

GRINNING WHITE TEETH

Cassius Hall, an Olympic caliber drug user and semi-functional human, is crushed when his estranged best friend, the famed Jennifer Belle, dies in a gruesome overdose. Determined to stop her consumption by the carnivorous "American Death Cult", Cassius sets out to tell his best friend's story before the cultural assembly line can get it's hooks into her. When it's discovered that a biopic about Jennifer is being developed, Cassius turns to the people closest to her to paint a picture of what celebrity really gets you.

Mike Black is a writer of prose and comics who has worked in small press publishing since 2002. He has worked with UraniumMusic.com, and Ronin Studios, as well as helping to found Enemy One Studios, and Nebula Magazine. Grinning White Teeth is his first novel. He currently resides in Tampa, Fl.

GRINNING
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BLACK



MIKE BLACK



ISBN: 978-1-4415-4763-7

9 781441 547637 (65325)

9.125 in

6.125 in

0.25 fold

2.875 in

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CONTROL NUMBER:		PENDING
ISBN:	HARDCOVER	978-1-4415-4763-7
	SOFTCOVER	978-1-4415-4762-0

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65325

Chapter 1—

Funerals are always hell.

I coughed involuntarily. I'm not sure if it was a smoker's cough or if I was choking back anger. My Narcotics Anonymous sponsor sat a few feet away from me worriedly watching for signs of lack of sleep, suicidal tendencies, anxiety, toxic psychosis, seizures, angina, "zombie demeanor" or any of the other side effects that would lead him to believe that I was back on Adderall. I was fucking with the skinny little bastard, though, by taking ether from the silver silk handkerchief in my jacket pocket.

I told him I quit using Adderall six weeks ago. That's a bold faced lie, but I live with it.

Jennifer's mother sobbed purposefully just opposite my sponsor, loud enough for all of the important people to hear her. James Ironside, Jennifer's boyfriend, sat next to her. He held tightly on to her hand and looked as though he was genuinely hurt. His face was distorted and shrunk, his eyes carrying fifteen pound bags.

Anna Halberg, ex-wife of the former Senator James, sat behind her. Glaring at the body of my best friend, which I'm sure was about making sure she was actually dead, and this wasn't some sort of publicity stunt for a movie.

Brockton Moore, director of "Defamation of Character : The Movie" and "The Leap-Six Story" sat in an expensive and trendy black suit, with his expensive and trendy black hair cut, wearing

expensive and trendy black sunglasses visibly mouthing his speech to the media about how we've lost another "Great personality of our time"—like Cobain, or Ledger, or whatever celebrity corpse was the flavor of the month.

Jennifer, of course, was laying in the most resplendent coffin ever designed by man. Flanked on either side by an explosion of flowers and a large photograph of her in better times.

I was uncomfortable, unsure of how I should be acting in front of all the others there to wish her off. My skin was irritated, and it felt like there was an ant crawling on my neck. I scratched at it and listened to the priest give the eulogy that I was originally supposed to. When I was asked by Jennifer's family I told them I wasn't interested. I couldn't possibly stand there and give that speech. The holy man droned on and on about the frailty of life, wrapping each statement up in an aphorism or quote from the Bible, and I felt like I was going to fall apart at the seams, unable to contain my frustration.

I stood up from the pew, straightened my tie, pushed my way out into the walkway, and reached in my pocket for my pack of cigarettes. I pulled one out as I walked down the aisle, slowly and calmly pressing it between my lips. The gawkers, the media hounds, the leaches, all rubber necked as I walked by—vengeance in my eyes. The fuck-ups who passed for Jennifer's friends sat stone frozen, fearful that I might come back for them as I glared at each and every stony face.

As I came out of the church the journalists who couldn't get into the funeral swarmed for the story. The spot where the ant may or may not have been still stung from my untrimmed nails, and it must have looked like I had just crawled out of Hiroshima on all fours. I lit my cigarette, took what might have been the longest drag in the history of mankind, and rolled the Marlboro between my thumb and index finger. I exhaled and leaned into the first TV camera I could find.

