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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
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From Vineyard to Vine

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Michael Donovan McBride

June 2015

Thesis Committee:

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DEDICATION

To Nora Aronow.

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CHAPTER ONE

First Time

“Two hundred for a fuck, one fifty for head,” she said.

“I’ll take two hundred dollars’ worth,” I said.

She walked over and put her arm through mine and turned me toward a motel. We were on Western Avenue south of Florence in South LA. It’s not a great neighborhood so I was skittish.

“You won’t regret it, mister,” she said. Her voice was flat and without affect. She spoke in an East LA dialect. There’s a nasally elongation. Certain consonants are more pronounced. Like the R at the end of “mister” was heavy.

“Did you call me mister?” I asked. “How old do I look?”

“I don’t know. You got a shirt on like my abuelo.”

It was true. I deliberately changed my wardrobe before moving to Los Angeles. I had on my work boots, poly-blend slacks and a short sleeve button down by Van Heusen. Over it, a black windbreaker. I’d cropped my hair close to my head. Gone were the brown waves of curl and I no longer wore the childlike clothes of my peers.

I heard tiny bells jingle and wheeled around. A short, stout Central American man with dark skin and a cowboy hat pushed an ice cream cart down the sidewalk. His grey slacks had a prominent crease. He wore swirly cowboy boots and an equally swirly long sleeved cowboy shirt with snaps. He walked with confidence, entitlement: a horseless

caballero out to make his own luck. I hoped I wouldn't see children trying to buy ice cream. That would kill the sexual arousal coursing through me.

The girl got me into the motel lobby and up to the desk to check in. It cost ten bucks for the room. I had roughly eight hundred seventy five dollars on me -- seven hundred of it in my sock.

Earlier that night I had treated myself to a great meal at Osteria Mozza. I started with shaved Brussels sprouts, mint, toasted almonds, pecorino & Parmigiano Reggiano. I followed with Burrata with Calvisius caviar, red onion, egg & chives. I couldn't resist the Porcini-rubbed rib eye. Of course the insalata mista was a must. With the starters I tried drinking their 2009 Bastianich "Vespa Bianco" and with the rib eye the La Mozza "Aragone" was fine but neither was anything to brag about.

I'd been living a monastic life in my three weeks in Los Angeles and didn't have room for dessert even though I was supposed to be celebrating sleeping with a prostitute. Only I decided to celebrate in advance.

She walked up the stairs ahead of me. She was even prettier than I first thought. She was the kind of pretty that makes you sick to your stomach if you're not already sick with nerves. Hot is actually a better word. The girl was hot. The lump in my throat was the size of a hormone-treated Thompson seedless.

"Hold on a sec," I told her. I took my jacket off and tried to focus. My shirt was soaked through and sweat was getting in my eyes. She was young for my taste but her face glowed with sexual vitality. Her lips promised pleasures not found in the common daylight world. Her body was petite but with curves, the ideal college cheerleader, the

one who can dance *and* do gymnastics. She was so hot I had considered finding someone else. I'd never paid a woman to have sex with me before. This would be my first and I wanted it to be perfect. I planned to write about it, to put it into my poetry. I'd heard one of the other prostitutes call her Annie.

Annie was the only realistic option that night. The next hottest girl looked a little masculine. I wasn't secure enough in my manhood to choose her. The rest of the prospects were hopelessly flawed in one way or another. For instance, one wore high-tops. I've never liked high-tops. Another was pigeon-toed with a gut. A third looked like she'd been kicked out of rehab earlier that day.

So I had no choice but to be with the hot one. I started to feel weak and a yawn burst from my mouth. It didn't make sense that I was so sleepy because I'd been sleeping twelve hours a night for the last three weeks. And I don't buy into that maybe-you-got-too-much-sleep myth. Death is the only way to get too much sleep.

"Okay, onwards," I said. She started up the rest of the stairs. Her body distributed what little weight she had in the sexiest possible sequences, and then repeated. Curved just the right way to my liking. She became my new ideal. Before Annie my taste ran toward a big-girl type. I liked big booty. But I not since Rena Baldoni played Sandy in my High School production of *Grease* had I been this attracted to a woman. "Do you read poetry?" I asked.

"You mean like 'There once was a man from Nantucket?'"

"That's a limerick," I said.

"What's the difference?" She asked.

I didn't know.

On the landing she turned down the hall and a young Hispanic man wearing a matching blue sweat suit and baseball cap ensemble was standing there and I thought, *here we go, I'm going to get mugged*, he had a stack of towels on a cart and he said, "Towels are two dollars."

I gave him a five and he gave me a towel and we walked past him and entered a small but clean room. The room consisted of a bed, a sideboard with little shot glasses on it; I figured people must like to have a snort before getting down to it so they keep the shot glasses there. There was a chair I could pile my clothes on and a sink and a toilet and a shower stall.

She undressed and I forgot to look at her naked body and instead studied the room and undressed myself. She pulled out a condom from her purse and I used a trick I'd learned from my dad's lawyer and produced my own condom and asked her if she cared if we used mine.

"Don't matter to me," she said.

I had disrobed except for my underwear. I stepped toward her.

"Two hundred dollars," she said.

"Right," I nodded and began to look for my money, trying to think of a way to distract her from looking while I grabbed my sock off the floor. "How's your night going?"

She shrugged and said, "Nobody's feeling me." There was the heavy NG sound. She hadn't turned away and I realized she wasn't a hustler, she was just a victim; she'd

never rip me off. I fished in my sock for the money. I counted off the twenties. "I'm feeling you," I said.

She looked alarmed when I handed her the money. Then she pointed to the rash on my chest. My chest, my stomach, and my shoulders were covered in red blotchy bumps that itched like hell. The breakout was aggravated by the coffee after dinner and sweating on my way over and then climbing the flight of stairs; the rash looked bad.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Just a heat rash."

"Could you put your shirt back on?"

"That'll just make it worse," I said.

"But I don't want that on me."

"It's not contagious."

"I don't think so," she said and she reached for her jeans.

I felt like Caliban. I put my sweaty undershirt back on. I sat down on the bed. She stood there naked and she removed a piece of gum from her mouth and tossed it into a wastebasket and grabbed the condom and asked, "You want to put it on or me?"

"You can do it," I said.

Her skin was pale and so smooth I marveled that she could keep it so nice in her line of work. Then I wondered if she got beaten in some diabolical way so the bruises didn't show. She climbed up on the bed and pulled my undies off. I was so nervous I was limp. I sat up on the bed with my legs out in a v shape. She knelt and started to play with my penis and balls, which lurched to life. I reached out and caressed her hip. Her manner

was so businesslike and un-sexual but before she'd stroked me twice I was ready. I was wondering if I was allowed to touch her pussy and without warning my dick was in her mouth. I took a second to be sure she'd put the condom on. She'd put it on so deftly I hadn't felt it. I'd always assumed a blowjob with a condom on would be subpar but I was about to climax. I didn't want to cum into a condom in a whore's mouth ten seconds into my two hundred fifteen dollars. So I asked her to slow down. She looked at me confused.

“You want to fuck?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

Annie lay back on the bed and I got between her legs and again worried I would cum too quickly. I entered her like a late arrival to a funeral, slowly and a little apologetically. I started to work in and out. It felt good. I wanted to kiss her full mouth but had picked up the idea somewhere that you can't kiss a prostitute and I was too shy to ask. She smelled sweaty under cheap perfume that had notes of bubble gum flavored child's medicine and mint. I could also smell the stale menthol cigarette smoke of her colleagues clinging to her pores. But her skin was like a puppy's belly and her tits were bigger than I anticipated and yet weren't fake.

I was really doing it. I was having sex with a real live sex worker. Then it occurred to me that she'd said it was two hundred for a fuck and one fifty for head and she'd done both. Was I looking at handing her an extra one fifty? If it was going to be that expensive I wanted to lock the memory into my mind so I could write about it later. I looked around the room. I couldn't wait; I had to capture the moment in real time. I

pulled out and jumped off the bed and reached into my windbreaker pocket for my moleskin notebook.

“What color would you say that credenza is?” I asked. I was a little breathless.

“What’s a credenza?” her speech was unaffected by sex.

“That sideboard there,” I tilted my chin toward it.

“The shelf? Green,” She said.

“Yes, but what *shade* of green?”

“Light green.”

I wasn’t hard anymore.

“Gremlin green,” I said and wrote it down.

I got back between her legs and tugged at my penis. Nothing. I asked her to turn over. On her hands and knees I thought brushing my flaccid cock against her smooth backside would get me ready but it didn’t work. She looked back over her shoulder.

“You done?” she asked. She seemed irritated.

“I’ve never been with a sex worker before,” I said as way of explanation.

She crawled off the bed looking sexier than ever, “I barely started doing it,” she said.

She got up and stepped into the shower without another word. When she got out I got a good look at her body and got turned on again. Her stomach was totally flat.

“I couldn’t cum, I’m sorry,” I said.

“Oh.”

How could I write about this? I thought. It wasn't literary at all. Here I was with a girl I could fall in love with. It was all wrong. I was supposed to either pity her or be comforted by her. Neither of us was comforting the other.

I put literature out of my mind and asked her, "Do you mind if I jack off while you get dressed?"

"You could," she said.

As she was dressing I took the condom off and started at it. I stopped to grab some toilet paper. Sat down on the bed in front of her still raging hard. She had her top on but no underwear when the climax arrived. I reached up and cupped her left butt cheek. I came into the tissue.

As I dressed she sat on the edge of the bed and waited for me.

"I'd like to see you again," I said.

"Cool," she said.

"I was wondering about that color because I was thinking if I were to write about it, what would I call it?"

"I don't know," she said and walked past me out of the room.

"Wait, take this," I said and I handed her a hundred dollar bill.

On my bus ride back to where I was staying I considered ways to lure Annie into my life. All of them involved me having money, which, of course, wasn't the plan. I had to stick to the plan I'd come down Los Angeles to execute. Also, her pimp might be some kind of monster. They usually were. Would he kill me? He had to be making a killing off

of her. She simultaneously appealed to any number of fetishes. You got the beauty of a call girl at a streetwalker price. Annie was the Dunn Vineyards of hookers! Dunn Vineyards was the wine equivalent of the kind of poet I wanted to be. Dunn was the highest quality but still accessible to normal people in terms of price and sophistication.

I tried to conjure the memory of her skin under my hand but it got lost in the credenza. Pea soup green? Is pea soup a different color from a pea? Gremlin green was good.

Then I anchored it, the image of Annie: her hands -- the color of white peach tree blossom -- were Japanese in their delicacy. Her face had some Aztec features; namely, a large nose. Her dyed blonde hair was cut in a bob with bangs. I wondered if she wore glasses when she was off duty. Ninety-eight pounds, five feet two, big-for-her-size breasts, perfectly proportioned hips, thick pouty lips. Almost comically pouty. Too much eye makeup. I wanted her so badly. I tried to remember that I'd just had her. I had her and went limp.

When I got back to the apartment where I was housesitting for my friend Victor, I noticed I was missing about five hundred dollars. I'd either let it fall out of my sock or Annie had stolen it. Clever Annie, resourceful Annie, how you could teach me to survive in the big city if only you wanted to live the life of a poverty stricken poet.

CHAPTER TWO

The List

The next day, while I was making myself a butter lettuce, shallot crème fraiche, cherry tomato and chervil with crushed roasted pecan salad, I was surprised at how upset I was at getting ripped off. It's not that I thought I had a connection with Annie. I was having trouble with not only not having a connection with her but also being a mark instead. The whole point was to become more street savvy. So I expected setbacks. But I was surprised at how much it seemed I had to learn.

I wanted to talk it out with someone but the only person who understood what I was doing was Professor Cooney. He didn't pick up. Calling my sister Uta was obviously out of the question. So I called the only other person I knew in Los Angeles besides Victor: my buddy Curtis. He was a lawyer and wouldn't understand what I was doing but talking about anything would help. I called his office and his assistant put me on hold. When she came back she said Curtis was busy and couldn't talk but he wanted to meet me for coffee a few days later. She gave me instructions. I liked her authoritative tone. It was sexy.

In the meantime I had to find a place to live and attack the list. I pulled out the list and consulted it again. I crossed out, 1. hooker. Then I contemplated:

2. hunger
3. bar fight
4. heroin

5. crack
6. arrested
7. mugged or rolled
8. swing

I'd been in Los Angeles three weeks. I moved down from Forestville, up in Northern California. Victor was a family friend; his dad and my dad went to Stanford together. Victor and his wife Delores were letting me stay at their apartment and water their plants while they were on The Big Island for a holiday. They were due back in two days and I had to find a place to live.

I moved to LA with an agenda. But my first three weeks had seen me prepping. My time with Annie was the first concrete action toward my goals since I'd arrived. Before that I was holed up in Delores and Victor's apartment resting and getting focused. I felt like the Marines on ships in the English Channel before D-Day waiting for the weather to break. Waiting for the go from Ike.

I managed to water the plants according to Delores' schedule but that was about it. Finally, my orders came through in the form of *Born Into This*, the documentary on Charles Bukowski. In the film I witnessed what I consider Bukowski's *lack* of authenticity. After three weeks of tranquility and reflection, it was time, to pluck the fruit, to let it fall from the vine into my palm. I strode out of the apartment and caught a bus down to Western and Florence to become Annie's John.

Delores and Victor's apartment was in a gorgeous building on Rossmore down south of Melrose, walking distance from Larchmont, a cute neighborhood with shops and

cafes and even a bookstore. The apartment had two bedrooms, a tile bathroom, and fun 1920s charm. I was not long out of college and had only lived with fellow bachelors, in other words, squalor; or with my family. So I was used to either beer cans and dirty dishes or old-people art and rugs. My mom, before she died, favored plants. Delores and Victor had plants too, just not so many. They had a great mix of cool stuff like a vintage turntable and vinyl collection as well as DIY bookshelves of wood planks and cinder blocks.

Some young couples live in a Laura Ashley wet dream. There's no evidence that a man lives there. In contrast, Delores and Victor's had a woman's touch but Victor wasn't emasculated in the décor.

That kind of explains why I took three weeks to get down to my list. I was comfortable in Delores and Victor's apartment; it was the kind of place in the kind of neighborhood I'd have wanted to live if I'd stayed on my life course and moved in with a girlfriend, if I'd stayed on the path of marriage and family, if I hadn't moved to LA to live in the opposite conditions. This brings me to my list.

The list. This was the list I put together with the help of a poetry professor at Santa Rosa Junior College. His name was James Cooney and we were at The Old Main Street Saloon in Sebastopol drinking Campari and soda and talking about my chapbook of poetry and why it was a failure. Professor Cooney kept coming back to the same note: *lacks authenticity*.

“You cannot be someone you're not,” he said.

“I know that, obviously, it’s just... I relate to the feelings. Why can’t I speak to the feelings?”

“You can. But I believe they need to be grounded in specific, physical actions.”

I pulled out my chapbook, “They are, look.”

The skin around the wound
was tender to the touch,
my chapped hands gently moved toward the seam.
Increasingly ache became stabbing exuberant pain.

He kept his eyes straight ahead. He signaled to the bartender, an attractive older woman who’d seen some hard years. “Don’t take my word for it. Ask other people. I’m not some authority,” he said.

Cooney was in his early thirties, married with a kid. His poetry was good but not the kind I was interested in. He wrote about fly-fishing and nature. I had my Bachelors from UC Davis in Viticulture and Enology and was headed toward a career in wine but back home after graduation I spent more and more time on my poetry. I wanted some help with my writing. I took a poetry class with Cooney and we hit it off. He edited *Redwood Farrow*; a poetry review I was hoping would accept one of my poems. At first he was real excited by my work but lately he seemed less and less enthusiastic. I couldn’t tell if it was me or if he was restless in his staid, married, domestic life. He seemed to leer at women when he’d get a few drinks in him. He was handsome, in spite of thinning hair and jowls beginning to form. He smelled like the Drum cigarettes he rolled and Altoids. Underneath he dabbed Canoe cologne onto his wrists and throat.

“You want me to write about the first time I played with my friend Jordan? How I felt sorry for him because his butt-crack was showing on the bouncy thing on the playground?” I asked with a little more hostility than I intended.

He turned to me with a smile, “That sounds great. What was the bouncy thing? Like a bouncy house?”

“No, I don’t know what it was. A teeter-totter with four places to sit and huge springs in the middle so it would rock back and forth. I don’t know what you call it.”

“Don’t call it anything, just see it. Then make us see it.”

“Kids on the playground? I was joking.”

The subject matter of my poems was, admittedly not based on my own life. I wrote about drinking and struggling on the street. I wrote about love that gets pulverized by economic exploitation.

“Besides, how many of these so called gritty, real-life poets are happy? How many survive? Don’t you want to be happy?” He asked.

“No, I want to feel that I’m not a joke. That I’m real,” I said.

“So write about that and you’ll feel better over time. It works, it really does. Revolving in this world of negativity and self-pity just leads no place. You want to go out like Jared Wright?”

“Who’s Jared Wright?”

“Exactly.”

“No, why does that name sound familiar?”

“Because he was a Cleveland Indians pitcher. He was Jaret with a T at the end,” he said.

“Oh. How did he ‘go out’?” I asked.

“As a rookie he left game 7 of the 1997 World Series after 6 1/3 innings with a 2-1 lead... the Indians lost in 11.”

“Now I remember. Brutal.”

“The *poet* Jared, with a D, died like Dylan Thomas. Just drank until his liver exploded.”

“You know I didn’t grow up rich, right?” He looked at me like he didn’t know what I was talking about. I continued, “It’s just that everyone assumes since my family owned Havenor Vineyards that we’re rich. It’s not the case.”

“Okay.”

“I feel like if you read my work and you didn’t know who wrote it, you’d like it better.”

“I’m not a machine, what I know about you, I’m sure influences my opinion. But look, I didn’t know about the winery until you brought me those bottles of wine, which I appreciate. But I’d mentioned this before that. Also, didn’t you get anything back from any of the magazines you submitted to?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“Derivative.”

“Well...”

“And lacks authenticity.”

“You’re young, this is how it works. You’re what? Twenty one?”

“Twenty six.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“You look young.”

“So how *does* it work?” I asked.

“You find your voice,” he said.

“I don’t care about my voice, I care about my imagination.”

“Imagination is overrated when it comes to poetry. You want to use your imagination write speculative fiction or screenplays. Use a giant canvas. Poetry is more about observation than invention.”

Without saying anything about it we paid and walked down the street to an Irish pub called Jasper O’Farrell’s. I’d been chewing on what Cooney said about imagination. *He might be right, I thought. He’s a smart guy. Even if he did go to Sac State.*

I ordered a Paulander for myself and a Sierra for Cooney. The bartender took his time to get them. Methodically sawing a lemon slice to plop into my beer.

“You mention your family winery. You have that. That’s an art,” Cooney said.

“I’m beginning to think it isn’t for me,” I said.

“You don’t like wine?”

“I love wine.”

“Don’t have the aptitude?”

“I’ve got the best nose in California.”

“No kidding?”

“I’m being modest by limiting to California.”

“Okay, so you’ve got your whole career laid out.”

“Sometimes I think I want to do something on my own. I want to make something that is mine. Poetry is the only thing I love as much as wine. I want to be great at it.” I squeezed my lemon into my wheat beer and inhaled the citrus hitting the hops and got essence of alfalfa and wood soap. “What does this Jared Wright’s poetry have that I don’t have?” I asked.

“Doesn’t it come down to necessity? In *True West*, the Sam Shepard play, do you know it?”

“No,” I said.

“It’s about two brothers. One brother is the screenwriter. The other is Lee. Lee is like you want to be. He steals televisions, has a pit-bull for a while. Dismantles stolen big rigs. He lives out on the desert. Real romantic. So the younger brother Austin eventually wants to join Lee out on the desert and Lee screams at him, ‘Do you think I live out on the desert out of some philosophical choice? I live there because I can’t make it here!’ There’s a great version with Gary Sines and John Malkovich playing Lee. They play it on PBS sometimes.”

