

SUN BEAT LEAVES // GRAZING SAND

August of 1965. Thomas Jr., or Tad—or, since we shall *obliterate the name of the exalted*, henceforth known only as T-d—is in the throes of a chapter of one of the four books he is writing simultaneously, strung out on junk food and what’s left of the PANAMA RED pot, that which hasn’t gone to dust. He landed here in Manhattan Beach, CA, after bailing on a sequestered life in Mexico, first stopping off in Houston, TX, where T-d shacked up with married friends Fred & Phyllis Gebauer, before they decided to blow the humid southern oil fields for the fat, busting burritos slung on the west coast. The Gebauers found a place in Westwood. T-d stayed with them for weeks before finally moving to his own place, a tiny first-floor bachelor’s apartment directly behind his landlord’s beachfront duplex on 30th Street. T-d quickly moved three streets over to another property owned by his landlord. It’s another ground-level spread, this one situated a short saunter east to what became his favorite dive, The Fractured Cow on Highland Avenue.

T-d sat alone at a booth in the Fractured Cow, disguised as how he thought a longshore fisherman looked, a turtleneck and eye patch, his body contorted in the vinyl booth in such a manner that his cheek floated an inch above a plate of something called The Lumberjack. On rare occasions, today being one, T-d dips into his dwindling advance to treat himself to foods in excess of the nourishment found in popsicles and tortillas. *If I wasn’t wearing this toboggan and ratty sweater, I might have gone unnoticed*, he thought, forking a lump of perfectly hard-

scrambled eggs and jam into the waiting pocket hidden under his overgrown stache. How fortunate for agents SIOUXX and COAK—who are expected at any moment—that T-d is stuck perpetually with this stubborn, onry delightful disposition. *It's hard to believe*, thinking again as he lapped up blueberry syrup, or what he's almost certain is blueberry syrup, *that I was hired only a year ago*; a time in that strange void before pot strangled his life and gave it meaning and direction. Anyway, like he was thinking: *ONE YEAR OF LIFE, that was the cost, that's all, and there's only a bit longer to go before it's time for all parties to make good on their agreement, so keep it straight, T-d, keep it straight—Those idiots had better get here soon.* When OCTAVIA LISTENS slithered in like a burglar between the foam seal of the closed glass doors, a vicious string of expletives overwhelmed T-d's senses—*Christ!*—VIA always complained about some aspect of their current set-up, no matter the case or quality. She had de-evolved over the last three years into a cosmopolitan bohemian—a *COBO*—the worst of the ilk. VIA, like T-d, is technically minded; sharp as a tack, but consumed wholly by lust and desire for sexual dalliances, and the insatiable need for admiration as a *true artist's muse*—as if she's Oona O'Neill, ha! This brainy COBO loves reminding T-d that artists have needs—deep, emotional, spiritual needs—something HE wouldn't know anything about being a writer. HE is living proof of her theory. Conversely, T-d is proud of his frugality, particularly his ability to have stretched Lippincott's advance to the last red cent. The plain and simple atomic truth is that HE and VIA were damned for all times. It was never, ever going to work.

“Oh, there you are,” and “ha, figures!” were her boothside pick-up lines when she found him trying to duck out of view.

“Hey there, hun; you coming to the beach or not?” VIA took note of T-d's practically translucent skin; so whitely deficient of vitamin D that the maroon vinyl booth cushion shone through where a face should be—his exposed ankles and wrists revealed soft pine streaks and scuffed linoleum squares. Once VIA's big brown doe eyes shook back to life, she

muttered something in the ghost's direction before dumping a short stack of delivered mail under his chin. She took a sip of his coffee and a single big bite from his last bacon strip, and then vanished out the way she arrived, missing the late agents by seconds in classic Marx Brothers fashion—and a good thing that, too, for they hate VIA with a passion—condemning her as a fully functioning, honest-ta-gawd witch. SIOUXX and COAK pick at T-d like meddling parents trying to persuade their child to see that the mate they've selected is not up to snuff. They constantly leverage their little power, hoping for the green light to make VIA ... uh ... vanish. T-d need only whisper the order, and it's lift-off, baby! The crowd goes wild when VAL SIOUXX and LEVIS COAK order one coffee and one tea; they'll work out who will drink which later—it's hardly important. Perhaps. These two are in relatively pleasant moods and come bearing notes from DIVISION DIRECTOR PROONE GHEISTWHITES, who is, for the most part, over the moon with T-d's constructed NARRATIVE thus far. However, GHEISTWHITES has a few *PAULEKAS points* that need tweaking, as well as details that are imperative to be worked into the THIRD AND FINAL PHASE. COAK produces a memo for T-d's review:

PHASE III IS TO BE COMPLETED IN NO MORE  
THAN ONE YEAR FROM TODAY'S DATE, AT WHICH  
TIME YOUR CONTRACT WILL BE CONSIDERED  
FULFILLED [STOP]

ARE YOU UP FOR IT [STOP]

CIRCLE ONE [STOP]

NO PROBLEMO [STOP]

NO WAY JOSE [STOP]

D.P. GHEISTWHITES [STOP]

*Fuck Salinger*, T-d thought as his hand hovered for a millisecond above the declination, and then he drew a big, hard ellipse around the answer that's going to ensure his riddled opus gets published at the House of HIS choosing, no questions asked, and with changes behest HIS wishes only.

