

Roanne's Dream

by Robert Crisman

Roanne banged the *chiva*, turned tricks, and ran out of road. She tried outrunning her demons. She took the train from Seattle. The same dope, tricks, and jails awaited in Frisco.

One night she lay on her bunk in the cell and fell into dreams.

She'd come out of a tunnel, or rather, the tunnel just broadened into some jerry-rigged downtown, its sky lit by neon.

Night became day. Now, all around her, throngs, traffic, construction. *No sound.*

The crowd thickened, heads bobbing, faces now cheek to jowl. So many men and women were bald! All of the people wore gray.

Then, up ahead, a six-year-old girl, already a Mediterranean beauty in pink. Roanne saw herself on the day of her first communion.

The girl turned and her eyes locked on Roanne, prayers in them. A tall woman shrouded in gray gripped her hand.

Roanne knew that she had to get to the girl. She started to shove through the crowd--and then she was running up over them now, on their heads and their shoulders, straining and flailing, reaching to stop the tall woman, who picked up her pace and moved swiftly away. The girl looked back. Her eyes held an infinite sadness.

Roanne chased them through streets in 10 cities, through streets she'd made home and through streets that had never existed. Always, the crowd underneath, the bald heads, the soft jostling. Roanne, desperate, sprinted to make up lost ground. The wind blew the hat that she wore off her head. It whipped, a black husk of feathers, was gone.

She'd lose sight of her quarry and then, out of the crowd, the girl would appear, eyes speaking from miles away. Roanne tracked her through years...

Years, years, and *years*--and the crowd became *statues*, now part of a bronze Aztec vista sweeping the plain as Roanne flew above them that stretched to a mountain: Popoceteptl, ready to blow. The

sun shivered; the sky was *impossibly* blue.

Noise of a sacrifice off to her left drummed louder and louder. As Roanne turned to look, the drumming became the full-throated roar of a people--not tired statues but blood-drinking warriors. Behind them, gold Tenochtitlan, the city of sacrifice altars...

And the statues crumbled to *powder*. Around Roanne now, bone-white desert that ate the horizon and climbed right into the sky.

The girl had never existed.

The dream took a rest. A blink or an eon of absolute nothing...

Roanne stood in the room of a house of a family she'd known. She was alone in the room, a large room, painted white. The room was empty except for bric-a-brac lining the top of a mantel against the far wall. Roanne *hated* these people, their meanness, their pride, a pride that spit upward from gutters.

These people looked down their noses and kept a cold distance, as if Roanne was someone's foul odor. They had God on their side.

This room was barren and cold...

Roanne knew that the family stood clustered behind the glass doors to her left. Their Puritan contempt seeped under the doorway like piss. She heard them mutter and spit imprecations.

She moved to the bric-a-brac lining the mantel. She reached and plucked some small piece, a glass amber bird. She held it there in her hand for a moment, then hurled it onto the floor where it shattered.

Fierce gesture! Something inside this dream, yet apart from Roanne had usurped her will and bent it in service of murder. She grabbed some other piece, tossed it. Then another, one more--and she reached out and *swept* those glass figurines off the mantel. Shards *piled*--and she could not stop! Fear rattled inside her! *And she could not stop!* The people behind those doors heard her, and *knew* she'd come here to kill.

Kill *who*? And now Roanne heard their laughter...

And sank to the floor, curled tight as a fetus. Her womb was thin air, no protection at all.

She heard the people enter the room, then felt them circling,

standing above her. They'd judge and condemn her this one final time.

Her fear pitched her toward hell.

The dream ended there.

And bled to new darkness.

Roanne stared up at the Sterling Hotel, Seattle, downtown, Third and Pike. Three stories tall, a narrow brick building, cowed there by midnight, in accord with a noirish romance.

The Sterling Hotel, where pasts had congealed into shapes that she'd run from forever.

Roanne had shot speed here, she and 12 other street kids one time in a second-floor room. She ascended the dark, narrow stairs to the second-floor landing. Beyond the landing an atrium circled, tintured with echoes. Door after door marked the wall circling round.

Silence and dying green light; the place was a sepulcher, really. A last resting stop, perhaps for those children she'd fixed with. She imagined them inside these rooms, old, toothless, bald, mouths gaped like black caverns, eyes staring at nothing, their air a medicinal reek. Each room was lit with a 20-Watt bulb, some red and some blue, there to embellish the darkness of tombs and perhaps coat the dead.

An old, enrobed figure brushed by her, slipped into a room up ahead to the right. Roanne followed. Farther down a room beckoned. Its door swung ajar. The room's blue light bled into the hallway. Roanne entered.

Inside stood a young man, blurred, indistinct, with a swift succession of faces, coyotes she'd known and not known.

And then--did she *will* this?--Joey, dead lover, pawing debris on the dresser, slowly, as if his moves had been choreographed.

He'd turned to Roanne, as if he'd known all along she would come. He held a CD in his hand. It was out of its case, chewed up, and useless. "I *slept* on it, man." He shrugged with a pout made for showtime.

