

# Solipsium

*Beauty must be served...*

*a novel by*  
**Daniel Couto**

# *SOLIPSUM*

A Novel by Daniel Couto



Eloquent Books  
New York, New York

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Eloquent Books  
An imprint of AEG Publishing Group  
845 Third Avenue, 6th Floor – 6016  
New York, NY 10022  
[www.eloquentbooks.com](http://www.eloquentbooks.com)

ISBN: 978-1-61204-721-8 1-60693-739-1

Printed in the United States of America

Book Design: D. Johnson, Dedicated Business Solutions, Inc.

*Solipsism* is dedicated to my parents.

And to Charlie.

I miss you.



## *Acknowledgements*

This book took awhile (quite a while) to write and it couldn't have happened without the loving support of a number of people. I would like to thank the following: Ayres and Irmelind Couto, my parents, for their boundless love and support, and who never even blinked when I said I wanted to write, James Town, for providing invaluable feedback I didn't listen to the first time, and for the "Platinum Pussy," Brian Dawson, for his unchanging friendship over the years and invaluable advice, Leila Courey for her comments and enthusiasm and especially for her faith, Peter Mensah, who was a friend in some dark times and who's professionalism, sage advice and laughter have improved my life immeasurably, Glen Hanson with whom I have done some of my best work and whom I will always love, Linda Gardiner, my NY roomie who read *Solipsum* and made some great suggestions, Kari Lakomski for her love, friendship, patience and spirituality, Oliver Couto, Natalie Couto and her hubby Keith Pace-Asiak, Rita Poole, the second subscriber, Henrietta Haniskova, for always being there and catching that Polaroid "girl-response-thing" and making a bunch of other valuable suggestions, Jonathan Boorstein for concise and powerful feedback that helped the story immeasurably, Betty Sze, Sabumnim David Herbert for technical help and being an astonishing and eye opening inspiration, Tony Chaar, a great artist and an even greater friend, Alisa Krost, stylist extraordinaire and great friend too, Kelly Meredith for her professionalism, artistry and great company, Michael Currie, who is *Solipsum*, Amber Noelle, Victor Tavares, Arash, Julie Miller (who never forgets), Willi, Drake, Anne Bock, Ilde DeMarco, Cory Mann and Lorraine Bird from NEXT, Cathy LeDrew and Cynthia, Mark Askwith, Michael Stevenson, Mark Terry, Walter Pacifico, Sifu Rupert Harvey, Sifu Simon, Bob Noorduin, Salem, Elle (you thought I'd forgotten you, didn't you), Vicki Sander, Lydia Pannicia, Gerry Turnbull, Wayne Barlowe and his book *Barlowe's Inferno* for its incredible depictions of Hell, and Sandy Tritt for her fine editing and suggestions, and Anna LeMay, aka Bunnie.

I would especially like to thank Donna Locke, my muse, for her love, friendship, beauty, intelligence and all those lessons about living in the Now (not to mention her great edits). You are the first reader and my best friend without whom none of this would have been possible. I will always love you. Hyuh!

## *A Note*

Solipsum is set in a parallel universe where film is still revered. Digital photography as well as much more advanced technology also exist but it is film that is most respected as a shooting medium.

[www.solipsum.com](http://www.solipsum.com)

***SOLIPSUM***





## *Prologue*

I remember her kerchief, fluttering in the breeze, nails lightly trailing along my arm as she laughed that musical feline laugh.

The Italian Alps seemed especially beautiful on that perfect summer's day, and I didn't have a care in the world. I was with the best friend I'd ever had, the girl of my secret dreams.

"Come sit on my lap," she said, her voice strong and clear as it came to me over the wind, "I'm cold." Then she flashed that goofy grin, the one that drove every photographer crazy. Of course I came, nearly putting a knee through the picnic hamper, our rented sportster was so small.

