

Excerpt from Gabriel's Eye - The Kiss

The teacher, Susan Hart, has invited the members of the art club to her apartment in Oak Lawn for a Halloween party. She is dressed as a black cat and her husband Curt as a pirate. As this scene opens prior to the arrival of guests, they are alone. Before this scene, Susan has been encouraging her student, Jeff, to participate in art club activities because he is new to their school and seems lonely. She has also given him a few lessons in drawing in private.

11

Curt kisses her, and they both feel woozy; they're pleasantly tipsy and feel the piquant conjugal arousal that comes when desire far outstrips the opportunity immediately available to gratify it. Her hand moves.

"Wow! Long John Silver."

"Now I'm glad you talked me out of coming as George Bernard Shaw."

She laughs. She hugs him, presses her cheek against his chest.

He bends; they smooch, again. If he's surprised to detect vodka along with their dinner wine he doesn't say it. She had a little tiff with herself over buying it, and she doesn't want to argue about whether it's proper for her to take a swig when the kids are in the house. It'd been a good while since they'd had any. A grown person ought to keep a bar stocked. And when she's nervous, she just needs a little something to calm her down.

The doorbell chimes.

"Damn!"

"Later, Irrigator!" Susan flits light-footed in her black ballet slippers down the carpeted stairs, her tail -- one of Curt's old ties and stitched to the seat of her body stocking -- flicking at the wrought-iron rails as she passes.

Matt is at the door dressed as a Burger King counterperson. With him are two fellows who both look like Ozzy Osbourne. He introduces them as Carver students who play in a local band called Kiddie Porn.

"Believe it or not," he says to his companions, grinning, gesturing toward Susan from head to toe, "This is my art teacher."

When Susan congratulates them on their costumes, Matt says, "Aw, they always look this way!" and they all three laugh.

Leading them back to the walled courtyard off her dining room, she chatters over her shoulder, dances, skips, making herself a moving target. Inward squirming, ill-at-ease. Their masculine gazes are puffs of breeze that set her spinning like a dry leaf.

In the courtyard, the pirate is stirring a kettle of Hawaiian punch and 7-Up. She wishes she could've bought a keg to get the party rolling, but no kid here will be within three years of legal drinking age. Besides, they'll probably have been drinking, anyway. When she was in high school she swilled gallons of rum or vodka diluted by Sprite or Coke. Tonight host and guests alike will find excuses throughout the evening to sneak off for a furtive snort. The absurd hypocrisy troubles her, but not much.

Curt waves his sword, says, "Yo!"

The bell chimes again. This time it's Becki and Cheryl, the former wearing what looks like a 50s prom dress and holding with vaguely papal dignity a wand topped by a large sequined star; the latter has on baggy men's overalls, a baseball cap worn backwards, one tooth blacked out, a pipe wrench protruding from one pocket. With them is a short person in a Batman outfit, complete with cape.

"This is my little brother," apologizes Cheryl. "I had to bring him. I hope it's okay."

"Sure. Batman is welcome at my house any time." She smiles like a den mother welcoming a new scout, though she's thinking that a warning would be nice. She's planned a short hike down to the Halloween parade on Cedar Springs for later, and she's not sure Cheryl's mother would appreciate Susan's exposing this child to the raucous, bawdy ramble of a thousand cross-dressers through the heart of the gay ghetto. Would Curt mind staying behind and baby-sitting? (Yes? No? Maybe?)

She flags the trio to the courtyard and steps into the living room, where she scans the dial on the stereo, second-guessing student tastes, thinking she'll alight on whatever sound pleases her the least. Here -- way too much drums and guitars amplified into howling distortion, somebody screaming words.

Five minutes later, when she's in the kitchen sliding a tray of egg rolls into the oven, the bell chimes again. Jeff? No, it's one of her Madonna Wanna-bes, Jennifer, tonight appearing as The Nerd, Vitalised hair, black-rimmed plastic specs, a dozen pens in her shirt pocket.

"Hey!" says Jennifer. "You look neat, Miz Hart. I heard about your costume from last year, it's great! You look really, uh, like you know."

"Thanks. I was going to wear something else, but I ran out of time."

"No, I think it really makes you look sleek and sneaky, cool, you know?"

