

THIS ANGELIC LAND

A Novel

Aris Janigian



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LOS ANGELES

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For my brother, Eric Janigian

“And so the Princes fade from earth,
scarce seen by souls of men
But tho’ obscur’d, this is the form
of the Angelic land.”

from William Blake’s
America—a Prophecy

AT THE HEART OF A STORY like this, The Kurd told me, there should be love—a man and woman, or friends, two people, anyway, who, amid the destruction, find in each other what may be worth dying for, what may even require it. As the city burns, imagine them at the kitchen table with cups of coffee, an atom of intimacy in a galaxy of waste. Watching the ashes drift they might still speak of another life in another place, certain that if such goodness between two people were possible then all was not lost, even if all might be destroyed.

Forget that it wasn't 1915, 1934, or 1984. Forget that we were hardly on death marches or stuffed into cattle cars or terror-bound to a chair—no, just the opposite, we were cock-walking pilgrims, each from a different country and caste, supercharged with will. Yes, we were a melancholy distance away from all that was familiar, at an outpost far from home; but each toted his or her best, the very most finely spun and handsomely hewn. There we showed, bartered, bought, and sold, to better store up for the long journey ahead on the magic lantern-lighted road.

Only in the middle of that sojourn we were forced to stop, such was the commotion over the high fence, stop and stoop and peer through peepholes. In black and white, the monochrome color of the plainest of dreams, several police, batons cocked, surrounded a man prone on the ground with his head vaguely raised. Then the man rose, and a policeman struck him, and the man went down, and then rose again and the policeman struck him again and again, and with each strike the man rose rather than fell, until another policeman, appalled, put out a hand. "Stop."

Suddenly, the man, like some cornered and wounded buffalo, lunged, and at the vile sight of his unlikely power they lunged back, his buffalo-sized body absorbing blow after baton blow. Groping in the darkness as though for a life rope, he fell to his knees like a supplicant. What must he do, *melt into the ground* before they would relent? He did melt to the ground, and one of the hyenas put a foot to his nape, and they struck his prostrate bulk. They were striking him for anything now, not because he was resisting them, but because he was there, because it simply struck their fancy. A tort of blows landed at each rung of his body, and when he jumped from pain they struck him for that too. Finally, convinced he was subdued, the hyenas cuffed his hands and lashed them to his ankles behind his back and dragged him facedown to the side of the street, where he was left to his debased self. And the hyenas loped back and forth, taking notes, dispatching reports, contented with their quarry.

What was done was done, except for a man hiding in the shadows, who at that moment had turned his camera on and now had in hand an accounting, a moving negative a mere minute long. With no floodlight or fanfare or marketing budget, in a matter of days this shortest-of-shorts dumbstruck the world. We watched it, endlessly studied it, tried to find a way to stamp it with reason, with purpose; but it continued to mystify, spooling upon its own tortured body, its own sadomasochistic logic.

Twelve persons were charged to put its meaning to rest. They watched and listened for three weeks, and frame for frame tried to fix the meaning of the *moving negative*; they

accepted arguments, retorts, theories, and counter-theories about what was in the hyenas' minds during each frame—what frame of mind accompanied the frame, how did the hyenas' action comport with the hyena handbook, why did the buffalo lunge at one of them, why, once surrounded, did the buffalo not submit?

They listened to experts and counter-experts, and bystanders who told of what we had not seen:

1. The encounter that night had begun on the freeway, with the buffalo trying to outrun the hyenas for eight miles at an ungodly speed.
2. In the vehicle, three men rode alongside the beast. When orders were given to heel, only the beast demurred. His stare blank, his limbs inarticulate, sweat dripping from his brow.
3. Whipped up and frothing, the beast grabbed his arse and to provoke the hyenas shook it brazenly.
4. Forthwith, it was surmised the beast had eaten crystalline, a hellish substance, and that this was what had unleashed in him such a formidable force. Upon this surmise, the entire pack, even those hyenas of two minds, were galvanized.
5. With stun guns, twice he'd been struck. But rather than wreaking havoc upon his flesh, the guns' hundred thousand mortifying volts by all appearance did multiply it.
6. The best science has it that no man not possessed by a malevolent force could prove so refractory to such stuns, be so impervious to pain.
7. As the malefactor was struck, emanating from his throat were grunts and reports of otherworldly import. Note: these diabolical cries rose even over the vulture's terrific thunders.
8. Even when subdued, handcuffed, nearly snuffed, the beast's spirit, animated by unknowns, was lambent still.
9. Of the beating, true, one of the hyenas had opined he'd never had a hand in anything akin to it reminded him, he averred, of a *hard ball game*, part of the good ol' American pastime, during which he had *hit a home run*.
10. There were spectators to this "sport." Some watched frozen in horror, others rallied the hyenas on, yet others pleaded for the hyenas not to mortally wound him.
11. Hospital pictures revealed that from the beating his face had lost its features. Blood-red, ochre, and plum-colored bruises, tumescent and everywhere split; it looked like something that from inhumation had begun to putrefy.
12. One eye from distension was sealed shut, and from a baton blow that had severed his face from ear to chin, a new eye was opened.
13. Before it was sewn shut, there were those who deposed: along the round of the iris was inscribed, *novue ordo seclorum*. "A new world has begun."

And the jury went into a room to deliberate. There, with the information they were handed, they elevated and elaborated, parsed the pure from the impure, the subtle part from the gross, and within a matter of days returned with their verdict: not guilty. How? How! It was as though the beating was legerdemain, that your eyes perhaps were cataract, your reasoning sublimated, from dereliction deprived, or that what you saw was a base version of the real, that the *deluxe, superlit* version existed elsewhere, where only those twelve people had in *luxury* stood.

