

**BRET**

**EASTON**

**ELLIS**

**AUTHOR OF AMERICAN PSYCHO**

**THE  
SHARDS**

**A NOVEL**

**Also by Bret Easton Ellis**

*White*

*Imperial Bedrooms*

*Lunar Park*

*Glamorama*

*The Informers*

*American Psycho*

*The Rules of Attraction*

*Less Than Zero*

# The SHARDS

Bret  
Easton  
Ellis

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# Contents

*Cover*

*Also by Bret Easton Ellis*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Dedication*

*Epigraph*

*Introduction*

## FALL/1981

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[\*Author's Note\*](#)

[\*A Note About the Author\*](#)

*For no one*



*Do you remember back in old L.A.  
When everybody drove a Chevrolet?  
Whatever happened to the boy next door  
The suntanned, crew-cut, all-American male?*

“Beach Baby”  
The First Class

If you want to keep a secret you must also hide it from  
yourself.

*1984*  
George Orwell

MANY YEARS AGO I REALIZED THAT A BOOK, a novel, is a dream that asks itself to be written in the same way we fall in love with someone: the dream becomes impossible to resist, there's nothing you can do about it, you finally give in and succumb even if your instincts tell you to run the other way because this could be, in the end, a dangerous game—someone will get hurt. For a few of us the first ideas, images, the initial stirrings can prompt the writer to automatically immerse themselves in the novel's world, its romance and fantasy, its secrets. For others it can take longer to feel this connection more clearly, ages to realize how much you needed to write the novel, or love that person, to relive that dream, even decades later. The last time I thought about this book, this particular dream, and telling this version of the story—the one you're reading now, the one you just began—was almost twenty years ago, when I thought I could handle revealing what happened to me and a few of my friends at the beginning of our senior year at Buckley, in 1981. We were teenagers, superficially sophisticated children, who really knew nothing about how the world actually worked—we had the experience, I suppose, but we didn't have the meaning. At least not until something happened that moved us into a state of exalted understanding.

When I first sat down to write this novel, a year after the events had taken place, it turned out that I couldn't deal with revisiting this period, or any of those people I knew and the terrible things that befell us, including, most crucially, what had actually happened to me. In fact without even writing a word I shut the idea of the project down almost as soon as I began it—I was nineteen. Even without picking up a pen or sitting at my typewriter, only gently remembering what happened proved too unnerving in that moment and I was at a place in my life that didn't need the added

stress and I forced myself to forget about that period, at least for a while, and it wasn't hard to erase the past in that moment. But the urge to write the book returned when I left New York after living there for over twenty years—the East Coast was where I escaped almost immediately upon graduation, fleeing the trauma of my last year at high school—and found myself living back in Los Angeles, where those events from 1981 had taken place, and where I felt stronger, more resolved about the past, and that I was capable of steeling myself from the pain of it all and entering the dream. But this turned out not to be the case then either, and after typing up a few pages of notes about the events that happened in the autumn of 1981, when I thought I had numbed myself with half a bottle of Ocho in order to keep proceeding, letting the tequila stabilize my trembling hands, I experienced an anxiety attack so severe that it sent me to the emergency room at Cedars-Sinai in the middle of that night. If we want to connect the act of writing with the metaphor of romance then I had wanted to love this novel and it seemed to be finally offering itself to me and I was so tempted, but when it came time to consummate the relationship I found myself unable to fall into the dream.

—

THIS HAPPENED WHEN I WAS WRITING specifically about the Trawler—a serial killer who had been haunting the San Fernando Valley starting in the late spring of 1980 and then announcing their presence more strongly in the summer of 1981 and who was frighteningly somehow connected to us—and a wave of stress so severe crashed over me that night I began making notes I actually moaned with fear from the memories and I collapsed, retching up the tequila I'd been gulping down. Xanax I kept in the nightstand by my bed was no help—I swallowed three and knew they weren't going to do anything quickly enough. In that moment: I was sure I was about to die. I dialed 911 and told the operator I was having a heart attack and then fainted. The landline I was calling from—this was in 2006, I was forty-two, I lived alone—alerted them as to where the location was and an alarmed doorman from the front desk of the high-rise I lived in escorted

the EMTs to the eleventh floor. My apartment was unlocked by the doorman and they found me on the floor in the bedroom. I regained consciousness in an ambulance as it sped along San Vicente Boulevard toward Cedars-Sinai, a short distance from the Doheny Plaza, where I lived, and after I was wheeled into the emergency room prone on a stretcher and had reoriented myself as to what had happened, I became embarrassed—the Xanax had kicked in and I was calm and I knew there was nothing physically wrong with me. I knew the panic attack was directly related to the memories I had of the Trawler and more specifically of Robert Mallory.

A doctor checked me out—I was basically fine but the hospital wanted me to stay the night so they could perform a battery of tests, including running an MRI, and my primary physician agreed, reminding me over the phone that my health insurance would cover almost all of the stay. But I needed to get home and opted out of whatever tests they wanted to administer because if I had stayed at Cedars that night I was sure I'd slip into madness, knowing that what happened to me had nothing to do with my body or any malady I may or may not have harbored. It was a reaction simply connected to memory, to the past and conjuring that awful year—to Robert Mallory, and the Trawler, and Matt Kellner and Susan Reynolds and Thom Wright and Deborah Schaffer, as well as the darkened tunnel I was traveling through at seventeen.

—

AFTER THAT NIGHT I abandoned the project and instead wrote two other books during the following thirteen years, and it wasn't until 2020 that I felt I could begin *The Shards*, or *The Shards* had decided that *Bret* was ready because the book was announcing itself to *me*—and not the other way around. I hadn't reached out to the book because I spent so many years pushing myself away from the dream, from Robert Mallory, from that senior year at Buckley; so many decades spent pushing away from the Trawler, and Susan and Thom and Deborah and Ryan, and what happened to Matt Kellner; I had relegated this story to the dark corner of the closet

and for many years this avoidance worked—I didn't pay as much attention to the book and it stopped calling out to me. But sometime during 2019 it began climbing its way back, pulsing with a life of its own, wanting to merge with me, expanding into my consciousness in such a persuasive way that I couldn't ignore it any longer—trying to ignore it had become a distraction. This particular timing had coincided with the fact that I wasn't writing screenplays anymore, that I had decided at a certain point to stop chasing that game—a decade of being well compensated for TV pilots and scripts for movies that would mostly never be made—and I briefly wondered if there was a connection between the book beckoning to me and the new lack of interest in writing for Hollywood. It didn't matter: I had to write the book because I needed to resolve what happened—it was finally time.

—

THE SPARK FOR MY RENEWED INTEREST in the novel was initiated by a brief moment years after that anxiety attack landed me in Cedars. I'd seen a woman—I was going to say a girl, but she wasn't any longer; she was a woman in her mid-fifties, my age—on the corner of Holloway and La Cienega in West Hollywood. She was standing on the sidewalk outside the Palihouse Hotel, wearing sunglasses, a phone pressed against her ear, waiting for a car, and even though this was a much older version of the girl I used to know when we were in high school it was unmistakably her. I knew it even though I hadn't seen her in almost forty years: she was still effortlessly beautiful. I had just made a left turn onto Holloway and was stopped in traffic when I noticed the figure on the deserted sidewalk beneath the umbrella at the valet stand—she was maybe twenty feet away from me. Instead of the happy surprise at seeing an old friend I was frozen with a sheet of dread—it draped over me immediately and I went ice cold. That glimpse of this woman in the flesh caused the fear to return and it started swallowing everything—just like it had in 1981. She was a reminder that it had all been real, that the dream had actually happened, that even

though four decades had passed since we last saw each other, we were still bound by the events of that fall.