I noticed his cheeks were getting flushed and he was pleased with the memory of some lame PBS movie. He was getting buzzed.

“You want another?” I asked. And he held two fingers up to the bartender.

The bartender nodded but continued to cut limes, doing his prep work. Finally, after like five minutes, he slowly pirouetted to a pint glass and poured another Sierra Nevada for Cooney. He brought it over then went back and started to pull my Paulander. The bartender was fifty pounds overweight. Five foot eight. Probably forty years old. He wore the baggy clothes of the heavysset man who has accepted he'll always be fat and just wants to be comfortable. While I can totally respect that, you have to look at what you're bringing to the table in a place like Jasper's. Maybe the guy is a million laughs on Friday or Saturday night with the bar full and a band playing. But he seemed to me to be a lazy fat ass. And he was hurting business.

"This fucking guy," I said.

"Maurice, it's fine," Cooney said.

"No, it's not fine," I said. "We come over to Sebastopol for a change of scenery and he can afford to take his sweet-ass time when nobody is in here?"

"I better be going," Cooney said.

"You haven't finished your drink," I said.

"I know, I shouldn't have ordered it."

"Can't you hang around for a few minutes, my friend Frida is supposed to meet me. I wanted her to meet you," I took out my phone to check if Frida sent a text and made sure he could see the picture of her I brought up next to her contact info.

"That's Frida?" He asked, trying to be nonchalant. I knew if he stayed to meet her he wouldn't remain nonchalant. Frida was sex on wheels. We had been friends a long

time and I'd never had any luck with her because she liked older guys. Older married guys.

“Before she gets here, I want to write down what this Jared Wright guy had.”

“I don't know, Maurice, why don't you read him yourself?”

I started to search Amazon for his books and Cooney chuckled.

“No, his books are long out of print. That's my point. Stop by my office tomorrow and I loan you a copy and let me know what you think,” he got up and put his corduroy blazer on. It had a stain on the collar from his hair product. When he took it on and off the odor of dirty hair wafted.

“But just off the top of your head, the qualities?” I asked.

“I was trying to say it was based in need. So for instance he sleeps with prostitutes because he can't stand real women or he went hungry because he didn't have enough money for food and was too proud to panhandle. He didn't go looking for bar fights, he'd piss people off and they'd beat his ass or he would smoke crack or shoot heroin because he couldn't stand the way he felt or he gets arrested because he can't keep from getting arrested.”

I was furiously writing on an Anchor Steam coaster.

“He'd get mugged because he couldn't defend himself because he was so high or drunk. He was too proud to panhandle,” Cooney's voice was raised and the pink in his cheeks had turned purple.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I'm good; I just don't feel like you're hearing me.”

“I’m hearing you perfectly; I have to need to do these things in order for it to count. I got it.”

“The thing is, Maurice, I don’t want you to get discouraged. Your writing has promise. I almost enjoy reading it. But it’s forgettable.”

He must have seen the pain it caused to hear that because he put his hand on my shoulder.

“It’s forgettable because it’s not you. You need to find you in there,” and he pointed to my chapbook. My hand stapled book of poems that nobody liked. Or they liked when someone else wrote them earlier. Someone I was ripping off.

“Thanks teach,” I said. He smiled and nodded.

“Now I need to smoke a cigarette and get some air before your sexy friend arrives.”

Initially I figured Cooney assumed my poems weren’t authentic because he knew a little of my biography. Everyone in Sonoma County knew my biography. My father was Albert Havenor, winemaker, philanthropist, and all around well-liked guy. So Cooney knew I hadn’t lived the content of my work. Plus, people assume that if you grew up on a winery you’re automatically rich. Believe me, we weren’t rich. Every penny went back into making world-class varietals or to one charity or another. In the end, my dad lost everything. When he died, there wasn’t much left to leave me. People assume you had everything handed to you. I figured that was why Cooney gave me those notes. After the bar it made sense he just didn’t like my work.

The next day Cooney looked like he'd had fun with Frida.

"She's fun isn't she?" I asked. Then backpedaled, "Not that I know in that way. I just mean, she's cool."

"Yeah, she's cool. Thanks for the introduction," he said.

He handed me the two Wright books, *Vagina Tooth* and *Belt Buckle Stew*. I read them while walking in Howarth Park. From my first look at Jared Wright's first line of his first poem

You needn't turn away
from the pain I caused.
It's still in me. Watch
the worm. eat me.

I was transformed. First chance I got, I was down in Los Angeles. Jared Wright convinced me to leave wine in favor of poetry. I had to look for Jared Wright's brand of authenticity. My plan was to follow in his footsteps. I would dissect each of his poems and do as many of the things he did, in the places he did them. I would find people who knew him and learn as much as possible about him. This was my plan to revolutionize the literary arts.

Before reading Wright I was on the fence. I considered moving to Oakland or San Francisco and dabbling in poetry. But that was way too close; I was too familiar with both those towns. After my exposure to Wright Los Angeles was the only place. Not only to study Jared Wright. But also, Los Angeles was not obvious like New York or Paris, and it was warm enough that I could be authentic and not freeze to death in the winter.

While the experience with the prostitute had been sexually disappointing, and outrageously expensive, at least I crossed one off my list. If I could let go of my embarrassment at getting played, I could feel a sense of accomplishment. If not yet authenticity.

CHAPTER THREE

Hovel Hunting

I went out to scout for a place to live. I needed to find a hovel. A hovel to house my golf pencil and stained, crumpled binder paper that would eventually replace my moleskin. I Ubered down to Skid Row. Skid Row runs from Third to Seventh streets and from Los Angeles to Alameda streets. I got dropped at 6th and San Pedro. I was expecting the Tenderloin in San Francisco but this was way worse. People camping on the sidewalk. Rows of tents. The people, and there were a lot of them, were fucked up. I don't mean they were drunk or high, though many of them were; they were just thrashed, physically. I saw crutches and wheel chairs and casts and arm slings and sores and a Carolina Panthers Jake Delhomme #17 jersey. This was several years after their failure in Super Bowl XXXVIII.

But the worst was the smell. Through a cacophony of fecal, urine, rotting cabbage was the distinct scent of unclean bandages: gauze weighed down with sweat, blood, puss and decayed flesh.

I stepped out of the Uber and a woman grabbed me hard on the arm, "I got a newborn baby. You gotta help me," she said. She held her tit, the nipple poked through her cable knit sweater and it leaked milk. Her eyes looked like my dog's eyes after a car had hit him. Uncomprehending and pleading. The woman looked like she was about fifty. Rail thin with hair twisted in little buds all over her head. The lines in her face were deep

and black and permanent. The sight of the nipple leaking milk struck some primal, protective chord in me. I handed her a twenty-dollar bill.

I felt tightness in my chest and I had trouble getting air. I got to the sidewalk with the woman muttering behind me. The smell morphed, everything fell away except the hot ammonia of piss in the sunshine. I just kept walking up 6th Street but it felt like climbing a sand dune. I had to concentrate to take a step. Then I noticed a few tarp/tents on the sidewalk up ahead before the next street and fear hit me. Breathing in the piss kept me focused on moving forward. My legs still felt heavy and it took forever for me to get past the first group of tents where all I saw were swollen bare feet with the skin flaking off the size of corn chips. I reached Crocker Street. I'd planned to turn down Crocker but there were more people lingering on the sidewalk down there.

The next block of 6th cleared a bit so I staggered forward. I crossed Towne Avenue thinking of Robert Towne, screenwriter of *Chinatown*. If Towne Ave were named after Robert Towne he'd have to feel somewhat poorly for its present condition. I know I did. I hoped to find a side street where I could just put my hands on my knees and catch my breath but Towne was teeming with life too. There were trucks loading and unloading fish. Vans, cars and people were milling around in various states of invalidity.

I pressed on and saw the final gauntlet. It was a tent city on one side of the sidewalk and a big rig trailer parked on the street. It created the feeling of a tunnel. I wanted to run but was so afraid of attracting special attention. The only way was through.

I had to keep blinking because I had trouble seeing, blotches of black were hurling at me. My eyesight was failing. What a time to develop cataracts! I started to get

dizzy again and I concentrated everything I had on a sign I could see at the end of the tunnel: La Jolla.

When I reached the hotel I exhaled loudly in relief. I pulled on the door to the lobby and it banged. Then I pushed and it banged again. It was locked. La Jolla is an affluent beach community just north of San Diego. It's where you'll find the University of California, San Diego. The La Jolla Hotel in no way resembled any part of La Jolla, California.

Then I saw the sign, "For entry, ring buzzer," over a button. I pressed the slick button. Another sign said, "No loitering." Which gave me an odd sense of comfort.

The comfort didn't last because I felt like the people on the sidewalk were looming up behind me and I glanced over my shoulder as casually as I could and saw that nobody was there. I turned back and I yelled. It was a scream. "Ah!" shot out of my mouth because there was a tiny Filipino man standing at the glass door. He opened the door for me.

The lobby wasn't bad. Okay, it was bad. It smelled like burnt tires. But there was nobody loitering. I guess, after my stroll, I was expecting someone to be performing crude battlefield surgery because the ambulance wouldn't come down to 6th and Stanford. Instead there was just a room with a window like they have in the check-cashing place, only smaller, one bank teller window, with nobody at the window.

"You want the room?" the man asked. The carpet was burgundy and looked cheap and old.

"Yes, I need a room for about a week."

“Two hundred for one week. Pay in advance.”

“Can I see the room?” I asked.

He was halfway back inside the office/cage. He stopped and looked exasperated.

“Come on, I don’t have all day.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“I’m the only one today.”

The room was on the second floor. Here expectations were met. The room was tiny, stuffy and smelled funny... An indistinct yet familiar smell... Very old bedclothes? The chimpanzee enclosure at the zoo? I thought it was fantastic I was going to pay for a room that was worse than the one in which I’d paid for sex. This one had a shower down the hall.

I pulled two one hundred dollar bills out of my sock and handed it to the guy. He took them and then I realized they were soggy with sweat. “Sorry,” I said.

“I get the key,” he said.

He pushed past me to race down the stairs. I followed him. “Do you want to buy an iPhone? I’ll give you a great deal. What kind of phone are you using now?” I asked.

My intention was to sell my cell phone. To live off the grid. I hadn’t handled that yet. Now I was on Skid Row. What would be the harm in Ubering out of here? I did not want to go back out on the street. Rather than go back the way I came I decided to treat myself, one last time, and I called my Uber driver.

The man came out of the cage and handed me a room key attached to a diamond shaped piece of green plastic the size of the iPhone he refused to acknowledge. Then he

bounded up the stairs and disappeared. A moment later he was back holding two twenty-dollar bills out to me. When I looked puzzled he said, "I take your phone."

"This phone costs hundreds of dollars," I said.

"I'll give you forty," he said.

I cancelled Uber. I made my last call on that iPhone. I called a taxi then handed the iPhone to the man.

Waiting out on the curb I looked up the street and saw the breast milk woman coming. I scanned up and down looking for the cab. When I glanced back over she was walking quickly in my direction with an expectant look on her face. She wanted to thank me.

"I got a newborn baby. You gotta help me," she said when she got within earshot. She kept coming closer and did the breast milk thing again. She didn't remember me. Just another mark in working man's clothes.

"I already gave you twenty bucks," I said. She looked stung. Then doubt flashed across my mind. *She was the same woman, wasn't she?* They were definitely the same type. Short hair, haggard. Black. I gave her another twenty-dollar bill. Or I gave this woman a twenty-dollar bill. I'm pretty sure it was the same woman.

Moments later the cab came and I got out of there.

I decided to stay one last night in my friend's apartment and enjoy the comfort and make the move the next day before they returned from Hawaii. I'd get up early and clean and shop for them and be moved out by the time they got back in the early evening.

I had crossed the first goal from my list and found my new home base. I decided to celebrate. Also, I needed to come up with a different term for the items on my list -- "goals" was way too Tony Robbins.

It sucked I didn't have anyone to celebrate with. I thought about going to Annie and just telling her, "look, I have close to twenty grand, hang out with me for a weekend, help me move, help me go through my list." But she had already worked me for eight hundred, why give her another crack?

The stress of navigating Skid Row tired me out and I didn't want to go shopping so I decided to use what Delores and Victor already had in the cupboard and replace it the next day. This meant drinking overpriced bottles of wine. I popped the cork on a Kendall-Jackson 2006 horse-piss, choked down one glass and reflected on my solitude.

After two glasses of Kendall-Jackson I decided to practice real drinking. I had to become more like Wright - an alcoholic and drug addict. I had to derange my senses. At least for a little while. No matter what, I couldn't give in to loneliness and self-pity.

That was the problem with Bukowski, so many poems and stories and chapters about being lonely, particularly about being heartbroken over women. He felt sorry for himself. I never got that from Jared Wright. Jared Wright was raised in an orphanage in the 1950's in Boyle Heights, a working class section of East Los Angeles. He worked

cleaning outhouses in the San Joaquin Valley. He never complained. He wasn't the opposite of Bukowski; he just beat Bukowski at his own game.

Most people have never heard of Jared Wright. He was institutionalized several times. He couldn't hold down a job at the Post Office much less bitch about it. Wright, like Alexander Trocchi, took it to the limit. But unlike Trocchi, he didn't fade away; he went out in a blaze of glory, his liver exploded on the corner of Western and Wilshire. Right now there are two schools of thought on Jared Wright: one is that he virtually killed himself, thinking it would make his art immortal and two is that he was just a very sick man who drank himself to death. The latter opinion carries more weight because Wright, an obscure poet in life, became a forgotten poet in death. I wanted to get inside his head and heart. His poems left clues. The reason I moved to Los Angeles: I had to decode Wright's poems and live them and extract from him the secret of great writing.

I got all set up for practice drinking. I helped myself to some pasta and fixed up a light garlic, olive oil and peas recipe that I always liked. The shaved Parmesan was from Ralph's but did the job. I ate the pasta and drank quite a bit of water to try to prepare my system for toxins.

I started with bourbon, a drinker's drink. Maker's Mark. I planned on drinking rotgut but, again, I didn't feel like making a run to the store and Maker's is what Delores and Victor had. Traditionally hard liquor didn't agree with me. I could drink some Single Malt Scotch but usually very little of it before it hit me too hard.

I poured some bourbon over ice and sipped it. It was so fucking gross I could barely swallow it without coughing it back up. So I poured some soda in with it but that was chalky so I dumped it all into a bigger glass with Coca-Cola. That was doable.

I took out both of Wright's books *Vagina Tooth* and *Belt Buckle Stew* and realized I should have waited to sell my phone. My plan was to get drunk and plot out the different locations for Wright's transgressive behavior. Without my phone I was sunk. Victor had a desktop computer. They'd asked me if I wanted the login information and I declined because my plans and intentions lay on the street, not in cyberspace. I could call them and ask them for the login but I felt that might involve a conversation about why.

I turned on the computer and tried a couple passwords like "password". Then I went through their desk looking for where it might be written down. Nothing. Interesting place to keep a vibrator though. Then I remembered a story Victor once told me early in his courtship of Delores. Apparently they had trouble having sex the first few times because of how big he was and how little she was. At the time Victor described this in detail. It led to a private pet name for Delores. So I typed in, "thimblepuss0517" – May seventeenth is Delores' birthday – then next I tried, "ThimblePuss0517" and the computer opened up to me.

I commenced my plotting. One place Wright had written about was nearby on Vine Street. Apparently Wright was incapacitated by drink and some children, probably middle schoolers, pissed on him as he lay helpless in a vacant lot. I had to admit the hard drinking intimidated me. I hated to be out of control. Being pissed on would be too

humiliating. But since I'd been with Annie I was feeling more and more like I could handle anything.

I started marking locations and went down the list. When I finished I felt accomplished so I streamed *Six Feet Under* on their TV and started to get buzzed. About three or four episodes in I was loaded. And I was out of Coke. But I was good and drunk and my homework was complete.

I absentmindedly looked at the bottle of bourbon and was stunned at how small a dent I managed to put in it. It didn't make sense. But neither did *Six Feet Under* anymore. The daughter was too young and too academic and chubby nerdy and that chick from Australia was kind of hot but odd. Something about her repulsed me. Actually, something about all the cast members repulsed me. I had to get away from this collection of unattractive attractive people. I decided it was time to go and get some *amateur* sex.

I walked up to Vine Street and strolled north. Wright's poem didn't mention cross streets and I couldn't identify any landmarks. A line such as, "The flop house with the snarled visage," was too vague.

I stopped in a seedy looking bar. It was supposed to be a dive but was filled with beautiful people. I wanted to stay to the dives but after the Maker's the temptation to look at girls was intense. So I stayed. San Francisco has its share of beauties but they are all dressed like Han Solo on Hoth. Sometimes you want to see a little skin. L.A. offers a lot of skin.

In the bar I, I felt out of place. I was adjusting to my new clothes. I compared my feelings to the first time I dressed that way. Back home I'd gone to Christy's on the

Square in Downtown Santa Rosa to meet my sister Uta and her friend Eileen. I walked past a collection of teenage smokers to the doorman. Christy's is upstairs. As I attempted to locate Uta and Eileen the hostess stopped me with the words, "Excuse me."

"Yes?" I said.

"Please wait to be seated," she said.

"I'm meeting someone. They are probably at the bar."

"May I have your name?"

"May I have your phone number?"

She winced a little. I'd completely thrown her off.

"I don't think so," she said.

"Cool," I said and I marched toward the bar.

The last glimpse of her face told me she liked my self-assuredness.

I saw Eileen and Uta sitting alone in a booth. I turned and looked back at the hostess and pointed at my party.

"I found them, thanks," I said.

She pretended to be confused and looked like she didn't remember me. I considered how best to approach later.

"What are you wearing?" Uta said before I could even sit down.

"What?"

"Did they hire you here as a custodian?" Eileen asked.

"Very funny. No, I'm just exploring a new look," I hadn't yet told Uta I was moving.

“Okay, what do you call it? Mexican?”

Eileen laughed really hard.

“That is terrible,” I said.

“I know, I’m sorry,” Uta said. “But you seriously look like you work maintenance at a hospital.”

“Good, that’s the look I’m going for,” I said. My confidence was shaken.

Later on, after a few powerful ales I circled back to the hostess.

“Hey,” I said to her.

“Restroom is right there,” she said without looking up.

“I don’t really want your phone number,” I said.

“What?” she finally looked up at me.

“I asked for your phone number earlier.”

“Look, I have a boyfriend.”

“I don’t care, my point is I’m *not* asking for your number, I was joking earlier, I didn’t want you to think I was serious.”

“Listen,” she said and she looked at my chest. Then she pulled back my coat. I stepped back so she had to release my lapel.

“Aren’t you supposed to have a patch with your name on it?”

“A patch?”

“What are you? A janitor? A plumber? Don’t those uniforms come with a nametag? What’s your name?”

“This isn’t a uniform. See? The pants and shirt are different shades of tan.”

“I bet you are super sweet but I’m not really in the mood for this.”

I took a long look at her face. She was gorgeous. She wore a tight dress but it was her face. Thin and golden skinned. Her hair was long and golden also. She didn’t seem to have it hair sprayed or styled at all. She wore no makeup but her eyes were huge with feathery lashes and though her lips weren’t pouty or anything they were sensual. She had a birthmark on her chin as if placed there by a makeup artist for a Restoration comedy. This woman would have perfect children. And I didn’t matter to her at all. I was an annoying phone call. I was a rock in her shoe. No, not even that. Just a bunched up sock you have to yank on to pull the sock all the way up and then immediately forget about it.

I so wanted to say something cutting but I lost confidence in my outfit so I said, under my breath, to myself, “Nice shoes.”

I walked toward the stairs. I could hear her say, “These are Manolo Blahniks, jackass,” behind me.

