Lunar Park

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1. the beginnings

"You do an awfully good impression of yourself."

This is the first line of *Lunar Park* and in its brevity and simplicity it was supposed to be a return to form, an echo, of the opening line from my debut novel, *Less Than Zero*.

"People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles."

Since then the opening sentences of my novels—no matter how artfully composed—had become overly complicated and ornate, loaded down with a heavy, useless emphasis on minutiae.

My second novel, *The Rules of Attraction*, for example, began with this:

and it's a story that might bore you but you don't have to listen, she told me, because she always knew it was going to be like that, and it was, she thinks, her first year, or actually weekend, really a Friday, in September, at Camden, and this was three or four years ago, and she got so drunk that she ended up in bed, lost her virginity (late, she was eighteen) in Lorna Slavin's room, because she was a Freshman and had a roommate and Lorna was, she remembers, a Senior or Junior and usually sometimes at her boyfriend's place off-campus, to who she thought was a Sophomore Ceramics major but who was actually either some guy from N.Y.U., a film student, and up in New Hampshire just for The Dressed To Get Screwed party, or a townie.

The following is from my third novel, *American Psycho.*

ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank near the corner of Eleventh and First and is in print large enough to be seen from the backseat of the cab as it lurches forward in the traffic leaving Wall Street and just as Timothy Price notices the words a bus pulls up, the advertisement for *Les Miserables* on its side blocking his view, but Price who is with Pierce & Pierce and twenty-six doesn't seem to care because he tells the driver he will give him five dollars to turn up the radio, "Be My Baby" on WYNN, and the driver, black, not American, does so.

This, from my fourth novel, *Glamorama:*

Specks—specks all over the third panel, see?—no, *that* one—the second one up from the floor and I wanted to point this out to someone yesterday but a photo shoot intervened and Yaki Nakamari or whatever the hell the designer's name is—a master craftsman *not*—mistook me for someone else so I couldn't register the complaint, but, gentlemen—and ladies—there they are: *specks*, annoying, tiny specks, and they *don't* look accidental but like they were somehow done by a machine—so I don't want a lot of description, just the story, streamlined, no frills, the lowdown: who, what, where, when and don't leave out why, though I'm getting the distinct impression by the looks on your sorry faces that *why* won't get answered—now, come on, goddammit, what's the *story?*

(*The Informers* was a short story collection published between *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* and since much of it was written while I was still in college—before the publication of *Less Than Zero*—it was an example of the same stripped-down minimalism.)

As anyone who had closely followed the progression of my career could glimpse—and if fiction inadvertently reveals a writer's inner life—things were getting out of hand, resembling something that according to the *New York Times* had become "bizarrely complicated . . . bloated and trivial . . . hyped-up," and I didn't necessarily disagree. I wanted a return to that past simplicity. I was overwhelmed by my life, and those first sentences seemed reflections of what had gone wrong. It was time to get back to basics, and

though I hoped that one lean sentence—"You do an awfully good impression of yourself"—would start the process, I also realized that it was going to require more than a string of words to clear away the clutter and damage that had amassed around me. But it would be the beginning.

When I was a student at Camden College in New Hampshire I took a novel-writing tutorial and produced during the winter of 1983 a manuscript that eventually became *Less Than Zero*. It detailed a wealthy, alienated, sexually ambiguous young man's Christmas break from an eastern college in Los Angeles—more specifically Beverly Hills—and all the parties he wandered through and all the drugs he consumed and all the girls and boys he had sex with and all the friends he passively watched drift into addiction, prostitution and vast apathy; days were spent speeding toward the beach club with beautiful blondes in gleaming convertibles while high on Nembutal; nights were lost in VIP rooms at trendy clubs and snorting cocaine at the window tables of Spago. It was an indictment not only of a way of life I was familiar with but also—I thought rather grandly—of the Reagan eighties and, more indirectly, of Western civilization in the present moment. My teacher was convinced as well, and after some casual edits and revisions (I had written it quickly in an eight-week crystal-meth binge on the floor of my bedroom in L.A.) he submitted it to his agent and publisher, who both agreed to take it on (the publisher somewhat reluctantly—one member of the editorial board arguing, "If there's an audience for a novel about coke-snorting, cock-sucking zombies, then by all means let's publish the damn thing"), and I watched with a mixture of fear and fascination—laced with excitement—its transformation from a student assignment into a glossy hardcover that became a huge best seller and zeitgeist touchstone, was translated into thirty languages and made into a big-budget Hollywood movie, all within the space of about sixteen months. And in the early fall of 1985, just four months after publication, three things happened simultaneously: I became independently wealthy, I became insanely famous, and, most important, I escaped my father.

