

The Opening

By Rick Lawton

I'm not sure what I am. I was a painter. Call me an art-vampire; call me Dorian's shadow.

I'm short, ironrail-thin, black-butched, thick-veined, Sicilian. I was a successful painter, had full bank account, and a small coterie of admirers and patrons, agents and gallery owners.

My flat and studio is on Nob Hill in San Francisco closer to the old grandeur of the Grace Cathedral and the Fairmont than the cesspool of Polk Gulch. I used to walk by the Vesuvius Gallery on Clay Street and admire my timed slashes on the gallery walls. I painted edgy Pollocks, red-rimmed Styls...stylized madness filtered through smug Midwestern eyes for pastel walls. I hinted at violence with red slashes on shiny whites and blacks occasionally adding a homespun calculation of existential angst, the vacant eye, the faceless face. But I knew where the money was. My paintings were never *too* outré.

My friends—a loose group of Art Institute kids, struggling artists, and wannabes—wondered about my taste for the secret violence and estrangement in man's soul. They nodded wisely over their lattes as they compared my paintings to Bacon's huddled red implosions, Nolde's frenzy, or Schiele's naked pink torsos.

Before the incident, I used think I could fuse the inner and outer, the left and right brain, the object and subject with my own peculiar slant. That was the theory, the Apollonian explanation. I lived close to Grace Cathedral, but my inspiration was Polk Gulch.

Late that day, I gravitated to Polk Gulch. I sat at the window of the Gulch Saloon. Behind me pool balls clicked and drunks spouted eternal verities. Outside it was the usual lust-chasing-the-edge-of-night, worn leather, hairless chests, pink skulls and green spike-heads. Hawks picked up chickens and chickens faced off in dark alleys. The street moved across the canvas of my eye. It was my carnival, a mockery, their faces my masks, their violence my timed slashes.

He was short, a plump Diego Rivera; dark hair fell like a sheaf over a simple brown eye. He garbled a threat. I glanced quickly up the street. No police cruisers. I shrugged and dug out my wallet. Simple enough. It was stupid; it was over. I would regard the scene with a new strain of cynicism; he would lose himself in Polk's stained fresco.

My brown-eyed Rivera looked at me, a smile tugging at his mouth and slashed up at my face. It must have been instinct or he saw something, perhaps arrogance, perhaps he saw I didn't care or would survive...I watched the fingerling blade in his brown fist hang against the dark shadows of the alley and then he was gone, slipping into the shadows.

The blood slipped through my hand. A drop splashed on the pavement like an exploded circle.

Then there were police, ambulance, St. Francis Hospital, ER's blinding white.

In the mirror, I saw a stitched scratch across my cheek.

I'm thick-skinned, cynical. I was okay. Incident over.

I sold a painting I'd already finished of whites and blacks with my red hints; I sold another with the same edgy background but with a cluster of Ensor masks in the foreground, carved and shiny like merry-go-round horses.

I misjudged my confidence. I dreamt of fingerling knives and brown eyes. I saw the outline of a real artist through the cut. The eyes in the mirror darkened and hollowed as I touched my

wound. I spread it with my fingers and saw behind the stitches a long scab brown like the cut on a baguette. I paced through my studio and began to see my red scrapes as false, a sell-out.

I haunted Polk Gulch. At first, I thought I had to find my little Rivera, face up to him, dare him. No. His fingerling knife was real and I was not. My scar was real, my red slashes not. When I put my finger on my scar I was touching art.

I was sitting in the Gulch Saloon, when I heard the ambulance. My stomach felt empty as I hurried up the hill towards the sirens.

Cars sped on Van Ness and bounced lights off shop windows. I rushed towards the crowd, but stopped at an alley in the middle of the block. Thick splashes wove out of the alley like red snakes.

I followed the snakes. Snakes with feet: right foot red, left a hollow print; right foot red, left a hollow print. Each square of gray pavement had a jagged line of red winding through it. The squares were paintings, rough, ragged, but true, real. The street was a huge gallery, the squares real paintings.

Inside the crowd, I found a slight man. His bare chest was slashed, his body pale, limned with night shadows. He was a real Shiele, a real Bacon. He knew the secret.

His hollow eyes fixed mine from inside a cone of white uniforms.

He was a real artist.

Another opening on the street.