

ALEX KANEVSKY

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Oil on Wood, 20 x 20 in



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

ABBEY HOOD

Madame Mustache

1. Madame Mustache

After the last game, after the last of the money Elanore had borrowed was gone, after she had gone home and changed into her best dress, after she had hawked her last good piece of paste jewelry, after she had gone first to one pharmacist and purchased a little bottle and then crossed the street to the other pharmacist and purchased another little bottle, after she had adjusted her hat using her reflection in the shop window, then she opened the first bottle and started to drink.

She drank and walked down the uneven boards of Main Street, across the muddy, horse-applied expanse. When someone called to her, a man and shouted “Hey, madam, want a glass of mother’s milk?” she tucked her bottle into her bell sleeve so he wouldn’t see and lifted her head. She stroked her mustache and snarled a smile across her teeth, raising her empty hand. Yes, she called, Yes I would.

“Crazy bird!”

She walked toward Bridgeport, though she had no destination in mind. Late enough to be quiet here except for the endless breaking of the stamp mills. She didn’t want to die within earshot of them, so she walked.

Past the last house to where a narrow path dwindled up the sage-crusted hill. Over one of these hills was a meadow and some scrubby willows, a brook that sometimes leaked clear water in the right weather. She wanted to be there. Quiet.

Quiet in a way the Paris of her memory had never been. All that noise there. Perhaps that’s why she had slept so well in the towns and not on the ranch that had, briefly, been hers.

Foolish. What did she know of cattle? What did she know of harvesting anything but men’s pockets?

She dropped one bottle, empty now, and opened the next with her teeth. Her head drifted. Heat mellowed through her though her breath rose in a fog toward the moon. It felt like summer even without a coat. Above her the stars rainbowed and quaked. They hummed at her. Had they always been so loud? Had stars always sung “Ave Maria” in her mother’s voice?

Her mother a second-tier opera girl, always in the chorus. She hadn’t the connections to do better. Nor the

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ambition, really. Not like Elanore, who had run to the Americas and never, before now, looked back. Had her mother, in her old age, developed the same pencil sketch of hair on her upper lip? She had no way of knowing. Her last memory of her mother: in a pale cotton dress in a cut fashionable the year before, a man in a tall hat next to her. Her mother's bright, rouged lips contorted, "*au revoir, ma petite puce,*" her gloved hand a bird fighting its jesses.

At the top of the hill she could see the moon singing above her, joining a duet with the stars. It spotlighted the golden meadow cupped in the shallow depression between the hills and she went down into it. She could no longer hear the mills or the restless town behind her. She settled into the grass and lay her head back on a stone she found there. The moon and stars went silent briefly and there was no sound, not even crickets, which was too bad. She had hoped this meadow would remind her of rolling grass far away. The little house that had been hers. The momentary and fleeting fulfillment of a surprising dream.

She tilted the bottle against her lips, didn't mind that it dribbled down her cheeks. The moon winked at her. Two stars waltzed around it and Elanore was glad she had killed her husband. Damn glad. So vividly happy that she laughed and startled the dancing stars to stillness. She'd a lot to regret in her life, but riding him down and giving him one right between the eyes, that she didn't regret one bit. She could picture him still, crouched by his fire, horse hobbled nearby and cropping the prairie. "Now, Elly," he'd

said, "you don't mean to use that shotgun." She'd pulled the trigger before he could ask her to sit a spell. Help him make dinner. Which he would have done. She regretted pulling the trigger too fast. She should have found out where the money was first.

She could have done that. She could have sat down pretty as you please and helped him make supper. Let him have a few swills, gotten him soused. Waited for him to spill where her money was. Let him fall asleep, head on his saddle and put the muzzle to his sleeping cheek and pulled hard.

She'd lost everything to his silver smile. No way to hire the hands. No funds for even a couple head of cattle. It had been too much to ask.

The moon seemed to think not. It leaned down toward her. It pressed its stony lips to her cheek. It took her hand in its, lifted her to her feet and led her across the wide, rolling hills.

2. Shepherds

It's the dogs that find her. The pair of them darting into the meadow ahead of their charges. They approach, hackles up and heads low and snarling. One of them lunges and grabs a mouth of skirt. The other barks from a safer distance.

The sheep come over the hill, the two shepherds following behind. One sits in the wagon that passes for home, the other sits on a horse. The sheep divide as they flow into the field. The grass is brittle with frost and has only the memory of green left in it. Soon it'll be time to drive the sheep out of the mountains and down into the valley to wait winter out.

"Damn dogs." The one on horseback spurs his horse forward and slips from the saddle, landing a kick to one of the dog's bellies. It yelps and backs away, the other following it.

He bends down, touches the woman's shoulder. "Ma'am?" He does not yet recognize her.

3. The Undertaker

One shepherd stood guard over the body while the other rode fast into town and went straight to the sheriff, who went straight to the coroner, who sent the shepherd to fetch

the undertaker because he was not going out at this god-awful hour to haul some dead whore out of a field. The undertaker, Henry Ward, his breath carrying the story of his night, asked the shepherd to hitch his horse while he dressed.

