

# **SICK SENSE OF HUBRIS**

**SOME SHORT STORIES**



**P. William Grimm**



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The storyteller makes no choice. Soon you will not hear his voice.

- Robert Hunter



### ***Gin on a Formica Table***

There is a flower that grows in Miami called the hurricane lily. It blooms red that is as dark as the letter A. Its season is the late summer, hurricane season. Some people call it a red spider lily. Those people do not live in Miami, at least not during hurricane season. There are long rows of hurricane lilies up and down the beach path where I am walking. Someone planted them there, I suppose. Maybe they grew there wildly, I am not sure. They are beautiful and terrifying at once to me. I cannot explain why. Perhaps a smarter man could.

\*\* \*\*

The ocean air feels good on my face. I look out to the sea, over the sand and the sunbathing tourists, through the hurricane lilies. I run my hands up and down my face. I cannot feel the wrinkles around my eyes. But I know they are there. I run my fingers through my hair. Receding hairline. I feel old, over even. Am I?

My shirt is a blue of light shade, South Beach blue. White trousers. White fedora. I smile as I begin to walk down the avenue, Washington Avenue. The sun is hot on my neck.

I walk into a bar. Club Deuce Deuce. It is hotter than the street inside. There is a gunshot somewhere in the distance. I don't notice, not really. I pretend not to notice at all. What does it matter?

It is hard to remember a reason to smile.

It is gin that I am drinking today under the hot Miami sun. The gin is warm. It goes down hard. It burns. Fire on the tongue. Fire down the gullet.

Past glories are a bitch. Rusted dreams are a mountain onto themselves, and the scoop-didly-woo-bop of memories is painful. I cannot help but laugh. "Doo-wop, wop," I sing between chuckles. "Doo, doo-wop, wop, wop." I am smiling. I am drinking gin. I yell to the bartender, "turn the radio up." The bartender obeys. It is the Crystals.

I listen to the first minute or so of the song. My eyes are closed. I am humming along. Everything is as it should be. It is all as scoo-do-la-dee-bop what I want it to be. I am smiling. I am bobbing my head. The drums are pounding.

He's a rebel and he'll never ever be any good. He's a rebel  
'cause he never ever does what he should.

The next thirty seconds of the song sounds wrong to me. I can't explain it. It is like cacti on my skin, alcohol in my eyes, razor blade between my toes. I am sweating suddenly. It is a cold sweat. It is a shaky sweat or, rather, it is a sweat that is making me shake; or a shake that is making me sweat. I cannot wait for the chorus to kick in again. I have to beat it before that. I might not make it if I don't.

\*\* \*\*

The hurricane lily grows in Japan, too. There is an old folk story there, about the hurricane lily. The hurricane lily lines the path to hell, so the story goes. And why not? They are as red as hell, as fiery as the devil himself. If a spirit follows the path of the hurricane lily, so the story goes, it will lead him into reincarnation. It will lead him to the next life. If I am only so lucky.

\*\* \*\*

There is a woman in the corner of the laundromat. The fluorescent light makes her face glow. There is no one else in the place. She is up front, sitting on the window sill. She is looking outside. I see her through the picture window, which frames her like a masterpiece. She is alive. I know what she is. She is a beat girl, all dressed in black and sulking, looking as romantic and sultry as a Greenwich Village lamp post. I do not have any choice. I walk right into the laundromat.

I walk past her to the last washer on the right. I do not say a word to her. The buzz of the machines. The buzz of the lights above me. The d.j. is talking to me. Talking about cigarettes. Talking about Chevrolets. Talking about everything but music.

"This guy is talking about everything but music," I suddenly rant in a whisper that hisses from between my lips. It is not even a whisper, not even a hiss. I am practically shouting. The D.J. talks some more, about magazines and televisions. A thousand advertisements a minute. A thousand advertisements a breath. I moan my aimless moan a little more. "This isn't radio. This dumbkoff just doesn't get it, not at all."

"Now, we give you the next song in our countdown. It's a new one, this one's an import we just got here straight from the Queen's own jolly ol' England. Here's to hoping you like it."

I laugh and shake my head. I scratch my arm and lean against a drier. And so the music begins. The sound is faint, full of static. The sound is rusty. But the music is right, just right. Eddie Cochran, "Summertime Blues." It stops me in my tracks.

The music makes me feel good. With gin in my veins, my skin is tingling. I look to the woman across the laundromat, right by the dryer. She is twenty-two, twenty-three maybe. I am all creased pants. I am all clean white fedora. I am all edgy charm. I am rock and roll. I have nothing to lose, so I walk up to the woman. "Hey, what's your name, sweetheart?"

She doesn't even blink. "Please leave me alone, cheese ball." Her black turtleneck is suddenly threatening. She refuses to look me in the eye. The dark, dark red lipstick glows as she curls her lips at me, suddenly a snarl. And I am suddenly in the sweats. The sweats are cold. I smile, but the words have slapped me in the face. "Come on, sweetness, don't be that way. My name is Alan."

"I know who you are."

“Hey, great. Let’s go find some tunes to . . .”

“Please leave me alone, cheese ball. I’ll call the cops. The station is right on Washington, just down the block.”

At that, she stands up and walks over to the radio. With a graceful flick of the wrist that seems effortless, she has removed Eddie Cochran from the room. I see her smile as she finds the station she seeks. I had heard this song before.

And there's two white horses following me  
And there's two white horses following me  
I got two white horses following me  
Waiting on my burying ground

She looks back at me with a satisfied smirk. The nasal twinge of the singer resonates throughout the laundromat. That beatnik chick smile grows wider as she raises her left hand up to chest level and extends her middle finger at me.

And there's one last favor I'll ask for you  
And just one last favor I'll ask for you  
You can see that my grave is kept clean

\*\* \*\*

The bar is dark and quiet. Around me is static, the white noise of nothingness. I am laughing to myself. Life is fucking hilarious. I am ridiculous. It is wonderful. I am not thinking straight. I could not count backwards from twenty if asked.

The air is thicker than my arm. Goddamn. I feel like I might die today. The humidity of this city is killing me. Miami, Florida. It is all

lime green and palm tree outside. Banana daquiri. Salsa. Me, I'm happy with my gin. I used to drink it mixed with tonic. Now I drink it straight. I am wiping the sweat off my forehead with a white linen. The linen quickly gets soaked. Goddamn, it is hot.

