CRIT

by

Andrew Kiraly
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Dean of the Graduate College

Graduate College Faculty Representative
ABSTRACT

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Andrew Kiraly

Dr. Richard Wiley, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

This creative thesis, a long work of fiction, is about a rock critic, Gabe Sack, who writes for a Los Angeles-based music magazine. He is tired of his job and decides to quit. However, his boss gives him one final assignment: he must track down an obscure lounge singer and write a profile of him. With his friends Staley and Darcy in tow, Gabe drives to Las Vegas. During the trip, he reflects on his life, his attitude, and his relationships with others. He senses that his job, which requires him to criticize the work of others, has had negative effects on his personality. During the course of his trip and his search for the elusive lounge singer, Gabe attempts to confront this truth and become a better person, with mixed results.
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CHAPTER 1

I was brain-deep in scotch and squinting to resolve the quadruplets on stage into Steve and Jeff McDonald of Redd Kross—truly, a shell of a shell of their former selves—when I decided to quit my job. Sure, I'd been considering it for months, but only as a fantasy, a perverse mental luxury, a giddy what-if scenario that shivers with the import of the Life-Changing Event. Tonight, however. This was it. My veins were boiling. The Whisky was infested with hipeoise.

Something about that Friday night crowd of aging dipsters in their Spock haircuts and stovepipe jeans—pushing 40, pushing strollers, pushing vinyl like some quaint tribal religion—watching with that disastrously polite, shushing respect of museum visitors. Something about those erstwhile thrashers from Hawthorne, Redd Kross, who once penned thrilling paeans to Linda Blair and Charles Manson, plodding through a set in a way that a more charitable rock critic might characterize as representing a seasoned approach to their oeuvre or somesuch bullshit. I was quitting, outta here, and Redd Kross—prancing now to a flat-footed rendition of "Sunshine Day"—was really going to get it in next week's issue.

They were decked in boutique Silver Lake slummer shit no doubt carted out of some downtown Salvation Army and marked up 400 percent; stringy hair that looked like it was auditioning for comb-over stunt work, Third World-chic frames fashionably underfed. Everything was overripe, and one fuming grumphole named Gabe Sack

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(thaaaaaat's me) was just the perfect rotting cherry to jam on top in order to send everything over the edge from mortifying to morbid, from corny to the worst kind of camp: the kind that manifests itself against anyone's will and to no one's delight.

Argh. Slap a handful of Xanax to my mouth and elbow-peck me in the neck, would you?

But for now, the hieroglyphics on my notepad were starting to settle down from their scotch-induced dance, so I ventured to drip some more venom on the page about the McDonald brothers betraying the very movement that had spawned them, mucking around in this nelly "post-punk" pabulum, and not even for something delicious and dishonorable like money; they were marooned on some indie label run out of some guy's spare bedroom in Modesto and would, much to my satisfaction at least, live out their days essentially hawking merch with novelty sets featuring the occasional *Teen Babes from Monsanto* track.

I wrote "MotherFUCK!" It seemed the most fitting form of punctuation.

Kate arrived at my end of the bar, ignoring the din of requests for Red Bull and vodka by the poor, parched rag-store refugees. She put her pretty face in her hands, her elbows on the bar, and said she didn't know what I looked more: drunk or unhappy. It was a testament to her grape-tightening cuteness that I couldn't choke up a witty retort. So I just told her I was a little bit of both, dear, and did she know any cures for unhappy, because I certainly had no problem with being drunk.

"I've got a cure," she half-yelled over the crowd noise, the music. "My place for coffee. You look like you can use a good kick in the head, soldier."

The grin that spilled across my face couldn't even be hampered by the fact that Redd Kross then launched into—what?—a cover of "Hot Child in the City."
"I hope I don't look that pitiful," I said. "Do I look that pitiful?"

Kate pretended to wipe a gob of saliva of her cheek. "Well, you are sputtering.
But I do like you despite that. It's the rare man who's attractive when he broods."

I could have hopped the bar right there and lip-locked to a mushy soundtrack, the way she suddenly ducked away to the taps to rescue a glass from overflowing with Newcastle, grab two Coronas and pop the tops with a certain gawky finesse. She jammed lime wedges in the tops, gave them up and came back to me.

Then I remembered. She arched an eyebrow at what must have been my crestfallen look. "Kill me," I told her. "I'm going to Kraft's party." She gave me an eye-rolling oh; it didn't exactly occur to my fucktarded self to invite her or anything.

"Mandatory duty."

"What timing," she said. "How are we ever going to sleep together?"

"Wanna come?" I said. Too late. I shrugged. Kate, in fulfillment of her duties as a "scenester," was well-apprised of Kraft's snifly little bi-monthly shindigs, usually the result of him shoring up some temporary network of sketchy coke connections to dazzle friends and sycophants with how "crazy" ol' Clark Kent could be once you got him outside the telephone booth.

"Think I'll pass on the coke-and-Jacuzzi crowd tonight. Just promise me you won't wear Speedos."

"Trust me. This is official business. Anyway, it'd make up for this national emergency." Red Kross flailed desperately.

"Beg to differ, Gabe. At least they're sticking to their old stuff."

"Some call it pandering."

It was her turn to roll her eyes. "They can't win, can they? I think you're about
ready for a new career. Undertaker, perhaps?"

"Funny you say that," I said. "I'm quitting."

"My. This is certainly sudden."

"No shit. I decided five minutes ago."

"You're not due for a mid-life crisis for another, what?" —she checked an imaginary watch on her wrist—"ten, fifteen years." Kate waved off a contingent of chain-wallet grommets calling for her. Dipsters at the gate. "Save me some gory details for later?" she said, picking her way backwards in her green Chucks. I dragged a finger across my heart, up to down, left to right.

Any fuzzy, scotch-aided daydreams of a coffee-talk tryst would have to wait, however, when I noticed that the leather-clad keg of a man next to me—who had spent a good portion of the set methodically nipping at a glass of whiskey—began shaking his head and smiling, as if laughing on the inside at a joke he'd just told himself. He muttered something to the effect that he couldn't believe it was me, Gabe Saek. Normally when mooks approach me in the clubs to shake my hand or curse my lineage, I muster at least a bemused interest. This meathead, however, seemed to be fishing for my attention. I was just drunk enough to bite.

"Your mindless servility should be more than enough thanks," I said. "And you are drinking?"

"Don't know," he said, raising his glass to inspect it. "Some Irish shit." Redd Kross was in the wailing throes of finale, wringing out Sabbath's "Citadel" as if in hopes of absorbing the faintest mist of credibility. There are some moments in rock that can nearly convince you that, at last, the giant is slain. Thing was, we weren't trying to kill it. This was one of those moments.
"Kate, more Irish shit for the gentleman," I said. I extended my hand. "And you are?" No handshake. Then I telescoped it back into my little cube of personal space.

"Just call me an admirer of your prose, Mr. Sack."

"A mouthful. At least tell me if we've met before. Because if we have, either I was drunk or you, sir, didn't make a good impression." I only acted friendly out of a sense of self-preservation.

He nodded. He didn't look at me, as if eye contact might betray some practical joke he was brewing. Just sat there hunched over his new glass of Irish shit—dutifully served up by a frazzled Kate, now swamped with post-set clamorings for drink, drink, drink—with his silly blue handkerchief wrapped around his skull. "Oh believe me, I made an impression, all right," he said, bursting into a hoarse chuckle. "Took a while for you to forget me, pal. But let's talk about you. Your line of work."

"What about it?"

"How'd you get into it, man? I always wondered." he said. He sounded impatient.

"My cheekbones thwarted the supermodel path."

"Be fucking serious. You're acting nervous." He looked at me. He had a little knot of a nose and black, hating weasel eyes. Ever look at someone and you can instantly see his high school yearbook photo looming behind that face—that pinched, insecure, distrustful little core around which he grows? Mr. Hanky was one of those cases; you could sense the wizened little sophomoric soul behind the glare-catching leather jacket and the gang-style hanky pulled over his dome. Nonetheless, he had me off guard; something in this he-knew-me-but-I-didn't-know-him schtick made it seem he had some sort of claim on me. And one part of my brain was telegraphing to the other part that my
remembering just who Mr. Hanky would make the difference between me walking out with a regular face and walking out with an order of deluxe faceburger.

"Well, my case is textbook," I said. The guy did start to look familiar. "College newspaper, internship, job. Birth, school, work, death. So I guess you might call it dumb luck."

"What's so dumb about it?" he said.

"Listen, can we just get drunk together and be friends for a night?" I said. "I don't know what's bugging you, but I'm trying to catch a buzz, too."

"No, really, what's so dumb about it?" His voice lapsed in that tone of nearly fawning reasonability; he was cat-and-mousing with me. "I mean, you're pretty good at it. I read your stuff every week, Mr. Gabe. So maybe luck wasn't so dumb in this case, you know. Maybe it was fated."

That dormant volcano in my head—the one under which sarcasm bubbles—erupts at the worst times. Call it my curse, my disease. I succumbed now, too: "Fated. Wow, man." I delivered it in the tone of some drug-hag swinging off the rings of Saturn.

His hand on my back had the solemn weight of a hammer. "Gabe. Gabe. Why do you have to be sarcastic all the time? I see you do that shit all the time in your articles, and sometimes I wonder how far it's gonna get you."

Suddenly, Kate was standing there. "You gents okay?" She gave me a quizzical, concerned look. Out of completely different impulses, no doubt, Mr. Hanky and I both nodded her off.

"The reason I say that," he continued, "is 'cause I used to wanna write about music."

"Well, your grasp of the English language seems suitable enough—"
"Bullshit. Grammar's a bitch that I can't hang with," he said. He jammed his elbows on the jar and hunkered down as if—alert!—his life story was forthcoming. He threw back his whiskey with a grunt and turned back to me. "How you remember all those rules? What kind of brain you need for that? It's beyond me."

Sensing that the guy was just unoriginal enough to launch into some self-pitying jeremiad, I left a crumpled five on the bar and rose to leave.

"Which is why I figured I guess I gotta play music if I can't write about it," he continued. "What kinda music you like, Gabe?" He turned to me and put his hand on my shoulder again, this time from the front. I felt an insistent pressure to return to my stool. "Okay, dumb question. I guess as a music critic you gotta like all types, right?"

"Well, I'd say Limp Bizkit is certainly a toss-up."

"Ha. Funny, too." Mr. Hanky's brand of sarcasm—if I may be a critic for a moment—was obtuse, blundering, overdone. All he needed to complete the line was a hearty slap on the knee. Then he looked up at me solemnly, scoldingly: "You like metal?" Despite his meat-paw on my shoulder, I still wasn't sitting; nonetheless, he was taking on the aspect of a father earnestly addressing a wayward son. "You know, heavy metal?" He air-quoted the words like some out-of-touch parent, then he returned his hand to my shoulder. "Because I think you might have a bias in that department."

I admit that I'd lobbed some uncharitable lines at metal in the venerable pages of Bang Bang, but then again, any paper-scouring nitpicker with nothing better to do could assemble a case saying I was biased against whatever his fave genre happened to be. So Mr. Hanky was one of those: a maddeningly overscrupulous reader whose mania for the drift and details of the local press belied a dire need for a constructive hobby. I didn't pity him. I didn't care if he was bigger than me. I wanted to go.
"Did Mr. Headbanger get his feelings hurt by one of my reviews?" I said. I tried to temper the tone in my voice with something like laughter—something to show my mirth was, despite its edge, inclusive—but, judging by how his face suddenly went Puritan on me with an aggrieved scowl, I suspected it didn't work. At this point, I pretty much expected him to smash me in the face.

"My feelings," he said, smiling. His teeth were, actually, were as white and neat as chalk; did I have a poseur on my hands? "This isn't about my feelings, Gabe. This is even more personal than that." He removed his hand to pull the blue hanky back off his head, revealing a shiny dome with a black tat zigzagging back on his head's western hemisphere in one of those vague, exotic designs dubbed "tribal" by alterna-tards. That tattoo suddenly framed an unsettling memory that had been floating in my head during my whole conversation with him, but one that I hadn't paid enough heed to fully bring forth in my mind: a fisheye-lens pic of some biker-warthog gracing the inside sleeve of a demo CD submitted to the "310" column along with three other men—a black-maned horse of a guy who, in his metal shoulder-plates and studded codpiece, needed only a longsword to complete the picture; his would-be twin, sporting the same but with a streak of white coursing through his ink-black hair; and a pathetically thin, punch-drunk-looking drummer, a medallion with a raven's head adorning his sunken chest. Just the sort of L.A. image-mongers, I thought, that the city needed to shake off like fleas. That was a month ago. The only thing I couldn't remember was the name of the band.

"Remember Nunpuncher?" he said. He remained on his stool; he was confident that I wasn't going anywhere. Meanwhile, the scene inside the Whisky had fallen to a smolder; the stage empty and the brothers McDonald having taken off to their own private hellish embarrassments, the stragglers were surrounding the bar as Kate yelled
last call. Usually when it happened, I absolutely hated it: but now I wished with the fervor of a zealot that someone, anyone I knew would come up and save me with a "Gabe! Hi!"

"Nunpuncher?" I said. "Can't say I do." A lie. If the mook wasn't quite animal enough to smell fear, he could probably notice it in the way I was rotating my glass. Noticing it myself, I snatched my hand away and plowed my fingers through my hair. Nunpuncher was a terrifically uninspired band that had somehow clawed its way into the consciousness of the scene playing simplistic doom metal that was somehow mistaken for being a parody (an album cover that looked like a scene from a Wagner opera splashed with several buckets of blood helped). They'd landed a deal with Metal Blade and their single, "Rock Your World's Ass," had even managed to pass through the hallowed gates of KROQ.

"Death metal? Heavy shit? Let me see if this rings a bell," he said, looking at the ceiling in search of a memory. "'Nunpuncher has plundered the worst elements of heavy metal—namely, the grade-school sexual fixations and clichéd Guitar 101 licks that led to the cheese-metal epidemic of the '80s—and forced them into painful copulation for music that you don't so much listen to as endure.'" I found myself mouthing the words along with him. He stopped and smiled with satisfaction. "Want me to go on?"

I said no.

"You're a pussy, Gabe," he said. He seemed to manifest an almost fatherly disappointment, which was good for me: it reduced the likelihood he was going to pepper me with knuckle-kisses. "I got no beef with critics taking shots from afar. But one who can't take credit for it in person? That to me is what a pussy does, Gabe." He turned back to his drink, as if he'd been expecting something completely different from me, a
something I failed to deliver.

"I know," I said.

Kate orbited by, two dripping bottles in each hand. "More scotch for the pussy, please," he called out to her. Kate looked at me, and I made the mistake of telegraphing her a painful smile that said it was okay, it's just a joke, I'm playing along, see? To protest would have shown a defiance I didn't want to pay the price for; I had reasoned that, if David (now I remembered the name!) could indulge in humiliating me for a while, it might defuse any desire he had to give me a good thrashing.

I sat there for another half an hour, tied to the stool, to David, by that leash of fear, engaging in a conversation utterly unremarkable and pedestrian except for the word pussy appended to each of David's sentences like a rhetorical kick to the nuts.

So have you ever played in a band, pussy? How'd you get into this business, anyway, pussy? Is being a pussy a job requirement, pussy, or is it just a nice pussy quality to have, pussy?

I spaced out sips of scotch, since I had yet to hit Kraft's party; I couldn't have my dignity, but at least I'd have sobriety. And to think I had been looking forward to the get-together, if only for the sense of smugness that came so easily and wore so comfortably around his band of friends—mercenary, urbane, vapid and, above all, loathsomely good-looking. But leave it to a wronged band member to jettison that possibility tonight; for the guitarist for Nunpuncher had momentarily wedged between me and my image of myself something I worked hard on a daily basis to avoid: the truth.

"I'm starting to wish you'd just kick my ass," I said.

"Not too late for it, man," David said. I was amazed by how he could go from weirdly amiable to menacing.
"You forgot."

"Whoops. Sorry, pussy," he said. "If you hadn't lied, I might've considered smacking you around a bit. But the way I see it, man, you don't deserve even that. Pussy."

"You've got principles about this shit? You should've just slugged me and gotten it over with. And speaking of getting it over with, I have to run." I waved mightily to Kate across the bar, who stitched her brows quizzically again, and I told David good luck with his band, and even, in some half-hearted gesture of detente, offered a sloppy handshake.

"Good luck with what band?" he said.

"What do you mean?"

"We actually had a showcase for Elektra this week at the Viper Room. It's ain't happening. The bottom fell out."

I let my hand fall limply in my lap; what do you say to that? A thousand pussies wouldn't have sufficed.

I cussed, bitterly and under my breath, in an attempt at commiseration. It's been a defining feature of my life that I don't realize until too late what kind of emotional freeway pile-up I've caused with my words, and, as a sort of compensatory strategy, I'd always come back with some theatrical show of sympathy. I momentarily imagined that David might break down and cry (I mean, as long he was breaking stereotypes, why shouldn't the mook go all the way?), but he was maintaining a fairly matter-of-fact composure about it. In a more reasonable (and slightly more sober) mindset, I'd be loath to admit the possibility that I was a factor in Nunpuncher's breakup; more often than not, the sketchy puzzle pieces of desires, personalities and agendas at cross-purposes (and
either too much or not enough beer) caused a band's demise. But thanks to that special, magical way that alcohol amplifies your sense of asshole relevance to the workings of the world, at the moment, I believed him.

"That shit takes the wind out of your sails," David said. Now he was nervously rotating his shot glass. "Not me so much. But those others guys get sensitive sometimes. Over a fucking month of practices, shit just went south 'These new songs don't feel right. Let's try a new direction.' You know how it goes from there."

I drank to quell a smile; I wasn't exactly thinking of somehow atoning for causing the breakup of Nunpuncher; instead I sat, once again, in secret grinning awe of my powers. Not to say that I didn't feel bad, on some murky level; but I can venture a generalization and say that for music critics, the holy grail of validation lies not in merely being read—oh no, that wears off about as fast as a Krazy Glue high—but in more concrete evidence of efficacy. While it's gratifying to wield your words with a surgeon's precision, the real fun is watching them take effect like a wrecking ball.

There is a place for compunction in all this—after all, here I was at the Whisky, alternately wringing my hands and jigging gleefully over the death of Nunpuncher (one imagines a collective funeral for the band, chromey black guitars, codpieces and a 24-pack of Pabst piled in a iron coffin fashioned by some wicked post-industrial madman)—but that was but a dwindling vanilla stripe in a churning whorl of self-congratulation.

I've been to rock-scribe conventions where the critics, gathering for some after-hours convo over drinks at the wan, pastel Hyatt bar, love to do nothing more than bonk each other over the head with blunt observations about music, pithy top-10 lists and desiccated witticisms about industry trends—but the conversation never fails to gravitate
toward that topic where pride and inebriation catalyze to umpteenth degree, The Time X Called Me Back. This is where I tell the story about Tommy Lee, apparently indignant about my boiling half-star review of his project Methods of Mayhem, left me a voice mail message that said, "Here's my review of your review, asshole," and heartily pissed for 30 seconds in his Hollywood Hills bathroom; where the guy from the L.A. Times talks about how Al Green's publicist called to scream so wheezingly, so vehemently about one April Sunday edition's politely withering concert review that he apparently passed out ("Either that or he forgot to hang up the phone," the Times guy said), or Limp Bizkit guitarist Wes Borland phoning the Austin Chronicle critic to unload a cargo of vitriol that devolved into the wronged guitarist rhythmically slapping his dick against the receiver along with shouted exhortations to "critique this, bitch" ("Sounded to me like no more'n three inches," the Chronicle guy said).

They're droll, exceptional tales, sure, but that doesn't mean we can't and don't live for them—not because of some puerile satisfaction of having gotten a rise out of our betters, but because, for a moment, the supreme screaming-into-the-void that rock crit so often is momentarily bore an answer—or at least an echo. And there is something to be said for the gratification of knowing you really pissed off someone famous; if Cher were to ever call and throw a bolt over me having dubbed her the "waxen diva who looks like some delicate novelty candle for a super-sized birthday cake," I think I'd be more than happy to pack it all in and sail heavenward.

Thus, it's only a few girlish skips of logic away that I should feel somehow cheated by David not neatly propelling one of his fists (cornily encased in one of those black leather half-gloves) into my jaw as recompense for my meanness in print, my cowardice in person—and I did feel cheated. For a Harley-humping ape, his temper had
sure subsided quickly, and the dirty snowball in my mind gathered mass with the
indignant thought that somehow I deserved more than this. I’d put in the time, led to the
breakup of the band, and royally pissed him off (somehow the fact that my review was a
true reflection of how I really felt was incidental to the whole matter); David’s fuse
sputtering out just short of high, righteous anger left me feeling shortchanged.

I deserved a good slug. I’d earned it. David owed it to me. Thus wend and warp
the logic of a man steeped in crit for too long; pissed at him for not being more pissed at
me, I succumbed to the dust-scuffing pique of the fourth grader who’s failed to get a rise
out of his classmate.

I told him to hit me.

I’d expected him to say What?—don’t they always say What? at those pivotal
points in the movies when The Outrageous Proposition is splashed onto the table?
(Following up on the thought, I was ready to do that boyish, shifty-eyed John Cusack
thing, the unsmiling nervousness: "Just...just hit me"). I’d expected to talk it out,
delicately unravel it like a wet napkin, an epilogue in which I explained that, well, gee, I
didn't really want to be hit (thank gawd you asked!); what I was really looking for was,
well, you know, some salient validation of my effect on your world. Tell me I exist, man.

The impact was swift.

Connecting perfectly with my left eye, the blow sent a wave of warm gravy into
my joints and I poured quite nicely off the barstool and onto the floor of the Whisky. As
the sea-level of the bar rose in a wooden, slo-mo wave, I saw Kate’s green Conversed
foot on the edge of the counter; she was scrambling over the bar to show David just what
the fuck was what when you mess with Gabe Sack. The throb growing even then as I
sank floorward, I could hear David in the supplicating tone of a man wrongly accused:
"But he asked for it, lady!"

Did I ever.
CHAPTER 2

Kraft's lawn—a sprawling fuzz-carpet jeweled with blue and green Malibu lights trained on the shrubbery as if each mock orange, each boxwood were about to break into song—was perhaps the best token of all his shameless WeHo pretension. Shameless in a good way; his unwillingness to varnish his wants was, actually, a quality I wasn't alone in admiring. Kraft wore his striving on his Fred Segal sleeve; it would have taken so much energy to loathe him for it that most of his friends and (ugh) associates gave up and took on the much less energy-intense posture of cheering him on; an "if you can't beat him, fawn over him" proposition that so often defines the dynamics of life when someone you know better than you want to steps over the threshold into the major leagues. Hell, he knew most people gravitated to him as part of this dynamic, he knew it wasn't out of any sense of personal fealty. We came to him as spectators in search of an answer: Was he going to bum up, or break the stratosphere's shell? It was his velocity that brought up the question. Kraft had worked his way up the Bang Bang chain through the vicious, backbiting orgy that is the sales department (versus, say, the vicious, backbiting orgy that is editorial), going from a cold-caller in a clearance-rack paisley tie to regional ad director to director and on to publisher in a scant, nearly mythical four years. Ever notice how people who win the lottery, when interviewed, blubber with there-there-nows about how the sudden windfall won't so much as muss their hair as change their values? In the lottery ticket that was Kraft's life, he grabbed the mic and said Hell yes I'm gonna change.
I'm gonna change everything. We took his shamelessness about it as a sort of martial, won't-bullshit-ya posture, and in a way we appreciated it. This sweep of emerald leading up to his bungalow was Exhibit A. He'd just moved in last year.

It was twenty past one; I was a wee bit late, checking my timing by the thin-strapped would-be Westsider gals who looked like they'd been ejected from the house by the sheer force of cool; shoeless and with skirts hiked high around their thighs, two of them were clumsily sharing a martini on the lawn. "Gaaaaaaaabe!" they squealed in unison. When they spilled onto the grass, the party had officially peaked. Without stopping my trajectory up the lawn, I did a half-ass twirl and saluted them. Editorial assistants. Honey-dipped UCLA seniors who thought, yeah, these soirees were the real crash course: it was where you were stripped, in quite a fun fashion, of the illusion that no, it isn't who you know...right? Right: and the Ivy was their place of ultimate pilgrimage.

Marcus the bouncer handshook me at the door.

"That, sir, is some prime real estate," he said. He took my head in his massive hands, inspecting me in the cursory fashion of a school nurse. "What did they do to my baby?" While Marcus didn't serve any particular function as a bouncer—we were civilized to a fault—Kraft hired him, I speculated, to play up the idea that these shindigs were exclusive affairs not to be taken for granted.

"Nailed me for a bad review. Believe that?"

"No shit?" Marcus whistled flatly. He was paid for the illusion of exclusivity, and to pretend not to care.

"And you thought music crit was for wimps," I said. "I guarantee you his knuckles are in a sling at this moment."
My head still in his hands, he looked at me with the stern worry of a dad.

"Nothing I can do about it, huh?" He smirked.

"Tempting. But I think I asked for it."

"Aw, Gabe, I can't imagine." When you're 270 pounds and look like a reformed pirate—kept the earrings, shaved the head—you don't need to couch your sarcasm; Marcus knew I could be an asshole.

"After you let go of my head, can you tell me where Kraft is?"

"Last I saw, by the pool. Avoid running into any more fists with that thing."

I've come to believe in the bromide that parties are an art; anything I've said or will say about Kraft should be leavened by the defense's argument that the guy could throw a party to rival the West Hollywood power gays. Sure, they crawled with all as-yet-unhumbled dot-com riches in from San Francisco, overslicked PR troggs, Echo Park trendoids, and second- and third-tier Hollywood lackeys; still, Kraft seemed to have a knack for inviting just the right amount and type of people so that conversations never wandered from a certain prescribed range of vaguely pleasant tedium: generally, a farrago of blasé, rehearsed "insights" into current events, politics and pop culture ladled over a brittle base of rumor and gossip about The Industry (choose one: Music, Film, Dot-com). It all had the effect of making us feel smart, stimulated and oh-so-decadently ensconced on that ever-hazy "inside track." Am I better for having recognized this as such? No, just about everyone did. It's like my friend Staley once said: Half of it is the fact that Kraft made feeling smart and beautiful so goddamn convenient. Why should anyone have to go out of his way?

The patio, dotted with tiki torches, was a gridlock of elbows attached to drinks; women in Prada thin-strap and guys in shiny, oversized shirts, as if this were a pre-party
for some touristy Sunset club crawl. I was playing the Underdressed Guy, but I justified it to myself with the explanation that I was here on a mission.

Suddenly, the happy moon-face of Megan was bobbing in front of my like a buoy.

"Godsakes, it's Mr. Sack!" she screamed. "And with a terrible black eye!"

"But both my ears are in perfect working order."

She held her martini at arm's length the way poor people imagine rich people do—as if it were a tampon. Her two exceedingly cute friends—tragically edible sorority material in cocktail dresses—leaned in on her and gave yours truly a faintly disapproving once-over. Megan was so bubbly, I swear that a gorilla could be fucking her in the ear and she'd try, try, try to look on the bright side and consider it an exotic earring. And it was just that bubbliness that I often found myself testing the limits of—mostly by playing the Brooding Writer around the office, cursing copy machine and coffeemaker alike—to which she responded with the serene smile of a Mormon missionary that, underneath, told me what a monstrous asshole I could be when I really put my heart into it. Thus her patronizing edge toward me, one that her friends had picked up on their own radars and were dutifully following suit with. If only she could nurture it into full-blown condescension, she had a fair shot at being promoted from office assistant. "And cute ones to boot. You actually left the house," she said. "Amazing." She mock-studied me like a painting.

I saluted. "Took a few tries."

"We must talk." Next thing I knew, she had her free hand clamped around my bicep like she was trying to squeeze out a tumor. It wasn't until her face swung close to mine that I caught a wino-worthy whiff of vodka on her. Megan—for all her bubbliness, a font of propriety around the office where bad behavior was subtly enforced as a fashion
statement—was quite drunk. I could have gotten a contact high just by hanging out with her breath. "I know," she said, reading my face. "I've indulged. But I wanted to talk to you." She waved to her two friends, who finger-waved back before they went inside where the DJ was throwing down some burbling trance; it drifted out on the patio like a long, lazy tongue. "Okay," she said. "I've got a friend in this band, and he wanted to submit something to you."

"Customer service is my passion."

"A sort of post-dance thing, but with guitars. I'm thinking Gorillaz meets Ministry. He's very smart. Very with it. What do you think?"

"Medium- to high-level suck probability."

"But it won't suck," she said. "I guess what I'm asking is...I'm feeling you out to see if you'll like it." She smiled in an attempt to look self-assured.

I put a hand to my heart and clutched an imaginary arrow. "And violate my most holy station as rock critic? Hopefully you won't remember this in the morning." I scanned the pool over her very pretty shoulder for Kraft, but the low wall, dotted with scrawny-looking date palms, was empty.

"I'm not asking you to act in an unessential..unethical manner," she said, teetering. "He's got some major label interest, but nothing's solid. Some strong editorial will give him just the right nudge. I'm just asking you to have an open mind."

"Don't leer. You look like an evil Tina Yothers."

"So you'll give it a listen?"

"That's all I can promise," I said. "He doesn't cry easily, does he?" She stuck a lip out and chucked me hard on the chin. I slipped back through the patio door. I might as well have a drink.
After nearly tugging the door off Kraft's stainless steel fridge door, I liberated an oatmeal stout (under the flame-shooting glare of some indie waif whose private stash it must have been), cracked it open and surrendered myself to the activity of mingling. Barely venturing two feet from the counter cluttered with glasses, cig-boxes, bottles and a plate of hummus with a cigarette butt jammed into it like an exclamation point—I slid into conversation with two of Kraft's "label friends" (his term, not mine) Doug and Marcus. A&R guy Marcus had most recently been staking his career, I'd heard, on having engineered the jump of NOFX from their own label to Capitol; with 21st century "punk" dominating the airwaves in its various prostituted forms, it was hailed as an object lesson that if the majors swore off the orgy of imitation and got back to basics—Exhibit A: take this slab of "real punk," punk!—then all would be well in the Magical Realm of Record Sales. Doug, meanwhile, ran longtime local indie label Pig, and much of his life was dedicated to demonstrating how much he was anything but one of those reactionary indie zealots by doing things such as hanging out at parties like this, with major label slugs like Marcus. Always between them was this simmering sesh of one-upmanship: who had more credibility, the indie label guy or the major label drone who supposedly didn't give a shit if he had credibility?

"Heard Bandwidth yet? Opened for Snagglepuss at the Gig last Friday," Marcus said. "Weird bill. Didn't think it would work—Bandwidth is pretty much pure electronica, with some definite throwback elements— but they made for a nice contrast to Snagglepuss."

