



IVORY TOWER

Grant Matthew Jenkins

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Part 1: A Convocation

I.

The thing about Margolis Santos—a sign she is slightly *off*—is that she sees ghosts. Real ghosts and not-real ghosts.

Start with the real ghosts. Well, one ghost in particular, her dead father Cicero.

He didn't want her to go to graduate school or become a film professor—no money in it—he didn't want her to marry Frank Sinoro—too much of a dumb jock—and Cicero certainly didn't want her to go against her university's president in her first year on the job as an Assistant Professor—no tenure to protect her.

But she did it all anyway, perhaps to spite him, though she didn't think so at the time. She thought she was just following her dreams, as they say in the chick-lit novels on her night stand. But the constant negativity would creep into every decision she'd made, to the point where it seemed like it didn't matter if any choice was good or bad, so she might as well choose bad.

Like this morning. A not-real ghost. She thinks back on it as she drives to campus.

Why did she let Frank come over before their 17-year-old daughter, Brie, woke up, just so he could pretend everything was alright, to keep up appearances? Why didn't she just tell him to fuck off and tell Brie the truth? She's 17.

Margolis reassures herself: she wasn't the one who had messed around with a graduate assistant when she thought her spouse was away at a conference. That was Frank. Sure, she had wanted to seduce students too—it was kinda easy and not that sexy for all that—but she had a rule, despite another not-real ghost—having a thing for younger lovers. That rule was: no students. At least while they were in her classes and hadn't yet graduated.

“Thanks, Glee.” Frank reaches for an orange and tosses it into the air. As it lands suavely in his hand, he leans over and

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smooches her on the cheek. “I’ll see you at school.”

Margolis reaches up and rubs the wet left by his lips.

“Bye, Bee.” At the breakfast table, he kisses Brie on the head as he walks by. She doesn’t even stop munching her Cheerios.

“Mbye,” she mumbles sleepily.

The morning ritual having been accomplished, Frank grabs his keys off the kitchen counter—*nice touch of verisimilitude*, Margolis thinks—and he glances back at her.

For a moment, she wants to wish him a ‘kick-ass day,’ like she used to. She catches herself, swallows the reflex, but that look in his eyes—she almost wishes this ritual was real, that he were here, had been here, in her bed. She can almost feel his fingertips on her skin, like it used to be. It felt so real. But it wasn’t.

Real or not-real, nothing can keep her demons away—not graduate school smarts, not middle-age maturity, not a hearty Midwestern Catholic upbringing, not even her cynically wry sarcasm. The visitations are starting again, now that it’s fall. She looks over her shoulder half-expecting Cicero to be in the back seat. She swallows the feeling as she parks the car and heads for class.

So, fade in on ‘The U,’ short for Athens University where Margolis teaches television and film. The august, southern university, vivacious and verdant, spreads across rolling, urban hills. Imposing buildings lord benevolently over ancient stone pathways and ivy-covered walls. A parents’ wetdream of future prosperity and security for their precious spawn.

Through this sylvan scene, Margolis leisurely makes her way dressed in a flowing floral toga. She’s tall, like Jennifer Beals from *The L Word*, and just settling into her early 40s. Her face is angular and a tad severe, but the dark brown eyes and high cheekbones give her a grace that defies age.

Margolis’s overconfidence flows from the belief that hers is an enviable life—nobly pursuing knowledge, furthering the progress of humanity, shaping the young minds of tomorrow’s

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leaders—all of that happens here, she thinks, inside the hallowed walls of the Ivory Tower. Margolis knows there's a reason why people rank being a college professor as the most respected profession behind Supreme Court Justice—because it's ideal, in a word, *cushy*. Summers off, flexible hours, getting paid just to think. Hundreds of young nubile bodies prancing around half-naked. A veritable paradise before the Fall.

Margolis stops in front of her lecture hall. Hesitates.

That's when it happens. Another visitation.

Margolis is transported to the middle of a desolate field landscape in middle America, the overcast grey sky and leafless trees give a sense of endless winter cold. In the distance the skyline of some nondescript city rises dark and foreboding. Maybe it's Omaha. Or maybe St. Louis. Maybe Minneapolis. It doesn't matter.

Margolis grew up in this lifeless exurb with Cicero, whose voice she hears, almost as if in a memory or a dream. Flashes of the dead Cicero stand in her mind's field like a warning. He's tall, dark-haired, with sallow cheeks, a ghostly pseudo of Edwards James Olmos. But it seems so real, his voice, as it spews from his mouth.

“The world is full of predators, Margolis. You eat or get eaten. Weakness—for money, for blood, for lust—gives the beast a place to sink his fangs.”

A phone buzzes. His twisted face disappears. And Margolis suddenly finds herself back on campus at the front of a large auditorium classroom.

Usually when she teaches, Margolis doesn't just stand, she *presides* over her class. But she's rattled after seeing Cicero. She takes a deep breath and rallies at the thought of finishing up a series of lectures on the rise of the sexual thriller in film history. For the students.

