gently, carefully. “Do you take credit?”



The bag of purchases thumped against my leg as I hurried to the exit. Two security guards, including the man I had spoken to earlier, entered the lobby behind me. The volunteer pointed and cried out, “He’s why I triggered the alarm!”

“You, stop!”

I slung myself down the front steps. The air fought me, refusing to fill my lungs. I was a painter, not a runner. Shop windows reflected my flight, the bag dangling like a broken wing. Three breathless blocks; no sirens, no pursuit. A bus stop offered cover, and I took it. Hands on my thighs, bent-double, gasping. The pavement was cracked, nearly shattered. Sanity filtered through those cracks, lost like spilled wine, my missing dreams, or the blanked paintings.

“Mister, you okay?”

A pair of women’s shoes appeared on the cracked pavement. They were heavy Doc Martins, the sort Darla would never wear. I drew myself upright and leaned against the cool Plexiglas of the bus stop.

“You good now?” she asked.

“Can I show you something?”

“God, not another perv! I will spray your dick with Mace.”

“That really won’t be necessary.”

“You’ve been warned.”

“I just want to show you a postcard.”

She raised an eyebrow. Her buzz-cut hair was glorious, Manic Panic pink. Cars flowed past us, more colors, but none as bright as her hair. I plunged my arm into the bag and retrieved a card. “Please, look.”

“I’ll probably regret this.” She turned only her eyes toward the postcard, paused, then swiveled her whole body towards it. “Groovy Escher!”

The black rectangle morphed into the iconic drawing of two hands in a self-reflective circle. She looked up at me, and I could feel her staring, but I couldn’t stop looking at the post card. The image faded to black.

“Did it look normal to you?” I asked.

“Escher, Dali, they’re super-normal...like, above it.”

“Okay, I can get that. But this particular postcard, your experience of it just now – did it seem like the drawing was appearing? Kind of, um, rising through darkness?”

“Man, it’s just a normal postcard.” She swept a hand over her short, pink hair. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“No, but I like your hair.”



The inside of the apartment was dim and protective, the blinds still closed from an earlier attempt to nap. I flopped on the couch and stared at the ceiling, but my feet and my hands kept up a constant twitching motion. The upstairs neighbor and her three kids were out, their silence a taunt. I was farther from sleep than any human, and I wasn’t sure I’d ever make it back.

My journal was on the coffee table, its pages filled with the ghosts of dreams. I picked it up, the cover crumpling in my haste. I set the notebook in my lap. The tremors in my hands didn’t stop, but they lessened as I flipped open to a random entry. *This dream was a disturbing one, even for me. Darla and I were in a car, we were driving down a long wooden bridge. No*

*guard rails. The water on either side went on in unbroken blue waves all the way to the horizon. Darla was at the wheel, and I was looking at the water. Clouds rolled in. The sparkle left the waves. Darla began to cry and fumble with the door handle. Before I could stop her, she jumped out. I was alone in the car, far from the driver's seat, too panicked to undo my seatbelt. The bridge wasn't a bridge at all. It was a pier. The last thing I heard before I woke was the hard slap of water on the hood of the car. My eyes slid down the page, seeking the accompanying sketch. After a moment, I leaned forward, sucking in a relieved breath. My sketch was still there. The darkness hadn't stolen it.*

“Why?” I yelled out loud. The silence had no answer.

I flipped through the rest of the sketchbook. Glimpses of dreamscapes filled the pages: a forest of teal serving utensils, a handful of broken teeth, my baby sister exactly as she was two decades ago. The older sketches lacked the skill of my more recent ones, but even the worst of them confirmed that the darkness had a limit – there were things it would not touch. On a whim, I retrieved my favorite college art book. Just like the poster display at Vos, the text was intact, but the images were dark. A chapter on Surrealism sent theories sparking through me like electricity. When I read René Magritte's description of his painting, *Son of Man*, the sparks coalesced and turned to lightening.



It was dark when Darla got home. I was on the couch, all of my Strathmore dream journals scattered around me. The art book on Surrealism sat open on the coffee table, the Magritte passage both highlighted and underlined.

“What are you doing?” Darla stood in the doorway to the bedroom. Her arms were crossed, one hip jutted in an angular fighter's stance.

“Something happened at the museum,” I said.

“Are you all right?”

“Now I am.”

She moved around the room, gathering up my journals. “You were supposed to meet me tonight. There’s someone at the clubhouse I wanted you to talk to, and he came to this meeting because I said you’d be there.”

“Shit,” I said. “I forgot.”

“You always do.”

“No, this was different. All the paintings were black!”

“I don’t care if the paintings were *gone*.” She shoved the stack of journals onto the shelf. “I want you to get help. Levitan is a sleep expert, an MD, willing to help us.”

“Please,” I said. “Sit down. Let me explain.”

Darla returned another journal to the shelf, and paused outside our bedroom. No doubt, she saw the unmade bed surrounded by a litter of dirty clothing. Her shoulders lurched as heavy sobs burst forth from her tiny frame.

“I meant to clean before you got home,” I said.

“That’s not why I’m crying.”

“It’s been tough for both of us since I lost my job.”

“You didn’t lose it, Mario, you quit.”

“And now you’re working two jobs to support us, and I know it’s been a strain...”

“Did you look?” She faced me. “Did you even try to find a job today?”

