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Into the Umbra

If a thoughtful person from a hundred years ago, say the young Eleanor Roosevelt,¹ could survey how we live, one thing would stand out. Not the death of God. Most people have always had more faith in God than in the death of God. Not iPods, cell phones, or the internet, all long foreseen—as were droids and spaceships (the words seem quaint). No, it is in affairs of the heart that the present and the past have parted company. Victorian lovers used to see the starry aeons in each other's eyes. Being a busy people we have no time to waste on stars and aeons; the

most celebrated and desirable prospect, on our shrinking island, features alcohol (C_2H_6O) and sexual relations (viz. the Starr Report) in about the amount of time it takes to roast a small turkey hen (*Meleagris gallopava*).

By custom Rex and I hit hard on girls. We never exactly insulted them. It seemed most of the girls we liked were beyond insult. For them and for us it was purely a matter of establishing common interests. The long romantic rigmarole, that strained bureaucratic licensing procedure for doing what dogs do, had faded into a painless formality, like getting divorced, or simply not voting. Some might say things had become more truthful. There was never that much to talk about anyway.

When April turned the cow pasture to streaming mud, so that strange fish emerged in the marshes, Rex and I started drinking earlier in the day. We were semi-famous in Portland. A lot of people seemed to recognize us or have a sense of who we were. In a tavern out on Saint Helen's Highway we met a pair of attractive dark-haired girls with an array of elegant piercings: rings and stones for navel, ear, nostril, and eyebrow. The taller and thinner of the two wore rectangular glasses with red frames, stylish in their way. Like many young women she studded her tongue with steel. The stud murmured its eternal message of oral sex. But the other girl surprised me. Though she must have been twenty-one, her face had an eerie meekness like a baby's. At the same time her body spoke a grown-up language all its own. But what got me was her tongue. It was actually forked like a reptile's. She called it

“tongue-splitting” and said it was a done in ancient times. I thought it slurred her speech a little.

After a boozy substanceless hour or two we drove in the soft twilight back to their house. They lived closer to town, on a nondescript side street, where a lame old man walking a black mutt waved hello to the girls, who waved back in friendly fashion. It stopped raining. There were birds chirping noisily and a full moon sagging into the sky as we trailed along behind them past a few mute bushes and across a wet lawn. Inside, we drank some wine and sat on the rug as a joint floated from hand to hand. It was strong shit, Oregon’s finest. The girls encouraged us to take our shirts off, and the younger one started massaging my shoulders and back. Her name was Maya. She wore a red stone in her nostril and said she liked boys with blond hair. When we kissed I noticed how her tongue felt funny.

Rex was being very forward with Deirdre, the other girl. Her glasses were off her flushed face and I caught sight of her titties before she stood up, put her glasses back on, and dropped in a DVD. She said it was a “ritual.” It occurred to me they’d been making references to rituals and religion all afternoon.

I tasted my wine, which was cool and sweet, and watched the TV. It began with a group of half-dressed people wearing masks. They were gathered in what appeared to be a warehouse or cellar with crude drawings on the walls. The whole thing put me vaguely in mind of Mardi Gras until the camera lingered on a wall painting of a red-masked face with black eye sockets and a split tongue. It didn’t look like it was preparing for the rigors of Lent.

Deirdre explained they worshipped something called the “Umbra.” She said the Umbra was returning, thickening in vacant buildings in the Northwest, which she called Nerland, a name I’d seen in the graffiti around town. Someone had painted the words on one of the overpasses: “Welcome to Nerland.”

“What’s the Umbra?”

“It’s a spiritual force,” she said. “Sister of darkness, mother of night.”

“An older night than the night of the sun,” Maya said.

The masks on the TV screen came in all sizes, shapes, and colors; some had horns and other protuberances. One man stood out in the crowd, a tall skinhead shaking a metal tube that made a hissing sound. His wiry frame was shudderingly tense, and his taut thin stomach swiveled in all directions as he gyrated before the camera. He wore a sleeveless leather vest, and his mask was sulphur yellow.

