

Venus Figurines

Inspired by 'Love in the Time of Cholera' by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Dedicated to Nadine Chesnut, mi esposa

Forward

Venus Figurines is a love story written as a modern myth. It is about Anya and James whose struggle with love becomes obsessive, ritualistic, and self-defining. The underlying theme of my story is how love drives the creation of art, particularly the art of a venerating woman – Venus Art. Venus Art is very old. Some ancient examples are statuettes of women carved from mammoth ivory by Neolithic people thousands of years ago. Archaeologists call these artifacts Venus Figurines. Although we can only speculate about what motivated these ancient sculptors, I believe they were inspired by love and beauty, as were the myths and artwork of Venus that came later. Enjoy my book.

Chapter 1

He placed her dainty foot into the palm of his warm, brown hand. Her foot was ill at ease in his hand as if held against its will. He ran his fingers over it, caressing the contour of her ankle and the shape of her unblemished sole, all of which came together in his mind with a space and gravity all their own.

It tickled and she crinkled her nose. Her reflexes flinched, betraying aversion to his touch. “Relaxxxxxss,” Feo hissed, grinning at her with gold teeth. The skull tattoo on his shoulder leered at her innocence, eyelessly.

Anya could not bear to look at his pockmarked face or rough hands as they touched her smooth skin. She turned away from him in dread, scanning the dirt-caked windows and concrete floor of the studio in search of solace, her gaze coming to rest on the soiled sheets of an unmade bed.

“How much?” James interrupted their strange communion.

Feo turned his head towards James and said, “For her foot?”

“No, everything.”

Feo petted her calve while inhaling her perfume and anxiety. “I have to think about it.” He shaped his hand into a caliper with his thumb and index finger and slid it up her lower leg. His spidery caress made goose bumps rise on her helpless flesh. She felt like a fly in his web, but relented and endured his touch anyway.

Sitting perched beside James, aloft on a white sofa, she looked like an angel on a cloud or a porcelain miniature on a cake. They looked down at Feo, who knelt in silence. James nudged her. She glanced at him hesitantly, but then relented and while nodding ‘yes’, lifted her dress

further, succumbing to circumstances that were beyond her control. Feo's hands climbed to her knee and slid along her thigh.

"Sixty thousand," Feo blurted out.

"Are you kidding? I was thinking more like forty. How about forty, Feo? Think forty."

James glanced at Anya, who looked ashamed. Beads of sweat formed on her upper lip. She shot a despairing look back at James, which seemed to ask, 'Must we go through with this?' She held his hand, feeling for the protection of his love.

"That's an insult! Sixty thousand?"

"Fifty."

"You are trying to steal from me, *gringo*." Feo, opaque behind his dark glasses, lit a cigarette and blew smoke rings at James with relaxed aplomb.

Anya's face glistened with fear. The dull throb of regret beat in her chest. James fanned the smoke with a hand while he waited, but Feo betrayed nothing. "Well, is it fifty?" James asked.

Feo's glasses peered away blindly, as if distracted. "I have many other things I can do with my time, *cabrón*. Sixty thousand." His Mexican brogue colored his speech with melodrama. Smoke billowed from his nostrils and devolved into fairies in Anya's imagination. She thought of a Minotaur wearing dark glasses and jeans, with black hair and tattoos who exhaled angelic spirits with angel wings, some blowing trumpets.

"Fifty-five," James replied. He could easily afford more, but his ego stopped him there.

Feo shook his head and then placed her foot on his chest over his heart and murmured, as though reciting a prayer, "To capture her soul. Isn't that what you want? What are you willing to

pay for that?" Time slowed to a pause, standing still, while the gravity of his meaning sank in. He added, "For *that*, I need inspiration."

"What is he talking about?" Anya whimpered as her pores opened involuntarily, taking in the ambience of the moment, allowing it to mingle with her own, intimate chemistry. She felt violated.

Feo tapped his lips and waited in silence.

"So, you'll do it?" James asked, his face slick with dread.

"Sixty," Feo repeated. "I will think about it." He pushed his chair to one side. He was done for now.

"Did we just agree to something?" James was confused.

"There is no agreement." A woman's voice startled Anya and James. Isabella had been out of sight watching them, listening in; the sneaky voyeur that she was. Feo grinned, but Anya and James were horrified.