The shepherd led him to where she was being guarded against the dogs. Her head lay on a stone, one arm was crooked across her stomach, like she'd just lay down to look at the clouds.

"Madame Moustache in repose," he'd said.

"*Qué?*" The shepherd who had been guarding her from the dogs looked confused. The sheep huddled nervously all together, bleating.

"Don't mind his ignorant ass," said the other.

Ward draped a shroud over her, had the other help him lift her into the wagon. She was not a thin woman. He found the small blue glass bottle in the grass and pocketed it. He gave the shepherds two dollars and the last of his pocket tobacco.

"Couldn't believe when I saw," said one shepherd. "Played against her two weeks ago. Took me for all I had, didn't she?"

"*Si,*" the other replied.

Ward tipped his hat to them and rattled the reins at the horses.

Early September and in the leaking dawn Ward could see the horses' breath clearly as they hauled against their harness, heads lowered. These Sierra mornings were nothing like the gentle English dawns of his childhood. No robins, or cows, or deep green fields. Instead the growing sound of the stamp mills, the start of the morning winds. A shrill chitter as finches burst from the sage ahead of his horses. In another hour or so even the groaning mills would be drowned out as the racket of construction began its daily race to beat the threatening winter. His own house just completed and he'd had three offers to sell. Beds and rooms were hard to come by. Saloons seemed to be half boarding house, their customers kicking their legs up on the tables and drifting to sleep in the early morning hours. Sleeping outside, even in summer, could be deadly. It was a rare morning that didn't have frost.

He drove the wagon round the back of his parlor and carried her in. Christ she was heavy, her chilled corpse stiff with fading rigor mortis. He laid her out on the cooling

boards, made sure the shroud was pulled discretely, the curtains still closed until the coroner showed. He put the horses and wagon away. Built a fire in the front parlor stove and put a kettle on. Pulled the curtains back and tied them, unlocked the door. Out of habit he knocked the bell above the door with his palm.

Peterson ambled in with his blue tin coffee cup. He pulled the shroud back, unbuttoned the pearls at her throat, pushed her head one way and another. Examined her pale blue fingers, the cracked, dry tips of them. He pulled off one of her boots and a stocking, examined the bloated ankle.

"Sure as hell don't look like she got beat in." He noted this in the little journal he carried; he'd have to submit a formal report. "Goddamn cold last night. Could have gotten drunk? Lost her way? Froze to death?"

"I found this with her." Ward gave him the small blue bottle.

Peterson lifted it to his nose, though he didn't need to. He shook his head. "Sure it was hers?"

"I am."

"Suicide, then, damn." He slapped his hand against the corpse's meaty shoulder. "The Grand Madame is dead. Won't the papers be happy?"

"What'll I do with her?"

"Let her lie for now. No doubt the red street girls will want to see her properly handled. They done it before for their kind."

4. The Ladies Auxiliary

Amelia Ellis heard it from the butcher who heard it from the vaquero who heard it from the shepherd who had found the body that Madame Mustache was dead. She went immediately to June Dallas's to tell her the news and then the two of them went to Celia Brand's, which was, in their opinion, all the important people in the Bodie Ladies Auxiliary & Sewing Circle.

All Celia could say was, Are you sure?

Amelia said that she was and wasn't this an opportunity for their fair camp? A famous figure dead. They should see to it that she would be properly and respectfully buried. Maybe they could get a headline in the San Francisco papers. Something small, she said. Simple. They could get

the pastor to deliver a sermon on the dangers of drink and gambling. Make a plea to the honorable men of the town not to allow such women to lead them all astray.

Celia said that she didn't think the pastor would like seeing the likes of Madame buried in the Christian cemetery as she had heard that Madame had not always depended solely on her luck at cards to make her way.

But Amelia wouldn't hear of it. Madame had never done those things here, in Bodie. She was a new woman after she married. She had repented. It was demon alcohol, she insisted, she said they would make them believe it. They'd make a martyr of their sister.

Madame wouldn't begrudge them it now that she was dead, after all.

5. The News

The Bodie Morning News, Sept 9, 1879

A Suicide—Yesterday morning a shepherd, while in pursuit of his avocation, discovered the dead body of a woman lying about one hundred yards from the Bridgeport road, a mile from town. Her head rested on a stone, and the appearance of the body indicated that death was the result of natural causes. Ex officio Coroner Justice Peterson was at once notified, and he dispatched a wagon to that place in charge of H. Ward, who brought the body to the undertaking rooms. Deceased was named Elanore Dumont and was recognized as the woman who had been engaged in dealing a twenty-one game in the Magnolia saloon. Her death evidently occurred from an overdose of morphine, an empty bottle having the peculiar smell of that drug, being found beside the body. . . . The history connected with the unfortunate suicide is but a repetition of that of many others who have followed the life of a female gambler, with the exception perhaps that the subject of this item bore a character for virtue possessed by few in her line. To the goodhearted women of the town must we accord praise for their accustomed kindness in doing all in their power to prepare the unfortunate woman's body for burial.

6. The Gentleman

You're not going to let those hens bury our Elly under somber, moral flags, are you, sir? She deserves better than that!

