



1. Me and Chuck B.

I first began reading Charles Bukowski right around the same time I was falling off the earth. Hearing that he'd lived a tragic, tortured life made me all the more eager to get involved with his books, to read of his treacherously long, odd soul-searching days at the U.S Post Office, his part-time gig when not entrenched in the written word. How peculiar for him to have had such a wide array of untamed characters showing up at his residence: seasoned drifters from far away posing as fans, presenting themselves at his doorstep; assorted folks driving through who thought they'd just pop by. Poor guy, dodging compliments from illiterates who said they loved his words though had read none; pointless people rallying around his noble bungalow, peering in windows to maybe catch a view of a great writer enjoying a beer and a cheese sandwich. Ah, the human race strikes again. This made little sense to him or his life partner Linda, who'd often be keeping watch, on Selective Security Sifting Mode (I imagined this role for her), fielding requests from the front door, bellowing to Chuck, off hiding in the kitchen, "You have visitors, Shakespeare," but ultimately telling the gang to take a hike and come back another year. "It's not that he doesn't love the admiration, guys, but, he's too drunk off his ass right now anyway...he just wouldn't want you to be disillusioned, is all." She wished them all a Bon Voyage while swinging a sharp wire broom to shoo them away.

"So long, hippy parasites," she cheered sarcastically.

"Scram, vamoose! Slink away, you cockroaches." The woman could be entirely nurturing when she wanted.

The bunch hopped back in their hippie-sippy love van and happily scooted off. "We met the master, man!" they must have shouted as they all high-fived one another, turning up the car radio as loud as it would go, then disappearing onto the next street, to the next task of the day.

These constant ambushes occurring because the youth of this era sensed Bukowski (and others like him: Miller, Kerouac) represented a generation's rebellious view of society. He was only writing what was in his heart and suddenly he's some kind of society spokesman, partaking in what by this time, had become daily involvement in an unwanted celebrity pseudo side-show; his reward for being a storyteller, one whose rare voice of gutsy, ball-gripping' prose and to-the-point

raging doggerels engulfed a nation. The Kerou-wackos scurried off, hustled up more drugs, called it a day, and forgot where old man Bukowski lived altogether.

This was the 60's, man.

Recently, I've had my own share of poignant moments and bewildering escapades in Los Angeles, reason enough to draw comparisons between myself and the horse-race-gambling, portlier, *slightly* more successful Bukowski. Something I don't recall him being famous for was writing bum checks to bookstores and cabbing it to second-hand haunts to get what cash he could for them: that's been my job. His books always brought in a favorable bounty at the establishments I slithered into. Man, they got some sweet deal off of me. I'm guessing the bookshop owner's greed overshadowed his moral ground, but really, who could fault him? My desperation, racing blindly through intersections with stolen words, the soon-to-be profitable works of literature sitting pretty in my accredited accomplice - the threadbare soiled sack; and if the sweat on the brow and the holes in my shoes weren't a dead giveaway, I don't know what was. I must have been some sight. Maybe if I'd schlepped less, showered that week, come in with less of a Neanderthal-like presence, maybe then I could have kept up a better face for my narcotic fun-run, chock full of wily adventures and good times I told myself I was having.

On a few occasions, I handed over the crumpled receipt given to me an hour earlier from the three-storey-high, unsuspecting book conglomerate not yet tipped off to the literary mad genius scam I believed so foolproof, such clever creativity...inevitably my demise. They must have been kicking themselves having trusted me and my post-dated, personal out-of-province checks, my bank account a Less Than Zero affair. I can laugh about it now, a little. After a time I gave up further attempts at acting cavalier and nonchalant, just dumping the books out from the satchel, scattering them feverishly on the counter, the way one might brandish a sour attitude, or a gun in a hurried frenzy, "I'm in kind of a rush. You know how it is...whatever you think is fair."

The similarities crossed over into the bizarre, Bukowskally-speaking, as during one of my most recent stints at a recovery rehab institution, I learned that the distinguished address of 360 South Westlake Boulevard - where I called home for a grand total of nine days - had actually been occupied by the eminent author many years earlier, though at this moment was housing many non-writers and felonious finger-painters. Seems it had been magically transformed into a chirpy dwelling called The Royal Palms Center, though the furthest thing from some balmy, palm-desert-hallowed-ground the name might conjure up.

I was the clock watcher, needing the hours and days to pass quicker than usual so I could make it out of there in my own time and in one piece. Fidgeting and depleted, up at 4 a.m. on account of not being able to sleep from the all too familiar withdrawal game, perched on the rusty blackened fire escape, a solitary spot I discovered up at the fifth-floor window, to rock back and forth, rattle and hum while considering various game plans that weren't working. Passing prayers and fleeting thoughts flew across my mental dashboard, devoted mostly to just how I'd ended up in such a demoralizing all-male recovery dorm. These prayers and thoughts I was privileged to own, as most else was sold or misplaced. "How did I land here? What am I going to do when I get out?" How close had I come to overdosing and dying? Was this my bottom? Did I have anything saved in some reserve tank for another run? Could I control it better next time? I had no way of knowing. Crazy questions nobody I had run into could possibly provide a clue to. I mumbled to myself, considering various occupations I'd not yet taken a stab at, in an attempt to diminish and make light of the cold, illogical end-of-the-line scenario. "I could be a limo driver. Yeah, I could be good at that...meet people, be my own boss, not cooped up in some office, good tips, but that friggin' red tape about a license, then insurance..."

Crawling out to that fifth floor fire escape, a perfect breeze, was the only thing on earth I looked forward to, in order to receive my dose of sanity, an all too sobering symmetry, the twisted station of silence apart from the other court-ordered drug savages; they, a constant static with buzzing backward agendas, having to cope and muddle through amidst their irritating milling about, their rummaging amongst each other's diseased minds that sickened me to see, feel and regrettably be a part of my home team for the time. Addicts don't get breaks, it seems. Not for fucking long anyway.

Directly below, a family dealing in the brisk sale of crack cocaine fiendishly working all hours: a spiffy, finely tuned operation taking place around the clock, a freakish after-hours carnival, night after night, ominous, never ceasing, not that I saw anyway. It inspired dread but amazed me, much the same way *A Clockwork Orange* did as a kid; decadent and intriguing, fear-provoking, nightmare-inducing but strangely, not scaring me off the way it should have.

All sorts of shoppers would drive up in search; high-end, slick subterranean appendectomies to broken-down rusty lime-green Gremlins hobbling relentlessly on their last legs, callous bug-eyed drivers in need, pushing poor blue-exhausted jalopies beyond their own wake.

Colonel Sanchez (I named him) and his chain gang of feisty fools chattered away in foreign tongues, keeping tiny bundles tucked away in their orifices, awaiting the substance seekers to show up to purchase their goods. They'd know precisely when to open the gate and step into the spotlight from the graffiti-strewn apartment complex, to rapidly conduct their openly orchestrated drug shuffle. I gave them credit, such unwavering teamwork. Every actor prepared to play their roles exactly as rehearsed. There should've been a flashing neon sign blinking *ONE STOP SHOPPING TRI 'N SAVE* which would've been monstrously funny.

“Yo, dog, what you doing watching us out here every night? Why don't you get your cracker white ass down here to the party?”

The grand pursuit is going on as we speak, bleeding waterfalls spilling creepy shadows into our cities, towns and streets across this limitless land of heartbreaking unfulfilled need, the devil's agents always advertising, accepting garden-fresh and hasty applicants in their smoke-filled *Mad Men*-like office down the hall, publicly, unashamed, requiring anyone with a human head and an aorta to sign up, grab a name tag and hang out contentedly at the septic tank cooler, excited and assimilated to maybe, finally, belong to *something*, even if it's the devil you don't know that well - yet. The naïve participants for this alluring fury and undefined hunger to survive - an underworld complete with its own twisted primitive set of rules - murky manners, fabricated protocol, things you just don't do, and ways in which to manipulate the team and yourself...like in any other world, be it under or above ground. There's no jubilation here people, enslavement gets to be a cheery upper, served encrusted and awkward. Cheating Death is one thing - to repeatedly laugh in his face, steal his lunch money and perform Oedipal acts with his mother - is another story. Anything went down.

Different worlds co-existing dangerously close, and me, too infatuated, too fucking fascinated with my proximity to the psychotic prowling, no one paying me much mind, mostly.

