The Suffering Machine
by
Saint James Harris Wood
a novel
submitted on April 4, 2018

Hezikiah Ulysses Blue, college dropout and obsessive bibliophile, loses his mother, then withdraws from the world into his books and a penetrating loneliness. Hezikiah detaches himself from his siblings and quits his job at Nordstrom’s men’s department in the San Fernando Valley. Socially and spiritually adrift, he meanders into a plan to rob a bank, which he fulfills with freak stumblebum perfection; then forges a cockeyed alliance with a young band of drug dealers and has a torrid affair with one of them, a beautiful and profoundly self-interested prostitute. As the stakes rise with riskier drug deals, Hezikiah finds himself tossed on a tide of fluctuating disaster. Struggling with himself, the ghost of his mother and the shifty, tilted world around him, Hezikiah longs to find a life worth living.
THE SUFFERING MACHINE

by

Saint James Harris Wood

Chapter One

The First 30 Brief Years Of My Life

Against our entire extended family’s wishes, Jean named me Našlkišš Ulysses Blue. Now wasn’t a religious nut or hippie chick, she simply wanted her children to have distinctive names designed to free us from the crowd. In kindergarten I found it satisfying that the other 5 year olds couldn’t pronounce Našlkišš, but my sister, Naruda, and my brother, Dali, struggled with their names from the day they entered school and realized what had been done to them—that certain children find a mean joy in taunting weird kids, like us. We were born in consecutive years, making us closer than your average siblings. Dali was 3, Naruda 4, and I was 5 when our dad had a rapid middle-aged crisis, screwed a client at the real estate office (where he and we worked), ruined their marriage, then disappeared from our lives forever. Deeply humiliated, Jean refused to speak of our father from that day forth. He left us with nothing—no monetary or emotional support or parenting of any kind save an appalling example of how not to be a father. It hit Naruda the hardest, she aspired towards being a daddy’s girl. Over the years Dali and I latched onto various teachers and coaches who temporarily filled the dad void. None of us really suffered much in this regard, it was a given that mom adored us with no reservations regardless of what trouble we got up to. Besides, our neighborhood, in the profoundly suburban San Fernando Valley,
was crawling with relatives. Mom's brothers, Uncle Tony and Uncle Mike, lived only a
couple of blocks away, and the two of them produced nine cousins for us. Also, our
grandparents' house was only a 5 minute drive away, and we made the most of their desire
to corrupt us with ice cream and late night movies. Every Christmas, Thanksgiving,
graduation or birthday was excuse and occasion enough for the large extended Blue family
to get together, eat, drink, party and steadily bond. Grandma Blue was the matriarch
by dint of her age (mid 70s), but Grandma's inclination was to do no more than sip wine
and help a little in the kitchen; and so, my mother easily stepped up and into the role
of matriarch and head enforcer. Jean was the oldest child, like me, except that she
was 8 years old when her brothers were 1 and 2, so my uncles were used to her being
in charge from the beginning of their lives. Uncle Tony summed it up, "Grandma knows
a lot, but your mom knows everything."

Jean's sagacity was propped up by her passionate, almost unnatural lifelong
relationship with books. She had us reading at the age of 3 and by the time school loomed
we were compulsive readers, which again made us strange to the other kindergarteners.
Every room in our house was a library of sorts including the kitchen, dining room and
bathrooms. My bedroom resembled a small book store visited by a tornado. The garage
looked like a storage facility for bibliomaniac monks. We were proud of first time
visitors' incredulous reactions to our messy, book strewn house. As a kid I liked the
Ninja Turtles and violent Saturday morning cartoons; but I loved Tom Sawyer, Oz and
all of Jack London's dogs. Mom steered us toward a broad literary spectrum and over
the years during various stages I collected every book concerning Tarzan, The Hardy
Boys, Dickens, Conan the Barbarian, Elmore Leonard, Woody Allen, James Bond and Hunter
Thompson. I amassed a thousand science fiction paperbacks but mom banished them to our
attic, which was fine with my little coterie of 13 year olds as it gave us a place to
hide out and study Playboy. Neruda, while more of a reader than her peers, was taken
early by popular culture via music and Hollywood. Whenever one of the family conclave
or shindigs was held at our house, uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews left with at
least one book, knowing that to refuse would cause Jean to burst into an indignant speech
about being plugged into life through the world’s literature. I personally turned cousin
Eddie into a Conan the Barbarian aficionado at the of 9. Controversy ensued when my
Aunt Mary, Eddie’s mom, took exception to the racy cover art. During our high school
years my cousins spent entire weekends at our house doing homework, knowing that their
aunt loved to dig around in her library to help out with reports and essays. Jean
babysat, advised, ordered around and loved the entire Blue clan with an irrepressible
verve that made anyone connected to her by blood feel grounded and safe.

Our long lost dad destroyed mom’s faith in marriage and she never sought another
husband or lived with a man again; however, she indulged herself with a long string
of discrete affairs as a serial monogamist. If one of her boyfriends spent the night,
he left early and us kids were never faced with a man in Jean’s bed. Each affair lasted
only 8 months to a year, then were done and over with. Dali and I, while mildly aloof
with these men, gave them a passing respect because we loved our mother and she enjoyed
keeping a man on tap to take her out to dinner, movies and . . . for things we didn’t
care to contemplate. Neruda, however, threw herself into the role of daughter with every
one of Jean’s boyfriends. We were all joiners and if Neruda had a soccer game, dance
recital or play, she’d beg mom and her latest manfriend into attending, thereby fostering
the illusion of a nuclear family. After each of mom’s routine and inevitable breakups,
Neruda would be inconsolable. The dismissal of Jean’s paramours was always a gracious
affair with a final homemade dinner and discussion of the breakup (one man in 15 years
made a scene by crying on the front lawn, embarrassing us all, providing yet another
anti-example of manhood for Dali and me). Recognizing that the dissolution of these
relationships were adversely affecting her father starved daughter, mom began to include
Neruda in the final dinner. Pouting and brooding, Neruda would argue for the outgoing
boyfriend, and then sleep in mom’s bed for a few days.

Jean managed the local Coldwell banker and we were as comfortable as any two
parent family in the Valley. She managed to get all three of us into college. Dali, while the youngest, turned out to be the best student. With the help of a baseball scholarship, Dali was the only one of us who saw his education all the through, becoming a lawyer, thank god. Neruda went to San Diego State on a volleyball scholarship, majoring in veterinary science. Her sophomore year she fell in love with Joe Hill, got pregnant, married, then dropped out of school. After Joe graduated (as an architect) Neruda hectored him into relocating to the San Fernando Valley so she could live near mom. Though I never had any real or clear ambitions, a track scholarship got me to UCLA. In high school I smoked pot before track meets, it made the pain pleasant. The endorphins from running a fast mile mixed well with cannabis. I cultivated a thriving habit and took it to college with me. There I fell in with a rowdy crew of hard drinking, pot smoking, steroid taking football players. I had a wonderful time in school, enjoyed some of the classes, met interesting women, but UCLA has a "no tolerance" policy towards drugs. After several ounces of Marin Chronic were found in my room on campus, I had no luck pleading that the weed was for personal use since it was in 40 separate baggies. I was thrown out of school near the end of my junior year. Although ambitionless, I'd intended to stay in college for 8 years, sequestered from the world (and work), but that sketchy project and my liberal arts education was left in a shambles.

Disgusted with life and myself, I moved back in with Jean. She insisted that I quit drugs and spend a week in rehab, which I did. Shunning higher education I began a string of jobs. I tried construction, selling cars, telemarketing, and even fell so low as to sell candy from door to door, a complete comedown. Stone cold sober, the only women in my life were grumpy housewives and old ladies with mean little dogs. I missed college.

Back in my boyhood bedroom, when not telemarketing or selling candy, I lay in bed reading John Steinbeck (who can be one depressing son of a bitch), one novel after another, sleeping up to 12 hours a day. At no point did my mother make me feel bad about
myself. Her love life in a lull, with no boyfriends in sight, Jean and I hung out a lot. We listened to music and watched Jeopardy obsessively. During one late night talk she told me the name Hazikiah had been inspired by a Bob Dylan song. Mom also confessed that she'd been a dedicated pothead, but gave it up while pregnant with me.

"I smoked during the first trimester. Your idiot father thought it was healthy. I worry that's why you like weed, and started so young."

"Young? What are you talking about? I started in college. You're tripping."

"Honey, I washed your clothes. You started in the tenth grade."

"Why didn't you do something about it?"

"You were a track star with good grades. My parents tried to stop me and only made it worse, and drove me away. The past is gone—let's ignore it and try to focus on something, anything that you enjoy doing."

"I enjoy nothing," I said, suddenly dark and sullen, like a teenager.

"Bullshit. You like books. And what about music?"

"Good idea, Ma. I'm not a musician. Wish I was, but . . ."

"So, sell music. There's a dozen music stores in the Valley. You can do anything."

"Work in a music store? Full of stoners? I'm only a month out of that stupid rehab, which by the way, I really didn't need."

"I know."

"What?!"

"It was punishment. If you love me—go get some kind of job."

Anything was better than disappointing Jean. I went from store to store until I got a job at Cindy Lee's New & Used CDs, which actually suited me. Listening to music all day long was nowhere near as grueling as the door to door gigs. There were obnoxious kids who stole from the store, and I was expected to deal with them, but overall I didn't hate the store or Cindy Lee. Mom made it plain that she'd support me for as long as it took. While this didn't improve the ruins of my education or the dubious course of my life, it did make me feel like I belonged right there.
I spent a few years coasting effortlessly along, disconnected and peculiarly content, doing the old nine to five selling used CDs. I'm not good or bad with women, but it doesn't matter as I am a serial monogamist like Jean. I fall into relationships of convenience and the least resistance and forged one with Cindy Lee because she was right there in the CD store with me. My capricious lifestyle isn't conducive to long term commitments, but I liked Cindy Lee, she got drunk on music like I do with books. However, she is a collectoholic while I am liable to abandon most books after I'm finished with them, rather than haul a library around. Mom tried to get me interested in accumulating a lifelong pile of books like hers as a hedge against a vague future apocalypse of ignorance brought on by the internet and Republicans. I never bought into it and Jean contented herself with being mildly gratified by my compulsive reading habit.

Cindy Lee noticed the similarity of our manias and so seduced me with music, sarcasm and books; wily moves that I appreciated. I have trouble seeing the difference between love and lust, though I don't mind telling a woman that I love her if it makes life easier. My declarations of love seem sincere since I might really mean it. Even though she got me smoking pot again, my mom liked Cindy Lee because she accepted every single book Jean offered. After a weekend at my place, Cindy always left with a few musicians' biographies; although, she wasn't above later selling Jean's books at the store.

Four years into the Cindy situation, immediately after a promotion to night manager of the CD store, a terminal boredom possessed me, and I quit. A big part of it was the store's clients—a crowd of disenfranchised, willful outcasts headed nowhere—they looked and lived just like me and I was tired of the constant reminders. Cindy Lee put on a good show of being thunderstruck that I would leave after such a prestigious promotion (my pay was raised from minimum wage to eleven dollars an hour; with no healthcare or overtime, or even a key to her restroom). I didn't even want to break up with her, loneliness and celibacy are irksome, I just wanted to quit the stupid used CD business. The real sincerity of our alleged love affair was demonstrated by Cindy's refusal to
talk to me after I quit working for her. Her contention that I wouldn’t commit to the relationship was belied by the previous four years. What good is a verbal contract? As far as she was concerned, if I quit Cindy Lee’s New & Used CDs, I quit her. When the sex is good, which it was, I always assume it means the same to the women in my life. But a woman can walk away from good sex, while most men, unless hobbled or medically castrated, will continue to have sex with the exzes (yes, plural) until someone dies.

With my final paycheck, which was thrown at me, I bought Phillip Roth’s last book, Margaret Atwood’s sci-fi quadrology, and a Japanese crime novel I’d heard about from one of the punk/computer nerds at the CD store; and took a reader’s holiday, laying in bed for days on end eating cheesecake, oranges and peanut butter sandwiches, reading until three in the morning, then I’d sleep until noon. Unable to resist, Jean sat in a chair by my bed and read with me for a couple of hours each day. The only time I left the bedroom was to drag myself into the living room to watch Jeopardy at seven o’clock each night with Jean who would microwave a half dozen of those little frozen chicken pot pies, the epitomy of how one wastes away an evening in the suburbs. It took two restful and agreeable weeks to make it through my new novels (Atwood, good; Roth, eh; Japanese crime fiction, interesting). Jean didn’t address my unshaved and increasingly unambitious state, but I could hear her loudly thinking, "Go to work!" I couldn’t take it. My fiction thirst temporarily sated, I went out for the local papers that still existed that had classified sections and spent a long afternoon in a coffeehouse looking for a god damn job.

Wanting to change everything, I took the unlikeliest path imaginable and finagled my way into Nordstrom’s selling expensive men’s clothes. From torn jeans and flannel shirts to a full fledged suit. At 29 years old I could feel 30 beckoning, forcing me to grow up, a little. Nordstrom’s corporate overlords not so subtly suggested that I attend seminars and other educational affairs that trained me to believe selling clothes is a higher calling, and my manager covertly planted the idea in my head that if I stayed with the company, absorbed the culture and their way of business, the sky is the limit.
It was all designed to make me into something I am not. I cut my hair, quit smoking pot for the tenth time, and even gave up literary fiction. Dali suggested a handful of autobiographies by famously successful people, dropped the books off at the men’s department during lunch and then spent two thousand dollars on Calvin Klein’s finest. Dali wanted to make me look like a good bet to the new boss. It worked and I stuck with Nordstrom’s for a good long while.

I lived with Jean for six years total, then moved out. Nordstrom’s paid commissions on top of a decent salary and I effortlessly sold a lot of clothes to fashion cripples. Jean didn’t want me to move out and disrupt our domestic cocoon. She’d arrived at that age that shuns change. I made sure to stay down in the Valley and found a small two bedroom place (my first!) only three blocks north of Jean and four blocks south of Neruda and her growing family, two kids and counting. I like to live within walking distance of the people I love because I don’t believe in cars. As a serious teenaged pot-smoker I noticed a disquieting correlation between automobiles and getting arrested. The cops hardly ever pull over taxis and never a bus. Although I wasn’t getting high while practicing haberdashery, my earlier life has infused me with a stoner’s viewpoint. My distaste for authority in general is put off by the DMV’s tests, registrations, pictures, fingerprints and the complicated legal clusterfucks one has to put up with while dealing with the state. All the paperwork and government riffraff associated with cars are a right winger’s wet dream and a free person’s nightmare. I’m not political, a lapsed anarchist at worst, who just wants nothing to do with politicians or cops or the DMV. I love our vast mass transit system with its trains, buses, thousands of taxis; I even like the pedicabs, rickshaws and—though I am uncertain of their province or availability—I long for the hot air balloons I see floating through the city skies. My book addiction goes hand in hand with mass transit. I get on a bus, open a book and am always pleasantly startled when a long boring hour hopping to and fro from home or work passes quickly by like a magic trick. Sometimes I deliberately miss my stop and
ride the bus mindlessly, wherever, in order to lengthen the Zen-like cruise along the highways, city streets and suburbs of SoCal, which are so spread out that foreigners sometimes think they've been driven to San Francisco or New Mexico. Nordstrom's has stores all over Los Angeles and I'd volunteer to work anywhere, as long as I have a bus schedule.

I wholeheartedly buy into the Nordstrom's nonsense for over a year. Eventually I came to feel I'd made another mistake; yet stayed on and on, the pay excellent but my life aimless. Uncle Tony saw how it was and kept telling me to quit and offered me money, which was his way of showing love. Uncle Mike offered me a job at his supermarket, where all of his kids, my cousins, work; but I didn't feel like letting down any more people that I care about. I date a woman from the cosmetics counter, watch Jeopardy with Jean everyday after work, and stay in bed reading every weekend. Not a great life; it is life nonetheless. I'm lucky to have a family that loves me, especially my mom.

***

Normally I get off work at six, bus to Jean's for dinner and TV, and I'm home in bed by ten. She always beats me at Jeopardy which gives her a little too much pleasure. My hope is that as she gets old and mentally feeble, I'll have a chance. Our dinner and TV is a solid nightly ritual since I moved out two years ago; around the same time she dumped her last boyfriend. Jean claims that there aren't going to be anymore men in her life, that nowadays at 55 she can't attract the type of man she finds desirable. This may or may not be true, who knows, I still don't want to dwell on my mother's sex life.

Jean makes me dinner, Monday through Friday. At least once a week Neruda and Joe bring their three sons (Swan, Orson & Dred) over and it's noisy, warm and comfortable as if I'd never grown up. I possibly depend on these dinners more than Jean.

As I walk up the street from the bus stop, mom's house is dark. I open the front door, go into the kitchen to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for dinner, a joke between us. I turn on the TV to find Jeopardy in progress, which worries me as she hasn't missed an episode in 20 years, as far as I can reckon. Even though Jean usually works from home, I call her office to see if maybe she went in for a real estate emergency,
if they have such things. No one is there except for hardcore salesman, Don Quintz, who
has no life, only work; and though he knows I'm Jean's son, Don attempts to wage a real
estate deal with me. I hang up on him mid-spiel, and call my uncles. They've had no word
of Jean today. I call Neruda. She immediately goes into hysterical crisis mode. I try
to calm her, "Don't be a drama queer, she's probably shopping or . . ."

"Mom always shops with me. I called her, like, three times today; no answer. She's
missing. Why didn't you call me earlier? You're so irresponsible. Why . . . ?"

"Shut up, for Christ sakes. I got here five minutes ago. Re-lax."

"My mother is missing. Call Uncle . . . "

"She's my mom too. I called Tony and Mike. Did she finally get a boyfriend, maybe?"

"No, of course not. You have no idea. You are vacant. I'm hanging up. I'm gonna call
the real estate office."

"I already did, she's not there."

"Oh, God . . . Why didn't you talk her into getting a cell phone?"

"She's your best friend, why didn't you? Get a grip, seriously."

"I'm coming over. Don't do anything stupid."

"What? Like what?" I ask, but she'd already hung up on me.

Distracted, trying not to let worry have its ruthless way, I sit down to nibble on
my peanut butter sandwich. Curiously uneasy about looking through the rest of the house,
I wonder about what I could possibly do that's stupid. Neruda's noisy Volkswagen pulls
up in the driveway. Expecting her to come in the front door, I hear the garage door open;
then, nothing. Getting to my feet, I head outside and see Neruda standing in the driveway,
her purse on the ground, her face ashen.

"What's wrong? You're scaring me."

"Her car's here. Mom is in the house."

"No she's not . . . " The hair on my neck rises and my stomach falls. Neruda walks
slowly towards me, takes my hand, and heads into the house towards Jean's room. Mom and
I had long ago agreed to never violate the sanctity of each other's bedrooms, and update this policy every few years. As a teenager I had girls over, and contraband I didn't want discovered; neither did I want to accidentally witness the elderly congress of mom and her latest manfriend. So, conditioned to stay out of Jean's bedroom, I pull away from Neruda, stop at the end of the hall, by the living room, and won't go any further. She hisses, "Hazikiah, what are you doing?"

"I'm freaking out. Sorry."

"Quit saying that." Grabbing my arm, she pulls me down the hall. The door is closed. No light is on. I'm wishing with everything I have that Jean is in there fooling around.

"Are you sure she doesn't have a boyfriend?"

"Shut up!" Neruda barks furiously, as if this is my fault, whatever it is. "You don't fucking know anything. Mom's alone." She pushes the door open and flips on the light.

There's Jean, asleep, thank god. My sister lets go of my arm, approaches the bed and pushes mom's hair back. Neruda moans, "No..." She feels mom's neck, then, insanely starts pounding on her chest. "Give her mouth to mouth. Hazikiah, god damn it, move!"

"All right," I fall to my knees, "okay," and put my hands on my mother's cheeks. Her skin is icy, the cold of flash deserted by life; love's warmth, and all that we are has fled. My mother is gone. Neruda's pounding causes mom to move, and for one precious second I think she's alive; but the lamp shows one eye is open and the other is closed. Leaning over, I gently close the lid, kiss mom's forehead, shove Neruda to the side and give my best friend in this world, one last long hug. Then, I wrap my arms around Neruda, stopping her frantic useless ministrations.

Feebly fighting me, she growls, "Don't give up, Hazikiah, god damn it, you give up on everything. Please... don't give up."
Chapter 2

Willing To Suffer

A stroke hit Jean while she was asleep. She didn’t suffer, thank god, only the living suffer, and I’m willing. Jean passes out of our lives and the world shifts; life turns meaner, colder, losing a depth I can barely describe. Death bludgeons beautiful people out of existence. The world will never regain the grace and goodness that Jean effortlessly brought into our lives. Whether family, coworker, lover or stranger, friend or neighbor, everyone is bereft, lessened; each and all of us knew that Jean was extraordinary and impossible to replace. In the days following her passing it was wildly embarrassing to see her many ex-lovers—fraternity members of mother’s long trail of temporary monogamists—come to the wake, attend the funeral or drop by the house to let Neruda know that they treasured that year or so as Jean’s man and Neruda’s fugacious father. That Jean could be taken so suddenly reveals life to be dark and unreasonable. I’ve lost what little respect I had for the sundry institutions that try to organize our lives and the world in general. What good are they? No church, philosophy, police or government bastion is worth a damn or can change what’s happened, reduce the profound loss or put things in perspective. There absolutely is no good way to view the death of my mother, no cushion to break the fall. At thirty-three I should be married to a woman who will carry on my mother’s work of keeping me sane and ostensibly a good man. But I completely screwed up any chance I had for matrimony by sheer irresponsibility, laziness and immaturity. Once I finally stopped fucking up, drinking and drugging, Jean became my only good friend and confidant; sadly, I nourished no others. While Jean was alive it seemed as if there was time for me to get on track, but with her gone, in my mind, it’s all evaporated and I am stuck right where I am.

Whatever, it doesn’t matter. I’m in shock and can feel nothing. I live in an empty humorless realm. Nothing is right. I have no energy and am sick of people. Work is out, it’s impossible. I either lay in bed listening to music, or sleep with piles of the books mom recently forced on me; yet reading is hard. I don’t have the will, strength or
focus to get from one page to the next and just pile novels and biographies around me
on the bed. I weep for three days and slowly disconnect, drifting further away from what
I formerly regarded as sanity, no longer beholden to the laws and various codes that
Jean adhered to and tried to instill into my crooked head.

Four days after the catastrophe, Neruda and Dali show up on my doorstep. The air
has been taken out of Neruda especially, and while the bond and the presence of my siblings
gives me a small boost of reassurance that life might still have some meaning; after
I make coffee and ask if Dali is okay, he tears into me.

"You're an easygoing glib motherfucker, aren't you?"

Neruda grabs his arm. "Dali, chill out, don't start this now."

"Start what? Is he talking to me?" I'd been so consumed with with my own grief
that I hadn't noticed Dali going mad with loss. For some reason he is directing his anger
over mom's passing towards me. Blaming me.

"Yeah, I'm talking to you, you snotty, self-involved soul sucking punk. Stressing
mom out, living off mom, disappointing her, for years. The college education and money
you wasted ..."

"Whoa, whoa ..."

"Shut up, you asked, now listen. You threw away every bit of work and hope she
put into your life and college education. Then you pushed it in mom's face by moving
in with her right out of rehab. What a loser!" he barks at me, right up in my face as
if an actual physical fight is in the works.

"Where is this coming from? Mom practically begged me to come stay with her. She
was lonely. We'd see you, like, once a month."

"Go ahead, try and turn it around on me. You hurt her, embarrassed her, stressed
her out with your drugs and the cops and ..."

"Cops? What cops?"

"Hezikiah, Dali, please, we're family. Who else do we have?"
I jump to my feet. "Fuck you Dali, I don’t need this shit. Neruda, call me when this asshole comes to his senses." I leave my own house.

It’s hard to accept where life has deposited me: alone, an orphan, the boring job at Nordstrom’s catering to fashion crippled yuppies. Even before the catastrophe I was unhappy, though I hadn’t fully embraced it; now, the sadness endemic to every facet of my life is revealed and I wallow in it. It’s been years since I let loose, got regularly high or indulged any base urges. I was always walking on eggshells afraid to embarrass the family, mom mainly. And now she’s gone. I lay in bed, listen to Dylan, the Cure, Kings of Leon and other bands whose lyrics have a terminally morose bent. My boss lets me know that I can have a few more weeks off. The gall.

Mom used to say that God didn’t believe in her and made it clear that she wanted no type of ceremony, only to be cremated, the ashes thrown in the ocean. The day we found Jean in her bed I wish that Neruda and I had taken her body out to the desert like Indians; though I doubt that we could have managed a cremation. And yet our uncles, both forced into Christianity by their wives, insisted on some churchy crap, and that lead to a terrible argument. Hating God, Christianity and all other organizations that pretend to make sense, I may have blasphemed to the point where my uncles’ wives will not let me back into their homes unless I apologize. Apologies are not forthcoming.

Time passes, a couple of weeks, maybe, as I get used to being an orphan. I can’t go back to work at Nordstrom’s. I don’t have the strength for a discussion with those people about quitting, or worse yet, staying on. I’ve stopped weeping during the day, but at night I’m usually in the mood and allow myself a good cry. I call Neruda at least twice a day. Dali’s back at work and though I know it’s not fair, it makes me angry. Neruda is a mess, crying and cursing the world. Her husband has been supportive and her mother-in-law has essentially moved in to help with the kids. I have no one.
I buy a bottle of Jack Daniels, I don't know why, I've never been much of a drinker, though we drank in college every weekend, so I know how to do it. I watch TV and knock back half the bottle, pass out, have terrible dreams, wake up in my underwear in the backyard, crawl into bed and stay there for two days. Then I mope around the house for a week and find I'm finally able to read a little bit and do about 30 pages of Bleak House a day. During the part where the crippled old man's wife shouts, "Ten pounds! Ten pounds!" I laugh quietly, then hysterically, then I have a good cry. Mom loved Bleak House.

Three weeks after my mom's passing, I get out of bed, take a long hot shower, put on some clothes and try to go to work. Too tired to look at people on the bus, I take a taxi to the Beverly Center, the mall that encompasses Nordstrom's, find a space in the parking lot, and sit in the cab for a while watching shoppers and shopkeepers flow into the mall, a river of rampant commerce. I see Bev, who works the perfume counter and she's on her cell phone, laughing, happier than fuck. A rush of hatred for her surges through me; it's not a good idea to go into the building. I direct the uncaring driver to take me back home where I intend to try the whiskey solution again. While driving down Sunset Boulevard I see a guy who is obviously a drug dealer on a corner. I point at him and the driver, in a soft Spanish accent, speaks his first words, "I'm gonna park just past him, keep a eye out."

"Thank you." What a good driver. He's the first person I can stand in weeks. I hop out of the cab and approach the dealer who looks me up and down.

"Was'up homes, watchu need?"

"I need some pot?"

"Some pot?" He laughs at me. "Where you from? Idaho? They sell chronic in these parts. Ya cook chicken in a pot."

"Alright, hipster, you got any chronic?"

"What you call me? Chipmunk? You sayin' I'm a chipmunk? That some new racist shit,
from Idaho, callin' a black entrepreneur a chipmunk?"

"Hipster, I said hipster."

"That sound worse. Man I hope you spendin' some money, while makin' me endure this cracker shit."

"Yeah, I wanna buy some pot, I mean chronic."

"This here the crack spot. How much money you got?"

"All right, I'm not a crack fan . . . "

"Nobody a crack fan, fool. They addicted to the shit; and you blowin' up the corner. I gotta 20 dollar rock, jus' for you."

"Listen carefully. I don't want a fucking rock."

"Look carefully," the dealer says, and pulls up his shirt to reveal, tucked in his waistband, a gun so big that I imagine it could blow the whole cab up from fifty yards away. A thrill of fear wakes me up a little.

"Okay, hold on." I pull out my wallet and extract a 20 dollar bill. "Here you go."

He snatches the bill and holds out a little plastic bag with a tiny sliver of what I assume is crack cocaine. "Here, take your shit. Chipmunk."

"No, I don't want it."

"Man, you jus' bought it."

"You keep that 20 dollars. Just find me some weed." I say as succinctly and respectfully as I can manage.

"Ah right, ah right, I sees, you givin' me a finders fee. That's honest work."

"Relatively."

"May I board your vehicle?" The drug dealer who'd moments ago threatened me with a gun, asks politely to board my taxi. The driver, whose been reading a Spanish language newspaper the whole time doesn't react at all as we both approach his car.

"Since you asked so nicely, sure."

"Well, some white peoples don't like armed black man in they cars. And I already got the 20, so . . . "
"Where to."

"Are you the police?"

"Now who's racist? All white people are cops I guess. And I already could of bought cocaine from you, which is more illegal than weed."

"More illegal?"

"I don't know. Where to?"

"I can't help but notice you don't answer my question."

"No, I'm not a cop. I'm Hezakiah. I work at Nordstrom's selling men's clothes."

"Hezamotherfuckin'kiah. Man, that sounds like bible shit."

"I don't know if I'd put it like that, but I guess so."

I didn't want to try and explain Bob Dylan and go down another rabbit hole. "Look, can we just go get the weed?"

"The chronic. My name Elbow. This here leather jacket from Nordstrom's. You get me a discount next time I go shoppin'?"

"Bro, get me some chronic and I'll get you a god damn discount."

"That's what I'm talkin' about."

So Elbow, who couldn't explain his name ('That's jus' what peoples call me'), took me deep into the ghetto and then right out of it again all around L.A. in an effort to confuse me I imagine, until we ended up at a house in the Valley near my place. Elbow goes in and comes out with Tommy Stillwell, who used to sell me weed in high school when I was on the track team. I'm relieved to see him.

"Tommy Stillwell, what the fuck?"

"Dude, I knew there was only one Hezakiah in L.A., probably the whole state. Elbow told me you were probably the police; and I said, that's him!"

"Why do I have to be the police?"

"Last time I saw you was at Safeway two years back and you were in a tie and a three piece cop suit. And right now you're in, like, thousand dollar loafers and slacks. I know you're not the police, but you look like a TV detective, the Mentalist maybe."

"All right, all right, okay, all I want is to get high."
"Come on, come in, I'll hook you up."

"Say, say," says Elbow, "Your homeboy already took care of my cut; I gotta get back to my corner 'fore them 10th Street gangsters take over."

"What's the fare?" The driver nods at the meter which says $45. This weed is getting expensive. I pay and Elbows rides off into the smog.

Sitting on the low rent Persian rug covering the living room floor Tommy has a huge electric bong that looks like it can make expresso. He stuffs a quarter ounce of weed into a chamber on top and sets it on fire. I take one humongous hit and cough for a long minute and am instantly high. I don't get off Tommy's couch all night. We talk a little bit about high school days, watch selected features from his zombie movie collection which I don't want to like, but find them compelling in light of my morbid state of mind. This morning, instead of breakfast, he gives me a fat joint that is going to last a week since I'm a dilettante who needs only one hit. The pot makes me feel . . . not happy or even good; it simply takes the edge off my rank despair. Marijuana aficionandos call it a "head change". My head definitely needs adjustment.

Tommy and I trade phone numbers and I take off walking since I'm only a few blocks from my place. After walking home, I take a long hot shower, read a few chapters of Bleak House, get dressed and start towards work, hoping to get all the way into the store this time. It seems like the thing to do, fill my new head with busyness. I haven't felt like a real person for weeks and between the zombies and the weed, I'm properly disoriented. On the bus to the Beverly Center, the people around me are irksome, wrong. I don't linger in the parking lot this time, but as soon as I'm in the store I have to endure the rote sincerity and annoying displays of sadness from everyone, especially my boss, and it bugs the holy fuck out of me. At break, I sneak out to the parking lot and take a toke off the joint. It only makes the last four hours of work slightly bearable. Coming here was a huge mistake; I've been ripped away from my old state of being that tolerated the life I lived before Jean died. I can't patch it up.
Depressed, I go home to take a hot shower, hot as I can stand. For unknown biological reasons, a hot shower beats back the blues for about 15 minutes. Afterwards, wearing only a towel I go into the kitchen to make a couple of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches (on sourdough), my main nourishment the last few weeks. Dropping like a rock onto the couch in front of the TV, I smother myself with blankets and look around for the Jack Daniels to wash down the peanut butter, but the bottle is gone. It wasn't working anyway.

Any number of shows might have been on, but it's the true crime channel and the theme is bank robbery. A long convoluted program about a Detroit cop who subsidized his meager pay with bank robberies every couple of months, catches my attention. What interests me is that he gets away with it for over 10 years and has all these rules. Never have a partner. Hit banks at least 50 miles away from home. And never use a car as an escape vehicle as they have a tendency to get pulled over; my very theory of avoiding arrest. It's serendipitous and I tell myself that the Detroit cop isn't a bad role model. After all, he's a cop. That I might rob a bank gives me a pleasurable jolt of fear, like when I saw Elbow's gun. That fear displaces grief for a few moments. I haven't had the slightest idea what to do with my life; yet now, this robbery business strikes me as a way, with a single stroke, that I can obliterate my grief and afford not to be around people. If a bad cop can get away with it for 10 years, I should be able to pull it off for a year or so. I fall asleep thinking that this is a great idea.

It's a really stupid idea, I realize in the morning light. I could never get away with robbing a bank. While in the middle of another steamy shower I take a hit off my joint (wrecking it; I put the messy remains on the window sill to dry out). Feeling wellish I get dressed and walk to the bus stop, hoping work won't be so horrible. And it's not, when I'm high; though, that still defines a big part of my life as bad. Each clueless customer wears on me, the cumulative effect toxic and frustrating. It's impossible to imagine staying here. I get through the day mulling over the Detroit cop's long successful
spree of robberies. Deciding that there's no harm in living with a crime that's only
in my head, I slowly warm to the idea again. And then, I suppose I begin to act out.

After work, rather than get on the bus, I walk for miles guiltily sussing out
the layouts of local banks, and escape routes weaving through the business district
that surrounds the mall that enfolded our store. While I'm planning this crime, a heavy
fear pulls me away from thinking about the bleak burden of my wasted life, that was
easier to bear while Jean lived. Fear is an antidote for sadness. If an idea lives
in your head long enough, its realization gets closer and closer.

***

The first one is surprisingly hard to pull off. My plan is, post-robbery, to
leave the scene walking, mindfully turn several corners around large buildings, go
in the front door of a bowling alley or a video arcade, go out the back, then into
a bus or taxi and be gone. Bagone Hazikiah!

It's soothing to consider bank robbery, and though I'm scared, the men's
department is insufferable. It's turning what little is left of my battered self-esteem
to weary crap. While putting up a munificent front, Nordstrom's crushes all ambition
and hope (insignificant things--destroying them is a little feat). I have no strong
desire for the future; although, I once had aspirations--to write a novel stylistically
combining Elmore Leonard and Nabakov, written in the present tense so I can write
nonstop and not have to remember anything. I also once thought to pack it all up and
go live in the Mojave Desert to paint landscapes for a few decades. Life in the Men's
department continues to pall and has no future whatsoever.

After a couple of weeks I tell my boss I'm having a grief relapse that's going
to require two days of sick time. It's no grief, it's hatred. I spend a whole day
googling bank robberies, which teaches me a lot, including the important info that
note robberies will backfire. Numerous incompetent rookie robbers have picked up the
cash and left their notes behind smeared with fingerprints. Sometimes they drop
the note right on the counter to help make it easier on the cops. If fingerprints aren't smeared all over the note, expensive handwriting experts arrive and put forth almost half-baked theories. Their only role in life is to testify to whatever the D.A. demands, using arcane science lingo, charts and lies. I have perfectly good vocal cords and so will write no notes. I practice my spiel. "This is a robbery, stay calm please, nobody needs to get hurt. Don't push the alarm, put all your large bills on the counter with no dye packs, GPS device or funny business." It seems like a lot to say when time is crucial. I spend hours concocting shorter, pithy versions of my demands, that lack narrative but get to the point.

The day is spent looking at a couple dozen banks, the best way in and out and how to put some distance between me and the crime. After devoting three hours casing the joint, I had the perfect bank in the perfect spot. Luckily I'm paranoid, and finally notice two customers, also skulking around, burly men in slacks and bland Hawaiian shirts. I notice them when one takes his gun out and lovingly shows it to a female customer, like it's his dick. A bank robbers' web site reveals that undercover cops are working at institutions that have been robbed more often than they like. It's noted that these retired ex-cop thugs are trigger happy. So, it's on to survey more banks. I drop the idea of a fake mustache when I happen to see some old cop show where a robber is captured after the police check every costume shop in Southern California and find the store where the crook bought his mustache.

