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THE AUTHOR

CHAPTER 1

WET HOT

FAMOUS

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by

The Author

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CHAPTER I

wet hot famous

xxx

The car ahead signaled toward the shoulder and parked halfway onto the dirt. Reflexively I followed, nerves hopped and hacked, and didn't look to my right and didn't turn around. Horns honking but I didn't hear them. Time had dilated to an impractical expanse, so big I was sure the whole world had died like one great big engine death and left us here in this stillborn disappointment. Is that what happens when time grows? Not passes but grows. Everything hushes to a pause. Like the breath between a laugh.

I could not move. The car was doing the work for me, maneuvering to the side of the road, parking itself just behind the one I'd hit. Another narrator might describe these few seconds as the shape of panic, but I'd never read that fucking guy's story. And perhaps the world had not died; perhaps I was just experiencing some sort of systemic vasoconstriction due to the excessive cocktail of party drugs administered over the past twenty hours.

My cheeks burned hot. Sweat cried from my forehead. I tried to open the door, my hand making to grip the handle, but looking down I was still clutching the wheel. If a camera were on my face, and I always imagined there was, it might have caught the yawn of a smile. Through the windshield I saw a woman emerge from a silver Volkswagen hybrid under a big green road sign that read *No Exit*. She was a greying brunette with kind unassuming eyebrows; I guessed late forties

Her body inoffensively chubby, she exuded a sort of middle-class ordinariness that invites carnage. I muttered something unfair and horrible which I would later repeat when describing her to the people I called my friends.

She walked to the back of her car and bent over to inspect the area I'd driven into seconds ago. Apple bottom. Too many apple pies. I could feel myself getting hard and with a newfound vigor shucked myself free from the wheel, accidentally sounding the horn, which sent the woman down on her ass like some frightened rabbit fat with babies. No, it is not safe to litter here.

I was outside of the car now, delivered from its routineness. Instinctively I heard myself wrangling with the Hertz representative: I have no fucking idea, what dent? An armada of vehicles slowed to avoid me, a mere arm's length away, teasing at the inevitable. Hair blowing in the exhaust, California dreamin'. For a moment I considered taking a selfie and posting it on Instagram, counting by the thousands the number of *likes* this sort of perspective would award me while simultaneously lambasting each and every moron behind the thumbtap for contributing to the devaluation of an artform. If I died right then I'd be a celebrity by morning sun. A digital monument, no filter. I imagined the photo's composition: the light-shadow a premonition kissing through the background, a life described in retro vintage, the racing ghost of a Buick inches from sending me to that nowhere-destined place, the sunspot halo above my eyes. I wouldn't blink, I told myself. What would my eyes say? What would you say seeing them?

I imagined my face posted across the internet, all the friends I'd posthumously accumulate—come with me, I want to take you with me—and at once understood the psychology of a ghost: it's not the sticking around that's attractive. I considered living forever in a digital medium, celebrated exclusively

for my death, almost like James Dean but without the proof; the wistful clichés—*He had so much potential*—redressing the failure I'd been while alive. Then I imagined an old beaten truck operated by a deadbeat degenerate driving fuck-all-to-hell down the 405 swerve to barely miss me and slam into this poor woman, a victim of my narration, effectively terminating both the claimant and witness of a crime that had surely been imagined but not yet proven.

But a horn blasted. I'd nearly wandered beyond the white divider line. You too buddy, I thought and waved at the honking. The seizure of recycled air, the exhaust tornadoing like junk hollow tribal music. Dizzy. I was dizzy. I steadied myself, peering into the tinted car window to see whether my appearance might pass for sober, my starry details eclipsed by an epic comedown of nuclear proportions. I promised my reflection not to lose my shit.

I then proceeded to lose my shit. Tears tasted in my mouth as I hustled toward the woman, feigning a noticeable limp for no reason other than to elicit sympathy. My legs were fine. In fact I was in tremendous shape and, despite indulging in a daily regimen of prescription amphetamines prescribed for someone else, never got sick. I shouted or half-attempted language or cried like the doleful pilgrim I was and took the woman by her hands.

“Your leg,” she said. “Are you all right? Are you hurt? Should I call 9-1-1?”

Absolutely not!

I winced and rubbed my knee just like I did that time in second grade when Randy Hicks slide-tackled me from behind, cleats up, to stop my breakaway. One goal away from scoring a hattrick. Head down, I gingerly walked off the soccer

field, sucking my cheeks, crushed that I couldn't win your adulation. Who were you? I didn't know then but I always felt your presence. Like an imaginary friend always keeping score.

