

# **The Soul Institute**



**Michael D. Smith**

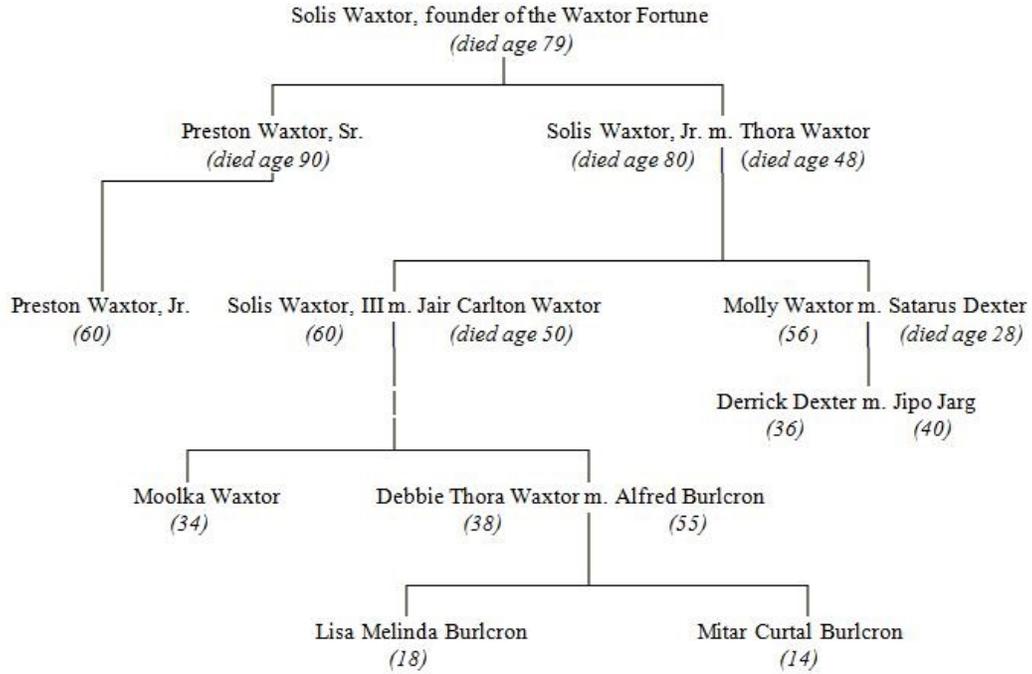
# **THE SOUL INSTITUTE**

a novel by  
Michael D. Smith

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For my wife Nancy  
who has given infinite support to my art  
from the beginning

## The Soul Institute - The Waxtor Family



## CHAPTER ONE

### Goodbye Moolka

*Friday, November 2*

Derrick sipped his clear wine among the crowd beneath the banner. GOODBYE MOOLKA. It was good so many had turned out on her last day.

“I still can’t believe she’s actually going *back*,” Debbie said.

“I know,” Derrick muttered. “It just doesn’t make sense.”

Late afternoon light glowed through two sets of glass doors. Sixty people were jammed in the English Department lobby. Everyone already had enough wine to be laughing and forgetting that Moolka was really leaving the Soul Institute.

Moolka came up for a sideways hug. “There you are,” Derrick said, squeezing her. “We’re just discussing how awful it is for the millionth time.”

Moolka was short, with brown eyes, a round face, and long wild dark hair. She wore a loose-fitting top over big melon breasts.

“We can’t believe you’re really *leaving*,” Debbie said.

“I’ll always be here,” Moolka said, pointing first to her sister’s heart, then Derrick’s. “You know I’m really just going *home*.”

“But it’s turned into such a *cesspool*,” Derrick said.

Moolka shrugged. “No, really, Derrick. When I interviewed in September, the grounds were as beautiful as ever. It’s still the way it was, deep down.”

“Really? Really?”

“But of course it’s just like some cheap amusement park now,” Alfred Burlcron put in. Tall and sallow, the Director of the Soul Institute extended his arm to Moolka for yet another sideways hug.

“Well, we can’t put a damper on Moolka’s plans,” Debbie said. “She’s doing good for herself to go.” Debbie Burlcron was even more gorgeous than her sister. There was a definite facial resemblance, and Debbie’s green eyes were as

intoxicating as Moolka's, her blond hair thick and long like her sister's. But Debbie was taller, her face sharper, her voice deeper, her body excellently proportioned. Men drooled at the perfection of the Director's wife. Yet there was something irritatingly vacant about her.

