

## Onyx and Red

By Joseph Kenyon

Gil Manthus, “the Patriarchal Stuffer,” as Simon used to call him, never permitted his droopy jowls to leave the premises of the Manthus Funeral Home. But there he was, sitting with his son Ben on Astrid’s couch on the day Manthus and Son came to tell Astrid that Simon’s body was missing.

Astrid took a variety of shots that afternoon, but the photo she chose for the exhibit was the one she took while standing on the ottoman to get a downward angle. In the photo, Gil Manthus was looking off camera, stage left, as if above all this foolishness. Ben’s blended look of professional serenity and personal opportunism turned wary and exposed, the way an animal is spooked by a sudden noise.

Ben had a difficult time re-composing his expression. Old Man Manthus, on the other hand, narrowed his eyes and tapped a heavily-lined forefinger on the arm of the couch to convey his disgust that Astrid and her camera had taken a tragic moment and, in his eyes, turned it into something cheap.

“We understand what a shock this must be for you, Mrs. Kent,” Ben said as Astrid lowered the camera, jumped down and re-took her seat. “It’s surreal to us. In the eighty-two years the Manthus Funeral Home has been in existence, this has never happened before. And it won’t happen for long. Let me assure you, we’ll find your husband’s body. I promise.”

At that last phrase—“I promise”—the senior Manthus turned his head away again, and Astrid wondered if he were reconsidering his choice of sons to carry on the Manthus tradition. Or was he washing his hands of the entire generation: her queer reaction to stolen death and his

son's shallow promise? From the moment Gil Manthus came through the door, Astrid could feel his hostility. His body language railed at her for being married to a dead man who had the audacity to go missing; for forcing him to leave his three-story world of muted and sterile demise; for exposing his inept, lothario son to the world; for Astrid being an adult who had not given up childish things in the face of the gravest encounter of humanity. He brushed at the thighs of his trousers as if his fingers could brush away the whole affair. Then, he signaled with a slight movement of his head, and both men stood.

Astrid was standing, but with the camera dangling at her side she felt out of place, closed over and wide open at the same time. Ben's voice and the word "missing" bounced around in her head, whisking her thoughts. The elder Manthus started for the door, but Ben held back, lingering in the yellowing, late-afternoon light, tracing the room around Astrid with his eyes, the casual turning of his head defining a tight ark that circled and ended on her. She saw herself in his eyes. Emotional. Vulnerable. Available. How many times had she seen in the eyes of Simon's patients the powerful but rootless intimacy that people develop toward professionals in a crisis? The difference was that Simon remained professional. He never allowed them to think that he had more comfort to offer them. Ben's expression had a different cast. He was writhing inside, embarrassed, aroused, frustrated, and hungry. He was toeing the depth of her vulnerability at that moment, reckoning. It made Astrid want to snap off another shot of Ben's face and say out loud that she was going to call it "Vulture Pornography."

But the camera stayed at her side and the only words that came out of her mouth were an edgy, "Thank you for coming."