Sensing the fulminate taking shape, civic leaders and clergy rose to prayer, imploring,

flapping, squawking, one by one, running the sky the way crows do before a storm; but no sooner had they come than space was emptied of them, of sense itself. The city had turned into a sense vacuum, and in a matter of hours into this vital negativity, this perfect black body, particles began to collide and form a kind of supernova. It was just about dusk when you felt it from the heavens with an appalling force hit.

In a section of the city there was thunder, lightning, a gale strong enough to bust open the cages and set loose a horde: they flooded into the streets throwing bottles and rocks, overturning garbage cans, and screaming from rage. Then they began striking at cars with bats and bars and jumping up and down. And then we saw, from a peephole in the sky this time, a big truck lumber like a lost elephant into an intersection and dumbly stop. Within seconds they had swung up and lifted from right out of his seat the driver, a sad, waif-like figure. They dragged him into a clearing, where he cowered and looked confused, because never, even on TV, even in the movies, had he seen anything like this. They screeched and hollered and spat at him and jumped up and down, and threw him to the ground, and one of them held his head down with a foot, and the others kicked and struck him, and he wondere—as he wobbled to his feet like a newborn calf, lost his balance and fell, and tried to find his feet again—what was going on, and they stood over him, kicking and striking, aping each other, and then a man with an X on his chest hurled a canister at his head, and then another man, at point-blank range, did a trick with a brick, busting it on the scrawny calf's skull, whereupon his body collapsed to the asphalt and went limp. We saw the bloody mop of his newborn head; his innocent body curled up unconscious. We saw the bricklayer do a little ji,

I WAS PUTTERING AROUND my Manhattan apartment, still working through jet lag, when the riots in LA began. I had just returned from Beirut, where I had filmed my first feature length documentary, whose subtitle, *The Burden and Promise of Memory*, could just as well serve as the title for what I've decided to embark on here.

My parents, my aunt, and my cousin lived in Hollywood, and not so far away, in Mid-Wilshire, were my brother Adam and my good friend Sasha. For three days I sat at the edge of my seat, with the TV remote in one hand and the telephone in the other, ringing my brother up nearly every hour, following his "eyes on the ground" through the helter-skelter path the riots cut.

My name is Eric Derderian. My family were refugees from the Lebanese Civil War, and yes, there was a dark irony in the fact that they were now reliving the horrors we had crossed half the world to escape. Yes, I was worried about them, but alongside the worry, I confess, was a vague satisfaction in watching LA get precisely what I believed it deserved for the very reasons I had left it.

But that satisfaction would quickly dim, as the riots spread, and my brother's voice grew from astonished to bewildered to alarmed to grim. As most of America watched a city collapse upon itself like a building rigged for demolition. Before the smoke had cleared, literally, I was boarding a red-eye flight from JFK to LAX. I knew, roughly, what I would find in Los Angeles, but I was hardly prepared for what I wouldn't.

For its sheer destructive force, the so-called Rodney King riots were unprecedented in U.S. history. The legendary Watts riots of 1965 couldn't hold a candle to them. Hardly any section of Los Angeles went unscathed, and whole neighborhoods were eviscerated. In the tersest of terms, fifty-five people were killed, thousands injured, and ten thousand businesses destroyed, at a cost of over a billion dollars. But behind each number, as they say, is a story and as I sit in my studio apartment in Manhattan, almost exactly six months to the day after the riots ended, having completed that documentary project on Beirut, I will try to tell that story. Even though it is one that I will likely never stop writing, I am driven to begin, and to do the best I can from the bits and pieces I have in hand.

Around 7:00 p.m. on the first day of the riots, our little cousin, Hovig, the gangster, rang Adam up.

"Are you tuned into this shit?" Hovig asked.

Adam said, "What are you laughing about? They're rioting out there."

"Bro, this is nothing. I'm telling you..."

"Telling me what? Is this an occasion for laughter? People getting beaten to death?"

"When'd you start talking like that? 'Occasion for laughter' Did that old man teach you that shit? The Wizard—bro, is he from fucking Oz or what?"

"Ease up on The Wizard or I'll rip your earring out with my teeth."

"Keep your head down, bro."

“Pull your pants up.”

Adam had brought a case of tequila home for tasting because they'd raised his regular pour a buck a bottle and he needed a sub. He had a cheap tequila-tasting buzz going, which made him a little edgy.

Adam asked, “Did you see what they did, to this guy in the truck?”

“Bro, remember Lebanon. The shit we went through in Beirut. Worse. That's the word, bro, on the street. Protests motests, bro—the sevs (blacks) are out for it.”

“Out for what?”

On the ground, cars neverminded the traffic lights, stop signs, the roads themselves, weaving, pausing, and darting through the throng.

“Where the fuck are the police?”

Hovig answered, “Protecting their turf.”

“Their turf is our fucking turf!”

“That's the big illusion you all live in, you and your martini crowd.”

“Please, don't start in with that.”

“Wait and see who you call, bro, when the shit hits the fan.”

“Hold on,” Adam said, his attention tacking to the TV.

TED

We're switching now to Trish Eliason, who is reporting live from Parker Center.

[Trish, an all-American brown-haired beauty, is standing microphone in hand in front of a mob. The mob is chanting that the LA police are “Racist,” that LA's top cop is “A Criminal.”]

Adam told Hovig, “They're down there at Parker Center.”