Exasperated, I said—was surprised to hear myself say—my mother had just been in a terrible car accident near her home in Santa Monica, right next to the Hotel Shangri-La. I paused in disbelief. I hadn't prepared for such a lie, and, anxious I'd now have to commit to this undeveloped plot I was wildly unfit to narrate, I managed to shut myself up to see where this woman might take it. Her eyes softened.

“Oh dear. Oh no. Are you serious?”

Just look at me!

“I'm rushing over now,” I said. “She's barely breathing, they said.” Who *they* were was immaterial. What mattered was that this woman's experience of my experience of my mother's life hanging by a fucking thread—an Oscar-worthy performance, I might add—should conjure the pretense of armies, doctors, religious heads, and Christ almighty rushing to her aid.

These were real tears.

That my mother lived in Long Island and had never even visited California was immaterial. In fact Mom hated the very idea of my moving to Los Angeles, an idea I'd recently floated multiple times while training at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting—if you count railing lines of adderall in the bathroom prior to scene study class *training*. No question, Mom's dying in Santa Monica would be

profoundly ironic because in a little over an hour I was to fly home to New York to celebrate her birthday and surprise everyone with the big news that I'd just been signed by my new agent Harrison at WME. Mom, I'm going to need your help (money) to ship my belongings across the country—Happy birthday!

I think I passed out. I must have because the woman grabbed me as I fell into the honking horns. The smell of gasoline was profound. Confessions, imitations, assurances spat from my mouth with a frazzled urgency that only infants appreciate, my gaze sufficiently schizophrenic.

She was at my side, the woman was literally at my side, propping me up for balance. My poor leg, I didn't know how I'd hurt it. As I sobbed and mewed I noticed myself confusing the two accidents, my mother's imagined crash and the actual consequence of the *tiny bump*, I'd call it, playing out before me, thereby assuming blame for the false tragedy of my mother's car-flipping inferno, severity escalating, blood on my hands. My mother's blood! The woman gasped in horror as if I'd just stabbed myself, *or her*—which, give me the knife, I thought—and pulled me into her fat bosom as would my own mother, petting my hair and whispering a lullaby of hushes. I was in a tizzy, she said. I needed to get my head straight. Everything's okay. Nothing's my fault. Okay?

Okay!

The totality of this exchange all but eclipsed my responsibility for the one true thing of this elaborate spectacle: that at eighty miles per hour I'd driven my rent-a-Mazda right into the back of some innocent woman's Volkswagen while jacked up on an indiscernible amount of cocaine to keep last night's roll going so I

could get on a plane that was leaving for New York in less than an hour with or without me. These were real tears.

“Calm down,” the woman said. She touched my face.

I looked into her eyes and experienced her experiencing me as the object of her future fantasies and how today’s scene would play in her mind repeatedly, indefinitely, with illimitable alternate endings and intimations of sequels to come. I rubbed her shoulder. She kissed my forehead. I kissed her cheek. “Go, your mother needs you,” she said and kissed me again. To you I dedicate this, my second attempt at a novel, I wanted to say but didn’t know how. She hugged me goodbye, slight pause before release. “Call me if you need anything.” She recited her number, perhaps expecting I’d take out my phone to save it, and dumpily made her way back to her car.

“Only a few scratches on the bumper. You can’t even notice!”

Did she say that or did I?

Day three in Los Angeles: put it in the books.

xxx

The day before the accident, my second day in Los Angeles, was a celebration.

I rolled face for hours. Dipped, licked, and snorted nearly an entire gram of mdma all by myself. It was Saturday. I arrived at The Standard Hotel twenty-five minutes late. The valet attendant tapped the window of my rental Mazda and

waved to roll it down. I did a keybump of coke and opened the door, expecting him to escort me into the belligerently cool hotel.

“Sorry, sir, but you’ll have to take your car to the valet down the block. This area is for private use only.” I glanced over at the Ferrari, the G-Wagon, the Porsche, and lit a cigarette.

Nothing a free baggie of high-grade amphetamines can’t solve, *am-I-right?*

He paused, checked to see if anyone was looking, and took the keys.

Inside danced with purple electric lights. The lobby gave the impression of an early James Bond film. Groovy but boutique, eccentric but sophisticated, museum-like: look but don’t touch. Several guests stood queued behind the large black laminated kiosk counters, boxed and framed by silver edging. A cool springtime funk played lightly overhead, synths and slappy bass. A man dressed in a white suit and black turtleneck, German-looking with cropped hair, pointed me in the direction of the obnoxiously yellow restaurant with 1960s-inspired seating. There I spotted Harrison’s very attractive assistant, who to my dismay must have been a lesbian, maybe some sort of activist. She said her name was Woolf.

“Two Os like Virginia and never forget it.”

“How could I? It’s nice to officially meet,” I said, attempting to hug her hello, which she did not reciprocate.

