



**a Petal  
under  
Pavement**

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Joan was tougher than your average nineteen-year-old, and would never hesitate to let you know it. She was a dope fiend in the disguise of a statuesque bombshell, who could often be found hustling for money around the affluent LA suburbs she called home. Her father was a successful defense attorney, and her mother was a naive homemaker, who found her comfort somewhere close to the bottom of a wine bottle. She had a younger brother, who at the age of twelve had seen more fucked up shit than most people see in a lifetime. He was as cold to the world as she was, yet slightly less educated when it came to the ways of the streets. He overdosed on his mom's sleeping pills about a year ago, and left a note that had nothing vital to say about his state of mind except a terse FUCK YOU and the childish scrawl that was his signature. His mother found him lying on the bathroom floor with his arms outstretched in a Jesus Christ crucifixion pose, and proceeded to sue the school district for not getting him the proper counseling that she felt he needed. Joan wasn't at his funeral, but then again she didn't attend hers either. It can be funny the way things work out sometimes. She could never smile at the weird twists and turns that life seems to dish out for the sole purpose of entertaining itself. I can- maybe that's why I am still alive.

I first met Joan a few days after my twentieth birthday, during the final weeks of January 2000. I was sitting on a bench placed in an isolated corner of the Oakview Promenade, speeding my brains out on a bad batch of crystal meth, and puffing up the remaining drags of a Camel Filter, when suddenly she appeared out of the Southern Californian sunset and asked for a smoke. I reached into my pocket, pulled one out, lit it, and handed it to her. She was impressed by my classy move.

"Nobody has ever done that for me before," she said.

I cracked my knuckles anxiously, and replied "That's OK nobody has ever done that for me before either."

It was then that I took in the full image of her body. She had bright red hair, ashen skin, and a smile designed for the purposes of tragedy. I was immediately taken.

"So what brings you here on this beautifully smoggy day?" I asked her, as an attempt to pick up a conversation.

"I am waiting for someone very special to me to show up."

"Is it your boyfriend?"

"No," she laughed. "He's just very special to me."

She paused and asked, "So what's your story?"

"I am counting how many different objects the clouds can turn themselves into," I told her, as I felt myself getting sucked ever deeper into the green horror of her eyes.

“Sounds like fun,” she shrugged sarcastically, while ashing her cigarette onto the ground.

Something about her made me want to tell her my entire life story, to release my entire being onto her, but I knew that would be stupid, and I was pretty sure that the speed grinding its way through my system was the real driving force behind these desperate urges.

It had also become obvious to me that I was getting more and more self-conscious by the minute, and when she finally did break the ice surrounding my psychological torment by speaking again, I took in a deep breath of relief, and in its place shot a stream of smoke into the air.

“Do you do E?” she inquired.

“What?” I asked dumbly.

“Do you do E?” she repeated herself.

“I do a lot of things but as of now I only have five bucks to my name.”

“And what is your name?” she smiled.

“John Reagan. And yours?”

“Joan Paterson,” she muttered solemnly, as if her last name brought up troubling memories of several years past.

Her eyes grew large as soon as I mentioned that I had money. The vampire in her soul decided that this was the moment to lay it on.

“Do you want to get some acid? It’s only five bucks a hit and the guy I’m meeting will give me one for free if you buy one.”

I couldn’t think of anything else that I would do that night, and there was no way in hell I was going to say no to the stoned-out Mona Lisa sitting beside me. So I agreed without hesitation or thought, and for the next twenty-minutes- waited for The Man.

The Man turned out to be a twenty-four-year old Austrian immigrant named Charlie, who was living at his drug dealing older brother’s house in Woodland Hills. He was paying his side of the rent by slinging acid and ecstasy, while his brother covered his share with crack and smack deals. His brother’s girlfriend occasionally lived there, and was somewhat of a minor celebrity in the underground porn industry. Charlie’s brother was unaware that his chick was banging both of them for dope, and when the truth finally did come to light, he beat Charlie and his woman to death with a tire iron while he was fucked up on a nasty new brand of PCP. That’s a whole different story altogether, but who knows; perhaps the rumors aren’t true after all.

Charlie pulled into the parking lot and opened the passenger door of his grey Honda Civic to let us in. Joan explained that she had just met me and that we wanted to trip. He drove us all to his brother's house where we waited in the driveway while he retrieved the goods. He returned a few minutes later holding a small plastic bag that contained three small pieces of paper. I paid him the five bucks and we each popped a tab into our mouths.

"I know a good place where we can kick-back and enjoy the trip," Charlie informed us.

"I am down for anything," Joan stated calmly.

I remained silent.

We drove for about an hour, chain smoking, and guzzling from a fifth of Jack Daniels, until we finally reached our destination, which I believe was somewhere out in the middle of Van Nuys. It was a high school that had a park built into its right side.

"What the fuck are we doing at a high school?" I wondered aloud.

Charlie explained that we weren't going to the high school, but rather that we were going to a place that was up into the park a bit. A short walk, he said, but well worth it.

He told us that there was a story behind the place, and that he would tell it to us only when we reached the spot he had in mind. It was after he finished his sentence that I felt my head explode, and when I turned to tell Joan that I was beginning to feel the LSD, her features began to take on a liquid-like texture, while her mouth caved in on itself like the lips of a fish. I looked at her carefully and realized that she too was feeling it, so I kept my mouth shut, and calmed the rising high that was beginning to feel more and more like a tidal wave crawling ever closer to my brain, by lighting a cigarette and chewing on my already damaged lower lip. We walked for another five minutes and found the place we were looking for.

It was a well trimmed grassy area with a pole stuck into the ground about ten feet over to the left side of the clearing, while to the right there was a fence supporting an aging rusted gate that guarded a small square of land measuring about twenty feet in width. We were standing between these two landmarks, when a gunshot of a gust of wind smacked my face and head with a colorful montage of electrically charged visual patterns that danced erratically around the bare-knuckled flames that had rapidly become my inner and outer states of consciousness. It was then that I noticed how badly I wanted Joan.

I wanted to push her down in the grass and fuck her like she had never been fucked before. I wanted to taste her kisses and make her feel beautiful. I wanted to hold her in my arms and shelter her from the winds, the world, and all the bullshit that seemed to surround us like an enemy army waiting to strike from deep inside the many folds of night. I wanted to take her away. I wanted to take her somewhere where we could be safe from everything. Where we could grow old together, and die in each others arms like Siamese twins doomed to the sorry end that is symbolized by the bleak landscape of a hospital bed.

But above all, I wanted us to be alone, to be alone, and to be able to feel for each other in the dark and majestic silence that is complete and total isolation, and know, that somewhere out past this bittersweet maelstrom of euphonious and euphoric madness, there is a light that will guide us safely past the man-eating reefs that are wrapped around the devastatingly inevitable arrival of dawn.

I barely knew the girl, but there was an undeclared connection of understanding passed between us. Its foundation lay in the fact that she knew however bad her life had been for her, she would be all right, because I had just as horrible a time with my own. The feeling ran vice-versa and brought us together instantly.

Through the haze of the acid, I began to believe that she was having similar thoughts to mine, while we both superficially watched Charlie pack his box of Marlboros against the palm of his hand. It was then that he began to tell us the story behind our newfound sanctuary.

“Three weeks ago some Mexican drug dealers brought two kids that went to this high school up to this spot, because one of the kid’s older brothers owed them over twenty-five grand.”

He stopped and lit a cigarette.

“You see that pole over there?”

He pointed to it with his left hand.

“One of the kids was tied to that pole, tortured with a knife, and shot nine times in the face.”

Joan and I grimaced at the thought of getting shot nine times in the face.

“You see that fence over there?”

We nodded in unison.

“The other kid was stripped naked, castrated, and cut from chin to waist back there.”

Fear gripped my heart, and I felt an overwhelming sadness for these innocent spirits that lost their private wars no more than fifty feet from where I was sitting. I can't put together the words to describe how evil this place suddenly became for me. Shadows shifted in and out of the grass, and appeared to be attempting to piece together some form of jagged understanding from the painful fragments that they had collected from the shattered windows of the past.

I glanced over at Joan and watched a red veil of sadness fall over her face. Her lips twitched, and her breasts moaned in time to her heartbeat.

She turned to Charlie and screamed, "What kind of a sick fuck are you? Telling people shit like that when they are totally out of their heads! You are the fucking devil!"

Charlie laughed and filled the bowl of a hash pipe.

I put my arm around Joan's shoulders and whispered in her ear.

"Did it really get to you that bad?"

"It could just have easily been you or me," she muttered dismally, while reaching for the pipe.

The next morning I felt like absolute shit due to the fact that I was still feeling the effects of the cocktail of chemicals I consumed the night before. Joan promised me on the ride home that she would come pick me up at around three o'clock, and that she would somehow get a hold of a car and some cash. I was tired and my nerves were shot, but I knew that today we would actually be able to spend some time alone together, which made even my headache seem slightly worthwhile.

So with her face bouncing around the far-corners of my mind; I yawned at the prospects of what might occur today, turned my alarm clock around so I could read what time it was, gulped down a cup of coffee, smoked two cigarettes, and lazily hopped in the shower.

She arrived about thirty minutes late and sporting a brand-new Mercedes convertible. I could never have pictured her behind the wheel of such a car, and was shocked by the hilarity of the scene.

"Hop in!" she yelled from the driver's seat.

"I didn't know you boosted cars."

"I don't. My mother said I could borrow it for the day."

"Your mother trusted you with a Mercedes?"

"Yep."

I found this hard to believe, though I did not want to question it. My head was throwing a riot of a temper-tantrum, while my throat became a miniaturized version of the Sahara- which made it painful to speak and almost unbearable to think. I lit a cigarette and held my throbbing head in my hands, with the hope that I could somehow suck the pain out of my cranium by applying pressure to it with my palms. I watched her carefully, and was amazed that she didn't seem to be hung over at all, which was simultaneously surprising and disturbing considering the depth of my own private misery.

"How are you feeling this morning?" I asked, hoping to gain insight into how to deal with the wretched turmoil that was twisting its black and blue fingernails around in the clay-like flesh of my sadly- abused nervous system.

"Amazing. And you?"

"Like death," I confessed.

"Well I guess we will have to bring you back to life then."

She seemed to be in a remarkably good mood, almost too good of a mood if I didn't know better. I assessed the size of her pupils and noticed that they were as large as planets. She was humming joyously to herself, while grinding her teeth together savagely. The radio was blaring an old Rolling Stones song, and she shook her upper torso in time to the music with an animalistic intensity that matched its snarling sexuality. I pinched my forehead with my hands, turned to her, and scornfully asked her what drugs she had so obviously consumed.

"A little E, a little C, and a little K," she replied happily.

"Jesus Christ! And you're driving a Mercedes?" I gasped.

"Yep."

"Well, be careful for fuck's sakes. I don't want to be the one that has to explain to your parents how you totaled it."

"Don't worry about it. I can drive perfectly fine even when I am blacked out. Besides, it would serve them right if I totaled this fucking Nazi car."

"Well even if it would, don't get me involved."

"Like I would," she smirked. "Oh, I almost forgot. Open the glove box, there are some treats for you in there."

I opened it, and found a cellophane bag half full of white powder, a large bag of pot, and another bag containing a few small white pills that had a picture of the Buddha stamped on one side. I quickly slammed the glove box closed, and realized that I had no clue where she was taking me.

“Where the fuck are we going?” I asked  
“Don’t worry about it. It’s going to be a surprise.”  
“I hate surprises,” I told her.  
“You’ll like this one,” she replied cryptically.

After the Rolling Stones song ended, Jimi Hendrix’s version of “All Along the Watch Tower” kicked into high gear. We sang along to the first verse, while she maneuvered her car down the crooked backbone of the 405 Freeway. The traffic was bright with the glow of all intimate insecurities, and the air seemed to be as heavy as the weight resting on poor Atlas’s shoulders.

I stared at every driver and questioned the worth of each face, and wondered where exactly they were going, or if like me, they really had no clue or care. My mind fluttered through the silicon barriers of billboards and bus stops, and only when I noticed that Joan was watching me instead of the road, did I snap back into the artificial gamble that creates every moment’s circumstance.

“Watch the fucking road!” I yelled.

“I am. Chill out. Everything’s fine.”

“Just be careful,” I pleaded. “I really don’t want to die in your mother’s car tonight.”

“You won’t,” she said. “I won’t let you.”

By the time Hendrix lapsed into the song’s final guitar solo, Joan stopped the car on top of a cliff that overlooked the entire valley. She opened the glove box, pulled out the bag of white powder, and dumped its contents onto a small oval hand mirror she pulled out of her purse. She chopped at the coke with her driver’s license and fashioned the powder into four long lines. Using a ten-dollar bill as a straw, she proceeded to suck a line into each of her nostrils at an almost superhuman pace, before handing the mirror over to me.

I sniffed at the coke tenderly, and choked when a few small pebbles of blow rubbed against the back of my throat. I leaned my head against the headrest, and let the powder drip downward, while eagerly waiting for the satisfying numbness of quality cocaine to fill my brain with all the grandiose emotional excesses that would keep me going for the next few hours.



I was not disappointed, and noticed that the residual pains of yesterday had vanished into a red mist of ecstatically radiant roars. Joan leaned over my body, like a predator waiting to pounce upon its prey, and pressed her lips firmly against mine. We exchanged tongues, and rubbed our teeth together to create a sensual clicking sound, which mixed with the taste of coke on her breath, and made me secretly crave her even more. I rubbed her breasts with my hands, while still kissing that damned angelic face, and couldn't help feeling like it was an almost divine counterpart to the gaunt roughness of my own.

Before long, my jeans had fallen past my knees, and my cock had lost itself in the tropical wilderness of her thighs. A pair of cigarettes was then lit like candles in a humble celebration of bestial spirit, while our eyes fell shut in a never-ending gasp for breath.

About an hour and a half after we finished our cigarettes, Joan received a page that she identified to be from her friend, Rick, who lived in an upper-middle class community that was only ten to twenty minutes away. The page was a signal for her to pick him up, and surprisingly enough Joan didn't want to leave him hanging. I would have been happy to, and began moping pathetically to myself as the car sped past a row of palm trees tragically rooted in a narrow stream of cruel cement. It was around then that Joan picked up on the pissed off, self-centered, vibrations I was sending out to her. . .

