

Tales from the Lunatic Decade



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Contents:

Chapter	Narrator	Year(s)
Part I		
1.) Pax California	(Will)	1989-1998
2.) A Long Dark Hall	(Will)	1998-1999
3.) Elysium	(Will)	2000
Part II		
4.) Bleeding in the dark	(Tim)	1998, 2006
5.) See You Falling	(Jamie's Id)	2005
6.) Irish Girls in the Sun	(Will)	2004
7.) The Siren	(Belise)	2003
8.) The Time in the Tides	(Erin)	2002
9.) The Cancer Tree	(Will)	2001
Part III		
10.) The Venus Generation	(Jamie)	2007, 2008
11.) Symposium	(Jamie)	2008

*Dedicated to
Elise, Jovana, Michelle, and Ruben*

*With special thanks to
Carolyn Chiappelli and Randy Fallows*

*And a shout out to
Bojana Vidojevic and Vanessa Ferro*



PAX CALIFORNIA

*Even his griefs are a joy long after to one that remembers all that he wrought
and endured.*

-Homer, *The Odyssey*

Claremont, CA, summer of 1989:

It would have been something, I suppose, to see Jameson (James) Watts in her youth. Not as the über-babe cutthroat of east LA but as the somber and slightly built twelve-year-old girl from the outskirts of Claremont; raised by parents she rarely saw in a house surrounded by vacant lots. Jane Watts bore James, her first daughter as far as I know, a few days before her twentieth birthday. She had married Sam, a man 15 years her senior out of, shall we say, traditional motivations. Sam worked for the Pomona National Bank (which does not extend outside of southern California). At the time, he was in charge of overseeing negotiations between clients within the inland empire.

Jane became a real estate agent within the tri-county area. She began by promising middle-class lifestyles to blue-collar families, pushing one-bedroom condos onto go-getting young couples that couldn't even afford to get divorced. She eventually moved up to selling million dollar homes in Upland, Claremont, and the newer areas of Pomona. Sam landed in the Executive Vice President's chair of the PN Bank in Claremont.

Mr. Watts held an MBA in Accounting and a BA in finance. He had a knack for judging the prudence of his competitors and relied on several strategic alliances between

other firms and his own, ever advancing the company's profits. If Mrs. Watts ever attended an institution of higher learning, it was an accomplishment of lesser transparency. She spoke either with the saccharin dexterity of a Bel-Air call-girl or the supercilious yet banal ferocity of a cable news correspondent. I only once saw them in the same room together, darting around their kitchen as one passed a cordless phone to the other. Their faces held expressions fixed to whatever tone of voice that they were using in order to sell some key argument pertaining to investments or high stakes transactions. It was akin to being on the set of a second rate drama about emergency room doctors, frantically operating on the guest actors. The family act looked good for about a half dozen years but it was neither insulated nor self-sustaining. Someone would eventually have to bring the house down.

In the 1980s it was fashionable to acquire a bulging, dark tan figure, providing you were of Northern European descent. Jane's bronzed body sprawled over a towel next to a stack of *Elle* magazines became a daily appearance in the Watts's backyard. If Jane consumed more than three highballs of Finlandia, she would lie out topless. In the summer of her tenth year, James decided that she too would spend the entire day lying under the sun. She had watched her mother for years lying unblemished in her string bikini and tropical oils. James made herself a drink from the Sake and cider stashed in the vegetable bin of her mother's double-door refrigerator. Before that day, she had never been exposed to ultraviolet light for more than a half hour – Jane feared her heir's losing a fair complexion before her time. James lay out naked from before ten in the morning until after five in the afternoon, when her mother found her lying unconscious, poisoned by the sun. It was the middle of August; I doubt there was a cloud in the sky. The worst

of the burns stripped several layers of skin from the right side of her face. She had passed out on her stomach from an overdose of ethanol.

James developed a condition called Bells Palsy after being admitted to the hospital, half of her face becoming paralyzed consistent with the crisp membrane reaching along the bridge of her nose and just above the hairline. After her burns had healed she looked well enough, but if she ever again underwent prolonged exposure to the sun, the condition inevitably reemerged. The doctors didn't know why. They told Jane to keep her daughter indoors. From age ten James never attended any event in direct sunlight. She always wore sun block exceeding an SPF of 45 and never left home without sunglasses or a visor, preferring only to leave the indoors upon observing the day's passing from the safety of her window.

James rarely saw her father while she was in the hospital. The doctors also found that she had an exceedingly low tolerance for alcohol, even for a child. Blood work showed that she had inherited a metabolic disorder arising whenever her liver attempted to process anything fermented. The treatment center speculated that three shots of whisky would almost certainly induce a state of toxic shock. It was a genetic trait particular to people of Asian ancestry. In two hundred years of Sam Watts' family line, no one had originated from outside of Britain. The paternity test came back six weeks later. It was never discussed. Both parents began working later into each day. James was enrolled in music and art classes after school to keep her hands busy. Nine months later Andreía Watts was born.

Northern Claremont, 1994:

A few days after James's fourteenth birthday, the home being built on the lot to the west of hers was completed. A family by the name of Dubois moved in. They were from some part of southern France, I believe, and the father had been offered a position as a computer programmer for a local software company. The family was comprised of Mr. Dubois, his wife Laetitia, and their seventeen-year-old son, Clay.

The Dubois house stood the slightest among the neighboring houses, appearing more like a cottage that extended from the Watts estate. The backyard was set around a swimming pool, surrounded by rows of fig trees. Curving plaster walkways led through the yard and into the house. Within a week of their arrival, Clay had placed a set of weights and a lawn chair near the edge of the pool. In the afternoon of each weekday, Clay would exercise with his shirt off in the balmy desert air. While his parents attended church he would lie out and swim for much of the day. During the evenings before dinner, Clay would study in his room near the glass door that led to the side yard. Its pastel glow became a familiar sight to James from the window over her bed.

That summer James enrolled in a couple of art classes offered by the colleges. On Tuesdays and Thursdays she attended a sculpture course that began just after dusk. Before going, just prior to when Clay began his daily iron pumping, James opened her bedroom blinds after taking a shower. She proceeded to walk around the room in the nude for a half hour or more. She was not ashamed.

One evening the Dubois's accepted an invitation from Jane for dinner at the Watts house. Jane served venison with mashed potatoes. After James mentioned that she was having trouble with her French class, Laetitia offered up her son as a possible tutor. Following a brief display of reluctance, Jane accepted on behalf of her daughter. James

said little that evening, her body shifting against the fabric of a newly bought dress, her manicured fingertips sliding down the condensation of her glass. Clay raised a toast for hopes regarding the prosperity of the newly elected president. He glanced at James through the port soaked crystal. She hadn't touched her potatoes.

The extra large T-shirt she wore to bed probably opened like a parachute the first time James scaled over the east wall. Creeping against the stucco barrier, past the sugary fig trees, she came upon Clay's door. I'm not sure how she went about it, perhaps an excess of perfume, fondling his hair, a zephyr of whispers, or in all probability nothing simpler than a kiss. If, say, no courage had been required - if it was simply nature taking its course, then Clay was undoubtedly doomed the instant that he awoke. She stayed with him until he fell back to sleep. She would later tell me that, lying there, she felt her mind change as though it were collapsing in on itself; all siphoning down a psychic cone to the reptilian base of sex, aggression, and fear. Sometime after 3:30, she slipped through the curtains; her bare feet running over the damp soil, under half a dozen stars, over the fence she went.

Claremont High School, Summer of 1995:

James made her way amongst the theatre and athletic crowds of Claremont High School through Clay. At the end of her freshman year she was a rising star in both circles. Most of her time was spent learning the technical demands for putting on a theatrical production. As a "tech" worker, one is required to spend several hours volunteering after school, indoors, dressed entirely in black. The techs had to operate unseen by the audience. The school building, which housed the theater, sat as an insular

circle overlooking the parking lot. James became proficient in lighting, sound, and make up. For the larger productions, she would sign up for a role as an extra or bit part. The bigger shows brought in many students who needed to fill an elective credit, most of whom were either associated with athletics or reveled in having as few of such associations as possible. The dressing area for costume changes was a seldom-used lecture room with stadium seating. Due to a permanent lack of available space, the dressing room became coed by necessity. James gained popularity rather quickly.

The following year Clay moved off to college and James began to stay out ever later into the night. Her grades were promising, she ran over three miles per day on her treadmill, and she used her parents' house for lavish parties every other weekend. At one such festivity a couple of students spilled saltine crackers on Jane's bed after having sex on it, and someone gave nine-year-old Andreía a pair of wine coolers. James was forbidden to have any more parties at the house or to stay out past 1:00 a.m. on a weekend. Jane's resentment at her daughter, at younger more independent version of herself, ran deep. She regularly alluded to her daughter's loose moral standards. Sam sent Andreía to a Catholic school.

While attending St. Mary's School, in the mountains above Claremont, Andreía became involved in a youth group through the local church. In addition to prayer and bible study, she went on retreats, sang in a choir, and went on to ace Home Economics. Of the one hundred people in her graduating class, ninety-six of them went on to four-year colleges. She wouldn't date any of the boys at her school. The boys sought the solace of a tightly wound community emphasizing academic excellence without fear of any social backlash. The female students however, by the time they reached eighteen,

were women amongst girls. In the mornings before first mass, Andreía's father would talk to her about what was expected of a young woman who would make something of herself. Sam bought five uniforms for Andreía each semester and had them dry-cleaned every Saturday. On Sunday, he, Jane, and Andreía all attended church together before going out for frozen yogurt.

The highest room in the Watts house was refurnished into an office for Sam. He was competing for the top position at PN Bank. The family had acquired sizable debts. Sam typically worked fourteen-hour days except on Sundays when he only worked eight. A long black desk was placed against the far corner of the ashen room. The blue carpeting displayed stains of spilled ink cartridges and bourbon. A picture of Andreía sat beneath the desk lamp. He would sleep on a pullout mattress whenever he and Jane argued. They had begun to fight often. The room's access to daylight was just grand but it lacked sufficient insulation from exterior noise. The office was located directly above James's bedroom.

That spring, James passed her driver's test. Boys from the high school began to accompany her home after school. She led them straight to her room, blaring new wave songs through her speakers. Once when Sam was revising a proposal, the Depeche Mode that rattled the framed portrait of his daughter stopped abruptly, and the heavy sighs and overlapping quick breaths of James and her partner ascended through the carpet.

Everything counts in large amounts. The next day, James didn't play any music. Sam left for the sanctuary of a bar, nursing a drink while memorizing flow charts until well after dark. Sam had a photographic memory. A week later, U2 blared for two hours while he was on the phone. The songs she played all consisted of catchy pop lyrics set to

uncomplicated backbeats. Sam continuously felt the vibrations under his feet. He heard the music from every room in the house. He heard it in his sleep. Most of the songs she played were radio friendly, the kind one heard in office buildings. With each passing week, the stereo became louder and played for longer periods of time. After she drove them home, James indulged a hot bath and then retired to one of the couches in the living room. While she studied for the SATs, the logo of her Fruit of the Looms lay exposed by the white T-shirt that slid up her back as she stretched out over the leather cushions. Whenever Sam was watching her, she knew.

