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It's 6 am. And still dark outside. February dark. Winter dark. Cold dark. Depressing dark...or maybe it's me who's depressed, yeah, that sounds right. I'm lying in bed, staring at the cheap clock radio on the cheap yard sale dresser, and smoking. I take a drag, blow the smoke out the window then hold the cigarette through a little hole in the screen.

My dog, Shnooky, lies next to me and watches. She is a beautiful mixture of brown, white and gold with Maple eyes and a deep purple tongue. When I found her on the street six years ago she was so filthy, and mangy, the vet had to give her three baths to find out what color she was. Now she is a stunning beauty queen. Shnooky doesn't like the smoke but she puts up with it just to be on the bed just to be close to me. Dog love, you know how that is.

Anyway, I cut the hole in the screen to get minimum smoke because I share the bedroom with my thirteen-year old son, Max. He's snoring in the bed on the other side of the mini-dresser. One of the front panels of a dresser drawer is on the floor along with a few pairs of his boxer underwear and socks. I always fucking glue it and it always falls off. I told Max I would buy him a new dresser as soon

as we have money. I told him I'd do a lot of things when we have money. He always says, "Sure dad, we'll never have money."

"We will fuckin' too!" I always say.

"Dad do you know you swear like worse than anybody I know?" He says. "Don't you think that's lame for a man of your age?" It is and I am and I know it. We agree on that. But I keep on swearing. It's 6:04. The alarm goes off. Shnooky wags her tail and jumps off my bed. Breakfast. Walk. She's one second ready like only dogs can be.

"Max, get up," I say as I stub the cigarette out on the windowsill.

"Dad, why the hell are you smoking in the room?" he says, his face still buried in his pillow.

"Just get up," I say. "I was up most of the night trying to find Tony again."

Max turns his apple cheeked face towards me, opens one of his beautiful, almond shaped, dark hazel eyes and stares at me with it to give me a reality check.

"Dad, Tony is a loser crack addict."

"Max, he's my friend and my writing partner. As soon as we finish this script..." Max cuts me off.

"Dad, shut up. You'll never finish with him. Just do it yourself." I can't tell Max, I'm scared to write alone,

that I don't think I'm capable so I work with some moron I can berate to feel better about myself. Sick. *I'm fucking sick, Max, can you help me?* is what I want to tell him but Max isn't my mommy, he's my son so I just say, "I can't, we're too far into it."

"Sure dad," he says. He knows. He pulls the TV controller out from under the covers (he sleeps with it) and clicks on the TV my brother gave me for Christmas eight years ago. The screen is covered with greasy fingerprints and the box is covered with skateboard stickers. You could say Max has put his mark on it. MTV comes on, some hip hop rapper wit his posse and ho's video. I start staring at one of the dancers gyrating her ass. I imagine me behind her, naked, gyrating with a huge hard-on as she reaches back and grabs my cock and the other dancer...

I stop my thoughts, hating them, hating myself for having them. I deflect the thoughts by getting angry.

"He wasn't smoking crack when we started." I say.
"Okay? I didn't plan it out this way. Just get up and get ready for school... and turn the TV off!"

"Fine," he says. "Grumpy". He clicks it off and gets out of his bed. He is wearing a pair of Ralph Lauren plaid boxers.

I know because the quality is better than the cheap ones I buy him at the T-Shirt outlet. He got the fancy boxers from his school friend Leo. Max goes to a rich kids' school. Leo is from a rich family. We are a poor family. So what? Why the fuck do I have to think of all this so early in the morning?

Max's hair is long. His bangs are down to his chin. He's getting tall. Tall and thin, like me. That's the only resemblance we have though. Face to face, you couldn't tell we were related. He reaches up and stretches. He's got a few wisps of hair under his arms. Shit, it must be hard for him to share the same room with me, I think. I was jerking off all the time at his age. What a drag he doesn't have his own room.

"The drawer is broken again," he says.

"I know," I say. He looks at me, disgusted.

"Dad, why do you still smoke?"

"Just get ready." As he walks to the bathroom he says, "Dad when you get cancer, I'm not visiting you in the hospital."

"I've been up all night trying to track Tony down in every crack hotel in Hollywood," I say. "So don't give me any shit."

"Okay, dad," he says, already in the bathroom which is just outside the bedroom door. We're talking small one bedroom apartment.

"Okay," he says, "Just get me my own room so you can do whatever you want in yours." He closes the bathroom door hard. He doesn't slam it. I'm the door slammer. I've slammed it so many times that the wood is splintered on the bottom. I hear the shower go as I get out of bed, drop to my knees, pray to God to help me be happy and have a good day...I feel nothing, no change at all but I know it's saving my life anyway.

I stand up and iron out the wrinkles on my gray long-sleeved sweatshirt and sweatpants with my hands. I think of changing and say, "Fuck it, for who? I'm driving him to car pool and coming back." I throw on my black wool cap because I'm going bald and can't deal with trying to fix what hair I have left and think of all the jobs I wish I was going to; movie sets, production offices, early writer's meetings.