"You're mad at me aren't you?" she asked.

"A little."

"Man, I am sorry. It's just that this boy is a really good friend of mine, and I think that you are going to like him a lot. I mean they don't sell kids like him in stores any more."

I laughed at that, and whined like a true lovesick puppy, "It's just that I thought we could spend some more time alone together."

"We will later tonight. As a matter of fact, we can spend the whole night alone together if you wish."

I did, and smiled triumphantly, while Joan parked the Benz in front of a huge two-story house that I assumed was Rick's parents. We had just began to kiss and grope each other, when a pint-sized youth, wearing a pair of baggy blue raver pants, a backwards Tribal baseball cap, and a black windbreaker, suddenly jumped into the backseat of the car and broke us apart.

“I hope I didn’t interrupt anything,” he giggled.

“Rick!” Joan screamed. “How are you?”

“I ‘m just chilling,” the kid replied coolly.

He turned to me and said, “What’s up? My name is Rick. I’m sure you already figured that out. What’s your name?”

“John Reagan,” I said quietly, while staring angrily at my feet.

“Are you two down for a party tonight? There’s supposed to be a dope-ass DJ on the turn tables, and I’m sure we can find some E there.”

Joan laughed and opened the glove box. “We got some E right here,” she said, taking out the White Buddha tablets.

I shut my eyes and opened them again after an indefinite amount of time. The car was now in motion, and Rick and Joan were rapping about various acquaintances and what had become of them. My headache had returned. I was more tired than I had ever been before in my entire life. My guts ached due to lack of food and too much nicotine, and my whole body and mind were somehow being held together by the hangovers of the various narcotics that were also tearing me apart. I believe I fell asleep at this point, but I can’t be too sure of it. What I do know is that I was awake soon enough, and that when I did come to, I was once again lost inside the vortex of another fucked up evening.

The party was being thrown in a gigantic three-story mansion that must have had about a dozen bedrooms and bathrooms and an ocean of a swimming pool in the backyard. It was pretty obvious that some preppie’s mommy and daddy left them alone for the night, and that they wanted to make themselves look like gods in the eyes of their peers by inviting them to an out and out drug and sex fest that no one really had to worry about paying for.

It was even more obvious though, that almost everyone in attendance was between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, and that they all had more money than they could ever know what to do with. You could tell that just from seeing the long parade of BMWs that were lined up outside, or how many cell-phones were in circulation at any given moment.

These kids were the cream of the American youth crop. They were elite members of our country’s upper-class minority and damn well knew it. I grimaced at the thought of my place in all of this, and hesitantly popped the ecstasy pill that Joan had quietly handed me as we exited the car. Then, all too aware that I was in for a bumpy ride, I took a final drag off my cigarette, and flicked the flaming butt into a fountain that was churning out an existence of spotless worthlessness that it probably had inherited several years ago.

Joan and I walked through the front door of this palace hand in hand, while Rick bounced around with each step he took a few feet ahead of us. I grasped her palm hard, and noticed that couples of varying sexual orientations were kissing and fondling each other up against the walls in the doorway, and that I was quickly becoming self-conscious about my clothing, which consisted of a faded pair of 501 jeans, a leather jacket, and a black T-shirt that cost \$5 at K-mart. I smiled at Joan nervously as we found ourselves in a spacious living room that was occupied by a group of fourteen-year-old girls and thirty-year-old men, who were passionately engaged in the act of chopping up mountains of cocaine off a glass framed family portrait that they had removed from one of the white walls that surrounded me.

“You guys want a line?” a petite bleached-blond princess modeling a powder-caked nose casually asked.

“Definitely,” Joan replied for the both of us.

We sat down next to the girl, and each snorted a long fat line of some of the strongest blow I had ever had the luxury of pushing up my nose. And after thanking the girl cordially, with my tongue numbed to nothing and my head blown to dust, I began to pace the place so I could clear my head, and come to some understanding of how the fuck I had gotten myself into a situation like this.

I decided to escape this scene and go looking for Rick, and I found him upstairs, among thirty or forty other kids, dancing away to some bad techno music that was being performed right across the room from me. I began to walk up to him to see what was happening, but as I did, I started to feel a tingly sensation in my toes, that soon rose up my legs, and then shot into my brain in an intense rush of absolute euphoria.

He spotted me a few seconds later, and stepped through the crowd that lay between us, while I clung uncomfortably to a wall, and felt my eyes roll lusciously back into their sockets.

“What’s up man?”

“Nothing much,” I croaked almost incoherently.

“Do you want to go outside? It looks like you’re rolling pretty hard.”

“Sure,” I muttered between my teeth, while searching blindly for the half-empty pack of cigarettes lodged in my left pocket.

He pulled open a glass sliding door, and we stepped out onto a balcony that had one of the most beautiful views I had ever seen. The whole valley lay silent and stranded below, but there was an added element that differed from the way it appeared earlier. The montage of lights, which perched inside my blurred pupils before settling in a most abstract vision of destiny, made it apparent that this view was a sight reserved for the eyes of the rich.

It was a landscape painted for a man whose only goal in life was to become an equal to God, and be able to look down upon a city, and all of its car alarms, police sirens, liquor stores, and strip joints, and laugh from high above, unaware of the fact that one day he will die, and that with this means to an end, his dreams will forever be lost under the callous soils that suffocate the midnight spirits of this never-ending motion of reality.

A few seconds later, my meditation was disturbed when I heard Rick mumbling something under his breath.

“Doesn’t this make you sick?”

“Doesn’t what make me sick?” I asked, while lighting the cigarette that I had been holding for the past minute or two.

“All of this bullshit,” he said, gesturing toward the house.

“It’s all so fake and egotistical. So completely full of shit.”

I nodded my head in agreement as he licked the joint he had been rolling closed and patted his pockets for a lighter. I handed him mine, and he lit up eagerly.

He sucked hard on the joint, held in the smoke, and offered it to me. I turned it down, and with shrugged shoulders, watched him exhale, cough loudly, and prepare to take another hit.

An eternal moment of silence then fell upon us, making it almost impossible to break away from the horrible rat race of my over-stimulated thoughts. A voice from deep inside of me was just about to scream for mercy, when Rick’s words quivered once again over the music blasting forth from the house, and the clangs of the conversations held firm and persistent directly between my eyes were finally dimmed to zero.

“It’s a tragedy, Man. I will never get away from this. I was born into this, raised into this, and I will never fucking escape this.”

“What makes you so sure?” I asked, while simultaneously puffing fiendishly on my cigarette, and wondering whether or not he had been speaking to me the entire time I perceived it to be silent.

“I just am,” he confessed, while tossing the remains of the joint over the balcony and into the hands of the silhouettes of shrubbery sleeping directly below.

Just then, the glass sliding door whisked open, and Joan stumbled out, stone drunk, and still swigging from a fifth of vodka she held in her arms like an aging wino.

“Why the fuck did you ditch me downstairs you fucking asshole?” she screamed in a way that seemed to be almost jokingly furious.

“I was looking everywhere for you. Never leave me alone like that again you cock sucker!”

Rick and I looked at each other in disbelief, as Joan continued to stumble and scream.

“I needed you and you weren’t there you son of a bitch! You should be a little bit more considerate of other people’s feelings!”

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again,” I told her, hoping that she would mellow out once she gained the apology she was so obviously seeking from me.

She sighed loudly and somewhat victoriously, gulped down her remaining booze, and smashed the empty bottle against the ground. I felt like I was going to vomit, but I held whatever was in my stomach under control. My watch said that it was 12:45 A.M., and it was getting quite clear to me that my night was far from being over.

After turning our backs to the charred remains of what once was a party intoxicated by the excruciating wines of madness, Joan placed herself behind the wheel of her mother’s car and clicked the ignition key with the agility of a prizefighter’s punch. I began praying silently and halfheartedly to myself for her drug and alcohol induced stupor to abruptly end, and for a little extra protection against anything horrible that could happen to us as a result of letting her drive.

We then spun swiftly and suddenly out of the driveway like a mobile portrait of reckless perfection, and headed back to Rick’s house, so we could drop him off and carry on toward whatever else destiny had hidden up its automobile torn sleeves.

Once we arrived at Rick’s house, we waited in the driveway for a few minutes to make sure that he made it through the door alright, and backed out of there in a blaze of screeching tires and burnt rubber.

Joan, while attentively steering her vehicle, bummed a cigarette off of me and pushed in the car’s cigarette lighter, as my stomach grumbled unhappily over the orchestrated purr of the engine.

“Joan. I’m starving. Can we get something to eat?”

“Sure,” she slurred. “I don’t have that much cash, so can you just get some hot dogs or something at a 7-11?”

“I don’t give a shit. I just need something to eat.”

She stopped at a 7-11, bought me two hot dogs, and decided that it would be nice if we spent the night together on the beach. It sounded good to me.

After passing through a series of tunnels, while climbing ever higher through the canyons of night, we reached our point, and knew that we had arrived at a place where we could finally lay down and stretch out our over-clipped wings.

The beach was completely deserted, and the tide was rolling towards our feet in soft majestic strides that could never be mistaken for anything other than the proud gallop of the Pacific. The stars were twinkling as loud as I had ever seen them in California, but the majority of them were still hidden behind their tight-fitting widow's veil of smog and car exhaust. There was an old broken down pier resting beside us that looked to have been weathered down to the point of extinction by the water's white crested rolls of salt and power.

A muscularly chilly wind was beating against my skin, and was pushing Joan's red hair back behind her head in a staggering gush of allegorical freedom. She unfolded a large yellow blanket that she had taken from the trunk of her car, and stretched it out on the sand.

We both laid down and curled up into a fetal position, her lying in front, and me holding her from behind, fashioned into one undisturbed unit.

"Isn't it beautiful," I said. "It's just you and me, the stars, the sand, the wind, and the water. It's the way everything should be."

"Yeah," she said. "It's just too bad that it's so goddamn cold."

"Don't worry honey," I grinned. "You've got me here to warm you up."

I turned her around and placed my body on top of hers. I warmed her arms with my hands, and kissed the perfect geometry of her lips, while nuzzling her innocent looking breasts with my chin. She moaned shyly towards the sky, as our clothing took on the form of a neat pile, and I began to do exactly what the moment was telling me to do.

Once we were good and spent, we held our positions in silence for about five minutes, shared a cigarette, and felt the temporary warmth that this form of pleasure so often brings about. As it began to subside, we decided that it would be more practical if we put the top up on the convertible and slept in there. So we got up, dusted the sand off of each other's backs, and walked back to the car, giggling like little kids, and holding desperately onto each other's hips.

Within the confines of the luxury car, we turned on the radio, and listened to a block of bad alternative music on KROQ, while sharing a twenty-four oz Corona that she claimed to have stolen from the 7-11. After I guzzled down the final drops, cautiously trying not to spill beer on the upholstery, I handed her the empty bottle, and watched her chuck it out the window. She looked at me in a most curious fashion, blinked her eyelashes twice, and began to cry uncontrollably.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, fearing that this breakdown may be the result of a poor sexual performance on my part.

“I just can’t believe that you put up with me. You are the only person that actually cares for me and deals with all of my bullshit. Why the hell do you do it? I am nothing but a selfish whore who is all fucked up and doesn’t even deserve to live,” she sobbed into her hands.

“Because you’re amazing,” I said. “You’re perfect. You are a diamond in the rough and most people can’t appreciate something like that. You just have to be strong and someday things will turn out smoothly for you.”

“That’s bullshit!” She cynically laughed between her tears.

“Nothing has ever worked out for me, and nothing will ever work out for me. Things will never change. I’m not strong. My life is shit and there is nothing that I can do about it.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I said, raising my voice. “You are strong. How else could you have made it this far if you are so weak? I don’t know for sure, but I suspect that you have gone through quite a lot in your life and it must have taken some strength to have survived it.”

“Whatever it is that has helped me survive I know is not strength. It is probably just vanity. I am probably just too fucking vain to give up.”

“Now you are being ridiculous,” I grumbled, yawning loudly.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” she smiled, wiping her tears away.

I rolled over, yawned, and finding myself barely able to stay awake, asked her if we could just get some sleep and forget that this idiotic conversation ever occurred. She agreed, adjusted her seat back into a reclining position, and rolled her body away from mine. I covered myself with my jacket and shut my eyes. A few seconds later, she tenderly said my name and rolled over to face me.

“What?” I asked.

“Promise me that you’ll never leave me,” she whispered.

“I promise,” I said, while drifting away from consciousness, the car, and the ocean of tears that had fallen down the desperate ditches of her cheeks.

I awoke suddenly as the car clouded up with pot smoke, and the sounds of the freeway began to buzz uncontrollably in the not too far off distance. Finding the morning light a little too bright to handle, I glanced into the rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of Joan smoking a joint, while attempting to comb out her mane of tangled bed hair.

“Good Morning, Sunshine. Ready to wake and bake?” she chirped merrily, while passing me the burning reefer.

“Sounds good to me,” I said, inhaling a large puff of acrid smoke.

“We have to go back to the Promenade pretty soon, because I told Rick I would meet him there. He said that he could probably hook me up with some opium, and that he would be there some time between ten and ten-thirty.”

“That’s cool, but I wish we could do other things besides hang out with your friends and get fucked up all the time,” I said, raising the joint to my lips again.

“We will do other things. It’s just that lately I have been obligated to do shit with my friends, and you have got to understand that I can’t just walk away from them.”

“Yea, I understand,” I lied, as she kissed me softly on the cheek.

The Oakview Promenade was booming much more intensely than I would have expected it to at this time of the day. Wealthy shoppers hopped from one store to the next and conversed with one another with a kind of hesitant ease that had always baffled me as I surveyed their happy little locale with my young and angry eyes.

Glancing through the crowd that marched from one end of this outside mall to the other, I found Rick sitting outside the Starbucks coffee shop at a table shaded by a blue and white umbrella. He was diligently sipping an espresso, smoking a cigarette, and reading a book that he quickly stuffed into his pocket as he saw us approaching.