“Let it burn, bro. Those cops don't mean nothing to us. They take care of their own—*Yahudis*, movie stars, rich spoiled white punks like your partner, Nick, dick, the guy who's fucking you blind. But don't worry, bro, I've got our family covered. If they come around here, we'll kill them, bro.”

“What are you talking about? Jesus.”

“Bro, watch your mouth. Hey, we're the first Christians.”

“Later.”

“Hey, Adam.”

“What, Hovig?”

“I love you, bro. You're my blood.”

“Love you too. Be careful. Think about your Mom.”

TRISH

All colors are represented here tonight, Ted. Nobody seems to have gone untouched by the verdicts. For the most part, this is an orderly demonstration, but there is considerable tension in the air.

TED

For some of us, Trish, who were here during the riots of '65, this brings back terrible memories. This is a very unwelcome reminder of those events. We are covering this from downtown Los Angeles, approximately, now, four hours since the verdict “not guilty” was handed down in Simi Valley today.

TRISH

(knowingly)

I think that is just what's at issue here tonight, Ted. People have told me that, in their minds, guilty was the only possible verdict any reasonable person could render. We can only wonder what Rodney King is thinking at this moment.

TED

We understand that he is sequestered in his apartment, refusing to speak to reporters. Trish, I'm wondering if we can get the input of some people who are there now, in their words what they are feeling right now. Obviously there is a lot of anger and frustration, but we'd like to have it in their words.

[Trish gently taps a man on the back. He turns around, and then two other black men turn with him.]

TRISH

Sir, would you care to tell us what brought you here, what's going on in the minds of the people here tonight, what exactly are you protesting?

PROTESTER 1

What do you mean, *What?* That bullshit in Simi Valley is what.

TRISH

We just would like to get your impression...

PROTESTER 2

Who their right minds can say them cops didn't mean to do what they did? This is no justice. This is injustice, this is what you call violence, not just against the Rodney King, but the black community.

PROTESTER 1

And we here to make sure the LAPD knows that we sick and tired of being treated like animals and that we going to take justice into our own hands.

PROTESTER 3

Say black man can't get no justice through system, he's gonna get it another way. We're not gonna roll over and play dead no more. This ain't even the beginning. The city of LA ain't seen nothin' yet. We ain't gonna let up till the whole world knows how we feels. The city, the cops, newspapers, the whole city gets blame, the whole city is racist. That ain't no impression, that's the truth!

TRISH

The verdict has obviously opened up deep wounds in the community, Ted.

TED

For those of you just joining us, we are broadcasting live from Parker Center, where protesters have gathered to openly protest the Simi Valley verdict. The station management has told us that we will stay with the action as long as is necessary tonight.

[And, then, suddenly, what looks like a fire.]

TRISH

Hundreds of people have brought their opinions to the doorstep of the LAPD, and are...

TED

What is that, Trish?

[Trish, holding the microphone tensely, turns around.]

TRISH

From here it looks... it looks like the kiosk. Yes. I think you can see it in back of me. [stepping aside] I believe that is the kiosk. The kiosk here at Parker Center is on fire. Things are escalating very swiftly here, Ted. I am not sure we can say for certain now that things will not escalate.

TED

(concerned)

We have to ask, we've moved beyond a certain decorum here, folks. Do you feel safe there, Trish?

TRISH

We're fine here, Ted, though the mood here is very tense, indeed.

TED

Trish?

TRISH

Yes, Ted?

TED

We have a source here who confirms that windows have been smashed at the Times building.

The phone rang again. Adam picked it up.

"What's going on out there?" It was Sasha, the museum curator.

"I don't know. I think, I just heard, the *LA Times* building was attacked."

She gasped, "Oh my god. I need to get out of the house. I need to debrief. Can you please debrief with me? Please!"

"Hold on."

TED

...no doubt now that the riot seems to have come downtown, folks. What we prayed, hoped would stay isolated to one area seems to have spread. Once again, we just received a report that the *LA Times* building has been the focus of a group of protesters, and that the building has been attacked.

Sasha said, "PLEASE!"

"M" WAS NEARLY EMPTY when Adam walked in. Brad and Chris, his two mid-week barkeeps, both actors in real life who relied on big tips to support their astral aspirations, stood at the far end chatting with a couple of regulars, Lucas and Lucia. Brad came over with a toothpick in his mouth. He flipped a napkin in front of Adam, and Adam asked for a martini.

"Olives on the side?"

"Thanks."

"Hey Lucas, Lucia."

Hunched over his drink, Lucas ticked his head. Lucia smiled shyly.

“Can you believe what’s going down out there?” Adam said.

“Yah,” he said.

“So sad,” she said.

Lucas was a middle-aged Hungarian writer/director hoping to break into the industry; Lucia was a black-haired, blue-eyed, twenty-two-year-old beauty from Poland who looked sixteen. They were lovers, but for the longest time everyone had assumed she was his assistant.

Sasha walked in. Over a black turtleneck she had thrown a long black coat. Her face, even at a distance, showed abject shock, like she’d just been made to confront some dark feature of her personality in therapy.

“Lord,” she said, shaking her head.

“Sit. Relax.”

“How can you say that?” she said. “Relax? Did you see what they did to that man in the truck! Oh my god.” She reached for Adam’s arm as though he might fall off the barstool.

“Does this remind you of Lebanon? Does it feel like that to you?”

“Not really. Not yet.”

“I thought you were Armenian,” Brad said. “Didn’t know you were a Lebanoner.”

“It’s Lebanese, Brad, not Lebanoner.”

“Excuuuse me.”