I didn't suddenly pull over to the side of Holloway, near the mouth of the garage of the CVS across the street from the Palihouse, and present myself to the woman, exclaim surprise, get out of the car and offer her an embrace, marvel at how beautiful she still looked—I had successfully avoided contact with any of my classmates from our senior year on social media, with only a few having reached out to me over the years, usually in the weeks after I published a book. Instead I just stared through the windshield of the BMW I was driving as she stood on that deserted sidewalk, holding the phone to her ear, listening to whoever was talking to her, not saying anything, and even with the sunglasses on, there was something haunted in the way she held herself, or maybe I was imagining this was true—maybe she was fine, maybe she had completely adjusted and had processed what happened to her in the fall of 1981, the terrible injury she suffered, the awful revelation she experienced, the losses she endured. I was on my way to Palm Springs with Todd, someone I'd met in 2010 and who'd been living with me for the past nine years, to spend a week with a friend flying in from New York who had rented a house on the edges of the movie colony in Palm Springs before heading to San Diego to attend a series of conferences. I'd been having a conversation with Todd when I saw the woman in front of the Palihouse and was shut down mid-sentence. A car suddenly blared its horn behind me and when I glanced at the rearview mirror I realized the light on Holloway had turned green and I wasn't moving. "What's wrong?" Todd asked as I accelerated too quickly and lurched toward Santa Monica Boulevard. I swallowed, and numbly offered, trying to sound utterly neutral: "I knew that girl..."

—

OF COURSE SHE WASN'T a girl any longer—again, she was almost fifty-five, as I was—but that was how I'd known her: a girl. It didn't matter. Todd just asked, "What girl?" and I made a vague distracted motion with

my hand—“Just someone outside Palihouse.” Todd craned his neck but didn’t see anyone—she was already gone. He shrugged and looked back at his phone. I realized that the satellite radio was tuned to the Totally 80s station and the chorus from “Vienna” by Ultravox was playing—*It means nothing to me*, the singer cried out, *this means nothing to me*—as the fear kept swirling forward, a variation on that same fear from the fall of 1981, when we played this song near the end of every party or made sure of its prominence on every mixtape we compiled. Letting the song take me back on that December day, I thought I’d acquired the tools to cope with the events that happened when I was seventeen and I even thought, naïvely, foolishly, that I had worked it out through the trauma in the fiction I published years later, in my twenties and thirties and into my forties, but *that* specific trauma rushed back to me, proving that whatever I thought I’d worked out on my own, without having to confess it in a novel, I obviously hadn’t.

That week we were in the desert I couldn’t sleep—perhaps a couple of hours each night at the most even with a steady intake of benzodiazepine. I might have knocked myself out with the Xanax I’d overdosed on but the black dreams kept me from sleeping for more than one or two hours, and I would lie awake exhausted in the master bedroom in the house on Azure Court combating the rising panic tied to the girl I had seen. The midlife crisis that began after that night in 2006 when I tried to write about what happened to us our senior year at Buckley, completed itself roughly seven years later—seven years spent in a fever dream where the free-floating anxiety alienated everyone I knew and the accompanying stress caused me to drop forty pounds—waned away with the help of a therapist, a kind of life coach whom I dutifully saw every week for a year in an office off Sawtelle Boulevard just a block past the 405 who was the only one out of half a dozen shrinks I’d seen not afraid of the things I was telling him. I had learned from the previous five therapists that I had to downplay the horror of what had happened—to me, to us—and that I had to rearrange the narrative so that it was more palatable in order not to disturb the sessions themselves.

I was finally in a long-term relationship and the minor problems that never actually threatened my life—addiction, depression—crept away. People who had been avoiding me those last seven years, when I was emaciated and furious, would run into the new Bret in a restaurant or at a screening and seemed confused when they saw I wasn't as freaked out and messed up as I used to be. And the prince-of-darkness literary persona readers thought I had always embodied was now vanishing, being replaced by something sunnier—the man who wrote *American Psycho* was actually, some people were surprised to find out, just an amiable mess, maybe even likable, and not nearly the careless nihilist so many people mistook me for, an image that I perhaps played along with anyway. But it had never been the intended pose.

—

SHE WAS STANDING across the street from a CVS pharmacy that used to be, decades ago, a New Wave roller-disco rink called Flipper's, and on the way out to Palm Springs the sight of the woman caused me to remember the last time I had been to Flipper's, in the spring of 1981, before Robert Mallory appeared that September and everything changed. I was with Thom Wright and two other guys from our class at Buckley, Jeff Taylor and Kyle Colson—we were four seventeen-year-old high-school students in the convertible Rolls-Royce of a mildly infamous but harmless gay con man in his early forties named Ron Levin who Jeff Taylor had introduced to the group, all of us a little wired from the cocaine we had done at Ron's condo in Beverly Hills earlier that evening. This was actually on a school night during the middle of our junior year and what this might suggest about our adolescence is, I suppose, open to interpretation. It also might suggest something about our world that Jeff, a handsome surfer who—after Thom Wright—was the second- or third-best-looking guy in our class, was supplying Ron Levin with mild sexual favors for cash even though Jeff was straight, most of it going to a new surfboard, stereo equipment and a weed supplier in Zuma.



It might also suggest something about our world that Ron Levin was murdered a few years later by two members of something called the Billionaire Boys Club—an investment and social group collective made up of many of the guys we vaguely knew from the private-school scene in Los Angeles, guys who went to the Harvard School for Boys, which, along with the Buckley School, was one of the two most prestigious private schools in Los Angeles, and students from both places often knew each other in the vaguely exclusive world of prep schools then. Later, I would meet the founder of the Billionaire Boys Club, a guy my age named Joe Hunt, during winter break from Bennington at a casual dinner with a few friends at La Scala Boutique in Beverly Hills in the months preceding Ron Levin’s murder at the hands of BBC’s security director that Joe ordered, and nothing about Joe Hunt, tall and handsome and quiet, ever suggested he would be capable of the crimes he was later imprisoned for.

I’m digressing because what happened to us that fall in 1981 had nothing to do with the Billionaire Boys Club or Ron Levin or Joe Hunt. This was just a segment of where the world we were a part of was heading toward during that deep span of empire, and by the time the Billionaire Boys Club “happened” in 1983, what “happened” to us had already occurred, and it was perhaps the casually hedonistic world of adults we were eagerly entering that opened a door that allowed Robert Mallory and the Trawler and the events of that fall to greet us—it later seemed, at least to me, an invitation we thoughtlessly sent out completely unaware of the price we would end up paying.