My father made the bulk of his money from highly speculative real estate deals, most of them during the Reagan years, and the freedom this money bought made him increasingly unstable. But my father had always been a problem—careless, abusive, alcoholic, vain, angry, paranoid—and even after my parents divorced when I was a teenager (my mother's

demand) his power and control continued to loom over the family (which also included two younger sisters) in ways that were all monetary (endless arguments between lawyers about alimony and child support). It was a mission of his, a crusade, to weaken us, to make us intensely aware of how we—not his behavior—were to blame for the fact that he was no longer wanted in our lives. He left the house in Sherman Oaks under protest and moved to Newport Beach and his rage continued to clash with our peaceful Southern California surroundings: the lazy days hanging by the pool beneath a relentlessly clear and sunny sky, the mindless wanderings through the Galleria, the endless driving with swaying palm trees guiding us toward our destinations, the easygoing conversations over a soundtrack of Fleetwood Mac and the Eagles—all the laid-back advantages of growing up in that time and place were considerably darkened by his invisible presence. This languid lifestyle, decadent and loose, never relaxed my father. He remained, always, locked in a kind of demented fury, no matter how mellow the surface circumstances of his life really were. And because of this the world was threatening to us in a vague and abstract way we couldn't work ourselves out of—the map had disappeared, the compass had been smashed, we were lost. My sisters and I discovered a dark side to life at an unusually early age. We learned from our father's behavior that the world lacked coherence, and that within this chaos people were doomed to failure, and these realizations clouded our every ambition. And so my father was the sole reason I fled to a college in New Hampshire rather than stay in L.A. with my girlfriend and enroll at USC like most of my classmates from the private school we attended in the San Fernando Valley suburbs ultimately did. That was my desperate plan. But it was too late. My father had blackened my perception of the world, and his sneering, sarcastic attitude toward everything had latched on to me. As much as I wanted to escape his influence, I couldn't. It had soaked into me, shaped me into the man I was becoming. Whatever optimism I might have held on to had been swept away by the very nature of his being. The uselessness in thinking that escaping him physically would make a difference was so pathetic that I spent that first year at Camden paralyzed by anxiety and depression. The thing I resented most about my father was that the pain he inflicted on me—verbal and physical—was the reason I became a writer. (Added fact: he also beat our dog.)

Since he had no faith in my talent as a writer my father demanded that I attend business school at USC (my grades were poor but he had connections), even though I wanted to enroll somewhere as geographically distant

from him as possible—an art school, I kept stressing over his roar, that offered no business courses. I found none in Maine so I chose Camden, a small liberal arts college nestled in the bucolic hills of northeastern New Hampshire. My father, typically enraged, refused to pay the tuition. However, my grandfather—who at the time was being sued by his son over a money matter so circuitous and complicated that I'm still not sure how or why it began—footed the bill. I'm fairly certain the reason my grandfather paid the outrageously expensive tuition had to do with the fact that it would upset my father greatly, which it did. When I started attending Camden in the fall of 1982, my father and I stopped speaking, which for me was a relief. This mutual silence prevailed until *Less Than Zero* was published and became a success. His negative, disapproving attitude about me then metamorphosed, by the popularity of the novel, into a curiously glowing acceptance that intensified my loathing for him even more. My father created me, criticized me, destroyed me and, then, after I reinvented myself and lurched back into being, became a proud, boastful dad who attempted to reenter my life, all within what seemed to me a matter of days. Again I felt defeated, even though I had gained control through my newfound independence. Not accepting phone calls or requests to visit—refusing any and all contact with him—gave me no pleasure; it didn't vindicate anything. I had won the lottery yet still felt poor and needy. So I threw myself into the new life that was now offered, even though—being a savvy, jaded L.A. kid—I should have known better.

