

YUPPIEVILLE

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Screaming Dreams

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For Dave Wingrove and Sue Oudot

"Houses, cars, the grid of streets, the laws and regulations that desperately frightened people had invented – none of it added up to anything more than a primitive circle of wagons around a campfire" – Dennis Etchison, *California Gothic*

CHAPTER ONE

LIBERTY SQUARE

Ms. Mackenzie – her first name turned out later to be Judith – met them at the house itself, and was not dressed the way that they would normally expect a realtor to be turned out for an appointment. She was in sneakers, loose-fitting jeans, a faded blue blouse, and had her hair tied back with a red-and-white bandanna. As if she had been momentarily disturbed from working in her garden, rather than trying to sell a property. But Frank and Joannie both dressed casually themselves on most occasions, so they didn't mind that. Not at all.

P.J. O'Rourke – whatever you might think of his political opinions – tells an interesting story. How he visited Haiti once, one of the poorest countries in the world. And, wandering amongst the seething, refuse-strewn slums, he met a little boy who had drawn a picture of heaven. It was a large, single-storey house with an integral garage, a car parked on the driveway and a TV dish up on the roof.

Maybe we have gone there, to that same mundane paradise, Frank thought. Died, but in a slightly different way? He felt a part of himself – the studentish, rebellious part that had still survived into his mid-thirties – curl up and cringe when he first looked at the place. Oh my God, a provincial-looking home in a small town. He couldn't quite believe that they were considering this.

"It's an extremely roomy property," Judith Mackenzie told them, and then reeled off some statistics about square-yardage of floor-space, which were always lost on Frank.

"Let's take a look," she suggested once she'd finished.

On the way to the front door, she enquired politely, "Have a good drive up from L.A.?"

Joannie screwed up her nose a little, her eyes turning glassy. It was left to Frank to answer. "It was a perfectly clear run, once we'd gotten out of the city."

Judith Mackenzie released a tiny, knowing laugh at that. "Yes, I know what you mean. I used to live there, once upon a time. And I *always* hated the traffic."

All three of them stepped up onto the porch and she produced a set of keys. As she hunted for the correct one, Frank turned away from her and looked around him, taking in his new surroundings in one clean sweep for the very first time.

They were on the outer edge of Youngesville. To either side of him stretched houses pretty much like this one, although each one of them slightly different in design. The town itself could not be seen, and he was staring at the desert. It was, he had to admit, a pretty amazing view. And, now that he admitted it to himself, he had always carried around in his head a little fantasy that involved living in a part of the world like this. All this space and freedom.

Judith Mackenzie was saying something about the tax advantages of living in Nevada, but he wasn't really listening.

The colours were amazing, swirls of ochre, streaks of brownish-red. There were three Joshua trees within several hundred yards of him. The mountains in the distance were like mirages in a heat-haze. And the sky which pressed down on them was the clearest eggshell blue he'd ever seen. A buzzard wheeled above the landscape, and he'd always had a big thing about birds of prey.

"Frank's a graphic designer, freelance," Joannie was explaining.

"So he works from home. How lovely to be able to do that."

The door clacked open and he heard Joan say his name.

His first impression as they stepped inside was that they could fit the whole of their apartment back in L.A. into just this living room, and still have space left over. *Jesus*. The fact that it was bare of furniture increased the sense of size, he knew that. But this great pristine expanse of gleaming pine-laminate and airy, slightly off-white painted walls? It was like a massive canvas laid out for him to draw on. He could hang up all the pictures that

he ever wanted, purchase and lay out some quite amazing rugs. And Christ, his Bauhaus recliner would look *great* in here.

Joannie started walking round it, and he noticed how excited her step had become.

The sliding windows overlooking the back yard were massive, filling the place with clear, crisp daylight.

“Let’s take a look at the rest, shall we?” suggested Judith Mackenzie after an appropriate while.

They’d been woken first by sirens, then by squealing tyres, and finally by pistol-shots, right below their second storey window on Van Nuys. That had yanked them out of their initial drowsiness like two submerged corks being released, and rushing to the surface. A gun battle was actually taking place right outside their home.

Thinking quickly, Frank pushed Joannie off of her side of the bed, so that she was safe behind it. He yelled, “Don’t go near the window!”

And then promptly ignored his own advice.

He went at a low crouch to the corner of it, and lifted his head carefully – very nervously – over the rim to find out what was happening below.