“In the demonic Umbra,” Deirdre said, “the world will start to change. Everything will be affected. Government, big business, the lies. The country will implode.”

Maya smiled dreamily.

The camera jerked into another room from which the sound of chanting emerged. The quality was excellent, not the least grainy. I saw a ring of masked skinheads and their females dancing like apes or lurching in place with candles shining in their hands as they hollered back and forth. When the cameraman panned to the couples in their midst I recognized Maya, her face blank as the moon. She was one of the white naked bodies writhing on a mattress. The lovers reached their collective climax as the tall

skinhead exulted before them, shaking his ugly scepter. The video ended abruptly, without credits. It left me no more ill at ease than if I'd been hanging out with a bunch of film students.

Deirdre broke into wild laughter.

"You know that church on Vaughan Street?" she said. "The pretty one with the cupola? Well, ever since they closed it down it's become a magical place. We go in there a lot. The demons love us."

"I heard they were going to turn it into a dance club," Rex said.

"That would be cool. The Umbra in there is dark. You have the feeling it could do anything it wanted."

I stretched out on the rug as my head drifted pleasantly among a few light clouds. It was warmer inside the house than out. Maya let me fondle her great big breasts. Then Deirdre joined us with a kiss and sent Maya away.

"We're witches," Deirdre said. "Maya is my initiate. She is affirming her truth—her place in the universe. She is unlearning the lies of her childhood. Learning to see, to rupture the veil of cascading time."

Rex and I smiled. When we saw it wasn't the appropriate response, we stifled our laughter, glanced at each other, and laughed twice as loud. I thought back to freshman orientation, discussing rude male behavior with rich girls from the valley. But just from the newspaper I knew there were witches in the area. The Northwest has a lot of strange religious activity. Cults and covens. Some very nice people had told me stories about their past lives. They even revealed to me their real names, which they use in private. But this was my first encounter with witches.

I considered asking to see their witch certificates.

“Are there any men in your religion?” I said.

“Yes. Powerful head dancers, warlocks and watchers.”

“Who’s in charge, the men or the women?” Rex said bluntly.

She smiled and took up her earlier theme.

“The Umbra has a red gate tonight. We want to unlock it.”

“What do you mean, a red gate?”

“It has to do with how the moon is poised.”

“With how the moon is poised?”

“You have to get past the guardian. And to do that you have to get past yourself. The self you don’t need. The self that society imposes on you. You have to exorcise the mask. Then you can use the magic. *Zine oben nustra.*”

Deirdre handed us a pair of masks that covered our faces. Then we followed her up a crooked staircase to a dark hall where I could scarcely see where I was going. In the hall she opened a door to a narrower and steeper flight of steps.

The narrow attic flickered with candle-light. There was only one window covered by a Venetian blind and flanked by posters: on one side the Twin Towers engulfed in fire and ruin, on the other the musician Oedipus Leech, masked and naked, his body covered with tattoos like continents on a map. The candle-flames, which trembled when we entered, straightened themselves in the darkness. They burned in rows like sentinels on a wooden altar table, beyond which hung a glimmering partition of aluminum branches that toppled from a crossbeam. The tree must have been insane to the root: its foliage and fruit were shaped from the ugly husks of mass-produced beverages. Behind us loomed a grotesque

sculpture, a breasted man with wings, fashioned entirely out of scrap metal. It glowered as we came in. Kneeling on a futon in a Chinese bathrobe Maya ignored us. She sat back on her heels, facing the altar with her hands resting above her knees. She was wearing a mask.

My head was an island of wine and weed as Deirdre fitted a golden mask over her eyes.

“Maya, do you open yourself to the Umbra?”

“Yes.”

“Then light the first candle of Sheboth.”

The girl rose, put an altar match to a tall candle on a crude metal stand, and turned sedately around. She removed her robe, which rustled to her ankles, and her naked body made a silhouette against the altar table. She dropped the mask behind her, baby-like, a torn reflection. Then she resumed her kneeling posture. Deirdre took a scissors and glided beside her on the futon. She pointed as she lifted the girl’s dark hair, revealing a tattoo on her pale neck.