The novel was mistaken for autobiography (I had written three autobiographical novels—all unpublished—before *Less Than Zero*, so it was much more fiction-based and less a roman à clef than most first novels) and its sensational scenes (the snuff film, the gang rape of the twelve-year-old, the decomposing corpse in the alley, the murder at the drive-in) were taken from lurid rumors that whispered though the group I hung with in L.A. and not from anything experienced directly. But the press became extremely preoccupied with the book's "shocking" content and especially with its style: very brief scenes written in a kind of controlled, cinematic haiku. The book was short and an easy read (you could consume this "piece of black candy"—*New York Magazine*—in a couple of hours) and because of its large type (and no chapter lasting more than a page or two) it became known as "the novel for the MTV generation" (courtesy of

USA Today) and I found myself being labeled by just about everyone as the voice of this new generation. The fact that I was only twenty-one and there were no other voices yet seemed not to matter. I was a sexy story and no one was interested in pointing out the paucity of other leaders. Besides being profiled in every magazine and newspaper that existed, I was interviewed on *The Today Show* (for a record twelve minutes), on *Good Morning America*, by Barbara Walters, by Oprah Winfrey; I appeared on Letterman. William F. Buckley and I had a very lively conversation on *Firing Line*. For an entire week I introduced videos on MTV. Back at Camden I was engaged (briefly) to four different girls who hadn't seemed particularly interested before the book was published. At the graduation party my father threw for me at The Carlyle the attendees included Madonna, Andy Warhol with Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, Molly Ringwald, John McEnroe, Ronald Reagan Jr., John-John Kennedy, the entire cast of *St. Elmo's Fire*, various VJs and members of my massive fan club, which five Vassar seniors had started, with a film crew from *20/20* covering the event. Also attending was Jay McInerney, who had recently published a similar first novel, *Bright Lights, Big City*, about young people and drugs in New York, that made him an overnight sensation and my closest East Coast rival; one critic pointed out in one of the many articles comparing the two novels that if you substituted the word "chocolate" for "cocaine" both *Less Than Zero* and *Bright Lights, Big City* would be considered children's books, and because we were photographed together so often people began to mix the two of us up—to simplify things the New York press simply referred to us as the Toxic Twins. After graduating from Camden I moved to New York and bought a condo in the same building both Cher and Tom Cruise lived in, a block from Union Square Park. And as the real world continued to melt away I became a founding member of something called the literary Brat Pack.

The Brat Pack was essentially a media-made package: all fake flash and punk and menace. It consisted of a small, trendy group of successful writers and editors, all under thirty, who simply hung out together at night, either at Nell's or Tunnel or MK or Au Bar, and the New York as well as the national and international press became entranced. (Why? Well, according to *Le Monde*, "American fiction had never been this young and sexy.") An updating of the movie star Rat Pack from the late 1950s, it consisted of me (Frank Sinatra), the editor who discovered me (Morgan Entrekin in the Dean Martin role), the editor who discovered Jay (Gary Fisketjon/Peter

