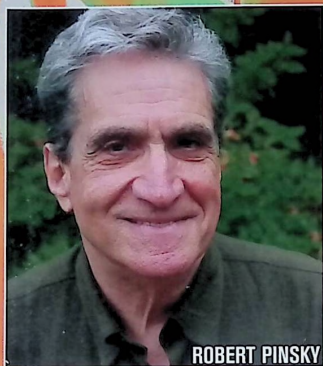


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ROBERT PINSKY



SELINA TRIEFF





BLEED

By John Buffalo Mailer

PART 1

Alex

Provincetown, Massachusetts
July 1, 1995

I'M DRIVING HOME on Route 6 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 right giving me the illusion I'm in the Sahara. Provincetown is good like that—it gives you many illusions.

I pull up to my parents' place, a big shingle-style house in the East End, very Cape Cod. Gonzo's car is parked outside, a true Brooklyn car: Black Toyota Corolla, '93. Shiny silver hubcaps put on by Gonzo himself. To be honest, I'm a little uneasy about these guys coming to visit me here. Not so much because my parents don't like them (although they don't), it's more that I have no idea what kind of trouble I am bringing upon myself by making these two worlds, P-town and Brooklyn, collide in the madness that is sure to take place this weekend.

I walk around the side of our house to the beach and see Gonzo and Mike sitting in their bathing suits drinking bottles of Bud.

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

"Al! Finally! 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, Ciro's, right in the heart of Provincetown. But I'm just a busboy.

We laugh because it's been a long time since we've 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, spending summers here on the Cape. But after Rebecca's funeral, my parents kind of retired from life and we moved up here full time. Now I'm eighteen, getting ready to go to Yale in the fall, and not quite sure where 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, other people think he's a stud—he still sees a fat kid when he looks in the mirror. I guess it takes some time to realize you've changed. People tell me I'm good-looking, but I hate my nose. Such a small Waspy nose. Weak. Wimpy.

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 in Orleans. I've never 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 fisherman nets that have never seen the water. 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 seat us in the smoking section. She shines a look at me and says, "It's all smoking," then follows up with a giggle. She has olive skin and thick, curly black hair. It touches her shoulders but doesn't cover them completely. Her eyes are a blue I've never seen before. They remind me of the ocean after a storm has passed and everything is calm again. I wonder why anyone who radiates beauty like this would be working in a restaurant called the Crab Tree.

Once seated, we ask for an ashtray. She goes looking for one, then comes back, embarrassed.

"This is the nonsmoking section." She gives me a wink. "Sorry. It's my first day." As she walks away, I notice she's 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 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. What does it matter? She's way out of our league."

"Are you kidding me!?" Mike pipes in. "Al, 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 jumps on board.

"You guys ever hear of the middle class?"

"All right, be middle class, so long as you pay for my dinner, you rich pussy motherfuckers." Gonzo yells it loud and all the tables within earshot stop eating to look up at us with disgust.

"Gonzo, don't make me take you outside and throw you a beatin'." I really hope that ends the conversation. But it doesn't.

"You couldn't beat your meat."

"You would be thinking about that, wouldn't you? I'm trying to play it tough, but I hate situations like this. What's the point? Aren't we supposed to be friends?"

"Hey, Al." Gonzo smiles in a particularly unpleasant way, like it hurts, but he kind of enjoys the pain. "You ever been in a fight?"

"Are you always this nice to your hosts?" Now I sound weak, even to myself.

"I'm not sayin' you're a bad guy, Al. But you are a pussy. Everybody knows that."

Ever since Rebecca did it, I have these episodes that hit me out of the blue. I feel an unstoppable need to bawl my eyes out. For no reason. It's humiliating. So I take a deep breath and look down. Mike is saying something funny, trying to move past this awkward moment, but all I hear is my father's voice from when I was a kid and crying to him because a bigger kid was picking on me.

"You have to have backbone in this world, Alexander.

You won't go anywhere if you're afraid to stand up to a bully. A beating to your body is no fun, but a beating to your ego can be far more damaging."

This was before Rebecca, that's my sister, before Rebecca got so depressed and killed herself in the upstairs bathroom of our house in Brooklyn. It was two and a half years ago, but to look at my parents, you'd think not more than a week had gone by. They don't take much of an active role in my life since that day Mom found her.

I miss the talks me and my dad used to have. Or the walks through the botanical gardens in Brooklyn with my mom and Rebecca on the first day of spring every year. Maybe we'll do it again someday. You never know. Anyway, I'm not a rich pussy. It's true that I've never been in a fight, but that's only because I've really never had a reason to fight. I would though, I tell myself. If I had to, I would fight. I'm not scared. I think I'm not.