"It's okay, honey." I look up and I see her, glowing in the light of the darkness. She is smiling, and she repeats herself. "Honey, it's okay. You look like yesterday's left-overs."

She is not beautiful but her face is warm. She is a plump woman, her long dress fragile and beautiful but near tatters.

"Eh," I mutter nearly voicelessly. "I am not who I used to be."

She just laughs. "Well, hell, sugar. Who is?" She sits down at the bar stool next to me, and orders a white wine. "And who wants to be?" She laughs some more. Her laughter is contagious, but I must have already had the disease.

I sigh. I look into the mirror behind the bar. Paunch. Greasy hair, slicked back like I was in the middle of yesterday. Tomorrow is somewhere and I am nowhere. I cannot help but smile. I look down and am staring at the bottom of my empty glass. I call for a refill.

"One more, bud."

"Coming up, Alan."

She is looking me up and down, reading me like a book, like today's newspaper. I am trying not to pay attention. "How about a tune, hon?" I look over and she is turning a quarter around in her hands. She is smiling at me. I like her smile. But I do not smile

back. I shrug. She smiles more widely as she rises from her bar stool. If she asked me for a recommendation, I would have had several. I know that juke well. But, she did not.

I watch as she drops the coin into the slot. She picks a song and I can hear the machine squeak as the wheels turn and the disc is dropped onto the turntable. The needle falls on the vinyl. The crack and pop of vinyl, the sound is something special. It makes me remember some other time.

I know the song immediately. "Party Doll." Buddy Knox. I remember the day I first heard the song. Walking down Broadway, right past a record store. I heard it from the street and knew it was something special. I was right. I had a knack for being right about such things. I don't have that knack anymore. Not about anything. Not about anything at all. I sigh and think of the ocean. I want to walk on the ocean.

Well all I want is a party doll.  
To come along with me when I'm feeling wild  
To be everlovin', true and fair  
To run her fingers through my hair.

She is back by my side and she is shimmying in her seat. It is a good tune. It is good times to me. These times right now, they're not good. They seem good to her. I wish I could catch what she is spreading. It is not to be.

"Now, come on sweetheart, Why don't you let it all out. I've got nothing better to do but to sit here and listen to you."

I pause. "Can't we just listen to the tune?" "We can do whatever you want, sweetheart. I'm just here drinking my drink."

Maybe she is trying to get me comfortable, say nothing much so maybe I'll start saying something. But I've got nothing to say. I really don't. The song goes on and on. I close my eyes.

Come along and be my party doll.

Come along and be my party doll.

I'll make love to you, to you.

I'll make love to you.

\*\* \*\*

I don't know what it was that got us up and walking out of the bar. Maybe it was the song. Maybe it was something else. It doesn't really matter much. The point is that we are walking down AIA. The sun is bright as ever. I am tiny behind my shades. She is talking about something, I don't know what. I'm not listening and she is not asking me to.

I am struggling to walk, and she is holding my arm. I lean into her grasp. Spinning, the white puffy cloud are spinning above me. The sun is hot on my face. I am sweating. "Shit," I murmur, but I keep walking. She is talking. The sound is foreign to me. Still, it feels good, like a nanny speaking to a child in her native tongue. Mandarin or Tagalog or something exotic like that. The clicks and pops of her voice sound good, even if you don't recognize their meaning.

\*\* \*\*

The hurricane lily does not reproduce sexually. Each plant has a set of both sexes. Each plant is sterile because their chromosomes are randomly assorted, so the only way the plant can reproduce is by the bulbs dividing. They live in the summer, and they die in the spring.

The flower pot by her front door, it's filled with hurricane lilies. I stare at it blankly as she fumbles in her purse for her house key. Eventually she finds it. She opens the door and walks in. I follow her.

"What are you drinking, gin?"

"Yes, please."

"With tonic?"

I pause. "Straight, please."

"Huh, the man is a serious drinker. I like it."

She pours me my drink and places it on the kitchen table, a yellow and white table. Formica. I can see my own eyes in the reflection of the drink. These eyes are old. These eyes are tired. I look away, maybe because of disgust. Maybe because of fear. Maybe I'm just bored with it. I don't know. My head is spinning. I pick up the glass of gin and take a drink. The gin feels good on my tongue. I think back to the woman in the laundromat.

"So, how about some music?"

Her words shock me out of my thoughts and I jump a little. "What's that," I exclaim without thinking. She just laughs. "Music, silly." She says. "How about some music?" "Oh, right. Sure."

And then, looking over her shoulder at me, she asks me for any suggestions. "Any suggestions?" she asks. I look over to her at her turntable. It is big and awkward and clumsy. Her record collection

is small, maybe fifty LPs, about the same number of forty fives. I shrug. "Surprise me." I see this makes her smile. She pulls a forty five off the shelf and slides it onto her record player. Ah, that crackle and pop. After just a moment, the music begins to play. I close my eyes. When I open them again, she is sitting across from me. I look at her over the glass of gin on the formica kitchen table.

I've made up my mind.  
To live in memories  
Of the lonesome times.

It's useless to say  
So I'll just live in my dreams  
Of yesterday

The music is beautiful. The voice. The piano. I close my eyes again. When I open them again, she is standing. She walks over to me, around the formica table with my glass of gin on it. "They never should have taken you off the air," she whispers. She kisses me on my lips. I kiss her back. Darkness falls.

\*\* \*\*

I am walking in the South Florida evening. It is cool now, far different from the heat of the afternoon. That is Miami. Hot in the sunlight, cool in the dark. I am drunk. I stumble into my hotel room and switch on the light. I throw my key on the one table in the room and I kick off my loafers. I sit on the bed. I stare at the wall. My bones are tired. I am not sitting there for five minutes before the telephone rings. The ring aches my head. I hesitate to answer, but somehow I manage to stand and walk to the phone. The phone is cold in my hand as I pick up the receiver. "Hello," I say. The voice is scratchy but clear enough to hear. "Yes," I say.

