



**THE MOST INTERESTING
MAN IN THE WORLD**



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Owen was in Los Angeles on business, staying at the hotel he liked. The one with a scene, but not too much of a scene. A pool glowing blue and chairs you could sprawl on, sink into, with a cocktail at the end of the night or the beginning of the night and watch the beautiful men and women slide by. He imagined a moving sidewalk, like the ones at the airport, with interchangeable blondes moving past. Robots. And if he got lonely enough, he could pluck one. Plug in.

On these trips he had things to do of course. Meetings, drinks, dinners. But on this particular trip, he had nothing planned that night. Yes, he could fill the space, the emptiness with any number of possibilities. A call to an associate, an excuse to meet someone somewhere or simply strike up a conversation with a robot blonde.

So when Hugh called him saying he happened to be in town and would Owen want to meet “us” for dinner, he accepted without hesitation. He didn’t even bother to ask who made up the “us.”

It would be nice to see Hugh, he thought, after all these months. And he scored coke in anticipation of their reunion, figuring it would be like old times. Whiskey and drugs.

He did a line and went down to the pool just as the sun was setting. It was his favorite time of day and perched in the hills, he felt as if he were sitting just below heaven opening up above him. It was one of those evenings where the clouds were suspended like sculptures in a faded lavender sky. The city lights blinked like a million stars. Owen rubbed his gums and looked around for Hugh.

He sees her first. There are a million beautiful girls in Los Angeles. Nevertheless, his eyes are drawn to her. Her wisp of a body. The thin,

scarf like shirt she wears that exposes her back. The tiny mole above her lip and the necklace she never takes off. A single sapphire on a silver chain. The way her hair is piled on top of her head. He wants her. Wants her in a way he could never explain—not then, not years later. An overwhelming need to be with her and know what her flesh felt like. His mind would circle back to this moment, the pure ecstasy of not having what he wanted. She flashes him a smile and then he sees Hugh waving.

“Long time brotha.” Hugh claps him on the back. The fluttery bits of his British accent still hovering after all these years. Owen remembers how strong it was when they met in college. *My mum. A bit dodgy.*

They hug briefly, in an exaggerated masculine way. Owen can smell her perfume. Sandalwood. A metallic drip slides down the back of his throat and he notices her neck. Pale and slender.

“I’m Mimi,” she says finally extending her hand. Her nails are short, bitten down to the quick like a child’s.

“Is that your real name?” It sounds funny in his head. Light. Teasing. But the look she gives him. She finds him ridiculous.

She raises one of her dark eyebrows, glancing at Hugh, her expression now a mixture of amusement and skepticism.

“No, it’s my fake name.” She laughs and takes a cigarette out of her purse. The air has a balmy quality and the smoke hangs around them in a hazy screen.

Later, much later, when she lies next to him with wet, clean hair, wearing nothing but her necklace, just as they are falling asleep, she whispers, “my real name is Maude.”

But that night, they barely speak. At first anyway.

Mimi sips her vodka with lime and Owen and Hugh drink Manhattans and reminisce about that one time in Ibiza. That other time in Miami. Or in London. The highlight reel of their younger years.

“Remember when...” one of them starts to say.

“Or when we...”

Mimi listens, nodding and laughing at the appropriate times. It’s a

show, he thinks. She doesn't really care.

"I used to live in London," she says. "I went to CSM."

"Hmm." Owen doesn't know what CSM is. He hopes he sounds nonchalant.

"Central Saint Martins," she says.

Owen drains his whiskey. A slow burn down his throat.

"What about you?" Mimi asks.

"This guy," Hugh says. "Always on the move."

"San Francisco now," Owen explains. "But I was living abroad. Here and there."

Madrid mostly. Then Milan. Flew to London and Paris and did a lot of European business. But then Jill had gone and broken up with him because he couldn't stop bouncing around and he came home.

"The Most Interesting Man in the World," Hugh says now. "That's what we call Owen."

"Like the beer guy." Mimi says, tapping the table with her fingers, which are long and elegant and do not match her child nails. "That's the title of your autobiography."

