

Sample chapter from my novel The Clubber -

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Aqua Haute

The Aqua Haute was a large warehouse that had been inexpertly converted into a series of small live/work spaces. Andre had already been there a few times before, usually to talk to Ian, the unofficial manager of the warehouse. The residents were an odd and widely varying collection of artists, musicians, and drug addicts. Most of the living spaces took up the bizarre third floor of the warehouse, the floor which hung like suspended boxes over the cavernous interior.

Virtually every square foot of wall space was covered with graffiti. Andre estimated that it would probably take a couple of days to read all of the graffiti throughout the warehouse. Some parts of the warehouse walls were covered with semi-competent works of drug-inspired art. The warehouse floor was habitually covered with second-hand furniture, beer cans, and motorcycle parts. There was a small band stage against the far wall, complete with a short plywood drum riser. The wall right behind the stage had long been covered with layer upon layer of band flyers. He wondered how far back the flyers went, if anyone would ever muster the time and the patience to dig through all of the layers of ancient copy paper and staples.

Tonight, the Aqua Haute was having a rent party. They had cleared and cleaned up the warehouse floor for the event. The residents of Aqua Haute usually held a rent party every month or so, charging a few dollars at the door so they could make enough to get past their rent and bills. Their parties always had a few bands and plenty of cheap booze. Occasionally, they would also include a few temporary galleries as a way of promoting some of their artists, as well as add some production value to the parties.

Andre was more than a little miffed when he found out that two other artists were having their works displayed alongside his. He was even more perturbed when he found out that someone else was getting the gallery section that was closest to the entrance, which was where they also happened to be selling the beer.

There were some stand-up walls made out of flat pieces of plywood and metal bracings where the artists got to hang their work. The painters who lived at Aqua haute had made them to showcase their

own work for visitors, but they removed their pieces when other artists came by to put up displays. The other painter had already hung his paintings by the coveted entrance position. A sketched-out Throckier was posing her sculptures in the back gallery, the space over by the long and creaking stairway that led to the Daliesque third floor.

He had just finished setting up his work when people started coming in for the party. The first few people to arrive were usually friends of the Aqua Haute residents, and a few others who wanted to get their drunks started early.

Walking cautiously around the warehouse floor, Andre nursed a beer and watched the first band set up.

He began looking for Serge and Edrea. They had assured him earlier that they would be attending. Cale had said something about trying to stop by, but he had not sounded all that sure that he would be able to make it. Andre understood. He knew that an artist like Cale had a lot of work to do.

Casually wandering back from the music stage, he eventually got around to examining the other painter's material. He knew he would eventually walk up and introduce himself to the other artist, and he would also force himself to talk to the Throcked-out sculptress, even though he thought that her work was far too kitschy and campy. Her wire and plaster figures were adorned with numerous pop icons, such as second-hand Barbie dolls and old metal lunch pails. He also thought that the sculptress dressed a bit too typically. Her hair was too frayed and her hips were just a bit too wide. He would say hello to her in any case, just out of professional courtesy, but she wasn't someone he felt necessarily compelled to become familiar with.

The bulk of the people who came to an Aqua Haute rent party were not like the typical club-goers of the Das Treffen. There were more tattoos, more facial pierces, and a lot more second-hand clothes. Aqua Haute crowds consisted mostly of punks, strung-out clubbers, and sketched-out Throckers, and not the kind of Throckers that were just for show. There was something in their faces and their gaits, as there was with a lot of people there, that indicated they were steeped into a much more extreme lifestyle than the run of the mill scenester or club poseur. You could see it in the lines in their faces, as well as their casually burned out air. At least, Andre could. There were people who tried to look as though they were extreme, and then there were people who really were extreme, and he had become fairly adept at telling them apart. It was a sixth sense that he could not fully describe.

He walked up to the makeshift wooden bar by the entrance and bought a Meister Brau, the only brand of beer they were selling. He knew he could have taken one from the back for free, since he was one of their featured artists for the evening, but he also knew that the warehouse residents were struggling bohemians who were trying to make some extra living money. He didn't feel like depleting

their meager resources by grabbing freebies.

More and more people were trickling in. A small crowd was growing. No doubt most of the night's patrons were already loaded and drunk so that they wouldn't have to spend so much money on booze once they got into the club. In an hour or two, the real crowds of people would begin streaming in.