“There isn’t much call for a painter with a fine arts degree.”

“Maybe not, but you managed to get work before.”

“Let’s not have this fight.”

Darla crossed the room to sit on the couch. We were both very stiff, posed like strangers on a park bench. “I want you to get help.”

“I know.”

“Lack of sleep is dangerous. You’re unreliable and erratic. I’m afraid for both of us.”

I returned to the sketch I started before Darla arrived. It was the apple from Magritte’s painting, but my version was rotten, and leaked worms full of dreams. “Are you saying I make you want to use?”

“I’m a recovering addict with a boyfriend who’s lost touch with reality, what do you think comes to mind when I’m stressed?”

“I haven’t lost touch with reality.”

“Then what is this?” Darla spread her arms, indicating the coffee table, the mess, me.

“I’m sorry I’m such an inconvenience for you. I thought you understood why I had to quit that job. Retouching prints with cheap paint to give them ‘authentic texture’ was perverse. It killed my inspiration, and then stole my dreams.” I finished shading a wisdom tooth in the belly of a worm, and tossed the sketch book onto the coffee table.

Darla’s lower lip quivered. Her nose whistled, a high-pitched reminder of the all the coke she’d done. “You need help,” she repeated.

“Thanks, but I’m fine.” I passed her the Vos bag. “I got this for you.”

She pulled out the bear and adjusted its tiny shirt. “Do you really think you can fix this with a stuffed animal?”

“No. There are postcards in there, too.”

Darla tucked the bear under her arm and fished in the bag. She shuffled the postcards. Escher and Munch appeared and disappeared in exquisite detail. When she set them on the table, the images morphed to black. “Should these mean something to me?”

“Probably not, but they’re part of it.” Thought-lines furrowed her brow. Before she could speak, I asked her, “What do you see when you look at that book on the coffee table?”

“A picture of a man with a floating green apple in front of his face.”

“Do you know what I see?”

She shrugged.

“Nothing. I see a black rectangle where the picture should be. Magritte, the artist who painted this, explained it by saying ‘everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see.’”

Darla clutched the bear to her chest. “What does it mean?”

“I think it explains what’s happening to me.”

“What, Mario, what’s happening to you?”

“I’ve been chosen for something.”

“Chosen?” she repeated.

“You make it sound crazy.”

Darla buried her face in the stuffed animal, shoulders shaking with the intensity of her cries. The upstairs neighbors returned home. Their laughter, noise from a foreign land, reverberated from the space above a fragile ceiling.

“Will you do me a favor, Darla?”

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand. Her congested nose no longer whistled.

“What do you want?”

“Come to the museum with me tomorrow.”

“I have to work.”

“It’s on your way, and there’s an exhibit I need you to see.”

Darla forced her hair into a pony-tail. Without the soft curls at her face, she was a warrior. “I *needed* you at the meeting tonight.”

“I’ll make it up to you by going to the AA picnic this weekend.”

“Will you talk with Levitan?”

“Yes. I’ll talk to anyone you want me to. But only if you stop in at the museum.”

“I can’t stay for long.”

I clasped her hands in mine, kissing them. “You won’t regret this. You’ll see.”



On Wednesday, I got up before Darla. I fried nitrate-free bacon, toasted organic bread, and scrambled the eggs of cage-free hens. The coffee smelled like the brand we bought when we started dating, but it was fair trade and much more expensive.

“This is a nice surprise,” she said, looking rested and healthy. I had the urge to tell her I’d beg to have my job back, if it would keep us together. Instead, I asked her how many slices of bacon she wanted.

“Two, no three!” She raised her arms above her head in a slow, unconsciously sexy stretch. She finished; smiled at me. “This reminds me of our first morning together.”

“I asked you what you dreamed.”

“I remember.”

“Me, too.” I set a filled plate before her. “You dreamed that there was a giant trout swimming in the water. It came near the surface, and it had amber eyes.”

“Golden amber,” she continued. “Where the pupil should be, there was a baby. I could see tiny fingers and the umbilicus.” She sipped her coffee. “I wonder what it meant.”

“Everything,” I said, and sat next to her. “It’s why I fell in love with you.”

Darla raised her eyebrows. “And I thought it was my sexual prowess.”

“That didn’t hurt.” I put my hand on her leg. “Thank you for agreeing to go to the museum with me.”

“Mario,” she said, repositioning her leg so I could no longer reach it. “I agreed because it’s the only way I can convince you to get help. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” I stood. “I’m going to get dressed.”

“What about your food?”

“I don’t want you to be late to work.”

In the bedroom, I put on a black tee, my fedora, and the glasses I should wear but normally didn’t. Then I got the blindfold from our naughty drawer. An inkling of arousal skittered through me. I was still thinking about how warm and toned Darla’s thigh had felt. When I returned to the kitchen, Darla dropped a half-eaten slice of toast on her plate.

“Wow,” she said. “What’s with the look?”

“You like?”

“I do.”

“Think it’ll get me past Vos security?”

“Do I even want to know why that would be an issue?”

“Probably not.”





We drove my old Camry, the same one I had dreamed fell off the pier. My glasses imparted crystal clarity: Darla's curls tucked behind her tiny ear, her dimple, the shadow between her breasts. "Do you remember how we used to play hooky?" I asked.

She smiled. "We'd drive to the coast, and get a room where we could hear the water. Did we ever even make it to the beach?"