I make my bed, half-assed. I hear Max, yelling "Dad, this shower sucks, there's like no pressure again." I'm too caught up in my list of things that I don't have to even answer him. I pull his comforter up, slap his pillows a couple of times. Two half-assed made beds now. I look at

the framed picture of his mom that is on his side of the dresser, facing his bed. His mom Keri, who died when he was five. She fell asleep at the wheel while driving through the Wyoming desert on a warm August night. I was here in Los Angeles. Max was in the back seat of her car, sleeping as she passed out, veered off the endless, narrow, dark road and flipped over an embankment. No seat belts. Damn it Keri! Why? Were you drinking? Maybe. Max said you had wine at dinner. God, I think of this every time I look at you...

As the car rolled over in the air, both were hurled out of the windows. Max scraped and bounced down the pavement, lacerating skin and breaking bones as the car landed on Keri, killing her instantly. He was laying there in the road, five years old with his mom, mangled to death, less than twenty yards away from him...

Here in the picture she's dressed in a gold cashmere sweater, and black flannel, skirt with her almond eyes and apple cheeks all rosy and her skin bronzed from the sun. Her long straight, raven black hair falls behind her head that is thrown back in a "devil may care" attitude. Keri laughed a lot. Keri was laughing out loud when the picture was taken. Not a care in the world.

"I love you Dave. You're doing a great job with Max", I hear her say.

"Easy for you to say," I answer to the picture.

"You're dead."

"Oh, brother," I hear her say, "Like I can do something about that now? Stop being such a broken record."

I want to keep arguing about the seatbelts, the drinking but I tell myself to shut up. Keri is free now and watching over us in all her magnificence from the heavens.

Shnooky wriggles around me impatiently, nibbling at my sweatpants. "Okay, okay," I tell her as she follows me through our living room, which is our only other room, cluttered with four decent but worn pine wood and leather chairs of Keri's, seated around a varnished custom made plywood and pine table of hers; stacked with bills, papers, magazines and movie scripts. Then there's our two old computers side by side on a little garage sale office desk rammed up next to it, a splintered garage sale, wood dining/coffee table that we sanded to make look like an antique, that's what I say anyway, it's an antique. In front of it is our worn out three piece couch that needs reupholstering (also of his mom's and it was decent once), our one good TV, Sony, not bad but five years old, my overflowing dilapidated bookshelf, numerous skateboards, basketballs, surfboards...just a whole bunch of shit that I stare at and can't figure out how to organize. I have an

urge to throw it all out. Everything. Just get rid of everything. Like I own so much stuff, right. Except Keri's, it's all crap. I own a bunch of crap. I feel like crap and I am crap. I am.

I tell myself to shut up over and over again, like a mantra, as I go into the kitchen. Shnooky rubs against me as I get her bag of dog food and pour some into her bowl. She wants me to be happy. I'm not happy and wish I could remember when I was. There were days, sure but I can't remember them because today sucks. *One Day At A Time*...okay, fine, today sucks. The sink is full of dishes. "Damn it!" I say as I stare at them, thinking I just washed all the dishes yesterday. Every day. Every fucking day, for years I wash dishes.

I look out the window over the sink. The moon is still out. It's that time, seconds before dawn when it's still dark but you can see things better than the dead of night. I get a view even if it is over the top of the building in back of ours, through black telephone cable wires and satellite dishes. I can see the tops of the palm trees that line Beechwood Street. The long hanging palms look black. Better than the sick green look they have in the light of day. I've been to Hawaii. I've seen healthy palm trees with rich green palms hanging. I think about how I used to go to

Hawaii from New York and kick heroin on my way to Japan to clean up for those forty thousand dollar a month modeling contracts in the eighties. Four rough days curled up in a Waikiki hotel then gradually making my way back into the sun; going to beaches all over the Island; swimming, snorkeling, surfing, getting all tan and healthy.

Let's not forget drinking and fucking. Drinking didn't count back then, drinking was normal. And fucking a different sun-kissed girl every night...I still beat off thinking about those days. That's when I remember being happy, traveling all over the world, making money. Then I blew it. God damnit...in the past. Takes up a lot of time. Too much. The sun's already set there, buddy. Wake up; it's rising in the present now, before your very eyes. Stay in the present, do the fucking dishes, make Max some oatmeal, walk Shnooky and take Max to car pool. Do it! Get out of your God damn head!

I wash the dishes and watch the black sky turn orange and blue in the sunrise. I feel a soothing warmth come over my body as I give myself to the sky. I'm in it. In the sky. In the world. In the universe. Melting. Magic. Power. God. The dishes done with a smile. Easy. Sweet. Brief reprieves that keep my monster in my mind at bay.