"But she'll really be running the place," Derrick put in. "It can't help but improve."

Burlcron looked down on Derrick with Moolka under his arm. "Well, I suppose one can hope."

"You'll all have to come visit when I get it back on its feet!" Moolka laughed, punching Burlcron's arm.

Nobody else would dare touch him like that, Derrick knew. How could the happiest, most carefree person here be leaving them?

"Oh! There's Greg! Greg! Where've you *been*?" Moolka cried, embracing baby-faced Milton expert Greg McKinnon.

"How's my Moolka?" Greg said. "Have you had any of Janey's cookies over here?" Derrick watched Moolka's trim little ass swaying as the two moved off.

"Man, I haven't been back there since God knows when," Derrick said.

"Well, when I was back a few years ago," Debbie mused. "It's really still beautiful. Well, except for those rides by the lake."

"Yes, I'm sure Preston's little theme park is quite lovely," Burlcron snorted. "God, what a *waste*." He emptied his red wine and searched for more. "Well, possibly our little Moolka will work miracles there. Who knows? Excuse me, please." And he was off for the wine table.

Derrick let out some air. "Well--I bet she will."

"I guess we'll all have to start budgeting for monthly airplane tickets," Debbie said. "We'll have to visit all the time. We can't just let her be all alone up there."

Derrick winced. "It's just that I haven't been back there in so long."

"And of course, Daddy being back in Chicago complicates things."

"Really? Are you kidding?"

“He’s been back since late last year, that’s what Moolka said.”

“Are you kidding? He *can’t* be there!”

“Shhh! No, Preston seems okay with it. I guess he feels sorry for him or something. Somehow Daddy has money again.”

“No!”

Debbie considered her husband far away by the cookies. “Look, I don’t know how or why. Anyway, Daddy sent Moolka a letter in January asking how things were. So, a few emails back and forth ...”

“I can’t believe this! Moolka’s *writing* him?”

“Of course. How do you think she landed the job?”

“God, I thought Solis legally couldn’t have anything to *do* with it.”

“Well, I don’t know all the ins and outs. I guess Moolka’s going to find out. It was all so edgy when she was up there. She never did see Daddy. Just Preston.”

“Huh. Why does that sound so typical? Well, maybe it was for the best.”

“I know. I’m not sure I could deal with him in person myself now anyway.”

What was up with Debbie today? She never opened up like this with him. Was it because everyone was pretending to be so happy? Or maybe the wine?

*Hell, maybe she wants me! Could that be it? God, she’s a piece. Wouldn’t we all like to fuck her good and hard!*

*Shut up! You’re not supposed to think that!*

Debbie looked across the room. “Well, cheer up, you’re actually gaining *another* cousin, not losing one. I’m sure you’ll have Lisa in one of your classes this year.”

“Huh? Oh--right.” Derrick followed her gaze to where a young woman in a long gray dress was spilling crimson wine onto a tablecloth. As she pulled back with a hand over her mouth she knocked a plate of sandwiches to the floor. Burlcron and Debbie’s daughter had been so moody and withdrawn her last couple years of high school that Derrick was startled by how much she’d grown

up. She was an elegant--if somewhat uncoordinated--eighteen-year-old beauty.

Maybe it was the fuzzy gray turtleneck dress outlining that long slim body. Such a solemn oval face, such sculptured lips, long brown hair falling well past her small breasts. Endless slender legs. Huge brown eyes. How would Aunt Jair have defined the new Soul Institute freshman? A first cousin, once removed? Now he had *three* beautiful cousins.

Wouldn't old Alfred be pissed if Derrick began nosing around his daughter? Damn, her ass was nice in that clingy thing. Was she a poet? Was she an artist aflame with buried passion? He knew she studied music; surely she played haunting airs on the flute. She'd be shy in bed but Derrick would teach her fantastic things--

"Are you even listening to me, Derrick?" Debbie demanded.

"Well, sure. Something ... about this manuscript TSI Press got?"

She shook her head. "Derrick, I swear, your listening skills ..."

"This weird book Alfred wants you to publish?"

"I mean, the thing is, Felicia won't even let me read the thing, but she lets out all these hints about how insane it is, how it'll *destroy* TSI Press."

