

Irvin Morris

THE SLEEPING PICASSO

For my muse, and those hot desert nights

It was Friday afternoon in Tucson, the reeking crotch of the universe, as Vince called the sunbaked burg, and he was more bored than at any other time he could recall, which was saying something. It was 103° outside and as dreary and tortuous as slow death. The swamp cooler loudly but hopelessly huffed out an ineffectual stream of stale air, and the knots of flies scattered across the ceiling sat stupefied and motionless in the swelter. It was so hot they refused, or perhaps forgot how, to fly. Outside, the frail blooms on the potted fauna lined up astride the porch rails wilted and curled up like fists. He slumped on the ratty couch, enervated by the wet-rag embrace of heat and humidity, staring listlessly at the fuzzy images on the old TV with the missing knobs and buzzing speaker. Days like this said to him, emphatically: you can run, but you cannot hide. It was something he hated but had accepted—for the time being, at least—as one of the unavoidable and lesser evils of living in the desert. Like snakes, bugs, snowbirds and packrats.

Bad as it was, though, he had been through worse.

Much worse.

The clock ticked relentlessly. He drifted in and out of the zone between sleep and irritable wakefulness. It was the kind of neither-here-nor-thereness that defined his life now, a tenuous existence of mooching and hustling, plasma centers and petty thievery, a hand-to-mouth regimen which was itself mere steps from the riverbed camps he'd called home for months after moving from Santa Fe to escape the cold winters and the callousness of in-your-face money. He sighed wearily and swallowed the last of the Red Dog someone had left in the fridge, then his fingers lost interest and went limp, letting the empty drop to the floor. It landed upright on the dusty braided rug then wobbled and tipped over like a reeling drunk. He wanted to let loose a vein-popping shout and kick it through the screen door, but he couldn't work up the energy. Instead, he fixed his bleary eyes on the crazy dance of heatwaves corkscrewing up from the ground outside. As the world closed down around him, a stray thought skipped across his mind, something weird involving melting clocks, skeletal trees and a sense of drenching melancholy.

He floated like a mote in that warm dark place, turning slow circles in the soothing push and pull of subtle currents and eddies. Then from the velvety depths a hand reached out and paused just beyond his fingertips. He strained to grasp the hand, but it darted away and vanished as a gun went off to his right. He jerked awake, arms flailing. Brown glass tinkled down all over. It took a moment to realize that the bottle had shattered against the wall by the door and that his big toe throbbed horribly. Hey, he croaked, realizing he'd been dreaming and that the loud pop was merely Ivo and Nina's van backfiring. Their appearance was a welcome ripple. The twelve-year-old Rorschach of cinnamon rust and aqua paint they called Zena scrolled quickly past the doorway and crackled up the dirt driveway. As the van's doors screeched open and then banged shut, he heard Nina's nasally voice ordering Buck and Earl to mind their manners. They responded with smacking and panting noises.

Hey, she said, flapping the front of her tee shirt as she walked in. She plopped down next to him and flashed a gap-toothed grin. How's my baby?

Vince smiled weakly.

Nina gave his arm an affectionate pat. That's my boy.

I thought you might've changed your mind.

No such thing. She cupped her hands to her mouth and loudly addressed Ivo, who was still outside. Tie their leashes to the van. We don't want them giving free puppies to that mangy bitch next door!

Vince held out his shaking hand and Nina clucked her tongue in sympathy. I've got just the thing for that.

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Nina, Nina, medicinewoman, curandera extraordinaire.

Vince, Vince, my poor haggard prince, in dire need of some care.

Bag it, you two, or Ivo will choke on smoke—and asphyxiate from a fit of coughing.

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Later, Ivo's searchlight gaze bore into Vince's bloodshot eyes. Yup, he's cured, he announced. Vince's pupils were dilated beneath their heavy lids and nearly identical in color to the irises. From a distance they were the same bottomless black. Ivo furrowed his brows and asked again, You're sure now?

More times than I can remember.

Let's go then.

They gathered up three folding chairs, the two Rottweilers, and some leftover citronella.