I make the oatmeal, good Irish oatmeal with spring water. I stir it with a wooden spoon, cut in organic bananas then pour soy milk and maple syrup in. We eat good, no artificial shit, and no short cut meals. I feel strong in the kitchen because I know what I'm doing. The oatmeal is done. I make a big bowl for Max and let Shnooky lick the rest off the wooden spoon. She loves it so much. This makes me smile because I love her so much. I look at the wall clock. It's already 6:20. Shit.

"Max!" I yell, "Get the oatmeal before it turns cold. I'm walking the dog."

I'm back in the apartment fishing around for the old Bernie script. I wanna look it over and start comin' up with ideas for the re-write and I think there might be copy of Conrad's 'Lord Jim' in my mess of a bookshelf because Max had to read that in school but I really should pick up 'Outcast of the Islands' if I can find it and get, 'Heart Of Darkness', too just so I have Conrad in my mind. Maybe if I'm saturated with him, I can attempt to weave some kind of genuine thread through the hacked out, piece o' shit script I wrote. I know I'm getting way ahead of myself but I'm excited to get on it. After I do the commercial of course. Maybe in our new house. Yeah, that's where I'll write it.

Then I get the calls, one after the next after the next.

Frank tells me the owner is changing her mind and giving the house to her daughter.

"What daughter? What the fuck, Frank?"

"Sorry, Dave, her daughter was excluded from the contract and she can do what she wants."

Kim tells me I've been taken off hold for the job.

"But the director loved me... they all laughed. What the fuck, Kim?"

"Sorry, Dave, they decided to go another way."

And Bernie tells me the investors just got busted for ten kilos of heroin.

"Why did you have them as investors? What the fuck Bernie."

"Sorry Dave, and I thought they were crack dealers."

And I hear the same consolation from all of them.

"Don't worry Dave, you'll get another house."

"Don't worry Dave you'll get another job."

"Don't worry Dave, we'll wait 'till they post bail and see what happens."

So it's bad news and my expectations are squashed again but I've been knocked down so many times that I'm used to it. Well, not that used to it. I'm still stamping around the apartment, hyperventilating and screaming, "No! No! No!" while Shnooky trembles in the corner... but I feel like I'm gonna get over it. Not now but soon. Maybe. I don't know. Maybe not. Why couldn't have things just worked out for once? Well, I guess I can get another house. Not

like that one though. Selfish bitch owner, giving it to her daughter. She could have gotten any house. I needed that one. I should burn it to the ground so nobody lives there...but April, poor April and little Daisy...what would they do? I wonder if she is gonna miss us? I'm gonna miss her. It would have been so great over there. Ah, fuck April, she probably thought I was a creep and told the owner not to sell the house to me. That little twat, phony, hippie wannabe...

Stop. Please. Stop. Please.

No. Wait. Shut up. I have more...

...And that cocksucker commercial director, how could he just change his mind? Bastard. The advertising people probably forced him to. I knew I shouldn't have done that pissing routine. They all laughed but wait... the snotty, stuffed shirt on the cell phone, he didn't laugh that much. Yeah, he was the one. Bet he was the boss. Damnit! And Bernie, Bernie's just a moron. Fuck that stupid script. I hated it anyway. I scream out, "You happy now, Joseph Conrad, wherever you are?"

Fuck it. I should just blow all this bad news off and go out somewhere. Just go out. But I don't even know where to go anymore. Out where? I was out. I had my time. I was out on a twenty-year summer vacation; out in New York, out

in Miami, out in LA, out in Honofuckinlulu, out in Paris, out in Berlin, out in Madrid, out in Milan, out in Tokyo and Sydney friggin' Australia. All I have to show for it, is a bad liver, a bunch of stamps on my passport and some wild fuck stories. Now I'm just an old, boring, balding, teetotaler that stays with his kid all the time and doesn't know what the fuck to do when he's not taking care of him.

I've tried to go out before when Max was spending the night somewhere. I've called up some of my beyond 'Big Lebowski' burn-out friends that are still hittin' the clubs and bars and parties, trying to impress little, hottie girls half their age with TV and film credits from decades ago.

"Oh, you were that guy? I saw that when I was three."

"But I still look good, don't I, baby?"

"Kinda..."

All I do is stand in the corner and judge people so I don't feel so horribly insecure or to directly quote Dostoyevsky in, 'Notes From Underground'...

'I for instance am horribly insecure.'

"And all the rest of the crap stems from that," I say to Shnooky, as I yank my little Dostoyevsky paperback off the shelf with 'Notes...' and 'The Dream of A Ridiculous Man' and selections from 'The House of The Dead'. Not that I

finished any of them, twenty pages into his stories always put me in a tailspin.

Maybe I should stay in and read Dostoyevsky until I'm so bug-eyed disillusioned and despicably despairing, that I tear the pages out of the book with my teeth and gnaw on them while I throw myself on the floor and writhe around, groveling, sniveling, swallowing down his inked words, spitting out the chewed up pieces of saliva soaked paper all over myself until I burst into hopeless hilarity.