Occasionally, a squad car would pass by a few streets over and shine a disquieting spotlight down the alley. “Buddha!” or whatever the code word was for that special night shift got screamed out by a guy whose job it was to keep watch and everyone would scatter like unexterminable crazed centipedes. I'd stretch my neck out, further dangling over the outside landing, inhaling the scent of the Spanish spider people scurrying to their concealed cracks, who'd reappear minutes later to continue

Business as usual

It's scary and speaks of uncaring, the trifling inhumane kind, to close one's eyes when others around them are losing theirs, sinking, spiralling south of eye level to a suffocating soil, and me unable to mushroom in a much trounced upon earth; nobody growing with me here at the birds-eye view, deserted and unfed, along with the sweet and sweaty whores lacking manners, even though they turned out to be amazingly supportive spellers when the time came. I knew this because I'd seek out their wisdom, shouting down the occasional crossword query.

"Excuse me there, ladies, um, ten letter word for 'Used in alloys, electrodes and catalysts'?"

"Try M-O-L-Y-B-D-E-N-U-M," one of the girls shouted up to me all casual like.

"You don't say?" I tried fitting it into the puzzle and was instantly amazed that she was bang on.

"Holy geez, it fits. Way to go ladies. Thanks."

"Gladys, you always had a knack with that Periodic Table of Elements stuff. Shit, you're in the wrong biz, doll!" the compliment flew from her friend.

They all laughed like hyenas in the alley up the way while I jotted down impressions of the scene in my notebook, paying enough attention to film it all in my mind. We worked out a system where if they helped me complete the damn thing, then I'd toss down a dollar or two, which they promised would go towards an academic fund, just in case the sex-for-money thing didn't pan out as they had hoped. The tarnished herd could saunter over to the local community college and enroll in a handful of adult night classes that might hope to give them some kind of future, breathe some possibility into their depleted lives, which they told me at this particular moment, in a barely comprehensible floppy Spanish accent it was, "*Not on our Pajendas, Pappy!*" (?) and, they also voiced concern, dead set against, "all that wakin' up early n' stuff." They may have had a point.

Crosswords remind me of mom, of her and I sitting on that green vinyl couch in the cozy den, figuring them out, using whichever dictionary, thesaurus or wordy supplement might assist us in the majestic quest to complete the thing. Somehow, we seemed to bond while this went on, maybe without our knowing the wheels were spinning towards, dare I say, an understanding of each other. Neither of us tuned in to that fact and I'm sure if we became too aware of the development, it would have gotten in the way.

We both shared a passion for words and their meanings. The lure of the crossword held promise, a set formulaic thing that wouldn't let you down, crash into you or rip your heart out; it was reliable, and once completed you even got the feeling of conquering *something* outside yourself. How many things in this world can you say that about?

Once I snuck out to my perch, it was hard not to get engrossed in the Disney Downer Soundstage (I liked to call it) - reeled into the whole scenario. I'd catch Colonel Sanchez and his compadres counting out crumpled American bills, elephantitus-like wads that must have been in the thousands. Had this always been The Family Business? Just how did they fall into this profession anyway? Were they putting their kids through expensive private schools? Needing to keep up appearances?

Risking my Royal Palm live-in status and in an attempt to connect with one of the crew, one night I took hold of that rusty fire-escape ladder and made my way down there, nearly breaking my neck, ignoring for the moment the series of ballistic punishments the counsellors would dream up for me if they caught me off grounds.

I jumped down off the last rung of the ladder, somehow twisting my ankle, embarrassed at my obvious childlike footing, not yet used to the sleepy-time meds they were providing me with in order to help get over the dope sickness. I took a seat at the curb, lit up a cigarette and with slurred speech spoke. "I remember back when I was your age, my father was working as a copy editor at Spitzer, Mills & Bates."

"Yeah, my dad runs a gang and he's going to rip your head off mutha fucker. Gimme your cash and your car keys, man."

"Well, uh, I don't have a vehicle - see, I'm in this rehab. I'm the guy five floors up. You see me all the time," trying to reassure my new friends that I obviously was no threat, "I thought maybe I'd come down and check out the scene you got going...maybe try some of the gross national product." They must have found me a refreshing humorist. "I could pay you with..."

I'm rudely interrupted.

"Get the fuck out of here, Narc." I was no good to him or his family that began to threateningly assemble around me, so I quickly climbed back onto the fire escape ladder like a skittish ring-

tailed lemur escaping from an animal-hating zookeeper and made my way back up to my balcony where it was mostly safe.

Melodic echoes bounced off the concrete minefield, soulful sounds from Isaac Hayes, Larry Heard, The Gap Band and others I couldn't identify. These songs acted as the soundtrack of the night, transmitting sex and smoke, personal meaning and raw sketches of better times - all making its way over from a boom box somewhere nearby, a faded and minor electric blackboard of LA ethics. Pointless poetry filled my head all too often...inarticulate speech, parts of odes and lyrics that once meant something to me, now disarmingly menacing - words flew around that I hoped could help make sense of the fragmented man-child I now was; the rhymes now had their way with me, and the little mercy they did show revealed themselves pounding what truth they possessed atop my confused frame.

A voyage of the damned, the always intact unyielding dawn, my carousel of the macabre holding firm, cinematic cysts brewing in me for what's seemed like forever, what's infected my sub-par moral infrastructure, this stalled carnival in need of interior updates, the windswept boulevard needing a good hosing down. I will tell all, as I am told I'm allowed no secrets in this purge pot, this reeling and revealing revelation in and of

C o M i n g C l e A n .



2. Tropical Travel / An August Scene

I'd like to let you in on some things. To recollect a little may even help me out of this upside down Flint Rubble Bubble of a mess. I'm drained, sickened, scared of the world and don't know how to stop being this way. For not having found suitable tools with which to address daily concerns, I'm disgusted with myself, not to mention dealing with those baffling life questions no one seems to be able to help me with. Further, I can't stand this "unfestive" bachelorhood I drag around with me. This doesn't even begin to address my scarcity of a proper protective force field or necessary but absent resources - others have ways. I seem to have missed the entry deadline, by now far too late to be considered for college classes in *Important Strategies to Keep On Hand 101*. I need some time alone, to think it all through. While at the same time isolation does kind of make for a crummy playing-field to bounce ideas around in, so maybe that's the farthest thing from what I need? What's worse is discovering what you think could be a satisfying calm, but just when you're slipping it on like a snug-fitting slipper, it materializes into something else entirely (wrong-sized stinking rain boots?) and feels ultimately unattainable, even pointless. It's like being on some King Kong-sized outdoor squash court, the wind whipping the tiny black ball around too goddamn fast for you to ever get a proper swing in. There's no time allowed to stop, breathe, to recoup and get a decent look at how to approach any of this, even who (or what?) my opponent is - how to interact with these things getting shot at me. My Play Now, Pay Later Rusty Linings Playbook, too scuffed up and soiled to read, just hopeless hodgepodge hieroglyphics really. I've got to play a part (they say) in my own recovery, find unity in community amongst my fellow humans, somewhere I could flourish (does this exist?), take some action towards ousting the drugs and any other toxic evils from my sewer system of a body, what I'm supposed to regard as my temple, but really, closer to the truth and more to the point, has been remodelled into more of a shack for hanging sea bass in.

I need rest: rest that's been put off and time away from the struggle. Not to mention a quality moisturizer. I'm looking for a magical formula in the anti-wrinkle, anti-oxidant, anti-psychotic department: a lotion or an ointment, a cream, oil, some toner: a super serum to shellack over me so as to replenish my decaying mind. Just maybe?

There is some good news; I feel some minuscule solace in the idea that I should be living somewhere near, if not directly on, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Capricorn* - a city (or island?) where you can speak your mind, that's still edgy and inhabited by eccentrics and sincere nymphomaniacs, but peopled also by the delicacies of childhood; a playground rich and exultant complete with tuxedo-laden man-servants always in ear-shot, devoted solely to providing me with top grade, Italian fresh-roasted espresso...and Swedish massages, doled out by scantily-clad, wolverine-like, sex-starved princesses, but brilliant too, and curious, and eager to massage me out of my grief. I could see myself acclimatizing to such a hot and exotic, but gracious climate.

Now, just how to get there.

I'm frustrated and more than a little put off when I arrive at the L.A airport - these goonish airport security fellows tell me, "You cannot park that...that CAR here, sir!"

