
Opening Extract from...

Soho Sins

Written by Richard Vine

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by **Richard Vine**

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To my own true Melissa—Wong Kit Yi

Every work of art is an uncommitted crime.
—Theodor Adorno

SOHO SINS

I

I slept rather badly the first few nights after Amanda's murder. Once I heard the story of how her body was found, twenty-four hours following the shooting, I walked alone from the Odeon to my Wooster Street loft, chilled through by the dampness. For warmth, I stood at the sink and drank a shot of Glenfiddich before going to bed. The whiskey helped me to nod off quickly, but my mind came alert again just before three AM, chanted awake by the refrain of "Philip and Amanda Oliver." That was how the art world had celebrated my friends for years, their names run together like the scientific term for a rare, vanishing species: the SoHo conjugal pair. On the donor lists of countless arts organizations, among the lender credits for major exhibitions, embossed on museum-opening invitations, sparkling from the lips of Park Avenue hostesses: Philip and Amanda Oliver—Phil and Mandy, or sometimes just "P and M" to their close friends and would-be intimates.

For all their glitz, the two had taken good care of me, in their nonchalant way, after my own wife died in Paris. They talked casually about Nathalie, as if she were still waiting for me back in the twelfth arrondissement, while the three of us traveled relentlessly around Europe together, dropped in at the couple's various residences to recoup briefly, and later attended a ludicrous number of exhibition openings in New York. I don't know if it was a proper form of mourning; we didn't have much practice with death in those days. Mandy's style was to lunge ahead. She and I would often leave Philip behind—stuck with his intercontinental calls and glowing computer screen, making the high-tech money that made everything

possible—while we went off to the latest cultural site or soirée. Maybe things got a little stickier between us all than they should have, a bit too Bloomsbury for this aging American lad, but the couple gave me back my manhood—or whatever is left of it. For that I was deeply grateful, a fact that only added to the damned annoyance of thinking about Philip's mental ruin, his betrayal of their marriage, and now Amanda's wretched death.

To prepare for the blank hours ahead, I took two 10-milligram Ambiens and chased them with another scotch. When I tried to go over our shared life chronologically, nothing would stay in order. Anyway, it would be hard to say exactly when Philip decided to dump his second wife. "Eight years with one woman, Jackson," he said to me once. "You have no idea."

Actually, he was wrong about that. Even though I had not confined myself to anything so quaint as "one woman" during my own term of marriage, I recalled that the motives for domestic rupture are minutely cumulative, a Chinese torture of minor irritants and small, exasperating quirks—a bill left unpaid, a pillow moved to the wrong side of the bed, a black hair coiled on the bathtub soap. Every spouse keeps a running catalogue of capital offenses, a book of poisonous hours. And what does anyone, to say nothing of a man with Philip's appetites and financial means, do about the temptations? Mandy—rich and free and lithesome, his "Upper East Side gypsy"—had spirited him away from his first wife, sweet Angela, just a year after the young Brit gave birth to their daughter. Then, six years later, Mandy in her turn became an encumbrance.

The trouble began with an image. Philip's first sight of Claudia Silva (or, rather, of her sleek, ample anatomy) was via a photograph in *Flâneur* magazine. Taken from behind, it showed the young painter in pink vinyl pants, her hips cocked, as she—with the viewer—surveyed a canvas at her second solo show at

Patricia Knowles Gallery in Chelsea. The painting was a tangle of quasi-pornographic S-curves afloat in a limbo of monochrome white. The photo's accompanying paragraph reported that the artist, a recent School of Visual Arts graduate, was the daughter of a well-known Italian museum director. As a champion of figuration and juicy brushwork, she considered herself—at 26, with pictures selling at $35,000 apiece—an embattled outsider, suffering critical and financial neglect from an art establishment preoccupied, for the moment, with video experiments, lame digital imaging, and installations of household detritus. Her life, meanwhile, consisted largely of all-night parties in Williamsburg and "self-educational" trips to biennials in Venice, Havana, and São Paulo. "I need to know what's happening globally," she said—a sentiment no doubt shared by the sophisticated readers of *Flâneur*.

For Philip, flipping through the high-gloss pages of the magazine on his way to JFK, the first challenge—something that always roused his virility—was simply to see Claudia's features. From the backseat of his town car, he called me at the gallery, using my private number.

"Save me from torment, compadre. Do you know this new SVA comer named Claudia Silva?"

"I do. Since she was on her papa's knee."

"Well, she's not a kid anymore, in case you hadn't noticed. What's the scoop—is her art as good as her ass?"

"You won't know which to grab first."

"Don't be too sure." He seemed to weigh the options for a long moment. "Can you arrange a studio visit?"