Doug said, "Heh. You can always count on Snagglepuss for some true degradation. Right, Gabe?" They laughed and smacked their beer bottles together in a show of fraternity. "I love how you can walk away from one of their shows and just feel..."
so filthy, you know?"

I'd seen Snagglepuss; the band was a middling glam-thrash outfit—all crimped hair and mascara applied with a roller—that preferred a reputation for wallowing in high camp versus, say, wallowing in good songwriting. Listenable but dishonest; lead singer Candy Vixen, I'd heard, was actually a monied brat from the green and blue of back east who'd originally paddled westward to go to film school. Hardly the kittenish, eager-to-please gutterslut I'd fantasized sweately about when I saw Snagglepuss for the first time at Spaceland over a year ago.

I said, "Snagglepuss blows."

Marcus nudged Doug in the ribs (clad in a $42 "vintage" swim team T-shirt) rolling his eyes and feigning shmarmy exasperation. "The oracle at lo-fi speaks."

"Don't you two bright young men find the band...dishonest?" I said.

Marcus took this one. "Well, if you're talking about their image, I don't think anyone in their audience is naive enough to think they're trying to be real or anything."

Doug nodded. "Everyone bashes them for their so-called fakeness," he said. "But isn't rock and roll largely about fantasy? I think it's completely bold of Snagglepuss to knowingly wear their figurative costumes whenever they perform, knowing full well it is, on some levels, a lie." Doug, for all his passion about independent music, sounded sometimes like a complete pussy.

"Yeah, but singing heartfelt songs about growing up in an abusive household, junkie moms, shit like that?" I said. "I can dive into the pageantry as easily as the next ironic guy, but singing songs like 'No Daddy Please No' asks for some honesty."

Doug shot a glance at Marcus, eyebrows dancing. "That's a good point, but that's part of the band's whole schtick. Snagglepuss isn't so much a band as an artifact."
I heard a the distinct *zip* of a needle sliding across a record, and looked up to see a girl in a red wig lolling over the turntable—with no DJ in sight—in an attempt to beach herself on Kraft's Lawton sofa. "Whoops," she said, catching my eye and cracking a crooked, sweet smile. Then she leaned over the armrest and fired a formidable stream of vomit into a wicker basket. Another girl steadied the record player and put the needle back in place as though she were sewing a stitch. The thousandth Coldplay remix continued.

Marcus nodded. We'd meet for drinks sometimes and he'd peddle new bands. Despite the fact he was prematurely bald, he was also developing the cocky air of someone becoming successful before they deserved to be. "Yeah, you rock out to Snagglepuss, but, on the other hand, you sort of stand back and observe. You're sort of forced to operate in dual modes, to stand back and yet be invited to participate at the same time. *Very* sophisticated of them." He slapped me on the back. "See? You'll be liking them in no time."

"You two fuckers feed off each other, don't you?"

"You should hear Juggernaut," Doug said. "All rock, no spectacle. *Definitely* your thing." Doug was disgustingly handsome and dressed the way Volkswagen commercials imagined hipsters to dress: rumpled but clean.

A brief train of girls, holding hands, redolent with weed—a rare scent at these parties—bumped by us as they bumbled into the kitchen.

"Or The Eaters," Marcus said.

"You two sophisticates are losing me."

"The Eaters are like The Dozens, but with more of a sneer," Marcus said.

"And if you like Man Bites God, you'll like Juggernaut."
"Man Bites God?"

"Man Bites God," Marcus said, bathing Doug and me in a patronizing look as though we were foreign exchange students who didn't know the name of the president: humorous, yeah, but faintly distressing. It was just such small victories that these types lived for. "They just put out a new album on Paingate Records. You know Paingate, right?"

"That's an indie label from..."

"Sacramento," Doug said. "That Jason's a great guy. I totally respect his vision. I don't think he's turned a profit yet. Catbird Seat is their big band, remember?"

"Catbird Seat," I repeated flatly.

"I've heard them," Marcus chimed in. "Imagine a more fuzzed-up version of the Empire of Cock."

"Incredibly self-conscious," Doug said. "Like watching paint dry that knows you're watching it." Doug had that utter feyness that often came with indie cred.

They both laughed. I had little recourse but to nod in sage agreement through the fog that was enveloping me—I was so far out of the loop, I needed a roadmap as these two wielded their knowledge of hip obscura like a nightstick. I was as guilty as anyone of doing it; even the worst forms of art boasts the power to belittle when they wear the mantle of obscurity.

I feigned a pensive look, nodded with knowing confidence now. "Catbird Seat, huh?" I said. I cracked open the beer and licked my hand. "Sounds like Beefcake 77."

The two shared a brief look of shock, then did a little eye-roll as if for mutual comfort. Modest Mouse on the turntable now, mellowing out the room, heavily ribboned with skank smoke.
I pressed on. "Talk about self-conscious. I don't think I've ever seen them face the audience at any of their live shows. Charming in a way, I suppose. Heard of them? Beefcake 77? Portland?"

"Can't say I have," Doug said. Marcus just shrugged.

"I'm thinking Godflesh meets some methed-out Chili Peppers. Like The Poisoners, but with a definite industrial penchant-for-discord going on."

"The Poisoners?" Doug said.

I called his bluff. "Heart be still. Can it be that I'm speaking to a fellow Poisoners fan?"

Doug's bony shoulders sank with the admission. "No. Catchy name. Hope they copyrighted it."

"Marcus?"

"Not exactly up my alley, but their demo was well-produced," he said, taking a sudden an interest in his beer. He tipped the bottle to his lips. It was empty. "Call me a sensitive type, but there's only so much heavy stuff I can handle, you know?"

Then Staci, Kraft's girlfriend—corkscrewed black hair in need of serious taming, green feather boa writhing—floated up and locked her arms around Marcus and Doug. "How're my boys?" She squeezed their shoulders like an over-affectionate aunt. I could smell an invisible funnel of gin coming forth from her mouth; she dipped and wove when she talked, briefly flashing gifts beneath a purple work shirt happily missing two top buttons. Nothing worse than a tipsy beauty wielding sex, that flaming sword, underlining her unavailability with an orange furrow. Doug and Marcus, made suddenly meek by her presence, murmured back: yes, yes, we're fine, the party's great—though most of the crowd had slowly spilled into the backyard with the shimmering pool and clattering lawn.
chairs, outside where the cliché of cocaine could be momentarily reinvigorated by—tada—snorting it under the stars.

"As pleasure enforcer, I'm afraid it's compulsory anyway," she said. "However, I appreciate your cooperation in this matter nonetheless." She plucked Doug's cigarette from his mouth, dragged it deep until the ember was stop light red, and replaced it before he even realized what had happened. "And you?" She looked me up and down, scrutinizing but smiling. I waved as if from a postcard pic of yellow beach and blue sea, put on my best sunny smile. "Having a wonderful time," I said. "Wish you were here."

I managed to get a laugh out of that one; the little yellow incisor of hers said volumes to me: it said she had better things to think about than impeccable dental care, and she wasn't even self-conscious enough to hide the results.

"Perhaps I'll visit," she said. How Staci—earthy and genuinely nice—stomached Kraft's Westside striver complex was a math problem. She wound up, threw her boa around her neck, and vanished into the back yard. I suspected Doug and Marcus, like me, were suddenly in danger of dry-humping the nearest warm extremity. I snagged a second and third stout from the fridge (indie-waif, thankfully, having returned to her peaceful woodland home or thereabouts), and ventured through arches of smoke and a beaded curtain into the back yard again. Perhaps in their ongoing cooler-than-thou brinkmanship, Doug and Marcus would suss out that there were no such bands as The Poisoners or Beefcake 77.

Kraft had re-emerged from wherever he'd been hiding (likely in some walk-in closet with Staci, where, during these parties, they'd tryst with such scripted timing that someone was always sure to "catch" them and—the real point of it—later kick-start a round of gossip about how oh-so-hiply naughty those two were), sitting where I'd looked

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for him last, perched on the low wall that traced the small kidney of blue water that was his pool. Engaged in some important-looking, low-toned conversation with some portly middle manager or other (indeed, some considered it a benediction to get talked at by Kraft about *business* during a time so obviously given to pleasure), he was negotiating a martini in his left hand and, under his right arm, some blinking starfucker blond loosening up for a night of gawk 'n' squawk at Skybar. It was the source of only mild, whispered shock: unofficial word was that he and Teresa had (gasp!) an "open relationship," a designation I suspect Kraft cultivated like a goatee. Somewhat convinced by my third stout, I found less and less reason to stand on the edge of the pool's shallow end like a drooler while Kraft and his associate finished up their business. But Kraft had seen me, and his single finger held aloft in a paternal signal to *wait your turn, young man* stopped me. His associate reached down to shake Kraft's hand, turned on a heel, and walked past me such oblivion he could have passed right through. Kraft didn't waste a second: he gave me a robust body check—that sweeping once-over that instantly assesses (and, I suspect, consigns to hell) a person's fashion sense and moral stature—and a dry, effeminate handshake before asking me straight away just *what* special effects artist did the stunning work on my eye tonight.

"One hundred percent *au natural,*" I said. "Fortunately I have a soft skull."

"And I bet you'd just *love* to tell the story for the thousandth time," he said. The blond girl, meanwhile, followed Kraft's lead with her own body check. (She could at least work on *masking* her contempt.) "When not being a consummate smartass, Gabe is an authoritative rock critic," Kraft said, waving a hand from me to her. "He's—wait, let me see if I can get this right—" he touched his temple, shut his blue eyes "—'a fresh voice in what is too often a cacophony of so-called critics.'" He was quoting a brief
mention I'd scored in a *Time* cover story three months ago, some weird 12,000-word paean to "eminently unsung" Los Angeles. In fact, it was when I'd received that glib accolade—from a national publication, no less—that I knew I was doing, by my lights anyway, one shitty job. It was more than a minor factor in my long-brewing decision to quit. Not that I minded praise, but legitimacy? A sign I was on the wrong path.

The blond must've read my mind. "Sounds like a death sentence," she said.

Kraft put on an expression of feigned pique. "How is Gabe going to be his charmingly self-deprecating self if you beat him to it? This is Katie, by the way."

Between the self-congratulation in his voice and the way he rubbed her arm, a smoking jacket and brandy snifter would have only completed the picture. Katie cutely waved a finger at me; I smiled back.

"Hope to see you at the execution," I said.

Katie stood. She was nearly six feet tall; one of the palm fronds tickled her hair, cut in some mussed/chopped Braggart Salon style. "You boys need anything?" Kraft asked for a whiskey sour; I held up my stout.

With Katie barely out of earshot—just as she was padding around some old-style life preservers bobbing in the shallow end—Kraft said it. "I'm not banging her. I was just buzzed. Hands, as you know, wander."

"She's not *my* sister, man," I said. The guy talk put me off. "What makes you think you need to tell me anyway?"

Kraft laughed. "I can see how that might give you the impression that I care what you think," he said. "On the other hand, maybe I don't care if you think I care about what you think of me."

"Lost in transmission, Houston. You're buzzed, I'm buzzed. Just don't put your
arm around me, okay?"

Kraft gave a goofy lip-smile and patted the spot next to him. "Promise. You must want to talk about something. Usually you avoid me."

It wasn't any secret; and with alcohol making its merry way through both our bloodstream, lying would have taken too much effort. "Well, for one thing, we have nothing in common. That and we make each other uncomfortable." But even with such buzz-induced declarations of truth I needed confirmation: "You know?"

"I do," he said. "What do you do if you're not into this shit, Gabe? I bet you have a mysterious inner life."

It was the kind of wanna-get-to-know-you remark made by drunk bosses the world over. "Needlepoint. Casseroles. That kind of thing."

He laughed flatly. "Don't ask, don't tell," he said. He put aside his glass, scooped a handful of dates from the soil and was popping them into the pool like a bored grade-schooler. He realized he'd have to be more oblique. "Your copy's reading strong. Can't say you'll be voted Most Popular anytime soon, but that's a good sign." I could have sung that last phrase as a chorus with him, it was so well-used. "School the hopelessly lost. What's the hot band these days, anyway?"

"The Poisoners," I said. "Don't you read the paper?"

"Does looking at the ads count?" he said. "Kidding. Nice profile of Exene. Was that restraint at work?" I'd done a Q&A with Ms. Cervenka and, in tongue-in-cheek, kill-your-idols style, asked if she ever felt undignified still clinging desperately to her status as a punk rock suffragette well into her 40s with concert appearances that people seemed to attend more out of a sense of religious obligation than true enthusiasm. (To her credit, she told me it was just such pervasive, chauvinistic double-standard bullshit that made
"Where Are They Now?" fodder out of Joni Mitchell and Grace Slick while the stature of the Rolling Stones continued to grow like a swollen prostate. If I hadn't been so dumbfounded, I would've flung myself over the table at Ipanema and hugged her into a coma. The interview, understandably, ended there.

"She hasn't called for a second date yet, I'll say that."

Kraft stood up and stretched his neck. "I think Katie's been kidnapped. Looks like we're going to have to scout for our own drinks. What did you want to talk me about?"

"Quitting."

He let out a contemptuous snort. "Get in line. Staci's been on me about it for the past month. She says the fact that I pour a drink first thing upon coming home—" he expertly threw up an air-quote "—'says something about my priorities.' Now you come along with that comment and now I'm almost thinking there must be something to it if you're noticing."

"I didn't mean that," I said. "You hold your drinks fine as far as I know."

He slid open the patio door and waved me in. The DJ, hunched over his turntable, headphones professionally askew, was valiantly attempting CPR on the party with some Portishead—peppy, civilized, but inviting in a way that refused to impose or intrude. But though it was only a little after two, somewhere, somehow things had gone irreparably slack. The pyramid stack of martini glasses on the broad counter had been depleted, conversation had smoldered, everyone looked drawn and even the glass-topped coffee table had two white lines left that looked strangely pristine and untouched.

"Well, it's a nice attempt at backpedaling on your part," Kraft said, "but out is out. I don't care that you know."
"Inhaling the stuff, huh?"

He ignored the question. In the kitchen, Kraft swung open a cabinet, retrieved a cocktail glass and snagged a liter bottle of ginger ale from the fridge. "This is what I'm really addicted to," he said. "I think I'll need a replacement pancreas by year's end."

"I'm talking about me quitting," I said.

"Drinking? Gabe, you're boring enough as it is—"

"No. This job."

"Oh," he said. His tone suggested he was disappointed the conversation wasn't about him.

"I'm burnt on it. Very burnt. With all due respect, all that."

Kraft hated to be seen gathering his composure. "You realize I'm going to try to counsel you now?"

"We both know you're not capable of that," I said. "If I have nothing else going for me, I know myself well. I'm pretty certain of that."

He handed me a glass of ginger ale. "Am I in a position that I can demand an explanation?"

"Thanks for asking. I'm just burnt." A lithe brunette in a teal dress floated into the kitchen, slipped between us, and plucked a box of Nat Shermans off the counter.

"Burnt. This is absurd. The burning question is what will you do for money?"

"It's the land of a thousand PR jobs. I'm not so dignified that I'm inflexible."

He body-checked me again; he was probably restraining a snort. "I couldn't talk you into a raise? I can save you yet. Public relations does require some social graces. Offense intended."

"None taken. I'll sit at a desk and type releases."
Kraft was leaning into the counter, his elbows tripoded out, listlessly stirring his ginger ale with a green hors d'oeuvre sword he'd picked up off the counter. He stared at a framed print of a purposely blurred Polaroid of a Matchbox car; local art. I was always amazed how sometimes he could look like such a little kid. "I have my doubts, Gabe. It seems even below your dignity, despite your protests."

"When did I catch that disease?"

He laughed. "Am I not the one who's supposed to be cynical? The business-side-of-things guy? Why'd you come all the way out here to tell me? Couldn't this have waited until Monday?"

"One of those things," I offered lamely. "Guess this kind of blows your party." It was a good question; stepping back from myself, I realized there was an urgency to it I hadn't taken stock of. My urgencies, I'd discovered in the past few years, were pretty much guaranteed to lead me into the crags and jags of rash decisions and spiky regret.

"Now that's taking some credit," he said. Still, I refused to believe my sudden, burning yen to quit—half-formed as it was—was not cheap, was not invalid. Kraft never would have asked me to stay outright; that would put him in a position of wanting something from me, which was uncomfortably too-removed from wanting (read: demanding) me to do something for him. He didn't like too many of his relationships straying from that tight orbit.

"What next? You leaving town? You going in search of something? I hope for your sake you're not in some quest mode."

"Quest mode?" I said.

"I've lost too many people to fucked-up quest modes. Here, you'd think it'd be drugs or greed that would get most of them. But no, it's soul-searching that always ends
up getting them. Why do people have to get introspective?"

"That's the most cynical line I've heard from you in a long time," I said. "There's hope for you yet." I toasted him.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," he said. "This isn't over by any stretch, Gabe." His hand holding the ginger ale deployed a finger to point at me in a vaguely scolding manner. Then he smiled and shook his head as if forcing himself awake from a dream. "This is too sudden to be anything but provisional. Is that why you chose to come over tonight? You knew I'd be a little soaked. Kraft in all his leniency? Sorry, Gabe."

"So much for your blessing," I said, turning to leave.

"Bullshit. You came here wanting something. Why show up in person otherwise?" Kraft had the type of personality that was so conscious of its own force that, just as it was convincing itself, it was convincing you. And that gave me pause enough to think that, too, was a very good question. I'd chalked it up to some existential urgency—somehow it always required the route most prone to face-to-face drama—but now he had even me second-guessing myself.

"Are you going to get all Yoda on my ass?" I asked. Weak.

"You're out for validation, aren't you?" he said, and so smugly I wanted to jam the martini glass in his ear. That telltale creeping tension in my neck and fingers: the truth about myself I hated to hear. "Let me say this: I'm changing my position. I won't abet you getting a new job."

"How did this turn into me asking for permission?"

"Maybe you should. What could I possibly say to all those prospective employers asking what the hell ever happened to dependable old Gabe Sack?"
"You can be an asshole, even without the rumored drinking problem."

"As long as you're being provisional, let me be provisional."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll let you go on a couple of conditions," he said, stirring his drink; the ice had turned into little slivers chopping about hopelessly. "One of which is your last assignment. Want to go to Las Vegas?"

"Actually, I want to go home."

"Your out-of-touch boss managed to get a bead on a great story. And, at the risk of sounding like a recruiter, I think you're perfect for it. So why am I even asking? I want you to go to Las Vegas. Ever heard of Hambert Larkin?"
Kraft and I once had the pleasure of going to Las Vegas together. Don't roll your eyes just yet; this is no sober avowal of some wayward tryst. Here's how lurid it was: I'd been assigned to cover the National Association of Broadcasters convention, and Kraft, on one of his notorious whims, decided at the last minute to tag along. Of course, he had the means and utter lack of discretion to visit Las Vegas any time he wanted; coinciding the trip with a radio convention—during which panels upon seminars upon panels wrung their hands over reaching the "millennial listener who's as likely to download files as to turn the dial" (blurb courtesy of the glossy green program)—at least availed him of the opportunity to disappear on company time. We didn't spend much time together, save for one Wednesday night I ran into him at the loathsomely corpora-hip Hard Rock Hotel; making eye contact over the central bar manned by gum-snapping guys who insisted on calling me *bro*, we both flushed with embarrassment: Gee, two cool guys from Los Angeles in a place like *this*. We both raised out eyebrows in a mutual "What are you doing here?" gesture, and decided to end any brinkmanship of coolness by having a drink together. Depressing, I know: Vegas, with its neon pinwheel of narratives about debauchery, regret, spiritual peril and raw, tattered pleasure offered up to me on a girlfriend-free weekend (I had one at the time, I swear), and here I was looking down the barrel of the possibility of descending into the whorl of one of those drunken, overearnest, boss/underling tete-a-tetes usually reserved for office Christmas parties.
In the annals of Unsettling Encounters with the Boss, this night easily qualified for the top ten. I had only been at the paper for a year, and had mostly distinguished myself by a white-knuckled resistance to so much as dip a proverbial toe in the murky stream of *Bang Bang* office politics. Even Kraft must have rolled his eyes when he imagined the script unfurling before me, which I'd dutifully follow like a grocery list: strike up some flinty relationships with fellow staffers based on such profound commonalities as a grumpily refined taste in music, fall in with the drinking crowd, and start sleeping with the grudgingly receptive female staffers: say Flora, the editorial assistant with the appealing pug nose (for some reason, it indicated to me, in some secret language or another, a certain sanguine sluttiness); within my first week there, she'd bump into me with perfect timing in the doorway of the employee lounge and winkingly complain, "That's harassment, mister." Or Janet, the movie critic whose severity didn't seem to allow her to like me—but only because what most people perceived as my severity somehow threatened to outrank her. And yet there were shadows of indications in my encounters with her—a curt "Hey" and an inviting, downcast glance at the copy machine, or the way she'd mutter to no one in particular in moments of frustration, "Please, people!" and cast me an imploring glance—that softening my own edge might be rewarded. Perhaps that I availed myself of none of said opportunities for complicated but (with any luck) guiltless sex must have told Kraft and other observers that I was either hopelessly principled, gay, or just utterly blind to the bounty before me.

And it was this apparent lack of enthusiasm that piqued Kraft's slightly inebriated interest in me at the clamoring, overpolished Hard Rock, where the music sounded refrigerated (The Black Crowes' version of "Light My Candle" twice-dead, twice-cold) and the boxy glass cases displaying memorabilia—from Prince jackets frothing with
cummerbunds to Springsteen's matter-of-fact guitars—that seemed freeze-dried. Kraft took on a vaguely aggressive posture with me, the bully stuck in detention with the geek, bored into a grudging inquiry into his motives.

"You learning anything at the seminars, or just banging cocktail waitresses?" he said, inky bang flopping onto his forehead.

"Wink wink," I said, and he raised his hands in jesting self-reproach. I'd just spent a thoroughly demoralizing day navigating the drab, soundless halls of the convention center, teeming with media mooks like me sporting goggled glasses and post-fashion haircuts, toting plastic bags filled with pamphlets, handouts, and packets that—what?—were supposed to sweep under the music press like a goddamn magic carpet and shoom us into the 21st century? Who knew. Conventions are demoralizing in the sense that the guides and the guided are shuffled and swapped in so many permutations—you lead a seminar, you attend a seminar, you're an authority here, an initiate there—that it robs you of any real hope of leadership: if at some point all the leaders are the followers, and all the followers leaders, who's in charge? My spirit was deflated enough to not give a shit whether Kraft would take offense at me giving a figurative eye-roll to the cocktail waitress crack. He didn't care; he was a certified tail-chaser.

"It's Vegas," he said as if in apology. "You didn't pack your sensibilities, did you?"

I said to no one in particular as another scotch and soda materialized in front of me (courtesy of the meaty-armed bartender whose name tag declared him to be, in shouting all caps, BRENT), "With entertainment like this, who needs lounge acts?"

Kraft supplied his own unenthused rim shot. I couldn't have disappointed him
more than if I'd started humming out with the Creed now snoring out of the speakers.

"I take it you're girlfriended," he said.

"Yeah. Frances."

"Great."

"Yeah. You?"

"Practically married," he said. "Technically free."

"Serious, or not so much?"

"Eh. I play the cheating asshole on occasion. But it's sanctioned."

I said, "Being an asshole or you cheating?"

Kraft gave me an unsure smile; he must have been uncertain how to take my brazenness. I immediately regretted the remark.

"The cheating part. I have one of those open arrangements. Sanctioned liberality, all that."

"Open to even Bang Bang staffers?" I could've done worse by rubbing my hands, scheming-villain style.

"Everyone but, Gabe." He didn't smile.

Awash in a buzz, I was being such a fucktard I could have eaten my own hand. The enduring mystery of why I became like this—snippy and casually mean-spirited as if everyone owed me an explanation, a justification about the choices that made up their cheap little wicker-and-felt lives—was rendered no clearer by the fact that I was willing to act this way around my somewhat new boss.

"Can I backpedal?" I said. "That was an asshole thing to say." I was fighting for earnestness.

"Yes you can, and yes it was." He drained his overpriced martini and waved at
BRENT for another. It was a sign I was being graced with a shot at starting over (I raise my pom-poms: Fucking hurray).

Kraft kept the conversation on what I suspected was a favorite—because it was comfortable—frequency of his, one tailored for lessers. He was patronizing, lapsing into visible uninterest when the topics teetered my way; earnestly proud when it creaked back toward him. It was admirable, in a way, to see how he had mastered the diabolical art of steering a conversation like some beast of burden, goading it this way or that with some tired anecdote about Adventures in Publishing that might've been juicy the first half-dozen times he told it. We grazed a vending-machine variety of nonsubjects from politics (both dancing around a certain polite, mincing, in-the-know progressivism) to food ("Yes I eat, do you?" I'd wanted to say, syrupy with sarcasm and eyes madman-wide) to, finally, that topic I'd thought I'd been holding at bay with the flimsiest cudgel of prayer, music. I'd been secretly dreading the topic because I knew I'd be painted into a comer by the not-unreasonable assumption that I approached appreciation of the art form with delicacy, refinement and the responsible backgrounding befitting a professional music critic—which I didn't. So Kraft starts in with the music small-talk, a brand of conversation that I swear must be forged by the fucking thousands in some platonic metalshop class.

"Trivia question," he said. "Is Yo La Tengo still together?"

"Goddamn," I said. "Come to think of it, I have no idea." I realized I sounded as though I were surprised that a suit could have such taste.

"I was wondering. I feel asleep listening to Electro-Pura last night. I dreamt of bunnies made of steel wool. Hey Brent," he said, waving the crew-cutted pro-wrestler over. "Yo La Tengo. Broken up or between albums?"
"Don't follow you, bro. That's Spanish, right?"

Kraft gave me a look; it was an invitation to browbeat the mook: ever heard of Matador? Ever heard of Pavement? Ever heard? Ever heard? Hipster trivia is one of the most useless forms of knowledge there is, but powerfully narcotic in its draw. "It's a Red Hot Chili Peppers album," I said to BRENT.

"Yeah? You guys are with the music convention, aren't you? That shit has just blown up."

We nodded as he poured us two more.

"You guys hooked up with any labels? My brother's got a band that someone's just gotta hear."

"Send a kit to the Tropicana, room 342," Kraft said.

"Beautiful. Thanks. This one's on me."

As BRENT waddled toward a passel of blondes in those cheap leopard-print cowboy hats on the other side of the bar, Kraft flipped a five on the bar out of pure habit anyway.

"Room 342," I said. "Nice."

"And you thought only critics could be cruel," he said. "We suits got it in us, yet." He stirred his drink. "And have taste in music. You're surprised at that, aren't you? Your brows jumped off your head."

"No."

He looked at me.

"Yes," I said. "Stereotypes. They die hard."

"Point taken. You're not the first to be surprised. That's the part I just love. The checking. If it's not the labels on your clothes, it's the CDs on your desk."
I knew what he was talking about. While I won't say that the Bang Bang office was some soul-refreshing oasis of human warmth and culture, I will say that compared to some of the P.R. offices I'd worked at—poisoned with a sort of collective mutual contempt that stemmed from ambition gone sour—the place was a welcome change. Sure, in the end, it was an office—and what role did offices ever play in the burgeoning parade of history and culture?—but you could console yourself with the fact that at least it was an office in which a sizeable chunk of the people shared a love (sometimes grudging, but love nonetheless) for music. But there were snakes in the grass, so to speak, and one of them was the collective habit among the editorial staff of playing hipster spy-games which required the writers (oh, just on the way to get coffee, water or to take a piss, surely) to pull these bullshit recon missions at the desks of others. They'd look for an album or an artist that would imply some grave lapse in taste, some gaffe in the appreciation of an art form that functioned as much as a fashion accessory—loove the way that Tortoise's Millions Now Living Will Never Die complements that Supremes Greatest Hits!—as it did inspiration, etc. for the human spirit. At least once a week, writer Frank Russek would "happen" by my cubicle to cast a few searching gazes at whatever random assortment of CDs happened to be littering my desk, an overladen buffet plate of review schwag and personal library shit, everything from Maiden's Killers (mine) to Linkin Park's Meteora (schwag, schwag! I swear!). One day, when he lingered at the edge of my cubicle a few seconds too long—arms crossed against his dumbass $50 Atari t-shirt—and even venturing an ironic hmmm—I opened the top drawer of my file cabinet and clackered all the CDS into it with one overdramatic swoop. I saw Janet's eyes and furrowed brow above the horizon of her cubicle; I could tell she was smiling. 

"Russek has it down to an art form," I said. "One of these days I'm going to catch
him going through my file cabinet to verify my cool credentials."

"My nemesis," Kraft said, "is Margritte."

"Your assistant? How brave of her." I said it with admiration. I liked her. She had this smirky, hot-librarian thing going that could make me choke sometimes.

"She saw me at Red Hot Chili Peppers at the Century City Pavillion. She was filling in at our promotional booth by the bar. We make eye contact, and I feel guilty, like I was caught beating off or something. Like it's a fashion crime. I'm ready to take my shirt off, go the mountains and beat drums. I like the Chili Peppers."

I hunched down next to him in a conspiratorial manner; Gordon Lightfoot was coming out of the casino speakers in big cottony hunks. "Couldn't you, like, just fire her?"

"That's an invitation to disaster. She fucks like an Olympic swimmer."

Maybe Kraft sensed that the night was getting overripe, too—we'd been hanging at this particular bar for over an hour, which, in a 35-frames-per-second destination like Vegas, borders on criminal. And on a Wednesday night, no less.

In such a vacuum, it's only a matter of time until an alcohol-blessed sense of mission takes shape. Maybe that was what inspired Kraft to bring up Larkin. In the dusty annals of famous last words, Kraft's might have their own gilded display: "Hey, I know what we could do..." He was quite comfortable in assuming both that I was boring him, and its corollary, that because I was boring him I was somehow duty-bound to accompany him while he entertained himself.

This is how the myth of Hambert Larkin was first brought up. "He's a lounge act," Kraft said. He registered my eye-roll. "Fret not, son. He's not just any lounge act."

Turning mechanically on occasion to take in eyefuls of passing shoals of women,
invariably in halter tops that must've been the Hard Rock's dress code—Kraft went on to explain that Larkin was stupefyingly bad. I suppressed another eye-roll: gee, a night of empty-calorie camp for two calloused souls. Just what Dr. Doom ordered. The more he talked about it, though, the more his juvenile appetite for it grew: he'd read somewhere, in _Los Angeles_ magazine or maybe even in some national pub, how Larkin's show had so radically inverted the concept of quality that the casino kept him around precisely _because_ he was so awful. He remembered reading something about deflated '80s pop meets soul and R&B numbers filtered through a talentless entity whose only claim on anyone's time and attention span was derived from his ability to elicit only one response: laughter.