Looking back towards the galleries, he saw that the other artists were still fiddling with their pieces. He decided he should probably nitpick as well, before it got really busy.

Andre went back and fixed up his paintings, though they were pretty much arranged the way he wanted them. The bright painting of the bloodstained doll holding onto a butcher's knife was the first thing people would see. Then there was his series of twisted and rotting faces, adorning the next few spaces. After that was his depiction of burning monochrome bodies. He had brought all of the work that he was unable to display at places such as the Das Grass: His really intense work.

He bought another beer from the bar and drank it down quickly. He had been doing a lot of drinking lately, and it was getting harder and harder for him to establish and maintain a decent buzz.

The first band had almost finished setting up. The band was a motley group of longhairs, wearing frayed Discharge and Verbal Abuse t-shirts.

Glancing back towards his gallery, he was irritated that no one was looking at his work, especially since there were now a lot more people coming into the club.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that the Throoked sculptress was approaching him.

“Hi. Andre, right?”

“Yes,” he replied guardedly, wondering how she knew his name.

“Hey. I'm Sharon.” She held out a clumsy hand.

“Hello,” he intoned formally as he shook her hand.

She pointed to Andre's section of the gallery. “They were gonna give me the middle section, but I asked for the back because I'm worried about my stuff getting knocked over.”

He didn't say anything. He was looking out over the warehouse floor, as if he were absentmindedly searching for someone.

“That's why I brought my B pieces,” continued Sharon. “I'd be too worried about my other pieces. I wouldn't want my really good stuff getting destroyed”

“Mm-hm.”

“I mean, this place makes me nervous. I wonder why I agreed to show off my stuff in this place.”

She began looking over the warehouse floor as well, possibly to try and see what Andre was looking for. He admitted to himself that she looked a lot better close up, at least physically, but there was something about her attitude that was throwing him off. It was probably the way she talked about

herself and her artwork.

“Aren't you worried about your paintings?”

“Hm?”

“Aren't you worried about people messing with your paintings?”

He was taken aback by the question. He was wondering why he had not thought about the possibility.

“I believe they'll be all right.”

“Okay, but you should watch out. There are lots of drunken fools in here.”

Still looking around the warehouse, he saw the other artist, the painter who had been given the first section of the gallery. He was a very tall and lanky fellow, dressed in tight and tattered black clothes. His outfit was no doubt a testament to his lower-class lifestyle. His hair seemed to be encrusted with an extra thick layer of Aqua Net or Knox, or whatever it was that he was using to make his short, thick hair stick straight up.

“Hey, I like your premiere piece,” remarked Sharon, as she pointed to his doll painting. “It's very d'Anshou-like.”

“Excuse me, I have to go talk to someone.”

“Okay. Nice talkin' ta' ya” she chirped, as he formally walked away.

He casually cast a glance toward his gallery as he walked over to talk to the other painter. He was considering the idea that they had somewhat similar styles, as each one of their pieces seemed to have a dominating color, though the other painter was apparently a little more neurotic about his paintings. He noted that quite a lot of detail in his work was somewhat overdone.

“Hello.”

The tall and lanky artist turned around. Andre was surprised at how gaunt his face was. His countenance was thin enough that you could easily estimate the shape and volume of his skull. It made Andre feel as if he had a fat face.

“Hey,” droned the artist.

“They gave you the first gallery.”

“What?”

“The gallery next to the entrance.”

The tall man looked to his paintings as if he had not noticed that they were by the entrance.

“Oh.” He was reacting as if Andre had just told him something completely pointless.

“Yes, they gave me the gallery right after yours.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Perhaps they felt our works would complement each other.”

“They should've given Sharon the first gallery,” he replied with a wave of his hand.

Straightening his posture, Andre moved his feet to a more formal position. “Sharon?”

“Yeah. I really like her work.”

“Mm-hm.” He began looking around, looking for a new out. He was trying to see if he could spot Ian, the man who had commissioned him to showcase his work. His attempted conversation with the other painter seemed to be going nowhere.

“Sorry, dude,” said the tall lanky man. “I'm kinda outta it. Someone gave me a hit a' X when I got here.”

“Ah.”

“It's pretty good stuff.”

“Yeah.”

“I'm Phil.”

“Andre.”

They shook hands. Phil's large, flat hand was hot and sweaty, as if he had a fever.

