

JOHN MAILER

BLEED

Part 1

I

I'm driving home on Route six when it occurs to me a couple of friends from Brooklyn are coming to visit today, Gonzo and Mike. The ~~new~~ Techno version of *Total Eclipse Of The Heart* just ended on the radio and the DJ informs me the Fourth of July is in three days. Heat beats down on my head through the sunroof as sand dunes pass by on my left giving me the illusion I'm in the Sahara. Provincetown is good like that, it gives you many illusions.

I pull up to my parent's house and see Gonzo's car parked outside. A real Brooklyn car: Black Toyota Corolla, 95. Shiny silver hubcaps put on by Gonzo himself. I'm a little uneasy about these guys coming to visit me here because my folks don't particularly like them. My parents want me to have nice friends who already know which law firm or medical school they're going to. These guys are not that. I like these guys.

I walk around the side of the house to the beach and see the two of them sitting in their bathing suits drinking bottles of Bud. Waves kiss their feet.

"What the Hell are you two vagrants doing on my property?" I shout.

"There he is! Three hours waiting for your silly ass to show up. Where the fuck you been?" That's Gonzo. He's short, and everything that goes along with it.

"I been at work you stupid bastard. Who told your dumb ass to show up before I got home?" I work at a nice Italian restaurant, but I'm just a bus-boy.

Advent to Exeter.

We laugh because it has been a long time since we have seen each other, and now we're on the beach with beer and sun and life feels good. I grew up in Brooklyn until I was sixteen. Then my parents retired and moved here. Now I'm eighteen, getting ready to go to Yale in the Fall, and not quite sure what to call home. Mike is my oldest friend. We've been close since fifth grade. Back then he was a fat kid, but now he's a stud. Well, at least he looks like a stud. People tell me I'm good looking, but I hate my nose. Such a small WASPy nose. Weak. Wimpy. I can't stand that.

The guys shower and we head up Cape for some dinner. Mike has been to Cape Cod before with his parents and remembers a little fish place off the highway. I've never been there or even heard of it. That means it's probably crummy, but I look at Mike's face and can tell he wants to be there for the memories. So we go.

Plastic lobsters line the walls in funky old fisherman nets. The menu doubles as a place mat and has all sorts of illustrations for the mentally slow tourists. It's fairly insulting that restaurants on the Cape have to cater to tourists. What can you do?

We ask the hostess to put us in smoking. She shines a look at me and says, "It's all smoking." Then follows up with a sly giggle. I wonder why someone who radiates as much beauty as this girl is working in a restaurant called *The Crab Tree*. Once seated, we ask for an ashtray. She goes looking for one, then comes back a little red-faced from embarrassment.

"This is the non-smoking section. Sorry." She has straight, satin-like, blond hair. It goes down to touch her shoulders, but not cover them. Her eyes are the color of the

ocean after a storm has passed and everything is calm. She is tall and slender with the hint of a small belly only a privileged few may see. Her voice is soft and...

"Painter! You ready to order yet or what?" Gonzo is good at intruding. "What are you thinking about? That chick? The hostess? She's fucking hot, huh?! How old do you think she is?"

"Twenty-two, twenty-three. I don't know. Either way, she's too old for us," I tell him.

"Are you kidding me!?" Mike pipes in. "Bro, you are a good looking guy. You're smart, You're rich, and your folks have a beautiful house on Cape Cod!"

"I'm not rich."

"Painter, you're loaded and you know it," Gonzo says.

"You guys ever hear of the middle class?"

Alright.

"Alright, be middle class, so long as you pay for my dinner you rich pussy."

"Gonzo, I don't want to take you outside and kick your ass." I hope that ends the conversation.

"I ain't never seen you kick nothin'. Hey, Al, you ever been in a fight?"

"Just drop it."

"Have you? Or maybe you're a piece of shit pussy."

"You short bastard." Mike says, "let it alone." He always looks out for me. But I don't like situations like this. Who would? I am not a rich pussy. It's just that I've never had a reason to get into a fight. I would, I tell myself. I'm not scared. I think I'm not.

II

We're driving down Commercial Street looking for girls. Commercial Street is the main strip in Ptown, and all the tourist girls leave their mommies and daddies to find out what this place is really about. The local guys are these girls' tools for having a wild time. That's what they really want, to go on vacation with their parents and tell their friends back home that they hooked up with a local boy. Now the local boy is probably going to end up catching fish for a living. But right now he's a ton of fun, he's an adventure. They see the locals as dangerous, ^A little dangerous. They like that.

