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GENERATION X

TALES FOR AN ACCELERATED CULTURE

DOUGLAS      COUPLAND

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"Her hair was totally 1950s Indiana Woolworth perfume clerk. You know—sweet but dumb—she'll marry her way out of the trailer park some day soon. But the dress was early '60s Aeroflot stewardess—you know—that really sad blue the Russians used before they all started wanting to buy Sonys and having Guy Laroche design their Politburo caps. *And such make-up!* Perfect '70s Mary Quant, with these little PVC floral applique earrings that looked like antiskid bathtub stickers from a gay Hollywood tub circa 1956. She really caught the sadness—she was the hippest person there. Totally."

**TRACEY, 27**

"They're my children. Adults or not, I just can't kick them out of the house. It would be cruel. And besides—they're great cooks."

**HELEN, 52**

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**PART ONE**

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# THE SUN IS YOUR ENEMY

Back in the late 1970s, when I was fifteen years old, I spent every penny I then had in the bank to fly across the continent in a 747 jet to Brandon, Manitoba, deep in the Canadian prairies, to witness a total eclipse of the sun. I must have made a strange sight at my young age, being pencil thin and practically albino, quietly checking into a TraveLodge motel to spend the night alone, happily watching snowy network television offerings and drinking glasses of water from glass tumblers that had been washed and rewrapped in paper sheaths so many times they looked like they had been sandpapered. But the night soon ended, and come the morning of the eclipse, I eschewed tour buses and took civic bus transportation to the edge of town. There, I walked far down a dirt side road and into a farmer's field — some sort of cereal that was chest high and corn green and rustled as its blades inflicted small paper burns on my skin as I walked through them. And in that field, when the appointed hour, minute, and second of the darkness came, I lay myself down on the ground, surrounded by the tall pithy grain stalks and the faint sound of insects, and held my breath, there experiencing a mood that I have never really been able to shake completely—a mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination—a mood that surely must

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have been held by most young people since the dawn of time as they have crooked their necks, stared at the heavens, and watched their sky go out.

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**USE JETS**  
**WHILE YOU**  
**STILL**  
**CAN**

One and a half decades later my feelings are just as ambivalent and I sit on the front lanai of my rented bungalow in Palm Springs, California, grooming my two dogs, smelling the cinnamon nighttime pong of snapdragons and efficient whiffs of swimming pool chlorine that drift in from the courtyard while I wait for dawn.

I look east over the San Andreas fault that lies down the middle of the valley like a piece of overcooked meat. Soon enough the sun will explode over that fault and into my day like a line of Vegas showgirls bursting on stage. My dogs are watching, too. They know that an event of import will happen. These dogs, I tell you, they are so smart, but they worry me sometimes. For instance, I'm plucking this pale yellow cottage cheesy guck from their snouts, rather like cheese atop a microwaved pizza, and I have this horrible feeling, for I suspect these dogs (even though their winsome black mongrel eyes would have me believe otherwise) have been rummaging through the dumpsters out behind the cosmetic surgery center again, and their snouts are accessorized with, dare I say, yuppie liposuction fat. *How* they manage to break into the California state regulation coyote-proof red plastic flesh disposal bags is beyond me. I guess the doctors are being naughty or lazy. Or both.

This world.

I tell you.

From inside my little bungalow I hear a cupboard door slam. My friend Dag, probably fetching my other friend Claire a starchy snack or a sugary treat. Or even more likely, if I know them, a wee gin and tonic. They have habits.

Dag is from Toronto, Canada (dual citizenship). Claire is from Los Angeles, California. I, for that matter, am from Portland, Oregon, but where you're from feels sort of irrelevant these days ("Since everyone has the same stores in their mini-malls," according to my younger brother, Tyler). We're the three of us, members of the poverty jet set,

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an enormous global group, and a group I joined, as mentioned earlier, at the age of fifteen when I flew to Manitoba.

Anyhow, as this evening was good for neither Dag nor Claire, they had to come invade my space to absorb cocktails and chill. They needed it. Both had their reasons.

For example, just after 2:00 A.M., Dag got off of shift at Larry's Bar where, along with me, he is a bartender. While the two of us were walking home, he ditched me right in the middle of a conversation we were having and darted across the road, where he then scraped a boulder across the front hood and windshield of a Cutlass Supreme. This is not the first time he has impulsively vandalized like this. The car was the color of butter and bore a bumper sticker saying WE'RE SPENDING OUR CHILDREN'S INHERITANCE, a message that I suppose irked Dag, who was bored and cranky after eight hours of working his Mcjob ("Low pay, low prestige, low benefits, low future").