I was in no mood for an irony parade. But for job security's sake, I gave lame indications that I was game, and Kraft's growing enthusiasm gathered its own momentum. "We'll catch ourselves a cab and conquer the Strip," he said. He threw back the rest of his martini like a gay viking and said, "Onward, young Huns." We asked Brent about him. He thought Hambert Larkin meant goodbye in German; he waved us off; room 342, right?

We got a cab in front of the Hard Rock's gleaming driveway. Kraft, expansive with drink, told the cabbie that neither rain nor sleet nor a Nasdaq bubble must stop him from his divine mission of finding Hambert Larkin. The cabbie said the bad news was that missions from God cost money, and the worse news was he'd never heard of any Hambert Larkin.

Kraft waved a clip full of damp money. "We've got time, money, youth, will, you name it. You just steer the HMS Rickshaw and I'll navigate." Over the next hour, Kraft took us up and down the Strip twice, a mewling fashion parade-cum-traffic jam filled, at
this time of night, with 14-year-olds driving convertibles. Our eyes dry by the constant wash of neon, we scoured marquees for his name, made the cabbie dive in and out of casino parking lots ("This is getting nuts. You sure I ain't on some reality TV show? Where's the camera at?") and call dispatch to repeat the name: Ham. Bert. Lar. Kin.

"I would apologize," Kraft said at 1. "But on the other hand, I think we're both finding this educational."

"Don't forget expensive," the cabbie said.

We soon gave up on Larkin, but not on entertainment. Fifty bucks later, we were blankly prowling the north end of the Strip—a creeping interzone where motels advertise hourly rates (and, with explosive redundancy, "XXX Adult Movies") and pawn shops line the street with their tiny, bright, barred windows. We'd slowed to a trawl, as though some oracle told us that, after performing the correct arcana, Larkin would come leaping through the passenger-side window. Then we gave up, and told the cabbie that anywhere was fine. The Royal—a tiny hotel sunk back from the street as though frightened of traffic—would be our consolation prize.

Stray cats bolted as the cab pulled into the gravelly parking lot. The Royal was a sagging old lady who strained for elegance but only managed to be tawdry instead. The flat-fronted building could've been as conspicuous as your average apartment complex, but it was the paint job (no neon to see here, folks, keep moving)—a black, red and blue would-be rainbow scheme that crept along the face in a building in a faded wavering ribbon—that made it look like its owners were rooting for some hopelessly obscure minor-league baseball team. A pair of yellowing palm trees crackling in the breeze stood sentry as either end of the building.

"Is it me, or do I hear a white guy singing 'Funky Cold Medina?'" the cabbie
asked. Kraft already had his arm around my neck, tugging me toward the hand-smeared glass door.

Inside, a desperately quiet tableau of time-wizened gamblers hunched at video poker machines confronted us, as well as a sign advertising Vic "The Voice" Blesdoe appearing nightly in the Throne Room Lounge. That was where we'd discover the source of the song being belted out by a stick-limbed, swollen-bellied lounge singer.

"Blessed chance," Kraft said. "We threw a Hail Mary and came up with Vic the Voice."

"He comes with the Kraft stamp of approval, huh?"

"Drop the attitude and try to have some fucking fun."

The lounge was like an ambitious closet, tiny, dark, rocked with waves of chatter and music. On stage, Vic was frozen in a pose that looked like he'd just thrown a strike in bowling and his back had seized. Behind him, the band—by which I mean a karaoke machine that looked like Darth Vader's ice chest, an infernal box bristling with lights, knobs, dials and sliders—sputtered out a drum finale as Vic continued to stand, stuck in the mud of music-induced passion: thiiiiiiiiiiing. Kraft and I took a few seats at the tiny room dotted with stain-smeared tables and covered our eyes against the violent shine of a lighting system that was apparently controlled by some vindictive robot. Suddenly an old woman was at my ear, croaking something about a two-drink minimum. I mouthed for two Coronas and handed her a five.

Squinting through the smoky darkness, I noted, much to my increasingly drunken chagrin, the crowd comprised people of the same general age, class and temperament as Kraft—a veritable whirlpool of aging, would-be styleniks clinging to the phenomenon of Vic, a leaky lifeboat of camp that must have provided a balm on the order of religion for
these people. Unlikely: Prada heels and Nunn Bush clunkers kicking with poodlish fervor, thumb-ringed fingers slapping against palms made soft by long and close association with paperwork, capped smiles buoying above Aura club shirts rippling with shine—it was the upper-caste fashionistas on a wild night out.

The applause momentarily grew in fervor, and with good reason: Vic's Lycraed pelvis was bomping to the opening march of "We Will Rock You." At the table next to ours, a trio of chubby Forme-victim sisters sent up an over-cutesy peal of ardor; fingers twinkled with rings as they fluttered well-lotioned hands against their fat little hearts.

I often think the very marrow of my bones is going to catch fire. Why can't a guy just live and let live, allow people to have a good time—even if it involves dressing up as though they're attending a Gambino family funeral to listen to some shipwrecked lounge act who pleases their flickering, fast-dying youthful suspicion that there's something good in the bad? I cringe to speculate: perhaps I can't live and let live—at least not in that manner—because I'm headed toward that very crossroads, too, and choking up such disgust and chewing on it is a way of steeling myself. Practice—even in the darker, drippier feelings—makes perfect.

I didn't have to look far for confirmation: Vic was working the tables as he rhymed face with disgrace, distributing high-fives like manna among the sentiment-starved crowd. By the time he reached our table—where Kraft was signing sloppily to the frozz-haired waitress for two, no, four more Coronas—Vic was bobbing about free-form on a what must have been some custom-made karaoke mix in which the cheesy Casio beat just lay there in a perky loop. His hole-black, frizzed hair dripping with jewels of perspiration (I found comfort in the fact that a few faces, in addition to mine, registered disgust), Vic dispensed high-fives, back pats and a rough sense of humor.
"This your date or your dad? *Both*?" "Hey, how you doing? [here, the mic pushed in some woman's mug] What's wrong? Never had something that big in front of your mouth before?" "If those are real, my *eyes* must be made of silicon!"—rank curbside one-liners that titillated them with the idea that, no sir, Mr. Blesdoe would *not* be so easily fetishized as some candied "bad lounge act" for convenient weekend consumption. Of course, that resistance was part of the very fetish. He wasn't Kraft's storied Larkin, but Vic managed nonetheless to have some bite.

Vic approached our table, and Kraft sent the thing into a teeter in his efforts to stand and give the Vic a hearty handshake. As soon as flesh met flesh, Kraft pulled him close. He spoke with such forceful enthusiasm, I could hear him above the din of beats, convo and clinks of drinks. "Howzit goin', my man...been a while...been jonesin' to see you [here a mock delirium-tremens hand-wiggle]...Caleb Kraft from *Bang Bang*...music pub...a MUSIC PUB...you know, newspaper...you're the best with the most, my man...missed 'Superfreak,' think you can pull that puppy off again? I'd appreciate it *immensely*...hey, someone I want you to meet..." Vic's schmooze circuit had a rhythm, and Kraft was managing to derail it.

"We've met," I yelled, offering my best lame, lip-locked smile. A convenient lie for both Vic and me.

Kraft, tottering on Corona-weakened legs, had his hand behind Vic, who was trying to extract his hand in hopes of re-railing himself before the song ended. "This is Gabe. Works for the paper. He's a Vic initiate." At that last word, he threw up two fat air-quotes—clearly forced entry with some kind of inside joke. By now, Vic was matching my mirthless smile with one of his own, and he began fingering the gold chains waterfalling down his bare, hair-scraggled chest. "Gabe, this is the master of late night
entertainment, Mr. Vic 'The Voice' Blesdoe." Vic gave me a perfunctory nod; I returned it with a commiserating one and rolled my eyes apologetically in Kraft's direction. Vic was most likely waiting for Kraft to throw up a pair of air-quotes, which would free him of Kraft's corralling hand and offer him a chance at escape.

"An initiate, huh?" I said, against the noise. The naked beat—long-divorced from the pep of "Groove Is in the Heart"—had long started sounding absurd.

"Oh yes, young appointee. You'll soon learn the innermost secrets of night life—" here the orphaned beat finally cut off, and Kraft was yelling against a sudden silence barely peppered with conversation—"of fabulous Las Vegas, where true prince of neon reins with a voice of pure silver!" The chatter dropped. All eyes settled on us, and Kraft must have had the brief but shocking realization that he'd detained Vic too long; caught hogging the candy, as it were. No air-quote was necessary now. Kraft brought his hands up as if letting a hostage go and acquiescing to arrest. "Er, how about I let the man do his magic?" I slugged violently at my third Corona and held the fourth close.

"Goddammit," Kraft said as Vic slipped into the hallway. "I forgot to request some Van Halen. He does an incredible 'Jump.' Seen my beer?" I told him to sit down.

During the intermission, Kraft queried me in his eyebrow-waggling excited way about what I thought about seeing the veritable crown prince of lounge ("Everything I expected," I said, adding lowly, "and less"), kept rubbernecking for the next round (and the next round, and the next) of beer, and generally waiting on me to—fuck if I know—crumple in worshipful deference to his acumen and taste in introducing me to this—oooh—rough gem in a field of diamonds. I was all ironied out, however.

"Youth, youth," he said, slapping the air in front of my face. "Or is it that you resist showing appreciation for anything? I suspect that's part of your nature."
"Hey, there's no howling generation gap separating us. It's not some irony thing. I like Vic. I really do. In fact, I'm resisting the urge to dash on stage and dry hump his mic stand. Hold me back. I'm a madman." Somewhat nonplused in the face of Kraft trying to show me how cool he was—a microcosm of Bang Bang's sour little ethos, sour little praxis—I was resorting to that old standby, sarcasm. It had the effect of only steeling his intentions. When Vic made his triumphant return—jogging onto the tiny, Christmas light-fringed stage and doing his best triumphant Rocky jog-in-place—Kraft's fandom was at its fullest pitch. He shouted along with "Think" (perhaps most disturbingly, crinking his neck Egyptian funk-style during the shout-along refrain), girlishly finger-snapped to "Raspberry Beret" and teeter-tottered, gleefully sodden, along with "Delilah." When those openingstoner-comb keyboard strains of "Jump" feebled their way through the speakers, he grabbed my arm (with alarming strength) and towed me along with him to the tiny square of parquet in front of the stage that served as the venue's dance floor. Beyond a certain point, refusing and resisting these forceful invites—believe me, I refused, I resisted—makes you look like a drip to unwholesome degree. And when I reached that threshold, I was aware enough of the female factor resident in the place—even if they were tipsy turbo-yups clawing backwards at some mistaken notion of youthful elan—to know that lunking back to my table with a sour face would be counterproductive. What can I say? Some them were goddamn hot.

My chances with a blonde-bobbed slinker (the pink streaks in her hair coordinated with her spaghetti-strapped dress) were, from the get-go, jeopardized by Kraft's insistence in doing—and not even in rhythm—the west coast-east coast, his hair floppy and overmoussed, his tie flopping like a dog's tongue. The problem was he looked like what he was: a businessman whose entertainments represented the bizarrely violent need to
derail the very squareness that defined his life. Suits with extreme and illicit pleasures ("he led a double life," goes the news lead) are the worst; their overcompensating nature is the kind that swings the needle in the red zones, to loss of dignity, loss of friends and death. I would've almost admired Kraft if he'd had the type of meteor-hot heart that forced him to such extremes. But he didn't. (And to his credit, let it be known that I'd never reach that echelon on which Kraft perched, because I lacked a fundamental drive to succeed.) He was, in many ways, a middle-of-the-roader, his interests in having certain tastes only so deep as far as they were useful as accessories.

West coast, East coast. Like a crack-fired Karate Kid famously waxing on, waxing off.

"Your boss better take his medication," Pink Streak said to me, "or he's going to turn into a puddle of drool."

"The tragedy of Tourette's," I said. "Get too close and he'll call your mother all sorts of terrible things. How'd you know he was my boss?"

"Or he's your older brother. Either way you look like you're ready to die of embarrassment. Let me guess. You're set up with finding the poor guy a date."

Kraft must've been dreaming he was in the middle of a Stoli malt liquor commercial—one of those stylized, celebratory fantasygasms that lasts 30 seconds—as he looked to be working hard to align himself with the dance floor's locus of energy. He was an old pro at it—locating it took instinct and skill enough, required some fine sense that lay between smell and hearing, a fine tuning towards sex and conquest—but he seemed to have lost his inconspicuousness with the onset of this thirties. Thus his pose, his person, a cheerily drunken invitation to ladies and gentlemen to *come party with me and—oh yes—look stylish doing it, please*, seemed somehow outranked, looked
somewhat silly. But outranked by what? Tragically, by the age-yellowed pick-up scene commanded by groping mooks who were plying the women with drinks and throwing out lines—laced with only the faintest smirks of irony—about *did you spill Windex on your pants, 'cause I can see myself in 'em!* et al. Kraft was getting some play—two high-pumped Cuban women, pants flared, arms heavy with bracelets—sandwiched him in a promising manner that, I feared if I scrutinized, might've been patronizing. I would have very much liked to think I was a dark horse, an X factor, and needed neither to spin pickup lines nor spool out sexual verve (I had neither anyway) to get what I wanted. Pink Streak (Sheri was her name, I'd learned, a college student from Atlanta who'd mooched along with her parents for a week-long Vegas junket) was a gift in that sense. If she was a coat, she'd be on—Sheri was amicably pressed against me and she smelled like cheap beer.

"I think he can ruin that well enough on his own," I said. I didn't believe it; I was fully expecting to catch a cab alone, back to the hotel, with nothing under my arms but sweat.

Sheri seemed unimpressed; she stuck her bottom lip out. "Would he reward you if you actually found him a date?"

"With riches beyond imagination." I was uninterested in the results of such an experiment. I wanted to sleep with her. "I'm Gabe."

"Not that I expect you to care," she said. "But we can make this interesting. Oh, this can be an *very* entertaining one-nighter. I can promise you that." She leaned in and kissed me. The sweat on her lip was salty and nice. I knew that's all I'd get; sometimes I seemed saddled with the curse of meeting rich, complex female creatures who weren't very amenable to fairly off-the-cuff but satisfying fucks. I could take it as a compliment.
paid to my character. But—sorry, it must be said—what about some compliments paid to my dick? "How about I go over and say hi to him? He doesn't look like a child-murderer or anything."

"Don't do it for my sake." I refused to pout.

"Always and only for you, Gabe," she said. In the way she looked at me as she raised her eyebrows—her gaze milky and unfocused, faintly childlike—I surmised she must be rolling. Sorority girl testing the outer limits. Onward! Sheri really had no idea what she was doing, but I calculated it would probably end in her giving Kraft a mewling blowjob in the back set of Daddy's Camry.

Rarely do I go for the straight shot. But what the hell. "But I'm really enjoying dancing with you." Kraft seemed destined to embarrass me even when he wasn't at my side; I wanted Sheri to remain innocent.

"Oh, likewise," she said, stiffly, suddenly grown-up. "But your boss is really sinking with those two women. Look." She was right. Their little would-be sex sandwich was falling apart; the two Cuban women, now slick-skinned with sweat as Vic powered through some bizarre 45-RPM version of "Just a Gigolo," were slonking over each other more than Kraft. In fact, Kraft had mashed himself against the tiny stage—it must've been death against his shins and kneecaps—and waving Vic along as if Kraft were some demon-possessed conductor, at this point doing a flapping parody of the cabbage patch. "You think he doesn't know he's embarrassing himself in front of you?" Sheri said. "Of course he does."

"But you're cheering for the underdog, aren't you?" I said. "Me being the underdog. Let him go. I've had enough of him tonight." I ducked to the side to allow a fat, beery couple maneuver by with all the grace of a trash barge.
"Gabe. Always thinking in the short term." Cute how she did that, pretending to know me. "But what about tomorrow, tomorrow and tomorrow? If he totally shames himself in front of you—even if you never told a soul—he'd resent you forever."

"What's the worst that can happen? He finds an excuse to fire me?"

"Let me guess," she said. "You wouldn't care."

She'd flattened the feeling before I'd even gotten to it. I had to answer anyway. "I wouldn't."

"Of course not," she said. "You're too cool for that, right?" What better way to make a man's boxers feel shrunk-wrapped than truly being wise beyond your years?

"You gonna blow him in your car?" I said. "Cause that would break my heart."

"Never said that," she said, smiling to herself. "But it's a nice thought." I couldn't stand self-conscious naughty girls; Sheri seemed that type, the kind to feign lip-licking interest in things like threesomes and bisexual liaisons for the sake of shock. Oh, the vampires of cool. "You leave him hanging like that and he'll never let you forget it—the fact that you chose to let him make a fool of himself just so you could feel superior."

"It has its appeal."

"I suspect that's what you're all about," she said.

"And what are you about?"

"Short answer? I'm about complication," she said. She was annoying, but she was interesting. At this point, they were neck and neck. "Just so it's out in the open, I'm not fucking you. You want me to rescue your boss or what?"

As long as we'd hit that particular dead-end, I was ready to cry why not with upturned hands and a call for more beer. Against all hope and dick-instructed reason, I relented and let Sheri do what she wanted. However, if I'd known that the night would
end with *moi* heavy-lifting bossman's beer-logged corpus across the threshold of his hotel room, right there I would have stolen the moment and punched Sheri in the face with my lips.

Besides *that* thorny complication, Kraft was offended at Sheri's approach, and he ultimately blamed me. He was drunk; he was Kraft! But he wasn't oblivious. He'd had one of his Corona-fishbowled eyes on us the whole time we were talking, and Sheri went into the whole operation highly suspect. An enormous woman wearing more makeup than a clown troupe tried putting some moves on me to Vic's romper-room version of "Careless Whisper."

"You don't look lonesome," she said, "but I'm going to pretend you do."

"Pretend that I just grabbed you by the throat, provided I could find it beneath those chins." I was busy looking over her hulking shoulder to watch Kraft and Sheri.

Her knee was a wrecking ball against my 'nads. Just as I buckled—Vic throwing out an inexplicable whoo! and a fist-pump to match the very act—Kraft stumbled up, Sheri in tow by the wrist like a kid who'd wandered off at the fair and nearly got nailed in the ass by a carnie.

"While I appreciate your concern, if I wanna pity-fuck, I've got my own methods of solicitation," he said.

I turned to Sheri. "What did you say to him?"

Kraft turned to her. "Is that how they phrase it here? 'Got a date?' I've seen it on the movies, but had no idea it had a basis in reality." Then he turned back to me, practically sizzling with indignation, his feminine wrists on his hips. Somehow, though he managed to smile. "I don't delude myself into thinking you respect me, Gabe, but *this* goes beyond prankishness."
I might as well have been slapping my sternum with a crinked wrist in total fucktard mode. It just wasn't registering.

Kraft's beery saliva peppered my face as he said it. "Gabe, she's a prostitute."

I wouldn't have been surprised if my eyes had telescoped out of my skull and ka-snapped Sheri in her broad forehead. "You are not."

"A very nice, seemingly well-cultured one, but a prostitute nonetheless," Kraft said. With a flourish, he presented her like a guest of honor. Perhaps it was a testament to his inability to summon true moral outrage that even now he gave her a droopy-eyed body-check. "Though you do get credit, Gabe, for guessing my type. Blonde. Pert. A little insolent. Love that look as if she's doing something wrong, knows it, but doesn't give two shits about it."

Between the poor man's disco lights, the intestine-rattling bass of Vic's overambitious karaoke machine (which, at the moment, was unfurling the bass line to some War B-side like an overfed anaconda) and this sudden realization that my beautiful Sheri was an interesting, complicated, lounge-trolling hooker, I felt a bit overwhelmed. The seven-odd Coronas currently working their magic in my bloodstream weren't helping, either. The cliche goes that the eyes can't support a lie. Sheri's briefly telegraphed a flagrant willingness—and stubborn will—to cover for herself, but that didn't last.

"Bingo," she said with a crippled "gee, what can ya do?" grin. "Well, technically, anyway. Your boss would've only been my second trick. Guess you could say I'm still in training."

"No wonder that opening line was so Raymond Chandler," Kraft said. "'How about a date, lonesome?' That was what you said. Consider working on it. Oh, and the
Kraft threw his head back and put yet another bottle of Corona to his lips, his adam’s apple woggling violently with each swallow. Sheri arched her brows at me, in a sort of commiseration: it was pretty gross. I didn't realize I was locked onto her with a smile—pursuing my own fantasies—until I heard a chorus of gasps and felt a thud at my feet. Kraft had passed out.

The cab driver didn't seem to notice, let alone mind, Sheri and I huffing Kraft's deadsack of a body into the back seat before telling him onward to the Hard Rock Hotel, please. Inside the Throne Room, however, it had caused something of a stir, and the two yellow-shirted security knucklers who'd appeared out of nowhere had the momentary suspicion that Sheri and I, some sinister duo working the Strip's hapless tourist population, had mickied some guy and were planning to roll him. After comparing my business card with his ("He's your boss then?" said one of them through gapped front teeth. "Best of luck!"), they relented, dutifully not bothering to help us drag Kraft to the curb outside after calling a cab. To his credit, Vic did, though—managing to keep the roof raised on the sparkling energy of Lionel Richie's "All Night Long" while helping us transport Kraft toward the door (some female acolyte holding the mic to his mouth as he held Kraft's ankles). "I'll be inside if you need me," he said, patting me on the back.

Following Vic to the casino's smeary front doors to watch, the crowd laughed, and then ebbed back toward the lounge as Kraft waved them back like endearingly trespassing children.

"I'm feeling insecure and weird now," Sheri volunteered during the ride. I hadn't bothered to ask what exactly she thought she was doing, coming along with us. "I'm not...that in the sense that you think I am."

"What?" I said. "A—" She shushed me down. Modest enough to care what some
jaded cabbie on his fourth Marlboro in as many minutes thought. "I'm not really \textit{that} in the way you think. I'm sort of...experimenting." Outside the roar and blur of Vic's show, her brashness seemed to have left her. "For instance, I don't have a pi...a boss or anything. I'm sort of trying it out. Not even that. Playing a role. I've got a degree, you know."

"Are you one of those Berkeley students who think doing stupid shit counts as 'embracing life'?” I said. Cheap and vitriolic, yeah, but blunt curiosity had outstripped any need to be polite.

We were tamped into the corner of the back seat, since Kraft, burbling nonsense like a hammer-smacked badger, had somehow expanded in his wasted state. Sheri took advantage of the arrangement to kick me in the calf. I yelped; the cab driver's eyes darted into the rear-view mirror.

"Not like that at all."

Me, plus beer, plus my mouth: "Poor little rich girl?" The woman had sturdy shoes. And again: "Fleeing trailer park youth? Hooker with a heart of cubic zirconium?" Whack. Whack. Thank gawd for the sedative qualities of beer, and the physical closeness that didn't allow her much momentum. "At this rate, I'll never backpedal enough for us to fall for each other like in the movies." Whack.

Kraft, in his mind still bashing on the Royal's scuffed parquet dance floor, requested "Where the Streets Have No Name."

"Even if you did understand, you'd choose not to because you're an asshole," Sheri said. "Have you stopped to wonder why I didn't ask \textit{you} for a so-called date? You were odious."

"\textit{Odious}, huh? Hooker with a thesaurus of gold." I braced my now-throbbing
shin against another karate attack, but none came. Then—it must have been some
dramatic film reel playing out in my head—I imagined her with her head turned away,
teary-faced toward the window. Surely some dramatic pose leading up to a kiss. I looked
up. Sheri slapped me on the mouth.

"Do that again," I said, "but with your mouth." The line plunked; she slapped me
again.

Sheri had to tell the cabbie twice not to veer left off The Strip. "You sure? It's
faster, Miss," he said. "Yeah, I'm sure, but where's the fun in that?" she shot back.

It was the response I'd been secretly hoping for: cliche, naive; it betrayed too
fresh, too supple a mind, and it said more about her than her stammering protests ever
could. She'd shown the mark of the tourist: their spirits so easily cowed and bullied by
neon, it was nonetheless a sign of a willingness to be impressed. The city asked for a
certain charity of spirit in that sense, asked you to play along. It was a difficult mental
position to agree to; the most natural response to Vegas and its giddily spilled neon
jewels of guts is the smirk, the shrug, the smile with the secret eye-roll. I was champion
at it; The Strip was one big asshole litmus test, and my tab never failed to turn color. On
the cab ride to the Royal, Kraft and I both had done the silent watch-and-dismiss all the
way down where the grand neon gasped out and gave way to pawn shops and skin
joints—in all our overflowing coolness, we were more into those; our dipster organs told
us it was gritty and cool, it had cred. What brand of spirit did it require to be impressed,
to consciously shake off your beading of too-cool anti-freeze and willingly invite
wonder? I don't know if Sheri managed it consciously or was naturally amenable, but it
said that she just might not be the jaded skin mistress I'd hastily concluded she was. With
the lights sliding down the windshield, she became silent—an admirably potent fuck you
to her main detractor sitting to her left (here I am, waving and grinning furiously as the camera pans my way)—and smiled when the famed volcano swung into view and burst into its scripted red and orange froth.

"What did you say?" she said.

I momentarily toyed with the idea of saying it must have been Kraft in his stupor—he was snoring fitfully, sounding like his head was filled with creamed corn—but I didn't. I told the truth. I told her I said sorry, I'm an asshole.
CHAPTER 4

That's the Vegas tale. Yeah, it's the kind of cheesebrick backstory that stinks to high fuck. My impulse to disown that little historical nugget is most likely due to the fact that, ever since that little trip back, Kraft had nurtured that little kernel of history into what he wanted me to think was the basis for some shared sympathy—all the more shared because it was so broken, so uncomfortable. Not only had Kraft humiliated himself, not only had we not found Larkin, but in the end I got a promising peck and a phone number from Sheri—and an admonition that if I was ever in Vegas again, ring her up, because a background of shared misadventures made for great sex.

I questioned whether the guy even existed: remember, a year ago, how we looked? Kraft didn't flinch at the recollection; if he knew lounge acts—and he's proven that he did—he knew Larkin was still out there. Even if he wasn't there, I still had a decent retrospective piece. But Kraft said he surmised that Larkin, over the past year, suffered a particularly Vegas-stamped fate, having lost one casino contract after another and had tumbled down the links of the entertainment food chain into oblivion. That oblivion was itself an unknown: whether Larkin was wringing a paycheck performing at some off-off-the-Strip casino with a stage and a small forest of cocktail tables or went for a straight gig—whatever that would be for a failed lounge singer—was a mystery.

I didn't give a shit either way. My level of jadedness—and my jadedness about my jadedness—was such that I could have easily made peace with the unfortunate fact of
"leaving on bad terms" or whatever other office-cult platitude was in circulation these days among the myrmidons and middle managers. I was fully prepared, minus the blessing and plus the steady-burning ire of Kraft, to fire off sheaves of resumes to the valley's PR firms or "go freelance," which, my unfortunate friends could attest, meant slogging part-time at a Melrose boutique while mooching the local press for CD and concert reviews and—that rare bone ragged with meat—musician profiles. But continuing to work for Bang Bang for an intern's wages with a little hunk of spirit deducted FICA-like had become untenable. I was liking press releases more and more; there was a neatness to them; they were inherently positive, upbeat; even so (and better yet), the emotional investment they required was minimal. I figured if I agreed to the final assignment, I might use it as leverage to wrangle some kind of severance package from Kraft. A mere $1,000 would give me time, rent and cheap Mexican enough for a month's worth of head-scouring down time. Who knows? Maybe I could find a girlfriend, too.

But the thing that finally nudged me into shouldering the assignment was that Kraft had one on me. He was civil, but he was also a shifty type in whose eyes you could just see the everyday swirlings and poolings of petty revenge, maneuvering and advantage-taking, and that meant he'd have no qualms about pressing the heel of his hand into what might charitably referred to as my future professional life. Over a dollop of Cali-French-Asian-fuckall fusion cuisine at the Crustaceans and the Ivys whose circuitry of power and striving he wanted so badly to be a part of, he could just as willfully not drop my name to the brother's cousin of a Marmont-trawling starfucker who hung out with the West Coast editor of Interview when he'd hole up every spring at the Mondrian to pretend to be a rock star. After all, I was a devotee of the city's central myth: that the
right amount of talent, karma and ass-kissing just might bounce your name off select sets of lips and right into the lo-calorie ether of success—which meant, at least in L.A., you could finally be an asshole without repercussion.

I drove home from the party, dropping like a marble into the grooves of the freeway and funneling with neither reluctance or enthusiasm back home to my dumb, hip rat pad. Why not? I was the gambling type. I flicked on the radio and bathed in what must have been the thousandth after-after-party trance remix of "Airbag." What a sign that was.

That inky late-night state of spirit made me call Staley after getting in. Note that I wasn't so desperate as to risk discourtesy; Staley was an insomniac.


"I'm lying down and smoking a cigarette," he said, "so don't worry if I sound, you know, not bowled over. But that's crazy. I didn't think you were going to do it. Where do you see your career going from here, young man?"

"I don't know," I said. A bad sign I was feeling confessional. "And I wish I was less nervous about it. Closest thing I ean come to regret, I suppose."

"Yeah. You're hoping regret is a natural human emotion, and not some sign that you did something fucked up, huh? I've been there, too." He laughed dryly. "Listen. I'm totally counseling you. Capital. Well, regret's natural."

"Thanks, really."

"Unless you did do something really fucked up. Like quitting your job, for instance. I'm messing with you, man." It was a testament to Staley's weird purity of character that you could trust that him messing with you lacked any subterranean motive.
Staley was too simple, too tired a soul to carry agendas. He really was just fucking with me. "The closest thing I've come to sleep in the past three days is reading Henry James. I'm on page 13 of The Bostonians. This is like torture of medieval proportions. I bet they use this in terrorist interrogations."

"You want to come to Vegas with me for a weekend?"

"That is way too heavy a convo for—what?—3:17 a.m.," he said. I could hear him exhale two hefty lungfuls of smoke, imagined him lying on his futon in bare feet surrounded by stacks of comic books, records and pulp novels. "Come by the store tomorrow. This definitely requires a face-to-face consultation. I take it the goal of said trip is celebration-based?"

"My last assignment, supposedly."

"Capital," he said. "But let me say that I know that you're probably all chewing yourself up over this. I mean, I know you'll act cool through the whole thing, and that's fine because that's your scene, but on the other hand I know it won't be lost on you to say that I think this is probably a good decision. That job wasn't cut out for you."

I said thanks.