—

FLIPPER’S LOOMED CLOSER on that spring night in Ron Levin’s convertible Rolls-Royce as we headed up La Cienega into West Hollywood from Beverly Hills, Donna Summer singing “Dim All the Lights” from the car’s stereo, off the eight-track of *Bad Girls*. Ron was driving and Jeff was in the passenger seat, Kyle and Thom and myself in the back, but I could see from where I was squeezed between Thom and Kyle that Ron’s hand

was on Jeff's thigh and then Jeff gently pushed Ron's hand away without looking at him. Thom had leaned over and saw this after I nudged him and glanced at me with a shrug, rolling his eyes, whatever. Did the shrug imply that this was simply where we all were and we were okay with it? I wondered hopefully as I glanced back at Thom Wright. But we really didn't care: we were high and young and it was a warm spring night and entering into the world of adults—nothing else mattered. This night in 1981 took place before a placid and beautiful summer in L.A.—the summer before the horror began, though we found out it had actually started *before* that summer, had already been unfolding in ways we weren't aware—and that night, which I remember few specific details of, seems in retrospect like one of the last innocent nights of my life despite the fact that we should have never been there, underage and slightly high on cocaine and with a much older gay man who would be murdered three years later by one of our private-school peers.

I don't remember roller-skating but I remember sitting in a booth drinking champagne, the *Xanadu* soundtrack blasting, and I remember that we went back to Ron's apartment in Beverly Hills and Ron casually disappeared into the bedroom with Jeff—he wanted to show Jeff a new Rolex he'd just bought. Kyle drove back to his parents' in Brentwood while Thom and I did some more coke and played records (and I remember those records that night: Duran Duran, Billy Idol, Squeeze), before I eventually left, while Thom waited for Jeff, and after Ron passed out the two of them headed to Jeff's father's place in Malibu, where they stayed up the rest of the night and finished the half-gram Ron gave Jeff and hit the beach in their wet suits at dawn to surf the waves cresting along the misty morning shores before they put on their school uniforms and made the long drive to Buckley, taking Sunset all the way to Beverly Glen and then over the hill into Sherman Oaks. Hours earlier I had already driven through the canyons back to my parents' place on Mulholland, where I took a Valium I found in a Gucci pillbox—the pillbox a Christmas gift from Susan Reynolds when I was fifteen and maybe another clue about where we all were—before falling into an easy and dreamless sleep.

---

WE WERE SO autonomous at sixteen but it never seemed like it was to our youthful detriment, because the week you got your driver's license in L.A. was when you became an adult. I remember when Jeff Taylor first got his car before any of us and on a school night picked up Thom Wright in Beverly Hills and then dropped by the house on Mulholland to get me and then drove into Hollywood with the eight-track of Billy Joel's *Glass Houses* blasting "You May Be Right" and we went to see a late show of *Saturn 3* in a deserted Cinerama Dome—this was in February of 1980. I don't remember the movie—R-rated sci-fi starring Farrah Fawcett—only the freedom of being out on our own and without any parents involved. This was the first time we had driven by ourselves to see a ten o'clock movie and I remember hanging out in the vast parking lot of the Cinerama Dome as midnight neared, a deserted Hollywood surrounding us, sharing a joint, the future wide open.

It was not unusual after I got my driver's license to decide at seven o'clock on a Wednesday after browsing my homework that I would drive down the hill from the house on Mulholland and into West Hollywood to see the first set of the Psychedelic Furs at the Whisky without asking my mother's permission (my parents were separated by that point in 1980), because this had become a common weeknight out. I would just let my mother know that I'd be back by midnight and then I'd slip out of the house and drive through the empty canyons with Missing Persons or the Doors playing and park in a lot off Sunset where I'd pay five dollars to the attendant on North Clark. I would easily get into the Whisky with a fake ID (some nights I wasn't even carded) and in the club I'd ask the Rastafarian by the bar if he knew where I could get any coke and the Rastafarian would usually point to a kid with platinum-blond hair in the back of the room, whom I'd walk over to and gesture at, slipping him a wad of folded cash before I ordered a whiskey sour, which was a drink I favored in high school, waiting for him as he checked something out in the manager's office and then brought me a small packet. Afterward I would drive up the canyons

and then cruise along Mulholland—everything was deserted, I was high, smoking a clove cigarette—and descend Laurel Canyon and drive along the neighborhoods nestled above Ventura Boulevard: I'd start in Studio City and then glide through Sherman Oaks slowly in the darkness along Valley Vista until I arrived in Encino and then, past that, into Tarzana, just idly driving by the darkened houses that lined the suburban neighborhoods, listening to the Kings until it was time to head back up to Mulholland. I'd take either Ventura Boulevard or the 101 and at Van Nuys make the drive up Beverly Glen, and sometimes while heading home catch the green flashes from the eyes of coyotes in the glare of the headlights as they glanced at the Mercedes while trotting across Mulholland—sometimes in packs—and I'd have to stop the car, waiting to let them prowl past. And I could always manage the next morning, no matter how late my nights played out, to pull into the Buckley parking lot, neatly wearing my uniform, minutes before the first class began, never feeling hungover or tired but only pleasantly buzzed.

—

IF THE SPRING AND SUMMER of 1981 had been the dream, something paradisaical, then September represented the end of that dream with the arrival of Robert Mallory—there was now the sense of something *else* moving in, dark patterns were revealing themselves, and we began noticing things for the first time: a signal we had never heard before started calling out to us. I don't want to make a direct connection between certain events and the arrival of Robert Mallory in September of 1981 after that paradisaical summer but it happened to coincide with a kind of madness that slowly descended over the city. It was as if another world was announcing itself, painting the one we had all safely taken for granted into a darker color.

For example, this became a time when homes in certain neighborhoods were suddenly being targeted and staked out by members of a cult whose purpose was hard to ascertain, the pale hippie hanging out at the end of the

driveway muttering to himself, his pacing interrupted by a brief shuffle-dance, and later, in December, there were plastic explosives planted all over town by the cult the hippies belonged to. There was suddenly a sniper on the roof of a department store in Beverly Hills on the night before Thanksgiving, and there was a bomb threat that cleared out Chasen's on Christmas Eve. Suddenly we knew about a teenage boy who had convinced himself he was possessed by a "Satanic demon" in Pacific Palisades and the elaborate exorcism by two priests to rid the boy of the demon, which almost killed him—the boy bled from his eyes and went deaf in one ear, developed pancreatitis, and four ribs were broken during the ritual. Suddenly there was the UCLA student buried alive as a prank by five classmates high on PCP at a fraternity party that a witness blandly said had "somehow gotten out of hand" and who almost didn't make it, ending up in a coma in a darkened room in one of the buildings lining Medical Plaza. Suddenly there were the spider infestations that bloomed everywhere across the city. The most fanciful story that fall involved a mutation, a monster, a fish the size of a small car hauled out of the ocean off Malibu—its skin was gray-white and there were large patches of silvery-orange scales dusted across it and even though it had the jaws of a shark it decidedly wasn't one, and when the thing was gutted by local fishermen they found the bodies of two dogs who had been missing swallowed whole.

And then, of course, there was the Trawler announcing itself.