I wish I understood this destructive tendency in Dag; otherwise he is such a considerate guy—to the point where once he wouldn't bathe for a week when a spider spun a web in his bathtub.

"I don't know, Andy," he said as he slammed my screen door, doggies in tow, resembling the lapsed half of a Mormon pamphleting duo with a white shirt, askew tie, armpits hinged with sweat, 48-hour stubble, gray slacks ("not pants, *slacks*") and butting his head like a rutting elk almost immediately into the vegetable crisper of my Frigidaire, from which he pulled wilted romaine leaves off the dewy surface of a bottle of cheap vodka, "whether I feel more that I want to punish some aging crock for frittering away my world, or whether I'm just upset that the world has gotten too big—way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it, and so all we're stuck with are these blips and chunks and snippets on bumpers." He chugs from the bottle. "I feel insulted either way."

So it must have been three in the morning. Dag was on a vandal's high, and the two of us were sitting on couches in my living room looking at the fire burning in the fireplace, when shortly Claire stormed in (no knock), her mink-black-bob-cut aflutter, and looking imposing in spite of her shortness, the effect carried off by chic garnered from working the Chanel counter at the local I. Magnin store.

"Date from hell," she announced, causing Dag and I to exchange meaningful glances. She grabbed a glass of mystery drink in the kitchen

**MCJOB:** A low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held one.

**POVERTY JET SET: A**

group of people given to chronic traveling at the expense of long-term job stability or a permanent residence. Tend to have doomed and extremely expensive phone-call relationships with people named Serge or Ilyana. Tend to discuss frequent-flyer programs at parties.

and then plonked herself down on the small sofa, unconcerned by the impending fashion disaster of multiple dog hairs on her black wool dress.

"Look, Claire. If your date was too hard to talk about, maybe you can use some little puppets and reenact it for us with a little show."

"Funnee, Dag. Funnee. God. *Another* bond peddler and *another* nouvelle dinner of seed bells and Evian water. And, of *course*, he was a survivalist, too. Spent the whole night talking about moving to Montana and the chemicals he's going to put in his gasoline tank to keep it all from decomposing. I can't keep doing this. I'll be thirty soon. I feel like a character in a color cartoon."

She inspected my serviceable (and by no means stunning) furnished room, a space cheered up mainly by inexpensive low-grade Navajo Indian blankets. Then her face loosened. "My date had a low point, too. Out on Highway 111 in Cathedral City there's this store that sells chickens that have been taxidermied. We were driving by and I just about fainted from wanting to have one, they were so cute, but Dan (that was his name) says, 'Now Claire, you don't *need* a chicken,' to which I said, That's not the point, Dan. The point is that I *want* a chicken.' He thereupon commenced giving me this fantastically boring lecture about how the only reason I want a stuffed chicken is because they look so good in a shop window, and that the moment I received one I'd start dreaming up ways to ditch it. True enough. But then I tried to tell him that stuffed chickens are what life and new relationships was all about, but my explanation collapsed somewhere—the analogy became too mangled—and there was that awful woe-to-the-human-race silence you get from pedants who think they're talking to half-wits. I wanted to throttle him." "Chickens?" asked Dag. "Yes, Chickens." "Well." "Yes."

"Cluck cluck."

Things became both silly and morose and after a few hours I retired to the lanai where I am now, plucking possible yuppie fat from the snouts of my dogs and watching sunlight's first pinking of the Coachella Valley, the valley in which Palm Springs lies. Up on a hill in the distance I can see the saddle-shaped form of the home that belongs to Mr. Bob Hope, the entertainer, melting like a Dali clock into the rocks. I feel calm because my friends are nearby.

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"Polyp weather," announces Dag as he comes and sits next to me, brushing sage dust off the rickety wood stoop.

"That is just too sick, Dag," says Claire sitting on my other side and putting a blanket over my shoulders (I am only in my underwear).

"Not sick at all. In fact, you should check out the sidewalks near the patio restaurants of Rancho Mirage around noon some day. Folks shedding polyps like dandruff flakes, and when you walk on them it's like walking on a bed of Rice Krispies cereal."

I say, "Shhhh . . ." and the five of us (don't forget the dogs) look eastward. I shiver and pull the blanket tight around myself, for I am colder than I had realized, and I wonder that all things seem to be from hell these days: dates, jobs, parties, weather. . . . Could the situation be that we no longer believe in that particular place? Or maybe we were all promised heaven in our lifetimes, and what we ended up with can't help but suffer in comparison.

Maybe someone got cheated along the way. I wonder.