A moving vehicle, a winding road, sure it was crazy. But we were all more than a little crazy back then. And when you're that young and beautiful, and I don't mean beautiful like you know beautiful, I mean anything-you-want-in-the-world-is-yours beautiful, well, you think you'll live forever.

You really do.

Then something—happened. I saw something I shouldn't have been allowed to see. And next thing I knew this huge dump truck was bearing down on us, horn blaring, brakes screaming. All of it happened so fast! And it was over the cliff or into the rocks.

I was thrown past the windshield; otherwise my neck would have snapped. That's what they told me later, anyway. They were amazed that I was even able to move, never mind find her.

She was so—bashed up—lying there on her back with that glorious face tilted up towards the sky. A face that was mysteriously unhurt—pristine. I'd never seen her look so sublime.

I fell crying to my knees and cradled her head. She looked asleep, her hair so soft and sun-warm as I touched it. Then I felt the blood, hot and sticky, its scent like sheared metal. My tears on her face must have brought her back because she opened her eyes, those blue, blue eyes, guileless and child-like and infinite as the vault of the sky above us. They found mine and her lips slowly parted, the tiniest trickle of blood meandering from her mouth.

"You—you do know that I love you, don't you?"

"M—me?"

"You, Spud. Not him. You."

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Her eyes grew wide and held something in them I'd never seen. "My God," she whispered, ". . . what are you?"

Then she died.

# Book 1

*“Un croquis vaut mieux qu’un long discours.” (“A picture is worth a thousand words.”)—Napoleon*

*10 Years just past Now . . .*

*30,000 feet somewhere above the North Atlantic, London to New York.  
First Class.*

Solipsum loved to fly. He leaned back in the wide seat, legs outstretched, comfortable in a black turtleneck and black slacks. On his index finger he wore a ruby ring that had once belonged to a king. He gazed out the window and noticed how much the clouds at this altitude resembled the fields of Heaven. It was the closest he came to the human emotion of wonder. He then settled back and closed his eyes, going deep into his mind exploring . . . potentialities. What would this world be like if all he had planned came to pass? He had almost finished constructing a consonance to his thoughts; the album Jim Morrison would have made had he not died so inconveniently. It would have taken the music of the next fifty years in such a completely new and impossibly fresh direction as to defy description. He was having trouble bridging the last chords. Like a broken record, one tone seemed . . . stuck.

His eyes snapped open, surroundings reassimilated, his crystalline awareness searching for and finding that which had disturbed him: the tinny jar of rap music leaking from someone’s headphones next to him.

“Excuse me.”

A man with a face like chocolate suet looked up from the fashion magazine he had been reading. He larded a shirt almost architectural in cut, dazzling leathers and colorful synthetics bitch-slapping each other, neither giving ground. He was also draped in what appeared to be a small rap label’s entire gold reserve. Solipsum’s eyes traveled to the man’s face, where he saw his own meatsleeve reflected back at him in designer lenses.

A broad hole broke in the suet’s surface. “The fuck, man, can’t choo see I’m busy here?”

“Your music.”

“What about it?”

“I find it disturbing. Please turn it down.”

Suet’s chubby hand knuckled with gold raised the magazine, his chin jutting to its cover. “This you?”

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For the second time Solipsum saw himself as if in a mirror, this time photographically. “Yes.”

Suet lowered his sunglasses to reveal fried eye whites the yellow of old crack. “Well, now that we know who you are, Mr. Pretty Boy *Versace* Dick Sniffer, you know who *I* am?”

“Yes, I do. Your name is Rufus Jelton, now known as ShitMou’, one half of the multi-platinum rap duo ShitMou’ and Vanilla-X. Formerly known as ‘Jell-O’ by the class of ‘09 because of your unfortunate tendency to jiggle, fat-like, no matter what you wore. That name carried over to your brief stint in Raiford. It was a term of endearment used by seven foot Billy Ray McGruder whenever he referred to his bitch. You.”