Here I was, bags packed, excited to begin what I was hoping to be an unfettered, self-exploratory journey. To my horror, I am denied a coveted schedule no one felt the need to share, when the next flight would be departing, and at what exact terminal: basic stuff one would expect without complication, "I don't know if I quite understand where it is you'd like to go, sir?" My inquiries met with dull wandering monkey minds, Burger 'n Fry's guys and gals concerned only with when their next break would be, eager to resume piling more garbage into themselves and continue their gossiping - the exchange of coveted private pointers on just how to remove mustard stains from shocking, pukey pastel golf course costumes, while marvelling at their own starry fashion sense, and further, congratulating themselves on black market, pungent perfume purchases from the duty free shop. An all too fragmented, vermin-ish bunch that seemed to share little sympathy with my gleaming quest of finding a new home. They had no clue as to how monumentally important this journey was to me.

Not wanting their virtually absolute unintelligible approach to infect me, I scurried off and took a seat in one of the crappy orange plastic cafeteria booths and awaited boarding instructions, along the way helping myself to stale salted peanuts from a mock food stand - a snack I assumed that was - though later was informed, was not - complimentary.

What side is anyone on these days anyhow? Me, feeling excluded, the ungodly unusable air-strip, some dilapidated misplaced runway. (Again, the confidence soars.) Lately, there's been little else to do but live in private created fantasies, a kind of hobby, moot criticisms with surreal characters,

real to me, bizarre and often alarming to others; this veranda with chimes onto myself where I don't contend, don't get disappointed, a mind-set where a large part of my down time is dedicated to not mopping up more severely agonizing messes, tired of that regularity, having just ejected myself from moping round the watery West Coast mine-field, where about the only helpful tidbit I've picked up is that, "*You have to be wiped out as a human being in order to be born again as an individual.*" Again, honing this misfitted charmer I can't help but be, this *l'enfant terrible* I see myself as, so marvellously maladjusted to anything going on around me; muddled, beaten, severely starved for answers. I'm all for finding a way to get re-born, to reinvent myself. I don't much care if it's as an individual, a peculiar smelling cabbie, a self-absorbed artist or an insomniac gravedigger with Stigiophobia, just as long as it's not someone who's stuck eternally hopeless, doesn't reach forward to be anything better and feels dismantled by his surroundings. Especially having all this crash in on you first thing in the morning - that's the worst: to rise and fall in the same breath immediately after opening your eyes, to wake and weep and have the helpless thoughts gearing up full-throttle to rock whatever faith you've got going. To rinse and repeat the cycle before your orange juice, coffee and Wheaties is...well, a shitty way to begin the day.

Another helpful thing learned during scary recesses: when the deflation scenarios stab at you, you might have a fair shot at blowing yourself back up, that is if you can listen raptly and learn from your mistakes. Such hints make for fun and flirty pontificating to spew as luring teasers at social events and company picnics. That is, if one is so privileged to have good-hearted friends, kind souls with solid steady jobs who take an active role in that ridiculous ritual of catching you a suitable female counterpart dragged in from Match.com who'll put up with your *tour de force* of nonsense, for any length of time. I can see the scene clear as the Liberty Bell.

"Guys, it's nice of you to invite me, but I have to say the last thing I feel like doing is getting in that itchy potato sack with that Denise person from accounting you're trying to hook me up with. This is pathetic, really. This mockery of competitive sport, these cheap games are lame, lonely and sad - beyond belief. They're making me feel drastically sub-par and unwell. I'm off to get more pasta salad. And wine."

"Oh c'mon, spoiled sport, we've got a good shot at first prize," says Denise, a tough to look at Cyclops. It continues, "Phil in sales is bull-legged and those other teams look drained and drunk from the day." I envied the imbiber's stick-to-it-iveness. "I need a partner," attempting to grab my

arm and get me “in the sack.” She finally got the message when I put my hands over my ears and began reciting Pythagoras’s Thermos and scaring the children with quick rapid jerky motions as if I was having a seizure, and made strange never-before-heard-by-human sounds not far from what I imagine cows being doused in kerosene and lit on fire might sound like.

This gal Denise had a talent for making me simultaneously miss pretty much any girl I ever loved or who loved me or cared anything about, she had the touch of morbid reflection. For whatever reason, her sad attempts to be cheerful, optimistic all in the guise of getting me to have fun plus my hyper-awareness seeing the mirror (and me in it) not responding well at all, everything all jumbled together. Worse, the sullied scene made me remember this 1st year college essay about Greek literature. “In the kingdom of the blind, a cyclops is a helpful guy/girl to know.” But not in this case, her one eye was so askew, and her solitary dark and furry eye-brow so continuous, then there was the fake color eye, I didn’t know quite what the hell I was looking at, so I became angry at her (unfairly I realized) for making me have to look at her face while at the same time having to take it upon myself to construct a method in which I would seem completely casual and non-chalant.

“Oh, you’re no fun,” she finally gets the picture of what she’s dealing with. “What is wrong with you anyway?”

You’re getting warmer, as I finished the last bottle of wine.

Those unsupervised security fellows have had their eye on me for the last few hours and seem to be taking their own set of notes.

“Can we see some ID, sir?” the airport security minions inquired. I smartly responded with, “Well, I don’t know. CAN you?” Why Smart-Alecky Tim decided to show up for these dudes in blue, I can’t say. Possibly the fact they were just hounding me for hounding sake. I wasn’t doing anything terrible or that could have been considered conflicting with the public. Also, my long standing difficulties with well-shaved authority figures couldn’t have helped my cause.

I catch them whispering in delicate tones, no one wanting to set me off. If somebody would only point me in the right direction, I’d leap-frog away and get out of their hair and finally could jet off on that international flight germane to my new existence, on to the eccentric destination where they lay waiting. (They?) The possibilities are endless, but are cut immensely short once I

realize I've forgotten proper funding and a necessary passport. Come to think of it, I don't have the legitimate ID (ideology?) for this aeroplane undertaking at all. I better go grab the car and drum up the courage to commence the trek back east by way of land. "I guess it's just you and me old man". (I talk to the car sometimes, to boost her confidence. More on the vehicular dilemmas later.)

"I was just leaving but thank you though. Are you Mutt or Jeff? You know fellas, it is good we've got you. I've had my eyes on those homeless gals dressed as nuns, yep, sitting right over there, *pretending*. They don't appear trustworthy, no siree Bob. They seem unclean, unsavory, and I think I saw one of them split without paying for her Orange Julius. Bunch of no-good-niks. You know the type. It'd be in everyone's best interest to pat 'em down, bring 'em in for questioning. I would have done it but hey, you guys have it covered, clearly. I mean, it's your turf, right?"

Sitting solitary in airport detention, a hand-cuffed man in a Khaki-safari-outfit-and-pith-helmet catches my eye, shuffles over my way and sits down beside me. I figure he is either a Jungle Trapper or works at a pathetically-themed-tropical-cinnamon-bun-stand. He launches into a dramatic tale of how he's just returned from The Congo with six Ecuadorian Spider-monkeys, each one worth at least 50,000 Kronkas - which sounded like a lot - but said he'd let me have them for one thousand Loonies. "A steal, at twice the price," he said. (Twice the animal? I thought, under my breath). "Maybe pets might help me take the focus off of myself, even make me feel needed." I thought about it momentarily, and then explained to him that I was on a mission, on my way back to my birthplace and it just wasn't in the cards for me to transport contraband animals that needed feeding, hosing down and proper washroom breaks. I couldn't risk it. Dealing with me was all that I could handle.

Focus was what was on the menu, with a side order of earned cynicism as usual. With an urgency afoot, somehow I sensed the people out there waiting for me to enrich their lives would only wait so long and I just had to find out who and where they were. As well, the little guy's high-frequency whinnying would have driven me completely mad...not from the trapper guy, the monkeys.

A couple hours passed before I was released from the airport's high risk security area. They could sense I wasn't the type to harm anyone but myself, I think. Mutt and Jeff said I was allowed to depart as long as I promised not to darken any airport terminals with my down-in-the-mouth

negative attitude or transfer any kind of monkey, be it Spider or Ecuadorian over any border; basically anything that had a pulse or could be considered zoo-worthy. I accepted his terms, even though I thought he was being, well, a tad unreasonable.

A full tank of fuel is all I've got, so somewhere along the way I'm going to have to sing for my supper, that is if I'm planning on eating sometime in the next few days, and coming out the other end of this Mr. Toad Wild Ride alive.

Time to strike the set. Now, where did I park you?