I'm scared, putting off the deed; and upon realizing that, the comfort of distraction this project provides, falls away. Slumping back into depression, I leave work the next day after only an hour, sullenly vowing to quit. While I fool myself that a bank heist is possible—the fear is real. I kept it going for three weeks, but no longer. Back home trying to read in bed, even Bleak House stalls. I remember stashing the half wet joint on the bathroom window sill. I make a little pipe out of tin foil and take a
gigantic hit; get dressed and call a taxi to take me to work. I haven't called or gone in for three days. When the cabby honks I go outside into darkness, and the driver informs me that it's ten at night, I had no idea. The taxi drops me off on Santa Monica Boulevard (there are 5 banks in a 3 block stretch) and I walk around and around the blocks. A cop car rolls by and eyes me. I wonder how any bank robber pulls it together. Community Bank is in the middle of a mini-mall, with a taxi stand just a block away. It's striking how ordinary this block looks, where my life is to be risked. This is the place, I'm going to do it. Soon.

Without a note or mustache—wearing a baseball hat, sunglasses and as generic an outfit as possible (blue jeans, button-down grey shirt); and though I meant to change them, I forgot and have on my Gucci loafers—I enter the bank, nervously pretend to fill out a withdrawal slip and look around. There are 5 open tellers, all with at least 7 people waiting because it's lunch time. Another tip for the bank robbing site: Don't pull your robbery during lunch, but I'm already here, committed to this, so I get in line.

I pick the wrong god damn teller. She is arguing with an old man who has emptied a brown paper grocery bag full of several thousand unrolled pennies, out onto the counter. The teller is rude and adamant; the old man is adamant and clearly has mental issues. They argue witlessly in circles. The line goes nowhere and pretty soon there are 5 people behind me. Even though the other lines are also growing, with more people swarming into the bank, I switch to a businesslike older female teller whom I believe will conduct my robbery efficiently. The second I'm in her line she takes one look at this Mexican kid's check and disappears to confer with a manager. The old man with the pennies shouts something about bankers and warlords, leaves the bank and the queue I was in starts moving like an express line, of which there are actually none. I wonder if I should lodge a complaint or suggest the express option—some other time. I'm thinking of changing tellers again, but ours comes back and I decide to tough it out.
Half an hour later I'm on my last nerve but finally up to the window. The woman—an angry fifty year old with no make-up or any other attempt to lessen her severity—regards me with contempt.

Her name tag says, Ms. Pent. "May I help you?" she asks sourly.

"Yeah, uh, this is . . . " I look around, there must be 60 people in the bank. It feels like they're surrounding me. I can't spit out the words, which I don't remember anyway. Twenty minutes ago, maybe, but right now I don't have the guts to rob the place.

"We're very busy sir, as you can see, so . . . " Ms. Pent licks her lips in a superior way that is so fucking exasperating I'm turned inside out, unable to think.

"I, this is, uh . . . " I can't say it. I give up. Her intense banking industry scowl, hypnotic and disdainful, freezes me up.

"Sir, you're not one of our regular customers, are you? Is this your first time here at Bank America?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to open an account?"

"Sure," I say, hating myself. But I figure I'm on camera and just bolting might lead to a problem down the road if I ever get the gumption to actually rob a bank.

"Good. May I see four forms of identification?"

"Seriousy?" I have a driver's license and one credit card. "You're kidding."

"No sir, new regulations, keeps the bank safe, homeland security, for the good of us all . . . " she's going to go on and on, " . . . standard protocol . . . "

I have to stop her. "Okay, okay." She stares at me.

"Sir, I can't read your mind."

"Here," I pull out my wallet and extract thirty-six dollars. "I want to open an account." I've lost control completely and am only trying to justify being in the bank. I've never had a bank account for two reasons: 1.) I have no trust for the people who run financial institutions because the magazines I read (Mother Jones, Rolling Stone, Adbusters, Vanity Fair) regularly report on the vast malfeasance practiced by the banking
industry. 2.) I never have any extra money; I spend it all on books and clothes and crazy girlfriends.

"An account?" She reaches out and gingerly touches the money. "With this?" Ms. Pent says, likely more appalled by my apparent poverty than bank robbers.

"Look, it's a start. I'm a person."

I don't want to start anything, but she's got my goat and I want it back. I take off my ball cap and sunglasses. "Can I open an account or what?"

"Not only do we have a hundred dollar minimum sir, but you've yet to show me the requisite identification."

"I have two valid pieces of I.D, and this one is from the great state of California. That's my picture, see?"

"Sir, please pay attention. These policies are in place in order to frustrate terrorists and weed out drug dealers..."

"You think I'm a drug dealer? With thirty-six dollars?"

"This is irregular."

"Can I see a manager, please?" I ask, before she thinks of it. I want to tell him my idea about the express line, among other things. I look around and the bank employees don't seem right, are unreal. Everything is closing in on me and my breath is taken away by the original plan. I have to leave. "Never mind, I'll find another bank." And I make to go.

Unfortunately, a chubby bald man in a too tight suit arrives on the scene. He's an officious, appalling money grubbing hypocrite. That I can see the sheer parasite of him, instantly, and yet he's been given control of a bank full of money, is a wonder to me. There really are two worlds and the victims in one world cannot recognize the capitalistic predator/parasites in their own world, and they are ravaged. That I shun banks has somehow given me the ability to recognize these men and women. I wonder what he makes of me. The manager studies my clothes and estimates my net worth, lingering on the shoes, licking his thin dusty lips, then turns to the teller. "Ms. Pent, you
buzzed?" She appears to adore him.

"This gentleman here, is trying to open an account . . ."

"No I'm not," I say, tired and embarrassed, yet hating these people. The customers, who I imagine are moaning, in the line behind me are growing increasingly vocal about the wait, but Ms. Pent doesn't care.

"He only has one piece of identification . . ."

"Yeah, well," I say, wanting only to leave and go home to figure out how to rob a bank without talking to anyone. Now I understand the notes.

"How much money do you plan to deposit," Chubby asks, his always calculating eyes alight, ready to turn me into an account. He puts his hand out to shake and I take a step back which makes him chuckle insanely. Anything a potential victim does is humorous to him.

"He has thirty-six dollars," Ms. Pent accuses.

"No!" says the manager, deflated, losing interest immediately. Without another word, as if I didn't exist, he waddles away. In the line behind me an insurrection is breaking out. Ms. Pent mutters and nervously counts some money. I turn and leave to be quickly replaced by a furious housewife who looks as if she wants to kill Ms. Pent, who assumes her haughty visage. Disgusted by the world of money, my desire to rob a bank grows. I get outside, feeling energetic, angry and unwell. The world is so different, I worry that it's not real. Real things are solid and unchanging and don't fall off the earth. Since I know nothing of banks, there are no comparisons and I can't tell if my experience would have been the same BM (Before Mom's Death). Did some dark corruption set in from that day forth? Did I have blinders on before? There's an explanation that's terrifying: I was real, but I'm not anymore.

At home by myself, I try to read constantly because there's nothing to think about except being an orphan. Each night, around one in the morning, I still cry. It's been two months since Jean passed and while the pain has subsided, I tend the despair and
give in to it, gratefully, when it's late and quiet, the tears a homage and ceremony for the only person who ever loved me without reservation. I don't believe mom's out there like a ghost or in heaven or some other dis corp o rate affair. If there was a trace of her left anywhere in or out of this world I'd feel less bereft; she is gone. I didn't realize how much our relationship defined me. Worse yet, I don't know how much she affected the entire world.

Dali takes a few days off to help figure out what to do with Jean's stuff and her house. At one point, shortly after she died, I was going to move into our old house, thinking it might make me feel something better than grief. But other than a pleasant afternoon spent with her books, the house only brought one memory after another, reminders of my diminished life. None of us want to deal with it, so we meet for dinner at a tony Italian restaurant, Dali's idea, on his dime. Before we even order he drops a new bombshell on our shrinking family unit.

"I've taken an offer and I'm moving to San Francisco," he says to Neruda, he's still not talking to me.

"And you want to talk to us about it?" Neruda asks, thinking there's wiggle room.

"I did it last week," Dali says, picking at a piece of bread.

"Did it. Did what?"

"I moved to San Francisco last week for my new job."

"But I called you two days ago, and ..."

"My phone number is the same, my house is in San Francisco, it's already done. I know you'd get all goofy on me, so ..."

"Oh, I'm a goofy bitch 'cause I love my family. Hezikiah, you know about this shit?"

"No, he hasn't said a word to me in weeks."

"You're my only brother, Hezikiah. Fuck you very much, Dali. When we should be pulling together, during this terrible time ... you just bail," Neruda says. Dali storms out. We leave mom's stuff at the house, a sad, creepy shrine.
Chapter 3

I Am Not Real

At two o’clock I leave the house on foot, get to the corner just in time to catch the big clanking, hissing city bus, pay my fare, find a seat in the back and ten minutes later I’m dropped off in front of a Wells Fargo bank. Doggedly, willfully not thinking, I stride right in and luck is with me, the youngest teller (a white kid looking uncomfortable in a tie) has only one woman in his line. She leaves quickly, which is surprising given all the crap during the last robbery attempt. At the window I can’t remember my spiel (perhaps another reason for a note), so I improvise, “Give me all the money in your drawer. Now.”

“Why?” the teller asks, confused as I neglected to mention that this is a robbery.

“This is a robbery!” I say, too loudly, catching the attention of the tellers on either side. My teller doesn’t look scared, more like excited, reaching quickly for the till.

“Where’s your gun?”

“I’m the robber. I ask the questions. Haven’t you been trained for this? Get my money!”

“Yes, sir.” He can’t be anymore than twenty-three, a college student maybe, recently trained to comply with robbers, for Christ sakes.

“Hundred, twenties, fifties,” I say commandingly, surprising myself.

The teller stacks the bills on the counter in front of me and I fill my front pockets as I forgot to bring a bag; there’s still a lot of money left on the counter. Things are slipping away, I stop for a long breath, then cram the last of the cash in my back pockets. I glance around in all directions—customers are carrying on, doing business, all is normal except for the two tellers on either side of me who are frozen in place, frightened I guess. My teller is smiling insanely, waiting for more instructions, but I’ve got nothing. Time has slowed down, yet my thoughts are racing, considering various irrelevancies: my brother’s contempt; I wonder what they’re doing at Nordstrom’s; and thank God my mom will never know of this.

Snapping back, I head out, pushing the bank door with my shoulder, careful not to touch
anything with my hands. Out front, on the street, I feel a vulnerability so strong it stalls me again, for a second. I get a grip, stumble around the first corner, shamble past a pet store, two hamburger joints, a comic book store, around another corner and then I'm in the front door of Chin's laundromat, a huge place, full of people, washers and dryers, walk casually as possible past a dozen women folding clothes, my heart beating so hard it makes me stumble; I forge on out the back door into a parking lot, around another corner, then another, look around as if for an old friend or a lost dog; amazingly, not one single person is paying me any attention. Most importantly, no cops are to be seen—then, just as I'm around one last corner to a taxi stand, police sirens waft in from all directions. I jump in a cab and give the driver an address a block from my house. There's no traffic, he efficiently arrives at the address, drops me off, I quickly stride down the alley that runs through the middle of our block, and am through my back door, safe at home. It's two-twenty. From my place to the bank and back took twenty minutes.

With adrenaline squirting everywhere and my heart trying to kill me, I lay down on the kitchen floor and try to breathe myself calm. Vomit fills my throat and before I can react and roll over I'm gagging and choking and something in my head comes loose, explodes my imagination: dreamy threats, cop shows, nonspecific fear, towns in Mexico, abstract paranoia, endless lonely years, penal codes and a very specific hazard, seven years in prison—something I looked up before this episode—and countless other bits of arcane consequence fight for dominance, come and go so quickly that many barely register. Committing this insane crime has destroyed my character and life as it was, and now the countless elements that make me up are struggling for some kind of order. I attempt to use my yoga training, which I took for one year, three years ago, to clear my mind and allow my heart and body to level out. A part of me forcefully demands that I burn the money, thereby eliminating the evidence of what I've done. In the midst of mental and physical breakdown I can't think of why I did it. A smug psychiatrist or counselor would suggest that I'm trying to steal love or compensate for a lack of purpose. Purpose and love; I
have no real ache for either of those things. I robbed the bank because I'm a collection of negatives. I have nothing and no one and spend every day doing things I don't care about. I have nothing to lose, except my freedom, but as I've recounted, it's not very free. I robbed the bank because I'm no longer a dutiful son. I'm not real.

But I did get away with it. There are no sirens. I peek out the window and there's nobody in sight except a dog across the street licking himself. Not one single SWAT team. After pulling down the shades and locking the doors, I dig the money out of my pockets, spill it onto the living room table and am about to count it when I start shaking. The whole neighborhood knows what I've done. I check the windows, open and close the shades on all four sides of the house, sick with fear and guilt. Still no cops or angry bankers. I suppose, technically, I got away with it.

Before counting the money, I decide to call work and quit. The floor manager wants to argue about it for a while, I've been working at Nordstrom's for almost four years and I sell a lot of clothes because I don't care. He offers me a small raise and if the robbery had gone wrong, even a little bit, I might have entertained the offer, but it was so easy; and forcing myself to get up and go to work every morning is too hard. I hang up the phone, sit on the floor and slowly count $8,050. Nowhere near enough to support me and pay my bills for even three months, which is disappointing, but still . . . there are lots of banks out there. Counting it again, I shudder at what I've risked, for so little. Even though the crime took only 30 seconds, the entire history of crime and criminal motivation has filled and informed me, far more than anything I ever got out of those stupid true crime books I lapped up as a teenager. Actually, Dali forced them on me. They're mildly addictive and a bunch of crap. Experience teaches us so much more than school or books. Right before I demanded the money I almost peed my pants, but from that point on it wasn't hard and right now, after processing the experience a little, I'm almost normal, whatever that may now be.
Sitting at the kitchen table I peel an orange and try to get a grip on what I am now. Take in what’s been done. I need long range plans, safety and freedom is an issue. I can’t just disappear. Starting my own business, be my own boss . . . no ideas, good or bad, come to me. There’s no one to talk it over with. I’ll deny it to Neruda, no matter what. I think she’d rather not know the truth.

I pick up a novel from the pile at the foot of my bed. It’s one of mom’s goddamn books, Wolf Hall, a bloody historical novel about Thomas Cromwell. I start the book and it’s engaging, but I’m lost in what seems like a hundred characters surrounding Cromwell, the King and the Queen. It makes me feel inadequate, that I have no life compared to Thomas Cromwell. For that, I’m no where near writing a novel as successful as Wolf Hall. I study the list of characters: at the front of the book; in my scattered state, it’s difficult to comprehend. Smelling the book, thinking it has Mom’s scent; all I get is dust and mold. I know not to lay in bed feeling sorry, once that gets started weeks pass in a brood. Spending money would cheer the average bank robber. I have too many books and CDs, and I can’t think of a material thing in this world that would make me content. I robbed the bank to buy my way out of work; but now, laying here with nothing to do, feeling like shit . . . I have to do something about it.

Getting high crosses my mind, preferably on the kind of weed I usually can’t afford. Old high school buddy Tommy Stillwell delivers pot. I smoke rarely, usually at the behest of a girlfriend or date. I figured smoking would affect me at work. No job now, it’s a brave new world. I call Tommy.

Sitting in the big soft easy chair, I’ve been in a thoughtful sulk for two hours, when Tommy finally arrives. In no rush, he probably figures I’m trying to get high for free like last month when I had him over. It’s good that he took so long, I needed time to decompress and shake off irrational thoughts. Tommy barges right in without knocking, before I can put the money away. First thing, he sees the pile of cash, spread out on
the table, and he's immediately overfriendly, like I'm a pretty girl.

"Hezikiah, you're in the green, that's good, let's dicker." Tommy has always struck me as a guy about to crash and burn because he's too lazy to put in the suffering. It makes you lax. However, from my new criminal perspective, though he doesn't have all of the answers, Tommy has a couple of them. His charismatic lack of concern shows me that this life can be successfully lived.

I push the money into a big trash bag and throw it behind the couch. From his expression, Tommy thinks this is a bargaining technique. I don't even know what I'm going to do. Wanting to change the subject and focused as I am on tragedy, I've taken to asking about people's mothers. It often backfires.

"Hey, Tommy, how's your mom?"

"We lost her in 2013."

"You lost her?" It's conceivable that he literally lost her.

"Breast cancer got the best of ma. She raised me for a few years, made a few sandwiches, I don't deny it; but the last few years, we didn't get along. It still hit me hard. Wigged out a little."

Not the feel good story one wishes for; although, I do understand going off the rails. "Yeah, my mom just went."

"Sorry, she was hip."

"Excuse me?"

"When Neruda and I were messin' around; remember?"

"No, noooo ..." Neruda successfully hid this from me.

"Anyway ..." Tommy produces a baggy, dumps out a pile of weed on the raw oak table and rolls a joint so quickly it's magical. "This is a tester, gonna get you toasted. Got about six different strains right now, from Maui to Patagonia. Can have it over her post hasty. You lookin' for a pound? More?"

"A pound of weed?"

"Product, we always call it product."
"No, I just wanted to get, like, ten dollars worth." But I'm already thinking, here's an idea, this might be a good business. Tommy seems like a footloose, carefree motherfucker if I ever saw one.

"Yeah, well, I saw all that cash out . . . figured you were gonna stock up."

"Maybe I could get into the business."

"Business?" Tommy says in a way that sounds like "business" is an infection. "I thought you were lookin' to buy some personal weed . . . to smoke?"

"Smoke a pound of weed? That would take, like, a decade. I was thinking I could sling it, like you, make a little money."

"No, no, no . . ."

"What's the problem?"

"Do you remember where you got your first joint?" He says, tapping my forehead, jogging my memory, which isn't necessary.

"In high school, we were on the track team. You told me smoking a joint before one of those three mile runs, coach forced on us, would improve my time. It did get me wasted, but ultimately, it ruined me. Was toasted all through high school. Anyway, so; when you came to my house to drop off weed, you were coming to see my sister?"

Tommy is in reminiscence mode, and ignores my questions. "I've been smokin' weed since I was twelve, thanks to my brother, Ronnie. Worked at Safeway for two summers in a row startin' when I was a freshman, trying to save money for a car."

"You had the first car of any of us; that Malibu . . ."

"Just listen, there's a point to this," Tommy says, though I have my doubts since he's been puffing on that joint nonstop. I took one hit and am extremely stoned, too stoned I'm thinking.

"Okay, so . . . " I say, because now he's just staring at me.

"What was I saying?"

"I have no idea. Something to do with my not being able to go into the pot business."
"Right, right, the business. I was tryin' to buy a car. But even after two summers of workin' like a grocery dog, caterin' to old ladies, this queer manager, and six different kinds of annoyin' motherfuckers, I only made $500, not enough for that sweet Malibu. So, I take the money, buy a big old bag of weed. At the time I was just gonna turn it over twice, get the car and get on with my life. The thing is, dude who sold me the weed wasn't a nice guy, like me. I had like half a pound of some low grade Marin bud. I take it to the video arcade to sell, and get jacked by these Mexicans."

"Castro and his thug, Flaco, the 20 year old high school senior."

"Right; they took my shit, like half of everything I had, and beat me down for tryin' to sell in their territory, like we were the Crips and the Jets. They couldn't stand me takin' any of their steady customers. See?"

"How did you get your weed business going?"

"Where did you get your first joint?"

"From you ... oh."

"I had to make my own clientele that had nothin' to do with Flaco and company. Got you started like I got dozens of motherfuckers. First one is free, for real."

"I'm thirty-six, how am I going to do that? Hang out at the high school? Jesus." I lean over the couch, pick up my trash bag of money and tie it shut.

Tommy gets to his feet. "Hold on, hold on. Maybe ... you can invest in my little business."

"Sure." I tie another knot in the trash bag. Tommy is a good guy to see once every couple of months; I can't imagine seeing him every day or having to trust him to run a business I'm part of. He sees that on my face.

"Nice; can't trust one of your oldest friends."

"We're friends?" I ask, hopefully. My last real friends were people like Tommy. I let them all go in order to placate my family.

"I don't know. Fuck a duck. Let's smoke some more of this good shit." Tommy rolls
another fat blunt so quickly it's supernatural. He sets it on fire, blows a big smoke ring and hands it to me. "You sure you don't need $5,000 worth of stash," he asks halfheartedly.

"To smoke? Smoke $5,000 worth of weed? One of your fat joints of this stuff would last me a month, or longer. One hit toasts me totally for . . . like, I have no idea how long."

"What the hell were you going to do? Sell it in the bathroom at Nordstrom's?"

"I don't know." I'd just robbed a bank; I don't think things through. "Okay, so I buy $5,000 worth of weed and then you sell it. What do I get out of the deal?"

"Nah, see, I'm thinkin' about gettin' a pound of cocaine; have a side business. A one-stop shop for the like-to-get-high crowd. Later on . . ."

"Yeah, sure, I get it; but what do I get out of it?" I'm high and too close to the earlier madness, not to mention my general melancholy, to make a good decision. But before Tommy even answers—I decide. "I'll invest five thousand." Jump right in, it's that kind of day.

"Wow, fuck me, great!" Tommy is stoned too, thank god we're on even ground. He grabs my hand and shakes it. "Good, good; I need money to make money. Francine, my old lady, is smoking me out of house and home. I've never seen anything like it. Chain smokes joints all day. Makes pot brownies and pot spaghetti, smokes out, eats all the pot food, then wipes out everything else edible in the pad. Bitch is still skinny like a rail. I hope to god she doesn't like blow. Cocaine doesn't make you hungry, does it?"

"How the fuck should I know." The adrenaline hangover mixed with the weed has rendered me incompetent. I want to tell Tommy everything and have at least one person know what I've done, maybe talk me down. Tommy confiding in me, about his wife, gives me a good feeling.
Chapter 4

Sex Is Illegal

Tommy leaves and I go into a deep depression. I'm not worried about my money, I don't care about money. Besides, at 35 Tommy's never been to prison and he's dealt drugs for nearly 20 years, so he has some skill in that milieu. I'm the problem, I'm adrift. And it's not just about Jean anymore, though that's where it started. I've actually stopped constantly focusing on the despair. It's just that there's nothing to replace it.

A week passes while I watch TV, work on that one joint and brood, which is more enjoyable than going to work. Still, I'm trapped in a post robbery depression, I'm either falling apart at quitting my job and becoming a criminal (and no matter how many times I call myself criminal, it doesn't ring true), or I need another fix of life threatening stimulation. At the end of that week, the joint is gone, I rouse myself and in a fit of responsibility pay the rent and all my household bills. Even though my one credit card is still robust, I am now only liquid to the tune of $300.

I'm tired of being in the house alone and in mild desperation call a few old girlfriends, which doesn't work out. Old issues are resurrected and we get into tit for tat arguments. Tia and Colette want to dissect our breakups. I'd been with them both consecutively (with a little overlap) for a year or so each, having caught the serial monogamy habit from Jean. While sex is part of it, I mostly want to hang out with someone and talk. Marvin, a shoe salesman at Nordstrom's used to brag about his exploits with beautiful paid escorts. I get out the yellow pages and call a service thinking that maybe I should get laid, it might straighten out my thinking, like shock therapy.

A mere fifteen minutes later my doorbell rings and Alicia enters my life. A severely pretty 23 year old mulatto woman, she studies my house, walking through the whole place, into the bathroom and bedroom, and is unimpressed.

"This place is depressing. How about we go to a movie?"

"Yeah, all right," I say; never having been with a prostitute I'm entirely unsure about protocol; the situation is strained.
"I noticed the new Woody Allen is at the triplex down the street."

"Good, good, good," I practically stutter. It's a good choice; although, I'm paying $200 for this movie date and Alicia, the escort (which I believe is a euphemism for hooker), acts as if the movie date, expensive popcorn, soda and taxi ride is her due. I allude to sex a half dozen times, and she just stares at me. I may have to make a move. She probably knows karate. Back at my house, sitting on the couch, drinking inexpensive (thank god) peach brandy, I clumsily mention the bedroom.

"It's illegal to pay for sex."

"I'm not a cop, you know."

"Interesting," Alicia says, with this sardonic look, as uninterested in me sexually as any woman who's ever lived. Right then I decide to call the escort agency and discuss the parameters of this woman's job. She's good looking, nice figure and clothes (tight black silk pants, flowing white silk shirt, fuck-me stilettos); but her bland attitude and profound indifference seems designed to defuse any passion her clients might harbor. Nonetheless, when she's in my bathroom, I call the service, hoping they'll tell me how to get sex out of this woman; even though I'm losing interest, it's more the principle at this point I'm afraid. A $200 movie date isn't right. I doubt that she'll give the money back, yet feel I'm owed joyless grudge sex. The agency phone rings once and is quickly answered.

"Exquisite Escorts."

"Hi, I've got one of your women here."

"Good for you, sir."

"Yeah," great, a wise guy, "no really, see . . . she's not very responsive. I'm having trouble communicating with her."

"Sir, is she there?"

"Yes, but . . . "

"Are you talking about sex?"

"Yes, thank you." I'm grateful that he's cut to it so quickly, unlike her.
"Sir, paying for sex is illegal, you know that, right?"

"Well, yes, but I thought it was implied, understood, the price . . . ."

"The girls are there strictly to escort you, as a companion. If she wants to have sex with you, well, that's between two consenting adults."

"Should I ask her?"

"I don't care."

"That's sad."

"Yes, life is sad."

"I want my money back."

His tone changes immediately. "Put her on," he says, in a new, scary voice. I start to worry about the agency sending thugs. Alicia is still in the bathroom, possibly shooting drugs, or climbing out the window.

"Alicia, come here, it's for you, the phone!"

She's right beside me like a ninja. "Who?"

"It's your agency, they want to talk to you." I hand her the phone and head for the bathroom.

She shouts after me, "Hey! Did you call my agency and tell on me? You big pussy. This was almost not terrible. Now you've ruined it." She gets on the phone and immediately says, "I think he's a cop. He's acting weird," loud enough so that I can hear her in the bathroom.

I yell back at her, "I'm not a cop, god damn it!" I notice the bathroom window is open and realize that I'm yelling, at midnight. I'm a criminal with an incompetent hooker in the house. Also, there's a half smoked joint on the window sill, from when I tried to smoke it while taking a shower. I take it with me back into the living room, maybe it will help.

"That wasn't cool. Kind of like something a narc would do, tell on me. Woody Allen would be ashamed of you." We both laugh.

"Sorry, my bad. Do you have any rolling papers? I've got this wrecked half joint, needs
to be rerolled."

"All right, now see, that's how you treat a lady. Hand it over."

"Here. I'm really sorry."

"Quit fucking apologizing, it's annoying," she says while professionally rolling a skinny joint. "Typical dude, assumes all women are hookers."

"Hey, I called a place, paid $200 . . ."

"Drop it," she says, takes a big drag off the joint and stares at me. "Change the subject."

"How's you mom?" I ask. Maybe I'm stupid.

"What? Oh my God."

"Sorry."

"Stop it. I told you to stop that. Take a hit. I want to see you inhale. You have any music in this depression factory? Any Miles Davis or Rage Against the Machine?"

"It's over there," I point at the messy stack of CDs next to the boom box in the corner. "Put on what you like." I take a hit off the joint and hand it back to her.

She tucks it in the corner of her mouth and paws through my CDs. "Miles Davis, god damn." She studies the liner notes, and says, "My mom is dead."

"Excuse me?"

"She died last year. Car accident," she says, and stares dispassionately at me.

"That's fucked up."

"Not a good day."
Chapter 5
Stealing, Suburbia, Love & Puzzle Pieces

The unknown variable rains down on me, metaphorically and actually. Walking down the street, or even in a deep sleep—capriciousness finds me and adds a kink to my life. Once, out of nowhere, a tree fell on my car, nearly killing me; dogs bite and I was almost electrocuted twice. To complicate matters; damaged people are attracted to me. Terminally shy females, socially inept and borderline weirdos (male and female) feel comfortable around me. Sitting on the city bus, a schizophrenic introvert who hasn’t talked to anyone for months will open up to me like a long lost brother, the same thing happens at school or in a restaurant; I have a dysfunctional magnet that brings gauche, awkward people into my orbit. In college lost sorts showed up at our frat house, with the wrong idea that I’d invited them. My supposedly hip frat brothers subjected the asocial to benign tortures to entertain each other. It’s not that I’m an especially virtuous person, I just don’t have a taste for tormenting lonely goofballs. I was around 35 when I realized that I had become one of them.

***

Brad, born and raised in suburbia, I can’t imagine living anywhere else. Lush lawns, close families, no cops, friendly pets and neighbors conspire to make the perfect nest; hundreds of them, all bound together. Suburbia is the essence of a cozy safe home as conceived and created by mankind over 100,000 years. From caves to bedroom communities, it’s been a long steady march, a blissful escape from the urban and the rural. At first each suburban enclave starts out as the epitome of convention—two or three hundred houses with only one or two floor plans, inside and out all the same: one tree, a lawn and a few bushes each, freshly built with no character. New home owners immediately slap on new paint, add rooms, dig pools, and landscape frantically until the hundreds of houses cease to look anything like the original community, conformity eclipsed by families making their spaces unique. One constant remains: families—kids on bicycles everywhere, mom and dad, pets and
Chapter 5
Stealing, Love, Suburbia & Puzzle Pieces

As a steady victim of the unknown variable, things from the deepest part of left field unexpectedly yet regularly rain down on me, metaphorically and actually. Walking down the street or even in a heavy sleep-capricious events find me, and keep my life in a kink. I nearly died after a tree fell on my car and was almost accidentally electrocuted twice. Another complication: damaged people are attracted to me. Terminally shy females, the socially inept and borderline weirdoes feel comfortable around me. A schizophrenic introvert who hasn't talked to anyone for weeks will open up to me like a long lost brother whether it's on a city bus, at school or sitting in a restaurant; I have a dysfunctional magnet that brings awkward, socially crippled and gauche people into my orbit. When I was in college, obviously lost sorts showed up at our frat house full of my supposedly hip brothers who subjected the asocial to benign tortures to entertain each other. It's not that I'm nice, I just don't have a taste for tormenting lonely goofballs. I was almost 35 before I realized that I was one of them.

***

Born, bred and raised in suburbia, I can't imagine living anywhere else. Lush lawns, close families, no cops, lovable pets and friendly neighbors conspire to make the perfect nest; 100s of them, all bound together—the essence of a beautiful safe home as conceived and created by mankind over 100,000 years. From caves to bedroom communities, it's been a long steady march into the outlying districts, a blissful escape from the urban and the rural. Each suburban enclave starts out as the epitome of convention—two or three hundred houses, with one floor plan, inside and out all the same, one tree and a couple of bushes each, freshly built with no character. The new home owners immediately start to add rooms, floors, slap on new paint, dig pools and landscape frantically until the hundreds of houses don't look anything like the original community, conformity eclipsed by people trying to make their space unique. One constant remains: families—kids on bicycles everywhere, moms and dads, pets and
barbecues, aunts and uncles, baseball games and sprinklers. During my short life, single
parent families took root and became half normal. I love suburbs, it represents the
best life has to offer. Waking up each morning to birds singing, lawn mowers, children
laughing, swimming pools splashing, ice cream truck melodies and cars growling; all
of it, a suburban orchestra that makes me feel safe, where I belong.

***

My moral compass has always been a little shaky. Mom used guilt to keep it
steadily pointed north. Yet whenever someone mentions sticking to the straight and
narrow, it sets me to wondering about the crooked and wide. At around 12 years old,
thanks to Jean's influence, books became desirable, an obsession. Other kids collected
baseball cards, video games or action figures; I sought out Harry Potter, John
Steinbeck, Stephen King and those Lemony Snicket (and his unfortunate events) novels
which at 12 years old I related to, as my life wasn't my own and always subject to
chaos. Somehow, the unruly, felonious episodes in the Snicket books gave me permission
to steal books, the first lawless period of my life. Book stores have little security.
Absolutely knowing that it was wrong, I'd walk into a Crown book store with an empty
backpack and leave with a dozen novels worth up to $100. The first time was the
hardest—difficult in that I had to overcome my conscience, and contend with my fear
that Jean or god (they had equal billing in my head) were aware of my sin. Once I got
away with it that first time, since nothing happened, no consequence other than a mild
attack of remorse, it was as if the universe gave me permission. The more I did it,
the more I wanted, and guilt grew faint. A pile of brand new books smells lovely; the
purity of perfect condition and being free is hypnotically alluring. About 3 months
into my criminal career I made the mistake of stealing a hardback, one of Bernstein's
books about King Bush the II. Trying to be a big shot, I gave it to mom. The next day
after school my crimes met me as I came in the front door. On the dining room table
were stacks of stolen books mom found in my bedroom, including 2 sets of every Harry
Potter and Anne Rice novel. I had 4 hours until she came home from the office. No good
lie would manifest that would explain away the fortune in Crown books. Now that someone
else knew what I'd been up to, it became real—the shame and embarrassment paralyzed
me. I seriously considered running away to Canada, but was sitting at the dining room
table, in the dark, when mom came home.

Once the trial started, Dali and Neruda came downstairs to sit quietly on the
couch to observe, judge and gloat.

Quietly, profoundly disappointed, mom made me feel like human scum. "What is
this?" she asked, holding up a $55 Salvador Dali art book I'd planned to give to
Janevil, this 14 year old punk girl I had my eye on.

"It's about Dali ... the surrealist."

"Don't smartass me. You have a $5 allowance. There's at least a $1,000 worth
of books here. Do not lie to me."

"I took them."

"You stole them! We don't steal. You're going to church with Uncle Tony every
weekend. Not because I think God will help you; it's sheer punishment."

"No church, please; I'm so sorry ..." I gave Neruda and Dali the meanest look
I could muster. "Do they have to be here?"

"Yes, it gives me comfort to have my good children nearby. Is there an excuse?
You fell in with a bad crowd? Are you angry about your father? I failed you?"

"No, god no, you're the best mom." I didn't care about my dad at all. And if
I fell in with a bad crowd, it's unlikely that they'd steal books.

Then, the worst, mom started crying. Not church bad, but really bad. "Do you
want me to take them back?" I got this idea from Bill Cosby who made one of his TV
kids return a shoplifted item, and it worked out.

"No, are you crazy? It's a felony when you steal over a thousand dollars. They'll
put you in juvie, or prison once you shoot off your smart mouth. Box up every single
stolen book; I'll take care of it."
I have no idea what she did with those books. I was so embarrassed and mad at myself for disappointing her, that I never stole anything (while she was alive) ever again, couldn't have been compelled by a bad crowd or anybody else. Although, four years later, thanks to my girlfriend and Tommy Stillwell, I began smoking pot, grounds for world class disappointment. I never got caught and after nothing bad happened, it lead to the college debacle, which fucked everything up and according to my brother, may have indirectly killed Jean.

***

Tamara Johnson was my only girlfriend all through high school. We met in the library and bonded over Cormac McCarthy and Clive Barker. She belonged to no clique, we both moved effortlessly through several crowds. Tamara was prone to overly independent thinking that gave little credence to school rules, yet she got high grades and her teachers loved her. She literally took my virginity (I was shy, she was not), and because I was a hopelessly crippled romantic I seriously thought we'd mated for life, she'd be my soul mate and best friend forever; however, Tamara wanted to have what she called "experiences". As we glided through our sophomore and junior years, these experiences included me. We smoked pot, learned to scuba, crossed the border to drink (at 17) in a scary Tijuana dive bar, floated over the city in a hot air balloon and most exciting, from my perspective, had a number of complicated menages with, for starters, Vicky, a cheerleader Tamara lured over to my house after one of my football games. Besides football, I ran track and Tamara orchestrated these mini-orgies and used me as bait to attract one cheerleader after another. This went on for a year before I noticed Tamara's appetites exceeded mine. Although Vicki was a regular feature of our lives, Tamara cast her eye towards the goth chicks. At this tender age I no longer really wanted to experiment sexually anymore, I just wanted Tamara for myself, monogamy appealed to me. Oddly, the cheer leaders were more willing than the goths to join Tamara's increasingly adventurous sex parties. Wholly ignorant of the female psyche, really of everything to do with females, as all teenage
boys are, I rode the wild wave of my girlfriend's desires and demands, thinking that it was a typical relationship; something verified by the complicated and unrestrained lying practiced by my friends and teammates, who had vivid imaginations, but limited sex lives. They were lucky even to get laid half the time. The excitement generated by my girlfriend's sex life, of which I was really just an incidental cog, palled as I noticed Tamara and Vicky spending more and more time together without me. I even walked in on them having leisurely sex one day and they didn't acknowledge my existence. The notion of our not being together until the end of time hadn't even occurred to me; in the parlance of pimps and military freaks worldwide, Tamara had turned me out, I'd do anything she wanted. We'd planned to go to college, UCLA, together, and in a finely tuned state of denial, I went on with that plan; my surprise was total when Tamara announced that she and Vicky were going to New Hampshire, to Dartmouth, nowhere near me.