You know, Dag and Claire smile a lot, as do many people I know. But I have always wondered if there is something either mechanical or malignant to their smiles, for the way they keep their outer lips propped up seems a bit, not false, but *protective*. A minor realization hits me as I sit with the two of them. It is the realization that the smiles that they wear in their daily lives are the same as the smiles worn by people who have been good-naturedly fleeced, but fleeced nonetheless, in public and on a New York sidewalk by card sharks, and who are unable because of social convention to show their anger, who don't want to look like poor sports. The thought is fleeting.

The first chink of sun rises over the lavender mountain of Joshua, but three of us are just a bit too cool for our own good; we can't just let the moment happen. Dag must greet this flare with a question for us, a gloomy aubade: "What do you think of when you see the sun? Quick. Before you think about it too much and kill your response. Be honest. Be gruesome. Claire, you go first."

Claire understands the drift: "Well, Dag. I see a farmer in Russia, and he's driving a tractor in a wheat field, but the sunlight's gone bad on him—like the fadedness of a black-and-white picture in an old *Life* magazine. And another strange phenomenon has happened, too: rather than sunbeams, the sun has begun to project the odor of old *Life* magazines instead, and the odor is killing his crops. The wheat is thinning

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#### **HISTORICAL**

**UNDERDOSING:** To live in a period of time when nothing seems to happen. Major symptoms include addiction to newspapers, magazines, and TV news broadcasts.

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## HISTORICAL

**OVERDOSING:** To live in a period of time when too much seems to happen. Major symptoms include addiction to newspapers, magazines, and TV news broadcasts.

as we speak. He's slumped over the wheel of his tractor and he's crying. His wheat is dying of history poisoning."

"Good, Claire. Very weird. And Andy? How about you?"

"Let me think a second."

"Okay, I'll go instead. When I think of the sun, I think of an Australian surf bunny, eighteen years old, maybe, somewhere on Bondi Beach, and discovering her first keratosis lesion on her shin. She's screaming inside her brain and already plotting how she's going to steal Valiums from her mother. Now *you* tell *me*, Andy, what do you think of when you see the sun?"

I refuse to participate in this awfulness. I refuse to put people in my vision. "I think of this place in Antarctica called Lake Vanda, where the rain hasn't fallen in more than two million years." "Fair enough. That's all?" "Yes, that's all."

There is a pause. And what I *don't* say is this: that this is also the same sun that makes me think of regal tangerines and dimwitted butterflies and lazy carp. And the ecstatic drops of pomegranate blood seeping from skin fissures of fruits rotting on the tree branch next door—drops that hang like rubies from their old brown leather source, alluding to the intense ovarian fertility inside.

The carapace of coolness is too much for Claire, also. She breaks the silence by saying that it's not healthy to live life as a succession of isolated little cool moments. "Either our lives become stories, or there's just no way to get through them."

I agree. Dag agrees. We know that this is why the three of us left our lives behind us and came to the desert—to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process.

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**OUR  
PARENTS  
HAD  
MORE**

"Strip." T'Talk to yourself." I"Look at the view." t'Mas-  
turbate." Ill's a day later (well, actually not even twelve hours later)  
and the five of us are rattling down Indian Avenue, headed for our  
afternoon picnic up in the mountains. We're in Dag's syphilitic old Saab,  
an endearingly tinny ancient red model of the sort driven up the sides  
of buildings in Disney cartoons and held together by Popsicle sticks,  
chewing gum and Scotch tape. And in the car we're playing a  
quick game—answering  
to "name all of the ac-  
they're by themselves out  
nude Polaroids." T'Hoard  
debris." T'Shoot those  
bits with a shotgun."  
kind of like life, isn't it?"

Claire's open command  
tivities people do when  
in the desert." T'Take  
little pieces of junk and  
little pieces of junk to  
H"Hey," roars Dag, "it's  
HThe car rolls along.

IT'Sometimes," says Claire, as we drive past the I. Magnin where she  
works, "I develop this weird feeling when I watch these endless waves  
of gray hair g obbling up the jewels and perfumes at work. I feel like  
I'm watching this enormous dinner table surrounded by hundreds of  
greedy little children who are so spoiled, and so impatient, that they  
can't even wait for food to be prepared. They have to reach for live  
animals placed on the table and suck the food right out of them."