Claremont High School, August of 1997

I remember those despondent freshmen running to flee the eggs being hurtled in their direction, their voices, followed by the junior students in pursuit, echoed throughout the concrete halls. A few of the coaches were watching the entire spectacle with unabashed pride as they hunched against the doorways to their impeded classrooms. The gaunt youths running from the physically superior football and water polo players were easily overtaken and thus had the minor consolation of only a brief moment of angst before being compelled to do push-ups. The courtyard was crammed with groupings of boys in letterman jackets counting to twenty in a huddled circle around the initiates. I distinctly recall Travis Felton, Styrofoam carton in hand, slapping Grant (my other friend from high school) on the back as he ran by, "Fucking Bitches!"

"Right." Grant breathed under the commotion. As inspiring as the sight of the thinning of the male half of the herd had been, the girls had yet to begin their parts in the August festivities. In the case of the boys, only the physically weakest had been selected

as the sacramental bread for that day's ritual. The hunt via the contents of an omelet was performed in frenzy, an aggressive and drunken stupidity of the mob to be forgotten about the next morning. The girls were nowhere near as forbearing - all but a few of the female freshmen were marked for participation in acrimonious rituals of systematic abuse that the older girls rapaciously implemented.

I recall James, voluptuous and pale, strutting between each group of junior and sophomore underlings – each of them wearing white t-shirts with the letters BBC (Big Boobs Club) written in pink marker over the fronts. They used lipstick to write on the faces of the schoolgirls. The letters *nine* and *eight*, referencing the graduating year of the junior class, marked the flushed cheeks of the fairer teenagers. The more unsightly girls hung their heads, Grant believed, because they had never been instructed to decline such treatment. A monster in the face reflected a monster in the soul. Rather, it was the reverse by the sight of it. Despite their wealth and stature, the snobbish girls of the BBC were nothing more than shaved barbarians, both savage and graceful in their vulgar domination.

A pudgy freckled girl with hair like copper wire was attempting to wipe away the tears streaming down over the cherry colored **8** of Max Factor that had been smeared over her right cheek. James had been preoccupied with writing the word ***SLUT*** on the girl's back in an area where her shirt would have covered the markings. Throughout the day I wasn't able to lose the memory of those tears, very nearly concealed by the sweat pouring out under the desert sun, just as the surrounding, well-endowed tribe detected them. She was frozen in place, praying that no one would notice. The few salty beads

that her plump hand neglected had merged with the lipstick under her eyes, turning them a sharp red color. The BBC saw it immediately.

“Are you fucking crying?” James was clearly amused. She twirled to face the freckled girl, her palms resting on her hips as she threw out her chest even further. The girl paused and briefly shook her head, rubbing at her eyes.

“You are so pathetic!” The other girls began to encircle her. “You’ll never get a boyfriend! Why the hell are you so fat anyway?!” One of the thinner girls struck out at the freshman’s side, sinking five manicured nails into the sagging, orange-spotted flesh of the girl’s hip.

Grant then sifted past me to grab the aggressor’s arm, pulling her nearly off her feet. “That’s enough.” His jaw clenched up after he spoke.

The girl with the freckles flinched as Grant turned to face her. “Go.” He pointed to the classrooms. She gave him a glassy-eyed stare as the bell rang, shaking her clenched fists as the pain began to kick in. She ran, awkwardly, into a nearby girl’s bathroom. I almost thought I saw the blood drain from Grant’s face as a hollowing sickness suddenly took hold of him. He stood in the shadow of that girl’s wounded expression until he heard the rustling of the BBC. It was then that I first saw the full influence of his father’s handiwork. Grant whirled around to face the collection of busty teenage sadists, barking out a “What?!” to the girl closest to him. She tightened up without managing to betray her surprise. Grant stared at James, his eyes telling brightly of anger and contempt as he grunted a slow exhale. It was the first time, I should say, that I had seen a boy stand up to an older girl on the grounds of injustice, let alone an

entire clique. Grant, at seventeen, had passed judgment on the most powerful girl in school, as though she were a beast.

James stood in a silent rage. “What’s your name?”

“Ulysses Grant Johnston.” They were fearsome in their formality.

“You’re fucking dead.”

We’ve been friends ever since. And not merely out of my admiration for his more heroic qualities but also due to certain natural elitist tendencies of my own. I knew he wouldn’t have many friends.

Seriously:

I first met Grant Johnston when I entered Claremont High School in the fall of 1993. He was the only kid I knew who was adopted. His father was Marcus Antoninus Johnston, a tall, powerfully built, jet-black-skinned man who adopted Grant when he was only a few months old.

Grant’s biological parents were exiles from the Soviet Bloc who had come to America in pursuit of the dream of dealing copious amounts of heroin to the miscreants of the greater Hollywood area. During a drug bust in 1981, the couple tried to flee from the authorities but their Corvette backfired as they drove towards four angry cops all with loaded guns drawn. Eight shots through the windshield later, the two Germans bled to death in less than six minutes at the corner of Sunset and Normandy. Grant had been wrapped in a blanket, asleep, on the floor of the passenger seat. No one wanted the child back in the Eastern Europe and so – with some help from a friend in legal aid - Marcus adopted the infant boy and they moved to Claremont on the far eastern side of Los Angeles County.

Grant's memories of his childhood – as he described them to me – were less than rosy. Marcus had minored in Classics in college and was convinced that the Hellenistic aristocrat's particular form of education had been the finest in the history of man. By Grant's seventh birthday, Marcus had enrolled him in Boxing, Kung Fu, and Ju-Jitsu classes. Marcus also took a second job with a private security company in order to pay for a succession of private tutors to teach Latin, Greek, Logic, and advanced mathematics after school. Until Grant was ready for tenth grade, Marcus had put him through private schools due to a fear that the lower classes would contaminate his son's mind.

Marcus disapproved of the greed that had defined the 'Me' decade. The squinting at pseudo-aristocracy and rampant anti-intellectualism that arrived in the 1980s moved him to take drastic steps regarding Grant's rearing. Marcus vowed that his son would not bend his knee to yuppie aspirations, illiberal foreign policies, and moral atrophy. All my other friends from high school and college remember their parents pushing them forward in order to make generational upgrades in terms of *lifestyle*. Even if vulgarly defined in materialistic terms, my generation was just told be *good* kids. Grant, looking back on it, was told to ravage and pound on the *bad* ones.

As Grant entered puberty, his father instructed him to lift weights, box bare-knuckled with 100 lb. heavy bag, and run for four miles every day before school began. By the time he was seventeen, Grant had dark almond colored eyes that were set deeply beneath his brow, blond and slightly wavy hair, and a man's build amid a sea of boys. Indigo, violet, and burgundy colored marks were often visible on his neck, elbows, and hands. His knuckles were often covered in Band-Aids. He couldn't hold a pen for a half the days of his junior year and would borrow my notes to recopy over the weekends.

Grant's bedtime stories were of Hector and Achilles dismembering Greek soldiers outside the walls of Troy and of Grant and Sherman smashing their armies through Confederate battle lines. Grant was expected to conceal pain, to learn as much as he could from those around him, to end every day in a state of exhaustion, and to force order onto a world that was based in a state of entropy.

As Grant prepared for his first day of elementary school, his father handed him a blank report card. Marcus kneeled to meet his son's gaze and said sternly, before shutting the front door, "Come home with A's, son, *or* don't come home at all."

I liked Marcus as a father. He served wine to Jamie and me the first time that we came over to study with Grant. Baroque music played throughout their house during the afternoons, followed by Jazz at night. Mostly because of the access to alcohol but also because Jamie's parents were getting a divorce, we slept over at stately Johnston manner for maybe half the weekends of our junior year. Every Saturday morning, Marcus made us eggs, bacon, Italian coffee, and stacks of buttermilk pancakes (made with melted vanilla ice cream) that were better than oral sex. The amount of butter, lard, and cholesterol in those feasts probably took five years off our lives. It was worth it.

At some point in early March of 1998, at three in the morning, Jamie Romano had sex with James Watts in his parents' hot tub. A party had been thrown because the first weekend of *Death of a Salesman*, put on by the theatre department of CHS, went over better than the cast had expected. I, for one, received a standing ovation at the curtain call – mostly because I had to wear a Superman inspired "S" in a particularly campy scene.

Grant worked in the theater as well but as a set builder with the rest of the techs. The techs drove old cars, carried around drills like Don Johnson carries a gun, and they frequently got to second or third base with the (mostly) attractive girls who had bit parts in the play. Jamie was a tech as well, which is where the three of us all met during our sophomore year. We had all taken turns being the fixation-of-the-week by the girls who had once portrayed *The Pink Ladies* in a nauseatingly Mormon-appropriate production of *Grease*. The freshmen girls adored Grant for being mysterious and “mature.” I was popular with girls around my age, providing that they had seen all the films of Kenneth Brannagh. And Jamie, *that bastard*, was popular with the junior and senior girls, in part due to his skills of seduction but mostly because he was the best-looking guy in school. I knew then, on some level, and I believe so did Grant and Jamie, that I was also attracted to the *guys* of the theatre. When I later admitted as much to Jamie while we were in college, he shrugged, shook his head, and replied, “Dude, you’re just *gay*.”

James Watts worked on the soundboard with Jamie. He said (which I don’t believe) that she mouthed ‘oh fuck’ several times as Jamie fingered her while, up on stage, the actor portraying Willy Lowman was explaining the importance of being ‘well liked.’ Jamie invited her to his party and added that she could bring her boyfriend, Frank, from Upland. My recollections of the most off-the-wall gossip that I heard about James in High School go as follows:

(1) Having sex with Sarah Olson’s boyfriend, video taping the whole thing, and then sending Sarah a VHS tape labeled, *Polygamy is a bitch! (I have the other copy, so drop the lead in the play – you Ugly Mormon Cunt!)*

(2) Mugging a girl working for *Unicef* in order to get enough change to call her dealer's pager.

(3) 'Experimenting' with the self-proclaimed bisexual girl (Monique) of the school, only to dump her a day and a half later, telling her that, "Clam-slappers *suck* in bed."

(4) Holding her sister, Andreia, underwater in their backyard pool, repeatedly, until she saw the urine flowing from Andreia's bikini turn the water green – just to see if it would really work.

(5) Ignoring Andreia's cries as she was raped in a closet by James's boyfriend at the time, Frank.