Lawford), hepcat Random House editor Erroll McDonald (Sammy Davis Jr.) and McInerney (the group's Jerry Lewis). We even had our own Shirley MacLaine in the guise of Tama Janowitz, who had written a collection of short stories about cute, drug-addled hipsters trapped in Manhattan that stayed on the *New York Times* best seller list for what seemed like months. And we were in hyperdrive. Every door swung wide open. Everyone approached us with outstretched hands and flashing smiles. We did layouts in fashion magazines, the six of us lounging on couches in hip restaurants, wearing Armani suits and in suggestive poses. Rock stars who were admirers invited us backstage: Bono, Michael Stipe, Def Leppard, members of the E Street Band. It was always the A booth. It was always the front seat of the roller coaster. It was never "Let's *not* get the bottle of Cristal." It was never "Let's *not* have dinner at Le Bernardin," where our antics included food fights, hurling lobsters and hosing one another down with bottles of Dom Perignon until the unamused staff would ask us to vacate the premises. Since our editors were taking us out all the time on their limitless expense accounts, the publishing houses were actually paying for this debauchery. It was the beginning of a time when it was almost as if the novel itself didn't matter anymore—publishing a shiny booklike object was simply an excuse for parties and glamour and good-looking authors reading finely honed minimalism to students who would listen rapt with slack-jawed admiration, thinking, I could do that, I could be them. But of course if you weren't photogenic enough, the sad truth was you couldn't. And if you were not a supporter of the Brat Pack, you simply had to accept us anyway. We were everywhere. There was no escaping our visages staring out at you from the pages of magazines and TV talk shows and scotch ads and posters on the sides of buses, in the tabloid gossip columns, our blank expressions caught in the dead glare of the camera flash, a hand holding the cigarette a fan was lighting. We had invaded the world.

And I was on display. Everything I did was written about. The paparazzi followed me constantly. A spilled drink in Nell's suggested drunkenness in a Page Six item in the *New York Post*. Dining at Canal Bar with Judd Nelson and Robert Downey Jr., who costarred in the movie adaptation of *Less Than Zero*, suggested "bad behavior" (true, but *still*). An innocuous script meeting with Ally Sheedy over lunch at Palio was construed as a sexual relationship. But I had put myself out there—I hadn't hidden—so what did I expect? I was doing Ray-Ban ads at twenty-two. I was posing for the covers of English magazines on a tennis court, on a throne, on the deck of my condo

in a purple robe. I threw lavish catered parties—sometimes complete with strippers—in my condo on a whim ("Because It's Thursday!" one invitation read). I crashed a borrowed Ferrari in Southampton and its owner just smiled (for some reason I was naked). I attended three fairly exclusive orgies. I did guest spots as myself on *Family Ties* and *The Facts of Life* and *Melrose Place* and *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Central Park West*. I dined at the White House in the summer of 1986, the guest of Jeb and George W. Bush, both of whom were fans. My life was an unfolding parade made all the more magical by the constant materialization of cocaine, and if you wanted to hang out with me you had to carry at least an eight ball. And soon I became very adept at giving off the impression that I was listening to you when in fact I was dreaming about myself: my career, all the money I had made, the way my fame had blossomed and defined me, how recklessly the world allowed me to behave. Whenever I revisited L.A. over the Christmas holidays I usually chalked up four or five moving violations in the cream-colored 450 SL my father had handed down to me, but I lived in a place where the cops could be bought off, a place where you could drive at night without headlights, a place where you could snort coke while getting blown by the B-list actress, a place that allowed the three-day smack binge with the upcoming supermodel in the four-star hotel. It was a world that was quickly becoming a place with no boundaries. It was Dilaudid at noon. It was not talking to anyone in my immediate family for five months.

The two main events during the next phase of my life were the hurried publication of a second novel, *The Rules of Attraction*, and my affair with the actress Jayne Dennis. *The Rules of Attraction* was written during my senior year at Camden and detailed the sex lives of a small group of wealthy, alienated, sexually ambiguous students at a small New England liberal arts college (so like Camden itself that this is what I called the fictional university) during the height of the Reagan eighties. We followed them as they wandered from orgiastic party to orgiastic party, from one stranger's bed to another, and the text catalogued all the drugs devoured, all the alcohol guzzled, how easily they drifted into abortions and vast apathy and skipping classes, and it was supposed to be an indictment of, well, really nothing, but at that point in my career I could have submitted the notes I had taken in my junior year Virginia Woolf course and would still have received the huge advance and copious amounts of

publicity. The book was also a best seller, though not as successful as *Less Than Zero*, and the press became even more fascinated with me, and by the decadence portrayed in the book and how it seemed to mirror my public lifestyle as well as the decade we were all trapped in. The book cemented my authority as *the* spokesman for this generation, and my fame grew in direct proportion to the number of copies the book sold. It all kept coming: the cases of champagne consumed, the suits Armani sent over, the cocktails in first class, the charting on various power lists, the court seats at Lakers games, the shopping after hours at Barneys, the groupies, the paternity suits, the restraining orders against "determined fans," the first million, the second million, the third million. I was going to start my own line of furniture. I was going to have my own production company. And the spotlight's white glare kept intensifying, especially when I started dating Jayne Dennis.