Who am I kidding? Like I'm some expert on Dostoyevsky. Did I read 'Crime And Punishment'? Did I read 'The Idiot'? I'm the idiot. I'm the fucking idiot here aren't I? I feel like some delusional, sad sack he would have written about. No, he wouldn't have even bothered. How could I have counted on those things to happen? Again, I got caught up in it. Again!

Oh shit, the self-hatred is seeping in. Oh, damn, I am feeling this. Here it comes. Oh, no. I have to put my hand over my face and close my eyes. Please go away. Please go away.

The phone rings. I couldn't get any worse news so I pick it up.

"Yeah..."

"Dude, ready to hit a strip club?"

"Corey, no, I'm havin' a little meltdown here."

"Dude, let's celebrate. I booked that job!"

"What job?"

I know what job but I just want to hear him say it so I can feel the dagger of despair plunging in deeper.

"That farmer job. I booked it!"

"Good...good for you Corey, I gotta go."

"Dude, stop bummin' and come to the Star Strip on La Cienega, you need to get out."

"Fuck you."

I hang up on him.

So it did get worse. Great. I'm really reveling in it now. What other pain can I gather? I punch in Carolina's number. No longer in service. Her mother's number. No longer in service. The whole family lives with that guy now. Yep. He made his move. He made his commitment. I couldn't do it. I blew it with her. I just kept thinking, it's not gonna work, it's not gonna work, it's not gonna work...and it didn't.

Am I ever gonna find the right woman for Max and me? Have I tried? Have I really tried to find someone to be with since Keri died? No, just a few months with this one here, a few months with that one there and in-between...nothing. So there, I have more pain now. I am so

deep in the shit of pain that there is no escape. What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?

I know what to do. I know how to get through this. I know the solution...

Get quiet and pray. Yes.

I open my little prayer book and read the daily meditation... *This is the time for my spirit to touch the spirit of God. I know that the feeling of the spirit-touch is more important than all the sensations of material things. I must seek a silence of spirit touching with God. Just a moment's contact and all the fever of life leaves me. Then I am well whole, calm...*

And as I'm reading this I drop to my knees, feeling in my soul that this is right, this is what I needed, this is perfect. And my eyes drift to an old LA weekly on the floor. Maybe I'll just go to a movie, I think as Shnooky snuggles up to me and licks my face.

Maybe you should just stay on your knees and pray a little longer Daddy.

"Stop it, I'm fine," I say as I set the meditation book back on the shelf and pick up the paper.

As soon as I stand up, I feel like I'm on my way to some sort of hell but it's just a tiny little glimmer of a flame, nothing to pay attention to. So I flip to the movie

section like I'm really gonna go see one then I realize I can't go to a movie because this paper is a month old. Who knows which ones are playing anymore? Right? I laugh a sick, helpless laugh like... Who are you kidding? I look at Shnooky and say, "Did I laugh like that?" I keep flipping through to the theater section. She looks at me very concerned.

Oh, boy, daddy. Put the paper down.

I wave her off and stop on the page where they have 'Pick Of The Week' and other recommended plays. Stupid 'Pick Of The Week' I remember when my play was pick of the week. *Big fuckin' deal, keep flippin' the pages. You know where you wanna go.*

I rip through the music section with page after page of concerts and clubs and bands and bands and bands. "Jesus, this is a hard business," I say. "Ian Hunter from 'Mott The Hoople'? He's still playin'? Joe Cocker? Holy shit, and they're playin' little clubs now. They used to be huge in my day. How do any of these bands make it? So many. So many, Shnooky. Let's see...what's on the next page? Shall we?"

Daddy, you're in trouble.

But I'm already there, in the back pages, staring at all the strippers in all the ads for all the clubs. Full

nude, live nude, totally nude, lap dance, couch dance...cock rub...

Well I don't read that but I imagine it and I imagine this is how I'm gonna get fixed. Fuck it. Do it. Get it over with and call it a night.

Don't meet Corey, though? No. I'll go where nobody knows me. Yeah, I'll go to a club in the Valley, deep in the Valley. And now my mind is just immersed in perversion. Deep in the Valley of her pussy, her sweet little shaved pussy, I push my tongue in further and further and further until I feel the rivers of cum running down then I take out my big throbbing cock and...

"Ah, fuck, I am in trouble, Shnook," I say. "But it's too late. So don't bug me. Lie down and shut up."

When did I breathe last? Oh, my head is getting full, fillin' up with it. Maybe I'll just call in some young slut to give me a half-assed back rub and jerk me off. I got at least three hundred cash in the drawer and money in the bank and a bank card incase I need extra for a blow job or a fuck and as I'm saying, "This is bad, this is bad, this is bad," I'm already looking through those ads...

Horny Red head, Busty Blonde, Brown Sugar, Asian babe, Latin Lolita...Hotties, hotties, hotties, all dripping wet and ready to go. In call/out call 24/7...