3. Crossed Country

Cross country travelling, so many stories. Everyone has theirs, and they're all important - to them, and maybe a few uncles and aunts well-rehearsed in counterfeit feelings; strange relations who're sure to put on caring faces when the time presents itself, to listen lovingly to that drab cliché data at graduations, weddings and funerals. I could be wrong, but I don't feel that I am.

I've made pretty good time, passed Vegas this morning and now I seem to be over some unbelievable mountains, which I'm guessing are part of Colorado. I don't map out specific hi-ways to take, don't have GSP or GPS, mainly, I use The Force, but I do have a sense I'm headed east, definitely east. Then it hits me that somewhere along the line I've got to head north. Hours of solitary driving lay ahead; Canada still days away, but it'll be worth it. The air is so thin up here; there's a chance I can't rely on my level-headed reasoning, even some of the heavier trucks pull over to the side of the road to re-establish their footing. I thankfully make it to the top, and the car thanks me for gliding wistfully down the other side of the mountain. I probably could have made my way down in neutral, but I thought it best not to confuse her. I wish more of the trip was like this. Effortless, beautiful, a gorgeous descent, a real breeze.

I'm starting to feel pretty exhausted, more to the point I'm running out of money and won't be able to afford the proper four or five night stay that awaits me somewhere on the horizon. After some tidy calculations, seems I'll have to complete this trip in a scant three days, tops. Maybe I can hunt down some of those speed pills that truckers gobble to stay awake?

I decide to give us a break - me and the 1990 4 cylinder Pontiac Sunbird - so I stop at this ancient gas station, that looks as though it was out of a 1950's American retrospective photography book, time having not messed with it one bit. There's an attendant wandering around inside so I walk in and decide to start up a little convo.

"Excuse me sir, can you tell me which time zone I'm in?" He answers with a Midwestern drawl. "There's only one REAL time zone, son...and you're in it."

"All righty then. Um...hey...you sell those things that help people stay awake when they're driving on long trips?"

“Pepto Bismol? Yeah, right over in that aisle there.”

“No, those little vitamin things, you know, truckers always take them. The quicker-picker-uppers.”

“Bounty Paper Towels?”

Is he kidding? We’re not speaking the same language, so I jiggle back and forth, eyes rolling around in my head, a performance with flailing arms and chattering teeth which I hope illustrates what medication I mean.

“Oh, that. Um, well, we’re not really s’pposed to sell that stuff, man. FDA’s been on our backs.” He winks at me, us now brothers on the same page, I guess - that or he’s quickly realized I’m his type. He tells me his name is Kenton, which was strange enough, as my new dungaree-wearing contact also had a name-tag stapled to his lapel that read Carl. One of the things I managed to pick up in cognitive therapy was that it could be possibly destructive to shut a door when so clearly here, one was opening, or knocking, or was that opportunity? Whatever, this must fall into a category that deserves attention. So, I decide to go with it. Kenton, or Carl, coyly motions to a hidden camera, whispers something that sounds like pig Latin to me and then. “Psssst. Dude, meet me out back in five.” After I take a gander at some glossy car magazines, munch on a child’s size bag of Cheetos and down a frosty Cherry Coke, I shuffle out the back way to meet my new connection.

“We ain’t supposed to sell it to customers over the counter, ya see. But I can let ya have these.” He pulled out of his overall’s pocket a Tylenol bottle filled with mysterious multi-colored tiny pills.

“Yes, that’ll do just fine. Now, my good man, let me see here (flipping through my slender wallet, beginning the financial end of our negotiation)...I’ve got postage stamps, food stamps, my Chevron card and...let’s see here...” He told me I was a real comedian and that he could accept nothing but cold hard cash, so I handed him more dollar bills than I could afford to part with, knowing full well this was none too hot an idea, though I did make a quick calculation that by taking the pills it would cut out the need to eat and stop anywhere decent to sleep, so actually I was saving money. Whoever said I can’t make quick snap decisions on my feet was dead wrong.

He wishes me a bon voyage and I am off again.

Equipped with more to remember, sort out and recall than there is to look forward to, I'm removing the bandages more and more as I feel the Eastern seaboard merging closer with my eager sensibilities. My companion, the sun, still beats down on me with all kinds of reminders, while I zip through what must be ghost towns, some of which boast populations in the hundreds. I blast the car stereo at my own emptiness and solitude, as well as the people who take the world (and each other) too seriously - humorless dark dogs baffled as to just what to do with themselves. This sorry-assed consensus fills the whole continent; nobody's immune to the poisons that seep into human hearts and minds from the periphery.

My sick but speedy spook-mobile announces to the small minded, un-musical, non-writer types here that I've arrived. The townsfolk return my wave, their blank empty faces saying, "Yes, hello to you too, Mister-Big-city-dick-wad, keep moving on, that's right." They man their cornfields and tar paper shacks while motioning to me, "Lower the volume on that God damn radio!" fearful I may stop and request to stay the night, ultimately causing them to shuttle their rosy-cheeked, Daisy Duke look-a-like all-too-curious daughters in tight red and white tablecloth tops back to their barns.

I pull the car over to the side of the road, stirring up a wealth of dust and debris. There wasn't another car anywhere in sight. The sun was going down in the late afternoon sky. It seemed like a good time to be in the moment, even appreciative. I walk around to the passenger door, open it, reach in the glove box and glance at the Helpful Hints Travel Log Book packed affectionately by my last sponsor, Franklin. These poor pamphlets are dreadfully out of date and behind the times.

Do you think you may have a problem

with drugs or alcohol?

H . A . L . T.

Are you Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired?

Ask yourself if you are any of these: it could be the

reason you're craving your drug of choice.

Let's see now, I'm most of these things a good chunk of the time, so where does that leave us? My sponsor said, "Plan ahead," and as my "very best thinking" (as they say in The Program) got me in this mess, I'd better heed someone else's words for a change. I should make a reservation as these past weeks of sleeping in the car have saddled me with car-mopius osteoporosis interrupti,

a whooping cough and some wicked headaches that have been setting up shop for longer and longer bouts the last few days. Hopefully the worst of me - along with all my long-term and recently contracted torments and grievances with just about everybody - are long behind me. Things have got to change. I want and can do better.

I got back in the driver's seat and made my way, still further north and east, away from a family of vultures that seemed to be assembling overhead.

I want to fly at warp speed, motor past every small town I'd never heard of while at the same time stopping everywhere to explore, make notes and take photos. This feeling of freedom is intoxicating: top down, tunes so loud, whizzing through states, spun on my own version of speed. These tiny spark plugs that my morally vacant and greasy gas station anthropoid sold me that promised pep aren't hurting any as far as making the trip skate along briskly.

I'm on my way, on my own and what I say goes. I punch no clock today.

I decide to disrobe entirely while driving. It's incredibly hot and I want to feel the sun everywhere. "Maybe it'll help my body repair," I muse. All that Vitamin D and stuff, and no one'll see. I joke how my car is now a nudy colony for recovering vampires-in-the-addict-relocation-program.

Ah shit, what now?

Damn Highway Patrol. This is all I need. This is not going to be good. I begin to pull my auto over to the gravelly shoulder of the interstate while at the same moment I realize I'm buck naked, except for a beach towel I've got on as a kind of cape. Immediately, I sense this will not be a whimsical meet 'n greet filled with delightful and polite social graces.

I manage to grab onto what I can off the car floor in the back seat that fell out of the costume trunk earlier, blindly assembling a sort of makeshift cop outfit; (co-incidentally) green felt Robin Hood cap - with feather - and a child's flimsy tan cowboy vest complete with a tin SHERIFF's badge as well as a much too big pair of colourful spotted Velcro clown bottoms.

I catch a glimpse of him in my rear-view mirror, moseying on over from his patrol car and right off he's an exact ringer for that weirdo whack-job Colonel Mustard from the game Clue, minus the monocle. As far as what kind of oddball I must have looked like, or from what board game I could have escaped from, I really didn't know. Nothing good or even remotely stylish, no doubt.

“Bonjourno, mon Deiter-Hausen. That sure is one hell of a scooter you got back there, Colonel,” tossing out multiple made-up mixed metaphor monikers, my friendly banter while unravelling maps from other states to cover up and hide my shame. I’m usually better prepared.

“Sir, do you know how fast you were driving?” he asks and receives a dead stare. “Well, I’ll tell ya: 130 through a construction zone and I’ve had the siren on for five minutes back there, ya couldn’t hear me?”