"You both look so guilty," Isabella said, slyly smirking. Anya glowed with embarrassment and looked away. Isabella was Feo's first cousin. She was also his lawyer and business manager.

Feo said, "We are all guilty and we will all suffer for it. You might ask yourself, Anya, how you came to be here, now, at this moment. What was the chain of events that led you here? What is the first link in the chain? What were the choices you made? How will the choice you make today affect your life tomorrow? I think you already know that there is no going back." His ticklish hand burned on her thigh, but she was helpless and could do nothing.

He continued, “And if you are wrong and this is a bad idea, it might bring you unhappiness for so long a time you will begin to think the only happiness you know is the happiness you used to know.”

“Feo! What are you saying? Are you trying to talk her out of it?” James snapped.

Feo stopped speaking, but it was too late. What had been said had already been heard by Anya, whose thoughts turned inward, burrowing down inside to a place where they became images; images of naked girls showering in a locker room: a painful event from middle school. She was twelve.

After gym each day, the girls were required to shower. This meant they had to completely undress. They modestly wrapped themselves in towels and marched solemnly to the shower where they dropped the towels and joined the other naked nymphets in the spray and steam, giddy and pink with embarrassment. The gym teacher stood by the line of girls, ticking their names off a list as they passed, making it impossible to escape the appalling ritual. Anya called it the Shower of Mortification.

The Shower of Mortification distressed Anya to her core, but she endured each day with stoic grace and dignity. She would wait until all the girls had left before disrobing. As she removed her shoes and socks, and then shirt and pants, pangs tickled her belly. She undressed until she stood in nothing but a bra and underwear. She then wrapped herself in a towel beneath which she wriggled off her undergarments, revealing nothing to the outside world.

One day, as she walked with dignified resignation, from locker to shower, she noticed the closet door move. As she passed, the door flew open. She turned and saw the janitor’s pink, domed head staring at her from the closet. His mouth hung open exposing brown, jagged teeth and bleeding gums. She shrieked and in her panic, dropped the towel which gave him a full

frontal view of her nude body — an image that he greedily supped up with his burning blue eyes. He licked his greasy lips as though he had just swallowed something sweet. The nymphets all began to scream, the gym teacher blew her whistle, and pandemonium ensued.

The next thing she remembered was sitting in the principal's office, where she was forced to recount each moment of the indignity to the principal, her father, and a police officer. She spoke with a broken voice as she relived it in front of them. The humiliation etched into her soul, leaving a scar. She was convinced the janitor would forever be able to recall the vision of her nude body in his mind at will, whenever he liked, holding her captive, permanently violating her privacy. He had stolen from her the first tiny bit of virtue and she felt degraded. She refused to shower at school again.

James touched Anya, who returned from her thoughts to find that she was still sitting in Feo's studio. They all looked at her as though waiting for a reply to Feo's question, which she could scarcely recall. It was something about unhappiness and persistent regret. She turned to James, whom she loved and trusted, and for whom she was willing to do whatever it took to cure him of his obsession and suffering. James, in spite of burning with jealousy at the sight of Feo touching her, reassured her with a nod and a smile.

“Yes, I will do it,” she said, relenting again as she had at each juncture in the past, agreeing to the next step in a slow sacrifice.

Chapter 2

After this first, painful meeting with Feo, James and Anya waited outside Feo's studio for Uber to pick them up and take them to his home in the Marina. The night was dark and damp and streetlights reflected off the slick sidewalk. They were south of Market in San Francisco, near Third and Bryant, in an industrial barrio of parking garages, auto repair shops, corrugated aluminum, and graffiti. Invisible to them, beyond the boundary of their mutual captivation, laid an eyesore of blight and soaking wet cardboard boxes that sheltered filthy, bearded men who shivered in the cold. One peered at them through a hole in his box.

The session with Feo churned in her mind. Despite feelings of moral degradation, her body responded to Feo's touch in ways that she could not admit, even to herself. Being watched by James while being touched by Feo heightened her sense of shame and spawned in her a new feral chemistry that took her against her will and brewed inside her, next to but separate from her sacred love for James. She shivered from it.

As they waited, her red hair absorbed moisture from the air and fanned out across her shoulders. "Oh, darn, my hair," she said and gathered it together, pulling it back into a ponytail.

"I love your hair like this — all frizzy. Let it loose," he said.

