



THE HILLIKER CURSE

MY PURSUIT OF WOMEN

JAMES ELLROY

A K N O P F  B O O K

ALSO BY JAMES ELLROY

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A Note About the Author

I will take Fate by the throat.

—LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

So women will love me.

I invoked The Curse a half century ago. It defines my life from my tenth birthday on. The near-immediate results have kept me in near-continuous dialogue and redress. I write stories to console her as a phantom. She is ubiquitous and never familiar. Other women loom flesh and blood. They have their stories. Their touch has saved me in varying increments and allowed me to survive my insane appetite and ambition. They have withstood my recklessness and predation. I have resisted their rebukes. My storytelling gifts are imperviously strong and rooted in the moment that I wished her dead and mandated her murder. Women give me the world and hold the world tenuously safe for me. I cannot go to Them to find Her much longer. My obsessive will is too stretched. Their story must eclipse Hers in volume and content. I must honor Them and distinguish each one from Her. My pursuit has been both raw and discerning. The latter comforts me now. There were always grace notes in with the hunger.

It's been a fever dream. I must decorously decode it. They are all gone now. I'm unbodied without them. If I address them with candor, they'll cut me loose of the fury. My grasp may recede to a touch in retrospect. I'll find the answer in dreams and waking flashes. They'll find me alone and talk to me in the dark.

PART I

HER

The numbers don't matter. It's not a body count, a scratchpad list or a boast. Statistics obscure intent and meaning. My toll is therefore ambiguous. Girlfriends, wives, one-night stands, paid companions. Chaste early figures. A high-stat blitz later on. Quantity means less in my case. Culminated contact means less than that. I was a watcher at the get-go. Visual access meant capture. The Curse incubated my narrative gift. My voyeur's eye pre-honed it. I lived a kiddie version of my twisted heroes thirty years hence.

We're looking. We're eyeball-arched and orbiting in orbit. We're watching women. We want something enormous. My heroes don't know it yet. Their virginal creator has not a clue. We don't know that we're reading personae. We're looking so that we can stop looking. We crave the moral value of one woman. We'll know Her when we see Her. In the meantime, we'll look.

A document denotes my early fixation. It's dated 2/17/55. It predates The Curse by three years. It's a playground shot in Kodak black & white.

A jungle gym, two slides and a sandbox clutter the foreground. I'm standing alone, stage left. I'm lurchlike big and unkempt. My upheaval is evident. A stranger would mark me as a fucked-up child in everyday duress. I have beady eyes. They're fixed on four girls, huddled stage right. The photo is rife with objects and children in lighthearted movement. I'm coiled in pure study. My scrutiny is staggeringly intense. I'll re-read my mind from 55 years back.

These four girls bode as The Other. I'm a pious Lutheran boy. There can be only one. Is it her, her, her or Her?

I think my mother took the picture. A neutral parent would have cropped out the freaky little boy. Jean Hilliker at 39: the pale skin and red hair, center-parted and tied back—my features and fierce eyes and a sure grace that I have never possessed.

The photo is a windowsill carving. I was still too young to roam unfettered and press my face up to the glass. My parents split the sheets later that year. Jean Hilliker got primary custody. She put my dad on skates and rolled him to a cheap pad a few blocks away. I snuck out for quick visits. High shrubs and drawn shades blocked my views en route. My mother told me that my father was spying on her. She sensed it. She said she saw smudge marks on her bedroom window. I read the divorce file years later. My father copped out to peeping. He said he peeped to indict my mother's indigenous moral sloth.

He saw her having sex with a man. It did not legally justify his presence at her window. Windows were beacons. *I* knew it in my crazed-child rush to The Curse. *I* entered houses through windows a decade hence. *I* never left smudge marks. My mother and father taught me that.

She had the stones. He had the bunco-artist gab and the grin. She always worked. He dodged work and schemed like Sergeant Bilko and the Kingfish on *Amos 'n' Andy*. The pastor at my

church called him the “world’s laziest white man.” He had a sixteen-inch schlong. It dangled out of his shorts. All his friends talked about it. This is not a whacked-out child reconstruction.

Jean Hilliker got bourbon-bombed and blasted the Brahms concertos. Armand Ellro subscribed to scandal rags and skin magazines. I got two days a week with him. He let me stare out his front window and fuck with his binoculars. My ninth birthday arrived. My mother got me a new church suit. My dad asked me what I wanted. I said I wanted a pair of X-ray eyeglasses. I saw them advertised in a comic book.

He yukked and said, Okay. He sent a buck in through the U.S. mail. My wait was grindingly attenuated. I made lists of all the school and church girls that I could see naked. I concocted ways to tape the glasses to my toy periscope. It would provide instant window access.

I waited—March, April, May, ’57. Late spring through the summer. I couldn’t track the sale. I had to trust the manufacturer’s honor and efficacy.

The wait derailed my fantasy life. I spun out in new directions. I sat in my mother’s clothing closet. I loved the smell of her lingerie and nurse’s uniforms. I swiped my dad’s binoculars and spied on a neighbor lady. I saw her reach under her blouse and pluck at her bra strap.