“You must have huge fucking balls,” she said, pride warming over me. “If you ever stand me up again, I’ll cut you out of your own dream. Do not kiss me,” she

deflected as I kissed her European.

I asked if she had a contract, which only made her laugh.

“Being a raging liar does not make you an actor. Don’t you people get that?”

I wanted to quote Alan Watts and say, “One's life is an act with no actor, and thus it has always been recognized that the insane man that has lost his mind is a parody of the sage who has transcended his ego”—but I couldn’t remember the quote exactly and instead said nothing, imbuing my silence with an air of incredulity, the truth so obvious that to respond would be insulting.

“Whatever. Let me know when you’re back from New York,” she said before giving me her number. “Never text me unless you have news. And never call me, period.” I was not invited to her table upstairs, she made sure to mention, because we were not friends and I’d already made her late. “The bullshit you pulled yesterday got you this meeting. I don’t know what Harrison sees in you, but it’s my job to develop you into something marketable. We have a long way to go.”

I blew kisses at her tanned slender back as she walked away. Then reached into my pocket and half-emptied the baggie of mdma straight into my mouth.

Showtime.

Today’s event was “Invite Only,” a private show for WME employees, celebrity clients, and industry scenesters featuring young DJs newly represented by the agency.

A group of pretty strangers were already in the elevator when I shouted to hold the door. “WME event?” I asked, marveling at the blood-orange ceiling.

The fashionable Italian dude in cotton button-down and Prada shades nodded.

“I like your vibe,” said the black chick with long braided hair. “What’s your sign?”

“Me? I’m straight.”

Everyone cracked up. I had no idea what she was talking about.

“No, your astrological sign.”

“Sorry, I’m from New York.” I told her my birthday.

“Sagittarius. Thought so.” She smirked. “I’m Pisces.”

She proceeded to educate me about myself, speaking passionately about my horoscope with the wild confidence of someone deeply confused, which, thanks to generous helpings of coke and molly, I found endearing. I gave her a hug as the elevator opened onto the rooftop, the day preternaturally bright and blue. I told these people I’d just been signed by WME, how my acting career was going to do wonders for my writing career. After many congratulations the older gent gave me his business card and said to the heavysset Latino dude with clipboard, “We’re all together.”

Just like that, I was in.

The Rooftop at The Standard consists of a giant swimming pool centering an expansive outdoor lounge: tiki bars and dance floors, that sort of thing. It was early yet, none of the featured DJs had started spinning. At that moment the pool was the party, not the music.

“We’re going to put our stuff in a locker,” the black chick said. I nodded along but lost them in the bathroom. They could have been anyone.

I spent the early part of the day walking laps around the pool. No one was swimming. Just a sea of translucent plastic cups pumping discordantly to the chimeric rhythm of shadowed bass seemingly sounding from some far-off place, as if another party was happening simultaneously on a different roof and we were listening to the residue of better fun.

There was no other party. This was the fun.

A cacophony of voices lily-padded among the participants, the loudest very obviously coming from the group of tourists splashing around below my feet. Interchangeable agents-in-training, I imagined, or worse, *lawyers*, and their posse of skinny fat girls who drank with unparalleled aggression. Now we’re one of the boys, now we can be loved. And would you believe it, they were my friends! I noticed a girl who worked in the mailroom at the New York office and knelt down to ask if she had a light; seamlessly, someone handed me a joint, already lit

My roll kicked up nice and clean as I cocktailed the molly with the coke I’d scouted from Craigslist the night before. A cool synthetic mist hovered in the air, a whiff of coconut. I bobbed my head and pretended to enjoy myself, my body relaxed with the conviction of a predator, Ray Bans on, locked and loaded. I tool

off my shirt, wrapped my phone inside, placed the bundle along with the pack of American Spirits on the ledge, and jumped in. Immediately I felt the confluence of stares, a phenomenon I'd grown accustomed to since losing all the weight. Or maybe it was the coke talking. I laughed idiotically, high-fived whomever, and made sure to acknowledge all the pretty people. Someone handed me a cup from which I drank indiscriminately, finishing its contents in one undergraduate chug. Then I helped some chick onto her boyfriend's shoulders and, exaggerating how much fun I was having—fist pumps and shoulder shrugs—casually floated back to the ledge. I'd successfully established a presence. I'd been absorbed.

There I perched and proceeded to smoke cigarette after cigarette, making sure not to get my hands wet, and spoke avidly if not fanatically to whomever would listen about my writing and the “State of Literature,” as it were, a bleak devolution toward dissolution in which the novel had been rendered obsolete in an age of digital reproducibility where social media was in the process of supplanting mass media which was in the process of supplanting the news.