(6) Offering up her sister (again) to Grant because she was too tired for sex. James sweetened the pot by informing Grant that, "She can keep a secret – *trust me.*"

At the party:

The layers of smog gave a wan, golden glow to the nearly full moon over the open backyard. The more muscular guys were chasing actresses from the play around the pool. Chlorine, tequila, and perfume drifted about the downstairs of the house. Used cars with K-ROQ blasting out of their windows pulled in and out of Jamie's driveway. Tammy Stone gained unofficial admission into the BBC after donning an emerald green two-piece bikini that was such a hit that two seniors on the varsity water polo team had sex with her the next week (she told both of them that it was her first time). The Pixies, REM, Guns N' Roses, Prince, U2, and The Police all played in rotation. And I don't remember any fights breaking out, and most of the kids were tan, and thin, and pretty, and I heard a girl ruefully moan "How could you do this to me?", and there was a protest

made by Steven Marburg over Grant “pussing out” of the party, and at some point I fell asleep in a guestroom with Emily Dukes, and nearly everyone was drunk.

Before the party started, Jamie, Grant, and I went to *E-Z Take-Out* for double cheeseburgers and blueberry milkshakes. Grant knew that James would be at the party and made it a point not to go. Jamie had reserved a plastic bottle of 100-proof vodka for Frank and himself. Jamie had also only preordered enough food to last for the first hour of the party so that the guests would either get sick off of copious amounts of booze or leave the party to find more food to be thrown up at a later time. Later that night, he went shot for shot with “The Frankster” until the bald-headed jackass vomited in the bushes on the side of the driveway.

Jamie patted him on the back. “Hey bro, maybe you shouldn’t drive. You wanna just crash on my couch?”

Frank feebly nodded his head before making his way back into the living room.

You’re passed out on a stranger’s couch, the same stranger who got you drunk, in a house you’ve never been in before. It’s 2:45 A.M. Do you know where your girlfriend is?

Minutes later, Jamie looked over at James standing as a silhouette in front of the steaming, illuminated Jacuzzi. Her cut-off denim shorts slid down her (newly waxed) legs just before she flung her T-shirt onto a patio chair, preferring, I guess, to swim in the comfort of her Calvin Klein underwear (Note: Ever since her twelfth birthday, James has only worn white cotton underwear – every pair of which is labeled with the date of its purchase and then thrown out exactly one month later; no exceptions).

James's pale blue eyes glanced Jamie's way and then back to the Jacuzzi. He went to turn on the jets. Looking down, James saw her expression ripple over the water's surface until everything disappeared in a flurry of bubbles, in the white noise. Dipping her foot into the water, she then reached back to unhook the rear strap of her bra - one that she was already growing out of. Jamie smiled.

The next morning:

What sounded like, "What's up motherfucker?!" preceded Frank's fist smashing into Jamie's right eye, immediately forcing it shut. Frank grabbed Jamie's shirt, keeping him from running off, and hit him repeatedly, striking at the middle of his stomach. One of the shots that Frank got in happened to nick Jamie's left testicle, which caused him to fall to the ground, moaning in agony.

Despite Grant's assertions of "That's enough!" Frank was unconvinced. He charged at Grant, flinging Jamie to the muddy grass. Grant pressed forward as well but side stepped to the left, parried Frank's fist and threw his right elbow directly into the side Frank's head. The blow had struck him almost directly on the temple, which caused Frank's head to droop slightly, his brain barely clinging to consciousness. As this happened, time slowed down for me and the other kids at Melville Park, just across the street from CHS. Grant shot his leg behind both of Frank's and the two of them, Frank first, fell onto an area of concrete with a blunted thud. At this point, I think I remember Jamie beginning to pick himself up but we were all shocked by what we were seeing. Frank was an idiot but he was also a big one. A high school career as a bully is a good choice for an evolutionary misstep from Orange County. Once the two boys fell to the

ground however, the fight was little more than the thrashing of a walrus-looking oaf by a near professional fighter.

Grant was unafraid of getting hit and thus, with gravity on his side, gave three punches for every one that he received. He was fierce and direct and, for an instant, I thought that he would rupture the other guy's eardrums from some elaborate double hand slap. Frank's eyes darted about as his arms waved wildly through the air. The wind had been knocked out of him and his nose bled profusely from having been broken.

Frank, panicked, tried to sit up while Grant grabbed his T-shirt, lifting up slightly, before striking Frank's jaw with his right fist. He then used his other hand to slam the back of Frank's skull against the parking lot – the *thump* of which released several gasps from the onlookers (myself included).

About thirty seconds later as desperate, sickly gurgling noises seeped out of Frank's throat; Jamie lifted his partially bloodied self off the ground and gently rubbed Grant's shoulder, "Ulysses, that's enough. Stop."

Grant loosened his grip over Frank's reddened throat and turned to face Jamie. He nodded and his gaze dropped slightly before he stood up, steadied Jamie's still shaky shoulders, turned to me and said, almost inaudibly, "Let's hang out in the colleges for a while." I suspect that he was very careful not to say '*hide* out.'

The walk to the colleges through the downtown was majestic and almost surreal. Jamie trudged along behind Grant and me. I could see drops of blood forming at the sides of Jamie's mouth, staining each of the brown paper cigarettes that he smoked continuously. Grant looked guarded beneath a façade of anger (masking an emotionally imploding combination of guilt and shame.) As a teenage boy, there's an odd

hyperrealism that washes over you after having done something truly awful. Even though the threat is gone, the senses are still afire with sensation. At the time, everything appeared harmonious, radiant, new.

Grant and Jamie looked older than I did which allowed us to blend in with the rest of the undergrads. The buildings were all constructed in the late 1930s and were decorated with an art deco theme that had been restored in the late 1980s. Frisbees flew everywhere, most everybody was still smoking, and khaki shorts were king. The afternoon fell into evening as we made our way to the *Pomona Poly-Technical Institute*.

Moving past the dormitories we could hear ‘Should I stay or should I go’ by *The Clash*. It was at this point that I noticed that Grant’s hand was bleeding at the knuckle, probably from catching one of Frank’s front teeth against his fist. We never saw Frank again but at every party or unfamiliar social event, it was visibly on Grant’s mind. I don’t think I ever saw him drink more than two beers before graduate school.

“Where are we going?” Jamie asked Grant.

“James has a swimming class around here doesn’t she?”

“Jesus! You’re not going to beat the shit out of *her*, are you?” I remembered saying this so loudly that a group of volleyball players stopped their game to stare at us.

Jamie lit another cigarette. “Nah, I say drown the bitch.”

We all laughed.

At the pool:

Young women in crimson Speedos were gliding underwater in a long chain. The Olympic sized swimming pool was painted gray as opposed to light-blue with diamond shaped navy tiles crisscrossed over the bottom. James was sitting in the shade near a

black iron fence that lined the north side of the grounds, talking to a group of girls about, I'm guessing, "how guys really like it." A woman in her late thirties, wearing red shorts and a white polo shirt with the word "STAGS" printed on the back, walked along the edge of the water, yelling something at one of the slower members of a relay team.

"You guys wait here." Grant ordered.

"What? Why?" Jamie and I demanded to know.

He looked at Jamie. "She likes you," then at me, "and she doesn't know who you are. I think we should keep it that way but it's your call." Jamie's call, really.

"Fine," Jamie acquiesced. "What are you gonna say?"

"That Frank and I fought and it's not personal and we're, y'know, not afraid of her or any other Nazi-piece-of-bitch-trash she wants to send our way. And, that it's 1998, and that her *time is over*."

Claremont California, April 1998:

Having gained an unexpected notoriety from *the fight*, Jamie, Grant, and I were invited to a whole slew of parties over the course of our sophomore year. So much so that I recall developing a "script" for what to both do and expect at such gatherings:

Upon entering, first see if the right crowd occupies this party. If at any time the answer is "no," then you have to leave unless someone is handing you free booze (Budweiser, Goldschlager, and PBR are to be excluded from this rule.)

The next two questions are to be asked sequentially: "Is the music loud enough so that I can barely hear someone two feet from my face?" And "Is the lighting darkened but

not *so* darkened as to allow for an unpleasant *surprise* in the quad the following morning?”

Then, find a place to stand or sit and make disinterested but well-timed eye contact. Following that, you should make small talk about things and people inside the vicinity; the rude/drunk guy dispensing the booze, what really is the best flavored-martini? Compliments are to be given regarding clothing, desired extra curricular activity, and physical attributes (above the neck for the first half hour). Following these guidelines, talk about your assets: living situation, vehicle, workout regimen, vocabulary, upbringing, etc.

Then buy or imply that you would like to be given another drink (only use beer as a last resort. Never. Order. Soda.)

If dancing is a possibility to show off your “moves,” then do so but avoid it if you’re from the suburbs.

Providing that you have made it this far, offer to take so-and-so to another (isolated) part of the party. If at anytime you feel uncomfortable, then simply say, “I have to return some videotapes.”

At some point after midnight on a Saturday night in April of 1998, Grant and James got to talking in the kitchen of Ana Castagnaro’s house. It turned out that James was not so much enraged as aroused by Grant’s declaration of animosity. While pretending to be interested in some girl’s ideas about the revival of New Wave, I caught a glimpse of the two of them facing one another – I couldn’t hear them but that probably aided my understanding of what was being conveyed. James tugged repeatedly at the bottom of her orchid-white t-shirt, which caused her nipples to protrude briefly through

thin cotton fabric. Grant stood across from her, nodding slowly as she ran her hands through her hair. I could see the muscles in his arms ripple as he cracked his knuckles by making fists against his palms.

I remember seeing James lead Grant by the wrist to her cream colored Mercedes. “Kiss them for me” by *Siouxsie and The Banshees* began blaring out of her stereo as Grant shut the door. Circles of orange light streaked across the roof and trunk of the newly waxed German luxury automobile as it sped away under the sodium bulbs of streetlamps, up Dartmouth Ave towards Route 66 before slipping into the night. I knew, at the time, that Grant was confronting something rather dark in himself by following her. James: a boasting, arrogant, soulless, skinny socialite was a kind of doppelganger for him. For the next nine months the two became synonymous with one another to the social circles of CHS. Standing under a high crescent moon, listening to what sounded like gossip already starting up from the girls lingering on the other side of the porch, I remember thinking that this was the safest thing for me and Jamie and the worst thing possible for Grant. Due to the rigidity of his father’s parenting style, Grant had developed a long shadow in the light of what he was expected to do. That shadow would turn out to be all consuming by late August of that year.

Imagine meeting someone who represents a reservoir of repressed prurient interests. Imagine that said person looks like an adult film star at seventeen. Imagine she has a 3.7 GPA, her own car, and a persona that is given absolute deference by feminists and misogynists alike. Imagine a chance to see what everything you hate is actually like. Can you really imagine saying “no”?



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A long dark hall

As love retreats, power advances.

-Carl Jung

Claremont, CA, 2:54 a.m., April 17th, 1998:

“Age of Consent” by New Order began playing over James’s stereo as she pulled into the circular driveway of her parent’s house. All the lights were out. She led Grant upstairs to her room and said “wait here” before disappearing down a long hallway. Grant later said that the first thing he noticed about the room was the number of locks on various drawers, chests, and a combination safe that sat below a television.