The three large figures hunched behind the skewed black Chevy didn’t come from this part of town. They were gang members, Polynesians by the look and bulk of them, and had obviously been pursued here before being stopped and cornered. Right now, they were fighting like trapped rats.

Four patrol cars had surrounded them, the officers crouching too. A helicopter started clattering overhead, its spotlight darting across the battle scene. As Frank watched, one of the gang boys reached into the Chevy, produced something that was probably an Uzi, began firing upwards.

He ducked back.

“Frank?” Joannie’s head had cleared the mattress. “Get away from there!”

He waved at her to keep down, then went back to watching till the sound of shattering glass, below him, told him windows in this same building were being hit. He spent the remainder of the gun-fight down on the floor with his back against the wall, where he supposed he ought to have been in the first place.

When it finally was safe to lift his head again, two of the gangstas were sprawled out, apparently dead. The third was being led away in handcuffs. And some paramedics were attending to one of the cops.

And Joannie? She was actually lying face down on the floor behind the bed by this time, crying fiercely, mumbling the same thing over and over to herself.

“No. I won’t do it. I cannot bring up children in this place.”

Afterwards – both of them suitably impressed – Judith offered to take them on a tour of Youngesville itself. They climbed into her big silver Mercedes. Judith pressed a button and the whole roof folded back. The hot afternoon sunlight struck at Frank, making him squint.

In that moment, he saw something move in the front window of the house next door to their prospective one. A figure passing by it. And – he noticed straight away – quite a figure too. A woman, at least six foot tall, Amazonish in her height and build, with wavy, coppery hair rolling down her back. Was this his potential new neighbour?

Except – in that same half-blinded moment – he imagined there was something slightly wrong about the way she looked. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it but ...

She was gone from the pane before he could take the idea any further.

Judith put the big car into ‘drive,’ and then started heading in towards the centre of the town.

Goddamn, he thought as front yard after front yard drifted by them. He really did like the house, and could not deny it. But the town itself was suburbia personified. Legoland, all the houses near-identical, with just small details changed to differentiate them. He had never lived like this, in a place like this, not even when he’d been a child.

Always a slight fan of science fiction, he remembered something Brian Aldiss had once written. ‘There is nothing so bourgeois as children.’ And was this what their desire for kids was now dragging them down to? It felt like they were at very least considering giving up the whole way they had lived until this point. Joannie might have a fairly mundane job – although

one that she was good at, handsomely rewarded for – but half their friends in L.A. were creative people of some kind or other, with a scattering of Goths, hippies and outright, harmless freaks amongst them.

“A good number of arty types have moved here in the last couple of years,” Judith Mackenzie informed them, as if she had read his thoughts. “Writers, painters, book critics, even musicians. One of them lives next to me, a flautist. He practises early in the morning and I have to say, it’s nice to wake up to.”

Joannie, who was already beaming, beamed a little wider. Frank wriggled slightly uncomfortably on the back seat, getting the strong feeling that a noose was tightening gradually around him. Cutting off, not his supply of air, but his reasonable arguments.

Another block of largely-similar houses went by, and then they were on the main street, Younge.

It was reasonably busy, very neat. Seemed to have its fair share of coffee shops with outdoor tables. There were small, trendy boutiques and medium-sized, European-looking restaurants. There was an arts supply store, which immediately knocked down another of his slight objections. There was a cinema, an independent one, currently showing the new Almodovar. And even a little theatre. The posters outside it mentioned Eugene O’Neill.

“There!” said Joannie, pointing out the logo of her bank above a wide glass door. It needed a new manager, and she could be transferred here any time she liked.

They followed the broad avenue the whole way to what he presumed was the centre of the town, a large, flagstone-covered square. ‘Liberty Square,’ he noticed from the signs up on the lampposts. A contradiction in terms, he immediately thought, since how could you be square and still have liberty?

Still thinking like a teenager, a more mature part of his brain told him, *and possibly an out-of-date one too. Do kids still even use expressions like ‘square’ any longer?*

He realised that he didn’t know. God, was he getting old?

The broad area that now lay before him was bathed in hot sunlight, like everything else around here. Women strolled across

it pushing prams. Mothers and fathers of about his and Joannie's age were leading toddlers by the hand, or simply watching as their offspring wandered. This seemed to be a place where families came. Without even touching her, he could feel Joannie stiffen, her neck craning up slightly.