“Culturally we're fucked but everyone knows that,” I said. “What no one's talking about is the over-commodification of language thanks to a digital commons underwritten by massive corporations that surreptitiously marketize its content and steal your data.” To no one in particular I gave what I thought was a rather brilliant, albeit damning, criticism of the unregulated capitalization of the internet and its devices, a prophesy of the world to come: how we'll soon bear witness to an emergent phenomena of consumption addicts and broadcast sluts for whom everything's shareable, sellable, and made to seem unbelievably urgent; how already there's no longer clear distinctions between art and advertisement, news and opinion, journalism and capitalism, public and private; how by collapsing modes of communication we're promoting the dumbing down of

language to nothing more than beanie baby hieroglyphics. “It’s fucking retarded!” I shouted with real anger, moved by my feeling moved. “Worst of all we’ve divested the novel of cultural impact. The novel no longer influences culture because you can’t stream it, tweet it, or scroll through it. Does anyone even *read* anymore?”

The guy to my left drank from his cup and slowly bobbed away.

I lit another cigarette and imagined fleeing into a romantic past to reengage an archaic artform, the novel, that one day with my pioneering, *if I dared*, could be invested with a new negative power that restored Literature’s maximal, albeit presently dormant, value. “Like a luxury good,” I heard myself say, exhaling the blue gorgeous smoke. “I just can’t find the time to write. Or I let myself get distracted. I’ve been thinking of going to creative writing school, whatever that is, to commit to a routine...”

The guy to my right asked what I was on and if he could have any. I let him dip into the sealed plastic baggie of mdma I’d carefully secured in the small velcro inner pocket of my spandex capris. He threw up a high-five and said, “Epic,” and told me he knew some chicks who would give us some coke. I followed him out of the pool.

Over the course of the next however many hours I smoked the entire pack of cigarettes, telling myself as I lit each one that I’d quit at the beginning of the new month, and at some point noticed I’d finished most of the molly in the little baggie. This seemed improbable, certainly precarious. One hundred milligrams is enough to chrysalis, two hundred to butterfly—at nearly seven hundred

milligrams, save for what I'd shared, I wasn't sure what I was in for, but I knew it'd be *Epic*.

I proceeded to make out with two lesbians, tell three girls I loved them, and promise so many guys we'd hang out tomorrow, saving their numbers and labeling them by the shared experience: Coke Dude, STandard Hotl, and so on. Eventually I bought Woolf a drink with money I did not have, hoping to catch her around, but drank half of it before realizing I wouldn't find her anyway. Everything was excruciatingly happy, burning livid under big baby sun reflecting white noise off the dark mirrored buildings just beyond the rooftop: tall commercial properties, the financial centers of Downtown Los Angeles. I imagined how my life would have turned out if I had been hired by one of the banks I'd peer-pressured myself into interviewing with before graduation. I pictured this alternate version of me in the building across the way looking down at the party, seeing my present self looking up, and, bemused, turning away in shame.

I must have looked lost, or gay, or both, because an older guy, a fag, came up to me and said, "Here baby, take these. Get you straightened out."

"What are they?"

"They're gre-aaaaat!!!!"

I pushed him aside or lapped his palm and saw a plush sofa nearby and floated over to talk to a group of strangers, realizing I'd forgotten my drinks. I kissed the nearest girl goodbye and found a large group of bikinis dancing in front of the DJ booth and fell into them and disappeared.

The day unraveled with intense disregard for personal space and private property I ingratiated myself with everyone I encountered, taking each stranger by the shoulders as if we'd been friends forever, pouring myself drinks from their expensive tables behind the velvet ropes, encouraged to have more.

I told everyone I was a writer, acting was more like my day job. I'd never acted in anything legitimate before, not unless you counted my entire life, and hadn't written a single paragraph since college but emphasized that I was hard at work on a novel. Saying it made it half true. In those moments of soul-swelling euphoria I believed myself capable of tremendous profundity, of writing works as timeless as Tolstoy's, as radical as Nabokov's, creating for myself a cult of personality like Hemingway's, and writing with such elegance and aplomb that F. Scott would shudder in his grave. Everyone thought my writing a novel was the "dopest" thing they'd ever heard because "who the fuck writes novels?" I must be "way smart" was their conclusion, and I encouraged more of that sort of talk. Then, in what seemed like practiced succession, the middle-aged Persian gentleman handed me a flute of champagne while the woman I interpreted to be his mistress, half his age, sporting ludicrously colossal sunglasses, fed me a keybump of coke. I kissed her forehead as she touched my chest as the girl to my left put a cigarette in my mouth while the girl from behind kissed my neck and, turning around, I discovered the girl was a man.

xxx

I found myself sprawled across a white soft waterbed encased by red plastic hollow. I didn't know where I was relative to the rest of the party nor how I had gotten there. All I could discern was that I was inside a pod, which to the best of my ability I'll describe as a plastic igloo that from the outside looked like a spade.

