



HARLEY LETHALM

# The Flower in the Wall

LETHALM

The television sprayed fantastic dove-tailed images into the pert and dark room: to mean - C-block, maximum-security, stunts of hysterical warfare and its brotherly stranger songs. Mumblings from prisoners and the trapped self-proclamations of Godheads. Corridors inked with long, long-length madness and whatever Ginsberg meant to say.

Richard Binkowski, renowned botanist, part-time narcotics professional, sat thumbing through channels as, above, his cellmate swatted here-and-there gnats that goaded his small and short world.

Dexicos Sturm, indicted on three counts of murder, one count of conspiracy to commit murder (the defense attorney had wedged this in like a little stripe-coated gnat, according to the solitary reminiscences of Sturm.), voiced his fingernails against the blue concrete walls, alternately humming a tune from Dallas and whatever dingy played from the box below him. He thought the meek old botanist was predatory with that remote, always lingering on one channel for a short period, usually a space of forty seconds or so, before thrumming onward to something else; he preferred great operatic sitcoms or else dreary Lifetime bodice-bracers; there were snatches of game-shows, too, and every once in a fucking navy moon the murmurings of some faux-Carson meld on the Late Late Show.

"What've you got down there?"

Binkowski mulled over the question for a blank period, for prison-time was its own time, a time of rehashed seconds and self-repeating infinities, before finally stumbling onto the marble-step of a word: "Nothing." And

"nothing" was good enough for Sturm, who had prided himself on his own homegrown nothingness, a private kinky nihilism only known to murderers and suicides. From the sentry-post a guard called out something not discernible to either Binkowski or Sturm, and that was fine too - nothingness calling out to nothing. Sturm pushed aside his pillow and caught the brief shimmering of the screen. Binkowski's socked feet jutted out from the prime-metal bed tray.

"Well in that case," said Sturm, "would you mind turning that goddamn thing off? You plant your head into that thing like you do your flowers - maybe you could use some weeding, Binky." The box flicked off and the darkness issued total, like an organ-stop, or of something coming suddenly alive after a spell of consistent nihil. Nothingness. The word was a prayer in Sturm's head, a clarion thruster, a great and pulsing Sakyamuni.

"There's no effort anymore; I wonder if they even bother with the marquee-boards in their little world outside. You remember those? Type-faced rah-rah; GRETA GARBOT; FANNY ARDANT; LESLIE CARON; Christ, you recall that bust? That particular Caron-bust? Surreal. There was something mindlessly fascinating about those old marquee-boards; there was sport to it. It was very sport, that's right. There's nothing like that in these fucking boxes - where's the appeal? Where's the Garbot-plaster? I'm sick of the Great Scheme and the clouted Infomercial-800 Solution. The Carpet-Duster Miracle From Out the Blue Depths of Starry-Footed Imagination, par excellence. I want my wonder, dammit."

"You're off your gourd, Binky. It's got to be changing,

things can't be plastic forever. The letters come down off the board in exchange for the New; the New will always be. The New isn't an idea any more than it is a truth."

"Ain't that the truth."

"And what about that?"

"Hmmm?"

"That Caron-bust. Wasn't nothin' spectacular."

Binkowski awakened to the coughs of a very light and very precocious dawn. Sturm was riding the slick of sleep. There was a certain profundity to something, somewhere, but he didn't and wouldn't know it. He contemplated the smell of musty mayflowers and the foghorn-immediacy of early-season sprouts as he fitted on his socks.

After breakfast, which was really nothing more than the toenails of old toast scraps, Richard Binkowski and Dexicos Sturm fouled around in the yard expanse, catching mint-stems from out the earth and dotting daylight constellations with their fingertips. Around them, the demographic was thick with the convicted and the near-innocent. Not one body had a chance, and every head had a mind of soullessness. Tether-ball meditations went on as pick-up games of invented sport went on, as things went on, as lives and deaths went on. There was much human surgery to be done.

"What's this here?" Sturm had a twaddle of brush-flower parsed between his fingers, appraising it softly in the light gloom of the courtyard.