“This means she serves the chant. She is a chantress.”

She brandished the scissors, which caught the light of the candles. Then she blew softly on the girl’s neck where the black tattoo appeared, a flame in a diamond.

“The mark of the hierarchy,” she said, clipping a strand of hair.

Rex and I watched in fascination as she touched the hair to the flame her initiate had lit, and dropped it burning in the shadow. When the faint acrid smell reached my nostrils I looked sideways

at my brother, concealed behind a purple goblin face. A ghostly alarm was jangling my nerves.

“One of you say the chant with me, while the other removes his mask with Maya.”

“And does what?” Rex asked, his voice edged with sarcasm.

“Sex,” Deirdre said, meeting his thrust with imperious candor, “must be directed to certain ends.”

The room was thick with smells.

“But we don’t understand you at all,” Rex said.

“You need to learn then,” she said. “Say the chant.”

“Why don’t you say it by yourself?” he insisted.

“Say it with me,” came her reply, soft and gentle. “Then it will be Maya’s turn to chant...”

Taking a candle from the altar she began her chant, a litany of gibberish, calling the spirits to come, summoning the Umbra. Her voice welled out of her with freakish conviction. It rose like a flood around the naked girl. Then she cried more loudly and I could see the stud in her prolific tongue. Rex stood motionless. I had never seen him bend his will to anyone. Spells and enchantments glanced harmlessly off his psychic armor.

“You need to say the chant. It’s the key to the gate.”

Vaguely aware of being trapped, my thoughts staggered to the floor of my mind, like they were being isolated and weighed down. She had fed her fanatical vision until others tasted its force. In her way she was magnificent. I couldn’t help admiring her.

“Come,” Deirdre urged with a supple voice. “It’s really very easy. You need to say the chant.”

“Let’s just have...have a nice time,” I stammered, and a demon knocked at my ear and snickered at my lack of self-possession.

“Let go,” she said softly, smiling. “Don’t be repressed. Maya is a magical lover.”

Still we hesitated. The candles flickered in their wax pools. The red and white flames sent shadows rippling through the crazy branches and garbage overhead.

“Say the chant and exorcise the mask.”

Deirdre beckoned to me with her hand.

“Say the chant and exorcise the mask.”

“Fuck the chant!” Rex shouted, unmasking himself.

She frowned. I felt the demons ranged like razors, ready to cut. But the spell was broken. We trampled down the stairs in the dark, grabbed our shirts, and pushed our way out. The streetlamps no longer illuminated the street but emitted a ghostly useless orange. Hurrying away I had a distinct sense of being watched, of a malevolent force pulsing on the back of my neck. A curtain fell in the silence, and I caught a glimpse of the old man with the dog, turning from the window of his house.

In preparation for LA, Rex and The Brains committed to a daily rehearsal schedule. We discovered that by staying sober and sticking to a routine we could get things done. We concentrated on fourteen songs with a couple of outsiders in case Luke Pound liked them. Experimenting with arrangements and settling on the best versions took all our spare time. We made constant use of the tape recorder. Rex perfected his vocals and built up his parts as Hank and I figured out the right combinations of bass and drum.

That spring I saw the Grudas when we were setting up to play at Kilroy's, or sometimes I just dropped in to say hello. Jack Gruda and I became friends. He was a late, possibly unexpected addition to the Gruda family, and our friendship gave him a sibling, just as it gave me a surrogate mom and pop. Memorial Day was a week away when he called me on the phone. A UPS truck had jumped the guard-rail near the Morrison Bridge and hit his older brother during rush hour. He bled to death on the interstate. Jack sounded terrible. He'd never seen his father cry.