"Is this on? Yes. My name is Cassius Hall, and the person holding this camera is a cock sucker."

The crowd surged in towards me. Reporters yelled out questions as I tactically ignored them, sounding like a symphony of fire alarms. I threw a quick elbow into the closest one; a woman with Barbara Walters hair and some very hard implants. I wasn't fucking with these people—not today—I was headed to the bar to finally kill my liver.

"Where you two seeing each other romantically?"

"Do you really think it's necessary to curse on live television?"

"Sir, who are you?"

"Do your research, you twat! Cassius! Does Jennifer's death affect your plans for a sequel to 'Defamation of Character'?"

I heard, from later accounts, that if you watch the news clips of my exit from the church, you can actually hear me muttering "die" over and over as I pushed through the crowd.

I finally reached the car, stepping over the possibly dead body of some suit from CNN, and opened the door. I turned back to the throng of reporters and drove a single finger skyward, waving it for all to see.

"Are you going to tell her story?"

And with that I froze. Billy Pepper's in the crowd. He's a good one. I had heard that he worked for the Times now, doing bitch reporting to keep himself afloat. I first met him during a question and answer session for "Black Hat". He called me out on a bullshit story I was feeding the room, and I bought him a drink. We hit it off, and I set him up with a few contacts at my publisher which would later grow into his first book, which was about the Internet or something. He spent six weeks in the house Jen and I rented on Bayshore, talking technology and various futurist theories and drinking all of our beer. He's saying hello. So, I said hello back.

"I should, shouldn't I?"

Chapter 2—

When I arrived home from the funeral I fired off a quick e-mail to my agent and publisher. Billy had given me a fantastic idea. Billy, who is a short, fat, balding little Internet geek, and who has no interpersonal skills at all, had shown me the most humane path I could possibly take. America is a giant death cult, once infatuated only with the hyper-famous, now obsessed with the deceased in any form. Americans love the dead, and they will spend time and enormous amounts of money to hear anyone who touches on the subject. To the modern world, death isn't for reflection, but an opportunity for profit.

This means I'm racing against hack jobs for a quick buck. If I worked quickly though, I could get the jump on them. I'll tell her story. I'll tell her story and tell it right, and I'll make sure that everyone understands why.

I was getting agitated, be it lack of cigarettes, hunger, or just boredom. Leaning back in my chair, I could feel my stomach stretch and buckle under it's own weight. It yelped back at me, screaming it's dissatisfaction. So, with time to kill before work began, and almost nothing in my fridge, I decided to make a plate of eggs.

Still half conscious from the ether, I stumbled in the kitchen, hunting for supplies. Reaching down to a cabinet for a frying pan, I opened it and a large ceramic baking dish slid out at an angle. Jennifer had made me buy it for cooking

turkey on Thanksgiving. Instinctively, my hand shot out and tried to catch it, but I was too slow. The dish shattered into a hundred pieces, white ceramic shrapnel flying out in every direction. One embedded itself in my right ring finger, just above the middle joint.

"FUCK!" I yelled, "God! Fucking!! DAMN IT!"

I immediately grabbed at the middle joint with my left thumb and index finger, attempting to stop the flow of blood. I gave my legs and feet the once over. No blood from anywhere else, everything else is OK. But the stinging in my finger continued to hound me.

I pulled the piece of ceramic out by hand and threw it in the trash. Quickly, I bandaged my finger and began to make the eggs. A slice of butter in the pan, two eggs, some pepper, a little milk, and hearty scrambling.

Jennifer was terrible at cooking. Simply horrible. She had figured out how to follow the directions on the back of frozen pizza boxes and that was the extent of her abilities. So, when we stayed together I did the vast majority of cooking while she sat on the counter watching, only coming to my aid when I needed her to grab something for me. It was an all too regular relationship, all the trappings of marriage without the sex.