If this place was called Liberty, then it had its own statue too. No Frenchwoman with a torch raised in one hand, however.

It looked, in fact, so incongruous in a place like this that Frank felt his jaw drop. Joannie's gaze was drawn to the thing too. He heard her murmuring under her breath, "What's that?"

It was about twelve feet tall, and seemed to be made of coloured glass, or some material similar. As abstract as anything he'd ever seen. There were tube shapes in it, most of them in spirals. There were globes. There were pyramids. No squares at all, he noticed straight away. No ninety-degree angles.

There were discs. There were ovoid-shapes. All of them in different colours, deep reds and rich greens and even traces of bright gold and silver, all of them translucent. The sunlight, beating down and passing through the statue, made the ground directly beneath it look like a huge, bottomless pit filled up with impossible hues.

Judith Mackenzie had stopped the car. She twisted around in her seat, grinning, understanding their reaction. She presumably took all her clients on this tour, and so presumably was used to it.

"It's a little unusual in a town like this, I know. But the man who commissioned it is pretty unusual too. You must have heard of him – Lyle Tamborough?"

Yes, of course. When Frank had Googled this town's name, weeks back, that other name, the one just mentioned, had immediately come up. Youngesville's single claim to fame, he would imagine. The great man lived here.

Lyle Tamborough, winner – only two years ago – of the Nobel Prize for Physics. After Stephen Hawking, the most famous quantum physicist in the world.

"It's called 'New Hope,'" Judith went on. "It was put together to his exact design, by a local artist called Bob Meaks."

And Frank had run across that name as well. Maybe this town wasn't so mundane as he had first expected.

“And they keep on adding to it, almost every month sometimes,” the woman told him, seeing how interested he was, “so that it’s a work constantly in progress, like the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, although on a smaller scale, of course.”

Comparing this bland-looking place to Barcelona, which they’d been to, almost made Frank chuckle. Except his throat had become tight by this time. His mouth had become dry. Staring at the thing, the statue ...?

He had no idea quite what it was supposed to represent, but ingenious thought had obviously gone behind it.

You just ... couldn’t get a grasp on its entire shape. It seemed to alter from second to second. Colours seemed to slide into each other and then re-arrange themselves again. The way it reflected the sunlight was ... the very definition of unusual, perhaps.

He wet his lips.

Joannie said, “I think it’s beautiful in an unworldly way.”

And he supposed that she was right.

“We can go see his house, if you’d like?” Judith suggested. “He often gets gawkers, so I’m sure he won’t mind. There a park on the way with a lake in it, stocked with perch and small-mouth bass. Do either of you like to fish?”

“Haven’t since I was a kid,” Frank answered. Although, recently, he had been thinking of taking it up again.

My God, *was* he getting old?

Joannie took the wheel of their big Lexus SUV as they headed back towards the city. They argued gently the whole way, trying hard not to become too angry with each other.

“Our friends can come and visit us. God knows, we’ll have the room to put them up, which we currently do not have.”

Frank closed his eyes and remembered the Tamborough residence. Set behind a high security fence, it was built of red brick, long and low, standing like a marooned ship in grounds that almost looked like a cardboard cut-out of a landscape. What had struck him most was the massive sense of isolation that hung about the place. And was that what he wanted for himself? Working alone in that big house, with only the desert for company?

“And I’m sure we’ll easily make new friends too,” Joannie

was insisting. "You heard what the woman said. They sound like our kind of people."

Later:

"When do we ever go to the theatre, anyway? We haven't been for a year, and that was fringe. And not very good if I recall. Besides, they *have* a theatre, so we'd probably go more often, if anything."

Later still:

"If small-town life gets too much for us, well, it's – what? – just four hours' drive from there to San Fran. We can stop over the weekend, take in a Giant's game, see Jack."

His little brother.

"We'll have the best of both worlds, can't you see that?"

The city came in sight at last, merely a shifting, blurry silver strip on the horizon at first. As they got closer, however, the pall of smog became apparent. And, as soon as they were onto the ingoing freeway, they ran straight into a tailback that stretched off ahead of them as far as they could see. Thousands of red taillights blinked at them. They had to turn the air-conditioning to inner-circulation, or else breathe exhaust fumes.

Joannie hunched forwards till she almost banged her head against the steering wheel.

"I can't take this any more, Frank. I've hated this place more and more the past couple of years, and no one can live like that forever."