"You fully have a more sensitive nature, I think, than even you're willing to admit," he said. A long pause made me wonder if he'd fallen asleep in mid-drag. "Hey, and now I realize I'm finally getting sleepy. That's funny. Goodnight."

Black Scratch, the record store where Staley worked, was a suitably garish and poster-lined hovel off Melrose, accessible enough for the trickle of tourists who decided no trip to L.A. is complete without a $79 Joy Division Japanese import, but with (barely) enough cred that the Echo Park dipsters who just happened to be beached on Melrose
could shop without too much trauma to their carefully groomed self-concepts. Staley was one of those insufferable vinyl purists—charming but insufferable—but only in the privacy of his own apartment. Black Scratch sold CDs, but any bold soul who dared purchase one was subjected to all manner of eye-shot laser beams and barely suppressed groans by reg patrons and Black Scratch clerks alike. The fact that the store stayed in business could only be attributed to the fact that it trafficked in that all-too-common intangible that L.A. could, if it ever got its shit together, pack onto cargo steamers and export worldwide: attitude. Doug, the owner—perpetually clad in cast-iron black and mindfully chewing gum while he flipped through stacks of proposed trades from some nervously waiting Culver City goth waif—was the central beacon of attitude. Go in and ask if he can get you *Double Nickels on a Dime* and while flipping through the catalog, he'd surely grumble that *What Makes a Man Start Fires?* was always a better album. On vinyl, of course. I'd been in countless—and just as fruitless—beer-slugging arguments with Doug over what I respectfully considered to be his bullshit theories of the superiority of analog to digital music, and I'd emerged from all of them with a growing certainty that Doug was old before his time, clinging desperately to the outmoded out of fervent belief, but also out of fervent fashionability. Hipsters, in the end, are just young old fogeys, nostalgic for pasts they never lived, or for pasts that, well, aren't quite the past yet. Or maybe I just resented Doug because he never gave me discounts and openly said he never read my articles.

Chris, an altogether humorless 18-year-old would-be transvestite, manned the counter. He pointed toward the curtains leading to the back room. "Staley's in the back. And—hello—busy."

"Too busy for even his beloved?" I said, walking through. Chris had a bright
future ahead of him: he'd learned bootlicking at a promisingly young age.

"Gabe! Hel-lo? He's back there with a gi—"

Staley was back there with a girl. Nothing to get red-faced over; she was merely sitting on his lap, swinging her booted feet amicably, her wax-haired head clamped along with Staley's into a pair of outsized headphones, the kind for stunt deejays in those overproduced beer commercials. Seeing me, Staley slowly (then again, whatever Staley did, it was always slowly) tugged off the headphones as the girl in question slid off his lap. They both beamed at me in an appeasing manner that betrayed no guilt whatsoever. Staley was slack-ass enough to pass time in the back impressing a new girlfriend, but too much of a professional to do anything remotely close to fucking. It was all actually very sweet.

"Busted," he said, standing up. He ran his hands down his pants in a sweat-wiping gesture. "Taking my federally mandated fifteen, you know. Didn't expect you this early, late riser. How was Kraft's social function?"

"The usual delight," I said. "Introduce your sister."

Staley turned a hand up to hold an invisible serving tray. "Ha. This is my friend, Darcy. Darcy, Gabriel Sack."

"Enchanted," she said. The irony of it hammered my ribcage: in the more foo-foo lunch meetings with band managers and tour wizards, enchanted was often the straight-faced greeting they offered along with two air-kisses and a business card. Which isn't to say that Darcy's was delivered with irony; rather, for the first time, the greeting didn't signify that something was wanted from me. Then, an about-face. "Your reputation precedes you," she said. "Like a plague." Staley did his horsy laugh. Darcy kept smiling.
"No kisses for me, I suppose." I turned to Staley. "I give up. Can you call off the attack girlfriend now?"

Staley wiped his hands on his shorts again. "Oh, yeah. I guess you could say there's a sort of unhealthy complication going on here. Not really a love triangle, but more like a hate triangle. Heh."

Darcy—between her gel-stiffened black hair and green cardigan, resembling a Smiths groupie by way of the Clash—looked at me with an expression of growing relish. Her arms were crossed; the posture of an imminent speech.

"It's not registering, is it?" she said. "I'll give him a few more seconds."

"Dar, do you really have to torture the guy?" Staley looked at me like a zoo exhibit: interesting, but even more pitiful.

"He's a slow one," Darcy said, smiling.

"I give up. You a long-lost daughter of mine?"

"No. You cost me two gigs, asshole," she said, a ring of saccharine condescension in her voice.

Staley, the unwilling referee, raised his hands. "Dar, relax. Did you take your meds today?" He said to me, "I guess you don't recognize her. Darcy sings for the 'Nads."

"You know, the band you said sounded like a stoned Debbie Harry at Pixies karaoke night hosted by John Zorn."

"You sing for the 'Nads?" I couldn't help myself. "Does your mom drive you to gigs?"

I couldn't blame Darcy, still smiling like a robot cheerleader, for snarling obscenities, for reaching for my neck. Staley held her back, talked her down.
Chris parted the curtains like royalty. "Gentlemen, did we special-order an Thunder Expr...excuse me, I'll come back later."

"Sorry," I told Darcy. "I'll give you my standard disclaimer: It's nothing personal, it's just my opinion."

She schlumped down in the lumpy chair. "Well, maybe that's why your weekly rag sucks dick. If it'd been the Weekly, I'd've really gone off."

"What did they say?"

"Ha. We're not even on their radar," she said. "One thing you should understand, Mr. Gabe, is that not every band in the world is knocking on your door for an opinion. That Spaceland gig you caught was a dry run. The kids loved it, but we didn't exactly advertise the thing."

Last week's show had been one of those sticky, art-damaged summer affairs where trust fund punks, hipeoise and trendbots temporarily joined hands in the hope of jamming a flag on the shores of the Next Big Thing. So went the buzz about the 'Nads. But I found their brick-thick jazz-rock more derivation than innovation, as if college engineering majors started Buzzcocks tribute band. The crowd, on the other hand, was enthused, a night of beery, earnest appreciation. It made me suspicious.

"Well, the consolation prize is that Gabe is quitting," Staley said. He chucked me on the shoulder and took a seat on the arm of the chair next to Darcy. "Much to the relief of hundreds of California bands." He bent over and fecklessly re-stacked some flaking Psychotronic magazines turning into mulch on the floor. The back room at Black Scratch was part temple, part lounge, part stockroom: only the most devoted regulars were invited back here to browse or hang out.

"So what's with the Vegas thing? You're like living a movie plot these days."
"I'm supposed to track down this lounge singer that Kraft is convinced is important for some reason."

"Going out with a real bang there," Darcy said. "You plan to put that on your resume?" Darcy's anger had simmered into a casual insolence. I was rapidly discovering that she was, in fact, a lot like me: most obviously self-assured (read: arrogant) to a fault.

I asked Staley if he wanted to grab a slice of pizza.

He understood: without Darcy. He slung his black backpack off his shoulder, shared a look with Darcy that most likely said surely she understood this was to be a private meeting between him and his intolerable asshole friend, told Chris he'd be back in twenty and slipped with me out the door.

Standing on the weedy sidewalk in front of Pasta Castle down the block, letting ropes of grease drain off my slice onto the cement, I had to say something. "Darcy seems nice enough. But I'll comment more objectively when the teeth marks in my neck fade."

"She'll cool off," Staley said. "I think I'm good for her that way. She's fully high-strung. She has like seventeen different pills for breakfast. You know, prescription. She says it makes her feel like she's living underwater, but I'd hate to see her off them. Officially, she's a recovering kleptomaniac. You know they have drugs for that?"

"Guess I have modern medicine to thank for her not eating my face right there in your store." We went back inside and slid into a booth. Some joker had programmed the jukebox—the kind with those three CDs twirling at the top like some cheesy corona—to play Dead or Alive's "Brand New Lover." Dipsters in their prankishness will prove to be the death of Western Civ. "So you make up your mind yet?"

"Oh, the Vegas thing," Staley said. "I bet you've been thinking about that a lot. And I know this is probably a totally transitional period in your life."
"You're going to say no, aren't you?" Dead or Alive started in again! Next thing I knew a meteor would crash-land on my pizza and crack open to present glistening baby Jesus to usher in the apocalypse. "If that fucking jukebox is some kind of harbinger—"

"Relax," Staley said. He put his hand on my arm; Staley had a thing for overdramatic gestures like that. Thing is, they were strangely endearing. "I really want to go, but I can't. Work is one thing. But, besides that, you know, I'm embarking."

"Did you just say embarking?"

"Yeah. Embarking. Embarking on a relationship. With Darcy. We're fully at this pivotal point. It's at that part where you're dating exclusively and both parties are sort of starting to wonder if it's, you know, as serious as you're both acting it is."

"Wait. How long have you been dating?"

"Oh, just once. But we covered, like, a month's worth in that time. It was a super dense date."

"Bring her along. Make it a goddamn modern honeymoon."

"Ha. You'd kill each other, fully."

"That's what makes it so modern," I said. He gave me one of his piercing, earnest looks. Staley was not above deception; I'd seen him wrangle more than his share of wisp-haired record collectors out of old Link Wray albums, Sun 78s, New Wave vinyl he could buy cheap and mark up for resale. But for the most part, earnestness was his method, his curse. "Stop in the name of love. I don't know if that's a good idea."

"Please tell me you're not going to sentence me to that long drive all by myself."

Staley said, "You don't do the puppy dog eyes so well. You look like a bug."

I told him to fuck off. As Dead or Alive kicked in again and I stood up to kill the
machine, the guy behind the counter said, whoa, why don't I just take a seat there, the repair guy's on his way. No need for that. How about a slice on the house? Yeah, mushroom and Vicodin for my friend, Staley said. He told me, geez, alright, he'd think about it.

I caught the freeway to some Century City industrial park where Systemic Productions made their roost among the weedy wank joints, auto body shops and telemarketing offices whose storefront windows were newspapered over with "For Lease" signs bearing fake phone numbers. Systemic had been contracted by Southwest Airlines—on a big "modernizing" kick in an attempt to siphon in more of the young and affluent, the thumb-ringed, the biz-classer—to update their airline safety videos in (scare quotes, everyone) hip, creative, contemporary fashion. Systemic contracted local metal band Tattooed Swan (imagine the T and N hugging the attowed Swa in aggressively fire-forged fashion on t-shirts, stickers), who'd managed in the past year to snag a few licensing deals with their cheesy throwback metal—mostly commercial tunes for the soda giants hawking their new tongue-hammering flavors—and dressed like they were hopelessly marooned on a fashion island named Kill Me It's 1983 Again. Not only was Tattooed Swan going to supply the music for this updated vid; the story was that they were going to actually appear in the video. The Systemic press release had promised that the new video would be "extreme," "cutting-edge," and—be still my beating spleen—would "usher in a hard-rocking new age of airline safety." Naturally, the local press had been invited to witness this historic event. Judging from the crumbling parking lot—where mid-range sedans in various shades of Toyota and Ford were the calling cards for that pragmatic yet grasping subclass of L.A. production professional—not many
journalists had deigned to make it out. I, eternal sucker for a good feature story, couldn't
fight off the feeling of being a total dumbass as I pulled up, got out of the car, and
stepped into a gigantic blue wad of gum which took all the strength of my right calf to
extract myself from. If I were one to believe in bad luck, I would've turned around
immediately and pointed my beak toward home.

I flashed my card to the security meat at the door and entered the warehouse; it
was bristling with the giant black insects of cameras, lights and various other electronic
alien torture devices—and the centerpiece, disembodied hunks of airplane, including an
eight-row span of fuselage seating with a white cloth draped on the end. I heard my
name pealed in that false, overfamiliar tone—"Gaaabe!" It was either an orgasm or a
publicity gnome.

A nameless gum-snapping, iceberg-toothed PR woman who wore those glasses
with girder-thick frames. "You made it. And right on time, too. Admirable of you," she
sang. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna air-kiss you. I know you're not one for formality!"
She launched into the usual fusillade of how-ya-beens and how's works; she was a
consummate PR doyenne in that she willfully embraced the well-cultivated professional
shallowness that is the beaming, steaming hallmark of any PR demon.

I spent the next two hours in Systemic's studio, watching the hypermuscled,
spritzed, moussed and oiled members of Tattooed Swan offer up an "extreme" rock 'n'
roll version of your standard airline safety video. I was so stultified with embarrassment
that at one point I actually crumpled by the craft table, barely managing to sag my ass
onto an amp in a weak approximation of its'-cool-meant-to-do-that normality. Why can't
I ever experience those transcendent moments of camp-busting badness that I hear about?
This bounded well past that well-flagged exit. The band thanked me for flying Southwest

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Airlines—*Lord knows we all love to fly hiiiiiiiiigh* (full-band shot, guitarists crossing axe-necks as if announcing an interplanetary rock dignitary—which would be none other than leadman Max Proctor, eyes agog gecko-like as he sustained the note, howling at some invisible moon)—and told me that there were just a few simple guidelines to follow to make my trip both safe and comfortable. First, federal law prohibits smoking on all flights *so don'tcha dare light up now, yeah* (Proctor plucking a lit cig tucked into the strings of Les Kramden's guitar and jammed it out in his open palm, pausing with a cartoon-cat mug of dawning pain and panic and unleashing a mock-scream), and tampering with a bathroom smoke detector is a violation of federal law (shot: tight, inside an airplane lavatory; a biz-class suit is about put his paws on the detector when the door flies open and Tattooed Swan—a sweaty mass of hair and leather—pulls the perp out and saves the day). And mind the fasten-seatbelt sign—*when the pilot says it's time to chill, pay him mind or take a spill!*, sings Proctor and crew as they prowl the aisle like panthers, snapping the belts of paid extras and tugging them snug (close-up: Proctor giving the belt of a hot suburban mom a slow pull, their mouths inches apart; he smiles; she sighs, eyes aflutter, desire thwarted)—lest turbulence dump you from your seat (example: comic shot of Tattooed Swan somersaulting down the aisle, jeans straining, hair flying in sassy arcs). And in case of an emergency landing, an inflatable life-jacket is accessible under your seat (as demonstrated by drummer Vinny Caldini, simply blow into the red tube to inflate—band members cheering him on—but not too much! the life-jacket explodes; the baby powder clears to establish the next shot, Proctor showing us, with his rippling, sweat-pearled forearms, that your seat cushion could also be used a flotation device (*and that's niiiiice!* Proctor rockingly reminds us against a backdrop of some tongue-flickering git riffage dutifully placed by the boys). Finally, they want to
thank me again for choosing Southwest Airlines, and they hope I have a safe and pleasant trip, wherever your final destination may be (final shot against a white-sheeted backdrop: the band slumped over a tumbled Stonehenge of suitcases and duffel bags—but where's Max? The mound of luggage flies apart and Tattooed Swan members are sent scurrying like villagers from a volcano as galvanized Max triumphantly emerges from beneath the pile—his hard-rock tresses impeccably plump—to address the camera with a final wail of gratitude that, solely on principle, I refuse to repeat, but will say attempted to rhyme the phrase final destination with time to rock the nation.

Two hours later, when a panting Proctor swaggered into me by the Havarti cheese and asked what the estimable Gabe Sack thought of the whole idea, I smiled and said it was perfect, just perfect material for the paper.
CHAPTER 5

That Monday, the *Bang Bang* office was, more so than usual, a bleeding hive of rumor and gossip. I relished a hearty slice of unfounded speculation with the best of them; I'd been known to kick back, let the cubicle steer itself for a second, and savor a sour delicacy about somebody or other: the latest tortured shenanigans of the comically still-closeted publisher of would-be rival rag *Pitch L.A.* Brett Kenter, a strapping, meringue-haired dood who lived in such denial you could feel the cognitive dissonance wafting off him like cheap cologne when you'd invariably run into him in full schmoozebot mode at one of those odious after-after-hours clubs where after 2 a.m. they'd dim the lights, triple the cover charge and start jamming ironic little paper umbrellas in the drinks. Or closer to home, there were the legion of young girls 'n' boy galley slaves who silently rowed the lumbering machine that was *Bang Bang* toward the promised land of increased profitability. It could be the clunkily bespectacled Christianne—shy by day, but sweetly, gratefully slutty when drunk, or so the stories went—or Aaron, the guy who somehow managed in Bartleby-like fashion to stretch out his internship in the honeycombs of the graphic design department for—what?—four years now. No longer fresh-headed and intolerably overeager, he'd grown surly and ungrateful, and with good reason: sure, the department had happily groomed him into a position of authority as associate director of design, but they'd never bothered to boost his basement-level wage. I'd often see him smoking out front, sunken-eyed and faintly
paranoid-looking, and I'd be afraid to do more than murmur a commiserating hello, lest he explode into a 11 o' clock news-worthy orgiastic primal rage. That was the rumor: that any day now poor Aaron was going to snap. Seeing him from my cubicle as he gesticulated wildly in the graphic design offices like a mime unhinged, I'd often mentally practice evasion maneuvers in case he did snap: duck under desk, curl into fetal position, pray very feverishly to a very recently invented god.

Now I was the center of it. Megan first cornered me in the employee lounge, practically dry-humping me right into the Braun. The coffee pot handle was jammed halfway into my kidney before I could muster enough groggy Monday-morn fury to make her back off and let me use my lungs. She was whispering hotly at me as though it was the best flaming molten hunk of office rumor that would come her way in this lifetime. The usual desperate queries on her part: What gives? Why are you leaving? Aren't you happy? What are you going to do? How does this benefit me?

In firm, fatherly fashion, I put my hands on her shoulders and pushed her back. "Do I have to put out a press release? Relax, you'll get your fodder."

Megan shifted to a solemn look. "Are you being pushed out? Corporate housecleaning?" Her nose for grievance and indignities suited her for journalism; as it was, she robotically clacked music listings into the computer all day.

"I wish my life was that dramatic," I said.

"It wouldn't surprise me. I mean, we both know you're not the most well-liked staffer here." She dropped into silence as a graphics troll slipped in to retrieve a Diet Coke from the fridge.

"What?"

"And if that's the case, I want you to know I'm on your side. Anything you need,
you let me know. Short of quitting along with you, of course."

"That's infinitely comforting," I said. "But it's not the case. On the other hand, I'm not making any speeches. Ever wanted a column?"

Moppy-haired Russek had come in, slipped quarters into the soda machine, and paused to listen in as if we were a television program that had snagged his attention.

Megan said, "This is voluntary? Bizarre. How long did it take to get that column? You're flushing years of slavery away."

"I'll be fine."

"But why?"

"Nothing more than one of those classic time-to-move-on scenarios," I said.

Russek broke his silence. "Can I have your column then?" Russek was like that; self-consciously transparent with his desires in such a way that, he must have hoped, would flummox others with the impression that, Wow, in a world of sly agenda-mongering, this guy sure cuts right through the bullshit. Problem was that Russek couldn't help but look like he was anticipating results—in the way he martially crossed his arms and suppressed his usual smirk—which undermined him more often than he'd like. In other words, his blunt methods didn't necessarily reflect some stylist's manifesto for dealing with the world; he had the same obsession with results as everyone else. At bottom, Russek was an agenda-monger too. If I'd offered "310" him on a paper plate right there in the lounge, he'd have darted off back to his sticker-plastered iMac and began clacking away on the first of what must have been hundreds of column ideas stored in his skullbox.

"No, but how about the rest of my business cards?"

"That hurts, Gabe." He thumped his chest without smiling. Russek never smiled
when he made jokes, as though he were *observing* himself making them instead of actually making them. That way, if you didn't laugh, he could always fall back on the claim that he was being ironic. "Where you off to?" Russek said. "I keep hearing about some cush cubicle gig at a PR firm? I can't believe it. I mean, it's Gabe Sack we're talking about here after all."

I knew whatever I said would circulate with the fury of a herpes outbreak, so I told him the most mundane thing that came to mind: the truth. "I've got about as much idea of my next move as my next column," I said.

"That explains their spontaneous feel," he said.

Film editor Janine had slipped into the room—sort of. In her trademark notation-in-the-margins manner, she was leaning against the doorway and inspecting her nails, acting as if she was waiting politely for a private conversation to end and *not*, say, eavesdropping. We made eye contact and, just to cut through the pretense, I waved her in. I imagined myself taking up position behind the lounge's Formica table, complete with a mic and water pitcher, and spewing smiling bromides in a full-blown press conference. A few movie and music scribes followed her in—corduroyed and tight tee-clad slouches who feigned momentary interest in a soda, coffee or something-or-other before giving up the ruse. Even classically disgruntled Aaron appeared, grey-eyed and groggy-looking, bringing up the rear of a phalanx of writers and artists. The downside was that this impromptu conference would effectively short circuit what could be a rich, flowing vein of utterly wrongheaded rumor. It was truly a pity, but when I'd decided to quit, I'd also resigned myself to the cold fact that, sooner or later, I'd have to *explain* myself.

"Looks like we got ourselves a hanging," Janine said. "For the record, pardner,
I'm here for the soda." She was a thick-ankled, vaguely resentful lesbian whose posture promised to suck the joy out of any type of contrary lifestyle.

I gave her a patronizing, that's-not-the-least-bit-fucking-funny nod.

"Aren't we grossly transparent?" Aaron asked.

Another nod. I was actually waiting for people to get settled. I imagined holding my hands in the air in that authoritatively settling-down gesture; testing the mic with a tap of the index finger, and aheming my way into a brief, thoroughly professional disavowal of runaway speculations and conspiracy theories.

"Well," I said to the employee-lounge assembly. "You can't all happen to be thirsty at the same time." This wasn't some chummy farewell or even a debriefing. A cog had slipped in the Bang Bang machinery, and these strivers, nourished on a certain sour ambition, had felt the tremors. I had to admire their pragmatism—hard-won in the face of so many trademarked dreams that they were like tattoos. If nothing else, the paper was a haven for the unreasonable realists of this town, the ones who had cashed in the myth of the meteoric rise, the fantasy of the suddenly discovered genius for more humble master plans that went something like: Step 1. Grab rung of pseudo-corporate ladder. Step 2. Claw, bite, ass-kiss like werewolf. Step 3. Repeat.
The trip was set for that Saturday; I got the oil in the Civic changed, shook the floormats and spent some quality time on Saturday morning vacuum-sucking nubs and morsels from the cushion cracks. Somehow, nothing can toss a thundercloud over a road trip quite like reaching back to scratch your ass and coming up with a fingernailful of lint, hair, and pulverized remnants of snack food. I was actually looking forward to playing a host of sorts. Precious as it sounds, Vegas was my town, in a sense; I'd churned out a half-dozen or so pieces about over the years during my Bang Bang tenure—mostly centered on the schlock value of the Strip's laser-lighted, silicon-enhanced offerings, which usually required parachuting in over the weekend, catching three or four production shows, and diagnosing some sort of new trend. If the latest wave was all choreoed topless gals and winking innuendo, sin was back (for the umpteenth time); if it was mulleted magicians with flounced sleeves and effeminate flourishes, magic was making a return. In that sense, Vegas was useful for insta-pundit—which isn't to say terribly accurate—prognostications about the zeitgeist of America.

Besides that, I wanted Staley to have fun. He was one of the few people around—whether we're talking about the sparkling blister that is L.A. or the rest of the world—who I genuinely liked and respected. Black Scratch may have been conjured out of a trust fund, but Staley worked hard—especially too hard for his clientele, who, despite his subtle attempts to educate them beyond a radio-brainwashed taste for the likes
of "extreme music" by rap-rock clowns or neo-garage acts or SoCal punk-pap, continued to ask, "You got the new Offspring?" Staley, that saintly slouch, would invariably take them on the scenic route, never failing to steer them by a handful of bands who did it better, did it harder, and did it first. He'd say something like, "Dude, if you're into Offspring—and I'm fully not trying to sell you anything, I'm just telling you—you might want to check out these guys..." He subscribed to that unspoken dipster tenet that said many of the world's problems would disappear if only people had better taste. Staley needed a vacation.

He had left Black Scratch in the dubiously capable hands of Chris, who greeted me with the his own brand of L.A. body check from behind the sticker-clad cash register: contempt mixed with what I thought was mild sexual interest.

"Don't you get my boss into too much trouble now. Some of us want him back," Chris said. He leered.

"In one manageable piece, I promise," I said. "Hopefully he won't kick and scream too much."

He thrust a CD at me. "Now that I've been nice to you, listen to this."

"That's nice? Chris, you're an ice queen and I'll never hold it against you." The CD cover art was a bad black-and-white photo of a hurt-looking little boy that was clearly taken by a college student. "But I will hold against you the fact that you just gave me a CD by a band called Forlorn."

"That's my band."

"All the worse for you. Let me guess. Smooth jazz. Sunsets and box wine."

"Oh, Gabe. As cute as you are when you act jaded like that, I really want you to listen to it. I play—"
"Keyboards?"

"Like I said, you're cute when you're jaded. I play guitar, silly. At any rate, I'll happily risk getting feathered in the village square, so have at it, sweetie."

I held the CD out. "I'd love to do the honors, but I'm not doing reviews anymore."

"This is a surprise. As of?"

"As of this week. I'm quitting. No more infamous Gabe at the helm."

Mike rolled his eyes perfunctorily; his practiced eye-roll gave him an air of everyday, housewife-grade exasperation that made you want to impress him somehow.

"Well, if that isn't a relief. My bandmates put me up to this. They insisted on trying to get a mention in your column. Of course, they don't know you like I do. Is there a worthy successor I can send this to?" I'll admit I felt the briefest stab at him seeming to be relieved.

"I'll deal with that as soon as I get back."

"And what's with this Vegas trip, anyway? Why drag Staley and his girlfriend along?"

"He's a completely willing participant."

"So you say," Mike said.

A leather-jacketed barrel of a guy trundled up and asked me, "Where's hard rock?"

I pointed to Mike.

"Excuse me?" Mike said.

"Hard rock," the guy harumphed.

Mike was suddenly a blur of arms and pointing fingers. "Emo's at the far end over there," he said. "Hardcore is next to the indie-rock, which is next to mainstream..."
rock, which is sometimes called hard rock, but we know better. Mainstream:
Whitesnake. Hard rock: AC/DC. Comprende? Punk rock and hardcore are there on the
east wall beneath the Sick Of It All poster. Goth is next to industrial, which is next to
electronica, by the T-shirts, which are on sale, by the way. Also, check out the EP racks
over there. But honestly, we don't really carry a lot of traditional hard rock." Mike gave
the guy his best understanding puppy-dog look, the kind that really made you want to
touch the back of his throat with your knuckles. Which is the feeling he was aiming for.
Mike had that classic indie-geek hauteur that makes record stores across the nation such
an unveneered joy to visit. The guy left.

"I don't think we'll see him again," I said.

"I don't mind. He dressed so circa '77 Meatloaf."

"So is Staley fucking his girlfriend back there or what?"

"Staley? He's at home. This was our big farewell scene. Oh, Scarlet!" He lash-
batted.

"Double Christ." I couldn't help but smile. "Goodbye."

I navigated among shoals of shiny '60s clunkers and made my way to Staley's
shitty Silver Lake apartment that had a nice view of the homes that had a nice view of the
reservoir. His pad had sheets in the windows, a beaded curtain in the hallway: two sure
signs he was an aspiring starving dipster. True to form, Staley was still packing, scouring
his apartment for I had no idea what.

"A brown sock," he said. "But a dark brown sock, not a light brown."

"Stay-lee!" Darcy, I presumed, called from the other room. "That is just gross."

"Don't gross out," he said to nobody, as he peeked under the enormous sofa
beached in his living room. "It's clean. I make sure to only drop clean laundry." As far as hipster pads went, Staley's wasn't too far off the radar. Evidence of his media consumption, of course, took priority in the interior design: a wall shelf bulging with his vinyl collection took up the north side of the living room; next to that, teetering towers of CDs were stacked on an end table that was, actually, one of those electric company spools with a $12 piece of "retro" fabric on top.

"A man particular about his socks," I said. "Not the best candidate for a road trip."

He peeked around the back of an etagere that groaned under the weight of record catalogs. "It's a healthy neurosis, Gabe. I mean, this way, my socks match."

"Do what I do. Wear longer pants so your ankles never show."

"That's funny, sir, but I'm not laughing," he said, still possessed. Now he was in the kitchen, going through drawers, one foot fully clad, one not. "My mom once told me a man's mind benefits from attention to detail. I have no idea what that means, but I think it has to do with socks."

Momentarily brave, I fished a brown sock from between the sofa cushions. "Is this it?"

"That's light brown." Darcy, black bangs stabbing down her pale forehead, stood in the bedroom doorway. She came up and held her discovery—quite possibly the dark brown sock in question—next to mine. "See? I win."

"I forgot the award bouquet."

"How are you, asshole?"

"Itching to drop you off already," I said.

"Darcy, are you being cruel?" Staley said.
"Yes. Oh, you can stop looking, Staley. I found your sock. The poor thing's dead."

He appeared in the kitchen doorway, ready for the reunion. "Where'd you find it?"

"In the sock drawer."

"Capital."

Darcy laughed dryly. "Nice magazines, too, you dirty old man. If I was a fed I'd call you in." She made a gun out of her hands and took aim. She didn't stop smiling. Staley had a rarity on his hands, a girlfriend who truly appreciated deviance.

"We have to find some underwear now, too?"

"He doesn't wear underwear," Darcy said, a note of triumph in her voice. I expected that getting used to someone knowing things about Staley that I, purported Best Friend, didn't, would take some time.

"I'm relieved that I can't corroborate that."

"Well, I still have to pack, of course." He stuffed a box of Vanilla Wafers into a duffel bag schlumped onto the easy chair. "There. Can't forget the yummy road eats. Darcy wanted to bring Chicken in a Biskit, but I don't think that's vegetarian."

"They keep those poor crackers in terrible factory farms," Darcy said. She hefted a gigantic purple suitcase over her shoulders.

"I mean the chicken flavoring—the chicken dust," Staley said. He rolled his eyes. I'd never seen him look amused and exasperated like that. "But it was funny. Point." He marked an invisible chalkboard with his index finger.

Friday morning traffic was its usual brand of urban soul-rape, snagged with uptown commuters in their class-ladder-clawing Beemers, the Santa Monica soccer mom
mafia humping along in their Navigators, laborers in rusty, flaking work trucks, and the common denominator, service-industry worker bees ensconced in their Neons, Elans, and other aluminum boxes with hopelessly bright names. What never failed to surprise me was the roadway's relative silence, evidence of a collective admission of the utter ineffectuality of the horn as a device for communication, motivation, or even for expressing a profoundly deep abhorrence for your fellow driver. The freeways: where we unwillingly gathered in a ritual show of mass resignation, confessing that the sooty, sprawling empire was, on many levels, fucked.