This, of course, led to endless ribbing when she worked photo shoots as some sex kitten home maker, cooking for her work week husband in little more than an apron. We'd often sit around and stare at the pictures and laugh at the irony. She could barely make a grilled cheese sandwich, and photographers would always feel some sort of primal need to shoot her cooking a steak, or making a cake.

For some reason, though, she seemed at home in the kitchen, despite being unsure of how anything in it besides the coffee maker worked. But Jennifer looked at home doing everything. Everything was internalized, and she was able to

put on the best of shows for the camera, for her public, for everyone. For me.

No one ever really knew what was going on with her. Most people thought she was air headed, off in her own little world, skipping through a field. However, it was simply a function of her quick wits. She was often three or four subjects ahead of the conversation, working on problems that had yet to present themselves.

So during conversation, when someone would ask for her opinion, she'd say nothing. They'd ask again and, her thought process broken, she'd quietly ask "What?" Who ever she was speaking to would usually chuckle and try to slow things down for her. She'd quickly lose interest again, and breaking with the moment and staring off into the distance until whoever she was speaking to would press her again, or turn and leave.

I'm unsure if this was a byproduct of Jennifer's beginnings, if she was just forced to think ahead to stay alive, or if it was simply because everything bored her to tears. However, because of her habit of stepping out of conversations, she had garnered a reputation as just a pretty face.

I know it weighed on her, and most likely had something to do with her emotional state later in life. She hated that everyone treated her like a child, precious few would figure out what was going on, careful to let her guide the conversation, working double time to stay on point. The vast majority, though, treated her like she was barely there, finding it easier to bark orders in short machine gun style quips.

I could never imagine what it would be like to have the entire world think you're an idiot simply because they couldn't keep up. The effect this had on her esteem only became evident after her death, and with self-esteem constantly battered by those around you, is it really that surprising that she'd eventually develop such destructive habits?

When I finished cooking the eggs, I plated them and stood over the sink to eat. This had become something of a burden recently, as annoying as attempting to change your own oil or pay bills. With everything that had happened I began eating less and less, only realizing I had gone a day without eating when I was in the process passing out. Despite this, I would often feel like I was going to throw up, as if I were gorging myself and my stomach was about to burst.

Of course, by the third fork full of eggs I could hold back no longer. My stomach tensed, and convulsed, forcing me to drop the plate and grab a hold of the counter for safety. I threw up violently, spraying with fire hose like force in the sink. Bits of eggs, and stomach acid exploding outward it what looked just like coffee. I dry heaved once or twice, sure it had passed, then I thought about Jennifer, and I threw up again. And again.

My cell phone beeped. Then rang. With my head resting on the lip of the sink I slowly pulled it out of pocket and answered "Hello?" I could feel the heat and blood beginning to drain away from my face and I wondered if I had popped a blood vessel in my eye from the force of the heaves. "Cass, it's John from Propaganda Publishing." The editor. That was quicker than I had imagined.

"Yes?" I said weakly. I was dealing with the snot running from my nose, and the stomach acid burning in my throat. "Are you alright?" he said. "Yes, I was just relieving stress." There was silence over the line for a moment. John had been my editor since "Black Hat", and had worked his ass off to keep my in the good graces of the publisher throughout the lean years. I coughed and asked him what he thought of the idea.

"We love it. We've already drafted a press release and sent it to your e-mail. Look it over and let me know what you think." First hurdle done. The next would be not blowing my advance

wallowing in self pity. "Frankly, we think you're the only who can do Ms. Belle justice."

I dry heaved again, and let loose, holding the phone far away from my head. "Cass? Cass? Are you sure you're OK?" I coughed up phlegm and spit it into the sink. John piped up, "Are you going through detox again?" Letting out a low groan I slumped down below the sink on the kitchen floor. "Yes, John. In a manner of speaking." He sighed and was quiet for a moment. "Are you still going to NA meetings?"

"Yeah, they've given me a handler, considering recent circumstances."

"Recent circumstances?"

"Yes. The handler walked in on me the other day. I was sitting naked on a tarp holding a bottle of bleach and a syringe."