Fall ’57. The Long Wait. Mickey Spillane wrote a book with that title. Spillane was the king of the anti-Commie thriller. My dad had a special shelf for his Spillane tomes. He said I could read them on my tenth birthday.

It’s the Season of My Discombobulation. It’s winging into the Withering Winter of M. Dipshit Discontent. I was agitated. The TV news scared me. The Russians launched *Sputnik*. Colored kids caused chaos at Central High School. I was dreading Christmas. My mother had scheduled a trip to Madison, Wisconsin. We were going to see her sister. Aunt Leoda married a Catholic. My dad thought she was Red.

The X-ray eyeglasses arrived.

My dad forked them over. I unwrapped the package and put them on. I squinted through colored cellophane. I peered around our living room. It was tinted turquoise.

The walls didn’t melt. I couldn’t see the crisscrossed beams under the plaster. My dad laughed at me. Sandra Danner’s house was three blocks away. I sprinted there, full tilt.

Sandy and her mom were up stringing Christmas lights. I put my glasses on and stared at them. They laughed at me. Sandy touched her head and twirled a finger. It was ’50s-speak for *He Craaaaazy*.

The glasses were a shuck. I knew about confidence schemes from *Whisper* magazine. Hucksters sold elderly stiffs plutonium mines in the Alps. They bilked the old cocksuckers and sent them to the poorhouse. I ripped the glasses into shreds of cardboard and cellophane. Sandy Danner went *He Craaaaazy* again. Her mom offered me a cookie.

I ran back to the pad. My dad was still laughing. He gave me my consolation prize: a new baseball. I chucked it out the window. My dad yukked and told me to shake a leg. We were going to a movie up in Hollywood. My flight east was that night.

The flick was called *Plunder Road*. Psycho losers loot a train loaded with gold bullion. Two

of the guys had zaftig blond girlfriends. They wore tight blouses and pedal pushers. The theater was near empty. I moved closer for a better orb on the chicks. My dad lobbed Jordan almonds at my head and chortled.

The heist went bad. The Main Loser and the Main Blonde welded the bullion to the front bumper of her car and chrome-plated it. They headed out to T.J. on the Hollywood Freeway. Malign fate intervened. The Main Loser and Main Blonde got in a fender bender. An alert cop noticed the gold underplating and wasted the Main Loser's ass. The Main Blonde pitched some boo-hoo. Her big chichis shook.

The movie spooked me. My wig was loose. I didn't want to fly to Dogdick, Wisconsin. My dad strolled me down Hollywood side streets and cut north on Cherokee. He installed me on the front steps of a building. He said he'd be inside for an hour. He gave me a comic book and said, Don't roam.

I was a dirty-minded child with a religious streak. My shit detector clicked in, resultantly. My mom told a friend that my dad craved skirt action. I heard my dad use the term *fuck partner*. I concluded this: He's porking the Main Blonde from the movie.

I noticed a half-full jug of cheap wine by the mailbox bank. I guzzled it and got goofy and euphoric. I'm tanked. I go window-peeping.

Cherokee north of the Boulevard. Spanish apartment houses and bungalow courts. Windows ringed with Christmas lights. Low first-floor windowsills. Perch spots for a tall little boy hot to LOOK.

I was blitzed. It was 53 years ago. I know I didn't see the Main Blonde or my dad in the saddle. I know I saw a fat guy flipping burgers. I know I saw a skinny lady watching TV.

It all blurred then. Booze blackout—age nine.

I recall a queasy cab ride. I'm back at my mom's pad in Santa Monica. I'm in my church suit. We're on an airplane. Jean Hilliker's wearing a blue serge dress and holding an overcoat. Her red hair is cinched by a tortoiseshell barrette. She's drinking a highball and smoking a cigarette.

I leaned close. She misunderstood my intent and ruffled my hair. I wanted to nuzzle her and taste the bourbon. She didn't know that.

I dozed off. Jean Hilliker dozed off. I woke up and watched her sleep. She was 42 now. She was boozing more. It showed on her face. She went back to Hilliker, post-divorce decree. She stigmatized me. Her pride, my bifurcated identity. I killed off the dregs of her highball and ate the cherry. It gave me a residual jolt. I saw a woman enter a lavatory at the rear of the plane.

I traipsed over and perched near the door. Passing adults ignored me. Women used the lavatory facility. I hovered and heard the door locks click. The women exited and scowled at me. I read biblical censure on their faces. One woman forgot to lock the door. I barged in accidentally on purpose. The woman shrieked. I saw sheer nylon stockings and some skin.

Madison, Wisconsin, was lake-bound and penguin-shit cold. A snow-covered field flanked Aunt Leoda's house. I got into a snowball fight the first day. An ice-crusting ball busted up my

face and loosened some wobbly teeth. I holed up in a back bedroom and brooded.

My cousins were off being happy kids at Christmas. Jean Hilliker was off with plain-Jane Aunt Leoda and porky Uncle Ed. Uncle Ed sold Buicks. My mother purchased a red-and-white sedan from him. The plan: drive the fucker back to L.A. after New Year's.