Saint Mary's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception is in NW Portland, a short walk from Kilroy's Tavern. It is a Byzantine structure of red brick. There is a marble baptismal font opposite the altar when you come in, stained glass windows high in the nave, murals on the walls of the apse, and lambent globes hanging from the coffered ceiling. On entering the church I was met by a young woman dressed in mourning black. She had been talking to an elderly couple who teetered off as the glass door of the alcove closed behind me. Her manner was frank and welcoming.

"You're Jack's friend," she said, extending her hand. "I'm Sheila Corcoran. Jack and I go way back."

Her face was quite beautiful, with almond-shaped eyes of brown, a tall forehead, a Greek nose, and generous red lips. She wore her hair up; it was thick rich auburn. Her complexion was fair. She wore pearl earrings worked in silver.

Mourners were filling the cathedral. A middle-aged man in a suit gave a weary wave as he passed by.

"Hi Dad," she said.

A woman started singing in a high sad voice. As she sang the atmosphere of the church changed, like a faint wind rustling the surface of a pool, the air becoming palpable. Not only the sound, but the emotion resonated in the spacious contours of the wide interior.

“Would you like to sit with me?” Sheila asked in a polite, kindly way. “You can just pick a seat.”

I slid into one of the pews as she genuflected in the aisle. Then she pulled down the kneeler from the back of the pew in front, and knelt praying with her hands together and her fingers intertwined. In a little while everyone rose. I could see Jack, his parents, and their family entering the cathedral from the front door. They went very slowly. Behind them came a flag-draped casket, trundling on a bier.

Like a marionette I followed the ritual of standing, sitting, and kneeling. The responses left me cold. After the Mass we tarried on the steps while Jack and the other pall bearers did their work. I saw Mr. Gruda, teary-eyed, talking with the priest beside the Cadillac hearse. The priest enfolded Mr. Gruda’s hand between his own. Mrs. Gruda looked grim and determined, like she’d taken something to freeze her face. She was holding her grandson’s hand. A little boy in black. The ceremony at the grave was surprisingly brief. The priest said a final blessing and they put the dead man in the ground.

Over lunch we started boozing it up. I tried the buffet and joined in conversation with Jack and Sheila. The funeral created a rapport between her and me that might not have happened otherwise. Jack was slapping me pretty hard on the back, getting a

little reckless. At last I said goodbye and walked back to the cathedral to retrieve my car. When I turned off the engine I could hear Rex and Hank hard at work.

The first person we met in LA was a chauffeur with a seamy forehead. He was holding a handwritten sign that said "Fontay." It was our guy. The pallor of his countenance was like the ashes of hippiedom, offset by an unconquerable nose that was scarlet with drink. There burned the last flicker of a flame that blazed so brightly that summer, when the goddess of love tripped in the garden of youth, and in her wake there bloomed the rose, the lotos, and the starry asphodel. How changed! He had long gray hair that hung in a greasy curtain from the circumference of his bald spot. He wore a tight-fitting black suit like a mortician, and a white dress shirt that opened at the collar over a dirty white undershirt. Hauling our gear he limped like a three-legged horse.

His name was Buddy Young and we found him in the middle of a monologue. Once upon a time he used to play the clubs himself. He'd made a record that sold 100,000 copies. It was called Forever Young. Had we heard of it? No. Had he heard of us? No. Did anyone give a shit? No. He'd been through the whole circus, kids, house, divorce, child-support. Things had fallen to pieces.

"Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke," Buddy Young said, flipping the bird at the ceiling with a half-cocked gesture so that it pointed at the back of his head.

As we waited in the limousine he spat disdainfully out the window and fumbled around with a pile of papers on his lap. He said "shit" on a regular basis, like Old Faithful. He passed a few

remarks about the President, who he said was a degenerate Nazi who came from a family of pigs. But they were smart.

“Don’t get me started on the Bushes,” he scowled, looking over his shoulder.

The country was a fascist state, only the Jews were in on it this time. It was the Jews and the Nazis. The Secretary of Defense was a fucking Nazi Jew. Even that black guy. What’s-his-face.

But Buddy Young was a fighter.

“Like Stalin,” I proposed.