"No, we were distracted by the bed."

"Those were the days."

"It could be today," I said.

"No, it can't. I'm not that person anymore, flinging myself into sex to avoid getting high. You're not the same person, either."

"What about this weekend? We could take a trip, just the two of us."

"The picnic is on Saturday."

"So we go to the picnic, then go to the coast and..."

"Please, just stop."

I pulled into the Vos underground parking garage. We were seven levels deep before I said anything. "What do you mean; I'm not the same person?"

Darla took a deep breath. "You're strung out. You remind me of what it was like when I quit using, but you haven't quit anything other than your job."

"I quit dreaming."

"And then there was last night," she continued. "That stuff about the blank pictures was strange, and this idea that you're what? An art prophet?"

I parked and cut the motor. Somewhere above us, tires squealed like an injured animal. "This really isn't going how I'd hoped," I admitted, pulling the blindfold from my pocket.

“Our sex blindfold?” she asked.

“Don’t worry, I’m going to wear it and all our clothes stay on.”

“You’re trying to make me feel bad.”

“No, Darla, I’m not. You don’t want to have sex with a deadbeat. That’s fair.”

“That’s not why. I’m worried about you, and worry kills the spark.”

“So you keep saying.”

Her hand squeezed mine, but I didn’t respond. A car alarm went off, echoing a warning.

Darla let go. I put my glasses in my shirt pocket. “You’re going to lead me into the visiting exhibit. Take a good look at the paintings before you tell me to take off the blindfold.”

“Fine,” she said, “But remember we have a deal.”

On the ground floor of the gallery, I tied the blindfold tight. Darla’s breast pressed against me when she took my arm. I shifted to avoid the false promise of intimacy.

“Turn here,” she directed.

“Is this the visiting exhibit?”

“Yes, and I have to say this is bizarre, even for you.”

“What color do you see?”

“Pink,” she said. “Hideous pink.”

I removed my blindfold. Hideous was a charitable description for *Cloud Ninety-Nine (As Seen from Easy Street)*. *Surreal Forest* consisted of magenta cherry trees. Even *Submissive Ocean* featured an overblown pastel sky. I clasped my hands over Darla’s eyes, and watched the paintings. She squirmed, but I held her until the pictures went black.

“Stop!” Darla’s voice echoed.

I let go, hushing her. “Please, I don’t want to draw attention to myself.”

“Don’t ever grab me like that again.”

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“Well, you did.”

I sank onto a bench in the center of the room.

“I’ve got to get to work,” Darla said. “I’m taking the Toyota.”

My head in my hands, I listened to the rapid tap-tap of her retreating footsteps.



The sound of people’s voices roused me. White-haired women and men leaning on canes milled about the gallery. Where they looked, color and form appeared. I put my glasses on and typed thoughts into a note-taking app on my phone.

PREMISE I: I can only see artwork in Vos when other people look at it.

PREMISE II: I can see my own artwork (unassisted).

PREMISE III: This is only happening to me.

CONCLUSION: ?

The group dispersed, leaving only a man wearing a three-piece suit and too much Old Spice. He looked at *Submissive Ocean*. It was more beautiful, and far less florid, when he looked at it than it had been when Darla did. I followed him to the next room. Still lives morphed into rich umber and shadowy green. Portraits of prim ladies appeared beneath his gaze. Bright landscapes were born, complete with fields and red barns. When he noticed me, I shifted my attention to a trio of elderly ladies discussing a Picasso.

“She’s so contorted,” said the woman nearest to me.

“Is she sitting on a chair?” another asked.

The third shrugged. “I can’t even tell which way she’s facing.”

Their words continued, but I ceased to hear them. Nor did I see the picture as a Cubist mélange of perspective. Instead, I saw three versions of Picasso's creation, one per woman.

"I don't get it," the first woman brooded.

I grinned, because I did. After dozens of Saturday afternoons at the museum that left me awed but daunted, I finally understood. "Multiple viewpoints are necessary," I said.

"Are you an art student?" she asked.

"Yes," I conceded. "I guess that's what I am."

The trio abandoned Picasso. I stayed until the canvas blanked out, my eyes blurred with wonder. I wanted to touch the canvas, to feel what it was like when the picture was gone, but a guard stood nearby.

"Were you here yesterday?" he asked.

"Yesterday?" I repeated as I adjusted my glasses.

The guard narrowed his eyes, focusing on the spectacles. "My mistake, sir. You look a little like a man who was here yesterday."

"No problem." I tipped my hat, and then pretended to answer a text on my phone. I walked, keeping my face downturned until I rounded the corner.

I ended up in the contemporary art exhibit. The attention of school children roiled the artwork. Like the Picasso, these abstract paintings did not adhere to the concrete rules that applied to realism. Images swarmed in, one for each child who looked at the painting. I added a premise to my list:

PREMISE IV: Style affects how viewers respond to art, and vice versa.

The assault of shifting visuals made me queasy. I staggered to the exit, not even caring that I had to pass the souvenir shop. Exhaustion was a physical weight by the time I made it to

the Oak Cabinet liquor store down the street from our apartment. When they rejected my card for insufficient funds, I used the joint card I had with Darla. It was a betrayal to use her money on vodka, but I needed sleep.



On Thursday, I woke on the couch with a dry mouth and a splitting headache. The sound of kids playing outside cleaved my mind. Memories nettled: drinking, fighting, Darla leaving.