Staley, in all his goofy chivalry, had insisted that Darcy sit up front. I only began to hold it against him when she'd pulled a tiny gleaming something out of her pocket and commenced clipping her fingernails, flipping little white shards my way with every other snick.

Snick. Her hands were girlishly small.

"Hey, look," I said. "Gee, there's a window to roll down. Snick.

"Well, what do you know," she said. Snick.

"Please."

She grabbed the handle and hustled the window down.

"Like I said before, it's nothing personal. Did that review really cost you two shows?"

"Nothing major," she said. "We're still showcasing at the Viper."

"Who doesn't showcase at the Viper?"

"God, Staley wasn't kidding about you."

"I told her you're a tiny bit cynical," he said, then went back to his Vanilla Wafers.
"Help. I'm sitting next to the Jason Vorhees attitude monster," she said. Staley snorted and kicked the back of my seat. "Let me know when it's time for his nap and I'll drive."

"How long are you gonna stay mad?" The range of my knuckles across the steering wheel was white.

"Me? *You're* the one who's mad."

"What am *I* mad about?" I said.

"Finding that out would require a therapist's couch. But I intend to at least *try* to enjoy this road trip."

"Staley, please save me," I said.

"No, save *me*, Staley."

It was all turning into a nice acid bath.

"It's official," Staley announced. He leaned forward, knifing his underfed frame between our seats. "Time for some road music."

KCRW had started to gasp after we slipped onto 1-15, around us, the stucco sea of San Bernardino congealed between hills stubbled with dead grass. Billboards floated by: a flounce-sleeved magician and his sidekick, a grizzly bear that had been dyed pink; a new outlet mall in the shape of one of those futuristic-looking athletic shoes; a casino restaurant advertising an outrageously generous steak and shrimp special called "Meat Storm." I liked this brand of desperation: much more raw, more unmasked than L.A.'s

Darcy fed a CD into the slot and suddenly My Bloody Valentine churned through the speakers, cotton candy with shards of glass. The road whirred and the shitty brown bushes outside sprinted by. My brain felt like it was being rubbed against a cheese grater. I endured for forty-five minutes. I chewed my lip until what felt like the thirty-
fourth track. I punched the stop button.

"Christ. That is not road music."

"Get the lithium. H.L. Mencken is getting a complex," Darcy said.

"Give me something propulsive. Some rock, some fey indie rock. Some garage bullshit. Even give me some shitty electronica. But I don't want to feel like I'm floating on a cloud to Dublin."

"I was kind of enjoying that, actually," Staley said. "Zonked out and daydreaming."

"The Pogues are good Irish road music. U2's bleating would be good Irish road music. But not My Bloody Valentine's Ireland. You'd think they don't even have roads there, that they ride along on magic carriages or something."

"U2 is not road music," Darcy said. "U2 is like funeral pop music for diplomats and neurosurgeons volunteering in Third World countries."

"Better than this shit. Film score for fucking space jellyfish."

"How about the new Cat Power? I haven't heard it yet," Staley said.

"Hell no. I can't stand that chick mewling and lowing like a cow that's been hit by a truck. One Joan Baez per millennium, thanks."

Darcy laughed. "Harsh."

I could hear Staley flipping through his CD case, unfazed; he'd heard me unload before.

"Alright. Truce. You can't go wrong with Elvis Costello," he said.

"Unimpeachability that makes me want to kick him right in the teeth. Musical version of the teacher's pet. Next."

"Now you're slagging stuff because it's too good?" Darcy said.
Victorville swung into view, along with a gigantic blue mall that looked abandoned. Barstow was next.

Staley flipped. "Surfer Rosa? Nobody doesn't like that."

"I really don't feel like reminiscing about my sexually barren high school years."

"Kid A?"

"Computerized dirges from a one-eyed monk? It'll drive me off the road."

"Elephant."

"Unassailable—"

"Then yes?" Staley said.

"—and thus boring." I felt like I had a cinder block in my ass; some old unworded indignation rising up in me. I had hit that point of momentum, startled, slightly exhilarated, high on the false ambrosia of my own bile. And even as I realized it, I couldn't resist; it had kinetic force. And I said why do they have to dress up in those stupid red and white themed outfits? Why did everyone have to be so winkingly post-ironically clever, and yet so strangely sanitized and spritzed and sanctioned. And I said everything had the fingerprints of handlers on it, everything with the gnashing suffix of neo: neo-blues, neo-folk, neo-garage rock, neo-fuck this, what I'd like right about now is some goddamn silence, if only because they haven't made a brand name out of it yet—or should we go for some stylized neo-silence and issue a press kit and demo, muscle our way into the Sam Goody listening kiosks, arrange door-facing CD displays at Virgin Megawhore, develop a simple but arresting logo, large enough to grab your attention in a crowded Century City mall, small enough to fit on a half-shirt we could sell for $30 at Zipper, and let's not forget the silence baseball caps and a whole line of silence streetwear—
Staley and Darcy looked at me like I was covered in ants.

"You really need to stop. Why didn't you bring any music?" she said. Her eyes were big with anger.

"Why didn't you?" I was short of breath.

She said that was her music, asshole.

What perfect timing: we pulled into Barstow just when we were starving and just when we had lost our appetites; they'd been slowly sandblasted away by Mr. Psychodrama Outburst. Barstow seemed festive with the spirit of people who are off to better places; technically, the vibe should have applied to us.

I pulled into the crowded parking lot of a breakfast joint called Space Breakfast that claimed to sell the "Best Hamburgers in the Galaxie." The sign had a picture of a burger on a plate zipping into outer space to, presumably, conquer and colonize new worlds. There was a retired couple in the parking lot, sitting on one of the steps of their mammoth RV, pulling on socks and sandals.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have arrived," Staley said.

Darcy didn't move. "I'm not hungry. I'll stay here."

"I'm being boycotted already?" I was just hungry enough not to momentarily overlook what an asshole I am. The smell of pancakes had me headlocked and lurching toward the door. Staley told me he'd be in in a minute.

Inside Space Breakfast, murmuring mid-morning chaos reigned; tables were filled with Barstowians and road warriors alike, busily hoisting eggs and pancakes into their mouths as they puzzled over maps and perused newspapers, all while a small army of servers darted around, refilling coffee with all the efficiency and warmth of a pit crew. A gum-popping waitress complete with squeaky white tennies installed me in a seat near
the window, where I could see Gabe and Darcy most likely discussing strategies for
dealing, or at least tolerating, this piece of asshole baggage that was accompanying them
on their would-be slacker Vegas honeymoon. Darcy was bolted in her seat, arms crossed,
with look of sullen determination crimped into her face. Not to say that Darcy's
numerous complaints about my character—which, it looked like, she was enumerating at
the moment with fuming precision—don't arc toward the bull's-eye, but, for her own part,
she was a strange girl. This isn't point defense; the thing about her that nettled me slowly
surfaced as I decided whether to clog myself with a stack of "black hole berry pancakes,
a "saucerburger," or, for tradition's sake, the more no-nonsense "grilled cheese with laser
fries" (quickly, before my already-waning appetite vanished beneath the avalanche of
half-hearted sci-fi gimmicking). It added up to something that suggested she was
somehow let down by me, that she had been expecting something different. Most of my
fans (thank you, thank you) will offer the most blistering asides about my character
without any hint that anyone, including them, had ever expected anything otherwise. It's
just the way I'm hardwired, they'd say, and clap the dust off their hands and get on with it.
But when I'd gone all Tourette's on her music, there was something more than anger in
her tone. There was a shade of disappointment, as if she'd been led (by Staley? By me?
By who?) to believe that I'd be different. There's no damning feeling quite like the one
that comes from briefly seeing some wubering pond-reflection of an alternative
self—new! improved!—that you miss being by miles. Especially when it's the personage
you thought people, whether out of mental laziness or convenience or charity, bought into
despite a dossier full of contrary evidence.

Maybe Staley saved me, because Darcy reluctantly schlumped out of her seat,
stood up and picked the wrinkles from her clothes.
By the time they appeared tableside, I'd decided to play meek and contrite, something just short of groveling.

"The vortex milkshakes look great," I said.

Lunch was served with a side of humility; I'd committed myself (like so many other times, temporarily) to fashioning my behavior during the course of lunch—I'd settled on an uninspired spread of flat, vaguely soggy "quantum hoagies" and under-fried french fries—toward something that resembled an apology. It was hard to do in front of Staley. Best friends make the promise to accept each other (better/worse, ad nauseum), purely in the abstract, and it's actually quite rare for us to see their scaly undersides. Thus there I was, acting visibly contrite toward Staley's new girlfriend, engaging in the kind of polite background conversation that requires little concentration and, thankfully, even less eye contact, and Staley must've seen the deference as an alarming reversal. It was alarming: Staley usually deferred to me. I don't point this out as a point of pride, just a point of fact; in every friendship there's that differential—even if it's undetectable, it's there—of interest and solicitude, and Staley's dim instincts must've alarmed him that it was being slowly flip-flopped before his very eyes. For her part, Darcy took my polite line of questioning—"What are you gonna do in Vegas? Been there before? Any big plans? Seen The Strip?"—as it was: a patronizing attempt to ingratiate myself with a girl I didn't otherwise care about. Still, she bore it with a certain smiling, contemptuous patience.

The car started up with a wheeze and a shudder, a sure sign the a/c was putting the thing through far too strenuous paces. But, much as I loved to experiment, I wasn't about to fuck with the fragile collective mood by exposing it to eye-melting desert heat. Staley was wiped out, drugged by a pound and a half of pure sandwich (he'd cheerfully
consumed the half of Darcy's), working his way into a nap with a rattling snore that would've moved to me to murder if I hadn't made a commitment to be on my best behavior. The a/c whooshing and humming, the desertscape resuming after billboards and buildings gave up in a gasp of truck stops and gas station signs, we forged onward. Darcy was apparently attempting to raise her spirits with a half-pound wad of bubblegum that she'd obtained by pumping seven quarters in an outsized machine in front of the Space Breakfast. She blew pendulous bubbles, and then sucked them in, a forceful, crackling and altogether annoying implosion of gum. She knew it, too, blowing four, five in a row until I was visibly pissed; my hands were so tight on the steering wheel I could've snapped the thing like a potato chip. I was doubly pissed that Staley was blessed with the ability to sleep through the noise. I tried to focus on the road. But I couldn't: Darcy was looking at me, smiling between those absurd, smackling bubbles. It was a tease; it was an olive branch. We laughed.

"You look like you're about to put your face through the windshield. Don't bug the man when he's hard at work keeping the car on the road." Another blow, another crackling pop.

I took advantage of the moment. "Sorry for what I said earlier. You get one free crucifixion."

"Was that sincerity? Wow."

"I didn't know I had it in me either." A lone billboard swooped by in slow motion, advertising a steak as large as your head that you could only get at a certain casino in Las Vegas. "Eat Your Way Out," the billboard dared.

"So, refresh. Staley said this trip's about you having to track down some guy for an article or something?"
"Profile of a failed lounge singer," I said. I sounded as though I was reciting something. And I was. "But first, I have to find the guy. Which, as you know, is half the fun." I gave a lame smile.

"How do you know he's failed?" Another blow, another crackling pop.

"Because no one's seen hide nor hair of the guy since I last wrote about him. And that was years ago. Working theory is that he's holed up in some off-Strip casino lounge somewhere, clinging by a thread, all that. The Un-Rat Pack. You know, the stuff great journalism is made of."

"What if it turns out he became a postman or something? Or the manager of an Arby's? You're sort of flying blind into this whole thing."

"I'll get a story. Even if it isn't that one. Vegas always has something going on. It hasn't let me down yet."

"Or a third-grade teacher or something," she said.

"That still makes him a failed lounge singer."

"Or a successful third-grade teacher," she said.

"Half-full, half-empty."

"You've trained yourself to be mean, you shit," she said. "It's just in your nature now. What's the meanest thing you ever wrote?"

I wasn't offended by the question. "Opinions vary, but some bands credit me with breaking them up. In my defense, I truly believe the world is a better place without them."

"Yeah, you slagged my friend's band Shoehorn pretty badly. And what was up with that thing on Cervenka? I still owe you a charlie horse or two."

"Fire away."
"I wouldn't give you the pleasure, you sick old man," she said. "You're pretty smooth on the surface, but I think you're a tortured little *artiste* on the inside. I can totally imagine you at the keyboard, pulling your hair out."

"You mean I agonize? Sorry, sister. You've got the wrong guy."

"Yeah you do. Otherwise, why quit your job? You're quitting because of your scarred little soul or something like that, right?"

I fired back. "You're a wonderfully deranged little girl, but you really need to work on reading character. The whole scene is just old. I'm in a what you might call a personal growth mode."

"That's a pretty fruity way of putting it. Okay, the *artiste* thing was a shot in the dark, Mr. Gabe," she said, punching me in the arm. "Though I did think I was getting somewhere when you started looking all sketchy and uncomfortable."

"Me, uncomfortable?"

She saw right through it. "Maaaaybe."

"Okay, Sister Darcy, cut out the mind games."

"You're losing your footing. Not so sure of yourself after all. Feels pretty good, though, huh?"

I didn't answer.

Staley was smacking his mouth, emerging from a rumbling sleep. "Whoa. I had a dream we were trying to outrun a hippo that was chasing us. Freaky. Somebody give me some water."

Darcy handed the bottle back. "Hippos can't run."

"Well, that was the thing. In the dream, he had really muscular legs." He swigged. "He was the Greek champion of hippos or something."
"You are impossibly cute, Staley," Darcy said. Suddenly she was holding a fistful of clinking silverware: knives, forks, spoons. "See? I mean it. I bear gifts for you."

"Let me guess."

"From that shitty restaurant," she said. "The least I could do to make up for that lamer of a meal. That sandwich was like socks between slabs of cardboard. There oughta be a law."

"Oh, geez. She does this every once in a while," Staley said. "Stealing's like an expression of her love or something. Is that how you explained it?" He turned back to me. "Dude, it's complicated."

"Who doesn't need extra silverware? Spoons and stuff are always getting lost."

She offered me a piece. "Need a butterknife?"

"Remind me not to visit any jewelry stores."

"Sorry if it sketches you out," she said. "Like I said, it's a compulsion thing."

"So you've said."

"It takes the edge off. It's a control thing, I guess. It counters anxiety. Here, Staley, have a teaspoon. It'll be a good luck charm."

I was going inform Darcy there were medications for that, but I didn't want to be any more needlessly antagonistic than my nature instructed me to. Besides, she was so sanguine, so smilingly matter-of-fact about her little habit that I couldn't help but muster what I interpreted to be respect for it. Her casual defense of it said it wasn't a problem, but a stone-cut trait. Take it or leave it. Could I really help but admire someone who embraced—and even nourished—her flaws? I'd accepted the butterknife and dropped it into the door compartment, my first souvenir.
CHAPTER 7

As we zoomed past the all-too-iconic "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" (barely visible among the phalanx of cameramen and strutting models; yet another someone must have been shooting a commercial), the south Strip greeting us with its black pyramid, a castle, various tri-winged hotels that represented the most recent building boom as the Strip shifted upscale, I was thinking about her. We'd talked only briefly before I left, but the brevity of the convo was a testament to its focus. I knew how it'd play out, a head-gamey slut-around that would leap the spectrum from athletic joy to braying ennui, but—testament to the male mind incoming—I couldn't help but look forward to it with all the enthusiasm of a sugar fiend on Halloween. I'd call her from the room, she'd answer in that self-assured manner that made my spine shiver, and I'd engineer some way to extricate myself from the company of Darcy and Staley. Like that would be hard: I'm sure I was proving to be as fun as a staph infection.

The term "fuck buddies" was alarmingly accurate; it'd take Olympian verbal feinting to avoid the charge—if it was something to be guilty of, that is. In fact, the phrase haunted me enough—something so pop-culture cheery about the phrase that it became lousy with contempt—that I considered not calling Teresa at all, and just dealing with that ghost of guilt that comes from visiting a city but never calling your friends and relatives who live there. Clincher is that if Teresa had found out later that I'd visited her fair city and never called, she'd probably have said she was busy anyway. Not in any
pique of sour-grapes; Teresa's weekends were precious. She put only things of value in them, like safety deposit boxes. It said something about my rank that I was seeing her on a Friday. I tried not to think about it too much.

"Damn," Staley said. "We should've timed it so we came in at night. I could use some drama after that drive." Though it was afternoon, the street was ensconced in shade from the forest of billboards, marquees, palm trees and hotels.

"Yeah," Darcy said. "We could've done the whole montage thing with a wicked guitar soundtrack. A gigantic Chuck E. Cheese for adults. Wild." We were wedged in traffic at a stop light, between limos, SUVs, sports cars. A roller coaster rumbled and screamed. A video marquee advertised a magician who could make an Army tank turn into a gigantic butterfly. Another promoted Chinese monks riding bicycles on fire. A fountain blasted fusillades of water into the air to some saccharine Puccini. Tourists herded down the sidewalks, gawking, photographing, posing, to the beat of a unique form of commerce that involved something other than your typical exchange of goods—it was a vaguely sinister canyon abuzz with activity. Surely, Larkin didn't exist on this themed and sculpted end of the food chain. The thing about the Strip was it got older and uglier (or, if you're a hipster, older and "more soulful") as you headed north. It was not only where Larkin might be found—where the hotels were more like ambitious encampments supplemented with greasy banks of slot machines and video poker—it was also where our hotel was. I didn't have the heart to break the news to Staley and Darcy. Thing is, they'd probably rejoice when we got there. They were still of that curious turn of mind in which seediness conferred cred.

We worked our way down, light by light. Four blocks later—having survived a veritable gauntlet of artificial volcanoes, pirate battles and swelling banks of neon
signage—we had the vague feeling of having been pummeled. Or, as Staley put it:
"Dude, I'm full," schlumping back in his seat like a man KO'd. By the time we pulled up
to The Crown Hotel, sitting on the north Strip like a forgotten scab, I was ready for a
nap—and not exactly in the frame of mind to explain my choice of hotels. Crunching
into the parking lot, we were confronted by a crumbling, low-slung dive designed in a
sort of no-rent Mission style.

"I'd say that it's probably not as bad as it looks, but I think that'd be a jinx," Darcy
murmured. "We wanted campy. We got campy." The whole scene was already turning
into a life lesson on booking hotel rooms online. Baby Jesus bless the Internet.

The front office, encased in broad milky windows that made it look like some
space cockpit, was manned by a short, suspicious man in a wife-beater. He barked for
my driver's license, and I submitted. He commanded me to sign a form agreeing to take
responsibility for the TV, the towels and bedsheets. He told us that cold sodas—as well
as extra soap and shampoo—were available at a vending machine at the end of the
building, that no loud noise was permitted after 10 p.m., and warned us that, while local
calls were permitted, the numbers to local escort services were blocked, "'cause the last
thing I need is another cameo on 'Cops.'" Then he slid two keys across the Formica desk.

"Whoa. I think we only need one room," Staley said.

"You paid for two, friend, and that's what you're gettin'," the man said, folding his
arms.

"Figured you two might want some privacy," I told Staley. A look of
embarrassment passed over Darcy's face; maybe it was the idea that privacy implied sex.
"Honestly, how long could you stand me in such close quarters? You'd go West Berlin at
your first chance."
"It's not like we're gonna be in the room all that much," Staley said. "We'll be out on the town, all that, right?"

"Think of it as a sort of honeymoon present," I said lamely.

"Honeymoon," Darcy said. "Ha."

Surprise. The adjacent rooms had been victimized by a hideous minimalism: stiff, coffin-like beds with thin turquoise bedsheets, the carpets a gaudy sea of swirling paisleys that looked like mutant fruit—surely they were scraps leftover from some forgotten '70s hotel casino, bought at a deep discount. However, the clown paintings—mine, a somewhat sinister-looking, heavily eyelined fat-face with coils of flaming red hair and a simpering grin; Staley and Darcy's, a square-headed jester-type whose tight-lipped expression of stifled mirth hinted at some criminal complicity—were a nice touch.

That hotel ritual: doors open, bags flung on beds, the wanderings in and out of rooms that are momentarily shared. Staley and Darcy couldn't resist doing the low-gravity bed-plunge on my unyielding king-size slab; they didn't bounce, they thudded.

Staley went into a mock-snore and roused himself. "So, boss, what's the plan? How about some food?"

"We should totally kick things off by hitting a buffet and eating 'til we get hepatitis." Darcy said.

"Yeah, I promise to hold your hand when you're barfing up vital organs in the emergency room," Staley said, turning his face to hers. He kissed her.

"First thing I'm doing is taking a shower, which is a sight best unseen," I said. Staley muttered a joking complaint.

A minute later I was wrapped in a towel, bedside, phone crunched between cheek
and shoulder. The shower was running—building into what I'd hoped was a steaming crescendo of heat—which explains why I didn't hear her come in. Rather, I saw a cube of sunlight expand on the far wall and Darcy's silhouette quickly fill it. I whipped around, clenching towel to skin out of something more like embarrassment than modesty.

"Sorry," she said. "Forgot my suitcase." She hoisted it off the bed and showed it as proof.

"No problem." Why did I suddenly feel guilty, as though I'd been caught, dick in hand, with a greasy *Hustler* in the other?

Darcy stood there. It wasn't defiance; it was curiosity. "Who you calling?"

A one-question pop quiz that threw me off. I stumbled for an answer, filed through flash-cards in my brain. Great question: who was I calling? Was she a friend, a dalliance, a whore? In all the fumbling, I reached for a familiar word that was hardly accurate, but convenient, flexibly vague. It *would*, after, all have the effect of getting this beautiful girl out of my room.

I could have said lounge, I could have said Larkin, I could have said dozens of things. Target acquired: fuckhead. I said girlfriend.

Darcy nodded mechanically and backed out of the room. Still clasping the towel to my hips—out of some vestigial modesty—I turned the deadbolt, hung up the phone and slipped into the steam.

Postponing only made me more nervous about calling. In all the mangled glory of contemporary relationships, the refuge of the coward is the fevered hope that she isn't *home*, and I clung to it like a life raft. Two rings. Three rings. Four rings. Surely there's some authoritative study to be cited here about how the average person has an answering machine pick up at this point, but I was on to seven rings before that beloved piece of
machinery picked up and said hello caller, you've reached Teresa, leave a message. I reciprocated: Hey you. As promised, I'm in town. Call me at the Crown Hot—

  Click. "Hey you."

  "No. Hey you."

  "Hope you savored the suspense," she said. "Screening my calls. Anyone who makes it through that gauntlet deserves a human on the other end. How are you? It's good to hear your voice."

  "Better now." I reddened. What a line. "Doing that lounge story I told you about."

  "Gabe's last hurrah. You celebrating?" Celebrating was a code word.

  "I've got two friends in tow. Tolerable enough. But I'm about ready to get away for a while before I have to see this guy tonight."

  "Break the news gently, you saint. Aren't road trips hell?"

  "Unmitigated."

  "How's the wasteland? I'd never drive to Vegas in the middle of summer. You're asking for divine intervention of the worst kind."

  "God has to find you worthy, first. So. You free?"

  "If I say yes, how soon will you be here?"

  Teresa wasn't looking for an answer that flattered her: not something like "in a flash" or "immediately," "asap." She asked for a reason; it was a tease, a warning that something else might capture her attention in the meantime. I told her twenty minutes at the outside—my heart whimpering pre-emptively lest she deem that too long a wait—and Teresa said congratulations, she'd be there.

  I knocked. Staley answered, shirtless and sweaty with what I suspected was the
throes of something resembling sex. He held the door tight around his head.

"You look nice. We late for something?" he said. His eyes were lolling as if he'd been choked.

"No. I'm heading out for a while to see a friend. Let's meet back here at seven. I suspect you can keep yourself occupied until then."

When the steam cleared and I'd boiled it all down, it was funny: there wasn't much reason to respect Teresa. She was a charming, complicated fuck-buddy, but still a fuck-buddy; and I was surprised at myself for counting respectability in my arsenal of yardsticks, but—flipping through the mental Rolodex of friends and enemies—it did matter. I know, I'm flouting that civilized paradigm that bestows, crown-like, the same sexual freedom on women as men. It's not that I've got some streak of old-fashioned values running across my heart like a racing stripe—I clamor for even more sluttiness in an age that takes itself too seriously—it revolves around something more personal. It wasn't that Teresa shared too much of herself; it was that the individual portions were so small. Her air was one of begrudging interest, as though she'd originally come for something else, had something else in mind, but, as long as she was here, she'd deign to pay you some attention until that Better Thing came along. That vastly oversimplifies it (and paints me as a brat, grinding his ass into the dirt in a fifth-gear tantrum). On the other hand, it wouldn't be an oversimplification to call Teresa a snob.

The barb: one without justifications. You can imagine mitigating factors: looks, say, or money. Teresa, really, had neither of those. She was inoffensively pretty, but could stand to eat an extra meal or two a day; when sitting, she could like look a collection of triangles. And she wasn't rich. She'd clambered up the jungle gym of the
Ivy League lite, graduating from Penn with honors in the ever-vague "international studies" program and promptly installing herself as a host for high rollers in that marble-and-glass jewel box the Bellagio, where her expertise in what must have been cultural sensitivity and worldliness was put to use in the form of knowing in precisely what instances her "exotic" guests might want, say, an extra pallet of hand towels. Like that threadbare fable of the butterfly and the hurricane, such culturally sensitive indulgence had the purported effect of making these jet-hopping high-rollers spend more at the baccarat tables—thus her low six-figure income and cushy work shifts. Perhaps that's what encounters with Others—sporting saris and Halsteads jewelry, Japanese reserve and overseas bank accounts earmarked just for gambling—did to her: set off a constant alert in her brain that there something better was always out there, waiting. It made sense: Teresa had the attention span of a housefly.

Traits. No real reason to not respect someone; but add to those Teresa's white-hot penchant for taking on men through a revolving door—with all the professional couth of a masseuse—and it wasn't hard to think of her as something of a mercenary with velvet vises for thighs. We'd met years ago, when she was on some L.A. junket, doing the personal-concierge thing for some Pakistani who needed your classic vacation-from-a vacation and, on a whim tailored for the rich, hopped on a first-class flight to L.A. The first thing she said when we were alone in her room at the Regal Biltmore was that, not to be unduly cold or anything, I might want to leave a few key items (her term) on, like my shirt, because she only had an hour. If I wasn't about to evaporate into lust, I'd've left on the spot. But I stayed, and I fell in a brand of love like a Chinese take-out box: it seemed sturdy enough at the time, but better judgment says you shouldn't use it beyond its purpose. She softened only afterwards. Teresa was one of those people to whom sex was
another form of conversation.

"If you're not busy later, maybe we should meet for a drink," she said. She was lying on her tummy, head on the pillow, exuding that steaming post-sex vulnerability. "I didn't exactly give you much chance to speak, young Gabe." The epithet—a sort of come-on like a verbal checkered-flag: you made it!—sent waves of giddiness riding down my back. "Do you think I'm a slut?"

"Just purposeful," I said. It was such a save I wanted to cross myself. "I've got no problem with directness when it takes this form." I was running a finger along her spine and her eyes blinked shut like a kitten's. I felt a cheap concoction of elation and bewilderment at not knowing what role to play. Rifling through the mental dressing room: the wide-eyed schoolboy? The grateful bon vivant, jaded with pleasure?

"You do not advance to the next round, young Gabe," she said, opening her eyes. "I am a slut." Her hair smelled like a perfumed jungle.

"Is that a confession or a job description?"

I managed to get a smile out of her. Promising. "Just a statement. I saw you downstairs hunched over your cheap drink, and I thought, now there's a single-minded man. A bit self-absorbed, but not a flake. No earrings. Always a good sign. And no tattoos. None visible from my vantage point, anyway," she said. She gave my ass a swift slap, and, inside, embers flared. "The absolute last person I wanted to meet tonight was some L.A. fashionista. They come out in herds."

"And thank god you weren't wearing a leopard-print cowboy hat," I said.

"Is this your usual hangout, or did I just get lucky?"

"I make rounds," I said. "Which makes us both lucky."

"Is that it, then? Is Gabe a sad, solitary drinker? You don't strike me as the type.
Too self-pitying for your taste, I suspect."

"I was actually supposed to interview a band." I could imagine the members of The Splits nipping at beers at The Gig, where they were supposed to put on their "third time's a charm" a&r robot showcase. Somebody was gonna snap up this bit of throwback New York Dolls whiteboy honky tonk, and Gabe was on the story, dammit. Steeling myself for the schools of glamhounds, factory-minted punks, rumpled dipsters and Golyester royalty, I put on a tie and pushed down my hair for a drink or five at the Biltmore. A sign of the end times that I could only find escape in hotel bars anymore.

Hey, where's Gabe? they must have wondered. Getting his brains balled out by a woman pretending to be just as weary as him. "Some things you can reschedule. Some things you can't." We were smiling at each other. "What's your excuse?"

"In flight from terror. Giving a personal tour to a madman who wanted to see L.A. Right about now he's probably receiving a dose of STD's from one of your many fine prostitutes on Sunset. He's a nice man, actually, but he thinks part of my job is to unintentionally fall in love with him like some movie. So, I pleaded headache and snuck downstairs for a drink."

"You're from Vegas?"

"Yes. I spoil high-rollers. Uphold the illusion that they're all-important. In some future, civilized age, better labor laws will forbid such barbarism."

I was almost afraid to ask the question. "How long you in town for?"

"We head back Sunday morning. Tomorrow he wants a tour of Paramount. He thinks there are round-the-clock outtakes from Grease or something."

"Definitely barbarous."

"I wish a rescue were possible. But I'm sorry. I won't be able to see you again,
Gabe. At least not this weekend." The implication was cheerful. "Are you falling for me already?"

What a stab—through the sternum, straight to the jewel. Teresa's brand of ennui was practiced—to almost contemptible degree—but she could pull the pin and toss out heart-rattling honesty like a hand grenade.

We parted with an amicable goodbye drink at the hotel bar, serviced by slick-haired automatons in white shirts as crisp as saltines. The whole playing-hard-to-get game is so storied, so referenced, so yellowed and cracked with age that it's easy to write off as a cliche, but Teresa should go down in the books for refreshing the institution. She'd fine-tuned her game to such wicked degree that I was hooked like the untold rest—sliding off my stool at the bar, saying a silent goodbye with a lingering clasp of hands that slowly pulled apart. I made the mistake of looking back: she was marching toward the golden elevator with all the purpose of someone who found it wise to take her attachments very lightly.

Teresa lived in what would've been, in any other gray and serious metropolis, a high-rise condo development that wafted that stringent, tight-lipped air of class and exclusivity. But against the Vegas "skyline"—strip malls and chain stores posed, snapshot-like, like idiot relatives in front of some important mountain or other—the Furman Estates looked overgrown and superfluous. Riding up the elevator—a musty cube of silence—with a frail bluehair and a uniformed myrmidon clutching what were presumably her groceries, I took a shot at small talk and asked her how long the place had been here.