“Hey,” James whispered, “let’s go in the spa first – my parents are still up.”

“I don’t have a suit,” Grant replied as he stared at the purple push-up halter top bikini that James had changed into. James tossed him a towel and smiled, “We’re going to fuck, not swim, *silly*,” adding, “You do coke, right?”

It began raining as James had her first orgasm against the south wall of her parents’ lukewarm, unlit pool. Grant would later tell Jamie and me that James was limber, sexually voracious, and multi-orgasmic. For the next few months we would occasionally observe bite marks and scratches on Grant’s chest, back, arms, and neck which would bleed at times if James nicked a mole. For her part, James often had hickies and, so she claimed, finger-shaped bruises on her breasts, hips, and thighs from when she was able to get Grant to climax especially hard. Grant thought that the coke was mixed in with something else as he described himself losing nearly all self-awareness.

The charcoal quality of the weather continued to etch itself over the suburban skies of the Inland Empire. As the jets shut off just after 3:30 in the morning and the water slowly stilled in the spa, Grant asked her how she stayed so thin, lean and yet busty. James described chewing monotonously on ice cubes, listening to a CD labeled *The Hounds of Love* that Clay had given to her on his last day at CHS – the end of James’s freshman year – that she would listen to so as to gain some distance between her and the slowly passing days of fatigue. Jane had insisted that James’s naturally full build was a sign of weakness of will. Mrs. Watts used that rationale as a justification for running James six days a week, swimming for five, and greatly restricting what she could eat, feeding the teenager’s animosity and vanity. Grant is the only person I know to have observed James Watts display anything resembling introspection.

Due to James’s weariness and hunger, Jane – a woman whose looks would visibly fade after too many years in the sun – took her daughter to see a psychiatrist to supply her with anti-depressants, metabolic accelerants, and various painkillers for phantom back problems and imagined weight gains. James described being able to tell with whom her mother was having an affair, even in thick cotton states of consciousness that defined most of her thirteenth year, by the way that particular men touched her or the lustrous confidence that lay just behind their faces. Jane could all but inject everyone around her with liquid forms of prestige and white light jolts of adoration. James dredged through every evening’s exhaustion reminding herself of how good it would be, in the end, to embody “success.” Kate Bush, a woman who greatly resembled Jane Watts, sang into the awkward girl’s ears:

*And if I only could
I'd make a deal with god*

*And I'd get him to swap our places
Be running up that road
Be running up that hill
Be running up that building . . .*

The words leaked out over the mattress as her eyes slid down under the weight of prolonged exhaustion. She awoke to cold, early mornings, year after year, gasping for breath just over the chlorinated pool's surface, moving into the glowing yellow light, over the slick navy tile. The Aryan ideal of herself as a slim, wealthy, erotic socialite was the morphine amidst her days of slow psychological emaciation. James fell away from consciousness each night while looking up, past the empty mercurial skies, to an imaginary world of endless splendor, of ultimate luxury. Soon she would be able to master an existence free of shame, free of envy, free from fat, and free of codependence. Anchored by wealth and held up high by public notions of beauty, James had been attempting to simultaneously cheat both life and death for nearly all of high school.

Claremont, CA, 8:15 p.m., April 24th, 1998:

At around a quarter past eight in the morning, Friday, Grant's father Marcus suffered a fatal heart attack while taking his morning bath. Grant had spent the night at James's house and, as far as I know, woke up around four and rode his motorcycle to within two blocks of his house and quietly walked it the rest of the way home straight into the open-air garage on the western side of the house. He crept in through his bedroom window and set his alarm for 7:30 and then quickly got up after a few hours of sleep, rode to school, and get to class before the last bell of first period rang – blissfully unaware that he was wanting for any immediate family in all the world.

There was a storage attic lined with the sort of carpet that I assume is typically reserved for federal penitentiaries that Grant slept on during lunch period. He had done this for what seemed like most of the week and was so exhausted that his speech was slightly slurred by the conclusion of A.P. English, our last serious class of that year before what seemed like endless days of review before the actual exam.

Once out of class, Jamie offered to give Grant a lift home, “to crash,” and that he could pick up his bike from the parking lot later that evening.

“Yeah, suurree, thankths,” is how I *think* he sounded.

“I need to drop off Will first,” Jamie began, “but you can just lie down in the backseat.”

“Cool.”

We piled into Jamie’s burgundy Volvo and drove the hell out of school, heading up Foothill Blvd. towards my parents house in the northern (read: swankier) section of Claremont. The Police’s fifth album, *Synchronicity*, played softly over the car’s two front speakers – Jamie had adjusted the sound with the turning of a couple of knobs on the dashboard – as we pulled up to the large, white stucco slathered house that my parents owned at the time. We lived two doors down from Jessica (whatsername) whose dad used to be the drummer for Poison. She was thin, shapely, and flashed her leopard-print panties to Jamie and me the day that her brother gave us a lift home from CHS during our freshman year. Like Andreía, I’m pretty sure that she was raped too, but, that was just a rumor, *seriously*.

I turned to say goodbye to Grant, but he was asleep. I held up an imaginary phone to the side of my face and mouthed the words, “call me,” to Jamie. He made an

okay sign with his fingers and I gently shut the door. The wine-dark Swedish sedan crept out of the driveway and picked up speed before disappearing onto Mills Ave.

Grant called Jamie at around eight thirty that night. He had passed out around four and woke up to a quiet, unlit house. He needed to use the bathroom and walked down a long dark hall to do so. But, half way there, his socks were soaked by bath water leaking from underneath the tall white door just ahead of him. Marcus used to take baths on Friday mornings while reading *Newsweek*, *The Economist*, or a recent book on current events. His baths usually lasted two to three hours at a time and he would refill the tub with hot water, past the drainage valve, once in a while in order to warm the bath water. Grant told me, at the funeral, that he knew something was very wrong when the water he stepped into was cold – clearly, the water heater had been exhausted by that point.

Jamie picked me up from a party that Laura Gann was throwing and we drove 14 blocks or so until we noticed the red lights flashing on the neighboring houses, trees, sedans, and Grant who was sitting on the curb, wrapped in a grey blanket, talking to a plain clothes detective – probably Marcus’s friends as no foul play was suspected. Jamie and I spent an hour on the hood of his Volvo watching Grant answer questions, seeing men in suits talk to one another and then talk to the EMTs, the neighbors talking to one another – one woman walking briskly at some point in the night in an attempt to embrace Grant before being escorted back to the other side of the street by a patrolman, and Grant walking barefoot over to us when the whole ordeal seemed finally to be winding down.

“Jesus, man! Jesus, I’m so sorry!” Jamie said to Grant as he sat between us on the hood of the Volvo.

“What did they say? How – why did he die?” I asked Grant.

“Umm . . . heart failure. They think that he had, he had a heart attack. I had to . . . to pull him out of the tub. Get him dressed, so, y’know . . . I need to, um, I need to talk to the mortician, and I need to have a funeral, and I need to, I guess, talk to a lawyer about his will? I, um, I *cannot* stay here tonight.” Grant pointed at the group of uniformed men talking to other men in suits. “Can I . . . I need a place to stay . . .”

Jamie looked over at me. “Why don’t we all stay at Will’s house tonight, huh? No one else has to know why. We can just crash there. Right?” I was relatively certain that he was talking to me.

“Yeah, yes – that sounds like a good idea.” I said and flung my arm around Grant, “let’s, you know, let’s get out of here, Ulysses.”

Grant nodded, threw the blanket onto the sidewalk, and got into the back of the Jamie’s car. We drove away. We would have driven to Oregon if we could have.

Back at my parent’s house, Jamie siphoned a large mixture of gin and vodka into a pint glass, replaced the partially emptied bottles with water, licked his thumb and rubbed off the penciled-on lines from the bottles of Absolut and Beefeater, told me to procure a bottle of orange juice from the fridge along with three glasses, and we all met up in my room. My bedroom was pretty nice back then. I remember having a CD player and a record player to play my mother’s old Beatles and Dylan albums, there was a futon, a queen sized bed that Gina Thurber let me feel her up in, a mini fridge, and a Macintosh that was hooked up to the stereo speakers.

It was nearly ten at night when Grant really began to talk as we (mostly) listened until about five in the morning: I think that Grant stopped then, not because he was tired,

but because the light from the cobalt sky that was siphoning through my curtains reminded him of the day that he very much wanted to forget.

Claremont, CA, April 26th, 1998:

I don't recommend attending a funeral for a man if the attendants are comprised almost entirely of his coworkers, with the exception of his adopted son, especially when that man was your best friend's father who never saw his fifty-first birthday. Marcus's former partner was a tall, robust Hispanic man with gelled hair and a graying mustache. He told a number of stories from their days as patrolman in the early 1980s, half of which were interesting. Grant had written out a three page speech on lined paper that was concise and dealt mostly with his memories from childhood and the examples that his father set for him that he would follow into manhood. His depiction of his first memory, of sitting on a pillow on Marcus's motorcycle, holding onto the handle bars as his father drove the two of them up and down route 66 on an early weekend morning in July of 1985 has always stayed in my mind when I think about Grant. A young man, hardened beyond his years, whose naive efforts at mastering courage and integrity constantly smash up against a culture of usury, apathy, and decadence.

Claremont, CA, The Watts's house, May 29th, 1998, 5:45 p.m.:

"No, but *seriously*, don't you want to fuck James's mom?" asked Jamie somewhat indelicately of Grant as the three of us were shaving, adjusting our hair, and straightening our tuxedos within the double bathroom of James's parents' house. The question was more of a barb at Grant's choice to spend so much time around a family of shallow

plutocrats. While looking through Mr. Watts's book shelf, I had pulled out a copy of *Decline and fall of the Roman Empire* and a picture of Mrs. Watts (which I assumed that he was using as a book mark) fell onto the floor. She had taken a picture of herself standing before a mirror. Her hair was up and she was wearing only a black bra and matching panties. Even in her late thirties, Jane Watts was a stunningly beautiful woman. Her eyes were a blue the color of the desert sky just before sun-up and she possessed a curvaceous, toned, gorgeous body obtained by lifting weights and swimming a mile every other day. I mailed the picture to Jamie as a birthday present. I'm fairly certain that Jamie still has it, probably framed. What struck me about the act of finding it was that Mrs. Watts's figure was not a sight that we were unfamiliar with. We had seen her – passed out, drunk – sleeping on one of the wooden benches that surrounded the pool. An emptied highball glass containing two or three twists of lemon lay by her side as the straps of her untied bikini top hung over the edges of the bench, swaying in the breeze. I think that Sam Watts stayed married to Jane for as long as he did because he thought that he had become successful enough to have earned the right to that body. Looking back, I think that James had learned a lot from her father.