“Well, Officer, the radio was on pretty loud and...”

“And, in THIS great state of Kansas, folks wear clothes when they drive. It’s not in the law books, it’s just kind of a given, ya see? And do you know what the punishment is for impersonating an office of the law?” Which was funny on many levels, as I can’t say anyone in their right mind would have bought the fact I actually belonged to any sort of law consortium.

My vehicle may have flown through their town a snippet of a percentage point north of the speed limit and true, most every stitch of clothing I’d put on for the day was tossed in the back seat, but who would have thought this all would have brought about sirens and condescending looks from pissed-off patrolers? There were no signs announcing, KEEP CLOTHES ON WHILE DRIVING! No picture of say, a grinning Amish lady with a red X through her, holding up some shirts. Where was that sign, mister!?! Yeah, just as I thought. Nowhere. That’s where. But a warning would have been nice, speed limit-wise, clothing-wise. “I’m sorry, sir, you’re so right, I had a situation...” To which there was nothing left to do but shut my mouth as nothing I would have said after that doozy was going to win this fellow over.

“Registration and insurance please, sir.” Can’t remember if I’m insured. I can find no information in this glove box to tell me one way or another. I guess I’m on my own if I get stuck. Nothing new.

My dreamy scene (whatever state I’m in) interrupted by this dim-witted freeway Mountie, needing to fill his required daily nonsense, thus robbing me of my escapist nostalgia. I cast him quickly in the role of a stark backdrop, some pedestrian panorama.

“What was that?” simultaneously shooting me a disapproving disgusted look that told me my faux merry clown suit and effeminate - but manly - Dane chapeau wouldn’t be a hit in this bogus Hamlet of his.

If I survive the next scene I'm going to have to give a concerted effort into keeping my mumbling to a dull roar as too many of these private thoughts are getting too many strange looks on this trip. Again, I'm much louder than I believed, just as he begins scribbling me a number of citations. Knowing there would be no audience response, I gladly approve and commend the hilarious comments under my breath. "Oh, nothing, sir." Feeling a little like an apathetic raven who had flown out of his designated jurisdiction, who doesn't know his place.

"What's with these California plates?" he quips while making notes and circling my vehicle. "Look, mister, having a driver's license is a privilege and in this state we don't drive like that. But I guess you're a long way from home, eh?" trailing off chuckling, tail in hand, probably drunk on dreams of jelly donuts and the heady promise of cellophaned white bread mayo sandwiches, maybe left over from some surreal suburban John Waters-like PTA type picnic. I would have made a joke about dollars to donuts but I'm pretty certain he wouldn't have dug it or even understood it.

Figuring he had heard all the "We're not in Kansas anymore" jokes, I digress, but come to think of it, we ARE actually in Kansas (pretty close, anyway) so there was no joke to be told, which momentarily made me down in the dumps, forlorn like a kid away at camp for the very first time, and getting picked on. This trip was fitting on me just fine, I thought, like a fucking strait-jacket.

I'm convinced there is a spirit that breathes somewhere here, a soul untroubled and tranquil, hidden in these far-off hilltops and vistas...but I'm promptly disappointed; they speak to me - and strangely sound like me - these mountains, and concede they are broken, blistered and dog-tired from the multitudes of hungry tourist's eyes seeking to extract something worthwhile. They declare they are fraudulent and meaningless, standing by, docile, clumped together, having given up trying to be something more than what they are: recipients of embarrassing salutes from Foster-Grant-wearing-Smokey-banditos-of-purgatory. Through trying to explain all this to the reptilian constable, I can see he's lost in my international rhetoric. I love it when others unknowingly make parodies of themselves.

When the police do stop me, more often than not, they're pretty puzzled as to what to do with me, my California plates and improvised erratic accents plus the dual citizenship thing, AND being Canada-bound makes them shrug their shoulders in confusion. They warn me about this

or that. Back in the day, I might have been taken for a draft dodger, but as there has been no draft to dodge for half a century or so, that wasn't the category that I fell into. These highway police folk sure look funny though, all portly and packed in, truly unaware of the power their utility belts wield. Now, if they had capes and masks, maybe pirate swords, vials of truth serum or MDMA - proper pills - that'd be something. As it stands, this one just plain bores me as I play atop it all, thank myself and speed off leaving Captain Sensible the Fully Clothed Commando behind in a cloud of dust. I am relieved as I won't do any hard time for my multiple car crimes. This is a relief, as I look (and feel) drab in stripes and bruises.

I really can't imagine what somebody would do if they ran out of gas in these parts - flag down murderers, rapists and hillbilly local-yokels with pitchforks to assist? Just don't let the tank drop down near E, so I won't have to deal with being fuel-less out on one of these barren but slick seemingly endless highways - it'd drown this whole business of freedom I'm getting used to.

I've left a few messages back west, my sponsor Franklin and a couple people in the program who still gave a damn, the constituents of quickly dimming crevices in my memory now made aware I'm on the wheelchair ramp of life and haven't yet succumbed to the turkey vulture devourings possible in these parched and wicked wastelands. I'm halfway gone, criss-crossing through, in hopes of making it safely across the border, returning to some sort of home base, a headquarters that may or may not still exist, and me, the great divided one.



4. My Haunted Carriage

I arrive at the motel where there's been a manger specifically set aside for me. I requested a room with two twins, the living breathing kind. Management, finding this request less than amusing, downgraded me to a berth absurdly close to the front desk clerk, so the higher ups can keep an eye on me. I'm guessing the quirky but clever remarks made into my imaginary hand-held tape recorder made the on-duty dweeb uncomfortable and suspicious; my allegedly unsocial conduct further ostracizing me from the troops and yet again, helping to build a strong case for an Isolation Chamber. I get him back by mumbling out of earshot, "Ya minimum-wage-earning mullet-headed red neck." That'll teach him, I think to myself, and may have said aloud.

I pop out of my room and walk to the lobby, making my way over to the adjacent bar for a watered-down scotch. By nightfall, when I return, there are two blond, pig-tailed twins in lacy pink Sunday doily-dresses in my room. These girls are groomed beautifully, and seem to be warming up for some twisted Little Miss Crazy, Jon Benet, Honey Boo Boo beauty pageant. With a lisp, one says, "Mommy thinkth I'm thowing too muth leg in thith evening gown, what do you think?" and from the other, "Do you want to see my special talent?" Questions I couldn't begin to answer. While staring through me with a piercing icy gaze, the twin things in precise unison declare, "We're shiny, feisty and super clever. Brush us pretty, mister." The nightmare befalls me.

My idea of a quality assignment with bite used to involve driving across America with a hot-chick-photographer, trying to score dope in every state capital I visit and then writing about it. Today, it's a little different. I prefer to take the pictures myself - getting into my own pants is tough enough - and as far as the scoring of dope, well, I'm much more above board these days (with the grain, as it were) - so to speak.

Being too cerebral and overly analytical while reflecting endlessly on my own peculiar actions - and scribbling myself memos in public - seems to have left me at arm's length from most everything. I've wondered for a hell of a long time just how others get along as well as they do.

Or are they dying inside and have just figured out how to hide it better? I feel I have no way of knowing. Maybe I'm an anomaly and this is simply how things move through me.

There was a time when I had a ceremonial parlor in my mom's basement to pay daily homage to Diane Keaton, a Kafka-esque super set-up complete with a fully-clothed mannequin dressed as the actress, fridge-sized black and white stills from Annie Hall along with melted candles, chalices, sacrificed squirrels pinned to a cork board and a couple shaved llamas. Visitors who'd returned with me to the homestead delicately shared that I was profoundly misguided. I still felt it was an achievement, impressive even, but, more than once ended up being on the business end of mortified looks and demeaning laughter from curious dates with the wrong questions. I've finally assessed that working with an arsenal of morbid though eclectic, ritualistic behavior has left me on the empty side. Further, I've discovered that to be neurotic, elitist and emotionally distraught (though possessing a keen fashion sense and the bizarre talent of guessing perfectly ladies' perfume choices whilst standing beside them in elevators), has become outdated and useless and also unattractive to the opposite sex, and apparently comes across as being really, really gay.

Maybe it's my whole way of being and not just my manner, my gait, my carriage, that's damn outdated and useless (AND unaccountably gay?) T'is also become a rarity to even find a gal who isn't convinced I'm just homo-hypocritical, just hiding in some closet. Not right. True, I've ventured into armoires, a couple of arboretums, a wardrobe (or whatever they're called), but that doesn't count, as I was only hunting around in there for a secret door leading into a mysterious land, some Narnia-like village which certainly can't be considered In The Closet. Plus, since I'm on the council for Hedonism and Deviant Decadence, it makes little sense that I'd veer away from something just because it might be deemed socially odd and non-conformist - knowing me, that would make me wanna do it even more.