“Martini, please,” Sasha told Brad. “Gin.”

She fumbled for a cigarette from her purse. Pretty, sophisticated, super-opinionated, Iranian, and basically good-hearted, she was also insanely, almost diabolically high strung, so he let her puff her puffs to settle down.

“Where exactly is Florence and Normandie?”

Brad mixed the drink and poured it into a glass. “Just around the corner, really.”

“What corner?”

He pushed the drink forward.

“To be honest, I don’t know. Anybody know?”

Her fingers were so jittery that an ounce of her gin splashed out of her glass before she got it to her lips.

Dabbing at her blouse with a napkin, she asked, “Across the freeway. The 10 freeway?”

Adam regularly traveled Normandie, but Florence? Shit. Could’ve been the Italian one for all he knew.

Back to the trucker, “I can’t believe he didn’t run!” Sasha said.

Adam said, “Going after a cop, a judge, I don’t know. But a truck driver? These people are innocent. Just taking stuff from here to there.”

“He just sat, like he expected they were coming. The way he just got out of the truck. Almost politely.”

“I know.”

She said, “To not at least try to lock your door? Don’t trucks have locks?”

“Like he panicked... froze... I don’t know what he was thinking. Maybe he figured he was cornered.”

“THAT’S MY WHOLE POINT! How can a man be cornered in a truck! I mean, just keep

going! Ohhh!” she lamented the trucker’s imbecility.

“Like the Lamb of God he gave himself up,” Lucas came out of nowhere to tell them.

Sasha shuddered and rolled her eyes theatrically. She hated Lucas, whom she believed was sexually exploiting lovely Lucia.

“I don’t think so,” Sasha said.

Adam said, “They’re no geniuses, these truck drivers. All that time on the road, that alone messes with your brain.”

Sasha said, “Are these African-American men angry at the verdicts? Are these gangs out there or what? I mean, or is it something else?”

“Yeah,” Brad said, “they were probably all jonesing to the hilt.”

“What do they do down there?”

“Ice. Crystal meth. It’s a mind snapper.”

“Absurd,” Sasha said. “There were hundreds of people out there, maybe thousands. It wasn’t about crystal meth! Why are you moving your mouth when I talk, Brad?”

“Nothing,” he said.

“It’s annoying.”

It was an acting technique he’d picked up the week before that he was practicing, watching the mouth move so closely you could actually guess what a person would next say.

Sasha continued, “Is this about inner-city poverty? Social injustice? Are these people righting a social wrong?”

“W-owe,” Brad went.

She said, “Where is this rage coming from?”

“Where is *that* coming from,” Brad said. “You sound like this JC teacher I had. Sociology or something.

Adam said, “Maybe you’re getting a little overly analytical at this point.”

“Think so. Aren’t these obvious questions: Race, disenfranchisement; what are the operative concepts here?”

Adam said, “I imagine all of the above. What do your artists have to say?”

“I just talked to one, Sally Stroke, up in Silverlake. You saw her show.”

“The hacked-up mannequins. Was that real blood, by the way?” The stuff was smeared all over their plastic bodies, even pooled at their plastic feet.

“Her own.”

Adam said, “No shit.” He had thought maybe she’d fetched it from a blood bank.

“Wasn’t that an incredible show?”

Adam shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, “not really.”

“You liked that show when you saw it. You changed your mind in a month?” She looked hurt.

“I guess I needed time to digest.”

“No. Definitely you changed your mind.”

Adam excused himself to the bathroom.

He’d already been to probably thirty gallery openings with her. Wine and cheese and crackers and Perrier and people exchanging phone numbers, and the artists themselves looking strikingly artistic, but hardly anyone paying attention to the art. The reason for this was obvious: anything that wasn’t moving, that wasn’t engineered for instant change,

transformation, difference, was hard to focus on. The very idea of something being the same now as it would be ten minutes from now already bored everyone stiff. Adam's conclusion was that Sally had gone over the top for shock value. Forget about faith, hope, love; the struggle wasn't even a struggle *for* anything anymore; it was a struggle *against* something, mainly boredom.

Brad and Sasha were in the middle of it when Adam returned.

"I just look at all this as a chance to see a part of reality," Brad was telling her. "Why get all involved?"

"You see," Sasha said, "this is what... what..." she was searching for the right word. "... What *hurts* me about LA. This attitude. The melee out there *is* yours, I have news for you."

Adam ordered another martini.

"*Mellay*. Kind of the opposite of mellow." Brad reached for the vermouth and said, "I don't think artists should be involved in society *per se*. As an actor, you have to be on the outside looking in."

Sasha, who believed that art was about uncovering the conceits and prejudices and power relations that *disenfranchised* or *marginalized* gays, lesbians, women, African-American Chicanas, transsexuals, transvestites, and others, raised her voice to a near shriek. "But where's your politics?"

Brad shook the drink, poured it into a fresh glass, and scooted it in front of Adam. Coolly, he said, "Totally not political. That's where I'm at with my politics. Anarchist."

"In *what* sense? The Berkman sense?"

"*In my sense*. What anarchism is. Nobody's sense but my own."

Jason stepped up to the little group with his hands raised, a gesture of surrender.

Lucas said, "Even biggest democrat is anarchist in his heart."

Lucia giggled. He turned to kiss her, giggling himself. Thirty years apart, they were like two urchins.

Sasha pressed Brad: "So what is happening out there is anarchy, nothing more?"

Brad said, "Whatever. Why are you getting personal?"

"What do you mean, 'Personal.' In what way?"

Lucas laughed. "Vatever. So 'merican, this speech."