“It's quite an opportunity,” remarked Andre. “Don't you think?”

“What?”

“To show off our work here.”

“I guess. Most of the people here are drunk or trippin', though.”

“Yes, but that's par for the course at a showing.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I mean, it seems to be more of a special opportunity, when you get to showcase your work in a place where other artists live and work.”

Phil was looking around as if he was thinking about what he had just said. “Hm.”

“And we also get a chance to showcase our work for a much larger crowd than at a usual gallery showing.”

“That's true, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Yeah. Most people are jus' kinda wanderin' by our work without really lookin' at it. At least at a real show they'd be checkin it out.”

Andre didn't say anything. He was starting to grow weary of Phil's permanent shrug. He kept looking for Ian out of the corner of his eye.

The first band started playing. He turned and nodded to Phil, who nodded back. Andre walked off

with the pretense of trying to find Ian. He was really scanning the crowd for Serge and Edrea. It was pretty obvious that they weren't there yet, as they would very much stand out in the Aqua Haute crowd.

The band was a bit hard to take. Their music was nothing much more than a blare of barely-organized white noise. He started making his way back towards the galleries, being careful to make sure he did not appear as if he were suddenly doubling back.

Even though he didn't listen to thrash very often, he thought the first band was terrible. His assessment was validated, as the crowd started to dissipate and disperse to other parts of the warehouse during their set.

Looking around, he still couldn't spot Ian. He was getting impatient for someone he knew to show up in the crowd. He finally decided to stand near his paintings, just in case someone came up to admire them. A few people were wandering around the gallery area, but they were apparently just being aimless. They didn't bother to look over his work as they just stood around, drinking beers and talking.

The first band finally finished. He realized he had better start mingling, or at least not just stand in one place. Wandering back over to the bar, he ran into Phil again, who was talking to Sharon.

“Hey, Andre,” said Sharon. “How's it goin'?”

“All right, but no one is looking at our work.”

“Eh, the art fags'll come around. Have you seen Phil's pieces yet?”

“Oh yes. Excellent work,” he remarked as he bent his eyes towards the bar.

“We just started talking about doing a collaboration.”

He was hoping she would not ask him about doing a collaboration. He felt her work was too cartoonish. He began to preconceive a few excuses that he hoped would sound convincing.

“I'm getting something from the bar,” he said.

“Oh, you can just grab a beer from the back.”

He ordered another Meister Brau at the bar. Looking around, he saw that the first band was long gone and the second band was almost done setting up. Sharon was still talking to Phil, and there was still no sign whatsoever of Serge or Edrea.

The crowd was beginning to turn into one black mass. There were punks, gutter punks, Rude Boys and Girls, and Throcked out tweakers and junkies. There were also a few odd Danzig boys and cycle poseurs wandering about, but the crowd was mostly punks and burnouts. The one thing they all had in common was their dark wardrobe. The floor of the warehouse was turning into a swirling sea of black.

He began walking toward the middle of the warehouse, trying to appear as if he were casually looking for someone. Serge and Edrea's persisting absence was becoming quite irritating. He was feeling a hungry need to converse with someone he could talk to for more than five minutes.

He walked up to one side of the stage. Across the way, he noticed several gutter punks looking over Phil's pieces. He felt a carefully concealed twinge of excitement, as it seemed the galleries would finally start getting some attention.

The next band was composed of some rather sketchy-looking Throcker types. He decided he should get some distance between himself and the stage, just in case they were as bad as the last band.

He was making his way back to the gallery area in a roundabout way. He wanted to see if the gutter punks had moved down to his paintings. He was anxious to observe some reactions to his work.

As he was making his way through the still-growing crowd, he spotted a familiar patch of spiked black hair. He recognized the hair, but that was all he could see in the swirling crowd. Moving through the crowd, he caught a better glimpse of the familiar spikes.

"Zeke!"

Zeke turned around.

"Hey, Andre! What th' fuck, man?" Zeke was with a short Mohican punk.

"Whatcha' doin'?" asked Andre.

"Checkin' out th' scene. Gonna see my friend's band. They're settin' their stuff up now."

Cool."

"This is mah' pal Jason," said Zeke, indicating the short mohican.

"Hey."

"Gimme a dollar!" grinned Jason.

"Um, no."