“No,” I say. “It is almost one a.m. Why are you calling so late?” I try to make my voice sound demanding, but it comes out sounding resigned. “Yes, I know it’s earlier in L.A., but here it’s almost one.” I know my voice is slurred but there is no use trying to hide it. It is late and I am drunk. “Well, what did they say?” What have I done with my life? “What did you say?” Where did my dignity go? “And that is the only position they have?” There was a time when people cared what I said. “Well, fuck it then.” There was a time when people made sure I was taken care of. “I don’t know.” This room is small and dilapidated. “I guess I don’t care what you say to them.” This room is sad and empty. “It’s over.” It’s over. I hang up the phone and I return to the edge of the bed. I put my head in my hands and close my eyes. There is a bottle of gin on the table by the bed. There is enough gin left in it to finish me off for the night. I wish I had a record player. I wish I had some records. The room is silent. I stand and walk to the bottle of gin. There is a hurricane lily lying on the table next to the bottle of gin. I remember that I picked it earlier in the day. It is red and it is wilting. Its bulbs are falling off. I leave the lily where it is. I grab the bottle of gin.

\*\* \*\*

The room is silent.







## ***Sunset over LAX***

Sunset over LAX. It is romantic in a Bukowski way. I am all alone in the hotel room, same as ever. I am dreading the evening. I am thankful the sunshine is over. When you fear the night and run from the day, your options tend to be quite limited. Sunset, like sunrise, is purgatory. Sunset, like sunrise, is reprieve.

The road is constant and the road never ends. This cliché is my truth. There are others that walk this road, too, of airplanes and airports, of bad shaves and thin towels, of pay-per-views and

sixteen dollar bacon burgers, of vapid magazines and Sky Mall catalogs, of taxis and shuttle buses, of hellos and goodbyes and of little in between the two. Our universes run helter skelter around one another, but never collide.

I never took a wife and consequently I never raised a family. I flirted with the proposition now and again. There was a woman once with blonde hair, who I loved greatly, perhaps more than I intended to love her. It ended years ago, for reasons I choose not to recall. It is hard to believe the reasons would matter now, if I did somehow remember, so much time having passed.

\*\* \*\*

The whore arrives at nine p.m., the hour when I typically schedule these sessions. She engages immediately in the type of small talk that I despise. I read once that many men who engage such services actually care more about the talking than the fucking. Not me. I answer her questions because I do not want to suffer the delay or discomfort that addressing the issue with her would cause. I don't ask any of my own. I know this will last just a few minutes, and then the physical act will begin. I have patience. I can play the game, though I would prefer otherwise.

I am fine. She is fine. I have a name, and she has one, too. I am from somewhere, and so is she. We have each heard of the place where the other grew up. It would be odd if she hadn't heard of Miami. It would be odd if I hadn't heard of Brooklyn. I do not ask her how she made it all the way from Brooklyn to Los Angeles, and I am passively relieved that she does not volunteer. After seven minutes that seem a hundred years, the talky-talky part is through, and she gets the money part out of the way, too. After that, she is all business, and I am relieved that I don't feel compelled to feign charm any longer.

She starts removing my trousers, and she is quickly on her knees. I offer her an additional fifty to -leave the rubber in her purse. She agrees. I am standing facing the mirror. I watch her as she works. I am hard but I feel no excitement, not really. Not in the gut, where it counts. Her hair is long and blonde. She is probably twenty-one, twenty-two. I remember that age, though it is so long ago now. I was a different person then, or rather, I am a different person now. Soon, she stands up and takes me by the hand. It is quite clear that my lady friend has a pattern for her clients. We are following that pattern. She unbuttons my starched white shirt and soon I am completely naked. She strips herself, too, and so we are now both naked. She lays me on the bed and we have sex. Three positions, the regular ones. She moans and moves her head and says yes, yes, yes several times. I am staring at the ceiling. I am staring at the wall. I am staring at the head board. I tell her I am about to cum, and I do so. On her stomach.

\*\* \*\*

She is gone and I am as alone as I was when she was still in the room. I am as alone as I was in the womb, more so even. I walk to the window and look out over the city. There are no stars in the sky, the frozen horizon of the airport shooting out more light than the evening can stand. I am dark.

I am at my computer and I am writing an e-mail to a high school friend. I write the e-mail several times, erasing it each time I get close to pressing the send button. None of the words I write seem real. None of the feelings I am feeling seem to come out. I erase and erase and erase. After the fifth time, I don't bother starting again. I turn off the computer and walk back to the bed and lie down. The clock says it is thirty minutes past midnight. That is a long time to go before dawn. I consider calling another hooker but I can't stand the idea of any more small talk.

There is a print of a sail boat on the wall across from the bed. I sit on the bed with my left leg crossed over my right leg. My arms are stretched out on either side of me. There is a plate next to me, the remnants of a chocolate cheesecake. The burger and fries are long gone. Two beers. The old waiter had been outwardly uncomfortable as he waited for me to sign the bill. Porn on the tube does that to some people. I dragged it out as long as I could before I handed him back the little leather pamphlet. It is the one moment of entertainment the night offers me. I sit up and look out the window. My eyes will not shut. This room is beginning to shrink.

\*\* \*\*

I am at the hotel bar and I am grateful it is still open. It is just me and the bartender, a homely woman that looks not unlike Flo from Alice. She pours me my whiskey and asks a question about my visit. I am not certain if she asks about my job or my family or what. I don't care. Without answering, I stand up with my drink in hand and walk to a sofa away from the bar. Flo just shakes her head and moves on to some other task, clucking like a chicken. It makes no difference to me.

I am sitting on a leather chair across from the bar. I am staring at the ice in my drink, and occasionally I mumble to myself. The lights above me are fluorescent. The lights above me make my head ache. I watch the ice slowly melt. I take another slow drink from the glass, almost empty now. In another few minutes I will order another drink. I will order another one after that.

I don't know what it is about the lights in a hotel bar. I don't what it is about the whiteness of the glare. I don't know what it is about the tube on the left that is burnt out, and I don't know what it is about the tube in the middle, the one that is flickering. I don't know what it is about any of it. But, I know I have been here

before. A hundred different times. In a hundred different cities. Shit.

\*\* \*\*

The woman approaches me so quietly that I smelled the alcohol on her breath before I heard her at all. She is smiling at me, looking right at me, but she doesn't speak a word. I wait a moment and, not having much desire for any further awkward moments to pass, I speak. "Hello." Her smile grows broader. "You're Jewish," she declares. "Yes," I agree. "I'm Jewish, too." "Ah" is all I can respond to that.

She wears a red velvet dress, no more the color of coral than are her lips. She treads on the ground. Her hair is black wires, but blonde. Breasts of dun. A true compare.