"What? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I was apparently screaming about how only bleach would cure my troubles. Drank a bottle of rum filtered through Angel Trumpets. I had told him I was living inside Brock Hudson's film career, and I was the one who turned him gay. He came looking for me when I hadn't checked in for three days. He threw me in the tub and washed me off. Stayed with me to talk me down from the trip. I fucking hate that asshole."

There was a long silence on the line. I thought for a moment that John had put down the phone and had walked over to his office window, carefully opening it before jumping to his death.

"Are you clean?"

"I'm too busy throwing up anything I take to get high right now, John."

"You'd think you would have figured it out by now, you moron. Listen, look over the release, we're going to print at five today to try and beat out any attempt to make a grab for the story. The idea is to pull the rug out from under them and get the readers behind the idea that this is the only real biography they're going to see. However,"

There was a sternness to his voice I hadn't heard in a long time. He's trying to be understanding, "You've got to get off your ass to fill a book as soon as fucking possible. All that goodwill is going to last for only so long. How do you plan on covering three-hundred pages in two weeks?"

This is where I realized that I've bitten off more than I can chew. I promised Propaganda that I would have first draft in two weeks. I figured I might be able to beat the first cable video biography if I hit that time frame. John doesn't think I can do it, and I don't really blame him. It's a a lot of ground to cover. I'm barely able to eat, and am essentially a recovering narcotic abuser. Or current narcotic abuser. I might have to fall off the wagon for this.

"I'm going to meet with her friends and work it like an interview based biography. I should be able to use a program to transcribe their interviews, and work in my own commentary as I go."

I am insane. I don't think any of her friends will want to talk to me. I don't think I'll really want to talk to any of them. The fear of facing this is way too strong. Some of them already didn't like me, figuring that I had hijacked her for the past few years. Others were left by the wayside as Jennifer fell apart. I'm sure that once they realize that I stopped talking to her just before she died, they aren't going to be the happiest of people.

"Alright, if you think you can do it, get to work. We'll hammer out the details with your agent and get the release out. I'll be in touch."

"I'm sure you will."

The line went dead and it was silent in the house again. I sat, leaning against the sink for far too long trying to figure out how I would do this. My head was spinning and I was exhausted from the lack of food and the forty gallons of stomach acid I had just thrown up. The question slammed around in my skull like a bell ringing

in the morning. How the fuck am I going to do this?

She deserves it. More than any other person I've ever met. This all has to be explained before it spirals out of control. Eventually someone will figure that they knew what happened, and gather up some celebrity psychologists, some historians, or whatever, and they are going to give the facts, and it will be accepted as truth. That truth will then in turn be filmed, and facts will be cut for time or content, and a new set of facts will be presented. That will be the new truth, the new Jennifer Belle, and it won't do anyone any good.

It won't be her, and it won't be her life. The new truth will perpetuate itself and be sold on t-shirts, in posters, and look-alike contests. The Death Cult will be fed again and again. Meanwhile, Jennifer will be nothing more than an image, something that the counter-culture wears to break from the norm. She'll be a fashion statement, and that is complete bullshit.

I could feel each heart beat throughout my entire body. My head pounded, and I had never felt so sick. For a number of years I abused everything I could get my hands on. Amphetamines, barbiturates, psychedelics, dissociatives and deliriants. Adderall, alcohol, lysergics, ketamine, and benactyzine when I can get my hands on it. They calmed, focused, or inspired. All in different doses and at different times. With Jennifer though, it all came together. Patchwork harmony keeping me on task.

John asked if I was in detox again. Yes, I had said. I didn't want to be, and impossible for me to sneak out and get high. Chemical receptors in my brain broke apart and caused violent reactions. Addiction starts to break almost immediately after the effects wear off. This wasn't chemicals. This addiction was harder to break. Any addict will tell you that once you've had a fix all you want to do is dive back in.

Here I am diving back in.