"It looks older than it is," she said. "You must be from out of town."
"Guilty. Do I look like a tourist?"

"No, you don't," she said. "But unless you're visiting a prostitute on the seventh floor, I wonder what you're doing in the elevator of a high-rise condo."

It dawned on me: Teresa had some kind of reputation? "How'd you know I was going to the seventh floor?"

"It's quite obvious." She raised her eyebrows and nodded to the panel, where number seven was lit up in what seemed to be a suddenly lurid fashion. I shouldn't have been surprised by the rebuke; the city's attractive retirement machinery meant that Las Vegas was run, in part, by the Depends brigade, and part of the official AARP platform must've been a reflexive distrust of anything resembling youth.

So, what better service to perform my generation than to gently correct her assumptions about our moral laxity? "Is it prostitution if I have to pay?" It wasn't a bad rhetorical question, actually.

She looked me up and down as the elevator stopped at the fifth floor. "That's not the least bit funny. Now please hold the door as I get out." She shambled down a hallway encased in carpet and floral-print wallpaper. The boy got out behind her, turned to me and said, "I was this close to flattening your face."

It had been a year since I'd last seen Teresa, but the distracted flourish with which she opened the door was instantly familiar. Phone clamped to her ear, she pursed her lips in an air kiss and waved me in to her apartment that was both as spacious and lavishly furnished as a warehouse. It didn't so much reveal a penchant for minimalism as it did a conscious use of resources. She poured her domestic energy where it brought the biggest returns: in the bedroom and the kitchen. I took a seat on a curvy, aluminum-and-leather couch-contraption and hoped the iron Calder knockoff swimming languidly over my head.
was well-anchored into the ceiling. She disappeared into the kitchen, where I heard the fridge kiss open and kiss shut, punctuated by yeses, nos, snatches of conversation that, I suspected, were purposely evasive. Probably another boyfriend. I indulged myself despite my better counsel: her discretion was a form of politeness for little ol' jealous Gabe.

Then there she was in front of me. She beeped the phone off with a button-punch and handed me a bottle of some boutique microbrew. She didn't so much sit down as let herself fall, quite fashionably, on the robot-couch next to me.

"What a greeting that was," she said apologetically. "Can I kiss you hello?" No chance for an answer: she dove in and planted one. Teresa knew that such language—the old saw about actions versus words, etc.—could set the tone for a visit, a dinner, a night. As well as the stock pleasantries she deployed in a way that made them sound sincere: "You look great. I missed you. Let's run off together." Hand on my leg already. The power of how she assumed such familiarity, and how I loved it.

"The feeling's mutual. I've got a tank of gas and a stack of shitty CDs," I said.

"A dowry, no less" she said. "I've got to confess that I haven't decided yet where I'm kidnapping you off to for dinner. In the mood for anything in particular?"

"Just something to counter the road-food blues," I said, bugging my eyes.


Teresa had a Mercedes. It didn't say so much about a trait of yuppie striverdom or vulgar class-consciousness; she confessed to having inner pragmatist who adored the longevity of a diesel engine.

With the mountains to the west bleeding red and purple under the waning sun, we wound through the streets where culture expressed itself in the form of snorting SUVs
and strip malls lathed and painted to look like desertscape. It was hard for me to sustain even the lousiest illusion of romance. I was being taken on a *date*: dinner, drinks, a drive, mollifying agents deployed by a woman with a goal. Wrapped in a somnolent hum of air-conditioning and an upholstered womb of leather, I loved Teresa for her devious efficiency.

"How do you live in this place? It's so...flat," I said.

"Flat. In more dimensions than you can imagine," she said. "But that's part of what I like about it. The whiners will forever call it an absence of culture. For me it's an absence of distractions."

"Distractions from what? You secretly painting a masterpiece?"

She gave me a mock-solemn glance as she checked her blind spot and dived into the right lane. "I got over not being an artistic soul in college. This schoolgirl is happy to report she is free from all illusions." A horn wonked behind us; Teresa cupped her hand in a so-sorry shrug. If I'd been piloting the veritable ark of an Oldsmobile behind us, I know I'd have forgiven her. "What I mean is that it's nice to go home and sometimes and know that a quiet evening in front of the T.V. is a viable entertainment option."

"Teresa the homebody, surely bad for Western civ. I was surprised you'd had time for me on such short notice."

"I'm often a callous, shallow bitch, Gabe," she said, wheeling into the parking lot of a crumbling strip mall; as far as I could tell, we'd worked our way to somewhere near the university district, where the sports bars and laundromats began popping up like so many architectural zits. She picked one of those cheerfully sleazy-looking Italian restaurants, and I could see it now: weirded-out would-be love among the fake ferns and patterned oilcloth. If I took it as a signal of her intentions, I'd be wise to keep any errant
hopes tamped down with an iron heart. At this point, I'd've been glad for a few handfuls of ass and some regrettable, breathy admissions of mutual lust.

But if the food was good, the forecast for romance—or a heavily physical lie that could resemble it—was initially dim. As the waitress, in high pants and rolled socks, brought out plates of calamari and baskets of bread stacked like monuments, we both relaxed under the effect of that blessed narcotic that is cheap red table wine. I didn't so much have conversations with Teresa as verbal skirmishes that pitted my (possibly) charming asshole jadedness against her (often) nonchalant cynicism. She quizzed me on the state of my spirits; I teased her about her matter-of-fact depravity. Things were going swimmingly. I'd give it—a wrist-flick, a watch-glance—oh, an hour before we were locked in a romping fuck-attack on various pieces of barely-there furniture in her apartment. Honestly curious, she kept steering the conversation toward my job. Talking about my job required talking about Larkin; talking about Larkin meant talking about tonight; talking about tonight meant talking about Staley and Darcy, who, before long, would be wondering where the hell I was. Not that they needed babysitting; but I was their host, and to fender-bend a trip to Vegas for the virgins with a major flake would not have been cool. The faintest mist of guilt; fuck the compass, I tried steering the convo elsewhere, somewhere vaguely bedward. Oh, the marvelous spell cast by the penis. She was fascinated by my quitting.

"You're getting desperate, young Gabe," she said. Beneath the table, her toe was poised menacingly against my shin. "What are you going to do after this? I'm as turned on as the next girl by such cavalier gestures, but on the other hand, you're too cute for the purgatory of public relations. I hear the job requires you to actually smile."

I showed off my pearly whites.
"Now all you have to do is pucker up," Teresa said. "You're hardly a born ass-kisser. I hope you're not thinking this is one of those crossroads moments where your hand is guided by fate and everything turns out all right." I was reminded of Kraft's "quest mode."

"Not in the least," I said, violently twirling linguine on my fork. I had to admit that being so evasive—and inspiring such concern in Teresa—was a pleasure I hadn't anticipated.

"Or that it's going to cure your sensibilities," she said. I felt her hand close over mine, an unexpected gesture that sent gorillas of pleasure marching down my spine. "You're murdering your linguine." Indeed, I was twirling like a foodie possessed.

Things were quickly curdling into one of those TV-movie moments where the searching piano music kicks in as a Secret Is Breached. Besides that, I couldn't stand when people presumed to actually know the tickings and whirrings of someone else, including me. Besides that, I doubly couldn't stand when they were right.

"Not that I claim to have any character, but that's what changing yourself is about," Teresa said, in full-bore couch-psych mode. "Switching jobs is like changing the mannequin in the window. What's that got to do with character?"

"That is a terrible metaphor."

"That's why I'm not a writer, and instead, a glorified concierge who earns more than twice what you do."

"Damn. Any openings?" I swear, her hand on mine was sending out slo-mo wave upon wave of stupid sex-giddiness. I was so up to here with it I didn't feel the slightest flicker of embarrassment when the waitress materialized to slosh more wine into our glasses.
"Besides, I would have guessed you found the whole personal transformation myth total bunk," she said. "Then again, it's kind of a turn-on to see you buying into it. Much as I hate the word, there's something fundamentally manly about it." Squeeze of hand. Pleasure. Wincing smile. The feeling was only magnified by the fact of my surprise that Teresa, satin-lined hammer in hand, wasn't too far from hitting it on the head. For a woman whose job was to cultivate a habit of mind to anticipate only the most superficial comforts of others, she was surprising me with how she must have actually applied the brakes for a moment at one of the busy mental intersections of her life and considered the psyche—the real stuff—of someone else. I had to remind myself that Teresa was shallow, but on principle, I didn't mean she lacked discernment, she just declined to use it, and saved her will for other pursuits.

No choice but hold my nose and resort to being earnest. "The decision's made. I'd hate to look like a waffler, especially to someone like Kraft. But I'm not grail-seeking here. It's less some vision thing than an animal response. My body wants me to quit."

"Yet your quitting does end neatly with a trip to Vegas. It shows some forethought."

"I've been guilty of using it on occasion. That reminds me. You're the Vegas authority. Any idea where this guy Humbert Larkin might be playing?" I'd photocopied a mugshot of him from some ad in the daily paper from when he played Vegas years ago, and I'd been carrying it around every since—less like a talisman than an albatross. I'd hosted many a dim fear that, when I'd arrived, the guy would be nowhere to be found, a surely deserved thank-ya for my dismal planning. I pulled the thing out of my wallet and showed it to Teresa, and cursed myself the moment I did. A surefire short-circuit to the flirting.
"Might as well be a police mugshot," she said, studying the picture. "Can't say I've seen the guy. Or that I'd want to. But your best bet is either the far south Strip or the far north Strip."

I said it with a mighty reluctance: "I suppose my best option is to go back to the room and make some calls." Begging inside, a sizzling mantra: please offer your phone, please offer your phone, please offer your phone—

"And what's wrong with my phone?" she said. Blessed, gawd-kissed Gabe. I could've looked weepingly skyward when her hand came back down on mine.

And I could've chewed off my shoulders when I felt against one of her fingers a band of hardness. A ring.

I nearly sent a hunk of calamari sailing across the room. Grasped her hand, raised it for the both of us.

"Nice ring. Did you set a date yet?"

The weight of blood pooling in her feet must've felt like cartoon dumbbells, because Teresa's face went pale as porcelain. In this life, I haven't yet had the depth of personality needed to ever feel cheapened, used, or—that grim byword of pamphlets and lawsuits—violated. Thus I'm not sure where the thing I can only call indignation came from (some font of self-recognition? it's a pop-psych answer, too neatly wrapped)—but I took it as a promising sign that, hey, at least some part of me valued truthfulness. But that frisson of momentarily taking some higher ground, all thanks to principle, gave way to an alternate: a murkily perverse pleasure in making Teresa uncomfortable. Her eyes on the oilcloth, her hands limp on the table, I was half-expecting her to shoot an evil spirit out of her mouth or something. She bit her lip, fighting off a self-loathing smile. The veneer had been breached.
"You're details, details, details," she said to herself. "How by precious God did you ever..." Her expression collapsed into one of near-relief, though I thought she was still momentarily crazed enough to take a huge bite out of the heel of her hand. I was instantly reminded that watching a human founder wasn't much different than watching a band founder—and they both gave rise to the same feeling, with that sap of superiority flaming sweetly in my veins. It's such a chore to be human, humane, whatever, as I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

Poor Teresa. She had forgotten to take off her engagement ring. I felt such contempt for her.

"It's okay," I said. It was like offering a crutch to a corpse. The new made-to-look-old jukebox wedged between the restrooms in the corner swung into "Fly Me to the Moon," Sinatra belting out a soundtrack to what would surely be one of the more memorable moments of my life. And, actually, it was okay. For me to go all volcano-like on the fact that she was slated to get hitched to someone else would've presumed there was something serious gelling between us, when all it really was an intellect-braised mind- and bodyfuck built on a foundation of playfully thwarting each other.

The solemn-faced talk-show host addresses the audience: If you can't take the relationship seriously, then how can you take the fact she's "cheating" on you seriously? (Audience chews inside of cheek in silence.) And yet that Teresa had so willingly (unwillingly?) crumpled into contrition said something about her feelings, as well. A muted alert in the depths of my most primitive brain, signaling: advantage, advantage, advantage... Contempt or not, I still had a dick.

I went for levity. "You little sinner, you," I said. I poured her more wine. "I'm kicking myself for not noticing. But he doesn't live there, does he?" She shook her head.
"I figured you'd have none of that. Who is he?"

"A guy," she said. "Gabe, I'm sorry..." As though I deserved respect.

"I'm not getting through to you. I'm really not mad. Surprised, but not mad."
The server appeared again—how about some coffee? Tiramisu? No, how about a gallon of wine to dunk my head in? "I even sort of admire your deviousness. Why do you feel so bad about it?"

She took another sip, put her hand on her head. Decorum was fleeing; her small forehead was furrowed with concern. I loved her hair, kinked and thick. "Ah Gabe, what does that say about you? What do you mean, why do I feel so bad?"

"I'm telling you I'm not hurt. We meet up once or twice every few months, play some headgames, screw—"

"I feel badly for him, not you," she said, loud enough for a few chewing heads to turn in our direction. She held her hand up, thumb against her ring finger as if reinforcing a weapon.

Oh. Love it when I'm knocked from orbit like that: it's not about me after all. If only there was a permanent cure for self-absorption. From the perspective she was pushing, I could agree that it was something to wallow in feelings of general shittiness about.

Dinner was wasted, wine turned to vinegar, etc., the leftover calamari and linguine drag-ass soggy and not looking too worthy of a trip back to HQ in a Styrofoam shell. But the landscape wasn't too ravaged for Teresa to roll out a self-absolving epilogue of sorts. I was somewhat glad of the explanation; in lieu of anything remotely physical happening, it could prove to be an ego-cuddling consolation prize with the proper amount of self-delusion: I could tell myself it was all her lately bloomed principles.
at work—you know, the kind that pop up when you're caught. Teresa broke out a pre-emiptive defense for that, as well: She knew I must be boiling with contempt for her at the moment, exposing her for her wantonness/harlotry, etc., but truth was she really did love him (and who the hell was he? I asked). I would've expected Teresa to succumb to being hitched to nothing less than contemporary royalty, someone who—after the dance of decorum and ceremony—had something to offer: a Japanese pop star, for instance, or a Harvard-educated sultan from one of those other little Far East thumbnail countries, or some homely New York corporate-finance consultant whose usual wariness had slowly succumbed under the tide of Teresa's soft-touch wiles. Someone who could really kick-start the crass rung-climber that I long suspected dwelled within her. Instead, she explained—the bill between us like a downed dove (my low-riding mind: for a second I considered not offering to pay as some sort of punishment, not so much a denial of money as a denial of an aspect of my personality)—he was a fellow worker bee at the gleaming Bellagio hive, a concierge for the high-roller suites that—laughing, almost crying—she assumed was gay for the first few months he worked there. But wuv blossomed, and so forth.

I was dying to know. "That's wonderful news."

She looked at me, somewhat deadened by the embarrassment, still working the side of her mouth against her teeth. She had the kind of chin perfect for palming and kissing; it would've fit into my hand like a little teapot.

"I mean it," I said. I did.

"I'll believe you, despite," she said. She didn't have to finish: despite my habitually ironic stance, untrustworthy as far as any real sentiment goes. "Is it safe to assume that lunch is, to borrow on of your prized expressions, supremely fucked? I am
sorry if I disappointed you, Gabe. Somehow, though, I think you're not."

"Who knows. Maybe it's one big turn-on for me."

"Just what I suspected." She seemed relieved. "That you'd be gratified on some level that I was more depraved than you imagined in that greasy little mind of yours."

She produced a purse, sleek as some laptop I couldn't afford, and whipped out a black credit card. One of those gestures of finality that said seize the day—i.e., to grapple at some chance for consummation, slipping away like a goddamn noodle. The hormone-drenched devil on my shoulder whispered that, sure, no problem, I could convince her.

"This was a mistake," she said—stopping to beam at the waitress as she bopped up and took both card and bill and disappeared among the ferns I now noticed were plastic.

"You're just giving yourself a guilt trip."

"Momentary guilt is one thing," she said. She held her finger up to me, nicely beringed (shades of Linda Blair: "It burns! It burns!" etc.). "I forgot to take my ring off.

But there's another proposition that it's not forgetfulness."

"You're not getting a conscience on me, are you?"

Teresa nodded, with one of those condescending, suck-lipped smiles. "He'd be devastated."

"In times of moral trial, we must ask: 'What would Gabe do?'" Humor, a signpost: desperation ahead.

Teresa shook her head; she beamed again, and even looked relieved at that closing ritual of restaurant culture: the Bringing of the Receipt and Pen.

Was I waving, drowning, or just being a mooky asshole? "You know what's going to happen when we get back to your place."

"That's not going to happen."
"Too early to tell," I said.

"I don't mean sex. I mean going back to my apartment."

"That was certainly frank. You're going to drop me off?"

She shut her eyes before delivering the verdict. "I don't think I'd even trust myself to do that." She stood up, radiating something like made-for-TV-movie resolve. "I think it's best if you took a cab back to your hotel."

Self-preservation tossed my heat-seeking penis right out of the front seat. "How am I gonna get back to the hotel? I've got to find this guy for my story." Probably the wrong answer; I should've pouted about the night's impending sexlessness, flattered her 'til the bitter end, a leash of hope. It surprised even me: maybe deep in the swamp-fog of my mind, I'd let loose of any hope of some kind of desperate, let's-sort-of-pretend-we're-thwarted-soulmates coupling.

Teresa stood. Purse primly on shoulder, she was resolute.

My desperation is as unstylish as anyone's. I said, "I don't even know how to get back."

"I've got to be firm, Gabe," she said. "I feel silly enough for meeting you in the first place. But it turns out you aren't irresistible."

"Guess this was your little field trip to find that out." My sarcasm was blunted. I was still in my seat, lungs rapidly filling with stupidity. "You're suddenly so sober. That's some heavyweight guardian angel shit."

"I didn't plan it this way. Being good sort of caught me unawares, I guess."

"You're really going to leave me here?"

"There's a bus stop across the street. North on Maryland, west on Charleston. You can walk to your hotel from there. It'll take you a half-hour at the most. Gabe, I"
"Can't risk it? As fine a testament to my irresistibility as I've ever heard." I hit the table, drawing looks. The wine drew it out of me. I stood up and floated with her through the door, along the sidewalk, to her car. It'd do Gregor Samsa proud: me, transformed into a hapless cement-pounding roach, peering hopelessly from a wooden bench for the next goddamn public bus. At her car, which, in the blowtorchy July heat, was the promised land: "No hug?" Partially a ploy to get in her car.

She offered one of her small, dry hands, that sexless, friendly coda to a whimpering lunch: a handshake. What could I do under the circumstances but take it in and put to my lips in a show of (reading her surprised, miffed expression as if I'd just lifted my leg and let fly a warm stream of piss all over her slacks) a self-consciously botched brand of gentlemanliness? She knew if she let her hand linger there, that would show condescension; thus she did me the favor of pulling it away just a second after the initial planting. That she saved me from that basement-floor level of contempt was something I could count as a relief.

As she pulled away in the shimmering heat—buses and cars back-and-forthing in blurs of color along the meager version of Vegas' college district—I was already burbling with a harvest of sour grapes and sweet lemons, maturity and good sense be damned: she was a fickle, superficial, flighty bitch, a conquest-fuck that had merely attained longevity as some sort of rearview mirror novelty trinket in the car of my ever-revving mind. No fleeting tenderness of feeling or cardboard love narratives could, ultimately, shield me from the ground-floor of the fact that it was, in the end, just a filigreed buddy-fuck. In a way, Teresa had done me the favor of doing eye-prying and reality-seeing for me; in her last-minute welter in suddenly discovered honor and dick-defying purity, she'd double-
exposed the illusion of what could be hardly-with-a-straight-face be called a relationship.

I was kidding nobody. I still wanted her. I waited on a bus stop bench across the street from the restaurant while some guy in a peach jumpsuit busily urinated on the bank of mock orange bushes behind us. His duty complete, he yanked up his pants and let the elastic snap back with a *fwip*.

"You know who Hambert Larkin is?" I asked. The heat was melting me. I was broke for conversation; anything to prop toothpicks under sagging morale.

He part-sat, part-squatted on the bench next to me as traffic made blurry columns through the heat and muttered in a wiseguy crackle, "That a code word for drugs? You kids. Keep the sales pitch to yourself, you little shit."

When the bus finally lumbered to a stop, I hopped on, shoved a pocket-tortured dollar into the slot and crammed into a seat next to some guy obsessively plick-plick-plicking away at text messages with his cell phone. "Hey, ever heard of lounge singer Hambert Lark—" (he suddenly clamped phone to head, "Hello?", a ploy). At the next stop, I switched seats, dodging between two gabbing schoolgirls to try my so-far shit-streaked Vegas luck with a classic crazy woman sporting one of those crinkly plastic grocery bags stuffed with moldering newspapers. I told her, hey, I have a sort of weird question for you.

She turned, exposing me to the full force of her breath, a mix of alcohol and putrefaction, the smell of drunk zombies. "I c'n see the future, ya know. In fac', I see yours right now. They let me out early, but I assure you I've learned to achieve wellness on my own."

"I hope to God there's a lounge singer in my future."

She pressed two fingers to her forehead and rattled her bag of papers in lieu, I
supposed, of a crystal ball. The bus lurched through traffic like a drunk, stopping, starting, stopping, starting, the doors hissing open and shut to accept and disgorging worker drones, sun-dazed tourists, college students sagging beneath overstuffed backpacks, and other ilk that made up the people-mulch of Vegas. This lady must've been a regular character, because the regulars were eyeballing me like I was a tool for talking to her. Little did they know I was a jade-coated L.A. schlump who was used to ignoring this kind of shit.

"You are...a tourist," she pronounced. A guy across the aisle laughed as though this were some initiation rite he'd seen a thousand times. "You have a predilection for the slot machine and the video poker, but this trip will not enrich you with this city's lucre." (She was, of course, wrong. On those rare occasions I could see through the scam-fog and plunk down a few dollars, it was either craps or blackjack for me; I couldn't stand to be associated with the bluehair slot monkeys plugged in with their club cards). "Young man"—I was only half-paying attention, watching for my stop, at which I'd have to weather another wait, another bunch of bus-stop creeps—but then I felt leathery hand clothespinning mine in a scolding grip—"pay attention to the pearl."

"The pearl, huh?"

The guy across the aisle turned to me; a hulking brother with glasses like windowpanes. "Yeah, the pearl." He said it in that stating-the-obvious-for-stupid-people-voice.

"What the hell is the pearl?" She still had my hand in hers.

"If you'd let her finish, you'd probably figure out that it's a made-a-four," he said. I muttered a stupid-sounding "Oh" to match.

She squeezed my hand. "You cannot see the pearl," she said.
"No ma'am, he can't," the brother said.

"Because the pearl is hidden beneath the shell. And you cannot just open the door," she said.

"You mean the shell."

"Not with an army of nations," the guy said. "Sure can't." The call-and-response gospel thing was starting to freak me out, but the other riders—plugged into headphones, reading, chomping gum, talking—didn't seem to mind.

"Only good acts will open the shell," she said, throaty now. "Acts away from the goodness. God never counts the good acts people do when they know he's watching."

"Should I say 'Amen'?" I said. "This is my stop."

The old woman released my hand, and several people in the bus turned to look at me in a curious, appraising way that suggested I'd just gotten a haircut. The driver called out "Charleston Boulevard!" on the crackling P.A. as the bus slogged to a stop, and the doors hissed open for me. I muttered a thanks and a cursory, just-glad-to-have-you-out-of-my-life wave and stepped onto the sidewalk, where another bus stop, another wait, welcomed the asshole tourist.

It's not that I don't believe occultish stuff or life metaphors, it's that I'm unwilling to muster the mental energy necessary to delude myself. But maybe the bag-lady prophet was onto something. The metaphor was careening and far-flung, and I'd have to really think about it to resolve it into intelligibility, but maybe it did have something to do with the fact that the bus stop ad confronting me as I stepped onto the sidewalk was—strike up jingly, ominous movie score—a poster advertising Hambert Larkin's appearance at a casino called The Oasis.
CHAPTER 8

At least it was a sound decision to donate a pile of alone time to Darcy and Staley; lazing on my bed later as I shoveled through the greasy phone book in search of The Oasis, they looked supremely, blissfully sexed out; my prime piece of evidence that they'd spent the last two hours as athletic screwbots was the fact that they'd scrupulously avoided eye contact with me, and also had that giggly afterglow intimacy hanging around them like flies. Apparently striking off after their acrobatic mattress test, they'd ventured out for junk food, plying me with microwave burritos and cans of iced tea. Given the company and the fact the conversation was such that I was actually able to digest solids, it was a better than the Big Break-Up Meal I'd had with Teresa. Three bites into my second burrito, with Darcy resting her smelly feet on my back while she lolled on the bed, I found The Oasis and snatched the phone. The call confirmed what my black heart of hearts suspected: The Oasis was, apparently, some dead-enders joint popular with speedfreaks and video poker addicts; at least, this is what I concluded from the few snatches of conversation I had with the raspy-voiced he/she who answered the phone.

"Hambert Larkin? You from out of town? 'Cause if you are, this isn't your thing." she said. "Might be a bit more primitive than what you're used to."

"How bad can a lounge show be?"

"Sure. Right. Come on down." I thought I heard what sounded like a chainsaw laughing before the village hunchback hung up.
"Well, shall we saddle up?" Darcy asked, levering herself up into a sitting position next to me. I could feel her warmth.

"I appreciate your sympathy, but you really don't have to go with me." It was a nice way of saying you're not going with me. The last thing on my list of mental chores was having to keep an eye on errant, love-addled charges, a bumbling record-store owner and a recovering klepto.

"Hell, I wanna see him," Staley said from the bathroom; the burrito had attacked his colon and he'd fled to the toilet. "Hey, how come you got two bars of courtesy soap?"

"I flirted with the manager."

"This sounds like some classic Vegas I can't miss," he said. "There's your story, man. The death of the lounge after the Rat Pack era. I mean, look at one of those tourist mags on the nightstand. It's all these ladies in leather push-up bras doing full-on Top 40 schwag. That's capital. What, my brother, is up with that?"

Darcy looked at me and said out of Staley's earshot, "He rants like this sometimes." She pointed a finger-gun his way and fired.

"So I've heard," I said. "And to think I've known him all these years."

Darcy was, at least, savvy enough to dodge any charges of presumption. "The funny thing is, he never talks about you."

"So close that I'm out of his field of vision. On the other hand, he talks about you a lot."

Hate it when the bushes part and opponents suddenly notice the high road. "I'm his girlfriend, you're his friend," Darcy said. There was less than foot of space between our faces, it was practically crackling. "I don't want to get into a shoving match over a boyfriend."
"A boyfriend," I said. As if it were a cold she'd get over; I almost admired her suddenly revealed mercenary spirit. "Just play nice with your toys."

"I love him. You're a dick. I don't have to prove myself."

Staley called from the bathroom: "Are you guys making out out there or something?"

All territory lines and petty pissing-on-hydrants aside, I must say that Darcy was not only daring, but she'd mastered the art of the passive-aggressive stance: right then—to my grape-tightening surprise—her lips were against mine, forceful and soft. I smelled girlsweat and feminine exertion on her face, her neck; she didn't open her eyes, even when a little dagger of her bad black hair slipped down between us. She was young, impulsive, must've still thought cultivating character traits like boldness was more important than the people she'd practice them on. More like me than I'd thought.

"Yes," she said to Staley. "And Gabe's a terrible kisser." He'd assume it was irony. "Don't look that way," she said to me. "You've been wanting to do that."

"Head games, round two."

I tensed my stomach in time enough for her punch.

From the bathroom, a hearty flush, the jangling of a belt, Staley's groans of satisfaction.

"Don't fuck with Staley like that," I said. "He's grown up, he's serious about things these days, and you should be too." Imagine: me, ruler in hand, lecturing. Thing is, it felt justified and right—temporarily. Darcy didn't blink; her brown eyes had manifold curiosities and deviousness behind them; it betrayed enough self-consciousness that her sentiment became suspect. This heart-scarred bad romance—thump! thump!—yet was at a loss as to whether this 19-year-old girl was toying with me or not.
It was wonderful.

Staley emerged, tugging up his stiff canvas work pants. "So where's this guy playing? I want to see some old-timey cheese Vegas in full effect. I hope you two brought your dancing shoes." Staley snapped his fingers and flung a pose worthy of *Saturday Night Fever II: The Reckoning*.

"The sets starts at ten. As for me, young people, it's naptime. That date wore me out."

"Yeah," Staley said, curious. "Didn't expect you back so early, maestro. Either things went really well or really badly." He kicked my foot and smiled, trying to drum up a testosterone cloud of male collusion. Darcy was watching me. I mustered: shields, etc., at full power. "Well?"

"It went perfectly fine," I said, kicking him back and throwing my best leer.

"Did you visit a working lady?" Darcy said. "I'm having trouble seeing through the fog of male-bonding here."

We laughed, and I explained it away until it was whittled to an innocent little nub of an anecdote about catching up with a longtime Vegas friend, dinner and drinks, story-swapping and joke-making, safe as horchata. My blunt antenna sensed that Darcy was relieved to hear my supposed lechery was, well, just supposed—my carefully hewn bad rep be damned. Oh, the gamesmanship of unwittingly ball-wrecking relationships. Amazingly, she seemed comfortable with the idea that was she above being lied to—that high, hazy province of the naive and the robotically honest.

I tugged the drapes closed, cranked the AC box into a pleading whir and conked out like a three-day drunk. Through the course of a day, the mind whispers things to the body: bad news that puts a drag on posture, glum insights that funk the brain. Mine
informed my body that this was going to be a long night.

If you were to believe the rasper on the phone, The Oasis was situated somewhere on the south Strip, where high-end casinos, armored in their veneers of sham sophistication, sputtered out in the wake of their cast-off cousins, tiny, grimy hotel-casinos hunched in their glare of neon, beckoning the desperate and the bargain-minded alike. That was us. We'd been driving in that direction for a half-hour, well past the tacky opulence of the giant black pyramids, the hormone-fed French-themed resorts swelling with baubles, fountains, the perfume of pretense, the castles and the other postmodern playgrounds so desperate in their grab for tourists that they'd lost a long time ago any coherent theme save for naked corporate hunger. Well past the overgroomed *Esquire* studs and their high-gloss girlfriends in do-me-daddy pumps hustling along the sidewalk, in desperate search of a velvet rope! please! just one velvet rope! and the smut mag pushers pressing their adult mags in the hands of the suspecting and unsuspecting alike, the nighttime joggers and fanny-packers, drunk on cheap splendor, there were plenty of loser destinations pleading for our dollar as we continued south; less like casinos and more like roadhouses, seas of beater cars lapping against them, scant lights glaring off dust-fogged windshields. There was The Vega$ Inn, laced in lurid red neon like smeared lipstick; the Cash Cow, fronted with an enormous Brahma spray-painted gold; Little Italy, the sole accent on the nondescript building an outsized Italian flag flapping sleepily; The Island, sprouting neon palm trees along with—sign of desperation incoming—one of those inflatable worm men who shimmies and waves with the help of a growling air compressor.