The greatest lady west of ole Miss! A proper French lady and oh, such a girl as we will never meet again here, right boys? You can't let those women make a dull morality out of our Elly!

No! You must give her a proper burial. A good New Orleans burial. We'll front, won't we boys? Here, here! Jack says he's a friend who could bring over a white hearse. Imagine that, eh? I bet she'd never have expected it, that she'd go to her final rest in a proper white carriage with a matched pair. The union band has already offered to strike up some proper tunes. We could have a parade. I saw such a thing once, when I was in the South (no, I was not no carpetbagger, damn you, John Folk!). People actually danced to the grave. Like they knew whoever was dead was going to a place much better, and we know our Elly will go to a place much better, don't we?

C'mon lads, throw into the hat. C'mon Mayor, sir, say you'll throw us your support. Let's bury our girl proper.

7. A Moment of Grace

Late at night Henry Ward welcomes Katherine O'Daniels into his undertaking rooms. She enters by the back door. She is dressed almost somberly, in a deep purple velvet. Ward has pulled the curtains shut and put up the privacy screens. He takes Kitty's hands, which feel small and cold even through her gloves, and leads her into the room. Elanore Dumont is already laid in her coffin. The lid of it stands sentry against a wall. Ward has oiled the wood to a high shine and has managed, somehow, to give a little life to the dead woman's face.

Kitty leans into the coffin and kisses Elanore's forehead and then, hesitantly, her lips. There is the faintest hint of perfume beneath the fumes of the preservatives Ward has replaced her blood with. Kitty adjusts the fall of lace down the front of Elanore's dress. Elle's favorite paste necklace glitters on her neck and Kitty realizes that, once Elle goes into the ground, she will have nothing but ghosts to remember her by. She slips her fingers behind Elle's neck and removes the necklace and lifts it to her cheek, holding it there until it grows warm.

"Why?" She asks Ward. The only person she can ask. "Why didn't she ask me for help?"

"Sometimes there isn't any help to ask for," Ward says.

8. The Sermon

"Let us now remember our fallen sister. Let us now think of her sad state. Let us bow our heads and pray, oh Lord forgive our sister her many sins. Oh Lord, forgive the world which leads the good from the narrow and rocky path of righteousness. Oh Lord, forgive the woman Dumont her trespasses. Oh Lord, have mercy on her soul as you will on our soul. Oh Lord, forgive her her gambling. Oh Lord, forgive her her many falls. Oh Lord, give her comfort and peace. Oh Lord, let her drink from the cup of life. Amen."

9. The Wake

A rare sight at the Blue Sparrow: the gambling tables unmanned and black draped except for a single faro table and a single vingt-et-un table. Both had a multitude of glasses poured and untouched. All the girls sat in the parlor dressed in the darkest clothes they owned. Almost none of them owned black, because Kate felt that black was unbecoming on a working girl. Sent the wrong message to any johns who came through the door. Made them think too much of morals.

She sat in what the other girls called the Queen's Chair because it had a higher back and stood higher than the others in the room. The girls were all soused and at loose ends, gathered around Kate who, for once, drank straight from the bottle. No airs today from her.

"Let me tell you something those natty old women would never say in their damn eulogies. Let me tell you what they missed."

The girls wobbled in closer. They'd been forced to stay as far from the funeral as possible, exiled as per the usual.

"One night in Bisbee some boys were getting into an argument at Madame's place. I forget what it was they were yelling about, but hands were touching pistols, I'll tell you. The place was clearing out quick, because everyone was sure there'd be shots before long. Madame, she sees that, right? It's bad for business, she knows! These boys bluffing at each other are frightening off the paying customers! So she, my hand to the Lord this is the truth, she stands up, she dusts her skirts off. She excuses herself from the table she's been working. She walks in between the two boys, all their friends shouting and raising fists. She's like a goddamn angel, I tell you. She don't even raise her voice.

Don't even raise her goddamn voice. She stands in between them and she says, "Now, boys, you should be acting like ze gentleman! Non of zis nonseence bluster and fight. Let us get you zome drinks!"

"And by God if everyone ain't just struck speechless by this little woman with her accent and her dark hair and if they don't fall all over themselves to apologize to the lady. If they don't end up buying *her* the drinks."

Kate took a swig off the bottle. Coughed. "By God, that's who Madame was. She'd walk right into the fire and it wouldn't dare to burn her."

10. The Grave

A single plank of carved pine draped with ribbons and posies from the day's funeral is what marks the grave. The soil is a hump of uneven clods. The make-do stage hasn't yet been cleared. It was a Sunday, the stamps shut down for the day and nearly everyone in town had gathered to watch the procession and to follow it up the hill to hear the speeches. Now they shouted and fought and drank and gambled and dreamed loudly below. If Elanore wished she could rise up and drift among them, sliding from gambling house to dance hall to saloon. She could see the drinks poured in honor of her, taste the memory of them as they were tossed down throats singing her praises. She could watch as they began to forget why they were drinking.

All but one, all but one.

Abbey Hood a graduate of Chatham University and lives in the Mojave desert. This is her first fiction publication..