

Avenging Allison

"The truth is rarely pure, and never simple." —Oscar Wilde

By Tom Bender

Chapter 1

On a warm and sunny Saturday afternoon in April of 1987 I went to an art show at the Stanton University Art Center in southern Illinois. The exhibit was of erotic photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe. There'd been a big flap about it. In fact, County Commissioners had tried to shut it down for what they called "a pornographic assault on community values." But it hadn't closed. Seven of the photos got cordoned off, and visitors were warned that these seven were particularly offensive, and that several others were also of "flagrant sexual impropriety."

Mapplethorpe's work, while interesting to some art enthusiasts, was offensive to a lot of southern Illinois people. Otherwise there wouldn't have been such a flap. And two of the offending photos were of children. But at any rate, bottom line, the commissioners' fury didn't prevail, and people who wished to do so got to see what most would consider perversions. So, for some people it was like a girlie show at a carnival, with bold men, and women as well, peeping in. Titillating, I think the word is.

Lee Ann Thomas, my boss on the state desk at The Stanton Post-Times, was with me at the show. Like me, she was curious to see what the excitement was all about. It was the final weekend for the show, so if you wanted to see it, it was that day, or Sunday, or never.

Lee Ann and I got separated, of course; when you go to an art exhibit it's to each his own. But at one point I spotted her and watched as she paused in front of one of the photographs. She cocked her head at it, sort of like a sparrow, then scrutinized the identification placard. I got close to her and asked her what she made of the shot. The photograph she was looking at, she finally said, was "homoerotic and sadomasochistic."

I considered the picture. It showed—well, I'm not going to say what it showed. "Is that your considered opinion?" I said.

"No. I read it on the card there."

"Are you aroused?"

I got her New York City smile. Although we were working for a newspaper in flyover country—near the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois—she kept her New York City attitude close at hand.

"What do you think this is about?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "Besides sex, you mean? Rebellion? I mean, this guy isn't going along with the crowd."

"I would agree, yes," she said. "A different perspective, whether we want to consider it or not. Integrity."

"Integrity?"

"I think so," she said. "Art has to be honest, ethical, don't you think? Otherwise it's just wallpaper. Or worse—trying to sell you something, even deceiving you. Think about Nazi art, Soviet art—propaganda, getting people with the program. On the other hand, this stuff tells the truth, at least as this artist sees it. You might not like what interests him, but he isn't lying to you about it."

"Art's usually ahead of me," I said.

"That's the point, isn't it? There's a new mood in this country, don't you think? We're going to a new place and we don't know where it is. Art is one of the road signs."

I glanced sidelong at her. We were just having a peek at some stuff at a show in the art center, and here she was, giving me a larger perspective. The downside was that sometimes when she got intense about things it signaled the onset of one of her depressive episodes. I always watched for those. It seemed to me she might be getting into one now.

"I never got a lot out of the soup cans," I said.

She smiled at that, and I relaxed a little.

We chose not to walk through the cordoned-off exhibit. I just wasn't ready to go there, and she wasn't, either. We strolled to the exit, her heels clicking on the parquet floor.

Bright sunshine—and one, lone picketer, who hadn't been present earlier—greeted us as we went out through the glass doors. His placard on a stick said "Repent This Abomination." He was discussing his position with another man. We overheard him saying, "No, I have certainly *not* been in there." We moved along.

We stopped further on along the walkway to take in nature's own artistic offerings. Down in the ravine to the east the redbuds were in blossom—tiny cranberry-colored beads strung along slender crooked limbs. The dogwoods were on display too—white and pink flowers that always excited me—a sign of spring. But fragile. Dogwood blossoms don't last very long.

For all the natural beauty around us, I was suddenly so focused on Lee Ann I was mute, as if I'd just seen her for the first time. Love comes upon us like that, does it not? We are caught by a turn of the head, a look in the eye, a touch. Vermeer knew this. His people, such as the girl

in the turban, her earring gleaming, surprise us. So it was with me, at this moment, with Lee Ann.

We stopped at a little café with tables on the sidewalk and got some wine. Lots of people—college kids, couples, elderly people, together and alone, people with various kinds of dogs, one guy shouldering a talkative parrot—went past our table. It was warm, maybe 65 degrees. I shifted in my chair to fit better, and also to get the light out of my eyes.