"What's that mean?" Owen asks.

"Oh." Mimi plays with her necklace. He notices the way she fidgets, squirms. A million little ticks. A bomb about to go off. "Everyone has one."

"And yours is?"

"The things which will destroy me."

They look at each other. She has grief in her eyes. Dark droplets that gather like dew on petals. He can tell. He can *always* tell. Sense their need. And this woman needs something. Wants something. They are the same. Crust, Mantle, Outer Core, Inner Core. The layers of the earth. The crust is relatively thin and the core is the thickest. We are so much like the earth, he thinks. The crust easily peeled back. And all the water. The salt.

"That's Sylvia Plath," he says.

He holds her gaze for a breath. There it is again.

Hugh slings his arm around her shoulders. Casually, as he shoots Owen

a hard expression of stone.

Stay away from her Hugh says later, when they're both falling down drunk and high. After Mimi has left them to their whiskey and blow and long talks about life. Like Jill, Hugh suspects but never asks. Never asks about what a bastard Owen might truly be. Then Hugh says *I love her*.

But Owen loves her. In this moment he does. He *thinks* he does. He always has trouble distinguishing infatuation from love.

Now, when Mimi looks up at Hugh, it makes Owen sick with jealousy. An actual seizing of his stomach. Pins and needles winding up his neck through his cheeks. Behind his eyes. What was wrong with him, he asks silently? No. What *is* wrong with him? Ongoing.

Owen finds himself trying to impress her. Trying to catch her eyes with his sly glances and witty jokes. It usually worked. No, it *always* worked. Except now. Except when he was rigid with want. So much so he found himself doing things close to desperation. Brush her hand when he grabbed his drink. Touch her elbow as he excused himself to the bathroom for another bump.

Nothing.

Occasionally she laughs, or smirks. He watches the rise and fall of her mole above her full mouth painted red. The way she pats the knot of hair on top of her head and her hard nipples visible beneath the cream of her blouse. No bra. She's fairly flat chested, which Owen likes but Hugh never did. In college, Hugh was with a girl named Tori. They all thought Hugh would marry Tori—she had these gorgeous fake breasts—but they broke up eventually. After seven years Owen supposed you either get married or cut your losses. Hugh's loss was Owen's gain. He slept with Tori, just this one time when Owen was really depressed, that one time Jill had broken up with him and he just couldn't live without Jill. Jill who made his mother's roast chicken and rubbed his back when it was hurting him. The way her hair always smelled like clean fresh flowers. Owen

didn't care for women who smelled sour, like they hadn't scrubbed their scalp enough. Or behind their ears. Sloppy, Owen thought.

Tori was in Manhattan and texted. *How about a drink old friend?* Because they were all old friends. Now Tori was married and living in Boca with two boys. They were Facebook friends and sometimes, occasionally, he thought about Tori screaming in his ear, begging him to give her the shocker.

"So," Hugh leans back in his chair. "How's Jill?"

"Who's Jill?"

"Owen's girlfriend."

"Fiancé now."

"Fiancé?" Hugh whistles. "Holy shit mate! Why didn't you say something? When did this happen?"

It happened recently. Just a week ago Jill was getting ready in their bedroom when Owen got down on one knee with the antique diamond and emerald ring. Circa 1925. The one Jill had seen when they were at a thing at Sotheby's. But she hadn't been expecting *that* ring. Sometimes he knew he was trying to make up for his secrets. Sometimes he lies in bed at night, staring out of his window and silently asks over and over again, *why are you so weak?* As if the city could answer him. As if within the pulsing darkness there was someone who would make him feel lovable.

"I knew we were going to see each other," Owen says. "So I didn't say anything."

"Well it's about time," Hugh exclaims. "How long is it now? Eight years?"

"Nine."

"This one doesn't believe in marriage," Hugh says. "Trying to change her mind though."

It takes Owen a second to digest this comment. This wasn't the girl *Hugh* would marry, Owen thought. Hugh would marry an English Rose.

"Why's that?" Owen asks Mimi.

She shrugs. "I don't know if I believe in anything."