She does not ask me my name. I do not volunteer, and I don't ask for her name. She does not ask if I am in town on business or pleasure. She does not ask me where I am from, and I do not ask her, either. We spend seven minutes talking about different types of alcohol. She likes vodka. I like whiskey. It is the kind of small talk I like. It reveals nothing of substance about either of us. I might as well be talking to my glass of whiskey, now empty. And that is fine with me.

\*\* \* \*

We are up in my room and I am lying on the bed. She performs a slow, sloppy striptease for me. The red velvet dress falls to the floor. She is in a black bra and panties. Her breasts are large but sagging. She is swaying her too-wide hips towards me. I could see cellulite on the front of her thighs. I think vaguely to myself that it is probably the same on her ass. Her ass is a fat ass. The room is dark. It could be darker. I see her eyes for a moment and I see that

they are kind. I avert my gaze from her eyes and make a mental note to avoid eye contact with her. There is a human behind those eyes, and I want to be alone tonight.

She is on the bed now, vulnerable on her hands and knees, smiling a come hither smile. She is crawling towards me. I touch her. Her skin is pale but warm under my grope. Suddenly, she is kissing me. It is not something a whore would do, and I am momentarily disoriented by this act of humanity. The taste is thick with cheap vodka and peanuts, an unpleasant taste. It reminds me again that she is human.

I can't say that the sex is any better with the red velvet dress woman than it was with the hooker. Awkward and unsatisfying, it dazes and baffles me. I don't bother to unclasp her bra, so when she is on top of me, she reaches back and does it on her own. Her tits are exposed and she looks at me expectantly. I avoid her eyes and don't say anything. She doesn't wait long for any comment. She seems as drunk as I am. She is on top of me and dry humping me. I try to play along and manage somehow to get hard. My shirt is still on and my pants are still around my knees when I enter her. She is wet and makes a sound upon first penetration. I am erect but, still, the fucking is difficult. Not physically, but emotionally. I can't explain it any better than that.

\*\* \*\*

I blink my eyes and she is no longer in bed. She is putting her panties on and smiling at me. "Thanks, hon. That really hit the spot." I don't respond, not really. Just a small nod of the head and the smallest of smiles. For the first time, she asks about me. "So, what are you in town for?" I surprise myself to find that I don't mind her asking. "I'm in town for a convention. A legal thing."

“You’re a lawyer?” “Yeah, for better or worse.” That’s my stock response. What am I supposed to say?

“I’m a lawyer, in a way. I deal with law, anyways.” “Oh, yeah?” “Yeah.” I know she wants me to ask, and I find I do not mind asking. And, so I do. “What is it you do?” “I’m a rabbi.”

I respond to that with silence. She is smiling at me, in just her black bra and panties., the velvet red dress still crumpled in her hands, waiting for a follow-up question. What am I to say? “A rabbi?” “Yes, a rabbi.” “What do you mean?” “I mean I’m a rabbi. My congregation is Temple Beth Orr. It’s only about two miles from here.” She says this with a knowing smile. My skepticism is loud on my face. “Oh,” she chuckled. “Do I have a doubter?” I smile and scratch my head, looking down before I look up at her. “Yes, actually. You do.” She scoffed once and put her hands on her hips, still dressed only in black bra and panties, shaking her head in mock exasperation. She opens her mouth and the most beautiful chant escapes.

\*\* \*\*

Yit-gadal v'yit-kadash sh'mey raba, b'alma di v'ra hirutey,  
vyam-lih mal-hutey b'ha-yey-hon uv'yomey-hon uv'ha-  
yey d'hol beyt yisrael ba-agala u-vizman kariv, v'imru  
amen.

She is suddenly beautiful. Her pronunciation is perfect. Her shoulders are up and her chin is out. The shallow light drenches her body with a single layer of illumination. She finishes her perfect chant one hundred percent perfectly:

Oseh shalom bim-romav, hu ya-aseh shalom aleynu v'al  
kol yisrael, v'imru amen.

\*\* \*\*

I am alone again. There is darkness. I think about all the people in my life that I could call. I would wake any of them up, if I called them right now. It is a claustrophobic feeling, like how you feel sixty feet under the water. Completely engulfed and weightless.

It is dark. I turn on porn but keep the sound down. My mind wafts away to that woman I knew so many years ago. In my youth. In my beauty. On the television, a skinny guy dressed like a border guard has a Latina woman by the hair, and he is fucking her from behind. That is what everything looks like in my life these days. In my head, I hear that chant, in that beautiful voice.

Yit-gadal v'yit-kadash sh'mey raba, b'alma di v'ra hirutey,  
vyam-lih mal-hutey b'ha-yey-hon uv'yomey-hon uv'ha-  
yey d'hol beyt yisrael ba-agala u-vizman kariv, v'imru  
amen.

\*\* \*\*

It is dark. The television flicker hurts my eyes. I switch it off. I stand up and walk to the window. The moon is high in the sky over the airport. A Delta 737 zoomed down over my head and charged onto a runway. The room is cool, if not chilly. I cross my arms over my chest. I rest my forehead on the cold pane of glass. The cold on my forehead feels so desperately nice. -

I turn my back to the window. I can't look at the city anymore. The room is small again, but there is no place for me to go. It is me against this room. Mono a mono. I am in love with the darkness but fighting it still. Handicap it anyway you want, I will win this one. I am a gladiator. I am a soldier. I shut my eyes hard until I see stars and rays of lights of blue, yellow and red. Shooting stars. Popping lights.

Will tomorrow be more Poe than today was Bukowski? I sigh. There is nothing left to do but wait. The sun pokes its head up in the distance, orange and purple. Dawn arrives again. Purgatory. Reprieve. I breathe in. I hold that breathe for a long time before slowly exhaling. This moment will not last long.



### ***Finnegan's Wank***

Finnegan sat in the corner, spent. He was sad now. The softest part was always the hardest part. He spit on the ground and looked around. He grabbed a dirty towel and weakly cleaned himself. A big fart let loose from his fat ass. The magazine he used was called Phoenix Park, and Finnegan made a note to himself to remember the title. It was a keeper.

The bachelor's apartment only had one room, other than the bathroom. The only sink was in the bathroom. Finnegan kept a hot plate on a table near the only door in the apartment. He occasionally cooked grill cheeses on the hot plate. He had never cleaned the hot plate. He owned two dishes, and he would clean them in the shower at the same time he showered himself. He owned one fork, and cleaned it with spit.