I definitely felt better in the Vine Street bar than that night at Christy’s. Satisfied with my progress, I found a stool at the end of the bar, sipped club soda, and waited for a girl who looked like Annie.

On the walk home from the bar, I stopped at Safeway to buy some chocolate milk. In Los Angeles Safeway is called Pavilions. There was only one checker for all eight customers in the place. I thought about globalization. There was a time that these monstrosities delivered mass produced wine to average people. Now they were stuck

between the convenience of 7-Eleven and the prices and quality of Trader Joe's. They were open 24-hours but it took ages to make your purchase. You could finally get good wine at the grocery store but the business model hadn't adjusted in other areas. The grocery stores of my childhood were almost gone.

I was waiting in line and just about to storm out when a group of young people got in line behind me. They were loud. There were four guys and two girls. The guys were big and athletic looking, muscles bulging periodically under their baggy clothes. One of the girls was overweight but tall and strong. The other was gorgeous. She wore skintight leggings and tight polo shirt that showed her cleavage. I glanced back and the guys were grabbing on each other in a way that made me think they might still be in high school.

To me they looked pretty hard but Forestville and Davis are both zero percent African American so I didn't have much to compare them to.

"Hey mister, you want to buy us some Alize?" said one of the guys. He had a deep voice.

The other kids roared with laughter. The heavy girl said, "We'll trade you for some sherm."

My instinct was to ignore them but then I remembered the list. I remembered what I'd come to do. Remembered I needed to transform myself into a man who could handle himself on the street.

I said, "Sherm? I'm down," without turning around.

They laughed again, and one of them, one of the guys with a normal voice, a tenor, actually did a pretty good impersonation of me. “He say, ‘Sherm? I’m down,’” it had that nasally Dave Chappelle-doing-a-white-guy quality.

“You guys know if these ATMs take deposits?” I asked, turning to face them.

“I don’t know,” the Dave Chappelle guy said.

“I have all this cash I’m carrying and I’m walking at night. I sold my car.” They stopped talking and joking and looked at me then at each other. I went on, “I should have put this money in the bank but I didn’t think of it and I was up on Santa Monica visiting a friend and now I’m like, ‘duh, why are you about to walk down Vine for five or six poorly-lit blocks with so much cash?’”

“Alright, Chief. Good luck,” said the biggest one.

I wasn’t tempting these kids because they were black. I wasn’t assuming they’d jump me because they were black. It’s because those four guys were so big. It was their size and not so much their skin color or culture that lead me to temp them with easy money. I did all of this without really thinking it through. If they were smart they could have the money without landing a single blow.

Sherm of course is PCP. It is a tobacco and marijuana cigarette dipped in PCP. Though Jared Wright never used the term, I’d come across the mention of it in my research connected with Wright’s work. I stepped out of line and I mumbled, “I’ll meet you outside.”

Out in the parking lot I didn’t see them. I wondered what I’d do with the Ciroq, Alize and Hypnotic I bought. I also bought some Robitussin and Sprite to make a poor

man's Drank. I'd dropped \$65 on booze. I figured there were a few ways it could go: I could trade them booze for PCP; they could just take the booze; or they could wait down the street and mug me and take the booze and the money. The worst outcome? They just leave and I'm stuck with gross liquor I don't know how to get rid of.

Then it occurred to me: I could use the alcohol to make friends down at the La Jolla. What I had engineered was a win-win-win-win. I started walking back down Vine. I totally forgot about the kids until they whipped a late model Toyota Corolla around the corner and stopped with a chirp in front of me. It was an ugly tan with heavily tinted windows and scuff marks along the doors. But it was clean.

"My man!" the guy wearing a Raiders #18 Jersey, nine sizes too big stepped out of the car.

"Hey, from the store?"

"Yeah, from the store, Chief."

"Right on, man."

I moved the paper shopping bag over to my right hand to get past the guy in the Raider Jersey to climb into the car.

"What? You think you coming *with us*?"

"No?" I asked.

"This here's a swap, a trade," he said.

"Sherm."

"That's right, d'Andre, give the man one of them wet smokes."

Two cigarettes emerged from the front seat and poked toward my face.

“No weed in them? But they’re wet?” I asked.

“Good shit too. Mellow.”

“Really?” I looked into the car at the other kids, “Any of you vouch for this claim of mellow?”

“You’ll feel like you are walking ten feet off the ground,” the bass baritone’s resonant voice came from the front seat.

“This won’t make me fight cops? I don’t want to fight cops,” I said. Before I could get the cigarettes to my nose I could smell the bug spray.

One summer when I wasn’t much younger than these kids my dad tasked me with getting rid of a yellow jacket nest on the eave over the garage. I bought Black Flag brand Wasp, Hornet and Yellow Jacket killer. That Yellow Jacket nest, a caked brown cone the size of a bowling ball bag, ruined my summer. So I’ll always remember the smell: melted plastic and hate.

“Come on, man. You want to give us the drink or don’t you?”

“Yeah, here,” I said and shoved it into the guys arms and started to walk away.

“Thanks my man.”

I could hear them laughing after the door closed. They accelerated into a dangerous U-Turn and I noticed the Corolla didn’t have any license plates and I wondered if I’d have felt better if they’d taken my cash too. Because *that* could go on the list. Being handed two menthol cigarettes purported to be laced with PCP but in fact had merely been sprayed with Raid in exchange for \$65 worth of alcohol and cough syrup wasn’t going on the list.

Back at Victor's apartment I reminded myself that the next day would find me living on Skid Row. I was too tired to experiment with PCP. I didn't want to freak out and trash the place. I was proud of myself. The list would be accomplished in no time. I fell asleep while reading and re-reading Wright's poem that hinted at a PCP induced clash with the LAPD, *The Dust of Angeles*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fresh Air

The next day I had to hire a cleaning crew to come and fix up Delores and Victor's place. I sent one of the crew out for groceries. It cost a lot of money but there was no way I would have been able to tidy up in time with the unspeakable hangover I had. I was overjoyed I hadn't smoked the PCP because that would have, at best, pushed me into dysfunction.

The feeling of pressure and panic at having to get Delores and Victor's place cleaned up reminded me of my High School graduation party. My folks agreed to let me hold the party at our house for the entire graduating class. The irony of a party on a boutique winery where the kids drink jug wine, Midwestern domestic beer and San Joaquin Valley sparkling wine wasn't lost on me, even then. The bottom shelf booze wasn't the problem. It was the cocaine that showed up late night. It must have been cut with something bad because the bathrooms were trashed. I had trouble getting people out of my house and I had almost no time to get it cleaned. I had to use some of my graduation money to pay a couple lower-classmen to clean our house and grounds. I still find cigarette butts around the property, or broken glass and I know it was from that night. Of course my sister and her family live there now that my parents are gone.

Generations of pressure built up for twenty-six years and it's not easy to walk away from expectations. Havenor Vineyards has been around since before the Second World War when my great grandfather allegedly won the land in a card game. It turned

out to be land with rich soil. My great grandfather and his son were efficient businessmen. They could maximize profits even in the Russian River Valley back when most of the sophisticated operations were in the Napa and Sonoma Valleys. But my ancestors were not winemakers. The wine great granddad and granddad made was like cheap Spanish peasant wine. It was my father who made the winery into what it is today, a winery internationally recognized for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The San Francisco International Wine Competition doesn't just give away Best in Show. We've had both a Pinot and a Chardonnay take that title. I was going to work for my dad and work with my sister but that all changed when they decided to become partners with Peter and Joe Sanchetti.

My mom was never involved with the wine. But when she died of breast cancer, right before I turned sixteen, my dad seemed to get more aggressive with the estate. Maybe it was as simple as grief, maybe it was a feeling of liberation. My mom and dad had a strange marriage. She was an intellectual, an Anthropology professor at Cal Berkeley. Native Californians of the North coast; the Miwok and Pomo tribes were her thing. But she grounded him in his business decisions.

So the sale to Sanchetti shouldn't have shocked me so. But it did. Just the name Sanchetti was synonymous with table wine. Frozen ravioli. Garlic bread. Sanchetti wines were sold in Walmart. Then my dad died of a heart attack. And my sister Uta went to work for Pete and Joe. Luckily, I found my own path.

When everything was in order at Delores and Victor's I packed my stuff and I walked down to Wilshire, I caught the 720 Eastbound. I tried to find an empty seat but the bus was crowded at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. After the bus, Skid Row seemed spacious. I made it to my room at the La Jolla without any trouble. Were people beginning to sense the street on me? I didn't unpack because I didn't really want any of my things touching the surfaces in the La Jolla. I sat on the bed and pulled out my two Black Flag laced cigarettes. If I were really serious about this whole thing, I'd just get high and deal with whatever happened.

I fought off the urge to go back to Delores and Victor's. They'd surely let me stay with them a few days until I found a place. But I needed to face my demons. I was inexplicably filled with doubts. My poems bored the shit out of me. How could I expect anyone else to like them? I needed to eat but the idea of going back outside on foot and confronting street people was intimidating.

I decided I could try to experience hunger in my hotel. Hunger was on the list. After all, there was no room service. To go out to eat meant negotiating tent city and lactating old women. I felt a definite hunger pang. Hunger seemed the best thing from the list to pursue while I tried to figure out which more complicated task to attack next. I looked at my watch. It was a Timex that was black and ugly and basic. It read 3:47.

I got up and walked over to the mirror. It was dingy and speckled with corrosion. I looked good. I was handsome enough to dress this way all the time. If I'd had black framed glasses I'd look too much like a serial killer. Now I did sort of look like a cop but with my kind face, I think people would guess my superior intellectual capacity to most

police. I examined my profile. Still lean but the time sitting at Delores and Victor's had given me a little paunch.

I took out my collated information about Wright from a manila folder. Dangling Hog Books had published his two books of poems. As far as I could gather there was no such press. His two titles were the only books published by Dangling Hog. He did have one poem, *My Liver Swells with the Moon*, published in an anthology edited by a guy named Seamus Albrecht. Albrecht still worked, wrote and read in Los Angeles. We'd talked on the phone but he seemed disoriented and kept insisting I come see him. This was right before I left for L.A. and I forgot to get his address. Then he stopped picking up the phone. He had a reading coming up in a few days at the mecca for poetry in Los Angeles, a bookstore called Black Veil Books. Before that I could follow up on *The Dust of Angeles*, set at 8th and Normandie, and smoke my sherm. In the meantime, I decided to be hungry and write some poems.

I wanted to say something about the levels of economic struggle. Maybe start by writing about kids having fun in a stolen car. Then about the Russians who cleaned Delores and Victor's for me. Then I could get into the people like the breast milk lady.

I was preoccupied, trying to identify the smell in the room. I was stuck on old linens. I got up and opened the window. It was nailed in such a way that it could only open a couple feet. There was no screen. A gale force smell of piss and vomit blasted into my room followed shortly by the odor of human feces. I struggled to close the window but it was jammed. The inside of my nose hurt. I worried cells were dying. Valuable receptors. I couldn't differentiate between the piss and the shit and the throw up. It just

mixed together. Panic began to rise in me. I clawed at the window. I stepped back and kicked the frame and almost caught the glass. I tried the window again saying, "Please," out loud. The kick worked and the window slammed shut shaking the whole wall.

The odor had attached itself.

I looked at my watch. It was 3:51.

I was four minutes into my hunger experiment when I remembered Curtis and how he had invited me to coffee the next day. I certainly wasn't going to not eat with Curtis and have to explain to him why I wasn't eating. If I presented my plan to Curtis he would just poke lawyerly holes in it. There was no point in not eating between then and the time I met Curtis. That wouldn't count as a fast.

The odor from the alley gave me such an awful headache that I got out of there. I figured I'd stay out as late as I could then get a cab back to the front door. That way I'd give the piss/shit/vomit smell time to leave and wouldn't risk being a homicide victim on my way home.

I ended up getting an unspectacular braised short rib, garlic mashed with baby veggies and intrusive mushroom sauce. I drank some flights of Beringer Founder Estate wines. This was at the Biltmore Hotel, not far away in Downtown. I'd noticed that Angelenos said, "in" downtown. Not just downtown, the way we'd say it in Forestville.

After my meal it didn't make sense for me to go back to the La Jolla that night. After the heavy meal, if I smelled that odor I'd surely puke my guts out. So I just got a room at the Biltmore. The comfort of the room allowed me to clearly identify my next

target. I was taught to do the most difficult thing first so I resolved to definitely smoke some PCP the next day.

CHAPTER FIVE

My Attorney

Before I could head to 8th and Normandie, the sight of Jared Wright's drug arrest, I was off to meet Curtis. I got out there early. His office was in Century City, this weird business high-rise district in the middle of West Los Angeles. Buildings surrounded for miles by golf courses, houses and two story mini-malls. There were big fountains outside these giant office buildings. The building from *Die Hard* is right there too.

The mall where we were meeting doesn't open until ten and I wasn't to meet Curtis until eleven so I had a number of nodding exchanges with security guards as I window-shopped.

It was nice to see Curtis again. I told him how great he looked.

"Running three miles three times a week, five miles twice and ten on whichever weekend day I don't play golf," Curtis said. We were sitting at a Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf in the mall. He had his legs rakishly crossed as he munched on a salad in a plastic container. I was just having coffee. It was heinous. Coffee in Los Angeles was in the Stone Age. The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf sold acidic office coffee; I tasted filter paper and chlorine from the city water.

"How's your jump-shot?" he asked then he looked at me for the first time. "Are you fat?"

"I'm living on room service right now," I said. I'd had a big breakfast.

Curtis said, "Where's that?"

“The Biltmore,” I said.

Curtis was 6’3” with long legs. I knew he could jump since we played basketball together in High School. His blonde hair was styled like a game show host, it was parted on the side and it swooped. He was wearing a tailored grey Italian suit and his brown designer shoes cost at least a month in the La Jolla. He said, “I thought you moved down.”

“I did, I just haven’t found a place yet.”

“Downtown is fun but you need to move west. West Hollywood is the farthest east you should be.”

“Out of my price range, I think,” I said.

“What are you doing for work?” he said then he put a forkful of salad in his mouth.

“Writing.”

His eyes went wide; he wiped his hands on a napkin and held out his right to shake.

“I never doubted you. That was *fast*. What are you working on?”

“I’m writing mostly poetry now.”

He made a face like he couldn’t remember where he’d left his wallet. Then he said, “Great, but what do you want to do for *work*?”

“Nothing, I want to write.”

“Your folks left you money? I thought there wasn’t any money,” Curtis said. He had always made a big deal about how he’d put himself through law school.

“I’ve got some of my own money,” I said.

“Like?” I hated talking about money, especially with friends who had settled into a career. “Seriously, what are you going to do? I can help,” he said.

“I really appreciate it. But my whole point in coming down here was to do it on my own.”

He looked down at his salad while nodding his head.

“I want to work... odd jobs,” I said.

“Like what?”

“I thought I’d work and either make just enough to squeak by or work and save until I had enough to quit. Then repeat that process.”

“About a year after I moved down here I went through something. I still don’t know what it was. A dark night of the soul.” He leaned forward in his seat. He looked in on me and recounted a dark period in his life before he went to law school. He had a bunch of symptoms but the doctors couldn’t figure out what was wrong with him and everyone assumed it was in his head. This increased his depression. A cycle formed and before long he was staying with his girlfriend and spending his days on Web MD.

“I got out of it by getting a job. I grew up. I wanted to be an actor and all I’d done was audit a class at The Groundlings.” He continued, “At first, I was temping for douchebags and making twelve dollars an hour. But my willingness, I’m convinced, got my energies moving and landed me with Sorensen,” David Sorensen was Curtis’s mentor who hired him as an assistant then helped him get into law school. “You can’t wait for stuff to happen to you,” he said.

I thought, *this is how he wins over a jury, or a client, or whatever it is he does.* He scraped the container of the last piece of cucumber and a garbanzo bean.

“It’s not that I don’t want any help. I want to make art and not depend on who I was at home,” I said.

“You should use your money on some poetry retreat this summer in Michigan or something and meanwhile you use your real talent to get a great wine job and write your poetry on the side.”

“I don’t know.”

“You have the best nose I’ve ever seen,” he said.

“I need to make something of my own. Something away from wine,” I said.

“Oh and if you want to get laid in this town, you need to be out in bars where they charge fifteen bucks for a girls drink. Eight dollar beers.”

“First of all, I’m not trying to get laid. This is the whole point of moving down here is to stop chasing ass and trying to keep up. What happened is I discovered this poet. His name was Jared Wright. He was incredible,” I said it before I could stop myself. Now I had to tell Curtis my whole plan.

“This guy was everything I want to be. An orphan, mentally ill, homeless...and a great artist, completely unappreciated.”

“You want to be a mentally ill homeless orphan?”

“That came out wrong. This guy wrote two books of poetry that are perfect. But there’s more than poems. Between the poems he’s got these autobiographical sketches. I moved down here to work on my poetry and maybe find out more about his guy. Who

knows, maybe there's more poems he wrote and left in an ex-girlfriend's garage, I don't know."

"So as far as a job, you don't have a resume, do you?" he said.

"No," I said it quietly but with just enough resignation to give him an opening. Never give a shark an opening. He took out a large phone. It had one of those electronic pens so you can write on it.

"You were working at your sister's winery before you moved down?"

"Family winery, yes."

He said, "You were a manager."

"No."

"You were the head of sales and services for Havenor Vineyards."

"No."

"-Managed the staff."

"No," I corrected.

"Marketing and promotions."

"No."

"Good. Before that -- what was that place called? That sales job--"

"-Stocking."

"In college... What was the name?"

"The Fine Vine," I said.

"Horrible name." He started to write then stopped. He looked pained. "That was really the name?"

“I know,” I said.

“There’s no way they are still in business,” he said.

“I think they are,”

He stared at his phone tablet and appeared to be looking something up. “Wow, looks like they are still around. Who trusts someone with a name that bad?”

I laughed and he went on, “You majored in English at Davis?” He looked up at me thoughtfully.

“Enology and Viticulture.”

“You *gotta* go Sommelier. Then during the day you can do your research.”

“Oh God,” I said. “I didn’t come down here to work with wine.”

“It’s great down here. You can’t live up there. This is so much better. You’re not a farmer wearing fleece; you want to be in the mix, meeting people, guiding them, helping them become...”

“I don’t want to be around the kind of people who can afford the wine I’m going to tell them to drink,” I said.

“...educated. You want to educate an ignorant but very attractive,” he gestured toward a redhead in yoga pants whose ass looked like it had been airbrushed.

He took some more job history then asked, “What’s your address? Oh right. Better use mine. Phone number?”

“I’m not using a cellphone.”

“You know what you should do? You should get one of those answering services like Woody Allen uses in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. You call from a pay phone.”

“Genius. Do they still have those things?” I asked.

“They must. Look at that guy,” he pointed to man in his late sixties wearing a tweed blazer, khakis, and a brown fedora. “Doesn’t he look like he calls his service? We’ll use my phone for now,” he said. “My assistant will email you a copy of your resume and any interviews, keep your mornings open.”

I was completely exasperated. He’d always been controlling but never this bad.

“Hey, Sorensen has started collecting. You should talk to him. I’m sure he’d pay a consultation fee. A *nice* consultation fee.” It was like he wasn’t listening to anything I said. I’m not a violent man but I considered slapping his face just to get his attention.

He looked over my right shoulder, “Excuse me, sweetheart?”

I turned and a lovely blonde about my age wearing tight faded jeans, a David Bowie T-shirt and Chuck Taylors came walking toward us. Her hair was buzzed in the back and on the sides but came down to one side across her high forehead.

“Yeah?” she said.

“What do you do? What is your day job right now?”

“I wait tables over at Domiano’s.”

“Brentwood?”

“Yeah.”

He pointed to me and said, “He doesn’t want to be in food service.”

“Who does?” she said. “But you got to pay the bills.” She put her hand on my shoulder and said, “Don’t worry, you can do it, you can live your dreams. Just don’t ever give up.”

