
The Demesnes That There Adjacent Lie

David M. Miller

Nick Ashwell threw The Complete Shakespeare to the end of his bed. He sat for a moment with his back propped against the wall and stared vacantly across the room. He ran his hand thoughtfully over his face. He hadn't shaved in three days.

The clock said 10:30. Friday night. John was on a date. Ray had a late study group. And Alan wasn't due back from San Diego until Sunday. Four roommates and nobody home. Nobody but Nick, that is.

Nick grabbed a sweatshirt and headed out the door. He was just putting it on as the elevator arrived. The cute girl from the sixth floor was already on board. The petite blond was holding a basket of clothing. Nick tried not to look at the panties on top, he nodded politely. "Late night laundry run, huh?" he asked coolly.

"Yeah," she said while staring up at the numbers above the door.

If only this damn thing would break down now instead of when I'm late for a final, Nick thought as he pushed the button for the first floor. The elevator had indeed stopped running once when he was racing to an exam.

Nick tried to think of something clever to say. Nothing sprang to mind. He tried to make casual eye contact. She stared straight ahead. He pulled the right corner of his mouth into that charming, engaging, disarming smile he thought he had. She paid no heed. He began to grow a bit uncomfortable.

Nick was relieved when the elevator did not break down. He got out on the first floor, leaving Suzi, the cute girl from the sixth floor behind. "So she does wear black panties," Nick mumbled as the door closed. "John owes me dinner."

The streets outside the building were empty. A row of palm trees rustled and creaked in the breeze. "Hotel California" found its way to the street from an open porch a few floors up. "Plenty of room at the Hotel California / What a nice surprise, bring your alibis."

Nick paused for a moment on the sidewalk. He breathed the air. *It almost smells clean at night*, he thought. *And you can't see the smog*. He thought of walking to Westwood. He could get there inside of fifteen minutes. Something was bound to be happening there. He could grab a burger at Johnny Rocket's, maybe see a flick, do the usual things. He'd probably run into some people he knew. They would drop by the coffee house and sit in a group and bitch about classes and professors and friends and politics and crime and such. And then they'd all go home bored and agitated. Christ he hated Westwood.

He cut across a couple of streets and headed toward campus instead. He was feeling antsy—tense, yet energetic. He felt like fighting, or flirting, or fucking. He felt like doing something really brave, or really stupid, nothing in between. He certainly didn't feel like studying Shakespeare—not with Mercutio dead. The wind was charging him, he felt like a live wire. He briefly considered going back to the laundry room and asking Suzi if she needed any help with her underwear.

He thought of the last time he'd felt so bold. He and Alan had gone to the California State Fair. They both were feeling nuts, so they paid sixty bucks a piece to be pushed off a tower with rubber bands strapped to their feet. Nick swore like a sailor the whole way down. And up. And down. The earth reaching out to grab him at a thousand miles a minute.

Nick wished Alan hadn't gone away for the weekend. Alan would undoubtedly have thought of something to do. Alan had the car. They could have escaped the Westwood area altogether. They could have gone walking down the San Monica promenade. They'd be checking out the skirts and watching the street performers in action—one sculpting shapes from soap bubbles in mid-air, another performing magical flashes and breathing fire, still another doing a stand-up routine.

Or maybe they'd have gone to that bar down by the beach—the one with the amateur sing-along contest. After a few drinks they'd definitely have the nerve to sing a few sour notes and get thrown off the stage. At least that was one way to get noticed. Chicks love guys who try to sing. Alan swears he

almost scored there once.

Nick cut across the basketball courts and headed for the south side of campus. His unused energy was rapidly turning into discontentment. He had to do *something*, and soon. He thought of going into one of the science buildings, maybe the one with all the telescopes on top. It was a good night to be above things, to look down on the world. Besides, he figured maybe he could look straight down and pretend that the earth was reaching out to grab him again.

The science building was deserted, but it was unlocked and well lighted. Ray was probably there earlier, working on the computers for his programming class with his study group. By now though they were probably stoned out of their minds on someone's floor. Ray's study groups tended to end up like that. Ray claimed to be a *serious* student.

Nick navigated the maze of corridors that led to the roof. Not many people could find their way around the astronomy building. Nick prided himself on being one of the few.

When he opened the door to the roof, Nick was surprised by the sound of voices in the darkness. There were obviously several people already there, all talking in whispers. At first Nick thought he had wandered in on some late class, and he was about to leave when he saw the sign to his left. It told him that the telescopes were open to the public a couple of nights each month. This happened to be one of those nights. Nick remembered Alan telling him that he'd taken a girl to one of these things. Cheap date, he'd said.

Nick looked at the night sky. Faint pinpoints of flickering light could be seen through the haze. Millions and billions of tiny suns he told himself. No harm in looking.

Nick waited for a chance at the telescope. Most of the people on the roof were standing in small groups or in couples. They all waited patiently for a chance to look up. *Not exactly a wild crowd*, Nick thought, *but who am I to complain?*

After a few moments, Nick looked through the telescope and found (not for the first time), that small flecks of light, when seen through a telescope, become slightly larger flecks of light.

Just as he was about to pull his eye away from the lens, a flash of fury lit up his view. A speck of dust or debris collided with the earth's atmosphere and caught fire. It was a one in a million chance, but through the telescope, Nick had a close-up view as the tiny object streaked the stars and proclaimed itself to the universe. Then it was gone. Forever. And the flecks of light burned on.

Nick continued to stare through the telescope for a moment, trying to find some grandiose moral or meaning to the shooting star. Its after-image still burned on his retina, but he could determine nothing.

Nick Ashwell wandered to the edge of the roof. He leaned over the railing and looked down at the earth. It wasn't rushing out to grab him just now, but he had the distinct feeling he was falling toward it, burning brightly. He stood there a while, just thinking.

"Aren't you in my chemistry class?" a voice asked from close by.

"Huh?" he stammered as he turned around. A tall, thin girl with brown hair stood a few feet away from him. She may have been attractive, he couldn't quite tell in the dark. Her nose ring glittered in the dim light. "No, I don't take chemistry," he said as politely as possible.

"Oh, you look like someone else then," she said. She tossed her hair back and looked at the sky. "Do you study astronomy?"

A glowing ash fell from her cigarette.

"Sometimes," Nick said. "I look for shooting stars."