"I could go to Dartmouth," I said, ignorance and denial working in tandem.

"No, you really can't; and you're not invited."

"Invited? I don't believe colleges issue invitations. I've got good grades; I have a track scholarship, I can go anywhere." My male ego had been successfully propped up by Tamara for nearly five years, while in reality, she was running every aspect of our lives.

"Okay, here it is. We're breaking up. I'm sorry. You've been a really good friend and that's all we're going to be from here on out. Friends, 3,000 miles apart."

"Honey, please ..." I said, but I'd known Tamara for five years and knew very well that begging her for anything was a fool's game that would make me look and feel like a complete wretch, and most germane—would not influence or change her decision to dump me. A dozen tactics on how to get her back writhed and percolated through my young ill-prepared mind. However confused and hurt I was, I'd long known that women mature faster than men, so it followed that I'd been left behind for being childish.

It's clear that my mother hadn't prepared me for the women of the world. Jean was wonderful, catered to and spoiled me and perhaps the phrase "momma's boy" isn't too far
off the mark, Tamara took me from my mother and crushed me.

That first year at UCLA, I found a very sweet woman, Janet Tyne, normal in all respects especially compared to Tamara. During our freshman year we had a good relationship, studied together, went to concerts, had a nice tame sex life; and then, at the end of that first year, indulging in a little preemptive romantic brinksmanship, I tried to crush Janet's heart, figuring that she would be hurting me soon. A sweetheart in all things, Janet took the breakup graciously and we remained friends and occasional lovers until I met my next girlfriend, Lydia, who was a tattooed lady, beautiful and mean. Lydia lasted six months and acted like a bitch the whole time. It went like this throughout college, where I precisely, almost scientifically, alternated sweet supportive women with crazy promiscuous bitches who kept me so disoriented that they were often able to break up with me before I could break up with them. The pattern lasted pretty much until I was ignobly kicked out of college; then, up until I was about thirty, wised up to a small degree and became a serial monogamist in earnest. I'd get a nice woman in my life, but within six months began to think there was something better out there, and within another six months I'd mastermind a breakup using a variety of methods. Looking back there were several women who would have made good partners for life, but I discarded and alienated them in favor of a mythological woman who surely doesn't exist. It is a sickness that left me living with my mother, and finally on my own.
Chapter 6
We Don't Believe In God

Alicia makes it clear that she has no interest in having sex with me; then, invites herself to spend the night on my couch/bed in the living room. Overwhelmed by her moxie, and not really wanting to be alone in the house, I suppose I agreed.

"Are you homeless," I ask.

"In between homes, which is different."

"Okay," I say, already unwilling to set her off or exchange insults. She is definitely one of those unknown variables with her own broken moral compass, and she's obviously a woman; but, Alicia claims to hate suburbia.

"The suburbs are just a fucking bland plot to keep people penned up, conforming like mad; a cultural wasteland. Suburbs latch onto a city like lazy parasites . . ."

"Hold up, what are you talking about? Everybody loves it here."

"I'm sorry, of course you do. It's so safe and warm here in the sterile womb." She stands and peers out the window. "All those fucking kids running amuck."

"I didn't invite you to spend the night. I don't know why you stayed."

"You called an escort agency and ordered a woman, trying to get some poor, vulnerable piece of snatch to come over to your house, for money, so you could have your way with her; taking advantage . . ."

"I guess I'm a bastard. Can I get you a blanket?"

"Yes, please," Alicia says, stretching out on the couch. Strangely enough, this is maybe nicer than if a normal hooker had come over, fucked me and left. Although, this being my only experience with trying to buy sex, it's now in my head that prostitution, as a practice, is so filled with unknown variables, that something is always bound to go wrong. Nonetheless, there's a female presence in my house, she's mean but chatty, and I'm not alone. Sex is overrated; but not by much.
"Are you hungry?"
"For food?"
"What else?"

"In this business men are always blurtng out idiotic double innuendoes and convoluted metaphors trying to get a hungry girl thinking about sex."
"It's double entendres."
"You aren't much of a seducer."
"I gave up on you sexually an' hour ago."
"Well, excuse me. I'm not attractive?"
"Are you hungry? For food?"
"I could nosh."

"I've got frozen chicken in the freezer, and some hamburger and noodles, we could make spaghetti or..."

"What, either I'm a hooker or I'm a cook?"
"I was going to cook it, bitch. Jesus Christ, get a grip."

"Sorry, sorry, you're right. I'm just not a good cook. My mom used to try and force me to be the perfect little Suzi Homemaker. I'm still resisting."

"Where are you from?"
"Earth."
I stare at her.

"Well, I was born in Montana. Where they have the coldest recorded winters in the United States."

"Not Alaska?"

"Nope, my little hometown, Fuckhole, Montana. Main exports: Snow and cows and dirt and dumbshits."

"See, that's sad, I grew up about three blocks from here and I loved it. Happier than a motherfucker."
"How happy are they?"

"Notoriously happy. What made you come out to the great state of California."

"When I was young and stupid I sang for this sort of pop blues band, and we thought it was a good plan to hit the road. But sometimes the road hits you right back."

"You were in a band?" I am getting interested in her, almost against my will.

"Yes, as I said, I sang blues."

"Get out of here! Well, actually, blues makes sense given your general mood. Who do you sing like?"

"I don’t sing like anybody."

"All right, then, who influenced you?"

"Billy Holiday and Janis Joplin."

"There’s an awful lot of musical ground between Billy and Janis."

"You’re on a first name basis with them?"

"I have a dozen CDs of theirs, all together. Janis was a loud raspy rock singer, and Billy sang soft jazzy blues. Put them together and I don’t know what you’d get that makes sense."

"That’s why I quit. People always want you to make sense. Music doesn’t make sense. I didn’t sing to make anybody else happy."

"I see. And you’ve carried that aesthetic into the rest of your life."

"Very successfully."

"So you quit? Gave it up completely?"

"It wasn’t hard. Nobody was paying me. Probably should have stayed in Montana. There’s like a million singers in this f**king town."

"Just on my block alone there are six bands, that I know of. In Hollywood there are twenty bands on every block. But a lot of them do it for fun."
"Bullshit! Besides, I don't like to have fun. It pisses me off."

We both laugh.

"What about you? Didn't you ever want to do something other than sell clothes to yuppies and old people? Modern dance; or be a rapper, maybe?"

"I thought about writing. Back when I smoked weed regularly it seemed like I had a lot of good ideas for a novel. In those days I read too much, hoping the skill of the writers I liked would seep into me by osmosis. But I was too busy partying; and then, I got kicked out of school."

"School?"

"I was in my senior year at UCLA."

"You lucky bastard. I never even finished high school. God, what a waste. Four years of college, down the drain?"

"Yeah, that's right, mom." I get up to go into the kitchen.

"Where are you going?"

"To make some food. I thought you were hungry."

"No, not really. Come back." She sits up on the couch and pats the cushion next to her. "Ask me some more questions."

"About what?"

"Music, Montana, me; anything that starts with m."

"What happened to you?"

"I don't know, a buncha shit. Nothing really, compared to some people. My parents were borderline religious fanatics. Made me feel like . . . not a sinner so much, but like I was an idiot, for not seeing that Jesus Christ was everything. Every fucking thing. No matter what happened, they had to bring Jesus into it. I never bought into any part of that crap. Mom and Dad didn't care that this is America, and that I have religious freedom; or the right to be free from religion. Even when I was a little kid I hated Bible study, thought it was complete bullshit before I even knew what bullshit was. Now what
"I mean?"

"No, mom raised our family as orthodox agnostics, or whatever. Her worst punishment, when we were kids, she'd make us go to church with one of our uncles who'd both been lured out of their agnosticism by righteous Christian sex and so married legitimate Jesus freaks."

"So you don't believe in God?" Alicia asks.

"I don't know."

"Who knows?"

"I don't. Let's drop it."

"That's probably best. My parents drove me crazy with Christ, then they drove me out of the state. I was in this... this, pointless band and they wanted to cut and run, get the holy fuck out of Montana, to anywhere else in the world. I was only sixteen and they were all 19 and 20. A bluesy experimental soul band wasn't going to make a living in Montana, so we snuck out of town in the middle of the night. I heard my parents flipped, but... you know."

It sounds like a fable to me. Growing up in our family was mostly wonderful. Problems were usually caused by me. "What'd they do that was so bad?"

Alicia waved her hands around, agitated. "They were annoying asshole hypocrites. That's hard to take. But the breaking point, that drove me out of their house, was when I joined The Earthers, this little environmental group back in Montana. We passed out flyers and held demonstrations here and there and a big one at the capitol. I was doing something, saving the planet and whatnot; then, my mom got on her high donkey, told me I couldn't do it anymore, 'cause she just thought I was bonin' one of the hippie dudes, which I wasn't. I had a boyfriend in the band, Bobby the drummer who had my mother completely snookered. He was good at talking Jesus Christ during the day, then even better at sneaking into my underage panties at night." She smiles at me, in a mean way, as if I'm a statutory rapist rather than her old drummer.
"You left home because mom wouldn’t let you go to demonstrations?"

"No, I left because the fucking old bitch didn’t care what I thought, she just cared what Jesus thought. Which, whatever, nobody listens to 16 year old girls anyway. This is what got my goat. Her whole argument against trying to stop global warming, fracking, coal plants... "Alicia is really getting worked up as if her mom is freshly driving a stake into her,"... according to mom... it’s Jesus Christ’s planet and he’s gonna do what he’s gonna do. Jesus invented everything including fracking and it must be part of some big God plan. And anyway, when you’re in heaven, who cares about what happens to the earth? The sooner the rapture comes and we all go live forever... well, it’s pointless to worry about using up our stupid, ruined planet. Everybody that gets left behind, all the satanists and Muslims and blues singers, too bad for them. My loving Christian mother thought it was downright idiotic to worry about sinners, or pollution and too many cars. Forget about what I thought; she only worried about invisible characters in her motherfucking fantasy novel...

... "Terminally furious and exasperated, she runs down and sighs.

"Alicia, calm down, I agree with you."

She lets the anger drain off, from her face anyway. "What? You agree that my mother is a stupid bitch?" It seems like a trick question.

"I agree with whatever makes you feel most calm."

Alicia touches my cheek and studies my face, rubs a strand of my hair between her thumb and forefinger as if assessing my quality. She leans back and pushes me off the bed with her feet. "Go away, I’m tired."

"You’re not hungry now?"

"No, all that talk about Jesus Christ makes my stomach hurt."

"Jeopardy’s on in a little while, do you want to watch it with me?"

"Sure, but I’ll kick your ass."

"That’s fine," I say, and turn on the tv. We’ll see.
Laying on the living room floor eating a hamburger for breakfast, or brunch I suppose since it’s elevenish, brooding over my inability to seduce or close the deal with a woman who works for an escort service, I slip into a black funk. I knew sex isn’t the answer to my steady depression, but it answers something. I’ve relinquished a small bit of the suffering brought on by my orphan status, and have let the idea of an attractive woman drive my life down into a canyon. It’s frightening how a man can spend all of his money and waste huge swatches of time, days, weeks, even, pursuing that one act, and the very instant it’s done, there’s a gloomy chance that the woman who satisfied this drive, will no longer be wanted. Lust ignites a temporary schizophrenia and the woman becomes a completely different type of problem, that one runs from rather than towards. With Alicia I wasn’t given the opportunity to discharge and dismiss the sad lust driven madness; and there’s no telling, given my fragile state, how I’d feel about her post coitus.

As I stare at the hamburger, there’s a pounding on my front door. It’s Alicia’s angry pimpish boyfriend I imagine. Leaning up against the door, I shout, "Who is it?!!"

"Quit yelling. Open the door, you idiot."

It's Tommy Stillwell. He hustles in carrying a big brown grocery bag, drops it on the living room rug, kneels down and pulls out two plastic bags of white powder. "Two kilos," he announces, as if it's the birth of his first son.

"Holy fuck." Nervous, worried about this meeting of felons, in all different fields, in my house, I lock the front door.

Tommy is dressed like a Seattle rocker in torn jeans, a Ramones T-shirt under a Pendelton, shaggy brown hair and incongruous $500 suede desert boots; the ensemble messy but somehow neat. There’s a clanking in the kitchen, Alicia’s up staggering around making coffee. It’s too early to explain her presence. There is no good explanation. "What are you doing here?" Tommy asks.

"She’s just a friend." I glare at Alicia, unwilling to admit that I’m in the practice of calling escort services.
She gives Tommy a chaste kiss on the cheek, then, with plain desire touches one of the kilos. "This is taking a turn."

"Hezikiah, you're blowing my mind. Getting into the drug trade, smoking the ganja, hanging out with good looking hookers . . . ."

"A hooker?" I say, incredulous. "What is your fucking trip? You're playing with my emotions."

"Is this guy a cop?" Alicia asks Tommy.

"Bitch. God damn it . . . ."

Tommy laughs, slumps into a chair, pulls a baggie out of his pocket and sloppily dumps a gram of cocaine out onto the varnished wooden coffee table. "Hezikiah's not a cop. I went to high school with this fool. Jesus, Alicia, you're gettin' paranoid. He works at Nordstrom's, for God sakes."

"Really?" she says, mostly focused on the coke. "Can you get discounts?"

"I quit."

"You quit?" Tommy says. "That would have been a good cover job, to sell to yuppies and rich posers. So, what, you're a . . . what are you? Seriously, Hezikiah, what's the deal?"

"I have no deal." I want to tell him about the bank robbery, and relieve some of the pressure; but, if I say it out loud, it will be too real. Right now it's as if it had happened in my head, an irresponsible hallucination. There are evident repercussions and echoes from the event, such as annoying guilt and the life threatening piles of cocaine in my living room. Still, if I cultivate a healthy denial and let one set of new circumstances after another form a buffer between me and the robbery, it will fade away. So, in my head, I change the the subject, shift into the present and disconnect from the past. Real is what I say it is.

Frowning, Tommy toes my hamburger with his expensive boot, then sits next to me on the floor. "The deal? You gave me five thousand dollars to invest. After that . . . ."
"And you were crying about two hundred and fifty," grumbles Alicia. Down on her knees and without invitation, she makes up an ambitious line of coke and somehow, without a tube or rolled up bill, snorts it up. I believe it's called hoovering. "Oh yeah," she whispers; wets her finger, runs it across the coke, rubs a little on her gums and sighs, "Okay, Hezzy, or whatever your name is; I'm ready to fuck."

"Tommy, how do you know this woman?"

"She used to run around with Billy, my little brother, a few years ago right before he went down for breaking into that pharmacy in Santa Monica. Our girl here got off scott free. Billy did two years, then fled to Canada."

"Not from me he didn't. And I told him, don't rob that fucking pill factory. And you of all people know Billy doesn't listen to you, me or anybody. We got into those shitty little percocets. Like heroin pills," she said slowly, sadly. "Drove him crazy. I liked Billy. I miss him." She licks the tip of her finger, dabs it in the coke and rubs it on her gums. "Hezzy . . . baby," she says mockingly. "Do you want some pussy, or not?"

"Fuck off. It's Hezikiah. And I'm not in the mood. Maybe you're a cop. Tommy, what is this shit? I have no idea what's going on," I blither, wanting nothing more than to get rid of Tommy, take Alicia into the bedroom or push her onto the couch and have at it. While Tommy's endorsement of my character, that I'm not a cop, and his cocaine, has made me fuckable—a useless shred of self-esteem lingers in my tattered psyche and wants to make itself known. It has something to do with Tommy witnessing my lack of gumption and reckless need. If he wasn't here I'd swallow my pride, pay any price or eat a bug if that's what it took to get at Alicia's pussy. Tommy looks away, he's got his own female troubles and recognizes a fellow halfwit.

"The coke is half yours, dude. I spent a week slingin' it, massaging the profits, pumpin' the volume. Now we're up and comers. Merchants, in pocket, ready to make a killin' and it's high time, if you know what I mean."

"I don't."

"I know, I'm sorry. What I'm tryin' to say is, there's a druggy wave in this town
and I caught it. You're gonna help by storin' the weight. I'm gonna quit the pot business. Francine is smokin' me out joint by joint anyway."

"Yeah? ... I still don't understand." Avarice and disoriented lust struggle for my attention. "That's, what, $100,000 worth of blow? Did you steal it?"

"It's more like 40,000. And you don't steal that much cocaine. I like living. Have faith, brother. I took your five thousand, added fifteen hundred of my own, got twelve ounces of blow, broke it down into eighths and the shit was gone within 24 hours and I made $10,000. Bought some more, a pound, and this time took it all the way down to grams; put them on the street and BAM! it was gone in 24 hours, again."

"You're kidding . . ."

"Recognize and realize, I'm frontin' a lot of this stuff to these gutter punk and skater kids who are slingin' in various and dangerous territories, like ghetto drug warriors. You know how many grams are in a pound?"

"About . . ."

"A little over 433," Alicia spits out like a coked up computer. She's flushed and excited by cocaine talk. The lazy rude bitch of last night is completely gone. A Columbian drug lord would simultaneously tame and arouse her.

"Bad with men, good with math," I say. "What's it all mean? Where's the bottom line?"

"We lost nothin'. No one ripped us off and nobody got busted. I reinvested again and now we have four and a half pounds of kick ass uncut cocaine. Dope money takes on a life of its own when things go right. It's like the money doesn't even need us, it's almost supernatural. If we gram it out to the street--be wicked fair and let them come out with, like, ten thousand each for this sack; leaves you and me with . . ."

"About, $175,000," says Alicia, who is also trapped between competing desires, though hers is avarice and love, a love for coke.

"This can't be right," I say, in the face of four and a half pounds of cocaine sitting in my living room. I'm wondering how in the fuck Tommy can be so honest. I'm not unduly cynical, and one doesn't have to be jaded to fall for the notion that drug dealers are
lying scandalous thieves; and yet, my old high school friend is the Abraham Lincoln of cocaine. I fell into this by complete fluke and deserve no credit or undue profit. Three days ago, five days after he left with my money, I figured it was gone and didn't care much. After a lot of bad turns and deep melancholy, my luck's turned golden (in a dark, illegal manner) like a motherfucking fairy tale, which proves that I'm not real. "You're saying, that this cocaine here . . ."

"It cost forty thousand. It's ours. And . . . once I explained the potential profit to my crew; well, actually, it was one of the kids, Bam Bam, this seventeen year old gay punk who looks like he's twelve, he convinced the other three to think about the future, which a couple of them have never done before. They don't trust the future. I am a little worried that when they get their out of the big money, the gutter punks are gonna kill themselves; they got all kinds of habits, even Bam Bam.

There's so much information and possible consequence that I can't focus. "How old are these kids?"

"Sixteen or eighteen, maybe. They been on the streets stealin' and dealin' and hookin' for a while though, so, in drug years, they're all like fifty. I guess, if they kill themselves off, well, they had full lives."

"I'd prefer to assume they're going to live."

"Yeah, of course."

"Exactly what do I get out of this?"

"Brohan, you get half."

"Half of what?"

"You put up most of the money . . . and, with my cut, a little out for expenses, and after we pay the street dealers . . . we're golden."

Alicia licks her finger and mutters, "Golden."

Tommy and I are sitting on the couch and Alicia flops down next to him. "This sounds like my bailiwick, my sort of scene." She leans over, wipes the last of the cocaine off the table, and gives me a big smile as if we hadn't been accusing each other of being
cops. Now that she's medicated and in a good mood, Alicia's even more interesting, by
which of course I mean only one thing.

Deliberately ignoring her, I say to Tommy, "Is there a number associated with this
term, golden?"

"Well..." he sucks on his lip and stares pensively at the kilos, "after all
those little bric-a-brac bits of business..." he looks at Alicia "you're lookin' at
around $70,000. In a week. Maybe sooner, this shit is flyin' off the shelf. You can make
more if you get all proactive and shit, hit the street with me and the crew."

"I'm not interested in doing that... I don't know. Probably jinx us if I get
involved. My luck, lately... shit." I'm flummoxed. I had Tommy and maybe the whole
world all wrong. He could have told me anything, all the way up to, the money was stolen
by terrorists. If he'd given me six thousand dollars I would have been perfectly happy;
well, not happy, but content. Almost by accident I'm getting a large amount of stupid
money. Not by working; by risking. Risking your life and freedom pays well, but it drives
men insane. Endless cash destroys perspective and balance. Ghetto drug kingpin maniacs
lose their minds under the pressure and kill everybody around them after making too much
money too quickly. I'm a little confused myself and have only been involved for about
an hour. Why did I think robbing banks was the way to go? Getting involved in Tommy's
cartel would be a world class distraction and might wear me out to the point where I could
sleep at night.

I punch Tommy in the arm. "I'll store it and drive and help you drop the shit off
to the gutter punks," I say quickly, very quickly.

"Cool. Francine's been my chauffeur, but she complains the whole time. This little
Vato, Termite, one of my dealers, almost shot her yesterday. You really gotta be a bitch
to get capped by a teenager."

"What about me?" Alicia says. "I want in on this. I'll work the street. Or drive
or whatever."

"Yeah," I say, "not gonna happen." I'm mildly appalled by how I'm handling her. This
is why women regard men as inferior creatures.

Tommy takes her hand. "Honey, this deal is kinda already in motion." He pours out another line to placate her. "Do you have any cash?"

Alicia snorts the coke, pinches her nostrils together thoughtfully, then says, "I got a couple thou. What can you do for me?"

"I'll throw it in with our next buy. It'll give your money a boost and that should get you four ounces or so; then, it's on you to keep it goin'. Think about it though, Alicia; didn't you go this route before? A buncha money got lost and you pissed off about eleven people?"

"I'm a little older and way smarter."

"You are a smart ass."

"I don't think I know everything; but I do know too much. I like blow, but I can put aside whatever I'm gonna use. I'll bust that four ounces into grams and then sell it all myself. Put the money in with you guys. I can do this. Shit, I'll help you get rid of this batch and you don't have to give me anything." Her tough broad front is dropped. She wants in on our impromptu conspiracy.

"The street kids have sales about wrapped up," says Tommy.

Alicia laughs. "I know about a hundred whores, so . . ."

"Huh," Tommy says astutely.

"I'm tired of selling pussy."

"You're lousy at it too," I say.

"You know what? Come on, I'll fuck you right now. You're just a trick. I can turn you out like a light. Just like this." She snaps her fingers.

"No, thank you."

"I'm not asking you. I'm high and in the mood," like a pickpocket her hand is quickly, magically in my pants, fondling me.

Holding grudges is often counterproductive.
Alicia proves to be a good partner, if just for her math skills alone. The first few weeks she sells as much cocaine as any of our people selling on the street; her friends in the "flesh trade" (as she puts it) are steady and well-heeled customers. After just a month, Alicia becomes a full partner with Tommy and I and we pool our profits for one big drug buy. The figures she throws out on future profits are hypnotic. Tommy and Alicia like to smoke and snort and buy expensive toys, while I am strictly in an empire building mode, thinking to put some financial distance between me and the possibility of another soul eating day job. Our coke connection, Broken Tony (who claims to be a made man, though behind his back Tommy says, "All he ever made was a sandwich"), now delivers since we buy so much of his dope. Broken Tony defers to me as I don't use the product, which in his mind makes me the only serious businessman. Although Tony was originally Tommy's connection, Tommy is happy to put some of the focus on me. Broken Tony is intrigued by our unusual "organization" but he doesn't know what to make of Alicia, who is as sardonic and rude as ever. I get the impression that Tony finds her contempt appealing.

Because of my partners' extensive history with the riffraff found all over Hollywood and downtown Los Angeles, they interview and recruit permanent members to sell dope for our nascent organization. Tommy's regular guy, Ram Ram, has three dealers who he insists we consider since they've already been selling for us. After the interviews, they are all brought in as second level members, not making as much as the three of us, but making a hell of a lot considering their hard scrabble lives up to now.

Ram Ram is an incoherent swarthy little punk whose racial origins are half in doubt as his mother was a Mexican crack whore. She had Ram Ram at 15 while in the middle of an incestuous relationship with her disgusting father, possibly making Ram Ram inbred, though nothing is certain since his grandfather was whoring his daughter out to dozens of sailors, construction workers, R&B musicians and illegal aliens 14 hours a day, 7 days a week. Business slumped with the pregnancy and birth, making Ram Ram unwanted, ill-bred
and unschooled; yet he became so street smart by the age of 12 that Bam Bam could be thrown naked into the middle of any city in the world (he speaks the international language of druggy hip hop) and stoner kids from New York to Mumbai to Samoa—all of whom worship Tupac, 50 Cent and Little Wayne—would understand him and be able to put him to work selling water, ice, black or white (PCP, Meth, Heroin or Cocaine) and he'd be in good shape, slinging dope to foreign addicts. Bam Bam is gay or asexual, addicted to televised dance contests and speedballs (heroin & cocaine). He's tiny, maybe five feet, has tattoos covering his body and shaved skull that make him look like a tough sixth grader. Still, he can be a vicious little motherfucker if his space is invaded.

Bam Bam's longtime drug partner from the hood, Termite, is terminally heterosexual and only at home in Southern California as he speaks only Vato and comes from a culture so specialized and broken down into specific tribes that the Mexicans from Los Angeles are obligated by longtime gang custom and orders from the top (their leaders are incarcerated) to kill Mexicans born north or south of L.A., especially the pisas from south of the U.S./Mexico border; however, Termite no longer follows this rigid credo. He pulled a Romeo and Juliet with the daughter of a Border Brother (a Mexican drug dealer from Tijuana) with whom he's had two kids, which is why he tolerates working with people like us. Termite deals drugs as it's his only skill and he desperately needs money to support his exploding family (his wife is pregnant again). The nineteen year old Termite is a fourth generation coke dealer who can eyeball a kilo into grams while drunk or high on the weed he chain smokes even at work on the street selling to addicts, criminals and rip-off artists. Since he's in bad grace with the Mexican gangs and always subject to getting jumped, Termite carries a gun, two knives and his own special mix of an especially virulent pepper spray. Thanks to his weed habit, he dropped a loaded gun and blew off three of his toes giving Termite a rather scary limp.

Then there's Glitch and his partner, Horny Donna. Glitch was born addicted to methamphetamine, thanks to his mother, a biker slut who injected speed into her veins every single day of her pregnancy resulting in Glitch being permanently hairless, skinny
Like an anorexic and mentally unusual. At 17 he's only 4'8", 80 pounds, blinks constantly and is so restless that he sells dope twenty hours a day, and is therefore well known to every other insomniac/addict in the city, because of his hours and his willingness to ride a juiced up Ellipsis to any part of Los Angeles, to deliver drugs to needy addicts. While Glitch and Donna own the expensive Ellipsis and a lot of jewelry, they have no permanent home and move from one profoundly seedy downtown hotel room to another and sometimes ride all night on the bus or sleep on the street. Glitch's strangeness is enhanced by body piercings of his nose, lips, eyebrows, ears, chin and genitals, topped off by a gold chain that connects his pierced nipples. Due to all of his veins being collapsed thanks to a longtime love of injecting speed, ecstasy and LSD, Glitch now has to take his drugs analagly and introduces the practice to anyone who will stand still long enough, which is how he met Horny Donna; who isn't horny or a woman or a man. Donna lives with Glitch and is a mid-op transsexual who has no interest in sex at all, though Donna (who likes to be called a shim) looks like a gorgeous fifteen year old girl on purpose in order to steal, beg or blackmail money from aging perverts. Shim likes LSD thanks to Glitch and they sometimes deliberately get too high and then stay in one of the downtown 24 hour movie theaters for days. Lately the couple have been living in an expensive Hollywood studio/apartment thanks to falling into our cocaine consortium. Bam Bam knows that Glitch is diligently honest and loyal to anyone who keeps him and Donna warm and in drugs. The three of them are part of a community of young androgynous teenagers in L.A. who had to sell their bodies to survive or were abused in group homes or institutions at crucial ages causing various dysfunctions that foster nontraditional attitudes towards sex and relationships. Tommy met Termite last year through his pot business and Termite had been using Bam Bam as a lookout and drug dealer for years. Bam Bam found Glitch and Horny Donna sleeping in a cardboard box downtown and felt sorry for Glitch as he has a soft spot for tiny tattooed sexually disoriented speed freaks.

Business booms and grows and after a few weeks the crew on the street is encouraged to find and take on a half dozen more dealers. America's failing economy assures that
even drug dealers are underemployed, so it's easy to enlist experts in the field eager
to work. None of our original three conspirators want to meet the newest dealers. We let
Bam Bam and his crew handle them. Tommy, Alicia, Bam Bam, Glitch, Termite, Horny Donna
and I meet at my house to break down the kilos. It's actually an incredible amount of
work to turn five kilos into thousands of grams and hundreds of eightballs.

A lot of money is made. We're sitting around, sharing a joint, which helps Alicia
and Termite but mathematically cripples everyone else. Alicia's calculator mind showers
us with the financial possibilities of continuing our business. No one has yet broached
one salient fact: we've had nothing but good luck so far, and in the drug trade, dark
happenings and accidents are inevitable and part of the cost of doing business. That tax
is due. Relatively new to the game, I focus on the astronomical, potential amounts Alicia
keeps throwing out. A good American, big sums of money entrance me. I've got more than
I've ever seen, and things going wrong refuse to take root in my mind. Termite lives in
a far more dangerous world, and he wants to talk about it.

"What kinda gat you got?" He asks me.

"Gat I got? Excuse me?"

Alicia rolls her eyes. "Hezikiah doesn't pack heat." Denigrating my masculinity
relaxes her. "Don't give him a loaded gun, he'd probably blow his own cock off."

"Probably," I say, not interested in guns, nor willing to take her bait.

"Man, what if shit goes down and we gotta cap some fools?"

"There's no point in getting hurt over a little bit of dope. Nothing has happened
so far. We haven't had any trouble. Why entertain the notion?"

"Entertain the notion," Donna says, chewing on the words. She and Glitch were
initially startled that I liked to read books, and attribute my unfamiliar turns of phrase
to this odd practice. Donna always repeats the phrases as if trying them on for size.

"Man, I almost had to cap some rude bitch a while back," Termite brags.

"That was my wife," says Tommy. "She was no threat and Hezikiah is right, if it's
just a gram or two, don't get into a shootout, let 'em have it. Losing one of you isn't
worth a hundred bucks."

"How much is? What's the cut off point?" asks Alicia, a contrary bitch who likes riling up our little gangsters.

"No one gets shot, no matter what," says Tommy, realizing, a little late in the game, that people do get shot when dealing with these amounts of money and dope.

"If we give up the dope, might as well let 'em fuck us in the ass, then," Termite says casually, bugging his eyes at Bam Bam.

"Yeah," Donna and Glitch say simultaneously. I'm not sure if they're agreeing with Termite or endorsing the idea.

"Can't let no fools take shit off us or we lose cred," Bam Bam says, upset.

Alicia stands on the couch and claps her hands. "Okay, break it up. Nessy isn't going to be out there on the street anyway. So let's drop it. You guys handle it however you think best. If you get shot or killed, well ... it's unavoidable."

"That's right," Termite says, as if longing to get shot.

"Let's break this shit up and get out there. Nothing is going to go wrong," says Tommy, eternal optimist. His stoned, sunny attitude is why I signed up in the first place. Other than Alicia and me, our whole crew is made up of unlikely and incurable optimists.
Chapter 9

Dope House

(Two Months Later)

Thanks to my incommunicado status Neruda decides to drop by the house around two in the afternoon, and unfortunately Alicia answers the door. The two women are complete opposites and exactly alike. My sister married young and since then, it’s safe to assume, has only had sex with her husband, whom she adores; while, of course, Alicia was, until recently, six different kinds of whore, though she expresses distaste for men in general and tricks in particular. However, both women have acid tongues and believe that their ideas and opinions are superior to everyone else’s in all that matters in every situation. They get into a long argument on the front porch, covering a lot of ground, ratcheting up the indignation and anger until it’s out of control and loud enough to arouse housewives and unemployed suburbanites for a block in all directions. Our neighbors lead stifling, overwhelmingly boring lives and my house has been a dark joy to them since that first day Alicia and Tommy arrived on my doorstep. Alicia has this habit of telling extreme truths that create pain in her adversaries, and she enjoys drama as a matter of course and a means to all ends. She tells my sister every god damn thing about my business, assuming that Neruda won’t call the police, which is a mistake. My sister, while not as volatile and off the rails as Alicia, is still capable of throwing blows as low as a Russian lawyer; and at first she doesn’t believe that I’m dealing drugs. Neruda says something scathingly rude, her forte, about Alicia’s body, which is absurd since she is very fit, nonetheless it’s the one thing that sinks in; and so, to win the skirmish by the blow-her-mind method, Alicia invites my sister to wait for me in the house, which has been turned into a retail cocaine operation. There are a half dozen triple beam scales in my living room that the crew use to break kilos down into grams and eightballs; and in the basement, Glitch and Donna, usually supervised by Alicia, make perfectly good cocaine into crack. I arrive right after Neruda has collapsed on the living room couch,
flabbergasted and afraid for me.

Alicia wasn't thinking about long term damage to my family, or even about breaching the security and sanctity of our dope house; in the heat of battle the cocaine is simply a ploy to shut my sister up. They weren't arguing about anything that made sense, it was a verbal struggle for an ill-defined dominance. Alicia leaves my sister on the couch with Bam Bam and Termite, and goes back down into the basement, gratified to have put a married mom in her place. She knew all about my sister as I talk about her a lot—I'm proud of Neruda—and it touched a nerve or set off Alicia's jealousy gland.

I come in the front door, relatively carefree, and see Neruda, distressed and agitated, her mouth slightly open, a sheen of sweat covering her face. She's sitting next to Bam Bam who is efficiently eyeballing and packing grams of cocaine into little plastic baggies while casting glances at the woman judging him, the odd tiny package of barely juvenile androgyny; surrounded by grams filling dozens of shoe boxes spread out all over the living room. Neruda in a speechless state is gratifying, but I'm panicky for a second, until it sinks in for the thousandth time that our mom is dead; Neruda can’t tell on me and therefore cannot control me. When I come in the door she gives me a quick look of alarmed communion, still holding onto a small hope that I don’t know about the drug factory in my own house and will be shocked along with her. I'm only taken aback by Neruda's presence, and it's now evident to her that I'm running a dope house. She sinks a little deeper into the couch next to Bam Bam, who tilts his head towards my sister in a "get a load of this" nod.

"Bam Bam, let me sit here for a minute."

"Your sister rude. I offer her a toot on the house and she don't say nothin'. Like I'm not human or whatnot."

"She's freaked out. Who let her in?" I ask, just as she finds her voice.

"God damn it! ... what in the hell ..." she barks, and then grabs my arm, hard, an efficient mode of expression.
"Come on, Neruda, let's go talk in my room. This isn't what it looks like." I pull her up by the hand, she jerks free and dodges past me.

"Later, baby," Bam Bam says. Neruda turns a murderous evil eye on him, then stomps into my room, slams the door and launches into me.

"What the fuck are you doing? I'm gonna call the cops, seriously. See if I don't. For your own good. This is acting out like nothing I've ever seen outside of a cop show. If it's not what it looks like; what is it? . . . say something!"

"I'm . . . ." There's no place to go from there. "I'm sorry. It is what it looks like."

"You're sorry," she sneers. "I don't give a good god damn. Something in your head is broken."

"I'm not hurting anybody."

"You're hurting everybody in the world, starting with yourself and our family. Who's the queer tattooed midget in your living room? This would kill mom . . . ."

"No, Jesus Christ . . . ."

"I'm sorry, you know what I mean."

"I hated that Nordstrom's job. And it made me hate myself. I've been in a tailspin. These guys look weird, I know, but they're not so bad. And the money!"