For about a year there had been various break-ins and assaults, and then disappearances, and in 1981, the corpse of a second missing teenage girl was found—the other one discovered in 1980—and was ultimately connected to the home invasions. Everything might have happened without the presence of Robert Mallory but the fact that his arrival coincided with the strange darkening that had begun to lightly spiral into our lives was something I couldn't ignore, even though others did, at their own peril. Whether it was bad luck or bad timing these events were simply tied together, and though Robert Mallory wasn't the sniper on the roof of Neiman Marcus or the caller who emptied out Chasen's and he wasn't connected to the violent exorcism in Pacific Palisades or anywhere near the

fraternity house in Westwood where the pledge had been flung into an open grave, his presence, for me, was connected to all of these things; every horror story we heard that fall, anything that darkened our bubble in ways we never noticed before, led to him.

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A WEEK AGO I ordered a reproduction of the 1982 Buckley yearbook from a website called Classmates.com for ninety-nine dollars and it was FedExed four days later to the apartment on Doheny and when it arrived I remembered why I didn't have a copy: I never wanted to be reminded of the things that happened to me and the friends we lost. Our yearbook was called *Images*, and this edition was overseen by a classmate who became a well-known producer in Hollywood and she gave 1982 a cinematic theme: interspersed throughout the yearbook were stills of movies, everything from *Gone with the Wind* to *Ordinary People*, which seemed, in retrospect to what happened, almost unnaturally frivolous and uncaring, a way of forcing a lipstick smile onto a death mask. While slowly turning the pages of the "Seniors" section, where each of us had an individual page to reminisce and thank our parents and add photos of friends and quotations, designing the page to represent who we thought we were at eighteen, our best selves, I was haunted by the fact that out of the sixty seniors from that class of 1982 five were missing—the five who didn't make it for various reasons—and this fact was simply inescapable: I couldn't dream it away or pretend it wasn't true. We were listed alphabetically and after sipping from a tumbler of gin I would tentatively turn to where each of them would have been placed within those sixty pages and notice that they simply weren't there—they had all existed that first week in September but now they were erased. Instead three of them were listed in the "In Memoriam" section at the back of the book.

FALL / 1981

# 1

I REMEMBER IT WAS THE SUNDAY afternoon before Labor Day in 1981 and our senior year was about to begin on that Tuesday morning of September 8—and I remember that the Windover Stables were located on a bluff above Malibu, where Deborah Schaffer was boarding her new horse, Spirit, in one of the twenty separate barns where the animals were housed, and I remember I was driving solo, following Susan Reynolds and Thom Wright in Thom’s convertible Corvette along Pacific Coast Highway, the ocean dimly shimmering beside us in the humid air, until we reached the turnoff that took us up to the stables, and I remember I was listening to the Cars, the song was “Dangerous Type”—on a mixtape I’d made that included Blondie, the Babys, Duran Duran—as I kept behind Thom’s car up the winding road to the entrance of the stables, where we parked next to Deborah’s gleaming brand-new BMW, the only car in the lot on that Sunday, and then checked in at the front office, and where we followed a tree-lined trail until we located Debbie trotting Spirit by his reins around a gated arena that was deserted—she had already ridden him but the saddle was still on and she was wearing her riding attire. The sight of the horse shocked me—and I remember that I shivered at its presence in the late-afternoon heat. Spirit had replaced a horse Debbie retired in June.

“Hey,” Debbie said to us in her flat, uninflected voice. I remember how it sounded so hollow in the emptiness that surrounded us—a deadened echo. Beyond the manicured stables painted white and pine green was a forest of trees blocking the view of the Pacific—you could see small patches of glassy blue but everything seemed ensconced and still, nothing



moved, as if we were encased in a kind of plastic dome. I remember it being very hot that day and I felt that I had somehow been forced into visiting the stables simply because Debbie had become my girlfriend that summer and it was required of me and not something I necessarily wanted to experience. But I was resigned: I may have wanted to stay home and work on the novel I was writing, but at seventeen I also wanted to keep up certain appearances.

I remember Thom said “Wow” as he neared the horse, and, like everything with Thom, it might have sounded genuine, but it was also, like Debbie’s intonation, flat, as if he didn’t really have an opinion: everything was cool, everything was chill, everything was a mild *wow*. Susan murmured in agreement as she took off her Wayfarers.

“Hey, handsome,” Debbie said to me, placing a kiss on my cheek.

I remember I tried to stare admiringly at the animal but I really didn’t want to care about the horse—and yet it was so large and alive that I was shocked by it. Up close it was kind of magnificent, and it definitely made an impression on me—it just seemed too huge, and only made of muscle, a threat—*It could hurt you*, I thought—but it was actually calm, and in that moment had no problem letting us stroke its flanks. I remember that I was aware of Spirit being yet another example of Debbie’s wealth and her intertwined carelessness: the cost of maintaining and housing the animal would be astronomical and yet who knew how interested she really was at seventeen and if that interest was going to be sustained. But this was another aspect I hadn’t known about Debbie even though we had been going to school together since fifth grade—I hadn’t paid attention until now: I found out she’d always been interested in horses and yet I never knew it until the summer before our senior year, when I became her boyfriend and saw the shelves in her bedroom lined with ribbons and trophies and photographs of her at various equestrian events. I had always been more interested in her father, Terry Schaffer, than I was in Debbie. In 1981 Terry Schaffer was thirty-nine and already extremely wealthy, having made the bulk of his fortune on a few movies that had—in two unexpected cases—become blockbusters, and he was one of the town’s most respected

and in-demand producers. He had taste, or at least what Hollywood considered taste—he had been nominated for an Oscar twice—and he was constantly offered jobs to run studios, something he had no interest in. Terry was also gay—not openly but discreetly—and he was married to Liz Schaffer, who was lost in so much privilege and pain that I wondered if Terry’s gayness registered with her at all anymore. Deborah was their only child. Terry died in 1992.

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THOM WAS ASKING Debbie general questions about the horse and Susan glanced over at me and smiled—I rolled my eyes, not at Thom, but at the overall non-situation. Susan rolled her eyes back at me: a connection was made between us that didn’t involve our respective mates. After petting and admiring the horse there didn’t seem much reason for us to be standing around anymore and I remember thinking: *This* is why I drove all the way out to Malibu? In order to witness and pet Debbie’s dumb new horse? And I remember I stood there feeling somewhat awkward, though I’m sure neither Thom nor Susan did: they were almost never annoyed, nothing ever ruffled Thom or Susan, they took everything in stride, and the eye-rolling on Susan’s part seemed designed to simply placate me, but I was grateful. Debbie kissed my lips lightly.

“See you back at my place?” she asked.

I was momentarily distracted by the whispered conversation Thom and Susan were having before I turned my attention to Debbie. I remembered Debbie was having people over that night at the house in Bel Air and I smiled naturally in order to reassure her.

“Yeah, totally.”