Nausea.

I took the last pull of vodka.

The bottle didn't make it back to the coffee table. It landed in an explosion of glass.

Oblivion.



Darla returned at half-past seven on Friday morning. My body ached from vomiting. Her expression hurt me more.

"We need to talk," she said from just outside the bathroom door.

"Where were you last night?"

"Mario, you need help."

"I just wanted to sleep." I leaned against the wall next to the toilet. The room reeked of alcoholic sweat and bile.

"You were selfish to bring alcohol into my home."

"You were a junkie, not a drunk."

Darla wrapped her arms around herself. "I can't live like this. I have to ask you to leave."

"And go where?"

"Todd and Jackie said you can stay with them."

"You talked to our friends about dumping me before you told me?"

“No, Mario. I told you. You were just too drunk to hear.”

“This is how it ends? Two years, like that?” I snapped my fingers. The sound ricocheted from the porcelain. Darla flinched.

“This isn’t how I wanted things to be,” she said.

“Isn’t it?”

“Of course not. I love you. But I won’t watch you destroy yourself or risk my sobriety.”

I raised my hands up and swiped at the air. “Something amazing is happening, something bigger than us. I can see the essence of art as communication. Don’t leave before I understand how to share it.”

“I’m tired of being lonely together.”

“Lonely together,” I repeated, and struggled to stand.

Darla backed away from me. “You have until Monday to pack your things and go. Please don’t make me fight you.”

“You’re serious.”

“I’d never joke about this. Don’t call, don’t text. If you decide you want to get better, come to the picnic.”

“So I can have Levitan diagnose my malady.”

“It’s a chance to live.”

I crossed the narrow bathroom and closed the door on Darla. When I was sure she was gone, I took a long shower. Melancholy was thick steam clouding a poorly ventilated room.

For the rest of the morning, I battled nausea with dry toast and coffee. The Vos newsletter distracted me from my memories of the scene with Darla. A visiting artist was scheduled to spend the afternoon in the gallery, sketching and mingling with visitors. I dialed Darla, got her

voicemail – a lie. She wouldn't be getting back to me as soon as possible. Outside, a nasty, soaking rain fell. I put on my hat-and-glasses 'disguise,' tucked my sketchbook under my jacket, and left the apartment littered with the shards of bitter vodka and smashed love. I ran across the slick parking lot to my car. At least Darla had left that for me.



Of course, the Camry broke down at Fifth and Argonne Heights. I put the car in neutral, and got out to push. Elbows locked and muscles straining, I made it to the center of the intersection just in time to be in the way of cross traffic.

"Fuck," I breathed.

A squeal of tires coincided with heavier rain drops breaking like eggs. My feet slid across the oil-slicked road. I was losing momentum, gasping, sweating. A few cars skimmed around me, their wheels hissing on the wet pavement. Another honked. Suddenly, the Camry shot forward. I lunged to grab the steering wheel and guide it onto the shoulder.

"Looked like you could use some help," someone said.

I craned my neck, trotting. Two guys wearing Army uniforms were pushing the Camry. We glided it to the edge, easy as moving a Matchbox car. Rain glittered their insignia. I was the only one breathing hard.

"Thanks," I said. "I didn't think I was going to make it."

"No problem, brother."

"You have someone you can call?"

"Sure," I said, thinking of Darla.

The Army guys exchanged a look. "Woman troubles?" one asked.

"Is it that obvious?"

"She worth it?" the second asked.

I blinked, forgot to breathe. My answer surprised me. “I don’t know.”

The first guy spit brown tobacco juice. His partner slapped his hand on the roof of the car. “Salvage this, ditch the girl.”

“Maybe I will.”

“Anything else we can do here?”

“No. Thanks for helping.”

They went back to their Humvee and I started walking, shielding my sketchbook from the rain with my coat.



In the Vos entryway, a poster board announced this week’s visiting artist. The photograph of Sarah Noe, graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, revealed wide, brown eyes and a shock of black hair. A museum docent approached, eager to help. It was the same woman from my ill-fated visit to the Souvenir Shop. I faked a coughing fit, hid my face behind my arm, and hurried past her into the visiting gallery.

There was no one in the room, and the paintings were dormant. Sarah Noe wasn’t in the contemporary exhibit, either. I turned a corner into the solidity of eighteenth century still lives, and there she was.

An angel with a pixie cut, she sat at the end of a bench. She conceded a small, welcoming smile before shifting attention to her work. I wanted to swallow her whole, digest the miracle of her fixed stare. Instead, I took a place next to her and started drawing. Together, we created twin reflections of Melendez’s still life with figs. We caressed the sensual curves of the fruit; lovingly shaded the leavened bread; detailed the sweet-juiced slit of an opened fig. Sarah and I finished at the same time, a sort of sex/wine triumph.



I glanced at her. She laughed and said, “I never noticed how thoroughly sexual this painting is. Even the bread looks *feminine*.”

“Maybe it’s only erotic because we looked at it together.”

“Are you hitting on me?”

I closed my sketchbook, hiding the juicy fig.

“Don’t blush. I didn’t mind.” She extended her charcoal smudged hand. “I’m Sarah.”

“Mario.” I felt my blush deepen when we touched. We held hands a moment longer than necessary, grinning.

“Did you walk here?” she asked.