“I'm just saying,” Jamie continued, “that woman has epic thighs.”

Grant glared at Jamie right before little Andreía Watts pushed open the door and stared at the three of us as we stood frozen with embarrassment, listening to Oingo Boingo on K-ROQ. She was eight years old at the time and, thankfully, had not heard a word of our conversation. Grant had been tutoring her in math and had used mix-tapes, of my own compiling, as bribes to get her to earn As rather than Cs on her examinations.

“What are you guys doing?” Andreía asked.

Grant, having finished shaving off his modest, never to be fully formed beard replied, “We’re shaving Andreía. We’re getting ready for the prom.”

“Should I shave too? My legs I mean.” She asked.

“It’s never too early to start,” Jamie smiled at her. Thinking back on it, I really think that Jamie thought that he was doing her a favor.

“Why do you need to shave your legs?” Grant asked.

“Other girls are doing it. I don’t want people to think that I’m a lesbian.”

Grant stopped shaving and set down his razor. He turned towards the door, “And, would that be wrong?”

“It says so in the Bible,” Andreía replied. Jamie chuckled as she said this. Grant continued shaving. “Okay.”

Grant partially filled the bathtub as Andreía took off her sweatpants. I handed her the bottle of shaving cream and said that she would need a lot for a whole leg. It’s possible that the three of us should have been arrested for doing this. After smearing so much Gillette foam over her legs which straddled the edge of the bathtub, Andreía drew Grant’s razor up her leg and stopped abruptly as a trickle of blood ran down her leg.

Grant soaked a washcloth in cold water and pressed it against the wound. Andreía looked somewhat pale. Her hands gripped around her thigh near the knee in an attempt to stop the blood flow.

“Better get used to bleeding, kid,” Jamie said as he applied Calvin Klein’s “One” to his chest. I think that he was drunk which, in retrospect, makes sense. He was going to prom with some gorgeous girl named Alana who would always see him as “a *really* nice guy.”

“You’ll be okay, Andy,” Grant told her, “both the cold and the pressure will stop the bleeding.”

“Okay,” Andreía said in a shy, embarrassed voice. “Do you . . . are you in love with James?”

I observed Jamie mouth, “Oh, shit” via the mirror.

“Well . . .” Grant sighed, wringing out the washcloth in the bathtub. Rose colored water trickled down into the ivory bath. “We don’t have that kind of relationship. I’m not sure that your sister loves anyone.”

Andreía’s eyes became watery, “Why do you say that? Everyone loves somebody!”

“I don’t think that’s true. I think that some people are born with a suffering soul, without conscience.” (Note: *psyche* (soul) and *pathos* (suffering) are the root words of *psychopath*.)

“No! It’s just that you don’t love her! If you did . . .” Andreía trailed off.

“Grant, sometimes you’re just like mom and dad.” Sam and Jane Watts were about to have a divorce, a bitter one.

“Sappy” by Nirvana played on K-ROQ:

*And if you cut yourself
You will think you’re happy
He’ll keep you in a jar
Then you’ll make him happy*

Claremont, CA, April 20th, 1999:

“I thought you’d say that,” Jamie said before pausing to take a drag from the clove he was smoking, “Extension would require the car that I don’t have right now.” Grant and I were on a self-imposed “five day weekend” and we had met Jamie at Nick’s for coffee. Grant and I were both enrolled at UC Berkeley and Jamie was attending UCLA at the time. We were hanging out at Nick’s coffee house which had acquired a superstitious aura for optimizing the time a student spent in preparation for an exam based on the fact that a student of a few years past had achieved a 1600 on the SATs by spending four to five days a week studying at said café. “More Than This” by Roxy Music played over the outdoor speakers.

Jamie’s father, Phil, a sheepish man with a comb-over, had gone bankrupt when his pharmacy in the Claremont Village went out of business. Phil had been unemployed for nearly a year and was selling his house in Claremont to move closer to his new job in Altadena. Phil’s credit was not what it had been when his son applied to UCLA and for the educational and housing loans, and now it was looking as though Jamie would be going to either Mt. SAC or Pasadena City College for his sophomore year to attempt to earn high enough marks to gain an academic scholarship as a transfer student to UCLA or one of the other schools within the University of California.

Jamie sighed. “Westwood is a really expensive place to go to school.”

“Have you thought about going to Cal Poly San Luis Obsipo or UC Davis?” Grant asked. “A college town is probably a lot cheaper than a major city. If I didn’t have financial aid, three scholarships, and my dad’s check every month . . .” Grant trailed off. We didn’t understand it at the time, but the issue of class was beginning to interrupt our once impenetrable fraternity. Due to the half a million or so in life insurance funds that

Grant had received after his father's death, he could no longer function as the middle class bridge between Jamie and I that had, without our knowledge, buttressed our friendships throughout high school.

“Hey have you guys,” Stephen Marberg, a former classmate began, “have you heard about that school in Colorado?”

“Uh, no, we haven't. Mostly because we don't give a shit about college football, Steve,” Jamie answered with a level of civility consistent to his life during 1999.

“No, no listen! All of these kids got shot. Like, twenty of them! It's at this high school in Colorado. Some kids showed up with machine guns and shot all a bunch of teachers and students. It's *fucked up!*” Stephen was clearly distraught, which should have been a warning sign. All of this was before cell phones, blackberries, and media websites had any real influence in society. If you heard bullshit, then you dismissed it as hyperbole as a matter of course.

“Okay, thanks Steve. We'll watch the news to see how bad it is,” Grant added, diplomatically. The reason that we did not believe him, the reason that some figure between fifteen and thirty casualties in a Middle American high school sounded ridiculous was not because the feat itself sounded impossible, but rather that we had all fantasized about doing the very same thing. If someone had rushed up to Grant, Jamie, and me and said, “hey, um, guys, some dude in a high school in New York just fucked Cindy Crawford – how cool is that!?” that would have sounded retarded as well - pure fantasy, nothing more.

Jamie rolled his eyes. “Do you still have booze at your house?” he asked me.

“Yeah, I should.”

“Great. Let’s have a beer and watch the news,” Jamie replied, “emphasis on *beer*.”

Needless to say, the news was horrible. Eric Harris. Dylan Klebold. Who doesn’t love those names? The plan of these two sociopaths, we would later find out, was actually to blow up several parts of the school so as to create a panic that would send terrified teenagers running and screaming into the teeth of the machine guns that Eric and Dylan had with them on a hillside – “suicide hill” is what they called it. But, they were fuck-ups. It’s true that they prepared some 95 explosive devices, the biggest of which was set in the school’s cafeteria, a propane bomb filled with nails set to go off at 11:17 a.m. so that the maximum number of kids would die due to severe burns and shrapnel intake. That could have been around 500 people. It turns out that one of six fuses failed to go off and that is the only reason that the body count was as low as it was. Their plan was to shoot the kids fleeing a burning building. When that didn’t work, they entered the school. There was some girl, one of the first to be shot, named Rachel. She was initially shot three times and attempted to crawl away from Eric Harris, who, valiantly, asked, “Where is your God now? Do you still believe in him?” And, actually, it was a good question.

She responded, “You know that I love Jesus.”

And, as she was bleeding to death, being mocked vulgarly for her family’s faith, Eric Harris also mocked the very wounds that he had inflicted upon her, mocked her as a person, and as she dragged her dying body across so much seemingly endless linoleum, Eric pulled up her drooping head by her hair and said, “Then, go and be with him now.” And that was the fatal shot – the first of many.

Los Angeles, the 405 Freeway, August 15th, 1999.

“The exit for LAX is about a mile away,” I said to Jamie from the back seat of the Volvo, barely being heard over the Belle and Sebastian CD playing over all four speakers. He was driving Grant and me to the airport for a flight to Oakland, where we would take the bus back to UC Berkeley before our classes began. It was very hot that day and the air had a heavy layer of smog that blocked one’s view of the horizon. Jamie, upon his return was going to enroll at Mt. SAC for his sophomore year.

A subtle but ever-present tension had developed between Grant and Jamie. It wasn’t that they were not talking to each other; rather, the trouble lay in their talking about one another with increasing criticality. Each man began to see the other as representing what was garish and limited about our generation, albeit for different reasons. What I hadn’t noticed in high school was that Grant and Jamie respected me for being an intelligent and resourceful person, but they respected each other as *men*. And, the bond between them seemed to have lost the vitality that it once had even just one year prior. In Los Angeles, August is always the cruelest month.

I remember looking at my watch to see if we would make our flight while listening to the argument between Grant and Jamie, already in progress.

“So, what? You think that my contempt for avarice exists because you’ve suddenly decided that you want a personal fortune someday?”

“No, I said that now that you actually have one, due to your father’s life insurance policy, that you don’t get that most of us in college need part time or even full time jobs just to stay afloat for four years only to be handed tens of thousands of dollars in debt.”

“I had a job last year, if you will remember,” Grant responded with thinly veiled condescension.

“Yeah, at the fucking library. Look, my point is that you didn’t need one, let alone one that paid you anything. So, it would be nice if you acknowledged that other people really do.”

“Yes, I get it. Just what the shit is your problem these days?”

Jamie sighed. “Look man, you’re becoming impossible to be around. All you do is lecture people about moral philosophy and political theory. These days, at our age, it’s pushing it to talk about the latest Kevin Spacey movie. You need to lighten up if you want other people to like you.”

“How so?”

“Stop being such a hard-ass, for one. I know that’s what Marcus wanted for you, but that only worked when he was still around. He did a lot to support you and you didn’t feel so under threat. But, now all of that is gone and you seem lost . . . lost as to how to get any meaning out of life again. Hell, just to get a little joy out of life again.”

“Okay *Pre-Med*, you think that I’m in *denial*?”

“That’s not what I-“

“-you think that my grief, the loss of my father is-“

“-No, Grant! I think that you’re crumbling under the weight of yourself.”