"This is so cheesy, I think I'm getting irony overload," Staley said. He had
cheerfully taken the front seat when Darcy declined; presumably, my (oooh!) punishment.

"Who's laughing?" Darcy said.

"I assumed we all were," Staley said. "On the inside, anyway."

"How dare you hurt the poor little casinos' feelings," Darcy said. She leaned over and squeezed his shoulders; couldn't help but think it was aimed at me, a routinely oblique jealousy attack. "You sure this guy, um, exists, Gabe?"

"Yeah, pretty soon we'll be running out of earth," Staley said.

What was whorling in my head as I pushed onward? Even the streetlights had gone all half-assed with their already meager glare, spreading it over little more than scant outcroppings of battered racks stuffed with hooker rags. Not long after, the sidewalk crumbled to an end and gave way to a moonscape blanket of desert where sporadic heaps of trash and real estate signage sat in the encroaching dark. And the tourist muses: no bullshit, it is an encroaching dark; trolling the Strip at night, awash in glare, gives you the distinct impression of a collective struggle afoot against an active darkness, a stay against a natural state that came on in curtains. We bumped over railroad tracks and looked at each other—that point of uneasy momentum when it's up to someone to say, "Well, we tried..."

Which means I was doubly freaked, nearly jackhammering the roof when Darcy practically trumpet-blasted in my ear, "There it is!"

"What the fuck? Where?"

"There, on the left," she said, annoyed. "About as bad as I expected." As though we dragged her here.

There it was, the Oasis curled like a beaten dog at the back of a gravel parking lot,
a smattering of beaters populating the dusty span. Looked like: a sparsely attended stock car race, a village tooth-pull, a barn-raising for the mongoloids—save for (it caught our eye like a jewel) the glimmering green Caddy that was out of place as a silk neckerchief at a farting contest. Hugged the median, flipped a left and bumped and womped into the parking lot. It was just after 10 o' clock; by that measure, the show was to have already started. Darcy double-armed us in the parking lot, our suddenly giddy chaperone taking us through a sagging Oasis front door lined with planters that now seemed to grow cigarette butts, empty bottles and cocktail glasses. Inside, nothing exciting; an architectural box jammed with banks of video poker machines, at which sat the usual cast of desperadoes: blue-collar galley slaves secretly praying for the rent, single moms overflowing their jeans, cigs firmly clenched in button-tapping fingers; oldsters, prim-lipped or practically drooling, all of them transfixed by the blue cyclops of video poker. The thin jangle of coins barely broke The Oasis's de facto soundtrack: the cheerful electronic chime—a slightly zany phone-ring, or insouciant plink of xylophone—that sounded whenever money was fed into the machine. A happy, grateful sound: money in, sad sputter of coins out, a marching song for this sad-sack army of locals and "tourists" who leapt the state line to feed some jones. I stopped a wrinkled old change guy, black slacks pulled to his nipples, and asked about Larkin's show.

"Surely you're lost."

"Tourists. Your spiritual sister, L.A."

"And you wanna see Larkin. It's in the back. Way in the back. Lagoon lounge," he said, pointing through a skein of cig smoke. If the place was half as uplifting as the rest of The Oasis, we were likely to be ordering Paxil shooters and Zoloft martinis.

Regardless, we had to mark our territory: to the restrooms it was. I let loose at the
urinals, surrounded by sad, coughing, farting men, while Staley—susceptible to stage fright—took a stall. At the sink crosshatched with brown scars from cigarettes, I splashed water on my face. Between the heat and the flying dirt outside, and the looming grime that hung in the Oasis like smog, I was ready for another shower. Staley appeared next to me and soaped up his hands and forearms as though he were going into surgery. In the mirror, his face was a portrait of someone thoroughly enjoying a novelty.

"What's with the smile?" I said. "Here I was feeling bad for dragging you guys along. I'm ready to ditch the whole thing. No story here."

"Sourpuss," he said, scrubbing vigorously. I never realized the extent of Staley's mania for cleanliness. "This place is such a depressing little pit, it rules. Capital, fully."

"I suspect Darcy would rather be Anywhere Else, U.S.A."

"Nah," he said. "Drive just got on her nerves. It's like her moods have residues. Tripper. She may not show it, but she likes you. So don't sweat it."

My brain dusty and baked, in half-ass fashion I lobbed the kind of suspect cliche that says either you don't give the tiniest shard of shit about what the other party is saying, or—bing! bing! Door Number Two swivels like a trick bookcase—you do mean exactly what you say, in such a manner that betrays a welter of private consideration on it. In other words, this tired bumble revealed I'd been thinking about Darcy, too. Which I had.

Those sinking words: "Yeah, she's certainly something, isn't she?" I might as well have winked and rib-cracked him with an elbow.

A suspicious second of eye contact in the mirror, losers wiry and fat crowding around us to the soap and sinks, unmindful as cows. In one of the stalls, someone hacked up what sounded like vital organs.
Staley smiled, falteringly. "You player, you. She's like your sister, as far as the scene on this trip. Right?"

I couldn't keep looking at him. "Roger that. She's a little feisty for my taste, anyway."

"A bitch?" He smiled. He saved me by answering the question himself: "She can be. Amazing the dimensions people have when you really decide to get to know them. I almost decided not to."

"You serious? I thought you were hooked."

"Dude, gimme credit for having half a brain. I'm getting older, so it's not like I can just pour all this time into people for a steady summer fuck. They're nice and all, but it's not my total life-mode. Is that what you thought this was?"

"No, no, no," I said, praying he didn't translate to yes, yes, yes. "Staley, I won't presume to know your date better than you do, but—"

"But what?"

"Forgive me in advance—"

"But what?"

"But what if she's in that mode?"

He balled his paper towel and missed a bankshot into the battered metal basket. "I fully appreciate you saying that. You're probably expecting me to be mad at you saying that, but I'm not, 'cause I know you care. But me and Darcy talked about this stuff. We're on the same plane. I know she doesn't seem serious, but believe me, she's at it pretty heavy."

"Want to punch me for underestimating you?" I said.

"No. You're just looking out for me."
I was. Really, I was. I'd washed my hands three times.

When we emerged, Darcy was locked in front of the blue glow of a Deuces Wild, slapping buttons in a mock, near-drooling daze. Staley grabbed her and barked, "Get this woman some help!" and Darcy roused from her pretend zombie-state and clutched her heart in full soap-opera style. They did have that rare, joking sympatico, the enthusiastic sarcasm that thrummed at the same rhythm, and yeah—despite Staley's fundamental naivete about such things—it backed up what he said. Maybe I didn't give him enough credit; my rap sheet of friendships was inky with that misdemeanor.

We worked our way through the subdued, well-managed chaos, along a curving wall, past a cash redemption cage (with, tellingly, no one in line) and, finally, dead end of dead ends, to the Lagoon Lounge, a dim, infernally red-lit cave in the back belching a brand of desperation that was neither quaint or funny: little but the electronic sound of greed-dreams being chased, the programmed cheery plonks and zinks of video poker machines dealing hands and transferring money from gambler to casino. Past the battered poster that advertised Larkin—from a photo that must have been taken no later than '84, his legs flung out in a spread-eagle leap a la David Lee Roth desperately attempting to draw attention away from Van Halen's music—the place was otherwise a cemetery. It was almost 10:30; Larkin was a half-hour overdue, and nowhere to be found. A perfect opportunity to rot.

"Take in the sights for a bit?" The stool at the front—ostensibly for a doorman—was empty. We went in.

Staley gave a look in Darcy's direction. "It's a little sketchy."

It dawned on me that Darcy was—that cackling curse of the fun gods—underage.

"I've got I.D.," she chirped.
"Let me see it," I said. I braced for the bleakly comic, and I got it: the sloppy cut and paste job screamed Kinko's with a cherry on top: Darcy, that stab of black hair bisecting her face, mugging in mock-seriousness, openly contemptuous of the very process of having to pretend to be grown-up to get what she wanted. "This looks like a grade-school collage," I said. She smiled, flipped me off like a salute. "But a gal's gotta try."

Miraculously, the ripple-browed bartender, huffing around behind the bar like a tow truck, didn't bother to ask for I.D.s. "I don't wanna be a heartbreaker. You look like you're having so much fun. What'll it be?" He set his sweaty bumper-arms on the bar; the thing creaked.

I played along and dutifully ordered three bottles of domestic schwag. "This is where the legendary Hambert Larkin performs, right?"

The irony ka-thunked. "Sure, funny guy. But not till his fans get here." He spat back fans in the same fashion I'd offered legendary. Touche with a cocktail sword. He delivered three cold-sweating bottles and asked me for five bucks. Tip not included, he huffed and rubbed an eye.

"No offense intended," I said.

"You obviously haven't seen the show," he said and shrugged. "Even I ain't used to it, and I've been here ten years."

"There aren't man-tits involved, are there?" Staley said. "I was led to believe this was a family establishment." Ever the pup, Staley had happily pulled up a stool and had fed a five into the video poker machine smiling at him from the bartop.

"I think disease is the right word," the bartender said. "And I'm not talking about the show. I'm talking about the crowd." He nodded at the rest of the tiny lounge, which
had slowly accreted with people while our backs were turned: a small herd of hoi pollois, bearded, hatted, grizzled. Some were splattered with paint or grime, day-laboring silverbacks diving into escape; others dusty and slightly bent with that posture learned from steady daily oppression. A few construction-worker wives, too, in the mix, cackling bleach-blondes with long teeth and skin hazed by a little too much desert sun—ditch the halter tops, please, till the surgery's cheaper. So much for the mystery: surprise, surprise, The Lagoon Lounge was a perch for blue-collar crows burning off the week's steam. I was feeling leagues and levels cooler than everyone else already, the perfect complement to a cheap beer buzz.

A few bottles later—an alcohol-inspired Staley and Darcy nose-kissing in their own private beer-lined love canal two stools down—and the black Formica tables were full of chittering, hollering beer mooks in various stages of shameless inebriation—mostly the last few despicable ones before unconsciousness. It was past eleven, the purple velvet curtain stirred only by the incoherent shouts of desperately cheerful men—"Bring it on!" rising distinctly among them like a chorus. The bar, too, was lined with them, and the fat bartender was practically jogging—routinely mopping his fat forehead with the bar towel—to take drink orders that were barked and slurred and shouted. I turned to the frowsy brunette with clownish mascara next to me—let's pray her beer goggles were as powerful a prescription as mine—and asked what the story was.

"You tourist," she said, bumping me. "You tourist. Just gimme your money. Ha. Fawk the state economy. Right, Charles?" She hoisted a bottle to the bartender, who was melting pounds away to make an infomercial proud, his hands a blur above the bottle-tops. "But I don't mind you here. The show can use some new blood."

"Can't say I like the sound of that. This a vampire cult or something?" Offered
my neck; she gave it a lip-smack.

She ran her arm across her lips and flashed her pearly yellows. "No, but you just might see blood, hon." Her mouth was a Klaxon in my ear; she grabbed my arm. "Don't freak. Nothing an adventurous soul can't handle. You are adventurous, aren't you? Scare easily?"

"I'm not going to get a straight answer out of you, am I?"

She smiled again; it confirmed a conspiracy. "Nope. Not that it's a big secret. I'm just toying with you. What brought you here, anyway?" Sized me up with mix of contempt and amusement. "Definitely L.A. He's got a cowboy shirt on and moussed hair. I bet the closest you've ever come to bullriding was eating a Quarter Pounder."

"Well, plans have changed. I was supposed to be writing an article about this guy you're so cryptic about, but now I'm wondering."

"You'll have plenty to write about, believe me. Problem is that journalistas never stick around long enough. They get a look, get freaked out and leave. You're gonna chicken out on us?"

A chorus of sloppy whoops went up; the purple velvet curtain had stirred from behind. I took enough solace in having found the guy; and much as I didn't want to appear to be buying into Ms. Snaggletooth's challenge, I was succumbing to curiosity. I schemed: I could always stick around, catch the show, and tell Kraft I never tracked the guy down.

Snaggletooth sputtered up again. "'Cause Larky is about to come on. And a hockey helmet would have gone so well with your get-up there."

"Fuck you very much," I said. It was offered in the way of a chummy, beery put-down. Snaggletooth toasted me with a hearty clank of bottle against bottle.
The violence of it was fitting, because—simultaneous with Larkin's appearance from behind the velvet curtain that I noticed seemed vaguely damp—I instantly figured out what Larkin's gig was all about. As a hidden karaoke machine sputtered to life with the goochy rubber bass of "Superfreak," the curtains parted, and no sooner had Larkin appeared that the crowd, suddenly unified in purpose, fired a barrage of insults, screams, shouts, balled-up napkins, cocktail straws, coasters, coins and glittering arcs of beer. BLEEAARGH is really the only word to describe it.

I locked eyes with Darcy—who'd turned from a lip-lock with Staley—and we shared a smile of incomprehension. Snaggletooth pounded me on the back while with her other hand she jabbed her middle finger at Larkin like a bayonet—as if he were an enemy who required aggressive vigilance. Above the din, base and animal and happy, she welcomed me to the Lagoon Lounge.

I've never seen a gang fight, been to a riot or—strip me now of any future right of mine to complain—even a protest, so I know next to nil about crowd phenom. But this is what it must be like to be bone-chilled by seeing a crowd with such a sharpened collective focus that it's completely natural to conceive of them as a single entity: the Lagoon Loungers flung at Larkin a distilled stream of contempt, mockery and fumbling rage. Larkin had barely got through the bridge to the first chorus—*that girl is pretty wild now*—when the men in the front tier of seats stood up, rattling their chairs, to spit and curse Larkin as he proceeded to deflate Rick James' slimy condom of a song of any funk or even sleazy spirit. Larkin dodged the projectiles as if out of habit—the man was well-trained—and swung into the chorus, overloud against the cheap karaoke bot. To his right, a volley of balled-up napkins and coins took his unguarded flank, pelting his melony head, his J.C. Penney suit. Next to me, Snaggletooth swiped a cocktail napkin
off the table, swabbed a long arc beneath her skirt and between her legs, and lobbed it stageward. Her lack of self-consciousness could only have meant such a practice was routine. A once-over confirmed it: others were spitting on the napkins, dipping them into abandoned drinks, jamming them into their armpits and tossing them Larkin's way.

"What, not throwing anything, Gabe?" Staley and Darcy had appeared by my side. I could barely hear them over the weird subterranean sound of boos, hisses and whoops.

"This is fucking nuts. I don't even want to legitimize it." Faced with the outrageous, I was suddenly Saint Above It All.

Darcy threw a few howls in with crowd; she'd been pounding beer like nails and was all jelly-limbed and overhappy. "But it's like some exotic ritual or something."

"When in Rome, right?" I said.

In a show of solidarity with Darcy, Staley girl-threw a coaster toward the stage; it sliced fecklessly into the curtain.

_She's all right, she's all right._ Between the beer and the blur of projectiles, I could see that Larkin—hunched and singing with at least a show of feeling—was either taking the brunt of it as some hearty cosmic joke or was inured to it from exposure. Exposure was the perfect word; the odium on display—magnified by my beer—had the force and simplicity of an element. The BLEEAARGH was an object, a stick, a cannon, a warhead, a war.

He was a small man with a large head, black-dyed hair issuing from the top thin fronds. His suit—quickly accreting dabs and dart-marks of moistness from flying napkins, flung beer—fit about as good as a tent; when he occasionally ducked—purely at his own discretion—his head dunked into his jacket, which almost threatened to consume
it. Otherwise, the man we'd come so far to see had all the stature of a barstool; the way he stood, splay-footed and braced against the crowd's attack, had more to do with function than commitment. He was clearly used to this shit. And as he closed out "Superfreak" with his own signature addition—a bizarre, what-the-fuck-is-that? wail that blew from his mouth like Coast Guard siren—I read on his face a familiar expression. His lips curled back into a smile of childish defiance, eyes squinty, hiding fear, he recalled the tortured charades of that neurotic kid in grade school who, hounded and bullied for being different, comes to embrace that difference with a sense of implacable, craze-eyed, madly grinning theater that invites his attackers to dare come even closer; it crackles with the threat of reverting to the primitive. Sure, you might spit names at this kid out on the blacktop, but your little-kid-aggro antenna tell you the fucker's got some raw, root-white savagery roiling beneath the snotty nose and hand-me-down Toughskin jeans that you don't want to stir up—at least not from a vulnerable position. Standing in an atmosphere of hostility—atmosphere in the sense of a weather system there in the Lagoon Lounge, a true rain of insults and projectiles—Larkin held his ground in a spiky bubble of jeers for a full twenty seconds after the song ended. At first I thought the karaoke machine was bellying up on us, but when Young M.C.'s "Bust A Move" sputtered into motion with its white-disco patter, I figured the gulf between songs was purely intentional—and taken advantage of by both sides. Already reaching a plateau of some of sort of animal pleasure, the crowd used it as a convenient sniping post, while Larkin employed it to revel in his status as target.

The bartender had huffed nearby for a round of drinks; luckily my station at the bar, now a whitebread slice wedged between apes, hadn't been commandeered yet. I shouted out for three more beers, and, yeah, just had to say it. Half-jokingly: "Only you
have the power to stop this, man."

The barkeep, a caged elephant who couldn't get quite enough momentum to
charge, shrugged as he slung two ropes of Jack Daniels into two glasses. "You think I
ain't tried? I tell you, to say that is the mark of the true tourist. Don't be a fuckwad."

A wiry guy with a greasy mullet shouldered his way in next to me. "Someday
Larkin's going to get to sing. Two belts of Cuervo!"

"Ha. I doubt anyone here would second that idea," I said. Handed the barkeep a
twenty for the round. "I got this one. So am I gonna see blood spilled tonight?"

"God, no. We ain't animals," he said.

"A casual observer, like me, might beg to differ."

"What?"

"MIGHT BEG TO DIFFER."

Darcy was suddenly squeezed up next to me, competing for space against a
barrel-sized moose of a man in sweat-dipped overalls. "By God, somebody's got to save
this man!" Her sarcasm deflated into silliness when drunk. "Staley's yurting his guts out
in the bathroom. Dumbass polished off some guy's flask. You gonna dance with me or
what? I'm a freak tonight!"

"Ah, we're controlling ourselves," the guy said to me; he sounded disappointed.

"We always control ourselves."

"But you can't deny that this is, to put it politely, completely fucking bizarre."

"Dance with me!" Darcy said, tugging at my shirt.

"I won't deny it is that," the guy said. "Hard not to watch, though, huh? Really
grabs you. 'Why are they doing this?' 'Why does that guy just stand up there and take it?'

Yeah, I asked all that stuff at first."
A particularly spirited whoop made me wheel around. A burly man with a goatee had clambered onto the green-carpeted stage, grabbed Larkin by the hips in a full prison-shower lock, and was now mock-butt-fucking him as though Larkin were a rag doll made just for the purpose. And for his part, Larkin was exhibiting all the will of a San Quentin Raggedy Andy, flopping with each thrust in a form of practiced, humiliated acquiescence. His small fists balled, his head bobbing, he threw an occasional leer or eye-roll as though it were some sliver of affirmation that, yes sir, he at some point had agreed to this and therefore, somewhere in the heady process of assigning power and blame, he had achieved some respectable rank as someone with control—even if the simulated ass-mastering he was being subjected to made him stutter and spit out the want to cure your lonely condition from "Bust a Move" as though he were a white rapper with cerebral palsy. But—even burbling in a vat of beer, Gabe's brain perseveres!—I suspected it was token defiance; one thing Larkin had forfeited was eye contact with anyone, and if you couldn't look aggressors in the face, then you lacked even some pretzel-knotted mind-fuck explanation of your willing complicity (and thus control) in what was going on.

How come Larkin didn't look at us? (The goateed one let him go and dropped off the stage to a small chorus of cheers; Larkin fake-tugged wrinkles out of his suit in a self-mocking grab at dignity.) I suspected he wasn't as defiant as he'd tried to fashion in his subtle way; spew on about role-playing and consensuality 'til you're a wizened lesbian prof, but the hearty doll-banging he'd just gotten was nothing short of humiliating.

"You're deep like that," I said to Mullet. "So what's the answer?"

"The answer to what?"

"Why the hell do you guys do this?"

"Whoa. I didn't say I ever answered any of those questions. I just sort of forgot
when I started joining in myself." Mullet shrugged, then flung a middle finger at Larkin and pounded his Cuervo.

Darcy vised my forearm. "We'll both be sorry if you don't fucking dance with me!"

"Where's Staley?"

"Mr. Lightweight passed out. I got him a room. They let me put it on his credit card. God, they're desperate."

I didn't find the image of Darcy rifling through Staley's pockets exactly comforting. "Looks like you're well on your way, too. Sit down before gravity makes you."

Sweat-dunked and shaky on his legs, Larkin was just three songs into his set; still, his professional would-be defiance hadn't appeared to flag. It was the first time tonight he'd directly addressed the crowd—in a completely unlikely rumbling bass that sounded like it issued from an ancient well of frogs. "Gooood evening and welcome to the Hambert Larkin show," he said.

"How's the spit tonight, Hambert?" someone cackled.

He ran a finger down his face and popped it in his mouth—as though he'd just taken a pie in the face on some canned-laugh prank TV show and he was sampling the meringue. "From your mouth to mine, like buttah. I'll cherish this forever." A round of contemptuous laughter rose like gunfire.

"But really, folks," he continued. "It's another wonderful night on the flipside of Vegas and I wanna—as always—thank you and you and you for your most kind patronage. Dare I ask if my wonderful audience is enjoying the show tonight—the word enjoyment, of course, being relative." He homed in on one a frumpish older couple installed
near the front and started to play Mr. Lugubrious. "And where are you two from?"

Crowd: "NONE OF YOUR FUCKING BUSINESS." This was part of some informal script.

Larkin, suddenly buttery with false charm: "That's in North Carolina, right?"

The crowd, slopped with beery enthusiasm: "IT'S UP YOUR ASS." I even saw Darcy half-mouthing the words.

Larkin dropped his head as though he were weighing the tone and timing of the response. "Well, if it's populated by people of your caliber, I've definitely got a reason to visit now." The karaoke machine lurched improbably into the oversugared lope-and-swing of "Delilah" and again the groaning, clapping, cheering, spitting, cursing and screaming BLEEAARGH fired up like some infernal engine—as always, the accompanying chorus of hissing, hostile incoherence.

Yeah, I saw the neon arrow flashing MATERIAL MATERIAL above it all, hanging from a lobe of my brain. I'd been incessantly jotting down notes since the beginning, thinking: rich, bizarre subcult story; completely bent personality profile; funhouse-mirror portrait of a quaint little Theater of Cruelty right here in Las Vegas; scoopfuls of detail, string of narrative, topped with a Larkin interview after the show—surely he'd consider a chat with a journalist a nice little cove from the storm of abuse that had slapped at his poor little sails all night. Scribbling barside, leaning like a wind-blown palm—the abuse had that effect—I pursued the thought that Kraft had probably never really expected me to even find Larkin. Lower-rung lounge gigs were as stable as a boiling brick of C-4; the chances alone of finding Larkin were slim at best, and Kraft would never have expected the minor, eschewed lounge deity to have mutated into this form. This was Kraft's pouty-boy snickering farewell present: an impossible
assignment that, he'd probably hoped, would be little more than a frustrating, fruitless trawl through Vegas in search of who? who? naw, sorry man, never heard of him. It made sense. He'd done a fair job of hiding his resentment over my bailout, but I wouldn't put it past him to attempt to engineer exquisite, high level troubles for a confused pup like myself. Little wonder Kraft was resentful: pardon the ego-trip, but it probably galled him to see a talent like mine go into disuse (and, worse, possibly move on to Something Better); from that standpoint, I questioned anew the whole move myself. Was my jagged little soul going to soften in the absence of a job dispensing razor-clad crit? If you stop the behavior, do you change your character? I was giving up a decent paycheck in pursuit of the experiment, and in the meantime, hadn't necessarily exercised any will to try to become a kindler, gentler little killing machine. Skeins of such philosophical shprag were bobbing through my brain-streams when Darcy grabbed my hand. She dragged me to the dance floor.

"For the last time, how are we ever going to remember this whole fucked-up occasion if we don't goddamn dance to it? Dance is like the tool for expression for good memories and shit." Her hand was slick with sweat; she smelled sweet even above the stink of cigs and b.o. that hung over the place like a shroud. Darcy was teeteringly drunk.

There were a few couples on the small dance floor, though they weren't so much dancing to "Delilah" as using the parquet dance floor as a staging area to catapult their odium at Larkin—while swaying perfunctorily in deference to the notion that, yeah, well, the place is supposed to be for dancing.

I pulled Darcy close. "I suppose it'll be memorable either way. Might as well make it really memorable."

She was surprised, tugged away a bit. "Lightening up at last, Mr. Gabe. I bet
you're still going to write all kinds of mean things about everyone tonight, though." On the dance floor, we had fallen into a shambling approximation of something that, on some far-away planet, was a version of a two-step. "Maybe I'll write an article to compete with yours."

"I'd like to see that," I said.

Her hand heavy on my hip; the other limp in mine like a flower. "Something like, 'The poor lounge singer Hambert Larkin undergoes a bizarre nightly ritual in which he is mercilessly assaulted by the crowd, with no hope of rescue, not even by the intrepid young man from L.A. who discovered his show one night by accident.'"

"Is that what I'm supposed to do?" A balled-up hunk of wet napkin zinged by and splatted Larkin in the thigh. He was carrying the tune into a cartoonish swing, piston-pumping his legs at each curling myyyy myyyy myyyy.

"I think," she said, sighing beerily, "a situation like this calls for some heroics. 'But then the young writer from L.A., outraged at the treatment of the lounge singer, stood up in his defense and addressed the crowd.'"

I said, '"With a loud belch, he said this was some bizarre shit that was going down. Then he was gang-raped by gorillas wearing jeans.'"

Darcy shook her head. In our slow orbit on the dance floor, we had reached the north end where a guy had clambered atop his table and grabbed at his crotch like a gearshift, yelling for Larkin to play something goddamn written in the past decade, asshole. Practically shouting over Darcy's shoulder. "No, no," she said. Her forehead was pinpricked with sweat. I felt bad that she was so hot. "That's not what he said at all. He told the people to relax, and the pure masculine force of his presence made them all submit."
Was she sending me some code about her fantasy boyfriend? It was time to assuage some lingering guilt: "What's up with you and Staley?"

"We're getting along fine, if that's what you mean. What do you mean?"

Transparent. She pulled me closer. "I don't know what I mean," I said.

"And then the writer took Larkin under one arm and, using the curtain as a rope, swung out of the lounge, out of danger, and got a million-dollar reward from the lounge singer's filthy rich parents.' Looks like you need it. This thing is pretty thin." Suddenly she was dangling my wallet in front of my face. She dodged when I snatched at it; then, resolutely—as though we'd reached an implicit understanding that I'd get it back only on her terms—she handed it back.

"Christ. I thought you were telling stories about the klepto stuff. How many have you pinched so far this trip?"

"A girl never tells," she said, close again. "But I will say this is the easiest crowd I've seen in a while. The beer and bad lounger singer helps. Larkin is one of the best distractions ever invented. You like the idea of me stealing, don't you?"

I mentally surveyed the crowd, and imagined beer monkeys waking up in the morning, frantically shaking down smoky jeans and jangling through pockets for misplaced wallets.

"Go ahead, read me all you want," I said. It was amusing. In the south corner, a guy had leapt out of his chair—and not to toss in a perfunctory curse as Larkin lurched into his take on "Secret Agent Man," complete with quaking hips and the mask made by scissoring fingers in front of his face. Instead, the guy was huffing and grumbling over his lost wallet; his exasperation had reached that critical mass where friends finally break and reluctantly join the search. Another at the corner of the bar started whapping his
jeans, too, as though they were ant-infested; he cursed and stopped to take a swig of beer, muttering just had it a minute ago.

Darcy smiled. "You like a little deviance in a girl. You take it to mean independence."

"Deviance is nice, but obsessive-compulsive disorders are something entirely different."

She pinched me on the shoulder and my jeans tightened like a vise. "You saying my deviance doesn't do it for you? Come on, Gabe, you're at least intrigued by it, aren't you?"

"Intrigued enough to risk mistakes." Eye-lock; a dappling of sweat on her upper lip.

The line tasted overripe, groping. Darcy let out something approaching a cackle as we rotated slow and incongruous in the sleepy eye of the BLEEAARGH to the swanky jetpacking of "Secret Agent Man." She wasn't going to let me in that easily. We were drawing a few looks in the crowd, but not as much as Larkin, who stood teeteringly stageside, shimmying like a wash machine housing a lopsided load. Directly in front of him stood a shuddering hulk of a woman in a blue flower-print mu-mu, in her hands she held a gigantic imaginary cock that she was presumably feeding into Larkin's mouth with each quiver of her hips.

"You're a little deviant yourself," she said. "But I still think I've got you beat across the board."

"Is that so?"

She parroted me sweetly. "Yes, that's so. I guess to tell you everything would be the real test."
A three-man assault had sprung up at the right corner of the stage, where the music seemed to be taking us with its strange gravity. Three trolls in paint-splattered overalls were punching at Larkin's chickeny legs every time he swung near; it was clearly some kind of contest to see who could deliver the most devastating charlie horse. During a chorus, Larkin's orbit swung too close and the grunt in the middle hammered Larkin on the thigh, and he dropped like a sack. It marked an uptick in the proceedings, the unwitting violation of some unspoken rule.

"It's okay," Darcy said. Her fingers were laced around my neck. "I pinched that guy's wallet just a little while ago." I envisioned some food chain in which the lounge singer was fed upon by the crowd, who in turn was victimized by the pickpocket, who in turn was pursued—in purely oblique fashion—by the rock critic.

From his new position on the floor, Larkin rotated fecklessly on his right shoulder like an overturned beetle. The expression on his face—there, then gone with each revolution—was one of desperate comic embarrassment; the class clown trying to laugh off a punch by the class bully. I wanted to say something. Lots of people wanted to say something, I suspected; maybe that was part of the game. Who'd've thought classic peer pressure and old-fashioned groupthink could maintain such a crushing gravity?

"You're winning the deviance contest," I said. Went for honesty: "I still really want to kiss you."

"When your approach is better, maybe I'll let you."