And then, on cue, as if everything was rehearsed, Thom and Susan and I walked back to our cars as Debbie walked Spirit into his stable, with someone from the Windover staff, uniformed in white jeans and a windbreaker. I followed Thom and Susan along PCH and as they made the left turn onto Sunset Boulevard, which would take us all the way from the

beach to the entrance of Bel Air's East Gate, a song that I liked but would never admit to was now playing on the mixtape: REO Speedwagon's "Time for Me to Fly," a sappy ballad about a loser who gets up the nerve to tell his girlfriend it's over, and yet for me at seventeen it was a song about metamorphosis and the lyric *I know it hurts to say goodbye, but it's time for me to fly*...meant something else that spring and summer of 1981, when I became attached to the song. It was about leaving one realm and moving into another, just as I had been doing. And I remember being at the stables not because anything happened there—it was just Thom and Susan and myself driving out to Malibu to see the horse—but because it was the afternoon that led into the night where we first heard the name of a new student who would be joining our senior class that fall at Buckley: Robert Mallory.

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THOM WRIGHT AND SUSAN REYNOLDS had been dating since they were sophomores—and were now the most popular people not only in our class but in the overall Buckley student body after Katie Choi and Brad Foreman graduated in June and it was obvious why: Thom and Susan were casually beautiful, all-American, dark-blond hair, green eyes, perpetually tan, and there was something logical in the way they had gravitated inexorably toward each other and moved everywhere as a single unit—they were almost always together. They both came from wealthy L.A. families but Thom's parents were divorced and his father had relocated to New York, and it was only on those trips to Manhattan where Thom visited his dad that he wasn't in direct proximity to Susan. For about two years they were in love, until that fall of 1981, when one of them wasn't, which set into motion a series of dreadful events. I had been infatuated with both of them but I never admitted to either one that it was actually love.

I had been Susan's closest male friend since we met at Buckley in the seventh grade and five years later I knew seemingly everything about her: when she got her period, the problems with her mother, every imaginary

slight and deprivation she thought she was enduring, crushes on classmates before Thom. She kind of knew that I was secretly in love with her, but even though we were always close she never said anything, only teased me at certain moments if I was paying too much attention to her, or not enough. I had been flattered that people thought we were boyfriend and girlfriend and I did little to stop the rumors about the two of us until Thom stepped in. Susan Reynolds was the prototype of the cool SoCal girl even at thirteen, years before she was driving a convertible BMW and always mildly stoned on marijuana or Valium or half a Quaalude (but functioning—she was an effortless A student) and impudently wearing Wayfarer sunglasses as she walked through the arched stucco doorways to her class unless a teacher asked her to take them off—every Buckley student seemed in possession of a designer pair of sunglasses but they weren't allowed to be worn on campus except in the parking lot and on Gilley Field. Susan seemed to confide everything to me during the middle-school years—in the 1970s they were referred to as “junior high”—and though I didn't quite return that openness I had revealed enough for her to know things about me that no one else did, but only to a point. There were things I would never tell her.

Susan Reynolds became the de facto queen of our class as we moved through each subsequent grade: she was beautiful, sophisticated, intriguingly low-key, and she had an air of casual sexuality even before she and Thom became a couple—and it wasn't because she was slutty; she had actually lost her virginity to Thom and hadn't had sex with anyone else—but Susan's beauty always intensified the idea of her sexuality for us. Thom ultimately took it a step further and Susan's sexual aura became more pronounced once they started dating, when everyone knew that they were fucking, but it had always been there; and even if they hadn't actually been fucking in the beginning, during those first weeks that fall of 1979, when they became a couple, the question was: how could two teenagers *that* good-looking *not* be fucking each other? By September of 1981 Susan and I were still close and, in some ways, I think she felt closer to me than to Thom—we had, of course, a different relationship—but there now seemed to be a slight wariness, not necessarily toward anything in particular but just

a general malaise. She had been with Thom for two years and a vague but noticeable ennui had drifted over her. The jealousy that they inspired and that had almost broken me was, I thought, dissolving by then.

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THOM WRIGHT, LIKE SUSAN REYNOLDS, HAD started Buckley in seventh grade, transferring from Horace Mann. His parents divorced when he was in ninth grade and he lived with his mother in Beverly Hills when his father relocated to Manhattan. Though Thom had always been cute—obviously the cutest guy in our class, adorable even—it wasn't until something happened to him over the summer of 1979, when he returned from New York after spending July and August with his father, that he'd somehow, inexplicably, become a man; some kind of metamorphosis had happened that summer, the cuteness and the adorability had faded, and we started looking at Thom in a different way—he was suddenly, officially, sexualized when we saw him back at school that September of our sophomore year. Even though I had always sexualized Thom Wright everyone else now realized he was *built*, the jawline seemed more pronounced, the hair was now shorter—somewhat ubiquitous among the guys at Buckley (mostly because of haircut regulations) but Thom's was now something stylish, a moment, a cue to manliness—and when I glimpsed him in the locker room that first week back from the summer changing for Phys Ed (our lockers throughout our time at Buckley were side by side) I hitched in a breath when I saw he had obviously been working out and his chest and arms and torso were defined in ways they weren't at the end of June, the last time I saw him in a bathing suit, at a pool party at Anthony Matthews's house. There was also the paleness around his newly muscled thighs and ass—the place where his bathing suit had blocked the sun from his weekends in the Hamptons—that contrasted with the rest of his tanned body, which shocked me. Thom had become an ideal of teen boy handsomeness and what was so alluring about him was that he seemed not to care, he seemed not to notice, as if it was just a natural gift

bestowed upon him—he didn't have an ego. I had repeatedly gotten over any notions that my feelings for Thom Wright would be reciprocated, because he was so resolutely heterosexual in ways that I wasn't.

This inchoate crush on Thom may have come back those first few weeks after he returned from New York that September in 1979 but then he was suddenly with Susan and we effortlessly became a kind of threesome once we got cars that following spring, hanging out on weekends, going to the movies together in Westwood, lying on the sand at the Jonathan Beach Club in Santa Monica and cruising the Century City Mall, and my crush on both Thom and Susan was rendered pointless. Not that Thom would have ever noticed it, though Susan, I'm sure, had registered my feelings and knew I desired her: Thom was, admittedly, a fairly unaware individual—about a lot of things—and yet there was an intriguing blankness that was attractive and soothing about him, there was never any tension, he was the pinnacle of laid-back and he wasn't a stoner. By the time we finished junior year the only drug Thom liked was coke, and only just a line or two, a few bumps could take him through a party, and he didn't drink except for the occasional Corona. He was so easy to hang with and so agreeable to any option that when I fantasized coming on to him I often dreamt he would have let me, at least halfway, before gently rejecting my advances, though not without a kiss and a suggestive squeeze on my upper thigh to uselessly reassure me. In some of my more elaborate fantasies Thom didn't reject me sexually and these would end with both of us covered in sweat and in my dreams the sex was exaggeratedly intense and afterward, I'd imagine, he would kiss me deeply, panting, quietly laughing, amazed at the pleasure I brought him, in ways that Susan Reynolds never could.