“Hey Boy,” Joan yelled to him.

“What’s up?”

“The sky,” she smiled. “Did you get what I need?”

“Not exactly. Sit down,” he said, pulling back one of the chairs at his table.

“What do you mean not exactly?” Joan asked edgily.

“I mean I got crystal meth instead.”

“That’s fine by me,” Joan grinned.



“It’ll be forty bucks, but I trust you to pay me back later if you don’t have the money right now.”

“Thanks. I’ll get you back by next week for sure.”

“Cool,” he said, handing her a small square of folded paper.

She opened the paper, tasted the contents, and rolled her eyes around as a smug sign of approval. A tiny mountain of clear crystals was shaped on top of the table we were sitting at, while I looked around nervously for anyone that resembled a cop. Joan, Rick, and I then continued to complete our covert operation quite successfully, while gaggles of shoppers hissed and hawed unknowingly in the background.

The speed hit lightly at first, but I knew that it was authentic due to the strong medicinal flavor that plagued my throat and tongue. A few minutes passed and nothing much was happening, so I lit a cigarette to deaden the horrible taste, and began to listen to the conversations of the people that grouped around us quite intently.

Just as I was pushing my cigarette butt into the sandy lining of an ashtray, the drug began to hit a little bit harder and then a little bit more, until finally, I transformed into an entirely different person, and noticed that a previously unconscious desire to walk and talk had become a desire that had to be satisfied immediately.

We paced briskly up and down the Promenade most of the afternoon, yapping about nothing and everything at a speed of somewhere close to a hundred miles an hour, while sucking down cigarette after cigarette, and sniffing our noses in a never ending attempt to try and get every last grain of crystal down our throats and into our bloodstreams. Then, just as we were making a turn past the large Borders bookstore for maybe the fiftieth time that day, Joan suddenly jumped behind a bush and whispered to us to just keep walking and that she would catch up to us later.

Baffled and paranoid, Rick and I did as we were told, until we saw a woman in her mid-twenties shout Joan’s name and run over to her hiding spot. A few seconds later, an immaculately dressed middle-aged couple came up behind Joan, and told her in a most robotic tone that, “We have to talk right now.”

“Shit,” Rick whispered to me. “That’s her family. We have to get out of here.”

“Why?” I asked, confused as hell.

“We just do. This scene is going to get pretty tense.”

As we turned around and started to walk away, Joan's father placed a hand on Rick's right shoulder and ordered us to come with them. We did as we were told, and were forced to sit down with the family at another table shaded by a blue and white umbrella. As soon as Joan sat down, she lit up a cigarette.

"I see that you smoke cigarettes now. It sure makes you look sophisticated," her older sister lectured.

"Fuck off" Joan replied, as everyone's mouth dropped open.

Her father melodramatically made a fist, slammed it down on the table, and yelled, "How dare you speak to your sister that way you fucking degenerate! Just who do you think you are? You do nothing but torture this family and all we do in return is love you!"

"That's Bullshit! And she's not my fucking sister!" Joan hissed.

"Bullshit indeed," her father said, while turning a startling shade of red.

"You won't think its bullshit when the cops come down here and arrest you and your dirt-bag friends for stealing your mother's car."

Rick and I exchanged very paranoid looks, as flashes of all the illegal substances in the car and our involvement in a Grand Theft Auto; mingled with whatever sentence those two charges combined could bring us in court.

"You are aware that your mother and I have reported it stolen?" her father smiled.

Joan stood up, burst into tears, and started screaming at the top off her lungs.

"I don't give a fuck! Fuck you! Bring the fucking cops down here! I don't give a fuck! I'll tell them everything about you people! You'll fucking see!"

My speed induced paranoia tumbled straight over the edge as Joan's father pulled out a cell-phone, looked straight into my dilated eyes, and told me that I was going to jail immediately if I didn't get her to calm down. It didn't take me long to figure out that if there was going to be any way out of this situation this was it, so I began to lovingly tell Joan such white lies as, "It's OK," and, "They just want to talk to you. Relax. Everything will be alright," while Rick told her parents things like, "We had no idea that the car was stolen," and, "She said that she had gotten your permission to use it."

Both Rick's and my tactics worked, and Joan finally sat down and wiped her eyes with a Kleenex that her mother retrieved from her purse.

"Now listen," her father spoke.

"I don't want to send any of you to jail. I only want to make sure that my daughter is safe and that she is not going to run away again."

"That's quite understandable," I said.

"We already lost one child and we are not about to lose another one," her mother said softly, hugging Joan in a superficial enough manner to grab my attention.

Her father then turned to the "elder sister" and said, "We are going to take her home now Sandy. I think you should talk to these boys for a while, and take my car back when you are ready to leave."

"OK Daddy," the girl smiled, her pearly whites flashing wide and hard.

"Here's the keys," he muttered, dropping them on the table, far from being amused.

"Sure thing," she replied ever so sweetly, as Joan and her parents walked away without even glancing back for a millisecond.

"Listen you guys," Sandy began, as soon as Joan and her parents were out of sight.

"I believe that you didn't know the car was stolen, and I assume that neither of you know Joan very well."

"I've known her for two days," I said, lighting a desperately needed smoke.

"I've known her for about six months," Rick said, trying hard to keep Sandy from noticing his grinding teeth.

"Well, do you know that she was accepted to UCLA on a full scholarship and turned it down?"

Dumfounded, Rick and I could only shake our heads when she looked at us for a response.

"She's a genius. She has an amazingly high IQ, and did very well in high school, but she has gone a little haywire ever since her younger brother killed himself. Her psychiatrist thinks that she is a manic-depressive, but she absolutely refuses to take the Lithium he prescribed her."

"Damn," was all I that I could think of to say about that.

Sandy shook her head in what appeared to be disgust, and said, "Well listen, I need to get your phone numbers so I can reach you if she pulls anything crazy like this again."

"No problem," Rick said for the both of us.

We wrote down our names and numbers in her pocketbook, and just as she started to get up to leave, she suddenly asked, "Oh, do you happen to know if she is taking any drugs?"

"I've never seen her do anything like that before," Rick lied nervously.

"She might drink alcohol or smoke a little pot but I'm not too sure of it," I chimed in, with the intent that it sounded a little bit more realistic than what Rick had just said.

“Well alright, thanks for everything. I’m sorry we had to meet this way. Take it easy.”

“You too,” Rick yelled to her, as she walked away from the table, and I desperately hoped, from my life.

Rick and I spaced out into our own little worlds for about twenty minutes after Sandy left, until my curiosity got the best of me and I asked him who Sandy was if she wasn’t Joan’s sister.

“She’s her cousin,” he replied, rubbing his chin.

“Really?”

“Yeah, she was adopted by Joan’s family after her parents died in a car wreck.”

“Jesus. Did you know about the whole UCLA deal?”

“Oh yeah, they make her sound totally nuts for not accepting the scholarship, but the truth is Joan just didn’t feel like she was ready to go.”

“I understand that, but I am having a hell of a time trying to figure out what the fuck is up with that family.”

“Well if you really want to get into it, Joan and her younger brother were molested by their step-grandfather for about five years. After a while they got fed up with it and told their parents, who absolutely refused to believe them. So one night her brother killed himself, and Joan completely fell apart. Her parents still believed that the molestation story was just a figment of their imaginations, and they blamed her brother’s death on problems he had at school. Joan just could never forgive them for that.”

“Fuck. How could you blame her?” I asked, totally shocked.

“You can’t really, but the shit she does is so unnecessary. She’s nineteen years old and she’s still living with a family she despises more than anything else in the world. She doesn’t have a job. She doesn’t go to school. All she does is get high and fuck dealers so that she can stay high. The funny thing is that before her brother died, she was the straight-A over-achiever type who did all the extracurricular activities, and now you could say that she is the polar opposite. If you ask me, both of the roles she plays show how much she craves attention.”

I was utterly traumatized by his remark about her having sexual liaisons with drug dealers for dope, and I began to second-guess what grounds my relationship with her was truly built upon. A cryptic wind of dizziness and nausea crept up my spinal chord, and I became all too aware of the fact that, for the first time since meeting Joan, my intoxication had torn itself away from my passion, and a bare rug of realism was rolled out across the placid pavement of my cracked heart and my stripped to nothing mind.

“You OK, dude?” Rick asked, looking over at me with an honest expression of concern.

“Yeah, I’m fine. This whole thing is just really fucking with my head.”

“You love her man. That’s why. I knew it the minute I met you.”

“Shit. I’m not too sure of anything anymore.”

“I’m pretty sure she is in love with you. I’ve never seen her act the way she does with you with anybody else before. Maybe you’re the one person that possesses the power to change her.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I shrugged.

“Whatever. I just think that I know two people in love when I see them. Come on man, I’ll give you a ride home if you need one.”

“Thanks a lot. I would really appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Upon stepping into my house, I was forced to confront a most agonizing and internal feeling of alienation. As soon as I walked through the front door, I noticed that all the lights in the house were turned off, except for the lights produced by the television set in the den. Its flicker illuminated every wall that surrounded it, and the inane and babbling sound that it produced echoed through the entire house and through every major bone in my body.

I stepped into the kitchen, filled a glass with water from the tap, and watched my parents stare blankly into the deep space of a remote controlled bliss. I greeted them with a hello and told them that I was going to bed. They both briefly shifted their eyes towards me, and nodded their heads like a pair of puppets whose strings were first tightly pulled and then viciously severed. I downed all of the water in one gluttonous gulp, tossed the glass into an over-flowing sink, walked up to my room, entered, shut the door behind me, and collapsed chaotically into that almost mystical sense of safety that seems to be contained only within the blankets that separate a man from his dreams.

But the dreams never came. I wound up tossing and turning all night, contemplating the great mystery that is human relations, and how my own little web of shifty attractions and unbalanced desires could possibly resemble the grand staircase that I have always imagined to symbolize true and immortal love.

This uncertainty merged with a new understanding of my total lack of direction in life, and gave me enough strength to fend off a million armies, but still not enough to ward off the snowy image of one face. And it was this face that danced through my head in an ancient and exotic bump and grind, until a ray of sunshine pierced its cranium, forcing me to acknowledge that it was getting close to time for me to awake.

Quite a few weeks passed since the day Joan's parents escorted her away from me, and I killed most of the time by working in a factory owned by one of my father's friends. The job was pure hell, as I was the only white guy in a work crew of about a hundred Mexicans, but I stuck it out, packing boxes diligently from Eight to Five, Monday to Friday, for a whopping five dollars an hour. Most of the younger Mexicans gave me a lot of shit, because they thought I was a rich stuck-up white boy who wasn't even cultured enough to speak Spanish, but a few of them actually talked to me and showed me some respect. The older ones left me completely in awe, as they were probably the most soulful hardworking people that I had ever seen. I couldn't help but notice that they actually were forced to support families on about as much money as my mother finds inside the washing machine every Sunday morning.

While I packed and closed the boxes that were handed to me by a faceless apparition with a booming voice, I spent a lot of time talking to a kid named Emilio, who had a pretty sound mind for a fourteen year old, but had to work his fingers to the bone to take care of his crack addict mother. He lived in a pretty seedy section of the valley, which was inhabited by some of the toughest street gangs in East Los Angeles. His two older brothers got pretty caught up in all of that shit and wound up getting buried in the crossfire.

He had enough sense to stay out of the gang scene, but all he usually talked about was the drug deal that was going to make him and his mother rich for life. I tried as hard as I could to explain to him that drug dealing was going to get him just as far as gang banging took his brothers, but he flat-out refused to let go of the one thing that helped carry him through the blood-soaked wasteland of his life.

I have never been able to find out what exactly happened to him, but I like to believe that he got his wish, even though the odds and ends of his situation were tragically rooted against him.

During these endlessly repetitive days, I mostly thought about Joan and how I wanted our relationship to continue to develop, despite all of the nerve-wracking experiences that were pushing us apart. I kept wondering if she was thinking about me, and if she was, I debated whether or not she thought that we could make something work between us.

I had no way of contacting her, and even if I'd had her phone number, it was likely that one of her parents would pick up the phone and hang up on me. So my visitations with her were restricted to the filmstrips of the night, where I saw vivid snapshots of us living in a small house in the middle of nowhere, with nobody around to bother us for miles.

However, these misty aspirations would always vanish into a puff of cigarette smoke, as soon as my alarm clock began to howl its guttural lyric about another day rising without a speck of color in its eyes.

The color finally did return, one placid Friday evening, in the form of a most familiar visitor, who skidded into my driveway a few hours after I got off work. I was sitting on my front porch, rubbing my aching back a raw red, when Rick unexpectedly pulled up to my place in his burgundy BMW sports car, which he parked casually besides my father's wounded gold Cadillac.

I approached the car ecstatically, while trying hard not to act like a little girl running towards her mother's arms after a traumatic first day of school, and began to greet Rick more warmly than I have ever greeted anyone in my life.

He grinned, slapped me on the back, wiped a speck of ash off of his black "I SURVIVED THE MILLENIUM" t-shirt, and informed me that Joan wanted to see me, and that he was here to take me to her. Before he could utter another syllable, I was already bouncing around in the passenger seat, and even though I almost habitually forget to put it on, I caught myself fastening my seat belt for the ride.

Rick's parents had gone to Rome for a week, which meant that he was throwing a small party at his house that Joan was now watching over for him. I asked him if he knew if she had run away again, and he told me that her parents agreed to let her out of the house as long as she didn't take one of their cars, and if she promised to call them and check in from time and time. He had just begun to tell me how much better she seemed to be doing, when his words were rudely cut-off by the gruesome sight of a horrifyingly large amount of cars scattered around his front lawn.

"I can't fucking believe it!" Rick screeched.

"What the fuck happened? I was gone twenty fucking minutes! Twenty fucking minutes!"

We got out of the car and, with Rick angrily leading the way, stepped inside his house.

An annoying mix of techno and hip-hop greeted my ears, while conversations whirled through the air at a rapid-fire speed. We found Joan, bottle of bourbon in hand, stripping to the music on top of a pool table in the living room. As she turned to undo her bra-strap, she saw me, winked her left eye, and screamed lustfully, before jumping into my open arms.