LATER THAT NIGHT, we drive down Commercial Street, the main strip in P-town, looking for girls. Commercial Street is where all the tourist girls leave their mommies and daddies at the hotel and go out to discover what this place is really about. The local guys are the 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. If he's Portuguese, that's even better. Now the local boy is probably going to end up catching fish for a living, which the tourist girls won't like in a few years, but right now he's a ton of fun, an adventure. They see the local guys as even a little dangerous. They like that.

I'm not the best at picking up girls. In fact I stink at it. My nature doesn't allow for sticking my head out the car window and yelling at people I don't know. I guess the positive way to look at it is I'm more of the silent type. This is not a problem when I'm with my local P-town 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 chicks? This is some town you live in, Al. Stop the car!"

"I can't. It's a one-way street, full of traffic, and there's a cop staring right at me." I'm certain Gonzo will cave to my logic.

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

"Absolutely not. I am not getting a ticket. Zero possibility. That cop doesn't like us already because of your New York plates. No way, no dice, no chance, no how."

An hour later we're at my house doing shots of Popov vodka the three girls Gonzo saw on the street. A forty-dollar ticket for "reckless driving in a densely populated area" weighs heavy in my back pocket, but I don't care. And the reason I don't care is because one of the three girls Gonzo somehow managed to pick up on Commercial Street happens to be the most beautiful girl I have ever seen in my life, the hostess from the Crab Tree.

"Hello," she says when she gets in the passenger's seat next to me. Her friends squeeze in the back with Gonzo and Mike.

"Alexander Painter," I manage to blurt out, extending my hand to shake hers in an unusually formal manner for some reason, only God knows why. She gets a very serious look in her face, then grabs my hand firmly while locking my eyes with hers. And then she smiles the brightest smile.

"I'm Celosia." I feel the skin of her hand, tender and warm, and with a fair number of callouses, evidence of the hard work she has obviously had to do all her life.

"Celosia," I repeat, "I've never heard a name like that. Does it mean something?"

"It's the name of a flower."

"What kind of flower?"

"A flower with plumelike spikes." She smiles at me. I'm going to have something special with Celosia. I feel it in my bones, in my heart. She's the One.

Gonzo downs his eighth or ninth shot—I've lost track at this point—then suggests we all drive around the town in his Corolla, and for another reason none of us can really figure out, we all go along with it and drive towards Herring Cove Beach.

Celosia is nineteen, grew up in Provincetown, but had to move to Wellfleet when she was sixteen, forced to change schools at exactly the same time in life that I was. All six of us are in the car, but I am alone with Celosia. We arrive at the beach and go for a late-night swim in our underwear. As Mike and I watch the girls strip down and enter the water, he puts his arm around my shoulder and whispers in my ear:

"I really like Cape Cod, bro. I really like it."

"What's not to like?" I say and swim over to Celosia. She has a boyfriend, Ivory. Been with him for two years. I don't know anything about Ivory. Anything except that I hate him.

At dawn we drive the girls back to Celosia's car, where we have a hasty good-bye due to one of her friends being late for her opening shift at the A&P. Celosia and I awkwardly do a half hug / half kiss on the cheek, but the corners of our lips connect. She holds for a moment, then another moment, and another. Finally her friend honks the horn and everybody laughs. She smiles at me, hops in the car, and speeds off; the look in her eye suggesting she knows there's a piece of me going with her already. Celosia.

Mike and Gonzo leave shortly after the girls, heading back to Brooklyn. I'm sad to see them go. Who knows when we'll all be together again? They're not the best guys in the world, but they're real, and they have my back. I still haven't found my place in Provincetown. All my friends here are real nice, but still, I feel like an outsider. I suppose everyone does. Most people probably just don't think about it as much as I do.

Speaking of thinking, I can't stop thinking about Celosia. Should I drive down to Orleans and surprise her at work? Will she think that's romantic or sketchy? I know she's got a boyfriend, but I can't get Celosia's smile out of my head.

AS I'M ON my way to the Crab Tree, the DJ reminds me there's only one more day to the Fourth of July. I pull into the parking lot and head for the

entrance. Through the window, I see her standing by the hostess station. She's daydreaming, thinking about something, or is it someone?

"Surprise," I whisper as I come up behind her.

She smiles and throws her arms around me.

"I knew you would come," She says it to me like we've known each other for lifetimes. She's such an old soul.