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I DIDN'T WANT DEBBIE SCHAFFER to kiss me at the Windover Stables that afternoon in front of Thom and Susan but I hadn't minded either. In a way she was an experiment—I wasn't determined to have a girlfriend my senior year at Buckley except if it had been Susan Reynolds—and yet

Debbie had become, somewhat inexplicably, exactly that at the beginning of the summer. We were at another party at Anthony Matthews's house and she just started making out with me on a chaise by the lit pool. I was stoned on a Quaalude, she was on coke, it was midnight, Split Enz's "I Got You" was playing from inside the house (...*I don't know why sometimes I get frightened...*) and I was at a point where I still tried to be attracted to girls—that hadn't ended yet—and all the requisite elements seemed to be in play. She simply pushed herself onto me and I surprised myself and went with it. I really didn't care about appearances—though I definitely wasn't out as bisexual and I had no desire to lead a girl or a guy on—but I was also fairly passive, and when it came to Debbie Schaffer, whom I had known since the fifth grade, I just went with whatever she wanted that summer, and I thought including her might round out the group of Susan and Thom and myself, make it less painful for me, hopefully inspire one of them to become jealous, which of course never happened. I also wanted to get closer to Debbie so it might bring me nearer to Terry Schaffer, the famous dad, who I'd always been drawn to and yet after all these years never really knew, and I'd known Debbie seemingly forever.

Debbie had transformed from a somewhat awkward-looking girl—though always bizarrely confident, or maybe just entitled, but pudgy with braces and a ponytail—into a kind of slutty teen boy fantasy by the time she reached ninth grade. Her breasts were full and high and she took every opportunity to show off her cleavage. A Buckley girl wasn't supposed to reveal this, the white blouse was supposed to be buttoned to the point where you couldn't see anything, but many of the girls ignored this rule in tenth and eleventh grade and, depending on what adult glimpsed this, it had become allowed—the rules were malleable. Her legs were stunning, long and tan and waxed, and the saddle shoes she wore with ankle-high white socks helped turn her into something fetishistic; the hem on the gray skirt of her uniform was at the highest permissible length so you could see past upper-thigh, and often when she sat down you just as easily glimpsed the light-pink panties she was fond of. By senior year her hair was a shade off platinum, Blondie-inspired, and though makeup was against the rules for

younger girls (lip gloss was acceptable), if you were in eleventh or twelfth grade it was allowed minimally, and often girls casually wore understated lipstick though Debbie wore hers defiantly, hot pink and blood red, even though she was often asked by a teacher or our principal, Dr. Croft, to wipe it off. Susan barely wore any makeup at all because Thom didn't like it.

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EVEN THOUGH AS A COUPLE THOM AND SUSAN, in my mind, seemed more defined than anything else in the minimalist moment we were moving through in 1981, which was inspired by New Wave and punk—numbness and disaffection, a general rejection of seventies kitsch, everything was clean with sharp angles now—they were a throwback to a distant era despite how up-to-date and effortlessly hip both of them outwardly seemed—they often acted as if they could have been the king and queen of the prom from a movie made in the early 1960s: happy, carefree, untroubled. But I knew at a certain point—by the late spring of 1981, almost two years after they started dating—that Thom was happier than Susan. She had recently confided to me one day near the end of our junior year as we walked through Westwood after school in our Buckley uniforms while Thom was at baseball practice that “Thom isn't dumb exactly...” She said this apropos of nothing, and I didn't know how to respond—I just looked over at her. It was true: his grades were good, he kept them up—he had to because of the sports he played and excelled at: football, basketball, soccer, baseball, track—and he read and admired books (as sophomores we bonded over how much we both liked *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises*) and he had become almost as much of a cinephile as I was, often accompanying me to revival theaters like the Nuart, where I would educate him about the differences between good Robert Altman and bad, and why Brian De Palma was an important director. “But Thom *can* be —” Susan started, then stopped herself. I remember she chose the following words carefully as we stood in front of the Postermat, debating whether to go in. *Outland*, a movie set on one of Jupiter's moons, was playing next



door at the Bruin, I remember. “Not dim,” she said, then pausing. “But uncurious.”

Well, Thom didn’t *need* to be anything, I argued, kind of joking. He was *hot*, his family had money, Thom would be okay whether he was dumb or not. What was she trying to say?

Susan looked at me strangely after I said this, seemingly bothered that I was overly effusive about defending something so innocuous and vague. “You’re hardly not hot, Bret,” Susan said as we slowly floated across the sidewalk.

I was swinging a yellow Tower Records bag (Squeeze, *East Side Story*, the Kim Carnes LP with “Bette Davis Eyes”) and tried to seem utterly nonchalant when I said, “But I’m not *Thom*.”

This annoyed her. “God, you sound like you want to date him.”

“Date?” I said, smirking. “Is that a possibility?” I was joking but I wanted to test her.

Susan glanced at me, smiling at first, and coy, Wayfarers on, lips lightly touched with bubble-gum gloss, and then she said seriously, “No, I don’t think so. No, it isn’t.”

The way she answered this with such a casual finality annoyed me. “Jesus, Susan, I’m kidding,” I said, even though, of course, I wasn’t.

Susan didn’t say anything as we crossed Broxton, just kept looking over at me even though I couldn’t see her eyes because of the Wayfarers—she was trying to figure something out.

I asked, “How do you know Thom wouldn’t?”

She finally sighed and said, “Oh, Bret, I hope you’re happy. I really do. Your secret is safe with me.”

I laughed and said, “You don’t know my secrets.”

But we *were* finding missing pieces and secrets everywhere and I had more than a few and in that moment I wondered which ones Susan knew, which ones she had uncovered, and which ones remained mysteries.

EVERYTHING SPED UP when you got your car at sixteen: you were now autonomous in ways you hadn't been, you could take care of yourself or so you thought—that was the illusion—and now that we were older, and especially if we didn't have siblings—which strangely none of us had, not Thom, not Susan or Deborah, not Matt Kellner, or myself—this encouraged our parents to either work longer hours or travel with less restrictions, many of them to distant movie sets in other countries, or they were simply taking more elaborate vacations, leaving behind empty houses in Bel Air and Beverly Hills and Benedict Canyon and along the cliffs of Mulholland and into Malibu that we took advantage of our junior year. And because of this new autonomy and mobility we were driving over to a friend's house whenever we wanted or hanging at the beach club on a whim, and some of the boys were now openly purchasing porn at the newsstands in Sherman Oaks and Studio City or sometimes driving into West L.A. or Hollywood to flash a fake ID and buy magazines and videotapes.

We also started spending time at the Odyssey, an all-age nightclub on Beverly Boulevard near the corner of La Cienega, which didn't serve alcohol but if you knew your way around you could score Quaaludes and weed and small baggies of cocaine, and for me, at least, the Odyssey had the added allure that there were gay men in attendance even though it was ostensibly a straight club; and though the gay men were perhaps older than I wanted to pursue, this was the first time I was in close proximity to them and it had been mildly thrilling even though I didn't do anything, just danced with Thom and Susan and Jeff and sometimes Debbie and Anthony and whoever else was there until two or three in the morning on weekends, and with our parents mostly absent that spring we could roll home whenever we wanted, sleep late, and then do it all over again—this was what the cars afforded us.

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WE ALSO DIDN'T HAVE TO DEPEND on our parents' driving us into Westwood Village, where we would meet up to watch two or three or even

four movies (if we were feeling particularly ambitious), which is how we spent our Saturdays, catching up on everything that opened Friday—the group evolving every weekend depending on what movies were playing and who wanted to see what, usually myself and Thom, Jeff and Anthony, maybe Kyle and Dominic. We would decide on Saturday mornings in a number of overlapping phone calls while going through the “Calendar” section of the *Los Angeles Times* on what to see (the only way in 1981 to find out what was playing where and when) and by a certain point the group scheduled where we’d be exactly throughout the day, so the girls would know where to meet us later. The girls were usually not interested in the two or three matinees we planned on seeing and they would meet us for a light dinner, usually sushi at a place we frequented just below Le Conte Avenue, a half-block from the Village Theater, and the last movie of the night.