"Baby, you're here. Your really here," She moaned lovingly into my chest.

"I knew you wouldn't forget about me."

I kissed her lightly on the forehead, while she turned to the gathered crowd and said, "My man is here. You can all go now. Find another slut to entertain you."

When they all left, she pushed me up against the wall, kissed me roughly, unzipped my fly, and fell to her knees. Rick was screaming at her from a distant planet, as the music blared obscenely into my thrusting pelvis. Inside my head, a glorious reunion was taking place, and through the murky haze of the moment, I could vaguely make out the likeness of a jaded but infantile world attempting to shine its yellow hi-beams down on me.

I stopped Joan before I came and told her that I thought we should find a room. Rick had disappeared, so with no one to guide us, we walked down an endless hallway to find a room with a bed. We opened the first door we came across to find two teenage girls rolling around with a man old enough to be their grandpa. The second opened to reveal Rick and another boy his age cutting lines of white powder on a mirror. Joan cheered and hollered, "Way to go bro," but the sight of the syringe and bent tablespoon on the night-stand disturbed me into total silence.

The third room was empty, so after taking a few swigs from Joan's Southern Comfort bottle, we climbed into the bed. She undressed me, mounted me roughly, and moved her body up and down my shaft with a savage precision previously unknown to me. My eyes closed tightly, as I chomped down on my lower lip, and let myself go into her. We then had a cigarette, cuddled tightly, and began to talk in syrupy sweet breaths about the passions we held for each other.

"Do you have any idea how much I love you?" I asked her, while wiping sweat beads off my forehead.



“Yes,” she whispered into my ear. “After all the shit that happened between us, you still came back to see me. That’s how I know how much you love me.”

I looked at her for a second and realized that any problem I could possibly have with her personality would be forgotten any time her radiant green eyes connected with my dusty blues. I was helplessly addicted, and I knew that from here on out there was going to be no turning back.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked playfully, handing me the half-empty whisky bottle.

I smiled, drank, and told her, “I am thinking about how great it would be if we could get out of the city. If we would find a nice little house in the country where we could live by ourselves and never have to deal with anybody we didn’t want to.”

“That’s so sweet,” she said, taking the bottle back from me with one hand, and caressing my chest lovingly with the other, “One day we will do it.”

She was just about to tell me she loved me, but the words were cut off due to the large number of loud voices that had united down the hall. I jumped out of bed and threw my clothes on, while Joan squirmed beneath the covers and drank from her bottle. I kissed her cheek, assured her I would be right back, and left the room.

The voices had come from the room that Rick was in, so fearing the worst, I pushed my way past a large crowd of people huddled in the doorway, and was blown back by the ghastly sight that lay crouched before me. Rick, crumpled in the corner, lay lifeless, with a bloody syringe and burnt spoon at his side. The first thing I did was yell for Joan to come help me, and then I ordered all of the people to get the hell out of there. They all left, muttering things like, “God, can’t we ever go to a party without some dumb kid OD’ing on us,” while I slapped Rick’s almost blue face to try and wake him up.

Joan came in a few seconds later and shrieked when she saw me holding Rick’s comatose body.

Her next reaction was to explode and scream, “Where the fuck is that guy he was with? I’ll kill the cock-sucker with my bare hands,” while balling her hands into fists.

“Cool it, Babe,” I told her. “He left. Go run a cold bath and find some ice.”

I slapped Rick around some more and tried to give him CPR, but even though he was mumbling inaudible nothings, I knew that he was pretty far gone and needed serious medical attention. When Joan came back, she helped me throw him into a bathtub filled with cold water and ice-cubes, but it was too late for that to do any good.

“Fuck Joan! We have to get him to a fucking hospital immediately!” I screamed.

“We can’t take him,” she cried.

“We both have been drinking and they will blame us for giving him the heroin.”

“I don’t give a shit! We are fucking taking him right now!”

I gathered up Rick’s clothes and put them on his body, while Joan cried softly on the linoleum floor. I found his car keys in the pocket of his baggy pants, and got Joan to help me carry him out to the BMW. We put him in the backseat, and even though I didn’t have a driver’s license, I took over the wheel and followed the directions Joan gave me to the hospital.

When we pulled up to the Emergency Room entrance, Joan started to act crazy and screamed for me to, “Just dump him here. They will arrest us if we go inside. They will say we killed a seventeen-year old kid!”

I didn’t want to just leave him there, but Joan kept ranting on about electric chairs and life imprisonment, so I gave in and let her make the call. I took his body from the backseat and laid it out in front of the sliding glass doors of the E.R. His head rolled from side to side on the ground, as his lungs struggled to breathe beneath the inappropriate slogan splashed across his t-shirt. Giving him a half-salute and a whispered, “Good luck kid,” I solemnly retreated back to his car, and to the many-layered hell of introspection that awaited me there.

Joan’s harsh words at the E.R. stormed incoherently through my thoughts, as the image of Rick’s deathly pale blue face and the perverted surrealism of the last few hours faded into the windows of the squadrons of ritzy apartment complexes falling behind us like trees planted in the polluted soil of our ever so destructive path. After a while, the horrible phrases I had heard earlier began to drive me mad with previously contained emotions, so I dragged the BMW into an elementary school parking lot, hopped out, and without discussing my motivations with my passenger, walked off towards the optimistic and innocent form of a playground, which I had claimed as my own, through the fog and the indestructible darkness that was taunting my bull of blazing insecurity with a timeless matador rag of utter desolation and despair.

I found a blue chrome swing set at the far end of the playground, which made me recall how much I loved to swing on them as a child, so I sat down on the small black rubber seat and swung back and forth, listening to the chains clank merrily, as my feet lifted up and off the wood chip covered earth.

Drifting away from everything except the swing set and a sharp longing to return to my childhood naivety, I only returned to my earth bound affairs when Joan appeared and asked if I was all right, in what struck me as the most beautiful and honest tone of voice I had ever heard.

She stood beneath the monkey bars to the left of me and smiled maternally, with her arms dangling at her sides like two plucked tulips, as I continued to shoot upwards towards the bar that kept the swings restrained from any inclination of unguided flight.

“I used to go to this elementary school,” I confessed. “I spent a lot of time on these swings. It was my favorite thing to do at recess. It was so simple. Things were always so fucking simple then. I would do anything for it to be that simple now.”

“Yea,” she sighed, sitting down beside me.

“I know what you mean. Life is way too complicated.”

She paused, took a deep breath, brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes, and added, “Don’t get yourself all upset about Rick. He’ll be fine. This is the fourth time he has overdosed and somehow he has always managed to turn out fine.”

“He’s done this four times?” I gasped, as my swinging came to a startled halt.

“Yea,” she whispered.

“The first time it happened I was there and freaked out just like you did, but since this has become a routine for him, I came to the conclusion that if the kid wants to die, then nobody can stop him but himself.”

“Fuck, then why did you act so upset and shocked when you first saw him tonight?” I asked, as I stood up, pulled out my crumpled cigarette pack, and carefully removed one.

“Because I fucking hate watching him do this to himself. He always talks about how fucked up I am, but he will never admit that he is just as bad if not worse than me.”

“Has he had it as tough as you have?” I asked, hinting to her that I knew a few details about her past.

“He told you about me. Didn’t he?” she replied curiously.

I nodded my head, and she added, “Whatever. I am sure everything he said is true. Did he tell you anything about himself?”

“No,” I answered, realizing that I knew absolutely nothing about him.

“That’s so like him. Well anyway, he was basically raised by a series of nannies, who could barely speak English, while his parents went on vacations and business trips without him.”

“There are a lot of kids like that in The Valley and they don’t all OD on smack,” I said, with an unintentional cynical edge, before lighting my cigarette with my trembling right hand.

“Yea, well, that’s true, but besides the usual fucked up bullshit that rich kids deal with, Rick’s parents do shit like completely stop talking because he wasn’t applying to go to law school but was applying to art schools instead. That’s what’s really fucked with him and that’s why I think he has overdosed so many times. He risks his life over and over again, hoping they will notice that their only son is destroying himself, and try to stop him.”

My cigarette burned untouched between my fingers, while my gaze shifted from Joan’s spotless white teeth and gentle pink tongue, to her almost nude shoulder blades, as she told me the story, which in many ways seemed to be so similar to her own. When she finished, I thought about my life, and wondered if my own demons could ever possibly compare to the menacing giants that plagued Rick and Joan.

Drawing a total blank, I dropped the stupid question, and smoked the tail end of my cancer stick, while eyeballing the futuristic metal play castle with a built in slide that was tucked into a corner across the playground from me.

“That castle wasn’t here when I was going to this school,” I observed. “Let’s go check it out.”

“John,” Joan asked shyly, as we walked towards it, “What hurts you? You know all about Rick’s and my problems but I have no clue as to what hurts you.”

I followed Joan up the ladder that led to the top of the red and blue colored castle, sat down besides her, and pondered her question for a moment, before giving her the only answer I could think of.

“What hurts me is living this life as a human being,” I told her bluntly.

“I am unable to place blame on specific entities like my family or this city, but rather, find that everything I encounter somehow fits into a giant ball of agony that keeps growing deep inside of me.”

“Do I fit into the ball?” Joan asked fearfully, as she lightly massaged my neck and upper back.

“Yes,” I replied earnestly.

“But it isn’t so much you, as it is all the bullshit I have to go through with you just so we can stay together.”

She grabbed my face and pressed her lips against my forehead, before breaking away, and begging me in a voice soaked with held back tears, “Don’t give up on me! I promise you everything will get better! I swear it. We’ll come up with a plan in the morning to leave all this fucking bullshit behind us! I love you!”

Paralyzed by the powerful shift in her mannerisms as she said those three little words, I held her arms firmly with my hands a few inches away from my chest, kissed her, looked into her snow white face, and told her, "I love you more than you could ever imagine and would never give up on you. I am willing to do anything for you. But if we want to stay together we have to do something soon, so I think we should sleep in the car tonight and in the morning we'll figure out what we are going to do next."

I laughed to myself as Joan's first truly ecstatic smile I had been around to see spread from her left ear to her right as we strolled back to Rick's car through a playground I knew I could never return to again. But even as we imagined a perfect world and future together, I couldn't help but wonder how long the hope intoxicating her every movement could flicker through her restless spirit, before getting quietly snuffed out by the plotted tyranny of whoever is the keeper of her flame.

We went to an ATM the following afternoon, and after I collected the meager amount of cash I had earned from working at the factory, I went back to my parent's house, where I grabbed a few of my belongings and said goodbye to them, which proved to be much easier than I had imagined it to be. The plan of the moment was that we were going to stay with Joan's friend, Sebastian, until we could scrape up enough cash to move out on our own. He told Joan he would meet us at Rick's house at four o'clock with his car, so we could ditch the BMW, and catch a ride with him over to his place. Sure enough, right on the scheduled time, Joan and I approached the driveway of the previous night's disaster, and found Sebastian already there waiting for us, leaning arrogantly against his dark green Jaguar, with a black clove cigarette clenched between his teeth.

Sebastian was a twenty-seven year old, tall, finely chiseled, Caucasian male, with black hair, dark brown eyes, a deeply tanned skin tone, and was dressed in an elegant but loud bright blue three-piece suit, topped off with a blood red tie. I immediately knew he was a drug dealer but I was pretty much expecting him to be one anyway.

"How are you kids doing? So you're going to be staying at my place. I guarantee it will be a total ball for both of you. It's an amazing house."

Sebastian gave us his pitch, but came very close to acting pompously self-confident.

"Now, you two just have to do a few things for me sometimes and we will always be cool and straight," he propositioned, with a quick glance in his rearview mirror.

"Do you understand what I am saying back there, Kid?"

“Sure thing, Sebastian,” I shrugged, knowing he was seeking my response more adamantly than Joan’s as a cautionary measure.

“Sure thing.”

Sebastian lived in a long one-story white adobe residence just off of Mulholland, which could almost be considered a mansion if one did not compare it’s simple Spanish influenced architectural design with the modernistic American elegance characterized by the other homes that neighbored it. Sebastian was able to pay for the place with a trust fund his parent’s gave him, but for extra bread, he had three other people living there who sold dope to earn their keep, just as we were to do for ours.

When we arrived, they were all sitting on a brown leather couch in the living room, watching cartoons, and passing a two-foot glass bong back and forth, with their obligatory coughs and giggles overpowering the sounds of the television.

Bridget was about nineteen years old, an obvious anorexic, a bleached blonde want to be actress, and at the time, a beginner in adult films. Adam, twenty-one, was a sharp flamboyantly gay party boy, an extremely blonde and handsome aspiring model, and when I first met him, was dressed in a extravagant outfit of black leather pants and jacket with bright red flames running up the sides. Max, a thirty-year old drummer in an industrial rock band, gave off the shallow impression of being extremely strung-out, dark, moody, artistic, and mysterious, as he sinisterly sized us up from behind his Ray Ban sunglasses and shaggy mop of dyed black hair.

“Joan! How are you doing Babe?” Bridget squeaked, getting up to give her a hug.

“I’m good. I haven’t talked to you for like forever. This is my boyfriend John,” Joan said, motioning towards me.

“Nice to meet you. You guys make yourself at home, relax, and take a few bong rips with us. Would either of you like some Xanax?”

“That would be most excellent darling,” Joan laughed, kissing Bridget on the cheek.

“Do you have any Percocet?”

“Nope. I got Percodan. Would you like those or some Xanax?”

“Both would be fabulous if you don’t mind,” Joan replied enthusiastically.

“What about you handsome?” Bridget smiled, throwing out her left hip.

“The same I guess,” I responded timidly.

“No problem, Babe,” Bridget giggled, gliding off into the kitchen.

Joan and I were presented with two Xanax and two Percodan each, which we washed down with a couple shots of vodka and a few hits from the bong. Max was jabbering on about how terrible the music industry had become in a slow motion stoned dialect, while I succumbed to a hodgepodge of thoughts about camels and desert nomads. Joan placed her arm around me and pinched my nipple so my attention would shift towards her.