The lights go down, and a projector lights up. Glenn Close from *Fatal Attraction* in all her frizzy 80s glory rolls on the screen above the chalkboard. In this scene, Michael Douglas

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follows her into her apartment after she's invited him in. He's here to end their torrid and adulterous love affair, but she drops the bomb on him that she's pregnant. Feeling that he's being manipulated, Douglas tells her that this affair is over. That rejection sets Glenn Close off, and she demands to be part of his life, exclaiming the famous line, "I'm not going to be ignored, Dan."

The clip stops with Glenn in mid rant and menacing glare.

Margolis flicks on her laser pointer and makes circles with the red dot around Close's face.

"You see her, Glenn Close? The classic femme fatale, threatening this normal American man's perfect, happy life."

Margolis turns on the lights and resumes her lecture—it's like nothing else has happened today. She's on.

"But Glenn Close takes it to a new level. She's authorized by history, in a way that no femme fatale before her really ever had been. In the wake of the Supreme Court's 1972 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion, Douglas's condescending line, 'That's your choice, honey,' takes on a much weightier and sinister meaning." Margolis looks at the clock and sees it's time to go. "But we'll have to stop at that cliffhanger."

Margolis raises her arm for attention as the students start to pack up their things.

"OK," Margolis increases her volume over student rummaging, "we'll finish the discussion of *Fatal Attraction* next time. Be sure to read the chapter in the textbook on Film Noir, or you'll learn from me the true meaning of femme fatale!"

With the screen behind her, Margolis rewinds the clip. She puts her laser pointer's red dot right on the nose of Glenn Close and mouths along: "I mean, I'm not going to be ignored, Dan!"

The class laughs collectively and shuffles out.

Margolis puts her own things into a tattered leather valise and hauls the strap over her wiry shoulder. At the front of the stage she stops for a moment and takes in a long, satisfied breath. *God, I love this gig*, she thinks to herself. What would

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she do without it? With one more look around, she strides, satisfied, out of the room, down a hall, and through the front door to the quad.

In the humid air, Margolis walks down the tree-lined walk. The sun is lower in the sky. Warm orange light glints off buildings and glows in trees. It's what filmmakers call the 'golden hour.'

Frank Sinoro jogs up behind her.

"Margolis."

She doesn't answer. She keeps walking.

"Margolis, wait." He reaches for her arm and pulls her gently to a stop. "Glee, hi. I'm glad I caught you."

Margolis turns, nonplussed. She feigns indifference to seeing her husband.

"Frank, I'm late." At six feet plus heels, Margolis towers over pee-wee Frank.

"Please? Just for a minute?"

She folds her arms and waits for him to speak.

"I need to ask you something. A favor."

"A favor? Really?"

"It's not a big deal, but I need you to go with me to the athletics banquet this weekend."

"A banquet." She chuckles. "Honestly, how can you expect—"

"I know I should have asked you this morning, but with all that's been going on—"

She folds her arms and looks around, impatiently now. "It slipped your mind."

"Yeah."

"It's a lot to ask, Frank. I'm done with that kind of—"

"Come on, Glee, you owe me this. At least this."

"Owe you? I owe *you*?"

"OK, OK. Listen. I'm asking you. Nicely. As a favor. Would you please go with me? It's a crucial time, and I need supporters to think that—"

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“Everything is golden in Coach Sinoro’s landscape, like that charade you pulled this morning for Brie?”

“Yeah,” Frank wilts slightly. “Yeah, exactly. At least for now.”

Margolis stands silently for a moment, considering the trees and looking like she wants a smoke. She turns her head down the quad as anger swells inside of her.

“I know it’s been tough. But please, this one last time. Will you go?”

Margolis thinks back to last year’s banquet. It was a blast, maybe the last time they were happy. Before he fucked it up. *Why can’t we go back there?* she wonders.

Gradually Margolis softens and gives a nod of assent. *There is no sense in saying no.* Anyway, the pretense that they are still a couple will give her a little more time to maybe figure out a way to fix things, maybe to reconcile. At the very least it will give her time to break the news to Brie. She doesn’t know that three months ago, her father secretly moved out, waiting until she goes to bed to head to his small apartment closer to campus and then coming back early in the morning before she gets up.

“Great, I’ve got a meeting with Lane, but I’ll be by to pick you up in a few hours—”

Margolis doesn’t wait for him to finish but simply turns and walks. Frank watches her go, shading his eyes against the late-afternoon sun.

* * * *

Angle on a classic southern mid-century motel. Vintage neon sign, a pool shimmering in the later sun. Cars whiz by.

Track in through a part in the sun-gauzy wool curtains and over the cliché of shag carpet. Margolis lies leisurely in bed with a sheet barely covering her naked body. She takes a drag from a cigarette.

Next to her is Ford Reinhart, 19, maybe 20 at the most. On

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the outside, he looks just like another douchebag: toned physique, his hair crew-cut blonde. His accent, southern. His face, a blueberry pie.

Ford flops out of bed, scantily clad in underwear only, looking for his jeans. Can't find them.