“You remember a character named Connie Rivers?” Lee Ann said.

“Huh?”

“In *The Grapes of Wrath*, they’re on the road, it’s hard times, and this boy, Connie Rivers, the father of Rose of Sharon’s new baby, is with them. One day Connie Rivers is gone. Just gone. Steinbeck never mentions him again. Never. In the entire book. After the boy disappears Rose of Sharon is never the same.”

“Steinbeck? I don’t recall the scene,” I said. Lee Ann had lost her husband like that, less than a year back, a deep razor cut to her heart.

“Did you find that stuff sexy?” I said.

“Did you?” she said.

“Well, maybe. But I think about sex all the time anyway.”

“You do.” When she smiled her look was acerbic, that slight twist to the side of her mouth. Her lips were just a tad thin, suggesting she might bite, rather than suck, your lips.

We sipped our wine.

“I’m glad we went,” she said.

“Because?”

“Well,” she said, drawing it out, like maybe she didn’t want to tell me, “I’ve been trying to get a fix on where I am. The Midwest. The South. Wherever it is. Seeing all those people in there made me feel good. Whether they ultimately liked it or not, they were deciding for themselves. To my mind, that tops the community values alleged by a few powerful people.” She frowned. Then she said, “I see they’re doing Salvador Dalí in May. Won’t that be fun?”

She was assessing life in Stanton, Illinois, a lifetime away from New York City. When she first arrived, she believed all there was west of the Hudson was sagebrush. But I had hope; there were surprises for her like the art center.

We gave the sun and mood fifteen lazy minutes, watching the passing people.

I looked around for a waitress.

“They’re happy to greet you, you know,” she said, “but they don’t want to see you go. That’s why you never get the check. It has to do with their social side.”

My turn to smile.

The waitress came, a college girl, childish and cheerful, with some hope about the tip, but not too worried about it either. Part of the education provided to me by my two daughters was to tip liberally. Mallory had worked, and Allison had filled in from time to time, at a luncheon place, Chierney's. Allison was just 15, under-age, when she started, but she got away with it. “These girls don’t make that much money,” Mallory had said to me once. “Sometimes they have a baby at home.”

The two girls were quite different from each other, Mallory diminutive, physical, strong, a field hockey player; Allison taller, less physical but self-possessed, assured. A photo I had posted on my refrigerator caught them in something of a role reversal, Mallory riding piggyback on her sister, the two of them joyful, clowning around. The image flashed through my mind.

Lee Ann and I headed back to the office, a twenty-minute walk in the cooling day, and climbed the rickety stairs to the second floor of the Post-Times building. Lee Ann went to her desk and I to mine. I started opening mail from stringers, measuring clippings.

Stringers clipped and saved their stories that we printed, and pasted their clips in a string. About once a month they sent us the strings and we paid by the column-inch. We had about forty of these people on contract, writing up social news and calling in anything that seemed important to them. One of the stringers appeared to me to have set some sort of one-month write-up record, with no less than forty-four column inches on club meetings. Occasionally we got tips on real news from stringers. Then we went after stories ourselves. Lately there hadn't been much of that.

“Should I do a column on Mapplethorpe?” I asked.

Lee Ann frowned. “It's closing. Besides, Harris wrote something.”

“I missed it.”

“I'm sure you did.” She gave me the New York glance, meaning she thought I should lighten up about Franklin Harris. Not likely; for a while, Harris had been my boss, and I'd concluded he was a smug and self-righteous jerk.

On the first Saturday in May, about a month after Lee Ann and I went to the Mapplethorpe show, a ten-year-old boy in a town at the extreme south end of our circulation area, a little burg called Everest, saw something falling in the sky—or said he did. The boy's name was Dougie Perkins and he had a reputation for making things up. He turned to his buddy and pointed to where he'd seen it. It was gone. His buddy didn't believe him. *A story like that, well. Sort of like a flying saucer. And from Dougie Perkins.*

So the whole thing should have died right there. Except. In one of those moments when kids talk about things they've been thinking about, in bed, tucked in for the night, before falling asleep, the boy insists to his big brother that his story is true. Because his brother hears this in a sort of confessional bedtime moment, he thinks about it. Then, casually, a day or so later, the big brother tries it out on a pal. Like he doesn't believe it of course, but what does his pal think? That's the way of big brothers. They pay attention, even when they don't let on that they do. Then they take your story to court, trying it out on a pal of their own.