I'm not the best at picking these girls up. In fact I stink at it. My nature doesn't allow for sticking my head out the car window and yelling at some girls who I don't know. I'm more of the silent type. This is not a problem when I'm with my local friends who consider me half a townie. But I am not with my local friends tonight.

"Look at these fuckin' girls! Mike, have you ever seen so many hot girls? This is some town you live in, Al. Stop the car here!"

"I can't. It's a one way street, full of traffic, and there's a cop staring right at me."

"Are you kidding me? There's three girls over there and they are checking us out. If you do not stop this car, right now, I swear to God, Alex, I will piss on your back seat." Gonzo would too, the pricknut.

"Absolutely not! I am not going to get a ticket. Zero possibility. That cop is looking at us already because of the New York plates".

Grace
xxx

"You seem to like your girl," I say. "Do you want a room?"

"I don't know. She has saggy breasts. That turns me off. You know me." Mike is serious about breasts. He could be in a psychology book because of it.

"Well, if you want a room," I say and I point, "take one at the left end of the house. That way you won't wake my folks." I leave him.

We are in the basement and Phoebe is watching her panties go round and round in the machine. There is an old couch set up in front of the washer and drier. We sit on it and I look at her nakedness. She has a sexy body, but for some reason I'm not into it. I guess what I want is more than a random hook-up. I want a girlfriend, and I have a feeling she isn't looking for the same thing in me. Still, we make out for a while. It's nice. As we start to get into more intimate positions, I hear a scream from upstairs. It's Mike's voice.

"GET OFF MY PROPERTY WITH THOSE SAGGY TITS!"

We get dressed and run upstairs. Sara is sitting on the couch smoking a cigarette. Gonzo and the other girl are nowhere to be found. Mike is fuming.

"You'll have to put that cigarette out. My parents don't let people smoke in the house. Now, what happened?" I say all this as calmly as possible.

"You are SLEAZE!" she says to Mike. "Come on Phoebe, let's get out of here! Alex, you're all right, but you might want to find some friends who can get it up. Good night!" Sara shouts. She drops her lit cigarette on the floor and pulls Phoebe out of the house.

I pick up the *cigarette* and put it out. "Mike!" I say. I am close to trembling with anger.

"Yeah?"

"You have very few words to explain this. Start now."

"I'm with this girl, naked, and I'm just *not* getting turned on. I'm telling you, it was her saggy breasts. Those fucking saggy breasts. I told you. Then she tells me to get a condom. I do, but I can't keep a boner. I tried, believe me. She starts laughing. I get mad, I tell her to get out. She says 'no'. I tell her again. She still won't go. Then she lights up a cigarette. I know how your mom feels about that, so I tell her to put it out. She won't. She stands there laughing at me. That's when I yelled. I'm sorry."

"And what was Gonzo doing?"

"Trying to get laid. But his girl said she was on the rag. So, Gonzo tells her to suck his cock. She got mad and ran out of the house. All of them are out now."

"Where is Gonzo?"

"He's outside, too. Having a beer and jerkin' off."

"Figures."

"Is there something wrong with me, bro? You know what I mean."

"Mike, I cannot tell you how glad I am you did not lose your virginity to that girl. I think your wang was just trying to tell you something your brain was too drunk to figure out. I know you didn't want to. I wouldn't worry about it. When the time is right, everything will fall into place. Don't worry."

"Thanks, bro."

We watch the sunrise and go to bed.

III

I have lost Mike and Gonzo. It's close to midnight and I have no idea where they are. They said they were going to pick up girls and I should wait at the house for them. That way they can fit more people into the Corolla. I have no idea how my parents did not wake up last night, but they didn't. I'm not going to try my luck again, so I wait outside.

They roll up to the house with three girls in the back.

"Painter," Gonzo says. "You ain't gonna' believe who we picked up. It's the Crab Tree girl!" It is. She looks more beautiful now than in the restaurant.

"I'm Celosia." She says extending her arm.

"Celosia," I repeat. "That's a unique name. Does it mean anything?"

"It's the name for a flower with plumelike spikes." I am going to have something special with Celosia. I feel it in my bones, in my heart.

She is nineteen. She lives twenty minutes south of Provincetown in a town called Wellfleet. We drink a little Popov and drive to the beach. All six of us are in the car, but I am alone with Celosia. The day we met her in the Crab Tree was her first day on the job. We were the only customers she liked. Now we all go for another late night swim, but the underwear stays on this time. She has a boyfriend, a boyfriend she's had for three years. Everyone is having fun. Even Gonzo is smiling. I don't know what I'm going to do about this girl.