Sasha had had enough of Lucas. "Okay already. Can you let us converse in peace?"

Lucia whispered something in Lucas' ear, probably an admonition. He nodded, okay, okay.

Sasha shook her head as though dazed. The gesture shoved Brad's ego into a corner. "Hey," he threw up his hands. "Chill. I mean, how am I supposed to know what it is? I just told you my philosophy, not what was behind all this *mellay*."

"Did you hooch it up before work today?" Adam asked him.

He cocked his head back, hesitating, and said "Nooo..."

Jason said, "I'll tell you what it is. You want to know what it is, I'll tell you what it is."

Chuckling sarcastically, Sasha said, "Am I asking too much?"

"Thing is, all I'm saying, there's no 'big philosophy' out there." Brad polished the counter with a rag. "I mean, everybody is doing his own thing. Why is this so difficult for you to get?"

"Hello," Jason said, and clutched Brad's arm, "Can I respond to this? Can I finish here?"

don't know why people can't listen to other people. That's a problem: Listening."

"Go ahead, man," Adam said, "we're listening."

"Like I was saying, people are what they are because of what they *were*."

"You mean like in reincarnation, dude?" Brad asked.

Jason ran his fingers through his jet-black hair, sighed, and said, "Yes, like reincarnation."

Brad said, "I believe in that. I believe in reincarnation."

"BUT YOU'RE AN ANARCHIST!" Sasha dropped her head in defeat.

Jason said, "Be honest, everything you guys have said, I don't even know what it means. If you empty your mind, you won't know what it means either. It'll just sound like a bird song, or a cat meowing. The question is: who are you? You know, what did you do in your past life? Karma. That's the question."

Sasha came back: "Are you trying to tell me that this is all about past lives now. Is this why LA drives me crazy?"

"Choose not to believe it, but everything is..."

Sasha cut him off "So it's no use worrying ourselves about it. What's going to happen is going to happen? Let's party!"

"I won't go there," Jason said. "Sarcasm is the worst kind of energy. But to answer your question: in a way, yes. And in a way, no. Maybe *your* karma makes you change the situation. Maybe it doesn't. To know what's really going on, you have to know how all the karma in the world adds up. That's enlightenment. And hey, you guys are okay—hey, *I'm* okay—but none of us is the Buddha."

"Some philosophy." She put "philosophy" in quotation marks with her fingers.

"People thinking philosophy: That's a problem. Get rid of your ego, and your philosophy goes with it."

Two groups of three had come through the door. The bartenders nodded to one another and went to attend to them.

Sasha said, "Sometimes I feel like...I don't know what. Like there's no way to get anywhere anymore. So many discourses."

Adam took her home and hugged her good night, her skinny little curator's body vaguely trembling beneath her jet-black outfit. When he let go, she reached back for his hand, like she bore news she hadn't the courage up until that second to deliver.

"You remind me of your brother," she said, and then instantly amended herself, "but different."

"That makes perfect sense."

"I miss him." It was an admission. An intimate admission. The rioting and her fear together had brought her feelings into focus. "Oh how I do miss all of New York right now!"

The other thing was, she hadn't slept with anyone in six months. Her standing as director of a high-profile non-profit museum, she had assumed, would lend her a degree of power and desirability, a kind of artistic power-broker seductiveness. In New York, to be seated on some artistic thing gave you sex appeal; in LA it didn't.

"I can't see anything like this happening in New York. It just couldn't."

"You're probably right. We'll talk tomorrow. Call me first thing."

Adam kissed her once more and told her good night.

He understood all too well what she was feeling, above and beyond what had happened that night. It was the bigger feeling of solid, even blessed ground suddenly crumbling beneath one's feet. His first experience with this had been just after his sixteenth birthday, a luxurious, softly flickering seventy-five-degree day, when he had lit out for the beach in Dad's 1972 Datsun. He took Sunset Boulevard, passing the strip joints and guitar shops and Mexican restaurants, and then the boutiques and Tower Records and that crazy Book Soup (why not Book Stew or Book Salad?). All along the way homes trimmed the relaxed hills as delightfully as Christmas ornaments. He glided through Beverly Hills, where on either side of the wide road the trees glittered, and down the grassy median joggers logged their miles. *How strange blinkered we live*, (he wrote in his notebook, years later), *we at the brink*. Indeed, a mix of innocence and impudence, an unsustainable combination, was in fact sustained in Los Angeles, and by nothing short, it sometimes seemed to Adam, of holy grace.

And after seven years living in the city he was beginning to feel it, allowing himself to feel it; weight-free and giddy he slid down the last hill toward the ocean, its protean effervescence almost a state of mind, like the infinite play of God's mind.

When he hit Pacific Coast Highway, he cut south, parked at Venice, flipped his sandals off and made for the dazzling shore. The water's rhythmic churning at his feet, the lapping wind and crying gulls, all of it made for an exquisite commotion. In the perfect privacy of his thoughts the other beachcombers, half a dozen or so, seemed almost virtual, like holograms. He came from somewhere else, but what did it matter from where, everyone was from somewhere else—even, in a way, people born in LA. Its locus was fundamentally immaterial, almost like consciousness, not a thing but a happening. Though all this—and its meaning would become clear to him only years later—what he felt then was simple freedom from his bombed-out past in Lebanon. Venice said it all—the simple fact of its name, appropriated without shame, without parody. Only *these Americans*, as Mom called them, would dare, dare steal the name of a world-class city-state for a patch of coastal dirt cut into here and there with “canals” that were little more than dead-end ditches. As a young boy in Lebanon Adam had always admired America for its principles, industry, and power, but it had taken living in LA for him to absorb the tectonic power of its playfulness. The power to invent required the power to ignore and forget. That was the secret, what made *these Americans* so different.