She did and it tumbled from her head, down her back in ripples of red, releasing a redolence he inhaled. It infected his blood, sedating him, easing his rage over the touching of her. He could not resist running his fingers through her hair. She laid her head on his shoulder. He wrapped her in his arms and touched her forehead with his lips. In the cool solitude of the damp night air, they began to relax.

In spite of their returning calm, the traumatic experience forced James to re-examine why they had come to see Feo in the first place. He asked himself two questions; questions he asked himself almost every day: *Why am I here? What am I doing?*

He could stop the events set in motion, but even if he did, he would never be able to stop himself, so it was futile to try. Bringing Anya to Feo was just a symptom of his problem. James understood Feo's warning about making choices and recalled his own chain of events. He even remembered the first link in the chain. It was when he was very young; around three years. He remembered it well.

He and his parents, John and Vivian, lived in an apartment in Palo Alto near the hospital where Vivian was finishing her medical residency. John, a wealthy heir, did not work. He was sort of a house dad. Vivian's career provided the rhythm for their lives with each day neatly carved into discrete activities: John taking James to school while she went to the hospital. Dinners were prepared and served, laundry done, beds made, sheets changed, all forming a neat order of events. It was his mother's influence.

Since John did not have to work, he had not pursued a career. In fact, he had not pursued much of anything. He did collect stamps and was proud of his knowledge of them and of knowing the word 'philately', which he would rhyme with Lady Chatterley to impress his friends. For years, he unwittingly called himself a phillaterer, until a friend embarrassed him by telling him that, "A philatelist collects stamps; a phillaterer is someone who fellates." Sadly, philately was about as deep as things ever got for John. To his credit, he had not disintegrated into hedonism like his father, although the temptation was always tugging at his sleeve.

One night, the family watched a Western on television in the living room. James played on the rug with trucks, mostly ignoring the program. The Western climaxed and the commotion caught his attention. He turned to the TV just as one cowboy shot another, who fell to the ground.

“Well, he’s dead,” John said.

“Cowboy dead?” James said with surprise. At three, he knew that death was the end of life and that all of the dinosaurs had died before having baby dinosaurs so they were extinct. He knew that a dead body disappeared into dust and understood that the transition to dust happens because tiny bugs called germs eat the body and poop dust.

He dreamed about his conception of death. The death dream always began the same way as he drifted off to sleep, starting with weird sensations like dizziness or the feeling that he had shrunk in size or floated over the bed. As he shrank, the crack between the bed and the wall grew, drawing him in until he teetered over the edge and fell. He then drifted slowly downward into darkness until he landed softly on a pile of hay in a dimly lit tunnel with a concrete floor and red brick walls. John and Vivian were there. They were going somewhere. They asked him to hold their hands, but he would not and instead defiantly chewed on a plastic toy airplane. His parents told him to stop chewing on the plane, but he ignored them. Their facial expressions became flat and their voices emotionless and alien, as though they were in a trance.

He walked next to them through the tunnel, which turned a corner and then became bright with light. Steps led upward into a nursery school classroom and he could see books and toys. As they climbed the steps, he collapsed on the stairs, overcome with fatigue. His parents continued to climb the stairs, ignoring him. Then he died and turned to dust, a ball of lint; *Germ Poop*.

The transformation into Germ Poop was painless and he could still see and hear even though he was dead. He saw a second dust ball. They played together. That was how the dream ended.

The death of the cowboy startled James. He let go of his toys and stared at the TV, thinking about what he had just seen. He knew death happened to dinosaurs, but that did not mean that it happened to people. He planned to live forever.

He looked at his mother and asked, "Cowboy dead?"

"Yes, the cowboy is dead because back then cowboys shot each other, but these are not cowboy times. You'll never be shot by a cowboy."

James grasped the terrible truth about cowboy times. They were dangerous and you could die then. He was glad he was not a cowboy. He went back to his trucks, confident that he would live forever.

Shortly afterwards, he learned that everything dies. The journey from immortality to knowing that everything dies began in the middle of the night. On that night, the phone rang. It disturbed his sleep, but did not awaken him entirely. He heard his father exclaim, "Oh, my god! Oh, my god! I'll be right there." The urgency in his father's voice startled James. He sat up in bed and listened.

"What is it, John? What's the matter?" Vivian asked.

"It's mother. They found her lying in the hallway. She wasn't breathing. She's at the hospital. I have to go."