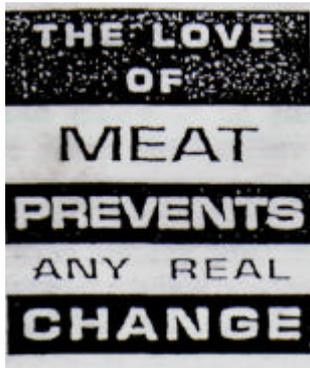
Okay, okay. This is a cruel, lopsided judgment of what Palm Springs

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really is—a small town where old people are trying to buy back their youth and a few rungs on the social ladder. As the expression goes, we spend our youth attaining wealth, and our wealth attaining youth. It's really not a bad place here, and it's undeniably lovely—hey, I *do* live here, after all.

But the place makes me worry.

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There is no weather in Palm Springs—just like TV. There is also no middle class, and in that sense the place is medieval. Dag says that every time someone on the planet uses a paper clip, fabric softens their laundry, or watches a rerun of "Hee Haw" on TV, a resident somewhere here in the Coachella Valley collects a penny. He's probably right.

Claire notices that the rich people here pay the poor people to cut the thorns from their cactuses. "I've also noticed that they tend to throw out their houseplants rather than maintain them. God. Imagine what their *kids* are like."

Nonetheless, the three of us chose to live here, for the town is undoubtedly a quiet sanctuary from the bulk of middle-class life. And we certainly don't live in one of the dishier neighborhoods the town has to offer. No way. There are neighborhoods here, where, if you see a glint in a patch of crew-cut Bermuda grass, you can assume there's a silver dollar lying there. Where *we* live, in our little bungalows that share a courtyard and a kidney-shaped swimming pool, a twinkle in the grass means a broken scotch bottle or a colostomy bag that has avoided the trashman's gloved clutch.

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The car heads out on a long stretch that heads toward the highway and Claire hugs one of the dogs that has edged its face in between the two front seats. It is a face that now grovels politely but insistently for attention. She lectures into the dog's two obsidian eyes: "*You*, you cute

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little creature. *You* don't have to worry about having snowmobiles or cocaine or a third house in Orlando, *Florida*. That's right. No *you* don't. You just want a nice little pat on the head."

The dog meanwhile wears the cheerful, helpful look of a bellboy in a foreign country who doesn't understand a word you're saying but who still wants a tip.

"That's right. You wouldn't want to worry yourself with so many *things*. And do you know *why*?" (The dog raises its ears at the inflection, giving the illusion of understanding. Dag insists that all dogs secretly speak the English language and subscribe to the morals and beliefs of the Unitarian church, but Claire objected to this because she said she knew for *a fact*, that when she was in France, the dogs spoke French.) "Because all of those objects would only mutiny and slap you in the face. They'd only remind you that all you're doing with your life is collecting objects. And nothing else."

We live small lives on the periphery; we are marginalized and there's a great deal in which we choose not to participate. We wanted silence and we have that silence now. We arrived here speckled in sores and zits, our colons so tied in knots that we never thought we'd have a bowel movement again. Our systems had stopped working, jammed with the odor of copy machines, Wite-Out, the smell of bond paper, and the endless stress of pointless jobs done grudgingly to little applause. We had compulsions that made us confuse shopping with creativity, to take downers and assume that merely renting a video on a Saturday night was enough. But now that we live here in the desert, things are much, *much* better.

**HISTORICAL SLUMMING:**

The act of visiting locations such as diners, smokestack industrial sites, rural villages—locations where time appears to have been frozen many years back—so as to experience relief when one returns back to "the present."

**BRAZILIFICATION: The**

widening gulf between the rich and the poor and the accompanying disappearance of the middle classes.

**VACCINATED TIME**

**TRAVEL:** To fantasize about traveling backward in time, but only with proper vaccinations.

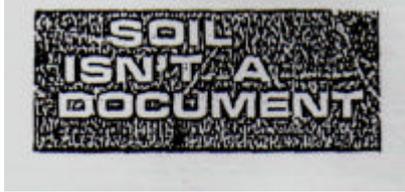
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**QUIT  
RECYCLING  
THE PAST**

At meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, fellow drinksters will get angry with you if you won't puke for the audience. By that, I mean spill your guts—really dredge up those rotted baskets of fermented kittens and

murder implements that lie at the bottoms of all of our personal lakes.