“That’s it! You *dead*, muthafucka! You hear—”

Solipsum raised his hand, thumb and index finger gently closing on nothing—and ShitMou’ felt his breath stop. He began to shake, fighting for air. Solipsum grabbed the rapper’s hand, almost crushing it as he placed it between his legs. ShitMou’ pulled back hard, putting his weight into it. For all the good it did. Then his earpiece was removed with a lover’s delicacy, the other man’s voice filling his world with an intimacy that smothered all thought. “I am your worst nightmare. Nothing would please me more than to give you ten times what you received from Mr. McGruder. At once.” Solipsum’s fabric-covered genitals bulged suddenly, writhing and twisting like a sack of snakes. “Then watch your liquefied innards run out of the only orifice that has never lied to you. You will remain silent for the duration of this trip. Do I make myself clear, Jell-O?”

ShitMou’s hand struggled feebly, pain-glaze dulling his eyes. He finally managed a nod.

Solipsum smiled, displaying a beautiful set of razored white teeth. Not pointed exactly, just very thin. Like razor blades.

His eyes cut to the aisle to see the first class stewardess approaching. The one he knew had been wondering all flight if he tasted as good as he looked. He released ShitMou’s hand, but not the rapper’s voice. The girl arrived and leaned over them just a little farther than was necessary. “May I bring you something to drink, Mr. Solipsum?”

“No. Thank you.”

She gave the sweating ShitMou’ a puzzled glance. “What about—?”

“I believe Mr. Mou’ will be sleeping for the duration of the flight.”

As he watched the girl go, he heard tiny rap obscenities still bleeding into the air around ShitMou’s head. His fingers reached over, flicking off a switch.

\*Click.\*

*New York City, SplashLight Studios*

The most glorious ambient electronica was playing and she had never felt more alive. This feeling that she got whenever she was in front of the camera, this simple joy, was the one aspect of her life that never changed.

Ahhh, the dance, the give and take, the movement through her lovers, the light and the shadow as they concealed and revealed, revealed and concealed.

The clothes were the lens that filtered her essence.

Sometimes she was hard and shiny,  
sometimes she was smooth and plastic,  
cable knit and textured mossy,  
synthetic android, super glossy.

Sometimes she was drenched in color,  
saturated and fantastic,  
sometimes she was raw emotion,  
black and white, monochromatic.

Tempress, seductress, innocence, unconditional love. She was all these things and more. And like the infinite whose essence she embodied, she was never the same twice.

She was fully aware of her power, but what elevated her from the merely beautiful to the realm of the sublime was her knowledge that beauty fades. This awareness allowed her to be in the only place that has ever mattered in front of the camera—the *Now*.

As she moved and turned, the light faceted the jewel of her beauty into film-sized shimmerings of capture. Each was exactly 6cm by 7cm, the chosen format of the day. Moving effortlessly between poses, she marveled and reveled in the life she had been given. She suspected, but did not realize, she was one of history's greatest beauties. In her unique combination of line, grace, energy, and finally, humility, she rivaled Helen of Troy.

Whom she once was.

She made a thousand dollars a minute on a good day, and this was one of those days. She was now and would be for the foreseeable future the most stunning creature on the planet. Her name was Phoena, and she was a model.

She had just spun into a turn, extending the line, the Clothing mannequined to best advantage when the vision burst upon her mind, thrusting past her defenses. Her breath caught, the rhythm broken, body slam-

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ming to a stop flash-frozen by strobe burst. “Are you all right?” someone shouted but she barely heard, the drum-sound pounding in her ears, the pain a molten blade as it slid into her brain. She cried out, then screamed, fists jammed to her eyes, the blade sliding deeper, twisting as the face, that *face*, loomed larger and larger, the room spiraling, floor rushing up, the face now vast, Solipsum’s face.

Before oblivion took her.