Derrick tuned her out. Across the room was Felicia McKinnon, Greg's wife. His dearest friend on earth. The woman he'd never stop loving as long as he lived. He smiled at her outrageous attire: the faded overalls over the bright red shirt, the boots. The woman was a walking work of art. She lounged against a table, tall and lean, brick-red hair done up high, exposing that lovely neck Derrick used to kiss, out of his mind.

*She* had the spark. *She* had the life force. She looked ready to leap onto a horse and spur it to full gallop. She was such an exuberant female, so mystical, yet so down to earth. That wary look in her sharp blue eyes always stunned him. She *defined* Woman. Her breasts under those overalls were the most perfect he could imagine.

So what on earth did she see in that jerk husband of hers?

But when she'd broken it off with Derrick in February she'd said: "It's all

for Greg now.”

They’d never even been naked with each other, except the time he’d gotten her blouse off for a couple minutes. Then she’d ordered him to stop. Only much later did he realize he could’ve had her anyway if he’d just pushed it. Dammit, he’d blown his one chance to fuck Felicia McKinnon. Well, maybe ending it had been for the best. But he still loved her, always would.

The chatter was deafening. Six-foot-four Tuttle Borgenfoen, Chair of the Languages Department, rode high above the noise, cackling through some off-color joke in his erudite German accent. Everyone at TSI was crammed in here, it seemed, all twenty faculty, dozens of students and staff. They all loved their Moolka.

But in the last hour Derrick’s entire life had been ripped apart.

Had one hour changed his feelings for Felicia? It couldn’t be. He didn’t want to drown in passion again. Felicia was good for maintaining a balance. He knew he loved her, but all that passion stuff was in the background now, and didn’t it help him as a writer to be able to stand back and just watch the cosmic sexual forces of life at play? If he got lost in passion again it’d wreck his growth as a writer, wouldn’t it?

A playful punch hit his shoulder. “Repeat back what I just said.”

Derrick was caught in Debbie’s challenging emerald eyes.

“What did I just say? Play back your tape recorder again, Derrick.”

“Well, you were saying Alfred’s already a little worried about how crazy this manuscript is, and that he hadn’t read it when he offered this new guy the job.”

“Amazing. I don’t know how you do it.”

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There was a commotion at the door.

“Sorry I’m late. Had to finish my run!” Jipo Jarg, who looked to weigh

sixty pounds, still wore her running togs after pounding her daily fifteen miles through the streets of Linstar. Her teeny breasts jutted from her tight black shirt like the armored ridges of some deep-sea crustacean. Her arms and legs were strained, yellow, and wet, like something Derrick might find in his basket beside the coleslaw at Clampers Chicken. He'd nearly run her down at a stoplight last week when, obsessed with her runner's high, she'd ceased noticing traffic. Derrick had screeched to a horn-honking halt to avoid the idiot, then recognized who it was. But she never turned to acknowledge him and in disgust he hadn't bothered to call a hello.

"Where's the OrganoWater?" Jipo cried, moving towards the wine table, the bright red key cord around her neck slapping her bony chest.

"I believe Debbie did get some," replied pseudo-artist Fannin Richardson, directing her to the clear plastic bottles.

Derrick snorted. The only time he'd ever had a couple drinks with Richardson was last March, when the guy had been promoted to Chair of the Art Department, and Derrick, as Chair of English, had been embarrassed that nobody else was about to mark this transition with any ceremony. But once Richardson was potted all he could do was whine about how he needed raw cunt in the worst way.

So why didn't he have a girlfriend? He'd been such a monk all this time that the rumor had it that he was gay. But there he was, slavering over the fantastic pussy here. Well, if he didn't mind an ugly bitch, wouldn't Jipo be the perfect match? What a hoot it'd be to see that bastard plowing his way between that runt's twiggy legs.

Jipo had collared Burlcron by the double set of glass doors to the fields. They were dark silhouettes against bright yellow green, Jipo jabbing emphatically, Burlcron shrugging in unconcern. Derrick grimaced.

Where was Moolka? She had to get packed up. She had a fifteen hundred-mile drive tomorrow. He had to let her know that somehow he'd be following her soon.

*I hate this place! Hate it! It's killing me!*

Moolka stood by the secretary's computer, chatting with Lisa Melinda Burlcron and Dorrington Caldwell, the sophomore psychedelic freak. Derrick picked two full plastic wine cups off the wine table and moved to Moolka.

"Saw you needed a fresh glass there." Moolka met his eyes with a dazzling smile that knocked the air out of him. His fingers slipped and the proffered cup plunged to the carpet.

"*Oh!*" she laughed.