"You wanna see a movie after I get you off?"

She is shocked for a second, then smiles at me, realizing I am clueless. And then it dawns on me.

"I mean after you get off work."

"That's not what you said." She throws me a stern look. Oh my God, did I just blow it? She sees how scared I am and gives me that smile I have already become addicted to.

"You're just fucking with me, aren't you?"

"Absolutely," she tells me.

"Absolutely you're fucking with me? Or absolutely you want to go to a movie?"

"Absolutely both."

I DRIVE TO the theater and realize there's nothing playing that late. So I go back to the Crab Tree and wait in my car until she gets off at ten. Her mother is away on vacation. Celosia has the house to herself, so we go there.

Her house is fairly deep into the Wellfleet woods. Her room is on the first floor. We sit on the bed and talk about how she's unhappy with her boyfriend, this Ivory guy. He's a 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 that Celosia makes him sound nasty. I wonder why this angel would be with a scumbag like that. She could be with me.

I'm about to tell her to dump him and run away with me, when I hear someone yell "BOO!" from the other side of the screen door leading to her driveway. It's Ivory. Having just been with Mike and Gonzo for the past two days gives me the attitude I need to face him. I won't wait for him to take charge—I'll get up and introduce myself.

"How you doin', Ivory? I've heard a lot about you. I'm Al. We have some friends in common."

"Friends in common?" he says to me. "Who you talkin' about?" He's not as big as I thought he'd be, but he sure looks tougher than me.

"Oh, come on. I know Pete and Jeb and Dave and Jesse and Josiah and Robin and Gabe. You do know them, don't you?" He's taken back by this. He says nothing and gives Celosia a look I don't like. She goes outside with him and they exchange a few words I cannot hear, then he leaves. Celosia comes back inside, shaking her head.

"Ivory—the only gun-dealer in the world who thinks he's a college professor."

"He didn't look all that professorial to me."

She laughs, but not like it's funny, then shakes her head again. "You know what he got me for my birthday? G-strings. After being together for three years, he gets me a thong for my birthday."

"What a pudknocker."

She moves closer to me. I can feel my heart beating faster and suddenly it feels like every ounce of blood in my body has rushed to the front of my pants. I've never had a hard-on like this in my entire life!

"What's a pudknocker?" she whispers.

"Ivory is a pudknocker."

"You do use the craziest words, Alexander."

"Thanks."

"That's why I like you," she says, her lips an inch from mine, her body pressed up against the hardness in my pants. "You know who you are. You know where you're going. You'd never hurt me, would you, Alexander?"

"I'd never let anything or anyone ever hurt you, Celosia." I feel something I've never felt before and suddenly I understand sex in a way that was always a mystery to me until this moment; my body is screaming to make a child with this girl. Everything in me burning to be inside her at all costs.

Her fingers move towards my shoulders now and I think I might explode from nothing more than her touch. I feel myself falling forward into her lips. So soft. They cradle mine. I spend the night there, but she doesn't want me to take her clothes off, she only wants me to hold her. So I hold her. I hold her all night long. She does, however, let me put my hand on her bare tummy, and I rub it gently until she falls asleep with a smile on her face. Celosia, the girl of my dreams.

I GET HOME from work the next day and call her first thing. She sounds happy to hear my voice and agrees that the house she left her place this morning feel like days.

"Ivory came by and got this stuff," she tells me.

"What did he have to do?"

"He called me a whore among other things."

"But all we did was cuddle."

"I told him that. He didn't believe me—" We're interrupted by her call-waiting. And while I wait for her to come back to me, I think about how nice it must have been before call-waiting, when you weren't getting interrupted all the time by whoever wanted to get a hold of you. I carried a beeper for a little while, but gave it up. I started finding that if someone beeped me when it wasn't a good time to call them back, they would take offense. Now I even see a few kids with cell phones. Crazy.

Celosia clicks back to me. "Alexander, are you still there?" She sounds slightly disturbed.

"Of course. Is everything okay?"

"That was Ivory."

"What did he say?" I'm almost scared to ask, she sounds so serious.

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

I feel a chill shoot down my spine, but my voice remains calm. "I'm still here. That really sucks!"

"I don't think you should go out tonight," she tells me, but her voice goes up at the end, as if it were a question. Before she got so depressed, when I was a little kid, Rebecca once told me that when a girl is telling you to do the safe thing, but it sounds like a question, even just a little bit, she's really testing you to see how brave you are and whether or not she wants to procreate with you. It was a lot to lay

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on a nine-year-old, but that was Rebecca.