"That's a bit nihilistic."

She laughs. “Maybe.”

“I can’t believe Ryan or Nate didn’t tell me.” Hugh shakes his head. “Usually this group can’t keep a secret to save their fucking lives.”

Owen passes the baggie under the table and Hugh goes to the bathroom.

They are alone for the first time. It is hot tonight. Sticky. She presses her glass to her forehead, then her throat. Owen watches her eat the garnish from Hugh’s drink. The cherry, an unnatural candy red. She plays with the stem in her mouth and he can see flashes of her tongue and teeth. He tries to breathe through the craving. Like in the yoga class he goes to with Jill. But the breath is stuck in his chest and it comes out heavy and labored.

“That’s surprising,” Mimi says.

“What is?” His voice is stupid, his brain slowed by the blood pumping everywhere but in his head.

Her eyes are so green. Owen remembers reading once only two percent of the population has green eyes.

“You just seem like someone who’s good at keeping secrets.”

In San Francisco, Owen goes to dinner with Ryan. This dumpling place on Clement Street where they always go and eat way too much and drink way too much beer. Ryan says he thinks he has gout. He says this every time they finish their food. They’d been friends since preschool and before there was Owen, Hugh, Nate and Ryan, there was just Owen and Ryan. Nate lives in the suburbs, working on Wall Street with three kids already. One girl and twin boys. One day Owen will live there too and stare at the same, but different invisible fence and wonder if he made the right choice, if he ordered the right dish, if he bought the right Range Rover with the creamy leather upholstery that always smells delightfully crisp. A beautiful, expensive prison.

“Not this again,” Ryan says when Owen tells him about Mimi. He tells Ryan almost everything and Ryan continues to be his friend. They’ve known each other too long and Owen’s never *really* lost a friend. He’s too

slick, too smart. Knows how to give attention and when to take it away. It's like a gambler's high, just waiting for that hit, for the slot machine to line up three cherries or horseshoes or sevens. You just know you'll get lucky one of these days.

"It's different this time," Owen says. He wipes his greasy fingers on a napkin and thinks about how he masturbated in the shower that morning, thinking about the mole above Mimi's mouth.

"What about Tori?"

"That was nothing."

Ryan sighs and says he has heartburn.

"What about what happened with Claire?"

What happened with Claire Mimi will ask him eventually. He's never told anyone other than Ryan. And even Ryan doesn't know every detail. Details like breaking up with Claire on Christmas Day, if you could break up with someone while you were living with someone else, before driving to Jill's parents' house in New Jersey. How Jill had started asking him where he was going after work and rummaging his desk because she was *looking for a pen*. How Owen's heart turned as cold as the ice coating the curb in December when Claire told him she was pregnant and he said *how much* and she cried and cried and finally took the check and everyone at work said how they couldn't believe Claire quit over the holidays and Owen just shrugged, glancing at the new *Tag Heuer* watch Jill gave him. He didn't wear that watch any more. He'd grown tired of it.

He doesn't see Mimi for three months. Not that he doesn't think about her, but things are good with Jill. They bask in the glow of the new engagement like a rising sun. Everything fresh and new and full of promise.

It's in Cabo. Happenstance. Fate, if he were feeling a little ridiculous which in this case he was. There for his buddy's birthday at a hotel he'd never been to before, the white stucco walkways are lined with birds of

paradise in bloom.

She's having a drink by the pool, standing alone. She wears a red dress that keeps catching the breeze. Blowing like a sheer red flame. Red like the cherry she ate off the stem in LA. At first, he wonders if he's in a dream. The sky on the precipice of night, a wavering blue and black. The moon a sliver of silvery white.

"Mimi," he says and she turns to him. Her hair is pulled back in a low knot, so tight he can see the white line of her scalp, the razor thin middle part. Her eyeliner precise and black around the rims of her eyes, glowing and green under the evening lanterns.

"Owen," she says. "I remember."

"Is Hugh here?" He looks around, the napkin around his drink turning to soggy clumps in his hand.

She shakes her head. "I'm here for work."

"Styling," Owen says. "I remember."