“My car broke down, and I wanted to see you.”

“Me?”

“I have a theory, and I hope it’s not crazy.”

“Your theory has my attention.” Sarah pushed the fringe of her bangs away from her eyes and leaned closer. “I’m interested in anything that causes a stranger to walk through a storm to talk to me.”

I lay my sketchbook on the bench and took a deep breath. “I can only see paintings when someone else is looking at them. If no one is there, they are completely black.”

“Go on.”

“Not crazy enough yet?”

“Strange, but not crazy.”

“I believe that art is communication, but it only works when there is a receiver. The painting is half of the conversation, and the audience is the other. How and why I intercept these

communications is a mystery, but I wanted to know what would happen if I looked at the same time as someone else who was also focused.”

She toyed with the edge of her sketchbook, eyes downturned. When she raised her face to me, my breath stopped. “It was pretty hot when both of us were looking, right?”

“Yes,” I managed.

“Is it like that when you are, um, looking with other people?”

“It’s nothing like that was.”

She licked her lips, stretched her legs. Her eyes locked on mine and she said, “Can you see what you draw? Like, when we were sketching, could you see your own work?”

“I can see anything I draw in my, I don’t know, transcriber mode...”

“No.” She shook her head with enough emphasis it transferred to her body. “You’re not transcribing. It’s a vision, an oracular vision.”

“Darla wouldn’t agree.”

“Darla?”

“My girlfriend. Or she was. I don’t really know.”

Sarah sighed. “Of course you’re not single. No guy who rocks a fedora without looking like a douche would be.”

“Thanks. I think.”

“It was a compliment.” She sat up straight, withdrawing from me a bit. “What happens if I look at an abstract?”

“Want to try?” I asked.

“Well, I can’t keep looking at these figs without having filthy thoughts.”

We gathered up our materials and walked down the hall to contemporary. The security guard's eyes traveled from Sarah's face to her feet. "I think you have a fan," I whispered.

"Too bad it's not the one I want."

The contemporary gallery was empty, except for one couple. They stood, arm in arm, staring at a painting. The canvas bloomed with pure and passionate red.

"What are you seeing?" Sarah asked, nudging me.

"Their lust."

"Do you have any idea how fucking amazing this is?"

"Only because of you." I touched her arm, and her body pressed against mine. My hand slid down her arm to her waist, and I pulled her closer.

"You!" someone shouted.

Sarah jerked away, startled. It was the security guard. With belated insight, I realized that he had probably paid me the extra attention due a competing suitor.

"I have to go," I said. "Thank you for taking the time to look...for helping me."

"Wait! How will I find you?"

The guard barreled into the room, distracting even the lovers in the far corner. I ran until I found myself in the art boutique district.



I entered a small, private gallery where I'd never managed to place a piece. A customer in a tailored suit contemplated a painting by Henri Benoît entitled *Red, Encroaching on Understanding*. For an instant, I saw the painting as it was created, a solid pane of vermillion next to an onyx vertical. Then the customer's vision of the work took hold, and the cinnabar shaped itself into a woman with an obsidian backbone. I sketched the blazing woman. Her might

conquered doubt, even in shaded pencil. The customer turned away from the painting. The huntress disappeared.

I left the shop too full of excitement to be fazed by the continued downpour. This journey had chosen me – I was sure of that now. All I had to do was give up everything.



A brilliant, clear Saturday followed Friday's storms. The police phoned to tell me my abandoned car had been impounded, and if I did not claim it within thirty days, it would be sold. As I listened, I put the last of my things into a cardboard box. The apartment looked the same. It was Darla's, had only ever been Darla's.

"You can sell the car now," I told the police.

"That isn't how the system works."

"I won't be coming for it."

"That's at your discretion, but you cannot get it back if it goes to auction."

"Good."

I ended the call, overflowing with plans. First, a stop by Artist's Haven to pick up some materials, then a visit to the AA picnic, and finally a trip across town to where the internet said Sarah Noe was sharing studio space with some of the better-known local painters. There was nothing I could offer her other than my visions, and I spent the entire cab ride to the Artist's Haven trying to come up with something to say to her that wouldn't make me sound like a stalker.

In the store, I gathered a few tubes of paint and a new brush. I went to the register and counted my cash. Two dollars and twenty-two cents.

"We're hiring, if you want a job that'll leave plenty of time for painting," the cashier said as she accepted my joint credit card. "Employees get a discount on supplies, too."

“How soon could I start?”

“Let’s ask the manager.”

The manager and I spoke – a brief interview at the front of the store. He was pleased when I asked for evenings and early mornings, and thrilled when I told him I could start Monday. He shook my hand and the cashier waved me back over to her.

“Hey, co-worker, I have to give you your discount!”

She rang down the total while I grinned. Not even the sour cabbie dulled my happiness. He glared at me in the rearview mirror.

“Don’t spill paint on my seat,” he said.

“I won’t open them in here.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I will kick your ass to the curb if I smell paint. And you still pay for the full ride, understand?”

“Yes, sure. Can you take me to Lakeside Pavilion?”

He put the taxi in gear, and I settled back into the seat until we got to the lake.

Darla stood alone, gazing at the water. Her hair blew in the wind, glinting in the sunlight.

“Darla,” I said.

“Mario.” She didn’t look at me, just kept staring at the lake. “Are you ready to get help?”

“I don’t need it.”