And then onto the pages with all the mini headshots and sexy names and one-line enticements and I focus on a pouting purse-lipped brunette with wicked, fuck me eyes... *'Tia. Exotic Eurasian with a tight little package for your big one. Outcall only.'* Oh, Christ, I already feel so inundated with smut sick... but I have the phone in my hand and I'm calling.

"Whaddya need, pal?"

"Pack of Lucky Strikes and some matches, please." And I'm staring at all the liquor bottles on the shelf, thinking, not yet but I could be back for one as I pay for the smokes and rip the pack open right there on the counter.

"You...ah, got a trash can for the wrapper?"

"I'll take it pal, you look like you're in a serious hurry."

"Yeah...thanks," I say and I stick a cigarette in my mouth, light it on the way out of the liquor mart, taking deep drags to make up for lost time. Then I just leave it dangling between my lips like I never quit and hop in the car. *What am I doing? What am I doing? What am I doing?* And that's my mantra all the way to the bank machine where I draw out three more hundred and head back to the apartment to get ready for Tia. And what a stupid John I was on the phone.

"Can she give a good massage too? I mean if I want one?"

"Of course she can, honey. What's your address?"

"And she's the girl in the picture?"

"Yeah, honey, of course. What's your address?"

I get home and clean up, chain smoking, ignoring Shnooky's pleading looks to come to my senses. I vacuum the bedroom like a madman, rip the sheets off my mattress, put on new ones, straighten Max's blankets out on his bed, hide Keri pictures in the drawers...No. I can't do it in here. I rip the sheets off the mattress and bring em' into the living room to toss over the crusty couch pillows. The place is a mess. *So...ah, yeah, Tia, I'm back and forth from my new my house in the hills I'm rebuilding and I kinda let my kid live here on his own...and I can't believe the god damn maid didn't clean this week...*

Shut up. Who cares? Tia is a whore, coming over to get you off, get paid and leave or get paid, get you off and leave. They always get paid first. You know that. You whored yourself. Didn't you? Remember the ménage with that porn actress you were working with, Kelly I think it was, and the wife of the ex-police captain of Greenwich Connecticut, while he watched nude with his captain's hat on and smoked free-base? He paid five hundred up front for both of you.

And then he took his billy club out and tried to handcuff you to the iron bedpost? Too much cocaine for the old captain. He was scary high. Good thing Kelly talked him down. That would have been a real mess. You were a real mess back then. Why are you doing this now? Shut up. Sweep the floor. Take the trash out. Make the place decent. It will all be over in an hour. Man, smoking these Luckies is making me sick. Sure, light another one.

I get the place decent enough, take the trash around to the dumpster behind the building and as I'm walkin' back up to the street, I see this girl get out of the passenger side of a black, Chevy Impala with tinted windows that's doubled parked in front of my car. When she looks up at the building, I can see from the streetlight that she has long, frizzy brown hair, really bad skin and sloppy balloon sized boobs under some flimsy, cheap pink, lingerie top. She leans back into the car to say something to the driver. I see the short, black skirt hike up over her thick, fleshy legs in torn fishnets with black garters going up to her huge ass cheeks, separated by a stretched out red thong. Are those pimples on her ass?

Oh, no, this can't be her. Oh, come on. I don't want to hurt her feelings but I can't do this. Good. I'm over it now. It was meant to be like this so I wouldn't have to do

it. I'm just going to tell her before the driver pulls away.

"Excuse me," I say as I walk up to her. "Are you supposed to be Tia?"

"What do ya mean, supposed to be?" she says. The accent is street harsh and hateful. "I am Tia. You Dave or David or whatever from number three?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's me but..."

"Well, you wanna go upstairs?"

"Ah...wait...I mean you don't look anything like the picture."

"Haven't you heard of advertising mothafucka?"

I hear a deep voice from inside the Impala say, "What's wrong Maria?"

"I thought you said you were Tia?" I say.

"Tia. Maria. Do you really give a shit what my name is? Now are we gonna go upstairs or what? Because if not, I want you to pay me. I didn't come all the way up here for nothin'."

I can tell behind it all her feelings are hurt and she knows I think she's ugly but I'm not gonna have a heart to heart honest share about it. No. It's not gonna work like that. And now I see some neighbors looking out of their windows.

"Listen, I'll give you twenty dollars for your trouble."

"Twenty?"

"Okay, forty. Look I'll give you sixty bucks, okay."

"I want my three hundred dollars."

"I don't have three hundred dollars."

"Then you can talk to Gus" And she hits the side of my car as she yanks her door open, gets in and slams it shut.

"Hey, that's my car," I say as this enormous kinda White/Black/Mexican looking mix of a monster in a purple sweat-suit gets out of the Impala and strolls over to me.