In a way, he had been American all along. Different from the start: Grandmother had told Adam as much. He felt it in the tremendous ebb and flow of his emotions. As far back as he could remember, *they* had stuffed him into a school uniform and suit, bound him to a desk and church pew, all in order to organize, maybe even galvanize his makeup. It wouldn't have worked. Lebanon would have cast him off as a mistake, and he probably would have destroyed himself there. “What's wrong with that boy,” they would have said. That tremendous ebb and flow was synchronized with the tremendous ebb and flow of the city he had landed in. Adam was no longer on the outside wondering how to make himself normal, but rather on the inside, where normal was precisely what he was. America was his *manifest destiny*. He had been afraid to take it all the way, trembled at the implications, worked to get straight A's in school and made good friends, helped the family out where he could, slowly showing everyone that he had earned the right to his own future.

Now, tossing his shirt aside, he sloshed knee deep into the water and watched surfers slash across it, and boats drift out and in. Maybe he'd be a filmmaker, an actor, or an artist

a writer. A screenwriter! Why not? Anything was possible in LA.

The water when he finally dove in was splintering cold, but still the wide-open ocean was his and wave over wave he swam, until fifty yards or so from shore he turned on his back and drifted, the warm sun on his belly and cold water undulating below, his body a kind of yin and yang.

For how long he floated he could not say, but it was long enough that when he looked up, he was fantastically far from shore—100 yards, maybe more. It was as though he'd traveled at warp speed from one reality to another in the blink of an eye.

He swam for several minutes, good, strong teenage strokes toward shore, and when he looked up to see how close he was, thinking he'd catch a wave the rest of the way in, he discovered that he might as well have been swimming in place, or backwards. Something diabolical was going on in the seas, and he started swimming with crazy resolve, looking up over the grey green humps to mark his progress. It was impossibly slow going, if he was going at all, and already his muscles were feeling scorched. To catch his breath he rolled over and floated on his back. A mix of self-pity and self-scorn for having swum so far out on his own filled him. Then suddenly, panic grabbed his heart. *People die in the ocean all the time*, he thought. Some people never reach the beach. He was on his stomach again—he couldn't wait with his head down thrashing, god, oh god he was going to reach that beach or die trying, and then, as though the beach had mercifully leaped, there was sand beneath his feet.

He stood trembling, disoriented. Maybe an hour had passed; anyway, the sun was beginning to set, a golden coin dithering on the horizon line. Two women were weaving their way on skates up the bike path. Half a dozen others were perched on a short wall drinking and smoking, probably dope. Nobody had been watching out for him. Why should they? Everyone was doing *his own thing*. Adam reached for his towel and draped it over his head and shoulders and sat there for several minutes looking like a Muslim at the haj. The churning beauty wasn't so beautiful after all, was it? He hated them for their leisure—they were so relaxed, so oblivious. Overwhelmed with embarrassment, he wanted to leave, to flee, actually, but from what and where to?

My brother was in the deep of America, where there was everywhere to turn, and nowhere. Get used to it. "Either sink or swim," as the tough guys on TV say. The sun rapidly lowered into the phosphorescent seas, the clouds turning inky at the edges. He stayed until the horizon and ocean combined, blazing. He stayed until the light had all but drained away, and the sea looked like some hammered ore, cooled and grey.

It was getting on midnight when Adam made his way to Versailles. This was the fourth "high end concept bar" that Sammy, a good acquaintance, had opened in so many years. Tired of managing "M," sick *and* tired of his partner Nick, and wanting to keep his options open, he had talked to Sammy about maybe starting a club somewhere *down the road*. Maybe something similar to "M," maybe somewhere like Silverlake. "*Let's keep the conversation going*" Sammy had told him, so when he called and asked Adam to come by and take a look at his newest venue—not just the physical establishment, but more importantly, the concept behind it—Adam took it as a sign he wanted to *further the conversation*. He obviously would have chosen another night to go, except Sammy had put Adam's name on that night's list. If Sammy called to ask his impression and Adam didn't have one, that would be the *end of the*

conversation. That's how it was with people like that, with people who had that kind of traction and money.

The girl with the pretty voice who had called to confirm he'd be coming had also said, "Look for the valet," and now he saw why: it was located in a residential neighborhood on a side street off Fountain, just below the Strip. He pulled up in his '86 Camry, and between a two-story-high stand of cypress trees the valet pointed to a flight of stairs. Halfway up, the façade came dramatically into view: a faux-French chateau right out of Disneyland, the kind of *voilà* architecture that reminded him that LA had been a place of magic and dreams long before he arrived, and would remain so long after he was gone.

On a semicircular porch, two bouncers dressed in beautiful black suits stood in front of a suede cord with clipboards in hand. He gave them his name, and they kindly nodded and welcomed him in. Ferns in decorative urns were perched on tall pedestals on either side of a large beveled black door, its surface lustrous as river water. Next he was standing at the threshold of a stunning room, angelically lit, with marble floors, textured like melted wax, which flowed out to a balcony where men were drawing richly on cigars. Waitresses whose body suits conformed to their bodies like swords to their scabbards conveyed tall cocktails to couples lounging on divans and curled up on oversized velvet chairs. On low glass tables, champagne bottles were sweating in classic silver coolers.