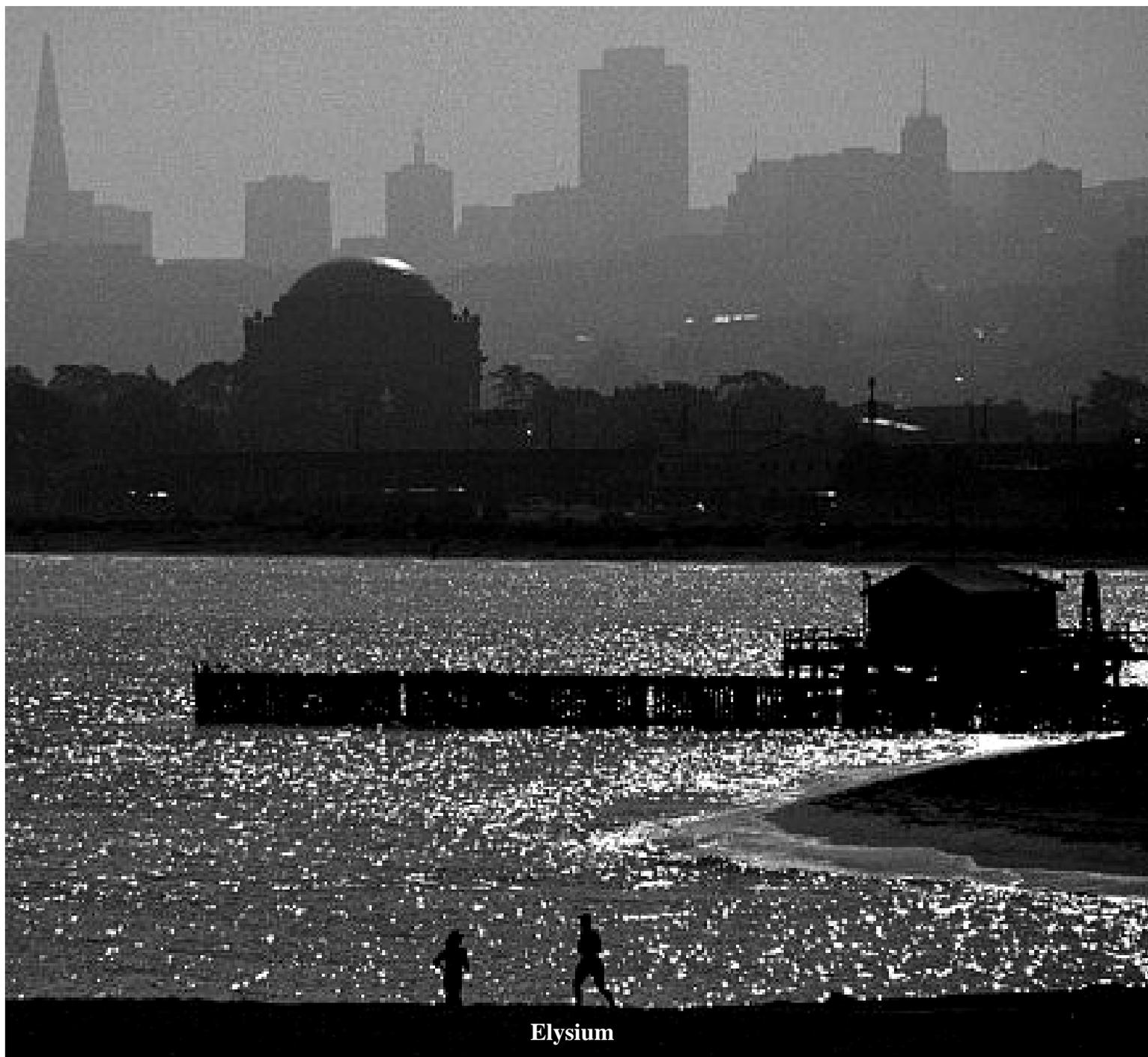
That sentence shut the two of them up until we pulled in front of the section of the loop reserved for Southwest Airlines passengers. “High and Dry” by Radiohead was playing in the black Lexus parked in front of us. No one said anything while Grant and I unpacked our bags from the trunk.

Grant turned to towards Jamie, tossing his duffel bag over his shoulder. “I know I’ve been distant,” he said, watching the cars drive by, cautiously merging in and out of lanes, “I need . . . I need some time.”

“There’s always email,” Jamie responded coolly.

“What do you think?” Jamie asked me as he took off his Ray Bans.

“I think that people are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles.”



Elysium

Elysium

*He was gifted with the sly, sharp instinct for self-preservation
that passes for wisdom among the rich.*

-Evelyn Waugh

Mel's Diner, San Francisco, November of 2000:

“. . . *Before the dark times, before the empire.*” The voice of Alec Guinness enters my head at the sight of an autographed picture of a frail, bearded man wearing a USC jacket. Gazing about the rest of the diner I infer that this man is George Lucas. Movie stills from *American Graffiti* are printed bigger than life along the walls like a mural. After placing my silverware beside a half eaten patty melt, I slide my plate to the end of the table in the hopes that a waitress will take note. Skinny white girls in cotton uniforms shuffle, to-and-fro, from the kitchen to the tables while their Hispanic coworkers occasionally yell something unintelligible as they labor over dozens of beef patties along an extensive fiery grill that spatters them with grease. A man with a bad haircut named Paul is the manager.

“All done here?” a girl with the nametag “Kat” asks.

“Just the check.” I smile.

“Oh-Kay.” Her voice is wholly free of cynicism. She has pasty Gaelic features, large breasts, and a tiny mouth. I had seen her giggling while waiting on the other tables, a façade of glee produced to ensure larger gratuities (I’m guessing). “I’ve seen you here before I think.” she nods, more to herself than at me.

“Yeah, it’s on my way to work. I don’t care for the food around school.”

“Oh, you’re in school?”

I turn my head eastward. “Berkeley.”

“That’s great. I go to USF but I’m only an undergrad.”

I turned twenty-one within the last forty-eight hours and am about to enter my senior year as an English Literature and Psychology double major. People have been presuming that I am older than my actual age for so long that I’ve grown into the habit of expanding on whatever they happen to guess. Displaying a liberal but controlled amount of interest, I ask Kat how she is getting on with earning her BA.

She lifts a plate onto her hip. “Actually I’m studying Biology and then going into nursing.” Her feet turn slightly away from the table while she leans forward, which I imagine is putting considerable strain on her lower back. My suspicion is that “Kat” believes me to be an acceptable combination of someone who is *not* psychotic while being fairly attractive, and is giving me the chance to pitch her a date in three acts: the clearing of the table, the return of the check, and a well-timed approach - upon my exit - to suggest the specifics for some kind of outing.

“Well,” I smile a little wider, my eyebrows bobbing up, “you hang in there. It gets better the further you go.”

She nods in agreement to my pious platitude. “I’ll be right back with your bill.” This is the point at which my shins would ache if my friends were seated across the table. Kat seems pleasant and sincere, good looking without being vain, and seemingly intelligent enough *or* at least deferential to those who are. Her diet is mostly pizza, her tastes commonplace, and she may secretly enjoy mild emotional abuse from the men in her sexual/romantic life. But I have no use for such a person. She is beyond criticism and, therefore, beyond my concern. As she walks away, Kat leans over a table to pick up a heap of opened sugar packets. She leans over so far that her left Converse hi-top lifts off the ground. This position allows the florescent lights to elaborate the curvature of her *derrière*. ‘Damn fine,’ I think.

“Damn fine.” I say to no one. She overhears this and, before returning to the wall separating the grease from the sugars, returns my glance with a trace of humiliation.

Neiman-Marcus, San Francisco, December 1st of 2000:

I’m listening to the last good album by The Smiths, released a decade ago, as I head to work on my bike. I lock it up to the post of a **No Parking at Anytime** sign and enter the alleyway behind the store to get in through the back. Sadly, my manager is already there. To refer to Mickey as fat is to slight the mild restraint shown by *ordinary* fat people. He is the sort of person who used to be fat and then one day decided that he simply wasn’t up to the challenge of an existence beyond barefaced obesity. His hair is slicked back into a ponytail. He is constantly on his cell phone and drinks from a two-liter bottle of Diet Coke clenched in his chubby right hand. He uses thick corporate speak as his arms move like a depression-era cartoon while he walks up and down the alley. The southern accent he heavily breathes under is Carolinian, I believe, and he is sweating profusely now which I believe is symptomatic of the fact that his boss has him in hot water for something. Mickey is a rat trying to pass himself off as a mouse.

Inside I am saddened further to see Tom “The Tom” Bradford. He is formally of Euro Disney renown as the Prince Charming character that would pose for photographs taken with American tourists. Tourists like Mickey and his fat-rat wife I would suppose. The lines alongside his cheeks all double over as he grins like a schoolboy. A woman in a green shirt and pinstripe suit, wearing a skirt instead of pants, is pleased to see him and the bulge in his pocket. I think said protuberance is a bottle of Windex and a handkerchief that Tom will use for wiping down any glass surfaces. In ten minutes, Tom will be planting Mrs. Julia Johnson a new one in the **Client’s Only** area (spelled out in a sign above the doorway in black letters over a white background.) This

section of the store is reserved for customers who spend over \$500.00 per month at Neiman Marcus. Mrs. Johnson looks around the store to see what else she wants as Tom hauls the last bundle of off-white woman's suits to the **Clients Only** section, which features fitting rooms with mirrors on every wall including the doors. Mrs. Johnson is an investment broker and she gives her card to every handsome young man that she meets. I already have two, myself.

In the absence of hearing any scandalous rumors about her until recently, I am assuming that this woman in question has only recently returned to a life of unveiled promiscuity. She comes in for nooners a few days per month now.

As a boy, I once read a graphic novel in which a middle-aged and emotionally lethargic Bruce Wayne finds his vitality and crime fighting passion restored when the gruesome details of his parents' murder are revived as he recalls a movie from his boyhood featured one night on TV. A giant bat that crashes through the windowpanes of The Batman's parlor serves as the physical manifestation of his psyche's renewal. As Mrs. Johnson quietly prances after Tom, heading for the mirrors, I try to imagine what would break past the glass for her.

This is something of a routine for Tom, Lance, and Reagan, who are all employees selling clothes to yuppies and amphetamines to staff and clients alike. This is all made possible by the fact that Mickey is rarely in the actual store and the assistant managers are busy chasing the more unsightly junkies, tramps, and ex-flower children out of our establishment. Theft is a somewhat humdrum affair at the department stores located on the corners of Union Square. The entire place sickens me. But, if you hate office jobs and cannot gain employment at the library – not for lack of trying – you need a plan B.

That being said, I am in a bad way: twitching, neurotic and less than cheery about the current situation. "Have you been losing weight Will?" My assistant manager, Anthony, asks. I

nod but avoid facing him so as to hide the contempt that his perennial up-beat tone produces in me. The weight of my academic and economic demands has produced a spiteful old man in me, permanently floating between antagonism and exhaustion. Only occasionally do I wash up along a whisky-lined shore of good humor or peace of mind.

“Peter!” The hand of an older man, early fifties, if I had to guess, squeezes my shoulder. He is confident, especially for a man acting gleefully towards someone whose acquaintance he has yet to make.

I nearly respond, “Will, actually” but decide that he has mistaken me for a coworker. After all, he seems to be bad with names. “Oh, I’ll get Lance he’s . . . in the back.” Or, ‘someone’s back,’ I think.

“No, oh no,” the man nearly chuckles, “I believe we met at a pub the day that all those *writers* were hopping from one bar to the next.” He removes his hand from my shoulder but leaves his palm hovering about three inches above my coat, ready to strike. “Have I got the name wrong?”

I recall what he is describing but I don’t *recognize* him. I think it’s because I never *cognized* this person in the first place. “My name is Will.” A small tremor of panic shoots up my spine as my *actual* name escapes my lips instead of the fake name of *Vincent* that I use for crazies such as this.