The smell of coconut was profound. I didn't know if I had just woken up or gone down, but the shade suggested of sleep and I gave in to the suggestion, my body liquefying into lazy currents of wow.

Three girls shared the pod bed with me, some towels thrown about. I blinked and smiled in appreciation of my fortune. Two of them were turned away and asleep or feigning to be, their thong bikinis dispelling imagination altogether, and I imagined them very much awake and trembling at the thought of me waking to find them. The third, the girl facing me, looked up and smiled. She kissed me hello in a manner that suggested I'd known her my entire life and that we were in love wasn't out of the question. I was positive I did not know her, positive we'd never met, though circumstance indicated otherwise. She looked down at the phone in her hand and began to read, piercing her brows in concentration as if my stirring had interrupted a prior engagement. Instinctively I reached for my phone, but it wasn't on my person, and I was seized by an animal terror, panic accumulating in my throat, my eyes. If I'd lost it I would have no hope of finding my way back to the Airbnb, no proof of my whereabouts whatsoever; my presence in Los Angeles could only be verified by the virtual. Then I realized she was holding it, and now I knew exactly what was going on here. She was reading selections from my undergraduate novel, which a few years prior I'd turned in as my senior honors thesis like the pretentious shit I was. While studying abroad my junior year I had the idea—as if I were the first aspiring author who had this idea—to write a contemporary version of *The Sun Also Rises*, which had had a profound effect on me. My protagonist would flee his former life, including his education, and find himself anew in an old world bereft of standardized expectations, a romanticized Europe suited to an artist. The novel would be autobiographical but fictionalized—“autofiction” is a genre now popularized by the likes of Karl Ove Knausgaard, Ben Lerner, and Rachel Cusk that at the time

I believed, mistakenly (retardedly), I was pioneering—and contain a series of slightly veiled transpositions. Instead of suffering physical castration like Hemingway’s Jake Barnes, my protagonist’s castration would be psychological, an overt nod to contemporary institutions’ gelding of modern man. I’d change names of friends: my roommate Scott would become Justin; my best friend Doug would become Andrew; my new girlfriend, truly the love of my life, would become “you,” the second-person singular who, I hoped, would scale into the second-person plural, a poetic dedication to all my future readers; and so on. I worked on the novel for a year, almost fanatically, and submitted the fifty-five-thousand-word manuscript a few weeks before graduation, my proudest moment to date. But instead of acknowledging my naivete and tossing the novel in the proverbial can, chalking it up to a good experience to learn from its extreme failures, I leaned into my naivete and spent the following two years post-graduation reworking it, earnestly believing I had something publishable. I ended up rewriting the novel so many times I eventually lost all sense of direction, then taste, then one sad sober morning I realized I’d only made it worse.

“You?” the girl said distractedly, reading the words on the screen.

I’d pulled this sort of stunt before, made myself “vulnerable,” something I “never did”—playing to my reader’s whims, typically a beautiful woman I wanted to bed but couldn’t because I was in a “committed” relationship—and reluctantly shared my “work,” which conveniently I kept saved on my smartphone.

I nodded with feigned embarrassment.

Say that it worked, was working, because unprovoked she began to read aloud, auratic and serious she was, selected lines of a Spanish woman featured in the

story:

“The heart divines its own spirit. It is the creator and the created. The heart decides but it does not choose. It sees the truth that the head cannot and the head often betrays the heart for its own fascination. The head allows many ugly promises to enter the body but they are false prophets and forgotten just as easily if allowed to disappear and if not allowed then they are devoured and digested by the heart which is immune to such ugliness.”

As I listened I could hear myself in her voice and to my surprise gripped her leg as if to say I was proud of her recitation, when actually I was proud of myself.

“The head makes reasons against the heart,” she continued as I inched closer, feeling myself getting hard. “The head is selfish and fractured and interested by what is not there, and the heart holds no capacity for imagination because its yearning is real and claimable and must be taken, to distinguish the loneliness from what’s not there, it must be taken, it must.” Suddenly she threw down the phone with superfluous intensity and told me I was brilliant, that my words described her thoughts, thoughts she’d never shared with anyone, thoughts I’d articulated better than she herself ever could, and she kissed me in a way I could not possibly write but would attempt to anyway, just like I’m doing now. She kept reading aloud and thereafter I couldn’t tell if she was speaking as the woman in the story or as herself, whoever she was, a broken mix of Spanish and English underscored by demonstratives. I experienced the girl experiencing herself captured in the present tense of the story’s action, even though it was written in the past tense, suffusing herself with romantic idealizations of the moments to come as if already they’d been written (they had), her fate already determined—similar to an actress viewing a performance of herself. There was nothing to do

but take it in. The potential for total transfiguration was a grant each moment could draw upon, we were imbued with a power of suggestion beyond ourselves, the immediacy of which rendered us powerless. We had to have it.