I laughed. "Have you forgotten who you are? Just name the date. It's a poor artist's dream."

"Let's keep it low-key, shall we?" He broke into a phony daytime talk show voice. "I just want to be loved for myself."

"Great, Philip. Isn't that why you have a wife?"

There was quiet at the other end for a moment. "You figure that one out, old chum, you let me know."

I waited, not wanting to let him off that easily. "There must be something you like about matrimony," I said. "You keep getting into it."

"I do, don't I?" He sounded sad and amazed. "From Angela to Amanda, nineteen years spent with the two of them."

"You could do worse."

"I could," he admitted, "and I probably will. But right now, I just want to do different. My life is half over, Jackson. There's a whole lexicon of women out there, and I've barely made it through the A's."

He'd been talking that way for months now, ever since the modern and contemporary auction at Sotheby's, where Mandy, in a rush of subtle excitement, had waved her bid paddle once too often. The couple had agreed to stick to contemporary work and not to exceed $500,000 for the evening, or $100,000 on any individual lot. But with choice pieces from the Steinberg collection hitting the block one after the other, Mandy got carried away by the twirl of the turntable, revealing delights in succession like coffee-shop cakes in a rotating pastry case. A Robert Longo drawing, turn, an Alice Neal portrait, turn, a collage by Ray Johnson. Finally, a prime example from Ian Helmsley's "Bad Blood" series did her in. She'd drunk three glasses of champagne at the private viewing, and now was gaily amused by the play of auctioneer Todd Simon's blue eyes, and by the clandestine thrill of coming up against an unnamed bidder on one of the three onstage telephones. (Philip, for his part, suspected the caller was a shill for Helmsley's own dealer, upping the ante to keep the reputation—and unstable prices—of the AIDS-stricken artist at an acceptable market level.) The bid hovered at $98,000 for a moment, already an auction record for the 36-year-old painter, then went to the caller at $102,000,

before Mandy signaled yes at $106,000 and Simon announced it going once, twice, and sold, with the crack of his palm-sized rapper, to the astute Mrs. Oliver, number forty-three.

Afterward, Philip threatened to call his good friend Walter Heinz and ask him, as chairman of the international firm, to void the sale on some technicality. Mandy, however, was having none of it. She reminded Philip, loudly, in front of several friends gathered for a last drink downstairs at the Bid, that she bought art with her own goddamn money—funds that her father had released to her when she turned twenty-one, long before she ever laid eyes on Philip; wealth that her grandfather had wrung out of the coal fields (and obdurate coal miners) of Western Pennsylvania. Philip accepted the put-down with a modest shrug, saying to his friends, "Amanda, last of the Wingate dynasty," in much the same way that Mandy once sighed and laughed and passed off his mounting affairs with a sharp, falsely light "men are animals."

Every marriage is a mystery, especially to its victims, yet this much I knew: Philip would never truly have left Mandy while she lived. All their repeated separations and reconciliations, all their legal maneuverings, were a kind of sport. In reality, Amanda was life itself to him. Once Melissa was born, an overwrought Angela, no longer so sweet, harped on Philip's familial responsibilities; Mandy just laughed, and taught him to play. Later, when she and Philip were both burned out from openings and benefit dinners and parties, she would wave the back of her hand in the air and say, "We'll sleep in another life." So they plunged on, transported fluidly by their driver, to the next radiant event. The booze helped, as did Mandy's yellow-and-white pills, but mostly the Olivers seemed to subsist on pure money; it affected them like nuclear fuel. Even when Mandy had her bout with cancer, the pace never slackened. They threw themselves, together, into her treatment regimen—chemo, diet

supplements, positive imaging, cardiovascular exercise—as though it were all a street carnival in Trinidad.

"You can find beauty in anything, Jack, if you look at it intelligently enough," Mandy said one night. She had just been freed from her hospital regime, and we were all sitting, very drunk, in a corner booth at Jean Georges. She quickly raised her blouse, revealing a stitched slash, a raw and puckered absence over her heart. "How smart are you?"

After three years, Amanda recovered, and seemed perpetually on the verge of going off to wade in a fountain somewhere. But no one much wants to see a woman with one breast and a thickening midsection, her dress soaked, frolic drunkenly in the Trevi waters. Age was the one enemy Mandy couldn't laugh into submission, not after Philip's eyes began to follow every coltish waitress who strode past with a cocktail tray. Indeed, her best-friend-and-husband made Claudia his public lover soon after Mandy's cancer went into remission. While she rested near Edgartown, Philip romanced the girl in private Manhattan dining clubs, at European art fairs, and in the fields and hot evening bedrooms of the Dutchess County enclave where his nonprofit trust housed its artist residency program. It was not one of his prettier episodes.