"That's the fifth cup down so far!" the shaggy Dorrington put in.

Moolka bent to pick it up, but as she leaned over in that loose top her bra came away from her magnificent breast. And there was her nipple. Derrick poured his own cup onto the carpet.

Moolka slopped at the stains with a cocktail napkin. "So what are *you* looking at, cousin?" she grinned.

"I--I--"

Derrick squatted to get a full view of Moolka's treasures. She met his eyes with another potent smile. His heart split open. *Again*. He was barely conscious of Dorrington handing him paper towels. He soaked up wine as best he could, unable to pull his eyes from that wondrous cleavage.

Fortunately Dorrington and Lisa Melinda couldn't see what Moolka was so happily displaying. Derrick groaned. What happened an hour ago flooded back.

*God, I thought I could handle it. But I can't!*

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Dim Warning

Pushing into the lobby, glancing at his watch: 2:30 PM. Felicia and others setting up for the party. He still had half an hour before it started. Time enough to write that letter to the Rumson boy's parents. The idiot had violated the drug code *again*.

Why on earth had he volunteered for Student Advisor this year? Answer: because he thought Burlcron might consider him for Dean of Students. How had he turned into such a brownnoser? There wouldn't be time to work on his play this semester.

Felicia looked fantastic in those old overalls. What a faultless tush. After all these dismal months apart, he still loved her. He moved to her but Debbie interrupted. "Hey, there, cousin! We could use some help!"

He found himself calling over his shoulder: "Sorry, but I can't. I'll be out for the party in a bit. Need to get that damn Rumson letter out." And then he was in his office.

A dim, delightful space twenty-five feet wide, once a conference room. He was lucky to have it, although the rumor was that Burlcron was looking to carve existing office space into smaller units. The entire far wall was solid window covered by closed miniblinds. There was a suggestion of November afternoon light and the fields of the Soul Institute.

He stopped in shock. "God! What are *you* doing here?"

"Hey there!" Moolka Waxtor said, leaning back in his big leather chair.

"How did you get in here?"

"I just came in, silly." Moolka took a deep breath and stretched her arms over her head for a yawn, thrusting out those big round breasts.

"I mean, how'd you get in here if--if the party's being set up out *there*?" Wasn't there some sort of protocol--brides before weddings, actors before a play--that you didn't appear at your farewell party until it was set up?

“Debbie and Felicia told me to come on in here and wait. I wanted to talk with you.”

“With ... *me?*” Derrick set his briefcase down.

“To say goodbye.”

“*Oh ...*” Goodbye forever. No more bubbly Moolka. He’d tried not to think about this moment since she’d announced two weeks ago that she was going to Waxtor Carnationist College. That the Enemy had hired her away. Everyone was stunned, but they all loved Moolka and not only had they forgiven her, they’d never really blamed her. They knew how much she loved her childhood home. Of course, nobody understood that Derrick loved it just as much. But wouldn’t he be seen as a traitor if he uttered that?

“We’ll ... stay in touch,” Derrick said. “We’ll email or something.”

“No, call. Call me when you can. I can’t write.”

“But you’re the Writer in Residence,” Derrick tried to joke. “Or were, I guess. I mean ...”

“No, it’ll be better to call me. I’ll need to hear your voice.”

“Oh ... okay.” He sat on the edge of the desk, his knee an inch from hers. Moolka was such an affectionate woman that she often rubbed up against him, touched knees under the table, and flirted with saucy smiles and pleasant deep laughs over double entendre chitchat. But always in the company of other people. This business of being only an inch from his knee, given that they were alone, was disturbing.

Today she wore tight gray jeans that excruciatingly outlined the shape of her thighs. He’d always had trouble believing that any woman could have such excellent legs. He was fascinated by the contrast of the gray jeans with the loose gray and white striped top. Everything was so gray in here. He realized he should’ve turned the lights on, but he preferred this grainy darkness. “Well, I’m glad you came by. You know we’ll always be friends.”

“Yes ... forever.” Moolka stood, arms wide. “Give me a hug, Derrick.”

He did so, surprised and delighted. Only once before had they hugged,

after a drunken party when he was escorting her to her car. Yes, she'd flirted with him ever since they'd been at TSI, ten long years of it even as she was engaged for most of that time to that Don twit who'd fled TSI a few years back. But he'd always had the impression that Moolka enjoyed using her position as cousin to merciless feminine advantage, with rubbing and joking sex talk to confuse him, knowing full well he could never make a serious move on her. Had she really forgotten their childhood friendship?