"Come on in, the party's out back," Susan says to squelch the talk about the costume. Is it such a surprise that adults can have sex appeal? *Sex appeal?* Sounds like something from *The Donna Reed Show*.

Responding again to the doorbell, Susan finds Lillian from her Drawing class in a ballerina costume standing on her stoop between someone in a mask and an unfamiliar boy in street clothes.

"Hey, Miz Hart!" chirps the masked man: Jeff! He's wearing a cape, a hood with sharp ears. She smells liquor. The three are beaming at her happily, Lillian rosy-cheeked. She'd never have put this girl and Jeff together.

"Batman!" she says. "You've arrived just in time. There's an impostor inside wearing your costume," she utters before thinking. She hopes seeing an eight-year-old dressed in a similar outfit won't wound Jeff.

Jeff waves at the other young man. "This is Todd."

"I'm here as Bruce Wayne," says the other. He's a handsome blackheaded kid with a slanted smirk, and when that's all either has to say about his being an uninvited guest, Susan steps aside and murmurs, "Come on in" to the trio without singling him out.

Susan moves her stereo to the patio, and soon the kids are dancing. For a while she's too busy to observe anyone closely to see who hangs close to whom. She slow-cooked a brisket earlier today and now she shreds it, while Becki helps by grating cheese, then they cut tomatoes and warm flour tortillas to make burritos. Once when Becki goes off to the bathroom, Susan opens the freezer again for the icy bottle.

Meanwhile, Curt keeps the chips and dip, the cheese and crackers, in proper order on the picnic table and piles ice on the drinks in the cooler. Susan's aware as she moves through the apartment and the courtyard checking on her guests that some vanish for minutes at a time -- in her study making out? In their cars drinking, smoking pot? As she works in the kitchen, she resists pouring herself another glass of wine.

Then around 11:30, she catches Curt in the living room.

"How're you doing, ace?"

"Pretty fair, Toots. How's about yourself?"

"Good so far. Thing is, though, we're going to be walking down to Cedar Springs to the parade in a few minutes, and I'm kind of worried about that kid. Would you mind staying here with him?"

He looks out of the window and onto the stoop as if hearing something.

"Aw, gee, Susan --"

"Never mind. It's not a trap designed to get you cozied up to the idea of having kids, Curt. It was just a simple goddamn request, a favor I needed done."

"It's not like I'm not doing anything for you otherwise," he tosses at her back as she goes out of the room.

They all agree to make the three-block trek to Cedar Springs for the Halloween Parade. When Susan volunteers to stay behind and baby-sit, Cheryl says her brother will be fine with her: "He likes to protect me," she adds.

The neighborhood is noisy tonight. It's unseasonably warm -- in the high 70s and humid -- and she'd hoped that Fall would have begun by now and had looked forward to the usually chilly breath of Halloweenish air. Apartments

nearby are flaming with light and music, people weaving in and out of doors, shouting, singing, drinking on the stoops, the landings, the balconies. The police have blocked off surrounding streets to vehicular traffic, and no sooner has the group left Susan's apartment than they meld into a swarm of pedestrians and revelers in costume: a man dressed as Dolly Parton, a woman with a mustache and tuxedo and top hat, a Devil in red satin, a man carrying a wine bottle and wearing nothing but a huge blond wig, shower shoes, and a jock strap. Becki and Lillian and Jeff's friend Todd walk behind the fellow, giggling and snickering. Curt seems unduly attentive to Jennifer, has seemed so all evening, she thinks. Matt and his buddies have swept up two girls(?) in cheerleader outfits and have surged on ahead, while Susan and Jeff and his pal, Lillian and Cheryl and the little Batman lag behind. For a moment she considers offering again to escort the little brother so Lillian and Cheryl and Jeff will be free, but the offer never makes it out of committee.

For a while they elbow through the throngs on both sides of the street, waiting for the parade, gawking at the other costumed revelers, worming past the al fresco terraces of cafes and bars, inching by the fire station where blue-shirted men sit as always in chairs before the open bay. Susan sees a brace of dominatrixes leading handcuffed, all-but-naked men on leashes, and she counts at least two dozen males clad in black leather outfits sporting studs and motorcycle caps and knee-high boots. Balloon breasts with painted nipples, balloon breasts with attached nipples; phalli fashioned from foam rubber, fabric, rubber hoses, foot-long hot dogs; Mickey Mouse and Goofy sporting long and floppy donges; several Marilyn Monroes, two Judy Garlands, a Whitney Houston. The floats inch by, moving party platforms, and the crowd squeezes between them, pass bottles and joints from the street to the floats and back.