I brooded. The practice entailed long stints alone in the dark. I thought about girls then. brain-screened girls I'd seen at school and at church. It was a pure visual panoply. I did not impose story lines. I have formally brooded through to this moment. I lie in the dark, shut my eyes and think. I think about women primarily. I quite often tremble and sob. My head swells in sync with women's faces merged with improvised stories. History intercedes. Great public events run counterpoint to deep human love. Women glimpsed for half seconds carry spiritual weight equal to my long-term lovers.

Bumfuck, Wisconsin, was a drag. My mouth hurt. The fucking snowball sliced my lips. I couldn't kiss Christine Nelson from school. My dad said he knew a TV babe named Christine Nelson. She was married to a Hebe named Louie Quinn. Chris was a nympho. She flashed her ass and snatch at him at some movie-biz party.

The adults came home. My mother brought me a library book. It was wholesome kids' fare full of mystical shit. It pertained to witchcraft, spells and curses. My mother turned the bedroom lights on. I had to read rather than brood.

The book jazzed me. I tore through it quicksville. It felt like it was written for me. The mystical jive derived from my ancestral home of Shitsville, Great Britain. Magic potions abounded. Warlocks guzzled secret brews and had visions. This wowed the incipient boozehound and dope fiend in me. The overall text buttressed religious lore I believed in then and believe in today.

There's a world we can't see. It exists separately and concurrently with the real world. You enter this world by the offering of prayer and incantation. You live in this world wholly within your mind. You dispel the real world through mental discipline. You rebuff the real world through your enforced mental will. Your interior world will give you what you want and what you need to survive.

I believed it then. I believe it now. My many years in the dark have confirmed it as my primary article of faith. I was nine then. I'm 62 now. The real world has frequently intruded on my spells in the dark. That book formally sanctioned me to lie still and conjure women. I did it then. I do it still. That book described the destructive power of formal invective. The notion of The Curse did not feel prophetic in late 1957. It was simply a footnote to my license to fantasize.

I have a superbly honed memory. My time in the dark has enhanced my process of minutely detailed recollection. My mental ruthlessness asserted itself early on.

I needed a Curse a few months later. I was insolently well prepared.

The new Buick was a full-dress road hog. It had wide whites and more chrome than the *Plunder Road* death sled. I wanted to zoom it back to L.A. and see my dad. I wanted to resume my fantasy life back on my home turf.

The adults went nightclubbing on New Year's Eve. A German immigrant girl baby-sat me

cousins and me. She was 17 or 18, acne-addled and plump. She wore a reindeer blouse and flannel skirt with a pink embroidered poodle. She emitted Hitler-Jugend vibes.

She tucked me in last. The bedroom door was shut. Her fluttery presence felt un-kosher. She sat on the edge of the bed and patted me. The vibe devolved. She pulled down the covers and sucked my dick.

I dug it and recoiled from it in equal measure. I withstood thirty seconds and pushed her off. She talked a Kraut blue streak and bolted the room. I killed the lights and brooded over the bad juju.

I felt sideswiped, more than assaulted. I recalled the magic-spell book. I figured I could brew a blank-memory elixir. I could create X-ray eye powder at the same time. I got bilked on those glasses. My secret eyeball blend would set that straight.

I fell asleep in '57 and woke up in '58. Jean Hilliker and I split Madison in snow flurries. It worsened a few hours in. We crossed the Iowa border. The road froze. The snow turned to ice. My mother pulled over and bundled me in the backseat. Cars lost traction and brodied off the highway. Wheels slid on slick blacktop. Low-speed collisions multiplied. Fool drivers smoked their tires down to bare tread and skittered into cornfields.

Jean Hilliker *winked* at me. She was *performing*. I've got the entire sequence freeze-frame. She wore a tartan scarf over her hair and a brown overcoat. She pulled back onto the road.

I watched. She chain-smoked as she maneuvered. She worked the pedals in her stockings and feet and gained ground in low gear. Cars caromed, bumped and rolled backward all around us. Jean rode the slow lane and sliced mud with her right tires. Ice shards bombarded the windshield. Jean ran the defroster and melted the ice on contact. The car was steam-room hot. Jean ditched her overcoat. She wore a short-sleeved blue blouse underneath it. I noticed how pale and lovely her arms were.

We skidded in and out of mud troughs. We clipped rural fence posts and sheared off our right sideview mirror. Jean scanned the road for no-ice patches. She stayed ahead of backward sliding cars and kept her eyes peeled for new ones. She gripped the steering wheel loosely and braced it with her left knee. She smoked cigarettes, white-knuckled.

The weather shifted. The ice mulched and set the road traversable. We turned into an auto court and got a room for the night. It featured timber walls inset with plaster moldings. My mother found a string quartet on the radio. We were sweat-soaked from her boffo play with the defroster. I showered first and put on pajamas.

She felt different that night. She overtook my dad within my crazy heart for a moment. Her eyes were tight and gray-flecked some new way. She had smiled and went "Oops" every time she banged a mailbox.