I finally pulled my ass off the tile. I still felt queasy and my head was still pounding. I turned on the sink and cleaned it of any remaining vomit. The phone beeped again, John was asking if I had read the release yet. I snapped the phone open to the QWERTY keyboard and typed sent "PUT THE FUCKING THING OUT." Hitting the send button, the phone beeped again. Billy messaged me, checking after me, seeing if I was going to do the book. A moment later it rang. The caller ID showed the name of my sponsor.

I sent the phone flying out of the kitchen and into the living room.

I stumbled across the the house to my office, a tiny little room with bad air conditioning. I always left the window open to let the cigarette smoke vent. All it really did was cause my electric bill to go up, and my office to comfortably sit at eighty-five degrees. I walked over and shut the window, and turned on the ceiling fan. Next to my notebook was a glass and a bottle of Stolichnaya. I unscrewed the cap and placed the bottle within easy reach of where I was sitting.

On my desk sat my MP3 recorder. Dropping into the cheap Office Depot chair I spent far too much of my life in, I leaned back and grabbed a cigarette from the pack. I checked for disk space on the recorder. Ninety-five percent full. I hit the ERASE button without a second thought. With the push of that button, three months of research and notes for my next novel were gone. They didn't matter anymore.

Hitting the record button, I lit the cigarette and took a long drag. Holding the smoke in my lungs for an unnaturally long time, I finally exhaled and began to talk.

Chapter 3—

I first met Jennifer Belle after the public fisting of Senator Anthony James.

It'd been so widely reported exactly what went on in room 442 of the Ocean Side Motel—much to the dismay of the then Mrs. James—that when I was sent by my editor to cover the post hearing I wasn't in need of much prep work. I still, however, ended up in the lobby of the Harbor Island Wyndham drowning myself with cheap coffee trying to piece together some sort of coherent story.

The clippings I had were like staring at a blank wall. I couldn't read more than three lines before seeing the same words I had seen thousands of times earlier in the stack. Bondage. Home movies. School girl uniforms. All of it settling in the bottom of my brain like an anchor at the bottom of the ocean. It wore on me that the Senator didn't have any imagination. It was as if the Marquis De Sade used up all the good ideas, and all we had left were the scraps the Japanese were tossing us in their never ending quest to come up with new ways of getting off. When did a good, old fashioned sex scandal become so boring?

I felt tired. The Adderall I had been taking to keep me focused was wearing off, and I was seventeen hundred miles away from my supplier. My head drifted back to my father saying "Cass, you look so fucking lazy." I couldn't help but laugh thinking about the strain I was going through just to write five thousand words. The cracks began

to show themselves. I knew there was a complete mental break on it's way. It was going to be spectacular.

Struggling with the notes was proving harder and harder by the moment, as my eyes glazed over and my skull began to pound. My hands became clammy, and my scalp began to itch incessantly. It suddenly struck me that I didn't have any cigarettes left. Panic set in. Hyperventilation and catatonia. The dread slid over me. Oh god, "The Dread". The terrified silence without any thoughts, and the realization that you have no cigarettes left. Now, I wasn't just struggling to hammer out five-thousand words, I was in a state of terror over having to do it without drugs or tobacco.

It was a horrible state of mind. Like spider webs growing from my brain stem and smothering everything in dullness. The same sort of feeling that most people experience when they've run out of gas in the middle of nowhere. When their Internet goes out. When their cell is dead. It is the panic you feel when you are not going to have a cigarette any time soon. This is "The Horror". Every smoker you know lives with The Horror every day. Like a beast circling at the edge of the shadows. Lurking. Snarling. It waits for that moment when you shake your pack and feel nothing inside.

The Horror and The Dread fought for control of my fragile mind. A state of emergency shouting over the top of everything else, drowning it all out, until nothing else remained. A deep sense of urgency that, compounded with the lack of sleep and general frustration with life, caused me to check out completely. Gone. Done. On the outside I had become the perfect Zen being. Silence and coexistence. But on the inside it was complete fucking Armageddon.