Darla shook her head. “I can’t be with you.”

“I know.”

“You’d rather throw us away than get help?”

“Things are different, Darla. I understand what’s happening now, and how I fit into it. I even got a job.”

“A job.” Her words fell, as flat and heavy as badly thrown stones that never stood a chance of skipping across the water. “Where?”

“Nowhere special.” I took the sketch I’d made of the warrior woman I saw in the Benoît and gave it to Darla. “She reminds me of you.”

She traced my signature with her finger.

A man approached us. “Is this Mario?”

“Yes,” I replied for Darla.

“I’m Levitan Doyle, psychiatrist. I specialize in sleep disorders. It’s nice to meet you.”

He extended his hand, but I couldn’t bring myself to take it.

“Doctor Doyle,” I said.

“Call me Levitan.”

“Levitan. Thank you for befriending Darla.”

“She’s worried about you.”

“I am, you know,” Darla said, looking up from the drawing.

“That’s why I’m here. I wanted to tell you I’m okay. There’s the job, and I found someone who understands what’s happening to me.”

“Have you been dreaming?” Levitan asked.

“No,” I said. “But I’ve got something better.”

A lock of hair blew across Darla’s face. I tucked it behind her ear, the last of our intimate habits. Tears moistened her cheek.

“Psychosis is a dangerous side-effect of lack of sleep,” Levitan said.

“I’m sorry I made you want to use.” I stepped away from Darla, saw her framed with the slate-blue water of my last dream. “Goodbye.”

She crumpled against Levitan, and I went back to the taxi.

The cabbie set aside his racing paper. Yawned. "Where to now?"

"Last stop," I said, and passed him the address of Sarah's studio.



"You!" Sarah wore baggy overalls, and a bandanna covered her hair. Her studio was small, but flooded with natural light.

"I hope this is okay," I said.

"Okay? This is beyond okay. I couldn't believe you left with no way for me to find you."

"Sorry about that."

"Security said you freaked in the souvenir shop, scared a volunteer."

"It's true."

"Are you crazy?"

"A psychiatrist just warned me that I might have psychosis."

Sarah hopped up and sat on the counter near her easel. "Go on," she said. "Tell me what you see in my painting."

"You have to look, too."

"Try."

I looked, and gasped. "I can see it."

"I made it for you, so I think that makes sense."

"It's me in some sort of temple," I said.

"Not just any sort. That's Delphi."

"Why am I soaking wet?"

"That's how you were when I met you."

"I was not soaking."

“Artistic license.” She smiled, deepening her dimples. “Why are you here?”

“Because I want to ask you on a date.”

Sarah swung her feet, kicking them against the cabinets. “I’m waiting.”

“Sarah Noe, graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design and sometime visiting artist of Vos Modern, would you like to go on a date with me?”

“When?”

“Two weeks from Monday.”

“Why a fortnight from now?”

“Because that’s when I get paid. I want to take you to a proper dinner. Right now, I could barely afford the dollar menu at McDonalds.”

“What about your girlfriend?”

“She probably doesn’t want to pay for our date.”

Sarah narrowed her eyes, playing at being mad.

“Actually,” I continued, “Darla and I are over.”

“Just like that?”

I crossed the room to stand near Sarah. She smelled like honey and citrus. Then, her mouth was warm against mine, lips parting with the sweetness of a fig.

“Are you sure you want to wait?” she whispered.

“Even more than ever,” I said. “I want this to be perfect.”

“Picture perfect,” she replied, and kissed me again.

#

That night, I used the joint credit card to order Thai takeout. I cut the card into pieces, and left them for Darla to see. The combination of a full belly and my Sarah-induced



contentment was enough for me to fall asleep. The dark tunnel of oblivion opened on a dreamscape. In it, a great swath of red carried me into the bearded mouth of a gigantic orchid flower. A moment of fear, and then I realized I was in the Vos souvenir shop. It was empty except for a round table. Darla and Sarah sat there, both dressed like fortune tellers. Darla offered me coffee. It was bitter, and Sarah offered me sugar. The sugar cubes were tiny, Delphic temples.



Early on Sunday morning, after months of darkness, I recorded my first dream in my journal. Then I showered, shaved, and put on my best suit. There was no money for a cab, so I walked the three miles to the boutique with the Benoît.

“Hello,” I said, approaching the man behind the counter. “Could I speak to the owner or the manager?”

“I’m both,” he replied. “Leonard Eastman. Welcome to Boutique le Senia.”

“I would like permission to paint here today, Mr. Eastman.”

“To paint here?”

“Please, take a look at my portfolio.” As Eastman flipped through it, I continued my pitch. “The Vos Gallery launched a resident artist program to get visitors involved in the living, breathing process of creation. I would like to be your resident artist.”

“Your work is impressive, but I’m not interested.”

“I’ll do it for free. Just give me a spot to stand and some water to rinse my brushes. I’ll bring in people.”

Eastman crossed his arms. “Most people aren’t buyers.”

“True, but they have to come inside before there’s any chance they’ll become buyers. Think of the press you could get, too. Wouldn’t you like Boutique le Senia to outdo Vos?”

He picked up my glossy print portfolio.

“That painting on the cover won the Loughin-Dail Prize and sold for seven thousand. Maybe I’ll never paint another like it, but a working artist will bring in traffic. If that doesn’t happen, we part ways.”