By the time they finally got home, they'd both agreed that they would sleep on it. And Joannie, rather glumly, dropped the subject. Frank cooked supper for them, conchiglie pasta with a very simple tomato, basil, and garlic sauce. He imagined himself doing the same in that big house in Youngesville, and wasn't at all sure how he felt about the image of it in his head.

They ate mostly in silence. Later, they sprawled on the couch, the constant murmur from the street outside making their windowpane shake very slightly. Frank slipped into the machine a DVD they'd rented, one they had missed at the movies and were only just now catching up with. It was the recent re-make of 'The Stepford Wives.' He loved the book. They both did. So they stared at the new film attentively, but only ended up watching it

halfway through, comparing it unfavourably with the original. Their attention, both of them, was focussed elsewhere. Inwardly, in truth.

Joannie decided to turn in early, claiming that the whole trip had exhausted her. Which was a slight lie, he realised. It was the uncertainty that was tiring her out, waiting for him to come to a decision. Was he being at all fair, he wondered? Did he have any right to do this to her? Her mind already seemed to be made up.

He switched off most of the lights and sat in the semi-dark, pouring himself a shot of Seagram's, then another. What to do? He didn't even like this place they currently lived in, that was for certain. But ...

He thought about the town's main street, how pristine it had been. He thought about the desert, and the way it had seemed to stare back at him when he'd looked out at it.

By the time he finally got to bed, he was slightly drunk, and bumped against a cabinet several times before managing to climb in. Joannie was flat out, and didn't even stir. In spite of all of which ... he couldn't seem to get to sleep. He tossed and turned for over an hour.

When he tried lying flat out on his back and staying very still, all that he could smell was her. Her hair. Her skin. A soft, natural perfume like scented talcum powder. Between one moment and the next, he became aroused.

When he looked across at her, her eyes were wide open, she was staring at him hugely.

He reached across and pulled her nightshirt off in one smooth motion – she helped him by raising both her arms. He rolled on top of her and started kissing her face.

Normally, when they did this, there was a lot of foreplay. But this time, Joannie pushed his boxers quickly down around his thighs, then guided him into her.

She was very much ready for him, and he began sliding backwards and forwards evenly, trying to take his time. He was usually quite good at that, but this time, the brakes that controlled him seemed to have failed. His strokes became faster and harder, his head filling with a clear white light that usually didn't arrive until much later.

It struck him in the next instant. *Is this the moment we conceive a child?*

He usually felt a very slight ambivalence at the prospect, but biology was driving him on by now. The muscles in his arms and shoulders bunched, and he pounded harder.

Joannie's eyes were firmly shut, her entire face screwed up, and she was making little noises he had never heard before. Like an infant being tickled very softly with a feather. Was that the potential child inside her, making itself known?

He kept on thrusting. Was something inside her changing? Both of them?

Their lips locked as they moved, and they began kissing the way they'd done on their very first date. Fiercely, their mouths trying to find different ways to meld against each other. Joannie was making squealing noises into his, pushing them down his throat like solid objects, her body tightening and pressing against his own. The white light in his head was brightening to gold, and he was lost in the sheer energy of it.

Nothing mattered except this moment. Nothing existed in the entire world except this feeling and this motion. The golden light was trying to break his head apart. Frank clenched his teeth, and ...

A fire-truck went by on the street outside, its siren blaring. Mr. Mojencu's German shepherd, in the apartment above theirs, woke up and started barking furiously. Then its owner came awake and started shouting at the thing.

They both stopped moving. The moment – so intense a few seconds ago – was lost completely. It had vanished.

He could feel himself deflating quickly. They stared at each other. *Damn! Will she be angry? Was that the right moment for her to conceive a child?*

He got his answer when Joannie began to laugh. It started as a gentle chuckle, and then became stronger and more infectious, till he finally joined in.

They lay there, him on top of her and their bodies still locked, gasping and sputtering and guffawing until their ribs began to hurt. And, *The hell with it*, Frank decided between furious snorts. *What's the point of living in a place that won't even let you finish*

making love? Coitus Interruptus Central – who in their right mind wanted to live there?

“Okay!” he managed to get out at last. “Okay, we’ll take the house!”

Joannie’s laughter died away. Her eyes, in the dark, became very huge and damp. And then she wrapped her arms around his neck, and began kissing him all over again.

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please consider purchasing the book!

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