AA members want to hear the horror stories of how far you've sunk in I life, and no low is low enough. Tales of spouse abuse, embezzlement, and public incontinence are both appreciated and expected. I know this as a fact because I've been to these meetings (lurid details of my own life will follow at a later date), and I've seen the process of onedownman-ship in action—and been angry at not having sordid enough tales of debauchery of my own to share. 'Never be afraid to cough up a bit of diseasedlungforthespec-tators," said a man who sat next to me at a meeting once, a man with skin like a half-cooked pie crust and who had five grown children who would no longer return his phone calls: "How are people ever going to help themselves if they can't grab onto a fragment of your own horror? People want that little fragment, they *need* it. That little piece of lung makes their own fragments less scary." I'm still looking for a description of storytelling as vital as this. Thus inspired by my meetings of the Alcoholics Anonymous organization, I instigated a policy of storytelling in my own life, a policy



of "bedtime stories," which Dag, Claire, and I share among ourselves. It's simple: we come up with stories and we tell them to each other. The only rule is that we're not allowed to interrupt, just like in AA, and at the end we're not allowed to criticize. This noncritical atmosphere works for us because the three of us are so tight assed about revealing our emotions. A clause like this was the only way we could feel secure with each other.

Claire and Dag took to the game like ducklings to a stream.

"I firmly believe," Dag once said at the beginning, months ago, "that everybody on earth has a deep, dark secret that they'll never tell another soul as long as they live. Their wife, their husband, their lover, or their priest. Never.

"I have my secret. You have yours. Yes, you do—I can see you smiling. You're thinking about your secret right now. Come on: *spill it out*. What is it? Diddle your sister? Circle jerk? Eat your poo to check the taste? Go with a stranger and you'd go with more? Betray a friend? Just tell me. You may be able to help me and not even know it."

Anyhow, today we're going to be telling bedtime stories on our picnic, and on Indian Avenue we're just about to turn off onto the Interstate 10 freeway to head west, riding in the clapped-out ancient red Saab, with Dag at the wheel, informing us that passengers do not really "ride" in his little red car so much as they "motor": "We are motoring off to our picnic in hell."

Hell is the town of West Palm Springs Village—a bleached and defoliated Flintstones color cartoon of a failed housing development from the 1950s. The town lies on a chokingly hot hill a few miles up the valley, and it overlooks the shimmering aluminum necklace of Interstate 10, whose double strands stretch from San Bernardino in the west, out to Blythe and Phoenix in the east.

In an era when nearly all real estate is coveted and developed, West Palm Springs Village is a true rarity: a modern ruin and almost deserted save for a few hearty souls in Airstream trailers and mobile homes, who give us a cautious eye upon our arrival through the town's

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welcoming sentry—an abandoned Texaco gasoline station surrounded by a chain link fence, and lines of dead and blackened *Washingtonia* palms that seem to have been agent-oranged. The mood is vaguely reminiscent of a Vietnam War movie set.

"You get the impression," says Dag as we drive past the gas station at hearse speed, "that back in, say, 1958, Buddy Hackett, Joey Bishop, and a bunch of Vegas entertainers all banded together to make a bundle on this place, but a key investor split town and the whole place just died."

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But again, the village is not entirely dead. A few people do live there, and these few troopers have a splendid view of the windmill ranch down below them that borders the highway—tens of thousands of turbo blades set on poles and aimed at Mount San Gorgonio, one of the windiest places in America. Conceived of as a tax dodge after the oil shock, these windmills are so large and powerful that any one of their blades could cut a man in two. Curiously, they turned out to be functional as well as a good tax dodge, and the volts they silently generate power detox center air conditioners and cellulite vacuums of the region's burgeoning cosmetic surgery industry.

Claire is dressed today in bubble gum capri pants, sleeveless blouse, scarf, and sunglasses: starlet manque. She likes retro looks, and she also once told us that if she has kids, "I'm going to give them utterly retro names like Madge or Verna or Ralph. Names like people have in diners."

Dag, on the other hand, is dressed in threadbare chinos, a smooth cotton dress shirt, and sockless in loafers, essentially a reduction of his usual lapsed Mormon motif. He has no sunglasses: he is going to stare at the sun: Huxley redux or Monty Clift, prepping himself for a role and trying to shake the drugs.

"What," ask both my friends, "is this lurid amusement value dead celebrities hold for us?"

Me? I'm just me. I never seem to be able to get into the swing of using "time as a color" in my wardrobe, the way Claire does, or "time cannibalizing" as Dag calls the process. I have enough trouble just being *now*. I dress to be obscure, to be hidden—to be generic. Camouflaged.

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#### **DECADE BLENDING:**

In clothing: the indiscriminate combination of two or more items from various decades to create a personal mood: *Sheila* = *Mary Quant earrings (1960s)* + *cork wedgie platform shoes (1970s)* + *black leather jacket (1950s and 1980s)*.