They drove south and then west from the city into the desert. Behind them the blistering sprawl of concrete and asphalt retreated into the shimmering distance and was obscured by the brown haze and miles of mesquite and cholla thickets. Saguaros and palo verdes loomed up and zipped past as they sped down meandering stretches of dirt roads and washes. Above the broad shallow trough of the valley, the staggered ridges of the Catalinas ranged from tans to green-black, to various shades of blue. Now and then a lizard or the occasional daredevil roadrunner darted across the road frighteningly close to the van. Nina, sitting on the sofa in back with Buck and Earl, strummed her guitar and sang. Ivo tapped out the beat on the steering wheel and smiled. Vince stuck his head out the window and let the rushing heat blast his face, imagining it was like being kissed by flames.

Here and there, they passed illegal dumps, ragtag altars of urban refuse left in homage to the lord desert; a decrepit gas stove, a wringer-washer, a doorless refrigerator, bald tires and innumerable shards of twinkling glass.

They heard scrub jays and doves.

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Freebird. Oye Como Va. Stairway to Heaven. The hoary anthems of yesteryear intoxicated the barflies with twenty-five-cent fixes of illusory immortality. For brief moments they were young again, fresh and hopeful, deeply in love or indescribably sad. Alive, anyway. Six feet off the ground, or twitching at the end of a pitchfork. The scene was so familiar, so cliché, if Vince wasn't there nursing a beer himself, he would have turned the page—in utter disgust—on any description of what he was seeing. He wondered briefly if this meant he was a cliché, too.

The older woman beside him took slow drags of her cigarette and leaked the smoke from the corners of her mouth. The bobby pins in her wig glinted in the dim light. She gazed into the eyes of an invisible lover and every now and then joined her scratchy voice to the choruses. *There's a la-dy who's sure all that glit-ters is gold.* She was oblivious to the guy next to her who was talking animatedly to no one in particular. He seemed innocuous enough, nondescript and of an indeterminate age, thoroughly hosed by three in the afternoon and suffering from a chronic case of verbal diarrhea. His oversized hands absently caressed the fluted curves of a small pitcher of piss-colored beer. He scratched at the stubble on his jaw and snickered. Naw, naw, that

ain't true, he said. No one cared or noticed. A woman with an ass the size of Montana played pool with a buzzcut young man whose biceps were scrawled with tattoos. His eyes followed her closely as she waddled around the table making her shots, widening appreciatively as she leaned over in front of him to send three balls slamming into corner pockets. She grinned at him and he grinned back as she chalked up her cue stick, twirling the small blue cube against the tip with unusual finesse.

Vince drank and listened:

Hey Roxie, you look good enough to munch, but man, you movin' like you got a rash.

Fuck you.

And a mouth like a cesspool.

Laughter.

Suddenly the boozy lethargy was shattered as the door flew open and daylight dazzled like it was the day of reckoning. The barflies squinted in protest and shock, some of them turning towards it nevertheless, like moths twirling helplessly into rushing headlights.

But this was no rapture.

In walked Ivo and Nina, tall, blond and garrulous. They greeted Vince, and forthwith, they began another of their legendary night-long binges, punctuated by occasional trips to the van for quickie hits. And as always, they were ready for bear. Ivo was wearing a black t-shirt and jeans, and Nina had on shorts and a turquoise buckskin halter-like thing that covered only her front—barely. And they had plenty of cash.

Roxie, two pitchers please!

Comin' right up.

And then they were off down that unruly road.

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With a final lurch around a sharp twist in the road, they are suddenly there, at the campsite, in the middle of nowhere, one of several, Ivo said. They are surrounded by palo verdes and mistletoe-infested mesquite. The saguaros are bloated and huge, dangerous with tons of stored water. The disarticulated ribs of a fallen giant lay scattered in the grass nearby. Vince snapped open a chair and plopped down in it heavily. He tipped back into the meager shade of the

van as Nina rolled open the side doors to let out Buck and Earl. They immediately positioned themselves under the van, inscrutable shadows, motionless as gargoyles. Ivo unloaded the stuff for later: the chairs, the camp table, the small grill and ice chests. A soft breeze glided through, making the grasses and trees sway lazily; moments later, it was followed by another. Vince rejoiced in the realization that it was cooler out here, away from the sizzling concrete and asphalt. He kicked off his sneakers and gingerly tested the ground. It was like pea gravel. And beneath that, caliche.

Ivo popped a top and handed the icy can to Vince.

Forget me? Nina said from inside the van, where she was rolling a joint.

Here ya go, babe.

Mmmmm.

Damn right.

What goes, ear-ear?