Through the dirty window, Finnegan spied a bird flying. He coughed once and turned away from the window. He lay back and stared up at the ceiling, scratching his belly. He imagined the two Asian girls he saw at drycleaner earlier in the day. They leaned over a sink, each washing a shirt. One was tall like a tree. The other was squat and short, like a stone. They were both beautiful. They were both perfect. Each time he jerked it thinking of them, he felt closer to them. Every day he felt closer to them.

Finnegan waited to get hard again. It wouldn't be long.

## ***A Ghost Tale***

It is not yet midnight when my ghost appears for the first time. I was alone in my living room a minute ago, the lights of the Bay Bridge twinkling outside my window. And now he is here, standing right in front of me, in a black t-shirt and torn blue jeans. Docs on his feet.

After the shortest of shocked pauses, I begin to scream like a scared little schoolboy, wetting his scared little schoolboy short pants. Perhaps this is because, although I am nearly forty years old, I really am just a scared little schoolboy, wetting my scared little school boy short pants. The room is a microwave. The moon is a lemon.

The skin of my ghost is pale. He is translucent, like a jelly fish. He looks just like I always imagined a ghost looks. He is all skin and bones, graveyard skin and mortuary bones. His eyes are the eyes of an albino. They are alive. He is alive. But from the moment I first saw him ninety seconds I ago, I have known that he is dead; I have known that he is a ghost. He is no fake. Even in his silence, I can feel his death. He is sitting in my lazy boy, scratching his stubbly chin, dully observing me. I do not know why I am referring to him as "my ghost." There isn't much I can see that makes him mine. I can barely think at all.

There is blood dripping from a small wound on the side of my ghost's head. He doesn't seem to notice. There is blood on one of his shoulders, underneath the wound. Other than the wound and the dead in his flesh, my ghost looks young, maybe twenty or twenty-one. I find it is more difficult to measure age in death than in life, so I cannot promise to be precise. Maybe he is four hundred years old, for all I know.

I am twisting and turning. My eyes are darting this way and that. I am shifting my weight from one leg to the other and back again. I am sweating. My fingers feel numb and tingly at once.

My ghost stands up as if to approach me. I begin to yell some more, loud and guttural. "Aaarghh! aaaarghhh!! aarggh!!!" is all I can muster. He shakes his head slightly from side to side, but seems otherwise unaffected by my shrill screams. My ghost is clearly bored. I guess he expects more from me.

I am looking right in his eyes. He is looking right back at mine. "So what's your name," he asks me casually. I don't know how to respond. I throw up instead.

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And so this tale begins. This tale of my ghost. Of my ghost and me.

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I am sitting at the kitchen table now, staring at my ghost. The yellow light of the morning sun drips down on us. I do not know where the night went. Here now, the room is still a microwave. Somewhere, the moon is still a lemon.

I had always believed that if ghosts actually existed, they could only show themselves in the dark; in the dreary corners of a decrepit haunted house and so forth. This, apparently, is not so. The sunlight did not seem to bother my ghost at all. He just starts talking.

"I would like this to be a dialog, bro. Not just a monologue, you know what I'm saying? How does that sound to you?"

I don't know how to respond to this at all. So, I throw up again. My ghost just shakes his head, completely unimpressed. There is a silence in the room I cannot explain. I would like to say it is the sound of a feather, but that is not right. It is the sound of the silk on the bottom of a coffin.

As he continues to speak, I am trying not to scream.

"Oh bro, I know some demons. Nasty, nasty demons. Shit torments me night and day."

I just stare at him. His face is so white. He blends in with the wall behind him, his dark long bangs hanging down his forehead, like charcoal on chalk. There is some odd combination of goth and

grunge in him I don't quite get. It feels very nineteen ninety-two. I just stare at him.

"I don't know how I got here. I don't know where I'm going. It's not like you think it would be. I mean, I know how I got here, don't get me wrong. What I'm saying is, like, I kind of thought there would either be answers, you know what I mean, answer to it all."

He pauses and looks at me. The thought occurs to me that he is waiting for me to respond. He could wait all day, for all I care. I have nothing to say. After a moment, he resumes. I try to make sense of his words, as he is pacing around the room like a young Lenny Bruce.

"You know, I kind of expected that it would be more free, like you could go everywhere you want, anywhere you want. That's kind of what like my fantasy about it was. Like maybe I could hover over my house and watch all my friends at my funeral, all crying and everything."

"That's not what it's like?" I am speaking to him, but I barely recognize my own voice. It sounds so dark and hoarse to me. His dead eyes grow bigger as he looks at me in glee. I can see he is delighted that I am beginning to respond.

"No, man! Not at all. Not all. That's just the fucking point. I can't fly. I can't see through things. I can't sense anything. I can't even walk through things."

"Really?" I find myself in genuine surprise. I guess I had always presumed that ghosts would be able to walk through things.

"No." He hesitates. "At least, I can't. Not really. Not consistently. Not yet."

“So, does that mean you will be able to walk through things some day?”

My ghost looked out the window, suddenly quieter, less animated. “That’s what they say.”

I pause for a moment. “That’s what who says?”

He looks up at me in alarm. And literally from one second to the next second, everything changes.

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Lights off. A loud noise. A bang. I hear a scream. It is a woman's voice. The room -- which was flaming hot like the inside of a volcano moments ago -- is suddenly frigid. That woman screams again. It is a piercing wail of a scream. I feel momentarily as though it could break glass. I find myself looking at the outside window, wondering if it will break. The sky outside seems thick and red, like the bottom of a wineglass after all the merlot is gone.

There is something inside me, too, that feels like that, like the dregs of a once fine wine. I get the sense that I may throw up again. I am slow and sludgy. My head is spinning like a top, like that little girl with the pea soup in the Exorcist, round and round and round again. I begin to make these peculiar gurgling sounds, as though I might be drowning.

There is a woman in front of me now. She wasn't there a moment ago. The lights above me are flickering wildly, racing on and off. The woman in front of me is scabbed and gray. Her hair is a mound of wire. Her eyes are not human. She seems a hundred years old. She is flailing about, her torn, dirty dress a tornado of rags and rips, oily and juicy. She is frothing at the mouth, her jaw hiccupping up and down, mad sounds drawing out of her.