The guys would start the day by meeting for lunch somewhere at noon—a favorite was Yesterdays and the Monte Cristo sandwich they served, or we’d take the street-level elevator down into the Good Earth, a modish upscale health-food restaurant where we drank giant glasses of cinnamon-flavored iced tea and ate salads, or we’d crowd into one of the red booths at Hamburger Hamlet for patty melts after buying our tickets for the next movie at the Bruin, adjacent on Weyburn. Dinner was sometimes at the Chart House or the old-school Italian of Mario’s, with breaks spent at the Westworld video arcade playing Space Invaders and Pac-Man or browsing the Postermat while sixties girl groups blared or looking for new music at Tower Records or the Wherehouse or leafing through paperbacks at any number of the large bookstores that dotted the streets—there were five or six in 1981, there are none now. The night would end at Ships, a retro coffee shop on Wilshire, situated along the edges of Westwood Village, with a boomerang-shaped roof and atomic neon sign, and where we’d order Cokes and vanilla milkshakes and smoke clove cigarettes, ashtrays and a separate toaster on each table, and stay out until after midnight. We were taking tentative advantage of the newfound freedom that had opened up to us—activating something in our group that made us want to become adults

fast and leave what now seemed like the stifling world of childhood behind.  
*Time for me to fly...*

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IN LATE MAY OF 1980—May 23, to be exact—*The Shining* opened, and I wanted to see it as soon as possible.

I'd read the novel when it was published in 1977, already a big fan of Stephen King, having practically memorized *Carrie* and *Salem's Lot*, his first two books, and *The Shining* scared me mightily as a thirteen-year-old: the haunted Overlook Hotel, the angry and alcoholic father possessed and driven murderous by the spirits of the place, the frightened son in peril, REDRUM, the hedge animals that came alive. I was obsessed and it remains one of the key novels that made me want to be a writer. In fact as soon as I was done reading *The Shining* for a third time I began writing my own novel in the summer of 1978, which I was still working on in the late spring of 1980, though about to abandon it in favor of what ultimately became *Less Than Zero*.

When I heard that Stanley Kubrick was adapting *The Shining* on a lavish scale I was immediately distracted—it became the most anticipated movie in my lifetime, and I closely followed its troubled production (delays, endless takes, a fire destroyed the main set, the ramping costs), and I don't think I've ever tracked the making of a movie with more interest—not even the ones that were later made from my novels gripped me as much as what Kubrick was going to do with *The Shining*. I was almost paralyzed with anticipation. And then a trailer dropped late in 1979; it was simple, almost minimalist, just an image—how one longs for trailers that didn't lay out the entire movie like today's three-act previews—of an elevator in the Overlook whose doors seem to be slowly pushing open because the cabin is filled with blood that starts pouring out in slow motion and then cascades toward us in waves until the blood crashes against the camera, turning the lens red, the credits of the movie rolling upward in neon blue over this one image. I saw the trailer many times during the fall of 1979 and throughout

the first half of 1980 and it never failed to rivet me. I began counting the days—the hours—before I could see the actual movie.

I couldn't go on the 23rd because of school and I didn't want to face Westwood on a crowded Friday night, so my plan was to go the next day—Saturday, May 24—and I wanted to see the 10:00 a.m. showing because I knew it would be less crowded than any of the later screenings. Surprisingly everyone argued for 1:00 p.m. at the Village—it was a Saturday, they wanted to sleep in, 10 was way too early. I argued to Thom and Jeff that the lines would be too long later in the day, since it was an exclusive engagement only playing at three theaters in Los Angeles, but everyone eventually bowed out and said they'd meet me for lunch at D. B. Levy's, a deli we frequented on Lindbrook Drive after the movie was over, and then see *The Empire Strikes Back* later that afternoon at the Avco. I was disappointed—I wanted to see *The Shining* with Thom—but it didn't diminish my excitement. This would be the first time I drove to Westwood by myself to see a movie alone, without the guys, and I felt incredibly adult as I raced across Mulholland toward Beverly Glen on that Saturday morning in my father's hand-down, a metallic-green Mercedes 450SEL, a four-door tank that was hardly the sporty vehicle I longed for at sixteen.

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I PARKED IN THE LOT ON BROXTON across from the Village Theater at nine-thirty—listening to a mixtape made up entirely of Joe Jackson's *Look Sharp* and *I'm the Man* with a couple of Clash songs from *London Calling* and Elvis Costello's *Armed Forces* added in—and was relieved that only a short line had formed at the box office then being admitted straight into the theater. I remember, and I don't know why, that I was wearing a fashionable new Ralph Lauren shirt, sea green with the insignia of a purple polo pony, and Calvin Klein jeans with Topsiders—and that I kept my Wayfarer sunglasses on when I bought my ticket. *The Shining* was rated R and I was momentarily worried I'd get carded even though I had a fake ID I barely used, the city was lax, and I didn't need it that morning—four dollars

for one adult. Again I was reminded as I moved into the grand lobby—looking at the carved winged lions that sat halfway up the 170-foot bleached FOX tower, which loomed over Broxton and Weyburn Avenues, at night lit by a blue-and-white sign crowning the tower, its shaft illuminated, a beacon—that this was the first time I'd come to Westwood alone and I felt genuinely grown-up and shivered with anticipation at whatever the future held. I bought a box of Junior Mints and moved from the bright Art Deco lobby into the darkness of the gigantic auditorium.

The theater was less crowded than I worried it would be but it was only nine-forty and it was bound to fill up, I thought as I sat and stared at the massive set of curtains draped in front of the 70-millimeter screen. Writing this now, I can't believe that I was left to my own devices for twenty minutes, just idly sitting there, thinking about things, about Thom and about Susan, waiting without a phone to look at, waiting without something to distract me. Instead, I took in the theater—my favorite in Westwood and the largest, with over fourteen hundred seats; it was its own vast world I took refuge in and it was one of the few places I was aware I might actually be saved—because movies were a religion in that moment, they could change you, alter your perception, you could rise toward the screen and share a moment of transcendence, all the disappointments and fears would be wiped away for a few hours in that church: movies acted like a drug for me. But they were also about control: you were a voyeur sitting in the dark staring at secret things, because that's what movies were—scenes you shouldn't be seeing and that no one on the screen knew you were watching. These were the things I was thinking about while I slowly pressed down on a Junior Mint, letting it dissolve on my tongue, glancing at my watch as the hands moved toward ten o'clock. The lights in the theater seemed to slowly darken even though there were still about two minutes before the curtain would rise. The ominous music from the soundtrack began softly announcing itself in the domed auditorium: snake rattles and bird trills and wailing horns. I realized, thrillingly, that there would be no trailers at this showing.

And that's when I saw the boy.