I pretended to sleep. She walked out of a steam cloud and towed herself off, naked. I slit my eyes and memorized her body for the ten zillionth time. She never hid her nakedness. She never flaunted it. She was a registered nurse. Her nakedness was always deadpan working on brusque. She was a woman of science and undoubtedly equated sex with cellular function. She wanted me to ask her the facts-of-life questions. She wanted to vouch for her stance as an enlightened mother and the first Hilliker to attend college. I didn't want abstract responses. I wanted to know about Her and sex in an enticing manner with

mystical bent. I wanted God and Her and her separate world in perfect proportion.

I had seen her in flagrante before. This geek Hank Hart was her first post-divorce squeeze. I got some of the mechanics down and stood back from the doorway. Hank Hart had lost a thumb in a drill-press mishap. My mother had lost the tip of one nipple to a post-childbirth infection. I skimmed the Bible and my dad's scandal rags for a sex-with-missing-body-part parlay. I got adultery condemned and Sinuendo. I went back to eyeballing women for my answers.

We cleared the storm zone the next day and turned right in Texas. I scoped out girls passing cars and scratched my balls on the sly. My mother said we might move in February. She was hipped to a house in the San Gabriel Valley. Our gelt was running thin. We were splurging on cheeseburgers and rustic motels. The Buick slurped high-test gas through four fuel carburetors. We laid up in Albuquerque and went to a movie. It was a seagoing turkey called *Fire Down Below*. The stars: Robert Mitchum, Jack Lemmon and Rita Hayworth.

I pointed to Hayworth's name on the screen. My mother *glared* at it. My dad went back to the '30s with *La Roja Rita*. It pre-dated his circa '40 hookup with Jean. Rita was half Angl, half Mex aristocrat. My dad was working as a croupier in T.J. Rita's father hired him as a watchdog Rita and deter mashers. My dad told me that he poured Rita the pork. I cannot verify this assertion. My dad *did* enjoy a long run as Rita's chief stooge. Rita sacked his laz, circa '50.

My parents defied easy classification. Jean Hilliker hit L.A. in late '38. She won a beauty contest, tanked a screen test and returned to Chicago. She lived in a big pad with four other nurses. A beefy bull dyke ruled the roost. Jean got pregnant, tried to scrape herself and hemorrhaged. A doctor chum undid the damage. She had an affair with him, dumped him and married a rich stiff. Marriage #1 fizzled pronto. Jean remembered how good L.A. looked and caught a bus. A friend knew a ginch named Jean Feese. Jean F. was wed to a hunky drift named Ellroy.

They met, they sizzled, they shacked. My dad dumped Jean #1. Jean #2 got pregnant in '47. They got married in August. A troubled pregnancy foretold my rapturously troubled and memoir-mapped life.

I never got Rita Hayworth. She was plucked, lacquered, varnished, depilatoried, injected and enhanced. She shit-canned my dad before the Hilliker-Ellroy marriage imploded. She was my dad's defaulting deus ex machina. He had a sweet deal with Rita. She blew it—not him. There were more sweet deals ahead. Other Ritas were out there. He would glom himself onto

It was loser shtick to a dipshit child predisposed to believe it. I heard it expressed plaintively, whiningly and disingenuously. Jean Hilliker heard it shrieked, sobbed and bellowed—behind bedroom doors closed to me. She underestimated my ability to eavesdrop and extrapolate. She did not credit me with a knack for decoding sighs. She went at my father with less volume and pathos. I watched her sadness and fury build from the inside out. I never *heard* her say it. I watched her think it and suppress it from the outside in.

You're weak. You live off of women. I won't let you take much more of me.

I knew it was true—then.

I sided with him—then.

I hated her then. I hated her because *he was me* and once he was gone I'd be alone with the breadth of my shame. I hated her because I wanted her in unspeakable ways.

I was an Ellroy then. I'm a Hilliker now. *Our* pride, my bifurcated identity.

My father made me his co-defiler. His mantra was, *She's a drunk and a whore*. I cravenly acceded to the dictum. He told me he had private eyes tailing my mother. I believed it then. I know it was hoo-ha now. It didn't matter then. *Cherchez la femme*. The imagined detective led me to women.

All solitary men were detectives. All male pedestrians were detectives. All men hiding behind newspapers were specifically tailing me. My dad employed at least one who worked for a detective agency. An equal number of gumshoes were stalking my mother.

My father was out discovering the next Rita Hayworth. His job description was "Film-Biz Slave" and "Hollywood Bottom-Feeder." He was tapping some fantasy windfall. He scored the big bowl of bread that Sergeant Bilko and the Kingfish fell short of in pratfalls and green. Private fuzz ran pricey. My dad loved me *that* much. A flatfoot fleet safeguarded me. Fleet #2 tailed the round-heeled redhead to juke joints and hot-sheet motels. Moral turpitude was a tough sell. Kiddie-court judges usually sided with the mom. My dad had film-biz clout. He had the lowdown on bribable Jew judges. He just slipped Perry Mason a fat retainer.

That wowed me. I watched *Perry Mason* every week. My case might wind up on TV.