I turned and looked up at her. Her nose was small and cute and covered in freckles. I would never give up.

“Don’t tell him that, I’d love for him to give up,” Curtis said and she smiled big, shook her head at him. Curtis just grinned at me, then back to her, “What’s your name?”

“Layla.”

“I’m Curtis, this is Maurice. Layla, do you like wine?”

“I do,” she said.

“Maurice is an expert in wine. He’s going to put together a little party for me and my wife and I want you to come to my house and taste wine with Maurice. Would you like that?”

“If I’m free that night, I might come. Can I bring a friend?”

“Is your friend a he?”

“No.”

“Then you can bring two if you want.”

She was already punching her number into Curtis’ phone as Curtis gave me an *I-own-you* look. My resentment melted.

Lunch with Curtis brought up issues I’d ignored since relocating to Skid Row. I didn’t mind a gig curating a wine party for him and his wife. That would be no problem. Besides, I could use the money. I just had to be strong and not allow myself to get drawn back into the world of wine. I was concerned because I love wine so much; it’s been such a big part of my life that I didn’t think I could do it halfway. If I was to make a clean

break and make a life for myself in another field, if I was to gain mastery in the world of words, it seemed I had to leave wine completely behind.

Seeing Curtis' familiar face and gestures and warmth in spite of the bossiness made me feel good. Seeing the girls in Century City was exhilarating. But for those very reasons I decided, after the Curtis wine party, to do no more wine. I committed to crossing something off the list right away. Women, wine, friends, these were the enemies of the list.

CHAPTER SIX

The Angels

One of Wright's poems alluded to PCP. It was called *The Dust of Angeles*. It was beautiful and complicated. He described being arrested for breaking a cop's jaw. Or perhaps resisting arrest and breaking a cop's jaw. I assume the "dust" of the title is Angel Dust, PCP. It speaks to the cycle of violence around the prohibition of drugs. It speaks to the powerless, the freaks, the outcasts. It speaks to power and revenge and I found it moving. I re-read it on the 28 bus down Olympic to Normandie.

It wasn't until I was in
court
manacled
like some
movie of the week Afro American
that I learned
where
it
happened:
8th and Normandie.

As soon as I stepped off the bus, the neighborhood blew me away. It was so wonderfully urban and dingy. The intersection of 8th and Normandie was the aesthetic zenith of binary ethnic diversity. Koreans and Latin Americans. On the southeast corner was Mercado Benito Juarez. It appeared to be much more than a mere Mercado. It was also a Tortilleria. And a Panderia. And a Carneceria. The building was painted yellow with red trim. The sign was green with red letters. In and of itself it was unremarkable. I'm from California. The Mexican look is something I'm well versed in. What made this

so terrific was that right across the street was a 98 cents and up store, Hispanic owned. Then across on the Northwest corner was the Savoy Tivoli liquor store which was on the ground floor of a beautifully well-worn apartment building. The apartments had been converted into self-storage. There was Korean writing vertically up each side of the building. Half a block west of the Savoy Tivoli was a plain storefront with Korean writing and the English cursive “Beauty Salon” as their only sign. It was all this ethnic diversity shoved together in one small space. In San Francisco the Mission district is Mexicans and Hipsters. In Chinatown it’s Chinese and Hipsters. In North Beach, the Old Italian neighborhood it’s tourists and Hipsters. Here were real people. The noise of the street, the smell of pickled cabbage and urine were the same as San Francisco. It was cold as shit too. The wind wasn’t blowing like in San Francisco but I wasn’t dressed for such cold weather. I kept expecting Los Angeles to be warmer.

But there was no sign of drug activity. It hadn’t occurred to me until then that I’d spent so little time in Los Angeles. These streets, buildings, and businesses were so fascinating that I almost forgot to get high.

Here is another stanza of Wright’s poem, *The Dust of Angeles*:

They say I broke
a cop’s jaw.
heat doing his job
and I make him
eat through a straw.
Keep him
hungry.
I’m delighted,
momentarily.

I read it again. I scouted for the right place to light up my wet cigarette. I wanted to slip down an alley and smoke it, in case someone identified the smell and called the in the heat. I walked east to Mariposa and decided to light up. I lit it like a cigarette then wondered if you were supposed to hold it in your lungs like you do with weed. Or would that be too much? If they only gave me two cigarettes for so much booze, one cigarette must be powerful. I stood on the corner and affected the posture of someone who is waiting for someone. I could taste a faint trace of bug spray but not as strong as I'd expected. I stopped halfway through the cigarette and tossed the rest into the gutter. Then I pictured some kid playing with it and getting poisoned so I walked over, picked it up and extinguished it and put it into a trashcan on the corner.

I wasn't used to smoking and my throat felt dry so I went back to Savoy Liquors. So far all I felt was the buzz from the nicotine making me light headed. Standing in front of the chocolate milk and Yoohoo I got hit by a pain. A pain in my chest and back. It really felt more like I had fallen from a height of ten feet, onto a piece of rebar. The air shot from my lungs and I dropped to one knee. Patches of black ooze swam before my eyes.

The strangest thing was that inside my head, my mind was calm and placid. I thought of a time I went to Reggae on the River, up near Garberville. I took some shrooms and as they came on I was overwhelmed with fatigue and wanted to crawl under a tree to nap. But there were no trees in this valley of the Eel River where the Reggae was performed. I looked up on the slopes and saw shrubs. I walked through a tangle of parked cars and revelers. They were indistinct and unwashed. They took squirts from bota bags

and passed joints the size of Sharpies. I went up the side of a gradual incline and crawled under a bush and slept. Took a dirt nap.

I had the sense of restful, dream-filled sleep. When I woke I was rejuvenated and eager to pop the cork on the bottle of Ravenswood Zin. Usually I feel Zinfandel is like driving a nail with a sledge hammer. But I went with Zin to match the rugged terrain. I looked around and was stunned to discover I'd slept through the concert. Down below I saw nothing but dust drifting in front of headlights, cars filing out of the venue. The sun had set. My friends gone. I had to sprint to the exit and decide, without the aid of cellphone service, if my friends had left the area and if I should start trying to hitchhike back to Forestville. As luck would have it I ran into some guys I knew from Matanzas Creek and we had a great time getting home. One of the guys was a cute girl from Santa Cruz doing an internship in the tasting room there. We made out in the back seat in a haze of body odor, tequila, and marijuana smoke.

On one knee in the Savoy Liquor store, there were no friends. No seller rats from Matanzas Creek. I tried to stay with the feeling of making out with that chick in the back of the Mercedes.

“You okay?” the guy behind the liquor store counter asked.

“Fine,” I tried to say but it didn't really come out. It was more like “Ffffffhuh.”

“You need a doctor?”

“Ffffffhuh,” I said again. I grabbed the handle of the cooler and got myself to my feet. Every muscle in my chest and neck was rigid. The pain was blinding. I could barely

get air down into my lungs. Everything hurt. “I need a cab,” I said. I fumbled in my pocket for a twenty dollar bill.

“I’ll call,” he said. I tried to smile at him but I couldn’t see well and I couldn’t change the expression on my face. I heard him request the cab then he was next to me with a Styrofoam cup of water. I couldn’t get it down. He guided me by the arm to the curb outside. I sat down to wait. I had to stand because bending my body like that to sit made my ribs feel broken. Every time I lifted my head to look around I was blinded by blackness and pain. I kept my head down and looked at the street. Gum. Some green gum was stuck in the groove between the street and the gutter. But I was getting air. I sucked. Then I started to gasp. Too much air.

The cab came. Thank God he could speak English. I was convinced I was either having a heart attack or going into diabetic shock. My dad died of a heart attack and my mom, before she died of breast cancer, had diabetes. Fun memories. The liquor store guy told the cab driver to take me to the nearest emergency room. The cab driver was Greek or Turkish and heavy lidded. As he was refusing me saying, “No-no-no-no-no...” I reached into my pocket and pulled five or six twenty dollar bills out and tossed them up front. We were in a Prius and the bills fluttered. He said, “Okay.”

The liquor store guy pushed the back of my head between my legs and we drove off.

“You be okay,” said the driver. “St. Vincent’s not far.” I was sitting behind the passenger seat and he put his hand over the seat and patted my head. A sob welled up

inside of me and I would have cried had I not noticed suddenly that I was breathing and the excruciating pain was merely tightness.

“I’m okay, thank you. I’m going to be okay,” I said, still a little breathless. My hands were still tingling. I leaned back on the seat and stretched my torso.

“Just relax my friend, just relax.”

I rolled down the window and rested my chin on the glass. I took long slow breaths.

“You breathe too much. Take it easy, my friend.”

“I don’t know if I should go to the hospital. I don’t have insurance.”

“You go,” he said and accelerated through a red light.

I sat in plastic chair at St. Vincent’s hospital. No insurance. This was before the Affordable Care Act took care of guys like me.

Something about an urban hospital I expected gunshot wounds and chaos. It was more like Starbuck’s on weekday morning, busy but controlled. The nurses and doctors were all business and I got a sense of no wasted motion. Every step and gesture was geared toward maximum efficiency.

When I arrived I’d walked up to a nurse at a desk with a high counter. She was young and looked either Russian or Armenian or Turkish. She was tan with big full lips and slightly crooked teeth. Her right front tooth was out just a bit farther than he left front tooth. She didn’t bother much with her eyebrows but I didn’t mind. She smelled like garlic and cocoa butter. I told her everything, “I’m experiencing chest pains, difficulty

breathing, tingling in my hands, pain in my left arm, sweating, heartburn, upper back pain,” I said, omitting the Angel Dust detail.

“Any history of heart disease in your family?” I turned to the older black woman behind me in line and gestured toward the nurse to let the black lady know when it was her turn, they’d do the right things.

“As a matter of fact my father dropped dead of a massive coronary last year.”

“And who is your insurance provider?”

“No insurance,” I said.

She took my driver’s license and information, typed it all up. Then she pointed to a rows of seats and handed me a clipboard and some forms. I didn’t like the way the clipboard floated in the air and her eyes were already off me and moving to the line of people waiting behind me. I complied. *She must know what she’s doing*, I thought.

Once in the plastic chair I didn’t have a recurrence of the chest pain or the lack of air but I had this feeling that at any moment I was going to begin convulsing. My mind remained clear. But I was unable to shake the thought that at any second foam would spew out of my mouth and I would diarrhea in my pants, and crack my skull on the tile floor. This unnerved me. I sat and tried to concentrate on what was on the form but it was difficult to read, much less answer. The feeling that death was at hand was very real.

The local news on the TV was blaring. They were reporting on a blind pole vaulter. She was sexy. She had a tight, pole vaulter’s body. I wondered if they’d do a human interest story on a non-hot blind pole vaulter.

I got up and went back to the woman at the front desk, “Excuse me. I probably should have mentioned this earlier but I just smoked a cigarette that may have been laced with PCP,” I said.

“Go ahead and be sure to put that down,” she said.

“I need to see a doctor.”

“And you will.”

I felt like I needed a nerve transplant. If I could just get some uncorrupted bone marrow. The quick breaths were back and I just couldn’t sit still. I walked outside and tried to relax myself. I tried to remember what the kid at the street corner said about the sherm. It was chill? It was steady? I couldn’t remember what any of them looked like. If I had to testify about the nearly lethal dose of PCP that almost killed me, I’d be helpless. *Old Toyota* would be all I could say.

I groaned, I couldn’t help it, it burst out of me. I went back inside. Paced and thought about going to one of the examining bays and pulling back a curtain and grabbing a doctor. Security would escort me out. I’d be signing my own death warrant. I found my seat and pressed my buttocks down into the seat so that I wouldn’t get myself thrown out.

The words, I’m dying flew from my panicked brain to the back of my throat and nearly out of my mouth but I bit my lip and bent over. I did this so violently I almost tumbled forward. My outstretched hand prevented that. I straightened up and went back and sat down. It was obvious I was going to die and the beauty of it was it would take

them hours to discover that I wasn't sitting there staring blankly at KTLA News on the TV, that I was sitting in blood leaking from my anus.

What was left undone? My dad had made a mess of everything. He'd blown the winery up and then died but at least he had at one time created the 2002 Reserve Chardonnay. And the 2004 Estate Pinot Noir. Nobody could ever take that achievement away from him. He'd been great. He'd achieved greatness. Nobody bats a thousand. I'd never done anything worthwhile. I was going to die with my music still in me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Haunted House

“Mr. Havenor?” a voice calling to me. It took a minute to realize it was the nurse at receiving.

“Yes?”

“I found your insurance and there’s a twenty dollar co-pay for an ER visit.”

“Co-pay?”

“You said you didn’t have insurance but when I ran your social Blue Horizon came up.”

“I didn’t know. I thought I’d been cancelled.”

“I even called to confirm.”

“Great,” I said. Somehow I was disappointed. That meant that the others there facing steep debts from their respective ambulance rides and tests weren’t my brothers and sisters but just hapless poor people.

“You want to pay now or should we bill you?”

“No, I’ll pay now,” the cab driver hadn’t taken all my money.

I handed over the twenty and smiled. She looked over my shoulder and nodded. I turned and another nurse was waiting for me.

“Right over here,” she said. And with those words I was no longer afraid. I went into one of those curtained off areas. The nurse took my vitals and I repeated to her that I thought I was having a PCP induce heart attack and that my dad died of a heart attack.

She hooked me up to one of those machines. She put the sensors on my skin. The line weaved and blipped across the screen.

“It doesn’t look like you’re having a heart attack,” she said.

Later, a tox screen didn’t show any PCP.

On the cab ride back down to Skid Row I was experiencing dread. Not what you want to feel when you’ve almost died. The La Jolla was a wonderful place but I might have to find something more centrally located. Only about one third of Jared Wright’s pomes and writings were about “The Nickel,” as 5th street on Skid Row was nicknamed. Mostly about a bar and restaurant called Cole’s, which was actually on the edge of Skid Row.

I’d started apartment hunting on Skid Row because I wanted to live in the cheapest possible place to keep stretch out my funds. But Wright didn’t actually reference the La Jolla. After coming back from St. Vincent’s I was leaning toward moving but I’d already paid for it so I had to stay the week.

It was around nine o’clock when I got back and I slumped on the bed and even though it was uncomfortable. I’d had an optimistic thought that maybe I could just luck out and sleep through my first night there. I’d had an elevated heartrate for hours that day, it wasn’t out of the question. I immediately fell asleep

I sat up in bed when I thought I heard a noise at my door. “You ain’t said that. You said the spot was correct.” A man said.

“You stupid mutherfucker. Why don’t you listen?” A woman said.

They sounded angry and on the verge of explosive violence. Then someone, maybe one of them pounded on the door.

“Mitchell, open up,” the man’s voice. Not as angry.

I started to get up as slowly as possible to keep the bed from squeaking.

“Mitchell, you keep me out in this hall, c’mon mutherfucker.”

“I’m not Mitchell, this isn’t Mitchell’s room,” I said.

“Where’s Mitchell at?” he said. Angry again.

“I don’t know nobody named Mitchell,” I said. Trying to keep the terror out of my voice. I scanned the room for something to use as a weapon.

“You better open this mutherfucking door,” the guy said.

I had a bottle of Schramsburg 2004 Reserve. I was saving it for a major victory. I thought I’d toast some titanic insight that had come from living Wright’s life. It was my only defense if this guy insisted on following up with Mitchell. Then I heard footsteps going away.

I went into my bag and pulled out the bottle just in case he came back.

I reclined on the bed and got fully dressed in case I had to defend myself. My watch said it was just after midnight. It was too hot in the room with the window closed and before long I sweated through my clothes. Every half hour or so I’d drift momentarily into a half sleep then jerk awake ready to swing the wine bottle in self-defense. I don’t know how long this lasted.

“Mitchell,” I heard a whisper in my ear and was on my feet, heart racing and hundred dollar bottle of sparkling cocked like a baseball bat.

“I hear you in there Mitchell, come on and let me in,” it was the same man from before. Then I heard him speak more quietly, “Give me that piece.”

“What you gonna do with it?”

“I’m going to wrap it in this here towel and,” his voice trailed off and I couldn’t hear what he was saying. I imagined he was going to come through that door any minute.

I had the window open and my head out, looking down into the alley. There was a truck parked below my window. I was on the second floor. The piss and vomit smell wasn’t as bad because it was a cool night outside. My eyes teared up a little from the fumes. I took my duffel and tossed it down onto the roof of the truck, it hit the roof and tumbled into the empty bed. The opening of the window was just big enough for me to get through. As I said before it was nailed shut so it couldn’t be opened all the way. I could still hear them arguing in low voices in the hall but couldn’t make out what they were saying. After the bag was down I realized I should have put the bottle in the bag padded by clothes. I didn’t want to lose my only weapon. I gripped the bottle by the neck with my right hand, my dominant hand, and got my legs out the window and dangled them down. I got flat on my stomach and held on with my right arm, moving my left out the window. I had a good grip and looked down. The top of the truck looked to be about five feet below me. It was a flatbed pickup.

I could no longer hear voices and assumed this meant the guy had stepped back and was about to blast the door handle. I dropped and pushed off from the wall. As my right arm came out of the window my fingers were pinched between the window sill and the bottle and the bottle came out of my hand. My feet hit the roof and the metal buckled

with a terrible noise. I took the impact with my ankles, knees, hips. I bent low and felt an excruciating blow to the back of my head. I fell forward and slammed my left shoulder into the wall, heard the bottle explode underneath me but the truck was parked so closely to the wall that I ricocheted back into a sitting position on the roof.

I didn't wait for my head to clear. I got to my feet in the bed of the truck and picked up my duffel.

"What the fuck?" I turned and inside the cab of the truck was a face. The window was dirty and it was dark so I didn't see more than the outline. I ran to the end of the bed of the flatbed and leaped. The weight of my duffel threw me off balance and I landed awkwardly sideways, stumbled and hit the ground on the same shoulder that hit the wall. I reached out and grabbed my duffel with my right hand then pushed off the ground with my left, relieved it still worked. I heard the truck door creak open but I didn't look back. The alley was blocked in by tents and boxes. I only had three or four strides to get up to full speed to jump but I found a low point in the horizon of tent and boxes and hurdled the whole mess.

I hit the sidewalk on the far side of the tents and boxes and braced myself for bullets but stayed on my feet. I heard a pop like gunfire. Flinched and took off Northbound on Stanford in a crouch. I picked a spot up at the end of the street. Another truck. Big and white, commercial. This one was parked on the street. I focused on the picture of a blue fish on the back, twisting as it exploded out of the water in triumph. I wasn't going to stop or slow down or look back until I was clear of that truck.

When I gained the truck I ducked down behind it and looked back toward where

I'd come from. I couldn't see well what was happening but there were shapes. I took off again. Sprinting across San Pedro on 5th Street I wasn't even a little bit scared but pitied anybody who fucked with me. My head swiveled and assessed threat levels of every moving and immobile object. I felt like a gun might slow me down but outside of that I'd just fucking run over anybody who tried to mess with me. I had my bag under my arm; it felt like a football even though it was much bigger and heavier. My head throbbed but it just triggered more adrenaline. I took 5th all the way to Pershing Square before I slowed my pace. I felt the back of my head and brought bloody fingertips out of my hair.

I sat down on a bench and looked up at the low clouds. More like fog. It hovered between the buildings obscuring their full height. I started to slowly re-inhabit my body. Legs, head aching. I noticed for the first time the inside of my forearm had been scraped. There was a little blood but mostly just raw skin. It started to sting. I couldn't lift my left arm above my head. The cool of the morning pre-dawn air was tingling my chest and shoulders. I looked at my watch. It was 3:33 in the morning.

I took out my moleskin and a pen. I wrote, "Jack be nimble..."