"Yak, yak, yak. This is no good. Tell me one sane thing about it other than money. You can kill for money. Let's do that."

"Nobody is getting killed."

"So far."

"People like to get high, and I'm making, like, $20,000 a week . . . ."

"What?"

"You heard me."

My sister has three kids and an unemployed husband. She needs and loves money and doesn't have any; a victim of the American system.

"How in the hell could you be making that kind of money? That kid in there . . . ."
"His name is Bam Bam."

"Of course it is. That's my point. Bam Bam. Barely speaks English. Looks like a skinny Hobbit from the ghetto. What is he, about 13? They'll put you in prison just for that."

"He's eighteen."

"Christ . . . " Neruda collapses and lays back to catch an exasperated breath. Stretched out on the bed, she quietly asks, "How much is he making?"

"About ten thousand a week."

"Bullshit!"

"You keep calling bullshit, and I admit, at first glance it smells bad. The money was pushed in my face, giving me no choice."

"You've got a fucking choice."

"In two months I've stashed $150,000 . . . okay?" That's hard to argue with.

"It's impossible on so many levels."

"I'm glad you're here." I'm glad she's not calling the police or cutting me loose. Even with Tommy and our little crew so busy lately, and with Alicia occasionally taking care of my baser needs, I've been lonely, and actively avoiding Neruda, worried about a scene like this. Sitting and talking to her now is a comfort.

She sits up. "I want to stay mad. I know you're still hurt and falling apart over mom; in a spectacular way, obviously. It's like, you're . . . losing it, striking out and doing things . . . you know you would have never done this when she was alive."

"You're probably right."

"Probably! You lived with mom, wore a suit to work every day, nine to five, six days a week. And now, look at your hair, and you haven't shaved for weeks. And the clothes; what is this? Bohemian Modern?"

"Ah, Alicia likes it." I hugged on my artfully ripped jeans. "These cost $250 and the hoodie is rough silk, cost a mint. I don't even want anything. It's stupid money. Alicia makes me go shopping for clothes."
"Don't tell me that you're involved with that rude crazy whore."

"She's not a whore."

"Spare me, she reeks of whore. Honey, I know you're hurting. You were closer to mom than anybody. Even after you moved out, eating dinner at her house every night. I have Joe and the kids to love, though they drive me crazy; it's just like how you used to drive mom crazy. It made her feel needed and wanted. Now, God, you have Ram Ram and some rude whore, and who's the other one, the Mexican."

"Termite, and there's a couple others."

"Termite? No more, I don't want to hear anymore. You're a grown man, it's not healthy."

"You know . . . everything's different. It doesn't matter."

"You matter, Hezikiah. You could be anything. We love you. You have unique qualities and untapped potential."

God, she's using momisms and it's getting to me too. "It's insane, but, think about it, I'll make this stupid money for a while and then get out, fat as fuck."

"These people in your house, they look homeless. And that bitch. Please tell me you're not involved."

"No, well, we're, like, business partners, and . . . "

"God, you're fucking her."

"Maybe a little." My relationship with Alicia can't be explained, even to me by myself. "What do you care?"

"You're right, it's the drug factory I'm going to call the police about."

"Come on, you don't fuck around now, Neruda, but back in the day you were smoking weed and snorting coke like Snoop Dogg. He was your role model."

"I grew up. I got married. I have a family. I'm sane."

"And look at the shape you guys are in. You have two jobs, Joe has none, bills stacked up on the porch."
"The economy . . . real estate market collapsed . . . s'not Joe's fault . . ."

"Yak, yak, yak yourself. It's not anybody's fault."

"Yeah," she sighs miserably, collapsing on the bed again, and I'm freshly reminded that no matter what she says, Neruda was closer to mom than anybody, the only daughter, who did everything with Jean and was hit by her death in ways unknown to me. Neruda imagines she has to take over the matriarchal role left so profoundly empty. My heart collapses a little.

"Do you guys need any money? I can help out."

"I don't know, probably. I don't like you with these people."

"I was depressed . . . the chance came up for me to make all this money . . . I'll stop in a few weeks, really, and then figure out what to do. I'm fucking miserable."

"You'll be miserable in prison, for decades if they get onto your house. And these people, seriously, I'm sorry, they're not trustworthy. That woman . . ."

"I know . . ."

"You always know, then it turns out you don't know shit."

"I'm useless. I don't blame this on mom dying. It was that fucking Nordstrom's, all day with nothing to focus on but one thing: I'm nothing, an orphan. You're better off without me."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, shut the fuck up. Acting all woebegone and whiny; you're a gangster. Act like one."

"I don't have a family."

"You had offers. That CD store chick. It's your fault."

"Is it?"

"You should come over, on Sundays, for dinner. The kids miss you."

"I'll bring Tame and Alicia."

"Fuck you. How did you meet these people anyway."

As if on cue, Tommy Stillwell breezes through my bedroom door without knocking, which
I'd asked him not to a hundred times. Both he and Neruda freeze. Until this moment, it had completely left my mind (marijuana rearranges the memory at will) that while my sister was living the wild life fifteen years ago, at a drug sozzled womanly nineteen, Tommy was her boyfriend. Not privy to all the details of their overly dramatic breakup, I do remember something about Neruda cheating on Tommy with Joe, now her husband, during her freshman year at college. There was a small question as to who is the father of her oldest son.

"Tommy?" Neruda says in a voice I'd never heard, husky and appallingly feminine.

"Neruda, honey, what are you doing here?"

"It is my brother's house."

"Hezikiah, get her out of here."

"I've never had any luck getting her to do anything."

"Tommy, I can't believe you're involved in this."

"Bitch," he says. Not insulting, he invests the word with a complicated kind of respect. "I'm in the same business you and I had going in high school, and college for a while, until you left me for some fucking gardener."

"He's an architect."

"So what. You fucked up everything, so . . . ."

Neruda grabs her purse, steers carefully around Tommy, then stops in the living room to study Horny Donna and Glitch, who are hard at work bagging grains. Neruda flinches, then gathers herself. "Please no introductions, maybe another time, Hezikiah, dinner, Sunday. No matter what. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Tommy, it was nice to see you. Be careful. Alicia, whore."

"Neruda, cunt."

Neruda strides out of the house with Tommy in pursuit. "That's just like you, Neruda, leave without settling anything. Can't face up to someone who cares about you."
"Tommy, that doesn't make sense. And aren't you married?" Neruda says, as she unlocks her car and opens the door.

"Yeah, but . . . ."

She rolls down the window. "I've got three kids. I can't care about you." Tommy sits on the porch with a look I can't interpret.

"Hezikiah, seriously, you shouldn't be doing this ridiculous shit in your house." I stride to the car and lean in to give her a kiss, pull a wad of hundreds, two or three thousand, out of my hoodie and drop it in her lap.

"Thank you, honey." And she's gone.

Neruda is right. We have more than enough money to rent a building. Alicia googles up commercial real estate and we agree to get a place. Alicia has several fake names with paperwork, and so we hide our little factory in a downtown area. Tommy's connection, pleased at our taking so much product off his hands (eight kilos last week), fronts us a huge load, 20 kilos.
Chapter 10

The Hezikiah Principle

There's a principle that comes into play when people who like to take drugs try to make money dealing drugs. I'd like to call this the Hezikiah Principle. I admire the Peter Principle (formulated by Lawrence Peter), which has actually come into play with Tommy, who has definitely risen to his level of incompetence, and now he's become afflicted by the Hezikiah Principle, which states: "Anyone involved in a business that sells drugs that they are doing daily, will shortly have no money left, no matter how much is made."

If I'd only been around one person who'd fallen prey to this principle, it might not have occurred to me; but I have five subjects to observe and so far they have each acted out in the same way, demonstrating my premise. Fifty thousand dollars disappears as quickly as five hundred dollars. The first thing a person (me) not under the influence notices is that stoned people get into the habit of giving away drugs and money at an insane rate that seems rational when one is high. Tommy threw a two day party and every low life, sleazy, crooked, Johnny-come-lately and riff-raff motherfucker in the municipal area, many of whom Tommy admitted later he'd never met in his life, showed up and helped him go through an entire kilo of cocaine. There's no doubt that two-thirds of it was simply stolen while he replenished bowls of party coke set out for his guests (only people who can't afford it do that). Some days, Tommy smoked a joint, snorted a few lines, had a bad argument with his wife and then, completely unsupervised, roamed the city from bar to bar buying drinks for felons and the unemployed, giving away money and drugs to strippers and rock musicians. One night he lost his car, which I'm assuming he gave away, and then paid a taxi driver a thousand dollars to take him to San Diego, where he was arrested on the wrong side of the border for public drunkenness and had to pay another couple thousand dollars in bribes to the local authorities in order to
get back to America.

Even Alicia, an authentic bitch who faithfully treats most everyone in her sphere with ruthless contempt, has a weakness for her acquaintances in the flesh trade, many of whom are scheming whores who come looking for a handout once it's widely known that Alicia has retired and come up in the world. There is a precise delineation between the upper crust concubines and courtesans, who are Alicia's best customers; and the lowly crack whores, strawberries and low level street hookers (a good number of whom also made it to Tommy's party) who are always in crisis or in trouble or in debt, and these girls expertly play on Alicia's emotions (not her kindness, pity or compassion, for there is none) and leave stoned out their minds after being given a loan because Alicia doesn't want to embarrass them with charity, even if they are coosuckers. The emotion they play on is Alicia's hatred for tricks—she imagines that if these prostitutes have money, at least on that one night the men they usually service will, as she puts it, "Have to suck their own cocks."

As to how Bam Bam, Glitch and Horny Donna waste their money, I'm sure I don't want to know; though Glitch shows up one day with $10,000 worth of excellent tattoo work, flaming skulls all over his face, beautifully done, yet ill-advised if one is roaming the streets trying to be a low-key drug dealer.

Only Termite and I don't fall prey to the Hezikhiah Principle. Termite has a family and a woman he worships who confiscates most of his cash and spends it on home and hearth, though I notice Termite flirting shamelessly with Alicia's friends which may be laying the groundwork for the Hezikhiah Principle to kick in the door of his life down the line. Whores are expensive. As for me, I literally bury a lot of my money, about three hundred thousand dollars so far, I'm not sure how much, in my backyard. Banks make me nervous.

Like clockwork, two weeks after each of our big buys is concluded, the coke distributed and the profits split, everyone except Termite and I is antsy to do another
deal. And this is why I am pressured by my fellow drug criminals into increasingly larger deals; even though I intend to quit after each one, figuring that I have enough money. Yet I allow Tommy and Alicia to cajole and persuade me. It's easy, there's a chance I'm used to them and would rather not go back to brooding about Jean, at home all alone. I don't have a woman in my life because I'm very slightly infatuated with Alicia, who has her way with me every once in a while when she's coked up and inexplicably aroused. I don't think I could seduce her to save my life, she goes into heat on her own schedule that I can't decipher. My status as a serial monogamist instinctively misleads me into pursuing no other women. Sometimes I think Tommy and Alicia are occasionally intimate, I'm not sure, it doesn't matter. Don't ask, don't tell, and don't admit anything seems proper given this crowd. There's so much going on, I've committed to going whichever way the wind blows. This is how we end up making a deal with Broken Tony, a million dollars for 100 kilos, absurd amounts. Tommy wants me to do the meet and pickup since more than half the money going into it is mine, but I'm not on drugs and not so crazy. Even though Tony prefers to deal with me, I make sure Tommy handles the whole thing, because our crew only came up with $400,000. Now Tommy owes another $600,000 for the coke. Broken Tony expects to get paid within a month.
Chapter 11

Students of the Absurd & Madcap Motherfuckers

"Actually, if we gram out the whole 100 keys, it would come out to, uh, about $9,569,300. Is that enough?"

"About?"

"Oh Dios Mio."

"Quit fuckin' around," says Tommy, and he jumps up to hug Alicia.

"I don't fuck around anymore, Tommy boy. Though, in your case . . . " Quick as a gunfighter she slides her hand down the front of his pants.

"Hey!" Tommy jerks away and dances back, throwing a look my way. I shrug.

Our downtown space on Fifth Street was a painter's loft at one time; and before that a small shoestring sweat shop that employed illegals. The entrance is right on the street, a large rough door that slides open for a freight elevator that takes us up one floor and opens right into our cocaine factory that is broken into two big rooms and a little ceiling loft up above that has a couple of beds (and not much privacy). The walls are institutional gray concrete and the floor is made of sturdy oak that would be beautiful if someone restored it, but currently it's scuffed, covered with paint splatters and some dark greasy marks. The building is not coded as residential and our neighbors all use their lofts to store things, and we rarely see anybody; though a band lives surreptitiously on the top/fourth floor and practices at odd hours. They're too cool to acknowledge any of us, and we avoid them. There's a big ten by ten foot window that looks over Fifth Street. The 100 kilos are piled in the back room as far from the door as possible. They were stacked neatly but are now sort of spread around haphazardly. We only have one couch and a few small tables, so Ram Ram and Glitch have been stacking kilos into makeshift chairs; and as they sit they've taken to cutting them open with little knives in order to get a toot during the long arguments and discussions.
"Do we have enough dudes to sling it on the street?" asks Ram Ram, who heard us arguing about this earlier. He wants the others to hear him speaking up since he's supposed to be leading them. The big numbers make him insecure.

Glitch and Horny Donna regard the enterprise they've stumbled into with nearly superstitious awe. Both are aware of their limitations and know that speaking up at our meetings will likely come to no good, but the mention of bringing in more people gets Glitch to his feet, which is hardly noticed by any of us until he pipes up in his high strange voice.

"We like sellin' it. I'm good at slingin'. And it's easy, like dancin'. Work the street, work the gutter. Let's keep goin' like we been ..." Donna pulls him back by the hand and whispers God knows what in his ear. Maybe she's telling him that we've already brought six more dealers into the fold who are going to work as soon as the kilos are turned into into grams. Everyone studies Glitch, he goes shy and sits back down. Other than the choices he's made in his personal life, I agree with the little speed freak more and more, and admire how he and Donna have forged a domestic situation, without a house and with all their unique ways. And I'm uncomfortable with the idea that my money is going to be spread out so thin with a half dozen unknown and untested madcap motherfuckers.

"Can we please just sell ounces?" I say.

"I never noticed how fussy you are, like my grandpa," Alicia says.

"I'm sure your grandpa is more reasonable than you. And while I enjoy the personal insults; my point remains. We should be selling ounces and eighths."

"Nah," says Tommy, "that would cut our profit way the fuck down. We're on a roll, I say we roll with it. We've been lucky with Termite and Bam Bam, and they know these people. Alicia, didn't you meet a couple of them, yesterday?"

"I don't trust them," Alicia says immediately, "but I don't care. I say we use them. We have no choice."
"Yeah, well," I say, feeling my point of view fading, "I guess they've been in the game for a while."

"Do you think it's a game, man?" asks Termite, with extra Vato in his voice, and his three compadres look intense and serious; I suppose because they literally risk their lives and freedom selling our dope.

"Hey, now, I only meant game, like business, not that you guys are out there playing games. I know it's, like, dangerous... though..."

All four teenagers burst into laughter. Termite shakes his head and Bam Bam gives him a quick complicated handshake. They are fucking with me.

"Man, can't take nothin' serious," says Termite, "cause there ain't nothin' serious in this world."

"That's truth in your mouth," says Glitch.

"I'm glad you students of the absurd are so carefree. Joke is on me. But are we really decided on breaking the keys down only into grams? It makes no sense. We should make at least a couple dozen into ounces and eighthballs?" I've done a little math myself and a hundred kilos will make about a 100,000 grams. "We're going to have grams coming out our asses."

Glitch and Horny Donna giggle since that's how they do their dope, while Termite and Bam Bam high five each other.

"Listen you little weirdos, we have a million dollars worth of dope we have to get rid of because Tommy owes $600,000 to a killer."

"Allied killer," Tommy mutters.

"Does that help you allegedly sleep? Alicia, alleged math lady, why didn't you mention how many grams this was earlier."

"Jesus fucking Christ, it's not that hard to figure out. We can get rid of it, we got ten people on the street now, and I'll do my part. This is seeming more and more like girl scouts trying to sell cookies. How did Donna end up being the most manly person
here?"

"There's too much dope and too many people and something will blow up in our fucking faces."

Tommy gives me a put upon look. "I'm getting sick of these constant reality checks of yours. I've got problems at home. I don't need you taking things apart. It's all going to be fine. I don't need all this shit!"

"Then why in the fuck did we take on a hundred keys?"

"I need the money!"

Tommy grabs Alicia by the chin. "How many grams? Exactly how many grams is in here?"

He gestures at the kilos stacked all around us.

"Exactly? Uh, 116,160." It's the first time Alicia seems unsure of her math. I don't believe her.

Tommy flops petulantlly down on the floor. "Bitch, we only got a month to get rid of this shit and give Broken Tony his money."

"You can call me bitch. But don't you be a little bitch. A month is plenty of time to sell $600,000 worth. We only need to sell 6,000 grams to take care of Tony. It's all profit after that."

"6,000 grams? Okay, okay . . . that sounds good. But seriously, I have to give Tony his money on that exact date, or . . . use your imagination. Cause you won't be able to use it after he's done breaking things."

"I hate to keep harping on the same thing . . . eightballs, ounces," I say, trying not to sound fussy.

Alicia pokes me in the chest. "It's hard for me to understand why you are the one I have to keep explaining this to. We have over 100,000 grams; if we sell 6,000, they're all paid for and the rest is profit. Quit your complaining and let's get started." Alicia knows numbers can be corralled and massaged, but she doesn't know what she's talking about this time.
"Is there one sane person here?"

Only Tommy raises his hand. He's the one Broken Tony will come for first. No one else in the room cares about sanity. "Alicia, how many grams do ten people have to sell in a month in order for us to hit $600,000?"

"Uh, at $100 a gram, that would be 600 grams each, they'd have to sell 20 a day, seven days a week."

"Is that possible?" I ask Bam Bam.

He winces, screws up his face up and pretends to calculate. "If we push it, we can do it," he says, and his crew murmurs agreeably. They'll agree with anything he says that sounds like money.

"And what will you live on for that month, since it all has to go to Tony?"

They're all silent.

Donna whispers into Glitch's ear, he smiles and and he says, "I wanna be a millionaire."

Everyone starts talking again and it's all about how to keep the profits high, the chatter riddled with pauses as they try to do the math (meaning their cut) in their heads. All of them are focused on that figure of nine million dollars and have a hard time coming off of it. I keep pushing the idea of eightballs and ounces and it seems Tommy is with me for a few minutes. But finally, after switching sides several times, he sides with Alicia. I suspect she doesn't care about money, and is being contrary for it's own sake, to no particular end. Trying to unravel her is a waste of time. Alicia likes to push the line and take people to the edge, maybe because she was mistreated as a child, possibly for sport. She knows how to get her way by appealing to men's libidos and everyone's greed.

So, avarice and a willingness to gamble wins out and the seven of us spend half the day and the whole night turning pounds of cocaine into little gram bags. By dawn we've only done ten kilos. Tommy starts panicking again and Alicia suggests we bring
in some of the new street dealers to help finish breaking up the rest of the keys. There's more arguing, she throws math at us demonstrating that by ourselves it will take a week and a half working nonstop just to break the entire 100 kilos down. We quail before Alicia's stats and agree; then have another spirited discussion about which of the new dealers can be trusted enough to work around our huge stash. Since Termite and Ram Ram brought them into our conspiracy, they're the only ones who can co-sign these characters.; so, as usual it's pointless to argue. Tommy has been smoking too much pot and snorting way too much cocaine and is so paranoid that he won't agree to even meet them. He's right—we weren't supposed to meet any of the street dealers working for Ram Ram, a practice your saner drug lords use to keep the police at bay. Tommy's paranoia infects me and I'm glad we rented the loft and that nobody is going to know where I live. Regardless of the dispute or what's best, Alicia has Ram Ram call all six of the new dealers in. Tommy fretfully agrees.

While this drama is playing out, Alicia asks to speak to me alone in the other room, then tries to lure me into the closet for a quick fuck. We've got the little bedroom/loft deal up above us that's used for naps and sex, but she... who knows? Alicia would rather have sex in a dark closet than on a bed. I beg off and she laughs as if I am the biggest joke of all time. It's a little scary. The pressure is getting to everyone except her.

By the time the new people trail in, around noon, Tommy changes his mind again and doesn't want to let them into the room where the cocaine is laying around. Ram Ram's recruits range in age from 20 to 35, four white guys and two black dudes, and all of them have that worn, unwashed look of people who only exist in the moment and sleep in cars. Alicia demands that they all work in the nude, like African diamond workers, and though one guy immediately strips down, obviously for her benefit, no one else will do it. More time is wasted as one person after another stands and makes a speech about integrity, humiliation, the fraternity and general trustworthiness of drug dealers.
Termite gets swept up in the speech making though he isn't being asked to work in the nude. Tommy, who has been hiding in the loft upstairs, calls Termite up and sends him back down with the idea of fronting each new guy a half pound to gram up and sell on their own. Alicia and I halfheartedly agree. We make it clear that once they've sold their coke, they're to come back and get a whole pound, keeping 20% of the money, a good deal for guys who'd recently been scuffling on the street selling nickle bags of weed and ten dollar rocks of crack. It's a huge opportunity to make a lot of money and get off the street. I let myself wonder why they haven't been working for a reputable drug dealer.

A list of worries forms in my head. 1.) We're fronting out such relatively huge amounts to low characters. 2.) There's still over 190 pounds of the god damn shit laying around the loft. 3.) Alicia is horny during the most inappropriate times imaginable as if clusterfucks turn her on, and I wonder if she's deliberately engineering trouble; of if I should. 4.) If it takes us 30 days to get Broken Tony his money, it will take us over a year to get our nine million. 5.) Everyone, even Termite now, I am alarmed to see, is using enough coke to keep three rock bands on the road.

The list is like the things you think about saying in an argument much later after everyone is in jail or dead.
Chapter 12

Uncle Christ & Three Whores

It's astonishing how quickly one can get rich, get poor, get fucked. I need another list in order to keep track of the various disasters. First, three out of six of the new street dealers simply disappear with a pound and a half of our cocaïne. In retrospect if you give a street person drugs worth enough to buy a small house, they're not going to be thinking about the future. Homeless men's lives indicate that they have a bad history with the future. We got lucky with Bam Bam, Termite, Glitch and Donna, and luck makes you mentally lazy. A meeting is held, and we invite the three street dealers who came back with our money. Bam Bam introduces them to me and Alicia, while Tommy hides upstairs. The lost cocaïne was only .05 of the whole and so we figure eating the loss isn't such a big deal now that we have three new people who are doing well. After roundly castigating the three thieves who ran off, rather than wrangle over figures and future catastrophe, we end the meeting and hit the street like football players breaking a huddle. Even though the new guys still have grams left from the first batch, they are each given a pound as encouragement, and to get more of that shit out of the loft. Then, as if they'd never thought of stealing our dope, and having heard the idea at our meeting, the last three disappear with their second issue of coke. The next day, when Tommy takes an accounting (he obsessively weighs all the cocaïne two or three times a day) two more kilos are missing. Alicia berates all of us for not making the new dealers strip down every time they came anywhere near our huge stash. Frustrated, Tommy, Alicia and I get into a huge free floating argument about nothing and everything.

"If you assholes had listened to me, this wouldn't have happened. Should have stripped them down like at a police station. You treat me like I'm just a pair of boobs and a head full of math."

"Nobody was going to strip down and work naked, except for that one pervert, and he ripped us too. We just gave them a god damn pound each and a motherfucking fare thee
well." Tommy says.

"We should have made them all strip down, god damn it!" Alicia yells. "They would have done anything to deal for us and make that kind of money. Your pot addled brain doesn't allow you to see good ideas."

"That's the slut calling the pothead addled. And they would have stolen our fucking shit anyway."

"You stupid motherfucker. You ingrate. You ... man." And Alicia did something I would have bet big money against ever happening: burst into tears, slaps Tommy and flies out the door like an illusionist.

"Alicia, hey ..." Tommy says, half to himself, but she's gone.

Off on a righteous snit, we don't see Alicia for days. Turns out slut is one of her buzz words. Bitch is okay, whore doesn't bother her, and while cunt will piss her off, slut hurts the one feeling she has left. Tommy and I don't know how to get ahold of her and it's another problem; Alicia has been selling more cocaine than anyone else, and she also has the best grip on the numbers game that rules our crippled drug conspiracy. Tommy is worried sick about how far behind schedule we are on the $600,000 for Broken Tony. The more I hear that name the scarier it gets.

And yet, I don't feel all that bad. Compared to the months I spent alone after Jean passed away, melancholy and negativity hounding me night and day, the last few months have been relatively pleasant. The disasters surrounding the drug business are just a distraction that can't touch the misery of losing my mom. Also, the idea of my old job selling clothes and folding sweaters and kowtowing to irksome poofs every day, makes me smile.

Alicia's been off pouting for three days, so Tommy and I sit down with pencil and paper and the big scale trying to weigh the coke and count what Ram Ram and his crew have brought in, which cashwise is only $62,025 if we count everything, even emptying our
pockets when Tommy insists. At a week in, with only three weeks to go, even our limited math skills reveal that trouble is on the horizon and moving in quickly.

I take a disconsolate Tommy out to dinner. After a few drinks with our meal (Tommy insists on paying and tips $100) we figure to chip away at our biggest problem and go out trolling the nightclubs trying to sell grams to ravers, disco babies, suburbanites and punk rockers until two in the morning. Bam Bam is out on Hollywood Boulevard doing his usual thing, almost gets caught up in a police sweep and turns in early. We confab by cell phone at 3 a.m. and decide to meet at the loft to brainstorm and complain, count the money and weigh what's left, yet again.

The freight elevator door opens to reveal Alicia and three street whores sitting on the couch, drinking wine. They've opened a kilo which has spilled out all over the table in front of the couch and onto the floor. Alicia grabs a bottle of wine and stands on the couch. "And these are my so-called friends. A toast!"

The whores, dressed and undressed in spandex, silk and various non-p.c. furs, raise their glasses and sloppily shout, "To so-called friends!" One of them, wearing a horrible silver wig and a ratty fox skin around her neck, can't quite manage the toast and slips off her chair onto the floor spilling wine on a pile of cocaine.

"No, no, no," says Tommy, as he scurries over to scoop up as much of the white powder as possible. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, god damn it, Alicia! What did I ever do to you?"

"S'Alright. We're a little drunk, but . . . ."

"You're fuckin' sloshed you god damn bitch. And who are these whores, spilling our cocaine all over the place? Jesus Christ on a crutch!"

"They're my friends, my only friends. Not like you, Tommy." Alicia isucked up so bad that when she tries to stand and point at Tommy she falls to her knees onto another pile of coke which she appears to notice for the first time. "Shit, what's this doing all over the place?"

Her friends are laughing, drinking, cheering Alicia on as if kneeling in a pile
of cocaine is the height of comedy, saying, "You go girl," and other witless things. Bam Bam is helping Tommy scrape up the coke until one of the whores, a short chubby little girl with an uneven black mohawk, tries to wrap him up for a kiss.

"Get off me! I ain't with females!" He backs up and practically runs towards the other room.

The whores look like the kind of women you see standing on a corner late at night, and at a distance, they're classically slutty/pretty; but once you're face to face with one of them, you see the uniquely crooked teeth, troubled complexion and profoundly vacant expression, and that the minute a conversation ends her entire body drops into a sad desolate slump. But in party mode, fueled by cocaine, vodka and the truly good looking Alicia, under the illusion that she is their friend, all the girls are presentable enough to be strippers in a biker bar or escorts for low level Arab princes.

Alicia, on her knees, tries to sweep up some of the cocaine, "Sorry, sorry, sorry," stands, loses her balance then settles back on the couch to swear at Tommy. She runs out of breath, lunges at the little mohawk girl and in the middle of kissing her, Alicia passes out, slides onto the floor and knocks over a bottle of wine. A whore with bleach burned hair and huge creepy boobs, says, "Hey, honey, wake up," and pokes the unconscious body with her $15 stiletto. With Alicia laying on the floor comatose in a pool of wine and coke, her three whores are confused. One wants to leave immediately as her small clutch purse is filled to bursting with ounces of our good cocaine. The other two are looking at me and Tommy, figuring that we are millionaire coke dealers and it would be wise to fuck us. I shoo them, chattering like a flock of retarded chickens, towards the door.

The girl with the fox fur grabs Alicia's arm and tries to drag her out, but Tommy pulls her away and says, "She's ours." The whores stagger and sway into the night.

A wooden ladder leads up the bedroom loft and Tommy, who at 6'2" still possesses some of his high school football muscles, hoists Alicia over his shoulder and powers her up the ladder and into one of the bunk beds.
"Stay up there and keep an eye on her. Don't let her escape again and when she wakes up, no insults."

"I won't," Tommy says sheepishly, knowing he'd somehow hurt Alicia's seemingly invulnerable sense of self. "I call her whore all the time."

"Dude, talk it out when she's conscious, just make sure she doesn't run off again."

Alicia's party had either inhaled, stolen or otherwise destroyed at least a pound of cocaine. The mohawk girl gone, Bam Bam is back scraping the soggy powder off the floor and table. The grimy concoction—mixed with wine, dirt and unknown substances—fills an empty plastic gallon milk carton. He might make it into freebase, though I've never heard of wine flavored crack.

The unknown variable is having it's way with us, events slipping away faster and faster; it's past time to slow things down. Tommy puts Alicia to bed but can't sleep himself—he's back downstairs telling Bam Bam to call his crew in with all the drugs and cash they have. About an hour later, Glitch rides in on his Ellipsis to tell us Donna is up in Hollywood Hills delivering coke to Lemmy from Motorhead, an English rock band that none of us have heard of, but we're glad for the business. Donna arrives by taxi two hours later looking disheveled. Termite's whereabouts are unknown.

"Call him, tell him to get his ass down here." Tommy is upset, more coke than cash is coming back, and we still haven't even hit $100,000. There are thousands of grams made up, filling assorted baggies, bottles and even a trash can, all full of cocaine. There's seventy-five kilos still tightly wrapped in plastic laying all over the place, and pieces and piles of other kilos everywhere, making Tommy hysterical as he weighs and counts them over and over.

"Oh, Hezikiah, you got me good. Tony wanted to deal with you and meet with you but you ... put it all on me. I've been in the biz for, like, god damn it, two decades; and I let a poser put me in a trick bag."

"I hate to blow up this paranoid ... scenario of yours, but this was your plan.
Look at me. Tommy, look at me."

He turns from the scale and slumps on the floor. "What?"

"I'm your friend. You came to my house with this whole great cocaine plan, right?"

"Right, you're right. I'm sorry. Where is Termite?"

"It's not his fault, either."

"I know. Do you wanna help me weigh this again?"

"No."

Alicia comes down the stairs. "I'll help you, Tommy." She sits on the couch, daintily makes a small line to snort, wipes her nose and gives him a hug. "Sorry, I got a bit of bitch in me, sometimes."

"A bit? Sometimes?" I say.

"Fuck you very much, Hazzz," she says, with little rancor. "Tommy, don't worry."

"People always say don't worry right before someone dies or worse."

"We'll make this right somehow," I say, but I can't imagine how. I'm trying to be positive.

Alicia gives Tommy another hug. "See, that's two-thirds of the brain trust, feeling it."

"That's great. We've already, basically, opened almost three million dollars worth of coke, according to your math . . ."

"That's right," Alicia says, with authority, while half-heartedly moving the shoeboxes full of coke around. Even though the thousands of grams look like a lot, they really only represent three or four kilos.

"Where the fuck is Termite? I hope to god he has about ten kilos or more."

Bam Bam is mortified. "He left to have chow with his aunty. I keep calling but only get his message." His leadership skills aren't called on very often, but every time they are lately, he's mostly ineffective. "He always answers or at least returns my calls. Damn fool, it's been, like, eighteen hours."
"This is important, do you know where this aunty lives?"

"No, no, not a good idea," says Bam Bam. "Sometimes, aunty, she like, kidnapa him and she ..." he whirls his hands, trying to finish the thought.

"The homeboys calls her Aunti Christ," says Glitch, snuffling a nervous laugh.

"This isn't funny. I promise you Broken Tony isn't going to laugh. He won't be stoppin' with us, once he gets mad, so ... it's not funny, I'll tell you that. Why in the fuck did I get involved with that dude. God, we had $400,000 and now ... I'm in debt, stuck with a bunch of kids, and piles of cocaine keeps disappearin'."

"Look, sweetheart, no matter how you cut it, we still have well over six million dollars worth of coke and we only owe him $600,000," says Alicia, as if the numbers she loves will calm Tommy.

They don't. He yells, "It's not money if we can't sell it!" sits on the floor and rolls a joint. "I shoulda stayed in the weed business. Screw, this is Francine's fault. Why did I ever get married? That bitch is sure as shootin' strung out on the motherfucking blow now. It's been ten days and we don't even have $100,000. Every time I take a step forward, it seems like we go sideways, and ... to make things worse," he jumps to his feet to face Alicia, "Francine thinks I'm cheatin' on her, which gives her license to do all kinds a wicked shit. A whole pound of coke is missin' from my pad. I only married her 'cause of that ZZ Top song."

"And she was pregnant," I say.

"Shut up. Don't change the subject. Every time someone comes into this place, big piles of dope come up missin'. I wanted to be a landscaper. Get a truck and a few Mexicans." Tommy takes a big draw from the joint. "Where the fuck is Termite? Jesus God, he's run off too ..."

Though Tommy is justifiably upset, Bam Bam is stoic as most street kids are, figuring that as long as one isn't being beaten or raped, things aren't so bad. Alicia is tuned to Tommy, willing to feel what he's feeling. While I am sporadically infatuated
with her—I chalk it up to common lust and try not to take it seriously—her being focused on Tommy (probably because he has a wife) makes my life easier. On the whole, I am inappropriately upbeat. After spending almost ten years as a wage slave, corporate nine to five jive motherfucker, whatever you want to call it, I've broken away from everything that I was, utterly and completely. I still don't care much for drugs, though I'm developing a taste for Tommy's weed—it almost makes me happy. I do understand why the average citizen wants all of us drug dealers in prison: their orderly lives are threatened by the chaos breeding antisocial out of the loop non-tax paying anarchists that we have inadvertently become. Part of me is rising to the challenge, taking in all the variables and random bullshit that clings to people like Bam Bam and Alicia; and the rest of me is sitting back, knowing that it will take maybe too much to make this work, because it looks as if we've collectively risen to our level of incompetence. In the spirit of simply doing something, I suggest that Tommy, Alicia, Bam Bam and I go over to this Aunti Christ woman's house to check on Ternite.

"Let's go get that Vato," I say. It's a small accomplishment that might be more easily attained than $500,000.

"Ahhhh," Bam Bam growls.

We pile into a taxi, Bam Bam gives the driver directions, and within minutes we pull up in front of one of those peculiar Hollywood suburban houses just north of Melrose that once belonged to mildly wealthy white people, and he has the driver park across the street. The neighborhood is now made up of Black and Hispanic families with parents working sixteen hours a day while most of their children run amuck. Out in front of Aunti Christ's house is Ternite himself, laying on the lawn in the fetal position as his aunt kicks him and dumps baggies full of cocaine all over the lawn. We all duck down in the cab. Bam Bam lays flat on the floor, wriggling around our feet.

"Gonna kill the grass," Tommy says knowingly, as he peers out the window. There's white powder all over the front lawn, in the gutter out onto the street which suggests
that she’s been at it for a while and has found Termite’s stash. He sometimes wears a backpack holding hundreds of bagged up grams, and it must have had at least a kilo in there.

No one moves, we stay slumped and watch.

"Christ, she’s gotta be six feet tall; kickin’ the shit out of the poor Vato," Tommy says. Even though more coke is disappearing before our eyes, he sounds a tiny bit pleased that someone else in our crew has troubles. "How long do you think she can keep it up?"

"Ahhh, she does him like this every other time he goes over, but not bad like this, usually. Dope gets her high," says Bam Bam.

"why the fuck does he go?" Alicia, with dual alcoholic parents, left home at fourteen, and can’t imagine willingly hanging out with anyone in her family.

"Misses his brother. He been stayin’ here."

The driver has been studying us in the rear view mirror the whole time, his engine running in case an escape is called for. "Excuse me, but is this it? Are you all gettin’ out?"

"Shhh, just watch," Alicia says.

"The meter’s runnin’," the driver says, lighting a cigarette.

