

Homicide: The Game

Presents

Painseeker

"Invocation and Introduction"

by Lance Wagner

Raychel. I invoke the name and drink three shots of tequila in remembrance. That was her drink. A shot of Cuervo Gold with two dashes of Tabasco sauce. I don't share her passion for it, but sometimes when I think of her I can't help reaching for a bottle.

I miss her. It's been 164 days since I heard she was murdered. Guess I could have said it's been over five months, but measuring in days seems to dull the length of time. Maybe if I can somehow make time slow down I can turn it backward, too. And then she never died.

Laura is right about me. Sometimes I can be truly pathetic. So I toss back another shot and try to regroup my thoughts.

I'm not what most people would call a people person. I guess that's part of why I became an artist. Some deep seeded need to feed the anti-social baby screaming to get out. I don't make excuses for it. That's my job. So it came as a great shock to find myself in late 1996 as the paternal face of a loosely structured artistic support group called The Bleeders. It came about in a surprisingly inconspicuous way.

I love to wander the streets at night when I have no real ideas floating in my head. I use it to re-energize. I dress in black (I'm sure that comes to no one's great surprise) and lurk about my area. We have a particularly harsh strip of beer-and-a-shot bars which I like to lurk. It's a no-shit neighborhood. Everyone walks head down, hands in pockets, and eyes on pavement. The hotel (in the middle of the action) is notorious for two things: hourly rates and trick rolls. Yes, believe it or not, prostitutes infest the area as well (and I'll take this opportunity to soil my own character to say that I have at times required their services). This strip of the city is what I feel is most real about the world in general, and it's not nice.

It was here that I found Safehaven, a new bar on the block (revamped, really). I fell for the name, particularly in that location. The image of a Titanic life preserver floating among the dead floated through my head. I liked it. I went inside, and found myself almost alone. There was me and the owner.

That was how I met Laura Douglass.

In a world obsessed with snap judgments and labels, Laura is easy to peg. Laura is rich. Everyone who knows her knows it. Except Laura. To her, Laura is not rich. Laura is a painter. While many people who have seen her paintings would disagree, in a way she is correct. Laura sees things as a painter would. Not that she has an eye for art (she doesn't). Instead, Laura's focus in life is not the pursuit of money; therefore, she is not rich. Her pursuit is anything that will get her paintings more exposure. So after a series of failed attempts to use her family's influence to receive showings at any of the numerous galleries to which her parents had donated, Laura decided to go the underground route.

In a combination of two personal pastimes, she convinced her parents to let her purchase the bar, which she renamed and rebuilt into Safehaven. She neglected to inform her parents of its location or the fact that the previous owner had died in a dispute over a bar tab. Ordinarily this would have given her pause before purchasing the bar; however, she dismissed it quickly as she had no intention of accosting customers about their bar tabs. Instead she intended to accost customers with her paintings.

I sat as politely as possible through an extended retrospective of her paintings. Having prepared for lurking that evening, I was felt surprisingly comfortable talking to her. Apparently I was the only one, as no other customers stayed for longer than five minutes.

Around the end of the evening and the bottom of the bottle, Laura told me about her dream for Safehaven. She wanted to build an artistic support community centered at the bar. There would be weekly open shows for painters, poets, writers, musical acts, or anyone who felt like they had something to contribute to the public. She already had a name for it: The Bleeders. The name came from her belief that truth and artistic

abilities came from a similar place deep inside the artist. Therefore, an artist who is committed to his or her art could symbolically bleed the truth through his or her work.

I found it immediately sentimental, naive, and beautiful. I joined her artistic community of one on the spot.

It was an ideal arrangement. She owned the bar and I recruited artists. For a person who prides himself as a loner and a lurker, I have extensive connections among artists. I had great fortune in convincing many of my friends to swing by on Saturday for the first real meeting of The Bleeders. I would have been proud of myself, but inviting artists to a bar with an open forum where they will have an opportunity to be stars for a few minutes is really nothing to be proud of.

To no great surprise, The Bleeders became Laura's dream community in a matter of weeks. And I was near the center. For months, The Bleeders percolated, building up steam. No one in the group went on to any success due to The Bleeders. We were happy. So what if no one else thought we were talented?

But in August of 1997 I met Raychel Vanderhoff and everything changed.