"Nice ride, new Four-Runner limited," he says. "And you tellin' me you ain't got three hundred dollars?" I'm thinkin' he's gonna put his fist through the window or through my head so I say, "Look, I have the three hundred, it's just that..."

He smiles, puts his tree trunk arm around me and leans into my ear. "Listen, man, I know your situation. You called for Tia and you got Maria."

"Yeah, exactly," I say.

"And Maria ain't exactly no Tia," he says.

"Exactly..."

"Well," he says, "Because most dudes don't give a shit. The girl shows up, they ready to go...know what I'm

sayin'. Now you, you're picky. I can respect that. So exactly what do you want?"

I can't say that I want him to get his big purple sweat-suit ass back in the car and drive the fuck away so I just say, "Um..." and he says, "Now you ain't gonna get nothin' that looks like Tia for three hundred, I mean that's like saying you're gonna get Angelina Jolie for three hundred. Understand? Tia is hot. Tia is fine. Tia is two thousand dollars, my friend."

"Yeah, that's... I can't do that," I say.

"Okay then brother, we understand each other. Now this is what I can do. I can get you a girl a step up from Maria, a big step up for the same three hundred, which, I am going to have to take from you now..."

And I see I'm getting' ripped off here in a nice way by a big guy that wouldn't hesitate to just snap my arm like a twig if I didn't play along...so I play along.

"Okay, send another girl."

"And you like em' more on the slender side, right?" he says as he holds out his hand as big as a plate. I put the three hundred in it.

"Yeah, slender will be cool," I say.

"Yo, those Lucky Strikes you smokin'?"

"Ah, yeah..."

"Give me one of those, brother," he says. So I give him one and he holds it between his sausage-sized fingers and looks at it admiringly. "My old man used to smoke Luckies," he says. Then he pops it in his mouth. "Give me a light." I light it. He takes a deep drag and coughs out half of it.

"Damn, that's a real mans' cigarette," he says and he gives me a wink before he gets back in the car. Maria flips me the finger as they drive away.

Although it was meant to be, I can't accept it anyway and have to take it further down, down, down.

"So you're doin' okay then?"

"Yeah, dad of course I'm okay," and I hear Leo's and some other kids' excited conversation and laughter in the background and music playing."

"What have you guys been doing?"

"Dad..."

"Just tell me, please."

"Ya know, skateboarding, some artwork..."

"Leo's mom make you dinner?"

"She doesn't make dinner dad, the cook makes dinner."

"But she eats with you."

"Yes, dad..."

"What did you have?"

"Dad, Jesus, we had some pasta."

"What kind?"

"I don't know, meat-sauce..."

"Better than mine?"

"Come on Dad, no, okay. Can I go now?"

I hear a girl giggling right next to the phone.

"Is that Carla next to you?"

"Dad, stop being a pervert."

"Don't call me that! Ever again!"

"Dad, calm down."

"Just don't call me that."

"Okay, dad. I'm sorry. I gotta go, okay..."

And it's just my heavy breathing into the phone and silence on his end with music and laughter in the background and I know he's waiting for me to let him go back to his fun, back to his life, back to not worrying about me.

"Okay" I say, "I'm sorry too. I'm glad you're having a good time over there. I love you."

"Love you too, dad. Bye."

I hang up the phone and now, in my wretched rationalization, it's all right for me to take the other three hundred from the drawer and head to a strip club. And as I grab the dough and the car keys, Shnooky sits by the door and gives me a last pleading look. *Why do you have to go? Why?*

"I can't talk. I can't talk," I say. Don't even look at me." And I walk out.

I'm on the 170 North into the Valley before I'm even conscious of it. Just get it done. Just get it done. Just get it done. *Just get what done?* Can't hear that voice, sorry. Here, off the Sherman way exit. West? Yeah, the little map on the ad showed it was west. Good. I remembered the directions. Don't wanna get lost and freak out. I'm that close, I feel it. Tense and hell bent.

It's fuckin' ugly out here, dank and foggy, nothin' but crap fast food joints and salvaged auto parts. Better that way. I feel ugly too. And I see the big, grey cement warehouse on the corner with neon pink, green and black on the walls. Totally Nude. Video tapes. Talk Booths. Show Girls. Pussy, ass and tittie parts. Where do I park? They got a drive-in garage with free valet parking. No thanks. Better I park down the street for a quick getaway. Get away from what? *Get away from yourself.* Shut up.

I park halfway down the dark, dismal street with fences and barbed wire on either side. I walk up to the strip club, with the name 'Déjà vu' in big black letters on the entrance marquee. Now if that isn't perversely profound, as if it's screaming at me...*you've already been*

*here in your life, Dave, understand? Already been, get it?
Go home.*

But it blows by with the stank night breeze as I walk up, pay the pink-haired, pimple faced girl at the door with the pin-head muscle bound bouncer next to her, twenty for the cover and two drink minimum.