"Oh, John, I'm sorry."

After a long pause, John said, with a faltering voice, "Well, it's not as though it wasn't unexpected."

“Yes, I know.”

“She would have been eighty-two, in December.”

“A long life.”

“Yeah, long enough. She had a full life, perhaps too full a life. I have to go to the house. I have to make the arrangements. Please, stay here with James.”

“Of course.”

James did not comprehend. He rolled over and fell back to sleep.

The next day, James played on the rug in the living room, encircled by toy trucks, soldiers, and planes. The television was on, tuned to Sesame Street. Vivian and John appeared. They settled on the couch. John switched off the television and said, “James.”

James ignored him and continued to carefully stand soldiers in a toy dump truck while muttering make-believe to himself.

“James,” John repeated in a louder, more serious voice. “James, look at Daddy.”

“No.”

“No? And what exactly do you mean by ‘no,’ young man?”

“No! I not looking at you, Daddy... I busy.”

“Busy?” John affectionately tackled James onto the rug, who giggled as they tumbled. John sat up and pulled James into his lap. “James, I have something sad to tell you.”

James continued playing with a soldier he held in his hand.

“Something happened to Geegee. Something sad.” ‘Geegee’ meant grandmother; John’s mother.

James turned and looked John in the eye for a surprised moment and said, “What happen to Geegee?”

“She died.”

“No, Daddy. Geegee no die” James waited for his father to deny that she had died, and when he did not he shouted defiantly, “NO, DADDY!” He pushed his father’s face away. “NO, DADDY, GEEGEE NO DIE.” He twisted out of his father’s lap and stood, stamping his foot on the floor, repeating, “NO, DADDY! NO, DADDY! GEEGEE NO DIE.”

John and Vivian sat helplessly while they watched their son’s psychic pain. All they could do was shed tears. James’ stamping foot grew into a dance of hysterical grief. His red face glistened with tears and anger. He howled as he hadn’t the words to properly express his shock and horror. He cried and cried and cried - for at least an hour, non-stop, pausing only to breathe, until he became exhausted and the crying faded away.

“Come see Daddy,” John said and got down on his knees and held out his arms.

“NO, DADDY,” James started crying again and ran away, across the living room where he stopped and turned and faced his father, glowering at him, angry over the truth he had revealed. “DADDY, GO AWAY!”

“He’s freaked. I don’t know what to do,” John said.

Vivian took over. She opened her arms for him and said, “Come here, my James. Come see Mommy.”

“MOMMIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!” he wailed, mouth opened wide, drooling, his face swollen with grief. He danced with anger across the room. She picked him up.

“Shh, Shh, Shh, James. Mommy loves you.”

“NO, MOMMIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!” he shrieked and swung his hand at her.

“He’s hysterical,” she said.

“Should we take him to the hospital?”

“No, he’ll get over it. How about a teaspoon of wine?”

“Good idea, Doc,” John disappeared and then returned with a bottle of port and a teaspoon. “This is sweet. He should like it.” He gave them to Vivian, who administered the medicine to a cautious James. The port was strong. It burned his mouth and caught in his throat. He choked and began to cry again. Saliva, red with wine, trickled down his chin and across her arm.

“Oh, James, please calm down.” She rocked him as he calmed. In a few minutes, he was quiet, his only sound being short bursts of reflexive sniffing. He fell asleep. The horror of death gradually ebbed away, but was never quite forgotten, always lurking, reminding him of the shortness of life and the problem of what to do while waiting for the end.

Chapter 3

James and Anya met at the City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco months before their visit to Feo's studio. On that night, just before they met, James sat in a sidewalk café on Columbus Boulevard near Chestnut Street. It was twilight in early summer. A marine layer cooled the evening. The clang of cable car bells punctuated the background din of the city. He sat alone, stirring an espresso with a spoon, while thumbing through *San Francisco Weekly* magazine, looking for things to do. He found nothing.

He had nowhere to go and nothing to do. Having nothing to do was a persistent problem for James. He had inherited a large trust fund and did not have to work for a living, so instead of struggling to survive, he struggled to fill his time. He did have a small business, which was buying and selling rare guitars. He bought them at estate sales and auctions and then sold them online and at fairs. The business took a few hours a week. It was a leisurely business — a gentlemen's business — almost a hobby; part time and modestly profitable.