That's how I got downwind of the story—not from the big brother but from a pal of *his*, a 16-year-old high school junior named Daniel Smart. Daniel was having a Coke with me in a café in a small town called Connerville. The two towns, Everest and Connerville, happen to be very close to each other on the north edge of the Shawnee National Forest—about a forty-five-minute drive south from my office in Stanton.

It was a week after the little boy had his vision. I had driven down to Connerville to interview Daniel to be our stringer in the area, replacing the present stringer, a woman fairly well connected in town but who hadn't seemed up to the job. All we got from her was Eastern Star kinds of stuff. She didn't want to dig and she certainly didn't want to ruffle feathers. The Post-

Times was trying to build circulation. To build circulation you have to report interesting local news, and sometimes reporting it ruffles feathers. Lee Ann had decided to replace the woman. Thus my mission to consider Daniel.

Daniel was in line to be editor of his high school paper beginning in the fall. He'd done some sports reporting for us—calling in the scores of games, that kind of stuff—which was why I'd looked him up.

“So, Daniel, are you interested in being a stringer?”

“Sure. But I may be working at the lumber yard too. I got a job there for the summer. Part-time, mostly Saturdays.”

“Good for you. It shouldn't be much of a problem, not for what I need from you. What will you be doing there?”

“I'll just sort of be in training— out in the yard.”

We sipped our drinks.

“Will you feel comfortable asking people questions, checking things out?”

He thought about it. “I do that for the school paper.”

“Doing it with an adult might seem a little—ah—pushy.”

He shrugged. “I ask questions in class. My teachers are okay with it.”

I smiled. “Good.”

“I'd be replacing Mrs. Penny?” he asked. “She doesn't want the job anymore?”

“We've decided to terminate that relationship, Daniel.”

“What does that mean, Mr. Morrison?”

I liked his question; his interest in seeking clarification, getting to the bottom of things, suggested he'd be a pretty good stringer. “It means we let her go and she didn't take it too hard.”

He appeared satisfied.

“Anything going on around here that I might not know about? Right now, I mean?”

He considered. “I don’t think so, but I don’t know for sure. I’m gonna figure out a kind of beat, you know? Where I check on things?”

“Good,” I said. “But remember, we can only pay you for what we use.” You manage a news beat like cops manage theirs—get around to see people and places and check things out. Having a beat seemed like a lot of work for what we paid. But I wasn’t going to discourage Daniel at this point because I thought he was a good prospect for us.

We fooled with our drinks.

“I did hear a kind of weird story,” he said. “Like maybe for your column?”

I guessed from his referring to the column that his family took the Post-Times, which was good. Not a lot of people around Connerville and Everest took the paper, which was why we were trying to find a better stringer than Mrs. Penny.

I filled my column, *Outtakes*, with stuff I picked up here and there that didn’t qualify as news but that readers might enjoy. For example, I stood up for a knife thrower one time—an “impalement artist,” as he called himself, although I’d hoped that wouldn’t happen in my case—and wrote a column about the experience.

“What’s the story?” I said.

“I have a friend, Randy Perkins? He lives over toward Everest. His little brother was down at Green Lake and saw something falling out of the sky. At least that’s what he told Randy. He—his little brother, I mean—said it looked like a person.”

“Huh. You’re talking about a lake near here?” Several small lakes dotted the Shawnee National Forest area south of Connerville, but I'd never paid attention to exactly where they were.

“Yeah. It’s a couple of miles south.” Daniel smiled for the first time. “I’m not swearing to this story, you know.”

“How old is Randy’s little brother?”

“Ten, I guess.”

“He was down there swimming? What?”

“I don’t know. There’s a little park in there.”

“With his parents? A picnic or something?”

“No. Just this buddy of his.”

“Pretty young to be going to a lake in the Shawnee without his parents,” I said.

“You see kids that age. It’s only a half hour or so on your bike. From Everest or from here, either. A lot of kids go down there.

I could hear Lee Ann: *Little kids alone in that forest?*

“When was this?” I said.

“Last Saturday.”

“Does his brother believe the story?”

Daniel smiled. “Randy thinks his little brother is, ah—” He searched for a word.