So there he was on the first night of the riots, deciding on a sage green comfy-looking love seat close to the bar. He ordered his third martini of that evening; yes, he was buzzed, and maybe that was why the violent images jackknifing his brain were already beginning to fold up and fade away. Serving three-ounce martinis at \$12 a pop (made from a \$7 bottle of vodka), Sammy was well on his way to owning yet another home. Adam remembered he'd been talking up Costa Rica. It was an hour before "closing," and amazingly fresh flesh and credit was flooding through the door. Like the lithe, toned, and tanned blonde in the flashy short dress now sashaying up to the bar, her eyes studying the room for a place to sit.

Adam made some small talk. "Looking for anyone special?"

"Supposed to meet some friends. Guess they're late."

"Have a seat in the meantime," Adam said with a quiet smile on his face. Crazy handsome, he never needed to do much more than that. They introduced themselves. The girl's name was Alice.

"Alice," Adam repeated. "It's such a sweet, old-fashioned name. I like it."

"My parents were South Carolina hippies, supposedly. Alice's Restaurant. It was supposed to be some cool, spiritual, happy place that they all hung out in back then."

"Would you like a drink?"

She patted her tummy, which was barely even there.

"Maybe later."

"Lose any more you're going to vanish."

"Just a few."

She tilted her head and let her tanned, toned calf bump Adam's.

"I don't know," she said. "I just needed to get out."

"I hear you."

"People are animals. Know what I mean? What they did."

"Definitely. People are no damn good, a friend of mine always says. But since we're all

we've got..."

"Maybe I'll take a sip from yours."

"It's more romantic anyway."

A waitress picked up the empty glass and cocktail napkin, and he ordered another.

"I would say you're very interesting looking," she said.

She took his hand and turned it palm up, studying it.

"Hmm."

"What do you see?"

"You definitely have an earth hand. Maybe in another life you were a cowboy, or a farmer. Close to the earth."

She slid a finger down the center of his palm, "That's sexy. You're kind of romantic, but emotionally you're unstable too. I don't see any signs of danger here." She let go of his hand, kind of pushing it away.

"Aren't dangerous men supposed to be a turn-on?"

"They used to be. Things are changing."

"Not from what I've seen."

A long, elegant martini glass appeared before them, its misty, shimmering opalescence a kind of mirage.

"Actually," she said, "I can tell by the way you pick up that martini glass that you're not dangerous. I was just double-checking. You like to drink, but you're not a drunk."

"For me, drinking is mostly celebration. Some people drink when they're sad. I drink when I'm happy, in order to be even happier."

"My father was a drunk. Same with my brothers, all the men in my family. All drunks. Are you always happy?"

"Wouldn't that be dull?"

"I just get that vibe from you."

"I've survived. Maybe what you're sensing is a survivor's contentment just to be alive."

"Me too. Boy did I survive."

"How'd you end up in LA?"

She told him her story, how at a resort town called Hilton Head Island she'd met a soap star. They'd hooked up, and in the course of what amounted to a week-long fuck he told her that he saw in her not just an actress, a dime a dozen, but a living, breathing artist in the vein of Brando, Bette Davis, or Meryl Streep. That affair altered the course of her aimless life. She was twenty years old, crashing in a shack on the beach, so she packed up, and in a beat-up Toyota she bought for five hundred bucks, made her way across the country, hoping to hang out with this actor. After putting in about a dozen calls with no call-back, one evening she drove to his house and waited for him until the wee hours. Around sunrise she realized that he would never be there for her like he had promised, and that probably he'd only said that he would hang out in order to shag her for the week. But she wasn't mad at him; no, she was grateful to him for getting her out of Hilton Head and putting her in touch with this haunting sense that there was something more.

"Know what I mean?" she said.

"It's the reason most of us are here," he said.

"Where did you say you're from?"

“Here. More or less.”

“You don’t meet natives all the time.”

“We’re hiding in the bush.”

“What are you?” she asked him.

“Excuse me?”

“I mean Italian, Spanish? You’re not Mexican, are you?”

“I’m American.”

“I know thaaat.”

“Let’s leave it there. I don’t want to ruin the mood.”

“The mood is good,” she said.

“You’re good.”

“If you have love. If you don’t have love, nothing is good.”

“Isn’t it the truth?”

“You see, I’m an adult child of an alcoholic.” Instantly her face went slack, as though she were a wind-up doll that had run out of juice. Vaguely spooky.

“You okay?” Adam asked her.

“I’m great,” she replied.

“Sorry to hear about that. Must’ve been tough. I bet it made you a target for bad characters.”

“How did you know?”

“I’ve heard it a thousand times,” he said. “I manage a bar.”

“You don’t even want to go there. You don’t even want to know.”

“Oh, I know.”

“Like my first boyfriend when I came out here. I met him at a party up in the hills. I was sitting with one of my girlfriends when, from all the way across this crowded room, I saw him. He wasn’t even that good looking, but I was drawn to him like a magnet.”

“Turned out to be the worst character in the room.”

“A criminal, a drug dealer. He fucked with me for one year. I don’t even want to talk about it.”

“Water under the bridge.”

“He had this gorgeous house on the beach, just this side of Malibu on PCH. You should’ve seen the view. His bedroom, it had a fireplace, and looked out onto the ocean, and he had a rack of Armani suits, I swear, a whole rack that went the length of the closet, amazing. In a way he was kind of a nerd though; in a weird way. He drove a Jaguar, sure, one of those convertibles, but there was something about him that was kind of goofy, too. For one thing, he didn’t do any drugs, he barely drank; he claimed to get these migraines if he did. Or, like he’d be dressed to kill, but would forget to tie his shoes; or he’d miss one of his belt loops, or his shirt would be sticking out, and on top of the fact that he wasn’t all that great looking, I don’t know, he kind of reminded me of someone who was *acting* like he was just rich, even though he was *really* rich. I mean, a guy has to have deep pockets to give you two thousand a week just for play money; that’s what he called it, play money. In some way he really was a sweet guy, and I liked that he was nerdy.”