I know some French, maybe a few Broadway show tunes (mother's fault), can cook when the situation really calls for it and yes, I've taken those sweltering sweat-hog Bikram yoga classes, but hey, that's only because I was trying to detox while simultaneously hitting on rich, sweaty divorcées while living the grand lacuna in Laguna Beach, California. I've always said that I'm comfortable enough with my own sexuality that I've never needed to act the male beast role. I'm

unhampered by rigid traditionalist notions of what's masculine and feminine, and have never felt the need to adopt that male-gusto-elbows-on-table-open-mouth-pose when ingesting food. And why should I be suspected on account of having refined tastes, minimal body hair or using a few sissy words like Thus or Whence or Tempestuous? And that last one, I'm not even sure I use properly. I do what comes naturally, thus side-stepping any machismo stereotypes. The kind of girl I end up marrying will find me to be an original, sensitive, even intriguing conformist for the first couple years (if that) but will ultimately leave me for a less artistic, knuckle-dragging, more employable type of guy. I'm guessing this'll be unavoidable, unless I can put an act of sorts together. Or at very least pick up my socks and start making some positive, healthy choices. A guy can only act out the scene from *Say Anything* for so long: the one where I'm in a trench coat, standing outside the girl's window holding a ghetto-blaster above my head blaring Peter Gabriel's "In Your Eyes" at an ear-splitting volume, before they in turn see the movie for themselves, inevitably rendering me fraudulent, creepy and unoriginal, not to mention, regrettably, sending all plans I had for enticing interplay - even just cuddling - dismally downhill.

The closest I got to that kind of cinematic-gooey-love-parade-of-intimacy was getting Ione Skye (the lead in that exact movie) to be my sponsor when I signed up in the Narcotics Anonymous program for a spell. Getting clean and improving myself was truly what I was after, but in all honesty it was her narcotic essence and promise of something more that kept me coming back. That was ultra-cool, and made for a great story to tell when I got back to hometown Toronto.

"All right, I'll be your sponsor, temporarily, but you know, you're supposed to have a guy take you through all this."

"What you said at the meeting last night really hit me," I replied, staring at her, google-eyed, a little nervous, almost stuttering. "What are you doing after, my chickadee? A Caramel Macchiato perhaps, mmmmmmmmy treat?"

"You know if you don't take this shit seriously, you're gonna die."

God, she looked and smelled great, just like in the movie. Now having gotten my hands on a personal tutor, a mentor of sorts, I set out to show her I was damn capable of taking this recovery stuff seriously. Beyond excited and raring to go, I began a routine of fetching her steaming hot coffee at 5:30 a.m each morning, to flow fluidly with the billboard-sized black and white headshots

of me in reflective scholarly poses nailed to her garage door and taped up onto her neighbourhood signposts.

I swear I was doing alright: on my phone, genuinely lurking in the bushes across the road from the 12 Step Meeting, monitoring my new sponsor - the lovely Ione - catching her sashaying out of the church with what must have been a new beau, maybe a new sponsee in training? Seeing her reaction to the love letter, candies and roses waiting for her at her car did nothing more than embarrass me, not my initial intention. Me, Mr. Maturity, reporting the sullied scene to my buddy Franklin over the phone.

“Really, I’m...I’m okay.”

“Where are you, buddy?” Franklin asked with concern.

“I’m in the bushes, where do ya think I am? You think I want her to see me, what’s wrong with you? She’s coming out the entrance way. Now, she’s embracing the flowers, she’s looking around...”

“Are you all right?” More concern.

“Stop asking me that, of course. I’m better than all right. I know what I’m doing.”

“Did you finally get your stuff off her lawn like she asked?”

“She wasn’t serious. Wait, now she’s...hold on, she’s stuck the flowers underneath the front wheel of her SUV.”

At that moment the sprinkler system decided to turn on; now, a very tiny Tim, tiptoeing through the awful tulips, the lurker in the rose bushes, socks squishy with mud, thorns jabbing my face. This, a banner fucking day in La-La land. I had arrived. Observing in Technicolor sadness her shooting the chocolates over to what appeared to be a hungry hobo type guy, then speeding off, running over and demolishing the roses, but not before she caught my eye, shooting a scowl my way to let me know I should look for another sponsor and that any hopes of future fine-dining experiences together were looking super grim.

I drop my phone plus my entire surveillance file in a giant rhubarb bush - time to reassess this unorganized amateur stake-out. I abort the mission, shuffle to one of what must be the last few standing PacBell phone booths in California and call my dealer. “What do you mean, you’re sold

out? Shit. What kind of outfit are you running?” Unacceptable. I later dub this day, ‘The Unbearable Darkness of Sharp Thorns and Hating Everything’, but also, make a note to later rework the name into something shorter, less touching and with more of a straight forward and quotable hashtag to it.

While wiping the mud off the phone and powering down, I get in my car (not an SUV) and try to recall the advice that I probably won’t put into play. My sober, philosophically-charged and always right-on friend Franklin, who’s bailed me out of trouble on more than one occasion, said earlier with care, “Look, I think you’d better get yourself sorted out first before thinking about dragging another poor girl through your childish bloody muck heap.” There have been more than a few unhealthy, less-than-spectacular, unhappy endings. Alright, I’ll give her a little space. Next time will be different.

“Where is it I’m going?” and “Do you want to come along for the ride?” Figure out the first one before even considering the next one...Apparently, I’m not supposed to get these questions mixed up or out of priority sequence. I’m supposed to figure out just what I’m doing with myself before I invite someone to co-exist with me and share the joy ride. Makes sense, kind of. Why do I keep forgetting that? Truthfully, it didn’t really take all that long for things to spiral south. With Ione, it ended as these things tend to, painfully and a monkey paw or two earlier than I thought they would.

I enjoyed Ione’s and my relationship (*working* relationship) tremendously and it went, for the most part, pretty smoothly; the cease and desist order and her second-degree coffee burns notwithstanding. Admittedly, I may have been somewhat over-zealous, but to this day, I have trouble comprehending why the heck she won’t return my calls. My heart was in the right place, the stalking was genuine and sincere.

My spooky curiosity entwined with an eerie interest in most everything dark and macabre have propelled me into being someone who repeatedly makes terrible, self-sabotaging choices in regard to drugs (and maybe relationships). Though, rather than define myself as a hyper-active addict, I kind of like to spruce it up, spiff it along if you will, and more often than I say this with a thick English accent, as if I were ordering a spot of Earl Grey Tea, sticking with ye olde reliable, more acceptable-for-conversation stock statement: “Why, yes, at times I have made some rather peculiar decisions in regards to my relationship with substances.” It sounds a little more above board.



5. Anybody Home?

So this is the arena where my dear mother and I are re-connecting, her grand old house in small town, Ontario. I'm allowed to live on this Glass Menagerie stage, that is, as long as I don't rearrange her meticulously placed items from their precious homes. Everything must be just so, right down to the delicate and easily breakable Tetley Tea miniatures and what I imagine to be a snug and comfortable afghan, which would be great to throw over me during allotted TV time, but alas, is only a prop for the show. There's a litany of crumbs to be picked up along with the predictable, unavoidable onslaught of leaves to be raked amongst skeletal trees, coupled with an a semblance of more than 100 years of surviving life (beating death) we've managed to pull together here on planet earth.

We share my Dad, his death, also her second husband most recently taken from her, both tragic, sudden and devastating... The latter more so for her, as my assigned step-monster and I were far from fond of each other.

There's her two strokes, her mysterious Multiple Sclerosis thing that no physician can quite make out what to do with, and of course my frustrations and failures, battles mostly lost out there in larger-than-life cities that've swallowed me whole. It breaks her heart, she says, to see me struggle. It breaks pieces still left in me to think about it.