THE BOPSEY TWINS AT THE SHORE—The unlikely trio made their way out onto the beach, and flew a kite and chain-smoked cigarettes until the sun disappeared further out to sea.

From behind a boulder, T-d spied PETER YARROW putting his predictable, pathetic moves on VIA, but she didn't bite—DAMMIT—It looks as though another easy-out for T-d gets foiled. He will have to remain patient. Surely another lug-head will blunder along soon; they always do.

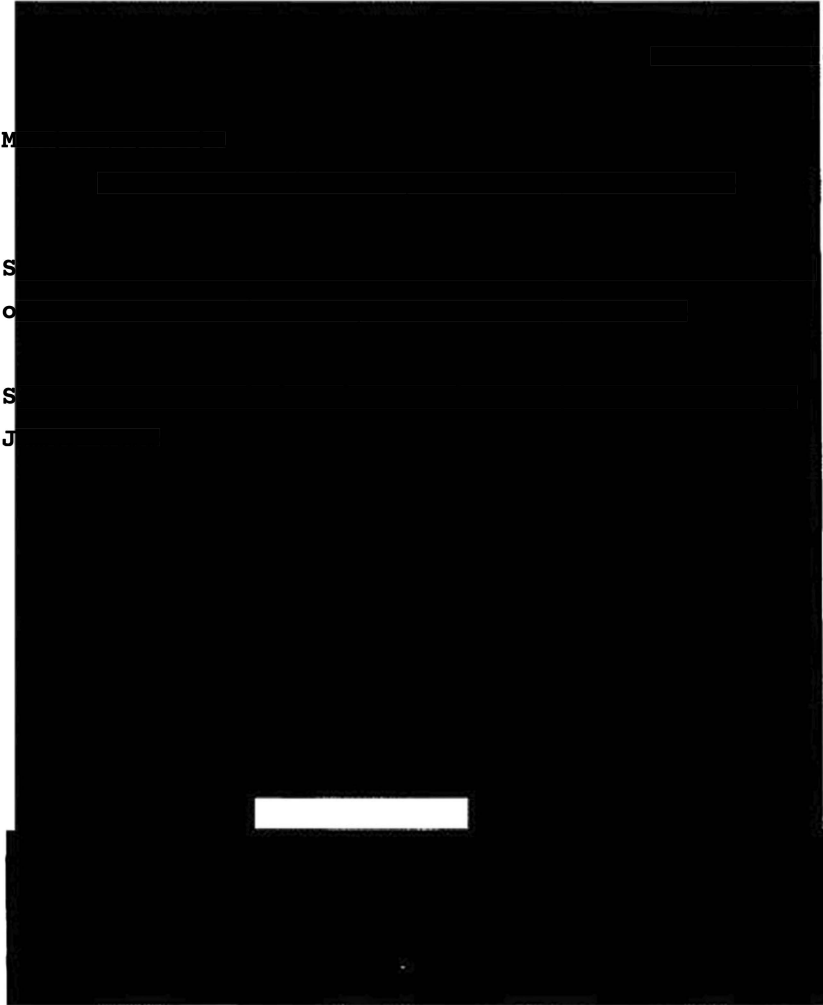
While COAK and SIOUXX packed up and shook the sand from their blazers and tuxedo shoes, T-d used his long, bony fingers to rake a pentagram in the sand around them, scooping up hundreds of butts that had been burned down to their filters. And then, with absolutely no provocation (but certainly for good measure), SIOUXX and COAK roughed up T-d, driving home the dire reality of the situation; to demonstrate the inherent stresses which temporarily own T-d, those which HE agreed upon involvement with (contractually speaking, of course). HE should consider this beat-down a reminder. It's nothing personal (or not *too* personal). Their shallow, slow punches and light heel digs were, in fact, secretly connected to the novelist having made them travel to MEXICO one year ago.

They both get a few more jabs in before propping T-d against the softest boulder they could find.

T-d felt the warmth of photons scattering across the bridge of his nose and cheekbones in the final dying moments before the deep blue puffings set in.



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