Jayne Dennis was a young model who had seamlessly made the transition to serious actress and had been steadily gaining recognition for her roles in a number of A-list projects. Our paths had crossed at various celebrity functions, and she had always been extremely flirtatious—but since everyone was flirting with me at that point in my life, her interest barely registered until she arrived at a Christmas party I threw in 1988 and basically hurled herself at me (I was that irresistible). At the after-party at Nell's I found myself making out with her in one of the club's front booths and then whisked her back to my suite at The Carlyle (it took the caterers two days to decorate the condo and three days to clean it up—there were five hundred guests—so I moved into a hotel the week of that party), where we had sex all night and then I had a plane to catch the next morning to L.A. for the holidays. When I returned to New York we officially became a high-profile couple. We could be seen at an Elton John AIDS benefit concert at Madison Square Garden, we were photographed at a Hampton's Polo match, we were interviewed by *Entertainment Tonight* on the red carpet at the Zeigfeld premiere of the new Eddie Murphy comedy, we sat in the front row at a Versace fashion show, paparazzi followed us to a friend's villa in Nice. Though Jayne had fallen in love with me and wanted to get married, I was simply too preoccupied with myself and felt the relationship, if it kept running its course, would be doomed by summer. Besides her neediness and self-loathing there were other insurmountable obstacles: namely drugs and, to a lesser extent, massive alcohol consumption; there were other girls, there were other boys; there was always another party to get lost in. Jayne and I broke up amiably in May of 1989 and kept in touch in a

sad/funny sort of way; there was a continuing wistfulness on her part and a high level of sexual interest on mine. But I needed my space. I needed to be alone. A woman wasn't going to interfere with my creativity (plus, Jayne didn't add anything to it). I had started a new novel that was beginning to demand most of my time.

What's left to say about *American Psycho* that hasn't already been said? And I feel no need to go into great detail about it here. For those who weren't in the room at the time, here's the CliffsNotes version: I wrote a novel about a young, wealthy, alienated Wall Street yuppie named Patrick Bateman who also happened to be a serial killer filled with vast apathy during the height of the Reagan eighties. The novel was pornographic and extremely violent, so much so that my publishers, Simon & Schuster, refused the book on grounds of taste, forfeiting a mid-six-figure advance. Sonny Mehta, the head of Knopf, snapped up the rights, and even before its publication the controversy and scandal the novel achieved was enormous. I did no press because it was pointless—my voice would have been drowned out by all the indignant wailing. The book was accused of introducing serial killer chic to the nation. It was reviewed in the *New York Times*, three months before publication, under the headline "Don't Buy This Book." It was the subject of a 10,000-word essay by Norman Mailer in *Vanity Fair* ("the first novel in years to take on deep, dark, Dostoyevskian themes—how one wishes this writer was without talent!"). It was the object of scornful editorials, there were debates on CNN, there was a feminist boycott by the National Organization of Women and the obligatory death threats (a tour was canceled because of them). PEN and the Author's Guild refused to come to my rescue. I was vilified even though the book sold millions of copies and raised the fame quotient so high that my name became as recognizable as most movie stars' or athletes'. I was taken seriously. I was a joke. I was avant-garde. I was a traditionalist. I was underrated. I was overrated. I was innocent. I was partly guilty. I had orchestrated the controversy. I was incapable of orchestrating anything. I was considered the most misogynist American writer in existence. I was a victim of the burgeoning culture of the politically correct. The debates raged on and on, and not even the Gulf War in the spring of 1991 could distract the public's fear and worry and fascination from Patrick Bateman and his twisted life. I made more money than I knew what to do with. It was the year of being hated.