It was a lie, a flirting. I was starting to suspect she felt a loyalty to Staley she found unfashionable to admit.

Larkin had scrabbled back to his feet, evoking—truly a surprise—a round of cheers from the crowd. As soon as he had gathered himself, though, a wave of jeers and
boos crashed over him. I thought I even saw Hambert crack a brief smile as he swung back into the song and caught one of its final rungs, managing to throw in a vocal flourish before the karaoke machine spat out the last of it.

"This sure isn't the soundtrack for what I want," Darcy said, letting her hands fall back to her sides. "And no, I don't want a hero." Inside, I prayed fervently: please play something for the lovebirds, against all odds, I'm bad, I'm a thief, a misanthrope, but please, a song for the lovebirds. My boxers were drum-tight and my mouth felt chalky. I was buzzed enough at the moment and stupid enough in general to ask myself whether this was it.

"Now we got a song here for all the lovebirds with us tonight," Hambert purred into the mic, unfazed by the recent violence. His suit was clingy and damp, and a tear at the knee made him look childish. "For all you here who got a man or a woman in your life who is the center of your little universe, your star, your solace. This one, ladies and gents, is for you." As if an echo from a loathsome mirror-universe, someone yelled, "And this is for you," and presumably grabbed his crotch.

If nothing else, I had to give Larkin points for massaging my ego by launching into something obscure. Rock critics love the obscure; it's a secret language of musical winks and nods whose purpose isn't communication so much as it is an affirmation of superiority. Thus the little buzz I copped when Larkin sunk his vox into Stephen Stills' "Cabin."

"Stay for one more song."

"Your desperation is almost cute. Of course I'll stay. I'll name my price later."

"Might as well say it now."

She laughed. "It's too tall an order for you to handle. Does it bug you that I'm
dancing with you?"

"How so?" Between the drinks slowly chugging through my system and the waving strains of "Cabin," we were dancing underwater. The yelling and cursing, the throwing of napkins, bottlecaps and assorted trash shunted, frame by frame, to slow motion. It felt good, and I felt the need to apologize for stealing Staley's girl—even if she wasn't that.

"It doesn't reflect too well on us, I guess," she said. "But this is more about you than anything. Like you'd be surprised to hear that."

"Surprise," I said. "With my luck he'll wake up and see us here and fall into a complex. You ever seen Staley fall into one of his complexes? It's fascinating. He actually does tear his hair out."

"I'm jealous. No, I haven't," she said. Another little knife of hair had fallen onto her damp forehead. Darcy gave a lippy, grateful smile when I pushed it away.

"But you were saying about me."

"I knew you'd come back to that somehow," she said. "What?" She was cutely nervous. "Nothing. It's just that you're weird. You're covered. You've got an exoskeleton. I'm experimenting to see if you'll come out."

"With the proper coaxing," I said.

"I was thinking more along the lines of a dare. You know, like one of those life tests where you try it just to see if you could do it."

"You been reading Redbook or something?" It earned me pinch. "Can't say I minded that much."

Darcy suddenly brightened, eyes child-wide with deviousness. "Why don't you get up there."
"Up where?"

"Up on stage. Sing with Larkin. I totally bet you wouldn't. I would. But," she said, "I asked first."

Darcy was expecting an avalanche of hellnos and fuck thats. She got it. "I don't care what it says about my character. Even I have to invoke dignity at some point."

"I don't think it's dignity that's holding you back, but that's your call."

"What is it, then?"

"You're scared." She threw me an eye-roll. "It's no big deal. It's completely natural. You're cool."

"The scary thing is your little reverse psych bit is working on me."

We'd orbited near the stage again. Larkin, jogging in place in that dip between songs—a space crowded with the constant animal rumble of what now seemed an almost amicable, ceremonial hostility—broke into a shimmy as the karaoke machine spat out a heat lamp-warmed version of the opening sprint of "Dancin' in the Dark." The few bodies on the dance floor took the cue as well, breaking into a pipe-legged two-steps, made extra lame by age and alcohol.

In the corner of my eye, movement; a scuffle at the edge of the dance floor. One figure standing over a sitting figure; the sitting figure rose, and in the same slo-mo frame-by-frame, the two melted together and started wheeling toward us like a living shadow. Heard a hoarse I'll teach you to cadge drinks, you skinny fucker; by the time the wave reached us, it had grown: four, five bodies now, massed like blindly fighting ants in some skirmish mandated by stupid instinct. The fact that I wasn't the kind of person who got caught up in bar fights (and somehow staked a considerable portion of my identity on such distinctions) suddenly meant nothing. A blur, a push, a heaving in the chest, like
sex but with more anxiety; Darcy fell away and I saw her beer-blurred face in a laughing expression. I sensed air beneath me, the surprise of sudden momentum. I fell onto the stage and felt the bony hand of Larkin grasp my right arm. I thought, *that bitch.* I wasn't sure whether to give her credit for being wily enough to be complicit in this, but I saw how it was playing out. A fence of bodies went up at the edge of the stage—menacing beer-pullers in grimy jeans and trailer hags with bleach-blasted hair, signposts of low-grade excess. What a bunch of fuckers. They'd been watching me—in this context, loathsome hipster with a bag made of carpets, loudly declaring he was A Journalist (now I remembered)—and concluded I was an enemy twice over. An alliance with Larkin was necessary. I stood up, the lights harsh in my face like an accusation; I put my hand up to shade myself as much from the glare—shifting and shimmering as forms moved in it, before it—as from the burl of insults I expected to come flying.

The karaoke machine blurped to a stop; chatter and laughter in the crowd. I sensed a menacing curiosity, crude suspicion at the new animal in the zoo, a low-dose cocktail of fear and disgust brewing in backs of brains.

"You going to do one of those duets or what, Larkin?" someone said with a snort.

Instinct: I called out for Darcy. Everyone broke into a coughing, ragged laughter. I might as well have been bawling for mommy. I didn't give a shit. On display in a fishtank, I couldn't see a goddamn thing. "Darcy, you there?"

More laughter. A chorus from the east side of the room: "Sing!"

I felt a hand on my back: Larkin. My eyes had adjusted. He stood next to me, and I lack just enough to balls to say it was a comfort. I sensed this was routine for him.

He cleared his throat against the dense air. "Looks like it's time for our Saturday night duet," he said. "And we got a special guest up here tonight that'll knock your socks
off and leave your shoes on the roof." He bent low toward an audience member to
receive a whispered message: a-ha, Darcy. "We have up here one Gabe Sack who's
gonna perform for you tonight. Happy birthday, Gabe!"

"It's not my fucking birthday." A blare of hoots, jeers and bottle clinks drowned
me out. Darcy was going beyond the call of duty; this was gratuitous mind-fucking now.
A brief drunken curl of "Happy Birthday" rose and died somewhere in the crowd,
crashing onto shoals of mean laughter.

With no help from Larkin, the karaoke machine clattered into an opening that I
didn't recognize, a circusy burble of love- and weed-addled guitars that invoked a blurry
pastiche of garish sunsets, cutoff jeans, braless hours in backs of American cars, wine
coolers, flat beer and fireworks, fly-specked ambrosia, comebacks, blankets on grass,
sandals, clumsy kisses. My brain sent my jaw slack with unconscious recognition:
"Show Me the Way." Larkin jarred me on the shoulder as he started in, caterwauling the
line like a cat on a pitchfork. It was without camp or irony; it was, rather, a most grave
flubbing. The chorus came on like a sudden fever; someone punched me in the knee and
I choked into singing it along with a suddenly cooperative crowd: I want you to show me
the way. My clothes were suddenly pattering; they were spitting on me. I threw in a
lung, a shoulder, a left foot, leaning into the gale: Show me the way. A bottle whizzed by
my head like a mutant horsefly, slapping into the curtain and smashing on the floor; a hail
of cocktail napkins and straws. I called out for Darcy again—for Staley. I got a wet
napkin plogged to my forehead, splattering into tendrils. I wiped it off. Excess is the best
revenge: I wonder if I'm dreaming. I feel so unashamed. The crowd teetered; I was
drunk, pacing the stage lame-like; I can't believe this is happening to me. Larkin took
two lines, twisting them into a wail. It's not a duet until you're competing, and he threw
himself into a fawning pose that drew a fusillade of fire from a crowd now roaringly
drunk and mashed against the tiny stage with balled fists and desperately clenched beers.
They were animals; they were mad, feeding off themselves; but they were necessary to
my sudden hostility; I continued singing, now with vigor; I heard a snatch of girlish
laughter that I guessed was Darcy. Know what? Fuck her too. I watch you when you're
sleeping, and then I want to take your love. There was a proposition in front of me that
said the force of proving myself required me to hate her, hate everyone, and I found
myself clamped arm in arm with Larkin, bearing the storm together now, momentarily
unfazed by the stream of vitriol and petty objects. The BLEEAARGH was petty. Its hate
was petty. I was degraded, yes, but beneath that I began to feel enlarged, magnified on
the stage; the force of proving something awakened some dark stream of energy that put
the words in my stomach, up my throat, into my mouth and sprayed onto an audience that
now seemed undeserving.

"Who are you?" I heard someone ask. The line was fanged with contempt, but it
came at me bent and twisted so that I read it as the wonderment of a stunned passerby
who witnesses the feat of a hero. I am Gabe Sack, goddammit. I feel so unafraid.
Squinting through the lights, I caught a glimpse of Darcy at the back, safe, arms crossed;
I suspected she was shaking her head, savoring her embarrassment for me like a true
irony kid. Hell, I was embarrassed for myself now, reveling in the molten feeling of it;
being next to Larkin, I sensed even he was embarrassed for himself. The dusty saw of
the wizened performer says the day you aren't nervous, you're washed up, pal, and I
suspected this was a mutation of that particular species of feeling. It didn't feel good, but
it felt justified and in place enough for me to feel equally right in trying to expel it onto
the audience.
We dueted, madly, swapping sloppy vocal lines over Frampton's lugubrious sugar-lava tune, all while the hailstorm continued. When I stumbled toward the edge of the stage, hands grabbed like vines, and I kicked back in a sort of reflexive, good-humored fury; part of me began to see the wider parameters of the BLEEAARGH where there was a shady allotment for penalties, limits, the vague outlines of rules. When I kicked, they gave slightly, when I instinctively moved back, they scooped with calloused hands where I left off—with a suspiciously ineluctable timing that belied their sodden state. And yet it only took the occasional crack to the knee—from beer bottle, ringed knuckle—to remind that the innocuousness was largely accidental. If this was theater, it had its own set of fuzzy rules that required a level of inebriation that me nor my liver was willing to pass through like some syrupy curtain to reach the li'l light of truth 'n' understanding. A particularly hard blow to my knee—sending me into a reflexive crouch, which I finessed into a sort of last-second, feminine bow—brought me face to face with a pug-nosed plumper with blonde curls the size of sewer pipes.

"It's disgusting big-city pricks like you who ruin everything," she said. She drew back a fist, with two fingers flexed, as if to threaten skewering my eyes.

To my surprise, and maybe even hers, I didn't flinch. "I want you day after day," I told her, holding the space between my eyes her and mascara-punched ones. "I want you...Show me the way."

A small gnarl of agitated drunkfucks had gathered behind her; the crowd was yanked in some mass-psych surge that sent a ripple of anger quickly rolling to the front. I felt Larkin's hand on my sweat-dipped shirt, pulling me up. A guy barreled right over Mascara Molly, slamming two meaty jackhammers of arms onto the portion of stage where I'd been crouched. Script or not, I replied with a shoulder kick; a satisfying crick...
traveled up my leg. The gods shower-rape me for saying so, but it felt nourishing. The sap peered up at me through a sweat-streaked face, looking vaguely hurt, then bug-eyed with anger. I leapt back as he swung again, catching my kneecap with his knuckle—just the type of glancing blow that because of its limited contact is that much more focused—and colon-clenchingly painful.

Larkin's damp mouth suddenly at my ear. "Don't push it, friend. Give and take."

I asked what the fuck kind of zen performance artist bullshit was he talking about, but too late; he'd ducked in toward the crowd to fire another Frampton verse at them in a maddeningly simpering manner that he must have perfected over thousands of shows.

I'd take any cue at this point. Leaving the stage was out of the question; between my body's quaint little instinctive desire to preserve itself against the horrors of a gaggle of blue-collar schwag apes thirsting for blood and a growing sense of humiliation—swelling slowly like some black water balloon behind the heart (that would surely burst upon seeing Darcy) yeah, admission: I suddenly cared a lot—I was essentially caged onstage. Welcome to the island, I told myself; put on a grass skirt and learn the language. I ducked as a bottle blurred past my forehead and smashed into the far wall, spraying the karaoke machine with pearls of beer.

Funny how you could learn the choreography, but still the anger throbbed, my heart knee-jerking. Pro wrestlers no doubt got mad at their opponents at the accidentally squashed testicle, an arm or leg splanked too far for theater's sake. Why not? Damn Larkin's language. I zoomed in on the fucker from the stage, a bearded, skin-and-bones junker who probably hosted a tapeworm or two. He was making his way to the front of the stage, licking his lips as he produced another bottle. Of course you could have a closer shot, Mister Polloi. Here, let me show you the way. He angled through the thicket
of elbows and chins; Larkin was at the far end, slathering himself over the chorus while I
joined in robotic fashion. The skele-fucker reached the front, braving a few jostles and
bangs here and there as I shouted—hoarsely, now that I heard my own voice—"Day after
day," and, just as he cocked his arm back to fire, I hammered my foot into his lower jaw.
He sunk into the crowd, swallowed by the body-swarm, followed by only a few wide-
eyed looks of now-this-is-serious horror.

My life's mistakes in judgment and perception will no doubt take a few yawnful
days of reading at the pearly gates, but this one, I think, will easily break the Top 10:
nailing the wrong guy that night at the Lagoon Lounge. My frothing mind worked it out
as the amber-colored blur sailed toward my noggin: a-ha, the poor guy wasn't cocking his
arm, he was raising a beer in comparatively innocent brutish affirmation with the rest. A
mook further in the back—obscured by the bottle about to make contact with my precious
egg of a head—was the culprit. Sorry about that, guy, I thought. Then again, in
situations like this, with such, ahem, intense celebrating going on, there are bound to be a
few accidents—that bottle (ah, Budweiser, not a Light, at least I merited that) ticking
closer with each camera snap, mechanically wheezing—but know in the end that there
was no ill will—bottle one frame closer, label curled at one edge, presumably from the
force of the throw—in this case, but still I extend my most sincere apologies crunch no
hard feelings blackness now I'm shown the way crit has nothing on good old-fashioned
physics.
Big surprise that my yen for egocentrism can outlast even a bottle-smash to the head. Never mind any cartoon birds and stars whirling around my dented skull, no matter the line of crusty blood tendriled down my dome and behind my ear, nor the view from inside, that looked like someone had broken into the booth on the balcony and kicked the film projector loose—the thought persisted that Darcy was calling my name.

Yeah, the bitchster who got me into this, who I now believed, through a muck of thoughts, had to take some of the credit for (perhaps not completely unconsciously) for leading me to that stage-edge that resulted in—the memory formed itself like a gunmuzzle against my head—a quite monumental dressing down in front of people whose opinion I suddenly valued.

I asked her what she wanted from me. I asked her if she'd enjoyed that little display of poetic justice. I told her that amid the slop, the drunken confusion, I'd seen her back there and I saw the irrefutable admission—that wry little punchable smile of hers—of complicity in a humiliation that, now that it was over, nonetheless seemed to throb with some kind of recalcitrant, unwholesome life. So this was humiliation; not that I'd hadn't tasted the sting before. That was the thing, though; this wasn't a sting, it was a throb—an undergrounder pulse that had its power in the fact that you were constantly reminded. Even there, at that early stage, on the hotel room floor, face against that scratchy natted casino hand-me-down carpet with who knew how many millions of dead
skin cells and mites and shit currently throwing a rave on my right cheek, I found myself craving forgetfulness.

What did she mean pipe down, kid? I was having trouble moving, but I still found force enough in my throat to tell her to shut her mouth before I piped down right on her pretty little head. I sensed no tone of gloating, but the fact that she'd engineered such a thing and then had the raw red cojones to stick around for the fallout—if I wasn't boiling with vinegar-filled veins, I'd almost respect her.

Then she laughed. I sprung up from the floor. The light caught my eyes, sent a shard of pain right through the sockets and I froze, clenching them shut. More laughter—knowing, confident, somewhat commiserating. I braved the light, accepted the pain, and opened my eyes to a grimy little shitbox motel room reeking with the smell of being inhabited by an unsavory class of character.

Darcy wasn't here. I was sitting up, leaning against the wall. I was in Larkin's room.

"Can I kill you?" I heard myself saying. "Motherfuck. I am really about to kill someone."

He laughed again, low and hoarse. It wasn't the voice of the man onstage. Still, I wanted to kill him. It was actually kind of nice to accept, and consider indulging, these sudden animal urgings.

"I'm all you got at this point," he said. "And you need me more than vice versa. You can't sing worth shit. What were you thinking? It was cute at first, the whole drunk liberal arts college kid thing, but then, whoa. We should have done some Wild Cherry. You don't have to sing to do 'Play that Funky Music.'" He was sitting in a chair next to one of those nondescript hotel-room desks, legs crossed and dragging off a cigarette.
"You rode the moment a little too far, friend."

"Pardon me if I get defensive for a moment," I said. I leaned up half my ass and slapped at the back to check for my wallet. "But I'm not a professional, and I'm not a college kid. Did you drag me in here or what?" Trying to stand only sent the green room awhirl.

"Just sit. You took one straight to the head. Even I never had that happen. Then again, I got a lot more dodging practice than you." He laughed. I told him fuck you. "You got a metal plate in there or something? I gotta say that shit was amazing. The bottle broke, you know. Lucky some shard didn't come and scoop out one of your poor little eyes. Fit for a Greek tragedy."

I put my fingers to my eyes.

"Not bad for your first night, over all."

I could already hear the "Twilight Zone" riff. I made a start.

His voice softened. "I'm joshing, man. So what were you doing up there, anyway?" I heard the clink of ice.

"I don't know. My inner Wayne Newton springing to life," I said. I looked at him. "That's a joke. Believe it or not, I came to interview you. I might as well start." I slapped around for my notepad, realized that I'd forgotten it. My mistakes were piling up nicely. I'd be lucky if I had enough functioning neurons to scrabble together for sentence-making. I was hammered, lurching without even standing up.

"Your girlfriend said something about that. That's the only reason I dragged you in here, you know."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"Of course she's not, but I didn't want to hurt your feelings by telling you that
myself," he said. "It's what she said, anyway. So, I'm sitting here while you were passed out, asking myself, 'Larkin, why do you deign to let this man into your most inner sanctum?' You see, watching you there on the floor, heaving—"

"I was heaving?"

"Oh yes, my friend, your body wanted to vomit very badly. Shades of Morrison, the works." He must've read the glow of murder in my eyes. "Don't worry, I turned you over for a while, expecting some real fireworks on my nice carpet, but nothing happened, so I flipped you back over. Figured it had to do with the concussion. That's when you started talking."

"I talked?" I braced myself for a round of slings and arrows from the skeletal lounge singer here in his own little private Congo outpost.

Larkin barked out a laugh. "Don't worry, friend. I tried listening, but it was no hope. Couldn't make out a word. But you see, it was when I watching you twitch and heave on the floor—"

"Oh, twitching, too." If a snorting mastodon made of flaming headache wouldn't have stopped me flat in my tracks, I would've beelined for the door, out of the room, out of the Oasis, out of Las Vegas and back to my stupid, but known, incomplete turd of a life. I wasn't particularly interested in what this man who was slowly revealing himself to be a flake of the highest magnitude had to say, but I was anchored to the spot.

"It was then that I saw a vision of my own mortality—that was some pretty dramatic stuff going down on the floor there—and figured, why be press-shy? Maybe this'll be my last chance to put some important words down for posterity. We talking a long piece here? Photos? Color? Glossy? Major magazine? You see, you've shown good instincts in coming here tonight, because I truly do think I am worthy of, if not at
least a flip little feature, a nice in-depth interview that just might, at last, get to the core of who Hambert Larkin really is." He seemed to materialize in front of me as my eyes adjusted to the pain, the light. Without his suit billowing around him like a sail, he had an almost sickly thinness; a knockoff Movado that sat on his wrist like a bracelet, socks sagging down minimal calves. His jacket was off; beneath his swampy shirt was a faintly concave chest. What had happened to the main in the bus stop ad? He was goateed, well-fed, showed a willingness to chuckle at his own lugubriousness. "And so we must ask, who is Hambert Larkin? Cliche as it may sound, he's a man with a mission of sorts, a man with a burden, a burning coal that resides in his heart that he must ritualistically try to expel nightly—"

I feigned a violent cough to get him to stop. My head throbbed like a hammer factory.

"—in front of a crowd of cavemen who could at best be called Philistines. The stupid ritualistic pain of it! That's what you were probably thinking, mostly the stupid part. I understand. I won't hold it against you. And really, who's to say that Larkin is above conscious, purposeful stupidity? Didn't the court jester employ that very apparent stupidity as part of his arsenal? Hm?" His voice had gone high, nothing like the seasoned gravel he'd somehow coughed up on stage.

A ruse to momentarily spare myself. "Listen, why don't we do this. Stop the monologue for a second, let me get my bearings, we'll go sit at the coffeeshop and you can talk all you want, and this time I'll even quote you on it." The red fog was lifting from my vision, and the throbbing in my head had receded to a tolerable if constant pang. I managed to get to my feet and schlumped toward his bathroom sink—cluttered with the detritus of a true tourist, little soaps, mini-toothpaste tubes and shampoo bottles—to spit
and splash water on my face. I sat on the edge of his bed and looked at him for what felt like the first time. He sat in his cheap little motel desk chair with a smiling, faintly feminine air that seemed both agreeable and weary—weary—of me? Likely. His eagerness for an interview was misleading; his schtick was so bizarre he'd no doubt fielded countless interview requests, countless journalists who thought they'd just stumbled upon some ancient freak relic of lounge culture, a shard buried somewhere between Rat Pack mythology and contemporary lounge cheese that aimed for the purely narcotic. He was onerous to me; I was probably a cliche to him. Larkin, monumentally bored, was indulging me.

"I can't go out there."

"What?"

"At least in the lounge I'm protected by the illusion that I'm an entertainer, that I'm in public."

The door thumped four times.

"See? Don't answer." I got up with more effort than I should've, and got as far as grasping the doorknob in my hand before Larkin barked at me. "You think I'm kidding, you asshole? That's my life you're playing with. Sit down." A snarling-dog edge had suddenly crept into his voice, an element that said he may be a skinny masochistic stage puppet during particular hours, but he'd scrap for survival in no uncertain terms. My ass was fairly vulnerable at the moment, but my ego's reflexes hadn't got the memo.

"Don't have to yell, asshole," I said.

"Easy for you to say," he said. He lit a long, effete-looking cigarette. "They'd throw some your way, too, if you'd let them in."

"I'd prefer not to think about it any more than I already am."
Larkin laughed huskily. "But the thing that's probably bothering you most, that amazes you most, is how easy it was."

"I'm supposed to be interviewing you," I offered weakly. Instinctively slapped at my back pocket again for a notepad.

"You know what it has to do with," he said. "Why would anyone in their right mind do this? You want my sordid tale for your article? It's like so many. It's like the rest."

The persistence of the swirl in my head—woodpeckering at my center of gravity just enough put me in a constant light swoon—was starting to get to me. It'd be just my luck if I had a concussion. When the vomiting and churn of nausea began, I'd know I arrived. The worrying thing was that I wanted to leave; the door had begun to present itself as something that bore menace. And yet Larkin had leashed my fevered mind into thinking that the outside somehow wasn't safe.

"I can't go back," he said.

"Whatever, Jonah. I need to go. I'm feeling sick."

"That's how people arrive at junctions like this," he said. I sensed a pity-play; Larkin leaned forward in his chair, looking at his trembling, feminine hands. "If you're off the map, nobody knows you, what does it matter what you do? And what if you arrived with a map, but lost it just when you got your bearings? That's when the real party starts, friend. It began for me ten years ago. You might even call tonight a sort of anniversary."

"Congratulations," I said, bitter.

"Thank you." He matched me so easily. "Had a few drinks, a few laughs, a few shouts and even a few emboldened fuck yours myself. Ha ha ha. Hilarity ensued. Unlike
you, I came alone. Hambert Larkin—what the fuck was that cat about? Then you notice
he moves with you, there's something about him. Is he a marionette? A puppet? A
robot?"

"This little drama is coming along nicely," I said. "I know where this is going, in
case you don't." Some little sneering blackball inside me was content to watch. Sitting
and witnessing Hambert flagellating himself presented itself as a worthwhile
entertainment. The little scar of a man was looking to spring a dramatic mind-trap on me.

"No. He's a reflection. See what I'm telling you? You're not listening. I doubt
you ever did. You are a rock critic?"

"Below the belt," I said. I smiled. "Are you going to cry? You're sounding
desperate now. I can stick around and spar all night if that's what you want."

He looked me straight on with glazed eyes, his big worm of a bottom lip
quivering. "I'm not Hambert Larkin, you idiot."

I swallowed and just missed the beat. "Now, that's an angle. I really need to find
something to write on." I slid open the nightstand drawer; next to the leathery brick of a
Bible was a yellowing complimentary Oasis memo pad; next to that, a chewed pen had
rattled out.

"If you can't remember," Larkin said, "writing it down won't help." Smoke
plumed from his cigarette as he tapped his temple. "This ain't some existential shit I'm
laying on you for existential shit's sake. This isn't a sideshow." It explained the bus stop
ad: the two weren't the same guy.

"This is a feature article interview," I said. I had had no idea what to say.

"That's realistic enough," he said, laughing ruefully. "In that case, how about this
for your lead. He's Hambert Larkin, but not the Hambert Larkin. You can take it from

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there, can you? Watcher becomes watched, observer becomes participant, witness becomes aggressor becomes victim. Throw in some quotes from your favorite philosophers. Move on, forget about it. Until the cat who's writing it looks down."

"And then what happens?"

"Then he realizes he's got one foot in the reflecting pool," he said. He sat back and regarded me with fresh eyes. Cagey smile and stiff lips to steel against crying. On the inside, Larkin was composing himself. He was teasing me; he'd assessed me as weak and unwilling, and I sensed some polite steps back. "Let's go back to me."

"You were saying," I said.

"Let's just say I grew into the role. Heard the one about the guy fronting a cover band who was hired on to do the real thing? That's the best anchor I can give you."

The throbbing in my head put me past any mood for being cryptic. "Let's boil it down to simple questions. Who are you?" Pen poised over the cheap paper; I was trembling.

"I'm Hambert Larkin," he said, so surely it struck me as rehearsed.

"Now you're playing games," I said.

"What kind of games?" Larkin—or whoever he was—smiled widely and catlike from his chair. "Maybe you just have to ask me more than once. Nothing wrong with plurality. Who says identities have to be mutually exclusive? There I go, dropping philosophy on you. But you seem hep to it. Why not?"

"Who are you?" It came out of me like a spurt of gunfire. I wanted to leave. I couldn't. I didn't really want to leave.

"You've got your function, right? You can say that's a form of identity, right? Doctor, lumberjack, teacher, whatever. Then you got all that stuff underneath, the
ineffables we love so much. The underbelly. No, not that. The real self. Why am I such a cynic? How long do I have to dance around before you catch the clue train?"

Larkin didn't give me enough credit; little surprise that he looked surprised when I fired back. My antennae weren't so dulled by the booze, by skull-wrecking bottles addling my brain like an eightball that I couldn't sniff out his direction. The name bore out his schtick: he was larking, all right. I could hear the rolling drums in the background, all tense and smoky, as the low-rung lounge act, stabbing and flailing at some quenching form of vengeance against failures and lost chances, told me that—gasp!—he wasn't the real Hambert Larkin. Cue the creep soundtrack and send the quivers marching spineward: oh boy. I grinned; Larkin's ears pricked up.

"What's your real name, then?" I said.

"That's not the point."

If I hadn't been too tired to reach, I would've patted myself on the back for being one step ahead. "So who was the original Larkin? And how did you ever fall into the job?"

Larkin waved the question off. "That's all background," he said. "What I was getting at is that tonight, in effect, someone else applied for the job." He added no emphasis; in fact, it was as though it had been superfluous to say.

I was dazed, so much I had to tell the truth. "I hadn't guessed that." A fast-motion life unfurled before me, a petite purgatory spent at the Lagoon Lounge, marble-mouthing bad pop songs to a crowd of the broken, tormented and confused. I was nervous enough that I obeyed the urge to stand up. "Not for me."

Larkin smiled serenely, again. The little insect of a man—who flung himself against the grill nightly (what had his crimes been? more severe than mine?)—looked at
me with resignation: He couldn't stop me. "But did you feel that tonight? It was rough, wasn't it? At least admit that, friend. You stank, you hurt. They hurt back."

He handed me a Kleenex. I wiped my face. "It was a firing squad," I said, shrugging. I shrugged again and tried to stop shaking. I told him I was leaving now.

Larkin put a hand up in a meek wave, then lowered, as if he just thought better of it.

I wandered around the small casino before finally seeing Staley. I didn't recognize him; he was hunched like a veteran at the main casino bar, slapping blankly at video poker. His eyes were wide as eggs. I asked him where Darcy was.

"She took off, man. Car's gone. You should've seen me. I was pissed earlier, then I just decided to get drunk. The connection fully makes sense now."

I cursed. "She took my car?"

"I scoured the parking lot. Guess she was moving on to better things. This is so capital. Never thought grand theft auto would hold that kind of thing for her. Guess we should call the police."

I cursed again. Staley looked at me. "I just want you to know I'm not mad at you," he said. "I woke up in the room and found her going through my wallet. You know what? She looked at me like it was fully a minor inconvenience that she'd just got caught. Like, 'Oh, darn.' She just dropped the wallet and left. Like that was that. I wasn't even thinking about the car. I know you're going to be pissed at me for being so naive. You liked her, didn't you? All that shit was going too weird a direction anyway for me anyway."

A bartender with a black brush of a moustache floated up and rested his knuckly hands on the bartop. I asked for a beer and slid onto the stool next to my friend. Staley said he knew it was too early to ask, but what were we going to do? I told him that it
looked like we were definitely going to be spending the night here.
VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Andrew Kiraly

Home Address:
8825 Tumblewood Avenue
Las Vegas, NV 89143

Degrees:
Bachelor of Arts, English, 1998

Thesis Title: Crit

Dissertation Examination Committee:
Chairperson, Dr. Richard Wiley, MFA
Committee Member, Douglas Unger, MFA
Committee Member, Claudia Keelan MFA
Graduate Facult Representative, Dr. Matt Wray, Ph. D.