“Will. The name’s Victor.” He proceeds to prattle on about his severe need for footwear this winter and surreptitiously mentions that he is a Hollywood art dealer and theatre producer and how struck he was by my “presence” and “intellect.” It’s possible that he has mistaken me for an actor. I suppose I believe his claims about himself, for now, and so I shamefacedly ask on about the shoes assuming his true motivations will be better exposed with continued chatter.

Victor picks up a pair of boots from a display. “What about some black ankle boots? Hemingway loved these, *you know?*” Bullshit, *of course*.

“*You,*” I pause, “you like Hemingway?” Anthony’s stare persuades me to be cordial.

“He’s great,” Victor continues. “That one about the war . . .” Eventually, he asks me if I like working in the rag trade. The temerity of the question leaves me a little off kilter. All my other plans for the fade from view off and I just stare at this audacious person. “Here? At Neiman Marcus? In the Financial district?” I can see that the irony is lost on him. He’s rich alright. And he always has been, that much is clear.

“No.” I rub my eyes. “No, but I need the money,” I respond, hoping that a punch line will come to me. There isn’t one. Writer’s block and insomnia have greatly eroded my capacity for wit. It’s not uncommon for me to sit, hunched over in my chair, picking away at the digital pages with thousands of keystrokes. Long, drawn out evenings are spent developing characters and atmospheric compositions which depict the more unstable personalities that I have heard in the back of my mind for some time now. If I spend more than 30 hours carving out fictional characters from the forests of imagination, I find that these characters have taken up residency on some dim lit stage of my psyche. I often lie awake under the weight of slowly falling autumn afternoons, unable to tune out the voices of sweating, flustered old men, rambling out nonsense past their dry yellow teeth. Trying to ignore the licentious art dealer in Nieman Marcus, I remember waking with the sun as a boy in my mother’s house, eager to see nature’s plan unfold on the bright sidewalks, to catch a glimpse of God’s will being done around some corner, to see miracles in flower beds and find some greatness in children playing tag. Such memories are a lifetime ago. I feel a dryness pulling at the back of my eyes and nose, unable to alleviate this sickness despite gallons of flat stale water. The old men start up again. Routinely, I will ring my

hands over the side of the mattress, the old men furiously negating and asserting their existences. They carry on relentlessly before drowning out each other in a flood of fear and bitterness, not to be forgotten, not to be irrelevant, they resided some place that I will someday have to descend to in person. There are moments at three in morning when I almost feel ready.

Victor goes on to say that if I am interested, he has “*An entrepreneurial opportunity*” for me to consider. It is very likely that this “opportunity” is merely *love for tender*. The frosted hair, the lavender silk tie, the imperious swagger, all suggest a creature of a duplicitous nature that has momentarily exposed a well guised desperation.

This man is clearly anomalous, in no way a gentleman. I know this. I *also* know that I work for a company that is part of a growing culture that I deplore: transitory ideals, unchecked commercialism, yoga, etc. I know that I am being sold into it. And I know that to return to the bar from whence I was first leered at is most certainly to invite disaster into my life. But life is difficult and banal for me at present, too taxing to justify even with the eventual refurbishments of a career, *marriage*, and the other boons that have been promised to me since the age of seven. I think that getting divorced would be very likely and I think pursuing a career is even more likely to become a desperate and fierce affair. And I am already tired. I am fed up. I have been so for the last three years. I subsist among the indifference and impersonal expectations of others. My time has become *their time*, company time. I see no reason for it to change with working full time, like so much dead weight on my mind at the end of the day. The weight bearing down on all those men in all those bars along Market Street, each day pushing up their sales and bottom lines at the expense of the their health, marriage, and vitality, and then trudging home again, back up the hills of San Francisco but never able to stand, in triumph, at the top. I want out. I want a change, if only for the hell of it. “You can reach me at his number,” I say as I hand him his receipt.

North Beach, CA, December 13th:

I am wearing wool slacks, a white cotton shirt that has actually been named “The Perfect Shirt” by its manufacturer, black loafers, and a dark blue Weimar-era cardigan sweater in order to take BART to pick up a friend, Grant, from the airport. I’ve become so accustomed to the benefits of Victor’s wealth that I have come to believe that a day without J. Crew or Hugo Boss on my body is a blemish upon some kind of aesthetic integrity. Except for a bum passed out in the back however, passengers do not take notice of one another. I have made it back up to running six miles per day around the rim of North Beach. The end of my workout is consummated by briskly ascending the western succession of hills until I reach the top of 1925 Caraway Way (and, no, I don’t know if the civil engineers were trying to be funny), which allows me the daily opportunity to look down upon the people who occupy less opulent neighborhoods. These are the very people with whom I am presently riding. They all appear exhausted, hunched over, and seem as though they would implode with the slightest barometric alteration.

A warm feeling is flooding through me, which can be superlatively described as triumph from having just finished another sexual bender with Alyssa, a resident nurse at St. Luke’s Hospital that I met in a coffee house last month. With the aid of a few of Victor’s “enhancements,” I have performed fairly well for a man who regarded himself as exclusively homosexual until the past few weeks. I will not limit myself so easily in the future; everything must be called into question.

The sights and sounds of silk sheets sweeping around Alyssa’s body, made golden by the afternoon sun, continue to float through my mind. I had made gin and tonics at a quarter before two; Alyssa had sipped hers from the safety of under the covers as her naked body dipped into a queen-sized waterbed. The booze had lifted my spirits above such insecurities however, which is

why I chose to wander the apartment in the nude in the hopes that she would notice the all-over-tan that I had procured from the salon and how defined my abdomen has become since I began my routine of stomach crunches while viewing The Charlie Rose Show and also Talk Soup if time and endurance both permit. She did notice.

Among the tapes and CDs strewn around the floor of her bedroom was an early Rod Stewart album which incited an unexpected declaration of “Rod the Mod!” out of my mouth with inebriated glee. Alyssa has said that she is twenty-eight and I replied that I was twenty-four. As I am nearly twenty-two, my guess is that she is closer to thirty-one, which would explain her love of music from the 1980s and effusive hatred for Reaganomics. As the music played I began to dance, ungainly to be sure, toward her. After setting my drink by hers, I tugged at her sheet, “Staaahppp,” she giggled. I maneuvered the sheet so that she needed to stand up to preserve her display of modesty. Ironically, my eyesight is about to exceed the corrective capacity of contact lenses and I had left my glasses at Victor’s house. My memories of the white silk whirling around her bleached hair and yoga-lean body are all tied into one long, elegant, and angelic blur as opposed to the stay-in burlesque routine that she took it for. Walking around the apartment had bought me sufficient time for all the blood-accelerants (Yohimbe, B-12, and something called Vipra – which is only sold in Europe) to kick in. I find that said substances work as a substitute for Viagra. Bi-curiosity only goes so far. We began to move more slowly as I used the bedding to wrap us into a kind of cocoon. Alyssa’s lips pressed forth slightly and then parted as her hand felt my heartbeat, literally racing from the amount of sin-powder thundering through my ventricles. As I dipped her back onto the bed and prepared for our third round I sensed that I had done something juvenile, probably in the way of checking to see if I had “done it” correctly. A pleasing, transparent expression drew

over her face. ‘He’s so young,’ she was probably thinking before gently moaning once again.

Damn right lady!

A bona fide sagacity for human potential has come over me like a hero’s apotheosis in an Alfred Tennyson poem. I no longer concern myself with what will be expedient to avoid the greatest losses in my life. I can now move towards the thoughts and actions that I find the loftiest. At twenty-one I have time and ability on my side in a way that I could scarcely have conceived of just three years earlier. As, I’m sure, that the plankton on BART will never conceive of. I wonder if Bobby Kennedy experienced a similar state of mind while he was helping to end racial segregation in the South whilst having sex – great sex I’m sure – with Marilyn Monroe . . .

Beverly Hills, CA, New Year’s Eve, 2000:

“If you’re not going to *drink* anything, then the least you could do is *fit in*.” Jamie tells me this as he carefully pours whisky onto a handkerchief before rubbing the dampened rag over my entire face, neck, and shirt collar, paying special attention to the interior regions of my lips. He pours some more of the whisky into a glass with half-melted ice and drinks all of it while turning to see how many of his friends (women) have turned up to his party. Looking past a talking pile-of-boobs, which I believe to be one of Jamie’s familiars, I notice Grant leaning against a wall. It is strange to see him here, standing a foot taller than the other Hindu, Gaelic, and Latin hipsters floating around the living room. His white t-shirt, well polished Doc Martins, and charcoal wool slacks are all fashion eyesores amid the layers of German Army jackets, Tommy Hilfiger “wife-beaters,” blue suede Sketchers, and the olive-green nylon bra with the word “VIRGIN” written across its cups bolstering up the breasts of a girl coming up to hug Angelina. The *chaste* young lady sporting the bra and blazer (her father’s I’m guessing) hastily embraces Angelina (Grant’s

girlfriend that he met at Berkeley). The woman's blazer draws up from her pants' line as Angelina's nails scratch, affectionately, at her back. This movement exposes a thong strap and a tattoo of a butterfly that is partially concealed by a pair of pre-distressed 501 jeans. Standing up, and away, from Angelina, the woman turns on what look like a pair of lavender Manolo Blahnik three-inch-heels and introduces herself to Grant, whom she stands just taller than. Virgin-girl is too thin for her height – albeit less so than Angelina – and is vigorously rubbing the upper sections of Grant's folded arms which seems to have triggered his predictable allergic reaction to yuppie dander. It's been almost two years since high school ended, and Jamie and Grant are still the only friends that I have.

As Jamie walks off, I follow him into the kitchen. He pours himself another drink before, finally, asking, “So, man, how old *is* this chick?”

“Around . . . thirty?” I have to guess as I don't know Alyssa's age. It suddenly occurs to me how bizarre it actually is that I've never really bothered to care.

A sigh slips out of the other side of Jamie's mouth. “Ahhh . . . what does she look like?”

“Like a heartier Diane Lane. More *voluptuous*,” I stress.

“You fucking pimp!” Jamie flashes me a smile, his signature one. “What have you two *done*? So far?”

“Everything,” I nod.

“Every- . . .” he pauses to consider what this statement fully entails. “Ev-ery-thing?” Jamie stares at me, incredulously, while thrice tapping the side of a Corona bottle.

I refine my assertion: “She hasn't used any devices on me, per se, but *I* have on *her*.”

Jamie smiles again, taking down the very last of the Corona bottles into his arms while holding the refrigerator door open with his foot. “Son-of-a-bitch.” His voice draws out the “*itch*,”

and it seems to linger in the frozen air wafting out of the ice bin before disappearing just as the door swings shut.