“Fanciful?”

“Yeah, like that.”

I shrugged. “Well, thanks for telling me. You never know. Sometimes the darnedest stories turn out to be true.”

Daniel and I finished our drinks. I gave him a one-page contract to read, sign, get one of his parents to sign, and mail back to me.

As I drove back to Stanton I thought about the little boy's story. A person falling? How much trouble would it be, really, for me to go down there and check it out? As matters stood, it was just a story a kid told his brother, and his brother told Daniel. But it might reach the ears of the sheriff. Rumors and tall tales get around, especially in small towns. So I'd be wise to be quick about it.

When I got to my little rental unit, where I'd been living since my wife Cindy and I separated, I phoned Daniel to see if he and his family were going to be okay with the contract. His dad had co-signed, he said. I asked him if he could get his buddy Randy Perkins to bring his little brother down to the lake so I could get the story firsthand and then have a little help from the three of them looking around.

"You think it's a good story?" Daniel asked.

"Intriguing, I have to say."

"You want me and Randy to just go look around?"

"Nah. I'll come down." It was too early in our new relationship for me to send Daniel off on an errand like that.

"When?"

"How about tomorrow afternoon?" I said. That would be Sunday. My two daughters lived with their mother. They hung out with me every other weekend. This wasn't my weekend. So I had nothing better to do.

"I'll call you after supper," Daniel said.

“Good deal.”

Daniel called at six o’clock. We were to meet Randy and his little brother Dougie around two o’clock Sunday at the lake. He told me a way to get in there.

About five minutes after Daniel hung up I got another phone call.

“Morrison,” I said.

“Yes. I believe you’re planning to meet my ten-year-old son tomorrow down at Green Lake?”

“To whom am I speaking?”

“Well, that would be obvious, don’t you think? My name is Raymond Perkins.”

Uh oh. “Yes, Mr. Perkins, that’s true. I’m a reporter with the Post-Times. Our new stringer, Daniel Smart, and—ah—I guess—ah—your sons Randy and Dougie, are meeting me there at two o’clock. We’re checking out Dougie’s story, you know, about maybe seeing something falling — ah—around there?” Said like this, by one adult to another, it sounded stupid.

“How old are you, Morrison?”

Not too many months before, when I’d been digging into a story about a dead boy, I’d been through a similar inquisition, that time at the hands of a guy who was putting pins in a county map to keep track of people he thought were perverts. Long story. Lucky for me, I was safely out of that picture. That was another time. But now this. Abuse of children was a hot topic in America these days. When I was a kid, one summer my brother Bob and I hitchhiked out to Yellowstone Park and got jobs. My Aunt Bessie and Uncle George, with whom we lived, didn’t think a thing of it. Neither did Bob and I. Lots of people gave us rides when we stuck out our thumbs. We had a great time out there and then hitchhiked home. Maybe we should have been

worried; it never crossed our minds. But that was another time—a time of innocence in America, as some people said.

“I appreciate your concern, Mr. Perkins,” I said, “but let me ask *you* a question. Do you believe Dougie’s story or do you think he made it up?”

“What business is that of yours?”

“I’m a newspaper reporter, Mr. Perkins. “I’m just trying to find things out.”

Chapter 3

After hearing from Mr. Perkins I drove—how to say, resolutely—the four miles or so from my little rental unit to May Street in Stanton, where the Post-Times building was located, parked in the office lot, and walked about a block to a little hamburger joint, The Press Club.

The dingy, long, narrow café, redolent of frying burgers, tried to replicate the mood of newspaper hangouts long gone. To the left as you walked in was the bar, backed by a mirror doubling the number of bottles. To the right was a long row of booths, reminding me of a Disney tunnel ride. I waved at Arnold, tending bar, and he returned the salute.

Taking off my jacket, I shook off a few raindrops, tossed it before me onto a bench, and slid in across from Lee Ann. This being Saturday night, we'd agreed to meet for a bite to eat.

She smiled. That smile said she was suspicious of everything and everyone, and had no patience with people she thought to be fools. Besides the NYC attitude, she had an urban disdain for the outdoors. She was uncomfortable with nature—that is to say, anything off the pavement. She saw me as her protector against southern Illinois. Which of course is where she'd wound up.

“You're late.”

“Yep.”