[the kids get separated into smaller groups and after the parade she thinks she needs to get back home to be there when they return.]

She squirms free of the crowd and turns down Throckmorton toward her apartment. Immediately, it seems, the crowd dissolves into the solution of the night; lights from the parade are swallowed by the gloom, and Throckmorton street is the setting for a charcoal chiaroscuro. The street lamps leak their dappled light through a scrim of leaves onto parked cars and other singles or couples drifting to or from the parade. She doesn't like to walk alone in her neighborhood at night, but her costume is camouflage, and though the atmosphere is vaguely noir-ish, tonight she's of it, not just in it, slipping along in her sleek black cat's skin. Sleek and sneaky, quick and agile. Got sharp teeth and claws, too, and a nimble way of leaping (well, there is the problem of warped perspective and a certain numbness due to alcohol.)

"Miz Hart! Susan!"

She whirls on little lithe feet, almost trips. Jeff is trotting to catch up to her.

"I thought maybe I'd walk back with you."

"How gallant!"

"Well." They walk side by side a moment. "I've got a headache, and I thought maybe you had an aspirin."

Susan laughs. "Oh, then you're not protecting my virtue?"

"Aw, uh," he murmurs. It amuses her how she can strike him awkwardly speechless by being so mildly flirtatious.

"I mean, yeah, I didn't want you to have to come back by yourself if it made you uncomfortable."

"Did I say that?" She touches his shoulder with her fingertips: I'm teasing.

"No, but when you left, Becki said she'd be afraid in this part of town and that made me think maybe you just didn't want to be a bother to us."

"You're sweet. But I don't want you to miss anything you want to see."

"It's okay. You've seen one drag queen you've seen them all."

They stroll in a companionable silence. She wonders where Lillian is and why she and Jeff aren't together. A couple cross-dressed as Rhett and Scarlett pass by arm in arm, and Susan resists a playful urge to hook her arm through Jeff's and

skip down a yellow brick road. Where before the dimly lighted street offered ominous shadows, now that darkness softens angles, and the solitary figures hurrying past are looking not for victims but friends and lovers.

"I didn't know you were married."

It's not a question, so no answer is required, thank God, but even in replay she can't tell if he's disappointed or only surprised.

"Did you think I wasn't?"

"I guess. I mean you don't wear a ring."

"Curt and I have been, well--" she stumbles, decides to lie, "married for eight years." The lie bothers her because she doesn't know what motivated it. "I mean, we've been together that long. Well, seven years, actually."

"He seems like a neat guy. What's he do?"

"He works for an architectural firm. They make models of houses or buildings or whole shopping centers or malls."

"Huh! I always wondered who did those. Is there good money in that?"

"Well, it's like anything else. The man who owns the business seems to do very well."

"Are you guys going to have kids?"

"Oh! Well! Uh, sure! Sometime." Inwardly, she reels from the unexpected question. No overture such as *Hope you don't mind my asking* to suggest he's even aware of a breach in etiquette. Should she respond in kind: *You plan to stay a virgin forever? Are you and Lillian sexually active?*

"Why did you wonder?"

"I don't know. I just think you'd be a good mother, you know. You guys'd make good parents."

"Really? What makes you say that?"

"Well, you know, because you're nice. You're a good listener, and you care about people. And you know stuff."

"Know stuff?"

He sighs, exhausted, it seems, with the effort of making himself understood. She can tell he doesn't want to be grilled; he'd rather simply utter what's on his mind or convey it telepathically without having to explain himself; in this, he's very much like his peers.

"You know how to get along with people."

"Well, I sure appreciate it that you think so, Jeff! Speaking of that, are *you* getting along okay, now? Are you feeling a little more settled at school?"

"Yeah. I guess."

She hears a plea for follow-up questions, but they've stepped up onto her porch and the light beside the door blinds them both. She squints while reaching up to retrieve the key they leave on a narrow ledge over the door frame; she's aware while stretching up on tiptoe of how her form is extended in space to his gaze as he waits behind her. Though her body stocking goes from her neck to her ankles she feels as nude as when he sketched her at the lake.