“Come on baby we need to move into our room,” she said, licking her front row of teeth suggestively with her hand moving from my chest down to my left inner thigh.

“I’ll show you were it is,” Sebastian grunted, trying to hold a cloud of pot smoke in his lungs.

Our room was only a king sized bed and four white walls, but upon showing it to us, Sebastian told us that we could spice it up a bit if we wanted to. It’s blandness didn’t bother me much, so I immediately threw my stuff down on the floor, spread out on the bed, and stared up at the cottage cheese ceiling, barely listening to Joan tell me that she had to talk to Sebastian for a second and would be right back.

She returned with a syringe, a spoon, and a small bag of something that looked like rabbit shit, and as she sat down besides me, I was surprised at how completely preoccupied she was with placing the rabbit shit in the spoon. It took me a moment before I finally put together what exactly it was she was doing, but when it eventually did register, I knew from the goose bumps crawling across my arms and neck that it could only be one substance she was preparing to enjoy- a substance that I had always associated with a whole range of despicable images and bankrupt lives- a substance most commonly known as black tar heroin.

Joan tied off her arm with her thin black vinyl belt and injected herself with the elegance of a perfectionist, while I stared at her cock-eyed with amazement, as if she had suddenly transformed into a Picasso painting just through carrying out this symbolic gesture of dejection. She rubbed her eyebrows with the back of her hand as she withdrew her spike, before falling down in the bed next to me, completely savoring the rush of the heroin, as if it contained several years worth of orgasmic pleasure. I sat up on the side of the bed and lit a cigarette, looking down at Joan as her lips mouthed the question, “Want a shot?” And about all I could do from there was roll up my sleeve.

A warm wind raced through my body like the sounds of a choir, filling my head with comforts like laughter and spring, and alluding to a wistful tropical island created possibly by my own design. I felt completely full of joy as Joan itched my creeping skin, burrowed her kisses into my neck, and sang me a bittersweet song of escape. I felt strangely at ease with my body as I vomited in the bathroom toilet down the hall. But for about six hours I do know that I did not really feel much more than that, the heroin, and the uncut charisma that was cast upon Joan's and my nude embracing bodies, as we held each other, and pretended to be Romeo and Juliet, under the warm and comforting covers of our newly acquired bed.

When the day's opiate intoxication turned into the evening's come down, Joan and I prepared ourselves to start our first day of work with a couple lines of cocaine, and then left to go to The Whiskey A Go Go, where Max's band, Bone Smack, was playing, and where we hoped we could off some shit for Sebastian fairly quickly, go home, and maybe shoot a little more tar before going to bed.

We cruised down Sunset Boulevard in Max's black mini van, and upon approaching the Whiskey, I noticed the enormous crowd of goth kids already waiting in the ticket line of the club, uniformed in huge amounts of mascara, badly dyed jet black hair, black lipstick, Doc Martins, long sleeved fish net shirts, fish net stockings, and t-shirts promoting their favorite bands or bearing slogans like, "SATAN'S LITTLE HELPER," and "DON'T BLAME ME THE VOICES MADE ME DO IT," which were almost all printed in large blood red letters.

"These are my people," Max said, looking them over. "They know what it is all about. They get it."

"Yea right," Joan snickered. "The only thing they get is discounts at Hot Topic."

"No one I associate with would ever buy anything from those fucking capitalist pigs," he angrily shot back. "Hot Topic is for posers."

Since Bone Smack wasn't due to go on stage for another hour and a half, Joan and I sat in the parking lot and smoked cigarettes, while Max tried to get us wristbands so we could not only drink at the bar but also gain free entry at the door. Despite the unnerving atmosphere I was certain I didn't belong in, I was feeling good, euphoric, and sincerely alive. I was idly playing with Joan's hair, when a crowd of about fifteen teenagers gathered around in a circle on the sidewalk facing the busy Boulevard. Just as Joan noticed them and asked me what was going on, a kid wearing a Charles Manson t-shirt saw us and called us over. Skeptically and gradually, we made our way there, and saw the same sight that they were seeing.



A long-haired bearded homeless man in his late forties or early fifties, dressed in rags and brandishing a garbage bag filled with more rags, was sitting on the curb staring hungrily at a set of crack pipes he had placed in a row at his feet. Eerily methodical in his manner, he took the pipes one by one, smoked from them, then broke them into shards in the street, totally oblivious to the cheers of his audience as the drug's wispy vapors passed through his cracked parched lips and eventually drifted off into the warm evening air. Upon finishing off the contents of his final pipe, he slowly stood up, smashed the small glass tube, and said something under his breath that sounded like he was clearing his throat. A girl, who was standing right by us, asked him what he had said, and suddenly turning to face me, the man began screaming, "I am Jim Morrison! I am Jim Morrison! I am Jim Morrison!"

I was utterly transfixed by the supernatural look in his eyes. It was a look that I had never seen before. A look hounded by the most hellish of terrors and misunderstandings. A look I will never forget. Joan reached out to him and asked the man if he could use some help, but before she could even finish stating her offer, he ran out into the street and howled, "I am Jim Morrison!" one last time, before being casually censored by the unmistakable and sickening thud that could only be of a man meeting a machine head on. The crowd roared its approval and then quietly broke apart.

As shaken as I could possibly be by the most ghastly and unexpected sideshow outside, and knowing partly that I was just being my own pitiful and emotional self, I hid out in the club's bar up on its second floor balcony, and drowned my discomforts in lukewarm Corona, while Joan tended to our trade on the dance floor. With cheers and cries of raw enthusiasm from their audience, Bone Smack took the stage, and began to bang out a musical migraine of stark keyboards, crunchy guitars, barked and screeched vocals, and repetitive pounding drums, that made me feel as if I were having several teeth removed at once, even though their black sea of angst-ridden swaying fans responded to the doom-laden hour long set with a fervor resembling a religious experience.

Joan came up to the bar once the band finally hauled their equipment offstage, and another group of similar looking characters set up theirs.

"I just sold enough rolls so that we won't have to do any dealing for a couple days," Joan merrily informed me.

"How much did you off?" I asked.

"Twenty pills in an hour. Pretty good huh?" She smiled, before ordering herself a Corona.

"Yea, let's find Max and bail. I am starting to feel like an extra in a really lame horror movie."

"I know what you mean. He's probably backstage. Come on, I know where it is," Joan said, pulling me up by the arm.

I felt extremely stupid in my tattered dark blue sweater and baggy white cargo pants, as the small backstage area was filled with fashion models possibly endorsed by Satan himself. The Coronas I drank during the show were telling me they wanted to vacate my body, so when we didn't find Max as quickly as I had hoped, I took a quick detour to the men's room, where I found Max entertaining a teenaged fan on her knees.

She was a pretty good-looking girl but could not have been any older than fifteen, which is much too young for any thirty-year old to be picking up, and from the looks of her brand new gothic designer outfit, I could tell she had only just chosen to look the part for the show.

"Hey John," Max said guiltily, when he saw me. "Are you and Joan ready to go?"

"Yeah," I replied, zipping up and flushing the urinal. "But aren't you kind of in the middle of something."

"Nah, Your coming home with me tonight aren't you Samantha?" he asked the kneeling girl.

"Sure, but will you take me home in the morning?" Samantha asked Max. "I promised daddy I would be home by tomorrow morning."

"No problem," Max said. "Where do you live?"

"Calabasas," the girl said, rising to her feet.

"Good to know," Max yawned.

"Let's go."

Everything but the room and the girl changed whenever I closed my eyes. The junk dreams were beautiful and compelling, but beyond them, I could still sense the order of the bed and the walls, and the sounds of Max and Samantha's over indulgent lovemaking in the room next door. I had become stripped of worry and discontent. Joan breathed softly and joyously from within her own cocoon of placated vitality, as I held her, and felt my lips kiss the infinite movie screen like depths of another narcotic nod. The cigarette I had barely smoked burned my fingers as the cherry reached the filter, forcing me to vibrate back into the distilled setting that had been given to us for the time being.

My heart ticked like a clock, beating faster and faster, as I cooked up, and felt the thin steel point penetrate my arm for a second time. The blood jetted up into the plastic syringe barrel and blossomed with imagery reminding me of William Blake's poem, *The Sick Rose*. As the opiate washed through my bloodstream, I lit another cigarette and fell on my back onto a field of snow just outside my home, a small honest log cabin surrounded by nothing but Christmas trees. Joan lay beside me and giggled childishly as we made snow angels by waving our arms up and down. When we stood up to look at the angels we had created, they suddenly materialized, flapped their wings, and flew off towards the sun. We were both overjoyed by the sight, but I soon discovered that I was crying. A voice screamed, "Cut," and the scene changed.

I was standing alone on top of the H of the Hollywood sign. The city below radiated a most cunning glory. I had no intention of jumping, but a force beyond my powers pushed me over the edge. Screaming bloody murder, I tumbled towards ground zero, only to find myself staring up at the ceiling of the same white room I never actually left.

For two whole days, Joan and I did nothing but make love, sleep, and shoot tar. On the third day, a Saturday, Sebastian let us borrow his car to run an errand for him, and we went down to Venice Beach. It was an extremely hot afternoon, and the beach was packed with the kind of eclectic crowd that only Venice could offer. For the hell of it, Joan and I each took an ecstasy pill, and by the time we arrived it had taken full effect. The Green Nike pills were very speedy, and Joan and I were both jubilant, skipping around like kindergarteners amidst the alcoholic bums, stoners, skaters, surfers, gang pawns, cops, and strung out beach rats dressed in clothing identifying them as pseudo-Rastafarians and born to late hippies.

The ocean was a brilliant blue plain burning brightly behind my dark black sunglasses. The waves were high and the surfers were out riding them. I have never been able to understand surfing. The Pacific Ocean will never be tamed and no surfer could ever be capable of it. The sea will destroy anybody it feels fit to in the end. The sea is life and death in its purest form. It would never humble it's self to merely take prisoners. The entire state of California is only waiting for an execution date.

The boardwalk was as it always is, with all the head shops and tattoo parlors opened for business, and the usual flocks of street people idly moving about. As we walked down the long narrow stretch of sidewalk, a most oddly dressed man on roller skates, brandishing an electric guitar and a portable amplifier, began to follow us, singing a strange song in a foreign language.

“We have no money,” Joan told the man, and giving us an angry look, he quickly rolled away.

Noticing a psychic palm reader’s booth, Joan exclaimed, “Let’s find out about our future. It’s only ten dollars for the both of us.”

“I’ll pass. I don’t like psychics very much,” I told her.

“You pussy. It’ll be fun,” she decided for me, before walking up to the booth.

An old lady in full gypsy garb was seated behind the box-like booth draped in a blanket depicting all the symbols of the Zodiac. After pocketing our money, she took Joan’s right palm and examined it carefully.

“You, young lady, need to be careful. Your life is going to be short but full. I see that you will experience true love but you’ll never marry or have any children. Your life is going to be turbulent, as I feel that it probably already has been, and will become quite tragic if you don’t step carefully,” she told her in a hocus pocus tinged speech.

She then took my hand. “Young man, you need to make up your mind about what you want to do and where you want to go. I don’t see anything ahead of you that is set in stone. There are many possibilities as to where you might be headed, but you are going to have to endure a lot of strife to get anywhere. The best advice I could give you is to not give up on what you feel inside.”

As I continued to walk and talk with Joan, I told myself that what the psychic had said was all a bunch of bullshit, and that she probably had figured it all out from just observing other types of people similar to the two of us. Joan, on the other hand, was excited by the fact that she had been told she was going to die tragically, and talked about it blissfully, as I kicked sand out of my ill-fitting rubber sandals in annoyance.

We had walked about half way down the boardwalk, when we brushed up against a tall black beach bum with shoulder length dread locks, who whispered, “Hash. Opium,” just as we were about to pass him.

Joan’s drugged eyes lifted up from half-mast when she heard those two words, and immediately, as if by reflex, she inquired on the cost of the opium.

“Sixty a G. Its pure Afghan shit,” the man slurred drunkenly in a thick Jamaican accent.

“Yeah right,” Joan sassed. “Latter.”

We began to walk away but the man kept right on us, and kept asking, “How much you got? How much you got?” Like a broken record played loud enough for anyone passing by to hear.

Joan said that I had all the money, so I told him, “Five bucks,” because that was about all I was really carrying in my wallet at the time.

“All right. Come with me,” The man demanded.

Judging by the tempered tone of his movements and motions, Joan and I began to walk away from him, but when that proved futile, we stupidly let him lead us into a dark corner between two buildings. The man grabbed me by the shirt collar, and with spittle flying from his lips into my face with almost every word he barked, he screamed at me, and clenched his fists into a set of solid punching instruments.

“You don’t fuck around on Venice Beach mother fucker! You buy shit and you cool! You fuck around and you get fucked! Give me that money before I fuck your ass up punk bitch!”

Catching that he had suddenly lost his accent in his rage, I dug my dough out of my wallet as quickly as possible, looked at Joan for a sign of reinsurance which was met only with a shrug, and laid the wrinkled fiver on him. To my disbelief, the man stuck a small pellet of something into the palm of my hand, and said, “I am here all the time if you need me. Come back again. Just don’t fuck around next time or you’ll get fucked up. That’s how this shit works. Keep it real.”

When I opened my fist to see what exactly the man had given me, I didn’t find any opium, but rather a lump of black tar heroin wrapped in a yellow birthday balloon. The shady bastard was trying to get me hooked on his supply of junk. Angry and fearing police surveillance, I put the balloon in my mouth, so I could easily swallow it if the cops nabbed me. Joan was laughing hysterically about how scared I had looked, but I ignored her to the best of my ability. I was extremely pissed off, however, that this whole ordeal had blown my high, and that we still had to make a trip down to Studio City for Sebastian. For the most part, I was thinking about how much I would laugh if the whole city of Los Angeles just fell under the sea. It sounded beautiful to me- total annihilation.