At dawn we drive the girls to Celosia's car. Mike and Gonzo leave shortly after the girls and head back to Brooklyn. I'm sad to see them go. Who knows when I'll see them again? They're not the best guys in the world, but they're real. The kind of people my parents want me to hang out with don't have any real problems. No back bone. I don't ever want to be like that.

IV

I can't stop thinking about this girl. She let me wear her sweatshirt last night and forgot to take it back. Or did she? I contemplate driving down to Wellfleet to see her at work. She's got a boyfriend, but her face won't leave my head.

I'm on my way to *The Crab Tree*, and the D.J. tells me only one more day 'till the Fourth of July is in full effect. I pull into the parking lot and grab the sweatshirt as I head for the entrance. I can see her through the window. She looks as though she's thinking about something, or someone. She's surprised at first, then smiles and throws her arms around me.

"I hoped you might come, but I didn't know. I'm so glad you did." she says.

"Do you want to see a movie after you get off work?"

"Absolutely." She tells me. Absolutely.

I drive to the theatre and realize there is nothing playing at the right time. Back to the Crab Tree until she gets off. It is ten o'clock. Her mother is away on vacation. She has the house to herself. We go there.

Her house is fairly deep in the woods. Her room is on the first floor. We sit on the bed and talk about how she is unhappy with her boyfriend, Ivory. He is a small time gun-dealer from New York, who comes up here a lot so he can be with Celosia and his friends. My local friends are his friends too. Why I've never met him, I don't know. But I do know I don't like him. Celosia makes him sound nasty. I wonder why this beautiful creature would be with someone like that, nasty. She could be with me.

I'm about to tell her, "dump him and run away with me," when I hear someone yell "BOO!" through the window. It's Ivory. Having just been with Mike and Gonzo for the past two days gives me the edge I need. I won't wait for him to take charge, I'll get up and introduce myself.

"How you doin', Ivory? I'm Alexander Painter, we have some friends in common."

"Friends in common?" he says to me. "Who?" He's not as tall as me, but he sure as hell doesn't look weak.

"Oh, come on. I know Dan and Jeb and Dave and Jesse and Joshua and Robin. You do know them, don't you?" He is taken back by this. He says a few words to Celosia in private and then leaves.

"You know what he got me for my birthday?" she says to me after he's gone a while. "G-string panties. What a jerk."

"He sounds like a real pudknocker." I tell her.

"You do use the craziest words, Alexander."

We kiss. Her lips are soft, they cradle mine. I spend the night there.

V

I get home from work the next day and call Celosia. She sounds happy to hear my voice, and I am happy to hear hers.

"So, Ivory came by today and got all his stuff." She tells me. "He called me a tramp among other things. I told him all we did was cuddle, but he didn't believe me...beep...beep...Oh, hold on that's my call waiting." I wait. "That was Ivory." She sounds slightly disturbed.

"What did he say?" I ask.

"He said, 'Alexander Painter is going to bleed tonight.' ...Hello, are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here. That really sucks!"

"I don't think you should go out tonight."

"Stop being ridiculous. It's the Fourth of July. I have to go out."

"I mean it, Alex."

"So do I. I have to go now." Damnit! I should have known this was too good. I forgot that nothing in life is free. One way or another, you pay. My father taught me that. I should have listened.

I go down town to a head-shop where I know I can get a butterfly-knife. It's a good knife to have because it takes apparent skill to open properly. That should scare this Ivory punk. The guy who works the knife counter is from Brooklyn. His name is Vasquez. He usually talks a lot of bull, but today he just looks at me funny. Almost like

he knows what's going down. I decide not to let it bother me. I'm good at opening a butterfly knife. I had to work hard to get it, but I did. I can open one in under a second, although I've never had to. Maybe it's a bad idea to go out tonight. If I don't? Now, I'm scared. I know that if I don't, I'll be a coward for the rest of my life.

Night time. I go to a beach party my friend Aria is having. I know Ivory will be there. Everyone will be there. I have to get this thing over with. I cannot let it last one minute more than it has to, or it'll kill me. I shouldn't think thoughts like that, they might come true.

I take a few shots of Vodka, it loosens me up. My stomach is in knots waiting to see Ivory. Friends are trying to get me to smoke some dope, but that will only dull my reflexes. I have to stay sharp.