The muffled *tatatata* of a police helicopter washes across the porch then a breeze lifts it away.

She goes first to the kitchen cabinet and gets two aspirin, then pours Jeff a glass of water.

"Here."

"Thanks."

He pinches the aspirin with his fingertips, sets them on his tongue, sluices down the tablets. A cool washcloth? Rub his head or neck? Her mom always massaged a headache away for her, and she did it for Nathan. Curt just squirms to be free.

"Would you like to lie down?"

"Oh! Oh, no, thanks, I'll be okay. Aspirin usually works."

"Do you have a lot of headaches?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Have you been to a doctor?"

"No."

"Why not?"

He shrugs, looks away. "Aw, I guess because it costs money."

Okay, she gets it now. He wants her to feel sorry for him, wants her to baby him. She does feel sympathy, sympathy for how the poor kid is having to work so hard in trying to manage Susan's sympathies, and she's at least three steps ahead of him. She'll tease him.

"I guess if aspirin usually works then a doctor's not necessary. My philosophy is to never go to a doctor unless someone else carries you there because they're afraid you're going to die on them."

"No kidding?"

She grins. "Yes kidding." They stand looking at one another, though his gaze has that wincing squint: that light's too bright! Just as it did that day at the lake, that look pricks her urge to make mischief. It's so rare that someone male is intimidated by her. No, abashed is a better word. Merely being a teacher gives her sufficient authority for intimidation; this is something else. And he has absolutely no idea how handsome he is. She sees that her wine glass sits empty on the drain board and feels a sudden need to fill it, does so, takes a slug of it. It was a cheap California cabernet, and when they had it for dinner it had an acidic twang. Now it seems very smooth.

"You want something to drink, Jeff?" Instantly, she pictures the bottle of vodka in the freezer, but she's got her wine glass in her hand. This kid rattles her; she wants to feel relaxed.

"Yeah, that'd be good."

"Why don't you go on out back and get something out of the cooler? I'll be right there."

"Oh, okay."

When she hears the door hiss on its runners, she takes a tumbler from a shelf, opens the freezer, pulls out the frosted bottle and pours herself two fingers of ice-cold vodka. She tosses it back in one gulp, grimacing with the cold shock against her teeth and palate, then she goes outside to the patio carrying the empty

glass. He's standing beside the picnic table with a diet Coke. She dips her hand into the freezing water of the cooler, extracts a Sprite, opens it and pours some into the tumbler, thinking this is kind of like high school except that she's just drunk her vodka straight and is belatedly using the soda as a chaser. She lifts her hip and eases onto the top of the picnic table, and Jeff sits very near her on the bench, his head level with her breasts. He has taken off his cape, the mask. His hair is tousled cutely. The shifting breeze brings them the sound of a band on Cedar Springs.

"Sounds like everybody's still having a big time."

"Yeah, I guess."

His *Yeah, I guess* sounds whiny, dog-sorrowful. She thinks he's trying to hint that he's feeling down, but he can't bring himself to explain what makes him blue, so the mournful sound is calculated to inspire her to dig the story out of him.

"I wonder how the others are getting along. I hope they're not getting into trouble." She coughs up a nervous chuckle. The vodka makes her head a little whirly.

"Aw, don't worry. They'll be okay."

"Did you lose your friend?" Maybe he and Lillian had a spat, she thinks. Maybe that's what's troubling him.

Jeff snorts. "Todd? Oh, I'm sure *he's* okay!"

Rather than amend her question, she says, "I've always thought Lillian was a really nice girl."

"Lillian? Oh!" Jeff laughs. "Hey, we weren't together! We just came at the same time. Besides, she thinks I'm slime."

"Jeff! What makes you say that?"

"I can tell. Girls like her and Cheryl and Becki at Carver think no-talent guys are loser slime."

"Oh, Jeff, it's just not true, believe me."

"You're a teacher, you don't know."

His burning look of injury stabs her. She says, coolly, "Jeff, I think I know them as well as you do, and I guarantee you they don't think you're slime. Besides, I meant that it's not true that you're a no-talent loser."

"I'm not?"