"Stop being ridiculous. It's the Fourth of July. Of course I'm gonna go out. . . . Aren't you coming to Aria's party?" I try to say it nonchalantly.

"He's not kidding, Alexander. Ivory is dangerous." Now she sounds like she does mean it. Shit, which is it? "He's really, really dangerous."

"So am I. I gotta go. I'll see you." I hang up before she can tell how scared I really am. Fuck! I should have known this was too good. Is nothing in life free? Do you always have to pay one way or another? My father told me that, right after I found out Rebecca had done it, slit her wrists in the tub I mean. I didn't know what he meant at the time, but now I understand.

If only I could go back to the time when I didn't, when I was innocent. . . . Or is it ignorant? Does it even matter?

I walk downtown to a head shop where I know I can get a butterfly knife. It's a good knife to have because it takes skill to open properly, and it's a pretty fancy display when you do it right. That's another thing Rebecca taught me, how to open a knife.

The guy who works the knife counter is from Brooklyn, too. His name is Vasquez. He usually talks a lot of smack, but today he just looks at me funny, like he knows what's going down. He's also got two black eyes for some reason. I try not to let it bother me, but it feels like a bad omen to have the guy who's selling me my weapon look like he just lost a fight.

I GO TO Aria's beach party over at Spring Cove. There are bonfires and coolers filled with beer and every kind of alcohol you can imagine. Aria does it right on the Fourth of July. I can see crowds of people laughing in the glare of the flames and getting drunk. Ivory is gonna be here. Everyone is gonna be here. And everyone knows what's going down. P-town is a very small town at the end of the day. I can feel the excitement of danger pulsing through the crowd. What kind of a show are we going to give them? The knife sits heavy in my pocket.

I take a shot of vodka to loosen up. Friends are trying to get me to smoke weed, but that will only dull my reflexes. I need to stay sharp for this.

Then I see Ivory. He arrives in his pickup truck. He's alone. After a quick scan, he spots me out of the crowd and heads straight for me. There's a good chance I'm going to vomit. 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 realistically? I'm going away to college in less than two months, and she's going back for her second year. Sure, she stayed faithful to Ivory, but maybe all the guys were just too scared to go for her because of exactly what is about to happen to me.

I watch Ivory getting closer to me, see the rage in his eyes, and I get it; this is not about her anymore. If I told Ivory that it was over between me and Celosia, that I swore I'd never see her again, he'd

attack anyway. This is about power. Me against a bully. Fuck him, I've got backbone.

There's a bulge under Ivory's jacket. Is it a gun? It's gotta be a gun.

He gets closer to my face, as close as Celosia was when she put her hands on my shoulders just before she kissed me for the first time.

"I'm surprised to see you out tonight," he says to me.

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

"That supposed to be funny? Come here, we're gonna take a walk."

He puts his arm around me and walks me away from the party. I have zero control over the direction we're going. The bonfire feels miles away. When he thinks we've gone far enough, he stops and faces out to the water.

"I'm gonna be honest, I was gonna kill you. No, don't laugh, cause it ain't funny. You were nearly a dead man tonight." I have my fingers on the knife, but it's no good. My hands are so sweaty I'm afraid I'll drop it if I try to whip it out.

"Then something happened," he continues. "I realized that you ain't never been in love. Cause if you had, you would never have done what you did. You took the only thing in this world I actually care about other than myself away from me. Now, aside from how stupid a move that is simply in regards to your own personal well-being, what it truly displays is a severe lack of any sort of code." This guy is lecturing me about personal codes? This fucking gun-dealer?! But he goes on. "It displays a lack of integrity. Do you know what integrity means?"

"I'd like to hear your definition."

"Completeness. That's 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 loved that girl, and you fucked it up. Damn you, Alexander Painter. Because of you, we will never have what we did, and that's a shame. . . . Cause it was beautiful.

"So, when you break it off with her in a month or two, after you get to Yale and find yourself some Ivy League pussy, you think about me. Cause I'll still have integrity, but you won't have shit. And if you ain't got shit, then you ain't shit. Now you go live with that." He struts off.

Before I even know what's happening, the words are out of my mouth.

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

PART 2

Ivory

Provincetown, Massachusetts
July 2, 1995

I LOOK TO the dunes passing by on my left, and I can't help but think about how much I love Provincetown. How much I love and appreciate that this is the only town in the world a bum like me could be with a girl like Celosia.