Of all the problems one might have, being wealthy and idle is not exactly a tragedy, but still, James cursed his ennui each day. He could do nothing about it. He lacked the will, commitment, and talent to change his life, so, he lived dreading the present tense, which right now, passed by so slowly that he could count each moment with a stir of his coffee spoon. He looked around at the others in the café to see how they passed their time. There was a bald man with a scab on his scalp slurping soup, two women with menus twittering at each other like birds, a couple who held hands and stared into each other's eyes, making James feel alone, reminding him of the Prufrock he'd become. He had withdrawn from life and avoided friends for weeks after his latest relationship disintegrated in public. As he sat in the café, he recalled the event. He and Janet, his girlfriend of seven weeks, met his best friend, Jack Hooker, and Jack's date for

dinner over a month ago. They were late. James and Janet began to bicker over how he had parked the car while Jack and his date looked on.

“Sorry we’re late,” Jack sheepishly apologized.

“You took forever to park!” Janet said with a strained, angry voice.

“Jeez! Sorry. I wanted a close space. You know, to save some walking.”

“We spent twenty minutes looking for a parking space!”

“Hey, try and relax. It was only seventeen minutes.”

“Twenty minutes, seventeen minutes. Who cares? The point is it took WAY TOO LONG.”

“Well, I’m sorry if I am not just like you, taking the first spot that you see, regardless of anything.”

“WE SAVED A COUPLE OF BLOCKS! ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND? Your parking habit – no, it’s not a habit; I’m being kind to call it a habit — it’s an impulse and it’s not just with parking. It’s with everything that you do! It’s out of control!”

“I don’t get what you mean,” he lied. He had heard it before. He did dilly-dally, but then he thought, *She just doesn’t understand the true meaning of having too much time on your hands.*

“IT’S A DISEASE. YOU NEED A SHRINK!” she shouted.

“I HAVE A SHRINK, AND HE THINKS I’M OKAY!” he shouted back.

A sullen silence followed. Finally, she said, “I can’t stand it anymore,” and left.

He did not miss her at all, but the breakup humiliated him. He withdrew to clear his head and assess his life, but after weeks of introspection, he had discovered nothing and gotten nowhere.

As the recollection faded, he found himself back in the café, starring at an obituary in *San Francisco Weekly*. He read the obit aloud, “Her name was Alice Smith, fifty-five. She had breast cancer. She was survived by her husband and two sons.” He stopped. The few facts of her life made her death too real for him and grief, followed by dread, infected his mood. He began to feel nauseous. He had to leave, to get away. He dropped the tabloid, left cash for his bill, and fled down Columbus Boulevard, passing Joe DiMaggio Park and shops selling flowers. He picked his way between cars and pedestrians that hurried by, all rushing somewhere, each with a goal and purpose. Something he lacked. He felt vague envy toward them.

When he came to City Lights Bookstore, he took his eyes off the sidewalk and glanced through the bookstore window. He noticed an audience gathered ‘round a man who was reading aloud. With his attention away from the sidewalk, he did not see the ragged bum crouched down below the ambience of the crowded sidewalk, leaning against a newspaper dispensary. James stumbled over him and lost his balance. They made eye contact. The bum said, “Don’t do it! No, don’t do it!”

James looked into the soiled face of the dirty beggar. “Don’t do what?”

“Buy me a sandwich.”

Now that’s original! He considered rewarding the bum for his creative food pitch by hustling him into a sandwich shop and buying him all he could eat, plus food to go. Then, he recalled a glint of red in the audience at the bookstore. *What was that? Red hair? A woman?*

He forgot about the bum and looked again through the bookstore window. He saw Anya’s red hair. A poster outside advertised a poetry reading, which was underway. He entered the bookstore, joined the crowd standing in the back, and scanned the audience. After spotting her, he moved to a position where he could see her more clearly.

She had curls the color of sunset that fell in ringlets to her shoulders. Her eyebrows knitted in relaxed concentration as she focused on the poetry being read aloud. She wore glasses and looked bookish, like ‘Madam Librarian’. James glanced at the poet and found him boring, so he returned his attention to Anya’s waterfall of hair, porcelain cheeks, full pink lips, and blue eyes. He could see the profile of her delicate shoulders and slender arms and wondered at what lay beneath her earth-tone sweater.

He had to meet her, to speak with her, to find out who she was. He returned to the back of the room — behind the audience — and waited.