My school was on Wilshire and Yale. My pad was off Broadway and Princeton. San Monica had semi-brisk foot traffic. I walked to school most days and dawdled home indirectly. My roaming range was two miles in circumference. Wilshire was dotted with cocktail caves and auto courts. I grooved the Broken Drum, the Fox and Hounds, and the Ivanhoe. I loitered outside and watched the detectives enter and split. I gave them perfunctory glances and shifted my gaze to any and all nearby women. I confirmed that my dad's goons were on the job and went wild with the adjoining scenery.

It's a fifty-year-old blur in '50s film-process color. It's etched in VistaVision and Sinerama. There're stop frames and jump cuts that signify new stimuli and depict my divided attention.

Some details remain ripe. Uni High coeds pour off the Wilshire bus. One girl dangles her schoolbooks, cinched by a brown belt. I side-tail a chubby girl. She's bare-armed. One dress strap keeps falling, she keeps retrieving it. She's got dark stubble, all powder-flecked. I watch women enter rooms at the Ivanhoe. One woman is Italianate and picks at her stocking run. Bus stops were good spots for repeat eyeball business. I saw the same detective at San Monica and Franklin several times. He was always chatting with a neighbor lady. She wore a dark green dress one day and showed boocoo back. The zipper was stuck above her bra strap. She told the man she worked in Beverly Hills. She carried a briefcase instead of a purse. I placed her age as Jean Hilliker's age. She always smoked a last cigarette and dropped it ahead of the right-front bus wheel.

I waited for her one evening. I was *nine* years old and just that obsessed. The westbound bus dropped her across the street from the outgoing bus stop. I tailed her to a crib on Arizona. She opened the door and saw me. She gave me a schizy look and shut the door. I never saw her again.

It was surveillance within surveillance. I breezed through coffee shops, used the can and

breezed out. I entered lounge lairs verboten to children and eyeballed the bar. I saw women reflected in above-the-bar mirrors. I saw women twirl ashtrays and look pensive. I saw women dangle low-heeled shoes off one foot.

Samo High and Lincoln Junior High were close to my pad. Kids materialized on my block around 4:00 on school days. Boys and girls together. Older kids. The girls hugged their schoolbooks and swerved their breasts. One girl rested her chin on her books and swayed as she walked. She always lagged behind the other kids. She was pale. She had long dark hair and wore glasses. She lived one courtyard over from me. I didn't know her name. I decided to call her "Joan."

I spied on her bungalow. I saw her reading a few times. She sat in an easy chair crossways and wiggled her feet. I studied her family life. Her dad wore a Jew beanie and doted on her. Mom favored the doltish kid brother. I have thought about Joan and prayed for Joan for 50 continuous years. I considered her a prophet then. I was correct. The real-named woman Joan appeared 46 years later. She was that wish-named high school girl, physical point by physical point.

Both Joans are gone now. The real-named Joan had stunning gray-streaked hair. It's been four years since I've seen her. I heard she had a child. I wonder how much more gray hair swirled through the black.

We made it back to L.A. on gas fumes and a buck-98. The Buick was paint-pocked and missing that right mirror. I returned to my roamings and ruminations. Jean Hilliker went back to bourbon and Brahms and her nurse gig at Airtek Dynamics.

I didn't think about the magic book or the Nazi chick and her aborted knob job. I didn't brew potions. I got pissed at my mother after church one cold morning. I told her to beware —my dad had hired Perry Mason to get custody of me. Jean Hilliker found this sidesplitting. She explained that Perry Mason was a TV fiction. Moreover: That beetle-browed actor's swish.

The old man kept bugging me to spy on my mother. He kept calling the crib and driving me to her batshit. She kept bringing up the move to the suburbs.

She persisted, she insisted, she blathered, she cajoled, she lied. "The Suburbs" euphemism/propaganda/forked-tongue doublespeak. The San Gabriel Valley was blast-over exile. Renegade rednecks and waterlogged wetbacks. A shit-kicker Shangri-la.

Of course, we moved there.

Of course, she died there.

Of course, I caused her death.

I throw myself at women and talk to them alone in the dark. They speak back to me. They have convinced me of my guilt.

We left right before Valentine's Day. I slid a card embossed with a big red heart under Joan's door. I bought the real-named Joan a Valentine's card and a blouse 48 years later. We made love in a hotel suite and planned our wedding.

It ended soon after. I'm alone with Joan imagery now. I'm mentally watching her age and

grow stronger. She's inside me with all of the others, each and every one distinct.

My dad got me. He alleged fluke providence. He didn't have to retain Perry Mason or brilliant Jew judges. We were both relieved and gratified. The murder went unsolved. I dodged the issue of my guilt and breezed through a season of adult solicitude. Nobody blamed me. *There she is there*. Isn't he brave and cute?

Alas, no.

Summer '58 unfurled smoggy and powder blue. I stalked girls at Lemon Grove Park. I stole a chemistry set, mixed powders randomly and sweetened my potions with Kool-Aid. I watched the *Criswell Predicts* TV show devotedly. Criswell was a fruity guy with a cape. He foresaw the future and spoke portentously. He exemplified the shuck of self-confidence. I studied him and honed my act under this boob-tube spell. The Mighty Elroy has decreed: You will drink this sacred elixir and disrobe!