“Shit, what are you, a smart ass?” Buddy Young said, hawking a final lugey out the window.

It kissed the ground with a smack.

He pressed a button and up rolled a glass divider between him and us. Then he played Led Zeppelin, which mingled with the palm trees and the tinted daylight until I somehow remembered a scene from Jurassic Park. The leather seat was cool and comfortable. I was fantasizing about Laura Dern as we coasted down the freeway and onto the crowded boulevards. Zepp was playing the immortal “Stairway to Heaven,” a musical catastrophe without parallel, shudderingly horrible as a raptor disemboweling a retarded child, but you have to love that big guitar solo at the end. Laura. Gazing out the window Rex was coming home.

When we arrived Buddy Young rolled down the divider and presented his business card.

“Call me if you need anything,” he said, laying on the charm. “Girls, boys, blow, you name it. Call me if you need a real guitar player.”

Then he got out and opened the door for us. As he fetched our instruments Hank turned to me with a look of anguish. I'd never seen him so red in the face.

"Fucking jerk," he said.

"Geez, dude. What's wrong?"

"I'm Jewish."

A fact I'd forgotten.

"The guy's just a loser. It doesn't matter what he thinks."

"That's what they said about Hitler."

Randy Pace, Vice President of Crocodile Records, was waiting in the studio. I placed him as the man who'd seen us playing in Corvallis, when I awoke on a stranger's lawn. Wide, tall, and loose of limb, he possessed a jutting jaw, flaring nostrils, and heavy bags under his eyes. He wore a white sports coat and pinkish trousers. The three of us sat before the massive console and listened to Randy Pace. He had come to see us once more in the flesh. He loved the music and though it was unfortunately a business he wanted us to see him as a friend. He got kind of teary about it. His business was to make us part of the story of people who were stars and stars who were people.

"We're all just people," he concluded, cracking his knuckles as Buddy Young clopped in dragging the last of the gear like scrap metal.

An unshaven slob wearing a Ramones T-shirt entered from the side door in a cloud of cigarette smoke. Randy Pace introduced us to Keith Richter's old acquaintance, Luke Pound. We were impressed by Pound. He produced gold records. His

talents were in demand. He collapsed in his armchair with a loud sigh and assessed his surroundings with self-pitying alertness.

“Fuck me,” he said, dropping his lighter.

Then he told us he loved “Painkiller.” He wanted to keep the rest of the album up to that level. He looked each of us in the eye and said there would be no drugs in the recording studio. We could all OD after the record was made, so far as he was concerned.

When we started working the truth struck home that Rex was the main reason they signed the band. He had a great voice, handled his instrument professionally, and looked like a leading man. My stature improved when Luke Pound learned I wrote the lyrics. Thanks to rap, lyrics were getting more attention. The most pressure fell on Hank. Drums are quintessential and a producer has no end of options. In consequence most novices find themselves demoted to tambourine or cowbell. Not Hank, though. Like a young Joe DiMaggio he gave notice he could handle whatever you threw at him. It was a pleasure watching him hit the ball, which is a fine turn of phrase, so fuck off. And when he was established behind the drums, with the threat of studio players removed, he had a sunny disposition.

The intense busy days in the studio consumed even our fresh supplies of energy. Up at eight and over to Burbank, recording for twelve or fourteen hours, then back in bed by one or two. On the other side of the glass Luke Pound stopped us countless times, at the start of songs, in the middle eight, astride the final chorus. We could hear the mistakes, concentrated as we were with the cans attached to ears. We just didn’t always agree they were important.

One day Hank out of revenge stole our producer's cigarettes and he couldn't work the board because his fingers started shaking. It was then he confessed to being a recovering alcoholic. He'd spent the greater part of a decade in a state between drunkenness and a walking coma. He referred to it as "the scotch time." Another day he vanished from the studio for several hours only to reappear clean-shaven in a tuxedo. His third wife had just married his second wife's stepson. Luke Pound had given the bride away.