'Comfortably Numb' by Pink Floyd is soaring out of the sound system as I see past the DJ booth and revolving disco balls hanging down to the flood lit, mirrored stage where a tall, tanned skinny girl with stringy, bleached blonde hair and fake softball sized tits, slinks around on six inch platform heels caressing the three shiny dance poles like they are all huge cocks under her control.

She looks as stoned as the song suggests. The black fluorescent lights shine down from the ceiling so her tiny, white thong glows purple as she glides it down over her tight, tattooed ass cheeks like she could care less about the guys sitting around the edge of stage, leering and jeering and tossing dollar bills down. I feel a lump in my throat. Run or be sucked in. Run or be sucked in. Run or be sucked in. And I just stand there as she squats down, legs spread, on the edge of the stage and idly fondles with her shaved pussy. *I'm so bored and stoned. I bet Dave is the*

only one that could really fuck me, really fuck me long and hard...

And now I'm sitting down at one of the cheap fake wood tables on a fake red velvet chair, my eyes fixed on her, mesmerized with all the other desperate horn dogs in the dark as she licks her fingers, draws them across her nipples, gives her ass a soft slap then crawls around scooping up the bills.

The wannabe radio DJ barks out from the booth, "Let's hear it for Samantha!" as she slinks off the stage and I stay for the next dancer and the next song and the flat club soda in the orange fluorescent drink cup that the waitress brings over looking odd just because she has clothes on and I slap down a ten-dollar tip from my roll of three hundred in her palm like I'm some big shot with all my lap dance moola while my head is screaming, I'm so sick of you, you *stupid motherfucker!* And I remember someone once told me if you don't think you are supposed to be somewhere, ask God to come with you and if God says, "No," then you aren't supposed to be there. So God is not here...and who the fuck do I think I'm listening to?

So I sit there sucked in and girls come and go and dance and strip to rock and rap and rave and trip hop as the DJ calls them out; Summer, Honey, Ikira and Fiona who

tweaks around to some crazed computerized outer space beat with a Satanic background female vocal repeating, "Do you know how I feel when I fuck on cocaine?" over and over and over and it's so intense it scares me but makes me wanna go there too and lap dances are offered but I'm not ready, not ready to be humiliated and cum in my pants or not get hard at all or what ever the fuck I think might happen back in the forbidden fantasy rooms. Definitely not just a good time, a fun time, a lusty happy few minutes with a young sexy stripper. No, no, no, for me it's way more serious. I'm on a mission run by the monster that has taken over, leaving me way, way, way in the back seat.

"Put your hands together for Holly!" the DJ says and I come back to focus to see, a gymnast's figure with a gangster snarl in a school girl outfit, skipping out to a song by the band 'Sublime' and I know it's one of Max's favorites but I can't remember the name and I think of calling him up while Holly grabs a dance pole and swings around it then locks her hard brown thighs on, shimmies up and hangs upside down while her plaid skirt flops over her tight stomach and shows her bare ass that has hot red and lime day glow streaks painted on each cheek and I'm staring, eyes hooded and biting my lip feeling like

Agualung, feeling like Steppenwolf, feeling like a dirty old man, feeling like...

I go off in my head again when I'm sixteen, in my old house at two in the morning and I'm in my bedroom peaking on chocolate mescaline and I have a black light buzzing deep florescent purple on the ceiling painted with day-glow stars and spaceships. I'm with my girlfriend Holly. Her name was Holly and we're listening to 'Good Morning Little Schoolgirl' by the band, 'Ten Years After.' We're sixty-nining and as she's giving me a long, slow psychedelic blow-job, I'm licking her pussy and finger painting her ass cheeks with red and lime day-glow. Red and lime day glow. And everything is throbbing and throbbing and throbbing. Then I start to cum and as I feel myself cuming and melting and melting and cuming, I lift my head because I think my eyes are rolling completely around in circles. Then I see that the bedroom door is cracked open and my father is standing there with his hand stuck in his plaid pajamas, biting his lip, watching with hooded eyes, the same hooded eyes that I'm watching with my hand on my...

"Wanna dance?"

"Huh?"

"A lap dance?"

I get up, destined to my own doom.

"No, I need a lot more than a lap dance," I say and as I walk out she calls behind me, "Fine, I hope you find it, ya old freak."

I'm in the car and it's started to rain. I'm headed downtown to push the sick blood passed on to me from my father out of my veins, the only way I ever knew how. It's a done deal now. What was I waiting for anyway? And that demon voice in my head says, *Come on, Dave, we knew it would come to this...*

I'm off the ramp at Alvarado like a 'Skinner's Rat' finding his way back through the maze even though it's been years and years, the behavior is still ingrained, etched so deep and yeah, I have a cigarette dangling from my lips and my 'Coltrane Plays The Blues' CD on because it makes everything feel so much more perfectly desperate with the rain coming down harder and the lights reflecting on the wet slick, black, garbage strewn street.