One Friday night at Emerson's, with seven or eight TSI people, including Felicia and Greg and Moolka's date Carl, a silent mustached turd she'd later dumped, Derrick and Moolka had jammed their calves against each other and undulated for an hour as drunken laughter went on all around them. Yet they'd never looked into each other's eyes the whole time.

He'd spent that whole weekend obsessing about running away with her. Of expressing everything directly to her, soul to soul, no secrets kept back, everything male-female that could possibly be. Then on Monday he'd woken up sane and realized it would never work. Moolka was just being herself, she was just his cousin, she had Carl. She was just spinning out her zany sexual power games.

Now Derrick had his delightful friend in his arms, and he felt her magnificent breasts pressed to him, he felt her arms come tightly around him in the realization that they'd never lay eyes on each other again, and he wondered why on earth he was letting her go.

"We'll ... write some emails ... or something," he babbled, his face in her fluffy brown hair. She smelled so good. Childhood friend, colleague, cousin, primordial woman, muse ...

"What ... whatever you want ..." Moolka whispered back.

He kissed her on the cheek. A final little goodbye token. But he found he couldn't stop with one. His lips roamed her face. She held him fiercely. How could she be so strong? "We'll write long emails ... very long emails that explain everything, things we take our time with ..."

“Anything ... everything ...” she whispered. Those brown eyes, shining with tears. Everything so dim in here. And Derrick kissed her on the lips. Then pulled back. She was smiling at him. Holding him so tightly. She was so warm.

“Moolka ... you know I’ll always love you--”

Derrick was about to add “as a friend,” but she silenced him with:

“I know. I love you, too.”

God, yes. Now it was clear. It was Moolka he’d always loved. All the flirting, all the games, had been there for a reason.

Kissing her. Deeply. Her entire body came to him. He rocked her back and forth. “God ... God ... *Moolka* ...”

“Oh yes, oh *yes* ...” Her tongue came into his mouth.

“I mean, is this right? I mean, should we be ...?”

“Oh yes, we *love* each other.”

“Yes ... we do ...”

He’d never looked into anyone’s eyes like this before. Not even Felicia’s. Moolka’s eyes were twin pools of brown love that went back to the beginning of the universe. She and Derrick were eternal. Their love was eternal.

“God, that it has to come down to *this*.” Derrick struggled for air, holding her face in his hands. “That--you’re *leaving*.”

She nodded. “I know ... I know. Just hold me.”

More kissing. Her hands came down to his ass and squeezed. He couldn’t believe it. She could be *that* direct.

“I guess it’s ironic ... we’ve always wanted each other ...”

“And couldn’t do anything about it ... until now.”

“I know ... but maybe it’s all for the best.”

Moolka pulled back. “I leave tomorrow.”

“I ... I know ...”

She looked deeply into his eyes. “Then this is our time, Derrick.”

“I ... I ...” he gasped, abruptly aware of himself surging against the flimsy confines of his thin pants, pressing into her thigh. He grabbed her soft ass and

found himself thrusting against her.

“Yes ... I want ...” she moaned. “I want *you*, Derrick.”

His hands found her huge breasts. God, they felt good. Before he knew what he was doing he’d pulled her top over her head.

“Moolka! God!” Her boobs were wondrous, magnificent, spilling out of her bra. With a smile she reached behind and helped him unclasp it. “God, you’re *beautiful!*”

She pulled his belt apart and slipped the catch of his pants free. “I want *this*,” she whispered, pulling his zipper down, unpeeling his underwear. He was in the open, in the air, and she was grasping it. “Oh, *Derrick ...*”

“*Oh my God yes ...*” Derrick shivered, all too aware of the unlocked door to his office and Debbie and Felicia setting up the party twenty feet away. “We ... we need to get into the closet--”

“The ... closet?”

“Over there,” Derrick said, waddling towards the closet in his fallen pants. “We can be naked with each other in there--”

“*Naked ...*” Moolka whispered, taking his hand. “I’d like that.”

Jamming themselves into the closet, nudging aside a dead laptop, scattering a shelf of student papers, they quickly shed the rest of their clothes. Everything was revealed. Endless exploring, discovering, kissing. It didn’t matter that anyone out in the lobby had to be hearing this. There was nothing but fondling her firm cunt beneath the big bush of fluffy dark hair. There was nothing but the bliss on her face. “God, you’re good, Derrick!” she moaned.