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So, after cruising around house-free streets, Claire chooses the corner of Cottonwood and Sapphire avenues for our picnic, not because there's anything there (which there isn't, merely a crumbling asphalt road being reclaimed by sage and creosote bushes) but rather because "if you try real hard you can almost feel how optimistic the developers were when they named this place."

The back flap of the car clunks down. Here we will eat chicken breasts, drink iced tea, and greet with exaggerated happiness the pieces of stick and snakeskin the dogs bring to us. And we will tell our bedtime stories to each other under the hot buzzing sun next to vacant lots that in alternately forked universes might still bear the gracious desert homes of such motion picture stars as Mr. William Holden and Miss Grace Kelly. In these homes my two friends Dagmar Bellinghausen and Claire Baxter would be more than welcome for swims, gossip, and frosty rum drinks the color of a Hollywood, California sunset.

But then that's another universe, not this universe. *Here* the three of us merely eat a box lunch on a land that is barren—the equivalent of blank space at the end of a chapter—and a land so empty that all objects placed on its breathing, hot skin become objects of irony. And here, under the big white sun, I get to watch Dag and Claire pretend they inhabit that other, more welcoming universe.



**I AM NOT  
A  
TARGET  
MARKET**

Dag says he's a lesbian trapped inside a man's body. Figure *that* out.

To watch him smoke a filter-tipped cigarette out in the desert, the sweat on his face evaporating as quickly as it forms, while Claire teases the dogs with bits of chicken at the back of the Saab's hatch gate, you can't help but be helplessly reminded of the sort of bleached Kodak snapshots [ taken decades ago and found in shoe boxes in attics everywhere. You ' know the type: all yellowed and filmy, always with a big faded car in the background and fashion- ingly hip. When you see such photos, you can't [ help but wonder at just how sweet and sad and innocent all moments of life are rendered by the tripping of a camera's shutter, for at that point the future is still unknown and has yet to hurt us, and also for that brief moment, our poses are accepted as honest. As I watch Dag and Claire piddle about the desert, I also realize that my descriptions of myself and my two friends have been slightly vague until now. A bit more description of them and myself is in order. Time for case studies. I'll begin with Dag. Dag's car pulled up to the curb outside my bungalow about a year ago, its Ontario license plates covered in a mustard crust of Oklahoma mud and Nebraska insects. When he opened the door, a heap of clutter fell out the door and onto the pavement, including a bottle of Chanel Crystalle perfume

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that smashed. ("Dykes just love Crystalle, you know. So active. So sporty.") I never found out what the perfume was for, but life's been considerably more interesting around here since.

Shortly after Dag arrived, I both found him a place to live—an empty bungalow in between mine and Claire's—and got him a job with me at Larry's Bar, where he quickly took control of the scene. Once, for example, he bet me fifty dollars that he could induce the locals—a depressing froth of failed Zsa Zsa types, low-grade bikers who brew cauldrons of acid up in the mountains, and their biker-bitch chicks with pale-green gang tattoos on their knuckles and faces bearing the appalling complexions of abandoned and rained-on showroom dummies—he bet me he could have them all singing along with him to "It's a Heartache," a grisly, strangely out-of-date Scottish love tune that was never removed from the jukebox, before the night was out. This notion was too silly to even consider, so, of course, I accepted the bet. A few minutes later I was out in the hallway making a long-distance call underneath the native Indian arrowhead display, when suddenly, what did I hear inside the bar but the tuneless bleatings and bellowings of the crowd, accompanied by their swaying beehive do's and waxen edemic biker's arms flailing arrhythmically to the song's beat. Not without admiration, then, did I give Dag his fifty, while a terrifying biker gave him a hug ("I love this guy!"), and then watched Dag put the bill into his mouth, chew it a bit, and then swallow.

"Hey, Andy. You are what you eat."

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People are wary of Dag when meeting him for the first time, in the same visceral way prairie folk are wary of the flavor of seawater when tasting it for the first time at an ocean beach. "He has eyebrows," says Claire when describing him on the phone to one of her many sisters.

Dag used to work in advertising (marketing, actually) and came to California from Toronto, Canada, a city that when I once visited gave the efficient, ordered feel of the Yellow Pages sprung to life in three dimensions, peppered with trees and veined with cold water.

"I don't think I was a likable guy. I was actually one of those putzes

you see driving a sports car down to the financial district every morning with the roof down and a baseball cap on his head, cocksure and pleased with how frisky and *complete* he looks. I was both thrilled and flattered and achieved no small thrill of power to think that most manufacturers of life-style accessories in the Western world considered me their most desirable target market. But at the slightest provocation I'd have been willing to apologize for my working life—how I work from eight till five in front of a sperm-dissolving VDT performing abstract tasks that in-I directly enslave the Third World. But then, hey! Come five o'clock, I'd go nuts! I'd streak my hair and drink beer brewed in Kenya. I'd wear bow ties and listen to *alternative* rock and slum in the arty part of town."