So, when I let my mind wander completely on it's own, and my eyes darted around the room in panic, it was no surprise that I found myself staring at the lady of the hour without realizing it.

Talking about how gorgeous she was has no point—anyone reading this already knows. For me, the first time I first truly saw her charcoal hair and fire engine highlights in a French Twist, the sly sway of her hips and pure confidence in every step, the way light—any light—danced off of her eyes like wet slate, and the slow methodical way a smile crept across her face, I was shocked.

I remember how she smelled, how her perfume dominated the air. I remember the way air crackled around her. I remember feeling like I was staring an oncoming tornado. I remember the first time I ever looked at her in person was right after the public fisting of Sen. James.

I also remember that it hurt to look at her.

Seeing Jennifer for the first time in person was like watching god work. His fingers smearing green, yellow, and orange together in slow, determined strokes. His hands shaping the Pillars of Creation in minutes, just for your own viewing pleasure. There's a word for this moment.

Clarity.

She strut through the lobby as the sea of people parted and slammed back into itself around her. Every conversation stopped, every pair of eyes tracked her. As she walked, she pulled a small silver box out of her bag. With a snap she opened it and pulled out a cigarette. Her eyes slowly scanned the room from behind black Roxy Atomic sunglasses before finally zoning on me.

Normally in instances like this, a person's heart rate jumps. Not in my case. As Jennifer came closer and closer, my heart rate became slower and slower. Like two Xanax dissolving in stomach acid, the world slowed around her.

"Can I borrow a light?"

My hands slowly patted my pants pockets, then my breast pocket. The words poured out of my mouth like vomit, my head heaved forward as I wondered if my heart would literally stop beating. "I can't find it."

She motioned to the table in front of me. My Zippo sat, slowly crushing the emptiness that was my pack. An orange lazer etched picture of a jack o'lantern smiled back at us. I looked at the lighter, and back to Jennifer, who stood waiting patiently.

"Oh," I let out, "Let me . . ." I picked the lighter up and leaned forward, flicking it open and holding up the flame. She smiled, and leaned forward slightly. As she inhaled, her breasts pushed against the top of her halter-dress. My head floated for what felt like an eternity.

She lit the cigarette, less natural, but more posing for the gathering clutch of photographers. The paparazzi crawled up the walls, hanging off of furniture to get every shot of her they could. The most famous of the photographs taken of her at this moment would end up hanging at the top of the stairs in our house on Bayshore Blvd. Jennifer lighting a cigarette from my shaking hand, an explosion of paperwork surrounding me on all sides. Under it was a plaque from Senator James' testimony. "She has Candy Barr's body with Gia Scala's face. She was a walking fantasy from my youth."

Jennifer looked around me as I put the lighter back on the table. She took a long, slow drag of her cigarette and exhaled into the air. I looked at the case in her hand and outstretched a hand. "May I have one?"

She smiled and handed the case to me. "Yes, you may." There was a small laugh hidden somewhere in there. "No one says 'May I' anymore. You're either an English teacher or someone's mother." I looked at her, confused for a moment. I gave a laughing sigh as I slid a cigarette between my lips and lit it. "Neither. I'm a writer."

There was a moment of silence. I thought she was going to turn away, fearful of yet another fuck trying to get an interview. "I couldn't tell from your understanding of the English language.

Is all this because of me?" She picked up one of the packets of beaten news clippings. The top headline read SENATOR CAUGHT RED HANDED WITH REDHEADED MISTRESS. She threw it back down on the table and looked back to me. "I'm a brunette, by the way. I have naturally black hair. The red hair was just an experiment. Make sure to get that right, please."

I quickly typed "BLACK HAIR" down on my laptop's keyboard. I was in the middle of rewriting a sentence. The next day, my editor wouldn't catch it, and it would go to print as "The proceedings were slow and meticulous. Each and every moment spent on the senator's BLACK HAIR many abuses."

"Got it. Brunette."

This time the laugh wasn't hidden. "Are you afraid of me, Mr . . . ?"

"Cassius Hall."