Sometimes being here even allows me to forget who I am for a moment. But it's only for a moment. Cause no matter where I am, no matter where I go, when I look in the mirror, I see what everybody else sees—a fuckin' gun-dealer. If I'm not careful, that's all I'm ever gonna be.

When I was thirteen I ran away from home and linked up with some hippies who I was selling X to at a Phish concert. They brought me home with them to P-town and I saw a way of life I had no idea existed on this planet. After I ran out of X, the cops busted my ass for trying to steal a microwave burrito from Cumberland Farms and they sent me back to Harlem. My mother's boyfriend beat me, she didn't do nothin' to stop him, so I split again. This time I stayed in the city and learned real quick how to avoid the heat.

There was this dude, Julius, who musta' been on the streets his whole life. He kinda took me under his wing, showed me how to own the street as a kid. He got me started on reading. The first book he ever gave me was *The Great Gatsby*. I thought Gatsby was a punk-bitch. He don't know what hard is. But I could get down with the way Fitzgerald put the words together, and since it's not like I had a TV or nothin', books became my entertainment. Julius thought I was some kind of genius cause I got a photographic memory. He once said to me, "All this talent and you go and become a dealer of arms. . . . If you had parents, boy, they would be disappointed in you." After Julius finished his soliloquy, he shot up with what he thought was gonna be some real good smack. Unfortunately, it was liquid Drano. Julius died right there in front of me. I was fifteen. Rest in peace, Julius.

I HAVE TO see Celosia tonight. My local boys want me to hang, and I haven't chilled with them since I've been in town, but I gotta make things right with my girl first. Last time I was here it was Celosia's birthday and I fucked up big-time. I have a dope present being custom-made for her now, but at the time I didn't have no loot, so I got her a pair of thongs, just for fun. She got pissed, real pissed. Some girls just don't like those kind of jokes. But I'm gonna make up for that tonight. Whatever it takes. Cause I don't know what I would do without her. Celosia is everything good about my world. Everything pure. The only pure thing I ever known.

I go to Whalers Wharf, P-town's version of a mall in the center of town, to pick up her real present. The statue of the ballerina is made of crystal and has tiny diamonds imbedded in the front of it that spell out "Celosia." I paid an extra two hundred beans for those diamonds. That's how much I love my girl, sky's the limit.

I ROLL UP to Celosia's place at nine thirty to be there to surprise her. At eleven thirty she's still not home. She gets off work at ten. Where the fuck is she? I lie down on our bed and wait for her. Now it's four in the morning. Still no Celosia. Who is she with?

The worst thoughts are always the ones that come to me first. I see her in bed with some guy, loving him in ways she never has with me. Some fucking summer kid from Harvard with a silver

spoon up his ass. Her ticket to a better life. A life we both know I'll never be able to give her. Scarface dies at the end, right? His ride cut short just when he's got it all. I feel pain in my right arm and my forehead starts dripping sweat. She's licking his neck. Licking his neck and smiling at me. She smiles at me as he rides her up and down.

I GO TO the local head shop in town, to see if anyone there saw Celosia last night. The guy who works the knife counter is a Brooklyn bum named Vasquez, but he's all right, thrown me some business once or twice. No angel. Asked for twice his cut cause he drew a little bit of heat from one of our deals. Now I'm not pretending to be any kind of angel either. But I can say I have never wronged someone who didn't do something to me first. That's just my code. And if I were ever to break that, then I really would have nothing. So I gave him twice his cut, and I did it with a handshake and a smile. But Vasquez has been on shit-thin ice with me from there on out.

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

"Why would you?"

"I got this town on lockdown, son. I see people, I see things, *see*." I can't stand when this clown pulls out that *ese boricua* shit, like he's so hard cause he grew up in Brooklyn. Shit, he probably grew up in Brooklyn Heights.

"You know who my girl is, right?"

"Yeah, Celooooosia." He draws out the "O" and I don't like the way her name sounds on his tongue.



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"She's foxy, bro."

"That's a lot coming from you."

"No problemo." This fucking guy.

"Did you see her last night?"

"Yeah, man." Vasquez takes awhile before he says the next part. "You ain't gonna like it."

"Tell me."

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

"I can take it, I'm tougher than I look."

"Information costs money, bro. What's in it for me?"

I grab him by the ears and push my thumbs into his eyes, just hard enough so he'll stop fuckin' around and tell me what I want to know. He'll have a couple of shiners for a few days, but he'll live.

"One more time, then I'm gonna get nasty. Who was Celosia with last night?"

"Some guys from Brooklyn."

"Friends of yours?"

"Nah, they was tourists!"

"All of them?"