The caustic chemicals outwafted the Kool-Aid. No girls put their lips to my cups. I dodged murder-one indictments *again*. Credit me with avant-garde panache. My shtick dramatically preceded the Jim Jones Massacre.

A nearby five-and-dime sold various brands of X-ray eye glasses. I stole them all and tried them all and got nil results. I bopped out to the Andrews Hardware Store. They sold infrared binoculars for night hunters. *I was a skin hunter*. The binoculars were expensive and too big to swipe. I aimed them at female patrons and saw my clothed prey in a red haze. A few women laughed and patted my head. *Awwwww*, isn't he cute?

Alas, no.

I lived to read, brood, peep, stalk, skulk and fantasize. My reading focus zeroed in on kid crime books and lingered there all summer. Rich kids from happy families solved murder. Ordered worlds got resurrected and nobody got too fucked-up. There were no Weegee-like photos. Homicide was sanitized. No semen stains, no blood spray. No locked-limb rigor mortis.

Formulaic pap. My sublimated dialogue on the Jean Hilliker snuff. Triage therapy that prepared me for Mickey Spillane.

Mike Hammer was a chick magnet and a Commie-snuff artiste. He pistol-whipped left wingers and bit women's necks. He was dutifully dichotomized. He brutalized bad men and saved virtuous women. Mike Hammer's quest became my moral credo. There was one major sticking point that vexed me.

Not all women expressed virtue. Some women were shrill and usurious. One woman was really a man with an implied donkey dick. Society women were One-Worlders and Comsymps. Mike Hammer slapped bad women around. Mike Hammer shot the big-dick he/she in cold blood. I could not read those passages. I could not endure depictions of violence on women. The same dynamic held with TV and film fare. *I could not see it*. I had

shut my eyes. I banished hurt women from my purview. I insisted that my maimed women remain off-page and offscreen. It was a bedrock of empathy within my overall kiddie-no-predation.

Hurt women brought me back to Her. Mental tenacity kept my guilt suppressed. I was a sex-crazed little boy *before* the death I mandated. I tamped down the upshot now. The focus of my will was, and is, the ability to exploit misfortune. Puberty boded. My hormones hosannaed. The stimulus of All Women All The Time forced me to contain the obsession. I was already a seasoned brooder and watcher. I started telling myself stories to rein it in.

Savior-of-women fantasies. Romantic tableaux set against history. Mike Hammer said misogynist text.

I got hopped up on the Black Dahlia murder case. Starstruck girl hits L.A. and winds up severed and dumped. It's another unsolved woman snuff. It's L.A. '47, again in SinemaScope.

I saved the Dahlia, alone in the dark. I killed her killer and resuscitated her with magic potions. I time-traveled. We dined at defunct hot spots resurrected from old photographs and impromptu imagery. We made love in a bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel. My dad and Rita Hayworth were our flunkies. They shagged us chow from Ollie Hammond's Steak House. I wasn't a skinny kid with emergent acne. I was Zachary Scott with that cool mustache and my dad's giant dick. The sexual mechanics were virgin-boy fantasia. A filtering process came and went and often shut down my narrative steam. I would see my mother in bed with Harlowe Hart. I would blot the image out and pray it away.

The Dahlia was a frequent co-star. I denied her martyred kinship with Jean Hilliker. A morbid subtext slammed me to Dahlialand. The same death sense shocked me and boomeranged me to my present-day world. I created stirring unions with local girls and their mothers.

I lived in a hotbox dive adjoining swank Hancock Park. Ritzy houses were arrayed in three directions. My dad and I owned a baleful beagle. She was dominant. She bit us and kept us on line. She defied housebreaking. She turned our pad into a dog-dung *demimonde*. The scene socked itself in and accreted. I took the dog for long late-night walks and peeped Hancock Park windows.

The girls went to posh private schools. They wore pastel uniform dresses by day and prepped-out civvies in the evenings. Madras shirtwaists and tartan kilts. Gingham button-downs inherited from big brothers. Sherbet-shade gowns for cotillions.

The girls were stunning in their collective pedigree. The girls were individually lovely as I peeped them in prosaic context. I had a secret compact with them. My access was God-like. It fueled my hunger and assuaged my privation in alternating heartbeats.

I took the girls home with me and talked to them in the dark. They spoke back to me in candid whispers. I concocted kid stories suffused with social-class struggle and love-conquer-all elation. My girls were never standard pretty or comely in prescribed ways. I was always looking for the physical flaw or distinction that marked gravity. I looked in window after window at face after face. I was looking for one face. There can be only one. Thus she will be me and she will be THE OTHER.

“The Other”: My real self made whole by an image. My hurt salved by a loving female

touch.

Voyeur. Pious Protestant boy. Fatuous seeker.

It played out *aaaaall* in my head.