She cocked her head to the side and studied me, she pouted her lips in what I would eventually learn was her thinking face. "Didn't you write a book?"

"Uh. Yes. 'Black Hat'. I think twelve people total bought it."

"I bought it."

"You bought it?"

"Yes. I liked the cover. I'm not sure how you managed to write a book that made computer security even remotely interesting, but I enjoyed it."

"Can I quote you on that? I think my publisher will shit."

The laugh came again. I was positive that my heart rate had slowed to forty beats per minute when I heard her laugh. Thinking back now, I imagine I looked something like a dog having the back of their ear scratched. Every muscle tightened and locked. I was stuck, unable to move. My entire body cramping.

"We'll have to work on something for the dust cover of your next one. You are writing another, right?"

All synapses fired at the same moment. I had nothing. At the time, my publisher was threatening to pull the book from print because sales were so terrible. Earlier that day, I had been on the phone with my mother, begging for a place to stay, because I was positive that I was never going to get another job as a freelancer.

"Yeah." Lies. "Sure." Lies. "I was thinking about writing something like Dante's Divine Comedy. Set in modern day, though. With a sort of," I paused for a moment, my eyes darting back and forth as I tried to search for the words. Any words. "Sort of John Wayne in 'The Shootist' in the lead." Huge fucking lie.

She took another long drag on her cigarette, holding the smoke in her lungs. She was trying to process the huge amount of bullshit that I had just shoveled her way, and I imagined, trying to figure out if she was going to be nice about it. She exhaled as she spoke, a gray cloud climbing over her head.

"You just made that up, didn't you?"

"On the spot."

"It's a terrible idea."

"I know."

"Spectacular failure."

"Yeah."

"Want to get a beer?"

I froze. She looked around and gave a shallow smile to some asshole taking a picture. Standing up, I stretched. I began to pack up all of my work. "I need to get cigarettes first."

###

Jennifer is originally from Tampa. I, on the other hand, grew up in Queens. So, when we left the Wyndham she suggested we take a short drive to neighboring Ybor to see a "real bar". This is where she introduced me to The Boneyard. A lone brick building surrounded by patios in the middle of the 7th avenue bar crawl. When I asked her

what kind of bar it was, she smiled and presented herself proudly. "I'm dressed like I just stepped out of a picture from 1957. What kind of bar do you think it is?"

We walked in and she motioned for me to take a seat at the bar as she sauntered to the jukebox—a huge old-styled Wurlitzer complete with terribly bright neon lights piped all the way around the frame. Her hips swayed with every step and clack of her heels. She was more aware of her body than any woman I've ever met. When she stopped, her hips shifted to the right, and she stood as still as a statue.

She fed the machine a ten dollar bill and flipped through her choices until she let out a low vibrating "Ooh." The bar tender, a girl who was a walking billboard for some local tattoo artist, stared at me annoyed that I had yet to tell her what I wanted to drink. I was too busy watching Jennifer. She turned and smiled. A smile that I would never get tired of seeing, despite all that was going to happen.

"Everything this man touches is amazing."

With that a long guitar bend bellowed out, and a honky tonk rhythm section kicked in. She told me it was Mike Ness, of Social Distortion fame, covering Wayne Walker's "All I Can Do Is Cry".

I finally broke from staring at her long enough to tell the bartender to bring me a Newcastle, and the billboard came back a minute later with the bottle. Jennifer sat on the stool next to me and took off her sunglasses. She looked at the girl behind the counter and giggled, "Sorry, Tanya. How long do we have until you open?"

"About two hours, Jen. I've got some other things to do while I'm getting ready, feel free to grab what you want."

"Thanks, hon. So, Mr. Hall . . ." Her voice trailed off, "What were you expecting out of this little interview?" I threw back the beer and set it on the bar. She was eying me intently, possibly waiting for an excuse to break my bottle over my head.

"If this is a interview, I'm completely unprepared."