“*You’re good*,” Derrick said, taking her breasts in his hands. “These feel so *good*.” Rubbing against her, squatting, maneuvering for an entrance. “Maybe this isn’t the best position ...”

“Maybe ... Derrick ... *oh ... just put it in*.”

She opened up. He peered deeply into those brown eyes--inexpressible intimacy--as his phallus slid home. Her strong hands pulled him deep inside her.

“I *love* you, Moolka! *God I love you!*” he moaned, animal force driving

from the depths, ramming up through her.

“I love you, Derrick!” Moolka cried.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Paradise and Depression, or, The Sneer

He and Moolka stabbed the floor with paper towels even as they poured themselves into each other's eyes. Derrick fought to catch his breath. Dorrington and Lisa Melinda behind them, tipsy and giggling, still didn't get it. They moved off for more wine. Moolka and Derrick were alone.

"I thought you'd run off on me," Moolka winked.

"I ... I thought it would look best if I mingled through the party. And if you did too ..."

"Don't run off on me, Derrick."

"No, I won't ... I'll fly up there every chance I get."

"That's what I was hoping. And I'll fly down here ..."

"Your breasts are so *beautiful*." Derrick was tempted to reach through the generously open neckline for them.

"I'm glad you like them. They're all yours."

"Well, I see our outgoing little traitor is now destroying college property," Alfred Moid Burlcron said from six and a half feet above them.

Moolka quickly straightened, with a hand to her chest to close off the view. "Well, I'm sorry, Alfred, but we couldn't afford red dye for this carpet, so we're using *wine*."

"I think we got the worst of it up," Derrick said. "Of course, we've needed new carpet in here for years."

"We'll have new carpet once we remodel all these offices next spring," Burlcron shot back.

*Damn the bastard. Well, so what if I lose the stupid office. My goddamn life is over. This whole bullshit at TSI is over.*

He tossed the bloody paper towels into a wastebasket as if they were TSI themselves.

The paper towels ... he'd come naked out of the closet, hoping Debbie or

Felicia hadn't entered the office in the meantime. Snatching a roll of towels from a shelf, he'd been appalled to hear people laughing on the other side of the unlocked door. Back in the harsh closet light, still panting from the exertion of the standing up fucking, they'd cleaned themselves with the rough paper and redressed. Derrick was horrified at the smell of sex all through his office. Moolka telling him everything was all right had no effect on his escalating panic.

"Did you guys have a nice chat?" Debbie had said as they'd emerged. Derrick couldn't recall what he and Moolka mumbled in reply. Surely everyone out there *knew*.

And now Moolka continued to banter with Alfred as he crapped on about office remodeling and budgets. Well, flirting was her nature, it was the way she related to men. Derrick supposed he had to love her for it.

God, what had they done? What had he done with his *cousin*? Didn't they just give way to *urges*? Wasn't it insane to fuck in the closet while Debbie and Felicia were setting up fifteen feet away?

Yes, even as he'd been proud to watch Moolka's lithe, big-breasted body hugging every man at the party as he stood there knowing he'd had her just an hour ago, he hadn't been able to say one real thing to her. Of course she'd sensed this. It was all crazy. They hadn't discussed birth control or STD's or anything. They'd just gone ahead and done it.

But even as all the hormones, sperm, penis, balls and everything else connected with sex had evaporated to nothing, even as the rational mind wrote off *the closet* as a flat-out mistake, even as Derrick assumed he'd never again feel horny for Moolka Waxtor, her naked breasts blew the rational mind off its foundations. He knew he wouldn't be flying to Chicago to visit his dear childhood friend; he'd be barging up there every weekend to bang her good and hard and then forget her for another week.

Something had begun that no force on the planet could stop. His mild wish for a controlled, low wattage observer lust, his fantasy of cuckolding Burlcron with Cousin Debbie, his wistful memories of Felicia, had all just been

games designed to distract him from the final insane force of *Moolka*.

That protection was now removed.

\*

“Attention, attention!” Burlcron intoned, Moolka at his side. “I have some wonderful news for you all. As sad as we all are to have our Writer in Residence leaving us, I must say we’ve got some great news, and I might as well announce it here. As many of you already know, and now I can make it official, we’ve hired a new Writer in Residence who’s due to arrive tomorrow.”

“*Tomorrow?*” Derrick whispered.