"Holds all the pretenses of a jonquil, but not the color; jonquils have a fascinatingly livid color that seems to bend and refract its own interior light. But you might know

such things."

"Don't get smart."

"I confess my round stupidity."

"Suppose we take one of these in, y'know, holster it, maybe get up a little garden, however temporary. I'm sick of the TV inscriptions on the walls, I'm sick of the canned laughter and death. I need something a bit more...responsible." Sturm buckled the sprout into his leggings and looked solemnly around. Field Heske was strutting a fantastic argument with one of the D-block fellows, and Sturm thought to himself that the hands of jailbirds knew only to fly.

"It'll croon for a few hours before it turns a sick feather; I don't know that I can bear to lose another flower. I've already lost all the gardens in the world."

"It can't hurt, Binky. At least that's a few hours of something." He twitched his whiskers significantly before adding, "something beautiful."

"Alright, you've already geared it up, anyhow. What do you say we go and play the ball for a bit?"

"Yeah."

They foisted up a false paneling and laid the stub of flower down; a cake of dirt milked out from beneath it as it assumed its new form."

"Now we need only wait for the heat to step on and we've lost our flower."

"Don't make it so horrible, Bink. We're on to something here, yeah. How about that?"

The flower peeled back rather seriously, like an alderman delivering the entry-waves of a lateral speech. Richard

Binkowski and Dexicos Sturm watched for hours as their little pet, lassoed from the whole of flora, dribbled into a harsh approximation of itself. They sat mystified at its conclusion, almost harried.

Sturm tamped his finger against his temple in contemplation. "Where does this leave us?"

"Well, in the gutters, I'd say."

"Supposing we're in the gutters, that doesn't take us far from home."

"No, no, I suppose it doesn't. Perhaps we'll have another go at it tomorrow."

"I'm with that, for true."

"Plenty of things to do tonight. Maybe a television program is in order."

Sturm grunted and cowered his head into the pillow.

"Anything?"

"Your common daisy," said Binkowski, looking lightly at the flower. The yard was dribbling with countenance both human and ghost. Sturm twiddled his thumbs against the orange flat of his pants.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's as good enough a device as any."

Sturm, again, rolled the flower into his pant-leg and stropped it down with a light kick of the heel.

They set on the little plot again, grinding the jonquil up into little batteries of flower and placing in its stead the daisy. They shaped the fusty soil before clamping the flower into its new halfway greenhouse.

"All these other guys," said Sturm, "they don't know the toughness of beauty."

Binkowski nodded his head, receiving the full import of Sturm's words.

"Well, what in blue hell do you make of this?" Sturm indicated to the flower which had, since the night went on inexorably toward the first chittering notes of day, become spectral with colors both false and true. It seemed almost to percolate with strange hues and even weirder tints, pausing gossamer before taking on a rapid shape of color.

"Heaven forbid, by the might of it all! It looks almost to be a kaleidoscopic imprint of some testy thing from the shores of implicit Eden - shall we alert the guards? They certainly must be aware of overfond pigments this morning; maybe their headpieces have gone awry and are barking different lengths of blond or blue; it's possible, isn't it? Here, check me for spots."

They studied the flower, brilliant in its petaled glow, until the inharmonious croak of their little metal sling-door opened, and they were just as soon summoned to lunch.

"Heske, you notice anything not that ordinary this morning," Sturm asked, turning a lazily buttered roll over in his hands, "something different with the whole monitor of the place? Maybe your footstool was leather-hide or the sparrows outside Argentinian?"

"Neh," said Heske.

"You alright, you sure?"

"Neh."

"Say, didn't one of those teeth of yours used to be false? Or you had a crown? What was it, something like that, yeah?" The roll was flat and carried up to be sheared

cleaned by the incisors - Sturm had peculiarly fierce incisors, a murderer's teeth.

"Neh."