Ivory arrives in his pick-up truck. He is alone. He spots me out of the crowd and heads in my direction. Grasshoppers are jumping around. In my belly. As he gets closer, I think of Celosia's belly, and how nice it was to feel its bare warmth on my hand. I think about how that one time may have been the last. Was it worth it? I like this girl, but do I like her enough to bleed? Either way I'm not going to spend the rest of my life with her. How long could it last? I'm going away to school soon, and I'm damned if I'm going to go with a girlfriend at home. This is not even about her anymore. If I told Ivory that it was over between Celosia and me, he'd shoot me anyway. This is about me and a bully. Fuck him, I've got backbone.

Ivory has a bulge on his side. I know it's a gun.

"I'm surprised to see you out tonight." he says to me, his face no more than two inches from mine.

"It's the Fourth of July. Haven't you been listening to the radio?"

"That's funny, kid. Come here, we're gonna' have a word."

We walk away from the party. He puts his arm around me tight. I flex all the muscles I can without holding my breath, but I have no control over the direction we're going. We walk under a wharf and he stops. I can hardly make out the details of his face it's so dark. The party feels miles away.

"I gotta' be honest, I wanted to shoot you. No, don't laugh, cause it ain't funny. You were nearly a dead man today." I have my hand on the knife. There is so much sweat in my palm I'm afraid it will drop if I try to whip it out.

"Then something happened." he continues. "I realized that you never been in love. Cause if you had, you wouldn't of done to me what you did. You took everything I care about from me. Now, you're a good looking kid. So I'm guessing, that if you never been in love, it's your fault. If it's your fault, then you must be a person without integrity. Do you know what integrity means?"

"No, why don't you tell me?"

"Completeness. That is something you ain't got. You probably never will. You're not going to last with Celosia. But you know that, don't you? I love that girl, and you fucked that up. Damn you, Alexander Painter. Damn you. Because of you, we will never have what we did, and that's a shame; it was beautiful. The most beautiful thing I'll ever see in my life.

"I'm going to tell you one last thing. When you break it off with her in a month or two, think about me. Know that I still have integrity, and you ain't got shit. If you ain't got shit, then you ain't shit. Think about that. Happy Fourth of July." He struts off.

I have never felt more degraded in my life. A small time gun dealer is going to tell me who I am? Not tonight. I yell after him.

"Hey, Ivory! You might have integrity, but I'm the one rubbing her belly tonight!"

Part 2

I

It's two days until the Fourth of July, and I have to drive out to the dunes to sell a gun to some stupid, paranoid, coked-out-of-his-mind, dead-beat. And all the time I am thinking about how much I love this part of the world, Provincetown. Sometimes it even makes me forget that I'm not going to the beach to get some sun and drink beer, but to sell a lethal weapon to someone who's dumb enough to use it, that keeps me in check. I'm a fuckin' gun dealer. If I'm not careful, that's all I'm ever going to be.

I pull up onto the beach. My ride is a four wheel drive so it can do this sort of thing. My boys back in Harlem laugh me out the house whenever I roll in. I guess it is pretty funny to see a white-boy in a GMC truck with jacked up wheels and sand on the floor cruising up Lexington Ave. to 134th street. I swear I don't belong anywhere.

This nutcase got my number from Joshua the last time he sold him some herb. I hate doing deals here. There ain't no reason to be shooting anybody in this town. It's peaceful. That's what I like about it. I have to walk with my duffle bag about a hundred yards over sand hills to get to this guy's house. A hermit. That's what these dune people are called. That's what they are. They have dropped out of the rat race for real. Live in wooden shacks on random plots of territory in the dunes. He's lucky I can drive most of the way, cause I'm damned if I would lug this ton of metal more than a football field.

Since the guy doesn't know what sort of gun he wants, I am carrying a selection. I shouldn't complain, I need the loot. I have a gift in mind for Celosia. A statue of a

ballerina. She always wanted to be one. Poor girl couldn't dance if a cowboy was shooting at her feet.

I get to the guy's front door. He's carved like fifteen paths out of the field of dune grass that makes up his yard. All the paths are twisting and turning until they finally end up in the same spot, about four feet from his door, which is enough to cut up your feet. This guy is not only a nutjob, but a real dick. He most likely should not have a firearm in his possession. I have to hop over the dune grass to his door.

He takes awhile to answer. While I wait I can hear him muttering something about snakes. He opens the door.