I took the girls home. Their mothers found me and pushed me into walls, threw me down and *had* me. Their hunger was my hunger expressed through their haunted aggression. They squeezed my face. Their hands hurt me. Our mouths clashed. Our teeth scraped. Our nakedness was blurred by a shutter stop inside me. I was frail and unequal to their bounty. They scared me then. The roughness unhinged me. The absence of a narrative line left me weightless. I didn't know what it meant *then*. I'll ascribe meaning *now*. They wanted me because I sensed who they were and went at them with that raging instinct. A dead woman fed me the knowledge. They were indistinguishable and each and every one unique. My moral intent was gender-wide and paid for in blood—frail boy bound credible and ghastrous deep.

Women were everywhere and nowhere. My dad hid his girlfriends. Our dog-shit diva deterred assignments there. I overheard his “Hey, baby” calls and inferred fuck-pad dates. I had no family. Jean Hilliker's kin were back in Whipdick, Wisconsin. I went to school and church because I had to and because there were women there. It got me out of the dog den and into the fresh air. Human interaction momentarily rewired my fantasy life. I was forced to sit, listen and talk. Matriculation led me to second-rung obsessions. American history and classical music started tearing through me. They were subsidiary fixations. They momentarily fogged my all-women mind-set.

I co-opted them fast. My woman-savior tales took on verisimilitude and topical oompah. Beethoven wrote me scores. Our rhapsodies out-juiced the Ninth Symphony and the last string quartets.

I *had* to talk to people. *All* people scared me. Women and girls scared me much more than men and boys. I addressed all males with braggadocio undercut with tight-throat fear. I ducked my head, made provocative statements and cut in and out of discourse quick. I could not talk to females beyond non sequiturs. I flopped at talking to boys about *girls*. Their chatter was too graphic, too uninformed and jejune without my puerile grandeur. I stayed pent-up into raging adolescence. Age ten to age thirteen was an onset-of-puberty blur. I grew tall and stayed commensurately unbodied. A neighbor boy introduced me to masturbation. I discovered it astoundingly late. That fact explicates my mental predisposition and horror of real sex. I reinvested sex and postponed approach every time I saw a female who might be The Other. I was a Scottish pastor's grandson and the scion of farmers and clergymen who took to the bottle instead of the flesh. I would have it all in due time and nearly die from it. My mind and soul met my right hand at age 13. It all accelerated. Jean Hilliker moldered in the backwash of fresh hand technique and constant stimuli.

Junior high was high-octane. It featured Hancock Park girls of high lineage and Jewish girls from Shtetlville West. I saw the wish-named Joan reborn in dozens of Semitic incarnations. I stalked Donna Weiss around Beverly and Gardner. I saw her go to synagogue shindigs around Gilmore Park. She was blondish and curvy. Her features were too big for her face. She wore

demure bikini poolside. Her tan deepened through the summer of 1961. The Berlin Wall fracas almost took the world down. I craved the easy out of nuke devastation. I loved Donn Cathy, Kay and many window faces seen. I yearned for mental monogamy. It drove me batshit. I wanted one image captured for endless consolation and sex.

There were *too* many girls and women. Hancock Park was ultra-swank and a hotbed of sex within view and reach.

Cathy Montgomery was pure Hancock Park. Kay Olmsted was fringe Hancock Park. The tall brunette. The short blonde with the hurricane-hurled hazel eyes. Villager shirt-dresses for Cathy. A black beret for preppy beatnik Kay.

I hoarded paper-route money and sent both girls big floral bouquets. I was 14. It was the Summer '62 D-day Assault. The *D* stood for desperate and delirious. I got blow-off/thank-you notes back.

I became a B&E artiste years later. I snuck inside Cathy's house and Kay's house repeatedly *then*. The notion to enter and prowl hadn't hit me yet. My desperation and delirium had yet to peak.

My teenage life stood in arrears. My acceleration was all internalized. I struggled through junior high and into senior high. I had shifting cliques of loser friends and no friends. I taped pictures of Beethoven over my bed and pondered our genius. He composed his greatest music for his "Immortal Beloved." Her identity remained as mysterious as The Other for me. Beethoven understood my deep loneliness and sorrow. His deafness inspired visionary thoughts unknown to mortal men. *My* deafness was voluntary. Beethoven dug that. I often played the adagio of the Hammerklavier Sonata before I went peeping. Beethoven approved more than condemned the practice. Sometimes he'd scowl at me and shake his finger. He never quite told me to grow up and pull my head out of my ass.

I was deaf to the real world and anything that contradicted my monomaniacal private agenda. The 1960s social scene was pixilated newsprint and no more. Nothing in the real world touched me or fazed me. Jack Kennedy got elected, got laid, got whacked. What, *my* worry? Fuck—that's Joanne Anzer. We'll almost *do* it in the Summer of Love. Now she's on TV. Fuck—that's *her*. She's doing the wah-watusi on the Lloyd Thaxton Hop!!!

The word *More* summarized my private agenda. It was sexual compulsion fueled by a terror of human contact and the forfeit of mental control. I could brood, peep, stalk, think and self-narrate. I could not *act*. I understood that conundrum in the moment. A conceit numbed the power of the revelation and pushed me further into a mystical state. I came to believe that certain women could read my aura and detect my prayerful condition. *Fait accompli*: those women would find me. Our identical passion would then be unified.