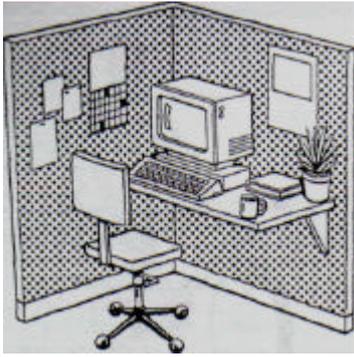
Anyhow, the story of why Dag came to Palm Springs runs through my brain at the moment, so I will continue here with a reconstruction built of Dag's own words, gleaned over the past year of slow nights tending bar. I begin at the point where he once told me how he was at work and suffering from a case of "Sick Building Syndrome," saying, "The windows in the office building where I worked didn't open that morning, and I was sitting in my cubicle, affectionately named the veal-I fattening pen. I was getting sicker and more headachy by the minute as the airborne stew of office toxins and viruses recirculated—around and around—in the fans.

"Of course these poison winds were eddying in *my* area in particular, aided by the hum of the white noise machine and the glow of the VDT screens. I wasn't getting much done and was staring at my IBM clone surrounded by a sea of Post-it Notes, rock band posters ripped of construction site hoarding boards, and a small sepia photo of a wooden whaling ship, crushed in the Antarctic ice, that I once found in an old *National Geographic*. I had placed this photo behind a little gold frame I bought in Chinatown. I would stare at this picture constantly, never quite able to imagine the cold, lonely despair that people who are genuinely trapped must feel—in the process think better of my own plight in life.

"Anyhow, I wasn't going to produce much, and to be honest, I had decided that morning that it was very hard to see myself doing the same job two years down the road. The thought of it was laughable; *depressing*. So I was being a bit more lax than normal in my behavior. It felt nice. It was pre-quitting elation. I've had it a few times now.

"Karen and Jamie, the "VDT Vixens" who worked in the veal-





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**VEAL-FATTENING PEN:**

Small, cramped office workstations built of fabric-covered disassemblable wall partitions and inhabited by junior staff members. Named after the small preslaughter cubicles used by the cattle industry.

fattening pens next to me (we called our area the junior stockyard or the junior ghetto, alternately) weren't feeling well or producing much, either. As I remember, Karen was spooked about the Sick Building business more than any of us. She had her sister, who worked as an X-ray technician in Montreal, give her a lead apron, which she wore to protect her ovaries when she was doing her keyboarding work. She was going to quit soon to pick up work as a temp: 'More freedom that way—easier to date the bicycle couriers.'

"Anyway, I remember I was working on a hamburger franchise campaign, the big goal of which, according to my embittered ex-hippie boss, Martin, was to 'get the little monsters so excited about eating a burger that they want to vomit with excitement.' Martin was a forty-year-old *man* saying this. Doubts I'd been having about my work for months were weighing on my mind.

"As luck would have it, that was the morning the public health inspector came around in response to a phone call I'd made earlier that week, questioning the quality of the working environment.

"Martin was horrified that an employee had called the inspectors, and I mean *really* freaked out. In Toronto they can force you to make architectural changes, and alterations are ferociously expensive—fresh air ducts and the like—and health of the office workers be damned, cash signs were dingling up in Martin's eyes, tens of thousands of dollars' worth. He called me into his office and started screaming at me, his teeny-weeny salt and pepper ponytail bobbing up and down, 'I just don't understand you young people. No workplace is ever okay enough. And you mope and complain about how uncreative your jobs are and how you're getting nowhere, and so when we finally give you a promotion you leave and go pick grapes in Queensland or some other such nonsense.'

"Now, Martin, like most embittered ex-hippies, is a yuppie, and I have no idea how you're supposed to relate to those people. And before you start getting shrill and saying yuppies don't exist, let's just face facts: they *do*. Dickoids like Martin who snap like wolverines on speed when they can't have a restaurant's window seat in the nonsmoking section with cloth napkins. Androids who never get jokes and who have something scared and mean at the core of their existence, like an underfed Chihuahua baring its teeny fangs and waiting to have its face kicked in or like a glass of milk sloshed on top of the violet filaments of a bug

barbecue: a weird abuse of nature. Yuppies never gamble, they calculate. They have no aura: ever been to a yuppie party? It's like being in an empty room: empty hologram people walking around peeking at themselves in mirrors and surreptitiously misting their tonsils with Binaca spray, just in case they have to kiss another ghost like themselves. There's just nothing *there*.