"So, maybe, we get out?" I ask, hoping someone else volunteers.

"That bitch will kick the fuck out of you, don’t try nothin’," Bam Bam says, still on the floor of the cab. "She got my ass twice." He pulls himself up to peer carefully at the house. "And even if we take her on, her husband, look . . . in the window. And he’s worse’n Aunti Christ. Likes baseball bats . . ."

"Who’s he? Uncle Christ?"

"A old dropout gangbanger. Done like six years, twelve years, then fifteen more years in the joint. Met Termite’s aunty at church and married her after the last time he got out. Nothin’ worse like a old gangster gone square. Cranky all the time, dyin’
to fuck some fool up," says Bam Bam. "Homeboys say he gone all the way bad, turned snitch. Call the cops in a heartbeat."

Termite's aunt has stopped hitting him, and seems to have found and dumped all of the cocaine. Her foot is on Termite's neck, pinning him to the ground, and Aunti Christ is breathing heavily. She abruptly sits on him, pulls a cell phone out of an apron pocket and punches in a number.

"Fuck, she's calling 5-0," says Bam Bam. He leans out of the taxi and yells, "Hey, you ol' puta!"

Aunti Christ stands and steps away from Termite, puts one hand on her hip and the other above her eyes and studies us. The second he is free Termite jerks away, doesn't try to get to his feet, just rolls across the lawn, over the sidewalk, bounces into the gutter where he finds his feet and is halfway across the street when Uncle Christ bursts out the front door. He's old, bent over, crooked and gray, using a baseball bat as a cane though he's moving quick, stops for just a second to confer with his wife and then they're both coming at us. Termite hurls himself through the front passenger window screaming, "Go! Go! Go! They're crazy!"

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," the taxi driver mutters, keeping his cool, guns his car and pulls away from the curb with Termite's head in his lap as the mad aunt and uncle reach the cab and the baseball bat cracks the back window. All of us scream, even the driver who loses his cool and floors the gas pedal and we're quickly a block away. I look back to see Aunti Christ chasing us on foot which seems ridiculous. Alicia leans out the window to curse and taunt her until we hit a red light and the old woman is right up to the taxi before the light turns green. Immediately we all collapse back into panic and anxiety, Termite cowers on the floor, praying, and though we pull away, the next light is red and she's still coming. This goes on for three more blocks, a red light on every corner, Aunti Christ in her apron and thick black dress grimly keeps coming and coming, like something out of the Old Testament.
Finally, we catch two green lights in a row and the madwoman is last seen collapsed on a corner two and a half blocks back. Even so, I can see her baleful glare full of hate for . . . us? Her nephew? It doesn't matter, I'm just glad we lost her. Alicia and Bam Bam, still shouting curses out the window, realize it's over and sit back in their seats.

"That was my fucked," Termite says, his voice shaky.

"Why do you go there?" Alicia asks.

"Tomas, my big brother, needs help with the yard, and I stayed for dinner. I miss him."

"Wonderful memories," Tommy says sarcastically. "And I don't care. What I want to know, is why don't you answer your fuckin' phone?"

"Lost it, yesterday."

"And how much dope was that thrown all over the place back there?"

"A lot."

"How fucking much?"

"About three hundred grams." He looks out the window. "And a kilo."

"Oh, fuck me," says Bam Bam.

"Hey, it's not like I planned it."

"No, look behind us."

We turn, expecting to see Termite's aunt with her teeth latched onto the bumper, but it's Uncle Christ on a Vespa scooter, waving his bat, only four car lengths back, shouting something in Spanish. He locks eyes with me, twirls and swings his bat in the air as if he's going to hurl it, but his scooter wobbles and he veers dangerously close to a truck in the bordering lane. Fighting the handlebars, he gets his balance, gooses the gas and pulls closer to the taxi.

"Go! Faster!" shouts Termite, a note of hysteria in his voice, grabbing at the driver's arm. "Get me out of here!"
Chapter 13

An Unorganized & Undignified Clamor

We get on the freeway and the old man’s Vespa can’t keep up. We lose him.

Back at the loft Glitch is using the scale to weigh cocaine and Donna has stacks of small bills all around her. Alicia’s demonstrations of math whizzery has Donna convinced that all it needs is the undertaking of tasks requiring math, that he/she will soon get it, and be indispensable like Alicia; not only a mathematician of note, but also lovely to look at. Horned Donna is pretty in unconventional ways, but lousy at math.

"How much coke is left?" Tommy asks despairingly.

"It’s hard," Glitch says, harried. "There’s all these little fuckers." He’s been weighing one gram at a time. I grab a handful and lay them all on the scale. His mouth drops open, "Ohhhh ..."

"Why the fuck are you weighing them at all? We spent days dividing up that shit," Tommy says, and kicks over the scale. "Just count the fucking grams. They’re grams!" he shouts, losing control.

"He’s jus' tryin’ a help," Donna says.

"Oh, Charles came back. Charles, one a the new dealers," says Glitch.

"And you let him in."

"He brought money," Glitch says, excited. "Says he wants to keep workin’.

"You let him in." Tommy says, enunciating each word while poking Glitch.

"Leave him alone," Donna says, getting in between Tommy and Glitch.

"He gave me a whole box a money, Charles did, for the pound he took."

"Not that much, turns out," Donna says. "After, when I opened the box, was all fives and tens, maybe three hundred dollars. Maybe."

"You let him in," Tommy says sadly, slumping on the couch. "What did he take?"

"We thought he paid up. Took a key."

"A fucking kilo," Alicia says. "He was only supposed to take a pound even if he wasn’t ripping us. He must of been watching the loft and knew it was only you and Glitch
in here."

Donna smooths Glitch's hair, and says, "Yeah."

"God damn it, Donna, I owe ..."

"You owe, we know, quit crying," I say, tired of it.

"Baby, do not worry," Alicia says, for some reason.

"Don't worry? Tell you what: don't call me baby. I'm married."

"Oh, please, you try to fuck me every single chance you get. Lately though, your crying about money has made you extremely unattractive."

"Bitch, shut the fuck up."

"Try to shut me up pussy boy. Give it a try."

Termite and Bam Bam start to clear back furniture, hoping for a fight; but Alicia grabs a shoebox full of grams and climbs up into the loft.

I sit down on the couch and scrounge around for one of Tommy's barely smoked joints. He's lately taken to rolling a giant spliff, hits on it one or two times, then puts it out—more of his conspicuous consumption. While I'm as concerned as any of them over our business problems, I don't feel bad, nor do I really care about the money. To me it's as if we're in a quirky play with excellent actors. The plot is foggy, but I believe in every single one of the characters. Alicia refuses to play her part—women in this milieu either don't like or will ignore a man who finds them worthwhile; or worse yet, will consume him until he's poverty stricken, broken down into his lowest common denominators, or dead—but Alicia's all over the place.

Nonetheless, life is interesting enough to get me out of bed, any time I want, not 6:30 every fucking morning like at Nordstrom's. Those people would view this disorganized drug dealing as a low life hillbilly loss leader, yet I feel relatively god damn content. Each day is different from the day before and the day to come, as opposed to selling clothes or CDs for years on end, which in an arcane manner kills people like me. And I was almost there when Tommy and Alicia came along.
My reverie is interrupted by Tommy yelling at Glitch upon the discovery that we not only have less cocaine, but some of the cash is also missing. Tired of the show, unnoticed, I take the elevator down to the street. The sun is setting and the smog makes a beautiful hazy cast of colors across the skyscrapers and clouds. As I light the roach and inhale, I almost choke—Uncle Christ is across the street. I have a lungful of pot and can't breathe. It looks like he crashed the Vespa into a mailbox because the scooter is laying on the street and the uncle is sitting on the curb, legs akimbo, feet in the gutter, talking on his cell phone. I duck behind a car and watch. The old man is yelling at the phone, giving someone directions. I scurry back into the building and up the elevator coughing out pot smoke. Back in the loft I try to interrupt a full blown shouting match between Alicia, Donna and Tommy. Termite is asleep on the couch, worn out from his thrashing at the hands of his aunty, and Bam Bam is in the upper loft, probably shooting up. Tommy is falling to pieces and ignores me at first.

"It's fucking bullshit; you refuse to understand how fucking much . . . ."

I yell, "Hey! Shut the fuck up," to little effect.

"You shut it. Tired of this shit," Glitch says, trying to stand taller than his 4'9". Tommy pushes him back down. Donna growls.

"Thought you should know Termite's uncle is outside . . . continue your argument."

Termite, instantly awake, rolls off the couch and is on his feet peering out the window. "God damn it! He's on the phone. Gonna get the cops on our ass!"

Tommy sinks to the couch. "This is it. I'm done. It's all over."

"What are you doing? We have to get out of here."

"Really? What about the dope? How are we gonna haul a hundred and fifty pounds of cocaine out the front door?"

"The cops aren't here yet. That crazy old bastard can't arrest us. Let's go. Now!"

Everyone but Tommy bursts into a blizzard of activity, stuffing duffle bags, looking
into every corner for stray keys, bumping into each other. Tommy lights a joint, Alicia shouts instructions.

I sit down on the couch next to Tommy. "You have to pull it together."

"Shoot me. I'm done."

Full of purpose and commanding, Alicia practically barks at us, "Check the bathroom, get all the coke, let's go!"

Tommy gets to his feet, unwilling to be swept up in the evacuation. He goes to the window, then ducks down so quickly he falls on his butt. "Cop car. Shit!"

"How many?"

"Just one, so far." He gets on his knees and peers out the window. "But he's talkin' to that crazy old man. I am ruined."

Frozen in place, no one says a thing, until Alicia shouts, "Grab the god damn duffle bags you faggots! Jesus God, Tommy, get a grip."

"Where the hell are we..."

"You think I'm gonna rent a dope house without an escape route? Upstairs, on top of the bunkbeds, the wall doesn't reach the ceiling. We push all the dope through and climb over ourselves."

"What's over there?" Tommy is literally hopping from foot to foot, new life in him from head to toe.

"Storage for some paper company. They only come by every couple of weeks. The door out of their loft is on the other side of the building on Fourth Street. We can totally get away. Grab the bags, let's go."

All the money and cocaine is crammed into five duffle bags. Tommy searches the room for anything else illegal, saleable or valuable, there isn't much. The TV and CD player will be abandoned. The loft was rented in a false name by Alicia. She's only 23 but right now I consider her a master criminal. If the cops catch us with so much cocaine, serious prison time is likely and I mention it.
him. Uncle Christ is peering up and down the street, he knows we barely got away.

"Can't handcuff Glitch," Donna says, "too skinny."

"What happened?" Alicia asks, "How'd he get left behind?"

"Donna?" I say; let her explain it if she can.

"He's gettin' touchy and shit. From watching you and all your boyfriends here bein' sexy all the time. Gave him big ideas. I didn't want to."

"You ever think about just breaking up with him? Instead of throwing him to the police wolves?"

"I don't know."

"We got most all of the dope, he'll be fine. They've got nothing to charge him with," I say, relaxing, too soon.

The police car, a block back, flares its lights and siren and pulls a U-turn to come after us.

"Ah shit," the driver says. "You are in trouble."

"Dude, not only are the cops going to take your new box of money . . . "

"Ahhh," the driver says, speeding back up a little.

"But they'll also take this . . . give him money," I yell, and our pockets are emptied to the tune of another thousand dollars. One of the duffle bags holds about eighty thousand dollars and Tommy is hugging it.

"Okay? Okay? That's more than two thousand dollars if you at least try to get us out of this."

"There's only one cop car," says Alicia, inveterate optimist and habitual gambler. "Let's go for it."

"I might be able to pull it off," the driver says, and he suddenly throws his taxi in gear and pulls a mad U-turn all at once, mows down a row of paper racks on the sidewalk, turns and hurtles down an alley, clipping a dozen trash cans. The cop car tries the same thing, immediately loses control and slides sideways right into an SUV and we're off,
on the run, free for the moment. Squealing out of the alley onto Los Angles Street, which is one way, he accelerates and makes five lights in a row, but the sixth is red. The driver starts to slow down, but Alicia, sitting in the front seat, lunges over and jams her foot onto the accelerator, the Cadillac jumps and we're halfway through the red light, cars, swerving and honking all around us, everyone screaming; I try to pull Alicia away, the driver is cursing a blue streak and we're almost through the intersection when the biggest city bus I've ever seen clips one of the back fins of the old Cadillac putting us in a mad spin, bouncing the Cadillac into a Mac Truck and then we're over on our side sliding until the cab hits a building. One of the duffle bags is in the street and is hit by another bus, bursting it open spilling twenty pounds of cocaine on the ground and in the air, a huge cloud, enough evidence to convict and put us all in prison forever. The driver is unconscious, but the rest of us are all right, climbing out the windows, abandoning the other duffle bags, even Tommy, and we break in all different directions. I'm just into an alley when I hear a police car, siren wailing, brakes squealing, come to a stop near the overturned taxi, and then there's gunshots. I peer around the corner to see Bam Bam and Termite in a KFC shooting at the cops. I never see them again.
Chapter 14

Menage Faux Pas

Alicia shows up at my house at three in the morning hanging on the front door. She's so resourceful, it's not a big surprise. I let her in, she gives me a quick hug and is in the bathroom without a word to take a long shower. Back in bed I continue watching a local cable news channel. Both Termite and Bam Bam were filmed being shot to death by the police in an alley behind Kentucky Fried Chicken. Horny Donna disappeared completely and is probably a boy by now. Tommy's whereabouts are unknown, and he is vaguely described as a white male with longish hair, armed and dangerous though he's never touched a gun in his life. The police describe Glitch as a severely retarded lackey and victim of the coke dealing gang whose surviving members are currently being sought for questioning and insults; so, I assume Glitch has clammed up and my house is safe.

There is no description or outcry for the arrest of anyone resembling Alicia or me. Uncle and Auntie Christ give incoherent interviews to the TV news reporters and swear to sue every official and police organization in the state for killing their nephew. That he is the one who summoned the police is lost on Termite's aunt and uncle. Different reporters repeatedly ask Auntie Christ how it felt to see her nephew shot to death and her husband finally gets his bat out and that's that.

Alicia crawls into my bed, turns off the TV and fucks me for a couple of hours, a survivor's erotic outpouring. Danger makes for good sex and it's better than anything I've experienced in what feels like a long life. Most of the time she is on top with me inside, moving her body in sweat complicated patterns that cause me to stay hard. When I finally begin to flag Alicia expertly stimulates me with her mouth so that she may continue thoroughly fucking me into a state that justifies life. It's as if I'm being indoctrinated into a singular cult that worships pussy. My mild infatuation for her blooms into love, I think.

After watching TV all night worrying about the consequences of the police stumbling into our loft and halfcocked coke business, I wouldn't have been able to fall asleep by myself. Thanks to the workout and Alicia's ministrations, a pleasant exhaustion claims
me and I actually have a nice dream of a normal life.

Around dawn I'm awakened by Tommy—who has broken into my house—as he crawls into bed on the other side of Alicia. They seem to be fooling around as I doze back off. Alicia has desensitized me to her promiscuity, and the idea that I might possess her is ludicrous. I've known all along that she was screwing Tommy, perhaps in a professional capacity (perhaps not) long before I met the enigmatic wench. My dreams turn strange with the two of them next to me running through the same routine she put me through. I sleep and they fuck in my bed. Though I don't realize it, I've implied a relationship between the three of us.

By the time I wake up, around noon, the news cycle has rotated and our story only takes up a couple of minutes, but it's good news in that the three of us have gone unrecognized, with no manhunt on our trails, or detectives with Asperger's trying to figure us out. As it stands we have two dead, one incarcerated—or more likely institutionalized in a mental hospital—one in the wind, and three safely ensconced in my bed. I think about waking them up with the relatively good news that while we are out of the cocaine business, the police know nothing of us, but Tommy and Alicia are solidly asleep and I'm a little leery of a discussion about the future. In the last three months Alicia has quit whoring and presumably the coke business; I quit the men's haberdashery game and definitely the coke business; and as for Tommy, he's been a lifelong drug dealer, so who knows what he might come up with; and of course, there's the Broken Tony matter.

I've yet to hear how Tommy and Alicia managed to successfully slip away from the taxi crash and KFC shootout. We three owe a debt to Termite and Bam Bam; if they hadn't engaged the police by trying to shoot their way out of the situation there might have been more of a concentrated effort by the cops to cordon off the area and head the rest of us off as we fled the scene. I watched the KFC battle for a few seconds but with the arrival of the fourth and fifth police cars I took off, moving from alley to alley,
blending in with the downtown homeless. Luckily my fashionably torn jeans and worn T-shirt kept me from standing out. Everytime a police car came screaming by or passed anywhere near me, I sat on the curb as if all my hours and days were spent in a Los Angeles gutter. I made it about six blocks from the shoot-out, jumped on a city bus, sat in the far back, slumped down and rode to the end of the line, which happened to be right in front of the Whiskey, in Hollywood. From there it was only a couple of bus transfers until I was back at home in the Valley.

The three of us spend a week secluded in my pad, ordering take-out Chinese food, pizza and submarine sandwiches, watching TV and reading the newspapers. Tommy discovers a weird little crime web site that obsesses over Southern California murder and drug cases and they speculate wildly about our supposed gang, concluding that it was run by the Mexican Mafia and used mentally handicapped kids as runners and street dealers based on police interviews with people who worked at businesses (mostly fast food stores) downtown near our loft. They apparently considered Glitch, Bam Bam and Donna to be mentally disabled fourteen year olds who were being taken advantage of somehow by the alleged gangsters (us!) in the loft; and yet, none of these concerned citizens did anything about it. The people working at KFC served Bam Bam and Termite chicken and soda during the shoot out, and found them both to be polite and mostly coherent. The loft is still bound up in yellow police tape and there's a news story four full days after the taxi debacle showing one of those idiot CSI teams picking up hundreds of cigarette butts. Supposedly they've already collected DNA, fingerprints and made veiled references to South American drug lords.

Alicia is sitting on the couch eating a bucket of KFC chicken, "What about our fingerprints?"

"Well, up until I hooked up with you two, all I did was sell CDs, clothes and candy from door to door. The police and I never had occasion to cross paths. Never got arrested."
No one has ever taken my fingerprints, let alone my DNA."

"Believe it or not, been dealing different kinds of dope, mostly weed, since I was in the tenth grade and I never got collared, picked up or detained, not once, not never. So they don't have my fingerprints anywhere in the system. Lucky as hell up until all this bullshit. Never had any partners get killed, put in a insane asylum . . . or, any of that shit. So, I'm still free and clear, except for, well . . . you know who."

"Yes, we know," Alicia says.

"What about you, honey," I ask Alicia. "Are your fingerprints in any databases?"

"Spare me. I know how to take care of cops. They're a bunch of tricks, bitches, cowards and corrupt one way or another. They almost got me once, but I don't think you boys want to hear about how I slipped out of it."

"I suppose then, we need to think about what to do now. We can't hide in here for the rest of our lives." I'm looking at Tommy, who's sitting right next to me rolling yet another joint. He's been chain smoking weed and is the main reason none of us have left the house. He's afraid. His wife, Francine, didn't help, and took a lot of the heart out of him. Even though Tommy was nearly hysterical with fear that first day following the taxi crash and loss of the cocaine, knowing that Broken Tony might have been at his house; Tommy, still loyal to Francine, took a taxi out of downtown straight to his house in the Valley to pick her up, thinking they might escape the catastrophe together to Hawaii or Alaska (he was also hoping that at least half the kilo he'd stashed at the house would be there to finance their getaway. But she was gone. Francine had not only taken all of Tommy's cash and cocaine, she'd absconded with the TV, stereo, washer/dryer, most of the furniture and didn't even leave a note. Fucking crazy Francine started all of this thanks to her insatiable appetite for drugs and rabid pot smoking pushing Tommy into the coke business, whereupon she immediately began inhaling clouds of cocaine so big they'd block out the sun.
I ask Tommy, "Do you still love her?"

"I have no idea." He hands me the joint.

Alicia pushes down with her butt to sit in between us on the couch. "I don't know about you'all, but this is a sweet situation for me."

The doorbell rings and all three of us freeze.

"Who the fuck is that?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

"Ignore it," Tommy says, and he's beyond pale.

The bell rings again and again.

"Christ," Alicia gets up off the couch, "this is ridiculous, I'll get it."

"No!" Tommy is up after her but she's to the door, and it's open.

"Hi, have you heard the good news?"

"What? The news, I wasn't on the news."

"I'm talking about Jesus Christ. He loves you!" It's door to door God salesmen.

Three of them, all around 20 and impossibly fresh faced, in cheap generic suits, bothering people.

"I reject your God," Alicia says, "begone!" and she goes to slam the door, but one of the three nearly identical white kids literally has his foot in the door.

"But our lord Jesus Christ sent us with his message. Please, just give me a minute. He loves you."

"Me? He just killed two of my friends."

"Alicia, shut up."

"All right, I was just kidding. How about, he tortured and killed his favorite son, willy nilly, to make some obscure point. Had the locals nail him to a cross. Did your god love that son?"

"Christ? Of course." This is more repartee than the young evangelicals are used to.
"I have experience with that kind of mysterious love. No thank you very much."

"Yes, but god loves all . . . ."

"It's too much love, it's dangerous, take it somewhere else. This is your last warning"

"But sister . . . ."

"Don't sister me you little bitch, get out of here before I call the police; or, I'll call your god and have him kill you, 'cause that's what he likes to do," Alicia says, while poking him in the chest. "He'll prove he loves you by torturing and killing you," and she pokes him out the door, slams it in his confused and god sotted face, then yells, "God bless you, brother!"

Tommy and I are nonplussed, a little entertained after being stuck in the house for so long. "If it wasn't for you guys I would have turned him out."

I'm not sure what she means by that, but it sounds interesting and is probably biblical.

Tommy and I are both fucking Alicia daily, and she enjoys the situation from stem to stern, and he is on the rebound and possibly getting a little too serious. One night, when Alicia was especially drunk and randy, she coaxed both of us into bed for sex at the same time, something I'd done with two girls, but this was a lot more dangerous to my sense of self and sexuality. I never kissed Tommy or did any of the other things Alicia casually suggested, but at a complicated point, dicks did touch and well . . . it's a weird scene. I don't believe that any sort of romance or physical acts with Tommy or any men is in the cards for me, but for the time being sharing Alicia is odd . . . it's all right. The sex is narcotic and though I may have to eventually quit, while it's available I'm going to indulge.

As far as cash on hand, we've got about two thousand dollars, but the rent alone
on my place is fifteen hundred a month, so we’ve got to leave the house, go out into
the world, and work or steal or come up with some scheme. Given our various pasts and
credentials, who knows what we might collaborate on. I don’t mention the money buried
in my backyard, I want to see how things play out before I get too generous. We’re
watching "Being John Malkovich" for the fourth time in as many days when Alicia cracks
up a little.

"I need to get out of here, I don’t care what happens."

"You know that . . ."

"Do not mention Broken Tony. I’m tired of that subject. Mention a plan for dealing
with it if you can think of one, but we can’t stay here forever eating this godawful
food."

"And the rent has to be paid."

"Don’t look at me," Alicia says, "I’m done with that."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"God," Tommy says, "she thinks we want her to sell pussy."

"What kind of men have you been hanging out with?"

"She doesn’t know us too well. Startin’ to remind me of Francine."

"Oh, come on," Alicia half laughs, "that’s insulting."

"Not as insulting as calling Hazikiah a pimp."

"She’s calling you a pimp too."

"Okay, drop it." She puts her arms around both our shoulders. "I misunderstood.
I’m a bad person. So how are we going to make some money?"

"I can get a job," I say.

"But Nezzy, you hated working at those places."

"The CD store wasn’t too bad."

"At minimum wage," Tommy says, appalled.

"I’m going out today, to take the lay of the land."
"Not me. I'm staying here, for a while longer," Tommy says, sucking on his joint as if it will solve something. "A long while."

"I'm going to the store and maybe go track down one of those assholes who ripped us," Alicia says. "They owe us big time."

"Don't go anywhere near downtown, or Hollywood, just don't. Broken Tony's got people all over Hollywood and downtown."

I have no intention of getting a job. I'm going to try and get Tommy and Alicia out of the house, dig up my money and see how much there actually is; it's a minimum of $300,000, maybe a lot more. There was a hell of a lot more until I put $200,000 into that last stupid coke deal. I want to pretend I have a job, so I can show up with rent and food money out of my stash. Alicia starts going out every day, but Tommy won't leave the house.

So, I decide to stop by to talk to my sister, Naruda, hoping she might have a little of the money I gave her left. She opens the door, grabs me and hugs me and then slaps my face hard.

"You son of a bitch, I thought you were . . . I don't know what I thought. I saw your weird little friends on TV."

"How did you know . . . ."

"Bam Bam? Termite? How many people do you think have names like that. Why didn't you call me?"

"I've been at my house. You could have come . . . ."

"And get caught up in a police shootout or giant cocaine bust?"

"All right, I'm here now, it's all over with "those people" as you call them." I'm surprisingly upset over someone talking disparagingly about Termite and Bam Bam.

"Thank God, that bitch was the worst."

"Oh, Alicia, she's still around."

"Around?" She looks over my shoulder, pulls me into the house and looks out the
"Are you serious? She's not literally around. Around my life."

"Hey, I have kids. Your friends are wanted criminals. She's a wanted criminal."

"So am I."

"She's a whore."

"It's overly complicated."

"Try to explain."

"The sex is so good . . . ."

"Gross, stop, never mind. God, what happened to you? You were always, I guess, on track to do stupid things . . . ."

"Thank you, so much."

"I'm sorry. It's like you were my friend. One of my best friends. Then, right when I needed you most, after mom . . . you go off the rails. Start hanging out with these people. Oh, and what about Tommy? I heard about that stupid bitch Francine. Is he all right?"

"He's staying with me right now."

"You, Tommy and . . . ."

"Alicia, her name is Alicia. I wish, for right now, you'd give me a little bit of respect and not call her a whore or anything else, okay?"

"Alright, I guess. Can I do it one more time?"

"One more time, sure, knock yourself out."

"She's a fucking whore, what are you doing?"

"I really like her."

"I'm so happy for you."

"You are so much like her it's almost disturbing."

"Now I'm not happy for you."

"Change of subject."
"Thank God."

"Do you have any of that money left?"

"Oh, hell no. Car payments, kid clothes, food, we have a great cable package now, thanks to you."

"Glad to help, really."

"Orson had to go to a special kid dentist, got my hair done at a nice place for once, Joe’s psych wanted money . . . ."

"Joe’s seeing a psychiatrist?"

"Thanks to your money. I’m sorry, it’s all gone."

"Jesus, sounds like you need more. Why is Joe seeing a psychiatrist?"

"He’s depressed about the work situation. Feels emasculated. You know."

"Why would I know?"

"Well, you’re obviously overcompensating by doing dangerous shit, going out with oversexed . . . women. Not whores."

"It’s a theory. Instead of a psychiatrist, tell him to try pot."

"Really? You never know. Get some from Tommy for me. And tell him I’m sorry about Francine. He’s a goofball, but he still deserves better than her. And I’m serious too, about you. Trying to fill a hole or make yourself feel better. It was going on long before mom died, which made it worse. You were doing half-assed okay at college, almost being normal, but practically from the day you got kicked out it’s been a long, slow slide into whatever the hell is going on now."

"Thanks doc. I’ll be in touch. Tell the kids I love them."

"You tell them. Come over this weekend. Don’t tell Joe you gave me that money. I told him I won it on a lottery scratcher. And bring him some pot. Make it a guy thing, like I don’t know."

"Sweet and devious, like this whore I know."

"What . . . ever," Naruda says, the eternal Valley Girl.
Chapter 15
Thy Name is Misery

My house is only a mile away but I'm not up to walking anywhere, and don't feel like seeing or talking to Tommy and Alicia. Defending Alicia from any rational perspective was difficult, luckily Neruda stopped me after my one and only talking point, sex. The house directly across the street from my sister's house has a lot of flyers on the porch and hanging from the front door knob, so I figure that the people who live there are out of town or dead; morbid ideas come easily to me. There's a big cushioned swing on the front porch and I slump down in it and wish I had a house with a porch and a swing, and a family. Cascading down into familiar depressed territory, I'm thinking myself into a new low point. After spending the afternoon in Neruda's house full of life, kid's stuff, talking about family and hearing the concern in her voice and her blunt theories about the wayward track I'm rambling down, I see the last few months of my life in an even harsher light. It hurts. Bam Bam and Termite were by no means people I'd willingly hang out with if sane decisions were being made or if the future meant anything to me, but they were people and had certain good qualities; most notably, they were loyal and honest. Either of them could have ripped me off for relatively astonishing amounts of money given their stations in life and circumstances overall. It's downright inspiring how much trust I eventually had for them. Six other motherfuckers from their world and part of town ripped us immediately, reflexively as if we were a natural resource that needed harvesting. And Glitch, in the end, had so much integrity that he went completely mum and got locked up rather than betray his street code by giving us up. Bam Bam and his little crew were odd and unique, but unusually good individuals, people the likes of which I'll never come into contact with again. After the cataclysmic end of our association, it behooves me to make sure I never have business partners like that again.
I'm guiltily relieved that they've been so neatly excised from my life, with little damage to me. Actually, other than recognizing that they had integrity in their druggy world and had real worth as partners in an illegal enterprise, while they were around I didn't understand anything about them, and am only now seeing Bam Bam, Glitch, Horny Donna and Termite as human beings. I used them to make substantial amounts of money like white men use disenfranchised peoples all over the world. Guilt makes me worry about consequence, bad karma, and that there's some way I'll be tracked down and charged for ... for what? All the cocaine in that crashed Cadillac taxi? As Alicia has explained to me numerous times, the authorities don't need evidence; the police manufacture whatever evidence or witnesses is needed to convict people they consider guilty every single day, just like on TV. So if they think I am some sort of slaver who specializes in retarded 14 year olds, the cops will come up with the evidence and it will be all over for me. There were probably video cameras covering the downtown area that show me consorting with the dead little Mexicans, and God knows what kind of twisted dark miracles they can pull off with DNA and magical CSI machines these days. I'm wracked with paranoia, worrying about all the clues I left behind that will lead LAPD to my house.

When Joe pulls up across the street in the family VW van, I feel so guilty and cornered that I freeze completely. Though I'm partially blocked by some bushes, I can see Neruda's house and watch their kids pile out of the van with their father. They have four sons and my sister has tried to carry on our family tradition of uniquely named children; and so, we have Swan 10, Orson 8, Dred 5, and Confucious 3. For a guy seeing a psychiatrist about emasculation problems, he looks carefree and about as lucky a man as exists on the planet. The smaller kids are literally climbing him, laughing and carrying on as if they are all skinny millionaires. Neruda is out the door and in Joe's arms causing their children to mock and dance around them creating a little festival celebrating their own precious family. Neruda lets Dred and Confucious pull her down
on the front lawn and they wrestle around for a minute like drunk puppies. Joe goes back to the car for a brown paper bag. In my world it would be full of cocaine or weed. But in their sweet domestic world it has groceries, including a box of popsicles and the whole family lays back on the lawn after dad issues them strawberry popsicles. Hidden across the street all by myself, I want one of those popsicles so badly that if I allowed myself I could easily burst into tears. Neruda is right about everything. I should never come near her house or her children. As soon as I can dig my money up out of the backyard I'm going to find a way to get most of it to Joe. We'll come up with a plan to help him explain it to Neruda that will shore up his masculinity. Maybe I can help Joe start his own business or . . . no, if I hang out with him too much Broken Tony will show up or Alicia will seduce him. I'll get Joe as much money as possible, without pulling him into my dark sphere.

Neruda is a genius of life. I am a failure. There's an awful, dull pain in my forehead, like I need to cry for a few hours or flagellate my soul. My sister was being nice when she described my situation, it's far worse. As I spy on her inhumanly happy family it's plain that I have not lived a real life since I moved out of our family's house at eighteen to go to college. I am drawn to the domestic scene across the street, but know that I would taint the happiness they've built. No matter how rock solid their home might be, my presence will in some way corrupt it. For I am nothing, and that vacuum sucks out warmth. Content to see that my little sister is completely successful at life, I settle in the swing. One of the kids has just come out of the house with a kite that Joe is probably going to put together, when the cops pull up.
Almost Stun Machined

"Sir, excuse me. Hey You, on the porch! Don't ignore me. Please step out here with your hands held out."

I try to shrink, to disappear. But the two cops step into the yard and approach me.

"Please stand, and approach us with your hands in plain sight."

I look across the street and there's the whole Hill family clustered together, Joe's arm is around Neruda and the kids are behind them, peering at the disruptive element, me. Blood rushes to my head and my vision fades for a second; fainting isn't out of the question. Stepping down off the porch I suppose I staggered in their direction, because both cops quickly take a step back, and one pulls out a whirring device, one of those infernal stun machines.

"Get out here on the street," one of the cops orders, and the authority in his voice clears my head and I make it out into the middle of the lawn.

"You look familiar," the cop says.

"No I don't."

"Hezikiah?" Joe calls out from across the street.

"Yes," I say, resigned.

"You know this man?" The cop with the stun gun shuts its down.

"Yes officer, it's my brother," Neruda says, pretending she didn't realize I was in the country. "What is happening?" she asks me.

"I was sitting on the porch ... resting, I guess."

The cops aren't impressed. "The neighbors called, they're watching the house while the owners are out of town. They thought he was a burglar."

"A burglar sitting on the porch?" I regret it as soon as it's out of my mouth. I don't need the police focusing on me.

"Maybe you were trying out the swing before you stole it, wise guy. You're trespassing at least."
Neruda quickly crosses the street, takes my arm and pulls me back over towards her house. "I know the Jensens, officer, it's their house. I'll take responsibility for my brother. He's eccentric, but harmless."

The cops grumble a little and one toys with his stun gun, looking at Joe and the kids to see if a jolt might benefit one of them. Finally the cops decamp, get in their car and are off to harass someone else.

"Honey, do you want to stay for dinner?" Neruda has my arm in a viselike grip.

"Stay, stay, stay," chants Dred and Confucious, pulling on my clothes like beggars. Swan punches me in the arm and says, "Come on Uncle Hezekiah, we haven't seen you in, like, forever. You owe me."

I don't know what he's talking about, but there's no way out of this.
Chapter 17

Dead or All Maimed

Alicia is out shopping for groceries. Broken Tony, who likes the big glass bottles of chocolate milk they have at Whole Foods, sees her in the parking lot and follows Alicia back to my house. We’re having tuna fish sandwiches when Broken Tony walks right in the front door, doesn’t bother to knock, and sits down at the dining room table. Tommy and I, like rabbits sighting a cougar, don’t even twitch. Alicia, afraid of nothing, smiles.

“Hey, Tony, where’ve you been?”

“Nowhere. Can you get me a glass?” Tony asks, motioning to Alicia as if she is a waitress. She doesn’t ordinarily serve any of us, but Tony’s appearance is so surreal that Alicia gets him a glass. He pulls a big bottle of chocolate milk out of his bag—which makes Tommy flinch—and pours himself a glass.

Tommy’s mouth is half open, I can see a piece of his tuna sandwich. He’s been staying in, getting no sun the last four or five weeks, so it’s hard to tell if he’s gone pale; he’s definitely not breathing.

“Nice little setup heah."

“Thank you,” I say.

“We’re thinking about fixing it up,” Alicia says.

“Some art, maybe. I need more bookshelves.”

“Yeah, I seen all the books. What’s up with that?”

Tommy tries to say something mush-mouthed through his tuna, which he can’t swallow because his mouth is completely dry, so he spits it out.

“Here, have some chocolate milk,” says Tony

“Are you gonna kill me?”

“Oh, God,” Tony says, and takes a big drink.

“Maim me? Is that it? You’re gonna maim me?” Tommy’s on his feet, looking a little wild.
"Whoa whoa, sit the fuck down, relax. How the fuck am I gonna get my money if you're dead or all maimed."

"How indeed," I say.

"My organs? Don't sell my organs."

"Jesus Christ, you watch too much TV. People are always leavin' town cause they watch too much god damn TV. Do not leave town over this."

"I won't. I won't. I just thought . . ."

"And don't think. I saw what happened to the little gangsters what worked for you and I figured, that money for you right now is tight. I woulda tracked you down sooner, but I wanted to see how it all played out. That one little faggot motherfucker they caught held his mum I guess; huh?"

"I guess. We guess. He must of."