When the reading ended, Anya sidled between the chairs to the aisle, where she turned and walked towards the back. She saw James looking at her and her heart jumped. She noticed his fine brown hair, gray eyes, and handsome face. He was looking directly at her, staring at her. She put her glasses back on. *Has he been watching me? Waiting for me?* She felt hunted and, in a way, James *was* hunting her. The thought made her uncomfortable. Her father’s face floated in her mind, warning her about men, but then James smiled and her fear melted away.

He gestured, asking whether she would speak with him. She looked away shyly at first, but then nodded. As she approached him, he held out his hand. “James, James Brighton.” He looked directly into her eyes, which blinked at him from behind glasses.

“I’m Anya.” She blushed and then looked down at her shoes.

He asked with a warm, but impertinent tone, “So, do you have a last name?”

“Anya Andersen.” She looked up into his face and offered her hand, which he took and held, feeling the warm delicacy of her fingers. She liked the touch of his hand and the look of his face. Her pupils dilated. His dilated in return.

He let go of her hand and cleared his throat. “So, what did you think of it? The reading? Did you like it?”

She nodded. “It was okay.”

“Just okay?”

“Well, listening to the poet read his work is much better than reading poetry silently to yourself. I mean, poets know exactly how to read their poetry, where to inflect their voice, where to pause, what to emphasize. Reading a poem properly is like acting. David does that well, but I’m not that big a fan of his themes or metaphors and besides, nothing rhymes. I like rhyming poems like *Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening*.” She felt at ease and took off her glasses, but kept them in her hand.

“Who’s David? Was this guy David?”

“David Meltzer, silly. Didn’t you know? He’s a beat poet. Do you like beat poetry?”

“Beat? Do you mean like, ‘*death and purgetoried our torsos, with drugs, with dreams, with waking nightmares,*’ and the possibility of HIV infection?”

“Howl! But it doesn’t mention HIV... You must like poetry.”

“Not much, not really. I liked Howl, I guess, at some point in the past when I was in college. You sound like an expert.”

“I know something about poetry. Did you like David?”

“Didn’t hear a word; wasn’t listening at all; don’t know who he is. I’m not really into poetry, either.”

She put her glasses back on, crossed her arms across her chest, and said, “I don’t understand... then, why did you come if you don’t like poetry?”

“Umm, well, I mean, I was in the neighborhood, and, uh, sort of bored, so I stopped in.
What about you?”

“I’m a writer. Attending poetry readings is part of that. What do you do?”

“Ah, you’re a writer. I am not a writer. I am not a poet. I am not a painter. I am not a musician. I am not a lawyer. I am not a doctor. I am not. I am not.”

“Defining yourself by who you aren’t doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does if the list is long enough. What do you write about?”

“Romance, mostly. Well, primarily.”

“With white knights rescuing damsels from dragons?”

“More contemporary, but there are similarities.”

“I’m intrigued. I want to hear more. May I buy you coffee?” he asked. She nodded.

“Let’s go.” She followed him out of the bookstore into the cool evening air and bustling street.

Anya had limited experience with men. In fact, going to coffee with a stranger in the city was a new experience. Her overly protective father smothered her adolescence, arresting her social development. She had escaped the small agriculture town of Buelton, California at twenty after attending community college there. She transferred to San Francisco State, where she earned a BA in Creative Writing. She had graduated a year before.

“When did you start writing?” he asked.

“When I was a kid and was bored, I told myself stories. Then, I started writing them down because I liked re-reading them.”

“Liked re-reading them?”

“That’s why I wrote them down. At first, I told them to myself, and then one day I just started to write them down and re-write them, changing things around each time: the characters, their names, how they looked and spoke, their habits.” She trailed off and became quiet.

“I’ve tried to write, but it turns into scribble,” he said.

“Scribble? You mean with a pencil?”

“No, I scribble with MS Word.”

But that’s not possible, she thought, while absent mindedly saying, “I use MS Word, too.”

“We use the same word processor! Doesn’t that mean we were meant for each other?”

“Only geeks say things like that.”

“Yow, that hurt. I am wounded!” he felt pinned and wriggling on the wall.

“Sorry. I hope it was only a flesh wound.”

It was only a flesh wound. He picked himself up, brushed himself off, and bravely continued. “You know, because we use the same word processor, we can exchange files!”