“I could send you packing now.”

“But you haven’t.”

Eastman tapped the cover of my portfolio. “This piece looks familiar.”

“It should. I sold it at the shop next door.”

“Why don’t you ask them to let you paint?”

“Because I want to paint here.”

Eastman shifted his attention from the portfolio to me, and a long moment passed. “One afternoon,” he said. “And you leave when I say, no argument.”

“Deal.”

I set my easel near *Red, Encroaching on Understanding*. Eastman brought a mason jar of water to me, and propped open the front door. Chilly air carried in the Sunday smells of uptown coffee and cinnamon rolls.



The first visitor was a man in an expensive camelhair coat. He nodded acknowledgement of my presence, and then perused the Benoît. His gaze inspired me to paint blood red, unsmiling lips and two cobalt eyes so dark they looked black. The disembodied features drifted against a backdrop of undulating texture that was neither water nor sky. Virulent streaks swirled at the lower left, a storm of distortion moiling the pattern.

“Look, Mommy, the man is painting!” A little boy led his mother by the hand into the shop. He stood behind me, his neck craned to see the picture.

“Is this the painter’s version of a poetry slam?” the woman asked.

“He’s providing a mind expanding experience,” the man in the camelhair coat said.

“Well, I’ve never preferred abstract mumbley-jumbles.”

The boy tugged at my sleeve. “Why is the lady in the picture sad?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Lady?” the man in the camelhair asked.

“He’s talking about this one,” the woman said, pointing at my painting.

The man in the camelhair came over to look. He swallowed hard, dabbed at his mouth with a starched handkerchief. “Why did you paint that?”

“It’s what I saw when you looked at the Benoît.”

“Astounding.”

“What’s astounding about it?” the woman asked.

“It’s what the Benoît made me think, how I’m worried about my sister.”

Eastman joined us. “Are you saying he painted what you experienced?”

“Yes.”

“Hah,” the woman said. “If you can do that, show me what I see.”

“I can’t.”

“Of course you can’t, because this is a scam.”

“No. I can’t because you aren’t willing to participate in a conversation with the artwork. Besides, I only have this canvas, and I’ve just started.”

The woman crossed her arms. “Does this gimmick ever work?”

Eastman made a placating gesture. He was about to speak when the man in the camelhair interrupted. “It’s not a gimmick, but it worked; I want to buy the painting of my sister.”

“I’ll sell it to you under one condition,” I said.

“Name it.”

“I am creating a collection. If I book a gallery, I would like to have this piece on loan for duration of the engagement. If you can’t agree to that, I cannot sell.”

“We’ll need a contract, and I’ll want a cap on that obligation.”

“That’s fair,” I said, and just as quickly addressed Eastman. “And, yes, I agree to pay you the normal gallery commission, whatever you’re charging your other artists.”

“Do you two know each other?” Eastman asked.

“Oh, this is rich,” the woman exclaimed. “They’re scamming you, too.”

The man tucked his handkerchief into a pocket. “I have never met your artist. In fact, I am in town for business, and stopped in because I wanted to see the Benoît collection.”

“My apologies, Mister...”

“Taylor, John Taylor.”

Eastman and Taylor shook hands. “Welcome to Boutique le Senia.”

“Is *Red, Encroaching on Understanding* available for immediate purchase?”

“Yes,” Eastman replied. “Of course it is.”

“I’ll take it, and I’ll pay in full right now.”

“Are you serious?” the woman asked, rolling her eyes. “Some people will buy anything.” She took her son by the hand and pulled him through the door.

“But I want to watch the man paint!” the boy cried.

“Well you can’t,” the woman snapped.

The boy waved at us, his hand flapping behind him.

“Poor kid,” Taylor said.

I nodded.

Unfazed, Eastman extended his arm in a grand gesture. “Mr. Taylor, sir, if you follow me to my office, we can finalize the sale.”

“Start the paperwork without me. I want to talk with your painter. He’s performed a miracle!”

Eastman smiled, scratching the palm of his right hand. “Yes. He certainly has.”

“A miracle.” Taylor repeated. “How many are in your collection?”

“This is the first,” I said.

“What are you going to call this piece?”

“I’d like you to name it.”

“How about *Encroaching on Mumbley-Jumble?*”

“I like that.”

“You’ve got me at a disadvantage. You know both my name and my painting’s name. I would be honored to know yours.”

“Mario Santa Maria.”

“What a name for an artist of reflections, what a name!”

# Tell Your Friends

Please help spread the word about *MIXED MEDIA*. Your support is priceless to me. You are my street team, my agent, my swashbuckling access to the realm of readers. Please give away your copy of *MIXED MEDIA*, invite friends to download the free PDF, or post to your favorite social media venue.

Thank you!



# Bonus Material!!!

Thanks for reading *MIXED MEDIA*. To express my gratitude, I've put together a collection of bonus materials related to the story. Enjoy!