I feel a nauseous comfort like I'm coming home to hell again as I drive past the Hollywood Express Inn, over Beverly Boulevard, past the Winchell's Doughnuts and the Royal Viking Hotel where my friend Bobbie overdosed. I cross over Third Street and come on down the hill towards the infamous drug haven of downtown, MacArthur Park, which

I only knew from a song by the actor Richard Harris when I was a kid growing up in New York.

It was some drippy acid love poem he was reciting to orchestra music, some Hippie shit and I scream out over the wailing saxophone, "MacAuthur Park is melting in the rain..." and I know there are tears in my eyes because the emotions have to build and build and build until I stick the needle in my vein...right, I mean that's how it is supposed to go and I look through my tears, through the smoke, through the windshield wipers fending off the pelting torrents as I come up on Sixth Street.

I'm lookin' for a dealer to buy some bags or balloons or foil or whatever the fuck they're selling the heroin in these days but the park seems vacant and the sidewalks are empty and it looks like nobody is out on the filthy street, save a drenched bum or two pushing a shopping cart. Why can't I find one? Maybe they won't come up to the new Toyota Four-runner as quick as they did to my beater Plymouths and Dodges in the old days. If I was in the Scamp they'd be racing up to me, coming out of the building stairwells or wherever they hide in the fucking rain I think and I'm pissed off that I'm in a new car and it doesn't even seem odd that I am because all I want is the dope, the dope, the dope.

I pull over and sit and watch and wait, desperate, crying and smoking and the jazz playing and me knowing this is really it, I'm really gonna do it, I'm gonna cop as many bags as I can and go back to the Royal Viking and get loaded and maybe I'm gonna stop and maybe I'm gonna blow through all that money in the bank for weeks on end until I hear Bobbie callin' my name and I hear a cool whisper in the back of my head... *Max will be fine. He can live with Leo's family. They love him, Laurie said they did. He'll be better off without you...*

I shut Shnooky completely out like she never even existed. I have to. Shnooky. No! Don't think of her. Shnooky. No! Don't think of her. There is no Shnooky. There is no Shnooky. There never was...

The rain plummets down as I sit and wait in desperation for my destiny with demise. Oblivion. Obliteration. Blot it all out. Better for me to die... It feels so intense and so dramatic that it makes me think of a scene, a scene I wrote in the movie about Max and me.

Keri's friends have gotten together and decided I'm not fit to bring him up by myself because I'm just too crazy to cope and they call in the child welfare department and put pressure on me. I have to give Max to Keri's friend, Barbara, until I get a job, a place to live and get

it together or I will lose him for good. I can't get it together and I can't cope. So in the scene, I drive down to Alvarado and Sixth Street to buy some heroin and fucking show them with an overdose. It's afternoon. It's not raining and I don't have Coltrane on. I have the Rolling Stones, 'Monkey Man' blasting out of a cheap cassette deck. I'm not crying, I'm in a furious rage, tearing through traffic, honking my horn..

I start to think, this is so much more heart wrenching and painful the way it's happening now, with the rain and the jazz in the wee hours on the empty street. There is no dope to be found. Much more dramatic! I should go home and re-write that scene. It would make it a much better movie.

Then it hits me. How fucking absurd is that? I'm ready to die and I'm thinking of how to re-write that scene.

"God help me...please. God help me."

I get surge of warmth through my body stronger and more pure than any drug, followed by laughter and tears and more laughter and more tears because now I hear a chorus of voices; my mom, Keri and even my father saying..

Go home, go home, Dave, go home..

Tapping on my window is a bug-eyed Mexican kid, in a soaked black bandanna, LA Raider's jersey and baggy jeans,

holding an umbrella in one hand and some of what I know is dope clenched in the other. But I'm safe now.

"Hurry up, hurry up, whaddya need?" he says, looking up and down the street with frantic jerks of the neck. I hand him the rest of my pack of Luckies and say, "Nothing, nothing man, take these..."

I'm back home like it was all a bad dream, walking through the door. Shnooky is jumping up with her paws on my legs and I'm bending down and holding them with my hands as she whimpers and kisses my face...

Oh daddy, oh daddy, oh daddy...

"It's okay, Shnooky, it's okay...I'm okay now."

Early the next morning we go for a run up Bronson Canyon. The stream is rushing with white water and the dirt trail is a deeper brown from the last night's rainfall, and the wild grass and plants on either side are covered with thousands of tiny, diamond droplets with rainbow colors shooting through them as they glisten under the warming sun and the hills are every shade of green with dots of yellow daisies and mustard flowers blooming and as Shnooky stops to sniff and pee, I reach out and wipe my hand over some tall, sweet fennel...

May I please, Mother Nature?

Of course, my son, of course...

I bring my hand to my face and christen it with the water from the heavens and take in deep breaths of the cleansed air and I know, I know, I know deep into my soul that I have been granted another reprieve as we continue up the trail, and the birds sing and the bunnies hop and the lizards scurry and it is a glorious spring day.