This is the reason why I've never forgotten seeing *The Shining* on May 24, 1980, at the Village Theater in Westwood at the 10:00 a.m. show. It was because of him.

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I WAS SITTING in the upper echelon of the orchestra section—above me was a two-tiered balcony that you entered on the third floor of the theater and that hung over the last ten rows of the orchestra without obscuring your sight lines—and I was off to the side, near the aisle, when I saw him: a guy around my age so stunningly handsome that I thought at first he was a movie star or a model I'd fantasized about from *GQ* magazine. He seemed to be looking for someone as he walked up the darkening aisle, everything slowly dimming around us. His face was a series of cut angles, and he had a full head of blond unruly hair, short and brushed back, and it stood up, adding to the angularity of his features; he had full lips and slightly sunken cheeks and an aquiline nose. He was tall, probably five eleven, slim-waisted, broad-shouldered, and as he passed I could see his mouth was working, chewing gum, and he was preoccupied with finding whoever he was looking for, and I could also see the long eyelashes and I pretended his irises were blue and that he was tan everywhere. A wave of lust crested hard in my chest and I suddenly ached for him—the sensation was so immediate and so tidal that I was shocked—and adding this new presence to the anticipation of watching the movie that was finally about to begin forced me to slow down my breathing. The boy aroused something primal in me that I had never felt before—I wanted him immediately, I needed to be his friend, I had to make contact, I had to see him naked, I had to own him. I shifted in my seat as the curtains in the theater were rising, revealing the giant whiteness of the screen—my hands were gripped into fists and I turned around and craned my neck, hoping to see where he went.

The Warner Bros. logo headed toward us as the opening credits of *The Shining* began over aerial shots of the family's Volkswagen heading up the deserted roads toward the Overlook. But I couldn't get my bearings,

because I now watched as the boy walked down the other aisle. He was farther away this time but I had a better look at his body: the tightness of his jeans showcased his ass, tapering up into a long back—this was becoming always the first thing I noticed about a guy—and I watched mesmerized as this boy, this god, walked the aisle, disappearing from my sight line. He had to be older than me, I thought; he was a UCLA student probably, maybe even a graduate, too manly to still be in high school. I saw him once more, mid-movie, as he walked up the aisle again, and I had to control what seemed like every muscle in my body and not follow him to what I assumed was the restroom or the concession stand, because he had glanced at me as I watched him pass by—we made eye contact, he noticed me staring at him—and he glanced away but not before a kind of lingering gaze took me in, and I fantasized that he wanted me, too.

After the movie was over—I was underwhelmed, it was nothing like the book, I felt cheated but also that I needed to be impressed because I had waited so long to see it—I walked into the lobby hoping to find the boy but he wasn't anywhere: not in the line to the men's room, which I checked out, and then idly waited to see if he had been, in fact, in there, but he wasn't, and when I walked outside to the front of the theater he wasn't there either. The crowd for the next show, at 1:00 p.m., was enormous: the line snaking around the block, along Broxton, and then curving along Le Conte, and then back down along Gayley and finally to the box-office booth of the theater, creating an almost unbroken four-block-long square. In addition there seemed to be hundreds of people outside the Village Theater who weren't in line, just talking and lingering below the giant FOX tower, and I lingered there too, only momentarily, knowing I wouldn't see that magical boy again but hoping to catch a glimpse of him anyway. And yet I was glad that I didn't see him: it would have been too overwhelming and ultimately tinged with disappointment, because I could never be for him what he ended up being for me. I even included a version of him in a short story I was working on that summer where he became a character I controlled.



AS I FOLLOWED Thom's car across Sunset on that September afternoon before Labor Day, weaving along the boulevard's curves, heading toward Bel Air, I reflected on the summer that had just passed: hooking up with Debbie, the weekdays at the beach club, the late nights at Du-par's after dancing at the Seven Seas mildly wasted on whiskey sours—the drinking age in L.A. was twenty-one but everyone had fake IDs—and we'd already left the teenagers at the Odyssey far behind us; there were the pool parties, usually at Anthony Matthews's or Debbie Schaffer's; we saw *Raiders of the Lost Ark* at a preview screening on the Paramount lot courtesy of Terry; a group of us went to a midnight show of *An American Werewolf in London* at the Avco in Westwood the weekend it opened in August, completely stoned, exaggeratedly laughing and screaming as David Naughton transformed into a monster, and we started seeing New Wave bands in smaller clubs—we were moving away from the Eagles at the Long Beach Arena (where we had watched as they broke up onstage in what would be their last concert for fifteen years) and Pink Floyd performing *The Wall* at the Sports Arena last February—our musical tastes were changing—and instead it was X at the Whisky, the Go-Go's at the Starwood, the Plimsouls at the Roxy. It was the summer that fashions changed: all the boys in our class were wearing Ralph Lauren Polo shirts in bold Easter-egg colors—pink and blue and green and purple—something Thom Wright and I'd started, but now worn with the collar sticking up, and plaid shorts, and cardigan sweaters, and we wore dress shirts with the logo of the Armani eagle as part of our Buckley uniform, and Topsiders and penny loafers replaced the standard buckle-up and tennis shoe. The male fashion in that moment was still streamlined, preppie, at times vaguely Italian, more *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* than *The Lost Boys*—we were a long way from shoulder pads and mullets and the clownish kitsch from the mid-1980s and most boys kept their hair short and dressed neatly and the girls took their dressier cues from retro classics: Capri pants, bubble skirts, taffeta. We were trying to look stylish, we were aiming for cool, we wanted to become adults. It was the August that MTV started airing videos but none of us had any idea what it would become—the Buggles' *Video Killed the Radio Star* was the first video the

channel played, and though we knew the song and had been listening to the album it came from, *The Age of Plastic*, we didn't know what a bold premonition that song and video would ultimately morph into.

As I said, the summer of 1981 had been a dream—I liked calling it *paradisaical*—and because of this I was envisioning a fairly uncomplicated senior year unfolding before us, one I would easily move through as if performing a well-rehearsed part while I figured out my escape, possibly somewhere along the Eastern Seaboard, perhaps farther, maybe across an ocean. What an innocent year it was going to be, I thought, driving along Sunset, so easy and effortless to move through.

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BY THE END of that summer I'd found out that even though we'd all known each other at least since seventh grade and we were supposedly such close friends and there were so many innocent truths we assumed, we were also realizing that these supposed truths were not, in fact, real, and I became aware that there were things that happened to me during that summer I was never going to tell my best friends, Thom Wright and Susan Reynolds, or my new girlfriend, Deborah Schaffer. They would never know about the dreamy afternoons swimming naked with our classmate Matt Kellner in Encino or that my hand kept caressing Ryan Vaughn's inner thigh in the Town & Country triplex while we watched *Escape from New York*, floating on the Valium I'd taken from one of my mother's many prescription bottles; it was a film I'd already seen—but I didn't care because I just wanted to sit close to Ryan in the darkness of the movie theater. My classmates would never know that Matt Kellner blew me in the pool house he lived in behind his parents' palatial estate on Haskell Avenue before I slid down and did the same to him, or that Ryan Vaughn, co-captain of the varsity football team, hadn't removed my hand from his thigh in the darkened movie theater on an August night just a few weeks ago.