--aniko

## SEE THE ARTWORK

[Brighter than a Technicolor Dream](#): Rothko, Ashley, O'Keefe

[Groovy Escher!](#) : M.C. Escher

[Wisdom Tooth in the Belly of a Worm](#): Munch

[We Always Want to See What Is Hidden](#): Magritte

[A Sort of Sex/Wine Triumph](#): Melendez

## LEARN ABOUT MY EDITING PROCESS

[Revision: Wanna See How Sausage Is Made?](#)

## LISTEN TO ME READ THE OPENING

[Author Reading: Aniko Carmean reads an excerpt from MIXED MEDIA](#)

## ABOUT ANIKO CARMEAN

[Visit Aniko's Blog](#)

[Subscribe to Aniko's Newsletter](#)

Aniko Carmean is a Virginia girl living in Austin, Texas. She writes stories and novels in a variety of genres including horror, science fiction, and literary-artsy. Her definition of success involves stickers, giving away free versions of everything she writes, and dwelling in the beauty of the literary community rather than the anxiety of selfish grasping.

If you enjoyed *MIXED MEDIA*, please write a review to help other readers. The links below open my Author Pages for Goodreads and Amazon. Click on *MIXED MEDIA* to rate and review.

[Aniko's Goodreads Author Page](#)

[Aniko's Amazon Author Page](#)



## Surprise! More Bonus Material!

# STOLEN CLIMATES

## CHAPTER ONE

Prentice Feyerbach lost his job and his girlfriend in the same week. He packed his belongings into a storage shed, bought a map, and highlighted the route to Texas in radioactive yellow. On a Friday morning he swept out of town, raucous music pushing his Corvette's speakers to the limit and a gas station coffee in the cup holder.

'I have a reservation in Breaker,' Prentice thought.

It wasn't a new thought anymore, but it still gave him a thrill. A song ended and Prentice sipped his coffee. A yellow light blurred and disappeared even as a pedestrian at the cross street gave Prentice a nasty look he tried not to see.

Like the idea of Breaker, the Corvette was no longer all that new, but it was still exciting. It was a big change from the hand-me-down beater Prentice bought before college and that he kept driving even after he got his first real job, the same job that laid him off without any more ceremony than a rented folding chair and an envelope with his name on it. Almost since the day he started that job, his paycheck had been enough to cover a car payment, but as long as the rust bucket was still running, Prentice hadn't seen any need.

It was his ex-girlfriend who made him feel the mustard yellow car was as noxious as mustard gas. That was when Prentice bought the Corvette. Blue as the other had been yellow, the mile-annihilating engine and pumped up sound system got Prentice closer to fine than anything

he'd ever known. It was an ego boost. It blew away the fancy watch, far overshadowed the expensive Italian leather shoes that turned out to be more durable than both job and relationship.

Sublime speed carried Prentice beyond the farthest point he'd ever been and turned the scenery into something smeared and amorphous. It no longer mattered that when he bought the Corvette his girlfriend turned it around on him and said, "I had no idea you were so materialistic." It didn't matter that the last thing his father said to him was, "You've lost a lot this week, but leaving makes it look like you've lost your mind." It especially didn't matter that his psychologist pronounced Prentice as being "vulnerable to fantasy." Their echoes were muted by speed, distance, and the promise of Breaker.

Prentice crossed Tennessee's border and checked into a hotel. He felt authoritative and he felt alive. The room was a bit of a letdown, but it was reasonably clean and it was only for one night.

His ex-girlfriend had been a sober vegan, and Prentice thought of her when he ordered a rare steak and wine at the hotel's restaurant that evening. There were pricier bottles on the list, but Prentice picked an Eco Domani chianti. The cork's imprint read, "Here's Tomorrow" and Prentice smiled as he poured his first glass.

He sipped the chianti. It left his mouth feeling as if it had been swabbed with antiseptic leaves. To shift his attention away from his dry mouth, Prentice focused on the couple in the booth diagonal to him. They were sitting close together and speaking in low tones. The man was roughly the same build and coloring as Prentice and, because of that, Prentice felt that he was the one sitting next to the woman. Her eyes were blue, her mouth sensual yet sad, and her hair a darkly romantic, windblown mess. He was in love with the warmth of her body and the scent of the spices she exhaled.

“Nova,” Prentice said, having decided that was her name.

The waiter arrived just as Prentice spoke. “Excuse me?” the waiter asked.

“Nothing,” Prentice said. “Just the *vino* talking.”

The waiter set the plate on the table and said, “Will you cut into the steak and make sure it’s done the way you like?”

As Prentice unraveled his silverware from the napkin, the waiter continued. “See any strange weather on your way here? There’s been nothing in the news except floods and fires, like Mother Nature’s gone insane.”

“I didn’t notice anything unusual,” Prentice said.

“You were lucky.”

Prentice sliced into flesh. Red juices poured onto the plate, life: diverted, appropriated, sacrificed. He forked a huge piece into his mouth.

“Steak okay?”

Prentice grunted his feral approval and the waiter left.

The next time Prentice looked up from his meal, the booth across from him was empty. He downed the last few drops of chianti and sat for a few minutes in sated comfort. Then he paid his tab and went back to his room.

Still clothed, Prentice fell upon his rented bed and dreamed he and Nova were sitting in the bough of a tree, eating a ripe peach. As they ate, the warm afternoon sun was supplanted by a sudden squall that changed not only the season but also Nova. Her hair became curlier, yes, and her eyes turned green, but more than that, she was scared. Nova was terrified because the tree was made of stone and the pit of the peach was an eyeball that blinked and blinked. The tattooed lid read, “Here’s Tomorrow!”

Want to know what happens?

[Purchase](#) STOLEN CLIMATES for your Kindle.

[Download](#) a FREE PDF of STOLEN CLIMATES.