I liked her ways as a boss, and accepted her attitude and biases as part of the package. For two months now we'd been the two-person state desk team at the Post-Times, she in charge, me the staff. Her best management attributes were her brains, her wit, and her wide gaze.

I was quite different: quickly and completely focused. Throw a stick and I'd chase it, as one of my army buddies once observed.

Our different styles, she with the wide gaze and I with the quick focus, helped explain why Lee Ann was the state editor and I worked for her. Other reasons included her relative youth, her charm, and her looks. Our publisher had a thing for her, I was certain.

"You're late."

"What have you been up to?" I said.

"Just before I came over here I had an interesting exchange with our new society editor," she said.

"Oh?"

"We were the last two people in the office. She stood up to get out of there, looked my way, and said I had 'the most interesting aura.' That's what she said, '*aura*.' Then, while I was trying to figure out what she meant, she changed the subject. 'Oh, the literacy project,' she said, like she was remembering something, or somewhere she was supposed to be. 'Would you get the lights?' With that, she gathered up her stuff, jumped up, went to the wall, swept down every switch in the panel, and ran down the stairs. There I sat in the dark, thinking how weird."

"Strange indeed," I said.

Lee Ann grinned. "Ditsy. But I don't get the aura thing." With her index finger she traced a halo in the air around her head.

"An aura is not a halo," I said.

"No?" I got the glance.

"There was a guy named Edgar Cayce," I said. "You know that name?"

She shook her head.

"He was a healer and a mystic. According to people who follow him, we have some sort of energy field around us. It glows. They claim they can see this glow—people's auras."

"People *follow* him? Where did you hear that?"

"I did some work at the naval station in Norfolk. It's about twenty miles from Virginia Beach, where the Edgar Cayce A.R.E. is located. Cayce people call it 'the Beach.' They have some sort of psychic research going on there. I've driven past the building."

"A.R.E.?"

"Association for Research and Enlightenment."

"Psychic research?"

"That's what they say."

"The Navy?"

I laughed. "No, no. Well, now you mention it, who knows? But what's this 'literacy project'?"

"I have no idea."

Given Lee Ann's wide gaze, she was perhaps wondering why I, an army guy, had been at a navy facility and knew about Edgar Cayce.

Arnold set my martini in front of me and I took a sip. Icy cold. "What do we know about this new society editor?" I said.

“Her name is Helen Beaulieu. The story is, her husband is the new manager at the bottling plant. Maybe they came here and she needed a job and applied to be the society editor. And maybe she’s gotten in with those faculty wives.”

Stanton society revolved around university people, as I knew.

Our new society editor and her husband had come to us from Toronto just a few weeks back. I’d heard that much. She looked like a petite runway model, if there is such a thing. What would mystify Lee Ann was *why* a farmland newspaper such as ours would have a society editor.

Skipping Lee Ann’s aura—I didn’t get that stuff—I told her about the falling man in the Shawnee Forest, and reported my plan to go down there. Then I told her Mr. Perkins’ reaction to me inviting his son Dougie to join me.

“Ten years old? I’d consider your proposal a little strange myself. You’re not still thinking of going?”

I shrugged. “I don’t need the boy to come. Our new stringer, Daniel, will be there, and maybe his buddy Randy, the kid’s older brother. The three of us can go in and look around.”

She sipped her wine. “Tell me about this new stringer.”

“He’s a nice kid. A quick study. Not afraid to ask questions. He’s the one who suggested the falling man might make a column.”

She nodded absently. “Let’s say the boy did see something falling in the forest. How would you get in there? Isn’t it pretty much a swamp?”

“It’s a forest, not a swamp. Well, I guess there’s some cypress swamps in there. It’s all mixed up. There’s farms in there, too. Private land. Anyway, it’s huge—farms, forest, swamp—all mixed up. And it covers most of the bottom quarter of the state.”

“It seems unlikely to me that you’ll find anything,” she said. To Lee Ann, the south end of our circulation area, which bordered the Shawnee, was even more primitive than Stanton proper, full of snakes and southern preachers. Yet, she wanted to bolster our circulation down there—precisely in the territory where I’d be going.

“If you believe the child,” she said, “there had to be an airplane, right?”

This widening of her gaze suggested she was at least considering possibilities.