"And them other two. At KFC. Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Like they was in Somalia or Compton."

"So, what . . ."

"We renegotiate. Most of the coke ended up all over the street downtown. Coulda been worse. Your crew wasn't no snitches . . ."

"And I didn't snitch!" Tommy says eagerly.

"Don't interrupt me. And why would you snitch? Why bring that up? Is it a option, in your mind?"

"No, no, no . . ."

"Tommy, shut up, let the man talk," says Alicia.

"Listen to the lady. So . . ." he guzzles chocolate milk, wipes his face. "You take a loss, I take a loss; just pay me the cost of the coke."

"Where am I going to get nine million dollars?"

"What the fuck are you talkin' about? Nine million? What the hell . . ." Tony looks alarmed for just a second, that he'd lost track of millions of dollars.
Tommy, hypnotized by fear and confused by Alicia’s extrapolations over the last few months, forgot the original figures.

"Tommy, please, shut up," Alicia says, and turns to Tony. "I convinced them that if we broke all the kilos down into grams . . ."

"A hundred kilos in grams?"

"I was sort of messing with them."

"Broads," Tony says. "I only paid a hundred thousand for that shit."

"And charged me six hundred thousand?"

"Hey, your accountant heah had you makin’ millions with it. I wouldn’t a never front you somethin’ worth even a quarter million."

"Let me get this straight. I give you a hundred thousand dollars and we’re square," I say.

"Until the next deal."

"I can come up with that," I say. Tommy and Alicia give me complicated looks.

"You got a month."

"But no more deals, I’m done," I turn to Tommy and he shrugs.

Broken Tony pulls out another bottle of chocolate milk. "Uh, we’ll see. Let’s drink on it."

With a big grin Tommy jumps to his feet to get us all glasses.
Chapter 18

Robbing Myself

"I got into this ... because of clarity ... nothing seemed authentic or engaged me. But that's not important I guess ... it's how I got the money to get into, or rather out of my old life that ... took me off the tracks. It was right around when I met you Alicia, and exactly when we got together Tommy. I mean, this time around, not in high school, obviously; that was probably, God, twenty years ago? I can't believe it ... so long ago ... That doesn't matter. The thing is, I decided I had to make some money. Well, I was making money at Nordstrom's, but ... it was sickening; an endless soul crushing waste of my life. Might of stayed there forever, but I was tripping over my own passing away, it was a bad, bad time. Didn't consider killing myself; suicide was cheery next to my state of mind. To tell you the truth I was freaking out. Started smoking weed, thank you very much Tommy. Called an escort service, yep, that's how me and Alicia met. I didn't tell you, I was embarrassed. But I'm glad we met, Alicia ... and yet, I was in flux, nothing was the same even before that day, the job, selling clothes to those people. I had to do something, anything to shake things up; to like, rearrange the atoms in my head. There was this searing, mean loneliness every waking moment, and in my dreams too. I didn't have any friends, none—that's probably why I got along so well with all those little drug dealing weirdos. All that trouble and being with Termites and the whole crew was better than being suited up at Nordstrom's. Clarity, that all I ever wanted, for things around me to come into focus, make a little sense. That fucking job. Wearing a suit every single day, strangling me. A death suit. You know what I'm sayin'?"

Alicia and Tommy are sitting on the couch smoking a joint. "No idea," Alicia says. "Is this like a manifesto or proclamation?"

"I'm just trying to explain, the circumstances, the place I was in, when I decided to make some money and get out of the rut I fell into after my mom died. My head was
so fucked up. I'm trying to make you guys understand."

"Seriously," Tommy says, "the opposite is happening. I get that you were depressed. Other than that . . ."

"Spit it out, "Alicia says, "whatever you're trying to say, do it in one sentence. One short sentence. If you can manage."

"I wanted to shake things up, a lot, and figured money would free me and I saw this true crime show on TV—got me to thinking . . ."

"Quit thinking, god damn it. Tommy, do you have any idea, what the fuck?"

"Yeah, I know what happened, I was there; Beziliah took some of his savings and put it in the cocaine biz. So? What's that got to do with paying Tony off?"

"That wasn't my money from Nordstrom's. That first day you came over to my house with weed, money was laying all over the place . . . remember?"

"Sure, right, whatever . . ."

"I robbed a bank, earlier, and you talked me into investing it in cocaine."

"I didn't talk you into anything . . ." Tommy takes the joint out of his mouth.

"Robbed a bank? Bullshit. You were making big bucks at that store."

"And you figured I always had stacks of money laying around?"

"What I figured . . . you musta sold a lot of Italian shoes or belts and got a big bonus or commission. How the fuck am I supposed to know?"

"I'm telling you how. About an hour before you came over that day, I robbed a bank."

"Baby, is that right?" Alicia is looking at me in a way that's disquieting. "How much did you get?"

"Not much, like, Christ, I can't remember."

"How fuckin' much," Tommy demands.

"About ten thousand dollars."

"It's not great. Not terrible," Alicia says.

"And so . . . what?" Tommy slumps. "That's your plan to pay Tony, Broken fuckin'
Tony? God, you told him we were going to pay him. You only got ten thousand at one bank, so that’s, uhh . . .”

“Ten banks,” Alicia says, “Christ, Tommy, are you pretending to be math challenged? Still, I don’t know much, but if you want to rob a bank for the kind of money we need for Broken Tony, you’re gonna have to do a whole takeover deal, with guns, put everybody in the bank on the floor. Razikish, you probably hit one teller and then ran away, in like one minute, huh?”

“Exactly, except it was more like thirty seconds.”

“I’m not robbing any banks. My nerves are shot,” Tommy says.

Alicia pulls me down on the couch, and says, “What are you thinking?” She nuzzles my neck as if trying to find the new scent of bank robber on me. I like it.

“I’ve got a method, I can get at least twenty-five thousand a shot and I’ll do it by myself.”

“All right,” Tommy says, “What’s the catch?”

“I’m in,” Alicia says.

“No catch, we got in this mess together; I’m going to pay him off and end it. And I don’t need any help.”

“All right.”

“Bullshit,” Alicia drawls. “You need a driver and a lookout. I know where to get a gun.”

“See, that’s why I’m going alone. No fucking guns for starters. And I don’t use a car, I take the bus.”

“Oh, yeah, fucking tricky,” Alicia says, while giving me a proprietary hug.

It’s the best lying I’ve ever done in my life. I don’t have an end game in mind. Paying off Broken Tony and getting Joe and Nezuda a good chunk of cash are my immediate goals. To get Tommy and Alicia nominally involved (and more importantly out of the house)
I send them on missions, casing various downtown banks, like I did on those two banks (one successful robbery/one not so much). While they are off sussing out my potential targets, I insist that they travel by city bus in order to look like normal folk. Tommy and Alicia defer to me as the expert, and it's worth mentioning that Alicia's change in attitude towards me is significant, almost respectful, since I've presumably turned us into a gang of bank robbers. Though Tommy grumbles and predicts mishaps, Alicia forces him onto the bus, giving me time to dig up the money in my backyard.

The ground is soft, but muddy after three days of rain. It's a mess and takes longer than I'd planned. Luckily Alicia is taking her role seriously and stakes out the bank for hours—noting the comings and goings of armored trucks and bank employees. She calls me twice with updates as I'm digging away, getting pissed and muddy. Finally I pull up the dirty duffle bag, take it into the house to count my ill-gotten loot.

There's $469,000; and in the bottom of the duffle bag, covered by money, is maybe a half pound of cocaine. I had no idea it was in there; though given the chaos and pervasive lack of accounting during our short-lived cocaine empire, it's no surprise. I put the money up in my attic, flush the cocaine down the toilet and take a shower. Alicia calls again and I realize they're not going to be back for hours. So I crawl back up into the attic and take down some of the money and call Joe.

"Hazikiah, God I'm glad you called. You coming this Sunday, for dinner?"

"Maybe, I wanted to talk to you about some business ideas."

"Not on the phone, meet me at McDonald's on Woodman Ave. in twenty minutes." And he hangs up. Very mysterious. I don't want any more mystery. But Joe is a good guy, almost always levelheaded, not to mention my brother-in-law.

Joe is already in a booth when I arrive, he and the three year old Confucious are sharing a huge bag of French fries that they are dipping into a small lake of ketchup. Joe waves me over and motions at the French fries, though when I take one Confucious gives me a big-eyed glare, which he can't hold as it takes his focus off the fries. He
cocks an arm around the greasy bag and continues eating.

"So, Joe, what's up?"

"You said business, and I didn't think it was a good idea to talk about it on the phone."

"What? Why?"

"I don't know, didn't your partner, Tommy Stillwell, have some problems with the cops? Some kind of bust?"

"Fuck no! Where are you getting this? Should the kid be listening?"

"Not to the cursing, but, he doesn't understand much. He's only three, he's busy."

Confucious is single-mindedly, mechanically, grabbing, dipping, and devouring the French fries, only paying attention to us if our hands get too close to the food. "We don't get out much these days, so Naruda is a recreational gossip, on the phone constantly talking to her old high school girlfriends and they all know about the adventures of Tommy and Francine Stillwell. He's at the center of a lot of talk. Francine is bad-mouthing him all over town."

"All right."

"So, I figure, you guys are in the weed and coke business..."

"Yeah, well, the weed business died before I came on the scene, and the coke business is a mess."

"I thought that was the business you wanted to talk to me about. I'm between situations right now..."

"Yes, I know, it's all over town."

"Very humorous. So, maybe, I can sell coke or..."

"Hell no! I practically shout, disrupting the restaurant, though it doesn't bother Confucious at all."

"Jesus, wow..."

"Since you know too much, already, I'll tell you this... I have a good sum of
money that no one knows about, and I was thinking we could start a legit business
together, maybe. No one can know."

"No drugs?"

I glance at Confucius and he's staring at me; doesn't like my tone of voice with
his father I suppose. He's probably still hungry; I don't know. We're related, but I
don't understand little kids.

"I'm going to give you $5,000 to get things started."

"I can't take your money."

"Use it to explore our options, find a business, or, god damn it, I don't know.
I don't feel like lying. I'm lying to everybody." I'm thinking about spilling it all out
to Joe. He's easy to talk to. My sister loves him. It may be too much; selfish of me
to unload on him. He might need someone to talk to himself, besides a psychiatrist. "What
the hell happened to you, anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your job, your career; why did you go to college?"

"What happened to me is the same crap that happened to everyone; real estate was
booming, houses and commercial structures springing up everywhere; then, it all crashed,
the firm I worked for went bust. Here I am keeping my youngest son alive with french
fries, begging my brother-in-law for a job dealing dope, and I can't even get that."

"You've got everything, man. Neruda loves you. I saw those kids and you and the
popsicles." Those popsicles choke me up again. "You've got it all."

"I know, theoretically; except for money to support my wife and feed my kids and
pay the rent, our payments, doctor bills . . ."

"Stop. Neruda ran it all down for me."

"Not all, it's endless."

"How much to get through the next couple of months."

"I don't know."
"Figure it out. I've got . . . I'm going to tell you something that no one in the world knows. Not Tommy or the woman I'm living with . . ."

"Alicia?"

"How'd you know?"

"She must be hot, your sister hates her."

"Here it is. I have nearly $500,000 and I want to put it somewhere. Start a business maybe. Help you guys out. Kapesh?"

"Business? What kind?"

"I don't fucking know."

"What do you like to do?"

"What?"

"I became an architect because I like to design and draw. I'm fascinated by all the different structures in the world. What do you like?"

"Nothing. Music, reading, not much else."

"That's tough. Two businesses that have gone out of business unless you're a musician or a writer."

"Not me. There's got to be something we can do that doesn't include gangsters or cops."

"What about your sister?"

"Tell her, don't tell her . . ."

"I don't know what to do."

"Aren't you guys getting along?"

"She's literally the perfect wife and mother."

"I know, it's almost disgusting."

"Right. I mean, it makes everything about my failings, worse. If she was a bitch, I wouldn't mind being unemployed so much. I love hanging out with the kids while she's at work."
"Working? She didn’t tell me that. Where?"

"A waitress at International House of Pancakes."

"IHOP! Why did you people go to college?"

"The craziest thing is that she makes a fortune. All these old people spend hours there and they know everything about her life, about me and the kids. They tip her like millionaires instead of seniors at death’s door on a fixed income. She takes the kids in to work sometimes. Confucious is a grifter. All he eats is fast food crap. The kids act like everything is fine. I can’t imagine doing this with any other woman. Naruda and I have been together practically since she was a teenager."

"She was a teenager. And I know all this. I get it. You have a great wife. Good kids. Wonderful marriage . . . and you’re miserable."

"Unemployment. Food stamps. What a nightmare."

Confucious taps me on the arm. "They’re gone," he says, pointing at the greasy french fry bag.

"He’s working you, like the old folks at IHOP. Give me the money. I’m going to do some research. We’ll find a business."

That afternoon I pull $35,000 out of the attic. I’ll give $10,000 more to Joe, call it seed money. I go down to my mom’s house, which is still full of her stuff. The yard is a little ragged. I don’t understand why the landlord hasn’t dealt with it. I still have a key, so I go in and hide $25,000 under a loose floorboard in my old bedroom. I sit on my mom’s bed and pick through her books, wishing I had another chance to make her proud. I hope God believes in her, though I know he doesn’t believe in me. As I come out, Mrs. Robinson, the neighbor across the street, says hey to me as if I’d never left.

I get up at dawn, so I can leave without a bunch of questions from Tommy or Alicia. I creep up into the attic for another $25,000 and stuff it in my backpack. The bus ride
is nerve-racking. I clutch my backpack with both arms and keep my eye on every dude who looks like he might be light-fingered and fleet-footed. Getting off the bus downtown, I end up at the Los Angeles public library and read magazines until three and then bus it back home. I stop at Alicia's favorite Chinese joint and get the works.

"Hey! Chow, who's hungry?" Tommy and Alicia are playing a bloody video game and ignore me completely; so, I set up the food in the living room. Unable to catch their attention with sarcastic comments, I dump the money on the floor in front of the TV. Tommy tosses the video game controls to the side.

"That's what I'm talkin' about. Where'd you go? Why didn't you tell us? How much is there? You seriously robbed a bank? You all right?"

I figure the less said the better. If you don't lie or even talk you can't get caught saying something wrong or inconsistent.

Alicia picks up a bundle. Whirs her fingers through it. Picks up another and quickly counts the bills, then counts the packets. "Probably $25,000. You are very handsome." She rubs one of the packets on her crotch. "Let's keep one. Tommy, go give the rest to that mean old Tony Broken. I want to see if Hezekiah's penis got hurt in the robbery."
Chapter 19

Lying & Faking & Library Cards

For three weeks I pull off a fake bank robbery every Friday. After each one, Alicia showers me with her version of affection, a base composition of lust and an ominous adoration. It's unsettling, yet satisfies my physical longing for her. Once my lamentable needs are dealt with, she looks down on me and licks her chops like a temporarily sated attack dog stuck between love and death. Alicia is beautiful, but it's that complex mind and personality that lures me in. She's not bad, but the lack of goodness flows through every inch of her flesh, lights her eyes and causes her body to arch in pleasantly disturbing ways. I choose to stay with her. I was going to say I choose to be with her, but that is misleading; even in the middle of sex, the notion that I will be cast off and deserted is never set aside. In another time and gender she would have been a sultan or warlord commanding those around her with a flick of the wrist or slight nod. Years down the line when I'm old and sexless, an abandoned celibate—my memories of these months with Alicia will be a consolation. The older salesmen at Nordstrom's often expressed an uncontrollable regret over sexual opportunities they cavalierly passed up as arrogant young men blind to their mortality. With the banquet laid before me, I plan to work out as many jejune male fantasies as possible. Watching Tommy fuck Alicia isn't one of those fantasies, but it is interesting. And when the inevitable gaggle of Alicia's stripper or hooker comrades drop by our place to mooch coke, love or cash, I've had a few of the menages featured in my youthful fantasies. Alicia, not a student of the male psyche so much as a tenured professor, notes and diagnoses the attention I give one of her slutty friends, then, with no effort on my part, the three of us are in my bed naked. Alicia receives most of the attention during these trysts, but at some time during the night, both women vigorously give me their all. The weird thing about her friends is that they all seem willfully stupid. If I met one of them at a nightclub or (more likely) in a
dark alley, a conversation would derail any intercourse or further doings. At thirty-six I am still a typically shallow man drawn by beauty, but I'm ten years past the time where a woman who says stupid things interests me. I wonder why Alicia's friends are so uniformly unintelligent.

"Your friends are pretty dumb."

"Friendly acquaintances . . . you're my only friend. And Tommy."

I'm strangely touched. "Nevertheless, none of your acquaintances, from your previous job . . ."

"Whoredom."

"Your, weird word, not mine. But you get my point?"

"You have to be pretty stupid to become a whore. A lot of them believe that they should have sex for money to give to a man because he loves her so much."

"What happened with you?"

"Why am I being interrogated? What's wrong with you?"

I have no idea. Regardless of how Alicia became the woman she now is, her intelligence is attractive but cumbersome. At the third fake robbery, unbeknownst to me, she grew skeptical of my version of events. That I came back with exactly $25,000 each time is suspicious to her. I'm not a good liar or criminal genius, especially when it comes to tricking an actual criminal like her.

For a lethargic, unemployed ex-drug dealer I'm engaged in too many odd secretive things: Funneling money to both Joe and Neruda, each of whom insist that the other not know. I'm paying all the bills to my mom's house even though no one is living there. I've enrolled in UCLA, and though once again the end game isn't clear, I've signed up for the classes necessary to get the degree denied me thirteen years ago. I haven't attended a single class; and I'm hesitant to tell anyone

The most obnoxious of my secrets is undertaken every Friday. Living the lie completely, I came up with Friday because that's when the banks have the most Money,
cashing paychecks and taking in weekly money from local businesses. Late Thursday night I sneak up into the attic to pull out $35,000, and worry about the shrinking pile of money. Even though I tell myself I don't care for or want money, it's easy to get used to having a huge cash cushion in this life. As always, early Friday morning (I leave early in order to avoid Alicia who is bringing increasing pressure to join me on the alleged bank robberies), backpacked and hopped up on coffee, I catch the bus downtown to the library. The first couple of weeks, carrying around such a large amount of money made me keep the backpack either clutched to my chest or strapped firmly to my back.

Laziness, in my habits and life, has always been a problem. Thinking, (or more properly not thinking enough) that I'm invulnerable to mishap on today's mission, I leave my backpack on the table as I go to get some more magazines. A clue to my inability to focus or keep my eye on the ball, I'm sitting for ten minutes, reading the latest issue of Psychology Today, before a slow to react observer in my subconscious raises the alarm: my backpack isn't on the table where I left it. I almost tip over backwards in my chair trying to move and look under the table. It's not there or anywhere else in the immediate vicinity. The library is a big cluttered place where the line of sight is continuously thwarted. I want to climb up on the table and take the high ground, but imagine the librarians (who have access to atypically huge security types; this is downtown) will have me removed. I'm not as upset as some might be, I really don't care about the money, I do have something like $350,000 left back in the attic; however, I am on a mission and it would be an incredible hassle to explain to Tommy, Alicia and good old Broken Tony, why I don't have this week's payment. Alicia obviously has some ill-defined doubts about my bank robbery excuses and I don't want to wage a new campaign of lies.

There's one other person at my table, a sickly looking blond haired high school girl, and I dismiss her as the thief, but have a small hope that she witnessed my backpack walking away. "Excuse me . . . ."

"No," she says immediately as if waiting for me to proposition her.

"I didn't say anything yet."
"Doesn't matter." She hunches down in her chair as if expecting a blow.

"Jesus, stay calm. I'm missing a backpack . . . "

"I didn't take it," she says so quickly it's like one word.

"No one said you did."

"I'm afraid."

"What's wrong with you? Afraid of what?"

The scrawny little girl whispers, "She said she'd kill me," and then starts to cry, loudly.

"Okay, okay, stay calm. Who . . . "

"I don't know," she shouts. This inquiry is going nowhere, and if the high schooler shouts anymore we'll both be thrown out and I might be arrested. The mousy blond gets to her feet and dashes for the library bathroom, abandoning her books and purse (not a good idea given the theft of my backpack). I sit down just as the librarian—an utter cliche with a gray bun of hair and constipated expression—arrives with backup, two big security types, one black, one white, both UCLA football players judging from every item of clothing on them.

"Sir, is there a problem here?"

"No . . . well, my backpack is missing."

"Do you want to file a report at the lost and found? Or register a complaint? I can call the police." She's sussed me out as someone who has nothing in common with the police. No shred of a convincing lie comes to me that will explain a backpack with $35,000, lost or found. The librarian is staring at me, head cocked, wanting an answer.

"Maybe, I left it at home?" I ask her foolishly, trying on the idea.

They're used to people not making sense. "Keep it down," the black bouncer says.

All three retreat to their stronghold on the first floor.

I sit back down, look under the table again and then around at all the surrounding tables and people in the vicinity. The veteran library patrons don't meet my eyes,
unwilling to be drawn into whatever trouble I've orchestrated. A disturbing number of people in the surrounding areas are armed. Anybody anywhere downtown—be they college student, street person, businessman or drug dealer—knows better than to get involved in sketchy people's problems. The library has a one-strike policy; any disruptions and you're banned. I do have a clue: Though she was scared witless, the high school girl said "she" threatened her. I looked under the table again while cursing myself for being so lax and mentally lazy. The odds are against a thief hanging around the library waiting to get caught, but I decide to roam the building for a while, and see what I can turn up. Maybe a demented homeless woman simply picked my backpack up and is still here. The bathroom seems like a good place to start. It's on the third floor and I'm quickly up the three flights of stairs and in a hallway leading to the restrooms, when the paranoid teenage girl pushes through the bathroom door.

"Is there anybody in there?" I look behind her and see no one, but do catch a waft of smelly institutional odors.

"No!" she shrieks, and dives back through the door. I hear a metal waste basket get knocked over. It's doubtful that she's hanging out with the thief. I retreat.

Vowing to walk through the whole library and then leave, I start on the third floor, which is full of students with backpacks that aren't mine. The second floor is mostly preschool kids' books and I see no credible suspects, only toddlers and their moms. I'm on the ground floor, where I started, making my way around, ready to give up when I see my backpack sitting out in the open, right in the middle of a table. It has a unique Sex Pistols sticker, so I know it's mine. About to rupture with righteous indignation, I'm up to the table looking for the guilty party, figuring she'll try to run or skulk away, when I look right into the eyes of Alicia. Sinking into a chair next to her, I try to breathe.

"Lose something?"

"Okay, just get on with it."

"Don't you want to try and lie your way out of this?"
"Nope."

This angers her, I can tell. She wants to assume the high ground or at least have the pleasure of an argument. "What the fuck?"

"Just hanging out at the library." Not truly a lie.

"I looked in your backpack, asshole. It's 9:30, the bank isn't open yet."

I hate getting caught in lies, it's annoying. "And your conclusions?" What can she do to me here in public? I don't seriously think Alicia would physically hurt me, but she instills fear into people. Who knows what she'll do. Maybe I can take her.

"I don't have any damned conclusions; except, you're a liar."

"I'm not going to sit here to be insulted. Good day." I grab my backpack and jump to my feet to escape.

"No, no, no..." She grabs my wrist. "Sit the fuck back down." Once again having all that money on me is nothing but a hindrance. I can't cause a scene, can only sit and look petulant.

We stare at each other for a long while. I try to get up again, but she grabs me by the collar of my shirt causing the three people sitting at our table to take notice. One gets up to move and I decide to give Alicia her confession. "Here's the deal. I put away a lot of money while the business was rolling..."

"So did I."

"What? You lying bitch!"

Having got to me, Alicia has a hearty laugh at last. "Who am I to stop you from being the big hero, a fake hero, saving Tommy. I should have known you were too big of a pussy to rob a bank."

"How much did you put away?"

"You first."

"About 500,000."

"About? Jesus Christ, when are you going to get serious about anything."
Tersely, I ask again, "How much did you save?"

"Right now I have three bank accounts with a total of $785,550. Exactly. You never asked, I never lied. I thought you were, like, this way out dude. That's the end of that good sex."

"Why?"

"I thought you'd just robbed a bank. Sure, we'll fuck, but it's not going to be the same. I feel like you took advantage of me. I came like three or four times."

"You come all the time!"

"Oh, please," Alicia says, and I notice the librarian standing right next to me.

"Uh, are we getting loud?"

"It's more the subject matter than the volume."

Alicia turns to the librarian and says, "Tell him how often we fake it."

"I'd like to see both of your library cards."

We have no cards but on the way out one of the security thugs takes our pictures with his phone. There's a wall of such photos behind the main desk. If they post ours Alicia's will be unique as she is exposing her breasts.
Chapter 20

You're Mine but I'm Not Yours

I am a child. At thirty-seven years old it comes to me that I've a case of arrested development that's nearly a mental illness. The only reason I'm not living with my mom is that she left me behind. It's three in the morning and I'm sitting in a wicker chair on the grass in the small suburban backyard behind my house. I can't sleep and I don't want to be around anyone. For the first time in months the thought of mom has me crying. A soft steady spilling of tears with a life of its own. While my weeping has been brought on by pain, there's an awkward pleasure to crying like this.

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving and last year at this time, at our house, my uncles Mike and Tony, aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews were all together as Jean and I masterminded dinner. My cousins Eddie, Little Mike, Janine and Ronnie have produced thirteen kids (so many it's like a personal reprimand and insult) whose names and parents escape me when the whole clan is in one place. The kids only seem like real humans once they become teenagers. Regardless, they are my family and I care about them all and part of my weepingness comes from not having attended one single family gathering in the last year. Only now, far into the retrospect, do I realize how they must have seen me at that last comfortable pre-orphan Thanksgiving. A grown man living at his mother's house. No one made me feel anything but loved though perhaps there was a dollop of pity for the single man with a job he didn't care for, no car, ambition, woman or children in my life. Brandon and Kurt, Uncle Mike's teenaged grandkids, suspect gayness and that it's just a matter of time before I come out and bring my special friend to the next family gathering. I brought Cindy Lee of the CD Shop to Uncle Mike's birthday bash a few years ago but she looked like an aging punk rock lesbian, which probably made those prone to questioning my sexuality think Cindy was a beard. Before last Thanksgiving I was thinking about bringing Rachel, who worked in Nordstrom's lingerie department, an overly feminine woman who'd put to rest the rumors of my lifestyle. I didn't do it, I'm too lazy and don't
care too much about what my relatives think as long as they love, or at least like me. At this late date, not much matters. Even as I start my first couple of classes at UCLA I am less motivated and far less mature than many of my 18 to 24 year old classmates with their well-honed ambitions, overly diligent study habits, life plans unto death and enough energy to take over and possibly destroy the world; all the while, believing in every god damn thing they’re doing—it takes my breath away. I don’t know if I’m subjecting myself to school for me or for the memory of Jean, who was crushed by my failures as Dali enjoys reminding me.

I sit in the backyard and carefully sob, as quietly as I can, while thinking of my unfairly departed mother, my partially estranged family, and fucking Thanksgiving—a holiday that celebrates the European subjugation and near genocide of the native Americans—so my sociology teacher teaches. In my mind the destruction of the original Americans and Jean’s death are intertwined and cause for misery.

Gasping, in order to have wind to continue crying under the stars, I’m trying to purge my regrets for losing the life I should have had, that every sane person around me tried to guide me towards. I may have gotten dramatically noisy. Alicia peers through the sliding glass window. She opens the door and sticks her head out. “What the fuck?”

I bite my lip. “Just getting some air . . . and thinking.”

“Were you crying?”

I mull over whether my misery will elicit sympathy sex.

I am completely tied to a wasteful life of sensation, pheromones and weirdly enjoyable chaos. I’m stuck in the moment. When I step away from that moment, grief over Jean and what I’ve become leaps on me like a cougar. And, of course, idiot lust regularly rears its seductive head. It comes from the lizard brain Cindy Lee used to say, when I crawled on top of her in the dark. Cindy elicited plain old American, and sweetly ordinary horniness; the steamy stuff flowing from a stoned Alicia is
far more savage and narcotic. She can tear off a fuck like a crocodile snatches a gazelle from the shore. After the fake bank robbery kerfuffle at the downtown library, on the bus ride home, Alicia encouraged me to find a normal woman.

"An average well-adjusted woman who'll make you feel manly."

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"We're just having one of those long term flings that are bound to end. A man of your age and temperament needs someone routine and conventional, not like me. I don't want kids."

"Who said I want kids?"

"Don't you?"

"I suppose. What about you? What is your perfect man like?"

"There is no perfect man. You're all flawed."

Alicia looks at me through the glass door, leaning out into the night. While I try to figure out what to say, she often stares at me for long minutes, interested in our conversations as if she's an anthropologist studying a backward tribe. All that staring usually gets me to tell her the truth.

"Yes, I'm crying."

"About your mom?"

"How the fuck . . . "

"You're a mama's boy. That's sorta kinda why I put up with you. Your mommy half trained you to respect women. Even if you are a crybaby liar."

I considered telling her that I really had robbed a bank right before we met, and have the newspaper articles to prove it. There's a pretty good picture of me above one article taken by security cameras in the bank wearing a baseball hat and sunglasses; but, something keeps me from confessing this real, serious crime to anyone, even if it results in spectacular sex. Alicia gives me the mildly contemptuous gaze she's adopted
since that morning at the library when I let her down by not being a huge criminal. I regard the new distance between us with equal amounts of regret and relief. And yet I can't dismiss the sexual creature crouching within her.

"Why are you living here?"

"It's comfortable. Both you and Tommy are safe. I was hooking for eight years, from when I was fifteen. Molested by my dad and his brother, blah blah blah. Just like every dumb hooker. The last couple of years I had a bunch of regulars with daughter and granddaughter issues and was doing well; I thought, until I fell into this crazy shit with you guys and your calm suburban dude ways. It took me two years to sock away $90,000 and then we make all that stupid cocaine money in a couple of months. You'all are easy to hang with, and . . . I wish I could cry out the past, but I can't. I just can't. After the ninth or tenth rape I got all cried out. Switches were thrown in my head that can't be turned back. Sex will never be normal. I'm not sure what I'm going to do now. You and Tommy are safe, like puppies, that I can fuck sometimes. Regardless of all the bullshit I went through the last, like, ten or eleven years, I like cock. Let's just let things lay for the time being."

"You didn't think I was a puppy last week."

"See, I'm fucked up. When I thought there was some kind of calm maniac in your little puppy head, it made me wet. It actually seemed like your cock was bigger."

"I think it was." This is cheering me up.

"I'm telling you. I hated those fucking pimps and all those lame ass tricks. And most of the drug dealers were assholes. When I got it in my head that you were like this sweet, dangerous character . . ."

"With a big cock."

"Don't get carried away. That little scenario is dead. Though I do give you credit for working me. So . . . I'm living in the suburbs with two boyfriends."

"You're my girlfriend?"
"Hell no. You're mine, but I'm not yours. I'm a woman who lives with you right now that likes to get extra personal. And if you show up with a new piece, that's life, that's fine, good luck to you and her. Marry the bitch for all I care. You really are the type that would do good with a wife and a family. She'd probably be a big bore though." Alicia is getting worked up over a fictional woman.

"I used to be a serial monogamist."

"Monogamy, what a racket. It's kind of like slavery without the fringe benefits. You know what I mean?"

"I have no idea. I'm tired."

"Go to bed, and quit your crying. You looked like a pussy sitting out here in the dark weeping. I'm going grocery shopping."

"It's four in the morning."

"So what, go to bed."
Chapter 21
What Happened

"Tommy, what happened with your mom?"

"She got sick and died."

"No . . . I mean, what happened between you and her?"

"Typical bullshit. From when I was thirteen, ma never liked one single thing I did. Until then, according to her, I was perfect. She hated my friends and video games and my music . . . "

"And the dope?"

"I was only smokin' pot, but even before that ma was weird with me once I wasn't a little kid likin' Disney movies and Chucky Cheese. Nine Inch Nails replaced Disney, that's what ticked her off. Ma'd flip out and trash my CDs and posters. It seemed like she was out of control, made me powerful actually, thought I was smarter than her, like she didn't get it; so, back then to me she was stupid and maybe since I felt that way, there was no respect. I was the kid, but she was down on my level arguin' and losing her temper. Then in one day I cursed her out, got kicked out of school and then the cops chased Joey Fratone; 'member that idiot? He stole a case a beer, jumped in my car, and we both got arrested. Ma kicked me out."

"You never went back?"

"Nope. But I always kinda thought that sooner or later, when I grew up, she'd get over it. You know? Give up on tryin' to change me. I meant to make something between us. When I was, like, 25 I flat out told her I deal weed. Thinkin', you know, the truth would fix things. And really, one of the reasons I put up with Francine for so long was 'cause she gave me the idea we were gonna have a kid or two, which I figured would warm ma up a little, grandkids and all."

"You were going to have kids so your mom would like you?"

"Maybe. But Francine kept not wantin' to get pregnant, always with the, "next year, next year, maybe next year." Ma was actually hatin' on me more as I got older. So I
just worked and sold weed, puttin' off life mostly. Then I find out from one of ma's friends, almost by accident, that she's dyin' of cancer. And then . . . it's funny. 'Cause her precious Reader's Digest said pot was okay for cancer people, she starts to smoke a little, and for a second there I thought maybe . . . you know . . . but it was too late."

"Did you know it was coming?"

"Yeah. Took a little while. We had dinner a few times where ma seemed like she didn't hate me as much as usual. Still got in digs about me being a drug dealer. Fuck Francine, though. If she hadn't a been so . . . not ready to grow up. We could of had a kid and made ma a little happy before she tapped out."

"Did you, like, hang out with her the last day?"

"No, it was too sad. I thought, maybe, since it was all over she might want to be friendlier, but she still couldn't get over . . . me being how I am. Like me."

"That's too bad."

"Once, during the last week, we had a moment. I told her I was sorry, even though I wasn't. No skin off me, you know. She kinda broke out of that mean character she was always puttin' up and patted me on the shoulder. Even said she loved me. Like she was confessing something."

"That is sad."

"Who knows. She kicked me out of the house when I was sixteen. Your sister was nicer to me than my own family. Neruda let me crash over. We'd like . . . you know, mess around. Then she'd make me sleep under the bed in case your ma came creepin' around. You were lucky to have a whole family."

"My dad abandoned us when I was five."

"I had two parents and your family was more wholer than mine."

"I know. God damn it."

* * *

"What happened with you and your mom?"
"I told you. She was drunk on Jesus Christ."

"Some Christian mothers love their daughters; right?"

"Mother didn't have room for other relationships. The only worth I had was as a soul she might draft into her rabid army of religious enthusiasts."

"You should be writing plays."

"They'd all be about the same thing."

"Did your mom and dad . . ."

"Have sex?"

"No!"

"You're right, they didn't."

"That's not what I'm asking. Their marriage is what I was thinking about."

"Don't be delicate. Whatever they had wasn't enough. And even if it was, my father and his people . . . God, his "People" were not right. A motherfucking freak show. Him and that faggot brother of his."

"You didn't like him?"

"I didn't mean faggot in a nice way. My . . . father, also a Christian, blamed me for being there when he and his brother fucked me. And good old Jesus Christ let him off the hook every Sunday."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, you started this."

"I asked about your mother."

"Too bad. So, since I was steeped in sin, my father thought he could help cure his brother of "being queer" by making him do me. You know what I mean?"

"God, no."

"That's what she said."

"What?"

"It's a joke. Do you want to hear this or not?"
ready to accept Jesus Christ into my heart."

"She didn't do anything or say anything . . . "

"Yes, she went to the highest authority in the universe. And for the first time in quite a while, since I was, like, five I think—which is when, in my mind, I left the church—I prayed with my mother, because I needed help. And it worked, for about ten days; until my father brought Uncle Barney over to the house for a weekend, while mother was out of town. They both fucked me. At least my uncle cried; and he stayed gay."

"And your mom didn't . . . "

"She didn't do shit. And I didn't bother bringing it up again. Bad enough to get raped, but then I have to ask Jesus for help and he ignores me. It's off-putting, you know?"

"You had no . . . uh, there wasn't any sort of mother/daughter connection at all, even when you were younger?"

"It was all one way."

"Which way?"

"I hated her."

* * *

The next person I wanted to talk to was Neruda, because I'm sure she liked our mother. It's raining, so I take the bus and ask the guy in a cheap suit sitting next to me, "What happened with your mom?"