Shit.

By sunset they were feeling mighty fine. Nina oohed and ahed over the amazing spectacle; the tie-dye colors of the evening clouds and the inverted mounds of the blood-red mountains.

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Shaman, ramen, said Vince. It's all the same to me.

My, my, so cynical—and at such a young age! Nina sat with her arms wrapped around her drawn-up knees. The evening had deepened into a thick, velvety dusk. The sky began to shine with stars and there was the periodic hoot of an owl and the skitter of bats. Ivo stoked the campfire and they sat in the coppery ring of light, talking about weirdness. The fallacy of things. The verity of beliefs. The way a person might never really know who or what they are, despite spending every last moment of their lives inescapably in their own company, privy to the deepest, darkest thoughts and wildest secrets.

24-7, said Vince with a mossy tongue.

Then inevitably, the time was upon them. There was no signal, they just knew. The flames seemed to herald the arrival of the moment with a flurry of crackles and snaps that released galaxies of sparks churning and swirling up into the darkness. Nina sat up, rapt. The chains around her neck shot splinters of light. A plane droned past overhead, punctuating the darkness with red and white flashes. The dogs sensed something was up and crept closer to the fire.

I am serving notice, said Ivo, that something holy is going on in the universe.

Malpractice! said Vince, laughing. My HMO would never accept this chicanery!

I *am* the shaman, continued Ivo, behold! He pulled a small packet from his shirt pocket. Pipe down in back. Tonight we have the tremendous honor and privilege—the tutelage and company, yessir—of our dearest friend the sage, the time-traveler, the magician. My love, would you do the honors?

Nina smiled and held out her kohl-decorated palm. Certainly.

She divided the tabs. She handed Ivo his share and then turned to Vince. My dear little one, she said, dropping two onto his upturned palm. Sweet dreams.

Vince felt the fear settle like a hard, heavy weight in his bowels. His brain screamed that he was going to pay an extraordinary price for the lie he had set loose in the world. He had never done this before, and he was trembling uncontrollably inside with that knowledge, certain it would somehow come back to bite him on the ass, though on the outside he was the very picture of calm. He feigned nonchalance and sat back to wait for whatever would come.

Beautiful sky, he said.

Fuckin' gorgeous.

They were quiet for a long time, each wrapped in deep thought, waiting. The fire spoke for them with its crackling voice, conversing with the night.

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Half an hour later, Vince began to feel indescribable relief. It wasn't working. He was going to be spared. He grinned hugely. He opened another can and took a sip. Nina was standing beside the fire, staring deep into the shifting colors. She was singing a beautiful melody without words, a song that made him simultaneously sad and unspeakably happy. He glanced at Ivo and choked up. That was Nina's song in Ivo's eyes. He felt sad again; would he ever know that kind of devotion? They had always amazed him. Sometimes they almost seemed to communicate telepathically. One of the dogs rose and licked Nina's hand and briefly leaned against her leg, then it backed away from the fire and lay back down.

Nothing is happening, Vince said to no one in particular, but as he said so, the whole world rotated onto its side. Suddenly he was hanging off the edge of the planet with the whole cosmos gaping black and empty below. Hey, he

shouted, gripping the flimsy arms of the folding chair with all his strength, but no words came out. Colorful little spots of light looped and wriggled across his field of vision. He saw the beers crawl out of the cooler and walk off into the dark desert, into freedom. They marched like ants past the dogs who ignored them. Look at that! he shouted, but the words flew from his eyes instead, fluorescent-green and shimmering like balloons sequined with Fourth of July sparklers. Holy shit! he yelled voicelessly. The balloons turned into glowing neon-pink birds that circled his head screaming holy shit, holy shit!

Easy there, the voice of God said, in a soothing baritone. You'll be okay.

* * *

The next few minutes or hours went by in a blur; it was hard to tell what that meant anymore. At all. If ever. Then he realized he could read their thoughts. Shit! Ivo and Nina were not what they seemed. They were up to no good. They had brought him out here for a reason. They had slipped him something. They were waiting now for the right moment. For midnight. They were going to . . . sacrifice him. They were satanists; no, skinheads. White Aryan Resistance. Christian Brotherhood. They had brought him into the desert where . . . so no one would hear his screams. They would torture him for hours, draw blood, and then they would skin him alive. It was part of some ritual, some rite of passage. Some hate/power thing. Oh my god! They were going to let him think he was escaping, give him a few minutes head start, then come after him with the dogs. Those jaws on legs. Look at them, looking at him with those glistening eyes, they're slobbering already. Those sharp teeth! Gotta get outta here! But I can't let them know I know. Gotta stay cool. Not let them read my thoughts. Oh no, he knows what I'm thinking.