Leaning against the cabinets, now, I have a better view of the harmonic movements of the schools of partygoers still swimming along under the glow of a ceiling that is covered in 500 square feet of aluminum foil. The sounds of wooden soled heels *klip-klap* down the hall as an anemic Valkyrie appears from the living room.

“Whoofff,” she murmurs, feigning amazement, waving her hand in front of her face from the smell of the whisky soaked into my clothes and skin. Annoying bitch.

“Jamie,” the woman’s footsteps speed up before halting, abruptly, “what’s up?!” Jamie and the Valkyrie embrace.

“Belise, it’s fan-fucking-tastic to see you.” As he is saying this, Jamie’s eyes wander from her face to her bra to her nipples to her abdomen to her hips to her naval piercing, back to her nipples that are pushing out the dots from each of the *I*’s inscribed in white along the nylon bra, to the collar bones that match up perfectly to her father’s lapels, to the glitter-specked lotion that she has smeared over her chest, neck, and eyelids, and then finally back to her face. “You’re looking gorgeous as usual.”

“Yeah, I like your hair though,” Belise hesitates, almost imperceptibly, before raking her bony fingers through his bangs, “so *long* now.” Jamie’s eyes move briefly, with delight, in my direction: a Freudian slip.

“Hey, this is my friend from San Fran, Will.” As Belise turns to nod in my direction, vaguely, Jamie winks at me as if to say “Bros before Hos” or “I’m gonna climb this mountain” or *both*. “You ought to move out here man,” Jamie continues, “I mean – don’t get me wrong and all – San Francisco is picturesque for a good third of the year but . . .” he moves to pour a round of gin

and tonic for himself and Belise (her glass receives twice as much alcohol) . . . “there’s just not a lot goin’ on.” Jamie raises a toast, along with Belise and swallows some more poison.

“I’m telling you, man,” Jamie taps his free hand against the window over the sink, “capitol of the fucking world.”

I consider the phrase “not a lot going on.” As of last week when I was in North Beach I learned that Alyssa is actually bi-polar and that I am apparently just one of several men that she sees each week, crystal meth is sweeping across the Castro like a blizzard, like the Red Death; an agent from The Vanguard Titans Inc. is interested in publishing my novel; and Victor has lost 20 pounds in five weeks. But, I take Jamie’s point. For most ambitious young men finishing college, living in San Francisco was like swimming through a giant decaf latte: tasty, overpriced, and utterly devoid of excitement.

“Yeah,” I nod at the window.

“Hey,” Jamie continues as he leans against the counter in order to inch closer to Belise, “I was at Ameba Records last week and I saw Bret Easton Ellis perusing the *Echo & The Bunnymen* imports. Far out, huh?”

“No one reads him anymore.” I look back into the party down the hall. ‘Black coastline like the edge of an abyss’ is the phrase that keeps repeating in my mind as I think about the last time I drove down Lincoln Ave., to Alyssa’s apartment, in the rain at four in the morning with sweat running down my arms, back, and forehead. In her apartment, windows fogged up, the bed frame knocking against the wall, Alyssa sweats even more than I do when we’re really in the throes of it all, as though she’s on automatic, gyrating her hips into my face, palm, or even my thigh once I’ve gone flaccid, once I have nothing left. Listening to Morrissey songs, smoking brown paper cigarettes, and thinking on and off as to whether I have a disease from that woman and/or will

acquire any future diseases from her, and why it is that I seem to be just the right body (for now) to engage her bottomless, pathological sexual needs. And then, on the flight from SFO to LAX, I wondered how I came to be so useful for the most prurient interests that humanity has to offer. How does a man turn himself into a commodity without even thinking about it? At what point do people just aimlessly process the limited resources of their lives? And just how did I become a live-in callboy? A Diet Coke?

I nod to Jamie and Belise who are “off for a smoke” as Jamie, already standing on the fire escape doing his best Christopher Reeve impression, takes Belise’s hand as she swings her other leg across the window frame and onto the grate below. Jamie hoists her up, onto her unsteady feet, into his wistful gaze. They won’t be back for hours.

Angelina offers a brown bottle of beer to Grant, which would be his fourth for the evening. He slowly pushes the bottle away, gently saying something to her that might have been “nothing in excess.” Angelina playfully claws at his stomach in order to coax him into further inebriation, smiling up at him after sipping from the 32-degrees-Fahrenheit vodka swirling around her wine glass – the ice cubes of which luminously catch the light of the room. I had forgotten that certain types of women have a tendency to manhandle Grant if they’ve had a few too many. Both muscular and effete, Grant – like Angelina – is an aborted soul from another time, perhaps The Jazz Age. The fact that the two of them have done rather well for themselves in Berkeley during the end of the twentieth century is an ethnographer’s dream waiting to happen. “Bled White” by Elliott Smith begins playing over the half dozen speakers mounted along the south wall of the living room as Grant walks down the hallway towards me, his contemptuous dark eyes looming above his excessively and even unattractively broad shoulders.

“Where’s Jamie?” he all but demands to know.

“He snuck out the kitchen window with some Nordic broad.” As I’m saying this I turn my hands up flat, as if to say, ‘Jamie’s a man-whore. What do you expect *me* to do about it?’

Grant points at his chest with his thumb. “Virgin girl?”

I nod. Grant holds my gaze for a second, then rolls his eyes and moves to open the freezer door. After a moment, he decides on something and pulls out a bottle of Grey Goose vodka – probably because it is the most expensive thing in the icebox (and I’m certain Jamie paid for it). At this point, the eight-pill combination of Tylenol and Nyquil that I had washed down with a tumbler of Alka-Seltzer has *really* begun to take effect. So much so, that I fail to notice Grant leaving the room. I slip my hands into the pockets of my hooded sweatshirt and feel the Discman and the latest Philip Glass album that I am presently thanking Christ for having remembered. Moving past the groupings of people – all young, all thin, and all rich – I find the bathroom.

Before stepping over the bathtub and onto the fire escape below the window, which overlooks sweeping, immaculately cut lawns, I manage to take in some of the more tasteful elements of the washroom’s interior. Each wall is covered from top to bottom with a different continent: Europe to the north, Africa to the south, Asia to the east, and The Americas to the west. The cartography is not modern however; the jagged coastlines of the North American West and the modest size of the sub-Saharan landscapes suggest the world of the late eighteenth century. The ceiling is a Rubenesque depiction of what I believe are Zeus and his children traversing over the heavens. Lilies have been hand-painted over the tiles, one shade of white over another.

Angelina’s mother is Arsonphobic. Every since childhood she has had nightmares of being trapped on the second or third story of a building while the first floor was ablaze, thus dooming her to be burned alive. This is why a two story mansion not one block from Sunset Blvd. has three fire escapes, tastefully painted white, which are attached to the master bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen

of the second floor. Using my jacket as a pillow, I lie down over the egg shell colored metal rods of the fire escape. The easterly winds remind me of the weight that I've lost since moving in with Victor, nearly twenty pounds by now. The weight of the past six months begins to roll down on me all at once and I can feel the last vestiges of what passed for stamina, agility, and resilience bleeding out onto the roses planted in the side yard below. Listening to my Walkman, ignoring everything but the sky, I close my eyes and let the world fall away . . .

. . . I begin to hear the echoes of tender music floating around the room as Grant and Angelina talk. Gordon Lightfoot, The Replacements, Leonard Cohen, Ride, Kate Bush, and Nick Drake play in rotation in the background. Occasionally, Angelina's toes tap against the other end of the bathtub as she counts along with the percussions of the more fanciful ballads. I remain in a state of gray twilight – that odd, dead, ethereal place between dreams and waking life - for what feels like a half hour before heaving myself up to a sitting position. The bathtub is so large – half the size of the room – that Angelina has to wade over in order to see me. The angelic face of a naked girl, joint in hand with her chin resting on her forearms, smiles sweetly at me before giggling a “Hi.”

“I'll bet,” I giggle back.

“I'm taking a bath now so you can't come in without getting wet.”

“I see – got it.”

“Take off your clothes and hand them to me, across the water.” Grant advises this from a chair at the southwest corner of the tub. A cup of coffee on a saucer rests on his hand. Grant drinks an inordinate amount of coffee. “Four pints a day,” was his best guess, adding, “strong enough to float an iron witch.”

Looking outside to the street to see if anyone else is around (and disappointed to only spot five hipsters piling into a Mercedes), I remove my shoes, socks, belt, charcoal wool trousers, my black hooded sweatshirt, a twelve hundred dollar cashmere sweater, wife beater and my watch until only me and my Tommy Hilfiger boxer-briefs wait outside the window's ledge. Grant sets all of them, the sweater on top, beneath his chair. Angelina slides back to the other side of the tub as my right foot passes beneath the water.

"You want a hand?" Grant asks.

"I'm fi-" the ball of my foot loses its traction and my arms wave wildly about as my lower back slams against the wall of the tub. Suds fly everywhere. Grant covers his coffee cup with his palm while Angelina's eyes open wide as dinner plates. I glance at both of them and blurt out, dryly, without too many traces of agony, "Ow."

A brief pause precedes the shrieks of laughter. Grant is more chortling at me while Angelina – the beautiful child who is laughing with me – has become violently happy, her hands slapping the side of the tub as her feet madly kick the surface of the warm ivory liquid.

"Yeah . . . crap," I say while rubbing my throbbing, under-padded backside. Angelina passes me (out of what I take to be empathy) her recently lit weed. What happens next is difficult to keep together in my mind . . .

Angelina talks, through a sort of personal narrative, about the wilderness surrounding her grandfather's cottage, about Derrida and Whitman, about the first time her thighs shook after an orgasm, and about seeing people as "pantheons unto themselves." Her hair often falls in front of her face, forming a yellow veil. At some point I remember that a doctor has told her that radiation therapy has "done all it can." Her earrings and the silver nail polish on her fingers and toes remind me of the constellations – Orion in particular.

Grant sits coarse and common beside his new best friend. Scars from fistfights and from warts (sexually transmitted to him in high school by James Watts) that he hacks off with a Revlon nail clipper litter his knuckles and fingers. His eyes still betray the hollowness that defined him after his father's death. He sits, somberly, near the water, tapping his father's gold ring against the rust colored mug. He never – he admits – smokes, hardly dates, and drinks only when asked to (always by Angelina or Jamie). He also listens to people more intently than any other young man that I've known.

What is clear is that their rapport is not *mad love*. There are no cries of passion, no torn clothes strewn about the tile floor, only a mortal understanding of what one has undergone and what the other will soon face . . . and the peace that comes with that recognition. The whole atmosphere of the bath is strangely relaxing, so much so that I forget how worried I briefly was about the possibility of a threesome ensuing (and by "worried," I mean that I was insecure about how severely the Nyquil, THC, and whatever substance is extracted from wormwood, would diminish my "stamina.")

I realize, as though Grant were a boy of nine and Angelina were a girl of eleven, that this is their pond in a black forest, their garden within miles of concrete: paradise.