She points at this and that around the room, and my belongings go flying. A flower pot flies over my head. My mattress flies off its frame. Records zing through the air like frisbees, crashing into walls and exploding into a hundred pieces of black vinyl tragedy.

I am covering my head. I am screaming but it is no longer a high-pitched screech. It is a low, throaty yowl, just vaguely aware now of the bad things I am facing. It is a wet cry, a soaking yelp.

I grab at the arms of a chair and try to hold on for dear life. The ceiling above me is a magnet. I am a bag of nails. I use all my strength to just stay in the seat. I am breathing heavy like I'm in a marathon. I am hyper-ventilating. My lungs are primed to explode. She is inside me I can feel it. My head is readying to pop off my shoulders. I cannot breathe. My head is a cement block. It is all about to end. I hear a loud hum.

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I hear a loud hum.

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I hear a loud hum. The pressure on my skin lets up. My sinuses loosen. My nose drips. I can feel the snot on my upper lip. It is cold. I look around. The lights stop blinking. In fact, the lighting has become nearly romantic. There is no more shaking. There is no more sweating. There is no more screaming. I am alone.

I know I am not alone.

I hear something. I make out a sound. I can see no shapes. Everything is blurry. But, I know I hear something. I know I make out a sound. I try to stand up. I wobble for a moment and am convinced for a second that my legs will buckle underneath me. They do not buckle. I put one foot in front of the other. I find that I am walking. I find that there is blood in my veins. I find that there

is strength in my muscles. I turn my neck left and right. I take another step. I take another step. I hear another noise, it is a moan, or a groan perhaps. I walk towards what I believe is this noise.

The noise is right in front of me. It is moaning. It is groaning. It is slurping. It is sloppy. It is wet. It is passionate. It is kissing. Goddammit. It is kissing.

Just as I come to this realization, their images begin to come into view to me. They are kissing passionately. They are making out. They are groping at one another's body. They are locked together.

And she is absolutely beautiful. In fact, she is divine. She is a siren. She is a muse. No more than twenty-one. Skin as white as a puffy cloud. Sad eyes of blue. Wispy locks of blonde. She is tiny. She is nineteen fifty seven art deco cool. She is a little china doll of beauty.

My ghost is all over her. The two kiss and touch, lips pouting, tongues exploring one another's mouth. She seems to be weakening, slowing down slightly. My ghost, who started off below the woman, is slowly rising up above her. Their hands are all over one another. Their moans and grunts are loud, pulsating.

It is the sound and vision of love. No., it is the sound and vision of making love. It is coital for certain. It is pulsating. It is sweaty. It is raunchy. It is fucking. I am watching two ghosts fuck. I find I am aroused. I cannot help but be aroused.

I can see the desire in their eyes, locked hard onto one another. I can sense their urges in their embrace, entangled deeply in one another. I can feel each of them. I am one with them. My body begins to shake. I struggle to control myself. There is fear in me. There is love in me. There is hate, too, and exhilaration. And there is want. My body is not in my command. I feel like my body is seizing up. I hear a loud hum.

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I hear a loud hum.

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I hear a loud hum. And in a wisp of colored smoke -- green and blue and red and more -- she is drawn upwards, sucked upwards and disappears. Just like that. As quickly as her presence appeared, now she is gone.

And as suddenly as it started, it is over. Her eyes are still piercing, but they are only in my memory. That beautiful spirit is gone. After another moment, I begin to make a noise. It is not a scream or a gargle or a yelp. It is more like a stutter. "Well, well, uh, well. Wh, wha, wha, wh . . . whut?" The shards of words get louder as each one escapes out of my mouth. Involuntary protest, I suppose, of what I had just seen.

Through the fog, I hear a laugh. It is not, it seems to me in my muddled confusion, a malicious laugh. It is a genuinely amused laugh, almost warm. Comforting. Home. I am not threatened.

Through the fog, I hear a voice. It is not, it seems to me in my blurry uncertainty, a vitriolic voice. It is a soothing voice, almost welcoming. Perhaps I will find some wisdom in this voice. I concentrate hard.

"Dude, what is that face, bro?" I can barely understand the words through the guffawing. Guffawing.

It is my ghost, and he is reclining on my couch, guffawing. He is lighting a cigarette. "This is one of the great things about being a ghost. I always have the same seven cigarettes in my pack that I had the day I died." He holds his pack of American Spirits up as an example. "I can smoke all day, and I still have seven cigarettes. Fuckin' rad." He leans his head back and exhales a long, wide cloud of smoke. I cannot smell any smoke.

"Anyways, man. She's out of your life now."

I am trying to focus on anything at all. It occurs to me that my face is frozen in a contorted mess. I turn my efforts towards wiping that terror-driven scowl away. I am not certain how successful I am, but I shake my head once and move on. I attempt to find some words to say.

This is the best I can do: "But . . . bu. . . who is she?"

It is enough to keep the conversation going.

"No clue, dude. She was haunting that ashtray." My ghost points to a green ashtray I had bought back when I lived in Manhattan fifteen years ago, three lifetimes ago. "She's gone now."

"But . . bu . . . where? how?"

"No clue where, bro. No clue how."

"But . . bu . . . what did . . what did you do?"

"Ah, some ghoul told me about some other ghoul that could shut a ghoul down just by getting down with it. It took me forever to get up the balls to try it. I just went for it, no idea what was going to happen. Same fuckin' thing. Crazy shit turns into hot chick. Disappears into smoke. She's off to go find the next piece of her puzzle. Free from that ashtray now. Don't know how. Don't know why."

I had nothing more to say. That was no explanation at all, but I cannot even think of a follow-up at all. Crazy shit turns into hot chick. Disappears into smoke. That about says it all.

"But, but. . . " I am trying to think of all the questions I have. Not just the obvious: what piece? What puzzle? But also, all the wonders of the world, the meaning of life, life vs. death, the doors I could have opened but did not; the windows I forgot to look

through. The pathways I didn't even know where there, that I could have followed but didn't. I can't think of a single thing. I improvise instead, trying hard to focus on something my ghost said, anything my ghost said.

This is the best that I can muster: "You talked about demons and torment? But, bu . . well . . . you don't seem tormented."