"Who the Hell are you!?" He's bald except for a ponytail. His three teeth are yellow. I mean piss yellow! And they're chipped. He's wearing cargo shorts. It takes me a minute to realize he isn't wearing a shirt. He doesn't need to. He has a tattoo of a brown T-shirt all over his chest. Did I say a nutjob? A fuckin' whacko.

"I'm Ivory. I hear you would like to purchase something."

"Who sent you?" he says.

"I sent myself, tough guy. You lettin' me in or what?"

"I suppose."

This guy's house fits his looks. Ugly. No class. Smells rotten.

"You boiling up possums in here or what, old man? This place stinks like a sewage pump."

"That's the way I like it."

"What's with the tattoo?"

"I never change my shirt," he says.

I can tell he wants me to do my business with him and get out. But I don't work that way. I'm not about to sell a deadly weapon to some nut unless I'm convinced he ain't gonna' kill anybody I care about, most of all me. I look around his place. He's got one book shelf with three Bibles and three copies of *The Great Gatsby*. The Great Gatsby? His stove has one pot on it and that hasn't been washed since I been alive, twenty years. That's a funky pot.

I sit down on one of the two chairs he has in this place and put my bag down.

"What's your name?" I ask him.

"Why do you need to know that?"

"For my tax returns when I write this up as a business lunch. What the fuck do you think? Listen to me, old man. I am about three seconds from walking out. If you're too paranoid to give me your name, then what are you doing inviting a gun dealer into your shack in the middle of nowhere? Are you out of your skull? I could kill you right now for no reason at all. You think that giving me your name is going to put you into a more vulnerable position than the one you're already in? Think again. Now, one more time, what is your name?"

"Edgar," he says

"Nice to meet you, Edgar. Pretty big fan of *The Great Gatsby*, huh?"

"What do you know about it?"

"I know he dies in the end."

"You've never read a book in your life. Don't attempt to match wits with me," he says with a smile like he's won something.

I nod. "In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since."

"What's that?"

"That is the first line from your favorite book, Gatsby."

"Gatsby!" he says.

"Now, asshole, tell me what kind of gun you want."

I got him. He knows it. "Tell me what you have."

"What do you need it for?"

"Protection," he says.

"Figures. I'll sell you a Walter ppk for five."

"That's a pussy gun!"

"I know. Five hundred. You want it or not?"

"Outrageous."

"Good bye, Edgar."

"Wait a minute."

He grumbles to himself for a second, then gets up and rummages through the house finding crumpled up money in random places, like behind his sink, or under his funky pot. He tries to trade me some cheeba for the gun, but I don't smoke. He goes through his three copies of Gatsby and takes a hundred dollars out of each. Whacko. He hands me the money and I take the Walter out of my bag.

When I was thirteen I ran away from home and one way or another I ended up in Ptown. The cops got me when I tried to steal a microwave burrito from Cumberland

Farms and they sent my ass back to Harlem. My mother's boyfriend beat me up pretty good, and she didn't do a damn thing to stop him, so I split again. This time I stayed in the city and learned real quick how to avoid the heat. I used to chill with a bum named Julius and he started me off reading. The first book he gave me was *The Catcher In The Rye*. I thought Holden Caulfield was a spoiled bitch with a silver spoon stuck up his ass, but I dug the story just the same. It's not like I had a TV, so this was the entertainment. Julius thought I was some kind of genius cause I could remember what I read. Poor bastard was lost in all the books he had. That was all he carried around with him, a big shopping cart full of books. He was always trying to get street kids to read. I was the only one who liked to.

I want to see Celosia tonight, but my local boys want to hang and I haven't chilled with them since I've been in town. Things have been busy in the city. Last time I was in town was Celosia's birthday. I fucked up big time. Didn't have the money then to get her something nice, so I thought I'd buy her a G-string, mostly as a joke, but of course I wanted to see what she looked like in it. She got pissed, real pissed. Some people don't like jokes. I have to make up for that night this trip. I don't know what I would do without her. She is everything good about my world. Everything pure.

I go to Whaler's Wharf, a mall type deal in the center of town to get her the gift. The statue of the ballerina is made of crystal and has small diamonds imbedded in the front. It screams Celosia. I love that name. The guy tells me four hundred fifty for it. I end up paying three. These clowns don't know how to haggle. He should of started at six hundred, he would of gotten four.

I go to Joshua's house. He's smoking a blunt alone in his room while he watches TV. Joshua's a good guy but he's lost his drive since he started smoking pot everyday. He's still got a *little* something going on in his brain.