*On a dusty road, somewhere in the Dominican Republic.*

He was royally pissed. The location was too hot, make-up sucked, his first assistant was not working out and the models (except for one) couldn’t ride and were thus completely wrong for the job. To top it off, the art director had taken to touching his ass (again) whenever she needed to make a point (which was often). He was shooting a campaign for *Republic Jeans*. His name was Joshua Stone and he was the highest paid photographer on the planet. He was also one of its most talented. If someone were to mention these two facts to him, he would have assumed the bored expression he got when presented with irrelevancies. Because for Joshua Stone, it had always been about pushing the envelope, and everything was a tool in the service of that ideal.

Stone now stood in the burning sun, khakis and t-shirt already sticky, a hand shielding slitted eyes as he surveyed the scene before him. Motorcycles, shooting truck and jean-clad models all stood at the ready. He quickly ran through a mental checklist as the sweat began to bead his shaven skull. He noticed, not for the first time, that the silver halide black of his skin absorbed even more heat than it did light. Perhaps that was simply because at 6’6”, he stood closer to the sun than most—a sun which he noted was finally at the perfect angle. He cupped his hands and shouted, “Okay, let’s roll!”

Three bike engines roared to life as Stone clambered aboard the mobile shooting platform. The wide wooden ledge was spot-welded to the driver’s side of the battered old pick-up, barely a foot above ground. Simple and solid, it was where he needed to be to get that special angle critical to his vision.

The convoy began moving along the narrow dirt road, trees and tropical foliage a solid wall of green almost close enough to touch. There was little room to maneuver, and even less for error.

He gave the signal and the massive prototype racing machines throttlescreamed with the power of burning high-test. The girls jockeyed furiously for position, fat grooved tires spitting up plumes of dirt and gravel.

In an instant, a magnificent hurricane of grit, sound and streaking color filled his world. The hurricane's eye was Joshua's eye, the calm at the center, projected through his viewfinder.

He fired away, barely pausing to change backs on the 220 motor wind camera he held in his hands like a toy. Images that would later appear on billboards, bus shelters and in-store posters were chosen/frozen instantly, instinctively.

Jimmy, the first assistant, turned to look down the road ahead and felt his stomach drop. *Jesus H., I thought this road was closed!* An old junk truck had suddenly appeared in the road ahead of them, piled high with God knows what and taking up way too much room.

He hammered on the truck's side but fucking Pedro had the radio up too loud again and couldn't hear shit. Jimmy turned to his boss. "Josh! We got trouble!"

Stone was lost in the Now, eyes painted to the action. Jimmy saw the junk truck and quickly figured out there would be none of that ships passing in the night thing. *Unless we're talking Titanic. That old junker is gonna scrape our rig off like—fuck! No time!*

He jumped the rail into the truck bed just as Stone handed his camera back to be reloaded. The photographer twisted sharply when no one took it, to see his first assistant where he should not have been. Before he could yell "What the fuck?", they both heard the honking horn. Jimmy's skinny arm pointed up the road but Stone had already spun to look. His eyes widened with shock. The junk truck was almost upon them.

He glanced back at Jimmy who shrugged as if to say, "I told ya." Knowing he had no chance, Stone's leg muscles bunched as he reached high for the safety rail. Out of the chaos a voice screamed, "JOSHUA! GET ON!"

His head snapped around to see his best rider racing alongside. He crouched lower, preparing to jump, his eyes for an instant pulled to the motorcycle's wheels, spinning, spinning, close, so close, and time  
... s t r e t c h e d . . .

He found himself falling into a Vortex of images, images, billions of images, like tumbling cards from God's tarot deck, tumbling, fumbling, stumbling—

—towards the edge of the shooting platform, Death rushing towards him, reflex taking over and he was suddenly in the air, camera thrown to Jimmy, landing on the bike's seat with teeth-jarring impact. His arms grabbed the rider's waist just as throttle torque almost threw him backwards to dust and doom.