She is trying not to smile. He sees the corners of her mouth turn up.

"You look beautiful." He can smell the sandalwood and cigarettes.

"Thank you." She accepts the compliment without fuss. A flower petal lands on her arm and he brushes it away, letting his fingers linger for just a moment longer on her skin and his body pulses, everything heavy. Dizzy. She shivers and lights a cigarette.

"You shouldn't smoke. It's not good for you."

"Neither is cocaine." She exhales a long stream of smoke. "Neither is sleeping with your *brotha's* girlfriend."

"I'm not..." his voice trails off. She sees him too. They see each other and know each other and the heaviness is like sinking into warm ocean water. All the salt. Salt when she licks the white crystals from his neck, chasing his sweat with tequila. He can taste her already, the brine of her body on his tongue.

"Cigarettes are worse than cocaine," he says.

"Really." She takes a long drag and stares at him.

Again, she levels him. It's different than with Jill. It's not that he doesn't want Jill. He wants Jill like Pip. The old Pound Puppy he used to sleep

with, the one his mother bought him after his dad left. He couldn't fall asleep without Pip. Until he was sixteen. It was a secret, just like Mimi said. And he never got rid of Pip. When Jill was out of town and Owen felt that familiar ache rising up inside him, he would take Pip out from the back of his closet and hold him close. Pip's gray fur and floppy brown ears worn even softer with age. Jill didn't even know about Pip.

Mimi would know about Pip. *Great Expectations she asks?* He kisses her then and she smells a little stale and dirty, but he doesn't care. He doesn't care about anything except her as they watched the sun rise from the top of Corona Heights. Where they climb up the craggy, clay-colored rocks to perch as close to the sky as possible.

The sunrises always hold something new, she tells him over their coffees with extra cream. The sugary kind from this Salvadoran place in the Haight he bought the day before and heated in the microwave. Jill couldn't stand the microwave—said they should get rid of it. And they did eventually, after they'd married, and moved. Bought a place back east to be close to Jill's parents so they could babysit Violet. Owen kept Pip though. Buried beneath his crisp Lacoste collared shirts.

Someone is calling his name. Mimi and Owen turn. It's this guy Andy. Owen knows him from school. This birthday party is for a different circle, not including Nate and Hugh. A Venn diagram of social networks. Andy is already wasted and sweating profusely. The group is leaving—heading into town he says. Andy glances at Mimi who smiles politely, no teeth. She fiddles with her necklace, sliding the sapphire back and forth.

“You coming with, dude?” Andy mops his forehead with his sleeve. Owen shakes his head. He knows they're going to some strip club. That they'll be there all night, paying for someone to make them feel special. He and Mimi stare at one another. She is his. He can feel it. The heat as red as the dress she's wearing.

“Dude.” Andy pinches the skin between his eyebrows. His eyes well up and Owen feels his own dread well up simultaneously, realizing what Andy is about to say.

“You know you look just like Stewart. Fucking crazy man.”

He doesn't though. He looks like Owen. But every so often, he hears this. And whenever this happens, Owen imagines his body detaching from his soul. His body is only mass, matter, atoms, that split and he is two people. The person that pats an arm and says *it's okay man*. And the other person who watches with a high-pitched whine ringing in his ears like feedback from a microphone. So loud it's deafening. Mimi studies him and he wonders if she can see both people. If she knows the matter is all the same. The same as the stars and the earth.

Andy leaves finally and she touches his cheek. Her fingers are ice-cold from her drink. Damp and delicate. The palm tree fronds above them tap together in the breeze

“Who's Stewart?”

Stewart was Owen's older brother. He is dead. Did it matter how he died? How he'd been driving home from college and stopped to help a woman broken down on the side of the road, because that was Stewart. Always helping. How another car drifted, just slightly, supposedly, to the shoulder where Stewart was standing.

They ask each other questions, search each other's bodies like maps. Long lines from lips to legs. After the tequila shots. After the sky is a smooth black stone and he presses her back into the white stucco wall enveloped in the lush greenery so neatly manicured around them, as he kisses her for the first time, as they wind their way up sunflower yellow and indigo tiled steps into her room and sleep with all the windows and doors open so they hear the rhythmic crashing of waves until morning.