“I don’t know you well enough to exchange files.”

“Why, what are you afraid of?”

“Viruses!”

“Nice... so, what would I find if I opened your files, Anya?”

“Well, um, unfinished stories... weird ideas ... epiphanies... stuff like that.”

“Epiphanies! I can’t remember the last time I had an epiphany. I guess you have a diary full of them.”

“No, not a diary. It’s a collection of broken thoughts. I call them Shards, James.”

“James!” he said. “You know, that is the first time you’ve said my name. I am deeply moved.”

“You are so sarcastic.” She leaned towards him playfully, coming close to his face, looking directly into his eyes, inhaling and then moving away.

They arrived at the café. He opened the door for her. Once inside, he signaled a waiter who led them to a table by the window.

“What have you published?” he asked.

“A few short stories in local newspapers, literature journals in college. Things like that.”

“Local papers? Which ones?”

“The *Santa Ynez News* and the *Lompoc Record*.”

“The *Lompoc Record*? What’s that?” He looked incredulous.

“Lompoc is near my home town, Buelton. It’s their newspaper.”

“Where?”

“Buelton, near Solvang?”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve been to Solvang.”

“I’ve written some novels. Well, the first two aren’t any good, but I’m working on one that is going to be great.”

“Do you make any money from it?”

“Practically nothing.”

“Then why do it?”

“It is part of who I am. For money, I tutor English, reading, and writing. What about you? I know what you’re not, but ‘I know not what you are’.”

“I’m a collector.”

“Really? What do you collect?”

“Rare guitars,” he said, cocked his head to one side, and raised an eyebrow as if he expected her to be impressed.

What a pretension, she thought, but politely said, “Gee, that sounds interesting.”

“You have no idea. It is interesting. There’s a lot to know, lots of details.”

“So, what are some details about rare guitars?”

“Like one I bought a few months ago at an estate sale in Tahoe City, you know, near Lake Tahoe. A rich guy died and he had a lot of stuff. There was an auction. I drove up. Stayed in Squaw Valley, skied a few days then went to the auction. He had one guitar I wanted. It was a 1957 Les Paul Custom. It is soooooo coooool. Totally black. They call it ‘Black Beauty’. It has a mahogany neck and an ebony fingerboard with inlaid mother of pearl fret markers that are white and shiny and contrast amazingly with the black. It’s signed by Les Paul... Here are some pictures of it.” He held up his cell phone.

“Did you buy it?”

“I stole it for three thousand dollars. I can get twenty thousand in Japan. I do about twenty deals a year. I always have a deal in the air, if you know what I mean. Would you like to come to an auction sometime? I do a lot of traveling because of it, across the US, England, Canada, Japan, Germany, France.”

“Um... I don’t know,” she replied. An awkward silence followed.

James then tapped on the window and said, “See that bum out there? I spoke to him earlier tonight.”

“About what? Did he tell you why he became a bum?”

“No, no, well, it’s not as though we had a chat or anything like that. He just asked for food, sorry beggar that he is. After coffee, let’s take him out to eat.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Not at all. He’s hungry. We can take him to a sandwich shop. Buy him dinner. A modest act of charity, wouldn’t you say? You can ask him why he chose a beggar life-style.”

“When you put it that way, all right.”

After coffee, they walked outside to the sidewalk. James scanned the street for the bum. “I don’t see him.” He waited a few minutes and then said, “Well, it looks like he’s gone. Listen, I have absolutely nothing to do tonight. Want to take a walk or something? Or we could share a dessert at the top of the Mark Hopkins.”

“I’m afraid not, I have to get going. I’m tutoring in the morning.”

“Oh, come on. I’m safe. I am so bored. Let’s do something.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Listen, is there any way I could see you again? Maybe meet for dinner and a show? Something like that?” he asked.

“Yes, I think so,” she said and waved down a cab.

“How do I get in touch with you?”

“Look me up on Facebook. Look for Anya Andersen, Author.” A cab pulled up. She opened the door and got in. “Goodnight, James... It was a pleasure.” And then she said to the driver, “Please, take me to 2501 Crestline Drive in Twin Peaks.”

“Yes, Miss.”

The cab pulled away from the curb, leaving James alone with the present tense and his ennui. He considered scuttling back into his shell, but then he spotted the bum. He decided to dine with the bum instead.