Moolka bit her lip. Derrick could feel shock waves through the room. It was just like Burlcron to screw up a heartfelt party with some tactless political crap. Moolka took a deep breath, suppressing tears as Burlcron rattled off the newcomer’s name and accomplishments, neither of which Derrick caught.

God, she was lovely. He had to have her right now. Couldn’t he lead her back to the office, make everyone think he was taking her away from the obvious dismay of hearing how easily she could be replaced? No, that was impossible. She had to stand here and take it. Was there any way he could fly up to Waxtor himself and just never come back? Get a job there himself? Turn traitor to Burlcron and the Soul Institute? Meanwhile the anorexic Jipo led a round of applause for the next Writer in Residence, declaring how much he’d have their support, how Burlcron had such a “flash of genius in hiring this new jewel.”

*God, Jipo’s an asshole!*

Moolka’s face was close to collapse as Burlcron continued to enumerate the stellar qualities of her replacement. Chatter resumed. Derrick basked in the radiation sleet of sexual satisfaction, fantasy, longing, dread and nostalgia, for everything from his childhood at Waxtor to the Urges in the Closet.

“This Steina guy is an absolute fruitcake,” Felicia said, leaning in. Derrick gaped at the one-time love of his life.

“Who?”

“This Steina guy. Did Debbie tell you about his insane manuscript? It’s totally *pornographic*, it’s fifteen hundred *pages*, and he says he’s constantly revising the whole thing. You wouldn’t believe the gall of the cover letter he had with it. Burlcron happened to be in the office and I showed him the letter as a joke. But he says it’s *inspired*. Next thing I know he’s offered the Writer in Residence job to this *idiot*.”

“Damn, Burlcron’s more senile than we thought.”

“It’s gonna be weird. This guy is *nuts*.”

But Derrick didn’t care about Moolka’s replacement. He was transfixed by her overwrought round face. For so long she’d cultivated this image of herself as mindlessly simple, absorbed in her sunny creativity. No, she was *complex and unhappy*. Derrick went to her, daring another sideways hug, appropriate for their public personae. “We’ll send email, or something ...” was all he could think so say, hoping to recall to her the power of *the closet*. But to his dismay her mouth and eyes crumbled into uncontrollable sobbing, and she was fully in his arms.

“She’s ... just a little upset,” Derrick said. “She’ll be all right.”

“We’ll really miss you, Moolka,” Greg McKinnon put in.

“She’s so sad,” someone said.

“But ...” Moolka said from Derrick’s arms, turning to the crowd. “I’m so confused, but ... I have an announcement of my own to make.”

Derrick drew back, sure she was about to describe *the closet* in life-shattering detail. But he gasped in relief as she went on:

“I just wanted to tell you all how much I’ve appreciated your party, and, and your love for me, which I can never forget. It’s just that I don’t want to, like, piss anyone off, but ...” She paused for a long time, crying.

“You couldn’t piss off anyone for any reason!” her sister Debbie laughed. “Go ahead, Moolka!”

“It’s just that this party ... well, we should have it for another reason,

maybe not my going away.”

“But we *want* to give you this special party, child,” Burlcron said in his most charming, officious manner. “After all, you were practically one of the founders of TSI.”

“No ... because I’ve made up my mind ... not to take the WCC job.”

Silence.

“You ...” Burlcron began.

“I’ve made up my mind. Maybe it’s not right to try to go back to paradise. Maybe I have paradise right here ... among all these people who love me.” Crying. Not meeting Derrick’s eyes.

“*Wow ...*” Fannin Richardson blurted on behalf of everyone.

“Did you ... decide this ... when?” Debbie blurted.

“Right now! I decided right now!”

“Well, my dear, sometimes it’s wise not to let opportunities like Waxtor Carnationist slip by,” Burlcron said. “Maybe when you sleep on it ...”

“I’m not going! Oh, I know you hired this Steina person! He can be the writer! I’ll just be a janitor, or work in the garden, or--or--if you’ll have me, that is! If you love me as I love you!”

“Well, well of course we’ll have you,” Burlcron said, blinking in the glare of sixty people’s eyes. “Of *course* we love you ...”

“I love you *all*. I *can’t* leave,” she said, barely audible, sobbing.

Derrick surveyed the crimson refuse in the wastebasket. Paper towels in *here* soaked with wine, paper towels in *there* soaked with ... with *sex* ...

He looked up to meet his wife Jipo’s eyes expecting him to share her sneer.