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*Too late! Too LATE!* his mind screamed as the bike accelerated and swerved between the two rushing vehicles toward a quantum gap that should not . . . have . . . been. And Stone knew they were dead.

Then they were through, rushing down the clear dirt road, wind in his face and it had never felt so good, the rig-wreck crash-sound already fading behind them.

By the time they returned, the ad agency's art director and the junk truck driver were face to face, screaming obscenities over the incredible pile of wreckage. The shooting rig was a write-off and Pedro had had the shit scared out of him, but other than that, no one had been hurt. Money would change hands, but that was not Stone's problem. Not today.

He dismounted and felt the tension-quiver jelly his legs. *Fuck*, he thought, *I can't believe I'm still alive*. It got better as he took the first few steps to the craft table already laden with lunch. The bike rider shut the engine down and sauntered over to join him in the shade. Joshua inclined his head, leaning back against a tree as he popped a cold one. "Thanks, you saved my life. I owe you. Big time."

The bike rider slowly removed her helmet, then shook out a tumbling mane of scarlet hair. She flipped it back from a face that was dirty, sweat-streaked and absolutely stunning. Joshua drank her in, seeing freckles, lashes, simple detail with a clarity he had never experienced.

She grinned at him as though she knew and her green eyes blazed with life. "Does this mean I get danger pay?"

Stone almost choked on his beer, laughing. He wiped the froth from his lips and turned to his first assistant. "Jimmy?"

A sheepish Jimmy looked up from the broken camera he had managed not to catch. "Yes sir?"

"You're fired."

### *New York City, lower TriBeCa*

Sunlight gleamed from molten gold, from silky tufts and strands of blond that swayed and played and intertwined, breeze-coaxed for the briefest instant into something like a window. To look through it would reveal a timeless, swirling Vortex, a thing so beautifully vastly fractal in the backward origami of its complexity it could only be held in God-Mind. And it would seem that if you could look at it just a tiny bit longer, the Universe would be laid bare. And you would never have to ask another question.

Ever.

Then it was gone, as if it had never been. And you thought you must have imagined it. For really, what else could it be, but the breeze? Playing in someone's hair . . .

. . . a girl's hair that framed a striking face with the most intensely violet eyes. She stood amidst her clothes that had been strewn all over the alley, chin thrust forward as she glared defiantly at the window three stories up. "Fuck you, you creep!"

Her ex-boyfriend braced himself in the window's frame, brave with the safety of distance. "No, bitch, fuck you! Find yer own place to stay, ya fuckin' tease!"

"But it's my apartment!"

"Too bad it's my name on the lease!"

The new girlfriend joined him, dangling a bra over the window's edge. "Yeah, Charlie Brown, ya little fuckin' dyke, hit the road!" She snapped her gum with satisfaction, then skinned her teeth as she let the little piece of lingerie flutter to the ground. A pair of glasses were next.

The girl in the alley followed the progress of her favorite bra as it fell directly into a puddle and felt the hot tears come. She wore a cropped black baby-t with the logo for the grrlband *Three Hole Punch* in cracked and faded glitter. The sheared waistline of her baggy cargo pants revealed a thin crescent of thigh cut men's jockeys. Her arms were clenched around her portfolio, making the dragon tattooed on one shoulder puff with ferocity. *Fuck, I'm already late! What am I going to do? I can't just leave this stuff here!*

A change rippled through her like a cool wind, the tears replaced by thousand-folded steel as she remembered who she was, and how she came to be.

"To hell with it. I'm outta here!"

She grabbed her glasses and left the rest.

It was one of those beautiful New York days, an unusual late-October day when Fall forgot she wasn't Summer, so she could see all the bare arms and legs one last time. As the young girl moved through the crowd on her way to what would be the most important appointment of her life, she was completely oblivious to the effect she had on passers-by.

Her name was Charlie, and she was the Future.

