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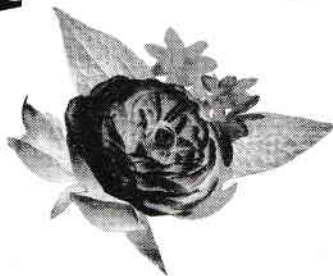
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PART I



SANTA ANA RAPTURE

“Los Angeles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse, and, just as the reliably long and bitter winters of New England determine the way life is lived there, so the violence and the unpredictability of the Santa Ana affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability. The winds show us how close to the edge we are.”

—Joan Didion, “Los Angeles Notebook,”
Slouching Towards Bethlehem

“This is a love story and I apologize; it was inadvertent. But I want it clearly understood from the start that I don’t expect it to turn out well.”

—Eve Babitz, *Slow Days, Fast Company*



THE BASS THROBS FROM inside the club like the pulse in a cracked chest cavity. The bodies squirm, a festering hive of foreign motion. Traversing the line feels like being digested slowly, by measures of inches, by an oscillating snake. Pods of larvae, copulation in progress, hedonistic swarms. Everything so animal, insectile. Hollywood after dark.

I pick thoughtlessly at my nailbeds, dry and flecked with mud (it could be mud). The skin is like eggshells, partially cracked. The backpack on my shoulder is unconscionably weightless when the bouncer shines a light inside. "What's this?"

"Busy day at work." My mouth is arid. So thirsty. No time. "Meeting a date."

"First date?"

"Yeah."

"And you brought a change of clothes?" The bouncer shines a light in my eyes and I squint. The bright white of nothingness lasts half a breath. A siren screams in the distance. "My man."

I stumble inside with the sound of your laughter ringing in my ears. Then the memory of a wretched cough, a dry death rattle of calcifying tar.

Bathroom first. The air is thick, asphyxiating. Four feet shift inside a stall. The light in here is a satanic red, the better to overlook slick vodka spills and mud (it could be mud). Don't make eye contact, don't make eye contact. The water in the sink runs cold and dark.

"Hey, man, you dropped your phone—"

Swallowed up by the pulse of the music inside, a molten embrace of the inferno. I try not to look at all the flashing lights.

The bag.

"Not right now. I want to dance." (I don't know why I argue. Proof of life? Sentience?)

Get rid of the bag now.

"But—"

A sharp prick then, right to the place where I might clock a craving—a balloon-pop of disapproval, the flash of an old memory, the maggoty swallow of a pleading throat. "Fine."

I make my way to the bar, dropping the bag from one shoulder to rest my full weight against the lip of the counter. "Whiskey, please."

"What kind?"

"Any kind."

Face the crowd, casual, normal people stand like this. A sip tastes like rubbing alcohol. Could I be cleansed from the inside, maybe? Possibly? Pretend I'm sterile now. A glance at my feet says the bag is swallowed up by the detritus of Friday night.

I drain the glass and ask for another.

"Keep the tab open?"

I hold up the bills, crumpled wads from my pocket. "Nah. Paying cash."

"We don't take cash at the bar."

"What?"

"We don't take cash at the bar."

"But it's money. You know? Currency. Legal tender. Exchanged for goods and services." (There's a hollow laugh from somewhere in the recesses of my memory.)

Slower, as if I'm stupid: "We don't. Take cash. At the bar."

The smell of smoke and cinnamon enters my periphery then, like an intrusive thought just lying in wait. "Here, give it to me." A cool hand closes around mine, slipping the bills free. "Three vodka sodas, lots of lime. Keep it open."

A woman, pretty, with an undercut, a clavicle tattoo, that smell of spices hovering nearby. The inevitable is coming: *what's your name, are you okay, is that blood on your neck, do you need an*

ambulance. When she turns to the bar, I slip away, readily consumed by the crowd.

The bass is a wave of thunder now, one of my hands finding the steady roll of ample hips.

Get out of here.

"No." (A drink spills across my arm.)

You look ridiculous.

"You look ridiculous. Shut up."

"What?" (Hips that belong to a face. A set of bleary, half-conscious eyes.)

"Nothing. Come here." (The suckling heat of a seeking mouth finds my neck. The prickle of a half-trimmed beard. Lips that taste like anise.)

I let myself be pressed against a wall. No, I want this. We switch. Hurt me. Tell me I'm worthless.

You already know that.

"Leave me alone."

You're a child. Remember the ritual.

"I just want to—" (A hand finds my throat. Yes, yes, there.)

You're not listening. You know what happens when you don't listen.

It's so hot in here I can almost taste the fugue state incoming. There's a probing hand on my cock, but I want it back on my neck, poised on the little red button, the possibility of detonation. My nose is dripping, not like everyone else's. The eyes that met mine had at first worn a glazed look of *I won't remember*, but now a spark in them transcribes the shadows of my face.

See that? That's officially a witness.

Good. Witness me, someone. Anyone.