"How you doin' there partner?" I say to him as I open the door.

"Jesus! Ivory? What are you doing here, man? You scared the crap out of me."

"Thanks for the warm welcome. You know I could of been hanging with Celosia tonight. Instead I thought I'd drop by and see you, maybe catch up a little bit. It's been a long time."

"Yeah, it has, Ivory. Every time you come to town, you spend about ninety percent of it with her, and none with us. She's trouble, man. She sucks. You're one of our boys. Why don't you get your priorities straight?"

"My priorities are straight you stoned bastard. Fuck you I don't spend enough time with you! Smoke your blunt. I'm going to see Celosia."

"Whatever dude. You could care less us about here. You think we're gonna' kiss your ass cause you sell guns? Think again, man. I don't care if the rest of the group thinks you're hot shit, which they don't by the way, I'm content!"

"You are stoned, my friend. I'm going to Celosia's place. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Hey, man! What are you doing on the Fourth, bro?"

"I hadn't thought about it much. Where's the party?" I say.

"Aria's, man. On the beach. Everyone's gonna' be there. I'm taking shrooms."

"Good for you. I'll see you tomorrow." I leave.

Celosia isn't there when I get to her house. It's ten thirty at night. She gets off work at nine tonight. Where is she? I go to plant the statue in one of her drawers and then remember that I left it in my car. I'll just get it later when she gets here. It'll be better that way. I wait on her bed.

It's four in the morning. Where is she? Who is she with?

The worst thoughts are always the ones that come to me first. I see her loving some guy in ways she never has with me. I feel pain in my right arm and my forehead starts to sweat. She's licking some guys neck. She's licking his neck and smiling at me. Smiles at me as he rides her up and down.

II

I wake up. It's seven in the morning. No Celosia. I write her a note and leave it on the bed.

Stopped by at ten thirty, but you were not here. I'll call you later.

I love you,

Ivory.

I go to *Shop Therapy*, the local headshop in town, to see if anyone there saw Celosia last night. The guy who works the knife counter is a Brooklyn bum, but he's all

right. His name is Vasquez or something like that. I walk past the fat middle-aged hippies who own the store and don't like me very much cause they think I'm trouble. I guess to them I am, but they are to me, too. This guy has been busted with forty-thousand tabs of acid in his van. Forty-thousand! That's trouble in my book, 'cause I know he don't care who buys the shit from him, as long as he gets the money. I saw him deal to an eleven year old kid once. That's the kind of thing that makes those people who walk around talking to themselves at age fifty. I heard a story once about a guy named Freddie Boomba who grew up in Ptown. When he was a kid, twelve maybe, this same fat hippie slipped him ten tabs of bad acid, as a joke. Real funny. The kid thought he was turning into an orange, and tried to peel himself. He still ain't pretty to look at, and his head is not all there to this day. That was ten years ago.

I know I'm not really one to talk, doing what I do. But I don't intentionally mess with innocent people's heads. I've done some wrong things in my day. I'm no angel, never pretended to be. I have never wronged someone who did not do something to me first. I never will.

Vasquez wraps up a sale and shoots me a big grin. Kiss-ass.

"Hey, Ivory, I didn't know you were in town."

"Why would you?"

"I know things, ese. I got this town on lock down, kid. I see people, I see things."

"You know who my girlfriend is?"

"Yeah, Celosia." He draws out the 'O' and I don't like the way her name sounds on his tongue. "She's foxy, homes."

"Thank you, Vasquez. That means a lot coming from you."

"No problem, bro." What a fuckin' idiot this guy is.

"Did you see her last night?" I say.

"Yeah, man." He takes awhile before he says, "you ain't gonna' like it."

"Tell me now."

"Are you sure? You're not gonna' like it at all."

"Trust me, I can take it."

"What will you give me? Information costs money these days, homes."

I grab him by the head and push my thumbs into his eyes, just hard enough so he'll stop fuckin' around and tell me what I want to hear. He's blinded for a second and starts freaking out. I slap him sharply across the face and he snaps out of it.

"One more time, then I get nasty. Who was she with last night?" I say.

The fat hippie owner starts coming towards me, but I can see on his face he's scared shitless. I turn towards him.

"Sit down, fat man."

"I'm going to call the cops if you don't get out of my store, now!" he says with a big hard-on.