She emerged from the subway's depths, still blocks away when she saw it, rising in the distance. It was arguably one of the world's most famous buildings, and now she knew why. She stopped and stared at her destination, peopleflow eddying around her.

*Will you look at it! It's like someone made a playland for the Light! All those angles and textures, I don't think I'd ever get tired of shooting there. She shook her head in wonder. I can't believe I got an interview with this guy, and me just out of photo school too.*

Soaring one hundred stories above the City on a slender stalk of cement and steel, Stone Studios looked like an offering to the sun. It was one of the strangest and most beautiful buildings Charlie had ever seen. It paid but passing homage to gravity and none at all to convention. Old and new combined in ways that surprised and delighted her eyes. She had an impression of massive rusted arches, glassy plasma hemispheres, walls that curved and ran like ridges in thick cream, slowly poured over the rusted crenellations of some long forgotten machine. Then she remembered how late she was and hurried on.

Arrival. And a glass lozenge that took her to the top, ears popping as its doors opened. She found herself in the wide, illuminated corridor formed by two walls that curved and recurved before ending in a large exhalation of stone: a reception desk, some distance away. Recognition flickered at the edges of her memory. The architecture reminded her of something, something so fundamental . . . then it was gone. She shrugged and continued on, marveling at the subtlety of the lighting. It was almost like being in some sort of backlit

*(birth canal)*

shirt sleeve. Then she saw the first framed photograph. After a quick check to make sure no one was looking, she put her glasses on. *Much better.* It was black and white, tiny, no larger than a 4x5 Polaroid. Which it was. Noon sun, desert, children, three of them, dressed in rags, but with the most beatific smiles on their faces. Such characters! They had obviously known each other forever. One held a hubcap as they laughed at the camera, pushing and shoving like puppies, slightly blurry, just goofing, and each had only one leg, and it wasn't a hubcap, it was a landmine—a dud?—all of this registering in a nanosecond.

She went to the next. There in original was an iconographic image she had seen before only in reproduction, on the cover of the world's leading news magazine. She was astonished at the original's subtle shadings of gray, the depths of emotion they created in the dead soldier's face. The . . . clarity. Very soon, she completely forgot why she had come as she zigzagged from photograph to photograph, wall to wall, lost.

Images assailed her, startling juxta/compositions of stupid rag doll bravery and petalled grenade blossoms, bloody linen trenches and tank tread suppression, symmetries of protruding limb and shrapnels of hu-

mility and life, life, everywhere Life. It was almost more than she could bear. What prevented her from feeling bludgeoned by the photographic gauntlet was the astonishing beauty the photographer had made her see in all these situations. Simple human situations that far transcended any artificial boundary of language, skin, border or birth. Slowly she understood that what she was seeing was Joshua Stone's photography.

Before.

The final picture in the series was unusual in that it featured the man himself, sitting in the cargo bay of some army helicopter festooned with gear, feet dangling, a small Canadian flag on his breast pocket. The look on his face was indescribable—Virgil at the Gates.

Then like a curtain dropping, the photographs abruptly changed. Bright flowers of saturated color exploded on white backgrounds and Charlie recognized several images that formed the core of fashion's recent history. Some featured a young and beautiful Harlow Bleake, and Charlie was momentarily saddened as she remembered what had happened to her.

A spread followed the cover, and then came a series of covers, more spreads, ads, nudes and personal work in a creative riot so boundless and exuberant it could only be the work of a child never grown except to mastery.

The last picture was a large 20" x 24" blow-up of a magazine cover that Charlie instantly recognized. Simple, just the model, nude, cropped above the waist, hair tousled, looking out at her as if she were right there. Charlie stared in disbelief. *My God, her presence!* It was one of the most famous fashion images in the world.

Phoena's first cover for *Vogue*.

The shot was magnificent but it was the model's eyes that held her, large and green and so compelling she felt she would fall into them. Then she heard a voice behind her.

“‘For her eyes are like armies,  
And where her glances fall, there cities burn,  
Until the dust of their ashes  
is blown away by her sighs.’”