Penelope and Ellen weren't exactly on speaking terms. Ellen's zealous devotion to "that sad relic of patriarchy," in other words her family, put mother and daughter on opposite sides of a cultural battle line. Not that Penelope objected to families, per se, though she thought them archaic and preferred the term "extended relationships." It was her daughter's decision to stay home with her children that riled the author of *Women and Chaos*.

Ellen's husband, Emmanuel Mantica, had been in this country since high school. His father had fled the Sandinistas, whom he reviled. He departed his law practice one afternoon, boarded a plane with his wife and their five children, and landed in California. It was no easy thing, supporting them with a tire dealership in East LA. He made it the hard way in America. At the wedding Penelope clashed with Manny's father. Penelope called Fidel Castro a hero. Señor Mantica responded by swearing more and more violently in Spanish. The ensuing explosion probably could have been avoided had Penelope realized the old man wasn't agreeing with her.

When I visited San Bernardino the world seemed to be conspiring in a humorous prank. I was met at the door by three children, a four-year-old girl, a three-year-old boy, and a two-year-old girl, to whom I was known as Uncle Freddie. Call me a cubist, but I will forgo the quotation marks in an effort to include their perspective. They took me in without a moment's hesitation. They showed me their toys and books and the pages they colored. Carmen, the oldest girl, gave me a card she made herself, a heart with my name in it, also without quotation marks.

Ellen served potato soup, salad, and a roast. When the six of us gathered around the table, Julia, the baby, refused the high chair. In front of her Uncle she wanted to be like the big kids. Manny started the conversation by saying the music business had always interested him. His questions about the band were all good. How were the songs coming along? Did the producer understand our music? Where did we see ourselves in a year?

After supper, while Ellen attended to the kids, my brother-in-law invited me outside for a brandy. He dusted off the snifters and we retired to the deck.

"These are the long June days," he said, pushing back the chair to give his legs room.

I admired his wavy black hair and handsome features, but for a politician his accent seemed fairly thick. He swirled the brandy in his glass, put it down, undid a button on his shirt. Then he tapped two fingers on the table and passed a remark about politics. I wished I had something to say on the subject. Everyone I knew assumed politics to be absurd, unless it was radical politics. I didn't consider myself at all political. Fishing around for a

comment I remembered there'd been a ruckus up in Oregon about the state budget. There was no money left for pensions. People were mad at the government. I looked at it, "government," like a big fat tuna hauled from the bowels of the sea. It gasped for air. It lay on its side and twitched.

"People fail to distinguish politics from economics. The government is a political institution. It has to be careful about its economic prerogatives. There are things that fall outside its natural scope."

The tuna caught my eye. It seemed to be blaming me, as if it was a victim of my own inexplicable violence. It looked wistfully at the sky, found nothing it liked, and went stiff. I felt kind of guilty.

"What about institutionalized racism?"

It was the magical phrase that saved my GPA in college. All you had to do to earn a "B" was to mention "institutionalized racism." The idea is that institutionalized racism is the worst kind of racism because it is invisible. It's like a virus and white males are the carriers. I grew fond of pointing out how "this very essay" was an example of institutionalized racism. It worked like a charm except the one time I took a leap and extended the argument to my handwriting. The professor, a black guy, obviously new, very inexperienced, wrote "How so?" in the margin. It shook my faith in creativity.

"Which institutions?"

"All of them," I said doubtfully. "Our whole society is racist."

"Says who?"

"My professors. It was practically the core of the curriculum."

“You went to Stanford, right? Well this might sound shocking to you. As a lawyer I can tell you the race industry is a big class-action law suit. In other words it’s a shakedown and there’s a lot of money at stake. Now here’s the strategy. The carrot is calling whitey compassionate, which makes him feel good. The stick is calling whitey racist, which makes him feel bad. Independent blacks are Uncle Toms. Hispanics who think for themselves are traitors to their own people. If your opponent disagrees with you, he isn’t just expressing an opinion, he’s a hateful racist bigot. Freddie, are you a hateful racist bigot?”

“So you think there’s no compassion involved?”