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He has me by the tie. "Tormented?!? You wanna fucking know about tormented???!?? Do you have any fucking clue dude? Huh, motherfucker??!! You imagine what it's like to have dreams, bro? Fucking dreams, man? And you take the fucking jump and what the fuck is there? but here? I don't even know what mother-fucking year it is, asshole."

He is a completely different entity than thirty seconds earlier. He is no longer translucent. He is transparent. Eyeballs zinging out at me. My ghost's face is much longer than it was moments earlier and sunken, a villain in a Poe tale. There is nothing I can do. He has me by the tie. Veins are popping out of his forehead, popping out of his neck. The room is shaking violently.

"I will tell you, I have paid my dues and I don't what the fuck is going on, but you try to tell me I'm not tormented? My fucking life is black man. I wanted it and I got it. Life is a goddamn pit, a puss-infested swampland. I am walking around in circles man, and for all I know it's for fucking eternity. This is not what I expected. I knew it would be bad, but it's the not knowing that is destroying me."

He grabs me by the shoulders and shakes me violently, his voice deeper now than a low E. "Is this purgatory, man?! Is this purgatory?! Is this as good as it gets?! Is there nothing else?! Is that what I get for my decision??!!"

I don't know what to say. I should say something wise. I say this instead:

"Whu..whu...whut decis-, decision?"

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My ghost just smiles at this. He is suddenly my ghost again.

"Oh, bro, enough about me. Sure, I'm a little tormented . . ."

"Yes, yes you are," I chime in. I want to make certain he knows I'm on the torment team.

"A little tormented! Who isn't, right?" He is delighted at my agreement. "Anyways, I don't remember exactly what you're asking, but maybe we could talk about it some other time. I'm fuckin' spent now."

"I see." His whole demeanor is different. His shoulders are slouched, his eyelids hanging low. He looks almost high.

"I have to go now. I'll see you around, though, bro," he mumbled confidently. He was suddenly a young man again, just barely dead and with all the arrogance and naïveté of youth.

"Wait," I call out as he seems ready to disappear or evaporate or whatever he is clearly about to do. "If you just give me a second, I am sure I will have a thousand questions for you. Like, why did you show up here in the first place? And where are you going?"

He just smiles, the tortured rage from a moment ago is a million miles away. "Oh, don't worry, bro. I'll be back."

I am disappointed at the response. Where is he going? Why is he here? And even though he says he will return, perhaps I will wake up tomorrow and this ghost will be gone. I do not know if I will be relieved or disappointed if he never returns.

“Hey, by the way,” my ghost calls out to me over his shoulder as he prepares to go who-knows-where. “You know why you keep thinking of me as your ghost?”

“No,” I reply quietly, but with sudden anticipation. “Why?”

He pauses for a moment. “Because,” he answers slowly, a smile subtly conquering his face. “Because, I am.”

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I do not know what to make of this response. I get the sense that maybe my ghost doesn't, either. That doesn't make him any less here, any less standing right in front me.

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"Hey, one more thing," I call out to my ghost, suddenly recalling something is instantly of primary concern to me. He looks back at me, almost as if he knows what I am going to ask. "Um, is there anything else in my apartment that's haunted, other than that ashtray?"

My ghost smiles. "Honestly," he asks?

"Yes," I respond, nervously nodding my head up and down.

"Honestly . . . I have no fucking clue."

## ***Juice of the Barley***

"Hey man, the fucking machine doesn't work."

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I am losing my shit. This fucking machine. My feet are sweating in my dirty white Chuck Jones high tops. This shirt is too small for

me. I feel like tearing at my skin. My head aches, my whole face even. Fuck.

I pull hard at the pinball lever. I could pull forever. I could rip that fucking thing right the hell out of its socket. I could break its glass into a thousand pieces, into a million pieces. I could tear the clouds out of the sky. I blink twice and clear my throat.

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Most of all, I blame my mother. I don't want to, but there you go.

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"Excuse me, son?"

"I said the fucking machine doesn't work." I draw out the word "said" in a manner that is intentionally annoying, gnawing by design. Like, "I saaiiiid the fuckingmachine doesn't work." I almost bite off my bottom lip as I make the "f" sound in "fucking." Fuckingmachine is one word. As the sentence leaves my lips, it grates even on me.

My face is all red and scrunched up. I must be a sight. Between my fourteenth and fifteenth years, a vein started to form on my forehead, from the bottom of my hair line down to the top of my nose, between my eyebrows. Now in my sixteenth year, it seems to be a permanent fixture. At least, it sure shows up every time I get upset. And lately, I seem to be upset all the time. Today is no different.

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Why didn't she help?

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"The fucking machine doesn't work," the guy repeats dully, through dead eyes.

That just kills me. No wonder this guy works in a fucking game room. He is dumber than a bag of nails. He is denser than Yosemite. He is thicker than a brick. I feel the urge surging through me: go for the throat; go for the throat; go for the throat.

"Yeah," I repeat between gritted teeth. "The fucking machine doesn't work. I put my mother-fucking quarter in, and no fucking ball came out." I declare this angrily, jabbing an accusing finger at the pinball machine.

The dumb guy points to the machine. I see for the first time the red letters on the machine by the coin slots:

"Fifty cents." "Ya need two quarters for this fucking machine. Other than that, the fucking machine works perfectly." He speaks so dully, the sarcasm drips from his lips, thick like honey.

"Shit," I think to myself. "Shit, shit, shit." Out loud, I say the only thing I can think to say.

"Well, why the fuck is it fifty cents, anyways. It's not that fucking cool."

The dumb guy just shrugs. "Machine works," he mutters and walks away. I flip the bird to his back, the kind of bird where your hand is balled into a fist other than the middle finger; not the all fingers half extended kind of bird.

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I pull a second quarter from my pocket and drop it in the slot. The machine wakes up. The machine comes alive. Centaur by Bally. It is all black and white. It is white skull. It looms over me like a curse, staring me down like a school yard bully. I'm not backing down. The thing that hits me next is the soundtrack, a steady boom boom boom and then high pitched zings of distorted noise, wings of a straining angel. The first ball drops and I am ready to go. Bam, I am on the flippers and I am hitting them hard. Bam, bam, bam. Its deep robotic voice is mocking me, taunting me. "Fuck you, mother-fucker," I swear in my head, so loudly that I worry the guy at the next machine might hear the curse. I do not linger long on the thought. I am all focus on the game. Centaur, you are mine.

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She just sat there. I needed her and she just sat there.