I put the notebook away. I decided that I wasn't going to sleep. Adrenaline was fading but it would take a long time and a large, locked door for me to sleep soundly any time soon. I might as well use my health insurance and I started walking to St. Vincent's Emergency Room. From memory I couldn't think of any significant Wright reference to Skid Row that would require I return to the La Jolla or any of the surrounding area. After the impotence with Annie and the fake wet cigarettes I was increasingly pleased with myself for having escaped harm at the La Jolla. I felt like I finally had something to write

about. Even if all that came to me now was a nursery rhyme. I finally had some momentum. Some experience. I had no plan after going back to the ER but even that felt good. Walking the streets of Downtown LA in the early morning hours was exactly what I wanted out of my new life. Alive with adrenaline and hunger I walked, still feeling invincible.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Good Vibrations

I didn't need stitches in my head and the doctor didn't think I had a concussion so I wasn't admitted to St. Vincent's. I hadn't slept when they sent me on my way. I had nowhere to go so I went to the cafeteria and got breakfast and looked over my Jared Wright notes again to plan what was next.

It was the morning of the night of Albrecht's reading and I hadn't looked up the location of Black Veil Books while I was still at the Delores and Victor's. Black Veil Books was a mecca for poetry. It was opened in 1967 and it became famous for being neutral in the Los Angeles poetry wars. It was never home to any particular LA poetry movement but at one time or another hosted events and readings from such groups as the Venice Beats, Watts Writers Workshop people, Punk influenced poets, something called Woman's Building Community, LGBT, Invocation LA, and Chicano poets. Though I know little about these groups and movements I do know that Black Veil was the only bookstore Jared Wright was never 86'd from. He claimed it was because he liked the bathrooms so much.

The founder of Black Veil Books was Samson Alexander. Though not a poet himself Alexander loved poetry and devoted himself to keeping poetry alive in Los Angeles. "Poetry is the voice of the soul of the city," he said.

In 1995 he died under mysterious circumstances while on a sex tour of Southeast Asia. His son Quincy took over and managed to keep the doors open.

I called Curtis' office, "Hey, this is Maurice Havenor, I'm Curtis' old buddy from back home. I've called a few times without introducing myself."

"Mr. Ellis isn't in; would you like to leave a message?" I knew Curtis was in Palm Springs.

"Yeah, you know what? Actually, I need a huge favor," I said.

Then I heard her voice, "You have reached the voicemail of Curtis Ellis, please leave your name and number..." She'd sent me straight through to voicemail. I hung up. I called back.

"Yeah, hey, it's me again. Maurice. Listen, I need a huge favor," I said.

"What can I do for you Mr. Havenor?"

She remembered my last name, nice touch. "I dropped my phone in the toilet and my computer froze."

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

"Could you look up Black Veil books for me? The address," I said.

"5417 Sunset Blvd."

"Thank you so much, sorry to bother you."

"Anything else I can do for you?"

"Do you happen to know the nearest cross street?"

"Western."

"Thank you, you are a life saver," I paused and then decided to go for it, "Let's say I was taking the bus."

“I have to take this other call, hold on,” she had good energy. I knew I was putting her out but she was so gracious. I’d have to send her a signed copy of my first book. Or put her in the acknowledgements.

She came back, “Where are you?”

“St. Vincent’s Hospital on 3rd and Alvarado.”

I could hear the clacking of the keyboard. “If you take the 16 along 3rd to Western. Then the 207, just take it up to Sunset,” she said, sounding a little bit harried.

“You’re busy and I really appre-“

“-I have to take this, good luck,” she hung up. She’d done enough. I was grateful.

I went down to the corner of 3rd and Grand View. I didn’t have to wait long for the express. There were still seats and I plopped down. It was morning rush hour. It felt good to be up with the drones, only I was heading toward literature. I looked at all the slob on their way to miserable jobs. The rocking of the bus put me to sleep in minutes. When I woke up we were at Cedars Sinai Hospital. I got off and caught the bus back the way I came. The inbound bus wasn’t as crowded.

I got out at Western. I didn’t want to pay again to get back on the bus so I decided to walk the rest of the way. The landscape was similar to Santa Rosa or San Jose except everything was older and more run down. The strip malls seemed to be coated in exhaust. A grimy dust was everywhere. I was walking toward the Hollywood Hills and the Hollywood sign but the incline of Western was gradual. I wondered how these businesses stayed open. Not so much the Rite Aid and the Staples but the typewriter repairs place that advertised, “Japanese Transistors and Semiconductors.”

I walked into a Chinese food and donut shop for a bottle of water. The guy behind the counter looked like he just climbed out of a cargo container on a ship. A desperate stow away fleeing religious persecution in Red China.

“Scuse me, sir, how far to bookstore on Sunset?” I pantomimed opening and reading a book.

“Black Veil? Not far, three or four major streets. You even been to Book Soup?” he said with a faint trace of an accent.

“Oh – sorry – yeah – no,” I was crossed up by his American-ness.

“It’s a few miles west on Sunset in West Hollywood.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I pressed on. I continued up Western at a slower pace, trying to keep from an all-out soaking sweat. I already had salt rings from last night’s sweat. It wasn’t even hot out. Couldn’t have been in the seventies yet. After I passed Santa Monica I noticed another surge of euphoria. The implications of the last few days was mixing with the cars crawling north on Western. Buses, trucks. I saw a Mexican man pushing an ice cream cart toward me. He wore an old, tattered cowboy hat and his clothes were clean but well worn. His cowboy boots were down at the heel. I wondered if South L.A. on Saturday night was a good territory and that’s why the guy down there looked good and if Thursday morning on Western was slim pickings and that’s why this guy looked like a bum.

When I reached Sunset, Black Veil was smaller than I expected. It was a shop in a strip mall. The building looked like it had been built since 1968. There were a few customers.

I tried to imagine what it would be like when I'd walk into an indy bookstore and be immediately recognized as Maurice Havenor, poet, critic, architect of a new interest in poetry. There was a giant ficus tree in the middle of the store. It reminded me of a small town bookstore. It looked like a woman over fifty had decorated it.

My reverie was broken by the hardcover copy of the latest Malcolm Gladwell book. Obviously Black Veil wasn't above cashing in on Gladwell's sloppy logic.

I didn't see the poetry section from where I stood. The plain, bookish woman at the counter greeted me when I approached, "How's it going?" she asked.

"Great, I was wondering... I'm interested in local poets. I wondered if you could tell me who some of the top poets are in Los Angeles."

She looked at me for a second then said, "Top poets? We have a reading coming tonight with one of my favorites, Seamus Albrecht. He's terrific." The instant before she said the poet's name her face exploded into a beatific smile.

She was a type: bangs, dark hair, not skinny, thick-framed glasses, thrift store cardigan sweaters.

"Other than him, maybe someone younger?" I asked.

She gave me a look like I was an idiot.

"Any others poets you can think of?" I asked.

“Let’s take a look,” she said and she walked from behind the counter to her right and there was the poetry section. I noticed her jeans were frumpy but I could imagine she’d look good naked. I suddenly liked the idea of a woman who was so distracted by a life of the mind she didn’t have time to concern herself with fashion or money.

“How do you get a reading here? How does that work?” I asked.

“When someone has a new book coming out, we like to promote local authors, and of course if someone big is in town.”

“Like Malcolm Gladwell?”

“Sure, though I don’t think he’s been here. He’s really big,” she said.

“But you have to be established?”

“Precisely,” she said then she pointed, “We have this section here, local poets but I don’t really know which ones are popular.”

“Can you look up your sales results, maybe?” I asked. “I don’t have time to read all these people.”

“I can’t do that on this system.”

I had every intention of reading Albrecht but I wanted at least one other name.

“You ever remember selling any of these authors?”

“Sure, there’s Wanda Coleman, Eliot Gerstel.” She reached out and grabbed a book. She caressed it. Laid her hand on the cover and smoothed it around. “Feel that,” she said, handing it to me.

I took it and imitated her action. It was a small book, about the size of wine label. The paperback cover was made of this wonderful textured material. It felt luxurious to

the touch. I looked at the cover. A silhouette of a lighthouse was small in the middle of the cover. Seamus Albrecht's name was there too, printed in an attractive font.

"This is nice," I said.

She stepped next to me and gazed down at the book. "The things he does with rhythm in this one..."

My heart began to beat faster. I could smell soap on her. Mass produced verbena and lime. We were shoulder to shoulder. This Albrecht guy had quickened some animal vibration in her and her vibration was twanging in me. Like a tuning fork. What power this man's words had. I hadn't looked at them yet and they were already in my body. Reverberations of lust ricocheted around the Local Poetry section of this neighborhood bookstore.

"Are you seeing anyone?" I asked.

She had a boyfriend. That was okay.

"My name's Maurice," I said.

"Hannah," she said.

I bought the book called *Lighthouses Are Too Bright* which was the new one. It was printed on that nice paper by Bear Star Press. I decided to go write some poetry to make a girl's tuning fork buzz.

The reading wasn't until seven that night. I'd identified another location from one of Wright's poems. The Hartley Apartments on Vine Street. I made my way down Sunset to Vine and I stopped for a light lunch of pan seared scallops with asparagus and English

peas at a joint called Magnolia. I decided against wine. The time had come to wean myself off of the good stuff. I had sparkling water and a coffee instead.

The next few hours I killed in Starbuck's writing furiously. The narrow escape on Skid Row and then the arousal displayed by Hannah opened me up to some things that hadn't been stirred before.

Like a Vietnamese coffee
My java on top
The cream lay
At the
Bottom, undisturbed.

Originally I planned to just scout out the Hartley. But after spending the morning writing prolifically, inspired by Hannah, it felt like maybe the problem was Downtown and Skid Row. Maybe I needed women. I'd wanted to avoid women to get work done but without any sex energy I'd gone dry. Maybe moving into the Hollywood area could get me closer to where Hannah worked, where women like Hannah lived and worked.

I opened to Wright's poem again, the one about the Hartley:

The shadows creep
across the building next
door
The Hartley has no
curtains.
Last night
A loud bag lady shrieked.

From the outside the Hartley Apartments looked perfect. This wasn't Skid Row so the dead and dying weren't crawling over each other on the front step and yet the building reeked of hard times. The whole area had been considerably gentrified but this one particular building had what I wanted. And surely there were still bag ladies around

here.

The café below looked like they might have poetry readings and AA meetings. I imagined what they'd say on the Maruice Havenor walking tour, *He used to smoke cigarettes and nurse a hangover in this cafe here*. I walked into the building and they had a similar security cage deal as at the La Jolla. A large woman came and opened up. She wasn't the old man in wife beater, smoking a cigarette that I hoped would work the lobby. She was in her fifties with dirty blonde hair, so-so skin, and she wasn't fat so much as just big. She wore loose fitting jeans, running shoes and a sleeveless green blouse with stitched flowers on it.

"You interested in a room?" she asked. "Let's go look. The bachelor or the studio?"

"The bachelor for a bachelor," I said.

We took the elevator up to the third floor. With the heat and the airlessness in the car, it felt like we were slow dancing. The building smelled like a restaurant with a B rating: rat poison and dirty dishwater.

She led me down a dark hall. I didn't want to be there. My whole plan was starting to seem fundamentally flawed.

"How much for this one?" I asked.

"Nine seventy for the bachelor," she said.

I can't live in places like this... and for almost a thousand dollars? I thought.

She showed me into the room. There were some impressive locks on the door. It would take a couple rounds to take out all the locks and get the door open. Otherwise, not

really different than the La Jolla or the prostitute's room: fucked bed, table with busted chair, old bathroom with stained fixtures. Though this one had a tiny kitchen area with a mini fridge, sink, hotplate and some counter space and a cupboard for cans of stewed tomatoes. I placed my copy of *Vagina Tooth* the cover facing down, why offend this nice woman? Then I sat on the bed and the springs creaked with anguish.

“Nobody complains,” she said.

Her green eyes were understanding though a little tired. She looked like a poor soccer mom. She looked like Jimmy Ferguson's mom. Jimmy always needed a ride home from basketball games because his parents couldn't afford a car.

I wanted to take the room but to try and stay in this shit-hole a month was too much. There had to be a notch above. What good was squalor if it was too hot and stuffy to get any work done? It was time I get momentum and build off of today. I got up and headed for the door.

“What do you think, hon?” she asked.

“It's great; I'm just looking at a couple other places.”

She followed me out into the hall, locking the door behind her, “Oh yeah, which ones?”

“I have them written down in my book,” I said. Then realized, “I forgot my book.”

She put the key back in, smiled at me, and then snapped the key off in the lock.

“Crud,” she said. She tried to pinch the end of the key with her fingernails.

“You want me to try?” I asked.

“Let me see your fingernails,” she said. I showed her.

“Too short, might squeeze it back deeper. Let me go get my needle nose. Back in a flash.”

She went over to the elevator, hit the button and looked back at me. She nodded then hit the stairs. I liked her. Too bad her building was untenable. Until the elevator door opened and out stepped another muse.

She was about 5’3” with shoe polish black hair, teased hair, like she was following an 80’s rock band but she was otherwise dressed tastefully. Her full lips had the traces of red lipstick and she wore heavy mascara and eyeliner. Her very high heels accentuated her thin and elegant ankles. Her terrific legs were on display because of her short burgundy sack dress that was low cut enough to show off her cleavage.

“A new white boy?” she asked. She had one of those sexy raspy voices.

“That’s right,” I answered. She stared at me. She wobbled slightly. “You live here?” I asked.

“You’re sharp” she said. She stepped toward me into the light with her lips parted in a half smile. She had a slight gap between her teeth. I couldn’t think of anything clever to say. “Do you have anything to drink?” she asked.

“I haven’t moved in yet.”

She walked past me toward the next room and her arm grazed my arm and I smelled her perfume and dried sweat and cigarettes. The perfume reminded me of a Dolce & Gabbana that was incongruous with that environment. She fished in her large purse for some keys and as she rummaged she peeked back at me with one of the sexiest

smirks I've ever seen.

“You play your cards right and I might let you keep track of my keys so I don't have to keep looking for them.”

“I'm good at cards,” I said. I thought that was clever.

“Keys!” she pulled a janitor's bundle of keys from her purse and somehow grabbed the right one, stuck it in, looked back at me, pulled the key out, stuck it back in, and slowly inserted it as she exhaled, “Aaaaah,” she said. “What are *you* thinking about? Perv.”

Then she slipped into the door and shut it behind her.

“I don't know what's wrong with that God dammed elevator but it usually works fine,” the manager lady said. She huffed up the stairs holding a pair of needle nose pliers.

“Will you take cash?” I asked.

I set down my duffel and unpacked. This would be home for a while. When I stripped down to shower I noticed for the first time the stink coming off my arm pits, my crotch. I was ripe. I'd stood next to two hot chicks smelling like this? At first I was embarrassed. Then I realized I was finally being real. If they couldn't handle it, I didn't need them. I thought about showing up to the reading with my rumpled smelly clothes. Instead I decided to shower, put on clean clothes, and just stop wearing deodorant.

CHAPTER NINE

The Reading

The reading at Black Veil was small, maybe fifteen people. I looked for Hannah but she wasn't there. I tried to guess which guy was Seamus. Nobody met my expectation. I pictured black jeans, boots and a black t-shirt and maybe a wool cap of some kind. A wallet chain. He'd probably be in his sixties but still virile. A Vietnam Vet? There weren't any men there that looked like that. Some of them looked like homeless people trying to get free cookies. One guy with matted hair, who smelled like he'd slept in a pile of dirty jock straps, loaded sugar into his coffee. His trembling hands tore three *Sugar in the Raw* packets at a time. He discarded the wrappers next to the cup he'd filled to the brim. He'd also used three stir sticks and tons of coffee and milk came out with the stirrers, which he deposited on top of the empty sugar packets. Then he lifted the cup with a trembling hand and dumped coffee onto the table. When he got the cup to his mouth the greedy slurping noise was unsettling. As I stepped up to plunge my own coffee from the thermos I wanted to convey that I wasn't there for a freebie. I only took half a cup and congratulated myself for drinking my coffee black.

Stepping away from the refreshment area I took a closer look at the crowd. There was a scholarly woman in her late twenties with hunched shoulders and drinkers eyes. She dressed in clothes off the racks of Gap or Old Navy. Her shoes hadn't been popular in ten or fifteen years. Where did she even find them? Maybe she was *over* thirty. Actually, I was the only person other than her who was under thirty.

There was a very old man with wild grey hair sitting up front. He wore a rumpled blazer and pleated khakis six sizes too big. He carried a bundle of loose typed pages under his arm like his life depended upon protecting them. I wondered why he hadn't taken more care to neatly stack them. He stood and turned to face the room and his eyes were captivating. They were dark, almost sinister. They didn't fit on his kindly old man face, which looked like it had been inflated then deflated till the skin just hung on his skull. He had hair growing on the bridge of his nose. He wore his pants high above his navel and there was a fold to compensate for how much bigger they were than the belt and his waist. He turned and marched to the podium and asked the scholarly woman if she could turn the mic on.

"I was going to introduce you," she said.

"I don't need a fucking introduction, there are three people here," he snapped then he walked over to me, shoving chairs out of the way. For a second I thought he was going to attack me.

"Son, my name is Seamus Albrecht, I'm a god damned poet."

"Uh," I said. It was his threatening approach and his extreme old age that stunned me.

"Nice to meet you Uh," he then turned to the scholarly woman and said, "Elaine, I've met our audience, I introduced myself." At least he had some virility left.

There was a laugh from the other fourteen people who were sitting down sensing the show had started. But before I could say anything he was back up at the podium introducing his first poem.

It was called, *Shoulder Surgery* and it was about a guy who goes to Dodger fantasy camp. We find out at the end that he was able to pay for it off the malpractice suit he won when his wife died on the operating table during routine shoulder surgery. It was a long poem. The homeless man sat next to me and got up repeatedly to refill his coffee. The cookies were long gone but someone kept restocking the sugar. My indigent friend was happy. At least he seemed happy based on the yummy noises he kept making.

Albrecht read for twenty minutes then turned it over for questions. A man dressed as a limo driver asked about chasing perfection. "I'm always fiddling. Can't ever let go of the thing. You got any advice?"

"What kind of poetry are you working on?"

That question triggered a memory. I'd just told my dad I'd discovered poetry. He knew I'd always been interested in writing but I'd only just started writing poems.

"What kind of poetry?" my dad asked. He was underneath the Mustang. All I could see was the lower half of his body. The carport was out behind the house, down by the creek and it was damp most of the time. It was built back in the twenties as a horse stable but had been slowly converted over the years to accommodate four cars. There were two cars in it now and the other two bays were piled with stuff: tools, heirlooms, a tractor, about four sets of golf clubs, fishing gear and decrepit sports and camping equipment. The floor was uneven concrete that had been haphazardly mended. It was enclosed on the back and sides and had a roof but there was no garage door. Where we lived you didn't have to lock stuff up. Next to the sixty-eight Mustang my dad was working on sat an MG sedan that hadn't run since nineteen sixty-eight. It had no

seats. My dad was so disorganized. He just ran from crisis to crisis. He would get out into a pile of stuff then something would come up, someone would call in sick and rather than delegate, he'd just go do that person's job. Leaving the first mess behind.

He'd tried to teach me how to change the oil but I'm just not mechanical.

"I don't know what you call it. I want to write what I see and feel," I said. At that point I wasn't very widely read. I'm still not. But I'd read some Robinson Jeffers and Bukowski and a little Richard Brautigan.

"Sounds good," he said.

"Aren't you risking some kind of lung disease? Aren't there spores down there?" I asked.

"I may drown in oil."

I walked over to a pile of artifacts, "It's just something I want to explore," I started to pick through wet boxes. "Any idea where my Rugby ball is? The one from grandpa?"

"I haven't seen it. Could you give me a hand?"

"I'm really not in the mood to get all greasy. I'm going out soon."

"Why don't you hand me that not greasy crescent wrench then?"

"Fine," I said and I walked over and looked for the crescent wrench.