"No you're not. You don't own an ice cream store, fat man. You own a head shop. If you were actually stupid enough to call the cops, they might dig up all the illegal shit you got in the basement. But, hey, let's say they come, I'm still here, and they decide to arrest me for assault. Well, then I would go to the county jail house for the afternoon, pay my bail of two hundred dollars, have my court date set for three months from now, and come back here to see you."

"Pretty tough talk. Maybe I should just throw you out myself." he says.

"I wasn't finished."

"Oh, no?"

"No. When I come back, I'll start by showing you how it feels to be ^{duct}duck-taped to your bed. Then I'm going to pour gasoline over you. I'll follow that up by lighting a string of firecrackers off. You'll actually have a chance to live. Because you can't tell with firecrackers. They might not light the gasoline. Either way, I'm doing you a favor. If you live, you have one hell of a good story to tell your fat grandkids, and if you die, then you'll get to experience what most people don't. You'll know what it feels like to have your flesh cooked off your bones. How do you like it, fat man? Medium, rare, or well done? Now, can I get back to Vasquez and ask my question, or do you still want to call the cops and find out if I'm joking?"

"Ask him what you want." he says.

"Thank you. Where was she last night?"

"She was rolling around with some guys from Brooklyn."

"Tourists from Brooklyn?"

"I seen one of them around before, but I ain't never seen the other two guys."

"Who's the guy you know?" I ask.

"I don't know him. I think his name is Painter, Alexander Painter."

"Alexander Painter."

"That's it," he whines. "That's all I know."

"Thank you for your cooperation, Vasquez. Take care of those eyes." I leave.

That mother-fucker! Who is Alexander Painter? More importantly, who does he think he is? If he's messing around with Celosia, I don't know what I'm going to do. I am scared of what I'm going to do.

I drive out to the dunes to watch the sun set.

Maybe she was just having a good time with her friends and they met up with these clowns. She probably wanted to leave or thought she'd run into me or I don't know what. My arm hurts and my hands cramp up. Please don't, don't do this to me, Celosia. Please. I'm sorry about all the bad stuff I've done. I'm sorry about all of it. I can't live without you. You are everything I can want in this life. There is nothing for me if I'm not with you. Please don't flush the last three years down the toilet. Please.

It is ten thirty in the evening. I have been driving around all night. The ballerina statue is on the seat next to me where Celosia should be. I drive to her house. I park the truck and walk up the long driveway. As I get closer I think I hear her talking. It feels like a month since I saw her last. The hair on my arm stands on end and I am suddenly filled with a warmth increasing with every step I take, hearing her voice get that much closer to my heart, to my soul.

She must be on the phone. I creep up to her window and yell "BOO!" She's in there with a guy. She's talking to some guy on her bed. What happened? When did all this happen? I walk around to the front door and go into her room.

"How you doin', Ivory? I'm Alexander Painter, we have some friends in common."

This is Alexander Painter? This guy with the WASPy voice is him? Pretending to talk like he's from Brooklyn? The balls on this guy are enormous to talk like I don't know what's going on.

"Friends in common?" I say to him. "Who?"

"Oh, come on. I know Dan and Jeb and Dave and Jesse and Joshua and Robin. You do know them, don't you?" Does he think he's a real hard-on? I'll deal with this little piece of garbage soon enough. The balls to think that dropping a few names is going to get him out of this ditch he's dug himself. Oh, I'll take care of this piece, but first I want to talk to Celosia.

I smile at this Alexander Painter and then I look at Celosia to tell her I want to talk to her outside.

"So, what do you want to talk to me about?" she says.

"What do you think I want to talk to you about? What are you doing? Why are you doing this?"

"I think you should leave, Ivory." So it really is over.

"You don't even have a reason for being with this guy?"

"I'm not with this guy. We were just talking. Am I allowed to talk to people, or do I need your permission?"

"What are you talking about, permission? You don't have enough love and respect for us to be *straight* with me now? You don't have that?"

"This is not about you, Ivory. Things aren't always about you. Go home. Don't worry about this."

"Are you serious? 'Go home', 'don't worry about this'. Do you hear what you're saying? Celosia, I love you. I've never loved anyone, and I mean anyone, but I love you. Please don't throw that away. Please."

"Go home, Ivory."

I can feel the tears start to well up in my brain. They are going to hit my eyes in a moment. I have to get one last look at her before I leave, then I go.