Charlie spun and found herself looking up into one of the most striking faces she had ever seen. “Who—”

“Euripides,” said Joshua Stone. “Talking about that woman whose face launched all those ships.”

“I've never heard words like that.” She quickly removed her glasses.

“You've never met a woman like that.” He stepped back a bit. “Who are you?”

“Charlie. My name is Charlie. And I’m—”

“Late,” he finished. “You must be the last. Get over to wardrobe. Russ will tell you what to do. And hurry. You almost didn’t make it.” With that he disappeared around a corner, leaving Charlie staring.

She heard footsteps behind her.

“Hi, I’m Trish, Joshua’s receptionist,” said a red-haired woman as she approached.

“God, I took way too long to look at this stuff. Now I’m totally late.”

Trish smiled in sympathy at this cutie who was so obviously a model. “No worries, frisky creature. They’re running behind.” She pointed. “First door on your left.”

“Thanks!” Charlie smiled over her shoulder as she hurried down the hall.

Trish waved. “Good luck!”

The young girl entered what looked like some sort of model’s change room, eyes and armies still reverberating in her head. She saw someone standing with a clipboard, tall and surfer-blond, with glasses and the sort of compact and fibrous musculature Charlie knew quite well. It wasn’t the kind that came from the gym. It was the other kind you hardly ever saw. The kind that evolved naturally after thousands of hours of—

“Okay, we need to see you in your underwear.”

“W—what?”

“You heard me. Your underwear. Change in there.” He pointed.

Charlie hesitated. *This must be some kind of test or something.* She held up her portfolio. “What about my book?”

“Bring it with you.”

In the main studio, Joshua Stone stood talking with a silver-haired art director, half his mind still on the strange and striking blond girl he’d seen in the corridor. Their backs were turned when Charlie snuck past in her *Calvin’s*, clutching her portfolio to her bosom. She took one look, then quickly averted her gaze. *Oh God, there he is! And I’m nearly naked!* She made a conscious effort to relax. *A test, a test, this is just a test.*

The art director sighed and looked up at Stone. “I know we’re a cosmetics company but this has to be the biggest casting *Narcissia’s Hope* has ever done. What did we see today, a hundred girls?”

“Probably closer to two. But I think it’s Phoena.”

“I would have to agree.” She glanced at the set. “But this last girl does look rather interesting, even though she’s far too tiny.”

Charlie watched them from the little black tape X Clipboard Guy had told her to stand on. Stone barely glanced at her as he stepped behind his

camera but she still felt her heart do a funny little flip. Then she noticed the rather large crowd of onlookers all staring at her, like they were waiting for something. *Narcissia's* art director crossed her arms and nibbled on her lower lip as Clipboard Guy, Trish and two other assistants lingered a bit farther back. She caught a funny look on Clipboard's face, like he hoped she'd drop her book or something, the oily dog. A strange and powerful tension filled the air, out of all proportion to the events that were unfolding. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath. *This is one hell of a test*, Charlie thought, but after what she'd seen in that corridor, she knew she would do anything to learn from this man.

She pressed her portfolio a little tighter to her breasts as she watched him bring his face to the viewfinder and focus. Then he lifted his head and his eyes met hers. "Uh, we need to see your body."

"Okay, Cherry Co-ra," she whispered. "This is it,"

Charlie placed her portfolio on the ground and slowly rose, flowing with only the slightest hesitation into a pose. Feet spread apart as toes gripped the floor, hands resting in tiny fists on either side of her canted hips. Line of leg flowed through tautness of belly to breasts high and shapely, capped with pink translucence. Clean limbed and beautifully proportioned, Charlie was simply exquisite. And completely unaware of her effect. She could have been carved from living marble, were it not for the two bruises, one large and purple-black on her rib cage, the other, fading to yellow, on her forearm. The small dragon tattooed on her shoulder seemed somehow perfect. She stood with an easy grace and sunny confidence, radiating what once we had when the world was young.