"This one?" I asked. Speculating on what a crescent wrench might be.

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"Sorry I don't know what a crescent wrench looks like."

"Take it easy."

“I’m late to meet somebody.”

“I know. I do want to say though,” he glided out from under the car. “I value your contribution to the label. I respect your palate,” I looked away and went back to the boxes and pretended to be looking in them. He continued, “I want your opinion. I’d like to see you put yourself into it. I know you can do it if you decide it is what you want.”

“Thanks.”

“But you have to decide that. You have to decide that independent of Uta and me.”

“I know,” I turned to look at him.

He was sitting up with a smile on his face.

“Is that my skateboard?” he was sitting on my skateboard.

“You’ll make the right decision.”

I wanted to say something but worried that if I tried to speak I’d just say something corny. He stood up effortlessly for a man of 50. He wiped his hands on his favorite rag. It used to be red but had faded pink. It was pink and black and brown. My dad looked like Harrison Ford, the Jack Ryan Harrison Ford, although my dad was a little stockier and his nose was straight. He had that face that men get, deep handsome lines, and he radiated vitality and health. He reached out and we clasped hands. He took me in his arms and his sweat had dried and he had body odor that immediately took me back to riding on the plow holding onto his ribs and his impossibly large torso. Like hugging a redwood. I’d close my eye and press my face against his back and feel the lift and surge

of the soil as we climbed along. Sometimes he'd sing and I'd listen for the bass notes through his chest.

"Tell me why; is it hard to make arrangements with yourself? When you're old enough to repay but young enough to sell..." it was usually Neil Young. He'd sing the first few lines in a joke falsetto holding his nose to emphasize the Neil Young whine. Then we'd laugh and he'd forget himself and he'd boom out the lyrics in his own manly deep singing voice. He sounded like Eddie Vedder but not so stiff.

Neil Young was an odd addition to his musical repertoire which was predominantly Country. He liked the old stuff. George Jones and Hank Williams Sr. I imagine in college he jumped on the Neil Young and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young bandwagon.

"I am lonely but, you can free me all in the way that you smile. Tell me why..."

But that was gone. All that remained was a place under new management.

Better to leave and protect the memory than see the winery he'd built from table wine to award winner recede back onto the lower shelves of the Liquor Barn.

I'd missed the question and answer and came back to hear Seamus Albrecht say, "It wasn't until I was able to be truly alone with the page that I was able to share with it what was in me."

When it was all over I turned to go and he walked right up to me, "What did you think? What is your favorite of my poems? Do you want to buy me dinner?"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Hannah standing back by the register.

"There's somebody I want you to meet," I told him.

“Fuck,” he said as he stepped forward.

I took him by the arm and lead him over to Hannah. He made a low growl that sounded like, “yes” as we got close.

“Hannah, have you met Seamus Albrecht?” I asked her. She looked at me like she didn’t remember me.

“Your names Hannah?” Seamus said, smoothness took over his voice and demeanor I hadn’t heard in any of the poems he read. Then I noticed a guy standing next to Hannah. He was plain looking with short hair. He wore a black tight tee shirt with some decal, tight blue jeans and Chuck Taylors. His hips were too wide but he wasn’t bad looking. Hannah acted like he wasn’t there.

“Mr. Albrecht, sometimes when I read your work I feel like you’re inside me,” she said as she stepped close to the poet. I’d expected her to be star struck but it seemed like she was going to try to fuck this old guy in the back room.

“Well kid, you must be mistaken because if I were inside you your tonsils would be sore,” he said.

I winced but she laughed and said, “I bet you’re amazing.”

Seamus moved between Hannah and the ineffectual wide-hipped guy.

“What do you think of him?” he asked and gestured to me.

“He seems nice,” she said.

“Oh, he’s not nice at all,” Seamus said. I could not follow what was going on.

“Um, we better be going, it’s not assigned seating,” the guy said to Hannah.

Without looking at him she said, “Tyler is into music and so were going to stand around listen to people play it.”

“Do you write?” Seamus asked Hannah.

“No,” she said.

“You need to read *this* guy,” he put his hand on my chest.

She looked at Seamus like she was going to eat him whole and said, “I’d love to.”

“Uh,” said her boyfriend.

“I better get to this show, nice meeting you,” she said.

There was something off putting in her frankness. Like a woman that young shouldn’t be so directly sexual with a senior citizen. I couldn’t put my finger on it but I was both repulsed *and* wanted to fuck her.

Seamus turned to me and asked, “Can you drive a stick?”

House of Pies isn’t expensive, by any means, but I’d been spending so much money on a prostitute and rents and the hospital co-pay and cabs, not to mention the Biltmore, and now I was treating an old man to dinner. Luckily there are senior prices for what he ordered. A hamburger patty, cottage cheese and sliced tomato. I ordered a burger and fries. I was feeling pretty cocky that he’d asked me to dinner. Looking around House of Pies I could imagine it becoming a regular place for me to eat. It was a diner. Not a chain like Marie Callender’s. The coffee was probably Farmer Brothers, with hints of vinegar and charred bark.

Seamus took about ten minutes to get settled. He'd set his attaché case down then move it. Then he'd take off his blazer then he'd put it back on. When he finally stopped fidgeting he stared at me. He reminded me of a carnival hypnotist. All he needed was a turban.

"You like depressing poems?"

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

I didn't want to confess to him that I'd only read some of his poems from the one book so in the car I said I was glad that he'd read *Shoulder Surgery* because that was my favorite.

"*Shoulder Surgery* is pretty depressing, most people think."

"Oh... I didn't get that. I thought it was about the good that comes from death."

He smiled. Then he turned away and fumbled in his case. I thought he was going to bring out Aristotle or some other aesthetics and set me straight but he pulled out a pill container the size of a cigar box. It had morning, noon, evening, and bedtime slots for each day of the week. "What's today?" he asked.

"Thursday," I said.

I noticed his Wednesday and Thursday compartments were full. He said, "Shit." Then he dumped Thursday evening out on the table and scooped them all in his hand and wedged them into his mouth. He gulped ice water and swallowed.

"I could never get more than a couple pills down at a time," I said. "They lodge in my throat."

"You'd never make it in adult film," he said.

Our food arrived and he burped continuously through the meal. My burger was edible. Plenty of catsup and mayo masked the bitter hormone undercurrent in the meat. I could taste raw mustard greens and insecticide. But it didn't ruin the effect of the atmosphere.

He asked me about my poetry. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm trying to get a reading at Black Veil," I said.

"When's your book coming out?" he asked.

"Ha ha," I said.

"That wasn't sarcasm," he said.

"I thought you were rubbing it in."

"You just want to read there? You don't have a book to promote?"

"That's right."

"So first things first, let's get you a book."

"I'm currently studying the work of Jared Wright," I said. He looked confused so I reminded him, "You put one of his poems in an anthology back in 1985. The year he died."

"I know who he is, I'm just wondering what you see in his work?"

"It's so real," I said.

"What?" he looked angry.

"Well, it seems to me that poetry is dead," I told him. "I mean, let's face it; it's a dead art form. You're one of the greats and how many people were there because they loved your poems?"

“I don’t know, how many?” he asked.

“You can count out me and the guy sitting next to me guzzling free coffee and Elaine and the guy who asked about internet porn and... let’s be generous and say, ten.”

“Generous.”

“It’s not your fault. Your work is obviously fantastic but what would get asses in the seats?” I asked.

“This is what you want to do? Become popular?”

“Well why not?”

“Because it’s antithetical to art.”

“Art? What is this, 1925?”

“What are we talking about?” He asked.

“I’m talking about making a dying art form relevant.”

“Have you considered that maybe you don’t care for the art form?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you want to make poetry like television, maybe you don’t like poetry,” he said.

“Why couldn’t it be like good television?” I asked.

He started writing on his napkin, “Look at this list and tell me which of these poets you’ve read.”

I looked and didn’t recognize any of the names: Simon Armitage, Denise Levertov, Denis Johnson, Marge Piercy, and some others. I almost pretended that I’d read a few but what was the point? He nodded when I didn’t say anything.

“Maybe you need to go out more and listen to more people and maybe you need to read more.”

“I absolutely do,” I agreed.

“I might have some of his old letters. Seems we wrote a bit back and forth then. I was up at Asilomar.”

“I’d really appreciate it,” I said.

“There was this one marine biologist. She liked to fuck like an elephant seal, I shit you not. You ever go to Ano Nuevo and see the elephant seals?”

“I have.”

“Getting a poke in the sand is difficult enough but try getting inside a woman who is lying on her stomach with her legs together. No hands!” He waved his fork at me and a little milk from the cottage cheese hit me on the shirt. He didn’t notice. “I’d give up and then she’d start this low bellow like the elephant seals and it made me that much more determined. Those bulls are fighting and fucking all day.”

“My problem is where I live I don’t like to write. Do you have an office?”

“What?”

I repeated my question.

“No, you know who does?” He asked.

“No.”

“My accountant has an office.” He pointed with his fork over my shoulder, “That rat-fuck suit has an office,” and I turned to see a guy in a grey suit that looked too big for

him. In fact, the guy looked hard up. His clothes looked like they'd been bought at a thrift store only not to be hip, out of necessity.

“No office. Got it,” I said.

“You need a book.”

“I need poems. Everything I've sent out has been rejected. I've written a bunch in the last month but they're rough.”

“Self publish.”

“You mean like Amazon?”

“I do not mean like Amazon. I know everything you need to know. You print your own book and you walk it into bookstores.”

“I don't know... I want my poems to be good and right now I'm not so sure.”

“Give me your poems, I'll judge.”

“You will help me?”

“If you're interested in my opinion.”

“Absolutely, I'll need to get them together but yes, absolutely.”

We ate.

The curiosity was getting to me so I asked, “How much does it cost to print a book?”

“Not much. Of course you have to do it the right way.”

“I'm sure.”

“If money is a problem then maybe you should just keep working and,” he made a fist and a derisively enthusiastic face and said, “Sub-mit!”

He was annoying. But he'd made Hannah vibrate. And I hadn't actually met a published poet in Los Angeles before. It was dark and I began to worry about the bus and what time it stopped running. I asked him, "You know what time the regular buses stop running?"

"You took the bus?" he asked. I nodded and he said, "You shoot me home." Then he handed me the check.

He didn't like to drive at night but his assistant had gone AWOL. Driving a car was more pleasant than I remembered. It was an old Volvo station wagon. Where I come from they are plentiful but I hadn't seen many in the southland. His car smelled like mildew and ointment. The things Seamus said about poetry were working their way through my head. What to make of Wright's impact on me?

"What do you do to pay the bills?" he asked.

"Nothing right now," I said. A University of Phoenix billboard passed on our right. "You ever do any teaching to sustain yourself?"

"I have - I have... Thankless task."

"What do you remember about Jared Wright?"

He didn't appear to have heard me. He said, "I'm the next left." I made the turn. "Jared Wright is real?" he asked.

"Yes. I don't have much to go on but I really admire him."

"There was a certain enthusiasm." He pointed and I parked in a perpendicular space on the street.

“He had no self-pity,” I added.

“I should think not,” he said.

“Do you know anything about the night he died?”

“Sure, I remember. We had a reading the next night down in Redondo. Wright was supposed to read. He’d made this changing screen. It was a little more than waist high. He said he was going to masturbate behind it. So I was surprised he didn’t show up.”

“He jerked off at readings?”

“I don’t think he’d done it yet. That’s why I’m surprised you like his poems. He was more of a performance artist type to me, less a writer,” he said. “In the middle of the show the two guys who were with Wright showed up and said he didn’t make it.”

“Who were those guys?” I asked.

“Dean Cueva and Tommy Lancaster... come to think of it, Tommy’d gone home early, it was Dean was with Wright when the ambulance came.”

“Any idea where Dean Cueva is now?”

“I assumed he was dead.”

He reminded me to get him my poems so he could tutor me in verse and help me self-publish my book for the small price of a meal every now and then. I told him I’d take him up on it and chose not to bother sharing my financial circumstances.

“Where can I catch a bus around here?” I asked.

“No idea.”

I figured it out. I got home late. Walking through the lobby of the Hartley I was already composing my next poem when I heard a voice, “You got a message,” the man at the counter said. He was brown but not brown based on ethnicity; he was so yellow he was brown from tobacco stains and misery. It was amazing he was upright.

I looked at the note; “Call Curtis” was all it said. I just thanked him and walked up stairs contemplating what Curtis wanted. My evening had left me so excited to sit in my room for as long as I could stand it and write, write, write.

I got all set up on the small table in my room. I took out my list. Now I would be able to accomplish a task from the list, then write a poem about it and then get immediate feedback on that poem from Seamus Albrecht. A perfect place to live, a couple of interesting females in Hannah and my new neighbor, a mentor who not only was offering an opportunity to publish my book but he personally knew Jared Wright and his circle of associates. It felt a little like I’d landed on the Wicked Witch of the East and stepped out of the drab grey of the Havenor Vineyard into a Technicolor world on Vine.

CHAPTER TEN

The Neighbor

I set my pencil down. I looked around the room. It was 5:30 in the morning and I couldn't sleep. My first night in the Hartley was dragging. A few hours into my writing session and my creativity went dry. I was tired and yet I couldn't sleep. The thought of publishing a book, by whatever means, had hold of me. I kept envisioning a book signing in New York with the line snaking around the block.

Though the neighborhood was much better, the room itself wasn't much of an improvement on the La Jolla. All that meant is that my anxiety could shift from worrying about a monster high on Bath Salts bursting through the door to eat my face and focus instead on cockroaches getting lodged in my ear canal as I slept.

The window had a view of a wall painted a tasteful olive color. There was a sink, a toilet and a shower stall. I was sitting at the table writing with my golf pencil in a spiral bound notebook. I was feeling nauseated and weak, probably from the fatigue. I got up and put the bottle of Almaden Mountain Chablis - distinct pre-vomit saliva flavors - in the fridge. Then I went and reclined on the lumpy, creaking, synthetic-bedsread covered bed. I'd paid a full month.

By 6:00 A.M. I gave up on sleep. Where could I go? What was open at 6 AM? I decided to walk up to Starbuck's. I heard voices out in the hall but they'd been quite for a few minutes. I slipped out the door and locked it. I nearly pissed my pants when she whispered, "Hey." It was my neighbor. "You moved in yet?" she asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

She stepped from the shadows and gave me an impatient look. I unlocked the door and followed her in. She turned and brought her face close to my face. I leaned back slightly and she looked me over meticulously.

“You’re cute. Nice lips,” she said. And I could smell cigarettes and booze on her breath and it reminded me of being 16 and the first girls I hooked up with at parties: Lana, Dory and Crystal. I asked myself, *am I about to get laid?*

“Can I get you anything?” I asked. Then an unwelcome thought, *could she be a hooker? How many hookers wore cute dresses?* I didn’t know.

She crossed to the fridge and pulled out the Almaden. “I owe you a bottle of wine,” she said as she walked out the door with my bottle.

I sat on the bed. I reminded myself of the virtues of playing it cool. Maybe she was joking and was going back to her room to get wine glasses or a condom. She said I was cute. I heard voices again. This time I knew her voice. She was speaking to a man who sounded like a surfer from the 1960’s. “Almaden? That’s totally boss man, far out.” the man said.

I couldn’t take the suspense so I got up and then I heard footsteps coming toward me so I sat back down on the bed and tried to look distracted. I was just a man sitting on his bed, doing some thinking at 6:03 AM Pacific Standard Time, no big deal.

There was a hollow rap-rap-rap on the door.

“Yeah?” I said.

The door exploded open and she was back in my room saying, “Just open it. He’s right there,” and she pointed at me.

“I’m just trying to respect a man’s abode,” the man said. He was tall with a huge Adam’s apple. He looked like a rocker version Ichabod Crane. He wore tight black jeans that showed his genitals and his tight long sleeve tee shirt revealed an utter lack of muscle development. His shoes looked like Stacy Adams loafers but I wasn’t sure. They were worn. His long black hair was teased like hers. The perfect couple. He was our age as well, if not younger.

“Hey bro, thanks for the vino. Sherry owes you big-time,” he said.

“Yeah, I owe you big-time,” she said while making a “blow-job” gesture.

“Hey, anytime I was just going out anyway, gotta get the hard stuff.” I said.

He dug into his pocket, “Get me some smokes?” he asked and he handed me a ten. “Reds... and keep the change as a down payment on the Almaden.”

“Sure, no problem,” I said even though I was planning on leaving and enjoying a leisurely low fat latte. She kept staring at me. “Do you want anything?” I asked.

“No,” she said and it snapped her out of whatever looking at me made her think about.

“Thanks brother,” he said and held out his fist for a fist bump.

I reluctantly pounded with him.

I was bummed. I paid for a month because a hot chick was living on my floor. Obviously he was in a band or was a bartender or something. He irritated me but I recognized I was jealous.

When I returned with the smokes and a bottle of Carlo Rossi I walked up to her door. And as I was about to knock I heard a low bellowing sound that reminded me of something I couldn't place. I was tempted to knock. The Elephant Seals. Was she doing a mating ritual with him? Then I heard what sounded like someone, most likely a man, skipping rope. The thwack of the rope was preceded by a quick "huh" exhalation then the floorboards would take his weight. It went "Huh-Twack-Boom-Huh-Twack-Boom" over and over. All the while she was bellowing.

I decided to return to my room. I got to the door and remembered his cigarettes. I went back and placed them on the threshold with the change from the ten underneath the box. *He* could keep the change.

Back in my room I cracked a seltzer instead of Carlo Rossi. I sat back on the bed and sipped the seltzer. I heard peals of laughter from down the hall. It sounded like them. I got up and turned my transistor radio on to Classical KUSC. I fell asleep.

When I woke up it was late in the afternoon and I was surprised I was able to get good rest. I was craving carne asada. When I opened the door there was a brown paper bag with a bottle of Almaden wine on it. On the bag was written, "Thanks Bro".

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Score

Even after a rough night I was still enthusiastic about how everything was lining up for me creatively. Maybe the girl down the hall and the dude would turn out to be friends? If they lived in the Hartley, they had to be regular people. It was more important than ever that I make progress on the list, to establish that as part of my routine. It was time to tackle heroin. Wright's poems about heroin were not often geographically specific. I thought it was more important to score the heroin then worry about where I would nod.

Rocked to sleep
On a sea of starlight of gold
Liquid bold
Fold
Asleep
The voiceless voice.

That was one of my favorite sections of his heroin poem called *Junkie Fuck*.

I went to the library for a little research and was pleasantly surprised by what I discovered in news articles about the rampant street level drug dealing in LA. I assumed I'd be heading back to where I picked up Annie. As much as I wanted to see her I was more paranoid about scoring dope than I was picking up a sex worker. But according to the Internet the place to buy drugs was the San Fernando Valley.

The idea of strolling into a motel parking lot in Van Nuys or North Hollywood and waiting for someone to emerge from the shadows was not nearly as intimidating as trying to score from a gangbanger; a Rolling 40 or a Black P Stone.

As embarrassing as it is to admit; I'd never scored drugs on my own before. I always smoked other people's weed, popped other people's pills, and snorted other people's crystal or cocaine.

There was the time I scored blow with my friend Dale. Dale stayed in town after he graduated high school. He was a year older than me so we hung out my senior year. He worked in a machine shop and made contacts. It was a machine shop in Santa Rosa so contacts were for crank and cocaine. When I needed some coke for my senior prom I asked for help. Dale called up Ernie at Castle Plastics. I went with Dale over there to Rohnert Park to score.

Dale and I pulled into an industrial park and found Castle Plastics. It looked closed. We parked in front of the office and we saw the blinds part. The front door cracked open and a hand waved us in.

"They've been tapping my home phone so I'm doing all my business out of here," Ernie said.

Ernie was a man who is now a cliché. He was the Camero driving, mullet wearing; Iron Maiden tee shirt clad, white trash meth dealer cliché. He had greasy blonde hair, acne and he was rail thin yet muscular. He didn't have any visible burn scars that come from a batch exploding but that was all that was missing.