Joey, at home in this room for dead children, a hole in his temple

plowed by a bullet that stopped his childish transgressions.

He stood stripped to the waste, his arms striated with tracks like ravines. Tattooed on his chest, more bullet holes, spewing blood, diagonally lined right to left, ending there at a heart reproduced from a textbook. Roanne peered closer. "You like it?" His voice seemed a part of the light.

She wanted to ask him who'd done the tattoo. But now--had she blinked?--he was gagged, an old, dirty rag crammed right down his gullet and spilling like vomit down past his chin.

His eyes were gone too... And then so was the world.

She awoke--no other word--in a warehouse, the warehouse she'd seen in a movie one time where the Queen Of the Gangsters hefted an Uzi and ruled. Roanne stood there now, where the Queen Of the Gangsters had stood, surrounded by jostling, jockeying men, supplicant weasels looking to put her to sleep and then have their fun.

One man gained position, old Ling the grocer whose son had killed Joey that night in Ling's store. He smiled. His eyes though...they spoke a language she'd heard in another connection.

He proffered his hand. In it, some coin of the realm. His smile now straight from the ho stroll...

Ling became Daddy, talking through cotton. A gloom-shrouded room. Roanne was six, she wore a pretty pink dress, and this was the day she'd taken her first communion. Daddy was schooling her now on the propers that shape little girls. She sat with hands clasped in an overstuffed chair. She darted looks at his face, then stared at the floor. Daddy's words tumbled, silent, to dust.

He didn't care really, that much she could tell. She'd failed to live up to his strictures but her sins were tools he could use. She knew that too...

He refused to look at Roanne all the while. His eyes, wet marbles, intent, almost burning, stayed fixed on a point to her left by the desk. They were clicking off odds. Assessing--what? Smiles ghosted his lips. His fingers, those all-seeing fingers that she'd known forever, tattooed the arm of his chair.

Roanne's shame became fear.

The room whisked away and took her into a void.

And after years she came on Michelle in a plaza, the old SeaFirst plaza on Fourth in downtown Seattle.

Michelle, her partner the night this trick promised them dope and then reamed Michelle bloody. Roanne, her protector had pulled out a gun and *blasted* that bastard and sent him to hell, her eyes squeezed half shut, heart knotted, rounds spraying the room...and when the smoke cleared...

oh my God--

Michelle--!

Dead in the bed, blood gushing, a hole where her eye used to be...

Now in the dream, the cold, windswept day filled with rain. The plaza rolled from building to street, a flat, unprotected expanse, a gesture of bankers' indifferent contempt to all dancing life.

Michelle turned, saw Roanne, and she smiled and said, "Hello, Roanne." She was older now, maybe mid-30s, and her beauty had settled, shaped by the gray business suit that she wore, with the hem of her skirt at her knees.

Roanne approached, her heart pounding, warmth celled inside her, this *longing...*

Michelle's smile, *gentle*, a breath of the love that Roanne had always kept hidden, lest the world sniff it out and rip her wide open and chew it to nothing and spit out the bones.

Michelle led Roanne into the building. They walked arm-in-arm through the lobby. Michelle looked right, left, and surveyed her domain. And it *was* her domain! Clacking and commerce all ceased as they passed. Lackeys stared at the two women walking.

Michelle led Roanne to the elevators now, in a corridor that stretched on forever. The walls were festooned with cold bankers' art: Mark Tobey's, nothing but rain and more rain in a city of rain, redundant and leeching the color right out of the souls of the suits who did business in this place.

Roanne shivered. Michelle took her hand.

They traveled the miles, curves twisting this way and that. The carpet they walked on was velvet blood red.

Michelle said, "We'll get there. It's just up ahead." Roanne said, "I know..."

The elevators at last. The ones that would gain them the top of the world.

Michelle stopped. She turned to Roanne. "Press the button." She said it so gently... Roanne pressed the button.

Michelle smiled. Roanne looked into her eyes.

Those *eyes*. Roanne drank them *up*. Tears welled inside her. "I love you, Michelle."

Michelle said, "I've always known that."

Roanne loved Michelle from the day she was born...

Sadness washed over Roanne, the sadness that lost moments bring. Moments when all tears are murdered and swept into some unmarked grave. Dead tears that weep under rubble.

The lift door hissed open. Michelle pushed Roanne gently. "Go on, get in, I'll be up in a minute."

Michelle whispered a laugh, then turned, walked away. Roanne watched her go as the door softly swallowed her up.

Michelle, eaten, digested, and *gone*--

A demon crouched on the last bed she'd tricked in. He sucked Roanne's marrow, then laughed and told her, "You're *still* my bitch!" He grinned and drooled, a pastiche of all the feckless tricks that she'd tricked with, then got off the bed and tossed her a quarter, then spit on the floor and went out.

Michelle lay on the bed there beside her, left eye shot out, gouting blood.

The blood spread like ink from a squid and painted the dream with a dampness that *bit*. It ate Michelle's flesh off her bones. A scream punched a hole in the dream.

Roanne woke. Her sense of loss *pounded*. Her tears came alive, rushed like blood.