"So, 'Hey Martin,' I asked when I go to his office, a plush James Bond number overlooking the downtown core—he's sitting there wearing a computer-generated purple sweater from Korea—a sweater with lots of *texture*. Martin likes torture. 'Put yourself in my shoes. Do you *really* think we enjoy having to work in that toxic waste dump in there?' 'Uncontrollable urges were overtaking me.

' . . . and then have to watch you chat with your yuppie buddies about your gut liposuction all day while you secrete artificially sweetened royal jelly here in Xanadu?"

"Suddenly I was into this *tres* deeply. Well, if I'm going to quit anyway, might as well get a thing or two off my chest.

' I beg your pardon,' says Martin, the wind taken out of his sails. ' Or for that matter, do you really think we *enjoy* hearing about your brand new million-dollar *home* when we can barely afford to eat Kraft Dinner sandwiches in our own grimy little shoe boxes and we're pushing *thirty*? A home you won in a genetic lottery, I might add, sheerly by dint of your having been born at the right time in history? You'd last about ten minutes if you were my age these days, Martin. And I have to endure pinheads like you rusting above me for the rest of my life, always grabbing the best piece of cake first and then putting a barbed-ire fence around the rest. You really make me sick.'

"Unfortunately the phone rang then, so I missed what would have undoubtedly been a feeble retort . . . some higher-up Martin was in the middle of a bum-kissing campaign with and who couldn't be shaken off the line. I dawdled off into the staff cafeteria. There, a salesman from the copy machine company was pouring a Styrofoam cup full of scalding hot coffee into the soil around a ficus tree which really hadn't even recovered yet from having been fed cocktails and cigarette butts from the Christmas party. It was pissing rain outside, and the water was drizzling down the windows, but inside the air was as dry as the Sahara from being recirculated. The staff were all bitching about commuting time and making AIDS jokes, labeling the office's fashion victims, sneez-

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#### **EMOTIONAL KETCHUP**

**BURST:** The bottling up of opinions and emotions inside oneself so that they explosively burst forth all at once, shocking and confusing employers and friends—most of whom thought things were fine.

#### **BLEEDING PONYTAIL:**

An elderly sold-out baby boomer who pines for hippie or pre-sellout days.

**BOOMER ENVY:** Envy of material wealth and long-range material security accrued by older members of the baby boom generation by virtue of fortunate births.

#### **CLIQUE MAINTENANCE:**

The need of one generation to see the generation following it as deficient so as to bolster its own collective ego: "*Kids today do nothing. They're so apathetic. We used to go out and protest. All they do is shop and complain.*"

#### **CONSENSUS**

**TERRORISM:** The process that decides in-office attitudes and behavior.

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ing, discussing their horoscopes, planning their time-shares in Santo Domingo, and slagging the rich and famous. I felt cynical, and the room matched my mood. At the coffee machine next to the sink, I grabbed a cup, while Margaret, who worked at the other end of the office, was waiting for her herbal tea to steep and informing me of the ramifications of my letting off of steam a few minutes earlier.

'What *did* you just say to Martin, Dag?' she says to me. 'He's just having *kittens* in his office—cursing your name up and down. Did the health inspector declare this place a *Bhopal* or something?'

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# QUIT YOUR JOB

"I deflected her question. I like Margaret. She tries hard. She's older, and attractive in a hair-spray-and-shoulder-pads-twice-divorced survivor of way. A real bulldozer. She's like one of those little rooms you only in Chicago or New York in superexpensive downtown apartments—small rooms painted intense, flaring colors like emerald or rawbeef to hide the fact that they're so small. She told me my season once, too: I'm a summer. " 'God, Margaret. You really have to wonder why we even bother to get mean, really: *Why work?* stuff? That's just not What's the common as- from here to here? What cream and running shoes have? I mean, I see all of *up* in the morning. I Simply to buy more enough. Look at us all. sumption that got us all makes us *deserve* the ice and wool Italian suits we us trying so hard to acquire so much *stuff*, but I can't help but feeling that we didn't merit it, that.. ." 'But Margaret cooled me right there. Putting down her mug, she said that before I got into one of my Exercised Young Man states, I should realize that the only reason we all go to work in the morning is because we're terrified of what would happen if we *stopped*. *We're* not built for free time as a species. We think we are, but we aren't.' Then she began almost talking to herself. I'd gotten her going, She was saying that most of us have only two or three genuinely interesting

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