The first thing Ernie did was line us up with two fat rails of crystal meth. I had done crank a few times before but never in lines that big, the size of my pinkie finger. I was scared but Ernie wouldn't shut up about the cops and I've always felt like I look like a narc so I inhaled that line with impressive efficiency. I took the first half up my right and the second up my left. It was like snorting glass mixed with Clorox.

So we did the deal and I felt relieved until I began to review in my mind what Ernie had been saying about the police. At that point I wasn't familiar with the paranoia that comes with heavy drug use. I also had no way of knowing what kind of vice work the Rohnert Park police were doing. So as Dale and I got into his truck and he tucked the cocaine we bought into a compartment under his stereo I became convinced the police had been watching the shop and were going to pull us over, bust us, and make us turn states.

I was freaking out. I wanted Dale to speed away but that only gave the police an excuse to pull us over and blew any chance of beating the rap on probable cause. I just suffered in silence and tried to enjoy Kanye discussing his personal and professional achievements on Dale's stereo. I smoked a Camel and felt my jaw start to work. I was so fucking high and it was only 4:30 in the afternoon.

Dale, no doubt as petrified as I was, chose to take a back way home. We were out on Petaluma Hill Road and I couldn't see what was behind us and if I turned I knew that would look suspicious. Finally, I asked Dale to pull over. I told him I had to piss.

When I got out of the truck I planned on wandering slowly into the bushes then sneaking away. But when I saw there was no traffic on-coming in either direction I

shouted to Dale I'd call him later and I bolted across the road and leaped over a fence and into a pasture. I didn't stop running until I knew I couldn't see the road anymore. I could hear him shout something but wasn't sure what it was. Later on when I called Dale he didn't have much of a sense of humor about it. Our friendship was forever strained after that.

I walked up to the Hollywood Station and took the Metro Red Line all the way to Lankershim and Chandler, which is one major street south of Burbank Blvd, my target.

I wanted it to be an organic experience so I was glad to be rid of my iPhone. I enjoyed the feeling of not having an iPhone and the feeling of walking to score. I didn't want to write a poem about Siri hooking me up. That gave me an idea. Perhaps under a pen name I could write a series of poems about the interface of street and underground culture and technology. I could insist on getting paid in Bitcoins.

I strolled up Lankershim. It was right there. I turned right on Burbank and saw a liquor store next to a motel exactly like the ones described online.

I walked past the parking lot and casually surveyed for anyone who looked like they might deal drugs or be an undercover cop pretending to be someone who deals drugs. I had no idea how to tell the difference. I kind of hoped that the undercover cop would accidentally wear white socks. I didn't see anybody but the building looked so promising I had to take a closer look. I walked to the back of the parking lot. There were rooms on all three sides.

Right on cue a shadowy figure walked out from behind a dumpster and I tried to affect the perfect posture of both self-assurance and need. A skinny teenage boy walked past me and into one of the rooms. I waited about five minutes and didn't see anyone else.

That night I covered an area from Colfax in the West to Clybourn in the East. North to Oxnard and Riverside to the South. It was a lot of walking but it was a nice night. I fell in love with the Valley. That feeling of shabby suburbia I had walking up Western toward Black Veil was only heightened in North Hollywood. Everything was drab. The wide streets were filled with anonymous cars with indifferent headlights. Fast food franchises stood in for ingenuity and personal expression. From the sidewalk I occasionally saw small groups of people in parking lots of motels but was too scared to approach. I never saw the right posture on a lone individual that advertised they were peddling horse.

I returned the next night, a Saturday and there were still people out and about. I walked and took in the majesty of North Hollywood. I covered a larger area, moving past the 170 in the West to Cold Water Canyon and North to Vanowen.

At the corner of Vineland and Vanowen there's a 76 gas station. I saw four suspicious looking men standing off to the side of the store attached to the station. I was so sick of wandering I just walked right up to them. It was three Mexicans and one Asian guy. They wore jeans and basketball shoes and hoodies, vintage baseball caps.

"How you doing, Boss?" The Roberto Clemente Pirates cap asked.

“I’m good, fellas, I’m good. Hey, I’m out here trying to score some dope. But I’m new in town.”

“Oh yeah, you mean like weed?” The same guy said.

“No, actually I mean more like heroin,” I said.

“That’s entrapment, Boss. You could get into trouble for that.”

“Yeah, but I ain’t a cop,” I said. I liked this back and forth, this banter. It was fun. It was thrilling.

“Who told you you could score right here?”

“My buddy Troy.” I have no idea why I didn’t think of a less gay name than Troy. It just came out.

“Oh, so Troy said you could come out here and buy some drugs?”

“Right.”

“But Troy couldn’t come tonight?”

“No, yeah, he moved. He moved away and so he told me to just go out to the Valley.”

“You stay in Santa Monica?” They all laughed.

“No man, I live in Hollywood. The Hartley,” again, I’m not sure why I thought Troy and the Hartley would have traction with these guys. I was starting to get mixed up.

“The thing is,” he said, and he looked at his buddies and nodded, “the shit we got is real expensive, don’t know if Troy told you that.”

“Oh yeah, no, I’ve got money.”

“How much you got?”

“Well how much is like one serving?” I couldn’t believe I hadn’t researched the weights and measures of heroin.

“We don’t really sell individual serving sizes,” he said.

“Come on man, what you got?” I jumped because it was the first time any of the other three had spoken. It was the guy in the Minneapolis Lakers cap. He had hold of my arm. He grabbed hard and pulled me to him. And the third Mexican guy in a Dodgers cap that was USC colors padded me down then put his hand in my pockets and pulled out my money and my wallet and my room key and my moleskin.

“Hey,” I said. It came out like a whine. The USC cap punched me in the face. Not super hard but just like as an attention getter. “Okay,” I said.

They let go of me and looked through my wallet and looked through my notebook and when they were satisfied that the three hundred cash I had was all I had the leader/speaker said, “Get the fuck out of here.”

And the guy who hit me the first time hit me again. Only this time I went down. I was dazed and they kicked me two or three times before I knew what was happening. I rolled onto my stomach and scrunched up. Then they walked away. Not a word from the Asian guy. I looked up and they were strolling away, unconcerned that I’d call the cops. I collected my things and headed back toward the Red Line.

The first thing I did when I got home is to gleefully cross number six, “mugged or rolled” off the list.

Since I wasn't actually hurt from being attacked, I was merely bruised and scraped, I decided to give it one more night. And I returned Sunday. I was going to go back over some of the places I'd tried before and hope my timing had been poor the first night. I returned to the motel where I saw the teenager taking out the trash. I wasn't in the parking lot two minutes before a thin black man of about forty or fifty stepped out of a room and headed out into the parking lot. He looked over at me and I nodded. He glanced around as if he thought I was nodding at someone behind him but nobody was there. He approached me and I tried to subtly inch my body around so, if needed, I could sprint out to the street while screaming for help.

"You need some help?" He asked. He stood about five feet from me and then I realized he was holding one of those ice buckets from a room in the motel.

My mind went blank and a phrase I used to use back in Davis at this bar where I'd score cocaine, actually, my friend would score cocaine and when he wasn't around I'd sometimes try to score but never could, I guess they didn't trust me even though I'd spent thousands of dollars in their bar. "Anything going on?" I asked.

"Just getting some ice," he said and held up the bucket.

"Oh, sorry, you look like this friend of my girlfriend's. I thought you were someone else," I said.

"No problem, I hate that."

"Yeah, totally awkward."

"Right?" he said.

"You want to come and have a drink? While you wait?"

I didn't know what to say. "Yes," was the only thing that came to mind.

In his room he took two plastic cups, filled them with ice then poured Dewar's and gave me one.

"I don't have any soda or anything," he said.

His name was Claude. He was from Eritrea and was actually twenty-five years old. His pleated khakis and acrylic sweater made him look twice his age. He was in Los Angeles looking at Graduate schools. Pepperdine, UCLA, USC, all of them. He was a chemical engineer and he'd gone to the University of Washington. We bonded quickly and after two cups of Scotch, which had shades of turpentine, I was wasted.

"So what are you doing in LA?" he asked.

"I'm just going to be honest with you and hope this doesn't totally freak you out," I said. He got a scared look in his face and glanced at the door. "No, it's nothing like that, it's just that I'm here to score heroin. I saw a black guy lurking in the shadows and racial profiling said, heroin dealer, so I did what I came out here to do, tried to score some dope."

He got up and ran his hand over his head. His hair was worn in kind of a mini fro. "I'm not into that, man."

"Me neither," I said. Then I laughed, "I'm a writer and I'm doing research, I'm writing a character who gets into drug use. I've never used heroin."

"Isn't that a little dangerous? The drug laws here are such that if you got caught, God forbid, you'd be really messed up."

“This is true, this is true,” I said and then I started laughing uncontrollably. Something about the absurdity of my situation. I didn’t even know this guy yet I was confessing to him. It felt good though. “That’s another lie. Not that I’ve never tried heroin, I haven’t. But the reason I want to try it. I want to try it *once* so I can write about it but it’s poetry I want to write.”

“That’s even crazier.”

“I have a list of things I want to try before I ...”

“Like a bucket list?”

“No, I want to do it all now, as soon as possible, I’m trying to find an authentic voice.”

“That’s very interesting. I don’t know anything about being creative like that.”

I was drunk and so was he and we decided to go out to a bar. I offered up my money allocated to buy heroin to buy his drinks.

At Pat’s Cocktails we ordered beers to try to keep from getting completely sideways.

“So what’s it like growing up in a war torn nation?” I asked, fueled by the booze.

“It’s lonely.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“No, I’m just lonely. But I guess for me it’s self-imposed.”

“Well, I’m glad you decided to let yourself out tonight, Maurice,” he said and he patted my hand that was on the bar and when I didn’t remove it he left his hand on top of mine.

It had been years since I’d read *Less Than Zero* but the homosexuality in that book appealed to me. Also Michael Chabon’s *Mysteries of Pittsburg*. It showed me that you can suck a dick and it doesn’t make you gay. Not that I’d mind being gay, it’s just that I’d put so much time and energy into getting chicks it would be embarrassing to learn I was queer this whole time. But I was curious. And yet, I didn’t want to lead him on.

“Claude,” I said and I turned my hand over so that we were palm to palm. “I like you a lot and I’m attracted to you but I might freak out and run out of your room.”

“You’re going to tell me that you’ve never done this before?”

“That’s right.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve heard that before.”

I guess there was some time where we were sitting and drinking. Then on the way back to his room he turned to me and we kissed. My first male kiss. It wasn’t entirely repellant but I wasn’t sure who I was supposed to be. I assumed that I was the more masculine as I was the one who is attracted to women, and that’s something. I think of being attracted to women as masculine but upon reflection it’s an idiotic perception.

He took control and I simultaneously liked it then was ashamed of how nice it was not to have to think about how to do it and what do. I wanted to escape. A kaleidoscope of butterflies fluttered up from asshole to abdomen and I wanted to scream and run but I pulled my head back and he let me.

“It’s okay. We can take it slow,” he said.

“I don’t know. You got any more to drink?” I asked.

I wasn’t any more gay than Rimbaud. Or Jared Wright for that matter. Once I’d kissed Claude. Once I’d broken the ice. Once I’d put myself in a position to experience this, I had to ask, *what would I do if I were really an artist?* The thing was that Claude was just looking for a good time. He wasn’t falling in love with me like Verlaine and he wasn’t ugly like Verlaine. His chest was this hairless wonder. He had small knotty muscles that bulged when he pulled me into him. It was weird having this conflict between wanting to master and desperately wanting to give up control. I was so tired of being with women who expected me to do everything, decide everything. I kept thinking, *he’s done this before, let him show you*, but the impulse to fake my way through was strong. I did the best I could.

The next day I wondered *what if I just did this on paper and walked the reader through my doubts in my poems?* That’s essentially what I did with Claude. It’s the most honest experience, sexual or otherwise I’ve ever had.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Muy Bonita

I spent all day Monday in and around the Hartley. With the exception of a trip to Black Veil to buy some books of poetry on the list Seamus gave me, I was home. I was still holding out hope that I'd see Sherry, the rocker chick, and hear about how she'd broken up with her boyfriend and was looking for someone shorter. But that's not all I did. I also organized my poems to present to Seamus. I was to meet with him that Wednesday. I added up my remaining capital and calculated how much I could spend on publishing before I got a job. Depending on the breaks I might be able to squeeze another month out of my nest egg. It would probably be a good idea to start putting feelers out for jobs.

The other thing I did was take stock of the list. Of the eight items I'd crossed hooker, mugged or roll, and swing off the list. That left hunger, bar fight, heroin, rock cocaine, and arrested. I was sore after the mugging and still had the scrape on my arm from jumping out the window at the La Jolla. A fight wasn't appealing. I'd failed at heroin but would get back to it soon. I figured maybe I would meet someone who could score for me. I wasn't too keen on getting arrested though.

I took out *Belt Buckle Stew* and thumbed through it for inspiration. I landed on a poem about stocking shelves at Jons Marketplace. I must have missed it before. Maybe because it wasn't about anything exciting I skipped over it intending to get back to it. But

this was perfect. Job hunting was just what I needed to continue my study without having to dig deep for hunger or a beating.

In his Jons poem he wrote:

It starts with indignity,
the very fact of it.

Why do I have
to do this?

How else to fix?
Strong arm is not my strong suit.

Jons Marketplace. I had to go apply. I decided I could do it the next day before meeting Curtis for dinner. It was settled. I had my next three days planned. I'd apply at Jons, meet Curtis for dinner, study with Seamus and then Thursday I'd do more job hunting.

On Tuesday, after dropping an application at Jons Marketplace on Santa Monica, I went over to West Hollywood. L'Orange Grande is a French restaurant on Third Street. Curtis wanted me to meet him for an early dinner. He said he felt bad he hadn't had time to set up the wine party for me to curate. I hate to admit how nice it was to have a break from solitude. I thought that a night out with Curtis was a well-deserved reward. When Curtis originally invited me I didn't want to have to go back to that world even for one night. I didn't want to lose momentum. But I'd accomplished so much and I was already set on what I was to do next I decided to let myself enjoy a good meal for a change.

I took the 780 heading South on Fairfax. I looked around the jam-packed bus and wondered if my comrades could be trained to appreciate the kind of wines I'd be drinking in just a few minutes. It was just a matter of opportunity. It had to be.

When I arrived at L'Orange Grand the place was empty except for waiters folding napkins and bussers setting places and moving furniture. Curtis waved me over to the bar. When he saw the way I was dressed there was an instant of dejection, which then fluidly exploded into a smile.

“No way!” he shouted. The staff all looked over at Curtis, some, including a smoking hot brunette built like a dancer, smiled and others went back to work, expressionless.

“No way what?” I asked.

“I forgot to tell you to wear something nice!” he never hesitated humiliating me in front of strangers.

“I don't *have* anything nice,” I said. And it was true. It was deliberate. First, I had been disciplined in packing and limited my wardrobe to two pairs of pants; seven pairs of underwear and socks, generic Van Heusen button up shirts, and five undershirt-type shirts. I had only one pair of boots to cover all my footwear needs. I hadn't been with one pair of shoes, ever. I'd always had a pair of flip-flops or soccer cleats or something specialized. As a recovering pack rat and a fashionista this was a triumph. As a result I was a little underdressed for L'Orange Grand.

“This is Bonita Passarelli,” Curtis said as he made a grand gesture toward the bartender.

The woman behind the bar was ridiculously attractive: medium height with jet-black hair, pale skin and blue eyes. I noticed some dimples. She walked from behind the bar and came around and shook my hand. Her hands were soft like a doctor's. Then she

gave me a Euro kiss on each cheek. She wore the right amount of Guerlain L'Heure Bleue. It came alive on her throat.

“Maurice? Curtis has told me a lot about you,” she said. “Have a seat guys, can I pour some wine?”

“Please,” Curtis said.

I turned and looked at the restaurant. It was so peaceful in there. A patio garden that played Ambient Dub. The low pulse of the music reminded me I knew good taste. I turned back around and a flute full of sparkling wine sat on the bar. I put it to my nose and smelled bloody sockets where molars used to be. It was prosecco. To the untrained palate it was just another sparkling wine. But to me that distinct smell overpowered everything. People describe it as “dry” but that’s the limit of their range. I can’t get the taste of dental surgery out of my mouth if I drink prosecco that’s traveled across the Atlantic. I waited a half second to see if I could play it off but decided, why try? This was sort of a vacation to me. I wouldn’t taint it with prosecco.

“The only place you can drink prosecco, Bonita, is in Italy,” I said. I pushed the glass away from me.

There was a silence. Bonita just looked at me. I could hear the fountain on the other end side of the dining room, and then the honk of a chair dragged across the floor. Curtis burst out laughing and so did Bonita. The bar-back walked out from behind a cabinet and laughed. I seemed to be the only one not in on the joke.

“Take it easy, let’s have some wine,” Curtis said.

Bonita said, “Curtis told me you wouldn’t drink prosecco and I didn’t believe him. So I poured our best bottle and you nailed it.”

I couldn’t help but smile. It was nice to be with someone who knew me. Curtis appreciated what I could do.

The first customer arrived. Curtis introduced him. He was older, maybe in his early fifties. He was thin and stylish but his skin showed the effects of cigarette smoking.

Bonita returned with a bottle. She laid out our wine glasses and poured. I felt a wave of familiarity and comfort descend on me like sunshine. I got warmed up. From the first sip I took them all on a palate voyage. Curtis, Bonita, the new guy, and the bar-back, all came along with me. The bar was filling up and people were arriving for dinner. The staff and a number of guests would stand around and I’d lecture on the wines, as we tasted them. Bonita sold bottles of wine she’d forgotten she had. People were getting hammered. I was buzzed, even though I was mostly spitting the alcohol accumulated in my system.

I had not seen anyone in Los Angeles be as gracious as Bonita. Nor had I seen it in Sonoma County. She seemed to be having trouble with her bar-back but was good at turning her frustration on and off. I was terrible at that. When I get upset it follows me through the day. I admired her. Then I started noticing the customers, men and women. One was on a date but not paying any attention to the woman he was with. Then there was a pair of super sexy women in their late thirties who were trying to play it cool but could barely contain their enthusiasm when Bonita looked their way. There was an after

dinner rush of people who all seemed to be there to see Bonita. Who was this woman and what a gold mine she was for this restaurant?

A guy with a goatee and a vest had been at the bar for about an hour. He was sitting with an older guy who looked like he'd had part of his neck removed. It wasn't obvious but there was something off in the symmetry of his jaw and neck. I couldn't get a good look at him because he was to my right and a couple people were sitting between us. He had sandy blonde hair and stubble. I hadn't seen or heard him say one word since he sat down. His companion, the guy in the vest, spoke loudly about comic books and graphic novels. He was the Harold Bloom of comic books, it seemed. His monologue had paused a few times to observe me making a point about a particular wine.

"So you know a little about wine, so what?" he said to me finally.

"Hey pal, this is the machine," Curtis said to him, quoting *Glengarry Glen Ross*.

"The sleep machine," Bloom retorted.

"I don't think anybody thinks it's a big deal. I'm just sharing my opinion," I told the man.

"Can you do anything interesting, like tell what a wine is just by tasting it?"

Bonita said, "You going to pay for the bottle?"

"And if he doesn't get it, I'll pay for it," Curtis said.

"Come on, guys, I'm in no condition to do that. I'm so out of practice."

The guy turned the wine list toward Bonita and pointed to a wine. She turned and went into the back and came out with a glass with wine poured. White. The bottle she had wrapped in a napkin in such a way I had no idea its shape.

“Don’t I get odds?” I asked.

“Fine, I’ll give you two to one,” Bloom said.

“Three,” I said.

“Fine.”