She fed me a lick of mdma, which I sucked clean off her finger, and I reciprocated the drug as she sucked mine. She looked Portuguese but could have been Persian or Greek or indeed Spanish, her dark hair streaked gold and her skin of the same denomination, which I touched and held and again kissed deeply. Pulling away, drawn into the iceblue frost of her eyes frantically searching into the depths of my own for what I did not know, frostbitten I was.

She pushed me down and straddled me like a murderer, and I held on, held her a the fold of her hip, the soft tissue over taut fabric, my fingers tucking under the elastic of her bikini. I half sat up onto my elbows and cupped her mouth and asked who she was, perhaps a model or actress, someone recognizable, someone celebrated for being recognized. She brushed away my hand and laughed like I'd already asked, and just then I remembered I had. You've seen this girl while driving down Sunset Boulevard, her giant face postered alongside the Andaz. You've seen her in magazines. You've jerked off to her Google images, if you're anything like me.

She told me my words were more beautiful than her face and my face more beautiful than my words. I had no reciprocal compliment prepared and asked, audibly this time, if she were real. She didn't know what I meant. I told her she looked like the woman I had written in my undergraduate novel, the one she was reading. "As if I had written this woman with you in mind before I knew who you were, before I knew you were real."

Real? she asked but only with her eyes as she took my hand and placed it over her heart, my cock cramping inside my unconscionably tight, unconscionably expensive Lululemon spandex—for which I have no explanation other than my ass looked good and my legs long.

What I actually wanted to say but didn't know how was that I was creating her for *you*, a reader who by reading is participating in the creation of a fiction that, in the act of reading, comes alive, steps off the page. How do I say it? How can I explain that I'm imagining her just as you are now? Bound by the constraints of narration, how can I communicate that we're all in this story together? I did not know how to describe it. And I don't, still.

I told her she was the muse of my dreams, the fantasy delivered. Just ridiculous. Then she kissed me as if never again would it happen and we lay put like that, crouched and fetal, for I don't know how long.

One of the other girls woke, or pretended to wake, and lit a joint. Would you believe it, it was Woolf! I wanted to thank her for inviting me into her circle, wanted to say something profound or disarming, to say anything at all—but I couldn't. It was dark now as my girl passed me the joint and the consideration of night seemed impossible. Time was shrinking, not speeding up, that was what we were doing. I was about to hand the joint back to its originator but already it was gone, in fact it had been extinguished long ago. The girl took my hand outwardly extended to no one and led us from the pod. I waved goodbye to Woolf, who smiled at me with affection in her eyes. But no, she was laughing. And then I saw why. It was my erection, ballooning through the spandex like a Hess Truck, despite all odds, despite all the amphetamines. I emptied the rest of the mdma from the baggie onto my tongue.

Outside was warm under the lights, Downtown lit up around our spinning top so many stories high. The party had transitioned into night, bad electronic music playing from somewhere above or beyond—loud, hollow, synthesized. I ran over to a group of girls smoking cigarettes and, unable to control the volume of my voice, asked if I could have one. They had obviously just arrived, their short skirts and heels showing off night attire, whereas I was still in my bathing suit or whatever you'd call it. One of them made a joke about my wardrobe or lack thereof, and I said I'd take off my spandex and run ass naked into the pool if she gave me a smoke, which she did, then I asked for another, only to be shooed off. I stumbled away and found my girl, who didn't say anything, just sort of frowned and looked away from the skirts. Just then I considered the possibility that she might not speak English after all, at least not fluently; her performance earlier might have been just that, a performance. First striking me as preposterous, this indulgence of the imagination quickly ingratiated itself into the realm of possibility and presented like a winning lottery ticket. I didn't have to say anything, I thought. Her initial experience of my writing formed her impression of me as an author—*The Author*—someone only capable of marvelous speech that swelled with profundity with every utterance and non-utterance. Now my silence was an investment made for her imagination to appreciate. I didn't have to speak a word.

I communicated this thought with a kiss which, lacking all depth of feeling, felt amazing. She laughed and grabbed my hand and implored me to follow her to the bar. Flashes of impossible orange turned to flame and drizzle and then nothing all at once, color dissolving into a kaleidoscope of sepia and crawling zygotes, and with another flash orange returned. I opened my eyes and now I was sitting on, or sliding down, a rubber lounge chair. I didn't feel panicked so

much as retarded, incapable of making choices for myself. The girl pointed to the bar and made drinking gestures.