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Three balls are down and I am grunting like a madman. Bam, top left flipper smacks one ball; bam bottom right flipper slams another. The third ball is up on top, spiraling between the two bumper and the O post. "Destroy Centaur" the robotic beast dares me. "Yes, I fucking will," I say out loud. I am not sure how loud it is, and I do not want to lose eye contact with any of my three balls, so I do not look up to see if the guy is watching me. Fuck it. Arrows are lighting. Green and white. Flipp-er hit. Flipper hit. Lights are blinking on and off. The soundtrack is blaring. I feel it pulsing through my muscles. I feel it in my hands. I feel it in my feet.

Hit the R. Hit the O. Hit the B. Hit the S. Fucking aye, I am rocking. The flush of four letters down distracts me, and I take my

eye of the ball on the top level. It sneaks past my right flippers and it disappears. “Shit,” I mutter. Or maybe I yelp it. I am not sure. I do not look up. Fuck it. “Destroy Centaur.” Yeah, you are goddamn right I will. Or is it “you are goddamn right I will.” I don’t know. I do not give up. I am hitting the flippers hard. The machine is a part of me. We are dancing together, like some juvenile geek tango.

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The dirty dishes were being thrown, and soon they were on the floor, broken and in a hundred pieces all over me, pouring down on me like burning embers and shrapnel. She didn’t say a word. What was I supposed to do?

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I lose another ball. I am getting distracted. I have to focus. The lights are shining and glimmering in my eyes, like stars above Alaska. I smile despite myself. There is a chill going up and down my spine. Minutes pass. More balls get thrown into the mix. More balls get past my flippers. I feel like I am flying. I feel like I have wings. I thought I would never smile again. I no longer notice the ache under my left eye.

Minutes turn into an hour, and that hour turns into another, maybe two. I lose track of the time. I lose track of my thoughts. Two quarters then four quarters to six quarters, then eight. It is always the same, me against Centaur. “Destroy Centaur,” he booms. Yes, I mouth silently. I shall destroy you, Centaur. Here it is only me and Centaur. There is no Twenty-Fourth Street. Here, there is no home. My grin creeps up and my face starts to squint.

The sound. The lights. The noise of the game room.

I cannot say how much time has passed in the dark game room. It is like Reykjavik in the winter, just dark and dark and dark in here. It could be anytime at all. There is no clock on the wall and I have no watch. I do not really care. It could be two hours. It could be two lifetimes. I play and play and play, until there are no more quarters in my pocket. I play until I can no longer pay.

I pull the bottle from the lining of my coat. I drink the rest of what is inside. It burns my throat and nose. I force back a cough. I throw the empty bottle into a green garbage can next to a Q-Bert machine. A fat kid with a Chunks shirt walks by me. You know, Chunks from Goonies. The fat kid looks at me, but I barely notice him at all.

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I walk outside, out of the darkness of the game room. It is still daylight outside. The rolling hills go on forever. I stop and look up, and then I close my eyes. I feel the heat of the sunlight on my face. Somewhere far away, music plays.

I open my eyes, looking left and right. How far to Cumberland Farms?





### ***I-40 (Wry Mutterings)***

Filled to the brim with gaping canyons, heaven-scraping mountains and gloating green pastures – not to mention black-leathered bikers, saline-saturated strippers and disney-shirted, overbloated tourists – America, you are me.

The footprints under me – of Kerouac and Ginsberg; Emerson and Thoreau; Pollack and O’Keefe – guide me to an oasis of sunshine in which I swallow whole the flowing air of yesterday and tomorrow

like tequila to my tongue. I am intoxicated and mystified and I know somehow that America, you are me.

I am a citizen of this place: these log cabins and suburban sprawls; these wide-eyed young children with their crippled (wizened) elders and bawling out babes; these snotty, sullen teens that hump without feeling; these punks and these priests; these pimply prostitutes and ruddy-faced, blue eyed truckers; these rabid, malodorous animals and sweaty, foul-mouthed manics; these hopeful and hopeless; these abandoned and these forever charmed.

All of these are mine, for America, you are me. I cry and I moan a gully of tears for America's losses: its Columbine, its Oklahoma City. I mourn these losses as though they were losses of my own limbs, and they were. I feel crippled and raped by these sufferings, but still strong enough to kiss the glory of a coming day. There is always a coming day, America remembers, and so do I, for America, you are me.

Walt Whitman whispers to me warmly on these willowy leaves of grass and still somehow with wonder makes love to this land, lifts its skirt up to scream out in surprise and glee that it is fertile and supple and so ready to pop, pop, pop. I make love, too, each and every day I wake. America, you are me.

Oh say can you see someone sang to me once but I never the rest of those words anyway. Of course, without explaining or complaining or letting myself de-train I find I know them all, each and every one, without speaking a single one with my voice because America, you see, you are me.

You are stinky hotel room with seats that stick to me and body odor that clings and clings to the dirty bedsheets and it all drips, drips, drips into my soul and I love it. You are a crackle over the television so loud I can barely hear that homely small-town anchorwoman

Speak words and words of nothing. These words mean nothing and still so much, so much and America, you are me.

With peanut butter and bananas smeared drunkenly on these walls, this place is overfed and overdugged. Still there is a clearness inside this tempest, this hurricane, this tsunami, this miraculous mire that is always confused and bleary and dry heaving, while still singing somehow like a nighttime muse to me, loving me, hugging me and yes even drugging me so I feel no pain. It feels so real to me: America you are me.

Each drive-thru and quik pump in each gasfoodlodging town I find seeps into my veins and my brain and my soul and spirit as the blinking neon lights beckon out to me: sustenance is coming soon. The texture of each burgertacopizza is the texture of America and the texture, of course of me, because America, you are me. Each mile post brings its own vision of hope and youth and vigor and starch of brainless pandering with goof-off caravans that sprinkle energy without shyness on the cobalt black hue reflecting off the road in front and in back, while shameless huckster and each naïve follower allows me to share in each dream that flowed up or burst down to the ground and each dream is me and is mine for you America, you are me.

And if ever I find my naked body being dragged down that lonely path to be draped over that splinter post – sharp and prickly; alone and unashamed; weary and exhilarated; frightened and recoiling; sexless and horny; determined and without any sin left to bemoan – let them scrawl "America" on my titulus, for I am you America. And America, you are me.



auf Wiedersehen . . .