“I can't explain it.” She is sitting in her living room on a floor cushion. The house her father left her. “I look at my reflection and all I see is this vile creature. This horrifying *thing*.”

He asks about the scars, the thin white slashes on her soft skin like a tic-tac-toe board. It's the voice, she says. The voice telling her she's ugly

and fat and stupid and a loser and doesn't deserve love of any kind. She doesn't deserve when good things happen to her. Her voice has a strange, melodic far away quality as she tells him about her mother, the British alcoholic. They don't speak. Her parents divorced when she was three. She was born here, in Los Angeles, in a bathtub. She went to England for a time, but she doesn't know why she tried so hard with her mother. Why she went to England at all.

"I need the attention. The attention from the people who never want to give it. From the ones who always make me work for it."

She lights a cigarette and says, "It's really sick, actually."

He is empty. Ravenous, devouring, insatiable.

"Why do you stay with Hugh?"

"He makes me feel safe."

"How do I make you feel?"

That moment on a rollercoaster, after the first crest, when you are flying, flying down so fast it is so terrifying and euphoric you think you might die but you would die if you never felt that way at all.

"Unsafe," she says.

"One day we will be together. We'll start a new life."

"Where should we go?" Mimi asks.

"Buenos Aires," he says. "Barcelona. Berlin."

"Only places that start with B," she laughs. "Bali. Bangkok."

He unties her silk robe. Mimi only wears silk to sleep. He parts her legs with his knee, and she wraps them around his waist, her breath in his ear. He knows he's never felt this way, fallen this far, this deep and he kisses her like she's the last person he will ever kiss and he tells her he loves her and they lie awake for hours, listening to *Tu Si na Cosa Grande* over and over again.

"How did you know it was Plath?" Mimi asks. "My autobiography."

He smiles. "I do read."

“Yeah, like *The Davinci Code*. She rolls over to face him. “Not Sylvia Plath.”

“Wow.” He holds his heart. “Crushing.”

He tells her how he wanted to be a writer. How Stewart was the better writer. The smarter one. The faster one. How he was too afraid to follow his ridiculous dreams and did what he does now instead. He makes lots of money and tries not to think about the searingly painful spaces in his intolerable mind.

When you leave, I am so lonely, she tells him. It’s unbearable, she whispers. I’m beginning to believe you are the only one who has ever understood me in my entire life.

She climbs on top of him and he forgets what he was going to say.

He can’t stop. The texting. The emailing. His fingers gripping his phone, waiting for the buzz back, his insides shaking with joy. Hysteria. Grief.

Jill is happy, too busy with wedding planning to notice. She keeps saying how she really wants a destination wedding but Owen isn’t really sure his mother in Ohio wants to fly to the Caribbean and he hates himself just a little bit more when he sees the crestfallen look in Jill’s eyes. He says he would talk to his mom.

One day Jill comments how Owen is on his phone a lot more these days and he makes an excuse about work being busy and she says *okay* and he notices a tremor in his hands. Owen saves Mimi’s number under the name *Plath* but then he worries Jill would ask *like Sylvia Plath* and find it suspicious so he changes *Plath* to *Silver* because he thinks *Silver* sounded like *Sylvia*. And he wonders if he is losing his mind because he really isn’t sleeping very much, even less than how much he normally sleeps and he is drinking so much coffee and losing weight, but he can’t stop.

One night around three am, he goes into the second bedroom he and Jill use as an office with a pullout couch and he and Mimi whisper the dirty things they did and would do to one another and he comes so hard he bites his own hand to keep from screaming and he is just throwing the tissues away when Jill calls from the hallway and he panics, getting back

into bed, his heart pounding.

“What were you doing?”

“Reading. I couldn’t sleep.”