"That fucking bitch! Did she send you? Tell her it's my money."

"So, the relationship isn't all that good right now, for the time being."

"She's dead to me," he says, and moves to a seat in the back, and is still talking to himself when I get off the bus.

Neruda is on the front porch with Confucious. She's drinking a beer, taking in the rain.
"What happened between you and mom?"

"What are you talking about? Where have you been?"

"I've been at my house. I'm just curious about what happened?"

"You know what happened. It's cruel to bring it up. Do you want me to cry, is that it?"

"Don't cry mommy," Confucious says.

"No. I don't know what I want. I thought ..."

"Are you giving Joe money?"

"Don't rock the boat. Is there a problem?"

"I suppose not. Except with you."

"Now that I'm not so busy, I'm falling to pieces a little bit, again. School isn't
taking up but ten hours a week. Too much time to think; you know, and I come to find
out, other people don't care about their mothers, like we did. I thought talking to
them about their relationships, would make me feel connected to ... I don't know,
the maternal force in the world, that we no longer have access to. But instead, turns
out that our relationship with mom was extraordinary; and it's making me feel worse."

"Seriously, what is in your head?"

"I just want to talk to one person who currently has or even had a positive mother
experience. Maybe get a vicarious jolt out of it. But they all hate their moms."

"Who hates their moms? Who are these people?"

"Tommy."

"Oh, yeah."

"Alicia."

"Go figure."

"And some angry dude I met on the bus. Tommy had the best relationship which was
sad. The others went right to hatred. We lost so much."

"I'm a mom, you know."
"Yeah, that's right. Hey, Confucious, look at me."

Gripping two crayons at once, laying sprawled out on his stomach, he's furiously scribbling on a coloring book, not only outside the lines, but onto the porch and his shirt sleeve. The picture in the coloring book, two turtles in a boat, doesn't appear to have anything to do with Confucious' art. He pauses to point the crayons at me.

"What, Uncle Hezekiah?"

"What's happening with your mom? Is she treating you right? Is she a good mom?"

He scratches his arm with the red crayon, wrinkles his nose and says, "She does good stuff, for a mom."

"Okay, mission fulfilled," Neruda says, ruffling her son's hair.

"But he's only two."

Confucious leans over and taps my leg three times. "Three years old. Almost a school kid."

"It's just that there isn't much time in there, in his little life. Things could go wrong."

"Nah," Confucious says, tired of the conversation, back to scribbling like a maniac.

He does seem content.
"It's up to you."

"My God fearing father stumbled on his brother, Barney, at a restaurant, on a date with his boyfriend. Brother Barney’s boyfriend. In those days, folks in Montana didn’t watch Will and Grace, and father's "people" while accepting of the forgivable transgression of diddling their sin filled daughters and nieces; well, they hated harmless faggots." Alicia sat back on the couch, sighed heavily and put her hair in a ponytail. "Do you want to fuck?"

"No ... no, I don’t."

"Sorry ... really, I’m sorry." She scoots over on the couch closer to me and puts her head on shoulder. "I’m retarded. The whole Christian thing gets me worked up. It’s not even hypocrisy at that level. Nuclear hypocrisy, maybe. Lets you preach high and mighty righteousness while your heart is blacker than sin. That’s my father. Clutching his bible like a machete; while mother clings to her bible like a quart of Jack Daniel’s."

"But your mother must have have loved you."

"She did? I hated her, from back as far as ... always? But I know what you mean. The word mother suggests things. She motheres you. Father is nothing more than sex. They father you. Wham Damn fuck you ma’am. It’s always motherfucker; you don’t hear much about fatherfucking. So, I admit, all the way up to about fourteen I had some small hope that my mother, would mother me. If she just could have left off sucking up to Jesus Christ almighty for ten or fifteen minutes; all the begging and praying and down on your scabby knees imploring and pleading ... for what? What are they begging for? According to mother, the only hope I had was in the holy word of her most beloved Jesus H. Christ. Hope for what?"

"So ... "

"I was fourteen, all freaked out, and I told her that father had come into my bedroom and hurt me. I didn’t have a clue about sex--mother figured that I was finally
Chapter 22

Fleeing From The Afterlife

Tommy and Alicia are off on some druggy mission. Completely fed up with dope and chaos and my idiot, gothic interest in Alicia; on the spot I concoct a plan to be free of this latest deadend stage of my life.

I have a sudden burst of longing for one last episode of Alicia’s unrestrained fucking; and then feel a weary pride that I am running from her. In the hall closet I pull down the collapsible ladder and go up into the attic. The backpack full of money is untouched, ascertained by a little spycraft picked up during my youthful James Bond obsession. After filling a suitcase with 40 books, I abandon everything else in the house, who needs material things when you have a backpack that is worth a year’s work and sweat of ten ordinary people, distilled down into a pile of filthy money. And yet, while it puts a lightness to my step, even with the knowledge that I can go anywhere and do anything, one simple notion sticks in my head, that I am trying to run away from my own inescapable weak character. An enormous part of the problem is the house I’ve been living in the last few years, my current partners in crime and our tangled personal lives. They can have the house and each other.

As I’m walking to the bus stop, I give in to a reasonable paranoia about toting around a little over $300,000, and call a taxi. Sitting on the curb, my feet in the gutter, backpack strapped on backwards, so that it’s wrapped around my chest and I can hug it, I mull over leaving Neruda behind as I flee from myself. I like this neighborhood, would love it if I didn’t live here. The taxi pulls up and I get in the back. I have part of a plan.

"Where to?"

"Can we drive around, find a newspaper, then just cruise . . . “

"I’m gonna need to see some money, 'fore we go anywhere."

"Okay, fine, turn around . . . I just need a few seconds of privacy."

"What? Look, I don’t need you jackin’ off in the back of my cab."

"Oh my God, what kind of people are you . . . “
"This is Los Angeles, not far from Hollywood. I seen a guy suck his own dick back there."

"Oh fuck ..."

"I cleaned it."

"All right," I say, and as surreptitiously as possible, I pull a handful of bills out of the backpack and give him a hundred dollar bill.

"Okay; this is all find and well, but if you're a drug dealer I'm not gonna ride around town and . . ."

"Not a drug dealer," I say, ruder than I'd intended. A little mortified that the driver has deduced my money's provenance so easily, and put out that I can't do anything without static and complaints, even from strangers whom I'm paying, I appeal to his greed and professional pride. "I need a driver for a few hours. I'll pay double the meter. I'm not a drug dealer, I promise you. But if you don't feel like you're up to a complicated job; how about, you radio or call whoever sent you out here and have them send me another driver."

"You're not doing deliveries?"

"For the last time . . . no."

"Then, what are you?"

"Give me a break. What are you?"

"A taxi driver."

"Okay, Jesus Christ. I'll tell you what I am. I'm not a guy who needs all this bullshit. I'm a guy trying to get the hell away from the best fuck of my life and find someplace where I can think for a few days without having to see my partner getting it on with the very same woman. I'm trying . . ."

"All right, okay," the driver says. "All you had to say was woman trouble. Worse than drugs but not illegal, not gonna get me in hot water. So, you're like, runnin' away from home."

"No . . . yes."
"And you have some kind of game plan?" he says, dubiously.

"Sort of, just a couple of stops, and then ... I'll figure it out, and you'll make some extra money."

"And you don't have any drugs?"

"Jesus, No."

"Not even a joint?"

First the idiot driver takes me to a supermarket where I buy a small bag of groceries (peanut butter and jelly, sourdough bread, granola, a pad of paper, a pint of peach brandy and the L.A. Times). He tries to strike up more conversation and I pay him another fifty dollars not to, and he takes it in stride. We drop a brown paper bag with $50,000 off at Neruda's house. I don't want to talk to her, so I have the driver park four houses down and I sneak around the side and put the bag in the back of their garage, then, as we get on the freeway I ask the driver to call and tell her where I've hidden the money.

"Can I use an accent?" he asks.

"What? Why?"

"Well, we're doin' this secret agent shit, I figure ..."

"Sure, why not. Just so you know, it's my sister. Her husband is out of work. I'm helping them out with money."

"Good, good to know. Helps me get in character." He calls Neruda and proceeds to tell her where the money is in a terrible Elvis Presley imitation and things quickly get out of control. There's an argument, but I can't get the gist of it only hearing one side. "Okay, okay, don't get crazy," the driver says in his normal voice and hangs up. He pulls off the freeway and makes a U-turn and heads back towards my neighborhood.

"Hey, wait, what's happening?"

"That broad, excuse me, your sister; is it really your sister?"

"Yes, what are you doing? Why are you going back? I don't want to go back."
"She said she's gonna call the cops, have my phone traced if she doesn't see you and make sure you're all right."

"No, no, no, turn back around. She can't trace your phone. It's a bluff, a ruse."

"If it's your sister, I don't see the problem, just to be on the safe side. She seemed concerned. Are you havin' mental problems?"

"No, god damn it . . . ."

"This is almost worse than drug dealin'. Here we are, just get it over with and we'll be on our way."

"I'm paying you!"

I slump down in the seat, and am about to pull out more money to bribe the driver out of his fears. I see Neruda coming out of the house. I get out of the cab and sit on the curb.

"Why are you sneaking around like a cat burglar?"

"Or a drug dealer," the driver says from the window.

"Close your window, stay out of this."

"Come in the house. Talk to me."

"No, I need to get away, be by myself for a little while. I'm not sure when I'm going to come back. Just wanted to leave you guys some cash, without a big discussion. Without any discussion actually."

"What about your house? Where's Tommy going?"

"I'm leaving them behind. The rent's paid up for six months. I'm leaving Alicia, that should make you happy."

"I don't know. She isn't so bad, really, once you get used to her."

"That's not right. You hate her."

"Nah, she came by one day. Brought over rum and vanilla ice cream."

"Well, that's great, but I don't give a fuck. I need to think, I'm taking off for a few weeks, so . . . that's it, okay?"

"Ooookay, you seem almost normal. Just stay in touch. What do you want me to tell
"Tell her? What are you talking about? Don't tell her shit. No, tell her I joined the army! Or tell her I went to China to be one of those kung fu priests. Tell her I'm dead. Tell her . . ."

"Okay, I get it. Sorry. Where are you going, really? I won't say anything to anybody. Promise."

"I'm gonna rent a room some place, out of the way. Get some rest, then maybe go up to the Bay Area, see Dali or something. I need a vacation, from everything. From myself." I get up to give her a hug, then get back into the cab. The driver gets out and asks Neruda, "So . . . it's okay?"

"God damn it," I say, "I'm the one paying you, just . . . let's go." And we're off to find me someplace to hide from myself and everybody else.

Up in the Hollywood Hills, I rent a small, well-furnished cabin on a dead end street. Left alone with no distractions or sex or pot; I sink into the softest bed of my life and sleep almost two days. Still tired but unable to sleep anymore, I dig into my suitcase full of books, and find once again that I can't focus enough to read. I'm thinking about my mom; reliving that last night. After Neruda, crying hysterically, left the room to call the ambulance—I turned on the TV in my mom's bedroom to watch Jeopardy, holding her sad, tiny cold hand. Time stopped completely and though I used every bit of my well honed powers of denial, begging and wishing the world around me to rewind, Jean's hand grew colder and colder. The paramedics, at the end of their shift, pulled me away from my mother and wouldn't let us finish the show.

Four days in, depression has taken over. None of my cabin's neighbors seem to be in residence, it's post-apocalyptic quiet all the time. It's 7:30 at night and I've missed Jeopardy. Seemingly out of the blue, waves of sadness knock me to my knees, then all the way down to the floor onto the beautiful, thick Persian rug. Writhing and caressing
the rug, I break down into an absurdly long crying jag. I'm such a selfish bastard, only crying for myself; why shed tears for my mother, who's past all the suffering? Why does anyone cry for a loved one gone to wherever their homeless souls end up? Purely selfish, the living cry out of loneliness and the loss they've suffered. While my mother didn't necessarily believe in the Christian version of the afterlife and reality in general—she also didn't necessarily think that it's all darkness after we die. Jean indoctrinated me into her system of believing in everything and nothing. Even when I was a teenager rebelling against her parental authority, losing interest in our conversations—she'd draw me into talking about death, because teenagers are morbid.

"So, where do we go after we die, if not to hell?"

"You're only 16, you've got years before you go anywhere. And no one who hasn't died and come back can tell us what's on the other side. So far the only word on the subject has been from mystics, drug addicts, holy men, liars, alleged sons of gods, and prophets born thousands of years ago who may or may not have got it right."

"Holy cow."

"Yes, and cows are supposed to be holy."

"So, what happens after we die?"

"Something happens."

"I thought you were an atheist."

"No energy is wasted in this universe, and you're about as much energy as can be imagined—so, what happens to that energy when you finally manage to kill your body?"

"I don't know. And I wasn't thinking about it. But now you're making me nervous."

She laughed. My mother had the most beautiful laugh. "That energy that animates you, will never die. I have no doubt of that. As a matter of fact, it's you, Dali and Neruda that pulled me back from the brink of believing in nothing but darkness."

"And we don't believe in hell?"

"If there is a hell, it's made by men, right here."

"Not women?"
"Of course not."

"Aunt Teresa and Aunt Mary talk about hell . . ."

"Saint Teresa and Saint Mary were raised by God addicts and married my poor brothers as teenagers because they were horny little hypocrites who wanted to get laid."

"Now, seriously, I don't need to hear about old people . . ."

"I'm just saying, as far as your Uncle Mike and Uncle Tony—give me 20 minutes, and if I wanted to, I'd roll back all that Christian lunacy, straight out of their heads."

"Don't get mad at me. Besides, you're the one who punishes me by letting Saint Mary take me to church."

"I'm sorry, that's not fair."

"It's not so bad."

"It's supposed to be bad."

Through these conversations, I became a lapsed atheist; and now, I sit in the dark and cast my thoughts out, asking to hear from my dead mom, hoping she was mostly wrong and maybe partially right—that her essence is out there, maintaining the personality that raised and cared about me, her love and deathless energy somehow available. If she can't communicate with me, which does seem far fetched no matter how appealing—perhaps through an unknown agency, she can hear me, my thoughts I suppose. Feeling like a traitor to myself, I speak aloud, just in case a dead person is more likely to hear my voice, rather than my thoughts or prayers. Asking for her, calling for my mother aloud, is also a betrayal of the things she believed, I think. Nonetheless, I can't stop myself from at least mentally checking the void, calling out silently into the night, hoping that she hears or senses my love. That it gives her some small satisfaction out there, wherever the hell she is, enjoying herself I'm sure.

During one of my calls checking in with Neruda, unfortunately, my god damned Aunt Mary is there and she wants to talk about my mom. For Mary's own religiously kinky
reasons, she describes purgatory to me. And thanks to Jean's influence, I consider everyone's far fetched theories, and so entertain a bit of worry that my mother lingers in this foggy ill-defined waiting place ("I guess it's foggy," claims Aunt Mary). If Jean is there with nothing to read and no one to talk to except religious fanatics, that's a bother. So, I begin to read for my mother--thinking that if she's in Purgatory, and can tune in to my reading; well, it must give her comfort, and relief from the ramblings of the company she's forced to endure. Obviously, I can't read any science fiction, since Jean scoffed at it, though someone in her current position might have come to appreciate it. I don't really expect to hear from her, given my lack of religion and the fact that I deserve nothing—but I cannot shake the idea that the purgatory angle might be valid and Jean is receiving my messages. One of course can't live on mights and ifs and maybes, but can one die and live on in a maybe. That's my problem.

If I'd been so wise as to have a wife, she'd likely jar me out of these preoccupations with my dear mother—but I'm not wise. I'm holed up in a small but comfortable one bedroom cabin deep in the Hollywood Hills on a cul-de-sac (French for: bottom of the sack; try to talk your way out of that) with little food but enough books to read to my dead mother for months. This wasn't the plan when I came up here. I sort of talked myself into it.

I develop a regimen where I meditate (deciding to avoid the word "prayer", too many crazy people pray), focus on Jean, seeking her, reach out a mental hand, assuming that she needs an invitation as the woman was nothing if not endlessly courteous. I thought the first serious attempt at a book to distract her from Purgatory should be something we both liked, that is serious and yet has humor. I imagine that if you're dead, a little humor goes a long way. Moby Dick fills the bill and then some. I also decide to not plow through it at my usual speed, which is okay for me, but I remember that my mother liked to savor a book, to take it one sentence at a time, enjoying every word, reading with as much care as it was written Jean used to say.
So, I meditate on the past, memories of my mom swirl around in my head ... until I am three-quarters convinced that her spirit is present, impatiently waiting for me to read. I start, "Call me Ishmael," and the hair rises on my neck. The next four hours are spent with Jean and Ishmael, slowly working our way through Manhatto and New Bedford, as I lower myself into the whaler's world. I haven't read anything slowly, well, ever. I do so now and see the attraction; inhaling, caressing and living each word. As I literally read the book, I read my life into it, invoking the memory of Jean, recognizing quotes and ideas she'd culled from her many readings of Moby Dick. Right away—Ishmael shares a bed in the Spouter Inn with the cannibal, Queequeg, future shipmate on the Pequod—it is so funny, I laugh out loud for the first time in several months, and in this moment ... my mother is completely with me, we laugh together, sharing an admiration for Melville's sense of the absurd. If I am to ever get religion in this life, it's right now, my heart and soul fully open, belief in Jean's presence complete. But it's a personal, singular experience that doesn't invite any other people, and no organizations, into my life. Still, encouraged and heartened, I become Ishmael and live his adventures. I even give a thorough reading to chapter 32, Cetology, which I've mostly skipped in the past because it too extensively lists the types of whales, and their anatomy is explained to an obsessive degree. "It is some systemized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera, that I would now put before you. Yet it is no easy task," Melville admits; and my mom eats it up. It seems like I'm not only in contact with Jean, but also striking up a relationship with Herman Melville. And though Herman comes off as bitter and somewhat put out at my intrusion, the book is wonderful. I'm freshly surprised by Chapter 40, which is in song (and there's dancing!). Along with an earlier hymn (Chapter 9), and all the pieces of folk songs, shanties, and sailors bursting into poetry backed by tambourines, not to mention the whaleman's catechism wherein they train new conscripts with chants and choruses, the musical component is so pervasive that it pleases me to think that in modern times Melville might have conceived Moby Dick as a musical. This conceit is supported by an odd preamble, called Extracts (which are supplied
by someone called a sub-sub-librarian who describes himself as a "mere painstaking burrower and grub worm of a poor devil of a Sub-Sub" and may or may not be Melville).

The extracts are 11 pages full of pieces from a hundred or so different poems, songs and quotes from the last two thousand years; anything that ever mentioned a whale be it literature, the Bible, sailor’s biographies, Whaling How-To Books or nursery rhymes. It’s just odd, but entertaining and indicates an obsession of the author’s that rivals his fictional Captain Ahab’s problem with the white whale.

For five days I’m either asleep or reading Melville’s long weird wannabe musical to my mother. I’m nearly done with Moby Dick, but haven’t had any food for 48 hours. Trying to keep a low profile I tramp down the hill at six in the morning, catch the bus and hit the Farmer’s Market for supplies. I run into Aunt Mary, maybe the last person I’m hoping to see, but then again I have questions. Exhilarated by what she considers my hermitage and attention to Godly matters, Mary takes me by the arm and won’t let go. While Jean consistently described her as driven mad by religion, Aunt Mary seems like the nicest person I know gone mad in that manner. I admit to her that I’ve been paying attention to spiritual matters and praying for my mom (I can’t say meditating because her sect considers emptying your mind sinful), yet I don’t feel comfortable telling her that I’ve been in touch with Jean, let alone Herman Melville. We shop together, while she confuses me further on the subject of Purgatory. Afterwards, Aunt Mary tries to lure me to her church. I lie (a sin!) and tell her I have a job interview. I have no intention of getting a job as long as the money holds out, and haven’t even made it to school the last week. I need to stop by a book store. Nearly done with Moby Dick, I had an epiphany that the next book to read should be Bleak House by Charles Dickens; it’s from the same era as Moby Dick, which went over so well with my mom, and has that same mixture of drama and comedy. All the used book stores are closed but I find a paperback copy for a dollar at a Salvation Army, then all I want to do is get back home to my quasi-spiritual experiences.

An unfortunate part of my sequestration in the cabin is that the nearest bus stop
is four miles away, up a long winding asphalt road surrounded by trees, shrubs and brush on a steep hill. Dozens of driveways snake off the main road towards houses of every kind, some grand and expensive filled with rock stars and working actors; others not so grand, like mine, occupied by all types of L.A. people from every imaginable part of the world, most of whom have some source of income, whether it is from working, past glories, family money or from dealing pot and cocaine to the well-heeled of Hollywood Hills. All of these houses, no two alike, are scattered, helter skelter throughout the hills and canyons; some with spectacular views, others hidden away in the canyons. I could take a taxi home from the bus stop, but the need to inconvenience myself is strong, so I hike up the brushy twisting road carrying my bag of groceries, dodging cars and worrying about territorial dogs.

Though I've withdrawn from the world, I may be experiencing a religious bursting forth like Jesus, Buddha or Jimi Hendrix who all willingly undertook their quests, while I blindly stagger towards the divine. They wandered around deserts, defied the authorities and had visions—while I ran around with gang bangers, smoked pot and limp up and down the Hollywood Hills in a daze. Jesus, Jimi and the Buddha had experiences that resulted in a breaking down of barriers, letting in God, oneness and psychedelic music; mine brought my mother home. While I want to explore whatever is happening to me, to see where it leads, I have no desire to read the Bible or any other religious propuganda, firmly believing that great fiction is a far better window into humanity's soul. The Bible, all of its offshoots and sequels (the Koran, New Testament, Book of Mormon, etc.) could be considered fiction; but those books' adherents claim them as God's stone cold truth. It's possible, I suppose, but the veracity of fiction and its ability to move me spiritually is part of my credo; and fiction is more likely to entertain my poor mother trapped in Purgatory by God, until he knows when.

Sleeping more than one would think possible, a storm of interesting dreams plague me and merge with the day and reality. Jean makes regular, welcome appearances and we're
always in the cabin, it's too much like regular life . . . if she still lived. Not being able to tell the difference between the dreams and being awake is enticing. If I had a normal life anchoring my desires and grip on reality, this blurring between the designated authentic world and sleep wouldn't be happening, but nothing in this world holds my attention. Contrarily, the dream world is exactly the same, every mundane detail.

Asleep, I dig up my backpack, buried in the backyard underneath a huge mass of bougainvilles, and count my money ($252,100 is left), unaware that I am dreaming, yet every shovelful of dirt and each hundred dollar bill is precisely rendered. I go into the living room and pick through my CD collection, read some of the liner notes, and spend an hour listening to Infidels (A Bob Dylan CD) all the way through. The dream is extraordinarily detailed and precise, no unreal or fantastic elements (other than Dylan). It lasts for hours with consistent visual, auditory, tactile and aromatic elements, all exactly like my life and house during the waking hours, except for Jean who I find sitting by my bed reading Bleak House. She sets it down and nods towards Moby Dick. We never speak directly to each other. The only sounds she makes are sighs and the laughter that first made her real to me.

Maybe I fall asleep listening to Infidels and reading the last few chapters of Moby Dick, not the cheeriest fare for one already flirting with the doldrums. Dylan is always depressed and apocalyptic; everyone but Ishmael is dead, and he's not doing well. Jean slumbers in the chair by my bed, Bleak House on her lap; just like she did during my week long reader's holiday after Cindy Lee and I broke up. It's utterly normal and I'm utterly content. Nothing is out of place and there are no dreamish details other than my mother. Her presence is increasingly acceptable to my scrambled sense of propriety, and is almost like a drug that centers and calms me. My meditations and prayers have been answered and the worst thing to do would be to question Jean's return.

Feeling an obligation to call Muruda, I pick up the phone and study it. Mom looks peaceful and content, slumped in my chair, smiling at her own dreams. Those dreams, within
my dreams are windows into places I will not attempt to explore. I'd say, "Don't rock the boat," but cliches are annoying, and it fails as a metaphor except for the rock which is sinking, pulling me down into a quixotic sea of mud and nod. I want to wake Jean and ask her a question, that's right on the tip of my mind, but out of reach, which is fine. I am lazy and dismiss the worries and questions tugging on my consciousness. This familiar position, in the crook of my mother's love, tranquil, disoriented and quiet, keeps me drifting through my nightly trance, deep into the a.m., having forgotten her death, I wonder how mom got up the hill to my house.

When I was a teenager Jean obsessed for a month on "The Dream Book" which is about directing your dreams, controlling where you go, who you see and whatever else the subconscious spews out during the night. The Dream Book turns up in a pile of books at the foot of my bed. I didn't buy it and I am uncertain as to whether it's real. The title only muddies the water, nonetheless I read it. Professional dreamers use various techniques to subdue and navigate dreamland. The easiest method is to focus on what one wants to dream about in the moments immediately before falling asleep. Of course, I'm not entirely sure if I'm awake or asleep and might be dreaming about trying to direct my dreams; or, I may be inadvertently trying to control my waking state from a dream (though then I should have a book called "Awake!"). It's a new level of disorientation that at least serves to help dissipate the ennui that threatens to suffocate me.

Jean never leaves the chair by my bed and still hasn't said a single word. When she isn't around, I assume that I'm awake, but as these dreams (or trances or hallucinations) go on, I'm increasingly disconnected and unaware of my status. Truthfully, I don't care if I'm asleep or awake and choose to believe the most positive scenario: That my meditations and readings of her favorite books have summoned Jean's spirit. When she's not at my bedside, I imagine her to be in Purgatory satisfying
whatever duties souls there are assigned. At one point I cover all the bedroom windows with aluminum foil, encouraging the endless stupor that has taken over my life.

Having lost track of how long I've been in bed, I'm seized by an urge to go outside to see the larger world, hoping to find clues that will reveal whether I'm in a dream or not. My imagination isn't capable of accurately recreating the world in its entirety—like it does my cabin. I'll be able to recognize the real world. The clock by my bed says it's midnight or noon. I'm going outside.

Wearing only a pair of shorts, I get up, make my way out the backdoor into the dark foggy Hollywood night, a dreamscape if ever there was one. Stumbling around the side of my cabin I kick over a trashcan (very realistic), hop a fence and walk across the driveway onto my front lawn and sit down. Studying the sky, hoping to catch sight of some familiar star or the moon, I look for inconsistencies that will tell me if this is a dream. Not that it much matters—in a dream or not, lately I've been living in my head or in the past or through my books; anywhere, but in the real. In the last year I spent vast resources of my energy mourning or scrabbling away from regret, which apparently left me vulnerable to weird phenomena. Having Jean around, regardless of the capacity, has brought me to a halt and stumped all drive, leaving me up in the Hollywood Hills, stuck in neutral.

An erection wakes me up. Calculate for however long I've been up here in the hills with my head in the clouds, the morning wood summons up an extravagantly erotic memory of another time I woke up with a boner—Alicia was laying on the floor next to my bed licking one of her dumb pretty girlfriends. Almost as if they'd planned it and were waiting for me to wake up, her sex toy orgasmed, spurting a gummy liquid out the tip of her clitoris while Alicia finger-fucked her. At the time, oddly enough, I thought that was a dream, until both women started in on me, sucking and fucking; and, well, this was on my mind as I fell back asleep, thus inadvertently using one
of The Dream Book's techniques which brings Alicia into my life of dreams. She never
did seem real, and fits right in.

Someone is banging on the front door. I peak out the window and see Alicia in a
typical costume: black skin tight toreador pants, low leather sandals and shreds of a
black Cramps T-shirt that makes her look desirably frightening. I left her and Tommy
because I was tired of the druggy life. Not that I can recommend my current dream infused,
day to day way of living, undisciplined and lonesome.

"Let me in," Alicia hollers through the door as she jiggles the knob.
I lay down on the living room couch and yell, "How did you find me?"
She doesn't answer and continues fooling with the door. Alicia's criminal skills
allow her to go where she wants, and the door swings open. Haughtily walking right past
me, she explores the cabin, complaining about the kitchen and the bathroom, lingers in
the bedroom and I hear her talking to someone. Then she's back, into the living room
onto the couch right next to me.

"I thought your mom was dead."

This is a definitely a dream. I get up and glance in the bedroom. Jean rolls her
eyes. She's never met Alicia in real life, but if the occasion arose, mom would find
lots to roll her eyes about. If I have my druthers, which is rare, Jean and Alicia will
have no confrontation or eye rolling contest. One of the tenets of The Dream Book is
that once you realize where you are (in a dream in your own head), it's relatively simple
to control events, and suggests that you can even fly or practice other magical powers;
but to me, making Alicia do what I want is supernatural enough. As I sit back, close
my eyes and attempt to take control of Alicia, she is already on her knees in front of
me, expertly sucking my dick, which is gratifying and confusing. I can't remember how
it happened, getting hard or anything; I'm just all of a sudden in her mouth. The pleasure
is riddled with suspicion that she is uncontrollable regardless of the venue. Another
earie thing is that while sex was on the agenda; first, I was planning to make her
speechless. Not with my dick necessarily; because, in the real world, during our drug dealing days, whenever Alicia wanted to control me, she put my cock in her mouth. Once again, my druthers would prefer to fuck her agile pussy. Dream or no dream and regardless of the setting, the woman is an Olympic calibre cocksucker. On a purely carnal and base level, it feels about as good as man is allowed to feel in this short dreary life; and yet, she has me in her clutches, as if I am in her dream. One would think that I’d be servicing her. One would think many things. Alicia is a complicated woman. Trying to unravel one of her plots is wearing and a waste of time; especially if we’re in a ridiculous dream war. I just want to go to sleep or wake up; and she’s gone.

Food forces me back out into the wilderness of Hollywood proper. Trying to avoid Aunt Mary and everybody else, I bus down to an obscure Korean grocery store on Melrose and La Brea to buy five loaves of sourdough bread, three industrial jars of peanut butter and ten pounds of granola in a bag that looks like it holds dog food. Struggling towards the bus stop up Melrose Avenue with my groceries, I notice a small house that’s been converted into a storefront for Madame Bluesky, a palm reader and interpreter of dreams. I’m reading the sign on her front porch, didn’t intend to go in, when the psychic’s lackey appears out of nowhere, picks up my groceries and hustles through the front door forcing me to follow him into a waiting room. It’s filled with pamphlets, pictures of Popes and Presidents, religious and new agey crap, and stinks of incense and old women. I pick up my bags and am about to exit when Madame Bluesky opens the door to her inner sanctum (there’s a plaque above the door calling it that) and gestures me in.

The Madame is a well-heeled vagrant with her hair dyed black and is tricked up in an outfit of flowing skirts, a long colorful bandana and a enough jewelry to open a shop. She’s very white, Irish maybe, playing a gypsy, and may be a little drunk. She is talking to herself steadily while a small dog (breed unknown) is growling and running around under her skirts. The manservant puts me onto a couch more suited to a psychiatrist than a palm reader or a dream weaver. Madame Bluesky wastes no time and kicks off the
prognosticating immediately (vague, almost rude gibes about my love life). I sit up to complain.

"Please, lay back, make yourself comfortable."

"I'd be comfortable sitting up." The couch smells of cabbage and perfume from the sixties.

"Who is the soothsayer here, me or you?"

"You, though I'm not interested in anything you have to say about ... my sooth; what is a sooth?"

"It's the truth! I'm a seer, a see-er of what's to come. Your future is an open book to me. There's a woman ... "

"I don't care about that."

"A man, then."

"No, no men or women in my life. I've killed all romance and friendship off." I could predict my future. The same as the past and present. "I'm more interested in your take on my dreams or, just in dreams in general."

"Your mother has passed," she says casually, studying her nails. God, I hate scary women.

"How did you ... "

"Did you look at my sign? Why would you come in here? If you don't believe?"

"Calm down witchy woman. Your assistant volunteered me; kind of herded me in here. I don't not believe in you .... The thing is, my mom passed away, about ... a while ago."

"And you'd like me to contact her. Fine."

"Oh, god no. I see her all the time. She's living at my house."

"Um ... I don't understand."

"It's just that, my mom, is sitting in my bedroom and I'm glad ... really. She is literally the only person whose been there for me, my entire life. She's my mom."
"That's why I knew, when you walked in. So polite. A mama's boy, all day long."

"That seems to be the consensus. After it happened, I went into a tailspin. Quit a good job. Went way off into the deep end. Bad, bad like you don't want to know."

"Sure I do. I'm like a doctor."

"It kind of seems like it. It's good to talk it out. But... you don't want to hear everything."

"Yes, I do. I can give you... what's it called...?"

"How can you give it to me if you don't know what it's called?"

"It's like a lawyer..."

"You mean, attorney/client privilege."

"That's right, you got it. Only it's doctor/patient. So you did drugs and lost your job. Why would I tell anybody that? Come on; details." She puts her hand on my shoulder and I see the woman under the disguise. If it wasn't for the horrible black hair, she'd be cute. She's around my age, but it's hard to tell anything else about her because she's so wrapped up in the Madame Bluesky role. I look at her hand on my shoulder, she withdraws it and says, "How can I help you if you don't tell me everything?"

"Jesus, I have no idea."

"Okay, then leave."

"No, no, you guessed good on my mom. You want to know everything? First, I staked out a couple of banks. I didn't care if I got shot while robbing..."

"Hold up, no, don't tell me about that. God, you people. I thought you were, like, blowing grass."

"You wanted to hear it all."

"I was wrong. Back to your mother."

Madame Bluesky is a little queasy for someone who allegedly contacts the dead, but I forge on. "I went into a long, deep, dark depression. Somehow I got hooked up with this world class whore, Alicia. And the sex..."
"Okay, this is what I mean. This is interesting."
"... and we went into the coke business, like tons..."
"Whoa, whoa... back to the dreams... and your mother."
"Yeah, yeah... you didn't see any of this coming? I told you. I'm just trying to figure out what's real. It's great that she's at my house all the time. It's given me a little bit of closure. Before, it felt like every human part of me had been destroyed. But she won't talk to me. Just sits by my bed and reads. Or listens to me read to her, which is...
"The whore wants you to read to her?"
"No! God damn it. My mother. My dead mother."
"Your mother has definitely passed away?"

"Have you been listening? Look, I wouldn't even have stopped for a second in front of your little..." I wanted to say con game, but I hate to be rude. "If I could find a rational explanation... I wouldn't be talking to someone like you. But if there is something going on up at my place, supernatural, maybe someone like you knows how to deal with it. Please, just tell me, are you all bullshit, or..."

"Let's start over. In a couple of sentences, tell me your problem. Dreams? Dead mother. Leave out robbery and the whores and coke dealing; unless your mother was involved."

"You're right... surprisingly. Here it is: I think I'm dreaming all the time. And my mom is at my house, except I don't know if it's a dream or not."

"Let's see if I have this right. Your mother is actually dead?"
"Yes."
"And she's at your house?"
"Sitting in a chair by my bed. I read to her."
"Well, this is remarkable."
"That I summoned my mother from the afterlife?"
"No. That I'm qualified to help you." She points at a certificate on the wall behind
me. I turn to see that she may have graduated from UCLA and is a psychologist.

"Is that legit? You're Rita Bluesky? You graduated?"

"Yeah, for all the good it did me. I spent a lot of time studying Jung and dreams and a bunch of other crap. When I got out of school, positions for psychologists were scarce. I found an online job paying $20 an hour lying to people about their dreams. One thing led to another and here I am, dealing with robbers who hang out with whores and have issues with their mothers."

"Excuse me."

"Don't feel bad, I had to work as a stripper to get through college."

"Okay, well, that's nice. I'll drop in again sometime."

"Don't get butt hurt. I know what's going on with you."

"Pray tell."

"Do you think your mother's really there, or is it only in your dreams."

"In my dreams, probably, maybe. Maybe not."

"I'll need $200."

"It says $25 out front."

"That's the bullshit rate. We're going to spend an hour talking about what's happening to you and more than likely, once you know, it will stop."

"What if I don't want it to stop."

"Are you here because you're happy?"

I stare at her. Fucking bitch. I am not happy. After turning 21 steady happiness evaporated. For brief periods, maybe dozens of them, I was happy for an hour, several hours, even a whole day once or twice; but those brief flashes of happiness are buried underneath long terrible periods of loneliness, self-loathing and a sense of separation from the rest of humanity. Living with my mother was embarrassing, for those years after I got kicked out of college, and yet they were also the last time I felt, if not actually happy, at least content; I wasn't miserable and suffering. And there were the nights
with Alicia, fucking my heart out. Base fugitive moments of submersion in her wonderfully dark version of love, I experienced a stirring counterfeit of what normal people feel. The irresistible bliss of plugging myself into Alicia was undeniably addictive. During her heroic fucks there were brief flashes of a sinister yet true happiness. If I could fuck Alicia’s perfect cunt nonstop forever, well, that would fix everything.