That's because Margolis has them. She takes a pack of smokes from the back pocket, pulls one out, and lights it.

"God, that tastes good." Exhales, "I haven't smoked a cigarette in years." A beat. "How come so many of you kids smoke these days?"

She takes another drag, watches him. He's clearly sober and a bit nervous. He stops.

"Kids?"

"You know what I mean."

She offers him a cigarette, and he takes one. Lights it.

"Margolis, can't you—" Ford starts but she interrupts.

"It's pronounced *Margo-lee*. Rhymes with *glee*."

"Margolis, can't you..." He pauses a beat. To Margolis's expectant eyebrows: "Can't you, like, get in trouble for this?"

She laughs. "For what, smoking?"

"No, for this." Standing in his underwear, he gestures back and forth between himself and her.

"Oh," as if considering it for the first time. "Oh, no. No. What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I've never done this before, like, been with a professor."

"Shut up! You're not even my student."

"I know. I just thought maybe there were, like, rules and stuff. You know, ethics."

"Ethics?" Margolis stares at him. Incredulous, then annoyed. "Look, I have a rule: No students."

Ford shrugs, "OK."

This talk has clearly taken the savor out of the moment for her. She wants to get it back, so she watches Ford pick up a shirt and put it on over wash-board abs.

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“Look, we met on Farrah’s set. *She’s* your film professor, not me. She’s my friend. I was only there as a consultant, not a teacher.”

It’s like she’s rehearsing a poorly prepared script. He doesn’t know it consciously, but he hears that in her voice. You can tell from his reply.

“You’re also an investor, right? A producer from the U?”

Suddenly worried, “Yeah, well, that’s true. But that doesn’t mean anything. It can’t.”

“Couldn’t you, like,” Ford presses, “get fired?”

Margolis confidently, “No, not fired. I’m tenured. You have to basically break the law to get fired as a professor.”

Ford continues putting on his clothes. She watches his legs, his bulge. He speaks as he slips on his Calvins. “I mean, I like you and all, but I don’t think we can keep doing this.”

Margolis smirks. “Come on, haven’t you ever done anything that was a little, um, frowned-upon?”

“Yeah!”

“Like what?” Margolis teases in a dubious tone.

“I picked a lock on my uncle’s liquor closet so I could get some of his booze.”

“What? Really? You can pick locks?”

“Yeah, and it’s something he taught me, just to give me a real skill. ‘In case the social order breaks down,’ he used to joke.”

“Ah come on, we’re not breaking the social order, Ford.”

Ford doesn’t respond but keeps dressing. Margolis exhales, relaxes.

“Hey, stop. Come here.” She pats the bed and gives him a come-hither smile. He pauses, then relents, diving on the bed next to her.

She folds him in: “Don’t worry, OK? It’s all going to be golden, Pony Boy.”

Then she kisses him, long and firm, on the mouth.

In the gap, Ford: “*The Outsiders*. Nice.”

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She kisses him on the neck and reaches under the sheets between his legs. She moans seductively. He reluctantly is getting aroused.

“You know, your parents, salt of the earth that they are, will eventually find out about us. You ready for that?”

Ford, suddenly with a start, “Oh, shit. What time is it?” He jumps out of bed and looks furiously around for his phone. “I haven’t talked to my parents since Tuesday before the shoot. Fuck! Where’s my phone?”

“Well, of course you haven’t talked to them,” she jokes. “You’ve been too busy diving for pearls with your tongue.”

He finds the phone, unlocks it. “Shit, shit, shit. There’s 30 messages, like 14 from them.”

Margolis takes another drag.

Ford reads through texts, eyes darting back and forth. He thumbs out a reply quickly.

“Ah hell.” Margolis watches disappointedly. “Smart phones—world’s greatest buzz-kill device.”

“Great. Everyone on Facebook is wondering where I am. They think I’m missing.”

“What? It hasn’t even been a day since you talked to your folks.”

“Two days.”

“Two days?! Whatever.” Margolis dismisses.

“Since I live at home, Professor Santos, they’re always up in my business.”

“If my parents had ever overreacted like that, I would have told them to go fuck themselves. But they weren’t like that at all—I would have been shocked if they cared where I was at all.” Beat. “And call me Margolis, please. Jesus.”

“I told them I was staying at a friend’s house.”

“You lied?”

Ford isn’t listening, he’s reading text messages. The phone suddenly dings, vibrates. “I gotta get out of here. They are pissed. Even called the cops!” He grabs his stuff and runs out

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the door without waving goodbye.

Dissatisfied, Margolis lies still for a minute, the only motion the smoke rising and fluttering from her fingers.

Suddenly, a sick feeling comes over her. Was she really living out this cliché, the student-teacher affair? Jesus, she thought she was above that.

Guess not.

She'd rationalized it by constantly reminding herself he's not her student. But, fuck, what does that matter? She may have just gotten the poor kid in big trouble. Why did she have to be so self-indulgent?

She doesn't have an answer. She just mashes her cigarette out in an ashtray on the bedstand, pulls back the covers, and reaches for her bra.