"No, of course not." The wonderful thing about really young men, thinks Susan, is that they have no idea they're not supposed to let their needs be so naked. By the time they reach Curt's age, they will be claiming that they're geniuses and winners but will secretly suspect otherwise and expect you to know that and reassure them, even though they don't officially need it and would be the last to admit they did, and if you give them reassurance they don't have to thank you because, after all, they didn't ask you for it. When you compliment them they act like you're trying to overfeed them, make them fat; Jeff, on the other hand, is a puppy eager to gulp down whatever tidbit she'll toss him.

"I think you're very talented, Jeff. I'm sure that given a little more time you're going to feel very much at home at school. You'll make friends soon, I just know it. You're charming and very attractive."

"I hope so, I mean I hope I can make friends at Carver. Todd is one of the few people from my old school who'll still have anything to do with me."

"Why is that?"

"Because I got kicked out and people there are embarrassed to be seen with me."

She looks down at his face. Seated on the bench with his shoulders against the table, he stretches his head back so that his face lies horizontal, eyes closed, as if he's floating in a pool of moonlight. She's sitting on the table top, her feet on the bench near his hips, and his left cheek is only inches from her right thigh. She knows she's supposed to ask what he did to get kicked out; he's offering her intimacy of a peculiar kind -- I'll tell you all about my troubles but only if you promise to feel sorry for me.

But that in itself stirs her compassion, that he feels such an extortion is required: it was like using a crutch to gain sympathy when you also couldn't walk without it.

"What happened?" she asks softly.

He's silent for a while, and she holds back the urge to coax him out.

"I'd hate for people at Carver to learn about it, you know?"

"Jeff, please don't feel you have to tell me this right now. I want to be here for you, I really do. And of course I believe you can trust me. But - " she pats him on the shoulder - "if you don't feel like saying anything, don't."

"Okay. Thanks."

They're silent for another long beat and she considers suggesting that they go back inside and busy themselves preparing snacks, making more burritos. She doesn't want to make him uncomfortable, but, then again, she also doesn't want to abruptly end an opportunity for him to talk if he needs to.

"Thing is," he says, "I stole a credit card from this girl's purse. Then I went shopping at Neiman's and bought a whole lot of just *shit*, you know? Just crap I didn't need or nobody else did, and I started giving it all away as presents, and it only took about a day to get caught. I mean, I wasn't even smart about it."

When he doesn't go on, she says, "Do you know why you did it?"

"Yeah, I think. I just wanted either to fit in or get kicked out. I couldn't stand being in between."

He bows his head, puts his face in his hands. He's very still, so she doesn't think he's crying, but his body language speaks deeply of his shame to her. She slides her hand across his nape and squeezes gently.

"Jeff, you *will* make it with us, I promise!"

"Please don't tell anybody," he murmurs between his fingers.

"No, of course I won't."

She wants to comfort him. Her hand lifts from his neck and moves across his back, patting him gently on his shoulder blade, as if saying *there there*. Her hand moves back to his neck, to his head; she gently strokes his tousled hair. She

pities him now the way you pity that one kid in a kindergarten class who clings to the teacher's side.

He bends his head back, drops his hands. His eyes are watery, and he smiles weakly.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"You're a really good friend."

His face is uptilted below hers, with the white moonlight playing in his long lashes, his mouth full-lipped. *Endymion*, she thinks. She bends toward him. An image pops to her mind of a plate with a cupcake on it. Kiss the hurt. What harm would it do? His own mother doesn't give him much, what he needs, an intelligent, sympathetic ear, an understanding of what it means to be young and in a state of yearning.

"How's your headache?"

Since she's perched on the table top and he's sitting on the bench below facing out, his shoulders almost touch her knee. It's easy to move her hand to his forehead, and when her palm settles on his cool skin, he lurches with surprise but quickly settles back to let her stroke his hair.

"Better."

"You feel a little warm," she says. She strokes his forehead for a moment. "You'll be okay, Jeff, I promise," she whispers. She can make the hurt better. A mother's kiss.

She hovers over his floating face and dips down to brush his lips with hers, gently, bestowing grace upon him like a blessing: *you will be fine, believe me, trust me*. Before she pulls away he strains up to secure the match, and someone moans. Her head swims; they are both paralyzed in place except for their faces, their lips, and his mouth is a tender well from which she thirstily draws something she didn't know she needed until this instant.