I did the whole deal. Swirled it. Checked the color in the low light. Used a candle. I was buzzed. I thought about standing in the cellar with dad. He’d be asking me what I tasted. If I didn’t come up with a creative description I had to run, or do push ups or like that one time I had to get the yellow jacket nest. He didn’t make me do it. It was our way of working on what I wanted to get better at. I got better at identifying flavors and aromas and got in great shape. I slurped and he was talking to me.

“New world or old?”

“Old,”

“The grid,” he said.

I closed my eyes. Flavor/Aroma; fruit, non-fruit, mineral, oak, Structure; sugar, acid, alcohol, tannin, finish. Conclusion; climate, style, grape, country, vintage.

I looked up and shook my head. I looked over at Bloom.

“There’ve got to be four or five possibilities on that wine list,” I said to him.

“You want to go double or nothing? Maybe you guess right,” he said.

I looked at Curtis, “It’s your call.”

“If there’s one thing Maurice Havenor is good at it’s taking a wild guess.”

Still looking at Curtis I said, “The reason I asked you first is,” then I looked up at Bloom and said, “This is a fucking expensive bottle of wine.” Bloom’s smile disappeared. He dropped his head.

“This wine is clear, this wine is golden in color,” I began. I put my nose in the glass and slowly drew it in. “This wine has green apple, it has apricot hints, ripe lemon. I’m even getting passion fruit, tropical fruit. It has hints of new French oak.”

I slurped and aerated the wine in my mouth.

I closed my eyes and let it come to me. The way it came to me could shift in subtle ways. Words would come out of my mouth. Sometimes I’d be transported somewhere and I’d just report what I saw and smelled and tasted. This time I was on a bare veranda on a terraced vineyard in what appeared to be Italy. The stone and the sea said, Chínqueterra so I had to wait for it because nothing that I saw or felt or... A hint of oak, just enough to give it structure.

That phrasing brought up a memory of a conversation I had with waiter at Zin in Healdsburg. It sounded like it came out of a catalogue.

And then I bit into a lemon that was almost sweet.

I looked up at Bonita. She had a bemused smile on her face. It projected both kindness and curiosity. Was there a spark of physical attraction there? I liked her a lot.

“Citrus, sun ripe, it is lemon blossom. Golden nutty, hazelnut. And rain gutter minerality. This is a rich full bodied wine, lovely acidity, not particularly dry. Medium alcohol.”

Bloom said, “He’s stalling, just guess.”

“Jesus Christ,” Bonita said, then she looked at Bloom and he mouthed, “Sorry.”

“You want me to just guess?” I asked Bloom. He nodded.

“This is an old world wine. This wine is from France, this wine is from Bourgogne, Cote de Beaune, Meursault. The Clos des Ambres. The producer is Arnaud Ente. The vintage is 2005 and I am *not* stalling.”

With a flourish Bonita removed the napkin and revealed that the jackass in the goatee and vest had to not only pay for the two hundred fifty dollar bottle of wine but had to give Curtis five hundred in cash.

Curtis, always a sore winner mocked the guy, “This is Maurice Havenor. He’s a good guesser,” he said.

“You weren’t kidding,” Bonita said.

I shrugged. I was reminded that Curtis had brought me in to impress his high-class friends and clients. Normally I would mind but I hadn’t done anything nice for Curtis in years. The alcohol brought a surge of nostalgia. I put my arm around Curtis and squeezed. “Remember Oakland Airport? San Diego State?” I asked.

“Oh my God, I haven’t thought about that in ages,” he said.

“What’s that?” Bonita asked.

“Can I tell it?” Curtis asked me.

“Oh, go a-head,” I said with a big smile.

“We played basketball together in High School and this guys dad was pals with Steve Fisher down at San Diego State. So we went down to his basketball camp every summer. Maurice went for the basketball I went for the girls.”

“You did very well,” I said.

Bonita smiled and nodded.

Curtis continued, “Al, Maurice’s dad, drives us down in one of those big vans. To the airport.”

“Oakland,” I said.

“And we’re pulled over unloading the luggage and this like Mexican guy comes up to us. There are five young men. We are in peak physical condition. Kyle was there. He’s 6’10” and like 275. A big kid. And this Mexican guy,” Curtis hold his hand out to indicate the height of the guy. His hand is shoulder height. “The guy is upset. ‘What the fuck are you laughing at?’ kind of thing. We are all confused.”

“We have no idea what this guy is talking about,” I said.

“And he punches me in the face,” Curtis says.

“No,” Bonita says.

“And nobody did anything. We just stood there and gawked. All of us. We could have taken this guy apart. He was back in his truck and driving off before it even occurred to us to get upset.”

“Bunch of pussies,” Bonita said.

“Exactly,” I said. “We were just small town boys. We were in Oakland. The guy could have been in a gang or anything.”

“Right, you don’t know which of them is in a gang,” Curtis was laughing hard once he got that sentence out.

I laughed too. We were attracting a little too much attention so I tried to laugh quietly. I thought about how naïve and green I was then. I compared it to my trip to the Valley and my exchange of gunfire on Skid Row. How much better I could handle myself now.

Bonita wanted to corral our exuberance so she brought us back to the wine.

“You got the wine, what do you think of it?” she asked.

“I think you opened it a year early,” I said.

Bonita slurped a little and spat it into a ceramic spittoon she lifted from behind the bar. Then she grabbed the bottle at the neck and headed for the back and shouted over her shoulder, “He’s right.”

“I got mugged,” I told Curtis. “It was so fucking great.”

“What? When?” he asked.

“The other night, out in North Hollywood.” He looked stricken. “It was my fault, I was trying to score some heroin.”

“What the fuck?”

“How about another?” Bonita asked. She walked back and reappeared behind the bar with a new bottle of wine.

“I’d like to buy everybody in here something nice,” I told her.

“This wine is on me, tonight,” Bonita said.

A handsome, dark-skinned food runner walked up and put a plate down in front of me.

“The pork cheeks,” he told me.

“Oh, I didn’t order.” But the guy just nodded toward Bonita.

I ate the pork cheeks. They melted on my tongue and the idea of returning to the Hartley and my uncomfortable bed became unthinkable. Bonita served more wine.

“So what brings you down here, Maurice?” she asked.

“Wine.” “Poetry.”

Curtis and I both answered at the same time. Curtis, having taken my writing seriously said poetry and I was deciding to present differently to Bonita.

“My original reason for coming down here was to explore the poetry scene but I’m intrigued by the enthusiasm for wine in this town,” I said.

Curtis gave me a smug look, “This is what I’ve been trying to tell him,” he said to Bonita.

Bonita said, “We should talk.” Then she turned and walked over to the hot women.

It kept going like that and we closed the place.

I was feeling drunkenly bullet proof when I got home. There was a note taped to the door to my room, “Come see me... anytime, Sherry”. The first hint of loneliness abating and people were coming out of the woodwork to see me. I went into my room and changed my underwear, giving myself a whore’s bath. The water stung on my inner thigh and balls where the chafing had become a rash. All the walking was taking a toll on my nuts and inner thighs. I used my damp towels to dry off as much as possible but had to lean back on my bed and scissor my legs in the air to be sure my balls, taint and ass

were dry so I could powder. My legs were spread wide when I heard a single knock on the door and the door popped open. In one fluid motion I pulled my legs into my body, knees to chest and I rolled off the bed away from the door. And landed much harder than I thought I would as a result of my drunken miscalculation of the distance I was covering from bedside to floor. I'd also worked myself up a bit with my exercises and was panting. I tried to lift myself up but collapsed again.

“I think your asshole winked at me,” Sherry said.

I pulled the bedspread from the bed and stood while wrapping it around myself.

“Come on in,” I said.

“It smells like ass in here.”

“Jesus, I thought I locked the door.”

“Where were you tonight?” she asked.

“I went to a fancy West Hollywood restaurant,” I said.

“Which one?”

“L'Orange Grand.”

“Oh yeah, I love that place,” she said. Then she just stood there.

“I don't have any alcohol,” I said.

“Is that what you think of me?” she asked.

“No, I'm sorry,” I was wishing I wasn't so drunk. I tried to buy some time. “I'd like to get dressed,” I said.

“Go ahead; you think I haven't seen that stuff? I think I saw everything just now anyway.”

Perhaps emboldened by the wine and the attention from the folks at L'Orange Grand, I just let the bedspread drop and went to my dresser and put my clothes on.

“Do you like poetry?” I asked.

“I do,” she said.

“Would it be terribly gauche of me to read you a poem I wrote today?”

“Why, not at all.”

She walked over and lounged on the bed. She struck a pose. She leaned on her elbow, thrust her chest out and accentuated her curves by running her hand up and down her leg and hip. I wanted her.

“You’re my first audience,” I said. I picked up my neatly written poems collected in a folder for Seamus. I selected one. “This one’s called, *Don’t Let Me Die.*”

This is the poem I read:

She turns to leave
There's nothing else
We
Can
Do
"Don't let me die."
Sobbing into scrubs with Hello Kitty on them.

But that's not the whole poem. I stopped because she looked like she was falling asleep.

"I lied," I said. "I do have some wine."

"I'll have some wine," she said.

I took out the two bottles Curtis bought for me. A Clos du Bois Marlestone 2003 and a Chateau Gigault Cuvee Viva, 1998.

"I only have red," I said.

"You're a poet, eh?"

"I am. That's why I moved down here. There's this guy named Jared Wright and I'm down here to kind of re-trace his career and life."

"Is that a bottle of Marlstone 2003?" she asked. Her eyes widened. "You've got secrets," she said.

"I don't have any glasses."

She went to her place and came back with two rocks glasses. I popped the cork and started to pour.

"You want to let it breathe for a minute?"

"It does need to breathe, but you looked like you were falling asleep," I said.

“I can stay awake for a glass of this.”

“You know wine?”

“I stole some of that when I was a cater waiter at a fund raiser. Wow, that’s a lot of R endings.”

“Let’s just taste this,” I said. “It can breathe in the tumbler.”

We toasted. I just drank it. I didn’t want to do a whole slurping thing in front of her. I wanted to see if I could still taste the wine after a number of glasses, food, a cigarette and coffee.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“It’s so rich,” she said.

“You mean, the feel in your mouth?”

“Yeah.”

“Feel how it complements the flavors. Flavors you associate with richness, right? Chocolate and cherry.”

“I’m getting nutmeg,” she said, stepping closer.

“That’s good. That’s very subtle.”

“How do you know so much?”

“I used to work at a winery.”

“Which one?”

“Havenor, up in Sonoma County.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“The vintner there, was kind of Erik Olsen’s rival. He was the standard Olsen had to live up to.”

“Who’s Erik Olsen?”

“The guy who made this,” I held up my glass. “But I’m really a writer, a poet.”

“Why do you dress like that?”

“It’s just an anti-consumerist statement.” I sounded like a grad student. “That’s not true; I just wanted to simplify my life. Fashion is another distraction. A distraction from my art.”

“You should probably take that shirt off,” she said. She started to unbutton my shirt. “It’s distracting.”

“But you’ve seen me naked. So far, I don’t know anything about you,” I said.

“I grew up around here and now I live down the hall,” she reached up under her skirt and pulled her underwear down and stepped out of them. I wouldn’t have guessed she was a native.

“Why here? Doesn’t seem like a place for a nice girl to live.”

“Who said I’m a nice girl?”

We kissed. Slowly and luxuriously. She pulled back and smiled and said, “Cedar?”

“You are good,” I said. She tossed the rest of her glass back.

I did the same. Coming at the end of an evening of running shit at L’Orange Grand my confidence was high. I had none of the doubts I’d had with Claude. Sherry was a woman and I was a man. I knew how this worked.

She pulled a sleeveless denim shirt apart and revealed she wasn't wearing a bra. Then her skirt fell. She was standing right in front of me, her clothes piled on the floor. My shirt was off. I thrust my hips forward so she could undo my belt.

"This is canvas," she said. "A rope is so much less distracting."

"That's funny. But ropes take too long to untie."

My pants dropped. Then my underwear. I pulled her close to me and she was so short I could kiss the top of her head. Not really her head, her hair. She had tall hair.

The hairspray, the Aqua Net smell took me back. Uta had a friend, Angie. Angie was a rocker chick. Guns N' Roses and all that. I loved her so much. She was so cool. Angie was into retro rock n roll before it was cool to be into retro rock n' roll.

I hadn't connected Sherry with Angie until I buried my face in her hair. I used to go into the bathroom after Angie and Uta were done getting ready to go out. I'd just stand there inhaling the Aqua Net smell mixed with Ann Klein II.

Sherry let her hand graze my penis and she said, "Oh, sorry."

I put my hands under her armpits and hoisted her off the ground and said, "Oh sorry," as I tossed her onto the bed. The back of her head hit the wall as she hit the mattress and was launched off the other side, only backward so she landed even harder than I had. I heard a wheezing noise and ran around the side of the bed feeling a blast of shame.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

All I heard was wheezing. The blanket was piled on top of her. I reached under the blanket and she grabbed my wrist.

“Let me help you,” I said.

“Oh, don’t do that,” she said and she put my hand between her hot legs. She was wet and when the blanket fell from her face the tears in her eyes were from laughing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

My Tutor

I went to meet Seamus at his place early the next morning. It felt early but was more like eleven o'clock in the morning. I was viciously hung over. Plus sex with Sherry was somewhat athletic. I was sore. My muscles were sore. I had to get back in shape. But that would come in time. What I didn't have to wait for was sex. Or someone, a legend, to help me with my poetry. I didn't have to wait for a cool place to live. All I needed was a gym membership. Actually, I'd be better off working out in the park. I needed to get in shape and I needed a job. But the way things were unfolding for me, opening to me like a pollen laden stargazer, I had fewer and fewer doubts that I was destined to be the next great poet of the Americas.

Seamus lived in what daylight revealed to be a beautiful old building. He was on the fourth floor and it was hot in the building. I had to check in with a person in the lobby. Then I rode a small, old elevator up. I knocked at his door and, a matronly woman answered. She had a Caribbean accent. She was dressed like a nurse and I was immediately impressed with Seamus. The woman was much younger than him, in her forties. She was pretty, if too old and too heavy for me. Plus, she was from another culture. Seamus had the energy at his age to hit that? She showed me in.

“This is Mirabelle, my overseer,” he said.

“Oh now Mr. A, you stop that talk now,” she said.

He was sitting in an arm chair in front of an old television. The kind with a tube and a VHS tape player inside it.

“Do you mind if I open a window?” I asked.

“I’d rather you didn’t, my blood’s a little thin,” Seamus said.

“He needs the warmth for his old bones. It was very nice to meet you, sir.”

Mirabelle said to me. She picked up a large bag and a clipboard and then she left. She was his nurse. He was living in some kind of old folks home.

“Have a sit-down, son,” he said.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

“I got wood this morning during my rubdown. I can still get wood.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“What seems to be the trouble?” he asked.

“Maybe you can tell me,” I said and handed him my folder. “These put a woman to sleep last night.”

He got up and walked into a little kitchenette and sat at a small table. “Did she pass out before you started fucking her? Because that’s rape,” he said. He took my poems out of the folder. “These are hand written.”

“But I printed neatly,” I said.

He began patting his breast pockets, and then he stood and put his hands inside the pockets of his extremely baggy khakis. I pulled out a black pen and a red pen and offered them to him. He held up a blue pen and said, “Spectacles.”

“They’re hanging around your neck,” I said.

“Someday you’ll fart and fill your trousers with hot diarrhea,” he said.

“Someday? I call that Tuesday,” I joked.

He grinned and began to look at my pages after placing his reading glasses on the bridge of his nose. A moment later he tossed the pages down on the table and waved the blue pen over them and said, “No.” He looked at me. He shook his head. “What is this?” he asked.

“You don’t like them?”

“I didn’t say that. I don’t like this,” he held up the first poem, “I’m asking you, what is this?”

It was a poem called *Underclassmen* about affirmative action. “I’m trying to speak to man’s inhumanity to man.”

“Man’s inhumanity to man?” he really perked up and pulled his seat forward. I could smell his breath. It smelled like swollen tonsils. “Tell me about it, forget *this* for a minute,” he said, indicating my poem.

“You know how some people will continue to mine for coal, even though it’s ruining the environment of the people who live there?”

“Right, okay, so when you were working in the coal mines, can you think of any specific person who was inhuman to you?”

“I was just using that as an example.”

“It was a perfect example because that’s how far away you... whatever these things are. Which is why I want to get down to what are these? What is this?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Okay,” He said.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Let’s back up. So many folks get wrapped up in how to write a poem without even figuring out what a poem is.”

“What is a poem?”

“A poem is what you are going to learn what it is,” he said and he grinned an evil toothy grin. “Do you like boys or girls?” he asked and he made a circle with the fingers of his left hand and poked the index finger of his right hand through the hole in a “screwing” gesture.

“Girls,” I said.

“I want you to go out and find a girl. You probably already know her. I want you to find the one that makes your rectum pinch up. The one that makes you want to puke your guts out. The one for whom you’d do five years in a south American prison in hopes of sniffing her panties. Do you have one?”

Annie stretched out on the bed came back to me. “No, not like that,” I said.

“Well, go out and find her and don’t come back until you have. I’m not talking about the perfect mate, mind you. I’m talking about rape. Find a woman you want to hold down and rape.”

I was feeling uncomfortable. I said, “What if I just don’t think that way?”

“Then you’re not aware that you think that way,” he said.

“I’m aware.”

“You know why all women have rape fantasies?”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Because all men have rape fantasies,” he said.

“So you want me to try to have a rape fantasy?” I asked.

“This is what you need to stop doing. This is why these are worthless,” he said.

“The whole reason I’m here is to learn. I know these suck. That’s why I’m here.”

“We’re going to get you out of your head,” he said.

“Can I use your bathroom?”

“You gonna shoot up?”

“No,” I said then I just looked at him in disbelief.

“You don’t want an OD in your bathroom, that’s all I’m saying.”

I got up and went into his bathroom. There was some kind of attachment on top of the toilet. It was huge and plastic and had a whole that I could piss down but to aim straight down the hole the chances of not hitting plastic seemed thin. I decided to hold my piss.

When I got back to the kitchen he was staring off into space with a smirk. I interrupted, “Let’s say I wanted to try to find Dean Cueva, to find out if he’s still alive, what would you recommend?” I asked.

“Do you have the money for the printing?” He asked.

“But I need to rewrite these ones, maybe write some new ones,” I said.

“That’s the beauty,” he held up a different poem. “I can have this set and ready when the new ones come in. Gives me a chance to see how they look, try different paper stock.”

I took off my boot. Pulled my roll of hundreds from my sock.

“This is a good start but we need to spend a little up front, the outlay,” he said.

“And I’ll walk them into Black Veil and they’ll sell them?” I asked.

“They will. When they read them.” He held up three fingers.

I counted three hundred dollar bills and asked, “Did you get the letters from Wright?”

“He was a local kid. Venice. One of those skater types. Dog Town and all that horseshit. Why don’t you start there?”

“What?”

“Dean Cueva,” he said.

“What about Tommy Lancaster?” I asked.

“He’s teaching up at Chico State. I’ll tell ya, he was such an asshole,” he said.

“Do you have his number?”

“No, Cueva- Cueva was an asshole. Tommy’s a good guy, if overly domesticated. Tell you what I’d do, I’d go to Venice and go to AA.”

“Cueva went to AA?”

“I’m saying if he’s still alive the only way is because he stopped drinking. AA’s the only way I know works for people like him.”

When I left Seamus’ place I was discouraged by the state of my writing but reminded myself I never expected to be automatically good. That’s why I was here, to find my true self, to find my mentor and hero. To be guided. Wine had never felt like work. It was unearned greatness. The feeling of mastery I’d had the night before at

L'Orange Grand was so tempting to pursue. I had to block it out and stick to my plan. Get a shitty job, work on my craft. No distractions. It was the only way I could make my own name for myself.