"I seen one around before. His family has a house on Commercial."

"Tell me his name." I am calm.

"Painter, Alexander Painter."

Alexander Painter. When I find you, I'm scared of what I'm gonna do to you.

IT'S TEN THIRTY and I've been driving around all night. The ballerina statue sits on the seat next to me where Celosia should be. I drive to her house and this punk-bitch Painter has his car parked in my spot. Even got a Yale sticker on his bumper. I park at the foot of her driveway so they won't hear me coming up on them and creep up to her window. Inside I see the two of them sitting on our bed, and it's so obvious, it hits me in the gut like a fuckin' brick; it's their bed now. What happened? When did this happen? I walk around to the front door. She's got the screen latched but the door is wide open, so they can feel the cool summer breeze as they laugh. I stand there for a minute looking at them through the haze of the metal screen. She's looking at him the way she looked at me when we first got together and everything was possible. Before I fucked up one too many times. I can't watch this shit anymore. And so I yell:

"BOO!"

They jump at first, but then this skinny punk has the balls to come up on me.

"How you doin', Ivory? I've heard a lot about you. I'm Al. We have some friends in common."

This is Alexander Painter? This lil' pussy? Thinks he's all that cause he's from Brooklyn? All these bitches from Brooklyn thinkin' they so hard. Shit, this ain't even gonna be a challenge. "Friends?" I say to him. "Who you talkin' about?"

"Oh, come on. I know Pete and Jeb and Dave and Jesse and Josiah and Robin and Gabe. You do know them, don't you?" This motherfucker just rattled off a list of my boys. Like dropping a few names is gonna get him out of this ditch he's dug himself. I'll deal with this piece soon enough. Oh, I'll take care of him. But first, I give Celosia a look to tell her I want to talk to her outside. She at least does me the courtesy of excusing herself from this punk-bitch's presence long enough to tell me what I gotta hear.

"What do you want to talk to me about?" she says.

"Why you doing this?"

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

"You're not even going to make up some bullshit excuse for why you been running around with this punk?"

"We were just talking. Am I allowed to talk to people, or do I need your permission?"

"What are you talking 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. Please."

"Celosia, I love you. Don't throw that away. Cause if you do, we're all gonna regret this for the rest of our lives."

"Go home, Ivory. You can come back tomorrow to get your stuff." She turns away from me and stares into the woods. I'm a stranger to her now. She doesn't even remember why she used to love me.

I feel the tears welling up in my head. They're gonna hit my eyes soon. No stopping it now. This is going to hurt. But I need one more look at her. So, I give it all I have to hold back the tears so I can at least protect her from the pain she doesn't even realize she's created because of this clown. At least for one more night.

I go home, like she told me, and I drink a bottle of Jack Daniel's. Then I smash the crystal statue on the floor. I take off my shirt and roll around on the broken shards. For some time I move I can feel a piece of Celosia's broken statue enter my body. The pain takes over everything until it hurts so much I can't see her face anymore. All I see is pain. Pain and Alexander Painter. I see his face and I know I can take all this hurt out of me, all the pain I had to carry with me the whole life, and I can blast that shit into him. The next night, Al, you'll understand what you've done. You opened the door and I'm part of your motherfucking life journey now. You've done wrong to me. You don't even begin to understand who you're fucking with! Now you're gonna take whatever the fuck I want to give you! Prepare yourself, Alexander Painter. Your world is about to change.

I WAKE UP the next morning and I drive over to Celosia's to get my stuff. I let myself into the bedroom. She has everything in a box. The G-string is laying on top. She's on the phone, but hangs up as soon as she sees my face.

"You have a good night?" I ask her as I look around for anything she might have kept for herself.

"All we did was cuddle."

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

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

A connection!"

"Whore."

"Fuck you, Ivory."

"Yeah, you did. You really fucked me."

"Get out of my house."

I can't breathe.

"I guess in the end, we were lucky it happened the way it did. I know it wasn't easy—going to the clinic... losing everything like that." I can't believe I'm doing this to her, but it's like I'm possessed;

can't stop myself. "I mean, the world didn't need another unwanted kid, right?"

She stiffens and puts her arms around her stomach. I hate myself for letting those words come out of my mouth. She's crying now, holding the hollow space where once upon a time our future wanted to grow.

Tears are spilling down her cheeks now. All I want to do is hold her and tell her I'm sorry. Tell her everything's gonna be all right. That we'll work it out. But she can't even look at me. And I've never been much of a liar. So that's it. Like flipping a light switch, click, the love is dead.