It was Charlie's first time in front of the camera.

When Joshua said "Okay!" she looked straight into the lens, past glass, past film plane, directly into his eye.

And smiled.

At that instant, the camera for Stone disappeared and he was back in the hallway. He distantly heard the shutter click, unaware he had shot the Polaroid that would change their lives forever.

Time seemed to lengthen and then it was as if everyone remembered to breathe again. Two assistants began whispering and Stone finally stepped out from behind the lens. "Let's see your book. And you can put your top back on. What agency are you with?"

Charlie blinked. "Agency?"

"Yes, you know, Agency. *BORD, ELITIST, P.M.P.*, what?"

"Uh, I'm not a model, Mr. Stone." Charlie was getting a bad feeling.

"You're not a model?"

“No, I—I had an appointment for an assistant’s position.” She tried to smile, the feeling worsening.

“Uh—that was two hours ago. I’m sorry, but that position has already been filled.”

Charlie jammed her book against her breasts, the smile sliding off her face. “Oh it has, has it? Let me tell you something. I’ve had one hell of a morning. I’ve been kicked out of my own apartment and my clothes are scattered over half of New York. Now I come here to see the man who’s been my shining idol all through photo school and I’m made to stand in front of him practically naked! And he won’t even look at my book? Fine! Fuck it! I’m outta here. I hope you got a thrill.” She whirled about, strides long and angry, her tears making the studio blurry. “God, why did I ever come here?”

Stone caught up, a hand tentatively reaching out to touch her shoulder. “Hold on a minute. I’ve obviously made some sort of mistake.”

Charlie kept her back to him and wiped a tear away with a small fist, not sure if she’d heard him correctly.

“I—shouldn’t have cut you off in the hallway. I made an assumption because of how you looked.”

She turned at these words, still very aware of her nakedness. “Does that happen often?”

“No. Never.” Something moved in his eyes before his client-face snapped back into place. “Please. Get dressed. Then we’ll schedule an appointment for first thing tomorrow.”

She noticed his hand was still on her shoulder at the same time he did. But there was no awkwardness, even when he left it there, gently guiding her in the direction of the change room.

### *New York City, Stone Studios*

A sleeping cat with silver fur lay under a couch in Joshua’s main studio. At least he appeared to be sleeping, until his paw streaked down, pinning prey.

Time does not exist when you have endless patience, for all things come to he who waits. Even redemption, he hoped. This he had learned over hundreds of lifetimes. He had learned it so well that for his final incarnation on this plane, he had earned that most special of gifts, the physicality of a cat. His true name was unpronounceable but humans called him Bruun. And he was nine lives in one away from Enlightenment.

Bruun thought that now would be a great time to show the pleasant burden that was his human pet what he had been up to for the past three hours. Perhaps the poor creature would finally learn something. He crept past furniture, seeing the world as most animals did, low to the ground with wide perspective. He nudged Stone's shin, then looked up. *Here, Tall One! See its blood? See the symbol?*

He had brought the dead mouse to show Stone. Were the man to look closely at the pool of blood that had spilled from the tiny creature's mouth, he would see something familiar. Something he had last glimpsed in a spinning motorcycle's wheel . . .

*See what comes? How you must prepare? No, NO!*

Stone picked up the cat and cooed to it.

*Idiot! Did I make the pick-me-up sound? No! Are you deaf as well as stupid? Ah, the One preserve me, how am I to communicate with something so closed? Let me look into the creature's mind while I make the contented sound.*

As Bruun purred, he saw a collage of images, sex, money and shoot details, all blending and overlapping like transparencies spilled on a light table.

*Ahhh, the usual. Even the mouse-thing is more ordered in its thinkings. I will sleep now. But beware, Jo-shua, something comes that will change your world forever. And I do not know if even I can save you.*

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