Sturm turned to a fattened old crosspatch named Lemmy Fraker. He was installed in an odd place with odd hands at an overwhelmingly and immaculately odd angle. He was, generally, an odd fellow. Noticing this, Sturm shied away from the potentiality of that investigation, as Fraker, as was his wont, couldn't normally tell the difference between a freshling prophet and Christ himself - over today's dead-living debacle, there was too much allowing error, and Sturm wouldn't have it. He shouldered Binkowski, who was easily chewing at a piece of loaf relished in mustard. "These guys aren't nothing, Bink. They sit on the pot all day long thinking only about how long to take and how long to get off; they don't think about flowers, god dammit!"

"The man who considers flowers oftentimes considers his own lack of self," replied Binkowski stoically. "And when he finds his lackluster countenance in all those serried rows of living and thriving things, he looks not to glad heights of spirits but to sad heights of bridges. It's what I've read in the horticultural literature, which, as you may be aware, is just gilded Kant and Shestov with ringlets of posies around the ears."

"Sure, sure, I didn't assume it was so provincial."

"Provincialism is the going of an inmate's soul to C-block."

"Sure as that, yeah. Hey, Heske, you meanin' to eat that asparagus?"

"Yeh."

"Gabriel in torment," said Sturm, relaying back to his cell, "would you look at that, Bink, would you just take a merry fuckin' gander at that?"

The daisy was there, still, filigreed with all manner of color and spread apart at its roots so that it appeared almost to sprout forth in several opposite yet apposite directions, divulging some God-figured information redolent of the outside world, the world where poplars sang under a gift of Autumn and the jays thumbed about the low dusk like the gentlest finger-scrapings of Child, Christ, Saint Paul, and so forth and et cetera and et hoc genus omne. And all the rest.

"I can't attest to the nature of the thing anymore than I could the truest predicament of any one century, but I can tell you that something's amiss here. There's no wilt, no intoxication of dullness. Simply put, man, that's a blot out of Paradise."

"Ain't it so."

"It seems to be."

"Say, what do you consider? Maybe we take it out of the bean hole tomorrow and set it free; like a jay, or something great - it sure seems to me like it's too proud a thing to be just lounging about in here. It needs a place to stalk, make the other flowers feel differently of themselves - gauge the confidence of the soil, yeah, yeah."

"I'm afraid any more meddling will have this thing dead before either of us can reach the can. With real exasperation, and frightful as it is, this flower must needs stay here with us until we can figure out a way to keep it from straying anymore from the prim path of faultless surrender;

in a word, I mean death. This is abominable, this, that it should be so particularly alive, and with such vibrancy, while everything around us meets at a point of precise insipidity and fruitlessness. Every guard on the tower couldn't make to such lengths, no matter how much farther up the tower they were. The best thing to do, I think, is to let it set over us like a quiet gloaming and if asked, we can testify that we had no indication whatsoever of anything strange or extraordinary with us in here, that maybe it was incidental or chance-way or something of that sort that led this rather precious flower to develop its luxurious condition outside the range of our knowledge."

"Yeah, say, that'll be alright."

"Would you look at it though, squarely, surely? It has all the meaning of something heaven-sent, and all the meaning without. It's as though you've plucked the tag-end of an angel."

"Confound my sorry ass if I'm to believe a thing like that - how could you really think up such a sappy story like that when we're ages deep in this loathsome place? Even the cockroaches know better than to play with this artlessness."

Binkowski tamped a finger on the television and delighted privately as it lit up, the one serene excuse for the whitewash of internal occupation, of the eyeballs' engagement with something as docile and blameless as the infinity of a screen barking with images and voices slack and stiff and faucalized and breathless and the feature-long lives of debutante screen-actress under the salute and surrender of viceful Hollywood execs sheepish enough for a turn of fealty to the right penny-poking hand, yet wise enough to

gloat and prognosticate on topics of prescient commercial value: the natural predation of gusto and anxious hunger rolling on the menthol-dipped tongues bore a cerebral fascination to Binkowski, and he just as soon forgot about the turn of the flower as the inaugural riffs of a Winkler-besotted Happy Days special enveloped the room with its particular vowel and volume. Sturm assumed his usual slunked position on the hard bed-frame and craned his head back so that it stared half-encroachingly into the steel folds of some faraway heaven, as the flower below him crooned a song of similar divination and faded into the background as an old prize of wonder.