The place in Studio City that Sebastian wanted us to make a pick up at was about ten minutes south of City Walk and Universal Studios. It was an exceptionally run down track house in a very seedy neighborhood, where illicit trades are big time businesses, and where business is open twenty-four hours a day. I was nervous just driving through there. I was certain that all the rock dealers and hookers standing on the street corners were just itching to kill me, so when we reached the address, I made to the front door as quickly as possible, trying to avoid becoming an easy target for someone’s shooting practice.

When we knocked, a small Latino woman opened the door, leaving the safety latch on.

“What you want?” she asked, glibly.

“We need to see Miguel. Sebastian sent us,” Joan informed her.

“All right,” she replied, unlatching the door to provide us entry.

The woman took us inside, where several doped out beat up men and women lay crashed out across a wood floor littered with used hypos, burnt spoons, broken crack pipes, ripped open cellophane baggies, and disposable blow torches.

She pointed towards a back room and said, “Miguel’s in there.”

Strangely enough, the back room looked more like an office than a shooting gallery. Miguel, a stately dressed middle-aged Latino, was seated behind a long mahogany desk that stretched far enough across the room to insure a good barrier between us.

“So Sebastian sent you?” he inquired.

“Yes. Do you have what we need?” I asked, nervously eyeing the handgun placed closely within his reach.

“Si,” He grinned, revealing two gold front teeth. “You bring the money.”

“Yea,” Joan cut in, dropping a thick wad of bills on the desk. “We need two vials of liquid, an uncut quarter of tar, and fifteen white rolls.”

“No problem. No problem,” Miguel said nonchalantly, as he retrieved the drugs from a floor safe below his desk and handed them to her. “Do you want to give the smack a taste. Its good shit. Fresh over from Tijuana.”

Joan glared at me for a response, so I gave her a look that said why the hell not, and pretty soon, we were presented with a set of clean works, and each took a fix right in the office. I was quite paranoid that the cops would raid the room, so as soon as the needle left my arm, I thanked Miguel, and made Joan split before anything too crazy went down.

It was no exaggeration when Miguel said the dope was good shit, and as Joan drove home, I chain smoked, and through heavy stoned eyelids, watched the office buildings, motorcycle cops, convenient stores, and the jaded poor faces of the inner city eventually transform into Topanga Canyon and crooked old Mulholland. This life was getting to me, and I wanted to leave it all behind more and more with each passing hour. I knew that Joan and I were not exactly working hard at fulfilling our fancies of an ultimate togetherness, but I consoled myself with the fact that we were together for the moment. And that, I thought, was all that really mattered.

Sebastian was pleased with the merchandise we brought him, and enjoyed the story about what happened to me at the beach, so as a reward, he invited us to come with him to a house party in Malibu. A girlfriend of his, who was joining us for the festivities, ordered a black stretch limo with her mother's credit card, that picked us up at eight-thirty, and sent us swirling off onto a beautiful ocean front drive, lit up by neon light bulbs and the ghostly aura of a semi-starry moonlight.

"Your all are going to love this place," Sebastian told us, carefully holding his teenaged girlfriend and glass of champagne.

"My buddy, Double D, got this house from the royalties on his last film. What he'll do now is all up for the moguls to decide. I personally think he's washed up beyond belief."

"So how long have you two been going out," Joan interrupted, to ask the girl wearing the five hundred dollar mini-skirt.

"Oh," she gasped. "We're just fucking."

"Really," Joan said, trying hard not to laugh at her. "That's great. Really."

After staring down at my sandy beat up sneakers for a while, comparing them to Joan's less ragged ones, and then to the shoes on Sebastian and his lucky lady's feet, I knew we were in for a time. Joan nudged my hand open and placed a vial of blow in my palm. I tucked it away in my pants pocket for later use.

The limo came to a halt somewhere up on a heavily lighted side street, and a valet in a red and white uniform opened the door for us. The sight was a house you think could make anybody envious. A house about twice as big as any I had ever been inside before.

"Hey John," Joan whispered into my ear.

"Welcome to another episode of lifestyles of the rich and shameless."

A sad-eyed Asian butler took our jackets for us at the front door, and then showed us all into the indoor discotheque. Inside the huge sweltering room, sweaty masses of people bounced off each other to the beat of synthetic dance grooves, as the bartenders kept the champagne flowing to everyone on the dance floor. Feeling like I was in the middle of Rome during its heyday, I graciously accepted a glass of champagne, gulped it down, and took two snorts in each nostril from the coke vial. When a slow song came on, I suddenly found within myself both the desire and the opportunity to dance with Joan.

The music was too loud for us to hear our own voices, so we let our bodies do the talking, and held each other closely, perfectly neglecting the other couples that were surrounding us. For the duration of the song, I felt as if Joan and I were basking in a virginal white spotlight that's warmth grew beyond us, inside us, and most certainly among us. There was no world we belonged to. For a fleeting instant we were the world.

I held her head on my shoulder and gently swayed back and forth, embracing the rest of her body, while trying to telepathically send a current of love through my hands into her hips. Raising her head, Joan and I locked eyes, and then positioned our selves for the obligatory kiss. Her familiar loving breath whistled down deep into my lungs, while our tongues sought each other, and our beings intertwined. We were free. We were beyond chains of any form. We were birds in flight naïve to the awful world below. Much as I was dreading but expecting it, the song eventually came to an end, and the hunter's shotgun went off without a bang.

The two-room Hip Hip H2O warehouse party seemed like an ample center of commerce for Joan, Adam, and I to sink our teeth into. After selling a stash of White Dolphin ecstasy pills in the parking lot to a crew of Japanese club kids, the three of us all passed through the security checkpoint without any problems, and swiftly entered the main party area. The multi-colored strobe and black lights whizzed around the darkened venue's glitter and fluorescent stained walls, as the sweating gyrating clumps of human variations searched for drugs, openly consumed them, and danced to the turn table mixes of two disc jockeys stationed at opposite ends of the flesh compacted room. Break, liquid, and glow-stick dancers dominated a middle section of the floor, where Adam began to twirl his glow-sticks in the air, forming several intricate bright light patterns, before he abruptly bopped right off towards somewhere closer to the heart of the hedonistic setting.

Once he was gone, Joan took me aside to talk in the corner of the doorway cut between the two parallel rooms.

"Baby, I don't know about you, but I am feeling fucking strung-out again and I don't think I want to be here anymore."

I told her I was feeling a bit sick as well, but what could I do about it. We were both broke and still owed Sebastian some cash for keeping our heads straight for the past few days.

"I got an idea how we could make some serious funds," she smiled mischievously.



“But you are not going to like it.”

“What is it?” I asked, straining to stretch my voice over the music and my hoarse aching throat.

“Let’s sell some bunk acid and then bail before they realize what didn’t hit them.”

“Whatever,” I replied. Thoughtlessly more focused on wiping my itching runny nose with my jacket sleeves than on anything else of potentially greater or lesser importance.

If under the influence of a different set of circumstances, I know that I wouldn’t have agreed to do this. But despite the guaranteed risks involved, it did seem easy enough to avoid those dreaded pitfalls, so we went into the neon purple and red paint splotch adorned “Chill Out” room to execute the plan. We both filled our pockets with sandwich bags that each contained a hundred bunk acid tabs, which Joan had secretly cut out of a notebook earlier that day.

Almost immediately, a minor pack of extremely stoned college students approached me.

“Got any doses or GHB?” A large athletic type, wearing a tight UCSB t-shirt, baggy blue jean shorts, and a candy bead necklace with a rubber baby’s pacifier dangling from the end, somewhat timidly asked.

“Are you a cop?” I quickly shot back.

“No,” he replied, slightly insulted. “Are you?”

“Not that I can remember,” I replied.

“I got doses. How much are you looking for?”

“Well, we were kind of hoping we could score a sheet from somebody.”

I was dumfounded.

“That’s a pretty large order,” I said, trying to be very calm and assertive.

“I’ll sell it to you for two hundred.”

“Deal,” he said quite enthusiastically, before giving me two one hundred-dollar bills in a clammy handshake.

I slipped him his goods by dropping them on the floor directly next to his feet, so he could pick them up while appearing as if he was only tying his shoelaces. He thanked me after pocketing the bag, and said that he thought, “It sucks that acid has been getting so dry on the circuit lately the prices have had to double,” before being quickly ushered off into the other room by his sheep-like peers.

Before I could even begin to feel guilty about my cold-blooded crime, my second batch of customers appeared before my dope-sick glazed-over eyes, and asked if I could service them.

“Sure,” I told the two scantily dressed older women disgustingly ripped on X.

“But I am only holding acid.”

“That’s not exactly what we want,” one of the women snickered, lightly licking her pink heavily glossed lips in an effort to impress me.

“We were hoping you might be for sale. If you know what we mean.”

My whole thin nervous frame shuddered at the crude sexual suggestion, and after I said a polite, “No thank you,” I carefully backed away from it.

Suddenly, I felt a hand loosely grasp my shoulder, and a voice I immediately knew as Adam’s said, “Hello there, sweet prince. What brings you to these parts?” just a mere inch or two away from my left ear drum.

I turned to face the blonde spiky-haired figure in the classy aqua blue silk shirt and well-tailored black slacks. And immediately realizing that he was completely blown out of his gourd on Special K, I also sensed he was being held up by nothing more than the wall he was leaning against.

“Are you feeling OK?” I asked.

“No. We have to leave now. Find Joan,” he said, almost losing his usually feminine lisp to whatever panic he was harboring inside himself.

“We need to leave right now.”

“Why?” I inquired. “What’s wrong?”

“Pokers,” he said shakily. “There are pokers here. We need to leave.”

“Pokers?” I asked, puzzled by the term.

“You know, those assholes that go to raves with AIDS infected needles and poke people with them.”

“That’s just an urban legend,” I told him.

“It’s an excuse people use to cover up for how they really acquired the disease.”

“It’s not a legend,” he glared angrily at me.

“I just heard it happened to some people here tonight, and I know I don’t want it to happen to me. Just think of my career. Models aren’t allowed to have AIDS.

Where is Joan?

I would never be able to pick up a gorgeous guy ever again.

We need to leave.”

“She’s probably in the other room. Come help me find her so we can get the fuck out of here,” I told him, as he sluggishly abandoned the wall and tried to regain a near decent sense of balance.

Finding Joan almost as soon as we exited the “Chill Out” room, I briefly summed up the situation by telling her we had to leave right away, and then guided us all safely out of the warehouse. Once we were outside, and had distanced ourselves from the throngs of people in and around the venue, I told her about Adam’s poker scare since he was refusing to talk about it, and how I couldn’t believe I had made two hundred dollars so easily.

“That’s great, John,” Joan snickered, digging into her purse. “But why don’t you check this out?”

She flung a thick wad of crinkled up bills into my opened hands, and said, “Five hundred and seventy big ones. What do you think about that, huh, mister?”

“Amazing,” I smiled.

“Absolutely amazing.”

Her royal red hair blew through her cracked car window following the direction of the sickly humid wind, as she dealt with the nagging car ride home to our bed and the bags of junk awaiting us there. The fact we had made a little money on our own that night had told me changes were lurking somewhere around the corner. It wouldn’t be long until we began to live out the sparkling future we had always so feverishly dreamed of. And if we only could just hold the reigns tightly enough, it wouldn’t be long before we could finally leave an entire history stranded back in the motionless dusts of distance.

High as a kite on the remains of the coke and heroin supply four days and all of our money had gone towards, I began drawing an extremely sloppy portrait of Joan’s nude body, trying to capture some of the flavor of it with a pencil, as she nodded off on top of the unwashed blankets of our unmade bed. Her eyeliner-streaked eyelids suddenly opened, while her arms reached back for the pack of Camel cigarettes and silver butane lighter set just behind her. Before lighting her smoke, she slurred the unsettlingly mind-altering and poorly timed confession, “I think I am pregnant,” as the tip of my pencil snapped in synch with the hissing ignition of her lighter’s transparent blue flame.

“What?” I grimly asked, knowing exactly what she had just said, and feeling faint and lightheaded under the pleading glass stare she fixed upon me.

“I think I am pregnant. My period has been late for almost a week.”

“Fuck,” I heaved through my chest.

“Are you sure? I mean, Jesus, what do you want to do about this?”

“I want to have my baby with you. I will not have an abortion and kill what we have created together.”

Caught in a brief moment of silence, she longingly reached towards me for assurance, but I saw only the bruises and small pink track marks lining the insides of her rapidly thinning arms. Intolerably nauseated by the severity of her wounds, I avoided the urge to look at the evidence of my own deterioration, by throwing on my rumpled pair of jeans, and making a quick break for the bathroom down the hall.

I tried to maneuver my queasy staggering self to the bathroom, but instead, overestimating the sobering strength of what I had just learned, stumbled over the few wrong steps leading to the living room. Bridget lay on the couch with her tanned naked white legs spread wide open and pointing upwards towards a chandelier swinging above her head. An older black woman with an explosive perm inserted a roaring vibrator between the positioned limbs, licking at Bridget’s navel as she pushed two fingers inside her own body’s bare frontal crevice. Sebastian, wearing a red suit jacket, a blue tie, and nothing else, straddled Bridget’s face, and squeezed his power tool in and out of her mouth, groaning like a tortured beast as he explicitly explored her throat. A white-haired heavy-set man in a multi-colored Hawaiian shirt and white cut off shorts eagerly videotaped the affair, switching between different camera angles, as I looked on, thankfully unnoticed by both cast and crew.

Incapable of watching the dramatic pornographic performance for any longer than a minute, I dragged myself into the bathroom, and violently hurled up what little food I had previously held down. The soupy mess mingled with the water in the toilet bowl, and as I laid my heavy throbbing head against the cold porcelain seat, I gazed downwards, and watched the vile-smelling contents of my stomach churn into an unanticipated brilliant image.

Under an open cloud-filled blue sky, upon a pavement path cut between two fields of wild unruly grass, Joan and I were walking with a baby stroller between us, laughing securely as one constituent, as we pushed our newborn child along the way. We looked healthier than ever before. We looked like any normal well-off love struck young couple should, and proudly marched our baby through the empty park of a blissful domestic fantasy. Out of the blue, thunder and lightning sounded, the vision turned grey, and it began to rain on our modest parade. Within seconds the entire landscape flooded, and as our faces gasped in horror at the water rising towards our necks and the infant body I clutched helplessly in my raised arms, I flushed the toilet, and watched everything disappear into the coarse emergence of my own reflection.

