



## Ashes (an excerpt)

By Mike Errico

We went to a dark lounge that I knew played old soul music. She ordered two Guinnesses before I could get my coat off. I realized, as we settled on the couch, that I hadn't gotten a good look at her. She wore loose black clothes that hid her features and had pushed her long, straight blonde hair in towards her face. She situated herself away from the beam of overhead pin lights and crossed her hands in her lap.

The Guinness arrived. "Cheers," she said. Her voice was quiet and strong, like a forceful whisper.

After an uncomfortable moment, I tried to break the ice. "So, tell me what kind of art you do." She scanned my face to see if I was joking. I wasn't. I think that amused her.

"I use a lot of Catholic iconography," she said, pausing for effect. "Saints, the cross, large canvases that seek to illustrate the inversions of faith that keep sin alive."

She paused again. "You have a lot of vowels in your last name. Italian, right? Are you Catholic?"

"Um, I was born Catholic, yeah. I grew up in that faith. I was an altar boy as a kid..."

"An altar boy..."

"Yeah, crazy, right..."

She took a deep swallow of Guinness. "I have such a fetish for altar boys."

I scanned her face to see if she was joking. I didn't think she was.

I drained half my beer, and despite the direction the conversation was heading, continued an innocuous line of date questions. "So...you probably came from somewhere else to paint?"

Without looking up at me, she ran a long white finger along the rim of her pint glass. "I'm from Miami. Or, I was there for a while, working in a bar, primarily for drug dealers."

"Really?"

She ignored me. "There were doors by almost every table, primarily for exiting purposes. The girls used to trick for cocaine, but I never did. They used to go on expensive skiing trips out west with these sweaty little guys. They used to laugh at me for not coming along. '*Chica*, the coke is totally uncut, all you have to do is blow the guy. It takes like 30 seconds anyway. These boys are *tiny*."

"So, it was kind of a 'theme restaurant,' then?"

"Sure," she smiled. "You could certainly put it that way. If it helps."

"Did you have, like," I phrased it gently, "a...uniform?"

"Oh, you know, a little number, fishnets, a mini skirt, little vest, the whole nine."

I nodded. "Classic."

"I looked good in a thong."

"I'm sure."

Her voice lowered. "I lived with a guy named Ronaldo, a dealer, but also kind of a junkie. We had to move to Arizona for a few months, for several reasons, it's kind of complicated, but I'd never been in the desert before. I remember one day just standing there, and looking in all four directions, and it was just flat, nothingness. Horizon in every direction. I almost lost it, and I told him I was going to New York to be a painter, and he said he wanted to go to New Orleans. He was a great sculptor, actually, considered a genius in Latino circles. I told him if he went to New Orleans, he'd be dead in six months, and it was true. I heard he died of liver failure. I only found out because his parents, who hated him, sent me his ashes in a UPS box, which is sitting in my closet."

“Wait.” I kind of wanted to say it myself. “Your ex-boyfriend is in a UPS box in your closet?”

“Ronaldo is, yes.”

“Still?” I pictured dozens of women’s shoes cluttering the bottom of a closet and surrounding a solitary dented cube adorned with canceled stamps.

“It’s not glamorous, I guess, but I don’t know where to put him, and besides, I have a plan...”

“You do?”

“Yes. I had this idea that I would mix him into my paints and depict myself as Eve in the Garden of Eden...only this time with Adam sort of...conspicuously absent.”

“Absent, because...he’s in the paint?”

“Yeah, so he’s actually there, depicted in full, but in a different medium. Another dimension, kind of. It’s cool. I like.” She took a long, self-satisfied swallow of Guinness.

“So, it’s as if the paint itself is subject matter...”

“Totally,” she said. “I know people have worked with the dead before, but this has a kind of resonance. Because art is about the ‘story of the art’ now. Sad, but true. It needs the Enquirer angle to validate it. This piece has a story that combines textually with the piece itself. Everybody wins.”

“And Ronaldo?” I asked.

“Oh, Ronaldo would laugh. He was like that.”

Another round hit the table, and I thought things over. It was all there, if I wanted to pull the trigger. I could see the shoes, and look at the box. I wasn’t sick. I was just curious.

“I’ve never worked with this medium,” she continued.

“Human remains...”

“Yeah. I don’t know if I should tell you this, but,” she steeled herself with

fresh beer, “I’ve wanted to familiarize myself with the material, because, you know, there’s not that much of it, and I won’t be able to make many revisions. So, in order to understand its texture, as well as its power as metaphor, I’ve been eating it.”

“You’ve been eating Ronaldo?”

“Well, don’t be dramatic about it. I ate some of the ashes. Just to understand...I don’t know what really.” She paused. “Just to be closer to it. To the idea. To the whole thing.” She stopped.

“Closer to him,” I said.

“I don’t know...I guess so. It’s still sort of a recent breakup.”