Ivo, I *know*. Ivo threw another log on the fire and glanced at Vince, who was acting weird, avoiding eye contact, not talking. He was a bit worried about the silence. He hoped Vince wasn't having a too bad a time, but he would keep an eye on him. Nina, too, was quiet, but that was par for the course. She'd be fine. She would tell him about where she'd been when she came back. Venus, maybe. The moon. But Vince—Vince had lied. This was probably his first time. The fuckhead! Serves him right—no, but he's cool. It'll be all over in a few more hours. By dawn they would be back. The meantime, though, might be a bitch.

Vince was like a tightly coiled spring ready to bound into the night, but he realized he couldn't move. His body had betrayed him. It was dense as stone. Immobile. This was what it felt like being dead, or being anesthetized but conscious in an operating room. Helpless. Wood. Stone. Ivo and Nina's thoughts were terrifying. This redskin mutherfucker is a fuckin' prize. Hot blood. Marrow. A thumping, quivering heart. Fat and sinew. Steaming viscera. Imagine how he would cry out, pleading for mercy: but shit, he ain't gonna get it! Scream you goddamned Indian bastard, nobody's gonna hear you! We're gonna crisp you like frybread, how do you like that? We'll roll your balls like dice, play a hand with your hands—play casino out here! Ha ha! I know you can hear me, but you're done for. Hear me? I'm in control. You can't get away. I'm too strong for you. Scream, mutherfucker! Scream!

Ivo knew he had to do something. Vince was beginning to moan too loudly. He was really having a hard time. But Ivo knew he needed to move slowly. He was afraid that if he did something suddenly, Vince would faint or freak out—and there was no telling what would happen then. He'd be searching the desert for hours, or days, or trying to call him back from within. Careful, be very careful, he told himself. Kid gloves. Just then he glanced down and saw the answer. It lay at his feet: a small faceted stone.

Vince, listen.

Before he could say another word, one of the dogs rose to its feet and shook itself, then it scratched an itch behind an ear with a hind foot. The tinkling sound of the tags and collar and the brief commotion of flying dust created a dizzying sight. Vince uttered a garbled cry and keeled over sideways. He lay there mumbling incoherently, his eyes bulging and rolling wildly like a dog-tied calf.

Vince, listen to me. You're having a bad trip.

Uhhnn.

Vince, you're okay, you hear?

—

It's all in your head. You can control it.

—

Move your little toe. Wiggle your pinky.

—

Yeah, like that. Now breathe.

—

Listen to me, Vince. I'm gonna help.

—
You gotta trust me. Here, take this rock. Hold it. Hold it tight.

—
Hold onto it! Long as you hold on, everything'll be alright.

—
Hold onto it. It's your rock. It's your anchor.

Nnnnn.

That's it. Hold on. You'll be okay.

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Man, Ivo said later as they sat around the smoking remains of the fire, this is getting harder and harder. I'm gettin' too old for this crap. He waved his hand like he was swatting away a fly.

No, you're not, said Nina. You big lug. You love it.

You both had me worried; you had me goin'. I feel worn out. Pooped.

From somewhere, Ivo worked up the strength and willpower to make some tea. None of them could eat anything, so they just sat and watched the eastern sky put on a bravura show. Magenta. Salmon. Gold. Pearl white. And finally, a pale blue. The sun rose and the mountains were then so achingly beautiful, their etched contours and lines delicate almost as filigree. Fuzzy with cacti. Vince studied the small rock at his feet. It looked like a miniature sculpture. A faceted, face-like thing. Wait! It looked exactly like an African mask he'd seen in a gallery downtown.

This rock, said Vince. This rock reminds me of something.

You called it a Picasso.

Nawww. No way! Yeah?

A sleeping Picasso.

The Sleeping Picasso, Nina said.

Their laughter started the dogs snuffling and stretching. The sky brightened quickly and soon they could feel the heat starting to rise.

Well, let's head back.

Fine with me.

Buck! Ear! Boys! In the van!