“Water. You wait,” she said.

I nodded, annihilated by her attempted English, and tried to say it was a good idea, I would be here, wherever this was, a big lounge chair, a submariner amongst a company of handsome strangers, experiencing the symptom of myself.

It was then that I got the call from New York. It was my girlfriend, the love of my life. (Please forgive me.)

I answered the call, but this is where narration gets tricky, I have to admit, because my brain was having a hard time registering my body attached to it, or my body was having a hard time registering my brain at the head of it, but actually I was face-planted on the ground. The muscular stranger helping me back up to the chair said his name was Brad or Brett, but I’m probably making it up.

“Thanks. Want some molly?” I said, handing him the baggie. “Never mind, it’s all gone.”

He looked at me, blinked, and walked mournfully back to his friends. I dropped the plastic baggie, watching it half-flutter like a dead butterfly, and remembered the phone.

“Where are you? Where are you?” She sounded like a starving baby. She’d been calling all day, all night—it was already 9:00 p.m.!—and was about to involve the

police. “I’ve been so scared. Oh my god. Thank god you’re all right. Your mom is freaking out. Why haven’t you called? Where *are* you?”

“Why would you call my mom!” I said, truly terrified. Then I tried to catch her up to the plotline involving Harrison, the agent at WME who’d agreed to sign me. She let out a horrible breathless toll, a souvenir of love; I could feel her transitioning from living inside one nightmare where I’d died and gone to hell to another nightmare where I’d abandoned her to sign with some big agency in Los Angeles.

“How cliché a storyline!” I said, trying to calm her down. “Who’d ever believe it!”

After much convincing I told her I loved her, don’t worry, no character in a story not even my own, could take me from her. I’m flying back to New York tomorrow, my flight leaves in the morning. Tell Mom I’m sorry for lying at her expense; I can’t explain, you’ll understand when you read it.

I grabbed my personals from the locker, god knows how I remembered the combination or if I’d even used a locker, and didn’t say goodbye to anyone. On the way out I realized I didn’t have a shirt and took the first one I saw bunched on the ground next to a lounge chair. I put it on, skintight, barely making it over my shoulders, and in the elevator mirror was surprised to see Miley Cyrus on my chest, tongue protruding, the light of the world wishing me well. Then I realized I hadn’t gotten the girl from my novel’s number and laughed psychotically because, since I wrote her, I could just make it up—not that I’d call her anyway. The elevator doors closed as my eyes melted down my face, my vision littering into yesterday’s story, tomorrow’s sadness. With hesitation a voice asked if I had been to the day party and, what the fuck, I hadn’t noticed the manicured couple

behind me; they scared the spit out of me. Sorry, I said, attempting to wipe down her dress. I thought I might vomit and might've said as much as the woman nervously studied her iPhone, which I couldn't afford, as if engaged in a serious task while the guy vocally fumbled some rushed incoherent remark about how excellent their dinner had been, a subject they had not been discussing. The door opened, another couple entered, and hysterically I exited in search of a water fountain or trash bin but soon gave up and just vomited on the expensively carpeted floor. Relieved, sort of, the taste of hot metal shrieking in my mouth, I continued on. A set of doors led into a swanky billiards room. I ran through them to the bartender and begged for relief.

“Water, do you have?”

Two large men grabbed me by the shoulders and brutally escorted me out a different set of doors, informing me with awesome contempt that I had not been invited to Ms. Cyrus's private reception—which, looking down at my shirt, amazed, I could not believe.

Outside at last, under purple velvet lights, a red carpet ushered my deliverance. I tipped the valet attendant sixty bucks because money didn't mean anything and played it cool as I waited for my rental car, smoking a cigarette procured (stolen) from the bum passed out against the stairwell. The car door opened, the valet holding it like a cape. I rushed over, tripped inside, my Ray Bans falling off my face. What the hell, not to worry, I told the attendant as he reached down to grab them, slamming the door shut, barely missing his head. I was off to save the day, tomorrow.

Waiting at a red light I saw a baggie of coke and pack of American Spirits in the cupholder, which meant I *had* planned on telling my girlfriend about signing with

WME. I felt proud, if that's the word, and rolled down the windows to endorse the shitty hip-hop blasting from my stereo, Rick Ross grunting he's a boss, a siren for all to hear. I lit a cigarette and inhaled, the navigation on my phone would lead me home, wherever that was, I didn't even have to touch the wheel.

xxx

Kill shot. Oh god, protect me.

I told her I loved her, I would protect her. I didn't know from what. Four years *is* a long time. I was pleading on my knees, some pathetic rendition of a movie I'd seen. Wolves howling, candles flickering. The candleflame that flickered and bent

What sounds the best? I said. Read it aloud and tell me what sounds the best.