She laughed lightly. She was working really hard not to show she had control over the entire conversation. Polite to a fault. Pushing a loose strand of hair from her eyes behind her ear, she perked up a bit and straightened her body. She patted my bag on the bar, brimming with news clippings and magazine articles. "I find that rather hard to believe, Mr. Hall."

I shook my head no and leaned forward. "Believe it. I have absolutely no idea why you've brought me here other than to escape from the massive amount of photojournalists following your every move."

"Maybe I just want to have the only signed copy of 'Black Hat' in existence?"

"I find that hard to swallow."

"Perhaps I just wanted some company that wasn't all over me for an article, or a quote, or some other ulterior motive? You, as far as journalists go, seem fairly out of your element. At least today."

My laugh was probably a little louder than it should have been, but at the time I didn't care. However, the mood was immediately broken by a hard thump at the bar's large pane-glass window. The mob had found us. Photographers were pressing each other against the glass trying to get some sort of shot. One was trying frantically to push past the three security locks on the floor door, slamming his shoulder into the large wooden door over and over.

Tanya, the bartender, came barreling out from behind the bar yelling at the top of her lungs. "We're closed! Come back tonight! It's Sink or Swim!" She began swatting at cameras from behind the glass, yelling "Fuck off!" over and over. Jennifer put her sun glasses back on and turned away from me and back to the bar.

On the TV hanging above us a local news story began to run about Jennifer at the Wyndham. Shaky-cam

footage of our brief conversation was playing under an anchor talking about the ramifications of the hearing, and asking extraordinarily vapid questions about who Jennifer was. For her part, Jennifer had held her composure fairly well, but the armor was gone and each moment she seemed smaller and smaller.

Under her breath, she said "See what I mean?"

I looked to the crowd at the window, and then Jennifer. To this day I'm not sure where the strength for this came from, but I cherish it as one of my lone moments of manhood in an otherwise timid life. I stood up and walked behind the bar, turning off the TV. Before my hand had even left the power button, I was moving back around the bar to the front window. Tanya was still slapping at the window, yelling for the camera men to leave.

I unlocked the door and pulled it open, both Tanya and Jennifer turn and yelled for me to stop, but it was too late. Maybe they thought I was just going to let them all in, free to hammer Jennifer with whatever they wanted. As I pulled the door open the guy who was trying to ram the door down stopped and smiled at me. "Thanks!"

I reached back and punched him harder than I had hit anyone else in my life.

The photographer reeled back and fell into the group standing behind him. The crowd paused in shock before going into a barrage of ready-to-made statements about the First Amendment. I screamed, "Get the fuck out of here!" a few too many times, but the crowd would to disperse. My throat was horse, and the message was falling on deaf ears.

Most began to leave quietly, a few backed up but kept taking pictures and screaming about their rights. The one I hit was dragged off by some of the crowd. "I'm pressing charges! I swear to god! That's battery! Your going to do time, buddy!"

He was right. I did see him in court, and spent two weeks in a work-release program because of

the incident. Curiously, after the news coverage moved to national media, the sales of "Black Hat" surged, and it hit number four the Best Seller list. I signed a copy and sent it to the photographer, with a thank you letter.

Walking back into the bar, Tanya slammed the door behind me, locking it again. Jennifer was standing up, next to her seat, watching what had just happened. "Oh my god!" She said, holding her hand over her mouth in shock.

I shook my hand trying to stop the tingling sensation. It throbbed and stung and I wondered if it was broken. "Sorry."

"It's OK, it's really OK."

I sat back down at the bar and hammered the remainder of my beer. My hand was shaking, and I was struggling to get another lit cigarette in my mouth. Jennifer saw the trouble I was having and lit one, handing it to me. "Thank you," she said. "I really appreciate it." I inhaled the cigarette and stamped it out in record time. Tanya had set another Newcastle in front of me, and I was using it to ice my hand.

Jennifer looked at me for a long while, I suppose reassessing everything she had figured about me. After a few moments of silence, she asked why I had done it.

"It was only right."

She smiled and offered me an interview. From then on we were inseparable.