We also share her Lorazepam, but I'm praying mom thinks the missing pills are the work of a tooth fairy, some foreboding fly-by-night-figure with weathered wings who can't keep track of what cargo she's supposed to pick up and what proper legal tender to leave behind for us molar-less humans. Maybe I could talk this impish pixie into taking me with her, swap me and leave in my place a kind of changeling? Creepy, yes, but I'd like to think I'm open to change. Regardless, she doesn't care much either way as long as she gets a sweet deal for the pills when she arrives back home to her corrupt cloud. I could be wrong. I'm just hoping she doesn't organize a proper Law & Order-like investigation concerning the missing medication - my mom, not the hopped-up fairy-duster with wings who pawns her wands and wares. Mother has her own fantastical explanation for how things operate here on planet earth. We're both trapped in this portrait of unhappiness and illusion and we both have our own ways of coping. So, this is where we'll repair, or at least, attempt to.

They think she might also have cancer, so they keep removing sections of her skin, making her look as though she's been picking and scratching at scabs on her face like a crazed meth addict would, but they say it's a necessary process. I feel awful for her because I know how self-conscious it makes her feel. It's more than a little unnerving, but I think I'm getting used to it. They thought I had Hepatitis C when I got back from California - another reason to eject myself from the pricey American medical matrix I wouldn't have been able to afford - but luckily, they also said that I'm one of the freak cases where the bad blood swimming around in me just kind of eerily vanished. It hasn't shown-up on any of the latest tests so I'm keeping my fingers crossed. Also, none of the pens work here. (She holds on to the unusable ones, for what?) I feel a spooky ironic overtone flowing un-fluidly along with the dozens of clocks tick-tocking away in my mother's kingdom, marking time in this dungeon of threadbare opulence, clearly not mine for thousands of hard-earned reasons, all belonging to her. I hear the cuckoo clock chime, "Not mine, not mine, not mine..."

After zoning out in front of the television for what must have been an entire afternoon, an intense numbing boredom comes over me coupled with hot and cold flashes, a duplicitous soul-curdling recipe. I get the feeling that I'm even more alone in the house than usual, therefore free to forage with ease as opposed to when mom's nearby keeping close watch, so I ignore my strange symptoms and run frenzied into the bathroom, open the medicine cabinet to hunt for helpful drugs of any kind. To come across only Women's A.M and P.M One-a-Day Vitamins is a sorry tale, but I down some anyway. I also discover chewable Vitamin C and Evening Primrose Oil, so I ingest a large quantity - a William Burroughs quantity - knowing full well this'll do little else than arouse a more fragrant scent and jaundiced coloring at my next outing at the urinal troughs. The buzzing serenity of fortified bone structure is not the desired effect, but the evening in evening primrose sure makes it sound calming, like some sort of Valiumy-like-valerian-licorice-root-soother, so I pop those puppies too. Tonight, I eat you all. Bingo! Something that seems to be prescribed by a doctor. This could be good: Medroxy-progesterone and Conjugated Estrogens, though after a quick glance in the DSM reference guide, I learn this omelette of witchy womanhood won't help the likes of me. Suddenly I feel faint and imagine being absorbed onto a drafty 70's game show sound stage - a confusing affair, this unwanted Logan's Run television portal. A kaleidoscope of colors dance and flicker around the room and come at me, instantly calling to the stage a Chuck Woolery-ish game show host-type guy who introduces himself by thumping me senseless over the head with an enormously long metallic microphone, then

evaporates magically, disappearing as quick as he appeared. I'm now orbiting Planet Distraught - a scant galaxy away from my new home, Planet Bizarro, a triple long jump from Planet Abyss, a ghostly ravine most living creatures are lucky to avoid. My fears sometime speak to me. Today they mention matter-of-factly on their way to the gym, that I am the void inside a volcano, not unlike Mars, with all its mysterious craters and hills, endless valleys and peaks. And to also try to include some exercise in my strange days, that it'll help to release serotonin and dopamine. (When did fears get so vocal and scientifically informed?).

I think I hear Mom. Yup, the sound of the side screen door slams. Oh oh, she's hunted me down. She's returned from shopping and I can hear her ominous and ghostly moccasin shuffle on the other side of the door; a frightful and twisted unglamorous *prêt-a-porter*, now too near. Realizing I've picked the booby pill prize and not having the courage to stick around to receive whatever the drab parting prize is, I carefully try not to make any incriminating sounds or actions, and gently position the tiny bottles I was rummaging through in the cabinet back behind the sliding glass mirror.

"What are you doing in there?" she queries. I open the bathroom door, obey my mopey mood and counter, "Nothing mom. Geez, why are you always on me?" Simultaneously slinking past her to the living room where the 100-year-old Steinway baby-grand piano sits. This is an amazing piece of handiwork: brilliant, kind of a deep rich maroon, mahogany maybe, inherited from my grandmother, the piano I learned on that's always sat atop this hardwood floor making the perfect beast resonate wonderfully with an echo of ages.

The rare instrument hasn't been played much in years, still there's a familiar scent of Old English genuine Lemon Oil, as mom still manages to look after it to keep it from cracking and aging prematurely. The strokes and MS have left my mother's motor skills fragmented and discombobulated. Maybe she's a little jealous, as I still have a say in how my hands glide across the keys, and can play tunes she once performed with one hand tied behind her back. She tears up pretty often when I sit down and get playing this beautiful monster that haunts both of us daily for many reasons, though I'm pretty sure I'd just be guessing at what they are.

I've always felt fortunate, how I was introduced to the passions and intimacies of such an eclectic range of music: everything from Debussy's "Clair de Lune," Saint-Saëns' "Danse Macabre" to Vince Guaraldi's Charlie Brown jazz numbers, to pop song singles by Christopher Cross, Toto

and oh yeah, Hall & Oates. This is around the same time I began to hone my improv skills and my talent of playing by ear, in life and at the piano.

Mom studied at the Royal Conservatory as a kid, her Rosedale values and upbringing, now a cruel template. But thank god, she's managed to save all this wonderful timeworn sheet music, not to mention plenty of hardly-played classic vinyl albums for me to pick through. I first heard a good deal of them during those in-between moments - waiting for my parents to drive me to early morning grade school classes in wintertime, my forehead pressed against the frosty screen-glass door, drifting away, listening to the finely-etched melodies from a kitchen radio seemingly set to an old fuzzy standards and classics station, that couldn't help but make an impression on me. What came with it was an ability to instantly conjure up images to go along with the music that started to connect to my heart.

I used to get Mom to sit at the piano and play popular songs I wanted to learn. These were magical times. I'd put my hands on hers and say, "Go" and "Again," then, "Is that it?" It was another world, deciphering the hidden meanings of the notes, clefs and time signatures on the page. Too impatient to sit through proper lessons, I learnt by listening. Blessed with an uncanny musical ear, that unique gift of improvisation really became fun. With an aptitude to figure out just about any song, plus my virtuoso bravura of self-soothing, suspended chord clusters and dreamy yet sorrowful minor nines, the piano would be like a companion for me. Not many things, hardly any, actually, have come to me as naturally. To live vehemently and vicariously through the connected resonating strings, the pedals, note by note, all of it and me, the voracious skimmer, making the music my own. It was all I'd have left after spending all that I was. I still cherish this big old crazy box of wood. "One day you will be mine, all mine, all mine," I whisper to it.

Someday, my poor fatigued mother will pass on and it will be my turn to read a horrifically-sappy eulogy at her funeral, a W.H Auden poem I'll cut, paste and mostly plagiarize - alongside my less than welcome two-cent-stand vestige. I foresee some rotten hazy February afternoon, drizzling sewage, mud sliding down into the dug area the casket is being lowered into at some cemetery named St. John Wartz on the Hill, like it was at my grandmother's burial, that day when those pall-bearing strangers so callously did their job. Standing there, I stood quivering, squeezing my mom's hand so tightly, almost breaking it, these seconds between us...clenching on to her, needing her to offer up something, maybe answers. I became furious and resentful that she didn't have the goods to make those minutes disappear. Stopping the procession, "Hey, Granny, wait...I,

but...wait...um.” Looking up at a sympathetic cousin, “Can’t I...still...say something?” Unable to stop crying. “Gran, no, you can’t go! Gran, no, you can’t go!! Wait. Stop.” I immediately realized, embarrassingly I might add, that I had transformed into a one-manned cheering section for some goddamn fucking College prep-school. Christ, any levity available would have helped soothe while she slipped further away from me, the coffin gaining speed, lower and lower into the unforgiving stupid ground. **B u T n o t h i n g d i d.**

One thing for sure, the joy that was in that piano would change. I didn’t know that the pain from the memories and the feelings of desertion would help make for better song writing. But what kind of trade-off is that? This was the moment I knew there would be no returning to that house down on Alvin Avenue around the corner from that ornamental parkette, near the schoolyard, amidst leafy trees that circled and cast that late day shadow on the kid’s swings, with their pure nostalgic sounds that fed me all along. Plus those tennis courts that were all ease and innocence. Those weekend sleepovers, permission to indulge in Earl Grey tea and stay up late, sometimes viewing slides from her world travels during her younger years where it looks like she’s another lady entirely! That was the greatest. Safe, and cared for. The gentlewoman who was all grace and under whose loving aegis I’d first experienced cards - double solitaire, and bridge as mysterious to me now as it was then. She was active in church, lawn bowling and thinking of others first. I like to imagine her as just away, off somewhere like Belgium, maybe Geneva - some outlandish, maybe Communist city, protected by some Iron Curtain rod, or representing Canada at an Anglo-Saxon cuisine conference or playing in some prestigious international bridge tournament that’s gone into like quadruple overtime.