"No, I’m not happy. So . . . what?"

"When you see your mother . . ."

"Her name is Jean."

"All right. When you see Jean, what do you talk about?"

"She doesn’t talk."

"Nothing, not a word?"

"She sighs, laughs sometimes."

"And you said something about reading?"

"That’s how it starts. I imagine, or dream or god knows what . . . that she is in some afterlife situation, purgatory maybe . . ."

"Purgatory, holy shit, how gothic."

"I know, I know, but there’s literature on it."

"The Bible?"

"No," I say wearily, "I think the Catholics started purgatory, probably. My aunt half convinced me of the possibility. And I began reading books to my mother, to Jean, all the time, every night for weeks. And then one night, I heard her laugh, and not long after that, she appeared. It may have been real, or as real as supernatural beings and things of that nature are . . . you tell me."

"There is no supernatural. There are no dead people talking to any live people. All there is . . ." she waves her arms around, "is what you see around you at any given time."

"So, it was all a dream."
"It was all a dream. You're projecting at best, what you want to see. At worst, you've gone bat shit psychotic crazy and are actually hallucinating, seeing things and hearing voices."

"But I don't hear her voice."

"Exactly; and really, sitting here, talking to you, I just don't get that psychotic mental breakdown vibe. You're a sad and lonely man who has been spending too much time alone brooding about your mother. It's not healthy."

"Oh, God."

"There's no god, either. Two hundred dollars, please."
Chapter 23

Beer is Love is Beer

Sitting on the cast iron bus stop bench, from memory I tentatively recite the part of Moby Dick where Ishmael first meets Queegqueg the cannibal. It made my mom laugh that first time. Whether it's my faulty memory getting the scene wrong or that Rita is right, there's nary a peep from my mother. Maybe I have to be up at the cabin to get through to her. No . . . Rita Bluesky's no-nonsense appraisal of my mental state has pretty much convinced me that I'm a sad sane man in a secular world. The only mysteries are buried deep in my addled psyche which enjoys using its fevered imagination to fuck with me.

It is all in my head. In light of her chosen profession, it's difficult to ignore what Rita says about the afterlife. The very word: afterlife, gives up the game. After life is death. Yet I still mutter as much as I can remember of Ishmael and Queegqueg's first meeting, an incantation from a previous life that has only just ended down the block at Madame Bluesky's house of lies and truth. It's proper that she charges more for the truth, if indeed that's what I got for two hundred dollars. Her atheism was bracing and reminded me of Jean in a secular mood. This sets me off on yet another senseless train of thought that entertains the shaky notion that my mother possessed the fake gypsy in order to advise me.

I'm so into my reverie and latest personal loss (of a ghost) that I don't at first notice the two homeless men approach and sit right next to me. Swinging my attention away from my fading delusions, they drift into focus and I study the pair. One is what locals uncharitably call a gutter punk, a teenager incongruously dressed in punk rock fashion, his clothes so dirty and tattered they may have come from the wardrobe of one of the original 1977 punk rockers; a dead one from the smell of it. The gutter punk's partner, fifteen years or so older, looks like a surfer far down on his luck, flirting with old age at thirty-three. He wears nearly traditional hobo garb: a dirty T-shirt under a sports jacket that died twenty years ago and an awful garment that can truly
be called sweat pants. The kid is sitting on the ground leaning against the bus stop bench, tearing up a beer can and the older one is on the bench next to me, steadily staring, waiting to be acknowledged.

"Who the fuck is Ishmael?" he asks politely.

"What do you mean?"

"You been sittin' on our spot here for, like, a hour, talkin' about Ishmael. I was gonna say somethin'..."

"Your spot? This is a bus stop."

"Yeah, but we hustle change here, everyday. Get beer money."

"Got any beer?" the punk kid asks.

I ignore him. "You guys have been sitting here watching me, no one else has come by, and that's your hustle?"

"Beer," the kid says, simply, his life simple in all ways.

"I'm Lost Bob," the older hobo says, "and this is Gizmo. He only seems stupid cause we're sober."

The new hole in my life wants to be filled with something, anything; and these guys, the first fairly human characters who've wandered within my sphere, are drafted.

"I might have some beer up at my place," I say, half mad at myself for being such a needy little bitch.

"Maybe?"

"Well, we can get some, I guess. Does it have to be beer?" I don't like beer.

"Can't drink guesses and maybes. Now, is there a actual plan to come up on some beer, or what?"

"I can assure you, if beer is so important. It's not a problem. We'll get some beer."

They hold a hurried, grunted confab. The kid, Gizmo is all for whatever I have in mind but Lost Bob wants to work me for all that he can. "Do you got a couch at your
pad, maybe?"

"What?"

"I figure you got the bread to finance us all tyin' one on; well, we need some place to crash."

"Sure, whatever." I am at the loosest end possible and these two roustabouts will likely be a distraction; and I suppose their pathetic state and obvious homelessness reminds me a little bit of my lost compatriots Glitch, Termite and the rest; God, I can't remember their names.

I buy my new alcoholic friends a 48 ounce bottle of Budweiser each, which Lost Bob brown bags up like a mother swaddling an infant, and we get on the bus, taking the big seat in the back. They proceed to inhale the beer so quickly that I fear for their health. Gizmo belches thoughtfully, holds the empty bottle up to his eye, staring in it as if looking for a lover he misplaced years ago. Lost Bob hits the end of the bottle so that it bangs into Gizmo's face. He balls up his fists for a second, then they both chuckle appreciatively at Lost Bob's wit and the head change brought on by 48 ounces of beer.

Fondling his empty bottle, Bob stares at me, and even though I've told him twice, he asks, "Where's this pad of yours?"

"Hollywood Hills."

"Liquor store?"

"Right where the bus lets us off, at the bottom of the hill."

Lost Bob scoots a little closer to me and says softly, "Nothin' wrong with it, but I ain't queer, ya know. However . . . " He nods his head towards Gizmo, raises his eyebrows and leers horribly.

I'm fully taken aback. The idea of anyone willingly having sex of any sort with the filthy drunken gutter punk is so ludicrous that I burst out laughing, which is a nice head change for me. I knew these goofballs would be a distraction.
"Yeah? Yeah?" Lost Bob says, thinking god knows what.

"Hey!" I grab him and quickly let go as his jacket is stiff and greasy. "I have no interest in your little buddy there."

"Hey, jus' tryin' to be hospitable," Bob says, as if the bus or maybe the whole world is his home, and offerin' up his teenaged friend is something any good host would do.

Gizmo scrunches up his face, lifts his shoulders, runs his hands theatrically through his hair (a crooked grown-in mohawk), bites his knuckle in an Italian gesture of exasperation, cracks his knuckles, and I'm beginning to wonder if he's a mime running through his repertoire of gestures, when he finally cries out, "What's happenin'? Are we fixin' to get some beer?"

"Do you have any other conversation?"

He licks his lips and asks, "Like what?" genuinely mystified.

The next morning I toe Lost Bob and Gizmo's inert bodies. They're wrapped up together on the living room floor. It never occurred to me that the homeless beer hounds were a couple, with Lost Bob acting as pimp if necessary, in order to procure their precious beer. Last night, realizing that Rita Bluesky has completely blown the circuit in my mind that generates the dreams or the delusion of my dear mother; I decided to abandon the cabin and go back to my house in the Valley to hang out with Tommy and Alicia, whom I consider friends, maybe my only friends. The rent on the cabin is paid up six months in advance and I told Lost Bob they could have it. He was suspicious and amazed and couldn't grasp all the angles of what I was trying to do.

"You paid all that rent? Up front?"

"Sure."

"If you don't mind my askin', how much did that run ya?"

"It's fifteen hundred a month, so, with the deposit . . . a little over ten
thousand," I said, while piling up some logs in the fireplace at Lost Bob's request. Apparently they are always cold.

"Hot damn," said Gizmo, "ten thousand dollars!" as if he refused to believe in such a sum. "That could'a bought, like, a shitload'a beer. We coulda had . . . " He can't finish. The idea of irresponsibly wasting so much money on rent nearly shocked Gizmo into coherence.

Beer is their money, their sun and moon, the reason they get up in the morning and what they dream of at night. Beer isn't their God so much as a steady sacrament that elevates the two of them to a divine state requiring no reflection or study. Poor Gizmo is obviously willing to do anything to get enough beer in order for him to be able to function and think about how to get more beer and so on ad infinitum. At one point during the night, after I ranted about Alicia and the wonders of her pussy, the way she could outtalk, outthink and outdo me in nearly all things; it set Lost Bob off, bragging about a few of the women they'd known and how each one of these feminine paragons in one way or another was worth a guaranteed amount of beer. Sex didn't seem to be a consideration, except as a bartering tool. Bob's and Gizmo's focus is admirable, their goal always in sight and more easily achieved than my neurotic concerns. I assume that when they come upon me at the bus stop, the obvious despair and air of the lost in my bearing suggested bear. Their low expectations have surely been exceeded.

"Why you givin' the place up? What's the rub?"

"Nothing, I'm moving on."

"What have I gotta do?"

"Absolutely nothing, the place is yours."

Lost Bob is fingerling the beautiful Persian rug, trying to figure its worth in cases of beer. He narrows his eyes and softly asks, "Are you a cop?"

"Why the fuck would a cop buy you beer and offer you someplace to live for a few months?"
"Why would anybody do it?" Bob asked, angry for some reason. He took a huge swig, and lets the anger go.

As long as Lost Bob was there drinking my beer, it seemed fair to vent and spill out my troubles. It felt so good to do it with Madame Bluesky, I wanted some more. Without drinking a drop, I got a little contact high, which loosened me up and set me off talking, about Alicia mostly, but everything else too, all of it. Bob didn't mind hearing about my list of crimes, fornications and corruptions. A decent listener, he gave me the impression he'd heard it all before, and was in fact an aficionado of careless episodes, depraved behavior and wanton crime—giggling where some might have gasped. Gizmo was a terrible listener (his main comment, "Huh?") and his one track mind caused him to be sent down the hill three separate times for beer. I gave him money for food, but he spent it on beer. Gizmo got lost his second time down the hill and we had to go out and find him stumbling around three blocks away, cursing, trapped in one of my neighbors' cactus gardens, of which there are an absurd number. I called a cab to tote him up and down the hill the last time, then had to break up a fight in front of my cabin. Gizmo had spent the taxi fare on beer, and tried to run away even though they were parked out front. I paid the cabby off and invited him in for a beer, which turned out to be a rookie mistake. Lost Bob insulted the driver until he left in a huff.

"That wasn't cool," Said Gizmo. "See how he was eye-fuckin' our beer. Uncool."

The amount of liquid they consumed was riveting, unnatural, like something out of a tipsy fairy tale. Gizmo, no more than one-hundred-thirty pounds, could belch like a thousand pound bullfrog in a way that defied the laws of physics. Neither Bob nor Gizmo seemed drunk, all the way up to the point where the little gutter punk sadly said, "Beer," keeled over, moaned piteously, then curled up into the fetal position. He may have been snoring, but directly contradicting his magnificent belches, his snores were steady high little moans, as if a clarinet was crying, an immensely sad sound. As we sat next to the fire and listened to the pathetic snore-moans, Lost Bob considered his little buddy
and said, "Sometimes I think I should smother the poor little guy, just as a favor."

"Why beer?"

"It's cheaper."

"Wine is just as cheap. Cheap wine, anyway."

"Beer is more American. I'm tryin' to set a good example for Gizmo. 'Sides, you don't hear much about people drinkin' themselves to death on beer. We could go on forever like this. Seriously . . . " And he passed out.

Making sure that my guests are unconscious (for all I know they've killed for beer money), I slip into the backyard and dig up the backpack full of money. I leave a hundred dollar bill on the kitchen counter, and abandon everything else (forty-odd books and some clothes). I haven't counted the money in a month, but figure there's got to be at least a quarter million. I hike down the hill, hop on the first bus running, which is going in the opposite direction of the Valley, but I don't feel like sitting on a street corner with all that money. I ride until the bus rolls past a taxi stand on Hollywood Boulevard, jump off at the next stop and give the driver directions to a place I am optimistically thinking of as home. Hoping to gather some forward momentum I dig around in the backpack and am inordinately pleased to find a little notepad I bought while feeling mildly ambitious some time in the past. The driver lends me a pen and I start a list of things to do. In high school and college I thought of myself as a master list maker and considered lists one of the hallmarks of successful men. Right off the bat, 1.) See how badly I've fucked off UCLA by missing so many classes.

As I'm writing it down, it seeps into my consciousness that the only reason I'd attempted to go back and finish college was to make my mother proud or happy or something. She is gone. I've wasted money, time and several pieces of my soul while accomplishing a weird sort of nothing that involves a dead woman. Now it's out in the open (in my head); I wasn't college material the first time around back when I was young and relatively
handsome. The list has immediately proved its worth, turning my attention fully onto the UCLA problem, bringing reality into focus. There’s no point in going on. I scratch school off the list. I quit.

Deliberately not thinking, I quickly write out a new 1.) Use the money I have left to start a business, possibly with Alicia and Tommy. I wait to see if it’s another ill-conceived non-starter, but this one is common-sensical, it stays on the list. Maybe I could open a hip coffeehouse that has live blues and folk music, and sells books and art. I could be the manager. It would give me something to do. I have no idea if Alicia will go along with this latest delusion; although, I imagine it’s delusions like this that ordinary people need to keep going. Tommy will likely do whatever I come up with since he has nothing going these days; and, I protected him from Broken Tony’s collection tactics (Tony’s claims of no violence only makes violence seem imminent). Since he’s unemployed, Joe, Neruda’s husband, might want to get involved while I’m in an entrepreneurial mood, though most coffeehouses don’t use an in-house architect. Still, a job is a job. It’s been a while since I’ve felt any sort of ambition, it’s making me giddy.

I look at my list and can’t help but feel thwarted, there’s only one item. Seeking momentum, I add 2.) Buy some clothes. Although, I left a lot of clothes I liked back at my house in the Valley. Who knows how much money I’m going to need to start my coffeehouse. I cross number 2 off the list. Now there are more crossed off items than there are actions to undertake. Thinking outside the box (so to speak) I try on for size and write 2.) Fuck Alicia. This seems a reasonable and altogether timely ambition given that I’ve only had sex in my dreams the last couple of months. I underline fuck for emphasis and then write 3.) . . . and I’m stalled.

The cab turns onto Woodman Avenue, my street and I’m not quite ready to face Tommy or Alicia. "Driver, could you just spin around the block a few times."

“What the hell for?” He’s one of those long-haired rednecks with an NRA sticker
on the bumper.

"Because I hired you, to drive me around, and that's what I want."

"I got, like, normal fares I could be takin' to normal places instead’a whatever you're up to."

"Christ on a crutch," I say, pulling a hundred dollar bill out of my backpack.

"Is this enough for you to drive and not complain?"

"Yeah; but, just drive in circles?"

"By not complain, I mean don't talk, just drive."

He holds the bill up to the light, studies it for a long moment, and says, "Dumbs the word."

So we drive around and around my block. Each lap takes about two minutes as the cabby is driving sarcastically slow, maybe ten miles an hour, though it's inadvertently wise. Any faster and we might run over one of the numerous dogs, kids on bicycles, joggers, or any of the many locals out and about on this sunny Saturday morning. On one side of the block there's even a flag football game in progress with a dozen teenagers running up and down the street like joyful savages unafraid of traffic or anything else because we are all in the heart of suburbia, the pinnacle of civilization, peaceful, beautiful, full of happy families, well tended gardens and yards; there is no setting or place in this cruel world where I'd rather live. I only retreated to the Hollywood Hills' sham suburban neighborhoods (houses too far apart, not enough kids, too many rich people, etc.) to take a break and work out the kinks in my head and heart. Now, driving in circles around this wonderful piece of real estate, I know that it's the only place I can comfortably exist and prosper. I do lack one component of traditional suburbia: A family. Such a simple concept. Families are unavoidable when one spends even just an afternoon in the suburbs, which conversely wouldn't exist without the common American family; although, nowadays, any household with even one parent (or two gay parents), a few kids and a dog, in my estimation qualify as classic suburbanites. The cabby turns on some music, an
ancient Neil Young CD, Harvest I think, a melancholy soundtrack that suits a wretched mood. I wasn't fully in touch with my wretchedness, but the music brings it home.

I do not fit in this neighborhood. The household I'm returning to, with Alicia, Tommy and possibly a few castaways and dysfunctional dancers, is the discordant note around these parts, the exception that proves the rule. All the surrounding houses are full of functioning families set on a sunny path, mom and/or dad goes to work, the kids go to school and into the crystal clear future. My house is the one that parents warn their children to stay away from and we're generally excluded from the web of community that holds everyone else together. We're not invited to any of the barbecues, birthday parties or holiday get-togethers. It wasn't like this when my mom was alive and I worked at Nordstrom's. Then, suited and tied, I fit right in; after I took up with Alicia and Tommy it turned sour. Sadly, it's all I have. Maybe I can get back into my neighbors' good graces. I'm drawn to this warm, safe neighborhood that cradled my family as I grew up. On about our tenth time around the block I see a couple of little kids wrestling with their dad on the front lawn while mom sits on the porch, laughing with joy at the sight of her family. The wholesomeness is almost morbid; or rather, the lack of my own normal loving woman, my own family, the loss of the last two decades when I should of been following the proper and well beaten path to this suburban dream is what makes me morbid, all the out of reach joy. On the next lap around the block I see another woman standing on the corner, on her tiptoes pushing back her boyfriends hair, and the sweet, simple gesture touches me in a way I'd rather not be touched. Those people have everything. I don't. We drive past them and I turn around to look through the back window and see him lean gracefully, effortlessly over to kiss her on the forehead. It breaks my heart. I barely notice tears literally flowing, soaking my face. The utter emptiness of my life has me weeping. The release is awkwardly satisfying; it takes a moment to realize how much I enjoy my heart falling to pieces. We come around the block again and I look for the couple, and there they are, hand in hand, sighing, giggling and whispering to each other like it's a god
damn romantic comedy. It pisses me off, I can't get enough, and the tears come twice as hard. An undeniable bittersweet pleasure courses through me. Now that I'm emotional and raw, as we cruise around the block again, the sight of every happy-go-lucky kid, besotted couple, serene family, and heedless suburbanite gives me a thrill of pain. A huge lump in the middle of my chest is feeding the steady stream of tears, which I savor like a flagellant. In the front seat the driver grunts disapproval of my weeping, but the hundred dollars keeps him mostly in check. I pull out my list and consider exactly where to begin when one wants to start an entirely new kind of life fifteen years late. As I review the paltriness of the list so far, number two, fucking Alicia, gives me the far-fetched if not downright bad idea that maybe, like me, Alicia is ready to settle down in suburbia to start a family. The cab is just passing the god damned happy couple again and I vow to fuck Alicia so thoroughly that she'll at least consider the notion of motherhood.

Passing my house for the umpteenth time, I tell the grumbly driver, "Pull over, right here."

"That's $67.50."

"Keep the change."

"Oh no, that $100 was to shut me up, as you so rudely asked, and to drive in circles when I couldn't half a dozen normal fares who most likely wouldn't a been moaning like a little girl. So, fork it over 67.50."

I give the great greedy bastard his money, slam the car door, and walk up the driveway into the garage of my house. I'm a little nervous about seeing Alicia now that I have this absurd plan. I think about making a new list, of reasons why she should consider changing her life by starting a business (a family business?) with me, but first I'll take the lay of the land and fulfill number two on my woeful list.

Upon opening the door I am immediately rewarded with the pleasing sight of Alicia asleep laying face down on the couch completely naked, her arm wrapped around a pillow.
It makes you wonder about divine providence. I set down my backpack and take a quick
tour of the house to see if Tommy or anyone else is here. The place looks good, as if
no parties have recently raged here, and no troops of prostitutes bivouacked and demolished
the place. Conveniently, no one else is in the house. I sit down on the rug next to the
couch and stare at Alicia’s back and butt. Considering the life she’s led, the woman’s
skin is beautiful, taut yet soft. Completely on its own, my hand is running up her thigh,
over her uniquely curved butt and then back down in between her legs. She always contrives
to have a faint vanilla smell down there. Though I assume Alicia’s asleep, under my
carasses her legs come slightly apart, far enough for me to get at and softly rub her
clitoris, and to slip a finger partway in where she is suspiciously wet; so, I slide
two fingers in and very slowly finger fuck her. She mutters in her sleep, thrusts slightly
and opens her legs all the way. It’s evident that Alicia is awake when she pushes her
butt hard against my hand and moans.

"Alicia?"

"Hezlikiah?"

I pull my fingers out and stand. "Who the fuck did you think it was?"

"Don’t stop, I was having such a good dream. Oh my God, baby. Here . . . " and
she fumbles at my pants. I’ve been hard since I first saw her on the couch. "Perfect,
stick it in. Now!" She pulls me down and has my cock all the way in immediately up to
the hilt and I push both of her legs back almost to her head so that I can get in even
deeper. She grunts like an animal and bites my shoulder. Contrary to most of our past
sexual experiences, Alicia immediately, loudly comes, which sets me off even though I’ve
been inside her for about eleven seconds. Welcome back to suburbia.

"Sweetheart," she says, biting my neck, giving me goosebumps, "that was so good.
I missed you. I’m so glad you’re back."

"What’s happening?" Still inside her, I’m no judge of anything, but the mood is off.
"I’m for this new attitude, but the last time I saw you, there was talk of my finding
a normal woman."

"You're the one who stuck your finger in my pussy while I was dreaming. Jimi Hendrix was fucking me on this helicopter flying over Viet Nam." Even her dreams are lavish and preposterous.

"Okay . . . wow . . . "

"Come on, I don't care about him. He's dead. You're here, and, god, why are you so secretive?"

I carefully pull my cock out and collapse. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I thought I knew what was going on with you." She stands and puts on a large T-shirt. "Let's go in the bedroom."

"Right, but afterwards we need to talk."

"Baby, you can do whatever you want to me."

I missed something. I follow her into my bedroom, which someone cleaned; I sure didn't leave it this neat. Alicia goes straight to my closet like she owns the place. There's a big cardboard box of bills, paperwork and other crap I'd been too lazy to purge or deal with when I was last in residence. Alicia drops it on the floor, sits down cross-legged and pulls out a hardback biography of a Canadian bank robber I'd admired for about a week; and I know what she'd found hidden in its pages.

"Baby, why did you let me abuse you about the bank robberies when you'd been at it before we even met?" Alicia pulls out the newspaper articles (security camera stills and all) I'd foolishly saved from my successful robbery. "You could have had your way with me. You're complicated . . . I don't know what to think; you know?"

"I know," I say, sadly. I can't live up to this.

"How many did you do? I mean, if you don't mind my asking. Obviously, you don't brag, and I understand. And you're probably a little bit put out after the way I treated you. I'm so sorry, seriously. Not many men could have fooled me like that."

"Me and Jimi Hendrix."

"Come on, sweetheart. I don't know what to think. You act one way, then leave
the house and god knows what you're up to . . . " She's gushing, playing with my hair, looking right at me. I'm going to take some small advantage of the situation. "Hezikhiah, do you have any plans?" My plans are going to surprise her.

"Yeah, well, you know . . ."

"I do, I do know. I found those articles a few days after you left and, god, I felt like such a bitch and a fool. I should be mad at you. Maybe, me and Tommy can do the next bank with you. Don't worry, I haven't said a word to him. Didn't want to say anything to anyone without talking to you first. It's hard to believe I misread you so completely. I don't know what's wrong with me. You know what I mean?"

"Sure."

Alicia is not going to be a good suburbanite. Then, she's actually kissing me. The whole time I've known Alicia, we've fucked about 20 times, but probably only kissed about 10 times. When I'm not a dangerous bank robber she thinks kissing is too intimate and a waste of time. She'd rather suck my cock than kiss my lips. It's sad as hell.

I last about two sweet minutes the second time around, and Alicia comes four or five times. It's a hopeless situation.
I wake up with Tommy and Alicia in my bed, a bed far too small for a heterosexual man whose friends are tangled up naked right next to him. Throughout the night Alicia, who is fourteen years younger than Tommy and me, turns into a strange and aggressive succubus/pimp/damaged creature that enjoys humiliating men. She likes sex far more than most women and men, too much really, but she doesn’t consider fucking an intimate act and if one is so sentimental as to refer to it as “making love” Alicia will ridicule the idea of love mercilessly. After Tommy and I refused to have sex with each other for her entertainment, Alicia pouted until Tommy agreed to put on her panties and roll around on the floor. I was a little drunk (Alicia’s brandy), and only half enjoyed the evening’s relentless carnality; but I did enjoy that half. At one point I retreated to a bedroom corner and sat in my black velour chair to watch Alicia athletically fuck Tommy while leering at me. I wanted to find my list and rip it up. The achingly odd thing is that Alicia believes I endorse her sexual predilections, relished the night’s drunken orgy, and accept everything else about her life, drugs and all. She loves all of it and herself and ignores my reservations. In her febrile mind I rob banks because I am a proud but humble outlaw blowing off steam, and we are both over the top libertines seeking extreme sensations of any and all kinds. In truth, I was desperate and needed money to escape, from myself I suppose. She refuses to accept that I robbed only one bank, insists on believing that I am being modest; not understanding that relatively normal people who steal or rob in moments of weakness, prefer to deny their crimes. Before we started in on the brandy and the night’s sexathon, I tried to have a conversation with Alicia about the future of our relationship, and alluded to a placid suburban life. She ignored me completely. When I pressed the issue and presented a short list of reasons to settle down, she pretended to not understand. Possibly as puzzled by me as I am by her, she
scoffs at the future and shuts down all talk of it. In between couplings Alicia went into the bathroom for a long shower and a vigorous douche. I took the opportunity to talk to Tommy about what the hell he is doing.

"What in the hell are you doing?"

"Alicia is my girlfriend."

"No she's not."

"How would you know? You haven't been around."

"She tried to make us fuck each other."

"Yeah, that was scary."

"Alicia is scary. She told me you're all excited about robbing banks with me. Are you up for that?"

"Not really. She's been trying to get me to do it, the whole time you were gone. I'm a terrible thief. We went shoplifting one day and almost got caught. I got chased down Melrose by these girl clerks. We go grocery shopping and she walked out with a full basket, in front of everybody and got away with it."

"Dude, she has, like literally, almost a million dollars socked away all over the place."

"No ... no way. Last week we dined and dashed at Burger King."

"It's a fact, she's got money coming out of her ass. She told me."

"God damn it. It's, like, a constant battle to stay on my feet with this bitch. I'm off balance, always. She lies for no reason."

"It's all bad. She's a control freak who's completely out of control."

"Still, believe it or not, I figured her out a little bit."

"Bullshit."

"No, listen. Whenever she, like, tries to make me do something weird or over the top—when I resist or argue, it makes her happy, like crisis is the point. I mean, if you give in, well, she'll take advantage and have you robbin' banks or fuckin' a dude.
She likes drama. I'm not sayin' it's any way to live, but . . ."

"When I refused to rob banks with her, she didn't like it one bit."

"And I'm not sayin' it's a perfect system or anything, I'm still tinkering. It's just that she's a drama machine who enjoys a good argument, a spectacle."

"So, you're not going to leave? You see yourself staying here, living like this, indefinitely?"

"There's some things, we get along . . . I mean, what am I gonna do? I'd go back to dealing pot, but I don't have a penny. I still owe you, like, a $100,000 'cause a that Broken Tony bullshit. If it wasn't for this house . . ."

"God damn it Tommy, you don't owe me shit. Take off those fucking panties."

It's almost dawn and they are both in a deep slumber, worn out by hours of sex, arguing and steady drinking. After knocking off a dozen pints of the cheap virulently tasty peach brandy favored by the debaucheress, they finally fall out in the middle of cunnilingus, Tommy's arms wrapped around her legs. Despite his theories and our conversations, Tommy lavish a lot of love and attention on Alicia and I am genuinely sorry for him. He's been a good friend. Tommy's a sweet man who easily falls in love with stubborn, cock-eyed women, like Francine who deserted and left him to the sophisticated mercies of Alicia. I wish, for Tommy and I, an entire alternate reality where we have been steady pals for the last 20 years, with good wives and a small flock of kids, leading full lives here in the Valley. A warm little fantasy.

My outbursts of misguided longing for Alicia in the last 48 hours, imagining that she might be a romantic partner, have dissipated completely. In the cold morning light I see that by virtue of her youth (as one ages away from it, youth becomes nearly an extraterrestrial condition) and her willful egocentricities—a match between her and any person is far-fetches. A small team of men and women might be up to the task. She is an unorthodox and beautifully peculiar individual, and in her case individual means
alone. Alicia's militant lifestyle is a way of testing men, or driving them off. Her stance is, if you love me you will love me no matter how far out I am or how far I want you to go. Unfortunately, sharing her on a regular basis is too far for me. I'd spent the night engaging in what many allege is the most intimate act, literally merging with each other, yet those hours of intimacy made me even lonelier than I was up there in the Hollywood Hills reading Melville to my dead mom.

I get dressed, trying to make a little bit of noise, but they are out cold. The emptiness in me—that the sex didn't address—wants to be filled with conversation or a smattering of bonhomie. My friends remain rudely deep down in the unconscious. The Tommy and Alicia chapter of my life has run it's course. I'm headed off on my own. I'd rather be lonely all by myself.
Chapter 25
Karl Marx, Lyndon Johnson & my Mom

I am abandoning another house; four all together, if you count this one twice and the
loft we abandoned to the police during the rout and retreat. I put $25,000 in an envelope
for Tommy and write him a short letter which mostly advises him to run.

As I step outside with my trusty backpack, night dissolves into day. The sun creeps
over the horizon and eats the moon. I never know what time it is anymore, clocks have
lost their hold on me. The sidewalk and the streets are deserted though a raccoon nods
to a cat coming on to the day shift. A distant bus sounds like it’s grinding coffee.
Sparrows in the trees discuss the cat. Mocking birds cry of cell phones and car alarms.
A van, full of feral teenagers, sneaks by looking for some new brand of trouble I’ve
never heard of. Croggy clouds drift aimlessly. The air is crisp, the lawns and houses
well tended and fragrant with imported ferterlizer and exotic wood in the fireplaces.
Every yard is different, some are like well kept golf courses, every blade of grass
healthy and obnoxious; there are bonsai and cactus gardens, one old woman has rose bushes
from eleven different countries surrounding her entire house; while a new agey couple
has a miniature farm growing carrots, peaches, pineapple, tomatoes, oranges and avocados
smothering the front and backyard, supplying enough organic food to feed a small army
of horticulturally minded hippies. I pass a yard filled with slides, a trampoline and
swings which look forlorn empty of children; and who knows what’s going on next door
because they have a ten foot high bush across the entire front yard blocking out the
sun and the world. At today’s real estate prices most of these houses probably run around
a $100,000, but many owners have driven the price way up by going wild remodeling, adding
rooms, entire stories and according to local gossip, underground shelters in case of
war or government interference. There’s a small park, an empty lot covered with pickle
weed, and as the sun rises higher I’m stalked by a 100 year old jogger. Early morning
commuters, warming up cars all up and down each block, step out and study the sky like
generals losing a war. I smell eggs and bacon glumly crawling into frying pans. Dogs in a hundred yards wake from dreams of paperboys living in the wild. I love it all. I love suburbia; have I mentioned that? My neighborhood reminds me of growing up in my Mom's houses, well cared for, loved, with one eye on the future laid out for Neruda, Dalí and I while we were still in the womb. That's where I've been headed from the minute I rolled out of bed and abandoned yet another house at dawn this morning. I want to be back in the bosom of our irregular yet perfect family. I'm going home.

Picking up the pace, in five minutes I turn a corner and see the old homestead at the end of our glorious block. The San Fernando Valley is the essence of and the most suburban neighborhood in all of Southern California, maybe the universe. Turning up the driveway towards Mom's house, every part of me centers, my blood pressure settles and becomes perfectly sedate, the shroud of loneliness falls away and I take my first easy breath in months.

Our lawn is overgrown, there are bunches of flyers and batches of litter scattered on the front porch. Taking a couple of minutes, I pick it all up. Around the side of the house the trashcans stand at attention, ready to work. It makes me want to mow the lawn and trim the bushes. I haven't been here in five or six months; truthfully, I can't call it within several months, time is lost, my life has been erratic off the grid. All the stupid pot smoking last year didn't help. I'd lost my key to the house during the cocaine debacle, but there's a way to wiggle the sliding glass door in the backyard, and it lets me in.

Though I'd paid rent on the house for a year in advance (oh God, house number five!), no one, neither Neruda, Dalí nor I has dealt with Mom's stuff. All the furniture and appliances are still in place and the power is still on, giving me the illusion that things are as they were. It's dusty, so I go into the bathroom, wet a towel and work my way through the living room wiping down the coffee table, all of the bookcases, clean the television and a shelf full of bric-a-brac that nearly starts me crying again. It's
a bunch of 99¢ Store knickknack crap given to Jean by us when we were kids. Junky little snow globes, cheap glass animals, arts and crafts projects we made at school and wholly unmemorable birthday presents that mom displayed like heirlooms. Cleaning and dusting, I keep busy, trying to resurrect the past, wipe the kitchen counters, refrigerator, dishwasher, and study our family pictures covering every surface, Jean's shrine to her family. There are a pile of bills inside the front door, none are shutoff notices, except for the phone. Last year I gave the property manager a big money order and he must of made an executive decision about keeping the electricity and water on.

Standing outside of Jean's bedroom, I freeze, stopped by a lifetime of habit, the long ago kid in me afraid that I might see her with a boyfriend. At 12 years old I once caught a glance of mom through her half open bedroom door, wearing only a pair of blue jeans, brushing her hair, and it gave me a bad moment. I didn't like to think of her as an actual woman with qualities such as breasts that her manfriends might find interesting. As a kid I preferred her strictly in the asexual role of my mother.

I'm sitting on a kitchen stool, in a trance, staring at family pictures on the refrigerator, missing Neruda, mom, and even Dali though he treated me badly and to this day Dali hasn't tried to contact or call me. Mom passed away and our family fell completely apart. I'm about to start crying again, when a sudden notion sends me out of the house, towards the supermarket to buy peanut butter, jelly and sourdough bread. I run halfway but am so out of shape and shaken by the exertion that it takes a good ten minutes to bring my breathing back to normal (one of the grocery baggers asks if I'm all right). After shopping, I take it easier and walk home, go around to the backyard to sit on the picnic table and make a sandwich. It's something mom and I used to do.

Jean cared about appearances and kept the front yard looking nice and the lawn trimmed, which is one of the reasons why the neighbors liked us back in those days. But in the backyard we used to let the lawn grow wild. We were so busy with school, work, sports, friends and our magnificent lives, sometimes the backyard grass got to be eight
inches high. To a kid it was a spot of wilderness in the center of a boring civilized world. One night in particular I remember mom and I sitting in the backyard, eating tuna fish and avocado sandwiches for dinner, just the two of us. Dali and Neruda were off with their friends at a soccer game. Jean was talking to me about Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, how they were radical revolutionaries, far more dangerous than the Clash (my favorite band at the time) who I thought were serious revolutionaries. Filling my head with lofty ideas and revolutionary war trivia, mom shared her intellectual passions with me as if we were equals, topping off the evening with a John Adams biography. Conversations like this turned me into a voracious reader just like Jean, because I wanted to be just like her. I didn't want to be a drug dealer or a bank robber or to even know such people.

Rueful over how I spent the last year, I need the distraction of a good book. Going through mom's library in the living room I discover a Karl Marx biography and take it into my bedroom. Years ago, Jean and I had a backyard conversation about communism and Russia's long hard haul. The next day after school I found the definitive Karl Marx biography on my freshly made bed. I meant to read it but never did. Mom told me that Marx had all these ideals and sincere beliefs about the bourgeois and government, but when it came to his daughters he wanted them to go to the best schools, make good marriages with wealthy men and to enjoy all that the elite have to offer. He wanted the imperfect world changed and for men to conduct themselves well in a new perfect way; but not until after he and his family enjoyed the good life and were long gone. I never read that book. I'm going to stay here and finish it, and all the rest.