I go home, like she told me. As if doing what she tells me is gonna' make her want to be with me again. I drink the rest of a bottle of Jack Daniel's I have. I smash the crystal statue on the floor, take off my clothes and lie down on the broken shards. Every time I move I can feel a piece of broken statue enter my body. Every time I move I can feel a piece of Celosia hurt me. She hurts me. I must feel this pain. I must feel this pain until it scars me. That way, I will never forget what this pain feels like, and I will never let this happen to me again.

III

I wake up and get as much of the glass out of my body as I can. I drive to Celosia's to get my stuff. She has put it all in a box. The G-strings are on top.

"Did you have a good night?" I say to her as I look around for anything she might have kept for herself.

"All we did was cuddle."

"You're a liar and a tramp." I don't see anything.

"We had a connection. Do you understand that? A connection."

"Tramp."

"Fuck you, Ivory."

"Yeah, you did. You really fucked me. Thanks a lot."

"Get out of my house."

I go home and look at my back. The glass that I couldn't get out hurts every time I breathe. I keep telling myself the pain is good. Alexander Painter's face will not leave my head. He keeps smiling at me while he has his way with Celosia. She truly is a spiked flower. But I can't be mad at her. I want to be, but I can't. This would not have happened without him. I have to kill him. I have to.

I clean and load my gun. Forty-five caliber automatic. I've never used it. I will tonight.

I call Celosia.

"Hello."

"Celosia."

"What do you want?"

"Alexander Painter is going to bleed tonight."

I hang up.

As I roll in and out of sleep I cannot stop thinking about this guy. He has no heart. He can't. I wouldn't have done something like that to my worst enemy, he doesn't even

know me. That stupid bastard! Why would he make me do this? I keep seeing him taking her to new levels of orgasm and she smiles at me. She smiles.

I wake up in pain. It is night time. I grab my jacket and go to the party at Aria's with my gun at my side. He is there. He is the first and only person I see. He is alone. This is it.

I get out and walk towards him. He looks like a deer in headlights. Frozen. My life starts flashing through my mind. I see the day my father left my mother. I see when I first met Celosia. I see many things, then I see a thought I had two days ago. It slaps me in the face like a billboard. "If I'm not careful, a gun dealer is all I'm ever going to be." I see myself shooting Alexander Painter. I can't do this. I can't. I can't. I can't. He's within talking range now. I have to do something.

"I'm surprised to see you out tonight." I say to him.

"It's the Fourth of July. Haven't you been listening to the radio?" Please don't play the tough guy. Please don't do it.

"That's funny, kid." I finally say. "Come here, we're gonna' have a word."

I put my arm around him tight and realize how scared he is. His weakness is oozing out his pores. I don't have to kill him. He has no backbone. He's nothing of a man. To end my life for this piece of shit is not worth it. He's pathetic. Pathetic! I don't want to kill him. He's not worth it. He's not. But before I'm through with him, he's gonna' understand what he did, and pay for it the rest of his life.

I take him under the wharf. It's dark.

"I gotta' be honest, I wanted to shoot you." He starts to laugh, the dumb fuck.

"No, don't laugh, cause it ain't funny. You were nearly a dead man today. Then something happened. I realized you never been in love. Cause if you had been, you wouldn't of done to me what you did. You took everything I care about from me. Now, you're a good looking kid. So I'm guessing, that if you never been in love, it's your fault. If it's your fault, then you must be a person without integrity. Do you know what integrity means?"

"No, why don't you tell me?" He's pushing it.

"Completeness. That is something you ain't got. You probably never will. You're not going to last with Celosia. But you know that, don't you. I love that girl, and you fucked that up. Damn you, Alexander Painter. Damn you. Because of you, we will never have what we did, and that's a shame; it was beautiful. The most beautiful thing I'll ever have in my life.

"I'm going to tell you one last thing. When you break it off with her in a month or two, think about me. Know that I still have integrity, and you ain't got shit. If you ain't got shit, then you ain't shit. Think about that. Happy Fourth of July." I walk off, content. I will not be a gun dealer for the rest of my life. Then he calls after me.

"Hey, Ivory! You might have integrity, but I'm the one rubbing her belly tonight!"

Before I know what is happening Alexander Painter is bleeding on the sand. I shot him three times in the belly. Now the blood has made its way up to his mouth. I drop the gun. Everything is quiet.

I am in jail. I think about that night everyday. I keep going over it in my mind. Only two questions left. What happened to his soul? And was it worth it? I'll pay for what I did with the rest of my life, but jail ain't the worst part. The worst is that he haunts me. Every night. He hovers above my bed and whispers in my ear: "Know that I still have integrity, and you ain't got shit."