Jill says *hmmm* and asks if he wants some chamomile tea or something and he says no. Jill falls back asleep and his stomach hurts so much he wonders if he has an ulcer. The next morning they skype with his mom over coffee and the pancakes Jill made with bananas and blueberries and his mom cries saying how she was just thrilled, *thrilled*, to go to the Caribbean because she’s never been and then Jill cries and Owen wonders how he could make other people so happy when he makes himself so incredibly miserable.

“You look like shit.”

Ryan hands him another Old Fashioned. They’re at Nate’s house for his annual 4th of July party. Everyone’s here. Jill. Hugh. Mimi. Drinking heavily and he’s already drunk. Drunk enough to kiss Mimi off behind a large bur oak tree. Reckless as they slip into the side of the pool house and have sex standing up. Mimi squeezing his hand with tears running down her face. It’s the first time he’s seen her cry and she begs him to leave Jill, to run away with her like they planned and through his post-orgasm haze, golden and gauzy, he hears that high-pitched ringing in his ears, microphone feedback, and he knows it’s happening again. He’s dividing, splitting.

Later, Jill says she can’t believe how Mimi smokes and Owen just shrugs. *But you hate smoking* Jill says a bit indignantly and there is something sharp in her voice that makes Owen slightly queasy. *She can’t know* he thinks and pounds whiskey until everything is brown and blurry and he doesn’t have to feel bad about anything in his life.

Now, Jill is sitting with Nate’s wife Paige on the front porch drinking Rosé. Mimi went for a walk and Hugh and Nate are playing cornhole in the front yard. Owen can hear them hollering at one another.

“Dude.” Ryan lowers his voice. “Are you trying to permanently fuck up your entire life? Because it seems that way.”

At dinner they sit outside at a long table set impeccably with white linens and straw placemats. Blue rimmed china and red rose centerpieces. The cater waiters refresh drink after drink.

“What do you do Mimi?” Jill asks.

“I’m a stylist.”

“For famous people,” Hugh slurs. He’s completely hammered.

“Anyone we’d know?” Paige smirks a little bit. Maybe because she’s wearing a seersucker shift dress and pearls and Mimi is wearing a faded L.A. Rams jersey, cutoffs and sunglasses that cover most of her face. Owen sees Mimi pick at her cuticles.

“I don’t like to name drop.”

Owen swats a mosquito on his arm and blood smears across his fingers. Hugh names a couple of people that everyone has heard of and Mimi lights a cigarette.

“What do you do Jill?” Mimi asks then.

Jill says she’s a nurse and Mimi says *oh that makes sense*. And there is a lull in the conversation and Neil Young croons *Harvest Moon* in the background.

Paige changes the subject, asking Owen and Jill about the wedding and Mimi smokes without getting up from the table and Jill laughs loudly, her hand, flashing with her Sotheby diamonds, grips Owen’s wrist, stroking the place where the mosquito bit him, while Owen feels more and more like he can’t breathe, feels something very close to regret, while Mimi stares off into space, the way she did at that first dinner in L.A., while Hugh goes to throw up in the pool house bathroom just feet from where Owen came all over Mimi’s back.

She won’t see him. *I’m going away* she tells him and Owen can’t swallow. He knows she has ended it with Hugh but it doesn’t matter. *This is what you want* she says but Owen doesn’t know what he wants. He wants things and then he doesn’t want them. And he knows he wants to always come home to Jill because he knows he’s a coward but he doesn’t tell Mimi this.

Instead, he just says sure and crawls back into the comfort of his cocoon.

She texts him one time. *Are you happy?*

But he never answers her and she never writes again.

He still thinks of her, every once in a while, when he hears a certain song, when he reads a poem, or sometimes when he jerks off. But then he and Jill get married and Jill gets pregnant and he thinks of her less, until years later when his daughter brings home a cat with green eyes and he thinks he might cry, because he thinks he smells sandalwood. And then he knows he will never be happy.

His daughter asks if they can keep the cat and Owen nods and says *of course* and wonders if he's dying. That night he locks the bathroom door, climbing into his empty tub with Pip the Pound Puppy, his tears soaking Pip's plush fur, thinking of Mimi, thinking of his brother, waiting for his bones to turn into dust, into ash.

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