"Then gimme a kiss."

"Sorry. A kiss costs a dollar."

"I know. That's why I want the dollar."

"Y'got your work up in here yet?" asked Zeke.

"Yeah." "You mean that stuff by the door?" asked Jason. "That shit is hella cool!" Andre felt a hot tremble go through his throat. "No, my work is in the second section."

"Hey, don't worry about it," said Zeke. "You know the best band never gets to be th' headliner."

He found Zeke's comment to be quite refreshing, though he was forcing himself to maintain his stern expression in spite of the compliment.

"So, what's your friend's band like?" asked Andre.

"They suck!" blurted Jason. "He jus' likes em' cause they're friend's of his." "He's cute, ain't he?" said Zeke. "Y'just wanna take him home an' beat his ass."

"Would'ja? Would'ja please?" Jason bounced up and down. "C'mon, I been a bad little punk!"

“Punk? I thought you were a death rocker,” sneered Andre.

“Gyah!”

Jason started to hop up and down in mock frustration, as Zeke pretended to restrain him. The two goofy punks were obviously in a good mood, and it was rubbing off on Andre. His inclusion in their banter helped him feel like part of the scene, rather than an aimless spectator.

Just as Zeke and Jason stopped their facetious display of aggression, he felt someone tap his shoulder. Turning around...

It was Serge. Edrea was standing right behind him.

He stiffened up. He just turned and looked at them, stoned faced.

“Andre!” said Serge. “There you are. How come you're not hanging out by your gallery?”

“What?” he blurted.

“I think one of those punks is writing on one of your paintings,” said Edrea.

A shot went through Andre as he recalled Sharon's earlier anxieties about people messing with the displays.

“Relax,” said Serge, taking note of his alarmed expression. “She's just kidding. No one's near your paintings.”

A flash of hot anger swelled inside his chest. Edrea had caught him off guard, and right in front of his friend Zeke.

“What are you doing here?” blurted Andre.

“Whattaya mean, what are we doing here?” shot back Serge incredulously.

“We told you we'd be here, didn't we?” said Edrea.

He stood in place and kept his expression straight. His posture was erect and his feet were firm, but he couldn't think of anything to say.

“So where exactly are your paintings?” asked Serge. “We didn't see them on the way in.”

Hot blood began flowing into his face.

“They put em' in the back so they wouldn't scare the children,” jibed Zeke.

“What?” asked Serge.

“There are children here?” asked Edrea.

“Yeah. Jason's here.”

“Fuck ya, mon,” smiled Jason.

“And such a cute child!” kidded Serge.

“I bite!” bellowed Jason as he jumped up and down in place.

“Thanks. That might come in handy,” said Edrea.

“What are you talking about?” asked Serge.

“You haven't bitten me in weeks!”

Andre was the only one who wasn't grinning or laughing. He was quite rigid. He could feel a new mood seeping through his expression, even though his train of thought could not tell him what kind of mood he was in. His thoughts kept racing around as he tried to think of something to say.

“I have to check my exhibit.”

“Yes, make sure there aren't any frightened children cowering under the paintings,” joked Serge.

He started walking back to the galleries. The crowd had grown even larger during the moments he had been talking to Zeke. He was walking more or less towards the bar, though he was thinking more about getting through the thickening crowd than where he was going.

It took Andre a few moments to push his way back to the galleries. He emerged right next to the makeshift bar. He had forgotten why he had come back. but then he quickly remembered that he had told his friends that he was going to check his artwork. He could see a few people standing around, talking and drinking right in front of his paintings. They were just standing and talking, not even looking at his work. They were treating the galleries as a sort of lounge area.

He bought another beer from the bar. A drop of sweat rolled down the side of his head. The air was getting hot because of the packed crowd.

Walking by his display, he refused to look back out into the crowd to see if Serge and Edrea were still talking to Zeke. He began looking over one of his own paintings, as if he were simply a spectator. Suddenly he was wondering how it would look if one of his friends were to see him observing his own work, so he made his way over to Sharon's sculptures.

He cautiously examined the first sculpture. It was a mannequin covered with small plastic toys. It didn't take long for Andre to start feeling ridiculous, looking at such childish artwork. He quickly made his way over to Phil's section. As he walked past his paintings again, he wondered why the hell Serge and Edrea had not come back to talk to him by now.