I go home to clean and load my gun. For myself, I carry a .45 automatic. I've never had to use it. But there truly is a first time for everything.

I call Celosia.

"What do you want, Ivory?"

"I want you to know Alexander Painter is going to bleed tonight."

I'M AT HERRING Cove beach. It's 10:38 PM. I know he's here. I know because he is the first and only person I see the moment I roll up to the party. He is alone. This is it. Destiny.

I get out of my truck and walk towards him through the crowd. But instead of seeing the sights of the party around me, my eyes are filled with images from random moments in my life, like a movie I can't stop or even walk out of. My father leaves my mother, I am very small, life on the streets. A pimp takes a carrot-peeler to my twelve-year-old cheek, slices off a strip of flesh and eats it, telling me that now he got a piece of my flesh inside him, he owns my ass forever. I kill that motherfucker in his sleep with the same carrot-peeler. I see so many things, but they all lead me back to the vision I came here to create, the image of Alexander Painter, bleeding on the sand. I'm about to reach him, when a car slaps me in the face like a billboard. And it's his voice: "If you're not careful, a fuckin' gun-dealer is all you're ever gonna be."

I see myself shooting Alexander Painter, and I know I can't do this. I can't. He's right in front of me now. I have to say something.

"I was surprised to see you out tonight." I barely manage to get the words out.

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

"That supposed to be funny?" Take control, Ivory. "Come here, we're gonna take a walk."

I put my arm around him tight and realize how scared he is. The stink of fear seeping from his pores. Spineless. Pathetic. I'm not gonna end my life for this piece of shit. But, before I let him go, this Alexander Painter is going to understand what he did, and when I'm done, he ain't never gonna be the same again.

I take him away from the party. Far away. Into the dark.

"I'm gonna be honest with you, I was gonna kill you." He starts to laugh like this is a joke, the dumb fuck. "No, don't laugh, cause it ain't funny. You were nearly a dead man tonight. But fortunately for you, I realized something, which is that

you ain't never been in love. Cause if you ever had been in love with someone, truly, you wouldn't a done what you did. You took away the only thing in this world I actually care about other than myself. Now, aside from how stupid a move that is simply in regards to your own personal well-being, what it truly displays to me, is a lack of any sort of code. A lack of integrity... do you know what integrity means?"

"I'd like to hear your definition."

"Completeness. That's something you ain't got. You probably never will." He's trying to put on his tough guy face, but he's shittin' his pants. So I take a pause, and then I go on. "You're not going to last with Celosia. But you know that, don't you? I loved that girl and she loved me and you fucked that up. The most beautiful thing I'll ever see in my life, gone because of you."

"So, when you break it off with her in a month or two, you think about me. Cause that's when you're gonna grow up and realize that I still have integrity, but you ain't got shit. And if you ain't got shit, then you ain't shit. Now you go live with that." I walk off, content. And for a moment, I glimpse a future where I am not just a gun-dealer, a future where I actually do something with my life, something I can be proud of. And the moment is beautiful.

Then he calls to me.

"Hey, Ivory!"

I take out my gun and turn around, cause I know what comes next. Cause I know the moment is already gone. Did I ever have a chance of living that moment? Was the game rigged from the start?

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

Do any of us ever really know how quickly it comes and goes before it's already passed us by?

Before I know what's happened, I see Alexander Painter laying before me, bleeding onto the sand. Three bullet holes in his belly. I drop the gun. Everything is quiet now.

PART 3 Celosia

Provincetown, Massachusetts
July 7, 1995

ALEXANDER'S MOTHER CRIES all the way through her son's funeral. His father remains stoic, or perhaps he's in shock. I cannot imagine what it would be to bury one child, to say nothing of two. Still, I'm surprised his parents decided to have the services here at Saint Mary's. I figured they'd want an up-scale funeral back in New York. But I guess they moved to P-town for the shelter of it all. So many people come here for that.

I want to go up to them, tell them how much I cared about their son, even in the brief time we had together. Tell them how sorry I am for their loss, and how I will always take responsibility for what happened out there on that beach. I want so badly to tell the Painters how their boy did

not die in vain, how if he had not done what he did, something in my soul tells me it would have been me lying in my blood on the sand, Ivory standing above me. Of course I can't prove it. How could anyone prove such a thing? But I know. If I could, I would tell the Painters how in the short eighteen years of his life their son, Alexander, truly became a man. And how proud they deserve to be, because by saving my life, he did more with his eighteen years than most men do with eighty.