Incapable of unkindness, she is well liked and needed elsewhere for now. She has information. Knows important secretive stuff, like, exactly how to set a pristine, profoundly welcoming table. She knows where everything should go; how to exquisitely prepare and wheel out the cut-up celery and carrot sticks and the green olives with the things in them; yes, a hugely underrated skill in times of bloodshed and warfare between countries.

I believe most underestimate the intrinsic value of those Triscuits and Turtles chocolate treats Gran seemed to always have plenty of in the pantry, prepped and ready to roll in, in case company came - important captains or generals from one side or the other deciding to pop by uninvited to discuss casualties. Such snacks can be monumental when it comes to improving relationships between countries, grandmothers and grandsons. She had a way of understanding me with just

a look, and also had the best sense of humor I've ever met in anyone her age. So, I'll do my best to be mature and let others appreciate and enjoy her for a while. The governing card council in charge of Card Games Gone Wild - The Senior Episodes, have to hold on to her, temporarily.

Great. Mom has left me another list. "Alright, I said I'd get to it." Amidst her obsession with the daily rituals that I myself would prefer to pass on, but I'll do my best to placate. I've got to get out there to rake up those crunchy Canadian maple leaves before the terrible winter weather returns. Again, both front and backyard need tending to: a seemingly never ending task amidst some desperately needed humor. I'm sure if she could, she'd find a way to keep a tally of me failing to attain the made-up global leafage accumulation measure, some proper per-square-capita-per-day of leaf luggage I fall short of. Seems it's never enough, as the leaves fall faster than I can stuff them into the goddamn Hefty bags. Out of breath, I suggest to Mom we play Beat the Clock and ask her to keep time - how long it takes me to gather all the leaves and shoot the lot of them onto the neighbor's lawn while she rifles through her purse for medication. Mother doesn't find this game funny. This, I can tell, as she begins breathing heavier, shaking her head back and forth. So, I up the stakes, almost knocking her over with an unexpected bonus round question in my best Howard Cosell voice. "This is the last match of the day. You can have what's behind Garage Door Number 1 or settle up and pay off your son's accumulated allowance for the last 15 years." Weighing her options, she opts to head back into the house to hunt down a calculator, I assume. I yell out an offer to paint the entire house if she can pull an albatross, a prescription pad and a chess board out of her ass. Purse. I meant purse. She's back in the house going through her wicker bag as I continue the yard work, remorsefully, on account of I really meant to recommend that other crazy Monte Hall fantasy booze cruise competition, Let's Make A Deal. I don't think it would've made much difference though. The triple espresso latte with twelve sugars I made for myself earlier is peaking in me. I'm at my emotional zenith and am forced into a feisty, playful mood, bouncing into the garage and coming across enough material to construct a flag from a neighbor's tossed-out-wooden-leg I've been saving and an old white pillowcase lying mockingly amidst the hammer and nails area. Though that pillowcase may also have been a handkerchief belonging to someone with gigantism. I tie the cloth to the wooden leg and with a black marker, write **S U R R E N D E R** on it, retreating behind the flimsy partition.

This surrender scene with the flag reminds me of that brief stint in the All-Addicted, Inner City, Non-Traveling All-Stars at that Royal Palms Rehabilitation Center (Bukowski's old digs). I was forced to sing in this recovery choir:

***“We are the soldiers in the army, we had to fight,
although we had to cry,
we had to hold up the blood-stained banners...
we had to hold ‘em up until we died...”***

Or pretty close to that. A soothing ditty I can assure you, and yes, it's been a battlefield. It never fails though, when one is *forced* to sing anything, there will be not one grain of passion. Same goes for sincerity. In an attempt to get on the choirmaster's good side, I joked with him that I had some experience playing the triangle of self-obsession, that maybe he could keep me in mind if they add an addict orchestra. But the comments did nothing more than make the guy mad and doubt my level of dedication.

Rest time was a luxury no-no at the Royal Palms. You were never allowed to just hang out in your room and stay in bed if you felt like it, and you couldn't talk back or offer excuses to the higher-ups in charge or you'd get what little privileges you had revoked. "Don't think you can try that crap on me, mister. You know how I can tell if an addict is lying? His lips are moving." Not entirely true. In retrospect, my lips have spent all kinds of time moving without anything close to a lie coming out of it...not for days in a row or anything; I'm just saying it wasn't terribly kind for the staff to say it was an absolute.

It wasn't enough that we were up at 6:00 a.m scrubbing repulsive toilets and lime-entrenched shower stalls. There was also the herculean task of cooking breakfast, lunch and dinner with the full-time kitchen staff for a couple hundred loud, mostly ungrateful, frenetic insensitive guys. The folks in charge still wanted you fresh and chipper, to be alert for group sessions or - if the need came - to bellow passionately in a pointless choir. Were they trying to kill us, I wondered? We were supposed to have our parts down, memorized and solid, so that when it came time to step up and perform an absurd solo, you didn't make the whole damn group look inept or God forbid, even worse - unmusical.

Phone calls were attempted by me, dialing out on a scuzzy Pacific Bell rotary-dial telephone in the cafeteria; desperate to tell anyone who would listen that this just couldn't be where I belonged. Someone must have made a mistake.

There were the counsellors who I could handle, even have a heart-to-heart with on occasion, and then there were the ones who wouldn't give me the tiniest break, who went out of their way to belittle me. Larry the muffin man, who ultimately ousted me, was one of these guys. I liked to imagine him as a steaming hot but rancid buttery muffin with legs. It seemed to take away a good deal of the power he felt he had over me and the other klutzy castaways. Come to think of it, Larry the blueberry dough boy was the first staffer I met when I checked in. His comments stick out in my mind, like, "The bellhop's off today, so you'll have to carry up your own bag, Sonny boy," and later, "You can't accept collect calls here, who the hell do you think you are?" and "It's time for meditation, get off the fucking phone. This ain't the Hilton, dude."

Then there was the night my mom tracked me down on my birthday from her hospital bed in Toronto. I heard an announcement over the intercom that there was a call for me, but by the time I raced down to the front desk from my fifth floor suite – decked out in brown and white cowboy pajamas with the feet in them – she was eagerly cut off by helpful, kind and cuddly loving Larry. "No, don't hang up! I've been waiting for that!" I yelled. An important call, a rare moment, as my mom and I weren't conferencing all that often; I saw no reason to keep her up to date on every little place I happened to check into. Why worry and upset her any more than she had to be, I figured. "Ah ha, too late. You snooze, ya lose. Got to be quick around here. I'm sure whoever it is will call back. Get back to bed!" Bastard.

In the future, if there is one at all, I'm guessing Mom and I will muster up the courage, even take part in some small victories: times we'll look forward to an event or happening, maybe a day trip together somewhere, the pinnacles in-between the tears, when the pain and suffering from being forced to press on takes a vacation. When genuine feelings might raise above the surface for a quick breath, some moments strung together when the weight of everything we've both been through doesn't have to be part of every conversation, or isn't present every time we look at one another. These are golden and much welcome breaks.

But Mom and I must learn to share more than when the tea is just right. Maybe I can still drum up a good old college try, "Fight the good fight" – as Granny used to say. Who knows? Questions come up, a lifetime worth of them, and Uncertainty – an ugly term I'm getting to know all too well – is a belt I tie 'round myself first thing every morning to kick off the day, which doesn't come off until I *retire* at night, which is sure a funny word for calling it a day.

I only hope that Mom has not activated her own plan of devising a strict drug testing kit for me while staying under her roof. As weird as things can get around here, I wouldn't put it past her.