"Hey, your nose is . . . Are you okay?"

Get out of here now.

Like a knee jerk, a reflex test. I stumble to the door, tasting blood. That smell of cinnamon hits me again like a wave of nausea, a whip of hot wind like a slap from the street.

"Hey, it's you again—Wait, are you okay?"

"Ro, what gives?"

"I think this guy's having a seizure—Nessa, help!"

No, don't help me. I try to push them away, words slurring from my tongue. "I don't want to do this anymore."

"What?"

You have to talk to them now. That's three people minimum who might remember your face.

"No."

Tell the girl everything is fine. Long day at work. Boss is riding your ass. Tell her your meds are mixing weird.

"Her name is Jessica."

"Wait, whose name?"

What are you doing?

"This your date, bro? Damn, girl. No wonder my guy over here brought a change of clothes—"

Make that four witnesses. Just get out.

"Oh, I'm not his date, I just—Hey, is there, like, a medic on staff or something?"

The ritual isn't over yet. Get out of here.

"I said NO—"

You're testing my patience. Are you tired, is that it? Is it time to go back to sleep?

"Leave me alone, JUST LEAVE ME ALONE—"

"Is he bothering you, miss?"

"No, no, I think he's seizing—Hey, dude, do you need me to call someone? Or like, an ambulance? Do you have insurance?"

"Ro, let him go, it's probably just coke or something—"

"But what if it's not? What if it's, like, fentanyl or some shit? Or bath salts?"

"Ohhh, she reads one news article and now she's a bad bitch—"

"Roro, what's going on?"

A new face. I catch a furrowed brow, a blur of gold that materializes for only an instant before everything starts to evanesce. A familiar countdown to the end.

Desperation turns my head, propels me forward. The cityscape

transmutes to starlight before me, the forms and shapes nothing now but blinding lights. The zip and sting of city traffic. From the street, glossy eyes of oblivion look headily back at me.

Don't do it.

I have seconds left, maybe less. Enough time for a single decision. The most human thing in the world is this: a senseless choice.

(I'm tired, I don't want to do this anymore, I don't want t—)

I said don't do it!

A blare of a bus horn, and then:

Bang.

Too late.

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0106 ASLEEP



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ROM THE BLACK OF my mind, a thin, mocking whisper:

Did you really think that would work?



AN INCOMPLETE LIST OF LA WEATHER: ETERNAL SUNSHINE, JUNE GLOOM, INFERNAL HEAT, DEMON WINDS

THEY'D BEEN CALLING IT the summer of exsanguination; not that I worried about those things at the time. When you're young, nothing can touch you. You never think it's going to be *your* body on the ground, *your* organs spilling out onto the sidewalk. At twenty-two, nothing but the risk of ubiquity is ever all that real.

I'd gone out with my cousin Roro, who had recently taken a wealthy lover, and her best friend Nessa, whom I tolerated only because it had been two decades with no other choice. It was Roro who'd forced me out that night, to a cowboy-themed party at a new club in one of the warehouses off Melrose. During the Uber ride over, Ro kept saying things like "Did you know that's a real-life cement factory??" as if trivia could make me forget I'd just lost my job. Or as if any part of me, at my most beautiful and my most selfish, could be persuaded to care about gentrification in the least.

I knew about the recent string of murders to the extent that dead bodies were part of Roro's pitch to persuade me to come out with her. She was an artist, the unpaid kind, and thoroughly obsessed with death. "If I die getting serial murdered at the club," Roro told me over the phone, "you're going to feel like shit."

That night, I saw a man step in front of a bus that should have

killed him, and then I watched him walk away. Then, characteristically for the person I used to be, I forgot him.

Until I saw him again.

Back then, whenever the void came calling, I liked to play a little game with myself called *Could I Survive It?* A simple game, where I would imagine myself in some kind of terrifying situation, and it was like a puzzle, sudoku or something, to see how I'd make it out alive. Maimed, fine. Scarred, possibly ruined, sure. But importantly, alive.

A fall from a great height in my car. A tumble downhill on foot. A low railing on a rooftop balcony. An earthquake in this spot, or this one, or this one. A strange man standing too close. *Could I Survive It?* You get the gist.

As I said, the rules were very simple—all I had to do was come out alive—though I had a confidence about the future that was totally unearned, born from a place of stubbornness and imagination. I didn't actually understand the specs on my car, which aside from being precious to me was a danger to the environment and only technically in working order. I didn't understand physics, either, being not very interested in physics and only sort of paying attention whenever I was put to the task by force. I'd gone to a performing arts high school, one with an endowment from the de Witts, though of course it's getting ahead of myself to mention them now, or maybe not. Because it would be very difficult to explain any of this if you didn't understand that the de Witts had always been there, hovering around the circumstances of my daily life.

It wasn't so much a matter of saying yes to them (although I did). It was more like . . . taking my entire existence to its inevitable conclusion.

The only way I would have made a different choice is if I'd been born a different person, in a completely different place.