But I don't go up and talk to them. I wouldn't want to see the girl who got my boy killed, either. Right now, that's all they will be able to see if they look at me. So instead, I say a prayer and take one of the white roses from the altar down to the beach where he died. I throw the rose into the bay and watch it as the sun sets and its petals separate one by one, free to ride the tide out to the sea.

Some tourists are drinking around a bonfire, and it makes me think of the stories my *avó* told me about life in Santa Maria in the Azores, about the fishermen who brought their ships too close to the lights onshore and ended up crashing into the rocks. She said people lit those bonfires to lure the fishermen in, knowing the ships would crash and could be scavenged. I always wondered why the lit fires didn't warn those ships away. Perhaps after being out at sea for so long, the sight of the lights was just too hard to resist.

It's dark now and I can't see the flower anymore. I walk back to the parking lot. The tourists—a family with some teenagers—are getting louder. In a few weeks they'll be gone, leaving only the die-hard year-rounders to inhabit this slice of land at the tip of America. We'll have this magical place back to ourselves again. Locals and washashores—fishermen, descendants of fishermen, artists, children of artists, gays, straights, bi-curious. Provincetown, where the only rule is you have to be yourself, yourself and no one else.

People who were born here call themselves locals but the truth is this land doesn't belong to any of us. Not to Ivory, or Al, or even my grandmother. It doesn't belong to us, because sooner or later, everyone leaves. Sooner or later, everyone who comes here to experience the madness and the magic, eventually takes what they learned with their time here, and moves on, washed back out to sea.

Even if it was just for one day, that magical and mad set of twenty-four hours is more than enough for me to know how far ahead of the game I am already. For to have touched true love while here in Provincetown is to know a taste of the lips from your own personal paradise, the one that awaits you on the other side of your journey. And they're all unique. And the best part is you get to make your own rules there, just like here. In my paradise, seconds last for years, and one day can count for a lifetime. So I won't cry again until I get to end of my journey, and finally join the others who came before me, then went back out with the tide when their time had come.

IT'S SEVERAL MONTHS before I hear from him. Then one day I get a letter and it sends a shiver down my spine. I do not know it at the time, but this is the last letter Ivory will ever write.

Dear Celosia,

I'm guessing you know I'm doing life at Walpole, so I won't waste time with the details of how I got caught. That doesn't matter anyway. I want you to know I think about that night on the beach with every waking moment and in my dreams. What it all means. I'm not pretending to have any answers, but of all the questions I have, two haunt me most:

WHAT HAPPENED TO HIS SOUL?

and

WAS IT WORTH IT?

Like clockwork, at 10:41 PM, Alexander Painter appears in my cell and whispers to me. Every night since I killed him, for seven months, he has come to

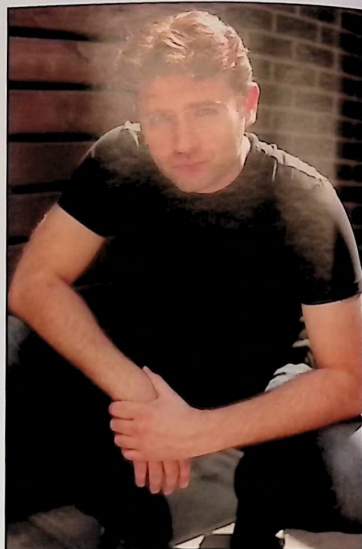
me and said nothing but these words, "I still have integrity, and you ain't got shit."

But last night was different. Last night his words were not the same. I'm praying that you know something, something you can tell me about him that will make sense out of what he said to me. I'm begging you, if you know anything, please write me back and explain why I feel the way I do. If you ever loved me at all, tell me what he's done to me, what he's planted in my head. Please.

I'll end this letter with his words. If I don't hear back from you, I will never bother you again. But I had to tell someone.

Alexander Painter's ghost sat there next to me, a grin on his face.

"Rebecca is looking forward to meeting you. She says she'll be seeing you soon."



JOHN BUFFALO MAILER PHOTO BY KATHINA EUGENIA

JOHN BUFFALO MAILER is a screenwriter, actor, journalist, magazine editor, playwright, and producer. He is a founding member of Back House Productions, a theater production company in New York City, which developed the 2008 Tony winner for Best Musical, *In the Heights*. Mailer has written several screenplays and plays, including *Hello Herman*, which had its New York premiere at the Grove Street Playhouse in 2001. Mailer has held the position of executive editor at *High Times*, editor-at-large for *Stop Smiling* magazine, as well as contributing editor for the international publication *TAR*. He has freelanced as a journalist for

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