“We’re going to have to quit using,” I told a sobbing Joan, as soon as I returned to our bedroom. “It is the only way we can do this. We both look like shit, are totally fucked up, and are living lives that no child should ever be brought into.”

“I know. I know,” she wept into a dirty t-shirt. “I just don’t think I can do it.”

“Can’t you find some painkillers or something to help get you through withdrawal a little easier,” I asked, sitting myself directly besides her.

“That’s not the problem. I just don’t think I can kick that easily,” she cried mournfully, trying to hide her tears behind her twitching fingers. “I am still going to have to deal for Sebastian.”

“If we clean up now won’t all the shit be out of our systems in a few days?” I inquired.

“Yes.”

“Are you still sure you don’t want to get an abortion.”

“Yes,” she said again, but a little more reluctantly than before.

“Then let’s go cold turkey. After a few days, when we are completely clean, we will do our business for Sebastian. And if we don’t blow all the money we make on tar, we can use it to get the fuck out of LA.”

“That sounds beautiful, John,” she said kindheartedly. “But where else can we go. I don’t know anyone that lives outside of California.”

“I have family in Minnesota,” I revealed to her. “If we get enough cash and stay clean we can probably find a place to live out there. I hear the cost of living is way cheaper out there than it is here.”

“Lovely. It sounds like a great idea, but I am not too sure I can do this,” she said, tugging fiercely at her matted oily hair.

“Yes you can,” I told her. “You have me here to help you through.”

Withdrawal’s sharp agonies stabbed us, no more than six hours later into the evening, and tore at our crawling skin with pitchforks made of fire and ice. Joan and I groaned in acute anguish, as we tried to protect ourselves from the varying hells of body temperature with blankets as quickly used as were discarded. At some point, Joan dashed out of the room, and spent an extremely long time in the bathroom losing control of her bodily functions, as I lay crippled with cramps in the pungent-smelling disheveled bed. My nose ran faster than my hand could pull at the Kleenex box underneath it. I was going to make it. I was going to see this through. I was going to see that Joan saw this through.

A little too quietly for my liking, Joan returned from the bathroom and drooped down on the bed. Her pupils were pinned, her motions slow and calculated, and a thin trail of blood trickled down her right forearm onto the milky white surface of a pillow. She wasn't even bothering to hide her return to vice from me. She knew that I knew what was going on.

"If you want a shot, Sebastian says he'll fix you up with one," Joan mumbled through the silence, carefully avoiding looking me in the face.

"You're about to become a mother, Joan! How can you do this to our baby?" I asked, entirely enraged.

"I told you I wasn't sure I could do this cold turkey!" she whimpered, before totally breaking down. "I am sorry. We'll kick tomorrow. I am sorry. I couldn't do this right now. We'll kick tomorrow! I swear to you! We'll kick tomorrow!"

Slamming the bedroom door behind me, as I left to go find Sebastian, I told myself on every possible level that everything was all right, and that indeed we would kick tomorrow. It is way too easy counting on the refuge the guarantee of a tomorrow provides, especially when one looks out at it from atop the abhorrent mountaintops of a catastrophic present day. We would kick tomorrow. I was standing firmly on the grounds of that desire alone. We would kick tomorrow- before it went off and faded into today.

I awoke with my neck and head aflame, sometime around noon the following day, and Joan was nowhere to be found. Frantically, I searched the entire premises, and ended up in Sebastian's room, which was inside a separate smaller house out by the pool in the backyard. His walls were ornamented with swords and other artifacts of medieval weaponry and, already dressed in a white suit and a black tie, I found him busy watching the adult film he had starred in the day before.

"What do you want, Kid? I am not going to give you or your girl any more shit on the cuff so don't even try," he said, not looking away from his fame.

"That's not it at all. I just want to know where Joan is. Have you seen her?"

"What do I look like? Her father? I don't know why you stick around with that junky slut anyway. You could make something of yourself, Kid. All you need to do is just ditch that dumb broad. She is nothing but trouble and she isn't even that pretty."

“Maybe,” I replied. “But she is pregnant, and we were supposed to kick our habits together today. I love her, man. Can’t you understand that?”

“Sorry,” he shrugged. “Not with that bitch. Besides, what makes you so sure she’s having your baby? I would sue a little hussy like her if she told me that.”

Furious with his lack of sympathy, I left him alone without uttering a single angry word, and went back to our room, to wait out all of the many pains I had been singularly holding for a party of two.

As the stereo besides me blasted an old Nirvana song on KROQ, further elements of detoxification landed. The sweats, the shakes, and the sinus troubles I had been beginning to know all too well, punched in on the time clock of my desperate plight. Unable to deal with the harsh level of personal angst apparent in Kurt Cobain’s voice, I switched to KLOS in time for the first synthesizer notes of The Who’s “Baba O’Reilly” to begin. I rolled around in my bed of constant illness for God knows how long, deeply questioning her, me, and this whole goddamned trial by fire that the world had become for us. “It’s only Teenage Wasteland,” the song screamed. I was so lost in the thick wasteland of my own sorrows that I didn’t even hear the front door open or close, or feel the silhouette of my love breeze into the throbbing room of my terse condition.

Her visage told me she was stoned to the gills, and that she was bearing extremely pressing news.

“What is it?” I asked her, wiping piles of sweat off my skin with a towel, as I sat up in bed. “What’s going on?”

“I got some money. We can finally leave this goddamned city and quit doing dope and shit. We can have the baby and live the way we always wanted to.”

“Where did you get the money?” I asked, both nervously intrigued and frightfully alarmed. “What the fuck did you do Joan?”

“It’s a surprise,” she said, both cryptically and reminiscently ironically.

“Joan, sweetheart, haven’t I told you how much I fucking hate surprises!”

“Don’t worry. As long as we leave here tomorrow everything will be fine. Here, I’ll go fix you up a rig so you’ll feel as good as gold my sweet Romeo.”

Joan exited the room to grab a spoon and some water to cook up the dope she had scored with, as I brutally speculated at what exactly she had caught herself up in. Flashes of involvement with gangs, armed robbery, angry drug dealers, and street-corner prostitution drove me mad with apprehension and terror. And it was all too heartbreaking, when my worst fears were suddenly confirmed, with the demonic bang of a pistol shot, which shattered my previously splintered strengths, into the tragic shape of absolute nothing. A shape, or a ghastly prism, that reflected all the finality and loss I had never imagined possible for a single isolated man to bear. What was over had never actually begun. It was done whether I wanted it to be or not. It was done. . .It was done. . .It was done. . .An assassin's trigger had spelled out each and every letter for me. It was done.

Her head lay flat upon the smoothly divided red stained white kitchen tiles. Ruptured, broken, and stolen from the Earth like a loaf of bread from a jailhouse cafeteria. I thought of kissing her, as wine bottles of young blood oozed from the three clean bullet wounds carved slightly above the base of her skull, and the forgettable fourth hole punched into the utmost edge of her upper back. I thought of her imaginative depths, our unborn child, and the thought-less tragedies of our times. She had been taken from me by a demon of both the mansion and the sewer. A demon or a secret vigilante that resembled a face-less vulture hovering below a furious western sun. I stared down at her serene eyelids, my faith melting into use-less waxy ooze. The horror of her departure did not bother to stalk the slick grin that was stretched across her now heavily kissed lips. She smiled onwards into whatever the infamous world of beyond possibly, maternally, held for her. Through this empty aquarium of soul, I could still feel my love hanging on to the anonymity of the air. Dancing above me like a candle, I felt her laugh from the very tips of this disgusted American atmosphere, as Sebastian entered the somber scene through a sliding glass door pulled sternly to the east.

“What the fuck, Kid. Jesus Christ. What did she do to get this job pulled on her? Damn. Come on. Talk to me, Kid.”

I didn't respond, but continued longing for the surrendered vessel of my aspiration to fight on, and continue its fruitless struggle for air. A cyclone of pain tore out of Sebastian's hands as he shook my shoulders and screamed for me not to gape forward into the emotional bank robbery of her pallid death mask. I grimaced as his cell-phone dialed nine mysterious digits and pummeled me with nine hollow clubs. The procession then ferociously whipped me in the eyes with a sensual extinction I had here forth been rejecting only as fate.



“Hello. Sergio. I’ve got a bit of a mess that I need you to help me clean up,” Sebastian sung into the phone. “Come over and bring some guys with you that I can trust. Yeah. I know that you know how to deal with the kind of shit I am going through right now. Yeah. I’ll have money. Who do you think I am? Fuck, come on. Consider it done. Yeah, I get you. Fine. See you soon.”

He returned the phone to his right suit jacket pocket, and lowered his voice towards me to resemble that of patronizing concern.

“Come on. Get up, Kid. On your feet, Junky, you have to leave. I’ll take you home or anywhere you want to go. Just get up and fucking pull yourself together.”

“Yeah get up, John, come on,” I said to myself, as I picked myself up from my knees.

Sebastian was staring into my panic-struck direction, when suddenly his face blasted forwards, and tore into what I saw as a rugged resemblance to an athletic field of cacti. I knew I could always go home. I knew I needed to fly someplace far away from here.

“I’ll give you a fix if you start acting straight again, Kid.” Sebastian said.

“Please. Please,” I begged of him, lying near spiritual ruin at the toes of his expensive black over-polished Italian leather shoes. “Do you understand Love? Do you understand anything? Fuck,” I held my head in my hands. “Give me something for Christ’s sakes. I need to get high. I need to get numb. I need to get fucking dead!”

“Whatever,” he said, throwing me an extra cold shoulder. “Don’t do anything stupid. Even though I have to ditch one body tonight I don’t particularly want to ditch another.”

“How?” I asked, getting up, angrily attentive.

“How are you going to ditch her body?” I asked again, standing up to face him, contemplating going for his throat with my quaking fist if his answer failed to please me.

“Sergio and his boys will take care of her. They will probably just bury her out in the desert. Don’t worry about it. I just have too much shit to lose if the cops or anyone finds out about this little incident. There is too much illegal shit in the house for that to happen. And why should any of us get busted for that dumb valley cunt’s stupidity? Just keep cool, Kid, and I’ll go cook you up a hit.”

Death Valley sprung to life in my mind, once the last touch of dope I knew I would ever jab into my vein hit the scene. A godly gust of breath blustered across my face, as I stood before a hole dug into the ground to resemble the obvious dimensions of an average sized human form. Snakes hissed and traveled and coiled upon the wind-beaten sands, as thousands of invisible coyotes howled at nothing at once. The boiling taunting sun beat down upon my face, but was soon quenched beneath the blackness of what lay stretched across the bumpy belly of the terrain. Cowboy and Indian figures appeared from a stretch of powdery dunes and battled each other, guns and tomahawks raised, both sides screaming challenges of death. As their cries rang out, the Cowboy and Indian figures exploded into waterfalls of blue blood. Ribbons and ribbons of blue blood that maliciously fell upon a Jack in the Box, which then transformed and opened up into the Christ-like illuminated shadow of a man. I peered forward through the pair of sunglasses perched above my nose, and the man stepped foreword to reveal himself to my internal cinema of muted qualms.

“Are you enjoying the meth, Kid. It looks as if you have never shot the shit before. I’ve never seen anyone twitch around like that,” Sebastian laughed, lighting a clove cigarette and adjusting the knot in his bright green tie. His dark blue suit shone into my face, as he walked out of the shell of darkness he had previously occupied with such occult deranged style.

“I thought you gave me a rig of tar? I mean what the fuck? Do you want me to lose my fucking mind?” I asked, my tongue sticky and sputtering words like a machine gun caught in the strict grip that locked my nicotine-stained teeth together.

“What are you? Oblivious? It was pure crystal, Kid” Sebastian said, kicking a pile of sand into the hole. “If I gave you smack you would go try to get more and OD or something. Anyway, aren’t you enjoying the film a little better now?”

He smirked securely, before taking another drag off his clove. I was completely fed up with the ruthless tricks he was playing on me, and lost whatever cool I had been keeping.

“Quit talking that evil shit! Quit talking! God, will you please shut the fuck up. I CAN’T FUCKING TAKE THIS! I JUST WANT TO DIE!”

I screamed louder than I ever though possible, and was taken back by the harsh wail that shot out of my emaciated speed infected body.

“I didn’t say anything you nut. You are going fucking mental,” Sebastian laughed uproariously. “I didn’t even say a word you fucking lunatic.”

My voice, I found, had frozen as I struggled to reply to the accusation, and in the place of figurative communication my voice sounded out only a succession of yellowish clouds of smoke. I needed to find my home, but I only wanted to drift further away from wherever that might be.

So upon the day her eyes met mine, and we found a sense of solace within the illusions of the city's heat, I prayed we would go somewhere with our testimony, and that the lights of the constellations would never dim their estranged and beautiful passageways upon the squinty-eyed surrender of the night. I prayed that we would forget the past and our masks, and eventually wander forward into the dreams we had forever been told to believe. American dreams full of love, wonder, fantasy, and freedom, and dreams that would prove too painful for us to either ignore or accept.

Knocking on my parent's front door, I quickly glanced over my shoulder, to watch Sebastian evenly pull his Jaguar and wealthy arrogance away from both my demented cause and effect. After three loud raps at the door, the large red plank of wood opened slightly, and my mother's distorting face immediately poured a bucket of revulsion over me.

"Oh my God!" My mother gasped when she saw my obviously changed facade. "Johnny. Baby. What's wrong with you? Where have you been?"

Mother's facial features distorted into those of a Medusa-like monster, as her voice barked and scratched at my temple like a three-headed dog of hallucinated sound.

"Come inside, Son. Why are your eyes so big? What are you on?"

I refused to answer her questions, somehow thinking that if I didn't respond to them, then the truth of my wretchedness would turn around and withdraw from her sight. Besides, I knew she was working with the police. I knew she wanted to put me away forever. She knew everything that had happened to me anyway. She had people out spying on me the whole time. I was on to her all right. I knew what her game was all about.