Women—not girls. The *mothers* of the girls. The fantasy women who once went at me so powerfully and roughly.

I peeped a dance party at 2nd and Irving. Cathy Montgomery lived two blocks west. Joanne Anzer lived a block north. The party vibed earthquake epicenter. It was fall '63. I had a vague sense that the Twist was dead. Yes and no—dig those middle-aged stiffs doing it now.

Yes and no. The men were stiffs. The women weren't. The women married the stiffs and regretted it now. Every woman I saw danced better than her male partner. There was more

hip movement and less inhibition. There was a sense of gyration as a sexual substitute. The condescended to the silly music less and relinquished themselves to it more. It meant more to them because family duty had fizzled and daddy-o was less than they thought. The dance party was a reprieve from the ennui and repressed tenderness that would lead them to me. I sensed sweetly what career womanizers know cold: female discontent is opportunity.

The party lingered as an image bank. I roamed Hancock Park and saw a few of the women I'd seen dancing. They were decontextualized and still breathlessly deep. I corralled one woman's runaway dog. We talked for a few moments. I was 15. She was 45-ish. She looked like my future married lover Karen.

The lightning-rod concept lingered. No women sought me out and proved it valid. Fall '68 extended. My dad had a severe stroke. I capitalized on his hospital stay, ditched school and ran wild.

I stole *Playboy* magazines, second-line stroke books and nudist-colony photo jobs that showed female pubic hair. I taped pictures all over the pad and tacked the Playmate of the Month up beside Beethoven. I roamed, peeped, shoplifted and brooded from dusk to dawn. I discovered *The Fugitive* on TV.

The title character was my imagined self as sexual igniter. He was running from a murder charge as trumped-up as mine was real. The show was the epic of shifting and lonely America. Love was always unconsummated. Yearning was continuous and transferred monogamously. Dr. Richard Kimble had moments of stunning truth with women weekly. The real world interdicted his efforts to claim them and create a separate world mutually safe. The guest-star actresses were torturously aware and rooted in complex and frustrated selfhood. They all try to love him. He tries to love them all. It never happens. It all goes away.

I fucking lost it and wept every Tuesday night. Every one of them was uncontestably *The Other* for an hour alone with me.

My father came home from the hospital. He was needy and frail. It infuriated me. I had to remove the skin pix and relinquish my access to the TV. I considered reviving *The Curse* and decided against it. He was old. He'd be gone soon. I'd survive for more Tuesdays.

It wasn't the way they looked at Dr. Kimble. It was who they were and the path of the hurt up to him.

I woke up. I was naked, she was naked, I didn't know where I was.

We were under bedsheets. She was still asleep. I didn't know *who* she was.

I rubbed my face. It felt like a four-day growth. I was clean-shaven at my last recollection.

You sold blood plasma downtown. You hitchhiked to the beach. You met your pal Ranc and started drinking. You argued with some hippies. You stood on the Palisades and fulminated. Your tory worldview appalled them. You stormed off then.

Booze blackout—age 23.

I was a fit 160. The woman weighed three bills easy. I *looooved* voluptuousness. My standards were permissive. These were curves I could not condone.

A memory burst hit me. I still had nine bucks left from the blood bank.

My clothes were on the bedside floor. My glasses and wallet were safe. Two twenties were tucked in the billfold.

The woman snored on. Maybe she paid me for it. That would mark a first.

I got up, got dressed and stealth-walked out of the pad. Stairs led down to a ground-floor landing. I stepped outside. I was on Fell Street in San Francisco.

. . .

She was the fourth. Keeping track was easy then. Susan was #1. She was 29 to my 20. She needed a roof and fucked me in the Spirit of Revolution. She caught me jacking off on upper the night RFK got shot. She defamed me as a perv, a bum lay and a fascist. She turned dyke for political reasons and the valid motive of inclination.

I was an especially puerile 20 and malleable in the extreme. I was months into a run of sobbing fits out of pure sex hunger/angst. Susan had a '60s-zeitgeist spiel down pat. I believed all of it when we were stoned and none of it when we were clean. Susan knew a high school pal of mine and fucked him just as callously. He was even more pliable than I was and had an even more roach-ridden apartment. His cystic acne was worse than mine. I could steal drugs from stores and rich people's houses. He was afraid to. I boded as a better doormat/pity fuck.

Susan and I guzzled cough syrup and pills swiped from medicine chests all over Hancock Park. We talked classical music shit endlessly. We got bombed and played Emil Gilels and Sviatoslav Richter. We defamed rock and roll as counterrevolutionary pap. Susan endured Beethovenian mood swings and treated me as her mongoloid kid brother and dope-thief-on-command. All that tsuris got me four peremptory fucks. My zits popped in the throes of my real and her feigned passion. Susan held the line at fuck #5. My technique had not improved to her specifications. My social skills were sub-zero. I was staggeringly uncool and required deep pore cleansing and dermabrasion. Besides—she'd just met a groovy chick with a co

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