“There’s more water on Mars. It was Nietzsche, you know, who talked about compassion as a mask for the will-to-power.”

I am named after Nietzsche.

But Ellen interrupted our little dialogue. Manny had to say goodnight to the children and get to work. As we shook hands I studied his face with curiosity. He was a new type of animal to me. Thus I had to...

Thus?

She looked good, my sister. She wore her hair short and neat. The muscles in her arms and legs were nicely toned, I suppose from swinging all those kids around.

“The blessed hour when the children are in bed,” she said, taking Manny’s seat.

I asked her if she would ever go back to the law, and she surprised me by saying yes, when the kids were grown. She would be in her forties.

“Forty? It seems old.”

“Oh, you’ll change your mind.”

The sprinklers came on and a bird started chattering on the roof. I sipped my brandy. The cloudless sky was expanding from blue to purple.

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Well, there’s a girl I just met.”

“Her name?”

“Sheila.”

“That’s an old-fashioned name.”

“She’s an old-fashioned girl. She goes to church.”

Ellen said nothing, so we sat in silence awhile as the bird explored its range.

“Your husband’s intense.”

“My whole family.”

She and I used to go ice skating in Palo Alto. We would bike over to the university in the sixty degree weather with our skates dangling from the handlebars. I used to miss the snowy winters back east. Ice skating lent substance to December in California.

“Why don’t you and Penelope talk?”

Ellen put down her glass and folded her hands in her lap. Then she looked at the table.

“Sorry,” I said. “We don’t have to discuss it.”

“No, it’s all right. I want you to know. It’s because of something that happened when I was in college.”

“What happened, Ellen?”

She rose and turned the deck lights on. Then she poured a little bit of brandy into her wine glass and tasted it. Her voice was suddenly thick with emotion.

“I had an abortion when I was twenty. My first experience of intercourse and it made me pregnant. The guy of course urged me to have an abortion. It was so easy and cheap. You know, like in Hemingway, ‘Just a little pinch, Jig, to let the air in.’ I talked it over with...our parents. It seems like the only thing they ever agreed on in my life: my abortion. So I went through with it.”

“Did it go okay?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Ellen, I just don’t understand. You have to explain it to me. Did Penelope say something that hurt you?”

“Maybe you have to be the mother of small children...”

“Oh,” I said; it was starting to register, like a faint pressure in my throat. “You feel like you’ve done something, uh, wrong.”

“I murdered my baby,” she said, as the tears flooded her eyes.

“It’s all right, Ellen. You didn’t know. How could you have known? I mean, how could you know what you’d feel later on?”

“Penny says I’m being ridiculous. She says I’m manufacturing feelings to fit my agenda. I hate that word, ‘agenda.’”

“It’s a lousy word.”

She stood up and walked behind me and kissed me on the top of the head.

“Oh, Freddie,” she said, like she was rocking a baby to sleep. “Little Freddie.”

The next morning I poured myself a cup of coffee, took out my notebook, and sat down in the studio parking lot. I'd been dissatisfied with one of the lyrics. Now I rewrote it in a few hours. It was called "Jig."

VERSE

I knocked a whore up
Her only name was Jig
Three months later she was
high at every gig
We went back to her room
Her beauty was appealing
She didn't seem to know me
as she stared up at the ceiling

CHORUS

Throw it into stainless steel
Tell yourself it isn't real
Tender tender tender veal

VERSE

They love her at the clinic
She never has to pay
Finishes by five o'clock
and feels a little gray
I'm always glad to see her
She knows my every whim
She's creamy smooth as butter
but she spreads herself thin

REPEAT CHORUS

VERSE

She whispers to her son
when nobody is there
He's not a real person
He's just a pinch of air
She lies awake and stares at him
His beauty is angelic
and when she summons him by name
it's fucking psychedelic

REPEAT CHORUS

I liked it better than what we had on tape and Rex agreed to re-do his vocals. Luke Pound mixed the song with a fade-out of Rex shouting the word "tender," making it loop around over and over again.