Entering my parent's house, she tried to hug me, but I violently pulled away from her, and pushed her down to the floor.

"Fucking Gestapo beast!" I screamed at her. "Don't touch me. I need to sleep. I am having a breakdown. Don't fucking make me worse."

The devil woman gasped, and began crying. "Jesus please help us. Please help us Jesus," as I laughed hysterically, and ran off towards my bedroom, leaving the crying figure who gave me life, kneeling in the front doorway, whimpering pathetically for divine intervention.

I placed a chair in front of my bedroom door, so that neither she or any of her people could enter and take me off to the mental ward, before spreading my ailing bones out on my bed, so as to comfortably begin kicking off the remains of my unrelenting torments. As I stared down at my arms, I watched thousands of ants crawl across my pale flesh and eat at the track marks that scarred my inner elbows. I tried in vain to pinch and stamp out the ants that were feasting upon me, but they only increased in number. As I looked on, they gradually covered my entire body and hissed angrily in unison as I tried to brush them away.

Two human characters entered the room through the ceiling, which was polluted with heaps of garbage and large white worms. One was a young man that closely resembled myself, and the other was an elderly woman with long red hair. They were both nude, and had the delicate transparent aura associated with visitors from beyond the grave.

The young man spoke first in an unbearably piercing child's voice.

"You killed me Daddy. You killed Mommy. You're a bad man Daddy. You're a bad man. I hate you."

Older Joan smiled and quickly blew me a kiss before they both levitated and vanished through the filthy ceiling from which they emerged.

A fleet of miniature covered wagons, and a storm of Nazi foot soldiers ran through my room, and shattered into small pieces against the wall farthest away from me. Bombs burst all around me, while airplanes ran Kamikaze missions into the carpeted floor, and then almost immediately set the entire half of the room ablaze with their senseless casual warfare.

Inside the flames, I could see and hear Joan and our son screaming for me to help them. Reaching out to save them, they and everything else disappeared except for the sound of my mother's voice.

I could hear her talking on the telephone in the living room, a thin wall away from me, and what I heard her say did nothing to calm my paranoid state.

"Johnny's really strung out and crazy. Please come home from work and help me get him to a hospital. I think he has snapped. I love him but he is absolutely out of control. Come quickly. Yes. All right. I love you too."

There was no way that they were putting me in any hospital. They would lobotomize me and give me electroshocks and mind-numbing pills until I wasn't even a human anymore but some sort of walking vegetable. I had seen the type before, and there was no fucking way I was going to let them turn me into one. I would rather die than become one of their prisoners. And if that was the answer, then so be it. I would do what I had to do.

After I heard my mother retreat to her bedroom, I decided to make my escape. I knew that I would need some money, so I tiptoed into my father's study and began rummaging through his desk drawers, hoping to find a secret stash of wealth. Having no such luck, I went into the study's walk-in closet, and searched through the pockets of his many jackets, only to once again find nothing. Running my hand across the shelf above the carefully hung-up coats, I found a shoebox tucked into a corner barely within my reach. With much effort, I brought the box down and opened the lid. I was delighted to find not only a roll of twenty-dollar bills held together with a rubber band, but also a snub nose thirty-eight caliber pistol, and a small box of ammunition.

Holding the handgun tightly, I thought of Joan, her twilight, and her magical presence of mind. How something was lost in the God-less cruelty unleashed upon her. My swift, powerful lioness of blessed mud would roar no more, and as my tongue promised to forever refuse to drink or to forget, the desire arrived to change the world today. I knew that I could never make it in this world. And if I couldn't change the world with new affection and new sounds- Well, there always would be that heroin connection.

Stealing the keys to my mother's burned out Volvo was easy enough, but carting myself away from home was an entirely different matter all together. The hallucinations were still unbearable, and as I drove down several snake-like side streets, I looked through the windows of the other cars that surrounded me, and saw only skeletons wilting behind their steering columns. They were the walking dead. Everyone was dead and unable to admit it. I had no idea where I wanted to go, but the vague notion came to me, if I scored some more dope everything would turn out all right, while I followed a strict path through the Valley's rushing hungry veins, towards another scene, where I would care less to win over some overlooked discovery, if maybe it meant that I would manage to muster up something resembling more than an easily captured scent of earthly control.

And then again, there was my faulty romance. I had lost this war and could no longer be damned by the allegations of her bereaved magnificence. I couldn't stand by the irony of an enslaved point's worries. And sure, I had never felt anything, and the marginal invitations to the ravenous deadline of this pilgrimage must have been lost in the mail. So I swore to an open pawnshop that I would no longer burn on the stake of the tear, and that these dramatic circles would always be puzzled by the static formulae of reason.

So I guessed purity would no longer be an option. I steered my own vessel, ignoring the stupidity of the icebergs that bobbed malevolently in the livid waters leering despondently ahead. And then suddenly, apart from the canyons daydreaming beyond, I knew exactly what I would do. I would return to the place where it all began. I would return to the place where I first learned what it meant to fall head over heels for a mistress of the setting sun.

I sat down on a most familiar bench in the Oakview Promenade, lit up a cigarette, and jumped up about a yard, when someone called my name, and another ghost that I had never quite known, placed two hands flimsily around my neck, while sitting himself down next to me, with a bit more solid of a style than he had ever cared to present before.

"I'll be damned!" I shouted upon identifying Rick behind the glamour of his strange new look. "How are you doing? I thought you were dead. Fuck Bro. What's up? What's happening?"

"Good things, Man. Good things. I got accepted to Vassar, and am actually going to be leaving this hellhole this fall. My parents are going totally nuts over it. What do you think? Do you dig my new threads? My dad picked up the check for a whole shit load of new clothes last weekend so I would have enough gear to take with me on our trip to Spain this summer."

Rick evidently had an easy time hitchhiking from his friends' uncharted worlds into the unsightly ones of his father's, and having so recently seen how he had looked at the emergency room entrance, it was extremely difficult for me to take his brand new suit and style seriously. So swallowing the hot poisons swirling through my skull, I let my mouth ease words into the conversation we kept, and let my heart gasp, laugh, and try to beat it's self back into a passive resemblance of deep, deep, sleep.

"You look really fucked up man," Rick ruthlessly observed. "I am sorry about what happened to Joan. It was pretty fucked up how she was snuffed out like that, but its no reason for you to hit the needle so hard. You saw what that shit did to me. Don't be so careless dude. It's not worth it."

"Don't patronize me, Rick. I don't deserve it. I just lost someone I love. Please cut me a little fucking slack OK?"

"All right," Rick replied sarcastically. "But I think you should know that this guy, Jimmy, who goes to my school, just tested positive for AIDS, and he supposedly date raped Joan at a house party a little while back. She was like totally bad tripping on a few hits of this gangster wannabe Arlen's double dipped orange gel-tabs when it happened."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" I asked, as my throat clenched up, and a cannonball of fatality blasted through the unintended bull's eye of my chest.

“Go get tested, John,” he said almost professionally. “Find out if your still cool or not.”

I didn't say anything, but hell, I couldn't say anything. My under declared feelings of doom had been accurate all along. My lady of joyful sorrows was dead, and I had now just received the executioner's acknowledgment that my time was to come as shortly and surely as fields of green grass are mowed. Fuck it all anyways. I could still at least try to get another taste of sweet and sour numbness. But even as the fear of final conclusions carried on, I was able to emotionlessly ask Rick where I could find a good source to score from, and disguised my voice of all chance traces of hatred or envy.

“My friend Derrick is slinging out of the Rite Aid over there.” He pointed the cherry of his cigarette towards the other end of the Promenade. “I don't think he has any of the harder shit though. He mainly specializes in Shrooms and X.”

Taking careful note of the information he had given me, I left Rick stunned and a bit frightened, when I raced off to find The Man without supplying him with any sort of heart-wrenching goodbye, or even a basic understanding of what it was I had actually just left behind.

Immensely disappointed with Derrick's well beyond skimpy bags of mushrooms, I crouched down in my mother's car in the parking lot of the Rite Aid drugstore, and popped an entire eighth into my mouth. While I chewed up the raunchy, almost stale cracker tasting chunks of fungi, I knew deep down that I was locked in an extremely volatile mindset, and that only a hallucinogenic drug could press it out as far as it needed to go. I was no longer afraid to journey further than I had gone before. I would go wherever I needed to be taken. I had completely given up on everything for a heaven built upon nothing. And I was sure there was no longer going to be anyone around that could ever show me a different way to unearth the wings of angels from beneath such imposing piles of diamonds, ashes, and shit, as the sweet rollicking hills of this frighteningly frank metropolis.

I drove aimlessly, alone, along the edge of the city, waiting for the first psychedelic flashes to transform me into a new man. It was April- a month made famous for it's powers of rebirth. It was spring- a season often overlooked by the eternal summer that is Southern California.

All the cars pressing down upon hardy Pacific Coast Highway appeared to fear the urgency obviously locked in my ever widening course, and just as I pulled onto one of the beaches that marred it's resilient flank, my head shot straight up into the solar system, and I started to brace myself for what I was now considering to be the trip to end all trips.

Situated in a neutral mid-section of the shoreline, I stared up at the clouds poised and anxious to rain, and looked out at a shrieking succession of crashing white-tipped monstrous waves that bopped unevenly, as if in time to an incredibly rhythmic but sluggish jazz record. Then, still looking out at the everlasting vanity of the water, searching for a fleeting glimpse of Japan, I saw not a country in the distance, but an enormous preying mantis in the sky. The mantis opened it's gruesome muck dripping jaws, and after taking a gigantic bite out of it's own left arm, it screeched a fingernails on chalkboard type scream, causing me to turn to face the way of the highway, and the concerns contained in the disease-ridden Los Angeles corruption of all the small spaces that lay flat and hysterical, in a different world, in the depths of a young man, forever struggling, in what lies, groveling, suspended, constantly churning, surely and truly, with all love lost- somewhere in the darkness- somewhere in between the ends of this ridiculous fray.

A narrow lagoon cried murderously behind me, while respectably facing its great hypnotically blue-fancied father. It whimpered dog-like through a thick coating of dumped pollutants, shattered liquor bottles, soggy cigarette butts, and other remnants of objective decay. Alligators and other predators of pre-history dunked and dived in the water, eyeballing me, determining whether I was a threat to their reptilian consciousness with egotistical scaled over stillness and shark-like intent. The modernist swamp flickered as quickly as a dying light bulb with picture frames enclosing a reinvented Garden of Eden. I couldn't turn away from the divinity encapsulated in the destruction; the voices of history's muses rising and falling as their heads moved with the greasy detachment of a most naturally divisible rage. But it all blazed too brightly, and once again, I was forced to turn away.

I reached into my coat pocket, and found the small spiral notebook I had begun writing in while living at Sebastian's house. Once I had opened it, I struggled to read the first paragraph, as the words danced around the pencil lead marked page. The words shuffled around, but I managed to find order within the attempted chaos, and pondered the first sentence, hoping to find truth within the simple statement I had created what seemed like no less than an eternity ago.



“Joan was tougher than your average nineteen year old and would never hesitate to let you know it,” the entry began.

I thought about this image, and about how false it truly was. Joan was as fragile as anyone, but did possess the strength to create a deceptive outer core, which she innocently enough thought nobody would ever try to fuck with. In the end, like everything else I had ever known, it turned out flat, and I began to think about how fragile we all are. How we are all just simply lost at sea, and are forever searching for a lighthouse to help us get back to port. The realization proved to be most transcendental, and for the first time in a long time, I began to notice the beauty hiding behind every life and all forms of experience. I felt as if I was levitating into a Buddhist sphere of unconditioned bliss, but with that came the rain, along with an army of about three million fierce sand-crabs fully set, as they surfaced from beneath the dishonored water behind me, on taking a little bit more than the beach back as their own.

I quickly fled the beach and the merciless crab invasion, in an exchange for scenery, which I knew would prove more suitable in my quest to finally say goodbye and start anew. Besides, there is no better way to view a sunset than from the top of the world. So after procuring a bottle of red wine from a Junior Market off of Reseda Blvd. that didn't hassle minors, I made my way to the top of the canyons, uncorked the bottle, and stared down at the city of illusions, within whose stout limits, I had grown from starry asphalt.

The more wine I drank, the more the effects of the mushrooms were diluted to a tolerable noise. In every aspect of the word, I was sick, and would be sick for several more days, as all the toxins crept out of my body like ants from an anthill, and I fought my own mind from replacing them with a fresh supply.

It was no longer raining, and under a neon purple canopy, a vivid rainbow stretched out across the north and south sides of the city. It was the perfect backdrop for my final salute to Joan and all other children that were devoured by the agonies of the adult world that surrounded them. No more than a simple gamble really, but one that had all the significance of total perfection. I was ready to finally test my fate.

I drained the last of the wine, tossed the bottle over the edge of the cliff upon which I stood, and watched the small green shape dissolve into a thin layer of dark post-storm clouds hovering over their collective losses below. Straightening my back, I slowly reached into my pocket, and brandished the revolver I had loaded with three slugs. After taking a deep, possibly final breath, I gazed longingly at the sun setting out over the coast, spun the wheel, and brought the barrel to my head.

“This is for you Joan,” I said, while glancing down at the many movements of Los Angeles during rush hour, “This is for all of you.”

I pulled the trigger, and was greeted with a click and nothing more. I was alive, but had I won?

There I stood- A spider web of a western kingdom boiling in the sordid warmth that prowled below the skyline of an unforgivable unforeseen truth. Illusions of cowboy ghosts, tarnished youthful battlegrounds, and deeply mourned streets of motion, motion, and ocean lingered below my tired cynic feet. I no longer feared this cruel frontier. Love had faded to disease. This palm tree eternity had bartered seasons for dust.

Laughing out loud at the grace with which I had cheated death, and the absolute absurdity of everything in general, I tossed the handgun, and knew, with unusual certainty, that I was to carry on; that there were going to be new nights and days ahead of me, and new stones to be uncovered along the way.

So there and then, I became a whole, lit a cigarette, and made my way back towards the shadows and the lights. A simple piece of a bizarre mosaic- from atop whose constant, winding shoulders- I was born.

# a Petal under Pavement

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