No, this is not your fiction, said through blond hair weeping in the shadows, her shoulders heaving. Inside our room played like a movie. Some minor chords to underscore the element of dread I felt while packing up my belongings.

Come close to me, I said. Come close.

She squirmed and begged and fucked my ears to deaf. So I threw her the drugs and let her go ballistic. Which never actually happened, I wish; it would have been so much easier if it had.

Why can't you write me as a real person? she said, attempting to walk off the page. Why do all the hard things get brushed away into poetry or whatever this is

you have me saying? I'm on rotation in the morning. Patients, real people, actually depend on me. How could you be so selfish?

Because poetry doesn't mean anything, I tried to explain. Because on the page, one step removed, I don't have to look at you. This is all that I have, my delusions.

If you want to write then write! Just stop talking about it, for god's sake.

This is me doing that now, I could not explain.

I've always supported you. Put up with your apocalypse moods. Crying, she pleaded with me not to leave, not to write her out.

I won't write you out, I didn't say, I'll just blend your story with many others. Make you a composite, anonymous. I'll never share your name.

But residency is in two years, she said. We can look into LA programs if that's what you want. I'll do whatever I can. Please. I know you. You'll regret this.

I pressed my mouth to her mouth-cheek-hair, a sopping wet coalition of sympathy to drown in. I heard myself promise I'd never leave—I was just moving.

She slapped my chest, my cheek, and emptied the coke onto the dresser top, cutting four enormous lines with indiscrimination other than to cannonball. Actually that was me in the bathroom, alone. Death-starved lover. Star-crossed starving. In less than one minute, three lines were gone. She put down the straw,

but it wasn't her hand, and out of the bathroom I walked with no words written worth sharing, at least not yet.

Tank on the floor before me. Bra on the floor before me. Bend over. Here's the part where you seduce me to stay. But no, you wouldn't do that, you never did, which drove me insane. I needed you to show me what you wanted, needed to know I'm wanted. I wanted you to rip my heart out and throw it on the bed and straddle my bleeding corpse and tell me I'm the one, you'd rather kill me than let me leave. But you didn't, which I'm sure was my fault.

Then you cried something whispered and sounded like my mother when I was momma's baby boy sick in stupid hospital with pneumonia, the doctors unsure why the antibiotics wouldn't take. Love that has no name, only sound. I felt tired. I felt hungry. Remember all the late nights we'd smoke weed and eat Pinkberry? You hated how thin I'd got. I'm sorry if it made you self-conscious; I loved how powerful looking good felt. You thought I might be bulimic, remember asking me at Alta on Valentine's Day, our final one? No, it wasn't bulimia, that sounds so embarrassing, it was much worse.

Help me count the number of nights I spent in a bathroom stall sniffing for an inspiration I could not find inside myself. You can't because I never told you about the drugs. I wasn't an addict, just a loser. If you're reading, now you know.

On top of the bed you twisted some thinly infantile love ritual under moonlit morning, the moon smiling through the half-wall window before us, the only window in our shoebox apartment, a New York bookmark. You and the window naked and the moon tooth-crooked and the cigarette eating itself on the tray reserved for fights like these, no hand to hold it, no hand to hold.

I had her on her back now, legs squeezing to throttle, and she gasped, begging to take me in, absolutely needing to take me in. Slap me all you want, I said. I won't write you out so much as read ahead. I heard myself promise I'd never leave.

For the last time, stop with the poetry and fucking look at me, she said. You fraud. What are you saying?

What am I saying? Can I say?

So many years later I want you to know I was proud of you for being a doctor, even though you thought I wanted you to be someone else. These throwaway moments, those only I can share, they're not what I remember, they're what I've made up. In truth I could write an entire book about you, and I have, which no one will ever read—unless you've handled my phone. I'll save you forever, will never press delete. Just turn the page. The author is not your friend. No matter how close you get. That's why I have to leave.

She came twice, or faked it, and I didn't even.

Afterward I fed her three xanax and she laughed because she'd just taken two in the bathroom, she said. But that was a different time, someone else. I always looked up to you for being happy without the help, like a character in a book I could never touch. And so you'll remain.

I took a few pills myself and managed to get some shuteye as the morning moon hung stupid and out of place.

Tomorrow I was moving to Los Angeles because, baby, I was famous.

about the author

The Author's lawyers and agents have demanded he not release this scandalous tell-all, in fear of one of their biggest talents being canceled. Thus, to satisfy the wishes of his representation, the author of this book has decided to keep his identity anonymous. His team has worked overtime to bury all associations made in this book to its author, including names, dates, locations, timelines, etc. Hence, "The Author."

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