“What did he do for a living? Did you say he dealt drugs?”

“I wasn’t just there for the money. I really liked this guy, and I was serious about me

acting, my art, really serious. Anyway, he was in with this crowd, this porno crowd. They all worked out of the valley but they had places on the beach. There is a lot of money in porn; you wouldn't think so, but there is."

"No, I believe it. Porn is big business."

She jerked her head to the side, as though someone had called her name. Adam doubted she was really waiting for friends to show up—that was probably just a hatch she had secured in case she needed an escape—but maybe he was wrong. He turned to look. She was staring at an empty spot in the room.

"You've got radar out everywhere, don't you?"

"Think so."

"All this reading of people. All this vigilance."

"You make me want to relax. You make me not have to be vigilant." She lifted the martini glass and took another swig.

"This tastes good."

"Relax away. You deserve it."

She took yet another drink, almost like she was obeying an order.

"We'll just keep splitting them."

Adam waved the cocktail waitress over and ordered another.

"So he was in with these porno people. Ben, that was his name. Ben. When you think of porno, you think of... I don't know what, but what I thought of was a bunch of wild, big-mouthed, dick-slinging braggarts."

"Dick-slinging. That's a good one."

"But these people, what amazed me the most was that they were so normal acting. We'd get together, order pizza and, you know, watch a movie and bullshit. I didn't think they were saints, but they were no worse than a lot of people. Some of them were even married. I met three couples, and they loved each other just like normal acting people. Sex, it was what they did for a living; a job. No big deal. In fact, when they couldn't do it good anymore, especially the guys, when they couldn't get wood fast or hard enough they got down—you know, because they fucked up at work. One of these guys, I swear, was so depressed he couldn't get it up anymore he actually killed himself. One of Ben's closest friends."

"Were there a lot of drugs? Lot a time there are drugs in these kind of things."

"That's the main reason they were Ben's friends. There's where most of Ben's money was made, from the drugs these people bought. But you know, they could also play monopoly and be happy."

"Hanging out with these people was Ben's way of establishing good business relationships?"

"No, it was more than that. He loved that crowd."

From the corner of his eye he thought he saw Sammy. He focused in: no, it wasn't Sammy. All Iranians, like all Armenians, kind of look alike.

"Sorry," he said. "I thought I saw a friend."

"That's okay."

"So you think these porn stars weren't sex-addicts or anything. It was like any other job. Say you go to work bagging groceries, and come home after eight hours of doing it—you don't become a grocery-bagging addict. Something like that?"

“Exactly like that.”

“Wow.”

“But, this was two years ago. I’ve totally changed. I wasn’t even in touch with myself back then. I wouldn’t be found dead around those people anymore, even if fucking on film was their job. I have more self respect. You see, I was never taught to have self respect. I never really loved myself. A lot of people do things because they don’t love themselves.”

“Maybe there is nothing to love. Maybe they have a good reason not to love themselves.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say.”

“I don’t love myself,” he said. “In fact, there are times when I hate myself, and feel that the hatred is deserved.”

“When people like you say that don’t love themselves, that’s because they don’t take themselves so seriously. When people like me say that they don’t love themselves, it’s different. See, I bet you had a healthy family life.”

“I think by definition a family is a neurotic structure that produces neurotic people. But there are degrees, true.”

“That’s the difference. There’s normal—what you call ‘neurotic’—and then there is dysfunctional. People come out of dysfunctional families emotionally crippled and neurotic. That’s the reason I got involved with people like Ben.”

Just thinking about him made her laugh in disgust. “Porno. It’s totally exploiting women you know. It’s just another way of demeaning women, what men have been doing to women for thousands of years. Sexually abusing them, taking advantage of their sex. But guys are like that. It’s like an animal thing.”

“I’d like to think there are exceptions.”

“Every guy does.” She put a hand on his thigh, and said, “Don’t worry.”

“You don’t worry either.”

“So, Ben was in this crowd. We all hung out. *It’s what they do*, I told myself. Until one day Ben asks me, ‘have you ever thought of doing porn?’”

“No kidding. Your boyfriend.”

“Living with him. Living together. Anyway, I passed it off as a joke at first. I mean, why would I want to do porno? But I was kind of hoping he’d think it was because I was so beautiful or something. I guess I was fishing for a complement, because he never said anything about how pretty I was.”

“He was blind.”

“You’re sweet. You know that, you’re really sweet. There’s something sweet about you.” She sighed, and continued: “So Ben tells me, ‘I’ve been asked by John,’ this was a producer-director friend of his, ‘if you’d be interested in doing some acting.’ That’s what they called it ‘acting.’ ‘And I wondered myself,’ he tells me. ‘You know, it’s a way to break into the industry. A lot of girls start out that way, you’d be surprised.’”

“What a line.”

“Yeah. Wasn’t it, though? Wasn’t it a line? So I ask him, ‘Do you want me to do this, Ben?’ and he goes, ‘I think it would be a great idea. I thought that from the first day. I mean you’ve got a great body.’ I say, ‘You know, Ben, you never complemented me before, why now?’ ‘Oh,’ he goes. ‘Well, we live together. That’s my compliment. But now I’m talking

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