“First,” I said, “I need to find a body—or something, anyway. Otherwise, no story.”

“Okay,” she said, leaning back.

Her jacket had slipped slightly, baring her shoulders, and in the dim light she looked younger—and far too New York for Stanton, Illinois.

“But you still have to ask yourself, falling from what?” she said. “It wouldn’t have been an airliner, right? You don’t just open an airliner door and jump. Well, I guess a guy did that once, with a parachute and a rucksack full of money. But I never heard of it happening again. And if somebody jumped from an airliner, or some part of an airliner fell off, we’d have seen something on the wire.” She paused, recalling something else. “I remember an engine blade came loose from one of those big airliners once. I think it broke a window and sucked a guy out. Over Albuquerque, I think.” Her face registered that horrific vision. “Always keep your seat belt fastened,” she said. “But, again, that’s the only time I heard of anything like that. So you’d have to think it’s local—one of those little private planes. Maybe we can find out if a plane like that lost something or other—or maybe one of its occupants. I don’t know. Do people fall out of those little private planes?”

I shook my head. “That would take a lot of checking. That’s why I’m going down.”

She narrowed her gaze to my plan. She didn't much like it. "We can't spend much time on this. If you're so set on it, why don't you let our new stringer—what's his name, Daniel?—poke around."

"Daniel Smart."

She was right in one respect; I was burning energy on something frivolous. She and I were trying to cover about a third of the state, about thirty-five communities in an area the size of Hong Kong. Not to be funny, but Lee Ann couldn't even understand what people south of us were *saying*, let alone what they were thinking. A factor in her favor was that her responsibility was not to cover things so much as manage them. Our stringers covered the day-to-day news. She managed the process. As to big stories that broke, we had to be selective about the time we ourselves gave to them. Otherwise we'd go under. Sad to say, we hadn't had a big story yet, not as the new state desk team, anyway, so the issue was moot.

The more I thought about it, I just didn't feel right sending Daniel into those woods, on a mission like that, without me. If we were going to look, I had to lead the exercise.

"Let's say the boy really saw a person falling," Lee Ann said, indulging herself in my quixotic enthusiasm. "You have to wonder if he, or she, was alive, don't you think? Like maybe a parachute didn't open?" She frowned. "Or maybe the pilot was dumping somebody. It's happened, you know. They were dumping people out of airplanes in Argentina not so many years ago. Alive. Into the ocean." Her blue eyes stared at me. Her depression had just kicked in, like somebody threw a switch.

Her very sad personal history had involved seeing her husband shot dead in the street in New York City. Occasionally her mind and heart went to that. If anybody did see auras, hers would reflect that.

“Want to come along?” I asked. “It’s actually very pretty down there. Tom Sawyer whitewashes the fences.”

She looked up, shaking her head. “Are you forgetting about Injun Joe chasing Becky in the cave?” She thought for a moment, shaking her head. “I’m not going squishing around in some swamp looking for whatever’s been in there for seven or eight days.”

Her vivid imagination was, in this instance, part of her problem.

“Sooner or later you have to get down there, I said. “It’s beautiful. Oak and hickory forests. Rolling hills. Beautiful lakes. Some swampland, sure; but that’s not the main feature. It’s a forest. You’d enjoy it.”

“Tom Sawyer, huh?”

I had a hamburger. She had one too. Doing so, we got the top of the menu. Before she got into her burger she scooted away from the coat that had slipped off her shoulders.

“As I recall from high school physics,” she said, “things fall at about thirty-two feet per second per second squared. That’s in a vacuum, I mean. Let’s say an airplane was at five thousand feet—”

I think I have a fetish for pretty shoulders.

“As I understand from jump school—”

“What’s that?”

“Parachute training,” I said.

She looked me in the eye, the burger suspended. “Parachute training?”

“Well, you go in the army, sometimes they offer you that. I took it, but I didn’t stay in that line of work.”

“I didn’t know you were a paratrooper. As you understand it, what?”

“I wasn’t a paratrooper. I took the training. Your body creates a lot of drag. The fastest you’re going to fall is about a hundred and twenty miles an hour.”

“They just told you that.”

That was the Lee Ann I liked. Sly. Sort of sassy. And she wasn’t worrying anymore about how I’d chosen to waste my Sunday. Or thinking about her husband getting shot.