He decided to kill some time by taking a closer look at Phil's work. The centers of Phil's paintings were dominated by swirling colors made with broad strokes, but the corners contained very fine detail. He thought the contrast did not work very well, but he still wanted to study the intricate corners more closely.

He was looking at a painting of a tall, lanky and blue figure. He thought it might be a semi-surreal self-portrait. In the left-hand corner was a small television set, finely done, with extremely small words written on the screen. They were incredibly small and finely detailed curly letters. He could barely make out what they were saying.

“Do you want to know what it says?” He was momentarily startled, as he had been concentrating so intently. Phil had come up right behind him.

His face became hot as he brought his head back. He held in a violent shudder.

Phil was looking at him with his blank, drug-induced stare. Andre didn't say anything. He felt like screaming at Phil, but instead, he maintained a motionless expression and casually put his hands in his pockets.

“I'm glad someone was trying to read them,” intoned Phil. ”I made them that small so that people would try to read them. It's a trick I learned from a t-shirt.”

Andre relaxed his posture ever so slightly. He bent his elbows just enough to give his arms their proper angle as he tilted his head back, ever so slightly.

“My friend Stephanie had this t-shirt with really small writing on the chest. When you saw the shirt you had this natural inclination to look closer, to see what it said. I totally fell for it and stuck my face right up to her shirt. It said, 'Stop staring at my tits.' “

Phil grinned and chuckled, and Andre smiled ever so slightly, keeping his eyes locked in their expression.

“She had pretty big breasts, too. I basically shoved my face right into her cleavage without even thinking about it.”

Andre started to look away. His skin became tight when he saw that Serge and Edrea were still talking to Zeke in the middle of the club floor. He quickly turned his eyes back to Phil.

“That's what gave me the idea,” continued Phil. ”There were these quotes that I wanted people to read, but I didn't know if they would really read them if I just wrote them out. They would just think they were clever little phrases and not really concentrate on what they were saying.”

“I see.”

Phil leaned over and pointed to one of the corners. “By making it this small people would concentrate on it, and they'd be more interested in what it said. This one says, 'Give me a fruitful error anytime, full of seed, bursting with its own corrections. You can keep your sterile truth for yourself.' “

Phil straightened himself and looked at Andre.

“It's a quote from an Italian economist,” he continued. “I always thought it was a wonderful quote. If you really think about what it says, it can really teach you an awful lot.”

“Ah.”

Phil pointed to another corner. “This is another favorite quote of mine. 'Truth is always subversive'.”

“I see.”

”This corner says, 'It is a strange courage you give me ancient star; shine alone in the sunrise, to

which you lend no part.' “

”Hm.”

“That's William Carlos Williams.”

Phil seemed to stiffen up when some rather bohemian-looking people wandered by and looked over his paintings. His voice became softer, as if he didn't want anyone to overhear him.

“You should read the rest. Believe it or not, the last corner of this piece has a line from Richard Nixon. It's really ironic, at least to me. I really love that quote, even if it did come from him.”

“Hey, Phil!” A short and sketched-out punk chick with bright green hair was calling out from the entrance.

“Hang on.” Phil made his way past the bar crowd.

Andre looked around; Serge and Edrea were still talking to Zeke. He clenched his teeth. His hands became tight.

They were supposed to be there for him.

He looked over to the other exhibits. There were people milling around, drinking, and talking in front of his paintings. He saw a few people checking out Sharon's sculptures, but they seemed to be motivated by idle curiosity rather than any serious contemplation of her work.

Turning back to Phil's painting, he leaned in and squinted at the last corner. It took a bit of time, but he managed to make out the small words that were entwined around a small child playing with a toy tank.

“There will always be those who hate you, but those who hate you can't win, unless you hate them back, because then, you destroy yourself.”

Andre quickly straightened up. He had stood there and listened to Phil because he was a fellow artist, and he had been curious to hear about how he had fashioned his paintings. But he thought the idea of tiny words in the corners of a painting was just a cheap gimmick. He was not really interested in catchy little tricks when it came to art.

Turning around, he saw that several people were already squinting at the corners of Phil's work, trying to read the small words of pop wisdom.

He turned and headed for the stairs. He really needed to talk to Ian. He could see that Serge and Edrea were still ignoring him for Zeke.

Climbing up the warehouse steps, he could feel his chest burning.